

**The Conspiracy of NDN Joy: Essays on Violence, Care, and Possibility**

by

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## **Abstract**

The essays herein add up to an examination of the ways in which Indigenous peoples in Canada desire something outside of the terror of the present and the afterlife of the long twentieth century. By way of the modalities of memoir and cultural criticism, I A) seek to lay bare how the cruelties of structures reverberate inside a singular life and B) probe the limits and uses of art and literature as performances of liberatory politics, which is to say I use as material for theorization both my lived experience and the works of contemporary Indigenous cultural practitioners about the coloniality of the world. The main thesis is that joy is an at once momentous and minimalist facet of Indigenous embodiment that rebels against and builds alternatives to the zones of unfreedom that comprise the domain of everyday life. To make this argument, I take up a number of instances of social violence to demonstrate that in the end we are never overdetermined by them, that we locate ourselves inside an affective and aesthetic commons unmoored from suffering and brimming with possibility. Methodologically, I operationalize what poet Ocean Vuong has called a “restlessness of form”: the use of a plurality of literary modes and styles when one’s subject matter is as enormous as a country and as intractable as history. I conclude on the note that though our lives as queer and/or Indigenous peoples are mired by death of all kinds we are called on by one another to build a new world in the image of our radical art.

“Failure to hear will matter to those who do not listen and those who are not heard, not only because stories without an audience do not survive but also because being heard or ignored impacts how the past resonates in the present – it affects human processes of revision. ‘Revision’ here refers not to the lies of revisionist history but to how human beings live their pasts in the present moment.”

Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*

“I am not interested in longing to live in a world in which I already live.”

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

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## **Prologue: A Letter to Nôhkom**

This isn't a book about you, nôhkom. A book about you, a book in which you appear uncomplicatedly in a world of your own making, is an anti-nation undertaking. Canada is in the way of that book. To write that book I would need to write crookedly and while on the run. I would need to write my way out of a map and onto the land. For now, you move in and out of my books as though wind in a photograph. I swear no one will mistake you for a deflated balloon hanging from my fist. Here, and in my poetry, you're always looking up at the sky, longing for the future. In order to remember you as a practitioner of the utopian, I need to honour the intimacies of the unwritten. This project, then, is as much an ode to you as it is to the world-to-come. In the world-to-come, your voice reminds those in your orbit that we can stop running, that we've already stopped running.

Often I remember that you likewise have been denied the relief and pleasure of stillness. When I do, my heart breaks. When it does, I gather the shards into the shape of a country, then I close my eyes and swallow.

Courtney and I have a running joke about how you call her only when you're searching for me, because for whatever reason you can't find me between the hundreds or thousands of kilometres that make the world too wide for you to be beside me anymore. In the summer of 2016, for example, I travelled to Honolulu for the gathering of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. Before I boarded the plane you said this to me over the phone: "Don't forget to call me, because I'll go crazy if I don't hear from you."

What a sentence! Built into the mechanics of love is the possibility of mismanagement, for we can never adequately anticipate how our relation to a love object might shift or morph over time. Love has a tendency to shatter; it is prone to weakening and to running amok without notice. Perhaps, ironically, this is how it anchors us to a world, how it makes us want to give everything to the project of living well with others. Without love or the object into which we hoard parts of ourselves, we might go “crazy,” lose our bearings. Although distance and time have pried open a barely translatable gap between you and me, we still find something worth tending to in the history of us that is unavailable elsewhere.

You love to tell the story about how when Jesse and I were babies, you had to sit me in a jumper and him in a saucer to feed us concurrently. You would shovel a bit of oatmeal into my mouth, then turn to Jesse, you inform us, smirking. You fill the room with laughter each time you describe and re-enact how impatiently I would wait for my helping. Begging, high energy—you had to pick up the pace to appease me. I’m floored, not only by your ability to call up a decades-old memory, but also and more acutely by the joy that having had such an experience brings you.

Even in my earliest memories, I’ve always intuited your presence as a capacious one. I was a “kokum’s boy,” so to speak. You took me everywhere—albeit not to the bingo hall! You showed me a level of unconditional love that I rarely find at all nowadays. You were and are at the core of an extended family unit, balancing, back then, the fine line of encounter between my mom and my dad, your relatives and his. As kids, as you know all too well, Jesse and I rarely spent the night anywhere but our little house in the bush. Yes, we often made ambitious plans to do otherwise, but

you always answered our late-night phone calls spurred by a sudden bout of sickness and then drove anywhere between fifteen to thirty minutes to fetch us. Truth be told, we were seldom ill; we simply wanted to be where you were.

It seems now that this flow of emotion has inverted as I've grown up. Today, I sometimes forget to call when I said I would, or I habitually wait for your number to flash across my phone. This monumental change is a disorienting fact of adult life—we stretch outside the collective skin of the family. But back then your love incubated a refuge, one I can always return to if need be.

To speak of the possibility of losing me because I'm not near you might also point to the ways that we inhabit imperilled bodies in a shrinking world in which we don't remember how to coexist without stymying collective flourishing. It's as though you're saying, à la Warsan Shire, that I'm "terrifying and strange and beautiful, someone not everyone knows how to love."<sup>1</sup> It's as though you're warning me that your house might be the only sanctuary for NDN boys who love at the speed of utopia.

Nôhkom, I'm not safe. Canada is still in the business of gunning down NDNs. What's more, state violence commonly manifests as a short-circuited life, one marked by illness, sadness, and other negative affects by which we become ruled until what remains of a body is more so a ghoulish trace. Despite the stories of progress and equality at the core of Canada's national identity, a long tradition of brutality and negligence is what constitutes kinship for the citizens of a nation sat atop the lands of older, more storied ones. I can't promise I won't become snared in someone's lethal

mythology of race. What I can do is love as though it will rupture the singularity of Canadian cruelty (irrespective of whether this is a sociological possibility). Herein lies my poetic truth.

Love, then, isn't remotely about what we might lose when it inevitably dissipates. How unworkable love would be were we to subject it to a risk-cost benefits analysis! In the world of the statistical it doesn't survive and is stripped of its magic; love dwells somewhere less rhythmized by anticipation, less mediated by prediction and calculation, all of which fools us into fighting to preserve a sovereignty that doesn't exist. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz writes: "To accept the way in which one is lost is also to be found and not found."<sup>2</sup> What has stayed constant between us is this cycle of losing and finding, this unending transference of vitality, without which we might feel directionless. Love of this sort, however, isn't about making a roadmap to an other who then becomes your compass. It is a proposition to nest in the unrepayable and ever-mounting debt of care that stands in opposition to the careless and transactional practices of state power that mire the lives of NDNs and other minoritized populations. Having inherited your philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom, *nôhkom*, I can write myself into a narrative of joy that troubles the horrid fiction of race that stalks me as it does you and our kin.

It's likely that you might feel confused at times by my style of writing, its dexterity, its refusal of easiness, but I know that you'll sense the affection bubbling up inside each word. That affection is joy, and it started with you. Now, I see it everywhere.



kisahkihitiin,

Bill

Edmonton, AB

## Introduction

There are two theses underneath the essays that follow: (1) wherever Indigenous peoples are, so too is the feeling of utopia; and (2) in a world in which we have been corralled inside an emotional grammar of despair, our joy is a conspiracy, something difficult to discern but nonetheless humming with aliveness. I have a set of keywords that I make repeat in the hopes that their repeatability reveals to me and those who choose to think in concert with or beside me the blueprint to a world-to-come. With these clues, armed with other decolonial tools of political thought and action, we might breach the singularity of racialized suffering and violence that stabilizes the death-world of Canada. My keywords are joy, care, possibility, freedom, and utopia, all of which are positively coded and I wed myself to them with a sense of optimism that they can be of service in the making of forms of Indigenous life that free us from the position of non-being. Against our revolutionary disposition, this mode of weakened existence, the trapdoor of non-being, condemns us to social deaths of all kinds, and it is narrativized with excited speech as an unmitigatable fact of Canadian life. We, however, refuse entrapment; we speak another language of resistance and world-making. The meta-claim undergirding this at once cautious and hopeful orientation to the countercultural power of language is that the brutality of state practices of cruel speech does not extinguish indefinitely the excess that lingers wherever discursive power is exercised against populations of radical love and care. In a recent lecture of Dionne Brand's, this excess appears as an insurgent force-presence that responds to and, more profoundly, veers from a cultural predilection to use narrative to entrap racial life; like me, Brand is fixated on "the thought that exceeds the narrative."<sup>3</sup>

With which concepts, then, might we instruct one another how to be more *here* than we already are? To allow others to comprehend that we are deserving of and that we indeed already practice this expansive here-ness?

I have a growing suspicion that the academic is not quite the proper modality in which to do the work of utopian imagination. Still, the intellectual operatives of the settler state apprehend the Indigenous in the ditch of a toxic history that is motored by an anthropological gaze that does little to abate a general craving for the sight of racialized misery. Even more troublesome, perhaps the academic text puts undue strain on the shape of Indigenous life and being, which is to say that the academic text demarcates the affective tonalities and ontological possibilities that comprise indigeneity. The academic text was where indigeneity was fashioned into an object of curiosity and certainty in the eyes of the researcher, made to weather an atmosphere of ideas with origins in the social Darwinist laboratories of the Old World. Whether academia is a place always-already perilous to Indigenous freedom and indeed in aggravated contradistinction to it is a question that frustrates answerability, for this is a matter of deep sociological and metaphysical significance not definitively knowable via metrics of recruitment, retention, publication records, and so on. There is a fundamental homelessness that awaits the Indigenous studier as she is coaxed into the corridors of the university. The Indigenous studier owes nothing to no one, which is a sort of radical openness that is closed off to the university and that the university seeks to disavow. The academic is he who like all settlers bears the ongoing debt of colonial nation-building, that brutal insistence on existing where one's existence was not welcomed. In opposition to the debt-ridden academic, Indigenous peoples bring to the university an absence of ethical debt – we do not belong to those who studied in the name of imperialism and other systems of oppression – and this to some is a

cause for alarm. As I see it, this panic, which is a political and metaphysical one, produces a burden of proof that is lopsidedly borne by Indigenous peoples and other people of color who wind up in the university as a place of consciousness-raising and knowledge mobilization. This burden of proof is the cost of thinking and writing in the direction of a future hardly imaginable to those who emerge from and desire to reproduce if only subconsciously the present of the sort that depraves Indigenous peoples of the materials for kinship and care.

On proof and evidence, Fred Moten is illuminative in a beautifully musical talk called “The Poet’s Essay”:

“Let me write you a song about all of that shit you did. I’ll put it in blue notes and broken English and cross you, but can I cross you without crossing over? We’re both at the airport, why wouldn’t you like that shit as much as me? I don’t mean to be mean; I know you mean well. But what if eating the Wall Street Journal commits to a kind of initiatory gesture in order to prove a point that ain’t worth proving, another evidentiary gesture towards what we already know? When will knowing what they’ve done is how we feel reach the point where it no longer needs to be proof? Why do we continuously submit ourselves to this trial, an endlessness for which we volunteer as an application for admission? When will we break free of the annular advancement and critique of this restricted notion of the evidentiary?”<sup>4</sup>

Here, Moten criticizes the vampiric consumption of information as a part of a performance of the self that entraps one in a vicious circle of proof-making contra liberation. It might be worth

applying this observation to the context of the university, which is infested with evidentiary gestures, to articulate a critique of the constraints placed on people of color who are already gridlocked in a discursive terrain teeming with noxious ideas about us. Our voices are shot through an auditory mesh of data that muddies our poetics of dissent. Denise Ferreira da Silva is likewise instructive in “In the Raw”:

“[I]f the task is unthinking this world with a view to its end – that is, decolonization, or the return of the total value expropriated from conquered lands and enslaved bodies – the practice would not aim at providing answers but, instead, would involve raising questions that both expose and undermine the Kantian forms of the subject, that is, the implicit and explicit positions of enunciation – in particular, the loci of decision or judgement or determination – this subject occupies.”<sup>5</sup>

My project is not an academic one. It is not intelligibility I am after. My field is Indigenous freedom. My theoretical stance is a desire for Indigenous freedom. I am not bent on taking part in enactments of subjectivity that reify a position of impossible knowability.

What’s more, Moten gestures to the incredulity of narrating an unnarratable sensation that is localized to those who do not dare or who are not moved to translate what is housed in the domain of the affective. If we are on the run from socialization, where socialization is a matter of adhering to the codes of settler disposition, then we ought to eschew the labor of evidence, for the process itself is “an endlessness” in which we risk losing sight of our emancipatory aspirations. This is not to say that evidence itself is bad prior to meaning-making, but that in universities, which are the

intellectual arms of settler states, this ritual fogs our liberatory visions, which are at times contra the university. We are faced, then, with a question of prioritization: where the academic prioritizes evidence, proof, and debate, the studier, the activist, the poet, they all prioritize feeling and freedom. An anxiety about the position of the academic, about what it savages and allows others to savage, appeared in a poem I ended up axing from my second book of poems, *NDN Coping Mechanisms*, but that is useful to resurrect here:

“I refuse any and all practices of nominalization if the speaker is unaware of the torture of classification. I lost interest in academic writing because I couldn’t yield myself up to the sovereignty of the reader, his vicious want of clarity. I started to oppose the violence of the thesis statement, how it containerized meaning and made vultures out of everyone. Instead, I wrote nonsensical essays with run-on sentences about the conspiracy of NDN joy and the two valences of abandonment and the tenants of the terrain of bad feeling. I wrote poems with titles and others without. At first, I said that this was about the negation of epistemic mastery. Who was I to assign the rules?”<sup>6</sup>

Against the wholesale production of a reading practice that is more about dissection than it is about the riot of rallying against the injunction on our intellectual activity, my artistic practice and my creative life more broadly are aimed not at resorting to the seductions of argumentation but at the elaboration of how we might live in a way that engenders more life, in the name of a red utopia.

Perhaps something like Indigenous theory is against the demand to lay bare or to make seeable that animates settler modes of perception in the university. Indigenous theory, then, troubles the

fetishizations of proof and evidence; it banks on that which is opaque and speculative, that which is in an antagonistic relation to logic and common sense. It is through a grammar of joy that Indigenous theory refuses to articulate Indigenous life via a continuum of suffering. Joy is thus theoretical insofar as it rebuffs a temporality of the future that consigns us to the position of the socially dead. Indigenous theory is how we think up and perform our aspirations for Indigenous freedom. Indigenous theory is what happens in classrooms where the impetus for study is futurity. It allows those of us here under terms other than proof-making to use its resources subversively. Indigenous theory is a theory of appropriation and sabotage.

So, what follows is not a painstaking development of a single argument but instead an experiment in making use of the ways of unseeing and seeing that are available to those like me who are in a world we did not want. I heed Moten's call to write sentences differently. By this, he means that if those who study the writings of black feminists (his material for protest) are to take them seriously as objects that produce knowledge about the past and the world against which some of us rebel, then the sentence that motors normative academic inquiry, which is hindered by tradition, by the strictures of form, is untenable.<sup>7</sup> It anticipates its contours before it is written. We need to think and feel in the direction of a new way of writing, one that bodies forth a line of inquiry, rather than merely offering up a disembodied set of observations from the vantage point of nowhere (call this distant writing). A way of writing that is both in excess of and irreducible to what appears on the page might look something like speculation, like putting pressure on the clock of writing proper. Indigeneity is temporally errant; it makes trouble for the idea of time, which is to say that indigeneity's time – NDN time – is a speculative affair. Speculation not just in the sense of rupturing knowledge production, but speculation as a mode of rapt and spastic attention, one that

enables us to see in a way that is animated by what we feel (call this decolonial synesthesia – the relay between sight and flesh that pinpoints on the body what is to come before it materializes in a stable form). Writing is a practice that is performative; it has a visual component, which lays bare the imagistic quality of words. I, like Jack Halberstam, want to practice the art of seeing *unlike* the state,<sup>8</sup> and this means that I have to ask: what is to anticipate or to notice a world congealing just below the threshold of visibility? How might we give into the precarities of “the possibility of everything you can’t see”<sup>9</sup> in the event that what is unseeable is actually the spectral trace of a world-to-come?

To speak of Indigenous joy as the creative-theoretical force that it is, as that which rends the desire for finality that racialized suffering posits, we need to write lopsidedly and without linearity; we need to write vulnerably and in a mode that is both indebted to and more than narrative. Indeed, to provide an account of the cluttered affective spheres inside which Indigenous peoples enact a form of geographic escape that is still unfolding, we need to write against the unwritability of utopia. This means that joy is somewhat of an impossible desire, but one that we cannot stop thinking about and enacting. That we experience joy, that we can identify it, if only belatedly, illuminates the dead-end towards which the settler state hurls. In our insistence against elimination, the logical holes at the heart of settler colonization are exposed. According to Patrick Wolfe, settler colonialism is the structure in which those of us in colonized states like Canada, the United States, and Australia are immersed, and it operates by way of a logic of acquisition that seeks a settling of the land and a logic of elimination that kills Indigenous populations where possible and/or makes us take on unanimated lives.<sup>10</sup> Put differently, settler colonialism seeks (1) to transfer governing power from an Indigenous polity to an invading settler one via an egregious display of



cruelty compounded by ruses of negotiation, consent, recognition, and empathy; and (2) the production of an enduring state of suffering and political and social chaos into which we get swept up. In their crucial essay “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang lock in on the ways in which settler colonialism fuses the modes of colonialism that are internal (forcible removal from ancestral lands, internment, biopolitical management) and external (resource extraction, military activity), the violence of which “is reasserted each day of occupation.”<sup>11</sup> What strings all of these tactics together is the desire of the settler to stay, to homestead, to make property out of “land/water/air/subterranean earth.”<sup>12</sup> There is a kind of joy to be made in the thingification of everything in the mind/body of the settler. Consigned to the lesser ontological state of property, land/water/air/subterranean earth mix into the settler’s conception of self such that everything outside him is a reflection of his livability. Part of the work of decolonization and of Indigenous theory is to undo this metaphysics of settlement, to reroute joy away from a dispossessive mode of living.

Settler colonialism inheres too in a culture of affect that not only curbs emotional responses to the brutalities internal to it (from those who inherit the spoils of conquest and Indigenous peoples prevented from diagnosing the historical contingencies of their suffering), but also clots Indigenous social worlds with an atmosphere chalk full of bad feeling. This is a primary concern of this project, which seeks to dispel the myth that Indigenous peoples take on lives that are limited by a narrow set of emotional responses (think of the long-standing archetype of the “stoic Indian” or of the routinized portrayal of us as peoples who are drowning in the pathea of sorrow and woe). Settlers invent the fictions into which Indigenous peoples are written, a tradition of rhetorical trickery that propels indigeneity into a whirlwind of ideas that puncture us from the inside out.

Daniel Heath Justice had this to say in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* on this facet of settler story-telling: “Many of the stories about Indigenous peoples are toxic, and to my mind the most corrosive of all is the story of *Indigenous deficiency*. We’ve all heard this story, in one form or another. According to the story, Indigenous peoples are in a state of constant lack” (emphasis his).<sup>13</sup> There is a racial fatalism to this: we are always-already broken, regardless of context. In a similar vein, in *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* Jodi Byrd uses “transit” as an analytic to throw into relief the circuits of axioms, capital, and affects through which the concept of the Indian is made to move. Byrd writes: “Indianness can be felt and intuited as a presence, and yet apprehending it as a process is difficult, if not impossible, precisely because Indianness has served as the field through which structures have always been produced.”<sup>14</sup> We thus need to train our ears to hear historical contingency, to weather the loudness of competing moral, political, emotional, and ontological claims about us.

This project, however, does not seek to impart a set of rules by which to proliferate joy. I do not purport to hover above the terrain of the good life and bestow onto readers that which I see. Rather, the essays collected here bring into focus the ways in which experimentation and risk are the social methods by which Indigenous peoples enliven a world against the present. Against the emotional imperatives of colonialism, which torpedo us into a state of precarity that is unworkable and contra freedom, I attend in this project to the theoretics of joy, a task I cannot properly undertake without first summoning those who have indelibly shaped my curiosity about the possibility of the end of our troubled world and the habitability of a more spacious one.

In an essay called “Black. Queer. Born again,” Ashon Crawley is moved by his Grandmother’s death, a life made “unsavable” and a subsequent death made unmournable in the Pentecostal church, to ask about his own countercultural production of “a queer vibrancy” in a church that “shun the very possibility of queer thriving.” He asks: “Is there joy in, and thus against, the sorrow of an antiblack, anti-queer world?”<sup>15</sup> For Crawley, radical joy begins where there is a dissonance between socially sanctioned practices of “damnation,” or “systems that bind and constrains us all,” and a felt belief in an ethics and a poetics that “announce worlds.”<sup>16</sup> I likewise understand joy to be an at once minimalist and momentous facet of minoritarian life that widens the spaces of living that are otherwise thinned by settler colonialism and its attendant structures of unfreedom (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, transphobia, etc.). A theoretic of joy is therefore how thinkers, artists, writers, and the like operationalise and/or evince how our conviviality and hopefulness engender another experience of the world that is not solely destructive. In my indigeneity and queerness, in my queer indigeneity, there is a closeness to possibility that I wish to put to rebellious use.

Care is bound up in a theoretic of joy too. “Care, caring, carer. Burdened words, contested words. And yet so common in everyday life.”<sup>17</sup> So begins María Puig de la Bellacasa in *Matters of Care*, a book that seeks to retrieve care from the gutters of the mundane and elevate it to a place of sociological import that has everything to do with whether or not we as a species – humans – commit to building flourishing worlds for all forms of life. Care, if rescued from the neoliberal pressure to install concentration in that which has a market value or that which injects us with enough vitality to make us better workers, is in the mind of Puig de la Bellacasa a “disruptive thing” insofar as it harbors a normative theory about the way the world should be against the pale,

lifeless, and demented practices that the world-as-we-know-it has birthed. It is additionally in opposition to the uses of care by the state to fix Indigenous children in particular in a cultural exile of sorts that we might aim to return to care as a site of protest and decolonization. To imbue care with a decolonizing function is to zero in on how a dominant facet of the colonality of being was and is to refuse care to Indigenous peoples or to subject us to a biopolitics of care that strips us of liveliness. This biopolitics of care has been closely tracked in the north, for example, by Lisa Stevenson in *Life Beside Itself*, a book that explicates the ways in which colonial governmentality constrains the modalities of sociality by which Inuit can participate in performances of world-making. Under the guise of governmental concern, politicians and scientists subjected Inuit to a project of serialization by which their animated lives were condensed into a set of numbers and names that unearthed people from affect worlds and emplaced them in a maze of bureaucracy – an archipelago of sanitariums, hospitals, and residential schools – where some were left to die, disappeared.<sup>18</sup> To colonize, then, is partly to force Indigenous peoples to live a compromised life in a world not of our own making; care is what refutes this and instead motors acts of world-making with indigeneity at their core. Of significance to me are the instances in which care is a quiet but nonetheless powerful creative-theoretical force. For Christina Sharpe in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, care is the antidote to anti-black violence; it is what dissipates the climate of anti-blackness that makes breathing difficult for some more than others.<sup>19</sup> An incommensurate but nevertheless entangled storm has been and is brewing that pressurizes Indigenous peoples' capacity to breathe freely in cramped spaces where our intimate lives hang in the balance.<sup>20</sup> To care in this formulation is to promulgate the atmospheric conditions in which the air is thicker and thus more inhalable.

Inspired by this interpretative trajectory, I was galvanized by the concept of conspiracy. With conspire, there is a riot against something, the shape of which fluctuates according to the form of disturbance one aims to bring about. There is also the act of breathing together, which comes to us from the Latin *con-* (together with) and *spirare* (breathe). What I arrive at is fugitive breath/ing. As of late, there has been a surge of critical race theories of how it is breath that entangles us to others, for better or for worse. In *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Crawley starts with the sparse words hurled out into the world by Eric Garner before his on-air death at the hands of police officers in Staten Island, New York. Despite efforts to sever his ability to vocalize, to make words leave his body, “I can’t breathe” was the refrain that Garner spit out eleven times. “I can’t breathe” sat in the surround both unnoticeably and immensely visible. At the same time, it rippled its surroundings. “I can’t breathe,” says Crawley, was “a rupture, a disruption, an ethical plea regarding the ethical crisis that has been the grounds for producing [Garner’s] moment, our time, this modern world.”<sup>21</sup> This modern world is interrupted by the enactment of a different sort of exhalation, one that is “a critical performative,” a refusal of “the western juridical apparatus of violent control, repression, and yes, premature death.”<sup>22</sup> In *In the Wake*, Sharpe likewise probes the difficulties of accessing something like “fresh air,” for the wake, which is where “the past that is not past reappears,” which swells up from the climate of anti-blackness in which we all ride the unstable currents of respiration, is congested with “brehtaking spaces.”<sup>23</sup> Aspiration, Sharpe notes, is how we put breath “back in the Black body in hostile weather.”<sup>24</sup> I move with Crawley and Sharpe through the conceptual and material world of aspiration because it unobscures how Indigenous theory is entangled with the Black imaginary. Put differently, I cannot begin to elucidate a theory of conspiracy, of collective and fugitive breath, without thinking with Crawley

and Sharpe. The note of caution and dissent they sing is a part of the chorus that makes up a revolutionary shout that is decolonial.

So, “I can’t breathe” repeats from the wretched of the earth, those whose “daily practices of survival,” to use Ann Cvetkovich’s language, are caught up in an atmosphere that makes a fool out of the lungs.<sup>25</sup> “I can’t breathe” is a theoretical claim; it draws attention to the obstruction of that which, according to Crawley, “is constitutive for flight, for movement, for performance.” “I can’t breathe” also irradiates the unfinished project of care, how some have been barred from uncomplicatedly accessing the sky. The sky seizes the body and makes a mockery of it. Following Crawley, “I can’t breathe” potentiates; it ratchets up an excess that cannot, in the end, be wholly negated.

“I can’t breathe” is one theory of how indigeneity is made to apparate in public life in Anishinaabe artist Fallon Simard’s “Bodies that Monetize,” a Master of Arts thesis exhibition that took place at Blank Canvas Gallery in Toronto in the fall of 2017. Simard’s “i cant breathe” is stylized with a blurred photograph of crumpled brown paper bags, which are prosthetic-like household items used to assist with breathing during biosocial events such as a panic attack. Though Simard is not responding to the brutal breath-stealing scene of Garner’s death, there seems to me to be a kind of horizontal or planar field of thought and aesthetics here that brings the two together (outside of my own choreographing of the events). That is, they render the terribly shared condition of being structurally hindered at the level of biology, of biosociality. Simard in their case uses the form of the meme, which enables a mode of mobility that exceeds the gallery walls, to activate something like a poetics of putting it out there, out in the open, such that the surround of the surround, which

is to say the air, is thrown into relief. From Simard's art comes the thesis that troubled breathing is a normative facet of North American modernity. In *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues that a "weak" mode of state killing proliferates sores, bad colds, and small pains in the chest in Indigenous communities, but also that uncritical deployments of care are not quick-fixes for these forms of "dispersed suffering;" she writes: "In neoliberalism to care for others is to refuse to preserve life if it lies outside a market value."<sup>26</sup> Everywhere Indigenous suffering is embedded into the mechanics of modernity, so something as biologically insignificant as the inhalation and exhalation of breath becomes a political and an aesthetic experience in and of itself.

In her genre-bending essay "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix," Karyn Recollet writes: "Gestures of futurity are choreographies of possibilities and hope – not residing so much in an unattainable dreamscape, but rather they are in constant figuration and reconfiguration all around us."<sup>27</sup> For Recollet, there is a kinesthetic component to decolonization; indeed, she beautifully posits that the moving body reveals a "map to tomorrow."<sup>28</sup> This refusal "of being stilled," she declares, after Crawley, is the scene of a geographic flight, what I might describe as an eschewal of ontological entrapment, which for Recollet is irreducibly gestural. Breathing is thus but one example of Recollet's "gestures of futurity." Ours is a time and place in which indigeneity is organized via a mode of enfleshment that is at once numbing and agonizing, one that produces forms of pain whose vocalizations become unhearable in the theatres of liberal redress. To be in the world is to be fleshy and to be fleshy is to be susceptible to a form of social power that occurs at a level the naked eye cannot apprehend. Emotion strives to translate this. Part of what I am doing here is to say that yes we are subject to processes of enervation that choke, that morph the body

into a sign of the failings of self-sovereignty, but there are “choreographies of possibilities and hope,” to harken back to Recollet’s phraseology, that abound too. Indigenous joy is a sociological and statistical feat, but it flowers nonetheless.

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I cannot wrap up an introduction on futurity and joy without José Esteban Muñoz; if I did, something would be missing. Queerness matters here in my talk of futurity because it is one of the interlocking positions from which I write. Some of the essays that follow attempt to articulate the struggle and possibility that have orbited around my sexual practices and politics. Queerness for me makes available a modality of being that is forward-bearing, which is a line of inquiry that comes to me via Muñoz. We – queers of color, oddballs, weirdoes, hopeless romantics, and doomed lovers, those who gather in the dust of possibility – live and think now in the crawl space pried open in the wake of *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Published a decade after his debut book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* is a crashing wave at which we can but stand open-armed, with which we can but become lastingly mixed. He had an eye for that which was blurred by the drama of the everyday, the haze into which we all risk disappearing at the expense of a time and place that is not ravaged by the cannibalism of the normative. At the end of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz wrote: “Utopia in this book has been about an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning.”<sup>29</sup> As he saw it, the future is queerness’s turf, which means that queerness is not right now, but instead an ideality, one that is always elsewhere, gyrating to the beat of the unsung on the dance floor of the world-to-come. For Muñoz, past, present, and future



collide at the site of queerness's elaboration – they appear in public life by way of a lisp, a wink, a beat, a tempo, a can of pop, a drug (in his case, MDMA), all of which are a part of a choreography of desire. Linearity is thus a conceptual trapdoor around which we must tiptoe. We, queers of color, armed with the magic wand of intimacy, birth a future unlike anything we know now. In Muñoz's words: "Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I am calling an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present."<sup>30</sup> We therefore do not sit back and anticipate the joy at the end of the ride. The here and now is a prison house, to evoke Muñoz's seminal argument,<sup>31</sup> but it is also the scene of a flurry of investments, curiosities, anxieties, presuppositions, and desires, some of which give us a sneak peek into the world of tomorrow. With the analytic of the "future in the present"<sup>32</sup> at the fore, there is nowhere to go but here.

In a question period that followed a lecture given at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Maggie Nelson briefly singles out Muñoz for fashioning a "world... where all art has to do this political labor."<sup>33</sup> Nelson refutes the methodologies of those like Muñoz who cherry-pick the works that are then used to instantiate a thesis that seeks to pull others into an object world that renders us synonymous. In other words, the thesis is less about surprise than it is about community-building. Suspicious of this, Nelson wants instead a "Sontagian" mode of critique that imbues with difference "the signs of entanglement, not signs of our estrangement," using Denise Ferreira da Silva's language.<sup>34</sup> While I am not convinced that Muñoz's project was one that forced art to bear a difference-obliterating form of utility, I call up Nelson here to reiterate that the objects – broadly construed as that which is open to theorization – assembled here resonate with me vis-à-vis my political commitments to a world without premature and preventable Indigenous death. The art

and poetry I analyze vibrates of course with meaning that is not exclusively captured by an analytic like joy – how could it be? There is always more to the story. Muñoz taught me, though, that it is not unintellectual to spend time with and to blend into that which inspires us and fills us with hope.

In *Secrets from the Centre of the World*, Joy Harjo makes poetry out of the photography of Stephen Strom, and in her preface she argues that “the distance he intimates make sense in terms of tribal vision. We feel how it all flows together, and time takes on an expansive, mythical sense.”<sup>35</sup> With the caveat that I do not subscribe to a biology of race that falls short of explaining the social life of indigeneity, I do believe that there is something like “tribal vision,” that there is something about the feeling of indigeneity that enables us to see via an optic unavailable to others. In my unpublished thesis submitted as part of the requirements for my M.St. in Women’s Studies at the University of Oxford, I called this “decolonial sight,” which is an embodied mode of apprehending the riot of time, a visualizing practice that glimpses the ways in which the present already bears the world we want. Sometimes we have to tilt our heads to see the world-to-come. The otherworldly is a category of the experience of indigeneity.

From Muñoz and Harjo, I inherit a conceptual arsenal that enables me to listen to the frequencies of the modality of existence that are utopian, even if they are crowded by the miseries of coloniality. This conceptual frame – of spotting seeds of life in the ashes of enactments of state violence – burgeons too from the hermeneutic that Saidiya Hartman brilliantly makes use of *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*; she writes: “rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in

which terror can hardly be discerned.”<sup>36</sup> To be sure, I do not mimetically operationalize this optic; rather, I seek to examine the scenes at which affects like joy and care are difficult to distinguish from the less glamorous work of survival. I attend to a temporally and thematically diverse archive that I have assembled of art, literature, film, current events, events in recent history, historical documents, and autobiographical experiences that all illuminate performances of world-making at the interstice of colliding times and places, of a rotted past that endures and a future that is at once already here and still to be actualized. My objects are bookended by a time frame that is more than a century-long, which should nod to the *long durée* of hope as a modality of life in Indigenous social worlds. The essays can be read individually or as a polyphony, one that announces the multitudinous ways that Indigenous peoples ward off the injunction to live a quiet, suffering-filled life.

What should become apparent is that I use lived experience as raw material to articulate the oft-overlooked ways that a singular life is or can be indicative of a larger pattern of behavior and sociality that is keyed in the register of futurity. Implicit here is an understanding of an individual’s life as a worldly experience, which is to say that it unfolds and is enmeshed in an affective sphere that is shared and co-produced. I operationalize the form of the personal essay to do much of the theorizing that follows; to me, the personal essay agitates the academic norm to shun oneself from what counts as the subject of a study. For Ann Cvetkovich, the essay is a “public genre for speculative thinking” insofar as it veers from “the usual methods of cultural critique”; Cvetkovich writes in the mode of the essayistic as a symptom of her longing for “new forms of writing and knowledge that come from affective experience, ordinary life, and alternative archives.”<sup>37</sup> I am interested in exploring what criticism might look and sound like if the archive at hand is a body

and more precisely if that body is mine. In my very corporeality I am a record of a life lived against the embargo on Indigenous life at the heart of Canada as a colonial project still savagely unraveling. In my grandparents' and parents' will to shower me with affection they evinced what Cvetkovich calls "the utopia of everyday habit,"<sup>38</sup> an ensemble of feeling and action that amounts over time to a less diminished life. As a writer, it is my duty to account for this labor of love, which is always in part a gamble for it is rare that the dispossessed exceed the structures that swallow them up. To write in a way that is memoiristic, then, is itself a critical method insofar as it is in the minutiae of what has already happened that "the revolution and utopia are made... not in giant transformations or rescues."<sup>39</sup> I write as well about love, sex, trauma, and other hard topics to try to capture both what it feels like to be bogged down by machinations of oppression and what it feels like to be in the thick of modes of relationality that surge with radical possibility. In the fragility and vulnerability of my autobiographical writing I want to illuminate what it is to survive and how beautiful it is to be in concert with others who want nothing but to be freer.

My modes of address shape-shift as the conceptual terrains of the essays shape-shift. Sometimes I must conjure an "us" and a "we" that is Indigenous, that pirouettes through the reserve and other Indigenous social worlds. Other times I invoke a "you" that is majoritarian, settler, non-Indigenous. I do this with confidence that my readers will sense the differences by way of affective captivation and dissonance. We feel inside our chests when we are being beckoned, when we are being challenged. What's more, I rely on metaphor, sometimes to the extent that the metaphors compete and contradict, because it, like a utopian imaginary, gives up on the fantasy that the present is all there is, that proof is all we have to power inquiry. In *Men in the Off Hours*, Anne Carson remarks that "metaphor teaches the mind / to enjoy error."<sup>40</sup> What if the error is a

metaphysical one? An error that sharply renders the possibility that the present is something we can untether ourselves from? Metaphor is a joyous matter because it can illuminate lines of thought that make our joy less of a sociological impossibility.

Across genres and forms, what Ocean Vuong calls a “restlessness of form,”<sup>41</sup> there are signs that the political violence in which we are mired cannot wholly extinguish that which it despises. This is the crux of settler colonialism, its inability to exhaust a people who continue to have the capacity to dream up otherwise forms of embodiment, being, and temporality. With hints of a world-to-come everywhere we are and have been, a more utopian tomorrow is on the horizon.

### **An NDN Boyhood**

My twin brother, Jesse, and I were born marked by a history of colonization and a public discourse of race we can't peel from our skin. We were tattooed by that which arises from the structural violence of being made to take on a mode of embodiment that erodes from the inside out with vicious precision. At the same time, we came into being because love is mathematical: when two people desire each other they multiply, in various shapes and forms. In our very corporeality we are thus a container for the terror of the past and the beauty that it can't in the end negate. In this way, we, like NDN boys everywhere, are subliminal.

The first year of Jesse's and my life was a hotbed of decisions, desires, and disavowals that would hover above our shared emotional worlds deep into adolescence. This isn't my story to tell in painful and careful detail, so the picture I paint now is one that's rehashed from a handful of sources, including something like intuition.

Here goes.

My mom and dad loved while coated in the ash of history. Twenty-somethings entranced by the ecstasy of optimism, they made a family out of nothing but the human need to be a part of something less resonant with toxicity than solitude. They didn't know how to ask the question Sheila Heti poses in *Motherhood*, which is: "Who is it for me to bring all this unfolding into being?" Perhaps the philosophical basis for their family was that they no longer wanted to exhale smoke.

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The truth is, these brief reflections on the sensibilities of my parents might be more autobiographical than not. If we subscribe to the idea that we inherit bits and pieces of the psychosocial lives of our family, then it might also be descriptive of a time and place I now inhabit, in their aftermath. Perhaps this pressurized orientation to memory is always the case with life-writing. The writer is called on by others to do the politically significant and ethically charged work of construction and then documentation. This is my job: to report from the scene of where an undead past and a still-to-be-determined present collide.

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By the age of twenty-three, my mom had four children, two girls and two boys, between the ages of three months and five years. My dad says Jesse (his legal name is Jesse-Lee) and I were named so as to usher us into the world of rodeo. I have seen the pictures of toddler-me dressed up as a cowboy, my dad positioned in the left corner of the frame, smiling, perhaps bathing in the scene

of self-recognition before him. Names are worldly, and it was with that knowledge, that emotional and maternal knowledge, that my mom gave us her last name, passed onto her from her dad: Belcourt. I imagine this was a rare practice in the nineties in northern Alberta, which was unshakably conservative. I like to think my mom did this to foreground our enmeshment, how irrevocably *hers* we are, how even outside of the womb we populate the affective house of her, then and now.

The story goes, my mom and dad fell out of love, hard, with an always-accelerating speed, shortly after our birth. A forest fire can't be a refuge. My mom wanted to live in a land without dangerous weather – in this way, we're profoundly alike. According to my dad, he went about the drama of raising twins on the reserve, enlisting the aid of a similarly inexperienced nephew. Six months slowly inched by as his sense of maternity disintegrated. On our first birthday, having lived twelve months in an ecology of complicated love, of sociological forces that elided our awareness, we went under the care of my mom's mom, nôhkom. It's impossible to deny that this reorganization indelibly ordered Jesse's and my future, those collectively and individually lost and those newly birthed. Language is inadequate here to bring into focus the communal effort, involving an extended family unit that included my parents and their parents, that went into raising two NDN boys not in a way that would ignore the coloniality of the world but so as to engender life that might breach its grip. This is the old art of parenting in order to keep NDN kids safe from what lingers from a governmentally sanctioned death wish against them.<sup>42</sup>

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NDN boys are ideas before they are bodied. Our lives are muffled by a flurry of accusations that outrun us. Ideas of this vexed sort leave a burnt path in their wake. Feet like ours are singed with a history that isn't done with us. There is a point – call it a turning point – at which NDN boys can become angry men of at least two types (to be sure, I'm not suggesting that this is fatalistic; the norms of gender and race fail to regulate us completely, to paraphrase Judith Butler): one that is imprisoning and riotous at once, a mode of being that sucks the air out of the room, and another that is quieter but equally as denigrating, a slow injunction on happiness and possibility. Both beget a sense of immobility – these are ways of life at the heart of colonialism that cut along gendered lines. There is a host of violent acts done as a symptom of these performances of racialized masculinity. This is a well-documented facet of NDN life: the trauma of colonialism erupts in the minds and bodies of men, who then bombard the lives of women and girls, two-spirit peoples, and queers. Today, we are beholden to the work of feminist mothering and fathering to repair what has been done and to bring about boys and men who answer the call of democratizing the labour of care.

What is to to live, to suffer, and, above all, to love in the most inflexible of affect worlds fashioned to produce men who eat “too much of the sunset?”<sup>43</sup> We are haunted by that turning point, brought back to it again and again. But, it doesn't once and for all consign us to a ravaged life. There is more to be said; there is another mode of life to inhabit.

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In my first memory of nôhkom, she and I are on the couch in our home in the hamlet of Jousard, only a few kilometres from the place of our political and social belonging, Driftpile. What I



remember most is a feeling of childish liveliness, which orbits nôhkom, and her enduring attentiveness to the ebb and flow of my behaviour.

I've found myself unable to properly go about the task of articulating the infinitude of nôhkom's care. How does one thank another for manufacturing a world to experiment with the precarity of aliveness? I might spend the rest of my life inching closer to that place of articulation, to a place where her act of giving into the demands of care are made visible, celebrated. How could I strive for anything but this unfinishable avowal? How does one remain unwaveringly answerable to this call from nowhere and everywhere? On the other hand, how do I resist enfleshing a writer-me that is obsessed with bringing into view this unrepayable debt while the world-me idles by? Too much can go missing in this space of translation. Maybe the onus isn't to sputter out in the ruts of the abstract, of the textual, but to live in a manner that cites those dear to the heart. Butler claimed that language and styles of behaviour are citational, that they echo from a history of use. Joy, then, is a politics of citation.

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Like most twins, Jesse and I were inseparable. We were Pokémon trainers and baseball players, boreal forest foragers and amateur engineers. At times, however, I strain to call up shared memories; I suspect this is because our senses of selfhood were intertwined, that we were bound up in a "you" and an "us" and a "we" that hardened into a singular entity over time, having begun in utero. What I do know is that many, relatives and otherwise, made us out to be opposites, good and bad, feminine and masculine, academic and unruly. Perhaps they were simply pointing out the parts of us that bifurcated, in opposition to our drive to enact a sameness that upset liberal norms

of individuation. Maybe it's a mere psychosocial fact that the lives of twins are labyrinthine like any other social form. There is a photograph in an album somewhere that commemorates a Halloween in the late nineties. I'm dressed as Tinkie Winkie, the purple Teletubbie, and Jesse is dressed as the blue Power Ranger. This photograph is regularly invoked as evidence of our disparate identities (and my nascent queerness). Nevertheless, Jesse and I were collaborators and accomplices, best friends and sometimes rivals. Which is to say that we too were key architects of the world of care that brought and is still bringing us into being, against the odds, in opposition to the insufficiencies of gender that colonialism yields.

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“maybe i am here in the way that a memory is here? now, ain't that fucking sad and beautiful?”<sup>44</sup>

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It is likely impossible to trace when, where, and under what conditions those who arrived with enmity on the shores of what is now improperly called Canada inaugurated a modality of gender that produced men who self-destruct. Surely a historian more disciplined than I has tried to do this, but my suspicion is that one would end up again and again with an incomplete bag of events, theoretical inclinations, and emotional responses. That this blow to subjectivity doesn't invite curiosity from those outside our communities doesn't however lessen its cruelty and longevity. We might look to the testimonial record that burgeoned from the atrocities of the twentieth century bathed in the language of state care and fiduciary obligation. Here, for example, is the public

testimony of a woman who attended St. Michael's Residential School in Alert Bay on Vancouver Island, British Columbia:

“I remember entering through the front doors, and the sound of those doors closing still haunts me when I go to places that look like . . . that building . . . when the door closes . . . The fear and the hurt . . . there's nothing you can do once you're . . . once you're there.”<sup>45</sup>

Though not explicitly vocalized, we might hear in this harrowing account of the reverberations of the trauma of state education a nodal point in the history of colonization that has to do with the brutalization of NDNs at every conceivable level. This is to say that throughout the long twentieth century, Canada incubated death worlds where meaning was made to injure via the categories we have come to inhabit with ease. Part of what is ghoulish about the fungibility of those doors, those facades that lived on in horror-filled memories, is that they bear too the traumatic experience of gender as it was being unmade and remade in the bodies of NDN children.

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It's sometime in the early 2000s, and the wretchedness of history is still revealing itself, testimonial by testimonial, angered and shaken voice by angered and shaken voice, until there's a pile up of words and tears that Canada can't obliterate from its cultural memory. I can't identify the source of my curiosity, but I ask nimôsom if he had been made to attend the Indian Residential School at Jussard. *Yes, but I don't want to talk about it*, he says without looking up from his plate.

This “Yes, but I don’t want to talk about it” floats above our family like an open secret. I watch nimôsom struggle against emotion, against gender, but never waver in his drive to break from the spell of that haunted door, that omnipresent and cursed doorway, in order to provide for our family. Everywhere NDN men are in a struggle against gender.

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There are cavernous gaps in my memory in which people I love with fortitude today, those without whom being in the world would be a taxing affair, don’t exist, as though my brain has been surgically hampered. Rather than let those gaps swallow me up, I plant flowers of all sorts there. Daisies and prairie crocuses. Northern Alberta flowers that grow in the wild, ones that hold a firm place in my childhood psyche where bodies should be. There is no use marinating on the thorny question of how and for what reasons there is nothingness where there should be a haze of good feeling. A thick opacity is missing. Again, it isn’t mine to estimate who or what was the thief in the prairie, subarctic night. Perhaps I write now, in the mode of autobiography, to stimulate the conditions that might call up that opacity, the fragile and engrossing density of memory. In this way, I’m an archaeologist of the disappeared.

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Nôhkom worked full-time as a receptionist at the health centre on the reserve, so when nimôsom, a mechanic, had an uncompromising string of repairs to attend to at his garage, Jesse and I would stay at my dad’s house, also on the reserve. In and out of his house flowed a host of relatives and

family friends, all irrevocably thrown into the orbit of softness and openness that was my dad. To this day, his house is something of a brown commons, an ideational and affective infrastructure that, to use José Esteban Muñoz's language, "holds and shelters brown life within its walls,"<sup>46</sup> one that dissipates the governing power of the male property-bearer and proliferates space for other forms of life, other ways of togetherness. For the untutored eye, for the normatively socialized onlooker, my dad's house, his houses, might be best aestheticized as a disorderedness, one without law or social norm. It is, however, this anti-authoritarian rhythm that irradiates a more politically radical geography of care. In retrospect, this is likely why Jesse and I rarely wanted to leave when nôkhom came to retrieve us after work. This is what I want my home to make possible, the shelter for brown life I want to prop up, wherever I end up. This, then, is part of a feminist project that Maggie Nelson describes as a socialization or democratization of the maternal function, which is to ask: How are we to architect places through which NDN life flows, through which it isn't slowed down or disappeared but embraced and therefore multiplied?

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I never felt the pressure to actualize my parents' dreams. Not one. Or, if any, it was the dream of making a life unhampered by the strictures of indecision and ignorance, which is probably something we all want for ourselves anyways. One time my dad said I was living the life that he could've had, had he refused to let anyone be the bearer of his optimism. I wonder what it is about my life now that he wishes for his past self, the self-that-could-have-been. Like most parents, he inspects me through the rosy filter of unconditional love, but he doesn't have enough material to develop a complex idea of the intricacies of Billy-Ray Belcourt the adult, who is different from Billy-Ray Belcourt the child. I don't mourn this lack of expectation, this absence

of narcissism, which is the narcissism of wanting to see oneself in one's child, to have them bloom into another you. On the contrary, without a mirror held in front of me at all times, I felt without scepticism the platitude that anything was possible.

Maybe I spoke too soon. I remember the worrisome responses from a number of relatives upon the declaration of my queerness. Despite establishing in clear yet sparse wording that their happiness was contingent on my happiness, there was also a fog of grief. This was the grief of childlessness. In my vocalization of a non-normative sexual identity, they heard too a disavowal of futurity, that I had relocated permanently to a land emptied of fathers, one inhospitable to the customs of fatherhood. Perhaps in those seconds and minutes I became less like them, less *theirs*, less bound up in the ticking time bomb of social reproduction, so less beholden to the continuation of a name, a history. In the quiet variations of tone and tempo I heard the world rearrange in their minds. I watched their language ache and falter as I myself ached and faltered.

Regardless, I forgive them just as I forgive naive versions of myself. I choose instead to appreciate the vastness with which they think of my future self, however tied it is to a fiction over which I don't hold sovereignty. I can't blame my kin for forgetting that the form for my life's emotional content isn't, as one might expect, a family but an entire world, a wilderness ruled by unknowing inside which I'm a future relic. What binds us is the knowledge that it can be devastating to discover that a loved one has forfeited everything to that which you'll never fully see for yourself. To love someone is firstly to confess: *I'm prepared to be devastated by you.*

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The noise of everyday life rings inside my head. This essay sits at the centre of the multi-sensory labyrinth that is memory recall. When not distracted by other business, I, like a janitor, scan the darkened building of me for detritus and misplaced things, something to put me to work again. When nothing jolts me out of a stupor, I stare up at the ceiling, hoping something will drop onto my face, something with which to make a mess worth looking at, worth showing to others.

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I didn't ever think I would write about this, but here we are. The conundrum is that the data that is the past is not a block of clay we can, like an artist, hammer away at. Some of us might seek to be one step ahead of memory, to whittle the loose ends of our personal histories down to a single knowable object (a block of clay or a diary or a memoir), to expose a kind of hidden or suppressed truth, to give it a form, to contain it, to master it. It is difficult to discern when I'm doing this and when I'm not.

In my case, the memory is one I have let slip from my mouth only two times. Even now I won't divulge all the details. The first person with whom I had sex was a dear friend. He and I spoke few words and no complete sentences. In the absence of language, we activated the textuality of gesture and emotion, of sense and sensation. This repeated in the thick of one hot summer. It matters what I call this now, so I hesitate to call it anything. Perhaps if it were a performance art piece I could call it *My Subjectivity* or *Becoming a Subject in the Shadow of Language* rather than having to make do with the tropes of the coming-of-age story. That this encounter has seldom lived in the world of speech, hasn't grown a skin of its own, perplexes me still. Memory, it seems, isn't

always material out of which to make art. Sometimes memory refuses us. Sometimes I'm a shoreline the water of memory drags its palm across.

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It's August 2012. I give the valedictory address in a church behind the high school. In it, I spend a great deal of time thanking family and friends for their contributions to my upbringing, to my becoming-human. During the softly named "rose ceremony," I cry as I hug a number of my relatives. As the graduates empty out of the room, I hug my dad who is sitting with his partner and their kids near the altar, at the front of the church. I realize everyone is taking in the spectacle of two NDN men in a familial embrace, both of us overcome with emotion. In those piercing seconds, we were possibility more than anything else, a mode in which NDN men rarely exist. In hugging me, my dad teaches me how to hold. In hugging me, my dad teaches me how to be held.

At night, I turn down the lights with this image. It gives me a nocturnal language – something with which to go about the unglamorous work of survival.



## **Futuromania**

“As soon as someone dies, frenzied construction of the future (shifting furniture, etc.): futuromania” - Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*

The aesthetic function of the novel, to my mind at least, is to whisper, to hide critique, to grab a reader by the throat with an invisible hand. I want no part in this. My provocations will be bare-faced. I won't trick anyone. Maybe what I want is to be violent in an *epistemic* sense; the blood will be not on my hands but on my words, an alphabet of longing. This is why I'm a poet before all else. Maybe it is best if I admit everything that is fucked up about me and my writing practice in the first paragraph of any unit of creative writing. Am I fucked up because I believe beauty is in short supply? That this lack is all I care to write about as of late? That the world is at once the condition of possibility for and addicted to this beautylessness? Probably. To be without beauty is an integral component of human life in Canada. There, I said it. Now, no one needs to feel slowed down by this heretofore unutterable sentence. This act of avowal is no heroic feat; my desperation is creaturely. I spew verbal matter even when my mouth is shut. Truth is I feel savaged by language, by the History of Language, which is always-already a History of the NDN as an Endangered Animal.

I'm a body of knowledge, not one of chemical compounds. Which is to say it is the fate of NDNs to live as ideas do. It is on the rez that one can hear words speak as though in a chorus. To tear the page is to tear our world apart. What shame to be a sentence on its knees! The day I obtained my driver's license, I followed a cumulus cloud through a maze of dirt roads until it evaporated. Forty minutes. That was all it took. I bore witness. It didn't ask this of me, but I wanted to keep watch of the dying everywhere, so I could figure out how to care for a bleeding sentence.

I admit to a friend that most days I feel like I'm sinking in on myself. She asks me to elaborate. I say, *I had a dream recently in which I was bent backwards, my arms perpendicular to the floor. This is how I wander about*, I tell her. *What others see is out of sync with the interior of my body, which is rarely still or upright. It sounds to me*, she says, *like you're plagued by a kind of dysphoria with the world. Loneliness*, I wonder out loud. *Yes*, she answers, *yes. I'm reminded*, she adds, *of a line in Claudia Rankine's Don't Let Me Be Lonely: "deep within her was an everlasting shrug."* *Not a shrug*, I protest, *but a bark, a primal shout. A beast of burden is a beast nonetheless.*

I pull over to the side of a dirt road to change a flat tire. I'm in the middle of nowhere, which for some is all we have left and all there ever was. The tire isn't a tire but a balloon that cost one dollar and ninety-nine cents at a grocery store on the main street of nowhere. The balloon isn't filled with air but with grief. The grief isn't a response to just one event but to a continuance of events, a horrible rhythm of events. The tire that isn't a tire but a balloon pops and suddenly the heaviness of being is what tethers us to the earth while the world floats away. In the acoustic aftermath of the pop, in the cacophony of its wake, there is "pure gesture,"<sup>47</sup> there is a feral form of freedom.

A structuralist on my worst days, I fixate on suffering's form, its toothy outline. This gets me nowhere but nowhere. The jury is still out on the question of whether function outweighs structure in the *longue durée* of settler colonialism. Some say the fact of our killability and the fact of their bloodthirstiness is the ur-function.<sup>48</sup> Others are inclined to flesh out the methods and ways of thinking of this prolonged manhunt, how it evolves and manifests where we can barely diagnose it. Regardless, that so few have packed their bags and left in opposition to this unethics of settlement is an affront to poetry. Is all Canadian poetry an incantatory performance of an impossible subject position? Not mine to answer once and for all, but I do read with a tilted head and squinted eyes. No matter how much of the literature of forgiveness I take in, which sings in a prayerful register, I can't shed this ancestral anger. I visited St. John's, Newfoundland in the summer of 2018. An elected councilor mentioned that there has been an uproar in response to the city's routinized declaration that they sit atop the traditional lands of the Beothuk, now extinct. Fevered locals have called for archaeological evidence to prove this act of emplacement. The "now extinct," so carelessly narrated, so emptied of its terror, has been altogether wiped from the city's political imagination. They built and continue to build their lives in a bout of historical amnesia. The ungrievable, those of us who worship an impossible future, we who never were, are rarely granted as sizeable a public rage as theirs on that tiny, haunted island. This is our racialized burden, our embargoed emotivity. Your staying put isn't an innocent stance. Nothing will make this hurt less.

At the time of writing, I'm not in an argument with Canada. Yet, Canada has its gloved hands over its ears, as though someone were about to question why it is splayed out on a toilet like a widower on an open casket. Canada has yet to recoil at its reflection in the rear-view mirror. America, its deranged brother, is already engorged on itself like a nesting doll. Canada lives in my refrigerator. It spoils my groceries, just days old. It hangs, like an uvula, from my throat, governing my speech, draining it of its venom. Canada is more akin to noise pollution than the canopy of a boreal forest. Not a country, but a radioactive wolf in wolf's clothing.

I have a phobia of the police. How could I trust he who disavowed personhood to instead be a gun? He who is bullets rather than an organism capable of nurturance? To be a gun is to be against life. I want to be for life and to be against that which is against life. Living in a world where people are guns is a brutal legacy. To some, there is an incomprehensibility to this. Why divest oneself of the ethics of being a person and thus refuse to be open to the charity of those around you? A bullet is beholden to nothing, not even the barrel that births it. We can't ask a gun for forgiveness; its maker has already been empowered by law to shed blame, to be blameless. The police are differently personed; they are without souls, thus incredibly ugly. I was about to say that this made them non-beings, but no that is mine and our imprint; this makes them beings writ large in a colonialist sense, the apogee of an ontology of modernity. The police are at the same time deader than even those of us who are the ontologically dead. The police don't live in the world or in a reality shared by others. The police are faceless, which engenders a Levinasian dilemma. With what do we signal our humanity in the line of fire of their guns? Forever is not an impossibility for them. In a haven of infinitude, which is not the world-as-it-is, the police are zombified. Zombies are at once beyond justice and its deranged progeny. Police are grievable subjects par excellence. Once the state manufactured a monopoly on grief, the marginalized went on embarrassing the privileged with our buckling, bullet-holed knees.

Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary* is not poetry per se but a record of a struggle with aliveness, a struggle that eschews and indeed consumes the primacy of writing. I, in my twenties, feel a lot like Barthes in his sixties, grief-stricken, without the nucleus of his affective life, his mother. In pursuit not of understanding but of misunderstanding, of a "sense of life," which is not "a life" because "a life" is too unmusical. Misunderstanding here signifies not confusion, Barthes teaches us, but a modality of interpretation, a way of thinking, that enables one to become one's "own mother," against the evidence that this is an unbearable project. There is, however, a key distinction: to be NDN is to be without a "sense of life" from the get-go. All of us are unlucky in that we make soggy memories in a weaponized loneliness that is irreversible. There is a "discontinuous character" not just to our mourning but also to our aging. In our homes, the furniture is always shifting while we sleep. I wake up and there is a sofa on top of me. The sofa is both fictive, a thought experiment of sorts, and a psycho-onto-epistemic emblem of the experience of NDN life, our tortured embodiment, which is televised and made into bad art as a type of bodylessness. We are without a flesh to signal our futurity, overwrought by signification, in the no man's land of a wild imaginary. Soon, there will be a sofa everywhere my shame grows: everywhere.



Pulled over just outside Westlock, Alberta. An hour outside Edmonton. A conversation with a white male poet about Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* comes back to me. I mention that I think the novel is riveting in its restlessness and that Heti takes an ostensibly refined and knowable concept – motherhood – and disaggregates it, making it curiouser and thus open for resignification. *There is a cinematic quality to the experience of reading*, I tell him, *as though witnessing a sculptor at work*. He says, *Right, but I am not sure I will read on. To me, it boils down to the fact that there are just more important things to write about*. This signified to me that he had been mothered by someone who seldom put pen to paper. This means that his mother didn't let him in on the open secret of her ugliness, which is what creative writing *does* – it traffics in ugly. In protest, I ask, *What about those for whom their mothers were passing cars or an open flame in the part of the brain where memories are made?* I wait for my skin to stretch itself over his, so that he can feel the panic I do, an accumulation of all the motherless men with whom I have spoken about matters of love and heartbreak. I take in emotional resonances of this sort, catalog them – this is my bioethics. I thought this was also my pedagogy of empathy. But there I was, flat on the floor – a question mark with hair.

Brennan Ahenakew, twenty, was found dead in a burnt out car on the Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation. Three months later, the RCMP ruled that “nothing indicate[d] foul play.” You should know this by now: poetry is the act of “hearing beyond what we are able to hear.”<sup>49</sup> With settler gossip of this nature, the RCMP sought to order grief, to pressurize the narrative and what could be publicly felt about Ahenakew and his loved ones. “Foul play” here is a well-oiled machine, hidden away from the discursive grid in which NDNs are made to live and die in ways that are without shock value. I dream in English and it is foul play. If I could free sense-making from the spell of the juridical and thus come to mediate what “foul” can incite, I would drag that burnt out car across the prairies, through towns of no significance. With what remains, I would make another kind of music, one that would floor those within earshot, using only the ground beneath my feet. An ethnographic event. A revolutionary moment of acoustic violence. My music would be pungent and foggy. In the sensory world of my grief, there would be touch and sound and nothing else. My song would go on forever – “a future / music still unheard.”<sup>50</sup> People would fall in love to it, sleep to it, have breakfast to it. Still, they would be corrupted by the hackneyed fact of their living. Too entangled in the world to write, caught up in a performance of sorrow, I would finally be a poet.

When I wake up, I think there should be flowers at my feet, but there never are. I could be a [insert overdetermined noun], and no one would be able to discern it, a starved nothingness spewing from my ears to no alarm. In my bedroom, the words “political” and “depressed” go hand-in-hand, as though to enunciate one is to mouth the other. This is the hallmark of institutional discourse. How much devastation can a word unleash? How much subtext can I hide under my armpits in a laboratory for excited speech? Sometimes I live not in an apartment but in a glass cube, as though exhibited in a museum of political depression. I lob words at the glass, though this is an inadequate characterization because what I do is both before and more than linguistic, a post-verbal conduct. I experiment with the intensity with which words torpedo out of me. A mouth is no longer a mouth when it twists language into something without and against form. A mouth is no longer a mouth when it can't hold back what is inside it.

Something happened in those death-schools that made happiness into a rotted thing. I smile now and it is still a rotten smile. My teeth are historical solidities. My breath reeks of the loneliness of living under a bed. I confused a man for a prairie sky. Up there, in him, how I hoped to have my soured breath drained out of me! At sunset, NDN boys look red, drenched in biopower. Our fury is animalistic. Can a poem resemble animality? Can a poem be ontologically resonant with it? Fury is a revolutionary habit. I have faith in the emancipatory power of rage and that is it. In my fury, I'm differently gendered. I want to be a bad girl. I want to be a bad girl so there is a musicality to my rebellion. To be a bad girl is to be one of the most furious things in the modern world. To be a bad girl is to be one of the most admonished things in the modern world. A bad girl is she who has rid herself of the brutalities of socialization. I want to be looked at as though I were something to be disappeared; no one will look at me adoringly and because of this I will be freed from the sovereign's clenched fist. The antithesis of the bad girl is the man who self-destructs. She savages the codes of gender; he is made rancid by them. I'm no tutored dialectician: it is too soon to tell what they together make possible in their wake. To be a bad girl is to be alive against the odds, a screeching question for whom a funeral is the sole acoustic environment into which she assimilates. Let me be a bad girl.

NDN writer bemoans the Red Condition, which is that wherever he goes he posits his queerness as a metaphysical conundrum. Modern History aggregates inside him like a wasp colony with each lispy word. Everywhere he is met by rows and rows of Michel Foucaults who promise he is freer than he thinks. NDN writer chuckles to himself now and then about the idiosyncrasy of this aphorism. NDN writer is reminded of Judith Butler who in *Gender Trouble* ruminates on what she calls the “sentimental” Foucault, the Foucault who despite his paranoid habits of diagnosis and disavowal sometimes paused and stood beside himself to nod to a less disciplinary elsewhere. Legendarily, Foucault seldom spoke autobiographically. Him and NDN writer do not have this in common. But, NDN writer does suspect that Foucault’s sentimentality had everything to do with something he has already written down in another poem: no one runs to theory unless there is a dirt road in him. NDN writer is hard at work on the paradox that one can be born into a past and at the same time undecipherable to it (that is his job: to keep watch of paradox). NDN writers knows this is not a new undertaking. To be unoriginal might have humiliated NDN writer a few years ago, but today it doesn’t matter because he is in a boat with a bunch of Foucaults minutes away from an island where the only universal is that there are no bodies to bury and thus no longer a need to make shovels out of our heavy hands.

White empathy razes everything in its path. Since I can remember, the world hasn't lasted longer than a single day before it was flushed down the toilet. I take in the news south of the border. I take in the news of the border. Knives flower from the soles of my feet. Even my tiptoeing is a kind of violence. I don't shed a tear about this. I cry about other matters: that so much of being alive in the space-time of the Americas is about playing dead. To go about the drudgery of the day, I have to at least marginally play dead to white anger and white sovereignty and white hunger and white forgiveness and white innocence. If one is alive to all these rabid emotions all the time, one experiences the world as though it were nothing but digital TV static. It is a sedative, so indifference is no armor. That my heart beats loudly doesn't immunize me from the static or make it have less of a grip on my well-being. I understand this to be my Canadian inheritance.

Until today, I railed against the grisly fate reserved for men like me. I'm an anachronism in the way that all queer men are anachronisms – far too early. I'm a poet in the way that all queer men are poets (not a novel thought, likely). Ours is the audacity of begging for “a compassionate / wilderness.”<sup>51</sup> José Esteban Muñoz: “The queer citizen-subject labours to live in a present that is calibrated . . . to sacrifice our liveness.”<sup>52</sup> I don't need a record of my here-ness. What I do need is to take ecstasy with José Esteban Muñoz. Paradise is wherever he is. Until then, I will try to be a pretty wound at least once.<sup>53</sup> Confession: I'm not yet comfortable taking my shirt off in a poem. Subjectivity abuses. Subjectivity rescues. Men shoved my head into the clouds. I missed so much. There is humiliation in this dystopia, too. Here, my words appear in the air, upside down:

My mouth is a dirty floor. I'm sweeping up the dirt with my imagination.

## Theories of Reserve Life

### INTRODUCTION

We live in the ashes of an era of forced migration inaugurated by the brutal feat of race-based death policy called reservization. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, the Indian Act of 1867, and the Numbered Treaties (1871-1921) form an aggregate of meta-principles about territoriality that suspend the Indian, who is made answerable to the Crown, in a legal limbo of sorts caught in a semi-sovereign state between administration of political life and state oversight. In what follows, I use paradox as an optic to spot what lingers in radical excess wherever state power is marshalled. This means that reservization simultaneously demonstrates that we are at the whim of the state and utterly free from it, for the state cannot govern all facets of daily life on the reserve. Sculpted with gross indifference to NDN livability, the reserve was and is a problem for emotion. It is the site of an affective opening to what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls “the eroding edge of pathos.”<sup>54</sup> But, “the eroding edge” is also home to emotional and political intensities that escape or elide juridical capture. Again, we are in the throes of a form of administrative power that violates via neglect. Our history of neglect, however, also suggests that we are the abandoned who need but perform an escape from the ditch of history to enact a world-to-come. What interests me about reservization is thus its constitutive defect, how it spawns an ecology of feeling that erodes the mandate of the state to make us into the unseen, into something like a vaporous population, caught in the air, atomized, and swallowed up by time. The reserve, the back alley of modernity, is a liminal space that makes everywhere else in a settler state habitable. Nonetheless, it is also where we were and are left to our own devices to refashion what is thinkable in the thick of an



environment that wards off the labor of regard and compassion. Outside the watch of what are now two ministries of NDN misery, we concoct our own social experiment, an indeterminate one, one without end, but always alive and rebellious.

## LESSER SLAVE LAKE

I write on the shores of Lesser Slave Lake, a place where history is “too much like the wind.”<sup>55</sup> Here, history, like air in motion, is not always something to behold, especially when it blurs into the background noise of the ordinary. Nonetheless, it sounds out, and sometimes in competition with a dominant auditory emission. If we think of the present as something like a dominant auditory emission, then this means that we have to strive to hear the low hum of context. As both vibration and wind, history is of the atmosphere. In northern Alberta, the atmosphere is, of course, subarctic, but swept up in it is also the terror of settlement. Bounded and unsafe, it is dense with the alarm of biopower. To the untutored eye, the affect worlds that bubble up at the water’s edge and nearby are outside of the political, unhinged from the thick history of colonial dispossession that brought and is still bringing Canada into existence. Since at least 1900 and deep into the sixties, this comparatively small pocket of the province was the site of a terrible and terror-making social and necropolitical experiment of epic proportions: the Indian residential school. Lesser Slave Lake covers just 1,160 km<sup>2</sup>, but at its western and eastern shores (at Grouard, Jousard, and what is now Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park) were a total of four of the abovementioned schools throughout the long twentieth century (two at the same location, under different names). What happened in those death worlds is now in the non-place of unrepresentability. Surely we can surmise the generics of what horror unraveled there from the testimonial record of those who broke through the sound barrier of Canadian historical ignorance to pronounce a violence that was at once infrastructural, cultural, psychosocial, sexual, and biological, but the trauma that polluted the air of those schools is both more than and contra representation. State power, against joy, against care, made trouble for thought and image-making. It produced a zone of ethical abandonment that

continues to haunt those who make life on the reserves and in the towns on the shores of Lesser Slave Lake through which Highway 2 runs.

But, however tinged the air of a haunted place is with a trauma that is made anew beyond its expiration date (which has heretofore looked like a governmental apology, a cash payout, and a nation-wide set of public engagements), there is always the possibility of another sort of respiration. This is the conspiracy at the heart of this project, both in the sense of an uninstitutional or fugitive act and of collective breath. It is not that we can retreat to a space of innocence that is prior to or freed from that overdetermined and overdetermining form of subjugation. Instead, our togetherness, which is both a symptom of and in opposition to the vulgarities of state-making, is a cause for celebration. Fred Moten: “the unremitting cause for celebration of that which cannot be celebrated.”<sup>56</sup> We cannot abandon the world, but also we already have. This is a paradox with which to agitate social inquiry, not one to hide away, not one to sweep under the rug. In one another’s company, we plunge into a debt that is not the debt that those who plunder the world with the well-oiled machines of racial capitalism amass in perpetuity. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Moten and Stefano Harney write: “Debt is mutual. Credit runs one way. But debt runs in every direction, scatters, escapes, seeks refuge. The debtor seeks refuge among other debtors, acquires debt from them, offers debt to them. The place of refuge is the place to which you can only owe more and more because there is no creditor, no payment possible. This refuge, this place of bad debt, is what we call the fugitive public.”<sup>57</sup> Joy as I understand it is what motors the accrual of debt. It is the emotional house inside which those who are on the run from a past that is not over seek refuge.<sup>58</sup> It is not that joy bears radical possibility in and of itself. Like on the shores of Lesser Slave Lake, NDN publics everywhere burgeon joy despite the suffocating

violence that makes a fool of the lungs – it is the “despite” that renders joy political. That we laugh and care for one another and watch one another’s kids and pow wow and feast are matters of deep sociological significance given the brutal history out of which these joyous practices emerge, however incredulously. We are still in the inchoate afterlife of the cruelties of Indian policy, so it is imperative that we nest in and speculate about all of that which is greater than and in contradistinction to that ever-changing, ever-compounding cruelty.

We are more than non-beings from the badlands of modernity. We are here at the edge of the world, and there are doorways everywhere.

## A DEATH DOCUMENT FROM 1935

The reserve is where we were and are to be done in by time, to be ousted from the shallow protection of the body politic, made to live out a wretched existence under the watchful yet sadistic eye of the city that deals in NDN misery, Ottawa. The reserve is where sociality was meant to slip through our fingertips, where the threat of body snatching was and is always-already, where those who brutalized on behalf of the state could freely derange NDN performance, suspending it on the barbed-wire fence between life and death. This is to say that the reserve is governed by an absurd logic that NDNS would not enact care against the embargo on care that is Canada. Case in point: in a letter dated July 24, 1935 from the Office of the Indian Agent at Driftpile, Alberta, H. P. L'Heureux accounts for the seizure of the "monthly ration" of the family of J. B. Gambler, "an Indian of Calling Lake" who made fugitives out of his children on the run from a residential school in Wabasca. Gambler refused to allow the state to "regain possession" of his children, to heed to the process of making-property that was state education, to accelerate the circuitry of biopower that motored state-making in the long twentieth century. Gambler refused all of this: he swore at the Indian Agent and threatened to shoot him dead. In response, the Indian Agent marshalled the extralegal power of the state, tapped into its monopoly on torture and withheld food, which is of course a tactic of arresting NDN vitality, unleashed in the domain of the biological. I do not know what happened to Gambler or to his children, whether or not they were stolen from him again, whether or not he got revenge on that Indian Agent, but I do know that what this document accounts for, against itself, against the correspondence of the grim reapers at Driftpile, Wabasca, and Calling Lake, is the unfinishability of settlement, that we protect our own, that our ancestors

did resist the debilitating wrath of the settler state during some of its grisliest times. We are not sick and tired of running away. Today, everywhere thickens with the possibility of NDN uprising.

## THE REZ

The Rez is something in campy excess of the reserve. In her seminal essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Susan Sontag writes about camp as an aesthetic experience: “Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>59</sup> Following Butler, drag has become something of a metonym for camp in that it exposes not only the violability of gendered norms, which are articulated at the levels of biology and sociality, but also the possibility for new modes of subjectivization that do not cathect the body with a vulnerability that is injurious – “the norm fails to determine us completely.”<sup>60</sup> The Rez is thus campy insofar as it is performed as a subversive remaking of the codes of NDN life, which are dreamt up in a racial imaginary that drowns us in the dirty waters of signification. The Rez demystifies the haze of “realness” that surrounds NDNs everywhere. Much like drag, the Rez is comprised of a discourse, styles of behavior, a visual field, and a set of norms that are routinely subject to improvisation. The convergence of all of these factors creates a world that is mobile and makeshift, precious and ever-proliferating. In sum, the Rez is what is produced by those in the outskirts of the good life who refuse to submit to the invisibility regime that undergirds the logic of reservization. Snotty Nose Rez Kids, a hip hop duo that lives in Vancouver, have a line that goes something like (though I haven’t been able to find it since): you can take the snotty nose rez kid out of the rez, but you can’t take the rez out of him. The Rez is an affective structure that we co-produce with those with shared histories that is coded not with grief but with an energy that is vitalizing. It is unlocated, for it pops up any- and everywhere. With those like us, in the open secret that is our conviviality and hospitality, we enact a Rez that is both unseen and against disappearance.

*FIRE SONG* (2015)

Adam Garnet Jones's *Fire Song* (2015) is a film that torpedoed right into the cacophonous atmosphere of reserve life. Let us consider the film's para-text: "Andrew Martin gives a stellar performance as Shane, a gay Anishinaabe teenager in Northern Ontario, struggling to support his family after his sister's suicide. Originally Shane planned to go away to college in the fall, and he had been trying to convince his secret boyfriend to come with him. Now he is torn between responsibilities at home and the promise of freedom calling from the city. When he finally has to choose between family or future, what will Shane do?" The film is a hard one to watch, for we are made to arrive again and again at the scene of history's elaboration. Shane and David are caught up in a discourse that imbues the reserve with particularized meaning, as that which cannot empower a queer world. Following Muñoz's *Disidentifications* we might wager that Shane and David disidentify with the heteronormative terrain of the reserve, and that they do this by retreating to the space of the queer bedroom, for example. They desire a reserve, but desire it with a difference.<sup>61</sup> They seize the crumbs of social agency to perform a reserve that "should be, that could be, and that will be."<sup>62</sup> Shane and David transform the cultural logic of the reserve as a queer death-world. They leave, but they leave behind kernels of radical possibility: they sneak in queer looks at the lake; they are beside themselves with desire in the bedroom. They suspend the reserve in a state of ambivalence, meaning that it is open to re-signification, to a performance of world-making that might allow us to be as queer on the reserve as our hearts desire.<sup>63</sup>



REZ FAG<sup>64</sup>

Can the Rez Fag speak?

The Rez Fag both is and isn't: how are we to undo the ideational deficit of melancholy?

Everywhere the Rez Fag is pulverized: at the kitchen table, at the Band Office, at faculties and departments of Native and Indigenous Studies.

To talk about the Rez Fag

you have to talk about circuitries of unbecoming

and to talk about circuitries of unbecoming

you have to talk about the ghosts in the machine of relationality

and to talk about the ghosts in the machine of relationality

you have to give up on the allure of self-sovereignty

and to give up on the allure of self-sovereignty

you have to destabilize the body as the sealed container for political life.

## THE ZONE OF NO ATTENTION

Demian DinéYahzi's "Rez Dog, Rez Dirt" (2014) is a poem that is multi-modal, using voice, text, sound, and image together, which is to say that DinéYahzi' makes use of everything he has at his disposal to agitate language, to make it shout from a place of ethical desertion: the rez. It is not that he marshals the excesses of voice to bring to light the ways in which the world propels NDNs in a circuit of ideas that leave us dirtier than before. Instead, DinéYahzi' speaks in the registers of utopia and dystopia, of possibility and grief, all of which contribute to a dialectics of freedom. "MY FEET ARE SCARRED FROM THE STEPS TAKEN IN THE DIRECTION OF FREEDOM," fills up the frame, superimposed over the serene and terribly beautiful land just north of the Navajo Nation, land with which his grandparents are in relation. The direction of freedom is not so much a trek from point A – a place without freedom – to point B – a place with freedom, but a *longue durée*, a durational enactment of care and emotional reckoning that is against the distribution of freedom into some places and not others. The rez, here, is the earth, which DinéYahzi' describes as "A PLACE TO BREATHE." To be of the rez is to be of the earth, an ethical position against all of that which makes waste of the world.

## A History of My Brief Body

Let's start with the body, for so much is won and lost and lost and lost there.

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I was lonely once and that was all it took. A thick haze, a smothering opacity, this was the loneliness of feeling estranged from one's body and, by extension, the world. My loneliness asked nothing of me; it festered with inattention. Rarely did it think out loud. I neglected my loneliness and it expanded with animosity. My loneliness grew into a forest atop me.

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There are over seventeen million results when one Googles *Is it possible to cry oneself to death?*

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I was a haunted teenager, so much so that every photo of me also featured an apparition of sorts—an unseen and unseeable force-presence that, like a parasite, flourished in the wasteland of me. One of the first things I did when I moved out of nôkhom's house and to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta was delete my first Facebook account. I self-abolished. I had lost fifty pounds since Grade 12 and wanted to undergo a process of self-making that wasn't shadowed by a past-me. At this funeral of me in a west-end hotel room, I made myself anew, destroying the

photographic record of my adolescence. Now, it's difficult to find photographs of this time. In this way, I made waste out of history. What's more, I made myself exist less. I lost more weight, shrunk myself. I ate less and spoke quieter. I deflated everything I could. As such, I internalized the ugliness of colonialism. I pitted the world against myself. For years, I ate photo albums as late-night snacks. Most days I cowered before the mirror. Other days, dimmer ones, I placed a ban on my reflection; the ecstasy of not knowing was a buzz I rarely rebuffed.

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To be queer and NDN is paradoxical in that one is born into a past to which he is also unintelligible. I wasn't born to love myself every day.

There is a dead future with my name on it in the territory of my people. There isn't much one can do but run when the future becomes road kill. I didn't wish to find out what it might take to incorporate road kill into the everyday, to drain it of shock value. One would likely need to sacrifice inner life, uninvent it. In *Introduction to the History of Art*, which I took years ago, the instructor informed us that photography, much like portraiture, enticed many to rethink the contours of the self, also sometimes called the soul. Perhaps in leaving I chose not to be soulless. I chose instead to continue looking at myself.

Is there anything left to say about the closeted gay kid? Sometimes I think without pathos that the coming out story is endangered, and rightfully so. Best left in the previous century, where it teemed with subversiveness. Back then, to confess to desire in a different direction was to expose oneself to existential risk, among other types. The avowal – *you are gay* – had everything to do with a refusal of the world-as-it-was. (This calls to my mind Foucault's de Beauvoirian insistence

that homosexuality is not what one *is* but what one *does*). There need not be new narratives of this sort because they are already there, archived, fixed in the zeitgeist. Other days, I'm desperate for everyone to know that I sat, seasick, overcome by lightheadedness, in the closet, imagined and material, like all feral metaphors. I thought I was to drown. I drowned. *YOU'RE SPEAKING TO A MANNEQUIN*, I wanted to shout to everyone within earshot. I was arrested by my own tragic story. I took pity on myself. Edouard Louis: "I didn't want to carry a pain I didn't choose."<sup>65</sup> I see it too everywhere on the rez, when talking to men on Grindr – the aftereffects of surviving a struggle against oneself, against an identity you are squished inside. I didn't know what to do with my trauma, so I did what most do with the at-once unknown and menacing: I waged a war on it, on myself. Desire appeared around me as a flammable entity. I ran around with my hands on fire.

I have died. I have lived. What glory!

Symptomatic of the loneliness of the closet was how devoted I became to the prospect that I would die at a young age. At thirteen or fourteen, I discovered a lump on my right testicle while masturbating. I had already felt that I had come into the world in a frenzy the way a volcano's eruption creates an archipelago. I believed that my longing was poisonous and thus I had begot the lump on my genitals; in a biblical fashion, my punishment was meted out in the body. I took a vow of silence. I lived terribly in a village of no one and nothing. I will always have one foot there, in the wet, shimmering grass.

I didn't know where to go, but I knew I had to be in flight. I slipped out the bathroom window. No one was looking. No one knew how to look at me in those dying days. I went to what many in northern Alberta affectionately call "The City," Edmonton. I was non-existent, yet to come, and alive in a hypothetical tomorrow. I wished to assassinate history's version of me, put

him to rest, let him soar into the clouds like a floating lantern. I wanted to be there, below him, with a single candle, crying for the last time.

As a teen, I devoured dystopian and queer novels to put to use the existential deferral narrative elicits. Teens don't read for beauty, but to practice the art of disappearance. Today, I read and write for beauty, and live so as to disappear.

If I'm more of a toy to be wound up than a man, can I write beautiful things? What I mean is that I don't subscribe to the fantasy of self-sovereignty, knowing fully that the past starts into my brief body like a knife.<sup>66</sup> My hands are made up of a set of hands that puppeteer me. The hands aren't God's. They are History's. Its sores are mine. The past came with me to Edmonton. It's like a layer of dust on everything, so granular it encases me.

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I have found myself a number of times driving in the direction of the old apartment in which I spent many weekends with unlovable men out of neither nostalgia nor habit but a yearning for revenge. I believe it is a writer's job to tend to memory in its last hours, as though a nurse in an infirmary. Lately, however, I want to hunt memory, to sink my teeth into it, to transform it into a gangly creature I might terrorize. In undergrad I was taught that horror films enflesh worldly anxieties, enabling us to confront and thus banish them into the unreal, after which we return to "reality" with a non-violent disposition. This displacement of volatile emotion wasn't what I was after. I wanted to watch memory squirm. To torture it as it had me. I wanted it to lock eyes with me in a pale, trembling light.

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The eyes of a man I sleep with are dead, like an empty street, always on the verge of mutinous activity. His face emits an explosive kind of impressionability, so much so that I suspect a man – any man – could get him to drop his underwear once more were he instructed accordingly, even though he has just orgasmed. Strangely, this makes me think of a special viewing of Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* I attended in Oxford. The film hadn't been widely distributed in the UK outside of London, so the theatre was full of queer and black students, all of whom were there not passively to consume a film, but to be bodiless for ninety minutes, to have the unbearability of their longing momentarily suspended or supplanted with another's (this is also the closest I've come to a definition of love). When the credits rolled, I realized that even though the film had gotten under my skin, ruptured it, eviscerated it, the experience of affection wasn't mine, wasn't private. Sometimes when I fuck, I fuck not in the name of futurity, but as a symptom of a romance with the negative, a romance with my own injurability. Perhaps there is something queer to be said of the act of running around without a skin. Lee Edelman: "The queerness of which I speak would deliberately sever us from ourselves."<sup>67</sup>

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Fucking won't rescue me from my longing.

This revelation came to me as though ventriloquized from a part of my consciousness hidden in the apartment. My hands sweat with it. Add this to the evidence that I'm innately and intricately fucked up. A pop psychoanalyst (which is to say that I read a bit of Freud in undergrad

and queers are melancholics writ large, so I speak with experiential authority), I suspect that this kind of indefatigable longing can be the origin of an artistic disposition. “Loneliness is a kind of dysphoria with the world” is a refrain that repeats in my body of writing. It’s a hunch of mine that no one can apologize for or administer a cure for the racialized and sexualized condition of existential ennui. The sum of all political actors, of all the puppets of the state, can only render the apology an ever-engrossing work of fiction, an all-consuming atmosphere of white noise, something to which I would be bound against my will. Apologies for an engineered catastrophe, constrained by a fetishization of the present, threaten to pin me to reality, and I’m interested in something far more real. The cure isn’t conjurable in government offices. It’s a matter of time, of temporality. An anachronism, I’ve spent my youth in a tale of contradiction. My outsider status is the price I pay for a mode of attunement and perception that compels me to write into the airless grip of an unattainable object of desire. Utopia, of course, is an impossible love object. But, as such, it is also an incitement to write, to run with pen in hand into the negative space of the future. Would I have it another way? What a danger to creativity, after all, to find oneself fitting neatly into the world!

If I’m a writer, it’s because to be an NDN is to be a concept that speaks. I live in the world of ideas because it’s the world of my people. If I’m a writer, it’s because to be queer is to worship loss — and what is a book but a losing game?

Back to fucking. When I first downloaded Grindr in 2014, I wielded the app like a weapon in a war of emotion. I was a soldier slippery with regret. In each new bed, hungrier than the last, I surrendered so much. I surrendered with fevered surety. To and from each bedroom I left with my wounded shadow hanging over my shoulder.



One long summer night, I agreed to meet a man who refused to send a picture of his face. He told me he was handsome and white and that he had a nice dick. I'd slept with handsome white men with nice dicks in the past, so I could summon an image of him that titillated, that felt tangible and authentic. It also felt like I was taking part in a tradition of random sex between men for whom faces were secondary erotic materials — a gay rite of passage. I arrived at the Delta in downtown Edmonton, where he was staying, motored by the possibility of my impending death, which is perhaps one of our species' oldest aphrodisiacs; if not, surely this is the case for gay men. He met me in the lobby, as the elevators were keycard-operated. I fixated on his attire, which was outdated, possibly socioculturally or religiously mandated, or both. I felt a pang of pity, which mixed with fear and horniness to usher me into an altered state akin to jet lag or vertigo. I was losing self-control with each passing second. When he waved me inside the elevator, I complied without hesitation. His room was lit only by the pay-per-view gay porn on the TV. The porn was interracial, which was likely intentional, and this made me chuckle to myself. He was readying himself to fuck a symbol. Like a good symbol, I kept my mouth shut. A creature of habit, I sucked his dick dutifully, which was heavily forested by pubic hair (the first clue that he was in a heterosexual marriage). Not wanting to cum prematurely, he lifted me up and sat me on the queen-sized bed, pushing me back with his left hand, which wasn't slowed down by the gold wedding band (the second clue), as one might hope. I knew that a tongue against a butthole could engender an earth-shattering sensation, but what I experienced was the tremor of how spoiled his desperation made me. While he tongued me I thought not of his wife but of my own impermanency. I went numb, for I had become a neighbourhood through which the aggrieved and unlively pass idly, with their eyes closed. I was an iconography of erasure. Nonetheless, I felt useful as his tongue drilled into me. I wanted to give a man a song to sing. I wanted to begin where his mouth opened.

In James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Ellen, the narrator's step-mother, reminds her husband that "a man . . . is not the same thing as a bull." The connotation is that we shouldn't raise boys to become men overcome with animalistic rage. As Simone de Beauvoir might have it, one isn't born a beast, but rather becomes one. Perhaps this isn't quite right. Maybe the most dangerous animal isn't a man with doors under his feet and walls in his fists, but a man on his knees, afraid of the ceiling, all too intimate with the earth.

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It is our luck as NDNs that the horizon of love is unreachable by ship or feet. When my ancestors had nothing, the night was still devoted to them, to being the body's negative space. We are children of war for whom the earth is a work of art collaboratively composed. We fold the sky into little flowers and keep none to ourselves.

On the other hand, were I to write a Modern History of Gay Sex, I'd need to write of the kingless in a sprawling kingdom of shame and ecstasy. I'd need to write of the ecstasy of shame and the shame of ecstasy. Much of being a gay man in rural Canada is still the experience of being a stampede of horses in an enclosed cul-de-sac. The horses are invisible and translucent, but the pain of galloping through walls and furniture and fences is acute.

At Oxford, in my dorm at the city's western edge, I hungered for a language in which each syllable held at least another, so I habitually logged onto Grindr after midnight. A man said he wanted me to "manhandle" him (an idiom that at the time I decided was from the maw of a masculinist vernacular fine-tuned by gay men for decades). By manhandle, he could've meant a whirlwind of things: a brutal intimacy, plain ol' brutality, objectification, sadism, poetry, and so

on. In my bed, ass up, face buried into a pillow, he was a monument to shame and, because of this, godly.

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is a treatise on gay shame – an arousing, devastating, and frustrating novel about a closeted gay man who brandishes confusion like a bludgeon. With men, I don't feel shame; I rarely have. And so I don't intend to write a book about it. If anything, I'll write an ode to gay fugitivity. What freedom to be a horse!

## Gay: 7 Scenes & A Poem

### 1.

I'm a closeted teen. From the non-place where psychic life and carnality meet, I muster the might to look into the mirror to mime an unutterable avowal: *I am gay!* The words crowd my mouth, but can only thicken into sound from somewhere else, as if ventriloquized. Language and gesture are too open to appropriation, too prone to misuse, so I have nowhere or nothing with which to do the deeply human work of self-making. My first territory of desire is the wasteland of me. Ocean Vuong: "A safe moment is when we are in control of our own pleasure, our own joy." Ocean goes on to say that perhaps masturbation is "a place that we are safest to ourselves."<sup>68</sup> In his "Ode to Masturbation" he writes: "& sometimes / your hand / is all you have / to hold / yourself to this / world."<sup>69</sup> I gave a quirky and discomfiting talk at the 2016 gathering of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association in Honolulu called "Anarchic Objects and the Autoerotics of Decolonial Love," and in it I argued that indigeneity is always-already an erotic concept. Against the sexual pulse of coloniality, its perverse sensuality and all that it elaborates in NDN social worlds, we have the safe haven of us, this flesh, however caught up in the sign systems of race. In this talk, I drew on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, which is where she writes: "I was somebody who, given the opportunity, would spend hours and hours a day in my bedroom masturbating. Really. Hours and hours." She continues by way of a haiku: "It's something I could / yearn toward and be / lost in the atmosphere of / To me, a whole world."<sup>70</sup> These theories of masturbation nod to the geographies of joy that manifest where we are trained not to see them. Remember: we need to keep watch of our own pleasures.

## 2.

It is April 2014. I finish my third year of undergraduate studies at the University of Alberta. I expand with sexual possibility. Which is another way of saying I'm horny. I have little sexual experience, but I'm not technically a virgin. I have not slept with anyone in Edmonton; I'm an Edmonton virgin. I download the free version of Grindr for the first time. For my profile picture, I use a tightly framed shot of my torso with a bit of a jockstrap peaking out of the bottom of the screen, which is blue and red with PUMP written above my unpictured crotch. Almost immediately, my phone buzzes with a message from a similarly beheaded torso: *hey, looking?* He has a couple of abs, which already makes me feel like I'm touring through a foreign world. He is vehicle-less and can't host me at his apartment, so he suggests we fuck in the exercise room in the basement, which he presses is rarely used, especially so late on a weekday evening. This jettisons me outside the neighborhood of old feeling, where there is nothing but red flags, somewhere outside ordinary time. I vibrate with worry so much that it feels like my skin is loosening. I pick him up, drive back to my apartment, where I unfold into him. He keeps asking what gets me hard, but I have almost no experiential knowledge to mine to hear the question. This will be the start of a hard-worn habit of setting myself on fire in dimly lit bedrooms all over Edmonton. I become that fire before I have the emotional intelligence to perceive it as such. So many world-shattering things can happen in the schism between an event and our ability to comprehend it. I pitch a tent there. It is years before I relocate, before I'm evicted.

## 3.

David is the first man with whom I fall in love. I write about him all the time, even when I'm not writing about him. Like all my would-be boyfriends in the period between 2014 and 2016, I meet him on Grindr. His messages are short, but wayward, direct, but quietly bizarre. We grab coffee at a local shop near my apartment. I'm fixed by quirky facets of his appearance, which don't align with his muted personality: a tattoo on the top of his ear that reads GANGSTA; his barren, blue eyes, which ward off attention more than they invite it; his Lululemon top and pants that are conflicting shades of blue. *You are gorgeous*, he says to evolve the awkward back-and-forth into something riskier. We laze about in a lawn in the front of a local university, which is when he decides he wants to date me. I don't say anything, but we kiss nonetheless. A few days later he tells me he loves me, a confession that throws me, for we have yet to sink into the mutual debt that comes from months of care-giving and re-subjection. At a restaurant, I ask him to invite me into the world of him, to open himself up to observation. He begins by telling me about the storied tattoos peppering his body – I remember none but the name MICHAEL etched across the small of his back, which commemorates an ex-boyfriend and a relationship that sounds eerily like ours. This unleashes a flurry of entangled vignettes about his life, including a summer-long stint in the British porn industry, footage of which I refuse to view when offered; there is something about the way porn shores up the performativity of intimacy that makes my heart sink. How was I to know what the difference was between porn-David and boyfriend-David? He then moves on with trepidation to the loss of both his mom and younger sister to suicide. With self-deprecating humor, he confesses that this is why he's so fucked up. He has known nothing but unbearable grief all his adult life, which pulls him into the emotional house of men like me. Terese Marie Mailhot: "I realized that love can be mediocre and a safe comfort, or it can be unhinged and hurtful. Either

seemed like a good life.”<sup>71</sup> Except for David, there would be no good life, just a depleted world, one without an affective motor, nothing keeping him tethered to a semi-sovereign “I.” I ask, *how do you know you love me?* He doesn’t answer. Later he gives me a cheap-and-dirty response from the bargain bin of capitalist feeling – *I love you because you do so much for me.*

We never fuck because his anti-depressants suppress his libido, but we spend a lot of time together naked, loitering in the bombed out visual field of us. “[T]hat our eyes stopped / believing in what was in front of us / was the closest we got to killing ourselves.”<sup>72</sup>

Fast-forward to the fall of 2017. I’m driving home from the university. I turn a corner that will put me on a straight path to my apartment building. Suddenly, shatteringly, I lock eyes with him, standing at an intersection. Until then, I had a suspicion he was either institutionalized or dead. He is neither, just impossibly alive. He doesn’t recognize me.

## 4.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz explores at length this sort of identity crisis: queerness, Muñoz argues, is made out to be a “white thing” in communities of color (he cites the infamous passage in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* in which Fanon posits that homosexuality was absent in the Antilles because it was not an “overt presence”; disidentifying with this facet of Fanon’s thinking gives us a new kind of Fanon, Muñoz argues).<sup>73</sup> Muñoz goes on to skillfully show that queerness is made available to racialized populations by way of a performance of disidentification. According to Muñoz, disidentification is what “enables politics” for “subjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres.”<sup>74</sup> Disidentification is a “mode of dealing with dominant ideology” that works on and against it; it is how we go about transforming “a cultural logic from within,” enacting “permanent structural change” via sly appropriations of that which spells or spelled out our demise.<sup>75</sup> In short, disidentification is what gives those of us who are racialized a viable queer future in opposition to the homophobia in our communities and the racism in the gay world.

This argument, however, loses a bit of explanatory power when it comes to NDNs, for we have an oral and written history that documents the existence of those who lived what would now be considered non-normative sexual and gendered lives prior to European invasion. Two-spirit scholar Alex Wilson, for example, writes: “historic record shows that violence on the bodies of Indigenous peoples who did not conform to the gender and sexual norms of European newcomers began soon after their arrival.”<sup>76</sup> In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resurgence*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson evokes the historical record: “In *Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner during Thirty Years Residence among the Indians*



*in the Interior of North America*, John Tanner describes Ozawendib (Yellowhead), from Leech Lake, as a visible 2SQ... with several intimate partners, of ‘husbands.’ Tanner records the term *agokwa* as one that was used to describe Ozawendib. He also describes an elder and the Nishnaabeg community around Ozawendib using the pronoun “she” to address [her] and notes her sexuality, relationship orientations, and gender were accepted as normal.”<sup>77</sup>

We are still bound, nonetheless, by the afterlife of that viscous want of a dead, strictly gendered world. We can enter into such an analysis by way of the fevered practice of nominalization. Words and names index desires and sometimes anxieties and curiosities about race, gender, and sexuality, which means that the grammar of indigeneity is contested. How one enunciates the fact of queer and trans NDN and two-spirit life is a scene at which a host of agents compete for semantic power. How we are nominalized is also tied to a theory that seeks to delineate how we are to appear in public life. Language can double as the limit of a world, so it follows that the queer and/or trans NDN is never done with, to paraphrase Veena Das.<sup>78</sup> It was in the thorny register of the anthropological that one could tell a story about NDNs who inhabit a queer time and place. For decades, anthropologists mobilized the term “berdache” to categorize sexual and gender “deviants” in NDN social worlds.<sup>79</sup> This ethnographic practice sought to lay out a set of “social roles” that might explain away the inexplicability of queer and trans NDNs vis-à-vis western paradigms of the subject. This term invited something of a gross obsession with those it sought to call into being, so queer and trans NDN activists came up with the term “two-spirit” (1) to counter this settler drive to enumerate and freeze them in the domains of research and (2) to nod to the cultural specificity of those who are NDN and perform gendered norms that elide the rigidity of the binary. Wilson contends that to call oneself two-spirit is to proclaim “sovereignty over” a body,

gender expression, and sexuality, which together make up an affective sphere inside which two-spirit people are normally brutalized.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the homo- and transphobic machinations of settler colonialism, queer and trans NDNs and two-spirit peoples have created a discourse, cultural logics, and a body of literature with which to do and enact sexuality and gender in ways that are not coded as a seizure of white norms.

At first queerness was guesswork, a series of mistakes that led me to dating a swath of white men who teetered between two poles: fetishization and colour-blindness. One white man from Atlantic Canada spoke proudly about how all his male partners had been NDN, unable to diagnose his own desires as dehumanizing, unable to discern that when he fucked me he made me into a moaning object. Another didn't believe that racial difference affected the texture of intimate life, insisting he preferred not to think of me as Cree, as someone whose capacity for love was bound up in his differential exposure to violence. In their minds, we were inside an experiment, one in which they could sculpt better, more cultured selves. I, however, was inside a proxy war, fending off yet another assault on NDN livability. Neither understood themselves to be my enemies. Soon after breaking up with the latter, I slept with another NDN for the first time. We met on OkCupid. We spent about a week texting, ruminating on the difficulties of interracial care, how it demanded us to be larger than we were and shrank us all at once. Together we created a form of vulnerability that we wanted to nest inside, not one that injured us. It was the small things in our brief time spent with each other that illuminated the possibilities of decolonial love—the talk of how the reserve is a lighthouse that beckons us now and then; the jokes about what it's like to be visibly NDN on dating apps, which are programmed at the levels of visibility and data collection to invite racism.

Despite having to lie in a bed with history, we—two NDN boys who needed to be saved just as much as we needed to do the saving—fucked in the name of queer NDN joy. On my knees, before him, he taught me how to long as though longing alone could propel me into the future. Until then, intimacy had been a lost country. I was becoming vivid to the world. Oh, how I wanted to remember everything before it happened. Oh, how tightly I shut my eyes.

## 5.

Lisa Duggan: “We have been administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever.”<sup>81</sup> At the core of this homonormative social sphere is an erotics of whiteness, which produces some bodies as undesirable, too submerged in the dirty waters of signification to rescue. This was one of the hardest lessons to learn, that a persecuted people could reinscribe the violence of ontological shaming. Judith Butler probes the limits of “outness”: “Who is represented by which use of the term [queer], and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of politics are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view?”<sup>82</sup> Queers who rode and ride the advantageous waves of whiteness slide smoothly into the depths of the normative. This is done at the expense of racial flourishing. On dating apps, where white men hide behind a veil of anonymity, but also sometimes discriminate out in the open, this identity crisis wages on – “NO FATS, NO FEMS, NO ASIANS” is a banner under which white men build a flat world. I could recite the vulgar speech acts that have been hurled at me, but I won’t. There is too much to mine in them from those who feed, like vampires, on the spoils of injurious information. Of course this does not negate the violence entirely – it lingers as a spectre, tied to the bank of memories we have about vicious language. Perhaps that spectre is politically volatile enough to arouse a sense of injustice to cancel the slow making of a queer future replete with racism. Maggie Nelson: “And what kind of madness is it anyway, to be in love with something constitutionally incapable of loving you back?”<sup>83</sup> Has anyone ever managed not to mould the body into an archive of their own degradation?

## 6.

It is January 2017 and I'm living in Oxford, U.K. I have a fuck buddy who is from Estonia, where his family of animists, witches, and shamans have lived for centuries. He bikes to my dorm on Roger Dudman Way, stinking with loneliness. Among a flurry of words, we, a soon-to-be-anthropologist and a student of feminist theory, talk about Cree language families, the ontological turn, and the heavy atmosphere of daily life in Oxford, how it thickens with racial matter. As fuck buddies do, we dance to a YouTube mix of techno songs from 2016. This blurs into something else. You get the gist. We – two men, both at least one hundred and seventy pounds, both at least six feet tall – sleep on my twin-sized bed, as though the next day were a Sunday, as though there were only Sundays from here on out.

## 7.

In the west end of Edmonton, my then-boyfriend and I are holding hands as I drive to the movie theatre on a sweltering August afternoon. We are stopped at a red light when a white heterosexual couple in a rusted, old pickup truck scan us like an abstract painting in a gallery, puzzled, repulsed by the unknowability of what's before them. Instinctually, I peer over and catch their frenzied glares. I turn into a wounded animal feral with insecurity. *What empowers them to look at us with the fury of history?* I say out loud, to no one, not even my boyfriend, who is erring on the side of optimism. I have been made into a toppled statue too many times to join him there. They lag as the light turns green, which allows them to pull behind me. Changing lanes when I do, turning when I do, they communicate to me without words that nothing, even if it is installed with the sentimentality of poetry, will dial back this sort of road rage. I imagine myself yelling lines of poetry at them as a last-ditch attempt to signal to them my and his and our humanity. Eventually, a yellow light separates us and my boyfriend and I exhale again. That night, I sleep not with him, but with the thought of what they could have done to us, what they wanted to do to us. From nowhere but the graveyard of history could someone marshal the cruelty of denying someone the solidity of everyday life. The biopower of each and every "faggot" hurled at me at the grocery store, at the university, in northern Alberta, torpedoes through my veins, making my body feel too much like a body, a feeling I had wanted to evade my entire life.

8.

I'm a love drunk thing, so I'm to be but found wanting. To be found wanting is to be caught red-handed. To be red-handed and to want not in the register of the here and now but in the then and there is an NDN fate to which I'm obedient.

How to account for the love that bubbles up where it is banned? We visit in the back alleys of the world, where those who have been caged in the visual register of nothingness gather, against the de-democratization of the ability to world, in a common worldlessness, armed only with our wordiness.

*NDN Utopia is a world away*, love announces. *Skoden*, heartbreak responds, pointing his lips upwards, knowing fully that it isn't that simple, but also that it is indeed that simple.

## Loneliness in the Age of Grindr

It's 2014. I hook up with men I don't find attractive because I suspect they've been told they aren't thin enough, toned enough, tall enough, pretty enough, or white enough to fuck. I take on a liberal savior complex. I commit to the idea that my body can be the conduit through which they learn to love their own. I think I owe them my flesh because they find me desirable when what I see is a knot of contradictions and sour myths. I quickly become an expert in the discipline of sacrifice. What's the word for when you fuck not out of arousal but a hunger for hunger? Don't call it desperation; too many wish to romanticize an NDN boy's experience of self-destruction.

I allow myself to tiptoe into economies of desire in which I'm a fetish or a compromise, which is to say I always melt into the mattress. Sometimes I'm told I'm beautiful or sexy, and for a long time this compels me to kiss the bloody lips of precarity day in and day out. This is the precarity of treating the body as though it were a catch-22. What is chronic loneliness if not the desire to exist less and less, to deplete little by little? Maggie Nelson: "I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do."<sup>84</sup>

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In the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, Grindr users fuck in the spectre of sexual infection. "DDF" – drug and disease free – is a high-velocity acronym, which not only presupposes that sexually active users are regularly tested, but also that this occurs outside the time frame at which a blood test will yield a proper diagnosis. For gay and queer men and their sex partners, it's as though Grindr users were paradoxically infected and not at the same time. Public health stokes the flames of this discourse too. I've never donated blood, for example, given the restrictions placed on those



like me in Canada who have the kind of sex I do. When paired with the sexual purchase of men who are white, muscular, neuro-typical, and straight-acting, Grindr morphs into something of a geography of anxiety. Our bodies – possibly contagious, possibly spoiled by the sign system of race – are disavowed, again and again. Grindr’s archival form – its very condition of possibility – generates encounters that might be racially and/or sexually polluting. This brings about strangulated forms of sociality: 1) of worrying, even if your sex acts were harm reductive, that your body could be destroying you from the inside; and 2) of wanting bodies made desirable as an effect of the sexual histories of colonialism and white supremacy. In this configuration, sex is always a guessing game ruled by risk. With risk as one of the primary engines of sexual life, a body isn’t a body but a battlefield.

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It’s deep into August 2015. I’m about to leave my apartment to welcome incoming First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students to the University of Alberta. Out of habit, I check Grindr. Almost immediately, I receive a message from an attractive white guy who had written to me a couple weeks back. The right mix of lonely, horny, and heartbroken justifies the possibility of a last-minute hook-up. I was already going to be a few minutes late anyway.

*You looking?* he asks.

*Yeah, you,* I respond, even though I should be out the door.

*Yeah. I’m so fucking horny. You a bottom? Home alone?*

*Yeah, I bottom. Want to come over?* I answer, maybe too quickly.

*What’s your address?*

Grindr users don't mince words. The app has made sex easy to come by for men who have been told their desires were to be shunned from public life. Sex, or something akin to it, will make you abandon the "you" you've sculpted over years in an instant.

I send the stranger my address and he shows up about fifteen minutes later (my instinct is to suggest that anonymous sex pressurizes the figure of the stranger, makes it into a pleasurable category). I feel as though I'm selling a false product, that I'm not his type, that he can fuck someone better looking. So, when he does show up, I've already decided I will bend backward for him, literally and figuratively. It's only 10 a.m., but it looks as though he hasn't yet slept. He's sweaty and fidgety, as though racked by street drugs. I know this isn't the ideal situation to put myself in, but I can't pass him up. Ideality, I reason, is an arbitrary qualifier anyways.

He's about 5'10", thin with a six pack and light brown hair. His eyes are large and blue, and he's wearing sweatpants and a hoodie, which somehow makes his slender body look sculptural. He's a twink, one of the most fuckable body types in the Grindr universe.

*I didn't think you'd come*, I admit, self-deprecatingly.

*Oh, why's that?* he fires back, winking at me.

*Because you hadn't said you were actually on your way*, I lie. We laugh. I want to cry.

*Here we are*, I say, as we enter my two-bedroom apartment. I let myself into my head to note that this feels like a cheap, amateur porno.

I immediately take him into my spare bedroom and unzip my jean shorts. You learn to cut to the chase in the drama of hookup culture. I'm wearing a jockstrap, which he requested, but I feel like an erotic being in one nonetheless, a rare occurrence. He makes me into a one-sided object of his desire by ceasing to say more than a couple words at a time to me. He turns me around to push me onto the bed. He alternates between licking my asshole and pushing his finger in. He then

jumps onto the bed to shove his large dick into my mouth – pictures of which admittedly caught my attention during our earlier chats. He thrusts his dick into my throat despite the gag reflex it elicits. He coaxes a pulsating vulnerability out of me and this turns him on. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes, but I don't want him to stop. I want to feel as though he can snap me in half. He bends me over again and rubs his dick on my butt. I don't feel comfortable anymore, but I don't let him know this either. He jerks off, and, without warning, ejaculates on my asshole. I don't notice until he puts his clothes on.

*That was weird,* he says, breaking the silence.

*What do you mean?* I question.

*I mean it wasn't weird, but I usually don't cum that quickly.*

*Did you cum on my ass?* I ask, knowing the answer.

*Yeah, sorry about that, that usually doesn't happen,* he admits, laughing. *I didn't even get to fuck you,* he adds, registering to me that he doesn't comprehend the depth of my question.

I feel violated. I grab the Kleenex box next to the bed to wipe my ass, cautiously, methodically, so as to avoid semen sliding inside my anus. I head to the bathroom to use the adult cleansing wipes I'd recently bought. When I go back into the living room, he asks if I have water. Sweating and out of breath, he drinks the bottle's contents in one gulp. I still have to make it to the university, so I walk with him to the elevator.

Once there, I make poor use of my words and ask him if he's "clean."

*Yeah. Well, I mean I hope so,* he jokes. I spill onto the floor.

*I wouldn't have let you do that if you had asked. Cum on my ass, I mean,* I respond, frustrated, sick with worry.

*Oh, well I guess that makes sense,* he thinks aloud, without compassion.

Standing in the lobby, we say goodbye to each other. I never see him again.

//

Hospitals have always been enemy territory. My body, too brown to be innocent, enflames the nurses' racialized curiosities. For them, there's always the possibility that my pain is illusory, dreamt up in order to get my next fix. Or maybe I just want somewhere warm to sleep because the world is too hard on an NDN like me. This is never the case, for me at least, but their imaginations run wild nonetheless.

I jump into my car and begin frantically searching Google to gauge the "severity" or "riskiness" of the hook-up. Most websites I visit suggest readers seek medical attention to see if they're eligible for PEP (post-exposure prophylactic), an antiretroviral drug that can prevent HIV from latching onto your body if administered quickly enough (usually within forty-eight hours of exposure). Instead of going to the university, I email my colleague to cancel five minutes before I'm due to speak. I drive to the STI Clinic. The STI Clinic is hidden at the back of an old and low-functioning downtown hospital. Filled with bodies confronted by their sexual histories, the STI Clinic is not my favourite place to visit. You have to go through a loading dock to get to it; once inside, you walk past the patrons who avoid making eye contact. The receptionists, located behind a plexiglas window (which seems antithetical to a more ethical, more feminist hospital), ask what your reason for visiting is, as if it could be anything. I tell the receptionist I have questions about PEP and that I'm hoping to see a nurse. She looks puzzled but pages a nurse anyway.

With a nurse, I replay the event: his semen, I sheepishly confess, likely got inside my anus. She asks if I'd been penetrated, to which I say *technically, no*. She points out that if my anus hadn't

been penetrated, it was unlikely semen had entered my bloodstream. She explains that PEP is only administered to patients whose risk of infection are exceptional: a prisoner raped by an HIV-positive inmate, for example. The drug, too expensive to be handed out to anyone with anxiety, needs to be approved by Alberta Health Services. Nonetheless, she suggests that I visit an emergency department to get a second opinion from a doctor.

*They might approve you. I would give it a shot,* she concedes.

I wait an hour in the emergency room at the University of Alberta Hospital. I ask the nurse at the triage station when I might see a doctor. She tells me that I likely won't see one for at least three hours, that my case is not life-or-death, that I'm still breathing, and that the doctor would likely send me away untreated. She suggests I make recourse to the STI Clinic downtown. I might not die in the lobby, I think to myself, but a world is still in the balance. I leave despite myself.

I work on campus for an hour, then drive to a nearby MediCentre. I can't shake the pestering sense that something is amiss. Once there, the receptionist asks for a reason for my visit.

*I'd like to ask a couple questions about my sexual health,* I say, trying to maintain at least a sliver of secrecy in the small room peopled to capacity.

*Oh, like STDs?* she wonders aloud, without concern for my privacy.

*Yup.* I clear my throat.

I explain what has unfolded to a doctor whose attention seems to be elsewhere. I ask if she knows about PEP and she admits that she doesn't, that she's just returned from the Middle East and that cases like mine didn't come up there. Men in the Middle East are having gay sex, I think to myself, but she probably wasn't a doctor they felt comfortable making recourse to.

It feels as though I'm utterly without agency in the face of an ignorant doctor who has little knowledge about harm reduction. After I note the worry that I can't shoulder alone, she excuses

herself to contact Alberta Health Services. The walls, paper thin, can't conceal the irritation in her voice. Speaking to a nurse, she says she doesn't want to waste anyone's time with such a silly matter. Her footsteps approach.

*You'll have to wait about 8 to 10 weeks to be tested,* she says, coldly.

*Thanks,* I manage to respond, half-heartedly.

I don't think about sex for weeks without a wave of anxiety overpowering my libido. Han Kang: *"I hold nothing dear. Not the place where I live, not the door I pass through every day, not even, damn it, my life."*<sup>85</sup>

//

My story, I now understand from a distance, was one of the unequal distribution of public knowledge around sexual health. I was being conscripted into a culture of fear that makes STIs such as HIV into public enemies. Without care, there is no room for harm reduction. What's more, I had no audience for my misery. With no one around to apprehend the exigencies of my emotional tumult, everywhere I went became a zone of abandonment. How was I who was barely enclosed in an "I" supposed to trudge through solitude's thick overgrowth?

//

Since, I've been fixated on the loneliness of being denied care where it is said or expected to be integral to a social operation. From the deleterious way in which men vie for sex to the room for disregard in the medical world, care is withheld or obliterated in an existential way, stripping some

of sovereignty to the extent that we put a ban on the production of joy. Jill Stauffer gets at something like this with her concept of “ethical loneliness,” which for her is “the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one’s life’s possibilities.”<sup>86</sup> It’s during moments when the self is negotiated with others – in sex, in medicine and public health – that one is prone to being pulled off course and thrown into a crisis of ontological proportions. I thus see it as my job to lay bare the catastrophic conditions that meet those who are wrenched into a world of loneliness where there are no bodies, just burning houses built from scratch.<sup>87</sup>

## Fragments from a Half-Existence

During a summer of sadness, I tried week after week to write a novel. The novel, which regularly changed form and genre and temporal structure and so on, was always about a previous relationship that happily unmoored me from a world I had lost interest in but nonetheless returned to out of a survival instinct that emboldened me to put trust in nostalgia.

I believed the quirk that made novelists novelists was an ability to say no to the world. But, as a poet, I couldn't break the habit of trying to make the world – and thus my lived life – into an art object. I said yes to the world again and again, sometimes to my detriment, if only to increase the volume of my selfhood, a performance of creativity I felt closer to than invention. One night in an empty bed (empty beds are for me a call to art-making in response to an imposed quietude) it occurred to me that what I wanted wasn't to write a novel but to fall in love. Both were overwhelmingly possible, which perhaps explains why I accomplished neither.

Here's a short example of one failed attempt that was a direct autofictional examination of the relationship.

The end of one month bled into the other, my "I" bled into his, and before I knew it I was fucking a man in my parents' guest bedroom, his tiny body perched so gracefully on me that his thrumming arms looked like wings. All the daylight lacerated by the blinds dripped onto his slender face. He growled as he pushed down onto me, a song of ontological compromise. A body atop another is an elegiac gesture. "So many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster."<sup>88</sup> He maintains a hard-on by spitting into my mouth, so I pretend there is a dried-up lake



inside me. I close my eyes and say, *I've been thinking about you. I'm right here*, he answers. *I'm right here. Open your eyes.*

My next attempt I believed at the time would rush out of me onto the page because it bore a narrative structure that hypothetically could reproduce itself without becoming monotonous. The concept was that an art history student has sex with a series of middle-aged white men who fetishize NDNs as a commentary on the erotics of race, on sex as a performance of race that is always uneven and a flattening of subjectivity for the racialized:

Sweating, oranged by a bedside lamp, it looks as though flames are tiptoeing onto him. He tosses words at me, but the crackle of vaporizing wood drowns them out. I'm always hearing more than what's hearable. It's an artist's duty to refuse to be sedated by the real. If materiality isn't the arbiter of sense, then a gaseous substance hissing at me in a stranger's home is as routine as a crow's song at daybreak. My ears heat up. I don't budge.

His apartment is in a state of disarray, an accumulative kind, symptomatic of a life staged in the throes of an indefatigable longing for that which hums with impossibility. The roughly six-hundred-square-foot space can hold neither more nor less than the grief of a single, self-loathing white man. His bedroom strains at its borders, barely able to suppress the emotional innards. A damp bath towel hanging from the lip of a bathroom door is his poetry. A throat cleared before he greets me after an afternoon and evening of no conversation is his sad music. Towers of novels hazardously constructed everywhere are the bounds of his armyless kingdom.

A pang of vigilance, like a hand extended out from under me, tugs me back into his queen-sized bed, wide enough to be a monument to a lover who never arrived. Each fold in the fitted

sheet has been won in a proxy war. The instigator, desire, hangs from the ceiling, grinning and bloodless. The weather here, I note, is sour. I shouldn't loiter lest I risk contamination. Unfreedom is contagious.

In my periphery, little pools of semen vibrate on his torso. He tracks my line of sight, which he interprets as interrogative, raising his right eyebrow in response. He tells me, defensively, that he was once toned but has since bloated with time.

He eyes me with a curiosity that I sense teeters between ferocity and emptiness depending on his sexual interest in the beheld. Tonight it's like a densely populated city, unpredictable and engulfing.

To disturb his gaze, I ask, from the edge of the mattress, "What's on your mind?"

He inhales like a singed tree. The textuality of his inhalation is a clue. He inches up the wall slowly until he is sitting upright. The semen dances. He rubs the back of his neck, smirks. A choreography of lust.

"First time I've slept with an NDN," he says, then winks.

Be the mouth of an ordinary river, my inner self instructs. Be not a gust of wind but the field of crops it brings to the ground in reverence and fear.

"What's the verdict?" The cadence of the sentence indicates amusement in spite of myself.

He hesitates. "You want the truth?"

I don't. "Absolutely."

"Well, I immediately got an erection when I read your ethnicity on Grindr, perhaps because I've been hooking up with dudes for decades now but none have been NDN. That made you interesting and strange and, and, uh, impossible. You were NDN, which meant that anything was possible because I had nothing against which to measure how sex with you might feel."

Were? He continues. “Then there you were, at my door, beautiful and, uh, fragile and attention-seeking, like an open window.” That he is a man of letters doesn’t ease me into his delicately spun discourse of race and eros. Sex can transform any and all into a starved, many-headed beast.

It dawns on me that I’ve been forced into the graveyard shift of a narrative of liberal empathy and personal development. I shove my legs into my jeans as he drones on. His voice wanes. He apologizes if he has offended me. I assure him he hasn’t.

When I leave, I kiss him on the lips as though they’re a country to which I have pledged, as though I’ll return. I won’t.

I didn’t ask for his name, so the pronouns he and him and his will have to do in this telling. Indeed, they’ve already done the job. And, like most things left unnamed, he will live on in my world as substance for creative labour and nothing else.

When I shut the door behind me I leave a cheap imitation of myself inside.

I have no one to ask if it’s bad writing or not. I put it here because I suspect it doesn’t matter.

//

Titles of novels I have tried to write thus far:

*Critical Race Theory*

*The Museum of Political Depression*

*A Beast of Burden Is a Beast Nonetheless*

*Bad Lover*

*It's Lonely to be Alive!*

//

The summer I had hours-long anal sex while battling a bout of hemorrhoids was an object lesson in entropy. The rectum is an affective sinkhole. *There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it,*<sup>89</sup> I mumble to myself as blood drips from me into a toilet. I'm a sculpture on which the artist chose not to leave a signature. If I continue to romanticize sex, to pontificate in public about how it combats the suffocations of individuality, it's because sex is one of few social interactions I choose that reminds me of my unending penetrability. Tangled in the body of another, something inside me shouts: *Even your precarious psyche isn't yours to mother!*

//

Foucault is a Libra and this matters to me. I had been at times ambivalent and at others hostile to the astrological renaissance at the core of contemporary queer life. It seemed to me to be a kind of cop out, in that it allows droves of internet users to think themselves outside the structures and political forces that strangle the world. The notion that one's disposition could be predetermined by the cosmos is orthodox and fatalist, two characteristics I never want attributed to me or my work. But then I came across a tweet that listed philosophers and their astrological signs. Foucault is a Libra and so am I. There is a kind of kinship in this that I don't want to lose. Had I been given

the name Michel, this wouldn't have ensnared me to Foucault the way our dates of birth do. He is a theorist of freedom, and so am I. This is our lot as Libras.

An ex-boyfriend and I share the same date of birth, October 21. I took this coincidence to be a sign of our compatibility as lovers, which to some might constitute a lapse in judgment on my part. Wasn't I an empiricist who sneers at a notion as immaterial as happenstance? But the theorists who excite me most are, in a sense, speculative fiction writers. What's missing or fleeting in the world is evidence of other ways of being, of something dawning, so the onus isn't to observe a phenomenon as it happens but to chase after a hunch or a half-formed hypothesis that might accumulate into a relic of a future history. Their keywords include possibility, utopia, futurity, hope, and optimism. This chorus of artist-thinkers taught me to be apprehensive about the tyranny of the material and to daydream about the underbelly of maps, about that which congregates just below the threshold of visibility. Perhaps this romance with the not-yet makes me a bad lover. So be it.

//

A man and I talked on the phone nightly, not because our lives were extravagant or torrid enough to warrant daily dispatches, but because we were planted in a narrative that was predictable, one in which we felt caressed. There was some end, however nebulous and inchoate, toward which we were heading. When the sex inevitably became procedural, I didn't soliloquize about the rise and fall of spontaneity. It wasn't a sign of doom, but a victory, a transcendence of promiscuity. Things happened I could anticipate. Finally, I was a part of a form in which I could suspend myself. In

those days I was astute at the art of destroying myself without resorting to self-destruction. In the eyes of a man I didn't trust, I was a glistening tragedy.

//

My kink is the annihilation of my core sense of self. On Tinder, I swipe right on post-structuralists and no one else. I'm looking for someone with whom to rent an apartment at the intersection of fissured systems of meaning. Queer as in my attraction to you is an attraction to ideas for which you are a practical substitute.

//

My sadness is an elongated state of emergency. I dream in the colour of sadness. I speak the bastardized language of sadness.

An autofictional dream-poem: When I first moved to Edmonton, at just seventeen, I had a recurring dream. In it I watch, as though in front of a movie theatre screen, future-me (he looked identical to me then, but taller and wider, like a child's vision of aging) happen upon past-me, frail, skeletal, in a farmer's field, a small house in the periphery, canola sprouting around me and me, around them. Future-me's face is stoic, having perhaps resigned himself to the terror of what is to follow. From a bird's-eye view, I see future-me bend down slowly, pick up past-me, get up, and then softly kiss his forehead. Future-me puts past-me back onto the ground. He places his hands onto past-me's papery chest, pushing him into the soil. (My mouth is sewn shut with barbed-wire

in the dream, so I can't scream). Then, poof, they're both gone. But, just as quickly, I appear again, a blade of grass caught between the rusty teeth of morning.

//

Grad school was the wrong place for someone like me with an appetite for the utopian. But I was an idea in love with an idea – where else was I supposed to shelter this form of love?

//

*iawîyak kanihtâ mihtâtahk* = a body made of regret.

//

Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai defines “stuplimity” as an experience of boredom that is overwhelming, excessive, against calm. Sometimes I’m so bored with my puny life that it feels as though the roof above me is going to cave in. When not distracted by the noise of the social, life looms over me, like a single rain cloud.

//

Perhaps my next book will be about the fury that NDNs sublimate to go about being in a world we didn’t want (a line of inquiry that repeats in almost all my writing). My book would be a speech

act unto itself in that I would unleash that fury onto the page. It wouldn't, however, help people live better, and because of this it would be a failed text. Han Kang wrote a book called *The White Book* (translated from the Korean by Deborah Smith) that likely does help people live better. She is unflinching in her exploration of what it is to grow up inside a story of grief, of what is to live in a place without boundedness where old memories materialize en masse. In a section called "Lace curtain" she meditates on what "a freshly laundered bed linen" can come to signify: "You are a noble person. Your sleep is clean, and the fact of your living is nothing to be ashamed of." Although it's beautifully rendered, I would want to turn this observation inside out, for I'm prone to spoiling even well-nourished words. The governing thesis of my book would be that we aren't noble people and therefore the fact of our living is something to be ashamed of. The question I'd ask would be: What might it look like for NDNs to refuse life in the wake of all that's happened to us in a country in which we're social experiments before all else?

//

A note on craft. In *Ban en Banlieue*, Bhanu Kapil writes, with wounding accuracy: "It's so quiet before a book begins. / So quiet that when my nervous system hurts, so does the sentence, because that's all we have: each other. The sentence and I. We cope."<sup>90</sup>

//

If I try to compose anything but sad poems, I fear it'll be akin to a widower trying to convince others that he has found happiness again by wearing a T-shirt that says HAPPINESS.



//

Why poetry? It allows for a romance of the negative that doesn't foreclose the possibility of a non-cruel kind of optimism.

The political climate in which art is made will determine whether poetry is a unit of accusation or revelation. I'm writing a literature of blame, for the record.

To my mind, one of the most vital modalities of decolonial life is that of remaining unaddressable to a settler public that feasts on our misery. Most of the time, writing a book seems incompatible with this.

//

At the book launch of *This Wound Is a World*, a white woman begged me not to kill myself. What this meant is that I hadn't yet died in a bewildering way. Then and now, I was and am a statistical and sociological feat. What she saw where my body should have been was an outline of a body crowded with signifiers of my expiration date. She heard the terrible music not of a desire for another world, but a premature death, a mangling. I should have asked her to lament herself, her Canadian looking practice.

//

*On a full, midday flight from Toronto to Edmonton.*

WHITE LADY: (*leans into me*) Is Edmonton home?

ME: (*restrained*). Yes.

WHITE LADY: Did you have a nice time in Toronto?

ME: (*pulls headphone out of right ear*) I was in Ottawa, actually. Just connecting.

WHITE LADY: Oh! What were you doing in Ottawa?

ME: I was at a literary festival – I’m a writer.

WHITE LADY: Do you have a book? What is it called?

ME: *This Wound Is a World*.

WHITE LADY: (*her eyes widen*) Oh! *This Wound Is a World* . . . What’s it about?

ME: It’s, uh, I’m Indigenous – it has a lot to do with colonialism.

WHITE LADY: I teach therapists at the University of \_\_\_\_\_, and recently a number of elders helped me really rethink how trauma affects Indigenous peoples. Trauma isn’t something you acquire—

[In my head, I think: “you” as in “me” specifically?]

WHITE LADY: –trauma is literally *who you are*.

*(An announcement by a flight attendant takes her attention elsewhere. Later, over Winnipeg, she asks if she can purchase food for me).*

Encounters of this sort are like a leg stuck out in front of you. You self-interrogate, are made to suspend yourself in an existential limbo. There’s the material you in the airplane who is called into an openness you have no power over, then the abstract you the white woman conjures from a bank of public ideas that are injurious. What’s more, a third you exists – the “lyric you”<sup>91</sup>: he who

observes, keeps watch, analyzes from afar, takes in data, then writes from a distance. In the end, all that matters is that all of you are bruised.

//

An NDN is the soul of a country. Racism, then, is a kind of moral death drive, an ethical desertion inflicted on oneself.

//

The NDN condition: being in but not held by the present; belonging to a past that endures and a future that moves backwards. The problem is that the present is in the air, is *now*, which is always an empty hand opening and closing inside us, like a heartbeat.

//

If nothing else, a sustained loneliness thrusts one into an ethical position: to be emptiness animated or personified is to be a two-legged warning sign.

## **An Alphabet of Longing**

### ASYMMETRY

I pick myself up off the page + I throw myself at it again = I throw myself at myself [repeat].

Don't touch my skin, it is a text in the making.

I hoarded dirt in my ears; months later, I pulled out a summer dress. When no one was looking, I ran it up a flag pole, so as to be allegiant to something other than my captor.

A tree screams in the forest – forgive me, not a tree, but an explosion of girls, an apocalypse of girls

In an ecology of a clenched fist, sadness is at once the fist and the fugitive air.

Love can make even the smallest of spaces feel too large. How?

### BIOSOCIAL

I cough and it is a historical cough. I have a coughing fit and it, as though a bellow, shocks those nearby into an alertness that is historicist. My coughing activates a reading practice in those cognizant of the anatomical debt borne by bodies like mine. One way my doomedness manifests is in the sense that I need to hoard a lifetime of living in just a few decades.

### BLAME

Blame isn't a question just of emotion but also of the politics of space. Concealment, hiding blame, is an architectural project, a visualizing practice. Everywhere, a citizenry is forgiven for a history they continue to stage in the theatres of everyday life.

The architects of blame can be found in departments of political science and history everywhere. Also at literary festivals. At the podium of one, a white poet prefaced a poem of hers with a heavy imperative statement: *Shoot me now!* For a surreal second, I thought perhaps she was serious and that it was neither rhetorical nor a distasteful joke (there are many for whom such a declaration is always in the air as an effect of the spoiled codes of race). To be a poet one can't use language so recklessly, I argued to no one. *If you love me, you will shoot me now. Before the poem begins.* This is what I heard as a kind of refrain, repeated by the audience too. I nonetheless knew that those three words were a whirlwind of white speech, wrecked and reckless. People in and of themselves aren't poems. Remember this.

## DESIRE

Once upon a time, time. This is desire's organizing principle, its political anthem. Desire runs in all directions: forwards, backwards, into the earth, toward the sky. If it could it would hurl our bodies onto the ground with the force of the history of human dissatisfaction. It would stamp us into our environments, amalgamating our interior and exterior lives (we rarely autonomously choose the latter), which is something we've all wanted at one point or another. (Richard Siken, in *War of the Foxes*: "A blurry landscape is useless.")<sup>92</sup> Desire, like writing, initiates a war waged against the "I," its permanency regime.

In desire's path we are a thread of smoke unspooling from a stranger's lips.

"Desire is no light thing," writes Anne Carson in *Autobiography of Red*.<sup>93</sup> Desire is heavy, dark, serious.

Desire is to time as the hunter is to the hunted, one might speculate. It seems to me, however, that desire is to time as the forest is to the hunter *and* the hunted. "The enormity of my

desire disgusts me” (Siken).<sup>94</sup> An enormous desire is a climate whose logics elude anthropological explanation.

Desire is a present tense verb whirling into the future tense.

Desire unfinished us.

Desire unfurnishes us: we are houses out of which it empties the furniture such that we can be peopled again.

#### DISPOSABILITY

I’m a walking sacrifice zone. Immaterial, I’m a supposition of a person; a trial run that exposes mechanical error upon mechanical error.

When I write, it feels as though I’m clawing at a ceiling lined with dandelions. The spores and dirt shower onto me, their velocity diametrically opposed to my writer’s block. I eat and eat until I’m more dandelion than anything else. The work of art festers inside me.

#### EMPTY BED

Suppose an empty bed were

an expression of politics rather than a negation of it.

a poem from the future.

the scene of a riot.

a painting without a focal point.

evidence that love is a grey smudge on a map of the Americas.

#### FREEDOM

I want to hold freedom close, like a newborn baby.

That is the wrong approach. You understand this too.

Freedom isn't a sibling rivalry. Our survival isn't a matter of motherly love.

In the early hours of my political awakening, I felt that I *had* to do something about all the gay men who devoted themselves firstly to lust and not to freedom. There was an undercurrent of desperation here, as though my suffering were correlated with their pessimism. Their unnumbered days and weeks and months had become mine (see BLAME).

I couldn't fuck my way out of white supremacy (one can accomplish the opposite, unfortunately).

Men left their dirty worlds in my bed. They are always *there*, especially when the men aren't.

## GENDER

When two bodies embrace they become a window. Gender is what's heard when wind touches glass. Remember: by the time sound reaches the flesh, innumerable bursts of light have already shot through us.

## HOPE

The settler state  $\neq$  the world.

## LONELINESS

Loneliness: an echo; the skin rubbing up against another world, the resulting friction; a philosophical position; an aesthetics; a bludgeon made out of bones; a blurry face in an old photograph; a revolving door.

This is my anti- or non-definition.

## LOVE

To a room of conference attendees, I said: *I'm an emotional person, so I read theory day in and day out.*

Love is the act of ramming headfirst into the window of an "I." Some nights I release a deep, sharp breath so as to draw two stick figures drowning in a frozen lake. *You're so warm*, an ex-boyfriend would tell me, barely awake, a pale semi-colon shivering against my back.

The mode of writing I'm bound to is something like what Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* describes as "outbursts of language," which he attributes to the lover who is overrun with ideas, who is jammed in the aesthetic realm of fragmentation, struck by "aleatory circumstances."<sup>95</sup> Barthes attributes an immobility to this discursive state; it is destabilizing and all-consuming such that one can't move on, as though a word or an idea could keep us tethered to the ground. If I'm in love with neither another person (an Other) nor the world, what then is the object of my affection which wrenches me into the kind of rhetorical frenzy Barthes sketches out? The answer is obvious: I'm a lover of the prefigurative, the makeshift, the missing.

Confession: my lovelessness is a symptom of the settler's bastardized possibility.

## NDN HOMO

NDN homo in a dead world.

NDN homo made of corrugated sensation.

NDN homo under the foot of history.

NDN homo an ethnographic spectacle.



NDN homo a mythology of desire.

NDN homo an erotic symbol.

NDN homo a postmodern slut.

NDN homo a brutal inheritance.

NDN homo glistens inside the smokescreen of liberal empathy.

NDN homo a cliché.

NDN homo an ongoing degradation.

NDN homo a poetic impulse.

NDN homo a tenant of the terrain of bad feeling.

NDN homo an architecture of emotion unto himself.

NDN homo a speculative historian.

NDN homo a post-structuralist suspicious of form.

NDN homo in a struggle with the appeal of always being in a struggle.

NDN homo a haunted house, a racially saturated visual field.

NDN homo fuckability.

NDN homo fugitivity.

NDN homo at the limits of political subjectivity.

NDN homo a corrosion of personhood.

NDN homo a sonic revolt from the future.

NDN homo in potentia.

NDN homo an optical illusion.

NDN homo a shape of a life, a philosophical gesture.

## ONTOLOGY

I take residence in a dumpster locked inside a parking garage. There is no ontological difference between the dumpster and I. We are mimetically liminal, both purged of ethical matter. To be young and in love in a dumpster, in the constitutive outside of the present, is a manifestation of melancholia.

Do you know how mindless I've been about where I plant my feet? The manner in which I stand determines whether I'm a statue or a monument.

## PESSIMISM

Somewhere a courtroom is painting an image of NDNs as a people outside the law, seizing us in the age-old position of the savage, the brute. I wonder how it is that we haven't simply become brutes and dug our teeth into the flesh of the country that has pursued us in bloodlust for centuries.

## REFUSAL

If I refrain from writing, no one can misunderstand me (Kierkegaard inverted). The more practical option is to burn all the maps of the province of Alberta in nohkom's front yard and inhale the smoke.

You can affix a price tag to anything – including a poem – to strip it of its treacherous affectivity.

There is no moneyed writing where I'm headed. The anecdotal is a hiding place. Join me.

Audra Simpson (Mohawk) taught us that it isn't lucidity of which us NDNs are envious. In fact, the settler's drive to coax us into an orthography of deficiency isn't the final nail in the coffin of pre-history. Our indecipherability turns out to be material for a commune of rebellion.

Better days are neither ahead nor behind us. We are stuck in a loop of pseudo days where what unites us isn't clock time but a dizzying drama of half-moments that refuse to aggregate into the outline of a lifestyle. There is a formlessness to our slanted existence. This is a cause for celebration.

#### RELUCTANCE

A poem isn't a coin-operated machine.

#### REVENGE

The purpose of NDN writing isn't to fatten the body of Common Sense, that rickety scarecrow.

None of your crying will unsick or unkill anyone.

Push this book out to sea. If you are forested, the river of your tears will do.

I'm ravenous for the future, but I hate its guts too.

Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Quollective: "This is a body made from all of the missing and gone faces. It is at once lovely and horrible and there are so many."<sup>96</sup>  
Some of us are barred from the terrain of attraction, our faces too ringed with caution tape.

I almost said I felt like a puzzle, but it is so unpoetic to be a puzzle! To be a puzzle is to be a carcass picked clean, and I'm supposed to do the picking.

The thing that makes men manly is that they force everyone to be witness to their vengeance. I want no part in this.

#### STATISTICAL SUBJECTS

Enumeration is an exercise that banks on a cruel form of nostalgia.

## STRANGER

A conversation between me and me:

What is a stranger? I ask.

(Silence that sounds like yesterday, like the end of a long season.)

Nothing, an outline of a life, a fill-in-the-blank puzzle, he answers.

I push at his side.

So we're simply two nothings trashing against one another?

Not simply, he retorts, but profoundly. Metaphysically, a stranger leaves no mark, makes no noise. The trace of nothing is still nothing. Zero added to zero is zero.

What if a stranger is a question mark unfurling inside the chest? The most pressing question, then, is: who has posed you as a conundrum?

## TERROR

Former Bank of Canada governor David Dodge, on the Trans Mountain pipeline: "There are some people that are going to die in protesting construction of this pipeline. We have to understand that."<sup>97</sup> There are killing fields where understanding blooms. Sometimes knowledge is a rope made of poison ivy. Why does anyone think it is more rope we need? What terribly human things can be done with rope!

## THEORY

I don't want to construct another ship made of poetry. My poems didn't float, so I didn't make it to shore.

I wanted you to look away as you ripped the wet pages from me. Instead, you wrote: *Run*. Sentences jutted from my mouth like laughter.

I asked to be a newspaper, finite and refutable information, but I was instead given a papery chest with which to instigate a new economy of pain.

My chest is so big it could be an ocean floor. Inside me, a cacophony of poets. “An embarrassment of poets.”<sup>98</sup>

## UTOPIA

Utopia isn't a feeling but rather the banished shape of an ur-feeling. It is in one valence submerged in an ethics of privacy.

Invisibilized, utopia is against a sovereignty of the senses.

In a more politically rousing valence, it is incommensurable with publicness, being instead an unownable thing that barks back at the interpellative shout of property.

In Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, utopia appears again and again as an insurgent force with which we smuggle ourselves into the future, with which we activate the ecstatic (a word Muñoz uses to speak to the convergence of past, present, and future).<sup>99</sup>

My project: A ricocheting “no” torpedoed at a world, a repudiation of a world in which NDN life is a fiction that leaves us wanting, caught red-handed, intoxicated on the promise of our impossible longevity. Also: a performance of a theory of nonsingularity and care that forgoes participation in the melodrama of individuality.

It isn't that NDNs bear an essence that is somehow unhampered by social power.

Have you taken note of the assaults of the many-headed beast of settler rage as of late?

NDNS are moved – positioned and oriented – not in the direction of the dead future that state violence anticipates but instead toward a time and place gushing with all of that which this violence can't extinguish, which is our metaphysics of joy.

## VOICE

I don't want my voice to be churned through a biopolitics of data collection that is the process of racialization. I won't take part in a performance of self that entraps me in a vicious circle of proof-making.

My field of study is NDN freedom. My theoretical stance is a desire for NDN freedom. My thesis statement: joy is an at once minimalist and momentous facet of NDN life that widens the spaces of living thinned by structures of unfreedom.

I will spend the rest of my life enfleshing this argument. This catalogue, then, doesn't and can't end.

## Notes form an Archive of Injuries

1. Dionne Brand (*The Blue Clerk*): “I walked into a paragraph a long time ago and never emerged from it.”<sup>100</sup> Maybe this act of getting lost in the textual is a spur to life, to aliveness, for those who have been barred from, whose barring makes possible, the biosphere of Canadian Literature. Canadian Literature is a crime spree. How frequently can one redraw the outline of a body and still call it art? The police – which Frank Wilderson reminds us is both an institutional form and the corporeality of whiteness itself<sup>101</sup> – made an oversized archive of our injuries. I feel their fingers in the pages of me when I write.
2. The problem of sending out dispatches from a life as it is being realized is a problem of bioethics, broadly construed. Any dirt road out of the wilderness of my body is so riddled with potholes it is undrivable.
3. To write as though a punching bag requires a different kind of bad posture.
4. All my most volatile and consuming yearnings could be summarized as a desire for an unstructured life, one without an organizational system other than something like untidiness. I don’t wish to be subject to the wrath of any clock, including the biological kind (the clock of utopia is one I adhere to but adhering to the clock of utopia is akin to sleeping on a couch constructed from love poems, a fate I will always choose). Writing

disarrays the world around me. With writing, I'm authorized to rebel against the biopower of permanency.

5. If there is an "NDN experience" perhaps it is that of being written about. Audra Simpson: "To speak of indigeneity is to speak of colonialism and anthropology, as these are means through which Indigenous people have been known and sometimes are still known."<sup>102</sup> There exists a modality of anthropological inquiry that is practised by Canadians from all walks of life by virtue of having been born in to a story of confederation and dispossession. To nod to Brand's theory of black life and presence, to go outside the limits of one's own existence as a racialized subject (which is cramped and ever-shrinking) is to enter into "some public narrative," a narrative of progress, for example.<sup>103</sup> To write so as to peel sentences from one's skin, so that words fall flat onto the floor without the hope of resuscitation – this is the NDN writer's work. This usage of the English language at least matches the intensity with which words have been flung at us like grenades.
6. NDN literature: to treat language brutally while still writing beautifully.
7. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney: "The open song of the ones who are supposed to be silent."<sup>104</sup>
8. A dead animal overwhelms a highway the way moss does a forest floor. This is my unstable definition of poetry.



9. I have lived. (The most dishonest sentence I have written.)

10. In *Senses of the Subject*, Judith Butler asks a colossal question that tailgates me everywhere I go: “What is it to require what breaks you?”<sup>105</sup> She is curious about the indeterminacies of being in the world, how that which constitutes selfhood – being in concert with others – also has the power to loosen our grip on a shared reality. I’ve evoked this formulation in the past to understand the metaphysical thrust of queerness; in a late capitalist world in which individuality is a fetish, a mass object of desire, a political anthem, what remains queer about queerness is that it entices us to gamble with the “I” in the name of love, sex, friendship, art, and so forth. There is a twinned horizontality and verticality to queerness that pulls at the self in various directions. It is through this directionlessness, by offering ourselves to it, that we evade acclimatizing to or being seduced by the norms of social legibility and a subject position coded as the bearer of regular life (a dangerous duo). To write about oneself seems also to be an affair with breakage. To borrow Anne Boyer’s phrase, there is a “range of textual annihilative desire[s]”<sup>106</sup> that make up a book, all of which are aimed at the writer by the writer. Some days, the act of writing isn’t so much holding a mirror to oneself but a grave. When I write myself into the haunted house of Canada, the dark spins around me as though my body were yet another empty room it could get inside.

**Peter**

*May 2017.* Our second date. Positioned, cautiously, a couple feet apart on the couch in my ever-shrinking four hundred square foot apartment in downtown Edmonton, we are bowled over with laughter.

Moments before, I'd gone to the washroom to pee; I sat on the toilet and fished my iPhone out of the pocket of my black "super skinny" jeans, which I bought in England, where retailers have yet to succumb to the masculinist renaissance of "slim fit." (Scrolling through tweets while my bladder emptied, it occurred to me that so few straight men around my age partake in this form of multi-tasking. Standing to pee seems like a relic of a bygone era. We maximize excretory time nowadays. Yet another unanticipated confluence of the gay agenda and late capitalism.) Buzzing with glee, I fashioned this text message to one of my best friends: "MAJOR EMERGENCY! CALL 911!!! We ended up back at my apartment and I'm feeling very FRISKY!" Much to my surprise, this wasn't sent to its intended recipient, but to you, Peter. I flushed the toilet, washed my hands, and then quickly opened the bathroom door to say *GOTCHA* – my unimaginative attempt to smother the sense of embarrassment flowering in the pit of my stomach. Grinning, you brush it off as a quirk of mine – and you're not wrong, I do silly shit like this all time. Nonetheless, I'm racked with nerves and struggle with basic motor skills; I spill a bit of water on me when I lift the glass to my mouth, for example. You don't notice, so I fill the quiet with a proposition: *Can I kiss you?*

Hours later, two orgasms later, we slow dance in my bedroom at two in the morning to the sound of nothing, to the acoustics of desire. In my head, Elton John's "Your Song" is looping on repeat. Already, I wish to leave the old future out to dry in tomorrow's sun. What good is it now

that I've tasted on your lips all the hope in the apartment? When you leave, so too does hope. I have wanted nothing more or less than this.

//

*July 2017.* Post-sex, fixed in the pale light of an overhead lamp, sprawled across my mattress on the floor, you are so motionless, Peter, it looks as though you are a painting ruled by sentiment. I hope that you are possible of such grace, so that I too can be. We, two men of no aesthetic significance, engineered beauty from stolen time with our lumbering bodies. Nostalgia for a moment I'm still alert to courses through me. All my psyche can hold is the past, present, and future tense of the moment. I lay down beside you, the sheets rustling beneath us, as though we have made a forest floor of our yearnings. I want to live a whole human life in this bedroom of wet hands, where, for evenings at a time, the world starts and ends without celebration or remorse. What I know: We aren't running away. The eyes are too hungry for their own good. There is yellow of endless gradations – I want to see you tiptoe into all of them. Beside you, bound together in the same puny blaze, there is little to believe in besides the promise of our infinite luminosity. Dozing off, it occurs to me that if there is a corrective to the problem of my existential loneliness, it is this study of light.

I feel unhinged, as though I were adjusting to a new frequency of everyday life, to a new gravitational force – call this care. I drift toward an elsewhere or a nowhere; it's difficult to decipher, so I make a republic of longing out of you. I become a citizen of the negative space around you. With each date, after I ask you to be my boyfriend and you say yes, I inch closer and closer to a Not-I. I end up at the gate of a becoming-us, which is a non-place at best.

It is in the shoddy and unmappable world of a non-place that object lessons abound, especially those about the exhaustibility of hope, about the way in which “exposure to otherness” is the condition of possibility for relationality as such.<sup>107</sup> I’m someone who worships at the altar of the post-structuralist notion that to be with others is to be undone by them, which is a state of being regularly intuited as love, “one of the few places,” according to Laurent Berlant, “where people actually admit they want to become different.”<sup>108</sup> To me, this means that in order to architect a livable world with someone, a loved one, with you, I have to undergo a process of self-abolition, to be in a position of existential risk.

As such, I empty myself into you – I have seen this everywhere on the reserve: bodies like invisible monuments. I spend hours beside myself in a loop of anxiety and depression that is against vitality – the antidote to which becomes the sparse texts you send throughout a long workday. Shortly into our new relationship, I decide, perhaps prematurely, that we’re brimming with possibility. I watch YouTube videos for hours on end of weddings, gay and straight, marinating particularly in the nuptials, which are a part of an ever-compounding embargo on bad endings that is the hallmark of monogamous coupledness. I spend a lot of time thinking about bad endings.

What is it to enact care in a non-place? In her introduction to *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa rescues care from the trap holes of a “moralistic feel-good attitude” and “warm pleasant affection” and emplaces it in “ambivalent terrains,”<sup>109</sup> where it is imbued with the power to rend the patterns of thinking of the present. I want here to zero in on Puig de la Bellacasa’s theoretic of care so as to refuse to “disentangle care from its messy worldliness.”<sup>110</sup> For her, care harbors a mode of potentiality that is disruptive and world-bearing; it “can open to ‘as well as possible’ configurations” in toxic presents.<sup>111</sup> This

frustrates the axiological facet of care – that practices can be installed with value, which is hierarchicalized and motored, for example, by neoliberalizing logics of individuation. To displace care from the chamber of “normative moral obligations” is thus to flower a politics of care,<sup>112</sup> one that enables us to speculate about the particularities of a world we do not want and the one we do. If care is world-ending, if it seeks to eliminate the set of norms, emotions, governmentalities, and place-making practices that birth a world where human and non-human life is deranged, then it is a negative affect as much as it is a positive one. To care is to think outside of a singular life and to do this is to participate in a process of self-abolition. Care asks that we displace our senses of self as the nuclei of affective life. With care, one grows a collective skin; “the fact of being touched by what we touch.”<sup>113</sup> Care detonates that which precedes it; it pulls us outside our bodies and into that which one can’t know in advance. We, however, are readied to blend into that which is unknowable.

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*August 2017.* A humid Saturday afternoon. You work unendingly until Friday evening, which is when you drive sixty minutes to make waste out of time with me for a few days. You arrive sexually aroused, so we ignore our emptied stomachs in the name of another type of emptiness, a non-sovereign one, an irreparable one. I burrow my face into your butt, my closeness to which drowns out the soundscape of downtown Edmonton. Suddenly I feel a small, metal object tumble up or down my nose – direction is eschewed in this sexual configuration. I politely ask you to jump off of me, which is when I realize that one of the studs on my septum ring has come loose in the ebb and flow of anilingus. I excuse myself from the room, only to swallow the stud in the

bathroom. I return to bed, but we have both lost our hard-ons. Potentiality, I learn, can bloat and then burst at any given moment.

We laugh about this incident for the next handful of days. It briefly smoothes the rough patches of my suspicion that you aren't gambling with your sense of self in the ways I do. It gives me something to hold onto as evidence of a shared world that has a plural "you" as its axis.

The problem is that I love you. The problem is that I'm in love while bound at the ankles to a country.

Shortly thereafter, you ask me to break up with you. Desire is too unruly for someone like you; it is too tempting, too gratifying, to sext with a normatively attractive man on the other side of the world, for example. I can't drown out the chorus of anxieties about your past life, Australia, and the what-could-be that awaits a world without me. If love is world-building, then heartbreak is an implosion. I block you on Facebook. Delete you on Snapchat. I begin the labour of sitting inside the silence that pulsates in your wake.

//

*Late August 2017.* After just two weeks apart, we meet up at West Edmonton Mall, where you're gathered with coworkers for a birthday and I with old friends for a bachelorette party (I star in the role of Token Gay Friend). You apologize profusely to me, tears welling in your eyes. I look into them as though they'll save us from what our hands are capable of. I accept your apology, believing that you are less wildfire than before. You tell me that you've ceased being able to determine what to do with yourself, which revealed to me that you hadn't yet mustered the courage to call grief by its name. Back at my apartment, we sway from side to side backlit by the moon. I tell you I want to make love, not fuck. Cliché, yes, but it feels as close to prayer as I've been. When we kiss, I

vibrate, as though a waterfall is rushing through me. My world had become so tiny you filled it entirely. Is that so wrong?

This is our last dance. Neither of us knows this.

//

*November 2017.* I'm re-reading a book of poems in which your name appears a number of times. Put off by how utterly mine I make this, I put the book away. For me, "Peter" is not merely a name or a set of memories, but a sign system, an electric field of sorts that animates a way of life. I'm compelled by the shock of this encounter with an undead past to scavenge in the ditch of history. The loneliness is unforgiving, dispossessive. It occurs to me that I wish I had a picture of us hugging, for it was never simply an embrace, but a giving over of oneself to another.

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*December 2017.*

B: Hey! You've been on my mind lately. How're things?

P: Coincidentally, I'd also been thinking of you lately. Who knew a two-word question would prove so difficult to answer succinctly. I guess I've been OK, had to kind of re-plan my life in Canada after I left camp. Honestly, didn't think I would ever hear from you again and having a weird mix of anxiety and various other emotions as I type this (the fact it's 3 a.m. probably isn't helping lol). Ummmmmm, went to B.C. for a couple of weeks and I'm living in Red Deer now. I got a job at a ski hill here. I don't think anything else of note has happened. How're things with

you? How did the book launch go?

B: I had a feeling that we'd at least chat again. For whatever reason, seems like loose ends were left untied – at least for me. Seems wild to me that you're living in Red Deer haha. How's that been? Fairly conservative there, eh? What do you get up to at the ski hill? I've been super busy with course work plus I've been jumping around Canada for book launches, which have all gone swimmingly.

P: Yeah, I didn't like how we left things. It felt wrong somehow. I'm glad you messaged me. Red Deer is a pit lol. Full of casual racism and homophobia. Feeling very out of place. But I have my own place in a nice house which makes life somewhat bearable. That's awesome about your book. I had a feeling it would go well. Any more travel ahead of you?

B: Housing is probably a lot more reasonable there! Someone once called Red Deer the armpit of Alberta and I was like "mhmm, ya," though perhaps armpits deserve better than that sort of comparison haha. In January, I'll be in Guelph, then a two week-residency at The Banff Centre, and Regina in March, though more could pop up.

P: Well we both know how you feel about armpits haha. That's awesome that you are getting to travel so much! Sounds like you're killing it! Keeping up with the course work?

B: Haha I am very vocal about armpits, yes. And I did, wrapped up the fall term this week!



P: Congratulations! What's the plan for Christmas, etc.?

B: Hang out in Edmonton, spend Christmas with family up north. Wbu?

P: Well I have to work everyday except Christmas Day, so mostly that haha. Not sure about Christmas Day, will likely spend it with other internationals I work with. I'm really glad you messaged me, btw. There have been a few times I wanted to but didn't really feel like I should.

B: Aw, well I'm glad I messaged too. What have you been meaning to say?

P: Well, happy birthday was one haha. But also I hated how things were left. I worried that you maybe thought I had done things while we were together that contributed to you needing space and cutting off contact. Also my profile on Scruff which tends to contain things just to get attention, which I now feel stupid about. I never thought we would go this long without talking.

B: Well, I had to cut off contact because I had such strong feelings for you, and I knew that seeing you on Facebook would upset me.

P: Yeah, I understood that. I guess I was just feeling shitty and sorry for myself – on brand for me lately. Do you feel like you're at a point where we could consider each other friends?

B: I mean, I still feel like you messed up something that could've been dope haha. I reached out thinking maybe you had reflected on that.

P: I have and I agree that's the case. I'm holding back a bit because I'm at work and don't want to appear visibly upset in front of customers.

B: Honestly, I still feel like I'd give you another chance, so IDK how that and friendship would mesh.

P: Fuck, I kind of wish you hadn't said that. Fucking up and breaking up showed me how much I cared for you, but I was sure you hated me so much that it didn't matter what I felt.

B: Gotta listen to your heart, Pete.

P: Something that I clearly need to spend a great deal of time working on.

B: So, what now?

P: I'm not sure. What's possible? Do you maybe want to talk after I finish work?

B: Yeah, I'd like that.

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*January 2018.* I weather two dense hours as you drive from your full-time job at a family-owned ski hill in central Alberta to Edmonton. By "weather" I mean I did nothing; usually, I gnawed at the sun. This was our ritual. You worked this into the rhythm of us, and I conceded to you.

Conceded: this is the word I use to describe the structure of feeling into which you had coaxed me. Slowly, I'm pouring myself into the floorboards of you. Soon, I will be an abandoned house, there will be nothing left of me but scaffolding. Lately, I can't help but nauseate on the vulgarities of our relationship: the two break-ups, both of which were kindled by your world-risking craving for the rote of sexual attention that's the hallmark of hook-up apps like Grindr and Scruff.

My anxiety calls up this moment from last summer: I heard you masturbating in the bathroom; the sound of your hand stroking your dick meandered effortlessly into the tiny apartment. My gut instinct was to be furious, as though you'd breached an unspoken social contract that any pleasure should be a collaborative project when we're in the same space. Around that time, however, you struggled to keep a hard-on when we fucked. Rather than read into this as a repudiation of me as an erotic being, I vowed instead to try harder to exude sexiness when with you, to demonstrate to you that I ached to be attuned to all your sexual motions.

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*January again.* I dig through your cell phone and find what I was looking for, against myself: incriminating evidence. Soon you're stirred awake by a bout of food poisoning. I pretend I'm asleep. You vomit on and off for five hours. You fall back asleep at 7:30. I get up to begin my morning routine. I look at you as though you're an emptied thing, a non-object from which there is nothing to mine. This is what it is to be torn from a "thick mesh of relational obligation."<sup>114</sup> Again, I'm at once wordless and worldless. This is a blow to subjectivity that follows the originary one care unleashes. One can anticipate the first ontological explosion that is the burgeoning sense one is falling in love. The second one is somewhere in a land mine into which one can only ever

trespass.

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*February 2018.*

B: Hey Pete! I wanted to write to say I unfriended you (which was rash, sorry). I've been reflecting on you and us lately – probably all of the sad music I've been listening to and my two weeks in the mountains, which compel one to turn inward haha. I decided I should write to say thank you for what we did have, rather than end on what went wrong. In classic “us” style, we ended on a rough note, so, if you hadn't been my boyfriend, my family wouldn't have been able to see me in love. I wouldn't have known what it's like to want to put all that you can into someone else, like SERIOUSLY, romantically, shamelessly. I hope you're well.

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What these snippets of the choppy waters of this romance world were to reveal was the negativity of care. Falling in and out of love both illuminate the deep ambivalence of care in which Puig de la Bellacasa marinates. Care does not easily retrieve us from the fragilities of cohabitation; it plunges us into the thick of a zone of being where everything shape-shifts, where everything is a potential site of severance and constitution. A relationship as new and spastic as this one was the scene of where care makes one straddle the fence of bifurcated times and places. In the aftermath, care promises nothing, but this doesn't mean that we must put a restriction on it. Care is a disruptive thing because it frees the analytic of the world from a state that is overdetermined. And so, those

of us who still want love in the couple form dwell in the tumult of the instabilities of caring for that which also has the power to undo us. But always, with care, we perform high-stakes processes of world-making in the hope that in our dying days we might feel freer.

### **Please Keep Loving: Reflections on Unlivability**

Desirous of a beautiful life I get out of bed, but it's Monday and I'm in the throes of a genocide. I make a cup of coffee and pick up a poetry collection, both of which I attend to at my living room window; for a few minutes, I think of nothing besides coffee, poetry, and windows, which feels like a small rebellion. In the corner of my eye I see a banner I constructed many months ago that says NO SETTLERS / IN THE FUTURE. I'm not in the future. I'm in the present; this means I'm as lonely and as brief as a country.

When I open the pages of the book, I'm transported to an elsewhere unhinged from misery toward which I can run. I begin to distrust everyday life, which is a conduit for grief's traversals; at the very least, I'm inclined to waste away weeks and months inside the literature of radicals for whom the present is a mistake, a ruse, something to turn our backs on. If all we need is one overdetermined reason to suffer the mode of aliveness, perhaps art is mine. Perhaps if Billy-Ray Belcourt is a concept that shouts and dances and philosophizes I'll in the end have been scattered in thousands of pieces across the nation. Everywhere will be my graveyard. I'll have lived and died as that which is more than the sum of my body parts. What will matter isn't how many days I endured in the battleground of linear time, but what every fibre of me aspired to—something more than the gift of mortality, more than the rusty category of the individual who had meaning spewing from his ears, something only fully and fleetingly realized in the hands and mouths and chests of those whom I encountered as a ghostly mark on the page.

How silly that we measure the day by how much light fits inside it and not by the number of ordinary wounds the light lands on at any given second.

There's dizzying evidence of the unlivability of Canada wherever one looks. That NDN kids, NDN women and men, queer and trans NDNs, are all enticed by the freedom of non-existence is an ethical problem at the core of Canadian modernity. It's worth noting that "the world" isn't a passive noun, one given unto itself by way of common sense; rather, it's a unit of power, and as such it harbours the toxins of history. NDNs, those against whom the world swelled into an oversized, self-destructive one, are made disproportionately susceptible to an existential sort of poison, to being suspended on the barbed-wire fence between life and death. That we haven't sufficed in the project of making being in the world an arousing and joyous thing for all is a cause for alarm.

To begin to articulate what drives NDNs to kick-start a premature death, the conditions of which the state brews, we require a new grammar of living, one that foregrounds the fact of our utopian modes of being. I tried to do just this in a poem I axed from *This Wound Is a World* about the eleven residents of the Attawapiskat First Nation who attempted suicide on April 9, 2016. I sought to paint an image of contorted living in a pocket of the world that engenders exhaustion as a symptom of governmental neglect. To infuse the body of he who takes his own life with a complex form of agency was a herculean task I didn't want to risk botching. There had to be another way to go about this, without the room for mishap that verse pried open. This, then, is an experiment in writing in the direction of a time and place that doesn't produce suicide as a chronic condition, as a suitable response to trauma.

There's a way to talk about and represent suicide that's not pathologizing. The webseries *Feral* follows the frayed lives of a host of twenty-something queer artists in Memphis, Tennessee, and does just this. Through a non-linear, powerfully incoherent narrative style, *Feral* reveals bits and pieces of the doomed relationship of Billy (Jordan Nichols) and Carl (Ryan Masson). It's slowly

made clear that Billy and Carl are in the thick of a mode of loving that is profound and world-shattering, so much so that it's difficult to think of them as separate people. Each short episode carefully elaborates the festering sense Carl has that to stay, to be in a body, to say yes to life, is too exhaustive an undertaking. Billy refuses to give up, to move on, to make love elsewhere; this is the sort of beauty in the face of existential deprivation that's especially useful now, in these dark times, in the fascist renaissance unfolding all over the West. Days before he takes his life, Carl whispers this to his boyfriend, who couldn't be away from him, couldn't let him go, *Please keep loving, Billy.*

This is an occasion not to romanticize suicide but to reflect on how to practice radical empathy for those who experience aliveness as a kind of ever-present death knell. *Feral* asks us to refuse to be entranced by easy fixes for the sicknesses of capitalist modernity, the corrective to which is an overthrowing of normal life. The webseries, in the end, posits love—queer, feminist—as what vitalizes the memory of the unjustly lost and functions as the foundation for a world that, like a benediction, is a promise of the glory of a dawning futurity.

I seek out a beauty that isn't subject to interruption, a beauty free of contestation. The kind that manifests as performances of social life and embodiment that run counter to the world. Beauty as a troubling of normality. Beauty as an indictment of the status quo. Beauty as what it is to exist in the register of futurity.<sup>115</sup>

At a reading, another poet says my love of beauty is abundantly clear. To be compelled to write beautifully about unbeautiful matters is a minor miracle, but it's also to declare that the world has been poured onto me and that anyone within earshot has the power to wield a word like a match.



Nested at the mouth of the Attawapiskat River on James Bay in northern Ontario, the remote Cree community of Attawapiskat is a pressurized site for the convergence of forces that stomp suffering into the rut of statistical truth. In one sense, suicide emerges as a political response to structurally manufactured sorrow where joy has been shut out of everyday life for a long time. The manufactured sorrows include inadequate and improperly constructed housing, overcrowding, state mismanagement of funds, ecological harms, intergenerational trauma, and so on. It should be unsurprising to those of us who attend to the long elaboration of colonial violence from coast to coast to coast that these sites for bad feeling are all propagated by a decades-long governmental project to suppress NDN vitality. We might think of these environmental stressors as grim reaper-like, foul things that feed on the happiness of us, one by one, until something like the soul has been picked clean. What else would compel more than one hundred people at Attawapiskat—whose population is only 1549, according to the 2011 census—to try to end their lives between September 2015 and April 2016? I write today on the side of joy, to expand its geographical confines against the tentacular ways the state and its gruesome history extinguish possibility in the lives of NDNs.

What do we owe the machine of living, which gushes its venom at the innocent? By innocent, I don't mean those unscathed by politics, which is an impossible position to occupy. Purity is a misleading thing. With this troubled word—"innocence"—I want to nod to those in a brawl with the world as a consequence of what they signify in the arena of national sentiment. How any of us survive a world always against us, against what we signify and make imaginable, is a sociologically significant act. What I know is that it's unfair that NDNs are called on to make do in a world we neither wanted nor built ourselves. I have called this bind precarity. It's also the ground zero for suicidal ideation.

The Neskantaga First Nation in northern Ontario has been under what is essentially a permanent state of emergency since 2013, as compromised living conditions continue to govern life and death there. In April 2016, after the aforementioned suicide attempts on a single Saturday, the Attawapiskat First Nation declared a state of emergency too. Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the “news from Attawapiskat” heartbreaking, and Charlie Angus, the region’s MP and New Democratic Party Indigenous affairs critic, called it a “rolling nightmare.” This governmental speak, this action-less language, does little to ameliorate the conditions that elevate suicide to a state of emergency. “Emergency” is a key word here, for it indexes a set of circumstances that call for an immediate end to the “rolling nightmare.” “Emergency” is a noun that yanks us from the normality of daily life, but its invocation also promises to grab us by the hand and lead us to safety. The addition of “state of” here is also important insofar as it butts up against “emergency”; it stretches the word out, which denotes its protracted nature, its velocity and scale. The emergency isn’t one emergency but a pileup of emergencies. On the other hand, the state of emergency can be understood as a singular emergency; it is the emergency of Canadian history.

I wrote this poem in the wake of a suicide pact carried out by two girls, aged twelve, on the Wapekeka First Nation in January 2017, published in *This Wound Is a World*—perhaps another attempt to use poetry to get at a deeper understanding of why some NDNs choose death:

in january 2017,

two girls, 12, carried out a suicide pact

on the wapekeka first nation.

what is suicide

but the act of opening up  
to the sky?  
what is suicide  
but wanting to live  
more than once?  
yesterday  
a cloud fell onto me  
and i never felt more at home.  
sometimes i cry in indian  
and it sounds like  
i am speaking  
in english.  
don't open your eyes.  
pretend that  
everything is a bird  
and no one is hungry  
for what they can't have

Set in the mood of the elegiac, I sought to reveal some of the aspirations that animate suicide: the feeling that life has stranded you; the making of heaven, of the sky, as an NDN world of sorts; the woe of being severed from your mother tongue; the existential hunger that drives men to do egregious things to women and girls and boys. "don't open your eyes," then, is an ethical call, a note of care and instruction, that has to do with the possibility of another way of looking,

one that might illuminate a future in which the clouds aren't more hospitable to NDNs than Canada is.

A country is an argument against beauty.

Ocean Vuong: "I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication."<sup>116</sup> How to be alive outside the affective register of the state, inside something less structurally sound, where to be lonely isn't to ruin?

Not every melancholic is buried in his longing. I want a song or a poem or a myth to drape over me like a fourth layer of skin. To be a gust of life, à la Roland Barthes, pirouetting throughout the world—how graceful!

The Cross Lake First Nation in Manitoba also declared a state of emergency, on March 9, 2016, in response to 140 suicide attempts in the preceding two weeks. An editorial in the *McGill Daily* argued that the so-called "suicide crisis" or "suicide epidemic" couldn't be resolved without accounting for the region's ecological harms and economic insecurity. NDN activists and scholars have similarly been quick to point out that the high incidence of suicide and suicidal ideation on reserves has everything to do with funding shortages for adequate and culturally safe mental health facilities, racism in urban centres that do offer services, and other forms of social and political violence. But Dr. Alex Wilson of the University of Saskatchewan also insisted that many of the youth from Cross Lake who attempted to or did take their lives were LGBTQ-identified and that this wasn't being factored into public discourse. Perhaps part of what overwhelms a more precise interrogation of the particularities of this NDN death drive is the way words such as "emergency," "crisis," and "epidemic" sensationalize rather than humanize those who exit the world. There's a

poetics to be tapped into that pries apart these concepts, one that disappears the mist of signifiers so as to allow us to conceptualize suicide as of a piece with the long war on NDN life. To prevent premature death, we are all beholden to doing away with uses of haunted speech.

On March 10 of that year, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, a grassroots organization by and for NDN youth that operates in the United States and Canada, and for whom I used to work, received an email from a family doctor stationed in northern Manitoba, pleading for help as he was worried that homophobia and transphobia weren't being taken up in the mental health crisis intervention strategies by the federal government and the band leaders. For many, the "suicide crisis" on reserves is a crisis of trans- and homophobia.

Suicide is routinely coated in negative affect, for it marks the loss of a life that could still be here. I, however, want to be able to talk about suicide as both devastating and as a kind of politically charged reaction to a world that makes living at the intersections of social loci untenable. Suicide prevention, then, can't simply be about keeping NDNs in the world if it remains saturated by that which dulls the sensation of aliveness for those who are queer and/or trans and/or two-spirit. History and its ongoingness drove us to a point in which abandoning the world elbowed its way to the front of the line of individual agency. Suicide prevention thus needs to entail a radical remaking of the world.

In her beautiful and painful collection of songs and stories *Islands of Decolonial Love*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, "suicide's not something you do to other people, it's something you do for yourself."<sup>117</sup> Value judgments that smother suicide in shame extend the violence that stunted the lives of queer and trans NDN youth in the first place. If "suicide prevention" is the analytic we're going to attach to, then it needs to be about making new forms of collective NDN life, ones that don't cherry-pick ways of being over others. Reserves can be

incubators of transphobia and homophobia as a symptom of the Christianizing project carried out by settlers for decades; that history, however, doesn't absolve NDNs of making use of a single-issue focus on race that ignores to a grievous degree the pain of the doubly and triply marginalized.

NDN youth, listen: to be lost isn't to be unhinged from the possibility of a good life. There are doorways everywhere, ones without locks, doors that swing open. There isn't only now and here. There is elsewhere and somewhere too. Speak against the coloniality of the world, against the rote of despair it causes, in an always-loudening chant. Please keep loving.

## Care for the Disappeared

*“The Royal Canadian Mounted Police acknowledged in a 2014 report that there have been nearly 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women between 1980 and 2012. Indigenous women’s groups, however, document the number... to be over 4,000.”<sup>118</sup>*

(1) In October 2016, Larry’s Water Hauling, a trucking company in Grande Prairie, Alberta, refused to reckon with the murderous impulse of one of its employees, whose name was kept hidden from the public eye. A semi-trailer truck was photographed with a sticker that read in bold, red font: “ONE SQUAW TOO MANY.” The photograph went viral on social media, provoking complaints of hate speech and expressions of shock and other emotional performances of outrage at the nerve of the driver, at the flamboyance of his racist and sexist mode of thought and behavior. According to a *Metro News* article about the incident, the driver wanted to crack a joke, one that might “talk one driver into leaving his significant other,” the eponymous “squaw.”<sup>119</sup> Supposedly unknowingly, the driver called up a history, a wretched one at that which made and makes Indigenous women into objects of injury and sorrow, unendingly killable in the melodrama of confederation, which is an ongoing undertaking.

“ONE SQUAW TOO MANY” is a horrific calculus – a way of ordering Indigenous women inside zones of unfreedom where they are to die, usually gruesomely and at the hands of white men.

Nothing life-like, nothing resembling a livable life, can be apprehended through this calculus, just the made-killable. Made-killable; a non-ontological state stockpiled with the non-beings of the world. As Eve Tuck and C. Ree see it, “making-killable” is a machination of racial capitalism whereby masses of people are readied inside death worlds for mass slaughter; it is a way of “making sub-human,” turning people “into always already objects” of violence and genocide.<sup>120</sup>

Squaw is a derogatory term used to make Indigenous women into a surplus population that is not worth keeping in the world. It is what Jodi Byrd calls a “constructed fiction of colonialism,”<sup>121</sup> subjecting Indigenous women to what Kimberley Juanita Brown describes as the “closed shutter of blind recognition,” a process of subjection that blocks “a visual constituency” from signalling “its connection to humanity.”<sup>122</sup> For some, like the aforementioned truck driver, the squaw is part of a visual arsenal; she is made visible via an everyday practice of observing who is and who is not of this world, a mode of observation that reifies an “order of representation” that “gives way to a more violently affective contact.”<sup>123</sup> The squaw is of a piece with an economy of signification inside which NDN women and girls in what is now called Canada are hailed as non-beings writ large. “ONE SQUAW TOO MANY” is a frightening reminder that gender is a site of severance as much as it is one of constitution.

(2) Rebecca Belmore’s *Vigil* (2002). Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is a zone of social abandonment unlike any other, for it is where an ever-ballooning form of economic precarity exists in combination with a gendered and racialized state of killability that demarcates the quality of life of NDN women in particular. Known to those who do and do not live there as “Canada’s poorest postal code,” the Downtown Eastside exists in the shadows of a liberal state that requires some and not others to endure, to weather and to incorporate into ordinary life, an array of structural conditions that leave them vulnerable to being disappeared. In 2002, the compromised social worlds of the Downtown Eastside torpedoed into the imaginaries of the Canadian public; this was the year that the now-infamous serial killer Robert Pickton was arrested for the murders of several women from the area. Maggie Tate notes that “between the years of 1980 and 2002, more than 65 women were disappeared from the Downtown East Side [*sic*],” and that many were not only



“linked to the buried body parts on the land of” Pickton, but were also revealed to be First Nations.<sup>124</sup> So, the spectacularity of the “buried body parts,” of the brutalities of a time and place animated by a wretched and deep history of the violability of Indigenous women, to use Audra Simpson’s language,<sup>125</sup> sets the context for Belmore’s *Vigil*, a site-specific performance art piece that took place in 2002 during the Talking Stick Festival in front of the Firehall Theatre, just a block away from the corner of Main and Hastings.

Undoubtedly, the Downtown Eastside is understood to be more than a geography of domination; those who bear the negativities of settler nation-building also participate in fugitive and joyous practices of world-making. Belmore’s *Vigil* does not spawn a representational field in which we are compelled to gnaw away at what remains of the disappeared, to bathe in the sadness and ache that partly made up their affective experiences of being in the world prior to a grisly and premature death. Instead, Belmore opens up an intermediary space between subjection and freedom that is something like documentation or bearing witness, which includes a form of ethical attention that calls on those who listen to reckon with the production of Indigenous death as a normative facet of Canadian modernity. Belmore’s *Vigil* makes use of sound as a modality that has the affective power to initiate a thick sense of one’s implicatedness in the gendered and racialized trauma of colonialism.

In the Downtown Eastside, Belmore fashioned a small aesthetic world out of grief: the audience, those who saw fit to see what it was that Belmore was up to, were spatially arranged in relation to a sanitized segment of concrete, to Belmore’s graphed body, and to a volley of lit candles. Belmore proceeded to yell out the names of the disappeared, to expel from her lungs the breath that was

emptied from the bodies of those whose lives were ended by Pickton and a host of grim reapers like him. By intensifying her voice, by governing its rate of vibrations, Belmore operationalized a frequency of audibility that exceeded everyday speech. To yell is to breach the social and physiological boundary of human interaction and this indicates that what one is confronted with is a matter that cannot be integrated into the quotidian. Belmore broke through a sound barrier of sorts that had heretofore, prior to the sensationalized arrest of Pickton, smothered and discredited the vocalizations of worry and loss from those in the Downtown Eastside. Sex workers, poor and vulnerablized women of color, all of whom were rendered unhearable in the theatres of redress, were conjured in spectral form in Belmore's *Vigil* to throw into relief the uneven approach to listening that dominated Canadian political life. Belmore thus engendered "an ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved," to use Tina M. Campt's phraseology,<sup>126</sup> that is not possible by making recourse to only one type of sensory experience. By propagating this sphere of affection and affectability, Belmore hailed the bodies of those near her as ones that live now in the wake of this string of disappearances, that are indelibly marked by the confluence of aspirations, privations, and fantasies that produce living, exhaustion, and death in Canada. Perhaps by exposing the bodies of Canadians as ones that were and are susceptible to the sonic resonances of Indigenous sorrow, Belmore bore a capacious sense of inheritance, which is a concept that Amber Dean uses to describe the difficult practice of recognizing oneself as being in a relationship with both the living and the dead from the Downtown Eastside.<sup>127</sup> The ethical demand, then, was and is not to en flesh the names of those yelled out, to vicariously inhabit their suffering, but to come to the realization that one's livability is entangled in the miseries of coloniality and that this is a cause for political rebellion.

Further, skin and locution converged here to enact a performance of mourning that was and is contra the act of enumeration, where enumeration is a counting game that risks severing a name from the felt histories through which it is remembered and kept in the world. Belmore upended a habit of empire and whiteness that sought to account for the dead in a way that would extend the process of racialization, that would continue to subjectivize Indigenous women as loci of doom and gloom. The drive to compile a database of the dead was eschewed too in the sounds that emitted when Belmore nailed a red dress and then tore it from a nearby pole. Inflected by the guttural noises that Belmore released, that indexed the physical exertion of the performance and of occupying the social position of the killable, this together orchestrated a soundscape, a social music that was and is drowned out by a national death wish that is settler colonialism. With all of these auditory emissions, Belmore worked up a cacophony of sorts, one that was comprised not only of the ethical plea to memorialize the dead, but also of the competing narratives of truth and Canadian political life that produced the ungrievability of Indigenous women in the first place. On the one hand, there was and is a semiotics of indigeneity at work that routes Indigenous women into death-worlds insofar as they signify, to evoke Simpson's key argument, land and in this the constitutive impossibility of settlement, of doing away with Indigenous presence once and for all.<sup>128</sup> On the other hand, there was and is a refusal of all of that, an insistence instead on the sounding out the terror of Indigenous life and the possibility of a world without it. Simpson following Jodi Byrd writes that cacophony is a "riot of noise," one that "requires an ear, and a decipherment, an audibility but perhaps a willingness to listen."<sup>129</sup> Belmore thus asked of those in attendance to cultivate a listening practice, to drown out the contestatory narrative of the disposability Indigenous women, and to hear care and concern, to hear a desire for a future without tattered dresses.

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In *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Audra Simpson argues that “the ‘phenomenon’ of the disappeared women, the murdered and missing Native women in Canada, is not a mystery, is not without explanation,” that it is “explained by Canada’s dispossession of Indian people from land.”<sup>130</sup> She continues: “This dispossession is raced and gendered, and its violence is still born by the living, the dead, and the disappeared corporealities of Native women.”<sup>131</sup> This brings about a problem for care: how are we to go about *caring for*, not simply *about*, “the disappeared corporealities of Native women?” Belmore’s *Vigil* not only provides an alternative method of engaging with the disappeared that is against the racist and sexist vision of the Larry’s Water Hauling employee, it also performs a form of care that is aimed at the disappeared. We are to go about living on in the wake of these disappearances in a way that impossibilizes the possibility of its continuance. We inherit what was lost and it is with this understanding of our locatedness in political history that we refuse disappearance and democratize care and joy in its place.

## Fatal Naming Rituals

Sometime in 2011, at fifteen or sixteen, I ordered Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* to my childhood home in Jossard, Alberta. My oldest sister, an undergraduate student at Grande Prairie Regional College at the time, had been assigned the book in a Native studies course. I wanted a glimpse into the intellectual world of post-secondary education, to read and to be moved, irreparably and unsuspectedly. I wanted to tip toe into the mise-en-scene of a novel, to let what I might witness illuminate a way of writing, a listening and looking practice, that I had only known as the felt suspicion of something more radical, more energetic and enlivening, unrulier and more complicated than "Language Arts."

With *In Search of April Raintree* I found all of this. I found a book that was more than a book; Mosionier's story of the lives of two NDNs girls who care for one another in contradistinction to the cruel "care" of the state, of social services, was and is a searing indictment of Canada. It was and is a critique of this country's inability to stop compounding the brutalities that NDNs are made to endure, brutalities that live and breathe in and possess the bodies of those endowed by governments of all sorts to mediate a history that is in fact without end, without mercy. *In Search of April Raintree* refused to torpedo NDNs into the gutters of misrepresentation. Mosionier took the work of description into her own hands and because of this she refused to offer up a rhetoric that one might describe as simple. That is, Mosionier wrote in the mode of "truth-telling" to paint a picture of complicated and compromised living in the crosshairs of settler governance. In this way, she laid bare a way of storytelling that always returns us to the possibility of NDN life unhampered by a coloniality of the present. Fred Moten: "Anybody who thinks that they can understand how terrible the terror has been, without understanding how beautiful the

beauty has been against the grain of the terror, is wrong.”<sup>132</sup> Each word of Mosionier’s book, each pronoun and preposition, all of them, shook and shake still with a vitality that is in the name of NDN freedom and nothing less.

There is an art to spinning words so that they are always-already against the monotony of voice and for the polyphony of political speak. This is the terrain of NDN writing. It always has been and always will be.

Say forgiveness. With a maw full of smoke, say the aftermath of history. Hold our books in your slippery hands with the ever-loudening fact of their eschewal of the violence of a reading practice that makes a feast out of “a choreography of mangled bodies.”<sup>133</sup> Mouth the word “enemy,” but do not enunciate it, for it isn’t a subject position worth keeping in the world. Living as we do in the charred remnants of a time during which the voices of NDNs were siphoned out of the theatres of culture and into the wastelands of law and order, you, a white and settler you, are beholden to a project of lessening the trauma of description.

Everywhere in the colonial archive there are a plethora of descriptions that sought and seek still to hold the position of the NDN in a state we could describe as against opacity, as against the right to be unseen and unseeable. Colonialism is in part a system of clarity in the visual sense: an articulation of NDN life that refuses it the promise of freedom and a world-making kinship that was in opposition to the world-engulfing effects of racial capitalism based on what we and our communities look like. We were and still are made to exist in a visual field in which we are barred from democratizing the felt knowledge of our dignity.<sup>134</sup> In *Mohawk Interruptus*, Audra Simpson

traces the discursive and political beginnings of "the savage" to the earliest moments of contact at which settlers did the terrible and terror-making work of classification so as to acclimatize the NDN to an atmosphere of ideas they transported from Europe. Today, we hear the resonances of this fatal naming ritual repeated and made anew. There were and are ways of thickening words with meaning so as to injure, of making words into evidence of our injurability. Hurling with the right amount of intensity, words floor us. There are words that lay me flat on the floor of the world. One of these words is "simple."

Simplicity is a mode of being in the world available to those enmeshed in white structures of feeling. Simplicity is an affect that motors the cultural imaginary of whiteness; it is an interpretive strategy. Simplicity hides a flurry of forms of social and political violence that rip the lives of the marginalized from the freedom of a simple life, from a life emptied of historically contingent turmoil. Simplicity belongs only to those who live and write unfettered by all of that which ravages the worlds. It is an emotional orientation that enables one to pick up a book and put down a carcass. Simplicity is a structural impossibility for NDNs who make life hampered by oppression.

On June 5, 2018, *The Walrus* published a review of my Griffin Poetry Prize-winning debut book of poems, *This Wound is a World*, "Billy-Ray Belcourt's Simple and Radical Poetry." The title alone steals breath from the bodies of those who are roped into the unlivable and racialized terrain of simplicity – the headline was later modified by axing "simple" after writers like Gwen Benaway wrote incisive threads on Twitter critiquing the profile. Writer Jonah Brunet likewise made use of the rhetoric of simplicity: words like "plainspoken," "straightforward," and "unmistakable" pile up to chase after a thesis about method in poetry that has at its heart a binary between indecipherability and simplicity. There is nothing fundamentally poisonous about

“simplicity,” but Burnet is bathed in a tradition of wordliness or perhaps “languageness,” to use a term I first heard used by Layli Long Soldier, that traps NDN writers in the slum of plainness. He quotes a review of Mosionier’s *Raintree* in *Queen’s Quarterly*: “[Mosionier] sets out to tell a story—her own story—in the plainest available language. Nothing else is needed.”

This interpretive behavior is everything in literary history: Burnet also nods to a classic of NDN writing, Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, a memoir that, like *In Search of April Raintree*, creates what theorist Dian Million in an essay called “Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History” describes as a “new language for communities” to get at the sorrow and love that proliferates in NDN social worlds. Million cites both Mosionier and Campbell’s texts as ones that evidenced an artistic practice that punctured through the sound barrier of Canadian historical ignorance to tell “politically unspeakable” stories. Indeed, it was recently revealed that a chunk of Campbell’s book was edited out because it detailed sexual abuse at the hands of members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, an avowal that would have surely thrown into relief the chronic problem of police brutality against NDN women<sup>135</sup>. This time, Million tells us, produced “a profound literature of experience.” Still, those who look and install meaning into words with the force of a history of impoverished reading negate the profundity of our writing.

The meta-claim that is underneath this line of inquiry is what we might call a “racial fatalism”: in other words, it is as though NDNs were so bogged down by history, by bodies that emerge from that history, that we can only write in a way that is “plain,” that is “sparse,” that is “simple.” Burnet turns to a liberal interpretative strategy that seeks to empower a “humanity narrative” that is in fact a trapdoor, worthless in the fight against the cannibalistic genre of the human inaugurated in the laboratories of the New World.<sup>136</sup> It isn’t that we need to be welcomed into the wasteland of the human, to be made fit for the operations of violence that uphold it, but a



remaking of the world, one not ruled by Man, one that flowers freedom for those denied it as a symptom of the many-headed hydra that is white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

In non-Indigenous narratives that hinge on proving our humanness, NDNs sit stilled in the role of the described. As the described, our words are pit against us. Having only at our arsenal words that self-destruct, we shoulder the burden once more of voicelessness. How cruel to have our critiques of the ways in which unlivable lives are manufactured everywhere in Canada heard as evidence of our ability to speak and nothing else!

“My story was maltreated.” So goes Terese Marie Mailhot in her memoir *Heart Berries*. *Heart Berries* elaborates a theory of ethical living, of how we might tune our ears to hear the always-compounding ways that NDN women are denied care. It isn’t just that we are called on to listen in a mode that might breach the smoke screen of liberal empathy (to testify), but also and more importantly to treat a story so as to read and act in the direction of the world it begets. So, it isn’t that contemporary NDN writers are speaking in unison, as if in a chorus uttering the same things, all in the name of a singular avowal of that which impedes our flourishing. We are all caught up in the singularity of coloniality, but, each book, each poem, each story, *is* against the trauma of description, those ways of reading and listening that make vampires out of people, possessed by an insatiable hunger for a racialized simplicity that makes us into objects of study to be fed through the poorly-oiled machines of analysis.

To tell a story of the possibility that swells up even where it is negated requires a sociological eye, an epistemological standpoint, that is borne out of experience, of knowing what it is to be a map to everywhere and nowhere. What’s more, to hear this story of compromised

living, of joy against the odds, of the repeatability of a history that lives in the bodies of those who reap the spoils of colonialism, as something more than a “simple” account of a singular life, is to undergo a process of resubjectification, one that requires the abolition of the position of the enemy, the vampire, the one who describes, the settler. You need to read, to listen, and to write from someplace else, from another social locus, a less sovereign one, a less hungry one.

All my writing is against the poverty of simplicity. All my writing is against the trauma of description.

Today, the world is just beginning, so I pack light. I start and end with books by NDN writers. With Layli Long Soldier’s *Whereas*, “I Mommy the edge” between a painful history that isn’t done with us and a still possible future that proliferates care. I call this edge the “eroding edge of pathos,” which is where I jump from with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *This Accident of Being Lost*, an unruly and differently ruled text that welcomes us to “the space of the unspoken and the unwritten and the unsung.” It is here, Gwen Benaway tells us in *Passage*, that “passage is more than movement,” is in excess of and prior to geographical change, is an ontological force as much as a creative-theoretical one. With these books I build a monument to futurity where we assemble another “congress / of selves,” where we perform and enact “everything [we] long to know and hold” (Liz Howard in *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent*).

You aren’t invited into our tent. We aren’t yet at that point of hospitality. I won’t tell you when the time has come. “There isn’t time here. There isn’t ever time here. There is only *here* here, only land here.”<sup>137</sup>

## To Hang Our Grief up to Dry

Activists doused the statue of John A. Macdonald in Montreal in red paint a number of times in 2018. In so doing, they refused to live according to what Christina Sharpe calls “monumental time” in which history is motionless, dead, and outside the ethical tonalities of the present.<sup>138</sup> Instead, the activists insisted on a politics of accusation, throwing into focus the *longue durée* of state-sanctioned violence against NDNs in Canada. It isn’t just that the blame was aimed at Macdonald and his ilk, but at time too, which carries with it the lethal resonances of a past that unmade NDN worlds with brutish accuracy. Time doesn’t move as though a ghostly entity, but through the bodies of those endowed by history who seek to fix NDN life in a continuum of suffering. The red on Macdonald is red on the body politic, on Canada writ large.

Macdonald was, of course, an architect of genocide. An ethno-nationalist, his stint as Canada’s first prime minister unleashed famine in the prairies (to make way for westward expansion), inaugurated the time-altering residential school system, and saw ruthless retaliation to NDN resistance (i.e., the hanging of Louis Riel for his part in the North-West Rebellion of 1885).<sup>139</sup> We are thus in the interval between his murderous past and a rotting settler state in the twenty-first century where there is an ongoing crisis of NDN death both social and physical. We haven’t had time to hang our grief up to dry, for the mourning is never-ending and the erosion and interrogation of NDN livability is built into Canadian political life. Much of what followed Macdonald’s age was a kind of plagiarism of his intimacy with brutality. We, NDNs, are given over to that brutal intimacy, against our will, as abstraction and ideality, not as ourselves, never fully material, never allowed to inhabit our messy materiality. Such is the fate of NDNs, the slow violence of being made to live as ideas do. One need not look too far to glimpse the carelessness

with which others treat concepts (that free thinking careens into cruelty is a hallmark of racial capitalist modernity). What the statues of Macdonald do in opposition, perhaps, to the progenitors of trauma worship is bring out into the open the afterlives of dispossession and capture, their grim futurity. We can't look away. The blood is there, before us. Each day, it spills anew.

January 29, 2018.

Word reaches me that jury selection in the high-profile Gerald Stanley trial in Battleford, Saskatchewan, was carried out by way of a surgical exploitation of race-based loopholes in Canadian law. One by one, each potential juror with NDN features or an NDN cultural disposition was shown to be too biased or too implicated in the case to deliver justice (which, again, is blind according to an old Western legal fiction, so this apportioning of NDNs on the other side of law and order isn't unprecedented). "Shown" here indicates the performative power of the law – to bring about that which it names – and thus the insufficiency of NDN speech to mark another kind of advocacy on behalf of those whose killings are thoroughly politicized. Here's what *The Globe and Mail* reported from the courtroom: "Each time a person who appeared to be Indigenous took his or her turn, a single word emanated from the defence: challenge. The potential juror then walked slowly back to his or her seat. Whether male or female, young or old, the potential jurors who looked Indigenous were blocked."<sup>140</sup> What resulted was an all-white jury, an end that demonstrated to the Boushie family and to those watching from their homes that what was to be scrutinized wasn't truth but the social conditions by which NDNs were to live and die. The courtroom in Battleford, like courtrooms nation-wide, was a laboratory of sorts, an overwrought

zone of memorialization and colonial governmentality, yet another realm of confrontation in the long history of the catastrophization of NDN life and bodies.

February 2, 2018.

*Hazlitt* publishes Anthony Oliveira's long form essay, "Death in the Village."<sup>141</sup> News has recently come to light outside of the whisper network of Toronto's Gay Village that a serial killer has been targeting gay men via dating apps like Grindr. Oliveira beautifully and painfully accounts for the unbearable tragedy of losing a loved one without either a trace of his body or an answer to the question of his disappearance. Death, no matter how much it decorates our lives and this planet, regardless of the vast territory it stakes out in all of us, is always a badlands, a devastated and devastating environment in which no one wants to linger. Bruce McArthur's killing spree evinced the exhaustibility of liberal correctives to state-sanctioned homophobia (that human rights wins didn't extinguish the proximity of queers to death), but also and significantly the ongoing indifference of the police and other institutional bodies to the plight of queers made susceptible to harm in ways that don't catalyze public rage or concern. Oliveira notes that police withheld from declaring a serial killer was on the loose and thus couldn't avow that queer men – many of colour – were going missing under similar circumstances in Toronto. Trauma, made unspeakable in public, consumes, whittling a life down to the bare bones of emotionality: paranoia and a survival instinct. Made to endure too long in paranoia, the survival instinct glitches. "Survival" itself is an eddying concept: what is survival when the psyche is an unlocked door?

I'm quick to identify with the victims (who were much more than victims, unjustly reduced to that flat form of subjectivity by McArthur and the media). I have spent most of my adult life

engaging in anonymous sex with men I met on dating apps. Men whose names I didn't know. Men whose faces I didn't fully see. Men who seemed to have given up on care, whose touch wasn't touch per se but something sharper, something heavier. Men I met in hotel rooms and darkened vehicles. Dozens of men, innumerable now that I've not laboured to keep the memories of them alive. There have been hookups I've abruptly left out of a sense of impending danger, ones I've counted myself lucky to have escaped. Queer men know what lurks inside dead eyes and bowed heads. What happened in Toronto in McArthur's apartment, how the police poorly managed the case – this all refracted out into the world and thus into the bodies and minds of queer men of colour everywhere in Canada. I felt as though I was a part of an endangered species. I still do. This is how I've learned kinship with my kind: danger finds us, on our knees, sweaty with want.

What makes a livable sexual life? Where does grief go when it is barred from institutions of justice? What do we do with our surplus rage and fear?

February 9, 2018.

I'm reading to a book club in Edmonton when the verdict comes down in the Stanley trial. Acquitted. Found not guilty of all charges. It took an all-white jury just thirteen hours to decide that Stanley was a free man, that Colten's killing was neither accidental nor premeditated but necessitated. The room compresses around me. Those still unable to process what this means look at me with heavy and wet eyes. Out of the duty that comes with the role of the public intellectual, I comment on how the verdict reminds us that we need poetry to counter the world of that courtroom, the logic that NDNs are dispensable in the face of property, capital, and democracy. That what poetry intimates is resistance to and a shelter from the killing machines and grim reapers

who preside over much of the prairies. Perhaps, I suggest, poetry can caress the truth that the courtroom left to die. That we've congregated here under the presumption of mutual care and in the interest of a type of writing that punctures the solitude of a singular existence radically opens us up to joy, I tell them. There are words I can't speak, however. They line the walls of my chest, pulling me downward, compounding the earth's cruel appetite.

I drive absent-mindedly to my apartment, not needing to be alert to the road out of habit. I sit in my vehicle in the parking lot for thirty minutes, sobbing. The sobs come from a cavernous place inside me in which it is easy to get lost. There is a cavern of this sort inside all NDNs. Some of us reside there because we've stopped looking for an exit.

There's the quick, untimely death that Colten met, then there's the slow life and death that NDNs like me weather – we'll all know what it is to exist with the night sky underneath us. This is our Canadian tradition. The acquittal, the panic in the jurors (reported on social media by those in the courtroom), the insatiable hunger for NDN suffering in the prairies – all of this emerged from a centuries-old white imagination that has matured into a heartless beast.

On the one hand, poetry did nothing to prevent Colten's death or the subsequent and dizzying display of juridical violence in Battleford. On the other hand, poetry made room for me to grieve. A river of longing flowed through me. I feel its frenzied waters right now.

NDNs everywhere in this country, particularly those in my generation, have been indelibly altered by this ruling. I wonder: How will we ever look white people in the eyes and not periodically see our mangled bodies? This isn't hyperbole. Yes, because we have Canadian citizenship just the same and, as citizens, we will remember how to participate in the world, but we are still the hunted. The hunted, however, speak of joy and joy beckons the hunted.

This history of violence appears here, choreographed, because it hovers above me like – like what? A crow? An abandoned house? The sky? It reckoned with me in an existential manner. I felt doomed, so much so that objects and activities lost their aura of attraction. I didn't yearn for anything but privacy, because it is an embarrassment to be a wound in public.

When I think of an instance when a violence entangled categories of identity tighter with grief, I think of June 12, 2016. In the early hours of that day, Omar Mateen entered a gay nightclub called Pulse in Orlando, Florida, with an assault rifle and a pistol, shooting and killing forty-nine patrons and wounding fifty-three others. Later that day CNN reported that according to authorities the Orlando shooting was “the deadliest mass shooting in the United States” and “the nation’s worst terror attack since 9/11” (this “deadliest” has since been used to describe the Las Vegas shooting).<sup>142</sup> Partly in response to the impoverished, imperialist optic with which American media and politicians interpreted the shooting, Jack Halberstam noted in a blog post titled “Who Are ‘We’ After Orlando?” that this killing was “highly specific,” for those gunned down by Mateen were at Pulse on “latino night.”<sup>143</sup> In an essay offered as a tribute to those killed at Pulse, novelist Justin Torres uses phrases like “every shade of brown” and “if you’re lucky, they’ll play some Latin cheese” to foreground the demography of Pulse on June 12: mostly Latin queers, some undocumented immigrants, many from places like Puerto Rico, a US colony “drown[ing] in debt”<sup>144</sup> There was a two-fold sort of negation of queer-of-colour life here: firstly, the dead were called up as subjects of American empire, as grievable life only insofar as their geographic location annihilated all other markers of identity; secondly, the shooting was fundamentally racialized and queered, in that Mateen corrupted a place of brown queer congregation, of brown queer sociality and aesthetics. If, as then-President of the United States Barack Obama put it, we need to take



shelter under an “us” to become “resolute against terrorists,” if the families torn apart by Mateen “could be our families,”<sup>145</sup> then the interpellating call of this “us” and this “our” couldn’t be answered by those killed on the dance floor of Pulse, those who were always-already banned from the territory of American futurity. Their lives couldn’t and weren’t grieved by way of the sign of the nation. This called for another kind of politics of mourning, one that could account for the intersectional thrust of much homo- and transphobic violence: the volatile nexus of race, gender, sexuality, and class. If statist and popular discourse can’t mitigate our differential vulnerability to premature death, then it won’t propagate our grievability.

In the hours and days and weeks that impossibly and cruelly followed the Orlando shooting, I bore an acute sense of alienation, to my body and to the world. Tears welled in my eyes without a visible trigger. A queer co-worker and I vented about how fragile and violable our spaces of communion felt, especially in a province like Alberta in which homo- and transphobia are still underneath the sensibilities of average joes everywhere. Everything was dimmed, except the ever-solidifying threat that plagues queers of colour in the Americas. Wherever there is a disavowal of something like brown queer joy, though, there is also its undefeatable excess.

This undefeatable excess is what I understand to be the poetic drive. Christopher Soto, a self-described “queer latinx punk poet,” penned a beautiful poem called “All the Dead Boys Look Like Me,” which articulates a method of thinking about Pulse that ruptures the optic of terror that deracialized and desexualized the deaths in Orlando. “All the Dead Boys Look Like Me” registers an affective structure that US government officials like Obama couldn’t, an “embodied cultural surplus,” to use Muñoz’s language.<sup>146</sup> In it, Soto writes: “Yesterday, I saw myself die again. Fifty times I died in Orlando.”<sup>147</sup> Here Soto confesses that for people like him, living on felt impossible in the wake of the Orlando shooting, that people like him are stuck in an interminable grief, that

they're ontological misfits made to live, love, and dance near death. For Soto, those killed in Pulse had erected "cathedrals," cathedrals others mistook for cemeteries. There would be no proper living while brown and queer. The Orlando shooting was a heartbreaking reminder that the world isn't for queers of colour, that "the whole world was [and is not ours] for the choosing."<sup>148</sup> In a video posted on YouTube mere hours after the Orlando shooting, Soto recited a poem by poet Ocean Vuong called "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," first published on May 4, 2015, in *The New Yorker*. Fighting through tears, Soto breathes new meaning into the stanza: "don't be afraid, the gunfire / is only the sound of people / trying to live a little longer / and failing. / Ocean. Ocean, / get up." Importantly, "and failing" barely leaves Soto's lips, for it is now encrypted with a shattered queer life-world, transporting us across time and space to the dance floor of Pulse in Mateen's aftermath. In both poems, Soto seeks to enact a form of critical affect that might keep brown queer joy in the world, in a state that can't be attacked by those who seek to do so. At the end of "All the Dead Boys Look Like Me," Soto writes: "'Yesterday, my father called. I heard him cry for only the second time in my life. / He sounded like he loved me. It's something I am rarely able to hear. / And I hope, if anything, his sound is what my body remembers first.'" This sound is the sound of a world-to-come imbued with brown queer possibility.

Vuong and Soto write not away from but into traumas mundane and spectacular. By installing the poem with an elegiac force that refutes pacification, that pairs grief and rage, they actualize a style of writing that is against doom – "Ocean. Ocean, / get up." – and one that is bent on illuminating the art of living on in the midst of an illogical and all-too-logical terror – "He sounded like he loved me." To write is to live on. The page rescues us from a longing for finality. Grief doesn't wholly assail our imaginations. The cultural imagination, the artistic impulse, is above all a thunderous yes to life.

What is it to account for freedom events, for enactments of liberatory desire, in a time mediated by signifiers of doom such as these? To be alert to freedom and doom is what I make of my job as a writer. It is my job because I'm aware of the conditional and thus refutable nature of both facets of social life. We can understand doom as the ways in which the knowledge of one's killability sits in the air, menacingly, and how that brutal information is renewed by quotidian and spectacular acts of violence in daily life. Freedom makes breathing easier; it begets an atmosphere governed by joy, not oppression. Freedom is a measure of breathability. A writer, then, is also the public's barometer of terror and freedom.

What does freedom demand? An old question, but one that requires ongoing renewal. My understanding of freedom's demands come to me by way Muñoz and Dionne Brand and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, thinkers who have all in their own ways refused the statist machinations that inhibit joy and possibility for queer and racialized peoples in the Americas and elsewhere. Simpson, for example, teaches us that woven into Nishnaabeg language and philosophy is a normative theory that instructs her people how to "dance through their lives with joy."<sup>149</sup> I'm reminded that freedom is itself a poetics, in that it seeks to reschematize time, space, and feeling in the direction of a future driven by an ethics of care, a relational practice of joy-making that is all of ours to enact.

Thankfully, Brand has provided us with mantras for political life in this anti-earth, cruelty-loving age of white dominance: "they hate our freedom,"<sup>150</sup> so "only freedom matters."<sup>151</sup>

*They hate our freedom, so only freedom matters.*

What determines our lives as NDNs and/or queers are pain and trauma, love and hope. There is death looming at all scales, individual to planetary. But, there is also an ecology of

creativity, one indivisible from our futurity. In the face of an antagonistic relation to the past, let us start anew in the haven of a world in the image of our radical art.

**Coda: Our Joy is Unseen**

I was recently part of a conference call for a national art magazine on whose board I sit when a debate about the usefulness of joy as an organizing system ensued. One board member insinuated that it was unfashionable how fashionable a concept joy had become, and that there were less operationalized and thus more captivating words around which the magazine's next issue might orbit. The meta-claim was that joy, like happiness, was over-determined, at once jammed with nuance and deterrent of unexpected, surprising lines of inquiry. Speaking with the force of universal truth, my colleague eulogized joy. The story, it seemed, had already been told. I jumped in to reflect on how boredom and newness govern affective cultures of analysis, and that we can choose not to participate, to marshal different interpretative strategies. It isn't the concepts themselves that expire, I noted, but we who grow tired of them. What would it mean to weather the short lifespan of a trendy topic, to remain when others are packing their bags, to tend to the forgotten? I made reference to this project and said that joy has been an umbrella of sorts for me in an world inside which signs of my disposability and killability rain down without end. I came to joy's defense, but it is joy that defends me.

The essays herein posit joy less as an analytic tool and more so as that which might infuse a life with vitality, with what José Esteban Muñoz called a "forward-dawning futurity,"<sup>152</sup> in opposition to the necropolitics of Canadian modernity. For NDNs, the mode of aliveness is something to suffer, for it pulsates with the traces of a history inside which our flattened subjectivities were programmed to propagate misery and little else. So, it is joy and love and rebellion that engineer otherwise possibilities, that free us from the orthographies of deficiency and disaster that herald

the settler as he who makes claim to the world. Joy, then, is a discourse, an aesthetics, a way of life.

My method was autobiographical, in that I wanted to show how the cruelties of structure reverberate inside a singular life, but not fatally so. I am one in a chorus of resistant voices for whom futurity is a call to arms. I decided to unearth past pain to demonstrate that joy, like reality in Anne Carson's key formulation, is a frequency we have to strain to hear.<sup>153</sup> Like Heather Christle in *The Crying Book*, I wondered: "What if I could hear among the songs of grief a refrain of sweetness too?"<sup>154</sup> Desirous of a joyous life I saw inside myself and my kin a kind of beautiful landscape.

It isn't my intention, however, to inflate joy into a mega-concept that is always-already a spectacle. Part of why it has fixed my attention is its minor variations of tone and texture, how it is hard to discern amidst the louder songs and larger narratives of political life that posit the body as an inviolable container for meaning. Joy reigns in the domains of emotion and intimacy, which we so regularly wander through outside the dominant gaze. In my mind is Taije Silverman's "On Joy." In it, she writes:

"Last night, I walked to dinner on a gravel road  
through rain into a joy so unaccountable  
and plain, it did not need a witness."<sup>155</sup>

And Joy Harjo's "No": "Yes, that was me whirling on the dance floor. We made such a racket with all that joy. I loved the whole world in that silly music."<sup>156</sup> What strikes me in both these scenes of joy-making is a form of fugitivity that elides anthropological containment. To not need

a witness (a spectator), to partake in a choreography of love that has no instrumental or productive end (in the capitalist sense) – these seem as powerful modes of resistance as any. What joy wants exists in the registers of the immaterial and prefigurative; it is about wanting a world-to-come, insisting on it, performing it in an inhospitable now. While our joy is still a sociological feat, the goal is to carve out an affectsphere in everyday life where it is a governing force; as Tina M. Campt argues in *Listening to Images*, the quotidian “is a practice honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility.”<sup>157</sup> Joy, then, is the emotional engine of the quotidian; it is its background noise, its soundscape.

In order to bring about a modality of NDN joy that permeates the ordinary, some things have to be lost, affectively disarrayed. Tasha Hubbard’s *nîpawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up* (2019) brings into focus the kinds of settler joy that animate the fight to transform land into property so as to compound the suffering of the dispossessed. Hubbard documents the aftermath of the killing of Colten Boushie in rural Saskatchewan (as discussed in “To Hang Our Grief Up to Dry”) so as to paint a heart-rending picture of the genocidal character of the Canadian state. Aside from the beautiful refusal of the Boushie family to have one type of truth supplanted with a corrupted one, the film made me pause and ruminate on the perverse joyfulness of those endowed by the past to haunt the prairies like grim reapers. By way of real-time social media commentary, footage of brutal testimony from white farmers, and a scathing analysis of the racialized logics of justice, Hubbard and her team show that whiteness, which Christina Sharpe reminds us is a political project unto itself, seeks to trap NDNs in a state of joylessness, one that is proximal to and entangled with death, legal and social. Put differently, there is a kind of collective joy to be made at the expense of NDNs. White kinship, settler affect, these have coalesced around NDN sorrow. Sharpe, writing

about the climate of anti-blackness that undergirds American personhood, that ties Black death to American life, says: “One must be willing to say this is abhorrent... Refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. Refuse to feast on the corpse of others.”<sup>158</sup> Hubbard orchestrates a similar note of caution and accusation; she calls on settlers, especially those in the prairies, to take responsibility for the ongoing emptying of NDN bodies of joy and liveliness. Some must rend their joy, unmoor it from white structures of feeling, so that we might proliferate ours.

We as NDNs can't exhaust joy; it is an earthly pleasure that is endangered, especially so in a time governed by a pessimism of the future and a romance of the present, but it is self-perpetuating, which is to say it perpetuates the conditions for a less bombarded selfhood. NDN joy is a conspiracy because it troubles normal life, demands its overthrowing. It is exceptional within the coloniality of being, insofar as NDNs are political subjects awash in bad feeling. Our joy is unseen, and for once invisibility doesn't spell our demise; it means what we make will not be derivative or hyper-surveilled. Let us transmit the beautiful music of our joy. We will, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says about the philosophical tenets of her people, dance through life with joy, regardless if others interpret our behaviour as such.<sup>159</sup> In a minor chorus of rebellious voices we will fashion a joyous world where NDN freedom isn't an exception to the anthropological rule.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Warsan Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (London: flipped eye, 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 73.
- <sup>3</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r\\_HdOZIFEI0&t=3109s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_HdOZIFEI0&t=3109s).
- <sup>4</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMf6GJ8wBf8&t=2065s>.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2019).
- <sup>7</sup> Fred Moten made this remark at a conference in honor of Saidiya Hartman's ground-breaking book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997). See <https://youtu.be/dJ1EDweOfB8>.
- <sup>8</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Joy Harjo and Steven Strom, *Secrets from the Centre of the World* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990): 18.
- <sup>10</sup> Patrick Wolfe, "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.
- <sup>11</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2018): 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): xviii.
- <sup>15</sup> <https://aeon.co/essays/black-queer-born-again-a-life-in-and-out-of-the-church>.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).
- <sup>19</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> Sharpe's *In The Wake* has been a key text of mine, one with which I spend a lot of time. It is important to note, however, that Sharpe's lines of inquiry are provincial and that they can only inch my thinking about Indigenous freedom forward. I am, nonetheless, beholden to living in a way that likewise contests anti-blackness.
- <sup>21</sup> Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017): 1.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34.
- <sup>23</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 9, 108-09.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 113.
- <sup>25</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- <sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 145.

- <sup>27</sup> Karyn Recollet, “Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix,” *Dance Research Journal* vol 48, no. 1 (2016): 91.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.
- <sup>29</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 188.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.
- <sup>32</sup> “A future in the present” is a turn of phrase that Muñoz inherits from C.L.R. James.
- <sup>33</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQqBJAB2XJU>.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Harjo and Strom, *Secrets from the Centre of the World*, n.p.
- <sup>36</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 4.
- <sup>37</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 23.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.
- <sup>40</sup> Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 2000): 31.
- <sup>41</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/06/05/survival-as-a-creative-force-an-interview-with-ocean-vuong/>.
- <sup>42</sup> “The afterlife of history” emerges of course from Saidiya Hartman’s crucial “the afterlife of slavery.”
- <sup>43</sup> This is a line from *This Wound is a World* (Calgary: Frontenac House, 2017).
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Cited in Dylan Robinson, “Intergenerational Sense, Intergenerational Responsibility,” in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, ed. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016): 43.
- <sup>46</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huGN866GnZE>.
- <sup>47</sup> Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2014).
- <sup>48</sup> For more on this disciplinary debate, see Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Peges, and Alyosha Goldstein’s “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016).
- <sup>49</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004): 18.
- <sup>50</sup> Dionne Brand, *Ossuaries* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010): 84.
- <sup>51</sup> Maggie Nelson, *Something Bright, then Holes* (New York: Soft Skull, 2018).
- <sup>52</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- <sup>53</sup> See Hieu Minh Nguyen’s “It’s important that I mention, I truly wanted to be beautiful / for her.” *Not Here* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2018).
- <sup>54</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *This Accident of Being Lost* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2017): 35.
- <sup>55</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *This Wound is a World: Poems* (Calgary: Frontenac House Press, 2017): 42.
- <sup>56</sup> See Moten, <https://youtu.be/dJ1EDweOfB8>.
- <sup>57</sup> Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013): 61.

- <sup>58</sup> On the errant temporality of histories of racial violence (in particular, anti-blackness), see Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>59</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes On ‘Camp,’” see <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>.
- <sup>60</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 127.
- <sup>61</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 15.
- <sup>62</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 69.
- <sup>63</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 34.
- <sup>64</sup> This section is in response to an image of Demian DinéYazhí’s by the same name.
- <sup>65</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/02/we-speak-about-violence-abdellah-taia-and-edouard-louis-in-conversation/>.
- <sup>66</sup> Recycled from “Duplex (The Future’s a Fist)” in *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2019).
- <sup>67</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 5.
- <sup>68</sup> <https://youtu.be/ZiVvQvvIPY4>.
- <sup>69</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2016): 61.
- <sup>70</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1999): 45.
- <sup>71</sup> Terese Mailhot, *Heart Berries: A Memoir* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2018): 60.
- <sup>72</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, 21.
- <sup>73</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 10-11.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.
- <sup>76</sup> Alex Wilson, “Our Coming In Stories: Cree Identity, Body Sovereignty and Gender Self-Determination.” *Journal of Global Indigeneity* vol. 1, no. 1, 2015: 2.
- <sup>77</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resurgence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 124.
- <sup>78</sup> Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007): 4.
- <sup>79</sup> Qwo-Li Driskill et al. “Introduction,” in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, ed. Driskill et al. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011): 11.
- <sup>80</sup> Wilson, “Our Coming In Stories,” 3.
- <sup>81</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy*, ed. Russ Castronovo et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 189.
- <sup>82</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 1, 1993: 19.
- <sup>83</sup> Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2009): 15.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>85</sup> Han Kang, *The White Book*, 10.
- <sup>86</sup> Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 1.
- <sup>87</sup> This is a nod to a poem in *This Wound is a World* called “Ode to Northern Alberta.”

- <sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art,” in Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Futurity* (New York: New York University, 2009): 70.
- <sup>89</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010): 3.
- <sup>90</sup> Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue* (Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2015).
- <sup>91</sup> After writing this vignette, I came across a reference to the “lyric u” in jos charles’ *safe spaces* (Boise: Ashata Press, 2016): 15.
- <sup>92</sup> Richard Siken, *War of the Foxes* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2015), 7.
- <sup>93</sup> Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 133.
- <sup>94</sup> Siken, *War of the Foxes*, 8.
- <sup>95</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 3.
- <sup>96</sup> See Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Quollective’s “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It.” <http://liminalities.net/12-1/dispossession.pdf>.
- <sup>97</sup> I first heard this quote in Dionne Brand’s lecture upon the conferral of her honorary doctorate at the University of Toronto.
- <sup>98</sup> Vahni Capildeo, *Venus as a Bear* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2018): 14.
- <sup>99</sup> Muñoz: “Utopia in this book has been about an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning.”
- <sup>100</sup> Brand, *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2018): 136.
- <sup>101</sup> <https://illwilleditions.noblogs.org/files/2015/09/Wilderson-Prison-slave-READ.pdf>.
- <sup>102</sup> [http://pages.ucsd.edu/~rfrank/class\\_web/ES-270/SimpsonJunctures9.pdf](http://pages.ucsd.edu/~rfrank/class_web/ES-270/SimpsonJunctures9.pdf).
- <sup>103</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r\\_HdOZIFeI0&t=1733s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_HdOZIFeI0&t=1733s).
- <sup>104</sup> *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013).
- <sup>105</sup> Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- <sup>106</sup> Anne Boyer, *The Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2018): 57.
- <sup>107</sup> Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015): 16.
- <sup>108</sup> “No One is Sovereign in Love: A Conversation Between Laurent Berlant and Michael Hardt,” *No More Potlucks* (blog), <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/no-one-is-sovereign-in-love-a-conversation-between-lauren-berlant-and-michael-hardt/>.
- <sup>109</sup> Marie Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 2; 5.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>115</sup> In conversation with Saidiya Hartman’s reflections on beauty: “Beauty... is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure”: *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2019): 33.
- <sup>116</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 139.
- <sup>117</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Press, 2014), 81.
- <sup>118</sup> <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-and-girls-in-canada/>

- <sup>119</sup> See <http://www.metronews.ca/news/calgary/2016/10/31/grande-cache-company-says-derogatory-sticker-a-joke.html>.
- <sup>120</sup> Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacey Holmes Jones et al (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013): 649.
- <sup>121</sup> Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 40.
- <sup>122</sup> Kimberly Juanita Brown, "Regarding the Pain of the Other: Photography, Famine, and the Transference of Affect," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 181-203.
- <sup>123</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 14.
- <sup>124</sup> Maggie Tate, "Re-presenting Invisibility: Ghostly Aesthetics in Rebecca Belmore's *Vigil* and *The Name and the Unnamed*." *Visual Studies* vol. 30, no. 1, 2015: 20-31.
- <sup>125</sup> Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 156.
- <sup>126</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 40.
- <sup>127</sup> Amber Dean, *Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulties of Inheritance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
- <sup>128</sup> Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 156.
- <sup>129</sup> Audra Simpson, "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Theory & Event* vol. 19, no. 4, 2016: n.p.
- <sup>130</sup> Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 156.
- <sup>131</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>132</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_tUZ6dybrc&t=4620s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_tUZ6dybrc&t=4620s).
- <sup>133</sup> From *This Wound is a World*.
- <sup>134</sup> "Felt knowledge" is a concept that Dian Million uses to signal ways of thinking that emerge from the context of emotional experience. See *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*.
- <sup>135</sup> See <https://canlit.ca/article/i-write-this-for-all-of-you-recovering-the-unpublished-rcmp-incident-in-maria-campbells-halfbreed-1973/>.
- <sup>136</sup> To follow this line of inquiry, see the work of seminal Black studies scholars like Sylvia Wynters, Katherine McKittrick, and Christina Sharpe.
- <sup>137</sup> See Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Quollective's "Before Dispossession, or Surviving It."
- <sup>138</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*.
- <sup>139</sup> <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreal-the-moment/montreals-john-a-macdonald-statue-spray-painted-by-activists>.
- <sup>140</sup> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/familys-hopes-dashed-as-majority-white-jury-selected-for-boushie-murder-trial/article37784480/>.
- <sup>141</sup> <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/death-village>.
- <sup>142</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>.
- <sup>143</sup> <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2016/06/22/who-are-we-after-orlando-by-jack-halberstam/>.
- <sup>144</sup> See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-praise-of-latin-night-at-the-queer-club/2016/06/13/e841867e-317b-11e6-95c0-2a6873031302\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-praise-of-latin-night-at-the-queer-club/2016/06/13/e841867e-317b-11e6-95c0-2a6873031302_story.html)
- <sup>145</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/16/remarks-president-statement-press>.
- <sup>146</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 161.
- <sup>147</sup> <http://lithub.com/all-the-dead-boys-look-like-me/>.

- <sup>148</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>149</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resurgence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 8.
- <sup>150</sup> Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (Toronto: M&S, 2006): 27.
- <sup>151</sup> Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 227.
- <sup>152</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
- <sup>153</sup> Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998).
- <sup>154</sup> Heather Christle, *The Crying Book* (Berkeley: Catapult, 2019): 102.
- <sup>155</sup> <http://www.shiningrockpoetry.com/poetry-anthology/fall/two-poems-by-taije-silverman-an-essay-by-eleanor-wilner/>.
- <sup>156</sup> Joy Harjo, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015): 11.
- <sup>157</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 4.
- <sup>158</sup> <https://thenewinquiry.com/lose-your-kin/>.
- <sup>159</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 8.

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