

Book Reviews

OBITUARY OF LIGHT: THE SANGAN RIVER MEDITATIONS.

BY SUSAN MUSGRAVE.

LANTZVILLE, BC: LEAF PRESS, 2009. 64 PAGES. \$16.95.

THE NEW BLUE DISTANCE.

BY JEANETTE LYNES.

HAMILTON, ON: WOLSAK AND WYNN, 2009. 80 PAGES. \$17.00.

GRAVITY MATTERS.

BY SONYA RUTH GREKOL.

TORONTO, ON: INANNA POETRY AND FICTION, 2009. 120 PAGES. \$18.95.

SUBURBAN LEGENDS.

BY JOAN CRATE.

CALGARY, AB: FREEHAND BOOKS, 2009. 84 PAGES. \$16.95.

PORCUPINE ARCHERY.

BY BILL HOWELL.

LONDON, ON: INSOMNIAC PRESS, 2009. 96 PAGES. \$11.95.

FROM OUT OF NOWHERE.

BY JOHN TOONE.

WINNIPEG, MB: TURNSTONE PRESS, 2009. PAGES. \$17.00.

THE SWAY OF OTHERWISE.

BY DAVID HELWIG.

OTTAWA, ON: OBERON, 2008. 68 PAGES. \$18.95.

LE POÈME INVISIBLE / THE INVISIBLE POEM.

BY E.D. BLODGETT.

OTTAWA, ON: BUSCHEK BOOKS & ÉDITIONS DU NOROÏT, 2008. 83 PAGES. \$17.50.

Surely it cannot be an accident when nine recent volumes of poetry from nine different presses across Canada sound similar themes and modes of organization, similar tempers and tropes. When similitudes cluster, literary scholars are tempted to speak of a “movement.” I’m not sure that’s what we have on hand; there are many much more formally radical or experimental kinds of Canadian poetry—not to mention regions, populations, and languages—than are represented here. Rather, I think the likenesses suggest something we might call a “national Anglophone literary drift,” cultivated and tempered by what are now mature or middle-aged “national institutions” of poetry—if we dare to call them that—ranging from literary magazines and competitions to writing classes, granting agencies, presses and poetry readings.

What the works gathered here sketch out is something like a strong “middle way” of contemporary Canadian lyric poetry: sound (and often cleverly hidden) craft, regional interests and language wedded to bittersweet, deftly ironic laughter about the foibles of living and dying in the human enclaves we’ve carved out of this vast landscape. The significant challenges are, on the whole, thematic—death, middle age, masculinity, femininity, finding and losing memories and relationships, agonies over injustice and the state of the environment—rather than formal, linguistic, intellectual, geographical or clashingly emotional. These are adept new soundings of familiar boxes, offering here and there unusual portals, as when Susan Musgrave pares poetry to sparse fragments, or John Toone laconically composes an entire text from a gathering of contemporary clichés. For the most part, nearly every poem in each collection “works” well—and, now and then, in each book, a reader may be transported by darts of rage, draughts of cold water, stunningly beautiful insights. Reading for this review has been a succession of small but thorough pleasures: in these nine books I’ve meandered through laughter, delight, a sudden intake of breath, and here and there a line so lovely I’ve had to read it aloud, to test and taste it against my own lips, tongue and teeth. My faith in the order of the world has never been shaken; rather, each work has reaffirmed, in one way or another, the steady and remarkable artfulness of daily life at the margins of southern, mostly urban Canada.

In *Obituary of Light: The Sangan River Meditations*, Susan Musgrave writes short, pristine poems—sometimes literally haikus—with the elegance of fresh tracks on snow. Dedicated to the memory of Paul Bower, a friend and neighbour on the Sangan River in the Haida Gwaii, these short works are literally meditations, poems designed to focus one’s mind on the things that matter, the small actions of the immediate present. Organized in a sequence of seasons from winter to fall, the book begins and ends with death and burial: “I thought *the going / doesn’t get any easier*. We are the broken/heart of this world” (63). But even so—or perhaps more aptly—because so, there is hope for us:

After the first snowfall I find
a winter wren frozen on the forest path.

Who could have imagined it?
Even the birds are freezing.

As I push through earth locked in sorrow,
in ice, find a hollow between rocks
where her body will lie, a winter wren lights
on the handle of my shovel. (11)

Of all of the books, this is my favourite, the one that I will keep on my bedside table and reread. Its stark lines are freighted with wisdom deep enough that I've yet to scrape bottom. Musgrave quotes a Chinese proverb: "You cannot stop the birds of sadness / from flying over your head, but / you can stop them from nesting in your hair." Likewise, so long as one has an "obituary of light," there is still light:

There's just enough light left
on the river tonight to turn
the water black. You see it flare up
behind my eyes: the obituary of light (46).

As one might expect, Jeanette Lynes' *The New Blue Distance*, her fifth collection, seamlessly mixes popular cultural references and poetic history, dosing both with irony. These are fresh, courageous poems, charting the vulnerable places in a woman's life, where humour masks loss, but never really hides it. For example, "A Style Manual for Late Winter" charts, in the guise of a chatty love letter, the sometimes hilarious obsessions of Lynes' jaunty, poetic "I": "I wanted this less raw but / you know desire, that goofy gun" The speaker lightly confesses her frustration with the weather, with the routines of her life and the baggage of her pasts: "I long for cherry prints and leaving ... / I drag my big sorrowing valise. I love him but. / Backwoods things alone excite me" Then suddenly, in the midst of that erotic confession, whips a wintery blast, as if to say, *hey you, pay attention to what really matters here*: "By the way, if you / plan to write back in that hothouse mannered style, / don't write back at all" (38).

It might look innocuous or even funny, but Lynes' "new blue distance" is really a lonely, melancholy place, where memory mixes with the itching of desires, one's own and others'. A persistent theme is the plight of daughters, even into middle age, under the pall and thumb of their mothers. In two longer poem cycles, one on Elizabeth Smart, the other, Beatrix Potter, Lynes muses on the weight and shadow of a mother in her adult daughter's life: the unending battles, the delayed and interfering loves and hatreds. In Lynes' hands, Beatrix Potter confesses, in "Letter (Never Sent) to an Admiring Reader": "There's everything ... of myself in my books" (99), just not quite the way you might think. So too, perhaps for Lynes, who dedicates her book to the memory of "three inspirations." The first is "Mabel Seim (1917–2007)—my mother."

The New Blue Distance is bittersweet; it marks how far away we have to go from home to be able to measure the feeling in our hearts. It is the colour of accommodation, another word for the practice of writing poetry, where one fits word to form so that something may sing, humour, delight, and haunt. Beneath

the veneer of this laughter, everything is deadly serious and weirdly wonderful: the poem. “Still Life: Cowboy Thinking of Writing,” alone is worth the price of the book.

Sonja Ruth Greckol’s first collection of poetry, *Gravity Matters*, tackles the impossible question: how can any I, particularly a feminist I, navigate what is unspeakable? In this case, the question is animated by a mother’s worry about her daughter’s travels to Rwanda. To keep her company, the mother reads, works towards other instances of our awful human history, tries to place herself within it as an emotional actor, rather than as a moralizing observer. These are crucial explorations, heart- and gut-wrenching scenarios, but not Greckol’s best poems—perhaps because the questions and horrors of war are so much larger than these few words, which must strive too hard in thin fabric. More convincing are some of Greckol’s short, lyrical pieces, her six-line revelations, “Mother Watch” and “Small Disturbances,” her erotic musings on the lusts of middle age, and her meditations on memory loss. These are meaty, humorous, poignant poems, each detail sharply observed and precise, the metaphors fitting, even rhyme working distant lines: “a smudge of song from a dulcimer struck blunt ... / Dessicate tumbled grainy as a dish of salt” (“More Self Portraits in the Mother Line,” 95).

The standout in this marvelously variegated collection is an ambitious cycle of fifteen poems about an eighteenth-century mathematician and scholar, Emilie du Châtelet. “Emilie Explains Newton to Voltaire” recounts Emilie’s life in many voices—a narrator-historian’s, Voltaire’s, Emilie’s own. Each poem in the sequence begins with a variation of the last line of the previous poem; the final poem is a marvelous summation of first lines, an intricate interlocking of “first principles” that shadows Emilie’s own interest in Newton’s *Principia*, his explanation of the laws that govern the movements of matter, gravity, of course, among them.

Joan Crate’s *Suburban Legends* revives some old fairytale characters, including Snow White, to explore how a woman might age inside, with or against the dreams and tales of contemporary suburbia. As Anne Sexton did, Crate playfully rewrites the fairytale as a wise-cracking, storm-darkened Albertan suburban legend. This time, however, Snow White has a friend in the narrator, who sees what traps await her, and is ready to help her escape—or at least to serve up tea and sympathy. Snow White, it is clear, is the narrator’s sister/neighbour/junior/alter-ego/not-quite-self, the part of herself who bought the myths that North American life dishes up. Despite her name, “Snow White gets blue / this time of

year. / Winter brings to mind her near death experience in the forest" (30): what she needs is the warmth of a friend with a house full of children. Together, in this "bi-polar climate" the women survive the descent into winter (losses of dreams, youth, relationships) and re-emerge into a summer of some sort, prepared to live through the next winter.

Scattered in among the fairy tales are several elegiac love poems, hymns to aging in which "August sways sad and gorgeous" (81). "The Space Between" wryly observes that "aches of the heart settle in the knees" (80); another, "In Season," pleads, "Look at me. Remember me this way, / happy, grey and golden" (81). Steeped in irony, a feminist consciousness, and (mostly happy) family life, these poems testify repeatedly to the fact that grief and laughter are always neighbours, and both live at the edge of the settled prairie. Beyond this, the howling wind, and already, as the insomniac narrator makes plain, it has climbed into our dreams. Read and stay wakeful.

Bill Howell, in *Porcupine Archery*, also writes playful, geographically-rooted poetry, mixing memory and middle-aged desire. One poem that details a (literally) fiery affair, "Where They're Coming From," begins by confessing: "Whatever you've heard, the distances / in this poem are mostly local, if not exactly / logical or close" (26). That could be a definition of lyric poetry altogether. Generous with humour and Atlantic Canadian voicings, Howell prizes laughter and strong metaphor from situations of remembered injustice—the title poem recalls a moment when a teacher stubbornly insisted porcupines were dangerous because they shot their quills. The speaker, who disagrees, is strapped: "it felt like being stung by jellyfish. / And I didn't learn a thing" (18).

These are subtly irreverent, passionate poems, poems concerned enough with oblivion to ask, "How many of us become bit players in our own lives?" ("And the Smallest Fish Will Be Voracious," 74). Howell is not afraid to play with well-known plots; his is often a playful, dramatic, knowing "boys'-eye" view of the world, even when that boy is grown and disappointed and jaded. Speaking of faulty records from dysfunctional family life in a long poem, "Fly Fishing in Andromeda," the narrator wryly observes: "some people are adept at wrecking the given moment / by trying to capture it" (80). He concludes, at the end of this stanza, still working the metaphor of the photograph: "What remains unseen includes wilderness / no one else uses." (80). This is the space the speaker claims, a space that is above all, interior. The first poem in the collection, for example, "Welcome to My Fort," invites us into the book as a fantasy or play space, where real items, trees say, remain trees, but can also become ships or airplanes. For this narrator, even when grown up, objects and spaces have a movement and embodiment of their own; thus, "empty rooms clear their throats" when their occupants

have died (“Late Light,” 86). So too, in Howell’s love poems, tiny pleasures cast themselves backwards and forwards until the whole day is alight, “blessing and bewitching / the thirsty hearts of stars” (“After Dusk, Off Jeddore,” 88).

Written in a tough-guy’s one-liners, John Toone’s *From Out of Nowhere* is a marvelous compendium of wordplay and contemporary business, political, cowboy and advertising clichés set to stagger in single broken lines. I like the way Toone lets words run down the page—ragged on the left, but (often) towing the line on the right, neatened up, like a fence. For this book is about the occupation (loss) of the land, its colonization, line by line, its shift from wilderness to farm to suburbia, where temporary profits “revolution eyes / the great wide open” ... “untitled / free and clear / site unseen” (85). The speakers are small-town heroes, ancestors or shysters—now and then, their words run into one another; they contaminate one another’s utterances, the way clichés do, staggering in single lines down dusty tracks. The book ends with the forever hope that someone will ride out of the wilderness with the answer—even to questions we’ve not asked. But the poem knows the hero is just a mirage. He’s no more a game changer than any of the speakers, who must admit to themselves: “chances / you will spend your life / looking both ways before / deciding to stay put” (21).

Sometimes, particularly towards the end, the neatened lines of the book are broken up; words slide back and forth, cluster—“this is the church’s / secret hand/shakin g/ orders / ... finger pointing” (96)—in the middle. It seems as if a new order will assert itself; what is rotten, exposed, what is hoped for, emerging, but this in the end, is too just cliché: “i know what you are thinking / ... / i give a way / catch the drift / right before our eyes / remains / a straight shooter / at the crosswalk / appearing / from out of nowhere / the end” (102). The would-be game changers—businessmen, cowboys, developers, farmer ancestors—change no games. Only art can do that, slipping the tongue in sideways, showing how “plain english” never is.

David Helwig’s *The Sway of Otherwise* is anything but plain English. Filled with lush and tricky sonnets (so tricky sometimes they do not seem like sonnets) and slant rhymes mapping “how things / don’t stay as they are,” but shift and slide in unexpected ways, *The Sway of Otherwise* is a wonderful collection. These are beautiful poems: spare, elegant and intelligent, they are so well worked that their sway looks effortless. This is a practiced, late-life collection that muses on aging, the ends of life, and others’ beginnings (the dedications are birth poems). Repeatedly, the collection works the tropes of evening’s decline, vespers, and

death. Likewise, it begins with winter, works its way through the seasons, ends with winter, and stops frequently in autumn. But these predictable turns are neither hackneyed nor dull. Rather, thanks to their familiarity, we stop easily and are invited to see or to hear anew. Consider, for example, the sonnet titled “Vespers” (53), a poem that documents both the boredom and rewards of repeated spiritual practice:

The tedium which is a certain kind of joy
grows attenuated over the reaches of time
as languorous evenings offer us the sublime
onset of absence, the deserted beach, the way
it fades, though in the west the last trace of day
hangs luminescent, postpones the closing rhyme;

Sonorously, you witness the slipping away of the preoccupations of the world with the dying of the light—long vowels cling, slowing time. And this joyful tedium to which the poem confesses shifts—thanks to the postponement of the closing rhyme—to pleasure in the shifting sounds and imagery of light. “Vespers” could be read as a gloss on Helwig’s entire book: “Like a final diminuendo that sustains / into silence and beyond ... / we must endure / what will end and in ending what will begin.” Echoing and revising T.S. Eliot’s meditation on the passing of time, Helwig offers an important shift: there is joy here in Vespers, and community—a “we” rather than an “I.” Helwig embraces somberness, but a far more joyful metaphysics than Eliot ever imagined: in “Occasion,” for example, he writes: Everything that is falling comes down toward you / while what is unseen contrives a newer music (33).

Such subtle tricks are Helwig’s striking wisdom: he celebrates and marks—above all *below* the tideline (for him this is not a futile act, but a deeply spiritual one)—“the sway of otherwise, the long long reach/of possibility nothing to stay where it’s put” (25).

At the back of *Le Poème invisible/The Invisible Poem*, E.D. Blodgett writes, in French, without translation, “A single wish has animated this collection, the wish to speak to my francophone poet-friends. Yes, we speak often, but the differences in our writing, the separation of our books—theirs in French, mine in English—has prevented any real conversation, because, in the end, poets speak in poetry. I’ve made this book for them.” Then, oddly, the catalogue entry at the beginning of the book claims that *Le Poème invisible* is a translation of *The Invisible Poem*. Perhaps, but I don’t believe it. These are poems written in French, and then rendered, sometimes well, sometimes less so, in English. They

resemble little else that Blodgett, a scholar and prolific English-language poet, has written. These are short, charming jingles, easy-to-read French poems that play with constriction, assonance, rhyme and French poetic tradition: the repetition of certain words like *rose*, *ose* or *disparu*, *inattendu* echo, lightly, the metaphors and vocabulary of Baudelaire.

Can a poem be destined to speak in two languages at once? Looking at these offerings, I am not sure. If its tongue is always forked, isn't some part of a poem, as Blodgett's title and words here suggest, forever hidden—*invisible* in both languages? It is as if these small poems with their constrained vocabulary meditate forever on silence as the hidden freight of any tongue: meaning is what flows out of the cracks between one universe and another. Thus, in a poem entitled "Langue/Language," Blodgett writes: "Quand tu marches / les traces que tu laisses / derrière toi/prennent la forme / d'une langue inconnu /...elle se parle à elle-même /si doucement // When you walk /the tracks you leave / behind / assume the shape / of a language / not known / ...it speaks so softly / to itself" (52).

Indeed, all poetry does so. This is why it is sometimes difficult to read. Tracking the murmur of the world is a serious and wonderful job.

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UNSETTLED REMAINS: CANADIAN LITERATURE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL GOTHIC.
ED. CYNTHIA SUGARS AND GERRY TURCOTTE.
WATERLOO, ON: WILFRID LAURIER PRESS, 2009. 297 PAGES. \$38.95.

It seems impossible not to invoke Northrop Frye when considering the discomfiture with space in much of Canadian literature. The sheer expanse of this country has haunted both its literature and its criticism since (at least) Susanna Moodie's defiant Anglocentric claim that the country was too young for ghosts. But as editors Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte suggest, while "haunting" has long been a mode of critique in Canadian literature, the turn for some time now has been away from Anglocentric perspectives. Further, pairing "postcolonial and gothic discourses ... in critical invocations of the 'unhomely' or 'spectral' legacies of imperialism and globalization" is an established methodology. Sugars and Turcotte cite Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs' foundational text, *Uncanny Australia*, which argues that "the postcolonial nation is 'haunted' by 'ghost stories'" and suggests that the "reappearance of these suppressed 'stories' or histories produces an uncanny and haunted space in the narrative of nationhood" (viii).

What is notable about *Unsettled Remains* is its "attempts to unpack the manifestations of the Gothic in Canada as a transplanted form" (viii). The vol-

ume as a whole “engages with the intersection of gothic modes of influence in a settler-invader postcolonial context” (vii). In other words, many of the articles mobilize the gothic uncanny to confront “fears that the Gothic is itself a mode that can never be indigenous to Canadian experience” (ix). The volume resists the urge to apply gothic tropes to the “colonial settler-invader context” of Canada (xi). Instead, the essays examine a myriad of ways that “Canadian writers have combined postcolonial awareness with metaphors of monstrosity and haunting” as a means to enter into discourse with the many “attestably unsettling contexts” in Canada (xvii).

The essays cover a wide variety of texts and contexts. Andrea Cabajsky’s “Catholic Gothic: Atavism, Orientalism, and Generic Change in Charles De Guise’s *Le Cap au diable*” opens the collection. Cabajsky argues that the “fractured plot” and Catholic tropes “should be seen as emblematic of the epistemological challenges” de Guise confronts by using the “metropolitan British Gothic” as an “argument for the viability of Catholic modernity” (1). The second chapter moves the reader from the little-known *Le Cap au diable* to the more familiar writing of Farley Mowat. In “Viking Graves Revisited: Pre-Colonial Primitivism in Farley Mowat’s Northern Gothic,” Brian Johnson places Mowat’s work “within a specifically New World tradition of northern Gothic” in order to demonstrate Mowat’s extension of the tradition (25). Marlene Goldman pairs Sheila Watson’s iconic *The Double Hook* with Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. In choosing texts that explore “racialized natures of desire,” Goldman argues that “in the Canadian Gothic both Old World castle and New World land are ... sites for ongoing struggles over possession” (52, 66). “Horror Written on Their Skin’: Joy Kogawa’s Gothic Uncanny,” is co-editor Gerry Turcotte’s essay, in which she returns to Kogawa’s canonical text to explore how *Obasan* re-figures history (82). Turcotte maps Freud’s uncanny onto the history of Japanese-Canadians. Here Kogawa’s text is understood to “foreground Canada’s disparate selves” in defiance of the myth of national unity (88).

Shelley Kulperger, Atef Laouyene, and Jennifer Andrews offer contributions that virtually haunt each other. In Kulperger’s “Familiar Ghosts: Feminist Postcolonial Gothic in Canada,” *Monkey Beach* and *Fall on Your Knees* are joined by Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* to posit an undercurrent in the Canadian Postcolonial Gothic. Linking feminist definitions and understandings of domestic violence with postcolonial considerations of legacies of colonization and Gothic tropes, Kulperger reminds the reader that “what haunts us, what traumatizes us, and what terrifies us and terrorizes us can always be located—and is never far from—home” (120). Placed strategically after Kulperger’s comprehensive survey, Laouyene’s consideration of MacDonald’s text is intricate. Though his “Canadian Gothic and the Work of Ghosting in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*” is not in direct conversation with the previous essay, the editor’s

placement allows the reader to make connections beyond the similar interest in *Fall on Your Knees*. Lauoyene acknowledges the critical attention garnered by MacDonald's text, but submits a fresh consideration. Here, *Fall on Your Knees* "not only re-focalizes the perception of Canada's haunting/haunted history of racial formation," it also crucially "suggests ways of working through the several personal traumas that are dynamically implicated in this history" (129). Jennifer Andrews' "Rethinking the Canadian Gothic: Reading Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*" picks up threads of both Kulperger and Lauoyene. Andrews demonstrates that Robinson radically inverts traditional gothic tropes: here, the "Other" is non-Native and the North is "a vibrant place that has been romanticized for the purposes of marginalization" (223). Andrews builds on Robinson's text to ask "how and why readers ... see [Aboriginal, Northern] communities as Gothic and who such labels serve" (223).

The final four essays examine texts unexplored by other writers in the volume. Lindy Ledohowski considers how Ukrainian Canadians occupy the uncanny and ambivalent space of both settler and invader, colonizer and colonized. "A Ukrainian-Canadian Gothic?: Ethnic Angst in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *The Green Library*" focuses on Kulyk Keefer's protagonist, Eva. Eva lives in the hyphen and it is only "by engaging in the process of ethnic identity construction" that she can come to terms with, and complete herself (159).

In "Something Not Unlike Enjoyment': Gothicism, Catholicism, and Sexuality in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*," Jennifer Henderson picks up on some of Cabajsky's concerns and, given her focus on Highway's text, her essay resonates with many of the others. Henderson's writing is precise, compact and provocative, and she reads *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as staging "a reversal of the colonial Gothic's location of dangerous forces in the irrational 'wilderness.'" Instead, she argues, Highway's text "deploy[s] elements of the European Gothic to identify the realm of excess and tyranny in the reason of the modern colonial state and its accessory institutions" (176). Here, "the fur queen herself—the novel's master trope of gender ambiguity, cultural hybridity, and gay specificity—can be read as an attempt to resolve ... discursive and political disalignment" (198).

Herb Wylie's "Beothuk Gothic: Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*" considers the macabre nature of historical fiction in general, and Crummey's text in particular. Wylie rifts on Margaret Sweatman's claim that "it's ghoulish writing, [historical fiction]. You get off on all these dead people" ("Ghosts are Our Allies," 187). Wylie uses Crummey's text to examine the extinction of the Beothuk, an Aboriginal group indigenous to Newfoundland and Labrador, the only group "to be entirely extinguished during the colonial period" (230). In Wylie's investigation *River Thieves* acts as an attempt to revise history at "the intersection of postcoloniality, historical fiction, and the Gothic" (231). It is, for Wylie, a text that performs the very uncanny absence and aporia that it examines.

Unsettled Remains closes with co-editor Cynthia Sugars' "Keeping the Gothic at (Sick) Bay: Reading Transferences in Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures*." Sugars focuses on the twinned nature of transference in Lam's text, which "seeks to 'de-gothicize' the common portrayals of modern medicine ... at the same time infusing this world with gothic potential" (252). Lam's setting does not immediately hail gothic tropes, and yet, as Sugars argues, the function of narrative transference between doctor and patient are haunted by the spectre of the Gothic (252). It is fitting that the anthology closes with Sugars' article precisely for the fact that it mobilizes the postcolonial gothic beyond immediately apparent manifestations. Like the subject of her essay, Sugars, too is "able to use the Gothic to access the suggestive realm of uncertainty in interpersonal unconscious communication" (253).

Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic is a strong anthology. Though its essays might have been more overtly linked, they are inherently conversant in the uncanny fashion that is the focus and foundation of their origins. In this anthology Sugars and Turcotte bring together an admirable range of writers, whose various positions allow voice and space to many of the "uncanny reminders of [Canada's] problematic history" (xxi).

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REGREEN: NEW CANADIAN ECOLOGICAL POETRY.
ED. MADHUR ANAND AND ADAM DICKINSON.
SUDBURY, ON: YOUR SCRIVENER PRESS, 2009. 142 PAGES. \$18.00.

For the first time ever, two anthologies of Canadian nature poetry appeared in the same year. With her ambitious historical project, *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (Wilfrid Laurier Press), editor Nancy Holmes opts for breadth and a conservative definition of nature poetry—the vast field of potential prompted Holmes, in the end, "to select only poems written about 'wild' nature rather than 'domesticated' nature" (xv). However, Madhur Anand and Adam Dickinson narrow their historical and thematic focus while broadening their definition of nature poetry. *Regreen: New Canadian Ecological Poetry* represents a fitting addendum to *Open Wide a Wilderness*, one that responds in a particular thematic way to some of the latter's inevitable gaps—namely, in post-1960s selections and the relative absence of avant-garde poetry. To be fair, Holmes lays out a chronological, recuperative agenda and, at over 500 pages for 200 poets, makes some admirable decisions in crafting the first ever historical survey of nature poetry in Canada. And many of the poems in her collection deal with nature in complicated, if formally conventional ways. While *Regreen* did

not begin as a direct response to Holmes' anthology, both editors refer to *Open Wide a Wilderness* in their introductions by way of positioning their anthology as a twenty-first century compilation of poetry and "physical, social, and linguistic environments" (13). Such a broad understanding of environment and ecological poetry complements the editors' multi-disciplinarity: Anand is an ecologist who began to take poetry seriously while studying the "unique ecology" of Sudbury, Ontario (20); Dickinson is a poet who has turned toward environmental science in his poetry and scholarship.

According to Dickinson, "this was going to be a book about Sudbury," a place infamous for its moonscapes resulting from massive mining projects in the twentieth century (16). Anand's scientific research into the city's efforts at restoring the denuded landscape was the impetus for a pair of questions that both editors pose: "What was to be made of such transformations? How do we re-imagine spaces in the act of restoring their diversity?" (20). The questions, fittingly, require both scientific (ecological) and imaginative (poetic) responses. In her introduction, Anand suggests that "[r]estoration ecology is the science that puts into practice the process of remembering" (22). This is not (just) metaphor; in attempting to "regreen" ecosystems, restoration ecologists aim to re-imagine a lost state. Like memory, of course, such restoration efforts are both active and imperfect since all the ecological relations that develop over millennia within a given system cannot be replicated in mere decades, let alone years.

Both Dickinson and Anand—in introductions titled, respectively, "The Astronauts" and "Gap Dynamics"—nicely set up their selections and their organizing principle. And though each editor views the poems through slightly different (and at times overlapping) lenses, basically the book's three sections foreground 1) observations of the material, "wild" world; 2) interrogations of built environments; and 3) meditations on the role of language/representation in considerations of environmental crises. The categories are not definite. Like ecological niches that meet at their edges and create ecotones—zones of interaction comprising species from both niches and a few not present in either—many poems could survive in more than one section. Throughout the collection, though, memory persists as a keynote first struck by Anand in her introduction. Memory connotes loss, and loss is the purview of poetry, ecological and otherwise. In the anthology's first section, Rhea Tregobov evokes the sadness of loss directly in "Elegy for the Wild," while others strike an elegiac tone by referring to stuffed owls in antiques shop windows (Bert Almon, "A Duty of Care"), recalling childhood, as in Monique Chénier's "Falconbridge 1964–1975," in which the speaker shares "Stationary moments" involving grandparents picking blueberries, and invoking cultural memory, as when Armand Garnet Ruffo pinpoints the moment when people in Sudbury began to realize that, in order to deal with pollution, "it would

take a new kind of thinking / that was actually old / ancient” (“Ethic”). In “Leaving the Island,” Brian Bartlett advocates a forgetfulness that, ironically, enables place to remember its own natural history, and Don McKay, in an excerpt from *The Muskwa Assemblage* (2008), aligns the process of restoration—ecological memory—with the act of writing a word down only to “Cross it out.”

In the two remaining sections, memory plays a less dominant, if similarly implicative role. Humans’ complicity in ecological degradation, while not simple, informs the very act of remembering. Rita Wong, for example, unwittingly follows McKay’s suggestion by asking readers not to forget the relation between linguistic and ecological colonization in North America: “the city paved over with cement english cracks open, / stubborn Halq’eméylem springs up” (“Return”). This request embedded in Wong’s poem is repeated in the blurring of “history and place” in Rhonda Collis’s “Sudbury—1972” and in the title of Katia Grubisic’s “The Rememberers.” But alas, much of what is worth remembering has been abandoned, “buildings torn out of the earth and forgotten,” as Lisa Robertson has it (“Fourth Walk”). Tending more toward formal unconventionality than the earlier selections—some of which represent the avant-garde preferred by Sina Queyras, who has a poem in *Regreen*—the poems in the final section enact typographical loss, positing language itself as (imperfect) cultural memory. From a. rawlings’ poems made almost entirely of pronouns to Alison Calder and Jeanette Lynes’ “imprint poems”—in which they create poems by utilizing only those words used in emails to each other—these poems foreground and complicate the ephemerality of landscape, birds, language, knowledge, memory, and more besides.

“It is difficult,” notes Dickinson, “to care about things we do not see, or that do not signify for us” (15). Understanding and/or interrogating how we perceive the world, then, represents one of the poet’s most lasting and relevant contributions to environmental activism. A focus on memory’s role in negotiating such a contribution is only one among many focuses in *Regreen*. Its modest ambitions—modest in scope, ambitious in its approach and organization—make this anthology appealing to both professional and non-professional readers concerned about ongoing environmental crises and efforts to address them. Despite the sombre tone underlying this project, Anand and Dickinson invite readers to explore and enjoy the restorative potential of new Canadian ecological poetry. It is an invitation well worth considering.

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CANUCK ROCK: A HISTORY OF CANADIAN POPULAR MUSIC.

BY RYAN EDWARDSON.

TORONTO, ON: TORONTO U PRESS, 2009. VIII, 336 PAGES. \$27.95.

Starting with the rise of American rock-and-roll in the mid-1950s, historian Ryan Edwardson sets out to chronicle and explain the process by which “music in Canada” became “Canadian music.” He meticulously establishes a narrative that can be summarized as follows. Initially considered a frivolous and often debauched intrusion from south of the border, rock-and-roll was neither claimed nor valued by mainstream Canadian commentators. With the maturation of the genre, due in part to the influence of socially conscious and poetic folk music in the mid-1960s, “rock-and-roll” became “rock,” and its practitioners increasingly became recognized as “artists.” This growth in popular music’s cultural capital coincided with the rise of a fervent new Canadian nationalism, and journalists and fans—and sometimes the musicians themselves—increasingly sought to engage popular music in the project of defining a distinctively Canadian national identity. Lacking a sufficient industrial infrastructure in Canada and facing the refusal of Canadian broadcasters to air homegrown talent, Canadian artists such as Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, and The Band were forced to move to the United States to establish successful careers in music. Despairing the drain of Canadian talent to America, Canadian nationalists urged the government to take action to guarantee Canadian musicians access to the nation’s airwaves. The resulting Canadian content legislation enabled Canadian acts, previously limited to regional audiences, to gain national exposure and helped to foster the growth of a domestic popular music industry. The arrival of a Canadian music television network and the rise of music videos in the 1980s enhanced the capacity for popular music to articulate a sense of the national. This notwithstanding, multinational record companies capitalized on Canadian content regulations and the growing awareness of a distinctively Canadian brand of popular music, establishing subsidiary labels in Canada, in many cases to the detriment of the Canadian artists they contracted. The digital revolution of the 1990s and the alternative music distribution networks it fostered have diminished the role that the idea of nationhood plays in the music industry, helping to bring the “heyday” of nationalism in Canadian popular music to an end.

The story is compelling and is supported by extensive evidence taken from journalism (musical and otherwise), music industry trade publications, governmental records, chart and sales statistics, and the author’s personal interviews with significant players in particular Canadian popular music scenes. Importantly, Edwardson resists the reductive Canadian essentialism that, as he notes, has characterized previous histories of Canadian popular music. He

usefully deconstructs the myth of a “Canadian sound” characterized by a polite, distracted anguish, a sense of isolation within a vast, wide-open landscape, a feeling of frontierism, and, more recently, a sense of irony. Edwardson points out that none of these traits is exclusively Canadian or unique to Canadian music, and the romanticized and celebrated notion of an anti-modern, authentic Canadian essence overlooks the real issues of class struggle, racial inequality, and industrial imbalance that have characterized the history of North America and its popular music. As Edwardson effectively illustrates, with few exceptions, the idea of a distinctively Canadian music has had more to do with nationalistic journalists and fans reading Canadianness into the work of their favourite artists than it has with Canadian musicians actively seeking to articulate a sense of the national. Readers interested in a discussion of how Canadian artists and their songs relate to broader developments in Canadian social and political history and have constructed meanings within that context, however, will be disappointed.

This is particularly true of Edwardson’s treatment of the period after the turn of the 1970s, which he identifies as the “heyday” of Canadian musical nationalism. Roughly half the book is dedicated to covering the rise of American rock-and-roll in the 1950s and its development throughout the 1960s before the idea of a Canadian popular music gained traction. While Edwardson covers this history from a Canadian perspective and ably chronicles the impact of American popular music on fledgling Canadian music scenes during the 1950s and 1960s, this territory has been covered extensively in the numerous histories of rock-and-roll published over the last two decades (Reebee Garofalo’s *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the USA* and Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman’s *American Popular Music: Minstrelsy to MP3*, both of which now exist in “Canadianized” editions). The disproportionate attention dedicated to the well-trodden history of popular music before the rise of Canadian musical nationalism leads to the curious and problematic result that a book titled *Canuck Rock* could lavish more attention on American acts such as Bill Haley (with index citations covering 18 pages) and Jefferson Airplane (13 pages) each than it does on seminal Canadian groups such as Rush (3 pages), Triumph (3 pages), Bachman Turner Overdrive (4 pages), Blue Rodeo (2 pages), and April Wine (not in the index) combined.

Once Edwardson does get to the emergence and development of a Canadian popular music, the discussion tends to be bogged down in extensive details concerning the various branches of the Canadian music industry (record labels, radio stations, music publishers, and music television networks), the legislation regulating them, and their relationships to multinational media conglomerates. A historian by training, Edwardson eschews any substantial discussion of musical or lyrical content and makes virtually no attempt to analyze, interpret, or tease social meanings out of musical recordings or performances. While this book provides a useful and thorough survey of the music industry in Canada, it would have benefited significantly from a greater interdisciplinary thrust. On numerous occasions Edwardson could have drawn profitably on the scholarly literature and

approaches drawn from sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, and, perhaps most importantly, popular music studies, a necessarily interdisciplinary field that the author engages only sporadically. When he does venture beyond empirical historical documentation to address musical elements, Edwardson runs into trouble with imprecise use of musical terminology (using “triplets” when he means “trios,” terms that refer to entirely different musical phenomena). His relative unfamiliarity with popular music studies is further displayed by his inaccurate labeling of musicians (identifying keyboardist Richard Manuel as a drummer) and scholars (identifying sociologist Simon Frith as a music theorist). While *Canuck Rock* presents a wealth of information on the Canadian popular music industry and the individuals and institutions that have shaped it, a history of Canadian popular music as an aural and meaningful social phenomenon has yet to be written.

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TRANSNATIONAL CANADAS: ANGLO-CANADIAN LITERATURE AND GLOBALIZATION.
BY KIT DOBSON.
WATERLOO, ON: WILFRID LAURIER U PRESS, 2009. 258 PAGES. \$36.95.

If Canada’s literal borders are being reinforced in the twenty-first century, it is in contrast to the recognition that Canadians’ cultures and identities are increasingly uncontained by our national borders, but are formed by the flow of categories of belonging within and across national boundaries. Yet these boundaries continue to be used to describe Canadian identity and Canadian literature, and many leftist social critics have argued that they are key to resisting an unfettered global capitalism. Kit Dobson makes the case that the national and the global are most productively understood today as interpenetrating, rather than opposing, spheres. Accordingly, transnational approaches to Canadian literature give us new ways to understand the challenges posed by our texts and our changing social landscape.

Transnational Canadas is the first book-length consideration of transnationalism’s effects on the production of Canadian literature, on critical responses to it and, in a more general sense, on the political and social climate of the country as we consider issues of identity and belonging. As such, the book is significant and welcome. Broad in scale, it is an excellent survey of changing approaches to the idea of a national literature in the last fifty years: through the flowering of literary nationalism in the 1960s and 70s; discussions of Canada’s postcoloniality; debates surrounding multiculturalism in the 1980s and 90s; to today’s literature as it engages with a globalized contemporaneity. Dobson balances theoretical discussion with readings of key Canadian texts, highlighting the debates these texts have provoked throughout their critical reception. For a

book that announces the need to engage with the changing present in Canadian literature, it spends much of its time looking back—but this is not a flaw, rather the mark of a new approach as it situates itself. Throughout, Dobson’s voice is assured, clear and often wryly funny.

Dobson’s discussion begins by assessing the repercussions of the linkage of a unified Canadian identity with the growth of a thematic model of Canadian literature that occurred in Canada in the 1960s. He contextualizes this assessment with a chapter considering how poststructuralist and Marxist thought not only conflict but also come together in ways that are productive of political resistance to globalization. While this might seem a circuitous beginning, it is useful here. Drawing on Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, Dobson presents a cogent overview of the interpenetration of leftist critique and poststructuralism to form a “responsible” deconstructive politics. Having established this, his contrast of the models of national literature in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* and Dennis Lee’s *Civil Elegies*, subjects of the next chapters, is more keenly felt. Dobson’s examination of *Surfacing* notes the anti-Americanism and voicing of national themes for which the novel was often considered a political manifesto, but assesses the ways in which these attempts to consolidate Canadianness eventually break down. Likewise, Dobson outlines the ways in which Lee, drawing on George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation*, imbues *Civil Elegies* with nostalgia for an authentic, distinct nation, then investigates how Lee approaches the idea of Canada as a deconstructed, diverse nation only to reject it as a “void,” threatening in its moral relativism. Next he turns to Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*; in Cohen’s chaotic “joyous failure” he locates a criticism of the nationalism and nostalgia of the period, and a challenge to the available “politics of being and belonging.”

Part Two, “Indigeneity and the Rise of Canadian Multiculturalism,” moves from Cohen’s challenge to survey the ways that various writers and critics began to reconstruct Canadian identity as ex-centric, drawing on the burgeoning discourses of identity politics throughout the 1980s. Dobson uses Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* to frame his discussion: Spivak’s use of Marxism and deconstruction to inform anti-imperialist thought is a natural foundation for Dobson’s interest in transnational literature and politics, and he lucidly summarizes her significance to Canadian debates about agency, representation, and the relations between hegemonic structures and subaltern groups—particularly as, in gaining acceptance, multicultural and indigenous voices at once challenge and function within state norms and institutions. Dobson uses the diversity of readings of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and *Itsuka* and Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* to discuss these politics of inclusion: both texts contain elements that can be seen variously as “resistant,” interrogating the limits of the state’s benevolent discourses of multiculturalism and its underlying racism, and also “resolutionary,” complicit in maintaining a normative, white Canadian mainstream against which minority groups remain marginal. Part Two moves to a sustained treatment of Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* to explore indigenous writing that posits

alternative models of community. Dobson reads *Slash* in counterpoint to Frank Davey's reading in *Post-National Arguments*, which suggests that *Slash* validates the state in order to provide common ground for negotiation. Dobson proposes that *Slash* rejects the perspective of many rehabilitative multicultural fictions and instead questions the nation's right to exist, advocating indigenous sovereignty.

The final section on "Canada in the World" begins with a discussion of transnationalism, focusing on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's texts *Empire* and *Multitudes*. While Dobson points out the importance of the questions these texts raise, he questions their call to dismantle national sovereignties and establish a "democracy of the multitude" as a way of resisting domination by today's transnational capitalism, warning against the pursuit of vast liberatory goals via a continuation of colonialist practices. Instead, Dobson espouses a transnational feminist approach that is wary of hierarchizing oppressions and solutions and makes use of positional allegiances. To illustrate today's changing landscapes of literary resistance and commodification, Dobson thoughtfully explores the mainstreaming of multicultural literature in Canada, observing that the critical and public reception of texts and their interpellation through state discourses can historicize or otherwise mute texts' social criticisms. He argues that in a publishing climate characterized by consolidation and foreign ownership, the texts that are produced, and that sell well, do so because they are perceived as representations of cultural difference in a universalizing form that does not challenge the normative values of the nation. Dobson turns to Roy Miki's *Surrender* and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* for such challenges. His fine readings examine their negotiations between the liberatory potential of a destabilized subjectivity and the need for community as a basis for resistance. Dobson calls for careful attention to the ways that such transnational subjectivities critique the flaws within existing national and global discourses, acknowledge the impossibility of a pure existence outside of global capitalism, and yet offer alternatives based on ideas of provisional belonging and motion with the potential to change how we configure selfhood, community, and nation in a global era. *Transnational Canadas* is both an excellent history of political movements within the Canadian literary and cultural scene, and a foundational text in itself, one which will be integral to scholarship going forward.

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