

Outside Words¹

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ABSTRACT

We read differently outside. Discussing works by two experimental poets, a. rawlings and Christine Stewart, this essay draws on geocritical and ecocritical methodologies alongside Indigenous theories that link language, story, and land to consider how an outdoor pedagogical practice attunes readers not only to the spatial dynamics of language, but also to the linguistic dynamics of place. While the colonial, sedentary structures of traditional classrooms shut out the world, immersing us in literary realms as though they were separate from our physical realities, reading outside makes us viscerally aware of how land and language shape one another. Beyond the walls of our classrooms and homes, we can feel our entanglements with the land, its histories, and other species. In the colonial spaces of Canada, which continues to grapple with considerable ecological and social harms, cultivating such awareness matters: while reading outside is not enough to save us from the environmental crises we are facing or assuage colonial grief and guilt, doing so brings us closer to the living edges of language, which

1. I would like to thank Emily Hoven and Eric Adams for their generous and generative readings of early drafts of this essay, Christine Stewart for ongoing conversations about poetry and Treaty, my students who have accompanied me outside and prompted many of these thoughts, and the two anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful interventions sharpened my thinking about many aspects of this essay. Its shortcomings, of course, are mine alone.

is where new forms of attention might nourish a more mutually sustaining relationship between land and words.

Keywords

Geocriticism; Ecocriticism; Habitat Studies; Colonial Relationships to Land; Outdoor Reading Practice; Experimental Poetry; Treaty; Deixis.

It is autumn, the first day of fall term classes. After the relative quiet of summer, the university campus is full of life again, the buildings crowded with students. I greet my new literature seminar in our assigned room on the second floor of the Humanities Centre—a concrete block of brutalist architecture completed in 1972 that currently houses the Department of English and Film Studies. After a brief introduction, we leave behind our classroom's stucco walls, two narrow windows, and brown industrial carpeting, and head outside. Past the manicured lawn with its artificial brook-fed koi pond, across Saskatchewan Drive, we head down the steep wooded banks of the North Saskatchewan River Valley that cuts a long, undulating, blue, green, gold, or—during our long winters—white line through the city.

More and more frequently since I began teaching in 2008, I have been taking my classes outside. Sometimes we head across campus, settling in amongst the boulders in the geology garden or on some quiet patch of grass on the Quad, but mostly we end up in the river valley. There, we cross paths with a handful of other people: joggers, a cyclist, a group of biology students checking bug traps. There is room for us to spread out under the trees, not just to read and talk, but to walk and observe. Across the river, the downtown buildings reflect the sky. The LRT rattles the bridge overhead. The air hums with the distant but perpetual sound of traffic. But we can also hear bird calls, rustling leaves, a chattering squirrel.

My outdoor pedagogy has been influenced by multifarious and, in my research, entangled commitments of geocriticism and ecocriticism, along with a deepening sense of my responsibility as a descendant of settlers teaching English literatures in Treaty 6 Territory and Region 4 of the Métis Nation of Alberta, all of which lure me outdoors to consider how reading extends to land. Geocriticism, as developed by Bertrand Westphal, posits a method of reading places, not just in, but through literature (see especially ch. 4). Ecocriticism—particularly the method of habitat studies pioneered by Laurie Ricou—challenges literary scholars not only to read for interspecies relationships in literary texts, but also to "*listen to what the world outside of (human) language systems might be saying*" ("Disturbance-Loving Species" 163; italics in original). Acknowledging Indigenous territory and Treaty obligations anchors these forms

of attention to the interplay of land and language in my responsibilities to the complex ecologies of the place where I live and work, with its confluence of languages, histories, and Indigenous and newcomer ways of knowing.

As awkward as it sometimes feels to let go of reading practices honed in the cloistered, sedentary space of a classroom, to expose ourselves to the unpredictability of wind and weather, or the late-summer panic of wasps searching for food, this practice has felt increasingly necessary. We read differently outdoors. This essay is my account of how this happens—or at least how it has happened to me, in a particular place, at a particular time—and why it matters.

Beyond the walls of our classroom, we become entangled in the worlds we read about. Moreover, we can think more concretely about language as something that we not only speak and read, but also *inhabit*. As much as we dwell in architectural and geographical spaces and places, we also live in (and through) the soundscapes and perceptual frames of words. Edmonton, a place known to the nêhiyawak (Cree) as *amiskwaciwâskahikan* (Beaver Hills House), is home to many languages. I dwell predominantly in English. Like the walls of the buildings I occupy, like the fences and hedges that divide land into private and public property, and like the roads and pathways that guide my movements through these spaces, the vocabulary and grammar of this language shapes my experience of, and relationships to, the world. Outside—immersed in a wider environment that includes both human-designed spaces and the tangle of more-than-human lives with whom we share them—these perceptual frames become all the more apparent.

In *Treaty 6 Deixis*, a long poem that rearticulates ways of relating to this place through the limited frames of English, Christine Stewart asks: “What happens when the text is invited into this / frozen sky wind north with snow with tree and snow shaking in this wind this cold these hands cold hands” (116-17). What happens, indeed, when—as Dwayne Donald, a scholar descended from the *amiskwaciwiyiniwak* (Beaver Hills people) and the Papaschase Cree, suggests—the land itself doesn’t understand English.² Guided by experimental poems by a. rawlings and Stewart, Donald’s reflections on walking and wâhkôhtowin imagination, and other interventions by Indigenous and non-Indigenous poets and thinkers who have sought to reorient English and its systems toward the world, I take words outside to both understand and shift the colonial ecological relationships that are built into my language.³ Not because such practices

2. Donald has mentioned this on more than one of his guided walks through the River Valley, which he has been giving since 2006 (see Donald 61 and Connor McNally’s film *ôtênaw*).

3. a. (or Angela) rawlings is known for producing “a radically experimental poetry that

alone can save us from the ecological crises we are facing or assuage colonial grief and guilt, but because they bring us closer to the living edges of language, which is where new forms of attention can nourish a more mutually constitutive relationship between land and words.

1. Inhabiting English

One warm fall morning early in the term, many weeks before the first snow, we gather on the grass to contemplate encounters between this language and this place. Under a towering poplar, leaves turning a rich golden yellow above us, between the Humanities Centre and Saskatchewan Drive, which runs along the upper banks of the river valley, we open a copy of *ReGreen: New Canadian Ecological Poetry*, edited by Anand Madhur and Adam Dickinson (regrettably now out of print). Turning to a. rawlings' poem "signs of whom," we read aloud. In his review of this collection, Travis Mason emphasizes that "these words" in particular "are meant to be read (and heard) and not to be just looked at (and seen)." Read aloud outside, they become especially potent. In the first two lines of the poem, the pronouns "I you he she they we" move swiftly into their possessive forms, "her your our my her his their." These possessives then run riot in the second verse paragraph:

yours mine theirs theirs theirs
theirs mine theirs theirs theirs
theirs theirs yours theirs theirs
ours yours theirs theirs theirs
.....

until, eventually, they seem to take over the speaker:

mine Mine mine mine mine
mine mine mine Mine mine
Mine mine mine
ours... (lines 8-18)

Among the trees and shrubs, the sidewalks, the road, the woods and thick underbrush that blocks our view of the river on the other side, and the cityscape punctuating the sky beyond it all, rawlings' words resonate as part of our

critiques the role that anthropo-, phallo-, and eurocentric language has played in the discursive settling of Canada" (Groeneveld 141).

habitat. The repeated possessives become active determinants of our relations to the built spaces and managed natures in our midst. Is this building “ours” or “theirs,” we wonder. What about the trees? the grass? the historic “Rutherford House” now dwarfed by university buildings (“his,” we conclude).

As we walk down to the river, the words clinging to us like spider-webs, we read the land itself through them. We find analogs for Rawlings’ language of possession all around us: in fences and walls, signs, gates, locked doors, lawns and benches, bike paths and streets; in the bushes, a collection of sundry items mark a space someone has claimed for shelter. On the path that runs alongside the river, we notice that, while much of this managed forest and undergrowth remains open (and thus accessible habitat for coyotes, porcupines, and unhoused fellow humans who dwell, in the warmer months, amongst the red osier dogwood, highbush cranberry, and balsam poplar), some has been fenced off; although none of us is sure why, we immediately understand that this is “theirs” (whose?) rather than “ours.”

Rawlings’ poem makes us suddenly and sharply aware of the extent to which this city is a concentration of humanised, managed, and owned spaces that extend across thousands of miles of prairie. Read aloud in this place, their words become a distant, colonial-world echo of Gertrude Stein’s account of nineteenth century English literature as a literature of possession:

They owned everything inside of course but that they had always done, but now they owned everything outside and that reinforced their owning everything inside, and that was as it was only more so but as they owned everything outside, outside and inside had to be told something about all this owning and so there was invented explaining and that made nineteenth century English literature what it is. (48)⁴

From the boreal forests and Precambrian shield on its northern fringes, to the mountains along its western edge, what was once open grassland shared by millions of migratory bison, bears, birds, and of course people, was transformed by the Dominion Land Survey into a now familiar patchwork of private farms. Nowhere was the difference felt more acutely, perhaps, than on the reserves to which Indigenous nations were relegated, their movements restricted

4. For a detailed and succinct analysis of other ways English served colonial appropriation in the earliest encounters between Anglo writers and the lands now called Canada, see D.M.R. Bentley’s “Tokens of Being There: Land Deeds and Demarcations”; this subject also runs through my book *Mapping With Words: Anglo-Canadian Literary Cartographies, 1789-1916*.

by resident Indian Agents well into the twentieth century (the Pass System was not formally repealed until 1951).

The shapes of colonial ownership, and the uneven relations it produces between humans as well as between us and other species, are still apparent almost everywhere we look. And so, gathered on the grass, we inhabit—not metaphorically, but literally—this language of possession. As surely as maps and walls, “yours,” “mine,” “ours,” and “theirs” determine who belongs where. These words texture our experiences of the world, determining how we perceive and act in it, shaping our relationships with everything and everyone who is not “us.”

While rawlings attunes us to the power of possessive language, the experience of semantic satiation that the poem produces (whereby repetition robs words of their meaning) also renders these words absurd. Reading them outside in the river valley accentuates this feeling, the proprietary language becoming increasingly strange as it echoes through a world which, it soon becomes obvious, should not, indeed *cannot*, be appropriated. The valley may be quiet compared to the city above, but it vibrates with life. More than 2000 coyotes live here, along with a similar number of beavers; waterfowl, songbirds, woodpeckers, owls, hawks, ravens, and even bald eagles find shelter and food, as do many species of fish and insects, garter snakes, chipmunks, muskrats, weasels... The list is, needless to say, far longer and more diverse than I can do justice to here—Wikipedia tells me that “at least 325 vascular plant species, 50 types of mosses,... 40 lichen species[,]... 150 bird species, 50 mammal species, 27 fish species, and seven amphibian and reptile species” are estimated to live “in the river valley” (“North Saskatchewan”). It is for good reason that this area has, since time immemorial, been recognized by the *nêhiyawak* (Plains Cree) as a *pêhonân*: a gathering place for more-than-human communities and kin. How can such a place be owned?

2. Beyond English

According to Tomson Highway, who grew up speaking Cree in Dene territory (and has learned several other languages since), “speaking one language is like living in a house with one window only; all you see is that one perspective when, in point of fact, dozens, hundreds, of other perspectives exist and one must, at the very least, heed them, see them, hear them” (20). In his guided walks through the river valley, Donald has suggested that this land doesn’t understand English: it needs to be spoken to in *nêhiyawêwin*, which has deep connections to these landforms and waterways. In this predominantly anglophone city, however, we are surrounded by words that not only define the world as property, as rawlings’ poem underlines, but also conjure elsewhere

rather than connecting us to here. “Edmonton,” named for a suburb of London, encapsulates the exogenous character of the language most of us inhabit. By contrast, the *nêhiyawêwin* place-name, *amiskwacîwâskahikan*, or “Beaver Hills House,” draws attention to the specific geography and ecology of the area: the hills bordering the river, the beavers who have lived along these banks since time immemorial, and the humans who joined them in this *pêhonân*.

Cree intersects with other Indigenous languages—such as Stoney, Siksiká, or Dene—that also speak from this region. Highway explains: “the Dene language belongs to and comes from the soil and the muskeg and the reindeer moss of the northern extremities of the three Prairie provinces and a sizeable chunk of the Northwest Territories” (11). If “Cree comes from the laughter of a cosmic clown” who takes the form of “Coyote on the plains” (11), this language also binds humans with the landscapes they inhabit. The North Saskatchewan River is an anglicised form of the *nêhiyawêwin* name *kisiskâciwan-sîpî*, which describes the water flowing at a swift walking pace. As Donald has pointed out on his guided walks, only by walking beside the river can one experience the embodied relationship upon which this name relies—how it holds within it a sensory mode of knowing, a phenomenological experience of one of this river’s most prominent attributes, or ways of being.

The difficulty of English is not just that it is an exogenous language without roots in these particular geographies, but that its very vocabularies and grammatical structures can hinder intimate relationships with the earth and its other creatures. In her essay “Land Speaking,” Okanagan writer Jeanette Armstrong illuminates this problem by pointing to the differences between the English and Okanagan word for “dog.” Because the Okanagan word *kekwep* contains both “an action syllable meaning something like ‘happening upon a small (thing),’” and a second syllable “meaning something like ‘sprouting profusely (as in fur),’” Armstrong observes, “[w]hen you say the Okanagan word for dog, you don’t ‘see’ a dog image”; rather, “you summon an experience of a little furred life, the exactness of which is known only by its interaction with you or something” (190). By contrast, “[t]he English word solicits an inanimate generic symbol... independent and isolated from everything else, as though a dog without context and without anything to which it is connected could really exist. It must be a frightful experience to be a dog in English” (190).

In a similar vein, in her essay “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” the Potawatomi writer and biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer considers the perceptual implications of verb-based Anishinaabemowin languages compared with the noun-based English. For Kimmerer, the fact that English is so noun-heavy—70 percent of our words are nouns—is “somehow appropriate to a culture so obsessed with things” (53). Her discovery, upon studying her ancestral Potawatomi language, that 70 percent of Anishinaabemowin words are verbs shifted her

understanding of the world and her relationship to it. In Anishinaabe languages, even rocks and water are conceived grammatically as active, animate beings. What in English we know simply as “a bay,” static and discrete—not unlike the word “dog” in Armstrong’s account—is, in Anishinaabemowin, “to be a bay.” Conjuring a state of watery being, the active grammatical structure makes it harder to regard nature as a collection of inanimate objects and resources (mere “things”). A grammar of animacy opens up an active realm of beings deserving of a different kind of consideration.

Kimmerer and Armstrong offer glimpses through what are, for me, new windows onto the world, fresh ways of seeing places I thought I knew. As I walk with my students through the woods with these teachings turning over in our minds, we endeavour to acknowledge—not to understand, but to recognize and appreciate—what it might mean to be a river, to be a balsam poplar, to be a coyote, to be a blade of grass. It takes time to loosen the bonds of the English tropes and literary traditions that make it difficult to imagine animacy as something other than personification, or the metaphorical transfer of human attributes to a nonhuman being or object. Kimmerer’s elucidation of Potawatomi and Anishinaabemowin grammar brings us closer to understanding the embodiments of being that exist here, too, alongside the human.

Inviting rawlings’ text into this particular place draws attention to why it is necessary “to listen to what the world outside of (human) language systems might be saying” (Ricou, “Disturbance-Loving Species” 163). This endeavour is a central tenet of habitat studies, an ecocritical method developed by Ricou that radically opens up the very concept of reading: to different kinds of writing, to wider ideas of storytelling, to broad and capacious listening. The habitat studies scholar reads in order to grapple with the tangled and shifting mesh of relations among beings, both animal and vegetable, in the shared spaces we inhabit. Eclectic and interdisciplinary literary histories converge around a particular animal, plant, or feature of the bioregion—for Ricou: salal, the plant that grows on the forest floor throughout the Pacific Northwest region of North America; or salmon; or even rain; here: magpie, chickadee, trembling aspen, coyote...⁵ In this practice of reading, the habitat studies scholar leaves the classroom behind in order to attend to the larger world in which human activities and cultural practices are embedded—a vast and complex world that sustains us, body and soul, and that imprints itself on our language—but that speaks

5. See Ricou, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* and *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*; inspired by Ricou’s methods, my own areas of research and graduate teaching are increasingly focused on how other species, especially those common to the parkland biome, can guide our reading practices.

in other tongues. Habitat study thus decenters not only a particular bookish scholarly tradition in literary studies, but also our very language.

As we walk among the balsam poplars, red osier dogwood, and sarsaparilla sprouting on the forest floor (many of us suddenly aware of how few of the species around us we can even accurately identify), the questions remain: how to listen to these tongues? How to read the land's own languages?

Indigenous scholars remind us that such questions are colonial ones. The rift between nature and culture that ecocriticism seeks to mend is, in North America, an imported construct that is in many ways inseparable from the introduction of English and other European languages to these places. As we have already seen, many Indigenous languages nurture different relationships between humans and nonhuman kin. In "Land Speaking," Armstrong emphasizes the inseparability of land and language: "it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die" (176). As Armstrong underscores, the articulateness of the land is not *distinct* from human language, as Ricou suggests, but embedded in it. For a speaker of Okanagan (or N'silxchn), listening to the land does not require moving beyond human language, because this "language was given to us by the land we live within" (Armstrong 175). The relationships upon which such listening depends are reflected in the vocabularies and grammars of N'silxchn, along with many other Indigenous languages.

Writing in both N'silxchn and English, Armstrong wrestles with the difficulty of translation. She explains, for instance, how "the term *Tmixw* in Okanagan, meaning something like loving-ancestor-land-spirit," becomes simply "Grandmothers" in her poem of that title. A fuller translation emerges from the poem itself, which describes the ancestor-land-spirit's "voices speaking to me / in early morning light / glinting off water / speaking to me in fragile green / pushing upward / groping sun and warmth / pulling earth's breath / down and in / to join with porous stone" (176-77). As the slow rhythms of Armstrong's English words draw together land, sun, water, fire, and air, she evokes how, for the Okanagan people, "land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us" (178). "Within that vast speaking," she elaborates, "both externally and internally, we human beings are an inextricable part—though a minute part—of the land language" (178). Along with scholars like Kimmerer, Armstrong suggests that it is not necessarily "human" language that poses a problem for deep ecological listening, but rather the introduced colonial languages that emphasize—some might even say create—a separation between the land and the words we use to define it.

For many Indigenous educators, leaving the classroom is a political act that is central to decolonization and cultural resurgence rooted in the integral

connections between land, language, knowledge, law, and governance. As the Anishinaabekwe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson observes, “Indigenous education” is founded upon learning “*from the land and with the land*” (154, 150). This learning lies at the heart of the laws that undergird Anishinaabe culture and relationships with the nonhuman world, as Indigenous systems of “Natural Law”—including the *nêhiyaw* system of *wâhkôhtowin*—“flow from the consequences of creation or the ‘natural’ world or environment” (Borrows 28). The Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows explains that these laws “may be regarded as literally being written on the earth,” and so “the casebook for learning natural law requires an intimate knowledge of how to read the world” (29, see 28-35). As Borrows describes it, the land itself is a language that enunciates—for those who learn to listen to its complex syntax—ways of being in community not just with fellow humans, but with birds, insects, plants, animals, soil, water, rock, and so on.

In a recent article on “walking and the *wâhkôhtowin* imagination,” Donald underscores that paradigms of sedentary, book-centred classroom-learning anchor much of our educational system in a colonial model of progress that obscures Indigenous knowledge, which, here in Treaty 6 Territory, includes the *nêhiyaw* practice of *wâhkôhtowin*. Walking outside, Donald argues, not only facilitates the creative thinking that is required to find “a new story to live by,” but, more specifically, nurtures a “*wâhkôhtowin* imagination” attuned to kinship and reciprocity (61). Walking “wake[s] up something important inside of people that was put to sleep as they became educated. By walking and listening, people begin to perceive the life around themselves differently. They feel enmeshed in relationships” (61).

3. Reading at the Edges of English

When we walk in the river valley—which some students tell me they have never visited, despite its proximity to campus—the enmeshment that Donald describes begins to undo the separation we feel when overlooking this space from the windows of our classrooms. And while English reinforces this separation in many ways, it also, as Kimmerer underscores, has a certain elasticity to it (as all languages do). A new set of relationships becomes possible when we use our language differently, opening it up to other grammars. When Kimmerer questions why, in English, we usually refer to nonhuman beings—even other animals—as “it,” she also observes:

In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed to any person, as it. That would be a profound act of disrespect. It robs a person of selfhood and

kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family. (55)

She goes on to show how a simple change in diction can nurture companionship with other beings: for example, when a lifeless “something” becomes “someone,” as in “Someone is in my hat,” a deerfly ceases to be simply a nuisance and becomes an individual in their own right, buzzing around for their own particular reason, experiencing humans in their own way (56).

Experimental poets like Rawlings and, as I will discuss momentarily, Stewart, probe the limits and possibilities of English as a tool that, for better or worse, they are compelled to use as they try to attune themselves (and their readers) differently to the land. In the midst of Rawlings’ text-scape of possessive pronouns, a single noun appears in the final two lines: “Il my my moth. Yesyes her with my / moth. Still.” Its jarring emergence reminds me of—while simultaneously affirming and defying—Kimmerer’s critique of the noun-heaviness of English. Conjuring a delicate, winged insect “covered in microscopic scales, typically drably coloured and held flat when at rest” (“Moth”) this noun brings welcome relief from the abstractions that all but conceal the animate world through the rest of the poem, alighting on it in much the same way as a moth suddenly lands on a back-lit window-screen.

In keeping with Kimmerer’s critique of the interpenetration of English and cultures of consumption and extractivism, the dominant way of relating to this solitary living creature in the poem remains trapped in the possessive: “my moth” (emphasis added). Indeed, the moth may be “still” because it has literally become “my moth”—preserved, lifeless, pinned to a board in a collection (a familiar sight on a university campus, I cannot help but think). “We murder to dissect,” warned Wordsworth in his own critique of western practices of book learning; in *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists*, Rawlings “draw[s] a parallel between the lepidopterist who pins down moths and butterflies and the act of rape” (Groeneveld 149; see Rawlings, *Wide* 74-78). Given the rest of Rawlings’ near-obsessive dissection and re-collection of possessive language, we might well read the moth as another victim of these ways of carving up the land itself into discrete entities: a specimen violently cut off from the ecological liveliness in which she was once enmeshed. It is frightful to be a moth in English, Armstrong might say.

At the same time, the sudden emergence of this creature in the poem—the sudden emergence of the poem’s only noun—also ruptures the text-scape of possessive pronouns, even as the creature becomes embedded in it. Against the strangeness of a text devoid of other nouns, the “moth” introduces a concrete liveliness to which we must “listen,” if only for a moment. In this spirit, “my

moth" could be an affectionate gesture of kinship rather than possession. The stillness that descends on the final line, in such a reading, could be the stillness of the moth settling on the poem, which unsettles the static rigidity of those borders of "yours" and "mine" (which mean nothing, after all, to a moth); or it could be the stillness of a speaker without adequate words, the stillness that descends when one listens beyond human language.

Either way, this unexpected beacon from the nonhuman world throws the dense, abstract text-scape of pronouns and possessions into relief in a way that makes us feel the absurdity of confining a varied and complex ecosystem within a language of ownership. "Moth," too, is cast into relief by these words, not unlike how a living moth, drawn to a small circle of light, becomes a small but vivid presence against the darkness with which it is surrounded. Whether we imagine this delicate creature pinned in a private collection or landing on a window-screen, she is there, inviting the reader to imagine the reciprocal entanglement, the mutual shaping, of language and world.

Outside, on the day that we are discussing this poem and wondering at how even our limited, noun-based language might cultivate attentiveness to a world beyond the text, a white-tailed deer walks quietly by the patch of grass where we are sitting. Stunned to silence, we consider how the noun, "moth"—with its soft humming and fricative flow evoking the quiet, airy being of the moth herself—might similarly conjure an encounter with wilderness, in Don McKay's sense of the term: a being or life-force that, even when pinned by a word, nonetheless "eludes the mind's" (or poem's) "appropriations" (21). Did this moth fly into rawlings' poem the way an actual moth flies in at an open door, or a deer wanders into our peripheral vision, unbidden, transgressing the threshold of "yours" and "mine"? This poem, after all, inhabits the world of the moth—is at once sustained and disrupted by it.

4. A Language that Points

Habitat studies prompts us to attend to moths and other organisms who show up in our poems and stories by going outside the text to the ecological contexts described by biologists and ecologists as much as by poets. Attention, in this method, begins with a name, however imperfect that name may be. A non-specific noun that tells us only the genus, "moth" opens the poem to any number of potential species. Despite the taxonomic knowledge that runs through her collection *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists*, rawlings' vagueness here is understandable: this, after all, is how many of us relate to these winged nocturnal insects, using one catch-all name to conjure any one of the thousands of species that exist (there are around 160,000 in the world, "many of

which have yet to be described," Wikipedia tells me). The more than 2000 species that live in Alberta include Hummingbird Clearwing, Sphynx, Police Car moth—the allure of these metaphors reminding me of the many ways that “moth” brings us to the edges of language.

Outside, we are inspired to learn the names that will help us read the “forest” and “river” not as indistinct landscape, but as complexly variegated ecological communities. Wandering among the trees and understory shrubs, one student acquaints us with the Red Osier Dogwood, with its long, elegant, deep red branches used by Indigenous people for pipe-stems; another draws our gaze down to the forest floor, where horsetail has been growing since dinosaurs roamed these regions. Combining our limited lexicons and partial knowledge and experience, our vocabularies expand into new, more granular forms of attention.

We can also feel the wholeness of life that cannot be named. All names are, in a certain sense, metaphors. “Moth” is but a sign carried over for a signified; a quiet cluster of letters on a page; a thin, soft sound, beyond which lies a whole world of creaturely lives and languages. In *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*, McKay describes the “vertigo” that afflicts those who recognize that “even ‘apt’ names touch but a tiny portion of a creature, place, or thing. When that vertigo arrives,” he says, “we’re aware of the abject thinness of language, while simultaneously realizing its necessity” (64). We are left in a state of longing for the wilderness beyond language. He adds, “But longing: well, longing leads to poetry, which speaks out of, and sometimes to, this crisis in the naming of things” (64).

As a poet, McKay is drawn to metaphor, the “excess” of which “points to a world beyond language”—the world to which Ricou would have us listen—“even while it cuts a fancy linguistic figure” (85). Metaphor, he argues (borrowing a beautiful one from Mary Oliver) liberates the “screech owl” from the “cage” of his ill-fitting name and carries Adam, in McKay’s meditation on this originary story of naming, “down the little aluminum ladder of his scream” (qtd. in McKay 93). But metaphors are themselves limited; as McKay observes, even Oliver’s resonant image fails to convey “that gentle fatal presence on the path, that extra hush” that befalls Adam when he encounters this creature, “a darker darkness that swept down the path and into the foliage” (92, 91). Not even the most sensuously playful of metaphors can contain the fullness of existence. As McKay observes, this language “can be no more than—in the traditional metaphor—a finger pointing at the moon” (86).

This idea becomes an animating principle in Stewart’s *Treaty 6 Deixis*, a long poem noticeably devoid of metaphors, but full of words that point. In it, Stewart registers a deep awareness of the problems with English—its shortcomings, and even violence, which are tied to the poet’s own shortcomings and simultaneous “love and... violence” as “a person of white settler descent” struggling to “honour [her] obligations as expressed in the spirit and intent of the Treaty negotiations” (113). “Here,” Stewart writes,

we are asked to learn the meaning of Treaty 6 itself as it was agreed to by the nêhiyaw Îyârhe Nakoda Dene and Saulteaux.... nêhiyaw elder Bob Cardinal says that Treaty 6 is based on the original agreements of reciprocity that were made and that have existed since the beginning of time agreements of reciprocation that were made between humans and animals between humans and air between humans and water humans and plants humans and rocks. (124)

As Rob Jackson observes, Stewart's "short dyspneic lines... evoke a sense of hesitancy in the face of the English's inadequacy for articulating the intensity and necessity of treaty relationships" (82). Moved by the problem of "how to turn English from a low-context language / into a high-context language" (as Rita Wong put it in these lines from "value chain," which form one of the book's epigraphs), Stewart considers the potential of deixis as a means of re-articulating relations between the poet/reader and this place. Deixis is "'verbal pointing,' that is to say pointing by means of language" (Stewart, *Treaty 6* n.p.); she elaborates: "[a] deictic expression (or deixis) is a word or phrase (*this, that, these those, now, then...*) that points to the time, place, or situation in which a speaker is speaking" (115-16). Among other effects, "Deixis indicates the thing's location"; thus, it "invites the outside world of space into that of the text," reminding us that "we are also sustained by our spatiotemporal context" (116).

Deixis has long been a feature of ecological and anticolonial poetics. Behind Stewart's work lie the experiments of Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, and Juliana Spahr, among others—all of whom, like her, resist appropriative language and the anthropocentric nostalgia of the lyric voice. Stewart's epigraphs and citations trace a literary context that also includes Wong, Rachel Blau Duplessis, and Stein, whose "language practices consider the material world by pointing to the matter of English and its grammars" (117). Most vitally, given where she is and the understanding of the Treaty that guides her (124-27), Stewart follows nêhiyaw language teacher Reuben Quinn, who provides her with the epigraph "Touch the earth with each word, reorient yourself." Reorientation requires a poetics of "minding" rather than knowing (51). Accordingly, Stewart eschews descriptive and figurative language, particularly metaphor—which, conveying the referent by way of a vehicle that is radically other than the thing itself, arguably "touch[es] the earth" only by moving away from it (the way that the owl's call becomes a "little ladder"). Instead of emerging from figures of speech, the meaning of her text relies on context—on the meeting of poet and world. "*This valley,*" "*This river,*" "*That bridge,*" "*this water,*" "*this sand,*" "*that bend,*" "*That bank*"—these phrases are kinetic gestures that point beyond the thin veneer of words to an embodied experience of the world that the poet meets and minds, beckoning us also to attend to where we are (4-8; italics in original). In the classroom, we can only imagine these points of contact, but venturing outside, we

become participants in the intimate and physical poetic labour of reorienting ourselves, wherever we may be.

Everywhere, there are invitations to notice. "This is the object of our attention," we read: "A bird's head looking out at a bird's head" (Stewart, *Treaty 6* 55). Outside, the reader continues this project of noticing by filling in the blank spaces: This magpie. That squirrel. This balsam poplar's sticky fragrant buds. Polysensory space, "like that where we were there was this noise this noise," makes other beings "the centre of our attention" (60). Although, unlike many of the nature poets McKay describes, Stewart relies on concrete rather than figurative language, her book contains a handful of deictic half-similes that repeat the act of pointing rather than offering fully realised comparisons: "Beavers through there" / "Like this" (14-15). Like what, we wonder? The lacuna suggests both the ludicrousness of comparisons, and our need for them. Again, we must fill in for the poet to co-create an encounter between text and world.

Reading outside, immersed in the "here" to which Stewart points, reminds us of the reciprocities of the Treaty, and the labour that they require. Still, Dallas Hunt's caution that "the collection risks being read like the all too easy declarations that 'we are all treaty people'" (107) registers an anxiety that runs through these poems. "[W]hat else might poetry do"? Hunt asks (108). Stewart writes from this question, too, claiming very little for the white settler poet, other than gestures "to what I do not know and to the reasons why I do not know" (*Treaty 6* 115). For Stewart, pointing is noting rather than understanding. There is no mastery here. Bidding us to "notice our robbing minds, telling, representing," she resists the urge to describe, to represent. Instead, she offers the simple instruction: "Shut up... Drink this / river's water" (96-97). Thus, we repeatedly feel the poet standing in the quiet space beyond the limits of her words, watching and listening for elk and beaver, coyote and human—all the beings who move in the interstices of the colonial city—reminding us that this place we share sustains us.

Colonial relationship-denial is, Stewart emphasizes, a physical condition and practice: "our bodies became that ignorance," she writes, "and by extension became / this violence" (*Treaty 6* 78). Deixis reminds us not only of the weight and complexity of where we are, but also of the poet's (and by extension, the reader's) corporeal presence in the midst of everything—and everyone—else. This state of being-in-the-midst is critical to Stewart's consideration of the encounter between words (both English and *nêhiyawêwin*) and the place she inhabits. Stopping the violence involves a careful negotiation of an embodied process of speaking, reading, and writing ethically, in relation to her ever-unfolding Treaty obligations: "The points of connection and obligations," she urges, "are infinite and demanding" (115).

By pointing rather than describing, *Treaty 6 Deixis* resists the myriad ways in which "[I]and calls settler bodies forth into a horizon of perceptual entitlement,"

as Paul J. Guernsey memorably puts it (835). Treaty, as it is understood by Indigenous scholars and knowledge-holders—those who honour the “legally binding contract” of “the pipestem” rather than only the “affixing marks in ink” (Stewart, *Treaty 6* 71, 74)—calls on settlers to relinquish this entitlement, which includes mistaken perceptions of terra nullius: “But this which they saw and do see with authority as empty / perfectly empty perfectly was not of course it was not” (82). Citing Sharon H. Venne’s “Treaties Made in Good Faith,” Stewart reminds readers of “[t]he simple fact... that, without the treaty, no one other than Indigenous Peoples has the right to live in our land” (63).

Unlike the “yours” and “mine” of rawlings’ text-scape, “this” and “that” locate without appropriating. Stewart’s deictic language places the poet in the midst of a world much larger than herself and her desires, although she admits to having been driven by an acquisitive compulsion, too: “I collected because I could because I desired because I wanted everything because I could because I could I wanted everything and was absolved of nothing” (*Treaty 6* 85). Deixis does not absolve her (or us). But it indicates another way of being and thinking and looking at the world that changes the registers—and implications—of our attention: “To be found waiting not wanting / To be found to show in a way to be thanking and waiting” (94). Waiting, not wanting, the silent spaces of her text leave room for moths to land, for deer to walk by. By quieting the dominant language of English, she leaves space, also, for *nêhiyawêwin*, a language she has studied with Quinn, but which speaks in her text primarily through the words of the Cree Elder Jim Kâ-nîpitêhtêw, whose account of Treaty 6 remains one of the most important records of this negotiation.

First signed in 1876, Treaty 6, according to Indigenous interpreters and knowledge holders, asks us to “have respect for the land and all its relationships” (Venne 7), to attend to our nonhuman kin as well as Indigenous relations with whom we share the land and water in order “to restore the kinship systems and the balance that is necessary for all life” (Stewart, *Treaty 6* 124). This alone should be reason enough to take our students outside: shut away in our classrooms, it becomes difficult to remember where we are and the responsibilities we carry. As Stewart reflects in “Propositions from Under Mill Creek Bridge,” an essay that contemplates how to read the confluence lives and alterities that are all too often unseen or ignored in this urban space: “when I don’t go back to the underbridge, when I just keep writing and stop wandering, the underbridge”—including the complexities of this place marked by capitalism and colonialism, and her discomfort in reading it—“turns into something else, an embellished abstraction” (252). Through repeated encounters, however, she notes that “the underbridge stopped being a liminal space,” and, instead, “began to run dendritic through the middle and around the edges of everything” (246).

Literary scholars can attend to these relationships and our Treaty obligations to them by illuminating the ways that language shapes, and can be shaped by, them. As Donald posits, we all are in need of “a new story that can give good guidance on how to live life in accordance with kinship relationality” instead of through the “relational psychosis” that afflicts colonial society (55, 56). The question that Duplessis asks in an epigraph to Stewart’s book—“Will sheer pointing / save the place?”—remains unanswered. But we know a little more, after reading this work, how much is at stake. Reading outside, moreover, re-engages the connections between language and habitat, bringing us to the edges of English where, in the hands of poets, it loosens its grip on the world, opening up to more ethical possibilities that balance the needs of humans with those of nonhuman kin. As Stewart shows, English can become quieter, less certain. In this quiet space, we can continue to look for and cultivate the words that, alongside Indigenous language systems, might help attune us to the articulateness of land.

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