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# *We Are Already Ghosts*: Reflections on Composition

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ABSTRACT
In this piece, author and critic Kit Dobson discusses and analyzes the composition of his debut novel, *We Are Already Ghosts* (University of Calgary Press, 2024). He analyzes the novel along at least three axes: first, as a novel that can be classified as a character-driven "summer read"; second, as a work of experimental fiction; and, third, as a text that analyzes and interrogates the spaces that make up the Canadian province of Alberta. Dobson notes influences on the novel from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*; to the poetics of bpNichol; to the tension between settler and Indigenous understandings of land, territory, haunting, and presence. Throughout, Dobson notes that the time in which the novel is set, between 1996 and 2011, marks a period of transition for the Briscoe-MacDougall family members who populate the book, and for the world and society that these characters represent.

Keywords
We Are Already Ghosts; Virginia Woolf; bpNichol; settler and Indigenous understandings of land

*We Are Already Ghosts*, which is my first (published) novel, took nine years to complete. I wrote the initial draft of this novel while I was a Visiting Fellow at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada during the 2015-2016 academic year. I was at the same time completing my nonfiction book *Malled: Deciphering Shopping in Canada*, a book that was published by Wolsak & Wynn in 2017. After *Malled*,

I returned to the novel and to other projects. I co-edited two academic books published in 2020 and 2021 by the University of Alberta Press, and I also wrote, edited, and published my nonfiction book *Field Notes on Listening* with Wolsak and Wynn (that book was published in 2022). I did much of the substantive work of *Field Notes* during the first half of 2020, during the early days of the pandemic. In January 2020 I held a brief residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; in February of that year – until the pandemic intervened – I was a visiting faculty member at the University of Salamanca, Spain. I rewrote *We Are Already Ghosts* alongside my nonfiction project. I later received a promotion from Associate Professor to Professor at Mount Royal University and, in 2021, moved from Mount Royal to the University of Calgary. More personally, my children grew from young people into young adults. Behind the composition, editing, and publishing of this book, then, a great many other things took place in my writing, professional, and personal life. It is a tremendous pleasure and privilege to be afforded some space to think through these times now with some grace and hindsight.

My novel intends to do multiple things at once. If I can summarize it in two ways, I will say that *We Are already Ghosts* is a novel that, first, endeavours to be an engaging summertime cabin read (or cottage / camp / chalet, depending on where you are), and, second, it equally posits itself as a work of post-conceptual experimental fiction. These two purposes are ones that are perhaps difficult to reconcile, and my readers are the ones who will let me know if I have been in any measure successful in this endeavour. An additional goal that connects both of these threads is that this book also strives to provide us with more nuanced, meaningful representations of the place currently known as Alberta during the ending of settler innocence in Canada. I will explain all three of these elements of the novel, as they all go beyond the surface level of the text – though one final hope for this project is that I wish for it also to be a straightforward read, one that remains meaningful as literary fiction as well.

## 1. A Summer Read

*We Are Already Ghosts* takes place over four summers at the Briscoe-MacDougall family cabin on an unnamed lake in the central parklands region of the province currently known as Alberta. The summers on which we meet with the family occur at five-year intervals. This set-up means that the main elements of the story take place in August of 1996, August of 2001, August of 2006, and August of 2011. Short passages – "corridors" – detail the passing of time between each of these summertime visits. Although it is a fictional place, the lake on which the cabin is situated lies specifically in Treaty 6 territory, a treaty signed in 1876 by representatives of the British Crown and local Nakoda and

Cree nations. The lake closely resembles other lakeside communities in central Alberta like Sylvan Lake, Pigeon Lake, Gull Lake, and a few other spots. The Briscoe-MacDougall family cabin is, notably, an early one among those built along the lakeshore. It is one that was built by the Briscoe generation previous to the older generation depicted in the novel.

The novel is inspired by Virginia Woolf's works, first and foremost, and by the 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* in particular. Like Katharine Smyth in the 2019 book *All the Lives We Ever Lived: Seeking Solace in Virginia Woolf*, I find that Woolf's novel is one to which I return regularly. It is a book in which I find great comfort and, indeed, solace. *To the Lighthouse* is a novel that, famously, occurs in two long passages with a ten-year interval between them (the "Time Passes" section in the novel's middle). The First World War occurs during that interval section in Woolf's novel, with consequences for the entire family. *We Are Already Ghosts* links to *To the Lighthouse* in significant – but hopefully not overdetermined – ways. First, a careful reader can observe that Clare Briscoe is the granddaughter of Lily Briscoe, the oft-unhappy artist of Woolf's novel who has a moment of final clarity at the book's end. Clare is descended from an imagined child born to Lily not long after the end of Woolf's novel in 1919, a child born outside of marriage and whose arrival leads – in my imagining – to Lily's departure for Canada. Perhaps Augustus Carmichael in Woolf's novel is the child's father, but that is uncertain; this out-of-wedlock child runs counter to much of how Woolf imagines Lily, as well as Augustus, but Woolf leaves room, I think, for characters to behave in surprising ways (Woolf scholars may disagree with me on this point and others). Clare inhabits a stream-of-consciousness world not dissimilar to Lily's and, indeed, the characters of my novel are ones whose consciousnesses the novel moves between in a manner somewhat akin to Woolf's narrative techniques. Significantly, though, my use of the paragraph is quite different than Woolf's; hers are generally longer, and they are truly amazing things. Mine are briefer, with – in my thinking – more space to breathe between them. Perhaps with increased attunement I might be able to achieve something of the scale and scope of Woolf's paragraphs in time. The secondary Woolfian note in the novel is the pageant that takes place in Part II of the novel, a pageant that recreates, from the children's perspective, a condensed history of Canada and of the twentieth century through puppetry. This pageant takes some inspiration from the pageant of British history that forms the backbone of Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, the novel that was completed just before Woolf's death in 1941.

*We Are Already Ghosts*, then, deals with family relationships, with the tensions between generations, and with the ways in which world events lead to change over time. Between 1996 and 2011 the world was a different place than in Woolf's time, yet it was marked also by major technological changes

and by warfare. The advent of mobile technologies, to start with a relatively minor point, leads to changes at the cabin, as everyone has to agree to put their phones in storage when they are there. John, more significantly, serves in Afghanistan after the wars that are declared in the wake of the attacks of September 11th, 2001. The global financial crisis of 2008 impacts the generation of kids by the end of the novel, as they struggle to get underway with their lives and they are not quite able to establish careers in ways akin to what their parents were able to achieve. This is a novel in which, often, very little happens, as the time at the cabin is one of quiet reflection. Instead, characters consider their lives, their loves, and their losses. They swim in the lake; they go canoeing (not dissimilarly to the sailing trip in *To the Lighthouse*); they go to the store and to the dump. They go for walks. They are loving to the best of their abilities. Along the way, however, life happens. People die, a new generation begins to be born. Things change, but many things also stay the same. By the end of the novel, though, I think that it becomes hard to say that the world of the Briscoe-MacDougall family will remain the same going forward. This novel marks, too, a time when it becomes impossible for a relatively privileged, white settler family like this one not to recognize the ways in which they are implicated in the existence of Canada—and Alberta, specifically—as a settler colonial state. This dawning recognition, especially among the younger generation, forms an important political element of the novel.

## 2. Experimental Fiction

*We Are Already Ghosts* equally strives to be an example of experimental fiction. We might call it a form of lyric conceptualism, to follow Sina Queyras, or an attempt at post-conceptualism. I am not too set on any label that would imply that this novel is part of an aesthetic movement. It is, rather, an attempt to reply to a series of different conversations taking place in the literary world, many of them from the world of poetry. There are multiple experimental layers to my novel and I can only discuss some of them here.

First, at the level of structure, my novel endeavours not simply to be Woolfian—written with four sections at five-year intervals rather than Woolf's two sections at a ten-year interval—but also to combine the mournful modernist spirit of *To the Lighthouse* with the playful spirit of my favourite Canadian poet, the experimental writer bpNichol. Many know Nichol's work well, and I heartily recommend and teach his work often. The specific reason that I have sought to link these two authors is a result of their unlikely shared affinity for the letter H. bpNichol is well known for his play with this letter. It was his favourite letter for many reasons, starting with a time living in section H of Wildwood Park,

Winnipeg, in his youth (see Davey), and it shows up very often in his work. Nichol creates concrete poetry and comic-style images out of letters, especially this one, and I think of his formal play at the level of letters and words often. Woolf's association with this letter is more specific to this context. Writing notes toward the composition of *To the Lighthouse* in her notebooks, she described the shape of that novel as "two blocks joined by a corridor" (this choice also explains my calling the short sections of *We Are Already Ghosts* "corridors"). Here is how Woolf illustrates that concept:

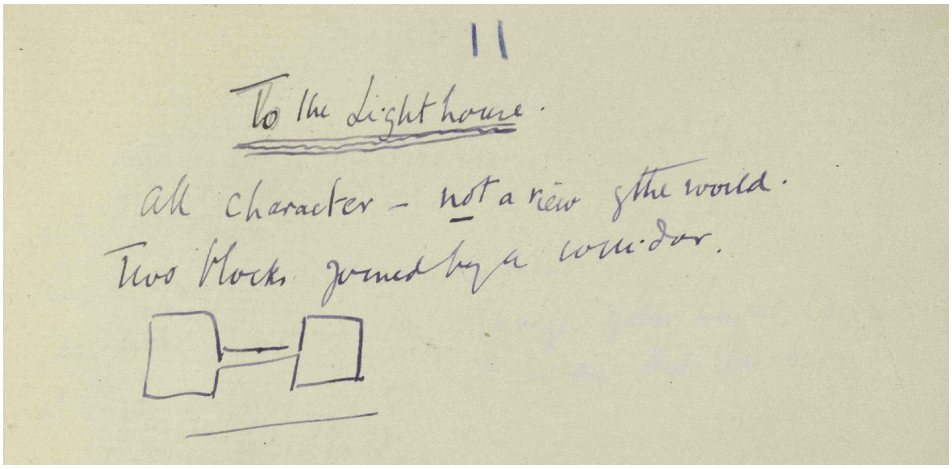


Figure: Virginia Woolf, "II." *Notes for Writing*.

This depiction of the blocks and corridor looks suspiciously to me like a giant letter H. I meditated on this structure for a long time. One day, I recalled something from bpNichol's "allegories" series. I couldn't recall exactly where I had seen it, but it compelled me to think about the possibility of mixing Woolf and Nichol together. I described what I was looking for to several of my friends who are leading scholars of Nichol's work: a giant blockish letter H rendered in three dimensions, with an H on each side making four connected letters. My friends and I were stymied for a long time, all of us remembering the likely existence of this figure in Nichol's works, but not knowing where, exactly, in the extensive archive of his oeuvre it was to be found. My colleague and friend Gregory Betts eventually sleuthed it out, finding it in a copy of the 1974 Nichol book *Love: A Book of Remembrances*. Here is the image in Nichol's work:

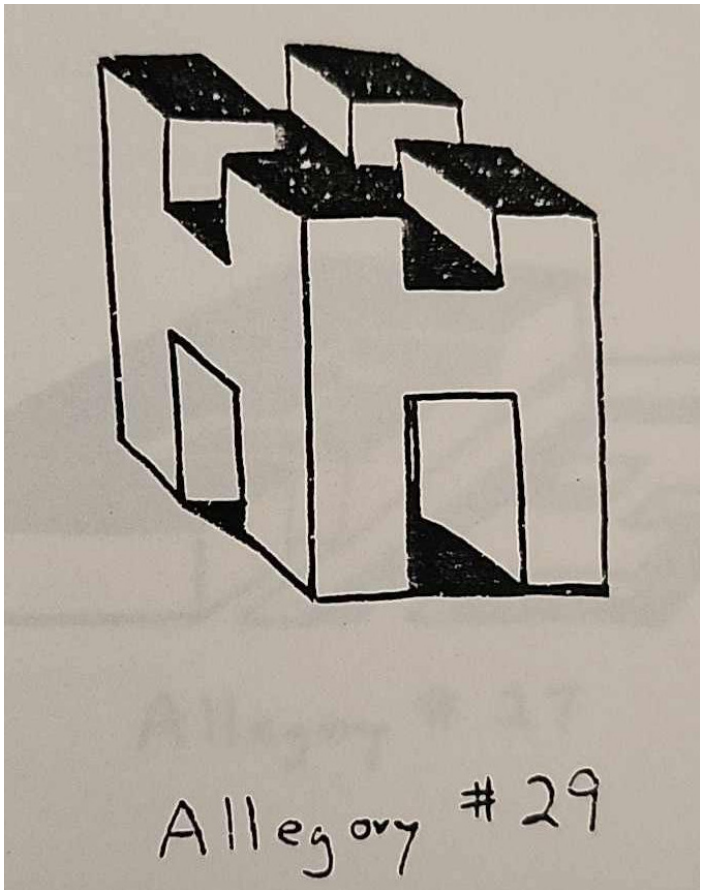


Figure: bpNichol, "Allegory 29." *Love: A Book of Remembrances*.

What would it take to create a novel in the shape of Nichol's "Allegory #29"? It came to me that a novel with four "blocks"—four main passages—connected by narrow corridors would allow for me to combine the spirit of both Woolf and Nichol. This is the reason why the novel has the shape that it does, with four passages happening at five-year intervals. This is the reason, too, why *We Are Already Ghosts* endeavours to be reflective, meditative, and mournful, as well as playful, joyous, and light. Endeavouring to bring together two unlikely writers in the background of this text has been tremendously challenging and, for me, fruitful. My younger child felted me a version of the novel's structure after a conversation about what I was trying to achieve with this work, and I think that this version is perhaps the best representation of the novel's structure:

Figure: Clementine Hanson Dobson, "Untitled."

The colour blue in this piece, it should also be noted, is also important. Blue is the dominant colour of the novel (and is why the interior of the cover of the physical book is printed in blue as well). Characters reflect on the artist Yves Klein and his particular shade of blue; one character meditates on the blueness of the August sky; at another point a very blue collaborative piece between bpNichol and Barbara Caruso called *From My Window* is referenced as well. Blue runs throughout this H-shaped novel.

As such, we might consider *We Are Already Ghosts* to be a form of lyric conceptualism or post-conceptual writing. I was inspired by Sina Queyras' "Lyric Conceptualism: A Manifesto in Progress," a piece published online in 2012. Queyras is a poet, novelist, and essayist whose work I admire tremendously. My novel quotes a line from their book *Expressway*; their novel *Autobiography of Childhood* is a deeply moving text; and their book *Rooms: Women, Writing, Woolf* is a sustained, personal inquiry into Woolf's influences and the complexities and challenges of the writing life. At the moment of Queyras' 2012 essay, conceptual writing—and conceptual poetry in particular—occupied a great deal of critical attention in Canada. Texts that were dominating much of the conversation were characterized by the concepts that drove them, rather than by their contents, forms, or meanings at the level of language. There is a great

deal of conceptual writing that I admire and it remains an often vibrant movement; I edited, for instance, Derek Beaulieu's *Please, No More Poetry: The Poetry of Derek Beaulieu* for the Laurier Poetry Series in 2013. Beaulieu is a writer whose work is very much influenced by Nichol; he has edited Nichol's works on multiple occasions, most recently in 2024 with Gregory Betts (see Nichol, *Some Lines of Poetry*). Conceptual poetry also, however, dominated much of the conversation about writing at that time and led to some seemingly very strong, gendered (and at times vitriolic) divisions in the poetry world between conceptual and lyric poets. I don't wish to rehearse that history, as it belongs, really, to others who were more active in those movements at the time. Wayde Compton's recent intervention, *Toward an Anti-Racist Poetics*, in my view does a very good, succinct job of re-reading some of this vexed history from an anti-racist perspective. Queyras' suggestion in the manifesto sought to bridge the divide between the conceptual and the lyric. I read it not long after the essay came out, and it stuck with me—now for over a decade—as having real promise. My novel, as a result, has a conceptual framework in its overall H-shaped structure, but it is also deeply personal, lyrical, and driven by a series of strong narrative voices and characters. It is a character-driven work, and I mean that very literally, while also being a conceptual—or perhaps post-conceptual, if one prefers—project.

Other experimental elements animate this text, but I won't be able to detail them in as much detail. One key to planning the novel was to begin to get to know my characters. I did so by determining which ones were my main characters—those who spoke to me the loudest—and I assigned each of them a punctuation mark. That punctuation mark was the starting point for their characterization. I won't reveal all of my characters' punctuation marks, because that would take some of the fun out of the book, but I will say that Clare's punctuation mark is the exclamation mark. In the final version of the novel these affiliations with punctuation are not intended to determine each character in a narrow fashion – the language that I use with each character is allowed to be broadly expressive – but these decisions allowed me to get to know each of my characters and in many cases their mark remains apparent in the final, published version of the text. (Not all of the characters have punctuation marks assigned to them, however; there are too many characters for this practice to be feasible. The main ones all do, however.)

Beyond that, the novel has many literary references. By and large my characters' references are conventional, "high" literary ones marked by canonicity and a comparatively narrow range; while the characters in my book view themselves as progressive, they are constrained by their Euro-Western backgrounds and educations. They read Marcel Proust and Leonard Cohen; they remember Tragically Hip lyrics and quote Shakespeare to one another. I play at multiple

points with Gertrude Stein's 1914 *Tender Buttons* and I return to that text, in particular, at the moments in which characters are contemplating or making food. Stein's book is perhaps the single most humorous book about food—especially chicken—that I can think of. I taught it in a class on experimental modernist writing one time and the whole class broke down in laughter more than once, not laughing at the text, but, rather, laughing along with Stein (though Michael's preparation of duck *à l'orange* also parallels Mrs. Ramsay's *boeuf en daube* in *To the Lighthouse*). I have had many experiences with experimental texts where they can become joyful, humorous, witty, and deep, when read and discussed together in community, and it is in that spirit that I have sought to create what is also an experimental text.

## 3. Depicting Alberta

I have already said that my characters in this book are limited in their perspectives. Indeed, this portion of the novel is deeply important to understanding its historical moment. Alberta was created in 1905 out of territory that had previously been part of the Northwest Territories. The Northwest Territories were created, in turn, after the 1868 Rupert's Land transfer from the Hudson's Bay Company and then the 1870 Northwest Territories Act. The government of Canada thereafter pursued the negotiation of the numbered treaties with the First Nations that have been on these lands since time immemorial. I live in Treaty 7 territory (1877); *We Are Already Ghosts* is set in Treaty 6 territory (1876); my family also settled in Treaty 8 lands (1899) in northern Alberta. I think of my treaty responsibilities daily and endeavour to work in the best relations with Indigenous peoples as possible in my personal life. In writing this novel, it was imperative to me to heed Indigenous criticism's caution against settler writers appropriating Indigenous voices (a perspective with a long history, advocated strongly by Anishinabe writer Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in 1990, and repeated at intervals ever since when settler writers have overstepped). At the same time, it was necessary to show that colonialism underwrites my characters' privileged lives and, indeed, the undercutting of this privilege is a key element of the text. Near the landfill to which the characters return at intervals – and in a few other, possible moments in the text – we see evidence of ongoing Indigenous presence. Many have observed that settlers have not respected Indigenous lands, stowing their waste in disrespectful ways, and this pattern is repeated in my novel as one more note about how colonialism impacts Indigenous people and their territories. This evidence shows up in a sign that reads "You are on Native land" that William sees in part three of the novel, but that we never see him investigate or learn about fully. Later, in part four, Celeste and Daphne

encounter signs that read "Your home on Natives' land" and "Stolen land" when they encounter a blockade on the rail line that bisects the road that leads to the dump. As a result, they are unable to unload their refuse in the dump, symbolically unable to get rid of their detritus on Indigenous lands and at the expense of Indigenous people. For the younger generation, it is no longer possible to ignore their ties to the colonial project that is Canada, even if this shift occurs in seemingly small ways.

The temporal period is important. The novel is set between 1996 and 2011; the Kanehsatake Resistance of 1990 (often called the Oka Crisis in settler media at the time) still hovers in the background of the novel's opening, in part because the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which was struck in August of 1991, would deliver its final report in October, 1996, shortly after the novel's opening. This report noted, among many things, the key role that the residential schools system in Canada played in settler-colonialism and, in turn, laid elements of the foundation for the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which spanned 2008 to 2015. The Idle No More resistance movement would come to public view in 2012, a little more than a year after the novel's final section, but it is important to note the long-running activist movements across Turtle Island in Indigenous communities (see Armstrong; the Kino-nda-niimi Collective; and many others). The blockade in the novel, occurring in August of 2011, then, prefigures Idle No More and the outcomes of the TRC, but is consistent with long-running resistance movements. These are movements about which many white settlers remained unaware for too long. When Celeste and Daphne encounter the barricade, they don't quite know what to do; Daphne asks "What next?," and although the immediate reference is a question about where they literally go from there, the extended resonance is intended to refer to the possible ways in which they will need to confront their own privileges and roles in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples. Whether I have struck an appropriate balance with this issue is for my readers to determine, once again, but the context of Indigenous resistance against white settlers like the Briscoe-MacDougall family has deeply informed the setting, place, and organization of the action of the novel.

## 4. Conclusion

I will end with the beginning – or, rather, with the title of the book. *We Are Already Ghosts* is so named for multiple reasons, one of which links to the settler-colonial context to which it responds. There is a tradition of haunting in literatures in Canada, but it is one marked by absence as much as by presence. The title is taken from a line in the novel, one that Clare thinks to herself as she

views the pageant in part two. During this portion of the pageant, the children's puppets reenact colonial encounters and Canada's early settlement. They reenact, specifically, a section of Susanna Moodie's 1852 novel *Roughing It in the Bush* in which a character states that "the country is too new for ghosts." A bit more than a century later, poet Earle Birney, in the 1964 poem "Can.Lit," wrote that in Canada "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted" (notice his somewhat slippery use of the supposedly inclusive "we"). Those statements irritate me and there is a robust critical literature about ghosts and haunting in this literary field (see for instance Goldman). In both cases, the writers ignore Indigenous presences and hauntings—let alone Indigenous conceptions of life and the afterlife—and they downplay their own roles in being and becoming part of the story. More recently, in the 2007 novel *Soucouyant*, David Chariandy's narrator says to his mother "there are no ghosts here" in discussing their old house above Lake Ontario (113). Readers know, however, that Chariandy's narrator is a limited one; by the time of this novel's publication, there is no way to assert that Canada is not haunted. Chariandy, in my view, is offering a way of speaking back to that settler tradition. So: my title is a different response to that settler tradition of erasing both Indigenous people and ignoring settlers' own ways of haunting Indigenous lands. Taking a longer view of things, we are already ghosts, at least in my view. The "we" of my title risks being troublesome, but it intends to contest the exceptionalism with which European settlers in Canada have often viewed themselves, to recognize the harms of colonialism, and to prevent such narratives from providing its characters with exculpation and exoneration. To follow the thinking of Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wayne Yang in the key essay "Decolonization is not a metaphor," settler innocence has ended in Canada within my lifetime and, with it, the uncritical celebration of the nation-state. While my characters may remain in place at the novel's ending, they do so uncertainly. What the future brings remains to be determined.

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