

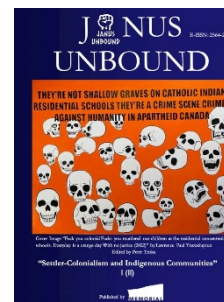
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Writing to Right the Wrongs: Truth, Appropriation, and Poetry on a Genocide Site (an essay in three-and-a-half parts)

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How, then, ought settlers stand in relations of forward-looking responsibility without attempting to stand in the place of Indigenous people? How ... can we share responsibility for the situation we have the bulk of responsibility for creating and benefiting from?

— Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*

Part One

Anyone paying half-hearted attention to the conversations in Canadian literature circa 2017 might have thought there was a thriving debate going on around cultural appropriation. That year, the word “appropriation” made regular appearances in online and print media, and the term “appropriation debate” was reified by commentators united in the conviction that allowing Indigenous writers and their communities sovereignty over their own voices and stories somehow constituted an infraction against literary freedom. Settler Canadian writers, well versed in the ins and outs of intellectual property regulations, failed publicly and spectacularly to grasp that Indigenous stories *are* Indigenous intellectual property—if not by Canadian laws, then certainly by their own. An editorial by novelist Hal Niedzviecki in the Spring 2017 Writers Union of Canada newsletter, *Write*, incensed Indigenous writers and their allies by flippantly dismissing the idea that cultural appropriation in literature should be discouraged. Niedzviecki’s piece asserted instead that appropriation was what made literature great, and proposed that there ought, in fact, to be an “Appropriation prize” awarded for “the best book by an author who writes about people who aren’t even remotely like her or

him” (Kassam). To add insult to injury, Niedzviecki’s editorial appeared in an issue of the newsletter dedicated to writing by Indigenous authors. Whatever Niedzviecki—who quickly stepped down from his position as editor of *Write* amid the controversy he’d incited (Dundas)—had meant to achieve with his editorial remarks, the reaction the editorial spurred among Niedzviecki’s supporters and detractors exposed an ugliness in the generally sedate world of CanLit, and put the phrase “appropriation debate” on Canadian readers’ lips and into their Twitter feeds.

Of course, there never was a literary “appropriation debate” in Canada, or, at least, not a proper one. A debate happens when two parties meet on equal grounds to discuss a matter in which they each have a comparable stake. To suggest that Indigenous and settler writers have an equal stake in the telling of Indigenous stories and the representation of Indigenous characters is to ignore the motivation behind each party’s bid for control. There are no equal grounds to meet on when one party belongs to a group that has spent the last five hundred years appropriating the lands, waters, languages, belief systems, children, and identities of the other. The “appropriation debate” was just one more display of dominance, of the colonizer telling Indigenous communities, “Even your stories are mine for the taking.” It may not appear as obviously colonial as pipelines, or inadequate housing on reserves, or residential schools, but literary cultural appropriation is still part of the colonizer’s playbook. Niedzviecki’s coupling of “appropriation” with “people who aren’t even remotely like” a (presumed) white writer, in a magazine issue dedicated to Indigenous writing, lends false credence to the notion that Indigenous people are “not even remotely like” the rest of us; that is, that Indigenous people are the “other,” and the other is wholly alien. In this equation, cultural difference overrides shared humanity. The showcasing of top-tier Indigenous literary talent in *Write* was cheapened by Niedzviecki’s words, and socially conscious writers were quite rightly furious.

It was against this backdrop that I had begun my graduate studies. After a 14-year hiatus, I returned to academia to work on a poetry collection of my own. Having been involved in social justice movements since my teens, and having been sensitized—through friendships, through travel, through study—to the continued colonial violence against Indigenous people in what is currently called Canada, I restarted my scholarly life ready to use my privilege to amplify voices that had been forced out of the conversation by settler writers and journalists swapping glib comments on social media about the “Twitter mob” that was no doubt plotting to “cancel” them. When selecting my courses, I registered for whichever ones had Indigenous writers on the syllabus. When there were not Indigenous writers on the syllabus, I tried my best to work them into my papers and presentations. When, in my extracurricular life as a poetry

critic, I was offered lists of forthcoming releases to review I chose new collections by Indigenous writers whenever I could. I felt that, as a white scholar and critic, this was the least I could do. Book reviews are few and far between these days, and they make a big difference to poets—not necessarily in terms of sales, but in terms of successful grant applications to write more collections in the future. If I could help some writers build their CVs to secure future funding, I would feel like I had done something useful. It did not hurt that the books were, in general, among the most interesting offerings of any given release season. Reading Indigenous poets was a joy.

I loved writing those reviews, but looking back, I do not know whether I was the right person for the task. I am embarrassed to admit that it did not even occur to me at the time that I might have instead lobbied my editors to seek out Indigenous poetry critics. Maybe I am exaggerating my power in the situation; would any of my editors have so much as entertained my lobbying? I will never know. I am left asking myself: where does “using my privilege” end and “talking for others” begin?

Part Two

I live in, and work in, and am from the island of Newfoundland, which is the ocean-bounded bit of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Newfoundland and Labrador is Canada’s youngest province, joining confederation in 1949; the island of Newfoundland was England’s second-oldest overseas colony, claimed for the crown in 1610. While contemporary Canada argues over whether it, as a nation-state, is guilty of “cultural genocide” (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1) or “regular genocide” (Staniforth) against the over-600 Indigenous nations that exist within the country’s borders, Newfoundland distinguishes itself as a regular genocide site, marked by the death of the last known Beothuk, Shanawdithit, in 1829 (Carr 350). Canada, of course, does not take responsibility for this genocide—they were not even there when it happened. Until recently, Canada had not taken responsibility for anything having to do with the Indigenous peoples—the Mi’kmaq, Innu, and Inuit—of the province; the Terms of Union between the province and Canada makes no mention of Indigenous people, and this omission has excluded Indigenous people of the province from rights ensured by the *Indian Act* (Hanrahan 1). Mi’kmaq history (Aylward and Mi’sel 124) and cutting-edge DNA research (Carr 350) both maintain that members of the Beothuk nation were absorbed into other Indigenous groups but, for all intents and purposes, the Beothuk as a nation exist now only in the collective memory, and in the stories that emerge from that memory. For the Newfoundlander of European descent, the Beothuk were subsumed into the “vanishing native” archetype, doomed not by the

encroachment and violence of colonizers, but by some sort of innate impermanence. In her introduction to *Tracing Ocbre: Changing Perspectives on the Beothuk*, Fiona Polack quotes the explorer William Cormack, who wrote of the Beothuk, “There has been a primitive nation, once claiming rank as a portion of the human race, who have lived, flourished, and become extinct in their own orbit” (3). This perception of the Beothuk as a people in their own little woodsy world, too pure for the European-centered and -settled future, has been essential to the formulation of Newfoundland, and by extension Canadian, identity; Polack writes that this “islanding” allowed the “appropriation” of the Beothuk (specifically, of the absent Beothuk) “into narratives of settler-colonial nationhood” (3-4).

It is apt that Polack selects the word “appropriation” here; everything we know about the Beothuk—everything I learned in school as a child in the 1980s and 1990s, every poem, every novel, every museum exhibit—is the product of appropriation. University of Edinburgh’s John Harries describes an entire industry of Beothuk re-imagining in Newfoundland, calling it “a whole culture of recursive revelation that is oriented towards excavating the scene of a crime that is foundational to the becoming of Newfoundland as a settler society” (226). Harries inquires, through his writing, into the rumoured presence of Beothuk remains in a museum in St. John’s (the capital city of Newfoundland and Labrador); the rumour comes to Harries via a friend who had heard it in 2010 while at a Newfoundland literary festival where three writers and one visual artist made up a panel discussion on the Beothuk. The three writers had written novels on—that is, fictional accounts of—the Beothuk. The artist had been commissioned to create a sculpture in memory of the Beothuk. None of the panelists, it goes without saying, is Beothuk. To the best of my knowledge, none of them is Indigenous. But they had each either taken it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the Beothuk, or had been trusted with the task of representing them.

2010 is not that long ago, and even though discussions of cultural appropriation were not as common then as they are now, I have a hard time picturing an all-white panel convening at a literary festival to discuss books they have written narrating the lives of Cree characters, or Coast Salish characters, or Inuit characters. If they had written such characters and conjured such stories in the past, they would likely have enough sense, ten years into the 21st century, not to draw attention to the fact. But Beothuk narratives are, apparently, free for the taking. Polack is right that this appropriation of Beothuk narratives has facilitated the creation of Newfoundland and Canadian identity; both Polack and Harries quote Terry Goldie, who remarks caustically that “We had natives. We killed the natives. Now we are the natives” (Goldie 187). It does not take many hours of Sunday-morning traditional Newfoundland radio to absorb the

message that “we” (that is, Newfoundlanders of European descent, like me) are the rightful heirs to the island we have come to call our own. As the unofficial provincial anthem and popular trad-night singalong “Saltwater Joys” goes, “This island that we cling to has been handed down with pride / By folks that fought to live here, taking hardships all in stride” (Chaulk). Newfoundland is an inheritance in this narrative, a birthright bestowed on each generation by the last, earned through hard and honest work and not through violence, erasure, and disenfranchisement. It’s all ours.

It was against *this* backdrop that I became a writer. I grew up in a place where one group of Indigenous people had been encased in an amber of romantic rememberings and misrememberings, and where others were discussed either in hushed tones (“Davis Inlet”) or not at all (Roache). The festival panel writers and the convening artist Harries refers to in his chapter were presences in my youth, sometimes literally: I am a second-generation writer, and such birds of a feather often flocked in my mother’s living room. Writing about, and for, and in the voices of the Beothuk was not seen as doing the colonizer’s work; it was seen as making necessary reparations, telling the stories that had to be told. But did anyone ask whether those stories were theirs to tell?

I think I remember the remains Harries talks about; I am sure they were the centrepiece of an exhibit I frequented at the provincial museum on Duckworth Street in St. John’s as a child and teenager. Shiny brown bones laid out as though at a burial site. But maybe I am misremembering. Maybe they had been long since removed by the time I was old enough to have seen them. Maybe I dreamed them. Are they mine to dream? Are they mine to mourn?

Part Two and a Half

This essay is not about the Beothuk. Not really. And it is only sort of about cultural appropriation. I think what I am reaching for here is some sense of direction. We have established, I hope, that genocide is wrong. We have established, I hope, that genocide is a tool of settler-colonialism. We have established that cultural appropriation, too, is a tool of settler-colonialism, and an insidious one. Settler writers who feel invested in justice, in telling the stories that need to be told, are easily co-opted into the colonial project—or, perhaps, they are never *not* part of that project. The writerly soul does tend to wallow in a sense of alienation, but how much of that is real, and how much is affectation? The more I ponder the question, the less I like the answer.

I can tell you what I know is wrong, but I cannot tell you what *right* looks and feels like. I know what I am supposed to *not* do, but I do not know what I am supposed to do. Settler Canadians and the European economic migrants who became Newfoundlanders have never known, on any large scale, what it

looks like to live in right relation with Indigenous people. We are all striving for something, and we have no examples to work from.

I am a person who struggles to work without clear instructions.

In addition to being a poet and an academic, I am also autistic. And while there is no one universal autistic experience (except maybe a marrow-deep sense of alienation that many writers could only dream of), most of us have a hard time working toward a goal we cannot envision.

In general, my autism is pretty handy—it helps me write good poetry, it makes me an excellent editor, it keeps me amused. But sometimes it gets in the way. Like other autistic people, I am prone to dramatic and often humiliating meltdowns. Unlike many autistic people, my meltdowns tend not to come in the form of rocking or groaning or lashing out, but in fits of jagged, incoherent sobbing. As is the norm for autistic people, I am easily overwhelmed and overstimulated, and this is what initiates the meltdowns. I can usually manage sensory overstimulation well enough to get to a safe and quiet space before I fall apart, but emotional overwhelm comes on swiftly, strongly, and often without warning.

The things that trigger a meltdown—the things that push us autistics from “just keeping it together” to “definitely making a scene”—vary from person to person, but for me one of the biggest triggers is unfairness. I cannot cope with double standards. I react to injustice with a full-body response that I can only describe as a sort of heaving cellular grief. In the past, prior to learning about my autism, I accepted others’ analyses of the situation and believed myself to just be a deeply sensitive person, attuned to the pain of the world. But I do not think it is as noble as all that. Why injustice triggers my meltdowns, I do not know. I do know that it does not make me a capable leader, or a strong and vocal advocate. It makes my voice quaver in public, and my face turn pink, and my eyes well up.

It makes me unsuitable for the work I want to do, and for the conversations I want to have with the people I want to have them with.

In addition to being a poet *and* an academic *and* an autistic, I am also a 40-something white lady. On the inside, I feel maybe like an alien, or a child, or an alien-child, but on the outside, I look like a choir mom and urban farmers’ market enthusiast. When a 40-something white lady cries, she cries white lady tears, indistinguishable from the hundreds of years’ worth of entitled weeping white women have done to suppress and oppress marginalized people, and to leverage “affective capital” (Phipps 83) by eliciting sympathy from other white women and activating a protective response in white men. And while I might

be able to forgive myself for an out-of-all-proportion emotional reaction initiated by some neurobiological misfire that happened in utero and fused “unfairness” to “grief” in my brain, I can not forgive myself for carrying on like a fragile oppressor who, in Black American activist Rachel Cargle’s words, needs to be “coddled” into listening (Meltzer). I want to be present and sit in my own discomfort and bear witness to other people’s stories, but I do not want my education to come at the expense of the comfort and safety of the people who are sharing their stories with me.

To quote Cargle again, “Anti racism work is not a self improvement exercise for white people” (@rachel.cargle). I take this to mean that the project of anti-racism work—of anti-colonial work—can not be motivated by the desires of people like me to become (or at least to be seen as) “better people.” Instead, it has to be driven by a genuine desire to work toward an egalitarian world where neither the comfort nor the anxieties of white settlers is at the centre. When I first encountered this statement by Cargle, I found it deeply unsettling. It de-centered me, well and truly. It caused me to look back over the times that I had allowed my desire to learn to come at the expense of someone else’s need to speak. Of the ways in which my very presence had created an imbalance without my even knowing it. Of the ways in which I may have done harm while trying to do good.

And so, I read. Crying into a book does not require apology or explanation, and if you are doing it in the privacy of your own home there is no risk of your tears being misinterpreted as performative (although, to be fair, I have cried into books in public and people seem to have ignored me, which I have appreciated).

And so, I write, trying my best to filter out a lifetime of Eurocentric settler norms and biases, not knowing what will be left once those things are removed.

Part Three

There has never been a better time to read a diversity of voices; the call to “decolonize your bookshelf” has been captured on mugs, t-shirts, and reusable tote bags, and for all that it risks veering into cliché, the tagline expresses an important imperative. As Juan Vidal explained in a piece for National Public Radio in the United States, white people tend to read books by other white people. This, of course, leads to an echo-chamber effect, and one antidote to the echo chamber is to expand one’s personal library. “Reading broadly and with intention,” Vidal says, “is how we counter dehumanization and demand visibility, effectively bridging the gap between what we read and how we might live in a more just and equitable society” (Vidal). Vidal’s comment might feel like a commonplace—*of course* we should read widely, right?—but his position is far from a universal one. Canadian poet Jason Guriel, capping off the wild

literary ride that was 2017, published an opinion piece that December on the online platform of popular magazine *The Walrus* called “The Case Against Reading Everything.” Guriel, in the guise of a tell-it-like-it-is writing buddy who is not afraid to say the unpopular thing, instructs his reader, “Whatever else you do, you should not be reading the many, many new releases of middling poetry and fiction that will be vying for your attention over the next year or so out of some obligation to submit your ear to a variety of voices” (Guriel). I imagine Guriel probably meant to project a sort of “lovable curmudgeon” tone here, and he might even have pulled it off if the previous 12 months in Canadian literature had not been dominated by “appropriation debate” rhetoric and a chorus of emerging writers of diverse backgrounds whose new releases were indeed vying for readers’ attention. For all that Hal Niedzviecki had fumbled his editorial, he *did* serve as editor for a magazine issue that represented at least some of the “variety of voices” emerging in Canada. He had not endorsed those voices just for them to be received (or rejected) as a force to which readers were under “obligation to submit.” He had endorsed them as literature we were invited to spend time with, learn from, and celebrate.

It was against *this* backdrop that I began teaching.

The year I finished my master’s degree, my thesis supervisor retired, and I was asked to teach a poetry writing course she had established: an advanced undergraduate workshop on formal poetry technique. Autistic autodidact that I am, I had only ever taken one creative writing course in my life, and all I knew was that I wanted to load the reading list with as many writers of diverse backgrounds as I could get away with. It was in part a gesture toward social justice, and in part a response to arguments like Jason Guriel’s. The institution where I teach is increasingly culturally diverse, but my department is overwhelmingly local; that is, my workshops are almost always made up mostly, if not entirely, of white or white-coded students. I wanted—I always want—to offer my students something they might not find elsewhere, and this meant introducing them to poets they might not otherwise have the opportunity to meet. There is nothing altruistic about my selections; the writing I choose from is intriguing, challenging, and often demonstrates subversion of form, which is exciting for me and for my less rule-oriented students. That first year I taught Cree-Métis poet Marilyn Dumont’s “A Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald” in my lecture on the epistolary form (that is, poems written as though they are letters). I explored metrical variation through Ojibway writer Louise Erdrich’s “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” and Africadian (Black-Acadian-Mi’kmaq) poet George Elliott Clarke’s “Black Sonnet.” Each year, I bring in more material; this year,

I compiled a playlist of performances, from Tsleil-Waututh poet, orator, actor, and leader Chief Dan George's 1967 "Lament for Confederation" to Cree poet and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt reading "Love and Heartbreak are Fuck Buddies" in front of the Griffin Poetry Prize gala audience in Toronto in 2018. I post links to audio and video readings whenever I can in an attempt to connect my students to the material. In my opening lecture of that very first workshop, I told the group that I would be assigning as broad a reading list as I could manage, asking them, "What's the point of paying for this class if all we read is poets you can find in the Norton Anthology?" I also told them that I was not the expert on the experiences the poets were writing about, and I urged them to read up on each of the writers I shared. I think this was important. I think saying "I don't know how to do this either" is good role modeling. At least, I hope it is.

I do not ask my students to write on particular subjects; I give them prompts like "Write about one thing you know to be true," and "Make a list of five things you remember, and then put them into a poem without using the words *I remember*," or "Write a poem that responds to a sound you hear on your way home." I give them a lot of latitude. Invariably, at least one student writes about the legacy of colonization: about residential schools, about land theft, about nationalist propaganda. When these poems are shared in the workshop, I often ask, "Which part of this story is yours to tell?" Often, when the poems are not quite working, it is because the student is trying to tell a part of the story that is not theirs, to speak from a bodymind that has never been theirs to inhabit and that they can only see through a colonial lens. A bodymind that has been appropriated into our Newfoundland and Canadian creation myths.

Typically, my students are cleverer than I am, and when I engage them in these conversations, they exceed my expectations. They are sensitive and inquisitive, and they want to do the work. Sometimes they realize that the notion of speaking for the marginalized subject is so deeply entrenched in their way of thinking that they have never examined it. They are shocked and unsettled to find just how much easier it is to write as the generalized, absent "other" than to write from the position of the beneficiary of systems of oppression. We write these poems because we want to be the good guy; we read Indigenous accounts of colonial trauma and we do not know if we ever *can* be the good guy. We try to write ourselves better, and we do not know how.

We read, and we feel, and we want to write our feelings into something that helps us find direction, be better, do better. I read, and I want to write myself into something gentle and generous and humane and expansive and kind and good.

I write this essay as a gesture of accountability, knowing full well that it might be read as a bid for absolution. I am not so naïve as to believe that such

absolution exists. Accountability, though: accountability makes sense to me, even though I struggle with what it might look like (and, perhaps more crucially, with what it might *feel* like).

I write this essay because this, too, is something I need to read: the story of the imperfect but determined self learning from her errors, listening to others in order to figure out where she is helping and where she is getting in the way. This is the part of the story that's mine to tell.

Biography

Andreae Callanan is the author of *The Debt* (Biblioasis 2021). She is a doctoral candidate at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, and the recipient of the Vanier Canada Scholarship and the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholarship for her research on poetry and public engagement.

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