

Cecily Nicholson

From the Poplars

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REVIEWED BY NATALIE KNIGHT

Unarchival ones all labour: Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*

for sisters worth crest
what is work, what is a living

unarchival ones all labour

in cycles immaterial
this material is meaning what is said cows
after a long dry spell spindly and sickly

to give more—not what you got but what you can give (68)

– *groundwork* –

In a call and response to a fluvial island splitting the Fraser River, Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars* counts and accounts for the labours of the land. These labours are many, and Poplar Island emerges as much a subject as it is an object of the ebb and flow of industrial development. Through the work of poetic research—walking the land, visiting city archives—*From the Poplars* hears the island's immense story and responds to it, sustaining a conversation that extends well beyond the local. The Fraser River bends around these acres of hardwoods, trunks tangled in ivy, visible from a morning skytrain ride carrying commuters between Surrey, New

Westminster and Vancouver, the proper metropolis. Here is a site-specific poetics of history's force and its abandonment—and not to be diminished, its attendant human survival—astounding for its severity as much as for its unexceptional recurrence; “where violence routinely occurs generic” and yet we are “given to tropistic / survivance” (78-9). This place, like every place nearby, remade through colonialism, the iron grips of industrial capitalism and its recession from the rivers and forests and factories; pressures that take bitter accumulation. “The mill turns around of its own free will”—a deceptive ideology if there ever was one (37).

Industrial development and its need for human capital—“globalized workers soldiers”—act as a poetic drive, where “world war firms canning, vessels and munitions / southern portions and recording systems stacks / hey day may days post-fifty-five industrial / dense” (36). This too is the story of colonialism told by certain of its globalized workers-soldiers who, themselves uprooted by capital, displace Indigenous communities. Nicholson's long poem tracks these multiple evictions across time from the subjective perspective of an island that becomes visible, in mainstream histories, through colonization.

Poplar Island is part of unceded Coast Salish territories in western British Columbia, a province where the majority of land is stolen, even by the standards of colonial law. The 1763 Royal Proclamation, a colonial document laying British claim to what is now Canada, required treaties between the Crown and First Nations before settling the land. But in true Wild West fashion, when British Columbia joined a newly constructed Canadian Confederation one hundred years later, it threatened to secede from the developing nation if pressed on its disregard for treaty laws. The only territory negotiated through treaties was on Vancouver Island—the Douglas Treaties—and Treaty 8 land extending across multiple provinces into northeastern B.C. When the reserve system was created in 1876 to forcibly divide and contain Indigenous communities into a patchwork of small land allotments, Poplar Island became one of three small reserves designated by

the federal government for Qayqayt peoples. This was a colonial erasure of multiple kinds, since this land was likely shared among many Hə́nq̓əmińəm speaking people, including Kwantlen, Katzie, Tsawassen, Tseil-Waututh, and Musqueam First Nations. Then during WWI, Poplar Island was taken for shipbuilding and all its Indigenous inhabitants evicted. As Mercedes Eng writes in her piece on Nicholson's book in *Jacket2*, Poplar Island has been "a former reserve, a smallpox quarantine zone, a ship-building site during the First World War, a base for the logging industry, now unused and lush with trees, in the present moment of the city's waterfront redevelopment to expand retail and residential space."¹

From the Poplars holds a poetics of these transitions and of the labours that made them. It is also groundwork, as Nicholson said over dinner last November, a desire to approach "home" as it is reconstructed in displacement, and the work to do so by a diasporic body, a bird with no feet as she put it.² The understory of the island, told through its fractured historical memory.

Commuters on the skytrain riding high alongside. Deciduous island bare in winter. Log rafts of Doug Fir moored along minimal beaches. The dense uses of space; lasting traces of human presence; the island's body still there as its own labour. Just might begin to be felt.

– *tropistic survivance* –

"This on is still on about an island" (68). It is also, to my ear, so much about this elusive "felt"—a call to connect to the hard matter of history to revive ourselves towards responsibility. *From the Poplars* attempts a whole life of an island—not a single geography within a single river but instead a site for poetic investigation of historical memory, dredging the "poetic sediment" as Garry Thomas Morse writes in his review of the book.³ This memory is always both immensely in and of a place and a memory that haunts across time.

Grosse Isle onto the fever sheds
or as *Skwtsa7s* future remains
after gales tear the soil

the defence is national
natural

kept and sent subjects
armed to a place
static

invariants

there
and here
as long as the tongues thrive
tips swirl in a huff of cheeks

centripetal release

ecology down and up river
the *həhəmiñəm* curls carried on (10)

Grosse Isle—a quarantine site for Irish immigrants after outbreaks of cholera and typhus in the 1830s and 40s in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in Quebec—a parallel to the smallpox quarantine on Poplar Island. These “kept and sent subjects” in *From the Poplars* span also Kamau Taurua, or “Quarantine Island” in New Zealand, subjects kept in lazarettos, or quarantine areas—not dissimilar from a lazarette, or a small storage compartment below a ship’s deck. These subjects also know “homeless encampment slats / and garbage bags full of newspaper” (24); they know the resource industries that crisscross British Columbia in our modern era of dispossession and displacement, where:

paid shill for Big Oil
fuel-injected big-block on cowboy boots suns
the Diamond Club where real men come to play

the basic industries (83)

These “basic industries” of intimacy and the harshest toil, where “no asylum here winter is hitting / tent frame shed shack trailer SROs” (83). These basic industries time travel across the history of bodies and their movement. The poem is:

anticipatory force archivally replays
a point of view as slippery as itself
in an economy of fur-bearing animals (77)

A point of view that roots into place even as it kaleidoscopes. This “economy of fur-bearing animals” is located at Yi Fao (the Chinese name for New Westminster), at 49° 11’ 56” N, 122° 56’ 3” W, “from Koonspa at the tip of Lulu” (Chinook jargon for Queensborough, a neighbourhood with a view out on the Island), at Mohawk Lumber Company and Westminster Shook Mill, and at Woodlands, once the Provincial Hospital for the Insane in New Westminster. It is “men and women working day and night” at Vulcan Iron Works; it is the shipyard that built “*War Comox, War Edensaw, War Kitimat, War Ewen* / and a couple coal carriers after the war” (40-41).

How many coordinates can you give to labour and to land? This land even knows the Diggers song: “stand up now, the wasteland to maintain / your houses they pull down / stand up now ...” (56). And it knows, throughout *From the Poplars*, “the hanging lots for crows” (3), the reoccurring references in the poem to Abel Meeropol’s song “Strange Fruit” that echoes behind lines like:

once harvest was done
harvest done worried some

worried men sing a worried song
[...]
“finance” is a slave’s word ima read

A poem of an island as a body within rivers of diaspora—of labouring, racialized, Indigenous and gendered bodies—I slip between reading the few “I”s in the book as either and all: the island itself; Nicholson herself; and these diasporic unarchived bodies. It is “an ‘I’ on pavement or other words over / centuries of rotting matter;” and also “an ‘I’ wants to pull a part as well” (4, 5). One migration traced of one of these “I”s travels to Detroit, citing a Philip Levine poem, where “men in league . . . still charge this fence” (71). As she says in conversation with Christina Cooke, Detroit is part of a narrative of migration stemming from Nicholson’s own history.⁴ Traveling Poplar Island by foot and by document places Nicholson on the island and a part of its diaspora too. This is a committed responsibility to the island’s call—to not turn away from your own place within it, to implant yourself, to have the courage to do so.

State combatant; abiding love; Indigenous displaced; wanderer from rural to the city wilds and back; carer and witness; Black diasporic; ward of the state; state combatant. Here is the subjectivity of the island, or is it the poem’s, or the author’s? No matter an answer, lighter for the possibilities: “It’s hard to summarize.”⁵ The feltness of this book emerges in the expanded island who has found itself again, a subject in time that holds the possibility of travel. This is not merely abandoned acreage parting a river below a skytrain; this poem, and island, knows that “time is different at Cankpe Opi” (the Lakota name for Wounded Knee) and bends the subject, already given to tropistic survivance, towards feeling once again (89).

– *basic industries, erotics* –

The land as subject, ever made by colonialism and uprooted by capital, makes a poetics rigorously committed to place and enormously generous with time. Maybe these are the conditions of being for North American

long poem traditions, like M. Nourbese Phillip's *Zong!* or even Kamau Brathwaite's *Arrivants* trilogy. I suspect that these long poem forms come from necessity, not a formal choice—necessary to deal with the *erotics* of the land and the felt labour within it.

A local long poem, Daphne Marlatt's 1974 *Steveston*, puts it this way: "This corporate growth that monopolizes / the sun. moon & tide, fish-run" where there is a "multiplicity simply: the physical matter of / the place (what matters) meaning, don't get theoretical now, the cannery" (*Steveston* 90). Marlatt's poetic site, Steveston, is only a half hour drive from Poplar Island, once a fishing village on the mouth of the Fraser River that also held a Japanese Canadian internment camp during WWII.

To the rigor of Marlatt's reminder, "don't get theoretical now" and to stay with "the cannery," Nicholson responds:

out longer ones longer begins to feel oh ones, feel
full touch down attach associate sensitize

feel pain, feel the evidence, feel free

feel *historical problems* trending present

tense fingertips feel a show of armoury green

move our aim we saw we and others have seen

for the wind to suck, for the sun to rot, for the tree to drop

be done and undone spring-like off the shuck off jive
gone apophenia

giving form to stimulus, not just some figure in the clouds

strong every day and every time with whole history out loud (69)

Staying with the cannery, or with the island in Nicholson's case, is a "touch down," attached, associated, sensitized in order to override our shared "congenital insensitivity to pain" (39). It is a poetic method alert to the people who make history and give "form to stimulus," like Mary Agnes Vianin, Qayqayt resident of Poplar Island in 1912, evicted from the reserve to build the war's shipyards—her trace left in a letter to the government demanding compensation. These erotics of the poplars risk feeling the evidence, in order to risk feeling free. To be a "dead tree standing sunned and whipped dry": the price of feeling historical problems trending present (37).

The erotics of the poplars is *totalizing* then, the risk is full, there is no way back from its commitment. At the same time an erotics that projects towards freedom *knows* itself to come up short, the approach to home delayed, and still redoubles the effort.

They say that the long poem is a modernist project, one intent on the trick of totality, of playing with the subjective and the objective to catch the glimpse of them constituting each other until they repel and break into apparent singularity again. At its best, this is a constructed act of time travel, a projection of the poem, the self, the island into the past and the future until we don't know anymore. The long documentary poem makes evident our desire for the world that never comes (yet): simply, to inhabit a subjective space, where to be a subject is to possess oneself. And, radically, not as property: it is instead not among logics of dispossession. As Fred Moten writes, "You must have faith, in short, in some animus that allows the continual projection of discontinuity, the persistence of a certain structure of life in which final judgment—in which justice—is always deferred, to come, up ahead."⁶

sift the roving fragments attentively
subatomic cosmic clearing agents
incised spirals circle winch shapes

sinuous bands interlocking lace
so delicate it is weightless
hints of a watery primordial world
radiating appendages slender
cities like galaxies tend to cluster
spiral to elliptical oscura poured fire
rational primes disposed to struggle

river road for the duration securely ore
red slip surface and the orange clay below

not a question of knowledge but alertness (88)

¹ Mercedes Eng, Cecily Nicholson's 'From the Poplars'. <http://jacket2.org/commentary/cecily-nicholsons-poplars>

² "Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs." Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 1982.

³ Garry Thomas Morse, Geomantic Riposte: 'From the Poplars'. <http://jacket2.org/commentary/geomantic-riposte-poplars>

⁴ Christina Cooke, "Call and Response: In Conversation with Cecily Nicholson," *Room Magazine* 37.4 (2015).

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2003, 99.