

CECILY NICHOLSON

in dialogue with Michael Nardone

“Through fact with texture, atmosphere and affect,” Cecily Nicholson’s poems compose the possible syntaxes and slogans of collective resistance. Her first two books, *Triage* (2011) and *From the Poplars* (2015), are palimpsestual and polyvocalic studies of imperial violence’s perpetual encroachment on lands and lives, and articulate how solidarity might be materialized in language and in action against such forces. Her most recent book, *Wayside Sang* (2017), thinks with the fugitive movements and networks of black diaspora and Indigenous displacement so as to establish a ground for convergence, for communion, for chorus.

Michael Nardone: I wonder if we might begin by discussing Vancouver poetics, or what it means to compose works on the unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories known as Vancouver. When we originally talked about doing this dialogue, its destination was for a publication emerging out of an academic conference on contemporary aesthetic communities in Vancouver. I think both of us felt some hesitation to contribute to that forum, though.

Cecily Nicholson: The one piece of feedback that struck me was—and it’s a typical thing that happens in academic contexts—about the way the conversation was framed, that the conversation itself fed into academia. It doesn’t matter, you can’t have grassroots dialogue in spaces that are not accessible to community to get there. Basically, unless you’re moving through academic channels, or if you were invited and had somebody paying you to go, it wasn’t possible for people to be there and represent. So, I was aware of that, too, that perpetual divide in terms of who gets to represent any place away from it. Certainly with Vancouver this plays out.

MN: The form of the event immediately forecloses any possibility of the kind of grassroots dialogue of which you speak.

CN: I think so. I think it's that notion of—how do I say it?—it's this fact that those people who are really entrenched in the local, the people who are the most Vancouver, are the ones who are the most immobile (and who are, at the same time, often the most subject to displacement, institutionalization, forced migrations). I mean, with love, I am interested when people are trying, but I do think—and I realize I'm generalizing—that academia fails often when it tries to connect to and enact non-academic community. They are coming from too remote a place socially, or it's been too long for them to grasp what's practically needed. It also has to do with the communication, with the methods of gathering and how we come together. The material barriers are a perpetual problem for all that we imagine ourselves doing.

MN: Yes, and mobility arises in terms of the circulation of works, as well. The phrase that you used earlier about “the most Vancouver” of the Vancouver poets—I feel like one has to do a lot of work in relation to other readers, other poets in order to get to that milieu. There are people I look to in Vancouver, and who are always reading the work of Vancouver poets, and so I know to look out for the work of Annharte and Mercedes Eng, and to track down what was published in those old Tsunami Editions, and to read Dorothy Trujillo Lusk.

CN: Good examples, and Maxine Gadd, similarly. They are prominent in certain ways because writers lift up their work and remind us. Otherwise, their works don't circulate in the same way. There are historical divides that are gendered, racialized and certainly classed. One of the lovely things about the Kootenay School legacy is that the school has always been concerned with class. I mean, it's failed in other considerations, no doubt, but its consideration of class is an important legacy in Vancouver poetics. I feel like that doesn't function in the active way that it needs to these days, across experience, as we are even more defined in this city by the stratification

between rich and poor, and, overwhelmingly, as so many art and literary representatives come from the academy, through the academy. You don't often hear from writers of my generation or younger who aren't somehow connected to universities. That's an incredible limitation when we think about who accesses, and succeeds at, this kind of education.

I wonder about it. In Canada, I'm barely published outside of Vancouver. I want to think for a minute, because perhaps I'm missing something, but I'm pretty sure you'd be hard-pressed to find my work anywhere east of Calgary.

MN: I think it's an issue in Canada where poets who are committed to exploring diasporic and internationalist affinities and commitments in terms of poetics and politics simply don't have a place in the cultural apparatus here, which is vehemently nation-centered. They may have their singular site, their city, but if they want to be read outside of it, there has to be some kind of network forged outside of Canada.

CN: Yes, and things are shifting right now for me in that way. I am spending more time south of the border, and embracing my own personal history in terms of ancestry and forced migration and displacement, and feeling some deep affinity with works in the US. I recall you introducing me to Fred Moten's work years back, and as Mercedes Eng and I head to New York in the spring to visit him and community there, I think on new friendships. I think of friendships in Detroit. And in the Bay Area, Tongo Eisen-Martin, such a lightning bolt. Meeting him felt like meeting new family. I think of Aja Monet and Jasmine Gibson. I appreciate Juliana Spahr and David Buuck, who have made space for me and my work. It's an odd shift as my work these days finds more resonance perhaps in those directions as opposed to central Canada, even though I grew up in rural Ontario. Then again, the conversations continue. Christina Sharpe and Dionne Brand were in town from Toronto recently and somehow I ended up at the same table for a moment or so. I mean, I've been reading Dionne Brand since I was a kid, terrified, coming to Toronto in my teens, sitting with her

poetry on the Greyhound bus to the city, it was critical for me. And all the brilliant work, Katherine McKittrick, Robyn Maynard, I mean the kind of practices that black women intellectuals are doing right now *and* that we're able to access in this moment, is moving. That shift isn't just a mainstream push or pull around literature. It's a resonance from multiple communities foregrounding experiences of blackness, embodied—we're using different language, we've multiple locations, influences, and affinities, we are global in our relations and I also belong to this.

MN: I'd love to hear what you've been up to in Detroit and Windsor while you've been writing *Wayside Sang*.

CN: The book runs through Windsor to Detroit. The cities are twinned in a way, but it's always been about Detroit for me. I've been going there for decades now. When I was young, I went just a couple times, but later, kept getting called to visit. Part of that evolves out of limited narrative I have around my birth father's movement. He was a travelling musician, among other kinds of work, and he was often crossing that border, at that place, although I didn't know that until later in my life. I've needed to think about and spend more time in that space to gain a better sense of it, and of myself there.

In Vancouver, we certainly have a lot to face in terms of the cost of living and the idea of affordability, but we sure have resources when it comes to art production. There's so much infrastructure that's threaded through by the province, by the state, and by the municipality, and that is actively a part of how art work and art world conversations occur in this locale. It's not to say that Detroit doesn't have government funding influences—the private foundation model does seem to be much more prevalent—however, there is this real dearth of infrastructural support, right through to a lack of good public transit. What I've witnessed over the years has included some really humble and humbling practices, examples of community, incredible collaboration, and use of materials, the rise of lost and derelict and things

broken, refashioned, with social and non-capitalist purpose. And being in a majority-black city, it means that almost everywhere you look, there's people that can see me. I'm a mixed, light-skinned black Canadian citizen, I think through my mobility and privileges—including the history of my education and diction—yet I feel freer there than in Vancouver. It's confusing. I feel a debt to the city. It seemed necessary to finish this recent book there, to let a neighborhood suffuse the last bit of process as I wrote by an open window during one long summer month, resting, where Detroit meets Hamtramck.

MN: *From the Poplars* reads, for me, as a site-specific work in that it is focused on Poplar Island, a small island near the delta of the Fraser River, close to Vancouver. Is *Wayside Sang* similarly site-centered as a work?

CN: I struggle because I'm compelled to do that, but I couldn't quite do that with this narrative. It's a narrative that travels roadways, crosses borders, and land. There are some site-specific efforts concerning the areas and road travel that I'm undertaking in these multiple narratives, not just my own narratives. The writing does work through some of the place names, thinking through territories, through migratory routes and waterways, things we can think of comprising the ecology of a place. It is a ways away from the west coast. If anything there's some interplay of the prairies, because I was also thinking through my relations to fathers and brothers, some how come through there. My only black brother lives in the prairies. Also a musician, he's in this book somehow. Although it does deal with specific locales at moments, *Wayside Sang* is definitely not the specific study that *From the Poplars* is. I needed the narrative to not be fixed this time around.

MN: Yes, the reason I ask is because I think of that site study as a central part of your poetics—the exploration of space's composition, its strata of history and rhetoric and contestations. I read *Triage* as a book specifically about the Downtown East Side, about the various spheres of power and resistance that intersect there, but perhaps that's an impression I put onto the text knowing you and your efforts parallel to writing.

CN: No, you're not the only one. I didn't make that overt when I wrote *Triage*. It's more in retrospect that I realize, of course, that's so much of what it's about. I mean, certainly there are more obvious narratives that are working through being present in a neighborhood—those are entirely about, in, and of the downtown eastside. Now that book means a lot to me, actually. I suppose all our first books will mean a lot to ourselves in the long run, right? It really was an achievement post-traumas. I look back on it and feel really, not proud, well, maybe it is pride, I don't know. Something. A sense of survival and thriving beyond. But it is situated, for sure.

With *Triage*, I don't know what got into me, but at that point I was just starting to enter into art gallery spaces, and realized that I've missed a great deal in terms of the relevance of visual culture. I was thinking a lot about that while I was writing the book. I picked up a camera for the first time and began to see protest as an aesthetic, or to see the aesthetics of protest. And I began realizing that, again, I'm so naïve—there are whole threads of history I've missed. I realized I was completely hindered by politics, by the idea of politics. I did not realize that questions about “politics” have also been a way of marginalizing aspects of art history. I was trying to figure out some things about art and art world and as I worked on that process with poetry, I realized that poetry, somehow artificially, in a really disturbing way, gets separated out from these spheres—again, related to issues of class, and the notion that access diminishes quality. So, with *Triage*, while it's working through and is of the downtown eastside, and of trauma, it is also trying to figure out entry points to a world of art. The more experimental parts of it—not really in terms of form, but in terms of language in that book—have a lot to do with that.

MN: When were you writing *Triage*?

CN: It was published in 2011, but the work for that book got underway in the early oughts. I started working in the downtown eastside in 2000, and I was writing poetry out of necessity pretty much right away. The book was a long time coming.

Work seems to come together for me a lot faster now, in terms of the writing, what I do with it and where it goes. Part of it, maybe, is confidence. Part of it is that time presses harder and harder. I think I'm also less caught up with the need to pore over things. I realize that sometimes people are interested in what you're saying off the cuff, you know. I'm trying to find balance and to practice.

MN: I remember when we first met—at the Beyond Oakland event that David and Juliana brought us out for in 2013—how impressed I was in hearing you speak. I admire so much your capability of talking about the context where you've been engaged and the people you've been working with over the last decades. Your groundedness there permeates your language about it. Can you say more about that? It's something I struggle with, but it's also something I'm perpetually intrigued by—who speaks? what are the practices of listening involved in this kind of collective work? what are the modes of engaging with others, on behalf of or in connection to a place, in relation to other sites and activities?

CN: If we're of a community, we know who of a community can speak back and be supported in doing so. We know that. The thing about the downtown eastside at this point for me, is that it's been almost 18 years that I've been working on that ground, within networks that connect there. That's not to say that my legitimacy in terms of representation has grown just because of time, but my relations and my security in knowing that I am also of that community has. I have process for reporting back, and process for reporting out. When I am mobile, when I'm being invited to represent things—commonly from a quote-unquote minority position—too often we're called upon to represent widely.

I've been working in the federal prison system for several years now, but the people I'm working with have been at it for over 30 years. Every time I'm invited to talk through related issues—concerning blackness, concerning disability, trauma and mental health—you feel an urgency. You don't want

to not speak. If you're present, you don't want to not take that space if you're the only one there who will honor your communities. You always have to have a sense of who you're indebted to, who else could be there alongside you, should be there instead of you and doing a better job. You need to figure out what you can do to support that work and make those connections.

MN: You said earlier that you started working in the Downtown Eastside upon moving to Vancouver in 2000. What brought you there in the first place?

CN: I guess I had an uncritical vision of being an activist at the time. I'd been aware and learning more about violence, particularly for racialized and indigenous women in the sex trade. I wanted to do a PhD at the time, so that was in the back of my mind. I was moving with my partner, now my husband, and both of us had some visions about cities that we loved. One of the first decisions we made was not to stay in the States. I had a job in Indiana at that time. We had just fallen in love. You know that moment. I knew I couldn't go back to Ontario. We had two cities in mind—Montreal and Vancouver. At the time I had French in some small ways, but not professionally, and I was really worried about what that would mean. I'd never been to Vancouver, but I thought: ocean, mountains, why not? I should go at least once. I found a job at the Women's Center within months. And that was it. I still work across the street from there. For 17+ years, I have spent the greatest percentage of my time literally on that corner.

MN: What's the corner?

CN: Columbia and Cordova—it's been my vantage of Vancouver. Now I don't live in the city anymore. I've been evicted twice, and not for anything we've done wrong; it's the nature of the city. I won't move back to Vancouver. I feel it's unlikely. I feel very angry and haven't recovered from the Olympics. There are uncomfortable places in Vancouver for me at this point.

MN: Did you know much about the writing community when you moved there?

CN: No, I didn't. I had heard of Fred Wah and I think I heard of Wayde Compton. There was very little else I can think of that I would have known. But I also wasn't really a writer then. I was one of those people who always had written, but I kept it to myself. So I didn't arrive thinking I'm gonna be a writer. That wasn't even a priority. But what happened was that I got here, and within a couple of years I was involved in the university system. I met people and began to pay attention to poetry publicly, and started coming out to events. I didn't find communities of color therein, couldn't find black poets or audience at the time. I did connect to the Kootenay School poets and their poetry, although I was never a part of their collective. I was interested in and engaged by the people there. A favorite person from day one was Jeff Derksen, a really critical figure to me. Of course, many others! What drew me in most was a desire to be part of these conversations.

MN: So, Derksen was someone you began reading and exchanging work with—who else?

CN: Early on Wayde Compton, Rita Wong, too, amazing people I was fortunate to encounter. Also, Larissa Lai and later Steve Collis.

MN: This would have been the earlyish or mid-2000s?

CN: Yes, around 2004 to 2007. My first public reading was, I believe, 2008.

MN: I love “The Quality of Light” essay you wrote for Stephanie Young’s series on poetry and money¹ where you detail the your personal history of writing and reading poetry through the conditions of labor and work and service.

CN: Well, that was a funny thing to come at, to think it through with that lens. It was helpful, actually. I learned about myself. It could have been longer, but then I was like, Oh, this is just getting embarrassing. To reveal like that, I mean, I don't typically talk about myself in writing—that's the first time I've ever done that.

MN: What I like so much about it is how clearly you think through the material conditions of writing, of the means and for whom one writes. On that note, can you describe the work you do with Gallery Gachet? I know you're involved in so many formations and networks of organizing, and to single it down to the work in that one location is an insufficient way to come at all the work you do. But visiting you at Gachet and walking around the neighborhood with you, I feel I gained this deeper understanding of the language of your poems, their material context.

CN: Gachet is my paid work. So the ways in which that dominates our lives do matter, but fortunately my heart has been committed for six years to the work I'm doing there. I'm an administrator—I think it's quite boring at the end of the day, but I have learned that administration and how you construct a program or programs is not by any stretch a neutral way of managing or being behind the scenes. Gallery Gachet straddles social and arts practices. We're a mental health resource, but we're also a gallery and an artist-run centre. We run a public-access gallery where we host five to seven exhibitions each year. Three or four of those will be juried, and work with artists that we put in dialogue with our communities. Then two or three of the exhibitions are always based in community and partnerships longstanding. The work is predominately visual art. We do performance a lot in the space and, not surprisingly, a lot of social practice stuff happens. And we do a lot of stuff scattered across sites, so we are increasingly not working just in the gallery—everything from parades to workshops to pop-up exhibitions and performance work in public spaces. We're trying to gain a better understanding of public art, and trying to break that down what makes certain art public art.

MN: Yes, and experimenting with a public art that doesn't uphold the formations of the social as they already are. This is something I've been thinking about often, how so many social-practice-based works mostly reinforce the already-existing parameters of art and aesthetic cultures.

CN: That's right, and because of that we're very careful about who we work with and bring into the gallery. One of our ongoing partners has been the artist-curator Carmen Papalia, a real leader in terms of trying to think through ideas of access. He's a non-visual learner, self-described, who makes use of amazing interpretations of a disabling world. He was actually the first person to publish me. Many years ago he ran a journal called Memewar with a group that worked out of Simon Fraser. Anyway, he's one example of some of the wonderful people who are able to do work in and of our community as they get to know a plurality of who that community is, and somehow help interface in broader art-world conversations and problems.

MN: And you've also been inviting writers into the space, I believe?

CN: Yes, I've been able to do literary programming in the space as well. We've hosted Jasmine Gibson, Tongo Eisen-Martin, Juliana Spahr and David Buuck, Marie Annharte, Mercedes Eng, Julie Okot-Bitek, Jordan Scott, and others locally. One of the more influential series in recent memory, in my mind, in this city, was REVERB: a queer reading series. They just disbanded after four and a half years, but that was a crew of people led by the writers Leah Horlick and Estlin McPhee. They curated queer writers, and did so in ways that engaged questions about access for audience and readers, and what it meant to situate themselves at Gallery Gachet in the downtown eastside, considering who attends and how. They did amazing work, and they were just building and building—physical access, environment, figuring out good childcare, figuring out ASL, figuring out queer ASL...and withstanding necessary critique along the way.

There are all kinds of moments around Gaget, centered in it, that have been just amazing. And then we're a resource, also, for the social movements of the neighborhood. So when there's a paint-in or when there's banner-making, when there's a need for a parade, a report to be designed or support for communications, people know they can call on us. It's been important to have some of that work in the space. That is part of my work.

I suppose could talk about my volunteer time or the other things that I do—filtered through what that community deals with. A lot of residents and former residents experience policing, surveillance, carceral logics and systems, formerly or family-wise, or are at-risk of, and so I've been concerned and involved with work and organizing within prisons and without, extending notions of community to really understand what's separated out, to resist what that these systems try to do. An example of that is the Memorial March committee.

MN: The Memorial March, is it for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women?

CN: It's for missing and murdered women, led by Indigenous women. I'm quiet in that circle for good reasons, but I am a helper through the years. Sometimes the work is not about organizing, it's about being organized, allowing yourself to be a part of being organized. At this point, I help coordinate the guardians for the march; the guardians are what one might call marshals in another setting. We have guardians, all women of the community, who know the community and many are living in the neighborhood. I think that march is one of the most stunning aesthetic examples of Vancouver—a presence and commitment through the years—in terms of the sound, the Women Warrior's Song, and the drum, the uniformity of message that's consensual, the many works that flow through this moment, the complexity of regalia, the leadership of matriarchs and the movement in the streets, orchestrated and organic. There are so many ways to consider it. I'm also involved with a group called Joint Effort—we

try to find ways to connect with incarcerated women and to connect them with their communities outside of prison. For the march each year, Joint Effort goes in to the prisons bringing materials for quilting. We bring out finished smaller pieces that get sewn all together in a banner, and every year that banner is part of the march. We photograph each piece as well as the banner as well as the banner in the march and the people who march with it and we take that documentation back to the prison to remind the women of their connection. These are small textile works and they're very humble, but they connect us somehow in these moments. The march will never call itself a protest. It does interrupt the major flows of capital and all the things that a good protest can do, while memorializing.

I cannot write much about this. There will be shades, there will be corners that get occupied by what's relevant to my everyday, but I really can't write about a lot about this work. It goes back to those questions, which are ethical ones, about representation and being grounded, of being of communities and speaking to that. I will listen and lift. I can work through practices and methodology, I will collaborate.

MN: It's interesting when one's own engagement allows for them to realize the responsibility of not speaking, of not representing. I want to say, though, I'm amazed in the midst of all these efforts, how quickly you've moved from first reading to first book to the two books you've written since!

CN: It's funny because it's not like I have more time to write. It seems I make decisions and they're supposed to set up that possibility of having more time to write. For instance, like taking on the Writer in Residence position or getting support from an arts council, which have been new experiences for me of late. They're wonderful and this is not a complaint, but it's confusing because it doesn't seem to work like that. It's not like there's more time.

MN: I imagine that the work you do with Gachet never stops, because the community is constantly going and that never stops.

CN: That's true, that's true. And everybody's got my cell phone number. But definitely there's a lot of respect for my time—I get calls when I need to get calls. Some day I look forward to being a volunteer in the community, to just being a volunteer. I look forward to someday not representing an organization that has relationships with governmental bodies, such that myself as an individual can't not represent some things publically. I look forward to that because I think what's happening as I age and tire a little bit in that weary sense is that I don't think my activism is as sharp. Sometimes I'm not able to answer these calls. And they're not just coming from downtown, of course. And, I just can't jump to it in the ways that I used to. Part of it is that I'm accountable to a home network, as well, one that keeps me healthy. Part of it is that I am engaged in wage labour, particularly. But I think it's heralding maybe a different time for me coming in the next decade, and I think that will be about writing and about creative and collaborative organizing work. It's always going to be necessary to be in the street, or to support people in our streets, to be a live part of movement. Can't skip that step—our relationship to frontlines and land defense, that's always going to be there.

Being a witness has other responsibilities to it. Collective, creative work can have powerful, relevant outcomes. I think about that these days as an uninvited guest on these territories. I don't just want to thank people. I don't just want to name who I am and what I think I'm up to. I want to think through what is relevant to the Tsleil-Waututh, what is relevant to the Musqueam, to the Squamish. I feel that way foremost embodying black and femme experience, realizing violences of state and border, I want to be relevant.

MN: Will you discuss the relation between your engagement with these with regard to the syntax of your work? I ask because I am interested in how your work combines a mix of syntactically dense and technical language—which might signal to readers a kind of impersonal affect or distancing effect—while at the same time they inhabit this grounded, self-present mode of direct speech, which I read as emergent from the forms of address that I imagine are central to the work you do as an organizer and activist.

CN: That's interesting to hear because this is the kind of analysis I cannot do. I'm not so deliberate in terms of strategy. I'm just trying to do what's necessary, and that's going to keep changing. I don't think it's something that I can map out.

MN: Anytime something arises as being necessary, there's always a site, always a situation, and always others involved to respond to and with.

CN: Exactly. It's one of the early lessons I learned from Derksen. I remember him reading a very early collection of poems for *Triage*, and he asked me to consider several things. One was that I had a ton of quotation marks. When I did a reading once, my first reading actually at the railway club for the Shortline Series (also organized at the time, by Carmen Papalia) ever other line I was like "Quote, duh duh, duh, duh," and I did that for the whole reading. He said, "Maybe just let it go, let the quotes go." But that led us to talking in particular about the idea of texture, how our affective language and psyche and concerns and personal observations, how all that sprawling stuff is situated. What it was, in part, was a materialist argument for poetry, that we need to ground it in the real. He didn't use that language, but I love this idea of texture. I feel like texture happens as an interplay. It cannot be so interested in the self, the I is not that interesting for me, unless it is part of broader networks, media and relations.

Anyway, my heart is trying to do with language what feels necessary. I am fascinated by language, and I always have been. I'm never going to be accountable if I write a book that's so cerebral, and so entrenched in isolated material, in terms of the words on the page itself. It's not enough for the work to only succeed there. I, of course, value the literary. I am grateful for the kinds of conversations that are possible, for the kind of people who study and are actively concerned with poetics. Yet I am ultimately concerned with movement, and I'm looking to people—to kinds of land and community-based, relational practices that are off the page, even if anchored to a page.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2016/04/the-quality-of-light>