

**Transforming Ritual: Unconventional Translation and the Contemporary English-
Canadian Elegy**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Doctorate in Philosophy degree in English

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Abstract

This study explores the ways contemporary English-Canadian elegists transform rituals of mourning in order to accommodate a broader set of losses than has been permitted by the conventions of elegiac tradition. Focusing on the poetry of Jordan Abel, Stephanie Bolster, Anne Carson, Anne Simpson, and Souvankham Thammavongsa, I explore the ways these elegists make use of unconventional translation practices — that is, translation practices that privilege creativity, process, and transformation rather than mimetic transfers of information — to capture the incommensurability of grief. By exploiting the transformative power of translation, these elegists use unconventional translation practices to create a version of elegy that shifts attention from elegy as product to elegy as enactment. These works find value in the ongoing process of lamentation rather than in the cessation of mourning that characterized pastoral elegy and has become understood as paradigmatic of elegy more broadly. For the elegiac works I discuss in this dissertation, translation functions as both a metaphor and a tool to deal with the dilemmas presented by mourning in the context of a new global reality characterized by unbridgeable geo-temporal distances and community fragmentation.

Each chapter of this dissertation explores the way that the transformation of elegiac ritual occurs in the context of a particular kind of loss by analyzing one or two representative texts. Chapter One reads Anne Carson's *Nox* as an example of the familial elegy in the context of community fragmentation, examining the ways that Carson's abundant, amplificatory translation of Catullus's "Poem 101" allows for the creation of an elegy that grapples with geo-temporal distances through the creation of an elegiac ritual that acts as a stand in for the funeral. Chapter Two considers Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Found* as an example of the postmemorial elegy, arguing that the combination of found poetry and ekphrasis allows for the creation of an elegiac

ritual that facilitates acceptance but is limited by a desire to protect both the elegist's own privacy and the privacy of her father. Chapter Three analyzes Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*, arguing that the use of erasure in this text allows for the creation of an elegy that politicizes grief by challenging the subjects that are considered worthy of elegy and actively working toward the reclamation of identity through a rewriting of accepted colonial collective myths. Chapter Four pairs Anne Simpson's "Seven Paintings by Brueghel" and Stephanie Bolster's *Long Exposure* in order to consider the ways that the contemporary phenomenon of mediatized trauma can be mourned through ekphrastic elegies as well as the ways these works push the contemporary elegy to its limits by exploring the ethics of witnessing. By reading this group of elegies in the context of the history of the English elegy and through the lens of translation, I argue that these elegists open the field of elegy to voices that have frequently been excluded and challenge our understanding of readers as participants in elegiac community.

Acknowledgements

There are many to whom I am immensely grateful for seeing me through a program that has proven to be a tremendous challenge. Thank you to Dr. Cynthia Sugars for supervising this project. Thank you, also, to my examiners, Dr. Tanis MacDonald, Dr. Jennifer Blair, Dr. David Staines, and Dr. Robert Stacey, for reading, evaluating, and providing commentary on this work.

I would not have made it through this degree without a whole community of friends and family. First, thank you to my parents, Glenn and Sandy Keeler, and my brother, Theo Keeler, for their support during my many years of schooling. Although the list of people who have offered feedback, encouragement, or an understanding ear is far too long to list here, I'm particularly grateful to Jennifer Baker, Jessica Ballantine, John Robb, Anne Sophie Voyer, Lisa Templin, Cameron Anstee, Andrew Loeb, Karenza Sutton-Bennett, Kent Hoffman, Patricia Webley, Rhonda Smith, Ryan Jones, and Alex Ambeault, who have all been incredibly generous with their time, wisdom, and support over the years. Finally, I would like to thank Lisa Hauch, Erin Hoffman, Heather Craig, and Cheryl Gauthier, whose friendship has kept me grounded and whole through the most difficult phases of the last many years, who have celebrated every tiny win with me, who have listened to countless hours of self-doubt and panic, and whose unwavering belief in me made it possible for me to do this at all. I love you, my dear sister-friends.

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Introduction: Transforming Ritual

On March 23, 2020, less than two weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the *Harvard Business Review* published an article online entitled “That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief” in which Scott Berinato interviews David Kessler, an expert in grief,¹ in an effort to analyze what we were all feeling in those early days of pandemic life. Berinato prefaces his conversation with Kessler with a personal anecdote about a Zoom staff meeting. In a scene likely familiar to many of us, Berinato and his colleagues talked about work projects alongside discussions of how they were all feeling. When one of Berinato’s colleagues identified her emotions as grief, “[h]eads nodded in all the panes” (Berinato). This moment of identification prompted the interview with Kessler in the hopes that “[i]f we can name it [what we are feeling], perhaps we can manage it” (Berinato). This article made the rounds on social media, gracing Facebook timelines and Twitter feeds. Perhaps because I study topics connected with grief and mourning, friends, family, and colleagues started sending me the link. But I think at least some of these shares were motivated by something more than knowledge of the topic of my dissertation; a lot of them were motivated by the fact that the subject of the article resonated with so many of us. We all shared Berinato’s hope that having a name for what we were feeling meant that we could begin to deal with it.

Emerging literature on the topics of grief and mourning in the context of the pandemic suggest that part of the “grief pandemic,” as mainstream media has taken to calling it, is a result of the death toll and the ways that the pandemic itself has fundamentally altered and interfered with mourning rituals. However, equally important is a set of other losses that are more intangible.

¹ Kessler is best known for co-authoring *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*.

Family and friends are often separated from their loved ones when they are dying, both because of COVID protocols in hospitals, which necessitate patient isolation, and due to travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders. Additionally, as a consequence of restrictions, funerals and other mourning rituals are banned, delayed, or severely restricted in size. For many, this means traditional mourning rituals simply cannot occur. For others, it means that access to these rituals is limited to a virtual platform. Both situations deny mourners access to processes that are important for affective adjustment after loss (Gesi et al.) and deprive mourners of the significant role that in-person interaction plays in such rituals (Albuquerque et al.; Gesi et al.). Moreover, community and support have been interrupted by isolation and social distancing (Albuquerque et al.). The fact that the *Harvard Business Review* article appeared so early in the pandemic reveals an important aspect of pandemic grief: it is not solely tied to the death toll of the pandemic, but to other kinds of losses. Kessler tells Berinato that “we’re feeling a number of different griefs,” including “the loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection” and the “loss of safety”; but also “anticipatory grief” about the future (Berinato). Emerging literature relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in psychology and psychiatry journals has begun to discuss not only anticipatory grief — “grieving what is expected to come” (Bertuccio and Runion S88) — but ambiguous loss — which occurs “when there is psychological presence with physical absence, or physical presence with psychological absence” (S88). Literature also considers the ways that the interruptions to daily life cause grief (Albuquerque et al.; Gesi et al.; Bertuccio and Runion S87). These factors also impact deaths that are not a result of COVID-19, which amplifies the impact the pandemic has on grief and mourning.

In the midst of all this, poetry began to appear in unexpected places. I first noticed this when by some fluke of social media algorithms, a video of an Irish news broadcast that

concluded with a reading of a poem by Seamus Heaney appeared on my Facebook feed. Sadly, the video has been lost to the hazy first spring of the pandemic, and I have been unable to find it again. I doubt that I have imagined or misremembered the video because in May 2020, *The Guardian* published an article online entitled “‘Solace and Healing’: Ireland turns to poetry to ease lockdown strain,” which traces the ways poetry was bringing comfort to Irish citizens, particularly during lockdown: “New poems are being commissioned and performed and old poems are being rediscovered [...] Social media hums with quotes, poets read verses over the phone to people in isolation and households hang banners with favourite lines” (Carroll). But it was not only Ireland that took to poetry for solace. Before long Canadian news outlets were covering the publication of poetry collections (Hunt; Squibb), and poems written by frontline workers (Azpiri; Rosen), students (Dyson), poet laureates (Davis; Chariton), and other poets (Beaudette). The recurring ideas of solace and comfort in this coverage are notable, as is the coverage of poems written by people who are not published poets, suggesting that poetry holds a broad appeal as a way to cope or deal with the griefs the pandemic has brought, not only on an individual but on a collective level. This coverage suggests that poetry can be healing for the individual poet as well as for the broader community with which the poetry is shared.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was not the impetus for this dissertation, the pandemic elucidates some of the questions that did motivate my research regarding both the kinds of losses we are now encountering and how poetry operates in these contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a real-time demonstration of why mourning studies and studies of elegy have increased throughout the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries as one sees an increasing interest in finding ways to mourn death when standard rituals of memorialization and mourning are unavailable as well as ways to mourn abstract and intangible losses. Interest in

these fields has largely focused on the evolution of mourning and elegy arising from the pervasive melancholia of “a century that has repeatedly witnessed unimaginable loss of life” (Zeiger 1). The secularization, privatization, depersonalization, and commodification of grief and mourning (Ramazani 15-19), the fragmentation of community (Homans 1), and, more recently, the growing influence of media in shaping mourning and trauma (Butler 147; Kaplan 2) have all contributed to this evolution. In other words, the kinds of losses being mourned by contemporary elegies are wide ranging and often less concrete than individual deaths, and even when an individual death is the primary subject of an elegy, shifting socio-cultural landscapes have frequently complicated what might typically be viewed as a simple subject for mourning. Discussions of mourning and elegy must go beyond laments for the dead, notions of “recovery,” and evaluations of “success” or “failure” if they are to remain relevant to contemporary circumstances.

Both the changing roles and accessibility of mourning rituals and the increasingly ineffable nature of the losses being confronted in the space of elegy have created a requirement for new modes of engaging with loss. The elegy has, as a result, had to adapt to contemporary circumstances, and many English-Canadian elegists have turned away from traditional elegiac requirements such as consolation and detachment from the dead. Instead, these elegists use elegy to construct new rituals that both accommodate a broader set of losses and seek to redefine the purpose of elegy by using it to shape mourning rituals that allow for different outcomes, encourage continued attachment to or investment in that which has been lost, create new communities that bridge geo-temporal gaps, and consider the process of mourning as one with potential ramifications for both identity and relationship. This dissertation explores one particular subset of contemporary English-Canadian elegies: those that use unconventional translation

techniques to establish new, idiosyncratic mourning rituals within the context of shifting geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts. In recent years, scholars in translation studies have been working to understand how translation functions beyond its disciplinary bounds in order to consider its metaphorical power in an interdisciplinary framework (Parker 17), an approach that has allowed an examination of the role translation plays in fields including mourning and trauma studies. In addition to exploiting translation's metaphorical power, elegists use particular kinds of translation practices as tools that help construct elegies that reflect and embrace the complexities of mourning in the contemporary world.

Following Priscila Uppal, I refer to the poems I am discussing as examples of English-Canadian elegy. This term does not indicate a cultural association but rather the language of publication and therefore what audience the poets might anticipate for their texts. Additionally, this term contextualizes the work of these poets within the history of English elegy (Uppal 5-6), a history that informs the way I approach and understand the poems in this dissertation. This framing is not intended to downplay the complexity of language use, which is central to the use of translation both as metaphor and technique; indeed, the political and personal connections between language and identity are crucial to the discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

The discussion in the following chapters is dependent on two key terms: elegy and unconventional translation. Although this introduction explores the history of these two concepts and the ways these fields interact and intersect, two initial definitions may help elucidate both what I mean when I describe the subject of this dissertation and why I focus on particular elements in these histories. I consider elegy as a genre or mode rather than a defined form, and as such I define it quite broadly as a poetic space in which to explore, define, and potentially work through loss and resultant grief. Despite remaining committed to a relatively broad

understanding of elegy, using this specific term, rather than a wider category like elegiac literature or literature of mourning, offers important context. While broader terms like elegiac literature allow fascinating and important work to be done exploring what it looks like to mourn in forms like the novel, the term elegy allows for some specificity, signalling a focus on poetry. Adopting the specific term elegy also contextualizes the five texts discussed in this dissertation within the ranging, mercurial history of elegy, and in so doing establishes a connection with elegy's history as it is related to socio-cultural norms and memorialization practices. This connection to ritual and organization is important in the poems I consider since it is the need to establish or create new mourning rituals that drives the inventiveness of contemporary elegy generally and motivates the turn to unconventional translation by the group of poets being discussed in this dissertation.

In conjunction with this broad definition of elegy, I've adopted the term unconventional translation in order to discuss a grouping of techniques that use the structure of translation but operate outside traditional ideas of heterolingual translation and eschew the concepts of fidelity, equivalence, and transmissibility as central to the task of translation. Instead, unconventional translations privilege creativity, process, and transformation, often incorporating visual elements and homolinguistic structures in which the source text and translation are in the same language. The emphasis on transformation and process in these techniques is vital to the ways they enable contemporary elegy to create new approaches to mourning. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler suggests that "mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (21). She continues, "[t]here is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned" (21). As they work to shape elegies that operate

across geo-temporal distances and complex emotional landscapes, the potential for new and unexpected transformations and thus new and perhaps unexpected purposes for the elegy becomes fundamental to some contemporary English-Canadian elegies, and for the group of poets I examine in the following chapters, such transformation is facilitated by the use of unconventional translation.

MOURNING AND ELEGY

Loss, grief, and mourning are universal human experiences, so it is no surprise that literature engages with these subjects. Grief and mourning are often equated, and the terms grieving and mourning are often used interchangeably. However, though both are responses to loss, they are distinct from one another. Grief is the emotional response to loss; mourning is a ritual action undertaken to cope with the emotion of grief (Homans 2). It is the process of mourning that is captured in elegy.

Mark Strand and Eavan Boland introduce the elegy section of *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* with a definition that helps contextualize the elegy in its broadest form:

It sets out the circumstances and character of a loss. It mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event. Despite this, an elegy, unlike a metrical form, is not associated with any required pattern or cadence or repetition.

For this reason, the structure of an elegy is less visible than a regulated form such as a sonnet or a villanelle. But the structure is there nonetheless — made of the slowly

evolving customs and decorums, the coral reef of what each society expects a public poem of lament to contain and an elegiac poet to focus on. (167)

This passage highlights the challenge of defining elegy. Elegy is a mode rather than a clearly delineated form, but it still has features that distinguish it from other modes of poetry. Elegy is also, as Strand and Boland highlight, ever-evolving due to its connection with socio-cultural contexts; therefore, definitions and descriptions of elegy are always historically contingent.

In her introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Karen Weisman highlights the difficulties in offering an unqualified definition of elegy, arguing instead that “[e]legy inhabits a world of contradiction. The narrative of its historical development is tortuous at best, and the unraveling of its salient preoccupations betrays a persistent entanglement with its generic and formalist relatives. In its adjectival form it is all pervasive in literary criticism, and yet few scholars would profess certainty in knowing precisely what *elegiac* denotes” (1). However, Weisman does offer two characteristics of the contemporary elegy. The first is the broad definition that it is “the framing of loss” (1), and the second is that it “marks a passage from the inchoate gasp to the formalized utterance, from the chaos of the mind to the ordered presentation of a publicly available expression” (1). Although Weisman specifically references contemporary elegy, this description could encompass almost any moment in the history of elegy. Elegy is a poetic space in which an elegist can impose structure on the chaos of loss in order to frame and present it in an ordered, if not always orderly, fashion.

Perhaps the most codified version of elegy is the English pastoral elegy, and this is often what comes to mind when thinking of elegy. Tanis MacDonald begins *The Daughter’s Way: Canadian Women’s Paternal Elegies* by declaring “I blame it on Milton. And given the opportunity, who would not?” (3). Not only does Milton bear the blame for MacDonald’s interest

in elegy, but he is also to blame for the codification of the characteristics of pastoral elegy, characteristics that continue to inform studies of elegy. MacDonald argues that “Lycidas” is still held by scholars studying elegy as “the gold standard, a kind of precedent text that demands attention for its crystallization of the poetic command to which all subsequent elegists must listen: sing for your dead, if you are human” (4). MacDonald is certainly correct, for one can hardly find a book on elegy that does not present “Lycidas” as paradigmatic of elegy as a whole. David Kennedy similarly presents “Lycidas” as a seminal text, one that “revived and reworked the tropes of pastoral elegy into a well-defined progress from grief to consolation and detachment” (*Elegy* 5).

Uppal elaborates on how this codified progression manifested in English elegy more broadly:

The traditional English elegy moves from the individual death being mourned into a meditation on the current state of the world and one’s place within it and, eventually, towards a form of consolation that accepts the earthly separation of the dead loved one from the living realm. The transformation is such that the mourner ends the period of mourning, and the cycle of life and death in the natural world resumes, with the living effectively replacing the dead. (10-11)

In this structure, consolation is impossible without separation, a separation in which physical distance is emphasized. Once separation is achieved and accepted, the mourner is a mourner no more and may return to whatever they were before the natural cycle was interrupted.

In addition to this general structure, pastoral elegy has a number of defining features. William C. Watterson emphasizes the fact that the category of pastoral elegy is an attempt by academics “to establish a link between Theocritus’s first ‘Idyll’ (Thyrsis’s lament for Daphnis)

and all subsequent mourning poems set in the *locus amovus* or green world” (139). Thus, the setting became crucial to defining the category; in other words, pastoral elegy is defined by its pastoral setting (Lambert xiv). Watterson suggests that pastoral elegy can be divided into two subcategories: elegies for real people and elegies for fictional characters (139), a division that operates alongside the fact that influential poems like “Lycidas” not only served to standardize pastoral elegy but also funeral elegy (Kennedy, *Elegy* 5).

As Strand and Boland point out, the expectations of elegy are deeply informed by socio-cultural contexts, particularly by mourning rituals and understandings of death. As the pastoral elegy was becoming what we now think of as the traditional form of elegy, the dominant model for mourning was what Peter Homans calls, following Philippe Ariès, “the tame death,” which Homans presents as the prototypical Western model for mourning up until approximately the 1800s (4-5). The framework offered by the tame death is roughly as follows: attachment, loss (death), mourning, and reattachment (5). It is essential to note that in this model, mourning is essentially a liminal state, always, when successfully performed and completed, resulting in a return to the previous position and way of being; it is a temporary detour rather than a fundamental shift of existence. Also important are the roles of community and memorials in the tame death. Mourning is fundamentally a public rather than a private endeavour in that mourning is undertaken as a community (4). Memorials and rituals serve as “containers” for loss in the sense that they “contain” mourning by setting bounds through the dictates of any given ritual and in the sense that they provide a physical container for the loss (most commonly in the form of a grave or other funerary marker) (4). In so doing they facilitate the ability to separate one’s self from the loss; the loss is physically located in one place while the mourner is able to move away. In enacting the stages that characterize a traditional English elegy— loss, mourning, consolation,

re-entry — elegy itself serves as a mourning ritual, with the literary product serving as the memorial container.

Discussions of elegy often frame themselves using Sigmund Freud’s understanding of mourning and melancholia, which he developed in the early twentieth century. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud draws a distinction between two responses to loss. Mourning, Freud claims, is the normal response to loss and eventually reaches resolution, ceasing when the mourner transfers their affection for the lost object to a new person or object. Melancholia, on the other hand, is a pathological state, a response to loss with no definitive endpoint because the melancholic cannot let go of the lost object. Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia based on whether the loss is a conscious or unconscious one and based on the involvement of the ego. Mourning, Freud concludes, is the result of a conscious loss; the transfer of attachment can be accomplished because the mourner is able to identify the loss and thus move through the process of reality-testing (“Mourning and Melancholia” 244-45). Melancholia, however, results from a loss that remains in the unconscious; reality-testing and the transfer of affection cannot occur because the melancholic cannot always fully identify the loss that has caused their grief (245). Moreover, because the melancholic cannot identify the loss, they turn feelings of emptiness and lack toward their own ego rather than directing them at the outside world as the mourner does (246).

Closely connected to the Freudian understanding of mourning is the concept of “working through.”² Working through, as presented by Freud in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-

² “Working through” is found more frequently in discussions of trauma than discussions of mourning, but the structural similarities between this idea and mourning rituals are striking. Within Freud’s work itself, the two fit together well; the therapeutic practices in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” describe means by which to facilitate the identification and reality-testing necessary to mourning as described in “Mourning and Melancholia.”

Through,” is the process by which a traumatic episode moves out of an unconscious state of repression and repetition and is reincorporated into conscious memory, ending the repetition that has kept the past trauma in the present tense. Working through, unlike mourning, may, Freud implies, continue indefinitely (155). Dori Laub calls this the “ceaseless struggle” of testimony (Laub, “An Event” 75). Significantly, both working through and mourning are largely predicated on processes of testimony, an act of telling that is simultaneously imperative and impossible. Laub argues that survivors have “an imperative need to *tell* and thus come to *know* [their] story,” but this compulsion is continually thwarted by an inability to completely and properly “articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought*, *memory*, and *speech*” (78). Similarly, Jacques Derrida repeatedly returns to the idea that after the death of a loved one, “[s]peaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness” (72), so one is left “with having to do and not do both at once” (45). The telling of a loss is necessary for any process that will allow the survivor to move forward and is driven by an inner compulsion to speak in these moments, yet it is also impossible to find the right words, for all words feel insufficient or like a betrayal. Moreover, both working through and mourning are inherently discursive practices; Freud, of course, argues for the necessity of an analyst, while Laub emphasizes the importance of a witness. Part of the work of elegy is the act of telling, of relating a loss, to another, who, in the context of elegy, is the reader. *How* to tell and *who* to tell become complicated sites of inquiry in the contemporary elegy.

Because the elegy as a genre evolves in order to accommodate the cultural norms surrounding mourning, scholars like Homans and Jahan Ramazani trace the ways that socio-cultural shifts in relation to mourning practices were reflected in the concerns of English elegists in the early twentieth century. In the twentieth century, major shifts in mourning practices

occurred in order to reflect shifting conditions arising from technological advances, wars, genocides, and forced migrations of increased severity, scale, and frequency as well as modernist and post-modernist challenges to religious, political, and cultural institutions. Life and death both became secularized, and as a result, funeral directors gained power, the funeral became a commodity, mourning rituals were moved out of private residences into spaces specifically designed for funerals, and they were increasingly limited in time and space (Ramazani 16-20). Wide-ranging social change caused like-minded communities to fracture, and consequently mourning was increasingly performed individually rather than communally (Homans 5-8). Media practices changed dramatically, evolving from the advent of the newspaper to the current use of social media. Formats multiplied, lead-times shrank, the news cycle began to run 24 hours a day, and social media fundamentally altered the dissemination patterns of information. As a result, *who* bore witness to these events and *how* events were witnessed changed drastically. The concurrent and ongoing changes in science, technology, and industry, and the new scales, types, and frequency of loss “fragmented and gradually dissolved the traditional sources of authority, guidance, and consolation that had been in place for centuries” (Homans 5).

As this process eroded the fundamental elements characterizing the tame death, it also forced an adjustment of mourning rituals, including the elegy. To some poets, pastoral elegy no longer seemed sufficient to encapsulate the emerging shapes of mourning, but this did not doom the genre to obscurity. Ramazani’s examination of the modernist elegy suggests that “modern poets reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions; instead, they violate its norms and transgress its limits. They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre” (1).

Modernist elegists resisted the conciliatory tradition. Instead, in “[s]corn[ing] recovery and transcendence, modern elegists neither abandon the dead nor heal the living” (4). Modernist elegies became marked by what Ramazani calls “melancholic mourning,” a conflation of Freud’s binary terms that describes a variety of “ambivalent and protracted grief” (29), a version of mourning that is “unresolved, violent, and ambivalent” (4). These elegies are characterized by anger, skepticism, and anxiety (1), and the anger and ambivalence directed at both the elegists themselves and at the dead distance the elegy from the love and praise that characterized the pastoral treatment of the dead (5). In its modernist iteration, the elegy is anti-everything: “anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary” (2). As a result, Ramazani suggests that modernist elegies “mourn not only dead individuals but mourning itself, elegize not only the dead but elegy itself” (8). Sacks similarly declares that “the mourned subjects of recent elegies include not only the deceased but also the vanished rituals of grief and consolation themselves” (299-300).

Despite elegies for elegy itself suggesting the death of the mode, elegy persists in contemporary writing. Like modernist elegies, contemporary elegies pick and choose elements, attitudes, themes, and features from across the history of elegy, adopting, reinventing, and rejecting as best suits them. Contemporary elegists, however, have the advantage of a longer history to draw from than their modernist counterparts, which allows them to select the features that work for contemporary socio-cultural contexts and create elegies that grapple with geo-temporal dislocation, disconnection from community, and the disintegration of structured mourning rituals, while simultaneously being able to select elements that tailor their elegies to idiosyncratic losses and personal circumstances.

By and large, contemporary elegies tend to be, like their modernist predecessors, anti-consolation. However, Uppal argues that the English-Canadian elegy is distinct from its contemporary American and British counterparts in the purpose of this rejection:

English-Canadian poets have also deviated from their elegiac predecessors, departing from conventional notions of elegist and elegized, yet in a manner significantly different from that of their American and English counterparts. At the risk of over-generalizing, I believe that English-Canadian poets, without dispensing with consolation altogether, also challenge the traditional work of mourning model of the English elegy. (12)

In the work of some contemporary English-Canadian elegists, consolation is not entirely rejected; instead, alternative sources of consolation are found which are neither predicated on detachment nor dependent on finality and conclusion. Uppal argues that these elegists reject detachment as the source of consolation and instead attempt to recover their dead.

The poets whose work I read in this project shun the traditional demand for distance between the mourner and the elegized subject implicit in both the notion of memorial-as-container and the idea of return wrapped up in the pastoral elegy's structure and Freudian model of detachment and re-attachment. In its place, they actively seek continued connection with the dead:

The valorization of poetic distance from one's subject has been found wanting by numerous English-Canadian elegists and thereby discarded as a goal of the work of mourning. Instead, by adopting and adapting the elegy, by uncovering strategies for reunion with the dead and dialogue with the past, they protest the severing effects of

death and historical time, and advocate a new standard of elegiac success: reconnection with one's subject. (Uppal 36)

These poets, Uppal argues, "welcome the dead to sit down with us in our living rooms, recognize us, and tell us who we are" (37). They encourage conversations with both the living and the dead. However, what Uppal is describing is not the refusal of detachment that characterizes melancholia. Instead, the bounds between self and other are reconsidered and the relationship between living and dead is redefined. While the melancholic clings to the pre-death relationship, longing for an unchanged circumstance, contemporary elegists present the connection with the dead as a reunion that may bridge the distance of death but does not negate the transformation caused by death and loss.

While the desire to recover the dead can be quite literal in the context of an elegy for a person, the wider application of such prolonged attachment is equally important as it seeks to address losses that are less concrete:

Diverging from their English predecessors, these contemporary English-Canadian poets present an alternative elegiac strategy in their response to loss. They wish not only to remember the past, and memorialize it, but also to recover the past and use it to create a future. The dead are sought out by the living to interact once again with their communities. Consequently, the metaphors of consolation in these English-Canadian elegies present a past that can be interpolated into the present and the future. Recovery is not merely inheritance of the past, as in conventional rites of passage, but a creation of the present and future through dialogue and active engagement with the past. (Uppal 13)

Many contemporary elegists in Canada are looking for ways that consolation can be resisted as the end goal of elegy but are also actively seeking alternatives to it. Elegy remains a work with a

goal, and that goal is a version of recovery that allows a movement into the future without the substitution or separation necessitated by the conciliatory model of mourning.

Contemporary elegy, whether Canadian or not, like modernist elegy, is also often characterized by melancholic mourning. This ongoing trend has necessitated a theoretical reconsideration of the value of melancholia, specifically seeing it as a site of creative power and depathologizing it in order to envision a version of mourning that is not focused on consolation and cessation predicated on the transference of affection but on a reconnection and engagement with the past (Uppal 13). MacDonald claims that the elegist is inherently a melancholic, but one for whom the dilemma of attempting to determine what intangible elements have been lost through the identifiable tangible loss is “less pathological than it is productive” (*The Daughter’s Way* 38). The contemporary elegy is invested in these intangible elements, the elements lost but not readily identifiable, particularly those losses that emerge from within complicated tangible losses or those that are always already intangible.

An essential element of the contemporary use of elegy is the recognition not only of new goals for mourning practices but also of a wider variety of subjects worthy of mourning. Nevertheless, Ramazani, despite recognizing that modern elegies expanded to other subjects, insists that melancholic mourning depends on the mourning of “specific deaths, not the vague or unconscious losses of melancholia” (4). This claim overlooks half of Freud’s definition of mourning. Popular understandings and theoretical explorations of mourning often focus on the first part of Freud’s definition of mourning, that it “is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 243). The remainder of his definition — “or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one [a loved person], such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243) — is equally important, if not even more essential in the

context of linguistic and geo-temporal fragmentation. While the most widely recognized subject of mourning is the death of a loved one, “one can also lose and mourn one’s attachment to an abstraction, such as an idea or an ideal” (Homans 19). Similarly, although elegy may commonly be conceptualized as a genre intended to mourn the death of an individual, it has always recognized and embraced the need to mourn abstractions and ideas.

In broadening the definitions of what constitutes an “acceptable” subject of mourning, the contemporary elegy works to address the fact that elegiac conventions arise out of a “social history that designates some bodies as more worthy of mourning than others, and a parallel history that differentiates between gender, race, age, and class to determine whose work of mourning may be considered worthy of literary posterity” (MacDonald, *The Daughter’s Way* 12). Butler asks, “What *makes for a grievable life?*” (20). By extension, this question also asks what makes for a grievable loss by turning attention to the types of losses suffered by particularly vulnerable populations. By declaring a larger set of losses grievable, the contemporary elegy allows for a much wider range of voices because it creates space for the experiences and losses that are often unique to marginalized communities and because doing so calls attention to the fraught position of these minorities in traditional elegiac frameworks.

Central to the contemporary Canadian elegy is a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes a grievable life and a grievable loss. Uppal specifically identifies the concerns of contemporary English-Canadian elegists as encompassing “what is unknown or has not yet been legitimized as worthy of mourning: the histories of where they live, the histories of the people who lived or live there, the construction (or absences) of regional or national identities” (29). Uppal additionally notes, “[i]n many of these elegies, a revisionist historical project or nationalist project is afoot: to challenge traditional elegies by claiming Canadian history and Canadian

communities as worthy subjects for elegiac exploration” (29). These are specific examples of the abstract losses found in Freud’s definition of mourning. These concerns tend to collect around questions of community and identity, which is no surprise to scholars of Canadian literature. However, in these works, questions about identity are frequently coming from historically marginalized groups such as women or Indigenous Peoples who have largely been excluded from these conversations in the past.

The role of community also surfaces in the rejection of consolation. Figuring grief as a communal experience recalls one of the central features of the tame death model and the ritual role of the procession of mourners that sometimes appeared in pastoral elegy while simultaneously resisting the move toward the privatization of grief and mourning that emerged in the twentieth century. The features of the communities assembled by these works, whether the poet actively selects and invites particular individuals or suggests the presence of a less clearly defined group, explicitly work to counter the geo-temporal divisions that have ultimately led to the disintegration of the traditional community of mourners. As a result of both the desire to hear the dead speak and the emphasis on the communality of grief and mourning, the contemporary English-Canadian elegy tends to be polyvocal, according to Uppal, who argues that in “[a]nticipating this poetic site as an eventual community, the elegiac monody is replaced with the elegist’s welcoming of multiple voices. A subject, the poets argue, must interact with other subjects to remain alive” (Uppal 36). The dead are invited, even encouraged, to speak, yes, but the community of mourners is also invited into the conversation. Like the dead, they may speak clearly and loudly in works, but they may also be silent presences, multiple voices in the anticipation of speech rather than the actual manifestation of it. The elegy becomes a site where community can be reconstituted.

TRANSLATION

The question for poets wishing to represent experiences of mourning that refuse to follow widely accepted rhythms of mourning and elegy is how to best render these experiences in poetry. For the poets in this dissertation, the answer is found in the adoption of what I am calling unconventional translation practices. These practices are more concerned with the creative power of the translator, textual transformation, and semantic play than with any attempt to transfer information between languages; in fact, many of the examples I consider are homolinguistic, meaning that the source text and translation are in the same language. The creativity and flexibility of unconventional translation provide a way for poets to give voice to losses that may previously not have been considered grievable or worthy of attention, whether because the trauma of the loss itself left the individual mourner unable to articulate or identify precisely what had been lost or because socio-political structures denied validity to such losses. For these poets, translation becomes both a metaphor and a tool that allows them to shape new mourning rituals that respond to individual circumstances as well as to socio-cultural shifts in the kinds of losses being felt and the ways mourning is constructed and enacted.

Translation theory, much like mourning and elegy, is undergoing a conceptual broadening. Additionally, there are significant structural and theoretical similarities between translation and mourning, similarities that, particularly when traditional literary modes for mourning are insufficient or ineffective, allow translation to serve as a structure for unpredictable, transformative experiences of grief.

Popular understandings of translation, and a significant portion of Western translation theory, still centre around versions of what Roman Jakobson calls “translation proper” or

“interlingual translation” which is “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (127), a process dictated by concerns of transmission and equivalence. This kind of translation can also be called heterolingual translation because it moves from one language to another. As the use of the word “interpretation” indicates, equivalence becomes a central question and concern early in the history of translation theory. While Jakobson admits that “on the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units” (127), he also presents this as a problem that needs to be managed, suggesting that “[e]quivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics” (127).

Indeed, questions about the degree to which translators should pursue equivalence in their work and what exactly constitutes equivalence, along with accompanying questions about the visibility/invisibility of translators themselves, have shaped and continue to shape translation practice and translation theory. The ideal translation, when measured in terms of equivalence, should carry a core of unchanged meaning from one text to another, changing only the container/language. This illusion depends on a belief that meaning can be divorced from word, that sign and signified are separable such that the sign can be replaced without altering the signified. When discussing a concrete object, like a chair or a cat, the notion of equivalence mostly holds, though it does not account for cultural context that may mean a French speaker, German speaker, and English speaker all picture slightly different cats on slightly different chairs. However, while such equivalence is perhaps possible when naming concrete objects, it becomes far more challenging in texts discussing abstract concepts or attempting to convey multiple levels of meaning. The illusion of equivalence also depends on the effacement of the translator, since the individual who transmits the meaning should have no effect on it. When the

translator is foregrounded, this illusion is shattered. Instead, translation theorists and translators shift their focus to the process of translation and the multiplicity of voices involved in any act of translation.

In contrast to traditional ideas of translation, Susan Bassnett begins her prologue to *Tradition, Translation, Trauma: The Classic and the Modern* with a bold statement about what constitutes translation:

We are all translators, in one way or another, even those of us who only live with one language in our heads. Engaging with different people in our daily lives, we also engage in acts of translation, as we shift linguistic registers, edit and adapt what we choose to communicate, reshape narratives in different contexts for different people. We may tell the same story to close friends and distant relations, but the telling of it will be different, the ways in which we choose to articulate the story will not be the same, because we are not always able to rely on the same degree of intimacy, the same kind of understanding, the same empathy. Some of us cope with tragedy in our lives by transforming the painful and the grotesque into comic anecdotes, some of us exaggerate or play down incidents in the retelling, and all of us interpret the unknown by filtering it through the familiar, all of which can be viewed as forms of translation. *Translation in the widest sense of the word is an endless process of reshaping, retelling, reworking* and we all, to some extent, engage in versions of that process in our daily lives. (1; emphasis added)

In this, Bassnett takes translation and recasts it not as a single type of action but as a framework for a person's interactions with others, the world at large, and even themselves. She emphasizes experiences of transformation, creativity, and perpetuity, suggesting that these features, not transfer and equivalence, are the central concerns of translation in practice. She thus opens up the

field to new literal and metaphorical understandings of translation, which in turn allows translation to serve as a key metaphor and practice in the work of the poets I discuss in this dissertation.

Much like broader understandings of elegy, critical and theoretical space for more creative translation practices, including homolingistic and non-linguistic forms, has always existed to some degree. Jakobson described not one but three types of translation. While his favouring of “translation proper” is apparent, he introduces two other modes of translation: rewording (or intralingual translation) and transmutation (or intersemiotic translation). “Rewording” is Jakobson’s term for what is now called homolingistic translation, the translation of a text within a single language. “Transmutation,” on the other hand, refers to the movement of a text between verbal and non-verbal sign systems (127). Importantly, however, Jakobson does not hold transmutation as being equivalent to translation, as indicated by his use of the term mutation, but the seeds for a broader understanding of translation are present even in this early text. Jakobson also claims that “poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible” (131). While this point is often invoked to support the idea that translation of poetry shouldn’t be attempted, the core of Jakobson’s claim is not that poetry cannot and should not be translated but that it must be approached through methods that embrace creativity and transformation.

One of the most enduring metaphors for translation is Walter Benjamin’s comparison of the translator’s task with the reassembly of a shattered vessel (81), an image that emphasizes the impossibility of producing a perfect translation. While Benjamin cites this state of perceived incompleteness as the great disappointment of the work of translation, Paul Ricoeur revises Benjamin’s arguments in order to suggest that recognizing the impossibility of perfection “makes

it possible to live” (8). The failure of perfect replication becomes the source of creativity. Moreover, implied in Ricoeur’s insistence on celebrating the impossibility of perfection is an emphasis on process rather than product and a sense of perpetuity. Rainer Guldin identifies this same focus at work in metaphors of translation as a “third space,” which propose that translation “is not so much the linear relationship of a point of departure to a point of arrival but an open-ended process that is never final and never total” (58). This sense of incompleteness and imperfection is essential to broader understandings of translation.

Translation is central to life and literature in Canada. As an officially bilingual and functionally multilingual country, movement between languages is an everyday experience for significant portions of the Canadian population, whether because they speak multiple languages or exist in a space that often presents public information in multiple languages. Moreover, when we begin to consider the ways that abstract losses of place, home, and culture manifest in Canadian literature or poetry, the Canadian context demands we specifically consider the role of language for refugees and immigrants (see Chapter Two) and Indigenous Peoples (see Chapter Three).

In Canada, unconventional translation has been a prevalent poetic practice since the late-twentieth century, from some of the work by concrete poets of the 1960s/70s to the work of various bilingual poets and translators in the 1980s, including the “bicultural” approach of such figures as F.R. Scott and D.G. Jones and the feminist translation poetics of Barbara Godard. Many of these writers and theorists have been engaged in an overtly decolonizing project, whether from a feminist perspective, an anti-imperialist standpoint, or both. While these projects have taken a wide variety of forms, they all share an interest in considering what happens when translation is no longer about the transfer of information from one location to another. These

poets, for various reasons, want to investigate how translation can serve other purposes. For example, Steve McCaffery and bpNichol sever translation from its role to transmit information in order that it may “become a creative endeavour in its own right” (32). However, “unconventional translation” is indeed translation in that it retains the tripartite structure of original text, system of translation, and new text (Barbour and Scobie 141).

In *Pirates of Pen's Chance: Homolinguistic Translations*, Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie explain the relationship between heterolinguistic translation and homolinguistic translation:

Translation is a transfer of language from one code to another. Normally, the two codes are two different languages, and the mode of transfer is semantic identity, or at least equivalence. In these poems, however, the two codes are in the same language: hence “homolinguistic” translation, translation from English into English. As for the modes of transfer, they are many and various: some are closed, formal systems, which allow very little leeway to the translator, and some are wide-open, free-association processes which allow the translator unlimited freedom. (141)

They go on to emphasize that homolinguistic translations “push language to the outer edges of meaning,” producing texts that “hover on the borders of intelligibility, never wholly rejecting meaning, but never wholly embracing it either” (141). Other forms of unconventional translation share these same features. They subscribe to the basic structure of translation, but they emphasize process and transformation rather than product and equivalence. Though semantic meaning is not entirely done away with in unconventional translation — for those poets using these practices for decolonial, feminist, or anti-imperial purposes, semantic meaning still retains

substantial significance — the finality and authority of this meaning is questioned in these works.

McCaffery and Nichol identify four general approaches to what they call “configurational modification” (32), two of which are significant when reading the elegies discussed in the following chapters: geomantic and developer. These two approaches are, primarily, examples of homolinguistic or intralingual translation. Geomantic translation consists of “the realignment of space and of the balance between already existing phenomenon [*sic*]” (33). In other words, in a geomantic translation, pre-existing elements are manipulated and rearranged on a variety of levels. Words or phrases may remain intact or be broken down into constituent elements such as letters and punctuation. The emphasis on space is important here; white space is often manipulated in these works. The developer method is similar to the geomantic in that it involves “the shift and reorganization of stable units, with development achieved through simultaneous spatial preservation and alteration” (39), but the developer method “places maximum emphasis on the *process* of translation, minimizing semantic import beyond the formal procedure of its development” (39). The pre-existing elements are still manipulated, but the process by which these manipulations occur takes precedence over the end result. The features of these practices can be found in approaches such as erasure or found poetry, both of which manipulate an existing text within the confines of parameters set by the poet. Moreover, poets who work with either found poetry or erasure practices are often as invested in the process as in the final semantic value of their work. (See Chapters Two and Three for discussions of found and erasure poetry.)

The appearance of works that can be categorized as unconventional translations varies widely, even within identifiable categories. Barbara Godard’s self-translations could be called

unconventional translation. So, too, could Lola Lemire Tostevin's bilingual poems such as "Gynotext." Much of Erin Moure's translation work, such as *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person* or *Secession/Insecession*, is unconventional. However, despite this wide variety, works by Canadian poets turning to unconventional translation in the wake of loss tend to share several broad characteristics such as an emphasis on process rather than completion and a willingness to question and manipulate accepted structures or practices.

Shoshana Felman claims that Mallarmé's poetry is "an art of accident," a "testimony to an accident which is materially embodied in an *accidenting of the verse*, poetry henceforth speaks with the very power — with the very unanticipated impact — of its own explosion of its medium" ("Education and Crisis" 19). These observations arise in part from a familiar claim that due to the central role of metaphor in poetry, the practice is capable of asymptotically approaching a representation of that which is unrepresentable. However, Felman's claims go beyond this to suggest that poetry is in no small part able to represent the accident (Felman's very Freudian term for a traumatic event) because when the physical form of poetry is manipulated, or exploded, poetry becomes an embodiment of that which it attempts to represent. In other words, it is not merely the linguistic power of poetry that suits it to the task of writing trauma, but the malleability of its form. Unconventional translation practices exploit this malleability to an extreme degree, which places them in an excellent position to represent trauma and, more broadly, loss, particularly within the contemporary fragmentation of community.

INTERSECTIONS

As these brief surveys of mourning and translation suggest, the contours of these two fields are remarkably similar, and it is this similarity that allows translation to serve as either a metaphor or

a process for mourning itself, perhaps even more so when it comes to representing mourning that is no longer moored to well-structured ritual and is thus in search of formulation or expression. The broadening of both fields has called into question the authority of the original, the importance of equivalence, and the understanding of the process as a closed system. Instead, critical attention has shifted to the intervening process as transformative and an end in and of itself. This emphasis on process and transformation asks that we conceive of translation and elegy as *acts* rather than products. By emphasizing the verb form — to translate, to elegize — rather than the noun form, contemporary elegies that utilize unconventional translation shift focus from the end goal to the act itself, finding value and purpose in the action rather than any particular outcome. Although this does not devalue approaches that focus on an end goal, whether that is consolation or not, it does offer a different way of understanding the purpose of elegy. This is not to say that contemporary elegists who use translation do not have goals or outcomes in mind, but to argue that these outcomes are not a point at which the elegy ultimately arrives. Where traditional elegy concluded by finding resolution for the mourner, contemporary elegies that emphasize process find their value in raising and exploring questions and beginning an ongoing process of consideration and lamentation.

To an extent, pastoral elegy has always suggested the importance of elegy as an act. Sacks argues that even in traditional elegies like “Lycidas” there is a self-conscious emphasis on the performance of a ritual such that “emphasis on the drama, or ‘doing,’ of the elegy is thus part of the crucial self-privileging of the survivors, as well as a way of keeping them in motion, ensuring a sense of progress and egress, of traversing some distance” (19). This sense of progress aligns with Freudian mourning, which progresses through the work of mourning and thus contrasts with the stasis that characterizes melancholia. However, the performance of ritual,

while essential, is still focused on outcome; it is a progress toward something in particular.

Framing, and even reconstructing and altering, such ritual in unconventional translation removes the expectation of an end point and instead finds inherent value in the “doing.” Again, this shift is, in a way, highlighting an element of traditional elegy that is not typically foregrounded.

Lambert argues that even within pastoral elegies “[e]ndings of poems do matter; but they are not all that matters. They are not all that consoles” (xv). When the possibility of a conciliatory end, or any end at all, is questioned or entirely rejected as it is in many contemporary elegies, the other elements that console — or offer some other effect — become the most important parts, and it is these parts that unconventional translation often allows to develop.

The fragmentariness endemic to translation, as demonstrated by the metaphor of the shattered vessel, allows translation’s movement from original, through process, to translation to serve as a metaphor for processes of testifying about loss that form the backbone of elegy. Bella Brodzki argues that this image, of shattering and reassembling, aligns translation with post-traumatic working through, figuring the translation project as a metaphor or guide for this work (123). Brodzki recognizes that in both the translation and the post-traumatic work, the shattered pieces “cannot be reconstituted, instead remaining forever essentially fragmented and fragmentary” (123). The remembrance of traumatic loss is frequently characterized as fragmented and marked by gaps in memory (Freud, “Remembering, Repeating” 147-48), especially within intergenerational trauma, which can be seen as being marked by “an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” (Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* 6). Unconventional translation’s blatant rejection of equivalence between original and translation frees the translator/poet to embrace the fragmentary, fractured nature of translation. In fact, many forms of homolinguistic translation actively seek to defy relationships of sense, instead

assembling fragments from which the reader will both wish to and be unable to create meaning (Barbour and Scobie 142). This freedom allows for the creation of elegies that can deal with traumatic losses not by resisting such fragmentation or attempting to integrate and order experiences, but by embracing, replicating, and even celebrating imperfections and ruptures. Rather than serving as a space in which an elegist can turn the chaos of loss into an orderly, presentable ritual, the contemporary elegy that employs unconventional translation presents the experience of loss as the mess that it often is.

Both translation and contemporary elegy attempt to make present what is past, and in this they are entwined with the idea of repetition. The translation attempts to manifest the past in the present in a new form. The elegy addresses the repetitions that can characterize mourning. The contemporary elegy in particular, in the desire not to use elegy as a tool to distance one's self from that which has been lost but as a means to resurrect and reclaim it, relies on translation's structure of repetition and the collapsed temporality, in which past and present collide, that such repetition produces. Understanding this collapse of linear time as productive rather than flawed underpins both melancholic mourning and creative translation.

Many contemporary English-Canadian elegists are invested in creating ways for the living to remain connected to ghosts of those they have lost, and translation is structured in such a way that it can aid in creating this connection. Translation, according to Bassnett, "is a form of resurrection of the dead" ("Prologue" 2). The past that translation recovers can never be exactly the same as the past it is reaching for. Therefore, translation "may be a means of recovering the past, of bringing the dead back to life, but what it recovers must remain forever incompletely known and understood [...] there are gaps across time and space that can never be fully bridged, and translation is a literary act that is destined to be incomplete, always in the making, always in

motion, never reaching a final point of stillness” (2). This description once again invokes the fragmentation of both translation and testimony, but it additionally points to the ideas of transformation, process, and perpetuity that recur throughout current discussions of mourning and translation. These features are why translation is suited to the task of writing elegies in an age when mourning need not be brought to a conclusion, for “[t]ranslating lament can convey rather than exorcise pain” (Guldin 93). The purpose of translation, particularly of unconventional translation, in the context of mourning is not to bring mourning to a conclusion but rather to communicate the experience. While this process may help “make sense” of the pain or the loss, while it may provide the language with which to begin articulation of an experience, it does not insist on an arrival at a place of consolation or separation.

While unconventional translation can amplify the alignment between translation and mourning by making apparent elements of metaphor, fragmentation, process, disruptive temporality, and polyvocality, this in itself does not fully explain the predilection for unconventional translation rather than something more akin to Jakobson’s “translation proper” (127). One prominent feature of unconventional translation, particularly as it has been used in Canadian poetry, helps explain unconventional translation’s suitability for complicated reactions to loss. Namely, the relationship between mourning and translation is strengthened by unconventional translation’s investment in understandings of the ego and identity-transformation. Barbour and Scobie claim that their homolingual translations “free [them] from the expressive demands of the lyric ego” (141), an idea that characterizes much Canadian homolingual translation, even if it is not explicitly noted by the poets. Except, perhaps, in very particular examples of unconventional translation, this freedom does not equate to the erasure of the poetic ego; rather the poetic self becomes more complicated as it is transformed by the ways

that unconventional translation works upon and presents texts. Because unconventional translation is a form of translation, it begins with a text that already presents a particular self, that of the original author, and in transforming the text, this self is transformed and called into question.

For instance, Moure's concept of translation, her term for her method of translating Fernando Pessoa's *O Guardador de Rebanhos*, written by Pessoa's heteronym Alberto Caeiro, is embedded in an understanding of the self as plural and the identity of the translator as affected by the work of translation in ways that significantly complicate the concept of the lyric ego. Although Pessoa's multiple selves — Pessoa and Caeiro in the case of this text — played a role in this effect on poetic ego, Moure also claims that engaging with Pessoa's poems "altered [her] as an addressee (a reader) and as an actor-upon-a-text (a translator)" ("Hi, Fidelity!"). Indeed, for Moure this transformation was so profound that she published her translation of Pessoa, *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*, under the pseudonym Eirin Mouré. For Moure, this transformation reflects an excessive subjectivity that is bound up with the excesses of her translation practice, which "pulled into the translation not just the Caeiro text but also the chance or hazardous appearance of words in my head" ("Hi, Fidelity!"), and thus both exposes and alters the translator, at least for the duration of the text. However, in the context of contemporary elegies, this transformative potential can be repurposed to reflect much more permanent alterations of self. Such transformation in the context of contemporary elegy can either allow for a parallel transformation of the elegist's identity or provide a counterpoint against which the elegist can explore their own sense of identity in relation to the loss of cultural and familial connections.

MacDonald suggests that although the elegy claims that its subject is the lost individual, in reality it positions the elegizing self as the subject of the work ("Night in a Box" 54). While

the nominal subject in the elegy may be that which has been lost, the ultimate subject is the self, and such a preoccupation with the self betrays a melancholic streak even in what are thought of as traditional elegies. In the contemporary elegy, however, melancholic fixation on the ego becomes a site of creative production; it is essential to the task of mourning rather than an impediment to it. Creative approaches to translation help drive interest in identity and establish the potential for transformations of the self because “[i]nventiveness in translation cannot be separated from the *transformations* of identity the translating act invites” (Nikolaou 22). It is, in part, this interweaving of identity and translation that drives the feminist and decolonialist adoption of unconventional translation practices, and it is this connection that also suits unconventional translation to elegies that refuse to leave the mourner unchanged by the experience of loss.

Interest in dismantling the role of the lyric ego also allows for a renegotiation of the terms of the relationship between elegist and reader. Elegy inherently exists in a liminal space between public and private, much the way a ritual like a funeral does; both are public performances of privately felt emotions. The traditional, pastoral elegy incorporates the communal aspect of mourning rituals, often featuring a procession of mourners, and in so doing suggests that the reader, too, may be one of those mourners. Indeed, MacDonald’s discussion of “Lycidas” argues that the poem demands precisely such participation from readers, for those who would not also sing for Lycidas are unfeeling (*The Daughter’s Way* 4). Yet the speaker of the elegy is singular, and the mode is typically monodic, which establishes a contrast between individual grief and the collective nature of mourning, a contrast heightened in elegies that emerge out of contexts in which the collective nature of mourning is challenged and challenging. The contemporary elegy, then, often constructs community rather than reflecting it.

The reader's participation in a conventional procession of mourners in a pastoral elegy is encouraged by conventional approaches to understanding the reader's relationship to lyric poetry. As Dale Tracy notes in *With the Witnesses: Poetry, Compassion, and Claimed Experience*, the role of the lyric ego raises the problem of identification, specifically the tendency for readers to identify with the speaker in lyric poetry and in so doing come to inhabit the position of the speaker as if it were their own (4). Within the context of trauma studies, this tendency raises concerns regarding the possibility of contagious trauma.³ Helen Vendler identifies a longstanding tradition within lyric poetry whereby "[a] lyric poem is a script for performance by its reader. It is, then, the most universal of genres ... because it presumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer's shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader's own" (qtd. in Tracy 5). The convention is for the reader to become the actor of the poem; the map through grief to consolation provided in the lyric elegy is as much, if not more so, for the reader as it is for the poet. The elegy becomes an instructional tool. Vendler also identifies the problematic desire for universality, an assumption that actively denies the existence and validity of voices from the margins since "universality" is typically determined by whether the group in power is able to identify with the speaker of any given text. As in the case of declaring a life or loss grievable, this power structure puts marginalized groups at a significant disadvantage.

Unconventional translation's ability to interrupt the power of the lyric ego also disrupts some of the problems with readerly identification with the elegist, or at least calls attention to them, by complicating the simple substitution that typically occurs in the process of

³ While I will address these discussions more fully in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, it is worth noting here that understanding trauma as something that behaves like a contagion is distinct from the idea of intergenerational or inherited trauma.

identification. Unconventional translation stands in the way of this identification through the abstraction and manipulation of meaning that result from these types of practices. While these works may in some cases actively encourage readerly participation in the process of mourning, that is far from their sole purpose. The personal experience of mourning may be able to serve as a starting point for readers to enter their own processes, but it does not serve as a script for any other experience of grief in the way the traditional elegy does. The poem's ability to serve as a script is partially interrupted by the contemporary elegy's emphasis on process and incompleteness; if there is no final sense of "arrival" or "success," then the best a reader can do is join the process as it moves forward both within and outside of the bounds of the poetic text.

Moreover, the unpredictability of the transformations that are so fundamental to expanded understandings of both mourning and translation — Butler calls the transformations caused by mourning something that "cannot be charted or planned" (21) and Barbour and Scobie emphasize the arbitrariness of homolingistic translation (141-42) — suggests a certain level of individuality to the process, meaning that the usefulness of understanding the text as a kind of script is at best limited. Furthermore, in making space for previously marginalized voices by providing frameworks that facilitate the mourning of systemic loss, elegies that employ unconventional translation actively deny the assumption of universality required for identificatory processes. Instead, they facilitate these processes for those who have been historically excluded from simple identification due to lack of representation. In fact, this reversal of identification is essential to certain contemporary mourning projects, and the process of erasure actively facilitates it. None of this entirely precludes the process of identification; while an experimental translation based on pure play may be able to entirely forego a lyric "I,"

elegies do not offer the same freedom. However, unconventional translation complicates the “I” of the elegy, calls it into question, and turns it to creative purposes when possible.

In her work, Tracy emphasizes the significance of compassion, defining it not as “‘inhabiting’ another’s position” but “‘inhabiting relationship” (5). As I will explore in Chapters One and Four, this shift, from substitution to alignment, is one of the most hopeful shifts encouraged in rendering grief by way of translation. Butler suggests that “[d]espite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (20). What she is advocating, like Tracy, is not a flattening of experience but a reconstitution of a community in which the reader may participate, though in a very different manner than identification or direct participation. In denying simple substitutive identification, unconventional translation within the elegy encourages this community building across geo-temporal divides.

While discussing the troubling, often discomfiting, modernist elegy, Ramazani declares that we need elegies “because our society often sugarcoats mourning in dubious comfort, or retreats from it in embarrassed silence, or pathologizes it, even locking it up in medical institutions. We need them because people die around us every day and neither science nor technology can fix death, reverse loss, or cure bereavement” (ix). The poets I consider in this dissertation, however, demonstrate that these are not the only reasons elegy continues to be an essential mode of literary production. These poets, particularly as they use unconventional translation, allow previously marginalized or silenced voices to express experiences that are beyond easy translatability, either for reasons of traumatic silencing or temporal-geographical distance (or both). For these writers, translation is a key metaphor and tool to deal with the

dilemmas presented by mourning in the context of a new global reality in which elegy and mourning must grapple with unbridgeable geo-temporal distance and community fragmentation. In shifting attention to elegy as an act, these poems explore the ramifications of loss on both individual and collective levels.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Though the poems I discuss in the following chapters are united in many of their approaches to the project of elegy — they universally reject consolation and detachment, emphasize process, manipulate temporality, and play with the role and manifestation of community — they each respond to a particular set of circumstances. Where the circumstances of these losses align in their cultural and social contexts, we see overlaps, but the projects do not form a monolith. Instead, these poems demonstrate that, despite common threads, elegy as it is construed in these texts is multifaceted, invested in very different outcomes that are dictated both by the nature of the loss being mourned and the poet's individual circumstances.

Chapter One examines Anne Carson's *Nox* as an example of familial elegy. Yet, despite its conventional subject matter, the mourning undertaken in this elegy is complicated by estrangement and physical distance, and as such it serves as an microcosm of mourning in the midst of fractured and dispersed communities and presents ways by which translation broadly and unconventional translation specifically can help bridge geo-temporal distances through the reconstitution of community. *Nox* is an elegy for Carson's brother, Michael, who died while living overseas and estranged from his family. This elegy is, like all elegies, a mourning ritual, but it is one that specifically seeks to act in lieu of the funeral that Carson could not attend because of her fractured relationship with Michael. Carson's elegy is structured around a highly

unconventional translation of Catullus's "Poem 101," an elegy Catullus wrote for his own brother, who also died while in another country, and whose funeral Catullus could not attend. In beginning with this text, Carson begins with a classical elegy that is structured around a Roman funeral. Her translation then expands and fragments this text, using accumulation, amplification, and repetition to expand and recontextualize the original poem. In so doing, she borrows elements from throughout the history of elegy and other memorial practices in order to create a ritual that is characterized by contradiction and paradox, and thus reflects her personal experience of grief and mourning. The elegy is both detached and intensely emotional, it attempts to create a fitting memorial to Carson's relationship with Michael while refusing any kind of finality, and it is simultaneously deeply sorrowful and celebratory. Carson redefines the role of consolation in the elegy, creating an elegy that allows the mourner to hang on to the past even as they move forward into the future.

Chapter Two reads Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Found* as an example of postmemorial elegy, and considers the ways that mourning a set of abstract losses arising from experiences that are at once one's own and another's can and cannot be accommodated by the elegiac mode. Based on a scrapbook that her father kept while living in a Lao refugee camp in 1978 and 1979, *Found* foregrounds the elegiac task of naming the dead, modifying it to the circumstances of the generation after and the more abstract losses they experience due to lack of knowledge about familial history. Using unconventional translation techniques that draw on the principles of both found poetry and ekphrasis, Thammavongsa shapes a text that becomes a portrait of both the experience of loss and the places that loss manifests. Yet, Thammavongsa struggles with the impact of choosing to keep her father's privacy intact, resulting in an elegy that is limited in its ability to understand or compensate for loss by answering Thammavongsa's

questions about her family history. However, while her elegy is limited by these choices, these limitations produce the conditions for an elegy that significantly revises the ultimate purpose of mourning in a postmemorial context, framing it not as consolation, compensation, or the ability to move on from one's past. Rather, the elegy that Thammavongsa creates transforms melancholic fixation on the past into a productive stance that carries the past forward into a new future not subsumed by the legacy of the previous generation but still clearly informed by it, and because of this the elegy works toward acceptance of a liminal state of being in which the elegist is caught between the echoes of the past and their own experiences. Such betweenness is recast as a comfortable existence, a place between extremes in which loss can be understood and identified but never moved beyond, and a place in which both the elegist and those who came before her are safe.

Chapter Three considers the ways that the combination of elegy and unconventional translation is used as a tool for dealing with historical trauma by Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel in his work *The Place of Scraps*. In Abel's elegy, grief becomes political, and mourning serves as a starting point for the ongoing work of resistance, reclamation, and both individual and communal healing. Abel uses erasure to translate excerpts from Marius Barbeau's *Totem Poles*, an ethnographic study of the Indigenous Nations in northwestern British Columbia published in 1950. This transformative translation technique allows Abel to mourn the losses that characterize what Neal McLeod calls "spatial diaspora" and "ideological diaspora" (172), states of being that result from the physical removal of Indigenous people from their ancestral land and policies that result in alienation from ancestral knowledge and epistemologies (172). However, Abel does not simply demonstrate what has been lost, he turns his attention to the systems that caused and continue to cause historical trauma for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, revealing the ways that

they operate to cause physical and ideological diaspora. By identifying these flaws, Abel recasts elegiac purpose as healing not through detachment from that which has been lost but through resistance to the systems causing loss and reclamation of that which has been taken. By translating Barbeau, Abel participates in the rewriting of the national collective myth, issuing correctives and making space for alternative stories told by Indigenous voices.

Chapter Four addresses the role of elegy in the context of the contemporary phenomenon of mediatized trauma, a kind of vicarious trauma that occurs as a result of witnessing catastrophic loss through media coverage. Anne Simpson's "Seven Paintings by Brueghel," an ekphrastic sonnet corona written after the titular seven paintings by Brueghel the Elder and after photographs of the Fresh Kills landfill which became a forensic investigation site after 9/11, and Stephanie Bolster's *Long Exposure*, a long poem to-date only published as excerpts written after Robert Polidori's photographs of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, both turn the elegy to the subject of mediatized trauma by using ekphrasis to shape mourning rituals that respond to grief and mourning resulting from losses that are both abstract and ongoing. Ekphrasis, a kind of unconventional translation that translates from a visual medium to a linguistic one, becomes a tool for embodying the experience of mediatized trauma and in so doing a way of exploring why the affective experience of such witnessing necessitates mourning. However, in transforming the elegy in order to mourn the abstract losses of vicarious trauma, Bolster and Simpson push the elegiac mode to its limits. Because the elegist who mourns losses caused by any kind of vicarious trauma inherently occupies a double position of witness and mourner, their witness position and relationship to the inciting catastrophic event must be critically examined, and both Simpson and Bolster confront questions of who has the right to mourn what losses and what it means to create an elegy that honours the very real affective experience of the elegist as she

witnesses devastation and destruction by way of photographs while resisting the adoption of someone else's loss and grief as one's own.

The elegy is an ever-evolving mode of poetic expression that responds to shifting socio-cultural landscapes. Taken together, this set of elegies demonstrates both the contemporary elegist's desire to transform mourning rituals to suit individual needs and respond to shifting socio-cultural landscapes, and demonstrates that the transformative power of translation, particularly unconventional translation, has the ability to facilitate such transformations and provide ways for elegists to address complicated, multifaceted losses. While some contemporary contexts stretch elegy as a ritualized form to its limits, such expansions of the mode allow it to remain a relevant tool for understanding our concepts of grief, and our comprehension of mourning rituals and their purposes in an age in which events that give rise to mourning remain a prominent feature of our daily lives.

Chapter One

“Festive in their way”: Paradox and Ritual in Anne Carson’s *Nox*

Early in *Nox*, an elegy for her brother, Anne Carson introduces the concept of *das Unumgängliche*, or “overtakelessness,” which she defines as “that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts - it remains beyond them” (1.3).⁴ This term presents the complicated landscape of mourning that Carson’s elegy explores, highlighting the tension between the desire to take action of some kind in order to get through this feeling and the impossibility of such a task. This tension could result in a kind of paralysis, a paralysis that the sequence of actions that structure many mourning rituals is meant to counter. *Nox* constitutes such a ritual, both as an elegy and as a substitute for the funeral that Carson did not attend. Yet, the goal of this text is not to allow the mourner to overcome their loss. Instead, Carson’s elegy recognizes the impossibility of that task and embraces the fact that what it confronts cannot ultimately be “seen to the back of” (1.3). As a result, the ritual Carson creates in *Nox* is characterized by contradiction and paradox, tensions that are facilitated through the use of an unconventional translation practice as the structure for the work of mourning. It is detached and controlled while simultaneously being scarred by strong emotive outbursts. It attempts to fabricate a farewell that delineates between living and dead, yet it also attempts to resurrect and stay in conversation with the dead. It seems to work toward a final conclusion, but

⁴ *Nox* is unpaginated, which makes it challenging to cite the text effectively according to MLA conventions. In keeping with published scholarship on this text, I will cite the numbers associated with numbered passages when quoting or referencing them. All other citations will be provided according to MLA conventions for unpaginated material, though I will make an effort to give a description of where it occurs in the larger work or provide identifying features that will allow it to be spotted in the text.

continually denies closure, instead reveling in process. Ultimately, this elegy is at once an act of mourning and an act of celebration; both sorrowful and festive.

Of all the texts I examine in this dissertation, *Nox* is the one that has received the most scholarly attention. Unsurprisingly, scholarship thus far has paid particular attention to the striking materiality of the text, Carson's use of translation, and the work of mourning she undertakes. A number of scholars emphasize the ideas of loss, repetition, and failure as they manifest in the text and figure these as working in service of a modified version of mourning that some scholars propose offers a new version of elegiac consolation. For instance, Kiene Brillenburg Wurth concludes that "*Nox* is a book about the recording of loss: lost time, a lost brother, lost presence" and "it conveys this loss through a re-visioning of the paper page and a translation of an ancient poem" (31). Jocelyn Parr presents the materiality of *Nox* and Carson's use of translation as distancing tactics that "express grief and the impossibility of mourning" (352). Joan Fleming figures *Nox* as a substitute funeral rite and argues that "*Nox* as therapeutic biography sets into motion silences, blanks, and unanswerable questions, in an ultimately hopeful process of grief-work and psychic renewal" (65). Additionally, Gillian Sze suggests that "[i]n the materiality of the replication, we see that the fold in *Nox* is not merely an index of loss but also, for Carson, the only possibility of consolation" (67). The material form of the text is certainly important, and the general structure of translation is essential to the way this elegy functions; however, I propose that, in addition to these elements, it is the particular unconventional translation practice Carson adopts, one which relies upon amplification, fragmentation, and accumulation, that facilitates the creation of a modified mourning ritual. It is the unconventional approach to translation that allows for an emphasis on process, an embrace of *das Unumgängliche*, and, ultimately, a kind of festivity that calls attention to the contradictions

within mourning rituals, especially those that confine, dictate, and limit the emotional landscape of grief through imposed structures of mourning.

Nox is a physically substantial object; at approximately 15cm x 6.5cm x 24cm it makes a powerful visual impact, and at just over two pounds, its visual impact is matched by its heft when picked up. The scrapbook-like text is printed on one side of a long sheet of paper.⁵ This sheet is accordion-folded and placed inside of a sturdy, clam-shell box. The folds of the text can be turned like traditional pages in a codex, but as the distribution of weight shifts from right to left, the sheet begins to stretch out between the two sides in such a way that folds don't fully turn but rather stand up as peaks between the two sides, sometimes folding back to where they came from and undoing what the reader has just attempted. The text can also be stretched out into a single long sheet, either in part or in whole, but the length of the paper makes this impractical, if not impossible, in most settings.

The text opens with a yellowed copy of Catullus's "Poem 101," and the rest of the text is structured around a series of lexical entries that construct a word-by-word translation of this poem. Interspersed with these entries are prose passages by Carson, fragments of a letter from Michael, photographs presumably from Carson's and Michael's childhoods, simple figural or geometric paintings, rubbings of words etched into a surface, and an assortment of other ephemera. The overall structure of *Nox* is dictated by the text of Catullus's poem, with the lexical entries appearing in the order the words appear in the original poem. Additional structure is provided by the numbering of the prose passages. This numbering is not consistent enough to provide a definitive overall structure, but it does indicate that there is a specific order in which

⁵ For practical production reasons, this is a series of sheets joined together to give the appearance of being a single, unbroken sheet of paper.

the fragments should be read, that they are presented in this order, and, since the numbering system skips over certain numbers, that there may be missing pieces or sections that have been edited out at some stage of the text's life.

Catullus's poem is an apt starting point for Carson's elegy because the circumstances of Carson's elegy parallel those of Catullus's in significant ways. Carson tells us that Catullus's elegy is "for his brother who died in the Troad. Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death. Catullus appears to have travelled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at the grave" (7.1). This description parallels the information we have about Carson's relationship with her brother and his death. Michael was overseas at the time of his death; he and Carson were estranged, so little is known by either Carson or her readers about him outside of his death; and Carson also travelled a great distance in order to visit the place he died, although there was no grave. These parallels enhance translation's ability to offer a starting point for articulation by not only offering a way to begin describing loss generally, but a way to start discussing a loss very similar to the one that is the subject of this particular elegy.

Nox is inherently linked to the tradition of elegy both as its own mourning ritual and as a reflection of socio-cultural norms around other rituals like funerals and memorials. However, while *Nox* draws on this history in order to construct a ritual for Carson's specific loss, the choice to translate "Poem 101" links Carson's ritual with Roman funerary rites. In acting as a source text, "Poem 101" provides a foundation and a guide for the mourning ritual undertaken in *Nox*. Andrew Feldherr suggests that Catullus's poem emulates the Roman funerary rite:

the poem's elaborate ten-line structure throws into almost graphic relief the progression from one kind of separation to another that the Roman funeral was designed to enact: it moves from the isolation of the mourner, contaminated by death, to the final separation

from the dead that returns the speaking poet to the world of the living, after passing through a moment of unrestricted mourning where the impact of the loss of the deceased on the living is most clearly revealed. (215)

The poem begins by “emphatically situat[ing] its audiences at the performance of a ritual act” (209) through a description of a physical journey to the location where the funeral is taking place, and it concludes by reproducing the last words of the Roman funerary rite (215). However, aside from the final phrase, “Poem 101” does not explicitly reproduce or describe the content of the funeral. Instead, the elegy reproduces the *effects* of the funeral, acting as a kind of substitute for the ritual that Catullus missed.

In translating Catullus’s poem, Carson is able to take the ritual it references as a starting point for the creation of a ritual of her own that, like Catullus’s poetic ritual, can stand in place of participation in a funeral and thus substitute for the affective process that such a ritual is meant to facilitate and contain. As Sze points out, in *Nox*, “Catullus provides a paradigm of mourning and serves as the lens through which loss is comprehended” (72). Importantly, however, the transformation enabled by Carson’s unconventional approach to translation allows her to mold the ritual she is creating to suit her particular set of needs. She is not beholden to the Roman ritual Catullus references or the variation Catullus himself offers. Instead, she has the freedom to adopt the portions of that foundational ritual that suit her and reject those that don’t while also collecting and modifying various aspects of other mourning rituals across history, particularly the history of elegy. Moreover, the act of translation becomes a vital component of her ritual, providing a series of steps for the elegist to progress through that serve a similar function to the conventions of a mourning ritual. Translation, however, is less fixed, less structured, and less prescriptive than mourning rituals. The translator, in a sense, possesses more agency than the

mourner; there is no one agreed-upon approach to translating a text, even when translators are pursuing the same goal as one another, but there are highly codified mourning rituals that mourners are typically expected to adhere to based on cultural or religious associations. While participants in a mourning ritual largely cannot control the pace or structure of that ritual, translators are able to set their own tempo, choose where to place their focus, determine the duration and order of the stages of the process, and decide when they would like to stop.

Translation relaxes the strictures of the funeral rite while still providing a clear series of steps to undertake.

RESISTING CONCLUSION

Using translation to loosen the expectations and structure of mourning rituals means that Carson is able to construct an altered ritual that notably resists conclusion, instead expanding into an ongoing process not bounded by the elegy and not intended to be bounded by the elegy, even while she occasionally gestures toward the very methods that allow more traditional elegies to create a conclusion, suggesting that there is a continued appeal to such an ending. Because mourning rituals present a process through which a mourner progresses, questions of pacing and timing are central to these rituals. In a Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia, one of the distinguishing features of mourning is linked to pacing: it draws to a close “after a certain lapse of time” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 244). Although this time frame is not fixed, it does contrast with any potential timeline for the progression of melancholia, which tends to be protracted. Mourning rituals, however, assign a certain timeframe onto the process they prescribe, a time frame that tends to be more truncated than the entirety of the process of mourning. The elegy, in particular, traditionally favoured shorter forms, which means that in

pastoral elegies “the work of mourning may be so concentrated and prescribed that we have little leisure to observe it” and as a result of the tight constraints on space and procession, “the elegist may be in such secure control of his repertoire that the work of mourning is empty and pro forma” (Shaw 51). In contrast, “[o]nly in a longer confessional elegy, where lyric anxiety threatens to delay consolation and even thwart catharsis altogether, and where the outcome seems more at risk, is it possible to study in slow motion that gradual ‘working through of an impulse or experience’ that converts a mourner into an elegist” (51). The shortened elegiac form truncates a longer process, moving it along at too rapid a pace to encapsulate the whole of what it purports to present. Carson reduces the pace of elegy even further, not only stretching it to a truly impressive length within the text, but ultimately resisting the idea of conclusion all together, insisting that elegy cannot fully contain mourning no matter how long an elegist makes the text.

The pacing of *Nox* is not only determined by the text’s length, but by Carson’s approach to translation. While translation proper often obscures the process by which a translation is produced, and, as a consequence, effaces the translator, *Nox* celebrates and foregrounds both the translator and the transformative activity of translation. Transformation is also critical to the work of mourning, which attempts to transform grief into consolation and transform the mourner into a member of the society of the living once more. In opting to translate, Carson chooses a practice that encourages transformation from one thing to another; in opting for an *unconventional* approach to translation, Carson creates the opportunity for this transformation to go in unexpected directions.

Nox lays bare the process of translation it undertakes, and as a result, the ritual Carson’s translation practice establishes is fragmented and meandering. In a broad sense, the fragmenting and amplification of the original text emulate a more standard word-by-word translation process.

First, the original text is broken down into its linguistic components. Then, each word is looked up in a lexicography that offers a number of possible meanings. However, while translation typically requires the translator to make a choice between definitions, Carson presents all of the possibilities as part of the final product, suggesting that there is a multitude of valid options. She amplifies each word from the original, investigating the plurality of meanings encapsulated within each one. Significantly, the emphasis in these entries is not on the context of the original text by Catullus, as one might typically expect with a word-by-word translation, but on the context of Carson's life and Michael's death. No source text is provided for the entries, and many entries contain examples that have almost certainly been added by Carson. Each word is then further amplified by the inclusion of the various fragments located between the lexical entries.

Even though Carson's text is undeniably an elegy, and she identifies it as such, the initial description readers encounter, found on the back of the box, identifies the text not as an elegy, but as an epitaph: "When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get" (Carson, *Nox*). The black text on the grey surface mimics the appearance of an epitaph found on a headstone. But an epitaph is typically short, and *Nox* ultimately cannot keep to such a concise, controlled form; it cracks open and unwinds, spilling on and on both physically and in its content. As Tanis MacDonald has noted, this dual identification should not be understood as an elision of these two forms; rather, it ought to be understood as a duality of purpose and function ("Night in a Box" 53), a mixing of genres characteristic of Carson's larger body of work. Such generic mixing is also central to the Canadian long poem, a genre favoured by many contemporary English-Canadian elegists (Uppal 19-21). Smaro Kamboureli cautions that in the Canadian long poem "[c]oherence, then, does not

annul contradiction: it brings to light the generic interplay that makes the contemporary long poem a distinct poetic form. The inclusiveness of the long poem does not presuppose a harmonious interrelationship among its mixed literary kinds, nor does it necessitate a complete cancelling out of their idiosyncratic generic elements” (45-46). Kamboureli’s claim presents tension and unresolvedness not as failings but rather as hallmarks of the poetic form in which they are operating, and such tensions are the defining characteristics of Carson’s elegy. She slows down the process of mourning and this opens up space to explore and emphasize tensions that mark Carson’s personal experience of grief and mourning and can be found throughout the history of elegy to various degrees.

In addition to mixing elegy and epitaph in this text, Carson, as she does in many of her works, mixes poetry and scholarship. Although fragment 1.0 begins with Carson identifying her project as an elegy, she quickly reframes her project as she begins to “think about history” (1.0). Initially, Carson identifies history as being defined by the act of asking: “[t]he word ‘history’ comes from an ancient Greek verb [...] meaning ‘to ask.’ [...] But the asking is not idle” (1.1). In this asking, Carson claims, “[h]istory and elegy are akin” (1.1). Linking these two fields places emphasis on a key task of elegy: naming the dead, and, in so doing, identifying what has been lost. In attempting to write her brother’s history, Carson is attempting to also outline and understand who and what she has lost in his death.

Carson’s attempt to write her brother’s history relies on the accumulation of a variety of sources. Since translation cannot exist without a primary text, choosing to translate signals the importance of documents from the outset. Photographs serve as primary sources, and Carson compiles as many as she can, including those with no obvious representational value. She also draws on Michael’s letter, which can be considered another primary source, and several versions

of what might be called interviews, such as her phone conversations with Michael and her conversations with Michael's widow. She draws heavily on a wide variety of secondary sources, quoting from Virginia Woolf, Hekataios, Herodotos,⁶ and Plutarch. In assembling all of these sources, Carson intentionally presents herself in the role of researcher and translator, favouring these academic positions over her role as mourning sister. As Parr suggests, Carson "retreats into the reserved posture of the academician, a posture that affords her a distance from the story she will tell and the pain that it will convey" (350). In this sense, Carson's turn from elegy to history acts as a defensive measure, one which builds distance between herself and the subject of her elegy. Like a memorial container, the neutral academic position provides Carson-as-mourner with boundaries.

Along with Parr, I suggest that in *Nox* the dual position of translator and historian allows "Carson to distance herself from the subject of the book — the death of her brother — while maintaining the nobility of the effort to bridge that distance" (352). Translation allows a version of plausible deniability; one can insist that the words are someone else's, which allows a retreat if one feels one is saying too much. Similarly, scholarship provides at least the semblance of objectivity. Carson is thus able to question and investigate, to probe both her brother's life and her own response to his death, from a safe distance. This is not only a distance afforded by the ideal of scholarly detachment; it is also the temporal distance afforded the classics scholar and translator of Latin poetry. Carson primarily turns to Latin and Greek secondary sources, most obviously in choosing to translate Catullus. This contextualization creates the impression that a greater amount of time has passed since Michael's death than actually has by positioning his

⁶ Carson spells this name Herodotos, though it seems she is referring to Herodotus. I remain faithful to her spelling for the sake of consistency between quoted material and my text.

death as ancient history. And, as the saying goes, time heals all wounds, so creating this false temporal structure allows for another level of distance intended to enable such healing, or, at least, give the illusion of healing having occurred, which proves to be an act of self-deception on the mourner's part.

While discussing Carson's poems of desire, Lee Upton describes the result of her retreats into scholarly detachment as "a skin of scholarly reference" (107). However, Upton also suggests that Carson's writing is unique not only because she unabashedly mixes genres, including the poem and the scholarly essay, but because "neither the scholarly techniques nor the excesses of passion, including the most obsessive and deluded passions, are abraded in her work" (104). Like skin, Carson's generic mixing is protective. Yet the barrier it creates can easily be broken, and such wounding occurs repeatedly throughout *Nox* as emotion and passion burst through the skin of scholarly detachment and disrupt the expected emotional trajectory of elegy.

In this sense, *Nox* is similar to modernist anti-elegy. In his list of the key characteristics of anti-elegy, R. Clifton Spargo identifies five features, including the "expression of so-called inappropriate emotions as part of the repertoire of grief, including aggression, resentment, or phlegmatic indifference toward the dead" (Spargo, "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy" 416). Yet, despite features like this, he suggests that "anti-elegy may deploy a figurative break in the tradition even while carrying forward themes or elements prepared by the tradition itself" (416), since many features, including so-called "inappropriate" emotions appear throughout the history of the mode. Traditional conceptions of elegy have been dogged by the idea of solemnity, specifically the kind of measured seriousness associated with funeral processions and veiled mourners, but English elegy's history is not exclusively characterized by such solemnity. Donne's argumentative register, for instance, reveals that not all elegists have conformed to such

measured structures. Anti-elegy borrows these elements of elegy's history and exaggerates them. Carson, in turn, borrows this from anti-elegy, reframing it by putting it in juxtaposition with the controlled, measured tone not of the veiled mourner but of the academic.

This insertion of "inappropriate" emotions also characterizes *Nox* as an act of melancholic mourning, a conflation which will recur throughout many aspects of the text. In particular, Jahan Ramazani highlights the fact that melancholic mourning is "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4), an apt list of descriptors for *Nox*. It is certainly possible to understand the academic voice as ambivalent in its detachment, and the emotive interruptions in the text do, at times, become violent in the way that they appear in the text. Moreover, these emotions remain unresolved, as does the elegiac project as a whole.

Traditional elegy resolves any painful or disruptive emotions, when they do appear, by the end of the poem, providing a carefully delineated space in which to express the depth of sorrow or anger. Feldherr calls this "a moment of unrestricted mourning" (215) in the Roman funeral structure that informs Catullus's elegy. However, in rejecting consolation, versions of elegy like the modernist anti-elegy or contemporary elegies that adopt a mix of melancholia and mourning also reject the need to resolve the "inappropriate" emotions that may emerge in the course of mourning. In the elegiac ritual Carson is creating, she captures a tension between the desire for control, structure, and resolution and the need for unrestricted mourning, along with all of its attendant emotions. The guise of scholarly detachment provides a version of the traditional solemnity of mourning, not by resolving strong emotions, but by creating a space in which they do not inherently belong. But this protective skin is repeatedly punctured, and the eruptions of emotion are never fully resolved. Instead, their recurrence throughout the text forms an integral

part of the elegy and their persistence exposes the tension between lived mourning and elegiac traditions.

Such emotive eruptions are particularly evident in the various instances of etching such as the one on the page with fragment 3.1 (see Fig. 1), which calmly identifies two facts: Michael

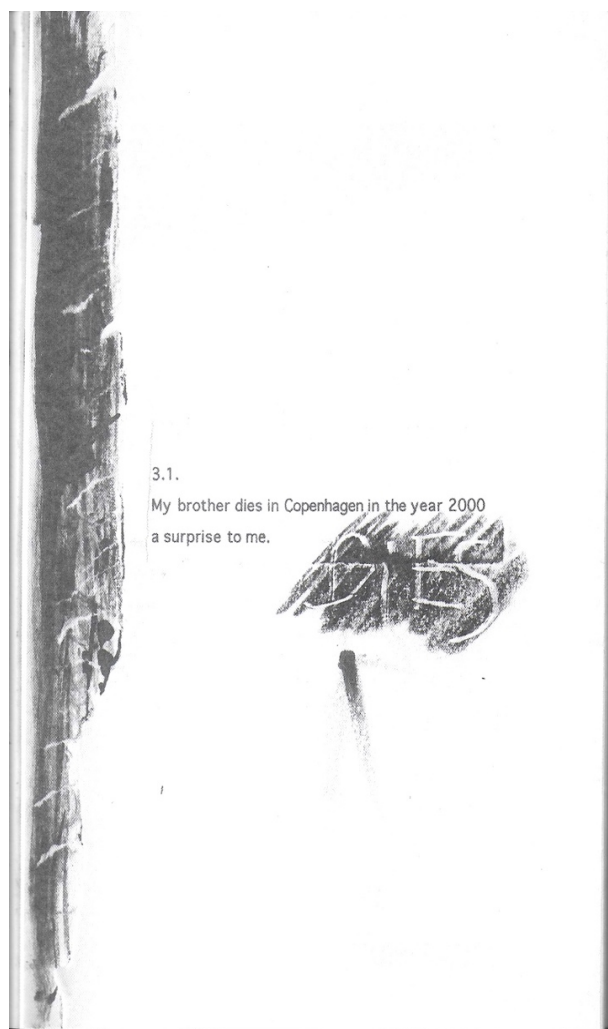


Fig. 1. Fragment 3.1. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

died in 2000 and his death was a surprise to Carson. An etching of the word “dies” rubbed over with charcoal or pencil crosses over the edge of the paper on which the typed text presenting these facts is found, so that the word is half on the scrap of paper and half on the background paper to which this scrap has been affixed. The choice to etch the word and then reveal it through rubbing creates an extreme contrast between this addition and the neatly typed, trimmed, and pasted text of fragment 3.1. The physical appearance of the scratched word lends an immediacy to the emotions at work, as if it is creating a record of the emotional experience as it is occurring. The lines of the letters are disconnected or incomplete

suggesting they were written with a sense of urgency in which speed and communication overtook aesthetics in importance. The charcoal rubbing that reveals the letters is sufficient for the word’s legibility, but it is, like the letters themselves, not perfectly complete, with the edges

of letters disappearing into the surrounding paper and a disconnected smudge suggesting a lack of carefulness or delicacy in the effort to uncover the word. The scholar presents the facts of the situation; the grieving sister etches the word into the surface. Though at times the text of *Nox* seems controlled and calm, this surface is punctured again and again by such moments of high emotion.

Such puncturing occurs in both obviously disruptive and far more subtle ways, and both result in part from the mode of translation undertaken by Carson. Catullus's poem, Sze suggests, "provides an allusive space of lyric grief that Carson accesses for her own mourning" (73) and so it is, in a sense, the choice to translate that makes mourning possible. Yet, it is the unconventional approach to this translation that allows Carson to create an emotional landscape reflective of her personal mourning, a landscape that builds upon and echoes Catullus's but is uniquely Carson's. This unconventional approach to translation facilitates one of the subtle manifestations of emotive puncturing: the amplification of each meaning allows for emotional intrusions into the scholarly project. The lexical entries serve as a visual cue that leads readers to frame the project as a scholarly one and thus associate Carson with her roles as researcher and translator, those figures that offer Carson distance from the subject of her brother's death and therefore establish a space in which Carson remains in control of the emotional register and trajectory of the text. Yet, despite this initial impression, the amplificatory approach to translation introduces room for the voice of the emotional mourner to emerge, for the personalized interjections and modifications that appear in these lexical entries not only recontextualize Catullus's elegy, they also introduce emotion to an otherwise detached element of the text. Sze describes Carson's introductions of her own definitions into the lexical entries as moments when "[t]he neutral and authoritative voice associated with the dictionary is apparently

overtaken by one subjectivized, humanized” (73). These incursions into the lexical entries are a result of the translation practice that Carson chooses to use, one which allows her to add and collect almost infinitely, permitting modifications and liberties with definitions that typical heterolingual translation would not.

Carson’s amplificatory approach not only facilitates such subtle introductions, but also disruptive, violent punctures through the incorporation of non-textual material in the translation. These elements physically interrupt the scholarly premise of research with overtly personal and emotional fragments. But these interruptions themselves are part of the translation Carson is creating, an extension of the liberties she takes within the lexical entries. The painting of red, outstretched hands (see Fig. 2) is a striking moment of such emotional disruption. Red symbolizes both passion and anger while also suggesting blood or muscles stripped of their protective skin. These could be Carson’s hands, reaching out to try to grasp her brother, or they could be Michael’s hands, reaching back from the dead. Prior to this image, Carson tells us that “[m]ore than one person has pointed out a likeness between my brother and Lazarus” (8.3). Are these, then, the outstretched hands of the resurrected Lazarus? As is so often the case in Carson’s work, the answer is that the hands



Fig. 2. Painted hands. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

encompass all of these possible readings; they are Michael's and Carson's, Lazarus's, and, as quickly becomes apparent, Lazarus's sister's.

After the painting we are presented with a scholarly discussion of the story of Lazarus which presents two possible ways to understand him: "You can think of Lazarus as an example of resurrection or as a person who had to die twice. An historian will take the latter view" (8.4). However, what interests Carson most is Lazarus's muteness each time he appears in the Bible, even at his own resurrection (8.4). This muteness is what we expect of the dead, and the parallel drawn here between Michael and Lazarus suggests that Michael, too, will remain stoically silent. Yet, despite the silence that characterized Carson and Michael's relationship as adults, the Michael resurrected in the elegy ultimately subverts the expectation that this Lazarus analogy creates.

Carson's interest in muteness turns quickly from Lazarus to Lazarus's sister as she shifts her attention to a painting by Giotto, noting "the person with raised hands and no mouth (perhaps his sister) placed behind Lazarus to load this space with muteness" (8.4). The hands, then, become the hands of the sister, the mourner turned celebrant in the story of a resurrection. Significantly, this figure's muteness is involuntary; Giotto has rendered her mute by taking away not only her voice but her very ability to form words. While the biblical story depicted in Giotto's painting does feature Lazarus's sisters, the muteness of the woman in the painting, rather than any accepted painterly conventions, seems to be what leads Carson to the assumption of a familial bond between this figure and Lazarus himself. The assumption of a sibling relationship also arises from Carson's presentation of Lazarus and Michael as analogous figures, which implies that Carson herself would have a parallel within the painting. Thus, the figure with whom she identifies most becomes a sister figure and the mouthless, wordless woman becomes

her stand in. The literal impossibility of speech for this figure evokes Carson's own sense of overtakeness, the feeling of needing to confront something even when one cannot fully describe, understand, or articulate what it is. It also explains, perhaps, why her elegy begins with someone else's words and why the elegy itself is shot through with moments of intense emotion. The figure with whom Carson identifies herself is unable to speak, but, as a result of her muteness, she becomes an embodiment of raw emotion. The grieving sister is incapable of speech, so she begins the process of articulation by borrowing words from Catullus. If the painted hands are understood as hers, then they are meant as a substitute for language, a way to convey both sorrow and celebration, and consequently they are a piece of complex emotive material breaking into the scholarly discussion. They serve to help translate elements of Catullus's poem that defy simple language by expanding definitions of each word well beyond the denotative.

Figuring Michael and Lazarus as analogous also demonstrates another way the structure of translation is essential to the ritual Carson is creating. Susan Bassnett argues that translation "is a form of resurrection of the dead" ("Prologue" 2). Walter Benjamin claimed that translations constitute the afterlife of a text, for through translation, a piece of the past is brought into the present (77). The past and present become proximate through translation, and, in the context of mourning, this temporal distortion brings the dead and the living into the same moment without necessitating a melancholic fixation on the past, for the act of resurrection/translation transforms the one being resurrected. Thus, Bella Brodzki claims that "To cross the threshold from life to death and from death to afterlife is *to be translated, to be in translation*. Translation is the mode through which what is dead, disappeared, forgotten, buried, or suppressed overcomes its determined fate by being borne (and thus born anew) to other contexts across time and space"

(6). Michael is translated as Catullus's poem is translated, brought back into connection with the living.

Since *Nox* translates Catullus's elegy, the relationship between living and dead in Catullus's poem serves as a basis for the relationship Carson's elegy creates between herself and her brother. The more contemporary funeral, much like the pastoral elegy or the Roman funeral, ostensibly concludes with a clear division between the living and the dead, a separation that is restored by way of the ritual itself and is necessary for the conclusion of the mourning process and the return to community life. Yet the Roman ritual that shapes "Poem 101" suggests ambiguity in this relationship. While the funeral ritual works to re-establish boundaries between the living and the dead, it also "define[s] a new context for exchange between the dead and the living" (Feldherr 212), and these two processes "cannot be completely disentangled chronologically" (213). An ongoing relationship — though a redefined one — exists even at the same moment the mourner is attempting to establish a clear delineation between themselves and the one they have lost. Such ambiguity and tension, rather than the intended limitations, come to characterize Carson's text.

Because melancholic mourning rejects consolation derived from a separation between mourner and mourned, the elegy that embraces such a practice works instead to maintain the connection between the living and the dead. Uppal argues that often contemporary English-Canadian elegists turn the elegy into a tool for "uncovering strategies for reunion with the dead and dialogue with the past" and in doing so "protest the severing effects of death and historical time, and advocate a new standard of elegiac success: reconnection with one's subject" (36). Where the traditional elegy speaks *of* the dead, the contemporary elegy, rooted in melancholic mourning, speaks *to* and *with* them. Longer poetic elegies allow such connections to emerge

because “[t]he expansiveness of the long poem and its ability to encompass a variety of approaches, styles, and poetic forms, allow for multiple avenues of reunion and recovery” (Uppal 19-20). Carson makes use of the longer form and its potential for multiplicity. Her approach to translating Catullus exemplifies the contrast Uppal identifies, transforming the succinct Latin elegy into a long, unruly text that incorporates a multitude of modes and forms.

Nox begins with an invocation of the dead, an attempt to call them into conversation and, in this way, to perform a resurrection. The first page has six hand-painted iterations of “Michael” over which a small piece of vellum with the printed phrase “NOX / FRATER / NOX” — which translates as “Night, brother, night” — has been pasted (Carson, *Nox*). This is, Brillenburg Wurth notes, in part “[a] farewell, resigned” (24), as Carson seemingly wishes her brother goodbye or goodnight, starting the text with an attempted farewell. However, the repetitive structure here offers a double reading, not only as a farewell but also as an address to the night-as-brother and the brother-as-night, imagery that indicates a lack of knowledge about Michael’s life and a certain familiarity or comfort with the darkness. While in one sense this opening may be resigned, it is also “the exact opposite of resignation. The naming is like an incantation, repeated over and over, as if to resurrect the brother who disappeared” (24). The sense that this repetition is a kind of summoning is strengthened by the use of Latin, a language often associated with or bastardized for magic spells in popular culture. And so, this starting page suggests that as this initial attempt at a farewell fails, the brother is summoned in order to provide another chance to say farewell through a ritual that supplants the funeral and its function as an act of parting.

The invocation is successful to a degree, with Michael making appearances in the text primarily by way of photographs, recollected conversations, and a copy of a letter he wrote. Michael appears in photographs, or he at least seems to. When he does show up he is too far

from the camera, or his face is shadowed, or the quality is poor. He is, if indeed it is him, always a child, but his identity remains unconfirmed since the figures are never named. We don't know whether the child pictured is Carson, Michael, or someone else entirely, and, thus, we are left only with the assumption that these are indeed family photographs and that Carson has chosen to feature Michael in these images. As a consequence of all this, he is never quite there, a presence that is suggested but slips away just as one thinks one has a firm grasp on him. Similarly, while Michael occasionally speaks by way of his letter and transcripts of his phone calls with Carson, anything he says is disjointed and fragmented. The letter is torn into pieces and scattered throughout the text, breaking apart any cohesion or coherence that marked the original. In his calls with Carson, he is taciturn, offering brief and uninformative comments. Carson's approach to translation, which takes on a mosaic-like quality, shattering things in order to bring the pieces back together in a new arrangement, both reflects the relationship that existed between the siblings prior to Michael's death and exacerbates the fragmentation and lack of communication by literally tearing apart coherent units of communication like the letter. Because Carson's translation prizes incompleteness, her desire to draw her brother into conversation can never be fulfilled, yet the text simultaneously denies the muteness we expect of the dead; Michael, unlike Lazarus, does not remain silent, even if his speech is often fragmented and occasionally enigmatic. The sister in the painting and Carson both celebrate a resurrection, but where Lazarus's resurrection restored the brother to the sister and, as far as we know, allowed them to return to their lives as they had been before Lazarus's death, Carson cannot execute this kind of resurrection. Instead, Michael's stubbornly enigmatic presence undermines the celebration perhaps prompted by such a resurrection and is ultimately the reason that resurrection and continued connection with the dead do not offer a conclusion to the process of mourning.

The expected conclusion to this elegy is an act of farewell that facilitates a parting between living and dead. “Poem 101,” emulating the traditional Roman mourning ritual, ends with the literal farewell that typically closed the Roman funerary rite (Fleming 68). Carson’s first full translation of “Poem 101” found about two-thirds of the way through *Nox* similarly ends with a farewell. Indeed, this version ends with a doubled farewell: “and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell” (Carson, *Nox*). This doubling reads as an echo reverberating “into forever” (Carson, *Nox*) which suggests it is infinite and unending. This farewell, though repeatedly attempted, is never fully successful, not least because this farewell line does not conclude the text. As Fleming observes, “[t]here is a sense in Carson’s translation that the act of farewellling the dead can perhaps never be *done*” (68). The resulting tension between the desire for a farewell and the desire for continued relationship is a fundamental feature of this elegy. Carson has rejected the necessity of conclusion or parting, yet the elegy betrays the attraction of such a clear structure and demarcation between living and dead. Once again, the elegy renders the ways that lived experience is in conflict with mourning rituals, and as a result Carson’s alterations to the elegy sometimes feel reluctant.

The repeated attempts to articulate and execute such a farewell multiply through the last third of the text. The entry for *vale*, the final word in Catullus’s poem, includes a series of farewells — “Goodbye! (at the close of a letter); (in taking leave of the dead); (as a formula of scornful dismissal); to bid goodbye” — and concludes “*parum valent Graeci verbo* the Greeks have no precise word for this (but we call it ‘night’)” (Carson, *Nox*). As night falls gradually, so too does the farewell happen gradually. There is no one marked moment of separation. Unlike the traditional elegy, and markedly unlike the highly ritualized form Catullus’s poem follows, Carson’s elegy fades out slowly. The next page after the entry for *vale* contains a scrap of paper

with “He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears” (Carson, *Nox*). This, Fleming notes, suggests that Michael “refuses the definitive ritual send-off. He resists the closing of the rite” (69). Although this is a parting, it is not a well-defined farewell. Michael leaves, but without any sense of finality or momentousness, simply withdrawing silently. The lack of definitive conclusion in a ritual farewell is seemingly owing as much to Michael as it is to Carson, suggesting that the dead have continued agency and actively participate in an ongoing relationship with the living.

The amplificatory and accumulative approach to translation in *Nox* connects this text with Carson’s term for the sublimity of documentary excess: foam. Carson begins her commentary on foam and the sublime by discussing Longinus’s *On the Sublime*:

This work is an aggregation of quotes. It has no argument, no organization, no paraphrasable conclusion. [...] You will come away from reading its forty chapters with no clear idea what the Sublime actually is. But you will have been thrilled by its documentation. Longinus skates from Homer to Demonsthenes to Moses to Sappho on blades of electricity — who cares what his theory is, the skating is a joy! Sublime quotes are their own reason for being. (Carson, “Foam” 96)

Such excess and accumulation also describe the contents of *Nox* and the translation process Carson employs, which relies on the gathering of ever more material, on plumbing the depths of each individual word as far as she possibly can. Sublimity arises from quantity and repetition, and from flitting from one fragment to another.

Nox collects fragments, offering limited organization and little in the way of paraphrasable conclusions. The first lexical entry in *Nox* is for the word *multas*:

numerous, many, many of, many a; many people, many, many women, the ordinary people, the many especially in phrase *unus de multis*: one of many; many things, much, to a great extent, many words especially in elliptical phrases e.g. *quid multa? ne multa*: to cut a long story short; an abundance of, much, large, *multum est*: it is of value; appearing or acting on many occasions, assiduous, regular, used many times; (of persons) too much in evidence, tedious, wearisome, verbose; occurring in a high degree, full, intense, *multa dies* or *multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late. (Carson, *Nox*)

The entry itself is an example of *multas*, of an abundance, even an overabundance. As the first entry, occurring so early in the text, this sets the tone for the work as a whole. The repetition of the word “many” throughout the first series of definitions creates the sense of overabundance even within this very entry. Yet, as much as this may be a literal description — “verbose” seems particularly apt in a text that is constructed around the accumulation of lexical entries — we are also told that possible definitions include “occurring in a high degree, full, intense” (Carson, *Nox*). *Multas* is not only present in the physical text but in the emotional register of the work, and this work, the work of mourning, will not always be pleasant. At times it may seem like too much.

At the end of this lengthy definition, Carson uses the Latin phrase *multa dies* as an example, translating it somewhat poetically as “broad daylight,” an image that suggests frank, unflinching examination, bringing things to light, specifically a clear, full light that leaves no room to hide, a light that reveals so much it might be uncomfortable. The more literal translation of *multa dies* would be “many days,” a phrase that offers insight into the temporality of the work of mourning being undertaken in this elegy. *Multa dies* here suggests that mourning is a lengthy

process spanning many days. Interestingly, Carson presents first *multa dies* and then *multa nox*, many days followed by many nights, a logical order from a chronological standpoint, but an inversion of how the metaphor of day and night typically works in the context of mourning, where the darkness of night is the period of grief, disconsolation, and sorrow, and is dispelled by the hope and metaphorical return to the world of the living symbolized by the day. By inverting this order, Carson rejects the notion that day or light is inherently conciliatory, instead suggesting that mourning occurs at all times, and simultaneously amplifies an implication of that typical metaphor: that day will inevitably be followed by night, and thus though grief, sorrow, or pain may wane and allow for celebration or joy, that state is not a permanent one.

Carson also takes advantage of the heterolingual translation that structures the text in order to pun on the word *dies*. For English speakers, the word *dies* in *multa dies* is a homograph for dies, so this phrase indicates an abundance of light and time, but it also suggests an abundance of death and thus creates a balance between the two within the elegy. The light does not overwhelm the death; the two coexist. The link created by this punning also offers a secondary reading of the scratched “dies” on the page with fragment 3.1 (see Fig. 1). The repetitive, nearly frantic scratching that seems to have produced the word dies on that page, along with the urgent charcoal rubbing that reveals it, now suggest not only overwhelming grief, but overwhelming hope or determination to find something beyond that grief; it suggests a determination to find daylight by which to see things clearly, some of the light with which Carson hopes to fill her elegy (Carson 1.0). The puncture created by the scratched word breaks the academic skin not only as the voice of a grieving, wailing sister, but as the voice of an elegist determined to find a way for elegy to offer a way through, a way out of paralyzing grief even if the concept of consolation in any traditional sense has been rejected.

The abundance of the text and the work it undertakes, however, means that the collecting is never done, and the impossibility of conclusion, built into the translation practice Carson adopts, makes traditional mourning rituals insufficient because they typically insist on limiting the scope of mourning in some fashion by clearly marking out the end point of the ritual. Carson's elegy foams and spills over these boundaries, even when they are ones, like a farewell, that she seems to actively pursue. Fleming notes that "Carson's choices in translating the Catullus poem blur the boundaries between the living and the dead, and suggest the insufficiency of the funeral rite. These strategies insist on her grief-work as processual and ongoing. There is no definitive cure" (68). This insufficiency and the sense that the work of mourning is unending are essential to the way *Nox* functions as an elegy, and this insufficiency is a tension in the original Catullus poem that Carson's approach to translation accentuates. Feldherr points out that in the Roman tradition the funeral does not mark the end of mourning, but rather the start of a series of repetitions that re-draw the line between the living and dead (224). Carson's ritual enfolds many of these repetitions into a single ritual.

Despite her attempts to assemble her brother's story from the fragments to which she has access, Carson is never able to arrive at an entirely coherent narrative. As a result, the elegiac ritual she enacts is shaped by the *work* of mourning, presenting it as a perpetual process rather than a singular task. Sze sees the controlling structures of *Nox* as the act of replication, which she grounds in the material form of the text. Carson identifies the work as a replica on the back of the box, and Sze links this with the folding of the text by way of the etymology of the word *replica* which "derives from the Latin *replicare*, meaning 'to reply,' 'to copy,' and, most importantly, 'to refold'" (67). She goes on to argue that "[t]he epitaphic 'reply' to the question of Michael's identity can only be a copy, a simulacrum, something that always gives itself to more foldings

and refoldings, in accordance with the material processes that *Nox* invites. The work of mourning both falls short and is extended indefinitely” (72). The intrinsic failure of the project is not, however, solely a result of the material form of the text. Liedeke Plate suggests that “[i]n elaborating the parallel between translating poem 101 and remembering her brother, Carson emphasizes (never-ending) process over (finished) product” (104). Sze recognizes this parallel as well, drawing our attention to Carson’s own assertion that “[e]very translator knows the point where one language cannot be rendered into another” (qtd. in Sze 73). Sze elaborates, “[i]t is a truism that translation entails loss — inherent to the very process — and nothing can make up for it. Loss is both the enabling and the disabling condition of all translation” (73). Paul Ricoeur sees mourning and translation as connected: “it happens that the work of mourning finds its equivalent in translation studies and puts its harsh but invaluable corrective into it. I will summarize it in one line: give up the ideal of the perfect translation” (8). If one accepts the impossibility of the perfect translation, then attention shifts to process, making the act of translation, rather than the final product, essential, and as Ricoeur’s analogous link between mourning and translation suggests, this impossibility must also be recognized in the work of mourning. There is no perfect work of mourning, no ritual that will neatly guide the mourner to the idealized conclusion of separation from that which has been lost.

However, it is not only the general structure of translation that imbues the text with such an emphasis on process; rather, it is Carson’s choice to translate this specific poem by Catullus and the translation process she uses to create her translation. The act of translating this poem is itself a perpetual project, an unending series of replications. What would typically be considered the “finished” translation — the complete English version of Catullus’s poem — is neither the

culmination of the text nor the end of the process. Instead, it is lost within the process, buried amidst the fragments. Moreover, versions of the “final” translation appear three times in the text, and the most complete of these is the first iteration, further undermining its status as end product. The first appearance of this “final” translation is yellowed and the ink is slightly smudged, so that the text seems to be fading away even as it is presented to us (see Fig. 3). In its next appearance, it is cut into strips, which are pasted over one another so that only portions of the text remain legible (see Fig. 4). In its last appearance, at the end of the text, it is waterlogged, as if soaked in tears or drowned in the ocean that separated Carson from her brother, and as a result is nearly unreadable (see Fig. 5). The waterlogged appearance of this iteration of the poem

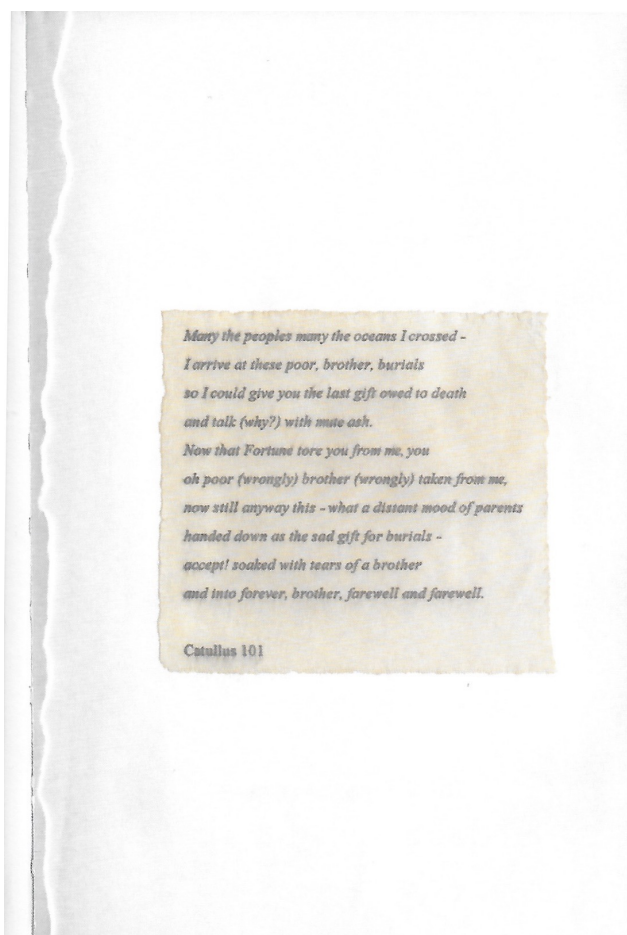


Fig. 3. The first appearance of the “finished” English translation of “Poem 101.” Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

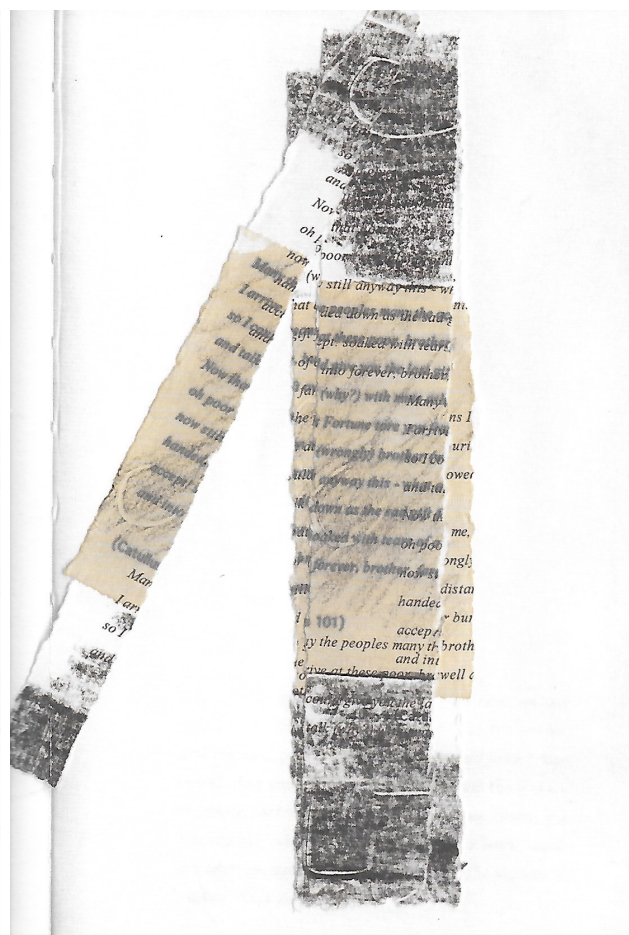


Fig. 4. The second appearance of the “finished” English translation of “Poem 101.” Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

connects her text with the watery history of pastoral elegy. In this, she evokes Lycidas “[s]unk [...] beneath the watery floor” (Milton line 167) and the ocean’s subsequent recurrence in elegies from the seventeenth century onward. David Kennedy observes that in many elegies, “[t]he sea figures, in the words of Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*, the possibility of ‘a sea change’ into a ‘rich and strange’ consolatory apotheosis” (6). But in *Nox* it is the elegy itself that has been drowned, suggesting that the ocean that Carson’s elegy must literally and figuratively bridge ultimately makes a consolatory conclusion impossible. The distance, the circumstances, and the grief, are too great to be completely consoled

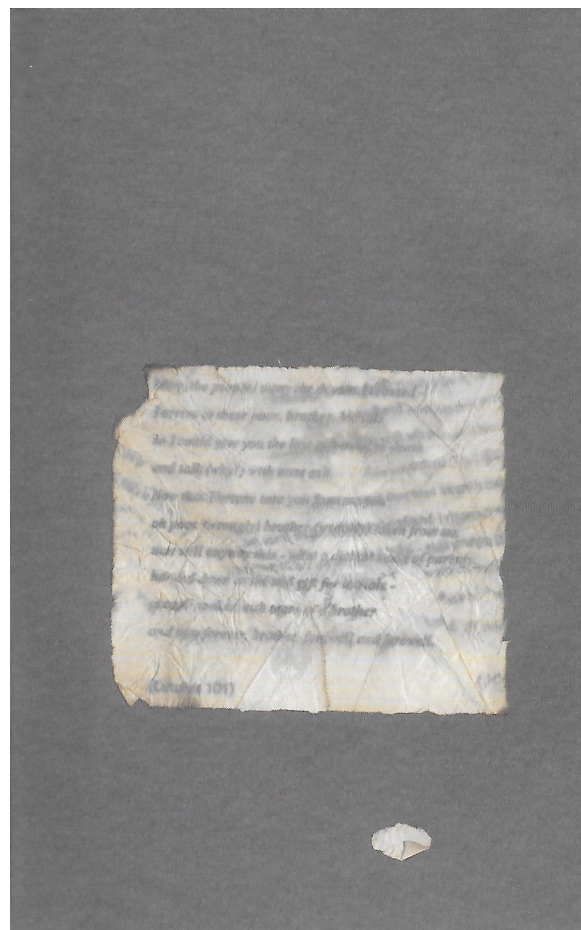


Fig. 5. The third appearance of the “finished” English translation of “Poem 101.” Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

in the way that a conciliatory elegiac model necessitates. However, the transformative “sea change” of the elegy is redirected, with the ocean eventually becoming the place where mourning may become festivity, and in this way some consolation remains present in the elegy, even if it must paradoxically exist alongside ongoing sorrow.

The final page of the collection, which presents the last “complete” version of the English translation of Catullus’s poem, is, uncharacteristically for the work, dark grey (see Fig. 5). The words “(why?)” and “brother” are the only legible bits following the paper’s soaking. This final page brings the elegy back to the night it began with, back to the relationship between mourner

and mourned, and back to questions rather than answers. Whatever sense of finality the “full” translation offers when it first appears is slowly diffused over the course of the final third of *Nox* so that by the end there is no conclusion. We are instead left almost exclusively with the process itself and with the sense that another attempt must be made. Kevin McNeilly suggests that in Carson’s writing, “[w]hat we take for fixity, for self-evidence, is really only another way to frame a question” (“Five Fairly Short Talks”). The initial iteration of the “complete” translation of “Poem 101” evokes fixity and finality, yet Carson immediately destabilizes this impression and plunges herself and her readers back into the next lexical entry because the translation is not yet complete.

Process is not merely given room in this text; it is the text. And while the text may end, there is no suggestion that the process — of translation or mourning — has ended along with it. In fact, Carson draws our attention to the fact that she has encountered and translated “Poem 101” before, describing her relationship with it as an unending series of translations dating back to her first encounter with it in high school (7.1). One of the translations she mentions appears in *Men in the Off Hours*, as part of a sequence entitled “Catullus: *Carmina*.” Moreover, it could be argued that the textual version of *Nox* is not her most recent attempt at translating “Poem 101.” The dance productions of *Nox*⁷ which were created subsequent to the text’s publication are yet another attempt to translate, another phase in this unending relationship.

Repetitions or, to borrow Sze’s term, replications such as these various attempts at translation of “Poem 101” contribute to the documentary sublimity of the text, but they also lend

⁷ Choreographed by Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Reiner, the dance version of *Nox* premiered at Danspace Project, 10-12 May 2012. Carson and Robert Currie, who helped with the production of the text version of *Nox*, participate in the performance through live drawing on overhead projectors. More information and a video of the performance can be found on Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Reiner’s website: <http://www.rashaunsilasdance.com/nox>.

a compulsive quality to the work. Carson's collection of fragments takes on a hoarder-like tendency, as even the most inconsequential of scraps are saved just in case they are needed later. At one point, a crumpled mess (see Fig. 6) resembling the offcuts that might normally be thrown away in a scrapbooking process is stapled to the page. She also re-examines pieces over and over. Take, for instance, the series of pages on which fragment 2.2 appears. The text of this fragment is reproduced four times, but each time it has moved to a new position and is accompanied by a new fragment from Michael's letter. Fragment 2.2 presents the facts of why Michael moved overseas and changed his name and details his sporadic contact with his family in the ensuing years. Only one small change occurs in the text: the addition of a single handwritten comma that changes the sentence "I don't know how he made his decisions in those days" to "I don't know how, he made his decisions in those days" (2.2). The change is a small one, but it marks the distinction between Carson and Michael that emerged from his departure. This presentation of fragment 2.2 suggests that if one just looks hard enough, if one finds the right angle and context — if *Carson* finds the right angle — something essential will be revealed by the scraps

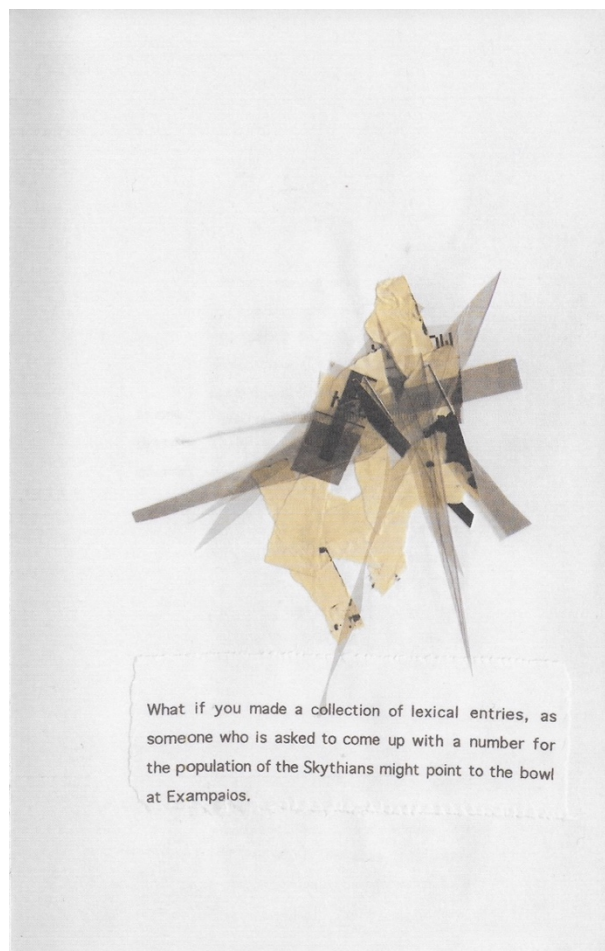


Fig. 6. An assemblage of remains. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

under examination. Whatever it is that Carson is looking for never appears, and as a result, the process of reconsideration and re-examination must continue indefinitely.

Repetition thus becomes caught up in the compulsive accumulation that fuels Carson's gathering of information, and as such, the methodology of this translation becomes analogous to the repetition linked with the Freudian process of working through, which holds clear parallels to Freudian mourning. Repetition in the context of trauma, according to Freud, is an example of a patient reproducing a repressed or forgotten memory of the traumatic event ("Remembering, Repeating" 150). This is not precisely the kind of repetition occurring in *Nox*, but it does reveal a link between the process of remembering and the action of repeating, one which does also manifest in the history of elegy, namely in pastoral elegies: acceptance. Peter M. Sacks proposes that some pastoral elegies borrow a choral structure, either by introducing a chorus or splitting the single elegiac speaker's voice into a somewhat divided one, and that one purpose of such fracturing of voice has to do with "the very recognition of loss" (35). He suggests that "through a kind of repetitive dialogue the bereaved is forced to accept a reality that he might otherwise refuse" (35-36). The repetitions, particularly of bare facts like those found on the repeated fragment 2.2, in *Nox* serve a similar function; what Carson is searching for in her repeated examinations of those facts is a sense that they are true, a sense of acceptance. Importantly, however, these repetitions are intentional and conscious, distinguishing them from the unconscious repetitions that Freud discusses. However, like Freud's repetitions, even in a controlled environment in which the repetitions are intentionally being invoked (for Freud this is executed by an analyst, but Carson serves this role for herself, perhaps another benefit of her split role as academic and mourner), there is not necessarily an end point, and instead the work of remembering must continue in spite of continued resistance and repetition ("Remembering,

Repeating” 155). The repetitions are a manifestation of the elegy’s attempts to articulate and understand what has been lost through Michael’s death, and this process is neither simple nor finite.

REFRAMING CONSOLATION

By shifting the focus of the elegy to process and work, Carson is able to transform melancholic attachment with the dead and fixation on loss into the source for a version of consolation that is not dependent on conclusion or separation. Consolation is no longer something that brings mourning to an end. Instead it becomes a feeling of comfort, even joy, that paradoxically exists alongside ongoing grief. The potential for joy to come from something other than a final product, to emerge from unending process, is partly facilitated by translation. Ricoeur sees renunciation of the idea of perfect translation as the source of “the happiness associated with translating” (10). Similarly, Carson’s emphasis on process is ultimately a gesture of hope, for it counters melancholic stasis even as it allows for a recognition and manifestation of the ongoing nature of grief. While the ritual created here rejects the idea of conclusion, it does not entirely refuse comfort or consolation. Instead, it repurposes and relocates these concepts, seeing them emerge sporadically throughout and by way of work and process.

The comfort or consolation offered by mourning rituals is partly tied to re-engagement with the living community, and while Carson’s elegy maintains an active relationship between the dead and the living, it counters the pathology of melancholia by simultaneously working to place the mourner in community with the living. In this sense, the elegy as Carson constructs it serves as a substitute for another fundamental task of the funeral: community gathering. Feldherr points to the role of community in the Roman funeral ritual, which presumes that mourners

occupy a liminal state between the community of the dead and the community of the living and the purpose of mourning rituals is to redraw those boundaries in order to allow the mourner to reintegrate into the community of the living (212). The notion of mourning as a liminal state from which one emerges in order to re-engage with the living and leave behind the dead also characterizes Freudian mourning and pastoral elegy. Yet, while Carson makes attempts at delineating between living and dead, she is ultimately unable to perform such a separation and therefore creates an elegy that is uninterested in redrawing a boundary between living and dead to the extent that models like the pastoral elegy are. However, the community aspect of the elegy remains central, with Carson reconstituting a group of mourners akin to the procession of mourners referenced in pastoral elegies, but doing so across geo-temporal divides.

As part of funerals, the eulogy, according to Derrida, serves a particular community-building purpose. In his eulogy for Paul de Man, published in *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida explains, “[w]e are speaking today less in order to say something than to assure ourselves, with voice and with music, that we are together in the same thought” (72). Funerals are fundamentally acts of commemoration, an act of public, collective remembering and celebration. Dale Tracy suggests that “[c]ommemoration is another kind of meeting: remembering through public celebration brings individuals together while bringing the significance of the past into the present’s meaning” (210). However, while commemoration is an act of remembering, those who participate in a commemorative event need not be directly connected to the deceased nor directly impacted by their death. Indeed, in addition to creating space for the kind of assurances Derrida describes, commemorative events create space for what Tracy calls “with-ness” (160): witnessing as being with and alongside another. Such community comes together in the act of commemoration and in this gathering provides support and comfort to one another.

Michael's widow is the only other living mourner who appears in this elegy; thus Carson's record of her journey to visit her and the information she gives Carson about Michael's funeral provide Carson with a belated and indirect connection to the community-building function of the funeral, tying her to the community of the living and providing proof that there are others who share her loss. However, because the access to this community is only belated and indirect, the community created in *Nox* must be assembled across geo-temporal spaces in order to act in place of the community that she may have otherwise found at another event like the funeral, so in addition to the fragmented community of fellow mourners with whom Carson tangentially and belatedly associates herself, *Nox* gathers an extended and ever-expanding community by inviting a degree of participation from readers. As is true of any published elegy, the choice to replicate, publish, and distribute what was initially a private act of mourning and memorialization opens up positions in the sympathetic community to readers, providing an ongoing guarantee of community. Publishing not only invites readers into community with Carson but also gives this text the potential to find a position within the sympathetic community of another mourner who is mourning in isolation. Indeed, this possibility is encouraged by the blank reverse side of the text. In an article in *The Irish Times*, Carson tells Parul Sehgal that "[b]ecause the backs of the pages are blank, you can make your own book there" (Sehgal). MacDonald comments on this aspect of the text and the implications it has for the creation of elegy: "The implication is, undoubtedly, that one grief will awaken another: that elegies will beget elegies so that the 'books' generated by this single book are potentially infinite. All books composed on the back of *Nox* will be inevitably part of *Nox*: informed by its style, influenced by its propinquity, and folded into the proliferations of *Nox*" ("Night in a Box" 57).

As the text calls to the future, it builds an ever-growing community of mourners. Similarly, Sze links the existence of community with the text's physical capacity to create engagement with readers, arguing that "every time we fold and refold *Nox* we participate *materially* in the experience of Carson's grief" (72), and, because of this participation, reading *Nox* "is not at all an act of voyeurism [...] but literally an act of *compassion* on her behalf. As long as we replicate *Nox*, we grieve with Carson and sing for Michael" (72). The distinction between voyeur and witness is an important one, but Sze's claim comes precariously close to relying on a substitutive relationship between reader and elegist. As Tracy notes, one of the principal dangers posed by standard conceptions of lyric poetry is the tendency for the lyric speaker to be understood as a cipher for the reader. But in order to enact compassionate witness — the mode of elegist-reader relationship that *Nox* establishes — we must maintain a distinction between reader and elegist such that the reader does not mourn as or on behalf of the elegist any more than they stand at a distance as a voyeur. While *Nox* may invite readers to write their own elegies, whether metaphorically or literally, these elegies need not be for Michael.

Assembling community plays an important role in compassionate witness, which is grounded in the concept of "with-ness":

In compassionate response to a poem, a reader feels with a speaker rather than as the speaker. It is this response that contributes to a network of care extending beyond the poem. Actual relationships between readers and speakers can metonymically become part of a system of compassionate response when readers feel their own feelings in response to poems' speakers. (240-41)

Nox may invite readerly engagement and participation, but it does not ask that we as readers mourn for Michael, merely that we feel (and even write) our own responses, our own feelings.

Unlike a community gathered for a funeral, we do not gather to mourn a single shared loss, but to derive comfort from the commonality of the general experience of loss, to know that while others may not have experienced our particular loss, they have experienced analogous losses.

The text's inbuilt capacity for participatory replication allows for the formation of a compassionate community of mourners, but the invitation to participate is enhanced and encouraged by the amplificatory approach Carson takes to translating Catullus. Because the translation process Carson undertakes actively works to undermine any sense of finality or completion in her work, and because she explicitly describes the need for repeated attempts to translate the material, she presents the possibility that each reader, when they accept the invitation of the blank reverse side of the page, might be the next one to translate Catullus. Moreover, Carson presents all possible meanings for each word, and even proposes her own, leaving readers with the ability to pick and choose which option they would select, a choice that places them in the position of the traditional translator and makes them an active participant in a new iteration of the translations of Catullus. Similarly, the more abstract fragments of the text lend themselves to multiple interpretations and multiple lines of connection, once again offering the reader more information from which to choose in the construction of another translation of Catullus's poem. Thus, while Carson's translation works toward a nearly blank "final" translation, the reader who comes along is invited to step into this blank space and begin to assemble their own "final" translation.

While community may offer some comfort, consolation also manifests throughout the elegy in flashes of something Carson calls "festivity." For Carson, grief, mourning, and celebration are interwoven; sorrow and festivity co-exist. According to Sze, this is one way readerly participation and replication come together to create a consolatory effect in this elegy.

She argues that “we perceive the consolatory power, and even the generosity, of *Nox* as it urges us to participate in the dynamic of grief not by dwelling on loss but by producing something novel and perhaps even beautiful” (76). The text is shot through with festivity and hope: the raised hands of the sister-mourner in Giotto’s painting and the red hands that parallel them in *Nox*, the duality of *multa dies* and its promise of light, the commemorative act of mourners gathered for a funeral, and the joy of impossibility in translation which reframes the necessity to endlessly translate and re-translate Catullus as an act of celebration rather than desperation. The hope of future repetitions, whether from Carson or other mourners who have accepted the invitation of the blank page, offers the promise that although this particular text does not conclude the translation or the grief, the work of mourning has not stopped and morphed into pathological melancholia. The work is, instead, ongoing.

The sense of festivity emerges in *Nox* in no small part because of Carson’s choice to structure her elegy around a translation of “Poem 101.” This festivity is embedded in the mourning ritual Carson chooses to begin her work with — Catullus’s poem — and is the element that she claims most easily escapes translation:

I want to explain about the Catullus poem (101). [...] I have loved the poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. (7.1)

The crucial feature of Catullus’s poem, the one that makes it impossible to ever translate fully or satisfactorily, is that surprising “deep festivity,” and the physical presentation of this fragment highlights exactly that quality (see Fig. 7). A darkened, though still transparent, strip of acetate overlays the parts about festivity and the turning leaves, immediately drawing attention to this idea and positioning it as central to the quality of Catullus’s elegy and Carson’s interest in it. In translating this text repeatedly, Carson is attempting to produce a translation that, in part, captures this festivity, this turning over. In *Nox*, the image of the

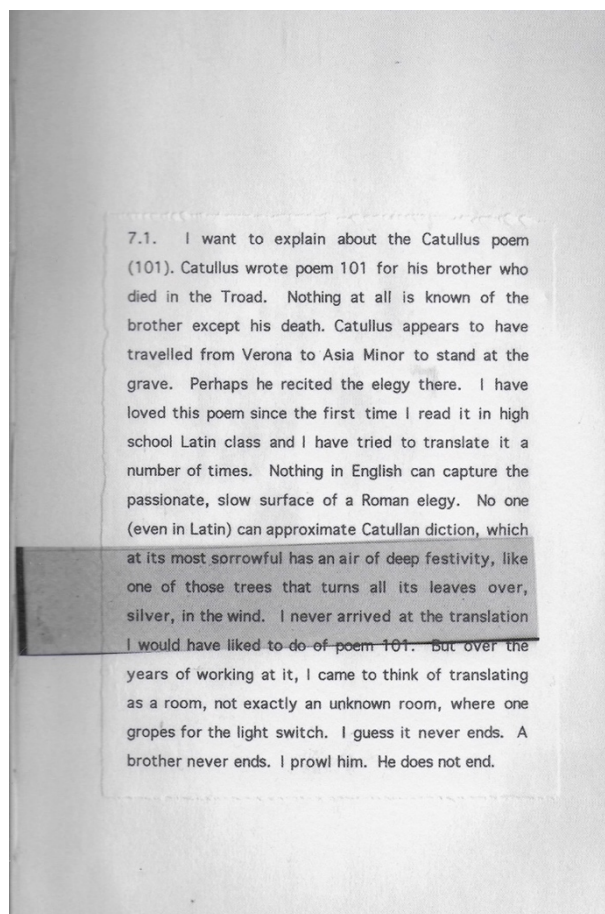


Fig. 7. Fragment 7.1. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

leaves is manifested in the two-sided text, which flips over to reveal a clean, white expanse. Yet, as with the leaves, the two sides co-exist. With another gust of wind, the leaves may turn back over. This co-existence, physically manifested in the text, calls our attention to the paradox of mourning rituals like elegies and funerals, which ostensibly provide a way to bring mourning to an end and yet so often fail to accomplish this. As Fleming explains, in *Nox* “there are motions towards understanding and there are moments that transform sorrow into celebration, but there is no end, no final cure — no definitive interpretation that can evaporate the need for therapeutic exploration” (78). The tension between the two is never resolved.

As a result of the documentary sublimity resulting from the amplification and accumulation of Carson's translation practice, the text as a whole takes on the peculiar joy of any sublime experience, and moments of hopefulness materialize in the text, often in the form of repeating egg-related imagery. The eggs first appear as a painting of two ochre ovals that are imperfectly rendered so that the ovals are not fully closed (see Fig. 8). The context for this painting is revealed two pages later, in

fragment 5.5, when Carson describes her sudden realization "that both [her] parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, accidentally) in bright yellow sweaters. They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks" (5.5).

Eggs suggest life, birth, and, contextualized as they are in the discussion of funerals, rebirth.

Consequently, their introduction at this moment in the text provides a sense of hope for a potential, if unidentified, future. As with the looped outline of the eggs, there is no definitive end or beginning, just a continuation. Yet, as is so often the case in this text, these suggestions

are immediately undermined. The ovals in the painting are broken; the lines do not quite meet in order to close the shape.

Two pages later, we are presented with a photograph of an egg and bits of straw that look like they have been launched or tossed into the air (see Fig. 9). This image is printed on acetate



Fig. 8. Two painted yellow ovals. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

and has been partly sliced into ribbons that have then, sometimes, been folded back on themselves, which creates the illusion that the egg is exploding out of something as if being shot out of a cannon. Whether this is a launch into a potential future or a destruction remains unclear. The text remains suspended like the egg: on the one hand characterized by failure, loss, and melancholia, and on the other hand characterized by festivity and hope. Thus, Sze's reminder that "we must not overemphasize the pathos of *Nox*, we must not dwell too long on its obsession with loss" because "[t]o do so would be to ignore the affirmative and



Fig. 9. Egg photo. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New Directions, 2010).

consolatory dimensions of translation for Carson" (75), is crucial to understanding this elegy.

Translation helps open the door to the idea of festivity, a reframing of the role of consolation that allows the mourner to move forward even while maintaining a relationship with the dead.

Finally, Carson returns to the idea of festivity when she describes a moment she shares with Michael's widow:

My brother's widow says she rented a boat and went up the coast to put his ashes in the sea, at sunset, near the castle of Helsingor. SHE threw sunflowers after. You know what they do? (she asks me) they turn around on the water.

Festive, I say.

Festive in their way. (7.2)

The image of the cheerful sunflowers floating on the ocean provides a metaphor for *Nox* as an elegy. The ocean of grief, the very one that drowned Carson's attempts a traditional elegy or translation, is dotted with pops of festivity. This double referral to festivity in mourning is not a suggestion that grief ought to be transformed into or replaced by festivity. Rather, it suggests that grief and festivity can coincide with one another. The festivity in *Nox* is the festivity of documentary sublimity, the joy of skating from one frame to the other as Longinus does (Carson, "Foam" 96). This doesn't come at the expense of mourning, but rather as a by-product of the accumulation of facts, the embrace of fragmentation, and the idea of coherence without completion. As a mourner, Carson opts for festivity, which allows her to infuse the light she repeatedly calls for into her elegy, a manifestation of the two versions of *multa dies*; although there is much death, there is also much light. Tracy notes that the idea of celebration is embedded in acts of commemoration⁸:

As both "a calling to remembrance" and a "public celebration" (OED), "commemoration" captures the making-public involved in celebration as well as the individual mental state of waiting with memories. Commemoration incorporates public attention to affective relationships and personal time for remembering one's place within them. Witness poetry and commemoration are about "the celebratory waiting" and "the smell of wounds." (214)

This, where both things — festivity and sorrow — remain true at once, is the state in which Carson's text exists. In choosing to begin with Catullus's poem as a model for her own mourning

⁸ The later quotations within this quotation ("the celebratory waiting" and "the smell of wounds") come from Dionne Brand's *Ossuaries*, which Tracy is discussing at this point in her book. The sentiment here seems profoundly applicable to *Nox*.

ritual, Carson grounds her elegy in this duality. The mourner's attempt to gather the pieces of her brother's history into a coherent shape, however incomplete and imperfect the end result may be, may not bring about a conclusion to the mourning process, but it does offer the potential for the creation of something remarkable, new, and even occasionally beautiful. *Nox* embodies melancholic mourning, balancing the waiting and the wounds, the celebration and the pain. The sister's hands are raised in both sorrow and celebration.

Chapter Two

“Somewhere between / two points”: The Difficulties of Postmemorial Elegy in Souvankham

Thammavongsa’s *Found*

Souvankham Thammavongsa’s *Found*, a collection of poems derived from a scrapbook Thammavongsa’s father kept while living in a Lao refugee camp in 1978 and 1979, begins by setting the speaker, readers, and the collection in a space of betweenness with the poem

“Thermometer, A Diagram Of”:

The human body
is set

between
two points

The point
water boils

The point
water freezes

This
is where

it lives
and how

Somewhere between
two points (15)

The diagram of a thermometer to which this poem responds encapsulates the interstitial space of postmemory and the balancing act of postmemorial elegy. In occupying such a space, *Found* exposes the difficulties, complications, and limitations of elegiac writing as a means of mourning for the losses that permeate postmemory. Thammavongsa uses an unconventional translation practice that combines elements of found poetry and ekphrasis to focus her elegy on the task of naming and describing the elegiac subject, an essential element of elegy, though one that is not typically discussed as part of codified elegiac structures and is, therefore, somewhat incidental in those structures. While doing this, *Found* must find ways to depict Thammavongsa's loss without betraying the privacy of those whose stories are intertwined with this loss, particularly Thammavongsa's father. As a result, *Found* presents an elegiac ritual that is stubbornly solitary and that must grapple with the silences and gaps in knowledge that permeate postmemory and contribute to the losses being mourned. By refocusing the elegy on the task of identifying loss, Thammavongsa establishes an elegy that self-consciously operates as a component of a larger mourning ritual and, ultimately, adjusts its end goal, chasing after acceptance rather than resolution or consolation.

Most of the scholarly attention Thammavongsa's work has received considers her poetry within the context of refugee narratives. It is not surprising that *Found* is often considered in this context, given that the collection opens with the following explanatory note:

In 1978, my parents lived in building #48. Nong Khai, Thailand, a Lao refugee camp. My father kept a scrapbook filled with doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements. He threw it out and when he did, I took it and found this. (11)

This note frames *Found* as a refugee's story, specifically Thammavongsa's father's story. Yet, the content of the collection does not exclusively present a refugee narrative. I am considering this text not as a telling of Thammavongsa's father's story, or a more generic refugee story, but as a postmemorial elegy produced by a member of what Marianne Hirsch calls the "generation after."⁹ *Found* undertakes an elegiac project, identifying and exploring a loss in order to find a way to live after that loss. Although the introductory note in *Found* points readers in the direction of a refugee narrative, it also encourages the kind of reading I am proposing. This note foregrounds Thammavongsa's experience with the use of the first-person pronoun in the final clause. The endpoint of the introduction, and the starting point of the collection, shifts focus from her father to Thammavongsa herself. Moreover, such a reading does not negate, but rather necessitates, the possibility that the text also tells her father's story since postmemory is characterized by such a layering of stories; the story of the generation after is layered upon the story of the previous generation so that the two stories are inextricably linked with one another.

⁹ Postmemory and equivalent terms are often paired with the term "second generation," a label that excludes those who survived events as young children. This is the terminology that Hirsch uses in *Family Frames*, published in 1997, in which she identifies postmemory as characteristic of the "experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives *that preceded their birth*" (22, emphasis added). I opt for the term "generation after" that Hirsch favours in the more recent *The Generation of Postmemory*, which allows for postmemory to describe the experience of those who lived through events as young children but who may not be aware of these influences or have conscious memories of those events. Thammavongsa was born in the Lao refugee camp during the period covered by her father's scrapbook. In a technical sense, this means she herself was a refugee when her family arrived in Canada and, therefore, she is not technically a member of the second generation. However, the events of the scrapbook certainly preceded her awareness, placing her as a member of the generation after.

Hirsch's description of postmemory offers a way to understand the project undertaken in *Found* and, furthermore, why the structure of translation might be suited to such a project:

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (*The Generation of Postmemory* 5)

Importantly, postmemory is not the manifestation of someone else's memories — “we do not have literal ‘memories’ of others' experiences, and certainly, one person's lived memories cannot be transformed into another's” (31) — and is therefore connected with past events through their affective ramifications for subsequent generations. Although there are clear lines of transmission such as stories and images that pass information directly from one generation to the next, creating narrative “memories” the way looking at a family photo album repeatedly may convince us we remember an event from our childhood, there are also more indirect lines of transmission such as behaviours and “traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction” (5). As a result, postmemory is characterized by “an uneasy oscillation between

continuity and rupture” (6). The central distinction between memory and postmemory lies in the means by which it is engaged. Memory is recalled; postmemory is created. Postmemory requires “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (5), requirements that make it unsurprising that postmemory is so frequently associated with literature, and often with somewhat unconventional texts.¹⁰

This necessity of imagination, creativity, and projection also links postmemorial projects with the work of translation, which demands similar investment from translators. Hilary Levinson notes that the kind of creative activity required in the production of translation mirrors the kind of creativity required in postmemory since “postmemory, though it draws on various creative processes, is not strictly an act of creation by an autonomous subject in the same way that the translator’s autonomy is circumscribed by the characteristics of the original” (593). Both postmemory and translation rely on the existence of someone else’s story and are defined and, to an extent, limited by that story. Central to this parallel is the idea that creativity is transformative. Due to the importance of transformation, unconventional translation becomes particularly suited to the writing of postmemorial texts. While translation “serves to transform something that is incomprehensible into something that is comprehensible” (593), unconventional approaches are not primarily concerned with ultimate comprehensibility. Thus, they allow for an emphasis on the creative process that underlies postmemory and translation while also foregrounding the translator’s role in a way that allows for the double-layered structure characteristic of postmemory to be explicitly integrated as a feature of the work.

¹⁰ For instance, Hirsch calls Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel memoir, *Maus*, “a paradigmatic and generative text for [her] argument” (*Family Frames* 12) and also includes discussions of, among others, Jamaica Kincaid’s autobiographical novel *Annie John* and Marguerite Duras’s autobiographical novel *The Lover*, both of which integrate photography into their texts.

The process by which Thammavongsa sculpts *Found* from the source material of her father's scrapbook is an amalgam of found poetry and ekphrasis. The title of the collection and the initial description of Thammavongsa's discovery of the discarded scrapbook explicitly point toward the tradition of found poetry, and in the sense that this text has been found and subsequently structurally transformed by Thammavongsa, it is indeed an example of found poetry or structural translation. However, in an essay about *Found*, Thammavongsa reveals that her father's scrapbook is written in Lao, a language that she neither reads nor writes, although she is able to speak it. She also notes that she didn't ask her father to clarify, explain, or translate any of the contents of the scrapbook ("My Father's Scrapbook"). This linguistic barrier means that the most archetypal kind of found poetry, that which uses only words as they exist in the original text while leaving questions of form and structure up to the poet, is inaccessible to Thammavongsa. Instead, her text turns to ekphrasis as a way to allow her to work with the elements of the original scrapbook to which she does have access: the pictures, diagrams, and otherwise visual components of the text. This is still a found poem, since it does take an existing text and manipulate and refashion the information from that text in a new way, but one that supplements the tradition of found poetry with ekphrasis.

According to David Kennedy, "[c]onceiving of the ekphrastic art object as foreign or other goes some way to explaining why ekphrasis can be said to converge in interesting ways with the practice of translation" ("Ekphrasis and Poetry" 84). In other words, because ekphrasis takes something that is, in a sense, in a radically different language and then renders it in another fashion in order to communicate some essential meaning, it can be aligned with translation. However, ekphrasis is deeply transformative, not only due to the shift between mediums but because while "[c]ommon sense might protest that an ekphrastic poem always has a clearly

identifiable referent [...] it is important to note that the referent that the ekphrastic poem creates and represents is never the same as the initial ekphrastic object. It is a story imagined around the context of the original” (85). Thus, ekphrasis emulates the imaginative investment necessary to the formation of postmemory. What is presented in an ekphrastic work is a translation, but one that foregrounds the authorial, creative capacity of the translator. In combining ekphrasis with the titular suggestion of found poetry, *Found* further magnifies the intervention of the translator-poet, drawing attention to the act of transformative translation that underlies ekphrasis. The intersection of ekphrasis and found poetry lies in the role of the visual. Because found poetry works with the text as rendered in the original, it offers poets working in this mode a way to use non-linguistic elements as a powerful tool for communication, an option that Thammavongsa avails herself of throughout *Found*.

DEPICTING THE ELEGIAC SUBJECT

An important step in elegiac rituals is the naming of the dead. Such naming has important memorial functions, and it also serves to ground loss and make it seem real. The recognition of loss and the ability to identify what has been lost is an essential difference in the Freudian dichotomy with which the elegy is so often associated, for it is only once a loss has been recognized and identified that mourning can occur. On a fundamental level, naming the dead serves to situate the reader of the elegy and focus the elegist by bringing attention to bear on the subject of the elegy. Such attention, in the pastoral tradition, was typically intended to honour the dead, and, to that end, pastoral elegy often includes the creation of a flattering, if somewhat general, portrait of the person being mourned. The elegy traditionally “abstracted and objectified the dead” and presented idealized, laudatory versions of them (Ramazani 18), but the modernist

elegy sought to counter such practices, and “the often idiosyncratic and intimate representations of mourning and the dead could be seen as resisting the increasingly impersonal, bureaucratic propensities of modern mortuary institutions” (18). Jahan Ramazani argues that “as the more systematic disciplinarity of modern institutions extended to the dead and their mourners, poets became ever more articulate about their intimate and contradictory feelings toward the dead, who became in turn ever more distinctive because of their complex portrayals” (18). Rather than vague, laudatory portraits, the modernist elegy created realistic, sometimes unflattering portraits, tending to “move away from the categorical and universal to the intimate and particular” (18). Many contemporary English-Canadian elegists follow in the modernist elegy’s footsteps in the sense of favouring an honest portrait of the elegiac subject. However, the creation of a portrait of the elegiac subject becomes more complicated when that subject is abstract rather than concrete, since the elegist is left with the challenging task of depicting something that is ineffable. The difficulty of this task is compounded in the case of postmemorial elegy where the loss is not only abstract but multiple — comprised of both the loss of family history and the near over-writing of one’s own life by the life of another — and, moreover, always characterized by lack. In a sense, this means that the portraits created in *Found* must acquiesce to failure and partiality, but such incompleteness becomes fundamental to the task of describing loss by showing the holes and silences that fill Thammavongsa’s family history and thus revealing what has been lost.

In *Found*, Thammavongsa uses both the structure of translation, which mirrors the layering and interconnection of two narratives that shape postmemory, and the structural principles of found poetry in order to create a text that physically manifests the loss she is elegizing rather than attempting to describe or articulate it outright. In particular, spaces pervade the text of *Found*. The poems themselves are printed in small text while lines and stanzas are

abbreviated, typically running one to three words per line and one or two lines per stanza. These small groups of words either range across large pages, swimming in white space, or are confined to thin columns of text in the centre of the page. Early in the collection, poems tend to spread across multiple pages so that despite the abundant white space and small islands of type, each poem takes up significant room. Then, as the collection progresses, the lines condense into thin columns in the centre of the page as if huddled together for safety and protection. Eventually, the poems surrender to blank pages with only titles. The gradual increase in white space over the course of the collection means “[t]he text begins to seem crowded, even crowded out, by all the absence, as if words simply cannot cope with so much silence” (Kraus 16). This slow consumption by silence is facilitated by the kind of unconventional translation practice Thammavongsa adopts through found poetry’s assumption that the translator-poet will manipulate the structure and form of the original text in order to transform it into a poem. The choice to translate, however unconventionally, her father’s scrapbook provides a way for Thammavongsa to, in a sense, articulate her experience and her losses, not by finding the language to do so or by filling in her history, but by manifesting loss through the act of translation itself.

The structure of translation also manifests the temporal betweenness of the generation after, who exist in the present but are consistently impacted, and sometimes overwhelmed, by events of the past. The broad structure of translation allows Thammavongsa to bring past and present into the same space through the resurrection of family history by way of rescuing the scrapbook, a physical relic of the past, and transforming it into a text that carries that past into the present. In *Found*, this intersection of past and present is emphasized by a sequence of seventeen poems that constitute roughly the last third of the collection. Each poem is titled with a

month and a year, with the dates spanning the period from January 1978 to December 1979, though not every month is represented by a poem. By using month and year as titles for the poems in this section of the text, Thammavongsa emphasizes that these are moments from the past that have found their way into her present by way of the original scrapbook. The blankness of the pages suggests the way that the past echoes in the present. Past events may be notable and have affective power over the generation after but they remain unknowable and incomprehensible. Additionally, skipping months also suggests the fragmented way the past intrudes on the present in postmemory; some parts of the past are unnotable and have no particular bearing on the experience of the generation after, but some moments intrude, appearing not as flashbacks but as echoes, sometimes overwriting the generation after's life stories with silence.

This manipulation of linear time serves in part as a reminder of the difficulty of discussing postmemory in an orderly or complete fashion, a problem that the poems in *Found* raise in relation to the question of clear articulation. Several poems in the collection reflect on the linguistic limitations that Thammavongsa encountered while reading the scrapbook. In doing so, these poems highlight the gaps, both literal and metaphorical, that run through the collection. In "The Bible, Notes On," Thammavongsa tells us she "can only / read // one word" (28). Similarly, "What I Can't Read" describes the physical appearance of the foreign characters on the page:

Each letter
wound

around itself
drawing

a small dark
hole

an
inner ear

tiny
and landlocked (*Found* 26)

Carrie Dawson suggests that the reference to the inner ear evokes Thammavongsa's familiarity with the sound of the language and the impossibility of translating the written form into this familiar sound ("Treaty" 19). The written language curls in to form "a small dark / hole" (Thammavongsa, *Found* 26), evoking the lack of knowledge, a black hole swallowing meaning. The words are "tiny / and landlocked" (26), stranded on the page, impossible to connect to anything familiar or comfortable. Such meditations on the limitations of Thammavongsa's understanding, particularly when set against the surrounding poems that seem to confidently present pieces found in the scrapbook, "underscor[e] the difficulties, limits, and, crucially, the excesses of her translation" (Dawson, "Treaty" 19). The translation is necessarily unconventional and reliant upon a method and structure that allows a work-around for these difficulties while still signaling the presence of the omitted material. Moreover, these poems indicate the barriers to further knowledge of past events, reminding readers that not all postmemory can be placed into a narrative form and cautioning against an assumption that an effective postmemorial elegy must overcome this impossibility in order to fill in the gaps in the story of past traumas and familial history.

In rendering large spaces and silences, the text also manifests the diminished role of Thammavongsa in her own origin story, allowing *Found* to grapple with the loss incurred by a life “dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness” (Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory* 5) and register what it means to have “one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by [one’s] ancestors” (5). When Thammavongsa finds a family artifact that ought to hold information about her birth — she was born on August 13, 1978, a date covered by the scrapbook — she hardly exists within it. Her arrival is noted in “August, 1978” as “A circle / rounds // 13” (*Found* 46). However, without outside research, readers do not know that it is her birthdate that is circled here. Indeed, we only discover this at the end of an interview with Amanda Jernigan, who, because of “August, 1978,” specifically asks Thammavongsa about her birthdate. Thammavongsa confirms that she was born on the thirteenth and then explains the significance of that circle:

I had wanted to know exact details of the day I was born but all there was in my father’s scrapbook was a simple circle, traced over twice, maybe three times. That small detail I saw there really moved me to tears when I first saw it. Because I was born in a refugee camp, I wasn’t given a birth certificate. Nothing to prove I was born, to whom, and where. For me there were no words, no pictures, not even a document to prove that I was born —and there still were none — but there, there was this circle. Proof.

(Thammavongsa, “Finders, Keepers”)

The circling then is the only place in which Thammavongsa could locate herself in a document that she might expect to fill in the story she was looking for. Certainly, as Thammavongsa points out, this conspicuous absence points to her own lack of documentation and, as Dawson’s readings of her work elucidate, more broadly to the significance of documentation — of proof —

for refugees (“On Thinking” 59-60). But when *Found* is read as a postmemorial elegy, the absence highlights not a political state of being but a personal one. It indicates the overwhelming power of other people’s stories. Her own conspicuous absence from the narrative, an absence emphasized by the absences that pervade and overwhelm the text, allows this elegy to demonstrate losing one’s own narrative without needing to find a way to articulate the experience. At the same time, unconventional translation provides a way for her to counter this absence through the assertion rather than effacement of the translator’s creative agency. As she adopts the position of narrator, shaping and controlling the story being told through the transformation from scrapbook to poetry collection, Thammavongsa asserts proof not necessarily of her existence in the events the scrapbook records — although the use of “we” in poems such as “Laos” begins to blur that delineation — but of the link between her existence now and the events recorded in the scrapbook.

“I am thinking about space and time and language,” Thammavongsa explains in an interview with Shoshanna Ganz. “What happens when someone gives you this narrow space or this little time, how do you move within it with language? How do you get yourself to the centre of your own language? How can clarity and understanding shoot through that space?” (3). Thammavongsa answers her own question: “I think you have to understand your material really well and trust what you know even if what you know isn’t considered knowledge in a traditional way” (3). This declaration illuminates a second role of white space in *Found*. The space is not simple emptiness but a manifestation of the paradoxical nature of postmemory, which “need not be absent or evacuated: it is as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself” (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22). The white space in the text does not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge or understanding, but rather a different kind of knowledge. This is crucial for the

text's elegiac purpose since it means that in rendering the partiality, the fragmentation, the spaces and gaps, Thammavongsa is also rendering the kind of knowledge that the generation after is so often overwhelmed by, silences that do not signal emptiness but rather some other kind of knowledge that is inarticulable but always present.

Knowledge is intertwined with perception in this collection. In "Light," Thammavongsa plays with the idea of seeing clearly, introducing the importance of perception and the ways information can be transformed based on the filters through which it passes:

Because glass
has not yet

learned
to bend

and because
even now

glass
will not bend

light
must come in bent (*Found 22*)

This "bent" light, symbolizing knowledge and insight, suggests the alternative kind of knowledge Thammavongsa brought up in her interview with Ganz. The information is there, but

it is “bent,” altered in some fundamental way. Significantly, the filter in the poem is glass, which initially suggests a lack of interference. Yet the poem draws our attention to the ways it can warp and alter perception. This emphasis on perception highlights the ways that transmission of information between generations can be warped and how it is informed by the generation after’s perspective, even when the lines of transmission seem clear and straightforward, as with the scrapbook itself, which ostensibly should provide insight into the past but ultimately generates as many questions as it answers. This recognition also highlights the intervention of the translator-elegist. Particularly in a translation where readers do not have access to the original, it is easy to assume that what is being presented to readers is an accurate representation of the original, where accuracy is defined by equivalence. While the structural translation Thammavongsa uses counterbalances these assumptions to an extent by drawing attention to translation as transformation and translation as play, the poem “Light” reminds us that elegy is ultimately as much about the elegist as the elegized, and that what we encounter as readers is informed and shaped by Thammavongsa’s relationship to the scrapbook, to her father, and to her family history. Readers have no way of verifying the accuracy of her translation, but that is not the point because the purpose of this elegy is to understand Thammavongsa’s loss, and therefore the information from the scrapbook, filtered through her perspective and her translation process, is what is needed rather than any facts or details the original text might contain.

The longest poem in the collection, “Na,” explores the ways language itself, especially in translation, can serve as such a filter and simultaneously work to reveal and conceal by enumerating the disparate and contradictory meanings the Lao word *na* can have depending on how it is pronounced. As the meaning of *na* changes over the course of the poem, the possible roles of language both generally and within *Found* make themselves apparent. The first

definition Thammavongsa offers us is that “Na / is a face” (38), suggesting that language functions as a way to identify and understand someone and evoking elegy’s traditional interest in depicting or describing the dead. The promise of finding someone in the scrapbook pages runs throughout the collection, but it is never fully borne out. The first poem of the collection begins:

I took only
Bone

built half
your face (13)

Untitled and coming on the heels of the opening explanatory note, these lines describe Thammavongsa’s project, which draws upon the bones of the text she has discovered. The “your” here seems to point toward her father since readers are aware that the scrapbook was his, yet the pronoun remains unattached and the subject of this partial image will shift and multiply over the course of the text as Thammavongsa attempts to sketch the shape of her loss in order to identify it. Later in the collection, Thammavongsa references an absent portrait of her mother, telling readers:

There are
no photographs

of
my mother here (31)

Instead, it is just “her / real name” (31) that appears in the scrapbook, but Thammavongsa holds that information back so that the poem, titled “My Mother, A Portrait Of,” provides no actual information and makes no attempt at portraiture. Although portraits of individuals are what we often expect from elegy, *Found* does not mourn either parent’s death, and therefore portraits of

them are only tangentially related to the subject of Thammavongsa's elegy. *Found* mourns losses of familial history. Thus, the incompleteness or absence of these two portraits of Thammavongsa's parents suggests that part of the loss this elegy mourns is an understanding of and connection with her parents. Thammavongsa does not fully know them and cannot fully know them because of the overwhelming silences and gaps in her knowledge of their stories.

The poems "Sculptor" and "My Father's Handwriting," presented on facing pages so they speak to one another, link language, creativity, and identity discovery. "Sculptor" calls back to the opening poem's creation of a face:

you took
a knife in

cut out
for us

a human face (24)

Again, the unclear second person pronoun creates ambiguity about the various actors in this poem. In the framework of the collection, "you" in this poem seems to refer to Thammavongsa's father, presenting him as the one who created a sculpture. The scrapbook then becomes his portrait of someone, perhaps his unintentional portrait of himself. In "My Father's Handwriting," language becomes the medium of the sculptor who "carved / every letter" (25). Yet, the ambiguity of the unattributed pronoun allows readers to notice that the creative actions being described here could also describe Thammavongsa's work upon the scrapbook, which she has cut up and reshaped into something else.

The collection as a whole serves as a portrait of the experience of loss in a postmemorial context as well as a portrait of what Thammavongsa has lost as a member of the generation after. The text calls attention to the way that family stories, family history, and familial connections in general, are interrupted and partial. The very structure of translation that generates *Found* indicates this lack, from the found nature of the material to the lack of access Thammavongsa has to the full story even within that found fragment. Playing with visual elements lifted from the original scrapbook and white space allows the text to shape a portrait of what has been lost not by finding answers and information to describe and articulate what is missing but by demonstrating where losses and absences occur.

While the use of unconventional, structural translation methods helps create a text that delineates rather than describes loss, another way this text approaches the task of depicting postmemorial losses is provided in the next definition for *na*: the word “is a deter- // miner” (39), a term that offers precision. Language serves as a way of identifying and articulating, a useful tool for the project Thammavongsa is undertaking. The ironic contrast between the definition and the premise of the poem, however, highlights just how difficult translation can be as the mercurial word shifts in meaning even as it claims fixity. The challenge of equivalence between source text and translation in Thammavongsa’s case is exacerbated by the literal linguistic barrier. Although the unconventional approach to translating the text allows her to bridge the gap between herself and the original text to some extent, it also necessitates discarding parts of the original text without knowing what exactly is being omitted.

The stanza break occurring in the middle of the word “determiner” isolates the word “miner” from the rest of the poem. *Na*, and more broadly language, then becomes a way of plumbing the depths of something, of digging in order to uncover. It is exploratory and holds the

promise of value. Or perhaps it does not, since the homophone “minor” is also suggested here, a suggestion that plays up the significance of the insignificant in this text. Based on a source text that had literally been discarded, *Found* revels in the insignificant: the smallness of the type, the spacing that fragments the text, and the contemplation of small details in the scrapbook, whether a stamp, marginal notes, or a single strike-



Fig. 10. Front cover. Souvankham Thammavongsa, *Found* (Pedlar Press, 2007)..

through mark that comes to be so significant it graces the front cover of the book (see Fig. 10). The insignificant becomes the structuring principle of the translation of the scrapbook.

Ultimately, such dependence on the minor results in a partial portrait. “Na / is a face” (38), but it also “is not a face” nor is it “a body // you can / remember” (40). Language paradoxically becomes a way of identifying but also a way of vanishing. It both reveals and conceals, manifests and disguises. Kraus notes that “Na” “invites the reader to consider how language can hide ‘a face,’ ‘a body,’ a memory or a meaning, just as easily as it can expose them” (6). Although Kraus sees this as a commentary on the ways refugee narratives function, it is also the way the postmemorial elegy functions. Even as it reveals information, it conceals it, mimicking the nature of postmemory, at once full and shot through with holes, at once silent and overwhelming.

PROTECTING THE SELF AND THE OTHER

This vanishing act is also protective, and the vulnerability that may need protection in a postmemorial elegy is doubled since the sense of loss with which the postmemorial elegist grapples is intertwined with, though distinct from, the trauma, loss, stories, and experiences of others. This layering and connection make translation a particularly useful modality. However, the risk of such an approach is the exposure of someone else's story. A text like the scrapbook Thammavongsa takes as source material is inherently an intimate one, and in translating such a personal text and story, one runs the risk of opening the wounds of another, a person who did not ask to be included in the narrative but who is inextricable from it. Thammavongsa deliberately guards against such exploitation through her refusal to ask her father to explain or translate any of the scrapbook: "That belongs to him, even the questions themselves. What I wanted most was to protect my parents, to respect and honour their private and personal experience" ("My Father's Scrapbook"). Language, more specifically translation or, rather, lack of translation, becomes a means by which this protection can be accomplished. In "What I Can't Read," the poem discussed earlier in which Thammavongsa describes her visual impression of the Lao in the scrapbook that she cannot translate, the enjambment of the lines in the poem isolates the word "wound." In the context of the poem, this describes the way the characters wind around themselves, but the enjambment also allows readers to see the word's homograph and therefore understand each word as an injury, a site of pain denoting her father's traumatic experiences, experiences that remain inaccessible to Thammavongsa the same way the Lao in the scrapbook does. The doubled meaning of the word suggests protection of these wounds as the characters wind around the "small dark / hole" (26) she describes in the poem. In the same way,

Thammavongsa protects her father's wounds by choosing not to ask him to translate or explain the contents of the scrapbook. The written words that are not transposed in the act of translation protect and obscure, hiding parts of her father's story, but in doing so, they also leave scars in Thammavongsa's story, similar holes resulting from the untranslatable, unknowable information.

In addition to protecting her father, Thammavongsa uses both language and translation as means by which she can distance herself from the subject of her collection and thus as a way to control the emotional tenor of her work, affecting, if not always achieving, a degree of detachment. In an interview with Amanda Jernigan, Thammavongsa discusses the poem "The Heart":

Found had the option of being a sentimental work. It is, after all, so close and personal. I chose though to remove my own sentiment and attachment from the site where poetry begins for me, in the scrapbook. I had to. That's what the poem about the heart served to tell readers when they enter the work. The heart as a symbol is loaded with sentiment and meaning but I stripped it of that. I chose to treat the heart as it is in the body, before it meant something, before we attached any idea of sentiment to it. (Thammavongsa, "Finders, Keepers")

The lack of sentimentality Thammavongsa describes here as well as the resultant sense of detachment from the subject matter are evident in the poem itself, which I quote in full here, including the extensive spacing present in the original, which spans two pages:

THE HEART,

the real

heart,

is ugly

Nothing

here

can break,

or be broken

And nothing

can come

from here

but blood (16-17)

This poem appears quite early in the book, helping establish the tone for the collection. It actively denies any impulse to skew the heart, and subsequently *Found* as a whole, in the direction of symbolism, unflinchingly directing readers' attention to the literal heart, highlighting its physical presence, its mess and gore. Stripping the text of sentimentality provides Thammavongsa with a kind of clinical distance from the subject matter; rather than investing in pathos, this poem, in tandem with others that appear near it in the collection, focuses on the medical, clinical, physical body. Two poems prior to "The Heart," the untitled opening poem introduces the image of bones. Immediately after "The Heart," readers are presented with "The Lung," in which the lung "takes / what it has / always taken" (18). Thus, in the early poems of the collection, readers are presented with a kind of dissection, a clinical identification of parts of the body and their physical function. The space that this poem takes up slows the text down, reflecting the intentionality of the work Thammavongsa is undertaking. The calm, factual tone of clinical observation continues throughout the text. The sentiment has been drained, and what is left is a detached, observational voice that protects the elegist from full emotional vulnerability. This tone distinguishes Thammavongsa's project from both the sentimentality that might be associated with pastoral elegy, with its idyllic settings and lauding of the dead, and the intensely emotional modernist elegy, with its unresolved and "inappropriate" emotions.

In part, nothing “can break, / or be broken” (*Found* 16) in this elegy because the position of translator affords Thammavongsa a certain distance from the subject of her work through the presumed neutrality of the translator, particularly because the translation undertaken in this text is rooted in concrete poetry and structural translation, practices which can emphasize experimentation and play with language over the transmission of information, including emotive content. Language is thus neutralized to a degree, becoming a tool with which Thammavongsa can prod at the scrapbook, her family history, and her own losses without having to fully surrender to the emotional intensity that such topics might cause.

These efforts to create distance from the subject of the text are undermined even as they are attempted. The calm, clinical voice is contrasted by the viscosity of organs removed from a body. Despite the lack of sentimentality, “The Heart” concludes with blood and all of the vitality, life, and passion that the word connotes, beginning to erode the sense of clinical detachment. The functions that the heart and the lungs serve are literally life-giving. The blood is a reminder that no matter how hard Thammavongsa may try to dissect and distance, total removal of herself and her emotions is never possible; dissection is not a clean business. The fundamental nature of blood suggests how crucial the family history contained in that scrapbook is for Thammavongsa, and it simultaneously draws attention to the familial lines of transmission. Blood is, after all, one way to define the bonds of family. Blood stains, and these stains are difficult to remove, demonstrating how impossible it is to remove oneself from the familial bloodline, how the echoes of the past continue to appear in the future. Even as the text attempts to gain elegiac distance, it undercuts its own project. Thammavongsa may attempt to remove the sentimental symbolism of the cartoon heart, but this leaves her with a far more visceral connection. The bonds here are messier, but they are also stronger and more fundamental.

The structure of unconventional translation proves essential for the creation of a text that can provide distance for the elegist and also protection for the generation that came before her. The choice to translate at all emphasizes the connection between the two stories by revealing the ways that the two stories are intrinsically connected and provides a degree of protection for Thammavongsa's father by denying access to his text and his story and instead foregrounding Thammavongsa's. The unconventional structure of translation allows for the extensive transformation that is necessary to elide so much of the original text and to transfer attention to the creative work of the poet-translator. Even though the initial framework provided for the collection — the introductory comment telling readers about the scrapbook — attempts to obscure the translator's intervention by presenting the text as if it were a replica of the original scrapbook, the contents of the collection quickly dispel that notion, positioning the poet-translator as the speaking voice in the work.

The decisions made in order to protect both father and daughter have consequences for the role of community in the work of elegy undertaken in *Found*. Limitations to access and information are emphasized in the way the collection, and thus the elegiac ritual, concludes. The text ends with a warning that interrupts the increasing silence in the collection and brings the elegiac examination to an abrupt halt:

My father took
a pigeon

broke
its hard neck

cut open
its chest

dug out
a handful

and threw back
its body

warning (60)

The intended recipient of the poem's warning is unclear, as is the warning's relationship with the content of the original scrapbook — was this part of the scrapbook's contents? An event from a later time that Thammavongsa herself is recalling? A family story she recounts? A complete fiction? The enigmatic nature of this concluding poem leaves readers uncertain and brings the elegy to an ambiguous but definitive end. Regardless of the event's origins, its placement at the end of the text serves to isolate the elegist. It is a warning from father to daughter, a simultaneous denial of further access and rejection of what she has created; the heart that Thammavongsa emphasized at the beginning of the collection is ripped out and the remains are discarded. She heeds this warning, leaving the carcass of the scrapbook behind and focusing only on the heart, which could suggest she focuses on what is essential to her story, her loss, as it intersects with the original text. However, she is always dealing with only a part of a greater whole, no matter how essential that part may be. As long as the warning is respected, the portrait of loss can never be completed.

While the warning moves from father to daughter, it also moves from elegist to reader, denying communal versions of mourning and returning the elegy to the traditional monodic mode of the pastoral elegy. Yet, while pastoral elegy often integrated a procession of mourners, Thammavongsa's text does not even afford her that degree of community, despite the presence of at least one other voice. The solitary nature of Thammavongsa's elegy is complicated by the very structure of translation as it introduces Thammavongsa's father's voice from the original text. However, this interruption is only allowed insofar as it facilitates the imitation of postmemorial loss, and as such it allows for description and foundational information but does not contribute to community creation. *Found* resists community, cutting the elegist off not only from her parents but from any community that could potentially be formed through the elegy itself, whether through other mourners or readers. The isolation of the elegist is in part a result of postmemorial elegy. As Anne Carson's *Nox* demonstrates, it is possible for translation in elegy to serve as a means for building a sympathetic community that understands the same kind of loss if not the same precise loss; postmemorial elegy, at least as Thammavongsa approaches it, does not connect to a community by way of translation. Thammavongsa's elegy cannot establish a parallel relationship between two parties experiencing similar losses because the translator (Thammavongsa) and the source text's author (Thammavongsa's father) come from two different generations that do not have the same relationship to the events recorded in the original scrapbook. The losses recorded in the scrapbook are the father's experience, and while these form the basis for the losses Thammavongsa is mourning, they are materially different kinds of loss that make this avenue unproductive as a means of community creation.

The white space does not invite potential contribution from readers, nor does the text bear any evidence of attempts to gather or engage a sympathetic community. Instead, readers are

resolutely left on the outside so that “[l]ike nearsighted voyeurs, readers of *Found* study the poem’s small print and engage its details while longing for the big picture” (Dawson, “Treaty” 21). Readers are denied this access through the denial of access to the original text. Such inaccessibility is uncharacteristic of the other works under consideration in this thesis and of translation more generally. Typically, a reader’s lack of access to an original text is rooted in linguistic barriers; the translation is being read because the reader does not understand the language in which the original text was written. Similarly, in ekphrastic works, readers typically have access in some form, whether physical or digital, original or reproduction, to the source work. Notional ekphrasis, like Homer’s description of the Shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*, is a notable exception to this, since it represents imagined works of art, and therefore it does not have an original to which readers can gain access. However, notional ekphrasis differs from what Thammavongsa does in that the original in such poems does not exist, whether because it never did, as in the case of the shield, because it is an object that has been destroyed, or because it is an imagined object that seems to borrow its characteristics from a number of different subjects. Thammavongsa, in contrast is working with an original that does exist but simply is not publicly available. James Heffernan argues that there is a fundamental difference between ekphrastic works in which readers have access to the original and those where readers do not have such access, arguing that “the *availability* of a painting represented by a poem should make no difference to our experience of the poem, which — like any specimen of notional ekphrasis — is made wholly of words. But the availability of the painting allows us to see how the poem reconstructs it, how the poet’s word seeks to gain its mastery over the painter’s image” (7). Thammavongsa’s intentional obfuscation of the original scrapbook means that readers are aware that a transformative translation has occurred but are unable to see what process was undertaken,

and this denial of access means that the elegiac ritual becomes a stubbornly solitary one for Thammavongsa.

Because the original text is obscured in this way, *Found* ends up aligning in two ways with pastoral traditions. First, the collection emulates the pastoral elegy's truncation of a longer, more involved mourning process. *Found* may not truncate its process, but it does present a curated portion of the work of mourning, only revealing specific aspects of a larger ritual of which the elegy is the final product. Second, *Found* adopts, to a degree, the pastoral emphasis on the cessation of mourning. In the pastoral elegy, the conclusion of the elegy signals the conclusion of mourning; beyond the elegy, no further work is necessary. This conclusiveness is echoed in the way *Found* ends, but it is framed differently and invested in a redefinition of what it means to move forward after loss rather than a cessation of mourning that enables a version of moving on from loss. In further contrast to pastoral elegy, the portion of the ritual that is presented in *Found* does not obscure or downplay the work that was done outside the confines of the text; readers are informed of such extra-textual work through the introductory note on the text and reminded of it through the physical appearance of the poems in the collection. Although *Found* only presents part of Thammavongsa's work of mourning, it is self-conscious about its status as end product.

Despite the ways Thammavongsa intentionally isolates herself as mourner in this elegy, publishing a collection like *Found* implies that there is a role for readers. The denial of access to the original also mitigates readers' ability to substitute themselves for the "I" of Thammavongsa's poems because they are unable to participate in the process the text undertakes. However, while the approach to translation that Thammavongsa uses creates a relationship between reader and elegist that is, in this regard, primed for compassionate witness,

Found does not, beyond its publication, actively pursue or invite readerly identification or involvement in the act of mourning. This kind of relationship is not a necessity for the work of elegy as Thammavongsa constructs it.

REACHING ACCEPTANCE

This enigmatic ending to the collection shows that the struggles of postmemorial elegy revealed in *Found* extend to the question of elegiac purpose. Kathleen Woodward argues that the legacy of Freud's binary has detrimentally limited the ways we are able to discuss grief and mourning and she advocates for the need to theorize "something *in between* mourning and melancholia" (112) in order to cope with those who "come to terms with their grief by learning to live with their pain and in such a way that they are still *in* mourning, but no longer *exclusively* devoted to mourning" (116). Woodward's call for an intermediary position has been answered by elegists and theorists in a number of ways. The anti-elegy's position, which expresses a "skepticism about religious consolation," "indifference or hostility to mourning customs," and "expression of so-called inappropriate emotions as part of the repertoire of grief" (Spargo 416), offers one such alternative. The melancholic mourning proposed by Ramazani is another answer to the need for something that lies between the Freudian poles of melancholia and mourning. But the concept of melancholic mourning relies on the language of Freudian mourning, suggesting that there is a pathological aspect to melancholic mourning that makes it less effective than mourning that aligns more closely with Freud's model in some way. It also necessitates the integration of strong emotions typically considered to be outside the realm of the elegy. Anger in particular, whether directed at the mourner, the form of the elegy, or the elegiac subject, is a recurring trope of the melancholic mourner, according to Ramazani (5-6). Yet, *Found* offers something that is coolly

neutral rather than intensely emotional. It does not seek consolation and rejects the possibility of compensation or substitution in its denial of any search for a more complete historical record; rather, the collection ultimately settles for what might be called acceptance. Its elegiac purpose is served through the description, and thus identification, of postmemorial loss, a process which allows the elegist to recognize what she has lost and then carry on with the knowledge that the loss can never be rectified or fully understood, the gaps will never be filled in. In other words, the elegist learns to live with loss rather than seeking to remedy it or signaling that some ongoing work is needed.

A sense of incompleteness, of the text not quite being finished, pervades the poems in *Found*, emerging in the truncated lines and the general lack of punctuation, particularly end punctuation, which leaves thoughts seemingly unfinished, suggesting that the rest of the information, in some cases the information that might allow readers, or Thammavongsa herself, to make greater sense of the poem, is hidden behind the white spaces on the pages. The long pauses between stanzas, often in the middle of a thought, slow process, work, and time; the content does not come quickly or easily, nor is it to be understood quickly or easily. This slowness is temporarily countered as the poems begin to draw into narrow columns of text in the centre of pages. This drawing together suggests a growing sense of clarity and coherence in the portrait being developed as it speeds up the pace of the poems, suggesting that less thought and work need to be undertaken to process information, but this suggestion is undermined as quickly as it emerges. Instead of drawing toward ever tighter, ever more controlled and clearly rendered thoughts and portraits, the collection shifts toward even more dramatic space and slowness as it enters the sequence of dated poems in the final third of the book. These poems emphasize the importance of time through their titles, which draw past into present, but their content serves

to create a very particular experience of the passage of time. The poems begin with descriptions of how the dates have been marked off on the calendar pages, sometimes in conjunction with replications of the marks found on the pages in the scrapbook (see Fig. 11). Then for February through August of 1979, only the diagonal strike that “takes out / the month” (*Found* 48) is reproduced, unaccompanied by any text aside from the title (see Fig. 12). Finally, in “September, 1979” Thammavongsa tells us September “is the first // month / left unmarked” (56), and the final three poems in this sequence — “October, 1979,” “November, 1979,” and “December, 1979” — are left blank just as the calendar pages in the scrapbook were (see Fig. 13). The

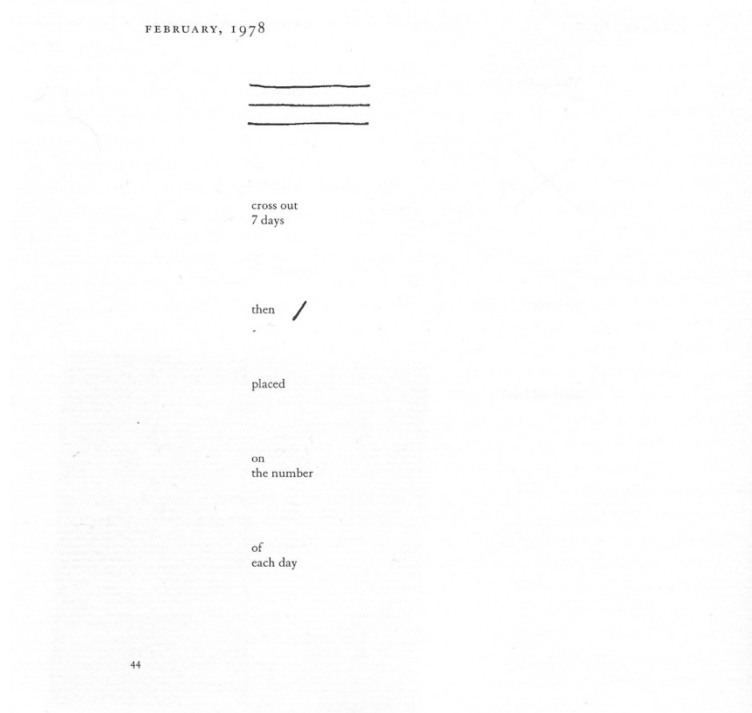


Fig. 11. “February, 1978.” Souvankham Thammavongsa, *Found* (Pedlar Press, 2007). p. 44.

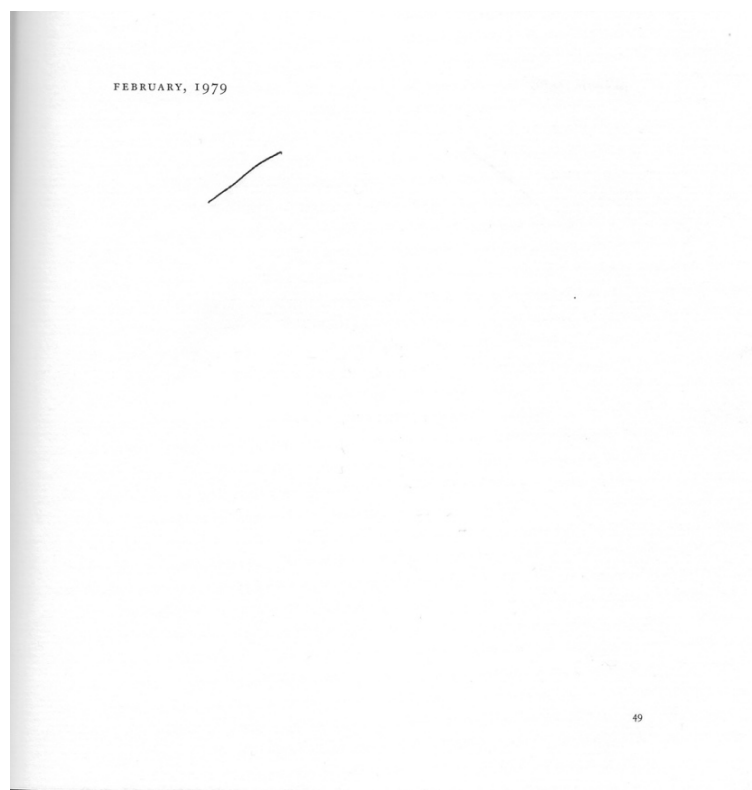


Fig. 12. “February, 1979.” Souvankham Thammavongsa, *Found* (Pedlar Press, 2007). p. 49.

poems succumb to white space and silence. This sequence of poems demonstrates the way that the principles and limitations of found poetry — taking material from the original and rendering it as is but in an altered context — shape the kind of mourning work Thammavongsa performs.

As readers, we do not have access to the source text of the scrapbook, so it is unclear whether

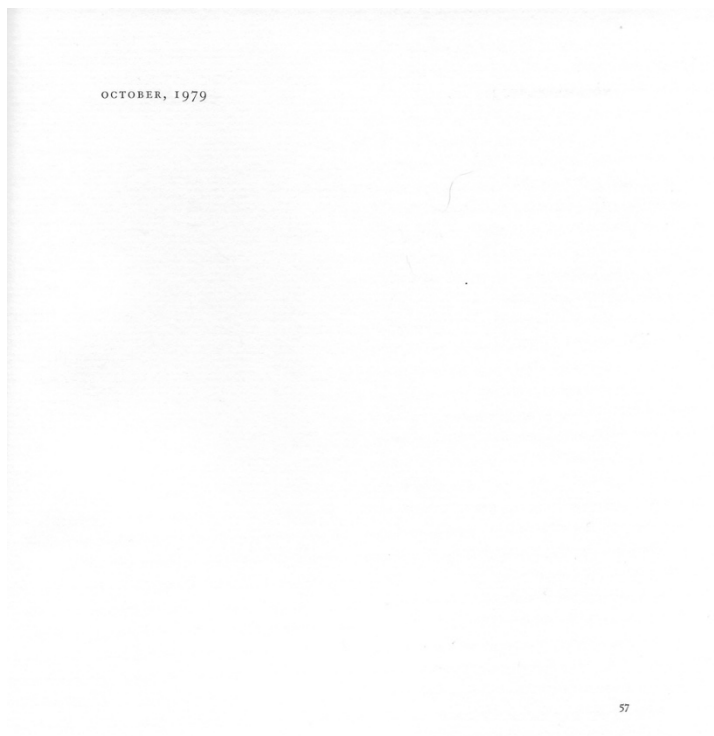


Fig. 13. “October, 1979.” Souvankham Thammavongsa, *Found* (Pedlar Press, 2007). p. 57.

these are the only calendar pages in the source text or whether Thammavongsa simply chooses to begin recognizing them at this juncture in her own collection. From paratextual material, including interviews and Paramita Nath’s film adaptation of *Found*, we know that the stretch of time encompassed by this sequence includes two significant events. The first, already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is Thammavongsa’s birth, alluded to only by the circled date noted in “August, 1978.” In Nath’s film, we learn that Thammavongsa was born prematurely, weighing less than two pounds, and because her family did not have the money for a hospital and an incubator, they took her home despite her fragility and waited to see whether she would survive. The image of marking time in this sequence of poems becomes quite literal, the crossouts and blankness are indicators of time spent waiting. The second event remains a mystery, but like Thammavongsa’s birthday, January 1, 1979, is also circled (48). Perhaps this

date is linked with the family's petition for asylum, and the waiting and silence that characterizes such a process; perhaps this circle simply marks the beginning of another year in the refugee camp, significant as a marker of time passing. In translating part of the scrapbook into this sequence of poems, Thammavongsa intentionally amplified the sense of waiting: "I divided the calendar into sequences and organized them so that each detail occupies a single page. This created a physical presence of time, of waiting, of occupying a particular space" ("My Father's Scrapbook"). In addition to creating a sense of the waiting her parents endured, the waiting that the scrapbook recorded, it also serves to register the time and waiting inherent to mourning and the strange stasis of betweenness that is often experienced by the generation after.

However, decontextualized by the transformative translation of the scrapbook, these passing pages lose any sense of anticipation; they, and by extension Thammavongsa and her readers, are no longer waiting *for* something specific. Instead the blank pages and exaggerated silences between poems become meditative, providing time for contemplation of the scrapbook, Thammavongsa's relationship with and response to it, and that which she has lost as a result of the legacy of the events the scrapbook records. Like meditation, the goal is awareness, not solutions or dismissals. Despite the gaps and truncations, despite the sense of incompleteness, the collection comes to a definitive end alongside Thammavongsa's investigation into her family past. Though for both readers and elegist, questions may be left unanswered, the text does not indicate any need for further work to uncover more answers. Examining and recognizing the loss as it exists, rather than attempting to rectify or compensate for this loss, is the ultimate goal of this elegy. Once the loss has been given shape through the transformative translation of the scrapbook, the elegy's work is finished.

When the collection is brought to an abrupt halt by the poem “Warning,” it shakes both elegist and reader out of the meditative space, but it does not negate the meditative process. Awareness extends to the limitations of knowledge, and the awareness provided by this contemplation allows for an acceptance of what is and can be known and what is not and cannot be known. Nath’s film version of *Found* begins with a voice-over narration from Thammavongsa in which she declares “I can live with what I know and with that alone” (Nath). Rather than seek out more information, or attempt to fill in the places of not knowing, the postmemorial elegy in *Found* contents itself with creating a representation of the losses experienced by the generation after in an act of recognition. The postmemorial elegy points to the loss, articulating it as best it can, and then sends the elegist on without compensation or mediation, simply with knowledge. The postmemorial elegy, therefore, does not provide a way out or a way beyond the betweenness of “Thermometer, A Diagram Of.” Rather, it marks this state as one that is necessary and unavoidable — the place in which life is possible — and recasts this existence as acceptable, a place of balance between two extremes, between freezing and boiling, between melancholia and “moving on.”

Chapter Three

“I translated [...] I must remember”: Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps* and Indigenous Elegy

In the titular poem of Nisga’a poet Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps*, readers are presented with a passage that both articulates and demonstrates the work undertaken by this collection:

I trudged on

I translated

I rested

I caught

I gazed

I must remember

(161)

Translation is presented here as the method by which an elegist can engage in the work of remembering, and remembering is presented as both a necessity and a challenge. The copious white space, the laborious trudging, and the need for rest all suggest that the work of remembering is indeed *work*, requiring both effort and time. Moreover, though translation is presented in the past tense, remembering is presented as a future action, something not yet achieved or completed. In the context of the collection as a whole, a text which uses erasure to transform Marius Barbeau’s *Totem Poles*, an anthropological study of the Tsimshianic-speaking peoples of northwestern British Columbia published in 1950, the word “remember” takes on multiple meanings. The remembering occurring is the kind of remembering undertaken by

mourning rituals, but it is also a literal re-membering of history that seeks to reconstitute cultural and ancestral knowledge that has been suppressed by colonialism. As a result, what Abel creates is an elegy for “being home,” not only for himself but, as his dedication declares, “For the Indigenous peoples of North America.” By using the transformative power of unconventional translation, the elegy becomes a tool of articulation, discovery, and resistance, and thus a means to begin a process of healing, both for the individual and for the community.

As a way to frame my discussion of Abel’s project, I am using Neal McLeod’s concept of “being home,” which he defines as follows:

“Being home” means to be a nation, to have access to land, to be able to raise your own children, and to have political control. It involves having a collective sense of dignity.

[...] A collective memory emerges from a specific location, spatially and temporally, and includes such things as a relationship to land, songs, ceremonies, language and stories.

(170)

“Being home” is the opposite of being in exile. However, it is not only about physical location or proximity to community. Rather, the exile in question is also fundamentally ideological:

To be home, in an ideological sense, means to dwell in the landscape of the familiar, collective memories, as opposed to being in exile. “Being home” means to be a part of a larger group, a collective consciousness; it involves having a personal sense of dignity.

Furthermore, an ideological home, housed in collective memory, emerges from a specific location, spatially and temporally. (172)

“Being home” is the ability to be connected to and with one’s community regardless of physical proximity or location. An ideological home may be linked to a specific location, but

disconnection from these ideological elements, even while living in that physical location, prevents an individual from being fully home.

For Indigenous Peoples in Canada, colonialism has severed ideological and physical connections to all that constitutes “being home” by denying them dignity and political control of their own lives, by breaking the lines of transmission for collective memory, and by restricting access to cultural contributors to identity such as songs, ceremonies, language, stories, and artifacts. These denials have led to “spatial diaspora” — “the removal of an Indigenous group [...] from their land” (McLeod 172) — and “ideological diaspora” — “the alienation from one’s stories [...] the removal from the voices and echoes of the ancestors” (172). Abel’s elegy responds to the losses connected to both varieties of diaspora, seeking to recognize them and, ultimately, begin a process of remembering that counters them.

The Place of Scraps is a transformative translation of excerpts from anthropologist Marius Barbeau’s *Totem Poles*, a lengthy study of the Indigenous Peoples of northwestern British Columbia, including the Nisga’a, and Abel’s relationship to this text is essential for the construction of his elegy. Barbeau’s text serves as a source of information about the Nisga’a, and therefore using it as a source text for his elegy allows Abel to draw on this information and engage in the work of remembering. As Abel explained in a 2016 interview with *EVENT Magazine*, Barbeau’s writings are one of the few readily available and easily accessible sources for information about the Nisga’a in the early twentieth century:

My original intention, of course, was to explore Marius Barbeau’s *Totem Poles* in order to better understand the Nisga’a Nation. As an intergenerational survivor of the residential school system, my connection to Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies was very limited. At the time, I felt like my only connection to Indigenous knowledge

was through the library. So, naturally, I ended up finding Barbeau's foundational writings almost immediately. ("Un/Inhabited")

Barbeau's work is "foundational" due in large part to its prominence in academic and cultural records of Nisga'a history. This foundational position makes Barbeau's work an ideal source text for the elegiac project Abel is undertaking in *The Place of Scraps*. Its prominence allows for an easy entry point to reconnect with personal and cultural history, and its perceived singularity exemplifies and draws attention to how little information is available and, therefore, how crucial the work of remembering is, while also revealing how extensive the losses of the ideological components of "being home" are and, therefore, how necessary the work of mourning is to the process of remembering. Additionally, the anthropological bent of Barbeau's study suits Abel's project, which is, in its own way, an anthropological exploration of personal and cultural identity.

Further understanding the ways choosing Barbeau's text as the source text for his transformative translation allows Abel to engage in remembering requires a consideration of the content and context of Barbeau's study. Barbeau was interested in cultural preservation, attempting to memorialize what he saw as vanishing cultures, as he makes clear at the outset of his book:

The purpose of this book is to bring out the cultural aspects of these activities, only in so far as totem poles, house posts and frontals are concerned, many years after the collapse of the fur trade and of all native institutions and incentives. The fur trade now is only a vestige of what it used to be, and the Indians themselves, decimated long ago almost to the point of extinction, are forsaking their recent past and are adopting modern ways for good or evil. (*Totem Poles: According to Crests and Topics* 15-16)

What Barbeau describes is salvage ethnography, which “began from the assumption that traditional aboriginal cultures were rapidly collapsing before the onrush of the modern age” (Nurse 444). In a discussion of Barbeau’s writings about the Huron-Wyandot, Andrew Nurse explores Barbeau’s participation in the salvage ethnographical methods and attitudes that pervaded early twentieth-century anthropology:

It [salvage ethnography] posited that authentic aboriginal cultures had once existed in a sort of timeless and holistic prehistoric state that had been corrupted by progressive interaction with white culture and society. Interaction with white culture caused authentic aboriginal cultures to decay as elements of these cultures fell into disuse or were abandoned by aboriginal people themselves in favor of newer cultural adaptations imported from white sources. The task of the salvage ethnographer was to preserve the remnants of rapidly vanishing cultures to reconstruct authentic “prehistoric” native cultures. (444)

Although Barbeau recognizes the continued existence of the Indigenous Peoples he is making a study of — after all, he interacts with individuals from these Nations so he cannot fully deny their continued survival — he presents their survival itself as a kind of loss since they have not maintained their “true” culture. This belief places Barbeau and other anthropologists in a saviour position, casting them as the only ones invested in preserving these cultures in their “true” form.

In *Nishga*, published in 2020, Abel discusses the way these two components affect *The Place of Scraps*. He explains that one central narrative in the text is about Barbeau, salvage ethnography, and the ways that Barbeau’s work participated in “dismantling Nisga’a culture, [...] along with any other nations in the Pacific Northwest, [...] by the buying and often stealing of totem poles and other cultural items from struggling communities” (44). However, a

personally motivated interrogation of identity and the legacy of intergenerational trauma were the starting points for the creation of the text. Spurred on by the desire to find information about the Indigenous side of his family, Abel went to the library and “started to look for books using the search term *Nisga’a*” (43). In that search, *Totem Poles* was the first book he could find (43). *Totem Poles* thus became an “imperfect entry point” into Nisga’a knowledge and worldviews, but rather than offering the information Abel had set out to find, Barbeau’s text led Abel to question why he didn’t know any of the stories he found in Barbeau’s text. Thus, *The Place of Scraps* engages with Barbeau’s book in order to create a text that is “about what it means to be an intergenerational survivor of Residential Schools,” “about what those experiences can look like,” and “about having no choice but to learn about your own family history through the now-debunked work of a dead, white anthropologist” (46). The convergence of these narratives in *The Place of Scraps*, speaks to the ways the personal and communal are intertwined in Abel’s project and to the ways that loss is central to the way the text was created.

Barbeau’s *Totem Poles* is the primary source text for Abel’s transformative translation, but it is not the only text Abel translates. The poems found in *The Place of Scraps* can be placed in three categories based on the source material being translated: those that begin with an excerpt from Barbeau’s *Totem Poles*; those that begin with a prose passage that appears as though it comes from *Totem Poles* but was actually written by Abel; and those that begin a diary or journal entry that relates a story from Abel’s own life. The passages from *Totem Poles* are easily identified since Abel provides a citation. The passages written to emulate Barbeau adopt his third-person voice and anecdotal relation of stories and are only distinguished from those passages actually excerpted from Barbeau by the fact that they do not possess a citation. The journal entries are distinguished from the other two categories both in form, since they are each

headed with a date, and in content, since they relate personal stories. However, these passages also adopt the detached, third-person voice of the anthropological study; both the content and the dates place these events within Abel's life, suggesting a kind of anthropological interest in himself and his connection to his heritage. In addition to these three categories, Abel occasionally draws from the work of Barbeau's contemporaries, though these texts are relegated to the margins of the poems in which they appear, serving as secondary rather than primary sources for the translation.

Each poem consists of a prose passage that falls into one of these three categories and a series of transformations¹¹ of that passage generated through erasure. Although the erasures are presented one after the other, each returns to the full original passage as its source material rather than drawing upon what was left in the preceding transformation. Each transformation occupies its own page, and the back side of each page is left blank, so while the prose passage and related transformations are clearly connected by content, they are each also presented as independent entities. The number of transformations, and the order in which the various elements are presented, varies between poems. Abel also incorporates archival photographs of totem poles in various ways throughout the text, and he uses a handful of other transformative techniques arising from conceptual and concrete poetry traditions, such as moving text around on the page, appending quotations from other materials to his primary source material, and using repetition.

¹¹ I refer to each of these portions of the poem as a "transformation." I have chosen this term over the term "erasure" since "erasure" already serves as a term for each individual erased word and for the practice that produces the text, and the addition of a third meaning creates unnecessary confusion. Additionally, "erasure" limits methodology to the act of erasing, whereas "transformation" can encompass other methods, such as the movement of words around the page, the creation of palimpsests, and the introduction of both visual and linguistic material from other sources, all of which Abel engages in to some degree.

However, Abel's primary technique is erasure, and the other methods he sometimes incorporates work to support the erasure rather than replace it.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND INDIGENOUS ELEGY

The diasporic disconnection McLeod identifies, and from which *The Place of Scraps* emerges, is related to what Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart calls historical trauma and the historical trauma response. Historical trauma, she explains, "is cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences" ("The Historical Trauma Response" 7). The historical trauma response "is the constellation of features in reaction to this trauma" (7). Significantly, she links this response to "historical unresolved grief that accompanies the trauma; this grief may be considered impaired, delayed, fixated, and/or disenfranchised" (7). At the centre of historical trauma lies grief, and because of this the elegiac mode is well suited to expressing and working through historical trauma since it facilitates the process of grieving and offers the possibility of countering the delays and impairments that make historical trauma so damaging.

Historical trauma is explicitly characterized by the "cumulative" (Brave Heart 7). The events that produce historical trauma are both passed down to *and* enacted upon each generation. In other words, the primary source of trauma is ongoing and experienced by multiple generations even as past traumas are simultaneously being transmitted to subsequent generations. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the residential school system in Canada, a source of systemic trauma that has received attention in public and academic discourse since the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report in 2015. The legacy of the residential school system certainly aligns with postmemory and intergenerational trauma, yet because the schools

were open for more than a century, several generations also experienced the trauma of the residential schools firsthand in addition to being impacted by the effects of the trauma experienced by previous generations. Abel explicitly references his position as an “intergenerational survivor of the residential school system” (“Un/Inhabited”) as part of the impetus behind *The Place of Scraps*, but by opting to translate Barbeau’s text in particular, Abel broadens the scope of his elegy to mourn and reckon with larger systemic causes of trauma and loss.

Although I will be contextualizing Abel’s elegy in the history of English elegy, and, indeed, the text’s resistance to the conciliatory model of mourning that underpins much of English elegy is essential to the work of mourning conceived by Abel, the text also operates within the context of Indigenous elegy and mourning practices. There are relatively few studies of Indigenous elegy as a specific genre since elegy is a European form and Western categories for literature have long failed to account for oral traditions. Frequently there are no equivalent terms in the lexicon of Western literary criticism to discuss or describe traditional Indigenous oral genres (Krupat, “‘That the People Might Live’” 343-44). However, this absence of formal discussion does not mean that there are not some common characteristics to Indigenous elegiac expressions, and Arnold Krupat has attempted to adapt the elegy as a category to Indigenous poetic expression. Krupat explores what elegy looks like in a Native-American context, first in an essay entitled “‘That the People Might Live’: Notes Toward a Study of Native American Elegy” included in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, and then in an expanded book-length version of the essay, *‘That the People Might Live’: Loss and Renewal in Native American Literature*. Although Krupat’s studies focus on Indigenous literature in an American context, they provide a useful framework for Indigenous literature in Canada, both because little has been

written on the subject of Indigenous elegies in Canada and because several of the features Krupat points out elucidate elegiac features that Abel uses. He argues that “commitment to remembering the past, the refusal simply to mourn-and-be-done in the interest of wholeness, may be found in a wide range of Native American expression in the elegiac mode, from the nineteenth century to the present” (“*That the People Might Live*” 161). Additionally, he claims that Indigenous elegy is broadly characterized by an understanding that loss and mourning “affects not only a particular individual or family but the larger community — clan, moiety, tribe, nation — as a collective entity” (9). The refusal of conciliatory mourning, the desire to remember history, and the understanding of both mourning and healing as collective experiences affecting the community, are all fundamental elements of the elegy as Abel construes it.

Contextualizing *The Place of Scraps* this way is particularly important as it allows one to consider the ways the text resists the English elegiac tradition as part of its broader task of resistance as well as to understand the ways it resists and aligns with concerns of non-Indigenous contemporary elegists. Priscila Uppal’s analysis of elegies for cultural losses and displacements is helpful in thinking about Abel’s work. Uppal explains that “[f]requently the legitimate inheritors of cultural traditions and knowledge have been denied cultural continuity and are unable to articulate or isolate what has been lost. Either the losses are too massive to be properly restored or the methods by which to restore them are unknown” (189). It is into this space, Uppal argues, that the elegy enters as a tool to “counteract the severe psychological damage caused by forces that have disrupted continuity between generations” (190) through “ritual performances that help to replace ‘collective trauma’ with ‘collective memory’” (193). Because the elegy is capable of working to restore collective memory, it “performs a crucial function for present and future generations whose relationship with the past has been virtually destroyed either by the

negligence caused by assimilation or the by [*sic*] willful erasure of history and cultural knowledge caused by such violent acts as attempted genocide or forced exile” (192).

Additionally, Uppal suggests that “the elegy provides a space for a post-colonial project that seeks not only the restoration of memory, but also the creation of memory, enabling loving attachments to form between present, past, and future communities that have been or are currently severed” (33). In doing so, elegies also become a means to create “a bridge to reconnect present generations with their cultural legacies and to honour those forgotten inheritances in the process” and even “counterbalance the official histories that have silenced or erased these memories or created gaps between cultural generations” (193). This ability to counter official narratives and bridge gaps in memory also allows for the elegy to become a political tool for reclamation and resistance and, in doing so, a tool for communal healing.

REMEMBERING AND RE-MEMBERING

The process that McLeod presents as countering spatial and ideological diaspora is “coming home,” which is “an exercise in cartography; it is trying to locate the place of understanding and culture” (183). It is also “the attempt to link two disparate narrative locations, and to find a place, a place of speaking and narrating, wherein the experiences of the present can be understood as a function of the past” (183). McLeod’s description has much in common with the elegy’s task of naming the dead. In order to see the connection between past and present, an elegist must be able to identify what has been lost and what caused that loss. This task is, arguably, more difficult in the case of abstract losses like the effects of physical and ideological diaspora because both cause and effect — present diasporic condition and historical trauma — are more obscure and complex than they are in an elegy for the death of an individual.

Unconventional translation becomes a way of showing the complexity and depth of loss in these circumstances.

As in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Found*, unconventional translation in *The Place of Scraps* becomes a tool by which Abel can show rather than articulate loss. In the context of cultural displacement, which disrupts the transmission of cultural knowledge and is accompanied by a general lack of resources to counter this disruption, this means articulating, emulating, and drawing attention to the silences that exist within both collective and personal knowledge. Erasure inherently creates white space since the spaces mark where text has been removed, and this white space is compounded in *The Place of Scraps* by the physical layout of the text. The pages are slightly oversized, yet the text is contained in a set area in the centre of each page, taking up about a third of the available space. Moreover, the entire book is only printed on one side of each page, effectively inserting a full page of space between each section of text. Even the original passages that are being worked upon are surrounded by white space, indicating that these are short pieces of the original but also suggesting that *Totem Poles* itself is operating with and within a partial narrative. The white space in the text also serves to slow down the reading process, reproducing the difficulty of finding and connecting to the information that has been lost. Persistence is required in order to uncover meaning and access information. This is indeed a "place of scraps" as the collection's title promises.

In contrast to the prominent white space throughout the collection, Abel's translation creates a few transformations that are dense with text, such as one that appears in "Myth explaining some of the crests." Here Abel prints the same erasure on the page four times, slightly moving each iteration so that the repeated words layer on top of one another, making them difficult, if not wholly impossible, to read (see Fig. 14). The initial visual appearance of this

transformation
 suggests the
 impossibility of
 finding meaning not
 because there is
 nothing available, but
 because what is
 available amounts to
 meaningless noise. The
 density of the text

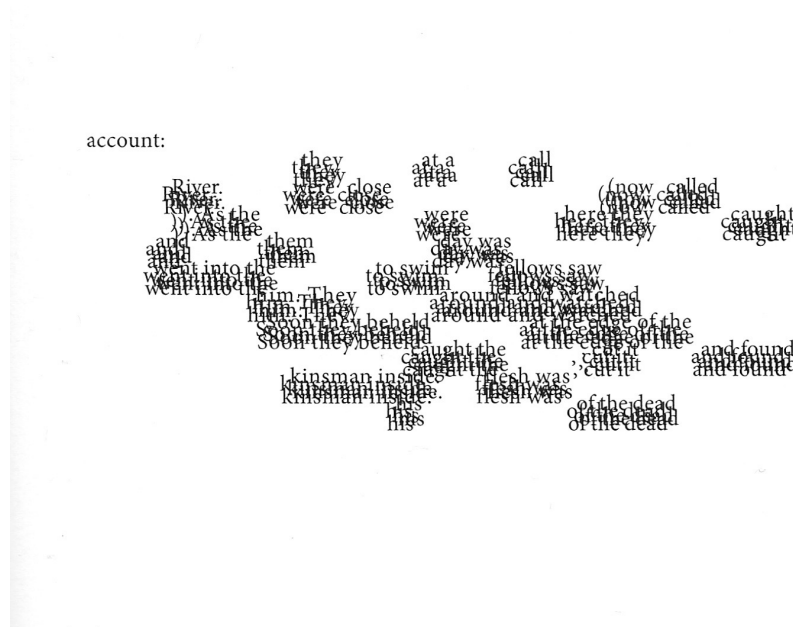


Fig. 14. Transformation on p. 117 from “Myth explaining some of the crests” from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

created by the layering of the repetitions draws attention to the spaces on the page created by erasure by heightening the contrast between text and space. But the replication of the same information also indicates that what is available relates only the same partial narratives over and over again. By manipulating the text through unconventional translation practices, Abel demonstrates the complexity of the losses that deny him the state of “being home.” By taking a text that ostensibly should provide the kind of knowledge that could serve in a process of “coming home” and physically manipulating that text through erasure, Abel transforms it into a record of the insubstantial amount of knowledge that this foundational text actually offers and thus shows how extensive his lack of access to cultural knowledge is.

In addition to highlighting the lack of available information, Abel’s use of erasure draws attention to the attitudes that informed Barbeau’s approach and that shaped, and continue to shape, policies that inflict the systemic trauma that leads to the loss of physical and ideological home. In doing so, the text makes the causal connection between past and present that McLeod

presents as necessary for the process of “coming home.” *The Place of Scraps* opens with a striking example of this practice in “A feud over this pole,” a poem that highlights the question of possession and the lack of access to cultural knowledge. The initial transformation retains a portion of a footnote from the original passage in *Totem Poles* in order to provide the tag line “by Marius Barbeau” (7), suggesting the creative license Barbeau took in recording the information he included in his work and raising the question of possession by asking whose story *Totem Poles* tells. The second transformation introduces the “his” that will repeat throughout the section, but it is the final two transformations that make the question of possession unavoidable. The penultimate transformation leaves each iteration of possessive pronouns, primarily “his,” on the page, whether the word appears in the passage from *Totem Poles* as that word or contained as a whole or piecemeal within another word or words (see Fig. 15). The next transformation reads simply “In summary / , his” (15). The antecedents for these pronouns remain unclear, echoing the titular feud over ownership of the pole; the ownership remains in

question in the transformations, but the players have changed and the topic has expanded beyond the pole itself. The footnote retained in part on page 7 and page 13 emphasizes the text’s status as a translation,

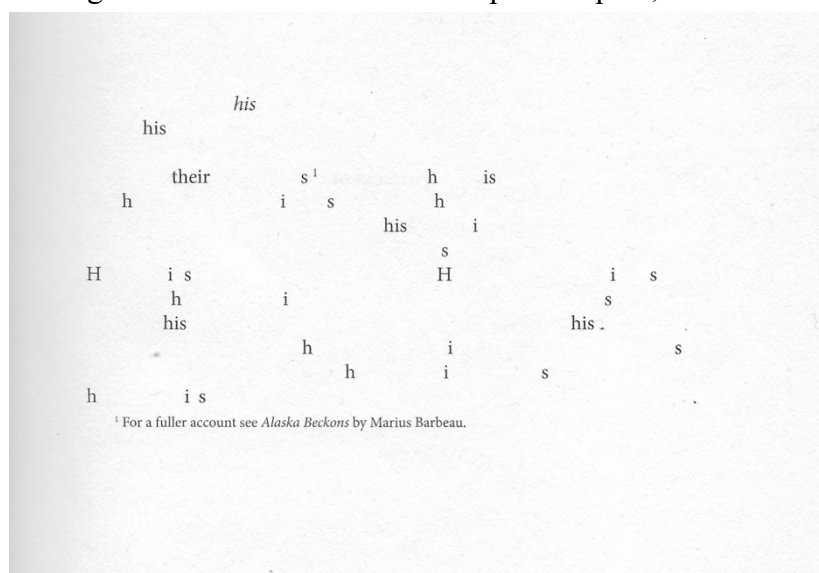


Fig. 15. Transformation on p. 13 in “A feud over this pole” from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

drawing attention to the original author and thus suggesting Barbeau as one of the options for the

antecedent, a reference that points to the colonial idea that artifacts, stories, and even people themselves were objects to be possessed by the colonizer. This footnote also emphasizes the lack of information available on the history and culture of Indigenous Peoples, directing the reader to yet another text by Barbeau, establishing him as the sole authority on Indigenous cultures. If Barbeau is understood as the antecedent to “his,” then the number of occurrences of “his” versus the singular instance of “theirs” highlights once again the prominent position of Barbeau’s narrative while simultaneously suggesting Barbeau as the rightful owner of the poles and all they are assumed to represent. In this transformation, Barbeau becomes the one who possesses most of the “true” culture, while the presence of “theirs” reveals the resistance, persistence, and survival of Indigenous people. It’s an early indication in Abel’s project that their erasure has been incomplete, an early assertion of presence that shifts the focus of mourning from the supposed loss of Indigenous cultures to the losses experienced by Indigenous Peoples.

The second poem, “The pole transported to Toronto,” introduces the salvage ethnography that led to the movement of many Indigenous artifacts to museums, as well as the violence enacted upon these objects and upon Indigenous bodies. It relates how the Sakau’wan¹² pole was moved to the Royal Ontario Museum, a process that involved felling the poles, floating them down a river, and, eventually, cutting them into sections, but the translation emphasizes the violence of this process. Possession again haunts these transformations, with the “his totem” and “his Indians” (23) of the second transformation offering a double reading. If the “his” is read as referring to Barbeau overseeing the transfer of the totem poles, it suggests that he feels

¹² Abel, because he is drawing on Barbeau’s text, spells Sakau’wan this way. As this is the primary source from which I am drawing material in this chapter, I have chosen to use the same spelling. However, there are a number of variant spellings of *Sakau’wan*; when I am quoting directly from a scholar who uses a different spelling, I will maintain the spelling used in that work.

he owns both the totem and the people to which it is connected. If the “his” is read as referring to Sakau’wan, then the scene becomes a mournful water funeral, with Sakau’wan’s people being floated down the river with the pole, the removal of the artifact a blow to their very existence. Abel then links this violence to the violence enacted upon Indigenous bodies with a transformation that reads:

remove
thousands of

Indians

successfully

without feeling a tremor (25)

The violence here alludes to genocidal campaigns, with “remove” functioning as a euphemism for death and also referring to the forcible expulsion from ancestral lands.

The final note of apathy revealed in the line “without feeling a tremor” (25) on the part of the one doing the destroying emulates the scientific approach of the anthropologist, and is an echo of an earlier transformation in the same poem:

feel
no difference
in the water
or

Toronto

(21)

This same transformation also describes a focused work ethic — “face forwards / work” (21) — that evokes a sense of willful ignorance. In these transformations, the act of erasure uncovers these attitudes, attitudes that allowed and still allow systemic abuse and mistreatment of Indigenous people. But it also reveals another reading of the collective myth. Although the acquisition of artifacts such as the totem poles was often presented as beneficial both for Indigenous people, whose culture is being saved from destruction, and for non-Indigenous people, who could go to a museum and learn about these vanishing cultures, no one is benefiting in Abel’s poems. Rather, one group is severely harmed and the other is entirely unaffected.

By adopting a translation technique that creates gaps and silences, Abel manifests absence and loss and thus embodies a kind of melancholic mourning that Krupat presents as characteristic of much Indigenous elegiac writing. Krupat argues that Indigenous elegy is characterized by “a collective melancholic mourning that will not release the palpable *presence* of what is *absent*, that will not *mourn* in the classic Freudian sense” (“*That the People Might Live*” 7). This present absence is physically manifested in the spaces of Abel’s text and emphasized by the consistent attention paid to acts that create an absence, echoing from the removal of the totem poles that becomes, through Abel’s transformation, the removal of “thousands of / Indians” (25) to the death and burial of the individual referred to as the “old Indian” in “The doctrine of the Indian prophet” (191-207). Both the euphemistic death (removal) and the literal death and burial are reminders of those that are not here, drawing attention to their absences. Similarly, if there is a concrete elegiac subject in *The Place of Scraps*, it is the totem poles themselves, a focus established by the choice of Barbeau’s text as the source text for Abel’s translation and by their prominent subject position within the collection. The poles, too,

are simultaneously absent and present. Their absence is emphasized through the focus on the story of their removal that begins the collection. Yet the poet later encounters the poles in a museum context, asserting their presence while simultaneously underscoring their absence from the ancestral lands of the Nisga'a. Absence is not overcome or compensated for in *The Place of Scraps*, but rather allowed continued existence and importance, and thus loss — whether of people, artifacts, belonging, or knowledge — is maintained.

Abel uses erasure to show both part of what has been lost and the systems that created, and continue to create, that loss, allowing a more complete picture of the consequences of these systems, and thus the losses being mourned. But pointing out these systems also turns this elegy to the work of re-membling by creating opportunities to resist and correct these systems and their products, including national collective myths. Indigenous scholars and authors emphasize the connections between communal healing and story-telling. Jo-Ann Episkenew explains that “[b]y writing the stories of their lives, stories that articulate Indigenous truths in the form of alternate collective myths, Indigenous writers not only fill in the gaps in the collective myth of the dominant, colonial society but also correct many of its falsehoods. These gaps and falsehoods have functioned as weapons that continue to injure the collective esteem of Indigenous people” (72-73). She adds that by telling these stories, Indigenous authors are producing a body of literature that “also depicts the resilience of Indigenous people and articulates their emotions in a way that inspires hope in its readers” (74). Daniel Heath Justice advocates for the existence of “a more powerful reality, one in which written words — those of Indigenous mother tongues as well as those of invader tongues that have been indigenized by centuries of use by Native peoples — are a meaningful complement to the healing processes of decolonization and Indigenous empowerment” (“Conjuring Marks” 5). According to McLeod, it

is the telling of stories that counters the breakdown and disconnection experienced in diaspora because “[s]tories act as the vehicles of cultural transmission by linking one generation to the next” (182). They “allow the possibility of cultural transmission and of ‘coming home’ in an ideological sense” (182).

When the stories that need to be told are the very thing that has been lost, and thus part of the loss that needs to be mourned, then alternative methods of expression beyond simple telling must be found. Translation’s basic structure — original text, process, translated text — means that every act of translation begins with the words of another,¹³ and it is this other’s words that may express what needs to be said, or, in Abel’s work, what “wants” to be said. However, in the context of historical trauma, particularly when that historical trauma consists in no small part of the obliteration of cultural ties and language and when the rightful inheritors of information have been intentionally cut off from that information, it is hard to find any text that encapsulates much of what an elegist is trying to say. Because Abel’s text is grappling with the effects of colonialism, the story that must be told to facilitate healing is a counter-narrative to the national collective myth in which Barbeau’s text participates. As Episkew argues, “to heal the wounds that colonialism has inflicted on the Indigenous population, [they] must hear [their] truths in the national collective myth.” (73). Abel’s text accomplishes this through both form and content: drawing attention to the destructive treatment of Indigenous people that the Canadian national collective myth is founded on, exposing attempts at erasure and silencing, and turning the tables

¹³ The exception here is self-translation, but even that has been argued to adhere to the same structure by authors such as Samuel Beckett and Nancy Huston who frequently practice(d) self-translation. In fact, Abel indulges in self-translation to an extent since some of the prose passages he erases are his work. However, in imitating Barbeau or adopting a third-person persona in the journal entries, these words can also be understood as the words of another to a certain extent, exemplifying the complexity of self-translation and indicating that this logic holds even in these instances.

on these practices. Translation is fundamentally an act of rewriting, at least if we understand translation as a creative task in which the translator's agency is equivalent rather than subservient to the original author's, which suits it to the project of correcting and rewriting the national collective myth. By translating Barbeau's text, a significant contributor to accepted narratives about Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Abel can rewrite the story that Barbeau tells.

RESISTANCE AND HEALING

Within a colonial context, translation must always be acknowledged as a tool used to establish and maintain power structures between colonizer and colonized. In fact, the very losses that an elegy such as Abel's mourns are in no small part caused by language policies and translation. As Eric Cheyfitz and Alex Harmon note:

Colonial translation, then, becomes a way of both domesticating (subordinating) the foreign to the settler regime and, at the same time and as part of the same process, alienating the Indigenous subject from its domestic (proper or literal) place, that is, making this subject foreign or figurative to itself as a way of derealizing, fictionalizing or objectifying, the subject.

In its colonial sense, then, translation is best understood as a mode of production *and* a technology of domination. (278)

Translation, in other words, is one of the tools for the creation of ideological diaspora. It serves as a way to produce the very disconnection from self-knowledge that led Abel to begin work on *The Place of Scraps*. This is, for instance, why residential school systems frequently forbade students from speaking Indigenous languages and placed such emphasis on teaching students to speak English for the purposes of assimilation. Erasing language is an effective way to sever

cultural and familial ties by denying one of the most fundamental access points to those groups. The designation of national “official” languages worked to further establish power dynamics in which English¹⁴ was given validity and credibility while Indigenous languages were erased from official narratives. We can see this linguistic manifestation of a power dynamic at work in Barbeau’s ethnographic practices in *Totem Poles* as well, as he presents only the English translation of the stories he records.

And yet, translation is not solely the purview of the colonizer. What Cheyfitz and Harmon call “motivated mistranslation” on the part of Indigenous translators, specifically individuals working as interpreters, has been noted as early as Columbus’s voyages (280). The word “mistranslation” ties this effort to unconventional translation practices. Unconventional translation disregards the idea that translation is meant to transmit a core meaning of some kind, instead intentionally “mistranslating” texts to see what other meanings can be created. Moreover, because translation holds the power to damage or to erase, when the power dynamic is reversed, when the oppressed take up translation and use it on the texts and speech of the colonizer, it becomes a tool of resistance. While “motivated mistranslation” as a term primarily refers to instances of bilateral interpreting,¹⁵ the resistive uses of translation also manifest in written translations, a practice often called “retranslation.” As the term suggests, retranslation is a

¹⁴ French adds another dimension to the linguistic power dynamics in Canada. Moreover, Canada was settled by other European populations that spoke languages other than English or French. However, since I am focusing exclusively on poetry published in English, I will be looking at the power dynamic between English-speaking colonizers and Indigenous people in the context of language and political power.

¹⁵ Bilateral interpreting (also known as community interpreting) occurs when two parties are only capable of communicating through an interpreter. Because of the language barriers involved, the interpreter in these instances has the power to manipulate the message being conveyed without either party being aware of the change in meaning since the interpreter is the only one who knows what is being said at all times.

“translating again,” typically for corrective purposes. Sometimes this is simply undertaken in order to correct perceived errors in the previous translation, but in colonial contexts, it can be undertaken as a version of writing back. The text in question is reclaimed by the colonized group. Rainer Guldin argues that “[i]f translation is fundamentally a channel for empire and a tool of colonial dominance, retranslation is a form of resistance to colonial power” (88); it “is not simply an attempt at eradicating the cultural traces of oppression but a way to transform and reframe them” (88). Retranslations retain a sense of the oppressive translation they are working against; they do not simply reject the translation and return to an original text. Both motivated mistranslation and retranslation demonstrate that translation has the ability to serve as a tool for resistance or subversion because translation is ultimately an act of transformation.

Motivated mistranslation and retranslation traditionally operate within heterolingual translation, meaning that at least one of the languages in use is the language of the colonized. Thus, retranslation in particular often serves as a means to salvage and return to prominence languages that have begun to disappear due to colonization. In Canada, keeping Indigenous languages alive is a powerful means to resist colonization since it actively resists the process of cultural destruction that colonialism is founded on. McLeod argues that “[e]very time a story is told, every time one word of an Indigenous language is spoken, we are resisting the destruction of our collective memory” (182). Abel does participate to a limited degree in such resistance; the first transformation of “The pole of ’Neesyq and ’Neeskyinwæt” retains only the Nisga’a words as they are found in Barbeau’s text, although he retains their parenthetical positions, highlighting the fact that Barbeau saw them as afterthoughts or addendums rather than crucial information. The transformation is an act of linguistic resistance that also reminds the reader of the

subordinate position that Indigenous languages occupy on the rare occasions that they appear in the dominant collective narrative.

But in the context of a colonial environment where Indigenous languages have been effectively suppressed by severing familial and community-based lines of transmission, homolingistic translation can serve the same purposes as a heterolingistic act of retranslation. Retranslation flips the power dynamic by performing the same act of translation that asserted the dominance of one group but reversing the direction of that act, erasing the colonizer's language in favour of the colonized language. Erasure allows for this reversal even in circumstances where the colonized language has been effectively eradicated or suppressed by providing a means by which the effect of the original translation — an act of obliteration — can be reversed even while operating within only the language of the colonizer. As *The Place of Scraps* demonstrates, erasure thus actively obliterates the narrative that was initially constructed through obliteration.

The power dynamic that exists in a colonial country is reinforced and propped up by language and translation, and because of this, the creation of silence in *The Place of Scraps* becomes an act of resistance both because it rejects the voice of the colonizer and because it reclaims silence as space for the colonized to begin the work of healing. The silencing of colonized groups by colonizers does not have to do with the creation of silence; the colonial subject was silenced so that the colonizer could speak, or, to put it another way, the colonial subject was silenced by the colonizer's speech. This dynamic plays out in the fraught relationship of erasure and telling when it comes to cultural histories; the colonial power eliminates Indigenous cultures but then produces its own versions of the histories, stories, and cultural traditions of these cultures through anthropological studies and museum exhibits that typically present the erasure as final and natural, rather than incomplete and a product of colonial

policies. Abel, however, does not emulate this dynamic; instead of speaking over Barbeau, the text silences with silence.

The silencing enacted by erasure-based translation is particularly noticeable in transformations that retain only the punctuation found in the original passages, such as the first

transformation in “The myth of the Dragon-Fly” (see Fig. 16) or the second transformation in “The pole of ’Neesyoq and ’Neeskyinwæt” (see Fig. 17). Karpinski

claims that in part *The Place of Scraps* uses

erasure to “return[] to the colonizer the very

grammatical system

that was used to

discipline the

Indigenous body into

colonized subject” (78).

Erasure in these

transformations

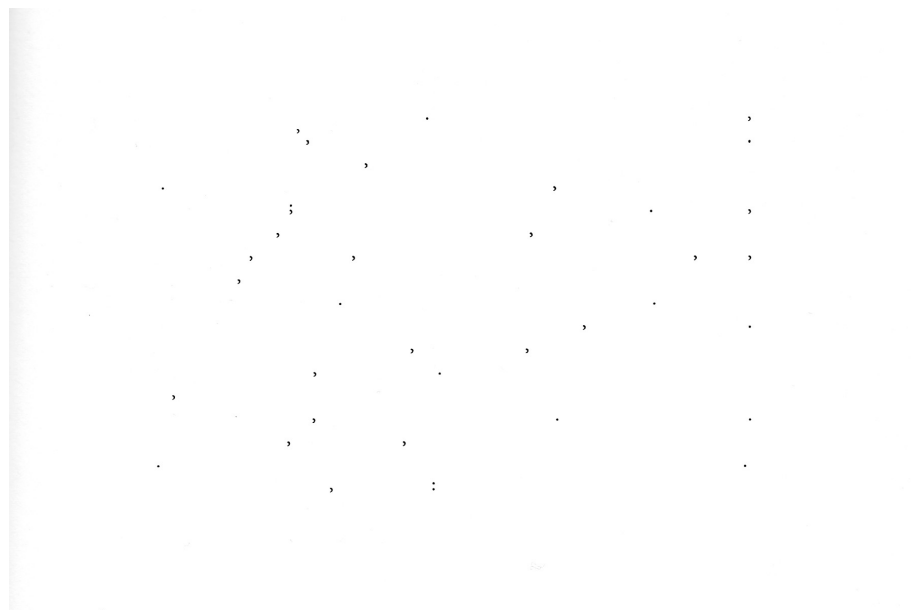


Fig. 16. Transformation on p. 69 in “The myth of the Dragon-Fly” from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

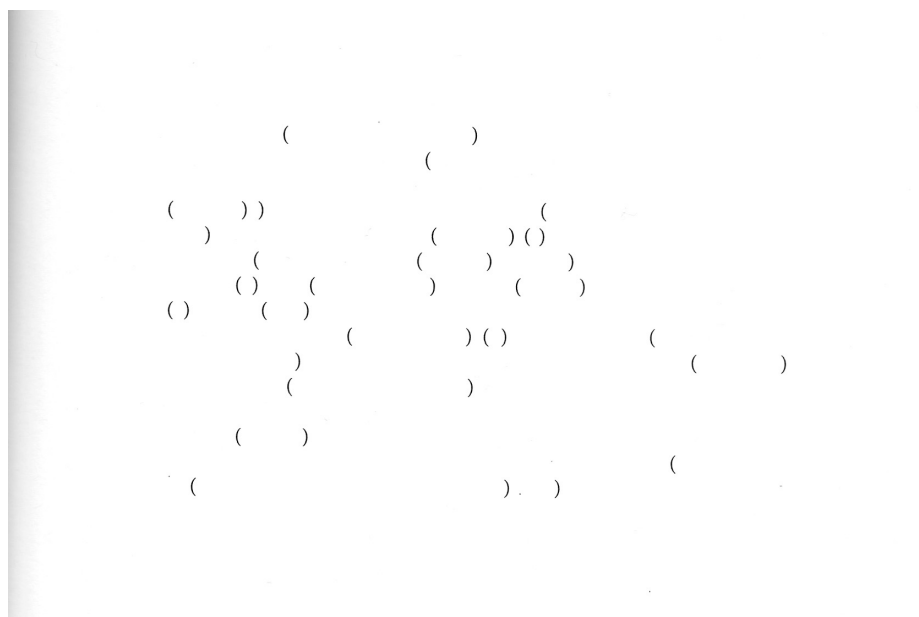


Fig. 17. Transformation on p. 51 from “The pole of ’Neesyoq and ’Neeskyinwæt” from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

extracts the punctuation — the building blocks of grammatical sentences — from the original text, isolating that structure as something to be interrogated. This is an act of silencing in which the colonized silences the colonizer, reclaiming their own stories and leaving the colonizer with the structure they have imposed but no content with which to fill that structure. Significantly, in the case of “The pole of ’Neesyoq and ’Neeskyinwæt,” what is being returned is a set of grammatical markings that marginalize. But tellingly Abel leaves the spaces. In fact, the space overwhelms the page. This is true throughout the text, but the amount of space on pages that contain no language is especially notable even within a collection as driven by white space as this one. The extremity of white space here allows these transformations simultaneously to engage in an act of resistance — silencing the colonizer’s voice and symbolically returning the very syntactical system that was used to oppress — and to present the option of what to do with this space — either telling an alternative narrative or remaining silent.

If these pages are read as returning the colonizer’s grammatical system, then the implication is also that the extracted story has been reclaimed by Abel. However, another way of reading these transformations is that the only useful parts of these passages for Abel are the grammatical structures, and this is why they are retained. In a way, these transformations then become a microcosm of the larger project being undertaken by Abel’s elegy, reclaiming elements from Barbeau’s text and translating them to different purposes. Retaining the grammatical structure suggests that the impulse in Barbeau’s text is to be found in the provision of structure and order. Translating Barbeau’s text provides a structure and practice that organizes and focuses the elegiac exploration of and response to loss.

The silencing created by translating Barbeau’s text also signals the need for alternative stories to replace the one already in existence. It is not only rewriting that contributes to healing,

but the telling of new stories. Inserted between translations of Barbeau, are six journal-style entries, grouped into three sets of two, that seem to relate personal stories from Abel's life, offering up one individual's story as a way to begin filling in some of the room translation has created. In part, these sections tell the story of two separate trips to visit the totem poles housed at the Royal Ontario Museum and thus offer more recent stories about the same poles Barbeau chronicles. In doing so, Abel establishes his personal relationship to the history and knowledge with which he is trying to connect, but also asserts the continued presence of the people and culture Barbeau prematurely lamented, and this assertion of presence serves as a counter-narrative to Barbeau's. The first of these trips occurs when the narrator is a child; his mother takes him to see the poles, and the description of this visit emphasizes both the artificiality of the interaction — "The poet obeys the rules (contemplative lingering, artificial glimmers of insight) as though a violation would be severely punished" (59) — and the lack of connection he feels with the totem pole — "But the poet is incapable of converting the contents of the stairwell into memory" (59). The subsequent excerpt describes a moment twenty-five years later when his mother asks whether he remembers that trip, and he "does not hold that memory" (63). This sparks a brief moment of shame "that the pole that was removed from his ancestral village has also been excavated from his own memories" (63) and signals the beginning of a complicated relationship with these particular artifacts, one marked by "a multiplicity of subtle emotions" (63). The second of these trips occurs "Of his own volition" (143), a trip on which he is "confident that he will be reunited with the totem pole removed from the Nass River valley by Marius Barbeau" (143). And yet, despite the suggestion of import or connection, there is no clear articulation of what this connection might be or how this meeting impacts the poet; the section

ends simply: “The pole is here; the poet is here” (143). Finding the poles and being in the same physical space as them, holds importance, but it is merely a starting point.

While the introduction of these journal entries is not itself a result of the choice to translate, it is indicative of the freedom and flexibility afforded by unconventional translation, which allows the original text to be interrupted or broken up in ways that traditional heterolingual translation does not. Significantly, these passages are themselves translated, using the same erasure techniques employed to translate Barbeau, demonstrating that translation is an important tool whether the losses are being examined on an individual, familial, or societal level. The poles in their museum context become a parallel for Barbeau, another way to attempt to access information, and another way that this discovery is thwarted. The deconstruction of these passages by way of erasure produces some of the most extreme examples of erasure in the text, consisting of transformations that retain only individual, disparate letters scattered across the page, suggesting that the encounters in the passages are, ultimately, even less informative than Barbeau’s text.

The disintegration of the individual narrative upon closer examination also suggests that any one personal narrative is insufficient for the work of correction and rewriting. If Indigenous history is to be re-membered, then it must be a collaborative effort. While Abel presents the impetus behind the creation of *The Place of Scraps* as a personal one, the loss being addressed is also communal and community-related. Part of “being home” is being “part of a larger group, a collective consciousness” (McLeod 172), and consequently, part of the work involved in “coming home” consists of re-connecting to this kind of community. However, Abel’s text addresses not only his individual dislocation from community but the fact that loss itself is communal. Krupat argues that Indigenous elegiac writing adopts a “communitist” perspective

(“*That the People Might Live*” 9), a term he borrows from Jace Weaver in order to suggest that mourning is undertaken both in and for the community. Loss is registered as communal since it impacts the community as much if not more than the individual (4). As a result, many Indigenous elegies undertake the work of mourning in order to “console and sustain the community” (10). The trauma is experienced by the community, and so it is the community that must grieve and heal, and this healing is its own undertaking, not simply a by-product of individual healing.

Abel begins to move beyond his individual story through the introduction of photographs, using them as a way to gesture toward the existence of other stories that need to be told. Marianne Hirsch, in her study of postmemory, claims that “[i]n memoir and testimony, and in historical accounts and scholars’ discussions, as within new artistic texts, archival images function as supplements, both confirming and unsettling the stories that are explored and transmitted” (*The Generation of Postmemory* 73). Many of the images come from *Totem Poles*, their existence in *The Place of Scraps* a consequence of Abel’s translation, which has spared them from the erasure enacted upon the text and thus brought attention to them. The photographs become more frequent, and more prominent, as the collection progresses. After the conclusion of the third personal section, about two-thirds of the way through the collection, in which the poet encounters the totem pole in the museum, the images become a prominent feature, as if the encounter with the pole leads the poet to seek out other physical traces of his cultural history. Prior to this section, the images appear as background on the “title pages” of poems. Eventually, images begin to appear on the pages of the erasures and excerpts, blocking text, asserting themselves over the text. Finally, the images appear with only scattered letters in the background. This progression marks a transformation from the story of the oppressor to the story of the oppressed.

across time until it is, finally, time itself making the call. What this call is requesting emerges in the penultimate transformation. Adopting the imperative structure, the transformation instructs its addressee to “split open” and “fill [...] in” both “what had happened / and [...] / had become” (89). While this transformation could be understood as a description of the work Abel undertakes, splitting open Barbeau’s text to attempt to discover the past and understand its connection with the present, when it is contextualized by the calls to “the people” earlier in the poem, it also suggests that what Abel’s transformative translation of Barbeau’s text has uncovered is, in part, the need for other voices to join him in this work.

Despite this call, Abel’s text does not actively assemble a community as we saw Carson do in *Nox*. Rather, by creating space within the text for other voices and other stories, Abel establishes the possibility for a variety of responses, including continued silence. Participation in the text is not predicated on articulation, since silence is an essential element of truth-telling that functions alongside and within storytelling. Elder Stephen Augustine told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that “[s]ilence in the face of residential school harms is an appropriate response for many Indigenous peoples. We must enlarge the space for respectful silence in journeying towards reconciliation, particularly for Survivors who regard this as key to healing” (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission 18). The relationship between silence and speech is complicated, a duality central to grief and mourning. Jacques Derrida in his eulogy for Paul de Man, “In Memoriam: Of the Soul,” found in *The Work of Mourning*, declares that in moments of grief “[s]peaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness” (72). This paradoxical position is arguably exacerbated in the context of historical trauma because of the role silence or, more accurately, silencing plays in the power dynamics of colonialism. While mourning and healing are predicated on telling, the act of telling

may not be appropriate in all circumstances and may in fact require moments of silence to honour loss and provide safety. Forcing speech when someone — whether individual or community — is not ready for it or does not have the sense that they will be listened to is as harmful as forcing silence. Abel’s text creates the space Elder Augustine calls for through the physical layout of the pages in *The Place of Scraps*. But Abel leaves the option of how to use this space open. This openness is crucial to communal healing because it recognizes that the community is not a monolith, and the individuals that constitute the mourning community will have a variety of needs. The silences offer a place to begin mourning, but they do not prescribe where each mourner who engages with the text must go next.

Since this elegy is constructed in part for the benefit of the community, the question of who can belong to that community is essential, particularly because the elegy as a mode has a history of including readers in the various iterations of community either reflected in or established by the text. In discussing Sherman Alexie’s elegies in *The Summer of Black Widows*, Laura Arnold Leibman recognizes the difficulties that the conventional elegiac approach to readerly involvement create in Indigenous elegies:

Conventional elegies create a dialogue between or within “solo plaints” and a chorus of mourners. As these voices come together through an emotional bond of loss and concern, the elegy (re)forms them into a community. This is possible because, as Mark Strand has noted, “death constitutes a cultural event” but also because elegies serve to mediate the division between the personal and the public. The conventional elegy moves the reader and speaker through the mourning process to achieve consolation. But [...] what happens when the speaker and reader are not from the same community? What if some of the

readers are from the community responsible for the poet's loss? What then is the role of the reader's grief? (542)

In *The Place of Scraps*, Abel uses the techniques that shape his translation of the text in order to address the questions Arnold Leibman raises here, setting boundaries regarding who is being welcomed into the community established in the text. Fundamentally, Abel's elegy attempts to define the relationship between reader and poetic speaker in such a way that one group — Indigenous readers — are invited to identify with Abel while another group — non-Indigenous readers — are warned off such identification. The vast spaces in Abel's text are, in part, about access: who has it and who doesn't. Abel's elegy emerges from a situation in which loss has been experienced in no small part because the wrong people have access to particular information. Like all projects of reclamation, *The Place of Scraps* works to revoke that access, giving it instead to the Indigenous people to whom Abel dedicates the work. "Please STAY OUT of the Totem Pole Area" the sign in the final image on the final page of the book reads (255). This sign itself is a governmental injunction that Abel disobeys (Karpinski 80), but he repurposes it here, directing it toward the non-Indigenous colonizer who denied him and his people access in the first place. Appearing at the end of the text, this injunction restricts non-Indigenous readers from the continued work of retelling stories; they are asked to bear witness to the parts of the process that expose the flaws in the collective myth and demonstrate the trauma of physical and ideological displacement, but they are precluded from filling the spaces the text creates in the narrative.

Left unfilled, the spaces produced by Abel's approach to translation create a text fixated on manifesting what Krupat describes as "the palpable *presence* of what is *absent*" ("*That the People Might Live*" 7), resulting in a text that refuses to participate in mourning that would have

the mourner detach from what has been lost and thus move on from the past. Yet, Abel's text refutes pathological melancholia as much as it does finite mourning that would see the mourner move on from what they have lost. Instead, Abel's text presents the continued recognition of loss not as pathological but as productive, even necessary. The pathology of melancholia lies in the past's overwhelming of the present and the future, which cuts the melancholic off from their present life and prevents them from establishing a future for themselves. In contrast, the kind of melancholic fixation on loss that Krupat describes and Abel practices actively engages in the creation of a future that is dependent on the continued existence and recognition of the past. The present is recognized as informed and affected by the past, but by the same logic, the present eventually feeds into a future that, because of the now-established connection between past and present, can be a journey of healing and "coming home."

This distinction between a backwards gaze that precludes forward motion and a future-oriented gaze that encompasses the past is characteristic of all of the poetic works I have been discussing. In these works, a continued investment in the past facilitates the process of healing the elegy seeks to begin. In *The Place of Scraps*, Abel returns to wounds that colonialist anthropology presents as history in order to demonstrate the ongoing effect of historical trauma, and the structure of translation allows for precisely such a return through the treatment of Barbeau's text. According to Krupat, "melancholia is a more politically active stance than mourning, insisting upon the significance of past losses and upon the connections between present and past" (*That the People Might Live* 3). In refusing to "let go" or "move on" from past losses, in naming and discussing these losses in the present, and in insisting that this process has ramifications for the future, Abel uses melancholia to declare the present presence of Indigenous Peoples and to fight for their continued existence. This turns melancholia into a

productive position, one from which the future can be viewed with hope both because the presence of the people endures and because, unlike in pathological melancholia where the lost object must remain forever lost, there is the possibility for reclamation. Reclamation does not negate the loss itself, but it does mean that the loss does not have the power to erase the future.

Yet it is not merely the sentiment of reclamation that Abel's translation engages with. The introduction of archival photographs into the text, as well as the focus on the Sakau'wan pole — a central item in the conversation surrounding reclamation — tie Abel's work with the active practice as well as with the sentiment of reclamation. Where stories have yet to be told, artifacts can be an essential starting point, but, Allison Nyce cautions, this is strictly a starting point. The Barbeau collections “represent only one point in our [Nisga'a] history. They are not complete, and they do not represent every Nisga'a Matrilineal Wilp/House group” (266), and, moreover, they must be treated with care and caution, for both the people and the culture surrounding the artifacts have changed in the intervening period (263). “It is,” Nyce goes on to say, “the Nisga'a collective memory and collective history that can now fill in the blank spaces left by Barbeau and other anthropologists” (266). Artifacts are not able to tell the whole story, a fact highlighted in *The Place of Scraps* when the poet finds that standing in front of the totem poles evokes nothing more than a vague sense of importance or a desire for connection (Abel, *The Place of Scraps* 143). But the caution and care that are necessary in reclamation are also evident throughout *The Place of Scraps*. This is a text that takes its time, that moves at a slow pace because of the white space. It is a text that is willing to take a little at a time — a word, a phrase, a scrap of punctuation.

The text's engagement with reclamation, an ongoing project, complements the ever-evolving nature of historical trauma, and both of these elements mean that the healing

undertaken in this elegy is not completed within the confines of the text. Again, translation helps establish a framework in which process is valued above completed product. Susan Bassnett's argument that "translation is a literary act that is destined to be incomplete, always in the making, always in motion, never reaching a final point of stillness" ("Prologue" 2) elucidates the kind of translation Abel undertakes. Abel's version of translating Barbeau's text values perpetual evolution and leaves room for future translation work by Abel himself or by the wider community of mourners for whom the text is intended. By structuring each poem as a group of transformations of one passage from the source text, Abel creates the sense that translation is something that can and should be repeated and thus that no one translation is the final or correct translation. Additionally, the presentation of the text on the page, both due to the retention of white space and, even more strikingly, due to the way text is sometimes shifted around the page and piled up on itself, gives the impression that the words are in motion as if floating on currents that deposit them in various locations. Abel emphasizes that the translation process in *The Place of Scraps* is an ongoing one, explaining that for him, "*The Place of Scraps* is constantly being rewritten. Every time I read the book, I think about the words that I erased from Barbeau's writing and if I would erase the same words today. Sometimes the answer is yes. Sometimes the answer is no. I suspect readers ask themselves similar questions" (Abel and Saklikar). In rejecting the possibility of a final translation, Abel leaves the work of mourning and the work of remembering in a state of perpetuity. The elegy, even in its final published form, is not finished.

The collection's titular poem, "The place of scraps," demonstrates how process is foregrounded by making the work of translation prominent while also indicating that the work of translation, and thus the work of mourning and remembering that it facilitates, are perpetual. This series, like Abel's project, begins with a desire for language, suggested by the first

transformation, which presents a pair of quotation marks containing only white space and a single period:

“
.” (155)

In this initial transformation, there is no language to fill this space. As the poem progresses, the space slowly gets filled in, but as the language begins to accumulate, Abel introduces the idea of mistranslation:

translated
“ shadow
of stars.”

barren
fist (157)

The difference in meaning between “shadow of stars” and its purported translation “barren fist” (157) is striking, though whether it is meant to suggest a mischaracterization of Indigenous people as violent or to demonstrate the changes in meaning that occurred when oral stories were translated and recorded by ethnographers like Barbeau, creating a lasting loss of information, is unclear. While the silence has begun to be filled in, what is offered is confusing, and serves as a reminder of both stereotypes and colonial violence, drawing attention to the need for more work and additional information to aid in the work of re-memembering.

It is only after a number of transformations that the source passage for this poem is introduced. Its appearance in the poem suggests completion since it appears that the meaning

lacking at the outset has finally been assembled, an impression that is enhanced by the fact that no citation is offered for this passage, indicating that while the passage seems to be drawn from Barbeau, since stylistically it fits with his work, it is actually an imagined text, an effort on Abel's part to fill in the blanks in the information of Barbeau's text. However, instead of concluding, the poem carries on and this passage is pulled apart once again, though less extensively this time. Additional sources are brought in for the first time in this poem, appended to the text as a kind of frame around the designated area of the prose passage (see Fig. 18). These

passages are drawn from a wide variety of texts, spanning philosophy, literary theory, and anthropology, and published across the twentieth century.

Their presence demonstrates that

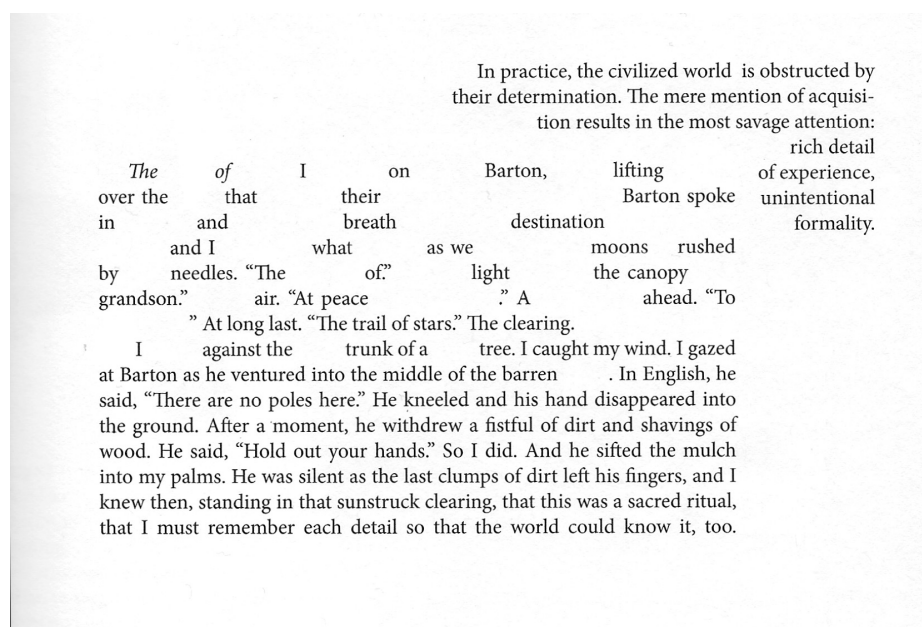


Fig. 18. Transformation on p. 167 in "The place of scraps" from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

Barbeau's views were not singular. References to a search for "their true nature" (169) and the dichotomy between "[p]rimitive culture" (165) and "the civilized world" (167) demonstrate this. They offer narratives that must be resisted and corrected, thus further undermining the sense of completion suggested by the paragraph written by Abel that appears at the midway point of the poem. Indeed, section 2b, an otherwise untitled section of the text on pages 211-31, consists of

only these marginal notes, suggesting the extent to which further correction is needed beyond consideration of just Barbeau's work.

These new sources are, at least in "The place of scraps," "Coffin House of the Frog" and "The Doctrine of the Indian Prophet," countered and resisted by way of Abel's translation. The erasure of these new texts, however, is accomplished not only by erasure but by a kind of censoring. The text is blocked out by photographs of the Indigenous people and artifacts that it discusses (see Fig. 19). In "The place of scraps", the photograph is placed sideways, allowing it to cover most, though not all, of the text on the page. This orientation adds a sense of chance to its appearance, as if it has been dropped onto a desk containing a poem, suggesting the arbitrary nature of Abel's translation process which he describes in several interviews ("Un/inhabited"; "TtD Supplement #36"). Yet, this seeming randomness is betrayed by the way the photograph is carefully aligned with the top and right-hand edges of the paper as well as the left-hand margin. Because of the way the image is cropped along the left-hand margin, it looks as if in delineating the working space of the poem, Abel had to physically cut off

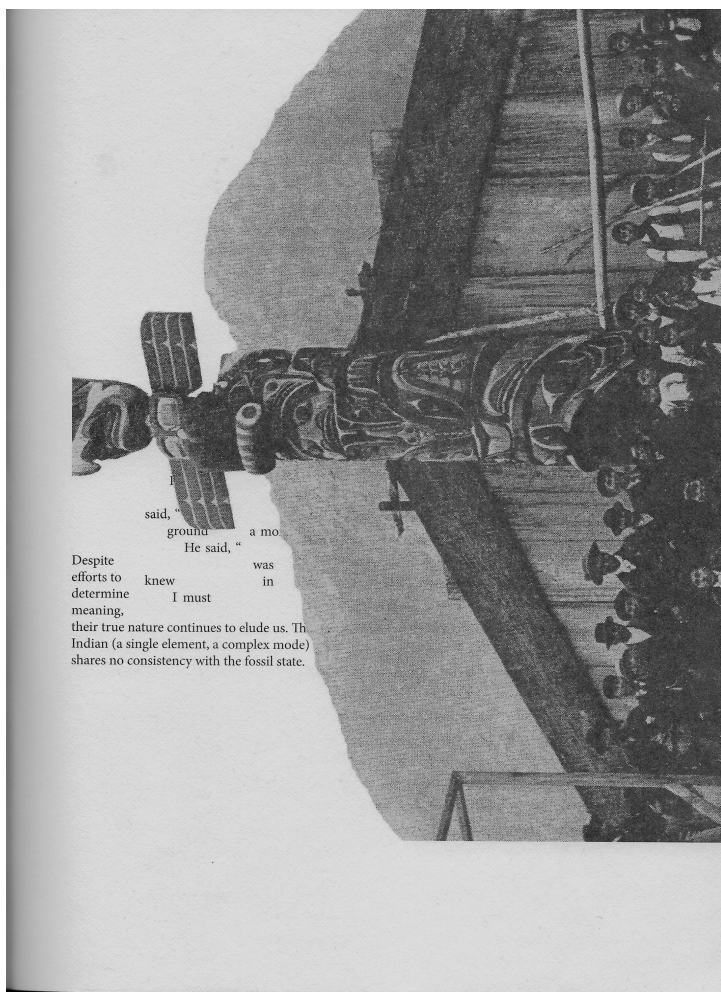


Fig. 19. Transformation on p. 169 in "The place of scraps" from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

the image as well. The photograph becomes the tool of erasure, not just a consequence of it. Unlike white space, which has the dual effect of drawing attention to itself and the lack it represents while also emphasizing the text that is left on the page, the image visually takes over the page, distracting from what text does remain. Although small fragments can still be read, notably a description of a belief in a “true” or “original” culture that has been lost, the photograph asserts Indigenous presence, countering that which it does not block out. Ultimately, these framing quotations also become subjects of Abel’s erasures (see Fig. 20). They surround the same empty quotation marks that began the poem and thus maintain their supporting role. The scraps gleaned from these additional sources are no more able to fill in the gaps in Abel’s knowledge than Barbeau’s text. At the heart of all of this research is still silence and erasure. And though this silence may simply be understood as a stage in the process, it is also a reminder that the process never reaches completion, there is always more information to be found, more corrections to be issued, more pieces to be translated and incorporated.

Abel’s elegy works toward healing, working to transform loss into reclamation, but the elegy itself does not complete this process. Instead, what Abel produces is an elegy that faces the future with hope while refusing to forget the past. Warren Cariou

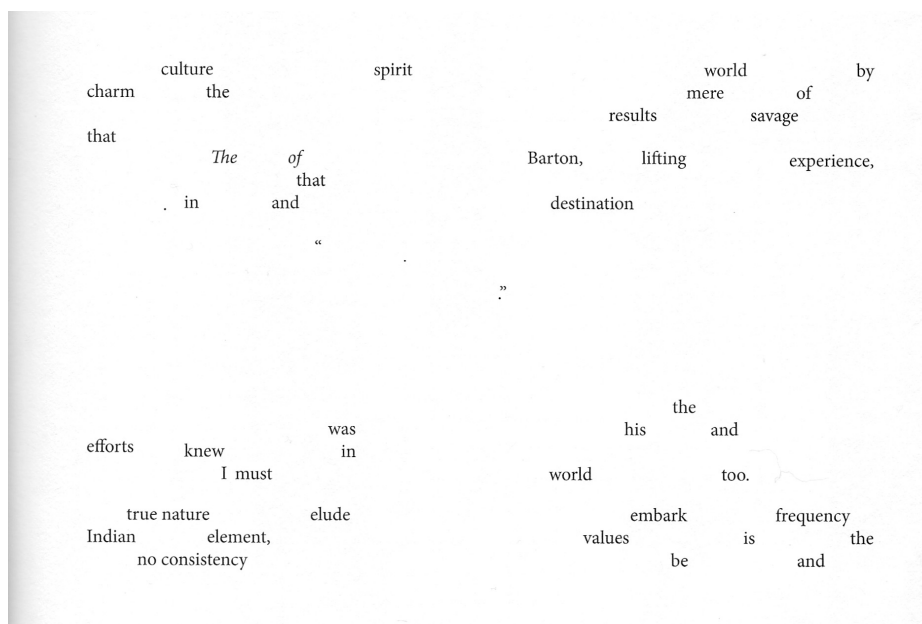


Fig. 20. Transformation on p.173 in “The place of scraps” from: Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013.

suggests that Indigenous writers in Canada often strike a balance in their stories between loss and hope:

Canada's Aboriginal writers [...] give us stories of dispossession, of the loss of land and language and identity, but they also, crucially, give us narratives of persistence and survival and even celebration. They remind us of what has been lost, but they also remind us that not everything is lost. After a fire, something always remains: something that must be accounted for and honoured if we are to have any idea where we are and where we are going. (qtd. in Justice "Currents of Trans/national Criticism" 334)

To tell such stories is fundamental to the work Abel's elegy undertakes. "Coming home" is dependent on telling stories and restoring voices. McLeod explains, "stories give us voice, hope, and a place in the world. To tell stories is to remember. As Indigenous people, we owe it to those still unborn to remember, so that they will have a 'home' in the face of diaspora" (183). Abel uses the transformative power of translation to make room for exactly such stories and the hope they offer. His elegy translates in order to remember.

Chapter Four

“It wasn’t supposed to happen”: The Elegist as Witness in Anne Simpson’s and Stephanie

Bolster’s Elegies after Mediatized Traumas

After walking through an exhibit of Robert Polidori’s photographs of homes in New Orleans that were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, the speaker of “*Long Exposure* (excerpts),” part of an as-yet-unpublished long poem by Stephanie Bolster, laments, “It wasn’t supposed to happen. / It keeps happening” and now “It is happening again” (33). This moment encapsulates many of the features of an elegiac response to “mediatized trauma,” a term I borrow from E. Ann Kaplan (2). Elegies after mediatized trauma emerge in response to a kind of vicarious trauma caused by exposure to traumatic events by way of media. Like the ekphrasis that shapes them, these elegies are “after” in the sense of temporality and in the sense of emerging out of or responding to something. Elegies like Bolster’s *Long Exposure*¹⁶ or Anne Simpson’s “Seven Paintings by Brueghel,” an ekphrastic series of sonnets written in response to photos of the Fresh Kills landfill site that housed debris from the Twin Towers after 9/11 and to seven of Peter Brueghel the Elder’s paintings, use the act of looking and the transformative power of ekphrasis’s translation of material from a visual to a linguistic medium to create an elegiac structure that diverges from tradition in significant ways. Confronted with a strange, nebulous sense of loss rooted in an event to which one is witness, elegists responding to mediatized trauma seek control and structure through an alternative set of structuring principles found by way of ekphrasis. This turn to ekphrasis allows for the creation of a melancholic elegy that adopts a model of what Melissa

¹⁶ Although the full text of *Long Exposure* has yet to be published, I refer to the four excerpts I discuss collectively as *Long Exposure*.

Zeiger calls “closural suspension” (108) and attempts to reckon with the complexities of being a mourner while simultaneously occupying the position of a witness.

Simpson’s “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” is a sonnet corona, or crown, comprised of seven Shakespearean sonnets, each in response to a painting by Brueghel. Each of the seven sonnets that comprise “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” is individually titled after the painting to which it responds. The corona as a whole, however, is an ekphrastic response to a series of images now published online by *Cryptome*, which were taken by an unknown photographer and show the Fresh Kills landfill site on Staten Island. This landfill had closed in March of 2001, but was reopened a few months later following 9/11 as a forensic site for debris from the Twin Towers. Because this is a sonnet corona, the sonnets are linked by repeating last/first lines; the last line of each sonnet is repeated as the first line of the next sonnet, and the final line of the last sonnet is the same as the first line of the first sonnet, closing the corona into a loop.

Bolster’s excerpts from *Long Exposure* respond to “Robert Polidori’s photographs after Hurricane Katrina” (“*Long Exposure* (excerpts)” 30). These excerpts are always identified in some manner as portions of a longer work, which Bolster describes as a “book-length poem that takes as its starting point Robert Polidori’s post-disaster photographs of New Orleans and Chernobyl” (“Stephanie Bolster”). Details of the four published excerpts suggest that these passages specifically respond to Polidori’s photographs of New Orleans, likely the ones exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art September 19-December 10, 2006. These excerpts also demonstrate contemporary ekphrasis’s interest in the museum context, often focusing as much on the exhibit space and the way viewers interact with the images as on the photographs themselves.

These elegies, it is important to note, are not specifically mourning the events of 9/11 or of Hurricane Katrina. Rather, they are mourning the sense of loss accumulated by those who were removed from the event and only witnessed it through media images. These are elegies of witnesses, and as such the focus of these works is on the experience of witnessing rather than concrete losses that occurred on 9/11 or during Hurricane Katrina. Instead, what is essential is the affective experience of witnessing these events through media coverage.

Both elegies make use of the translational structure of ekphrasis in order to facilitate an experience of mourning that emulates the way mediatised trauma occurs and thus allows the elegy to, like a metaphor, circle and show and allude, without necessitating full recognition or even an understanding of what precisely has been lost and thus what is being mourned. Moreover, the choice to translate, and specifically the choice to use ekphrasis, allows these elegies to engage with questions about the ethical responsibility of witnesses in these circumstances.

Given the commonly quoted definition of ekphrasis, James Heffernan's description of it as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3), it isn't surprising that translation frequently appears as an analogy for ekphrasis. An often-quoted instance of this analogy occurs in W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology*, when Mitchell settles on translation as one way to explain the operations of ekphrasis:

One model might be the relation between two different languages that have a long history of interaction and mutual translation. This analogy is, of course, far from perfect. It immediately loads the case in favor of language, and it minimizes the difficulties in making connections between words and images. We know how to connect English and French literature more precisely than we do English literature and English painting. (44)

Although Mitchell admits that this is an imperfect comparison, the analogy has stuck. In Chapter Two, I presented David Kennedy's argument that the key features ekphrasis and translation have in common are otherness and the undertaking of transformation to bridge that otherness.

Kennedy suggests that "[c]onceiving of the ekphrastic art object as foreign or other goes some way to explaining why ekphrasis can be said to converge in interesting ways with the practice of translation" ("Ekphrasis and Poetry" 84) and cautions that "while the ekphrastic poem might appear to represent its object, it also represents a set of judgements about it which might range from the aesthetic to the moral" (84). Aislinn Hunter similarly suggests that "[t]he contemporary ekphrastic poet doesn't just describe the work in order to evoke it — he or she prods it, refracting it rather than replicating it" ("Notes from Outside the Object-Language Exchange" 12).

Ekphrasis, then, is a form of translation that transposes a visual medium into a linguistic one without the concern of replication, acknowledging that it will be an inherently transformational process and that context is essential to this change.

Lawrence Venuti focuses on this question of context, arguing that what links translation and ekphrasis so completely is a dual process that occurs in both linguistic translation and ekphrasis. The first of these two concurrent operations is decontextualization, a process that ekphrasis undertakes to a more extreme degree than linguistic translation because of the shift from a visual medium to a verbal one ("Ekphrasis, Translation, Critique" 137-38). However, "[t]he interpretive force of a translation issues from the fact that the source text is not only decontextualized, but *recontextualized*" (138), and "[e]kphrasis likewise recontextualizes the visual image, but once again the process is much more extensive and complex because of the shift to a verbal medium with different forms and practices" (139). The process of decontextualization and recontextualization fundamentally alters the text without reducing the

source text. Instead, “the source text undergoes not only various degrees of formal and semantic loss, but also an exorbitant gain” (139). The poem produced through the use of ekphrasis, then, is inherently a distinct product, not the same as the painting or photograph or other art piece that it translates. However, while it loses aspects that cannot function within the new language, it also gains in ways that allow it to communicate newly in new contexts.

MEDIATIZED TRAUMA

The elegy after mediatized trauma is a particularly contemporary phenomenon. In the introduction to *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*, Zeiger suggests that the cultural turn toward elegy in the twentieth century “betrays the pervasiveness of cultural melancholia at the end of a century that has repeatedly witnessed unimaginable loss of life” and concludes that “[i]f the resources of elegy have often been called upon, and sometimes found wanting, it is partly because elegiac occasions have been so numerous and so dire” (1). Although Zeiger’s analysis immediately brings to mind dramatic historical events like wars, she is equally interested in the ways investment in elegy intersects with the AIDS epidemic and breast cancer survivors. In other words, it is not merely that the twentieth century was host to historical events with easily attributable dates, but that over the course of the latter half of the century there were frequent traumas of a more domestic nature and these losses contributed to the century’s melancholic character and the prominence of elegy and elegiac writing.

Zeiger’s observations about the nature of the twentieth century hold true for the twenty-first as well. However, the way information about catastrophic events is disseminated has evolved rapidly in the twenty-first century, increasing the reach and frequency of such coverage. Chiara Ferrari suggests that media studies “was turned on its head on September 11, 2001 (and

the following weeks, months, and years) because media themselves were catapulted in a vortex of change” (156). Although changes in news coverage practices were not necessarily precipitated by 9/11 in all cases, the coverage of 9/11 and the following time period is often a focal point for these discussions. The 24/7 news cycle had begun to rise to prominence in the late 1990s, and the pressure for information in the wake of 9/11 prompted media to provide “primary evidence of the event and the chaos that ensued in New York” alongside “an immediate response to a country in desperate need of reassurance” (156-57), which turned the 24/7 news cycle into standard practice. In other words, the speed at which information became available increased significantly in the twenty-first century, moving more quickly than the traditional pace of daily papers and nightly news programs. Indeed, the role of media became so significant in the way we encounter the world that by the time Kaplan published *Trauma Culture* in 2005, she was suggesting that “most people encounter trauma through the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important” (2). Little could she have known that over the course of the next 15 years, her evaluation would only become increasingly relevant as social media once again transformed media and people’s interactions with it.¹⁷ Although both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the subjects of the elegies under consideration in this chapter, occurred before social media had gained the immense power it currently has, it is worthwhile to keep in mind the direction that media, and thus mediatized trauma, took shortly after those events because this shift has made the kind of elegiac work Simpson and Bolster undertake more relevant than ever.

¹⁷ A brief timeline of the emergence of social media as we understand it today: Facebook was founded in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010, Snapchat in 2011, and TikTok in 2016. There have also been other social media platforms that rose to prominence only to either fall out of popularity or to be erased as their parent companies went under or were purchased.

Although the affective experience of mediatized trauma is often informed by sorrow over death tolls of the event in question, whether that death toll is relatively low or very high, the types of loss primarily at play here, as Kaplan's consideration of New York in the aftermath of 9/11 makes clear, are more abstract in nature. In previous chapters, I have explored the way that abstract losses manifest themselves in versions of what Priscila Uppal identifies as a concern of some groups of contemporary English-Canadian elegists: loss of home or a place of belonging, whether through loss of a physical home or loss of connection to personal, familial, or cultural history (28-29). These kinds of losses, as we saw in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Found* and Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*, connect to issues of familial and community belonging and the sense of personal identity that emerges from such belonging. Considering mediatized trauma, however, points us in a slightly different direction. As addressed by Simpson and Bolster, mediatized trauma introduces a new category of abstract losses, though one that is intertwined with identity, both personal and national. The abstract losses Simpson and Bolster's elegies mourn are rooted in the loss of ideals such as safety, security, certainty, and belief or faith in the fundamental goodness of humanity rather than in the dissolution of the connective tissue of community. Mediatized trauma creates a sense of vulnerability for those who may not have felt vulnerable before and can exacerbate previously existing feelings of vulnerability for others.

ABSTRACT LOSSES AND CLOSURAL SUSPENSION

Elegy after mediatized trauma has, in part, to cope with a problem of scale; the numbers of dead or displaced are almost incomprehensible in many of the kinds of catastrophes from which mediatized trauma arises. The question of scale is also central to Zeiger's discussion of breast cancer elegies, which, like war elegies before them, "detail the inadequacies of traditional elegiac

tropes and narratives as a response to massive, general loss” (159). The losses such elegies confront are large-scale and constituted by more than the number of dead. In Simpson’s and Bolster’s elegies, the focus shifts from the dead to this less definable kind of loss; death haunts both elegies, as do other kinds of wide-scale destruction, but death and destruction are not the elegy’s focal point, merely the genesis for other abstract losses. The tangible losses are massive — the size of the Twin Towers or the unfathomable quantity of water flooding New Orleans are visual markers of the scale of these events — and as such the shock of loss, always a feature of grief and mourning, becomes a defining characteristic of these elegies and is accompanied by a permeating sense of disbelief and speechlessness, all of which become a starting point for the elegiac work of identifying loss.

Simpson’s ekphrasis interweaves Brueghel paintings, the photos of Fresh Kills, and the memories of other 9/11 media coverage that the photographs frequently evoke throughout the corona. What is evoked by this looking is the fragmented, shocking experience of observing catastrophe:

Don’t watch. Go blind. Oh Lord, those moans
 will haunt us. This one. That one there. Brief
 lives. Snow. And here, between the black trees, blood.
 A leaping dog. A bird. Everywhere we turn
 there’s whiteness in the air. And memory, a flood
 of killings no kindness can assuage. (“Seven Paintings by Brueghel” 23)

These lines offer descriptive details of Brueghel’s *Massacre of the Innocents* and evoke news coverage of 9/11, and the speaker wants to look away from these details. Indeed, the speaker is so desperate to stop watching that they would rather “[g]o blind” (23). And yet, even blindness

doesn't save them from the experience; sound begins to leak in and it is just as scarring and unforgettable as the images. The scene is so difficult to look at that it can only be taken in a little at a time. The poem presents bits and pieces and leaps between ekphrastic sources. The full stops lend urgency to the imperatives and break up the act of looking into small fragments. Simpson explains to Anne Compton that she "could only write in this disjointed, fragmentary language. No other language would do[,] though I was still trying to make the lines fit the sonnet form" ("Writing Paintings" 38). This was the only approach that would work. The subject matter itself resisted any other form. This kind of looking, though, is partly derived from the painting being used as source text in this sonnet, which, like many Brueghel paintings, presents a patchwork of small dramas within the larger canvas; the ekphrastic source text provides a model and mode of looking at both images and memory.

Immediately after this onslaught of images and sounds, the sonnet turns to questioning, revealing an inability or unwillingness to understand what has happened: "Who knows what happened? A short straw of fate" (24). This question is the type of question we ask when confronted with a shocking or horrifying event, exclamations of "when?" and "how?" and "why!?" These questions rarely have an answer, at least not a satisfying one; the "short straw of fate" (24) is all we are offered by way of explanation. Ultimately what's being looked at and experienced defies expression. At the transition between the second and third sonnets of the corona, Simpson asserts that "We take the shape of soil, abandon words" (20). Language is insufficient in these circumstances because there are no answers to be found. Ekphrasis offers an antidote to this speechlessness by providing a starting point for articulation that is not rooted in language at all. Rather than borrowing someone else's words in order to begin an elegy, the elegist who uses ekphrasis borrows a process of looking, a way of seeing.

The structure of ekphrasis mimics the experience of mediatized trauma, and in both Simpson's and Bolster's texts the chosen images — Polidori's photographs in Bolster's poems and the photographs from *Cryptome* in Simpson's — are the types of images that provide windows into traumatic events that could create an experience of mediatized trauma. In addition to this, however, Simpson's decision to work with multiple sets of source images further mediates the implicit mediation of both ekphrasis and mediatized trauma, and in so doing further mediates the act of remembering. The loss addressed by Simpson's elegy arises from an experience of trauma that results from a mediated exposure to another traumatic event, in this case, the loss the elegy mourns arises from the mediated experience of witnessing 9/11 from a distance. Moreover, the elegiac processing of that loss is itself further mediated by the introduction of Brueghel's paintings. This additional layer through which the photographs are seen and understood provides the structure of the elegy as it directs the elegist's way of looking at the photographs and in controlling the elegist's gaze this way emulates the way mediatized trauma results from an experience of an event that is framed and directed by images.

This imposition of structure is crucial to Simpson's and Bolster's elegies, which are grappling with amorphous and non-typical, at least as elegiac subject matter, loss. In lieu of an established ritual for mourning these losses, and faced with a loss that is challenging to articulate, poetic structure becomes the means by which mourning can be shaped and ritualized, and in using poetic structure to this end, these elegies engage with this tradition of the mode, using the elegy as a way to contain, limit, and order the experience of loss. While to greater or lesser extents, both Bolster and Simpson use poetic forms and formatting like lines and stanzas to create this structure, both also use the broader structure of ekphrasis and their particular source images to impose further structure. For Bolster, this derives from the inclusion of the gallery

space, which provides a spatio-temporal context within which the losses her poem considers can be placed and a structure through which the images can be encountered. There is a degree of ritual to the way she presents the exhibit opening, with “The opening: stemless glasses / full of what would stain if spilled” (“*Long Exposure* (excerpts)” 32) followed by “The chatter: This red, how did he get this red. / Or: This mold is baroque” (33). The elements and behaviours are prescriptive, a list to be checked off. Similarly, in “An Excerpt from *Long Exposure*” she describes an order of events with precision: paying exactly “eight dollars” in order to walk around a room for precisely “two hours,” declining to donate, taking notes, then getting lunch at the cafeteria, loading plates, sitting down, talking (50). The rhythm of the visit is familiar to anyone who has ever been to a gallery. The steps are routine, and one follows naturally after the other. While Bolster derives additional ritualistic structure from behaviour and spatial boundaries, Simpson’s introduction of a second set of ekphrastic images provides additional structure by providing a way of looking at the photographs themselves that is always informed by the paintings. The composition mimics traumatic memory, but it also imposes that way of remembering on the elegist. The paintings hold pride of place in this collection: the titles of the corona and of each individual sonnet reference the paintings rather than the photographs, the contents of the poems more recognizably reference the paintings, and each discussion of the photographs elides with discussion of the paintings so that it is only when an anachronistic detail strikes a reader that they are reminded that, in fact, many details are not from the paintings. The ekphrasis in response to the paintings thus informs the act of looking at the photos.

The excerpts from Bolster’s *Long Exposure* are marked by the same disbelief and inarticulateness that runs through “Seven Paintings by Brueghel.” More than one excerpt returns with incredulity to the idea that “This was not supposed to happen” (“Excerpts from Long

Exposure: The Address” 87). Fragmentation plays a role in these poems, but while Simpson’s text is a cohesive structural whole comprised of smaller parts, the fragmentation of Bolster’s text occurs primarily on the structural level. In part, this fragmentation is a fluke of the published form in which *Long Exposure* is currently available; by virtue of only having access to excerpts, we only have access to fragments of a longer whole. Three of the four excerpts I am examining are specifically published as “excerpts” — “Brief Excerpts from *Long Exposure*,” “*Long Exposure* (excerpts)” and “Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*” — emphasizing plurality and drawing attention to other kinds of fragmentation we encounter in the poems. However, the fragmentation extends beyond the circumstances of publication. Bolster favours short stanzas, and the text is frequently divided by dinkuses, which are consistently, regardless of the publication in which the excerpt is found, three small dots that look like an ellipsis, which allows them not only to physically chop up the text into smaller fragments but to suggest that there is more beyond these pieces and what is currently available to the public has been selected and stitched together. This fragmentation is informed by the ekphrastic source images, a collection of photographs rather than one single image. Bolster’s fragments shift between images, spending time with one individual photograph and then stepping back to consider a number of images at once. As with Simpson’s poems, the act of looking is both reflected in and informed by the choice of source images.

In “Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*,” Bolster offers an ode to both the fragmentary nature of the poems and an allusion to the fact that, when it comes to experiencing catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina by way of various forms of media, we are inundated with information to the extent that there is too much to process all at once. Part way through the excerpt, she inserts the text of the Wikipedia notation that appears when a page for a subject gets

too long: “This page may be too long to read and navigate comfortably. Please / consider splitting content into sub-articles and/or condensing it” (88). These suggestions offer two ways of dealing with having too much information: dividing up or condensing down. These two options are, in a sense, the two options of elegy. The shorter, familiar, more codified traditional elegy and the ranging, overfull contemporary elegy. Bolster’s elegy sub-divides in an attempt to make the experience more manageable. As Uppal establishes, the long poem is favoured by many contemporary English-Canadian elegists because it offers a broad scope in which to explore the complexities of loss (19-21), yet Bolster’s text here presents a flip side to having so much space: discomfort. Divisions and ways of breaking down a longer text become a way of countering such discomfort to a degree by building in moments of rest within a longer text.

Like Simpson, Bolster emphasizes the inarticulateness that occurs in the wake of catastrophe, repeatedly turning to the impossibility or inappropriateness of speech. In her elegy, “Words show how flat / they always were” (“Excerpts from Long Exposure: The Address” 89). Any comment, any remark, falls flat, so “What’s the point” (89). Although we typically expect this phrase to be a question, Bolster makes it a statement, ending the line with a period. There simply is no way to linguistically respond to the experience of looking at Polidori’s photos, so there is no need to make this a question. Instead, the phrase becomes a vestige of a time when things made sense and questions potentially had answers. Moreover, not only is language inadequate, but “To talk is wrong” (“Brief Excerpts from *Long Exposure*”). Even an attempt doomed to failure ought not to be undertaken; it is not simply that anything said would be inadequate, but that somehow speech would be inappropriate.

The pervasive sense of shock indicates that these elegies are engaging with the elegiac impulse to articulate or identify loss by returning to and representing the experience of loss itself.

Importantly, however, while what I have identified as the losses associated with mediatized trauma are alluded to in these poems, the losses themselves are never named outright in the way that the dead might be explicitly named in an elegy. Instead, Simpson and Bolster both use unconventional translation to demonstrate rather than describe loss. In turning to ekphrasis, Simpson and Bolster can represent precisely the type of event to which they respond. Since ekphrasis is structured around the act of looking, the process of translating the visual to the linguistic mirrors the process of encountering and responding to an image that constitutes mediatized trauma. The structure of the translation undertaken in these texts then becomes a means by which loss can be articulated without having to be explicitly identified or even understood by the elegist, which gives these elegies a melancholic character, unable to move on from their subjects because they cannot fully understand what that subject is.

Although events like Hurricane Katrina or 9/11 are typically discussed as fixed and limited temporal events — we even refer to 9/11 by a temporal marker — both Simpson and Bolster opt for photos that are temporally removed from the primary catastrophe, instead opting to look at the ramifications of the catastrophe. The temporal distance between the event and the images and then again between the images and the viewing of the images, emphasizes how both the aftermath and the media coverage of the catastrophes in question lasted well beyond a single point in time. In the previous chapters, I noted that the contemporary elegist follows in the footsteps of the modernist elegist who resists consolation (Ramazani xi). In Simpson's and Bolster's elegies, we see not only the rejection of the possibility of closure or consolation but a complete refusal of any kind of definitive end point. The treatment of closure in these poems has much in common with what Zeiger calls "closural suspension" (108). In discussing the ways AIDS elegies work to create new funerary rituals, Zeiger argues that the ones created are

characterized by “closural suspension in which the dead are at once dispersed as ashes and conserved as ghostly presences” (108). Closural suspension is distinct from the resistance to closure or consolation that has thus far characterized other texts because it arises from the fact that the “[t]he permanent vulnerability of the gay community to AIDS makes the elegist permanently vulnerable to loss” (Kennedy, *Elegy* 79). The imminent threat of further losses means there is no point in concluding the elegy, because losses will only continue to compound and another elegy will be required. In other words, delayed or rejected consolation is not a choice in these works but an inevitable result of the kind of loss to which they respond. There is a sense of coming in upon the middle of things in such works, the loss is ongoing, the grief is ongoing, so the elegy comes to serve a different purpose; it becomes a marker of active grief rather than a tool for processing, understanding, or working through.

Although the ideas of “permanent vulnerability” (79) and elegy as an act undertaken in the midst of ongoing loss connect AIDS elegies and elegies after mediatized trauma, the two are fundamentally different from one another because of their relationship to the inciting crisis or catastrophe. AIDS elegies emerge out of an ongoing *crisis*, and the elegists who produce these works are personally affected by the crisis itself, facing imminent threats to both themselves and their communities. Elegies like Simpson’s and Bolster’s, on the other hand, arise not from ongoing catastrophes — both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina were sudden, short-lived events — but from ongoing trauma arising from witnessing these events through media coverage that continued well beyond the conclusion of the catastrophes themselves and that reached well beyond the areas directly impacted by 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina.

Unconventional translation foregrounds the role of the translator, making it clear that while there is a connection between original and translation, there is distance between the two,

and this distance parallels the remove between the one witnessing a disaster and its aftermath through media and the event itself. Ekphrasis in particular clearly establishes Simpson's and Bolster's elegies as ones that result from the experience of witnessing via media by establishing a structure in which the elegist does precisely that, looking at and responding to images that formed part of the media coverage of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, both Simpson and Bolster select source images for their ekphrasis that depict not the catastrophic event itself but the aftermath, highlighting that these elegies are responding specifically to ongoing trauma related to ongoing media coverage. Polidori's photographs were exhibited a little more than a year after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, and the *Cryptome* photos of Fresh Kills were taken in January of 2002. The mediated experience of witnessing continues beyond the spatio-temporal confines of the original catastrophe, and thus elegies responding to mediatized trauma are responding to the ongoing trauma that can result from such witnessing.

The seeming endlessness of loss and catastrophe demonstrated by the type of images with which Simpson and Bolster engage is also reflected in the structure of their poems. Simpson's corona loops back on itself, making escape impossible. Not only does the last line of the corona send the reader back to the beginning, but the line itself suggests perpetuity: "These watches. Ticking, still. Each hour is cold" ("Seven Paintings by Brueghel" 19). The continued ticking of watches marks the forward march of time, but because this is the device that returns the corona to the place it began, the structure of the poem loops that time back upon itself so that the "still" no longer marks the *forward* march of time but entrapment in the temporal loop constructed by the corona. Simpson comments on this image, and reveals that for her "[t]here is no light at the end of the tunnel [...] in this corona" ("Writing Paintings" 39). Though Simpson frames this as a lack of positivity or joy in her work, it also reflects the lack of an end to the mediation.

Inescapability appears throughout the corona. “Landscape with the Parable of the Sower” longingly focuses on the harbour in the background of the painting: “We meant / to go, but every boat was laden. Tides / pulled home, pulled here, then left us for the birds” (“Seven Paintings by Brueghel” 20). The desire to leave is thwarted. There are no boats, and we have been pulled back to here, back to the place we meant to leave. The sonnet’s next and final line — “We take the shape of soil, abandon words” (20) — reveals the pointlessness of trying to leave any more. We have become one with the soil of this place, rooted in the spot. The boats can’t help us now; there is no way to leave, we can only watch, silently. The composition of this painting, and consequently Simpson’s contemplation of the inaccessible promise of escape embodied by the water, is paralleled in Photos 14 and 16 of the *Cryptome* photo set, which present destroyed vehicles piled in the foreground, while the water, devoid of ships, comprises the background. Here, too, the means of transportation has been made inaccessible, and while the water sparkles in contrast to the brown of the earth and debris that fill most of the photographic frame, there is no way to take to it. Indeed, it is even fenced off from the landfill itself, so the photos, like the painting, remain stuck on land. Viewers may find themselves glancing at the water, but the image will not let them use it as an escape.

The sonnet that best captures the looming, pervasive sense of danger and threat is “Hunters in the Snow” written after Brueghel’s painting of the same title. In the foreground of the painting are a group of the titular hunters and their dogs, trudging through the snow. Their destination seems to be the valley below, which is dotted with houses and dominated by a frozen river, upon which a number of figures skate, play hockey, and curl. Initially, this seems like a pleasant winter scene. However, details of the painting undermine the quietude. The hunters are hunched against the cold, and the dogs are skinny. Their only catch seems to be a single fox

carried by one of the hunters. Simpson's sonnet picks up on these details, describing the ways we attempt to return to our lives in the wake of catastrophe:

Who knows what happened? A short straw of fate,
 all that. Years ago. But now we've changed;
 those terrors tucked back in the heart. "Just great,
 that weekend special: everything arranged."
 We return; the house looks strange. Each thing
 deceives. The counters, cutlery. Believe
 the chairs; they guard the table in a ring.
 The hunters come. They're trudging, slow. Reprieve
 makes curving flight, a song in evening's sky:
 pale green at dusk. Some children skate; they laugh.
 And history has no place. Easy to lie
 on queen-sized beds, *dream a little dream*. Half-
 heard, the phantoms speak: No, you weren't there —
 We turn; we sleep. But once there was a prayer. ("Seven Paintings by Brueghel" 24)

The sonnet begins with the suggestion that time has passed, that somehow we have been changed by what we have seen, what we have lived, and that we have moved past it, with "those terrors tucked back in the heart" (24). Yet, Simpson's subsequent interpretation of the painting immediately calls this assertion into question, and instead the return to the familiar and domestic is disquieting and uneasy. The imagined return home echoes the subject of Brueghel's painting, extending the frozen moment of the painting forward in time by presenting what could be read as the hunters' own reactions upon returning home. In this moment of unease, Simpson directly

introduces the figures of the hunters, taking a step back from what could be understood as their internal thoughts and returning us to the position of viewers looking at the painting. As we step back into this position, the uneasiness that Simpson has established transforms the way she, and consequently we, interpret the figures in the painting. Now when “[t]he hunters come” (24), they become symbolic of an approaching threat to disturb the safety of a home. Or, perhaps, we (the readers and elegist) are the hunters, returning home to find everything wrong.

Simpson’s translation of the paintings also relies heavily on how she groups these works together. The connections between sonnets suggest connections between the paintings as well. If the hunters are returning, then the arrangement of the paintings suggests that they are returning from the preceding scene: “The Slaughter of the Innocents.” The term “hunters” overlaps unsettlingly with the images of killing in that painting and poem, only increasing the sense of danger that hangs over “Hunters in the Snow.” The claim of change rings hollow by the end of the poem. History is left homeless, denied a place or significance, and the enjambment at the end of line 11 indicates that the easiest thing to do is lie, and in that lying deny history or claim we have changed because of what we’ve seen. We try to sleep, to dream, but we are haunted by the looming threat, the persistent loss. The choice of Brueghel as ekphrastic source text enables Simpson to integrate the looming sense of threat to domesticity into her poem, and in so doing, she illustrates the loss of safety and security created by a terrorist attack like 9/11 and, more specifically, by the mediated exposure to such an event.

Bolster’s *Long Exposure* likewise takes advantage of an overlap between the domestic and the threatening by choosing Polidori’s photographs as her ekphrastic source text, which themselves depict the domestic space after disaster. The excerpts return to the idea that there is a looming threat of future loss. The later sections of “Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*”

focus in on one photograph from Polidori's exhibit, an image titled by the house's address (something Polidori did with several of his photos), though we do not know which one. The poem moves with this house thorough several years after the hurricane, imaginatively walking down that street and eventually looking it up on Google Maps, watching as it becomes a vacant lot and then is rebuilt, yet the image that the poem derives from, and thus the one that it foregrounds, is Polidori's, an image of destruction and wreckage:

After walking past the wreck
 enough times, walking past the gap,
 what's left to remember? This becomes
 what life is, not
 what it was. ("Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*" 91)

Initially, this stanza seems to present the idea of a "new normal," a concept that suggests acceptance if not forgetfulness. However, what life becomes in this stanza — the 'this' of the third line — is a perpetual state of wreckage. Normal is now an unending state of loss rather than a return to some previous state. The poem reminds us of this again after the house is rebuilt. The penultimate stanza reads "Not far off, a tall wall. Behind it / the water" (93). Even when the physical reminders of loss have vanished, the threat remains in the background, not always visible, but always present because of the images that have allowed the elegist to witness it. Repeatedly returning to the image of the wrecked house, the metaphorical "walking past the wreck" (91) that the poem references further underscores the relentlessness of the media exposure to which Bolster is responding. The looming sense of danger and threat characterizes the sense of loss resulting from mediatized trauma — the loss of a sense of safety and security — but the continued feeling of insecurity arises as much from the ongoing act of witnessing

imposed by a media cycle that continues to show images of destruction as it does from the content of those images. Judith Butler describes this kind of loss and vulnerability as arising from not only from the experience of violence but from being “exposed to its possibility, if not its realization” (20); it is the continued exposure to possibility that makes the losses caused by mediatized trauma so persistent.

For those witnessing these events from far away, there was, in the weeks and months following 9/11, a sense of imminent threat to physical safety. Across the United States and Canada, as well as in many parts of Europe, any site deemed to be of strategic importance was pervaded by a fear that it could be the next target of an attack despite a lack of immediate, tangible threat.¹⁸ The threat, therefore, primarily comes from an imaginative investment that results from watching these events unfold from a distance and through the media. Although the Twin Towers were not a domestic space, the city more broadly is a domestic space, and, more specifically for Simpson’s elegy, the nature of mediatized trauma is that it infiltrates the domestic space, destabilizing an area that was previously a site of security. But by constructing her elegy using ekphrasis, and by pairing this particular group of paintings from Brueghel with the photographs from *Cryptome*, Simpson’s elegy also addresses another aspect of this loss: the loss of security is in part predicated on a loss of faith in humanity. Belief in the fundamental goodness of human beings is threatened in instances of both terrorism and war, and in a post-9/11

¹⁸ Although Simpson’s elegy is written from a white Western perspective, it is important to note that the threat to safety manifested in other ways for other populations. For Muslims living in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, the increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes following 9/11 posed a very real threat to personal safety on a daily basis. This is distinct from the kind of amorphous threat Simpson addresses since it is more immediate and likely and because it occurs on an interpersonal level. For residents living in countries that became targets of the “war on terror” launched by the United States, the threat to physical security was, once again, much more immediate than the kind being mourned in Simpson’s elegy.

world, government messaging, particularly within the United States, but also within countries like Canada that were allied with the United States as it started the “war on terror,” was centred around an us-versus-them narrative that incorporated the idea of an enemy within, creating largely racially defined fractures within communities and causing the sense of threat within communities to arise from skepticism about one’s neighbours as much as from unknown sources outside of the immediate community. By carefully selecting a set of Brueghel’s paintings that span both his domestic scenes and his mythological or historical images, Simpson creates conversations between the paintings, and these conversations allow her to translate in unexpected ways that emphasize this sense of internal threat, as we saw in the discussion of “Hunters in the Snow,” which reveals how this view of one’s neighbours also disrupted the feeling of security and the certainty that domestic life would continue to offer safety. By then further pairing Brueghel’s paintings with the photographs from *Cryptome*, Simpson establishes a similar conversation between the paintings and the photographs, taking a large-scale disaster and turning the attention of her elegy from that event itself to the effects that ripple out from that event.

Natural disasters like a hurricane threaten security for those who are not directly impacted by the catastrophe by creating a feeling of ecological vulnerability. Although Bolster’s elegy does not specifically address ecological concerns, the loss of security that her elegy mourns is rooted in a sense of ecological vulnerability. Witnessing the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina through images like those captured by Polidori served as a visceral reminder of the potential for other natural disasters, even in areas where the potential threat does not come from hurricanes. It also served as a reminder of the precarity of life that results from the increasing number of environmental crises precipitated by climate change and lack of action on climate change. Hurricane Katrina, as the Polidori photographs emphasize, directly impacted

domestic spaces, so it was not difficult for those witnessing the events from a distance to imagine the way that an extreme weather event could suddenly destroy the safety and security of their own domestic spaces. By using these images as the source material for her elegy, Bolster establishes her elegy as one that mourns precisely such feelings of precarity and vulnerability, even if she does not specifically name or identify them. The ekphrastic translation of Polidori's photographs becomes a way to gesture toward a wider set of losses that emerge as a consequence of continued witnessing of a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina.

The looming threat within *Long Exposure*, though, is not limited to the hurricane itself and the way it shatters the safe sphere of domesticity; it also arises from the seeming constancy of catastrophe. Referencing Nick Ut's famous photograph *Napalm Girl* taken during the Vietnam War, Bolster establishes an ever-repeating series of catastrophic events and the at-times questionable practice of photographing them:

It wasn't supposed to happen.

It keeps happening.

(The napalm girl running, screaming.)

The room breathing in breathing out.

It is happening again. (*Long Exposure (excerpts)* 33)

The elegy cannot possibly end if there is no end to catastrophic events or to the witnessing of such events through the media.

The suspension of closure in these works is caught up in the creation of alternate temporalities that collapse or loop time, as Bolster's concern with the repetition of history or Simpson's privileging of the image of the watches have already indicated. This concern with the role of time as central to the elegy is a feature of the modernist anti-elegy (Spargo 417), and runs

counter to the pastoral elegy's tendency to "retreat from time" by "envisag[ing] ideal or eternal landscapes" (Uppal 17), a tendency that allows loss and the elegy to be removed from the linear flow of time such that the mourner can simply return to life after the conclusion of the elegy. As in all versions of translation, the collision of past and present is facilitated by the structure of translation, which decontextualizes the past in the source text and recontextualizes it in the present. "Seven Paintings by Brueghel" draws the distant past and the more recent past together before bringing them into the present. Although the temporal distance is shorter in Bolster's poem, it is amplified by the fact that the excerpts from the longer work have been appearing in publications since 2011, so the temporal distance between event and publication is ever increasing.

The use of ekphrasis as the method of translation centres temporality in another sense. Studies of ekphrasis fall largely into two camps when it comes to the way that the ekphrastic poem relates to time. On the one hand are those like Murray Kreiger, who suggest that the ekphrastic poem freezes time by interrupting a narrative flow (7), or Wendy Steiner who sees ekphrasis as a mode "in which a poem aspires to the atemporal 'eternity' of the stopped-action painting" (Steiner, qtd. in Heffernan 5). On the other hand are those who align with James Heffernan's argument that "ekphrasis is dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers *from* the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (5). Indeed, the tension between these two ways of understanding the purpose of ekphrasis is apparent in Simpson's and Bolster's poems, both of which move fluidly from one approach to the other. The elision of these two techniques can be seen in Simpson's "Landscape with the Parable of the Sower," which quite directly describes elements visible in several of the *Cryptome* photos: "A landfill plain: / a ghost in biohazard gear"

(“Seven Paintings by Brueghel” 20). The clipped lines freeze the elements of the scene the same way the photo does; there is not yet movement or narrative, simply a frozen moment in space and time. But immediately, the narrative impulse emerges as “The cranes all lift and hum, / making hills of metal, bone” (20). The stillness of the photograph gives way to a story about that which is occurring beyond the moment of the image. Bolster similarly oscillates between these two ekphrastic modes, as the opening of “Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*” demonstrates. The opening lines, “The red dress a crescendo off-centre, / a Southern Comfort poster, a cloud of feathers on a wheelchair” (87), present elements from a photo as frozen in time, the list noting their presence but only that. The following lines, though, take these elements and begin to explore a narrative that they suggest, though one in the past rather than in the present or future:

Someone hung a mirror.

Someone bought a shoetree.

Someone did not go to the French Quarter

unless visitors were visiting, which didn’t happen often.

Someone suspended a trio of baskets from the ceiling.

Someone thought: this will be useful. (87)

The frozen image gives way to narrative, to the story only suggested by the photographs.

Within the world of elegy, this tension between ekphrastic practices becomes a means of manifesting the tension between melancholy and mourning. This tension between an “atemporal ‘eternity’” and a narrative impulse emerging from such an eternity is a powerful dynamic for elegy because it parallels the tension between “pathological” melancholy, which is fixated on the past, and “healthy” mourning, which propels the mourner into the future without the encumbrance of the past.

The complicated temporal structure of ekphrasis is magnified by the photograph. “Photographs,” according to John Berger, “are relics of the past, traces of what has happened” (*About Looking* 61). However, they are not frozen in history because “[i]f the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments” (61). The photograph itself, before ekphrastic intervention, embodies the very tension that characterizes ekphrasis.

The image of the “watches. Ticking, still” (Simpson, “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” 19) that connects the beginning and end of Simpson’s corona clearly establishes the tension between forward momentum and the still moment of the past. The image is an obvious link to questions of time, but the phrase “ticking, still” (19) simultaneously suggests the frozen moment of the melancholic or the photograph and the continuing, relentless march of time. The watches are still ticking, still marking the passage of time, and the “tick” and “tock” of the timepieces interrupt the first and last sonnets (19, 25). Yet they are also simultaneously ticking and still, frozen reminders of all that has been lost and reminders of time’s continuing march.

Time almost becomes a sentient being in this corona. It has a will of its own that seems not to conform to any rules of temporal construction. “Time / swings bones on circus wheels” (19), gleeful in its illogical behavior; it is active and moving, but there is no discernible pattern. Indeed, its movement seems at best baffling and at worst threatening. Alternatively, time becomes completely unstructured: “All stopped. Each thing unclocked, undone” (21). Indeed, by the end of “Christ and the Adulteress,” the final sonnet in the corona, just before we return to those paradoxical watches, we “Turn in. Turn out of time. Where nothing’s clocked” (25). Time temporarily loses all meaning and for a moment, the elegy completely renounces any temporal

structure at all, removing itself from time entirely. Briefly, the elegist achieves the escape of the pastoral elegy, having introduced the fantastical landscapes of Brueghel as an alternative to the idyllic pastoral landscape. In her study of pastoral elegy, Ellen Zetzel Lambert suggests that “Pastoral consoles us by enfolding us in nature’s sympathies” (xviii). Lambert argues, “we ask different things from nature in our moments of extreme need: we ask her to ease the burden of our anger; we ask her for revenge; we ask her to share our melancholy” (xxvi), and “when we invite nature to turn her order upside-down or to weep with us, what we are asking for is not a display of anger, or a promise of revenge, or even (primarily) a display of grief. We are asking for a demonstration of love” (xxvii). Rather than a nurturing, loving natural landscape, Simpson retreats into Brueghel’s paintings which frequently present another level of human suffering and pain. The escape from time is short lived, and the merciless watches return only one line later; the elegist remains a melancholic fixated on the ever-repeating moment.

The overall structure of the corona operates in a similar way, with the flow of time moving forward while simultaneously standing still, mimicking and drawing attention to the ekphrastic oscillation between frozen moment and narrative motion. The repeated last/first lines give the sequence a sense of forward momentum, propelling the reader from one sonnet to the next. Within the sonnets themselves, Simpson practices a kind of ekphrasis that enlivens the image, creating narrative from the still moment, and so there is also motion as figures in the paintings and photos are given movement. Birds fly, dogs leap, cranes move debris, hunters walk, children skate, a plastic bag flaps in the wind. At times, though, this motion ceases, and we are reminded of the still image. Babel, for instance, is “All locked, shut down” (21) and “The horses, loaded carts, / are stuck. The ships, the docks. Thin bridles / of cloud. All stopped” (21). The forward momentum of the sequence and the movement of the scenes within the sonnets is

also undermined by the final loop back to the beginning of the sequence. The structure of the corona allows for forward momentum, but only within a closed loop; the elegist and the reader never gain enough momentum to propel themselves out of the temporal bubble of the catastrophe for more than brief flashes of time. These temporary escapes into what Simpson refers to as Brueghel's "imaginative otherworld" (Hunter, "On Being Inside the Imagination" 49) do not, as in the pastoral elegy, eventually return the elegist into a standard linear timeline, but rather return them to the loop of the corona.

Time is less prevalent in Bolster's elegy, but the title *Long Exposure* alludes to a similar experience of time as simultaneously moving forward and standing still. A long exposure photograph occurs when the shutter on a camera is kept open for an extended period of time, allowing the resulting photograph to depict several seconds, minutes, hours, or, in less common cases, days, months, or years rather than the fraction of a second that most photographs capture. Long exposure photography is particularly helpful in low-light conditions, making that which may not otherwise be seen visible in the photograph, but it also allows the photograph to capture movement, and as a result may produce blurry images. This practice is briefly described in "*Long Exposure* (excerpts)" when Bolster explains that Polidori "kept the shutter open long enough / for the light there was to seal / the scene of what there was" (32). The long exposure photograph has a different relationship to time than is typically associated with photography. It does not produce a frozen image of one single moment, and thus it inherently denies that photographs are "arrested moments" (Berger, *About Looking* 61).

However, time does operate in a linear fashion in long exposure photography, and the excerpts reflect this forward momentum. Time passes in a logical fashion. The attendees of the art exhibit arrive, walk through the room, then head home. The destroyed house is demolished,

grass grows, the house is rebuilt. Yet, the temporality of *Long Exposure* is not as simple as this may make it seem. The place, like the long exposure photographs that constitute the source text for Bolster's poem, collapses time in upon itself so that all moments are present in one location at the same time:

Around the corner, someone might still live.

Or might again live. In between:

a banishment, another place, another kind

of time. No place

like home. ("Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*" 90)

Time somehow occurs all at once — the “still” and “again” in tension with one another and suffused with the uncertainty of “might.” In becoming a place that simultaneously contains past, present, and future, the house is unmoored from reality as we understand it and left in a liminal state. The notion of banishment suggests isolation and suffering, even purgatory. We are left marooned in both space and time in a place that is entirely unlike home. Moreover, the enjambment of the line suggests that this unmooring has resulted not only in finding ourselves in a defamiliarized place, time, and way of being in the world, but that there is no longer any place that is like home, thus underscoring the loss Bolster witnesses by way of Polidori's photographs and the loss of certainty in the domestic space as one of safety and security. Yet the line break simultaneously suggests that it is not “no place that is home,” but rather this non-place, non-time that is now home. This is not, the lines suggest, a temporary or transitional state of being but rather a permanent collapse of linear understandings of time and the way temporality intersects with our physical environment.

These collapsed temporal structures open the door to nostalgic longing. Bolster evokes nostalgia by creating a sharp contrast between before and after:

Before appears in Technicolor: a girl home from school

slams the door, angry in a minor way

the future won't permit her.

No one notices the wallpaper,

the 70s flock thick as mildew

(as if in ironic foreshadowing of what water will do). (“Excerpts from *Long Exposure*:

The Address” 90)

“Before” is brighter and better; it is bright and colourful against the muted, waterlogged colours of Polidori’s photographs. The combination of the phrase “No place / like home” (90) and the reference to Technicolor alludes to *The Wizard of Oz*, a story in which a devastating storm transports a girl into a new reality, to somewhere that is indeed not a place anything like home. Unlike the film, technicolor wonder does not characterize the new reality but the old. Dorothy’s sentiment, the nostalgia for home, is only heightened by this reversal. The mundane moments, much like the table and chairs Simpson emphasizes in “*Hunters in the Snow*,” become the ones that hold the most power in Bolster’s poem. The unnoticed wallpaper, the stropy teenager, “[j]ust ordinary / voices, TV, coffee” (“*Long Exposure* (excerpts)” 31), are all reminders of before that echo through the excerpts. Bolster focuses on the things those who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina might miss and long for after they have fled, after they have lost everything. In imagining what the survivors might have felt, Bolster reveals what she herself would miss, and suggests that these are the things anyone might miss. The smallness and mundanity of the details noted here demonstrate the kind of security and certainty that are lost in the wake of an

event like Hurricane Katrina: certainty in home, in day-to-day life continuing as it is. But more than this, it is not only the survivors of the disaster who lose this security; observers like Bolster, like others who watch events unfold through media, are reminded of the precarity of their own lives, reminded that in one unpredictable moment they could lose all of the details that constitute the fabric of their daily lives.

Simpson, too, relies on nostalgia as a tool to emphasize what has been lost both by those directly impacted by the events of 9/11 and by those who have been disillusioned and shaken by their encounters with it by way of media images. As much as “*Hunters in the Snow*” plays up a sense of unease, it also evokes a kind of nostalgia for what life was like before the catastrophe and a longing to return to that simplicity. The emphasis on the skating figures and the use of the line “dream a little dream” (24) establish childhood, play, and love as the things we long for in the wake of a disaster, and thus the things that have been lost. This sonnet comes late in the sequence and doesn’t invoke memories of 9/11 itself or make significant reference to the Fresh Kills photographs; in fact, it is the closest thing to simple descriptive ekphrasis in the sequence. But this withdrawal from the events of the day shifts the focus to the witnesses, those who watched the horror unfold and then tried to walk away from it, to sweep the terrors under the rug as it were, and in this it frames nostalgic longing as a way to understand what kind of loss mediatized trauma can create.

THE ETHICS OF WITNESSING AND THE LIMITS OF CONTEMPORARY ELEGY

The burning edge of nostalgia in these elegies also illuminates a degree of disenchantment with humanity as a whole, a kind of loss of faith that plays a significant role in constituting the losses caused by mediatized trauma. Disenchantment with humanity is what drew Simpson to

Brueghel's paintings in the first place. She tells Compton that Brueghel "revealed so much about human nature [...] — all the greed, indifference, cruelty, capriciousness, kindness, nobility — that he observed without flinching" ("Writing Paintings" 37). "The Slaughter of the Innocents," written after Brueghel's *Massacre of the Innocents*, is a rare example of a double narrative and thus a painting that simultaneously displays the greed and cruelty of humanity. Originally a painting of the slaughter of the children ordered to death by King Herod transposed into a wintery Flemish landscape, the painting's owner, The Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II, had the babies being slaughtered painted over (Royal Collection Trust). The babies were replaced with bundles or livestock or food so that rather than killing an infant, soldiers were killing geese or boars or turkeys, and mothers were grieving blankets and hams (Royal Collection Trust), transforming the slaughter into a more general pillaging. Curiously, on the left side of the image, one soldier can be seen grabbing hold of two children and dragging them from their house, a reminder of the even greater cruelty and brutality of the original painting. Like many Brueghel paintings, the overall impression is one of chaos. The sonnet after this poem, then, conflates this scene with the chaos of the fall of the Twin Towers. In incorporating this painting within her elegy, Simpson is able not only to interject an unflinching examination of human cruelty but to point to the ways in which we attempt to hide these acts, to avert our eyes. Ekphrasis is central to the expression of what has been lost in "Seven Paintings by Brueghel," providing a way to incorporate and reveal the ugliness of the world that the elegist encounters through the experience of mediatized trauma. When held alongside the nostalgia for something that came before, readers can see that what has been lost is a sense of safety and security along with faith in humanity.

In Bolster's poems, the exposure of human ugliness extends to the very people amongst whom Bolster casts herself and her readers: the exhibit attendees, who circulate rooms lined with images of the aftermath of a catastrophe and coolly discuss the aesthetic qualities of the image, asking, "This red, how did he get this red," or noting, "This mold is baroque" ("*Long Exposure (excerpts)*" 33). Bolster implicates herself in this group: "Will I always be able to pay eight dollars to spend two hours / walking through rooms of photographs. / *Sorry* when they call for donations, *not this time*" ("An Excerpt from *Long Exposure*" 50). There is a glimmer of hope for the attendees, though, who "might go home and hold each other" ("*Long Exposure (excerpts)*" 33), but this is small consolation and certainly not enough to outweigh the loss of faith in humanity (and in art institutions) that these poems demonstrate in this interrogation of their relationship to other people's trauma.

This indictment of the exhibit attendees indicates another role of elegies after mediatized trauma: to interrogate the ethics of witnessing. Elegies after mediatized trauma must reckon with the ethical questions of witnessing and appropriation because the elegists themselves in these circumstances are witnesses both to the inciting tragic events and to the aftermath of these events by way of the images and depictions to which they are exposed. For elegies like Simpson's and Bolster's that use ekphrasis, this question is even more pressing as the elegist's role as witness is emphasized by the very structure of ekphrasis which foregrounds the act and affective consequences of looking. Thus far, I have been discussing mediatized trauma as a wholly unproblematic concept. However, the ethical questions that surround vicarious trauma and witnessing must also be considered in the context of Simpson's and Bolster's elegies. Vicarious trauma is a blanket term to refer to any affective experience of traumatization encountered by indirect experience of a catastrophic event. Fundamentally, vicarious trauma is trauma

experienced by a witness, and thus it is defined and shaped by the witness's relationship to the initial traumatic event. Kaplan offers a helpful division of potential relationships to a traumatic event:

1) direct experience of trauma (trauma victim); 2) direct observation of another's trauma (bystander, one step removed); 3) visually mediated trauma (i.e., moviegoer, viewing trauma on film or other media, two steps removed); 4) reading a trauma narrative and constructing visual images of semantic data (news reader, three steps removed); 5) hearing a patient's trauma narrative (perhaps the most complex of all the positions, since it not only involves both visual and semantic channels, but includes the face-to-face encounter with the survivor of the bystander while involving the intimacy of the counseling session). (91-92)

These varying levels of relation to an event can be visualized as a series of concentric circles rippling out from the central catastrophe. Kaplan's notion of visually mediated trauma describes the kind of mediated encounters to which Simpson's and Bolster's elegies respond. This model for considering an individual's relationship to trauma helps situate the way that witnessing and mediatized trauma intersect; trauma derives not from the event itself but from the act of witnessing, thus making it a vicarious experience. Because of this intertwined relationship between vicarious trauma and witnessing, elegies after mediatized trauma must contend with the role and responsibility of witnesses since the elegists occupy a dual position as both mourner of the loss they feel as a result of mediated exposure to catastrophe and witness to the events that are depicted in the media.

The notion of vicarious trauma is contentious largely because of its association with the concept of transmissible trauma, which is the idea that trauma is fundamentally contagious both

in spoken and written accounts of traumatic experience. This view crops up throughout trauma studies, but is particularly prominent in Cathy Caruth's work, which characterizes a formative period in the field. Central to Caruth's writings is the claim that trauma can be transmitted from the one who experienced the event to listeners. The listener, who becomes a reader or viewer in the case of written or visual representations of trauma, becomes an active participant in the process of witnessing and this puts them at risk of "catching" trauma. Caruth's understanding of the listener's role is partly informed by Dori Laub's description of the role of the listener's active participation in the recounting and working through of trauma, which suggests that "[b]earing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* — in the position of one who hears" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 70). This total bonding, when taken into the context of literature, creates an expectation for identification. As I have noted in previous chapters, Dale Tracy begins her reconsideration of models of witnessing by exploring the ways that this understanding of the witness-listener is reflected in standard approaches to reading witness poetry. She argues that "[t]here is a long tradition that suggests that readers adopt the speaker's position when reading lyric poetry" (5) and the combination of these identificatory assumptions with "a cultural emphasis on the ethical value of 'putting yourself in another's shoes' or assuming that 'I feel your pain,' create[s] conditions in which readers may take the space of the speaker as a gesture of empathy" (6).

Dominick LaCapra takes issue with the notion that total identification between listener and speaker (or reader and writer, viewer and artist, as the case may be) is a desirable goal, particularly for academics who are working with trauma narratives. However, he does acknowledge that "the secondary witness (including the historian) who resists full identification

and the dubious appropriation of the status of victim through vicarious or surrogate victimage may nonetheless undergo empathic unsettlement or even muted trauma” (70-71). So, while full identification ought to be avoided — one ought not to seek out vicarious victimization — the idea of vicarious traumatization as a separate experience remains possible. The crucial point is that separation between witness and trauma victim be maintained; to be vicariously traumatized is not the same as taking on the trauma of another as if it were your own. Rather than identification, LaCapra proposes empathy as a mode of engagement that, unlike “[u]nchecked identification” that “implies a confusion of self and other which may bring an incorporation of the experience and voice of the victim and its reenactment or acting out” (28), keeps the delineation between the two but still “involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78). Empathy, however, has its own set of pitfalls. As Tracy points out, “whatever degree of force one ascribes it, this privileging of virtual experience is a commitment to identification” (14). Moreover, both “[t]he terms ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ suggest moving into the other person or that person’s feelings” (8), which means that empathy as a model invites identification and the substitution of the self.

Empathy is a troublesome framework for understanding the interaction between listener and speaker for reasons beyond its encouragement of identification. In discussing the effects of war photography, Kaplan introduces the concept of empty empathy, which she defines as “empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without any context or background knowledge” (93). She claims that such isolated images fail to provide the kind of connection required to activate the pro-social aspects of empathy (93); instead, the empathy elicited by them is “empty” because while it consists of taking the sorrow and pain of another on board through a

degree of imaginative investment prompted by fascination, it does not produce meaningful results in terms of engaging or developing pro-social responses that benefit witness, victim, or society. This description echoes the circumstances of ekphrasis both generally and in Simpson's and Bolster's texts. The images that comprise the source text in ekphrasis are often presented with relatively little context. Bolster, for instance, notes that the photographs are Polidori's, but provides no other contextual information, and when readers look for the images online, once again, they find little or no contextual information — The Met's website offers a brief two-paragraph overview to précis the exhibition, while other websites provide general biographical information about Polidori, but little to no context for the images themselves. Simpson offers slightly more context for the photographs to which she responds, providing an endnote to identify them and the fact that they came from *Cryptome*, but on *Cryptome* the images are presented with relatively little information. In a sense, the choice to use ekphrasis sets Simpson and Bolster up for an encounter that, through its decontextualization, encourages empty empathy.

In order to elucidate what exactly she is describing when discussing empty empathy, Kaplan introduces John Berger's division between despair and indignation, aligning empty empathy with what Berger identifies as despair:

They [the photographs] bring us up short. The most literal adjective that could be applied to them is *arresting*. We are seized by them. (I am aware that there are people who pass them over, but about them there is nothing to say.) As we look at them, the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us. We are filled with either despair or indignation. Despair takes on some of the other's suffering to no purpose. Indignation demands action. We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives. As we do so, the

contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen. (*About Looking* 42)

In aligning empty empathy with Berger's despair, Kaplan elucidates the two processes at work in constructing empty empathy: identification and disengagement. In a sense, the two forces of identification and disengagement contradict one another, but as a witness moves from one to the other, or oscillates between the two, this opposition ends in negation, so that the ultimate result is a non-response to that which has been witnessed. The first of these two processes, identification, is central to the work of elegy after mediatized trauma. The photographs are "arresting" according to Berger; Kaplan describes this as a kind of fascination with the images that causes her to be unable to look away. In this moment of empathic engagement, Berger asserts that "the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us" (42), eroding the distinction between witness and victim, reader and poet, viewer and photographer that critics like LaCapra and Tracy emphasize as being crucial. Kaplan similarly claims that "empathic sharing entails closeness but may lead to the overidentification of vicarious trauma" (122). The one looking at the images then becomes subsumed by the suffering Other, taking on their emotive burden.

We see such moments of identification throughout both Simpson's and Bolster's elegies, as each imagines the experience of the victims of 9//11 or Hurricane Katrina. Bolster imagines the emotional and psychological aftermath faced by those who lost their homes in New Orleans, placing herself, at least herself as the narrative "I" of the poem, in their homes and lives, both old and new. Simpson engages in this sublimation of self into other even more fully, as she travels through a series of images — the paintings to the photographs — in order to imagine how "up the stairs / a rescuer is climbing" (23) or "Someone's cellphone. / ("Are you still there? *Are you?*")" (22).

The element that distinguishes empty empathy from more general understandings of empathy is disconnection or disengagement. Berger suggests that indignation demands action and prevents the resumption of life as we knew it before an encounter with images of catastrophe; the implication is, then, that despair allows for precisely such a return. This ability to disengage from the emotional experience of viewing images characterizes empty empathy. The kinds of images we are typically shown of catastrophes, Kaplan claims, place so much distance between the viewer and the subject that the events depicted no longer seem real. Instead, we become fascinated by the technology that allows us to see these images in the first place — and in the case of war photographs the technology on display in the weaponry shown — rather than the disasters they are meant to show. Moreover, these images are frequently sanitized, and the resulting reduction in shock contributes to disengagement by directing our gaze and thus our attention away from suffering (94-95). As layers of distance are reasserted between viewer and subject, the horrors being witnessed become less and less real and thus less and less affecting.

The types of photographs chosen by Simpson and Bolster arguably sanitize the catastrophes they are meant to depict. Although Polidori's photographs are of destruction, it is only material destruction that is shown, and all images are of aftermath. The *Cryptome* photographs are largely aerial images, literally distancing the viewer from the subject, and moreover, they are images of Fresh Kills, a different site both physically and temporally from Ground Zero. Although Simpson introduces horror and terror into her poems, imaginatively returning to images that were played over and over in minor variations in the news of the towers smoking and falling, those images themselves do not appear in the ekphrastic source texts for her work. As layers of distance build up, the initial catastrophe begins to seem less horrifying.

But derealization in these poems also stems from the relationship between image and truth or image and reality, a relationship that is crucial when it comes to witnessing by way of images. “Paintings,” Simpson suggests, “reveal the impasse they try to surmount: some incompleteness, or gap, lies within the very thing that any painting attempts to demonstrate. The image can’t begin to fulfill its promise — that of revealing the truth of the thing itself. It evades us” (*The Marram Grass* 67). Stephen Cheeke similarly argues that if we consider the relationship between poems and paintings “as one of radical difference or alterity,” then “[w]e discover in poems for paintings the pain of an insuperable difference, the rejection or denial of the artwork in the crucible of the poem — the exposure of its ruses” (6). The relationship between truth and art is perhaps even more complicated in photography, a medium that operates in both “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” and *Long Exposure*. Photography has a complicated relationship with reality. Berger argues that “photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights” (*Ways of Seeing* 10). Photography ostensibly captures a moment of reality and presents it to us directly as unfiltered truth. This perception of truth and reality is particularly attributed to the journalistic, documentary style of photography with which Simpson and Bolster engage.

In contrast to the assumption that documentary photography presents an unvarnished truth of what was occurring in a particular location at a particular moment, Bolster describes photographic practices of framing — “He didn’t move the dress. / Moved himself to make the dress / the centre of regret” (“*Long Exposure* (excerpts)” 30) — exposure — “he kept the shutter open long enough / for the light there was to seal / the scene” (32) — and development — “The larger the negative, the more” (32). She makes us aware not only of her own process of looking

but of Polidori's process of photography, and in this makes evident that even in documentary photography there are choices being made that intervene in the reality the photos purport to show us. Photography is, to borrow from Berger, a way of seeing, and as such offers a mediated vision of the world. Choices about what we are looking at and how it is being presented — framing, composition, colour, light — have already been made by the time we come to look at an image. Because of the influence of such choices, Peter Barry argues that “[w]riting a poem about (say) a photograph seems to involve tacitly accepting that poetry can only deal with *representations* of reality, never with reality itself” (157). The photograph is ostensibly a presentation of reality, and yet its mediated nature means that it is also a tool of derealization that distances the viewer from reality. In choosing photography as the visual component of their ekphrasis, Simpson and Bolster opt for a medium that can, therefore, undermine the reality of the events being witnessed, which allows the witness to engage with what they are seeing only briefly before returning to their life because what they are seeing does not necessarily register as reality. This pattern of imaginative investment followed by return to status quo is explicitly described by Bolster in her observations of the exhibit attendees who, after analyzing the images as art, noting their colouring and composition, at best, “might go home and hold each other” (“*Long Exposure* (excerpts)” 33).

Yet, Bolster is critical of this attitude, and in the next stanzas she emphasizes that the critique of whether these images are art obscures the reality of the catastrophe itself:

Not real art because he just looked.

Because someone asked for it. (Because
a magazine.) Because someone paid for it.

Because he didn't move anything. Because he didn't
make anything. Because many

saw it. Because there was an opening.

Because he didn't live there.

Because it really happened. (33)

Bolster offers a critique of the way these images are discussed and treated as art and reminds readers again and again that they are based in something real. This is a place. We can see it on Google Maps. We can “[c]lick on the little orange man” and then “[s]et him down” (“Excerpts from *Long Exposure: The Address*” 91). We can look around. And the fact that we are doing this on our screens should not lull us into a false sense that we are distant from this event and have no responsibility. Like Berger, she suggests that the resumption of life as it was before the encounter with the images would be “a hopelessly inadequate response” (42).

Simpson likewise presents this desire to move on and return to the comfort of domestic life in “*Hunters in the Snow*” only to critique and question this impulse. However, Simpson’s critique is also embedded in the structure of her piece, which refuses to allow either her or her readers to move on or escape their engagement. The cyclical structure of the corona means that the text itself does not offer a point at which readers can easily disengage from the act of looking. Although the focus on the paintings may seem like a way of disengaging from the photographs, even this looking away returns Simpson’s thoughts to the photographs, as her poems move between the two without marking the shifts back and forth. Surprisingly, Simpson’s choice to pair the *Cryptome* photographs with Brueghel’s paintings also serves as a way to ground the photographs in reality. Because the *Cryptome* photos are of subject matter that is distanced from 9/11 in a multitude of ways — it is physically removed from the city; it is distanced from Ground Zero; the aerial photos are not close up, involved photographs like Polidori’s images; the subject matter is not inherently domestic or clearly tied to daily life —

contextualizing these images with Brueghel's paintings, particularly those of relatively mundane scenes like *Parable of the Sower* or *Hunters in the Snow*, provides a reminder of the connection the photographs bear with everyday life.

The resistance to and critique of a pattern of intense identification followed by a quick return to everyday life have implications both for the purpose of elegy in the context of mediatized trauma and for the way the role of the elegist as witness is constructed in Simpson's and Bolster's texts. The rejection of distance and detachment as witnesses aligns with the closural suspension that characterizes these elegies as one feeds into the other. As elegists, Simpson and Bolster forego closure because the nature of the losses they are addressing is open-ended, and because of the ongoing nature of media exposure, the task of the elegists as witnesses also does not conclude; there is always more to bear witness to. Thus, empathy becomes a failed model of engagement. Yet simple identification is not a possibility either. While to some degree identification is essential to these texts, both because without it vicarious trauma is less likely and because it allows the elegists to begin to articulate the ways in which their feeling of security has been shaken, the distancing that characterizes both texts suggests that such identification is insufficient as a mode of engagement. As a result, these elegies come to suggest that an alternative model of witnessing is necessary, and what begins to emerge in the texts aligns with Tracy's notion of compassion. Where empathy adopts the imagined feelings of another person, compassion asks the witness to feel *with* the victim rather than *for* them (Tracy 240). "In compassion," Tracy explains, "my feelings become contiguous with yours; my feelings do not stand in for your feelings but stand with them" (19). In other words, poetry that engages compassion "mobilizes compassion as an engagement that does not pretend to dissolve the distance involved in poetic mediation. Additionally, witness poetry emphasizes the

compassionate ability to imagine, not pain one did not feel, but a relation to others feeling pain” (9). Importantly, compassion does not preclude either identification or distance, nor does it declare that either of these is an invalid form of engagement. Tracy is careful to note that she does not think of identification as “an improper route of engagement” (8), and to highlight that compassionate witnessing is actually dependent on “finding a distance from which one can offer one’s attention, thought, and emotion” (8). Compassionate models of witnessing are, therefore, reliant on not a rejection of either identification or distance, but a balancing of the two that allows the witness to remain engaged without taking on the position of the victim and distanced without completely disengaging from what is being witnessed.

Importantly, to adopt a witness position based on a model of compassion, self-awareness is crucial. Because “compassion is about feeling in response to another’s expression of feeling, it is as much about the self as it is about the other” (19). Therefore, Tracy argues, “[a]ttention to the self is not narcissistic but necessary. Genuine response to another requires self-awareness” (19). Both Simpson and Bolster introduce a degree of self-reflexivity to their texts, examining their own complicity in a model that allows for rapid disengagement from images, though not the intense identification that accompanies this. If we consider Bolster’s excerpts in the order in which they were published, then self-awareness is central to the project from the beginning. “An Excerpt from *Long Exposure*,” published in *Eighteen Bridges* in 2011, uses the first person in order to describe the process of viewing Polidori’s photographs and immediately disengaging in order to return to daily life. After “walking through rooms of photographs,” the speaker and whoever she is with stop for a meal and the poem transports us into the quotidian world:

We look and take notes and then we load glass leaf-shaped plates
with all that isn’t meat and pay by weight. Water in a jug for two.

Our window looks out onto an intersection onto which
 a woman in an office window briefly leans as though she sees us. (“An Excerpt
 from *Long Exposure*” 50)

Presented in the first person, this brief moment describing disengagement from what has just been seen offers a critique of such behaviour and suggests that Bolster is aware of her own complicity. Indeed, even though she reserves her most pointed criticism for the “they” attending the opening in “*Long Exposure* (excerpts),” she implicates herself here too by setting up this scene with the lines “We walk into rooms of walls and look / into the rooms on walls” (32). Although she shies away from “we” in the stanzas that follow, she has already grouped herself with those who distance themselves from the tragedy through the guise of art critique and who only “might” (33) react to the emotional content of the images. This kind of self-awareness is less sharp in Simpson’s poems, perhaps because her critique is less prominent. However, like Bolster, Simpson adopts the first-person plural “we” indicating her own complicity in any reaction she describes. In “*Hunters in the Snow*,” the “we” becomes a way to describe her own attempts to return to an unaffected life and her own attempts to disengage: “we turn; we sleep” (24). Although this awareness is not the primary feature or driving force of either “*Seven Paintings by Brueghel*” or *Long Exposure*, its appearance signals an awareness on the part of Simpson and Bolster that though they themselves are mourning some form of loss, they also hold a position that comes with obligations if it is to be undertaken ethically.

Kaplan contrasts empty empathy with witnessing, which, she explains, “has to do with an art work producing a deliberate ethical consciousness” (122). In other words, witnessing has to do with the adoption of a sense of responsibility that can only manifest if the distinction between the witnessing self and suffering other is maintained (123). Someone who responds to mediatized

trauma with empty empathy is also occupying a witness position; however, what Kaplan delineates is the difference between being a witness — as in being someone who sees at some degree of remove a catastrophic event — and the act of witnessing. The key difference is the verb form; witnessing is an act, and it is an act that comes with an ethical responsibility to respond. Tracy takes this notion of witnessing as a verb one step further, defining it as ongoing rather than a one-time action. For Tracy, “witness is not completed in an action or feeling” but is instead “an ongoing process of relation” (19).

Although Simpson and Bolster seem to acknowledge the need for another model of engagement beyond identification and empty empathy and seem to indicate in their recognition of their own complicity in such practices that there is some ethical obligation to respond in an active manner, neither poem suggests what such a response might look like. And this, perhaps, is where these texts run up against the limitations of elegy, particularly elegy informed by the structure of translation. Simpson’s and Bolster’s elegies are fascinating because they take the ekphrastic mode and use its translational structure in order to create a way to approach mourning in very contemporary circumstances, stretching elegy to accommodate new kinds of losses. Yet the complexities of the dual elegist-witness position endemic to mediatised trauma create conflicts within the texts, pulling the elegists towards identification and pushing them away from it at the same time. The elegist must engage in identification because it is such identification that creates the vicarious trauma that prompts the need for elegy in the first place, but the witness must resist elision of self and other in order to undertake the responsibility of witnessing. Moreover, translation is always predicated on the adoption of another’s voice, another’s words, another’s perspective, and as such it classically erases the translator as individual. This structure has the potential to feed into identification. Yet, unconventional approaches to translation

foreground the translator's voice rather than subsuming it within the original author's voice, which works against pure identification.

When Kaplan returns to discussing New York City in the aftermath of 9/11 in the conclusion of *Trauma Culture*, she suggests that for the city, acts of memorialization seek to create opportunities for the work of mourning that are capable of “providing — not closure or healing (the wound to New York will remain forever) — but a fitting witness, a fitting way to memorialize the catastrophe” (136). In a sense, this is also the work of the elegy after mediatized trauma: creating a ritual that suits the needs of a very particular contemporary experience. Tracy optimistically claims that “Poetry is, at its core, dizzying. Poems can place disparate components beside each other, holding in connection what does not necessarily belong together through poetic work. I consider poetry to be a safeguard of what falls out of thought dominated by linear argument” (25). But while poetry may be able to contain a wide array of ideas all at once, this is, for Simpson and Bolster, also where the difficulty comes to lie. The elegy as ritualized form of mourning is stretched perhaps to the breaking point in these works, but the work that they undertake is essential in considering how contemporary elegists might grapple with mediatized trauma and the losses it produces.

Conclusion: What You're (Still) Feeling is Grief

Susan Bassnett argues in “Translation as Re-membering” that “[i]nnovation in literatures has frequently come through translations; new ideas, new forms, new genres are transmitted through translation. Conversely, old ideas, old forms are sometimes reinvented through translation” (303). Taken collectively, *Nox*, *Found*, *The Place of Scraps*, “Seven Paintings by Brueghel,” and *Long Exposure* demonstrate the ways that some contemporary English-Canadian elegists engage with translation’s ability to reinvent old forms and ideas, using unconventional translation methods to transform the way elegy functions as a mourning ritual. By exploiting translation’s transformative power, the elegists that I discuss in this project reimagine elegy in order to accommodate a range of losses that often fall outside of those permitted by elegiac conventions. In these elegies created by Anne Carson, Souvankham Thammavongsa, Jordan Abel, Anne Simpson, and Stephanie Bolster, elegy is understood as an action rather than a product, and thus value is found not in resolution but in the ongoing enactment of mourning. Elegy does not need to function as an all-encompassing text, carrying a mourner from grief all the way through consolation; rather, the elegy continues to provide structure to the work of mourning, helping to contain and articulate grief, and offering a way to frame loss that prevents the elegist from being subsumed in the chaos of grief without necessitating a departure from mourning. The elegist is transformed by their experience of loss, forever marked as a mourner, immersed in what *Nox* identifies as the condition of “overtakelessness.” The elegies I discuss in this project admit that in the circumstances to which they respond, there will always be some part of their loss that “cannot be got round” (Carson, *Nox* 1.3).

The subset of elegists I consider in this study respond to dissonance between elegiac conventions and personal experiences of loss and grief. They turn to unconventional translation

to provide an alternative structure for their elegies in circumstances where elegiac conventions seem insufficient or unsuitable. In doing so, these elegists afford themselves a freedom not often granted to mourners: the ability to shape their own ritual. Replacing the traditional elegiac trajectory from grief to consolation with unconventional translation allows these elegists to confront abstract, complex, and ongoing experiences of loss by providing a way to begin to articulate, and thus recognize and understand, those losses. It also shifts the emphasis of elegy from product to process and resists consolation and resolution as the necessary goals of elegy, allowing for the pursuit of other outcomes. Unconventional translation is particularly suited to this shift in focus. As translation, it is a process that does not have a definitive end since there is no such thing as a perfect translation, and as *unconventional* translation, it foregrounds the creative power of the translator, meaning the process by which the translation is created often eclipses the end result in importance.

Each of the elegists I discuss, with the exception of Simpson and Bolster who use similar methods to respond to similar losses, approaches a different kind of loss by way of a different translation technique; the type of source text and the translation methodology serve to shape the elegy being produced so that it responds to the specific needs of that elegist and to the broader socio-cultural context in which it was produced. All of these elegies emerge from a global reality in which mourning rituals must grapple with unbridgeable geo-temporal distance and community fragmentation. Because the elegies they write are products of this context, the elegists I discuss often take advantage of unconventional translation's polyvocality to explore the role of community in elegy, interrogating the role of the reader and the ethical responsibility of elegists who occupy a double role as both mourner and witness to someone else's trauma. Because translation begins with the words (or, in the case of ekphrasis, visual expression) of another

person, elegies built on this foundation contain, in a sense, two voices, both original author and elegist. The flexibility of unconventional translation, which not only encompasses a wide variety of techniques but allows individual poets to alter pre-existing techniques or invent new ones, also provides the opportunity for some elegists to introduce other voices beyond the original text with which their work begins by integrating other original sources or by bringing in other materials, such as photographs, that serve as part of the translation of the source text in some way.

In her elegy for her estranged brother, Michael, Carson begins her translation with an elegy by Catullus that mirrors the basic circumstances of her own loss and thus provides her with a way to begin articulating her loss while also providing a structure for the creation of an elegy that serves as a substitute for the funeral she could not attend. Her methodology for translating Catullus's poem then transforms his text into one that better reflects the complexity of her own experience by amplifying, slowing, and resisting elements of the ritual Catullus mimics in his own elegy. Her accumulation of fragments explodes Catullus's tightly controlled elegy, unfurling her grief in perpetuity and refusing the final farewell to the dead that ends Catullus's poem. Instead, the translation foregrounds process and undermines any sense of finality. The amplificatory approach she takes to translation allows for the introduction of fragments of conversations, photographs, letters, and work from her family and a wide range of scholars, and through the introduction of these voices, she reconstitutes community across geo-temporal divisions, gathering a sympathetic community of fellow mourners who enact a kind of "with-ness" (Tracy160), standing alongside Carson not to mourn a common loss but to derive comfort from the shared general experience of loss. Ultimately, Carson styles herself as a melancholic mourner who is not subsumed by grief but who also has no desire to let go of her dead.

Translating her father's scrapbook from a Lao refugee camp the year she was born allows Thammavongsa to articulate her loss by showing it rather than describing it; she does not need to explicitly name the features of postmemorial loss because the fragmentation, silence, and struggle of searching for information in the limited resources available to her is embodied in the translation technique she adopts, which combines found poetry and ekphrasis. Limited not only to the scrapbook itself but to the portions of the text that she can read, the resulting text is fractured, replete with gaps that cannot be filled in because Thammavongsa chooses not to ask her father to translate any of the Lao in the original book, despite the fact that she herself cannot read Lao, privileging his privacy and right to his own story over her desire for information. Her translation of his scrapbook thus has to do with her relationship to the scrapbook and the history it represents rather than his trauma. This decision produces an elegy that is stubbornly solitary, silencing, as much as she can, her father's voice as it exists in the original text and preventing readers from identifying with her and involving themselves in the mourning undertaken by the text by denying them access to the original text. Although Thammavongsa initially comes to the scrapbook in search of answers about her family history and early life (Thammavongsa, "Finders, Keepers"), she does not find any concrete answers. Instead, when the elegy comes to an end, there is no resolution in the conventional sense. Loss is still very much present, a vital part of Thammavongsa's own identity as a member of the generation after, and the process of translation serves as a way not to counter or overcome that loss but to accept it and proceed into the future with more questions than answers.

Like Thammavongsa, Abel uses unconventional translation to demonstrate rather than explicitly identify or name the losses his elegy addresses. By translating excerpts from Marius Barbeau's *Totem Poles* using erasure, Abel reveals both the lack of information available to him

about the Nisga'a and the destructive attitudes that constitute the accepted colonial collective myths about Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Like Carson, Abel introduces photographs into his text, gesturing at the possibility of reconstituting community despite immeasurable geo-temporal distances. Abel carefully delineates the members of this community, however, using the text's dedication and final page to establish boundaries, identifying this as a text intended for "the Indigenous peoples of North America" (*The Place of Scraps*). Translation becomes a form of resistance in this text, creating an elegy that recasts the possibility of healing for both individual and community not as an effect of the cessation of mourning, but as a result of acknowledging persistent losses and recognizing the impact of these losses. In addition to such recognition, healing is directly connected to work that resists the systems inflicting these losses and reclaims or rediscovers what has been lost. The elegy begins a process of "coming home," but the uncovering of the stories that makes "coming home" possible is work that must continue outside the bounds of the elegy, because the stories that can be uncovered through a translation of Barbeau's text are limited. The erasure of Barbeau's text, however, symbolically provides space for those new stories to be told in the future. Abel's assertion that he "must remember" (*The Place of Scraps* 161) carries the losses mourned by this elegy into the future, with the hope that one day they can be rectified.

In a familiar move, Simpson and Bolster, like both Thammavongsa and Abel, opt for a translation method and source texts that allow them to show loss rather than attempt to describe it. Writing elegies after mediatized trauma, both Simpson and Bolster opt for ekphrasis, a translation approach that moves from visual expression to linguistic expression, and in so doing establish a structure for their elegies that mirrors the same kind of looking that caused the experience of mediatized trauma in the first place, allowing the elegies to record the affective

experience of witnessing catastrophic events through media rather than requiring the elegists to find language to explain what they feel they have lost. Cessation is made impossible in both texts, reflecting the ongoing losses the texts mourn, yet it is the process of mourning itself that holds value in these texts, offering a way for the elegists to begin to understand what it is they are experiencing and feeling. The kind of translation they choose to structure their elegies also calls into question what the responsibility of the elegist who is also a witness is exactly; the ekphrasis that structures these elegies reminds readers that Simpson and Bolster are looking at images connected to someone else's trauma. Navigating this dual elegist-witness position proves difficult in an elegy shaped by translation. The fact that translation is always predicated on the adoption of another's words and perspective means texts created through translation have the potential to elide the witness and the one suffering if the translator's role is obscured; however, unconventional translation, perhaps particularly ekphrasis, since it moves between two radically different forms of communication, foregrounds the translator's role, mitigating, though not eliminating, this risk. Simpson and Bolster both recognize the need for a model of witnessing that moves beyond identification, but neither manages to fully articulate what this might look like, perhaps because such identification is caught up in the translation that structures their elegies.

I began this project by contextualizing my discussion in the rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coinciding wave of losses. The pandemic, I suggested, provides a real-time demonstration of the need for ways to mourn death when we lack access to standard rituals for mourning and memorialization as well as ways to mourn abstract and ambiguous losses. As I am finishing this project, the fourth wave of the pandemic is taking hold in Canada, and our immediate context continues to emphasize how essential mourning rituals are and how

necessary it is to find ways to mourn abstract losses, complicated or multifaceted losses, and losses that are ongoing. In the spring of 2021, *Vox* published a series called “One Year Later,” which included an article by Nylah Burton titled “What You’re Feeling is Grief.” While Burton’s article doesn’t break new ground about the pervasive experience of grief in the context of the pandemic, it does recontextualize ideas that were already circulating by emphasizing the ongoing nature of grief and loss. More than a year into the pandemic, Burton argues, loss and grief have not abated but have simply accumulated and changed. Losses have compounded and “even the small things can have a crushing cumulative effect on mental health, as many have had to give up parts of their lives that once seemed guaranteed — going to a friend’s house, eating in a restaurant, or even taking an unmasked walk” (Burton). In contrast with the acute and sudden losses of the early days of the pandemic, loss a year into the pandemic is often small, mundane, and cumulative. The fact that the title of Burton’s article echoes the title of Scott Berinato’s interview with David Kessler published a year earlier in March 2020 — “That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief” — emphasizes that this experience is not new but persistent.

In many ways, we are only just beginning to experience and recognize the full scope of the pandemic’s effects. The scale of the impact from the deaths caused by COVID-19 is difficult to comprehend. A study by Ashton M. Verdery et al. calculated that for each American who dies of COVID-19, approximately nine family members will be left bereaved. This number, the authors point out, does not account for broader kinship ties or other kinds of relationships like friends, coworkers, or neighbours. Nor does it account for indirect causes of increased mortality like increases in drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence, self-harm, or acute or chronic conditions that cannot be adequately treated due to lack of capacity in the health-care system or individual fears of going to a hospital or clinic. If all of these factors were considered, the

authors of the study note, the bereavement multiplier would be “substantially higher” (17699).¹⁹ Yet, as articles like Burton’s and Berinato’s make clear, deaths are only the most obvious sources of grief, easily quantified and understood. Froma Walsh argues that “many families are experiencing an ongoing, pervasive sense of loss” (899). Although Walsh’s article focuses on the ways therapists can help families cope with grief in the context of the pandemic, the list of losses she provides is applicable to individuals as well. She suggests that the pervasive and ongoing loss caused by the pandemic results from “the tragic deaths and threatened loss of loved ones; the loss of physical contact with family members and social networks; the loss of jobs, financial security and livelihoods; the loss of pre-crisis ways of life and threatened loss of hopes and dreams for the future; and the loss of a sense of normalcy in shattered assumptions about our lives and connections with the world around us” (899). The concurrence of both concrete and abstract losses further complicates the kinds of loss being experienced. We are also beginning to learn about the long-term effects of the pandemic on both physical and mental health. The persistent symptoms associated with what is being called long COVID or post COVID-19 condition, mean that those who have technically recovered from an infection, or those who have a loved one who has recovered from one, can be caught in an ongoing cycle of loss as the symptoms continue to impact their ability to engage with the world in the ways they did before they fell ill. Mental health concerns, including PTSD in frontline workers (Carmassi et al.) and those who have been hospitalized with COVID infections (Janiri et al.) as well as possible increases in anxiety and depression in both healthcare workers (Mrklas et al.; Sriharan et al.) and

¹⁹ Although it seems similar studies have not yet been conducted in other countries, and the exact value of the bereavement multiplier will likely vary from country to country, Verdery et al.’s study highlights the scale of grief caused specifically by the deaths resulting from COVID-19.

the general population (Dozois; Hyland et al.; Shah et al.), constitute another way that the effects of the pandemic will continue well beyond any official declaration of the pandemic's end.

In a moment when collectively we are viscerally aware of the necessity of mourning rituals that can accommodate ongoing loss and help us navigate a wide variety of experiences of loss, particularly in circumstances in which the ways we traditionally do so strike us as insufficient or remain inaccessible to us, examining elegies created through unconventional translation can provide hope. They remind us that it is possible to invent that which does not yet exist, to take the parts of pre-existing rituals that will serve our particular circumstances and leave aside those that do not. They promise that there is value in taking up the work of mourning, even if it will not lead to the cessation of grief. Elegies created through unconventional translation perform elegy in a manner that accounts for the inherent messiness and difficulty of grief, drawing attention to its transformative power and unpredictability, acknowledging the lived reality of loss as something that fundamentally changes the mourner and that cannot be neatly charted in a linear progression confined within an elegiac performance. Although unconventional translation does not offer a prescriptive model for mourning or constitute a new codified framework, its emphasis on process and transformation provides one possible way for elegists to revise and rework elegy. Because the elegist is no longer beholden to resolution as something that must happen within the space of the elegy, and because translation and transformation are themselves never fully settled, elegies based on these principles retain a malleability that allows the elegy itself to shift and change as the landscape of loss evolves not only over broad historical time periods but within the experience of a single elegist.

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