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2020 and All’s Well: On Positionality, Transtemporality, and *Scandalous Bodies*

Libe García Zarranz

2019 and all’s well

—Larissa Lai, *Automaton Biographies*

[W]e need to learn how to live with contradictions, and to do so without fetishizing difference.

—Smaro Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies*

It is 2020 and all is *definitely* not well. The ironic words of Larissa Lai’s racialized automaton, rachel, in the first epigraph could not be more timely to fathom this “age of turbulence” (Mbembe 185). A global pandemic hit the world on March 11, dramatically affecting the lives of millions of people and intensifying social, economic, and political inequities. In the words of Danielle Peers, Canada Research Chair in Disability and Movement Cultures,

[i]f this pandemic has clarified anything, it is that eugenics is not in the past: ableist triaging of medical supports; coerced DNRs; herd immunity strategies; and the immense precarity of those we have institutionalised (e.g., long-term ‘care’, prisons, detention centers).

Given how systemic ableism is intimately intertwined with ongoing colonialism and increasing racism, as Peers aptly contends, the livability of racialized peoples is always at stake.¹

It is therefore not surprising that Indigenous, Black, and diasporic writers of colour in Canada are making extensive use of print and digital platforms to publish their work, often positioning intersectional approaches to race and ethnicity at the centre of creative inquiry. The relentless work of

book publishers such as Arsenal Pulp Press, for example, is remarkable in this regard. In the current historical juncture, “the hegemony of the twitter feed . . . white backlash, [and] government by troll” (Lai, “Insurgent” 91) coexist with the unpredictable force of collective protests and racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Black Trans Lives Matter, and others. This continued paradoxical sense of despair and possibility, polarization and alliance, where contextual, institutional, critical, and creative impulses cannot be de-linked, remains at the heart of Smaro Kamboureli’s influential *Scandalous Bodies* (2000).

Writing her book within the textures of the mid-1990s, Kamboureli defines this decade as one of “vociferous advocacies” and “global upheavals” (1). This is the time when some of the last residential schools were still operating, demonstrating the force of ongoing colonialisms and expressions of assimilation; the time of *Writing Thru Race: A Conference for First Nation Writers and Writers of Colour* (1994), which many found scandalous at the realization that “whiteness is not paradigmatic” (Kamboureli 91); a time before 9/11 but after the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) when the poetic and critical wordings of Lee Maracle, Dionne Brand, Hiromi Goto, and many others were transforming the contours of the literary traditions produced in Canada, counteracting the pernicious “sedative politics” (82) of official multiculturalism that Kamboureli persuasively articulates. These writers, whose work had appeared in the anthology *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (1996, rev. ed. 2007), were revolutionizing stifling conceptualizations of diaspora and multiculturalism beyond “symptom[s] of difference” and “sign[s] of cultural excess” (Kamboureli 132). Instead, as Kamboureli contends, anthologies in the 1990s began to problematize the representation of ethnicity as “relational knowledge” (161); a knowledge that is relational between hegemonic and minoritized positions and thus imbued with rupture and contradictions but also open to alliances and transformation. This relational epistemology challenges nostalgic impulses and essentialist origins while being firmly situated historically. In my view, Kamboureli’s meticulous attentiveness to the “vagaries of temporality” (Freeman 9) becomes indeed a *transtemporal methodology*—that is, a critico-ethical course of action for the contemporary literary critic and teacher invested in examining how diasporic politics and poetics operate across multiple temporal frameworks simultaneously.

As someone who is currently based in a department of teacher education in Norway, who *also* teaches literatures in English with an accent, I found Kamboureli's grounding of her study on pedagogical questions crucial. Her extensive reflections on positionality, regarding not only background and identity but also epistemological and methodological frameworks, help situate *Scandalous Bodies* in a space where contradiction and unpredictability become critico-ethical navigational tools. Drawing on diverse traditions in oppositional and radical pedagogy, Kamboureli locates her study within a "negative pedagogy" (25) which is driven by the ethical imperative to practise responsibility and to assume that knowledge systematically creates gaps. As Kamboureli puts it, "negative pedagogy is relevant to a multicultural society because it may enable us to begin to address history and the historicity of our present moment *responsibly*—without, that is, maintaining the illusion of innocence or non-complicity" (25, emphasis original). Hence, pedagogical and ethical concerns must be understood as asynchronous, discontinuous (Freeman xii), transtemporal assemblages where questions of positionality need to be scrutinized.

In the prominent study *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (2009), Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux educational scholar Margaret Kovach devotes a chapter to the question of self-location and purpose for Indigenous researchers. Kovach also touches on the commonality and importance of reflective self-location within feminist methodologies, where "researchers are encouraged to locate themselves, to share personal aspects of their own experience with research participants" (110). Kamboureli's insistence on the contradictions and tensions intrinsic to the situatedness of critical research marks an important contribution concerning self-location to literary studies in Canada. As Cree-Métis literary scholar Deanna Reder puts it, Kovach's emphasis "that scholars identify the purpose of their work is nearly unheard of in literary studies. At no point in any of our training are we ever asked to articulate why we are drawn—on a personal level—to do the work we do" (15). I would add that the ethical imperative to clearly disclose the purpose of our work as literary and critical scholars is also key in queer and transgender literary studies, particularly from those examining and learning with racialized authors. As I argue elsewhere (see García Zarranz), the contemporary work of trans writers and artists of colour, such as Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek

Shraya, and by Two-Spirit Indigiqueer authors, such as Joshua Whitehead, is revolutionizing diasporic lexicons by providing readers with novel paradigms that offer accountable and transtemporal ways of seeing, acting, and being in the world.

Discussing critical questions on temporality, Kamboureli contends that it is “imperative to address ethnicity . . . in the context of our present place and time” (140) while regarding historical legacies of racialization (84). This transtemporal logic is often erased from public discourse, as was the case both during the so-called multicultural wars in the 1990s and often in our current post-truth moment. Strategies of “verbal terrorism” (Kamboureli 85) continue to saturate the media and institutions such as the university, where freedom of speech is, once again, appropriated by dominant voices as a banner to justify the spread of hate. In this sense, it is remarkable how Kamboureli’s discussion of Gina Mallet’s 1997 article in *The Globe and Mail*, “Multiculturalism: Has Diversity Gone Too Far?,” resonates with the current historical juncture. Mallet, for example, complains about how “[f]reedom of speech is called racism” (qtd. in Kamboureli 85). See, in turn, the letter published in *Harper’s* on July 7, 2020, where such signatories as Margaret Atwood and J. K. Rowling mistake having the right to open debate with holding no sense of accountability for one’s actions.² This scandalous conflation has dire consequences for minoritized writers who are subjected to racism, sexism, transphobia, and other violences on a regular basis.³

Let me close these notes on positionality, transtemporality, and Kamboureli’s trailblazing book, *Scandalous Bodies*, by circling back to the beginning: 2020 and all is *not* well. This is why it is vital to envision what the unexpected may bring and to be attentive to the “emergent insurgencies” of the world (Lai, “Insurgent” 98), together with the critical and aesthetic labour of the literary imagination, to counter racist structures and forge more ethical futures. After all, to borrow the words of Nova Scotian filmmaker and multimedia artist Sylvia D. Hamilton, “we will always have music and poetry, they endure.”

NOTES

- 1 The term “racialized” is a contested one as Tewelde (2020) aptly contends. The formulation “marginally racialized” would convey more accurately the argument I make in this essay.

- 2 For well-crafted responses to this letter see, for example, Hannah Giorgis in *The Atlantic* or Jessica Valenti in *Gen*.
- 3 See Lai and also McGregor, Rak, and Wunker for in-depth discussions of the numerous recent scandals in the Canadian literary and cultural scenes.

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Articles, Forum, & Opinions and Notes

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