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Writing on Occupied Land

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Reading Indigenous poets such as Joséphine Bacon (Innu) and Jean Sioui (Wendat), one is struck by how marvel before “nature” is intertwined with loss and mourning. The experience of loss derives from the interrelated ills of territorial dispossession and environmental destruction caused by settlers’ violent relationship to the land. When reading their verse, we are reminded that today’s Indigenous poets are writing on occupied land. All of us on Turtle Island are writing on occupied land, of course, but it remains easy for settlers to delude ourselves into thinking the land is either everyone’s or rightfully ours. We rarely if ever see ourselves as occupying land that does not belong to us. Facing this uncomfortable truth appears crucial when thinking about what it means to “write the land:” whose land is being written? by whom? and for what purpose?

In the preface to his collection of poems *Mon couteau croche* (2015), Jean Sioui writes that in reading his book we are entering his home (p. 10). He invites us to visit his literary territory, and we must do so with respect, gratitude and humility. In a powerful poem, the speaker depicts himself as made from the earth, old roots piercing his body, storms visiting him throughout the seasons, until from his fertile body memories grow (p. 32). No boundaries separate the speaker from the land, he is not *outside* of nature looking at it; they are united in one sensitive and sentient body. We see this again in the transcription of the “Writing the Land” roundtable published in this issue of *Green Humanities* when Sioui talks about his reciprocal relationship with the water on the land, a relationship that comes to be disrupted by colonization and

pollution. Seeing the defaced brown water – which he cannot drink and in which he can no longer swim – causes profound sadness in the poet: an injury has been done that is not being repaired, leaving both the water and the relationship broken.

With her travelling words, Joséphine Bacon often moves between spaces and times, visiting places and people that appear gone. Waiting for a bus on a Montreal street where the sightline is blocked, the speaker of one of her poems in *Uiesh, quelque part* (2018) closes her eyes and immediately begins to see. She watches as a group of Elders sit by the sea, looking ahead in a quiet and private moment of peace (p. 66). While she remains physically bound to the city, the poet's mind and spirit keep on travelling the land, following the footsteps and canoes of the generations of Innu who walked and paddled through these territories before her.² Bacon writes in the prologue that she did not come to know the land by walking it, but by hearing its stories told by Elders with whom she worked throughout her life (p. 5). Now in her later years, she generously passes on those visions and tales to her readers so that they may begin to know which land they are standing on: who is Nutshimit? what are her stories? But as we walk the streets of Montreal or of some other city, are we able to see the profound relationships to the land, traditional or otherwise, that are still being practiced on this territory? Because although the places and people Bacon conjures might seem gone, they are very much alive and speak to the present and the future of the land as much as of the past.

Writing the land, writing the territory, cannot mean the same thing for Indigenous and settler writers. While both can express deep attachment to the land, we should not ignore the fact that most of us are uninvited guests on Turtle Island, while others are its kin. Experiencing love and a sense of belonging to the land does not grant us settlers any right to inhabit these

valleys, mountains and shores, nor to dispose of them as we please. Through their words and visions, Indigenous poets share a precious way to “read the land” and invite us into their homes. Hopefully we learn to become better guests, seeing the land and listening to her stories with clearer minds and hearts.

Notes

1. The author acknowledges that, as a settler, she lives and works on the actual and traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples.

2. The author would like to acknowledge that Michèle Lacombe also discusses Bacon's poetry by paying attention to the importance of walking and retracing the steps of ancestors in her article "Pimuteuat / Ils marchent / 'They Walk: A Few Observations on Indigenous Poetry and Poetics in French" (in Neal McLeod (ed.), *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014, p. 159-182).

Works Cited

Bacon, Joséphine. *Uiesh, quelque part*. Montréal, Mémoire d'encrier, 2018.

Sioui, Jean. *Mon couteau croche*. Montréal, Mémoire d'encrier, 2015.