

"Exorcising a lot of shame": Transformation and Affective Experience in Marilyn Dumont's *green girl dreams Mountains*

Cara DeHaan

Volume 34, Number 1, 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl34_1art12

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

DeHaan, C. (2009). "Exorcising a lot of shame": Transformation and Affective Experience in Marilyn Dumont's *green girl dreams Mountains*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 34(1), 227–247.

“Exorcising a lot of shame”: Transformation and Affective Experience in Marilyn Dumont’s *green girl dreams Mountains*

CARA DEHAAN

IN A CONVERSATION with Jennifer Andrews, Cree-Métis poet Marilyn Dumont describes her poetry as “one way of exorcising a lot of shame. One thing I’ve learned,” she reflects, “is just how debilitating shame is, and it’s not one of the emotions we associate with being most powerful” (Andrews, “Among” 148). The shame, Dumont explains elsewhere, is not purely personal but communal, grounded in the cultural and political challenges of being Métis in Canada: “I write for or tell stories of many of the people in my extended family who did not have a voice,” she says. “I guess what’s driving me or what drives a lot of my writing is the sense of shame that took away their right to tell those stories. A sense of shame that they didn’t ‘make it.’ There was always this idea that we were just poor half-breeds eking out an existence. We were always being compared or defined in the sense of lacking something” (Gunnars et al. 110). In thus articulating her poetic project, Dumont aligns herself with other contemporary Aboriginal writers, whose stories, according to Kimberly Blaeser (Anishnaabe), have “supra-literary intentions. They want to come off the page and affect life. . . . They work to make us into communities, form our identity, ensure our survival” (“Writing” 65).

The supra-literary potential of Dumont’s first collection, *A Really Good Brown Girl* (1996), is widely acknowledged by critics who attend to its many poems foregrounding the tensions and challenges of growing up Métis, poor, and female, surrounded by the “white judges” (Dumont, *Brown* 11, 16) of patriarchal Canadian society. Diana Relke describes it as “poetry that enacts the process of transforming the present” (277), poetry through which Dumont both “confronts the myths and stereotypes generated by white culture . . . [and] challenges those aspects of Native identity politics that keep Native poetry on the peripheries of

white culture and the Canadian poetic tradition” (277). Renée Hulan contends similarly that Dumont’s poetry, by witnessing to Métis life and history in a way that resists pan-*Native* stereotypes, “makes a challenging intervention in literary, critical and cultural discussions” (“Cultural” 79). Susan Gingell shows how Dumont’s poems express “the politics of voice in the contexts of cultural imperialism and racism” (447), and Jennifer Andrews (“Irony”) demonstrates how Dumont uses irony to critique dominant discourses and to convey the specificity of her individual and communal identity.

In contrast to *Brown Girl*, Dumont’s *green girl dreams Mountains* (2001) has received almost no scholarly attention, despite being lauded as “beautiful and moving” poetry in which “many of the poetic features of *A Really Good Brown Girl* are sharpened” (Hulan, “Things” 128, 129). Dumont describes *green girl* as less “politically charged” than *Brown Girl* and speculates that this shift may account partially for her difficulty in securing a publisher for the second collection (Andrews, “Among” 151-52). It may also partially explain scholars’ lack of attention to *green girl*.¹ Critics are learning, as Hulan urges, not to dismiss Aboriginal literature for being “too political” but rather to attend sensitively to its political, cultural, and aesthetic aspects (“Critical” 79). What kind of reading is appropriate, though, for a text that does not feature, as in *Brown Girl*, a “politically charged” First Peoples persona speaking on behalf of her people but instead, as in *green girl*, a sister, daughter, lover, friend, teacher, writer — who happens to belong to a First Peoples nation? How does such a text accomplish the supra-literary tasks central to Aboriginal storytelling traditions?

I submit that one ethical and flexible way to address Aboriginal literature in its variety is to examine it for evidence of transformation — that is, “metamorphosis” (Allen, “Answering” 150) or “a change in consciousness” (Gould 17, 21) — which is a concept essential to notions of indigenous spirituality. As Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) puts it, “Transformation or mutation is at the heart of the sacred. The ceremonial understandings of the Native world revolve around the concept” (*Off* 116; cf. Gould 142). Many contemporary indigenous writers, particularly women poets, describe the supra-literary potential of language in terms of facilitating transformation (Andrews, “Living” 14; Allen, “Answering” 150). Muscogee poet Joy Harjo says, for example:

I'm aware of being involved with transformation in my work. I spend much of my time with Indian people, and I love my people . . . but because I've seen a lot of destruction and many of the effects of that destruction — the alcohol, the government programs, and so on — I know that I want to work with all that and encourage the incredible live spirit in my people. I want to have some effect in the world; I want my poetry to be useful in a native context as it traditionally has been. (43)

Blaeser articulates the transformative power of language in this way: “what happens when we are recipients or participants in the life of imagination, story, poetry, or song? . . . If language has that power to really move us, to literally change our thinking, and if who we are depends on how we think, and I think it does, then we are transformed” (Andrews, “Living” 14). As scholarship on *A Really Good Brown Girl* illustrates, overtly political Aboriginal literature definitely has the potential to “change our thinking” and thus to transform us if, as Blaeser points out, we participate in the language. When politics fade into the textual background (without disappearing completely, of course), it is still worth asking what metamorphoses are represented in the text and what changes in consciousness are facilitated by the text. To do so enriches one's understanding not only of transformation itself but also of the text's supra-literary potential. Moreover, even though transformation is always “somewhat illogical” (Andrews, “Living” 13) and “magical” (Allen, *Off* 116), to the extent that critics consider *how* transformation occurs in and through an indigenous text, they will gain greater insight into the text's form and aesthetics.

Reading for transformation in *green girl dreams Mountains* reveals that this second collection, like Dumont's first, does have potential to “come off the page and affect life.” In addition to diverse images of transformation in individual lyrics² — all of which indicate that the poet is open to and aware of the possibility of metamorphosis — the text presents two significant narratives of transformation. First, across *green girl's* second section, “City View,” the speaker transforms from an outsider-observer of the Vancouver cityscape into an empathic insider-participant, modeling ways not simply to observe a text but rather to participate in it. Second, the collection as a whole narrates a transformation of emotion. Although Dumont describes her poetry as “all autobiographical” (Andrews, “Among” 148), *green girl* moves beyond simply autobiographical to become a sort of auto/biography, the story of a single

speaker whose life resembles Dumont's own. Its five sections explore in turn the poet's prairie childhood, especially her relationships with her mother, her father, and one of her eight siblings ("Homeground"); her experiences in Vancouver, where she obtained her Master of Fine Arts and has lived for about half of her life ("City View"); ways in which she has been influenced by both prairie and ocean ("Gazing Ground"); her relationships with lovers and friends ("Mine Fields"); and her writer-teacher persona, fascinated with sound and language ("Among the Word Animals"). More important than the loosely chronological narrative, however, is the speaker's transformation from paralysis to freedom, from shame and dread to confidence and love. As writer and readers come to participate actively in the text — a transformative process modelled in "City View" and facilitated by poetic features throughout the collection — the transformation of emotion represented in *green girl* moves beyond the literary to offer a lasting change of consciousness for all participants.

Reading *green girl* in this way deepens our insight into transformation itself, particularly as it relates to what literary critic Charles Altieri calls *affects*, a category encompassing not only emotions but also passions, feelings, and moods. Altieri argues that all affects involve both body and mind, defining them as "immediate modes of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension" (2). *Emotions*, specifically, are well-defined affects directed toward specific objects or situations, are closely connected to beliefs and judgments, and orient the subject toward various actions and commitments (48, 72). Emotions such as hatred, anger, and love are prominent in Aboriginal texts and scholarship. In fact, as Dumont's reflections on shame illustrate, the emotions addressed by indigenous writers are at times so central to the writers' personal or communal identities that they could be called *passions*, "distinctive kinds of emotions in which we find our identities seriously at stake . . . , those emotions that become inseparable from the agent's sense of what makes life worth living" (268-69n1).³ In contrast to emotions and passions, *feelings* and *moods* are diffuse and often inarticulate affects. They need not be connected to beliefs, and absorb the subject in the present moment somewhat passively (54-55); moods are more encompassing than feelings and seem to pervade situations (54). Feelings and moods are less often mentioned in Aboriginal texts and scholarship — perhaps because such affects are often inchoate,

perhaps because indigenous literatures are characteristically minimalistic (Blaeser, "Writing" 63-64) — but Dumont's affectively rich lyrics demonstrate that feelings and moods are present in and vital to such texts.

While Altieri's wide range of terms is useful for attending to the subtleties of affective experience in Aboriginal texts, his insistence that affects involve both sensation and imagination is critical for addressing Native representations of the affects as they relate to transformation. Transformation always involves a corporeal element, as Allen explains: "Transformation is not a matter of a change of feeling from depression to excitement or enjoyment. It . . . does not take place in the emotions. It consists of the verifiable, dramatic shift in physical construction of a person or object from one place to another by 'magical' means" (*Off* 116). Allen offers an important word of caution to those who would equate transformation with only a change in affect; it involves, rather, a radical, magical, even physical, change of identity. Conversely, a change of affect transforms the body as much as the imagination; indeed, it transforms one's entire identity.

Links between transformation and affects in an Aboriginal context have not been examined at length, but writers do imply that such connections exist. Scholarship on Joy Harjo's poetry, for example, indicates that emotions can be transformed and that they can serve as transforming agents. Harjo explicitly seeks the transformation of emotion, commenting, "I hope that on some level [my poems] can transform hatred into love. Maybe that's being too idealistic; but I *know* that language is alive and living, so I hope that in some small way my poems *can* transform hatred into love" (43-44). Janice Gould (Maidu) contends that love itself is transformative in Harjo's poetry: "While other emotions — hatred, humiliation, and shame — can lead to psychological and even physical metamorphosis, changing our perceptions and our actions in the world, Harjo's emphasis is on love as a positive force for change" (145-46). These two links between transformation and emotion are summarized succinctly by Jacqueline Kolosov, who argues that Harjo's poetry "demonstrates the way imagination and language can transform loss, hatred, and suffering — *into and through love*" (56; emphasis added).

In addition, scholars who examine how Aboriginal writing is influenced by oral storytelling traditions imply that affective involvement

is critical to the supra-literary potential of an indigenous text. Blaeser explains that to be transformed by Aboriginal writing, writers and readers must participate actively in the text, creating the story together through an exchange similar to the dialogue between oral storytellers and their audience (“Writing” 56; cf. Brill de Ramírez 82-83). This cooperative process, according to Renate Eigenbrod, requires writers and readers to “understand and feel empathy with” story characters (96). Ideally, she says, they become so involved that they “undergo a process of transformation, ‘becoming’ that very character: understanding, feeling, smelling, tasting and touching life as the [character] does or learns to do” (97). Thus the emotions and passions represented and addressed in an indigenous text, as well as the feelings and moods it evokes, help writers and readers to participate empathically in the story and, ultimately, to be transformed by it in their daily lives. Brenda Payne (Cree-Métis) affirms this connection between affects and transformation in her analysis of *A Really Good Brown Girl*. Although she asserts, “The power of Dumont’s writing reinforces my belief in the significance of story and the ability to heal and be healed through creative expression and respectful acknowledgement” (135), her analysis reveals that in addition to being creative and respectful, transformative storytelling must also be affectively involved. That is, it is specifically by reflecting on her grief and pain that Dumont can, according to Payne, “face, mourn and, eventually, recover from her losses” (135); further, it is specifically by reading poems that “give voice to many of [her] feelings and experiences of sorrow, frustration, discovery and determination” (135) that Payne finds herself changed by Dumont’s collection.

The connections sketched here between transformation and the affects in a First Peoples literary context gain vibrancy and depth in *green girl dreams Mountains*. The poetic narrative of transformation in “City View” functions as a model for how to participate in an Aboriginal text; it demonstrates how empathy and affective involvement can “transform” writers and readers into story characters, as Eigenbrod puts it. Other poems in the collection indicate that Dumont has sought this sort of storytelling transformation and that, with various formal strategies, she has made possible a similar transformation in others. Active participation in story prepares Dumont and her readers to inhabit and truly experience the other significant transformation in *green girl*, the transformation of the speaker’s emotions. As the speaker moves from

shame to confidence, from longing to love and contentment, so too may the writer and readers find “a lot of shame” “exorcis[ed]” from their hearts and lives.

Transformation I: From “striding city gal” to “timid green girl”

In the ten poems of *green girl's* “City View” section, all but one titled with the name of a downtown Vancouver street or intersection, the speaker is positioned on the bus, in a café, or otherwise near enough to present specific impressions of the downtown core, particularly of the poor and homeless people who populate it. In the beginning of the section, especially in the second poem, “Powell,” the speaker finds herself an outside observer of the city and its inhabitants, uninvolved and unaffected by the homeless strangers she sees:

I try not to
stare
but my gaze is threaded
to the needle-thin figures
who live in doorways and
streets I pass, benignly
on the bus (40)

She sees those outside the bus merely as “stick figures,” as

someone
I splay open
with my curiosity
as if I were glancing at the 6 o'clock-
somewhere-else-news (40)

Although one reviewer asserts that in “City View,” “the speaker does not cultivate the role of voyeur or tourist” (Hulan, “Things” 129), the speaker is exactly that in “Powell.” By the end of the section, however, the poet’s role is different: no longer a voyeur or tourist, she announces in “Broadway” that she has been transformed into the people and places around her. “I am now Hastings and Main,” she asserts, “tattooed, pierced, shaved and dyed; the rain and rhododendrons and the Lion’s Gate Bridge; I am now the panhandlers, the junkies, the hookers, the homeless, all of them” (48) and so on — five *I am’s* in all. These two poems articulate two very different reading positions. In the first, the “reader” stands apart from the “text” of Vancouver, reading without

involvement or responsibility but with a curiosity that threatens to violate (i.e., “splay open”) the story characters. In the second, the reader is positioned fully within the text, identifying with and functioning *as* the story characters. This transformation from outsider to insider mirrors the sort of metamorphosis required of writers and readers within an Aboriginal storytelling context — required, that is, if the texts are to have supra-literary impact.

Neither “Powell” nor “Broadway” offers any explanation of how this metamorphosis occurs, thus foregrounding the magical nature of transformation, but the intervening poems suggest that the change is facilitated by the speaker’s empathic imagination. Although her emotions are never explicit in “City View,” the poems reveal that she is increasingly assuming the affective framework of the people around her. In “the drive,” for example, she demonstrates sensitivity to the perspectives of others:

they serve me here too
 at the Café-du-Because we know
 we could be panning on the street in minus 10 Celsius
 like the two young pierced, tattooed, and shivering skins
 sitting a cardboard’s thickness away from icy cement (41)

The speaker is sensitive both to the thoughts of those who serve her, imagining that they share her relief not to be homeless, and to the sensations of the homeless people around her: they are no longer “stick figures” (40) but rather cold young people decorated with body art. In the next poem, “Robson,” the speaker expresses concern over the injustice of the “divide” between “the two thin bums who beg and fry on the concrete” and the “city cop and royal-blue redhead” who can afford to buy “two hundred thousand-dollar condos” (42). Concerned “for the sake of” (42) homeless people, the poet is beginning to take on their cause, even as the poem conveys the complexity of solving the problem of homelessness. The poet takes an additional step toward empathy in a later poem, “Salsbury,” which unlike the other “City View” poems is narrated from a multiple, not single, first-person perspective; readers can infer that the “we” speaking are those the poet sees on Salsbury Drive. The speakers do not identify their affective state, but as they recount their daily routines with short phrases, verbs consistently in simple present tense, they convey the dull tedium of their lives:

we are stirred enough to
 shut off the alarm
 grind the coffee
 squeeze the toothpaste
 lock the door
 stop at corners
 look both ways, walk (44)

To write this lyric from the workers' perspective, the poet had to empathize with them. Her empathic imagination is also evident in "Oak," in which the speaker visualizes a family preparing supper. She imagines not only the family's activities but also the affective mood within their home, identified as "love" in the penultimate line (45). The poet describes everyday events, such as the interchange "How was your day?" "Fine" and the acts of spreading a tablecloth and setting the table (45), but the love she imagines colours the entire poem. Like the warmth of the family's activity, the warmth of the "sausages nestled, lined up like warm piglets ready to suckle," and the "light from small windows" (45), love becomes a warmth radiating throughout the poem, the affective framework underpinning the family's words and actions. The poet's empathy enables her to move imaginatively into the home to tell the family's story.

While the "City View" poems represent the speaker's transformation from outside to inside the "text" of downtown Vancouver, poems throughout *green girl* indicate that Dumont as storyteller undergoes a similar process to move inside her text. As this transformation takes place, readers too are enabled to participate actively in the text. Dumont's use of a first-person perspective in most poems facilitates this transformation (Eigenbrod 96); as Dumont writes the words and as readers speak them silently or aloud, she and they come to inhabit the speaker's perceptions and affects. Conversely, Dumont's frequent use of the second person creates a direct address to readers that makes them involved participants in the poetic narrative (Brill de Ramírez 88-93).

Because her poetry is autobiographical, Dumont is intimately connected to the first-person speaker, but to fully transform herself from adult poet into the child protagonist of "Homeground," she must consciously assume the child's affective framework. This process is demonstrated in "will I, night," which begins:

I shy from the familiar in these woods where
 I'm alone, here my body
 is a wafer of itself, here
 I am pitiful, not the striding city gal but
 the timid green girl
 my feet thin and dumb (31)

Only after the adult narrator's "city gal" confidence is transformed into the timidity and fear of her childhood "green girl" self can she successfully describe the scene. The next poem, "I am five," explores this transformation programmatically. Four times throughout the poem, the speaker asserts, "I am five." Lines threaded among the first three assertions create a sensory rich scene in which writer and readers can participate, evoking different senses in turn: sight — "the needled-limbs loft and / blond grass-heads move like flames" (32); sound — "grass-hoppers clack / snapping their hot wings / near my ear" (32); smell — "breathing the body smell of this place" (32); and touch — "the skin of fruit-warm cedar" (32). The final assertion, however, goes beyond sensory observation to encompass an imaginative dimension: "I am five and / don't know that this burning inside is / loneliness" (32). These last lines indicate that the speaker is not actually five years old but someone mature enough to articulate as an emotion (loneliness) what was for a five-year-old an undefined feeling (burning). The lines also establish that the imaginative transformation of the mature speaker into her five-year-old self requires not only the five senses but affective involvement too; indeed, the poem's structure suggests that this involvement is the ultimate step in the speaker's transformation.

Dumont's use of the lyric poem facilitates her affective involvement in the poetry, as it allows her to evoke scenes and characters without needing to set them within a fully described narrative framework; it also enables her to dwell at length on images, feelings, moods, and emotions without reaching a neat sense of closure. The poem "lucky stars," for example, meditates on the speaker's feelings while she is being driven home in the dark by an older brother. Although the speaker refers briefly to an outside world — "many times I am taken back / to my parents in that logging camp" (17); "a family of ten" (17); "the dark wood ahead" (18) — the poem focuses on the brother and the protection he provides to his younger sister. The brother is affectionately fashioned into a mother duck, "his hair slicked back, a ducktail" (17), in whose "nest

of blankets and pillows” (17) the speaker feels safe and protected. This metaphor extends throughout the poem, creating a mood of lightness, warmth, and innocence mirrored by “those big-eyed stars / overhead” (17) and “our high beams splitting / the dark wood ahead” (18). The poet’s frequent use of present continuous verbs (driving, singing, lying, mothering, swaddling, glowing, splitting, pulling, unfurling) keeps her reliving those moments between her departure and her logging camp destination. These techniques likewise facilitate readers’ engagement with the affective experience of the past, enabling them to internalize the mood experienced by the poet, even to be transformed into that girl “bundled in the backseat” (17).

In her analysis of *Brown Girl*, Brenda Payne points out that the frequent commas in “let the ponies out” force readers to “linger . . . in the suffocating atmosphere of illness” (137) and that the jagged white space in “yellow sun days of leaving” emphasizes “the staggering effect of grief” (139). Dumont’s creative use of the lyric form to accentuate affective experience continues in *green girl*; “then came Christmas” is an excellent example. The substance of this lyric responds directly to the two-line epigraph by Derek Walcott:

Through the year pain came and went, then came
Christmas, everything correct, everything in order. (29)

Although the speaker begins as Walcott does, “through the year pain came and went” (29), she ends by negating his statement: “then Christmas came and everything was not correct, everything was not in order” (29). The rest of the poem explains that this disorder was caused by “our family shame that crested and fell like waves in our own sea sickness, the pain came like the flu that held on for two weeks mostly at Christmas” (29). The comparison of pain and shame to both ocean waves and waves of nausea powerfully conveys how overwhelming these emotions were. Equally powerful is the poem’s form. In stark contrast to Walcott’s doubly indented lines with precise, traditional use of punctuation and capitalization, the main body of Dumont’s poem features continuous, enjambed lines without stanza breaks or full stops. These features create a disorienting stream-of-consciousness movement that mirrors the emotions that “engulf, consume” (29) the family. The poem envelops the reader in the speaker’s pain and shame so intensely that it is almost physically painful to read — perhaps, at least in part, because the lyric does not clearly articulate either the source of the pain

and shame or the beliefs and attitudes underlying these emotions. Other than noting that the pain is something that she “thought then, my father brought home” (29), the persona simply immerses readers in her emotions so their “out-of-controllness” (29) can be inhabited. Only by examining other poems in the text can readers infer the source of these overwhelming emotions, which I will discuss in the next section.

The minimal use of punctuation and capitalization in “then came Christmas” is common throughout *green girl* (as it is in *Brown Girl*), and it creates an openness that facilitates readers’ entrance into the experiences of the speaker. Without internal punctuation to guide comprehension, readers must read closely to understand the syntax of each poem. The poems also tend to have no closing punctuation, a typographical reminder that Aboriginal writers seek “to destroy the closure of their own texts by making them perform, turning them into a dialogue, releasing them into the place of imagination” (Blaeser, “Writing” 56). This lack of closure, too, enables readers to interact with the text and respond to it. The same may be said of Dumont’s use of white space within and between the poems, which corresponds to the verbal silence critical to oral storytelling (Blaeser, *Vizenor* 21; Brill de Ramírez 92).

The second section of *green girl dreams Mountains* represents the sort of transformation explored and facilitated in poems throughout the collection: the metamorphosis from outside observer of a text to inside participant, a process requiring empathic sensitivity to the feelings, moods, and emotions of the story characters. This storytelling transformation prepares writers and readers for a supra-literary transformation; that is, it enables them to share in the *green girl* speaker’s transformation of emotion. This metamorphosis is represented across the text’s first, fourth, and final sections.

Transformation II: “Exorcising a lot of shame”

In the first section, “Homeground,” the child speaker is preoccupied with the family context characterized in “then came Christmas” as overwhelmed by pain and shame. This “family story” (28) is articulated succinctly in the poem “not Dick & Jane”:

brother we share the same
 a father who hid in a manly bottle, and
 a mother who kept one eye on him
 and the other on her suitcase (28)

The speaker's father is paralyzed by liquor, while her mother longs to leave him but does not; the speaker feels camaraderie with her brother, likely the one represented as a mother duck in "lucky stars."⁴ The paralysis suffered by the speaker's parents in "Homeground" plagues the speaker in this section, too. In "jig dream," she dreams of a long line of children dressed in traditional Métis clothing, dancing "light and fast and fleet" (27). As she watches them, she mourns, "Oh I wanted to dance wanted to dance, but I was still held fast paralysed by desire and dread and desire and dread" (27). Although the speaker is paralyzed by dread, she is equally overcome by a desire to dance. Thus, while she is "pitiful," "timid," and "afraid," as in "will I, night" (31), and lonely, as in "I am five" (32), she is not resigned to paralysis; she longs to free herself from the brokenness and shame of her family.

This longing is the speaker's central concern in "anti-I-over." In this poem she remembers summer evenings when she was eight, tossing a ball over her family's house to her brother on the other side. She imagines the ball "rising above everything except / wing-ed beings" (19), a stark contrast to her parents' shame, which they "pull on . . . / like heavy boots / tethering our feet to the ground" (19). Inside the house, her parents "pressed time in their hands / like gods" and "rattled / every board and breath awake / with their suspicions and charges of infidelity / in one another" (19). But outside, in the "deep night buoyant with promise" (20), dreams are possible, and the eight-year-old girl dreams of rising free with her ball, refusing to be tethered or paralyzed by her parents' shame. Even when she must return inside to prepare her school lunch, she places in her paper bag "an apple the size of that ball" (20) — a comparison that keeps alive the possibility of rising.

The collection's title poem, which begins the fourth section, "Mine Fields," returns to the notion of dreams, but as the title specifies, the longing is not for freedom per se but for "Mountains" (59). The one peak specifically named in the poem, Cypress Mountain, is described in terms of its "greenness," and it is lit up by "a sun's blade" (59). That sunlight reminds the speaker of an earlier time, when she was a "green girl" (59). In contrast to the timid and pitiful "green girl" (31) in "will I, night," green refers here to innocence and physical youth; the speaker is "round-eyed and hardly hurt," with "narrow and firm" hips and breasts like "weasels' noses" (59). She spends this earlier time with "mountain friends" (59), riding horses "with some ready-sweet boys / and a boy-

friend whose hair / was the color of corn silk” (59). Mountains thus connote something positive, a site of life, light, and friendships. The poet says,

In those days my body
volunteered me, pulled me
onward to dreams, verdant
and monumental (59)

Like Cypress Mountain, abundant with vegetation and massive, her dreams are abundant and ambitious. Because it is the speaker’s body — specifically her breasts and hips — pulling her onward, the particular “Mountains” she dreams of can be characterized as boy-related, a representation of physical and relational intimacy.

Desire for intimacy pervades “Mine Fields,” a section addressing the speaker’s human relationships as an adult. In “naked wind,” for example, she remembers lying with an unnamed “he” (60) on a hot, breezy July day. “I remember,” she says,

tasting

his lips, savoring his sweat, and feeling the heat
trace through
my seams like liquor, melting to my groin
until I wanted to undress and ride him in the naked wind (60)

Desire in this moment is intensely physical, accompanied by an imaginative longing for physical union; indeed, the speaker’s body pulls her onward to that union. Physical desire is also central in the poem “scorching,” in which the speaker waits at length for her lover. The poem is replete with hot images — “Scorching sun” (66); “red tips / of the burning bush / out my window” (66); “full sunlight” (66) — all of which relate closely to the heat of her desire:

I hold
 desire
 kindle it, carry
 one coal
 lit
 into the next day (67)

Although desire transforms the speaker so that she herself is “glowing” (66) like burning coal, her lover does not arrive, leaving her desire unfulfilled. In these two lyrics, the speaker experiences some intimacy,

but it is balanced by a sense of unfulfillment, which echoes throughout the section: “Have you, my darling ever wanted to / understand the prairie in me like I / want to understand the sea in you?” (62); “And yet there is more I want to say / having said nothing, yet” (64); “I faced west to the end of prairie & land saw the tangle of rainforest green in my desires set to clearing a space in its thick undergrowth write myself upright once more” (65).

In “Homeground,” the speaker is paralyzed by shame and fear and longs for freedom from such emotions. In “Mine Fields,” the speaker is not paralyzed but actively seeks an intimacy that is never fully achieved, with the words “want” and “desire” prominent in many poems. These affective experiences reappear in *green girl’s* final section, “Among the Word Animals,” but its mood is ultimately different. In “sound shard,” the speaker calls for someone to “scrape these broken tones off my breasts / scrape every last shard of a shape like grief / fear, and dread until I shine” (77). In “sad flute,” sadness permeates the speaker until she is metaphorically transformed into an instrument, “a reed for God or some other mad musical / inclination to play a ditty or dirge on my losses” (79). And in “raw,” emotional rawness is powerfully evoked by metaphor: “split wood / my chest and belly / like kindling” (83). Clearly, the speaker continues to deal with negative emotions. But no longer is she paralyzed, tethered by someone else’s shame. In “sound shard,” she takes charge, addressing someone who is her equal:

why
do our voices collide
in the often fragile air?
.....
... what are the notes
we draw from to remedy ourselves? (77)

The poem’s onomatopoeia (scrape, rip, shave) and alliteration (shoulders, shard, shape, shine, fishhooks) emphasize the violence caused by emotional brokenness, but the vigour with which the speaker utters these harsh-sounding words indicates she is courageous and strong enough to “scrape” and “shave” them off until she “shine[s]” (77).

Just as negative emotions reappear in “Among the Word Animals,” so too does the longing for intimacy. In “stillness for company,” the speaker asserts, “I want a man who knows the meaning / of stillness” (80). She repeats “I want” four times, emphasizing her desire for both a man

and stillness itself. The white space on the page, however, indicates that although she would like relational intimacy, she is at rest herself even without the man who knows the meaning of stillness. Carefully positioned within each line, the internal white space produces a vertical line that divides the poem in half, creating two columns of text that evoke an image of two human bodies sitting side by side. Just as importantly, the space creates a visual pause in each line that encourages readers to savour the poem slowly, thereby experiencing the speaker's stillness. Later, in "dawn always begins in the bones," the speaker openly declares her love, comparing it to light that can transform a landscape:

my love
 I love you like
 the crocus the spring air
 the light rippling over slopes
 the rolling hills rising and falling
 as if light on their uneven ground had weight (85)

No longer is the speaker longing or in want. She has found someone to love and is confident in that relationship, finally at rest.

In this final section the speaker is confident during emotional difficulties and displays confidence and love in relationships. The confidence permeating the section also arises from the speaker's attention to words: she explores sounds and revels in language with sophistication and celebration. Thematically, many of the lyrics address sounds (e.g., of birds, kids, traffic) and comment on language as varied as parts of speech and others' published texts. Formally, the poet delights in alliteration, metaphor, simile, and wordplay. It is in this section that the speaker comes into her own as a writer, the culmination of a long, difficult search for purpose that is narrated in "up/write." For much of her life, writes the speaker, her "translucent" (91) spirit was liable to be blown about by "a big wind" (91). Though she was likely to land "upright, I guess / she knew she had more than one life" (91), she wandered through her various lives, wondering, "would she follow the last ghost of a life / time running out" (92). Only at age forty is she given a vocation with which she can truly live:

she finally said, "Enough,
 I'm fed up with trying to please every tom, dick and jane?"
 "What is it? What is it I am supposed to do?" And the voice

that came back said, "Write"
 and she knew that she had landed once more
 up/write (92)

The act of writing infuses the speaker with purpose and confidence and ultimately rids her of the shame that paralyzed her parents.

Fittingly, then, the final poem of the section (and thus of the collection) describes an act of language, a "throatsong to the four-leggeds" created by the speaker in cooperation with readers directly addressed as "you." As a song celebrating the animals and human ancestors who have provided for "us," the poem serves as a joyful exclamation point to the transformation of emotion represented in *green girl*: with shame exorcised, one may not only speak but sing! The lyric also vividly illustrates the connections between transformation and the affects explored in this essay. Because the speaker addresses readers as her fellow singers, the "throatsong" becomes, like all oral (and orally informed) storytelling, a "cooperative venture" (Blaeser, "Writing" 56) — so intersubjective, in fact, that the singers share air and use each other's throats as resonating chambers:

we sniff each other's airs, noses flare
 jaws drop to the shape of "O"
 in the mouth
 then "Ahhh"
 in the throat
 the other wind instrument
 and we suck and blow
 volley the air between us
 through a long dark throatshaft
 back and forth, back
 and forth, through
 a song travelling now
 from my throat to your
 call and response (96)

As the song continues, the singers morph into story characters, first their animal ancestors —

stretching
 back into the gut of ancestors, sucking and mewling
 deer, moose in the muscle of our being
 back into the ancestors we are

back into groin of our helplessness now
 into the rhythm of our joy and pain (96-97)

— and then, as the referent for “we” shifts from present to past, their human ancestors:

in the bush we once hunted for their generous red-blue flesh
 that fed us even through our own wanting and neglect
 we ate all the sweetmeat of those animals
 then sucked the bones white
 that became our whistles when we danced and
 the crosses when we prayed
 in the Lake of St Anne (97)

As in *green girl's* “City View” section, the singers’ metamorphosis into story characters requires their affective involvement, specifically attunement to “helplessness,” “joy and pain,” and “wanting and neglect.” Actively involved in this way, the singers experience an emotion-centred transformation in their daily lives that is described in the poem’s final lines: the speaker sounds

single notes of gratitude
 for those mammals that sustained me even
 before I could mewl myself in my mother’s belly
 the chord that she struck was the chord that bore
 both of us through all those times of want and waste
 of breath that we never put to good use
 in song or bellowed back refrain
 of gutsong and throatsong to our relatives
 now in our days of plenty (98)

Exchanging wasted breath for throatsong, the singers find their indifference transformed into celebratory gratitude.

Two brief poems near the end of *green girl* feature the metamorphosis of the arbutus tree, a striking evergreen that periodically sheds coppery-red bark for a young green skin. The lyrics characterize transformation as a phenomenon that both frees from what binds and unites what was divided. In “arbutus I,” the tree’s mature bark, which is “crackling like wood sap catching fire,” cools and “contract[s]” in the evening air to make way for a new green covering “as if it were / molting, excitedly breaking away from its bindings” (88). In “arbutus II,” as the trees transform, they invite the speaker into an embrace: the arbutus “split

their dresses” to “pull me into their smooth lime arms” (89). These lyrics point to what is offered in *green girl dreams Mountains*, not only to the speaker-protagonist but also to affectively involved writer and readers: a transformation of emotion that offers freedom from the pain and shame of one’s past and confidence and contentment to pursue loving intimacy. Thus, although Dumont may have been “more consciously withholding [her] politically charged persona” in this text (Andrews, “Among” 152), her second volume is no narcissistic self-examination. As Brill de Ramírez points out in her discussion of *A Really Good Brown Girl*, “Dumont and many Native writers offer their personal stories less as an end in themselves and more as a means toward the larger ends of the larger stories being told” (88).

Kimberly Blaeser contends that to change our thinking is to transform who we are (Andrews, “Living” 14); *green girl* suggests that changing our emotions — modes of response as physical as they are imaginative — can also transform us into different people. Even though my narrative mapping of this change indicates a certain linearity, transformation in *green girl* remains ultimately magical. What happens to the fear, pain, and longing so palpable in “Homeground”? How is the desire in “Mine Fields” transformed into contentment? In contrast to a traditional linear narrative, which might explore how the protagonist’s emotions evolve and how her underlying beliefs and commitments shift, the poetic narratives in *green girl* are composed of discrete lyric moments that leave much unexplained. As such, they remind us that metamorphosis is always part of “a world / that was forever bigger and vaster than any of us” (Dumont, *green* 97) — and suggest that lyric poems positioned into a narrative sequence may be an apt form for exploring transformation in an Aboriginal context.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I would like to thank Shelley Hulan, Linda Warley, and the anonymous vetters at *Studies in Canadian Literature* for their helpful suggestions on earlier versions of this essay. I am also grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program for generously supporting this research.

NOTES

¹ We have yet to see how critics will respond to Dumont's recently published third volume, *that tongued belonging* (2007).

² In "nothing asks me to leave," for example, the speaker invites readers to imaginatively transform the Pacific Ocean's "green waves" and "sea gale" into rolling prairie grass and "a wind off the prairie" (53). In "mine fields," she reflects on the transformation of a relationship from angry alienation into quiet understanding (61). And "ghosted" illustrates how heavy drinking transforms "the one who is my father / into a stranger, into an Indian / staggering down the street" (34).

³ Although Altieri's distinction between emotions and passions is instructive and, I think, very applicable in an indigenous context, I do not distinguish here between emotions and passions in Dumont's text. I refer to all well-defined affects as emotions.

⁴ For elaboration on the speaker's family context, see the "Homeground" poems "house, broken" (30), "ghosted" (33-34), and "the shape of water" (35). In the first two, the speaker presents in greater detail the tragic effect of liquor in her family; in the third, she emphasizes again "the proximity of siblings" (35).

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Paula Gunn. "Answering the Deer: Genocide and Continuance in the Poetry of American Indian Women." Rader and Gould. 143-52.
- . *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Canons*. Boston: Beacon, 1998.
- Altieri, Charles. *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003.
- Andrews, Jennifer. "Among the Word Animals: A Conversation with Marilyn Dumont." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29.1 (2004): 146-60.
- . "Irony, Métis Style: Reading the Poetry of Marilyn Dumont and Gregory Scofield." *Canadian Poetry* 50 (2002): 6-31.
- . "Living History: A Conversation with Kimberly Blaeser." *Studies in American Indian Literature* 19.2 (2007): 1-21.
- Blaeser, Kimberly M. *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1996.
- . "Writing Voices Speaking: Native Authors and an Oral Aesthetic." *Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Oral Texts*. Ed. Laura J. Murray and Keren Rice. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999. 53-68.
- Brill de Ramírez, Susan Berry. "The Power and Presence of Native Oral Storytelling Traditions in the Poetry of Marilou Awiakta, Kimberly Blaeser, and Marilyn Dumont." Rader and Gould. 82-102.
- Dumont, Marilyn. *green girl dreams Mountains*. Lantzville: Oolichan, 2001.
- . *A Really Good Brown Girl*. London: Brick, 1996.
- Eigenbrod, Renate. "The Oral in the Written: A Literature Between Two Cultures." *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 15.1 (1995): 89-102.
- Gingell, Susan. "When X Equals Zero: The Politics of Voice in First Peoples Poetry by Women." *English Studies in Canada* 24.4 (1998): 447-66.
- Gould, Janice May. "I Give You Back: Memory, Language, and Transformation in Joy Harjo's Poetry." Diss. U of New Mexico, 2000. Print.

- Gunnars, Kristjana, et al. "Panel Discussion: Was the West Ever One?" *Open Letter* 10.2 (1998): 101-21.
- Harjo, Joy. "Ancestral Voices: Interview with Bill Moyers." *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews*. Ed. Laura Coltelli. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. 36-49.
- Hulan, Renée. "Cultural Contexts for the Reception of Marilyn Dumont's *A Really Good Brown Girl*." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 35.3 (2000): 73-96.
- . "Things Made Beautiful." *Canadian Literature* 180 (2004): 127-29.
- Kolosov, Jacqueline. "Poetries of Transformation: Joy Harjo and Li-Young Lee." *Studies in American Indian Literature* 15.2 (2003): 39-57.
- Payne, Brenda. "*A Really Good Brown Girl*: Marilyn Dumont's Poems of Grief and Celebration." (*Ad*)*dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*. Ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo. Penticton: Theytus, 2001. 135-42.
- Rader, Dean, and Janice Gould, eds. *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2003.
- Relke, Diana M.A. *Greenwor(l)ds: Ecocritical Readings of Canadian Women's Poetry*. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1999.