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Anne Quéma

Volume 45, Number 2, 2020

Special Issue: Neoliberal Environments

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080272ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080272ar>

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Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Quéma, A. (2020). Bioarchives of Affect: Erín Moure's The Unmemntioable. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 45(2), 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080272ar>

# Bioarchives of Affect: Erín Moure's *The Unmemntioable*

ANNE QUÉMA

**I**N THE LAST THIRTY YEARS OR SO, theories of affect have been enlisted to elaborate critiques of neoliberalism. In 1990, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critique of capitalism invoked processes that wrest compounds of sensations from dominant systems of thought whereby "landscapes . . . have become pure percepts, and characters . . . have become pure affects" (105). At the turn of the twenty-first century, in his post-Marxist critique of capitalism, Antonio Negri considered affect as "an *expansive power* . . . a power of freedom" (86). Defying economic measurement, "value-affect opens the way to a revolutionary political economy in which insurrection is a necessary ingredient and which poses the theme of the reappropriation of the biopolitical context by the productive subjects" (88). However, affect has also been prodded as the new basis for commodification, profit, and biopower. Indeed, in 2008, Patricia T. Clough argued that affect, which she defines as matter's capacity to self-organize and to generate biological information, is the target of power as the latter mediates, racializes, and surveils populations through technologies of iris detection, DNA testing, and neural imaging (18-19). Today, while environmental policy and investment in a green economy have entered political discourse, commodifying practices are humming on. For instance, ads for vehicles still ram the message that the land shall be mastered through engine power or that the body of the vehicle shall be as swift and wild as a feline. Repeated ad nauseam, these ads mediate affect for profit while feeding necropolitical phantasms of biomechanized submission. The sobering truth about affect is that it is neither good nor evil; instead, running through life and matter, it can be captured by things as disparate as neoliberal practices, propaganda, and poetical processes. In this context, the critical challenge consists in examining ways in which thinkers, artists, and writers resist neoliberal appropriations of affect.

I propose to consider this type of resistance by regarding affect not as an entity but in terms of a relational ecology whose model derives

from contemporary biological conceptualizations of life as symbiogenesis. Specifically, Lynn Margulis's scientific research moved the focus from nuclear cells as units of analysis to relational cellularity as the basic principle to understand biological development among organisms. Life evolves according to symbiosis — that is to say, according to continuous patterns of hosting and merging among animal, fungal, and plant cells: “*Symbiogenesis*, an evolutionary term, refers to the origin of new tissues, organs, organisms — even species — by establishment of long-term or permanent symbiosis” (6). In this context, a cell consists of an ecology that hosts bacteria that are fundamental to its being. In fact, Margulis maintains that “no species existed before bacteria merged to form larger cells including ancestors to both plants and animals” (6). Focusing on the pollination adventures between plants and insects, Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers expand on “the *practices* that bring plants and insects together in an affectively charged, multisensory partnership” (78). They conclude their analysis of interspecies relationality by stating that “organisms can learn how to attune their sensory bodies to the ongoing improvisational rhythm of differences that make up the world. Plants . . . constantly run experiments to improvise new ways to articulate themselves, to register new kinds of differences in the world, and to invent new ways *to make a difference* in the world” (105). In other words, biological processes are affective, relational, and generative of ecologies of difference from the get-go.

Symbiogenesis offers a new paradigm for thinking and writing across boundaries. In particular, Donna J. Haraway sees in biological patterns of morphogenesis renewed ways of telling stories and of providing collective alternatives to practices of extraction in the Anthropocene (31-33). My analysis of ecologies of affect is inscribed in this critical paradigm, which Haraway names sympoiesis. Focusing on poiesis as a relational process, I seek to shed light on how writers such as Erin Moure have contributed to the emergence of affective ecologies by assembling bio with text and bio with poetics — that is to say, by entangling processes of life with processes of language, the sensorium, the imaginary, and the historical.

Such a sympoietic conception of writing accommodates experimentation in the name of hosting and difference. Symbiogenesis clearly demonstrates that biological communities are not predicated on homogeneity. Reflecting on a paradigm that takes into account biological

patterns of relationality in the affective mode, Hustak and Myers argue that at stake is

a theory of ecological relationality that takes seriously organisms as inventive practitioners who experiment as they craft interspecies lives and worlds. This is an ecology inspired by a feminist ethic of “response-ability” in which questions of species difference are always conjugated with attentions to affect, entanglement, and rupture; it is an affective ecology in which creativity and curiosity characterize the experimental forms of life of all kinds of practitioners, not only the human ones. (106)

Rather than consider innovative writing as an inaccessible type of medium severed from a community of readers whose shared language would ensure universality, I propose to read innovative writing as a manifestation of the very creativity, entanglement, and rupture that Hustak and Myers celebrate. A century ago, obscure and inaccessible Futurists and Dadaists triggered anger; today, logos and hypertextual designs have phagocyted some of their reprehensible tactics.

Moure’s own corpus is characterized by diversity — from the complexity of *The Unmemntioable* (2012) to the simplicity of *Sitting Shiva on Minto Avenue, by Toots* (2017). As in the case of *O Ciudadán* (2002), her experiments are always made with a view to creating, not assuming, a community. Similarly, reading Margulis on symbiogenesis requires curiosity and the willingness to explore a challenging use of language. The paradox is that there is no single and universal community but rather communities in the making that are striving toward potentially universal goals according to singular cultural practices and modes of knowledge. What should remain universal is the desire for and the practice of encounter, exchange, and bridging — acts that remain without guarantee but that characterize humans and nonhumans.

Moure’s biopoetics of conceptual, sensorial, social, and historical entanglements has queered ceaselessly the domination of monocellular narratives and practices, including the single-minded strategies of extraction, capitalization, and consumerism (which now fuel the mining of big data). In “Writing *In Secession*,” Moure uses the term biopoetics to refer to the tension between the writing body and the immaterial that poetry promises to materialize.<sup>2</sup> This biopoetic materialism generates affective ecologies that wrest affect from a neoliberal hegemony over the sensorial and that hinge on a biotextual interaction between

humans, history, and land beyond commodification and stereotype. In their key analysis of *The Unmemntioable*, Dominic Williams and Milena Marinkova refer to Moure's "affective trans-scapes" as "relational, affect-laden, and fluid topographies, open to an 'elsewhere,' while in friction with normative prescriptions" (77). Her citational practices (weaving in texts from diverging origins) and her collaborative practices of translation (generating texts in response to another text written in a different language) speak to a poiesis of relationality and combine with the exploration of relationships between poetry and historiography, land and history, the sensorium and language, memory and writing, the dead and the living. Out of this biopoetics emerge ecologies of relationality in the making through which disrupting and coalescing affect runs.

The generation of ecologies of affect will vary from one medium to another and from one history of traditions and conventions to another. For instance, it is clear that Edward Burtynsky's critique of the tar sands industry in *Manufactured Landscapes* draws on affect through the aesthetics of the sublime. In contrast, in Moure's *Little Theatres* (2005), whose main setting is Galicia in northwestern Spain, we find poems in which writing pays homage to water, the revolutionary force of the potato, or the mineral of the cabbage, and in which "even the grass has a voice" (40). Her homage to the land runs through her writing — from *The Green World* (1994) and *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person* (2001), in which a febrile search for the creeks paved over by the streets of Toronto unfolds, to her translation from Galician of Lupe Gómez's *Camouflage* (2019). Each work is characterized by specific procedures and concerns, so here I do not propose an interpretation of affect in Moure's poetry as a whole. Instead, I focus on *The Unmemntioable*.

The text can be read as a chimerical journey to Ukraine, a land ravaged by famine, military scorch tactics, and racial extermination between the 1930s and the 1940s. The task of the poem's persona, E.M., is to bury the ashes of her mother (M.I.M.) in the village where her mother was born before emigrating to Alberta. Shadowed by E.S., her doppelgänger and heteronym, E.M. is confronted with a paradox: while she has never experienced life in Ukraine, she is the receptor and the emitter of an intergenerational and historical trauma that remains unmentionable yet demands recognition. The question is how to weave into a poetic fabric this complex legacy, its political and historical sig-

nificance, its transgenerational impact, and its reverberation through the act of writing.

Lament, epistle, prose, lyric, serial, and cut-up, *The Unmemntioable* seeks to transmit a legacy, but it also *regards* those who lived and endured. Through this multiphonic, multilocal, and multitemporal text, Moure offers a compelling rendering of an affective ecology that generates bioarchives of the past in the mode of sensory cognition and that cannot be disentangled from an ethics and politics of responsibility. To consider what makes up affective ecologies in relation to experience, language, politics, and history, I begin with Brian Massumi's conception of affect and indicate the extent to which Moure shares with him an ecological configuration of affect in time and through language. Specifically, Moure's writing practices rest on an expansion of the sensorial and located body propelled by affect. If the poem sings in Moure, it is because the lyrical taps into acoustic entanglements involving languages, cultures, and lands.

However, while Massumi privileges continuity between the affective body and language, an enigmatic discontinuity between the material body and immaterial language arises in her writing. The breach is an enigma, not an assertion, and it leads Moure to approach other types of disjunction that Massumi brushes aside. In his rejection of identity politics, Massumi offers a conception of history that relegates questions of race, gender, and class to context. In contrast, Moure enacts the disruptive and dissentious legacy of political traumas by turning spaces, sounds, languages, and memories into affective bioarchives to be retrieved and transmitted publicly. Access to the past does not take the path of discursive historiography; instead, the past emerges from an ecology of affect that through a sympoietic process weaves silence with language, noise with the lyrical, the sensorial with knowledge, and land with necropolitics.

Massumi is concerned with the process of becoming in the Jamesian and Deleuzian traditions. Instead of being a predefined entity, the body is always in the process of actualizing itself through intensity in a ceaseless process of affective transitions. As a source of vitality, affect enacts the body as a relational and transitioning being prior to the emergence of subject-object categories: "Bodies in the making not as humans already existing but as perceptions on the cusp of environmentality, an ecological becoming" (Manning and Massumi 28). Affect consists in

performative, event-oriented gestures of instinct in the here and now. The objective is to relocate “the human on the animal continuum” (Massumi, *What Animals* 3) and to demonstrate that, far from being governed by biological determinism, instinct is in continuity with the aesthetic, language, and freedom. Specifically, Massumi locates affect in the ludic gestures of the body — both nonhuman and human. Tapping into the instinctual vitality of the body, these gestures also exceed it.

Describing animal play, Massumi argues that wolf cubs engage in performative acts that turn on the difference between combat and its ludic performance: “It is all in the gap between the bite and the nip, moving and gamboling, executing an action and dramatizing it. What pries open the minimal difference, enabling the mutual inclusion characterizing the logic of play, is once again style” (*What Animals* 9). In engaging in these performative acts, the bodies of the cubs exceed the instinctual level of being through “animation, vivacity — *a surplus-value of life*, irreducibly qualitative, actively flush with the living” (*What Animals* 10). This focus leads Massumi to maintain that instinct is characterized by intensification and expressivity outside instrumentality and cognition and that this surplus-value of life generates an “aesthetic yield” (*What Animals* 10). Characterized by a potential for plasticity, instinct is on a continuum with language, as the “prehuman, preverbal embodied logic of animal play is already essentially language-like” (*What Animals* 8). Thus, affect runs through play, improvisation, and metacommunication. Above all, vitality affect is autonomous and escapes cognition, emotion, and reason. On this autonomy depend “a bid for freedom” (*What Animals* 29) and an escape from entropy (Massumi, *Power* 106). Massumi identifies this power for life as ontopower.

As in Massumi’s case, Moure’s writing revolves around intricate ecologies of experience, language, time, and affect. While Massumi argues for a continuum between the animal and the human, her texts enact a relational ecology that through “*the art of the body*” (WSW 63) webs together humans, animals, things, and land. Sensorial bodies are always situated in places that poetry enacts into localities — whether it be Galicia, Bucharest, Huallen, Berlin, La Chaux, or Montréal where E.S. jots down quotations. In *Little Theatres*, sensorial affect circulates through a heteronomy of the vegetal, the animal, the mineral, the atmospheric, the aquatic, the igneous, and the human. As in Massumi, language is fundamentally gestural and performative, the task is not

representation, but enacting: “The protagonist in little theatres is most often language itself. And it has little time to act” (*Little Theatres* 37).

Moure shares with Massumi the notion that, running through experience, affect intensifies and exceeds the given. For her, experience is something that is going to metamorphose, tending toward multiplicity through accretion: “My writing process . . . is a constellative progression outward and sideways” (*My Beloved* 51). In *The Unmemntioable*, the role of the heteronyms Elisa Sampedrín (E.S.) and E.M. is to contribute to this constellative progression. In particular, E.S., who is associated with the language and the land of Galicia in Spain, figures as a trope of movement toward the infinite: “Thus ex/plosivity across membranes. A touch. E.S. and her prosthetic gesture: language” (39).<sup>3</sup> Animating the shifts between E.M. and E.S. is a tension between experience and writing as a prosthetic gesture that expands on the sentient body and generates a multiplicity of voices and lexicons: E.S. “stands on the threshold of the text in which she is put into play, or, rather, her absence, her infinite turning away, is marked on the outer edge, a gesture that both renders her possible and exceeds and nullifies her intention” (33).<sup>4</sup> E.S. is the torque in the biopoetic line that sets the writing body outward.

Out of this outward movement poetry springs as fabric, affective ecology, and soundscape all at once.<sup>5</sup> There is no language in the poems, but languages that are freed from nationalistic claims to purity. Romanian, Ukrainian, Galician, Spanish, Russian, Polish, and Portuguese exist in Moure’s poetry as many prostheses rubbing shoulders with one another: “panic. pandemonium. pâine. (broyt). chleb. χλιβ.bread” (7). Variations on the word “bread” spread out, with pain travelling through polyglottal soundwaves. In addition, the multitudinous citations expand and regenerate the writing body, threading and pushing sense-making through the texts. In the space of an article, I cannot do justice to the citational complexity of the poem, but here are three epigraphic examples:

I swam for us both. I did not swim. *Dear trout.* The shimmertree swam.

Ich schwamm für uns beide. Ich schwamm nicht.  
Der Flimmerbaum schwamm.

Paul Celan, 1963



. . . .

L'arbre aveugle vers l'arbre étend ses membres sombres,  
Et cherche affreusement l'arbre qui disparaît . . .

Paul Valéry (*Unmemntioable* 87, 89)<sup>6</sup>

The first epigraph translates Celan's lines as cited in the second epigraph, with "shimmertree" echoing "Flimmerbaum" while "swam" reverberates with "schwamm." A new biotext is in process, with the words "Dear trout" as the enabling graft. In the third epigraph, "shimmertree," "Flimmerbaum," and "arbre aveugle" recombine while "sombres" answers "schwamm" and "swam." Through the act of reading, recontextualized meaning traverses from one language to another, as sounds set it on antiphonic *voyages imaginaires*. Through the *bruissement du texte*, Moure mediates an ec(h)ology of affect, an "autopia" (*Little Theatres* 42) that resists the power to excise, ban, and restrain languages and sounds.

Similarly, the reflection on exile from Ukraine amplifies Ovid's exile from Rome, banished for having seen something that he should not have seen. His *Tristia* sound reflects the elegiac aspects of Moure's poems, as in "Like chagrin's first companion, error" (*Unmemntioable* 3), which itself echoes "joy's companion" in *Little Theatres* (74). Ovid's texts — *Consolatio ad liviam*, *Halieutica*, *Amores*, *Remedia Amoris*, *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, *Fasti*, *Heroides*, *Somnium*, *Metamorphoses*, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, and *Tristia* — all operate like sounding boards of the lyrical. Thus, the citational gesture is not so much a means of authorizing the past as it is of dislodging texts from authority while propagating words, thoughts, and sensations through sympoiesis.<sup>7</sup>

While Moure's biopoetics shares common ground with Massumi's ecology of becoming, the two approaches also branch out. In proposing that the aesthetic is already present in animal play, prefiguring communication and language, Massumi posits a relationship of continuity between instinct, affect, and the aesthetic. In contrast, Moure's writing lays bare enigmatic relations between language, thinking, and experience, generating tensions around which affect orbits. In *My Beloved Wager*, coalescence is a key word: "We beings are shimmers, coalescences, coalitional" (106). In *The Unmemntioable*, we read that experience "rents the entire person" (86). The ontology of sensorial immediacy

is beckoning, yet disrupted. A whirligig is set off between E.M. and E.S., who proceed through citational and dialogical moves that participate in exfoliating displacements of subjectivity. Ventriloquizing Descartes, E.M. laments, “A wide experience by degrees sapped the faith reposed in my senses” (48).<sup>8</sup> However, E.S. asserts: “But of course she *is* experience, even as she is not fully captured by what she is thinking” (59). She later remarks, “E.M. the notion of certainty in immediate experience via subjectivity crumbling” (75). Putting a damper on these positions is experience *of/as* a rupture:

Body (the illegible dis/guesture) enfronts all  
 language. a Body not  
 even accounted for — or constrained — by  
 this word “body” which wills or bodes its own remnant to  
     detach — from neural bliss —  
     a thick layer of cells  
     *que se despregan*, creating, thus,  
     context. (which is the body

    come loose, dislodged,

    inadherable, malsain, rotted, dross, snot, lichen,  
 tomb, drift, ambivalent, auganeve, pus, fog, urine, *šaltibarščai*,  
 snow (21)

Caesura and copula all at once, portmanteau and translingual, the statement flies in the cosmetic face of the animal continuum and enacts an existential enigma. If we are dealing with a relational and affective ecology of being, it is one that is dodged by the inhospitable — “The body itself is exile” (109) — but that is also generative of context and therefore of *autrui*.

The only way out is toward. If affect circulates and expands through languages, then poetry has the capacity to mediate an ecology of sounds and patterns as a fundamentally public way of being in touch with the world and with others, thanks to, not despite, the diversity and ingenuity characterizing human semiosis. This ecology of public relationality speaks to the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of affect. Upending Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of the face, poetry extends hospitality to all — animal, vegetal, mineral. “Regard a tree” (*Little Theatres* 4). To affect and be affected translates into to see and be seen, to touch

and be touched, to hear and be heard. Moure's practices of polyglottal relationality gesture toward *la communauté qui vient*, to cite Giorgio Agamben, or politics as "le geste même de nouer et d'enchaîner, de chacun à chacun," to cite Jean-Luc Nancy (175), or "the distribution of the sensible," to cite Jacques Rancière (12-13).<sup>9</sup> As in the case of the collective performances of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, poetry enacts a public locus of encounter with alterity, enacting the sounds of a polis in the making.

Massumi's own conception of the polis builds upon his ontology of instinctual being exceeding the affective vitality of the body. Politics is a fundamental manifestation of ontopower, as it takes the path of affect. Natural politics is thus envisaged in performative and gestural terms with a potential for transformation. Massumi argues that "political thought flourishes with noncognitive primary consciousness. This is thought in the act, flush with vital gesture" (*What Animals* 40). However, ontopower can latch onto anything, neoliberal capitalism in particular. While the neoliberal mantra harps on a rational economic system and free consumers' rational choice, Massumi maintains that neoliberalism marshals affect: "The denizen of the neoliberal world is called upon to equate the experiential value of its life — the *surplus value of life* . . . with standard quantitative measures of economic success" (*Power* 23). Thus, consumerism is the perfect example of the ways in which vitality affect is captured and transvalued into consumerist desires for instant gratification.

However, the difficulties arising from the emphasis on the immediacy and autonomy of affect become apparent in Massumi's philosophy of history, which in *Ontopower* focuses on the body engaged by the event and on affect as an unadulterated continuum of temporal tendencies and potentialities in contrast to what he calls conformity, the patterns established through repetitions, and the ideas captured and reproduced by reason. Absent from his analysis are the normative institutions and practices governed by racial, gender, class, and other beliefs to which affect adheres. In his rejection of identity politics, Massumi reduces all this dross to "the pieties of context" (*What Animals* 45). Yet, if the present and the future are enmeshed with the past, it is not only in terms of potential micro-tendencies but also in terms of sedimentation, address, and trauma, each of which characterizes Moure's reflection on the transgenerational legacy of the past, the responsibility to and

the transmission of the past, and the enduring effects of necropolitical violence.

If affect counters entropy and soars, it nevertheless rustles through the spaces and times of cultures, languages, and politics — all of which constitute the normative *terms* of relationality but also of aggression, violence, and genocide. Can we then envisage an approach to historical trauma as the formation of an ecology that hinges on specific terms and practices of political aggression while remaining anchored in affect as “noncognitive becoming” (Massumi, *Power* 63)? And if so, can we think of poetic practices of historiography that would offer alternative ways of knowing the past and doing justice to it? This alternative writing of history would prevent the secession between knowledge and affect and would draw on the space of the page to enact an affective ecology transmitting sounds from the past through sympoietic processes. This sympoietic and affective approach to the past would gather and keep in tension life and death, memory and the present, noise and the lyrical, the sensorium and cognition, and land and trauma.

Located at the junction of history, ethics, and justice, *The Unmemntioable* reads as an ethical act of listening to those who, in the first half of the twentieth century, endured or perished in the violence that ravaged today’s western Ukraine and its multi-ethnic, multilingual populations. E.M. claims her debt to the past — “I’m not then innocent” (102) — while her elegiac undertaking transmits a desire for justice. As in the case of Philip’s *Zong!*, those who perished did not leave any trace, and this absence of information creates conditions of knowledge and writing that are decisive for both Moure’s and Philip’s poems. The erasure of institutional knowledge (apart from the very brief legal decision in the case of the Zong massacre)<sup>10</sup> creates a historical constraint of composition that leads to a labour of recognition that cannot but draw on other means of telling history and of doing justice to the dead. The relational transmission of the past through the channels of affect precisely constitutes an alternative.

Moure’s elaboration of a biopoetics of affect to address the past is significant, as it speaks to a response to necropolitical violence that goes beyond the psychoanalytical thrust of earlier trauma studies. While affect as a concept remains subject to multiple if not contradictory definitions, it nevertheless signals the endeavour to apprehend the psyche anew and, by extension, to re-examine the ways in which we endure and

respond to violence and trauma. Certainly, poems like *Zong!* and *The Unmemntioable* do wrestle with the mutism characterizing trauma, but they also tap into resources of affect to counter governance by death and to generate a *biopoetic space* of knowing the past while acknowledging the blind spots affecting our inheritance of the past.

This deployment of affect sidesteps an intractable problem specific to psychoanalysis, which it inherited from the Enlightenment and its focus on reason (with the uncanny as its illegitimate progeniture): I am referring to the fundamental premise that the psyche is characterized by a dual relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, knowledge and repression, and reason and the irrational. In contrast, the move to consider affect in terms of an ecology allows one to envisage passageways among the unconscious, knowledge, sensorial experience, language, sociopolitical norms, and ethics. Further, such a conception of being begets a renewed reflection on language that calls into question notions such as the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic order, offering in place of this formidable fortress a proxemics revolving around noise, sound, voice, and land through which affect circulates. Finally, if language is the cornerstone of historiographical narratives, then an affect-oriented conception of language can only foster a renewed reflection on the transmission of history.

I suggest that *The Unmemntioable* subverts traditional historiography (as a representational mode) by transemittng bioarchives of past experience in the now through what Elisa Sampedrín calls “sensory cognition” (Moure, *Little Theatres* 43). Moure’s long poem pays tribute to silenced voices by creating a fabric of sensory cognition, weaving language with an aesthetic of the sensible engendered by acoustic, haptic, and optical procedures. From these procedures derives a kinesis of writing, reading, and hearing bodies exposed to and enacting an ecology of affect in all its complexities — sensorial, imaginary, linguistic, cognitive, and political. This aesthetic of sensory cognition generates bioarchives of affect hinging on coalitional experience.

What are the contextual impieties of the ecology of affect in these poems? E.M. is both an addressee and a daughter of Ukrainian history and of emigration to Canada. Deftly mapping the multilingual borderlands of Galicia in western Ukraine — “the cultural *cross-road* between East and West” (Yaremko 26) — through typography and sounds, the poems evoke a complex history of necropolitical aggression that encom-

passed both humans and land. The geopolitical tensions of the region, whose roots go back to ancient history, were successively characterized by Austrian and Russian imperialism; Poland's economic and institutional domination; Soviet control characterized by the systematic extermination of the Ukrainian population — including deportation to the Gulag — and scorched-earth tactics of military withdrawal in response to the German invasion in 1941; and the genocidal violence of the Holocaust as the Nazi regime implemented its *Lebensraum* doctrine between 1941 and 1943, with the effect of decimating the Jewish population of Ukraine (close to a million people) and of claiming the lives of 150,000 Soviet prisoners, Ukrainian nationalists, and Gypsies.<sup>11</sup>

All of these exactions, to which a paragraph cannot do justice, have constituted the enduring and traumatic legacy of twentieth-century Ukraine and inhabit the soils, bodies, sounds, and lexicons of *The Unmemntioable*. Throughout this history of conquest, control, and catastrophe runs a systematic ravishing of agricultural wealth in the chernozem belt, the most fertile zone of Ukraine. One of the most devastating instances of such ravenous pillaging is the Soviet policy of grain requisition and farm collectivization that in 1932-33 resulted in the Holodomor, a famine of frightful proportions that led to an estimated population loss of 4.6 million people.<sup>12</sup> The biographical link between this historical inferno and family history is established in “Tuteshni,” in which Moure recounts her complex relation to the place and history of her mother's village. In particular, she explains that her grandparents and her mother emigrated from Galicia to Alberta in 1929 and that they maintained contact with their Polish relatives who had been left behind until expulsion and murderous destruction in the village during the Second World War severed the link between them.

Thus, if Moure's poetry offers a sensorial and affective ecology of necropolitics, it is one that is contaminated by the sociopolitical norms hijacking the noises that our mouths emit in the present but also from the past. In *The Unmemntioable*, honouring the dead (and the living) begins with paying heed to the affective value of their languages: “What is inside, what is outside. What bears worth. What is a noise in the mouth” (105). Staging a cataclysm that revolved around famine, shibboleth, and genocide — “To say the name of food one way = / ‘the historical enemies of the x <scratch> people’” (7) — the long poem reads as a gesture of restitution, honouring the name of the mother while

returning her ashes from Alberta to the village of Great Hlibovychi where her family was obliterated. Beyond excision — and as they circulate between Alberta, Galicia, and Bucharest — the sounds, alphabets, and typographies of Polish, Russian, German, Hebrew, and Romanian graft onto each other.

Her mother's desire to have her ashes buried in the Ukrainian village is a profoundly moving address to which E.M. cannot but respond. Echoing Levinas's reflection on one's ethical response to the face of the other beyond the grave, E.M. states: "Though my mother is gone, her face still claims me" (106). Returning the ashes to the borderlands responds to maternal desire but also to those in the village who were unfaced by genocidal violence.<sup>13</sup> The mother's last sound redoubles the ethical exigencies of the address from the past: "A sigh, an interpellation that refused to articulate its word" (45). To bear witness to the maternal sigh requires an aesthetic of the sensible generative of an ecology of affect that cannot be disentangled from an ethics and a politics of responsibility. The immense and intense labour of the poem — its refashioning of syntax, patchworking of languages and alphabets, acts of translation, creation of soundscapes, and typographical design (blanks, struck-out words, fonts, angle or square brackets, open parentheses, dashes, and hyphens) can all be read as both ethical and ontological procedures.

Furthermore, the difficulty of responding to the past is affected by the genocidal use of shibboleth to enact mutism and to blot out language from experience. While the enigmatic relation between sensorial experience and language is ontological, instrumentalized shibboleth exacerbates the ontological condition and turns it into a weapon of necropolitical power: hence the scythes recur as a leitmotif at the bottom of pages (with flowing water and unimpeded breathing as its counter-symbolic). In the cataclysm, "At night the children were harvested with flames" (8), and words became hollowed out by excision: "Marked by that foreign word, marked too by imperial consequence / and time, peeled from the mud of labour, s\_rr\_w too / harvested of v\_wels / f\_r tr\_ut" (9). The exactions of shibboleth beget the grief and grievance haunting the polis: if death is the experience that leaves us bereft of language, then shibboleth prefigures the experience of death through the excision of language and the vitality affect that runs through it.

*The Unmemntioable* reads like a suspension bridge whose span rests and sways on the tension between voices and dead authors, sounds and burnt records, language and excommunication, grief and intergenerational silence. Under the interdict of censure, the poems mediate “the archive of infamy” (33)<sup>14</sup> by localizing a history beyond institutional memory — that is to say, beyond a catalogued memory of and from the village. It does so by generating bioarchives of the past through which affect swirls like an energy between past and present, the fields of Galicia and Alberta, aphasia and noise, amnesia and memory, blindness and hallucination, life and death.

Archives deal with institutional, if not imperial, memory. The western concept originates in the *archon* (magistrate) and the building in which the records were contained and interpreted (Derrida 12-13). In *O Cadoiro*, Moure cites Jacques Derrida: “L’archive est hypomnésique” (67; Derrida 26). In other words, archiving always falls short of the spontaneous act of remembering but retains its fascinating power from the promise to transmit. But here the archive is beyond hypomnesia, since it was pre-empted by the havoc wrought on Polish people and language in a Ukrainian village. In a deictic hide-and-seek — “Who this them was. This they. They/this/them. / (rain) / (silence of rain)” (*Unmemntioable* 5) — the poem underlines the fact that there is no church, house, school, foundation, or building left standing. Thus, the villagers’ experience has not made it to the archives. Only land remains. Another paradox emerges in that, while transgenerational, transborder anamnesis must not be spelled out, it ought to be mentioned — hence the misspelling of “unmemntioable” and its cataclysmic effect on readers.

Rather than write the grand narratives of history, Moure’s long poem listens to the signals emitting from the past, staging little theatres of soundscapes that are prompted by an ethical imperative: given the geopolitical and sociolinguistic complexity of Ukraine preceding the Second World War, how does poetry speak to the complexity of people’s experience in languages as disparate as Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Romanian, or German? The very act of translating these languages into proper English would repeat excision by cleansing them of the sounds that singularize historical experience.<sup>15</sup> Further, the record of the cataclysm is predicated on the death of the author: nobody survived who could author and authorize what happened. Thus, writing has “no ability to act as proxy to, to verify on behalf of” (13). Yet, how to account



for the “record of the body, an infinite outcry, an ethical subject /, a way of life” (41)? With noise and a *machine à écrire*. In a new twist on the epistolary genre, the poem engages in bioarchives of acoustics through trans-location and dis-location across borders.

One section of the text, “The R&se Letters by Grandmother Pound-Cake Rose,” the Heroide from Ukraine, consists of six letters plus three untitled texts (77-86). Four of the letters are addressed to E.M. as receptor and transmitter. With struck-out names — “author: ~~Elisa Sampedrán~~ / author: ~~Grandmother Rose~~” (77) — the frontispiece constitutes a threshold toward “the beyond of borders” (57). Upon first reading, the translations sound like rough approximations leading to hesitations, *contresens*, and polysemic ambiguities.<sup>16</sup> The reader is faced with dis-location through a translation that dislocates English syntax from its norms. This dis-location then triggers a trans-location of sounds as voices livestream from the past and across borderlands:

It weep and extreme desperation has covered it outlawed from  
the verge Ukrayina/Polska.  
One people <people> weeped, others sang tender favourite home-  
land  
farewell muzyka <voice>.  
There were cries, screech <squeaks>, it weep.  
The rest weep from we, who emerge.  
There was one wall of weeping. And we have parted with <from>  
you (78)

Dis-location and trans-location enact the perceived chaos and trauma endured by those who would eventually perish and fall silent. This affective soundscape in the now emits *strangerness* from the past, spectral yet close.<sup>17</sup>

Reading the texts aloud, if unfamiliar with the phonetic singularities of the various languages, readers enter this citizen-space (Skoulding 140) struggling with their mouth, lips, tongue, and jaws through the sounds. The experience is not one of immersion but of interpellation. Yet, while there is a rupture between body and language, there is also an elusive coincidence between the two that the mouth signifies, as it is the hinge between the buccal and the oral. This hinge materializes in different ways. On the one hand, the naming of Grandmother Pound-Cake Rose — a name that recalls Celan’s *Niemandrose* — derives from a pun on *babcialbabka*, which means both grandmother and cake in Polish and

which alludes to the famished villagers' reliance on meagre amounts of bread. On the other hand, bare life emerges at the point when the link between the buccal and the oral descends into the grotesque: "They have woken us up, it awesome cries / from former opening once a face / Now sponge, it has not tongue" (80). What was banned was not just a name or a language but a way of pronouncing, of using language in one's mouth and on one's tongue: the letters emit an ecology of affect through which the relations between noise, language, pronunciation, and nurturing underwrite the body and its survival.

Nor can bioarchives accommodate the grammar and the syntax of institutional memory. The energy of the poem derives from a poetics of disruption and syncope whereby sections and stanzas jump from one thought to another, one memory to another, one sensation to another, one language to another — from dream to insight to blindness to sensing to speech to silence. The montage is not one of temporal coherence. Anarchival, it thrives on stochastic sequences and games of chance, or "*jocurile de noroc*" (*Unmemntioable* 99). Moving through a polyphony of sounds whereby words border on each other, the poem enacts a space of anamnesis: the syntax is set into motion by contact but also by disruption between past and present, Hualen and Great Hlibovychi, Polish and Ukrainian, Galicia and Halychyna, signs and blanks, censure and sound birth.

Although neither the mother nor E.M. experienced the events of the village, both were affected by them, so seeing has to be endowed with enhanced meaning. In the poems, the references to the visual recur in complex ways: from observation to insight, from the sun as the eye of God to eclipse, or from seeing to blindness as in "Sometimes we are blinded by what we cannot see" (104). Out of experiential blindness emerge bioarchives of the haptic gaze, "the gaze that touches" (*My Beloved* 92) and that enacts a web of sensory cognition beyond traditional means of evidencing historical reality. Like Sara Ahmed's concept of affect as surplus (45), these bioarchives build up potency as the haptic gaze brushes by words, generations, land, bodies, and garments — actual or virtual.

This potency is conveyed by the shirt motif and by its ominous sightings across the borders of time and space. The first apparition occurs in "Field breaks child of crust to shirt blood <dry> blind" (25). Then, visiting a preserved wooden church in a museum in Bucharest,

E.M. sees that “on the wall or vertical field, a white rough shirt hangs on a hanger, arms fallen” (36). The shirt later coalesces with the mother’s shirt, wrung out while her cancerous tumour is growing in the blood (62). “Later, there is no cure with balsam or mint. No weapons, no shields, and almost no bodies. The shirt shimmers. She wipes water from her mother’s clavicle” (67). The next poem bears no title and has no addressee. It recounts the murder of a child: “One of they, they have hung on gate with nails young boy, / And they have deadened him, within his shirt” (83). Finally, E.M. braces herself for another visit to the museum in Bucharest with the wooden church and the shirt on the wall. Shedding light on the transgenerational effects of a trauma that was endured at a distance, these icons of pain accrete in the reiterative and hallucinatory mode — a cursed second sight that makes the act of paying heed to the past a dangerous undertaking.

The affective ecology of the poem — in which the haptic, the acoustic, the visual, and the buccal graft and redouble — originates in and persists through the relation to the mother as “*the unmemntioable boundary / that can never come fully clear*” (45). In doing so, the long poem offers a conception of language that restores a crucial link between the sensorium and language and that reconfigures the mother–daughter borderland as the matrix for historical transmission in a biopoetic mode.<sup>18</sup> Transmitting the past, affect travels through bodies across time and space, between languages, but also beyond recorded experience, as in the following dialogue between mother and daughter:

The village border  
kindled now only  
in the mouth, in the most intimate of conversations:

Jak się masz? E.M. asks M.I.M., bending close to her ear.  
Я не знаю. <coalesce> Ya ne znayu, she whispers.

In one ear the anthropologist (daughter): how are you? meaning:  
*stay alive.*

In the other the artist (mother): I don’t know. meaning:  
*prepare to die, and transmit* (71)

As the receptor of Grandmother Pound-Cake Rose’s letters, the daughter’s body in touch with the mother’s evanescent body becomes a means of stitching experience together again — bones, hands, soils, fruit,

mouth, and trees: “I see her wading in those grasses / outside memory, inside soil / her frail membrane / touches, what it touches <hillside> <touches> / disappears” (4). The response to the maternal address mobilizes the “i” of relationality and enacts a passage from infancy to language: “What is an entry into language? In it, we say ‘desire for love’. . . . Most of this desire is unmemntioable” (40), the latter words reverberating with the last two lines of the first poem of Moure’s earlier collection *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love* (10). Desire for love is the desire for being with, or relationality, despite necropolitical effects, past and present. This passing through and towards is re-enacted in the section precisely entitled “the unmemntioable.”

This most beautiful section reads like an oneiric and sympoietic experiment in recombinant verse weaving memory, mourning, and sensory cognition. Haunted by the spectre of excision, the act of writing sutures the cuts of history. In addition to the last two pieces, there are eight sections for eight months of mourning (92). Grave and votive, the lines carry readers across borders through a process of symbiosis. The motif of the horse sets off a process of haptic, acoustic, and visual coalescence by knitting together the mother’s childhood horse (66), the villager falling off a horse and being killed (79), E.M.’s “downfall equestre” (75) and her “interior vigilant naturally as a horse” (91), and the image of a boy staunching the blood from a gash in a horse’s neck (96). Words such as “horse,” “throat,” “lindens,” “soil,” “calf,” and “sleep” recur and combine, setting meaning adrift and shimmering. The procedures generate an ecology of relationality, turning on recontextualizing, pleating, and repeating the very sense of the unmemntioable: “i sew the alphabet shut too / a to b, facing / ab to cd, facing / o to a, facing / i to u, o, un / faced // e / the unmemntioable” (98). The fabric enacts a limitrophe where strophes cross limits and fray into silence.

In the face of normative hegemony and genocidal violence, Moure’s biotexts do not lead to a return to nature or to pure affect, nor do they erase the legacy of necropolitics. Instead, they reiterate the fundamental gesture of performing an entry into language through the paths of sensorial cognition, threading their ways through the exactions of genocidal violence, linguistic strictures, and the relentless destruction of lives and land through the imposition of what, in *Ossuaries*, Dionne Brand calls the “anthropometrics spectacles” of modernity (13). Thus, if writing bodies have the capacity to generate biotexts, they are nevertheless rent

by the sociopolitical norms that hijack affect. If the regeneration of sense making enacts the lyrical moment, this moment can be eked out only from the act of regarding those who endured and of heeding the effects of violence on transgenerational memory.

The biopoetical procedures I have examined — their creation of haptic, visual, auditory, and buccal bioarchives — indicate that, in this neoliberal era, the act of regarding the other includes regarding forms of life beyond a Cartesian dualism between mind and body, self and nature, or human and animal. Paying homage to the other in the past or in the present cannot take place outside our relationship to the land as a sensorium but also as a commons through which vitality runs. In contrast, Cartesian dualism privileges a rational subject from which the connection to and inheritance of the land has been ghosted. It is this act of abstracting the land that neoliberal practices repeat and multiply. Resource extraction, productivity, and massive global circuits of hedge funds fuelled by the digitalization of the economy in countries like Brazil all reassert historical patterns of excision of people, communities, practices, and languages from the land in the name of efficiency, rationalization, and productivity.

Resisting this economic hegemony and its biocidal effects, Moure's biotexts seek to reconfigure ethical connections between humans and nonhumans *in relation to* the land as a biopoetical space animated by ecologies of affect. The resistance to necropolitical violence through processes of biopoetics cannot take place without readers, who share this sensorial commons. This is where the civic aspect of ecologies of affect takes full effect, engendering resistance to the homogenizing forms of affect that we experience in neoliberal social and economic organization. For, while Erin Moure's biotexts foreground relational ecologies of affect, their response to otherness also calls for our own acts of sensorial cognition and capacity to host alterity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics as the organization of “*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40).

<sup>2</sup> On biotext, see Moure, *My Beloved* 207.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of excess of signification in Moure's writing, see Rudy, “What Can” 211; Skibsrud 18-19. On citizenship as prosthesis in *O Ciudadán*, see Moyes 113.

<sup>4</sup> Altered quotation from *Profanations*, in which Agamben writes: “They stand on the threshold of the text in which they are put into play, or, rather, their absence, their eternal turning away, is marked on the outer edge of the archive, like a gesture that has both rendered it possible and exceeded and nullified its intention” (67).

<sup>5</sup> On soundscape, see Moure’s introduction to her translation of Rosalía de Castro’s *New Leaves* (“We Can” 20). On noise and communication in her poetry, see Skoulding 140; Maguire, “Parasite Poetics”; Maguire, “Erín Moure.”

<sup>6</sup> Celan’s lines are from his poem “Flimmerbaum” (*Die Niemandrose* 31-32). Valéry’s lines are from his poem “Fragments du Narcisse” (*Oeuvres* 122-30), whose epigraph is citing Ovid’s *Tristia*.

<sup>7</sup> On Moure’s rhizomatic practices, see Dickson 26.

<sup>8</sup> Moure’s translation of Descartes’s statement: “Mais par après plusieurs expériences ont peu à peu ruiné toute la créance que j’avais ajoutée aux sens” (249). Through a pun, E.S. prescribes an antidote to Descartes for E.M.: “Je vous avise de brûler la mémoire des cartes et de penser pour vous-même” (53).

<sup>9</sup> For more on relationality and the ampersandic, see Susan Rudy’s conversation with Caroline Bergvall.

<sup>10</sup> Gregson v. Gilbert (1783).

<sup>11</sup> On the Babi Yar massacre on the outskirts of Kyiv, see Magocsi 679; Plokhly.

<sup>12</sup> On the genocidal impact of the famine, see the various contributions to *Holodomor*, edited by L.Y. Luciuk and Lisa Grekul.

<sup>13</sup> On the political significance of elegy in Moure’s poetry, see Williams and Marinkova 80-81.

<sup>14</sup> Citation from Agamben, *Profanations* 67.

<sup>15</sup> See Jacques on what she calls “the indignity of speaking.”

<sup>16</sup> The atmospheric of the letters recall the archival glitches of Rachel Zolf’s *Janey’s Arcadia*.

<sup>17</sup> For another shibboleth soundscape, see Bergvall’s “Say Parsley,” on YouTube.

<sup>18</sup> On maternal traces in Moure’s poetic language, see Carrière.

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