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Fictions, Fantasies, and Thought Experiments

The Year in Canada

Alana Bell

Some of the most interesting and celebrated lifewriting books this year have defied categorization. Through formal experimentation, metanarrative, the signaling of fictionality in memoir and of veracity in fiction, they prompt audiences to consider the multiple ways a life can be shared. Genre-disrupting texts are, of course, not new in auto/biography, and over the years have been especially common in Canada. In the 1990 *Literary History of Canada*, Shirley Neuman recognized that “the Canadian life-writing which is most sophisticated and thoughtful about problems of inscribing the self in literature . . . crosses and re-crosses the border between auto/biography and fiction in order to question static and holistic conceptions of the writing subject” (qtd. in Saul 261). And in 2001, Joanne Saul used George Bowering’s notion of the biotext to explore a particular subgenre of Canadian life narratives that “Rather than presenting finished versions of a life . . . focus on the process of writing a life—the ruptures, gaps, and workings of memory; the fictionalizing that reconstruction requires; the communal nature of the task . . . the necessity of ‘faking it’” (260). Yet while Neuman is looking retrospectively at several years of Canadian life writing and Saul examines biotexts published throughout the 1980s, this year multiple new publications stretch the limits of auto/biographical narrative and intentionally blur generic boundaries. Rather than being produced by small presses willing to take risks with unusual forms—Book*hug has been notable in this area over the past several years—many of these texts are from the catalogues of major publishers, suggesting a willingness by publishers and audiences to forego to some extent what Julie Rak has identified as the “recognition of repetition” and “measure of participation” that predictable generic conventions provide (29).

The multiple texts that disrupt the “typical” chronological, ostensibly factual representation of a life do so in a variety of ways. For example, Shelley Wood’s

biographical novel *Quintland Sisters* tackles the story of Canada's famous Dionne quintuplets through invented characters and real newspaper articles reprinted with permission, but as the acknowledgments indicate, they were "edited marginally to suit my story" (439). Aleksandar Hemon's *My Parents*, the story of the author's parents' immigration to Canada, is published in one volume along with *This Does Not Belong to You*, a more fragmented account of memories seemingly still in formation. Since one text starts at each end of the book, which must be flipped upside down and backward to make each story readable, there is no clear order, and as Madeleine Schwartz notes in a *New York Times* review, "you'll either be going from a concrete account to disarray, or watching the threads of memory come together into a single story." These texts and others deserve attention from lifewriting scholars because of the ways they challenge representations of stable, individual, and verifiable selves.

Here, however, I'm going to focus on three recent publications that most explicitly disrupt recognized auto/biographical forms by blending memoir, biography, and fiction. Helen Humphreys's *Machine Without Horses*, Harold R. Johnson's *Clifford*, and Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* challenge generic boundaries as they purport to tell the story of a self while signaling their fictionality, or in the case of Humphreys, purport to tell a fictional story while signaling veracity. James Phelan's notion of fictionality in life writing, defined as "any rhetorical act in which someone intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose" is useful here. Phelan suggests that "A rhetorical approach to fictionality in life writing can productively complicate our understanding of the relation between referential truth and subjective truth by adding a third option, a deployment of invention in order to better convey aspects of one or both kinds of truth" (235). These three texts might also be considered auto/biographical limit-cases, to use Leigh Gilmore's term, as each one focuses at least in part on the experience of trauma, while positing narrative production as an antidote to suffering. All three are widely-reviewed, award-winning, or nominated texts that suggest an expansion of boundaries in Canadian life narrative.

"Most stories have, quite frankly, been told before," Helen Humphreys's narrator states in the meta-auto/biographical first half of her novel, *Machine Without Horses*. "So," she continues, "it matters how you choose to tell a story. And it pays to spend a long time trying to figure out what the optimum way to do this is going to be" (85). The first half of *Machine Without Horses* is devoted to determining the best way to tell the fictionalized story of Humphreys's biographical subject, Megan Boyd. The book is a fascinating example of the melding of forms and play with narrative that has been noticeable in this year's Canadian life writing. Boyd, the twentieth-century Scottish salmon fly maker, was memorialized in a *New York Times* obituary given to the narrator by a friend, but details about her life beyond work are scarce. The first half of the novel, then, becomes a meta-auto/biographical and metafictional meditation on how the author will tell the story of Boyd's life given that so few verifiable details exist. In her attempt to actualize her subject into narrative, the narrator deftly melds Boyd's experience with her own. The two share

important biographical details: both moved from Surrey, UK as very young children (9), both find steady companionship in dogs, and both experience the death of family members and work in relative solitude on their craft—Boyd piecing together beautiful feathers and tinsel to create salmon flies, and the narrator piecing together the fragments of Boyd’s life to create biographical fiction. The narrator, though never named, shares important details with Humphreys, most notably the loss of multiple friends and family members to cancer over a five-year period (Bethune). These deaths hang heavy over the narrative, and especially in the early pages, they interrupt the telling of both Boyd’s life and the metanarrative surrounding it. Chapter 3 lists the five people (and one dog) the narrator has lost in the past six years, and Chapter 5 consists of the word “cancer” repeated six times, signaling both the referential truth of this text billed as a novel, and illustrating how trauma interrupts both life and story.

“[W]obbly” and “off balance” with grief, the narrator describes her attraction to Boyd as partly attributable to the “colourful, beautiful lures arcing out of the darkness towards me in a simple, perfect line,” whose “brightness feels like an answer to sadness” (11). The novel the narrator is crafting is also posited as an antidote to loss. Echoing statements uttered by Humphreys in a *Macleans* interview two years earlier, the narrator describes the way the “real life” of the writer must “fade into the background for a while,” and suggests that while “in the past” she has “found this difficult,” now “it is a relief” (12). Yet her real life is, in fact, persistently present in the first half of the text as she considers how best to tell Boyd’s story, and the seemingly autobiographical experience frequently halts the more fictional, biographical narrative. Boyd proves challenging to contain in text as much because the narrator cannot ignore her own experience as because Boyd’s life details have mostly escaped historical record.

Ultimately, the narrator decides on a way to tell Boyd’s story, but only by changing Boyd’s name in the fictional second half of the text and allowing herself the flexibility to move beyond biographical truth. Boyd’s life has “been whittled down to the facts of her work, to her accomplishments in this arena” (140) in the biographical record, but the goal of this life narrative is more than referential truth, so “it may be that I get most things wrong . . . but if just one scene, one line of dialogue moves the reader to consider Megan Boyd not merely as an oddity but as a fully realized human being, then I have done my job as a novelist” (141). Through the consideration of Boyd’s life and of the author/narrator’s personal experience with death, the text asks “What is the worth of human life” (141), and writing auto/biographically and fictionally—however the boundaries are blurred—becomes an assertion of human existence. In the end, by making the auto/biographical process visible, and consciously moving beyond it, the novel suggests that writing is always somewhat auto/biographical and that the “truth” may be better served through a melding of fiction and nonfiction forms.

In some ways, Harold R. Johnson’s memoir *Clifford*, nominated for the Governor General’s Award, covers similar ground in recounting the story of Johnson’s

relationship with his recently deceased brother. The trauma here is the result of Clifford's sudden death and also the intergenerational trauma Johnson's family experiences. Johnson and Clifford are the children of a father descended from the Sami people of Sweden, who were "treated as harshly by the governments in their countries as were Indigenous peoples here," and a Cree mother. After their father dies when they are children, their mother is forced by the government to move away from their home in the small Indigenous community of Molonasa, Saskatchewan into the nearby town and to rely on social assistance rather than living off the land (20). The time of his older brother's death is a crisis of identity for Johnson, and after Clifford's funeral, he returns to the abandoned family homestead, now overgrown and reabsorbed into the forest, asking "Who the hell am I?" (61) and "Why did we leave here?" (71).

Like the other books mentioned here, *Clifford* purports to tell the story of a real historical figure while also signaling its fictionality. Much of the text is a frame narrative told during the one long night Johnson spends grieving under the stars in his childhood home while memory tugs at him, preventing him from sleeping. The memories are what constitute the story of Clifford's life, and Johnson depicts Clifford—six years his senior, yet his closest older sibling in both age and relationship—as his companion, mentor, and teacher. Yet, memory, as Clifford shows in one of his many lessons for his brother, is troublingly unreliable, and Johnson both tells Clifford's story and unravels it at once. After recounting his earliest memory, an image of their childhood home, Johnson describes Clifford pointing out that it is in fact a "mirror image," rather than an actual picture of what occurred. He destabilizes the reliability of the auto/biographical narrator by recognizing that his "memory was flipped. . . . It had been stored like a photo negative, and when [he] retrieved it, it came up backwards" (125). This is one of many times the important ideas in the text are shared through Clifford's voice and teachings. The older brother emerges early on as a child fascinated by science and philosophy—full of big ideas he passes on to his younger brother, resulting at times in crucial life lessons and at others in hilarious mayhem. In dialogue with his younger brother, Clifford delivers much of the metanarrative in the memoir. In one of the many lessons he shares with young Harold, he asserts that the world is created of story, and all stories are fiction: "Everything we believe to be factual and true is just the most popular story of our time" (108). As a result, it makes sense that Johnson decides to write Clifford "as fiction, as a fantasy, as a thought experiment" (109), these words, along with "memoir" forming the subtitle of the text.

Acknowledging *Clifford*'s genre-disrupting form, Johnson, a prolific Canadian writer who has been nominated for multiple awards, is reported in the *Regina Leader Post* to have "shopped the book around to various publishers before finding House of Anansi Press, which—unlike the others—didn't discourage the book's scientific references," another fascinating aspect of this memoir, which, as it progresses, is given over increasingly to Clifford's first-person articulations of his scientific theories. The *Leader Post* notes these are in fact Johnson's own theories, given

to Clifford's character and thus further complicating the narrative and linking the primary two selves portrayed in the text. As Clifford's voice is given increasing textual weight, Johnson never seems to know whether he is making up his theories or whether to believe him, and in the end it doesn't seem to matter. Describing Clifford's story of how he sent a rocket into space, Johnson says, "I don't know which I regret more: believing him in the first place, or missing out on seeing the rocket go up" (145). For both his brother and the reader, Clifford is a charismatic, fascinating storyteller, who melds science, philosophy, fiction, and Indigenous storytelling, and part of his power is the way he straddles boundaries between truth and imagination (155). By the end of the narrative, as dawn rises on Johnson's night on his family land, influenced by his memories of Clifford, he comes away with a greater sense of his own communal and narrative identity, realizing "If Clifford was right, I am just the story that I tell myself" (209), but also "I am all the stories he told me" (210). As Johnson writes Clifford, then, he also writes himself. And since he has already established that all stories are fiction, the representation of both selves and the relationship between them remains unreliable. However disrupted the selves produced in his long night of remembering, writing proves here again to be an antidote to loss, and this book is not just about sadness and grief, but also about invention and reconstruction. Johnson writes himself to "the beginning of healing" by memorializing his brother in text (263). He reinvents Clifford as the scientist he wants to be, "like an Isaac Asimov character or an H. G. Wells invention" (108), melding Clifford's experience and ideas with his own to create a communal, familial self, and using literary genres as flexible tools for doing so.

Award-winning Inuit throat-singer Tanya Tagaq's strange, hypnotic, and uncompromising memoir is the most genre-disrupting text of the three considered here in that it foregoes the metanarrative that renders formal experimentation more palatable in the other two books. As Carleigh Baker says in her *Quill and Quire* review, Tagaq "blithely gives typical literary expectations the finger, daring us to see and experience narrative as chaotic, emotional, and deeply instinctive." A *Globe and Mail* article addresses the risk Tagaq took in publishing *Split Tooth* (Mistry), which is based on twenty years of notes and diaries that she never intended to publish ("Tanya Tagaq"). The risk has paid off with multiple awards and accolades: winner of the 2019 best published prose in the English category at the Indigenous Voices Awards, longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Sunburst Award, and the Amazon first novel award. Telling of the way it eludes categorization, it is called prose in the Indigenous Voice Awards, a novel in the Amazon awards—though also on Amazon, as of December 2019, it was rated No. 27 in Native Canadian biographies—memoir by the CBC, and perhaps most interestingly for lifewriting scholars, "mythobiography" by the *Globe and Mail* (Mistry).

Though Tagaq is an accomplished musician at a high point in her career, this is not a music memoir. The audience goes well beyond her fanbase and neither the writer's musical experience or music itself is a primary subject of the text. Its language, however, evokes a similar emotional power as Tagaq's visceral,

improvisational throat singing. Instead of an individually-focused musical coming-of-age, through poetry, prose, dreamscapes, and visions, *Split Tooth* tells the story of a seemingly average, and significantly nameless, young woman growing up in northern Canada in the 1970s amid love and violence perpetrated by both humans and landscape. She matter-of-factly describes various hazards—pedophiles, school bullies, rabid foxes—that must be navigated by the I in the story. Is the I Tagaq? Maybe. Sometimes. It is possible to trace some of the fragments of real-life experience in *Split Tooth* by reading it alongside profiles and interviews in which Tagaq has shared biographical details. Like the book's narrator, Tagaq grew up in an Arctic town with a loving family in a close-knit community; she was surrounded by nature both beautiful and ominous; she used drugs; she was sexually assaulted multiple times; she attempted suicide (Nelles).

Yet Tagaq refuses to be held by the bounds of memoir, and the book veers from these traceable “real-life” events to the wildly imaginative, philosophical, and mythical. The narrator's young life is full of peril as she navigates the social problems created by Canada's colonial history, and the book provides pointed social commentary in its multiple juxtapositions between warmth and comfort and chaos and danger. Like the lemmings the narrator finds under plywood on the tundra, who “get so startled as I rip the ceiling from their safety,” the children in this story experience the joys of family and friends, the boredom of long Arctic winters, and the social complexities of girlhood. Yet danger, generally in the form of predation, both sexual and from the natural and spiritual world, is always at the ready. As a result, the reader is constantly on edge, wondering when disaster is about to befall. Ultimately, human, natural, and spiritual dangers coalesce. Violated by the Northern lights, the narrator, still a young girl, bears yin and yang twins who are capable alternately of healing and harming those near to them. They become the basis for a retelling of the Sedna myth, in which the narrator casts them into the sea but is so devastated by the harm she has done to her children that she attempts suicide, only to find her fate is to live forever in hell as a savior to others, gesturing toward Tagaq's own self-appointed role as advocate for change for Indigenous people. In the end, through reenacting myth, the narrator finds her purpose (Houston).

Though the book ends with some sense of renewal, its complexity allows no easy resolution; the last line “start again” suggests a rebirth but also the possibility of reliving past trauma, and demands rereading. Like the role Tagaq is destined to play in the afterlife, experiencing eternal pain but with the purpose of helping others, Tagaq's prose contains a striking beauty as it moves between fiction, memoir, poetry, prose, and image. The beauty of the language and the power of story position it, if not as a remedy for trauma, at least as something that coexists with it. Dedicated to the “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and survivors of residential schools,” *Split Tooth*, like all of Tagaq's art, attempts to bring awareness to the issues facing Indigenous people in Canada. An epigraph taken from Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*—“What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh

and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music”—suggests that though it articulates the trauma of Indigenous girlhood in Canada, *Split Tooth* is also meant to be another form of Tagaq’s haunting, blissful sound.

In a 2017 interview, Helen Humphreys explains that “mixing fiction and non-fiction” allows her to “fully explore an idea without being bound by genre.” Fiction and history overlap, she notes, but “It all gets simplified, because its complexity is more than you can stand sometimes” (Bethune). Humphreys’s *Machine Without Horses*, along with Johnson’s *Clifford* and Tagaq’s *Split Tooth* exemplify some of the ways Canadian life writing has been stretching the boundaries of auto/biographical form this year. This year’s Canadian life writing embraces the complexity of experience and representation that a disruption of genres allows, and suggests that trauma may in fact necessitate the “full freedom of expression” that Humphreys describes. Judging from the success of the books discussed here, it’s a message Canadian audiences are interested to explore.

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