C21 LITERATURE Journal of 21st-century Writings

Hubbard, Alex. 2024. "The Politics in a Poem: 'Peripheral reading' *North End Love Songs* and *Estate Fragments*." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 11(2): pp. 1–23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.10547

The Politics in a Poem: 'Peripheral reading' *North End Love Songs* and *Estate Fragments*

Alex Hubbard, English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University, UK, alex.hubbard1997@outlook.com

This article examines the political dimensions of poetry through the lens of 'peripheral reading', considering textual representations of a place in relation to its socio-political context. It focuses on Katherena Vermette's North End Love Songs and Gavin Goodwin's Estate Fragments, two works which depict communities in urban places. Vermette's lyric poetry considers North End, a neighbourhood in Winnipeg, Canada, while Goodwin's found poetry explores Bettws, in Newport, Wales. Poetry is positioned as a mode of commemoration, resisting the erasures enforced by colonial and neoliberal ideologies. Vermette and Goodwin challenge binaries of the rural and urban, individual and collective, and Indigenous and settler identities. By drawing connections between local specificities and global processes, poetry not only documents but also critiques the forces that shape human relationships to place. Ultimately, the essay underscores poetry's potential as a political act, fostering dialogue across contexts.

C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.
OPEN ACCESS

Introduction

The concept of contemporary political poetry written in English might conjure images of didactic metaphors and moralistic messaging rooted in fixed, ideological camps. However, there are modes of poetics which investigate the effects of complex historical, global processes on the modern subject and the modern place, without falling into binary, possibly simplistic, political positions. Found poetry, for example, where the language of the text is at least partly made from sources such as newspapers, interviews and films, necessarily acknowledges the unreliability of singular narratives and universal truths. These modes attempt to record details about places and the people living in them, as well as how these details are shaped by larger trends, processes, powers, and forces. This practice is not confined to found poetry. In 'Poetry is not a Luxury', the philosopher and lyric poet, Audre Lorde, calls for poetry as a 'revelatory distillation of experience'; a distillation in that it is a focused recording of experience, a revelation in its capacity to inspire a reader to change how they view that experience (2007: 37). As such, lyric poetry is posited as a potentially political form. Lorde rejects poetry as 'play', a word she argues has been 'distorted [...] in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight' (2007: 37). Play erases poetry's capacity for inquiry, by permitting the reader only to escape from, rather than consider, the real. Meanwhile, effective political poetry locates and records what might otherwise be lost. Poetry, then, becomes an act of commemoration, preserving and celebrating under-threat experiences and existences. This commemoration of communities, peoples and places becomes even more politicised when considered alongside large processes of spatial re-organisation such as neoliberalism's centralisation of the free market in both local and non-local relations, and colonialism's occupation and re-configuration of places. David Harvey argues these processes aim to 'remake the world around us in a totally different image' (2005: 1). Our shared geographies, communities, even senses of self are reconfigured. Political poetry, then, might look to resist this remaking, by recording what is.

The historical processes of neoliberalism and colonialism each feature complicated sets of relationships between the local and the global. In the case of neoliberalism, there is the neoliberal individual's relationship to the market, their relationship to another neoliberal individual, their relationship to their family. For colonialism, there is the coloniser's relationship to the colonised, the colonised's relationship to the coloniser, and each's relationship to the colonised and colonial powers and peoples. When a place becomes colonised, neoliberal, or both, it shares traits with other places that have also undergone this transformation. However, there are still differences between these places. Ireland and India were both colonised, for example, but are not necessarily

uniformed into the same historical narrative, or their people into the same experiences. As such, the task of tracking these global processes is a difficult one. As Harvey writes on neoliberalism:

> Any moving map would therefore feature turbulent currents or uneven geographical development that need to be tracked in order to understand how local transformations relate to broader trends. (2005: 87)

Tracking broader transformations or processes means acknowledging how the local changes them. There are the ‘turbulent currents’ of political resistance, or social violence, and there are the complications of geography and people. Poetry might not seem the obvious method of recording these particulars. However, Peter Barry suggests that poetry about place, read in conjunction with recorded details about the place itself, can meaningfully document socio-political changes to the local. He calls this method ‘peripheral reading’:

> [A] process [that] begins to pick up political echoes by a ‘documentary’ reading practice which fills out a picture of the locatory focus of the poem by looking up documented details (of local history and experience, local buildings, local geography, and so on) and seeing these as the shadows which constantly ruffle the surface of the poem. (2017: 33–34)

Peripheral reading notes not only the places and events of a poem, but how these relate to the politics and histories of the places and events depicted. As such, poetry’s recording of specific experiences can produce meaningful commentary on larger political themes.

This article focuses on two poetic texts, each exploring an urban place with high levels of poverty. *North End Love Songs* (hereafter *North End*) (2012) by Katherena Vermette is a long series of lyric poems focusing on the North End in Winnipeg, Canada and particularly its Métis people. The poem explores how the locality plays into larger national debates around Indigenous lives in Canada. *Estate Fragments* (2014) by Gavin Goodwin is a found poem set in the Bettws council estate in Newport, Wales, and considers how the place and its community relate to conceptions of Britishness and class. These two texts are written in different modes and emerge from vastly different contexts.[1] What they share is an attempt to consider the particulars of a place in relation to large political processes.

---

[1] *Estate Fragments* is a long poem, while *North End Love Songs* is a collection of poems. For the purposes of this article, I am reading each in its entirety as a singular text.

Forces of Reorganisation: Colonialism and Neoliberalism

If a place is re-organised, then the people living in that place also re-organise how they see themselves. Naturally, those in power attempt to influence that new perception so that it acquiesces to the new order. Therefore, it is worth first establishing the nature of these transformations and influences, first in Bettws and then in the North End.

Neoliberalism in the United Kingdom more broadly came about both violently and quietly. In 1987, during an interview with *Women's Own*, the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher declared there was 'no such thing as society', only 'individual men and women' and 'families' (Keay 1987). This is a neat summation of the neoliberal philosophy. To contribute to the neoliberal country, a person needs to seek the highest wage possible, and the highest quality commodities. Springer defines neoliberalism as emphasizing 'market-relations', therefore re-tasking 'the role of the state, and individual responsibility' (2016: 2). At the centre of a country is its markets, rather than its society. In this sense, Thatcher's words can be read as a directive on how the British, neoliberal citizen should go about their daily life. However, coming two years on from the end of the miners' strikes, a significant event in the UK's neoliberal transformation, it also subtly erases many of the pre-existing 'institutional frameworks and powers [...] divisions of labour, [and] social relations' which contradict and potentially challenge the neoliberal ideology (Harvey 2005: 3). Neoliberalism is not a natural state of human affairs, but an ideology that has been realised through various acts of social destruction. 'There is no such thing as society', then, is not just a directive, but an act of erasure. Society, Thatcher argues, has never existed. It is also a victory cry. Those who wanted society to exist have lost. Owen Jones writes:

> Margaret Thatcher's assumption of power in 1979 marked the beginning of an all-out assault on the pillars of working-class Britain. Its institutions, like trade unions and council housing were dismantled; its industries, from manufacturing to mining, were trashed; its communities were, in some cases, shattered [...] the working class was increasingly sneered at, belittled and scapegoated. (2012: 27)

Jones links the neoliberal transformation to a particular form of classism, where those reliant on social frameworks, such as trade unions and the welfare system, are simultaneously helpless and reviled. The neoliberal United Kingdom, then, is a divided nation.

This division, not simply between the rich and the poor, but between considerably different conceptions of nation and politics, has complicated effects. Such a polarised collection of places creates a 'downward spiral of decreasing geo-graphical and social

mobility for residents within and between generations [...] and the subsequent erosion of social harmony within cities' (Le Zhang and Pryce 2019: 2018). People become increasingly rooted to places, without the economic or social means to move. As such, communities become increasingly at odds with each other. As Dan Evans writes on the complexity of class and community:

> [C]ertain classes become clustered in particular places, so people eventually end up hanging round with and dating "people like them" in these places. This inevitably creates a feedback loop, a solipsism that *our* life, *our* social world, *our* experiences, values and desires are the norm. [...] We increasingly live in hermetically sealed worlds. (2023: 6–7)

As certain ways of life cluster around each other, and communication between different communities becomes terser, each individual is not able to imagine or even perceive ways that might be different to their own. *Estate Fragments* emerges from this context, depicts people, living on a council estate, just as trapped in how they are perceived as how they live. A council estate like Bettws can become an inter-generational home for people trapped in poverty and in place. There is very little identity to be found anywhere beyond its 'hermetically sealed world', even from nationality.

This explains *Estate Fragments*' somewhat ambiguous relationship with national identity. Wales as a country is never mentioned in the text, but this reflects an apathy towards conceptions of Welshness by many Welsh people, particularly those who do not speak Cymraeg. Sophie Williams, who undertook a study on Welsh people's relationship with nationality, explains:

> Participants struggled to determine whether someone needs to speak Welsh to be Welsh, whether they become more Welsh if they speak Welsh, whether Welsh-born English speakers can be Welsh without the language, but English people must learn it, whether being Welsh speaking can counteract voting Conservative, and whether losing language means a dramatic change in conceptualisations of Welshness, and how this chimes with the linguistic reality of a predominantly English-speaking Welsh population. (2019: 85)

There is an ambiguity, then, about what it means to be of a place, particularly a nation. *Estate Fragments* explores this ambiguity, acknowledging and exploring the pieces of identity that something, perhaps neoliberalism, has shattered.

Canadian neoliberalism and settler-colonialism are necessarily intertwined. Glen Coulthard, writing about the colonial destruction of Indigenous communities, argues:

> formative acts of violent *dispossession* set the stage for the emergence of capitalist accumulation and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production by tearing Indigenous societies, peasants, and other small-scale, self-sufficient agricultural producers from the source of their livelihood – *the land.* (2014: 7)

Violent colonial destruction of Indigenous social structures, ways of working and ways of living helped capitalist markets grow. Present-day governments distance this violence to produce the image of a harmonious, postcolonial society. In the aftermath, the now-enlightened nation can treat such events as past, and, in doing so, re-formulate its consideration of how these events might shape its contemporary life. This is perhaps best exemplified by former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his various, seemingly contradictory statements on the country's history. In 2008, Harper apologised in the House of Commons of Canada to the survivors of the residential school system. By 2009, Harper had used a G20 summit to declare Canada had 'no history of colonialism'. Yet, rather than reflecting a superficially confused sense of Canadian history, these statements actually show a potentially insidious effort to simultaneously wipe Canada's slate clean, while entrenching it as postcolonial in the most cynical of senses, as in: this place is not being colonised anymore. Harper never refers to colonialism in his 2008 residential schools speech. This absence:

> enables a strategic isolation and containment of residential schools as a discrete historical problem [...] rather than one devastating prong of an over-arching and multi-faceted system of colonial oppression that persists in the present. (Henderson and Wakeham 2013: 2)

By discussing it as an educational failing rather than part of a system of colonial oppression, Harper's recognition of the legacy of the residential school system simultaneously erases colonial oppression. So, erasure of colonisation itself allows the prism of settler-colonialism – where the settler makes myths of taming the colonised land – to continue to exist.

This is an example of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to as 'white possessive logics', where 'sets of meanings about ownership of the nation' are circulated 'as part of common-sense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions' (Moreton-Robinson 2015: xii). Harper's own logic allows him to simultaneously apologise for an act of colonial violence committed by his country, while denying any history of colonialism. The colonial process commits acts of violence and dispossession to communities and peoples that might disrupt it; neoliberalism requires the forgetting and erasing of these people and communities, so that the individual can centre their

existence around the market, with only the nuclear-family as any kind of genuine supportive community. This produces a form of national identity reliant on negation and forgetting:

> This construction of "Canadianness" denies the ongoing colonialism within the border, or, if one accepts that there were colonized acts in the past, then some other state was responsible for the colonialism internal to Canada. It construes "us" as innocent. (Midzain-Gobin and Smith 2021: 481–2)

Canadianness erases ongoing colonialism and imagines that violent acts of colonization within its borders are other to it. The innocent, or perhaps ignorant, "us" can live freely, if they do not notice what their freedom costs.

Vermette's *North End* concerns itself with the lives of Métis people living in the North End neighbourhood of Winnipeg, Canada. Métis marginalisation is two-fold. Métis people are an Indigenous people, but their origin lies in the mixing of colonial settlers with other Indigenous peoples. As such, Métis is often mistakenly used as a catch-all term for any person with mixed heritage:

> For significant numbers of non-Indigenous Canadians, this mediation occurs through uncritical and problematic mobilizations of what is often *perceived* to be Métis identity – an identity which, for many with little connection to Indigenous histories or politics, simply signifies the mixing of cultures, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. (Adese, Todd and Stevenson 2017: 2)

Many non-Indigenous people might perceive Métis to mean the simple mixing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, but this in itself is an erasure of the complex history of settler-colonialism, sanitising and potentially erasing difficult histories in favour of a positive myth that offers useful symbolic resonances. This is another example of Moreton-Robinson's 'white possessive logics'. Métis identity is turned into a quasi-allegorical formulation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. As such, the significance and importance of Métis as a people is avoided and ignored.

However, historically, the '"national core" of the Métis must be traced back to its historical location at the Red River' (Adese, Todd and Stevenson 2017: 6). Métis is the French word for mixed, and it is largely accepted that the Métis as a new people 'emerged in the workings of the fur trade between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries' (Macdougall, Podruchny and St-Onge, 2014: 7), Yet, Métis people were not and are not tied to the geography surrounding the Red River:

> The Métis are neither nomadic nor settled but, rather, are both [...] spread throughout northwestern North America, the Great Lakes region, the Great Plains, along rivers used as major fur trade routes, in the subarctic scrublands, and in the boreal woodlands and parklands, where the physical and economic possibilities of these geographies informed the specific types of social and cultural communities that existed there. (Macdougall, Podruchny and St-Onge, 9)

This sense of the Métis as settled in many places, as moving with the seasons, already disrupts senses of place which focus upon locating and settling in a singular location. Whereas the latter is uniformed and still, the history of Métis peoples moving between geographies shows an acknowledgement of people's shifting conditions.

Métis notions of ethnicity, too, are more fluid than essentialist, colonial constructions of race, perhaps necessarily so, given the origin of both Métis as a name and a people. As Chris Andersen writes, 'racialization has never particularly been about us [the Métis]' but is 'part of larger colonial project through which administrators have attempted to usurp all the Indigenous territories' (Anderson 2014: 10–11). Métis notions of peoplehood accept identity as cosmopolitan:

> 'Peoplehood' is used [...] to encapsulate the fragile social relations produced in the first era: the process through which peoples co-produced intersocietal norms that allowed them to interact in ways other than through force or imposition. (Andersen 2014: 19)

Andersen recognises Métis peoplehood not as a product of traditional colonial relations, but a kind of alternate. As such, colonial violence is recontextualised, and considerations of it as a historical necessity challenged.

So, Thatcher's claim that there is 'no such thing as society' but only 'individuals' and 'families' is challenged by the particularities of lives in places. As market relations encourage the consideration of the individual over the society, then that society's inequalities can be ignored. But a community, where people of different experiences form relationships and rely upon each other, requires a recognition of those inequalities. If neoliberalism places the individual at the centre of daily life, then community is its antithesis. This is central to the success of neoliberalization at an existential level, reducing existence to merely individuals, families and, to add the implied third, the market. Community can act as a roadblock to the neoliberal process and a dissident to the neoliberal ideology. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams argues:

> **Community** can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society, etc.*) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (1985*:* 55)

Community exists alongside, perhaps despite, colonialism and neoliberalism, as well as something alternative to it. Just as there may be communities of colonisers, there are communities of anti-colonisers, people living and working together to actively resist their own subjugation and erasure. So, a poetry that explores the particulars of people in places, how they interact with each other and their geographies, can reveal something of how these political forces are at work and how they are resisted.

It is worth noting that *North End* and *Estate* are written by poets from the communities they are depicting. Both are writing against a mainstream culture that has stereotyped and marginalised their communities, albeit in very different ways. In an interview with Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio programme, *Q*, Vermette describes the perception of the North End community:

> They're the people that get picked on, they're the people that get blamed… but what I'm trying to do in my work is to go into looking closer and looking deeper… and seeing that they're not what they seem. (CBC 2014)

Vermette considers her work as an attempt to reveal to the reader that people and places are different to how they first conceive them. Similarly, the opening of Goodwin's *Estate* poetically enacts this process of looking closer and deeper. The collection opens at the 'estate peripheral' where the reader sees the 'single / class below' (5) The text offers an aerial shot of the estate where the reader can look down 'below', but can see 'a township of three thousand dwellings' (Goodwin, 5). The workings of the community, the people within it, are invisible. The text then 'broadcasts / other voices' (5). *Estate* and *North End* can both be seen as collections which look to broadcast other voices, voices marginalised, stereotyped and excluded from mainstream discourse. In *Estate*, the first other voices the reader encounters depict this directly:

> people judge people who come from estates
> people automatically think that people
> who come from estates are automatically
> not gonna be good people… (5)

The text plays here on the positioning of the reader, imagining where they are looking from. The reader is initially looking down on the estate, and then they are listening to it. The people of the estate are presented to the reader once, and then again, but differently. The text encourages constant re-evaluation of perceptions.

It is this re-evaluation of perceptions which is particularly important to the following readings of the texts. Poetry, against this complex, dynamic, political backdrop, can have a relatively simple purpose. It can resist the increasingly hermetically sealed nature of our social lives, by re-presenting them. As such, poetic texts can then be compared, to see how differing contexts and experiences speak to each other.

Recording the North End

North End's opening poem, 'Selkirk Avenue', is a triptych. Each section is named after a bird, and depicts a woman in Selkirk Avenue, one walking, one standing, and one driving. In the 'thrush' section the reader watches as:

> girl walks up
> selkirk avenue
> head down
> body huddled
> into herself
> shakes with winter (Vermette, 13)

The verse is characterised by short lines and images of 'girl' feeling the cold. It could be argued this suggests a displaced Métis woman attempting to escape into herself from surrounding urbanity. But there is an intricate strength to the language which places the Métis girl totally at home in the North End. Firstly, while *North End* does not typically use capitalisations, 'girl' seems to be used as a proper noun, making the character 'girl' as much as she is 'thrush', as much as Selkirk Avenue is the North End. Rather than shaking against the wind, she 'shakes with winter'. Her feeling the cold is as much part of the North End as the cold itself.

This resists colonial attempts to strip urban Métis communities of an urban identity. On definitions of 'Native identity', Bonita Lawrence writes:

> Given such high demands from all quarters, including those who consider themselves our allies for primordial Nativeness, to theorize Native identity solely as negotiated and shifting demolishes the boundaries that colonial governments demand as fundamental to Nativeness. (2004:5)

This characterisation of Native identities as primordial, which plays into a binary between the rural and the urban, is resisted in *North End.* In 'family', Vermette depicts:

> elms around us
> like aunties
> uncles
> cousins (52)

Vermette mostly writes in the third person, but here is a rare instance of her using a first-person pronoun. The 'us' is genuinely inclusive, not just of Canadians, but of the land itself. Adese writes of Métisness as 'a placeholder for a broad, meaningful, and very deep set of kinship ties, shared family and social (hi)stories, and shared geographic relations' (2016: 57). This consideration of Métis as an acknowledgement of the intertwined nature of individual beings and places is well-illustrated in 'family', which shows a radical inclusivity.

This inclusivity is a re-occurring theme in Vermette's work. In her short film *This River* (2016), made in collaboration with Erika MacPherson, Vermette follows two volunteers with the *Drag the Red* community, an organisation which searches for missing Indigenous people. Vermette narrates:

> We know what this river can do. So many of us are missing. Everyone knows someone who didn't come home. For a long time, many of us have believed our loved ones could be found in this water. The police won't look unless they're certain someone has gone in. They say it's futile. (MacPherson and Vermette 2016)

Throughout Vermette's work, the Red River is a complex site of both erasure and remembrance. The river hides and returns missing bodies. It is also 'the reason we're here. Every nation that first came here, Indigenous and European, came here by this muddy water' (MacPherson and Vermette 2016). The use of 'we' to identify both Indigenous and European and the recognition of the Red River as the site of a series of different beginnings has two important resonances. Firstly, it complicates the Canadian 'we' which sees itself as removed from colonialism. This is a 'we' existing because of continued settler-colonial dynamics, and one that stretches potentially across borders. Secondly, it speaks to an anti-essentialist understanding of peoplehood, 'less concerned with individualistic claims to Métis identity and more pre-occupied with engaging in in-depth conversations about how Métisness was formed from, and should be understood in terms of, collective consciousness' (Adese 2016: 61). To consider Métisness is not to consider it from the neoliberal prism of

individualism, but to instead consider plurality. It is also to consider the complex, nuanced effects of a history of settler colonialism. Vermette's *North End* focuses on considering how the North End and the Red River continue to shape and be shaped by Métis people.

This shaping takes place through tragedy as much as celebration. In another sequence, 'November', a young man goes missing and is found in the Red River, having tried to walk across it during winter when it was partly frozen over. This is most directly depicted in the poem 'indians':

> indians go missing
> they tell the family
> indians go missing
> everyday
> blue suits shrug
> no sense looking (90)

Bearing in mind that Métis peoples' sense of peoplehood is constantly problematized by a Canadian culture conflating it with simplified notions of mixedness, this poem ironizes the identifier 'indians'. The 'blue suits' only identify the missing Métis man as such in order to stereotype him and justify their negligence, referring to how 'indians go missing / everyday'. Worse, now that the 'they' of the poem does recognise 'the family' as 'indians', they take it upon themselves to teach 'the family' what 'indians' do. There is also the complicity of how 'everyday' the event is. Rather than the regularity being alarming, it suggests that 'indians going missing' is a natural symptom of Canada's colonial, neoliberal society.

Just as neoliberal and colonial projects are reliant on the reshaping of peoples and places, they are also reliant on a subsequent clearing of the debris, an erasure of anything that was there before they took place. The second stanza goes on:

> indians drown
> the family finds out
> happens everyday (90)

The line 'the family finds out' plays on the notion that the family are now seeing how their people and their community are viewed by those outside of it. Finally classed as 'indians' by the law, they are learning what the law thinks 'indians' do. The lines also convey the kind of violent destruction Coulthard and Harvey critique as part of neoliberalism.

However, the Red River resists this disappearance. While it takes the life of the young man, it also returns his body. Bodies may be 'missing', but they can still be found. Vermette writes:

> this land floods
> with dead indians
> this river swells (90)

Rather than allowing Indigenous peoples to 'go missing' and never be discovered again, the river floods the land with them. Neoliberalism and colonialism require not just the destruction of alternate communities and peoples, but the erasure of their existences. If Métis people 'disappear', they cease to exist. When the 'land floods' with their bodies, the river becomes not only a place of tragedy and memorial, but of resistance against neoliberal and colonial processes of erasure. The poem fights notions of going 'missing', recording the process in which the authorities attempt to phase the speaker's brother out of existence.

The poem 'indians' is reflective of a significant aspect of discourse around Indigenous peoples in Canada. Jennifer Adese views Métis literature as very specifically acting against colonial erasure:

> Literature, to me, is one of the many forms of the creative expression of our distinct Indigenous peoplehood. It is a mechanism through which we tell stories about who we were, who we are, and who we intend to be. With the threat posed to oral traditions by the loss of Michif and other Métis-spoken languages, literature in some ways has become a stand in for this. (Adese, Todd, and Stevenson 2017: 13)

Adese makes direct reference to the ongoing violent erasure of Indigenous cultural frameworks. Literature, albeit problematically, offers a new way of preserving the experiences of marginalised peoples. *North End* mounts an ever-present, ever-occurring resistance to the inactivity and apathy of Canadian authorities which is central to Vermette's broader project of resisting the erasure of her community. Elizabeth Strakosch writes:

> The emphasis of settler colonial studies is on the continuing failure of the settler project is its attempts to eliminate substantive Indigenous life, and on the dialectical array of complications and reformations that this creates. (2015: 42)

The settler project repeatedly attempts and fails to destroy Indigenous people, committing many acts of violence on its way. In the wake of these acts of violence,

North End is a reformation of Métis identity. It is one where the Métis simultaneously are oppressed by and, in their existence, contradict Canada's 'white possessive logics' (Moreton-Robinson 2015), disrupting the binaries of rural and urban and white and indigenous.

This disruption of colonial binaries speaks also to how a poetry invested in people, place, and the politics of place, can disrupt and resist erasures and simplifications. Through focusing on the particular physical, geographic and emotive details of these different aspects, a poem can commemorate them. As such, the poem becomes a political object, detailing ways of living and being that oppose cultural conventions produced by ideology.

Picking Up Fragments

Estate Fragments attempts to capture the remnants of a community smashed by neoliberalism. Often, the text quotes from the interviews conducted with people living on the Bettws estate in order to further investigate, disprove or realise propositions made by the selected academic texts. For instance, there is this quote from Paul Willis' sociological study, *Common Culture*:

> increased inequality
> ups the stakes (8)

Followed by this excerpt from one of the interviews:

> People that were younger than you
> were more dangerous (8)

The threat of violence lurks beneath these lines, as with increased inequality differences in age are highlighted as potential causers of harm. The interviewee's use of the singular second person suggests a lack of communal identity, while playfully nodding to an erasure of self where each I might also be its other. One must be aware of anyone other than oneself, but that one is also not entirely sure of what their own self is.

However, *Estate* also features moments of humour and goodwill which show Bettws' sense of community. *Estate* often juxtaposes these moments with larger British narratives on class and estates as a form of active textual resistance. For instance, Goodwin quotes Owen Jones:

> *Our newspapers eagerly hunt down horror stories... and pass*
> *them off as representative of working class communities.* (10)

only to follow the text with an anecdote one interviewee tells about getting the local newspaper for an elderly neighbour:

> I used to go and
> buy the Argus every day and give it to her. ... but some
> fella early in the morning... used to go down the shop
> and buy The Mirror and The Sun [for her]...
> [she'd say to me] 'you are, have the Sun
> and Mirror. I've read 'em already' (10)

The use of square brackets suggests there is even a particular South Walian dialect and language spoken by people on the Estate, one that has to be interpreted for outsiders to understand. The subtle punning on newspapers, which 'pass' off horror stories about 'working-class communities' but are also literally passed around the estate, is significant. On the one hand, we can see here a free exchange of information based sincerely on kindness and charity. However, the text implies that the stories these people are reading are those which demonize them. The elderly lady is not only helped by the interviewee, but is able to give back, due to an earlier act of kindness. More dramatically, another interviewee recalls how his friend Paul was saved from drowning by a 'Lad... who I would classify as / not the nicest person in the world' (12). There is something fundamentally humane shown in the community of Bettws. It is a community where even those who are 'not the nicest', the vagueness of which means it could mean anything from personally dislikeable to full-time criminal. Estates defy the neoliberal destruction of social relations in that, being stripped of other resources, they sustain them.

Estate Fragments' ambiguous relationship with Wales speaks to another ambiguity towards the country by its poets. Kathryn Gray writes, discussing a series of interviews with post-devolution writers she conducted, 'if one is to "belong", our Welsh poets [...] seem to be opting for a British position' (2017: 72). Welsh poets prefer to identify with a British than Welsh literary scene. Where does *Estate Fragments* fit in here? It is difficult to argue, using Gray's language, that it is a text 'belonging' to Wales, and that therefore Goodwin is a writer 'belonging' to Wales, either. Yet, undoubtedly the text is 'of' Bettws. The foundation of the text is Bettws. Peter Barry, writing of a similar relationship with place seen in Zoë Skoulding's work, puts forward that:

> the Penmon promontory is to Anglesey as Anglesey is to the whole of Wales, as Wales is to the whole of Britain, and as Britain is to the whole of Europe. (2017: 26)

A place, in being in another place, makes a part of the larger sense of that place. In the same way, Bettws is to Newport as Newport is to Wales, and Wales to Britain. It does not matter that Bettws is dislocated from wider senses of Welshness, in this it still gives a sense of its own Welshness.

The text uses sources discussing the geography of the Bettws estate, such as the 'Bettws History Project', before giving their scientific descriptions a more personal element with quotes from those living on the estate:

> *The layout has been designed to take full advantage*
> *of natural amenities, especially the... Brook*
> *which meanders lazily*
> *through the centre of the estate.* (8)

This is juxtaposed with a quote from a council estate resident reflecting on their childhood relationship with these 'natural amenities':

> You could go and play and get tadpoles and
> bring 'em home and try and
> make them into frogs. (8)

Here, the 'documented details' of the Bettws estate are more than simply 'shadows which [. . .] ruffle the surface of the poem' (Barry 2017: 33–34). Instead, they are central to the poem's mode of operations. *Estate* supplies its reader with both academic overviews and personal insights into the Bettws Estate. Therefore, if we are to accept Barry's proposition that 'devolved' poetics engages fully with a specific, almost documentarian, sense of place, such a tactic is certainly at work in *Estate*. This tactic acts essentially as a work of commemoration, preserving and celebrating marginalised urban communities that problematise neoliberal modes of living.

Comparative Peripheral Reading

Considering Barry's notion of peripheral reading, where texts are gradually revealed to be engaging with ever-expanding networks of contexts, Vermette's creative practice in *North End* suggests a kind of 'peripheral writing'. Note the similarity to Barry's remarks in Vermette's discussion of the North End:

> Winnipeg is kind of like the butt of all the jokes in Canada, North End becomes the butt of all those jokes in Winnipeg. (*CBC*)

If Barry enacts a process of zooming out, Vermette zooms in on Winnipeg, considering international, national, and then regional socio-cultural perceptions. There is an awareness from both Vermette and Goodwin that the communities they are writing about are moving within a series of geographical spaces, which, Barry writes, 'could be continued out into the universe' (2017: 26). If there is a 'universality' that can be achieved through 'specifics', it is one rooted in the uniqueness of different communities and spaces all operating within a singular reality. The last section of *North End*, titled 'I Am A North End Girl: Verses in Many Voices' ('North End Girl'), opens with the Blake quote 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand'. (Vermette, 99) This acknowledges *North End*'s primary poetic achievement and limitation. The text shows the multi-faceted world within the geographically small space of the North End. But it is showing the reader no more than one grain of sand, one part of a wider world.

Focusing on these particularities of human settlements challenges the binary of the rural and the urban. Each of which, in the neoliberal conception of place, has its own uniform that it should wear. As Raymond Williams writes in *The Country and the City*:

> On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, of innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (2013: 8)

This old conceptual contrast is a useful myth for neoliberalism to evoke in order to further encourage Evans' 'feedback loop' of communities' isolation from each other (2023: 6). To live in the country means one way of life, to live in the city means another and there is nothing that can link the two. However, as Williams goes on to argue, this is very much a myth:

> Moreover, in our own world, there is a wide range of settlements between the traditional poles of country and city: suburb, dormitory town, shanty town, industrial estate. Even the idea of the village, which seems simple, shows in actual history a wide variation: as to size and character, and internally in its variation between dispersed and nuclear settlements, in Britain as clearly as anywhere. (2013: 8)

There is not simply the city and then, bordered beyond it, the country. There are human settlements, all of which interlope with the rural, each in its own specific way.

North End and Bettws are no different. Significantly, rivers run through both spaces. The Bettws Brook through the Bettws Estate and the Red River through North End. Goodwin, in an article for *Wales Arts Review*, writes that:

> one of the planners' wiser decisions was to make the brook a central feature of the [Bettws] estate... it flows right through [its] heart... tarmac paths are laid alongside it, and willows bend over it. (2014)

There is a confluence here of rural and urban elements meeting, with 'tarmac paths' and 'willows' positioned together and over the river. Similarly, Vermette emphasises both the urban and rural elements of North End as a community. In 'under a shroud of trees' there are:

> elms
> so intertwined
> the concrete
> underneath
> barely changes colour (65)

This imagery is reminiscent of *Estate*'s. However, while in *Estate*, the urban and rural simply meet at the river, in 'elms', the rural bursts up from beneath the urban, reclaiming it as part of a precolonial conception of the land. The shadows of the 'intertwined' elms have had such an effect on the concrete that it is almost unrecognisable. The line breaks stress this sense of confluence, upsetting the binary of the rural and the urban. Just as rivers flow into one another, the rural and the urban flow, shifting seamlessly from one to the other, just as a river's currents might move from soft to strong. The placing of 'intertwined' in the line between 'elms' and 'the concrete' suggests that these elements, each a representative of one side of the binary, are themselves 'intertwined'. Disrupting this binary has added significance for Vermette, as a Métis poet looking to reclaim a colonized urban space in a culture where living in an urban environment might be seen as a potential marker of inauthenticity regarding identity.

The 'North End Girl' section aligns more closely with the poetic style engaged in *Estate* than any other section of *North End*. It is a polyphonic poem, featuring the voices of different Métis women living in the North End. In both *Estate* and 'North End Girl' the different voices of the community are all channelled through poetic verse. In *Estate* the reader is shown an account from someone visiting the estate, who declares it something that 'in my darkest / nightmares [I could never have] imagined', admitting he had a foreboding feeling the moment he saw a 'two-tonne Nova' (12).

Later, an interviewee admits 'I have been pulled over a few times…/ for just driving a clapped-out old Nova' (Goodwin, 12). There is a strong contrast here between how the Nova is seen by the visitor to the council estate, where the inclusion of 'two-tonne' emphasises its size, reminiscent of the notion that bigness equates to danger, and the interviewee who drives it. This contrast underlines stereotypes of working-class communities. The interviewee shows the Nova is not monstrous, but 'clapped-out' and 'old', a symbol of economic disparity as opposed to malevolent forces. There is a similar challenging of perception in 'North End Girl', where a voice puts forward: 'I am not cured, I am recovering; I am not a victim, I am a survivor' (101). It is the voice declaring their identity in their own terms. Both texts share a practice which gives agency to communities. As such, it depicts these communities resisting identities enforced on them by others.

Both *Estate* and 'North End Girl' refer explicitly to the rising tension and violence within their respective communities. In *Estate*, one interviewee says:

> I don't like going down the shops.
> I don't feel safe going down the shops. (9)

Similarly, one of the voices in 'North End Girl' admits:

> it's a war out there, people are dying, women are being raped, boys are getting killed, what else would you call it? (101)

Estate portrays a threat of violence that comes from within the community, making the place itself unsafe. In 'North End Girl', it seems to be threat to the North End itself, coming from external agencies. The final interviewee quote of *Estate* is from a resident who has since moved out of the Bettws estate, who admits:

> I was scared they
> Were gonna…
>
> I can't live like that anymore (16)

Even within the Bettws community, there is an unnamed, unspeakable, feared, othered force. But this is a vital part of accurately portraying marginalised communities, the marginalisation within them must also be recognised and represented. For *Estate*, it is a threat that seems to come from inside the community, something that the interviewee has had to escape from.

With Vermette, there is a sense that the violence is something being done to the community. Boys are 'being killed' and women are 'being raped', there is a sense that North End is under attack from external forces. Both, though, are fully committed to an honest, rounded portrayal of their communities which refuses sentimentality. This aim is summed up nicely in the final four lines of 'North End Girl:

> I've never
> not once
> not for one second
> looked away (105)

Which works in tandem with the final lines of *Estate*:

> parade   steel
> drum rhythm
> fluorescent-vested police patrol
>
> kids carry
> sticks of bamboo –
> star-lanterns of willow and tissue. (16)

In its closing lines, *Estate* does not 'look away'. Therefore, the reader sees all aspects of the parade moving through Bettws, both its tensions, highlighted by the emphasis of 'steel' and the 'vested police patrol', and its elements of community, the 'kids' carrying 'star-lanterns of willow and tissue', another combining of the rural and urban elements of the estate. With the 'drum rhythm' and the 'sticks of bamboo', the scene can be read as a parade under control, a march to war, or perhaps a conflict between the police and the children. Either way, it is this liminal, tense but celebratory image which the reader is seared with, an image unarguably of the estate.

Conclusion

Both texts, one with its declaration of never looking away and another with its final snapshot of its community, end in resistance to the marginalisation and erasure of the worlds they are depicting. If we think of text as ever occurring and always in the present tense, that means that these communities are given a kind of immortality, a textual refuge of sorts, from their dismantling and erasure. From writing specifically about their own localities, Goodwin and Vermette can speak to a wider dialogue on marginalisation, erasure and class. Peripheral reading can help take the textual and

contextual particulars of a poem engaged in the politics of a place and help link these with other poems engaged with the politics of other places. As such, a collection of poetic texts like Harvey's hypothetical moving map might start to appear. Perhaps, then, these recordings of experience at a local level might rise and, indeed, challenge the idea there is 'no such thing as society,' by asking, 'Then what is this?'

Competing Interests

The sole author of this article has a collegiate relationship with Gavin Goodwin, as both work in Aberystwyth University's English and Creative Writing department since September, 2021. Previously, Goodwin taught the author at undergraduate level from 2015 to 2018.

As an undergraduate, he previously interviewed Katherena Vermette for a student-run university radio show in 2016.

Neither author has had any influence in how their work has been considered beyond what is discussed in the article.

Other than this, the author has no competing interests.

References

Adese, Jennifer. 2016. 'The New People: Reading for Peoplehood in Métis Literatures'. *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 28 (4): 53–79.

Adese, Jennifer, Zoe Todd and Shaun Stevenson. 2017. 'Meditating Métis Identity: An interview with Jennnifer Adese and Zoe Todd'. *MediaTropes* VII (1,): 1–25.

Andersen, Chris. 2014. *Métis: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*, UBC Press.

Barry, Peter. 2017. '*Zoë Skoulding: Devolutionary Reading', Devolutionary Readings: English Language Poetry and Contemporary Wales*. Ed. Matthew Jarvis. Peter Lang: 23–40.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 2014. 'Award-winning poet Katherena Vermette', *Q on CBC*, 4 April. Accessed 05/01/2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyNJSfpkkBQ.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Erika MacPherson and Katherena Vermette (dir.). 2016. *This River*. National Film Board.

Evans, Dan. 2023. *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petty Bourgeoisie.* Repeater.

Goodwin, Gavin. 2014. 'Early Encounters'. *Wales Arts Review*, 6 November. Accessed 07/01/2019, https://www.walesartsreview.org/early-encounters/.

Goodwin, Gavin. 2014. *Estate Fragments*. The Knives Forks And Spoons Press.

Gray, Kathryn. 2017. 'For Welsh Read British?', *Devolutionary Readings: English-Language Poetry and Contemporary Wales*. Ed. Matthew Jarvis. Peter Lang: 67–88.

Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

Henderson, Jennifer and Pauline Wakeham. *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Cultures of Redress*. University of Toronto Press.

Jones, Owen. 2012. *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Verso.

Keay, Douglas. 1987. 'Interview for *Woman's Own* ("no such thing as society")', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*. 23 September. Accessed 09/01/2024, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

Lawrence, Bonita. 2004. *'Real' Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*. University of Nebraska Press.

Le Zhang, Meng, and Gwilym Pryce. 2019. 'The Dynamics of Poverty, Employment and Access to Amenities in Polycentric Cities: Measuring the Decentralisation of Poverty and its Impacts in England and Wales'. *Urban Studies* 56 (10): 2015–30.

Lorde, Audre. 2007. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press.

Macdougall, Brenda, Carolyn Podruchny and Nicole St-Onge. 2014. *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility and History*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Midzain-Gobin, Liam and Heather A. Smith. 2021. 'Debunking the Myth of Canada as a Non-Colonial Power'. *American Review of Canadian Studies* 50 (4): 479–97.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. The University of Minnesota Press.

Springer, Simon, Kean Birch and Julie MacLeavy. 2016. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Routledge.

Strakosch, Elizabeth. 2015. *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy: Settler Colonialism and the 'Post Welfare' State*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vermette, Katherena. 2012. *North End Love Songs*. The Muses' Company.

Williams, Raymond. 1985. *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Raymond. 2013. *The Country and the City*. Hogarth Press.

Williams, Sophie. 2019. *Rethinking Stateless Nations and National Identity in Wales and the Basque Country*. Palgrave.