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## ***Canadian Journal of Disability Studies***

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*what is said is*  
**a poetic and oblique re/presentation of disabled women in a Canadian shelter**

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*prolegomenon*

It is [our] belief that feminism, as a political programme as well as a pedagogic one, needs to use different forms of writing in different times and places. Writing is strategic; it has effects.

-Ahmed

There remain subjects, whose very appearance troubles the solidity of dominant Western discourses. Living outside of normative structures of able-citizenship their bodies, even as surplus, provide content for academic and neoliberal discourse. Within the cultural imaginary they are exhibited as excessive and out of place: abject, disfigured, criminal, mad (Liggett).

In order to gather these subjects so that we might further trouble the apparent solidity of Western epistemologies I engage a generative and reflexive practice, and affect. Theoretical, performative and lyrical strategies lean into moments from this inquiry. I<sup>1</sup> have spent months working with persons who do not have the place of privilege and comfort of home – instead they are insecurely housed, they abide in a shelter along a post-industrial stretch of Dundas Street West in Toronto, a stretch currently characterized by numerous empty storefronts and small family businesses. The women live with disability, and in extreme poverty. This inquiry encompasses three years of offering media, and teaching and learning with women in a neighbourhood shelter. The heart of the work is positioned within the domestic arts practices that

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<sup>1</sup> Although I use the first pronoun singular as a convention to indicate that I am the author of this work, there is no singular “I” identifiable within the practice. The writing is autographical, the self is provisional (Perreault). The “I” present within this text is she who finds herself continually mulling over what is left over from shared artistic work; she is ragged and the threads she carries forward have been given to her.

these women have learned from their mothers, aunts, and sisters. In the spirit of feminist practices, I came to understand knitting, crocheting, beading and other traditional women's practices as community building. Using the arts in this way draws upon the principles of community arts research<sup>2</sup> and social justice, the work is transformative. The use of poetry in the project and as a means of knowledge translation brings an additional resistive force – it resists the closure of affect within contemporary institutions. This work will not sit still, it demands language and thought and flesh – it tears into me until I “think something other” (Foucault 455).

Thinking something other, making knowledge different and different knowledge suggests that I cannot create a tidy text that maps easily onto usual ways of sense making (Lather). It is possible that thinking something other becomes writing something other and other writing. A bodywriting split open. The writing is a trace, traces ghosted dialogues that remain as faint echoes. The language I find is used “to direct our attention to something in our world experience, to show us something” (Hass 5). Agitated, it limps toward the quietest of bodies. Sunlight streams through blinds onto dust.

“What is said is not as important as the unsaid, which the said brings to mind.”

- Davey 4

I use this quote by Nick Davey to organize this something other, to find its language<sup>3</sup> from that which is both given and found. There are risks present; speaking the unsaid brings it to be said, to language. There are reasons, rationales, for silence. I may fail. The rational casts a shadow

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<sup>2</sup> Community arts as practiced here is feminist, participatory, dialogical, and relational. It draws upon arts movements including the Austrian arts collective Wochenklausur, Suzanne Lacy, and others who operate outside of contemporary gallery, museum and curatorial practices. The work is significant in its temporal, durational, ineffable nature rather than due to its status as a potential object for aesthetic consumption.

<sup>3</sup> The limits of our symbolic systems of communication suggest we must write and think beyond the said – to write the silences and the unsaid.

upon the unsaid, which rocks back and forth. The potential of failure is instructive – I re-member my writing table, cold fingers around a hot cup of tea, cold toes stuffed into extra pairs of socks, hooked around the stretcher. Shaking and anxious, I am not stable. The language that finds its way from body does not turn back. Leaves. Bodythought quivers. This tongue is not adept, not deft enough to curl around lip, touch tooth, drip wet word. The finger refuses to tap tap tap. *What is said is not as important as the unsaid, which the said brings to mind.*

Almost immediately the question arises: What are the moral consequences of abandoning the subjects of our perception? Leaving them unsaid, not speaking them when they are brought to mind? Language tumbles forward and down, until descent becomes ascent. Every said with its congregation of the unsaid. A mission that longs for a choir expressed in stumbles and dives.

*what is said is*

“Well, they are spoiled.”<sup>4</sup>

Return to the place of memory

*Around a table*

Spoiled suggests a flaw, a disfigurement even something ruined. Tainted. Rotting. It’s the way the word spills through architecture of mouth, vault of arch, cant of tooth. Not as indulgence, favouring.

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous

Become monstrous. Plastic bags and knapsack, all of the odds of a life create a shadow, a  
misshape in the dark. A misperception, an unspoken.

*Strip her*

*Remove her clothing,*

*Toss her belongings onto the sidewalk*

*For plunder*

*Split her open*

*Until she divides against herself*                      *withering*

*not as important as.*

These bodies (*not as important as*) inhabit institutions. Woven together. All of the bodies: the  
wanted and unwanted, the said and unsaid. Huddled together. Cockroaches, counselors, cleaners,  
bedbugs, chaplains, mice, lice, men who spray, cooks, women, maintenance crews...

And yet. These bodies, grown from seed,  
Conceived along terrestrial longitude  
Speak from east to west  
Their waiting shapes shimmer  
In the form of sand grains  
in pulsebeats  
in the name of

Holy, holy, holy

The shelter, the one trapped on that corner is a Salvation Army shelter for women. In 1878 the Salvation Army was founded upon the Christian Mission, which William Booth<sup>5</sup> had started in 1865 in Britain. Four years later the army marched into Canada.<sup>6</sup>

Daughters, mothers and sisters loiter on early morning sidewalks.  
One, seated with cigarette, slippers and housecoat  
Rests her foot upon her belongings  
As if the whole world were her home

One, seated with cigarette, slippers and housecoat  
Last night she slept with William Booth  
As if the whole world were his home  
His long beard tangles her hair

Last night she slept with William Booth,  
*One in hope and doctrine, one in charity*<sup>7</sup>  
His long beard tangles her hair  
Him singing

*One in hope and doctrine, one in charity*<sup>8</sup>  
Holy soldier of Christ  
Him singing  
While resurrection men hurry to death

As if the whole world were their home.

*the unsaid*

What is not said as we encounter the world remains within as gesture, as potential, as memory.

There are pulls on our perception, sometimes so minute that we pass without greeting. Yet the

impress

Below flesh

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<sup>5</sup> 10 April 1829 - 20 August 1912

<sup>6</sup> "The History of The Salvation Army in Canada"

<sup>7</sup> Baring-Gould

<sup>8</sup> Baring-Gould

Lingers

Invocations bring a small breeze.  
Forget that thoughts  
Once trapped by weight of bone  
Take flight through fingertips and pinions  
Across sea and heaven

My book presses into wood's grain  
Searching for sound  
Something left over,  
A crumb of language.  
A space not yet tidied away  
Remembers that once upon a time  
It wrote something beautiful  
Like laughter, or the sound of rain

In a room where we wear suitcoats  
There is a confession  
The only place where there was room  
Was where we wore suitcoats

Not so different from the buck or two a night hotels

The room sighs  
No purrs like a full-bellied cat  
Under this roof  
Let another decide if you are  
Too comfortable

Yellow crocuses  
Decorate

Horizon

My broken gray

thoughts

Unloaded and the truck on Sorauren backs up  
Smarties™ pour onto wet pavement  
*She's got issues*<sup>9</sup>  
They told me

She doesn't live here anymore  
She had to leave

because of  
Problems. Issues.

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous

Forever and ever.

But the unsaid remains.

Black stretch pants, grey hair, blue eyeshadow,  
plastic bags.

Blurred makeup. Accompanied. She reveals  
the unsaid.

Her body's thorns prick

The chaplain

The chaplain

Brings in 30 hats, flowers, feathers, glitter, glue, balloons  
To decorate, to wear while watching the Royal Wedding

Five thirty a.m. the television turns from black to faery  
The pageantry draws women from their rooms  
Some still in pyjamas wear their majesty

Declaring something old, something borrowed  
Is nothing new.

She stares at the women  
Drowning under the weight of ivory silk, and white lace.  
Under the goodness of her chosen intent.  
An enormous truth hid behind bosoms  
Of salvation

Flowers hang over the entrance to this sacred  
Garden where wine demonstrates that before  
It was Water  
It was grape.  
And later, in its waiting, will be blood.  
Crimson stained taste of  
Mildew, pepper, tobacco, cedar  
The common soldiers in this sad and glorious building

The chaplain with her newly shorn head, a second daughter  
With a rivalrous past and short nails  
Smiles at her women, her lost souls.

At night she dreams of pregnancy and rebirth  
Leviathan in Lake Ontario  
Ninety one sublime women in her choir  
On the precipice of orange earth  
From their mouths blue frogs with



Fine crocheted lace wings grumble  
While she trembles at this monstrous revival  
Strung cross stream and sky

Awakes to a chorus

Our sisters, who art now dead  
Perished by tinned tuna, powdered milk  
By the charity of gamblers and donation boxes at liquor stores  
And the forgetful who build glass staircases instead of homes and gardens  
May you forever haunt the cowards who legislate your poverty.

One of the women called by round copper  
Forgets her beauty curses her age  
The certainty of rotting teeth and heart  
Troubles sealed with truth and reason

Roses climb a frame of coat hangers  
Still in their winter woolens  
Their goal to bloom

The realm of the unsaid is imagination  
There we mind our gaudy, brazen, shameless strutting disgrace.

*which the said brings to mind*<sup>10</sup>

“Bring to mind.” Mind suggests that we are bringing to cognition. To a place where what is something other can become thought. Mind as well suggests memory, remember, remembrance, and even love. As well as care – to be mindful.<sup>11</sup> We move toward the expression of love where the said begins to love the unsaid even in its unspeaking. The unsaid compels remembrance. We move from mind as a place of cognition, to mind as caring, as heartfelt. And return to a minding that is caustic.

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<sup>10</sup> Davey 9.

<sup>11</sup> “Mind”478.

Hidden in the folds of mind, shame<sup>12</sup> creeps, framing me as it imagines us, as mirrors one to the other. The derelict and the citizen. The silver'd surface consigns my thinking to a room wherein the brought to mind takes the form of a grey-haired elderly woman, her polyester pants sagging as she pokes at them trying to rearrange them, herself. Her coat hangs slackly around her shoulders, both sadly turned down. Words grind the glass of her:

*she doesn't belong here*

*how did she get in how did she*

*get in where did she come from how did she*

*she's been asked*

*to leave*

*leave*

“Behind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred, but the fear of *contempt* which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of *abandonment*, the death by emotional starvation (Piers G. 29).

This passage written 50 or more years ago predicts a sad knowledge. What is brought to mind by this unsaid are the edges of words; the fear of not being loveable enough, easily discarded outside the bounds of – I like the word, humankind; it contests turning from, fleeing excess, escaping disgust, hiding from contagion.

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<sup>12</sup> Shame enters bodies softly. It is an habitual experience within institutions. Certain bodies are perceived as lesser or abject and it is these bodies that shame marks. The consequences of individualizing shame is that it is then removed from institutions and structures that rely upon it as an oppressive practice and is placed solely on bodies.

Human

kind.

Blessed.

A graying woman  
Call her grasshopper  
Blamed by girls for a hunger  
She cannot organize  
Devises goals to escape the worst

Months

Blessed is she  
Who lives in this old travel lodge

Surveil her mumbling

the streets are better

Blessed is she  
Who cares for mouse and flower

Dual screen monitors  
Divided into 16 frames  
32 views at a time.  
switch to another set of cameras,  
and again the women, frozen, enhanced, captured.

Blessed is she

Who knits knee warmers  
Sews insoles from patterned cloth  
Makes covers for every ironing board  
Performs domesticity on all five floors  
While planning her escape

Blessed are the poor for  
They take from the rich that which the rich no longer need  
Their worn clothes, broken appliances, and dusty knick knacks

Blessed are the women  
Who know a dozen ways to cook fiddleheads  
The technique for long tail casting on  
The perfumed orange of mango and squash

Blessed are these women who  
Dream of oxtail soup, and bitter greens.

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