

Before the Citation

Before we read the citation for the winner of this year's Donald Sheppard Prize, the members of the jury – Daniel Coleman, Paula Gardner and Karen Balcom – would like to note what a pleasure it was to engage with the outstanding work of our colleagues. The 16 books we considered were astounding in their breadth and vision; they showed the impressive results that spring from deep research, critical thinking, and careful writing. We left feeling impressed, and really humbled, by the strength of the Humanities at McMaster. All of the contributing authors deserve praise and recognition.

In a contest such as this, we were inevitably working with the research of our close friends and colleagues. Each of us had cross-cutting ties of friendship and affinity with particular authors. We worked very hard as a committee to design a review process that removed each of us as needed from final decisions on the works with which we were most closely aligned. We felt it was crucial to do this important work in a way that upholds the highest standards of academic review and assessment. Although we came at last to a clear consensus, it was challenging to reach that decision because the work in front of us was of such a high standard.

Citation

The selection committee is pleased to announce that this year's winner of the Donald Sheppard prize is Amber Dean, for her 2015 book from the University of Toronto Press, *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance*. Dr. Dean's book is a ground-breaking, multi-disciplinary study of the various ways in which the disappeared women from the Downtown East Side of Vancouver have been represented in a wide range of media -- including poetry, memoir, painting, posters, performance art, newspaper articles, and radio and TV news reports. Dean is concerned, most directly, with "what lives on from the violent loss of so many women." (7) She points out that although the women who were disappeared crossed many identity markers and life experiences, Indigenous women were and are vastly over-represented in this group; she insists that we must "recognize and grapple with the wider social context of settler colonialism" that underpins the violence. (7) Dean argues, as well, that a metonymic identification of Indigeneity, drug use, and sex work with the space of the Downtown East side has often served to render the disappeared women as distant and disposable, living and losing lives that are "ungrievable" by the wider population. Dean challenges this formulation and looks for a new practice of inheritance requiring us all to engage with the past, the present and the future of violent attacks on the women of the Downtown East Side. In her words,

"I am concerned throughout this book with understanding what might be required to support a wider public -- especially those of us with less material, geographical, or identity-based proximity to the women who have been disappeared -- to grapple with how we are implicated in the social conditions and arrangements facilitating the disappearance of so many women." (32)

The work pulls on an impressive range of contemporary critical theories of gender and race, memory, grief, trauma, loss, and postcoloniality, which Dean uniquely articulates to Indigenous approaches. Across this text, we watch Dean engage with Wendy Brown on practices of inheritance, with Judith Butler on grievable and ungrievable lives, with Avery Gordon on ghostly presences, hauntings and disappearances, with Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert on remembrance as a difficult and engaged return to the past, with Vanessa Watts on the deep significance of Place-Thought and attacks on Place-Thought, with Marie Battiste, James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson, Lee Maracle and Donald Fixico on the embeddedness of relation and connection in the very structure of Indigenous languages and epistemes. Dean turns these theoretical tools to engage with news media, art practices, family reports, and memorials that call up these disappeared women, with careful attention to Indigenous experiences and normative settler ethics. Dean is assessing where various cultural productions (those produced within the community and those produced without) succeed, or fail, to encourage a sense of implicated-ness or affective relation to the events and people depicted. The goal is not a collapsed identification; Dean points out that a response to the violence which overemphasizes “sameness” (that could be me) will erase the specificities of racialized, sexualized, colonialized violence and work against a serious consideration of how we are all implicated in the “ongoingness” of colonialism. Similarly, while Dean is very sympathetic toward efforts to humanize the individual victims of violence – to move sisters and mothers and friends and lovers from the category of “ungrievable” to “grievable”, she worries that this approach leaves in place the basic distinction between the grievable and ungrievable. Some lives matter, others continue not to.

Dean leaves us off-center and questioning, her approach to critique is one which refuses simple answers and solid ground. But, as she questions the theories and probes her examples, Dean also questions herself as a scholar, as an activist, as a non-Indigenous woman grappling with this material. This book, and indeed Dean's entire approach to scholarship and activism is infused with a deep self-reflexivity. The methods and questions in this book are applied to the theorists, applied to the cultural productions, applied to the reader, applied to the writer. And this is entirely appropriate for a book that is intended to make all of use re-think our relationships and our embeddedness in systems and representations that allow and in fact encourage ongoing violences. That thinking and rethinking is the necessary precursor to the creation of strategic alliances, to the formation (to quote Dean) "of an "us" committed to transforming the present, now, into a present entirely otherwise than the one in which we find ourselves in which the violence experienced by the women who concern me in this book remains an ongoing crisis."

(32)

Thank you, Dr. Dean, for this shattering, important, deeply thoughtful work.