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"Guests, Hosts and Parasites: Deviant Hospitality in Katherena Vermette's *The Break*"

In Vermette's novel, "the Break" designates a strip of land on which a high-voltage transmission line carries electricity from the generating stations south of the Canadian province of Manitoba into the north.[1] The line cuts through the North End of Winnipeg, the provincial capital city on Treaty One territory, and the setting of the eponymous novel. The Break is also the site where Emily Traverse, a thirteen-year-old Métis girl, is raped on a winter's night, within earshot of the neighbouring houses. The novel's choral composition brings together alternating viewpoints to throw light on the assault's circumstances, a combination of events that causes the line between victim and perpetrator to slowly blur. The crime is initially envisaged from the perspective of the Indigenous community, but the characters' lives are also replaced in the wider context of the colonial history that has shaken the foundations of home and homeland for Canada's First Nations. When seasonal visitors and partners in trade came to be replaced by settlers and the newcomers turned into permanent residents, the relation between hospitality and hostility evolved in response to the colonial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that welcomed some population groups to stay while rejecting others regarded as threats to the national project (Coleman 2006: 21-24).

The Break begins with a spatial description that goes beyond the requirements of the standard exposition scene, namely the presentation of a setting in preparation for the plot that will quickly eclipse it. A familiar example is the anthropomorphic brook in the incipit of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. The stream is endowed with attributes that blend the geographical with the human and announce the changes awaiting the young orphan girl about to receive hospitality from Avonlea:

> Mrs. Rachel Lynde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped into a little hollow, fringed with alders and ladies' eardrops and traversed by a brook that had its source away back in the woods of the old Cuthbert place; it was reputed to be an intricate, headlong brook in its earlier course through those woods, with dark secrets of pool and cascade; but by the time it reached Lynde's Hollow, it was a quiet, well-conducted little stream. (2004: 53)

If the Break also operates as a trope, its meaning is far from being as transparent as Montgomery's allegorical brook. Indeed, the toponym alludes to various forms of interruptions in the occupation of space, but also in the transmission of stories between

[1] Manitoba's extensive lakes and rivers system is the reason why hydroelectricity took an early start in the province. Bateman's overview of the history of Manitoba Hydro includes a map of the provincial electric facilities and a photograph of the 230 kV north-central transmission line from Kelsey Generating Station which occupies a central part in the novel.

successive generations of residents. The metaphor thus condenses ruptures in the collective history of Manitobans with cycles of shattering, intergenerational violence and breakdowns in communication. This last aspect comes through in the elaborate description of the crackling sound that fills the air when snow starts falling on the neighbourhood:

> In the winter, the Break is just a lake of wind and white, a field of cold and biting snow that blows up with the slightest gust. And when snow touches those raw Hydro wires they make this intrusive buzzing sound. It's constant and just quiet enough that you can ignore it, like a whisper you know is a voice but you can't hear the words. And even though they are more than three storeys high, when it snows, those wires feel close, low, and buzz a sound that is almost like music, just not as smooth. You can ignore it. It's just *white noise*, and some people can ignore things like that. Some people hear it but just get used to it. (Vermette 5, emphasis added)

"White noise" blends sight with sound into the monochrome of a snowy landscape, enhancing the blunting of perception that permeates the novel's prologue.[2] "White noise" is another phrase for static, *i.e.* the energy that dissipates along the way before electrical power reaches its destination. Similes compare the buzzing sound to unintelligible voice or music, the material medium (*phone*) that remains heterogeneous to the signification (*logos*) it supports (Dolar 2006: 15, 105). When electricity or information travels along transmission lines, static sends the disturbing signal that the energy lost in the process does not simply vanish. It leaves behind a remainder, the noisy evidence that communication is never immediate because it is unavoidably bound up with interception (Serres 1982: 44). White noise thus obscures the clarity of the message, the transmission of which it paradoxically accompanies and impedes.

This unnerving duality lies at the core of Michel Serres's theory of the parasite, the organism that feeds on another without giving anything but words in return, which Serres takes up as a paradigm to analyse patterns of interference in the communication between strangers who occupy the same space without sharing it. Serres's insights will help throw light on the workings of hospitality in *The Break*, a novel in which the hospitable relation deviates into parasitism and hostility: "There are some black spots in language," Serres reminds us. "The field of the host is one such dark puddle. In the logic of exchange, or really instead of it, it manages to hide who the receiver is and who the sender is, which one wants war and which one wants peace and offers asylum" (Serres 1982: 16). *The Break* is indeed a most troubled and troubling text, a landmark novel for those who wish to understand what circumstances may cause parasites to turn into predators.

Models of Hospitality

[2] The atmospheric aspect prevails over the racial connotations the same phrase acquires, for instance, in Sherman Alexie's short story "Family Portrait" in which white noise indexes the intrusion of the white man's world through the television sitting in a Coeur d'Alène living room.

The model of hospitality Serres analyses in *The Parasite* differs from Derrida's concern with hospitality as a law. Derrida starts from the reciprocity that defines *xenia* by conferring a status on the *xenos*, the foreigner or stranger who stands in opposition to the barbarian whose humanity is denied in classical Greece. This very distinction keeps the barbarian outside the city of Athens whereas the *xenos* will be allowed in upon certain conditions (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 23-24). To the limitations and contradictions of the "ethics of hospitality," Derrida opposes an unconditional "right to hospitality" that leaves no outlaw outside the gates of humanity (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 65). Serres does not begin with ethics but with biology, namely the relations of dependency that emerge with the development of life and evolve into the formation of collective bodies. In Serres's epistemology, the parasite embodies the logical conundrum of the excluded third that needs, by force, to be included for any system to operate in a satisfactory manner. For Derrida, on the contrary, the parasite must be removed from the equation: "Not all new arrivals are received as guests if they don't have the benefit of the right to hospitality or the right of asylum, *etc*. Without this right, a new arrival can only be introduced 'in my home,' in the host's 'at home,' as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest" (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 59-61). Serres's theory of hospitality diverges insofar as it takes dependency upon the milieu (or the medium) into account, whether dealing with biology, society or information (Serres 1982: 365). In all three domains, the parasite feeds on excesses that the social contract and laws of exchange have sought to streamline in the course of human history to avoid the equally damaging effects of scarcity and wasteful proliferation, surplus production and indebtedness. Relying on myth and fable, but also on the laws of thermodynamics and evolution, Serres shows that the parasite is a paradoxical index of health and hospitality. Because they are primarily drawn to robust organisms (first level: biology), parasites jostle to eat at the table of the most lavish hosts (second level: the collective as a complex of relations), and buzz along busy lines of transmission (third level: information). On all three levels, parasitic interference is a disturbing yet safe indication that systems work only insofar as they do not quite work. Serres is particularly mindful of the parasitic relation that develops when a gift does not receive an exact compensation, which causes the exchange to bifurcate into another relation, the deviation identified in the epigraph for this essay (Serres 1982: 33). Such is the case when the paradigmatic parasite converts the food it consumes at the host's table into stories, jokes and

entertaining verbal jousts. In the conversion of the material into the logicial [sic], Serres reads a general theory of the evolution of modern human societies.[3]

By contrast, closed circuits, implacably rational and cost-effective systems tend to create suffocating, lethal environments. Because they are devised to avoid waste, whether in terms of material, energetic or information loss, they produce environments where parasites are forced to turn into predators in an attempt to survive (1982: 167-168). Owing to the entropic degradations that proliferate along with them, parasites are reminders that all relations are dependent upon the milieu that keeps them alive and thriving. In Serres's view, relations never operate in perfect autonomy, but suppose various levels of mediation, attachments and dependencies between their constitutive elements, whether the latter are simple biological life forms, or more complex economic, social and political bodies. A brief overview of the relations of dependency that gave birth to the Métis nation[4] will illustrate this idea.

Who are the Métis?[5] The term is used today to refer to a specific population group born in the Canadian hinterland out of the diplomatic and domestic relations Europeans established with the First Nations in the early days of the fur trade. Strictly speaking the ethnonym designates the descendants of French *coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs* who contracted marriages *à la mode du pays* with Anishinaabe women in the Western interior, particularly around the Red River settlement, the cradle of the Métis nation. Such alliances were made possible by the elaborate rituals of hospitality, including sexual hospitality, found in North America's traditional Indigenous societies (Havard 2016: 447-457). Their frequency also suggests that much was to be gained from the bonds that were formally established between the two parties. Indigenous women played a pivotal role as guides, interpreters and diplomacy agents for their European husbands. As for the latter, surviving a winter in the interior would have been near impossible without the strategic support of Indigenous wives

[3] "The exchange of the logicial for the material is a parasitic invention. The parasitic is there, at the very beginning of exchange and gift-giving, of gift-giving and damages; it switches the changes between what is not equivalent" (Serres 1982: 150). The translators opted for "logicial" to translate the French "logiciel" and thus retained its etymological connection to *logos*, that is language and information, for which "software" does not offer an equivalent.

[4] "The ubiquity of national categories [in colonial America] was linked to an old definition of 'nation,' borrowed from biblical and legal texts, as a 'people, located in a relatively fixed spatial and cultural terrain, that was conceived of geographically and ethnographically (as well as ethnocentrically)'" (Vidal 2019: 445).

[5] The contextualization that follows does not purport to settle this question. For a concise presentation of the intense debates surrounding it, see Calder 2019.

and their relatives in regions remote from the company headquarters in the East (Friesen 1987: 68; Van Kirk 2018: 55-56).

In 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company absorbed its major competitors, the Nor'Westers, after years of fierce rivalry to control the Canadian fur trade. Now at the head of an immense network of commercial routes and trading posts, Governor George Simpson repudiated his Indigenous wives to marry his English cousin, Frances (Warkentin 1995: xvii-xviii). After HBC employees followed suit and sent for white wives from the home country, mixed marriages became frowned upon. Interethnic tension increased over the following decades, when HBC land was transferred into the hands of the new Dominion. Although the Métis people of Red River were part of the deal, they were not involved in the negotiations between the HBC and the federal government. Led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, the Métis refused to be incorporated as second-class citizens into the newly formed Confederation, and subsequently rebelled against the federal government on two major occasions. By 1885, however, the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway made it possible to rush troops by train to Manitoba. The Northwest rebellion was crushed. Its Métis and Indigenous leaders[6] were either executed or sentenced to life-imprisonment (Thompson 1998: 57-9).

Over the next hundred years, people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry were the victims of systemic racism, the result of prolonged efforts to extinguish native entitlement to land as well as rights secured through treaty diplomacy by forcing aboriginal people to assimilate into the Canadian population (King 2012: 73-74). Today the days of racial discrimination are far from over, and demographic indicators still point at the long-term effects of poverty, acculturation and disenfranchisement, but the pressure to "pass" has relented, and individuals have become less reluctant to acknowledge their Métis ancestry. The trend has received a fresh impetus in recent years after major court decisions reasserted treaty benefits and Indigenous land rights, which caused a surge of interest in Métis history with increasing numbers of people self-identifying as Métis in census counts.[7] In some western provinces, the proportion of aboriginal people has soared, making them a sizeable part of the electorate whose interests can no longer be disregarded or minimized. The results of the 2020

[6] Louis Riel was executed in Regina on 16 November 1885. "The hangman who exulted that 'the son-of-a-bitch is gone at last' could not have guessed that Riel would live on in the ethnic conflict between French-Catholic Quebec and English-Protestant Ontario, or that he would be resurrected a century later, by the descendants of the white regionalists who hanged him, to serve as a symbol of Ottawa's oppression of the Prairie West" (Thompson 1998: 59)

[7] This has prompted the recent phenomenon of "race shifting" (Leroux 2019). I am indebted to Alison Calder for this reference and her valuable insights on the same topic.

census are expected to confirm the extent of these demographic changes along with their impact on public policies and mainstream culture. In 2017 the controversial celebration of "Canada 150" – the anniversary of the birth of the Canadian Confederation in 1867 – fostered a wealth of publications by Indigenous writers across the country in the many fields of fiction, life writing, history and political sciences. Published the previous year, Vermette's novel has certainly contributed to drawing international attention to the flourishing of Indigenous literatures that is currently taking place all over Canada.

One of the functions of the novel's three-page prologue is to introduce the historical and geographical coordinates that anchor the novel in place, in its threefold dimension as location, locale and reserve for signification (Agnew cited in Cresswell 2011:132):

> The Break is a piece of land just west of McPhillips Street. A narrow field about four lots wide that interrupts all the closely knit houses on either side and cuts through every avenue from Selkirk to Leila, that whole edge of the North End. Some people call it nothing and very likely don't think about it at all. I never called it anything, just knew it was there. But when she moved next door, my Stella, she named it the Break, if only in her head. (Vermette 3)

Although the name of "the affluent city south" is never uttered, toponyms and directions delineate a referential space that is allusive yet precise. On the threshold of the novel, the incipit does not welcome all readers in the same way. Hospitality has its own subtle rules. Outsiders are greeted in with polite distance, whereas those with an insider's knowledge are invited to let themselves in through the repeated use of the definite article: "*the* North End," as in the citation above, followed by "the west side of *the* Red River," "*the* lake into the north" in following paragraphs (Vermette 3-4). The deictic repeatedly points to a shared sense of place that encourages recognition from those who know their way around, while leaving newcomers with a slight sense of disorientation.

Inside v. outside. The pull between those two extremes also adumbrates the predicaments faced by the main characters: wanting in or out? Begging to be let in, but remaining locked out. Sneaking in, breaking into, being broken into. Getting locked up, or knocked up, or both. Breaking down. One terse particle stresses in these phrasal verbs the vulnerability of bodies and places to intrusions, external threats to the physical integrity of people and their homes. Before moving into the complexities of plot and character, as novels will, the prologue therefore imposes a pause to envision the place we are about to enter, and everything it comprises. Some of its components are only too visible, whereas less obtrusive elements call for closer attention:

> It's Hydro land, was likely set aside in the days before anything was out there. When all that low land on the west side of the Red River was only tall grasses and rabbits […]. Someone once told me that

> North End houses were all made cheap and big, but the lots were narrow and short. That was when you had to own a certain amount of land to vote, and all those lots were made just inches smaller. (Vermette 3)

The narrator scrutinizes the landscape for traces of the past that index the power relations embedded in the geography, their impact on land use, urban development, the entrenched poverty and disenfranchisement of the populations that have successively moved to this part of the city. The neighbourhood first housed the cheap labour force Manitoba recruited in Northern and Eastern Europe to boost the development of the young province. A century later, Indigenous people came to replace the European immigrants, when the former started to flock to Canadian cities, as a result of the suppression of the permit system (Vermette 4). The narrator's pervasive use of the passive voice makes the mentioning of decision-makers superfluous, which, again, puts those familiar with Métis history at a certain advantage. A detail such as those "narrow and short lots" is therefore more likely to resonate with the readers who will catch the allusion to Métis collective land use and the imprint strip farming has left on the landscape of the Red River Valley.

The same holds for the description of the high-voltage line whose metal towers are compared to an army of robots surveying (and surveilling) the unruly land: "They each have a square-like head and go out a bit at the bottom like someone standing at attention […]. They are a frozen army, standing guard, seeing everything" (Vermette 4, see also 68, 85, 143). From one sentence to the next, what began as a comparison gradually swerves into a metaphor. Factual information bifurcates towards the figurative in asides, interpolations that angle away from the descriptive baseline, following the derivative logic of the parasite. The prologue is therefore informative, but only to a certain degree, as its content is also parasited with static, noise that hinders the clarity of the message, and makes it deviate towards what one may provisionally call a parabola.[8] Literary theorists have shown that this is precisely what makes literature a singular enterprise, namely its ability to veer (Royle 2011), take off at a tangent, and invite us to see through a glass darkly:

> It was snowing when it happened. The sky was pink and swollen and the snow had finally started to fall. Even from inside her house, my Stella heard the buzzing, as sure as her own breath. She knows to expect it when the sky fills with clouds, but like everything she's been through, she has just learned to live with it. (Vermette 5)

[8] The value of the "along side" embedded in the word *parasite* are also attached to the cognates of *parabola* in English: "the *parole*, [is] the word of honour which one gives in exchange for one's freedom, hence the judicial sense of being 'on parole', is a modification of Latin *parabola*. The parlour where one eats is the parlour, or parliament where one also, in parallel, speaks or palavers. The parable is a parabola, because it is a juxtaposition or throwing together, a process by which something curves or boomerangs back to itself" (Connor 2015: 9). Connor's essays on the prefix *para-* and the hard-soft (or material-logicial) continuum are fine introductions to Serres' epistemology.

What does learning "to live with it" exactly imply? The vagueness of the indefinite pronoun is made ominous by the hypallages that inexplicably transfer the attributes of a wound to the sky in addition to the insistent reference to white noise. Static signals disturbances in transmission – the opacity in the message, but also the error in the system, the glitch, the unexpected knock at the door, the unreciprocating guest, the enemy within. Such are the different types of parasitic interference Michel Serres explores when analysing "the relation of the aside, beside, or along side" (Connor 2015: 1) embedded in the word "parasite" originally meaning "to eat next to" (from the Greek *para-*, "next to," "aside," and *sitos* "corn," and therefore "food"), but also designating "static," the degradation of sound into noise that occurs when a message travels along channels of communication. The next section takes its cue from Serres's insights to throw light on the factors that impact hospitality in Vermette's novel and cause the relation to fail and deviate towards hostility.

The Enemy Within

The Break flirts with the whodunit. The first chapter begins at the crack of dawn, with two police officers recording Stella McGregor's statement after a fight outside her house drew her to the door during the night. The witness's testimony meets with contrasting responses. The most sympathetic officer is also the least experienced in the team: Tommy Scott is a young Métis who has just joined the force and feels personally committed to solving a case involving women that remind him achingly of his own mother. His senior partner, Officer Christie, stands as the very embodiment of the prejudice, distrust, and neglect undergirding the systemic racism that has been blocking the investigation of numerous crimes perpetrated against Indigenous women and girls all over Canada in recent years.[9] Throwing light on the circumstances that led to the rape therefore involves much more than the identification of a culprit or, for the reader, the consumption of another police procedural. The investigation edges on slowly, with Tommy Scott pushing back against Christie's eagerness to shut down a case he dismisses as another nasty consequence of native unruliness. Piecing together fragmented, contradictory evidence nevertheless takes time, for it requires listening to what the characters have to say, but also to what they choose to omit:

[9] The Canadian government launched a national inquiry on December 2015 which led to the publication of *The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (MMIWG) on June 30, 2019. It can be consulted, along with the transcripts of the fifteen community hearings, on the website of the national inquiry. In 2016 Vermette and MacPherson directed a 19-minute documentary film, *This River,* which pays homage to the volunteer group "Drag the Red" and their ongoing search for the bodies of the missing.

> "No physical evidence from the victim" Tommy thinks of that list again. Bruises on the wrists and ankles suggested several persons held her down, possibly. Bruised left side of her face where she was probably punched. The other victim too, was punched in the face even worse. That was by girls though. Zegwan said that – she said it was girls. Emily didn't say it was anyone. Just four gangbangers. With long hair. (Vermette 228)

The segueing of this end-of-chapter description to "Phoenix," the title of the next chapter, sends an unobtrusive signal to the reader two thirds of the way through the novel. The sequence suggests that the older girl may have exacted her revenge on Emily Traverse after Phoenix's ex-boyfriend took an interest in the thirteen-year-old. The hypothesis that Emily's rapist may have been another girl is thus silently held out to the reader who will nevertheless have to wait for another seventy pages to see it confirmed (Vermette 295-298). By giving the reader a slight advantage on the team of investigators, Vermette is encouraging the former to be critical of the assumptions that make a suspect an ideal culprit in the eyes of the police on account of their gender or race. The two-thirds-down-the-way revelation is admittedly a classic of creative writing courses. But the partial disclosure has little to do with the formulaic twist that restores tension to a sagging narrative arc. Here, the suggestion is so troubling as to have the opposite effect. It could even be argued that it delays the unfolding of the plot by adding to the confusion of the evidence. The obfuscation finds its analogue in the static that muffles the voices coming from the officers' radio, a recurring indication of the degradation of sound into noise, the resistance a message meets even as it is conveyed (Vermette 8, 127, 225). In the novel's fourth part the narrative pace therefore slows down as the story delves into Phoenix's past and decades of neighbourhood relations. The implausible yet possible perpetrator gradually takes centre stage, eclipsing the figure of the silent victim, at least for a while.

Phoenix Anne **Stran**ger. The three-part name balances two trochees with opposite connotations. The effect is one of unresolved tension as intimations of rebirth and exclusion flank an evocation of L.M. Montgomery's orphan girl – another Anne with an "e" whose way with words won her shelter and a better life. Phoenix, on the contrary, lacks the eloquence that earns the parasite a seat at the feast. Uninvited and unwelcomed, she remains a stranger whose ostracizing is narrated from successive points of view. The teenager is the main focalizer in chapters 3, 14, 21, and 27, one in each of the novel's four sections. Her physical stature looms increasing large at the same time as evidence of the many forms of rejection she has experienced accumulates. A geography of exclusion emerges when one retraces Phoenix's itinerary, from the "safe house" hotel where she was removed while in the custody of Manitoba Child and Family Services, to a stay in detention, followed by another in the

psychiatric centre she escapes from on the night of the assault, and finally the Remand centre where she is awaiting trial after arrest (Paris 2019, 74-75). Each successive, institutional answer to Phoenix's situation stands in stark contrast to the vocabulary of hospitality used when social services step in to substitute for deficient parental care.[10] A cycle of frustrated love and despair gradually superimposes itself on the bare facts the police investigation lines up. In the cast of characters, Phoenix occupies a pivotal position as victim and abuser in two causal chains – a long-term cycle of violence that has spared none of the characters and the short-term sequence of events that culminates with the assault on Emily. Standing at the intersection where the story's collective dimension impacts an individual life makes Phoenix a wild card in a story where she cumulates opposite roles as hospitable and hostile, friend and foe, victim and perpetrator.

Phoenix's ambivalence receives a striking expression when an ultrasound reveals that she is seven months pregnant. Even before a nurse finds out about her predicament, Phoenix's body is the focus of recurrent descriptions whenever she is shown avoiding looking at her own reflection, when she removes clothes that have become too tight, or puts on an extra layer to fight off the cold. When he first sets eyes on her, Officer Scott registers the presence of a "chubby" young girl where Phoenix cringes at the sight of "her gross, fat body": "she was just a fat freak" (Vermette 225; 32; 150 respectively). Such perceptions serve as a reminder of the destructiveness that goes hand-in-hand with a damaged self-esteem. But there is more than a psychological feature in the sustained attention paid to the heaviness the girl tries to hide, until the ultrasound detects another heartbeat in her protruding belly (Vermette 322). The revelation gives a twist to the dynamics of exclusion she has been caught in. Homeless Phoenix has become the host to another guest.

For Michel Serres, the dependency of the foetus on its mother's womb illustrates the imbalance of the parasitic relation in which the guest feeds on the host without offering an exact compensation. The exchanges that subsequently develop between mother and infant stimulate the forming of bonds that are never a given, or a strictly biological process. In this sense, the mutual attachment between mother and child highlights a trait fundamental to parasitic relations, namely the conversion of matter into voice when signs are returned for food and attention. It is therefore no wonder that Serres should regard the maternal body as the figure of hospitality *par excellence*, one whose gifts do not require a counter-gift to foster

[10] References to Phoenix's sisters' foster mother signal that such attempts can occasionally meet success (Vermette 314 and 316). For a nuanced overview of the fraught history of Aboriginal child welfare in Canada, see Hanson 2009.

a new life. Serres further argues that the parasite always "invents anew" because its intrusion alters the equilibrium of the organism in which it nestles: "Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic. He crosses the exchange, makes it into a diagonal" (Serres 1982: 35). The parasitic relation therefore triangulates the opposition between the host and the guest, turning it into a fruitful relationship that benefits an included third, the initial exchange deviating towards something entirely new and unpredictable.

Inventing Anew

Phoenix's unborn child occupies the position of a parasite in the dynamic, productive sense Serres detects in the word. Not only does its conception alter the teenager's relationship to her own body, but the birth will be held in her favour when she is tried as a sexual offender. At least this is what her lawyer wants her to believe (Vermette 319). The pregnancy is therefore full of ambivalent potential. Although it is likely to trigger a new cycle of child neglect and abuse, it could also encourage Phoenix to amend herself and make a fresh start. Vermette's treatment of the scene when Phoenix's mother visits her daughter in prison balances the two options. While her mother warns that the baby will be taken into foster care, just like Phoenix and her sisters once were, the girl barely listens to the admonition, engrossed as she is in dreams of an idyllic future:

> They'd go to the store, and she'd put the milk in the bottom part under the stroller seat. She would have to pull the stroller up all the stairs to their apartment, but Phoenix didn't mind doing all that stuff. She liked it, really. It made her feel important. Needed. (Vermette 320-321)

The fantasy of the good, nurturing mother basking in the approval of the neighbouring houses stands in stark contrast against the previous occasions when Phoenix is denied an invitation and has to sneak into her uncle's house to find shelter (Vermette 24, 238). When the police come to arrest her, they corner her in her uncle's bathroom where the nailed-shut window makes it impossible for her to wiggle out and run. The scene therefore suggests a disturbing parallel between personal hygiene and the policing that maintains the wholesome integrity of the collective body. Phoenix, however, cannot be modestly hidden from view then evacuated as part of the "social scum"[11] modern societies reject on their fringes. She stubbornly returns where she belongs, even if her proper place within the community remains moot.[12]

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[11] "Social scum" is one of the English translations for the term *Lumpenproletariat* introduced in Chapter 1 of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Engels derived the word *Proletariat* from the Latin *proleps* (what comes after, and by extension one's offspring) to designate those "who having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live." In this narrow sense, the qualifier applies to Phoenix who owns nothing, except a handful of black and white photographs of her closest kin.

[12] For Serres, cleanliness, with its rituals of exclusion and purification, is not the primary way of achieving the "proper" quality that translates into private property. For animals and human beings alike, territory frequently

Phoenix is shown twice participating in rituals that interrogate the way she fits in. The first scene takes place in the early morning, when the party is winding down. Phoenix is passed on the stub of a joint with a burning filter glowing "[l]ike a tiny city at night, houses lit up through a thousand windows, *a neighbourhood sitting on the side of a steep, black hill*. Phoenix wonders what this would be like, *houses on a hill*. She's never seen them except on TV or in the movies, but she thinks it would sort of look like that" (Vermette 141, emphasis added). In the horizontal geography of the Prairies, social relations spread across space in a manner that contrasts with the stereotype of the cosy neighbourhood disseminated by the film industry. The image Phoenix associates with stability suggests that her experience of constant drifting has made it impossible for her to feel safe in her own environment. Her thoughts follow a similar train while she is awaiting trial in the Remand Centre:

> They taught her about medicines and what they do and how to burn them for ceremony. The smoke is supposed to cleanse you, they said; when she first broke up the sage it reminded her of breaking up weed. She felt embarrassed. She thought the Elder would know what she was thinking about and ban her from doing it or something. But he didn't. […] She smudged a lot in the months she was there.
> She never felt cleansed though. (Vermette 151)

As the profane ritual contaminates the sacred, it dissolves the protective, purifying effects of the smudge. Whether after a night of partying or during a spiritual ceremony the character feels the same urge and impossibility to find a place among her people.

But starved-off Phoenix will not give up. The girl stubbornly comes back, although the likeliness of her being let in diminishes with each new attempt, either as a guest respectful of hospitable usage, or as a parasite abusing the kindness of her host. Not only does her uncle, Phoenix's transgressive model and last resort, throw her out, but even when the girl insinuates herself back into his house, the place barely contains the slightest scrap of food or attention she may divert for herself. Commenting on La Fontaine's fable "The Monkey and the Cat," Michel Serres writes:

> The cat lets the mice go if there is cheese left for him. He becomes a predator only if he can no longer parasite someone. Everyone knows that: in order for a cat to be a rat-catcher, he must be starved. Preying and hunting need more energy and finesse than sponging. Thus the latter is more probable. (Serres 1982: 165)

Phoenix becomes a predator after hospitality has failed her in different guises. Flashbacks and narrative delay give the reader time to ponder this realization, which does not make her crime less ugly, but certainly more complex. As readers, however, we are not placed in a vicarious position to judge, since Phoenix's trial is left outside the limits of the narrative. Although its plot moves ahead with tragic implacability, *The Break* does not resort to the scapegoating and

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depends on a strategic use of bodily emissions – visual, olfactory and noise pollution that cause disgust and force outsiders to take their distance and renounce appropriation (Serres 1982: 142).

rituals of purgation that traditionally restore balance after exclusion has cleared the way for reconciliation and the emergence of a new order. Instead of a formulaic unfolding, the novel opts for a course of action that enhances the characters' ability "to live with it," the indefinite pronoun having proved remarkably inclusive since the phrase was first introduced in the prologue. By the end of the novel, the scope of living with "it" has indeed widened to express a form of resolve that should not be confused with an expression of resignation. This distinction will be the object of the essay's concluding section.

Living with It

The Break could have ended with the ceremonial sweat friends organise for the Traverses in the bush (Vermette 344-345). But it does not, or not quite. The women leave their male relatives tending to the family traplines on the novel's last page, while their small group drives back to the city and its challenges. The ending thus fans out into various prospects including traditional care for the land as well as resolutions for the future, before culminating on an ambiguous expression of gratitude that contains an equal measure of acquiescence and reservation: "These are the moments she loves the most, the ones that feel good all the way, *no matter what*" (Vermette 350, emphasis added). Although the blow dealt by an insider did not shatter the group's cohesion, the struggle against disintegration has come with a cost, the repercussions of Emily's rape on the community. This internal damage remains perceptible after the conflicts and suspense that drive the plot have been resolved, suggesting that no narrative closure may assuage a wounding that revives the violence experienced over the past.

Emily's rape initially causes the family women to hold their male partners, even the gentlest ones, in a suspicion rooted in the abuse they faced in their youth (Vermette 84-86). The crime thus brings back the memory of individual losses, and of the addictions some developed to numb the pain while others opted for distance and married outside the community to try and survive grief. Stella went through all of the above, after her own mother died in violent, unexplained circumstances.[13] On the morning following her call to the police, her first reaction is to remind herself that what transpired during the night is none of her concern, urged as she is by her husband's words:

> "I mean it's not like anything happened to us or anything."

[13] I made the strategic choice not to discuss the ghostly presence of Stella's mother in the narrative, an aspect that should be connected with the Métis oral tradition as well as replaced in the wider context of the postcolonial gothic. I would nevertheless like to include the following remark from one of the vetting reports, and thank the perceptive reviewer for noting that "the mysterious narrative voice of the prologues to each part, who might be the protective ghost of Stella's mother […] has a strong link with the themes both of the break and the parasite."

> Stella tries to remind herself of this too. Nothing actually happened to her. She wasn't hurt, her family wasn't hurt, not at all. […] Her head is clear. There is *no droning, no white noise* between her ears. It's going to be a clear day. That means it will be cold. (Vermette 160, emphasis added)

The mounting denials betray the character's efforts to affect detachment in order to keep her life on a separate course, and avoid the contagion of violence. This instant of cold clarity and absolute silence is quite unique in the novel. The seeming lull has paralysing effects that dissipate once Stella leaves the conjugal home to seek the hospitality of her grandmother's bustling house, to grieve and mend in the old woman's soothing presence (Vermette 273).

Stella's story initially gives the impression of being a subsidiary thread running aside the plotline that connects Emily to Phoenix. The chapters' successive viewpoints nevertheless reveal that Phoenix's mother was a close friend of Stella's. The two women shared parts of their childhood and adolescence with its load of brutal ordeals, but there is no causal link between the events that befell them. Their respective stories do not intersect or overlap, but remain close enough as to produce the kind of parasitic interference thematised as static in the novel. Phoenix was conceived during a party when her mother initiated sexual contact with several men: "Stella never did find out […] why any of it had happened at all. There were big, blank spaces where all the answers should be" (Vermette 205). Stella's own mother died in circumstances that remain just as inexplicable until Stella painstakingly orders her mother's last whereabouts into a temporal sequence: "The bar. The hospital. The street. The back lane. It wasn't a night out anymore. It was a timeline. Her mom wasn't a person anymore. She was a story. […] Her mom was dead and it was all her own fault" (Vermette 272). Storying affords a grasp on events when their circumstances can be arranged into a rational development, an unfolding of causes into consequences that produces coherence and clarity. But the logic that emerges in the present case brings no understanding or relief, as it rests on a syntax that attributes to the victim the role of primary agent in her own destruction. The death of Stella's mother and Phoenix's conception do not correlate or comment on each other, but their individual stories do strike a parallel: they redouble the evidence that guilt, when it bleeds into the next generation, leaves corrosive traces on those who, indeed, have no choice but to live with it. It is therefore no wonder that Emily's ordeal should find a resonance in Stella: "All those big and small half-stories that make up a life. A *pattern*, she thinks of the word – like something that makes something else. *Pattern*. […] One by one the scenes echo in her head, almost every day" (Vermette 84, original emphasis; see also 85). When it designates a model used to duplicate or imitate, the word "pattern" adequately describes the sterile repetitiveness that crushes the victims of intergenerational trauma. Relevant as this meaning

may be to the novel, Stella underlines that the same word also has a generative signification when multiple iterations of the same produce a distinct motif – the transformation of the same into "something else." Here lies the creative dimension to which *The Break* bears evidence.

Not all attempts at transforming patterns of violence are met with success in the novel. A case in point is the itinerary of Sun Dancer struggling to conciliate the demand to be good with the imperative to be loyal. In response to these conflicting pressures, the character's position evolves from abiding son and loving brother to that of a revenge-seeker and potential gang member. Other examples nevertheless indicate that patterns of mimetic violence can be defused. Cheryl, the painter, "revive[s] an old series of paintings" in which her sister and daughters are portrayed as shape-shifters, "small, beautiful wolves, each looking just like their mother but in a different way" (Vermette 47). In the series, the iteration of the same never amounts to an exact duplication, but leads to infinitesimal differences, the variations that come together into an oeuvre and define its unique style. The Wolf Women series (Vermette 48, 118, 254, 262, 345) therefore offers a visual expression of the logic of the aside that informs the novel's composition. It also finds a poetic analogue in the significations the word "break" aggregates through successive iterations. The verb is used to diagnose collective damage ("They're already so broken, could they even break any more?" Vermette 344), but it also recurs, the same and different, when referring to the high-voltage line which is also a pathway, a breakthrough – in other words a traverse. The family name "Traverse" has its origin in Métis land occupation, as in the toponym "*La Traverse à Gabriel* (Gabriel's Crossing), named after Métis leader Gabriel Dumont who used to operate [a] ferry service" (St-Onge 2012: 158). But the word also fuses the notions of spatial displacement and psychological resilience with respect to what the characters are forced to go through before they can move on. In this sense, "traverse" comes very close to the idea of a "breakthrough" combining the dual and opposite ideas of an obstacle which is also a passageway.

The pattern of the break as a breakthrough goes through further iterations in the parallel dreams that visit Stella and her grandmother on the night when the elder peacefully dies. Their descriptions reorient the metonymic associations that initially tied the gash in the land to Emily's wound and Métis collective history. Stella's dream revisits a space which now contains an exit out of the solitary grieving that once entrapped her: "In the dream, the Break is land like any other land, just a place covered with snow. […] Stella walks on and knows she can take this path all the way north. She can go until she reaches the end of the city where she will see the sky and snow stretch out *full and empty*" (Vermette 273, emphasis added).

The oxymoron is suggestive of a tension between opposite poles that turns the Break into an opening instead of an interruption, an interval alive with currents of energy. The grandmother's death-vision confirms this change in perspective when it soars into a bird's eye view of the city and the high-voltage transmission line:

> I am flying again. I am high above the pointy housetops and scratchy trees and somewhere in the stars. I go higher and see the streets lined up in squares below me. Square after square, the city like a patchwork quilt, all stitched together in different shades of yellow and grey. Then I go further, that long chunk of field where the Hydro towers sit, *twisted like a thick white river, the land cuts right through everything*. (Vermette 337, emphasis added)

Comparing the fields to a patchwork quilt is quite in character given the elder's role as a homemaker confronting dispersal, pulling around her the many members of her extended family over the years. Less conventional are the associations that crop up when the Break suddenly comes into view in a succession of paratactic clauses. The comma splice gives pause as it precedes a simile that has no explicit referent in what comes before it. The anteposition "[…], twisted like a thick white river, *the land cuts right through everything*" makes visible what the eye cannot see in the high-voltage cables, the frothing waters that continue their course to the north once they have been transformed into energy. The elliptic trope captures the pulse of the land in the inert infrastructure of wire and metal that distributes electricity across immense distances. The final, emphatic assertion "the land cuts right through everything" reverses the idea of the break as a rupture into a poetic acknowledgement of the power of the land which leaves its imprint, its signature as it were, on those who have remained intimately attached to it.

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