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Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place by Daniel Coleman

Vivian M. Hansen
University of Calgary

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Showing Up: A Covenant with the Land

Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place

by DANIEL COLEMAN

Wolsak & Wynn, 2017 \$20.00

Reviewed by VIVIAN HANSEN

How is it that some writers who plan the rules for prose insist that a story should never begin with a setting, or that poetic language should be limited? Daniel Coleman's *Yardwork* sets itself completely against those rules. The narrative is just that much stronger for breaking them. Coleman's introduction calls us to awaken with him:

My eyes narrow when I stretch and yawn, making the prism of dew on a single blade flash emerald, then lime, before winking magenta, sapphire. (7)

This is the poetic entry point of a treatise on place, thought, and the sentient awareness of land that is called home.

Coleman is the child of missionaries. This subjectivity and background permeates his worldview and how he integrates his sense of home and place. He calls the land 'holy' and, with this sense of respect, he compares and disseminates biblical concepts with Indigenous origin stories. One such view considers

that all creation is around us and actively trying to teach us. Vanessa Watts, a friend and colleague who is Hodinöhsöni' and Anishinaabe, calls this understanding place-thought:

the awareness that places are alive, have spirit and are providing us with everything we need to live. I began to wonder if I myself could begin to learn some place-thinking: if I could transfer the skills I had developed in my bookish education toward reading the relationships that constitute a place, a landscape. (10)

Yardwork begins in the microcosm of Coleman's back yard with reflections on its qualities — birds, raccoons, grass, and all he touches during his personal yardwork. These reflections then spin out into the macrocosm of Hamilton and the larger area known as the Dish With One Spoon, a land covenant area of collective stewardship that governed game and fish and plenty for all. In Coleman's discussion, that covenant extends to European settlement and an interconnected respect for Indigenous worldviews. Each chapter of *Yardwork* includes an eye view of Coleman's yard, and then a consideration of the macrocosm: "Holy Land," "This Actual Ground," "Watershed," "Broken Pine," "Deer In Their Own Coats," "Traffic," and back to "Yardwork." The book is enhanced by lovely charcoal drawings by Michael Gallant.

Coleman's work is well-researched into the local lore of Hamilton, the families who settled there, and the Indigenous people who lived on the land prior to European settlement. He is inclusive of those stories; of recorded family history in old Bibles, the ceremonial and oral narratives of Indigenous peoples. This grounded history compounds in meaningful dissemination:

If we act like there aren't any stories, it's easier to think of our ocean-crossing founders as peaceful settlers and to ignore the culture killing that was part and parcel of land theft. If we act like there aren't any stories of those who lived here before our ancestors arrived, we take over without memory or conscience. (24)

Yardwork explores those Indigenous narrative depths and highlights them as a poetic treatment for understanding Place-Thought.

Common to Hodinöhsö:ni' origin stories and the Bible's Genesis is the geological story: "geologists say that in the beginning was water and the land rose up from it" (25). Coleman states that water is humble, but immensely strong. He and local writer John Terpstra explored the geological story of escarpment visuals, the waterways and secret systems below Hamilton. Pollution in the area has been long term, from the 1832 Cholera crisis to the dead waters of Lake Erie. Coleman discusses these disasters as a microcosm of systemic pollution to the Great Lakes. There is that troubling shyness of water:

That's the problem with the humility of water: It accepts whatever is dumped into it and then hides it from view. For a while. (116)

Coleman also discusses how local McMaster University's McMarsh Living Lab has succeeded in restoring healthy riparian ecosystems.

Where one section of *Yardwork* is devoted to scientific research, Coleman shifts into creative nonfiction to highlight his grounding in this place. "The Deer in Their Own Coats" leans into his relationship with fauna. Deer-watching includes recognition of specific animals and their quirks. The opening scene where he bows to the deer obliges him to consider his subjective role in relation to another species. This is the humility where one finds a story and a way into comprehending Place-Thought. Coleman seeks a set of antlers, a yearning that projects him into following, and joining, the local deer. On Easter Sunday, he finds the coveted antlers, which he considers "[a]n offering. A blessing" (193). This is the small story of how one must show up really to see the profound moments of life:

I'd been telling myself not to hope to find antlers. It was too cheesy; to wannabe native, too symbolic. But I'd hoped nonetheless. If it be thy will. This is the kind of thing you don't demand, though I knew the chances of it happening were higher if I showed up. I guess I showed up. (193)

Coleman's personal scholarship bears witness to a spirituality of place:

I couldn't get it out of my mind that it was on Easter morning, of all mornings, that one of these bucks in the bachelor group behind me hung an antler high enough for me to see. It was as if he were saying, 'I know

this is a big day in your religion.' I felt like falling to my knees. (194)

Coleman's scholarship and humility define the rewards in this book. As Coleman states:

If we can at least start to notice the place itself [...] perhaps we can turn around our thinking so that instead of dumping ground or real estate, it becomes the place where first woman touched down, limestone cliffs rose up and deer reminded us to use a good mind. (245)

Participating in *Yardwork* provides a reason to show up, whatever our location.

VIVIAN HANSEN is a Calgary poet and creative nonfiction writer.