

[Inside/ Out]

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If, for poststructuralists, there was nothing outside the text, reading work produced in the late age of neoliberal globalization, we might revise Derrida's famous dictum for our own moment: *Il n'y a rien en dehors du marché* there is nothing outside the market. The work I've gathered here by poets Souvankham Thammavongsa, Phoebe Wang, Chris Turnbull and visual artist Camille Turner bear witness to the market's insidious colonization of everyday life. Though these artists are as diverse in their materials as they are in their methods, they are united by a freedom-seeking struggle to find in art and the materials of art – language, image, photo and forest – a space outside the market, another commons.

Souvankham Thammavongsa's twin poems, "Brokerage Report I" and "Brokerage Report II" are inspired by her nearly fifteen-year career working in the research department of a downtown Toronto investment advice publisher. In these poems Thammavongsa reproduces the terrifyingly self-referential language of free market capitalism. While in the majority of Thammavongsa's work white space pools luxuriously around text, in these two poems the lack of stanza breaks and other white space works to enclose the space of the poem, reproducing the claustrophobic effect of an airless office tower. Disturbingly, there appears no possibility of getting outside of these poems. The language never refers to a world or the hope of an outside. The market appropriates everything to itself as a commodity: land, language, social relations, and even, in this poem, "the universe." Her second poem, "Brokerage Report II" begins to suggest something of an outside, but only in the jittery fear of a market collapse.

Toronto-based writer Phoebe Wang’s poem, “PSA,” bears ironic witness to the banal texture of everyday life for the middle class in urban North America, despite accelerating global crises – of climate, economy, food insecurity, war, and mass-scale human displacements. Here the burden of home ownership has been effectively transformed into a fetish: the labour required to maintain the bourgeois lifestyle contracts the focus of the individual so that, despite looming collapse, there is “no cause for alarm.” Community in this context is constituted only superficially by common aesthetics, for mason jars and preserves, well-kept gardens, *wabi sabi*, and the common but asynchronous consumption of the next popular Netflix series.

In Wang’s second poem, “Visiting Relatives,” the poet speaker journeys out of the urban centre of her first poem to the immigrant suburbs – locations like Scarborough, Ontario, and Richmond, British Columbia – places thought “ugly” and excentric by urban hipsters because of their strip malls, light industry, and warehouses, but which, as the poem shows, are vibrant centres in their own right. The journey instigates an experience of diasporic double consciousness for the speaker as she guides someone – this reader senses a white lover – through the experience. She warns her companion that:

when we arrive
 at the desert rose coloured house with its Legoland
 trees and oversized garage I might disappear [...]

my voice will drop and become richer
 when I talk in a dialect that neither of us learned
 in schools but that I’ve picked up

the way a net picks up by-catch when it's dragged
along tattered coral beds

Ultimately, there is a limit to both the speaker's ability and her willingness to translate for her companion. Translation becomes impossible as she moves into an embodied experience of diaspora: "my mouth will be full of tiny bones and slivers/ of something aromatic that I don't know the name of."

Toronto-based media and performance artist Camille Turner's photographic project, "Wanted," is also concerned with the market, both past and present. Historian Afua Cooper has described the existence of slavery in Canada as the nation's "best kept secret, locked within the National closet" (68). In "Wanted," Camille Turner, in collaboration with couturier Camal Pirbhai, confronts this erasure by presenting a visual and embodied archive of slavery in Canada. The title of her piece is multivalent. On the one hand, "Wanted" gestures toward the artist's method: she draws from detailed descriptions in "runaway slave" and "slave for sale" advertisements posted by slave owners in archival newspapers. Her title, then, refers to the ways African-descended people have been "wanted" as objects of labour in the marketplace. But rather than portraying enslaved people in the past where their lives are overdetermined by institutionalized slavery, the artist presents them in a future space. At first glance the glossy images appear to be fashion photos but the text is taken from the old newspaper ads displayed below them. The models are wearing exquisitely crafted garments, created by Pirbhai, to match the newspaper description of clothing worn by runaway slaves. Their strong poses are suggestive of the confidence and self-possession of blackness in Canada today, three hundred years since the newspaper ads ran calling for their return to bondage.

But Turner's title, combined with her glamorous fashion images, also suggests the ways the imagination of black self-liberation in the present has contracted to the dream of participating in the marketplace, not now as desired objects, but as desiring subjects. Turner's treatment of black subjects gives an ever more haunting turn to the dictum that "there is nothing outside the market."

Three photographs by Kempville, Ontario poet and visual artist Chris Turnbull explore what is outside as her environmental installation moves off the page – and what remains in. In contrast to the highly manicured garden of Wang's "PSA," Turnbull's three "wave form" images, created in nature using found organic materials (sticks, leaves, the forest floor, a lake edge, sunlight) is ephemeral, subject to elemental degradation and disturbance (whether human or animal), and exists now only in photographs. Turnbull sculpts the branches into a waveform, the abstract representation of a signal or the shape of a graph of a varying quantity against time or distance. She explores what can make a text or sign, and how these might be variously read/seen. One can't help thinking of an electrocardiograph, or a graph of the rising and falling stock market.

Comparing the first two wave forms with the third, "Wave Form Maple Forest 3," we perceive how much the position of the wave form in space alters our readings and feelings. Positioned flush with the ground, as in the first two photographs, the wave forms read as an organic, albeit arranged, element of the forest. Erected vertically, though, the wave form becomes a fence or a boundary, an obstacle to be knocked down. It invites trespass – it is an enclosure to be opened, a space to be made.

Meditating on Turnbull's installations, the meaning of the images expands and contracts, wavelike. It expands outward as meanings and resonances proliferate, and then

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contracts again as the installation once again becomes itself, elemental: sticks, leaves, forest floor.

WORK CITED

Cooper, Afua. *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal*. Athens: U of Georgia Press, 2007.

Karina Vernon is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Toronto Scarborough, specializing in Canadian literature, black Canadian cultural studies, collective memory, archives, and Canadian Urban Studies. Her first book, *Black Atlantis: A Recovered Archive of Black Canadian Prairie Literature*, brings to light a previously hidden archive of black prairie writing, from the eighteenth-century fur traders to contemporary writers, and is under contract to University of Toronto Press. She is currently at work on a SSHRC-funded project entitled *Black Art and the Aesthetics of Spatial Justice* which focuses on the aesthetic responses of black Canadian artists to urban planning policies that destroy black communities. She is also the co-founder and editor of Commodore Books, the first black literary press in Western Canada.