

Battleground/Gathering-Ground: Urban Space and Paradoxical Power in Katherena Vermette's North End Love Songs

by Emily Bednarz

Katherena Vermette, a Canadian writer of Métis-Mennonite descent, published her debut collection of poetry entitled *North End Love Songs* in 2012. The collection presents a multifaceted narrative of life in Winnipeg's impoverished North End in four sections. The first section, "Poised for Flight," focuses on the everyday violence women face in the public and domestic spaces of the North End. The second section, "Nortendluvsong," portrays the camaraderie formed in the North End amongst a group of young female friends. "November," the third section, continues this portrayal with an added emphasis on the disappearance and death of the speaker's brother. The final section, "I am a North End Girl," is composed of verses from the perspective of different North End residents, the speaker concluding that although she may have moved away from the city, she never once "looked away" (105). While each section is distinct in focus, the collection is bound by repeated images, such as North End landmarks, and thematic concerns, particularly the distinction between public and domestic space in relation to trauma and healing. In 2013, *North End Love Songs* went on to win the prestigious Governor General's Award for Poetry—a notable feat for a debut work. Also set in the North End, Vermette's first novel, *The Break* (2016), was a national bestseller and garnered literary recognition as a finalist for the 2016 Governor General's Literary Award, 2016 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and Canada Reads 2017.

Although Vermette's texts have received significant accolades, her work has yet to be thoroughly explored in an academic context, and it is imperative to do so for a number of reasons. First of all, because *North End Love Songs* is an Indigenous text about urban space written by a woman, and violence against Indigenous women disproportionately occurs in cities; recent statistics estimate that 70% of the 582 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls disappeared from an urban area (NWAC 4).

Secondly, scholars have argued that violence against Indigenous women in the city is generated by racist motives, shaped and perpetuated by public perception about Indigenous women. As Amber Dean argues, we must “look past stock narratives and consider how some lives are sentenced to death not as a result of their personal histories of trouble but because of how they are *socially* abandoned, their sentence ‘already passed’” (345). Indigenous women offer important interruptions to such narratives by articulating their relationships with different physical and social spaces. Finally, and consequentially, part of addressing violence against Indigenous women requires amplifying Indigenous women’s voices in an effort to shed light on the workings of patriarchal, colonial, and social power. While one Indigenous voice does not speak for the whole, Vermette’s work speaks as part of a complex collective; each part of this collective offers glimpses into the “racialized, sexualized, and gendered dynamics of Indigenous women’s lives” (Archuleta 110).

The first part of this essay will analyze Vermette’s depiction of colonial power as it relates to governmental institutions, the natural environment, and the literal and metaphoric boundaries that shape urban space and neighbourhoods such as the North End. The second part will compare the representational differences in the text between public and domestic space. Although Vermette depicts both domestic and public space as in need of rehabilitation, public space prevails in facilitating mourning, aiding in the adaptation of socio-cultural ceremonies, and providing a platform for women to gather and forge connections. Vermette articulates the essential paradox of urban space for Indigenous women; the city is at once marked by empowerment and disempowerment, comfort and violence, liberation and constriction, environmental destruction and cultural resistance. In doing so, she illustrates the Yaqui scholar Elizabeth Archuleta’s assertion that: “Indigenous women demonstrate that theory happens when we speak out and voice opposition to oppression . . . An Indigenous feminist ethos of responsibility compels Indigenous women to write and speak to ensure survival, to empower, and, most of all, to heal” (90).

Vermette’s Depiction of Colonial Power and Indigenous Resistance in Winnipeg

Before exploring how Vermette presents the North End as a site for Indigenous women to gather and voice opposition, it is necessary to acknowledge why such resistance is needed. As Anishinaabe writer and scholar Leanne Simpson’s asserts, systems of Indigenous Knowledge must be

restored in order for Indigenous Peoples to detach from colonial governmental bodies (373). In her depiction of personal loss, the natural environment, and social borders, Vermette articulates the connection between the deprecation of Indigenous Knowledge and wellbeing and the racist attitudes of local government and law enforcement.

In *North End Love Songs*, Vermette establishes the imbalance of power between local law enforcement and the Indigenous populations of Winnipeg by recounting the events surrounding her brother's death, thus elucidating how urban space is influenced by colonial power. For example, in the poem "indians," from the section titled "November," the speaker indicates:

indians go missing
 everyday
 blue suits shrug
 no sense looking
 they said

 this land floods
 with dead indians

 indians get drunk
 don't we know it? (90)

In this passage, Vermette ironically repurposes Indigenous stereotypes; the speaker presents the rhetorical question of "don't we know it?" in order to challenge the validity of racist assumptions like "indians get drunk." Vermette thus "presents strategies that empower" by "reinventing the enemy's language" (Archuleta 89)—a language that is tied, in this poem, to local governing bodies. The "blue suits" insist there is "no sense" in looking for the speaker's brother and, consequently, "this land floods / with dead indians," the apathetic response of law enforcement is linked to the deaths and continued mistreatment of the local Indigenous population. On the one hand, Vermette's anti-colonial rhetorical strategies illustrate the speaker's feelings of frustration regarding the search for her missing brother and, on the other, her protest against the endemic racist presumptions held by those in roles of authority.

Governing bodies represent colonial power in *North End Love Songs*, and the influence of this power is marked on the city streets of the text. City streets and the objects that fill them symbolize the memory of the speaker's brother, the search for his missing body, the effacing nature of the city, and

the lack of public concern. In “lost,” the speaker’s brother is described as “a picture / stuck to a tree / a light post” (74); in “spring,” the speaker indicates, “her brother’s missing / posters” are “tossed / across the nortend” like “oversized confetti / tacked to elm trees / taped to light posts” (87). The text links the search for the speaker’s brother with the streets of the North End; the repeated images of peripheral objects that frame the streets, like light posts and elm trees, make each street indistinguishable from the next—similar to how the brother’s “life” becomes “indistinguishable / from other information / stuck / in public places” (87). This poetic tactic expresses the futility of the search for the speaker’s brother and provokes a paradoxical image: his missing posters are strewn like “confetti” across the North End, filling the urban landscape, and yet his picture is effaced and “indistinguishable” within the chaos. He is at once presented and erased, remembered for the mixed-tapes he made his sister and passed over because “indians go missing / everyday” (90). This quotation points to the public’s lack of concern for the speaker’s brother, and the city, rather than being a place of comfort or liberation for the speaker, essentially obscures the complexities of her brother’s life and death.

North End Love Songs further portrays the city as a colonial space by depicting the environmental destruction that comes at the cost of urban development. In “wildflowers” the speaker indicates:

it’s the wildflowers
she feels sorry for
.....
people spread poison
to kill them off
call them weeds
.....
so they get yanked
roots burned
concrete’s thrown
over them
still they sprout all over the place
push through
cracks in the sidewalks (57)

The speaker implies that the difference between weeds and flowers is purely ideological; because the wildflowers spread too easily, they are “spread” with “poison,” “yanked,” and “burned” at the roots. Vermette constructs a metaphor for acts of Indigenous colonization in Canada: those

with control over the space attempt to eradicate unwanted Indigenous beings (as wildflowers are inherently native plant species). The poem thus conjures associations of the physically and ideologically violent European expansion into the West. Simpson clarifies the connection between environmental destruction and colonial violence against Indigenous Peoples, suggesting, “Our knowledge comes from the land, and the destruction of the environment is a colonial manifestation and a direct attack on Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous nationhood” (377). In poems like “wildflowers” and “green disease,” acts of environmental devastation are, therefore, not just metaphors for colonial violence, but represent another distinct layer in the interconnected nature of colonial violence. Although Vermette elucidates the extent of colonial violence on the natural environment, the final lines of the passage reflect a sense of perseverance, as the wildflowers “push through / cracks” of the sidewalk. On the one hand, this perhaps connotes those who “slip through society’s cracks;” on the other hand, it suggests that in order to resist the extreme efforts to eradicate their existence and culture, Indigenous Peoples have developed methods of survival. Based on the metaphor of the poem, this survival is ensured through a tenacious reassertion of the right to inhabit space, even in the face of capital and colonial expansion.

Vermette’s text acknowledges the social and spatial boundaries of the North End while emphasizing the benefits of peaceful gathering, collective vocalization, and activism. This emphasis reflects Vermette’s involvement with the many efforts that have been made to revitalize the North End. In 2016, Vermette produced a National Film Board short documentary with Erika Macpherson entitled *This River*, which focuses on the “Drag the Red” project—a volunteer coalition that combs the Red River for bodies of missing and murdered Indigenous people. *This River* went on to win a Canadian Screen Award in 2017 and the Coup de coeur du jury award at Montreal’s First Peoples’ Festival in 2016. Vermette has also worked with Winnipeg’s Indigenous youth via the “Meet Me at the Bell Tower” organization which hosts community organized workshops, events, and gatherings, including a weekly anti-violence rally. The rally, given its strong youth presence, is a powerful reminder of the ways in which urban spaces can be reclaimed through an enunciation of peaceful public occupation.

Community and activist groups repeatedly focus on Winnipeg’s railway tracks as symbolic of the social divisions present within the city. For example, the description of the The North End Community Renewal Corporation indicates that it was “established to serve the community within the geographic area north of the CP tracks, south of Carruthers Ave., east

of McPhillips Street and west of the Red River” (NECRC). A notable designation in this description is the “geographic area north of the CP tracks,” because upon its construction in 1912, the Canadian Pacific Railway mainline “effectively cut off the North End from the rest of the city” (Artibise 160). A 1912 article from the *Dominion* further explains the effects of this severing: “The street cars did not cross the tracks and passengers of the north-end had to transfer at crossings, often waiting many minutes in all kinds of weather . . . Naturally, with such conditions . . . those who located north of the tracks were not of a desirable class” (13-14). As such, dating back to their placement, the railway tracks have served as a marker for the divisions (primarily based on race and class) between the citizens of Winnipeg; one can literally be from “the wrong side of the tracks.”

Vermette interrogates the physical and ideological limitations the railway signifies in *North End Love Songs*. In a poem titled “trains,” the speaker says:

lights over the train yard
tumble out toward
the ground
.....
her daughters think
those lights are stars
.....
they hear
every sound
and still
sleep

still awake
she listens (33)

In this poem, the sonic and visual presences of the train tracks are ubiquitous within the daily lives of speaker and her children—so ubiquitous that the speaker’s daughters still hear every sound of the train yard while they sleep. Likewise, the mother is “still awake,” beset with the constant stream of noise and lights from the train yard. In a CBC interview regarding her video-poem *Heart*, Vermette states that “The train yards are iconic and the very physical division between the North End and the rest of the city. They cluck and fuss around like chickens, and just demand attention” (n.p.). Given the division that the railyards uphold in the city, the tracks stand as a reminder for how certain spaces can both necessitate and communicate

the social and racial inequalities experienced by their inhabitants. The railway tracks mark the space of the North End and thus shape the flesh of Vermette's poetic narration; they are not merely empty landmarks—they demonstrate how “Indigenous women's social location or positionality contributed to their critical understanding of the world and generated a critical consciousness of oppression” (Archuleta 101). *North End Love Songs*, with its focus on the local and its acknowledgement of the boundaries (both literal and ideological) that shape the North End, exemplifies the way in which one's positionality can be both the locus of oppression and foundation for resistance.

The Rehabilitation of Urban and Domestic Space in *North End Love Songs*

In *North End Love Songs*, the city is influenced by both colonial and patriarchal power. Vermette presents both urban and domestic space as in need of rehabilitation, reflecting recent scholarship regarding Indigenous women's writing and Indigenous feminist theory. While she depicts disempowered women in domestic and public space, she emphasizes how the city encourages points of contact to form amongst women. This contact is significant because, as Archuleta suggests, “Indigenous women's participation in various settings has created the conditions for our resistance” (110). Women confidently gather in urban spaces in *North End Love Songs*, and the city guides the speaker through mourning while also functioning as the backdrop for the adaptation of socio-cultural ceremonies. On the one hand, Vermette depicts “the physical realities of Indigenous women's lives” which “include daily struggles for survival and the threat of violence”; on the other hand, she emphasizes how the realities of Indigenous women “convey the resiliency of our survival” (Archuleta 110). For Vermette, the city symbolizes colonial and patriarchal oppression, but it is also an important site for Indigenous women to connect, heal, and share their stories.

The CBC describes *North End Love Songs* as Vermette's “ode to her neighbourhood,” Vermette adding in an interview with *The Walrus*: “We always love and hate our home. I have a complicated relationship with this place I call home. I spent years trying to run away, get away, and be any place else before I realized there was no other place I wanted to be, or could be, really” (n.p.). As Vermette says, home is “complicated.” Indigenous women have been tasked with reconstructing safe and healthy domestic spaces at the same time as disentangling themselves from colonial and

patriarchal narratives regarding Indigenous women's role (or lack thereof) in settler societies. The Stó:lō poet and author Lee Maracle argues that because the home has become such an embattled space, particularly because of gendered domestic violence, it is a vital to tend to when rebuilding Indigenous culture and sovereignty (132). While Maracle acknowledges the public political power Indigenous women must acquire, she emphasizes that domestic healing that must take place for Indigenous nations to thrive. Vermette accentuates the need for the rehabilitation of Indigenous domestic spaces by portraying the abuse, isolation, and disempowerment that can occur in the home in *North End Love Songs*. For example, in "Guy," the houses of the neighbourhood are built so close together that they precipitate a sense of involuntary intrusion to the speaker: "if she stretches out her arms / one hand touching / the white siding of her house / the other flat / on Guy's" (47). Because of their closeness, she can hear Guy "cry out / when his dad / throws him / against a wall" and "feel her window shake" (47). Though these passages present a form of silent communication between the speaker and Guy, the poem ultimately presents the two young persons as disempowered, because "when he shows up / at school all bruised" and "tells everyone / how he got jumped," she "just nods / like everyone else" (47-48). Since the speaker appears unable to prevent or protest the abuse in Guy's home, domestic structures ensure that acts of violence remain unchecked by concealing victims and preventing direct lines of communication from forming. Walls of houses, like the railway tracks that cordon the North End from the rest of the city, erect borders, separating and alienating figures from one another in the text.

Vermette addresses the violence and lack of bodily autonomy that Indigenous women face in public space as well as domestic. As the Alaska Native scholar Shari Huhndorf indicates, this limitation of bodily autonomy dates back to initial periods¹ of colonial expansion (182). One of the ways this control was articulated was through the simultaneous commodification and demonization of Indigenous sexuality, where Indigenous women were often unafforded an identity other than prostitute or concubine (Barman 264). In the opening pieces of *North End Love Songs*, Vermette acknowledges the prevalence of Indigenous women turning to prostitution but fractures the stock narrative by insisting on their right to be viewed as complex human beings worthy of bodily autonomy and safety. For example, in the series titled "selkirk avenue," there are subtle insinuations that the girl from the second poem, titled "robin," is engaging in prostitution against her desire or will. She displays a "too young body squeezed / into too tight clothing" (14), communicating her vulnerability

through her body, as she “stands on / selkirk avenue / head down / her body cries” (14). While the girl’s communication through her body may indicate a lack of bodily autonomy, it also demonstrates how Vermette participates in a theory of the flesh, exposing “racism, as experienced in the flesh, as revealed in the flesh of . . . Writing” (Moraga 34). The girl of the poem communicates her experiences of the racialized, sexualized, and gendered space of the city through her body; Vermette’s body of writing speaks these experiences through the rhetorical flesh of her subjects. Utilizing the body as a form of communication consequently exposes deep sufferings but also illuminates a path for recovery: “For Indigenous women, the rhetorical practice of writing and embodying a theory in the flesh empowers because it heals” (Archuleta 110). Vermette demonstrates that writing not only acknowledges shared sufferings, but encourages those who experienced such sufferings to gather and heal. The connection between healing and writing through images of the body continues in the poem, as the girl:

breathes out
with her whole chest
puffed out bright
and red
as if she’s
beautiful
as if she’s
proud (14)

While the repetition of “as if” suggests that the girl performs confidence in lieu of feeling genuinely safe or secure, her “puffed out” and “red” chest links her to the title of the poem, as she adopts the appearance of a robin. This zoomorphic technique, which continues through the series, produces an ironic effect of humanizing the girl: rather than solely concentrating on her role as a prostitute, her robin-like qualities represent her natural human spirit: her thoughts, hopes, or dreams. This simple technique conveys the complexity of her character—something that Indigenous prostitutes have not been afforded—while not presuming to appropriate her life story. As such, even in some of the darkest depictions of women’s presence in public space, Vermette illustrates that while the city may be the primary setting for violence against Indigenous women, it can also be the ground to disrupt discriminatory narratives and forge connections amongst women.

Vermette portrays how women can forge such connections in urban space despite social barriers. In the third poem from “selkirk avenue,” titled “hummingbird,” the speaker says:

girl drives down
selkirk avenue
looks forward
as if she don't
look at all of them (15)

The girl in this passage, like the girl in “robin,” mirrors the poem’s title by embodying the qualities of a hummingbird. She hovers and watches the young women on the street; but she “looks forward / as if she don’t / look,” ashamed by either the girls’ presence or her status as an observer. She erects a border between herself and the girls on the street as she imagines “her windows . . . are only tv screens / and the other girls / on the street / are only a show” (15). Vermette portrays women both off and on the street and, while they may be separated between the car and the sidewalk, they simultaneously inhabit the same urban space and form inherent lines of contact. As Elizabeth Kalbfleisch argues:

Despite variations in their roots (and routes), points of access, and experience, women who live in close proximity actively share relationships and investments in their space. They mutually occupy it . . . With Aboriginal people increasingly calling metropolitan areas home, these assertions speak overwhelmingly to the occupation of city spaces and the particular conditions these spaces imply. (287)

Although the car represents a difference in social or economic status between the “hummingbird” girl and the girls on the street, all of the women in “selkirk avenue” are presented as mutually occupying the space—as indicated by the title of the series and the connected subtitles. This mutual occupation functions as the basis of community, and Vermette’s text shows how Indigenous women form a “collective voice” when they connect, share their experiences, and uncover their “common legacy against violence and oppression” (Archuleta 97). In other words, while the city may be influenced by patriarchal and colonial power, the women of “selkirk avenue” experience points of contact within it; Vermette helps to articulate and promote this contact.

Although *North End Love Songs* addresses the violence women experience in public space, the text also forefronts the city’s ability to provide a platform for Indigenous women to gather. After establishing the ways in which women are visually objectified and robbed of their bodily autonomy in public space, Vermette demonstrates how “the process of ‘writing the city’ . . . makes possible the appearance of a feminine identity which

rejects the idea that cities only provide another space for the objectivization of women” (Schulenberg 57). She does so by featuring moments throughout the collection where girls and women gather in distinctly public, urban spaces—and have fun. For example, in “happy girls” the speaker observes:

two
drunk
girls on a bridge
.....

too
drunk
girls pause
in one moment
.....

one
girl burrows
into her thin jacket
emerges with
a fully lit
smoke

one
girl leans
her belly into
the cold cement rail
reaches over the river
for the first
flake
of snow (30)

As opposed to the girls in “selkirk avenue,” the “happy girls” engage in their urban surroundings with confidence. They possess a comfortable familiarity with the space: the first girl has mastered lighting her cigarette on the windy bridge, and the second girl presses her belly into the railing, despite it being cold, to catch a flake of snow. Moreover, the repetition of “two” and “too” in the first two stanzas emphasizes the girls’ status as a pair; although the following stanzas are headed by “one” and “one,” distinguishing them as individuals, the repetition again highlights their closeness. In their familiarity, the “happy girls” on the bridge illustrate the journey of the *flâneuse*, which Vermette continues to display throughout the collection: “Looking for a city of women, she stumbles across traces of

not-yet-actualized revolutionary potential to generate a women's culture" (Chisholm 48). This "revolutionary potential" to locate a "city of women" is evidenced in the second poem of the series titled "bannerman avenue":

girls walk
right down
the middle of
bannerman avenue
too important
to be ushered off
to the sidewalk (42)

Like the "happy girls," the girls walking down Bannerman Avenue present confidence in, even ownership of, their urban setting. Their walking is defiant; they walk down the middle of the street, "too important" to be displaced to the sidewalk by cars, laws, or any other power governing the space. Though "their bodies" are later described as "tough / used and / innocent" (42), they mark their agency in urban space through their walking. To counter the notion that women are inherently disempowered in urban space, *North End Love Songs* repeatedly portrays women as having mastery, confidence, and security in the city—particularly when they join and walk together.

Distinctly urban spaces like streets and sidewalks, not only link women in the text but guide the primary speaker through mourning the loss of her brother. Contrary to traditions of families gathering in domestic spaces to collectively grieve lost loved ones, domestic spaces are frequently portrayed as unable to facilitate the mourning process. This is illustrated in "mixed tape," where:

the girl walks under
winter naked elms
such a cold november
a season warmer
than her house (80)

Urban spaces, rather than domestic, provide the speaker with comfort in her time of grief because, despite the cold weather, the streets are "warmer" than the speaker's house. While the family grieves indoors, the speaker turns to the streets for comfort. The city streets also serve to connect the speaker with other women in her community during her mourning

process. In “christmas,” the speaker indicates she “wants to / be anywhere else” (81) than her home. She then:

slips out the door
with fluid
silent movements
runs down the street
along parked cars
just in case
she has to duck (81)

Domestic space again prevents the speaker from processing her grief; the city streets act as passage to female friends, as the cars provide cover for her escape. Vermette thus demonstrates how women can adopt urban space as the backdrop to gather, mourn, and connect.

Throughout *North End Love Songs*, Vermette depicts socio-cultural ceremonies (that contain echoes of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge and associated practices) as capable of adapting to urban environments. Though *North End Love Songs* dedicates time in addressing the devastation of the natural environment, the speaker utilizes objects particularly associated with the city as part of ritualistic practice, augmenting Maracle’s assertion that “Our beliefs and our lifestyle arose from those beliefs called upon us to utilize every part of the plant and animal we killed in an effort to support ourselves without destroying the earth . . . Waste was returned to the earth; it was not dumped in landfill sites” (143-44). Though the female subjects of the text do not engage with strictly natural materials, their “material culture” is built by the landscape they inhabit—waste, plastic, and cigarette butts are not simply “dumped in landfill sites” but are used in ritualistic practices. For example, in the first iteration of “big gulps” the girls observe the peaceful aspects of the nortend as it “is always quiet / during the day” (55). The streets provide a safe and enclosed environment for their quiet contemplation as the “girls walk back down / bannerman avenue / sip big gulps / talk too loud” while “elms curve / above them / like a roof” (55). They again partake in their Big Gulps in the second piece of the poem, where the speaker observes, “girls sit on / church steps / sipping big gulps” (56). Although Vermette highlights the commercial nature of the product (by naming the drink by brand), the girls’ repeated intake of Big Gulps in calm, communal settings presents the act as a ritual of their friendship. The speaker’s description of her personalized drink heightens this sense of ritual, as her Big Gulp forms “a delicate chemistry” made of “every flavour / but diet” (56). In lieu of a more traditional accom-

modation to the earth, the women opt for what is accessible: the ubiquitous objects of their urban lives. Alongside the ritual of sharing their Big Gulps, the girls also:

share cigarettes
small bags of chips
sometimes
a stolen can of beer
and stories
of their short lives (56)

The girls share cigarettes and junk food, staples of the urban environment and working-class youth culture in the text, but also their experiences. While the girls' engagement with commercial products shows how "commodity spectacle and advertising technology saturate and dominate space" of the city (Chisholm 11), the speaker's community of women is cultivated by and structured around this engagement. Scholars argue that adapting rituals to urban areas for the purpose of fostering Indigenous community is an unfortunate but necessary reality, especially since, in Canada, roughly "49 percent of Aboriginal people live in urban areas" (Kalbfleisch 285). The girls of *North End Love Songs* reflect how "large numbers of Indigenous people are experiencing culture and community in ways different from those living in reserve communities and on ancestral lands" (Kalbfleisch 285). As such, Vermette's depiction of the North End presents urban space as "an ideological home, one that is central to cultural memory and political agency" (285). Though containing ties to commercialism and waste, the rituals that the girls recreate in the North End communicate their thirst for community and cultural connection; Vermette demonstrates that the urban adaptation of Indigenous ceremony is thus a necessary element in the girls' physical and spiritual survival.

With the ephemera of urban space to populate the scene, parks and playgrounds function as locales for recreating ceremony and ritual in *North End Love Songs*. For example, in "pritchard park" the speaker's "fingers trace / the rough / lines others have carved / into the wood" of the playground (16). A similar image is repeated in the poem "peanut park" where the speaker indicates that the girls "know" that "the playstructure / at peanut park is old" as "they can count its years / by the history cut into it" (54). The girls wonder about the "names / dates / hearts / swears burned / into the wood" that appear as "runes from a different age" while they pass "around / a single / cigarette" (54). In these scenes, the speaker traces history through playground carvings, measuring a kind of urban ancestry. The

girls' ability to translate the playground carvings is contrasted in the poem "green disease." As the speaker looks at a tree that has been cut down, she "tries to count / the yellow rings that were once / inside . . . but each blond circle blurs / into the next" (64). Since urbanization has damaged the natural environment in such a prevalent way, using nature to gain knowledge and form communal bonds seems less viable to the speaker. Instead, she builds knowledge and communities around the spaces available to her. Moreover, in "peanut park," the girls observe the carved "runes" on the play structure while sharing a cigarette; the play structure transforms into a site of socio-spiritual contemplation as cigarettes replace sacred Indigenous pipe ceremonies. As Stephen Kunitz argues, cigarettes, in varying degrees depending on location and tribe, have been integrated into traditional pipe-smoking ceremonies over the last century (251). But the significance behind pipe smoking ceremonies can be applied to the girls in "peanut park," as pipe ceremonies "reified an ideology of peace for humankind," "promoted interdependency via trade and kinship ties," and "became a way to integrate Europeans into trading and kinship systems" (Thorne 70). In their sharing of the cigarette, the girls promote peaceful, interdependent relationships, but the adaptation of the ceremony to the play structure ironically represents their integration into settler society rather than the reverse. But this integration may not represent assimilation, as Archuleta asserts: "acquiring Western knowledge or speaking English does not mean we have become assimilated. Rather . . . it points to Indigenous subjectivity as multiple" (90-91). Ultimately, whether this presents a mourning of the loss of cultural tradition or a necessary process of regenerating community, *North End Love Songs* demonstrates that those who live in the city cannot "fully escape the conditions that control them, but they do find within the structure of urban life a type of human connection that can operate *despite* such constraints . . . cities like individuals can potentially be more than the forces that try to define them" (Murphy 41). In other words, while Vermette emphasizes the insidious reach of colonial and patriarchal power in the Winnipeg, she does not argue that Indigenous women should retreat from the city; rather, *North End Love Songs* exemplifies the necessity of maintaining social and cultural connections in urban space for the purposes of resistance, reclamation, and healing.

Though *North End Love Songs* examines the violence and injustice present in the North End, the speaker effectively emancipates the space. While listening to her brother play heavy metal in "nortendluvsong," the speaker observes that the music: "out here / it is almost soundless / soft / as a love song" (59). The public space of the "nortend" transforms her

brother's music, and the city itself, into a type of "love song." This transformation of urban space through writing, voice, and positionality is significant because writing through place demonstrates how an individual is part of a collective; though Vermette acknowledges the challenges of living in the city for Indigenous populations, she also presents the city as a ground for Indigenous women to gather, share their stories, and heal. Although the text grapples in depicting the realities of urban-dwelling Indigenous women, Vermette ultimately shows how mourning and socio-cultural practices can be adapted to fit urban space. Problematizing both domestic and urban space, Katherena Vermette depicts the North End as marked by oppression, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a site for contact and collective resistance.

Note

1. For a close reading of early Indigenous women's experiences in sex work in the late nineteenth century, see Jean Barman, "Indigenous Women and Feminism on the Cusp of Contact." In *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Feminism* ed. Cheryl Suzack (2010).

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