"Citizens of a human body of kind": Gender and Space in Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*

by Tanis MacDonald

> living unlived lives they died
> of course but truncated, stunted, never at
> home in native space and not yet
> citizens of a human body of kind. And it is Canada
> that specialized in this deprivation.
> —Dennis Lee, *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*

Memory creates the City, collective memory and women are still kept out of this memory.

—Erin Mouré, "Poetry, Memory and the Polis"

A writer may do as she pleases with her epoch. Except ignore it.

—Gail Scott, "A Feminist at the Carnival"

Pro patria, pro corpus: the political economy of anxiety

More than three decades have passed since Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* won the Governor-General's Award for Poetry in 1972. In that time, most critical readings of Lee's poetic appeal to re-enliven Canadian citizenship have concentrated upon the ways in which the Elegies hold the poetic mirror up to philosopher George Grant's anti-modernist beliefs in a martyred Canadian nationalism, beliefs that defined (and some say, limited) Canadian studies as an academic discipline from the 1960s until well into the 1990s. From the text's original 1968 appearance, to its revision and republication in 1972, to its 1994 reprint, reviewers have praised Lee's "candour" and "compelling desperation" (Schroeder 104), as well as his "technical mastery" of both "colloquial and intellectual" language (Fetherling 37). Lee himself discusses the synthesis of his poetics of political distress in his 1974 essay "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in

Colonial Space." Critical reception of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* has sometimes quibbled with Lee's terms or with the specifics of his Grantian perspective, but has generally agreed that the text captures the zeitgeist of early 1970s nationalism, focusing upon Lee's declaration that in Canada, "good men do not matter to history" (*CEOP* 28), swiftly followed by his impassioned plea for "a saner version of integrity" (*CEOP* 50).[1] This desire for integrity is most often read in the context of the poems as Lee's urgent articulation of resistance to American corporatism, a series of elegies lamenting the "humiliations of imperial necessity" that have resulted in "the deft emasculation of a country by the Liberal party of Canada" (*CEOP* 41-42). Integrity, for Lee's speaker, is intrinsic to the definition of corporeal citizenship throughout the Elegies, in which "appetite…presses outward through the living will of the body" and defiant people who insist upon a just society distinguish themselves by "leaving the / bloody impress of their bodies face forward in time" (*CEOP* 39).

However, integrity is not only political in *Civil Elegies*; it is also rigorously physical, even constitutive of the social conditions of citizenship. Lee's rhetoric of emasculation lends his metaphor of the citizen as body-in-crisis more than a little castration anxiety, and his lament that "it is / hard to stay in the centre when you're losing it one more time" (*CEOP* 40) is a statement that, from a feminist or postcolonial perspective, may bemuse as much as it describes. Heterosexual white men have a right to declare their alienation from the centre, and Lee does so with elegance, but one of his major concerns, in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* and in "Cadence, Country, Silence," is a search for language to articulate this centre that is not one. That search is profoundly embodied, as Dale Zieroth notes, to the point that Lee proposes that "the problem with the nation mirrors the problem with his body" (35). Reading corporeal anxiety as a corollary to political despair, Zieroth goes on to praise Lee's use of the male body as the eventual locus of civic responsibility that begins from a negated sense of physicality: "it is no longer a matter of feeling alienated from his body: there is no body, only a despairing will and consciousness hanging onto its emptiness, the full dead weight of absence" (Zieroth 38). Noting that the best reader of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* will understand that "to be alive in Canada is to be lodged in paradox," Stan Dragland asserts that Lee "probes with his nerve-ends as well as with his mind" (66), and even suggests that the rhetoric of emasculation may be too much for some readers. Assuring (male) readers that the book discusses castration but does not perform it, Dragland states that it will be "unnecessary to shield the scrotum with the hand that is not holding the book" (66). Dragland's remarks,

though made tongue in cheek, are typical of the effusively masculinized discourse concerning citizenship that dominates *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* as one of its central metaphors for civic anxiety, and also describes the tenor of the book's critical reception. Given that *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* concerns itself with discovering the cadence by which Canadian nationalism may struggle towards passionate speech, how then might we read the conditions for female Canadian citizenship in Lee's text?

I pose this question in the spirit of intellectual inquiry, noting that few female commentators have discussed *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, with Ann Munton's "Simultaneity in the Writings of Dennis Lee" as an eloquent exception. Yet Lee's speaker appeals to "citizens of a human body of kind" and, in the Ninth (and final) Elegy, Lee invokes "motherwit and guts" as two of the factors that will assist these citizens in sustaining "the long will to be in Canada" (*CEOP* 50). With the poet himself cognizant that at least half the citizenry of whom he speaks are female, it seems not only appropriate but urgent that *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* should be considered in a feminist light. My intention in doing so is neither to "catch" Lee indulging the cultural chauvinism of the early 1970s nor to pillory him for failing to anticipate the advent of feminist theory. Hindsight is not only twenty-twenty; it is often analytically spurious, and to view *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* through the lens of gender grievance would be unproductive, as well as unjust to both perspectives. In fact, given the era in which the text was written, the relative gender inclusiveness of Lee's cadence of citizenship is striking, and its enduring popular and scholarly appeal suggests that it is time to introduce some feminist rigour into the discussion of Lee's declaration of "bloody-minded reverence" for citizenship.[2]

We can begin by noting how Lee's images of the truncated, impotent, beaten–down citizen are definitely gendered male, as Zieroth and Dragland note. However, notwithstanding the stunted masculine body's role as Lee's central metaphor for butchered and bartered citizenship, the speaker of the Elegies avoids a number of sexist clichés that may have passed muster in the early 1970s: women as sexually cruel castrators, women as unequivocal nurturers, women as primitives, or women as the ironic embodiment of lack, absence or political irrelevancy. When women appear in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, they are sometimes mythologized, sometimes domesticated, and sometimes compulsorily heterosexualized. While the female figure is nowhere near as prominent in the text as the male figure, the spectre of female citizenship hovers uncomfortably around the Elegies in ways that demand discussion after three decades of criticism. Addressing this spectre of female citizenship has become more

possible in the last two decades as Canadian feminist writers have themselves begun to address the efficacy of female citizenship. Erin Mouré, in particular, has made the possibilities of "intersecting" the female citizen with the language of citizenship her most fervent poetic project for the past twenty years. In *Furious*, she explores the desire to "inhabit freely the civic house of memory I am kept out of" (1988, 91); in *O Cidadán*, Mouré declares the language of female citizenship to dwell outside the parameters of everyday speech, and in her attempts to bring any attempt to write female citizenship invites "semantic pandemonium" (2002, n.p.). I do not mean to suggest that, by reading together their mutual but very differently-wrought interests in a poetics of citizenship, Lee's and Mouré's concerns ought to be thought of as equivalent or even conjunctive. Since *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* predates Mouré's *Furious* by sixteen years and *O Cidádan* by thirty, it would be a bit foolish to judge Lee's late-modernist civic lament by Mouré's post-structural, century-ending lesbian feminist political standards. But considering the places that Lee and Mouré have made for themselves in Canadian literary history, I am inclined to suggest that any wholesale political agreement on their parts would be less interesting than reading the bumpy continuum described by their respective concerns about citizenship and the nation as it has played out at House of Anansi Press, the publishing house Lee co-founded with Dave Godfrey in 1967. Lee served as Anansi's primary editor from 1967 to 1972, and although he has published poetry and children's literature with other presses, Lee has published eight books with Anansi over a period of forty years, including his first book of poems, *Kingdom of Absence*, in 1967, and his most recent volume, *Yesno*, in 2007. Mouré's association with Anansi began in 1979 with the publication of *Empire, York Street*, and she has published another nine books with the press since, the last being *O Cadoiro* in 2007. While their styles are very different, both writers employ a rigorous poetics to speak of the vicissitudes of citizenry in late-twentieth century Canada, and Mouré's contention that "a citizen uncorks uncertainty's mien" (2002, 4) has been presaged by Lee's "brooding over the city" (*CEOP* 27).

The usefulness of uncovering the feminine—and potentially feminist—figurations in *Civil Elegies* becomes increasingly urgent as Lee's text achieves canonical status and is both read and taught as an inscription of profound civic anxiety played out alongside the cultural euphoria of Trudeau-era nationalism. Lee offers glimpses of a woman who seeks semantic space for her own form of citizenry, a search that may have parallels with but remains separate from the melancholy of Lee's speaker. His

speech cannot solve her linguistic and civic dilemma, but the acknowledgement of citizens even more disenfranchised than the speaker is welcome as we enter the twenty-first century. Thirty years before Mouré proposes her "semantic pandemonium," *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* anticipates but does not ameliorate feminist citizenship in Canadian poetry and poetics.

"Citizen-relation is itself spatial" reminds Mouré in *O Cidádan* (83), and Lee's speaker seeks a defined and locatable citizen-relation by situating himself in Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square, a public space fashioned as a twentieth-century agora rendered mute by the force of American imperialism upon the Canadian public consciousness. For Lee, the Square functions as a metonym for the nation, and the Elegies are public utterances that protest the sacrifice of a national ideal while seeking to reawaken the "passionate civil man" (*CEOP* 27). Throughout the Elegies, Lee's speaker mourns a loss of a socially responsive (and responsible) masculinity, and seeks consolation in the wish to be united with other citizens in a "human body of kind." *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* is not the first—nor will it be the last—Canadian literary text to assume that its local particularities speak in an iconic national voice. The "always already regionalized" text is omnipresent in Canadian literature: think of Margaret Laurence's Manitoba or David Adams Richard's Miramichi region. Perhaps regionality seems overtly noxious when Toronto is the region in question, and it is true that writing of the difficulties of cultural estrangement in the heart of the "world-class city" cannot help but be wrapped in multiple layers of irony, beginning with the Elegies' passionate commitment to being, to quote Linda Hutcheon, "as Canadian as possible under the circumstances." Just as Lee's Torontoian "passionate civics" can be simultaneously recognizable and exasperating for readers who live their Canadian lives outside the GTA, so does Lee's plea for a practical and poetic political autonomy spark chagrined recognition in readers outside the bounds of a masculinist perspective. For example, Lee's epigraph chosen from George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* is particularly appropriate considered in the context of feminist poetics in Canada: "to know that citizenship is an impossibility is to be cut off from one of the highest forms of life" (qtd. *CEOP* 25). While assumptions that feminist advancement was Grant's intention would undoubtedly be a bit of a theoretical imposition, reading the feminine under erasure in *Civil Elegies* necessitates a willingness to read women as the subject of this poetic discourse *especially when* they are left out of it, which must include the multiple ironies of recuperating a feminine consciousness from the ragged and sometimes violent edges of a self-con-

scious masculine imaginary. What Lee calls the need for "more authentically stern living" ("Letter" 69), though seemingly a Grantian dictum, actually presages the move towards feminist poetics of the 1980s and 1990s, and whether we read those feminist poetics as legacy or interruption of Lee's passionate civility depends on how we read female consciousness as a burgeoning incivility in *Civil Elegies*.

Of course, the struggle for a language to speak about conscious citizenship is couched in male terms in the Elegies, as Lee's 1972 diction demonstrates nearly every point made by Dale Spender's classic feminist text *Man Made Language*. If we return to Lee's epigraph by Grant, we will find that the quotation begins with Grant's declaration, "Man is by nature a political animal." It is impossible to read the multiple iterations of "man" in Lee's text as any effort towards inclusive language, even if the concept were not anachronistic. To some degree, Lee is trapped in a sexist apologia of the biological materiality of man, be he truncated, stunted, disaffected, disprized, or all of these, in the following examples: "In the city I long for men complete their origins (*CEOP* 29); "A man could spend a lifetime looking for peace in that city" (29); "To be our own men!" (29); "a man strays into that vast barbaric space (33-34); "immemorial pacts of men and earth" (36); "how should a man be alive and tied to the wreckage that surrounds him" (37); "we are all Canadians and honourable men" (42); "no man will use a mirror to shave" (43). Despite several references to "men and women" (27; 30; 37; 38), and even "brave men and spritely women" (44) who change into "brave men and subtle women" (45), Lee's focus remains firmly upon redefining an involved but exclusively gendered citizenship in the Elegies.

However, even as Lee's image of maligned national masculinity occupies the bulk of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, the subtext of the poems strikingly returns to the female citizen *sous rature*: as a demand for critical consciousness, as a strategy of refusal, and as a hint of future feminist debate about the need to reconceptualize citizenship. It is important to note at this point that "Coming Back," Lee's sequence of poems that comprise the "Other Poems" of the 1972 edition, precede the Elegies in the text. These "Other Poems" have been largely ignored by critics. Female commentators, in their brief comments, have been astute in regarding the difficult negotiations of the marriage described in "Coming Back" as a parallel to the civic debate of the Elegies. Christina Newman mentions that these poems give readers an image of the "private poet…looking inward at the wounds inflicted by enduring love and failed self-expectations" (88). Ann Munton draws attention to the figure of the chivalric "Lady" in the

"Muskoka Elegiac" section of Lee's first book, 1967's *Kingdom of Absence,* as a figure of peace and respite that counters the savagery of the city in the subsequent "Annex Elegiac" section (Munton 148).[3] But the first poem of the book, "400: Coming Home," collapses the pastoral relief of the northern landscape into a journey back to the city, and the anxiety of "Annex Elegiac" reappears in "Brunswick Avenue" and "Sibelius Park" in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems.* Some form of the Lady of "Muskoka Elegiac" is the addressee of "High Park, by Grenadier Pond," but she has been largely supplanted by a more troublesome and more interesting wifely figure, a woman who was once "a gentle girl, just married" ("Recollection," *CEOP* 10) and is now more likely to "turn and finger the miserable little feat" of her husband's daily accomplishments with more scrutiny than he would like ("He Asks Her," *CEOP* 6). If we view "Muskoka Elegiac" as the textual precursor to "Coming Back" and "Annex Elegiac" as the textual precursor to "Civil Elegies," then we must consider how the female figure has changed from a romantic nurturing figure to an ironically more distant wife, now not only a partner in her husband's civil agony, but also caught in "confessions and copouts" of her own ("High Park, by Grenadier Pond," *CEOP* 7). Munton notes with asperity that "Foundering marriages and a lack of communication are the consequence of modernity" (153), and it is no coincidence that it is within the context of these marriage-concerned poems that Lee's speaker first articulates the effort it takes to "com[e] to difficult sanities" (*CEOP* 8), a difficulty that is reiterated in the "Civil Elegies" section. The "lady" turned wife has been, as Lee warns in *Kingdom of Absence*, "sabotaged by love" (47), but this lack of marital communication is not total. The female figure in "Coming Back," though she says nothing, has a "body…full of listening" ("When It is Over," *CEOP* 11). To whom, or to what, she is listening remains a question.

Reading the two groups of poems in their textual sequence suggests strongly that Lee's melancholic masculinity intersects with and inquires into the feminine figures as the future of Canadian citizenship, partners in his hope for a "regenerative absence" that recurs throughout the Elegies. Certainly Lee works with compulsory heterosexuality and an implied necessity for reproduction in this formulation. But the mythical feminine power that underlies these poems, the grass-roots 1970s feminism that animates them, and the contentious feminist theory that re-enlivens the poems for the twenty-first century may be read in the ways in which Lee diverges from Grant by finding potential in "regenerative absence," rendered through poetics that emphasize the political economy of anxiety. Lee's first

project in claiming the potential for a regenerative absence is to insist upon "radical bereavement" as a force that drives the Elegies.

Such a radical bereavement enlivens Erin Mouré's textual gymnastics, and both feminine rage and feminine grief inform her search for the language of citizenship. In her 1990 essay, "Poetry, Memory and the Polis," Mouré asserts that poetry as memory undertakes to "undo the Law" by reminding the reader (and the poet herself) that however the Law strives to imitate discourse, the Law is not discourse; the Law always has an "outside." For Mouré, that which "proceeds and transgresses the Law" is poetry: "the structuration (the action or condition of structuring, the rendering visible, audible) of memory that can undo the Law of the City" (1990, 202). Lee's elegies commemorate the events that preceded (and formed) the Law of "losers and quislings," as well as the Law that serves "dishonourable men." *Civil Elegies* renders that transgressive memory audible in order to re-define Canada as structured by all three of Lee's poetic touchstones: cadence, country, and silence. If the recuperation of the feminine "undoes the Law" of corporatism, then *Civil Elegies* records a coming to corporeal consciousness in which Lee mourns the dominance of corporatism in terms that are concomitant, and in some cases, parallel with second-wave feminism. Just as Lee reaches towards a cadenced consciousness of Canadian language, so Mouré warns that making transgressive memory audible to a marginalized citizenry is a volatile project: "It's not easy. And it's anxious. And it takes attentiveness" (203). In a similar vein, Gail Scott, in "A Feminist at the Carnival," considers the political uses of melancholia in terms of feminist writing, and begins by asking what is "unskirtable" in a feminist consciousness and in a feminist text (Scott 117). Scott interprets "unskirtable" as "untameable, unladylike," and though the gendered dynamics of being unmanned and unladylike are certainly not equivalent, gender is always a factor in melancholy and in politics. In Scott's, Mouré's, and Lee's texts, what is "unskirtable"—that which defies easy gender definition and easy articulation, yet retains its urgency despite difficulty—is the need to speak the presence of an alienated or forgotten subject, and to find a language that can do so on the body's terms. Lee's search for a national cadence is an act of melancholia, a way to search for a new way to live despite "the gutting of our self-respect," understanding "how painfully each passing brings us down" (*CEOP* 38). Scott's "untameable" desire for honesty about feminist discourse, and Mouré's desire "to inhabit freely the civic house of memory" (1988, 204) are feminist extensions of Lee's search for a cadence of "radical bereavement."

What (Feminist) History Teaches: Canadian Fates and Canadian Furies

> To use the language of fate is to assert that all human beings come into a world they did not choose and live their lives within a universe they did not make.
>
> George Grant, "Canadian Fate and Imperialism"

The first of Lee's Elegies explicitly delineates a socio-political grief for the loss of consciousness in citizenship, as Lee calls up "spectres" that fly "across the square in fetid descent…congregating in bitter groves," and describes the spectres as those who "died truncated, stunted" by the self-betrayal of Canadian colonization (*CEOP* 27). Because they were "never at home in native space" and, as Lee specifies, they are "not yet citizens of a human body of kind," the spectres of the dead appear in this way to be paternal figures who haunt Lee in the classic filiative manner, urging on him an elegiac narrative that illuminates the frustrations of their unacknowledged deaths, as well as their "unlived lives" of quiet—and very Canadian—desperation. While Lee does not use Thoreau's phrase about the "mass of men," his diction, as well as his cadence, invites the allusion. The rest of the Elegies detail some of these dead men and their legacies as Lee construes them, which range from the nationally sublime to the (sometimes) politically ridiculous—Tom Thomson, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, Paul Chartier, William Lyon Mackenzie—and indict the weakness of Canadian government with the statement that "good men do not matter to history" (28). But by linking political oppression to the "unlived lives" of those who were "never at home in native space" during their corporeal existence, and who, despite their past lives, cannot *even yet* be known as "citizens of a human body of kind," the First Elegy also points to the absence of those whose names are not featured in official histories: women, people of the First Nations, people of colour. The absence of people of First Nations ancestry invoked by Lee's diction, suggesting that the economically colonized nation has passed on the state of oppression by regulating "native space," both geographical and legal, in ways that deny to people of First Nations heritage any citizenship of "a human body of kind," the pun on "kind" functioning in this phrase as both a typological designation, a kinship, and an attitude. The recent development of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee concerning government-run residential schools gives Lee's contention that "it is Canada / that has specialized in this deprivation" (*CEOP* 27) a special chill. The "not yet" of citizenship can also be read as a reference to the endlessly deferred social and political acceptance of new Canadians from other cultures, and in Lee's assertion of

what history teaches and what the dominant culture forgets, the histories of diasporic peoples who now live in Canada are echoed. How much, then, do "good" women, "good" Indigenous people, and "good" people of colour matter to Canadian history?

The feminine influence can be felt even in the spectres that descend upon Lee's narrator and haunt him, for despite the "truncated" masculinity that Lee attributes to these spectral figures, he also likens them, with good mythological reasoning, to furies. Lee warns that "though you would not expect / the furies assembled in hogtown," he "watch[es] the homing furies' arrival" as they "ring [him] round, invisible, demanding / what time of our lives we wait for till we shall start to be" (*CEOP* 27). The spectre-furies are numerous enough to "darken the towers /and the wind-swept place of meeting and whenever / the thick air clogs my breathing it teems with their presence" (*CEOP* 27). These are the transplanted furies of Greek mythology, at once imported and indigenous; they are as irrevocable as they are in the *Orestia*, demanding reparation for wrongs perpetuated upon the sense of the civic familial, one more way to read "a human body of kind." While Lee is not quite the modern Orestes, the furies dog him, demand answers, and so call forth the Elegies; the furies are the terrible muses that, in Milton's phrase from *Lycidas*, "loudly sweep the string" to begin this elegy. The homing furies give Lee permission to enter into the elegiac mode and to affix to public discourse the artifact of mourning that the Elegies become. To elegize without the guidance of the muses—even these altered angry muses—means that the elegist will not attain revelation or *anagnorisis,* as the Greeks called it. In these Elegies, as in so many others written since the sixteenth century, "regeneration" begins with the acknowledgement of death not yet properly mourned.

Regarding Lee's furies as inspirations for his "passionate civil man" seems a particularly fruitful link to the feminist poetics of Gail Scott. Despite Lee's reliance on George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* and *Technology and Empire*, an incipient feminist perspective cannot be ignored in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* for the very "unskirtable" political anxiety and political incivility that women represent in the text. In *Spaces Like Stairs*, Scott suggests that contemporary feminists are politicized furies who function in Canadian feminist discourse to "upset the power" of patriarchal systems in both literature and politics, to "uncover the matrilineal traces buried in the folds of classical drama," and to use this ancient tradition to "expand…into new time, into the new space that opens before us as the law wavers on the edge of social, ecological disaster" (Scott 123). Noting that the furies appear in the "ominous forebodings of black storm-

clouds" accompanied by the "buzz of mosquitoes," Scott gives readers an impression of a "furious" atmosphere not unlike Lee's "thick air" in the First Elegy. The contemporary fury, a "bittersweet mixture of eroticism and foreboding," is nothing less than a "revolutionary" figure who "might hold the clue to a new kind of heroine…who is not merely the feminine of hero" (Scott 123). This heroine, Scott proposes, would be "both grandiose and humble, miserable and angry," embodying such affective contradictions "without shame" (124). Margaret Visser, in her 2002 book *Beyond Fate*, reminds us that the mythological furies were unregenerate and unforgiving, and the punishment they inflicted included insanity and exile, civic deaths that were arguably worse than physical death:

> The Furies might…drive the transgressor mad, chasing him away from sheltering city walls, away from the map of streets and all the city's other structures, and out across a featureless plain. Madness was confusion, a loss of all points of reference. The punishments of the Furies were claustrophobia and agoraphobia. (Visser 95)

So Lee's homing furies are indeed powerful indicators of what it may be like to be either suffocated by the city/nation or abandoned by it, or possibly, paradoxically, both. Visser warns that the furies rule the realm of *moira*, where "laws are…shorn of transcendent dimension," and they obey "pattern pure and simple, the imprisoning outline of the universe" (53). However, Mouré uses the figure of the fury to expand the possibilities for legitimate love outside of that "imprisoning outline" of patriarchy. In Mouré's 1988 book, *Furious*—which, like *Civil Elegies*, was awarded the Governor-General's Award for Poetry—the central image of a female figure who is "terribly, terrifying alive" in desire and language functions through a "rapport with rage" ("my existence" 216-17). Mouré calls up the anger and the tenderness of the furies to offer a female figure driven by perspicacity rather than by rage. Compare Mouré's comments on language use and culture from her prose-poems, "The Acts," with Lee's contention that "to explore the obstructions of cadence is, for a Canadian, to explore the nature of colonial space" ("Cadence" 154):

> It's the way people use language makes me furious.The ones who reject the colloquial & common culture. The ones who laud on the other hand the common & denigrate the intellect, as if we are not thinking. The ones who play between the two, as if culture were a strong wind blowing in the path of *honour*. It takes us nowhere & makes me furious, that's all. (*Furious* 86)

From Lee's Grantian perspective, Canada is colonized by American imperialism; from Mouré's feminist perspective, the culture is colonized by the status quo of gender, class, and language. The politics of these poetics are not ideologically equivalent, but neither are they rhetorically disparate, with their shared concerns with colloquial language, with an appeal to the denigrated intellect, with the misuse of honour, and with a furious understanding of cultural stasis.

Why should she fake it?: domestic space and the civic house of memory

Lee's fury-haunted First Elegy seems to establish the feminine principle as a force of national conscience, but the Second Elegy reveals a woman in what appears to be a quintessential melancholic moment:

> the world is not enough; a woman straightens
> and turns from the sink and asks her life the
> question, why should she
> fake it? and after a moment she
> shrugs, and returns to the sink.
>
> (*CEOP* 31)

This is another moment that few critics have emphasized, though Robert Lecker's recent monograph, *The Cadence of Civil Elegies*, notes that this moment "expresses failure, fakery and alienation" and that this passage links "Lee's dissatisfactions to the woman's" but offers no speculation about why this woman appears at this point in the text (Lecker 31). At this early stage of the Elegies, the shrugging woman is not permitted philosophical debate or conjecture; her agency is as ambivalent as her shrug. Is she indifferent or exhausted, or both? "Faking it" indicates a faked interest in a limited version of citizenship as well as the sexual strategy of faking orgasm. How satisfied (politically and sexually) is it possible for this woman to be, given the equally non-responsive bodies of nation-state and male partner? Perhaps her question about "faking it" is a question about silence: the answering silence into which she launches her shrug, and her refusal to ask anything more. While the shrugging woman's refusal to "fake it" precedes by Fred Wah's theory of poetic/critical "faking" by more than a decade, Wah's famous poetic statement that in Canada, "when you're not 'pure' you just make it up" (Wah 43) surely has resonance with the woman's shrug and turn. Wah's difference is racial, and the woman's is gender-based. She is not a man, not a "pure" citizen; sullied by her elision from the discourse of citizenship, she has not yet "made it up" as she will

learn in the 1980s when feminist criticism takes off in Canada, so for now she asks "why should she fake it?" Syntactically, it is difficult to determine whether the question, "why should she fake it?" is actually the question she "asks her life," or whether the question about "faking it" is the answer to an unwritten question. Why should she perform citizenship in "the civic house of memory that [she] is kept out of"? Smaro Kamboueli, writing about Wah's poetics, suggests that all critical discourse may be viewed as "faking it" as it all produces anxiety, and that faking it means departing from convention even as it is used to "perform the national imaginary" while "dismantling a humanistic ideology" (Kamboueli 119). Wah's use of the phrase to connote racial and poetic difference is useful here as a sign of what is not sounded in Lee's burgeoning dialogue about Canadian citizenship, the racial "otherness" that is ignored in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, the First Nations "otherness" that remains strangely ahistorical, and the gendered "otherness" that the text cannot quite suppress.

The woman at the sink in Lee's Second Elegy is not an isolated image; it appears again and again in feminist texts of political and personal emancipation in which the woman at the sink represents both the status quo and the potential for political change. Mouré, in her 1984 article "I'll Start Out by Talking," uses the memory of her mother in front of a kitchen sink as a site of early feminist understanding and eventual emancipation:

> I get my courage from my mother, from the place she stood in front of the kitchen sink, and wore two holes in the linoleum. That right hole bigger than the left, indicating that she pivoted that way. Later,…my mother went to work, against my father's wishes, and bought, eventually, new linoleum. I carry her erasure of those holes around inside me. The place where I learned to read, the real causal existence of the place…is our secret now. (113)

The work of entropy and the energy of replacement in Mouré's anecdote makes the story more than just a feminist click. Mouré asserts that "entropy IS the organizing law of the City," and further, that women are excluded from the civic order and from civic power by this investment in entropy and decay ("Poetry," 201). Just as Lee insists "good / stateless men and women go down in civil fury" (*CEOP* 38), Mouré asserts that "poetic silence…is complicit with the existing order" (206). In her quest to "inhabit freely the civic house of memory," Mouré asserts a civic feminism that parallels Lee's frustration with ultra-masculinist nationalism. In discussing a love for debate and rhetoric, critic Rebecca A. Martusewicz uses a similar image of a woman by the sink who neither looks up nor shrugs: a symbol of political numbness, mute to her daughter's inquiries about the

way the world works. The questioning daughter in Martusewicz's narrative "knows that love is in those questions, a particular kind of love. It's impossible that her mother should not know this, too. But the woman does not turn; she remains at the sink" (Martusewicz 97). This space before the sink has been written as a space of ambivalence for some women, and a space of desire for others; it is politically loaded as a space for creativity and as one of refusal. Lee gives us a woman's refusal to fake it as one way to acknowledge the ephemerality of existence and the limits of language; he knows that he can "say nothing" about his "Master and Lord" that "does not vanish like tapwater," and the woman's shrug is eloquent in its refusal to speak the words that cannot represent reality, her own or anyone else's: why should she fake it?

This shrugging woman from the Elegies is definitely a return of the wife figure from "Coming Back," and in discussing the Elegies first, I have—in some ways—put the national cart before the uxorious horse. The "Coming Back" section begins with the dedication, "Illisque pro annis uxore," translated by Doug Fetherling as "For my wife and those years" (37). The juxtaposition of this domestic dedication rendered in religious/academic Latin against the "pro patria" of the Elegies' dedication raises questions about the relationship between the sections. "Pro patria"—for my country—cannot escape being read as an allusion to Horace's "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori": "Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country." However, "pro patria" also implies "for my father," imperfectly but surely, and juxtaposing it with a dedication to "my wife" suggests opposing aims rather than concomitant ones. While it is clear that for his country/father, Lee's speaker wishes honour and decency, it is anything but clear what he wishes for his wife. The marriage poems describe and cajole, but they do not demand or proclaim as do the Elegies. The addition of "those years" as ancillary to the dedication to the wife invites all kinds of questions about temporality: do the years accompany the wifedom, or do they undermine it? Does the invocation of temporality reinforce the dedication to the marriage or suggest the erosion of time on the marriage? And, most importantly, how does regarding the marriage as the promise of "heaven and earth and all / the vivacious things that throng around a man" (*CEOP* 16) prefigure the passionate civil consciousness of the Elegies? The wifely figure of "Coming Back" slouches, shrugs, and sleeps her way through the poems; her male partner is at first nonplussed by her refusal to embrace him, and along with him, the status quo. As Lee's speaker identifies his own desperate estrangement within the domestic space of the marriage, he becomes aware that estrangement increasingly defines his

relationship with his own body, with the city, and with the nation.[4] These poems suggest a certain piquant perspective on how women exist in the Elegies as the trace of "regenerative absence," that force that Lee proposes will revive a functioning nationalism from the space of its elision, and will defy the truncating force of masculinity with the "spritely" and "subtle" force of its refusal.

Lee attempts gender inclusiveness when he speaks of "good / stateless men and women" (*CEOP* 38), but when it comes to the desperate cries of the citizen, women are all but forgotten: "We are all / Canadians, and honourable men" (*CEOP* 42). Canadian female statelessness has not been produced by John Diefenbaker's failure of nerve in the Cuban Missile Crisis, as Grant would have it, nor by Paul Martin's imperialism-by-proxy. Rather, Canadian female statelessness has been produced and supported by the very kinds of national, rhetorical, and linguistic elision that Lee both reproduces and gropes towards refuting. Jill Vickers asserts that George Grant's anti-modernist nationalism represents a "defense of cultural identity understood from an elite, male-centred and white perspective" (Vickers 365), and Grant's influence on Lee can be seen most clearly when Lee's image of a beleaguered yet impassioned citizenry loses inclusiveness in as little space as five lines:

> …*the people* accept a flawed inheritance
> and they give it a place in their midst, forfeiting progress, forfeiting dollars, forfeiting yankee visions of cities that in time it might grow whole at last in their lives, they might
> belong once more to their forebears, becoming *their own men.*
> (*CEOP* 29; my emphases)

Even considering the bad habit of inferring that "men" includes "women," (a hard semantic sell even in 1972), Lee's linguistic amnesia rankles. What of the shrugging woman's question about fakery? Perhaps, in a liberal humanist paroxysm of forgetfulness, Lee's speaker intends to suggest that women, too, wish to "become their own men," but to return to Lee's epigraph from Grant, such a project seems to be impossible without acknowledgement that "woman" is also "a political animal" with her own desire to "become." But it is worth noting that the prospect of becoming one's "own man" seems overwhelming to the Elegies' speaker, as becoming one's own man would necessitate acknowledgement of "the difficult singularity of the man I am not ready for" (*CEOP* 9). Lee's male bodies are not emasculated by a devouring female, but rather by standards of masculinity: corporatism and a type of political pandering that John Ralston Saul calls

"courtierism," an ideological kowtowing to a financial monarch (Saul 27). To read that the speaker is not yet ready for normative masculinity is hopeful; it suggests that he may be ready to speak with a woman who also opposes this normative masculinity.

Public Space, Private Bodies: territorial possibilities

> …one of the most profound issues to beset any mourner or elegist is his surviving yet painfully altered sexuality.
> (Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* 7)

In his 1973 review of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, Andreas Schroeder notes that Lee uses the whole text to "wrestle with both private and public angels for nothing less than salvation" (104). The marriage poems act as a requiem for a relationship as well as for the citizen's hopes for the country, and it must be emphasized that the poet's struggle with, and hard-won admiration for, the feminine principle in the "Coming Back" sequence is vital as a component of the renewal towards which the Elegies strive. Sean Kane maintains that the Seventh Elegy gestures towards the book's ending by asserting that "the proper wisdom of it all is found in the way human beings treat each other" (140). Kane's seemingly simple statement is given greater significance by the way that the Seventh Elegy, with its emphasis upon the "baleful chemistry" between lovers, reintroduces anxious images of the marriage in crisis. Before Lee can speak of the need to be "at home in the difficult world," he gives us in the Seventh Elegy a series of portraits of fraught human relationships, in which "nerve-ends come apart and we spend / long nights separate in the same bed," and in which lovers "move through these hard necessities / like losers for awhile" before "they come to a / difficult rhythm together, around / their job and the kids, that allows for a / tentative joy and often for grieving together" (*CEOP* 44). But even this "tentative joy," which could be read as a heterosexualized solution to civic anxiety, is short-lived. The next line starts the penultimate stanza of the Seventh Elegy with the proposition that romantic partnership is as difficult as citizenship:

> But mostly each man carries his lover's fate
> inside him, which he fears as it stirs because if the drinks are strong
> or the conversation proceeds just so it will rise up and contemptuously
> destroy him, and at last when he meets the other
> with his own fate trapped like a bubble inside her body

> there is a baleful chemistry which draws them together for love and the kill.
> And out of that horror of life
> they take on the crippled roles that each has singled the
> other to partner, the voluntary betrayal is
> consummated
>
> (*CEOP* 44)

The identification here, in the final pages of the "Civil Elegies" sequence, of the female figure as a benevolent parasite that disturbs the inner workings of the male speaker, and who also carries "his fate" within her in a pregnant "bubble" of foreboding, is no accident. Lee's "spritely lovers / who could not love themselves" seem poised to inherit an absence in which even regeneration is rendered in fateful tones. Similarly tortured expressions of sexuality in the "Coming Back" section seem to emphasize an emotional impotence that unsettles intercourse. In "The Morning of the Second Day: He Tells Her," the poet-speaker worries about the damage that an expression of sexuality, and a female response to it, may bring to him: "How will you handle my body?" (*CEOP* 9). "High Park, by Grenadier Pond" cites "the / whiskey, the fights, the pills" (7), eschewing all pretence of domestic harmony for the kitchen-sink drama of a marriage on the wane. In "Brunswick Avenue," the speaker identifies the wife figure as "the woman with whom I did great violence for years" (5); the use of the word "with" rather than "to" gives us another window on sexuality and the quotidian commitments of married life as acts of mutual violence, "household acts of war" (33). Even the tender moments seem haunted by the possibility of failure and humiliation; "Recollection" tells of "the excellent pleasure" of sex in purely nostalgic terms (10). More straightforward expressions of consciousness-drowning desire, like "Come on over here, lie on top of me, let's fuck" ("Night" 12), are immediately subsumed into despairing political thought in the very next lines: "Good men would think / twice about it, they would / not be born in this century" (12). If no "good men" have been born in this century, the speaker then condemns himself, a stance that prompts David Helwig to write:

> …the marriage poems [are] the most painful and lasting piece of the Protestant inheritance – the belief that things can be explained…In the poems about marriage, Dennis Lee seems too ready to take the blame – or to believe that there is blame to be taken. The terrible hypothesis that things should have been better – the liberal guilt. (Helwig 67)

These vestiges of guilt and blame keep sexual intercourse from functioning as even a temporary "lobotomy" (*CEOP* 12), but the speaker maintains sufficient acuity to recognize the woman's different relationship to space. Though the speaker attempts to drown his anxiety in his wife's flesh, he finds that she experiences space differently than he does. Noting that her "body is full of listening, / exquisite among its own shockwaves," he cannot resist asking "What / space are you going into?" (*CEOP* 11). Unwanted in civic space, unaddressed and unsurveyed by the *polis*, the woman occupies a space of difference that eludes the poet-speaker, and interestingly, she does so willingly. The man's question, "What / space are you going into?" indicates that her departure is the volitional movement of an agent, not the involuntary withdrawal of a victim. The push-pull of these marriage poems concerns the "love-desperation" of the male subject (Fetherling 37), and the role of male self-abnegation in the erasure or recuperation of the feminine underscores a wealth of literary and philosophical traditions. Though Lee is at times tripped up by the tradition of regarding men as spirit and women as body, reading the Elegies after the Other Poems implies that the shrugging woman is an elegiac "lost beloved" of a political and personal nature, and further, that the Elegies themselves are haunted by the need for an embodied consciousness that cannot be fulfilled by gendered Cartesian dualism. Lee tries to follow Grant's anti-modernism that condemns ravenous corporatism as American and exalts the spirit as loftily philosophical, ancient, and the true Canadian legacy, but Lee's struggle to free himself from these dynamics is part of his broken cadence, anticipating while not modeling post-structural feminist poetics that strive to "write the body" without falling into old discursive patterns and linguistic traps.

In contrast to the suppressed but surprisingly independent female figure, Lee writes the male speaker as desperate to please according to his own absurdist aesthetic. The speaker performs carnivalesque acts of contrition for the wife figure; he "trickle[s] under the door" or hangs from his incisors from the second-story window ("He Asks Her," *CEOP* 6); he attempts an excoriating spiritual cleansing by "pronounc[ing] 'I hate you' with his body" ("Heaven and Earth," 16); he "wabbles [his] neck and lounges the trophy from [his] dream" across her body ("Glad For All the Wrong Reasons," 4). This comic-tragic desperation is outlandishly performative, and it explores a liminal, flexible mode of masculinity. To call such a masculinity "feminized" would be inaccurate; to say such masculinity learns from the feminine offers a more valuable social and political perspective.

But as Mouré warns, "A public space is where we are both signs, O Claire" (2002, 9), and without a doubt, Lee's search for a recuperative feminine in the public space of the poetic text is problematically heterosexist. A survey of the "marriage poems" reveals the female body as that which is both offered and withheld, a body that is subject to both admiration and envy. However, by observing his wife's "exquisite…shockwaves" (*CEOP* 11), the poet twigs onto a regenerative absence of the liberated space in private life that will manifest publicly in the civic square. In "When It is Over," the wife does not explain the "space" into which she has gone, and the poet-speaker finds a way to stop questioning her, to "let be" (*CEOP* 11), and becomes, for his efforts, amazed at the way she occupies space in ways that he does not. It is from this acknowledgement that people need "room to be" (*CEOP* 40) that Lee's speaker understands the need to "honour the void" in Canadian civic responsiveness (*CEOP* 36). After all, to paraphrase Gail Scott from "A Feminist at the Carnival," as long as a writer does not ignore her/his epoch, s/he may do anything s/he likes with it, including shrug, demand, appear spritely and/or subtle, turn away to the sink, or move off into an unknown space. "A woman wanting to write can be a territorial impossibility" writes Mouré in *O Cidádan* (9). In her refusal to fake civic inclusiveness, what remains unasked and unwritten by the woman by the sink; what territories are implied in her shrug as she moves away into private space?

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the biannual conference of the Association of Canadian Studies in the United States, in Toronto in November 2007. My thanks to my interlocutors on that occasion, and to Misao Dean for her early encouragement of these ideas.

1 The 1972 version of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* will be abbreviated hereafter as *CEOP*. I have deviated from the practice of citing the Elegies by their number and have instead cited them by their pages within the text as a whole, in order to include the "Coming Back" poems as a significant part of the text. The "Civil Elegies" sequence of poems will be referenced in quotation marks, or simply as the Elegies.

2 Margaret Atwood's editorial influence on the 1972 edition of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* with Lee is worth noting. Though she is not acknowledged anywhere in the 1994 reissue of the text, Atwood writes that when she was on the Board at Anansi, she worked with a number of writers on their books, including "Dennis himself, with whom I edited the second edition of *Civil Elegies*." See Atwood, "Dennis Revisited."

3 The female figure who is referred to only by her gender will reappear in later works of Lee's: in the poem "Remember, Woman," in 1978's *The Gods*, and again as "lady"

throughout 1993's *Riffs*.

4 Mouré's *O Cidádan* also includes a series of poems seemingly directed to a specific woman: "Georgette," whose name acts as the title for several different poems.

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