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Versed in the Sciences; Penned of the Land: a review of Liz Howard's *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent*

***Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent* by LIZ HOWARD**

McLelland & Stewart, 2015 \$18.95

Reviewed by **DAVID CARRUTHERS**

The poetry of Liz Howard's *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent* is not easy to define. The collection's oft-times seemingly artificially-high diction works to obfuscate meaning, occasionally alienating its readership. Be prepared when taking up this collection to arm yourself with patience and an *Oxford English Dictionary* at the ready, for many of the poems graft a highly-technical scientific dialect onto the sensuous language describing the interplay between the body and its environment.

It is just this tension, however, between a high academese and sensory experience, the intellect and the body, albeit often resulting in a chimerical enterprise, that defines Howard's project. Reflected generally in the two types of poems offered by the collection—the first, tripping over long lines favouring unrhymed tercets, floating in abstract thought with only the occasional touching-down into concrete imagery (as does “Terra Nova, Terraformed,” “Prologue,” or the two of the three poems entitled “Standard Time”); the second, shorter lines producing near-maudlin narrative poems recounting childhood memories, bucolic and ecoerotic scenes of northern wilderness underlined by a nostalgic melancholy (as do “Look Book,” “Boreal Swing,” “Debarker,” “Redress,” and “Bigger than”)—the *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent* encapsulates the schizoid nature of the modern subject.

This lingual fissure that runs both through and between each poem is, yet, performative of a cultural rift between colonial and indigenous regimes of knowledge. An Anishnaabe woman born into poverty and strife in northern Ontario with the cultural expectation that she was “meant for the office of methadone or welfare” (“short interview”), before instead studying cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto, earning an MFA in Writing at Guelph, and eventually being shortlisted for the 2015 Governor General's Award for this collection, Liz Howard's is the voice of “the other” that so preoccupies her poetic aspirations (“short interview”). The absurdity that arises in the poet's merging of these two camps of experiential and technical knowledges, of common and lofty dialects, is reflective, then, of the absurdity and irreconcilability of a continued colonial present mapped onto an indigenous past. The speaker of the *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent*, despite the difficulty, seems to navigate this dangerous chasm with grace, style, and ease.

The image of the titular “shaking tent,” provided in “Thinktent” (12, 14) with its connotations both of a popular ecosexuality and a fearful and reverent appreciation for the natural sublime, each to be discovered in this collection, is, moreover, the *Jisakiwin* ritual performed by the Anishnaabe in communion with the spirits to seek guidance in the right action to cure physical and spiritual ailments, to relieve one of the darkness that plagues us all in such troubled times.

And this, a much-needed restorative, as the body and environment in Liz Howard's nature are already polluted: rife with heavy metals, carcinogens, radioactivity, toxic thought and practice. The prayer, then, making up these verses,

comes after the end of the world (“Bigger than” 24-26)—post-colonial, -industrial, -Anthropocenic, and -apocalyptic. The speaker, this “infinite citizen,” fulfills a moral duty to a global community through focalization that shifts from the most local, particular experience, specific to the individual, spiraling outward into ecological, even cosmological dimensions, to think and speak through a more-than-human world. Perception spirals outward, almost uncontrollably, in poems such as “North by South”—migrating from a “walk far out / into the woods” (62-63), to a “river / dissolving ... silt” (66-67), “to Hudson’s Bay / to the Arctic Ocean” (69-70), and back to “a book of maps” (73); or the observation of “a boulder across the street” (87), to the slow recession of glaciers (88) and “growth of ... birch trees” (89), and then back to a mother’s memory of some years past, recollecting the span of a generation or two (90-91)—re-contextualizing the human through temporal and geographic expanses that lend themselves to the infinitude suggested by the collection’s title.

The effect, while at times dizzying and disorienting, is the direct experience of the abject that Timothy Morton, in his *Dark Ecology*, has so effectively named *ecognosis*: the uncanny awareness of belonging to *fuzzy* (potentially infinite) series of “wholes that are weirdly *less* than the sum of their parts” (71). The ecological thought of the infinite citizen, rather than solely relying on the holism of systems-thinking, in which one actor might be as good as any other, works to reconcile the human bound up in her world and to heal this Great Divide, by whatever means at the poet’s disposal—including material, philosophical, neurological, psychological, chemical, geological, and spiritual, not to

mention poetical, understandings of person, place, and time.

The Shaking Tent, then, produces citizens, made cognizant of a civic duty to life and the earth, not only out of a human readership willing to allow the poems to find itself trembling, mute and unarmed, at the grandeur of scale and so-seeming endless complexity of the world that surrounds them, but so also of the non-human elements granted new life through the voice of the collection—the star-stuff, bears, birches and wind-worn cedars, chemical compounds, on-ramps and estuaries, stones and orchids, celestial and geological movements that work on and through, comprising and interpellating this *Infinite Citizen*.

Reading nearer to Gertrude Stein, to whom the poet (dare I say, prematurely) compares herself in the title of “Steinian Aphasia,” than Walt Whitman, who shares this conveyance of the human as deeply entrenched in its spiritual, material, and biotic environments, the poems of Liz Howard’s *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent* risk frustrating readers expecting a poetry to please without strain and make its meaning immediately transparent. Or, perhaps the collection reads more akin to a Juliana Spahr, made strange, however, by too many nights in the lab. Such comparisons, though seeming critical, should attest to the strength of the craft of this young poet’s first collection, rather than to its weakness. This debut collection establishes Liz Howard among the many strong voices that make up the canon of Canadian poetry, and her future work will be read with wonder by wide-eyed students from various backgrounds and with similar artistic aspirations. I, myself, look forward to observing the development of Howard’s work in the years that follow.

Works cited

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