

2-7-2018

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Recommended Citation

Reis, Ashley E. (2018) "Lines of Flight: An Atomic Memoir by Julie Salverson," *The Goose*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss2/12>

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Tracing the Course of Mourning

***Lines of Flight: An Atomic Memoir* by JULIE SALVERSON**

Wolsak & Wynn, 2016 \$20.00

Reviewed by **ASHLEY E. REIS**

Julie Salverson's *Lines of Flight: An Atomic Memoir* is an essential addition to the nuclear literary tradition. In her memoir, Salverson interrogates the makeup of the material network that gave way to the most horrific act of violence in human history: the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Salverson indeed attends to this act of spectacular violence in and of itself. Yet, she advances an original and nuanced perspective, inviting her audience along on her investigative journey into the protracted and prolonged violence enacted on the Northwest Territories' Dene people of Déline, whose indigenous lands were excavated, and whose bodies were contaminated as these aboriginal laborers unknowingly contributed to the bomb's creation. All the while, Salverson ruminates openly on what it means to bear witness to environmental injustice, violence, and trauma, and affords her audience insight into the process of unearthing embodied knowledge in the name of ethically rendering testimony and confronting grief.

Salverson's memoir does the critical work of developing parallel elements of the narrative surrounding the atomic bomb. First, *Lines of Flight* highlights a missing piece of the material puzzle—or what Salverson calls “the Atomic Highway”—that connects the development of the bomb in the U.S. Southwest and the detonation of the bomb in Hiroshima to the mining of uranium in Canada. Little coverage exists of the uranium mining project that took place

on the edge of the Northwest Territories' Great Bear Lake, roughly five hundred kilometers north of Edmonton. Accordingly, Salverson and her research partner, Peter C. van Wyck, travel to Déline, an indigenous community of several hundred people, in an effort to fill the gaps in the historical account of Canada's involvement in what van Wyck calls “the great atlas of calamity that was the twentieth century's history with the atom” (2). They learn that in the 1930s and '40s, indigenous community members processed bags of uranium ore from the Eldorado mine by hand, and ferried them across Bear Lake. From here, the uranium travelled to Alberta, and eventually to a refinery in Port Hope, in Southern Ontario, before it was sent to New Mexico to be utilized in the development of the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. It was not until decades later that the deadly tie weaving together Déline and Hiroshima within a sweeping nuclear tapestry began to emerge. Salverson's work in her atomic memoir advances this history from a critical, humanistic perspective that highlights the extensive reach of disaster, which she explains, “is no longer linked to a specific incident—nuclear war, mass murder, environmental catastrophe,” but is, rather, “amorphous, ubiquitous” (123).

As Salverson's journey unfolds, she learns that contemporary historical accounts moreover overlook the Dene's place in global atomic history, failing even to mention them as historical actors (55). Her memoir thus develops this fundamental, yet neglected component of the Dene people's history. Salverson reports that a year's worth of uranium-impact research conducted by lawyers in the national archives revealed that within “the mountain of papers” that lawyers dug

up in Ottawa, there was “not one mention of the Dene” (31). Not only were the Dene erased from the atomic record, she informs her readership, the covert nature of the bomb’s creation means that the Dene themselves were in fact kept from the truth of their own deadly tie to Hiroshima; from the Eldorado mine’s earliest operations, the government kept crucial information from the Dene (30). Although 1932’s *Annual Report of the Department of Mines* included a detailed and lengthy explanation of the mined ore’s dangers, the government did not alert the Dene, who carried and transported it. Beyond obscuring the truth of the Dene’s exposure to deadly levels of radiation, the government also concealed from the Dene the greater context and purpose of their exposure, which Salverson’s memoir gracefully and respectfully pronounces. As it asserts the Dene people’s atomic agency—for better or worse—by highlighting their own story as it comes to bear on her own, Salverson renders visible the once invisible history of the Dene people’s connection to this pivotal event in world history, and their desire to recognize, confront, and apologize for their role in the violence, immediate and spectacular, as well as prolonged and attritional.

Salverson’s readership joins her as she confronts the Dene community’s prolonged struggle to contend with the psychological weight of their entanglement in atomic history. This leaves both Salverson and her audience questioning universal truths such as how to most effectively engage in the act of mourning, and to what extent each of us is responsible to our past. As she follows her own personal line of flight from her home in Ottawa, to Déline and New Mexico, and beyond, to Hiroshima itself, Salverson grapples not only with how

to tell the Dene’s story, but how to tell her own story. *How can one open oneself to a world beyond one’s own; hear what exists beyond language; witness the incomprehensible; and respond by letting the story change us, and even impact our own stories?* she muses. And, *To what extent must one enact vulnerability in the name of developing a relationship that fosters the kind of deep witnessing required to heal a trauma that spans generations, borders, and even oceans?* she wonders. Salverson takes up these questions, among a variety of additional prolific concerns, in *Lines of Flight*. In doing so, she and her readership simultaneously ascertain that no matter how far we must travel to contend with our own grief, and the ways in which it may or may not be bound up in the grief of others, the work of mourning will always lead us home.

ASHLEY E. REIS is Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at the State University of New York at Potsdam. She teaches Introduction to Environmental Studies, as well as courses in Environmental Justice, Ecology and the Mind, and Equity in the Outdoors. Her book project, “With the Earth in Mind: Ecological Grief in the Contemporary U.S. Novel,” investigates the phenomena of ecological grief and anxiety in post-WWII U.S. literature.