

In Conversation with Erina Harris and Christine Stewart

Christine Stewart is a poet-scholar living in Edmonton near the North Saskatchewan River on Treaty Six Territory. Her practice includes the publication of poetry chapbooks and books including *from TAXONOMY* (West House Books, 2003) *Pessoa's July* (Nomados, 2006), and *Treaty 6 Deixis* (Talonbooks) forthcoming in the autumn of 2018. A past participant in the Kootenay School, Christine has also worked in numerous literary, performance and pedagogical collaborations including the publication of the poetry collection *Virtualis: Topologies of the Unreal* (Book*hug, 2013), co-authored with David Dowker. Christine is an Associate Professor in the English and Film Studies Department in the WRITE Programme at the University of Alberta. Her pedagogical practice focuses on the ways in which poetic work might re-engage us with language, the world and with each other. Currently, she is co-instructing the course "The Poetics of Treaty" with nêhiyawewin language instructor Rueben Quinn.

Erina Harris is a poet living on Treaty Six Territory in Edmonton. She is a graduate and Fellow of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her poetry collection *The Stag Head Spoke* (Wolsak & Wynn, Buckrider Books, 2014) was short-listed for the Canadian Authors' Association Poetry Award. Her poetry has received numerous awards, short-listings, grants and residencies. She is currently editing her second collection *Persephone's Abecedarium: An Alphabet Play (an Ecopoetical Adaptation of the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter")* for publication in 2020. For over a decade she curated The Blue Betty's Bistro yearly International Women's Day literary event celebrating the work of innovative Canadian and American women writers. She is a SSHRC Post Doctoral Fellow in Poetics and Pedagogy at the University of Alberta.

Erina Harris – Christine, your literary, scholarly and pedagogical practices are vast and innovative. I invite you to discuss their intersections. In the spirit of feminist collaborative practice, I also invite you to curate this conversation with me.

You participated in the Kootenay School for Writers (KSW). Could you share your experiences?

Christine Stewart – Before moving to Edmonton from Vancouver in 2007, I worked on the edges of the Kootenay School for about 22 years. I first took a class at the KSW when I was 22 and with a nice young baby. It must have been the fall of 1985. I took a writing class run by Jeff Derksen and the late scholar and poet Nancy Shaw. It was there that I was introduced to Language poetry, to experimental poetry and to very different ways of thinking about writing.

Although, in the years that followed, I had another fine baby, and slogged through an undergraduate degree, MA and PhD at UBC, I always took courses at KSW. Over the years, I

worked with Fred Wah, Susan Howe, Peter Quartermain, Lyn Hejinian, and Charles Bernstein. Although university was challenging, it was at KSW that thinking and writing came alive for me. The discussions that we had and the readings that we shared created a warm kind of shattering for me—a welcome shattering, a fine and fiery rearranging of my thinking and my writing. To write was to think. To write was to read. To read was to write. There, I came to understand poetry as a theoretical/philosophical practice through which the world might be re-considered, re-configured.

And I read Stein, so much Stein, and Victor Shklovsky, The Language Poets, Hejinian, Bernstein, Silliman, and The Berkley Renaissance writers. Jack Spicer's *Letter to Lorca*. The Black Mountain Poets. The Objectivists, Zukofsky, Neidecker. I also refused many of the male writers we were told to read. But read Rabelais, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Agamben, Benjamin, Christine de Pisan, Whittig, Cixous, Irigary. It was exciting. Hilarious. Reading Rabelais. Gargantua wiping his arse with a goose. Laughing out loud in the old Ridington Room at UBC.

And working with Howe and Hejinian at KSW. I was there in Vancouver when Hejinian gave her talk on strangeness (now collected in *Language of Inquiry*). I was there when Susan Howe exhibited her early work on the archives of Emily Dickinson (later published as *My Emily Dickinson*). These were tectonic moments in my writing and thinking life—Hejinian's notion of metonymy as a poetic means by which the world could be ethically perceived; Howe's wild and rigorous poetic scholarship. These women, their works and their methodologies offered me permissions to think through poetry, to read and write into poetry in ways that felt a new kind of oxygen. I also worked in a reading group with Catriona Strang, Lisa Robertson, Susan Clark, Hilary Clark and Donna Guillemin. These collectively provided me with places where I could bring my babies (something not possible at KSW at the time). We met regularly in each other's living rooms, kitchens, sharing our writing and reading. Around this time, I also did a writing workshop in Red Deer with Fred Wah and bp Nichol. Lisa and Catriona took the publishing workshop with Fred and bp the following week. From there, Lisa and Catriona and I went on to publish *Barscheit* and Susan Clark and Lisa and I published *The Giantess*.

I guess, those days confirmed to me that writing was real, an active and material force in the world. But it is also true that our writing, and our reading, although feminist, and necessary, was also the writing and reading of a primarily white world and so, finally, untenable, unviable.

EH – You once mentioned that moving to Edmonton inspired or induced a radical reckoning asked of you as a poet and teacher. Could you elaborate?

CS – I now live in Rosedale, but I spent my first year living next to Mill Creek Ravine. That year and my job at the University of Alberta changed life for me in some pretty substantial ways. It was the first time in my adult life that I had been financially independent and secure. It was the first time that I had lived for any substantial amount of time without my kids. I was not broke and overwhelmed by day-to-day survival. But I was alone and overwhelmed by the strange new

place I was in. My initial fear of Edmonton and the Mill Creek ravine led me to a kind of heightened awareness that I had not experienced before.

It was also the time of an oil boom that had led to increased poverty and homelessness for many people.

During the summer of 2007, a tent city had grown up in downtown Edmonton. This was shut down by the city in early September and many of the inhabitants moved across the river into the ravine. In the mornings, on my way to work, as dawn broke, I would bike by people cooking breakfast on open fires or sleeping in shelters along the creek. At that time, the majority of the people living in the ravine were Indigenous, and as I later learned, many were *nêhiyaw* (Cree), from the Edmonton area—home and homeless. This condition remains very true for many people in Edmonton and across Canada—to be home and yet to be homeless in that very place of home. The enduring societal and governmental violence that is necessary for such a fact to be true is staggering. In the years that have followed, it has become obvious to me that I didn't know where I was in those days, that I never had known, and that I still don't, but that I urgently need to know where I am and what is expected of me here. This has led me to work and write in very different ways and with very different intentions and yet, I think what has remained with me, is that writing is real, that it matters, that language matters, how we use it and why, that there is a truth in language on the page. It might be a truth that we find hard to believe or do not want to believe but it is there. Which is not to say that writing is everything. It isn't. There are circumstances within which I often find myself now wherein writing needs to stop. Some things should not be written; sometimes writing is not enough.

EH – Can you discuss the relationship between poetry and philosophy in your past and/or current projects? Also, experimental poetics and avant-gardism have been accused of elitism on behalf of the erudition that may be required to engage with such writings. While I fear that some of this criticism has been launched historically as a form of backlash against erudition specifically within women's writing, are you concerned with questions of accessibility in your work?

CS – The relationship between poetry and philosophy and poetry and politics. The elitism of the avant-garde. The accessibility of my own work. Can poetics enact perceptible inquiries with and without reference to philosophical and theoretical references?

I think so.

Right now I am entirely occupied with being here, with the ongoing effects of colonization, with how I might be here in this impossible situation in an ethical way. How might I *not* perpetuate the very harms I seek to assuage, to address? The world is not the world I have been taught. Nor should it be. How to listen to this place, to this land as it is, as it speaks. How to listen to the communities to whom I am obliged. How to live in this smoke we have made?

I engage the page (or poetry) to try and sort something out. To sort out the patterns gathering in my head. To ask questions I can't answer. To try and bring a sense of a perception or a growing understanding to the page. I am rarely successful. Or perhaps, I am not trying to be successful. It is also possible that I am not precisely trying to be read, but trying to survive.

For my self, I find in poetry a field of inquiry where I can investigate conditions of thinking or living and where I can see what words might do on the page. It is not exactly public. Though it is not private either. For me, poetry brings with it a kind of permission to *not* be precisely understood. It refuses or can refuse to participate in being known and sometimes I find that I need that to go there, toward poetry, away from clarity, into the murk of whatever problem I have encountered. I am compelled to write what I write. However, how I write when I am alone with the page is very different from how I teach, I think. I teach to make sense, to make community, to make communal life possible. I think I have conversations for the same reason. But, in writing, on the page, I guess it is more about me thinking on the sidelines, thinking through what survival might mean and how English works with or against living.

In my teaching, I want to provide the room and the environment so that the students can move towards their own means of survival, to thrive in their own fashion, to engage language so that they can be heard, fight, understand, express. To me, teaching writing means the most when I work with people and communities to help facilitate, offer up the permissions that poetry offers, finding ways that language can work for them, about them and not against them. Can innovative poetry practices bring persons, lifeways and communities into view? Can it make a precarious life less precarious? I think both yes and no. As a member of the Writing Revolution In Place Creative Research Collective (WRIP—a collective of creative research scholars, artists and writers from around Edmonton and the university—some of whom live and work in extreme precarity), we have found instances where writing is meaningless in the throes of life, where writing might erode life, but also where writing might save a life. Sometimes these things can all happen at the same time.

EH – Elsewhere, you write:

“I am interested in the role that poetic language and form can play in the production of knowledge, and in the practice of concretely addressing issues of social justice... I consider the ways in which language can be formally and contextually engaged to reconsider and potentially re-articulate the world. How might certain poetic practices undermine racist ideologies and colonialism, engendering ecological attentiveness, anomalous, and compassionate communities?”

CS – Yes, I am interested in these things still. Though I guess I would no longer use the word justice in the wake of Dionne Brand's striking refusal of the term (see [Dionne Brand: Writing Against Tyranny and Toward Liberation](#))

And I am not sure if I want language to rearticulate the world or if I want language to help me understand that the world I have been offered, that I have helped and help to make is strange inverted shadow of its self or what it might be.

And, like I said, my teaching practices and collaborations work towards attentiveness, and, I hope, survival. It is what matters to me. It is the work that is central to WRIP. It was the purpose of the poetry workshop at Kitaskinaw School on the Enoch First Nation that I helped with and that was run by undergraduate students, Tarene Thomas and Rhiannon Arcand and Paige L'Hirondelle. In this project, it was their intention to encourage the students to write poetry so that they might thrive, so that they might survive.

In my own writing, I think I work more on a level of obscurity and a sense of words as universes pulsating with their own promise and beauty and violence. I quietly move things here or there to see what happens. I don't usually reach conclusions, and I don't really like reading in public. It is not why I write. I just want to set some small observation that I have made out into sea of shit and difficulty and see what happens. I want to see what happens, and what else might happen. I do not think poetry is precious. I love it as a possibility. I love the idea of poetry but I do not love all poetry. But I also don't care that much about that any more. I realize that it doesn't matter if I don't like certain poems or styles of poetry. Considering my situation, my current condition, while my opinion might be interesting to some, it is necessarily pretty irrelevant. My students have to write poetry. I know that. They need to thrive. I want that for them. And by virtue of putting words that interest them on the page, some of them will gain momentum and will find life bearable in ways that they did not previously imagine. Not all of them. Poetry is not magic. It is just a place of sometimes permissions that some students might fall into and where some might grow heartily articulate in the compost of those permissions. What I do on the side, in my work, in my books, matters but also does not matter. And that is important to me.

EH – Can you speak to the gifts and complexities of collaboration?

CS – Collaborations (in teaching and writing) are gorgeous and difficult and often hilarious. They work with my sense that making community and refusing the isolations we are given in this society (you here; me over there) are the only things that are possible and meaningful. Sometimes motley and sometimes incongruous, we come together in ways that no one wants or expects or believes in and then suddenly you have this conversation and you realize that everything is possible even in the midst of a world where little is possible. That said, collaborations also bring home the immense difficulty of working together and the infinite labour that is required of us working together, trying to be good to each other.

EH – I am reminded of poet Liz Howard's mention in an earlier CWILA interview of how it has been vital for her to access what she terms alternate "knowledge generating practices" specific to her Indigenous roots, in tandem with her ambivalent engagement with Western philosophy. As a poet, scholar and teacher of creative writing, (how) can you make a place for poetry within the university institution?

CS – One of my largest current concerns as an instructor at university right now is how to create spaces wherein Indigenous students can thrive. After teaching in TYP (a transition year programme for Indigenous students who would like to attend university—TYP affords students

with a year of preparation), I got a better sense of the serious struggles (like ongoing on-campus racism) that Indigenous students face at university and the necessity of creating spaces wherein they feel safe and able to work and think and create. It has become crucial for me to work at this both in my own classes, in my department and in the university as a whole. I have found that one of the best ways to do this is through collaborative projects with Indigenous faculty like Dwayne Donald or with people who work in various communities (like Reuben Quinn and Elder Bob Cardinal). I am extremely grateful for these opportunities and I take seriously Marie Batiste's assertion "nothing about us without us." Though, at the same time, I also believe that refusing the imposed divisions between us is crucial to resistance. Gathering is crucial.

Last year, I worked with Dwayne Donald and Bob Cardinal in a [remarkable 13-month class](#) based on the nêhiyaw 13 moons and in the Four Directions teachings—it took place largely out at Enoch.

For the last two years, I have been co-teaching [a class on Treaty Poetics](#) with nêhiyawewin instructor, Reuben Quinn. We are in our third year now. In these classes, poetic expression and creative research practices are necessary. These students need the permissions of the poetic in order to navigate all that they encounter.

For me, these teaching experiences strongly impact who and how I read and also how I have come to understand that reading a book is not always the best way to learn about the world we are in. It might make more sense to walk to swim to listen to pause to acknowledge one's own profound unknowing and the labour of unlearning.

I once had a colleague caution me about working in collaboration because I was in danger of "losing my own voice." I think I am okay with this danger.

EH – You have written fascinating reviews and discussions of female Canadian poets, often situating their work within communities of influence. Can you tell us what scholars and/or reviewers you read as companions to thinking with poetry?

CS – Currently, I read to in order to keep up with the ongoing conversations I have with my students and my WRIP colleagues. I read their work and the work they read. In most cases we are having similar conversations. This past year reading, Louise Bernice Halfe, Saidya Hartman, Lee Maracle, Christina Sharpe, Sylvia McAdam, Fred Moten, Kim Anderson, Dionne Brand, Leanne Simpson, Sara Ahmed, Claudia Rankine. I am also reading my nêhiyawewin workbooks and dictionaries, listening to my nêhiyawewin tapes constantly.

My most urgent need right now is to have live conversations, to respond to the different communities with whom I work. I used to write reviews. But I haven't in a while now. Part of the reason for that is that I am being taught or guided differently. I am being schooled in ways that I have not been before and in ways that I did not expect and in ways that are not conducive to writing reviews, expressing my opinion. Sometimes it is just necessary for me to stop reading and to stop writing. Sometimes I am asked to help clean up, make tea or stew, go to a

ceremony, drive someone home, walk down to the river, look for berries, watch the moon, look for willows, check out the way the river's current flows.

EH – You are working on the ongoing manuscript of “underbridge work” (components of this project are published elsewhere as “The Mill Creek Bridge Project”), and *Treaty 6 Deixis* is out this fall (excerpts from which have been published online in *Dusie*). What can you tell us about these projects?

CS – The underbridge project is a kitchen sink project or waterways project that has spilled out into the River and then some. It has connected me with everything and everyone I know and everything I write about. The manuscript is ongoing. Some of it published. Some of it still to be published. It would like to be a book. But not yet. It is an archive of how I came to be here and what I have found here.

The other project, *Treaty 6 Deixis* is an underbridge project, and, I think, a strange project that interests me very much. It is not really meant to be read anywhere. That is, it is meant to be read “here.” I ask the reader and myself to, “try this at this place that you might call “home.”” As a non-Indigenous person, I am trying to engage English to redirect myself to the land, to this place wherein I need to reacquaint myself differently. I ask this of myself and of my reader because I think this is being asked of me.

In *Treaty 6 Deixis*, I cite Reuben, “Touch the earth, with each word reorient yourself.” This came out of discussion we had about our *Treaty Poetics* class, and it strikes me as being at the core of my use of deixis. Can we engage the English language as a high context language in order to pay careful and precise attention to *this* place? Can the practice of deixis enable us to precisely and continually acknowledge, honour and care for our context? Can it allow us to attend to where we are and to how we should be here, for example, legally (rather than illegally), within (not outside) treaty law? However, it is a project that needs more time. My thinking on these issues shifts because I think about them all the time. The text falls into a bedlam of pronouns. It is a project of infinity. It is also an archive of how I came to understand the river and its trees—these communities. These communities that I live next to, am responsible for. Rather than existing (existentially) apart from (either adoring of or bored by), these are lives to which I am profoundly connected. Influenced by Stein and my shifting sense of the world around me (an erosion of my previously perceived alone-ness) the first part of the book considers these relationships. The second part focuses on why those relationships must be perceived and honoured. It reflects on the pipe, Treaty 6 law and settler relations—or lack of relations.

But I am also wary of reiterating my whiteness and its infinite capacity for self-focus and ambient violence. I need to think through what else is possible and present and requires my full attention. A different kind of labour is required here, and I'm not sure how to do it.

EH – You are preoccupied with “how to be part of a movement that shifts the university from being a predacious colonial construct to a place of ethical relations...”

Could CWILA contribute to this discourse in some way?

CS – I feel like the long interview format is interesting. In my experience people who live in situations of extreme precarity need to be included in long and careful discussions—like these. The amount of thinking that goes on out there, beyond the university is vast and often unacknowledged. The isolations in which we live need to be resisted. Connective tissues need to be allowed to proliferate in careful and caring ways. CWILA might approach people who are engaged in amazing thinking and brilliant writing beyond the usual contexts, like the writers in WRIP.

I also feel that young Indigenous women need venues of support. Places for their clear and intelligent voices to be heard. I would like to have the students that I work with to be asked by CWILA what is up and what is needed: Tarene Thomas, Paige Cardinal, Mackenzie Ground, Kailtyn Purcel, Corrinne Riedel. These writers are gifted, and young, and just getting published. They write powerfully into the difficulties of the world. Because of their work the writing of this place is shifting in important ways. As I understand, they are asking us to read differently. They are asking us to live differently.

And I do not know how to do this. But being here, gathering in different ways and paying close attention to being here, to my relations, to my obligations, this feels necessary to me. It feels like living.

Thank you Erina, for your questions and for giving me this opportunity to consider whatever it is I do. Last week, in preparation for our upcoming Treaty Poetics class, a group of us went picking sweet grass and sage and wild mint at Duck Lake, Saddle Lake Reserve, and Cucumber Lake. It took all day. We picked under the smoke and under the sky. It was a poem.

This interview was originally published on [CWILA: Canadian Women in the Literary Arts](#), 2019 (link no longer active).