

POETRY IN PANDEMIC TIMES: MOURNING COLLECTIVE VULNERABILITY IN SUE GOYETTE'S *SOLSTICE 2020. AN ARCHIVE*

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Canadian poet Sue Goyette's collection *Solstice 2020. An Archive* (2021), this article examines how dealing with the effects of a global pandemic through the medium of poetry can act as a powerful catalyst in raising awareness about collective vulnerability and mourning. During the locked-down days of 2020, Goyette felt it was her responsibility as a poet to find words to convey the sense of shared vulnerability people experienced in the face of a momentous event that confined them to their homes for days on end. Drawing on vulnerability theory, ecophilosopher David Abram's thinking on the more-than-human world, Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, as well as on recent theorizations on the COVID-19 pandemic, this article argues that Goyette's *Solstice 2020* is a most interesting sociological document that represents collective vulnerability, testifies to the conundrums posed by the still ongoing pandemic, and makes visible the deep affinities between humankind and the more-than-human world.

RESUMEN

Centrado en el poemario *Solstice 2020. An Archive* (2021), de la poeta canadiense Sue Goyette, el presente artículo analiza de qué modo el abordaje de los efectos de una pandemia mundial a través de la poesía puede llegar a actuar como un poderoso catalizador a la hora de avivar la conciencia de la vulnerabilidad y el luto colectivos. Durante los días de confinamiento de 2020, Goyette entendió que era responsabilidad

suya como poeta encontrar las palabras que expresaran el sentimiento de vulnerabilidad compartida que experimentó la gente ante un acontecimiento trascendental que la confinó durante días en sus hogares. Hallando inspiración en la teoría sobre la vulnerabilidad, en el pensamiento del ecofilósofo David Abram sobre el mundo más que humano, en el concepto de transcorporeidad de Stacy Alaimo, así como en recientes indagaciones teóricas acerca de la pandemia por COVID-19, este artículo sostiene que *Solstice 2020* es un documento sociológico de gran relevancia que refleja la vulnerabilidad colectiva, pone de manifiesto los interrogantes planteados por una pandemia aún en desarrollo y hace visibles las profundas afinidades entre la humanidad y el mundo más que humano.

POETRY, PANDEMIC, WINTER SOLSTICE

Based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Sue Goyette (b. 1964) is one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Canadian poetry. To date, she has authored eight poetry collections, including *The True Names of Birds* (1998), *Undone* (2004), *Outskirts* (2011), *Ocean* (2013), *The Brief Reincarnation of a Girl* (2015), *Penelope* (2017), *Anthesis: A Memoir* (2020), and *Solstice 2020. An Archive* (2021), as well as a novel titled *Lures* (2002). Focusing on Goyette's *Solstice 2020*, this article examines how dealing with the effects of a global pandemic through the medium of poetry can act as a powerful catalyst in raising awareness about collective vulnerability. As Goyette explains in a brief textual threshold to her collection, during the first 21 days of the locked-down and uncertain month of December 2020, she wrote a prose poem each morning that was published by Halifax's *The Coast* in the afternoon. Her plan was to give the newspaper's readers "[a] daily microdose of poetry, [...] to mark the calendar's march towards Winter Solstice" (Mullin, "Light a Candle"). Endowed with a strong sense of commitment to her art and her community, she felt obliged to fill citizens' lives with hope and help them make sense of what it meant to live amidst a pandemic that instilled in people a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. As she noted herself, "If I'm a poet in the community, I can contribute some words" (Mullin, "Light a Candle"). Gaspereau Press would then publish the resulting 21 prose poems in a beautifully handbound letterpress collection titled *Solstice 2020. An Archive*. Spread out on the page, the poems have "the immediacy of journal entries, but they are rich, allusive meditations by a poet with a nimble mind and an open heart" (Carey). They have

dates as titles and dwell on global vulnerability at a time of darkness when people were faced with an unprecedented event in the history of humankind. Yet they also shed light on the ordinary gifts of our existence and offer a way to move forwards with an enhanced awareness of our species' sociality, collective vulnerability, and human/nonhuman interdependence. All of this is suggested by Goyette's skillful use of words in making poems that seek to reconcile our fragile lives with a momentous event that has affected humankind on a planetary scale.

As Sylvia Hamilton notes in a perceptive review of *Solstice 2020*, “[t]he early poems signal themes that recur throughout the month: light and darkness; mourning and the work of remembering; mystery and the unknown; time and laughter” (2021). On December 1, the very first day of her advent calendar of poetry, Goyette writes: “we are the words left intact surrounded by darkness in this new version of December” (Goyette), highlighting from the very outset a sense of hope. She ponders the etymology of the word *dark*, which turns out to be central to the whole collection, both literally and figuratively, as December 21 is the shortest day of the year and the pandemic symbolized a time of darkness for humanity. Looking closely at the roots of the word, Goyette reveals that “*dark* comes from the Middle English *derk*, from Old English *deorc*, a distant relative to the German *tarnen*, ‘conceal’” (Goyette), trusting that language can help humans make sense of this dramatic event. On December 2, she thinks deeply about humans' need for connection and contact in moving terms: “I miss you. I miss the crowd of you, the eloquence of how we move together, the collaboration of motion” (Goyette), gesturing at sociality as one of the defining traits of humanity. On December 3, she ponders the sense of collective mourning unleashed by the pandemic: “And here we are: up to our ears in it—the unknown and its cut. And the grieving, burying what we knew as normal. This mourning is no small thing” (Goyette). Amidst utter uncertainty and chaos, Goyette insists that poetry can offer solace and spiritual comfort, even in the darkest of times. Therefore, she is determined not to give up on hope: “At the heart of mourning is an inlet with small boats for us to row forward. This is the work of remembering” (Goyette), she writes on December 6. When winter solstice comes, Goyette is amazed at “how our feet are ahead of us, making a new path” (Goyette), away from the darkness brought about by the pandemic and into the promise of light a new year may bring.

Minimalist in style, *Solstice 2020* is a collection marked by brevity and concision, as well as by deep thinking about what it means to be human in hard times. Readers are invited to immerse themselves in the experience of each poem as related in sequence, leading to the climactic moment represented by winter solstice. Not in vain, Goyette comes up with a handful of poems that she calls “an archive” for a good reason. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an archive is “a collection of historical documents or records of a government, a family, a place or an organization; the place where these records are stored.” In this way, *Solstice 2020* is the chronicle and testimony of someone truly alert to what happened at a turning point in the recent history of humanity. Ultimately, the poet performs an essential service for citizens: delivering the news, archiving the day (Hamilton). In so doing, she might be someone not just concerned with the art of deftly tessellating words to form poems of lasting value and beauty, but also someone who speaks on behalf of her community to come to terms with a new reality that eludes our grasp and refuses categorization. As Goyette confesses in a 2014 interview, poetry is “a vocation more than a job” and “resides in a poem’s silence, where its reader meets the words with their own experience and imaginings” (Poetry in Voice). As representations of (collective) vulnerability and meditations on loss, hope, and human/nonhuman interdependence, her poems are thus meant to actively engage the reader’s mind and imagination in their decoding.

Drawing on vulnerability theory (Butler 2004, 2009; Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2014), on ecophilosopher David Abram’s (1996, 2010) thinking on the more-than-human world, on Stacy Alaimo’s (2010, 2011) concept of trans-corporeality, as well as on recent theorizations on the COVID-19 pandemic, this article argues that Goyette’s *Solstice 2020* is a most interesting sociological document that deftly represents collective vulnerability, testifies to the conundrums posed by the still ongoing pandemic, and makes visible the sense of shared vulnerability experienced by humanity on an unprecedented scale. It aims to explore whether poetry can help our species make sense of reality when coping with a dramatic event like a global pandemic brought about by a highly contagious virus. Furthermore, it interrogates whether lyric thinking is able to instill hope and resilience in people in the face of excruciating moments in their lives and cultivate a form of attention sensitive to the nonhuman world. Lastly, it examines whether poems can have any redeeming power in times of chaos and uncertainty. Goyette believes that the

pandemic is a “real masterclass in being vulnerable and not knowing” and that poetry “understands all these feelings” (of loss and grief) and is “a great genre and way of thinking into the unknowable” (Mullin, “Six Questions”). Reckoning with silence, poetry “gets us to the edge of what is sayable, or what is legible, or what can be contained in words” (Mullin, “Six Questions”). Most importantly, poetry cultivates an enhanced form of attention that goes beyond the self, as it has the power to invite us to “be alert in the most vital way we can as a human being” and to change “how we engage with each other and the planet” (Mullin, “Six Questions”). As Goyette explains in an interview, poetry cannot save us, but “it can keep us company, it can help us endure and persevere” and “it can revive us [and] articulate the anger, frustration, exhaustion and grief we’re all feeling collectively and individually and that’s a pretty important thing to be able to do” (Green). In what follows, this article addresses the power of poetry to help humans cope with vulnerability and loss in the light of some of the most relevant insights of vulnerability theory, whilst emphasizing the centrality of the more-than-human world in Goyette’s ecopoetics.

HUMAN NATURE AND VULNERABILITY

As “a concept of enormous ethical salience” (Gilson 4) and normative significance for sociologists, moral theorists, political philosophers, and bioethicists (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 1), vulnerability “forms the basis for any ethics,” since “it is precisely because we are vulnerable [...] that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically” (Gilson 11). The concept has been discussed in three main areas: in the work of feminist theorists on dependency and the ethics of care; in the field of research bioethics and its core principles; and in the ethics of corporeal vulnerability (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2-3). To varying degrees, all three areas seem to share a set of fundamental assumptions that can be summarized like this:

Human life is conditioned by vulnerability. By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression,

political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our own, individual and collective, actions and technologies. (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 1)

Human vulnerability is primarily predicated on the human body's frailty or fragility. However, humans are vulnerable not only because of their very corporeality and exposure to the environment, but also because of their inherent sociability and interdependence. As Judith Butler puts it, "[t]he body is constitutively social and interdependent" (*Frames of War* 31). In other words, we are vulnerable because we are "embodied, social beings" and as such are "vulnerable to the actions of others and dependent on the care and support of other people" (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 4). A look at the etymology of the word "vulnerability," from the Latin *vulnus*, *-eris*, meaning "wound," reveals that it is "a capacity for damage, a liability to harm, an exposure to risk, aggression, or attack" (Ganteau 5). In short, vulnerability defines human nature: "[t]o be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering," that is, vulnerability is "an ontological condition of our humanity" (Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds 12). For Nathalie Maillard, humanity is marked by what she terms "vulnérabilité ontologique" (198), which accounts for humans' dependence on other people, resources, and forces. At any rate, central to the definition of vulnerability is "a vision of the human as essentially interdependent and in no way autonomous" (Ganteau 5). Theorizations as varied as Emmanuel Levinas's (1961, 1978) and Paul Ricoeur's (1960, 1990) ethics of alterity, dependency and the ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Held 1987; Kittay 1999; Nussbaum 2001, 2006), the ethics of vulnerability (Goodin 1985; Gilson 2014; Butler 2004, 2009; Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2012, 2014), and affect theory (Ahmed 2004) all pivot around the notion that humanity is essentially vulnerable and "starkly relational" (Ganteau 2), which is to say that we need the presence of our fellow human beings to live a flourishing life. As early as 1985, in his book, *Protecting the Vulnerable*, Robert E. Goodin pondered the "special responsibilities" (186) that humans have for other individuals who are not members of their family or friends, but rather part of a community or society at large, including "vulnerable compatriots, foreigners, future generations, animals, [and] natural environments" (186). For him, the duties to protect the vulnerable were the core of moral obligation. Heteronomy and interdependence are, in fact, "the cornerstone of the ethics of care"

(Ganteau 9), which is based on the fundamental insight that “self and other are interdependent” (Gilligan 74). It is only natural that the ethics of care should actively cultivate values such as solidarity, solicitude, and interconnection (Ganteau 9). In the field of affect theory, Sarah Amed emphasizes the power of emotions and “sociality” (8) and interprets vulnerability as a kind of openness to “spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other” (69). Along the same lines, Martha Nussbaum claims that the human being is a “needy enmattered being” (*Frontiers of Justice* 278) and posits a relational model of humanity as she observes that “We live for and with others and regard a life not lived in affiliation with others to be a life not worth living” (“Human Functioning” 219). In her close readings of literary texts, including canonical texts of the Greco-Roman tradition, she conceives of literature as the space *par excellence* to interrogate, represent, and express vulnerability.

Whereas *precariousness* as theorized by Judith Butler refers to “human vulnerability to the actions of others” (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 3), *precarity* refers to “the increased economic vulnerability experienced by some social groups as a result of globalization, the ideology and influence of neoliberalism, and the effects of the global financial crisis” (3). In the framework of an ethics of corporeal vulnerability, Butler argues that the human body is intrinsically vulnerable and explores the ethical implications of such vulnerability as one of the defining traits of the human condition: “we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life [...] This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 29). The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. At the inception of the pandemic, there was a concerted attempt on the part of media and scholarship to describe it as “something inherently new, capable of crossing and erasing the economic, racial, gendered, and religious divides that stratify societies around the world” (Duncan and Höglund 115). It was argued that the virus was just “a leveller of racial, gendered, and economic divides” (117), as no one was immune to potential infection. In the light of the alarming spread of the COVID-19 and the increasing figures of infected citizens, the deliberate focus was on our shared sense of vulnerability at the hands of a highly contagious virus for which there was no vaccine yet. Thus, Hari Bapuji et al. suggested that “susceptibility to the virus reveals how equal we are, despite the differences in our age, education, wealth and many other characteristics [...] While the effects of the virus may vary, what

appears fairly certain is that individuals are equally vulnerable” (1068). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some particular lives were regarded as being disposable, lesser than or inferior to others, particularly those of people in “high contact, high risk’ jobs” (Sandset 1419) considered essential at the time. As Butler puts it,

To say that a life is injurable [...] or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met to be sustained as a life). (*Frames of War* 14)

Despite the colossal magnitude of this global crisis, the pandemic was not a “great equalizer” (Bowleg 917), but evidence of a deeper crisis at work in capitalist societies. Environmental historian Jason W. Moore has observed that the roots of the planetary emergency humanity is facing are to be found in the dynamics of extractive and predatory capitalism, which disproportionately affects “women, people of colour and (neo)colonial populations” (Moore, “The Capitalocene” 54), pointing thus to the fact that some lives are more precarious than others. As perceptively argued by Duncan and Höglund, the pandemic is “not new or egalitarian, but fuelled by, and fuelling, crises already under way on a global scale” (115). Building on Achille Mbembe’s thinking on sovereignty as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (Mbembe 27; emphasis in the original) and on necropower as “subjugation of life to the power of death” (39), Sandset argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has evidenced how a “necropolitical regime of health care” has led to health care systems which have “created an environment not conducive to life but to slow death” (1411). In a way, the pandemic created “*death-worlds*” where “vast populations [were] subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (Mbembe 40; emphasis in the original). Conditions that make certain bodies more vulnerable are ubiquitous in specific contexts where neoliberalist policies reign supreme. Thus, the failure of some states to sustain high-quality public health, the increasing privatization of health care provision and the neoliberalist determination to end state welfare have resulted in “conditions where ‘slow death’ is an omnipresent danger” (Sandset 1412), a reality that the COVID-19 pandemic has made even more palpable. In this context, slow death is a variety of slow violence, which Rob Nixon defines as “a violence that

occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). What humanity is currently witnessing in the aftermath of the most destructive waves of the pandemic is precisely a form of slow violence in Nixon's conceptualization of the term.

The pandemic has revealed how structural violence is endemic and deeply entrenched in the socio-economic relationships constitutive of today's world order, whose hallmarks are capitalism, predatory formations as defined by Saskia Sassen in *Expulsions* (2014), and a shameless overexploitation of the Earth and its dwellers driven by resourceist thinking. This style of thought has been prevalent in the West over the last five centuries and has treated human beings, nonhuman species and land as resources susceptible to exploitation (Duncan and Höglund 116). Treating certain lives and environments as expendable or plunderable results in "material states of socio-ecological degradation and vulnerability" (116), which is an effrontery to life and human dignity. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood, "along with other crises unfolding in the earth's biosphere, as evidence that the extractive and exploitative processes through which capitalism works are currently failing" (116). The pandemic appears to be part of the endless litany of woes manifesting in the Anthropocene, environmental and otherwise, at a point in human history when the planet is close to a state of exhaustion. Yet, from a different perspective, the pandemic gestures to the logic behind what has been termed *Capitalocene*, which Moore defines as "a multispecies assemblage, a world-ecology of capital, power, and nature" (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* xi). Whereas "[a]t its best, the Anthropocene concept entwines human history and natural history" (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* 3), the Capitalocene as a conceptual tool illuminating the current climate crisis points to a new vision of "human organization as something more-than-human and less-than-social" and as "utterly, completely, and variably porous within the web of life" (5). The Capitalocene "signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (6), capitalism being "a system of getting nature [...] to work for free or very low-cost" (11). In constellating capital, power and nature, the notion of Capitalocene underscores the entanglements of society and nature, whilst it also envisions "humanity-in-nature" (6) or humanity as part of "the web of life" (6). In fact, Moore believes that we are witnessing "the flowering of an ontological imagination beyond

Cartesian dualism” (11), capable of transcending the binaries *res cogitans/res extensa*, mind/body, or culture/nature, so deeply ingrained in the Western mindset. In this regard, in *Solstice 2020* Goyette embraces a way of relating to the nonhuman that goes beyond Cartesian dualism, one marked by humility and the awareness that humankind is a part *of*, not apart *from*, the world at large. Acknowledging the entanglements of culture and nature, the poet cultivates a sense that it is a matter of the utmost urgency to dwell on Earth with duty, respect, and gratitude. She does so by drawing readers’ attention to the piecemeal destruction of the biosphere as the *oikos* of humanity. For instance, in her December 15 entry, the poet ponders ice melting as evidence of the impact of anthropogenic action on Earth: “Ice, as we know, is now a memorial, one of the last elemental clocks, melting its last gasp of vaporous blue mingling with the smell of a new and ancient mourning” (Goyette). The mourning for the current environmental crisis is thus conflated with the mourning unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COLLECTIVE VULNERABILITY: TRAINS, DARKNESS, AND HOPE

There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has represented a turning point in the history of our species. It has brought to the fore that humanity is extremely vulnerable and imaginatively resilient. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds propose a taxonomy of three different sources of vulnerability (i.e., *inherent*, *situational*, and *pathogenic*) and two different states of vulnerability (i.e., *dispositional* and *occurent*) which acknowledges that whilst vulnerability is inherent to the human condition, there are also “context-specific forms of vulnerability” (7). The pandemic is evidence of the overlapping of all three different sources of vulnerability. First, it is expressive of humans’ inherent vulnerability, a kind of vulnerability stemming from “our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social nature” (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 7). Secondly, it also illustrates situational or context-specific vulnerability, as certain social groups have revealed themselves to be more susceptible to precarity on the basis of such factors as household conditions, material infrastructures, government assistance, and financial security, among others. And thirdly, the pandemic has also triggered pathogenic vulnerabilities, i.e., those generated by a variety of strategies and measures intended to ameliorate people’s lives and yet resulting in the

exacerbation of “existing vulnerabilities or generating new ones” (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 9).

At any rate, ticking clocks stopped during the lockdown brought about by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As if suspended in a province where time did not reign supreme any longer, people living comfortably in the Western world all learnt to kill time in the seclusion of their homes—cooking, reading, taking physical exercise, listening to music, tidying up, sending each other messages via WhatsApp, videocalling or videoconferencing—so as to restore some sense of normalcy back in their lives. In fact, the pandemic has taken place amidst the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, which, according to Klaus Schwab (2016, 2017), will profoundly impact how we live, work, and interact with each other. Building on the digital revolution brought about by the Third Industrial Revolution, which made use of electronics and information technology to automate production since the mid-twentieth century, the 4IR is characterized by a fusion of technologies blurring the borders between the digital, physical, and biological realms (Schwab 2016). With billions of people connected by mobile devices, the breakthroughs we are witnessing these days in the spheres of “artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of Things, autonomous vehicles, 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science, energy storage, and quantum computing” (Schwab 2016) are simply unprecedented in scale, complexity, and speed.

In her prose poem for December 4, Goyette captures the uncertainty and radical hope that must have surely been experienced by an anonymous global collectivity. Though secluded in their homes, people all over the world must have felt a sense of belonging to a planetary community facing a novel situation that paralyzed normal life for weeks. A sense of paralysis is precisely conveyed by Goyette in her entry for December 4. As the poet watches and takes notes on what looks like a documentary on “the seven and a half-hour train ride from Bergen to Oslo” (Goyette) in an act of “slow television” (Goyette), she comes to the realization that, amidst a global pandemic, “we are pixelating; that our way of being is moving through chaos and is breaking into particles” (Goyette). The poet’s words allude to how people relied on electronic devices and social media to keep in touch with each other, with screens becoming an extension of their bodies. In this context of “slow television,” the train becomes an emblem of hope. Built in 1909, the Bergen Railway runs for 308 miles over the highlands between Oslo and Bergen, the two largest cities in Norway,

crossing some of the most inhospitable terrain and offering one of the most spectacular scenic experiences in Europe. The Bergen-Oslo train “travels through mountains by tunnel” (Goyette) across Hardangervidda National Park and onto the Hardangervidda plateau, Europe’s largest high mountain plateau, in what seems an endless ride, and serves as a most eloquent metaphor for hope, so badly needed in pandemic times. In Goyette’s depiction, the train advancing towards the growing dot of light that can be seen at the end of the tunnel is an apt metaphor for the hope that life might go back to normal once the pandemic is over. As the dot grows (on the TV screen and in the readers’ imaginative faculty), so does a sense of deep gratitude in the face of what promises to be “a version of the way out. As in: the end of the tunnel. Of course, this is just another version of a beginning, which explains the fear” (Goyette)—fear in the face of the unknown, fear that yet another tunnel (i.e., another wave or another virus mutation) might be waiting ahead for the train passengers. Wave after wave, it remains a fact that the COVID-19 pandemic instilled in people a sense of fear and vulnerability worldwide.

In her December 4 entry, Goyette ultimately offers a lesson in vulnerability. As Erinn C. Gilson observes, vulnerability is to be understood as “a pervasive immanent condition” (11), namely, “as definitive of life, a condition that links humans to nonhuman animals, and an experience that roots us in the corporeality of our existence” (4). It is “defined by openness,” since “to be vulnerable is to be open to being affected and affecting in ways that one cannot control” (2) and entails exposure to unfamiliar or unexpected situations like a global pandemic. Though *vulnerability* is not synonymous with *fragility* or *frailty*, all three terms gesture towards humans’ corporeal existence and their dependence on external factors that may affect them. Bodies are literally the places of existence—that is, the locus of grief, loss, violence, and death. From the entries that cumulatively follow each other to form her personal advent calendar, it is obvious that Goyette is not oblivious to the emotions and feelings triggered by the pandemic in people’s embodied minds. In the December 4 entry, like in many of the poems gathered in *Solstice 2020*, Goyette’s poetic persona wavers between fear and hope in the face of the ongoing pandemic. In *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2008), philosopher Jonathan Lear dwells on a people—the Crow Nation—faced with the end of their way of life and raises a profound ethical question that transcends specific civilizations and concerns how one should face the possibility that one’s culture might collapse. This is a vulnerability

shared by humankind—insofar as we are all inhabitants of a civilization, and civilizations are themselves vulnerable to historical forces. He ponders how we should live with this vulnerability and face up to such a challenge courageously. His philosophical inquiry into a peculiar vulnerability that is part of the human condition reveals itself inspiring to Goyette's meditation on the COVID-19 pandemic. With Lear's thinking somewhere at the back of her mind, the Canadian poet writes thus: "Jonathan Lear tells us that hope is radical when we lack the appropriate concepts to properly understand it. Tunnel after tunnel: a study of darkness" (Goyette). At this point, the December 4 entry in Goyette's lockdown poetical diary reveals that the lyrical subject is seeking to grasp a new experience for which she lacks an appropriate compass or measuring rod. In much the same way the Bergen-Oslo train slowly advances towards its destination in the dark, surrounded by a hostile environment of vast tracts of forest and blinding white snow, so does humanity towards an uncertain fate on account of the high infection and mortality rates, as the virus inexorably spreads across the globe. The World Health Organization's regular updates on the evolution of the pandemic worldwide only added more uncertainty to this bleak scenario. The train, a symbol of modernity and industrialization, takes on new nuances of meaning in Goyette's poem as it becomes a symbol of hope amidst collective grief.

"Being apart is not good for us" (Goyette), writes the poet in her December 11 entry, emphasizing the sociability inherent in humanity. Time and again, Goyette draws readers' attention to human vulnerability and our need for human contact. Thus, the December 16 entry dwells on the vulnerability of "aging women" (Goyette) amidst the pandemic. After confessing her desire to listen to Joni Mitchell singing "River," the poetic persona acknowledges that "[t]here aren't many grandmothers in this December. The sweet and salty bundle of them making their way through another winter" (Goyette). Secluded in the solitude of their homes for months, frightened of the unpredictable effects of COVID-19 upon their health, they are not to be seen anywhere outdoors, struggling with a viciously cold winter. Their fragility is made even more visible owing to the ongoing pandemic, which had an even greater impact on already precarious lives, including those of the elderly in need of assistance. However, Goyette finds room for hope amidst the bleakest of scenarios as she praises Joni Mitchell's capacity to move people with her voice and her music: "Joni rivers a longing that is tributary for all longing" (Goyette). The image of the river as longing is an apt metaphor to signify hope and

resilience, as also suggested by the image of “frozen rivers and the plants beneath, pushed up close for the sun” (Goyette) in the same entry. Just like beings and entities of the green world survive and persist despite adversity, humanity is to overcome the difficulties posed by a global pandemic. Not all metaphors in *Solstice 2020* are that bright, though. In the December 19 entry, with the winter solstice approaching, the pandemic is conceptualized as darkness and a sinister hunter: “The dark is fifteen hours long now. It’s a keen hunter and follows a sure river. Its pelt is thick, its eyes planetary. [...] We are the widest territory it covers” (Goyette). With daylight getting more and more scarce, the menace of the pandemic is further exacerbated. If darkness is a hunter, then humanity in its entirety is its prey.

ATTENDING TO THE NONHUMAN: OCEAN, BIRDSONG, AND SNOWFLAKES

Though we still lack the critical stance only the passage of time affords, coronavirus has had a deep impact on humanity. According to Jude L. Fernando, the COVID-19 pandemic signals the beginning of what he has termed the Virocene, “*a distinct epoch that demands fundamentally rethinking the relationship between humanity and nature at the global level*” (637; emphasis in the original). As Robert Bringhurst has lucidly observed, nature has room in it for *homo sapiens*, but it does not need anything from us and “cannot tolerate human domination” (10). Owing to humanity’s interdependence with the nonhuman world, he also suggests that we ponder how we relate to the biosphere as the home life has built for itself: “The earth’s life is much larger than our own lives, but our lives are part of it. If we take that life, we take our own” (Bringhurst 12). Put succinctly, immersed as we are in the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, we need to urgently rethink Eurocentric ways of knowing and understanding the world, an epistemology of control that seeks to take dominion over the land and the nonhuman world. The origins of such epistemology can be traced back to the emergence of Baconian science at the beginning of the Modern Age with the publication of works like Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and to the Cartesian divide between *res cogitans* (us, mind, humankind) and *res extensa* (them, matter, nature) expounded in René Descartes’s *Discourse on the Method* (1637). Moved by a territorial imperative, the main concern of this kind of epistemology is measuring, scrutinizing, and taking control over reality. There are, however, other forms of relating to what

ecophilosopher David Abram has termed the “more-than-human world” (*The Spell of the Sensuous*) or “Eairth” (Earth + air = breathing Earth) (*Becoming Animal*), one comprising human and nonhuman beings that have a fundamental trait in common: they are all earthbound creatures that are participant in a “Commonwealth of Breath” (“Afterword” 313). Abram has convincingly argued that language and meaning are not the sole prerogative of *homo sapiens*, but rather a property of animate earth, that the world has a mind of its own, and that all beings have “the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings” (*Becoming Animal* 172). What human and nonhuman beings share is vulnerability, one stemming not only from their bodily existence and sociality, but also from the current climate crisis we are all faced with in the Anthropocene.

Confronted with a widespread sense of utter devastation, uncertainty and fear brought about by COVID-19, it is no wonder Goyette should have turned to the more-than-human world in a handful of poems central to the overall architecture of *Solstice 2020* in search of solace and hope. As Paula Jessop claims, the Canadian poet “believes that each individual has a relationship with the vast and ancient wildernesses we often neglect—oceans, forests, plains and prairies—and these provide some of the major themes she explores in her poetry.” Goyette’s “knack for seeing the unusual in the usual” (Hamilton), including nature, is palpable in a number of her poems that gesture towards the impossibility of dividing “human corporeality from a wider material world” (Alaimo, “New Materialisms” 281). These poems suggest that Goyette is particularly sensitive to “the lively, agential, vast, material world, and the multitude of other-than-human creatures who inhabit it” (Alaimo, “New Materialisms” 281). Thus, her piece for December 10 is a moving eulogy of the ocean that directs readers’ attention to the overwhelming presence of the Atlantic Ocean, to the rhythm of advancing and retreating waves on the shore, and the tableau represented by a boat and gulls elegantly floating in a blue sky as if by magic. An essential presence in her life, the ocean teaches her “a master class on humility and wildness (...), the long look and beauty” (Kerricull). A moment with the texture of transcendence is experienced by the lyrical subject as she ponders

how the gulls were held aloft above the boat like an aerial exhaust of
bird-knot lace or a sophisticated mobile of contraptions with wings.
And how every once in a while the sun would use them to mirror itself
and they’d transform into this miraculous beacon of bright. (Goyette)

Mesmerized by the gulls hovering over the sea and illuminated by sunlight, Goyette's lyrical subject comes to the sudden realization that human and nonhuman animals are inextricably linked to each other as part of the web of life. As if to underscore both the deep kinship between humans and nonhumans and our shared vulnerability, Goyette writes: "That's when I thought of you, of us, and how we're occasionally okay. And how when we share the shine we're even brighter" (Goyette). Like her poems on the Atlantic gathered in her acclaimed collection *Ocean*, the poem for December 10 maintains "its wildness and its breathing" (Medley) and keeps good company with the other poems preceding and following it. Upon closer inspection, Goyette's poems in *Solstice 2020* represent acts of attention in the face of the awe-inspiring presence that seems to be pervasive everywhere she turns to look, as if the COVID-19 pandemic had honed her attention skills to unimaginable levels. They testify to her astonishment at the grandeur of what-is and "the entangled materializations of which we are a part" (Barad 384). As the poet writes in her December 1 entry, "[t]he world continues to be wondrous in unexpected ways" (Goyette). Small details that might have gone unnoticed before, in pre-pandemic times, are now the focus of her attention raised to its utmost power: the seagulls effortlessly hovering over the ocean, the sun illuminating the waves and the seagulls' backs, the way humans might participate in such radiance and shine themselves are all aspects of reality tessellated into a poetic vortex of maximum intensity in Goyette's December 10 entry. Like human beings, this assemblage of nonhuman animals and entities is also vulnerable and fragile and hence all the more precious. The persistence of beauty and rhythm embodied by the ocean waves are a reminder that there is room for hope amidst chaos and death, or so the poet appears to suggest, even with a devastating pandemic in progress.

In this regard, Goyette is not just the laureate poet speaking on behalf of her citizens, giving voice to communal concerns, but also one of the guardians of Being. In Heideggerian thought, "man is the shepherd of Being" (Heidegger 210), not the lord of Being, and poets' primal speech is capable of shedding light on areas of existence that often remain in the dark. As shepherds of Being, poets respond to the delicacy and vulnerability of everything that exists and seek to capture their astonishment through the medium of words the best way they

can. However, they are aware that words will not do full justice to the vastness of the experience. A poem might be an “inexhaustible artifact” (Strand 74) woven out of carefully selected words, endowed with the capacity to invoke a constellation of simultaneous meanings and persist in time, but reality is always vaster than whatever poets might have to say about it. The poet *qua* guardian of Being is discernible in Goyette’s December 18 entry. The entry draws readers’ attention to the complex beauty and determination of the more-than-human world to persist in time. She writes with moving simplicity: “Consider the pinecone. Imbricated in design much like fish scales. Thin bract scales beneath seed scales. Each seed scale has two ovules; a miniature forest maker” (Goyette). Looking closely at a particular tree species, she emphasizes the unstudied elegance of the nonhuman, as well as the self-sufficiency of the wild to perpetuate itself. Unlike humanity, “churning out bladed things at an alarming rate” (Goyette), overconsuming goods and plundering resources beyond the Earth’s carrying capacity in the Capitalocene, the wild (i.e., everything that is undomesticated) does not tolerate human control, but rather requires our attention and respect instead.

Goyette also instills in readers a sense of ontological horizontality by focusing her attention on nonhuman animals. As Abram notes, “[w]ith the other animals [...] we’re all implicated within this intimate and curiously infinite world” (*Becoming Animal* 158). Pondering human overdependence on electronic devices to keep them connected to the outer world during lockdown, she writes in the December 5 entry: “I have a cat who has never seen me do anything but sit at a screen all day. He is concerned and verbs and vogues to get my attention” (Goyette). The cat ultimately teaches the poetic persona an important lesson in voicing these words of wisdom: “*Leave the window and come to the floor, he says, it is the only way to wile these hours*” (Goyette; emphasis in the original). Playing and staying close to the ground (*Gea* or *terra matrix*) seems to be the only effective trick to kill time during the COVID-19 lockdown. Similarly in the December 12 entry, Goyette resorts to animals and their symbolical value to shed light on the pandemic. She ponders the meaning of “three roosters abandoned in the woods near Hubbards” (Goyette), a town in Nova Scotia: “In Norse mythology, three roosters are significant. In Buddhism, they symbolize greed” (Goyette). In Norse mythology, the three roosters announce the beginning of Ragnarök, that is, Doomsday or the Twilight of Gods, a series of natural disasters and a terrible battle that will kill many deities. Alongside with

ignorance and hatred, greed is one of the three main causes of suffering in Buddhist thinking. The lesson the lyrical subject ultimately gains from the three roosters and their ominous associations is captured in these words: “*I can’t rest if I know something’s out here and needs to be helped*,” says the voice of reason we need to bury as part of our cache we’ll dig up when this pandemic has gone back to its cave” (Goyette; emphasis in the original). Conceived as being a beast that will hide underground once humanity goes back to a new normal, the pandemic has taught humanity to stay alert to impending dangers lurking in the dark.

Many of Goyette’s poems are acts of attention and works of art “ultimately grounded in a sense of wonder at the natural world” (Jessop). They invite readers to ponder how humans are deeply immersed “within the material flows, exchanges, and interactions of substances, habitats, places and environments” (Alaimo, “New Materialisms” 281) that make up the Earth. For instance, in her December 11 entry, the lyrical subject senses the power of vibrant matter and the vitality inherent in the world in the presence of water in the city: “The buried waterways beneath Halifax are showing up in my dreams. [...] There is water beneath this land we’re walking on” (Goyette). Goyette embraces what Alaimo calls *trans-corporeality*, by which she means “the movement across human corporeality and non-human nature” (Alaimo “New Materialisms”, 282) and “the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” (Alaimo “New Materialisms”, 282). Thus, in her poem for December 17, she ponders the astonishment she feels in the presence of birdsong, snow, and other small details of the green world:

What else is surrounding us that we can’t yet apprehend? It’s going to snow today. The sky has that low-ceiling feel, burdened with forecast. Wilson Alwyn Bentley was the first person to photograph snowflakes on black velvet. He was also the first to record raindrop sizes. (Goyette)

Folded in within the fabric of Goyette’s poems are often allusions to historical figures, thinkers, authors, and artists in ways that recall a common practice in Modernist poetics. The allusiveness, plurilingualism and intertextuality of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* are the canonical examples that first come to mind. In a very subtle manner, Goyette is heir to the kind of poetical practice embodied in the masterworks of Modernism. Though the language is kept clear and understandable, though Goyette goes for

brevity and simplicity rather than for convoluted syntax in her prose poems, relevant information might be lost on readers if references are completely ignored. In the preceding quotation from the December 17 poem, American meteorologist and photographer Wilson Alwyn Bentley is a case in point. A pioneer in the study of crystal formation and snowflake photography, he was the first person to capture detailed images of snowflakes on black velvet before they vanished into nothingness. Despite the technical limitations of the equipment he deployed at the time, he perfected the method to such an extent that for well over a century nobody else bothered to take pictures of snowflakes (BBC News 2010). Fascinated by such ephemeral works of art, he captured more than 5,000 images of crystals that he considered “tiny miracles of beauty” and “ice flowers” (Watson). In so doing, he was responding to the fragility of the more-than-human world and capturing its beauty for posterity in the best way he could. In much the same way Goyette responds to the poetry of what-is through the medium of words, Bentley resorted to the use of photography to preserve the perfection of ephemeral snowflakes. Cultivating a scientific method and empirical observation, he argued that no two snow crystals were identical. Bentley was also the first American to record raindrop sizes and one of the first cloud physicists.

This wealth of information is elegantly packaged into Goyette's prose poem, which hints at the deep affinities between human beings and nature, and indirectly evokes the fragility that snowflakes and humans have in common. Vulnerability is thus part and parcel of everything that exists on Earth, Goyette seems to imply. The ultimate message the poet seeks to get across to her readership is crystal clear. As Claire Caldwell puts it in an eloquent review of Elena Johnson's *Field Notes for the Alpine Tundra* (2015), “no matter how much we attempt to quantify, qualify, explain or analyze the natural world, there will always be something ineffable and mysterious about it, something that escapes our grasp” (1). Abram puts it in most illuminating words: “After three and a half centuries spent charting and measuring material nature as though it were a pure exterior, we've at last begun to notice that the world we inhabit [...] is alive” (*Becoming Animal* 158). It seems Goyette is well aware of the ineffability of certain aspects of what-is; her prose poems convey a sense of the elusive, eel-slippery nature of the more-than-human world. However, she is inevitably attracted to how poetry “asserts wildness back into language. Poetry reminds words of their fur and their hoofs, of their seaweed and their hurricanes and, in the same way, reminds us of the

more complete version of ourselves” (Green). In other words, poems might as well be an outgrowth from nature itself; if there is wildness in poems it is precisely because they were born out of the wilderness in the first place.

TAKING WIDER VIEWS OF THE UNIVERSE

“Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man. I say study to forget all that—take wider views of the universe. That is the egotism of the race” (369), writes the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau in a journal entry dated April 2, 1852. As if following the Thoreauvian injunction, in two of her most accomplished poems in *Solstice 2020* Goyette turns to the mystery of the universe humans are a part *of*, not apart *from*. Thus, on December 13, she writes about the mystery of a ‘comet-asteroid hybrid’ by the name ‘3200 Phaethon’ whose orbital path the Earth would be passing through in the next few days. Resisting all categorizations, the poet explains, this asteroid happens to be “the bluest of all similarly coloured asteroids” (Goyette); it has “a comet tail and continues to perplex scientists by being the source of the Geminids meteor eleganza” (Goyette). As pointed out above, the dominant epistemology of the West is an epistemology of control that seeks to categorize, anatomize, systematize, and digitize everything that is to be known. It was in the opening lines of his *Metaphysics*, a seminal text in the history of Western Philosophy, that Aristotle claimed that the desire for knowledge is a universal *cupiditas naturalis*. “All men by nature desire to know” (1552), he wrote. However, no matter how hard we may try to pin it down, 3200 Phaethon eludes our understanding and resists all attempts at reductive interpretations. What is at stake in this poem is the hunch that the “material world is never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves and others” (Alaimo *Bodily Natures*, 283). As Goyette notes in powerful metaphors, humans are participant of the mystery represented by 3200 Phaethon, although we might have forgotten it during the pandemic:

This glorious contraction takes the long way to get close to the sun and is carrying on being itself by defying being trapped into category. And in its wake: galactic tinsel, sacred zippers undoing the night. May the sky be clear so we can receive a taste of it to fuel our own mystery. Or, at least, to wake it up. (Goyette)

Goyette seems to imply that everything in the universe bespeaks beauty, vulnerability, resilience—the macrocosmos echoes thus the microcosmos, or the microcosmos is a blueprint of the macrocosmos in miniature. If everything is entangled and mutually constitutive, then the mystery Goyette senses as intrinsic to the universe is also present in humanity. Emphasizing the vitality of the cosmos and the agency of matter, the new materialisms as theorized by Barad (2007) and Bennett (2010) have precisely reminded us that life is but a continuum ranging from the smallest inanimate entities to the most complex animate life forms. What they share is a common substratum of what Bennet has termed *vibrant matter*. For Bennett, matter is not “raw, brute, or inert” or “passive stuff” (vii). She claims that “[t]his habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is a “partition of the sensible”” (vii) which does not hold true anymore.

In yet another poem, the one composed for December 15, Goyette muses on space and the moon, on what it must feel like to watch locked-down life from outer space: “I read somewhere that space smells of metal, a simmering aluminum with a hint of hyacinth and its damp greenness” (Goyette). Looking at life on Earth “from the moon’s point of view” (2021), the poet writes: “Waxing towards full, it’s trying hard to loosen the structure of things or remind us to be rivers. Everything about this season is loosened in this way” (Goyette). The celestial body silently looks at human commerce on this speck of dust adrift in the universe, with a pandemic in progress. The implication seems to be that if humans cared to direct their gaze to the moon, we might as well learn to remember that everything is connected to everything else and that “there is, ultimately, no firm divide between mind and matter, organism and environment, self and world” (Alaimo, “New Materialisms” 283). The reference to rivers subtly evokes Heraclitus’ notion of *πάντα ῥεῖ*: everything is in permanent flux, as suggested by the metaphor of the river. We are also rivers, even amidst “this season” when “days are tearing from their masts and blowing out to sea” (Goyette). As Goyette has admitted in a lucid interview with Annick MacAskill, she is “enamoured/inspired by how we are constantly emerging into who and how we are” (MacAskill), which explains the mystery that the self-as-part-of-the-world represents.

Solstice 2020 is “no pessimist’s archive” (Hamilton); a current of hope is pervasive from beginning to end. This might be partly

accounted for by the fact that the universe holds endless fascinations for Goyette, as evidenced by the collection's closing poem. The piece written to commemorate December 21 is a moving lesson on the mystery of light. Daylight is precious and scarce on December 21, the day marking the winter solstice and the shortest day of the year: "Light is so condensed on this shortest day, it's a honeyed version of itself. And if a single bee can visit up to 5,000 flowers, this day is 3,695 flowers long" (Goyette), writes the poet using flowers as her measuring unit. On winter solstice, "Jupiter and Saturn [...] are conjoining so close they will spark a porch light for the mourning cave we are in" (Goyette), says the poet, alluding to the pandemic once again, conceptualized here as being a "mourning cave." The poem tessellates allusions to scientific data concerning the behavior of planets on winter solstice, to René Char (who wrote "To be of the leap, not to be of the feast, its epilogue") and to the amazing skill of spiders for constructing their webs mid-air. Resuming life after the havoc caused by the pandemic requires a leap that Goyette characterizes as being "the work of imagining a way forward so there's a bowl for everyone. [...] What can this feeling be but awe at how our feet are ahead of us, making a new path, a desire line to this knowing?" (Goyette), which is tantamount to saying that humankind is vulnerable and resilient; it will find a way to move on. *Solstice 2020* closes on a note of optimism, with a lesson on spiders' ballooning, an act of bravery that is to be emulated by human beings. The voice speaking in this excerpt "longs for a world that recognizes a duty of care for the young and for each other" (Hamilton 2021):

Ballooning is a behaviour spiders use to navigate the in-between to the next. To be on the move and of the leap. This is why we're here. Together and apart. They release gossamer threads and are at the mercy of air currents and electric fields. And this is where we leave each other, at the mercy. I'll meet you at the feast. (Goyette)

For many poets from different cultures and literary traditions, poetry is a form of knowing, possibly the purest one. Like science or philosophy, it helps us make sense of the world and our place in the larger mesh of things. During the locked-down days of 2020, Goyette felt it was her responsibility as a poet to find words to convey the sense of shared vulnerability people experienced in the face of a momentous event that confined them to their homes for days on end. *Solstice 2020* is her personal archive or advent calendar chronicling the effects of

the pandemic on humanity. As such, the collection is both a treatise on vulnerability as a defining trait of humankind and an anatomy of hope. What her poems emphasize time and again is not only our shared vulnerability when faced with the unknown and the sheer size of this unprecedented event, but also our need for human contact and a sense that hope is possible even in the bleakest of scenarios. She reads signs of hope in humankind's sociality, capacity for resilience, and creativity. Humans are vulnerable, yet they are also extremely versatile and creative, as evidenced by Goyette's multiple allusions in the living fabric of *Solstice 2020* to scientific discoveries in the fields of astronomy and physics and to humankind's multifaceted talent as represented by singers like Joni Mitchell, writers like René Char, scientists like Wilson Alwyn Bentley, and philosophers like Jonathan Lear. She turns her attention to the mesmerizing effect of waves in the Atlantic Ocean, to seagulls floating above the sea, to spiders ballooning whilst releasing their threads to build cobwebs, and to ephemeral yet perfect snowflakes as emblems of a more-than-human world that is simply wondrous to her imagination. Bearing witness to the universe and its mysteries is what Goyette does best. Transcending the Cartesian body/mind dualism, she acknowledges that there is always more than meets the eye. Populated by agentive and communicative entities that bespeak the vitality intrinsic to matter, the Earth reveals itself to be a continuum of relationships and entanglements that blurs the dividing line between perceiver and perceived, self and other, human and nonhuman. In the more-than-human world the poet finds inspiration as well as evidence that our species is part of something larger than ourselves and that the beauty of what-is persists despite the havoc caused by COVID-19. She feels that, in her capacity as a poet laureate, it is her mission to listen attentively to the world and to deliver such elemental truths to those fellow human beings who might care to listen to her poems. What she argues is that the world is real and holds endless fascinations for us all, if only we keep our eyes wide open and pay attention to the awe-inspiring beauty of the more-than-human world we are part of. What she claims is that life and poetry will persist, and that humanity will move on and hopefully overcome the pandemic together.

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