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Restorying Métis-Nêhiyaw Telepathies and Reading Unsettling Stories

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Not ghosted or reconciled to somehow fit into Western society,
to come to terms with being colonized. No.
An unsettling presence that brings awareness of
relationships that have too long been occupied with erasure.

Maya Ode'Amik Chacaby

A short story entitled "Mister X" from Lisa Bird-Wilson's 2013 collection *Just Pretending* "make[s] actionable" an "unsettling presence" of the kind Chacaby envisions above: "An unsettling presence of Indian that disturbs the norm rather than a consignment to failure at achieving the norm" (Chacaby 137). In the "(The Missing Chapter) on Being Missing: From Indian Problem to Indian Problematic," Chacaby insists on Anishinaabeg realizing their disruptive potential as "*un*-settlers" on the streets of Winnipeg and Toronto. If Saskatchewan Métis-Nêhiyaw writer Bird-Wilson at once disturbs and fails to approximate early psychoanalytic conflations between Indigeneity and the occult, "Mister X" also stories deep inter-relations between "Indigenous [urban] land and life" (Yang and Tuck 1) in ways which actively strengthen Métis-Nêhiyaw land bases and lifeways. Far from suggesting that Freudian psychoanalysis can ever

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be "free[d …] from its colonial baggage" (Brickman xviii), I retrace several ways in which this twentieth-century institution "steeped in colonial, racist thought" is repeatedly unsettled by figures it strategically imagines and all too often misapprehends. If Bird-Wilson's story "unlocks the [most] confounding aspects" of colonialist psychic imaginaries (Tuck and Yang 3), "Mister X" at once unfixes and loosens something else entirely.

"Telepathy" appears a total of three times in Bird-Wilson's ten-page story. Shortly after the character Beate announces to the nurse that she is "here to see Mister X" (87), Bird-Wilson draws the reader's attention to the patient's ambiguous name:

> In a pile of comics in [Beate's] room at home lies a first edition, in a plastic sleeve, where Mister X made his debut. Mister X: Marvel supervillain. Mister X can read his opponents' minds during a fight by using his powers of telepathy. He sees his opponents in advance and can stay one step ahead at all times. Since his only superpower is telepathy and not strength, he's worked hard to master every form of combat and to build the strength he does have to the highest level possible. Even though he's a villain, Beate sees the possibility for good in him. (87–88)

The brief repetition of "telepathy" in Bird-Wilson's story prompts unexpected engagements across two otherwise unconnected spaces. Mikita Brottman suggests that "Freud worked hard to keep the boundaries of psychoanalysis distinct from those of the occult" (6). She returns to Freud's persistent concern that any easy association between psychoanalysis and "the supernatural" might endanger the scientific credibility and reputation of "his new discipline" (5). Yet Freud makes a number of curious admissions in several of his published works, including *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, where, in the final chapter, he fleetingly entertains "the question of whether we are to deny entirely that superstition has any real roots: whether there are definitely no such things as true presentiments, prophetic dreams, telepathic experiences, manifestations of supernatural forces and the like," and to which he immediately responds: "I am far from meaning to pass so sweeping a condemnation of these phenomena" (261). If Freud confesses in this same piece to having "a few remarkable experiences which might easily have been explained on the hypothesis of telepathic thought-transference" (261–62), a footnote indicates that this last line was added to the original 1901 publication in 1924, at a time

when Freud's publications betrayed a growing preoccupation with matters of the occult.[1]

Despite these more public admissions, in a private letter written on 18 February 1926 to Ernest Jones, "the most resistant of psychoanalysis' inner circle to the occult" (Morlock 336), Freud insists that his own "acceptance of telepathy" (Morlock 344) is his "own affair [*Privatsache*], like my Jewishness and my passion for smoking, etc., and that the subject of telepathy is not related to psychoanalysis" (*F/Jon* 597, Morlock 344, quoted in Derrida 256). Nicholas Royle elsewhere translates Jacques Derrida's neologism "telepathies" as "A plural 'telepathy,' telepathy as more than one, as other than what one thinks, as the very interruption and dissemination of one subject, as one's undoing" (viii). This interpretation lends itself well to Freud's affinity for telepathic insistences, whereas the unsettling and repeated presence of this encoded word in Bird-Wilson's text spurs on a reading approach which, at once, widens existing psychoanalytic fissures and simultaneously confirms the strengthening power of this Nêhiyaw-Métis story: "[Beate] fantasizes that Mister X will use his powers of telepathy to see her and do just one act that will redeem him: save her. He is, by far, her favourite Mister X" (88).

Beate occasionally superimposes the real Mister X with portraits of other anonymous characters. A tangential reference recalls "a [French] spy called Mister X" as one of three anonymous agents Beate once read about, who "were sent by France's foreign minister to offer a cleverly veiled insult to American envoys attempting to resolve a diplomatic dispute" (89). They were "later vilified by the Americans. They went down in infamy. Beate prefers the idea of infamy, as a concept, over fame. It seems much more realistic" (89). A later reference to the Canadian Citation Committee's "Uniform Case Naming Guidelines" suggests that *Mister X* is a legal term intended to protect one's anonymity. But the real Mister X, the one who is known only by this name (94), holds lasting significance for Beate: "To [Beate], he's not unnamed. To her, he *is* Mister X" (94). When Beate encounters Mister X in a private room, she is hardly able to look at him: "She's seen a lot of things in her sixteen years, but nothing like this" (88). Bird-Wilson, who is at all times "one step ahead" of her reader, colours in

1 Freud's "Dreams and Telepathy" was published in 1922. In the 1925 publication of "The Occult Significance of Dreams," he concedes that "it may very well be that telepathy really exists and that it provides the kernel of truth in many other hypotheses that would otherwise be incredible" (136). The chapter on "Dreams and Occultism" appears in the 1933 *New Introductory Lectures*, and the posthumous paper on "Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy" was published in 1941, in which the word "telepathy" never once appears (Morlock 339).

the violence that Mister X endured with few oblique details: "She looks at his hands because she can't look at his face. *Closed head injury. Blunt trauma.* The nurse's words loop in her head" (89). "This isn't him," Beate's internal voice chimes in and relieves the reader from the effort to read between Beate's thoughts. Beate remains outwardly quiet in his presence as if to give ample space to his own unconscious musings: "Tentatively she puts her hand out, softly traces the place on his wrist where she imagines a tan mark from his wristwatch lingers. She already knows the watch has been stolen along with all his other possessions: jacket, boots, wallet, ID, jewelry. She shivers to think of him alone and cold in the February night after he left her place" (89). Eventually, she does speak. She tells him: "I waited for you" (89). Unable to "think of anything else to say, […] she repeats, 'I waited for you, Mister X'" (90).

As Theresa Warburton and Cowlitz scholar Elissa Washuta explain in the introduction to *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, "Native writers don't shy away from experimenting with form in order to explore the painful and the violent. However, they refuse a voyeuristic obsession with tragedy" (11). Similarly, Bird-Wilson's writing engenders worlds which resist what Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck elsewhere refers to as a damage-centred narrative approach and deficit research-model, which looks to reproduce Indigenous "pain and brokenness" in ways that foreclose complex subject-formations, reaffirms colonialist assumptions, and deliberately fails to consider context: "Without the context of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses" (415). Avery Gordon foregrounds the concept of "complex personhood" in the first few pages of her introduction to *Ghostly Matters*. Bird-Wilson's narrative reflects aspects of this conceptualization, as she reminds readers "that even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents" (Gordon 4). Her narrative gives prescient shape to various "social and existential realities" (Ahmed 161) which contour the reach of many individuals' desires, habits, capacities, aspirations (Ahmed 153–54):

> people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves […] that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is imme-

> diately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. (Gordon 4)

To the extent that Gordon's complex personhood "asks that we move within and between *furniture without memories* [Colonialism and] Racism and Capitalism" (Gordon 4), Bird-Wilson's story offers a way, then, of

> conceptualizing the complicated workings of race, class, and gender, the names we give to the ensemble of social relations that create inequalities, situated interpretive codes, particular kinds of subjects, and the possible and impossible themselves. (Gordon 4)

Narrative details shared about Mister X and Beate's courting are elliptical, vivid, sparse, significant: "They only ever did it the one time, out back, between the falling down shed and the falling-down fence, where the overgrown autumn olive looked as if it would, any minute, push the fence clean over with a spindly finger" (92). References here to the "overgrown autumn olive" (93) momentarily redirects the reader's attention to "Blood Memory," the second short story in Bird-Wilson's *Just Pretending.* The narrator, who is adopted and herself pregnant in this story, reimagines her own biological mother "swollen like an overstuffed olive" following a similar sexual encounter with her imagined biological father, although in "Mister X" it is Beate who "mark[s] her calendar [to indicate that] it's been almost two weeks" since her last and only intimate encounter with Mister X (93). The reference in the concluding paragraph to a "transparent tadpole" who listens attentively to the sound of a beating materiality again recalls an earlier passage in "Blood Memory," which circles around "a word bobb[ing] about in the depths, tickling the tadpole, the word waiting to be picked up and held in the palms of two hands, examined then crushed to the chest rubbed into arms, over shoulders, across the belly, the word more than word, to be inhaled then expelled bit by bit with every breath—the word *Métis*" (4).

Two stories within Bird-Wilson's collection meaningfully converse in proximity or shared distance. Spatio-temporal distinctions between both narratives temporarily retract or collapse in instances like these, where whirring words like "Métis" can beat with near-iambic precision and yet still remain vulnerable to dangerous misreadings. Beate awaits Mister X's return for two weeks, hoping that he will visit her at home or at the pawnshop where she works. Two weeks pass until he is found "Unconscious but alive" as the subject of an indeterminate case of violent assault (94): "Beate knew he was a half-breed. Métis. Day after day, the news reported

Two stories within Bird-Wilson's collection meaningfully converse in proximity or shared distance.

on the search for someone who could identify him, and Mister X took on a certain *curious* infamy. That was when she went to see him" (94). Bird-Wilson here anticipates the reader who might be tempted to place Mister X in someone else's story. Modeling a more generous way to read, she writes: "[Beate] sees people differently, sees through the thick layer of crappy life chances and bad luck to the cores of the people they might have been once" (90), and adds that Beate would "be the first to admit she has to scrape pretty hard to find even a glimmer of a long-forgotten innocence in some of them, but usually, eventually, she does. She saw it right away in Mister X" (90).

Beate learns about Mister X's hospital stay from the local newscast on television: "The police—asking for help to identify a man. Found. Unconscious but alive. Possibly Asian, said the reporter" (94). The error loops back to a memory imparted earlier on in the fiction (92). Near the end of summer, while Beate was accompanying Mister X on a walk back from their date at the fair, Mister X is branded by a group of young passersby with two racist slurs. The scene plays on the assumed privilege of whiteness as it discriminates against any perceived racialized traits. Mister X responds to the affront of being misread, first, as Chinese, and "then, [as] 'Indian,' as if they were guessing" (92) so that only Beate can hear his response: "'Yeah, *I'm* the missing link in the Bering Strait theory.' Beate laughed too, partly because it was funny, what he said about the Bering Strait theory, and partly because it was true, he did look kind of ambiguous" (92). Mister X uses humour as a way to process the harmful absurdity of being momentarily pinned between one racist stereotype and another racist misnomer. The idea that Mister X becomes the subject of "curious infamy" assumes another layer of meaning when we consider that Indigenous bodies are apprehended by imaginaries which reflect little else but their own colonial vicissitudes. While Mister X's indeterminate figure at once unsettles and exposes the persistence of such misreadings, the ambiguous circumstances which lead to his coma-induced state seeps in as a reminder of the physical violence that seemingly benign remarks, and the colonialist discourses which inform them, at once normalize and incite.

Standing Rock scholar Vine Deloria Jr writes in *Red Earth, White Lies* that "Bering Strait is simply shorthand scientific language for 'I don't know, but it sounds good and no one will check'" (67). In confronting so-called scientific communities who maintain the land bridge theory as fact, Deloria Jr reveals a poorly concocted anthropological narrative, based on deeply unfounded and misguided assumptions, which, far from reflecting

Indigenous peoples' cosmologies and generational knowledges, is revealed to have been manufactured in order to protect colonizers' tenuous claims:

> Since American anthropologists and archeologists are committed to supporting an outdated interpretation of human origins that sees Neanderthal as a predecessor to Cro-Magnon, that can only mean that American Indians are late comers to this hemisphere, having had to wait (at least in the minds of scholars) until Neanderthal evolved into Cro-Magnon and then for a convenient ice age when the North American continent could be linked with Asia. (55)

Deloria Jr argues that colonialist and racial capitalism, including the invasive methods of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology, work together to reaffirm the mythology that "North America was a vacant, unexploited, fertile land waiting to be put under cultivation" (67–68) and sanction early colonial strategies to clear and disappear Indigenous lands of their original occupants.

Three references to "telepathy" materialize under the section "Animism, Magic, and the Omnipotence of Thoughts" in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.[2] Here, Freud condenses the "immense domain" (75) of animism to speak of it as the "human race's earliest system of thought" (77), which, he claims, persists "among certain primitive peoples of Australia, America and Africa" (100). The animistic "view of the universe" (64–65), which Freud broadly refers to as the "first human *Weltanschauung*" (77), imbues "beings" like plants, stones, and animals with "benevolent and malignant" spirits (75–76) and attributes the occurrence of "natural phenomena" to "impersonal physical forces" (76). As Freud himself concedes in a footnote, everything he shares about animism and magic is first anticipated

2 In *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Ranjana Khanna resituates works like *Totem and Taboo* as produced "in tandem with the expansion of colonial interests" as with early theorizations of nationalism (100). Khanna explains that while a "definite correspondence between the analyst who excavates the unconscious and the archeologist who unearths the genealogy of civilization" (61) can be discerned in Freud's earlier works, in later writings, psychoanalysis emerges as "a product of colonialist and nationalist ideology that commits an epistemic violence upon those who cannot be founding subjects" (58). Khanna demonstrates that a splitting occurs—quite distinct from the one Fanon experiences when he journeys from the Martinican colony to the French metropole of Lyon (*Black Skin* 111–12, Cash 24)—when Freud experiences himself as "a national subject under threat" and is forced to flee Austria to avoid Nazi persecution (Khanna 59, 100). As the analyst's relation to the homeland shifts during the Second World War, Freud's changing relation to alterity prompts him to revise elements of his own metapsychology (100).

by cultural anthropologists J. G. Frazer, Andrew Lang, and E. B. Tylor (75). Colonialist ethnology and imaginative inquiry embolden Freud to retrace the origins of this totemic system to "primitive" peoples' earliest engagements with "the phenomena of sleep (including dreams)" and "the problem of death" (76).

"Telepathy" is summoned in the midst of Freud's engagement with magic as "the earlier and more important branch of animistic technique" (78). Freud discerns evidence of magic in cases where effigies are used to injure opponents or when rituals are practised to induce fertility and rain (78–80): "as in so many instances of the workings of magic, the element of distance is disregarded; in other words, telepathy is taken for granted" (81). He elaborates on this point a few pages later when he explains that "distance is of no importance in thinking—[as] what lies furthest apart both in time and space can without difficulty be comprehended in a single act of consciousness—so, too, the world of magic has a telepathic disregard for spacial [*sic*] distance and treats past situations as though they were present" (85). Both references to "telepathy" serve to massage Freud's conviction that animistic tendencies, broadly speaking, are based in the conjurer's "immense belief in the power of his [own] wishes" (83). He faults the animist for collapsing Eurocentric understandings of space and time and then mistakes imagined efforts to transpose the "structural conditions of his own mind into the external world" as evidence of magical thinking (91). By charting out "the evolution of human views of the universe" in three chronological phases—"an animistic phase followed by a religious phase and this in turn by a scientific one" (88)—this scaffolding technique enables Freud to associate animism's mythological phase with narcissism, an earlier development stage where "men ascribe omnipotence to themselves" (88); the religious phase with object-choice relations, where omnipotence is projected out to the gods; and the scientific phase with the civilized man who "adjust[s] himself to reality and turn[s] to the external world for the object of his desires" (90).

In Freud's *Totem and Taboo,* "the unconscious" is considered "evolutionarily and developmentally prior" where "time and simplicity in structure" are concerned (Brickman 15, 94, 229). By conceptualizing the unconscious as a psychic "repository" for so-called "primitive mental formations" (Brickman 86), *Totem and Taboo* homogenizes difference across a distorted spectrum of sameness:

> There are men still living who, *as we believe,* stand very near to primitive man, far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore

> regard as his direct heirs and representatives. Such is our view of those whom we describe as savages or half-savages; and their mental life must have a peculiar interest for us if we are right in seeing in it a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development. (1)

At the same time, Freud reveals intimate proximity where absolute distance had been otherwise assumed (Brickman 85, 53). His reading of "primitivity" as a "universal feature of all humankind" was intended to "dethrone[ ] the imperial European subject" while disturbing his imperialist assumptions about the superiority of "civilized public and private life" (Brickman 93–94). From Lamarck's theory of inherited "acquired characteristics" (Brickman 6), Freud permits himself to infer that earlier psychic patterns persist in the unconscious of obsessional neurotics and children (Freud 85–87, 160). Yet his infantilizing reading of Indigenous psyches as fixed reflections of "prehistoric" psychologies (Khanna 69) re-entrenches the racist anthropological taxonomies he allegedly set out to unsettle. As Martinican clinician and revolutionary Frantz Fanon[3] explains early on in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And consequently, the colonist is right when he says he 'knows' them. It is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject" (2).

A section of Jacques Lacan's seminar on *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, entitled "The Circuit," includes a reference to the "striking coincidences Freud noted in the sphere of what he calls telepathy. Very important things, in the way of transference, occur in parallel in two patients, whether one is in analysis and the other just on its fringes, or whether both are in analysis" (89). A subsequent note about repetition, as "the form of behaviour staged in the past and reproduced in the present in a way which doesn't conform much with vital adaptation," precedes Lacan's assertion that "the unconscious is the discourse of the other" (89): "[N]ot the discourse of the abstract other, of the other in the dyad, of my correspondent, nor even of *my slave*, it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce—that's what we call the *super-ego*" (89, emphasis added). Robert Weatherhill explains elsewhere that Lacan reduces the father to a language-effect; "to an agency of the symbolic

3 I wish to express gratitude to Barbara McNeil for gently encouraging me to revisit Frantz Fanon's work during Indigenous Literary Studies Association's *Kîhokêwin tâcimoyin* gathering in the summer of 2022.

structure—that of castration" (quoted in Weatherhill 9). As per Nigel C. Gibson and Roberto Beneduce's interpretation of *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan allegedly argues there that "Imperialism (the master's discourse) shapes the colonized's unconscious, instilling the Oedipus story along with colonial laws" (96). Despite acknowledging in a footnote that "Dr. Lacan [who...] talks of 'abundance' of the Oedipus complex" (*Black Skin* 152) would in all likelihood refute this claim, Fanon insists in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the Oedipal complex does not "come into being among" colonized Antilleans (152). According to D. S. Marriott, "Fanon refuses to define the complex as a sexual destiny" limited by a colonial interpretation of the family (80, 85). If, in Freud's view, the Oedipal complex is resolved once the "normal" child reconciles himself to a pre-existing familial world in which his desires are frustrated (Bird-Pollan 75–76), in Fanon's view, it is not the site of the family but "the slightest contact with the white world" which renders the "normal" Indigenous child "abnormal" (*Black Skin,* 143). In Bird-Pollen's reading of Fanon, an aggressive superego compels the Black child to identify himself with the "phobogenic object" (*Black Skin,* 74), an object which Bird-Pollen later defines as "a specter that has haunted western societies since the start of the European slave trade until today and at the core of anxieties concerning sexuality, citizenship, race, and family in French colonies" (Bird-Pollen 122). Although Lacan conceptualizes the unconscious as "transindividual" in the passage above (Khanna 39), Fanon insists that the racial drama "enacted every day in colonized countries" (*Black Skin* 145) plays "out in the open" (150) rather than at the level of the unconscious.

Fanon insists that the racial drama "enacted every day in colonized countries" plays "out in the open."

The above counterpassages from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* critically insist on the psychical and physical violences that colonialisms perpetrate against Indigenous bodies. While these layered symbolic violences colour Bird-Wilson's story, they also stimulate a kind of misguided reading approach that is incentivized to go astray or, even, to behave badly. If "Mister X" amplifies the violent absurdity of varying colonialist mythologies (including Freud's misappropriation of the unconscious as a phylogenetic repository and anthropocentric bridge), the story also enlivens a parallel Nêhiyaw-Métis world beyond the carceral borders of this so-called "colony" (Fanon 202). Just as co-editors Washuta and Warburton explore in *Shapes in Native Nonfiction* "how contemporary Native writers use form as a practice in imaginative world-making to shape the page into a vessel" (16), evidence of such transformative work can be discerned through Bird-Wilson's stylistic and aesthetic form, as when the narrative breaks or rhythmically shifts to give space to Mister X's altered state of consciousness:

"He lies flat to anchor himself and plants his cheek next to the earth as soft as black velvet" (89). All the organs in his body are working "together as a whole in neat tandem with one another to contribute to the rhythm of the earth under his chest" (91). Freud defines "telepathy" in "Dreams and Occultism" as "the alleged fact that an event which occurs at a particular time comes at about the same moment to the consciousness of someone distant in space, without the paths of communication that are familiar to us coming into question" (36). Ten years earlier, he defines "telepathic phenomena" in "The Occult Significance of Dreams" as "the reception of a mental process by one person from another by means other than sensory perception" (136). As the converging viewpoints in Bird-Wilson's narrative come together, another trans-communicative process, distinct from Freud's sense of "unconscious communication," presents itself:

> *Misdirects.* The word comes to him on a sweet platform of baby powder scent that makes him calm and happy inside, reminding him of a girl, *his* girl. Frustrated that he can't crack the code, the whispered word that comes to him through the sucking, humming, heart-beating noise, he reaches deeper into the reliable pocket of earth to bring her close in an extended bear hug. He puts out his hand to stop the noise, turn it down, but he has no effect. *It's broken,* he sobs inside his chest and knows he'll never escape the din. (92)

As Beate repeats his name, a verb conjugated in the singular third-person tense registers to him instead. The repetition of this live name works throughout to adjoin the storylines of its principal characters. Yet this same homophone spurs Beate and Mister X to engage in two parallel conversations: "*Misdirects* comes the secret word again to remind him how his mother whispered comfort in his ear when all else raged around them, underneath the poplar tree, a sanctuary" (92). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb "misdirect" signifies "to direct wrongly"—in the sense of a "crooked or curved course, form, or direction; twisted or bent in shape or contour." In one sense, then, Mister X's racial ambiguity ensures that neo-colonial profiling techniques will fail each time to easily place him. In another sense, the story suggests that while such oppressive taxonomies continue to sanction racist acts of violence, state apparatuses also strive to misdirect Indigenous bodies away from their lands and their extensive kinscapes: "His breath slows to keep time, and the faint tune from the shadows is subsumed in the operation of his lungs and the deep inhale-exhale of Mother Earth" (91). The sound of Beate's voice repeatedly speaking his name contracts in tandem with the feminine earth to

which Mister X is spiritually and physically in the process of returning: "He longs, to the point of tears, to fill himself with the sound and feel of the fluid heartbeat from the centre of the womb" (93). The narrative distills an understanding of the land as a pulsing, live, and agential home: "She speaks to him without words, and he listens, without mortal ears. Her message soothes and humbles him. He takes her hand and steps into the circle" (94).

Chacaby concludes that what is really missing for many Indigenous peoples is "A place to come home to" (138). The unexplained reference to the poplar tree, as a sanctuary, both suggests a return to the land and demands a localized reading. As Warren Cariou recently reminded me, various species—including the balsam poplar and the eastern cottonwood—can be found "along the flood plains of the North and South Saskatchewan rivers" across the Qu'Appelle, Souris, and Saskatchewan river valleys (Wright). White and black poplars were also commonly used by Métis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to build St Laurent-style log homes along the South Saskatchewan River. Along with the poplar's localized significance, Bird-Wilson's narrative at once seems to recall *mamâtowisowin,* a Nêhiyaw term which communicates an understanding of the "Earth['s] energy" as feminine (Kress 62) and which, as Margaret Kress elsewhere argues, is key to both Woodlands-Willow Cree Elder Stella Blackbird and Chief Tammy Cook-Searson from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in north-central Saskatchewan. Translated by Cree scholar and philosopher Willie Ermine as "the capacity to connect to the life force that makes anything and everything possible" (quoted in Kress 62), the possibility that Bird-Wilson's narrative might similarly "make[ ] anything and everything possible" again presents itself near the end when an unexpected item returns to Beate. A woman enters the pawnshop the day following Beate's hospital visit. She "approaches Beate and slips a man's watch from her wrist and lets it clatter to the scarred counter. Of course, Beate recognizes it right away. It's a decent watch. Beate remembers selling it to Mister X" (91). Then, "[Beate's] hand shakes. She wonders who this woman is in relation to Mister X, what she knows. Still, she can't bring herself to look into the woman's eyes and see" (95). Beate over-pays to secure the watch's place in her pocket. There, the unexpected heirloom-piece solicits the "keen inner ear" of a transparent tadpole who listens "for a reliable *tick-tock* that comforts like a third heartbeat" (95).

A confluence of quoted passages in the sixth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* mirrors the velocity of Fanon's alienation as he recoils from one colonial misreading to another. Fanon is critical of any tendency to "romanticiz[e] a primitive collective black consciousness" (Khanna 135):

"Black Magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism, it all floods over me. All of it is typical of peoples that have not kept pace with the evolution of the human race" (126). If his engagements with Aimé Césaire (124–25, 131) and Leopold Senghor prompt him in any way to "distrust rhythm, earth-mother love, this mystic, carnal marriage of the group and the cosmos" (125), it is partly because he refuses the projective identifications of European ethnographers like Denis-Pierre De Pédrals, who grafts onto "Africa […] a certain magico-social structure" in *La vie sexuelle en Afrique noire* (Fanon 125–26). For, as Fanon insists near the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future" (226). In "A Note-Imagining an Africa That Never Was," Africadian poet and scholar George Elliott Clarke heeds Fanon's cautionary note to "would-be Afrocentrists" against the idealization of a "socio-politically, irrelevant, African past"[4] (Yerby quoted in Clarke). Yet Clarke also acknowledges other Black Liberation Theory allies, including Malcolm X, who understood the power of Afrocentrism as both an antidote to "racist mythologies" and an "essential(ist) component to their programmes" (Clarke). Far from suggesting that "Mister X" summons telepathy as a pre-colonial marker of "cultural authenticity," I intimate instead that the story seeks to strengthen Métis-Nêhiyaw telepathies as it transmits this knowledge "surreptitiously" in a way that attempts to think alongside Diné/Bilagáana scholar Lou Cornum and Maureen Moynaghs. Elsewhere, Cornum and Moynaghs summarize Clarke's definition of the occult as "not just an invocation of magic but also refer[ing] to hidden knowledge transmitted surreptitiously—and also obscured by malicious intent" (3).

At the end of his editorial introduction, Royle lists several ways in which the *Oxford Literary Review*'s special issue on "Telepathies" engages "the plural character of Derrida's 1979 essay 'Telepathy'": "Concerning the notion of letters or messages not reaching their destinations, Derrida remarks: 'The ultimate naïveté would be to allow oneself to think that Telepathy guarantees a destination that "posts and telecommunications" fail to assure'" (Royle ix). Rather than suggesting that a letter, or a watch, always arrives at its intended destination, an occult hinge through which

4 Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard argues in *Red Skin, White Masks* that "Fanon was attuned to the ways in which the individual and collective revaluation of black culture and identity could serve as a source of pride and empowerment, and if approached critically and directed appropriately, could help jolt the colonized into an 'actionable' existence, as opposed to a 'reactional' one characterized by ressentiment" (44).

Beate and Mister X communicate in the text, at a distance, pulses throughout the story. If the homophone "Mr X" redirects attentions toward Indigenous land-centred relations and "the liberating work of self-conscious, cultural assertion[s]" (Odjo quoted in Clarke xiv), I suggest, in conclusion, the story as a whole may also function as a conduit between fiction and life. In an article entitled "The official reports of my father's death don't tell his whole story" published online in the *Globe and Mail* on 26 January 2021, Bird-Wilson, herself a sixties scoop adoptee, writes of her biological father, Eddy, who was either working or training in the mid-1970s as a steamfitter in British Columbia. Limning through details of his passing from the state documents she holds, Bird-Wilson re-stories his psychical activity that fateful night:

> When I think about that moment—Eddy in serious trouble, real peril—I imagine two things happened. One, Eddy's mind took him to remembered moments of joy—here I imagine my father at Indian Sports Days on the reserve, his eyes squinted up in his head as he grins into the midday sun. Or holding hands with my mother—both of them so young, untainted by the world. And second, I believe at that moment of assault, it began to lightly snow, big gentle flakes so Eddy would be less alone. ("The official reports")

Parallels to the short story can be discerned in these unsettling details: Eddy is found unconscious in the snow the following morning; he is misidentified as a person of Asian descent and referred to by the hospital staff as "Mister X." And yet, even if his identity is never expediently ascertained in life, Eddy's brother and sister-in-law search for him relentlessly, calling him repeatedly by his name. In collapsing the distance between past and future, life and death, fiction and reality, Bird-Wilson conscientiously materializes "a complete rendering" of her father ("The official reports"). Moving "backward over time and space," she "remembers with care" ("The official reports") that "the body is not something opposed to what *you* call the mind," and that Indigenous peoples cannot be ideologically abstracted from the world insofar as we are inextricably "in the world" (Fanon 126–27). References to "telepathy" throughout her story spurs a *misdirected* reading approach that actualizes unsettling capacities, including the critical (re)-evaluation of psychoanalysis's colonialist attachments. While Bird-Wilson points to the persistence of an ongoing colonial context—perpetually reminding some readers that "your white civilization overlooks subtle riches and sensitivity" (Fanon 127)—she also insists on an "actionable" and

relational commitment to beating lands which amplify Métis-Nêhiyaw telepathic intelligences (Hogan quoted in Miranda 104) in return.

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