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Past, Present, and Future Ruptures to the Commons

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Introduction: Past, Present, and Future Ruptures to the Commons

JOHN CLEMENT BALL AND ASMA SAYED

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* on *The Ruptured Commons* has its origins in a moment when many of us were feeling — and lamenting — the palpable relevance of that combination of words. It was July 2020, and half a dozen scholars of postcolonial and Canadian literature were teleconferencing from our states of isolation across the country to begin planning the triennial international conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS), to be held in Toronto two years later. We needed a theme, and someone said, almost offhandedly, “I’ve been thinking a lot about rupture.” Someone else floated the word “commons,” and as we brainstormed various concepts, those two words were the ones that stuck in our pandemic-addled brains. A *Ruptured Commons* call for papers (CFP) was born shortly thereafter, and we held a successful, SSHRC-funded conference with in-person and online delegates from around the world at Toronto Metropolitan University the week of 11-15 July 2022. Two publications were announced just before the conference: a *Ruptured Commons* book of essays, to be published in 2024 by John Benjamins, edited by Anna Guttman and Veronica Austen and comprising essays on literature in English from parts of the world other than Canada; and this special issue of *SCL/ÉLC*, which gathers thirteen essays on Canadian and Indigenous literature, including three comparative studies that examine a Canadian or Indigenous novel alongside one by a South Asian or Indigenous Australian or New Zealand author. Seven of these essays were presented in earlier versions at the conference; another two are by conference delegates who have written a different paper for us, and the remaining four were submitted to our post-conference CFP.

So, what did we mean by the ruptured commons? It is perhaps more appropriate to ask what the title *could* mean, for the possibilities are many. The conference CFP, in the manner of such documents, cast a wide and inclusive net in the scholarly waters it hoped to fish, and the combined

CFP for the book and this special issue resembled it closely. “At a time,” we wrote, “when we have all been experiencing profound and unexpected disruptions to our shared spaces, routines, economies, societies, and work-lives,” we invited contributors to “consider the nature and implications of rupture, the commons, and their conjoining: *the ruptured commons*” (“Ruptured” 310). We highlighted the particular disruptions of the pandemic, of imperialism and colonialism, of capitalism, of new technologies, of political actors, of environmental and climate crisis, and of social and activist movements, followed by the usual laundry-list of prompts. We wanted to invite contributors to think about (any one of) many forms of rupture to many versions of the commons: spatial, discursive, civic-communal, political, virtual, ecological, and whether of the past, present, and/or future moment, of the local, national and/or global scale. The essays that follow are a testament to the versatility and urgent topicality of these resonant terms.

While we often encounter “common” as an adjective applied to diverse concepts — common sense, common knowledge, common folk, common property, common rights, common ground — the word can also be a noun (a public common or commons) and even, as Peter Linebaugh and others propose, a verb: “commoning.” Whether as an enabling or limiting descriptive concept, a space conceived of as a resource, or an activity, in all of its grammatical variants *common* can be, in Linebaugh’s words, “a powerful term of sharing, agency, and equality” (82). Indeed, with etymological affinities to “commune” and “community,” the term signifies what Lauren Berlant calls “an orientation toward life and value unbound by concepts of property as constituted by division and ownership” (Berlant 82). As such, it looks back to medieval English property law where, George Caffentzis writes, “the term ‘commons’ referred to a set of legally recognized ‘assets’ — including meadows, fisheries, forests, and peat bogs — that a community used but *did not own*” (96). And while such a notion is wonderfully enabling in principle, in an influential twentieth-century critique Garrett Hardin called attention to what he called “the tragedy of the commons”: the inevitable human “self-interest” that could lead to the overuse and destruction of such shared resources by those who did not take responsibility for what they did not own. Whether pastures for grazing, fishing stocks, or the Earth’s atmosphere, the temptation to overexploit, neglect, competitively harvest, or wantonly pollute such commons is simply too great. Hardin’s thesis has been

critiqued for its assumptions of normative capitalism and blindness to self-regulating and self-limiting instances of the commons, which critics touted in rebuttal as alternatives both to his argument and to neoliberal privatization and profiteering (Caffentzis 97); still, the relevance of his concept to our current environmental crisis is indisputable.

As for our title's other keyword, "ruptured" is of course the adjectival form of "rupture," which is itself both a verb (to rupture; the act of rupturing) and a noun (the rupture or ruptures that result from that act). As such, its various meanings involve bursting or tearing, breaking or breaching, disturbing or disrupting, any of which can be positive or negative depending on context and perspective. If our title, *The Ruptured Commons*, locates such acts implicitly in the past, their outcomes and legacies continue into the present, and beyond as with two significant general instances of rupture that Elizabeth DeLoughrey cites in the introduction to her book *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019). For DeLoughrey, the Anthropocene is "a moment of disjunction and rupture in geological history and perhaps in knowledge-making itself" (3) — "a spatial and temporal rupture" "between humans and the planet" that is urgently of our time but also centuries in the making and, of course, deeply embedded in "the futurity of the human as a species" (4). Moreover, she notes, as the works of postcolonial and Indigenous writers and artists have shown us, "catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological systems have already been experienced through the violent processes of empire. In other words, the apocalypse has already happened; it continues because empire is a process" (7).

Over the last few years, we have witnessed multiple ruptures in a variety of contexts. In the wake of George Floyd's murder and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the world saw renewed calls to address the socio-political ruptures that have been shaking the commons. The colonial legacies of racism, discrimination, and brutality have left their scars on the psyches of historically marginalized groups. In Canada, after an incidence of racial profiling at one of the annual Congresses hosted by the Canadian Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities, in April 2021, the Federation released its *Igniting Change* report. The report, prepared by the Congress Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization, is a call to action for academic institutions and associations to be more equitable and inclusive. Since May 2021, the legacies of residential schools and the ongoing

detection of unmarked graves of Indigenous children on their sites have reminded us of the urgency of implementing and following up on the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, starting in early 2020, brought to light social inequities such as uneven access to health care and vaccinations, and the call for righting wrongs became much louder.

At the time when we are writing this introduction, the Russia-Ukraine war is ongoing, as is the Israel-Hamas conflict. Civil wars, poverty, climate refugees, and many other catastrophes are further disrupting many versions of the commons, as are technologies such as social media and AI. How will the commons shift further in response to rising conflicts, discrepancies, inequities, and disruptive technologies? What will be the impact of these conflicts on the future of the commons? Invariably, as writers address some of these issues through their creative output, the focus for literary scholars is also shifting. We may wonder how our field of literary production and literary studies will itself be destabilized.

Contributors to this issue and the writers they study address ruptures past, present, and future, in colonial and postcolonial Canada and around the world, in literary works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Unfortunately, they do so only in English: the French version of our CFP elicited no submissions. The thirteen articles we have selected (with much-appreciated help from many peer reviewers) engage our theme in relation not only to environmental and climate ruptures and those associated with colonization and its legacies, but also the ruptures of war (and its attendant social and political ruptures), of public-health crises (in colonial Canada and an imagined future planetary health commons), and a variety of interpersonal and relational ruptures contextualized by larger ones. We are enormously grateful to our fellow contributors for their insightful and topical work, which we are delighted to share in the following pages and summarize below.

Susie O'Brien's "‘Somehow, a City’: Unsettling Urban Resilience Narratives, delivered as a keynote address at ACLALS 2022, anticipates the engagements with ecological sustainability, public health, Indigeneity, and relationality in many of the essays that follow. Casting a skeptical eye on the way the City of Toronto's *First Resilience Strategy* (2019) imagines a future Toronto "able to cope with the shocks and stresses of climate change and pandemics" as its citizens pursue "‘Truth and Reconciliation,”

O'Brien shows how its models of living together resiliently remain beholden to longstanding settler-colonial structures. Within the broader context of ubiquitous and upbeat resilience-thinking not just in ecological and urban-planning discourses but also in psycho-social and commercial-industrial ones, she reads two recent literary narratives set in a climate-changing Toronto as models for more reciprocal forms of habitation. In the Black and Indigenous characters' affinities with urban nature in David Dabydeen's *Brother* and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's "Big Water," O'Brien provides narrative reinforcement to her argument that "resilience is not always a good thing, and some commons need to be ruptured in the interests of just futures."

While the novel is the dominant genre in environmentally themed contemporary writing, Christopher J. Armstrong demonstrates how five short stories in David Huebert's *Chemical Valley* (2021) use the form's compression and intimacy to "open new vistas for [Heather Houser's concept of] ecosickness fiction as a literary response to planetary environmental crisis." "Petrocolonialism, Ecosickness, and Toxic Politics in David Huebert's 'Chemical Valley' Stories" begins by framing the collection's first five stories within the "long history of extractive capitalism, pollution, and colonialism" through which Sarnia, Ontario, has become ground zero for central Canada's petrochemical industry. Armstrong's insightful readings of each story explore the ethical stakes and activist possibilities the characters navigate as they inhabit — and often work in — a place of chemical violence and toxic politics. By leveraging the short story's "lyric attentiveness" to the everyday, Huebert's linked narratives "depict moments of affect, awareness, and agency" to capture contemporary experiences of fragmentation and environmental crisis.

As citizens, scientists, and politicians struggle to respond to climate change as a real and present danger to our planetary commons rather than a distant future, writers of climate-change fiction from Canada and over (the rising) seas use varied narrative strategies to convey the crisis. In "*Gun Island* and *Blaze Island*: Improbability, Risk, and Eco-Cosmopolitanism in Two Recent Climate-Change Novels," John Clement Ball examines texts by South Asian novelist Amitav Ghosh and Canadian Catherine Bush in light of prior essays by each author advocating for a renewed approach to literary realism — and of "the real" itself — to represent the climate catastrophe's "ever more probable improbabilities" and existential risks. Unpacking the contrasting ways their novels incorporate improbable

occurrences or behaviours within otherwise realistic narratives, and their divergent but complementary approaches to spatial and temporal scale, environmental justice, the non-human, and cosmopolitan responsibility, Ball concludes that despite the bold (and risky) choices each author makes, they are “more modest — or maybe just realistic — in what they try to solve or resolve” in their narratives of climate rupture.

Writing at a time when the pandemic had precipitated the largest disruption to global societies in living memory, Shane Neilson, a literary critic who is also a physician, uses what he calls a “biomedical studies” lens to look back to Canada’s 1832 cholera epidemic as represented in two canonical nineteenth-century texts. In “Public Health Disruptions in Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush* and Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada*,” Neilson frames the Strickland sisters’ observations of cholera’s effects, and their critiques of “the imperialist and capitalist public health system” of the time, through two contemporaneous theories of infectious disease — miasmatic and contagion — and through Lauren Berlant’s contemporary writings about the commons and infrastructure. In detailed analyses of the ways these pre-Confederation texts “create an imaginative commons where transformation can be conceived,” Neilson makes a case for their contributions to the history of public-health discourse in Canada and their later influence on the development of the nation’s current system of socialized public health care.

Where Neilson looks back to a long-ago public-health rupture, Heike Härting looks to an imagined future for public-health critiques in “Speculative Health Futures: Contemporary Canadian Health Policies and the Planetary Health Commons in Larissa Lai’s *The Tiger Flu*.” Reading Lai’s speculative fiction against recent Health Canada planning documents, she shows how the novel challenges dominant anthropocentric discourses of global health in outlining a “more-than-human planetary commons” that is “epistemologically audacious.” The novel’s “collateral insurgencies,” Härting shows, help it destabilize and reclaim concepts such as equity, sustainability, and resilience that have been co-opted by neoliberal and technocapitalist health regimes. Lai’s subversive utopian imaginings, she argues, offer an alternative vision of collaborative relationality and collective well-being by extending human identities (and the human body) into a speculative realm Härting calls “*natureculturetechnologies*.”

In “Visualizing the Canada-US Border: Comic Adaptations of Wayde

Compton's 'The Blue Road' and Thomas King's 'Borders,'" Gillian Roberts shows how analyzing two comic adaptations of short stories, one by a Black writer and one by an Indigenous author, nearly two decades after the publication of the original texts, "enables us to trace both the continuities of border-crossing concerns for Black and Indigenous communities and more recent developments." Both texts challenge the idea of a nation-state with defined borders, settler-colonial power structures, and state violence and racialized injustice against colonized subjects. They push readers to recognize that Canada has been constructed on stolen Indigenous lands and that it is not a welcoming space/place. Thus, Roberts contends that the two adaptations, even after a time lapse, not only remain relevant but further "invite us to rethink the category of citizenship and consider instead the possibilities of relation."

Using a transnational and comparative literary method, Carolina Buffoli draws a connection between Indigenous fiction and the Gothic in Canada and New Zealand. Recognizing the risks involved in using Western literary concepts and "the constraints and ethical dilemmas inherent in applying Western generic classifications, such as the Gothic, to interpret Indigenous texts," the author argues that such a comparative reading can allow for an understanding of literature as a medium by which we can learn "to address the legacies of colonialism, including transgenerational trauma, collective memory, and silenced histories." In "The Gothic Genre and Indigenous Fiction: A Reading of Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*," Buffoli's transnational approach to reading texts from two distinct geographical sites addresses geopolitical, cultural, and historical ruptures that have emerged as a result of colonialism. As the two novels combine a Western literary form with Indigenous traditions and epistemologies, they challenge settler and imperial narratives and "explore loss and conflict as well as resistance and recollection, providing a space where cross-cultural negotiations between different ontological and epistemological systems can take place."

Another comparative essay that centres Indigenous texts is Michaela Moura-Koçoğlu's "To Carry Pain, to Heal through Ceremony: Indigenous Women's Standpoint in Indigenous Australian and Canadian Literatures." Using Indigenous women's standpoint theory, Moura-Koçoğlu asserts that "Indigenous knowledge and agency, as expressed through literature, serve to mend the ruptures caused by the imperialist and colonialist legacies of systemic marginalization and gender-based

violence.” Much like Roberts and Buffoli, Moura-Koçoğlu argues that Indigenous literature questions and disrupts colonization, and foregrounds Indigenous knowledge, culture, and ceremony. It offers a humane and biocentric approach to understanding gender- and race-based violence perpetuated by settler-colonial oppression and marginalization; in doing so, it acknowledges Indigenous knowledge systems and affords an opportunity for healing and for repairing the ruptures caused by long-term violence against Indigenous peoples. Indeed, as the author provides detailed feminist analysis of texts by Wiradjuri author Tara June Winch and Cree author Michelle Good, she suggests that “[r]eclaiming agency and power through Indigenous knowledge is crucial for navigating, resisting, and unmasking settler-colonial systems of oppression in the pursuit of sovereignty.”

History, as it has traditionally circulated in the West, privileges Western and settler-colonial voices and subordinates Indigenous peoples. Reminding us about the contributions of nearly four thousand Indigenous soldiers during the First World War, Alicia Fahey, in “*Tsawalk: Rupturing Canada’s First World War Origin Story in Redpatch*,” shows how Raes Calvert and Sean Harris Oliver’s 2019 play, through the character of the grandmother, “asserts an under-represented perspective of Indigenous peoples and reveals how war is antithetical to the Nuučaan̓uł . . . world-view.” Fahey argues that as it situates Vimy Ridge as a moment of rupture and “underscores the harmful effects of patriarchal, heteronormative conceptions of masculinity,” the play underlines “the power of live performance as an act of reclamation.” After tracing the history of participation of Indigenous soldiers in the War and the mistreatment they suffered after it, the essay further analyzes *Redpatch* as a play that reframes the War “by depicting it not as an exceptional event but as part of the ongoing genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada.”

In the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, Sidney Hambleton Sponer, in “Eating Cake, Staying Quiet: The Rupture of Many Selves in Shyam Selvadurai’s *The Hungry Ghosts*,” looks at ruptures in the identity of Shivan, the protagonist of Selvadurai’s 2013 novel. Sponer argues that the novel’s focus on multiple selves as Shivan navigates his hybrid Tamil-Sinhalese identity, further framed by its Buddhist intertext, presents “a troubling metaphor for the struggles of Sri Lanka itself and what a common peace might require of its ruptured citizens.” Shivan, “inhabit[ing] an in-between space,” suffers in “a country that demands the erasure of

his mixed Tamil identity as well as his sexuality.” Sponer also reads *The Hungry Ghosts* through exile studies, showing that migration to Canada creates ruptures and uprootings on multiple levels: from land, language, family, and culture. To then embrace a new community while struggling to belong as a queer Tamil man leaves Shivan “still hungry.”

One aspect of the ruptured commons that does not often get discussed is its impact on personal lives and relationships with others. Asma Sayed and Jacqueline Walker, in “Ruptured Relationships in a Patriarchal Commons: Mother–Daughter Conflict in Priscila Uppal’s *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother*,” examine the impact of social, cultural, economic, and political factors on the central relationship of Uppal’s memoir, arguing that it is impacted by “an overarching neoliberal capitalist system whose failures are so wide-reaching that those subjected to them cannot always appreciate their impacts at community, family, and individual levels.” They look at the “institutionalized expectations of motherhood” that require women to be “good mothers” despite inadequate social and familial support systems as well as the ways expectations of children in such a society are aligned with patriarchal standards and informed by a matrophobic social narrative that decentres the mother’s needs and voice. As Sayed and Walker argue, the commons, in this case, favours the traditional approach to motherhood and leaves both mother and daughter feeling inadequate and unhappy.

In “Revisionist Narratology in Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*,” Alexander Sarra-Davis explores the narratological ruptures embedded in Ozeki’s interwoven narratives, given their multiple genres, collapsed temporalities, and ambiguous acts of memorialization. In a detailed analysis of the complex relations between the novel’s two writer-protagonists, Nao and Ruth, Sarra-Davis articulates this metafictional text’s slippery, self-reflexive ways of understanding the present through acts of researching, writing, and reading about the past, and of understanding the self through writing about an elusive, lost other. In the process, he demonstrates, its thematization of xenophobia toward immigrants, cruelty toward young women, and state violence toward enemy nations propels this unusual text’s views of history beyond postmodern play. It also, he suggests, prompts readers to recognize the importance of “a shared ethical imperative toward creating more honest and just narratives about the historically marginalized.”

Unconventional temporalities stemming from textual engagements

with the life of a distant other also feature in Carl Watts's "'To Have a Body / Is a Cruel Joke': *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* and Gwendolyn MacEwen's Shameful Subversion of Cultural Singularity." With "the ruptures caused by colonialism, the wartime clash of empires, and the effects of the latter on colonized peoples" as the backdrop, MacEwen's "trans-subjective" representation of Lawrence, in Watts's reading, explores relationality as an alternative to singularity and shows how Gillian White's notion of lyric shame reveals alternatives to liberal-individualist models of the self. In a nuanced and expansive reading, Watts responds to key ideas from MacEwen's critics by positioning her Lawrence poems, and their engagements with the Arab world, in conversation with contemporary ideas of cultural fixity, fluidity, knowability, and ownership. The collection, he concludes, is "as valuable a diagnostic for our own critical and ideological assumptions as it is slippery, spiritual, and transgressively expansive."

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