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**Engendering Biopoetics of Testimony:
Louise Dupré, Chus Pato, and Erin Moure**

Abstract

The act of bearing witness to the remnants of Auschwitz strains poetry and poetics. To examine manifestations of this disarray, this article first establishes a dialogue between philosophy and poetry by discussing Giorgio Agamben's conception of testimony and Jacques Derrida's reflection on the shibboleth. It goes on to consider writings by Louise Dupré, Chus Pato, and Erin Moure, who write as inheritors of necropolitical violence, yet at a remove from the Shoah. Although their writing practices cross paths with Agamben's and Derrida's reflections, these poets generate a biopoetics of testimony that exceeds these reflections by engendering a tension between dispossession and regeneration.

Résumé

L'acte de témoigner des vestiges d'Auschwitz met à mal la poésie et la poétique. Pour examiner les manifestations de ce désarroi, cet article établit d'abord un dialogue entre philosophie et poésie en abordant la conception du témoignage de Giorgio Agamben et la réflexion de Jacques Derrida sur le shibboleth. Il se penche ensuite sur les écrits de Louise Dupré, Chus Pato et Erin Moure, qui écrivent en héritiers de la violence nécropolitique, mais à distance de la Shoah. Bien que leurs pratiques d'écriture croisent les réflexions d'Agamben et de Derrida, ces poètes génèrent une biopoétique du témoignage qui dépasse ces réflexions en engendrant une tension entre dépossession et régénération.

A reflection on the relation between poetry and bearing witness to the genocidal violence of the Holocaust inevitably calls to mind Paul Celan's often-quoted words: "No one / bears witness for the / witness." Celan's "Ashglory" was published in 1967, and fifty-three years later, poetry continues to respond to the ethical imperative to bear witness to the unmentionable. While no one may bear witness for the witness, to not bear witness amounts to ethical betrayal. Today, writing about the Holocaust and genocidal violence includes Louise Dupré's *Plus haut que les flammes*, Erin Moure's *The Unmemntioable*, and Chus Pato's "The Distant Carpathians," a text that Moure translated from the Galician into English, and that can be found in the collection *Secession by Chus Pato with Insecession by Erin Moure*.² In her analysis of Moure's dialogical practice of writing, Angela Carr describes the collection as a genre-defying work through which Moure "archives the encounter of translation by introducing a third text into the field of translation: a text that is neither the translation nor the original source text."³ In "Northeast of the Carpathians," Moure thus creates an occasion "when two thoughts and individuals are in consonance, in proximate space, in and between their languages. There is a new space of thinking that emerges which is neither the thoughts of one nor of the other, nor of the reader, but arises in between and among."⁴ In gathering *Plus haut que les flammes*, *The Unmemntioable*, "The Distant

Carpathians,” and “Northeast of the Carpathians,” my article seeks to extend this third space by accommodating poetic polyvocality. Common to the four texts is the fact that none of the three poets have experienced the persecution and extermination to which their writing seeks to bear witness. In other words, they are witnesses *in absentia*, to quote Nicoletta Dolce.⁵ Yet all three poets convey the extent to which the violence of an event can affect the relation between writing and knowledge beyond historical time and actual experience.

The act of bearing witness to genocidal violence strains poetry and poetics, and the language of these four texts clearly sags in its attempt to address the remnants of Auschwitz. To examine this state of disarray, I first establish a dialogue between philosophy and poetry by discussing the premises of Giorgio Agamben’s and Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the relationship between language and the Holocaust. For Agamben, poetry stems from the ontological act of testifying to the chiasmic relation between body and language. In this context, bearing witness to the *Muselmann* through poetry is not an act of redemption; instead, “it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem.”⁶ For Derrida, “in the poetic writing of language, there is nothing but *shibboleth*” in that, as a marker of linguistic difference, shibboleth may indicate non-belonging but may also engender creativity through alterity.⁷ Neither *Muselmänner* nor survivors, Dupré, Pato, and Moure write as inheritors of necropolitical violence, yet at a remove from the Shoah. I suggest that, although their writing practices cross paths with Agamben’s and Derrida’s reflections, these poets generate a biopoetics of testimony that exceeds these reflections by engendering a tension between subjective dispossession and affective regeneration.

Both Agamben and Derrida agree that language does not give access to the full presence of experience, yet they diverge in their accounts of the relationship between language and experience. Derrida argues that, as speaking subjects, we are always situated downstream of experience because we do not have access to a non-linguistic origin. If there is an *hors texte*, it remains inaccessible. Ontologies seeking to establish a metaphysical discourse of full presence from which language has torn us will mask the process by which speaking subjects are always caught in a stream of meanings that leaves in its wake multiplicity, ambiguity, and transformation. While Agamben does not call Derrida’s notion of *différance* into question, he does meddle with the relationship between language and non-language, the sayable and the unsayable, the speaking subject and the living organism.

Agamben argues that what makes humans singular is their relationship to language as living organisms. However, rather than intoning the usual discourse according to which access to language differentiates humans from non-humans, he considers the fact that our capacity to speak is contingent on our not being able to speak, or infancy. “The human being is the speaking being, the living being who has language, because the human being is capable of *not having* language, because it is capable of

its own in-fancy.”⁸ Subjectivity emerges as an act of testifying to the tension between having and not having speech, that is to say, the tension between living organism and speaking body, *zoē* and *bios*: “Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. These two movements . . . cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony.”⁹ In sum, the enunciating subject bears witness to the chiasmic relation between language and non-language. Within the subject a non-speaking, non-subject lies.

Now, Derrida does not ignore the nonhuman. Indeed, the question of the animal progressively becomes a focus of later writings such as *The Animal That therefore I Am* (2002) and *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009), in which he argues that there is continuity despite the differences between humans and non-humans, and that to maintain that the human is *the* speaking animal is to deny animals access to signification. However, when Agamben and Derrida discuss the question of the witness in the context of the Holocaust, their conceptions of language and subjectivity yield two divergent accounts of testimony. On the surface, one might argue that the divergence is so wide as to create incompatibility between the two. However, I suggest that the two approaches are actually complementary and necessary in that they describe two mechanisms at work in the exercise of necropolitical power.

In his complex analysis of the shibboleth in Celan’s poetry, which I cannot reproduce here, Derrida discusses the border between belonging and non-belonging, alliance and discrimination. As a test-word indicative of a person’s linguistic origin, the shibboleth will always denote heterogeneity, but that heterogeneity will beget either a celebration of difference, or a decision to outlaw, if not exterminate. Janus-like, the shibboleth can portend life or death. I suggest that what Agamben discusses is the moment preceding, and in fact precluding, the law of the shibboleth, that is to say, the moment when the capacity to enunciate one’s difference has been annihilated.

For Agamben, at the heart of necropolitics lies biopower, which seeks to maintain subjects in a state of survival whereby the capacity to constitute oneself as both a non-speaking and a speaking subject has been stricken down. In other words, biopower targets humans in their capacity to testify to their body as living organism: “Biopower’s supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoē* and *bios*, the unhuman and the human.”¹⁰ Bearing witness to the *Muselmann* not only avers the dignity of the Jewish people, but it also reveals that the aim of extermination camps was to produce a “final biopolitical substance . . . isolated in the biological continuum.”¹¹ Agamben calls this biopolitical substance *bare life*, the state when humans can no longer bear witness to their body because they are reduced to an organism severed from language.

It is at this point that the law of the shibboleth collapses. Indeed, the *Muselmann* is one who enters a zone where the distinction between Jew and Aryan ceases to operate because the distinction derives from a linguistic system from which the *Muselmann* has been banned. In other words, the *Muselmann* is located in a non-place where the shibboleth, either as belonging or branding, ceases to apply. Thus, it can be argued that these two philosophical accounts are complementary insofar as Agamben reads in the Holocaust a biopolitical occupation of the borderline between the human and the nonhuman from which language arises as it exfoliates according to Derridean multiplicity.

In his analysis of Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (1958), Agamben pauses on the impossibility of bearing witness to the *Muselmann*. Levi describes the way in which starvation and abuse reduced prisoners to mutism. While Levi seeks to testify to the muted beings, he does not consider himself a true witness. Instead, the *Muselmann* is the integral witness to a state between life and death. At the heart of testimony therefore lies a lacuna: the *Muselmann* dies without testifying to a death-in-life or-deal. Agamben suggests that testimony contains in its centre "something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority."¹² The inability to testify for the integral witness exacerbates our ontological condition according to which to speak is to lose contact with non-language, while by definition non-language cannot be spoken.

In attempting to speak on behalf of the *Muselmann*, the witness is faced with the impossible task of speaking on behalf of bare life, that is, a body dispossessed of language. Yet this evisceration demands the act of bearing witness to those who perished. The poetic act of bearing witness to this violence is bound to threaten the relationship between language and non-language with what could be called necrosynthetics. Identifying the relation between body and language, sound and thought in terms of a biopoetics, Moure suggests that "Poetry and translation of poetry are two of many activities that take form through the sited human body, through the body's liquids, cells, febrilities."¹³ Dupré's and Pato's texts speak to the ways in which degrees of proximity to bare life dispossess biopoetics of its capacity to generate meaning.

A major poet in Québec, Dupré undertook a journey to Auschwitz and Birkenau in 2008, but one year elapsed before she was able to write. She eventually published *Plus haut que les flammes* in 2010. In an interview, she explains that poetry imposed itself as her medium because "she felt the need to cry out what [she] had seen at Auschwitz." She adds, "la poésie s'adresse à ce qu'il y a de plus intime dans la personne humaine . . . et particulièrement en ce moment je crois qu'on a besoin d'une parole qui est habitée, une parole qui rejoint les lieux silencieux de la douleur."¹⁴ In her long poem, Dupré's poems lay bare an economy of violence that traps women in necropolitical assaults on life. The crisis arises from the annihilating effect of bearing witness to pain.

Although the maternal persona of Dupré's poems evokes a visit to Auschwitz, she does not seek to describe the experience. Instead, she pauses on the violence that hits the witness like a boomerang:

car elle ne prend pitié
de personne, la douleur

elle se présente arme
au poing

elle vise le battement
de l'amour

elle t'a forcée à errer
les yeux crevés, l'âme

crevée.¹⁵

Dupré's strategic use of the second-person pronoun "tu" points to a polyvalent practice of *deixis* whereby, depending on context, the pronoun functions like a semiotic weathervane. While the pronoun may read like an apostrophe to readers, and by implication, to a collectivity, it also ousts the "I" as if the act of writing manifested the dispossessing effect of violence through a gutting of intentionality. Moreover, the act of writing is exposed to the Beckettian *cul-de-sac* of meaningless repetition: "Et tu recommences / ton poème / avec la même main, le même / monde, la même merde / étalée sur la page."¹⁶ The mumbling of the word "même" points to a history characterized by the relentless repetition of violence that, although each and every time distinct and singular, exposes humans to what Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand analyzes as genealogies of precarious life.¹⁷

The dispossessing effect of necropolitical violence on Dupré's persona reappears in Chus Pato's "The Distant Carpathians"—a hybrid of narrative, poetry, and poetics—in which a visitor to Auschwitz endures the act of bearing witness to a display of glasses, shoes, polish brushes, and suitcases. A key contemporary European poet and political activist, Pato writes in Galician, the language spoken in northwest Spain and whose speakers endured censorship during Franco's regime of terror and persecution. Thus, if Pato writes about Auschwitz, it is with the political sensibility of a woman writer who has an intimate knowledge of the ways in which a western history of decimation has spawned necropolitical violence. The display of objects with which her visitor is faced constitutes the vestiges of systematic practices of annihilation that aim at ruining the human. Discussing Pato's conception of poetry as "a conjunction of ruins," Carr offers an analysis that speaks to Pato's account of the visit:

the poetic word takes the place of that which cannot write because it is crumbling. The ruin's active capacity derives from its place within collective memory, where it is not merely the site or embodiment of memory but the means and materials of remembrance itself: "these ruins are really us." In Pato's metaphor, the poet's language figuratively animates the ruin from which it emerges and resurfaces it from any sinking narrative of passive decay.¹⁸

In "The Distant Carpathians," this activating of the ruins is animated by the tension between the living organism and speech through which bearing witness in the name of collective memory turns into a dispossessing imperative.

The unravelling of the subject begins on the threshold of the camp, as the narrator looks up at the infamous statement *Arbeit Macht Frei*. That she is under stress is indicated by her reading the letters as if they were bent, "like people use on wedding invitations."¹⁹ Pato's text recounts how reminders of necropolitical violence affect the ability to read without which writing cannot occur. The absurd act of misrecognition coincides with a deictic shift that conveys a seismic disturbance of subjectivity. From the initial use of the "I" pronoun, the text slews round to "you," then "we," then back to "I." While in Dupré's poems, the "I" has been expelled from writing, in Pato's text the "I" cannot exert its will on what happens during the visit: "I don't even remember who bought the tickets . . . the day was magnificent, blue sky and hot, then we saw it, saw the gate and the letters on top . . . you look at them and don't look at them, you can't look at them for long . . . it's impossible to be there and turn back, you have to enter."²⁰ The visit undoes habits and jolts the subject out of intentionality.

If poetry hinges on the inextricable link between *zoē* and *bios*, or living organism and speech, the act of addressing assaults on life is bound to threaten the writing subject with aphasia. Pato's account of the visit to Auschwitz enacts a brutal switch to infancy, that is to say, a dispossession of language in the face of the remnants of extermination. The narrator undergoes this experience when her eyes fall on the used canisters of Zyklon-B: "The eyes strain, they decipher incredulously, they don't believe it, retreat to a time when they didn't yet know how to read, they sound out each syllable, but the brain doesn't recognize what's in front of it and creates a gap, a disconnection."²¹ This retreat to a pre-reading stage coincides with a retreat to a pre-speaking stage. Out of orbit, in the midst of the crowd of visitors, the narrator experiences "the impossibility of articulating words."²²

Bearing witness to necropolitics undermines any attempt at what Pato herself refers to as the grand narratives of emancipation or humanism. Dupré's words are blunt: "tu connais / la loi de ta naissance / au sein d'une espèce / prête à tuer / avec le plaisir / dont on fabrique le poème."²³ The lines recall Agamben's statement that "humans bear within themselves the mark of the unhuman . . . their spirit contains at its very centre the wound of non-spirit."²⁴ An agon surges between the possibility of a poetic

voice that would offer hope and regeneration and the reduction of articulation to a voracious maw. Who better to evoke this incarnation of violence than the painter Francis Bacon? Dupré states: “[la joie] ne t’appartient / que si tu la délivres / de cette bouche / béante comme le cri / qui brûle le ciel / rouge Francis Bacon.”²⁵ Thus, ekphrasis cracks the rock of humanism, exposing the public eye to the ubiquitous presence of violence. As in the case of Pato’s disabling encounter with Auschwitz, the poetic subject loses countenance:

te voici encore une fois
déformée

comme un personnage
de Francis Bacon

rouge sanglot, rouge
crucifié

mais tu répètes les mots
susceptibles de redresser
la nuit

la nuit est un livre
où tu lis
entre les lignes.²⁶

A visual poet, Dupré creates a startling red figure of slaughter against a benighted background that the poet reads like a book. It is striking that, in both texts, the unravelling of subjectivity prompts references to abstract art. Pato’s narrator first perceives the display of the spectacles left behind as an art installation and is reminded of Mark Rothko’s paintings. Dupré’s persona compares her memory of the destruction of a village without witness to a white square upon a white background, which the reader will recognize as an allusion to Kazimir Malevich’s first abstract painting: “une peinture terriblement / abstraite / un repentir / que tu grattes du bout de l’ongle / jusqu’au sang / des mots.”²⁷ It is as if, in its transition from figurative art, abstraction were the only form that could manifest that which cannot be figured (out).

Yet, in western law, bearing witness hinges on telling what one has seen. But how do you bear witness to someone or something if you cannot see? Common to both Dupré and Pato is the way in which the ability to see is blighted. While Dupré refers to the searing pain of seeing — “les yeux brûlés vifs / de n’avoir rien vu / rien / sinon des restes,”²⁸ Pato conveys a state of hypervigilance oscillating between hypertrophy and lacuna. The writing texture is punctured in its centre: a pit opens where the eye should prepare the ground for a rational report. While the visitor is hypervigilant, her eye is under assault, and that leads her to ill-see and ill-say. Indeed, she mis-

recognizes the gas chambers even though her eye records details meticulously. “I thought I was behind the crematoria, I looked at the pipes and deduced they were heating pipes . . . neither did I recognize the openings, the small holes in the roof, I thought I was in a storeroom.”²⁹ The eye no longer appraises, and language is pulled asunder.

This dual experience of dis-remembering and aphasia indicates that the remnants of Auschwitz necessitate an approach to language that takes into account a crisis of affect in the witness. The return of affect in criticism and philosophy in the last thirty years parallels the poetic attempt to reactivate the tension between writing and the living organism. If, as Agamben argues, the subject testifies to the chiasmus between living organism and language, then the act of writing has to mobilize affect in the living organism when it seeks to bear witness to bare life. Indeed, combining the ocular with smell and touch, Dupré’s and Pato’s texts generate a biopoetics of affect that testifies to the unspeakable. The violence of the past intrudes upon bodies, and perceiving takes on both a sensorial and spectral quality, as in “sa combustion vive, sa fumée / en spirale / de sapin ou d’érable / le paysage qui sommeille / dans sa paix fragile / alors que monte dans tes narines / l’odeur funèbre / des fours.”³⁰ These lines switch from historical knowledge to sensing moments of violence “that flash up as unarchived, effaced remembrances of suffering that interrupt and reorient this time,” to quote Rachel Zolf.³¹

Pato’s text similarly transmits omens of disaster by shifting from the ocular to the haptic mode, thereby ushering in the *Unheimlich*: “you hold out the palm of your hand to touch the bricks of this wall, permanently sealed, the windows, I say, because they lead to the so-called ‘execution wall.’”³² This uncanny dynamic lays bare a tension between the distance of historical violence and the proximity of the visitor to the objects at hand. The museum turns into a non-place where the subject is extradited from the house of language while her body is vulnerable to the tactile yet spectral presence of violence: “you’re left with immobility, touch // windows, bricks, a curtain, and evaluate proportions, measures, time, details.”³³ Thus, the remnants mesmerize bodies into the act of witnessing: you both see and cannot bear to see, a caesura that Pato illuminates with the oxymoron “Auschwitz is *dark lightning*.”³⁴

Citing Levi’s statement that the *Muselmann* is the one who has seen the Gorgon, Agamben discusses the mythological figure as one without a face or *prosopon* whose mesmerizing anti-face is nevertheless represented. Agamben suggests that “the Gorgon designates the impossibility of seeing that belongs to the camp inhabitant, the one who has ‘touched bottom’ in the camp and has become a nonhuman.”³⁵ Caught between a distant event of genocidal proportions and a subjective collapse, Pato’s visitor stands in a chain of beings sharing a phantasmal exposure to traces of bare life. Bearing witness to the Holocaust is not solely predicated on factual knowledge, but also on being stupefied. Stupendousness derives from the classical Latin

stupétre, which means dazed, stunned, or speechless.³⁶ A witness to the remnants, the visitor is struck with stupendousness. But then, how does one loosen the grip of horror on the writing hand?

Adumbrating the possibility of hope in Dupré's poems is the figure of the child whose regenerative function is diametrically opposite to Pato's representation of infancy as speechlessness. The child as embryo or swelling of the future sustains the conception of writing as an advent of transformation: "suspendue à l'idée / qu'il n'est pas trop tard / pour l'impossible."³⁷ This messianic possibility stems from the stubborn act of writing: "C'est ainsi que le poème / te tient tête,"³⁸ as if poetry had a will of its own beyond despair. At the same time, the child is no simple embodiment of innocence but is situated at the affective hinge between the human and the inhuman. On the one hand, gestation, birth, and growth connote life or *zoē*. On the other, the capacity to harm is nestled within childhood. The carnivorous rage of Bacon's visual imagination is there from the start: "comme tu as toi-même mangé / depuis tes dents de porcelaine / car la vie commence / avec les mâchoires / et les bœufs pendus / aux crochets des marchés."³⁹ As suggested by Marie Carrière, Dupré's biopoetics seeks to bridge the gap between life and rapaciousness via an ethics of care engaging not only the maternal figure and the child, but also the child and the other.⁴⁰

The title, *Plus haut que les flammes*, aspires to rise above the inferno desiccating the imaginary and the living. With each and every child, the process of learning starts anew. Nothing is guaranteed, but each birth signifies the renewal of the relation between life and language:

et tu redresses les mots
sous tes paupières

afin que l'enfant
près de toi
apprenne à gravir

une à une les marches
de ses rêves

car l'enfant est à lui seul
une humanité.⁴¹

The capacity for joy taps into the mythopoietic attributes of the child, who "vient comme toi / d'un peuple aîlé,"⁴² and whose presence quenches "une soif d'or / qui éclabousse le paysage."⁴³ It is as if the act of writing were indebted to the child's soaring vitality. Moreover, the haptic relation to the child transforms the uncanny irruption of historical violence into a biopoetics of dignity: "caresse, effleurement / valse des doigts / sur l'ourlet / des blessures cousues / et recousues / dans cette dignité

/ qu'on appelle parfois *poème* / la joie tient à un fil / invisible."⁴⁴ Between *poème* and *peau aime*, the writing subject attends to a rebirth of language thanks to a tenuous relation to the other. Similarly, the conclusion of Pato's account enacts a universalizing movement that broadens the significance of the visit to Auschwitz by invoking a collective other. However, the move to regeneration is *sotto voce* and can only point to a muted poetics of responsibility: "we are all vestiges, remnants of the humanity that was destroyed in us, but not totally . . . All we write are traces of a literally razed poetry, signals from a muse without attributes."⁴⁵

Soundscape, echolalia, and translation, the collection *Secession/Insecession* where Pato's translated text appears, bears some of the marks that have made Erin Moure's writing singular in Canada and abroad. Written in collaboration or in dialogue with other poets for the last forty years, her poetry has refashioned poetic uses of language for the sake of what she celebrates as intrasubjectivity. By generating tensile relations between the lyrical "I" and communities past and in the making, Moure has explored the historical and political complexities of the subject as embodied citizen and poet. In "Northeast of the Carpathians," she offers a text in response to Pato's "The Distant Carpathians." In this third text, readers animate the space of intrasubjectivity that Moure creates: the right page hosts her translation of Pato's text; the left page provides Moure's account of another journey to the death camps. This third text enacts a soundscape through which yet another conjunction of ruins reverberates.

Moure's third text also gestures to a collective trauma that haunts the pages of another work, *The Unmemntioable*, an elegy on the death of her mother and on the disappearance of those who perished in Ukrainian Galicia. The link between the mother and the disappearances is Velikye Hlibovychi, a small village where Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians cohabited, and from which Moure's four-year-old mother emigrated with her parents to Canada in 1929. A few years later, the letters that kept the family in Alberta informed about the village ceased, as Jewish people were exterminated, and as conflicts opposing Poles and Ukrainians during Soviet annexation led to the burning of the village.⁴⁶

The Unmemntioable pays homage and bears witness to all the people who were left behind. This homage engenders a genealogy of transmission from the woman shot for being a Pole by a German soldier in Ukraine—Grandmother Pound-Cake Rose⁴⁷—through Anastasya Humalyak, the grandmother who emigrated to Alberta, and M. Grędysz, the mother who grew up in Alberta. As the persona of the long poem, E.M. is the daughter who inherits the pain and silence of a transgenerational trauma, and who relies on Eliza Sampedrín (E.S.) as her *Doppelgänger* to transmit the past. Leaving aside Moure's response to Pato for the moment, I propose to pause on *The Unmemntioable* because, nestled within Moure's third text, lies an elegy that revolves around the questions of language, testimony, and affect that I have so far discussed.

Honouring her mother's last wishes, E.M. travels to bury her ashes in Velikye Hli-bovychi where only a grove remains. The journey to the grove is a return by proxy to an originary land that has been in the grip of military violence, anti-Semitism, and ethnocentric rivalry for centuries. The first six sections of *The Unmentionable* correspond to the six faces of a historical die that was cast to determine the fate of entire populations but also of a particular family. The task of bearing witness to the mother, the family who perished, and the village that burnt is burdened by two forms of dispossession. First, the destruction of the village hardly leaves any archive: "Torch the homes (cut out the tongue, excise the barbaric accent)."⁴⁸ Furthermore, on account of ethnocentric conflicts, the act of remembrance is affected by an "excision of language"⁴⁹ enacted by the law of the shibboleth legislating the border between alliance and extermination among Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians, Romanians, and Jews. Thus, the poems struggle with an event that is unmentionable and beyond archived memory and hence the catachrestic title of the collection.⁵⁰ How does one bear witness to that which has been excised?

Moure turns the law of shibboleth into a typographical constraint restraining the reading flow. This positions the reader as a subject dispossessed of words and sounds because language and life have been excised. Blanks, gaps, and em-dashes allude to words (_ _ _ _) and convey a sense of absence within presence, non-language within language. Marks of excision and disappearance are signified by the use of a fading font, as in: "(E.M., daughter of M. Grędysz, daughter of A. Хамуляк)."⁵¹ Similarly, the table of contents alternates between black and grey fonts, as do translations from either French, Latin, or German into English in the various epigrams. On account of the dearth of archives and the excision of language, genocidal violence cannot but reverberate as a legacy of affect through a gendered genealogy of transmission that spans times and places.

As in the case of Pato's text, infancy plays a key role in Moure's reflection on necropolitical violence, but with a different twist. Moure's biopoetics fleshes out Agamben's reflection on the passage from *zoē* to *bios* by creating a phantasmal scene of regeneration in which affect aids and abets a relational process. E.M.'s travelling to the grove-turned-grave hinges on the trope of infancy: "In grasses and herbs waist high, wick/wet to the waist, digging the small hole for the ashes of my mother, in this act in Великі Глібовичі I enfant myself, I enact as I was enacted, *infans*, I assume the question in the grass for as many and as few years as are left to me."⁵² In a beautiful dirge, words adjoin each other to convey coalescence between mother and child:

eye of your eye
and your blindness my blind
shoulder my shoulder

shape was your shape

and so we shaped
 so that shape could induce us
 in rain, in wet ends of buildings
 in sand and soil where I
 scooped soil mother daughter

and stepped out of “Polish” trees, I famished.⁵³

The syntax unfolds helix-like, spiralling its way through texture and sound while rewriting/redressing the story of creation and eviction in Genesis. The act of enfolding oneself is rehearsed beyond the death of the mother and beyond the cataclysm that destroyed an entire village.

The regenerative desire to coalesce with the maternal body is aporetic not only because E.M. buries her mother’s ashes, but also because the secession from the maternal body is what creates the desire for phantasmal coalescence. This aporia is articulated in a later poem: “A mother is the unmemntioable boundary / that can never come fully clear.”⁵⁴ The word boundary conveys all at once border and binding or distance and proximity. At the same time, the phantasmal return to infancy is vital because it turns the law of the shibboleth and the ravages of necropolitical violence topsy-turvy: from non-language as excision, the enacting of *infans* re-establishes the liminal state between non-language and the capacity to speak which Moure rightfully reascribes to the unascertainable child-mother boundary, when and where it all begins. The scene is all the more phantasmal as it enacts the rebirth of the mother. In response to the mother’s words “I come from nowhere,”⁵⁵ the daughter offers a body archive by birthing the maternal body in the grasses of Ukraine where the mother played as a toddler.

The scene is prelapsarian, as it is based on the bracketing of yet another constraint to the act of bearing witness. In fact, this constraint stands in jarring contradiction to the mother-daughter coalescence, as it introduces a caesura within the very subject:

Body (the illegible dis/guesture) enfronts all
 language. a Body not
 even accounted for—or constrained—by
 this word “body” which wills or bodes its own remnant to
 detach—from neural bliss –
 a thick layer of cells
 que se despregan, creating, thus,
 context. (which is the body

 come loose, dislodged⁵⁶

These lines and its signal portmanteau, “the illegible dis/guesture,” which makes the subject *unheimlich* or uncanny to itself—hosted and ghosted, guest and disgust all at once—redirect us to Agamben’s notion according to which the gap between language and body, the human and the nonhuman, motivates the act of witnessing: in its capacity to use language, the subject testifies to its constitutive infancy, that is to say, its non-access to language. However, Moure adds a considerable turn to the screw by reintroducing the problem of shibboleth, that is to say, the Babelian proliferation of languages by which to bear witness to the secession between living organism and language. Thus, not only are language and the body not making one, but upon secession from the maternal body, the multifarious means of bearing witness to experience never coincide. Thus E.M. asks: “Without experience, is there an ‘I’? How to speak of the experience of the ‘eu,’ the ‘je,’ the ‘я,’ the ‘I’? Can we speak of them at once? . . . Is this also the unmemntioable?”⁵⁷

The Unmemntioable creates a biopoetics of survival upon the remnants of genocidal violence, struggling with the effects of a razed capacity for language under the watchful eye of a muse without attributes. In this biopoetics, the mouth can be configured as the liminal zone between body and language where falling prey to excision lurks, where the aphasia induced by maternal loss jostles with the desire to honour the mother, and where Babelian heterogeneity and the necessity to speak to the singular collide. Hence the recurrence of the motif of borders, boundaries, or “verges,” each word speaking to the proximity between body and language, mouth and prosthesis, the unmentionable and that which ought to be sung. The act of bearing witness cannot rely on linguistic normativity, as the norms have been contaminated by necropolitical violence. The ethical imperative to bear witness can only emerge from a regeneration of language in its relation to the living organism whose sensorial affect can aid and abet the recall of the speech injuries that necropolitical violence inflicted.

Moure’s response to this ethical demand consists in generating affect that stems from the body as non-language and that perturbs normative uses of language. Plugging into the sensorium, this affect is characterized by kinesis and multiplicity in that, spurred by memory and simultaneity, one sensorial affect leads to another. This kinetics of affect merges sight with touch. While the mother struggles with a cancerous tumour that blinds her, she has the ability to see beyond the usual understanding of the word: “*Touch and sight merge. The brain doesn’t care what body or prosthesis act as conduit for sight. The skin too.*”⁵⁸ It is this merging that allows E.M. to reach the past beyond the notion according to which one has to experience an event so as to testify to it. As she buries the maternal ashes, E.M. says, “I see her wading in those grasses / outside memory, inside soil / her frail membrane / touches, what it touches <hillside> <touches> / disappears.”⁵⁹ These lines enact a biopoetics of testimony to the unmemntioable—the impossible memory of a child as figure of life whose family was scythed by necropolitical carnage.

Above all, this kinetics of affect centres upon sound as a sensorial mode of transmission. Acoustics is a key link between *zoē* and *bios*, as it designates the movement from noise to sound to language and vice versa. *The Unmemntioable* functions like an echo chamber by testifying to the non-place of bare life, particularly in the section “The Pound-Cake R&se Letters” in which writing bears testimony to those deprived of life in a village ravaged by destruction and famine. Elisa Sampedrín, or E.S., is a mediating and phantasmatic *Doppelgänger*, who assists in drafting letters to bear witness to the cataclysm. E.M. and E.S. are joined at the hip by an ampersand that speaks to the gap between language and the body, writing and experience, presence and absence, or seeing and blindness. A generator of mirages in the mode of affect, E.S. is the indispensable prosthesis sustaining epistolary acoustics: “Thus ex/plosivity across membranes. A touch. E.S. and her prosthetic gesture: language.”⁶⁰ E.S. is the proper conduit for an ethical response from the witness *in absentia*: how to bear witness to an event that one has not experienced, and how to translate languages that one does not know?

By mistranslating, one might say. The letters are composed so as to broadcast sounds from the Ukrainian past. Moure uses a technique whereby writing is spurred by the sounds of an unfamiliar language. The tentativeness of the translation from Polish speaks to a dispossession of grammatical and lexical propriety: “It weep and extreme desperation has covered it outlawed from / the verge Ukrayina-Polska.”⁶¹ Working in between non-language and language, words tentatively touch the noise that mangled and famished mouths made: “They have woken us up, it awesome cries / from former opening once a face / Now sponge, it has not tongue / <Speech> about some they released <emit> / Imitate <manage> has tongue <speech> for <about>.”⁶² Superseding the Derridean concept of dissemination within language, the letters engage in emission beyond language: “Translations emit.”⁶³ This acoustic emission participates in the razed poetry of Pato’s description. Indeed, the handsewn book of letters is twice (un)authored: “author: Elisa Sampedrín / author: Grandmother Rose.”⁶⁴ In fact, the unauthoring underscores the familial trauma insofar as the mother’s parents, who emigrated to Alberta, can no longer testify: “Анастасія and Tomasz, authors, vanish.”⁶⁵ E.S. is thus the sign of an impossible yet imperative act of testimony. The impossibility of a witness for a witness is twice acknowledged through a denegation whereby an enunciation arises and subsides all at once.

Denegation lies at the core of Moure’s “Northeast of the Carpathians,” her third text in which she responds to Pato’s account of the visit to Auschwitz. Her translation of Pato’s text takes her response eastward of Auschwitz to the city of L’viv and the decimated village evoked in *The Unmemntioable*. In doing so, Moure bears witness to another human being: her echolalia and Pato’s translated text stand side by side. This dialogical process of translation and response turns the exclusionary law of the shibboleth into an occasion for difference and hospitality. Other signs of linguistic multiplicity are scattered in Moure’s account of the visits to Płaszów, Birkenau, and

Bełzec, which begins with a landing in Kraków, followed by train and bus travelling with people of different nationalities. The text weaves together Hebrew, French, Polish, Ukrainian, and English. However, while *The Unmemntioable* strives to generate a biopoetics of affect on the threshold between non-language and language, “North-east of the Carpathians” confronts the reader with the failure to bear witness to the cataclysm.

It is as if the visits to the camps disavowed the act of bearing witness. This disavowal begins with the earlier silence of farmers who during the Holocaust saw the use of human ashes as land fertilizer. Hence, Father Desbois’ acerbic words: “No one’d cared if they saw . . . It is useless to write a book, he told me, dismissing poetry and theatre; while you write, he said, the last witnesses die off, unheard.”⁶⁶ Moreover, while Pato’s conclusion strikes a collective chord, Moure’s text is rent asunder by a pattern of incoherence that saps the sense of a community. For instance, the members of the group travelling to the sites are isolated along lines of class and gender. Marcello, the Italian guide so keen on remaining faithful to experience in the camps, uses French (the very language of so-called state neutrality predicated on the ban of *signes religieux*) to admonish orthodox Jews for singing at the gate of the camp. The visitors mill around the sites, failing to pay collective homage to the dead.

This fragmentation in the face of necropolitics is conveyed by parataxis and asyndeton: the text does not sing but hacks its way through words. The uncanny sense of disconnection in Pato’s text is amplified by a fractal type of writing: “So we walk. An easy walk. Cold. In groups. In overcoats. Some talking. Some are in couples. Some are alone.”⁶⁷ While in Grandmother Rose’s letters, acoustic translation lends an ear to the vanished, in Moure’s third text, the italicized translation of Christa Wolf’s novel *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (1979) disrupts syntax to reveal an act of ethical omission. The citations from Wolf’s novel are no coincidence, as its German title signifies the absence of place—twice: *No Place. Nowhere*.⁶⁸ Moure generates incongruous and aleatory effects of translation, letting the spectral past intrude upon Wolf’s text: “*Other people want thoughts that are not drenched in blood. The people in Auschwitz-1 couldn’t see the Birkenau camp. In this way the process would go on and on, and would also introduce a certain forward movement into the art of painting.*”⁶⁹ The non-italicized enunciation breaks into the translation and jabs at the refusal to see.

So what remains? As in *The Unmemntioable*, places remain and silently bear witness to pain.⁷⁰ In a biblical allusion — “O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place”⁷¹—Moure indicates the way in which exposure to the non-place of bare life calls for an ethical response that is grounded: “In willow bushes, pushed up by the receded snow, a child’s thin white rib. On the path, teeth of a young woman. The earth cries out with such a mouth, for earth is the flesh now of these bones . . . *C’est ici la Shoah.*”⁷² In a generative gesture of dispossession transcending the subject-object binary of western thought, the earth plays the role of a surviving third. Also, things

beyond mention participate in the little theatres of testimony: “potatoes were here too, frozen in winter, hulked with shut eyes unable to speak beside the *Judenrampe*.”⁷³ Testifying to devastation can only emerge from a use of language that acknowledges and testifies to its own *grounded* living organism. If, as Agamben argues, “the remnants of Auschwitz—the witnesses—are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved [but] . . . what remains between them,”⁷⁴ then that which remains in-between necessarily requires bodies situated in space and time to ensure the transition from *zoē* to *bios*, noise to sound, space to place, organism to speech. Celan already knew that: “Deep / in Time’s crevasse / by / the alveolate ice / waits, a crystal of breath, / your irreversible / witness.”⁷⁵

1

Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 65.

2

Respectively, Louise Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes* (Montréal: Éditions du Noroît, 2010); Erin Moure, *The Unmemntioable* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2012). Chus Pato’s “The Distant Carpathians” and Moure’s “Northeast of the Carpathians” are included in *Secession by Chus Pato with Insecession by Erin Moure* (Toronto: BookThug, 2014), 56–65.

3

Angela Carr, “One More Word: The Translator’s Archive in *Secession with Insecession*,” *Sillage critiques* 23 (2017): par. 2, <https://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/5517>.

4

Erin Moure, “Writing in Secession: Biopoetics and the Galician Imaginaire of Chus Pato in Canada,” *Canada and Beyond* 5 (2015): 81.

5

See “Plus haut que les flammes: Ton poème a surgi de l’enfer,” *Nouvelles Études Franco-phones* 30, no.1 (2015): 19, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/592463>.

6

Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 36.

7

Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 33.

8

Agamben, *Remnants*, 146.

9

Agamben, *Remnants*, 146.

10

Agamben, *Remnants*, 156.

11

Agamben, *Remnants*, 85.

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Agamben, *Remnants*, 34.

13

Moure, “Writing in Secession,” 72.

14

Interview with Louise Dupré, “La une franco-phonie,” *TV5-Monde*, January 22, 2015, 4:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rt9SKHGsz0>,

15

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 65.

16

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 37.

17

Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand, “La Shoah au miroir de la poésie dans *Comme une chienne à la mort* de Louise Cotnoir et *Plus haut que les flammes* de Louise Dupré,” *Québec Studies* 59, no. 3 (2015): 9–30.

18

Carr, “One More Word,” par. 24.

19

Pato, “The Distant Carpathians,” 57.

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Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 57.

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Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 61.

22

Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 59.

23

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 69.

24

Agamben, *Remnants*, 77.

25

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 77.

26

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 45.

27

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 62-63. See Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80385>.

28

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 13.

29

Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 63.

30

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 45.

31

"Noone Bears Witness," *Canadian Literature* 210-211 (2011): 260, <https://canlit.ca/article/noone-bears-witness/>.

32

Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 61.

33

Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 63.

34

Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 65.

35

Agamben, *Remnants*, 54.

36

Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "stupendous," accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/192213?redirectedFrom=stupendous#eid>.

37

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 68.

38

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 61.

39

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 21.

40

"L'éthique du care et l'écriture postmillénaire de Louise Dupré," *temps zéro* 12 (2018), <http://tempszero.contemporain.info/document1631>.

41

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 81.

42

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 43.

43

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 78.

44

Dupré, *Plus haut que les flammes*, 76.

45

Pato, "The Distant Carpathians," 65.

46

For Moure's account of her mother's origins, see "Tuteshni," in *Unbound: Ukrainian Canadians Writing Home*, ed. Lisa Grekul and Lindy Ledohowski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 86-99.

47

The name Pound-Cake derives from a pun on *babcia/babka*, which means both grandmother and cake in Polish.

48

Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 7.

49

Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 19.

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For a more detailed interpretation of *The Unmemntioable* as a relational ecology of affect, see my "Bioarchives of Affect: Erin Moure's *The Unmemntioable*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 45, no. 2 (2020): 25-47.

51

Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 4.

52Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 13.**53**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 12.**54**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 45.**55**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 14.**56**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 21.**57**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 37.**58**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 15.**59**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 4.**60**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 39.**61**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 78.**62**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 80.**63**

"Emit," in *Planetary Noise: Selected Poetry of Erin Moure*, ed. Shannon Maguire (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 163.

64Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 77.**65**Moure, *The Unmemntioable*, 13.**66**

Moure's "Northeast of the Carpathians," 62. See Patrick Desbois's *The Holocaust by Bullets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

67

Moure, "Northeast of the Carpathians," 58.

68

Translated by Jan van Eurck as *No Place on Earth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

69

Moure, "Northeast of the Carpathians," 62.

70

On the relation between affect and landscape in Moure's poetry, see Dominic Williams and Milena Marinkova, "Affective Trans-capes: Affect, Translation, and Landscape in Erin Moure's *The Unmemntioable*," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9, no. 1 (2015): 73-92, <https://academic.oup.com/cww/article-abstract/9/1/73/412691?redirectedFrom=full-text>. On biopoetics in Moure's and Pato's poetry, see Daniel Aguirre-Oteiza's "'What Politics where breath fractures?': (in)translation and the poetics of difference," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): 233-45, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14636204.2018.1456149>.

71

Job 18:16.

72

Moure, "Northeast of the Carpathians," 64.

73

Moure, "Northeast of the Carpathians," 58.

74Agamben, *Remnants*, 164.**75**

"Etched Away," in *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 2002), 215.