

Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic. By Lisa Stevenson. University of California Press, 2014. 272 pages. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper and electronic.

Lisa Stevenson's *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* is an addition to the field of Native American and indigenous studies that we will be thinking about, and with, for some time. Situated in the Canadian Arctic, and thus within the field of Arctic and Inuit studies, the author confronts a complex colonial landscape that has been mowed over by government officials, anthropologists, and journalists, all of whom leave behind a familiar wake of racialized tropes about indigenous peoples. The mode of representation that emerges out of this particular regional history, where images of Inuit death, squalor, and filth provide the common currency for thinking about Inuit life, Stevenson is particularly interested in the paradoxical way that this currency is valued in terms of care. The obsession with Inuit death in Canada, she argues, is actually subtended by a paradoxical desire to make Inuit live.

Stevenson provides a different angle to the more familiar histories of Canada's geopolitical project's effects on indigenous peoples because in the Arctic, Canada depends on Inuit life to assert its sovereignty. Since the nation's health is thus directly proportional to Inuit health, the colonial formation in the Arctic becomes primarily biopolitical in nature, with domination over Inuit life articulated through statistical sites of population size and health. Stevenson spends a great deal of time helping us understand the systematization of this biopolitical form in various health institutions and bureaucracies, but she is more interested in the "psychic life of biopolitics" (96): that is, how this form *lives* in daily life, in the mentalities and desires of bureaucrats and those who "care" for Inuit bodies.

Life Beside Itself is organized around the structural and cultural forms of care that informed the Canadian state's policies and projects for saving Inuit peoples from the tuberculosis epidemics of the mid-twentieth century, and the more recent programming for reducing suicide rates and saving Inuit (from themselves). Focus on these two temporally distinct "events" allows Stevenson to account for the shifts in colonial mentality and policy over the century while also finding the thread that connects them together over time and across space: namely, the institutionalization of care over Inuit life, but a care informed by the colonial ethos of indifference to Inuit death. Colonial desire, Stevenson shows, is formed by both racist tropes of filth and feelings of disgust, but has been framed within the biopolitical logic of "life for life's sake." Like most desires, these colonial architectures of the mind are burrowed deep and cannot be uttered or articulated except through indirect articulations: a bureaucrat who speaks of the sanctity of life and its inevitable good, but coded within a language of not wanting "to have" an Inuk death on his hands (33). The universal good of life is affirmed, but with unspoken desires and expectation of the inevitability of dead Inuit.

The brilliance of Stevenson's book is to locate this unconscious structure of desire within observable forms of care in the Canadian state. In the first two chapters Stevenson takes us through the history of the tuberculosis epidemic of the mid-twentieth century and associated health and hygiene campaigns that the government

initiated to save Inuit bodies. While health was the ostensible focus of these campaigns, Inuit filth was what framed this concern, as exhibited by *The Book of Wisdom for Eskimo*, a health care and social work handbook which was an attempt to civilize and save “the Eskimo” by cleansing him (49). The tuberculosis epidemic required a more concerted effort to “save” Inuit people, however, and thousands who contracted the disease were shipped to sanitariums in the south. Many never returned. Stevenson recounts the state’s “care” from the perspective of families who never saw their loved ones again, and the cold and calculated logics that cared for the diseased body, but not any of the social or spiritual relations that sustained that body.

Chapter 1 more fully articulates Stevenson’s theories of the image that structure her methodological approach and also asks “what happens when experience, or stories, of death are foreclosed?” Following a story of a grandmother who was taken away, never to return, and a grandson who waits for news of her death, year after year, Stevenson demonstrates the hold a body has and how its presence is always more than a biological fact. By highlighting the state’s notion of care for the body, driven by “factual” understandings of biological health, Stevenson begins to articulate other notions of health, ones that require bodies to be situated in stories and through social processes of narration. The state’s obsession with biology and statistics trumps the social requirements of presence, and we are forced to reconcile with Stevenson’s difficult question: can we ask Inuit to live while expecting them to die?

Stevenson approaches the “how” version of this question in later chapters that begin to introduce the reader to more contemporary issues of suicide prevention programs in Nunavut that have grown over the past decades, including massive ad campaigns and suicide hotlines. Noting the bureaucratized form of these programs, and the particular logic of anonymity that structures them, Stevenson makes some disturbing observations and arguments. The suicide hotline phone call, for example, is a location where caregivers and receivers are prohibited from identifying themselves on a personal level. In a small hamlet like Iqualuit, however, the practicality of such a bureaucratic rule becomes virtually impossible, forcing people to perform their relations in completely new and unprecedented ways. But for someone who is not from the place of the caller, it also raises the important question of how to care for someone you don’t know.

It is precisely the modern structure of this relationship that interests Stevenson, where both parties are forced to bear witness and perform their own subjective dissolution as abstracted members of the universal concept of humanity. Such a structure also permits an anonymous volunteer operator to experience the horror of a planned suicide, in all its gruesome details, but within a relationship where “no claims are made” on either party after the caller hangs up (84). Following this logic, Stevenson even asks if such an experience can produce delight in the volunteer who approaches horror from a safe distance, much like Edmund Burke’s sublime. Clearly, however, in this institutionalized structure the only object of care can be an abstracted notion of community or “humanity.” Volunteers experience themselves as caring persons but without responsibilities beyond the call. As one volunteer reasoned, “You don’t care about them personally, but as human beings” (84). These are the micromoments where

Stevenson shows how biopolitical principles of making and preserving life are maintained through notions of “doing something for your community” while simultaneously in the face of death.

The questions that Stevenson asks are tough, and their answers are often dark and uncomfortable. One finishes this book deeply challenged, but also oddly invigorated. In part this is due to the sheer ingenuity of this book, both in style and in Stevenson’s brilliant ethnographic methodology that dwells within a colonial realm of uncertainty for life. Theories of the image by Walter Benjamin, Freud’s psychoanalytic discourse of the dream, and Foucault’s theorization of the imagination all help Stevenson to achieve this. But something must also be said for the deep ethical commitments that are apparent on every page of this book. As Stevenson’s relationships with people in Iqaluit grow, she becomes more familiar with different understandings of life and death, and is forced to ask if it is always so clear that life trumps death, or what it could mean that hope might only be approachable beyond life itself. Her own moral and ethical dilemmas speak to these questions, and she often pauses to confront her own desire for life and fear of the possibility of the death of people she cares about. At several critical junctures she catches herself “desperately” wanting her suicidal friends to “want what I wanted—a future” (130). Another account of an uncomfortable visit with a friend after a failed attempt to commit suicide emphasizes that, while Stevenson did not know with any certainty whether the friend would try to kill himself again, she nonetheless realized that “each of us knew the other was willing somehow, and that we could be together in the face of another night” (100). By confronting her own moralistic reactions and by taking her friends seriously, the author articulates a position of care that is committed to dwelling in presence rather than anonymity and abstraction.

In these moments of contestation over the value of life, through her friends in Iqaluit she also identifies a unique form of refusal—a refusal to cooperate with the state and become a biopolitical subject and a refusal to live within its grid of intelligibility (70). From this notion of refusal emerges the difficult question of whether we can think of suicide as a way of imagining a different life, one with different temporalities and possibilities of living and belonging differently to the world (173). Cautious of the terror such a position might create, of the accusations that are surely to follow (*you do not care enough!*), and not claiming to know definitively what suicide is, Stevenson nonetheless holds open the possibility that suicide can also articulate a desire to live differently, “to transcend the grinding psychic pain that accompanies colonization” and to discover a new way to remake one’s world (172).

In an era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that mass mediates indigenous suffering to a Canadian public, and where the horrors of missing and murdered indigenous women have become an unavoidable topic of conversation, Stevenson hints at possibilities for a new ethics of caring and hearing these stories, but also contributes to the critical discourse on recognition and its politics that many scholars are debating today. Perhaps, Stevenson asks, there is a form of recognition that exists that is not premised on affixing and making subjects intelligible, as biological, as in her study, or simply as “victims,” in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and missing and murdered indigenous women (164). Perhaps this form of recognition

could be more like the throat singing with which Stevenson opens her book: two women call and respond to one another with the guttural sound of their voices – *ham me, ham ma, ma, ham ma, ham ma, ham ma*. Such singing, Stevenson argues, is a calling out, “less concerned with what is said than that something is said, that a gesture is made” (165). It parallels the structure of narration that reveals the meaning of something or someone without seeking to define it. Such insights are useful across many contexts of activism and writing, providing us with an ethical imperative for listening anew, but also how we might sing our own narratives in ways that are more adequate to the lives they emerge from.

Some may wonder, as I initially did, about the complete lack of discussion of indigenous sovereignty or nationhood in these pages, but I came to realize that this was one of the book’s strengths. As Stevenson takes us painstakingly through the numerous ways that the Canadian state tries to force Inuit into a form of life that privileges the biological body, we see how this is part of Canada’s attempt to make itself strong and healthy. This focus on biopolitics also permits Stevenson to further locate new sites of resistance and refusal against the state that demands cooperation in its interpellation of individuals as anonymous subjects. The youth, especially, refuse to abide this form of recognition that requires them to be suffering victim-subjects.

Suicide is, as Stevenson boldly but graciously puts it, a form of imagination. It will take the work of activists, community members, and indigenous studies scholars to work out how this ethical reorientation can inform political change. What remains important about Stevenson’s work is the ways it helps us imagine beyond the colonial abstractions and reductions of populations and biological bodies, to understand the importance of the excessive realities of life that are central to all communal forms, which hints towards new ways that indigenous futures can be imagined. Perhaps sovereignty and nationhood will be able to encompass these futures; perhaps new forms of political collectivity entirely will emerge. It will certainly require risk and a reorientation in the ways we listen to those voices within our communities who are saying something, but which dominant forms of recognition cannot hear.

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People of the Saltwater: An Ethnography of Git lax m’oon. By Charles R. Menzies. University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 192 pages. \$45.00 cloth and electronic.

“I open my house to you, Reader. Come sit down at the table and take your place. I have a story to tell” (9). With these words Charles Menzies disrupts a number of assumptions readers might make about him and the captivating ethnography he has written. Charles Menzies is a well-known anthropologist, a Canadian citizen, and a faculty member at the University of British Columbia. He is known particularly for his Northwest Coast-centered research on indigenous traditional environmental knowledge. At the same time, as readers of his book will come to understand in their own