

Olive Meadow

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### Artistic Statement

#### Introduction

*D'ainmnigh mé mé féin Olive. Is as Corcaigh mo shinsir. Is as Tír Cheyenne mé, agus anois tá mé i mo chónaí i Lingít Aaní. Go raibh maith agat do chuid ama.*

*Olive yéi sh xwadisáa. Cork Kwaanx sitee, ax léelk'w hás. Cheyenne Kwáan aanix' kuxdzitee, yeedát ku.aa, Aak'wx' yéi xat yatee. Gunalchéesh i gaawu ax jeet yeeteeyí.*

*I have called myself Olive. My ancestors are from Cork County, Ireland. I grew up on Cheyenne lands, but now I live at Aak'w, in Lingít Aaní. Thank you for your time.*

My first semester in college, my favorite course was entitled “A Sense of Place: Alaska and Beyond.” I was new to the university and new to the city and state in which it resides. I had only spent three weeks in Alaska before moving here, and the majority of my knowledge about my new home came from old films, books, stories, and the news. I had no sense of place.

My sense of place was not established in my hometown either. I had spent 18 years in the same little town, and I knew next to nothing about it. More pressing, I had little sense of self. My family was overbearing, and I continued to instate their norms and expectations on myself. My body was foreign, and my spirituality was tangled. I was in desperate need of a personal perspective of my environs, past and present. I first explored my own perspective in “Sense of Place,” and the past four years of studies have continued the exploration. Language, I have learned, is one of the greatest indicators of a sense of place. I give you first my introduction in Irish Gaelic, the language spoken by my ancestors; then I introduce myself in Tlingit, that

spoken on the land on which I reside, uninvited; then I introduce myself in English, the language that has colonized my ancestors' island and the archipelago in which I currently live. My introduction is more than just a set of classes I have taken, a degree which I am pursuing, a set of capitalistic accomplishments which I have summited. The last four years, made up of the uncredited labor of my peers and community members, could not accurately be accurately portrayed in a textual run-down of this sort. Rather, my introduction is an ancestral background, a place-based understanding of where I come from, where I am, and where I am going.

Memoir is conventionally seen as a reflection; I also see it is a jumping-off point. Supplemented by theoretical frameworks I have learned through my studies, this manuscript centers on my current perspective of the past four years of growth. It is an application of the labor and learning that most defines my undergraduate education, a look backwards at where I have been and where I am now. Then, I look forward. Alongside belonging, the future is the subject of my memoir. Maeve and Sammy compete for a place in Olive's future; Olive competes with Maeve and a multitude of other agents out of their control for a future in a place that they feel strongly about. In reflecting upon the goals and desires that I had in the past, I think about my current future prospects: as I reflect in Chapter 4, "I wondered what was in store for our future, what would happen to Maeve, Sammy, and me. I wondered what healthier relationships would come, what sense of belonging without force would comfort us" (88). These questions are compounded not only by the interpersonal dilemmas explored in the text, but by other, larger issues: climate change, colonization, queerphobia. My past and my future are haunted by these obstacles.

I am reminded of Richard and Keixwnéi Nora Marks Dauenhauer's discussion of the Tlingit term "shuká":

“Shuká, which is used in the title of this book, also means ‘ancestor,’ but in a more general way. The concept is two directional. It means, most literally, ‘ahead.’ It refers to that which has gone before us in time—predecessors, those born ahead of us who are now behind us. It also refers to that which lies ahead, in the future.” (28)

There is an intergenerational, bidirectional perspective. Potawatomi scholar Kyle P. Whyte identifies this perspective as a spiraling of time, a storytelling tactic crucial to modern Indigenous writers as they contend with climate change, colonization in its most recent form (5-6). For Whyte, the purpose of analyzing this Indigenous science (fiction) is to promote traditional ecological knowledge, to conserve spiritual and cultural values of the environment, and to deny the stereotypical ideas of Indigenous literature and Indigenous peoples as static or ancient. In my own writing, then, I have been working to see climate change not as a novel incursion on the landscapes and people around me (including myself), but a continuation and, in some ways, achievement of colonization. It is necessary to seek out the presence of the spiral of time in my own life, even as I am disconnected from it.

Perhaps more relevant to my own material existence, Rebecca Evans claims that this temporal spiraling may queer the narrative as well. Mixing genres and participating in eco-community-centric worldview denies the linearity of Euromerican temporality and uplifts queer lived experiences (Evans 99). In contrast to the stereotypical queer narrative—focused on coming out, on parental rejection, on final and comprehensive surgeries—the temporal existence of both the self and of the broader community’s ancestors and descendants are spiraled together. Our place-based connections are exemplified. The similar, transcorporeal concept of weathering seeks to eliminate the question “what should we do to stop climate change?”—something focused on the *now* of weather—and proposes instead “how is climate change me?” (Neimanis and Walker 561). Moreover, weathering facilitates a greater consciousness of spatial and temporal connections; not only is climate change *me*, but it is also “the subsistence farmer, the

young person sleeping rough, the wheelchair-user on a flooded street (not to mention the spawning salmon, the baobab tree, the algal bloom, the Arctic ice)” or any other weathered subject (Neimanis and Walker 560). These examples are to say nothing of the non-iconic subject or the wide variety of past and future weatherings.

For me, I have found my sense of place through writing, through reflecting on my past and looking towards my future. About creative writing, Jeremy Schraffenberger writes, “Our discipline is grounded in place. Our discipline slams its fist on the table and proclaims that we know *who* we are by knowing *where* we are” (2; italics original). Writing, and writing memoir in particular, is a circular process. It is like an argument with an ex: back and forth, tangential, referencing past failures and future possibilities, and always in circles. It is a constant return to the past. As I edit those memories, I return again and again, spiraling inwards and outwards. Though at first glance, each moment suggests a singular perspective or a linear truth, I have become convinced that my memories cannot be parsed as such. Memoir inherently blends time and space, connecting the character I-then to the narrator I-now. In response, my memoir confronts space and time, allowing them to deepen and spiral on the page and within the response of the reader.

### **Part I: The Process of Reflection**

Essayist Sven Birkerts identifies lyrical memoirists as

“[...] ecstatic dreamers. Highly susceptible to loss and change, they use their work as a tool of restoration, searching out recurrences and patterns, but also then allowing for the idea that pattern hints at a larger order, possibly an intention to underlying experience.

The memoirist researches this, using the self as subject, assembling the shards, riveting his impressions together word by word.” (37)

In creating my thesis, I have sought out patterns and woven them together into the hindsight-driven perspective of that larger order. I have taken apart and pieced together my actions and reactions, searching my constant wandering and displacement for patterns or sets of patterns that

may reveal some lived truth or new perspective on the experience as a whole. In fact, this seeking out of patterns is what pushed me towards memoir in the first place. In response to my relationships with the people portrayed as Maeve and Sammy, I felt that there were significant geographical and social patterns at play.

Specifically, belonging has become a major focus. Where I grew up is remembered violently, but where I live now is new and almost foreign. Throughout the spring and summer of 2021, my wife and I were entrapped in my hometown by my parents. We finally escaped after a particularly violent episode. It was not surprising, but it was the last straw for us. After fleeing, I was forced to contend with the stark contrast between the love I had for my family—and by extent, my childhood home—and how unsafe and unwelcome I felt with them. There is an opposition in my reflection of the place, one that I thought I might struggle to portray in my writing.

However, my knowledge of Colorado was deeper than I had thought. I had paid close attention, and it felt almost natural to uncover my dichotomous feelings in this way. I feel especially connected to the titular protagonist of the 2017 film *Lady Bird*, who is discontent with her own hometown and her own overbearing Catholic parents. In response to a college application essay, the following conversation occurs:

Sister Sarah Joan: You clearly love Sacramento.

Lady Bird: I do?

Sister Sarah Joan: You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care.

Lady Bird: Well, I was just describing it.

Sister Sarah Joan: Well, it comes across as love.

Lady Bird: Sure. I guess I pay attention.

Sister Sarah Joan: Don't you think maybe they are the same thing—love and attention? Even as I worked my way towards Juneau, even as I dealt with the memories of love and hate that crafted my perception of Colorado, all I could do was pay attention. It was necessary,

therefore, to document the changes that I felt each time I returned. Colorado feels like home. I know the weather, the people, the plants, the roads. But because of this intimate knowledge and history, I am kept from it: the weather is too dry for me, and in constant flux; the people dangerously bigoted; the plants and animals representative of colonization and climate change; the roads a trap with negative memories and police cars around every turn. I desire to know a place—to have a home—but I am unable to.

In this manuscript, my contradictory perspectives of Colorado are well-presented in the contention between my parents' warmth and coldness. To portray the precision with which my parents present themselves—warm to others, offensive and violent to myself—I included an almost dreamlike reflection in Chapter 2. Compare “The afternoon we would arrive, it would be warm. My mom would have made enchiladas” to “My parents were seldom home, so my father’s collection of Colorado whiskey kept me company. When they were home, Latin chants and apocalyptic readings from Revelations echoed off the hardwood walls” (30). The full reality comes out when Olive breaks down, reflecting finally on the emotional constraints that have been placed upon them, in Chapter 4. I write, “Fear was the only emotion I was allowed. When I got in trouble, my dad would get out the belt, and while I sobbed and hid under the glass-top kitchen table, my mother would crouch down and ask ‘Are you afraid of us?’ I would nod my head, and she would respond flatly: ‘Good. Keep it that way’” (87). More than there is a reckoning with my parents’ dual personas, there is a reflection on the past and a recognition of growth towards the I-now perspective, the narrating self.

In contending with my sense of place, both in my natal region and in the place I currently live, colonization is an obvious next step. Many of my sources of inspiration for this project relate to colonization and how sense of place may be obtained from or through it. Through this

project in particular, some of the most insightful advice I have gotten comes from Kuuyux Larry Mercurieff and Libby Roderick's *Stop Talking* and Ernestine Hayes' *Tao of Raven*. Hayes writes:

Non-Indigenous professors, artists, writers, scholars, storytellers, seamstresses, designers, speakers, and all those others who happen along and present themselves as authorities on anything to do with a colonized people—whether art, stories, or perspectives on literature—are engaging in appropriation and are normalizing colonial behavior. In spite of their protestations of respect, their citations of personal relationships, their exhaustive studies, all such practices are colonial acts.” (Hayes 155-56)

In no uncertain terms, Hayes is speaking of me, of my place in her world.

Most often, when I introduce my current and future plans, my profession and my actions, I relate to the fact that I am a colonizer. There is a deep and violent history to my writing and teaching goals, not to mention my presence in this land. Rarely, though, do I really realize my own individual place in this history. No amount of studying, of language-learning and book-reading, of literary analysis or edited clauses will erase this reality. As Walter Brueggemann claims, the innate human need to belong is an innate human need to enter history (qtd. Servid 291). What is there to do, then? *Every* occupation becomes a part of this violence. If it is as simple as to *Stop Talking*, what is the purpose of my own philosophies, of the very writing of this reflection?

This sort of nihilism has no place in belonging, in reckoning with sense of place.

If I have learned anything from *Stop Talking*, it is to listen. To be quiet is not enough. One must listen to accept any outside perspective. And, as Hayes points out, much of the Indigenous community is dying. “Nothing covers us enough to avoid the dawn,” she writes, “I don’t know how we survive this trauma. I don’t know where we should start. I don’t know which way to go. I don’t know how it’s done. I don’t know who I can trust. I don’t know when I will die” (Hayes 170). In the end, finally, Hayes’ visage has “fallen like leaves from a timeless forest” (172). I appreciate her sobering words. As leaves continue to fall in the timeless forest, I

remember that even as my presence is a part of the ongoing violence, there is still a desperate call to be a listener. To give up may be an incursion on the same or a great scale as a lack of listening. As I write this project, as I write to you and the broader community that will inevitably come into contact with my writing, I am writing to receive a response. I am writing to listen.

## **Part II: Applying Reflections to the Page**

### *Glacial Flow on the Mapped Page*

In her memoir *Canyon, Mountain, Cloud*, Tyra Olstad's paleontological perspective deepens her and her reader's place in the environment. In a u-shaped valley in Denali, Olstad sees millennia of glacial presence; in the deep Black Canyon of the Gunnison, she feels the river's two million years of carving. And yet, she watches a view for only a few minutes, or she spends a week hiking, or a summer at the ranger lodge. Often, even when she does revisit, the place has changed so much that it is unrecognizable: summits in Adirondack State Park may have sweeping views one day and be smothered by clouds another. It is this temporary, but captivating, form that defines her memoir.

In the Tongass, alongside glaciers and rivers, I listen to the centuries-long dance between granite, marble, trees, mosses, streams, ice, wind, salmon, deer, and people who live here (Matsen 76). For many non-Alaskans, the Tongass is the origin of canned salmon or that strong, "soft-needled western hemlock" (Snow 6) that holds up the frame of a house. For the people who live here—and especially the Indigenous peoples whose land the US stole and later offered a measly \$7.5 million for (Voluck 102)—it is the locus in which we interact with the land. Born here or transplants, we learn the way we fit into that centuries-long dance, the way we may be perceived as stewards or stealers of the land, or both. While we spend a single human life here, arriving and dying as quickly as salmon to their natal stream, we influence the ecosystem and it

influences us. The deep time that carves out rocks and mountains is at once carving out our hearts and minds.

In response to these concepts, I was forced to reflect upon my own presence: What opportunities for the exploration of time do I have? What experiences have I had with place that are both momentary and permanent, on myself and on my environment? What is my own place in the immense space that time takes up?

Throughout the memoir, I return to water and wind—to weathering. In their return to Colorado in Chapters 1 and 4, Olive sees the quick changes the landscape has made since their childhood. In Chapters 2 and 3, they see the way that colonization has affected and still affects Yukon and Southeast Alaska. In the Prologue and Chapter 2, this is perhaps most explicitly portrayed in the way that Olive reflects upon the glacial-carved valleys in which they stand. “In the airport parking lot, I looked north, at the squared bowl of mountains surrounding the Valley,” I write, “They seemed so permanent, but I knew that the glacier had cut through them like a knife through soft flesh not too long ago” (4). I return to this image later, documenting Olive’s view of Glacier National Park: “I saw the glaciers not as ice and snow, but as the cracks, boulders, moraines, valleys of the park. I saw the memory of glaciers where there seemed to be only granite” (48).

Drawing from Olstad’s reflection on glacial weathering and my continually growing perspective on the Tongass, I have highlighted the way water and experiences conform landscapes and perspectives. In attempting to comprehend the movement across time and space, I have mapped my journeys out on the page. I follow Schraffenberger’s claims that “Our discipline is cartographical. Our discipline writes the land. Our discipline is a landscape. Our discipline considers the crucial difference between land and landscape” (4). In writing, I create a

landscape. In memory, I recall the linear and more-than-linear ways in which I have interacted with the world around me, and how the characters of Maeve and Sammy fit into that world. It is a balanced braiding of history—my history, my lovers' history, my environment's history—that defines my memoir.

### *Balanced Writing and Braided Narratives*

When I first read *The Tao of Raven*, a professor put a name to one aspect of Ernestine Hayes' balanced structure: a braided narrative. I loved the thought of that. I imagined stories laid out on a landscape, some glacial god dispersing them and the u-shaped topography braiding them as streams through pebbles. Beyond the obvious artistic merit, braiding a narrative creates a montage on the page. When done skillfully, the reader can approach complex, metaphorical, or non-chronological connections with ease. As Hayes writes, "Raven teaches us we can be both devious and practical at the same time [...] Raven's teachings are open, so it is difficult to comment on them aloud" (30). She braids the memoir's narratives to explore these teachings and, more insidiously, intersperse the speed and treachery of colonial thought into her own memories. It is clear that *The Tao of Raven* is a Tlingit book, but it is also clear that it is a product of colonization. To be cremated, her mother's body had to be flown to Fairbanks and the ashes back to Juneau; to tend to a plot in her home village, Hayes had to complete piles of paperwork and government bureaucracy; to even braid the book together, Hayes had "to obtain a colonizer's education later in life [...] to capture a position at a colonial institution and at the end of her life wonder if she had done any good, or if there was even any good that could have been done" (37). She has hope, though: "For a few generations, Alaska Native people stood at a precipitous brink, at the end of a path constructed out of someone else's history. And now an

Indigenous path will be carved” (57). Hayes calls out for this path to braid past, present, and future together the way glacial rivers are braided across a pebbly valley.

Reading *The Tao of Raven* for the second time, I have begun to listen to Raven’s devious practicality. More than just trickery—the Tlingit verb root *yeil* denotes Raven and connotes deception (Twitchell)—he teaches patience, he teaches spirit, he teaches balance. Balance makes up the structure of Hayes’ work, and has been one of my greatest inspirations. Braiding appears in my own Prologue and Chapters 1 and 4 as a way to compare and contrast the numerous, non-chronological narratives that fit into my cohesive story. Working as the god of the narrative I-now perspective, I clash memories together, leading the audience towards the same questions and conclusions I had uncovered in the original moment. How did Olive convince Maeve to come to Alaska? How did their relationship fall apart? The motif of water in its many forms reminds the reader how fluid narrative memory can be. In following Hayes’ form, I have been responding to her call. It is my intention, therefore, to call out to a great number of readers in my own thesis. I find my own meaningful analyses through the collation of memories, and I braid them together to build off of each other and portray some greater meaning to my reader. This is a further reiteration of Sven Birkerts’ lyrical pattern-making.

#### *Chapter 4 and the Trans Memoir*

The first piece of writing in which I truly focused on my transition was “Nana’s Quilt,” a flash-fiction piece that won the Mac Behrend’s Creative Writing Scholarship and was published in the 2021 edition of *Tidal Echoes*. I approached a cherished object—the titular quilt my maternal grandmother made for me—and related its history and future to my own. Something clicked; it had somehow never occurred to me before to write about being trans. Upon reflecting recently, I realized that the reason I hadn’t thought to write about that topic was because I didn’t

have a good representation of what trans creative writing should entail. Like my perceptions of Alaska or colonization before I came here, my perceptions of trans writing were founded only on the normative narratives: man-in-dress jokes in sitcoms, gender-reassignment surgery, coming out. They were bland and I couldn't relate. Through this project, I have experimented with my own writing and analyzed historical and present trans authors to expand my ability to portray a more accurate representation.

Jonathan Ames, a cisgender-heterosexual man with a certain interest in the transsexual story, defines its normative three-act structure: “The third act to these stories—first act: gender-dysphoric childhood; second act: the move to the big city and the transformation—is the aftermath of the sex change,” he writes (Ames xii). This is not a total solution, though, for

“The writers will not proclaim that great happiness has been found or that all their problems are solved, but they all do seem to express this feeling that *they've done all they can*—penises removed, breasts implanted; penises constructed, breasts removed; myriad other surgeries; great physical and psychological suffering—and they have come, finally, to a place of self-acceptance and peace.” (Ames xii; italics original)

The memoir of a transsexual, it seems, must follow the transition from beginning to end, definitely answering whether or not the author has had *the surgery* that family and friends and strangers ask about on the street and in Internet forums. Furthermore, the narrative resonates well with Euromerican literary canon, as “it touches upon the age-old story of becoming something else and its immovable place in our literature and in our psyches” (Ames xvi). This fits perfectly with our well-loved, well-written three-act structure, our Bildungsroman, and our beautiful archetypes of linearity. It approves everything we've all thought about transsexuals before, and all we will continue to think of them. The transsexuals in Ames' anthology give answers and come to ultimate, final conclusions.

However, myriad other writers have established a different canon of trans writing. About his early years in transition, Cooper Lee Bombardier writes, “It was the version of my story that I

needed to tell in order to receive the medical interventions that I wanted” (74). This familiar sentiment is defined by coming out, seen often as the “inciting incident” of a queer or trans three-act structure. In my own experience, coming out has been a process as convoluted and continuous as transition itself. I felt pressured towards binaric descriptors of myself, unwilling to explain “non-binary,” “genderqueer,” and other, less family-friendly terms I had coined for myself to every prying stranger. “Trans woman” was fine enough, I thought. My uncle, the most accepting member of my family, once told me, “Think of your grandparents; they won’t know what this stuff is.” I told everyone to use she/her, but that felt almost as bad as he/him. In therapy, I knew I had to fit a certain model narrative (I’ve always felt this way; I always played with dolls; I always liked pink; I always felt I should have a vulva) to even start hormones. This is no falsification, but a lot is left out. Bombardier, like myself, is forced to subscribe to this linear, physical future.

Further, looking to Rebecca Evans’ work on queer futurity, the structure Ames posits only satisfies the cis-heterosexual gaze. It does nothing “to defamiliarize accepted understandings of time” (Evans 100). Truly defamiliarizing time in writing leads eventually to an awareness of ones’ ancestors and descendants and an awareness of how their place-based identity intersects time and space. Through trauma not only of existing in this colonial capitalistic society but also that directly inflicted by my family, friends, and community, my own past is anything but linear. I have shown this in the structure and the multiple personal and societal-level conflicts in Chapter 4, “Melting.”

When I first wrote Chapter 4, I followed the classic advice to write to a story rather than to a theme, and the piece came out better for it. I began with one of the final meetings between Maeve and Olive, one that I remembered as specifically explosive. The setting was my first

roadblock—the first draft took place inside a restaurant, while another was inside a parked car. My characters were cramped. As I approached the theme itself in subsequent drafts, I realized that it was necessary to portray the whole chapter as somewhat fluid. Unfortunately, I ended up disconnecting the chapter as a whole from a solid narrative or imagery. Close editing was necessary to maintain this balance. Finally, I struggled with exploring the intricate relationships between Callie, Maeve, Sammy, and Olive. This is where I turned to Bombardier's work. I found Bombardier's use of sections—half titled *There/Then* and *Here/Now*, and one segment at the end titled *Where/When*—in “In This Dungeon, All Prisoners Are Free to Leave” (41-57) especially useful in reckoning with a multi-layered approach to gender, sexuality, and relationships.

Similarly, Callum Angus intimately weaves bodily transition with that of the landscape. In his short story “Migration,” Angus portrays a relationship falling apart along with the environment. The narrator bitterly comments on the geese—flying north in midwinter, seeking out any bit of cold left—and their cheating partner—missing the narrator's feminine body prior to testosterone injections—saying, “I want nothing incapable of change [...] I want plants that can withstand a flood, insects that won't apologize for taking up space, things that shouldn't thrive but do because conditions are finally ripe” (Angus 34). I was forced to confront my characters' resistance to change and contend with the inevitable changes that have come with the passing of time. I conclude, “While I could learn my way around the wetness of Southeast, around that iconic wetland near my new home, Maeve and I wouldn't learn our way around our genders and sexualities to find some comfortable belonging in our relationship [...] Maeve wanted fluidity and solidity on their terms and no one else's” (83). The changes continue, and the characters must adapt or lose each other. Often, the outcome is loss.

In response not only to Bombardier's and Angus' perspectives, but Evans' discussion of the queer temporal spiral, I approach the melting of Olive and Maeve's relationship is not a singular moment. Their relationship extends backwards and forwards in time, through the characters' relationships with Callie and Sammy. Simultaneously, the physical environment of the wetlands surrounded by industry (not to mention Olive's and Callie's metaphysical genders) reveal the fluidity of monogamy, polyamory, and the uncertain boundaries of togetherness, not to mention unfaithfulness. My writing here is a mapping and a Frankensteinian construction of each character's body. Such a process is sexually intimate and, at times, relies on Eurocentric ideas of land and body in the first place. In reckoning with this, I have explored the claim that creative writing, "[...] is bodily. Our discipline is a body. Our discipline embodies. Our discipline is bodies of knowledge and bodies of work. Our discipline heeds the body's imperatives. Our discipline is a corpus, a corpse, carcass, cadaver, compost" (Schraffenberger 2). I return, therefore, to the motif of water and weathering. I return to the braided narrative. I search for place-based perspectives of my gender. I construct a narrative that clashes each relationship together and leads both myself and the reader to a greater perspective than even my past self could have had in the moment. There is mapping and there is intimate exploration of land and body; there is learning and unlearning and relearning, a constant look towards both the past and future.

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