**Experimental Writing and Reading across Borders: Rediscovering the ‘Vitality of Nonscalable Worlds’**

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**Abstract:** Reading across epistemic borders in a globalizing world requires a revised understanding of how experimentation functions in decolonizing contexts, intervening to trouble the prevailing paradigms through which readers understand how meanings are made. Experimental fictions free the imagination to envision cognitive and social justice, which take different forms within different settings. Through examining several texts written out of contexts of incomplete decolonization and ongoing imperialism in Canada, Australia, and the Caribbean, the paper shows how their various innovations navigate the problems of scale, generating new forms through which to represent cognitive justice in its many different potential manifestations, revealing the vitality of nonscalable worlds, and the links between the scalable and the nonscalable. Wilson Harris’s music of living landscapes is set in dialogue with Alexis Wright’s fictions; Patrick White’s artist as vivisector with Christian Bök’s “Xenotext Experiment”; Dionne Brand’s quest for a cognitive schema beyond captivity with Wright’s and Tomson Highway’s turns to the nonscalable space/time imaginaries of their people; and Shani Mootoo’s small island world with Jamaica Kincaid’s small place.

**Keywords:** postcolonial literary experimentation; cognitive justice; scale; globalization; Wilson Harris; Dionne Brand; Alexis Wright; Thomson Highway; Shani Mootoo.

“Even though a poetic act may not appear to make much happen, it remains a potent model of a creative form that attends to the ethical call of otherness” (Miki 204)

“Most modern science demands scalability, the ability to make one’s research framework apply to greater scales without budging the frame” (Tsing 522)

“Can criticism still be philosophical if it depends on judgments that can no longer, as with Kant, look to a common human sensibility for their stabilization and ground? Nothing would seem more obvious than that experimental writing today appeals to no broad public” (Berry 200)

**Introduction: Budging the Frame**

This paper argues that reading across epistemic borders in a globalizing world requires a revised understanding of how experimentation functions within and across the creative practices of actors working in different cultural contexts. Currently, as Anna Tsing notes, science demands scalability *without budging the frame* (my italics). Decolonizing experimental practices, however, budge the dominant frames that define modernity and its rules of intelligibility, including its assumptions about what experimentation is and how it functions. In *Globalectics*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes that “colonization of the cognitive process was the everyday experience in a colonial classroom anywhere” (39). Experimentation in decolonizing contexts disrupts such cognitive schemas with whatever resources it finds at its disposal. In short, therefore, literary experimentation may best be understood within performative terms as an intervention that seeks to trouble the prevailing paradigms and scales through which readers understand knowledge production, artistic practice, and interpretation. The goal of such troubling is to imagine forms of cognitive justice that can free the imagination to create social justice, a task that will take different forms within different social settings.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This essay examines several texts written out of contexts of incomplete decolonization and ongoing imperialism in Canada, Australia, and the Caribbean to show how their different innovations navigate the problems of scale, generating new forms through which to represent cognitive justice in its many different potential manifestations. Tsing argues that the rise of experimental forms of scientific enquiry has shaped the biases of our contemporary culture, encouraging the belief that knowledge can be based on the conduct of replicable experiments produced in laboratory settings, which through excluding extraneous factors can lead to the discovery of validated knowledge, thus substantiating faith in progress. Properly conducted experiments guarantee the authority of evidence-based decision-making and its superiority to other forms of reasoning and belief. Western science has moved from appealing to the established authority of the Christian church to vesting its authority in the logic of this kind of experimentation. Tsing terms this trend in capitalism “scalability” and locates its origins in colonial sugar plantations. Arguing “it is time for a theory of nonscalability” (505; italics in original), she points out that “the free play of diversity was banished from the plantation and the factory” (514) and as a result, “Expectations about scalability have blinded observers to the vitality of nonscalable worlds—and to the links between the scalable and the nonscalable” (516).

How might such a theory operate? After further explaining what is at stake in such a theory, this essay turns to the ways in which it is exemplified in Wilson Harris’s theorizations of the music of living landscapes set in dialogue with Alexis Wright’s fictional worlds of *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*. The scalability of Patrick White’s metaphor of the artist as vivisector is placed in dialogue with that of Christian Bök’s “Xenotext Experiment.” In contrast, Dionne Brand’s quest for a cognitive schema beyond captivity resonates with Alexis Wright’s and Tomson Highway’s turns to the nonscalable space/time imaginaries of their people, disrupted but not destroyed by colonization. The paper concludes by setting Shani Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughte*r in dialogue with Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, two responses to the tyrannies and vitalities of non-scalable worlds in a global context dominated by scalability.

Scale has emerged as one of the defining features of globalization. Initially a spatial marker, delimiting the hierarchical relation between local, regional, national, and global, it later expanded to distinguish different time-space spans: from the human scale of a single life time to the evolutionary, and finally a planetary scale in which the human is no longer the marker of meaning. Contemporary trends toward institutionalizing World Literature invoke global scales, whether applying notions of historical “deep time” to literary study (Dimock), or thinking of context within the wide scope of the Anthropocene. The scientific model requires experiments to be reproducible, transparent in method, and translatable across different contexts: to be seen as valid, experiments require scaling up. Is the same true of literary experimentation?

A similar set of criteria for world literary criticism, nuanced towards privileging the translatability criterion, has been advanced by David Damrosch for determining which literary publications might enter the canon of World Literature. Damrosch notes three ways of conceiving world literature: as ‘an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as *multiple windows on the world*’ (15). He stresses quality over global homogenization and recognizes that each place might generate its own version of world literature according to its own criteria of values. Nonetheless, ultimately what can be translated from one culture to another, and what gets translated due to the power and prestige of a particular language and nation-state, remain defining features as he notes.

However, there is a risk that working on global scales and within the time frame of centuries might overlook innovations that operate on local levels and within the span of a human lifetime, frames that are not so easily “scaled up” to universal recognition, especially in contexts of unequal power relations. Damrosch recognizes this risk in his article, “How American is World Literature?” yet sees comparisons conducted on the national scale as a possible solution (18-19). In contrast, the focus here is on sub- and supra-national scales of engagement. Arjun Appadurai (in “The Right to Research”) and Emily Apter, among others, have mounted powerful critiques of the ways in which such criteria reproduce unequal power relations and draw attention to what Apter terms, in the subtitle of her book, *Against World Literature*, “the politics of untranslatability.” To insist on the non-scalable is to return to a human scale, but as I argue in this essay, a human scale beyond the humanist imaginaries of earlier times, which denied scalability to subalternized cultures and individuals. This scale may also function at levels below and above the national as conventionally constituted in alignment with state structures. Tsing’s interest in the vitality of nonscalable worlds may usefully be compared to Apter’s interest in the productivity of the untranslatable, “doing things with untranslatables.” This paper suggests that many powerful contemporary fictions from different parts of the postcolonial world are finding their own experimental ways to perform the vitality of untranslatable particularity and represent the links between the scalable and the nonscalable in a globalizing world, which can be both benign and malign.

This is not to suggest that all postcolonial writing is nonscalable but rather to warn against two of the dangers often associated with postcolonial reading strategies: scaling up too quickly in conformity with dominant modes of understanding and insisting too quickly that everything generated within postcolonial contexts is automatically nonscalable. For example, some postcolonial texts have been labelled magic realist so as to scale them up to a normalized dominant understanding that downplays the alternative frameworks within which they operate. In other instances, critics aware of that danger sometimes over-react, insisting that everything in a non-Western text should be seen as radically incommensurable with Western meaning-making systems. This essay sees the need for balancing these two impulses, each of which is unable to operate within an “ecology of knowledges” approach (Santos, Nunes and Meneses xiv-lxxii)). In other words, it will be important to distinguish between an inherent quality of unscalability in the material itself and a failure within the reader’s toolbox of approaches for discerning scalability.

This paper addresses the question of how postcolonial experimentation attempts to generate new forms of cognitive justice that attend to the problem of scale through asking a series of interlinked questions. With Roy Miki, as cited in the epigraph above, it investigates the experimental function of ethical calls to otherness. With Tsing, it values the “vitality of nonscalable worlds” (516). With Berry (as cited in my third epigraph), my argument wonders about the audience for literary experimentation. Unlike Berry, this paper questions the need for an appeal to a “broad public” (another way of denoting scalability), advocating instead the value of multiple, overlapping, and contending publics for keeping experimentation alive and thus enabling its potential for understanding the links between social and cognitive justice. Negotiating within and across the creative expressions of such publics, attentive not just to frictions (in the sense advocated by Tsing in her book of that title) but also to what remains untranslatable, may require alternative forms of framing knowledge, defining understanding, and imagining community in ways open to difference. At stake in currently hegemonic definitions of scientific and literary experimentation alike is the potential loss of attention for postcolonial critique and affirmatively alternative forms of experimental creativity.

The following questions underlie this argument. At a time when commodification threatens to become the dominant mode of social relations, what kinds of creative forms can model viable alternatives to the logic of the marketplace? Is literary experimentation what escapes the system (as suggested by Gayatri Spivak in *Death of a Discipline*) or is it rather the most highly successful example of the ways in which capitalism effectively renews itself? Or more likely, can it perhaps be both, depending on the circumstances of its production and reception? If literary experimentation once seemed dependent on shared communal understandings, as Berry argues, how do the global dissemination of English and the global circulation of writing in English, change how writers and readers within different communities understand and practice experimentation? The three citations that head this paper raise three dimensions of experimentation that are examined in this paper. Each raises distinct contexts in which experimentation occurs and links it to a specific community of practice—contemporary poets attuned to the ethical call of otherness; modern scientists and social scientists in search of verifiable truths; a modern artistic avant-garde and its critics. Where and how do these concurrent approaches to experimentation come together when readers read across borders in the postcolonial moment? In exploring these questions, I argue for expanding understandings of literary experimentation beyond their conflation with ideas of an avant-garde or the command immortalized by Ezra Pound to “make it new.” In making this argument, I take my cue from Charles Bernstein, who cautions that innovation itself needs to be redefined so it can be thought “in a modest and local way, as responses to historical and contemporary particulars—as situation, not universal” (“Invention Follies” 34; 36). This paper asks how such a prescription might be activated in interpretational practice, suggesting that postcolonial literary experimentation can budge dominant frames, challenging their implicit presentism and elitism.

**“The Music of Living Landscapes”**

In writing out of the music of living landscapes, Wilson Harris takes his readers beyond conventional humanist frames, creating an audience attuned to the phenomenological sensibilities and South American perspectivalism explored in his works. Literary history is replete with stories of fictions too experimental for their times, texts that only found publishers after many rejections (such as Wright’s *Carpentaria*), or, if published, seemed ahead of their times. Wilson Harris may be one such writer. Despite enjoying a canonical status within postcolonial studies, his work only now seems to be resonating with readers beyond the field. In their special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, reading Harris through the lens of Appadurai’s global ‘scapes, Lorna Burns and Wendy Knepper argue that “much work remains to be done in terms of considering how the interrogation of multiple, intersecting spatialities and disjunctive temporalities in Harris’s writings enable a rethinking of worldly dynamics and cultural expression” (127-128).

In “The Music of Living Landscapes” Harris argues against the view of seeing landscapes and riverscapes as passive, arguing instead that the “landscape possessed a life” (40). He continues: “There are Amerindian legends which tell of sleeping yet, on occasion, singing rocks that witness to the traffic of history …” (41). This land surveyor’s insight resonates with quantum physicist Karen Barad’s suggestion that thinkers meet “the universe halfway,” as her title, borrowed from a poem by Alice Fulton suggests (39). It is also consonant with Waanyi writer Alexis Wright’s depictions of a living landscape in her novels *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, and with Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle’s fictional lifeworlds in novels such as *Ravensong, Daughters are Forever,* and *Celia’s Song*. Harris’s living land and riverscapes make more sense within an emergent critical imaginary in which the agency of objects once thought to be inert is being reevaluated.[[2]](#endnote-2) Barad cites Donna Haraway: “What counts as an object is precisely what world history turns out to be about (Haraway 1988, 588,” in Barad 42). This insight marks a current shift in thinking away from human-centred worlds toward emergent posthuman and non-anthropocentric imaginaries signaled in postcolonial critique by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s evocative call to think beyond globalization toward a planetarity that dwarfs the human scale and humbles its imagination. Importantly, however, Spivak’s planetarity turns to the precapitalist cultures of the world, rather than to any posthuman imaginaries. Discussions of planetarity often seem to proceed in isolation from one another, with little attempt at dialogue across ecocritical, new materialist, and postcolonial spheres.

 N. Katharine Hayles suggests that “part of the contemporary turn toward the nonhuman is the realization that an object need not be alive or conscious in order to function as a cognitive agent” (216). The other side of such an assertion is the questioning of the sovereign individual and the nineteenth-century realism that consolidated such a character. Harris’s well-known distinction between the novels of “fulfilment” and those of “consolidation” (140; italics in the original) in “Tradition and the West Indian Novel” can be linked to contemporary posthumanist rejections of what he refers to in this essay as “the sovereign individual” (143) whose character is consolidated, often at the expense of others, in what Harris labels the novel of consolidation. That novel assumes the universality of its consolidated sovereign form of individuality, a model that can be scaled up to a global scale as a universal condition of and for membership within the category of the fully human. Those defined by Europeans as deficient in such conditions were thereby doomed to die out or deemed objects of a justifiable genocide. This history of the terrible terms meted out for membership in the universally human illustrates the link between cognitive injustice and social injustice. In contrast, Harris offers his experimental novel of fulfilment. His discussion of scale in this essay corresponds to Tsing’s embrace of the nonscalable imagination when he links it to “the visionary character of fulfilment,” which, he continues, “can never be intellectually imposed on the material; it can only be realized in experiment instinctive to the native life and passion of persons known and unknown in a structure of time and space” (144).

At the same time, Harris does not reject a model of scaling up that can redefine universality as a form of diversality or pluriversality (as more widely disseminated by theorists such as Enrique Dussell, Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, Walter Mignolo, and Boaventura Sousa de Santos).[[3]](#endnote-3) Harris writes of his “sensation of profound necessity in the life of the imagination to visualize links between technology and living landscapes in continuously new ways that took nothing for granted in an increasingly violent and materialistic world” (“Living Landscapes” 43). Harris’s embrace of archetype and myth has struck some as inappropriately universalist, yet his insistence on challenging “the hubris of one-sided tradition” (“Living Landscapes” 44) suggests he seeks a different kind of rethinking of all the terms of these debates. His thinking seems closer to Santos’s “ecology of knowledges” approach. Harris’s “music of living landscapes” is neither what has been called animism nor what is emerging with Chen’s “animacies” or “Bennett’s “vibrant matter.”

Inheriting what he calls a “conquistadorial formula” of knowing, Harris writes, in “Letter from Francisco Bone to W.H.,” that it may seem inevitable or convenient to submit to one frame or name but, in so doing, cultures begin to imprison themselves, involuntarily perhaps, in conquistadorial formula that kills alternatives, kills memory” (51). Like Tsing, then, he advocates budging the frame. Both his criticism and his fictions explore alternatives to that conquistadorial formula and the historical judgements to which it gives rise. Of those historians who see the West Indies as “a mere adjunct of imperialism” (“History, Fable, and Myth” 158), he writes: “They have no criteria for arts of originality springing out of an age of limbo and the history they write is without an inner time” (159). How might historians and other writers attune themselves to the rhythms of an “inner time”? The revalidation of the creative arts of the folk, especially dance, and an open-ness to the rhythms of inner time and the dynamics of place, characterize the ways in which Harris attends to the rhythms of everyday life to budge the frames that eclipse the imagination within the Caribbean and Guyana.

Here his work links to that of Wright in Australia, who suggests that in *The Swan Book*, “It’s not a simple thing like going out into the backyard and seeing a hornet’s nest—it’s describing the hornet’s nest of the world” (Wright and Zable, 2013). This image captures the entangled and dangerous nature of a globalizing world in which our global home, a living and intimate landscape, a buzzing nest, needs to be approached with care. As people and ideas travel, Wright imagines the spirits of many places converging and contending in each local place. *The Swan Book*, for example, brings the swans of many places and all their legends together in her futuristic Australia. Bakhtin’s image of knots to be untangled through narrative comes alive through the convergences of swans and the animated and agential hornet’s nest. Like her earlier, eventual international success, *Carpentaria*, *The Swan Book* has received considerable praise, yet remains a more uncompromising and less accessible book. This is not a novel of consolidation, in Harris’s terms, but nor can it be described as a novel of fulfilment. This is a novel of the living landscape, which answers Harris’s prediction that “In an age of crisis the marriage of consonance and dissonance—transmuted into unpredictable and original art that challenges the hubris of one-sided tradition—is an important factor, I think, in the re-sensitizing of technology to the life of the planet” (“Living Landscapes” 44). I see that re-sensitizing as the mission of *The Swan Book*, a fiction that imagines a future that might be averted through exploring alternative routes toward re-connecting with eclipsed selves and re-rooting immigrant imaginaries within the living landscapes of Australia.

**“Rubbing Together Different Rationalities to Spark Meaning”**

Whereas the previous section investigated scales of landscape and deep time, this section turns to scales of subjectivity and cognitive schemas of rationality and affect. This paper has so far stressed divergences between scientific and literary forms of experimentation, as well as some convergence of their insights. Harris’s writing draws on both his scientific training and his yearning for “a new dialogue with reality in all its guises of recovered and revisionary tradition” (“Living Landscape” 43), a new dialogue that finds inspiration in African and Amerindian myth, in Dante and T.S. Eliot. For Harris, “there is no economic solution to the ills of the world until the arts of originality—arts that are driven by mysterious strangeness—open the partialities and biases of tradition in ways that address the very core of our pre-possessions” (“Unfinished Genesis” 251). Erna Brodber’s essay, “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure,” explains the experimental strategies of her novels, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, *Myal*, and *Louisana*, as part of her non-mainstream “sociological method” and “activist intentions” (164). Seeing herself as an “*intellectual worker*” (168; italics in original) rather than an avant-garde writer, she has produced some of the more experimental fiction of her times. Brodber’s “double vocation in the social sciences and the arts” is described by Shalini Puri as “one instance of the rubbing together different rationalities to spark meaning” (145). This “rubbing together of different rationalities” is the kind of literary experimentation this paper finds in the fictions it discusses. It is through such a process that we can begin to grasp the claim made by Boaventura de Souza Santos and his team that “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (xv). If the call of otherness is to be ethically met, then multiple rationalities must be given their due.

As previously argued, the dominant experimental model privileges the rationality of the scientist/artist conducting the experiment, who sets the framework through which the experimentation proceeds, and decides what is extraneous to the inquiry. This framework privileges the autonomy of the writer and of literature, the idea that the work can separate itself from the contexts of its production and reception to inhabit the same kind of ideal vacuum as a scientist’s test-tube experiment. Literary experimentation is usually, but not always, cast in a positive light. Experimentation “makes it new,” as Ezra Pound commanded. Australian novelist Patrick White, however, reminds readers of the darker side of experimentation, casting his artist figure in *The Vivisector* as akin to those nineteenth-century surgeons who conducted their experiments by cutting into the flesh of living animals. For White, the novelist’s craft necessitated the cruel practice of dissecting human relations in all their vulnerability.

Today, this paper suggests, the novelist as heroic vivisector is yielding to alternative models. Christian Bök describes his ongoing Xenotext experiment as a “literary exercise that explores the aesthetic potential of genetics in the modern milieu” (Voyce and Bök #58). For Bök, the xenotext will be “a beautiful, anomalous poem, whose ‘alien words’ might subsist, like a harmless parasite, inside the cell of another life-form” (Voyce and Bök #59). The ethics of interfering with another life form can seem problematic to some and a willingness to yield to the call of otherness for others.[[4]](#endnote-4) R.M. Berry claims that “The history of experimental writing from Romanticism to the present is the writing subject’s progressive discovery of the conditions of its continuing participation within the materiality of writing’s medium” (216). In such experimental writing, Berry explains, “Nothing is being represented, but something quite materially is taking its course” (216). This is literally the case with Bök’s poem. The Xenotext Experiment invests its human aspirations to survive through time after the artist’s death in something non-human acting with a non-human agency Bök hopes to manipulate but cannot control. He is both making life new in the most literal way while also creating something to survive the ravages of time. For Adam Dickinson, this poem in progress performs Bernstein’s correction of Pound’s injunction “to make it new,” revising it into a call to “make it live.”

As a synonym for experimentation, the virtuosity of the artist has also been questioned and reinvented in the context of trauma. Simona Bertacco follows Dominic LaCapra in suggesting that “virtuosity is one of the main tools of survival for people dealing with experiences of trauma” (1). She links the stylistic inventiveness of Dionne Brand and Marlene NourbeSe Philip to their “radical struggle … against traditional constructs of womanhood, history and textuality” (2) and follows Derek Attridge in suggesting that the event of reading is “something that *happens* to the reader in the course of a committed and attentive reading (Attridge 2004, 59”; Bertacco 14). Bertacco explains: “What I find insightful in this view of the ethics of reading is the fact that the ethical dimension is shown to be unrelated to the theme of the book, its historical content or the author’s political intention. Rather, it is found in the literariness of the work itself and in the reader’s ability to respond to it without reverting to a standardized grid of possible meanings” (14-15). In other words, the reader is able to experience a scalable understanding of how literariness and virtuosity operate in an autonomous realm in which the frames of intelligibility have been so naturalized as to become invisible. It is this understanding of literariness, and this desire on the part of the reader for a particular kind of experience from the literary text that this essay seeks to trouble.

This is the frame that structures Bertacco’s disappointment in Dionne Brand’s claim in *A Map to the Door of No Return* that for members of the African diaspora, “our cognitive schema is captivity” (Brand 29; Bertacco 5). In making such a claim, Bertacco argues, Brand “absolutizes absence” and casts the door of no return in mythic rather than historical terms (6). She sees Brand’s recognition of this cognitive injustice as a problem in itself. Bertacco is “left wondering what possibilities for the future can be envisioned out of the probing of that mythical Door” and concludes that for Brand’s “travellers the compass only points to dislocation” (6). Yet the moment is more complex. Brand begins the passage in question by asking: “Then what here can be called cognition let alone a schema?” (28-29). Brand is discussing dreams in which even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming, the dreamer “is captive” (29). She concludes: “Captured in one’s own body, in one’s thoughts, to be out of possession of one’s mind, our cognitive schema is captivity” (29). She returns to this idea to rephrase that statement a few pages later as a question: “What if the cognitive schema is captivity?” (34). After several pages of exploring this “what if,” Brand moves on to suggest: “To reclaim the Black body from that domesticated, captive, open space is the creative project always underway” (43). In other words, the cognitive schema of captivity, derived from a historical experience the impact of which still reverberates today, needs to be worked through to find other ways of “way-finding” (44). It is not a scalable quandary.

Brand is not interested in what she calls “calcified” narratives (70). What holds her is “the real look of things” (100), what Tsing calls the “vitality of nonscalable worlds.” Despite her moment of camaraderie with the parking lot attendant who comes “from one of the oldest cities in the world” (102) to disparage the idea of equating civilization with a parking lot, Brand recognizes: “I do not come from any old city. My civilization is the parking lot…I am the citizen of the parking lot” (109-110). This is only partly a lament. To claim citizenship is to claim responsibility and a form of belonging. To be “parked” is not necessarily to be dislocated. By the end of the text, the reader can see that books, friends, and such passing experiences have shaped the narrator’s ever evolving cognitive schema beyond captivity. She imagines herself one of a community of readers, each choosing “a different paragraph of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, a different line now perhaps interrupted, intercut by how we chose to live our lives, how we chose to interpret Lawrence” (189). Brand cites Harris: “It is not a question of rootlessness but of the miracle of roots, the miracle of a dialogue with eclipsed selves which appearances may deny us or into which they may lead us” (219). In other words, far from absolutizing absence or remaining trapped in dislocation, Brand’s text embraces “the miracle of a dialogue with eclipsed selves” and the mysteries into which they lead. Brand’s dialogue is episodic, fractured, and fluid. She has written a book subtitled “Notes to Belonging” but not out of loss or desire to belong. Rather, to fracture the word itself into its component parts held in productive tension so as to “be” in a state of permanent “longing” for a better world that stretches current limits of imagination. As she claims in an imagined address to Eduardo Galeano, “I am not nostalgic. Belonging does not interest me. I once thought that it did. Until I examined the underpinnings” (85). Brand’s book examines those underpinnings in the “cognitive schema of captivity” from many different angles, dramatizing a dialogue with the writer’s eclipsed selves and those she observes around her.

Similarly, Wright’s *The Swan Book* probes a different cognitive schema of captivity that may seem less hopeful in its shaping due to the looming threat of climate change and the loss among many of deeply sustaining connections to the land. As Wright explains, her challenge in writing *Carpentaria* was “how to write a novel where all stories come alive” (“Where to Point the Spears?” 38). She explains: “I like the idea of exploring ideas that can build new links or branches from our own traditions… and not seeing tradition as a limiting force” (40-41). Her method proceeds through “entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several songs at once” (41). But whereas *Carpentaria*’s entwined stories record an apartheid world of separated and clashing indigenous and settler worlds, *The Swan Book* imagines a future in which they have become dangerously linked, where an indigenous Prime Minister ignores his roots except where he can use some of its special knowledge against itself for his personal gain embodies a world in which few care for country anymore. The novel begins with two literal images of captivity: a violated young aboriginal girl trapped and hiding in the trunk of a tree and a witnessing worm trapped in her head. In linking the experience of her own aboriginal peoples to that of asylum-seekers currently imprisoned in Australian-run detention camps, Wright explores a cognitive schema of “detention” that like Brand’s work links colonialism to globalization: “Aboriginal people are no strangers to detention camps. We had missions, we had reserves … In a way, we’re still living in that world … Those walls around the Indigenous world are still very much in place with the intervention policies … (Wright and Zable).

 This novel can be read as an extended response to Kerry O’Brien’s question to Wright in an interview published in *Hecate*. O’Brien quotes some of Wright’s words back to her in a question about reconciliation. She reminds Wright: “You wrote, ‘I’ve often thought about how the spirits of other countries have followed their people to Australia, and how those spirits might be reconciled with the ancestral spirits that belong here. I wonder if it is at this level of thinking that a lasting form of reconciliation between people might begin, and if not, how our spirits will react’” (219). In response to O’Brien’s question, Wright elaborates that she sees “great efforts on our side to try to reconcile the spirits” (219) but little reciprocity on the part of others. In insisting that reconciliation involves more stakeholders than human individuals and communities alone, she introduces an important and often neglected element into current settler colonial reconciliation debates. Wright knows she is talking at cross-purposes to those politicians who hope that reconciliation will put an end to the past. Her worry about “how our spirits will react” is written out in the apocalyptic chaos and fragmented narratives, the global hornet’s nest, of *The Swan Book.*

Wright asks difficult questions about reconciliation and the resolution of historical injustices. Oblivia Ethylene, *The Swan’s Book*’s central character, has been gang-raped and retreated to hiding in a tree trunk, echoing perhaps, Prospero’s entrapment of Ariel in *The Tempest*. Her name suggests forgetfulness, a desire for oblivion, given her history, or perhaps a reflection of the ways in which colonial society sought to condemn her to oblivion, rendering her a permanently childlike character, unable, Wright suggests “to grow up” (Wright and Zable). Wright explains: “It’s a reflection on Aboriginal communities—unable to grow up if we keep on being shackled by policy and by other people’s ideas of how we should be” (Wright and Zable). In other words, somewhat like Brand, Wright is experimenting with the idea of what it means to be trapped in a cognitive schema of detention and paternalistic intervention, working through that schema in search of ways to “unshackle” the mind, for which she finds a model in “Aboriginal law” (Wright and Zable).

**Unshackling the Mind**

This article began with questions: Can literary experimentation offer routes toward forms of understanding beyond commodification? How can readers recognize such potentially enabling forms? Diana Brydon and Marta Dvorak begin *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue* by asking: “How do readers negotiate meaning in contexts where norms of understanding diverge?” (1). This collaboratively produced collection suggests that these questions of audience, community, and meaning-making across different scales of engagement and cognitive power require closer attention. Crosstalk was our metaphor for the complex forms of interference that can energize and frustrate communication across different scales of engagement, where the nonscalable, culturally and in relations of unequal power, can seem either unintelligible, or more problematically, too easily translatable, to those accustomed to the norms dictated by the rules of scalability. Donna Haraway cites Helen Verran to pose the opposite side of this dilemma: “How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to taking difference seriously?” (7). I argue here it can only be nurtured, very cautiously, by first attending more carefully to the vitality of the nonscalable.

Canadian Cree novelist Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is full of such crosstalking, interference-charged moments, which can be comic, tragic, or both simultaneously. A misheard prayer is rendered nonsensical (11). Jokes fall flat. It seems “a chasm as unbridgeable as hell separates Cree from English” (190). When Jeremiah asks, “How do you say ‘university’ in Cree?,” Gabriel answers “‘*Semen*-airy’ … the closest he could get, in his native tongue” (191), a playful pun that nonetheless carries the ambivalent taste of the sexual abuse that characterized their stay in the residential school: “The word flooded his palate like a surge of honey” (191), with “honey” the repeated signifier of resurgent trauma and the ambivalent emotions it evokes, including guilty pleasure, in each of the brothers.

Is it helpful to describe Highway’s novel as experimental? I suggest it can be, and not just for non-Cree readers unfamiliar with Cree modes of meaning-making, because the novel, like Wright’s fictions, makes its meaning through pluriversal modes that challenge all “monocultures of the mind.”[[5]](#endnote-5) It transposes into English and in recognizable novel form the meaning-making systems of the Cree people, their language, beliefs, and myths, as understood by Highway and lived by his characters, as well as the gaps between these systems and those afforded by Western belief systems. Certainly, in its depiction of the residential school system and its legacy, the novel goes even further, taking risks, as Jennifer Henderson suggests, by posing “taboo questions” (Henderson 188) about sexuality, violation, and identity, which may take specific forms for residential school survivors, male and female, but which also resonate within other contexts. She lists a few: “Does sexual abuse make you gay? Does cultural dispossession and contamination with Christianity make you First Nations?” (188). This novel, like Highway’s first play, *The Rez Sisters*, has travelled globally with significant success. Does that mean that its experimental achievements are fully scalable? Possibly not. Or not without significant effort into researching the many, sometimes conflicting, traditions on which it draws.

Henderson employs George Haggerty’s argument that “Catholicism has functioned in gothic fiction as something of a laboratory for the exploration of same-sex desire” to partly explain what she sees as “Highway’s curious deployment of the gothic trope of Catholicism in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*” (179). In this laboratory, the results are ambiguous, generating further questions for the book’s readers to explore. In noting that the “novel’s hybridities … are difficult …vexed” and “multiple” (179), Henderson concludes that to think of the book as an experiment in bridging cultures and opening new ways of cross-cultural understanding for its readers, would be to deny its sexually “scandalous” nature (189). To make it “function as the ethical disruption of postcolonial discourse” would require, she believes, First Nations culture “to be clearly and cleanly ‘other’ to settler culture” (188). After five hundred years of contact, such clarity is not possible and Highway does not attempt it. Nonetheless, room remains for reading the novel’s method as a series of ethical interruptions of many forms of received wisdom within and across various cultures in contact.

Highway sets postcolonial critique in dialogue with indigenous knowledge, especially through his deeply immersive understanding of Cree as in part an untranslatable (in Apter’s terms), not to deny the novel’s engagements with ambivalent sexualities but to see these within the frames set up by the novel’s epigraphs and its prefatory “Note on the Trickster.” Henderson is justly wary of employing indigenous texts to revive postcolonial imaginaries. They should not be instrumentalized in aid of settler colonial imaginaries. But Highway’s text, like Wright’s, invites a reciprocal dialogue without at all suggesting that it will be easy. Highway’s depiction of contemporary Cree lived realities and their rootedness in history and the land in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* develops its own map and history that is not readily assimilated into universalist modes of meaning-meaning derived from Eurocentric knowledge formations, nor from any of the better known postcolonial imaginaries, such as those derived from the black Atlantic, South Asian, or Pacific experiences.

Highway in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Wright in *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* speak to alternative logics of time/space that work through chronotopes that are formally transformative in ways theorized by Bakhtin. Bakhtin describes how the chronotope operates “as a formally constituted category of literature” (84), understood as “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” and where Time becomes “palpable and visible” (250). *Kiss of the Fur Queen* takes as its second epigraph, the powerful statement made by Chief Seattle of the Squamish that “the dead are not powerless” and proves the truth of that statement through moments that erupt through the narrative that follows. The prelude to Champion/Jeremiah’s birth is marked by the moaning and whispering of the ancestors, including his grandmother’s voice among them, despite her death twenty-one years earlier, shortly after her daughter Mariesis’s marriage to Champion/Jeremiah’s father (19). When the Okimasis brothers return home from residential school, they hear a lone wolf’s howl “touching off a vague shudder that brushed the surface of their hearts, in perfect unison, like the ice-cold hand of someone waking after five hundred years of sleep” (90). This occurs on the island where Father Thibodeau’s men had caught Chachagathou, a woman who the brothers are told was evil because she held a frightening dream power. As the narrative progresses, she becomes linked in Dancer/Gabriel’s mind to the winking white fox who appears at key moments to throw the text’s realism slightly off-balance (196) and as they learn more about her defiance of the church, the brothers’ interest in her grows (197). Through her power that transcends the grave, Chachagathou testifies to other modes of knowing, and forms of authority alternative to the Church and residential school. In these ways, Highway transforms both conventional gothic and indigenous modes of thinking the ghost to challenge readers’ assumptions about the divisions separating the real and the imagined, the living and the dead. He ties and unties these knots of narrative to unravel the cognitive schemas of colonialism, revealing the knots entangling the persecution of witches in Europe to genocide in the Americas, and unmasking the Weetigo behind the garb of the priest, while freeing the joys of music and dance for celebration, survival, and resurgence.

In *Carpentaria*, time becomes “palpable and visible,” through clocks, invisible nets, and ghostly figures of ancient women and lost tribes who melt out of the landscape and back into it so as to disturb the dividing line between waking and dreaming. Wright explains the temporal logic behind the telling of her text: “The idea struck me that if I were to tell a story to our people, I would also be telling a story to our ancestors” (“On Writing” 85). That expanded sense of audience, transcending time, necessitated a story, in her words, that was “written like a long song, following ancient tradition, reaching back as much as it reached forward, to tell a contemporary story to our ground” (85). Here is another version of Harris’s music of living landscapes. Wright’s simple lines challenge Western assumptions about audience, ground, time, progress, narrative, and value, which starts with the title of *Carpentari*a’s Chapter 1, “From time immemorial.” *The Swan Book* extends Wright’s rearrangement of Time into an imagined future. Their fictions introduce alternative time/space configurations that stretch the range of currently consensual models of what is visible or articulable through story. Their texts speak to readers across a variety of cultures while also implying there may be meanings beyond reach, reminding readers of the power of the untranslatable through their very assertion of the vitality of the unscalable.

**Rethinking Globalization Through the Unscalable**

This paper has argued that globalization is challenging accepted norms across a range of practices once thought to be stable with a force that postcolonial critique never quite managed. Multiculturalism, once thought to be a solution to increased migration, has since the events of 9/11 been redefined as a problem. As people and ideas travel, both physically and virtually through digital media, the global flows that Appadurai celebrated in *Modernity at Large* are increasingly understood in connection with the kinds of friction later identified by Tsing. The political response to increased global circulations, of ideas and peoples, is largely to lament the loss of stability and express fear about a world order that is ending and what is replacing it. Such fears are expressed in book titles such as Anthony Giddens’s *Runaway World* and Zygmunt Bauman’s *Globalization: the Human Costs* and *Liquid Modernity*. These political and social fears contrast with the celebratory discourses of champions of neoliberal globalization such as Thomas Friedman, in *The World is Flat,* and Tyler Cowen’s *Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World’s Cultures*. But they are also at odds with the growing body of work produced by theorists and artists who see openings for progressive models of change, through experimentation in social, political, and literary spheres.

Walter Mignolo has memorably identified the “cracks” now appearing in long dominant imaginaries, opening spaces for decolonial modes of understanding the past and reimagining the future (23). Working a similar vein of analysis, Boaventura de Sousa Santos has seized upon openings for creative rethinking of the connections between politics, culture, and knowledge in a series of books devoted to rearticulating relations between what he and his collaborators call “global cognitive justice” and “global social justice.” Global cognitive justice challenges the epistemic violence that accompanied colonialism’s physical forms of violence and that continues today through surviving forms of epistemic violence and the limits they place on imagining otherwise. Such violence can be enacted through literary experimentation and it can be challenged by it. In this thinking, the global is not a totalizing structure imposed from above but rather a new form of pluriversality that is learning to open itself to the vitality of the nonscalable.

Literary critics and writers continue to debate which kinds of literature are best suited to countering colonialism’s epistemic violence. Postcolonial criticism and theory have been accused of privileging experimental and postmodern fictions at the expense of literary realism and documentary. For these critics, a postcolonial fondness for experimentation over realism has encouraged complacency about the way things are and diverted attention, not only from issues of social justice in the world around us, but also from different ways of understanding how literary texts make meaning in different social contexts. But postcolonial realism has also been attacked from the opposite angle, for encouraging ethnographic readings of texts in search of “information retrieval,” and encouraging readers to treat complex creative texts as “native informants” or “otherness machines” (Suleri 105). These critiques identify worrying trends in some reading practices, with realism privileging a “salvage mentality,” “magic realism” becoming a limiting label, and other forms of experimentation sometimes falling into exotifying and othering interpretive traps. Those who advocate the autonomy of literature argue postcolonial approaches privilege theme over form, neglecting aesthetic experimentation, to impose the same tiresome grid of reading for nation, class, race, and gender on texts that reward such attention and ignoring others. Those who refuse efforts to separate politics from aesthetics argue for more complex attention to the ways they imbricate each other. Differences of emphasis separate these positions, but at their best both are advocating more nuanced understanding of the specifically located ways out of which texts generate their meanings.

Wendy Knepper points out that “Precisely because of its mobilities, intertwined histories, and intersecting cultures, the Caribbean is an important testing ground for theories and close readings that explore genre’s transgressions, unpredictable movements, and creolizing processes” (1432). In this paper so far, after beginning with Caribbean writers Wilson Harris and Dionne Brand, I have suggested that indigenous fictions from Canada and Australia can play a similar role. Both Highway and Wright compose fictions that emerge from very particular times and places to set up dialogues with the cultural traditions of many other times and place. They read the world through Cree and Waanyi eyes, from the respective norths of their two great continents. In this concluding section, I return to the Caribbean to consider briefly how a small island place can function as a testing ground for imagining ways of living without being “owned by someone else” (Mootoo, *Valmiki’s Daughter* 387).

In many ways, Shani Mootoo’s third novel, *Valmiki’s Daughter*, takes up a classic nineteenth-century realist problem in its account of characters who live their lives “bearing up under the burden of too much knowing” (391) with no release for their unsanctioned desires. Yet their small place exists in a globalizing world, where alternative destinies can be imagined, even if it takes considerable courage to make them happen. Within such contexts, the book can be seen as a quietly experimental fiction that pushes the boundaries of what can be imagined within the contours of a small Caribbean place. Of her second novel, *He Drown She in the Sea*, Mootoo writes that “In creating Harry, I wanted to paint the picture of a straight man through this queer person’s eyes, one whom I would feel comfortable, happy, and safe to be in the same world with” (“Writer Notes” 203). The creation of Harry, then, was a kind of thought-experiment, which challenged the dominance of narrowly prescribed heterosexual gender roles, their class-ed permutations, and national differences, from within a frame in which heterosexual coupledom was the norm. Patricia Saunders notes that this novel “seems committed to destabilizing the authority of boundaries: national, ethnic, class and gender” (65).

Those destabilizations continue in *Valmiki’s Daughter*, where a range of characters find themselves trapped within a heterosexist matrix that governs and distorts their relations with one another and their understanding of themselves. Nayan laments the influence of “This small, small place” and the way it makes him feel “a small man” in front of his cosmopolitan French wife, Anick (320). Valmiki, who as a young man had abandoned his male lover to enter a conventional heterosexual marriage, warns his daughter Viveka: “This is a small place. It is not a kind place. . . . This place is too small for you….Take a deep breath, and leave this behind” (354). All four of Mootoo’s novels can be seen as responses to the challenge of imagining freedom within such a place and the necessity of leaving these places behind if freedom is to be found.

In its direct address to an imagined tourist reader, *Valmiki’s Daughter* also seems a deliberate response to Jamaica Kincaid’s well known polemic, *A Small Place—*as well, perhaps, to Huggan’s characterization of the reader of postcolonial texts as often a tourist reader*.* Like Highway and Wright, Mootoo plays with the elasticity of time. Her book begins with a Prologue, subtitled 24 Seconds (1-4), which is revisited in an Epilogue, subtitled 24 Months (393-5). Twenty-four seconds refers to the “specific sliver of time” when Valmiki first realized who his daughter really was and when, he now thinks, he might have told her “his own story so that she might create a different one” (4). That moment was lost, and is now regretted. Twenty-four months refers to how long his daughter Viveka thinks that her marriage of convenience is likely to last. She and her lover Anick had dreamt of fleeing the island together until Anick’s pregnancy made such dreams seem impossible. Now Viveka has agreed to marry Trevor, who is being pressured by his own family to make a heterosexual marriage. Both seem to believe their marriage is doomed from the start yet neither see any alternatives.

The novel retells the events leading to these bookending frames, in which a heterosexual marriage marks a definitive end and beginning, yet another “cognitive schema of captivity” to return to Brand’s evocative phrasing. The story following this Prologue begins with an address to the reader titled “Your Journey, Part One” which orients the view as “you” imagine yourself “a tourist” (7). Like Kincaid’s tourist, if more gently, you are told what “You might or might not have noticed” (10); you are commanded to “Raise your eyes,” “Look behind you” (13), and finally told you will need “to move right into the homes, into the private and public dealings—into the minds, even—of some of its citizens” (25). “Your Journey, Part Two,” takes the reader into the city’s suburbs and class divisions and “Part Three” deeper into the heart of the country and its plantation history, with its “gulf between the cacao Indian and the sugar Indian” (263). The novel moves toward its concluding sections with “Your Journey Home” (363). In this final section, the referent for “you” begins to blur the initial distinctions between the reader and Viveka.

What the novel reveals through these journeys is this society’s domestic tyrannies and hypocrisies, described as a “clockwork life” (69) and linked to the “oppression of communal family living” (149) that Viveka finds in Naipaul’s *House for Mr Biswas*. Viveka’s lover, Anick, articulates what most of the characters feel, complaining: “Is like a prison living in this country” (177). These characters feel trapped within a different “cognitive schema of captivity” than that explored by Brand, and consequently they need to find a different route beyond it. These different cognitive schemas cannot be equated nor can they be scaled up without doing violence to their particularity. Parts Two and Three look at the class divisions that make the country unsafe for the privileged, while continuing to elaborate the homophobia that marks country and city, rich and poor. Anick’s French father sees the history of Nayan’s estate as the history of his island and “part of the story of the rise and decline of empire” (215) but that larger perspective seems denied to those born in this small place. Nayan expresses a Naipaulian sensibility, telling Viveka “We are not properly Indian, and don’t know how to be Trinidadian. We are nothing” (307). Viveka learns through the course of the novel that “She had to leave” (360). “Your Journey Home,” ostensibly addressed to the reader, also seems to speak for her: “In any case, as the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are. There you are” (363). The ambiguity of the “you” at this point implicates the reader in Viveka’s story in a very different way to that effected by Kincaid’s address in *A Small Place*.

In telling a generational story of the societal refusal to make space for same-sex desire, for Anick and Valmiki as well as for his daughter, *Valmiki’s Daughte*r employs realism to tell a story that can also be described as experimental, in its broaching of alternative epistemologies, its exposure of the subtleties of epistemic violence within this culture, and its experimentation with queer temporalities. Here it seems that the issue in assessing literary experimentation is less the author’s choice between conventional realism and its many others, but rather what is done by readers with the choices made. An experiment in one context may resonate differently in another. Experimental writers create in the hope, as voiced by Wright, that “It is possible to imagine difference, and it is possible to live the opposite of being shackled” (“Where to Point the Spears” 41). Following Wright, this article has unfolded in search of the “unshackled” imagination. There are many different “cognitive schemas of captivity,” and the effort to move beyond them may produce what Brodber calls “my head-hurting fiction.” Wright’s honesty about the challenge faced by settler colonial societies, and by those indigenous peoples surviving within them, is daunting: “These are the problems of unresolved guilt and debt. The debt is huge. Sometimes I feel that forgiveness is almost unimaginable” (“Politics of Writing” 15). That bleakness shapes her work, yet is counter-balanced, if precariously, by her faith in “the power of words” and “the hope of writing. Believing the unbelievable” (20). Such a faith can spur literary experimentation, and that experimentation, in turn, can enable such imagining otherwise.

Like Roy Miki, Charles Bernstein offers poetics as “the foundation for a realm of value that is neither scientistic nor moralistic,” arguing that “poetics is the ethical engagement with the shifting conditions of everyday life” (“Practice of Poetics” 78). Such engagements require a renewed attentiveness to nonscalable worlds, their distinctiveness, and their relations to the scalable. Literary experimentation can document the cognitive schemas of captivity that shackle the imagination, it can rub different rationalities together to create the frictions and energies of renewal, and it can free the imagination to envision social justice, a task that will take different forms within different social settings.

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Notes:

1. These concepts, borrowed from Boaventura de Sousa et al, are explained later in this paper. See also Brydon, “Globalization and Higher Education.” The thinking and research for this paper have been conducted with the support of the Canada Research Chairs program and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am grateful to the reviewers, editors, and my research assistant, Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba, for their editorial advice. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See for example, books by Bennett and Chen, neither of whom, however, reference indigenous or postcolonial theorists for their theorizations of “vibrant matter” (Bennett) or animacy (Chen). Chen places stones at the lowest end of the animacy hierarchical scale (5) but this may be because they operate within a longer timeframe than that observing humans are able to perceive. The animate, agential rock that intervenes to save Will Phantom in *Carpentaria* prompts this observation. I am grateful to Libe Garcia Zarranz and the critical posthumanism reading group she organized in 2015 for insights into the work of these theorists. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a brief summary of these concepts, see Ravi da Costa’s “Afterword,” where he suggests that “If universalism can give way to pluriversalism, not only cognitive justice but also social justice can come closer to being realized” (249). For a more wide-ranging synthesis, see Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a fuller discussion of this poem in the contexts of ecocriticism and pataphysics, see Adam Dickinson (140-1, 144-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 25, and Brydon “Mobile Localities” for explanations of this term. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)