THE PERIMETER OF EDEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

The Perimeter of Eden is an innovative memoir that explores my family history and the ways in which it intertwines with American history. The book began as a response to an unpublished memoir written by my great-grandmother about growing up as a settler on Homestead Act land in Oklahoma. Reading her manuscript inspired me to dig deeper into family history; in doing so, I discovered fascinating resonances between the lives of women in previous generations and my own. I also began to see my family's story as inseparable from American history.

INDEX WORDS: Ancestry, Creative Nonfiction, Memoir, Women, Race

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER

1 Introduction 1

2 Entering the Conversation: Feminist Memoir and White Womanhood 8

3 Form 15

4 Unanswered Questions and Plans for Future Development 33

WORKS CITED 36

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, just before I published my first book, I had a dream. In this dream, I am staying in a hostel in Manhattan. I'm seized by an overwhelming need to go to the bathroom, but all of the bathrooms are occupied. Desperate, I find an empty room with a blanket spread out on the floor. I squat at the exact center of the blanket and shit.

Standing up, I behold my shit, stunned: it is beautiful. I know, the way one just *knows* these things, that I have created something truly great.

Suddenly I realize that I'm late to a party for which I'd accepted an invitation long before. With no other option—the bathrooms are still occupied, and I can't leave my perfect shit just sitting in the middle of this room—I wrap the shit up in its blanket and take it with me.

The party is a cocktail party full of preening, posturing literary/artsy types—a real see-and-be-seen-type place. Somehow I blend in perfectly. No one notices that I'm holding a pile of shit wrapped in a blanket.

After a while, though, a man approaches me. He is young and handsome in a sleek, urbane, faintly elfin way. He gives me a crooked, insinuating smile, like he knows some secret about me.

What have you got in that blanket? he asks.

Nothing, I say.

Come on, he says. I know you've got something good in there.

I demur again, suddenly bashful.

Just show me, he says. His smile is puckish, a dare.

Shyly, I peel back the edge of the blanket.

The man's eyes grow wide. Oh my God, he says. That is the most perfect shit I have ever seen.

I know, I say quietly.

I own an art gallery, he says. I'd love to put your shit in it.

I make an embarrassing, self-effacing gesture.

No, he says, his voice suddenly urgent and sincere. Your shit deserves to be seen by the world. I can't help but agree.

Now we are in the man's gallery. It is bright-white everywhere, walls and floor and ceiling—blindingly white, like sunlit snow, like the perfect death.

I suddenly understand that this is the wrong place for my perfect shit. This place is too sterile, too lifeless, too scrubbed. I take my shit to Paradise Garden and place it on the ground. Instantly, it sinks into the Earth; a tree rises in its place.

At the time I had this dream, I was acquiring a (very minor) public persona as a writer for the first time in my life. One of my stories had been read on national radio recently, and my first book was about to be published. I upgraded my website and created an Instagram account. I had professional author photos taken.

At the same time, in my private writing life I was doing something that felt secret and subversive, often ugly, impossible to show anyone. It felt deeply flawed, stupidly risky, and impossible to finish. In this writing I was turning my body inside out and telling all the

family secrets. I sometimes doubted whether I'd ever show it to anyone. At the same time, it felt utterly necessary—for myself, if for no one else.

The dream of the Perfect Shit is clearly about, among other things, this tension—the tension between the impulse to create, which is as deeply private and messy as going to the bathroom, and the impulse to expose one's creations to the world. In the end, the Perfect Shit turns into compost and fertilizes the growth of a tree—reminding me that, whatever the value of exposure, too much emphasis on it can kill the art itself. The ultimate reason to make art is to participate in a spiritual ecosystem in which all art circulates, composting and renewing itself and fertilizing new art.

It is significant, too, that the final resting place of the Perfect Shit is Paradise Garden, a visionary installation by Georgia folk artist Howard Finster, which I had recently visited and loved. Finster had an elementary-school education and no artistic training, but he heard messages from God directing him to create, and he obeyed—resulting in acres of flamboyant handmade sculpture that simultaneously possesses a just-cracked-open rawness and a remarkable aesthetic coherence.

The day of my visit, I had written down a quotation of Finster's and vowed to adopt it as a kind of personal mantra: "My work is scrubby. It's bad, nasty art. But it's telling something. You don't have to be a perfect artist to work in art." These words named the tension at the heart of the aesthetic rupture and rebirth I found myself negotiating at the time.

My work, up to that point, had mainly consisted of fiction in the "magical realist" or "fabulist" vein. Though its content was often strange, its form was generally conventional; I strove to attain a certain elegance and surface polish in my prose, a symmetry and classical

balance in my stories' structure. In other words, I was attempting to perform "mastery" of the "craft" of fiction—to mimic the kind of skill I had admired in the Great Writers held up to me by my schooling. Now I found myself frustrated with mastery and polish. When I read my earlier stories they seemed anxious and people-pleasey. They seemed overly polite. Even in the most successful of them, a certain striving for surface perfection seemed to stand against something wild at their center, something with fur and teeth. I wanted to write something that refused to behave. Something that was scrubby and nasty, but telling something.

At the same time, I was experiencing an increasing pull toward visual art. For years I had explored this interest from a distance: as an observer, an academic, an educator, even sometimes as a collaborator. I taught ekphrastic writing workshops and co-founded a literary journal in which artists and writers collaborated. But aside from a few tentative private experiments, I made no visual work myself. Finally I forced myself to sign up for a Maymester comics workshop with Dr. Chris Pizzino. At first, I hated making comics, because I felt I was so bad at drawing; I winced at my own lines. But the intensive nature of the workshop forced me to keep producing new work every single day, and eventually something broke through. For my final project, I decided to use comics to explore the material I'd been sitting on for years—stories from my ancestors on my mother's side, and of my own relationship to their stories. I had wanted to tell these stories for a long time—in fact I had come to this program to learn how to tell them—but I had never found a way in. Comics turned out to be the key. Though I still didn't love my drawing, though I still found my lines both childish and cramped, telling the story in a sequential visual medium

unlocked something; it spoke to the story's embodied nature and generated an associative logic that I might not have discovered otherwise.

It seemed clear enough, at this point, that making visual art would be necessary for the process of deepening and transformation that I hoped for as a writer. Through images I could circumvent my conscious mind and come closer to accessing the wild, furred thing that lived at the center of my writing; my translation of that thing still lacked the power I longed for, but I knew I was on the right track. Furthermore, making visual work ensured that I would be forced to resist the default settings that pushed me toward people-pleasing, toward surface-polishing. For a beginner like myself, perfection would be impossible. If my visual work had any power, it would come from channeling some visionary source, or from the simple power of vulnerable honesty—or perhaps from some electrical charge generated by the risk itself.

This isn't to say that the urge toward mastery or perfection would disappear. It lived in the margins of my evolving practice, spouting frequent and predictable criticisms about how bad my art was and how deluded I was in thinking anyone would ever want to see it. But now I recognized that voice, and saw my relationship to it as one of the primary subjects of the work itself. The voice that urged me toward perfection *and* the voice urging me toward some mythical horizon of untutored "wildness" sprung from the same inner tension; that tension, impossible to resolve, fueled the work.

Over time I realized that my newfound aesthetic orientation was a political one as well. I was writing about bodies and land, and the way I wrote about them mattered; I needed a form that would accommodate silence, and I needed a form that would accommodate the jagged, awkward, vulnerable quality of self-interrogation, and I needed a

form that would simultaneously allow for moral clarity and multiplicity of perspective. Only a hybrid form could do all of this—hybrid in its multiple registers of language, and also hybrid in its embrace of the verbal *and* visual.

Also, eschewing "mastery" of a linear, verbal text would imply a surrender of control—thus standing against a masculinist, hierarchical view of the world invested in purity and efficacy. The links between aesthetic mastery and colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist ideologies is now obvious to me. Even the supposed split between "wildness" and "perfection" implies a violent and very Western desire to control nature, to tame the feminine, to erase the dark. In this project I was interested in uncovering those disowned aspects of my own being—and, I now realized, I couldn't do so without naming the forces that had pushed me to disown them in the first place, while reckoning with the consequences of these forces as they played out in my own life and in the world.

To return to the shit dream: I offer it here not only because of its aptness as a metaphor for my current process and project—its organic, bodily quality; its resistance against participating in an economy of artistic value-judgment inflected by class, race, and gendered notions of purity—but also because, in sharing it, I am enacting the kind of gentle transgression that I hope my work itself is learning to perform. In my fiction MFA program, I often heard the adage "tell a dream, lose a reader"; this is an injunction I've always happily ignored, but I flout it more directly than ever in this paper and in *The Perimeter of Eden*, whose aesthetic DNA is structured by dreams and shamanic journeys. Also, in talking of shit—and of my own body—I aim to set a certain expectation for what I hope to enact with this project: the kind of vulnerable honesty that invites others into relationship with the dark, moist, unsightly process of compost and renewal that secretly structures our lives

and yet which we have been taught to ignore and revile. This is uncomfortable for me. I'm tempted to edit out the shit. But the shit is telling something.

In the rest of this paper I will outline my aesthetic and political choices in this project; limn its influences and aspirations; lay out my concerns, anxieties, and unanswered questions; and share my unrealized goals and next steps.

CHAPTER 2

ENTERING THE CONVERSATION: FEMINIST MEMOIR AND WHITE WOMANHOOD

The Perimeter of Eden was conceived, in part, as a contribution to the field of "feminist memoir"—works of creative nonfiction or autofiction that merge personal narrative with an investigation of collective experience and the systemic forces that shape it, through theory and/or cultural myth. Early innovators include Gloria Anzaldúa and Maxine Hong Kingston; more recently, writers such as Alison Bechdel, Maggie Nelson, Anna Joy Springer, Sheila Heti, and Elissa Washuta have written formally daring memoirs that simultaneously interrogate personal lived experience and hegemonic cultural values. The formal hybridity that these memoirs often embrace—combining fiction and nonfiction, theory and confession, sometimes image and word—makes them uniquely suited to exploring and articulating marginality (not only the marginality of femaleness, but intersectional marginalities as well: for example, Anzaldua's *mestiza* identity; the queerness explored by Nelson, Springer and Bechdel; Washuta's struggles with mental illness and cultural trauma as a Native woman).

When I first read my great-grandmother Ermine Houchens' memoir, *Growing Up with the Country*, I felt a deep desire to respond to it—to use it as a portal for writing that would explore my own identity as a woman and as a daughter (and perhaps, eventually, a mother). I sensed, in Ermine's words and in the silences between them, some kind of key that could potentially unlock generational patterns of repression and shame so that I could hold them up to the light. I imagined that the book I'd write would be intensely, specifically personal while also invoking some kind of collective voice: the voices of my ancestors, of the cultural groups to which I belonged, perhaps to women generally. The genre of

"feminist memoir" seemed like the only one offering tools appropriate to the task, while leaving room to innovate and experiment.

I wanted to write a kind of autobiography that emphasized the blurred borders of the self, the self's constant unbecoming and re-becoming. In this sense, I aspired to write into a tradition well-established since at least the 1980s. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss in their classic critical study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "the patriarchal notion that the writer 'fathers' his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization" (4). Thus, women writing at all—and in particular, women writing about themselves as subjects—challenges such masculinist notions of authorship. Such writing also challenges traditional patriarchal ideas of the "subject" as a unified self: women's experiences, particularly our socialization as primarily relational beings, emphasize the blurriness and mutability of the self, rather than the triumphant fantasy of its supposed unity. Psychoanalytic critics such as Nancy Chodorow, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray turned in the 1980s to biology and maternity for metaphors for the feminine self's multiplicity: Chodorow argued that a girl "comes to develop more fluid ego boundaries than a boy because she does not have to resist her early identification with her mother or undergo a rupture" (Smith/Watson 17), while Irigaray cited the "plural" morphology of female genitalia as a metaphor for the potentially generative multiplicity of feminine texts, and Cixous celebrated the decentralized, "cosmic libido" of the female writer.

More recently, while the inherent value of texts written by women and nonbinary people has become obvious, and a "traditional" masculinist style often viewed as passé, a new group of writers has investigated the topics of motherhood and daughterhood, in

particular, with renewed seriousness. Adrienne Rich's classic *Of Woman Born* is a common ancestor for many of these new texts—but each explores the topic in fresh and exciting ways. As Lauren Elkin wrote in *The Paris Review* in 2018, these books "demand that the experience of motherhood in all its viscera be taken seriously as literature. They put the mother and her perspective at the center of their concerns. We have lacked a canon of motherhood, and now, it seems, one is beginning to take shape." Such works—including Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, Meghan McConnell's *And Now We Have Everything*, Anna Prushinskaya's *A Woman is a Woman Until She is a Mother,* Rivka Galchen's *Little Labors*, Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*—examine motherhood from within, while works like Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* explore the meaning of daughterhood from the perspective of child-free women who seek to understand the psychic legacy of their mothers and grandmothers. These last two have served as particularly vivid examples for me: I've been primarily concerned with the question of how stories are passed down through a line of women and somaticized—how the daughter of such a line might understand and transform her own psychic inheritance.

As I read more widely within the genre of feminist memoir—including but not limited to the literature of motherhood and daughterhood—I came to notice something. The memoirs by women of color tended to explore both race and gender as aspects of lived experience (and often sexuality, nationality, and class as well, depending on the writer's interests and background.) However, the memoirs by white women tended to ignore the writer's race and nationality. This silence surrounding the more privileged aspects of the writer's identity mirrors a longstanding cultural silence around whiteness—an assumption

that it is neutral, a default setting, unworthy of interrogation. It also potentially speaks to a delusion, commonly shared among white people, that interrogating one's own privilege can only stem from guilt and must result in self-censorship—and that ultimately, therefore, such interrogations are incompatible with creativity.

For example, in *The Argonauts,* Maggie Nelson admits her "abundant privilege" and acknowledges that "privilege *saturates*, privilege *structures*"—but then refuses to "argue for the rightness, much less the righteousness, of any particular position or orientation" (97). One gets the sense from this brief, qualified acknowledgment of privilege that, for Nelson, to interrogate her whiteness would be equivalent to admitting her own position lacks "righteousness" and would therefore disqualify her from speaking—a logical leap uncharacteristic of Nelson's otherwise-rigorous thinking. She claims, somewhat defensively quoting Deleuze, that in the act of writing one can be a "traitor" to "one's own sex, one's own class, one's majority." But of all the "majority" and minority aspects of her identity she interrogates in her book, race is not among them.

In recent years, it's been harder than ever for white people to willfully ignore our place in the social hierarchy, and our complicity in keeping that hierarchy intact. I began this project amidst an explosion of public outrage surrounding the police murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. Since then I have watched a reactionary faction of white people (including, famously, 53% of white women) vote for an openly white supremacist and misogynist president, and look the other way when his administration caged brown children at the border, disregarded environmental catastrophe, and further eroded Native sovereignty. As I continued to work on the project, a pandemic swept across the world, and cries for racial justice echoed in the streets after the murders of George

Floyd and Breonna Taylor. As I write these words, a new administration calls for "unity" immediately after an insurrection at the nation's capitol. In this climate, "progressive" white people have been forced to confront their place within a violent and brutal system. Books about racial justice topped bestseller lists this summer; attempts at both performative and genuine activism multiplied across social media screens.

As I investigated my family's history while living within this cultural climate, I came to yearn even more deeply for a body of literature that explored white identity from the inside, while decentering whiteness enough to examine it critically. I wanted a body of literature that would help me understand why people who looked like me acted and thought the way they did; how they came to hold the deep delusions that bred a culture of violence; and how we might find our way toward a different orientation toward the world. I came to feel that I needed to write the book I was looking for.

Of course, I am not the first white writer to tackle whiteness in this way. To name a few: Eula Biss's essays in *Notes from No Man's Land* do some important work toward the kind of interrogation I seek to perform, though their lens tends to be more cultural than personal. Jess Row's recent critical study *White Flights* examines whiteness in literature, taking up the conversation begun by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, and considers the possibilities and perils of "reparative writing"; this work has been highly useful for my thinking, but remains within the vein of academic criticism. Mab Segrest's essential writing on whiteness inspires me and moves me to respond from the vantage point of my own generation and social location. Another model I've found for the work I want to do is Nora Krug's graphic memoir *Belonging*, in which the author reckons with her German identity and her family's role in World War II and the Holocaust.

A body of creative literature investigating American whiteness from the inside seems necessary because, as many writers and activists of color have pointed out, it is ultimately white people who will need to change if the system as a whole will ever change. It's well and good for progressive white people to announce our commitment to antiracist and decolonial ideals, but we can't resist the culture of whiteness if we don't understand what it is, how it came to be, and how it lives in our bodies, in our intimate relationships, and in our relationship to the natural world. To do this work is to flout unspoken codes that keep whiteness invisible to itself. As Row puts it, the refusal of whiteness to engage with its own history is "wishful thinking as a way of life, a way of seeing, and a way of making art" (9). I am attempting to write my way out of this wishful thinking—a process that will be incomplete and imperfect, but hopefully generative.

In this book I have attempted to explore and represent certain overarching cultural narratives about race, gender, religion, and nationalism, while focusing on how these narratives have refracted through my own very specific bodily experience and those of my ancestors. The book's structure operates in a series of expanding circles: it begins with my body, then expands to consider my immediate ancestors and their experiences of their bodies, finally zooming outward to consider the cultural and historical forces that shaped our lives and through which we have affected the lives of others. Finally, in the last section, the focus contracts slightly, training its lens on my current household and community, as I attempt to integrate all I have learned and absorbed. In this sense, the book takes a cue from Adrienne Maree Brown's concept of Emergent Strategy, and specifically of fractals—the notion that by focusing on what is immediate and local, we might influence the collective, because our words and actions resonate at all levels simultaneously.

The personal is not only political, as the feminists say; it is also the portal to the universal. I hope that readers of all backgrounds find something to relate to here, even as it sparks productive critique and conversation.

CHAPTER 3

FORM

The Perimeter of Eden interweaves different voices and registers in an attempt to account for the complexity and nuance of its explorations. Most of the text would be categorized as "lyric essay"—a flexible form of creative nonfiction that eschews linearity, often melding the lyric intimacy of the "I" with a critic's analytical lens. Some of the lyric essays in this text are intimate and personal, while others incorporate historical research and theory and read as something closer to cultural criticism. Interspersed with these essays are transcriptions of dreams, letters to my ancestors, mythlike parables in the voice of an ancient ancestor, and an interlude of fictional short stories inspired by my great-grandmother's text. The heterogeneity of these registers is deliberate: each offers a different way of approaching the material I seek to explore and illuminate, and each features a different authorial stance—from the implied authorial absence of fiction and myth to the deeply personal letters and confessional essays to the more detached and analytical eye of the critic. None of these voices has mastery over the others; all of them are "mine." The choral quality of the text (or "hypertext") speaks to the plural nature of the speaking self—a self simultaneously "actualized" and hopelessly porous, a self that, like light, changes in the act of being observed. These different voices are actively seeking ways to coexist; this is an ongoing, dynamic process that cannot be neatly summed up or explained, and therefore is directly represented instead.

The messiness of the text's multiplicities is also in keeping with the aesthetic principles I mentioned in opening: a resistance to closure and "perfection," a refusal of mastery, an embrace of wildness and of organic forms. Though some of the writing here

sounds "authoritative," though some of it is quite polished, these voices exist alongside voices that are more hesitant and searching, more confessional and raw. If the final result feels "unfinished," that is deliberate. This is a political as well as an aesthetic choice, as mentioned earlier: both patriarchy and white supremacy value linearity, mastery, closure, and a unified, triumphant conception of the self. Taking a cue from my forebears in the field of feminist memoir, I aim to resist reinscribing such values, even while acknowledging how they have shaped me.

Another salient aspect of the literary form is its embrace of voices other than "mine." I frequently quote from my great-grandmother's text (signified here by an alternative font that more closely resembles the font of her typewriter). I include quotes from interviews with my mother, grandmother, and other family members. The text also contains sections written in the voice of an ancient ancestor who goes by "Grandma Australia." One might say that Grandma Australia is a character I invented in order to conjure or ventriloquize a voice in a more mythic register. Personally, I feel it would be more accurate to say that I *channeled* her voice; to me she is as real as the ancestors whose names I know, whose graves I have visited.

There is so much I could say about my belief that writing is *always* "channeling," even and especially "fiction" writing. I am not alone in this; a wide body of literature concerning writing and creativity acknowledges the common perception that characters "speak," that the writer's work often feels more like transcription than invention. Yet I also want to emphasize that when I talk about "channeling," I often mean it quite literally. As a result of the process of spiritual deepening I've undergone in the last ten years, much of which is described in this book, I now embrace a worldview I could best describe as

animist; I believe that spirits are real, that we can communicate with ancestors who have passed, and that even the seemingly "inanimate" world possesses a form of sentience. I don't fully understand my own beliefs—many aspects of spiritual truth remain deeply mysterious and paradoxical to me, and always will—but I've come to feel a deep certainty concerning the reality of hidden forces and unseen beings.

I came to this worldview largely through the process of shamanic journeying—a kind of trancelike image-based meditation through which, it is believed, one can enter an "otherworld" and interact directly with spirits. Shamanic journeying, in the form I learned it, was popularized in the US by Michael Harner, a white American man who was rigorously initiated by a Jívaro shaman in Ecuador and developed a body of practice he called "core shamanism." Core shamanism draws elements from shamanic traditions around the world, which are wildly diverse and yet which share certain "core" elements in common. I have mixed feelings about the cultural roots of core shamanism; while it approaches other cultures respectfully and does not appropriate from any single culture in particular, it does perform a kind of whitewashing—an erasure of the cultural particularities of each tradition from which it draws. Some practitioners I've met acknowledge this complexity and are actively committed to decolonial and antiracist practices within their work, while others are not. As for myself, even as I negotiate my own relationship to the practice, I am deeply grateful for what it has given me: a portal of access to an experiential dimension that is quite clearly *there*, however we approach it.

In fact many of my own ancestors would have been familiar with some aspects of the practices I learned through core shamanism; the Celts, for example, practiced rituals enabling them to enter an "otherworld" in which they could directly communicate with

beings such as fairies and the spirits of the dead. Many indigenous cultures, including the ones in Northern and Western Europe from which my ancestral lines emerged long ago, contain rituals of ancestor reverence and earth-connection, and recognize the reciprocal relationship between human activity and "natural" forces. Through various factors including capitalism, patriarchal Christianity, and the colonization of the Americas, my ancestors became estranged from such practices and eventually embraced a worldview based on punitive monotheism, patriarchal individualism, and capitalism. In my own spiritual practice, I seek not to appropriate the beliefs and rituals of any particular indigenous group, but rather to recognize the deep, life-sustaining truths from which my own ancestors became estranged, in a way that emerges organically from my lived experience. This is partly a gesture toward recuperation of a lost matriarchal lineage, restoration of a split from the divine feminine that likely occurred millennia ago.

I've come to believe that restorative spiritual practices such as these are imperative not only for my own spiritual health but also for my attempt to coexist on this planet with other beings, doing minimal harm. As indigenous thinkers have been telling us for centuries (in our contemporary moment Robin Wall Kimmerer, N. Scott Momaday, and Cutcha Risling Baldy come to mind, among many others), and as ecologically conscious non-indigenous writers like Wendell Berry, Joanna Macy and Barry Lopez have asserted in their own language, the health of our planet and our avoidance of the most extreme forms of climate apocalypse depend upon a critical mass of people embracing a holistic, non-extractive worldview that recognizes humans' place within a web of human and nonhuman relations requiring reciprocity and care—in other words, a worldview that respects the more-than-human as kin, exercising stewardship of resources while remaining "right-

sized" within creation. In a practical and political sense the response should include many specific interventions such as the return of Native lands and sovereignty, the elimination of our dependence on fossil fuels, and much more; such seemingly "radical" changes are in fact entirely possible, but only if a significant majority of us are willing to think outside of the extractive, colonized, capitalist paradigm—a kind of revolution of the imagination to which I believe literature and the arts have much to contribute. One strand of *The Perimeter of Eden* concerns my representation of the process by which I arrived at this worldview, and the factors that influenced that process (and continue to do so)—including the spiritual practices mentioned above, as well as my reading of various indigenous authors.

Thus, the polyvocal quality of *The Perimeter of Eden*—the multiplicity of its voices, distinct yet "channeled" through my own—is much more than a literary device. It is a representation of a spiritual worldview that de-centers the individual human subject, or at the very least places this subject within a web of relations, often mysterious and only partially graspable with the logical brain. Rather than "representing" the voices and experiences of my ancestors, I see myself as directly collaborating with them. In doing this work, I seek to address what is wounded within our family line: a series of painful ruptures ultimately traceable back to our dislocation from the Earth and a sense of belonging to it. This dislocation is responsible for the cultural harms in which we have participated, such as white supremacy and settler colonialism. It is also responsible for the harms we ourselves have suffered: our feelings of alienation and shame, our disconnection from our own creative power. The process of healing from this dislocation and its long-term effects has required me to learn to relate directly not only to my ancestors but also to the natural

world. Many of the book's recurring motifs—the snake, the whale, open water, the garden, and more—surface over and over within the text, as though demanding attention. The book's searching first-person speaker recursively builds her relationship with these images: the natural forces they represent, and the relational power they unlock. I imagine that this element of the book will become even more pronounced and powerful once visual images are added to the written text; images tend to take on a life of their own, insisting on a vibrant presence and asserting agency within the text's web of relations, as though indeed they are alive.

There are several reasons why I believe this book demands to be rendered in hybrid visual-verbal form. I've named some of them already. To reiterate: in its earliest stages, this material seemed almost to *demand* to be rendered visually, and I've learned how important it is to listen when a project tells me what it needs. Once I began to experiment, I saw how images allowed for an added layer of depth and an increased capacity for associative connections between the text's various registers and themes. Visuality also has the potential to enhance the book's potential to embrace a raw, visionary quality that pushes back against "mastery" and "perfection."

I also have deeper spiritual and political reasons for working with images. As many thinkers have articulated, there is something "alive" about images. Lynda Barry expresses this idea beautifully in in *What It Is*: "What is an image? At the center of everything we call 'The Arts,' and children call 'play,' is something which seems somehow alive. It's not alive in the way you and I are alive, but it's certainly not dead. It's alive in the way our memory is alive. Alive in the way the ocean is alive and able to transport us and contain us. Alive in the way thinking is not, but experiencing is, made of both memory and imagination" (14).

If Barry's description sounds animistic, I believe that's no accident—many (most?) artists would describe the images they work with not as inert material to be passively manipulated but as some mysterious, active form of life with which they collaborate. By "image" here I do not mean *only* visual images: Barry's description would apply equally well to the other senses, or to the kind of linguistic images with which the Modernists, for example, became obsessed. But visual images, which don't require the mediation of language and bear a more direct relationship to the body that created them, perhaps wear their "aliveness" more openly, in a way that's harder to argue away or pretend not to see.

Unsurprisingly, Western culture—inflected as it is by patriarchal, colonialist thinking that devalues what it cannot control—is obsessed with images while harboring a deep mistrust of visuality. The image is devalued as "artificial," an "imitation." Language, supposedly a more logical and rational way of organizing experience, is often pitted against the unreliability of the visual image. As W.J.T. Mitchell discusses in *Iconology,* it's impossible to discuss the image without falling into cultural snares laden with implicit values. He writes, "Every theoretical answer to the questions, *What is an image? How are images different from words?* Seems inevitably to fall back into prior questions of value and interest that could only be answered in historical terms" (3). The image-word binary, dating back at least as far as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's "Laocoon" (1766), lines up with many other value-laden binaries: among them feminine/masculine, irrational/rational, and natural/cultural (43). Mitchell astutely outlines the many ways in which our culture has privileged reason over emotion, word over image, masculine over feminine, and how these value judgments find their way into our language about the image. Like the bodies of

women, like the feminized body of the Earth, images are seen as unruly, lacking control, requiring of intervention.

Yet even Mitchell won't allow himself to talk about images in certain ways. His book *What do Pictures Want?* is premised on the notion that it would be a fruitful exercise to approach images with the conceit that they're alive—since we treat them as if they're living anyway. But Mitchell is careful, again and again, to qualify his statements: to make it clear that this conceit is an intellectual exercise, not an ontological position. In other words, he bends over backwards to make it clear he's not advocating animism. "We are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures," he writes, "and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them, to work through their symptomatology" (30). But why think of them as "symptoms," something we're "stuck" with? Such an attitude seems both chauvinistic towards so-called "primitive" or "premodern" cultures but incredibly limiting in terms of potential perspectives for understanding human experience.

I see my work with images, like I see my work with "voices," as explicitly animistic. While I'd hesitate to say that visual images are somehow "more" alive than linguistic images, it is my experience that they're alive in a different way. The way in which they are alive demands a more direct involvement of my body, an *awareness* of my body, than what I experience when I'm working only with words. This is partly because I'm actively using my hands, and partly because the images seem to arrive on the page in a less-mediated form than words do. I could possibly explain this by referring to research about the left and right brain and their distinct ways of processing visual and verbal information—but whatever the explanation, it feels phenomenologically true.

Working animistically with images, for the reasons named above, feels related to a recuperation and valuation of the feminine and all that's associated with it: the "illogical," the mysterious, the nonlinear. It is also related to a valuation of precolonial and decolonial ways of knowing. I'm not saying that anyone who works with images is inherently doing decolonial work—but in my case, I don't think I could attempt to do the inward decolonizing that this project demands *without* working with images.

This shift requires a certain re-wiring of the way I've been taught to see the world, and the skills I've been encouraged to value and develop in myself. I've always had a facility for language—a facility that was praised and valued in my formal schooling, which emphasized literacy and de-emphasized the "creative arts," especially those that were image-based. Within my own family culture, visual art was appreciated but literacy was prized above all else. As I discuss in the book, my family never built much generational wealth, but we have always highly prized education and seen our education as aligned with our social class. When my great-great-grandparents sold the land that they acquired through the Homestead Act, the money was ultimately used to fund their children's education. As I describe in the book, this was a form of strict Christian education that prized linguistic fluency and "correctness" above all else, and explicitly devalued the image: my great-grandmother describes being beaten by her teacher for the "sin" of creating pictures when she was done with her other schoolwork.

Paula Gunn Allen, in *Off the Reservation,* writes that "Western civilization was erected on twin pillars, so to speak: civilization and literacy" (18). Literacy, because it was seen as evidence of "civilization" and thus of superiority, justified conquest of cultures organized around orality or images. "The idea that my literacy makes me more powerful

than someone who is not literate is ludicrous," writes Allen—yet literacy has become "a tool for the exploitation and manipulation of human beings—the same kind of tools that land ownership (possession) and domination over others have been" (20). This is not to say that literacy has no value in and of itself—only that its value has been inflated and held over against other forms of expression.

In this project, I aim to undermine and deconstruct my own previous ways of knowing—those that depended upon settler-colonial value systems that I now recognize as harmful. It's difficult to imagine how I could even begin to write my way into different ways of knowing if I were only reliant upon the written word to do so—especially when my own way of using words has been so conditioned by my Western education and the value-systems invisibly coded within it. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," said Audre Lorde. Though I don't imagine I'm doing anything as grand as that—perhaps, if I'm lucky, enabling myself to walk to a window of the master's hosue and peer outside of it?—it seems obvious that if I rely only upon the written word I'll be able to do nothing more than pace around within its walls, staring at my own feet.

The traditional understanding of visual art as "space-based" and literature as "time-based" maps onto another useful decolonial lens. While this dichotomy is to a large extent false—as W.J.T. Mitchell points out, *all* works of art, whatever their genre, are "structures in space-time"—it is another way in which Western culture has divided literature from the other arts and elevated its status (103). Vine Deloria, in *God is Red*, discusses the ways in which Western European notions of time—as linear, and as more important than space—have inflected American attitudes toward land and indigenous peoples. "The very essence of Western European identity involves the assumption that time proceeds in a linear

fashion," he writes. "Further it assumes that at a particular point in the unraveling of this sequence, the peoples of Western Europe became the guardians of mankind" (76). Tribal religions, on the other hand, tend to be more space-based: organized around a particular community's relationship to a particular sacred place, and concerned with that community's reciprocal relationship to the beings and resources that surround them. Part of the colonial project thus involved devaluing space and place so as to privilege a linear, disembodied notion of "progress" that justified genocide and destruction in favor of "Manifest Destiny." As Deloria points out, the abstraction of time lends itself to ideologies and ethical systems that are not "limited by the real world" and that thus become irrelevant to practical situations involving actual people and places: "One could project, therefore, that space must in a certain sense precede time as a consideration for thought. If time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places but instead are always directed to experiential interpretations rather than to the experiences themselves" (85).

I see this insight as connected to the ways in which handmade visual art is always directly connected to the body, since the art object tends to make visible the process by which it emerged from the body at a particular time and place, in a particular way (in the sense that a particular curve of clay or stroke of paint evokes the gesture that produced it). Written narrative, while not completely *dis*embodied, depends less directly upon the position, state, and affect of the body that creates it: the marks made by the body are usually invisible in the final product; it erases its tracks. Linguistic art also must contend more directly with the theoretical abstractions invested in Western conceptions of time, as they are folded into narrative conventions; it must struggle with expectations of

directionality, linearity, and closure. This isn't to say that writers are necessarily owned by those expectations, or that visual art doesn't have its own potentially restrictive conventions. But Western ideologies about the primacy of time and the way time works (such as the notion of linear "progress") seem easier to push back against in a medium that's at least partly image-based—that engages readers spatially, with multiple senses. Images, in other words, open up dimensions of experience that have the potential to interrupt well-worn grooves of Western colonial thought. My own recent increased intimacy with images parallels an increased intimacy with my embodied self and with my surroundings; I don't think this is coincidental. The process of making images has changed my epistemological orientation as an artist in generative, revelatory ways; I can't control how much of this will come through to readers in the book's final form, but I hope that it's present in some way as a felt sense.

I envision the book's eventual form as incorporating comics, handwritten text, illustration, and collage of found materials, including original photos and documents. The aesthetic I'm envisioning is heterogeneous and "handmade"—something like an elevated scrapbook. The closest model I've found is Nora Krug's *Belonging*, which also includes all of these elements and, perhaps not coincidentally, deals with similar content (ancestral investigation and historical reckoning).

The relationship between these elements will develop over time as the book evolves. I'm imagining that the "lyric essay" and "ancient ancestor" portions of the text will be rendered in comics form (with two distinct styles to represent their distinct voices), while the letters and dreams will be handwritten text on a muted watercolor background. The more critical essays are perhaps harder to imagine as comics, but not impossible—

though I can also envision them being rendered differently, as something closer to "straight" text with accompanying illustrations. In all of these formats, relevant excerpts from *Growing Up with the Country* will be physically cut-and-pasted into the text so that they're read in the "original" typeface, as I encountered them myself (I've tried to loosely approximate this effect, for now, by rendering Ermine's words in a different font in this version of the manuscript). Relevant photos and documents—such as the Houchens' land titles, birth notices and obituaries—will also be pasted into the text where they are relevant, or as visual interludes between the sections of the book. This heterogeneity of form seems appropriate partly because some aspects of the text will lend themselves more naturally to comics than others; partly because I want to use different visual tools to represent the text's different "voices"; and partly because, since I do have a wealth of historical documents and photographs on hand, it seems like a natural choice to include them directly in the book.

At this point in time, while I have done some visual experimentation, my focus has been primarily on the written text. (I have included an addendum of visual images representing some of my experiments thus far). This has been the case for several reasons, including my relative comfort and ease with words and the necessity of generating a complete written manuscript to serve as my PhD dissertation. Now that I have a full first draft of the written text, I intend to shift my focus to the visual. I will continue doing research and revising the written text, but this will take a backseat to visual experimentation. I plan to create most of the pages by hand and then manipulate and edit them with graphic design software.

I intend to create a full first draft, including illustration and design, in my own hand. This is important to me for several reasons. First, I want to gain skills as a visual artist, and I will only learn by doing. Second, I've learned from my brief experience that the written and visual aspects of the text influence and change one another as the work evolves. Though the words always come first for me, it's not a simple matter of "adding images later"; once images come into play, they actively shape the text, suggesting how the words should be edited or rearranged and sometimes inspiring the generation of new ones. Finally, I believe that there's important affective and emotional information carried by the hand-drawn line (both in illustrations and in handwriting). Because *The Perimeter of Eden* contemplates the body, and the body's vexed relationship with ideologies that seek to conscript or govern it, its status as a handmade (embodied) object adds important layers of meaning; it makes sense that the story should be delivered *by* my body, through my hand. As Benoit Crucifix puts it, "The physical labor of storytelling is always visible in graphic narrative, whether the visible marks themselves remain"; the affective information carried by the line itself will likely fill in gaps left by the words, and deepen the text's emotional resonance (17).

That said, I recognize that I am a first-time visual artist with almost no training, wading into deep water; I will need mentorship and perhaps direct collaboration in order to achieve my vision for the book. After I've created a complete first draft in my own hand, I plan to collaborate with an artist who will help me revise the book and realize its final visual form. I'm not sure at this point whether that collaboration will take the form of simple mentorship and guidance, or whether the artist would intervene more directly by

enhancing and embellishing my images (or even creating their own images in a style that meshes with my own). I trust that the book will tell me what it needs.

Aside from Krug's *Belonging*, a handful of other visual texts have served as direct influences. I've assembled what those in the comics field refer to as a "swipe file"—a "self-curated archive" of other creators' images that can be "reused, repurposed or redrawn" (Crucifix 310). While I'm not yet completely sure how I'll use the images in my "swipe file," I share them here as a way of illustrating the influences that have animated my imagination of the book's eventual form. In the next paragraph I'll refer to page numbers in the swipe file so that readers can view examples of what I discuss here.

Anne Carson's *Nox* (7-10) meditates on the death of the author's brother by incorporating original text, photographs and letters in a way that forces the reader to meditate on the physical debris we use to construct memory and the gaps and silences left behind after a loved one's death. Anna Joy Springer's *The Vicious Red Relic, Love* (11-13) also explores the aftermath of a loved one's death—in this case through a combination of text in various fonts combined with hand-drawn illustrations. I've also been deeply influenced by Lynda Barry's comics (14-16), which frequently incorporate collage and photographs of found objects. Mira Jacob's *Good Talk* (17-20) is another recent influence. Like me, Jacob was a novelist with no formal art training who decided to write a graphic memoir exploring her experience as a gendered and racialized subject; she taught herself to use graphic design software and found a kind of visual shortcut by superimposing "puppets" of the characters over stock backgrounds. Kim Krans' recent graphic memoir *Blossoms and Bones* (21-24) folds the tortured process of creation into the text itself; the book evolves as a representation of her struggle to "draw the feeling" while dealing with

loss and addiction. It embraces process and imperfection in a way that I hope to emulate. Kristen Radtke's *Imagine Wanting Only This* (25-27), while different in visual style from what I'm aiming for, lyrically represents an embodied, searching self while also investigating the speaker's familial and historical legacy. Emily Ferris's graphic novel *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* (28-30), while fictional, combines cultural myth with personal narrative in intriguing ways, while also achieving a visual aesthetic that feels simultaneously virtuosic and homemade. I am also inspired by the self-reflexivity and intertextuality of Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (31-35), and the emotional vulnerability of Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (36-38). Outside of the book world, my aesthetic is informed by artists who work with collage and found objects—especially those whose work is inflected with surrealism. Aside from Howard Finster, who I mentioned earlier, these artists include Joseph Cornell, Mina Loy, Leonora Carrington, and Aloise Corbaz (39-44).

What most of the graphic narratives named above have in common, aside from their marriage of image and word, is an embrace of the imperfect and fragmentary. This is clearly a deliberate choice; these books were made by highly skilled artists who could have created a visual impression of repletion and closure, had they desired. This quality seems related to the topics they explore—including loss, grief, miscarriage, queerness, addiction, and family trauma. The visual dimensions of these texts are able to wordlessly convey qualities difficult to express in language: silence, absence, the unspeakable.

Scholar Hillary Chute, author of *Disaster Drawn* and *Graphic Women*, has eloquently articulated why comics might be a particularly powerful medium for representing trauma. Comics, she said in a 2019 lecture, allow creators to "assert the value of presence, however

complex and contingent," as against "the cult of the unrepresentable in trauma theory." This is because of the ways in which visual narrative makes absence and erasure literally present on the page: in the way comics employ negative space, including the "gutters" between panels, they "manifest material frames and the absence between them, literalizing the work of framing and exclusion" while remaining "forcefully invested in detailed documentation." Comics is a form of "contingent display," a "presence stippled with erasure." Thus, comics—despite their devaluation in literary history as "light" or unserious—are uniquely suited to depicting traumatic events that might seem impossible to represent in prose alone. Because of the unique way that comics manipulate time *and* space, they allow methods for the creator to represent hesitancy, silence, temporal gaps and irresolvable contradictions.

Chute also discusses the ways in which comics, as a medium, offer advantages to creators interested in limning the complexities of gendered experience. Visual narrative, she says, is "a form of textuality that takes the body seriously." In comics, the body is visibly involved in the process of its own representation. This allows women to determine the terms of their own visibility: "They return to events to literally re-view them, and in so doing, they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight. Further, through the form their work takes, they provoke us to think about how women, as both looking and looked-at subjects, are situated in particular times, spaces and histories" (*Graphic Women* 2). Visual narrative also easily allows for depictions of the type of multiple, choral selfhood I referenced earlier, in my discussion of "feminist memoir"—depictions that resist masculinist notions of the self as unified and linear, that adhere more closely to the messy experience of life in a female body. Chute

asserts that comics can "stage dialogues among versions of the self," representing internal fracture and discord while documenting the process of the self's flux and change (see page 20 of my "swipe file," from Mira Jacob's *Good Talk*, for a particularly vivid example of this phenomenon).

Chute's work helps me articulate why I was drawn to comics as a possible medium for telling this particular story. *The Perimeter of Eden* is, quite literally, a "dialogue between different versions of the self"—the self as it grows and changes, and also the different versions of the self that coexist (the daughter, the wife, the wounded child, the guilty colonizer, the healer, the searcher, the scholar). It is also about the fraught, complex experience of living in a particular body—and the silences and erasures that persist within families and cultures. Like the graphic memoirs named above, the book attempts to push back against these erasures while also representing them.

CHAPTER 4

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND PLANS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

As described above, the ways in which *The Perimeter of Eden* feels "unfinished" are largely deliberate—built into the project's aesthetic and political DNA. That said, the book is also unfinished in more literal ways as well. In addition to developing the visual aspects of the text, as outlined above, there are several ways in which I intend to continue developing it in the coming years.

First and foremost, I still have a great deal of research and self-education to do concerning American history—particularly the history of Oklahoma and of the indigenous peoples that settlers like my ancestors displaced (as well as the current realities of indigenous communities and the ways they continue to resist colonization). Though I've done a good deal of reading, and taken one research trip to Oklahoma in 2019 to view archives and museum exhibits, I feel that I've only touched the tip of the iceberg. There is so much I still don't know or understand about the history of the region and how it fits into the larger currents of American and world history. Also, my understanding of these histories is still shaped by the settler-centric narratives I was raised on; I have so much more unlearning to do before I can place the knowledge I *do* have within an appropriate context. I know I won't ever become an expert on these histories—that is not my goal. But I need to learn more if I'm going to speak from an informed position and correct some of my own preventable blind spots. I intend to continue reading widely and to make at least two more trips to Oklahoma.

I'm not sure how much my continued research will affect the text; my goal is not to give a comprehensive history of the region, nor to convey indigenous narratives that are

not really my story to tell. But I do imagine, based on prior experience, that my continued research will spur me to revise portions of what I've written, and expand it to accommodate new insights. One addition I'd love to make to the text, for example, is an illustrated timeline representing the history of Greer county (hopefully, the use of space on the page will allow me to visually represent the length of time the land was inhabited by indigenous people before European invasion). I imagine that I'll also continue to revise my writing about race, whiteness, and settler colonialism as I continue to educate myself on these topics and read work by indigenous writers and writers of color.

Another way in which the book is unfinished is that I am literally still living the story that I tell here. At some point, of course, I'll have to decide on an ending; any cutoff will probably feel arbitrary. That said, I have a strong sense that the next couple of years will contain experiences that I'll want to represent and wrestle with in these pages. The final section of the current manuscript ("Husbandry") looks to a future that's still evolving; I intend to continue writing about these aspects of my life while I work on developing the book's visual form.

I also have many questions about the text as it stands—regarding its degree of aesthetic coherence, its ethical clarity or lack thereof, its moments of over- and under-explanation, its blind spots and omissions, and the questions it raises. I hope to gain perspective on some of these from readers, including my dissertation committee, and to fold this feedback into my revisions.

I hope to publish *The Perimeter of Eden* with a literary press (large or small) that believes in the book and will commit to helping it find its audience. I intend to donate any royalties to indigenous organizations and/or individuals, as a form of reparation or

resource diversion: I don't believe it is ethical for me to profit off of a story that's largely about my own awareness of the exploitative histories in which I've participated, and from which I have materially benefited.

In addition to the publicity apparatus that would likely accompany the book's publication—interviews, readings at bookstores, etc—I plan to reach out to various formal and informal institutions to invite readers into dialogue. These might include universities, high schools, community centers, prisons, libraries, and informal social gatherings. White antiracist affinity groups, history clubs, women's circles and ancestry circles would be particularly interesting groups to engage.

My ultimate hope is that the book sparks conversation around gender, whiteness, spirituality, and the fraught process of reckoning with history, and inspires others to explore their own ancestry and relationship to place. While I expect it will resonate most directly with identities similar to mine, I hope it also creates space for reparative cross-cultural exchanges. Artistically, I hope that the risks I take here—as a writer creating an ambitious visual work with very little training—will inspire others to break through disciplinary silos, push back against classist notions of "mastery," and risk failure in order to create honest, vulnerable work.

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