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TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 64, Number 2, Summer 2020 (T264) , pp.
138-154 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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Business and Pleasure

I'm sitting with Dice Sun in a Starbucks in downtown Saskatoon, a small city in the Saskatchewan Province of northwestern Canada. Sun, a young Aboriginal¹ Canadian man, is 21 years old, 6'2" tall, and knife-thin. He's sipping an orange cream Jones Soda, and I'm having an espresso with Stevia. From the first time I saw him, Sun's fierce eyes gutted me. His voice is equally keen, punctuated at turns with a particular Canadian frisson (*add-ult; prro-cess*) and a hip hop-inflected African American vernacular English ("hangin' with my bros"; "peace fam").

1. I use the term "Aboriginal" as per the North American Canadian context. Aboriginal people, in this case, refers to what is called the Aboriginal identity population. The Aboriginal identity population, according to Statistics Canada, includes people who reported identifying with one or more Aboriginal group, including First Nations Groups, Métis, or Inuit, and/or those who reported being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian as defined by the Indian Act of Canada, and/or those who reported being members of an Indian band or First Nation (Statistics Canada 2016). (I have left the word "Indian" here as a historical term used by Statistics Canada, as it is used in the source material cited here. I have found during research that Aboriginal people in Canada generally do not use the word "Indian" to refer to themselves, unless in an emic or insider, members-only, sense.)

Sun's hair is ink-black, shaved close; he's wearing a green bandana, a barely there white tank, and low-slung jeans that whisper narrow hips. With our golden-brown skin, straight-brimmed New Era 9FIFTY Snapback baseball caps, and combat boots, our attire aligns, and we appear to be companions; peers even. In spite of our appearances, however, our positionalities—more to the point, our locations—contrast greatly.

Sun is affiliated with a Saskatoon street gang known as the First Posse.² Today, Sun describes his relation to crystal methamphetamine—the drug of choice in the city in the summer of 2018—as a vague blend of what he calls “business and pleasure.” Sun is also a student, a self-taught bike mechanic, and he plays several musical instruments. Still, in spite of our similar wardrobe choices, skin tones, and interest in the arts, I'm just visiting Saskatoon. I am here on an artist residency hosted by AKA, an artist-run center.³

The project I've developed during the AKA residency, *Public Library* (2018–ongoing), is a series of video and photograph-recorded conceptual actions and conversations in the plaza and sidewalk spaces around the downtown Saskatoon public library branch, the Frances Morrison Central Library.⁴

Public Library sees me coursing the streets of this city of approximately 250,000, talking to locals about city life. The first day I began filming *Public Library*, I met Sun, and an additional collaborator named Cole Blackstar; we've all been hanging out ever since.⁵ Today, over our caffeine and sugar, Sun and I discuss Saskatoon city life.

“Why are so many younger Aboriginal people here into crystal meth?” I ask.

A beat. And another. Then, the response: “This is our land, so we can do whatever we want to do.”

Sun's voice is unwavering, unflinching, calculating, as his eyes bore into me. His words stir my blood and cancel the distractions around us—a child nibbling on a cake pop; teenaged girls perfuming their wrists—as Sun calculates my reaction in real time. His eyes shift millimeters over nanoseconds, back-and-forth-tick-tock, as he gauges my response. The researcher, in this dialogue, is both Sun and me.

2. First Posse, gang colors, affiliations, and all names are fictionalized in order to protect confidentiality. Names of places are actual. Dice Sun's precise affiliation with First Posse, and whether or not he had a formal role related to illicit drug trafficking, are not clear. All quotes and information from Dice Sun and Cole Blackwater are from personal interviews and conversations in Saskatoon from July to December 2018.

3. AKA is a project-oriented presenter and exhibitor of contemporary artists and their works and practices, across national and international contexts. The center was founded in 1971 by a group of women-identified people making collaborative work. AKA's residency supported development of my *Public Library* project (see www.akaartistrun.com).

4. Available in its entirety for TDR readers at <https://mayastovall.com/section/467075-The-Public-Library.html>.

5. “Hanging out” in the technical anthropological sense, referring to the pursuit of participant-observation, in other words, observing and documenting social phenomena in their natural emergent form.

Figure 1. (facing page) The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 5 (2018). HD video still; the performance of the writing of field notes, while hanging out with Cole Blackstar. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)

Maya Stovall is a conceptual artist and anthropologist whose practice spans objects, performance, text, and video. Her Liquor Store Theatre (2014–ongoing) was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial and is the focus of her book of the same name, which launches fall 2020 from Duke University Press. She is Assistant Professor in Liberal Studies at California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly), Pomona. mayastovall@copp.edu

Sun's words—complicated and tormented—silence me for several ticks. The poetry, the arrogance, the savvy, all combine to pin my brain against the wall. Rather than condoning or denouncing Sun's notion—"This is our land, so we can do whatever we want to do"—I center my effort in trying to understand the *how* behind Sun's statement.

Meaning, how do history and political economy intersect with subjectivity and meaning-making to shape crystal methamphetamine narcoculture in Saskatoon?⁶ This is the question I bring to the streets and sidewalks of Saskatoon, into the *Public Library* project.

Public Library pursues the *process* of performance, that is, the process of acts "framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed" (Schechner 2013:3). Centering process rather than product, my approach to performance aggregates conceptual art and anthropological research. In centering the process, or the *how* of performance, then, I form an apt location from which to analyze the *how* of Sun's musing.

In conceptual art—and in reference to performance in particular—according to Amelia Jones: "The concept of *encountering* [...] provides a new framework to understand these questions surrounding when, where, and how art works" (2018:14). *Public Library*, then, deploys the notion of *the encounter* as central to both the *how* of art and the *how* of crystal methamphetamine narcoculture. Coursing through downtown Saskatoon, chance encounters are at the project's center. In the realm of the encounter, I listen to people's musings on city life, I perform, and I document with videos and photos an emergent *how*, as ways of knowing and ways of researching unfold on the streets and sidewalks. I critique a necessarily colonial, or hostile, gaze (hooks 1992; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Foucault 1977) with my own excess-infused approach. In other words, in performing the gaze through my shades; performing abstract, contemporary movement; and filming myself writing, I deliberately encircle my research and artmaking process in an aesthetics of excess.

An aesthetics of excess is effectively described as a piercing—a takeover—of the everyday (Wendt 2009). Pan Wendt theorizes place and space's transcendence, through an aesthetics of excess in the work of the avantgarde composer Sun Ra. Wendt writes that in Sun Ra's appearance in the movie *Space Is the Place* (1974) "the total incongruity of his costume and mystical patter opens up a place within the real world where other, new thoughts can occur. Another community is implied in this performance, one which transcends the musician's mundane, tawdry surroundings" (Wendt 2009:17). In *Public Library*, I work to encircle the everyday with surreal, excessive aesthetics that might press into questions of *how*.

Choreography as Strategy

A Saskatoon-fresh draft cuts through the summer sunshine, chilling my body as I press my right knee into a 90-degree angle, stretch my left leg behind me into an elongated arabesque, and lengthen the back of my left knee. Like no tomorrow. I'm wearing leather jeans over a plunging-neckline bodysuit with sunglasses. My hair is pulled into a severe knot, a "ballerina bun," at the nape of my neck.

I hold the moment, staring down the camera I've set up for the staged shot, a shot that runs parallel to an oblong planter-bench spilling over with bright green ground covers, around which people congregate. The people surrounding the planter are ethnographic informants to anthropologists, subjects to artists, and to me, "the people," experts of the city, the ones who make this place move.

6. I use the term "narcoculture" to refer to the complicated visual, material, and linguistic subcultures associated with licit and illicit drug use, trafficking, and exchange. In the Saskatoon case, the narcoculture I research relates primarily to crystal methamphetamine but is implicated by opioids as well.

I feel the tiny ticks of the moment as my eyes devour the camera. I listen to a rhythm of:

Traffic whirring by.

People's ambient conversation at planter-benches. Found music rising from nearby cars. Children's laughter ringing out.

Todd Stovall's original dance music—crackling from a portable Bluetooth speaker (note the mm-chck-mm-chck-mm-chck of baseline).

Whizzing wheelchair pulleys as a person deftly bustles by.

People calling to friends. Police car sirens swirling.

Automated traffic signal voice: “walk”—or—“wait” (note the instructive tone). Baby stroller rolling by.

Person walking by with the aid of a cane (note the click-clack-click-clack). Chatter of businesspeople.

I stare beyond my camera in front of me as I pull my left leg forward into (in ballet-speak) a *rond de jambe en dedans à terre*—that is, a counter-clockwise circling of the leg on the ground. The *rond de jambe* propels me forward; I advance toward the street facing City Hall. A breath; hold-hold-hold, right leg in *plié*, left leg stretched to reach far beyond this sliver of a moment. Slowly gathering myself. Standing up straight. Clash vertigo.

Hold-hold-hold-hold. Hold more.

And then, I spin my arms and my hands as fast as humanly possible—think of moving like an engine; a motor; an accelerator. I course through a series of movements I describe as a blend of voguing, hip hop style pop-locking, Jiujitsu, and finger tutting. *Slice-cut-drive-spin. Slice-slice-cut-cut-drive-drive-spin-spin. Slice-slice-slice-cut-cut-cut-drive-drive-drive-spin-spin-spin. Slice-slice-slice-slice-cut-cut-cut-cut-drive-drive-drive-drive-spin-spin-spin-spin.*



Figure 2. The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 1 (2018). HD video still; the performance of choreographed dance sequences. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)

Gathering myself, I let my arms descend to my hips—moment and momentum thaw; dissolve; evaporate—before I walk off camera. Reset the shot: stop-start. Spinning. Next, I pick up a notebook that is stashed nearby. Shifting gears, the next scene is what I call *the performance of the writing of field notes. Writing performances* for short. I move through a rhythm of:

Quietly standing still.

Opening notebook. Flipping to empty page. Steadying pen.

Scribbling musings about the current moment. Scribbling musings about the scene around you—the action, the people, the built environment, the vibe. Scribbling the questions on your mind.

Scribbling how you feel. Turn page. Write-write-write. Turn page.

Write-write-write.

Someone walks up to you—“what are you doing?”

“Making an art film about the city...”

“The writing is part of that?”

“Yes—talking is, too... Want to talk?”

“I suppose we are already.”

(Smiles all around)

As I continue writing, I gaze at the Saskatoon City Hall building in front of me. Scribbled notes describe a rhythm of:

Comings and goings of businesspeople. Public library patrons threading the plaza. Perhaps transient people quietly occupying grassy areas nearby. Opulent mid-century fountains. Lush landscaping. City flag, the Provincial flag, and the Treaty 6 flag.

In *Prairie Rising: Indigenous Youth, Decolonization, and the Politics of Intervention*, anticolonial scholar Jaskiran Dhillon traces the lives of Indigenous youth across Saskatoon. Dhillon's thorough monograph documents, historicizes, and contextualizes experiences of Aboriginal Canadian youth as they navigate, contest, and resist state violence. In other words, Dhillon traces "another section of the city, where growth, prosperity, and economic progress have not emerged in the same way and where a different kind of transformation is being conceived and contested" (2017:26). The plazas and sidewalks surrounding the public library reflect such sections of the city in which growth has not emerged in a proportionate fashion to the monied sections of Saskatoon. Zooming back to my dance and writing performances facing City Hall: Dhillon describes the scene that I'm seeing right now, as I perform on the sidewalks around the public library: "Downtown is also the commercial and tourist centre, where Indigenous cultural artifacts adorn public spaces and local parks, marking the outward acceptance of Indigenous difference and celebrating its richness as part of the city's social fabric" (27). Dhillon continues, bringing us squarely to the scene at the *Public Library* event today, describing what I see: "The Treaty 6 flag has recently been erected in front of City Hall, to fly in tandem with the city and provincial flags seen throughout the municipality. The city's official tourist website echoes these protestations of postcolonial calm" (27).

However, in reality, as Dhillon writes,

These public displays of Native endorsement stand in sharp contrast to the high rates of poverty and suicide; sexual exploitation; limited access to education; lack of safe and affordable housing; compounding health concerns as a result of malnutrition, infectious disease, and drug addiction; and soaring rates of criminalization of Indigenous children, youth and families. (27)

The conditions Dhillon writes of spill onto the plazas and sidewalks surrounding the public library. Youth wearing First Posse and Panic Crew⁷ colors mill around; discussions of scarce jobs, inadequate housing, and food insecurity are heard; meanwhile, families stream in and out of the library, a mother breastfeeds in a discreet cove of the planter-bench. Just when you think you've figured out the scene—it shifts.

My gaze spins from City Hall to the streets and sidewalks closest to the public library. *Write-write-write*. Think of the *writing performances* as daylighting performance as method; daylighting conceptual art practice; daylighting anthropological research—all at once.

As I scribble, subject to my own camera's gaze, I work to spin a space where I, like Sun Ra, present a potential portal to another realm of dialogue. The "community" Jacob and Wendt describe is visible behind me, where people—regulars at the downtown public library branch—chat and hang out, at times watching the performance that unfolds before them, and then, always, orbiting back into their own pressing lives.

Choreographic Photographs

I'm setting up a camera shot at the corner of 4th and 23rd. I'm alone in Saskatoon, flying solo in this artist residency, and thus I've settled into a familiar rhythm of setting up my camera shot in a reasonably secure location, and leaving the camera unattended while I film. A silvery blue

7. "First Posse" and "Panic Crew" are pseudonyms for Saskatoon street gangs.

sky brackets the summer afternoon. I'm cuing up music; preparing to slide into writing, dancing, conversation, listening. I'm focused on spinning a teeny-tiny-little moment into something scalable. My thoughts of scale are interrupted by a nearby voice.

It's Dice Sun's voice. "Hey, will you take my photo and bring me back a copy? Me and my boy," Sun tosses. A beat. I'm thinking; thrown off. To put it in stark terms, I haven't planned on taking photo portraits of people during my time in Saskatoon. I haven't planned on doing any of what is referred to as street photography. I haven't planned on doing any kind of ethnographic portraiture with still images.

My particular approach to street documentation centers on time, performance, obsession, context, conversation, and video. Street photography has not, and continues to this day not to be, part of what I consider my work. But then, Sun forced me forward. Sun took my notions of the *how*, the *encounter*, and the *conceptual*—the *process*—of art to task, all at once.

Artist Allan deSouza describes process-based work as:

that which emphasizes the procedures, methods, choices, systems, and duration of its making or coming into being. It may emphasize these to the extent that there is no "finished" work other than the process itself and the changes that may be in continual play. (2018:224)

Aligned with deSouza, choreographic photographs, as I frame them in *Public Library*, actually do *not* form a body of works meant for artworld consumption. Rather, the choreographic photographs emergent from the scene of my *Public Library* project are meant for the consumption of participants only, the subjects of the photographs; the experts of the city. Spinning back to Sun's inquiry, think of a rhythm of:

"Yes—I'll take your photograph."

"Let's do it."

Sun calls his boy over. Tells him the plan. Sun selects location. Sun arranges pose. Sun arranges another pose.

I set up camera shot. Adjust. Tweak. Focus. Passersby gathering; looking. "What's going on?" Snap-flash. Snap-flash. "Good...Okay...One more?" Snap-flash.

"Can we meet here tomorrow, at 2:00 p.m.? I'll have your print then."

"Yes."

Traffic whirs by. Conversations continue.

With choreographic photographs, I am attracted to concept and process above image and product. I locate and relish the way in which the choreographic photographs are a hidden-little-backstage-silver of the *Public Library* video series (Stovall 2018b) that is based on the writings, conceptual interventions, and dance performances I conducted to prompt discussions of city life and narcoculture.

I am compelled with the subtlety of a teeny-tiny tentacle of *Public Library* that exists only for the participants of a project, and does not land in a museum. I am attracted to a pointedly conceptual phase of the *how* of art and of research.

Returning to deSouza:

Process entails two primary approaches: 1) A conceptual or procedural system as a set of instructions or intentions; 2) A loose methodology that is more responsive to choices and changes during the process, and that may be linked more to the persona of the artist as ongoing decision-maker. (2018:225)

Moreover:

Process-based work that proceeds from a system or set of instructions may do so from an intention to undercut the myth of the expressive artist. [...] An emphasis on process can, however, radically change the terms of engagement with art. (225)



Figure 3. The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 5 (2018). *Choreographic photographs*, Untitled 1, documentation of exchange. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)



Figure 4. The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 6 (2018). *Choreographic photographs*, Untitled 1, documentation of exchange. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)

Building on Sun's prompt, I developed a set of strict conditions for the choreographic photograph series:

1. Participant approaching me in the spaces around the library, having heard about the project.
2. Participant asking for their photograph to be taken.
3. Participant selecting their own portrait location, vibe, poses. (I only manipulate light, exposure, depth of field, and angle of lens.)
4. Participant and I arranging to meet at planned times in the spaces of the library, when I deliver their prints.
5. Me searching out and returning photographic print to participant.
6. In order for photographs to be published or displayed, the print must be returned successfully.

The above conditions are followed across the choreographic photograph exchanges. I may bend tiny elements of the rules at moments. The pattern and flow of this process-within-project presses questions of how art can occur and for whom. Implicated in the approach as well are anthropological understandings of entanglements and devotion. Such understandings prioritize the notion of the gift as critical to reciprocity and power in relations (Godelier 1999, Mauss 1967).

Attuned to such entanglements, contemporary ethnographers work to press critical ways of documenting culture (Jackson Jr. 2013, Taussig 2009, Stewart 2007, Chin 2001, di Leonardo 1998)—ways of documenting infused with attention to reciprocity, power, and dialogue.

With choreographic photographs, I locate a flow and pattern of dialog that arcs through *Public Library*—separate from, but infusing and supporting, conversations on city life and crystal methamphetamine narcoculture. Such narcoculture, increasingly, is part of daily life in Saskatoon.



Figure 5. The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 5 (2018). *Choreographic photographs*, Untitled 1, documentation of exchange. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)



Figure 6. The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 7 (2018). *Choreographic photographs*, Untitled 1, documentation of exchange. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)

Crystal Methamphetamine in Saskatoon

Cole Blackstar is tall, crystal-meth-lean, grad-school-clever, with a quick wit and a sharp turn of phrase at-the-ready. He has bright, indigo eyes, a shock of thick black hair, and is perpetually carrying a notebook. He's a street philosopher; everyone—I mean everyone—knows Blackstar.

The day I met Sun, I also met Blackstar, and Blackstar informed me right away that Sun was his brother. Turns out, he didn't mean this literally, but rather, that Sun and Blackstar had shared links and connections that traced the terrain of the library and beyond. This is the terrain that *Public Library* traces, the streets of Saskatoon—a city at the moment entangled with crystal methamphetamine, a glossy little gossamer-winged-fiend.

Crystal methamphetamine, which people call crystal meth, also referred to as “crank,” “chalk,” “chandelier,” “ice,” “quartz,” or “redneck cocaine,” is spinning through the streets of downtown Saskatoon, slithering through sidewalk cracks, oozing into pores, lungs, hearts (Halkitis, Parsons, and Stirratt 2001). Crystal methamphetamine, an addictive, psychoactive, central nervous system stimulant, is a crystalline form of methamphetamine, prepared, cooked, or wake-and-baked, as it's said, with a variety of household products, the most important of which is ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, found in over-the-counter cold medicines.

On the streets and sidewalks of downtown Saskatoon, lean-and-hungry bodies, caffeine-cranked voices, deadly candy-coated footsteps, and an ever-shifting terrain of all-green-and-all-yellow street gang clothing are punctuated with the intermittent OD, ever-present police surveillance, and an ambient buzz of dealers. I meld into the scene, with people offering to buy, sell, or trade crystal or hydro pills.

I'm writing field notes in front of my camera shot as Blackstar looks on, when a young man wearing low-slung jeans and a dirty, distressed, oversized white T-shirt walks by. He drags a cigarette, appraises the scene, and asks me, “Want to trade a hydro for crystal meth?” It's week one in Saskatoon: I don't know what hydro is.⁸ Blackstar laughs softly. A beat. “You're not on hydro?”

Crystal?” He asks me. A beat. Then, he clocks my camera. “Oh, you’re the camera lady,” he scoffs. “That’s why.” He walks away with a fan of youthful, slightly-strung-out-looking friends trailing. Something similar to this exchange generally happens several times a day.

An hour later, in between performances, a well-heeled teenaged girl asks me if I want some leftover lettuce—locally grown, no less—that she bought too much of. Offers of opioids, crystal meth, and locally grown leftovers on the streets are new to me, even after being well-seasoned for years by my *Liquor Store Theatre* (2014–ongoing) project on the streets and sidewalks of Detroit’s McDougall-Hunt neighborhood (Stovall 2018a; Stovall 2016). I turn to Blackstar. “Why am I being offered drugs and free food?” I pose the obvious.

“You’re young, and you have brown skin, like us,” Blackstar replies nonchalantly.

“Also, it’s your energy. Your energy is like you’re on crystal meth,” he tosses. My mind spins.

The way I’m racialized and my combination of obsession with art practice and inclination toward coffee, tea, and vegetarianism, ironically, visually position me in this crystal meth landscape as a probable user.

This faux-insider cloak renders me another useful experience: as pedestrians outside the crystal subculture walk by, I can perceive—to a degree—how we’re received. I feel the respectability-politics-glare: the assumptions that we’re all necessarily stoned, tweaking, drunk, or all three.

Blackstar continues, “You’re dancing around and that might look like you’re on something, too,” he adds, giggling a bit. We continue our discussion of crystal methamphetamine, driving from the hypothetical to the day-to-day.

“What’s the day-to-day like?” I ask.

“So, to be honest, it has been...well, a lot. I went through like 6 grams in 4 days.” A beat. Blackstar glances at me, hinting at the significance of the time and quantity.

“How much is that compared to a more normal use in four days? What would a normal use in four days be?” I pose.

“About maybe, a gram and a half,” Blackstar responds.

“So, like, four times the normal use, you did?” I calculate.

“Yeah,” Blackstar replies. “That’s about right. So, I kind of, push the limits, and, gamble my life, and see what happens...,” he states, with a matter-of-fact hardness that destroys me.

“Why do you think that is?” is all I can manage.

“Because...I like it. I enjoy it,” Blackstar volleys quickly.

“You like the rush of it?” I press. I can imagine.

“Yeah,” Blackstar says. A beat. And another. Another still. I fight to stay silent.

“And,” he continues, “during that time, I felt like I could be myself, and I could do as much drugs as I wanted, without anyone telling me what to do, without anyone ruining my high, and I could enjoy it, so I just did more and more and more. I got to be *myself* for once.” He exhales at the end of this statement, marking its importance.

“You got to be yourself while you were tweaking,” I intone.

8. Hydro in this case refers to hydromorphone, an analgesic, semi-synthetic opioid widely prescribed for chronic cancer pain, acute pain, and in fewer cases, for nonchronic but acute pain (Murray and Hagen 2005).

Hydromorphone implicates the central nervous system and is highly addictive. It is also expensive. I’m told by numerous informants that a hydromorphone addiction, inadvertently acquired following pain management prescription, is often satisfied with a transition to crystal meth, given the low cost and ease of access to crystal meth.

“Yes,” Blackstar agrees. “Instead of doing what this person says or doing what that person says...and stuff I don’t want to do. I was just me,” he finishes.

“So, it sounds like you’re looking for some control. Like, you want to feel in control?” I feel my questions are flat, but I’m trying.

“Yeah. In that four days...I felt free. I felt like a free person for the first time. And, I got to enjoy every minute of it,” Blackstar tosses.

“That’s fascinating,” I toss back. “And, relatable,” I add. “I get it.”

“Yeah,” Blackstar nods. “So, this is day 13 since I’ve been up. Yeah. I’ve been up for 13 days now,” he realizes.

A beat.

“But with short naps?” I search out the possibility of this.

“Just the one-hour nap we took together yesterday,” Blackstar replies, referring to a single hour of sleep we grabbed together, in street clothes, sprawled next to one another on the couch of a miniature Airbnb, funded by AKA as part of my artist in residence travel support, in downtown Saskatoon in the teeny-tiny hours of the morning before dawn.

A beat. And another.

“Are you serious?” I press. “The nap we took—that’s the only nap you’ve had in 13 days?” My mind reels.

“Yeah.” Blackstar stares at me, intent, honest.

“We should stop this conversation right now and you should take a nap,” I volley, reaching for the recorder.

“Yeah, that’s why my baby moms got mad at me, because she didn’t know I’d been up for 13 days, and she didn’t know how much money I went through on drugs... I went through four or five hundred dollars... Just on myself.”

“Wow. Just on crystal?” I toss back, too fast. Slow down, I tell myself. Listen more, I tell myself.

“Yeah, just for me,” Blackstar says, chuckling a bit at my naivete.

“Was it a blend of different stuff or just crystal?” I press.

“Just crystal meth,” is Blackstar’s quick reply.

“So, that’s the drug of choice for you? Always?” I toss.

“Yeah,” he flips.

“Apparently it’s the drug of choice in Saskatoon now,” I cast.

“Well, it’s my drug of choice,” Blackstar casts back.

“Yeah, and it’s becoming the drug of choice in Saskatoon, based on what the news says. Of course, that could be wrong?” I wonder.

“Well...” A beat. “I don’t go out and steal my money, or whatever, but the money just came to me. I don’t even have a criminal record. I don’t know about the news, but I know a lot of people using it.” Blackstar seems to associate the local news with accusations of criminality.

“Yeah. Well, actually, a lot of people have criminal records... It wouldn’t mean you’re a bad person... Just is what it is,” I volley. And, redirecting, I ask, “What else is going on with crystal meth?”

“What do you mean?” Blackstar presses this time.

“Like, what’s happening here in Saskatoon?” I toss back.

“Crystal meth is a way for people to numb their feelings and not deal with their problems,” Blackstar volleys, right back.

“Yeah?” I press softly.

“But me,” Blackstar says, “When I get high on crystal meth, or whatever, I actually go to clear up all the stuff I need to do.”

A beat while I let this sink in.

“So, you use it to get numb and to do stuff that normally you wouldn’t want to feel?” I probe.

“Right. Like, I could be really high, and go to the social services, and talk to my counselor. I could get really high, and go to the police station, and talk to the police,” Blackstar explains.

“What is that like at social services?”

“Stressful. They judge you. Like you’re not a person,” Blackstar says. “Like they don’t do the same shit.”

“I see. I get that.” I toss. “So...that’s why you want to be numb?”

“Yeah, of course,” Blackstar volleys.

“I would want to be numb for that too.” And I mean it.

“Yeah... It keeps a smile on my face,” Blackstar says.

Blackstar is not alone. In Saskatoon, since 2013, use of crystal methamphetamine has increased exponentially. Between 2015 and 2016, people reporting crystal meth use spiked 200 percent. In 2016, for the first time ever, more people in Saskatoon were charged with trafficking crystal methamphetamine than any other illicit drug (Zakreski 2017).

In 2019, 10 times more people are in treatment programs for crystal meth than 5 years ago (Martell 2019). Also in 2019, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) hosted a conference entitled “The 2019 Crystal Meth Dialogue.” The conference, held at the Saskatoon Ramada Hotel, included discussions of lived experiences of persons in crystal meth recovery; the biology of methamphetamine addiction and treatment; related policing and surveillance concerns; and questions of personal safety amidst narcoculture (Matejka 2019).

It is difficult to convey the urgent threat that crystal meth poses to Saskatoon’s vulnerable populations. Health advocate Peter Butt points out that, “some people in recovery who have experienced it really see it as a form of a zombie apocalypse in the community. That’s their language with regards to it: people being like the walking dead” (in Zakreski 2019).

Pressing further, Saskatchewan corrections and policing critic Nicole Sarauer argues that resources should be spent on preventing meth use. “For years police forces have been pointing to the spike in meth use and the drug trade as a driver of crime,” she said at a recent Canadian Legislature meeting. The root causes of crime, she asserts, like disparities across employment, education, homelessness, and poverty, are ignored while the government focuses instead on law enforcement (in CBC News 2019). Ultimately, Sarauer argues that crystal meth is wrongly treated more as pathology than as the threat to community wellbeing that it is. Moreover, “there is a ‘shameful shortage’ of correctional supports for mental health and addictions issues, and a lack of reintegration supports” (CBC News 2019).

Days after our discussion on his 13-hours-and-counting meth high, Blackstar mentions that he’s emailed me a poem that will explain the drug more clearly, building upon our discussion. Imagine a rhythm of:

*Opening up Gmail on iPhone. Opening up Blackstar’s email.
Reading a devastating treatise. Transcendence turning to death.
Seeking turning to loss. Heart plunging at each word:*

Hello.
You may or may not know me.
I destroy homes.
I tear families apart.

I'll take your children and that is just the start.
 I'm more precious than diamonds, more valued than gold.
 The sorrows I bring are a sight to behold.
 You shouldn't have tried me how many times were you told?
 But you challenged my powers how could you have been so bold?
 You couldn't say no, and just walked away.
 If you could do it all over again what would you say?
 I'll be your master you'll be my slave.
 Don't fear being lonely I'll walk with you to your grave.
 I'll show you more pain than your deepest betrayal
 So come take my hand as I lead you to HELL.

—Author unknown (in Blackstar 2018)

The reality of crystal meth is obvious, yet elusive on the streets of Saskatoon, where the crystal explosion is surprisingly undocumented by empirical data at a provincial and city level, yet has droves of young, attractive people, mostly harmless, all vulnerable, milling around the city, reeling—searching out a fix.

People linked to the crystal explosion are neither criminals nor pariahs—they are complicated, nuanced people with goals, dreams, and families. This, of course, holds true regarding any drug explosion. People such as Cole Blackstar and Dice Sun, who have been spending hours with me in the spaces surrounding the library today, make this global reality excruciatingly local; personal.

Think of a rhythm of two hours of:

Write-write-write. Dance-dance-dance. Listen-listen-listen. Snap-snap-flash. Film-film-film.
Snap-snap-flash.
(Absorb espresso. Chug green juice. Do photosynthesis.)
(Repeat)

After two hours of this rhythm, I am exhausted. My body feels liquid. A bit too smooth. I ask myself a series of questions, appraising my ability to focus. *Who's the president? What's the date? What's your grandmother's maiden name? Check-check-check.* I click off the cameras but clear myself to continue my conversations in the streets and sidewalks with those who are willing. Blackstar says he has some ideas he wants to share.

We're sitting in the same spot. Imagine a frame of:

Planter-benches, full of people.
Strewn cigarette butts, bracketing a day of holding court.
Spent coffee cups.
Printed photographs in clear artwork tubes, awaiting return to participants.
Bluetooth speaker, still pulsating Detroit electro.

"Why are so many young Aboriginal people dealing with crystal meth?" I start. I have been starting quite a lot of conversations with this question these days.

A beat. Blackstar nods, leans back, considers the question. "Well," he begins, "it started off with hydromorphone, codeine, and all that, and then it switched to meth, because hydromorphone is too expensive, it's 20 bucks a pill, or even a hundred bucks..."

In an interview with CBC News, Saskatoon Police Department's Sgt. Robin Wintermute provides an instructive view of the economics. A kilo of cocaine, Sgt. Wintermute says, will run between \$55,000 and \$73,000 in Canadian dollars. A kilo of meth? \$20,000, Sgt. Wintermute says. The supply-side economics translate to the sell-side. "A point of crystal meth is going from \$5.00 to \$10.00, where a gram of cocaine is that \$80.00 to \$100.00 mark," Sgt. Wintermute says (in Zakreski 2017). The cheap price, Wintermute offers, and Blackstar confirms, is matched



Figure 7. The Public Library, vol. 1, no. 5 (2018). *Spyglass weaves a dreamcatcher for the author in expression of his satisfaction with his portrait.* Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Image courtesy of Maya Stovall)

with an extreme high. “The high is immediate,” he says. “It can last up to 12 hours, it’s a binge drug. It’s the drug of choice,” Wintermute concludes.

In dialogue with Wintermute’s financial analysis, Blackstar spins brass-tax economics and a particular global flow. In Saskatoon, he says, people’s addiction to opioids proves unsustainable. Crystal meth is cheaper, even than opioids. Lower-income Aboriginal people in Saskatoon are priced out of the opioid explosion because access to prescriptions and the prohibitive cost prove elusive to a lower-income, less-resourced population of Aboriginal people. Crystal meth is the affordable, similar-high substitute for opioids, Blackstar tells me. Through this connection, this tiny little slice of north-western Canada links to global political economic flows.

Big Pharma’s global opioid explosion began in earnest in 2000, according to a United

States Department of Veterans Affairs’ white paper, *Take 5: Pain as the 5th Vital Sign*:

Opioid manufacturers and pain management advocates then convinced the US Congress to declare “A Decade of Pain Control and Research.” [...] New TJC Pain Management Standards, used as a component of hospital accreditation and reimbursement, were implemented and required pain to be assessed and addressed in all hospitalized patients. (deShazo et al. 2018:596)

A decade later, in 2009–2010, Big Pharma had succeeded: “50% of patients admitted to hospitals for medical conditions received narcotics, and huge volumes of oxycodone and other opioids were produced, distributed, used, diverted, and abused. Opioid addiction and deaths, especially from heroin, continued to skyrocket” (599).

On the streets surrounding the library, global flows and inappropriate prescriptions land and register in a rhythm of:

*Want to trade hydro for crystal?
Got 1 of Oxy for 10 points of meth?
Got those time-releases?*

In 2007, Purdue Pharma became the first corporation to plead guilty to misleading the entire pharma supply chain, including government officials, MDs, and patients about the addictive characteristics of OxyContin, the opioid it manufactures and markets (Gessen 2019).

Global flows land in the artworld, as well—not only because some users are artists but because the multibillionaire, artworld philanthropist Sackler family owns Purdue. Some artists have critiqued the Sackler capital flow:

The U.S. art photographer and activist Nan Goldin brought the Guggenheim Museum in New York to a standstill [in February 2019] as thousands of fake prescriptions were dropped into the atrium to protest against the institution's acceptance of donations from the family who owns the maker of OxyContin—the prescription painkiller at the root of America's opioids crisis. (Walters 2019)

The Guggenheim action was based on Richard Sackler's statement that "OxyContin's launch would be 'followed by a blizzard of prescriptions that will bury the competition'" (Moynihan 2019). Responding to the protest, the Guggenheim Museum's board of directors stopped accepting Sackler family donations. But on the streets of Saskatoon, and in other derivative markets, the "blizzard" of meth continues to rage.

Back on the street, we soak in the afternoon sun. We let the scene of the city seep into us. We agree to meet the following evening, when I suggest we will view the Rebecca Belmore, Paul Chan, and Jimmie Durham exhibitions on view at the Remai Modern Museum. Right now, the sun is sinking slowly and Saskatoon's crisp breeze starts to blow across the prairie to the sidewalks and plazas of the library, landing on us. Blackstar helps me pack up; I hope he will crash with me and take a nap.

Later that night, think of a circuit of:

Uploading footage. Charging camera. Hot bath. Tears. Instagram. Turmeric tea. Bed. Daylight.

Giddy thoughts.

Espresso; carrot soup. Meet Blackstar and Rose Eden on corner.

(Hey!) Shared compulsions/different drugs of choice.

Hours later I'm sitting in the lounge of Remai Modern in downtown Saskatoon with Cole Blackstar and Rose Eden. Rose Eden is waif-like, with tawny-bronze skin, a sheer drop of velvet-black hair, and a shy smile that orbits her dry sense of humor. Eden, Blackstar, and I are museum companions today. Think of a rhythm of:

Rebecca Belmore's haunting photography.

Paul Chan's ominous wind-sculptures.

Jimmie Durham's fraught iconography.

I still can't shake Sun's Starbucks analysis. His words—"This is our land, so we can do whatever we want to do"—are stuck in my mind. I decide to ask Blackstar what he thinks about Sun's claims. Blackstar, Eden, and I take in a sweeping South Saskatchewan River view. The chic surroundings contrast with our raw discussion of crystal meth.

I frame the question carefully: "Dice Sun told me the other day, that the reason people are doing so much meth, is that this is Aboriginal land, so Aboriginal people can do whatever they want to do. What do you think about that?" I ask.

A beat. Another.

Blackstar looks at once slightly amused and also, annoyed. He lets the rhythm of the moment ebb and flow for a moment before he responds.

"I wish that people would stop saying that," he replies carefully.

"Do people say that a lot?" I press.

"Yeah," Blackstar replies. "They need to stop that, because this is a new century." A beat. Then, continuing: "Like, you could say, people from Africa could go there, and smoke whatever they want, and do whatever they want, but, that won't help." He pauses. Muses. "Like..." Blackstar continues, "what I say is that...we've been through the same thing as black people. Like, slavery and everything... That's why blacks and native people get along so well," he concludes.

A beat. And another.

Then, Blackstar continues, “But we can’t keep thinking like that. Like we own everything, so we don’t have to *do* anything,” he tosses.

Blackstar’s analysis, like Sun’s, presses my brain into yet another bind. As I’m processing, Blackstar continues, spinning and twirling his thoughts.

“Like, when I was younger as a kid, I was raped and molested as a kid. I grew up in many different homes, with many different family members,” he says. “I’ve been dealing with that for 26 years now, since I was 5 years old. And I try not to let anything hold me down...” A beat. Then, Blackstar continues. “I became an adult when I was nine years old. That’s why I don’t like adulting, because I became an adult so early. Now I have to gain those years back. When I was 9 years old, I set a park on fire. I didn’t think it would work. Because I ran away. But it did,” he finishes.

“You had to take care of your family when you were a child, so now you’re trying to regain your carefree years?” I press.

“Yes, that’s some of it,” Blackstar agrees, but he shuts me down and shifts back to the macro-level discussion.

“We have to come into the new century now,” he starts, wringing his hands. “All the whites, blacks, Chinese, every other culture. They’re growing, they’re expanding, they’re making businesses, whereas all the native people, they’re at the same spot, from the 1800s when the white people came.” Blackstar pauses. A beat. Then, he continues: “The white people tried to be involved with them, tried to build all this up for them. But the native people would rather fight for their land.” A beat. “And they still are fighting for their land, fighting the Treaty. Instead of building their own businesses, making their own money, whereas all these other businesses around started with nothing. You can go to the bank and get a loan,” he scoffs.

I hold my tongue. I want to reply that imposing rugged individualism and the myth of the bootstrap upon oppressed people isn’t helpful for understanding structural violence. Listen, just listen, I remind myself. I shift in my seat. A beat.

And then, quickly, Blackstar pivots again.

“Still,” Blackstar says, “even today, the schools are unjust. Nobody talks about Chief Big Bear. They don’t bring him up in schools, or in talks or anything. That’s why I gave you that note at your talk.” The reason why everyone talks about Louis Riel is because he’s half white,” Blackstar concludes.

Just when I think Blackstar has resorted to rugged individualism, he reminds me that his critical antennae are attuned.

Here, Blackstar invokes his Indigenous ways of knowing, referring to Chief Mistahimaskwa, also known as Chief Big Bear. Chief Big Bear, a Cree-Ojibwe leader, was the first western Indigenous leader to refuse to sign the Canadian government’s Treaty 6 (Fur 2015). Chief Big Bear, in 1876, explained his refusal to sign over 311,000 kilometers of First Nations Cree-Ojibwe land to the Canadian settler-colonial government. Chief Big Bear explained his conclusion that signing over Cree-Ojibwe land would harm his people with a succinct statement: “The law is only white” (in Wiebe 2010:31).

Louis Riel, a Métis leader, led a better-known revolt in Saskatoon in 1885. The Northwest Rebellion, or Riel Rebellion, protested military domination and the subjugation of First Nations and Métis people (Fur 2015). Blackstar, here, makes the argument that contemporary history discusses Riel more than Mistahimaskwa because of Mistahimaskwa’s relatively radical and Indigenous perspective. Blackstar, in spite of his harsh analysis of his contemporaries, *knows* what he describes as *his history*.

9. On 23 July 2018, I gave an artist talk entitled “Of Liquor Stores and Of Libraries” at my residency host, AKA in Saskatoon. During the talk, I described the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. Cole Blackstar informed me that while this was correct, it was important to mention Chief Big Bear as well.

Blackstar's connections across crystal narcoculture, Chief Big Bear's refusal, and settler-colonial-Indigenous knowing, resonate with black fugitivity (Sojoyner 2017). Moreover, in our conversation, Blackstar connects Indigenous First Nations and Indigenous African ways of knowing, saying that black people and native people have interconnected, related histories. Damien M. Sojoyner writes: "Practices of refusal, operating alongside practices of disengagement, are central to Black fugitivity and extend beyond common understandings of resistance" (2017:516).

Blackstar, then, presents a subaltern fugitivity through his immersion in crystal narcoculture. By claiming tweaking as a form of departure, Blackstar disavows the social services gaze and the stress of police surveillance. Blackstar connects his state disavowal with that of Chief Big Bear.

Sojoyner confirms this position:

Refusal is the embodied knowledge at the core of social visions of being that are irreconcilable with liberal, difference-making state projects. Refusal in the context of Black fugitivity is thus immersed in the politics of refusal. (2017:516)

Crystal narcoculture, here (not necessarily everywhere), represents a politics of refusal; a subaltern fugitivity, machined on the streets and sidewalks with a particular set of global, political, and economic circuits and flows. Saskatoon, stocked with postindustrial-metal-and-glass lofts, full-sleeved bartenders, and chic-fusion restaurants serving up tweezed-and-pruned small plates, doesn't seem a likely candidate for the open wound that is crystal meth.

And yet, the wound is fresh and active, and it demands treatment. Yet no one at this relatively early hour of the drug's explosion seems able to suture the wound, let alone offer an antidote. I hope that in searching out the *how's* of researching, of making art, and of knowing in *Public Library*, I might contribute to documenting and drawing attention to a critical moment.

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