

# see-to-see

## **Review of *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* by Mercedes Eng (Talonbooks, 2017)**

Billy-Ray Belcourt

“I see you on the streets / K-K-Kanada / I see you with the police / K-K-Kanada,” so goes the hip hip duo Snotty Nose Rez Kids in the provocatively titled song “K-K-Kanada.” What Snotty Nose Rez Kids glimpse in this accusation, an accusation lobbed at a country that has monstrously and surgically hid the violence of its founding and its ongoingness from the theatres of national identity, is the inextricability of the police and Canada. Rendering it with tripled Ks, Snotty Nose Rez Kids fashion an image of the country as a constitutive facet of the racialized and racializing assemblage of the police. The duo goes on to rap: “A time machine must’ve been invented / ’Cause it feels like we’re back in a time where this shit was accepted / Or maybe it was past generations / That passed it down to the next kin.” The police are not a singular institution but a settler disposition, one that lives and breathes in the bodies of those in and out of uniform, one passed on in the drama of white reprofuturity. Snotty Nose Rez Kids thus echo Frank Wilderson’s claim that

“white people are not simply ‘protected’ by the police. They are—in their very corporeality—the police.”

In *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, Mercedes Eng shows what it is to take on a mode of embodiment that is in contradistinction to the police, and thus to be singled out to be corrected by the police. The narrator of this researched and radically vulnerable book lives out a life ordered by the prison. In utero, throughout childhood, into adolescence and adulthood, she is mired in the singularity of incarceration, made to place her imprisoned father in a field of care with the odds stacked against her and her mother. It is out of this experience, however, that Eng aims an unflinching sociological eye at the many-headed hydra of carceral power. To read this book is to bear witness to Eng’s fast mind at work as she tours the reader through the social laboratories of the New World—the plantation—to the archives of colonial law, to the affect-world of an individual family. Eng operationalizes the language of the state against itself, gathering police documents, government surveys and notices, and press releases, with the total effect of demystifying the haze of normalcy that shrouds official speech. Official speech is contra poetry, then, for it seeks not to turn language inside out but to

disappear its tractability, to be particular in its understandability.

Against this tyranny of interpretation, Eng's poetics is continental and historical in scope—"Carole learns / about G4S regulating prisons in Palestine / regulating security check points in American schools / regulating the U.S.-Mexico border" (84)—her lines reveal why she is one of the most studied and visionary writers in Canada today.

Perhaps what is most admirable and graceful about *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* is Eng's insistence to recruit feeling and lived experience in the service of a more worldly rebelliousness: "Carole is / a ghost mama / whispering into the ears / of the fertile red nation" (49). At the core of the book is a concern for Indigenous and black flourishing, for a freedom-to-come.

I imagine Eng, book in hand, confronting the police and therefore settlers everywhere with this: "first things first, I'll eat your brain" (84).

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## **i await the conversations**

### Mackenzie Ground

Guide. To guide. To teach. i think of nehiyaw words.

To take time. Slow down. peyatik

Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* guides us through terminology and grammar, collaborative

work, publishing practices, and Indigenous Rights. This guide respects and affirms the Indigenous Right to cultural expression, property, and distribution, and it aims to strengthen future publishing practices of writing by and about Indigenous Peoples. Younging is a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, the publisher of the Indigenous-owned Theytus Books, and a teacher in the Indigenous Studies Program at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. He is an adept voice to guide us with his conversational but concise prose.

Trust.

There are good reminders in this guide. Its beauty lies in its trust for the reader as it asks us to make conversations, to listen to and to compensate the writers, communities, and story keepers. It gives attention to the work and role of Elders. It asserts publishers' and editors' responsibilities to be accountable, to reflect on the consequences of words, and to build trusting relationships. Younging outlines these clear guidelines into twenty-two style principles throughout the guide, which he collects into an appendix. Guidelines much needed in a time of controversies, violence, and trauma in writing by and about Indigenous Peoples. Guidelines that will need to grow to ensure respect for Indigenous women and Indigenous Rights.

Time and listening. Trust—the amniotic fluid of relationships.

Listen.

The guide reminded me that the spirits of terminology require different kinds of listening, trust, and time if we are to respect them. Guide becomes reference becomes manual, and this guide must be gentle for its many readers. Younging covers the appropriateness of terms, verb tenses, capitalization, and possessives; the different approaches towards property, words, and stories; and the Protocols and relationship-building necessary to respect writing by and about Indigenous Peoples. All important groundwork.

i found respect for capitalized words but crave more stories in these pages. Stories that take time and build trust. Listen. i see these stories in the case studies throughout

the guide. Nurturing, generative stories demonstrating attentive, collaborative work to which i will return again and again. Each return deepening the story and asking me, “what is my purpose in writing”? mah

i grow restless in terms. i grow restless as i carry my own writing into a world of publishing, as a nehiyaw iskwew, and as i dream about working with Elders’ stories. i thirst for more stories on publishing and collaboration, and i seek the groundwork of an Indigenous-led publishing Protocol.

And i have great guides to teach me and remind me. Time and time again.

Trust. The stories are there and growing.

i await the conversations that are taking their first breaths in these pages.

*now announcing the...*

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