

# see-to-see

## **Review of *Counter-Interpellation, Volume One* by Aaron Vidaver (CUE Books, 2018)**

Danielle LaFrance

*Documents live without us.*

A document can only tell you as much as you want to know about a document.

You trace the liner notes to see where you fit in the liner notes. Documentation reveals nothing and too much.

Aaron Vidaver's *Counter-Interpellation, Volume One* (CUE Books, 2018) escorts the reader through a series of documents collected and compiled by Aaron Vidaver through a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Simple requests for specific documents take four to eight weeks, while more complex requests can take approximately six months. (Note: this collection is only Volume One, with at least three more waiting off-stage.) *Counter-Interpellation, Volume One* holds eight forms of documentation, from transcribed audio recordings of Aaron Vidaver's father, Bill Vidaver, painstakingly working to cull words from Aaron Vidaver's toddler mouth, to evaluations of Aaron Vidaver's elementary school performance in 1975.

If you allow "the documents to speak for themselves" (to quote Reg Johanson's introduction to Aaron Vidaver's *Counter-Interpellation* reading at Merge on October 13, 2018), you begin with Bill and Josephine Vidaver's application for "a child." At this point in the compilation, Aaron Vidaver has yet to be hailed by any state apparatus, yet is already being imagined by the state. The Vidavers hope for "a child who is normal in intelligence, and to whom they could give every opportunity within the child's capabilities and interest" (21).

A counter proposal: documents live without us. The documents do not begin with "a child," just as the Archive did not begin with Derrida's encounter with Freud. *Counter-Interpellation* does not aspire to catharsis; the book does not excise the state apparatus by offering the reader the structure of the state apparatus in the form of documents. In many ways, the desire for the idea of such a compilation, the Archive, is more powerful and graspable than its constructed form.

Large omissions scale the documents, crossed out in the original, highlighted black with InDesign. Another form of omission occurs in the section in which Bill Vidaver demands that Aaron Vidaver "say something. Say anything." Aaron

Vidaver “refuses” to say something, say anything—a “practice of refusal” (Johanson) that perhaps began at an early age. No, another counter here: refuse any compulsion to armchair-psychoanalyze the subject Aaron Vidaver, don’t presume, any more than Bill Vidaver does, that Aaron Vidaver “can’t talk” (82), that “He will be seen by Psychologist for personality and cognitive assessment” (110). The document seems impersonal and yet the personal irrupts into every fibre of the document. So handle with care, not conclusion.

I did not navigate this book as strictly poetry or as a poetics, nor as documentary poetics or documentary poetry. I approached it as I would an Archive, a house for documents; the book is a house for the production of the subject “Aaron Vidaver.” When Aaron Vidaver performs these documents, as he did at Merge, they become something other—they transform from FOI requests to published pages of “poetry” to a follow-along script. A script is different than a document, in that it provides a blueprint of which acts to perform. As a document turned script, Aaron Vidaver’s text conflates the performing subject (the subject hailed unconsciously) and the documented subject (the subject captured by the state). Aaron Vidaver’s performance of Aaron Vidaver materializes this inscription, unfolding the subject back into itself, performing a counter that reaches beyond the confines of the book as Archive.

“There is nowhere beyond interpellation for us,” writes Denise Riley, quoted by Aaron Vidaver. She also writes how her name is a “ready-made badge pinned,” “something that [she] pulls inside of [her] to make it [hers], drawing it in from the outside” (115). This is how Aaron Vidaver makes his ready-made badge “his”: not merely by compilation, but by the act of transcription. Aaron Vidaver is both typesetter and designer of *Counter-Interpellation, Volume One*. While rifling through these 139 pages, consider: if the state has pinned said badge on Aaron Vidaver, Aaron Vidaver has had a hand in fashioning it. A typesetter, like a translator, plays an invisible role for the reader (a role as invisible as ideology). This is indeed the counter in *Counter-Interpellation, Volume One*: Aaron Vidaver’s continued appearance in every bleed, bullet, gutter rendered invisible (ideological) by the logic of producing books of poetry, producing Archives.

#### Works Cited:

- Riley, Denise. *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*. Duke University Press, 2005.
- Johanson, Reg. “Introduction.” Launch of *Counter-Interpellation, Volume One*, 13 Oct. 2018, Merge, Vancouver, BC.
- Vidaver, Aaron. *Counter-Interpellation. Volume One*, Cue Books, 2018.

**Review of *I'm Afraid of Men*  
by Vivek Shraya (Penguin  
Canada, 2018)**

Amber Dawn

At 85 pages, Vivek Shraya's nonfiction bestseller *I'm Afraid of Men* has been called "slim." The trim size resembles that of a small notebook—you can slip it into a coat pocket and carry it with you. Many readers will be able to wrap our hands completely around it. This is where the participation begins: by holding it. I recommend holding it at eye level while riding the bus so that other passengers may glance at the bold orange text that reads "I'm Afraid of Men" on the front cover and the bright violet text that reads "Men Are Afraid of Me" on the back.

This is what change-making nonfiction does. It invites us to get involved. Where do we fit into the paragraphs and pages of a poignant personal essay like Shraya's? How do we see ourselves as connected to her lived truths, as discomfiting as her truths are? When we read lines from her opening page—"I'm afraid of men because it was men who taught me to fear the word girl by turning it into a weapon they used against me"—what do we feel, and where in our bodies do we feel it?

For me, reading Shraya feels akin to debriefing daily misogyny with my closest friends: like that late-night phone call where a friend recounts how many times she was harassed at her last job, or that brunch meet-up where the conversation turns to violence and every woman around

the table discloses that she's been raped. These private conversations between women can offer much-needed solidarity; there is power in telling at least one other person about what we've been through. Now available in hardcover, eBook and Kindle, and as an audiobook read by Shraya herself, *I'm Afraid of Men* tells thousands of readers what women go through. Shraya changes the very culture of disclosure by taking these often private stories and making them public.

What I felt in my body is movement, a somatic shift in seeing the stories—that women, especially Indigenous women, women of colour and trans women, are taught to quietly bear as a part of simply existing—concretely written in large, accessible font. In a "slim" 85 pages, Shraya transforms fear into something powerful that we can carry with us into the public sphere (like the bus), into something we can hold up.

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**Review of *That Time I Loved  
You* by Carrienne Leung  
(HarperCollins, 2018)**

Chimedum Ohaegbu

Carrienne Leung addresses suburban secrets and domestic disaster in *That Time I Loved You*, her Toronto Book Award-longlisted collection of connected stories. At once a love letter to and an excoriation of 1970s Scarborough, Leung's book deftly explores the sub in "suburban," diving into the deep-buried, the ugly underneath.

“Her English was not good, but she knew what they were asking” begins “Sweets,” with a line that made me thrum with apprehension for the unnamed “she.” Leung’s technique is expert. The lyricism of this prose ebbs only in deference to the voice of the preteen June, who narrates three of these stories, including “Wheels”: “The year after all those parents killed themselves, something equally earth-shattering happened: I fell in love. Ka-boom.”

Leung’s opening lines hit like a gut punch or wreath you in a slower kind of menace: “On that day, the last day, the primroses were especially pretty” begins “Flowers,” a story about a rash of parent suicides, told from the perspective of one of the parents.

June is the collection’s throughline, the only first-person narrator, and a prominent side character otherwise. June generally doesn’t notice her economic privilege and can be ungrateful. But in “Kiss,” as a side character, she offers to watch *Amityville Horror* with her friend Josie, despite loathing the genre herself, because she senses Josie needs drawing out rather than demands that she feel better.

The other high points of the collection are “Treasure,” an absurd and poignant tale about a magnanimous, elderly thief-matriarch; “Things,” a story that takes up residence in the ribcage, about a Jamaican-Canadian boy dreaming big while struggling against his racist teacher; and the aforementioned “Sweets,” a character study of June’s grandmother, Poh Poh, as she forges a friendship (of

actions more than words) with June’s shy queer friend, Nav.

Nav, though, is the collection’s one sticking point—Nav never gets to be the observer, and he hovers on the periphery so frequently that this omission is confusing, considering the panoply of narrators the book cycles through. Some of the less memorable tales in *That Time*, e.g. “Rain,” could have been improved were Nav granted a role as narrator.

Yet overall *That Time I Loved You* beautifully illuminates what it chooses to touch on. Interrogative and thoughtful, this collection serves style and substance in spades.

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### **Review of *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life: A Tar Sands Tale* by Matt Hern, Am Johal, & Joe Sacco (MIT Press, 2018)**

Evan Mauro

While I was reading this book, seven Tsleil-Waututh and Greenpeace activists suspended themselves from Vancouver’s Ironworkers Memorial Bridge, resisting the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion by forming an “aerial blockade” of tanker traffic in Vancouver’s harbour. The shipping disruption was key, but the real genius of this protest action was its spectacle: daring, precarious bodies set against the bridge’s massive steel trusses and the bloated tankers docked below; long, triangular flags unfurling on a steady breeze, declaring Indigenous presence in and around these spaces.

At the same time, these bodies suspended mid-air between the bridge and the inlet below recall, to me at least, the 1958 industrial disaster that gave this bridge its name: due to an engineering mistake, nineteen workers were killed when they plunged from the same trusses into the water below. The aerial blockade never acknowledged the resemblance. That silence says a lot: too often we see an oppositional relationship between settler labourers, often made to be the shock troops of fossil capital, and Indigenous and environmentalist groups, the first of which are disproportionately exposed to extraction's effects. And it's this impasse that Matt Hern, Am Johal, and Joe Sacco's *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life* takes as its main target.

Part travelogue, part theoretical intervention, part graphic narrative, this is a book searching for a genre. But its formal uncertainty might be unavoidable. As Amitav Ghosh and others have argued, the failure to address global warming politically is largely an imaginative and cultural failure: we don't yet have narrative or representational forms adequate to the all-encompassing reality of fossil capitalism's hold on our lives. So to me the most fascinating pages of *Global Warming* are Sacco's, where the resources of graphic narrative are used to alternate between micro and macro scales in successive frames, from a teaspoon of bitumen to an aerial survey of tar sands terraforming. Here the book's contribution comes into focus: the project lands somewhere beyond investigative journalism but short of extended ethnography. It takes scrupulous care in its

representations of real people working at points of extraction, fenceline communities along sites of pipeline distribution, and communities at oil's diffuse points of consumption—particularly in cities, Hern's area of expertise, whose development and current form presuppose the availability of fossil fuels. All along, the authors avoid the temptation of what they call “enviro-porn”—the swelling list of documentaries and exposés of environmental degradation that, oddly, do good business among green urbanists. By focusing on individual consumption, and by framing oil industry labourers as unenlightened “knuckle draggers,” this genre misrepresents the issue and misses the real scope of the problem.

Striving to move beyond critique to constructive dialogue, the authors cite Giorgio Agamben's “sweetness of life” and Ecuadorian Minister Alberto Acosta's “buen vivir/sumak kawsay”—aligned concepts that point the way towards a new, politicized notion of ecology. As in recent books by Andreas Malm, or by Jason Moore and Raj Patel, here climate activism is reframed as an overdue decolonization:

by definition, any questions of ecology are immediately questions of land politics and sovereignty: who gets to make what decisions for what land? [...]rying to think about what an ecological future could look like has to place the relationships between settlers and Indigenous people at its center. (12-13)

The book features long interviews with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) and Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) to outline what

an anticolonial ecology might look like. Meanwhile Hern and Johal offer a number of other theoretical conversation-points to this ongoing debate. These include serious looks at Alain Badiou's recent turn to ecological thought as a potential way to solve capitalism's terminal crisis, and at Murray Bookchin's anarchist dialectical naturalism, which views ecology as an increasingly complex and decentralized set of human-nonhuman entanglements. Readers on the left will find plenty of material to think with and debate here. The authors' theoretical excursions are thoughtfully presented, offering several worthwhile framings of the book's central issue: the slow but accelerating violence of settler colonial extraction, which organizes false conflicts between workers

in Alberta, Indigenous peoples from points of extraction to tidewater, and environmentalists working on these issues.

This book arrived in stores the same month that the Trudeau government purchased the Trans Mountain pipeline to reassure energy companies and their investors that extraction will continue, must continue. To make that happen, a certain kind of narrative needs to be told about how extraction serves the national interest, or about whose interests are national, and whose aren't. *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life* tells stories differently: as Sacco's drawings telescope between tiny, everyday details and whole landscapes, the writing here holds in suspension different perspectives, geographies, groups, and arguments, showing us the complexities of telling this story properly.

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