

# see to see —

## ***Needed Medicine*** **by Manuel Axel Strain**

GALLERY GACHET, 2020

Hagere Selam “shimby” Zegeye-  
Gebrehiwot



Image credit: Nicole Brabant  
Courtesy of the artist

The exhibition opens with a performance. The artist Manuel Axel Strain passes around cards with instructions for audience members before momentarily

disappearing. A section of Blood Alley cobblestone is vigorously scrubbed clean by Stephanie Gagne, who performs as a token white girl. We are instructed to text the exhibition title and a reply appears in the form of excerpts from racist online trolls. I respond with ❤️.

Strain reemerges dressed in white, clean-cut with perfectly sculpted hair and eyebrows. They apply a mixture of smudge ash, clay, and tumuth to their face, pressing it against the washed cobblestone. They methodically repeat this action before laying on the wet ground, outstretched. Strain’s niece and others raise them up while audience members are invited to smudge. Strain names family members and ancestors before expressing an inability to feel the land—their ancestral land—then exits the alley.

Inside *Needed Medicine*, cedar branches rest on a table; a poised docent gesturing towards the main gallery. There are works in sculpture, video, body prints, and a mixed-media portrait. In the dual-channel video installation,

people introduce themselves on the right. They name origins and where they live, closing with “hay chxw q’a.”

A close-up of the artist’s mouth projects on the adjoining wall, translating the introductions with muted audio. One interview subject names ancestry traced to John A. Macdonald, while another names place-based origins as outer space followed by “hay chxw q’a” with fluent ease. The gaze of the artist is present although we only see their mouth in silent translation. Strategic humour emerges in the juxtaposition of different interview clips and in the form of subtle expressions on Strain’s face. The dual-channel install becomes a panorama in the form of a mirror-projected vista with a delay between projections.

The portraits and sculptures in the show ensnare me in the act of witnessing. The materials as autobiographic ephemera illuminate the hard and soft edges of who *Needed Medicine* is for and call into question what it means to be witnessed and by whom. Disparate healing traditions bound by colonialities are often pitted against one another, but in the show, they are situated in a dialogical approach to healing by juxtaposing the materials in single pieces. There is a medicine-wheel-cum-celtic-cross sculpture constructed out of transparent acrylic sheets filled with

empty methadone bottles and medicine bundles across from a monolith of psychology and social work textbooks. The bases of both sculptures are encased in the tumuth, ash, and clay mixture, marking the passing of time throughout the drying process during the run of the exhibition. The artist also makes use of substances and materials that point to the ambient intensity of addictions: a childhood portrait embedded in a mixed media tapestry hangs from blue stretch tourniquets tied to a cedar branch. This work faces a series of portraits in the form of recent body prints.

After the opening buzz, I stop by the show sometimes just to stand in the middle. I think, “Here I am for you, show. Your steadfast admirer.” I imagine our unmediated separateness and the sentience of the work. The art returns my gaze and we share a moment, nonplussed by the objectifying locus of the yt gayz.

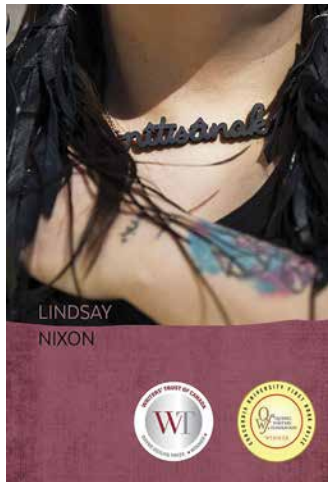
In the closing performance, the artist bundles, ties, and carries the cedar from the exhibition entrance to the harbour with a few of us trailing behind, chatty and reverent. The cedar branches are bundled in red material and tied to Strain’s biceps with blue stretch tourniquet. They climb down a low stone wall through some trees to stand by the water’s edge. The artist unbundles the cedar and two otters

swim by. Strain speaks, then they enter the water, swimming around before coming back to land and having a cigarette. I'm shook. I wonder if this is how audience members felt when witnessing Rebecca Belmore's performance, "Vigil." ■

***nītisānak* by Lindsay Nixon**

METONYM PRESS, 2018

Jessie Loyer



Lindsay Nixon's *nītisānak* is an accounting of beyond-family kinship, from the fragility of great-grandmothers to first gay makeouts. It feels like they are sitting next to you, visiting, talking round and round, pulling you in with familiarity and firmness. There are two relationships we

cycle around: "B2B," an abusive ex-love, and Nixon's white mom who adopted them. Nixon's roles in these two relationships shaped their nurturing hospitality and fierce tenderness.

The book allows Nixon to ask big and personal questions: what does it mean to have a white mom? And, what does it mean if your white mom does pills, but keeps it middle class fancy while busting her NDN kid for weed? It's cliché to do pseudo philosophy in a memoir, but what sets Nixon apart is that they definitively answer their own questions: "There's a particular kind of bravado that comes with threatening to call the cops on your Indigenous child because they're holding weed. A bravado tied up in The Truth of the yt man, and an ideology that drug use is only illegal, wrong, and immoral on the prairies if it's done by class-poor brown and Black people."

The author has a self-clarity and a wondrous ability to weave theory into their memories, seamlessly. This is never more clear than in the twinned chapters "Bottoming" and "pihpihcêw," when the sexiest thing anyone ever said to Nixon is paired with rigorous queer theory. It's a love song to the communities that rarely get big time CanLit billing: prairie punk scenes, foster kid solidarity, urban NDNs. If you're from these places, you're dropped into nostalgic memories (the endnotes, especially,

feel delightfully familiar); if you're not, you are invited into scenes painted in emotive, musical detail.

The MVPs — “Prayer 9: for My NDN Bb Girls.” and “The Prairie Wind is Gay Af.” — are two chapters so lyrical they brought me to tears. Nixon has love affairs with cities; they know this is embarrassing: “I know it’s a sin to love the city you’re in,” they write about Montréal. But the prairies are more than a love affair. The prairies are the emotional core for Nixon’s genealogy: their first relative. This memoir is drenched in Chrystos and Missy Elliot, OG(kush) and messy bodies — Teenage Dirtbag, but as more than a passing aesthetic or a joke. Nixon’s deft way of weaving their love life into ruminations on trans masculinities, violent policing, or feminism remind us that we’re hearing an ethics of kinship be articulated.

*nitisânak* is wildly interesting, thoughtful, and tender, but also utterly uncompromising. Nixon sees through the needs of a hungry audience who may have come to this queer Indigenous memoir to be titillated or scandalized and gently refuses. As they say, “Consider this reminder, dear reader: thank you for reading, but, while I feel no pressure to hide my pain from you and ground my story in neoliberalism, I don’t owe you my pain.”

This book is a litany of running away, but isn’t despairing; Nixon finds a home with *nitisânak*, which means “siblings,” a non-gendered term in Cree. The possibility of Indigiqueer kinship is a salve for the wounds from the other promising but ultimately disappointing homes they try out.

These are the kinships, both toxic and tender, that created Lindsay Nixon. ■

**The Corporeal Tongue:  
*Hell Light Flesh* by Klara du Plessis**

PALIMPSEST PRESS, 2020

Khashayar Mohammadi



In her new poetry collection *Hell Light Flesh*, Klara du Plessis delves into the heart of linguistics in an attempt to do

with language everything that surface linguistics denies the common speaker. *Hell Light Flesh* takes all words at face value, and, through the process of repetition and introspection, reveals the primal abstraction of all language and speech.

In the poem “HAND” we read: “Ow / Owl / Ow’ll / like some new kind of 1st person / accidentally saying I’ll (isle) I will.” Here meaningful play on auditory perception permits du Plessis to use the full spectrum of linguistic sound to map a schema of neurological pathways, giving new meaning to the illegible.

The book is a collection of three long poems: “HELL,” “LIGHT,” and “FLESH” each forming a layer of the poetic corpus. It also contains audiographs: light waves of once-legible sounds abstracted into illegible scratches on paper, “leering behind the ears” and “pulling the hair.” Through play, du Plessis acts as a cartographer of the artistic mind, circumnavigating the nodes that certain sounds or concepts have burned into it.

While the poet’s debut poetry collection, *Ekke*, was an exploration (and even to some point a demonstration) of surface linguistics and their comparisons, *Hell Light Flesh* takes on and nestles the reader within the linguistics of Art, and,

once comfortably at cruising altitude, begins to question the fundamentals of “artistic rhetoric” and the violence it can ensue on idealized and realized bodies. In the poem “LIGHT,” du Plessis writes that “the act of proximity to an artwork, / whether from the perspective of the viewer / or the maker, is an activation.” And yet, elsewhere in the poem, the same activation-by-proximity also presents a possibility to “hurt art.”

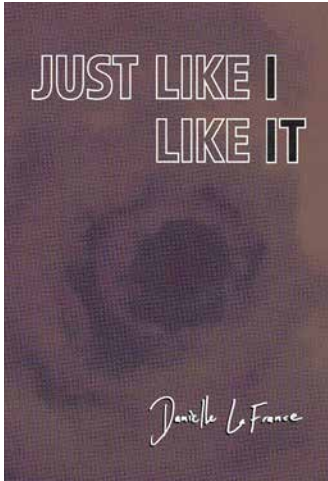
Violence is shown to be the hierarchical loci of control, a status quo constructed upon the linguistic powerplay of the artistic world. Here and elsewhere du Plessis shows both the importance and impotence of language when faced with violence — whether personal, familial, or structural. The surgical precision with which du Plessis approaches language throughout *Hell Light Flesh* shows a profound knowledge of aesthetic modes. But rather than add to the platitudes of artistic expression, du Plessis uses her incisive knowledge in order to rebel against them.

*Hell Light Flesh* is a book one can read endlessly and always reach new morsels of meaning. This is a book of poetry that manufactures its own poetics, creating new landscapes of artistic expression in the process. ■

**JUST LIKE I LIKE IT**  
by Danielle LaFrance

TALONBOOKS, 2019

Matea Kulić & Leah Sharzer



**LS** We've been walking and talking about *JUST LIKE I LIKE IT* (*JLILI*) and noticing its slips of language. One of my favourite lines from the poem "It Makes Me Illiad" is: "By the authority infected in me, I pronounce it / perfectly alive." Actually, now that I'm writing it down, "slip" seems inaccurate because these are more like "fuck-ups." They feel deliberate. I imagine these troubling new expressions as the speaker's weapon against the standard flow of language, against the right way to say it.

**MK** Yeah, speech is patterned, especially idiomatic expressions which seem to be associated with a very deep place of language. The logic of an idiom, at least for "native speakers," creates a situation where the sentence almost completes itself. So I too saw these "fuck-ups" as a way of working against the already-known. LaFrance uses these linguistic log jams or "cram techniques" (her words) in lines like "As it kills, fix it, dear Henry" and also in the use of slightly altered song lyrics such as "Thank you Canada. Thank thank you silence."—a riff on Alanis Morissette's line "Thank you India." These troubling new expressions are also to be wielded against state violence/silence and our complicity/complacency to its (capitalist) flows. But as the author writes in the last section of the book, "poetry is never enough."

**LS** I was curious to know what you made of that final section, "NOTESKNOTSNOTSNAUGHTS." There are many possibilities crammed into this title: *notes*, *not*, *know*, *naught* . . . and now I'm seeing *no* too. Unsurprisingly, this "explanatory" section both fulfills and resists our desire to understand the rest of the book. My younger self would have concentrated on how the poet resists meaning, but now that I teach literature,

I sympathize with my students who sometimes just want to know, “what does it all mean!” For example, LaFrance tells us that “‘I am dead because it’s stupid I pronounce myself to it dead’ comingles with the emotional turbulence of Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphorisms ‘I am dead because I am stupid’ and ‘I am stupid because I am dead.’” For me this referencing is generative rather than conclusive, generous rather than aloof.

**MK** On my first reading of *JLILI*, I had trouble sitting down with it. I was reading the words, and it wasn’t as if they were complicated or inaccessible, but somehow I wasn’t absorbing them. I had the urge to stand up and read the words out loud, almost yelling—but my daughter was asleep in the room next door, so I had to yell in a kind of muted fashion, pacing around the kitchen. At the beginning of “NOTESKNOTS...” LaFrance writes that “‘IT MAKES ME ILLIAD’ begins with rage” and that “rage is to be sung,” but, she adds, “at what tempo?” While I was pacing, I thought about the word *persona* and how rage is not

a tempo you can sustain outwardly for an endless duration. So I saw in the end section—LaFrance talking about her writing process, her residencies, her Greekness, her nuanced response to the accusation of sexual harassment levied against Avital Ronell...I don’t want to say that we’re getting the *real* Danielle here and not her poet or public persona—but I saw, as you say, a generosity, a slower inward tempo (more like hushed yelling), while at the same time a refusal to allow the reader any positive conclusions, like *aha* this is “it.” At the end of our walk we said, “we get at it but we don’t get it.” So there’s no satisfaction...

I feel like there’s so much more we could talk about—war narratives, masculinity, simultaneous inputs, saturation, sex—but we’re already past our word count. Do you have any last words?

**LS** I love this book!

**MK** Me too! ■