

Autoethnographic Poetry: First Summer in Whitehorse

Description

The AutoEthnographer



Wearing shorts and sweating in the North while working to mitigate the impacts of heavy snowfall is potent contrast. An engorged, gorgeous river that gives life to so much but that can also kill is potent contrast.

AUTHORâ??S MEMO FOR AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC POETRY: FIRST SUMMER IN WHITEHORSE

I moved to the Yukon, a territory in Canadaâ??s north in November 2020. Here, the impacts of climate change are not subtle, as the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report asserted, â??warming over land is larger than the global average and it is more than twice as high in the Arctic.â• That report also noted â??climate change is intensifying the water cycle. This brings more intense rainfall and associated flooding.â•

In the north, you would expect a winter of crusty, high snow banks and surging snowstorms, but Yukoners have told me Whitehorse, Yukon is actually known historically to have less snowfall than lake-affected south-western Ontario, where I was born and raised. Climate change is altering this and for two years in a row now there has been record-breaking winter precipitation in Whitehorse. December 2021 was the snowiest since 1980. We are preparing for spring and summer flooding again already.

This poem is rumination on how the personal experience of volunteering in never-before-seen flood relief efforts in the remote north reinforces the research that â??many of the changes observed in the climate are unprecedented in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years.â•

I now work directly with a leader, the Minister I mention in the poem, who was a former reviewer for one IPCC report, and who is passionate about reducing waste and protecting the environment for generations to come. He is on a mission to reach as many as he can and the boaters in the poem allude to a larger conservative culture of climate change denial that is still a challenge in many pockets across the globe. How do we reach them? We get in the water and we must get them in the water, too.

Wearing shorts and sweating in the North while working to mitigate the impacts of heavy snowfall is potent contrast. An engorged, gorgeous river that gives life to so much but that can also kill is potent contrast.

The physicality of stuffing sandbags followed by losing control in that dangerously high river reveals a tangible but also frightening and urgent sense of time in an intense environment. This intensity is our new everyday. It brought water to the forefront of the climate change discussion for me. And once you wade out of your fruitless battle with the Yukon River, you cannot go back to looking at it as you once did. The water has spoken.


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Photo of Yukon by jdblack for Pixabay

A mummified forest

Poking through on Ellesmere Island

Thereâ??s only one reason that was found

Black log whiskers in cold grey mud

Dried spikes

A whispering fortress

You wonâ??t get that off your fingertips

Your nails will never come clean

So much dirt and sand

Grains bejewelling the M on your palm

Especially that deep lifeline curve

Ropes of those tiny crushed pebbles

Circling your knuckles

The necklace of the summer

All these sandbags here in the North

A place more consumed by wildfire

So much water here in this strange Yukon summer

From so many pooling pearly skirts

Dancing snowflake girls kneeling

The spring ball cancelled

No where to go but down the mountain

Slow swim into panting pregnant lakes

Unzipping inch by inch

Sleeping bags of surf

A crawling suffocation

Lapping

Teasing treacherous goodnight melody

A tuck-in

Weighted blanket

Smelting.

* * * * *

The AutoEthnographer

I am on Army Beach Road

In Marsh Lake

In this northern territory of Jack London

Of Sam McGee and more importantly Ivan Coyote

In pink hiking boots and shorts

Straddling a burlap bag in desert sun

Sand in my socks

Cascading over burnt wrists

We cannot make them fast enough

The melt is coming

The melt is here

Most snow weâ??d had since the 80s,

They swear

Theyâ??ll say that again next December

So many factors

A flood every 100 years

No every seven right?

Unprecedented

Unprecedented

Unholy

Unyielding

The Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources is in the lake

Heâ??s an environmental scientist after all

Heâ??s measuring the waterâ??s journey with his body

Goes in up to his neck eventually

Followed by his wife in a wetsuit and camera

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We should all follow suit

We need to be touched by it

Frozen

The hydrologists keep getting the levels wrong

Rainfall is one thing

Downfall cracks open vials and hearts and will

Everyoneâ??s noticed except the boaters

Still out on the lakes.

* * * * *

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I am in the rushing Yukon River

Just past the blue bridge down from Yukon Energy

Talked into joining the raft flip event

For a white-water rodeo

The river is joyous and unleashed

It is alive and hungry

It fills my mouth and my eyes

Pulls me along with an unforgivable force

Reminds me why I am a lady of the Great Lakes

I come up under the raft

Thundering churning water

Go under like a humble leaf

Like a movie

Animal instinct taking over

I am gasping and crying

Uncontrollable

I am sure I will drown until someone grabs my lifejacket

Hoists me on board in one quick swoop

I choke

Apologize on repeat, trembling and amazed to still have my paddle

We lose the raft race

Hours later

I am still

Flooding.

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