

# Book Review: TransCanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics by Libe García Zarranz

*In TransCanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics, Libe García Zarranz analyses the literary productions of writers Dionne Brand, Emma Donoghue, Hiromi Goto and Larissa Lai to explore a twenty-first-century cross-border ethics grounded in material feminism, posthumanism and critical race theory. This is an ambitious and thought-provoking study that shows how literature can offer creative political interventions in an unequal globalised world, writes Hannah Spruce.*

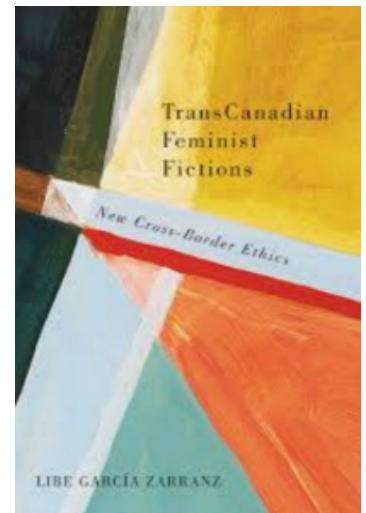
**TransCanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics. Libe García Zarranz. McGill-Queen's University Press. 2017.**

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In [TransCanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics](#), Libe García Zarranz uses the anti-racist, anti-colonialist and feminist literary productions of Dionne Brand, Emma Donoghue, Hiromi Goto and Larissa Lai to create strategies for living in a time characterised by unequal globalisation, feminist backlashes, mounting racism and rampant technocapitalism.

In line with the [TransCanada Institute](#), García Zarranz defines the designation 'transCanadian' as 'an assemblage where local, transnational, and diasporic subjectivities and locations are historically entangled' (8). She then redeploys the term to move beyond geo-political borders by constructing a feminist, queer conceptual space where the normative borderlands of national, sexual and human identity break down. Yet, for all the specificity as well as porosity contained in the term transCanadian, the author does not adequately address the question: why Canada? What is it about a transCanadian context that is so productive for theorising a new cross-border ethics? Unfortunately, this remains unanswered.

García Zarranz's twenty-first-century cross-border ethics are theoretically grounded in material feminism, posthumanism and critical race theory. Through feminist literary productions and posthuman figures, her cross-border ethics disturb normative, humanistic concepts of the corporeal and the affective as well as the biopolitical processes which stabilise them. These strategies for living follow Rosi Braidotti's invitation for posthuman scholars to think 'critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming' ([The Posthuman](#), 12) by articulating the political potential of non-human, not-quite and more-than-human citizens.



**Image Credit: 'Tunnel Through Time' installation, Budapest Park, Toronto ([Sharon VanderKaay CC BY 2.0](#))**

Among several posthuman subjects populating *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions* are the 'racialised cyborg' in Lai's long poem *Automaton Biographies* (2009), 'proto-queer teenagers' in Goto's novel *Darkest Light* (2012) and the 'hidden activist' (64) in Brand's poem *Ossurries* (2010). In Goto's work, García Zarranz reads Gee, a self-cannibalising creature, as a 'vehicle to ethically rethink the unequal distribution of resources under processes of late capitalism' (137), where what is rendered waste to some might be productive for others.

Readers will also discover Jack, an abject child and the narrator of Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010, more recently turned into an Oscar-nominated film in 2015). In 'Corporeal Citizenship' (Chapter Three), García Zarranz uses Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power to read Jack as a 'trans-corporeal, porous and malleable' citizen (52), whose deviant, abject and debilitated body 'manages to denaturalize the body politics of the nuclear family' (54) and 'problematizes normative conceptions of corporeality, home, and nation' (48). Having spent the first five years of his life without the disciplinary influence of institutions like schools or hospitals, Jack is 'remarkably free from institutional control' (48). The effect of his total isolation from the world as a child is that Jack does not understand 'the strange knowledge that adults seem to possess in this new world' (54), and García Zarranz asserts that this enables a subversive perspective which is critically attuned to and productively unsettling of 'traditional disciplinary mechanisms' (49). When Jack comes into contact with what he calls the 'medical planet' (*Room*, 163), García Zarranz argues that by drawing attention to biopolitical dimensions of hospitality and caregiving through his character, Donoghue's text questions and unsettles the arbitrary nature of biopolitical norms.

While García Zarranz gestures towards the real-world application of the ethics she develops in the book, it is not always clear how her literary formulations become praxis. She situates Jack's trans-corporeality in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis which requires 'novel forms of hospitality and care towards strangers' (56), but under-develops the links that she attempts to draw to the potential that a trans-corporeal ethics could have on forging this. She argues that Jack's body represents an 'unruly mode of corporeal citizenship that challenges normative borders around corporeality', which 'gestures towards novel forms of affect and embodiment that might open up ethical spaces for the regeneration of global geopolitical communities' (56-57). However, the mechanics of just how this literary analysis can translate into new ways of thinking about affect and embodiment remain unclear.

The theoretical and ambitious nature of *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions* does at times mean that the connections between the literary productions and their political potential are undermined by a lack of clarity. In what reads like a gearing-up, the readings and arguments in the introduction and first two chapters become strained under the weight of their global outlook. In 'Affecting the Ethical Imagination: Emma Donoghue's *Astray*' (Chapter Eight), García Zarranz argues that 'the ongoing civil war in Syria has made the figure of the refugee utterly critical in the restructuring of both internal and external geopolitical frontiers' (116). Yet her readings of Donoghue's short stories, while offering brilliant literary analysis, fall short of making convincing connections to the affective or lived dimensions of the Syrian refugee crisis. García Zarranz's cultural critiques therefore appear as references rather than sustained analyses, which is detrimental to her construction of a cross-border ethics.

Nonetheless, one of the strengths of *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions* is García Zarranz's discussion of biopower and affect in 'Cross-Border Affects' (Part Three, 103). Using the concept of 'pathogeography', which focuses on 'the affective expressions of the body politic' and the emotions 'circulating throughout the political and cultural landscape' ([Feel Tank Chicago](#)), García Zarranz turns her attention to useful spatial, temporal and corporeal constructs like the Black Atlantic and 'politicized counter-melancholia' (114). These cross-border concepts – which traverse time and space – allow her to explore how affect theory 'is embedded within economic processes with a number of implications for the gendered and the racialized body' (106).

In 'Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Cross-Border Pathogeographies*' (Chapter Seven), García Zarranz demonstrates how *A Map* may be read as a spatial and temporal border-crossing text which creates an affective 'map' and 'archive' of Black subjectivity loaded with 'negative affect' (109). This negative affect 'is described as an embodied spectrality; a yet-to-be-defined wound that not only haunts the social realm but also is felt on the skin' (109); this, when brought to the surface, can enact positive political potential. García Zarranz argues that Brand's haunting confrontation with negative affect and the 'impossible origins' (*A Map*, 48) of the 'Door of No Return' in *A Map* resists melancholia or nostalgia and instead 'manages to imagine alternative destinations' (111). In these alternate locations, she argues that 'the circulation of negative feelings such as pain or loss might be deployed to activate aesthetic creation, ethical responsibility, and political action' (112). Acknowledging the impossibility of reconciliation, she asserts that works like Brand's usefully locate the past within the present to combat those 'who refuse to accept responsibility as a result of "not being there"' (113). Such texts, argues García Zarranz, make the past move across temporal borders so that the present can be navigated in a way which is attentive to the political and social affects and economic effects of the historical domination and racialised abuse of Black citizens.

In *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions*, García Zarranz demonstrates brilliant literary analysis, and while she acknowledges the 'risky' (155) nature of the text's ambitious goals, her work is thought-provoking, especially in relation to corporeality, biopower, affect theory and posthumanism. The book will be useful to scholars concerned with the ways that literary productions can offer creative political interventions in an unequal globalised world. Those working in the field of posthumanism will also find the book of interest in relation to its engagements with posthumanism as a theoretical tool for the dismantling of anti-racist, anti-feminist, anti-colonialist discourses.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*