



Book Review

Surface Area

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Surface Area is a collection of 13 poems by Terese Mason Pierre, published by Anstruther Press in 2019. *Surface Area* launched in Knife/Fork/Book, a multifunctional shared artist space on Queen West, in Toronto. There was standing room only, coats were piled upon heaps. Half the attendees were established writers of review essays about literature, cinema, and stage. Toronto's poetry reviewers were already composing hypothetical reviews. To anyone in the room, Terese Pierre is a star in Toronto's literary sky, one national award away from CanLit's Aurora Borealis.

Pierre's literary life is already on secure grounds. She was the Poetry Editor at the speculative fiction journal *Augur Magazine*. She is mentored by Banoo Zan, as a co-organizer of the multicultural literary series *Shab-e She'r*. Pierre is a principal organizer for *AugurCon*, a science fiction and speculative fiction convention grown from *Augur's* success. She is a luminary in other worlds as well. She is a respected intellectual contributor on the University of Toronto's campus. Her picture appears on posters and recruiting leaflets. Pierre has accepted responsibility for helping ensure there is an intellectual community writ large and small in Toronto.

We could relate her to Malcom Gladwell's (2000) sociological theory of *tipping points in social networks*. Gladwell's theory involves three kinds of persons who maintain social networks or bring about change: Connectors, who maintain numerous friendships; Mavens, who gather information about social networks and constructively evaluate them; and Salesmen who pass messages through the network based on personality rather than direct knowledge. Pierre's success as a Connector and Maven was instrumental for

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maintaining intergenerational, multicultural mandates in the literary scenes of Toronto in the pre-pandemic moment.

Who am I to review of *Surface Area*? At least 15 years older than she, I have partied after poetry readings with Pierre more times than she probably remembers and fewer times than is useful for name-dropping her as a *close* friend. What I can do, is begin my reading of *Surface Area* with Pierre's personal calm. Pierre is quiet, serene, happy. I have seen her hawklike observation of writers in conversation. Her confident ability to naturally keep an idea in-progress when a speaker trips on their words betrays her foreknowledge – she has already thought what they are about to think. I've seen her effortlessly dispel a harasser near Glencairn subway station as if without even registering that she deflected his hand. Pierre is a problem solver among cliques of contagiously neurotic poets. She never stops being serious, never extinguishes laughter, is always capable. She is reflective, at the speed of light.

The poems of *Surface Area* are united by the interplay of surfaces. The feeling of water on skin, both sea and rain. Beach sand. Clean paper pages. Bookshelves. The poems are reflections, but none contain a mirror. Even when Pierre invokes a mirror in the poem "Pyrite" the absence of a mirror is replaced by a combination of touch and abstract graph theory, "What I really wanted was/to see my reflection in you,/to ground you into/a beautiful uniform/the way nature creates/planes and vertices" (p. 9). Even windows in the poem "Subject" are without images on the panes, "will I, barrier-free, you-free./Windows are wide. You provided those" (p. 14).

Taken as a whole, the poems are self-portraits, written in the first person, messages directed to her love, her mate, describing him at various times they spent together. Therefore, I propose that each poem retains the quality of a mirror. Looking at ourselves in a mirror set on the wall of a private room, we can see the scene behind ourselves clearly, but in particular we discern the shape of our lover on a bed or couch, recumbent, dreaming, obscured partly by our own body. In that instant, we exclude our bodies and reverse the conventions of portraiture. We know ourselves, by the negative space of the portrait, the image that surrounds us. Our hands work on autopilot, tying our hair, our minds consist only of our gaze, we focus on the reflection of our love. In that instant, we are a collection of feelings about them, and those feelings are what constitute ourselves.

This moment of reflection is *preceded* by another state of being, *afterglow*. Given the substance of the monologue in each poem, I am reaching for a psychoanalytic substitution. These poems are the report of what is inspired by afterglow. Pierre's gaze regarding her love echoes her afterglow state.

We live in a society with media-driven hypersexuality. Our visual palettes, music, scripts, are trained to recognize meet-cutes, anxieties, foreplay, sex. Pornography is ubiquitous, and so is sex as a cycle of character-driven goal setting for both entertainment and intellectualism. So immersed, how many poems can we write using the first person, without merely recreating the

narcissism of mass culture where our love should be? Pierre manages to use herself, in the form of “I” the unreliable narrator, to create a generous portrait of her lover by the convergence of his touch and her emotions.

In *Surface Area*, therefore, Pierre introduces herself as a complicated philosopher of time and phenomenology in the analysis of love or devotion. To her, meaning is accessible through experience, in afterglow. Her ability as a poet is to make that meaning accessible to her readers. Pierre activates afterglow as a spacetime for writing poetry, and by extension, philosophy.

My second proposal in this review is that in doing so, Pierre resurrects a Romantic Era theory of poetics which our current era tends to reject as too outside of the Fear of Missing Out and the anxious rush of mediated culture. Pierre disproves that we need to embody anxiety or the rush of buildup, execution, then immediately move on to the next experience. Dwelling in afterglow, Pierre could bring a renewed meaning to the hackneyed claim of William Wordsworth.

Wordsworth’s clichéd claim is that poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” If we want to, we can make this chapbook the locus of a movement for renewal of the Romantic Era in 21st century Canadian poetry. There are advantages to poetry written in the tranquil recollection so soon after the spontaneous overflow of feeling. Afterglow is a protecting moment of introverted privacy. In that privacy, our emotions present us with the options of calm or boredom, satiety, or the unsure. Afterglow is private, whether on a webcam, entwined in someone’s bedsheets, or alone.

Romantic poetry in this century, therefore, would not be an instant social media reaction. Romantic poetry would be written in private, beyond the panopticon. The status quo of CanLit is to create blogs and create online personas in order to fulfill the images of poet, novelist, journalist, researcher, professor, writing a commodified set of signals catered to social media. Afterglow is impossible for social media to mediate. Afterglow is a place and a time. The philosophy of afterglowing is phenomenological, immediately produced within ourselves.

In the light of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry, Pierre’s poetry collection is exposed as an opposite to our contemporary writing formalism. For example, the idea of Plunderverse, championed by the Canadian poet Gregory Betts (2005), takes fragments from social media and invites participation from Facebook friends and Twitter networks. We can have a heated argument about whether Plunderverse can be personal, philosophical, or private. There is, at first blush, a *public* requirement for the visible, mediated artifice of Plunderverse’s arrangement of others’ ideas on capitalized media which are synonymous with Silicon Valley’s colonialism; colonialism that recruits, repurposes, builds CVs, uses capital’s platforms to turn collaborative events into something for Salesmen to parody and generate more content. Colonialism is invasive, it ruins the sincere spontaneity of the

moment. Afterglow happens entirely within our bodies, is the opposite of invasion, is alone within us as an experience.

Pierre, by writing from the time and place of afterglow also presents an opposite of Steven Takatsu's *keitai shousetsu*, cell phone novels. Takatsu pioneered the cell phone novel first in Japan, then in Canada. Almost by definition, the *keitai shousetsu* is a novel which, by hitting the *send* icon, involves a kind of readiness to communicate, to move ideas from one person to another. The phone text is like the unquenchable need to make conversation between flexible, fast wits. The *keitai shousetsu* is maybe the most intellectual booty call of all, the flirtatious writing of the cybernetic era we've entered. Every paragraph is an invitation to hit *send* and communicate a work-in-progress and await (or ignore) a burgeoning inbox of replies. Pierre's collection is the opposite of foreplay, written from afterglow, in verse rather than prose.

Pierre's collection of poems is therefore a potentially new Romanticism. Pierre, depending on her proclivities, can reinvent poetics during an historical moment when many of us think privacy is impossible. To do so, she would be writing in an outlaw capacity, because every telecommunications device and media device is working with the law to foreclose on privacy and data mine our selves with ubiquitous surveillance. She would also be, unintentionally but as a side-effect, a Canadian poet, because almost all those data mining surveillance companies are located in California, staffed by Americans who have worked in their largely male dominated offices since they were college aged interns, interpreting everything they do through the lens of Cupertino's masculine, economically monotonous subcultures. Canadian afterglow might happen in the aural bath of iTunes playlists, but the experience is introverted and transcendent.

My reading of *Surface Area* might also be an opportunity for me to rejuvenate the concept of *mindfulness* in my own critical race theory. Mindfulness has been informed by theorists like bell hooks, who combined her practice of North American Buddhism with her expertise in Cultural Studies. Mindfulness has long since been reduced to a commercialized buzzword. Cornell West, another early theorist of mindfulness, regularly appears on CNN's political panels where he contributes to a progressive political resistance movement, but Harvard recently denied him tenure. What is mindfulness going to be, in my review? Pierre has written a collection of poems that offer a glimpse of her meditations about intimacy and the body. I must consider to what extent I am writing a response, versus to what extent I am leaning so heavily that the poems can't breathe.

I am a white man reviewing her work, analyzing what I believe to be a shared experience of privacy. My review is on the cusp of invasive. Even if I understand Pierre's synthesis of experience, should I critically contribute to the updated Romantic Era movement that I am proposing? I am most assuredly elevating the risk of reproducing the colonialism that I think her poems resist.

The Romantic movement I propose is based on how far social media has encroached on our previously private experiences. There are so few places without the panopticon, that afterglow is plausibly the *only* time that we experience ourselves without monetized media. White men can only seriously decolonize their private lives by reflecting on racialized women's experiences. Decolonization includes recognizing Pierre as a poet who can change the meaning of my own private experiences of intimacy; and synthesizing that experience for a wider public. The racial hierarchies present in our identities must somehow create a conflict between Pierre and myself, as well as myself and Black women poets as a kind of mutually supporting demographic. I am consciously making a decolonizing gesture. Pierre's audience at the book launch was evidence she helps to break more than one glass ceiling. I will obviously be cut by the broken glass.

A hypothetical movement that grows from Pierre's collection of poems does not need me to participate. Movements move on. Pierre's poems, though, offer a white male reader an opportunity to read the current, Canadian experience that can inform critical theory texts like bell hooks and Cornell West's *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*. There is little point to white men reading classics of critical race theory, unless we access contemporary Black women writers and learn from them.

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