

# DOING THE OTTAWA PRETZEL: Form and Language in Roy K. Kiyooka's *The Artist & the Moose*

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The knots appearing in Roy K. Kiyooka's *The Artist & the Moose* (2009) adopt the identities of both object and subject, which is unsurprising considering the stratification in its definition. As objects, knots are lumps made by looping and tying a string around itself, and as subjects, knots are lumps of tissue in the living, typically occurring on their backs, and not easy to see nor easy to reach ("Knot"). Aware the subject is always favoured over the object, Kiyooka plays with these definitions, particularly with the assumption that knot objects can always be untied. As Roy Miki notes, Kiyooka readily engages the confusion over the designation of subject for what should be object and the object for whom should be subject (165). Benedict Anderson observes that often the matter of "world-historical importance" is "according to taste" (1) and with it, as Miki argues, there are inherent "consequences of colonial violence" (156) which are never identified.

Anderson describes the relationship between "space new and old" (187) while investigating this silencing of "violence" (Miki 156). Space is "new" to those arriving to colonize but "old" (Anderson 187) to those who are already present. Attempting to rename this space causes harm, as Kiyooka points out with the "new" descriptions of the Moose:

*But it was only since 1492 that he really knew what "ugly" meant and, like other dumb critters, learned to see himself mirrored in Whiteman's languages. [...] By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he is cited by a Jesuit as a gangly quadruped with horny protuberances and a cloven-footed gait. [...] Those are among his most frequently cited paleo-attributes* (Kiyooka 13)

With the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Caribbean Islands in 1492 ("Columbus, Christopher"), re-naming becomes a competitive process between "sibling" (Anderson 187) dialogues for the right to assert itself as truth.

The “Whiteman’s languages” lump a word string of “ugly [... and] dumb” around the Moose to the extent that it is all he can see in the “mirro[r]” of language (Kiyooka 13). This new word association attempts legitimacy through “cit[ation]” and the Moose is tangled into a description with “horn[s]” and “cloven” feet, a walking devil (13). But by using the present tense with “is” and “are” (13), the Moose is interjecting the otherwise linear narrative from Columbus to Jesuit with his presence to create knots of his own. The resulting narrative conflation subverts the knots tied around his description and tops it as the Moose cheekily cites his own “paleo-attributes” (13). Though he can “heap scorn on New World Puritans and their pretensions” (13) in the recounting of the story, the Moose is unable to untie the knots put there by colonial space.

The narrator tests the assumption that language knots can be untied by “dutifully re-examin[ing] all the salient Texts” (74) like his Moose mentor, but to no avail. The colonial language knot is “endless” because “Ottawa posited an endless footnote to a sibling nation with [...] aboriginal emplacements” (41). In an attempt to re-interpret language, the Protege treats the knot as an object:

*Returning to the Archives after the Night Watchman had made his final round, he knotted all the untied strands of the infamous fishing line into a single tensile strand and tossed one end of it over a thick beam. Imperturbably he paced a chair on top of his laden table, got up on it, and lashed the line firmly in place. Without climbing down from his perch he coolly fashioned a noose from a Manual on Hanging to the free end and placed it snugly around his neck. He might have well hanged himself then and there, if it hadn’t been for the fire alarm he unintentionally triggered just as he was about to kick the chair under himself and dangle free.*

*The one thing he learned from this bit*

*of self-inflicted mayhem was that Death was no laughing matter without a wholesome paradigm. (76)*

Despite “knott[ing] all the untied strands”, despite “lash[ing] the line firmly in place”, despite consulting “*a Manual on Hanging*” (76), the narrator is denied the satisfaction of subverting the language knot. The Protege cannot trump the presence of the knots in the fishing line with death. His suicide attempt triggers the “fire alarm” which is the knot’s way of resisting re-interpretation. Language knots are in opposition to the “Imperturbably [...] cool[]” (76) manner of the re-interpretation attempt. As a result, the Moose’s Protege cannot supercede the object with a “paradigm” (76) of his own.

The “paradigm” (76) is confounded because of Kiyooka’s play with the object-subject definition of knots. Miki comments “the narrator realizes that his quest is destined to fail” (161) while attacking the knot as an object. Pursuing “order and purpose” (Miki 162) with the knotted object merely leads to “[t]hus another Paradigm, [...] g[etting] knotted for the White Paper’s sake” (Kiyooka 82). The pursuit is a futile effort under the domination of “White Paper” (82). Ol’ Moose’s Protege is able to shift out from the tangle of knots when he realises “he had pieced together more frayed ends of the infamous fishing line in his sleep than in all of his waking moments laid end to end” (89) and becomes “consciou[s] of [his] own absence” (Miki 162) of presence, his subject-ness.

The narrator’s subject-ness mars the linearity of the colonial language knots on the fishing line. There is a double back of the line onto itself “several times” in the Protege’s hands as he “tugs[,] tugged and [t]ugged” on “one of the longer strands of [Tom Aplomb’s] fishing line” (Kiyooka 38). Mentioning “tug” thrice in succession and in different tenses implies a shift of something obstinate. This shift causes the line to be “bloodied” while the narrator’s hands escape unscathed (38).

In a reverse appropriation, the knotted line adopts characteristics of a subject. When violence is done by another's subject-ness, the line bleeds in response. From this observation:

*It began to dawn on him that Tom Aplomb's copper fishing line couldn't even begin to dangle all the fraught "Figures" embedded in the pages of an incorrigible Text.*

*Knot a well-baited strand onto a strand with a sharp hook tied to one end and, if Lady Luck presides over the knotting ceremony, you'll surely snare an assassin by the scruff of his neck, if not a perilous Tundra Aesthetic. Thus he thought and thus he knotted his daily concordances. (40)*

While the fishing line cannot fully loosen and let "Figures" loose from their lingual entanglements, it can act as a conveyor due to its "copper" metal nature (40). The knotted line makes possible the "snar[ing of] an assassin" (40) whose identity is hinted at with fourteenth century adjectives like "fraught" and "incorrigible" (40). This saccharine imagery of quaint honor, gentlemen, and garters adds up to the "WASP" the Moose warns will "surely knee-cap" (14) the narrator. The Protege avoids succumbing to the assassin's wiles by means of "thought" (40). Through parallelism of the adverb "thus", Kiyooka equates "thought" to putting "knot[s in] concordances" (40). By meeting the knot on equal grounds, the Protege is able to have the last statement in the paragraph. He is wrapping the colonial language knot with a knot of his own.

Treating the language knot as a subject rather than an object seems to unsettle the stalemate. These actions on the part of the narrator accelerate the Plot and exposes its "own heartlessness manaced by each tensile knot in Tom Aplomb's duplicitous fishing line" (65). Calling the very existence of the knot "duplicitous" (65) is laughable as the Plot is one of the subjects entangled in Tom Aplomb's fishing

line. Through "demarc[at]ing" with "parenthetic heave[s]" (65), the Plot is revealed to be petty and "[k]not by knot the emboldened Plot superannuated all the lesser characters" (87). The assonance with the long "o" in "knot", "emboldened", and "Plot" (87) contributes to the singsong quality of the line. If the Plot has its colonial way, any one tangled in the knot would learn from the Plot by rote. The Protege's awareness of subject-ness allows for his narrow escape from the Plot:

*"Finders/Keepers: Losers/Weepers," he appended, almost forgoing his hard-won advocacy. Long after Ottawa had closed down for the night and all the Irish whiskey in the Grand Hotel had dried up, he felt an ugly knot being twisted in his groin. (75)*

The Plot has the narrator by the balls. The Protege is caught singing along with the Plot's "demarc[at]ing" (65) "/" (75) instead of the questioning hyphen. Without thought, the narrator is close to "forgoing his hard-won advocacy" (75) and succumbing to the same forces that twined language restraints around his "ugly" (13, 75) Moose mentor. The danger of being "knee-cap[ped]" (14) by the Plot is uncomfortably high. But the Protege is not without equally vicious means at his disposal and he "append[s]" (75) again, this time to a different source:

*"Death is the Mercurial River flowing through Big Trout's gills," he appended to his last Notebook entry, to assuage his guilt for punning around on the Laurentian Shield every WASP carries around like a bituminous lump on his vernacular back.*

*" – Beast of Neolithic Origins"*

*" – Beast of my Middennight Syllogisms"*

*" – Beast of Procrustean Ardour," he caught himself repeating. Meanwhile, another could-*

*be assailant slipped without rustling a single document into the Dead File, labeled "Guns for Hire."* (88)

"Beast", like "Death" (88), is a lingual "limit that cannot be erased" (Miki 161). But from experience, the narrator can now observe the subject-ness of colonial language knots which results in the subjective treatment of "every WASP[s] [...] vernacular back" in his "last Notebook entry" (Kiyooka 88). The note of finality the phrase carries means that there is room for the Protege to play with "[m]ercurial" (88) modifiers. The narrator lulls the Plot into a false sense of security before "punning" (88) his attack with relish to make it absolutely clear the Plot is now at the mercy of its own machinations.

A "Beast of Neolithic Origins" apparently describes the Moose but he is not concerned with new-ness, geology, nor "[o]rigins" (88). The narrator's use of the bullet point form adroitly delivers "Middennight Syllogisms" (88) which implies a thrice-ness ("Syllogism") that the Plot does not accept in its binary vocabulary. Finally, the "Beast of Procrustean Ardour" (88) or its own infatuation with conformity ("Procrustean") topples the Plot with a flourish. Aware of its defeat, the Plot is vanquished "[t]o the Dead File" (88). The narrator skillfully turns the colonial language knot back on itself and "slip[s]" up the "could-be assailant" (88) in its attempts to transform Tom Aplomb into an object rather than a subject.

In congratulations, "O! Moose's last words to his Protege were: [...] we know there isn't a panacea for our hubris, [The Rockies are] once again bare rock / incipient Void: O the Unmitigated Tundra" (104). His mentor's words are a reminder of the dangers of rote learning without thought. The protruding Rocky Mountains are knots in geological form. Combating tectonic plates disintegrate and cascade over, through, and under one another. The difference between the Mountains and the Moose

is that the Rockies are considered a subject with majestic beauty whereas the Moose is considered "ugly" (13) in the colonial language binary. But aren't the Rockies merely "bare rock" (104) as the Moose asserts, and isn't the Moose a subject too? The "/" co-opts the mountains into a capitalised "incipient Void" and the ":" anticipates colonial wonder in the "O" preceding "the Unmitigated Tundra" (104). The desire to re-name "the Unmitigated Tundra" (104) as "Canada" is strong, stemming from the ingrained reflex to recite the national anthem of "O Canada". But the Protege learns colonial language knots are reminders that language is living and resists with "*the tiny bird's ontological progeny*" (104) or the multiplication of thought. Kiyooka reminds his readers to be wary of the transcendence created by colonial living language and performed by the subjects that are enslaved to them.

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