

Looking for a Place to Happen

MINELLE MAHTANI

What does it mean to love a band? A friend? A nation?

When I got the text, it was July 2019. I was on a flight from Vancouver to Paris, sandwiched between my son who was reading a picture book about a pigeon who drove a bus, and my husband who was reading a book by Theodor Adorno. It was going to be our first trip to Europe together to see my husband's family. I had just started a new academic job and I was exhausted. I needed a respite. But the text read: "Please come now. The doctors say it is imminent." It was a message from my friend's husband, Tim. His wife, Ing Wong-Ward, my dear friend, confidante, wise-cracking genius and radio producer at the CBC was dying.

Ing and I had become fast friends when we were in our twenties. We were ambitious journalists in training, both of us longing to make a difference in national television news. Over icy blue slushies at the Lone Star restaurant near the CBC on Front Street, cheeks flushed, we would passionately speak about our shared hatred of injustice and our love of fashion, not always in that order. Ing's particular obsession were Manolo Blahniks—Ing absolutely adored a great pair of shoes. As a woman of colour and a woman with a disability, she would go on to become one of the country's leading journalists telling stories about disability and race.

I knew she was dying, and I was in denial. But when I got that text, I knew I had to go. We landed and I turned right around, catching the next flight to Toronto, leaving my husband and child in Paris.

The flight back felt interminably long. I sat numbly through film after film, not knowing what I would do when I got there. How could I say goodbye to a friend whom I had loved so dearly—and for so long?

What happened next was what you might expect—the rotating door of guests coming in to say their goodbyes. I said the things I needed to say. I heard the things Ing wanted to tell me.

My goddaughter, Ing's daughter—the look on her face at ten years old, a look one should never hold, even at a much later age, the grief sketched through. We went for a long walk in the Distillery District in the blinding July sun, she and I. The heat was desultory. We tried not to talk about the anticipatory grief we were feeling. It was overwhelming both of us.

That night, Michael D'Souza, another CBC journalist, came in to say his goodbyes. He took one look at me and said, "Minelle, you have to get out of here."

With my face I told him I disagreed.

Michael was having none of that. He said, "This is just hubris on your part. Come tonight to a dinner party I'm having. It'll be good for you."

I reluctantly agreed.

When Michael's front door opened, I heard the raucous laughter that only grizzled old journalists telling loud stories can share. One kind-looking woman smiled sweetly, patted her side of the couch, and said, "Come sit by me."

That woman was Jody Porter.

Maybe you know Jody's name by her byline. You've probably heard her voice on the radio, too. Jody's reputation as a white woman reporting on Indigenous matters with care was renowned. That night at the party, she was both generous and modest, telling me about the stories she was working on back in Thunder Bay. We kept things simple. I told her I was in town because a friend was ill. I left it vague, didn't offer any names. Why should I? I didn't want to get into it. I knew what would happen as soon I offered details: the inevitable pity, the cocked head.

Somewhere over the third course, though, I said something about the Tragically Hip and my fascination with Gord Downie, the lead singer. I'm not sure how this came up. I mentioned something about feeling depressed over his recent diagnosis of brain cancer. Maybe I did want to talk about my grief and I just didn't know how to, a sign of my passive-aggressive tendencies taking shape.

She looked at me, took a sip of her chardonnay, and said, "I met Gord once."

"Are you a fan?" I asked, incredulous.

"I am." She nodded a little sadly, which surprised me.

"So am I!"

Everything closed down around us as we launched into our own private fandom of the Hip—reciting the songs we loved, ones that harkened back to our memories in our twenties, thirties, forties. Jody recalled taking her baby sister to her first Tragically Hip concert at the old Molson Park in Barrie, Ontario, in the mid-1990s. Later, she'd remember it this way, writing:

It might have been Canada Day for all the national pride on display. Not the hokey, hand-on-heart, flag-waving patriotism of the USA, but rather the more subtle, self-effacing devotion to a nation still "Looking for a Place to Happen."

Introducing [my sister] to the Hip, in concert, felt like I was fulfilling my role as big sister, showing her the kind of people we were, or could aspire to be. It was exhilarating.

I loved hearing this same story from Jody that night. This experience of music—as not only

placeholder of time, but as sustenance, spoke to me so plainly. Because I shared that with her, too.

I was introduced to the Hip in the late 1980s, by a boyfriend, as many of us are—through someone who loves something so much they are bubbling with excitement to share it with you, just like Jody had shared the Hip's music with her sister. I had an ugly breakup with that boyfriend a few years later, but my love affair for the Hip flourished. I loved everything about them: their bluesy-rock sounds, their powerful riffs. Most of all, I loved seeing them perform live.

I saw them for the first time when I was a student at Dalhousie. I caught them at a dive bar called the Misty Moon. When Gord came on stage, the entire crowd took a deep breath. The charismatic nature of the lead singer was palpable. The audience sang along hoarsely to the lyrics, and I left jubilant and satisfied.

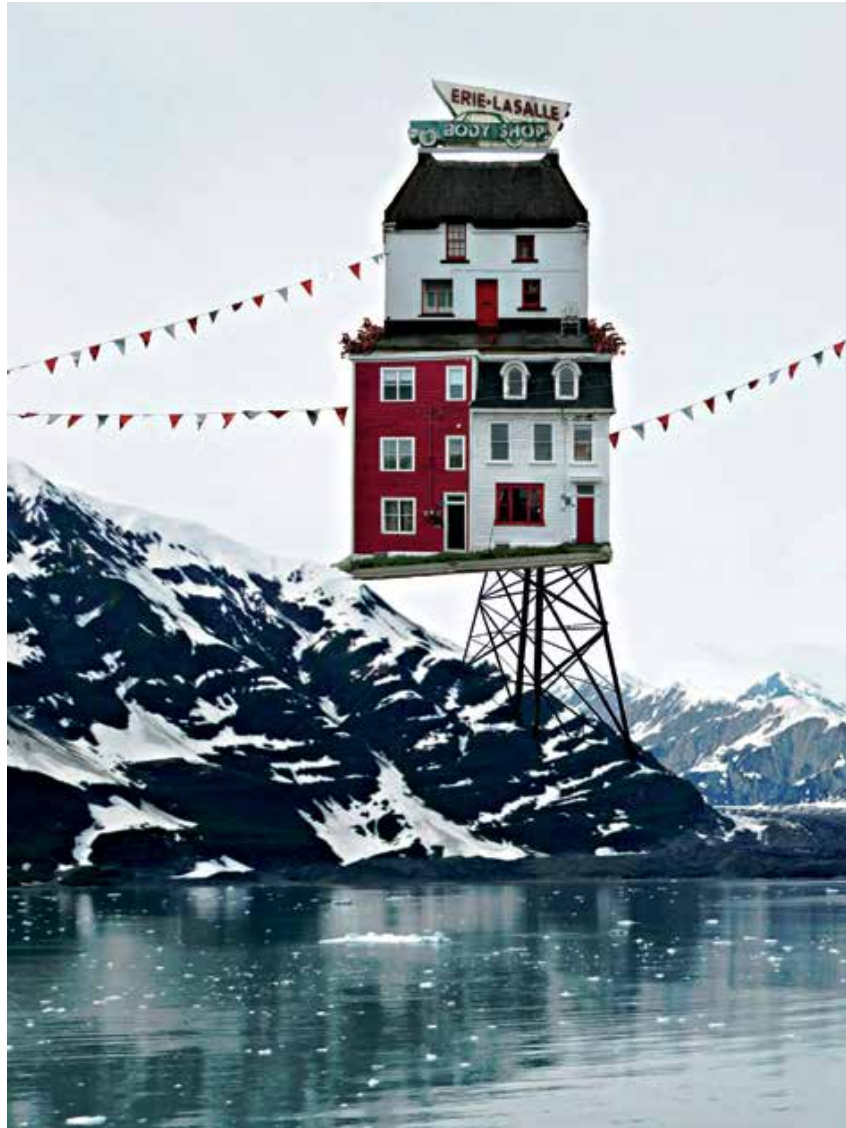
After that I couldn't get enough. This little brown girl? She loved them with all her heart.

When I went to London, England, to pursue my PhD, I caught them at a small venue in Shepherd's Bush; Gord and the gang appeared dishevelled and sweat-stained for their encore of "Little Bones," and I noticed crazed fans swinging Canadian flags over their heads. I screamed along with them. I was crazed, too.

Friends would ask why I adored them. Didn't I know the Hip were the quintessentially stereotypical Canadian band? The Hip have a relentless reputation as emblem of Canada, they would say with not a little disgust, and now we were trained, nay, were teaching the next generation, to abandon the idea of the nation-state. How could I love them, my friends insinuated, and still call myself a social justice scholar? I was a hypocrite, a sellout. They could reluctantly justify my childlike love of Shawn Mendes as indicative of a sweet admiration for a part-Portuguese kid (being mixed, he made it under the radar) and my appreciation for Vancouver-based Matthew Good—well, I could like him because he was at least up front about his mental health challenges. But the Hip? Good Lord! How could I explain it?

I couldn't. I just loved them with a wild abandon.

That wild abandon would lead me to bring my adoration to bear upon my intellectual



pursuits as a geography professor. Many academics pretend they don't do this—study something purely out of love—but don't be fooled. I know they do.

In 2000, I started writing about the Tragically Hip. Along with Scott Salmon, another geographer whom I had introduced to their music (and who had fallen in love with them too), I explored the relationship between the Tragically Hip, globalization, popular music and the expression of national identity. We wrote: "In the Canadian context, the music of the Tragically Hip has provided a vehicle for the expression and assertion of national identity amongst many of their fans." But who are we kidding, really? I can't hide behind my

academic persona on this one. The paper was really just a love letter to the Tragically Hip.

Strangely enough, the paper took off, as much as something can in the quiet corridors of academe. It was republished twice in other anthologies. Professors put it on their course syllabi. Folks wrote to say it resonated with them. But the truth of the matter was that I had mixed feelings about what I was writing. My love affair with the Hip was growing, while at the same time my love affair with Canada was waning.

When I was a graduate student, full of hope and excitement about the future, I heard Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the great Black prison

abolitionist and prison scholar, speak. She said something I will never forget. It was: “First you infiltrate—then you innovate.” Take over what already exists, she said, and innovate what’s still needed. I remember thinking that was a brilliant suggestion. That once you get into a system, infiltrate a corporation, a university or even a country, you can make change for the better. *One day you will become prime minister, Muni*, my dad would tell me, proudly.

My body remembers the many times I tried to infiltrate. If you are brown, if you’re a woman, if you’re queer, if you’re all those things together, maybe you too have those moments. The ways you bent your voice to sound more like the people in power. The way you covered up aspects of your identity, all to try to make it in Canada. I know I have those moments. The way I would often say yes, it’s Michelle, in order to prevent botched attempts at verbalizing my first name. The way I would learn to speak using what I read as Canadian vernacular—fancy-dan, rat’s ass—in order to seem more white. None of this worked, of course.

I also felt counterfeit in that my family’s origin story was founded on love of the nation—a nation that would never love them back.

I am only here because in the 1960s, my parents’ best friends in England, ironically also Iranian and Indian respectively, told them, “Canada wants us! We should immigrate there together!” And they did. My parents moved to North York, Ontario, from London in 1969 in an attempt to offer their not-yet-born children a better way of life, just two years before multicultural policy was inaugurated in Canada.

I’ve already said that I think sometimes we end up loving the things our loved ones love. My parents’ idealistic and naive love of the nation was passed down to me. This included, but was not limited to, their uncritical adoration of Pierre Elliott Trudeau: his dapper style, the way he held court and without irony told the country the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation. He was my parents’ prime minister, to paraphrase from the song “Wheat Kings” by the Tragically Hip, and he became my prime minister, too.

Family legend goes that I was born on the day Trudeau got married. This was told to me in hushed tones, as somehow indicative of the love my parents had for me. It would only be later that I would learn that this was, in fact, not

true—that Trudeau got married the day before, flying into Vancouver on March 4, hopping in a car to St. Stephen’s Roman Catholic Church in North Vancouver, where at 6:30 p.m., to quote from the *Vancouver Sun*, “the most-eligible bachelor of international politics” married Margaret Sinclair of West Vancouver.

That marriage would not survive. My parents’ marriage would not survive, either. But on that date, the entire country seemed in the thrall of Trudeaumania, in love with the idea of Trudeau being in love, the promise of their love fuelling a particular kind of patriotism. In turn, my parents’ love for each other waned, and uncomfortably tightened around their love for me, thus naming me “Wish Come True” in the hopes that I would ensure all their dreams for me, and for them, would take flight. But this country would never be the land of unending hope and promise they hoped it would be—for them or for me.

Family legend goes that I was born on the day Trudeau got married. This was told to me in hushed tones, as somehow indicative of the love my parents had for me. It would only be later that I would learn that this was, in fact, not true

I want to return to that night in Toronto, to that dinner party I attended when I was coming back to say goodbye to my friend Ing. Over Niagara strawberries with whipped cream, Jody’s face darkened between our exultations of the Hip. I told Jody that my love affair with the Hip was complex, because the Hip was now so roundly equated with a particular kind of love of the nation-state, and my love affair with Canada had soured so significantly. There was no way I could still love Canada, knowing what I did now about Trudeau’s legacy with the White Papers, with the Chinese head tax—the list of atrocities was long. But something else complicated this story. And it had to do with Indigenous lives.

Before Downie passed, he became obsessed with telling Chanie Wenjack’s story. Gord’s brother Mike had heard a documentary on the CBC about Chanie, a twelve-year-old Anishinaabe boy who had fled a residential school

near Kenora, Ontario, in 1966, and frozen to death on train tracks he thought would bring him home. It moved Gord so much that he wanted to give that story a national spotlight, culminating in a multimedia storytelling project called *Secret Path*. It included a ten-song album, a tour, graphic novel, and an animated film by Jeff Lamire. It was covered by almost every big media outlet, the campaign so slick it seemed ubiquitous.

The documentary that sparked it all was produced and voiced by Jody. But at the dinner party, I didn't know that. I just confessed to Jody something about my inability to make sense of my love for this band, and my intuition that something was wrong with the project as Downie had conceptualized it. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

Jody didn't tell me it was her moving work that catapulted this story into Downie's hands. But she confessed to me her own ambivalence about *Secret Path*.

As a careful reporter on Indigenous issues, Jody had invested years into understanding the complex issues facing Indigenous peoples, addressing their stories with depth. But something about the project wasn't right, and Indigenous writers explained why.

Clayton Thomas-Müller, a member of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation and the author of ecojustice memoir *Life in the City of Dirty Water*, explained: "At a time of reconciliation the most visible face in the discourse around residential schools and reconciliation should not have been a white rock star." He said that white translators of Indigenous stories have an obligation to think about how they capitalize upon those tales. There's a place for settlers to stand alongside their Indigenous allies to offer support, he said, but not when they become the story.

Another of Thomas-Müller's lines in particular stayed with me: "My challenge to Mr. Downie is to have him push forward the stories of our living survivors: Let us speak for ourselves about our collective resilience."

The late Mi'kmaw comedian and radio host Candy Palmater, a self-proclaimed Hip fan, wrote:

When I read that [Downie] was receiving the Order of Canada not just for music but for his leadership as

an Indigenous activist, I was stunned. Surely this was a misprint. After all, I know so many Indigenous people who have given their whole lives to furthering our cause without ever being recognized. Not only that, but so often, their lifelong anti-racist work has taken a toll on their health and careers.

Jody spoke about some of these tensions that night. I told her, "This is important. You have to write about it."

She hung her head. "No, I'm not the story. I don't want to become another white saviour."

I told her she was not telling me that story. That maybe by leaning into those critiques, she could offer readers a way to understand what it meant to challenge what felt like empty expressions of reconciliation as a white woman. I said again, "You have to write about it."

She did.

In "Pathfinding," the piece Jody eventually wrote for *Maisonneuve*, she expressed her ambivalence about her role as a non-Indigenous reporter on Indigenous issues, and her own experience covering Chanie Wenjack's story and Gord Downie's *Secret Path* in particular:

I thought my years of engaging on Indigenous issues had protected me from the white saviour complex... Instead, I was blindly galloping around on my white horse, not seeing the wholeness of Indigenous lives and experience. Not seeing my own brokenness. In focusing so much on the hurt in other people's lives, I'd missed the lessons they offered about healing. I failed to imagine the possibility of writing stories with this kind of headline: *Residential school survivor helps aging rock star confront death*—and failed to consider how such a story might help me.

When I read Jody's essay, it brought me right back to that dinner party, where I was in so much shock over the impending loss of my friend. It reminded me that not all our stories about inequality and colonialism have to include stories of white benevolence

or white guilt. There are other stories to tell. Jody had shown me that. Jody admitted when she got it wrong. And she offered a different path toward repair, as if such a thing was ever possible, or ever enough.

I remembered something my friend Ing Wong-Ward had told me in an email a few months before she died. “Stories disappear into the ether. Good ones are remembered. I rather see life like that too.” Jody’s story was one I would remember.

That night at the party, just as I was about to leave, Jody handed me a gift bag with a blue ribbon. She said, “Please give this to Ing’s daughter. It’s a present for her.” I hadn’t realized that Jody knew Ing, too. Maybe I should have.

The next day my goddaughter opened the present carefully but without enthusiasm. I thought back to the days of seeing her rip open wrapping with zeal. Now, gone.

The present was a butterfly game. My goddaughter and I played the game for a while that day. Each butterfly was its own tile. We spread them out, and tried to find the matching butterfly, each one in its own paired cocoon, until we had a pile of butterflies spread out on the ground.

When I looked up the symbolism of the butterfly later, I found this: “The butterfly has become a metaphor for transformation and hope; across cultures, it has become a symbol for rebirth and resurrection, for the triumph of the spirit and the soul over the physical prison.”

I thought about the body as a prison, as my vivacious friend lay languishing in her hospital bed mere steps away, barely breathing.

Ing died a few days later.

A year or so passed. Jody’s piece about the Hip was published in *Maisonmeuve*, and my own piece about racism and names was published in *This Magazine*. Jody and I hadn’t stayed in touch, one of those bright bursts of friendship that disappear sometimes, but I reached out to her when I saw we were both nominated in the same category that year for a National Magazine Award. We laughed at the serendipity of it all.

We both virtually attended the awards ceremony, me in Vancouver, her in Thunder Bay, messaging back and forth through Twitter.

I hope you win! Jody wrote.

I hope YOU win! Heart emoji, celebration emoji, heart emoji again.

I looked up our text thread yesterday to make sure I got that right. When I did, I found only my replies to her: full of exclamation marks and excitement.

Her side of the text thread was gone.

That’s when I realized that Jody’s account had been deleted and all text threads related to her had vanished.

Jody died of cancer on July 19, 2022, on her fiftieth birthday, not long after we had texted with each other. At the time, I had no idea.

To this day, whenever I see a butterfly, I think of Ing. I think of Jody. And I think about the butterfly game she gave to Ing’s daughter.

The last thing I had tried to send to Jody was a story about butterflies by Maria Popova. I thought she would find it poignant. It was a story about two sisters, Harriet and Helena Scott, who meticulously and with great love and care captured the science and splendour of Australian butterflies and other Lepidoptera. Even a century after their death, their stunning paintings are praised for their technical accuracy, artistry and contribution to the field.

I thought about the body as a prison, as my vivacious friend lay languishing in her hospital bed mere steps away, barely breathing.

I think this way about Jody and Ing now. They weren’t naturalists like the sisters, but as journalists, they too were committed to observing and illustrating, as Popova describes, “in real time the metamorphoses unfolding in the span of an hour, [even in] minutes,” in our world. Some of the sisters’ work required such precision that they used the single hair of a paintbrush, and their illustrations rendered the complete life cycle of the butterfly in exquisite detail. Ing and Jody, in turn, used stories to wield the power of a single question to inextricably alter the terrain of our social landscape.

The power of a good question.

Ing and Jody taught me to continue to question the simple scaffolding of the nation. To always question the ways socio-political

constructs of disability and race work to ensure power is kept in place. To remember how complicated and complicit our love of the nation can be. As Laila Lalami, the Moroccan-American writer, teaches us: “Patriotism means a constant questioning.... It means to question rather than accept the answer.”

I tell my students now that we must heed the words of the Black Canadian scholar Rinaldo Walcott. He once told me that if we study Canada from an anti-colonial context, we can't forget to bring in the three L's: law, land and labour. I have appreciated those signposts. I speak about them all the time in my classes. But I notice, now, when I try to write signposts, I always write songposts instead, as if the Hip's songs act as markers for me throughout my life, providing me with more solace and care than I ever deserved to have, to hope for.

The band was playing at the Royal Canadian Legion and I couldn't help but be taken aback by all the reverent references to royalty: large dusty framed pictures of the Queen on the wall, a Union Jack pinned up in the back corner.

I still draw from Walcott's significant signposts to be sure, but now I have added my own. My own three R's. I tell students to think about risk, relation and repair. That one needs to take risks to reach out, to think about relations, and attempt to repair. I think about the importance of relationality—acknowledging the networks of relations and histories of relations that pervade our professional and personal lives... those constellations not only forging our identities, but what we think of as possible in the world.

You'll notice that the word *reconciliation* is not there.

In January of this year, I came across an ad for a cover band of the Hip playing on Commercial Drive in Vancouver. The band was playing at the Royal Canadian Legion, and when I arrived, I couldn't help but be taken aback by all the reverent references to royalty: large dusty framed pictures of the Queen on

the wall, a Union Jack pinned up in the back corner. The place was packed. For a moment, I dared not go inside. I felt my brownness more than ever.

But then I looked around.

I noticed the crowd was full of... people like me. Brown women in their forties and fifties. And many Indigenous people, some of them wearing Hip paraphernalia. Eleven teenagers at the door wearing “Land Back” hoodies. I sang and danced with such uninhibitedness that night, and I was sure the checkerboard floors would break with the brute strength of all our feet pounding on the ground. Women I did not know reached out their hands to me as we screamed out the lyrics to each and every song. I was sweat-stained again, buoyant. I felt new for the first time in years, out in a crowd after pandemic, my N95 mask on so tight but my bodily presence so palpable, sharing this moment with others, so real and true and joyous. An “ecstatic” geography, as Ben Malbon might put it, from his writing on crowds, music and dancing, noting their roles in communal and interior experiences of resistance and vitality.

I want to return to the words of Ruthie Gilmore: first you infiltrate what exists, then you innovate what doesn't. What Ruthie was saying was that to innovate, you have to tear down and rebuild. To imagine something altogether different. Patriotism has a powerful pull. I had to commit to something else.

How do we honour our truest self in the stories we tell? How do we refuse the seductive nostalgia of the nation? It's hard, I admit, when that love of the nation is so emotionally felt. Gayatri Spivak asks: “When... does the comfort felt in one's corner of the sidewalk, a patch of ground... or church door—when does this transform itself into the nation thing? And how?”

The power of a good question.

I wrote this for you, asking: What does it mean to love a band? A friend? A nation? How is that love similar? How is it the same? What does it mean to be patriotic now, during this end of times, when finally, patriotism is rightly being recognized as a dirty word? What do we do with the shame of that love?

Reading the work of Tuscarora writer Alicia Elliott helped me to answer these questions.

In her essay “CanLit Is a Raging Dumpster Fire,” she writes: “It’s complicated to love a country that still actively hurts so many of the people who live within it. Do you let your love make you blind, do you stop loving the country entirely, or do you acknowledge its imperfections, shrug and try to love it anyway?”

Elliott continues:

All of us as writers know the blessing and curse that is constructive criticism. Though we can objectively recognize that it ultimately makes our work better, when we’re hearing that constructive criticism, *it hurts*. Sometimes for days, weeks, months, years. But eventually, we all sit down, assess the criticism and *do the work to fix the problems*.

I too hope that you find ways to love. But maybe we also need to ask what we love, and why and how. Loving hard means loving with both abandon and critique. Embracing that

ecstatic geography while also pointing out its flaws. A tough love, if you will.

The poet and critic Hanif Abdurraqib reminds us: “I don’t have time to write critiques of things that I don’t actually love, right? Critique, for me, has to be an act of love—or else it’s a waste of time.”

The answers came to me slowly, and then abundantly, that night on the dance floor, and then later took stronger shape in the classroom, and in hard conversations.

Infiltrate, then innovate. Do the work to fix the problems. Imagine a different place to happen.

Minelle Mahtani’s writing has appeared in This Magazine, Maisonneuve and the Walrus. She has been nominated for a National Magazine Award and won a gold medal in the Digital Publishing Awards for best personal essay. Her book, May It Have a Happy Ending, is forthcoming with Penguin Random House/Doubleday in September 2024.



HELP WANTED?

**EVENT'S
Reading Service
for Writers**

eventmagazine.ca