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Oblique Identity by Carl Watts

LITERARY CRITICISM MONOGRAPH #9

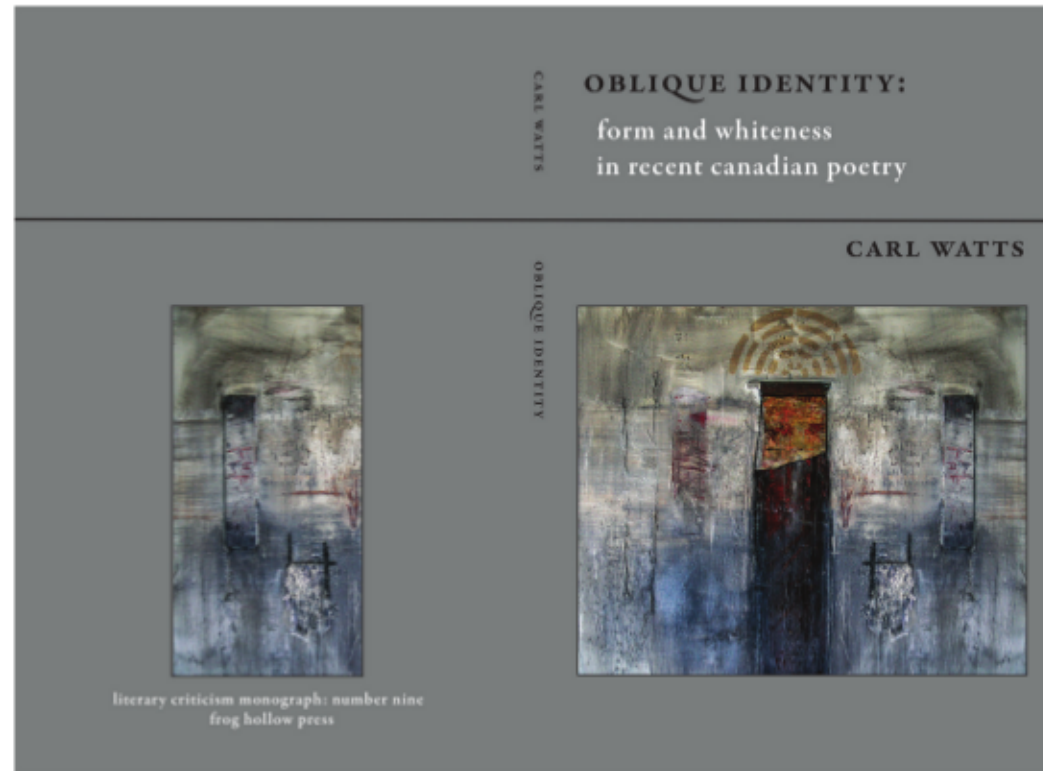


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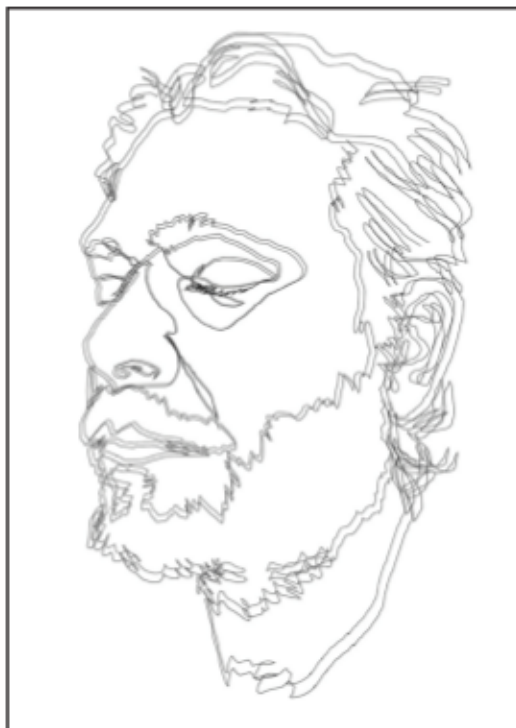
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Oblique Identity

INTRODUCTION

We live in what many disgruntled commentators talk about as a sort of Age of Identity: a time when election campaigns revolve primarily around a candidate's race or gender; a time when Condé Nast-era *Pitchfork* seemingly can't review a minor '90s emo album without claiming the racialized experience of a forgotten second guitarist was in fact what had shaped the band's sound all along. Given its connections with progressive academic institutions and pro-diversity government bureaucracy (to say nothing of the conscientious, inquisitive nature of scholarly and creative types generally—a natural confluence some bemoan as leftist bias on campus), Canadian literature has been at the forefront of this shift, with both scholarly and general-interest criticism usually conceiving of "types" of poetry in terms of a poet's group membership(s).

Such memberships most frequently include those based on gender, sex, and sexual orientation, or cultural or racialized identities (like Indigenous, African-Canadian, or, at least until recently, broadly transnational writing). There are formations that place somewhat less emphasis on innate or immutable characteristics, such as conceptions of region that either prize location itself (Newfoundland writing, New Brunswick poetry) or else conflate smaller geographical areas with broadly formal movements (Vancouver as avant-garde mecca, Anglo-Montreal as formalist bastion). For the most part, however, our interest in identity is a fixation on unearned privilege; the very concept of "an identity" hinges on a real or perceived lack of the latter (so that aristocrat, cosmopolitan, white man, or Formula One driver aren't identities per se).¹ Within this constellation, the individual (in the form of poet, speaker, editor, or critic) seems increasingly regarded as, and assessed for, speaking for a group identity from the position of membership in that group or else choosing to amplify the voices of a marginalized group of which the speaker is not a member but an ally. While one can't accurately claim that such biographical and representational concerns have displaced all others, it seems like any conscientious discussion of Canadian literature must begin by passing through some prism of group identity.

What happens, then, to poets who don't, according to the above criteria, have much of an identity? To white, cis-gendered men and women whose experiences seem to belong to the muddled mass of so-called mainstream society in one of the wealthiest countries in the world? A few possibilities come to mind. . . .



KEVIN ECKHOFF - SELF-PORTRAIT

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