

Interview with poet Arleen Paré, 2014

I was delighted to be introduced to Arleen Paré this fall when we read together at Russell Books in Victoria; we had been writing together for some time in what we call the Electronic Garrett, which is in its own way a call and response, only this time between some of Canada's finest poets (and me), plus I had asked to interview her for Brick Books. It was a very busy time in Arleen's life, that day we read, because, that morning, she had just discovered that she was a finalist for the GG. People will know by now that she won the Governor General's Award for Poetry this year, and I was stoked that I was invited to the ceremony at Rideau Hall in Ottawa, where the kick-ass Kitty Lewis beautifully introduced Arleen and her book "Lake of Two Mountains."

I interviewed Arleen for [Brick Books](#), where we are both authors.

Arleen Paré is a poet and novelist, author of two previous books including 'Leaving Now,' 2012 from [Caitlin Press](#). Originally from Montreal, she lived for many years in Vancouver, where she worked as a social worker and administrator to provide community housing for people with mental illnesses. She now lives in Victoria with her partner, Chris Fox.

Her award-winning title is poems for a lake where she spent her childhood summers.

1. I asked you if you'd mind choosing the poem you wanted to discuss because I think poets sometimes answer questions about poems they are finished with or don't maintain interest in. Why did you choose this poem, and what about it interests, or still interests you?

'Call and Response' represents the heart of Lake of Two Mountains. In the same way that nature uses a loop system to maintain itself and in ways that humans can only guess at or research, nothing that's always apparent, I wanted this collection of poems to speak to each other in order to build on itself. I wanted to write about this system of interdependencies, how humans too are woven into the loops. But I also wanted to evoke the rhetorical and religious methodologies of call and response, for instance, in the Catholic mass, so that the tone of the collection could take on some sense of the sacred, which then reflects the monastic life. It also is suggestive of the way memory operates, memories and our responses to them.

2. Your book is about the Lake of Two Mountains. Do you remember composing Call and Response in particular? What did you want to say about the topography of the area?

I wanted to show this topography so that the reader could imagine the lake and its environments more easily, graphically, calling out the names of the trees, for instance, the lake's fauna, geology, the geographic origins of the lake, to pull the lake into the whole of central Canada.

3. If geography can have a call and response, as you imagine here, does it have a sensate purpose? Is it just a cellular celebration (as it were), or, perhaps, can it alter the globe?

I can only imagine these answers. Does it have a sensate purpose? It does allow the cycle of life to spin through and on, but what kind of sensate does a maple tree include? I don't know. I know that the leaves of some trees curl up when rubbed, but that's not what a maple tree does. On the other hand, I think any alteration in a single natural loop system could possibly alter more than its own loop, so perhaps, it could escalate to alter the globe. Perhaps.

4. Does the call and response ever see beyond itself? Does it ever include panic at environmental degradation, if not within its self-ascribed borders, but in a wider way? If it talks to sturgeon and green frogs, does it converse, too, with humans?

In the way that butterflies, honey bees, frogs tell us that something is very wrong by the dwindling of their numbers over time, I suppose we can imagine the flora and fauna conversing with us, warning us in this case. In Call and Response, the human/arboreal exchange is limited to the human act of tapping into bark producing maple syrup.

5. Is there anything else you wanted to say about this particular poem, Arleen?

I wrote this poem using a governmental survey of the Lake of Two Mountains region. It was dated and spare. I craved more information; I couldn't find sufficient geographical information about the lake. I felt hamstrung because I don't speak French well enough to know whether more and/or better information is available about this area in French. I now know there is, though I'm not sure more information would have altered or improved the poem. In the end, the form of the poem, the call and response structure, determined its purpose and end.

Call and Response

by Arleen Paré

1.

The Canadian Shield calls to the

in Timiskaming Lake. The Shield shelters

more than half the land. The , tectonic,

replies with the Ottawa River, whose waters run east

and spread at the place of two mountains.

Becoming lake. In this way the lake is of lake,

song of song, Deux-Montagnes out of Timiskaming.

The lake there, at the two mountains, calls

to the trees near and around, riparian trees

on rocky shores and the terrestrials

within two miles of the shore. Perpetual loop.

One verse then the other. Connecting

trees to the sand, the orthic, melanic, soil,
tree canopies, consolations of climate.

The way birds in the morning define the new day,
call sunrise from night.

2.

The trees call to each other their own
names: sugar maple, hickory, eastern white pine.

Black willow chants the alphabets of green ash.

Yellow birch calls to red maple, chokecherry to beech.

They bear multiple names, formal, scientific,
common French and Mohawk.

And no names at all. Their calls
travel through air, water, through earth,
sedges and shrubs, algae
and cumulus clouds. All conversing.

Rocks and black leeches. Sturgeon, green frogs.

Limestone and vascular plants.

3.

How does the sky

reply when silver-backed leaves tug at the

blocking the passage to sea?

Clouds ring with rain

and the lake lifts small pewter washes

in rows of applause.

What listens to sugar maples' clear amber flow?

Rays: yellow and cold.

Fine beads of drizzle

hiss the filigreed ice.

What answers flood cover drowning hickory knees?

Clay or silt. Till or clay loam. Sap in the spring.

4.

Sugar maple is always and in all places attentive,

alert for replies from the open terrain.

The soil, fine or sandy, alluvium,

measures the length of flood time in spring,

speaks a name to the climate,

the warmest in the whole province. Call

and response: a dominant tree,

sugar tree that humans can tap into.