

Intuition and Liminality in *For Your Own Good*: An Interview with Leah Horlick

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Discourse surrounding intimate partner violence in Canada has substantially increased in recent years—particularly since the ubiquitous #MeToo social movement has offered sexual assault victims a platform for their historically silenced voices. This discourse in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, however, has remained scarce by virtue of the inherent pressures from both the social milieu, which sustains white, cisgender, heterosexual male privilege, and the literary canon, which adheres to heteronormative narratives. These pressures work in tandem to render intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community a taboo subject.

Leah Horlick's poetry collection *For Your Own Good*—a semi-autobiography published by Caitlin Press—addresses this supposed taboo subject as Horlick recounts her experiences as a Jewish lesbian in an abusive queer relationship. Rollè *et al.*, in their article “When Intimate Partner Violence Meets Same Sex Couples: A Review of Same Sex Intimate Partner Violence,” posit that many individuals in the queer community fear vocalizing their experiences with intimate partner violence as it may be used to “stigmatize the community itself, thereby contributing to building additional oppression” (1).

For Your Own Good grapples with a murky space between knowing and unknowing, desire and abuse, and intuition and manipulation. In Horlick's collection, there is a constant battle between the narrator's inner voice and the bellowing voice of the abuser; the latter renders the narrator's inner voice, for most of the collection, inaudible. However, through exploring the voice of a lesbian sexual assault survivor—a voice which has been silenced by both the androcentric society in which it reverberates and by the 2SLGBTQIA+ community itself—Horlick not only resists being trapped by hegemonic forces but also stimulates discourse and offers readers new ways of perceiving that have historically been stifled. While writing from personal experience is arguably the most vulnerable and audacious choice, Horlick chooses to do so. It is through this subjectivity and risk of potential backlash that Horlick is able to dismantle ubiquitous societal narratives which are predicated upon whiteness and heteronormative ideologies.

Leah Horlick is a writer and poet who grew up as a settler on Treaty Six Cree Territory & the homelands of the Métis in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Her long-awaited third collection of poems, *Moldovan*

Hotel, is available now from Brick Books. Her first book, *Riot Lung* (ThistleDown Press, 2012), was shortlisted for a 2013 ReLit Award and a Saskatchewan Book Award. Her second collection, *For Your Own Good* (Caitlin Press, 2015), was named a 2016 Stonewall Honour Book by the American Library Association. She is also the author of *wreckoning*, a chapbook produced with Alison Roth Cooley and JackPine Press. Horlick lived on Unceded Coast Salish Territories in Vancouver for nearly ten years, during which time she and her dear friend Estlin McPhee ran REVERB, a queer and anti-oppressive reading series. In 2016, Horlick was awarded the Dayne Ogilvie Prize, Canada's only award for emerging LGBT writers. In 2018, her piece "You Are My Hiding Place" was named Poem of the Year by *ARC Poetry Magazine*, and shortlisted for inclusion in the 44th Pushcart Prize by the Pushcart Board of Editors. She now lives on Treaty Seven Territory & Region 3 of the Métis Nation in Mohkinstis, or what is colonially known as Calgary.

Davis Fowlow (she/her) grew up in Ktaqmkuk, Newfoundland and Labrador, which is the land in traditional Mi'kmaw territory and includes the rich histories and cultures of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit. Davis has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language and Literature from Memorial University, Grenfell Campus and is currently completing her Master of Arts degree in Women and Gender Studies at Saint Mary's University, which is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the original Mi'kmaq People. She has two creative pieces published in *Paper Mill Press* (2021): "The Rock Tumbler" and "To the Trailblazers." As a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, her writing and research incorporate her unique perspectives on gender performance and queerness in relation to the expanse of heteronormativity, queer reproductive justice, and gender politics and ethical discourse surrounding experimentation with embryos and donor conception.

DF: I want to sincerely thank you for agreeing to do this interview with me. The exploration of abuse, community, and voice in your collection *For Your Own Good* is incredibly raw and powerful. Moreover, your vulnerability in writing about intimate partner violence in the queer community is not only commendable but also necessary in terms of the sociocultural phenomenon of compulsory heterosexuality that is still an omnipresent force in Canada. The narrator in your collection experiences many feelings of self-doubt; however, there is a deeply rooted seed of intuition planted within this narrator that ultimately gives her the strength to leave the abusive relationship. In a queer context, this narrative is vital as queer people often do not have this realistic representation in media and in literature. The ideas in this

collection have long been incubating in my brain, and I want to thank you for agreeing to answer these questions.

LH: Thank you so much, Davis. I am truly moved by the depth of your engagement with my work, and how the questions you developed for this interview (which you obviously devoted a great deal of time, care, and thought to!) have opened up some exciting new possibilities for interpretation in *For Your Own Good*. I am so looking forward to answering them as thoughtfully as I can today!

DF: As you have chosen to publish your works in feminist literary presses, are you writing for a specific audience / do you consciously consider who your audience will be while writing? If so, how does this influence your writing?

LH: I do tend to imagine my readers while writing or certainly who I hope to be my readers, and the people I love. This was one of the great joys of working with Estlin McPhee to create REVERB, the reading series we ran from 2013 to 2017: learning to create something beautiful in the form of a creative space for the people we cared about. Beyond influencing my writing, I find that holding the people I care about in mind while writing has a supportive, liberating effect that encourages me to continue, especially with difficult content.

DF: In an interview with *Open Book*, you mentioned “composting” poems when asked what you do with a poem that just isn’t working. Were there poems you composted, and later came back to, that became part of the collection *For Your Own Good*? If so, was this process similar to that of the narrator processing her abusive relationship? Moreover, do you think this period altered the poems or aided with the narrator’s journey to healing and forgiveness?

LH: Many of the poems in *For Your Own Good* took a great deal of composting. “The Disappearing Woman” stands out in my memory as a piece that took a great deal of time and many, many revisions before it reached the form in which it’s published. While I hadn’t thought that the process of composting might be similar to the narrative development of *For Your Own Good*, I do love considering that possibility.

DF: Although your collection is semi-autobiographical, you adhere to subjects such as horoscopes, magic, the Tarot, and the Major Arcana within the Tarot deck to narrate your journey. This creative use of symbols and magic to narrate this journey arguably disassociates your work from literary and poetic realism and, consequently, imbues it with a sort of cabalistic, visionary essence.

LH: This is a beautiful compliment. Thank you, Davis!

DF: Your work also foregrounds the liminal space in which pluralities coexist: the abusive relationship also contains moments of pleasure and feelings of desire.

LH: I would just add here that in my experience, and that of some, but likely not all, abuse survivors I've spoken with since creating this work, any pleasure or desire experienced within an abusive relationship is more of a hallmark of the relational container in which intimate partner abuse occurs, rather than a form of plurality. I would encourage anyone struggling with how moments of desire and/or pleasure might have shown up in an abusive relationship to speak with a trauma-informed and licensed therapist—ideally, someone who comes safely recommended by your peers, and who specializes in working with survivors of sexualized violence in particular. (This of course might not be the right option for everyone, as I'm not a health care professional myself, but I only mention this because I know it can be an especially fraught part of the experience.)

DF: In terms of genre, does the rejection of static binaries and rigid ways of perceiving—along with the subsequent exploration of the murky, grey space—reflect the ambiguity and confusion surrounding intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community?

LH: It certainly could! That wasn't my intention with the form, but I'm very pleased with your reading of the text here! I think my original intent to avoid binaries throughout the text was the ways in which I've seen binaries be weaponized against queer and trans people, and my own determination and hope to refrain from replicating that in my own work.

DF: I am wondering, too, how your work with the Tarot and magic contributes to this ambiguity. As the abuse does not fit the heteronormative framework of what 'actually' constitutes abuse, how important was it to play with this grey area and use Tarot as a means of narration?

LH: I think for me, the role of magic and Tarot in the text was a resource that supported me in coping with my own sense of powerlessness, and the ways in which I experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a kind of haunting or possession. The kind of magic that circulates quite popularly in the queer communities I've been a part of has often been a powerful support mechanism for those of us who crave protection and a sense of control over the systemic

forces that act on our lives daily. For me, it was important to include symbols from this kind of a practice, including the Tarot, in the text since they were a huge part of my life at the time as they helped me manage considerable distress and confusion.

DF: As a Queer woman, I have always told myself to listen to my intuition; however, in a society governed by the patriarchy, imposter syndrome and self-doubt come in large abundances. In your work, I feel met with a voice of intuition that quickly gets invalidated by a concurrent shadow of self-doubt. In an interview entitled “Fool’s Journey: Poet Leah Horlick Explores Trauma, Healing and Transformation Through Tarot Symbolism,” you explain that Tarot helped you map out the narrator’s journey. You also highlight Michelle Tea’s suggestion in *How To Grow Up* that “a good Tarot reading will tell you what you already know” and that you find a lot of your writing process “is about that refining and reflecting” (“Fool’s Journey”). In part six of the poem “Suit of Feathers,” which is entitled “Vulture,” you write that the narrator hides the cards under the bed from her partner. In relation to Michelle Tea’s assertions, is this act of hiding the cards a way to ignore intuition, or, what you already know? Is this symbolic of ignoring one’s voice or does it carry with it a different meaning?

LH: For me, that particular act represented the need to conceal yet another part of inner life that would have been ridiculed or exploited in the context of the abuse which in a way is a form of suppressing one’s own voice, yes! I am very moved by your interpretation here.

DF: *For Your Own Good* is certainly saturated with Jewish history and stimulates important intersectional feminist discourse. The poem “The Yellow Scarf” is especially contoured with a consideration of the history of your Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish ancestors. Did the consideration of the history of your ancestors catalyze your decision to listen to your intuition and find a way out of the relationship? How did their history impact your writing?

LH: There were certainly moments of abject racism in the context of the relationship that provided momentum, though it wasn’t until later that I began to integrate how a history of traumatic stress and intergenerational trauma might have been both a risk factor at the beginning of the relationship and also a source of strength throughout the recovery process. In my new book, *Moldovan Hotel*, I explore many of those themes—and specifically, in the poem “You Are My Hiding Place,” a defense mechanism that was used by my ancestors against the constant threat of sexual violence.

DF: In the conclusion of your collection, you mention the fear of being deemed a “bad feminist” or betraying the queer community if you spoke about your experience with intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. How did you overcome this fear?

LH: Out of desperation, I was able to kind of throw myself into finding professional mental health support despite the fear of being misunderstood by counsellors trained in heteronormative frameworks, and I have maintained that practice regularly as a part of my ongoing recovery. I am extremely fortunate to have lifelong friends who have known me through many chapters of my life and were able to reflect some of my experiences, changes, and symptoms back to me with love and respect. I also was supported by a kind of “whisper network” of other queer survivors, who generously shared their stories with me when I was especially wavering. I also began to spend more and more time with other queer people of colour, trans people, and queer people with disabilities, who regularly experience oppression from other queer people and modelled to me a new kind of community that was not predicated on a politics of respectability.

DF: Did you feel that getting this collection published was a necessity, as there has been a dearth of voices speaking about intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community?

LH: It was certainly my hope that it would contribute to, or become a part of, more and more works on this particular subject. I know my experiences, especially at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, of finding very, very little in print on this subject was tremendously alienating and also very galvanizing.

DF: If there was a sense of urgency and necessity which propelled your publishing journey, how much did it outweigh the fear?

LH: I would say those two particular emotions lived side-by-side (and sometimes still do!), rather than one outweighing the other. I think there was also a sense of obligation or certainly motivation to eliminate even just a small amount of silence, confusion, or erasure for other people who could be looking for writing that might reflect a shared experience. (Though I will add that any obligation was indeed a *sense* and not, in my opinion, at this time, an actual *requirement* for survivors.)

DF: Did you feel the pressure to filter details—and the gusto used to speak about those details—when writing about this particular type of abuse?

LH: It was important to me for my own internal purposes, and for the reader to create something that still felt beautiful to read, so rather than filtering, I felt quite focused on ‘readability’ and how the language could still technically succeed in addition to the narrative, or how I could continue to draw the reader in, and create a space that felt manageable to inhabit, despite the difficulty of the experience.

DF: Most of your poems in this collection are written in stanzas containing two lines; however, there are three poems in part two of the collection (“The Yellow Scarf,” “Seven of Swords” and “The Tower”) that are congested with words, leave no white space, and contain a stream-of-consciousness sort of style which diverges from the style of the other poems in the collection. Were these styles intentional and do they contribute to meaning in the collection? Moreover, was the placement of these three poems intended to enact an effect much like that of a volta in a sonnet?

LH: Oh yes! I wanted to have some moments where there could be some narrative release and freer expression, especially of grief and anger, in contrast to the restraint or focus I was trying to achieve in the two-line structure. And it was certainly my hope that they would enact a kind of a turn like a volta—I am so pleased that came through in your reading of the text!

DF: Part three of your collection is entitled “Amygdala,” which, to my knowledge, is the part of the brain wherein memory gets imprinted and the part of the brain that experiences PTSD. The poems in this section seem to relate to memory and PTSD. Was the name “Amygdala” chosen for this reason, or is there another meaning of this section’s title?

LH: Yes, that’s exactly it! (When I read that poem at events, I often end up meeting a lot of psychologists or other health care/science folks who are so excited about that title and its use in the poem. It’s always kind of delightful.)

DF: Intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community has been historically considered taboo and has, therefore, rendered victims silent; however, *For Your Own Good* challenges this notion of silence and secrecy. Your collection does not merely challenge individual silencing, but it unequivocally challenges systemic silencing. Can you speak about the role of silence in your collection and how it permeates your writing?

LH: I think I can only say that in my own experience, the systemic silence itself around this issue created a secondary trauma that only

prolonged and increased the individual grief, distress, and confusion I was already experiencing from surviving abuse, and it was important to me to demonstrate that particular violence and its effect in the text as much as the initial abuse. Poems like “Fill In the Blanks,” “The First Woman Who Doesn’t” and “Magic” were my attempt to show how the secondary wounding caused by silence and stigma ripple out from an intimate or domestic context to impact many queer relationships and communities. I’m very honoured to hear that the text has been successful in this goal in your reading. Thank you, Davis.

DF: Do you know of other works about intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community? Have you noticed an increase in the willingness to talk about these issues in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community since you published *For Your Own Good* in 2015?

LH: I have noticed a gradual but profound shift in the willingness, and necessity, to talk about intimate partner violence in a queer context. I can’t attempt to attribute it to one particular phenomenon, but I am thrilled that it seems to come with a concurrent effort to increase access to resources and information on healthy relationships to queer youth, and the disrupting of any remaining ideas about a utopian queer community.

I have a small, growing collection of works on related subjects—I find their increasing number is a deep comfort and a form of affirmation, rather than a source of shared grief (most of the time!). A few favourites that come to mind are *Everything is a Deathly Flower* by Maneo Mohale, *In The Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, the poetry of Jane Shi and Joelle Barron, the collection *Winter’s Cold Girls* by Lisa Baird, and Jameson Fitzpatrick’s piece “Poem in Which Nothing Bad Ever Happens to Me.” (Readers will benefit from content warnings for all texts.)

DF: I appreciate the specificity, and your reluctance to generalize, in your answers. Your answers are exceptionally thoughtful, and you offer wonderful advice for those who might be struggling with moments of desire that have shown up in an abusive relationship and the importance of speaking with a trauma-informed and licensed therapist. I would like to extend a sincere thanks for taking the time to answer these questions.

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