

*Reunion: an Albertan Revenge Comedy*¹

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YOU'RE INVITED!

“THERE’S A FUCKING REUNION! Lai Fun shouts, loud enough to wake the dead” (Mayr, *Venous Hum* 86). A reunion, a party, a masquerade, a fancy ball, a Hallowe’en extravaganza. Come dress up, be someone else, be yourself, but not quite, indulge in the revels of the carnivalesque nightmare that is the prairie High School reunion. You won’t quite achieve a perfect inversion of yourself but you may present a bent-self, a half-you, an improvised adaptation, a recreation. There’s a fucking reunion. Join in.

Suzette Mayr’s *Venus Hum* is set in the Frankencity of Calmonton. Or perhaps it’s Edmongary, who can tell for sure? Lai Fun gets married in Edmonton’s historical Hotel Macdonald, the stone griffins that decorate the street leading to Calgary’s downtown crash her reception, and Louve discovers an eel lying on the meridian where Calgary’s Centre Street meets Edmonton’s Groat Road (60). This melding of Alberta’s two largest urban centres implies a hyphenation of sorts, a blending of provincial geography, a determination to combine Alberta’s binary opposites. Binary opposites, after all, is what geographical Alberta is all about... yet I’m uneasy with these binary constructs, as they often perpetuate the very stereotypes of Alberta they purport to challenge. The thinking

¹ A Revenge Tragedy is an Elizabethan drama in which the dominant motive is revenge for a real or imagined injury. Most revenge tragedies end with a scene of carnage that disposes of the avenger as well as he/r victims. In the novel *Venous Hum*, Mayr plays with the notions of tragedy and comedy by juxtaposing images of revenge and carnage with scenes wherein racialized immigrants and lesbian couples negotiate their untraditional roles within their traditional domestic lives.

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goes: If you're from Alberta, you're either rural or you're urban; you're either small-town or big-city; you're either farm or oil rig; you're either Red Deer or Lethbridge; you're prairie or mountain, you're northern woods or Badlands.

Theories of binary opposites have been developed by Roman Jakobson through Ferdinand de Saussure and finally defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss. As Darlene Juschka succinctly summarizes Claude Lévi-Strauss's argument, in an introduction in her book on feminism, theoretical insights, and religion: "Nature is opposed to culture, female to male, raw to cooked, chaos to order..." (26). Furthermore, she explains: "The raw stands in opposition to the cooked, with each defining the other, but simultaneously indicating a metonymic relationship which means that evoking one part of the binary (the raw) really evokes the entire binary (the raw and cooked)" (26). Juschka² goes on to parse the ways in which those categories on one side of the oppositional line become aligned with each other (female with nature, etc.). Similarly, I am interested in the ways in which these binary oppositions become *universal* oppositions (i.e., that female is always the only direct and absolute opposite of male). Such binaries are stuff that grow delightful yarns. Mythic tales often invest in this idea of the "universal" binary, not just opposites, but opposites that insist each is the other's binary pole: the parables and allegories and legends that propose good against evil, strong against weak, white against black. Such "universal" binaries may be useful when offering metaphors of extremity, but metaphors have a tendency to leak their similean information into general discourse, and thus inform habits of thinking. Suzette Mayr has said about her novels: "I am interested in the details that make things difficult and complicated and messy and un-'universal'" (Mayr 2002).

² Darlene Juschka relies not only on a linguistic analysis of the binary opposition, but presents her argument in the context of an article in her anthology, by Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (61-80).

According to critic Debra Dudek, Mayr challenges “the ways in which Western literary traditions rely on insiders and outsiders” (Dudek 166). The literary tradition establishing an inside where every good writer should wish to reside.

Just as Juschka notes in examining not only the divisive power of binary opposites, but also the ways in which they begin to create (insidious) alignments, in the universal binaries I presented above, “good” and “strong” and “white” begin to align themselves together, just as “evil” and “weak” and “black” conflate on the other side of the linguistic phrase. This kind of leaky alignment is obviously problematic if one wishes to convince readers that to “blacken his name” or “darken her doorstep” are negatives that not only rely on clichéd language, but also reinforce the either/or binary that invents and invests in discriminatory insider/outsider discourse. To mess up those binaries messes with the meanings each extreme designates, but also rewrites the spectrum to include those who, as Fred Wah says, live in the inbetween³. The snare of the universal, then, is the enticement that it can be encapsulated or written by/about one group in order to “denigrate”⁴ another. And that universal re-establishes any story a reader already knows, dismisses other versions, promises that this one story contains all stories; so if you haven’t heard *your* story yet, well, perhaps you’re aligning yourself with the wrong heroes, perhaps you’re straddling too many grey points between the obvious and the thin black and white edges where “everybody” lives. The universal binary conflates the “us”

³ Poet Fred Wah has written about the concept of mixed race as a negotiation of the “inbetween” within the Canadian construction around the hyphen. See especially his critical article “Half-Bred Poetics” in his book, *Faking It*, as well as his photography article, “Is a Door a Word?” in *Mosaic* (Winnipeg): Vol. 37, #4 (2004).

⁴ This Latin loan word that English borrows – *from negro* – literally means: “to blacken.”

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and “them” extremes into no binary choice at all: “us” or “against us,” while the category of “them” retreats toward the eternally receding horizon of Other.

Another invisible problem with the Alberta “types” I list above, is that promoting certain provincial-wide binaries about Alberta as urban versus small-town, for example, re-inscribes a narrative of Alberta as only recently inhabited, as a province full of explorer and trapper stories, of pioneer farmers, or of indistinguishable city life. This image of Alberta as new-kid-on-the-block persists, despite a chronicle of narratives – oral and written – that speak alternative histories, and that remind readers of the plethora of indigenous stories, of the centuries of heroes and doctors and seamstresses and teachers and writers. Hence the need for another topsy-turvy party. Bakhtin’s carnival is present not only in Mayr’s (and others’) high school reunion, but in textual masquerades and banquets that celebrate the social institutions of words gone wild. The masquerade is not to insist that writers have to have masks, not to suggest that, eventually, certain writers will “find their voice” (presumably lost on the way to the Ball); rather, the mask and carnival and revenge reunion commemorate the countless writers who have informed this terrain, represented individual lives, recognized nations and their constitutions. Bakhtin’s carnival also closely connects the mask and societal upheaval with the figure of the grotesque, the problematic body that sticks awkwardly out of seemingly unified and cohesive narratives. Suzette Mayr, approaching both her reading and writing desires, asks for an Alberta that represents what she has said, “isn’t considered a typical Alberta face” (Mayr 1994). What, then, *is* an “Alberta” face? Who wears that face? Who sees that face? Who hosts the masquerade? Who understands that the dreadful face beneath the mask is likely more beautiful than the mask itself?

Says Mayr: “This whole notion of ‘prairie literature’ is one that needs some serious shaking up ... I want to shoot myself when I see Canadian Prairie Literature being represented by hay bells, pioneers, and gophers... It’s W.O. Mitchell and gophers *and* it’s Fred Wah and Hiromi Goto” (in Dudek 167). And Alberta Literature is Emma Lee Warrior and Marilyn Dumont and Gregory Scofield and Joan Crate.

In *Pale as Real Ladies* (1991), Joan Crate not only re-imagines a narrative for Pauline Johnson, she also expands the Alberta literary landscape to embrace Mohawk myths, to include a very particular cross-cultural character who fights to hold on to both her mother’s and her father’s heritages. Pauline Johnson could play the Mohawk princess, Tekahionwake, and she could dance at the British ball without losing her step. Her body reinvents itself within a Canadian province that continued to identify as a colonial birthright. Crate’s book, although set in Ontario, revisions Alberta, through Crate’s insertion of a narrator figure into Johnson’s history, a narrator who aligns herself with Johnson, with dual identity and with complicated bodily projections. Johnson, a historical and literary figure for Canadian writers, transforms into Albertan character, into this *place* that both embraces dual histories and resists the colonial narrative of native inhabitant and conquering heroes.

In the modernist novel *Tay John* (1960), Howard O’Hagan depicts his main character as caught between Shuswap culture and white trappers, between the masculine and the feminine, between being the hero of his own story and being the one who gets to tell that story. The truism, “history is written by the winners,” doesn’t encompass the whole story. History is also written by scribes and bystanders and passersby and bitter poets. But apparently not by heroes, not by bi-racial outsiders straddling more than one

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tale at once, and definitely not by the villainous monsters of the tale. Thus, in *Frankenstein*, the Creature gets to tell his own story at the end of the narrative, but only to his creator, only to readers whose sympathy comes too late, because he's dying, safe, enclosed, finished. The myth of Frankenstein's monster has mutated so that readers and film audiences believe the creator's name is the Creature's, and that the monster is the villain⁵. The Creature's role is to always and eternally embody the metaphor of the disaster that ensues when Man loves himself more than he reveres God and Nature. Frankenstein, argue so many critics, depicts the hubris of science, the catastrophe of the normal body gone wild, deviant, monstrous. Such a figure embodies the disabled abnormal, the freak, the cross-breed, embodies what Sheryl Buckley and Carol Donley call the "tyranny" of the normal body: "So many terms used to describe people outside physiological norms are negative and stigmatizing—freaks, mutants, monsters, and mistakes of nature, among others" (xvi). The monster stubbornly remains the metaphor for excessive ambition, excessive corporeal desire, and excessive physical prowess. And the creature, in *Frankenstein*, is just such a "deviant" normal: made from various other bodies, his own corporeal existence one of grave-robbery and surgery and, truly, the art of miscegenation.

At the beginning of *Venous Hum*, Louve (the human-eating-cum-immigrant-vegetarian) declares that "A monster is a monster is a monster" (Mayr 2004, 15), an allusion to Stein's oft-quoted dictum, "A rose is a rose is a rose." By invoking Stein, Louve shows off her literary knowledge in that her character is (among other things) an aspiring writer. Unlike Stein, Louve speaks of an impossible literalism. Mayr satirizes the idea of there being an equivalency between the full-blooded and the literal. The monster

⁵ Few readers name him the protagonist, though most concede he is the most important figure in the book.

as hybrid identity threatens stability in that it cannot be only one thing, but manifestly embodies a corporeal mix. Indeed, this mother character ironically reassures her daughter that the world contains no messiness, in her promise that creatures on one side of the narrative binary stay there, never to cross over, never to mix their blood, never to breed or bleed or leak across the page. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, critic Robert Young writes that “every time a commentator uses the epithet ‘full-blooded’, for example, he or she repeats the distinction between those of pure and mixed race” (27). And in his article “Foucault on Race and Colonialism,” Young follows Foucault by arguing that “blood” is the “key ideological term” that holds together class, race, and sexuality (61). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault links racism to sexuality through a discussion of blood, arguing that a “society of blood” gives way, by the twentieth century, to a “society of sexuality” (147). By linking social interactions and status to blood, Foucault makes explicit the progression from thinking about purity of race through sovereign hierarchy to thinking about purity of race through sexual normativity.

Lai Fun, in *Venous Hum*, not only negotiates her anxiety around a ten-year high school reunion, but also grapples with how she identifies herself as a lesbian, her own self-definition complicated by her worry she is a “fake” (Mayr 2004, 14), by a workaholic wife, by her pregnancy, and by her affair with her best friend’s husband. Not to mention her (heretofore unmentioned) monster heritage.

According to poet and critic Michael Davidson, the homoerotics of vampires relies on the homophobia of 19th- and 20th-century readers who find male penetration horrific. When that masculine penetration is enacted upon a male body, either or both participating

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figures risk feminization. Davidson says that “because Dracula’s bloodlust is gender blind, he is linked to homoerotic discourses, for which his effeminate and aristocratic qualities serve as markers” (43). Davidson suggests that hemophobia “taps into an ancient prejudice against bleeders,” a prejudice that links eugenics, Dracula, and immigration reform (41). The blood the monster craves defines that monstrous body as both sexually and physically deviant. In this vein, I pore over *Venous Hum*, here, in order to speak of the Alberta monsters that live under our beds, survive inside our own rib-cages. Alberta, as readers who’ve spent time going to high school reunions there know, is full of monsters. All Alberta books are about monsters. I argue that we are all monstrous. Perhaps *that* is what the adjective “Alberta” truly signifies: the monster, the awkward body, the margins encroaching upon one border, overlapping another border. Mayr’s book proposes that the division between “us” and “them,” between the “normals” and the “abs” cannot be easily discerned; identity based on skin acculturation, Mayr suggests, cannot recognize itself. That Lai Fun’s grade one teacher Mrs. Blake is a monster, and her own mother Louve is a monster, in this narrative, demonstrates that alliances through “blood” are ridiculous, farcical, preposterous. Mrs. Blake is a monster in that she terrorizes children, in particular the children who are not white, or whose parents are immigrants. Her hatred stems from her body, in that readers find out that she, too, is a monster “like” Louve and her family. But her attack on the children in these flashbacks is not because of either simple internalized racism or an ancestry she herself is unaware of. Unlike Renata in Suzette Mayr’s first novel, *Moon Honey*, Mrs. Blake does not carry a “smell” of familiarity (Mayr 1995, 176). Rather, the loathing Mrs. Blake feels for the students she is meant to care for and teach is more complicated. During a talk on Satire at

the University of Windsor, Suzette Mayr said this about the tragi-comedic trajectory of *Venous Hum*: “Many people think: ‘Immigrants took my job. If I can’t work, I can’t eat. If I can’t eat, then I die. Therefore, immigrants are killing me’” (Mayr 2008). Such an attitude (and its over-the-top conclusion) perpetuates the “us/them” binary that puts “them” into the same negative arena into which all other “not-us” categories begin to belong. For Mrs. Blake, the children cannot be *her*, due to their skin and their tongues, and therefore must be a particularly insidious kind of *them*. Thus when characters straddle this world or that culture, readers split them in half, then thirds, then splinter the remaining pieces so that skin itself requires an organ transplant.

Lai Fun has had enough of splitting herself. She enters an adulterous relationship with her friend’s husband rather than uphold her own sexuality and heritage, and because, as the narrator informs readers: “This is the way of the suburbs” (Mayr 2004, 139). Lai Fun, suburban, pregnant, and thoroughly Calgationian, spends most of the novel “passing” as a “typical” Albertan. Her “horror story” is not so much her turbulent emotions about every going on in her life right now, but rather the ongoing turmoil that originated for her with her peers and teachers in school. Lai Fun’s emotions ramble chaotically as she – reluctantly, yet determinedly – organizes her high school reunion: YOU’RE INVITED! In high school, Lai Fun “passed” in many ways, while at the same time she enacted a self she has been unable to return to for nearly a decade. Louve, although she has lived as a vegetarian for many years, never dismisses who she is from who she was. Lai Fun, utterly miserably, works doggedly at reintroducing herself to all those people from whom she’s spent the last ten years distancing herself.

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In a recent article on the phenomenon of racial “passing” in films, Miriam Petty discusses the themes and motifs commonly found in horror film. Speaking of the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, Petty says that “his hybridity is itself depicted as the source of his monstrosity” (34). Such an argument suggests that the monster in folklore has traditionally represented mixed-race characters, whom readers abhor because the very idea of mixing up bodily binaries both terrifies and exhilarates. Monsters are outsiders who’ve sneaked in – via monstrous offspring – a “them” faction, who secretly live among “us,” pretend to be “us,” and whose children come from within our own bodies. In an interview before *Venous Hum* was published, Suzette Mayr says:

I am interested in vampires because they work as a metaphor for just about anything having to do with being an outsider. They violate the sexuality rules because they sexily suck anyone’s blood and being killed by a vampire is a glamorous, orgasmic way to die. What pisses me off about the vampire myth though is that all the major vampires seem to be tortured, rich, white, young-ish men – there is nothing tragic or horrific about being rich, white, and male and I am going to write against this. Monsters in general work for me because sometimes I have felt ‘monstrous’ and outside category – I grew up bi-racial and gay in Alberta with assholes telling me how ‘hard’ it must be for me to be myself. (Mayr, 2002)

Bi-racial and gay in an Alberta whose recently-minted “official” centennial song (2008) has, in its second verse, the lines: “First Nations built the land / Fur trade, way back then. / We’ve come a long way since that. / Agriculture, lumberjacks, / Oil derricks, natural gas; / There is no turnin’ back.”⁶ The final words in this verse sound vaguely ominous, suggesting that even those who would prefer to “turn back” may not be

⁶ Ironically, this song also reminds me of the song I co-composed with other kids for Calgary’s centennial. The lyrics to the second verse are: “The Indians and the cowboys were the first ones in this town. / The farmers and the oilmen have brought us up, not down.” Although one song is about a city and one about a province – one written by children and one by an adult, one in Calgary’s mid-70s (1975) and one 30 years later – I find it suggestive that both “celebrate” and reaffirm the exact same Alberta stereotypes.

allowed. This officially-sponsored “song” *only* mentions First Nations people as living in this geo-political space to “buil[d] the land,” to usher in the fur trade, and to musically function as a historical Other who reminds “real” Albertans (presumably the men working on oil derricks) that Alberta has ‘come a long way, baby’. The song reinvests in that binary division that Albertans love to repeat: the urban versus the rural, with Albertans-of-colour squeezed into the recent urban category, and Indigenous Albertans assumed to reside in the rural-historic category. Missing in that terribly-flawed binary are the white and black American immigrants who homesteaded in Alberta in the early 1900s, the men from China who built the railroads then opened businesses in small-town Alberta, and a plethora of “new” Albertans who come from various parts of Canada and the world, from cities and from diverse terra firma. In a stereotyped provincial divide, the urban is all cityscape and oil business guys; the rural is red-neck salt-of-the-earth chaps. *Both* versions leave out First Nations people, both leave out the many and varied settlers who came (and still come) to Alberta from China, from Seattle, from the Caribbean, from South America, from the Ukraine, from the Philippines. This compartmentalizing of Albertans into one of two communal groups embodies the province, once again, as a vast (and often female) landscape of resources, empty yet promising, anticipating the kindly and rugged white *men* who will courageously settle this land, spontaneously reproduce, and almost absent-mindedly plant cities and river dams and skyscrapers and schools.

And once you sow high schools in a civilization, you’re bound to reap fraught reunions, desperate re-assemblings, without all the body parts included in the package.

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If you (and by “you,” I mean the universal you, the obvious you, the “every-person” represented-by-one-pronoun *you*) grow up Calgary, you grow up anti-Edmonton, perhaps even investing in a cultural slur by dismissing Edmontonians as people from “Edmonchuck,” that mythical rival, that big-city capital that got the name and the parliament and the obscenely monstrous shopping mall, but not the wealth, not the star attention, not the proximity to Banff, Calgary’s real claim to geographical fame.

Rivalry – between siblings or cities or mountain men or high schools – demarcates borders, lines and aligns people into one of two groups, designating *her* onto this side, *him* onto that side. There’s *your* team, this is *my* team; *there*’s my friend, *here*’s my enemy. Alberta is the best province, ever. Calgary is better than Edmonton, Triwood Community is better than Brentwood, Grade 9s are better than Grade 8s, girls are better than boys, *we* are better than *you*. The problem, of course, comes with tricky definition of “us” that can haunt an individual, can disturb the throng.

In high school, such rivalries underscore the petty conflicts that define and reveal larger social differences. Who “you” are becomes who you’re with, who likes you and who doesn’t. Cliques expand and contract – gaining popularity, losing members. If they need to, high-school students straddle more than one clique, belong to overlapping social groups. They hinge their identities on the drama club as well as the marijuana heads, on the party crowd as well as the drugs-free swim team. But straddling is difficult: negotiating membership between the kids who work after school and the preppy dressers can disrupt the pecking order, can disorder the order. One slip-up and you’ve lost your footing, damaged the hierarchy, injured a system dedicated to maintaining its bloodthirsty balance. And when you do fall, or begin already crawling or limping, when crutches

aren't an option because they signify social injury or emphasize the cultural difference between *you* and *them*, what then? What happens when disability metaphors don't work because high school isn't about skiing accidents, but about *Venous Hum*'s "Baked Potato" popular kids against the "Shit People" unpopular ones? When reunions should provide opportunities for revenge, but too often reinvent the sad comedies of puberty; when bodily wounds aren't the problem so much as bodily monstrosity, what then? What's a poor bi-racial pregnant vegetarian vampire to do? Nominate herself reluctant chair of the High School Reunion committee, of course.

Lai Fun, hating every minute of it, organizes all her ex-friends to reunite, come together, *come back*. But this is no ordinary high school reunion, this is a reunion of kids who studied together from grade one right through grade twelve. Lai Fun hated high school, but in grade one, she's still hopeful, eager, buoyant. Her mother Louve, back in an oil-rich, boom Calgary of the 70s, readies her youngest daughter for French-immersion elementary school, brushes Lai Fun's hair into three pigtails, walks her to the bus stop across the street. As she does so, neighbours watch "the only black lady on the street and her half black, half white little daughter walk across the avenue like their walking is the Second Coming" (Mayr 2004, 90). Louve invokes Yeat's poem, "The Second Coming," to translate her neighbours' fear of the unknown into one of that rough beast, "slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem." The beast may well announce a new regime, but Louve understands that the Calgarton suburbanites *won't* be pleased with the messy progeny that result.

Louve, her husband Fritz-Peter, and Lai Fun live in an Alberta city that both is and isn't heritage to Pierre Elliott Trudeau's official policy of Multiculturalism. They are

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vampires by blood. Trudeau has nevertheless invited this family in, has, in fact, opened Canada's national arms to all sorts of foreign and unseemly and messy "aliens." The invitation comes with urbane limitations: Lai Fun suffers at the hands of cruel and racist teachers, Fritz-Peter gets laid-off during the 80s bust. Louve finds ways to tolerate both daughters' homosexuality, which she mostly blames on the Alberta climate: "Maybe this is why Lai Fun becomes a homosexual. Because there [were] no natural changes of the seasons around her as a baby" (89). Louve's body does not suitably match the 'normal' Alberta insider, Alberta does not appropriately suit the 'normal' environment Louve thinks is best for her offspring.

Bi-racial and gay, the Lai fun attempts to balance wedding plans, pregnancy, heterosexual affair, and reunion organizing in order to, finally, put to rest her own identity. "Naturally," Lai Fun discovers that suburban stability is not an option, and that her chaotic lineage is cause for wild celebration, not stasis. For the beautiful monsters that inhabit Mayr's pages, there is no such identity marker as "finally."

Normal or Ab? Revenge Tragedy or Comic Vengeance? *Venous Hum* refuses a reassuring ending, declines to clean up the blood on the floor, treat the body as anything other than *delectable*. The myth of a universal binary – Calgary or Edmonton? monster or human? straight or racialized? – reveals itself to be predicated upon the tension of "us" and "not us." But *Venous Hum* invites vampires into the homestead: her novel includes the "not us" and the "also us," the "them" and the "me," the "either" and the "and." *This* is Alberta: monstrous and grotesque, beginning with complicated embellishments and ending with a carnivalesque, vegetarian, flesh-eating, orgasmic banquet. And you're (all) invited!

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APPENDIX ONE

Alberta

Composer: Mary Kieftenbeld

Verse 1

Flatlands, rollin' plains
Clear blue skies, prairie rains;
A tapestry of colours in the fall.
Snow covered mountain tops,
Wheat fields, canola crops;
Alberta has it all.

Chorus

Alberta is calling me.
Home sweet home, it's where I'm proud to be.
Alberta is calling me.
Livin' right I'm feelin' free.

Verse 2

First Nations built the land
Fur trade, way back then.
We've come a long way since that.
Agriculture, lumberjacks,
Oil derricks, natural gas;
There is no turnin' back.

Chorus

Alberta is calling me.
Home sweet home, it's where I'm proud to be.
Alberta is calling me.
Livin' right I'm feelin' free.

Bridge

Culture diverse as it can be.
This is the land of opportunity.
Welcoming friends, night and day.
That's the way I pray Alberta stays.

APPENDIX TWO

Calgary

Composer: Triwood Community Centre Summer Kids

Winner: 1975 Calgary Centennial City-Recreation Song Contest

Verse 1

With rootin' tootin' cowboys and a Queen to take our stand,
We've got majestic mountains and a rolling prairie land.
We've got no hate, no strife, we're free; we've got no poverty.
It's Calgary we love!

Chorus:

Calgary is a 100 years old.
Calgary is a 100 years old.
Calgary is a 100 years old.
It's Calgary we love!

Verse 2:

The Indians and the cowboys were the first ones in this town.
The farmers and the oilmen have brought us up, not down.
The people work together and we make this city strong.
It's Calgary we love!

Chorus:

Calgary is a 100 years old.
Calgary is a 100 years old.
Calgary is a 100 years old.
It's Calgary we love!