

*Mashkode*  
**A Verse Novel**

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BY

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from the rich tradition of the hybrid/verse novel, from my experiences as a two-spirit Anishinaabe/Turkish-Cypriot, and from post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, *Mashkode* puts its own spin on the mythical impossibility of the Manitoba Legislative Building. The story centers on representations of hybridized "Others" where the building fails to, forging a new myth in the process.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

My first encounters with the Manitoba Legislative Building took place during early adulthood. Although I had grown up in the north end of Winnipeg, I did not explore the core of the city until I started university. I first entered the building in the summer of 2019. I was with a small group of Indigenous youth who had occupied the legislative grounds, northeast of Queen Victoria's statue. Some of these people would help destroy the statue two years later.

For four days a fire was kept lit in a pit on the legislative lawn to support Indigenous Hawaiians, who were in protest over the construction of a large telescope on Mauna Kea—a sacred mountain. I arrived with the naïve thought that I could change something.

After the first night, a few of us stayed up to keep the fire going until the morning. We sat around the fire pit and talked. The manicured beauty of the grounds turned eerie in the dead of night, and the empty blocks were lit by white, LED streetlights. Every now and then, we would hear distant sirens or welcome an odd passerby to sit with us, but the night was mostly quiet. One woman began to talk about the legislative building as she laid near the fire.

“This place is a huge middle finger to us, like ‘Fuck you, I conquered you.’”

We paused to stare at the building, at the Golden Boy statue artificially lit in the dark.

“I've heard demonic stuff has gone on in there,” she said. “Like sacrifices.”

I'd never heard anything like it. I studied the north pediment of the building as we walked up the steps to use the bathroom in the morning. I had a growing sense that I was not inside another generic government building as we passed by a Manitoba limestone bust of Athena overlooking two bronze bison near the grand marble staircase.

Days at the camp were hot and chaotic. We sat on blankets on the lawn under a blaring sun while commuters and government employees scoffed at us. We ate off of disposable plates

with plastic utensils and drank from plastic water bottles. It was a days-long picnic and social gathering veiled as a sacred ceremony, but nobody really knew what they were doing. It felt like each of us was missing a distinct part of our identities as Indigenous people and we were trying to find it there, by playing Indian with each other and sleeping in Wal-Mart tents on the legislative grounds. I could not understand how the copious amount of garbage we created every day was helping the Hawaiians, so I left the camp shortly afterwards, but curiosities lingered about this odd building which sat just blocks away from my apartment.

Fast forward to 2021. I started off the year in a graduate poetry workshop in the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan. The Golden Boy kept appearing in my poems. The statue popped up unexpectedly as he does in the skies of downtown Winnipeg, where I have lived since 2017. The Golden Boy is considered Manitoba's best-known symbol, so I was taken aback to learn that my peers in the MFA program were not familiar with the statue. If the Manitoba Legislative Building was a Christmas tree, then the Golden Boy is the shiny star at the top.

During my initial research of the Golden Boy, I learned the statue was sculpted in France and modelled after the Greek god Hermes. The sheaf of wheat cradled in his left arm signifies agricultural and economic prosperity, while the lit torch in his right hand is a symbol of Manitoba's eternal youth. In my early poems, I struggled to understand what the Golden Boy means to Winnipeg today, a hundred and two years since the building's opening. My curiosity grew with every mention or encounter of the statue.

I finished the poetry workshop and embarked on a six-month mentorship with Katherena Vermette. While I had not thought of myself as a serious poet before the MFA program, the feat

of completing a poetry thesis was a daunting but thrilling prospect. I decided to dive in headfirst, but I needed a story.

After writing about my personal life in graduate workshops, I was bored. So I abandoned my initial plans to write a poetry thesis akin to Vermette's confessional *North End Love Songs* and I went to the library to check out a book called *The Hermetic Code: Unlocking One of Manitoba's Greatest Secrets* by Frank Albo.

The Golden Boy turned out to be the tip of the mythical iceberg that is the Manitoba Legislative Building. In his book, Albo argues that the building is a reconstruction of the temple of King Solomon II. Albo writes that at its core, the Legislative building symbolizes the union between the gods Hermes and Inanna (later synonymous with Ishtar/Aphrodite), which together represent Winnipeg as a gateway for commerce and agricultural prosperity as it was during the building's development in the 1910s.

The Golden Boy stands two hundred and forty-three feet above the Pool of the Black Star, the room at the bottom of the Legislative building. The Pool's design is inspired by Egyptian and Greek sacrificial altars, according to Albo, and symbolizes a sort of underworld, while the dome of the Golden Boy represents heaven, mimicking the hermetic golden rule of "as above, so below" (Albo).

At the centre of the room is the eight-pointed black star. What drew me to this star initially was its connection to Aphrodite, who was said to have been born on the shores of Cyprus, the Mediterranean island my father immigrated to Canada from. I read that Aphrodite's birthplace "hints at her eastern origins as a fertility goddess" (Cartwright).

Soon after, the black star motivated me to read *The Descent of Inanna*. I was happy to learn the influence of Inanna and her counterparts in Turkey and Cyprus, and my experience with



the Legislative building was beginning to feel like a strange rekindling of my relationship to all the aspects of my mixed heritage.

Go to the rotunda on the second floor and you can look down on the black star, but it will only appear in the centre of the balustrade to the Golden Boy. These two symbols centre the building, and a lacuna exists between them. Stand on the black star and your voice will echo throughout the building—an acoustic effect meant to represent democracy and the power of a single voice, a single vote.

Eight lamps encircle the black star which further symbolize the union between Hermes and Inanna. Two faces are carved into each base, one male and one female, and represent Hermaphroditos. At the bottom are the hooved feet of the Greek god Pan, who has been called the son of Hermes. Pan was a goat satyr who became associated with images of Satan, and his death was “a symbol of the end of the old pagan religions and the shift to Christian monotheism” (Greenberg).

I also learned that the famous proclamation of Pan’s death was thought to be a mistranslation meant to announce the death of Tammuz, a god associated with shepherds who was also the husband of Inanna. I found this interesting, since I had already read *The Descent of Inanna*, the ancient Sumerian tale which ends with Tammuz taking Inanna’s place in the underworld every six months after he failed to mourn her death. Both Pan and Tammuz are symbols of fertility and the wilderness.

As I familiarized myself with the Manitoba Legislative Building, I realized the place I saw myself most was in the Pool of the Black Star. As someone who is two-spirit, I connected to the images of Hermaphroditos; as someone of Anishinaabe/Turkish-Cypriot descent, I saw myself in the black star of Inanna as well as the hybridity of Pan and Hermaphroditos. Looking

back on this period, what strikes me as odd is that the images I connected with the most in the Manitoba Legislative Building were associated to the devil and hell, but these depictions ultimately formed the protagonist of my MFA thesis, Mashkode.

Mashkode is a genderfluid bison satyr. I chose the name Mashkode because the Anishinaabe term for bison is mashkode-bizhiki, or ‘prairie cow.’ I later heard a Winnipeg myth about a hooved man who shows up to parties with boundless alcohol and is thought to represent the devil. While it was exciting to see Mashkode reflected in local Indigenous myth, this myth was not a factor in her formation. In *Mashkode*, a verse novel, the statues of the Manitoba Legislative Building come alive after the protagonist’s arrival, and the black star becomes a portal to the afterlife, where she ultimately travels. I chose to write my thesis as a verse novel since I wanted to create something akin to an epic. In an interview with Paul Hetherington in *Inside the Verse Novel: Writers on Writing*, the poet calls *Gilgamesh* “almost as much proto-verse novel than epic poem” (Weste 21). I had also read about Ishtar’s appearance in the story, so I followed my nose to the epic.

While *Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest pieces of literature yet discovered, I was surprised to find that at its heart, the epic is about a man accepting his mortality and the death of a loved one. Reading this in the summer of 2021 with COVID-19 lockdowns always seemingly on the horizon, it felt like everyone around me was either struggling to accept their own mortality or that someone they love could pass at any time. Meanwhile, some people continued on as usual, oblivious to anyone else’s struggle. Soon after, I came across a paper by Yingge Zheng and Peitao Zhu that compared the epic of *Gilgamesh* to the COVID-19 pandemic. They write that “[j]ust as the bereaved Gilgamesh believed that he, unlike his brother Enkidu, could transcend death, many individuals struggling with the pandemic seem to believe that they, unlike the vulnerable and the

sick, could defy all odds and survive a deadly virus” (Zheng). At the end of the epic, Gilgamesh accepts his fate. He does so only after an arduous journey in pursuit of knowledge, sparked by the death of his brother. These were aspects of the story that I attempt to mimic in *Mashkode*. But *Mashkode* does not seek immortality like Gilgamesh. Instead, her bereaved quest is to retrieve her hybrid sister Sekhmet from the afterlife.

Death was certainly on my mind at this time. I was born prematurely and have suffered from various lung illnesses for most of my life. I was also a frontline worker at this point, as I worked at a shelter for Indigenous women and children. The world was turning into a scary place, and my MFA thesis became an outlet for me to avoid fear of death or dying. *Mashkode* was also becoming my own *Inferno* on the prairies, as the story required me to design my own version of the afterlife. However, I did not form my design out of devotion to a singular religion like Dante. In his book *Dante: Poetics of Conversion*, John Freccero writes that *Inferno* is the first novel “of the self,” as the journey requires the narrator to confront the darkest evils, and this is a concept that I hung onto for dear life as I first swung through *Mashkode*. My design of the afterlife incorporates aspects of the Anishinaabe, Greek and Mesopotamian worldviews, and it is anchored by the Anishinaabemowin word bimose, which means both *walk* and *journey*.

*Mashkode*’s journey in the afterlife intensifies the further she walks, and the people she meets along the way are in penance for various evils: crimes against oneself, to society and nature.

Constructing *Mashkode*’s afterlife then allowed me to become my own bogey-man and forced me to reckon with the values that were important to me amidst regular pandemic lockdowns.

My poetry submissions were flowing to Katherena, who said she felt like she was on an acid trip as she read my work, but that she always knew exactly where she was. I was beginning to think I had stumbled upon a promising thesis, but then the statue of Queen Victoria at the

legislative was pulled down by protestors on Canada Day in July 2021. I was not sure how to continue my project with such a new and glaring absence on the legislative grounds.

“The people who came here to this country, before it was a country and since, didn't come here to destroy anything, they came here to build,” former Premier Brian Pallister said in response to the destruction of the statue, whose decapitated head was found in the Assiniboine River by a kayaker (“Here’s...”). Then Wab Kinew, Opposition leader of the Manitoba NDP, publicly berated Pallister’s new Indigenous affairs minister for defending residential schools during his swearing in ceremony, after the former minister had resigned due to the Premier’s comments. All of this led to an apology and Pallister’s resignation.

Still today, Queen Victoria’s pedestal stands bare, decorated with red handprints and thousands of orange flags. There was a period of uncertainty as to whether the statue would be restored, but the province recently revealed that this will not happen due to the extent of the damages. When the statue was pulled down, my first thought was: “F\$%K!” and my second was: “So you set your thesis in a place that worships British imperialism, now what?” My writing streak hit a slump, but I was able to scrap together a first draft for Katherena by the end of the mentorship. I just didn’t feel like the poems had a heart yet, because they bore no real critique of the building. As an intergenerational residential school survivor, I wondered if focusing my MFA thesis on the legislative building would look as if I was celebrating my own colonization. However, this plateau took place in the early months of my research, so I gave myself more time. I was still dedicated to Mashkode and wanted to complete her journey, but I was convinced that I would not be able to finish my thesis if Queen Victoria’s pedestal remained empty.

The following November, I attended an online lecture by University of Winnipeg Classics professor Dr. Melissa Funke called: “Building a Narrative: Use and Misuse of Antiquity

at the Manitoba Legislature.” In her lecture, Funke argues that the settler-colonial ideas Pallister had tried to convey in his now infamous speech are reflected in the building he went to work in.

Funke likens the north pediment of the Manitoba Legislative Building to the Parthenon of Athens, which was also built at a time when its founding nation had thought itself an upcoming superpower. She also refers to the metopes of the Parthenon, which depict wars between the Greeks and Amazonians, centaurs, and giants. Funke explains that these “mythologized others” are meant to represent a lack of civilization, and I found this point interesting in relation to the depiction of the hybrid god Pan at the Manitoba Legislative Building.

In his essay “On the Transformative Power of Hybrid Forms,” Matthew Hittinger writes: “Consider for a moment the word ‘hybrid’ derived from the Latin *hybrida* meaning mongrel, a child the product of high and low class, a sign of mixed breeding. Degenerate.” Hybrid forms create “third spaces,” according to Hittinger, and he writes that these “new” forms are sometimes the only ones that can fully capture the experience and identity of people who society deems as “other” (Hittinger). I connected to that feeling of other-ness, as I have always had to create “third spaces” for myself in Canadian society. With *Mashkode*, my goal is to tell a story that reflects this struggle.

I further researched the concept of hybridity and came across Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, in which Bhabha argues that our contemporary cultures are not inherited from a pure tradition, but from the margins between civilizations. Bhabha writes that it is inside these “in-between” spaces where new, hybrid identities are being created, and the margins of society will increasingly define the core during times of post-colonialism (Ellis). For Bhabha, traces of the colonized are not exterminated entirely during conquest, but “repeated as something different—a mutation, a hybrid” (Bhabha 11). To me, these cultural traces are seen throughout

the Manitoba Legislative Building. The star of Inanna, sculptures of Hermaphroditos, Pan, Egyptian sphinxes and Louis Riel as well as the statue of a war chief on the eastern portico are all examples of these “in-between” interactions. While these hybrid features of the building are not the shining stars of the legislature, they are gems hidden in plain sight.

A paper by George Fulford, “Stone memories, sculptured history: multiple readings of Manitoba's Legislative Building,” further cemented the ethics of *Mashkode*. The paper is a collection of essays by six academics, each with their own individual perspective on what the Manitoba Legislative Building means today. The diverse range of myths seen in the Legislative building “encourages the public to celebrate ideological impossibility,” Arden Hill writes in his essay “Lacuna.” He introduces philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia in relation to the Legislative building, as it “neutralizes or inverts the set of relations that it designates, mirrors or reflects.” And a point Hill makes several times throughout his essay mirrors one made by Dr. Funke in her lecture: that the story the Manitoba Legislative Building tells is largely from a colonial-capitalist, middle/upper-class, white European perspective (Fulford).

My goal with *Mashkode* was to put my own spin on the mythical impossibility of the Manitoba Legislative Building, and to centre the hybridized “Others” where the building fails to, forging a new myth in the process.

The closest literary model for *Mashkode* I could find was Marie Clements’ 1993 play *Age of Iron*, which is an urban Indigenous retelling of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. In Giorgia Severini’s paper “‘You do not understand ME’: Hybridity and Third Space in *Age of Iron*,” the author suggests that Clements’ play uses Bhabha’s third space theory to assess the state of Indigenous people in contemporary Canada. She writes:

“Yet the play also appears to show the limitations of this theory...[S]ince it shows the cultures of the white colonizers and the non-white marginals as hybrid, but this hybridity does not stop whiteness acting with the power to Other.” The play ultimately “calls for renegotiation of the post-colonial culture of marginalized groups to occur within the marginal communities themselves” (Severini).

The “power to Other” as a hybrid is seen in *Mashkode*, as the protagonist asks her reflection: “Are you the tamer or the tamed?” after she enables the murder of her fellow bison. And the renegotiation of the post-colonial culture is seen at the end of the story when a statue of Sekhmet, the Egyptian human/lioness hybrid, is placed atop of Queen Victoria’s empty pedestal. As lonely as it felt writing *Mashkode*, I was glad to see that this was a trail that has been blazed before to some extent by another Indigenous writer.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, after writing about the Manitoba Legislative Building for over a year without being allowed back inside due to the pandemic, I was finally able to go in for a tour. I had butterflies as I walked up the front steps for the first time since 2019. In his tours of the building, Frank Albo would have attendees imagine they were about to step into a temple, and that is truly what it felt like as I walked up those steps.

During my research of the Legislature, I saw many of my peers simply dismiss the building as “colonial,” which it is, but I wanted to ask a different question: What will the Manitoba Legislative Building mean when our civilization ceases to exist? “Meaning is articulated in the gap where the text (the building) and the audience (myself) intersect,” Maria Fowler writes in her essay “Perspectives on the Centre,” and each meaning is mediated through the complexities of our positions as the viewer (Fulford).

The Manitoba Legislative Building was built at a time when the province wanted to show off its newfound wealth, gained largely thanks to colonialism and the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was also constructed during a period of transition, since this was following the end of the fur trade and the Red River Rebellion, as well as the extinction of the prairie bison, but the architecture fails to centre these stories. For me, the Manitoba Legislative Building represents the invisible sacrifices of people on the margins of society. My ancestors were confined to their reserves when the building opened in 1920. They never saw the Golden Boy, who represented a dream that came at the cost of their freedom—economically, politically, literally.

Now, whenever I pass by the Legislature, I find myself not dwelling so much on the imperialism of the architecture, but the joy that Mashkode has brought to my life. I find myself searching for her in between the pillars or atop of the roof, playing with the sphinxes.

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Winnipeg, Manitoba  
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DEDICATION

To all the North End kids with big dreams