

Waldemar Zacharasiewicz  
Christoph Irmscher (Eds.)

# Cultural Circulation

Dialogues between Canada and the American South

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Österreichischen Akademie  
der Wissenschaften



**OAW**

WALDEMAR ZACHARASIEWICZ AND CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER (EDS.)

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DIALOGUES BETWEEN CANADA AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH



ÖSTERREICHISCHE AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN  
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## Acknowledgements

The present volume is the result of an international colloquium that took place in Vienna in September 2010. Twenty-six writers and scholars from North America and from six European countries had been invited to explore the under-researched topic of the cultural exchange between the American South and in the fields of literature and culture. Highly respected experts in the field of Southern studies and equally well-known specialists in the realm of Canadian literature and culture turned their attention to the analysis of historical links between these two vast cultural spaces and considered the literary reflection of significant movements from one large region to the other in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They dealt especially with intertextual relationships and studied the creative energies that were released when North encountered South and South encountered North.

The colloquium and the publication of its proceedings were made possible by several grants the organizers received from institutions both in Austria and abroad. The Rector of the University of Vienna, Georg Winckler, and the Dean of its Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies, Franz Römer, offered initial support and the Austrian Academy of Sciences gave a generous grant, which are both gratefully acknowledged.

The colloquium also received financial assistance from the Canadian government through a grant given to the Center for Canadian Studies at Vienna University, and was similarly supported by the Association of Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries (GKS). A grant from the U.S. Embassy enabled several scholars from North America to attend the colloquium whilst the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research and the Cultural Office of the city of Vienna similarly provided support. Additional help was given by the Association for the Promotion of North American Studies at the University of Vienna.

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press his gratitude to Indiana University Bloomington for granting a sabbatical, which was also partly used for editorial work. Erika Jenns at Indiana University Bloomington meticulously prepared the index and proofread the entire text.

The two editors of this volume would also like to thank the Austrian Academy of Sciences for including this volume in its series of *Sitzungsberichte*. The editors wish to dedicate this volume to their many friends on both sides of the Atlantic who have engaged in the study of cultural circulation in the North American continent and across the Atlantic.

## Introduction

In *Birds of Ontario*, a magisterial, beautifully written account of ornithological sightings in and around his neighborhood, the coal merchant Thomas McIlwraith of Hamilton, Ontario, lovingly remembers a stuffed bird that was given to him in the summer of 1890, a small species that he had never seen but that corresponded exactly to written accounts of Cory's Bittern, a "southern bird," which he believes "has not been found anywhere north of Florida." Yet there it was, and the Toronto taxidermist who had prepared the bird had told him that it had been killed in a marsh near Toronto. Since then, there had been at least one other sighting in the Ashbridge marsh. Why had these birds come here? Mr. McIlwraith knew the answer: "No doubt this species associates with our common little bitterns, many of which spend the winter in Florida, and it is just possible that some gallant *exilis* has in his own way painted the beauties of Ashbridge's marsh in such glowing colors that as to induce this little brown lady to accompany him to the north, when he started on his annual journey in spring. Pity she did not fare better..." (110). Alerted by this story, paging through the other descriptions in the book, the reader discovers that very few of McIlwraith's birds can truly be said to be "of Ontario." Instead they are from all over the place – coming and leaving as they choose. For the birds, north and south are matters of convenience, not categories of belonging, a notion that McIlwraith, an immigrant from Scotland anxious to establish himself here, finds disturbing but also strangely comforting, as his frequent comments on the subject attest. For the bitterns of North America, everything circulates: it's their way of life. When your home is everywhere, if at different times of the year, exile is nowhere.

In varying degrees, the essays collected in this volume explore the ramifications of this premise. What the birds know, writers seem to have known all along. The lively response to our invitation to submit papers related to the interconnections between Canada and the American South demonstrated to us that the cultural circulation between two huge parts of the North American continent is an under-researched topic. And papers we received quickly reinforced our sense of the multiple ties between the two cultures that extend far beyond the preference of Canadian golfers for the links near Myrtle Beach in South Carolina or the annual migration to Florida or the Carolinas of well-off Canadians tired of their cold winters. Readers have long been conscious of the inspiration major Southern authors have provided to authors writing north of the 49th Parallel, and pertinent demographic facts have become part

of the collective North American consciousness. One need think only of the enforced displacement of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Acadians, who later reassembled in the Deep South, or the flight of thousands of fugitive slaves from Dixie who tried to make their escape to the safe haven in the north, at that time British North America. In addition, there have been several 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors (e.g., Elizabeth Spencer, Clark Blaise, Leon Rooke) who moved north from Dixie or who relocated several times during their writing lives, crossing and re-crossing the border between the two neighboring countries.

The essays in this volume were first delivered as talks at an international colloquium on “cultural circulation” held at Vienna University in September 2010. Experts on Southern and Canadian literature met for several days to discuss multiple aspects of cultural and literary exchanges between Canada and the American South. The essays that grew out of these talks and that are collected here shed new light on the many interconnections between North and South. Of course, they cannot, and don’t attempt to, exhaust a topic the richness of which has become even more evident to us as we have tried to organize the volume according to thematic clusters.

Our opening salvo comes from the pen of a major Canadian writer, the self-defined “Alberta maverick” Aritha van Herk, who boldly continues one of William Faulkner’s most enduring inventions – the life of deep-breathing Canadian Shreve McCannon, the Harvard roommate of high-strung Quentin Compson, now a pathologist in Edmonton. Expanding hints scattered over the course of Faulkner’s great novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, Aritha van Herk imagines Shreve’s life beyond Faulkner’s novel, as told from the perspective of his Edmonton landlady. Van Herk’s “ficto-critical” story explores the mystery of a man who, after all these years, still misses his friend from a region he never understood (Shreve’s eyes turn bright when asked about Quentin) and who, walking around windswept Edmonton with his “sackful of stories,” remains something of a stranger even though he is now supposedly “home.”

Following the course of North American history, our first thematic cluster unites several essays related to “le grand dérangement” of the Acadians or to other wanderings by a Frenchman across North America. Berndt Ostendorf offers a socio-cultural survey of the challenges experienced by the descendants of Acadian settlers in Louisiana and shows how their resilience helped them to cope with the experience of deportation and later with the attempts of Anglo-American capitalists to marginalize them. Though they were, numerically speaking, a rather small minority, the “Cajuns” managed to absorb

other ethnic groups in the same area and, in spite of powerful trends to Americanize them, retained their language until, ironically, the Codofil initiatives to revive French threatened to eliminate their linguistic culture. Ostendorf singles out the strikingly successful film *Bélisaire, le Cajun*, directed by rebellious sons of genteel Acadians, which gained great popular appeal and helped revitalize Cajun culture. From a more literary perspective, Jutta Ernst stresses writer Kate Chopin's double perspective as both an outsider and insider in Louisiana society. Her ambivalent attitude to the "local color" tradition allowed her to criticize biased, stereotypical representations of indigent Cajuns, whose inherent dignity she evoked in stories such as "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche." Chopin's subversion of social hierarchy contrasts with continued attempts to discriminate against Cajuns, such as the effort to ban the use of the French language the Cajuns had inherited from their Acadian forbears. The iconic identification figure of displaced Acadians everywhere became a woman who never existed in the first place, Longfellow's epic heroine Evangeline. In his essay, Jacques Pothier traces the links between Faulkner's response to Longfellow's intercultural fantasy, the uncollected story "Evangeline," and Acadian writer Antonine Maillet's complex narrative re-writing of Acadian history in *Pélagie-la-Charrette*, the first novel written by a non-French citizen to win the coveted Prix Goncourt in 1979. Borrowing from both Rabelais as well as Faulkner, Maillet spectacularly returns Evangeline (re-christened "Pélagie Leblanc") to her homeland, as the leader of a trek of deported Acadians that assumes mythic dimensions. Pélagie has been dubbed the "Mother Courage" of Canadian literature, and her dogged persistence has indeed brought a measure of redemption to Acadian culture: "I have avenged my ancestors," Antonine Maillet declared.

The first cluster is brought to a conclusion with another displaced Frenchman's trek, this time north, recreated from the traveler's diary entries by Christoph Irmscher. The ornithological artist and writer John James Audubon, though born in Haiti, would have liked for his contemporaries to believe that he was in fact born in Louisiana. His allegiance to all things southern was certainly undisputed. Nevertheless, Audubon, deep into his work on the spectacular *Birds of America* (1827-1838), which would become the world's most expensive printed book, was haunted by the sobering realization that he knew nothing about his favorite birds' breeding grounds way up north. Audubon's Labrador journey in the winter and spring of 1833 was supposed to take him to the origins of avian life. But instead it became a trek into the seventh circle of hell, to a place where birds were killed en masse by human greed. Audubon's disenchantment and conversion experience (though short-

lived) from killer to savior of birds is memorably invoked in *Creation*, the 1999 novel about Audubon's Labrador experience by contemporary Canadian writer Katherine Govier.

The volume's second cluster comprises essays that address the historic flight of fugitive slaves from the U.S. to the imagined and all too often imaginary safe haven Canada and the diverse ways in which this traumatic collective experience has been rendered in different media and literary genres. In his new reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Richard Ellis examines the novel's hopelessly intertwined geography, in which, at least from the slave's perspective, the differences between North and South are matters of degree only. Ellis highlights the basic irony inherent in the notion of the slaves seeking freedom in a colony of Britain, with its own history of repression. According to Ellis, the astounding success of Stowe's novel was not just due to the potency of her sentimentalist writing but reflected the deep undercurrents of sadism and masochism in her narrative, which traverse all distinctions between southern and northern, black and white in the novel, appealing to, as well as implicating, contemporary readers everywhere. Jutta Zimmermann, in her contribution to this cluster, contrasts Alex Haley's blockbuster success *Roots* – both the novel (1976) and the TV series (1977) that grew out of it – with the award-winning novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007), by the Canadian mixed-race writer Lawrence Hill, the son of American immigrants to Canada. Haley's particular brand of cultural nationalism led him to gloss over the ethnic diversity of the slaves deported from Africa, whereas Hill, influenced by studies of the black diaspora such as Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, seeks to regain precisely a sense of the hybridization the slave trade caused. In the process, he also challenges the cherished myth of Canada's clean record concerning slavery. That myth is still alive and well in the narrative series of paintings produced, as a tribute to Harriet Tubman, by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence during the Civil Rights Movement. Hans Bak, who begins his essay with a discussion of Lawrence's art, contrasts this evocation of Canada as the Shangri-La of black pride with Ishmael Reed's irreverent riff on the black exodus to the alleged promised land in *Flight to Canada* (1976), written at a time when American draft dodgers indeed found shelter there. And he turns again to *The Book of Negroes*, this time with a focus on the departure of Hill's frustrated protagonist Aminata from racist Nova Scotia to a colonizing venture in Sierra Leone.

A 20<sup>th</sup>-century version of the escape to the illusory Eden of Canada hovers in the background of Pearl Cleage's powerfully disturbing play *Bourbon at*

*the Border* (1997), the subject of Sharon Monteith's essay in the volume. But Cleage's protagonist Charlie, an African American Civil Rights volunteer severely traumatized by the torture he suffered at the hands of racist southern lawmen, never gets to cross the aptly named Ambassador Bridge that connects Detroit with Windsor, Canada. Instead, he is arrested for murdering, thirty years after his Civil Rights ordeal, three white men who had nothing to do with what had happened to him. Across the river still waits the fantastical Canadian garden where the sun always shines, the garden of hope where Charlie and his wife will never be.

A third thematic cluster – the largest in the volume – collects essays which uncover intertextual links (often directly acknowledged) between Southern writers and their Canadian counterparts. Applying the postmodern juggling of center and periphery to two family chronicles set in Dixie and in Eastern, David Williams compares Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) with Nova Scotia writer Alistair MacLeod's first novel *No Great Mischiefs* (1999). Drawing on Glenn Willmott's sociocultural diagnosis of narrative "disfigurements" in Canadian fiction of the first half of the 20th century, Williams finds the progression of the forces of modernity reflected in both Faulkner's and MacLeod's elegiac rendition of inevitable historical change. In her essay on the use of the Grimm fairy tale "The Robber Bridegroom" by writers as different as Margaret Atwood and Eudora Welty, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi uncovers shared subversive tendencies: Welty's eponymous novel is set in the planter society of the Deep South and features a heroic outlaw groom as well as a reckless bride, while Atwood locates her *The Robber Bride* right in urban Canada, inverting not only the title but also the plot, making the woman the culprit who steals the partners of her female friends. Eudora Welty's fiction is the subject also of a detailed reading by Pearl McHaney, who this time puts the Mississippi-born and -bred Welty in conversation with Ontario writer Alice Munro, who has in fact acknowledged her southern colleague's deep influence on her work. The Great Depression equally affected Mississippi and rural Ontario, but it appears differently in each writer's work: displaced into disciplined reflection in Welty's work and rendered autobiographically direct and searingly in Munro's writing. But such differences don't separate Munro from the world of southern literature. *Au contraire*: As Charles Reagan Wilson argues in his analysis of Munro's short story cycle *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), religious matters are of crucial importance in Munro's fictional work. Through her central character Del Jordan, Munro evokes the need for spiritual meaning in a small, provincial society. Munro's



Jubilee, Ontario, has more in common with Faulkner's Jefferson or O'Connor's dusty Georgia than critics have so far acknowledged, and the rituals accompanying baptisms or funerals contribute to the Gothic aura familiar to southern writers that also pervades Munro's narrative art.

The haunting character of both Canadian and American writing of the Deep South is picked up again in Danièle Pitavy's wide-ranging, provocative meditation on the two traditions. Pitavy sees writers from both regions deeply concerned with the borderland between two Arcadias, one "dark" (associated with chaos but also with vitality and creativity) and the other "light" (and therefore indicative of order, restraint and possibly death). Such borderlands are well familiar, she contends, to Welty as well as to Atwood, and they appear prefigured in earlier works such as "Désirée's Baby" by Kate Chopin or the short story "Extradited," by the prolific Irish-born Canadian poet Isabella Valancy Crawford.

Ian McRae proceeds to lend a truly hemispheric dimension to the concept of intertextuality, detailing the connections between *The Invention of the World* (1977), the first novel by the Vancouver Island writer Jack Hodgins, and southern precursor novels from Brazil (Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*) and Colombia (García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*). Against agonistic models of literary influence, McRae highlights Hodgins' willing embrace of this alternative literary tradition, which serves to debunk the great foundational fictions of western civilization and questions the very possibility of coherent historical narratives (as evidenced in the "Scrapbook" section of Hodgins' novel).

The "intertextuality" cluster concludes with a focus on a genre often neglected in such studies. William Davis furnishes a detailed analysis of the close relationship between the experimental poetry practiced by Charles Olson and his disciples at North Carolina's Black Mountain College, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, and the *Tish* group at the University of British Columbia, notably George Bowering, whose poetic life-writing illustrates the influence of the American avant-garde.

The notion of genre provides the focus of the fourth and final cluster of essays in *Cultural Circulation*, which looks at parallel developments in the Canadian and U.S. American short story and the emergence of a shared U.S. American and Canadian category of the "postmodern." Reingard Nischik compares the beginnings of the short story in the USA and Canada by focusing on the fictional work of Sherwood Anderson and the early stories of Raymond Knister. The latter's untimely death in 1932 deprived Canadian literature of a high talent that might have accelerated the evolution of Canadian

short fiction. Instead, the absence of periodicals and other suitable publication venues in Canada delayed the emergence of accomplished modernist stories until the 1960s. Nischik discusses the rejection of plot-oriented stories by Anderson before juxtaposing his classic tale of initiation “I Want to Know Why” with Knister’s accomplished early fiction in *The First Day of Spring*. By contrast, Dieter Meindl pursues a more epistemological angle, illustrating the shared passage from literary modernism via postmodernism to postcolonialism in southern and Canadian writing by offering close readings of three stories by Flannery O’Connor, Jack Hodgins and, finally, Leon Rooke. The latter’s fantastic, satiric rendition of the musings of a belated imperialist demonstrates both the effects of a decades-long intercultural dialogue between the two traditions but also marks the full flowering of contemporary Canadian literature.

Canadian novelist Rooke was in fact born in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, in a small mill town not far from the Virginia border, where his mother worked in one of the last mills in the South to defy unionization. Rooke’s struggle to shed those roots and become a writer not defined by narrow regionalisms led, after a few successes and even more setbacks (one of his stories was rejected 45 times before it won the O. Henry award), to an appointment as writer in residence at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. There, one of his colleagues was Tom McHaney, whose essay in this volume recalls Rooke’s early career before the momentous move to British Columbia. Reflecting on the ostensible orientation of Southern authors towards “place,” McHaney claims that Rooke’s versatile narrative art was, from the outset, based on “voice,” a category that defies locale and region and helps explain the eccentricity as well as the deliberate extravagance of Rooke’s characters.

If Rooke embraced his new Canadian home, the Mississippi-born Elizabeth Spencer viewed her twenty years in Montreal with considerably more ambivalence. Marcel Arbeit examines the hesitant use of Canadian themes in Spencer’s fiction, including her late novel *Night Travellers* (1991). He points out her continuing use of favorite motifs of the tradition of southern fiction and reflects on the recurrent solitude of female characters experiencing alienation in the affluent world of Montreal. Spencer’s exiled draft dodgers and political dissenters remind us of another aspect of the cultural traffic across the border, as does Nahem Yousaf’s look at Michael Ondaatje’s foray into the world of New Orleans jazz as exemplified by the cornetist Buddy Bolden, also known as “King Bolden,” whose band helped create what we know as “jazz” today. Ondaatje, in the absence of conclusive biographical

evidence or, for that matter, recordings, weaves an intertextual collage of tall tales and oral history, pervaded by a sense of the uncanny and the strange. In Bolden, a figure that would go on to stimulate other Canadian artists and writers, Ondaatje had found a model for the co-existence of creative and destructive forces inside the human mind.

In 1826, the famous epicure Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.” Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are. The final essay in this cluster, contributed by Caroline Rosenthal, offers a new take on this old saw. Tell me where you eat and I will help you become who you want to be. Comparing two novels set, respectively, in the Deep South and in British Columbia, Rosenthal shows how female characters learn to use traditional food practices as strategies to defend their individual identities against patriarchal violence. The novels illustrate how mutual support, be it in a café catering to the needs of a Southern community (Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café*, 1988) or in a kitchen on a farm in rural British Columbia (in Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, 1996), can help women develop their identities, subvert the prescribed gender roles, and endure even extremely painful, protracted challenges. Rosenthal’s essay also contrasts in the two texts the use of conventions of local color and of tall tales common in the Deep South with the transgressive narrative strategies associated with the tradition of magic realism that is a hallmark of writing on the Pacific Rim.

Last but not least, Laurie Ricou’s essay with its jocular search for traditions shared by the American South and Canada provides the unconventional coda for our volume. Framed as an attempt at understanding the *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel Psalm* (1997), a set of poems documenting the migration of African-Americans to Canada by the black Canadian writer Wayde Compton, Ricou’s essay meditates more generally on the global significance and reach of what once used to be southern music. But then Ricou goes on to anchor Compton’s transgeneric, border-crossing volume firmly not within North American or even Canadian culture as a whole but more specifically in a Vancouver pub, the Yale Hotel on Granville Street, where the author has gone to listen to a duo called Mud Dog (Christopher Allen and Steve Sainas) playing the blues: “As we get up to leave, we shout thank yous. And the guitarist calls us to more blues. ‘We’ll be back here October 1st and 2nd – with a full band.’” Surely, we have come a long way from amateur ornithologist Thomas McIlwraith of Hamilton, Ontario, lying awake in his bed at night in the 1880s, listening anxiously and enviously as flocks of geese – “Canadian” in name

only – honk as they pass over his house, hurrying to places southern and warm that Mr. McIlwraith can only dream about.

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# OUVERTURE



ARITHA VAN HERK

## My Love Affair with Shrevlin McCannon

*This ficto-critical story is a deliberately referential text responding to William Faulkner's epic novel Absalom, Absalom!, first published in 1936 and subsequently re-issued in many editions. I have taken up the story of Quentin Compson's Canadian roommate, Shrevlin McCannon, who listens to Quentin's story about Thomas Sutpen, and who amplifies and embellishes its details, even while he struggles to understand the "South" that haunts Quentin. Page references are to the Vintage International Edition of the novel, published in 1990.*

Shreve McCannon is a man who goes without gloves, who takes pride in walking the winter streets of Edmonton, Alberta, bare-knuckled. It is his way of declaring that he doesn't need to be prepared for the weather because it is *his* weather, and not some alien climate, which has caught him by surprise. He is intent on affirming that he belongs in this place, it is his home, has been for years, and no mystery to him. If he is asked whether his hands are not cold, he is prone to holding them up in front of himself and regarding them with surprise, as if they are a special implement that only he possesses. "Cold?" he says, with mock puzzlement, "not at all," despite what are decidedly blue knuckles, and as winter progresses, chilblains. They are an unusual symptom here, for this is a city that prides itself on a dry cold, easier to withstand than the bone-creeping humidity down east.

Shreve McCannon is, nevertheless, a man of mystery, a man about whom there is rumour and speculation, much whispering when he has passed. He still presents a round, cherubic face, a "moonlike rubicund face" (147), despite the dignity of his advancing age. It seems he is destined to look younger than he is, although he also manages to look agelessly crotchety, the province of those who have covered some milestone years, or perhaps a consequence of his round and rimless spectacles, which give his visage a shrewd and magnified mien. In fact, he is "one of those people whose correct age you never know because they look exactly that and so you tell yourself that he or she cannot possibly be that because he or she looks too exactly that not to take advantage of the appearance" (236), if you catch my meaning. People say he



harbours secrets, he has heard stories that should never be repeated. And because he is a generous talker, they attribute to him a peculiar notion of both time and combinant grammar. In their brusque Canadian way, in a place where articles are often dropped and even verbs deemed superfluous, they refer to him as a windbag. This in a city stormed along by its own wind and sun and ambition, governed by intense growth and wild weather. Oh, they speak tenderly enough, of course, there is deference in their summary of his vocal tendencies. But it has been a standing joke in our small city that at certain times of the year and definite hours of the day, he will stop an acquaintance on the High Level Bridge or Jasper Avenue and he will subject them to a length and flourish of rhetoric impossible to escape from.

“He gave me a five-hundred word sentence today,” a fellow physician will report.

“Lucky you,” a second will rejoinder. “I got at least eight hundred words last week, and I couldn’t figure out the beginning from the end of his observation. I tried to interrupt him, but there was no deflecting his spiel.”

The record, one wag has claimed, is no less than one thousand, three hundred and fifty-four words, a good half hour of stamping his overshoes in the snow-drifted street. “And one sentence, without taking a breath!” Their recounting of such McCannon rantings ring with cheerful tolerance, as if they triumphed in a contest of endurance. He has a long and convoluted way of talking, Shreve McCannon does, and once in a while, a slow defile creeps in, a circumlocution that works like digression or detour, but ends up turning back to the beginning, a complete circle. It is as if he were trying to cover his tracks. Another suspicion, for there are rumors that he is not really McCannon but MacKenzie and is operating under a subterfuge identity. But that too, in a city of fledgling dynasties, is not unusual. People come to this new west because they can change an inconvenient name, outrun bad debts or by-blow offspring.

He is fond of certain words, Dr. Shreve McCannon, words that do not ride well in Edmonton, Alberta. “Attenuation,” he will say, out of the blue, turning it over like a piece of shale in his hand. “Attenuation” (182). He has a way of enunciating avoidance, of naming elements of behaviour without ever mentioning them “by name, like when people talk about privation without mentioning the siege, about sickness without ever naming the epidemic” (186-187). “Prolixity,” he’ll mutter (190), “implacability” (200), “bombastic phrases” (194) yet pronounced in a forensically anecdotal manner, detached and interested at the same time. It does not do to get him started on legal and

moral sanctions and their intractable and unpredictable outcomes. He can bore you into another century with that, his mates exclaim.

In fact, I could tell them a thing or two. He was there when the “longest sentence in literature” (at least at that time – affirmed by the 1983 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records*) appeared, he was bystander to its clausal gulfs and summits. But as his confederates here are not entirely intimate with fiction, preferring their newspapers and their biographies, they have no notion of his once having been an ubervoyeur to a tale so full of watching and its watchings, so replete with refracted vigilance, so loud with sound and fury (that old pulpit line) that he was never the same. The force of his listening – and interrupting and magnifying and intervention – changed him utterly, more than the terrors he witnessed in France.

Shreve McCannon knows Edmonton better for having gone away, that period of time when he “went south” – his way of saying it – went south to get some education. More east than south, to one of the oldest and most prestigious schools in North America, but he does not add that. Shreve McCannon has a trace of modesty that he is immodestly proud of, although his certificate from Harvard Medical is framed on the wall. Only a few know enough to comment; Edmonton is an innocent city, too innocent of the cachet of Harvard to care as much as they should about its reputation. And Shreve McCannon is no family physician who thumps a knee or peers down a child’s raw throat. He trained as a surgeon, and as Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps performed the most gruesome operations at the French front. He practiced surgery here after returning, but he did not do well with patients; he told me once with quiet melancholy that he frightened them, exactly the opposite of what a doctor ought to do. Now he works as a pathologist, overseeing the bodies that require some summary of their expiry, some forensic interpretation. Each morning he walks to the University Hospital, which sits at the south end of the campus and is beginning to take itself more seriously every day. The Great War had that effect, and now it is a growing concern, although when it opened in 1906 – I was just a girl – it was staffed by no more than five physicians and nurses.

Dr. Shrevlin McCannon then, who lodges upstairs in the east room of my wide-veranda’d brick home, and who pays handsomely for his clean, well-aired room (the bedstead plain iron, covered by a dark-patched quilt), for laundry and breakfast and indifferent social contact, pulls on his bear-like overcoat more days than not (we are definitely a northerly city), and walks west, crossing 109th Street where the streetcars hover to dragonfly their way across the North Saskatchewan River to the Legislature and the city, walking

at his own lumberingly steady pace through the leafy streets around the university. He moves with a determined if hardly brisk gait – well, he is now almost sixty – then descends to the basement, bleak with tiles, of that same hospital, where he has an office and where he oversees a batch of underlings. There he looks through a microscope and writes reports on sclerotic or serotypical cells in a crabbed and enigmatic hand. He is a man of habit and routine, taking his breakfast of black coffee and steel-cut oats at exactly the same time every day. I do not have to prompt him to leave the envelope with his rent, or to have ready his sack of laundry for Monday mornings, but twice in the twenty years I have been his “landlady” (that slightly shabby term containing all the dismissive and yet resentful innuendos of tone and resistance that lodgers determinedly feel), twice I have had to remind him not to go out with his overcoat over his dressing gown. Both times he started, as if I had found him behaving not so much out of character as rudely, and both times he said, “It is a habit of my Harvard days, Rosa. We’d open the windows so that we could breathe, and it got so cold we’d wear our overcoats over top.”

“An unhealthy habit,” I remarked, and he merely grimaced, thinking me some leftover Temperance adherent. I suspect that he believes that I live a life “irrevocably excommunicated from all reality” (156), when in truth I am both hyper-aware of daily necessities, and required by my circumstances to be pragmatic. Nor am I some Coldfield Methodist. I like a taste of sherry in the lingering pale of autumn afternoons.

Dr. Shreve McCannon believes in the health benefits of cold. Each night before he goes to bed, he pulls the sash of the centre window in his east-facing room as high as it will go, so that it yawns wide, and he leans out of his window and he performs some ritual of respiration. I have not seen this, have not seen him “clench-fisted and naked to the waist” (176) drawing the air deep into his lungs, but I have heard those inhalations, vehement and fervent, when I laid a cautious ear against the door to his room. I have had occasion to ask him to ensure that he does not leave the window wide overnight, for fear of freezing the radiators solid, and he grunts and assures me that he will pay attention.

I have few complaints about Dr. Shreve McCannon as a lodger; he is a relatively simple care for me, and in truth is my economic mainstay. He smokes a pipe, he keeps a handful of them stem-up in a Chase and Sanborn can, but I am not bothered by the smell of tobacco. There are very few ways for a widow to earn her bread now that the men who survived have returned, and I have no desire to work as a telephonist or a saleswoman. I prefer my winter’s sewing circle and summer’s gardening club for social contact, and

having one boarder is enough for me. I suspect there is some talk, 1950 is not a particularly tolerant time, and I am a fifty year old widow with an unattached man living under my roof. But there are so few places to rent in this booming city that many houses board and lodge single fellows or girls. More precisely, though, and this has been true of him all his life, from every story that I have heard since he came back to Edmonton from having been south, from having been to France, from having chased a few ghosts around the world, Shreve McCannon is adamantly uninterested in women, provokingly oblivious to any feminine element at all. Some of my friends have inquired, delicately enough, if he would like to be invited for an evening of cold chicken supper and singing around the piano, and I laugh and tell them that he is a Harvard man, and they have been inoculated against women.

He roomed there with a boy called Quentin, Quentin Compson.

"What a peculiar name," I said. "What is its origin?"

"Torment and guilt," he said grimly, "out of the South. Better than the theatre. Better than Ben Hur" (176), which drew me up short, and left me open-mouthed for a second.

"I am sorry," he said gruffly. "I mis-spoke." It was then I understood that at Harvard he learned to pick fights and bring them to a finish, he discovered how the mere lift of an eyebrow can provoke implacable violence. And I found, dusting the books in his room one day, a photograph sticking out from the pages of a medical textbook, a very odd photograph of what appeared to be a plaque stuck in a small alcove and reading,

"QUENTIN COMPSON  
Drowned in the odour of honeysuckle.  
1891-1910"

I did not dare to ask him about that strange summary.

Another time he told me that they put the odd ducks together deliberately, in the student dorm, the blue-bloods (and not so much a question of blood but of money, that royal imprimatur) of the republic to the south of us disingenuously aware of the need to segregate the rich and the predestined from the eccentric and regional and foreign, which he and Quentin were – at least provincial and foreign, and so identifiably eccentric. And then he said that he and Quentin were a good debating team, the two of them questioning one another long into the night, and competing in their elaborate constructions, always "something curious in the way they looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent" (240). "I miss him still," he said, his eyes not quite moist behind those glittering spectacles, but suspiciously bright.

I am thrifty with my questions. Although I know Shreve McCannon walks around with a sackful of stories as intricate as the glass whorls of marbles, I am mindful of being too curious, of “snooping.” That was his one stipulation when he came to view the room. He snuffled around it like an old bear, pacing from the door to the bed and back. It is a large room, almost the size of two, with space for a settee and easy chair distinct from the bed and dresser area, and lined with three large windows that look, as I have said east, and over my back garden, where I grow what will grow here: sour cherries and raspberry canes and rhubarb, rutabaga and potatoes and broad beans.

He was sucking on the stem of his pipe, although it was unlit, and I realized, with that sudden proficient comprehension that comes if you stay quiet and wait, that he was nervous and fearful. Of what I could not tell, although now I will hazard that he was and is afraid to live alone in an apartment or a house, that he needs to hear some stirring, even if only the mouse of a landlady below him.

But he concealed that well, turning around the room as if to test the length of his own strides on the wide boards of the floor. “Excellent,” he said, “excellent. And the sunrise will be my clock. Are there church bells within hearing distance?”

“If it’s quiet you can hear Knox Metropolitan, but they ring only for weddings and funerals, not on the hour.”

“Hmm, unfortunate.” But he hesitated, and his pale red hands met one another, as if to claim kinship or test their own texture. He wheeled and faced me directly, and said brusquely, “I’ll take the room, but let’s be very clear about my requirements as a boarder.”

“Yes? Breakfast and dinner, linens and towels. Personal laundry extra.” I was new to the business, nervous too, with my husband not long dead, and my needing to pay the taxes and the utilities and my worrying that the weekly rate I’d quoted him was rather high.

“No snooping.”

I almost laughed, had to fight to prevent myself from raising a hand to my mouth to hide my smile. I did not want to reveal to this potential meal ticket my “affinity for brigandage” (61). In fact, I hoped that my “very simplicity” (61) would fool him enough to persuade him that here was a harbour of sorts, a place where he could anchor. We stared at one another across the stretch of gleaming hardwood floor, and recognized, “in a sort of hushed and naked searching” (240) that here was a potential match: we both resisted interference, over-interest, too much attentiveness. In fact, and this has borne itself

out over the years, we are similar not-virgins of the remote and suspicious kind, folk who would rather not be forced into intimacies.

And so, Shrevlin McCannon with his lengthy sentences and his bright distracted attention and his habit of interrupting and his ratty well-worn bathrobe (which I have been instructed not to touch) moved into my upper east room. We tolerate each other well enough, perhaps because we are not kin, and we have no contract. We practice a mutual *détente* that keeps us honest. Some days we say nothing at all to one another, and the silence is not accusatory or thick, but simply silence, his spoon steady in the thick sludge of his oats when I push through the double door with a fresh pot of coffee. Some days there are pleasantries about the weather, usually when the temperature stiffens and we meet the rhythm of winter in a northern city, hanging frost and bone-biting embrace and bright exhilaration. We both feel it and are quietly ensorcelled by our arctic precincts, the stir of living in a cold climate. And oh so rarely, never deliberately, we wander onto a plantation of strange, driven creatures who live according to an entirely different incentive. While one could relegate that experience to the war, in truth it reeks of magnolia and honeysuckle, a lush swampy redolence that Shreve McCannon seems to know far too well, more than he ought, given that he is definitely a Canadian and definitely not a man who comes from the hills or the savannah or the levees of Mississippi.

I do not say to Shreve McCannon, "*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*" (142). I am from central Alberta, south of Edmonton, the Battle River valley and the parkland, gently agrarian and not at all corrupt and ambitious and intent on creating and living and destroying according to some terrible predestined design. No architect set foot in that country of square-frame houses and hip-roofed barns, buildings flung together for functionality, neighbours exactly one mile in the surveyed square-section-grid away. And, like Shreve, I have never smelled "jasmine, spiraea, honeysuckle, perhaps myriad scentless unpickable Cherokee roses" (236). I know only the subtle prickliness of the wild roses that crowd our fence-lines, the scent of lilac shelter-belts as close to intense as can be found here in this sere, cold landscape.

"Were they curious about Canada?" I asked him once, daring to "snoop," and by "they" meaning the Harvard yard men, the southerners with their groves of gothic oak and their marble headstones and their genealogies of old planter families in straw hats and white suits, women stemmed under umbrellas and driving behind graceful horses, those characters below the 49th parallel, angry with themselves and with the world they occupy, always

it seems in some extremity of despair or rot or extirpation and so endlessly fascinating to we cautious Presbyterian-Canadians.

Uncharacteristically, he gave me a longer answer than usual. “They didn’t even bother asking about the north, didn’t say, ‘Tell about the North. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there.’ The south was sufficiently scandalous to kindle their interest, but the north? Edmonton, Canada? Their eyes glazed over. It is because we are too pale and subtle, because we have taken on the protective coloration of our own weather, we have bleached out so we ‘wont show up so sharp against the snow’ (302). Do we track men with dogs here? Not often, nor do we track men with men, although we have used aboriginal people to do our tracking. But we ride behind our dogs and water our whiskey and we hunt less and we do not experience the same quality of night. We are too far North.”

That was a mouthful, and difficult to sort, although I think he was talking about innocence, whatever that is, whatever euphemism for credulity it hides, whatever blameless irreproachability it claims. The point about innocence, and this is tricky, is that the innocent don’t “even know that [they are] innocent” (185). I understand this riddle: if you are innocent, you can’t know the impediment of what you don’t know you don’t know. In this innocent city, so bright-eyed that it barely adjusts to the sharp horizon, more laundry line than city, more bush garden than street should ever be, this city so new and fresh that it tempts the Shrevlin McCannons of the world to take refuge, bury their dark listenings, and hunker down away from the quest for design that will surely emerge here too, lurks just as certainly (under the surface of whatever we call Canada) as it does in the hot, wet, civil war and slavery-bound south, the inevitable incoming verge of corruption. Man’s wagon full of slaves which signal division and prejudice and racism and intolerance will inevitably arrive.

“He was always cold,” he said once, on a crisp September day when the leaves were starting to show colour, and I knew I would have to cover my tomatoes that night. And then he seemed almost to forget where he was, his rubicund face gone into a breathless wide-angle of memory, his voice into rant. “I told him, ‘if I was going to have to spend nine months in this climate [I meant the climate of Massachusetts, not Canada at that time, I couldn’t even begin to explain to him the climate of Canada], I would sure hate to have come from the South. Maybe I wouldn’t come from the South anyway, even if I could stay there [you see I was trying to explain to him about where you come from being where you come from, but he came from a different place than I do, and while he couldn’t go back there, I could and did come

back here]. Wait. Listen. [I told him,] I'm not trying to be funny, smart [I told him and I wasn't, not when he was shaking like that, as if he had the ague, febrile and pyrexia. I told him] I just want to understand it if I can and I don't know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there ain't anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves . . . and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget'" (289).

I was standing at the sideboard with a plate of hot toast, picking up the butter dish to put beside it, he liked to butter his own toast, even did that as if he were leaning out of a window taking deep invigorating breaths. I set the butter down again.

"We don't?" And my voice came out queer and squeaky, like I was being strangled, like I had swallowed rhubarb without sugar.

He looked at me then, which he seldom did, face on at least, looked at me with that inscrutable attention that made so many people stare after him when he walked past.

"Let me interrupt you for once," I said, "wait, wait," and I walked over to him, and made a motion for him to push back his chair, and he did, and I moved aside his now empty but still warm wide-mouthed porridge plate, the gluey sustenance that he demanded every morning, morning after morning, and I lifted the tablecloth that sat underneath that plate, the linen crisp with my ironing, and I pushed back the cloth so that it rumbled down toward the middle of the table, the oak table that was my grandmother's, how she carried that heavy ligneous object unwieldy and cumbersome across the prairie in a wagon is a mystery to me, and there, neatly patched by my late husband, but clearly a plug in the smooth-grained and much varnished wood was what could only be described as a disfigurement, perhaps not obvious to those who would not know, but I know, and I was about to tell him, before he interrupted me again, and said with a maddeningly calm, almost clinical interest

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"— a bullet hole."

"Yes, I said, "Dr. McCannon, it is that. But why does it have to be a bullet hole that gets our interest, why does the story have to have incest and miscegenation and brutality and apparitions before it becomes worthy of our measurement? There is enough hatred here, in this innocent city that is not likely to stay innocent for long, to compete with the south, and even to best it, given opportunity."

"Or to be its brother," he said.



“No, sir. Its sister. Remember, ‘It was a girl’” (234).

We faced one another, the doctor and I, he “huge and shapeless like a disheveled bear” (235) staring at me as if he had seen a ghost.

All Shreve McCannon’s carefully truncated life, in Edmonton, Alberta, the place he retreated to in order to avoid what he had heard and seen, the trench-warfare injuries he treated consigned to nightmares, the Harvard Medical School diploma on his wall proclaiming his superior education, almost but not-quite wasted except for stories repeated on cold nights, this Shrevlin McCannon who heard Quentin Compson’s suicided voice unravelling his whole steamed and sodden world toward the tense reverberations of dynasty and colour and race – Shreve had forgotten the most telling, the most dubious and unfortunate of all the details caught in the entrails of male ambition and genealogy and plot: biologically designated sex. That a girl is at the very bottom and never good enough to complete the design, even if she is the one most likely to endure.

We “stared – glared at one another” (243), and Shreve made to speak, although “it might have been either of [us] and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of [us] creating between [us], out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were . . . quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporising breath” (243). And then, of a sudden, the bells of Knox Metropolitan began to ring, probably for a funeral, for it was too early in the morning for a wedding.

He turned to leave then, as if he could not face his own discomfort.

“The demon,” he said then, “is where we find him.”

“Or her,” I flung at his departing back, for he was going out of the dining room, not quite hurried, but quickly enough to show that he was clearly in retreat.

“You’re quite right, Aunt Rosa,” he threw over his shoulder, and it did not take me a second to respond, with a fierce denial of my own.

“Ms. Rosa,” I said, a little too loudly in the morning air. “And no, I do not hate Edmonton, even if you do.”

And so we continue our sojourn, our mutual *détente*. He knows that I know more than he credited, and that in this house too burns the crux of not-innocence. I know that under our distanced propinquity, as decorous as a plate ledge, lurks a “robust and sardonic temerity” (48) and that if I choose,

I too can climb out of a window and vanish. Not that he would care, although he would now notice.



# ACADIANS AND CANADIANS



BERNDT OSTENDORF

## Et in Acadia Ego

*Some Versions of the Pastoral in the Cajun Ethnic Revival*

*The psychological root of the pastoral is a  
double longing after innocence and happiness,  
to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration  
but merely through a retreat.  
(Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute*)*

The two traumas of Cajun collective memory are displacement and diaspora. But these traumas are wrapped in a resilient culture of hedonism: *Bon ton roulet*, as Clifton Chenier has circumscribed this remarkable immunity of Cajuns against adversity. Who are these people who would rather *fais do-do* than fight?<sup>1</sup> The origin of the New World *Acadien* settlers lay in rural Normandy, Bretagne, Poitou and Guienne, from where they had migrated to what is today Nova Scotia. For 200 years, the Acadians were mere pawns in the war games between the French and British. Finally they moved. After migrating south they got in the way of the Spanish and Americans in Louisiana where, to add insult to injury, their name was corrupted from *Acadiens* to *Cadiens* to *Cajuns*, thus marking both the decline in social status and their inability to master proper French. This odium of being a “backward” version of Western civilization settled heavily on the shoulders of these rural folk who, wherever they found themselves, ended up in a subaltern and despised social position, the butt of endless jokes. This persistent diasporic push factor stabilized a pattern of cultural behavior: a certain cussedness, a preference to avoid rather than confront problems, and a tendency to resort to backstage tricksterism. All in all they turned inward into an ethnic corral. As a consequence, these Acadians-turned-Cajuns remained a tightly knit, endogamic ethnic group: “dedicated, stubborn, resilient, pettifogging, inventive, exasperating, peace loving,” as a sympathetic historian, James Dormon, calls them (7). The social mortgage of a subaltern situation seemed rather permanent, but it was lifted dramatically after 1964 and into the present time, when, to their own surprise, Cajuns and their culture became one of the hottest

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<sup>1</sup> See Clifton Chenier, *Bon Ton Roulet* (1967). *Fais do-do* refers to a Cajun dance party where children were urged to go to sleep (*fais do-do*) so the adults could begin the dance.

“commodities” on the American ethnic revival market. This revival involved most of all their music and their cuisine with Paul Prudhomme cooking ahead of the rest; but as a spin-off effect even their architecture, their habitats, their backward cussedness, and contrarian politics suddenly were “recognized” in a yuppified, multicultural world. In a pastoral recovery of ethnic virtues that even some Cajuns did not know they had, their living spaces were radically reevaluated and their diaspora turned into a privileged cultural realm. The question remains: how can a lifestyle and a cultural space that for more than 200 years remained ignored and despised turn into cultural capital? Are we witnessing the invention of a tradition or a nostalgic reconstruction of a culture that never existed? Invoked by what? Ancestry, language, music, food, politics? What constitutes a coonass – the current ethnic slur for Cajuns? Is it genealogical descent, cultural achievement, or outside ascription? Is the Cajun revival due to insurgent ethnic minority politics or is this a tacit assimilation to the new American multicultural marketplace?<sup>2</sup> In terms of the theme of this volume, becoming Cajun involves a journey across space and mind, a real dispersion of francophone migrants from Europe via Canada to the American South, whose culture, though marginalized and despised by the dominant Anglo-American business elite, resisted assimilation or negative ascription and gave birth to an imaginative reinvention of a Cajun biosphere. Cajuns prevailed against the Anglo power structure by an ironic inversion of power; genteel lace curtain Acadians who had been partly Americanized came to the rescue of down-home Cajuns and engineered a revival of Cajun vernacular culture.

Let us begin with the myth of origin, the firm belief that today’s Cajuns are the descendants of Acadians who migrated from Canada to Louisiana. The first dispersion, which the Cajuns refer to as the great *dérangement*, occurred when these rural French settlers were evicted between 1765 and 1785 from their “rural Acadia” in Nova Scotia by the British because they refused to swear allegiance to the crown, which in their view would have meant giving up their language and identity. After leaving Canada they were stranded in various places in France, the West Indies, or along the coast of North America, from Massachusetts to Philadelphia, Maryland, and Charleston. None of these places were to their liking; not even Catholic Maryland fit their bill, though in all these places some Cajuns got stuck. Finally they decided, more or less as a collective,

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert Lewis, “L’Acadie Retrouvée” (1996).

that they could best reestablish their habitat in under-populated French Louisiana. However, by the time most of these Acadians trickled in, the French colony Louisiana had been ceded to the Spanish. The Acadians negotiated long and hard with the Spanish governor; for they refused to be dispersed too far and wide, but insisted on adjoining holdings so that their community could remain spatially together. After a long debate they settled mainly in two areas: 1) on the Acadian Coast and Bayou Lafourche; later, after the second *dérangement*, they moved on to the Lafourche basin; 2) in the Attakapas and Opelousas Districts near Bayou Teche. The Spanish ruled lightly and left them pretty much alone, just the way the Cajuns wanted it. They adjusted well to the new climate and became successful small farmers. Indeed, the first Spanish Governor Antonio de Ulloa summarized the positive virtues of these newcomers when he confided in a letter in 1766 that the *Acadiens* were “a people who live as if they were a single family . . . ; they give each other assistance . . . as if they were all brothers, thus making them more desirable as settlers than any other kind of people” (Dormon 24).

Surprisingly, the Cajuns kept a social distance to the older Francophone Creole population of Southern Louisiana, perhaps because the latter looked down upon them as crude and backward peasants, and by their standards they were right. Surrounded by sophisticated Creoles, Cajuns chose to recreate their rural culture on the basis of a nostalgic memory of old Acadian-Canadian ways. Cajun life was a reconstruction of a lost Acadian utopia in Louisiana. Because their culture remained tight, centripetal and rigidly bounded, they, rather than acculturating to the surrounding groups, gladly absorbed and Cajunized other groups, among them Creoles, Black slaves, Indians, and even some 2,000 Germans who had been brought to Louisiana (under false pretenses) by John Law.<sup>3</sup> In a matter of one generation, by 1790, they had carved out a comfortable, if

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<sup>3</sup> See Helmut Blume, *The German Coast During the Colonial Era, 1722-1803* (1990). The Germans had been recruited by John Law for the agricultural improvement of the colony. Law ascribed sterling virtues to the Germans, as did Ulloa to the Cajuns. Hence the two groups bonded well. Shirley LeBoeuf writes about her Cajunness and her cultural conversion: “I didn’t want to know, or be associated with my Cajun heritage. I avoided taking French in high school. I would quote the family line. ‘Well, *my* LeBoeufs came straight from France, not Canada, so I’m not a Cajun,’ conveniently forgetting about all the other Louisiana born descendants in my line. And also quoting, ‘I’m German on my mother’s side’, also conveniently forgetting about that my German great-great-grandfather Dinger settled in Morgan City and married a Cajun woman, and his descendants married Cajuns, too” (“Some Stuff about Da Cajun Grrl”).



not exactly prosperous existence. Many of them thought that their odyssey had come to an end: Utopia was reconstructed and life was simple and pleasant. In the telling of this Acadian myth of origin, one salient demographic fact is usually forgotten. By the time the 3,000 Acadians had arrived in Southern Louisiana, the total population comprised 19,455 whites and some 20,000 Blacks. In short, the newly arrived Acadians made up less than 10% of the total population; the other 90% were Creoles, i.e. French who had come directly to Louisiana, or slaves from Africa and their mixed-race offspring, referred to as “Creoles of Color”. And yet, in our days the Cajuns have managed to monopolize the ethnic provenance of the entire region. Even in areas that are today labeled Acadiana, genuine Acadians make up just 2-3% of the population. There are only about 80 family names that indicate a genuine Acadian origin. New Orleans has no historical presence of Cajuns (merely 1% may justifiably be called Cajuns), yet, in the film *The Big Easy*, it has a police department entirely made up of corrupt Cajuns.<sup>4</sup> Carl Brasseaux explains this miracle of demographic take-over as a consequence of Anglo-Saxon ascription.

Cajun was used by Anglos to refer to all persons of French descent and low economic standing, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. By the end of the nineteenth century this class alone retained its linguistic heritage. Hence poor Creoles of the prairie and bayou region came to be permanently identified as Cajun, joining the Acadian ever poor and nouveau pauvre. . . . The term Cajun thus became a socioeconomic classification for the multicultural amalgam of several culturally and linguistically distinct groups. (104-05)<sup>5</sup>

Two changes loomed large as a growing threat to the Cajuns’ hard-won peace. The development of the sugar granulation process by Etienne Boré had given West Indian sugar makers a boost. Already during Spanish rule (1766-1803) there had been a steady growth of sugar cane production in Louisiana, which led to the expansion of cane fields. Louisiana, previously an economic failure, was fast becoming a money making colony along the lines of the heavily capitalized sugar industry of the West Indies. Anglo-American investors and entrepreneurs and their black slaves began to trickle into Louisiana well before the Louisiana Purchase, hungry for real estate and new markets. When in 1803

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<sup>4</sup> The box office hit *The Big Easy* did much to popularize Cajun ethnicity; it also called attention to the fact that Cajun politics easily corrupts into mafiotic kinship networks, which anthropologist Edward Banfield blamed on excessive family loyalty; his term for it was “amoral familism”.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Klinger, “How much Acadian is there in Cajun?” (2009).

Louisiana territory was sold by Napoleon to the young, purposeful American republic, the Cajuns became a demographic and linguistic nuisance standing in the way of economic development and national unity. Not even their French cultural origin saved them from contempt, for it was corrupt and unsatisfactory, an estimate shared by the defrocked Austrian monk, Charles Sealsfield, who became an authority on Louisiana ways. He described these “Canadians” as uncouth, sexually challenged liabilities to progress and well-being.<sup>6</sup>

The Louisiana Purchase (1803) accelerated this growing conflict over agricultural real estate and pitted the low intensity, subsistence economy of Cajun peasants against the high intensity, highly capitalized sugar and cotton production of entrepreneurially minded Americans.

By 1820 the competition for the best of the agricultural lands – those best suited to plantation development – was becoming acute and the Louisiana/Acadian habitants were occupying substantial areas of this land, especially in the Mississippi River settlements and along the Bayou Teche and upper Lafourche. (Dormon 27)

Hence a clash over space deepened between aggressive, heavily capitalized Anglos and the soft, destitute Cajuns on small ribbon farms. The latter farms were doubly desirable when fronting on the navigable waterways: biotopic Cajun space as subsistence utopia vs. Anglo-American real estate for growth, industry and marketing. It is at this juncture when Ulloa’s positive ascription gradually turned into the negative Anglo-American stereotype, which Cajuns would henceforth have to live with. In short, the stereotype became a function of real estate policy and national purpose and now included stubborn Creoles as well. An Anglo-Saxon visitor, Sargent S. Prentiss, writes about these Cajuns in 1829, “They are the poorest, most ignorant, set of beings you ever saw - without the least enterprise or industry. They raise only a little corn and a few sweet potatoes – merely sufficient to support life. . . .”<sup>7</sup> The contempt of the first sentence is paired with a sense of puzzlement in the second: “yet they seem perfectly content and happy, and have balls almost every day. I attended one and was invited to several others” (Dormon 25). It would take another century for that puzzlement to turn into celebration.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Sealsfield called part six of his series of novels *Exotische Kulturromane: Lebensbilder aus beiden Hemisphären*, “Nathan der Squatter-Regulator” (1836) deals with a group of pig-stealing Acadians.

<sup>7</sup> The first American governor of Louisiana, William C. C. Clairborne, wrote to Jefferson with some exasperation that the francophone citizens of Louisiana were only interested in dance and leisure whereas the new American citizens were interested in industry and improvement.

The principle of forced heirship, which was codified by Louisiana civil law, and the determination to keep kinship groups together led to the subdivision of family holdings into ever smaller units, which became easy fodder for real estate hungry Anglos. Many Cajuns sold out to *les Américains* and withdrew: a second expulsion and *dérangement*. The Cajuns basically had three options for their second withdrawal. Either they could move further on into the prairie country of Southwest Louisiana where they became small subsistence farmers operating *vacheries*; or they could move to the non-arable swampland of Lafourche and Atchafalaya basins. If those two options did not work out, there was the possibility of withdrawing into the uninhabited coastal marshland.<sup>8</sup> Over time the Cajuns used all three options. Either they carried their rural culture to spaces where they were safe from *les Américains* or they withdrew to the bayous, a virtually uncontrollable, fluid space, and became subsistence fisher-trappers using their pirogues for mobility. And others again set up the shrimp and crawfish industry on the Louisiana shoreline. But some stayed, made their peace with the dominant Americans, and Americanized themselves into genteel Acadians – often claiming “Creole” or “French” instead of their Cajun heritage.

The 1986 movie *Belizaire the Cajun*, directed by Glen Pitre, which is set in 1859, focuses on this second displacement within antebellum Louisiana.<sup>9</sup> The plot represents a morality play on the subject of real estate.

Wealthy Anglo-Saxon regulators eager to develop and improve the land for large-scale cattle farming used vigilante methods and the rule of law to rid the arable land of small time Cajun farmers with ribbon holdings.<sup>10</sup> The Americans felt they had every right to roll out the rule of law since the beleaguered Cajun farmers reacted to the threat of displacement by employing guerilla tactics by becoming cattle rustlers. Thus the moral scenario contains melodramatic formulas similar to those found in the Western: put pressure on the Indians until

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<sup>8</sup> A film documentary by Robert Flaherty “Louisiana Story” (1948, funded by Standard Oil) captures the confrontation between American progress in the form of an oil rig and a heavily romanticized Cajun *locus amoenus* in the bayous.

<sup>9</sup> The date is a bit too late for the economic realignment he describes; another anachronism is the accordion used at the *fais do-do* in the film. Accordions did not reach the Cajuns until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the New York firm Buegeleisen & Jacobson imported the instrument from Rudolph Kalbes of Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> This paper continues the argument begun in “Belizaire the Cajun and the Post-CODOFIL Renaissance of Cajun Cultural Capital and Space” (2005).

they react with violence, then use the moral legitimation to eliminate them. Indeed in this film we are given chase scenes of vigilantes or posses going after thieves. At a crucial moment of general social derangement Belizaire, folk healer, trickster, Robin Hood, anarchist, cook, and lover, enters the stage. By mother wit, luck and sheer bravado, he manages to save his own endangered skin, and, through his successful negotiations with the powers that be, opens two options for his group: peaceful association with the Anglo population on terms of mutual respect, but also the subsequent, large-scale retreat of the erstwhile Cajun farmers to the bayous. The plot of the film unfolds as follows. Belizaire Breaux (played by Armand Assante, who, despite his French name, is not a Cajun but New York born) does not seem to have any regular job, but lives from hand to mouth as a folk medicine man, a *traiteur* and healer. Belizaire becomes embroiled in the struggle between Cajuns and wealthy vigilante groups who want to run them out of the state. Belizaire's life-long love, a Cajun woman named Alicia (Gail Youngs), lives in a common law marriage with one of the young Anglos, Matthew Perry (Will Patton), the son of the biggest landlord. Although this younger Perry is one of the vigilantes, he is enamored of Cajun ways and tries to steer a middle course between the two groups, always under suspicion of his extended Anglo family that he may be "going native." Yet Matthew is enough of an American alpha male to resent the continued ethnic bonding between Alicia and Belizaire. Younger Perry has to be doubly careful lest he lose the plantation to his brutal and unscrupulous brother-in-law, Willoughby (Steven McHattie), and he has to be wary of Belizaire, his rival for the undivided attention of his wife. Willoughby thoroughly disapproves of his brother-in-law for going slumming with the Cajuns and for his common law marriage with a Cajun, but mostly for his growing softness towards Cajun claims to the land. To get him out of the way of his inheritance, he ambushes and shoots his brother-in-law. Suspicion falls on Belizaire's cousin Leger (Michael Schoeffling), a pathetic drunkard and cattle rustler, whom the dead Walter Perry had once given a cruel whipping. Therefore, a revenge killing would make sense. Belizaire tries to save his cousin's neck by claiming that he, not Leger, shot Perry, which, though nobody really believes it, is accepted by the authorities as a "compromise solution" in order to avoid further disruption. Meanwhile, a vigilante group of Americans has captured and shot the cousin that Belizaire desperately tried to save. Belizaire makes the most of the new turn of events by declaring his confession to be contingent on a major concession of the Anglos, namely that two of the vigilantes, who shot his cousin, will be executed along with him. The plot is resolved in a long gallows scene, where Belizaire, framed by the two vigilantes, is about to be hanged. The irony of the

biblical allusion is obvious. Before being executed, Belizaire distributes his folk pharmacy of healing potions and herbs to his people, an act of community bonding. He suggests that they ought to have a big gumbo in commemoration, a ribald reference to the Eucharist. Now he still has to find a way to take care of Alicia and her children. The common law status of her union with Perry would have prevented Alicia from inheriting any of the family fortune; Alicia and her children by Perry would have been destitute. Belizaire twists the arm of the priest who now claims that Alicia and Matthew Perry were married by him clandestinely – which makes Alicia a full heiress to the Perry fortune. Old man Perry and his daughter, Willoughby's estranged wife, tacitly accept Alicia and her children into the family by inviting them to sit in the coach. Now Belizaire goes into high gear. With the aid of a West Indian, killer-divining gris-gris doll (that incidentally has nothing whatever to do with Cajun culture) he manages to terrorize Willoughby, whose West Indian training had made him respectful of the power of root doctors. Willoughby's uncontrollable fear, which he exhibits in face of the gris-gris, outs him as being guilty of the murder. Willoughby flees in panic. Belizaire ends up a wealthy man, thanks to the deals he struck with the authorities, ready to marry Alicia, who will inherit half the plantation: a wholesale *Aufhebung* of all contradictions in a union of American and Cajun purposes.

The film is both a product and a mirror of the positive Cajun revival. Let us now return to the historical contexts which allowed this film to emerge. During the Second World War, Cajuns experienced their first cultural uplift. They found (to their own surprise) that knowing French was an advantage in and after the war. Cajuns understood and could talk to the Parisians, and, despite their foul accent, were accepted by them as distant country relatives. This put Anglo-American soldiers in Paris at the mercy of the very Cajuns they had looked down upon for their peasant French. Their reception in France made Cajun soldiers heroes at home; they discovered cultural capital in their Frenchness. Motivated by the experience of Cajun veterans, two politicians, Dudley LeBlanc and Roy Theriot, organized a bicentennial celebration of the Acadian exile in 1955. This cultural revival occurred from the top down, not from the bottom up. Neither the working class, nor the ethnic power base, but elite Cajuns of South Louisiana, who determined that they must network with French speaking Canadians and take action to preserve spoken French, were instrumental in effecting the turnabout. The revival effort by politicians was soon joined by members of the academic world. Professor Raymond Rodgers of Southwestern Louisiana University, not a Cajun but an Anglo-Canadian by birth (who admitted that his French was lousy), and Cajun Congressman James P. Domengeaux of

Lafayette joined forces. They established the State supported Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). There were similar movements in other places of America such as the *Mouvement pour la Protection de la langue française in Nouvelle Angleterre* in New Hampshire. CODOFIL made French instruction in public elementary and high schools mandatory for five years. Yet, there was a serious problem. Since speaking French had been forbidden during the peak of the Americanization drive, there was no local tradition of teaching or learning French. No teachers who spoke French were available. So these had to be recruited from France, Belgium and Quebec. And certainly, when the linguistic chips were down, CODOFIL had no intention of teaching Cajun French, a sociolect that James Domengeaux despised – along with the music or folklore that came with it. Despite the moral uplift and diasporic networking that the public attention via CODOFIL promised to Cajunhood, the real existing Cajuns were confronted with yet another derangement, this time linguistic and cultural. Their children were instructed, not in Cajun ways, but in high French in written and spoken form. Again the ordinary Cajuns felt down-classed and deranged, for their dialect was identified as a broken tongue, now by the high French who came in from the outside as teachers. In short, CODOFIL had little to do with the revitalization of a genuine Cajun ethnic identity, of ethnic folkways or of Cajun dialects. In fact it had a totally unintended effect. It led to a radical decline of spoken French in Louisiana.

But while spoken French petered out, CODOFIL had an unexpected consequence. The revival helped create a talented tenth, an academic version of what used to be called genteel Acadians. The top-down effort created a generation of educated, young Acadians who had been so successfully Americanized that they were able to make it into some of the best schools of the country. But due to the centripetal pull of Cajun ethnicity they all came home, a return to the folk pastoral. In order to establish their own economic and ethnic *raison d'être* and to mark their difference from genteel Acadians, they began folk festivals, academic programs and public celebrations, this time of “real” Cajun ethnicity. They rebelled against their genteel Acadian fathers with their fixation on proper French. The first public concert of Cajun music was staged in 1964 in Lafayette with surprising results. In spite of a bad press and thunder storms, the convention hall was overcrowded. Cajuns far and wide had come to listen to the very music which the CODOFIL elite considered a dreadful relic of the past. Once the new spirit of public interest in folk diversity and in multicultural tolerance had gelled, Cajuns could now come fully out of the regional closet. After 1968, there was an outreach to Quebec and a networking of francophone populations

in North America began to have effects. CODOFIL represented a strong internationalization of the effort by including people from Quebec, Belgium, France and New Hampshire. Cajuns were now recognized as part of a larger franco-phone family and now were on the public map. All of a sudden the previously negative ascription had become a positive value bathed in a pastoral glow. New Yorkers began to dance to *fais do do* music and learned to blacken their fish (let alone their toast).<sup>11</sup> Cajun folklore became attractive and an object of study for outsiders. This revival had a latent populist or leftist dimension as well: for the people called Cajun had survived all sorts of repression due to their stubborn resistance to class oppression. Just the thing for wine-and-cheese liberals. In 1974, Lafayette, which had become the center of Cajun revival activities, welcomed a festival called *Hommage à la Musique Acadienne* which attracted 12,500 visitors. This recreation of community affected a change from a focus on centripetal kinship to centrifugal marketing, from Cajun as a private work culture to Cajun as a public fun culture with music, cooking and dancing. Hollywood discovered the pastoral attractions of Cajunhood and *The Big Easy* became an international hit.

In this process, the role of professional folklorists was not unimportant. Barry Jean Ancelet is typical of this new cohort as is the film director Glen Pitre. The former is director of the Folklore and Folklife Program of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, and professor of French as well. Ancelet describes himself as an activist folklorist, that is, as a folklorist who does not only collect folk traditions, but nurtures and recreates dying traditions. There was, in the sixties, a battle raging between the young action folklorists, represented by the Philadelphia group, and the antiquarian folklore, represented by Richard Dorson in Bloomington, Indiana (Ostendorf, "Folksong" 93-99). Within the general cultural politics of revitalization, the role of activist folklore gives an interesting twist to the Cajun revival. It turns political and social disadvantage into a cultural and economic advantage, the Ur-American solution to all problems. Despite the empowerment of the group and the ultimate success of the revitalization movement, the new

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<sup>11</sup> The Prudhomme recipe "Blackened fish" has nothing whatever to do with Cajun traditions. The *New Yorker* may be depended upon to comment on the zanier aspects of such revivals. A cartoon shows a toaster with two burned toasts sticking out, and the caption reads "Blackened toast."

Cajun awareness does not seem to have any substantial political charge (Dormon, 89). There is no divisive Cajun nationalism within America, no cultural nationalism that has a political purpose. Instead there is a strong commodification of Cajun ethnicity as a marketable capital gain.<sup>12</sup>

This final, largely peaceful *Aufhebung*, which the film *Belizaire* charts, also turns out to be the real historical fortunate fall, since, as a consequence of the second derangement at the hands of American regulators, Cajuns would find their spatial utopia, the bayou, and their heraldic totems, shrimp and crawfish. The director Glen Pitre is a Cajun and a member of the post-CODOFIL cohort, the first generation to make Harvard, where, in the citadel of knowledge and in the bowels of American power, they could study books on Cajun folklore and ethnicity and ponder their newly discovered *echte* identity. Pitre received a degree in *Visual and Environmental Studies*, just the preparation to produce a film on a biotope. It is telling that Pitre's CV on his webpage identifies him first as a shrimp fisherman, then as a film-maker and only then as an academic – a populist presentation of self typical for many sixties activists. This academically inspired cohort with a pastoralized sense of rural-ethnic self masterminded the revitalization of traditional Cajun culture from the top down. This occurred at the very moment, between nineteen-fifty and nineteen-seventy, when Cajun culture, particularly Cajun French, had more or less gone under due to the massive modernization and due to a relentless politics of Americanization which lasted well into the fifties, an Americanization which left its trace in the habit of giving American first names to Cajun children: Barry Jean Ancelet, Bruce Daigrepoint, Mark Savoy, and Clifton Chenier.

The film was shot on the location of a reconstructed Acadian village and the drama unfolds, like the Western, as a power conflict over culture-in-space in a *paysage moralisé*; hence the plot is energized by a morally righteous spatial nostalgia which transforms the traumatic experience of repeated diasporic displacement into grounds for a celebration of cultural survival, and thus repeats the trajectory of Cajun myth of descent: a resilient cultural identity which survived British, Spanish, and American power politics. The fictional story is embedded in the very folk art that the Cajun renaissance had just helped to restore, thus the trickster myth is embedded in an overpoweringly real sense of Cajunhood and Cajun material culture. The soundtrack is provided by Beausoleil's Michel Doucet with music played on authentic fiddles built in 1779 and 1793.

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<sup>12</sup> Barry Jean Ancelet, "From Evangeline Hot Sauce to Cajun Ice: Signs of Ethnicity in South Louisiana" (1996).



Doucet himself is a key agent in the academic restoration of an Acadia that never existed in quite those purified, pastoral terms. The movie's celebration of particular Cajun mother wit is coupled with a dark view of American universalizing politics. This communitarian spin turns it into a Cajun version of the hip western and its nostalgic-spatial pastoralism of ethnic resiliency in an Americano-centric world. The overall aura of the film's closure is not revolution or rebellion but peace, made possible by the soteriological figure of Belizaire, who comes across as half wonder-working, trickster Jesus, half as a non-violent, peace-giving Bayou Ghandi.

Did these activists know what they were doing? Of course they did. Barry Jean Ancelet, co-author with Glen Pitre of a book on Cajun culture, signifies on his own complex identity in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*:

Visitors to South Louisiana invariably bring their own cultural baggage. French Canadians, for instance, who seek in Cajuns a symbol of dogged linguistic survival in predominantly Anglo-Saxon North America, find virtually no Anglo-Franco confrontation and an absence of animosity in cultural politics. The French who seek vestiges of former colonials find instead French speaking cowboys (and Indians) in pickup trucks. They are surprised that the Cajuns and Creoles love fried chicken and iced tea, forgetting this is the South; that they love hamburgers and Coke forgetting this is the United States; and they love cayenne and cold beer, forgetting this is the northern top of the West Indies. American visitors usually skim along the surface, too, looking in vain for traces of Longfellow's *Evangeline*. (422)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See also Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns* (2003).

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JUTTA ERNST

## “Beyond the Bayou”

### *Sociocultural Spaces in Kate Chopin's Louisiana Short Stories*

Kate Chopin (1850-1904), probably best known for her novel *The Awakening* (1899), was a very prolific writer, who, in less than fifteen years, authored one play, three novels, almost a hundred short stories plus a great number of poems, essays, and reviews. She now holds a secure place in the American literary canon, but her position was slow to develop. Regarded as “a bright light on the national literary scene” (Petry, Introduction 5) during her lifetime, she subsequently fell into oblivion and by mid-century was largely forgotten. Per Seyersted’s groundbreaking biographical and editorial work of 1969 was needed to rediscover Kate Chopin herself and her oeuvre for a wider audience. She has usually been classified as a Southern local colorist whose prose is comparable to the works of New England writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. This assessment originated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has since become a fixture in American literary history. As an 1894 review in the *Hartford Daily Courant* illustrates, her earliest commentators led the way by characterizing her stories as “faithful, artistic transcripts of picturesque local life” that “deal successfully with that ‘Cadian country which is comparatively terra incognita to the fictionist” (rpt. in Petry, *Essays* 43). Four years later, a reviewer for *The Nation* aligned her with one of the best-known literary representatives of the American Northeast: “Her [Chopin’s] stories are to the bayous of Louisiana what Mary Wilkins’s are to New England, with a difference, to be sure, as the Cape jessamine is different from the cinnamon rose, but like in seizing the heart of her people and showing the traits that come from their surroundings; like, too, in giving without a wasted word the history of main crises in their lives” (rpt. in Petry, *Essays* 49).

Toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century more and more scholars drew attention to the fact that Chopin’s prose was not as simplistic as it might appear on the surface level (Batinovich 80; Gibert 71; Goodwyn 4), and they were increasingly hesitant as to where exactly she and her writing belonged. This classificatory uncertainty has extended to the use of the term ‘local color,’ which is still applied to Chopin’s fiction, but in a much more qualified way. Thus Lynda S. Boren states, “Neither was she [Chopin] a slavish idolator of region or local color, even though she absorbed

and transformed it so uncannily in her depiction of Louisiana's Cajun-Creole milieu" (2). Likewise, Donna and David Kornhaber remark, "For Chopin, more so than for other local color writers, the meeting of cultures in the unique context of her nineteenth-century Louisiana home was in many ways a highly complicated affair" (17).

I would like to go one step further than these and other critics and argue that Kate Chopin was ahead of her time. Although the depiction of her as a local colorist is not completely invalid, it tends to gloss over the innovative representation of sociocultural domains and of cross-border interactions in her oeuvre. By choosing a locale with a rich history, a place where Acadians from Canada,<sup>1</sup> Blacks, and Native Americans meet with people of European descent, Chopin opened up a seemingly restricted space,<sup>2</sup> positioned the South in a global sphere, and raised universal questions of identity and belonging.<sup>3</sup> Concentrating on the two short story collections *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), I will address questions of race, ethnicity, class, and gender that, in Chopin's writing, are clearly configured in terms of space. I intend to show that Chopin anticipated 20<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of transnationalism and multiculturalism as they have been articulated in the USA and Canada by Randolph S. Bourne and others, thus turning her Louisiana into a model for North American societies at large.

## I.

The local color tradition, which flourished in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is considered by critics as an important step in the development of realistic forms of expression. At its origin were long-standing American attempts to not only cut the political ties with the former mother country but also to

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<sup>1</sup> For the Acadians ('Cadians, Cajuns) and their complex history, including Le Grand Dérangement of 1755, which brought many of them to Louisiana, see Conrad and Rushton. For 19<sup>th</sup>-century developments, see Brasseaux.

<sup>2</sup> As Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson explain, "[s]pace is the general idea people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other. In this sense, space is the conceptualisation of the imagined physical relationships which give meaning to society" (9).

<sup>3</sup> See Marcia Gaudet, who stresses that "Kate Chopin used the Louisiana settings and people in her stories and novels to write about things of universal significance and appeal" (45).

achieve linguistic and literary independence.<sup>4</sup> The reliance on specific, often little known, regional locales, be they in New England, the South or the Far West, allowed writers of fiction to present the manners and customs of their inhabitants and to make use of unique idioms. Whereas in the beginning, typified characters, their vernacular speech patterns as well as their provincial ways of life were employed for comic effects only,<sup>5</sup> a change was discernible after the Civil War: more and more writers started to depict regional cultures in an earnest manner, often in an effort to preserve in fiction the old ways of the past that had started to vanish (Spiller et al. 650-1, 848). However, as Henry Nash Smith explains, there were certain limits as to how far a writer could go in his realistic renderings of life. Decorum had to be observed and thus ethical righteousness became part of the set formula for the local color story, which was centered on the notion of “the heart-of-gold”:

If immorality could not be forgiven, certain other less central aspects of barbarism, such as incorrect speech, illiteracy, and uncultivated manners, could be condoned and even enjoyed as picturesque, provided the author demonstrated the inner moral purity of outwardly crude characters. (Spiller et al. 793)

When Kate Chopin turned to writing and started envisioning a literary career, the vogue of local color fiction was well under way. It was spurred by a constantly growing number of periodicals, which tried to cater to the urban reading public’s literary taste,<sup>6</sup> with the publishing industry of Boston, Chicago, and New York leading the field. The twenty-three tales and sketches later collected in *Bayou Folk* as well as the twenty-one specimens of *A Night in Acadie* were, with very few exceptions, first published in magazines with a national circulation such as *Vogue*, *Harper’s Young People*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century* (Chopin 1054-55).<sup>7</sup> Contrary to what might

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828; Gove 4a) and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s insistence on American “[s]elf-reliance” in cultural matters (163-65).

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Baker states that “characters were sometimes embarrassed and stereotyped by being saddled with the responsibility of representing a particular region” (Spiller et al. 847).

<sup>6</sup> See Donna Campbell’s remark: “In its characteristic form of the short story or sketch, local-colour fiction presented a carefully crafted vision of an authentic, unspoiled America, a picture comforting to city-dwellers beset by problems of modernisation and urban life” (30-31).

<sup>7</sup> Chopin “was never keen on attracting a Southern audience. Of the seven stories published in the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, her log book notes that all were rejected from five to

be expected, Chopin was not writing isolated pieces but constructing a linked panorama of contemporary life. Not only did she stick in her short stories to a circumscribed setting, namely the rural area of Natchitoches<sup>8</sup> and, less frequently, the city of New Orleans, but she also had characters of one story reappear in another story (Lattin), thus employing linking strategies in order to form a larger whole.

Kate Chopin, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, was familiar with the region she depicted, having lived with her husband in New Orleans, “this most exotic of American cities” (Benfey 5), and later in Cloutierville, a small village in Natchitoches Parish, in the Northwestern part of Louisiana. In 1884, however, after the premature death of her husband and before the publication of her first literary work, she moved back to St. Louis (Beer 1; Toth 18). Ultimately, Kate Chopin combined an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective in her œuvre, a practice which prevented her from writing mere nostalgic pieces, full of sentimental reminiscences, and made her use “cool irony” instead (Boren 7). A two-thronged approach is also discernible in the way Kate Chopin inscribed herself in the local color tradition. Whereas, on the one hand, she lived up to the readers’ and publishers’ expectations by providing standardized insight into the regional life of the American South, thus ensuring her literary success and financial profit,<sup>9</sup> she, on the other hand, tried to open up and enlarge that very tradition. Rather than solely modeling her short stories on the set formula mentioned above, Chopin drew added inspiration from other sources. These ranged from the short prose of French writer Guy de Maupassant, some of whose stories Chopin translated into English (Reilly 71; Sempreora 84-85), to anthropological texts on Acadian culture in Louisiana (Seay 38-40). As her critical commentary on “The Western Association of Writers” reveals, she valued the depiction of “human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (Seyersted, *Works* 2: 691). However, she

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fourteen times by Northern periodicals before Chopin submitted them there” (Thomas 107-08).

<sup>8</sup> For geographical and historical specifications on Natchitoches, see Warren (98).

<sup>9</sup> As Heidi Johnsen explains, publication was to a large degree dependent on the writer’s readiness to stick to established patterns: “When Chopin penned stories that fulfilled the local color writer category and upheld the societal values of true womanhood, she was able to find receptive publishers. Her later stories, however, pushed beyond that kind of acceptance and began questioning society while exploring other options, leaving Chopin outside the boundaries magazines like *The Atlantic* and the *Century* had set” (54). See also Ewell (79).

could not always openly follow this stance and had to find indirect ways of expression. Local color, as Kate McCullough persuasively argues, often served her “as a cover” (190), allowing her to put forward ideological positions and forms of behavior that might be deemed controversial, for, “as a genre, [it] was seen as quaint and conservative of old values” (201).

Chopin’s ambivalent relation to the local color tradition is most obvious in her story “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” where she introduces it as a topic (Steiling 197). The two first paragraphs read:

It was no wonder Mr. Sublet, who was staying at the Hallet plantation, wanted to make a picture of Evariste. The ’Cadian was rather a picturesque subject in his way, and a tempting one to an artist looking for bits of “local color” along the Têche.

Mr. Sublet had seen the man on the back gallery just as he came out of the swamp, trying to sell a wild turkey to the housekeeper. He spoke to him at once, and in the course of conversation engaged him to return to the house the following morning and have his picture drawn. He handed Evariste a couple of silver dollars to show that his intentions were fair, and that he expected the ’Cadian to keep faith with him. (Chopin 318)

Although Kate Chopin here connects the local color tradition with the realm of painting, her story may nevertheless be read as a metadiscursive commentary that exposes her views on one of the strands of emerging American literary realism.<sup>10</sup> What she takes issue with is the “picturesque subject,” as it is called in this excerpt, or, more precisely, the way certain sociocultural groups are represented by the artist (Steiling 199). From the very beginning of her story, Kate Chopin points to the unequal social status of her characters. Evariste is introduced by his first name only and is thus denied the more respectful designation of “Mr.” given to the painter. Moreover, he is immediately taken to be a typical representative of a specific group, as the term “[t]he ’Cadian” indicates.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Evariste is first perceived “on the back gallery” of the Hallet plantation coming “out of the swamp” hints at a

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<sup>10</sup> This is not Chopin’s only reference to the local color tradition. In the story “Athénaïse” she self-ironically comments, “[The magazine] had entertained her [Athénaïse] passably, she admitted, upon returning it. A New England story had puzzled her, it was true, and a Creole tale had offended her, but the pictures had pleased her greatly” (375).

<sup>11</sup> As Maria Hebert-Leiter explains, Chopin’s word choice is revealing: “her use of the term *’Cadian* . . . demonstrates the move toward American identification and away from more traditional Acadian culture and reflects an interstitial moment between *Acadian* and *Cajun* identification” (65).



dreary state of existence, which is further enhanced in the following paragraph, when the reader learns that he and his daughter Martinette live in a “low, homely cabin of two rooms, that was not quite so comfortable as Mr. Hallet’s negro quarters” (Chopin 318). Chopin leaves no doubt that the Acadians are poor people who rank at the bottom of the social ladder, often having closer connections to the Black population than to the Creole whites.<sup>12</sup> Their simplicity is illustrated by the way Evariste and Martinette first react to Mr. Sublet’s proposal. While father and daughter “could not understand [the] eccentric wishes on the part of the strange gentleman, and made no effort to do so” (318), Aunt Dicey, a woman of African descent, quickly grasps Mr. Sublet’s intentions and warns Martinette of the negative effects her father’s willingness to have his picture painted might have. She explains in her local vernacular:

“jis like you says, dey gwine put yo’ pa’s picture yonda in de picture paper. An’ you know w’at readin’ dey gwine sot down on’neaf dat picture?” Martinette was intensely attentive. “Dey gwine sot down on’neaf: ‘Dis heah is one dem low-down ‘Cajuns o’ Bayeh Têche!’” (319)

With this derogatory caption in view, the advance payment that Evariste received from Mr. Sublet no longer appears to Martinette as a welcome means to ease their lives: “The silver dollars clicked in her pocket as she walked. She felt like flinging them across the field; they seemed to her somehow the price of shame” (320). Consequently, she and her father decide to give the money back.

The story takes a decisive turn the next morning when Evariste, fishing in Carancro lake, rescues Mr. Sublet’s son Archie, who had gone out in a boat and nearly drowned when it capsized (322-3). Out of gratitude, Mr. Sublet proposes to produce a portrait of Evariste and publish it with the caption “A hero of Bayou Têche” (323). But Evariste is still not ready to have his picture painted, as he does not perceive his deed as heroic. It is only when

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<sup>12</sup> See the following references to Martinette’s clothing: “The girl’s shoes were considerably worn and her garments were a little too thin and scant for the winter season” (Chopin 319); “Her blue cottonade skirt scarcely reached the thin ankles that it should have covered” (322). That Chopin’s initial depiction of the Acadians is in line with their commonly acknowledged social standing becomes apparent when one considers the following assessment by Michele A. Birnbaum: “Within the codified hierarchies of race and class in post-Reconstruction Louisiana, Acadians were considered ‘lesser’ whites. Their lower class status and rural lifestyle set them apart economically, ethnically, and linguistically from Creole society” (311). For negative stereotypes of the Acadians see also Brasseur (3, 100-03).

Mr. Sublet takes up Mr. Hallet’s idea to have Evariste choose the caption that the latter is willing to be depicted. He asks Mr. Sublet to publish the portrait with the following text: “Dis is one picture of Mista Evariste Anatole Bonamour, a gent’man of de Bayou Têche” (324).

Chopin has, without any doubt, modeled Evariste according to the standards of the local color tradition: although he is illiterate (324) and speaks only “uncertain, broken English” (322), he is morally pure, humble and helps his fellow human beings in case of need. But Chopin goes much further in her story, transferring the question of ethical honesty from the characters depicted to the artist depicting them. She raises the question of who has the right to name and classify individuals and social groups. The respect that Evariste receives in the end by being allowed to choose the caption himself rather than having it bestowed upon him by a stranger is a clear sign.<sup>13</sup> And not surprisingly, Evariste asks for his full name to be printed, which marks him as an individual. He does not want to be seen as a representative of a specific ethnic group, but as a socially esteemed gentleman, similarly to Mr. Sublet himself. It is only consistent, then, that Kate Chopin’s story bears the title “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” a title which shows a reverential attitude towards the Acadians.

## II.

Chopin’s obvious wish to counter stereotypical representations of individuals and groups in her writing often goes together with a transcendence of seemingly constricted sociocultural realms. A strong spatial orientation is already apparent from the titles of her stories, which include “In and Out of Old Natchitoches,” “In Sabine,” “Love on the Bon-Dieu,” “A Night in Acadie,” and also “Beyond the Bayou,” which I adopted for the title of my essay.<sup>14</sup> At the outset of the stories, Chopin’s characters are usually bound to

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<sup>13</sup> Steiling rightly remarks, “The substance of the tale is that the rendering of individuals as ‘types’ is a literary exploitation” (199). See also the following statement by John A. Staunton: “Chopin demonstrates the need for a more participatory narrative rendering of local life” (219).

<sup>14</sup> The fact that, in this story, the bayou serves both as a concrete Louisiana setting, as “a real barrier,” and as an “integral symbol” (Rowe 7), makes it a fitting reference point for my line of argument.

specific spaces, in line with the rigid social structures that, even after the Civil War and the Reconstruction period, tended to prevail in the South. In the course of the stories, however, reconfigurations take place which oppose the notion of a strictly hierarchical Southern society and introduce alternative ways of life that stand in contrast to the common discourses on race, ethnicity, class, and gender.<sup>15</sup> This pattern is also discernible in “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” where initially Evariste is associated with a small cabin, the swamp, and Carancro lake, while Mr. Sublet enjoys his visit at the Hallet plantation. Both Evariste and Martinette approach Mr. Hallet’s homestead, but linger on the gallery and hardly dare to enter it (Chopin 318, 321). With the rescue of Archie Sublet, however, the invisible boundary becomes permeable. Determined to bring the child back to his father, Evariste goes inside Mr. Hallet’s house. Martinette immediately asks him to come home with her (323), but Mr. Hallet insists that both have breakfast in the large dining-room, where they are served, however, “with visible reluctance and ill-disguised contempt” (323) by Wilkins, Aunt Dicey’s son. With characters from different ethnic groups, various walks of life, and a variety of ages being united in one room, Chopin stresses communal features and points to a humanitarian basis shared by all. Those who still think in fixed categories, like Wilkins, who looks down upon his Acadian neighbors, have to learn to show respect and acknowledge the worth of their fellow beings.

A readjustment of sociocultural relations and the spatial realms that go along with them can also be observed in the story “Loka.” The title character, “a half-breed Indian girl, with hardly a rag to her back” (Chopin 266), grew up in the woodlands on Bayou Choctaw, where she was beaten by the squaw old Marot and instigated to steal, beg, and lie (269). No longer ready to take this treatment, Loka decides to leave her home and appears in Natchitoches. Although her name suggests a certain rootedness, Loka is a border-crosser, an itinerant figure. After a short interval, in which she works as a tumbler-washer in an “oyster saloon” (266), The Band of United Endeavor, a charity organization composed of the town’s most respectable women, decides on her future. The charity ladies, whose depiction is peppered with a considerable amount of irony (Ewell 69), place Loka with the Padues, a large Acadian family, which has a modest income from farming (Chopin 266, 269) and is thus a little better off than Evariste and Martinette in “A Gentleman of Bayou

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<sup>15</sup> On Louisiana society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Domínguez (593-95).

Têche.”<sup>16</sup> Madame Laballière, the wife of the plantation owner, argues that both sides would profit from this set-up: Baptiste and Tontine Padue would get help with their daily chores, whereas Loka would learn how to work and would receive moral guidance (266).

One day, at the Padues’, while she is alone with baby Bibine, Loka is overcome by homesickness. As the following passage reveals, this longing is rendered in spatial terms, with the woods being identified as Loka’s innate place:

Loka’s gaze, that had been slowly traveling along the edge of the horizon, finally fastened upon the woods, and stayed there. Into her eyes came the absent look of one whose thought is projected into the future or the past, leaving the present blank. She was seeing a vision. It had come with a whiff that the strong south breeze had blown to her from the woods.

...

How good it felt to walk with moccasined feet over the springy turf, under the trees! What fun to trap the squirrels, to skin the otter; to take those swift flights on the pony that Choctaw Joe had stolen from the Texans! (269)

Loka, sitting on the open gallery (268), and thus in a transition zone between the enclosed space of the house and the natural surroundings, decides to leave for the woods and take Bibine with her. When the family returns from its outing and notices that Loka and Bibine are gone, Tontine Padue, who is characterized as “aggressive” and “direct” (267), immediately falls back on her earlier assessment of Loka, namely that she is a “*sauvage*” (267, 270).<sup>17</sup> And she adds, “straight you march back to that ban’ w’ere you come from” (272).<sup>18</sup> For Tontine, Loka does not belong to their place. Her husband Baptiste, however, is of a different opinion. When Loka explains that her love for Bibine kept her from running away for good and prevented her from taking up her old lifestyle again, Baptiste is convinced that one cannot separate Loka from her guardian angel. He sees her as a girl who has been too severely treated by his wife and who needs more personal freedom. Claiming his position as master of the house, he asks his wife for indulgence, pointing

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<sup>16</sup> See Brasseaux, who stresses “the internal class and cultural cleavages” among the Acadians, thus countering the traditional view of them as a “monolithic people” (xiv).

<sup>17</sup> Loka’s alleged savageness is once again underlined by the narrator’s comment: “It was difficult to distinguish in the gathering dusk if the figure were that of man or beast” (271).

<sup>18</sup> Tontine probably refers to The Band of United Endeavor, which sent Loka to the Padues, but this passage might also be read as alluding to her Native band members.

to the difference in ethnicity and socialization on the part of Loka.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, it is not only for Loka to learn to act responsibly and to adapt to her new surroundings in the Acadian household, but also for Tontine to learn to show respect and consider the wishes of Loka. The educational process is a mutual one, resulting in an inter-ethnic “United Endeavor.”<sup>20</sup>

Human universals like sympathy and love, which in “Loka” trigger the reconfiguration of sociocultural spaces, also pave the way for change in other stories. A striking example is “Azélie,” a tale that brings together Acadian and Creole characters, although in the latter case, the ethnic affiliation is not spelled out and can only be deduced from the characters’ names, their use of the French language, and their social standing. The Acadian girl Azélie Pauché, who hails from the area of Little River, currently lives with her father Arsène, her brother Sauterelle, and her grandmother in a cabin on Mr. Mathurin’s plantation, “far away across the field of cotton” (Chopin 441).<sup>21</sup> Her father tries to earn a living by sharecropping (441), but as Azélie’s outward appearance reveals (438), there is not enough money for basic needs. At the beginning of the story, she approaches the large plantation house, which includes a store for the farm workers, intent on getting groceries. However, rather than expressing her wishes of her own accord, she waits under a tree until she is addressed by the planter from above, a scene which clearly illustrates the difference in social status. Having learned what Azélie has come for, Mr. Mathurin sends her to Mr. Polyte, who is in charge of the store (438). Polyte, well-dressed and good-looking, treats Azélie with haughtiness (439). He is reluctant to supply her with all she asks for, as he fears that her father’s crop will not cover the sums that have already accumulated in his daybook (439-41). Polyte’s conversations with both Azélie and Mr. Mathurin show that he has a fixed, rather disparaging idea of the Acadians. Vis-

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<sup>19</sup> Baptiste explains, “We got to rememba she ent like you an’ me, po’ thing; she’s one Injun, her” (272).

<sup>20</sup> A clear distinction between “outsider figures [who] habitually misread conduct, character, or race in context, as opposed to canny insiders who register an intuitive regional authority,” as Heather Kirk Thomas proposes it for Chopin’s *œuvre* (97), seems impossible to draw, as the case of Tontine Padue proves.

<sup>21</sup> What Dara Llewellyn specifies for Chopin’s story “Beyond the Bayou,” namely that “[t]he very real physical distance and barrier between the two homesteads represent the also very real social, economic, and racial separations between the characters” (256), largely holds true as well for the story “Azélie.”

à-vis Azélie ’Polyte speaks of “the lazy-bone ’Cadians in the country that know w’ere they goin’ to fine the coffee-pot always in the corna of the fire” (439). And when he talks to Mr. Mathurin, he refers to Azélie’s family as “that triflin’ Li’le river gang” (441) and adds, “I wish they was all back on Li’le river” (441). Shortly after, the reader learns that it is in particular Azélie whose presence ’Polyte resents (442). Here the story reaches a crucial turning point, for ’Polyte’s behavior suddenly appears in a new light: his haughtiness towards Azélie betrays itself as a cover for his obvious attraction to the girl. Similarly, his use of stereotypes may be read as an attempt to conceal emotions that he is not ready to admit, not even to himself (444).<sup>22</sup>

However, the negative image of the Acadians gains further support when Azélie breaks into the store one night. She is detected by ’Polyte, who first reacts with both verbal and physical violence,<sup>23</sup> trying to make her conscious of her misdemeanor, but then lets go of her and shields her from prosecution (443-44), thereby giving in to his innermost feelings. Although ’Polyte initially sees his love for Azélie as a “degradation” (444), the urge to be near her is so strong that he starts roaming the vicinity of her cabin and invites her to come to the store, where he pays for her goods (444-45). He then fashions the plan to marry her and have her live with him on the plantation, when, at the end of the season, the rest of her family will go back to Little River, a place that, in his eyes, is associated with death (446). He is convinced that he might turn Azélie into a better being, freeing her from “the demoralizing influences of her family and her surroundings” (445). Azélie, however, is not willing to leave her father and returns to Little River with him. Displaying solidarity with her family and her sociocultural group (446), she emulates values that were held high by the Acadians both in Canada and in their later places of exile.<sup>24</sup> At the end it is ’Polyte who has to make concessions: he

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<sup>22</sup> This passage is prepared for by the narrator’s reference to ’Polyte’s “*pretended* air of annoyance” (438, emphasis added), with which he first meets Azélie.

<sup>23</sup> See the following passages: “He seized her arm and held her with a brutal grip” (443). ““So – so, you a thief!” he muttered savagely under his breath” (443).

<sup>24</sup> That Azélie has her father’s well-being in mind is already apparent when she breaks into the store. Not only are the articles she is trying to procure probably meant for him, namely “some packages of tobacco, a cheap pipe, some fishing-tackle, and the flask which she had brought with her in the afternoon,” she also complains: “You all treat my popa like he was a dog” (443). See E.D. Blodgett’s remark, “the family [is] the central socially ordering principle of Acadia” (111-12). See also Rushton (15).

gives up his job with Mr. Mathurin<sup>25</sup> and exchanges the plantation for Little River in order to be together with Azélie (446-47).

While all three stories, “A Gentleman of Bayou Têche,” “Loka,” and “Azélie,” depict the crossing of borders in a literal and in a metaphorical sense, the latter text appears as the most daring one. In opposition to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century gender expectations, it is the woman here who asserts her wishes and determines her place of residence. Moreover, ’Polyte, whose social position is more elevated than Azélie’s, counters the much more frequent pattern of upward mobility when he decides to move to the Acadian settlement of Little River. Without any doubt, the reconfiguration of sociocultural realms based on tolerance and respect comes in diverse forms in Chopin’s stories. Championing individual life styles rather than stock solutions for identity and belonging, Kate Chopin clearly exceeds the typical local color story. Her fiction, as Winfried Fluck convincingly argues, might instead be read as “a kind of testing ground in which conflicting or even contradictory impulses collide and interact” and which “allows the expression of culturally unacknowledged wishes and fears” (152).

### III.

In a now famous article, published in 1916 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Randolph S. Bourne develops his concept of a “Trans-National America” and pits it against the established model of the US ‘melting pot.’ Convinced that America has given too much attention to the cultural heritage of the British mother country, trying to assimilate immigrants to what is only one strand of a whole array of traditions (86-87), he envisions “a new cosmopolitan ideal” (88) in which different sociocultural groups collaborate but stay distinct (90): “America is transplanted Europe, but a Europe that has not been disintegrated and scattered in the transplanting as in some Dispersion. Its colonies live here inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse” (91). In order to illustrate more clearly what he has in mind, Bourne has recourse to a second metaphor, namely the weaving of a motley piece of cloth:

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, ’Polyte’s work ethics changes after he has fallen in love with Azélie. As the narrator remarks, “He had always been an industrious, bustling fellow, never idle. Now there were hours and hours in which he did nothing but long for the sight of Azélie” (444). And later, “It soon became evident that ’Polyte’s services were going to count for little” (446). ’Polyte thus approximates the laziness for which he had earlier blamed the Acadians.

America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors. Any movement which attempts to thwart this weaving, or to dye the fabric any one color, or disentangle the threads of the strands, is false to this cosmopolitan vision. (96)

Interestingly, however, Bourne limits this cosmopolitan conception to the Northern States, for he regards the American South as “culturally sterile,” lacking any “cross-fertilization” (90): “The South, in fact, while this vast Northern development has gone on, still remains an English colony, stagnant and complacent, having progressed culturally scarcely beyond the early Victorian era” (89-90).<sup>26</sup>

Here I propose to read Bourne against the grain and to extend his comparative approach. Seen through the lens of Bourne, Chopin’s depiction of vibrant sociocultural realms in Louisiana displays a high degree of novelty. The diversity of these realms<sup>27</sup> not only aligns the American South with Bourne’s transnational North, but also prefigures the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ (Steiling 199-200) as it was developed in Canada in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, supplanting the earlier model of “Anglo-conformity” (Day 8). Tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding are common ingredients of this new concept, which has often been metaphorically rendered as the ‘mosaic’ and which, in the 1970s, was adopted as an official state policy in Canada. The intermingling of the English and French languages in Chopin’s œuvre adds to the perceived similarity, because Canadian multiculturalism, confirmed by the Multiculturalism Act of 1988, has been realized within a bilingual framework (Fleras and Elliott, chap. 7). Using her short stories as an experimental space for probing into diverse social discourses and practices, Chopin does not solely concentrate on ethnocultural affiliations. She brings in questions of race, class, gender, and economic status and thus considers aspects which critics of Canadian multiculturalism reprimanded politicians and other state officials for having neglected (Bannerji 107, 109-10; Dupont and Lemarchand 325).

The fact that Chopin tries to counter stereotypes and raise awareness for the possibility of a fluctuating social setting, in which identities are mutually

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<sup>26</sup> Bourne focuses on European immigrants and fails to adequately consider the Native and the Black population.

<sup>27</sup> Janet Goodwyn characterizes this diversity *ex negativo* when she writes, “There is no national, whole-cultural normalizing pressure in Chopin’s fiction; assimilation into the larger community of the United States is not a concern here” (5).



negotiated, is also apparent from the fact that some of her characters are not ethnically or racially identified. Again and again, this has led critics to speculate on the origin of her characters, often with contradictory results (Gaudet 50). Rather than seeing whiteness as an essentialist innate quality, for example, Chopin reveals it as a construct which changes and differs in function depending on the circumstances in which it is being used.<sup>28</sup> The dynamic quality of Chopin's sociocultural spaces along with her foregrounding of human universals allows, in the end, to raise the question whether her ideal perhaps even veers towards a model of society that may be termed 'transcultural.' Regardless of the answer, there is no doubt that Chopin's concept goes "beyond the bayou."

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<sup>28</sup> More often than not, "[w]hiteness is . . . ascertained as a cultural way of being in the world" (Shaker 26). The following dialogue between Aunt Minty and Lolotte in the story "A Rude Awakening" illustrates this very clearly: "'An' dah you is!' almost shouted aunt Minty, whose black face gleamed in the doorway; 'dah you is, settin' down, lookin' jis' like w'ite folks!' / 'Ain't I always was w'ite folks, Aunt Mint?' smiled Lolotte, feebly. / 'G'long, chile. You knows me. I don' mean no harm.'" (Chopin 238-39). Whereas Aunt Minty is introduced as an African American woman (233), Lolotte remains ethnically unmarked; her brown eyes (231), her brown complexion (232), and her black hair (238) could be indicative of different groupings.

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JACQUES POTHIER

## Northeast by South

*Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and Antonine Maillet's Acadia*

*Tell about the South. What it's like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there.  
Why do they live at all.* (William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 142)

The most famous Canadian in Faulkner's fiction – but is there another one? – is responsible for one of the best-known quotations from Faulkner, next to the often misunderstood “the past is never dead, it is not even past”: it is Shreve McCannon asking Quentin Compson to tell him about the South. A Southern writer keenly aware of his regional identity, Faulkner did not necessarily see a Northern interest in the South, but suggested that it took a Canadian to develop a candid interest in the otherness of the South.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides another example of the strange relation of the South with Canada: when she started her best-selling novel, noticing that in the whole United States slavery had now become virtually legal thanks to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she decided that only Canada was properly an abolitionist North, in a Union which had become for all practical purposes a wider South as far as slavery was concerned. This is a pattern that you can find repeatedly in the life-story of contemporary Haitian writers such as Dany Laferrière, a fugitive from the repressive regime in Haiti, who fled first to the South, and then went on to Canada to escape from the climate of racist violence in the South of the United States.

Faulkner seemed to crystallize this radical antagonism of values between the South and Canada when he had Shreve McCannon as the fascinated Other to Quentin's Southern Hamlet in *Absalom, Absalom!*. As if, just as you had to have been born there to understand what the South was about, you had to have been born in central Canada to wonder how being from the South was possible. But then, Faulkner had had personal experience of Canada: stuck there for months at the end of the First World War by the Spanish flu quarantine, he seems to have honed his talent as an author of fiction when he wrote south to his mother.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See *Thinking of Home: William Faulkner's Letters to His Mother and Father, 1918-1925*

The Canada I propose to address here is not Shreve's English-speaking Canada, but rather a region that shares with the Old South some common historic features that set it apart from the rest of the continent. To expand C. Vann Woodward's statement in *The Burden of Southern History* that the South was American long before it was Southern, it may be worth noting (as Renald Bérubé once did for a special issue of the French literary journal *Europe* devoted to the "new voices in the South") that Québec was Canadian long before it was Québécois, or that Québec was Canadian long before the rest of Canada.<sup>2</sup> Bérubé points out that both the Southern state of Virginia and the province of Québec were the core of the early development of their respective federations: whereas Virginia provided four of the first five Presidents of the United States, the Maritime provinces and Québec were originally populated as New France, and it was only gradually at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that "Canada" came to be used when referring to the whole region north of the United States. Besides, the Canadian confederation of 1867 arguably was a consequence of the end of the American Civil War and the race west between the United States and Great Britain at the time of the first transcontinental railway lines. New France, as the South, was subdued by a stronger power, and both regions experienced military defeat and its consequences – military occupation – on their own soil. As Bérubé read Faulkner, he pointed out he could effortlessly identify with the South against the North, the black against the redneck. Woodward observed that the defeat gave the Southerner a more tragic sense of life, a more acute sense of its complexity, sensitivity to the dialogism of voices, easily transferred to similar historic conditions, as when the Vietnam War became an extended metaphor of the Civil War in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*.

I propose to explore the hypothesis of an unexpected pairing – seeing a Canadian South of sorts in what is actually eastern Canada, French Acadia, through the work of a Canadian francophone writer, Antonine Maillet. There are two links between Faulkner's South and Maillet's Acadia: first, of course, the history of the Acadian people, most of whom were expelled from the Maritime provinces and eventually settled in Southern Louisiana to become the Cajuns, and the literary fact that the core plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* stemmed from a short story entitled "Evangeline," taking its title from Longfellow's epic poem about an Acadian woman separated from her fiancé in

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<sup>2</sup> See Bérubé (33-34).

the Great Disruption,<sup>3</sup> who hunts for him through the whole continent until she eventually finds him on his deathbed. Faulkner's unpublished story entitled "Evangeline" is first documented in 1931. The story is told by a narrator, with the ironic teasing of a co-narrator named Don, the forerunner of Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Of course Faulkner's "Evangeline" is not about the plight of the Cajuns – neither is Longfellow's, for that matter.

None of Faulkner's fiction takes place in Canada, or involves Canadians, other than the role of an external observer, which is assigned to Shreve in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In the crucible of Faulkner's mind, there may have been a combination of the Canadian theme of "Evangeline" with the character of the co-narrator of the original short story which produced the Canadian character in the later novel. What explains the title of Faulkner's "Evangeline" is the separation of two star-crossed lovers, never reunited before their death, enduring a romantic destiny such as the one of Longfellow's Evangeline. *Evangeline* is also a source of collective identity and pride for francophone Acadians (although Pamphile Le May's rendering of the text in French *alexandrins* changed the rhythm of the original).<sup>4</sup>

With *Pélagie-la-Charrette*,<sup>5</sup> Antonine Maillet became the first non-French citizen to receive the most prestigious French literary award, the Prix Goncourt, in 1979. *Pélagie* reverses the direction of Evangeline's flight, and to emphasize the intertextual connection Maillet has *Pélagie* return to Acadia in 1772-73, fifteen years after Governor Lawrence deported the Acadian people from the province of Nova Scotia in 1755. This ethnic cleansing resulted in the Acadians being crowded in the holds of transport vessels and dispersed throughout the North American colonies, with many families unable to meet again. In Antonine Maillet's novel, *Pélagie* returns to her home village, called "la Grand'Prée," echoing the "Grand Pré" Evangeline and her people were driven away from in Longfellow's poem (Maillet gives the name of the village as "la Grand'Prée," which seems to be a return to the authentic toponym as if it had been misappropriated by the Anglophone poet, as Acadia had been misappropriated by the British Crown). *Pélagie* represents the Acadians who refused to be displaced and decided to return home, those "few

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<sup>3</sup> "The Great Disruption" is Philip Stratford's translation for the phrase "le Grand Dérangement" in Antonine Maillet's text.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, "Le mythe d'Evangéline."

<sup>5</sup> Subsequent references to Philip Stratford's translation will appear in the text.

Acadian peasants, whose fathers from exile / Wandered back to their native land to die in its bosom” that Longfellow himself mentions in the last paragraph of his poem (l. 1393-4).

While Longfellow’s *Evangeline* told of the misery of removal and separation, of endlessly wandering exiles, *Pélagie-la-Charrette* tells of piecing together the fragments of a community, of returning to the native soil. *Evangeline* mentioned the lure of Louisiana as a cheerful alternative to the old country, and *Pélagie* also mentions a few companions of the protagonist to whom Louisiana provides an opportunity to “transplant” the country south, with the prospect of new life-styles as planters on the rich virgin alluvial soil of Louisiana, where French is already spoken. As Anatole-à-Jude puts it, “[t]here is a fine lot of our own people settled there already. Be it in the north or in the south, it will always be Acadie, and we’ll always be at home there” (*Pélagie* 101). In her quest for her lover, Longfellow’s *Evangeline* also found herself among happily settled Cajuns:

Welcome once more, my friends, who long have been friendless and homeless,  
 Welcome once more to a home, that is better perchance than the old one!  
 Here no hungry winter congeals our blood like the rivers;  
 Here no stony ground provokes the wrath of the farmer.  
 Smoothly the ploughshare runs through the soil, as a keel through the water.  
 All the year round the orange-groves are in blossom; and grass grows  
 More in a single night than a whole Canadian summer.  
 Here, too, numberless herds run wild and unclaimed in the prairies;  
 Here, too, lands may be had for the asking, and forests of timber  
 With a few blows of the axe are hewn and framed into houses.  
 After your houses are built, and your fields are yellow with harvests,  
 No King George of England shall drive you away from your homesteads,  
 Burning your dwellings and barns, and stealing your farms and your cattle.  
 (*Evangeline*, l. 986-998)

But *Pélagie* will not have it: she is undoubtedly what Faulkner would have called one of the unvanquished. She decides that the banishment of the French Acadians from the Atlantic Provinces cannot be condoned, because the identification of the people with the soil is a fact that physical banishment just cannot break off.

What a woman, this *Pélagie*! Capable single-handed of bringing her people home. And of bringing them back against the current. For the current ran south in those days, and Beau-soleil had seen half his people slip into it and let themselves be carried along to the Antilles or Louisiana. But now who had crossed his path but this stiff-necked, proud-browed woman who dared stand up to her people. (*Pélagie* 77)

Pélagie, widowed by the Great Disruption, becomes the widow of a family, of a people, of Acadia itself, which she nevertheless sets out to bring back to life. Her story becomes the epic of Acadia. Like Scarlett O'Hara, she can be counted upon to retain the pride of the people: "All heads, male and female, turned toward Pélagie. If Acadie had not perished body and soul in the Great Disruption, it was thanks to women" (*Pélagie* 112). Such unvanquished female characters abound in Maillet's work, as is evinced by the memorable strong figures who give their names to her novels or plays – *La Sagouine*, or *Mariaàgélas*, the bootlegger. As Janice Kulyk Keefer noted in a review of Maritime writers, "Her female protagonists are characters who spring into life – and words – in the gaps left them by the men in their lives." Among the legacies of the patriarchal South that Pélagie breaks away from is slavery when as a fugitive slave joins the pilgrims in Charleston as they continue on their way North.

There are a number of features that Antonine Maillet borrowed from Faulkner – and that consciously, since she mentions them in interviews:<sup>6</sup> the creation of her apocryphal postage stamp of Acadia, the recurring characters who change, develop and become richer from one novel to the next, and certainly the oral quality of her style that she takes to a different pitch, and this is what I want to focus on in the rest of this essay.

Maillet's orality is not just embodied in the spoken quality of the language, but in the narrative situation itself: in the "prologue" to her novel, Maillet justifies her narrative technique by explaining that for the French Acadians who had returned from exile, survival depended on silence – they came back on tiptoe, through the back-door as it were. A century later, the third Pélagie, Pélagie-la-Gribouille (which can be understood both as "messy" or as "the scribbler" – the English translation reads Pélagie-the-Grouch, which fails to do justice to all the implications of the original) will have to tell the stories of her ancestor through a collective process of narrative recreation reminiscent of what occurs in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. But her confrontation with the truth and the legends is staged by a main narrator, a woman who is the writer's contemporary. This authorial voice tells of the historic facts of the Acadians' migration back to the Maritime provinces in a voice that seems to function at times like the unifying, omniscient voice of the narrator of a historical novel, but this authorial voice is constantly questioned by other modes of narration. This main narrator fictionally

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<sup>6</sup> For example in "Un brin de Faulkner."



inherits the story from the ring of fireside Acadians (including Pélagie-la-Gribouille) who make up a secondary narrative frame, a group of descendants of the migrants discussing the past of their people in New Acadia in 1880, when Acadian identity really coalesced.<sup>7</sup> At each fictive diegetic level of narration, Maillet has some younger members of the group listening: those are the ones who will report (and distort) what they heard to the next generation. Maillet also identifies the narrators' voices by their pronunciation (with different spellings) or their level of culture – for instance when the narrator warns that a character couldn't have thought about a specific biblical comparison because he just wasn't religious enough, or when another perspective conveys the popular rural lore of how the Acadians yoked their cattle differently from their Anglophone neighbors. But mostly, the text seems to be generally broken up into fragments of tales cut off by interpolated objections that are difficult to trace. Still, who cares about consistency or facts in the fiction? The contemporary main narrator sums up the miserable year of 1777, reflecting: “Why 1777 alone contained the seven years of lean kine and the seven scourges of Egypt. / . . . The ten scourges of Egypt,” an unidentified voice interposes – but it might be from another time. “Ten if you wish,” the voice resumes, “but let me tell you, the Acadians had their hands full with seven and would have passed up the other three without a whimper” (*Pélagie* 184). The interpolated remark is introduced by suspension points, which function somewhat like the shifts from italics to roman types in Faulkner, to indicate a change in the narrative authority, or a change from narrative to dialogue. They are to be distinguished from the usual hyphen, which in French typographically signals a change of speaker.

The New Acadia is a patchwork, and so is the story of this secret migration north, made up of disconnected patches of individual stories told by fathers to sons about ancestors, distorted by the desire to distract or educate, or just plain tall tales that may be inherited from south-western humor as well as from Antonine Maillet's French legacy of Rabelaisian carnevalesque. As she says about one of her characters:

For it mustn't be forgotten that Beausoleil-Broussard, like Bélonie, sprang from a people of storytellers and chroniclers who had produced Gargantua and his noble son Pantagruel, and that he remembered all the horrific and dreadful tales passed along from generation to generation while roasting chestnuts by the corner of the fire. (*Pélagie* 140)

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<sup>7</sup> For a Genettian approach to the narrative structure in *Pélagie*, see Magessa O'Reilly, “Une écriture qui célèbre la tradition orale: Pélagie-la-Charrette d'Antonine Maillet” (1993).

At the outset of *Absalom, Absalom!*, we read that “[Quentin]’s very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth” (12). Antonine Maillet’s commonwealth is more extroverted: it is made up in the present time of the conference of the heirs arguing about whose story they will choose to hear about the past, and this quiet negotiation in itself creates the Acadian community. The success of some of these stories depends on their evocative symbolism: like the battle at sea involving the last Acadian sloop, caught in the fight between a British man-of-war and an insurgent Virginian sloop, two valiant Davids to a Goliath, as the Acadian captain chooses not to stay neutral but to help the Southern ship. As she tells the story, the narrator thinks of its future epic inflation into a legendary and profoundly significant memory of an act of bravery – a merger of future and past, characteristic of Maillet’s manner. In the half-legendary collective narrative, it is told how the Acadian captain remembered his Rabelais and went on to tell how they chased the English ship north, eventually reaching the arctic latitudes where the air is so cold that words freeze and fall as hail – a story that French readers are familiar with from the Third Book of Rabelais’s *Adventures of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. At this point, the audience is so engrossed that the narrator does not know how to stop: the stories become too attractive for historical truth to be heard. One century after the events, the Acadians of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century identify with the American freedom fighters against their common English enemy, and they tend to imagine that their ancestors of 1774 did too – but what if they actually turned against the “Anglo-Saxons” regardless of what side they were fighting on? Who is there to tell? Could not the younger generation, born in exile in Georgia or South-Carolina, identify with the American patriots? Like an American Moses, Pélagie restores Acadia to her people. But *La Grand-Prée* is deserted forever, as the Acadians spread over the country. In an epilogue to the novel, Antonine Maillet, who mentions that she is kin to Pélagie, states that she does not have mixed feelings about Acadia. In Bouctouche, in 1979, she completed her epic on the three hundred and seventy fifth anniversary of Acadia. It was a celebration to a past not past.

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# TRANSMIGRATIONS



CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER

## Audubon Goes North

In the early summer of 1833, John James Audubon went north, leaving the United States for what was then literally uncharted land, the easternmost section of the Canadian Shield, also known as Labrador. Accompanied by his son, John Woodhouse, and four assistants (two medical students from Boston, George Shattuck and William Ingalls; the son of an old friend, Tom Lincoln; and Joseph Coolidge, an acquaintance of the captain of the ship Audubon had chartered), he left Eastport, Maine, on the *Ripley* on June 6. They rounded Nova Scotia, passed by Cape Breton Island and then entered the Gulf of Lawrence, headed first to the Magdalen Islands and finally the coast of Labrador. On August 13, they were back in Newfoundland again. Audubon was no longer young. At age 48, his teeth were falling out; his body ached; and fatigue threatened to cut short his typically long drawing sessions.

Due to bad weather, Audubon's party was laid low in Maine for three weeks prior to their departure. Snow covered the ground in Eastport, and Audubon was surprised how "shockingly cold" he was (Hart-Davis 199). He had equivocated throughout his life about where he was born (one of the many lies he told about his origin had him born in Louisiana, "my favourite portion of the Union"; *Writings* 384), but he had every right to consider himself a child of the South. Little Jean Rabin, as he was then known, had lived his early years in the sweltering and humid climate of Haiti, until the expanding slave rebellion forced his father to have him and his sister Rose whisked away to France. Some biographers think Audubon was three when he left; others believe he was six (the latter scenario seems more amply documented). The tropics remained forever in his blood, as did the racial complexities of that island. No wonder that he remained able to stalk his birds even on the hottest of days, weighed down by his rifle, knife, journal, and paint box. Where others would have fainted, Audubon strode on. Why did he suddenly decide to travel north, to expose himself, in advanced middle age, to the rigors of Labrador?

He had wanted to go to the "granitic rocks" of Labrador, Audubon said jokingly, because he wanted to be where the loon went for the summer (7: 299). But he also wanted to see the great auk, the gannets, the puffins, birds that had, he knew, colonized entire islands up there. Almost certainly, Labrador was some kind of athletic experience for him, at the other end of the

spectrum of extreme experiences to which he would subject himself. He was, he wrote in his journal, “farther north” than he had ever been before (*Journals* 364). Gales were so strong here that they rocked the *Ripley* even when she was firmly at anchor. On land, his men would sink a few inches deep in soft moss. There was little vegetation here, except low-growing plants “of the pygmy order” (*Journals* 374), plants so inconspicuous that they seemed like weeds, an impression not dispelled by their names. There was the chokeberry, for example, which Audubon had found in the coastal marches of Labrador and which he included in plate 194 of *Birds of America*<sup>1</sup> as the background for a group of boreal chickadees, or the dwarf cornel, the cloudberry, and dog laurel, all of which appear in the plate showing two Lincoln’s Finches, a new species they named after Tom Lincoln, the young man who happened to shoot the bird (Havell 193).

If the land wasn’t welcoming, the few birds that lived there weren’t eager to please either: the Lincoln’s Finches – the full absurdity of the fantasy of human ownership as expressed in scientific name-giving suddenly dawns on the reader – were “petulant and pugnacious,” as Audubon unhappily remembered later (2: 117). A fox-colored sparrow outwitted Audubon’s captain, not wise to the ways of birds, by rising with drooping wings and leading him away from her nest (*Journals* 403). Mosquitoes were as troublesome as they had been in Florida, attacking him “by the thousands” and costing him hours of precious sleep and leading him to spill ink on the pages of his diary (*Journals* 397, 412). They saw few other animals – some snakes and frogs on the Magdalen Islands and dogs as large as wolves. One night they indeed heard a wolf howl, and for three dollars Audubon bought the skin of a fox from a Scottish trader (*Journals* 392, 411). Of water birds, however, there were so many that the men’s minds went dizzy. As his journal and the corresponding essays from Audubon’s *Ornithological Biography* reveal, Audubon was little prepared for the multitude of birds he encountered in Labrador: they darkened the sky, crowded the rocks, and covered the sea around his boat, “playing in the very spray of the bow of our vessel, plunging under it as if in fun, and rising like spirits close under our rudder” (*Journals* 363-64).

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<sup>1</sup> Plates from *Birds of America* will henceforth be referenced by the name of Audubon’s engraver, Robert Havell, Jr., followed by the number of the plate (converted to Arabic numerals). I will cite Audubon’s bird essays from the Royal Octavo edition, with parenthetical references listing first the volume number, followed by a colon and then the page number.

They had entered a world in which the distance between humans and other creatures was, in the absence of other markers, measured by whether they could be reached by gunshot or not. In this bird-filled landscape, Audubon and his men moved awkwardly. In his journal, Audubon returns time and again to the contrast between the barren land and the unimaginable numbers of birds swarming over it or nesting on the ground. Birds have no problem living here; humans do. In fact, the more birds he saw, the stranger Audubon felt. At night, John Woodhouse would play his violin, carrying his father's thoughts "far from Labrador, I assure thee" (*Journals* 495). Labrador chilled the heart, Audubon said (*Journal* 403). Apparently, it also chilled his art.

Audubon's journal from those six weeks has survived the editorial fury of his granddaughter – though not quite. Some of Audubon's manuscripts still exist, and if the slashing and rewriting Maria Audubon performed on those texts that have survived is any indication, we may assume that not much of the flavor of the original Labrador journal was left after she was done. That said, the journal remains a striking text even in its impaired form, and one particular passage from it has been quoted many a time as proof of Audubon's conversion, late in his career, from slayer to protector of birds as well as of an environment that he finally realized had become extremely fragile: "Nature herself seems perishing. Labrador must shortly be depeopled, not only of aboriginal man, but of all else having life, owing to man's cupidity" (*Journals* 407). But is it really true that Audubon saw the light here – that Labrador helped him realize his "past excesses," i.e. the nefariousness of his industrial-style killing of birds?<sup>2</sup>

I'm not sure I can answer this question definitively. I doubt that Audubon's life followed the neat trajectory that popular biographers have invented for him. He was an artist, after all – nothing else really mattered to him, and he would change his opinions the way he alternated between lies about where he came from. And while some of what he saw in Labrador appalled him, he certainly did not go on and become an ecologist *avant la lettre*. In fact, he himself did a number of appalling things during his Labrador sojourn, and he didn't hesitate to tell us about them. What I do know for sure, however, is

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<sup>2</sup> See Ford 308. This alleged "environmental turn" in Audubon's life has become fairly commonplace in recent discussions of Audubon. See, for example, Branch, who recognizes Audubon as an "essential precursor to the ethics of modern environmental concern" (296). For a critique of such readings of Audubon, see Braddock and Irmscher, "Introduction."



that his art and his writing were greatly affected as he followed the loon up north.

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Audubon is known for his dramatic compositions, uncanny stories of violence that mocked previous representations of birds that were largely static. Take his well-known representation of two red-tailed hawks ascending, apparently fighting over an American hare. Their unfortunate prey, though airborne, is still alive, oozing blood and excrement (Havell 51). But the Labrador images are different. Take a look at his pair of common murre – Audubon knew them as the Foolish Guillemots – keeping watch on a rocky shore in Labrador in ill. 1. The somewhat comical effect of the line behind the eye of the male in the foreground is offset by the dramatically opened beak of the second bird, a female. The ocean in the background is remarkable, the waves sculpted into mountainlike, unrealistic formations – perhaps an unintended reminder that, throughout his life, the painter of this scene suffered grievously from *mal de mer*, sea-sickness. In the absence of any vegetation, these birds are, indeed, the only things that live here. And yet they seem static, works of art, actors on a rocky stage, their faces like masks, frozen into immobility.

To some extent, Audubon seems to have returned to earlier conventions of bird illustration: showing his birds in profile views, against backgrounds that are more delineated than realistically depicted. And yet, the resplendently colored plumage of the birds, an effect of Havell's aquatinting that makes every feather transparent, as well as the deliberate contrast Audubon has created between rock and water (the two chief habitats of the murre's life) distinguish Audubon's and Havell's expertise from that of a Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), who had also represented a guillemot posed – though rather stiffly – against some rock formations in the background.<sup>3</sup> Audubon's birds look as if they knew they were being "illustrated." Compared with such earlier representations, Audubon's images seem like conscious quotations, a riff on what others had already done with northern seabirds, with just enough detail inserted to make the quotation troublesome. The murre's delicately shaded wings show that, for an artist like Audubon, black is never just black.

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<sup>3</sup> See Bewick's "Lesser Guillemot" (an immature murre in winter plumage) in Bewick, *History of British Birds* 2: 164.

And if the tongue lolling inside the beak of the bird on the right makes us imagine sound, this only draws attention to what a silent, still image this is.<sup>4</sup>

Audubon's murre plate derives some of its effectiveness precisely from the fact that these birds are so obviously not human. And yet the question of what it means to be human is never far from Audubon's mind, and he never asks it more poignantly than in the plates that resulted from his stay in Labrador. Viewing an Audubon plate is always a lonely affair – at least this is how Audubon intended it. His essays are full of appeals to “the reader” whom Audubon invites along to see what, really, only he, the discerning observer and hardened naturalist, has in fact seen. These appeals are cast as a conversation between two, not as a collective enterprise. While the reader or viewer as well as the naturalist guiding him or her are always imagined as single, the birds in Audubon's plates and essays usually appear in pairs or groups (a vast difference from the lonely specimen preferred by earlier bird artists such as Bewick). The simple fact that there are two or more representatives of one species in most of Audubon's Labrador plates makes their world seem even more hermetically sealed – especially if we imagine the viewer facing the plate essentially alone (which is how I am currently viewing them, too, a facsimile of the seventh volume of the octavo edition of *Birds of America* propped up next to my writing pad). Even if they appear rigidly posed, they are together; we are not.

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<sup>4</sup> My assessment of the Labrador plates, then, differs crucially from the reading offered by Theodore Stebbins, who extols the “comfortable,” placid domesticity exuded by the birds Audubon drew in Labrador (20).

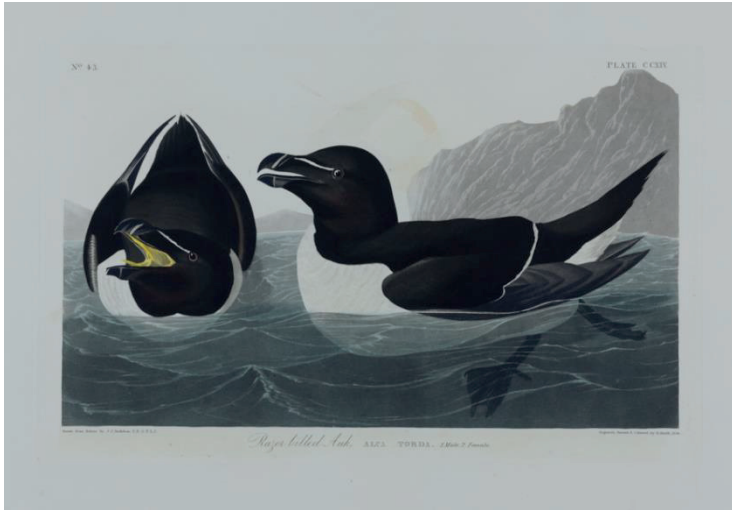


Ill. 1: Robert Havell Jr. after John James Audubon, Foolish Guillemot. Aquatint Engraving, 1834. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 218 (Courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington)

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Seabirds live and move comfortably where we can't. Consider the pair of razorbills Audubon drew on June 18, 1835 (ill. 2). Note especially the feet of the male on the right, treading the unrealistically transparent water. Unlike humans, these birds are comfortable both on the surface of the water and under it. It's scientifically useful to give viewers such a glimpse, but I cannot shake a suspicion that Audubon liked the staged quality of this arrangement, too. The female's body on the left, tail pointed upwards at the sky, corresponds in outline to the massive rock in the background on the right. These birds are both part of and apart from a landscape. The only speck of strong color in this plate is the inside view of the female's bill that we get, which is Audubon's way of highlighting this extraordinary appendage (whose formation he describes in great detail in the corresponding essay, from the white lines across the mandible to the "decurved" tip). Audubon describes the inside of the mouth as "gamboge-yellow," a word rare enough to attract the same kind of attention that the coloring of the inside of the bird's mouth does in the plate. "Gamboge," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is the

gum-resin obtained from the *Garcinia* or “monkey-fruit,” an exotic tree native to countries like Siam. Painters know the pigment derived from this tree, a bright yellow. In Audubon’s plate, the “gamboge-yellow” of the bird’s mouth attracts sufficient attention to invite us to try to re-animate the plate, to imagine sound where in reality silence reigns or, conversely, to realize the full extent to which Audubon, in painting these two birds, has also silenced them, stifled their cries.



Ill. 2: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, Razor billed Auk. Aquatint Engraving, 1834. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 214 (The Lilly Library)

Audubon’s murre and razorbill are very stylized images, icy in their precision. They say nothing directly of the massacres that preceded their making, the bloody collecting trips that yielded their bodies to the aging Audubon, who would then sit up all night, rainwater dripping on his sheet, sketching them. They tell us little, too, about the teeming bird life Audubon witnessed, the rocky shores and ledges where every inch seemed covered with birds. But even if these plates, by their very strangeness, do preserve some of the alienating effect that this “poor, miserable, rugged country” (*Journals* 365) had on Audubon, the viewer will inevitably turn to Audubon’s essays about the Labrador birds to supplement what the plates refuse to share.

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And the sharing Audubon does in these texts is extraordinary indeed. Appalled by the destructiveness of the poachers they encountered in Labrador – rough, unwashed men who entered the breeding grounds of birds with clubs, oars, and guns, killing the parents for bait or stealing their eggs – Audubon’s men contributed their own share to the rampage. In earlier essays, like the one about the “Ruby-throated Hummingbird,” contained in the first volume of *Ornithological Biography* (published in 1831), Audubon often justifies his intrusion into the private lives of birds by the benefits they yield for science and the reader’s enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Now, however, such justifications no longer come easily to the narrator. Repeatedly, we find him floundering through a bloody landscape strewn with bird carcasses, many of which he has helped put there himself. There is nothing accidental about these descriptions. Often they come at the end of a careful build-up, in which anticipation leads to desire and then death.

In his essay on the razorbill in *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon describes what he found when they were entering the harbor of the island of Ouapitagone accompanied by the terrified screams of cormorants, guillemots, and razorbills. Audubon deemed the environment, by Labrador standards, “delightful.” Waxing lyrical, he remembers: “The mossy beds around us shone with a brilliant verdure, the Lark piped its sweet notes on high, and thousands of young codfish leaped along the surface of the deep cove as if with joy. Such a harbour I had never seen before” (7: 247).

The aesthetic pleasure that he felt does not, however, prevent Audubon and his men from doing what they do next. Leaving the Ripley at anchor, they proceed to a small island further up the coast, where they insert their long hooked sticks into the cracks and fissures of the rocks to pull out terrified razorbills. Sometimes they lower themselves into these holes, smashing multiple eggs in the process. As they escape, the razorbills fly directly towards the muzzles of the guns of the rest of the party. “Rare fun” this was for his sailors, observes Audubon. Soon they had piles of razorbills lying next to them (7: 248). Audubon marvels at the apparent stupidity of the birds, which would fly into the gunfire as readily as “in any other course” (7: 249). Their meat was “tolerable” – it seems Audubon made himself some razorbill

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed reading of the hummingbird essay as representative of Audubon’s pre-Labrador phase, see my *Poetics* 199-200 as well as my “Audubon the Writer.”

stew – but what he, like the poachers of Labrador, really liked were their eggs, the yolk a delicate pale orange, the white a pale blue. They afforded, he told the reader, “excellent eating” (7: 250).

Audubon’s party is responsible for a similar destruction on the Murre Rocks, near Great Mecatina Harbor. Again, the sheer number of birds nesting there overwhelms him, while it also provides a convenient excuse for the slaughter in which he actively participates. “Every square foot of the ground seems to be occupied by a guillemot planted erect as it were on the granite rock, but carefully warming its cherished egg” (7: 268). Audubon deliberately plays with the ways in which the guillemots, depending on one’s vantage point, look like they are or aren’t part of the rocks on which they nest: since their heads are as dark as the rocks on which they stand, they seem headless when you approach them from the front. If you approach them from the back, they don’t seem to exist at all, except as another weird layer on the ground: “the isle appears as if covered with a black pall” (7: 269). Even before a single bird has been caught and killed, then, these guillemots appear to you already diminished – decapitated or merged with the ground.

I am using the second person singular on purpose, since this is what Audubon does, too, implicating the reader in the story of invasion and murder that he is about to tell. “Now land,” he tells the reader as if he or she were on his boat, too, “and witness the consternation of the settlers.” Note his choice of noun, which serves to represent this undertaking as an act of conquest, a hostile takeover of a peaceful settlement. The passage is so effective because Audubon doesn’t remind the reader that it is guillemots he is talking about until he is about half-way through. “Each affrighted leaves its egg,” Audubon continues, and then they hastily take a few steps and take off silently. “Thrice around you they rapidly pass,” he says, in lines that sound like a weird incantation. For the birds want to

discover the object of your unwelcome visit. If you begin to gather their eggs or, still worse, to break them, in order that they may lay others which you can pick up fresh, the Guillemots all alight at some distance, on the bosom of the deep to anxiously await your departure. Eggs, green and white, and almost of every colour, are lying thick over the whole rock; the ordure of the birds mingled with feathers, and with the refuse of half-hatched eggs partially sucked by rapacious Gulls, and with putrid or dried carcasses of Guillemots, produces an intolerable stench; and no sooner are all your baskets filled with eggs, than you are glad to abandon the isle to its proper owners. (7: 269)

This passage describes an uncomfortable experience, which is made doubly uncomfortable in that the reader is directly involved. Humans, wherever they are, cannot just be observers in Audubon’s Labrador; they are the agents of

destruction. Everyone is complicit. And so Audubon and the reader march through the empty Labrador landscape, pulling birds out of rocks, crushing eggs under their feet, inhaling the rank, rough smell of decomposition. In a particularly egregious instance of interference, Audubon, invoking the spirit of scientific inquiry as a justification, describes his attempt (“a severe experiment,” he calls it) to find out how long some black guillemots would be able to survive without food. He seals the entry to the fissure in which they live “for many days in succession.” Audubon says “many days,” as if to emphasize the starkness of this act, though he then goes on to explain that, kept away by bad weather, he had left the birds in that state for “only” eight days. Long, but not long enough for the birds to die: “The entrance of the fissure was opened, and a stick was pushed into the hole, when I had the pleasure of seeing both in a state of distress, run out by me, and at once fly to the water” (7: 275-76).



Ill. 3: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Great Northern Diver or Loon*. Aquatint engraving, 1836. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 306 (The Lilly Library)

Lamenting the distress of the Labrador birds while freely admitting that he has also caused it, Audubon again and again stages such scenes of human guilt, with an insistence his biographers have overlooked. The violence that takes place here is different from the violence depicted in earlier compositions. Indeed, the icy plates and the bloody texts work together in interesting ways. While Audubon's Labrador birds do little else but sit and stare (as opposed to pursuing or devouring their prey), the humans who pursue them seem almost frantically busy. The violence they inflict on the birds seems gratuitous, quite unlike that of the farmer who shoots the red-tailed hawk that has taken his poultry, or of the reluctant artist who, in a story that could have been written by Edgar Allan Poe, runs a metal rod through a golden eagle's heart so that he can paint it any way he wants.<sup>6</sup>

Labrador brings home something Audubon had always known: birds are a provocation. They bring out the best and the worst in us. They are so close to us, and then again so far removed. Take the loon, the bird he claimed had brought him up north in the first place. Was he any closer to it now that he was up here? Audubon once playfully said that one of his fears as a naturalist was the prospect of being "outdone by a loon" (7: 287), and this seemed to happen here more than anywhere. John Woodhouse, for one, was almost upstaged by a Labrador loon when he shot the bird with his "enormous double-barrelled gun" (Audubon takes care to mention the size of the weapon), and yet failed to take it out. The loon ran on, stumbled, rallied again, and reached the water before John Woodhouse could get to him. Indeed, the bird would have escaped had it not died of his wounds first (7: 287). Then there is the story of that other loon who played possum, as it were, drifting on the water pretending to be dead, until Audubon's men had almost gotten to him, when it suddenly rose and dived again: "we stood amazed, watching its appearance, we saw it come up at the distance about a hundred yards, shake its head, and disgorge a quantity of fish mixed with blood, on which it dived again, and seemed lost to us" (7: 288). This one they eventually got, too, but all too often Audubon found that he couldn't shoot them, though he could "clearly perceive the colour of their eyes" (7: 289). His own eyes grew weary searching for them (7: 287). It is perhaps no coincidence that what stands out about the pair of loons Audubon paints in Labrador is the eyes of the male, deep red, almost bloodshot with the intensity of looking. Audubon had found them so difficult to draw (ill. 3)! As he was sketching the pair he had caught, water

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<sup>6</sup> "The Red-tailed Hawk" (*Writings* 254-60); "The Golden Eagle" (*Writings* 354-58).



kept dripping from the rigging of the Ripley through the open hatches right onto his sheet, smudging the colors. The loon's element had invaded his picture too. "Man against loon," as Thoreau would describe a similar experience with a loon in Walden two decades later, recalling how on a fall day at Walden Pond one of these demoniacal birds kept eluding him, showing up where he least expected it, mocking him with his "demoniac laughter" (Thoreau 160).

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It isn't that Audubon doesn't understand these birds. He knows what is going on inside the murre as they are watching humans unfeelingly trample their nesting grounds into an unrecognizable pulp. In the fabulous plate of two Northern gannets, for example, he is able to project himself easily into the plate. The composition features an immature bird in front, with an adult visible behind, a kind of ornithological "before" and "after" image (ill. 4). Audubon painted the birds on June 22 and June 23, 1833, off Gannet Rock in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The adult bird's orange-buff neck and head, a loud, unrestrained color, adds luminousness, "conspicuous exuberance," in Alexander Theroux's words, to a composition otherwise done in muted colors. If the adult allows Havell to show off the possibilities of aquatint engraving, the young bird, in the foreground, with its intricately patterned, speckled plumage, gives Audubon the opportunity to demonstrate his marvelous eye for detail. "Each feather," he notes in his journal, "is divided in its contour from the next" (*Journals* 363), and this is precisely what he shows in his lovingly detailed depiction of the young adult's plumage. The viewer wonders why nature would spend so much effort on something that will only be superseded later. The adult bird's greenish, almost gaudy-seeming feet echo the color of the rock, reminding us of the absence of any other vegetation (moss, lichen, grass) in the image. If the feet seem to ground the bird in material reality, the resplendent head, pointed diagonally towards the sky, lifts it up. Orange is, wrote Theroux, also the color of high aspiration (108).



Ill. 4: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Gannet*.  
Aquatint Engraving, 1836. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 326 (The Lilly Library)

But as our eye wanders to the rock in the distance, swarming with birds about to land or about to depart from it, another narrative emerges, not one about youth and maturity, but about the difference between the one (or, rather, the two) and the many, between unique individuals and the indistinguishable mass of birds that nest on the Bird Rocks. Here, finally, is Audubon's attempt to let the teeming bird life of Labrador into his composition.

But the birds provide the background, nothing more. It is clear where Audubon's preferences lie. The combination of the old and the young bird in the foreground takes on a more than accidental dimension when we remember whom Audubon took along on his voyage, his 20-year-old son John Woodhouse (Victor stayed home, continuing to supervise the progress on *Birds of America*).<sup>7</sup> A similar juxtaposition of young and old has shaped

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<sup>7</sup> According to Rhodes, John Woodhouse Audubon was a "vigorous, outgoing twenty-one-year-old" at the time of the Labrador voyage (380). However, John Woodhouse was born 30 November 1820, which means that he was still twenty. He also describes George C. Shattuck, Jr. as a "young physician" (380), though Shattuck, later to be Dean of Harvard Medical

other Audubon plates, too,<sup>8</sup> but it appears nowhere as autobiographically charged as it is here. Linda Partridge claims that Audubon had gotten the idea of bird posed against bird rock from an earlier woodcut by Thomas Bewick, where a puffin appears in the foreground and a rock swarming with birds in the distance behind it (Partridge 294-95).<sup>9</sup> However, a comparison of the two plates is mainly interesting for the differences it highlights: in Bewick's woodcut, the "bird rock" appears centrally behind the bird, not pushed against the left margin as in Audubon's, and the swarming birds seem to envelope, indeed frame, the puffin, so that it becomes as representative type specimen more so than an individual or, as in Audubon's plate, two individuals. Audubon was interested in anthropomorphism only as a tool, not because he really believed that birds were like humans. He'd seen too much on his travels all over the continent to know that they were entirely different, that their needs, desires, and joys were not like his, even when they seemed oh so close. They were not inferior, just different. In this plate at least, Audubon is firmly on the side of the birds. Here the affecting family scene – the young bird preening itself while the older one looks skeptically at the darkening sky above – is directed against the eggers of Labrador he had seen land on the bird rocks too, beating the gannets' brains out with their oars, wreaking havoc right and left until hundreds, no, thousands of gannets were dead and heaps of bird cadavers, fit for cod bait, had found their way into the men's ramshackle boats. The adult bird in Audubon's composition elevates its proud, orange head in defiance against such callous obliteration, interposing its body between its offspring and the site of potential destruction in the background.

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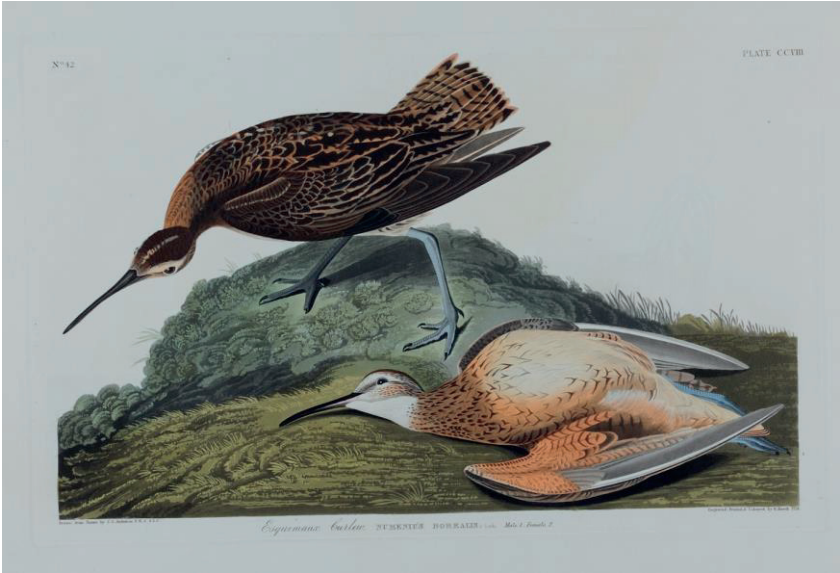
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School, would not graduate before 1835. Any of the current Audubon biographies need to be used with caution. Herrick's old biography remains the most accurate source on the details of Audubon's life as they were known in 1938.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, a bird that is generally assumed to have been drawn by the young John Woodhouse during the Labrador trip is the fluffy, bright-eyed black chick in the left foreground of a plate showing Black Guillemots in different states of plumage (Havell 219).

<sup>9</sup> For the image cited by Partridge, see Bewick, *History of British Birds* 2: 156.

But this is a wishful, wistful fantasy at best, one that negates Audubon's own complicity in the slaughter. From the time in Labrador comes also the only image in the Audubon canon that actually shows a dead bird, not a dead bird as another bird's meal, but a bird that's simply dead (ill. 5).



Ill. 5: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Esquimaux Curlew*. Aquatint Engraving, 1834. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 208 (The Lilly Library)

Audubon had long hoped to draw the Esquimaux Curlew, an abundant species then, which he thought previous naturalists had badly rendered (Esquimaux Curlews are critically endangered today, if not already extinct). He saw hundreds of them at “Port Eau,”<sup>10</sup> where the birds briefly landed to feast on berries, and shot seven of them, according to his journal. But he found these birds surprisingly hard to represent. His men brought him four more, to no avail. When Audubon was finished, his watercolor showed a male looking at his dead female mate, stretched out on the ground. The colors of her plumage are beginning to fade – a process Audubon, who drew from freshly killed specimens only, dreaded. Was it a coincidence that at about the same

<sup>10</sup> Forteau, a few miles northeast of the Québec/Labrador border.

time Audubon himself became acutely aware of the fading of his own powers? “The weariness of my body has been unprecedented,” he wrote a few days later. “My neck, my shoulders, and, more than all, my fingers were almost useless through actual fatigue at drawing. Who would believe this?” (*Journals* 425-26).

Labrador, for Audubon, meant a crisis of representation. Whether he became an ecologist here, or whether he was despondent about his own decline, I can’t say. But it seems pretty clear that, faced with a landscape that yielded nothing to him, his compositions freeze or crash, sometimes literally. For example, there is the dark cloud looming behind the Arctic Tern, painted on June 25: the bird shoots from the sky like an inverted bullet, a fall dramatically staged as if to mock our expectation that birds are supposed to go up (Havell 250).



Ill. 6: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Black-backed Gull*. Aquatint Engraving, 1835. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 241 (The Lilly Library)

In another drawing made in Labrador (ill. 6), he pictures a full-fledged crash, the malevolent Icarus felled not by hubris but by a shotgun. Richard

Rhodes claims that Audubon disliked the rapacious Black-backed gull (Rhodes 378), but this is not what I have found. Instead, he discovered in this bloodthirsty bird, who made, as he put it, the “winged multitude” tremble, a kindred spirit equipped with an amazing capacity for flight but also with an insatiable appetite for more and yet more. Remember the gulls that swept in on Murre Rock, finishing off what humans had left behind? But Audubon’s plate of the Black-backed gull gives us the destroyer destroyed. The bird appears in agony, collapsed, with shattered wing, onto a nest made of its own blood, the beak open to emit a silent scream of pain. One wing still reaches up, vertically, back into the element from where the bird came before it crashed, while the anatomical detail in the upper right hand corner anticipates the “after,” i.e. the bird’s imminent dis-memberment. Here, for once in Audubon’s Labrador works, stylized art and messy text meet. This is the aging Audubon’s grimmest self-portrait.

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Audubon left Labrador in a hurry and with little regret. Like the reader eager to rush off Murre Rocks, Audubon couldn’t wait to get back to where he had come from. When he was back in Newfoundland on August 13, he was delighted to hear the crickets again. He came as a hunter and singer of birds, says Canadian writer Katherine Govier in her wonderful novel about Audubon’s experiences in Labrador, *Creation*, published in 2002. “He will leave here a mourner of birds” (Govier 125). Throughout her novel, Audubon argues with Captain Henry Bayfield, the British admiralty surveyor for North America and an excellent cartographer, whose ship, the *Gulnare*, they indeed encountered. Bayfield aims to make Labrador more accessible by surveying its coastline; Audubon fears for the birds, even as he is shooting them. Govier’s narrator, too, realizes how empty Audubon’s compositions have become: “The birds have presence without depth,” her narrator observes. “Their animation [is] temporary and without meaning” (Govier 75).

To lend heft to the story, Govier invents a conversation in which Audubon takes on Henry Bayfield’s theologically orthodox position that the earth is meant for the humans to exploit. “The Bible was not written by a bird or a fish” (Govier 86). Govier’s Audubon constantly dreams of the island of his birth; experiencing the degree zero of nature – this is what Labrador stands for – the lush tropics of his infancy arise in his dreams, as do the landscapes of South Carolina, the home of Audubon’s would-be lover Maria Bachman, his collaborator’s second wife. Govier has invented that love story, but it

helps her make a larger point, one that has inspired this essay, too: “North is the negative of South,” her narrator says. “North is the nesting ground, the first feathers; south is full plumage” (Govier 266). For me, though, Audubon’s “negative” North is also, in some way, a positive. As distant as they seemed, the injured or rigidly posed birds he paints are the fragments of an imagined, composite self-portrait, if an increasingly unflattering one.

Ursula Heise has written about how narratives of extinction seem to follow the models of tragedy or elegy, “in which the loss of a particular species stands in both for a broader sense of the vanishing of nature and the weakening of human bonds to the natural world” (68). Leaving aside for now that elegy and tragedy are two different things, I want to emphasize that, like the rest of his work, Audubon’s Labrador plates and texts do not follow a predetermined script. Audubon responded to the crisis into which Labrador had hurled him in two superficially different ways, as I have tried to show: by freezing his images and by bloodying his texts. In effect, though, the violence highlighted in his essays is only the obverse of the icy precision that rules in the plates. Both evoke a world where life is out of whack. But it’s *Audubon’s* life that is out of joint, and that is an important modification of the traditional environmental declension narrative. Seeing the specter of his own death in the deaths he caused and lamented, Audubon wrote his own, and not nature’s, elegy in Labrador. While he might have become a mourner of birds in Labrador, as Govier says, I think he was really mourning what had happened to himself, mourning the naturalist he once was. Previously, he could always tell himself that, whatever he did to his birds, he was their savior, too: when he killed them, it was so that he could make them come alive again in his art. Now they were just dead, or almost dead. And so was he, almost.

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Rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, Audubon did not personally kill the last great auk. He never even saw one. He drew a pair of them later, after his return from Labrador, sometime between 1834 and 1836, presumably from skins someone had provided him with. The only one he knew who had ever seen this bird was his engraver’s brother, Henry Havell, who had “hooked” one on his passage from New York back to England and kept it on board for a while, for his amusement. “It walked very awkwardly, often tumbling over, bit every one within reach of its powerful bill, and refused food of all kinds” (7: 245). After several days, Henry decided to let it go. Unlike the murrets or razorbills or loons, this one really got away. And here there is no bloody

story to tell – for all practical purposes, the great auk is gone, “refusing” indeed to allow the naturalist to inject himself into its life, as Audubon had done with such desperate brutality in the case of the murrees and razorbills, and with such affecting empathy in the case of the gannets.



Ill. 7: Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Great Auk*. Aquatint Engraving, 1836. From Audubon, *Birds of America*, plate 341 (The Lilly Library)

All that remains is the image, and an image that emphasizes precisely its imaginary nature. It could have been drawn by any of the closet naturalists Audubon had attacked so vigorously earlier in his career, except for the sheer brilliance, the luminousness of Audubon’s colors, the crystalline sharpness of his lines. Audubon’s art here appears detached from all contact with messy, bloody reality. Was that why he left the drawing unfinished?<sup>11</sup> Havell had to complete the leg of the bird on the left, which Audubon had drawn only in outline. In fact, the landscape was entirely Robert Havell’s creation; if Audubon hadn’t seen the great auk, Havell had seen neither Labrador nor the auk. Note the slab of land on which the bird on the right squats, the wave lapping up the stylishly rugged sides. The scene as a whole has a fantastical quality, removed from any reality we might want to associate with it: the waves arrested in timelessness as in Japanese prints, the rocks bathed in a

<sup>11</sup> See pl. 169 in Audubon, *The Original Water-Color Paintings*.



light that seems to come from nowhere in particular, a perfect stage for birds that exist no longer in nature, but only in the naturalist's mind and on the pages of his big book.

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R. J. ELLIS

## Stowe, the South, Canada, and Sadism

This essay will consider the way in which the spatial geographies mapped out in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are less material than symbolic, and fundamentally compromised by the text's psycho-sexual mapping of slavery and its perverse sado-masochistic attractions, alluring not only to slaveholders, but also to the readers of slave narratives.

Two central features of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are going to provide my departure point. One of these is the frequent use of the word "Canada" (it occurs twenty-two times in the novel), the apparent clarity about what this proper noun stands for (symbolizes), and the way this clarity is compromised: Canada becomes, as it were, a fetishistic locus. The other is the way the text bifurcates into two narrative strands moving in opposite directions – one moving down on a Southward vector bearing Uncle Tom ever deeper into the slave-holding South, towards Louisiana; and one upward on a Northbound vector tracing the escape of the two runaways, George and Eliza towards Canada. Again, my argument will be that this apparently clear geographic polarization becomes compromised in the novel. Escape from the ramifications of slavery, particularly its racist underpinnings and its psycho-sexual dimensions is not and cannot be kept clear cut as flight to Canada implies, and any attempt to establish such a symbolic geography is unsustainable.

I want to focus first upon this latter feature of Stowe's novel and try to depart from the usual modes of analysis that this narrative bifurcation invites. Of course the two stories trace in rather different ways and with different emphases the interactions and tensions between a moral suasionist and a political position over slavery.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the book's anti-slavery line explores the issue of slavery's existence in the United States on the one hand, by advancing a moral and ethical case against slavery showing how it trespasses against God's law and specifically Christ's teaching; and, on the other hand, by a political argument, which seeks to effect the abolition of slavery

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, my entry on "Harriet Beecher Stowe" in the *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition* (662-63).

by way of action within the political and secular sphere, involving negotiating changes to the laws of the land, so that slavery becomes a trespass against United State statutes.

The first, moral suasionist line is absolutist in its approach, and by implication moves towards an immediatist solution – seeking immediate abolition through conversions to the God-given cause (and the book consistently advocates this approach); the second, political, course is more relative and contingent, allowing for a more gradualist and accretive process, though more immediate solutions are not precluded (Pease and Pease, 1972). The former admits almost no compromise; the second can readily negotiate compromise. Stowe herself, within a few months of seeing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* completed, was to experience the force of this distinction. Her husband's open advocacy, in speeches made to outline their shared position (Stowe herself declined to speak in public, seeing an impropriety in this)<sup>2</sup> in favor of a boycott on the purchase of goods produced by slave labor, was to lead to accusations that the Stowes were proslavery, because any such boycott would necessarily be gradual (cumulative) in its effectiveness, and because success could not be guaranteed.<sup>3</sup>

Analyses of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that emphasize its division along these two socio-geographical narrative axes can and perhaps should tend to identify the northwards advance of George and Eliza as more political in its orientations, with its accent on issues like those compromises surrounding the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave Stowe, as she explains in her final chapter, one main impetus for writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (II: 314).<sup>4</sup> The long scene between Senator and Mrs. Bird is, for example, a plain discussion of how moral suasionists are reluctant to have any truck with such political compromise, though in this case, gradualism's progress towards abolition is so rarefied as to be effectively non-existent: there is little sign of hope in any of the antebellum compromises between South and North, and least of all in the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act, that slavery will be abolished (except insofar as the law's unsatisfactoriness guaranteed future conflict). Mrs. Bird's attack on the Senator for voting to pass the 1850 Act is therefore in many ways indicative of the rising tensions both the North-South

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<sup>2</sup> See Hedrick (238).

<sup>3</sup> See Calvin Stowe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (lvii).

<sup>4</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will from hereon be referred to as *UTC* in parenthetical documentation.

compromises and the Fugitive Slave Act generated. By contrast, the southward progress of Tom tends to center itself more around the immorality of slavery, by providing a catalogue of examples of its mendacious consequences, focusing upon the break-up of families, the abuse of slaves, and heavy intimations of sexual coercion; the accent here falls not on debate but on generating moral outrage and Pauline conversions.

Yet, having said this, one has to note that the North-South separation is far from complete: both the northwards progress of George and Eliza and the southwards progress of Tom invoke moral suasionist as well as political arguments. In this respect, the discussions about, or, rather, arguments over Liberian colonization considered by Tom's master, St. Clare, and his skepticism about this solution, are symptomatic. I label them "debates" because, importantly, though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at one point, near its end does seem to endorse such white-organized colonization (300, XLIII), as advocated by the American Colonization Society, during the course of the novel this political solution is quite skeptically presented, as it is, indeed, at the very end (318). Possibly, over the course of writing the novel, Stowe's position kept shifting – as part of a more general hesitation over this issue.<sup>5</sup> The records of an 1853 convention of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been published) illustrate her uncertainty: according to the Convention report Stowe had argued that the existence of Liberia lent "dignity" to Africans everywhere, but a delegate who claimed to speak for her contradictorily argued that, if she were to rewrite *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she would not end her novel by sending off most of her freed men and women to Africa. In other words, by 1853 Stowe might or might not have changed her mind from what it seems to be represented as in the closing pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet even in her novel's closing pages, though Liberia is praised, it is also observed that it "may have subserved all sorts of purposes, by being played off, in the hands of our oppressors, against us. Doubtless the scheme may have been used, in unjustifiable ways, as a means of retarding our emancipation" (II: 301). Interestingly, George, when he leaves, "with his wife, children, sister and mother," embarks "for *Africa*" and not specifically

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<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, Douglass's opposition to colonization. Think also of the change of position of one of the two editors of first African American newspaper *Freedom's Journal*, John Russwurm, who initially supported the African Colonization Society, but changed his mind. The consequent falling out with Samuel Cornish, who had been his co-editor, led to the journal's collapse. See, for example, Hinks (101-03).

Liberia, which may suggest a measure of unease with the American Colonization Society and more enthusiasm for an unambiguously African-American-led colonization. As George says, “the whole splendid continent of Africa opens before us and our children” (II: 301-03; my emphasis). George’s rhetoric, as Susan M. Ryan points out, is consistently black nationalist and black emigrationist, rather than ACS colonizationist (Ryan 761). As such, George takes up a position which, at the time, was very popular amongst African Americans, as Howard H. Bell has noted (100). More surely, Stowe’s reluctance to endorse colonization in 1853 represents a return to a position voiced by St. Clare at an earlier point in the composition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. If one accepts that Stowe adjusted her position during the process of composing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and viewed Liberian colonization at least somewhat skeptically for much of the time she was writing the novel – which, it is worth recalling, appeared in installments – then the book’s focus upon Canada becomes all the more explicable, as it offers one solution to the issue of where escaped slaves should go, given that it would have become increasingly apparent how unsafe the Fugitive Slave Act had rendered the Northern States as a place of residence. Canada was the one acceptable (relatively uncontroversial) place where they could secure freedom.

Thinking in this way about the complexities of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shows us why suggesting that the northward vector is more political and the southward vector more moral suasionist is only broadly accurate. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* tends not to sustain clear-cut separations in this sort of way. This breakdown is important, since it merges, even muddles together, perhaps realistically enough, politics and ethics, and this muddling helps me explore what I now want to focus upon in Stowe’s novel: why it had such an extraordinary power to affect its (mostly white) readers, thus generating quite enormous sales.<sup>6</sup>

This power can, of course, be simply attributed to the combined force of the moral arguments advanced and the political case made against slavery and, more specifically, to the novel’s deployment of well-established sentimental tropes with the power to move: one might call these (in line with Raymond Williams) the text’s connection to contemporary aesthetic and cultural “structures of [abolitionist] feeling” (Williams 53-63). I am not seeking

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<sup>6</sup> I need to say that this essay takes as its focus white debates over abolition and white responses to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and consequently tends not to foreground debates concerning how racist the novel might be held to be.

in any way to gainsay this line of argument. The novel's sentimental power does of course possess great cultural potency (see, for example, Tompkins). Though it can be argued that many other texts mobilized the same array of sentimental power quotients, if perhaps not in identical conjunctions, such works did not have anything like the affective force of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and had nothing like its enormous success.

This difference of scale when weighing the novel's success is fully signaled by the novel's phenomenal sales. Of course, these sales can be accounted for in large part by the way in which Stowe brought sentimentalism to bear upon the issue of slavery in fiction in a sustained and focused manner for almost the first time (albeit following in the footsteps of the slave narratives and antislavery lecture circuit). The main exception is, of course, Richard Hildreth's problematic text, *The Slave*, published first in 1836 but going through many editions before Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Famously, this novel passed as an authentic slave narrative at first, though Hildreth was a northern white. He later, dubiously, claimed this passing was merely part of a strategic desire to maximize his book's impact, but the controversy probably helped impede the book's success and constrain its sales.<sup>7</sup> Sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by contrast, were so huge that something else beyond the novel's powerful conjunction of sentimentalism with the gothic and abolitionist elements seemed to be at work: almost two million had sold worldwide within a year of publication.<sup>8</sup>

Recalling how the focus of the trope of freedom in the text comes to fall upon Canada can perhaps begin to provide us with a clue to understanding its phenomenal success. I think this goes beyond the obviously symbolic function of Canada, which is always kept quite apparent. Plainly, Stowe is concerned to set up an ironic reflection upon how the institution of slavery generates a situation where the United States, that self-proclaimed bastion of universal freedom, in fact harbored in its very constitution the systematic oppression of a small but highly significant proportion of its population. Yet the reader can only be aware of the way in which Canada, as a locus, is in fact operating ironically: its shores, for example are called "blessed English"

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<sup>7</sup> When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came out, Hildreth coolly republished his book, entitling it *The White Slave: Another Picture of Slave Life* (1852). The novel went through many different titles. See Bentley, Brandstadter, Emerson.

<sup>8</sup> For one account of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* sales, see Fisch (96).



ones (*UTC* II: 238), which, to a U.S. American, can only invoke the way in which neither England nor one of its colonies can reliably represent a free haven. Even as it presses “Canada” forward as the locus of freedom, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* undercuts this via the clear note of irony deliberately invoked in the book by its many allusions to the Declaration of Independence.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this central and overt symbolic irony, however, I believe that Stowe establishes Canada as what might fairly be described as a fetishistic locus – a release of tension – and I mean this in a double sense. Firstly, there is what I might call an analogy at work: there is something quite perverse about representing Canada as the perfect epitome of freedom. It certainly helped Stowe create a powerful, indeed moving sense of irony, since, plainly, Canada did not offer fugitives clear-cut political equality.<sup>10</sup> It was a British colony, and Britain had only recently been fighting imperialist wars against its former colony, America (even if, of course, these wars also bore within them traces of the United States’ emerging imperialistic ambitions). In this sense, Canada stands, as it were, in terms of how it is established in the narrative, as a fetishistic totem for freedom, perversely represented as such (which is why Stowe ironically uses the phrase “English shores” and Canadian ones). But to note this does not, I want to maintain, go far enough, for the institution of slavery also obviously bore within it, quite centrally, as Stowe herself constantly reminds the reader, the opportunity for sexual oppression, exploitation and violation. If Canada functions as a kind of fetishistic symbol of freedom, it carries across in this symbolic process, inevitably, psycho-sexual traces that cannot be erased and that are vented by racial tensions. The intended allegorical perfect integrity of Canada as the locus of freedom bears within it the fetishistic understanding of (Canadian) freedom as orgasmic release (Freud speaks of “exclusiveness and fixation”; *Three Essays* 161), which is of almost explosive power for the escaping slaves:

She dreamed of a beautiful country, - a land, it seemed to her, of rest, - green shores, pleasant islands, and beautifully glittering water; and there, in a house which kind voices told her was a home, she saw her boy playing, free and happy child. She heard her husband’s footsteps; she felt him coming nearer; his arms were around her, his tears falling on her face, and she awoke! It was no dream. (*UTC* I: 203-04)

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<sup>9</sup> For an account of Stowe’s use of irony, especially in *Dred*, see Otter (2004).

<sup>10</sup> For a full account of the travails of escaped slaves and free blacks in Canada, see Winks.

As Eliza dreams of an idyllic Canada, her husband comes to her. One might fairly describe this as the climax of such fetishization, in André Lussier's formulation: an intense erotic sensation arises from the attainment of fusion with the fetish object in sexual excitement (Lussier).

Therefore, I want to consider the operations of one other, less overtly foregrounded but, I wish to argue, just as important source of affective power in the text, to do with the distribution of tropes of sadism and masochism. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself makes it quite clear that it is only on the verge of reaching Canada as fetishistic perfect, fused release that the book's sexuality can become as purely ecstatic as that experienced by George and Eliza. The mulattoes and mulattas, who reappear constantly in the novel, remind the reader of how violation, rape, and coercive sex are recurrent in white/black relations within slavery. Relatedly, for Southern plantation slave owners, since slavery illusorily represents a symbolically fetishistic totem for release – in their case a release into economic freedom and a release from any need to labor – the South also carries across with it strands of leisurely sadistic sexual exploitation. A key part of this illusory release – illusory, because the southern slaveholder has to work hard to hold his slaves – is the real access to sexual dominance that it offers; love's labors are, coercively, lost. In other words, in so far as fetishistic perversion should be understood to apply in Stowe's case and (to paraphrase and adapt Phyllis Greenacre; 89), since the seeking of illusory comforts of union with the mother (country) is simultaneously a disengagement, detachment and disidentification from her (seeking utopian freedom in slave-“free” Canada or labor-“free” Southern leisure), then *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes an exploration of how the psychosocial dynamics of this atrocious institution always possesses a perverse sexual undercurrent.<sup>11</sup>

[H]e thought he felt *that hair* twining round his fingers; and then, that it slid smoothly round his neck, and tightened and tightened, and he could not draw his breath; and then he thought voices *whispered* to him, – whispers that chilled him with horror. Then it seemed to him he was on the edge of a frightful abyss, holding on and struggling in mortal fear, while dark hands stretched up, and were pulling him over; and Cassy came behind him laughing, and pushed him. And then rose up that solemn veiled figure, and drew aside the veil. It was his mother; and she turned away from him, and he fell down, down, down,

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<sup>11</sup> I perhaps need to confess that, following in the footsteps of Laura Mulvey (177), I persistently use a fair bit of “poetic license” in drawing my analogies.

amid a confused noise of shrieks, and groans, and shouts of demon laughter, – and Legree awoke. . . . (UTC II: 225)

So, though turning to sadism and masochism may sound like a large leap for this essay to take, it is less so than it first seems, not least because, as Georges Bataille points out, there is a connection between religious ecstasy (which is so very prominent in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and sexual ecstasy. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the two become ever more subjacent, as both species of ecstasy's counterbalances to quotidian existence include masochistic and relatedly, sadistic acts:

“ . . . instead of getting cut up and thrashed, every day or two, ye might have had liberty. . . . You see the Lord an't going to help you. . . . Ye'd better hold to me; I'm somebody, and can do something!”

“No, Mas'r,” said Tom; “I'll hold on. The Lord may help me, or not help; but I'll hold to him, and believe him to the last!”

“The more fool you!” said Legree, spitting scornfully at him, and spurning him with his foot . . . and Legree turned away.

When a heavy weight presses the soul to the lowest level at which endurance is possible, there is an instant and desperate effort of every physical and moral nerve to throw off the weight; and hence the heaviest anguish often precedes a return tide of joy and courage. So was it now with Tom . . . though the hand of faith still held to the eternal rock, it was a numb, despairing grasp. Tom sat, like one stunned, at the fire. Suddenly everything around him seemed to fade, and a vision rose before him of one crowned with thorns, buffeted and bleeding. Tom gazed, in awe and wonder, at the majestic patience of the face; *the deep, pathetic eyes thrilled him to his inmost heart*; his soul woke, as, with *floods of emotion*, he stretched out his hands and fell upon his knees, – when, gradually, the vision changed: the sharp thorns became rays of glory; and, in *splendor inconceivable*, he saw that same face bending compassionately towards him. . . .

*How long Tom lay there, he knew not.* When he came to himself, the fire was gone out, his clothes were wet with the chill and drenching dews; but the dread soul-crisis was past, and, in *the joy that filled him*, he no longer felt hunger, cold, degradation, disappointment, wretchedness. From his deepest soul, he that hour loosed and parted from every hope in life that now is, and offered his own will *an unquestioning sacrifice to the Infinite*. . . . (UTC II: 242-44; my emphases)

As Reich observes, “the masochistic character . . . seeks to bind the inner tension . . . through provocation and defiance” (*The Function* 246), so that s/he is not responsible for the forbidden climax: “Beat me so that, without making myself guilty, I can release myself!” (*Character Analysis* 265). Here

the ambiguous vocabulary, which seems to come hot from romantic sensation literature even as it describes religious fulfillment, generates the climax, which soon follows:

Tom was silent.

“Speak!” thundered Legree, striking him furiously. “Do you know anything?”

“I know, Mas’r; but I can’t tell anything. *I can die!*”

Legree drew in a long breath; and, suppressing his rage, took Tom by the arm, and, approaching his face almost to his, said, in a terrible voice, “Hark ‘e, Tom! . . . You’ve always stood it out again’ me: now, *I’ll conquer ye, or kill ye!* – one or t’ other. I’ll count every drop of blood there is in you, and take ’em, one by one, till ye give up!”

Tom looked up to his master, and answered, “. . . Do the worst you can, my troubles’ll be over soon; but, if ye don’t repent, yours won’t *never* end!”

Like a strange snatch of heavenly music, hard in the lull of a tempest, this burst of feeling made a moment’s blank pause. Legree stood aghast, and looked at Tom; and there was such a silence, that the tick of the old clock could be heard. . . .

It was but a moment. There was one hesitating pause, – one irresolute, relenting thrill, – and the spirit of evil came back, with seven-fold vehemence; and Legree . . . smote his victim to the ground. (*UTC II: 272-73*)

Here, defiance leads directly to the moment of sadistic “thrill.” Launching out on this line of analysis can gain support from the way that a key part of my argument is anticipated by Marianne Noble. Noble subtly argues that at the center of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* lies the deployment of masochism, with which women can identify in a disempowering way – as a negative stereotype providing a model of passive and pain-bearing surrender – and/or in an empowering way – in that it provides women with a means of identifying with the pain-filled experiences of the slave that provides a basis for their finding a voice of resistance whilst also, more controversially, empowering them through a discovery of possible sexual fulfillment, which it shows as available to them in masochism. That is to say that masochism brings with it a species of liberatory power – transcendence – and here the focus again falls on Tom at the end of the novel transcending his pain in an ecstatic union.

Yet Noble’s argument, I believe, needs to be pushed further: there is a strand of sadistic perversity alongside the tropes of masochism in the infliction of pain in Louisiana, to which the fetishistic representation of Canada as release into freedom acts, specifically, as totemic relief from pain and perversity. I want to press beyond Noble’s focus on sexual masochism, by noting how it (openly) falls in line with the argument advanced in Krafft-Ebing’s

*Psychopathia Sexualis*, which formulated the category of paraesthesia (where the sexual instinct does not seek satisfaction in a sexual act; see 52) and in Freud's substantial refinements of this argument (*Three Essays; A Child*). Noble gains considerable traction for arguing this way by pointing out how, when discussing the role of pain in sexuality, both Freud and Krafft-Ebing mention examples of their patients' sexual arousal whilst reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Noble 296):

[I]n my patients' milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the beating-phantasies: those accessible to young people, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . (Freud, *A Child* 175)

**Case 57:** . . . in my early childhood I loved to revel in ideas about the absolute mastery of one man over others. The thought of slavery had something exciting in it for me . . . That one man could possess, sell, or whip another, caused me intense excitement, and in reading "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (which I read at about the beginning of puberty) I had erections. Particularly exciting for me was the thought of a man being hitched to a wagon in which another man sat with a whip, driving and whipping him. (Krafft-Ebing 144-45)

Despite the compelling power of her argument, Noble's invocation of Krafft-Ebing and Freud cannot but call up the intimate contingency between masochism and sadism in their writings. Accordingly, I want to focus more on the infliction of pain in the two vectors (North to Canada and South to Louisiana), in the sense of considering who inflicts it and who receives it, in a way less tied to considerations of sexual arousal or sexual gratification than readers of Krafft-Ebing and Freud might legitimately expect, whilst not denying their intimate linkage: I think it is worth recalling here that Freud and Krafft-Ebing both link sadism and masochism to anxieties over genital sexuality (Freud, *Fetishism* 155; Krafft-Ebing). I do want to acknowledge that there is anxiety in the terrain of sexuality, but also stress that both do involve pain and its infliction.

Plainly, in Tom's southbound story, pain is borne by blacks, and there is a constant flood of pain running through this vector of the narrative. And plainly there is a sadistic streak running through the administration of pain, upon white authority if not always actually by whites – by Simon Legree; by Haley the slave driver; by the Kentucky "mas'r" who had Prue whipped and left in a cellar until the "*flies had got to her*" (*UTC* II: 6; my emphasis); by Marie St. Clare; by Henrique, when beating Dodo; by the white master of Harry's sister. Each, quite apparently, in unleashing wanton acts of violence, enjoys inflicting pain upon a humiliated subject, and so, in the words of Sergio Benvenuto, puts into material effect sadistic perversion on a political scale (74). Along the other, Canada-bound northward vector, the occurrence

of pain is less pronounced, and is far less clearly sadistic or masochistic, not least because Canada becomes the totemic point of release from pain. Thus, when George Harris and Phineas mete out their violence in New England, inflicting pain upon the attacking slave hunters, with one pursuer shot and pushed off the precipice upon which the fugitives are assembled to make their “stand,” their party are heading towards nearby Canada (*UTC* I: 283). While it might be argued that sadism is not involved in this confrontation (even as the blood “oozes” out of Loker [*UTC* I: 289]), nor masochism either, overall in the novel the sadistic and masochistic strands that reside in the text are pronounced, and indeed were picked up on in contemporary visual depictions. With regularity, early illustrators of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* focus upon a minor, passing anecdotal mention of the whipping of George Harris’s sister, and carefully depict the way the female is bound and stripped bare to the waist so that the whipping can be better laid on. Indeed, browsing through any 1852 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reveals how central the infliction of pain and its experience is.

I want to suggest that the potency of the novel is enhanced by these disturbingly-inflected distributions of channels of pain and its carefully-weighted infliction, drawing, as they do, upon contemporary fascination with the instruments of slaves’ painful bondage (whips, manacles, ropes). The reader is invited to confront the possibility of sadistically inflicting pain (via identifying with the slaveholder or the resisting slave) or masochistically receiving it (via identifying with the abused slave or [even] the injured bounty hunter), and compelled thereby to confront a textual unconscious which both disturbingly and anxiously arouses the balance of subconscious sado-masochistic impulses within the reader, stirring up deeply-conflicted psychodramas (how much pain do you wish to inflict; how much pain do you wish to experience). Emotions are unleashed with unpredictable consequences, from which the reader cannot remain insulated – and here, I have in mind, in particular, the contemporary, mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century reader, far less accustomed to such sustained probings than is the case in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps this lies behind the response of one 19<sup>th</sup>-century reader explaining how he was “sleeping one night in a strange house [and] annoyed by hearing somebody in the adjoining chamber alternately groaning and laughing” and decided he would knock upon the wall and enquire, ““What’s the matter! Are you sick or are you reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*?”” only to be answered, less serendipitously than we might think, by the words, “Reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (qtd. in Noble 312).

The text constantly deviates from maintaining the South-North polarities it initially establishes (with Canada and Louisiana offered as the points of totemic release) into a more ambiguously-conflicted terrain. This is, in my analysis, not so very surprising: because in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* one is confronted not by clear geographical distributions and assignments, but shifting and ambiguous penumbrae and what might be loosely called diasporas. In the South, for example, one encounters from the start and again and again northerners moved South, and I am not speaking here of Miss Ophelia alone, for, the St. Clare family originates from Canada, St. Clare was raised in Vermont, and even Legree originates from the North – Vermont, New England, enabling George Frederick Holmes in 1852 to speak of “the atrocious heart of that fiendish Yankee, Simon Legree” – entirely missing the point of Stowe’s rhetorically ironic arrangement of constant, deliberate sectional crossings (Holmes 728). Thus, though Legree’s Southern plantation seems to be the prime locus for sadistic pleasure, his northern roots/routes destabilize this apparent spatial clarity, and intimate that sadism knows no such sectional limits. When Mary Boykin Chesnut pointed out that “Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot” since “Legree [is] a bachelor” (114) she initiates a tradition of passing over how the lace of sadism and masochism infusing Stowe’s text is far more disturbing than mere adultery.

The main southern representative in the text is apparently Marie St. Clare, but it is established she is French American, and by no means WASP. Similarly Madame de Thoux, the mulatta, was taken by her husband to the “West Indies,” while, originally, Eliza Harris was purchased in New Orleans. Southern WASPs figure only thinly in this ethnically hybrid, diasporic text. The characters in the northward vector are similarly located at the outer edges of the WASP mainstream. A Quaker family, a Senator and his wife, an anti-slavery refugee from Kentucky, and white southern bounty hunters constitute the cast-list for the majority of this narrative vector, and when, in the book’s closing chapters, escaped slaves and others flood northwards, New Orleans figures largest as their place of origin. In this, the text negotiates with the requirements of its pedagogic purpose, of breaking down sectional divides, as framed by Stowe, who is choosing her characters with this in mind. Thus, Ophelia is the more-or-less stock, initially naïve northerner encountering in the South the shocking characteristics of slavery in a classic narrative strategy; similarly, Quakers played a prominent role in abolitionist circles, and their non-violent, pacifist resistance dramatizes the problematic separation between political and moral suasionist antislavery positions, encapsulated in the violent shove given to Tom Loker by the pacifist Quaker, Phineas, at the

precipice when the fugitives make their stand. Nevertheless, the Sheldons in this process emerge as the main representatives of WASP America in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and their story of human frailty, centered upon the lapses of the patriarch, the ineffectuality of the mother, and the lack of good timing by the son, leaves the reader short of foundational role-models, and instead set adrift in a sadistic world of suffering, pain and perversity that, I want to maintain, does not provide safe or stable anchorages. The book is, in a sense, at sea, in a middle passage between South and North, where no port-of-call offers safety: the space where the Ohio River runs and the Middle Ground of Kentucky lies, which, Stowe claimed, harbored the "mildest" slavery (*UTC* I: 51), while, on the other, also harboring the horrifically sadistic circumstances of Prue's death at the behest of her Kentucky owners; the place from where slaves can be sold "down South"; and where Cincinnati lies, where Stowe resided for several years, and which can fairly be described as a "border" town between South and North, in which Ohio abolitionists campaigned alongside other Ohioans employing slaves hired out across the river. In these muddled grounds lies the institution of slavery's archetypal ideological roots. One is perhaps well reminded of the dry remark attributed to Malcolm X that the American South is "that area South of Canada" (qtd. in Crawford 40). Indeed, Miss Ophelia and St. Clare agree that the South "is the most obvious oppressor of the Negro, but the unchristian prejudice of the north is an oppressor almost equally severe" (*UTC* II: 139).

This of course leads me back to the role of Canada. Canadian soil is indeed offered as a place of safety, but for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader this is long established as a myth; indeed, Canadians are, in Norman Lederer's words, captives of their own myths if they believe Canada functioned as such a safe haven (Lederer 185). The black communities in Canada encountered substantial racism and intolerance, and "the blessed shores" described by Stowe's narrator as, in Eliza's dream, "a beautiful country – a land, it seemed to her, of rest" (*UTC* I: 203) offer no reprieve, precisely in the way that fetishistic totems cannot. All clear regional distinctions are, even as they are advanced, undercut by the lurking menace of the interdependent dark sadisms of racism and slavery. I argue that it is here that the power of the text resides. Take the passage where Cassy invites Emmeline to imagine the ash-black ground and blackened tree trunk where, we are led to believe, Legree burns his victims alive. As Cassy is preparing Emmeline for this revelation, the latter regards her in a way that can only be described as disconcerting, especially when the reader recalls how Cassy has just threatened Emmeline with a "glittering stiletto" (*UTC* II: 263):



“. . . you'd be tracked by dogs, and brought back, and then – and then –” [said Cassy].

“What would he do?” said the girl, looking with breathless interest into her face.

“What wouldn't he do, you'd better ask,” said Cassy, . . . You wouldn't sleep much if I should tell you things I've seen – things that he tells of, sometimes. . . . I've heard screams here that I haven't been able to get out of my head for weeks . . . . There's a place way down by the quarters, where you can see a black, blasted tree, and the ground all covered with black ashes.” (*UTC* II: 223)

Cassy's initial, theatrically hesitant, reluctance almost sadistically lures Emmeline into an unspecified imagining that is not exactly depicted in terms of fear. Emmeline's “breathless interest” is rather a type of perverse fascination, as, I would argue, her subconscious makes a break from its repressed cover. It is even unclear what end of the sado-masochistic spectrum is being patrolled by Emmeline's imagination at this point, though the masochistic might be held to predominate, and indeed this has been foreshadowed fully enough:

“Well, my little dear,” said [Legree], turning to Emmeline, and laying his hand on her shoulder, “we're almost home!”

When Legree scolded and stormed, Emmeline was terrified; but when he laid his hand on her, and spoke as he now did, *she felt as if she had rather he would strike her*. The expression of his eyes made her soul sick, and her flesh creep. Involuntarily she clung closer to the mulatto woman by her side, as if she were her mother. (*UTC* II: 178; my emphasis)

Plainly, Legree nauseates Emmeline in this gestural expression of sexual intent, yet the preference for the infliction of pain remains disconcerting: she is under the rod either way. Following Noble, one might argue that the sexual politics of the book compel the reader to regard Emmeline's later “breathless” fascination with Cassy's story as resulting from a masochistic anticipation of some intensity, but her fascination may in part stem from her imaginings of the tortured pain of Legree's burnt victims. Relatedly, the obvious pleasure with which Cassy narrates her anecdote and the hesitation she introduces into her narration, which perhaps enhance her dramatic performance, do not come across at all conventionally:

“. . . O, Cassy, do tell me what I shall do!”

“What I've done. Do the best you can, – do what you must – make it up in hating and cursing.”

“And I hate it so –”

“You'd better drink,” said Cassy. “I hated it, too; and now I can't live without it. One must have something; – things don't look so dreadful, when you take that.”

“Mother used to tell me never to touch any such thing,” said Emmeline.

“*Mother* told you!” said Cassy, with a thrilling and bitter emphasis on the word *mother*. “What use is it for mothers to say anything? You are all to be bought and paid for, and your souls belong to whoever gets you. That’s the way it goes. I say, *drink* brandy; drink all you can, and it’ll make things come easier.” (*UTC* II: 223-24)

As Cassy crushes Emmeline’s attempt to once more seek the “illusory comforts of union with the mother” (Greenacre 89), all this prepares us for the zest Cassy brings to the psychic torturing of Legree when he is down, and cumulatively disturbs any simple psycho-sexual distribution along familiar, “natural” gender lines. The sadistic inflictor of pain, Legree, suffers painful psychological torture from Cassy; apparently, his hidden God-given conscience has not been wholly extinguished. But it can well be argued that the Southerner, Cassy, toys with the Northern Legree with relish. Stowe’s intimation, I argue, through such complex, powerful characterizations, is that sado-masochistic distributions must be understood to proceed not simply by way of identifying male as sadist, female as masochist, and southern white as the sole reservoir of sadism, but must in fact be regarded far more anxiously. Things are not simple, as the frequent emphasis in anti-slavery literature on white female cruelty in the treatment of slaves intimates (see, for example, Douglass 36-40). What I am saying is that the text’s themes are rendered much more unstable when its subconscious complications are explored – though how subconscious they are for Stowe is open to debate, since at one point she suggests an awareness of suppression and its psychological consequences: “The psychologist tells us of a state, in which the affections and images of the mind become so dominant and overpowering, that they press into their service the outward imagining” (*UTC* II: 244-45).

Jim O’Loughlin suggests that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* works as “a way of structuring *experience*” (573), but perhaps it rather works as a way of recording the lack of structural fixity to experience, moving beneath any apparently clear structure, which in turn reminds us how power and its operations are not controllable in any safe way, but rather that the power plays of slavery are in fact infected by sado-masochistic dynamics that also complicate other power relations. This is surely what underlies Stowe’s fascination with the adage, “THE POWER OF THE MASTER MUST BE ABSOLUTE, TO

RENDER THE SUBMISSION OF THE SLAVE PERFECT.”<sup>12</sup> The apparently stable dyad, “Free Canada <> Slave South” is not as simple or as stable as it seems in this psycho-sexual underlay, in which seeking power is, in Fink’s formulation, a means to achieve an objective, but also, always power for power’s sake (29).<sup>13</sup> Racial domination and the fulfillment of sadistic and masochistic impulses become fused.

I have thus argued in this essay that beneath the surface themes which have been frequently, if also expertly, explored by many critics, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be seen to be more contingent and provisional than its reputation suggests, as the anxiety-inducing implications of its sado-masochistic regimes are fully contemplated and confronted. I would argue that Stowe’s text unconsciously adopts its insistence on perverse fetishism because, in the words of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, perversion “is one of the essential ways . . . to push forward the frontiers of what is possible and to unsettle reality” (61). Surely *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s huge sales and enormous impact indicate that it did indeed unsettle reality and push back the frontiers of the possible, *desirably*, as people recalibrated their association with slavery and revisited their own perverse fascinations.<sup>14</sup> Or, in the possibly apocryphal quip of

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<sup>12</sup> The adage was formulated by Judge Ruffin in *State v. Mann* (North Carolina, 1829) and quoted by Stowe in both *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (71) and *Dred* (II: 103).

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, exploring the text’s sado-masochistic underlay brings it thematically closer to Ishmael Reed’s *Flight To Canada* than might seem probable. See the article in this volume on Ishmael Reed.

<sup>14</sup> To some extent, Hildreth was able to produce similar effects:

[Colonel Moore] repeated his commands, with a tone and a look that were frightful. “If you wish to save your own carcass, see that you bring blood at every blow. I’ll teach you—both of you—to trifle with me.”

She now comprehended his brutal purpose;—and giving one look of mingled horror and despair, sunk senseless to the ground. Peter was sent for water. He dashed it in her face, and she soon revived. They placed her on her feet, and colonel Moore again put the whip into her hand and repeated his orders.

She threw it down, as if the touch had stung her; and looking him full in the face, the tears, all the while, streaming from her eyes, she said in a tone firm, but full of entreaty, “Master, he is my husband!”

That word *husband*, seemed to kindle colonel Moore into a new fury, which totally destroyed his self-command. He struck Cassy to the ground with his fists, trampled on her with his feet, and snatching up the whip which she had thrown down, he laid it upon me with such violence, that the lash penetrated my flesh at every blow, and the blood ran trickling down my legs and stood in little puddles at my feet. The torture was too great for human

Abraham Lincoln, on meeting the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "So this is the little lady who made this big war" (qtd. in Gilmore 58). His words, I believe, make far more sense and reveal couched, violent meanings in Stowe's novel if understood within the perverse parameters that I have outlined here.

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endurance; I screamed with agony. "Pshaw," said my executioner, "his noise will disturb the House;"—and drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he thrust it into my mouth, and rammed it down my throat with the butt-end of his whip-handle. Having thus effectually gagged me, he renewed his lashes (Hildreth, *The White Slave; or Memoires of a Fugitive* [65-66]).

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JUTTA ZIMMERMANN

## From Roots to Routes

*The Dialogic Relation between Alex Haley's Roots (1976) and Lawrence Hill's The Book of Negroes (2007)*

### I. FROM SLAVERY TO DIASPORA

Although geographically the American South and Canada are at opposite ends of the continent, they are linked in the North American collective memory by the "Underground Railroad," the route and informal network of abolitionists that led fugitive slaves from Southern plantations to settlements in Canada, at the time still a British colony. Non-fictional and fictional accounts of flights from Southern plantations to Canada abound in North American literature, ranging from 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narratives and the most popular abolitionist novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to contemporary texts such as Ishmael Reed's piece of postmodern historiographic metafiction, *Flight to Canada*, and Robert Hayden's poem "Runagate Runagate." Even more recently, in *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore alludes to the Underground Railroad when he crosses the U.S.-Canadian border at Windsor, Ontario to find that African Americans perceive race relations in Canada as less strained than in the U.S.

As will be shown in this essay, the historical experience of the Underground Railroad has led to a distinct image of the U.S. as falling short of its democratic ideals and of Canada as the "better America." Starting with novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Alex Haley's *Roots*, the focus of literary representations of slavery by black authors has shifted from claiming participation in the national collective to claiming recognition of cultural difference. The shift has occurred gradually, shaped first by the black nationalism of the 1960s and 70s, and then by the emergence of a black diaspora in the 80s. The concept of a diasporic black consciousness can best be illustrated by a highlighting of the dialogic relation between Alex Haley's foundational novel *Roots* and Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, the latter a rewriting, over thirty years after the publication of *Roots*, which gives expression to a diasporic understanding of identity as hybrid and processual rather than homogeneous and stable.



As a Canadian author, Lawrence Hill critically engages with the positive image of Canada as “safe haven” or “paradise” that is present in much of 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist literature. A good example of this strategic, stereotypical use of Canada as a counter-image to the U.S. is a popular ballad that was sung to the tune of Stephen Foster’s “Oh, Susannah”:

I'm on my way to Canada,  
That cold and dreary land;  
The dire effects of slavery,  
I can no longer stand.  
My soul is vexed within me so,  
To think that I'm a slave;  
I've now resolved to strike the blow  
For freedom or the grave.

O righteous Father,  
Wilt thou not pity me?  
And aid me on to Canada,  
Where colored men are free.

I heard Victoria plainly say,  
If we would all forsake  
Our native land of slavery,  
And come across the Lake[,]  
That she was standing on the shore,  
With arms extended wide,  
To give us all a peaceful home,  
Beyond the rolling tide.  
Farewell, old master!  
That's enough for me –  
I'm going straight to Canada  
Where colored men are free. . . . (Simpson 6-8)

In granting slaves the freedom that Americans had fought for a few decades earlier, the British colony to the North made use of a powerful political instrument. To radical abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison, slavery discredited the nation’s founding document, the Declaration of Independence. For the country to be able to live up to its ideals, slavery would have to be abolished. Since Britain had set the standard with the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and with the refusal to return fugitive slaves to their owners across the border, Sir John Colborne, the Governor of Upper Canada, in 1829, and Canadian politicians, publicists, and academics ever since have used the fact that a portion of Canada’s black population had reached the country via the Underground Railroad to create the image of Canada as the

“better America.” As has been pointed out, among others by African Canadian author and critic George Elliott Clarke, Canadians’ favorable perception of themselves is founded on an all too “cheerful reading of Canadian history”:

Canadians take pride in the fact that their country was the last “stop” on the Underground Railroad. One standard history of the country noted that Canadians can “claim the proud distinction for their flag . . . that it has never floated over legalized slavery.” The claim is literally true, but only because Canada did not yet exist when the enslavement of Native and Africans flourished on what is now Canadian soil. A 1995 poll conducted by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association found that 83 percent of Canadian adults did not know that slavery was practiced in pre-Confederation Canada until 1834. (103)

Over the last five decades, black writers in both the U.S. and Canada have turned to slavery as a literary topic (in contrast to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when black authors mostly focused on racial discrimination and segregation in the present). The contexts for the literary exploration of this topic, however, differ in the two countries. In the U.S., black writers turned to slavery in the 1970s, a time when race – like gender – was exposed as socially constructed rather than biologically given. Their premise was that a collective black identity could only be founded on historical experience and on the ways in which this experience had shaped black culture. “Ethnicity” replaces “race” in order to foreground the historical formation of culture and collective identity. Not coincidentally, the term African American emerges at this time, indicating the shift from race to ethnicity. Ron Eyerman points out the central role that slavery plays in this context:

It is important to keep in mind that the notion “African American” is not itself a natural category, but an historically formed collective identity which first of all required articulation and then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate. It was here, in this identity-formation, that the memory of slavery would be central, not so much as individual experience, but as collective memory. It was slavery, whether or not one had experienced it, that defined one’s identity as an African American, it was why you, an African, were here, in America. It was within this identity that . . . the identification “former slave” or “daughter of slaves” became functionalized and made generally available as a collective and common memory to unite all blacks in the United States. (16-17)

When Barack Obama delivered his famous speech on race during the presidential campaign in 2008, his reference to the slave ancestry of his wife and daughters was an indicator of the role slavery has played in recent decades in constructing a collective African American identity. Whereas 19<sup>th</sup>-century black authors were motivated by the desire to challenge stereotypical representations of African Americans by the white mainstream and to

demonstrate their equality in relation to their intellectual potential, artistic creativity, or emotional and moral sensitivity, contemporary authors now foreground the cultural difference between African Americans and the white mainstream. Alex Haley's *Roots*, the 1976 best-selling novel that was turned into the most successful TV series ever broadcast in the United States, can justifiably be called the single most influential work in popularizing the idea that African American distinctiveness can be traced back to Africa and to the cultural traditions which the slaves had brought with them to the "New World." While slavery remains crucial, it is no longer perceived as the complete disruption with the African past.

The argument for cultural continuity between Africa and the New World had first been presented by Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past* in 1941. Ever since the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, black authors have made conscious efforts to highlight the continuities between the various African cultures from which slaves were taken and the traditions and practices that have been established by the slaves and their descendants in America.

Paradoxically, when *Roots* first came out, the novel's focus on the African side of African Americans' composite identity led to it being perceived as typically American. In his 1976 review for the *New York Times* entitled "How One Black Man Came to Be an American," James Baldwin reads *Roots* as a symptom of "the beginning of the end of the black diaspora" (1976). Not only have blacks, in Baldwin's opinion, become an integral part of America and the West, since the Civil Rights Movement they also speak with heightened moral authority. The subtitle of Haley's novel, *The Saga of an American Family*, indicates the novel's claim to be representative of the American nation. In this context, it is significant that *Roots* – in spite of the fact that the author explicitly thematizes his upbringing in Kentucky and the novel, for the most part, is a portrayal of the Southern plantation system – is hardly ever discussed in the context of Southern literature. Baldwin's comment accounts for this fact. The Civil Rights Movement and the black nationalism of the 1960s, which aimed at decolonizing the United States, had put an end to the practice of delegating responsibility for slavery and racial conflicts to the American South. In this respect, *Roots* has performed important cultural work: "Haley's monumental achievement helped convince the nation that the black story is the American story," states Michael Eric Dyson in his introduction to the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. The "nationalization" of the slavery experience, however, led to severe criticism and, according to David Chioni Moore, to the novel's "critical non-existence":

[M]any on the Left . . . have been uncomfortable with the unchallenging character of the book's politics: for though *Roots*'s white characters are almost without exception villainous, they are all also, without *any* exception dead. *Roots* situates American crimes of race all comfortably in the past, and when the family's narrative stops in about 1921, one is left with an American success story in the classic mold. (8)

While the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Roots* in 2006 gave critics an occasion to assess the novel's impact on American culture, Canadian author Lawrence Hill set out to write a novel that is clearly modelled on *Roots*, yet diverts from it in crucial points. *The Book of Negroes*, published in 2007, presents a female protagonist who is irrevocably changed by the Middle Passage and slavery yet who creatively translates her African heritage to her New World environment and who realizes that her experience sets her apart from both mainstream North American culture – in both the U.S. and Canada – and from the homeland in Africa. Hill's critical rewriting of *Roots* is inspired by recent theoretical works on the black diaspora. The two novels represent distinct stages in the history of the African diaspora in the New World. Alex Haley's *Roots* marks both the culmination and the demise of black cultural nationalism. While the "roots" metaphor firmly grounds the novel in the tradition of African American nationalism and Pan-Africanism, its focus on the cultural continuity between African and African American cultures points towards a new understanding of the African diaspora that emerged in the 1980s. David Moore captures the emergent discourse in *Roots*: "Alex Haley's *Roots* profoundly argues, in some sense against itself, that we need to talk not about *roots* but about *routes*: trajectories, paths, interactions, links" (21). Thirty-one years after *Roots*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* illustrates this new discourse which substitutes for a negative image of the diaspora (as a community that suffers from the consequences of its dispersal) one that celebrates the effects of dispersal. Stuart Hall defines the new understanding of "diaspora identities" thus:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (401-02)

The intertextual relationship between the two novels can be captured by taking recourse to Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism," as Tzvetan Todorov has described it:

After Adam, there are no nameless objects nor any unused words. Intentionally or not, all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place. This is true not only of literature but of all discourse, and Bakhtin finds himself forced to sketch out a new interpretation of culture: culture consists in the discourses retained by collective memory (the commonplaces and stereotypes just as much as the exceptional words), discourses in relation to which every uttering subject must situate himself or herself. (x)

The dialogue which the two novels engage in is more than just an isolated event or a relation between two individual texts. Both novels take part in the larger project of inventing and reinventing a collective black identity under the conditions of what cultural critics refer to as “transnationalism.” Both novels, however, in spite of their involvement in the diaspora discourse, are also part of their respective national discourses on collective memory and diversity management.

In rewriting *Roots*, Hill not only tries to overcome essentialist notions of race and nation that are at work in Haley’s novel but also challenges the Canadian national discourse which “projects [blackness] . . . onto that country conveniently located just south” [the geographical direction is significant here, as a similar phenomenon can be observed in the United States where the South has also served as a foil onto which to project blackness] (Harris 367). Moreover, *The Book of Negroes* positions itself in relation to the diaspora discourse that has emerged since the 1970s. As I will show, the novel illustrates the theoretical concept of the African diaspora that was introduced in the 1980s. The title for this essay, “From Roots to Routes,” is taken from Paul Gilroy’s seminal study in the field, *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy uses the two terms as shorthand for the constructivist turn of the 1970s and 80s:

Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes. (19)

Gilroy chooses the spatial metaphor of the black Atlantic to draw attention to the movements and the cultural contacts that led to the emergence of hybrid identities and hybrid cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. The main target of Gilroy’s critique is the “reductive, essentialist understanding of ethnic and national difference which operates through an absolute sense of culture so powerful that it is capable of separating people off from each other and diverting them into social and historical locations that are understood to be mutually impermeable and incommensurable” (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 65).

Organicist images such as the tree with its roots, stem, and branches or its appeals to kinship or family give expression of *Roots*' essentialist view of culture. In contrast, the metaphor of the Black Atlantic conveys the idea of the fluidity of cultures. The term 'diaspora' is used in opposition to 'ethnicity' or 'nation,' concepts that are usually correlated with a specific territory. In his essay collection *Routes*, James Clifford defines "diasporic cultural forms" by taking recourse to both roots and routes:

They are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms. Diaspora is different from travel . . . in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home. . . . Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (251)

[T]he term 'diaspora' is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement. (252)

The constitutive features of diasporic formations are what Clifford calls "travel" and "translation": movement and contact lead to continuous acts of translating concepts from one culture to another. Even the transatlantic slave trade, the most violent displacement of people, did not lead to the eradication of African cultures, a position that, for example, African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier had taken in the 1930s. Rather, it "has resulted," as Clifford suggests, "in a range of interconnected black cultures: African American, Afro-Caribbean, British, and South American" (36).

When Clifford reintroduces the root metaphor, he foregrounds the processes by which collective identities are constructed and, more importantly, points to the ambivalence that marks the position of difference that diasporic people occupy: deficits in the present are often projected onto a past and an imaginary homeland. As James T. Campbell concludes in his study on *Middle Passages*: "Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society" (xxiv). Against the backdrop of these theoretical assumptions about the African diaspora, *Roots*' intertextual relationship with *The Book of Negroes* can be characterized along the lines of Todorov's remarks on Bakhtin – as a discourse in dialogue "with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates". *Roots* has triggered a new diasporic thinking that

challenges the essentialist and nationalist identity conception on which Haley's novel is based.

## II. *ROOTS* AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Alex Haley's *Roots* marks a turning-point in the collective identity of African Americans. It is the culmination of black cultural nationalism which emerged in the 1960s and was inspired by struggles for independence and decolonization in former African colonies. It was in this context that the diaspora concept first gained currency. German ethnographer Hauke Dorsch defines the rationale of those who introduced the term as follows:

Africans should no longer be represented as passive victims of proselytising, slavery, and colonialism but rather as agents who actively shape their world through resistance, escape, opposition but also cooperation and the reinvention of African cultures in the diaspora. (33; my own translation)

No other statement could serve better to characterize *Roots*. Haley's project, however, is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, the roots metaphor, a set piece of nationalist discourse like the family or the tree, suggests that cultural identity is biologically inherited. The novel's plot structure, which presents the history of several generations starting with the African Kunta Kinte and ending with Alex Haley in the present, foregrounds the biological continuity between the African ancestor and his American descendants. On the other hand, the novel's authorial narrator takes on the role of ethnographer, putting the focus on the cultural practices – in particular storytelling – by which the African tradition is kept alive.

When representing the early life of Kunta Kinte in his native village Jufure in Gambia, Haley takes great efforts to get across the cultural otherness of the Africans. The use of a great number of African words, among them "toubab" for "white person," and metaphorical expressions that refer to all those objects with which a member of the Mandinka tribe would not be familiar at the time, among them "a heavy metal stick with a whole in the end" for a gun or "big canoe" for sailing ship, indicate an African perspective. The prologue of the popular TV series (1977) refers to Kunta Kinte's removal as a journey that takes him from "primitive Africa" to the Old South. Critics have accused Haley of having misrepresented the conditions in Africa at the time. The most obvious distortion is, of course, that Haley does not mention the degree to which Africans were involved in the slave trade. Yet, while

Kunta Kinte is portrayed as naïve and innocent, a noble savage, Haley endows this character with an awareness not only of a tribal but also of a national affiliation. At one point, Young Kunta Kinte reflects on the widening circles he is part of, “his mates, his village, his tribe, his Africa” (120). The notion of Africa as an imagined community, however, elides the diversity of African peoples and is, as James T. Campbell argues, “itself an outgrowth of the slave trade, an artifact of the centuries-long encounter between Africa and the West. Such a conception would have made little sense to [18<sup>th</sup>-century Africans who were taken captive and shipped to the New World]” (10). But Haley’s novel does in fact construct such a collective African identity, and its representation of the Middle Passage illustrates this very process:

Then, after a while, a clear voice called out in Mandinka, “Share his pain! We must be in this place as one village!

. . . for the first time since they had been captured and thrown in chains, it was as if there was among the men a sense of being together. (Haley 183)

From this moment on, a collective African identity is constituted by “othering,” i.e., by opposing African cultural practices to American ones. Kunta Kinte is equipped with the ethnographic insights gained by anthropologists such as Melville Herskovits. His reflections provide instances of African cultural survival similar to the ones that Herskovits provided in his study *The Myth of Africa*:

Ignorant as they were, some of the things they did were purely African, and he could tell that they were totally unaware of it themselves. For one thing, he had heard all his life the very same sounds of exclamation, accompanied by the very same hand gestures and facial expressions. And the way these blacks moved their bodies was also identical. No less so was the way these blacks laughed when they were among themselves – with their whole bodies, just like the people of Juffure. (Haley 243)

Even at moments of intense crisis – for example, when Kunta Kinte is separated from his daughter, who is sold to another plantation – Kunta Kinte is presented as consciously reflecting his cultural otherness: “As if Kunta were sleepwalking, he came crippling slowly back up the driveway – when an African remembrance flashed into his mind. . . .” (Haley 453). Arguably, the detailed ethnographic description of cultural practices is an expression of what Gilroy criticizes as an “absolute sense of culture so powerful that it is capable of separating people off from each other and diverting them into social and historical locations that are understood to be mutually impermeable and incommensurable” (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 65).



Kunta Kinte's resistance to acculturation highlights the strict boundaries between cultures and people. Throughout his time in the American South, the protagonist alternates between his determination to retain his pure African identity while keeping himself apart from the American-born slaves and his fear of acculturation against his will: "Indeed, by now – Kunta grimly faced it – he even *thought* in the toubab tongue. In countless things he did as well as said and thought, his Mandinka ways had slowly been replaced by those of the blacks he had been among" (Haley 328). And yet, his conflict is ultimately resolved when he comes to know some of the slaves more intimately and realizes that he had misjudged their feelings towards slavery: "it pained him to think how grievously he had underestimated . . . the other blacks. Though they never showed it except to those they loved, . . . he realized at last that they felt – and hated – no less than he the oppressiveness under which they all lived" (Haley 359). Cultural essentialism – evident in phrases such as "Kunta felt African pumping in his veins – and from him flowing into the child, the flesh of him and Bell" (Haley 368) – is functionalized by Haley in order to counter white representations of passive and docile slaves.

However, there are also forces that work against the predominant essentialist ideology. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson draws attention to the way in which both individuals and nations construct their identity through narrative. In contrast to individual biographies that have a beginning and end, a nation's biography, according to Anderson, needs to be written "up time," that is starting "from an originary present" moving backwards in time (305). *Roots* illustrates how the process of invention is naturalized by eliding the status of the narrator's speech as discourse. Yet, at least on the plot level, the invented character of the collective African identity is explicitly thematized, in particular once Kunta Kinte is removed from the plot after the separation from his daughter Kizzy. When Kizzy gives birth to a son, Chicken George, after she was raped by her white master, she consciously constructs the genealogy of her child: "Kizzy decided that however base her baby's origins, however light his color, whatever the name the massa forced upon him, she would never regard him as other than the grandson of an African" (Haley 465). Haley's choice to trace Kizzy's son's ancestry to one individual, Kunta Kinte, and to neglect Chicken George's 255 other ancestors, who are equally related to him, serves the same purpose, namely to create a homogeneous cultural tradition. In choosing Kunta Kinte as the one

ancestor Haley remains caught in the racist ideology manifested, for example, in the one-drop rule that identified as black anyone with African ancestry.

However, the contradictory forces also at work in the novel indicate that racial essentialism is no longer tenable. David Chioni Moore argues convincingly that *Roots* points towards a future in which the idea of a bounded, homogeneous collective identity needs to be given up:

The recovery of a root – as in Haley’s *Roots* – serves an especially important function when a major chunk of the tangle of one’s identity has been either erased or systematically denigrated, or, in the case of Haley and his primary readers, both. Yet, once that origin is recovered, that nobility restored, the next important, and I would argue, moral task is to recognize that purities can only ever be tentative – that all languages are Creole, . . . that human evolution is . . . interlinking. (21)

### III. *THE BOOK OF NEGROES*: A DOCUMENT OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* realizes the shift from roots to routes that is only emergent in *Roots*. “We are travelling peoples” (301, 404) is a statement that the protagonist Aminata Diallo makes twice in the novel, thereby putting Gilroy’s and Clifford’s argument for the centrality of movement in the form of a memorable catch-phrase. Hill’s novel displays enough similarities with *Roots* to throw the contrasts into sharp relief. Like *Roots*, *The Book of Negroes* presents the narrative of a young African who is snatched by slave-traders and displaced to the American South. That Lawrence Hill chooses a female protagonist illustrates the heterogeneity of the diaspora: there are fault lines besides race or ethnicity – one of them is gender. This specific focus allows the author, for example, to represent a critical view of the female initiation rites such as circumcision, thereby avoiding the homogenization of African tribal communities. By using the young Aminata Diallo as focalizer, the novel can present the practice from two points of view, the first one embodying the dominant, the second one expressing the dissenting view:

Mama began to speak to me about how my body would change. I would soon start bleeding, she said, and around that time some women would work with her to perform a little ritual on me. I wanted to know more about that ritual. All girls have it done when they are ready to become women, she said. When I pressed for details, Mama said part of my womanhood was to be cut off so that I would be considered clean and pure and ready for marriage. I was none too impressed by this, and informed her that I was in no hurry to marry and would be declining the treatment. . . . (Hill 15)

In the following, the representation of this discussion shifts from indirect speech to direct speech, thereby foregrounding the clash of the opinions, that of Aminata, which is identical with the Western human rights discourse, in particular the right to physical integrity, and, conversely, that of her mother, which implies a competing right to cultural integrity:

“Did they do this to you?” I asked her.

“Of course,” she said, “or your father would never have married me.”

“Did it hurt?”

“More than childbirth, but it didn’t last long. It is just a little correction.”

“But I have done nothing wrong, so I am in no need of correction,” I said. Mama simply laughed, so I tried another approach. “Some of the girls told me that Salima in the next village died last year, when they were doing that thing to her.”

“Who told you that?”

“Never mind,” I said, employing one of her expressions. “But is it true?”

“The woman who worked on Salima was a fool. She was untrained, and she tried too much. I’ll take care of you when the time comes.”

We let the matter drop, and never had the chance to discuss it again. (Hill 15-16)

As is the case with Haley’s construction of a collective African identity in *Roots*, this conversation between mother and daughter is clearly an anachronism that reflects on today’s debates about female circumcision rather than on 18<sup>th</sup>-century reality. The main function of this anachronism is to represent African cultures as internally heterogeneous and diverse rather than as fixed and stable entities.

The diversification of black experience also governs the parts set in America. In contrast to *Roots*, Aminata Diallo’s journey in *The Book of Negroes* does not end in the American South. During the Revolutionary War the protagonist accompanies her master, a Jewish merchant, to New York where she escapes and starts working for the British Army. After the British defeat she is among the black loyalists who are taken to Nova Scotia. The title, *The Book of Negroes*, refers to the historical ledger in which the names of the black loyalists were listed. In Birchtown, Nova Scotia, however, none of the promises made by the British are kept. The black community is segregated from the white settlement, the blacks are resented because they compete for the little work there is. Aminata witnesses a race riot and is separated from a child of hers for the second time. Disillusioned, she joins a group of colonists who, under the leadership of British abolitionist John Clarkson, are

taken to Sierra Leone, a British colony, designed to relieve Britain of the blacks who had been taken from the American colonies. In Africa, however, her dream of going home is shattered. The homeland, which had been omnipresent in Aminata's thoughts, has become an imaginary one, incompatible with reality. Threatened to be re-enslaved by African traders, Aminata Diallo accepts Clarkson's invitation to accompany him to London and to become active in the Abolitionist Movement.

Compared with *Roots*, a number of significant changes suggest Hill's familiarity with the recent theoretical works on the diaspora. In *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata Diallo's journeys exemplify the criss-crossing of the Atlantic, which Gilroy uses as metaphor for the cultural hybridization that the slave trade effected. Her return to Africa and the disillusionment that follows illustrate Gilroy's most crucial point about the African diaspora: that in the New World Africans are subjected to and participate in modernity. When Alex Haley chooses for Kunta Kinte to be a Muslim, this choice reflects the militant attitude of black nationalism in the 1960s that looked upon Christianity as an instrument of oppression. In Hill's case, the same choice seems to be motivated by a desire to deconstruct the dichotomy of primitive and civilized, one which is so pervasive in that Western discourse about Africa that represents Africans as modernity's other. The deconstruction of these binaries is most obvious in the climactic scene of the novel after Aminata realizes that the man who is supposed to take her to her native village will sell her back into slavery.

[A]fter I heard Allesane's words, I felt no more longing for Bayo – only a determination to stay free. . . . Bayo I could live without. But for freedom, I would die. (Hill 442)

Freedom, the political ideal of the European Enlightenment that inspired the American Revolution, is here invoked by a slave for whom the word has a meaning quite different from the one white Americans attribute to it. At the outbreak of the Revolution, Aminata – then still in Charleston – had reflected on different meanings attached to the terms slavery and liberty:

White people in the markets mumbled to each other about being enslaved by the King of England, but I had stopped listening to their complaints. *Liberty to the Americans. Down with slavery.* They weren't talking about the slavery I knew or the liberty I wanted, and it all seemed ludicrous to me. (Hill 228)

Significantly, Aminata makes a distinction between "freedom," a term that seems to have an existential meaning, and "liberty," a term that is bound to a specific historical context, the American Revolution.

While Lawrence Hill uses a richly metaphorical style in order to express the particularity of Aminata's African world view, he simultaneously foregrounds the acts of translation that are constantly performed in cultural contact zones. This focus on cultural change through contact distinguishes *The Book of Negroes* from *Roots*. Aminata tells her own story in retrospect. The novel proceeds on two levels that alternate with each other. In the present, Aminata Diallo writes her life story in order to support the British abolitionists' initiative to put an end to the slave trade. The life story itself is presented in chronological order so as to foreground the fact that it is the result of Aminata's retrospective view. The use of the English language in this context is performative; it constitutes an act of translation, a fusion of perspectives. While Hill's representation of the Middle Passage echoes *Roots* in its use of figurative language to represent objects that are unknown to Aminata, it significantly differs from *Roots* in that the use of concrete and sensual images still characterizes the language of the narrating I when she composes her life story. The opening passage illustrates the particularity of Aminata's style, which is both metaphorical and colloquial. Some of the statements sound familiar enough to qualify as proverbs, though they are not:

I seem to have trouble dying. By all rights, I should not have lived this long. But I still smell trouble riding on any wind, just as surely as I could tell you whether it is a stew of chicken necks or pigs' feet bubbling in the iron pot on the fire. And my ears still work just as good as a hound dog's. People assume that just because you don't stand as straight as a sapling, you're deaf. Or that your mind is like pumpkin mush. (Hill 1)

Whereas in *Roots* the authorial narrator's use of English contradicts the novel's overt attempt at establishing and policing the boundaries between cultures, the narrator's discourse in *The Book of Negroes* foregrounds what Todorov metaphorically refers to "as a single voice . . . blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place" (x). What takes place in Aminata Diallo's discourse is an act of translation.

Due to the striking parallels between Haley's *Roots* and Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, the differences are thrown into stark relief. Haley's novel *Roots* has a nationalist agenda; it tries to define an African identity by taking recourse to biological inheritance. At the same time, however, the novel foregrounds the cultural practices that slaves held on to in the "New World" and thus points towards the concept of the black diaspora that emerged in the 1980s and 90s. Moreover, the novel has performed important cultural work within the U.S. in that it has represented slavery as a national issue, or as Gilroy has shown, as an integral part of modernity. Slavery can no longer be projected onto the South as the remnant of European feudalism in the "New

World.” Lawrence Hill accomplishes a similar task for Canada: Canadians can no longer hold on to the myth that, in contrast to the U.S., they never had a race problem. The part of the novel set in Nova Scotia does away with the image of Canada that was predominant in 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist fiction. At the same time that Hill embraces the concept of the diaspora as sketched out by Gilroy, Clifford, and others, he also points at the blind spot in the Black Atlantic, as Canada is hardly ever mentioned in this context. The transnational and transcultural perspective implied by the concept of the Black Atlantic reveals that close attention needs to be paid to the very specific cultural and historical location in which a voice is raised to make itself heard in a choir of voices. And in this context, national discourse still plays a prominent role, as both *Roots* and *The Book of Negroes* indicate (see Mayer 14).

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HANS BAK

## Flights to Canada

*Jacob Lawrence, Ishmael Reed, and Lawrence Hill*

*Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind.* (Ishmael Reed)

*We are traveling peoples . . . all of us.* (Lawrence Hill)

In this essay I compare and contrast the visual and literary representations of Canada as the imagined utopia at the end of the exilic, diasporic experience of the flight from slavery in the works of three contemporary North-American artists: (a) *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1967), a narrative series of paintings by African American artist Jacob Lawrence, intended as a tribute, conceived in the spirit of the Civil Rights movement, to the life and work of Harriet Tubman and her efforts to help runaway slaves escape to “the promised land” of Canada; (b) *Flight to Canada* (1976), a quirky and ironic post-modern exploration of Canada as a space of otherness (heterotopia) through a revisiting of the historical genre of the slave narrative, by African American novelist Ishmael Reed; and (c) *The Book of Negroes* (2007) by Canadian author Lawrence Hill, the widely praised account of the exilic passage from Africa to South Carolina to Nova Scotia (and back to Africa) of the female slave Aminata Diallo. Focusing on the shifting representations of the “flight to Canada” motif I will explore the tensions between (nostalgia for) an original homeland (Africa, the American South) and an “imagined community” in exile (Canada). In what follows I propose to read the three texts – one visual, two literary; two American, one Canadian – as an intertextual triptych of different but interrelated modes of “cultural circulation,” of revisiting the history of slavery and revising the motifs of exile and return, diaspora and homecoming.

### I. JACOB LAWRENCE, *HARRIET AND THE PROMISED LAND* (1967; 1993)

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was one of the earliest African American artists to gain support from mainstream art museums and patronage outside of the black community during an era of “legalized and institutionalized segregation” – as early as 1941 he exhibited side by side with established modernists such as Stuart Davis, John Marin, Charles Sheeler and Ben Shahn



(Nesbett & DuBois 11). It signaled the first time an African American artist was able to bridge the hitherto separate art worlds of Uptown Harlem and the established white avant-garde modernist galleries Downtown (Nesbett & DuBois 11; King-Hammond). Committed to a modernist aesthetics, Lawrence nevertheless developed a mode of painting that spoke to social and political issues concerning race. He maintained his belief in art as a communicative medium that could/should speak to as wide an audience as possible and that could have an educational function in giving shape to and helping to preserve collective African American (and ultimately American) cultural memory. It yielded a combination of – or perhaps, a cultural compromise between – modernism and humanism that earned Lawrence the dubious honor (mostly by white art critics) of being dubbed a “modern primitive” (LeFalle-Collins 121). Overtly or covertly, an element of social protest against a culture riveted with racism and prejudice is always palpable on, or closely under, the surface of his work. The effect has been to subvert the stereotypical images and representations of African American experience and to give eloquent and poignant expression, as if in visual counterpoint to the blues, to the pain and grief resonating through the black experience in the US.

Lawrence’s was above all a democratic and accessible art, in its use of simple materials, but also in its style and technique. Seeking to mediate high-modernist elements with a broad mass-appeal, he walked a careful line between abstract and figurative art. As he himself observed in 1945: “My work is abstract in the sense of having been designed and composed but it is not abstract in the sense of having no human content” (qtd. in LeFalle-Collins 123). His art always contains a recognizable representation of moments from the black experience that permitted easy identification on the part of black spectators. To this purpose, using seemingly limited means (mostly water-based paints on hardboard or paper), Lawrence painted numerous scenes from African American daily life that illustrated the effects of racism and bigotry on the black community, in Harlem and beyond – from street scenes to game playing in the black urban ghettos, from women’s domestic labor to factory life, education, and political revolt. Collectively, such images amount to a pictorial “imagined community,” a recuperated homeland-in-art.

Lawrence’s imaginative vision was unmistakably shaped by the social consciousness of the Great Depression years. Like many others he participated in FDR’s New Deal Federal art projects and, like Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison, he was courted by (but never joined) the Communist Party. He early absorbed the dominant ethos and aesthetics of social realism, as

evidenced by the many WPA murals, documentary photography, and the work of Mexican painters like Diego Rivera, whom he singled out as an early influence (King-Hammond 67-96). But Lawrence's work fused the social awareness of 1930s America with the ebullient and emancipated spirit of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, an eruption of black pride and racial self-awareness, which, in literature, art and music, led to the celebration of the essential contribution made by blacks to American culture through the centuries. Its spirit is perhaps best captured by a famous quote from Langston Hughes:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 1926)

Recent revisionist scholars have shown that American modernism in art and literature needs to be rethought as in essence a phenomenon in black-and-white (Hutchinson; Sanders) and that the "Jazz Age," even though the label originated with – and was embodied by – a white modernist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, would have been unthinkable without the input of African American art and music. It is this cultural mood and moment (of regained and rediscovered racial pride), carried over into the 1930s, which formed the launching pad for Lawrence's artistic career. Many of the themes of his work had been part of Harlem Renaissance literature in the 1920s (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay); through Lawrence they now (belatedly) entered the world of African American art.

Lawrence, whose parents had separated when he was about seven, moved to Harlem with his mother in 1930. He dropped out of high school in 1934, and received no formal training in art, beyond what he learned at the Utopia Children's Settlement House and the WPA Harlem Art Workshop, at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the New York Public Library. In Harlem he listened to oral stories about the African American past and to lectures on African American history and culture at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street Library. As he later recalled, he was eager to fill in the gaps in his historical knowledge of his own people:

I've always been interested in history, but they never taught Negro history in the public schools. . . . I don't see how a history of the United States can be written honestly without including the Negro. I didn't do it just as a historical thing, but because I believe [the

stories of black people under slavery] tie up with the Negro today. We don't have a physical slavery, but an economic slavery. If these people, who were so much worse off than the people today, could conquer their slavery, we certainly can do the same thing. (qtd. in LeFalle-Collins 123)

He was inspired by some of these lectures to do his own research into history, among others through voracious reading at the Schomburg Library. His explorations set off an astounding outburst of productivity: in a mere five years (1936-1941), between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four, he painted over 170 panels and paintings on interrelated themes spanning nearly two hundred years of African American history, grouped in five large-scale narrative sequences: *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* (42 paintings, 1936-1938), which celebrates L'Ouverture's role in establishing the first black republic in Haiti; *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (32 panels, 1938-1939); *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (31 panels, 1939-1940); *The Life of John Brown* (22 paintings, 1941); and the series that brought him mainstream recognition, *The Migration of the Negro* (60 panels, 1940-1941), on the grand exodus of African Americans from the diaspora of the impoverished rural and prejudice-ridden American South to the imagined community of the congested ghetto-like neighborhoods of the big industrial cities in the North.

Lawrence's narrative sequences offered representations of iconic figures and crucial episodes from African American history which had been neglected or suppressed in official cultural historiography, yet which had been formative in shaping and performing the cultural memory of the collective African American experience in the US (and by extension of Americans at large). As *Art Digest* put it in 1974: Lawrence "has put back into painting everything that recent history has concentrated on removing" (Nesbett & Du-Bois 53). If some of these black cultural heroes had been lionized in poems and essays of the Harlem Renaissance, mostly these stories had been kept out of the reach of the masses of black people (as Lawrence recalled, they were not taught in public schools), and many of them were not well known (if they were known at all) outside of African American communities. Lawrence's narrative paintings thus worked as an antidote to cultural amnesia and became an important educational resource for teaching black (and white) children about their own cultural history.

Especially in his narrative sequences, the element of story (rooted in an African American tradition of oral storytelling) ensures both communication and identification: the captions are elaborate, factual, descriptive, narrative, but also sober, plain, restrained. Even as they relate to instances of rabid in-

justice and racial violence and oppression, they are rarely charged with outrage or anger. The effect is that the images serve as illustrations to a story (rather than vice versa), as in comic strips or, more poignantly, medieval frescoes on saints' lives, or stations of the cross depicting, in narrative form, the stages of Christ's progression to crucifixion. As Patricia Hills has convincingly demonstrated, Lawrence in the late 1930s was casting himself in the role of the "pictorial griot" of the polyphonic Harlem community in which he was growing to personal and artistic maturity. In his narrative series of paintings he had made it his mission to translate the life stories of African American culture heroes (Toussaint L'Ouverture, Douglass, Tubman) as he had absorbed them in the stories of the Harlem community into a series of images (Hills 42), hoping to "bring them into the present to give courage and inspiration to his community" (Hills 43). Thus, by forging and articulating a collective cultural memory Lawrence was helping to create a sense of home and belonging that could function as a redemptive counterpoint to a historical experience of exile and diaspora.

In *The Life of Harriet Tubman* Lawrence celebrated Tubman as an American heroine of epic proportions. In this he was following the example of Aaron Douglas, whose Harriet Tubman mural had been reproduced in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Crisis* in January 1932: "I used Harriet Tubman [wrote Douglas] to idealize a superior type of Negro womanhood. . . . I depict her as a heroic leader breaking the shackles of bondage and pressing on toward a new day" (qtd. in Hills 44). Such religious rhetoric fitted Tubman's story – she presumably had visions and long communications with God – and is also echoed in several panels: in panel 2 a black man, scarred by whip lashes, hangs like a crucified Christ; the North Star figures as a "guiding" light in several of Lawrence's panels (10, 11, 12, 15, 18 and possibly 31); at least two panels (28, 29) "feature Tubman in tableaux suggestive of Christian iconography" (Hills 57); and the final panel features a river evocative of the biblical River Jordan that was crossed by the Jews on their way to the Promised Land, an image echoed in many slave songs and spirituals. Though *Life* evokes the Christian inspiration of Tubman's efforts to liberate her people, nonetheless the focus of the series is on the searing pain and suffering of slavery as the principal impetus to Tubman's subsequent heroism. The "realism" of Tubman's slavery experience is underlined by quotations from public figures (Henry Ward Beecher, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln) and elaborately descriptive captions adapted from authentic historical sources which Lawrence had consulted in the Schomburg Library (see Hills 45, *passim*). Both types of captions serve to underline the historical and

larger-than-personal significance of Tubman's efforts. Canada is explicitly mentioned (and snowily depicted) as the ultimate destination of the flight into freedom, in particular after the passing of the Fugitive Slave law of 1850 (panel 20). And the caption of panel 23, taken from a song called "I'm on the Way to Canada" (Hills 57), explicitly represents the border with Canada as "the line" to be crossed into freedom: "The hounds are baying on my track,/ Old master comes behind,/ Resolved that he will bring me back,/ Before I cross the line." Yet in the entire series Canada is not given much symbolic or mythologized weight as a place of redemption or "promised land" – the final panel of *Life* evokes Tubman's death in Auburn, in upper New York State, and ends with a Calvary-like commemoration of her death in the form of a "memorial tablet of bronze."

In 1967, Lawrence revisited the life story of Harriet Tubman in a series of seventeen paintings entitled *Harriet and the Promised Land*. Here we encounter not only a shift in technique – from the synthesis of an angular realism with cubist abstraction which made the *Life* series so forcefully expressive, to a softer mode of patchwork-color realism befitting a more consoling vision – we also meet with a different Harriet Tubman and a different representation of Canada. Thus, in *Life*, we are presented with a Harriet Tubman who may carry the biblical nickname "Moses," but who is realistically described as "huge, deepest ebony, muscled as a giant, with a small close-curved head and anguished eyes" (panel 25). Her figure haunts slave masters "Like a half-crazed sibylline creature . . . stealing down in the night to lead a stricken people to freedom" (panel 17). Also, her service in the cause of the Union – during the Civil War she acts as a hospital nurse curing soldiers of "some malignant disease" (panel 29) – is highlighted (in *Harriet and the Promised Land*, by contrast, the Civil War is conspicuously absent). Whereas the captions in *Life* do not in any way downplay the searing pain, cruelty, and humiliation of the slavery experience which motivated Tubman (panels 5, 6, 8, 9), in *Harriet and the Promised Land* the captions are softened, and the emphasis is unmistakably on the redemptive vision of hope and "promise" embodied by Canada.

*Harriet and the Promised Land* was first published in 1968, the year following its production, on the upswing of the Civil Rights Movement, and was reissued in 1993 to become a much-used educational tool in elementary schools. It was first of all intended as a tribute – emphatically pitched to an audience of children – to one of America's great women, a throwback to the many stories Lawrence had heard growing up as a young boy in Harlem,

from his mother and his teachers, about “the drama and the exploits” of Harriet Tubman, who risked life and livelihood by making nineteen trips from South to North, leading over three hundred blacks to “the promised land” of Canada, “always following the North Star until she and the other runaway slaves reached the vast snowy fields of Canada.” In paying tribute to Tubman, Lawrence wrote in a 1992 foreword, he wanted to implicitly honor the women in his life to whom he owed most – his late mother and his wife – and who enabled him “to express through the elements of color, line, texture, shape and value the wisdom of an almighty God” (Lawrence 1997, n. p.).

In both word and image the biblical overtones are likewise dominant in the 1967 narrative series: as befits a Christian icon, Tubman becomes a Moses-like leader of her people’s exodus from bondage to freedom. Her birth is imagined as a nativity scene, with a black female Jesus being born in slavery in a manger-shaped crib, watched over by an admiring and happy Mary and Joseph, and the North Star (a near-synonym of the Star of David) already presiding (panel 1). Harriet (dressed in impeccable, redemptive white) grows up amidst the harsh realities of a life in bondage: “Work for your master/ From your cradle/ to your grave” (panel 2). As a young girl she takes care of white children against the background of a tree whose leaves bear an uncanny resemblance to cotton blossoms (panel 3). In panel 4 the North Star is visible as young Harriet listens to her mother tell the story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. As Harriet grows into adulthood, her prayerful life is marked by the ruthless exploitation of slave labor (panels 6, 7). But from the moment she is given the “sign” (panel 8), the North Star will beckon her on as a guide to salvation and redemption, the symbol of the promise of freedom in Canada – enabling the runaway slaves who follow Harriet to survive the dangers of the wilderness (snake, owl) and the brutal pursuit of slave catchers and bloodhounds, as Harriet urges them to persist through the sheer force of her belief in Christ (panels 9, 10, 11). As they hide in stations on the Underground Railroad, Harriet’s companions-in-flight are fed by white abolitionists and Harriet’s feet are washed by a white man, much like Mary washed Jesus’ feet when he and his disciples ate at the Pharisee’s house (panel 13). Whites, also, give Harriet protection and coverage so she can travel in safety by day (panel 14), and lead her people across wind-swept stretches of snow and ice toward Canada, with always and infallibly the North Star pointing the way (panel 15). At moments of doubt and despondency Harriet’s faith is rewarded: in an image that suggests Elisha riding the chariot of fire into heaven, the Lord sends a chariot – pulled by a white horse (panel 16) – to

finally bring Harriet and her runaway slaves to “The Promised Land” of freedom in Canada, where children come running with flowers to welcome them home (panel 17).

Lawrence’s vision in *Harriet and the Promised Land* is one of unblemished and unshaded heroism. By presenting Harriet Tubman through analogies to Elisha, Moses, and Christ, Lawrence makes her into a prophet and messiah, an icon of suffering, endurance, courage, sacrifice and faith. Canada is represented less as a real place than as symbolic wish-fulfillment, the biblical promise of freedom redeemed, the paradise-like destiny of an imagined home – a dream that it is possible to find release from exile and diaspora, to find a site of home and belonging, to cross not just the geographical line into freedom, but perhaps also the color line. The latter is suggested by a painting Lawrence produced in 1967, just before but not formally a part of the Harriet series, entitled “Over the Line.”

Lawrence’s 1967 representation of Canada stays uncannily close in spirit to the way Canada was represented in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). As David Staines has observed in his illuminating *Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century’s End* (1995), “For Stowe, Canada is the alternative to the United States, a better land where freedom and prosperity are available to all races. More mythic than real, it functions as an ideal which underlines the social injustices of its southern neighbour” (45). For African Americans in Stowe’s novel Canada is “the New Jerusalem, the land of Canaan . . . the earthly embodiment of the freedom promised in the Bible” (45). Similarly drenched in biblical allusion, Lawrence’s visual representation of Canada thus echoes Stowe’s understanding of Canada as a mythic place, a recouped imagined homeland, an “Elysium of romance” intended as “a forceful repudiation of her own country” (46). Yet it gains enhanced poignancy from being read in the social and political context of its time: first published in 1968, Lawrence’s panels articulate *both* a tribute to a heroic anti-slavery champion *and* a searing reminder of the historical analogies between Tubman’s endeavors and the Civil Rights movement, between the campaign against slavery and the battle for equal rights.

Seen thus, Lawrence’s implied meanings may be understood in the light of Ishmael Reed’s self-professed interest in “slavery as a metaphor for how blacks are treated in this civilization” (Bruce & Singh 20). Implying an analogy between Eliza’s famous flight pursued by bloodhounds and the dogs let loose on African Americans seeking liberty in the American South at the time of the Civil Rights movement, Reed continues in a 1971 interview: “So

I say to myself and the rest of us that we are going to get to our aesthetic Canada, no matter how many dogs they send after us” (Bruce & Singh 21).

## II. ISHMAEL REED, *FLIGHT TO CANADA* (1976)

*Flight to Canada* (published in 1976, the year of the bicentennial) is Ishmael Reed’s parodic-postmodernist revisiting of Stowe’s and Tubman’s mythic exodus to the promised land of Canada, anachronistically transplanted from the pre-Civil War South to contemporary times (the early 1970s when Canada served as promised land of freedom for draft-dodging fugitives). Pre-civil war runaway slaves merge with 1970s political fugitives. Reed’s protagonist, Raven Quickskill, seeks to escape slavery by making his way from Emancipation City to Canada by airplane. In the poem “Flight to Canada,” which opens the novel, the author Raven Quickskill announces to his former slave master that he finds himself “safe in the arms of Canada”:

I flew in non-stop  
 Jumbo jet this A.M. Had  
 Champagne  
 Compliments of the Cap’n  
 Who announced that a  
 Runaway Negro was on the  
 Plane. Passengers came up  
 And shook my hand  
 & within 10 min. I had  
 Signed up for 3 anti-slavery  
 Lectures. Remind me to get an  
 Agent

Traveling in style  
 Beats craning your neck after  
 The North Star and hiding in  
 Bushes anytime, Massa ...

I borrowed your cotton money  
 To pay for my ticket & to get  
 Me started in this place called  
 Saskatchewan Brrrrrrr!  
 It’s cold up here but least  
 Nobody is collaring hobbling gagging  
 Handcuffing yoking chaining & thumbscrewing  
 You like you is they hobby horse ...



I must close now  
 Massa, by the time you gets  
 This letter old Sam will have  
 Probably took you to the  
 Deep Six

That was rat poison I left  
 In your Old Crow

Your boy  
 Quickskill  
 (Reed 3-5)

Reed mocks the myth of Canada as imagined utopia at the end of the exilic, diasporic experience of the flight from slavery, the land of rebirth and redemption, and the miraculous Pentecostal transformation of the escaped slave merely by setting foot on Canadian soil. A boatsman, who sets a group of runaway slaves ashore in Canada, relates:

*They said, "Is this Canada?" I said, "Yes, there are no slaves in this country"; then I witnessed a scene I shall never forget. They seemed to be transformed; a new light shone in their eyes, their tongues were loosed, they laughed and cried, prayed and sang praises, fell upon the ground and kissed it, hugged and kissed each other, crying, "Bless the Lord! Oh! I 'se free before I die!"* (155)

Reed's "real" Canada no longer works as an imagined ideal. As one character will have it, it has come close to being a Nazi nightmare one could only pray to be delivered from: "As for Canada, she said they skin niggers up there and makes lampshades and soap dishes out of them, and it's more barbarous in Toronto than in darkest Africa. . . ." (57).

In Ishmael Reed's ironic postmodernist revision, Canada has forfeited its function as the idealized "other," a Foucault-like heterotopia; instead, it has become an uncannily exact mirror image of its Southern neighbor, a promise unredeemed, betrayed. Thus, Quickskill has barely made it to his dreamland Canada, when he runs into an old friend, Carpenter, who tells him he has just been beaten up in the streets and been denied a room at a hotel. Quickskill's image of Canada as a paradise of freedom is brutally subverted:

"I don't understand, Carpenter. Why, outside it looks like the Peaceable Kingdom."

"Maybe here but not elsewhere. Man, as soon as you reach the metropolitan areas you run into Ford, Sears, Holiday Inn, and all the rest."

"You're kiddin," Quickskill said. "You have to be kiddin."

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“But what about St. Catherine’s? William Wells Brown told me that he’d gotten a number of slaves across to St. Catherine’s, where they’d found rewarding careers.”

“Let me show you downtown St. Catherine’s,” Carpenter said, removing a photo from his wallet. It looked like any American strip near any American airport; it could have been downtown San Mateo. Neon signs with clashing letters advertising hamburgers, used-car lots with the customary banners, coffee joints where you had to stand up and take your java from wax cups.

“It looks so aesthetically unsatisfying.”

...

“Man, they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Klan look like statesmen. Vigilantes harass fugitive slaves, and the slaves have to send their children to schools where their presence is subject to catcalls and harassment. . . . They beat up Chinamen and Pakastani [sic] in the streets. West Indians they shoot.” (160)

Not only does Canada look like America, Americans have literally taken possession of it. As Carpenter will have it: “Man, Americans own Canada. They just permit Canadians to operate it for them.” (161) Quickskill is devastated, deprived forever of a cherished illusion: “All my life I had hopes about it, that whatever went wrong I would always have Canada to go to” (161).

Reed projects the nightmare of a thoroughly Americanized Canada as the postmodern counter-image of a historical myth. Such a Canada can no longer function as what David Staines calls “the dispassionate witness,” an alternative to, and an inspiring source of critical commentary on, the U.S. But if, instead of the U.S., it is the real Canada that is to be repudiated, then all that remains is “the promised land . . . in [our] heads” (177), an “aesthetic” Canada as the only possible imagined homeland. Reed’s “aesthetic” Canada, then, is to be understood as a symbolic one, an artistic construction of the mind, a “Canada” that is a projection screen at best for imaginary hopes and desires, an internalized idealization which may serve as a source of personal consolation and dream, but which has little or no relation or resemblance to the actual political and geographical reality of present-day Canada. Understood thus, this new “Canada” may be tapped into wherever one is, a portable inspiration kit available according to the needs of the moment, in any place, at any time. As if in confirmation of this new understanding of “Canada,” the novel gives its last word to Uncle Robin (not Uncle Tom) – an old former slave who did not set out on a flight to Canada, but stuck it out in the American South: there, by slyly altering his master’s will so that the plantation is

left to him, he is now established in his former master's luxurious fifty-room Southern plantation mansion, done with the illusion of a promised land, but at home and at peace in his "Canada" of the mind:

*That was a strange letter from Raven this morning. . . . I wonder did he find what he was looking for in Canada? [...] Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind. (178)*

### III. LAWRENCE HILL, *THE BOOK OF NEGROES* (2007)

Unlike Reed's irreverent postmodern revisionism, Lawrence Hill revisits the genre of the slave narrative – as well as the brutal realities of 18<sup>th</sup>-century slavery and the slave trade – with unsparing realism and from a *transnational* perspective. *The Book of Negroes* revises history less through postmodernist subversion than by recasting the narrative of enslavement, middle passage, and escape to freedom in an epic-realistic picaresque mode that uncovers neglected dimensions of Canadian slavery and highlights the repatriation of slaves to their recuperated African homeland, thereby challenging accepted readings of the history of slavery and Canada's role in it. The novel thus effectively re-imagines the diasporic slave experience as a process of multi-directional flow and hybridization across national boundaries, a mode of both transatlantic and intra-continental "cultural circulation" as it was analyzed in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

This is not the place to recapitulate the story of witty, intelligent and somewhat iconicized Aminata Diallo – how she dreams of becoming a griot for her African community, but is abducted as a child and branded by African slavers; how she undergoes a harrowing middle passage aboard a slave ship to America; how she is sold to an indigo plantation on Sullivan's island, off the coast of South Carolina. Where forced to eke out a new home and refashion a sense of belonging in diasporic exile, she undergoes the brutalities of rape, exploitation, and child theft. Her experiences in the American South are a humiliating nightmare, to be sure, but my focus here will be on the way *The Book of Negroes* represents Aminata's flight to, existence in, and departure from Canada, hoping to find a new "promised land" – and reconstitute a new sense of self – in her originary homeland of Africa.

For Aminata Diallo the idea of resorting to Canada first comes toward the end of the American Revolution, as she learns about the British plans to "remove" Loyalist blacks who had served the British for a minimum of a year (and hence were nominally "free") to a place called Nova Scotia. Her first response is a cynical but realistic one: "I hoped it wasn't a penal colony"

(285). A British officer, Colonel Baker, explains and offers a familiarly idyllic image of Canada:

“Nova Scotia is a British colony, untouched and unsullied by the Americans, at a distance of two weeks by ship from the New York harbour. It is a fine colony indeed, on the Atlantic Ocean but north of here, with woods, fresh water, abundant animals and rich forest just begging to be converted to farmland. Nova Scotia, Miss Diallo, will be your promised land.” (285-86)

Aminata agrees to support the venture by registering all blacks entitled to leave for Nova Scotia in a ledger called “The Book of Negroes” – though a more cynical title is suggested by Captain Waters: “Exodus from Holy Ground” (the area where British soldiers met and maintained their black prostitutes; 287).

Taking down the names of fellow blacks, Aminata feels a surcease of loneliness, a sense of solidarity and imagined community in the knowledge that her personal history of “unexpected migrations” is shared by countless others. As she puts it, “We are traveling peoples . . . all of us” (301), a recurrent theme-song in Aminata’s life and story. But she also feels that in recording the names of prospective migrants she is giving them voice and visibility, a scripted identity that can serve as an antidote to historical silencing and erasure.

. . . I loved the way people followed the movement of my hand as I wrote down their names and the way they made me read them aloud once I was done. It excited me to imagine that fifty years later, someone might find an ancestor in the Book of Negroes and say, “That was my grandmother.” (295)

From the first, however, we receive hints that the promised freedom in Canada is not going to be pure and unsullied: in registering names, Aminata must give priority to the slaves and indentured servants of white Loyalists – only after these, can the free refugees be listed. As her husband Chekura scathingly observes: “Slaves and free Negroes together in Nova Scotia? . . . Some promised land” (294).

On the threshold of departure, on August 15, 1783 (she just knows), Aminata conceives her second child. Shortly after, she and her husband are handed their tickets for departure to Annapolis Royal on November 7, 1783. Their dreams of a joint marital life in the new, recuperated homeland of Nova Scotia, however, are cruelly disrupted when, on the brink of sailing, Aminata’s former owner from South Carolina, Robinson Appleby, re-appears to lay a patently false claim upon her, and husband and wife are once more separated by force – not until much later in the novel do we learn that on his

way to Canada, Chekura's ship has gone down, taking all its passengers with it.

Aminata spends over eight years in Canada, from November 1783 to January 1792. From the moment she arrives in Port Roseway (now Shelburne) the reality of Canada clashes with the "promised land" of freedom. Most of the people in the streets are white, "and they walked past as if I didn't exist" (313). Whites shoot peanuts and spit at her. The realities of segregation and discrimination ("we don't serve niggers"; "Birchtown is the place for your kind" [313]) are at least as bitter in Canada as they had been in America. The "free" blacks of Shelburne are effectively ostracized and ghettoized in a separate community called Birchtown, at a two and a half hour walk outside of town. Ironically, her guide to this new "promised land" is a lame and blind preacher called Daddy Moses, who informs her that though "Nova Scotia had more land than God could sneeze at," "hardly any of it was being parceled out to black folks," British promises notwithstanding. Nova Scotia turns out to be "Nova Scarcity" (317).

An experienced midwife as well as a highly skilled reader, writer and teacher, Aminata manages to make herself indispensable to the self-fashioned community of about a thousand free blacks who are vainly waiting to receive their own share of the promised tracts of land. In Canada she gives birth to her daughter, May, on whom she bestows an Anglo name, whereas her first child had been called, in African, Mamadu. Conditions of life in Canada under British rule turn out to be uncannily similar to (if not worse than) those in America: freedom and security are no more assured, and even the Canadian mosquitoes are "meaner than any I had met in South Carolina" (337). Poverty and hardship, violence and immorality, promiscuity, corruption, oppression, racism and discrimination are the order of the day – miseries only aggravated by the harshness of Canadian winters and the searing memories of her lost father, mother, husband and son. The sermons preached in church by blind Daddy Moses (he wears steel-rimmed spectacles with no glasses in them) about "Moses taking the Hebrews to freedom" – "*we too are the chosen people. We too, brothers and sisters, are chosen for freedom. Right here in Birchtown*" (327) – sound hollow and ironic to her Muslim ears.

After three years, the colony is beginning to suffer from economic adversity – and blacks suffer first and most. With businesses closing down and jobs becoming scarce, blacks are hired at lower wages than whites, thereby fostering racist resentment among white laborers – a carpenter is thrown into the harbor, the biggest black man in town is gang-beaten and his throat slit.

Rape and racist violence are rampant, blacks are lynched, and white gangs with torches descend on Birchtown, reducing Daddy Moses' church to a charred ruin and leaving Aminata's home torn apart. The promised land of Canada is a wasteland of destructive racism and oppression. But the worst is still to come. Eager to return to Birchtown to offer help, Aminata leaves her daughter in the care of a childless white Loyalist family, only to find that they have departed Canada for Boston by ship, taking her daughter May with them, leaving Aminata amputated once again: "My children were like phantom limbs, lost but still attached to me, gone but still painful" (350).

Over the next four years Aminata (meanwhile forty-five, graying and bespectacled) stays in Birchtown with the other free but still landless Black Loyalists, to face a seemingly endless perpetuation of British promises betrayed and conditions of slavery and intolerance persisting. A crucial turning-point comes when news reaches Birchtown that a Sierra Leone Company is setting up a "free settlement" (no slavery allowed) on the coast of Africa. A young British abolitionist, John Clarkson, manages to fire up the blacks of Birchtown with enthusiasm for "passage to a new life" in Sierra Leone, promising land, "freedom to govern their own affairs," as well as "political and racial equality" (356), provided they live in an atmosphere of Christian morality and purity: no dancing, no drinking, no licentiousness, no "displays of uninhibited emotion." As one black from Birchtown observes: "Hell, man, we go all the way back home and can't dance about it?" (357)

Despite initial reservations, Aminata falls for Clarkson's depiction of a new promised land, as her persistent dream of a return from exile to a recuperated homeland momentarily crowds out the searing reality of her pain and abandonment. Had she listened closely, she might have heard the echoes of a different fate in store: what Clarkson is really promising is a cleverly self-serving British plan, in which the Birchtown blacks will be made to serve British imperialist economic interests slyly disguised under the banner of human rights and abolitionist ideals.

The Sierra Leone Company, he continued, would spare no expense in removing us from Nova Scotia, out of the twin sentiments of duty and patriotism. Duty, because black people had a right to live free of slavery and oppression, and what better way to set them on the right footing than to send them back to Africa, where they could civilize the natives with literacy and Christianity. Patriotism, because we, the black colonists of Sierra Leone, would help Great Britain establish trading interests on the coast of Africa. No longer would the empire have to depend on slavery for enrichment. The land was so fertile, Clarkson said, that figs, oranges, coffee and cane would leap from our farmlands. We would meet our own needs easily and help the British Empire bring to market all the rich resources of Africa. . . . [The abolitionists in London] wanted to create a profitable colony

in Africa, where liberated blacks could live productively and in dignity, and from where Great Britain could build a profitable trade with the rest of the world – trade, he said, that did not rely on the evils of slavery. (359-61)

Aminata consents to work as Clarkson's assistant, once again registering the names of blacks eager to ship out to Africa, and upon learning of her husband's death by shipwreck, decides to "join the exodus to Africa. There was nothing left for me in Nova Scotia" (370). On January 15, 1792, together with 1200 free Nova Scotia blacks, one third of whom had been born in Africa, she leaves Halifax for Africa.

Even for Muslim-raised Aminata, then, Canada has turned from a promised land into another land of bondage, from a New Jerusalem into another Egypt – and Aminata (who has fully internalized the Christian rhetoric and symbolism) re-enacts another exodus, another journey to another promised land, her imagined homeland of Africa. Imagined, because the new colony in Africa turns out to be another deception and betrayal of the promise of freedom, as abolitionist idealism is inextricably entangled with imperialism and the slave trade that has taken deep roots on African soil and among African tribes. Once in Africa, Aminata not only finds herself in shocking proximity to the very island of Bance on which she had been branded as a slave and from which she had been exiled to South Carolina, she must now also face up to the fact that in the three decades since leaving Africa, her multiple migrations have effected a change of identity in which African, American and Canadian elements interact and intermingle:

In South Carolina, I had been an African. In Nova Scotia, I had become known as a Loyalist, or a Negro, or both. And now, finally back in Africa, I was seen as a Nova Scotian, and in some respects thought of myself that way too. . . . I wondered just who exactly I was and what I had become, after more than thirty years in the Colonies. . . . what part of me was still Africa? (385-86)

The real and most searing exodus has been an existential one, as in seeking to recover her homeland, Aminata must acknowledge that, where "survival depended on perpetual migration" (385), her African identity has become intermixed with an American and Canadian one. Whatever "home" she may find is no longer to be recuperated in a geographical or national space or territory, but in a de-territorialized, hybridized sense of self in a perpetual process of migration. Canada may have been left behind, but will remain an inextricable part of her portable migratory transnational identity.

In *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill has thus offered us a searingly realistic historical representation of Canada as a land of promise and betrayal, of exile and belonging, but embedded in a revisionist historical understanding of slavery as a transnational experience of “perpetual migration,” making Canada a full-fledged and deeply implicated player in the transatlantic slave-trade, a presence no longer erasable from the Black Atlantic, nor from Canadian cultural memory.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: A TRIPTYCH OF REPRESENTATION

If we read the three texts discussed above in dialogue with each other, as a triptych of representations of “flights to Canada,” we see an interesting shift in the nature and purpose of representational dynamics. Rooted in a modernist aesthetics, yet acknowledging a communicative and educational function for art as an instrument of cultural memory, Jacob Lawrence’s pictorial depiction of Harriet Tubman’s flight to Canada in *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1967) is foremost a tribute to an African-American culture heroine of epic proportions, whose life story of sacrifice and endurance (especially when read in the light of the Civil Rights movement) held out a consoling vision of redemption, the utopian promise of an end to a historical experience of racial oppression and enslavement. But as he moved from the forcefully expressive synthesis of angular realism and modernist abstraction that marked his narrative paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s to a softer mode of patchwork-color realism that more easily fit his educational intent, Lawrence in the late 1960s shifted to a religious iconicization of Tubman through a plethora of biblical allusions which brought him uncannily in line with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s vision of Christian heroism. In *Harriet and the Promised Land* Canada is first of all a utopian projection of an imagined possibility, an ideal of freedom that flickers beyond the horizon, but that remains untested in a practical encounter with concrete and lived reality. Never a real place, it remains a symbolic wish-fulfillment, a biblical promise of an imagined home, an end to exile and diaspora, the illusion that it may be possible to cross not just the geographical line into freedom, but perhaps also the color line. The reality beyond that borderline remains unseen, at best fleetingly imagined.

In Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) Canada is no longer mythic but disturbingly real: here, the utopian ideal *is* tested but found wanting. Reed’s trenchant examination of a false ideal, the exposure of the brutal reality behind the illusory promise, is drenched in postmodernist irony and



subversive mockery. In Reed's imaginative re-vision, Canada has become a promise unredeemed and betrayed, "aesthetically unsatisfying," an Americanized Canada that is closer to a nazi-nightmare than a vision of the "peaceable kingdom," a dystopia to be rejected and repudiated. In Reed's darkly-comic, ironic-parodic and postmodernist vision, the only Canada that remains is an "aesthetic" one, a symbolic or artistic construction in the mind – the possibility of freedom internalized, not bound by geographical or political borders, lifted out of time and space, but existing as "a state of mind," as compelling for a 1970s draft dodging refugee into Canada as for a post-Emancipation black man living in his former master's Southern mansion.

Whereas Reed represents the "real" Canada through a lens of post-modernist irony which precludes full narrative identification on the part of the reader, Lawrence Hill in *The Book of Negroes* (2007) draws upon the full register of narrative delights and identificatory pleasures that come with a (post-postmodern) return to the genre of epic, episodic realism – notwithstanding the harrowing and horrifying brutalities of slavery and the slave trade experienced and narrated by its protagonist. Unlike Lawrence and Reed, Hill vividly and concretely brings to life the searing realities of Aminata's actual life in Canada, begun in pursuit of a mythical promised land of freedom, but concluded in a somber realization that for her as for all blacks in Nova Scotia, Canada is little more than a wasteland of destructive racism and oppression. The myth of Canada – tested and found wanting – is here not so much repudiated as moved beyond: subverting any notion of Canadian exceptionalism, Hill's novel envisions Canada as merely one in a string of mythical places of promise and redemption, as Aminata shifts her dream projection of a life of freedom, home and belonging from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, only to be similarly disillusioned. If the nation state still functioned as an unarticulated spatial and political touchstone in both Lawrence's and Reed's representations of the "flight to Canada," *The Book of Negroes* places slavery and the slave trade at the center of a transnational network of economic and political interests, as it shows us how even the "promised land" of abolitionism is subsumed in the service of a transnational imperialist economy slyly disguised under the rhetorical banner of human rights and ideals of emancipation. Hill's revisionist historical understanding of (Canada's role in) slavery as a transnational experience of "perpetual migration" and "cultural circulation" is fittingly reflected in Aminata's new awareness of home and identity as by necessity transnational, de-territorialized, hybridized, and

perpetually in process of change and (re)composition – a multi-faceted kaleidoscope in motion, in which “Canada” is but one among many constituent elements interacting and intermingling.

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SHARON MONTEITH

## The Bridge from Mississippi's Freedom Summer to Canada

Pearl Cleage's *Bourbon at the Border*

African American playwright Pearl Cleage describes herself as a transplanted northerner who grew up in Detroit but for whom Atlanta is home and has been since 1969 (Paige 239). *Bourbon at the Border* premiered in Atlanta in 1997 and is set in Detroit in an apartment that looks out to the Ambassador Bridge connecting the US to Windsor, Ontario, the southernmost city in Canada and formerly an entry point for escaping slaves via the Underground Railroad. The play is set in September 1995 but revolves around events that occur in 1964 during Mississippi's Freedom Summer when African Americans May and Charlie Thompson are volunteer civil rights workers in Sunflower County in the Delta. Cleage has them suffer the same racial terrorism that broke the will of some organizers, damaged more and left other volunteers dead.

*Bourbon at the Border* is a story told against the grain; it belongs to a sub-genre of civil rights fictions that unsettles the dominant ways in which, in recent decades, American literature about the Civil Rights Movement has privileged stories of racial reconciliation. It unsettles the complacency that such stories risk fostering because it is finally a play about African American suffering and anger. Cleage has described herself as "a true child of the sixties" and "a third-generation black nationalist"; she sees herself as a political writer describing her cultural heritage as "a rich legacy of protest and resistance" ("Fighting Monsters" 104; "Artistic Statement"). Therefore, this essay explores the ways in which Cleage draws on black nationalist tenets and texts, notably LeRoi Jones controversial play *Dutchman* (1964) and examples of African American revenge narratives, to depict "the insanity of American racism" (Cleage, "Exceptional" 62). It also examines how she textures her play with political nuances that, in my reading, are most closely attuned to the ideas of French writer and philosopher Albert Camus, a touchstone for civil rights activists who were debating the efficacy of violent versus non-violent resistance in the 1960s.

Georgia-born May first sees Charlie Thompson campaigning on the steps of Douglass Hall at Howard University, drumming up support for the voter registration drive in Mississippi. Cleage studied at Howard from 1966-69 before going to Spelman. Her two-act play "Duet for Three Voices" debuted there in 1969 (Coe E8) and she remembers student protesters taking over Howard's Administration Building to demonstrate against the war in Vietnam (Cleage, "Believe" 124). In the play she imagines May and Charlie as a little older and implies that Charlie is a member of Howard's Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), the affiliate of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that drove the Mississippi voter registration project and campaigned on campus for volunteers. Some of the most well-known civil rights organizers first became politicized in NAG: Charles Cobb, Stokely Carmichael, William Mahoney, Michael Thelwell, Muriel Tillinghast, to name but a few. They joined SNCC and a number of these Howard students remained in Mississippi after the summer project ended. Cleage's characters Charlie and May fall in love at Howard and go to Mississippi together in 1964 to work for voter registration.

The play's central traumatic event occurs when Charlie and May are out canvassing; they stop to exchange an affectionate kiss and are arrested for their supposedly lewd conduct by a sheriff and his deputies. The three white men find a twisted and novel way to punish Charlie and May for invading their county as "outside agitators." In the basement of the jail, they force Charlie to beat May mercilessly; if he refuses she will be raped. As May admits when thirty years later she finally tells her friend Rose what happened, "they made him beat me half to death and . . . pulled my dress over my face and did it anyway. They all did it anyway in front of my Charlie" (Cleage, *Bourbon* 57). Charlie is forced to watch while the girl he loves is gang-raped. This event is the nucleus of the play. May leaves Mississippi to recover from her injuries at home but she is no longer capable of having children. Charlie stays to continue their civil rights work, calling her on the phone whenever he can until he is arrested a second time. In Parchman Prison he is tortured, his leg is broken in three places and he is left to rot in isolation until a doctor is finally called to set the leg. Left with a limp, Charlie is a dramatization of what Stokely Carmichael called "the walking wounded" of the Civil Rights Movement (284); it is an idea that Cleage explores in complex ways in *Bourbon at the Border*.

Thirty years on when the play opens, the Thompsons are married and settled in Detroit. Since Mississippi Charlie has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals and each time both he and May hope that he may be healed of the

residual trauma that has precipitated multiple suicide attempts. She maintains that Charlie has not changed from the idealistic Howard student she fell in love with: "He's not dangerous," she tells her best friend Rose, "the only person he ever tries to hurt is himself" (*Bourbon* 10). Spoken within the first few minutes of the play, this pronouncement guides the audience to sympathize with Charlie when he appears on stage. On his return from a psychiatric hospital in Scene 1, he tells May that he has "figured it out: The only way they win is if they make me too crazy to be with you" (19). It is only with hindsight that the audience identifies "they" as the three Mississippi lawmen that broke Charlie's mind and spirit in 1964. Cleage augments audience sympathy at the end of Scene 3 when Rose's boyfriend Tyrone offers Charlie a job but wants to know: "What kind of crazy are you?" and Charlie answers without a beat, "the nonviolent kind" (36-37). It is, the audience will realize later, a profound lie from a man who has killed another on his first evening back in Detroit.

Rose and her new boyfriend Tyrone, a Vietnam veteran, are foils for Charlie and May; against their reactions the events of the play may be weighed. Tyrone, for example, finds it difficult to conceptualize the role of strategic non-violence in the civil rights movement when remembering his own experience as a soldier in Vietnam, leading Charlie to muse that "sometimes it seems like it was all one big war, some over here and some over there, but one thing guaranteed – you weren't coming out the way you went in" (33). It is a cliché but also a clue for the audience to the identity of the serial killer who is cutting the throats of white men. The play foregrounds the deep love between the Thompsons, something that both Tyrone and Rose openly admire, and while this does not change, its dramatization in the early scenes serves to mitigate against the audience even considering the possibility that the murder of an "old white man" on the night of Charlie's homecoming could have anything to do with him or the two murders that follow in quick succession and racially polarize Detroit. For example, he tells May that "[i]f I ever do another thing that makes me have to leave your side for longer than eight hours at a time, I want you to do me a favor." "Anything," she replies. "Shoot me," he states (31). The murders Charlie commits come to be understood as another desperate suicidal gesture that will ensure that he will be removed from society and sent back to prison, the institution in which the defining moments of his life took place. Consciously or subconsciously he plants a clue for the police to ensure that this will be the case, dropping a piece of paper by the third body that is traced back to him.

Mississippi's Freedom Summer is the catalyst and context for this two-act drama. Cleage's dramatic vision also coheres around a series of tropes that interlock with the U.S. South of 1964: the bridge, the U.S.-Canadian border, and the Canadian wilderness. The South has long been understood as a symbolic signifier of resistance to racial change. For Malcolm X in the 1960s, the "South" was "anywhere south of the Canadian border" because he conflated the racist landscape of the region with the rest of America. The 49<sup>th</sup> parallel has been described as being "of enormous importance in the imaginative life of any Canadian" (Mandel 105) but the US-Canadian border is strangely absent from US literature and cultural productions, with the exceptions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narratives whose protagonists escape over the border and fictions written since the 1970s about young Americans escaping being drafted to fight in Vietnam. The relative neglect of the Canadian border in American literature may well be the result of the historical power imbalance between the two countries; it only began to change when the events of September 11, 2001 ensured that the northern border became a focus of U.S. security measures. In the 1990s, though, Cleage created a border-text that goes some way towards drawing the U.S. and Canada into an imaginative configuration. On his first morning back at home, Charlie suggests that he and May head over the bridge to Canada the following weekend because in the peace and quiet of a Canadian cabin, May will be able to see more clearly that he has recovered. That she responds so quickly with "Let's do it today" is a clue that she is not convinced; that Charlie projects the visit into the future makes it equally evident that he is really avoiding her close "inspection" and "examination" (*Bourbon* 20). That trip is continually deferred. The border is, as one literary critic has mused, "forever on the periphery of the possible" (Henderson 1) and in cultural criticism this interstitial space has traditionally been marked as liminal. The border may be used to distinguish a place of danger from one of safety; to communicate this idea, Cleage uses the metaphor of the bridge as a possible escape for her protagonists from their American past into a Canadian future.

The Ambassador Bridge is the central visual motif of the play and its emotional hinge. The stage directions indicate how it should be conceived in the drama and by the audience: "On clear days and at night, when it is lit, the bridge is almost a presence in the apartment" (5). The apartment is suspended like the bridge. Perched between two worlds, their home is as precarious as the Thompsons' life together. In a review of the original production of *Bourbon at the Border* in Atlanta, Freda Scott Giles noted that its staging emphasized the isolation of Thompsons' home. The rooms have no ceilings and the

doors are permanently open “into the blue cyclorama, indicating that, outside of a limited area of their space, there is much about their lives that exists in a netherworld, perhaps the border between sanity and madness” (Giles, “Theater Review” 725).<sup>1</sup> In the play, when May is trying to convince herself that Charlie’s shuttling back and forth from psychiatric hospitals will cease, she speaks to him “without taking her eyes off the bridge”:

When we first moved in the thing I really liked about this place was that I could wake up every day and be someplace that wasn’t here. I could just walk across the bridge and everything would be different. The money, the street names, the politics. Everything. There was a whole country where not a living soul knew my name. (*Bourbon* 51)

Gradually, the bridge seems even more precarious and May’s repeated use of the modal verb “could” emphasizes that hope in the future has not been realized by commitment to action.

In African American cultural history, “the bridge” is a landmark of the civil rights movement, as epitomized by Selma, Alabama’s Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* Selma is the “Bridge of Freedom,” on which demonstrators were beaten and bloodied in March 1965. The bridge is also a metaphor for the arc of racial change, as in the title of David Remnick’s 2010 study of the rise of Barack Obama to the US Presidency: *The Bridge*. In President Clinton’s second inaugural speech just three months before *Bourbon at the Border* premiered in the U.S. South, he recalled Martin Luther King, Jr., and promised that America would build a bridge towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Early in the new century, Rev. James Webb, who had been a local leader in Selma in 1965, stated his belief that the Edmund Pettus Bridge continued to “remind us never to slip into complacency.”<sup>2</sup> *Bourbon at the Border* – like Remnick’s biography of Obama – is about just that: the risk of nostalgic complacency that celebrates the successes of the civil rights movement but elides the suffering of those who fought its battles. James Baldwin warned that, “[t]o overhaul a history or to attempt to redeem it . . . is not at all the same thing as the descent one must make in order to excavate a history” (Baldwin 478). Cleage’s play is an excavation of this type and a chilling reminder that the pain and rage that May

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<sup>1</sup> This is a review of the April 30, 1997 performance at the Alliance Theater, Atlanta.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. James Webb, qtd. in Anita Weier, “A Bridge to Remember,” *Capital Times* (Madison, WI), June 8, 2001.



and Charlie experience during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s can persist for thirty years before exploding in vengeful and self-destructive violence.

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Her play is at its most convincing when Cleage draws on an enduring image of the South in the mid-1960s, a period during which Mississippi was variously described as the South exaggerated, a police state, and an Orwellian nightmare. She returns to the lawless segregationist violence and vengeance underlining the region's massive resistance against social change. May recounts a horrific experience of abuse that she and Charlie suffered at the hands of a sheriff and his deputies. Her description recalls exploitation movies with psychotic sheriffs, corrupt judges, rabble rousers, and racist peckerwoods proliferating. The atrocities the movies depicted, however, were all too often prosaic realities for black southerners and civil rights workers who lived in fear for their lives, struggling not to be intimidated by beatings, bombings, or shootings.<sup>3</sup> Cleage has Charlie incarcerated in Parchman, the prison farm where Freedom Riders and civil rights workers suffered the brutality of prison guards and where in 1965 a fourteen-year old boy shot by a trusty was left blinded and brain-damaged.<sup>4</sup> Parchman was also where SNCC's Bob Moses re-read Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), having first read *The Rebel* (1951) while incarcerated in Pike County jail in 1961. Moses was most struck by Camus's thesis because it could inform his philosophy of non-violent resistance, most specifically Camus's warning in his essays as spelled out in "Neither Victims Nor Executioners" (1946) that if you cease to see yourself as a victim of violence, you should also work to avoid becoming an executioner of violence against others.

Moses has been represented as a philosopher of the movement and as something of a mystic or saint. But in fact he was also the archetypal civil rights organizer who promoted the idea of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project to the rest of the SNCC staff. He was very aware of the reaction that seeing black and white young people together campaigning would provoke among segregationists who sought to act out their fear of racial change in the

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<sup>3</sup> See Monteith, "Exploitation Movies and the Freedom Struggle of the 1960s."

<sup>4</sup> See "Roberts vs. Williams" (1971) and David M. Oshinsky, "Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice (1996).

form of violent reprisals. Having pursued a Master's degree in Philosophy at Harvard, Moses read Camus throughout his time in Mississippi, and both Jane Stembridge and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC recalled later that on first meeting Moses they ended up talking about Camus (Sellers 41; Carmichael 310). In my reading of her play, Cleage's depiction of Charlie and May's experience during Freedom Summer alludes indirectly to Bob Moses and to the impact that reading Camus had on him and on other activists.

Moses was admired as the member of SNCC who would raise ethical questions and he reminded volunteers that during the Freedom Summer project they would be defined by their acts. A volunteer's description of Moses is typical: "[He is] like someone you only read about in novels. He has great currents of moral perplexity running through him."<sup>5</sup> SNCC's Mary King reported that locals sometimes called him "Moses in the Bible" (144-46) and stories even circulated that when suffering a beating, Moses would look heavenward and ask God's forgiveness for his assailants. Carmichael often laughed about "the fortuitous accident of Bob's last name," and Moses indeed renounced it in 1965, taking his mother's name Parris when he feared stories of saintliness placed him too centrally within what he saw as a movement towards participatory democracy. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, had changed the words of the spiritual to "Who's that yonder dressed in red? Must be the children Bob Moses led" (Carmichael 286-87). Like red rags to bulls, the summer volunteers soon discovered that their presence in the rural South was sufficient to provoke violent retaliation. Howard Zinn, historian and friend of SNCC, acknowledged that white supremacist ideology hit volunteer civil rights workers full force as "that terrible and special anguish with which youth discovers evil in the world" (216). During the orientation of Freedom Summer volunteers, Moses reached for existential analogies, like Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, to communicate what they should expect of "the struggle of good against evil." And he alluded specifically to Camus's *The Plague* when he told them, "The country isn't willing yet to admit it has the plague, but it pervades the whole society. We must discuss it openly and honestly, even with the danger that we get too analytical and tangled up. If we ignore it, it's going to blow up in our faces" (qtd. in Sellers 83-84). Camus's allegory of a small town locked down by plague was for Moses similar to the epidemic of white supremacy in Mississippi with

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<sup>5</sup> Belfrage quotes the student volunteer in *Freedom Summer* (25).

segregationists embodying the plague by acting as “a shrewd, unflagging adversary” (148) wearing down volunteers and undermining their studiously learned non-violence. In *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (1964), psychiatrist Robert Coles, treating civil rights activists suffering battle fatigue, cited one organizer who allowed that, “We get angry and scared, usually both . . . when all that happens, day after day, year after year, there is an effect on us, and part of that effect is that we become like our enemies . . . you develop his tactics and learn from him in order to beat him. What else can you do?” (Coles 236). Cleage’s Charlie is a fictional extrapolation of such fears and the story she tells seems to be informed not only by her knowledge of the history of Freedom Summer but also by Bob Moses and the writings of Albert Camus.

Moses found in Camus a way of articulating his fears about the long term effects of the black freedom struggle for civil rights and the long-term damage that he knew some civil rights workers would inevitably suffer: “For when people rise up and change their status,” Moses allowed, “usually somewhere along the line they become executioners and they get involved in subjugating . . . other people.” In 1965 he explained to Robert Penn Warren that the black individual’s reaction to being a victim of race hatred involved a larger concern as to whether an individual could cleanse themselves of that feeling or would seek to perpetuate it (Warren 95-96). Moses’ abhorrence of killing and the moral code by which he tried to live in Mississippi suffuses this play even though he is never mentioned. It underpins any understanding of Charlie who “somewhere down the line,” decades on and far from Mississippi, literally turns himself into an executioner. Such ideas are not confined to Camus, of course. Charlie may also be read as suffering from the long-term effects of what Cleage describes as “the insanity of American racism” (“Exceptional” 62) insofar as he entangles himself in the classic Nietzschean knot alluded to in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into the abyss the abyss also looks into you” (98). When Bob Moses looked into the abyss, he found Camus, as did so many young people in the 1960s. Camus’s existential dilemma texts were among the “scriptures of the generation”; he was one of the writers on a countercultural reading list providing cultural critique and performance models.

Like Camus’s Meursault who appears to be a “stranger” to his murderous act in *L’Étranger* (1942), Charlie is oblivious to his criminality. They each commit murder by proxy and both kill anonymous men. But where Meursault’s inability to mourn his mother’s death provokes another death

that will ensure his own, Charlie at first seems to crave that the murder he commits be understood, or at least discussed; without giving himself away, he sustains a conversation during which he steps outside of himself to consider the crime. When Tyrone wonders about the killer's motive, Charlie offers that "It could be something political," but also throws out false leads, like the idea of the killer being female, before agreeing that the mode of attack is intensely personal: "Slitting somebody's throat is always real personal" (41-2). Charlie's guerrilla-style retribution is a personalized act of anger and revenge, the antithesis of Moses' philosophy. It also contrasts with Cleage's primary political-philosophical lens, which emphasizes Black Nationalist self-defense and may be best understood via her allusions to W.E.B. Du Bois and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka).

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In the final line of her "Author's Note," in an extended reference to the work of LeRoi Jones in the 1960s, Cleage posits that "somewhere in the space between the nonviolent warriors and the powerless rage of the would-be poet" is W.E.B. Du Bois's "color line," a ubiquitous trope for the history of US race relations when Cleage was writing. In my reading, Du Bois's more acute relevance to the play lies in his response to the "Red Summer" of 1919 when in "Let Us Reason Together" he advocated using "the terrible weapon of Self Defense" but advised caution, warning that it should never become vengeance in the form of "blind and lawless offense against all white folk . . . we must carefully and scrupulously avoid on our own part bitter and unjustifiable aggression against anybody" (231). Du Bois drew the line between defense and retaliation carefully; Bob Moses tried to instill a similar attention to caution. The dilemma over whether non-violence as a strategy should give way to armed defense was a debate whose ideological heart could also be found in Detroit by the late 1960s. Cleage grew up in Detroit, the daughter of Rev. Albert Cleage, the civil rights leader who launched the Black Christian Nationalist Movement in 1967 and whose outspoken turn to Black Nationalism was epitomized by the huge black Madonna he had put up in his church. Detroit was a center of African American political activity with the city's Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a fusion of SNCC and the Nation of Islam agitating for self-defence by 1968.

Detroit in 1995 seethes with racial tension again when Charlie kills three white men. Their only possible or imagined relation to the racist violence he and May suffered in 1964 is their whiteness. Charlie confesses: "I picked out

three, just like those three in Mississippi picked us out, and I did what a man is supposed to do" (61). Twisted by the idea that the murder may restore a moral equilibrium, Charlie only regrets that he did not act on his anger earlier. This is Cleage's nod to the genre that informs her plot – the African American revenge narrative that since the 1960s may be traced through John O. Killens's *Sippi* (1967), in which the Elders react with vengeful violence against the white community when a civil rights activist is murdered. Revenge textures Gwendolyn Brooks' *In the Mecca* (1969), in which Way-out Morgan collects guns and his mantra "Death-to-the-Hordes-of-the-whitemen!" is a vengeful response to his sister's gang rape in Mississippi. It also propels the group that calls itself The Seven Days in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), willing to take revenge every time a black person is killed by a white.

The hypothesis on which the play is founded is implied in the Author's Note which specifies the "racial warfare" that threatened the Mississippi Project and that escalated through racist violence to murder. Nevertheless, so far Cleage's critics have yet to explore the fact that Cleage sets up a link to another play first performed in 1964: LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*. Cleage worries that "[t]he anguished assertion of Clay, the twenty-year-old Negro protagonist, that murder is the only solution to African-American madness is as real and as frightening now as it was then" (3). That this analogy has not been pursued by critics is surprising because in the 1999 publication *Flyin' West and Other Plays*, which includes *Bourbon at the Border*, Cleage adds an epigraph which was not present in the 1997 script and which makes the link explicit. In the original script, she implied that *Bourbon at the Border* pivots on yet another border too, "somewhere in the space between the nonviolent warriors and the powerless rage of the would-be poet" (3), and in 1999 she makes it apparent that she is alluding to Jones's play. *Dutchman* is a disturbing parable of 1960s race relations in which a white woman predator on a New York subway train taunts a black man until he slaps her across the face and rants against her, shouting "If I murdered you, then all the white people would begin to understand me" (35). The warning he issues prefigures Cleage's Charlie: "They'll murder you and have very rationale explanations. . . . They'll cut your throats and drag you out to the edge of your cities" (36). Clay may be read as a frightened and frightening precursor to Charlie, but he mistakes Lula's attentions from the outset when he takes her conversation as "pure sex talk" and is amused (8). She sees him as "a well-known type," a taunt that speaks to her assault on his black manhood and youthful idealism.

Lula's murderous rage is further ignited by Clay's sense of himself as a college student – as were so many of the volunteers for Mississippi Summer – and the discourse changes: “I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger . . . [Lula almost shrieks] A black Baudelaire” (12, 19). But just when Clay thinks Lula's racial psychosis has run down, she stabs him to death. Where serial killer Lula is left stalking her next black male victim at the end of Jones's play, Cleage shows herself more interested in Clay than in Lula and she turns her audience's attention to Clay's warning of murder and revenge.

In *Bourbon at the Border* revenge is deferred and it is random. Rather than avenge himself on the three Mississippi lawmen who came across Charlie and May sharing a kiss, or the prison officers who tortured Charlie and broke his spirit in Parchman, Charlie remains powerless against them and directs his anger away towards three anonymous white American men thirty years later. Cleage may be commenting on the futility of revenge for this tortured character. His psychic paralysis is intensified in the final moments of the play by which time the audience is secure in the knowledge that he is indeed a murderer and a criminal. Charlie has turned the men he killed into an abstraction; just as his assailants saw him solely as black and an “outside agitator,” and Lula saw Clay as an object of hate, so Charlie sees only the white maleness of those he kills and murders what is human in himself, thereby turning himself into an abstraction. The closest he comes to acknowledging this is when he confesses that the white men in Mississippi “took the part [of me] that can feel something beside anger all the time” (61). In this sense *Bourbon at the Border* is a declensionist drama and Cleage adds a tragic cast to the play's close. Charlie suffers an existential despair that is finally expressed in the quiet, fatalistic way in which he speaks to his wife in the play's final moments – about Canada. “Just tell me about the garden” he says quietly, “Is there enough sun?” (62).

Charlie's racial paranoia is no longer an inevitable or practical response to the murderous oppression he discovered in Mississippi, or defensive rhetoric like Clay's; it is pathological. The brutality of racial terrorism has ruled his life and made of Charlie an executioner in the way Bob Moses feared – but rather than subjugating others he has become a serial killer. The murders are both a release and his twisted idea of a moral equilibrium being somehow restored. His victims are not tyrants or despots, as Camus discussed, they are not even known segregationists fronting the anti-movement in the South; nor are they corrupt and violent sheriffs or sadistic prison guards. They are simply men who are visibly white and they constitute the lowest rung, if you

like, on the ladder of psychiatry that Charlie has been attempting to climb since 1964. Charlie is the idealist turned nihilist in existentialist philosopher Albert Camus's sense whereby the nihilist justifies suicide but advances as easily through a compulsive logic to seemingly logical murder.

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Pearl Cleage's drama has not yet been the subject of much sustained literary criticism. When critics read her work, they tend to focus on her cycle of "history plays." While *Flyin' West* (1996), *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1997), and *Bourbon at the Border* were all commissioned by Atlanta's Alliance Theater, to only read them together is to risk diluting the particular power of *Bourbon at the Border* to de-romanticize aspects of the African American freedom struggle of the 1960s. Thus, for example, Freda Scott Giles can end her essay on all three plays by concluding that, "Cleage demands that we air the festering wounds of our history, as black and white Americans and as men and women, so that we can begin to clean and heal them" ("Herstory" 711). However, healing is precisely what is withheld from Charlie and May. Charlie is too paralysed to move on. The impossibility of Charlie reconciling what happened to them strikes the play's final chord when May persists with her impossible dream, even more urgently as the police close in to arrest her husband: "We'll go to Canada. Tonight. You and me. We'll go so deep in the woods they'll never find us and we'll figure it out, Charlie. We'll figure it all out" (62). The violent act of 1964 has neither been contained nor survived; it has seeped into their present. They are trapped now not only by what happened to them in 1964 but also by his crime in 1995. They cannot cross the bridge to their imagined place of refuge. Even if in Canada they might escape their identity as Americans, forged in the crucible of Freedom Summer, they are left in Detroit at the play's end, trapped in the stark racial dichotomy that the racist murders have unleashed and that the idea of Canada cannot overcome.

Cleage's powerful play is perhaps least successful in imagining Canada, although the fact that it does imagine it at all is interesting enough. While Canada in the play functions as a dream-symbol, it also rests on a time-worn image of the Canadian wilderness as the "bush garden," as in Northrop Frye's metaphor. *Bourbon at the Border* conjoins the political metaphor of the bridge associated with the civil rights South with a Canadian trope: the myth of the Garden of Eden as a quest for self, identified as key in Canadian

literary criticism.<sup>6</sup> Through this conjunction Cleage explores the possibility of healing, thwarting that option for her character Charlie Thompson and leaving “Canada” as a metaphor, and little else. May’s dream of finding peace in the Canadian wilderness is personal and local insofar as she and Charlie once enjoyed a few days there in a cabin in the woods that she has since mythologized as the place where Charlie is “different” (24), as if the Canadian sun and snow were able to cleanse him of the trauma he carries. The Ambassador Bridge is the passage to the only haven that she dreams could save and restore them. The bridge is symbolic of that long arc of racial change in that it recalls the dreams of runaway slaves heading for the border to begin new lives in another country. But for Charlie and May even to escape north is to “return” south and to be swallowed up by the past; to cross the Ambassador Bridge into Canada is, in fact, to turn south again insofar as driving to Canada involves turning south to cross the bridge to the north.<sup>7</sup> The circuitous route that the Thompsons would have to take is therefore an ironic addendum to their plight, underlining, yet again, their inability to escape what happened to them in the American South in the 1960s.

While the plot faces south and looks back to the civil rights movement, “Canada” acts as an objective correlative in a play driven by grief and dejection. Cleage closes *Bourbon at the Border* with the impossible hope of a racial haven that Canada lends the protagonists, “so deep in the woods they’ll never find us” (62). While Canada was a place of safety for slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its meaning here is textured with little more than the Thompsons’ fantasies: they are indeed like desperados drinking bourbon at the border planning a hopeless getaway that will leave them “safe in the arms of Canada.” “Is there enough sun?” asks Charlie. “There’s good sun all over,” May tells him. “And in the wintertime, we’ll have a sleigh and we’ll go for rides in the snow and put bells on the horses and chestnuts on the fire like in that song you like” (62). Nat King Cole’s rendition of “The Christmas Song” is finally as relevant to their romantic ideal as any bolthole they might have found over the Ambassador Bridge. All that remains is for May to soothe Charlie as the police knock insistently at the door by describing for him the

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<sup>6</sup> Northrop Frye, in his Preface to *The Bush Garden*, allows that, “If the Canadian faces south, he becomes either hypnotized or repelled by the United States: either he tries to think up unconvincing reasons for being different and somehow superior to Americans, or he accepts being ‘swallowed up by’ the United States as inevitable” (1).

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Aritha Van Herk for pointing out how this fact supports my reading of the play. See also Mason, *The Ambassador Bridge*.



imaginary garden they would have planted in Canada to grow flowers and vegetables. She is reciting the names of tomato plants as the lights fade to black.

Charlie's experience of racial terrorism in the South of the 1960s is inassimilable. May lives beyond it, can share her pain with Rose, and has something of an historical understanding of the event that sets them apart from others: "People like to say how brave you are, but they don't want to hear how scared you were" (59). Charlie's nihilistic act finally signals his retreat from that world in anger; utopian ideas of the safety of Canada, and even of a happy marriage with May, are finally superseded by his need for the closed world of a prison psychiatric hospital, the only space now open to him in which to wait for his own death. The idea of escaping to Canada is a romantic plot that confirms Charlie's inability to endure the past and May's enforced acknowledgment that escape from the trauma that defines their lives together is an impossible dream.

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DAVID WILLIAMS

## Metropolis and Hinterland

*Faulkner and MacLeod*<sup>1</sup>

At the provocatively titled “One West, Two Myths” conference held in 2002 in Cody, Wyoming, participants by and large validated the claim that two distinct national historiographies, if not myths, had produced two differing Wests with disparate patterns of cultural development. Turner’s ‘Frontier myth’ of “perennial rebirth” on the American frontier, “at the hither edge of free land” (Turner 12-13), describes, with some justice, a body of thought running from Cooper, Emerson, and Thoreau to Steinbeck, Stegner, and Kesey, while the “myth” of metropolis and hinterland, associated with the Canadian economic historian Harold Innis, tends to underwrite a plot that turns back from the wild interior to a “maritime frontier” and formative contact with the culture and institutions of Europe.<sup>2</sup>

But what we all chose to ignore at Cody was a “sectional image” of the South that, as C. Vann Woodward once remarked, controverts the myth of “perennial rebirth” by its story of poverty in a land of plenty, by its history of defeat in a land of success, by its experience of evil in a land of innocence, and by its sense of rootedness in a land of mobility (181-85). The very premise of the “Frontier myth” – the rebirth of innocence on the margins of savagery – was evidently belied by southern history in general, and by Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*<sup>3</sup> in particular, with its wilderness adaptation of the biblical story of the Fall. If it remains an outlier in terms of Turner’s concept of the American West, a “sectional image” of the American South does fit

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a grant in aid of travel to the “Cultural Circulation” conference held at the University of Vienna from September 24-26, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See *One Myth, Two Wests: Special Issue on the West(s), The American Review of Canadian Studies* (2003), particularly L. Clark Mitchell’s essay (497-508) on the continuing influence of Turner, and R. Douglas Francis’s essay (473-85) on the many differences between Turner and Innis.

<sup>3</sup> John Crowe Ransom explicitly rejects the Frontier thesis in “Reconstructed But Unregenerate”: “Europe is founded on a principle of conservatism, and is deeply scornful of the American and pioneer doctrine of the strenuous life” (4).

surprisingly well with Innis's myth of metropolis and hinterland, hinting at likely similarities between these geographically separate cultures of the southern Confederacy and the northern Confederation.

In the "Conclusion" to his classic *History of the Fur Trade in Canada*, published in the same year as *I'll Take My Stand*, Innis had noted that a staple economy of southern cotton, like that of the fur-producing northern half of the continent, managed to keep both regions "closely dependent on industrial Europe, especially Great Britain." Separating these two hinterlands of fur and cotton was "the widely diversified economic territory including the New England states and the coal and iron areas of the Middle West demanding raw materials and a market" (392).<sup>4</sup> While the southern hinterland would be "forced after the Civil War to become subordinate to the central territory," the British-colonized northern hinterland would continue to be organized by London, before various successors in Montreal, New York, and Chicago gained economic control in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the Civil War, subordination in the South "to the central territory" likewise meant subordination to "centralizing" capital, to what Marxist geographer Neil Smith has described as "the drive toward universality in capitalism" that "brings only a limited equalization of levels and conditions of development," given the need of capital to resist falling profit rates by "an acute differentiation and continued redifferentiation of relative space" (121-24, 139, 147). And yet this familiar model of centre and periphery must also be inflected by capital's tendency toward "the equalization of geographical differences" (117), resulting in what "Smith calls the subtle 'urbanisation' of the countryside itself" (Willmott 152). While "the modern city produces the country as a differential and underdeveloped space, at the same time the city produces the country as a potential double of itself." In this context, modern, electronic media can only work to accelerate an "urbanization of consciousness" (151) in the hinterlands.

If the periphery has not yet collapsed into the center, it might be because it will not easily forget its colonization by the metropolis. In fact, the cultural geography of both the South and the various regions of Canada may be likened to the situation "in modern colonial Ireland," in the apt paraphrase of Fredric Jameson by his Canadian student Glenn Willmott. In *Ulysses*, for

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<sup>4</sup> Innis verges on economic determinism in his view that "The Northwest Company was the forerunner of the present confederation," since transport and communication, rather than political will, appear to determine the space of community.

example, the experiences “of the colonizer and the colonized, the metropolis and the periphery” are indissolubly linked, given that Joyce’s “dear, dirty Dublin” is “surrounded by and still rooted in a rather intimate, local, and rural society, even while subjected to and permeated by a metropolitan empire” (Willmott 45, 47). If such co-dependency appears exceptional to Jameson, it is much less so to Willmott, who has adopted Smith’s idea of the “invisible city, with its modern modes of production and class-social structure” as a basis for exploring in Canadian writing of the same period an “alternative regional modernity that is both metropolitan and colonial” (152, 45).

In this light, the fidelity of the Southern Agrarians to the metropolis is not surprising: “I have in mind here the core of unadulterated Europeanism,” John Crowe Ransom opined, “with its self-sufficient, backward-looking, intensely provincial communities” (3). What is surprising is his more shuttered view that “[t]he South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture” (5). But, insofar as his real *bête noir* was the defection of urban Southerners “to the industrial gospel” (x) of the northern states, Ransom could only look to “the village South and the rural South [to] supply the resistance” (20). In larger terms, this situation is close to that of “dear, dirty Dublin,” with its interdependence of colonizer and colonized, of urban and rural, in the same space. It is virtually the same space that Willmott locates in a modernizing Canada where “[t]he modern countryside is simultaneously both fixed and fragmented, underdeveloped and urbanized” (152). So how is one to locate the “invisible city” in literary works of either “hinterland”? It is the pull of a “globalized modernity” that massively disfigures, for Willmott, “every aspect of form – of narrative space, narrative perspective, plot structure, characterization, and genre” (60).

Form in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is obviously disfigured in massive ways, as undergraduates regularly attest, but it hardly seems deformed by an “invisible city.” At first, it appears to be disfigured by a *primitive* mind, not a modern one, a mind fundamentally unable to structure time sequentially or even to infer causation. In Benjy’s section, each instant has the sensory immediacy of a cinematic image, linked by time-shifts that merge in a prose equivalent of cinematic montage. Take a moment in 1908, when Benjy is thirteen, that abruptly merges into the narrative present: “He stayed in the moonlight. Then I could see the swing and I began to cry.” A cinematic straight-cut returns us to the present of 1928: “*Come away from there, Benjy, Luster said. You know Miss Quentin going to get mad*” (56). Longing to recover his childhood with his lost sister Caddy, Benjy appears

to inhabit a verbal form of cinema<sup>5</sup> where all time is one, in a sort of ever-present non-presence, rather like a film-loop without progression. And yet the ever-present pull of global modernity is subtly registered in his cinematic epistemology, even if it seems to be left on the margins after Caddy is married in 1920 “to a minor movingpicture [sic] magnate, Hollywood California” (“Appendix” 413).<sup>6</sup>

The sale of Benjy’s pasture to a golf club also evokes the wider *production* of nature by an urbanizing modernity when what Benjy had regarded as an absolute space of innocence, presided over by his beloved Caddy, turns into a relative space, where every golfer calling for his caddie recalls, to him, his intolerable loss. Finally, this artificial space of nature is transformed back into an ironic, relativized space as the “old Compson Mile” is made “intact again in row after row of small crowded jerrybuilt individuallyowned [sic] bungalows” (411), in what amounts to a bitterly ironic production of urban space.

In Jason’s section, the “invisible city” is linked to the hinterland by the telegraph office that connects him to his New York broker. A site of his red-neck animus against “a bunch of damn eastern jews,” the telegraph office is also associated with his “bitch” of a niece who costs him stock profits, “all because she had to come helling in there at twelve, worrying me about that letter” (237, 281).<sup>7</sup> While Jason’s boastful claim “to be associated with some . . . of the biggest manipulators in New York” (238) evidently links him to modern, predatory capital, it is his deeply anti-modern animus that drives him to be revenged on his sister Caddy and her daughter Quentin, since their

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<sup>5</sup> See my *Media, Memory, and the First World War* (2009), particularly chapters 5 and 6, for parallel examples of verbal cinema in three anti-war novels published at exactly the same time. It is this “cinematic epistemology,” which I regard as a true marker of “modern memory” in the Great War and its literary products, and of a globalizing modernity in novels such as *The Sound and the Fury*.

<sup>6</sup> After her divorce “by mutual agreement, Mexico 1925,” Caddy vanishes from sight “in Paris with the German occupation, 1940,” where she will only re-surface on the arm of a “staffgeneral” in “a picture, a photograph in color clipped obviously from a slick magazine” (415). The trajectory of Caddy’s “globalizing” career in the novel thus marks her very literally as the tragic victim of this Southern version of “global modernity.”

<sup>7</sup> That Jason finally succeeds in becoming a dealer in cotton (“Appendix” 421) marks him as an ironic avatar of global modernity, boasting how “Abe Lincoln freed the niggers from the Compsons. In 1933, Jason Compson freed the Compsons from the niggers” (422).

menacing sexual freedom likely represents to him “the feminization of culture” under the sign of a globalized modernity.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, his brother Quentin appears as Leopold Bloom in reverse, strolling through foreign territory that turns into an uncanny double of his own predicament. In the suburbs of a northern city, the southern boy seeks to recuperate his lost tradition – to salvage the honour of his “Little Sister Death” (94) – by joining her in an imagined hell of incest, thus stopping time and transforming *now* into an unchanging eternity of *was*. Even the style of his grammar – marked by sentence fragments resistant to completion – is a sign of his resistance to development, to any further engagement with history. In the largest sense, Quentin’s suicide hints at the farthest extreme of retreat of the post-bellum South into social and personal withdrawal from the urgent pressures of modernity, and from the co-dependency of the metropolis and the hinterland.

Finally, the Dilsey section unites the fragmented tales of the brothers, each “disfigured by an elsewhere” (Willmott 63), into a coherent framework of third-person, omniscient narration, a framework explaining the family’s decadence through the timeless vision of the old black servant, who, speaking historically as much as theologically, says “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (371). It is Dilsey who gives Ben the narcissus flower to hold in the closing scene, while Jason whips Luster’s horse-drawn trap in a counter-clockwise direction around the monument, as if to turn back the clock in an anti-modern pretense of continuity with tradition, or rural self-sufficiency. But it is mere temporizing, a Pyrrhic victory that turns into an emblem of its own defeat in the image of a broken narcissus.

What plays out as tragedy in *The Sound and the Fury* turns to elegy in Alistair MacLeod’s Dublin Literary Prize-winning novel, *No Great Mischief*, where a similar tension between metropolis and hinterland reaches back to the Highland clearances and the increasing power of London. Set in Cape Breton in 1968, a pivotal epoch in modernizing Canada, the apparent subject of the novel is the survival of a local, Gaelic-speaking culture into modern times, in a family saga that takes the narrator’s sister back to Moidart to revisit their origins in the western Scottish highlands of the 1770s. The first third of the story comprises an oral history of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, with tales passed on through the generations in successive chapters: the first recalling the arrival of the ancestor, Red Calum, in Nova Scotia in 1779; then

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<sup>8</sup> See Willmott’s “The Feminization of History” in *Unreal Country* (102-43).



a tale of the clan and its shibboleths likely familiar to Southerners – “*What’s your name?*” “*What’s your father’s name?*” “*What’s your mother’s father’s name?*” (28) – before recounting the life of the maternal grandfather; followed by that of the paternal grandparents, then the parents (who disappear crossing the ice to their island lighthouse), then the elder brothers, and finally, that of the narrator Alexander and his twin sister Catherine (both of whom have been raised by their grandparents after the death of their parents). More like dramatized genealogy than conventional bildungsroman, the opening chapters of MacLeod’s novel recall the “Appendix” to *The Portable Faulkner*, in its turn reaching back to Culloden.<sup>9</sup>

MacLeod even includes a Faulknerian scene of soldiers from the clan fighting in the Revolutionary War against “friends and relatives” from “the Cape Fear River area of North Carolina,” singing “Gaelic songs to one another across the mountain meadows where they would fight on the following day” (20). But the MacDonalds had fought for the British before that, at Québec, where they served under the command of the same James Wolfe who, at Culloden 14 years earlier, had crushed their feudal society. Writing to a friend in the title words of the novel, General Wolfe “made the cynical comment [about the Highlanders] ‘No great mischief if they fall’” (109). As the narrator’s sister quietly remarks: “It sort of changes the conventional picture of Wolfe with his ‘brave Highlanders’” (235). But the conventional picture of the Conquest will also be transfigured by a battle in 1968 between the MacDonald clan and hard-rock miners from Québec, resulting in the death of Fern Picard, the French leader (a modern Montcalm), and in the imprisonment of the narrator’s eldest brother, Calum (a modern stand-in for Wolfe). Only in the continuing friendship of the narrator and one of the Québécois is there a possible rapprochement that turns the Conquest into a civil war between brothers struggling to speak each other’s language, “as if Marcel Gingras and I had been inhabitants of different rooms in the same large house for a long, long time” (199). What Benedict Anderson has characterized in French history “as reassuringly fratricidal wars between – who else?

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<sup>9</sup> One need look no further than the patronymic ancestor of Faulkner’s “Appendix” to *The Sound and the Fury*: “These were Compsons: QUENTIN MACLACHAN. Son of a Glasgow printer, orphaned and raised by his mother’s people in the Perth highlands. Fled to Carolina from Culloden Moor with a claymore and the tartan he wore by day and slept under by night” (404).

– *fellow Frenchmen*” (200)<sup>10</sup> here becomes a similar trope of fellow citizens who have to learn to “remember to forget” (*Imagined Nations* 91).<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the music of Marcel Gingras recalls a different longing for a homeland that is neither Canada nor Québec, rather “*au pays des Laurentides*,” a local borderland where “the people of that region had more in common with one another than they had with those whom they felt controlled their destinies from the distant cities of Toronto and Quebec City” (247). By contrast with Marcel, the narrator appears as an agent of modernity, commuting between his luxurious home in Windsor and the flophouse of his alcoholic brother Calum in Toronto – that sinister metropolis of “canyons” – and in memory between the Atlantic, the Precambrian Shield, and the Prairies, until the entire nation is contained in his mental map of “the Trans-Canada Highway,” just visible from his sister’s palatial home “located high upon one of the more prestigious ridges of the new and hopeful Calgary” (167, 93).

The vehicle in which Alexander travels from beginning to end finally comes to figure as the vehicle of elegy, transporting him with his dying brother over dangerous winter roads from Toronto, crossing the Canso Causeway to Cape Breton, only to feel Calum’s hand on the seat beside him growing cold. “Ferry the dead,” the narrator thinks. “*Fois do t’anam*. Peace to his soul” (283). Just as his transistor radio had once brought news of world-altering events to the mine on the Canadian Shield (244-47), so his car now ferries him between the hinterland and the invisible city. Always on the road, sketching every region into his mental map of the nation, Alexander appears to accept the co-dependency of the metropolis and the hinterland, in the process becoming an antithesis of Faulkner’s Jason Compson who, in preventing his niece’s flight to the city, is left choking on gas fumes and hiring a black man to chauffeur him and his pounding head back home (Faulkner 390-92).

In the end, of course, the plot and the narrative perspective of *No Great Mischief* are both “disfigured by an elsewhere” that differs from that of *The*

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<sup>10</sup> Beyond French history, Anderson notes how “[a] vast pedagogical industry works ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great ‘civil’ war between ‘brothers’ rather than between – as they briefly were – two sovereign nation-states” (201).

<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I draw from my previous discussion in *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction* (2003) concerning the reprise of the Conquest in MacLeod’s handling of this scene.

*Sound and the Fury*. Appearing seventy years after Faulkner's novel, MacLeod's work stands at the end of many decades of technological, economic, and social change. While the reaction of the Southern Agrarians to the challenge of "industrialism" is surely writ large in the maladaptive behavior of the brothers Compson, the die was already cast in MacLeod's novel: economic necessity has long ago driven the clan MacDonald into the mining industry. In the narrative foreground of the 1990s, the information revolution and its assumptions are also at work to disfigure the plot of *No Great Mischief*. For that reason, the Mountie who stops the car on its return to Cape Breton may be less ironic than the narrator assumes: "'MacDonalds?'" he says. 'Are you the guys who make the hamburgers?' 'No,' says Calum, 'we're not the guys who make the hamburgers'" (280). Yet, more than he realizes, Alexander is effectively linked to this agent of globalizing modernity, since he has managed, by knitting center and periphery together, to reveal the co-dependency and reversibility of metropolis and hinterland, in a brave new world where centers are everywhere.

As for the disfiguring of perspective in *No Great Mischief*, there can be no doubt "that an oral narrative strains at the seams of the printed book."<sup>12</sup> From his opening sentence, the narrator is caught in an unacknowledged contradiction: "As I begin to tell this," he says, "it is the golden month of September in southwestern Ontario" (1). Such specificities of time and locale are quickly undone by his pretense that "[t]he 401, as most people hearing this will know, is Ontario's major highway" (3). No one is really "hearing this" except in the context of a conference presentation; the narrator is thus open to the charge that he tries to conceal the agency of the book as an emissary of the invisible city. Ought we then to conflate the hypocrisy of General Wolfe, the agent of the metropole, with the hypocrisy of MacLeod's narrator as an agent of modernity? Likely not, since the automobile, like the radio, or the industrial mining equipment used by the men has long ago foreclosed on the question of resisting a globalized and globalizing modernity. For it is not the narrator, but economic and social forces that have brought his fellow, foreign miners from "Portugal as well as Southern Italy" to the Canadian Shield, these lonely, dreaming men who circle a date on their calendars "with a word or phrase beneath: 'Freedom' or 'Gone' or 'Last Day'"

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the tensions between an oral narrative and the print-politics of this novel's narrator, and thus of a plot massively "disfigured by an elsewhere" (Willmott 63), see my *Imagined Nations* (98-102).

written in English; or words of equivalent meaning in the various languages of Europe” (145). It is ultimately to MacLeod’s credit that the vehicle of urbanization becomes a vehicle for eulogizing what is lost in the collapse of margin and centre, for what Faulkner had so movingly anticipated as the tragic fate of the Old South.

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# REWRITINGS AND INFLUENCES



ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI

## Re-writing the Grimms

*Eudora Welty and Margaret Atwood*

. . . with the twins she could barely get a word in edgewise. They would fight her for control of the story – Change the ending, Mom! Make them go back! I don't like this part! They'd wanted Peter Pan to end before Wendy grew up, they'd wanted Matthew in Anne of the Green Gables to live forever. . . . They'd decided that all the characters in every story had to be female. Winnie the Pooh was female, Piglet was female, Peter Rabbit was female. If Roz slipped up and said "he", they would correct her: She! She! They would insist. (RB 350)

This passage from Margaret Atwood's 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* presents an ironic but basically serious version of the aesthetics of the new fairy tale, popularized after the 1960s by such well-known writers as Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Angela Carter.

In the 1960s and 1970s fairy tales underwent a radical change: they were still told and, above all, *written*, but the author intervened and revised the received text as he/she wished, just like "the twins" in Atwood's novel wanted. As is well known, the traditional fairy tale – just like the epistolary novel, the historical novel, the autobiography, the thriller, and any other possible genre – became the basis for new, different works of literature, often feminist, generally labeled "post-modern." The essentially codified structure of the fairy tale, as evidenced back in 1928 in Propp's pioneering study, allowed writers to re-arrange its components, adding, as in every other re-written form, humor, parody, and often a feminist viewpoint.

Becoming aware that everything had been used (as John Barth had indicated in his "The Literature of Exhaustion"), authors chose to exhibit the very art of writing, and they made this metafictional discourse on fiction part of their new fictions.

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), Robert Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) can all be seen as postmodern texts which do use the genre of the fairy tale, flout its rules, and, at the same time, work out a *revenge* on the genre, bringing it back to the world of the adults, after it had been relegated to that of the children in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One must remember that in earlier times, the fairy tale was not a genre for children, but mainly for kings and courts, or for peasants. Roman Jakobson tells us that Ivan the Terrible had



three blind men sitting by his bed one after the other, in order to tell him fairy and folk tales before he slept (Jacobson 339).

It is particularly instructive to see how two writers coming from different backgrounds and living in different countries at different times reworked one specific Grimm fairy tale, *The Robber Bridegroom*, to create their own novels: Eudora Welty published *The Robber Bridegroom* in 1942 (Gray 2007) and Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* appeared half a century later, in 1993.

We know from both of these writers' memoirs that the reading of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* played an important role in their education. In her autobiographical essay, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty remembers that "there were the fairy tales – Grimm, Andersen" (8) among the books she received for Christmas as a child and read while sitting on the floor.

The same was true for Margaret Atwood:

I was exposed to a large chunk of these tales at an early age, before the manicured versions had hit the stands. When I was five or six, my parents sent away by mail order for the complete Grimm's Fairy Tales. This was the 1944 Pantheon edition... and it was flagrantly unexpurgated. . . . ("Of Souls as Birds" 93)

Atwood was well aware that these tales were "unexpurgated" and that their language was of the sort that called "a spade a spade, a wart a wart, an ugly girl an ugly girl," and she continued: "[t]his wasn't a book designed to please every small child. To some it would have given screaming nightmares. Possibly it had in mind a more adult audience."

Atwood underlined the change that the fairy tales were undergoing. Even today, endings are often different from the ones in the sources: Robert Darnton has shown, for example, how the ending of "Little Red Riding Hood" was originally very different (and did not at all have a "happy ending") in the peasant culture to which it belonged (Darnton 12-13). Cruel and gory scenes were taken out. Atwood in fact enjoyed some of the cruelty and bloodiness of these tales, totally bowdlerized in more recent versions, like the Walt Disney productions.

In spite of the differences in space and time, the Grimms' tales offered a common cultural ground for children, both in Welty's South and in Atwood's Canada: it is well-known that the 1812 edition of the tales was translated into English as early as 1823 and that it influenced different authors and cultures in Europe and in America, providing an example of internationalization or even globalization. In North America it encouraged, among others, such

writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Joel Chandler Harris to write “fairy tales” and “folk tales.”

What did Welty and Atwood do with the specific Grimms’ fairy tale they used? They both “subverted” it – to use a term taken from Jack Zipes’ studies—even if in different ways.

The title of the Grimms’ tale was not changed by Welty. Atwood, however, changed it, inverting the gender: the robber bridegroom became the robber *bride*, a bride that robs other brides of their men, not a bridegroom cheating women.

If Welty did not change the title, she still changed quite a lot in her novel, keeping the general structure of the Grimms’ tale, and some of its plot details, while changing their place and function in her narrative, and adding much material to the original story.

To see what happened to the tale, let us look briefly at the original plot: the Grimms’ tale tells the story of a robber who pretends to be a good man and wants to marry a beautiful girl, rich and beautiful in the 1812 version (where she is the daughter of a king), poor and beautiful in another version, in which she is the daughter of a miller. The girl wants to find out about her fiancé, and she goes into the forest, finds the dwelling of the robber, is warned not to enter by a bird (“Kehr um, Kehr um, du junge Braut // Du bist in einem Mörderhaus”), goes into the house anyway, sees her robber bridegroom killing a girl, cutting her up and cutting off her finger, which flies into her lap. Back home, she pretends she had a dream, tells her dream, and finally takes out the other girl’s cut-off finger and proves that her fiancé is a nasty villain. The man is chased away by the girl’s father (or killed).

If Welty kept the title, she freely changed many other elements of the fairy tale. The beautiful girl is neither the daughter of a prince nor the daughter of a miller, but of a wealthy planter of tobacco, indigo, and cotton, in fields worked by his slaves; Rosamond (that’s her name in Welty’s novel) falls in love with the robber and does not mind being robbed *and* raped by him. She does go into the woods and to the robber’s house and is warned away by the ominous bird. But she enters the house anyway and stays there, as a servant, cleaning and cooking in Snow White-like fashion, because of her love for the robber. In fact, one of the most obvious changes is to be found in the character of Rosamond, whose light-headed view of life and whose love for the Robber make her an ironic, or even parodic, character as compared to the original protagonist of the fairy tale.

As Rosamond is the daughter of a planter, one can see immediately that Welty inserted into the text elements belonging to her very real South, including historical-geographic ones (The Natchez Trace) and socio-historical ones (the slaves and the Indians). The cruel Indians have killed the planter's first wife, and they eventually kill his second wife, Rosamond's nasty stepmother, called Salome. In a parodic and grotesque re-writing of Salome's dance, the woman dances to her death because she has defied the Indians' God, the Sun.

If the character of the stepmother echoes the nasty current in fairy tales, as Salome is always plotting against her step-daughter Rosamond, the girl's response to her orders is not fairy-tale like. Rosamond in fact replies to Salome's instruction to get up and milk the cows: "Why should the slaves not milk the cows, for they do it every day and I have never done it before?" (*RB* 31). This answer takes the reader back into the world of slaves and planters.

Other parodic elements are offered by the presence of an odd "magic helper" (defined according to Propp's pioneering study), in the person of a clumsy and ineffectual character called Goat, who, however, eventually frees Rosamond and her father from the Indians.

What Welty did in fact do was to "subvert," by means of irony, the traditional fairy tale, in a way very similar to what writers of the 1960s and 1970s were to do as well, using the plot and adding different elements belonging to other genres. She enriched the original tale using also characters and stories taken from the genre of the tall tale, in a way I have discussed elsewhere, and by using such myths as that of Love and Psyche (see Mamoli 2011).

In her mixing of genres, Welty also used different language registers, some of them belonging to the "realistic" code, and some of them belonging to the fairy tale. As André Jolles and Max Luethi have taught us, the fairy tale is characterized by abstract time and abstract space. In Welty's novel there are many woods through which the protagonists "ride on and on," through scenery (or in a setting) that has no concrete definition and where there is no passing of time. Horses can go "like an arrow" (32), bandits can gallop "away like the wind" (29), and characters go "on and on" (38) in the forest: the formulaic language of the fairy tale is present along with other kinds of languages. Welty's mixing of genres and of language codes and registers created a very innovative kind of novel, opening the way to what is usually called the postmodern novel.

Atwood did not use the Grimm story in the same way. In addition to the title, *The Robber Bride*, which is used both as the title of the whole novel and

as the title of its fourth section and explicitly refers to the Grimms, she employed the language of the fairy tale in several passages.

In her novel, the robber *bride* is a female figure, Zenia, who is at the center of the lives of three other women (Tony, Charis, Roz), who have been at the same college, and whose husbands or partners Zenia has managed to steal away at different times. The setting is contemporary Toronto, even if, by telling the stories of the girls' lovers and parents, the story widens to include the past, notably the Vietnam War and holocaust Europe.

Zenia is thought to be dead (her three school-friends have actually gone to her funeral, where they assumed Zenia's ashes were being buried, after she had been supposedly blown up in Beirut). Instead, she re-appears in the flesh, causing the three girls to think back on their own pasts and to dread their own futures because of her presence. The death of Zenia is only one of the many lies or invented stories which this character keeps telling her friends in the book.

For Atwood, then, the Grimms' tale was only a starting point, and she went on to develop it from the changed viewpoint of the robber *bride* into totally different directions. However, she gave precise hints of the connection:

*The Robber Bride*, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, *lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron*. Like Zenia. (RB 352; my emphasis)

The dangerous forest of the fairy tale is no different from the urban jungle, where every balance is always temporary, at risk to be upset by the appearance of a robber bride, in the form of a glamorous young woman (as in "Bluebeard's Egg," where Atwood used another famous folk tale for her short story).

The language of the fairy tale, or, in fact, of different fairy tales, crops up again and again in the novel:

"How long can she protect him?" Tony asks herself. "How long before Zenia descends on them, with *her bared incisors and outstretched talons and banshee hair*, demanding what is rightfully hers?" (228; my emphasis)

Or consider this passage:

All the time she's rehearsing: *Wasn't one enough? You gonna kill my son, too? Get your claws off my child!* She feels like a tigress, defending her young. Or this is what tigresses

are rumoured to do. *I'll huff and I'll puff*, she roars inwardly, *and I'll blow your house down!* (525)

If the story of the Three Little Pigs is unmistakably behind the metaphoric huffing and puffing of Roz, other passages mirror scenes from other fairy tales. For example, "Little Red Riding Hood" is the barely veiled source for the scene when Zenia knocks on Roz's door:

*Knock, knock, knock*, she goes on Zenia's door. Just making a noise recoups her strength. Open up, you pig, you sow, and let me in!

And clickety-clack, here comes somebody. The door opens a crack. It's on the chain. "Who is it?" says the smoky voice of Zenia. (525)

Other expressions such as "*Mom! who's been in my room*" (95) echo the well-known language of the seven dwarves' or the three bears' questions in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

As mentioned above, Eudora Welty's re-writing of *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) precedes, by half a century, the postmodern re-writing of the fairy tale as practiced by Margaret Atwood in *The Robber Bride* (1993). Welty's re-writing thus shows that she was ahead of her time in experimenting new narrative forms.

There are more differences than similarities in the way in which the two writers used the fairy tale: while Welty added a lot of material, Atwood removed most of the fairy tale elements. But in both cases, the presence of the language of the fairy tale, and the addition of irony to situations, reactions, responses of the characters, show that Welty and Atwood have something in common: the ability to use freely and radically change into a new work a received text which had stayed with both of them from childhood.

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PEARL AMELIA MCHANEY

## Hard Beauty

*The Confluence of Eudora Welty and Alice Munro: Mississippi-South and Ontario-South Portraits of the 1930s*

The confluences of Eudora Welty and Alice Munro are many despite the generation and the physical distance that separates their lives and home places. Both began writing at an early age. Both excel in and prefer writing in the short story genre. Both are independent, willful, and mindful of their craft and their privacy. Both are outlanders of sorts: Welty, born of liberal-minded Yankee parents, lived in the nation's most conservative segregationist U.S. state, Mississippi. She was better educated and better traveled than many. Munro grew up on a silver fox and mink farm – a step up from other prospects, her mother thought, but this made Munro an outsider to the landscape and daily routines of her schoolmates. She walked from the country through the poorest section of town each day to and from school. She was better off than folks in Lower Town but poorer than her town peers. Before marrying, moving to Vancouver, and raising children, Munro had two years at the University of Western Ontario, that were, she said, “the only time in my life that I haven't had to do housework” – a time when she was independent and free (“The Art of Fiction” 402). These and many other similarities evidence the like mindedness of the two writers compelling us to ask, then, how their work, emanating from different places, addresses a set of cultural and historical phenomena stemming from the worldwide depression of the 1930s. Writing always of the complexities of human relationships, Welty and Munro approach their subjects from different perspectives: Welty remains detached, invisible, in her fiction, whereas Munro immerses herself in her characters and their lives. The two authors, confluent but distinctly different, write stories that portray human nature with particulars and truths that Munro calls “hard beauty, familiar strangeness” but from different points of view (“Golden Apples” 76).

Both Welty and Munro are praised as comparable to Chekhov (whom they read along with Proust and Mann) and to the short story writers Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. Both revere William Maxwell – Welty first as an editor at the *New Yorker* and later as a lifelong friend, and Munro as model writer. Both have been recognized for their accomplish-



ments: O. Henry prizes (eight for Welty and ten for Munro); Governor General (three) and Giller (two) awards for Munro; a Gold Medal for Fiction from the National Institute for Arts and Letters and a Pulitzer Prize for Welty. When Munro won the 2009 Man Booker International Prize for lifetime writing, Fiammetta Rocco, one of the judges, said, "There is nobody like her. Nobody so able simultaneously to be quiet – and ruthless. She is, quite simply, the best."

The early stories of each have Gothic elements, yet each author transcended mere regionalist writing without denying the importance of her region's rootedness. Caught by a dust jacket blurb announcing that Welty's *The Golden Apples* "creates a world," Munro recalls thinking that this "doesn't mean – simply to set out the right furniture and catch the exact shades of speech and put the right food on the table and the right concerns in people's heads – so true, as we say, to life" ("Golden Apples" 75). Such details are recorded in the fiction by both writers, but Munro continues,

More than skill must be involved, more than a sharp eye and a quick ear. The story must be imagined so deeply and devoutly that everything in it seems to bloom of its own accord and to be connected, then, to our own lives which suddenly, as we read, take on a hard beauty, a familiar strangeness, the importance of a dream which can't be disputed or explained. Everything is telling you, Stop. Hold on. Here it is. Here too. Remember. ("Golden Apples" 75-76)

So well does this explain Munro's own writing, that Robert Thacker uses the appraisal as an epigraph in his biography of Munro (vii).

Eudora Welty said much the same of William Faulkner, a writer whom she read and reread as Munro read and reread Welty. "[Y]our fiction," Welty said to Faulkner, "go[es] on revealing human life . . . each time we read, as we find again your vision enveloping us like new, to bring us again inside experience we had already known was indelible" ("Presentation Speech" 41). Munro told Thacker that she read Welty's *The Golden Apples* "not really to find out how she did it, just to let it sink in. It was the kind of writing I most hoped to do. . . . I read it for just the transcendence, almost to get into that world" (Thacker 141-42). While reading it, she was, she said, "stabbed to the heart . . . [b]y the beauty of our lives streaming by, in Morgana and elsewhere" ("Golden Apples" 75).

In the 1930s, after sojourns in the upper Midwest of Ohio, Wisconsin, and Chicago, and New York City, Welty, an adult, traveled to Mississippi collecting observations of the Works Progress Administration projects (newly opened farm-to-market roads, new air fields hacked out of old cow pastures) for state reports (*One Time* 3). She took photographs as she worked, but not

as part of her work. She wrote society columns for the Memphis, Tennessee, newspaper, wrote for a short-lived Jackson newspaper, and for the local radio station. She interviewed people for the Mississippi Advertising Commission and researched state history for her friend Bill Hamilton in graduate school at Duke University. Welty had spent a year at Columbia Graduate School of Business in New York City where she had seen lines of men out of work. When her father died in 1931, Welty returned home, and she and her mother managed the household with the benefits of his annuities, income from a boarder, and Welty's part-time work. But Jackson was the state capital, and as Welty was of a middle class family, well educated, independent, and confident, she was able to observe the effects of the Depression with some distance. She was "naïve," she said, "inexperienced, right out of school" ("Eudora Welty: 'I Worry'" 145). In *One Time, One Place*, subtitled "Mississippi in the Depression," Welty's first book of photographs, she clarifies that what she saw and photographed was the "real State of Mississippi," the place and the people, "not the abstract state of the Depression. The Depression, in fact, was not a noticeable phenomenon in the poorest state in the Union" (3). She set her novel *Losing Battles* in this period, for she wanted "a bare stage" to portray "a family who had *nothing*" to "show people at the rock bottom of their whole lives . . . when they had no props to their lives, had only themselves, plus an indomitable will to live even [when] losing battles . . . of poverty, . . . family troubles, and disasters." "All they had was one another" ("The Art of Fiction XLVII" 82; "'The Interior World'" 50; "Eudora Welty: A Writer's Beginnings" 133).

Welty's characters in her first collection of stories are isolated, lonely, and directionless because of their failures to build relationships, not out of destitution. She grants her hitch-hikers free will; they are "tramps . . . full blown, abandoned to this," thinks Tom Harris ("Hitch-Hikers" 79). Sara and Jason Morton of "The Whistle" are tenant farmers who are ruined – not primarily by the failing economy – but by the cold. That "[t]he old Farr furnishing store did little business now," is due to the deficiencies of the town's patriarchs, not the Depression ("Clytie" 107). It had been my impression that Welty's stories in her first collection were set in the 1930s, but in review, I find that they depict small town-1920s instead – people still have cars to drive to the neighboring town for a coca-cola, to buy hamburgers, to meet for dancing, to have a weekly shampoo and set, and eat three meals a day. Only "Flowers for Marjorie," set in New York City, depicts the "ruinous air" of the Depression.

‘Work?’ [Howard] said sternly, backing away from [Marjorie], speaking loudly from the middle of the room, almost as if he copied his pose and his voice somehow from the agitators in the park. ‘When did I ever work? A year ago . . . six months . . . back in Mississippi . . . I’ve forgotten! . . . I wouldn’t know what to do now if they did give me work. I’ve forgotten! It’s all past now. . . . And I don’t believe it any more – they won’t give me work now – they never will –.’ (122)

In her fiction and her photographs, Welty shows the “reality,” the “gestures” of the feelings, not of the conditions of poverty, gestures that transcend time and place (“Eudora Welty and Photography” 195; *One Time* 8).

Munro, born in 1931, says her “first memories” are of the “end of the Depression which meant that things were not normal. . . . There were a lot of people out of work, a lot of bootleggers, a lot of lives that had gone . . . awry. The whole aspect of the town had that kind of ruinous air. You’d be going by” what had once been a park “but now the grass was never cut anymore because you couldn’t pay anybody to do it. You didn’t have any money.” There was “a band of factory buildings, out of work people. Between the farm and school,” was “faintly desperate society” (“Interview with Hal Wake”). History bears out Munro’s experience. Overall, in Canada during the Depression, one in five persons were unemployed; one in 8.7 received relief aid, and except for Saskatchewan, relief and aid were the responsibilities of the municipalities, not the federal government (Bryce 58). Like Mississippi, which was poor before the Depression, the Maritime provinces had comparatively “less distance to fall” than other regions of the country (“Great Depression”). Munro was recording reality not only as she saw it, but even more so as she remembered it, using the filters of personal memories of feelings.

One of the “key essentials” of the story “Images,” Munro tells us is the “roofed-over cellar” she “went past every day on my way to school. A bootlegger and his wife lived there – they weren’t the only people to have contrived shelters like these during the Depression” (“Introduction” xix). In the story, the young girl who is checking traps with her father describes the experience. She begins both matter-of-factly and judgmentally. She notes that her father is polite and even complimentary to the thin, dark tramp, Joe, they have been invited to visit. Remembering how Joe had once mysteriously come out of the brush toward her father, the young girl, now in Joe’s cellar, becomes “transfixed” and then feels “recognition” (“Images” 55). It was “a cellar with a roof on. My father said, ‘Looks like you fixed it up all right for yourself, Joe.’” He answered, “It’s warm. Being in the ground the way it is,

naturally it's warm. . . . I got all the room I need here. I fixed it up comfortable" (56). The young girl who narrates describes Joe's cellar:

It was not completely dark. . . . It was all one room, an earth floor with boards not nailed together just laid down to make broad paths for walking, a stove on a sort of platform, table, couch, chairs, even a kitchen cupboard, several thick, very dirty blankets of the type used in sleighs and to cover horses. Perhaps if it had not had such a terrible smell – of coal oil, urine, earth, and stale heavy air – I would have recognized it as the sort of place I would like to live in myself, like the houses I made under the snowdrifts, in winter, with sticks of firewood for furniture, like another house I had made long ago under the veranda, my floor the strange powdery earth that never got sun or rain. ("Images" 56-57)

Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy" tells of a similar father-daughter journey, told by the young girl. "[U]ntil last winter we had our own business, a fox farm. . . . Prices fell, my father hung on hoping they would get better next year, and they fell again, and he hung on one more year and one more and finally it was not possible to hang on anymore, we owed everything to the feed company" ("Walker Brothers" 6). They move and her father, who seems to the girl "to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted," is now a "peddler knocking on backwoods kitchens" for Walker Brothers (5). Her mother, who "has no time for the national calamity, only ours," tells the neighbor, "We poured all we had into it . . . and we came out with nothing" (6). The ruins of Munro's earliest memories are described in the story, and in the course of the day's journey, she learns of the adult world and of individual dignity. When a tramp speaks to them, she is "too alarmed to catch" his request, but she tells the reader, "My father says he is a bit hard up himself. 'I'll roll you a cigarette if it's any use to you,' he says" and does so. The tramp "takes it and walks away. My father also rolls and lights and smokes one cigarette of his own" ("Walker Brothers" 4). This is not the essence of the story, of course, but the way that Munro can show us the real world of the thirties while ferreting out the mysteries of living in that world, the adult world.

Welty thought she might be an artist, then a photographer, and found success as a fiction writer. Munro was on her "third novel" by age fifteen, she says, but "[i]t takes nerve, to write a novel. So in the meantime, I thought, why not write a story. Just for practice, just to get myself in gear. Just whatever comes into my head. And I've been writing stories ever since" ("Stories"), now more than one hundred. Munro, as did Welty, began in her home place, moved away, returned, but never forgot and had never truly gone away from Ontario, the southern-most province, even if Wingham and Clinton, where she settled upon her return from British Columbia, are "southwestern"

Ontario, or Sowesto, Margaret Atwood tells us. Still it is the south of Canada. In "Home," Munro said she hadn't, as she had feared, "'used up' . . . that town's 'secret, plentiful messages' . . . , [for] she rediscovered anew her home place, a place where 'everything was touchable and mysterious'" (qtd. in Thacker 8). Welty said that Southern writers feel "passionately about Place. Not simply in the historical or philosophical connotation of the word, but in the sensory thing, the experienced world of sight and sound and smell, in its earth and water and sky and in its seasons. Place . . . fire[s] the imagination" ("From Where I Live" 245).

The difference between Welty's and Munro's writing, despite the confluences, is not place, not region – both of these are precisely rendered – but rather the point of view through which the gesture or the generative anecdote take on significance. Mona Simpson reads Munro's stories "deeply, personally, to learn how to live." Reading Welty, however, we seem to come from the outside, as observers, like the stories' narrators. Reading Munro, we are almost always thrown into the first person and see the world from inside. The writers' fictionalizations of their mothers serve as an example of this difference.

"The material about my mother is my central material in life," says Munro ("The Art of Fiction" 405). In Munro's story "Boys and Girls," the protagonist (a young girl) tells the reader, my mother "was kinder than my father and more easily fooled, but you could not depend on her, and the real reasons for the things she said and did were not known. She loved me . . . but she was also my enemy" (4). In "The Ottawa Valley," the female narrator recreates for us a scene of her childhood: "I demand of her now, that she [my mother] turn and promise me what I needed. But she did not do it. For the first time she held out altogether against me" (96). And then in the final paragraph a page or so later, the narrator as adult becomes the author and addresses the reader in the fashion that Ellen Douglas employs in *Can't Quit You Baby*: "If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could. . . . The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken" ("Ottawa Valley" 97-98). Fiction and autobiography seem inseparable when the narrator slips into the persona of the author. The story's narrator continues her self-interrogation regarding her mother:

With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid of* her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, . . . she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. ("Ottawa Valley" 98)

While Welty's mother, Chestina, may sometimes be central for Welty's fiction ("A Curtain of Green" comes first to mind), Welty does not admit to this in the same way as does Munro. Welty says, "I never in my wildest dreams thought I would write anything autobiographical. . . . I never expected to write about my mother"; she admits that "many things" from her life "were used in the stories, but they were very much transformed" ("Eudora Welty" 146). This is another essential difference between the two writers. Welty volunteers little, maintains what appears to be southern decorum and modesty, answers the professional questions, and scolds interviewers who ask personal ones. Munro consciously plumbed her personal histories because her past was what she had that relieved her from the present entrapments of marriage and motherhood in British Columbia. This became particularly so when she returned home the season after her mother died. (She had suffered a form of Parkinson's disease for eighteen years, beginning when Munro was ten.) As her grandmother and great aunt sorted her mother's clothes for re-use, they told her "minutely about" her mother's death. Munro says, "I had to write it in a completely different way . . . to get as much human truth out of . . . this event as I could and so it was a different tact to take than I had done before and also quite painful to do. Stories that come out of my personal stories are still stories" (Interview with Hal Wake).

Not until her penultimate fiction, *The Optimist's Daughter*, after the death of her mother at the end of a protracted decline and a long period of not writing, did Welty deliberately approach her family material. In the earlier work for the most part, Welty herself seems invisible, and the human relationships at the heart of her fiction are seen from the outside. Chestina Welty's death was one of those "sad things . . . those things we can't ever change but must try through fiction to make something with" Welty told a friend (qtd. in Marrs 371). She writes more formally that "part of the universal experience of personal loss is the urgent wish to find a way back through the exercise of memory and the acceptance of the responsibilities of feeling and understanding, to apprehend, absorb, and save some essence of the life that is just over" ("Foreword" 310). Munro understood this when she was just a novice. Welty downplays the autobiographical nature of her novel; though the story was not "'like' my own, it was *intimate* with my own – a

closer affinity. Writing it involved my deepest feelings, their translation into the events of the story was demanding of my ability as no other novel, so far, has been” (“Foreword” 310-11).

Both Munro and Welty write from character, and their stories take their cues from a gesture or an anecdote remembered. Munro explains,

The start . . . gets lost and is usually unrecognizable in the final story. Suppose you have – in memory – a young woman stepping off a train in an outfit so elegant her family is compelled to take her down a peg (as happened to me once), and it somehow becomes a wife who’s been recovering from a mental breakdown, met by her husband and his mother and the mother’s nurse whom the husband doesn’t yet know he’s in love with. How did that happen? I don’t know. (“A Conversation”)

The beginning leads to questions that give rise to stories. The genesis of Welty’s first story is the phrase “borry some fire,” spoken by a country man leaving his wife at their isolated home to borrow fire (“Looking Back” 300). The story is not about Sonny but about the lonely salesman who did not have, and knew he never would have, the love and comfort felt by the man and his expectant wife (“Death of a Traveling Salesman”). Only the instigating phrase comes out of the Depression, but even that shows human compassion and community. Welty explains her photographs, which I take to mean the moments captured in memory, saying, “I learned that *every* feeling *waits upon its gesture*; and I had to be prepared to recognize this *moment*” (*One Writer’s Beginnings* 928). Both Welty and Munro cherish the awareness that gestures exist, and if noted, can be catalysts for questions for which the writers can seek answers. Their answers, in specific detail of their stories, rise above the particular, certainly beyond any geographic region, and allow either the comfort afforded by the pleasure of observing the recreated world from an objective distance or the disquietude of experiencing the normally unspoken – because unrealized – realities of one’s life.

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CHARLES REAGAN WILSON

## Parallel Spiritual Worlds

*Alice Munro Country and the American South*

In Alice Munro's story "Baptizing," in her book *Lives of Girls and Women*, the protagonist, Del Jordan, is in love with a young man, Garnet French, who discovered evangelical faith while he was in prison. They meet at a town revival, and he soon has her attending the Baptist Young People's Society. Munro presents the details of the experience – the prayers, hymns, the sour smell of the church building, even the ping-pong game afterwards that provided fellowship. Yet in recounting the realistic details, Del thinks, "I had that strange and confident sensation of being in a dream from which I would presently wake up." While at the church, she was "always amazed and lonely as someone thrown up in a shipwreck." She uses the word "unreality" to describe this churchly experience. In truth, her attraction to Garnet is not, as she says, to "the regenerate Baptist" but to "the dark side, the strange side of him" (*Lives of Girls and Women* 236, 237, 241).<sup>1</sup>

The story illustrates Munro's complex engagement with matters of the spirit – both the importance of religious life to her community and recognition of a mysterious world beneath or beyond the daily one of ordinary behavior, a world sometimes of "the dark side" indeed, or at least the uncanny.

Garnet insists that Del be baptized before their relationship goes any further, and Del refuses. The conflict comes to a head when Del and Garnet are swimming, and he says she must join the Baptist Church and be baptized. "You know how they do it in our church? Baptizing?" he asks. "Dunk you right under the water. They got a tank behind the pulpit covered up. That's where they do it. But it's better to do it in a river, several at one time." She persistently refuses his demand that she be baptized, and he decides he will baptize her himself in the river where they are swimming. He forces her head under the water and, in his violent rage, holds her there. "I thought that he might drown me," she says. "I really thought that. I thought that I was fighting for my life" (*LGW* 259-61).

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* will be referred to as *LGW* in parenthetical references.

This scene is characteristic of Munro's use of epiphany to bring clarity to her characters and their stories. In this case, it leads to Del's awareness that she could not enter Garnet's Baptist world. Epiphany is strongly rooted in religious contexts, expressing spiritual illumination, and one writer of the American South is especially associated with it. Flannery O'Connor often used violent scenes to try to stir her readers out of a modernist spiritual indifference: "to the hard-of-hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures." She saw in modern life "distortions which [were] repugnant" to the Christian writer, such as herself, who has "to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural, and he may well be forced to take even more violent means to get his vision across to his hostile audience" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 33-34). Munro's "Baptizing" reminds me of O'Connor's scene in *The Violent Bear It Away* where Francis Marion Tarwater drowns the dimwitted Bishop while baptizing him, although O'Connor's baptism is characteristically more violent than Munro's.

Unlike O'Connor, Munro does not write from a specifically religious perspective, but I want to argue that Munro makes spiritual matters more central than critics sometimes acknowledge. Some commentators emphasize Munro's fascination with the ordinary in life, while others see gothic elements. But spiritual matters are too often underexplored in Munro criticism. She has acknowledged her debt to Faulkner, Welty, and O'Connor, and I believe she has created a fictional world with spiritual dimensions that parallel those of southern writers.<sup>2</sup>

Baltimore editor H. L. Mencken coined the term "Bible Belt" to describe the American South, first using it in a 1924 newspaper article. "The old game, I suspect, is beginning to play out in the Bible Belt," and at other times he referred to the "Bible and Lynching Belt" (Shapiro 2). Mencken used the term derisively, but it accurately describes the American South as a place of high religiosity, which has proven an enormous resource to its writers. The South has had by far the nation's largest percentage of people who attend church on a regular basis and give money to religious institutions. The re-

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<sup>2</sup> For a general discussion of religion and culture in Canada, see William Closson James, *Locations of the Sacred: Essays on Religion, Literature, and Canadian Culture* (1998). For a discussion of Munro and the South in general, see J.R. Struthers, "Alice Munro and the American South" (1978; 21-33), and Nora Robson, "Alice Munro and the White American South: The Quest" (1984; 73-84).

gion's predominant faith is evangelical, meaning, in this case, that its adherents prize religious experience. A strong inheritance of Calvinism has left a dim view of human nature and its tendency toward sin, but an equally strong Methodist Wesleyan legacy points southerners toward hope for redemption. The assurance of redemption then promotes a reformed lifestyle, with righteous moralism pervasive. The South's Bible Belt of the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was defined by religious orthodoxy, with doctrinaire attitudes typical. "Fierce sectarian debate often obscured a consensus on fundamentals," historian Kenneth K. Bailey has noted. "In such concepts as heaven and hell, God and Satan, depravity and redemption, there was little dispute" (2-3).

Southern writers found religion a rich resource. The region's most acclaimed writer, William Faulkner, wrote about religion, he said, because it was all around him, growing up in rural and small town Mississippi in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. "It's just there," he said, and biblical characters, stories, and themes pervade his work (Gwynn and Blotner 41). He saw Calvinism as a particular burden for his characters, portraying it as limiting human potential, a source of absolutism, fatalism, and self-righteousness. In recounting the founding of his mythical Jefferson, Faulkner's character Chick Mallison notes that the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches were the oldest in north Mississippi, but "the Baptists and Methodists had heired from them, usurped and dispossessed" the others. Mallison described the predominant Baptists as "incorrigible nonconformists, nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord" (Faulkner, *The Town* 306-07). The religious world that Faulkner explored was a rich one. The community church occupied a central place in it. He was not as interested as Flannery O'Connor was in the wild emotional spirit of the newer sectarian groups. Rather, Faulkner focused on the traditions, rituals, and behaviors of what he called "the spirit Protestant eternal" as he saw it existing in his mythical Yoknapatawpha County since its beginning (Faulkner, *Mosquitoes* 11). Institutional religion in that county was present from early on, with three churches present when only thirty homes dotted the countryside. Faulkner says the first ministers came "roaring with Protestant scripture and boiled whiskey, Bible and jug in one hand" and "a native tomahawk in the other" (Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* 89). The Bible had a near mystical attraction for Faulkner's characters, reflecting its centrality as religious authority in the South. The respectable Methodist deacon Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* waits in his room for Confederate troops to march outside, reading from the Bible "the passages of the old violent vindictive mysticism" (82).

Alice Munro's spiritual geography was perhaps less intense than that of Faulkner and certainly than that of Flannery O'Connor, but it was nonetheless an important part of her realistic picture of a regional society. Religion has been a key component of Protestant Canadian culture, and certainly so in southern Ontario, Munro's country. Historian William Westfall argues that religion in Ontario was the central factor shaping society, so much so that it produced what he calls a "Protestant culture." Westfall sees a strong Victorian legacy in Ontario, through church institutions and ethical convictions, resulting in a "heavy moral atmosphere that seemed to stifle individual freedom and creativity" (Westfall et al. 2). Northrop Frye stressed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries "the effective religious factors in Canada were doctrinal and evangelical, those that stressed the arguments of religion at the expense of its imagery," echoing the South's outlook (227). Robertson Davies referred to this outlook when he had one of his characters note that the worst Christians were those who "have the cruelty of doctrine without the poetic grace of myth" (226). Westfall adds, however, that religion in Canada also "provides a structure of metaphors that serves as a means of liberating the central characters from the very prison house that religion seems to have done so much to create" (Westfall et al. 3). In any event, historian Arthur Lower concludes that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Canada, in general, was "a strong church-going country" and "a country of intense religiosity" (86). Observers have sometimes used the term "Bible Belt" to refer to areas of Canada with high rates of church membership. Although southern Ontario is not usually included in Canada's "Bible Belt," I see intriguing, if speculative, connections to the American Bible Belt. Mencken's use of "Bible Belt" is popularly associated with the rural South, but in fact he included the rural Midwest in his classification as well. Historian Donald Mathews sees the Midwest providing the "suspenders" of the Bible Belt," and a little imagination can suggest those longitudinal suspenders stretch north into southern Ontario (Goldhaber 1997; Tweedie 865-76). Munro and the southern writers may be connected by a transnational, rural spiritual geography, rooted in time – the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – and place – rural areas of North America. They share a predominantly Protestant evangelical and orthodox religious tradition.

Munro's southwestern Ontario bears the strong imprint of a Scots-Irish presence with religious implications. Many of Munro's ancestors were Scots-Irish, and her book, *The View from Castle Rock*, identifies Scottish characteristics among her ethnic Ontario cultural ancestors, including their

intense Calvinism. Historian Barry Vann argues for Scots-Irish “geothological imaginings” that affected the sacralization of place in the South of Scots-Irish settlement. He quotes an 1889 address to the Scotch-Irish Society that said Scots-Irish, wherever they traveled, “would cherish with affectionate veneration the honour of their sacred sires, and keep the sacred fires of family love brightly burning on their domestic altars as long as a drop of the old Scotch-Irish blood should trickle through their veins” (155). Munro’s stories share Faulkner’s sense of Scots-Irish embodied Calvinism’s moralisms, deeply rooted in a regional society, as a restrictive factor for her characters’ development. As with Faulkner and other southern writers, the depressed economic conditions of her Ontario provide a place where fatalism promotes moralistic judgments. “If I’m a regional writer,” Munro says, “the region I’m writing about has many things in common with the American South. . . . A closed rural society with a pretty homogeneous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay” (McCaig 39-40).

Munro’s story “Walker Brothers Cowboy” portrays her fictional landscape of Tuppertown, “an old town on Lake Huron, an old grain port.” We see a factory with boarded up windows, “then the town falls away in a jumble of shed and small junkyards, the sidewall gives up and we are walking on a sandy path.” The narrator’s mood reflects the landscape and the sense of being trapped. Del Jordan’s mother uses a key Calvinistic word when she observes that “fate has flung us onto a street of poor people” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 1, 2, 4).<sup>3</sup> This also reminds us that Munro country is working class and often poor, with Depression-era settings reminding us of the Farm Security Administration photographs of the decaying South in the last days before modernization’s transformations in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Alice Munro’s spiritual geography was perhaps less intense than that of Faulkner and certainly than that of Flannery O’Connor, but it was nonetheless an important part of her realistic picture of a regional society. Revivals, baptizings, and funerals appear as prominent social events. The church is certainly a contested site for her characters, but its serving as a frequent source of conflict indicates its important role in her characters’ lives. Religious folklore pops up periodically. Uncle Benny, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, refers to a rainbow as “the Lord’s promise” (4) that there will never be another great flood. Munro can picture the obsessive side of religiosity.

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, *Dance of the Happy Shades* by Alice Munro will be referred to as *DHS* in parenthetical references.

“She was a religious fanatic,” says Del Jordan’s mother of her own mother. She recalls finding her “on her knees, bent down on the bed, praying. The family was poor, but when Del’s grandmother inherited some money she spent it on the Good Book to give to “the heathen.” “My mother took her money and she ordered a great box of Bibles. They came by express. They were the most expensive kind, maps of the Holy Land gilt-edged pages and the words of Christ were all marked in red. *Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” Del’s mother, at age eight had no mittens, but was “tramping all over the country” giving away Bibles and turning her permanently against religion (LGW 4, 84-85).

Munro shows this Ontario regional folk religion as being anti-Catholic as well. Young Del goes with her father to a friend’s house, and she sees a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall. “We have never known any Roman Catholics at all well, never well enough to visit in their houses.” To make it even more stark, her father has a drink of whiskey with his female friend, which would not have been seen in Del’s normal moralistic Protestant world. In thinking about Catholics, one of Munro’s characters uses a phrase that shows their marginalization: “so-and-so digs with the wrong foot” (DHS 14). This saying reminds me of a sign in front of the Anchor Baptist Church in north Mississippi: “There is no hope, in the Pope,” and despite Flannery O’Connor’s sophisticated Catholic theological appreciation of fundamentalism’s religious seriousness, anti-Catholicism long character-ized the South’s evangelical culture.

The Bible is a taken-for-granted item of everyday life in Munro country. In describing the people of her little postage stamp of native soil, the Flats Road in southwestern Ontario, she notes that one character kept a little donkey, “like the illustration to a Bible story.” The father of Del Jordan’s friend Naomi, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, “reads the Bible till his eyes fall out.” He sits on his bed one day, opening “a large-print Bible with the place already marked and began to read in a piercing elderly voice, with some odd stops, and difficulties of phrasing” the parable of the five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins. To be sure, Del has always disliked this parable, but she was well aware of it. Moreover, Del admits that the Bible gave her a “secret pleasure – poetic flow of words, archaic expressions. *Said unto; tarried; Behold the bridegroom cometh*” (LGW 171-72). This has certainly been true as well for writers of the South. Susan Ketchin, in her book about contemporary southern writers and religion, notes that “We became as southerners in the evangelistic Protestant South intimately familiar with the resounding beauty of the biblical language and the unmistakable rhetoric of sermons,

the rhythm and meter, symbols, the metaphors, the cataloging of images, and the building up of tension in the narratives” (84-85)

Munro’s chronicling of religion’s role in her regional society reflects her realistic concern to evoke the details of daily life. Margaret Atwood notes that Munro is interested in “what people eat, what they wear, what appliances they are using,” and these are “all important to her” (Awano 93). Religious life is a crucial component of that, just as in the American South. North Carolina writer Reynolds Price observes that southern culture “provided us with a daily world in which religion played an omnipresent role,” (qtd. in Ketchin 83) which was “immensely important” to those who would later become writers. It embodied a concrete sense of “the relation of human creatures to the Creator” (86), but that relationship grew out of the particularities of daily life. It relies “very intensely upon where we came from and when we came from and who was behind us, who was cooking the meals and who was taking us places on Friday nights or Saturdays and Sundays” (86). Price insists that “those things that make us most fully human largely occur, and are taught, in the way that table manners are taught.” From mother to child. From father to son or father to daughter” (87). He characterized the southern version of this as “that very complex bittersweet marination in religion that was available right on down through the 50s and 60s to the standard southern child” (Ketchin 86).

Faulkner presented the religious framing of his Yoknapatawpha County, and his fellow Mississippian Eudora Welty did so as well with her communities. “It is in a churchly society that most Southerners are brought up,” she once said, “and it is what they mention in every other word in their conversation. In a small town like Banner, if the Baptists couldn’t be against the Methodists, they’d have nothing to talk about” (Gretlund 395). One of the most revealing Welty scenes in this regard portrays and comically lampoons denominational rivalry. In *Losing Battles*, a storm sweeps through the community, picking up the Methodist Church in one piece, carrying it through the air and setting it back down right next to the Baptist Church. “Thank the Lord nobody was worshipping in either one,” said Aunt Beck. Mrs. Moody noted that “those Methodists had to tear their own church down stick by stick so they could carry it back and put it together again on good side of the road where it belonged,” said Miss Beulah. The final word of the situation was, “A good many Baptists helped ‘em” (238).

Munro’s most sustained examination of religion in her community of Jubilee is in the story “The Age of Faith.” Her religiously skeptical mother nonetheless allows Del Jordan and her brother to be baptized in the United



Church, which is a key Canadian church formed in the 1920s from a merger of four Protestant denominations with the mission of trying to bring institutional religion to the scattered regional populations in places like southwestern Ontario. In Jubilee, the United Church was “the most modern, the largest, and the most prosperous church building.” There were four other churches. The Catholics, of course, were regarded as the most extreme, seeming, Del says, as “bizarre and secretive as Hindus, with their idols and confessions and black spots on Ash Wednesday.” The Baptists were also extreme, “but in a completely unsinister comic way.” Unlike the South, where the Baptists are the largest religious group, in Jubilee “no person of any importance or social standing went to the Baptist Church.” Del thinks the Baptist Church “had more vulgar cheerfulness about it than anybody else’s” (*LGW* 104-05). Compare this with Faulkner’s view of the Southern Baptists as religiously stunted, aspiring to some spiritual meaning but one that “got warped and twisted in the process” (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner 190).

Although Scots-Irish Presbyterian folk theology clearly contributed to Munro’s sense of small town moralisms and fatalistic conformity, the Presbyterians of Jubilee were a small marginal group, as most of that denomination had merged with the United Church. The United Church’s prosperity was seen in “glossy golden oak” pews, a powerful pipe organ, and stained-glass windows that “showed Christ performing useful miracles” (although Del laments they did not show Jesus converting water into wine). Del decides to attend the United Church to shock her mother, but participating in the worship leads her to consider “the question of God.” Actually, Del observed, “the question of whether God existed or not never came up in Church. It was only a matter of what He approved of, or usually of what He did not approve of,” again suggesting religion’s role in reinforcing moralistic conformity.” Del is suddenly taken, though, with interest in the Anglican Church, largely at first because it had “the only church bell in town, and that seemed to me a lovely thing for a church to have.” She attends the Anglican Church service, but sneaks in hoping no one will see her, because it is not a very socially prominent institution in southwestern Ontario. A print of Christ appeals to her because he “looked more regal and more tragic, and the background against which he appeared was gloomier and richer, more pagan somehow, or at least Mediterranean.” She was used to seeing Christ “limp and shepherdly in Sunday-school pastels.” She discovers in the Anglican Church “the theatrical in religion,” just “what all those Methodists and Congregationalists and Presbyterians had fearfully abolished” (*LGW* 105-10).

In trying to find an answer to the question of God, Del puts him to the test. She is somewhat inept in her homemaking class at school, so she prays that she can avoid having to thread the sewing machine needle in class. After much engagement with her teacher, the teacher decides she is hopeless in such matters and takes her off the sewing machine, seeming to prove prayer works. She comes in time to realize the triviality of such instrumentalism, and the lesson is clarified further when her brother wants her to teach him to pray to save his dog. She decides realistically that praying was not going to stop her father from killing the dog who has become a sheep killer in farm country. "I saw with dismay the unavoidable collision coming, of religion and life" (*LGW* 113, 127).

Munro adds more complexity to her spiritual envisioning of southwestern Ontario by hinting at ways awe and reference can be glimpsed in the concrete experiences of her place and people. She notes that even her religiously skeptical mother is not "prepared to say *Nothing* and see herself and every stick and stone and feather in the world floating loose on that howling hopeless dark" (111). And yet the glimpses of worlds of dread could nurture an appreciation of the mysteries of the world around her characters. Del's wisdom at the end of "The Age of Faith" puts this sentiment in formally religious questions:

Could there be God not contained in the churches' net at all, not made manageable by any spells and crosses, God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith? (*LGW* 128)

Munro presents hints of the numinous less with explicit language about God than in images, scenes, and characters that suggest what has been called a southwestern Ontario gothic.<sup>4</sup> The Flats Road is the poor outskirts of Jubilee where Del's family lives during part of her youth. Uncle Benny is a neighbor who embodies a mysterious world where unnatural things can happen. Dishes smash themselves on the floor at night. A stew flies off the stove by itself. There are rappings on the wall. "Resting alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection," Del says.

[T]he same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand and be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic

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<sup>4</sup> Coral Ann Howells, in *Alice Munro: Contemporary World Writers* (1998; 2), uses the term Ontario gothic.

and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen, defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. (*LGW* 12, 30)

Munro presents here a mysterious spiritual world that is a separate place from the prosperous religiosity of the United Church or the drama of the Anglican Church and certainly a separate spiritual realm from the narrow moralistic conformity of her small town churchly society.

In Munro's portrayal of death, we see her bringing together her concern for the ordinary and the otherworldly. In "Princess Ida," she tells of her mother's affection for her teacher, Miss Rush, who has many appealing qualities and bright future. "What had happened to Miss Rush, then, with her beauty and her embroidery and her piano playing? She had married, rather late, and died having a baby. The baby died too and lay in her arms like a wax doll. . . ." Del's summary judgment here is that "stories of the past go like this, round and round and down to death; I expected it." The youthful Del is troubled by the reality of death and refuses to engage in the small town custom of touching the corpse of Uncle Craig. It brings an encounter with that mysterious other world that Del seems to glimpse but does not always embrace. "I wanted death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose, ignored but powerful; waiting to get in anywhere" (*LGW* 88, 53). She bites Mary Agnes Oliphant's hand when she tries to push Del to see the corpse, even – in a good Gothic image – tasting the blood from the bite.

Del's violent reaction is condemned by others at the funeral, but fear of death does not exclude her from the broader community trying to deal with mortality through the rituals of death that provide a shred of human dignity in the face of the abyss. Del has a vision that comes out of this experience of death.

To be made of flesh was humiliation. I was caught in a vision which was, in a way, the very opposite of the mystic's incommunicable vision of order and light; a vision, also incommunicable, of confusion and obscenity – of helplessness, which was revealed as the most obscene thing there could be. (*LGW* 65)

Yet this vision is, again, but a glimpse into a dark spiritual world. Del says that "like the other kind of vision this could not be supported more than a moment or two, it collapsed of its own intensity and could never be reconstructed" (*LGW* 65).

Munro's glimpses of gothic otherworldliness in later works would lead to her fascination with dark houses and the hauntings of dead mothers in their

daughters' lives.<sup>5</sup> This attraction to the gothic and the grotesque connects with southern writers. The decaying body at the center of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and the dark house at the center of *Absalom, Absalom!* are only the most obvious examples of Faulkner's use of gothic tropes in picturing mysterious and dreadful forces at work in his characters' decay in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patricia Yaeger's book *Dirt and Desire* draws attention to how southern women writers have, in particular, used the grotesque to illuminate a dark side of the South. But Yaeger fails to see the gothic and the grotesque as specifically spiritual imaginings of worlds that balance the realism of 20<sup>th</sup> century southern writers, just as we see it embodied in Munro country. According to William Van O'Connor, the grotesque, for modern writers, "is the closest we can come to the sublime" (19).

Munro is not the only Canadian writer whose spiritual geography connects with those of southern writers. Critics have noted the influence of Faulkner on Margaret Laurence, for example, and she has acknowledged his Yoknapatawpha works as a model for her Manawaka fictional world. Other scholars have compared her work to that of such southern writers as Carson McCullers, Peter Taylor, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor.<sup>6</sup>

The comparison with O'Connor summons Laurence's similar use of religion in her writing within a regional framework. Laurence calls Manawaka a prairie town; regionally, it *is* a western place. Its small town life resonates, though, with the American South, including the presence of evangelical Protestantism.

In Laurence's *A Jest of God*, religion is a part of everyday life, as with Munro, as prayers, hymns, and Bible passages are commonplace. In arguably the most memorable religious scene in Laurence's fiction, Rachel Cameron, the novel's main character, goes with a friend to a Pentecostal worship service at the "Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn." The emotion of the service is a terror to her, as she observes worshippers speaking in tongues, but she is led to understand, through the experience, the difficulties of all human communication. The novel shows Cameron in a lonely quest for meaning, faith, reassurance, and God in a moralistic, fatalistic, and hypocritical community. As Clara Thomas notes, Rachel sees herself and her life as "grotesques." In

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<sup>5</sup> Susanne Becker's *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (1999) explores the gothic mother-daughter relationship for both Canadian and southern writers.

<sup>6</sup> For references to Laurence's connection to southern writers, see Greta M.K. McCormick Coger, *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism* (1996; xx, xxiv).

her mind, “all the life that she can see is distorted, chaotic, terrifying, an enormity of injustice.” Still, as Thomas observes in evoking the importance of epiphany for Laurence, ultimately “there *is* a flash of life in her darkness,” which leads her to embrace her own strength as a source of meaning (Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* 89-90). Epiphany suggests again Flannery O’Connor who used it so often. O’Connor leads back, in closing, to the importance of regional contexts for Canadian and southern writers, noting that “the writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location” (O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 59). Munro has found that location in southwestern Ontario and Laurence in western Canadian prairie country, paralleling in both cases the religious landscape of the American South.

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DANIÈLE PITAVY-SOUQUES

## “A Wordless Unease”

*Some Aspects  
of the Relationship between Art and Politics  
in the Works of Southern and Canadian Writers*

*The power that I felt was not in the thing itself, but in  
some tremendous force behind it, that the carver had  
believed in.*

(Emily Carr, “D’Sonoqua,” *Klee Wyck* 36)

### I

Beyond the intimation of echoes and the possibility of influence, the reader of texts written by Southern and Canadian writers experiences a kinship between them that belongs to the spirit and to a certain vision of art. This kinship, I will argue, rests on a comparable attitude toward fiction writing, born of similar specific experiences. Through the way they relate to history, to the land and its landscapes, and to the different peoples that live there, Canadian and Southern writers share a dramatic multi-faceted experience that has led them to consider that the true nature of fiction writing, and consequently the role of the writer, is to destabilize the reader by opening the width and depth of the world. Theirs is a visionary experience that feeds a desire to explore, through fiction, the new territories opened up by the strange relationship the human mind entertains with the world around them. Theirs is a technique of disruption and disorder that questions the given, the visible, and they write highly political fictions that aim at undermining the establishment and at exposing hypocrisy, exploitation, and organized cruelty toward the poor and despised. Their works claim a concern for the different, the Other.

Comparable backgrounds have provided the political, geographical and “atmospheric” roots of this kinship, those shared elements and situations that have shaped mentalities, policies, and creativity. First, due to a long history of, respectively, slavery and colonization, the South and Canada are on the defensive: they feel threatened in their identities by the Establishment and share a similar double attitude of fear and arrogance that fosters dissent and



inventiveness. Then, both countries are subjected to the extreme violence of nature: climatic violence with harsh dark winters in the North and wild hurricanes in the South, the geographical challenges of the landscape, the ever threatening presence of the wilderness. Finally, because of centuries of hardship, oppression, and silence, among those writers sprang the first dissenting voices of previously silent minorities in North America (women, Native Americans, and African-Americans); relentlessly they examine the past and the present and write highly political fictions that denounce evils and offer the possibility to “rehumanize” the world. In other words, they belong to Dark Arcadia, pitting freedom and transgression against obedience and decorum, as we shall see.

Drawing on examples from Canadian and southern (short) fiction, I will argue that despite the use of different techniques that leads to all kinds of oblique strategies, the writers’ subversive attitudes are in resonance with one another and create specific echoes that are unique in North American literature. The first part of this essay will examine some aspects of this intriguing kinship from the perspective of the relationship between the land (the geographic specificity of Canada and the South) and place (metaphorically a space where people meet, learn and love, where things happen and where revelation comes). Of special interest will be the way the treatment of land and place reflects a preoccupation with the self and its avatars, an extreme susceptibility to otherness, to the strangeness of life. “Life *is* strange. Stories hardly make it more so,” Eudora Welty writes (“Place” 128). The second part of this essay will compare two 19<sup>th</sup> century stories as they exemplify the ambiguities of the relationship between the two literatures.

The notion of two Arcadias as proposed by Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* will be used as a critical tool since it seems appropriate to grasp the complexities of both literatures. “There have always been two kinds of Arcadia,” he writes, “shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic” (517). Both forms of Arcadia coexist and are mutually necessary. Dark Arcadia means chaos, and also creativity and sexuality, whereas Light Arcadia means order and control, and also destruction through absurd rationality. Although acknowledged by other writers in other parts of the United States and other Western cultures, this coexistence takes a specific resonance in the South and in Canada. This comes from those aspects of the land that attract the artists. As a natural landscape, the wilderness represents both a permanent threat to human lives and a challenge to the imagination with the treacherous waters of black bayous (Kate

Chopin), the inexorable entanglement of vegetation (Welty, Atwood), primeval forests (Faulkner, Isabella Valancy Crawford, Emily Carr), and ominous geological/paleontological vestiges (Robert Kroetsch). As a mental landscape, the wilderness for those writers is associated with the dark Other – African Americans in the South, Native Americans in the North and the South, and that instinctive part of the self, bent on destruction. The wilderness, which is often endowed with some supernatural force, is seen, felt, and feared. In Canada, painters provided a powerful counterpoint to the writers’ vision. The Group of Seven became famous in the late twenties and early thirties for their representations of the Canadian wilderness. Emily Carr defined British Columbia, that ultimate Canadian Province, by stressing the rever-sibility of land and ocean, painting the womb-like rain forest like the Pacific and the totem poles scattered along the shore like the ghostly soul of surviving islanders. For indeed, the wilderness is the place of creativity and of sudden illumination. One aspect of the kinship between Canada and the American South lies in the way writers from both landscapes emphasize and dramatize the borderland between the two Arcadias, that moment of moral, artistic and metaphysical revelation, which is at the core of their works. This is the moment of intense creative investigation when, with a strong feeling of guilt, the artist feels an impulse to dig to the roots of the subconscious to bring to light what it is forbidden to see (Milner 235), when only through the experience of evil and darkness light is allowed to explode, an ontological moment closely linked to the revelation of the Other. “All history is a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness,” says Simon Schama (“Clio at the Multiplex” 40), a sentiment that also influences Wiebe’s *Discovery of Strangers*, which carries as an epigraph two lines by Rainer Maria Rilke, “Strangely I heard a stranger say,/ I am with you.” Novelists have long practiced such negotiations between strangeness and familiarity in their representation of life as mediated by their personal vision of the world and this long before Freud gave it a name: *Das Unheimliche*.

## II

A physical and symbolic conjunction between time and place provides a stimulating dialogue across Canada and the South, since avant-garde writers use it to address the question of representation. My two examples here are stories written, one generation apart, by Eudora Welty and Margaret Atwood. Through their innovative approach, which is a splendid metaphor for the

fruitfulness of Dark Arcadia; they fictionalize the necessity of death and guilt for the creation of life-giving art.

Eudora Welty uses the Natchez Trace, a real place of tangled and overabundant vegetation that still exists in parts, as a symbol of the rough making of the American South. As a place of evil and greed, it is outside the law but also resonant with the sinister echoes of slavery, that excess of law and order. In “A Still Moment” (1942), one of her best stories, the Trace becomes a place of ontological revelation. Here, Welty sharpens her reflection on the Other and the visible when it is affected by the presence of an absence, and on the necessary rite of deconstruction in representation (deconstruction to be understood both literally and critically with Derrida). She presents a remarkable construction of the artist and the creative act through three historical characters and stages the action somewhere along the Natchez Trace, the highly emblematic place for American creativity in her fiction, sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the center, there is a triple figure of the artist: Audubon, the bona fide artist, a painter and a naturalist, and two other figures that represent the darker sides of the artist, Lorenzo, the preacher, intent on saving souls, and Murrell, the bandit, intent on ruling the world. All three men are consumed by a passion to possess their objects to the point of removing lives or souls (we are in Dark Arcadia). This is what Audubon does when he kills the beautiful white heron in order to paint it. His meditation on representation asserts deconstruction as an aesthetic necessity: “He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts” (“A Still Moment” 239). Faced with this “murder” inextricably bound to creation, Lorenzo, the philosopher – the thinking side of the artist – words the very questions that post-modernists will raise later:

He could understand God's giving Separateness first and then giving Love to follow and heal in its wonder; but God had reversed this, and given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first. Perhaps it was that God never counted the moments of Time; Lorenzo did that, among his tasks of love. Time did not occur to God. (“A Still Moment” 239)

“Separateness” in this context signifies the attempt to reject the principle of causality, the effort to run away from the oppressive world of narrative causality. Audubon’s gesture is a liberating gesture. So, if time no longer prevails, the logical organization of the narrative sequence no longer matters. And indeed the text is about “a still moment.” Moreover, inasmuch as the necessary similitudes or dissimilitudes disappear, representation can move

farther away from the original. It becomes, in effect, a reflection on the distorting power of absence over presence. Margaret Atwood’s “Death by Landscape,” collected in *Wilderness Tips* (1991), provides a counter-point to “A Still Moment.” Atwood’s summer holidays with her parents gave her first-hand knowledge of the wilderness up north, and her text is a brilliant reflection on the essence of the wilderness. The story is built on a first movement from the outside to the inside, from Light Arcadia to Dark Arcadia, and this overall structure, which the story shares with the paintings of the Group of Seven, encapsulates story’s meaning. In fact, Atwood leads her readers from a camp devised to initiate middle-class girls into that founding component of Canadian identity: the experience of the wilderness. In this respect, Atwood is not so far from Faulkner’s attitude towards the South in *Go Down, Moses*. The initiation rests on stereotypes – camping and a canoe trip, playing Indians, the original inhabitants of the wilderness – and on superimposed, fake signs such as rough face-painting, imitation vestments, and rituals. Likewise, the different episodes of the first day and night are what one would expect to experience in a well-organized Canadian summer camp. The real challenges begin when Lois and Lucy, the two friends, leave the group to climb up to Lookout Point, “a sheer drop to the lake and a long view over the lake” (121), and step through the looking-glass to be confronted with their own demons: the fear of heights and of getting lost for Lois, the lure of suicide for Lucy. They have left Light Arcadia to enter Dark Arcadia. The proliferation of signs in the camp is replaced by a traumatic absence of signs when Lucy disappears never to be found again (like Chopin’s *Désirée*). Now alone, Lucy is overcome by an intense experience of the wilderness where “you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path” (128). Being lost in and by a presence that swallows up, kills, and absorbs like a Leviathan, is an image often found in Canadian poetry, as Northrop Frye notes (36-37). Lois realizes how playing Indian in order to appropriate the Native Americans’ relation to nature through mere signs is wrong and false; she is now confronted with the wilderness as the other side of the self. Only by losing herself in herself can she open up to the destabilizing effects of the wilderness that will lead to an endless questioning of its essence. The text ends with a long meditation of Lois on the paintings of the Group of Seven that she has never stopped acquiring after the disappearance of her friend. The meditation caps a reverse movement from the inside to the outside, in resonance with “A Still Moment.” As with Welty, death must be sublimated to reach the

superior awareness of life that art provides. Aesthetic necessity forced Audubon to kill the bird in order to recompose the picture that would give the illusion of life.

Atwood's story evokes the powerful life-giving quality of Dark Arcadia, since it is only due to her sense of guilt over the death of her friend in the wilderness that Lois can experience the living presence of Lucy in the paintings. Yet, as in Welty's story, this unseen presence, like Lucy's voice which "she is always listening for" (128), is but an echo, not the thing itself, a reflection on the distorting power of absence over presence. Atwood suggests what her post-modern writing techniques abundantly exemplify, namely that in art the linear conception of time no longer exists since death is abolished. Lois's further discovery is that realism as it is evidenced in English-inspired early Canadian paintings is abolished in the landscapes of the Group of Seven. Because nineteenth-century Canadian painters imitated European models and tracked similitude rather than specificity, they produced still landscapes that reflected a colonial reality. Conversely, the Group of Seven was intensely receptive to the specificity of Canadian landscapes, especially to the wilderness. In their paintings, as described by Atwood, the classical division of space into foreground, middle ground, and background no longer exists: rational control that would reassure the viewer is eliminated. Instead, the painters privilege immediate confrontation and represent mental landscapes that invite the viewer to step into the picture for a labyrinthine exploration of something that always eludes grasping, naming, or understanding – an endless movement of the mind. "She wanted something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time what it was. It was not peace: she does not find them peaceful in the least. Looking at them fills her with a wordless unease" ("Death by Landscape" 110). In those pictures, something is alive and becomes all the more frightening as it eludes definition, despite seeming close to something once known and familiar. The powerful attraction of the landscapes of the Group of Seven, Atwood suggests, comes from the uncanny, which Freud defines as "that class of the terrifying that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (123-24). Because of it, the paintings draw every modern viewer into a personal ontological reflection on art, reality and the real, the sayable and the unsayable, and even more, as Lois's story shows, into a challenging and disturbing introspection. Thus, Atwood masterfully fictionalizes the problematics of the abstract quality of those paintings, which, despite an apparently figurative representation of the mood and identity of Canada, have long startled and haunted their viewers by creating the pure vibration of color (reds and blacks) that is the

very soul of Canada. Isabella V. Crawford was the first to celebrate them and to emphasize how they capture the new moods of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art:

And these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense, with a gentle hill, a curving river, a cottage, a mountain in the background, a golden evening sky. Instead there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock. No matter how far back in you go, there will be more. And the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour.

. . . She looks at the paintings, she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy. You can't see her exactly, but she's there, in behind the pink stone island or the one behind that. . . .

Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She's in Lois's apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors, she is here. She is entirely alive. (128-29)

Another aspect of the dialogue between Canadian and Southern writers concerns the way they indirectly address political issues. On closer inspection, the two Arcadias are not so far apart. Each has a positive and a negative aspect. Used as a critical tool to read literature, they function like two mirrors placed *vis-à-vis*, reflecting in reverse each other's pictures endlessly repeated and multiplied with differences that come to nought in the end. Signs are what matters here and even more the slightly delayed perception. I will insist on the delay, on that suspended moment of change. As confusion arises (psychological, moral, political, and ontological), uncertainty becomes a questioning of the self through the revelation of the Other. The writers aim at destabilizing the reader through the delayed realization of the real issues of the text, at upsetting certainties and the prejudiced common viewing of their works. In this perspective, daring strategies often too quickly dismissed or misunderstood need be reconsidered to grasp the issues at stake.

### III

A concern with the moral nature and the nature of humanity in relation to identity is poignantly dramatized in two much anthologized stories, written

at about the same time by two women writers born the same year. One is a French-Irish Southerner, Kate Chopin (1850-1904), whose work was brought to the forefront of feminist studies in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s; the other is an Anglo-Irish Canadian, Isabella Valancy Crawford (1850-1887), whose bold poetic imagination Northrop Frye heralded as being at the root of a distinctive Canadian poetry. "Extradited" appeared on September 4, 1886 in the *Globe*, and five months later Crawford died of a heart attack. "Désirée's Baby" was first published on January 14, 1893 in *Vogue*.

Both writers wrote from first-hand knowledge of their themes and backgrounds and addressed the burning social and political issues of a specific time and place in the history of their countries. Yet, because they differed, not in terms of the education they both received (which was considerable for women of their time), but in their poetic and social sensibilities, they emphasized those problems differently. Chopin came from an established, well-off family, whereas Crawford was the daughter of cultivated, unsuccessful Irish immigrants. Brought up with the liberating equalitarian idealism of nineteenth-century Europe, Chopin was a militant feminist whose fiction became a plea for the abolition of every form of enslavement: race, sexism, and tradition. "Désirée's Baby" denounces slavery, the victimization of women, and the opprobrium attached to miscegenation under the cover of an antebellum story. Chopin's readers were not blind to her true subject: the racial violence and injustice that tore the South in the wake of Reconstruction. More radically, Chopin invites her readers to reconsider what defines the identity of a mixed blood person in the light of what was practiced in more tolerant countries like France. The highly melodramatic structure of the story, in which everyone ends up being a victim, manifests her anger. In contrast, Crawford was, and essentially always remained, a *poet* responding to the dramatic beauty and idealism of a new country opened to immigrants. "Extradited" addresses the issue of Canada's ambivalent image in her century, a place of refuge and a place to plunder, a society whose dominant religion distorts Christian ideals and severely controls women. Crawford dramatically celebrates the romantic theme of strong male friendship facing the dangers of pioneering new territories and exposes at the same time the spiteful role forced on women as wives and mothers. Her story presents an ironic inversion of the domestic idyll in which the American Joe, a farmhand, appears to threaten the marriage of Bessie and Asam, a threat deflected by the jealous wife who has Joe arrested for a long-forgotten misdeed in the U.S. Widely perceived as The Promised Land, Canada welcomes and shelters all kinds of

newcomers and provides “regeneration,” as Crèvecoeur said of the American Dream (62-63). In another, less charitable version of the same image, Canada is seen as a land of plenty whose natural riches are violently exploited. Crawford denounces certain forms of hypocrisy attached to Presbyterian immigration in the West making a virtue of money-grabbing and of enforcing strict rules that victimized women. At first reading, Crawford’s Bessie appears as a monster and Chopin’s Désirée, a pure victim, yet echoes in plots and devices, the use of clichés and symbolic vocabulary, and the treatment of landscape, all betray a comparable challenging construction of the duality of Arcadia.

The writers’ most effective technique to undermine the apparently happy picture of life on the Canadian frontier and in plantations in the South rests on their manipulating the common narrative device of the letter so as to make it portentous. Whether it is overly present (as in Chopin) or only indirectly referred to as in Crawford, the letter becomes the sign of an excess of law and regulation that brings chaos where a successful social organization seemed to prevail. Light Arcadia has turned repressive and murderous. It encapsulates the political strategies of the writers, such as tracing moral iniquities to the lure of money (slavery, rewards to turn in lawbreakers), exposing the mutilating effects of prejudice and limited education in conformist societies, or promoting love and generosity to foster new behavior. Crawford castigates moral abasement in a society of Pharisees, which condones, even encourages, “delation” with money, a society where making money means virtue and wipes out the New World notion of giving a new chance in life. With Bessie, Crawford indicts the education of girls in Presbyterian Canada; some eighty years later, similarly devastating effects will be presented in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* (1964), a landmark in Canadian women’s literature.

She held a quiet contempt for her husband, the unlearned man who had won the pretty schoolmistress; and, *hedged in by the prim fence of routine knowledge and imperfect education*, she despised the large crude movements of the untrained intellect, and the primitive power of the strong and lofty soul. (Crawford 39; my emphasis)

Crawford’s Bessie is a victim of her narrow repressive education: she is like a hooded hawk trained to swoop down on its prey and get a reward for it (original meaning of the word). By contrast, Sam, her husband, is presented as the good Canadian frontiersman: a generous hard-working immigrant, whose Irish virtues are forgiveness and a genuine desire to acknowledge the other’s work toward regeneration.



On the other hand, the contents of the letters are part of Chopin's strategy in "Désirée's Baby." With three letters, she draws an anatomy of love – filial, conjugal and motherly – and dramatizes, with the agony of miscegenation, true motherly love as self-sacrifice carried to the point of accepting social disgrace, even obliteration. Madame Valmondé claims her adopted daughter, Désirée, and her black grandchild without any reservation. As she is dying, Armand's mother thanks her husband for his love and gratefully accepts obliteration for her child's sake, for she "belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (194). In Chopin's text, there looms the implicit legalistic background regulating degrees of color according to parents and ancestors, forbidding interracial marriages even with "free people of color," and in a more sinister twist, the right of a plantation master to add to his human chattel his own children born of a colored woman.

The duality of Arcadia structures the two stories with a similar dramatic pattern. At first, ordered and well controlled Light Arcadia seems to prevail: a large pioneer clearing in Western Canada, and a successful cotton plantation in the South. Then, a family incident reveals the sinister aspect of this Arcadia, where legalism smothers love and imagination, where Bessie and Armand believe they can appropriate the law, where economy rests on destructive profit with the over-exploitation of man in the South, of forests in Canada. As the text exposes the evil effects of this excess, a new in-between mental space appears, fraught with long repressed feelings and murderous impulse: the *Unheimliche* ushers in Dark Arcadia that brings tragic triumph over death.

Chopin's strategy pits the cruel reality of life in Southern plantations at the time of slavery against the illusion of a benevolent Old South created as self-justification by the defeated South. Armand is a cruel master enforcing strict rule toward his slaves (objects of punishment and sexual pleasure); his passion for Désirée lacks real love, and his violence seems to betray unexpressed darker fears. When the mixed blood of the baby becomes manifest, the *Unheimliche* takes over. In that in-between space that marks the passage between the two Arcadias, something that "arouses dread and creeping horror" (Freud 122), grips everybody: miscegenation and its origin. Armand is unable, or unwilling, to question his own identity, and so Désirée must be black since their child is black. The dramatic dialogue between husband and wife convinces the reader of Désirée's racial identity and reveals the complexity of miscegenation (some could "pass" for white). Above all, as it hints at Armand's true identity, it suggests that long repressed fears and creeping

horror are resurfacing and dictate his determination to get rid of that black offspring and its mother.

With her baby in her arms, Désirée’s walking to her death into darkness and the black waters of the bayou is a masterpiece of controlled pathos. In her light use of clichés and local color, Chopin puts into perspective the fallacies of romantic imagery about plantation life. A very short paragraph functions as a warning: the lovely peaceful landscape at sunset is a lure, as idealized as the Currier and Ives lithographs it brings to mind. Yet ominous echoes are present. Consider the economic prosperity of cotton plantations based on slavery; unjustly treated literary heroines, the cruelty of the actual Louisiana landscape with very real, dark water monsters like man-eating crocodiles and deadly mocassins:

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

. . . Her hair was uncovered and the sun’s rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again. (Chopin 194)

Conversely, Crawford’s celebration of the wild power of Canadian nature in spring gives an epic dimension to the death of the hero. The poet chooses the rise of the river at the time of the spring thaws for its dramatic possibilities and economic implications, because this is when Canadian loggers send whole tree trunks downstream to be carried by the power of the current. As the detective is putting manacles on Joe, Sam’s toddler falls into the river. Only Joe can swim and therefore dares to save the child:

It was a terrible fight between the man and the river – and the man subdued it unto him. He turned back to shore, the child in his teeth, both arms – one with the shining handcuff on it – beating the hostile current with fine, steady strokes.

Another moment and he would be safe on shore, a captive and ashamed. . . . [H]e half rose to step on the bank. Then there rose a bewildering cry from Sam and the men watching him: he turned and saw his danger.

With one sublime effort he flung the child on the bank, and then with the force of a battering ram the first of Piner’s logs crashed upon him. It reared against him like a living thing instinct with rage, and wallowing monster-like led its barkly hordes down the rushing stream, rolling triumphantly over a bruised and shattered pigmy of creation, a man. (46)

I am suggesting here that we read the two stories from an economic perspective because it reveals their modernity as they trace the root of the dehumanization of the world to a perversion of economy. But consider also the even more complex relation Crawford and Chopin fictionalize between money, heroism, and redemption, which adds an unexpected facet to the dialogue between Canadian and Southern literatures. This feature is due in part to their authors' awareness of women historically having been themselves objects of transactions. It reflects their vision of transcendence as artistic necessity, something shared by great artists in the South and Canada, irrespective of gender. Only the villains, Armand and Bessie, are not redeemed, as Crawford stresses by her the ironical play on aborted transaction. Betty feels frustrated and cheated of her reward: "'It don't seem that there's any reward for doing one's duty; oh, it's a downright shame.' . . . [S]he always had the private luxury of regarding herself as an unrewarded and unrecognized heroine of duty" (46-47). Likewise, Armand feels cheated by God: "He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul" (193).

With a textual restraint that suggests far more than the two writers say, they create emotion as they write of the ambiguity surrounding the relation between humans and nature. On the one hand, man exploits nature; on the other hand, nature can be deadly. Crawford, the poet, is at her best when she describes the two aspects of the relation Canadian pioneers entertain with the hardships nature inflicts upon them. Compare the two paragraphs quoted above: although nature is dangerous, it challenges man's courage and virtue, and in this respect corresponds to the myth of Canada as *The Promised Land*. Because Joe felt bound in his newly found honor to discard his own interest and perform a physical and moral feat to save the child of the man who has befriended him and given him a chance to be regenerated, his fight with the Canadian river in spring is celebrated with terse heroic and biblical undertones – the courage required of pioneers to survive in wild Canadian nature. But when cupidity and uncontrolled exploitation of nature's riches prevail, when the beautiful forests are depleted and the lovely rivers savagely invaded and put to monetary use, then terrible monsters waken. Crawford's angry rejection of obsessive greed and of the degrading system of rewards that has been at work throughout the text, culminates here with her use of epic imagery. Canadian nature becomes the scene of brutal primitive violence, and the horrendous age-old world's history of invasion, spoliation, and destruc-

tion, evoked with remarkable poetic economy, sends the reader’s imagination recoiling with horror. A further parallel between Crawford and Chopin concerns the paradoxical representation of heroism in their texts because it raises the question of redemption interestingly linked with the Other, the finer side of the self. Joe dies a hero, as Canadian nature offers redemption at the cost of life. The American thief, who had sought regeneration in the Canadian wilderness through clearing and cultivating a patch of land, risks his own life to save another one and dies a Canadian death when crushed by the drive of logs. In the unreserved admiration felt by Sam and the police, there enters something that accepts Joe’s newly won Canadian identity.

On the contrary, Kate Chopin, the feminist who knew the horror of slavery, sides with women and black people. Confronted with racism and slavery, both young mothers in Crawford and Chopin choose heroic deaths that reciprocally illuminate each other. The self-sacrificing death of Armand’s black mother choosing obliteration from her son’s affection in order to save her child from the opprobrium attached to the black race tragically redeems Désirée’s gesture and reveals its true dimension as heroic love for her black baby. Here, as in most of her stories, Chopin denounces the great scandal of the South: sexism, racism and slavery. She denounces the age-old prejudice against women (“a preconceived judgment passed in advance”) transmitted in Western culture through such myths as the Greek myth of Pandora or the Judeo-Christian myth of Eve, in which Woman is the cause of evil and is essentially guilty. And indeed, Armand immediately assumes Désirée is the guilty one. This is why he refuses to look at her, speak to her, or say goodbye: the victims of racism have no existence, as the text suggests of Armand’s mother. Moreover, “Désirée’s Baby,” like “Extradited,” plays on the word “shame” and the reversal of its meaning, from a personal painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt to the general opprobrium of others. In other words, innocent Désirée feels shame; though guiltless, she is overcome by disgrace, and cannot go home, for the victims of racism have no home. “I am like a motherless child,” the song says. In the agony of her despair, Désirée is lucid enough to envision the fate that awaits her black child after the death of her aged parents, and heroically, she sacrifices her own life and comfort to save her son from slavery. We do not know if Kate Chopin knew of the real event dramatized by Toni Morrison; at any rate, her story prefigures *Be-loved* and Morrison’s recent tragic novel, *A Mercy*. Therein, with the promise of education and a better life, a free Black mother gives her young daughter to a generous white planter, and pines for her lost child all her life, tragically unaware that the adolescent was sold as a slave by the heartless widow.

In spite of their apparent opposition, the endings of Crawford's and Chopin's texts show undeniable similarities. Just as Joe dies a Canadian death, victimized by the new forces of money that send the uncontrollable monstrous logs down the river, he is nevertheless regenerated by the selfless sacrifice of his life and by the generous love and respect the male community offers him. Joe is no longer a runaway thief but becomes a hero, even if he pays the ultimate price for this. With Chopin, Désirée dies an American slave mother's death. She is victimized by the iniquitous laws of slavery, of racism, and of sexism in the South. Although she is not a slave herself, she chooses the fate of her black child doomed by and to slavery. Her selfless sacrifice, at the price of a horrible death, is redeemed by the selfless love of a black mother.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century narrative code of dramatic reversal at the end brings here unusual depth and shatters the reader into a new humanizing awareness. Both texts spring from the deadly chaos of Dark Arcadia –treacherous and cruel, yet also life-giving and creative – that associates death, heroism, and redemption with nature. What Frye writes of Canadian poets is also true of Southern writers: “Death is the one point at which man and nature really become identified; it is also, in a sense, the only event in which the genuinely heroic aspect of human life emerges” (33).

I will conclude with Roland Barthes, who taught so many readers how to read a text, by quoting from the review he wrote about Kristeva's *Semiotike* in 1970 for *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, under the title *L'Etrangère*, (both the Stranger and the Foreigner). There he captures what he saw as the unsettling impact of Kristeva's work. The greatness and true originality of the best writers from the South and Canada, I submit, come from a similar mental attitude, in which displacement becomes a form of power:

Kristeva changes the order/place of things, she always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought could comfort us, the one we could be proud of. She subverts authority, the authority of monologic science and filiation. What she displaces is the already-said.

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IAN MACRAE

## An Open Field of Possibility

*Reading Jack Hodgins' The Invention of the World*

*in Dialogue with the American South*

*There is a lot of west in my poems. A lot. The rain forest, the sound of the people's heads, and the kind of interior music there is here on the coast.*

(bill bissett qtd. in Ricou 106)

*The task of the narrator is not an easy one, he said. He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one.* (Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* 155)

### AN AMERICAN, HEMISPHERICAL FRAME

Literary and cultural traditions have never been self-contained or exclusively local, of course; early in the twenty-first century, that affinities exist between writers that transcend national languages and literatures is hardly a case that needs be made. My essay's twinned epigraphs toggle us between the local and the global, between regional music and wider narrative fields, and between poetry and prose, suggesting any number of questions. How has "the one" story, that of Euro-American foundings, or "foundational fictions" in the Americas, a colonial master narrative, been made into "many," that is, been narrated in different cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts? And what does it mean to read these stories comparatively, across national lines, by taking up a series of specific and discrepant texts across conventional boundaries of language, culture, and political jurisdiction? Is this, as Edward Said (1993) argues, a way of challenging provincialism, insularity, and "reductive nationalism," and of teasing out literary relations as they actually exist "on the ground"?

More specifically, and with respect to this volume's shared program, what are the relations of Canadian literature with literary cultures in the American South? Is there such a thing as an "inter-American" literature – a network of critical and creative cultures marked by similarity with critical difference? If so, what would such a thing look like, what can it tell us, and by which methods can it be made visible, and hence available to criticism? Can we ground this almost impossibly broad literary-critical category in particular regional



historicities, as in specific literary texts – that is, in both a politics and a poetics of the American (hemispherical) novel? How, in short, can bissett’s “rainforest,” which is also part of Jack Hodgins’ “interior music,” be brought into meaningful dialogue with writers and texts from an “American South” that, in this analysis at least, includes works from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and the United States?

This essay takes up Jack Hodgins’ early novel, *The Invention of the World* (1977), in pursuing these questions. A work in comparative literary history, it situates Hodgins’ work with respect to two locations of culture: the story of European-American “origins,” and how this theme has variously been constructed and dissembled in four canonical 20<sup>th</sup>-century American texts, by Euclides da Cunha, William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and Hodgins; and secondly, with regard to the question of literary inheritance, dialogue, or influence in the Americas, how these writers structure and strategize a sense of textual history in their works. This essay seeks to situate an accomplished Canadian text in a broader inter-American arena, and to bring *The Invention of the World* into dialogic relation with a series of inter-American “foundational fictions”: *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)*, (1902), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)*, (1967).

As the reader will by now be aware, this essay uses the adjective “American” in what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls “its genuine, hemispheric sense” (2) – to extend not from sea to shining sea, but rather from pole to pole, and to speak of a paradoxical continuity in the fields of history, politics, and culture. This discourse of inter-American literary studies is both relatively new and increasingly well-established (see, for example Benítez-Rojo [1992], Chevigny and Laguardia [1986], Cowan and Humphries [1997], Fitz [1991], Moya and Saldívar [2003], Parkinson Zamora [1997], and Pérez Firmat [1990]). It is in this context that Earl E. Fitz articulates “a community of literary cultures related to each other by virtue of their origins, their sundry interrelationships, and their socio-political, artistic, and intellectual evolutions. Their very real differences notwithstanding, the nations of the New World share enough of a common history that they can legitimately be studied as a unit, as different manifestations of the Americanism or New Worldism that each represents” (xi).

In this essay, I take up a specific series of texts, from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions that provide representative stagings of my central concerns. I think we can read *Rebellion in the Backlands*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *The Invention of the World* as “foundational fictions”: synoptic creation stories of colonial and Creole cultures in

the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Djelal Kadir identifies this “quest for beginnings” as constitutive, “in a highly suggestive way,” of American discourse, its “paradoxical supreme fiction” (3). This is more or less the one, or the “same” story, the same larger structure and narrative mode – with critical differences, of course – which Euclides da Cunha tells, with Antônio Conselheiro, in *Rebellion in the Backlands*, which Faulkner tells, with Thomas Sutpen, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and which García Márquez retells, with the Buendías in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and which Hodgins retells (reinscribes, recontextualizes) with Donal Brendan Keneally (and then Maggie Kyle) in *The Invention of the World*.<sup>2</sup>

There is a conversation going on between these texts, manifesting itself in strong elements of internal allusion and complex echoing effects among scenes and speech types. This repetition with difference is far from mimetic; the dialogue is “real” in that each casts the others in new light. The same tightly-knit thematic complex is present – origins, genealogy, a tortured sense of the past, the entanglements of kinship. Each text tells of a charismatic founder seeking to start over again in what is only an apparently new world; of a people who seem innocent of history, which then appears overwhelming, and apparently “cursed”; of an anguished and insular founding community, in which the establishment of legitimate family, history, and community is perpetually threatened; and of a downstream redactor, archivist, or scribe compiling and annotating texts, editing and exhausting an archive of oral and written histories in search of interpretation (Quentin Compson, Melquíades, Strabo Becker, da Cunha himself).<sup>3</sup>

These are regional texts in an American tradition identified by Carlos J. Alonso (1990) in that they are set against the background of a specific geographic region, arise from a “persistent meditation on cultural autochthony,” treat the crisis of identity of Europeans in America, and purport “to represent synecdochically the entire culture of which they are merely a fragment” (Alonso 4). These writers combine intensely local elements with large-scale

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<sup>1</sup> This appellation picks up on Doris Sommer’s work (1991) *Foundational Fictions*, but takes up where her texts leave off: these are 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels, not 19<sup>th</sup>-century romances. Other texts could be added to this list, of course, by Toni Morrison, Patrick Chamoiseau, João Guimarães Rosa, for example.

<sup>2</sup> For reasons of readerly access and familiarity, I will use English titles and translations in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of the archive and the amanuensis in American literature derives from Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive* (1990), and will be discussed in more detail below.

Western myths and themes, and thereby transform their own “local backyard(s) into an image of the whole created universe” – as W. J. Keith once said of Jack Hodgins’ work (31).

#### THE ECSTASY OF INFLUENCE

This essay reads Hodgins’ novel with and against the critical and creative writings of a number of his important precursors, including those he explicitly acknowledges, including Faulkner and García Márquez, and those he might not (such as da Cunha, Oswald de Andrade, José Lezama Lima, Jorge Luis Borges). I aim with this reading to go beyond the direct, causal, or “genetic” links of literary influence, at least in the vulgar and anxious sense of writers in a struggle for supremacy, as made familiar by Harold Bloom. Partially as a result, this essay will follow what might seem a wandering path, in that after introducing Hodgins’ novel, a number of important figures, essays, and texts in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Brazilian literature will be considered, before a “return,” by means of Faulkner’s and García Márquez’s well known novels, to Hodgins’ *The Invention of the World*. Given that no brief survey can do justice to the complexities of the assembled texts, and that this synoptic argument covers a fair bit of literary and cultural history, this essay will assume the reader’s basic familiarity with the works of Faulkner and García Márquez (in which their own close relation is most directly expressed<sup>4</sup>), and will concentrate on the texts that book-end the series in chronological terms, by Euclides da Cunha and Hodgins.

In Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), the voice of the canonical strong poet holds such an overbearing presence that the present-day writer must resort to “creative misprision” – the necessary misreading of significant pre-texts – in order to forge a new expression. Hodgins’ anxiety is not a Bloomian one of agonistic and competitive influence, this essay suggests, but one of “origins,” in the sense put forward by Lois Parkinson Zamora in *The Usable Past* (1997): as a search for precursors, not their evasion or elision; a creative articulation of meaningful relationships, not a quest for utter originality.

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<sup>4</sup> As Parkinson Zamora has noted: “It is in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Cien años de soledad* that Faulkner and García Márquez are most clearly aligned, for these novels are explorations of the history and myth of America” (“End of Innocence” 24).

Hodgins himself has addressed these subjects directly, particularly in his early years, when in response to critics trying to situate his work – its outlandish characters, and its outrageous inclusivity – he would observe that Vancouver Island is on the same coastline that runs “all the way down to the tip of South America” (*Beginnings* 47) and that this “coastline that goes past Vancouver and past my house goes right down past Fuentes’ Mexico and Vargas Llosa’s Peru and Márquez’s Colombia, and I don’t want to make too much of it but there is that connection which is as tangible as the CPR lines across Canada, as far as literature is concerned” (Hancock 52).

Growing up on Vancouver Island, Hodgins has said, “you’re faced with the choice of being influenced by nothing, and writing in a vacuum . . . or by deciding that all literature in the world is equally yours.” Hodgins recalls attending a lecture given by a British-born poet, who heaped scorn on “these ridiculous South American *things* that Canadian writers are writing”:

I wanted to scream out that if you had grown up in Canada, perhaps you’d realize that Jane Austen is every bit as foreign as García Márquez. And if you had grown up on the West Coast, you’d realize that all literatures were equally foreign. That South American literature is not one bit more foreign to me than British literature or American literature, or, almost, Ontario literature. And that’s not something I’ve had to rationalize, that’s perfectly natural. (Hancock 52)

This decision – to cut himself off from nothing, to see all of literature as “equally foreign” and therefore as equally one’s own – is a familiar tactic in American literary history, as we shall see.

*The Invention of the World* is a large, polyglot, often comic novel, written in multiple modes or narrative styles. The novel is broken into eight sections and a prologue, and follows no linear pattern, but rather hopscotches across time and geography, bringing together two principal narrative and genealogical lines – one male, one female; one going up, the other down; one descending into cataclysm, the other rising into a redemptive new beginning, in a section titled “Second Growth.” The novel’s title foregrounds its preoccupation with European beginnings in America, going so far as to recapitulate the title of Edmundo O’Gorman’s seminal interpretation of American history, *The Invention of America* (1958). It is as if Hodgins is clarifying the nature of the object under scrutiny in advance, so that it may be held up for critical examination: a homage that is also a critique.

In charting the beginnings of an Irish settlement on his imaginary equivalent of Vancouver Island, Hodgins brings much of this “equally foreign” literature conspicuously ashore. He narrates the beginnings of settler-colonial culture in the Americas in an overtly intertextual manner, drawing on

Biblical, classical, and Irish texts, and myths, combining these with oral histories into a heterogeneous, often hyperbolic whole. There are references to Finn MacCool, Cuchulain-Conchubar, *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, and other heroes of Ireland's mythological tradition; to Genesis and Revelation, as to Eden, Moses, and the Promised Land; to Apuleius, Taurus-Europa and Persephone; to Shakespeare, Browning, Milton, and a host of others. The novel inscribes on a range of intertexts, perhaps too many to separate and catalogue, and does so in a hybrid mixing of influences, modes, and styles. Each intertext brings with it its own complex textual history, and is often itself an ancient amalgam of history and legend. Hodgins' radical inclusivity incorporates a range of textualized histories that have contributed to a specific regional culture, while searching for – not evading – significant precursors and relations. The resultant text affords no possibility of any objective presentation of the founding, or origin, of Donal Keneally's utopian community called "Revelations Colony of Truth."

Language itself is a basic problem for settler cultures in the Americas, and in this novel, Hodgins takes on the primary and double-edged problem of writing "in a European language about realities never seen in Europe before" (González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier* 26). On the one hand, a range of writers and critics have framed the European settler-colonial languages as imported, amnesiac, eager to settle, still struggling to find the proper names for things. The historic and on-going violence that marks the European-American founding undermines the settler's sense of self and place, and troubles the question of rights and title to land as to language. For the Cuban critic and novelist José Lezama Lima: "Therein lies the gist of the American's terrible complex: the belief that his expression is not accomplished form, but rather a problem, something to be resolved" (qtd. in Alonso 1). On the other hand, there is "an elation which sees everything as renewed," as the St. Lucian poet, Derek Walcott, characterizes the hemispherical writer's lot: "There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn" (38, 79).

Hodgins' response to these historical conditions, as we have seen, is to address all of literature as if it were "equally foreign" and hence equally one's own. A number of prominent American commentators have come to remarkably similar conclusions. T.S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," reasoned that "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the litera-

ture of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (431). As Borges, in “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” working downstream from Eliot, explains: “I have observed that in our country, precisely because it is a new country, we have a great sense of time. . . . I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition” (183-84). The call in both cases is to hold no truck with an anxiety of influence – a fraught and competitive bid against exalted forebears for remembrance, a struggle “suggesting unjust imprisonment” and pursuit of an “unhappy freedom” (Bloom *xiii*) – but rather to move toward a genuine, “perfectly natural” feeling for “the whole of literature,” even “the universe.”<sup>5</sup> The process is akin to what Jonathan Lethem has more recently called the “ecstasy of influence” (2011), a grand and mongrelized acceptance of widespread currents and borrowings in the fields of identity and culture. As Borges emphasized to his fellow Argentine writers: “I repeat that we must not be afraid; we must believe the universe is our birthright and try out every subject” (185).

In the 1920s in Brazil, Oswald de Andrade and the innovators of Brazilian Modernismo adopted a related, non-coincidentally convergent approach, for what I argue are similar historical and decidedly *American* reasons: not a denial of tradition, nor a sense of stifled belatedness, but a concerted incorporation of prior writers, methods, and modes. Andrade displaced any purported anxiety of influence with celebration, satire, humor and irony, making clear his method and intentions in his seminal essay, “The Anthropophagite Manifesto,” published in 1928: “Only anthro-pophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. . . . The transformation of taboo in totem. Anthropophagy” (96-8).

Influenced by Cubism and Surrealism, and by the European vanguard movements more generally, this is a tongue-in-cheek call for an exhaustive inclusivity: both Amerindian and European, classic and contemporaneous, outlandishly comic and deadly serious at the same time. The anthropophagite

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<sup>5</sup> Eliot’s call to incorporate the literature of one’s own country into a “simultaneous order,” much like Borges’ subscription to “Western culture,” pays little attention to indigenous literatures of the Americas. Similarly, indigenous traditions circulate largely outside the orbit of Hodgins’ invented world. The exception is the section involving Julius Champney, who is watched by an “old Indian woman” as he climbs the hill in town to a totem pole at the top, thinking of old Haida raiding parties, and hearing the voices of executed indigenous people shrilling in his head. In 1853, two indigenous men were hanged near Nanaimo for the killing of Hudson’s Bay Company shepherd Peter Brown.

ethic and aesthetic is summarized in Andrade's aphorism, written in the original in English: "Tupi or not Tupi: that is the question."<sup>6</sup> This witty, pithy, instructive saying celebrates and pokes fun at Shakespeare and the Americas both, drawing upon Brazilian indigenous traditions (the Tupinambá) and the canonically European, to rework a familiar formula into a new formulation that is the same as the old one – only different, that is, Americanized.

The "answer" to the problem of influence in the Americas for Andrade is that all that has gone before must be swallowed whole, digested, recombined into a new body, and into new aesthetic formulas that express a New World culture, identity, and aesthetic: hybrid, mongrel, built of multiple pasts (including Amerindian), unashamed by new experience or by new forms of expression, by rainforests or hybrid complexions. Cannibalism functions here as a metaphor for the desire to incorporate otherness in constituting a new, distinctly American corpus. Hodgins' method in *The Invention of the World* is not dissimilar, drawing explicitly and comprehensively from a range of traditions in order to form a new, polyglot American expression.

#### *REBELLION IN THE BACKLANDS (OS SERTÕES)*

With this expansive – yet for Hodgins "tangible" and "perfectly natural" – notion of the American South in mind, I would like to consider the backlands or *os sertões* of northeastern Brazil in greater detail, and in particular a crucial text that maps this terrain, by Euclides da Cunha. The backlands is a large, dry, scarified region subject to prolonged and periodic drought, where, in 1871, a charismatic preacher named Antônio Conselheiro began to wander. He would pause to preach in every town and rebuild wells, churches, and graveyards, thereby tending to the essential trinity of life, faith, and the afterlife. He soon began to accumulate followers as others might gather alms. When his flock grew larger than many of the small regional crossroads he visited, Conselheiro ("the Counselor"), founded a village on the site of an abandoned ranch named Canudos, and renamed it Belo Monte, "Mount

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<sup>6</sup> The Tupinambá were living around Rio de Janeiro and widely extended regions at the time of European arrival. Treated in Jean de Léry's early text, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, the Tupi's ceremonial anthropophagy helped reify the myth of Amerindian cannibalism, the trope celebrated by Andrade. De Léry's wonderful book is the little "breviary" which Claude Lévi-Strauss carried in his pocket when he arrived in Brazil; see his *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).

Beautiful” (1893-1897).<sup>7</sup> Nestled in a bend in the Rio Vaza-Barris and surrounded by water on three sides, the location provided both a sound defensive position and a rich alluvial plain. The land itself was decent, the economy in better straits than in surrounding towns, and here the backlanders, known as *sertanejos*, managed to evade the political strongman and the oppressive, landowning oligarch which dominated the backlands’ political economy. In Canudos, they enjoyed an autonomy which elsewhere they lacked.

By all accounts, Canudos provided a viable and relatively dignified existence to those who lived there, and soon enough, some 35,000 people did. The plantation grew quickly to become a town one-tenth the size of São Paulo, the second largest city in the state of Bahía and a newly important regional hub. Canudos came to be seen as a communitarian realm set apart from the state, and an anti-Republic, in the eyes of law-makers on the coast and to the south. Such a sizeable migration was bound to affect the region and to upset the status quo. The landowning class, already facing large-scale emigration, found themselves without the cheap supply of abundant labour upon which their agricultural system of sugarcane-producing *fazendas* had come to depend. Regional political bosses, accustomed to delivering mass votes *en bloc* to Republican officials in return for political favours, had lost their means to programmatic ascension. The local churches emptied when O Conselheiro appeared. This eccentric proliferation of the paths to faith and the means of production was bad for business as usual; the coastal, urbanized elites decided that Canudos had to be crushed.

Euclides da Cunha, a writer, journalist and intellectual, was embedded with the third military expedition for *O Estado de São Paulo* and stayed on to witness the fourth and final assault on Canudos. The resistance of the desert-hardened backlanders was fierce, however, and such was the gulf between the lives of these people and the government’s conception of them that the only viable solution to the problem of their resistance proved to be conspiracy: international agitators must be at work on Brazilian soil, fomenting dissent against the nascent Republic. The internal debates are beyond the scope of this essay, in which my point, as da Cunha took pains to make clear, is that the Republican leaders knew not the backlands or its people: “We were not acquainted with this society; it was not possible for us to have been acquainted with it” (161). And so the coastal elite “did what all intellectuals do when they fail to understand something: they invented a theory,” as Mario

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough English-language history of Canudos, see Levine, *Vale of Tears* (1992).



Vargas Llosa explains (134): foreigners must be responsible for this transgression against the state, and the “rebellion” must be crushed. Da Cunha’s text is the story of this invention, of its catastrophic effects on Canudos, which was razed, and of the dawning realization that the theory his society has invented to explain itself to itself is in fact a fiction, one that is unable to comprehend the actual conditions of backlands’ life and culture.

After the war, troubled by what he had seen, da Cunha wrote *Os Sertões* in order to explain the massacre, which was also to decipher the foundation and constitution of his country. Published in 1902, and translated by Samuel Putnam as *Rebellion in the Backlands* in 1942, this is a hybrid text, a polyglot’s masterpiece, not only a superb piece of journalism and military history, but also a treatise on the geography, geology, climatology and anthropology of the backlands region (Kadir 1986). This is a text with a totalizing impulse: to comprehensively describe and exhaust a world. A phalanx of authors and theories is cited directly, as works of ethnology, history, folklore, psychiatry, neurology and sociology, not to mention meteorology, hydrology, geology, botany, and zoology, are incorporated into an omnivorous, burgeoning form. It is an excessive corpus that refuses to be synthesized or adequately reconciled. As Kadir (1986) explains, *Os Sertões* ends famously, in the “intellectual catastrophe” of ellipses, with the author admitting that the entire complex needs another interpreter, another approach, another theory to solve the problem of national formation in the Americas. Backlands’ culture, a distinctly American mix of Native Indian, African, and European, cannot be interpreted by means of any number of theories imported from abroad. It is the lacuna signified by these ellipses that Oswald de Andrade aims to fill with his theory of anthropophagy, an early form of an ecstatic relation to influence in the Americas, which da Cunha’s text also explicitly practices.

The Cuban Lezama Lima, in a series of five lectures delivered in Havana in January 1957 and published as *La expresión americana (American Expression)* in 1959, identified this hyperbolic heteroglossia as the characteristically anxious American strategy of “no rechazar”: “the non-negation, non-rejection of every discourse, including that of the colonizer” (Levinson 52). As Brett Levinson (1993) explains, this aesthetic of abundance is also a discourse of need, of absence and of desperation, one that reflects the alienation and uncertainty of a strange people in a land that was new only unto them. It is a style that for Lezama Lima is uniquely American in the way that it “inherits,” through translation and transformation, the hegemonic European corpus in a manner that is not strictly oppositional, nor that is “easy” and without resistance. Rather, Lezama Lima’s American expression works to self-consciously fragment and recombine the shards of colonial culture into new –

and newly Americanized – aesthetic formulas. This approach to literary history is decidedly eccentric, “in the sense of decentered, moving out or away from a center” (Parkinson Zamora, “Magical Ruins” 82). It is both subversive, in that it destabilizes the colonial inheritance, and self-doubting, in that it proffers no local discourses (save the the outrageously amalgamated) to interpret local conditions. It is a way of Americanizing an imported corpus, of bringing together the tensions and contradictions of a heterogeneous history that cannot easily be reconciled.

I think we can see that William Faulkner’s rhetorical profusion in *Absalom, Absalom!* is exemplary in this regard. So too is the language of Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which appears to incorporate all of prior history, as is that of Hodgins’ in *The Invention of the World* – though few can surpass the anxious extremes of inclusivity to which Euclides da Cunha aspires.

#### FOUNDATIONAL FICTIONS IN THE AMERICAS

We remain a long way from Canadian literature, however, and a long way from Hodgins’s rainforest; and there seems to be no direct, genetic, or causal link between *Rebellion in the Backlands* and the work this essay remains most interested in, Hodgins’s *Invention of the World*. Paradoxically enough, this is precisely my point. The acausal or indirect relationship between Hodgins and da Cunha, or between da Cunha and Faulkner, is important to my argument in that it provides a means to transcend any narrow notion of a national, linguistic, or influence-oriented poetics and enables us to ground the imaginative structures of an inter-American novelistic series in the specificities of regional historical experience. In *Rebellion in the Backlands*, the entire historical and cultural ensemble of American foundational fictions is taken up and transmuted into literary form. The text is fundamental to my argument in that it bridges these strictly literary and social-historical concerns.

Faulkner poses another, related answer to the problems of European-American foundings, and of Euro-American literary dialogue, in *Absalom, Absalom!* In this text, characters and events are enfolded into a range of mythological and literary topologies (the Old Testament, Shakespeare, Greek and Latin classics, even the Arabian Nights [134]), lending the novel additional resonance and meaning extending far beyond the region, as if the entire European and classical inheritance were brought to bear. Thus Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen are figured as the biblical Absalom and Ammon, in a

struggle to the death over a sister, but also Polyneices and Eteocles, sons of the cursed family of Oedipus (Lind 23), with Sutpen as David, and so on. The various voices of the text align themselves with different traditions – Miss Rosa: doom-laden, vituperative, permeated with Judeo-Christian imagery and an Old Testament style fury; Mr. Compson: more distanced, steeped in the Greek classics, perversely insistent on misconstruing the past, his classicism hinting at decadence, nostalgia, and a denial of the present; Shreve: gruff, laconic, at an even greater distance from historical events, a facilitator who coaxes insight and meaning from his conflicted partner (Wadlington 1987). At the centre of the text is Quentin, of course: emotional, overwhelmed by history, drawn dangerously to the past, given to extrapolating the meaning of Sutpen’s rise and fall to the level of a Southern history. Quentin is home to a “commonwealth” of voices. He struggles, and fails, to interpret and reconcile the past.

*Absalom, Absalom!* responds to an anxiety of origins, to this challenge posed by American literary history, with a startlingly heterogeneous, polyphonic text “traversed by many voices” (Ross 81). Faulkner’s “solution” is akin to da Cunha’s: the past cannot be deciphered by the novel’s emplotted (diegetic) narrators, and Quentin commits suicide at Harvard – another intellectual and human catastrophe – some six months later in narrated time, in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

García Márquez takes up a similar series of questions with a related set of techniques in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. History here is represented above all in Melquíades’ room, an archive untouched by time, and seen, in the right light and by certain eyes, as never dirty – an abode in which the entropy which undoes the Buendía line is resisted. Melquíades has encoded his history of the family in Sanskrit, his “lengua materna” (557), which signifies a Proto-Indo-European language which underlies Hellenic, Latin, Germanic and Celtic traditions, and by extension all of European history, and the Euro-American (colonial) inheritance.<sup>8</sup> All of Macondo’s history is contained in Melquíades’ parchments, which “had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant” (382). The figure is of a Borgesian Aleph – a totalized, spatialized cosmos, “the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending” (Borges 23) – transposed onto a temporal plane. It is an image of Borges’ American maxim, “the universe is

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Sylvain Auroux, *History of the Language of Sciences* (2000), and Robert Beekes, *Comparative Indo-European Linguistics* (1995).

our birthright,” with all of history transparent, accessible, and easily at hand. When Aureliano Babilonia deciphers the text of Melquíades’ history, he enters into a “true present,” in which his reading and being coincide. This is a forbidden knowledge that brings about the end of both house and line.

What is worth emphasizing in the context of Hodgins’ dialogue with the American South is the extent to which his novel accords with, but also innovates or registers difference against, the series of texts to which he responds. As a review of Hodgins’ earlier, unpublished work (1983) makes clear, and as he has been generous to acknowledge, his debt to both Faulkner and García Márquez is substantial (see, for example, Jeffrey 1989, Fink 1985, New 1996).<sup>9</sup> *The Invention of the World* takes up and deploys these novels by Faulkner and García Márquez as models, a series of speech types, structures, and strategies, that can be creatively re-deployed in a new context, or cannibalized in the creation of his own novelistic “world.” *The Invention of the World* ironically incorporates the prophetic, oracular modes of creation myths, the dead, monotonic seriousness of historical epics (and of Faulkner); the hyperbolic accounts of legend, the “magical” instances of amnesia of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; and the apocalyptic and eschatological modes of each. Hodgins’ novel takes up the syntax and organizing principles (exodus, quest, journey, mythological birth, cataclysmic battle, etc.) of these foundational fictions, and turns the form and style of his models into what Bakhtin (1981) has called “a codifiable discourse,” one that can then be inverted, doubled, “monkey’d with” – to use one of Hodgins’ characteristic phrases (Struthers 184). *Invention* ironizes and pokes fun at *Absalom, Absalom!* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, while at the same time incorporating their structures and organizing principles; the novel pays an explicit homage while instituting a critical distance. Hodgins’ *Invention*, like these other works, is a suitably specious foundational fiction – pleasing, plausible, but also intentionally misleading and fallacious – in that this quest for origins, to begin again in the Americas, is always already an impossible search.

#### BIBLICAL FORM

*Os Sertões* traces the rise of Canudos from its inception as a founding village with communitarian promise to its fall as a city of guerrilla warriors destroyed in the revelation of an absolute apocalypse. The text begins where

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<sup>9</sup> “Faulkner . . . was and is my great hero,” says Jack Hodgins (Hancock 51), while García Márquez addressed Faulkner as “mi maestro” in his Nobel speech.

time begins, quite literally, with a geological exposition of the history of the earth; and it ends where time ends, again quite literally, at least for Conselheiro and his followers, in absolute destruction. The transformation within the book is from a promised land into its opposite, an inferno, or from Genesis to Apocalypse; this is the Bible's "familiar model" or ideal form (Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* 6). This too is the familiar form deployed by Faulkner and García Márquez in their own foundational fictions, which is in turn doubled in Hodgins' own creation story, as discussed below.

These four texts are founded upon a utopian design and written in an apocalyptic mode, with the retrospective glance of a totalizing history; they comprehensively describe and exhaust a world, and chart its course from beginning to end. These are "spiritual encyclopedias," in Kermode's phrase, comprehensive maps and guides to a specific region, and "behind all of them is a Bible, thought of as complete and authoritative, a world-book credited with the power to explain everything: a key to creation" (Kermode, *An Appetite for Poetry* 216). Da Cunha, like Faulkner, simply inverts the normally positive valence of the Judeo-Christian creation story, turning the backlands into the site of anti-creation, with Conselheiro as paradigmatic "Anti-Christ" (242): "One has but to imagine a buffoon maddened with a vision of the Apocalypse" (221).<sup>10</sup>

Faulkner and García Márquez organize their foundational fictions around a founding family; as in the Book of Genesis, genealogy and genesis, or beginnings and begettings, are indissolubly linked (Fokkelman 1987). Genealogy, encoded in the biblical keyword *toledot*, functions as a metaphor for both biological and cultural continuity, reproduction, and survival.<sup>11</sup> In Genesis, as in Faulkner, García Márquez, and Hodgins, a complex regional history is schematized as genealogical concatenation, and the concern remains with the people who were there at the beginning, the line they engender, the questions of primogeniture and continuation which surround it. The stories of these founding families – the Sutpens, Buendías, Donal Keneally and his brood, and later Maggie Kyle – correspond to the profounder historicities of their respective regions.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Imagine-se un bufão arrebatado numa visão do Apocalipse" (133).

<sup>11</sup> As Gerald Martin comments of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "If we take the term *estirpe* – stock, lineage – literally, we have merely been lured into the same ideological misreading as the characters themselves: it is a historical era that is over, not a biological line" (106).

<sup>12</sup> Antônio Conselheiro was also considered the "father" of his flock, and da Cunha writes of him as the head of a grotesque, deformed family.

Unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or even da Cunha's work, for that matter, Hodgins' is a tale of two families, two genealogies, two founding figures, two beginnings and two ends. The parallel narratives unfold some sixty to eighty years apart in time, but converge in space, in the same house, "The House of Revelations." This is the headquarters of Keneally's millennial, Eden-seeking commune, which is later bought by Maggie Kyle – symbolic matriarch of the second line – and renamed "Revelations Trailer Park." It is a parody of both Eden and apocalypse and a clear index of the second line's fall from quasi-sacred to profane narration.

Donal Brendan Keneally is the novel's founding patriarch, a master orator and landscape architect, a wellspring of local skill and technique. He is named Brendan after the Irish Saint, for his mother dreamed that he would travel to America. He is a hypnotist and master conjurer," a "villain, god, demon, magician, con-man" of uncertain paternity (343), who deceives an entire Irish village and leads them on an ill-fated quest to found a New World Eden, in a section of the novel unequivocally titled "The Eden Swindle." Keneally ruins all the lives he touches and leaves those downstream from him obsessed with and agonizing over his meaning. Yet he retains the prestige of the origin, as in the biblical covenant: he was there at the beginning, and his story makes all other stories possible. An anti-Christ with a dark design, the "imploded star" at the center of this text (364), the principal actor in an outlandishly inverted Judeo-Christian creation story, Keneally is this novel's Sutpen.

In marked contrast, Maggie Kyle is a thrice-married woman from a dead-end bush town whose children and partners have abandoned her. She is surrounded, in the present-tense of the novel's telling, by an assorted cast known as Kyle's Kooks or Krazies. Maggie's "new pioneers" form an imperfect yet functional community; she "could never find another group so sure to make her feel that this was the way for thing to be" (46). They are her "family," in a new configuration that proves meaningful: "This was what she wanted for herself, she said, a solid base from which to rise" (46). Neither of the two "families" in this novel (Keneally styles himself "Father" of an extended family) is traditionally or biologically affiliated: one is bonded in fear and blind faith, the other is functional if non-biological.

The two charismatic founders are not linked directly, through action or plot, and hold no conversation together (Keneally dies before Maggie is born). The coexistence of different periods within the novel poses a technical problem for Hodgins: how to link these sections so that the text retains its coherence as an architectonic whole. *The Invention of the World* asks that textual relationships be considered not in terms of the unities or continuities

of plot or character or chronology, but rather with respect to the repetition of theme, scene and incident, the locus of place and not the unbroken flow of time. This is a novel that contains its own antitype, an opposite and contradictory saga; the two founders are integrated into networks of community and events that eccentrically repeat, overlap, and echo one another. Parallels are extensively woven, such that a pattern of typological repetition with significant difference is structurally encoded within the novel's doubled form. This doubling entails an emphasis on amplification, reverberation, radiation, eccentricity, irregularity, adjacency, and play, to borrow terms from Said (1993), and may be the novel's most potent innovation within the context of Hodgins' dialogue with the American South. Maggie's life and quest cannot be understood without the balance and relief provided by the mythical, Edenic longings, the collective fears of an earlier community that are buried in Keneally's cataclysmic end.

Keneally's foundational story, historically the first, articulates the mythical origin and the Genesis-to-Apocalypse biblical superstructure associated with da Cunha, Faulkner, and García Márquez. The second founding, Maggie's, rather than carrying epic and patriarchal cadences, is prosaic, quotidian, lived, human, and profane. It is a repetition with significant difference, a return with a new intention and method. The formulation closes off an American obsession with *origins* – passive, quasi-mythical, sacred, “useful for veneration but not for work” (Said 1975) – and gives way to Maggie's *beginnings*: fragmented, discontinuous, multiple, lived, and human. The first impulse is homogenizing, nationalistic, patriarchal, vertical, authoritarian. The second is plural, diverse, dissembling, and marked by the horizontal bonds of a different, and in this case deeper, fraternity.

#### THE ARCHIVE IN AMERICAN FICTION

The two discontinuous lines in Hodgins' novel cohere above all in the figure of Strabo Becker, an amateur historian and writer, who is researching a book about Keneally and his alleged crimes. We encounter Becker in the short Prologue in his job as a ferryman, which foregrounds the fact that we are on an island, a space apart, and that he will be our guide. We may picture him in his cabin, surrounded by “scrapbooks and shoeboxes of newspaper clippings and cardboard boxes of old photographs . . . crates of cassette tapes . . . dozens of notebooks . . . he thinks that what he has here is at least the equivalent of all that exists outside his walls” (9). This is his “gathered hoard,” a “confusion of tales and lies and protests and legends and exaggerations” (10), a locus of false equivalences. More aptly still, it is a figure of the novel's

*archive*, in the sense put forward by Roberto González Echevarría in *Myth and Archive* (1990). This is the novel's source, a fragmented, heterogeneous, discontinuous, and contradictory "chaos" of reports, memories, newspaper clippings, and incidents, which Becker will analyze, interpret, and obsess over:

Becker the caretaker-god sits deep into night, every night, in his nest of deliberate clutter. He touches, he listens, he reads, he worries. He will absorb all this chaos, he will confront it and absorb it, and eventually he will begin to tell, and by telling release it, make it finally his own. (11)

There is a kind of "active memory" contained in Becker's fragments, a "repository of narrative possibilities," a record of the "variety of beginnings at the origin" (González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive* 2, 4). Becker (and behind him, Hodgins) deploys this figurative archive in an American context to create his own precursors and traditions, as a sum total of the local, historical past. These are the voices of the community – those who were there, who remember or were affected by Keneally. Their memories, and the oral history which recounts them, in this sense "authorizes" and underlies the novel, or at least Becker's telling of it. Rather than being content with merely channeling the canonical and inherited literary traditions (Irish, Greek, Hebrew, and so on), Hodgins extends his novel's retelling of a community's beginning on the west coast of Canada to include the spoken language, newspapers, and memories of local people. This is how he incorporates bissett's "rain forest, the sound of the people's heads, and the kind of interior music there is here on the coast."

The "Scrapbook" section lays bare these oral and written records. The fifth of the novel's nine sections, it is centrally-placed, a microcosm in structure and process of the whole. Compiled by Becker and belonging to him, the "Scrapbook" is presented in different typefaces, and contains newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor, dated and undated fragments, photographs, a nursery rhyme, the transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations. Becker's archive is emphatically intertextual, polyglot, multi-voiced, even multi-media. It is a catalogue of conflicting accounts, memories and half-truths which mixes fact and legend and which compiles the voices of the community to generate multiform, contradictory, yet still revealing perspectives on Keneally. It is another, localized case of an excessive heteroglossia, a radical inclusivity that exemplifies the American need and anxiety of artists, in what Hodgins, in 1976, could still consider "unexplored territory," to create their own precursors and traditions and to forge a "usable past" (*The Usable Past* xii).



“Scrapbook” is the novel’s homage to oral tradition, to communal memory and a communitarian perspective. And yet, it is no simple paean to what David Jeffrey has termed the “island mind.” Accounts contradict each other; people are unwilling to face their memories; people lie and cheat and accuse and fabulate, they tell stories, make myth, evade the past – that is, they do the things that Hodgins’ people normally do. Becker includes a skeletal chronology to Keneally’s life at the start of “Scrapbook,” and the dates, in general, seem to hold. On closer inspection, however, the date given in Keneally’s originary myth – “In the beginning, in the first year of the century, the Revelations Colony of Truth arrived on its land on January the sixth” (149) – will not reconcile with Becker’s Scrapbook arrival date, which is 1899. In this case, Becker’s millennial impulse, part of an inherited tradition, has trumped historical accuracy, or so it would seem. Margaret Atwood, discussing her own novelistic reconstruction of history in *Alias Grace*, notes that human beings in the act of remembering “are subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases” (*In Search of Alias Grace* 32).

There will be no unmediated access to historical truth in this novel, in which even the mechanical intervention of the tape recorder proves unreliable, transmuting oral record into something else. As one informant tells Becker, “I just talk like me until I start talking into that machine and start thinking about what I’m saying, and then it doesn’t sound like me talking any more” (251). In this novel, notes Linda Hutcheon, “recording (like writing) distances and alienates” (57). An informant named Guthrie tells Becker: “You’re a fool and more than a fool if you believe one word anybody tells you about that Keneally. They’ll make it up, they’ll lie just to please you. . . .” Then another emphatically interjects: “Everybody knows Guthrie is a big goddam liar” (279; underlining in original). Virginia Scully shoos Becker out of her place saying: “You’re wasting your time with all this, because the best you can hope for is ignorance and prejudice. None of us will ever know what really went on in that place” (288). The conflicting accounts emphasize distortion, exaggeration, falsity, duplicity, concealed motives and strange intentions: the origin of the Colony remains undefined, even undefinable. Becker’s trove of documents cannot uncover the origin of the Colony, and he must explicitly fictionalize in order to fill this void in his book, that is, to invent the world.

What Becker’s archive in fact reveals is that it contains no secret history except its own fragmented mediation, its constraints, and its limits. Becker constructs his own fictive project, the novel we are reading, from the ruin of this collective fiction. The “Scrapbook” section lays bare the process by

which historical event is transmuted into myth, and by which Keneally has been transformed into a fictional construction, through the community's willingness to grant him a transcendent, mythical value – to believe in a God. Once this mythical belief in origins is dispersed, Maggie Kyle's fresh project is set to begin again.

The drama of Becker's writing goes largely unrepresented in the text, though it is its constitutive element. It is present only in the broadest outline, as an envelope of structure at the book's beginning and end: the first and last sections of *Invention* begin with identical offset phrases, "Becker tells you this." In this way the novel establishes and then disperses Becker's stable narrative voice. As he comes to realize the vanity of his quest and to suspect that his totalizing quest for a comprehensive knowledge is bound to fail, he attains a knowledge painfully won by da Cunha and one that proved fatal for both Quentin Compson and Aureliano Babilonia. This transformation is at the core of the book's movement from (originary) myth to literature. In the end Becker releases Keneally's story, declaiming even the possibility of ownership:

*Believe what you want, trust me or not, this story exists independently of both of us. Donal Keneally is dead. His story has returned to the air where I found it. It will never belong to me, for all my gathering and hoarding. (437)*

Becker's realization of the indeterminacy of narrative and the fallacy of unmediated expression reveals a genuinely literary intention, in the sense that "literature finally comes into its own, and becomes authentic, when it discovers that the exalted status it claimed for its language was a myth" (de Man 14). It points to the fact that the thrust of *Invention* is anti-mythical, against counterfeits and conjured realities, origins and Edens. Becker's creation is arbitrary, artificial, and slowly becomes aware of itself as such. Eager to engage in the heroic feat of organizing the chaos, Becker learns that he has no access to any such thing, that the new start is always already history. The novel transforms "the story of that defeat into victory," dismantling "the central enabling delusion of Latin American writing: the notion that in the New World a new start can be made unfettered by history" (González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive* 4).

I would like to put "Latin" under a crude sort of erasure here, to include any number of texts written north of the forty-ninth parallel. Surely Becker's transformation is related to similar ones experienced by archival narrators in Carlos Fuentes' *Aura* (1962), Augusto Roa Bastos' *Yo, el Supremo* (1974), and Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1959). But what I have called his "archive" is also roughly analogous to the cassette tapes and notebooks

from which Professor Madham pieces together Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian* (1973), the drawings and chronicles from which Rudy Wiebe fashions *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), and *The Histories* of Herodotus with which Michael Ondaatje both anchors and disperses narrative in *The English Patient* (1992).<sup>13</sup> As Kroetsch explains, with the archival approach to writing and history, "A doubt about our ability to know invades the narrative. What we witness is the collapse, for North American eyes, of the meta-narrative that once went by the name Europe" (23). Part of my point in opening this dialogue with the American South is that neither Kroetsch's insights into "North" America, nor González Echevarría's into "Latin" America," are in need of this limiting modifier. In certain cases at least – Oswald de Andrade, Lezama Lima, Faulkner, da Cunha, Borges, Hodgins, García Márquez – we can begin to use the adjective "American" in hemispheric sense: to extend not from sea to shining sea, but from pole to pole, and to speak of a paradoxical continuity in the fields of history, politics, and culture.

#### TOWARD AN "OPEN FIELD"

Whereas *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is hardly a linear text, nor, for that matter, is *Absalom, Absalom!*. Hodgins takes the rupture of the linear and tightly knit novels of the realistic tradition to a further level of development, segregating the text into discrete units of time, geography, and narrative mode or genre. *Invention's* fragmented sections suggest a vision of diversity and plurality, as horizontal relationships of pattern and eccentricity replace vertical relationships of filiation, legitimacy, and kinship. The structure proposes a concept of identity not as root, racinated, telluric, vertical, patriarchal, but as branching, extended, sideways, rhizomatic – and above all communal, mutually supported, thickly inter-woven. By a similar analysis, Hodgins' relationship with his significant precursors is not one of originality, but rather of difference marked by play, reverberation, radiation, amplification, and eccentricity. Such a handful of concepts, as put forward by Edward Said, implies a set of governing notions with respect to literary creativity and

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<sup>13</sup> One thinks also of the archives that Marian Engel's narrator searches through in *Bear* (1976), "with its yellowing paper and browning ink and maps that tended to shatter when they were unfolded" (12); the "boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters; cablegrams and clippings from the papers" from which an anonymous amanuensis cobbles together Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (11); as well as the coiled birch bark that Oskar scribes with his goose quill in Douglas Glover's *The Life and Times of Captain N.* (1993).

influence that are entirely opposed to traditional, linear notions of filiation, and “completely modify a linear (vulgar) idea of ‘influence’ into an open field of possibility” (*Beginnings* 15).

“An open field of possibility.” Perhaps here is an apt way to categorize Jack Hodgins’ dialogue – and even the larger Canadian dialogue – with the literary cultures of the American South.

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WILLIAM V. DAVIS

## Crisscrossing the Continent

*From Black Mountain to Vancouver*

*To read the universe as a palimpsest, from which one writing has been erased to make room for another, and yet to find the one writing in the other, is to see history anew. . . .*

(Robert Duncan)

### I

*. . . what is requisite is that man, in conjunction with other men, should merge himself in the world as a historically concrete entity, so that, amid the universal homelessness, he may win for himself a new home. (Karl Jaspers)*

Precisely in the middle of the last century, in 1950, a middle-aged American poet broke on the scene with an essay that helped to change the course of American and Canadian poetry. The poet was Charles Olson and the essay was called, and called for, “Projective Verse.”

In this essay, which has been described as “probably the most influential poetic manifesto ever written” (Malkoff 79), Olson, “the central figure of postmodern poetics” (Altieri 102), defined and described the kind of “improvisatory” and “postmodern” poetry that he felt was needed to reinvigorate poetry – and he clearly felt that poetry needed to be reinvigorated. Olson took clues from several poets who preceded him. In particular, he looked to the example of Ezra Pound and his *Cantos*, that long, free-verse treatise in which a spillage of heterogeneous words and ideas spew forth in a seemingly pell-mell rush of non-stop thought. In Pound, who had called for poets to “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase,” not in meters or with the metronome, and to give “direct treatment” of the “thing” (3), Olson found a clear example of what he wanted to do, indeed what he was already doing.

Olson’s other primary poetic source was William Carlos Williams, who had called for “No ideas but in things” (6). In Williams’s long poem *Paterson*, with its focus on a specific place, Paterson, New Jersey, and on a larger than life protagonist, Olson found a source for his own obsession with his hometown, Gloucester, Massachusetts, and for his own autobiographical larger than life protagonist, Maximus. In addition to these two established sources, Olson found other, contemporary support among a group of younger



poets, who quickly turned to him and to his poetic theses and proscriptions. Adopting a phrase from Robert Creeley, one of his disciples, who had proclaimed that “form is never more than an *extension* of content” (Butterick 79), Olson called for poems to get “rid of the lyrical interference of the individual ego” and “of the ‘subject’ and his soul.” These heavily subjective requirements were to be replaced by poems which were composed “by field” and based on the “breath” (*Collected Prose* 247, 239).<sup>1</sup> The whole process, Olson felt, might be “boiled down” to several statements, which both posited the position he advocated and called for the continuation of it throughout the poetic processes. These statements, Olson said, had been “pounded” into his head by Edward Dahlberg, the outspoken critic, who was an early mentor to Olson. The rather insistent prescriptions were: “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION,” and each perception must “MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER” (*CP* 240).

Olson’s essay attempted to reverse – and, indeed, quite literally to *reverse* – what poets had been doing for centuries, to set them a new task and point them in a way that led fruitfully forward. Olson argued that “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to . . . the reader.” It is a “high energy-construct,” what he called an “energy-discharge.” He argued that poetry, “if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use,” “must . . . catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.” In short, Olson’s goal in “Projective Verse” was to do several things: “to show what projective or OPEN verse” (which he also called “COMPOSITION BY FIELD”) is, “what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished,” and to “suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader” (*CP* 239-40).

Stressing the syllable and the line as the “single intelligence” (*CP* 242) of a poem and acknowledging the need for the spontaneous and a lack of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, all references to Olson’s *Collected Prose* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *CP*. It might be worth noting here, however, that George Bowering and the *Tish* poets were to put another twist of emphasis on Creeley’s famous phrase. In *Craft Slices*, Bowering has described the circumstances in which he apparently first heard the phrase, with “content”, pronounced as “*content*” (14). Clearly it is intriguing to think of this word with both syllables emphasized.

logical, Olson described what he called the “two halves” of a poem as: “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE” and “the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (*CP* 242).<sup>2</sup> In an “open poem” “every element . . . must be taken up as participants [sic] in the kinetic of the poem” (*CP* 243). And, thus, “composition by field” brought “into being an open verse as formal as the closed [yet] with all its traditional advantages” (*CP* 245) intact.

Olson coined the term “objectism” to synthesize the older terms Imagism, Objectivism and Projectivism. Although it might be debated whether Olson’s “objectism” (which is more traditionally known as “objectivism” to distinguish it from “subjectivism”) was not every bit as subjective as the “subjectivism” of those he criticized or opposed, he argued that it avoided “the lyrical interference of the individual as ego.” And he defined and described his “objectism” in terms of the “relation[ship] of man to experience,” which allowed man to access the “secrets objects share” and thus provided him with a means to take himself into “dimensions larger” than himself (*CP* 247). If “projective verse” is “driven hard enough” along the course Olson thought it “dictated,” he argued that it could again “carry much larger material than it has carried . . . since the Elizabethans” (*CP* 248). But he acknowledged that “we are only at its beginnings” (*CP* 248).

## II

*. . . a bard is to be commensurate with a people. . . . His spirit responds to his country’s spirit.* (Walt Whitman)

From these beginnings and from the larger than life influence of Charles Olson (who stood 6’ 8” tall and called himself Maximus and his major work, written over a twenty plus year period and running to more than 600 pages, *The Maximus Poems*) sprang a tradition that would extend throughout the United States and then quickly make its way to Canada. This tradition, especially as it impacted a group of young poets in Canada, has not yet been

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<sup>2</sup> Many of Olson’s statements are not only arbitrary but arguably confusing, or at least inexplicit. As Louis Dudek, one of the *Tish* poets, said, “Whatever writing that ‘comes from the breath’ might mean, it is utterly confusing as a theory of metrics.” Even so, he argued that “Olson’s directives . . . released a number of young writers, gave them a sense of freedom, and pushed them to write in a certain way for a time.” And, thus, “‘Projective Verse’ created a definite school in Canadian poetry” (44-45).

documented in any definitive way – and I cannot hope to do that here. What I would like to suggest, however, is something of the trail that led from Charles Olson and the American poets who surrounded and were influenced by him to the Canadian *Tish* movement, which advocated for and illustrated in practice its American sources and which championed the poets associated with the Black Mountain School and its phenomenological philosophy.

Charles Olson was rector of the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the early 1950s and during his tenure there he invited Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and others to join him at Black Mountain. From this College and this “school” of poets, and especially through the person and the example of Robert Duncan, who was the primary conduit between Olson and Black Mountain, the “Tish” movement began.

If Olson was himself essentially an amateur phenomenologist and a potential mystic, as well as a powerful poet and an insistent mentor to all who came under his influence, Robert Duncan was perhaps Olson’s principal disciple and advocate. Duncan referred to himself as “a muse poet” (“Interview” n. p.), and he quickly became “American poetry’s occult priest” for the young Canadian poets (see Bowering, *Craft Slices* 34). Even more than Olson, Duncan was intrigued by mysticism and metaphysics, by cultivating what he called “the metaphorical ground of life,” and by exploring the “correspondence between inner being and outer world,” an arena that he felt created “a metaphysical aura” and which remained, for him, the authentic “sign of the poem” (qtd. in Allen 433). All of these ideas were attractive to his young Canadian disciples.

In *The Opening of the Field* (1960), a book with a suggestive title and one that contained several of what would come to be seen as his best and most important poems, Duncan detailed some key concepts of his philosophy. In “Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” he described the “return” indicated in his title as if it were “a given property of the mind” (*Selected Poems* 44).<sup>3</sup> In “Poetry, a Natural Thing,” he called poetry “a spiritual urgency” that “feeds upon thought” (*SP* 53). And “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” (a section of which is dedicated to Olson) opens with the “god-step at the margins of thought” and it moves, through “magic” and

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, all references to Duncan’s *Selected Poems* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *SP*.

an “accumulation of metaphor,” to a “dawn” and a “morning” that is “no-where” but that seems to be spinning out everywhere (*SP* 54-62).<sup>4</sup>

But Duncan perhaps put Olson’s theories into practice best in a poem called “The Continent,” the final poem in his volume *Roots and Branches*, a title which, for our purposes, is most suggestive, implying as it does on the one hand a root or source and, on the other, the growth that that source initiates. “The Continent” is a poem which suggested and detailed the very breath and extent of everything that Olson felt was needed, and what both Olson and Duncan had been calling for. In “The Continent” Duncan, conceiving of his theme as “a decorative frieze / out of earthly proportion to the page,” a theme needing “vast terms” to be accomplished, wrote: “The artist . . . works abundancies” (*Roots and Branches* 172).<sup>5</sup> And this theme emerges in the poem itself (which I here freely adapt, and perhaps somewhat take out of context) “as if the very Day moved northward” (*RB* 174). And thus, “a continent / looms” (*RB* 175) and, “Time zone by time zone // across the continent dawn . . . comes” – until “the margins of the page flare forth” and “There’s only the one page,” “only / the one continent” (*RB* 173). Duncan’s “Continent” is a “port of / recall” (*RB* 173) – that is, both a return to awareness and a restorative, a means of restoration and/or a reestablishment; it allows for (or demands) new beginnings.

### III

. . . in the care with words, a world occurs, made possible by that care. (Robert Creeley)

Duncan was the direct conduit between Black Mountain in America and British Columbia in Canada. But, before I turn to this literal connection and to Duncan’s significant influence on the young Canadian poets, let me briefly sketch the basic Canadian poetic scene at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his introduction to *Other Canadians* (1947), an anthology of the “new poetry” being produced in Canada between 1940 and 1946, John Sutherland described the “oedipus complex” (6) which had conspicuously held Canadian poets tied to British traditions and to British poets, so much so that it

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<sup>4</sup> In “Winter 1972. Vancouver,” one of the poems in his insistently autobiographical long poem *His Life* (2000), Bowering asks “Was Whitman right?” and then, “Was Duncan right?” The poem ends, “He makes a poem / ending with a word called Pindar” (59).

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter, all references to Duncan’s *Roots and Branches* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *RB*.

would have been “utter nonsense” (8) to suggest that there was any “tradition” in Canadian poetry itself at the time. Sutherland believed that it was time – and past time – for Canada “to grow up” (16), to assert itself. And he saw “abundant evidence that forces [were] at work from south of the border which must produce a drastic change” (17). He concluded that it seemed “quite apparent” the American example would “become more and more attractive to Canadian writers” (18).

Although Sutherland didn’t make any specific prophetic predictions, several young Canadian poets were perhaps even then looking to the south, and at least one professor was, too. In 1959, Warren Tallman, a professor at the University of British Columbia, invited Robert Duncan to give a reading at his home. This reading created considerable excitement and, as a result of its clear success, Tallman created a Festival of Contemporary Arts and invited Duncan back to inaugurate it.<sup>6</sup> At that time, the early 1960s, interest in Tallman’s Festival (which by 1963 had also spawned the Vancouver Poetry Conference) grew quickly. The young Canadian poets, excited by the now regular visits of various American visiting bards – which by then included not only Duncan and Creeley, but Olson himself, as well as other well-known American poets, among them Allen Ginsberg – inspired another new and important mentor for the young Canadians, Robin Blaser, an American recently arrived in Vancouver. Like Olson and Duncan, Blaser became influential both through his criticism and with his long poem *The Holy Forest*, a poem he began in the 1950s and worked on throughout his life, a poem, like Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*, that remained incomplete at the time of Blaser’s death. Like Olson, and like Duncan and Creeley, Blaser was “committed to a poetry that bears witness to ‘What Is,’” and his work, like theirs, “unfolds,” as Nichols says, “as a phenomenology of perceptual experience.” Blaser, then, like Tallman, quickly became not only an important mentor but also a powerful influence on the young writers then congregating in Vancouver. And as a direct result of all of these influences, both the American sources and the Canadian support of those sources, several student poets at the University of British Columbia, among them George Bowering, Fred Wah and Frank Davey, decided to start a magazine-newsletter to showcase

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<sup>6</sup> Tallman would later bring a number of American poets to this Festival, among them another Black Mountain disciple of Olson’s, Robert Creeley.

the new work that they were doing, based on both their American and Canadian examples. They called this small magazine *Tish*. *Tish* was begun in 1961. It had the expressed purpose of only publishing poems “which it felt were written in the spirit of the Black Mountain poetic of projective verse” (Knight 7). The first nineteen monthly issues were published by the student poet-editors.<sup>7</sup> Its influence – both positive and negative – created excitement and added new life to the Canadian literary scene. And the reverberations that *Tish* began can still be felt throughout Canadian literature, specifically in poetry, but in the other literary genres as well. Indeed, these reverberations reached eastward across Canada and then back and forth between Canada and the United States in an almost reciprocal interchange. As one critic, surveying Canadian poetry, has rightly said, “the energy, imagination, and inventiveness of the 1960s and 1970s, although less explosive [than the American], made Canadian writing some of the most significant and innovative in the Americas” (Boughn 125).

#### IV

*We published Tish from the fall of 1961 till the summer of 1963, when we were schoolchildren at UBC. (George Bowering)*

According to one popular source, the word *Tish* “was intended both to imitate the breath sound and (because these young poets saw themselves as artistic rebels who rejected the discreet romanticism of conventional Canadian lyrics) also to resonate scatologically” because, as Duncan and his young disciples believed, even any ordinary thing might be a suitable subject of a poem. And even though the *Tish* poets were “attacked by some critics at the time as unpatriotic, in that they adapted their poetics from conventions current in the United States, the *Tish* Group, over subsequent decades, came to be hailed as innovators in technique and the forerunners of a postmodern sensibility in Canada” (New n.p.).

Bowering himself has described the beginnings of the *Tish* movement and debunked the legends that have grown up around it on several occasions. In 1985, he wrote: “Bursting with our information and joy [in the early 1960s], we said what is there to do but begin a poetry newsletter, fill it with our poems and especially poetics. We wanted to make statements. Tallman said

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<sup>7</sup> The journal itself, under other editors, continued to exist until 1969.

go slow, you've got an apprenticeship to serve. You've got orders to serve, said Duncan, go ahead. He was there the night we made our decision to print and distribute [it] gratis [and] he gave our newsletter its name on the spot." Bowering added: "I have in the past decade heard many fanciful notions about the origin of the name. I even read that one Ontario journalist-poet said that it was "Shit" spelled backward. I would like to argue that it is "Hsit" spelled backward. The real truth is that the name was suggested to us by Mary Roberts Rinehart, who was, in 1961, giving us a series of lectures on Percussive Verse in Warren Tallman's living-room. . . . The name of the magazine was really an acronym, standing for Truth Is Sure Heavy, the title of a 1961 poem by the Okanagan Falls Brown Mountain [a name the young Canadians gave to themselves early on, one perhaps influenced by the American Black Mountain group] poet, Fred W[ah]. . . . What started in 1961 as a small regional poetry movement is now a seemingly unstoppable raid on the Canadian poetry sensibility" (*Craft Slices* 31, 15). And, in 1993, Bowering added even more detail: "We were, around 1961, a crew of young poets who created what Canadian-literature professors would call the Tish Movement. As far as we could see, Charles Olson was the main US American poet. . . . [T]he geography, history, and economics of Vancouver became the grid of our poetry. . . . Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley were important to us. . . . [T]hey are the history of the New World for us" ("Alphabiography" 309-10). It might, however, have been the case, as Hartley has said, that Bowering and the other *Tish* poets "embraced Olson's poetics in part because it advocated what they needed to do anyway: come to their own understanding of a place" (100).

The most definitive collection of essays on the *Tish* group is *The Writing Life: Historical & Critical Views of the Tish Movement*, edited by C. H. Gervais. In his Preface, Gervais called the *Tish* poets "the most cohesive writing movement in Canada" (7), and he credited them with the creation of a "big moment in Canadian literary history" (8), a major shift in Canadian literary consciousness. Warren Tallman was initially responsible for bringing Duncan and the other American poets who were to become the models for the *Tish* movement to Canada; they brought along with them their American "language lessons," and the young Canadians picked them up quickly. Thus, this "new wave" of poetry moved across the country, west to east, and its influence became "undeniable and considerable" (9).

In his introduction to the volume, Frank Davey deals with the "facts" of the *Tish* movement in terms of the rumors, legends and superstitions surrounding it, most of which "survive mainly because of ignorance" (16).

Davey stresses the centrality of the Tish “concept of community” and the “act of writing” as a “poetics of dwelling” in line with the philosophical tradition of the “historical immersion” advocated by Karl Jaspers and the “existential indwelling” (*Wohnenlassen*) of Heidegger (19). Tish was “a movement that espoused a poetry of individual articulation, place, and community” (21), and its adherents saw themselves as the “servants of language and polis.” They shared the common goal of “making the grounds of life in their community ‘speak’ to all its inhabitants,” (20) and they saw themselves as an “inseparable part of the social, cultural, and political life of [their] culture” (22).

Several other essays in this collection are significant and relevant for the purposes of understanding the Tish movement. In “Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver During the 1960s,” Warren Tallman, after detailing the enthusiastic reception of and response to Duncan and Creeley during their visits to Vancouver by the young Canadian poets in the early 1960s, described the essential lessons that the Canadians learned from Olson, via Duncan in particular. Tallman defined these debts in terms of the distinction between perception, which attempts “to take form” by focusing attention on external objects and events, and proprioception, a term and a concept adopted from Olson (see Olson’s *Additional Prose* 17-21), which consists of a “sensibility” from “within” (31). Tallman further described the contrasts this way: “It’s snowing. The eyes of perception take the snow in *out there*. The eyes of proprioception become an inner threshing floor on which a snowman will be enacted. The perceptive writer sees himself in the midst of the surrounding world as object. The proprioceptive writer sees the surrounding world in the midst of himself as subject – ‘sensibility within the organism’” (31-32). Therefore, in a proprioceptive sentence, “*self* becomes the subject, the *writing* becomes all verb, and the *object* is life” (33). For Tallman, Bowering’s *Autobiology*, in which he “is able to regress to stories his body remembers,” tells “the story of his *life*” rather than “the *story* of his life” (57). It is, therefore, a perfect paradigm of the proprioceptive poem.

Frank Davey contributed four essays to the collection, two of which are relevant here. In “Anything But Reluctant,” Davey stressed *Tish*’s “determination to remake poetry [as] a natural and spontaneous human occupation and rid it of the obscure and obviously ‘poetic’ creations of would-be ‘artists’” (141). In “Introducing *Tish*,” Davey described the conception of *Tish* as “a record of on-going literary activity,” (150) “sparked” by Robert Duncan, whom he called, in referring to Duncan’s lectures in Vancouver in July of 1961, a “walking and talking university of verse lore” (151). Davey also



detailed the origin of the term “Tish” and the founding of the magazine. *Tish*, he said – in a comment that predates Bowering’s description of the origin of the term above – was modeled on Cid Corman’s *Origin* and LeRoi Jones and Diane Di Palma’s *The Floating Bear* (both American literary journals), and it took its anagrammatical title from Duncan’s references to the use of the word “shit.” Since the young Canadian poets felt that many modern Canadian poems were “synthetic” and “impersonally fashioned,” they simply “adopted the phonetic inversion suggested by Duncan himself” (153) and called their journal *Tish*. For Davey, *Tish*, which “began as a documentation of the energy gained in a particular place” (157-58), marked a turning-point in Canadian poetry.

## V

*I compose what I call myself from a world. . . . I pose a creative process in which I assemble me from the surrounding facts. . . .* (Robert Duncan)

With this as background, I want to turn now to George Bowering, one of the young Canadian poets who heard Olson and Duncan read in Vancouver in the early 1960s, who studied with Creeley, and who took to heart the teachings of Blaser and Tallman, and was among the group, inspired by all of these influences, that funded the magazine *Tish*. Bowering, who has called himself “an ex-tisher who became a Canadian poet” (*Craft Slices* 100) has, since then, had a long, prolific and distinguished career, as a poet, a fiction writer, and as a critic.

Bowering was born in British Columbia and studied at the University of British Columbia, where Creeley became his Master’s degree thesis adviser. The first collection of poetry that Bowering published was called *Sticks & Stones*.<sup>8</sup> The book, dedicated to Duncan, as “the man who teaches people to

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<sup>8</sup> The 1989 edition of *Sticks & Stones* indicates that the original publication of *Sticks & Stones* “has been one of Canada’s great literary mysteries for almost three decades. Rumoured to have been published . . . in 1962 . . . this book has remained hidden from public view while Bowering’s literary career blossomed. Here, for the first time, is the complete unabridged publication of *Sticks & Stones*” (back cover). This 1989 edition contains an “Endnote” by Roy Miki, the editor of Bowering’s *Selected Poems 1961-1992* (1993). In this Endnote, entitled “Was It a Real Book or Was It Just Made Up” (a reference to Creeley’s essay, “Was That A Real Poem, Or Did You Just Make It Up?”), Miki recounts the mysteries surrounding the original publication of the book, which he calls Bowering’s “most mysterious book” (55).

listen,” contained a preface by Creeley. Two of the poems make explicit references to the tradition we have been tracing. “Wrapped in Black” (25) refers to William Carlos Williams – whom Bowering once described as “the father I chose” (*Errata* 50) – waiting “for death” (Williams died in 1963), “lying in / dying / like a poet.” “Somnia” (16) refers to Olson and “the Maximus poems / making sense all seasons . . . / breaking April over eastern sky / from Gloucester to morning.” In short, as can be seen even here at the outset, Bowering took “a phenomenological position that attempts to respond to the flow of consciousness at the moment of [its] occurrence” (Toye 47), and he has followed this kind of “flow” throughout his career, just as Olson, Duncan, and Blaser had. Indeed, Bowering’s inspiration was immediate and direct. He described the situation this way: “In the early sixties the young Vancouverians were reading Olson as much as they could, quoting him . . . holding discussions about his pronouncements. They found him very difficult to read, this huge Yankee, but they knew that he was announcing the ‘new’” (*Left Hook* 77).<sup>9</sup> In addition to the wide reading they were doing, the literal presence of the American poets in Vancouver was especially important to these young Canadians. As Bowering said about Duncan’s visits, they were “generative” (*Left Hook* 99).

Bowering’s poetry is difficult to excerpt and to comment on briefly, since his long career and his elaborate canon, like Olson’s, Duncan’s and Blaser’s, really, ultimately, needs to be understood as one long uninterrupted poem – and, indeed, several of his most important poems are themselves long poems.

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However, Miki argues that the poems in *Sticks & Stones* “are the pure product of the *Tish* group days.” He adds that most of the poems were composed “from August 1961 to May 1962” and that the book itself was probably originally printed at the “end of May, 1962” (59). As Miki says, “There’s the pun on ‘words will never hurt me,’ ‘sticks and stones and words,’ and so forth, but the main notion was that you built poems out of actual things – and some poems . . . carry that image through, of poems made of actual things,” (interview with Bowering, “10 April 1985,” qtd. in *Sticks & Stones* 59). He confirms that “The dedication to Robert Duncan acknowledges the importance of Duncan for the *Tish* group.” He also corroborates the fact that “Robert Creeley . . . was Bowering’s supervisor for his MA thesis” (59).

<sup>9</sup> In spite of such pronouncements by the poets themselves, not all critics subscribe to the belief that there was an overt and specific “influence” running between the American Black Mountain poets and the young Canadians. Wiens, for example, argues that “the Black Mountain influence has been exaggerated” and that the “‘modernism’ which developed in Canada during that period was a nebulous and internally differentiated creature; and that the failures of the young poets at this time were at least as productive as their successes” (84).

As Bowering himself has said, “I got into the habit of writing long poems.” And, he added, since the 1960s, “I have been writing long poems longer and longer ever since” (“Alphabiography” 308).

What I want to concentrate on here are several of these long pieces, each of which, like *Sticks & Stones*, is crucial to Bowering’s early career and thus important to the tradition he grew out of, the “tradition” that he and others established among the young poets in Canada in the early 1960s, the tradition that I have been trying to document.<sup>10</sup> The first of these texts is a book-length poem, *George, Vancouver: A Discovery Poem* (1970). In addition, I want to consider Bowering’s *Autobiology* (1972), a collection of forty-eight numbered and individually titled sections, really a series of prose poems, “bio-texts,” or “historiographical metafiction.” Indeed, “Biotexts” seems to be an appropriate term for these so specifically biographical or autobiographical texts. In *Errata*, which one critic has described as “an example of the poetics of extended form presented in an extended form of poetics, that is, in the . . . form of the serial poem as prose argument(s)” (Barbour 27), Bowering himself wrote: “I never wanted to write an autobiography. I think that certain works I have done with what looks like my life story should be called bio-text[s]. . . . Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an extension of him” (*Errata* 34).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I am mindful of the caution that Bowering himself has given with respect to readers and critics who attempt to describe or document traditions. In the first entry of his *Errata*, for instance, Bowering wrote: “People who posit ideas such as The Canadian Tradition or The Northern Experience should travel less and spend time in more places.” Even so, this entry begins, “In the theatre, each member of the audience sees a different play because no two people are sitting in the same seat” (1). Poets and their commentators, both historically and notoriously, have often sat in different seats.

<sup>11</sup> Although she does not discuss any of Bowering’s work in commenting on his term “bio-text,” Saul interprets Bowering’s term. A “biotext,” she says, “captures the tension at work between . . . the fragments of a life being lived, the ‘bio’ (with its emphasis on the self, the family, origins, and genealogy), and the ‘text,’ the site where these various aspects are in the process of being articulated in writing. Rather than admitting a gap between self and text, ‘biotext’ foregrounds the writer’s efforts to articulate him or her self through the writing process.” And thus, “the text itself comes to life” (260). Therefore, “rather than presenting finished versions of a life, these texts focus on the process of writing a life – the raptures, gaps, and workings of memory,” and they incorporate “elements of the epic, the lyric, and the documentary while challenging the very assumptions invested in these genres” (260-61). Similarly, in making use of a trope that is particularly relevant in terms of the title of this paper, Newman describes the process of “life-writing” as one that “crosses and recrosses the borders

## VI

*I do not compose poetry to show you what I have seen, but rather because I have seen. That is, this poet's job is not to tell you what it is like, but to make a poem.* (George Bowering)

*Autobiology* begins with a chapter called “The Raspberries,” a Gertrude Stein-like<sup>12</sup> reminiscence:

When I was thirty I had free raspberries in the back yard & I loved them. In the back yard & I ate them. & I ate them in the kitchen out of an aluminum pot. When I was thirty I loved raspberries, I loved to eat them. I loved the way they were made of many pieces in my mouth, & they came from the outside of the bush & the inside. They came from the outside in the sunshine & from the inside in the darkness, & that is where they went again. But inside in the darkness is where we are told the subconscious is & that is why I could not eat raspberries. (*Autobiology* 7)<sup>13</sup>

Much of the *Autobiology* is made up of such sequences based on specific memories. Indeed, as Bowering writes, in “The Verandah,” “so much depended on not now . . . but my memory” (*A* 18).<sup>14</sup> In this way, “[t]he word from my hand follows the release of my eye from the dream of my release from the ground but just” (*A* 13). And then he adds, “I began to think I was a super man . . . because I could not be ordinary or what was the use of being here inside my mind instead of out there where they all were?” (*A* 14).

In the chapter called “Composition” he writes:

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between auto/biography and fiction in order to question static and holistic conceptions of the writing subject” (333).

<sup>12</sup> In *Errata*, Bowering describes his indebtedness to Gertrude Stein and suggests that, finally, they might be evaluated similarly. He said: “I have known the name of Gertrude Stein all my life, and read her seriously for twenty years. I guess that when all is said and done I will settle for what they gave her: I will be someone who did not write books . . . to be placed in the mainstream of Canadian literature, but all the same someone whom they cannot write a history without mentioning. He was always pottering around in his garden, they will say, and once in a long while someone would come around and, well not really admire, but perhaps enquire about the odd-looking shrubs” (16).

<sup>13</sup> Hereafter, all further references to Bowering’s *Autobiology* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *A*.

<sup>14</sup> Here it seems almost certain that Bowering is echoing William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” and suggesting, as Williams had, that virtually *everything* depends on memories. Bowering’s reference to “The blood of the white chickens” (*A* 65) seems to be a further specific reference to Williams’ poem and to the “white / chickens” in it. This is especially the case when one remembers Williams’ continuous stress on “no ideas but in things.”

Consciousness is how it is composed. Consciousness is how it is composed. . . . Consciousness is how it is composed. . . . Consciousness is how it is composed. . . . It is composed & not by us because we are in the composition. I say consciousness is how it is composed. (A 33)

Later, he adds, "Composition is not there . . . & you are here & that is where & you might believe when. . . . Consciousness is how it is composed" (A 38).

Throughout *Autobiology* Bowering makes references to specific times and places in his past, his history, and then brings them into the present, into an immediate moment of consciousness. He writes, "I found myself for the first time in the present. . . . [B]ut I was already not the same & each time thereafter I was only by memory & the gift of the present not the same . . . because the present continues not moving" (A 19-20). And then, later, he writes:

The next place is really a series of places so that the next place is really time, that is, a series . . . that is certainly, there . . . & we always had a town or city nearby, & though we thought it was always different we always acted as if it was the same, perhaps, because we were, where we were, was always the same, though we spoke always of the difference, from time to time, of the place, & so, there you are. The next place, then, is always, a series of times, & we were always careful about time, & here I am, speaking of "we," so there we are. (A 75)

At the end of the book, Bowering poses several Stein-like unanswered and unanswerable questions. These questions are posed as statements and left hanging: "I am in the middle of a stream & my body is the stream & what is the boat. . . . If this is the stream & I am still to float what is the boat. What is the boat" (A 101-02). This is the essence of his *Autobiology*.

In the Prologue to his novel *Burning Water*, Bowering wrote:

When I was a boy I was the only person I knew who was named George, but I did have the same first name as the king. That made me feel as if current history and self were bound together. . . . When I came to live in Vancouver, I thought of Vancouver, and so now geography involved my name too, George Vancouver. He might have felt such romance, sailing for a king named George the Third. What could I do but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place? (9)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bowering added, "so I wrote a poetry book about Vancouver and me. Then a radio play about us. . . . But I was not satisfied. The story of the greatest navigational voyage of all time was not lyrical, and it was certainly not dramatic. It was narrative. So I began to plan a novel, about us, about the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken. Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor" (*Burning Water* 9).

Like his *Autobiology, George, Vancouver*, his first long poem, also fits into the *genre* of Bowering's "georgeographical verse" (Gervais 12). Dedicated to Warren Tallman – with another bow to William Carlos Williams and his poem *Paterson* – Bowering's poem conflates his own name, George, with that of the historical figure, Captain George Vancouver, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century explorer who sailed during the reign of King George III, and with the location, Vancouver, where the poem is set. It is, in this sense, as the sub-title to the book makes plain, a tripartite "discovery" poem. As Bowering has said elsewhere, in addition to remembering "Captain Vancouver's visits to our coast," he had to "cover the ground [himself] and bring any myths to life." He also had, he said, to "discover – and invent – our land for [himself]" ("Confessions" 79).

Bowering has described how "North is . . . an important concept for Canadians. . . . North is supposed to be mystical, national, psychological" ("Alphabiography" 308). In short, Bowering had an equal investment in the poem and the personages (primarily himself and George Vancouver) and in the place. As Hartley has quite rightly said, Bowering "reworks his life in connection with a well-known historical figure . . . and a well-known geographical location, simultaneously rediscovering both Vancouvers as they intersect with Bowering as both poet and persona" (97-98). Indeed, Bowering's poem was to become his own "northwest passage" and, in a metaphorical way, the result of his own vicarious "voyage" from Black Mountain north to Vancouver, Canada.

Consisting of thirty-three poems, several of which purport to be journal entries, definitions, or catalogs of "this Voyage of Discovery" (*George, Vancouver* 29)<sup>16</sup> or, in several instances, historical notes or references to events or circumstances in England at the time that Vancouver was in the area and charting the territory, the poem begins with both a physical and a metaphysical reference, an impossible possibility:

To chart this land  
 hanging over ten thousand inlets  
 & a distant mind of as many narrows,

an impossible thing----

no music

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<sup>16</sup> Hereafter, all further references to this book will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *GV*.

sounds as many changes with such  
common theme.

That is the possible.

The charts will  
take care of themselves. (*GV* 5)

The rest of the poem “charts” two journeys of “discovery,” that of Captain George Vancouver in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that of George Bowering in the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>17</sup> As Bowering, conflating himself with Vancouver and mixing the physical and the imaginative “territories” of their dual discoveries together, says, “There is that meeting edge / . . . across the ground of the continent” (*GV* 6). It is an “edge” here brought together.

Clearly merging his own voice anachronistically with that of his imagined predecessor, Captain Vancouver, Bowering says, “I, George, / sail beneath a suspended bridge,” one that is visibly “invisible in the fog” and with “the pressure of all that / continent, trackless” (*GV* 14) before him. And, as he also says, Captain Vancouver often “seems lost in the poem” (*GV* 15). This is an intriguing statement since *both* George Vancouver and George Bowering seem to flit in and out of the poem, being found, then lost, then found again as we read along, journeying as it were with them – and even, occasionally, getting somewhat lost ourselves. In so conflating himself with George Vancouver, and thus exercising the inherent “biotextual impulse” (Hartley 106) of the poem, George Bowering suggests another way in which he and Vancouver can be paired. In saying that “Vancouver’s job was to look at the coast / north to the passage, / & check on foreign squatters (*GV* 19), George Bowering, likewise, might well be thinking of his own “job” as a Canadian writer, one who needed to guard “the passage” of the poetic “information” being passed back and forth between America and Canada, one who needed to check on the “foreign” (American) influences which were

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<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning that George Vancouver, before he made his own voyages of discovery, served under Captain James Cook on Cook’s third voyage (1776-78) on his *HMS Discovery*.

making their ways “north” through the overland “passage” across the continent. Later on, in keeping with this increasingly complicated metaphor, Bowering, in the guise of an historian or a reporter, says, “The North West Passage / is the waterway / to the Kingdom of God . . . deep inland / up Cook’s River. . . // & you, Vancouver, will lead us” (*GV* 31). Vancouver, Bowering says (and perhaps he is also here thinking – even primarily – of himself), “went to the end & came back” (*GV* 36). And thus the journey he (they) undertook took them “That far south, / this far north” (*GV* 37).

At the very end of the poem, Bowering refers to “invit[ing] the fog / of the . . . current” and to sailing with a “map in their minds.” But he immediately cautions and reminds himself that much of this – his – journey “is conjecture” and that, in his poem, these are the “orders / I take and give” (*GV* 38). In the final entry in the sequence and the book, Bowering writes,

Let us say  
this is as far as I, George,  
have traveled,

the line  
obscured still . . . (*GV* 39)

Here, at the end of the poem, he acknowledges that he has “seen some / of what lies in the mind,” and that it has permeated his consciousness “like fish odor” and, keeping to the metaphor he has used since the outset, that it has gone “into the life-giving fog of that coast” (*GV* 39). With this, the poem, having rocked back and forth on the tides of their separate times, George Vancouver and George Bowering meld and merge into each other in the mysteries of an all-pervasive fog, giving new life to their dual, mutual, territory.

## VII

*I see – it’s some idea about life, some sort of philosophy.* (Henry James)

In 1959, shortly before he was to make his powerful impact on the young Canadian poets in Vancouver, Robert Duncan wrote:

These are the threads. And the weaving now of the design is so close, so immediate and so intertwined, with so many undiscovered threads, that I must trust the figures as they emerge, have faith that there is the wholeness of form. . . . There is a wholeness . . . that we will never know; we are always . . . the moment of that wholeness . . . but it, the wholeness . . . goes back into an obscurity and extends to and into an obscurity. (qtd. in Allen 436).



Perhaps it has always been the case that the “threads,” and the “weaving” of any final “design,” are inevitably “so intertwined” that the final figure in every literary carpet “goes back into an obscurity.” As Henry James said in commenting on “The Figure in the Carpet,” “the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn’t been lost. That is the situation” (45). Likewise, it is the situation here, and we “on the evidence” (46) are left to come to our own conclusions, just as James’ readers were.

I hope that I have adequately presented the “evidence” here and have provided – and come to – an appropriate “conclusion” with respect to the complex relationships in the rather elaborate crisscrossing of the North American continent from Black Mountain to Vancouver, and between the American poets and their Canadian counterparts, but that, ultimately, will be for others to decide. Whatever the final decisions may be, let me here give the last word to George Bowering:

Well was that the end yes & no. It was the end of the mystery & the end of the decade & the end of the Black Mountain Influence & the end of the geographical mystery of Canadian literature & it was in a way the end of Canadian literature. (*A Short Sad Book* 139)

...

I just want to know it’s not over, not (*Errata* 23)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Note the absence of any final period here – which is the way Bowering left it.

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CIRCULATING GENRES  
AND THE EMERGENCE OF A  
TRANSCONTINENTAL POSTMODERN



REINGARD M. NISCHIK

## Two Nations, One Genre?

*The Beginnings of the Modernist Short Story  
in the United States and Canada*

In view of the fact that there is no comparative study of the American and Canadian short story yet,<sup>1</sup> I want to focus, in this article, on the state of the short story in both countries at one particular period of time, the crucial period of the beginnings of modernism. This means that I will deal with the period of the American short story that was dominated by writers from the Midwest (Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald) rather than by Southern writers, who came to the foreground in the Southern Renaissance<sup>2</sup> as of the 1930s (Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor). I will thus be interested in the period of "high modernism" around World War I and the 1920s, and I hope that my comparative approach to the North American short story at this particular developmental stage will provide a useful historical context for several essays in this volume that deal with later North American short story writers.

I understand "modernism" as a periodizing concept within the arts, here a literary period of international relevance which is characterized by a network of interrelated historical, technological, intellectual, and aesthetic developments, and which resulted in innovative interrelated forms and styles of expressions in the arts and literature. Since the fundamental transformation of societies of the western hemisphere as of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a multinational phenomenon, including an increasing traffic of all kinds (also intellectual and artistic) across regional boundaries, questions of (cultural, literary) similarities, commonalities, and differences between different cultural regions arise.

Among the major technical innovations in the modernist short story are: a decisive turning away from "plot stories" ("Poison Plot," Sherwood An-

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<sup>1</sup> Nischik, *The Canadian Short Story*, and Nischik, *History of Literature in Canada* repeatedly draw cross-connections.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. ch. 1 of Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance*.

derson) toward a looser, seemingly “formless” structure and towards the inner worlds of the characters (subjective narrative focalization); an aesthetic of the glimpse rather than of broader views (“slice-of-life stories,” Anderson); epiphany (James Joyce) as an instant way of understanding and development; allusion and ellipsis (“iceberg-principle,” Ernest Hemingway); an indirect, symbolistic rendering of information, in particular concise, objectifying images to indirectly convey feelings and emotions (“objective correlative,” T. S. Eliot); narrative economy and stylistic succinctness; in-medias-res beginnings and open endings; and a greater focus on the narrative process rather than product. As to motif and theme, the modernist short story often deals with what Frank O’Connor called “submerged population groups,” with lonely, alienated, disillusioned post-war characters, often in the framework of the “initiation story,” which was particularly popular at the time.<sup>3</sup> Earl E. Fitz formulates in general: “Characterized by its preoccupation with consciousness, identity, and perception, the literature of modernism is less concerned with action and event in the external world than with the way a mind reflects on itself and on the universe surrounding it” (121).

In the United States and Canada, the short story entered the modernist period under completely different preconditions and with totally different histories behind it. In the United States, the beginnings of this genre go back to Washington Irving in the 1820s. In the period of the American Renaissance around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American short story saw a first peak with writers and classical narratives that supported the evaluation that the short story was a US-American genre invention (Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville). It saw another flourishing in the period of naturalism and realism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and partly the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with well-known writers such as Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather. The genre was thus in full swing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America and started vigorously into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with many authors who have become canonical today.

The healthy state of the American short story was supported by a wide range of possibilities and indeed a demand for magazine publication of individual stories: “The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a huge growth in the

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting theoretical approach to the modernist short story in general see also Dominic Head (*The Modernist Short Story*) who argues that “the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism” (1).

popularity and sales of the short story. . . . In 1885 there were around 3,300 magazines in the United States which published short stories. By 1905 this figure had risen to 10,800” (Scofield 107).<sup>4</sup>

The situation was quite different in Canada, where writers, especially avant-garde writers with a modernist writing style, had to look for publication venues outside their country, turning to European and American magazines. As Ken Norris states, “it was not until the 1960s that avant-garde literary magazines began to appear in Canada, some fifty years after the outburst of radical European Modernism” (9). No wonder then that the Canadian short story in the modernist period was still close to its beginning stage. In fact, one could argue that it was only then that the Canadian short story was coming into its own. There had been first beginnings at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by writers such as Isabella Valancy Crawford, Susan Francis Harrison, and Gilbert Parker. Today these writers are mainly known for their less formulaic stories reprinted in anthologies of Canadian short fiction. All in all, however, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canadian short fiction, plot-driven adventure stories and formula writing were the order of the day, with two significant exceptions: Duncan Campbell Scott’s short story collection *In the Village of Viger* (1896, set in Quebec), which, with its largely realistic depiction of characters and of complex psychological states, brought realism to Canadian short fiction, as in a way did the animal story popularized by Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton. Their naturalist or realist wild animal stories came to be seen as the epitome of Canadian short narratives around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not least because they fitted the popular image of Canada as dominated by nature and wildlife.<sup>5</sup>

It took two decisive and devoted innovators like Sherwood Anderson in the United States and Raymond Knister in Canada to usher in the modernist short story in North America.

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<sup>4</sup> This rise in significance does not only refer to the commercial magazines but also to the little magazines. See also Willa Cather’s statement in her essay “On the Art of Fiction”: “Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand – a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods – or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values” (939-40).

<sup>5</sup> Both Roberts and Seton were still publishing collections of animal stories in the 1930s. For a brief survey of early Canadian short prose see Nischik, *The Canadian Short Story* (3-5).



Although Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) also published seven novels, his main literary achievements lie in the short story.<sup>6</sup> The publication of his short story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio*, in 1919, revolutionized short story writing, and Anderson, himself influenced by Ivan Turgenev<sup>7</sup> and stylistically by Gertrude Stein,<sup>8</sup> became an influential model for many contemporary and later short story writers (such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, J. D. Salinger, and Raymond Carver).<sup>9</sup> Anderson published more than seventy short stories, most of them reprinted or first published in his four short story collections: *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919),<sup>10</sup> *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921; including "I Want to Know Why" and "The Egg"), *Horses and Men* (1923; including "I'm a Fool" and "The Man Who Became a Woman"), and *Death in the Woods* (1933). Anderson's short story oeuvre thus clusters in or around the 1920s, when he was at the peak of his short story creativity.

Born in Ohio, a largely self-educated man and voracious reader without a college degree, Anderson brought a new aesthetics to the short story. He was in life-long opposition to the commercialized magazine or plot stories, written for effect and to please the masses:

There are no plot short stories in life. . . . The popular magazines are but factories for efficient standardization of the minds of people for the purpose of serving the factories. . . . The writer is but the workman whose materials are human lives . . . The Modern Movement . . . is in reality an attempt on the part of the workman to get back into his own hands some control over the tools and materials of his craft. . . . To take the lives of . . . people and bend or twist them to suit the needs of some cleverly thought out plot to give your readers a false emotion is as mean and ignoble as to sell out living men or women. (Anderson, *The Modern Writer* 23, 31-32, 39)

Anderson coined the phrase of "The Poison Plot" (Anderson, *A Story* 255) to characterize what he detested, namely the overemphasis on plot in stories.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance: "Most of his novels are now seldom read. Even during his lifetime, it seems to have been understood that whatever enduring name Anderson would have would depend on his short fiction" (Small xi).

<sup>7</sup> See Turgenev's book of related sketches *Annals of a Sportsman*, an Anderson favorite. See also Judy Jo Small (8-9).

<sup>8</sup> On literary relations between Stein and Anderson see Linda W. Wagner, "Sherwood, Stein, the Sentence, and Grape Sugar and Oranges."

<sup>9</sup> For a long list of American writers apparently influenced by Anderson, see Robert Allen Papinchak (ix).

<sup>10</sup> Including well-known stories such as "Hands," "Paper Pills," and "Adventure."

He preferred grasping for that always elusive “large, loose sense of life” (qtd. in Curry, “Anderson’s Theories” 100). In *A Story Teller’s Story* he stated:

There was a notion that ran through all story telling in America, that stories must be built about a plot and that absurd Anglo-Saxon notion that they must point a moral, uplift the people, make better citizens, etc., etc. The magazines were filled with these plot stories. . . . “The Poison Plot” I called it . . . as the plot notion did seem to me to poison all story telling. What was wanted I thought was form, not plot, an altogether more elusive and difficult thing to come at. (255)

Anderson was thus after a kind of narrative that suited, indeed conditioned, his material and pondering narrators and that seemed natural to the story told, posing questions rather than giving answers and solutions.

In his numerous essays, notebooks, autobiographical writings (diaries, memoirs), and letters Anderson also, if diffusely, delineated something like a poetics of the short story. In contrast to the plot-oriented short story poetics still influential at the time, Anderson favored an anti-constructivist, intuitive, moment-oriented, and “organic” view of short story writing. In *The Writer’s Book* he states: “The short story is the result of a sudden passionate interest. It is an idea grasped whole as one would pick an apple in an orchard” (qtd. in Curry 85).<sup>11</sup> Anderson associated the conception of a short story with “moments that bring glory into the life of the writer” (*The Writer’s Book* 91), thereby also implying the high status short fiction had for him. The form of the short story correlated with his view that the “true history of life is but a history of moments. It is only at rare moments that we live” (qtd. in Papinchak 3).

Anderson wrote the first fifteen of the twenty-two stories collected in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) within one year between fall 1915 and fall 1916.<sup>12</sup> Half of the *Winesburg* stories were first published in the little magazines *The Masses* (New York), *The Little Review* (Chicago/New York), and *The Seven Arts* (New York) between 1915 and 1918 before they were collected in *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919. The modernist American short story, that is, was thus created as of 1915, simultaneously with modernist American poetry, and

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<sup>11</sup> *The Writer’s Book* was left uncompleted at Anderson’s sudden death in 1941, but one of the most important aspects of this text is the insight it provides concerning Anderson’s aesthetics of the short story; see Martha Mulroy Curry, *The “Writer’s Book”* (lii-lxv).

<sup>12</sup> “The Rabbit-pen” (which remained uncollected) was Anderson’s first ever short story to be published and the only one to appear in the respected commercial magazine *Harper’s* in 1914. It was written to prove that he was able to write successful commercial stories; this story was a kind of antithesis to the modernist short story he then set out to create.

around 1920, the modernist short story had been established by Sherwood Anderson in the United States, with Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald then also publishing important short story collections.

The Canadian Raymond Knister (1899-1932) – like Anderson a writer of short stories, poetry, novels, and literary and cultural criticism – started to publish his innovative short stories just a few years after Anderson. His earliest stories appeared in the American avant-garde literary magazine *The Midland* in the years 1922 and 1924 as well as in the Paris avant-garde magazine *This Quarter*<sup>13</sup> in 1925. Knister was able to place only one story in *The Canadian Forum*, a few stories in the Canadian popular magazines *MacLean's Magazine* and *Chatelaine*, and a series of sketches in the *Toronto Star Weekly*, all in the 1920s. Knister died by drowning in 1932 when he was just thirty-three years old; at that time he had only published twenty-seven of the several hundred stories he had completed.<sup>14</sup> Some twenty of his stories were printed posthumously; thus he never saw a collection of his stories published.<sup>15</sup> Canadian publishers and literary magazines were few and far between, and not only were they not open to modernist experiments but not even open to Canadian literature in general. Knister did not tire of complaining of the situation of serious writers in Canada.

At the same time, Knister worked toward alleviating the situation. He wrote perceptive essays in which he expressed general poetological statements that are reminiscent of those of T. S. Eliot (Eliot had published his seminal essays “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “Hamlet and His Problems” in 1919). Similar to Anderson, Knister made a point of linking up to contemporary Canadian and international writers who were also involved in the modernist project (see his extensive correspondence). He worked very hard to make a living as a creative writer in Canada against all odds, supporting himself by journalism, freelancing for several newspapers, writing numerous reviews (mainly for American newspapers) and several important essays. At the time of his early death, Knister had reformed the Canadian

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<sup>13</sup> Knister was appointed Canadian correspondent for this magazine and became associate editor of *The Midland*. He was also the first Canadian writer who published in *This Quarter*, alongside such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound.

<sup>14</sup> On the circumstances of Knister's early death and the myths surrounding it see the article by his daughter Imogen Givens (1979-80).

<sup>15</sup> So far, three collections of Knister's stories are available, see bibliography.

short story, published imagist poetry and two novels,<sup>16</sup> and was hopeful for a budding Canadian literature.

Similar to Anderson, Knister's lasting contributions (next to his poetry) lie mainly in the short story and in an innovative poetics. A voracious reader, he did not think – in contrast to many of his fellow Canadians at the time – that an awareness of international literary developments would hamper the further evolution of Canadian literature. At the same time, Knister was involved in the formation of the Canadian canon, especially concerning the short story. His first published book was the anthology entitled *Canadian Short Stories* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928), for which he – after spending several years reading all the Canadian short stories he could unearth – selected seventeen texts to show a beginning of a national history of the genre. The book also includes an important introduction (“The Canadian Short Story”), a useful list of Canadian short stories hitherto printed in magazines (comprising 280 titles), and a list of books of short stories by Canadian authors (comprising 91 titles). Knister opens this introduction as follows, showing his awareness for being part of a cultural threshold situation (and using imagery that reflects his involvement with farm life):

At the outset of a new era there is opportunity to look back upon the old; and in nothing have we more clearly passed an epoch than in the short story, here in Canada. Literature as a whole is changing, new fields are being broken, new crops are being raised in them, and the changes apparent in other countries show counterparts in our development. (xi)

Like Anderson, Knister criticizes the commercialization of short story writing: “The general materialism had imposed a false aesthetics, on this continent” (xiii). He denounces the “Americanization” (meaning commercialization) of the genre, against which he would like the Canadian short story to take a stand (Knister, “The Canadian Short Story”). At the same time, Knister recognizes the unrivaled excellence of contemporary American short fiction and relates its significance to the large number of short stories published in the United States and their distribution in widely circulating popular magazines (see Knister, “Democracy and the Short Story,” written in 1920, first published in 1975).

Although both Anderson and Knister also wrote short fiction set in the city (see, for instance, both Knister's and Anderson's texts set in Chicago), they are mainly known for their stories in a rural or small-town setting –

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<sup>16</sup> Another one was published posthumously in 2006.

Anderson with reference mainly to the Midwest and, to a much lesser extent, the South (Anderson wrote twelve stories set in the South),<sup>17</sup> Knister probably with reference to southwestern Ontario (mostly unspecified). Both writers were born and raised in a rural context, and both of them, although they also traveled or stayed abroad for a while, remained faithful to their country of origin and did not emigrate or become expatriate writers, as so many of their colleagues did at the time.

Significant parallels as well as differences concerning Anderson's and Knister's short stories become apparent in a direct comparison of their narratives. I have selected two of their best and best-known stories, with a similar theme, similar motifs, and some similar narrative techniques. As to production, publication, and reception of these stories, Sherwood Anderson's "I Want to Know Why" (set in Kentucky and upstate New York) was composed in August 1919 and was first printed three months later in H. L. Mencken's magazine *Smart Set*. The story was then included in Anderson's second short story collection, *The Triumph of the Egg*, of 1921 and went on to develop into one of his canonical stories, often reprinted, taught, and analyzed. Raymond Knister wrote "The First Day of Spring" (set in a rural, otherwise unspecified area) in 1924/25; although it is a competent story, it was not printed until 1976, half a century after its conception. Accordingly, in the still scant Knister criticism, there is practically no detailed treatment of this story, apart from one recent, excellent reading by Julia Breitbach of 2007. In other words, whereas "I Want to Know Why" is recognized as a "classic" of the American short story today, "The First Day of Spring" is still being established as an important early step in the development of the Canadian short story.

Both "I Want to Know Why" and "The First Day of Spring" are initiation stories, "uncompleted initiation stories" in Mordecai Marcus' terminology, in the sense that the process of coming to grips with a new level of awareness

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<sup>17</sup> With one exception – "A Meeting South," a New Orleans story – Anderson's southern stories are all set in the Upper South: Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. His published Upper South stories are: "These Mountaineers"; "A Meeting South"; "Brother Death"; "When We Care"; "Justice"; "A Dead Dog"; "I Want to Know Why"; and "Senility". Two more stories have a likely, though unspecified Virginia setting: "A Sentimental Journey" and "A Jury Case." Finally, two of his unpublished stories – collected posthumously in *The Sherwood Anderson Reader* – are also set in the Upper South: "Nobody Laughed" and "Daughters." In fact, one could call Anderson a border narrative writer of the regional and his stories a cultural marker of the Mason-Dixon line: his Upper South stories dovetail with his lower Midwest stories set in southern Ohio, Indiana, southern Illinois, and Iowa.

of self and world is still going on at the end of the stories. Both texts deal with the slow awakening of sexuality and with turbulent, diffuse emotions of their teenage male protagonists. The initiation into the adult world of these main characters is coupled with painful disillusionment and a gnawing lack of understanding on their part. Either story also makes use of autobiographical elements of their authors' lives: the farm life Knister experienced when growing up and later working on his German father's farm in southwestern Ontario, and the racetrack of horses as Anderson's passion especially as a boy.<sup>18</sup> In both stories, animals play a crucial role in the protagonists' development, also by means of the modernist device of symbolic displacement. In Anderson's story, the boy narrator perceives his beloved racehorses to exude a covert sexuality; the animals are then later linked directly to a prostitute ("the one that was lean and hard-mouthed and looked a little like the gelding Middlestride but not clean like him" [12]), and particularly to the horse trainer, Jerry Tillford. The boy briefly feels love towards Tillford during their non-verbal communication about racehorses before his affection turns to hate when he sees Jerry enjoying the same rapport with a prostitute as he had earlier with him about the fabulous stallion Sunstreak. A similar displacement concerning human being and animal is at play in the Knister story, where the horse Cherry is described as a "long-haired bay mare with trim legs," holding "her head high" (3). At the epiphanic end of this text, the boy's stroking of "the warm nose of a colt" while whispering to the animal "You're going to be broken in" (8) is an oblique reference also to his own initiation into the adult world – which had just taken place due to a painful event brought to the narrator's attention by his father: the schoolgirl the boy had been longing for from a distance was pregnant and got married to another boy and had most probably killed their baby in a pig trough (7).

Whereas the striking similarities between both stories thus mainly concern theme and motif, the significant differences between them are mainly connected to style and technique or, to put it differently, to the extent to which an innovative modernist writing agenda is implemented in each of these texts. For one thing, Anderson is the better stylist. He is known to have been a heavy reviser. He claimed that rather than revising portions of a text,

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<sup>18</sup> See the parallels between "I Want to Know Why" and a statement on horses in Anderson's *Memoirs*: "Tears came into my eyes and a lump into my throat. It was my first love. Oh the beautiful, the courageous and aristocratic creatures. I grew sick with envy of the drivers" (qtd. in Small 209).

he would throw away an entire manuscript and write it anew from scratch until he was satisfied with it. In this way, he had spent ten years working on his other well-known initiation story, "Death in the Woods" (1926; Curry, "Anderson's Theories" 102-05). While Anderson was about forty-five years old at the time of writing "I Want to Know Why," Knister was twenty years younger and had not yet developed such a meticulous approach to writing. Many of the stories from the beginning of his career were still unpublished at the time of his early death; had he lived, they would surely have profited from later revisions.

Although both stories are told by youthful first-person narrators, Anderson's verbal style is much more authentic and gripping, more "modern." The narrative has a convincing oral and vernacular touch not least because of Anderson's intense study of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In contrast, Knister's story is written in a more formal, indeed partly poetic, style which altogether comes across as more conservative than Anderson's. For instance, Knister writes:

The blue of the sky softens, the air lifts, and it is as though the lightness of a life above the earth were being made ready, an entering spirit to pervade the uncoloured and frost-clogged flesh of the world; or perhaps it is as though this flesh had suddenly sighed in its sleep, an exhalation intoxicating to men and beasts. (3)

Compare this with Anderson, who already sounds a bit like J. D. Salinger (or, rather, Holden Caulfield) some thirty years later:

Well, I must tell you about what we did and let you in on what I'm talking about. Four of us boys from Beckersville . . . made up our minds we were going to the races, not just to Lexington or Louisville, I don't mean, but to the big Eastern track we were always hearing our Beckersville men talk about, to Saratoga. We were all pretty young then. (6)

Both passages are taken from close to the beginnings of the stories, and they also demonstrate another difference between the two texts: whereas Anderson uses an *in-medias-res* beginning, which was innovative at the time,<sup>19</sup> Knister opts for a conventional exposition in an omniscient narrative voice:

It had been a mild winter, and yet when March came, and days in which wheels threw the snow like mud in stretches of road where snow still lay, the world was changed.

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<sup>19</sup> See the non-referential sequence signal right at the beginning: "We got up at four in the morning, that first day in the East" (5).

This change was more than seeming. Who misses the first day of spring? Snow may linger on the ground and return, but the new smell is there, more potent perhaps than it is ever to be in lush days of blossoms. (3)

After the two opening paragraphs in an omniscient voice, the Knister story shifts, rather abruptly, to a first-person perspective.

Such differences in structure and in the narrative process significantly influence the reader's reception of both stories. Anderson's text, with its many digressions, apparent "formlessness," disorderliness, and fragmentariness, as well as the open question posed by the story's title, reflects the confused protagonist's state of mind. His text integrates modernist tenets into the narrative process more decisively than Knister does in his story.

My comparative investigation of the beginnings of the modernist short story in the United States and Canada has thus garnered the following results: First, the modernist short story developed at roughly the same time in both countries. Second, this happened in an entirely different generic historical context, with the American modernist short story developing as an important innovation in an already extensive history of a genre "invented" in the United States in the 1820s, and the Canadian short story still close to its beginnings at the time after tentative starts in the 1880s. Third, whereas the innovative short stories by American writers could find American venues for publication even if American writers also published in Europe, Canadian modernist writers had practically no publication options in their own country; they had to turn to American and European magazines and publishers. Fourth, the modernist American short story was altogether more successful and accomplished than the Canadian short story of the period, which was not as technically advanced and influential, even in its own country, as its American counterpart. Fifth, whereas the American short story developed rather quickly during the later 1910s, the development was much slower and more halting in Canada.<sup>20</sup> Sixth, the direction of influence was largely one-sided at the time, with Canadian writers very much aware of American writing, while Americans paid hardly any heed to Canadian developments in the genre. Morley Callaghan, who once significantly called himself an "American writer" (22), was clearly an exception.

Thus the colonial time lag difference between both countries of some one hundred years, amongst other factors, also showed in the development of the

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<sup>20</sup> Thus realism had entered the Canadian short story decisively only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Sara Jeannette Duncan and Frederick Philip Grove.



modernist Canadian short story. Yet, as we saw, the Canadian modernist branch of the genre did start to develop at about the same time as in the United States, if haltingly and more modestly so, and the explosion of short story writing in Canada as of the 1960s would hardly have been possible without the early practitioners of Canadian short story writing during this period<sup>21</sup> paving the way. Comparing the American and Canadian short story as of the 1960s would yield different results. But that is another story.

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DIETER MEINDL

## Canada/American South in the Short Story

*Flannery O'Connor – Jack Hodgins – Leon Rooke*

This essay deals with three short stories respectively involving modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. The successive and overlapping literary currents indicated yield the contours of a cultural scenario in which these three stories – by Flannery O'Connor, Jack Hodgins, and Leon Rooke – reflect the growing stature of English Canadian literature in its North-American context. Around and during World War II, American Southern modernism – the Southern Renaissance – figured as North America's foremost movement in Anglophone fiction. Since then, modernism has given way to the two “post-isms” referred to, highlighted here by two writers with western Canadian backgrounds: Hodgins, who, though influenced particularly by Southern modernist Flannery O'Connor, can also be considered a Canadian postmodernist; and Rooke, who, hailing from the American South, absorbed Canada's colonial heritage as a resident of British Columbia during the 1970s and 80s and is presented as an accomplished postcolonialist Canadian writer here.

The first text to be analyzed, O'Connor's “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953), poses the problem of the relationship between modernism – an international or at least western literary trend – and regionalism. In *The Last of the Provincials* (1947), Maxwell Geismar, dealing with *modern* American fiction (as it used to be called), emphasized its strongly rural strain. This modernism, after affecting Midwesterners such as Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, gave rise to an unforeseen flowering of American fiction peaking in, of all places, the South, then the most backward region of the U.S. It was as if Faulkner, O'Connor, and company dug such deep roots into their native soil that they reached a subterranean layer of universal meaning. Tapping an underground reservoir can also serve as a figure to convey the course philosophical thought had been taking since the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Schopenhauer unearthing the blind, unreasoning “life-will,” Bergson bringing to light the *élan vital*, and Nietzsche delving into the Dionysian dimension. These thinkers all herald Heidegger's existential ontology, according to which *Dasein* (the human being) spontaneously participates in the all-encompassing *Sein* (Being), but can hardly talk or think of it without reducing

it to an object of the subjective and limited mind. Seeking to overcome western philosophy by exposing it as metaphysics, Heidegger created his own metaphysics, a downward, existential metaphysics according to which “thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where man has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous . . . than the ascent” (231). All those pre-rational nether worlds form a vast current of *Lebensphilosophie*, or life philosophy, coinciding with the gradual collapse of the transcendent Christian other world “up” there or “beyond.”<sup>1</sup>

But how can literature convey Being, total life inaccessible to the rational mind, preceding language (which always differentiates), and underlying the individual, the only agency that speaks? Significantly, modernism simultaneously promoted skepticism toward language and experimentalism in writing. Generally, the fading of the traditional religious superstructure left “only” life to write about. The more enterprising among the modernists, though, did not limit themselves to convey life piecemeal, in conformity with the basically concrete and specific subject matter of narrative, but strove to develop stratagems for suggesting the totality and motion of life. The modernists’ dedication to their craft is well known – but this “new religion” frequently conveyed a metaphysical aura surrounding its fundamental subject matter, life.

Turning to our first text, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953) by Flannery O’Connor, a Catholic writer best known for her portrayal of ultra-Protestant preacher figures, we might ask how the modernist-regionalist syndrome displaying a post-Christian existential metaphysics would pertain to her writing. Generally, O’Connor’s membership in the modernist guild is suggested by her reliance on the mode of the grotesque, which Mikhail Bakhtin views as expressing “life as a whole” (50): a creditable view, given that

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Matrix of Modernism*, Sanford Schwartz deals with most of the thinkers mentioned and observes “a global shift from the developmental (or ‘before-and-after’) paradigms of the nineteenth century to the structural (or ‘surface-and-depth’) paradigms of the twentieth.” Schwartz’s reach seems somewhat short, though, when he views the thought subtending modernist writing as resulting from a shift from “conceptual abstraction” and “the instrumental conventions that shape ordinary life” to the representation of “immediate experience” and “the original flux of concrete sensations” (5). However, his watchword “experience” is felicitously equivocal by suggesting both subjective experience and a reaching down to life as such, a descent from *Bewusstsein* to *Sein*, as it were.

the grotesque strives for comprehensiveness by canceling rational distinctions between human, animal, and plant, as well as the animate and the inanimate, and by conflating such tonal polarities as the comic and the tragic, humor and horror, glee and gloom (cf. Meindl, *American esp.* 14-20). The very title of the O'Connor text to be analyzed, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," can be construed as alluding to an existential dimension that we all share. The all-encompassing nature of life is also hinted at in the story's pastoral farm setting: "A fat yellow moon appeared in the branches of the fig tree as if it were going to roost there with the chickens" (148) – one of the text's many specimens of the iconic grotesque working to fuse rationally separate spheres. The fact that this story bestows the same name, Lucynell Crater, on a mother and her daughter also involves the grotesque mode. Bakhtin views the grotesque as not separating the body from the world or other bodies, treating the body as a principle of growth that exceeds its own limits in performing natural functions to which its orifices and protuberances are suited. Lucynell II would thus be an extension of Lucynell I (note that "crater" designates an orifice). If a view of two women in one strikes anybody as preposterous, this is exactly the point: the grotesque disavows the individual by expressing life's oneness and change, thus doing away with rational delimitations and distinctions.

Another stratagem suggesting existential all-inclusiveness is a character's incompatibility with life, for life as such, in narrative, can more easily be conceived *ex negativo*, by default, than represented directly. O'Connor's oeuvre contains two character sets that denote enmity to life: the fanatic evangelical preacher and the worldly agnostic urbanite. In the text at hand, the two types are conjoined. The story's protagonist, Shiftlet (a richly suggestive and presumably false name), is both a village theo-logian and an automobile-fixated tramp wearing "a black town suit" (145), thus representing the modern mechanical spirit as well as transcendence of this world. Shiftlet is also something of a ham actor. As he appears at the farm where Mrs. Crater lives with her daughter – deaf-mute, feeble-minded, and close to thirty in age – his listing figure is silhouetted against the evening sky, with his whole arm and his truncated one swung up and the whole figure forming "a crooked cross" (146). Shiftlet, God's self-appointed deputy, judges the world to be "almost rotten." This nicely exempts him from judgment and jibes with an egotism reflected by his triple use of the grammatical first person in his first words, a comment on the sunset: "Lady, . . . I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening" (146). Also, he casts himself as a critic of progress and human presumption when he tells about an Atlanta doctor

who has extracted a human heart to study it: “Lady, . . . he don’t know no more about it than you or me” (147). This episode harks back to the motif of the human heart, dark and impossible to gauge, in Hawthorne, Melville, and Joseph Conrad: an intertextual innuendo quite applicable to O’Connor’s opaque protagonist. To boot, Shiftlet strikes one as a homespun philosopher of the Cartesian dispensation, emphasizing the mind-matter dichotomy: “The body, lady, is like a house: it don’t go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move” (152). This tradition of thought reached a stalemate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when epistemological primacy was bestowed upon either the cognizant subject (idealism) or the object world (materialism). Shiftlet himself seems emblematic of the philosophical quandary in question as “[h]is face descend[s] in forehead for more than half its length and end[s] suddenly with his features just balanced over a jutting steel-trap jaw” (146). The philosophical stalemate (derived from the mind’s subject-object structure sustaining what is now sometimes summarily called *Bewusstseinsphilosophie*) was dissolved, or rather undercut, by *Lebensphilosophie*, which gives epistemological precedence to life (which can do, and long did, without the human mind) and to which Shiftlet lays a problematic claim, as it were, with his “look of composed dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly” (146). His statement that “a man ha[s] to escape to the country to see the world whole” (148) suggests that he may have an inkling of what life in its entirety and growth is. So much for Shiftlet, the preacher-prophet-philosopher.

At the same time, Shiftlet is a thoroughly worldly and practical person. Significantly, he fixes up the broken-down farm in no time. But what he really cares about and craves is the old car that has sat there for fifteen years. He gets the heap up and running within two days. His very name “Shiftlet” marks him as akin to automobiles, just like “Sparks” and “Speeds” (147), other names he intimates he could have used for himself. With his spiritual pretensions and materialistic talents, it is small wonder that he keeps contradicting himself. He asks rhetorically “if a man was made for money, or what” (148), and lays claim to “a moral intelligence” (149). Yet he is soon engaged in a silent financial deal with Mrs. Crater, who is “ravenous for a son-in-law” (150) to take care of her afflicted daughter. The mother offers him a farm and a car, in addition to her big, rosy-faced, blue-eyed daughter, an innocent woman in several senses of the word. The fact that he is able to teach only one word to his bride – “bird,” associable with flight – bodes ill for that marriage. Aptest of symbols for existential integration, marriage here conveys

life in a symbolic and privative fashion: through a sermonizing schemer who, in forsaking his mentally afflicted wife, betrays life per se.

As a crafty rationalist and a ranting theologian, Shiftlet cannot be in tune with life. In fact, modernism, in reaching toward the existential sphere – call it life, *élan vital*, or *Sein* – throws doubt on reason as well as God. Properly speaking, our text can be called neither religious nor irreligious. What it conveys is a sense of the sacredness of life that both Émile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade regarded as the beginning of religion (see Meindl, “Flannery”). Such sacredness manifests itself in the mother’s anguished good-bye to her daughter, as tears run along the dirty creases of her face and (symbolic of the bond of bodies) she clutches at her daughter’s wedding dress. So Shiftlet sins against life when he dumps his dozing wife in a roadside eatery, alleging she is a hitchhiker he has picked up and for whom he cannot wait to wake up, to which the attendant, a boy impressed by Lucynell’s pink-gold hair and half-shut blue eyes, responds by murmuring: “She looks like an angel of Gawd” (154). The mention of God at the story’s epiphanic moment does not oblige us to reconsider the view of modernism advanced here. The notion of god(s) has a place in post-Christian modernist metaphysics. Heidegger says this about nearness to Being: “In such nearness, if at all, a decision may be made as to whether and how God and the gods withhold their presence and the night remains, whether and how the day of the holy dawns, whether and how in the upsurge of the holy an epiphany of God and the gods can begin anew” (218). It is precisely in the secular sphere that the sacred achieves its quality of pure and transient vision.

Shiftlet’s dealings with God involve no sense of the sacredness of life. Having disposed of his wife, he picks up a young hitchhiker to whom he, who has just betrayed a mother’s trust, sentimentally rants about mother love, whereupon the boy tells him to go to the devil and jumps out of the slowly rolling car, yelling: “My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking polecat” (156). This decidedly grotesque allegation, expressed by way of animal metaphors, gets closer to the all-embracing nature of life than Shiftlet’s sentimental drivel. The insult confirms Shiftlet in his view of the rottenness of the world. As a thunderstorm draws up, he beseeches the Lord to “[b]reak forth and wash the slime from this earth” (156). However, God seems to turn against the betrayer of a farm girl. A turnip-shaped cloud, the color of the hitchhiker’s hat, covers the sun, and Shiftlet races a shower pursuing him into Mobile, Alabama. This story ending intimates that God is on the side of life, that is, the young, who seem to bear it away in this story: Lucynell II,



the youngest of all in terms of her mind, receives the young attendant's adoration; the hitchhiking boy administers a sound rebuke to Shiftlet, who, given his long list of former occupations, appears untrustworthy when giving his age as twenty-eight. Shiftlet reaches Mobile – getting nowhere, for he has been mobile and shifting all his life. He is on the move again, but hardly in step with life's motion.

Modernism was still establishing itself in Canadian writing when it was caught up by the advent of postmodernist fiction.<sup>2</sup> This state of affairs is reflected by the use of the term “post-realist fiction” at that time (see the title of George Bowering's essay). However, post-realism, if such a term is needed, is identical with modernism, which succeeds realism and which did exist in Canada, incipiently at least. It is instructive that Herman Melville, a symbolist, proto-Modernist, and, with “Bartleby the Scrivener,” an outstanding practitioner of the grotesque, as early as 1857 stood the whole idea of realism on its head when, in *The Confidence-Man*, he articulated a claim that the most lifelike literary characters are those that do not make sense: “that author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts . . . and . . . at variance with itself . . . may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to facts” (10: 69-70). Later, the consummate modernist William Faulkner would evidently feel unhampered by psychological consistency and social conditioning in drawing his characters – justly, for when, like Faulkner, one conceives of “man as a part of life” (Gwynn 5), one can expect veritably anything from an individual.

Eminent among modernist genres is the short-story cycle. One thinks of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and, given an interest in Canadian letters, of Hodgins's *Spit Delaney's Island* (1976). Hodgins's cycle is notable for its radical subversion of the reader's expectations; its surprising revelations are apt to provoke the not inappropriate comment “c'est la vie.” In “The Trench Dwellers,” Gerry Mack, apostate from the Mackens, a Vancouver Island clan, does not, as one expects, end as a loner, but shackled up with a mainland backwoods woman with already a dozen multi-ethnic children – as a father to the human community, as it were. In “By the River,” a backwoods farmer's wife, intent on welcoming her husband returning from a trip, walks to the railroad stop along a river. Finally, the reader realizes that she has walked by the river every day for six months, following the same

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Kroetsch says hyperbolically that “Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern” (qtd. in Pache 75).

route as the river. But she is ultimately very different from the river, because the river, unlike her, is ever changing, thus symbolizing life, whereas her days have become repetitive. Interest in the mentally afflicted, also manifest in “Three Women of the Country” in *Spit Delaney’s Island*, had been a conspicuous feature in the fiction of the Southern Renaissance. Such figures, often petrified in routines, may strike one as personified displacements of the *Erkenntnisträger*, the cognizant subject that, in modernism, abdicates its prime epistemological position, yielding it to life entire. Yet life’s sacredness still extends to them, as Faulkner’s famous “idiots” in *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Hamlet* would suggest: Benjy, bellowing when reminded of his lost sister, and Ike Snopes with his lyrically rendered love for a cow. Such grotesque figures appear generally related to a philosophical interest in how humans participate in life, life *in toto*, while the rational mind – singular, subjective, and individual – better serves to differentiate between life’s particles in thought and speech. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben says: “. . . everything happens as if, in our culture, life were *what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided*” (13; emphasis Agamben’s). The reason for this continuing concern with total life could be that this notion, which undergirded literary modernism, still attracts attention as the last grand master narrative prior to the advent of postmodernism and postcolonialism.<sup>3</sup>

Hodgins’s creative use of the fiction of the Southern Renaissance has been ably demonstrated, notably with regard to the palpable influence of O’Connor’s “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” on Hodgins’s “Every Day of His Life” (1968), his first published story.<sup>4</sup> The present writer views Hodgins’s text, on the one hand, as emblematic of the strong and lasting presence of classic American literary modernism in English Canadian fiction seeking its way after World War II, and, on the other, as breaking away from

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<sup>3</sup> The reverse may also be the case. Recourse to modernism (Agamben strongly relies on Heidegger), as the system preceding the postmodern one, may indicate the latter’s decline and point to a different matrix of thought. Postcolonialism, as regards the wish of ethnic and other subaltern groups for more presence, ill accords with the postmodern vision of a universe of interrelated signs devoid of essentialist presence. Life’s totality as an ultimate metanarrative in modernism is hinted at by François Lyotard when, in a context involving Proust and Joyce as well as abstractionism in art, he views them as attempting something of which no presentation is possible: “We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it” (78).

<sup>4</sup> See Zacharasiewicz, “Development” (esp. 177).

its American model and going beyond O'Connor to what may be called moderate postmodernism.

"Every Day of His Life" deals with a whirlwind courtship. Big Glad Littlestone – a single woman trucklike in build and with a little son, Roger – and Mr. Swingler, whose mobile disposition is indicated by a "road map stamped in red on the white parts" (93) of his eyes, woo and win each other within hardly two hours on a summer day. The wooing is nothing if not purposeful and has symbolic overtones as she offers him an apple and, later, self-made dandelion wine, balancing the full glasses and her imposing person up a ladder onto the rooftop of her house, from where Mr. Swingler is painting a mountain off in the distance: a story that seems innocently comical as well as magical at first glance, a comedy even in the old structural sense, which Northrop Frye has taught us is "the integration of society" (43) by founding a new family. However, to the perceptive reader, Mr. Swingler sooner or later starts manifesting traits that render him suspect. Granting that he, a Jack of all trades, may also be a dedicated artist, why would he travel so light as to have to borrow a pad of paper, a pencil, and a water color set from Glad? A baleful note is struck with his harsh response to Glad's second mention of her car: "I've been here more than an hour, most of the time sitting right up here on this roof, and I still haven't seen that car you keep on talking about" (95). His allegation that she harps on the subject of her car is suggestive of a preoccupation on his part. Having been shown the car behind the window of a side-building, Mr. Swingler appears henceforth determined and succeeds. After his brash proposal and Glad's belated hesitancy to give herself to a man she does not know at all, the story concludes with her consenting to their going to town right away to get the marriage licence. His are the last words in the text: "If you'll just give me the keys to the garage . . . we'll be on our way" (97).

A sinister version of the story emerges in the text, spreading like a blot of black ink. Connoisseurs of Southern literature may find Mr. Swingler, given his diminutive figure, rubber-ball eyes, and receding chin, reminiscent of the gangster and murderer Popeye in Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary*. Also, Mr. Swingler's wisecracking manner is not exactly endearing. Catching sight of Roger behind the screen door of the house, he stops his chewing for a second to ask "What's that?" (89), treating the child as a thing. He laughs off Glad's second thoughts about marrying so rashly: "Lady, . . . You made up your mind to catch me the minute I walked inside your gate. I could've been a murderer for all you cared" (97). Having previously learned from him that he is a widower who has drunk his cremated wife's ashes, she now asks him

whether he would repeat the stunt, should she die, whereupon he wisecracks: "Miss Littlestone, after the first time there's nothing to it" (97). Glaringly mismatched as these two may look, they at least share a sense of humor. For this reader, there is no way to decide whether Mr. Swingler will opt for truck-like Glad or abscond with her car.

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" depends on the grotesque, to which, as Bakhtin points out, clings an age-old life-affirming message, whereas "Every Day of His Life" appears suffused with black humor. Though both seriocomic registers, black humor and the grotesque are not indistinguishable. The grotesque displays humor and horror in tension, with the emphasis between the two varying. Black humor has been viewed as based on a stalemate between an aesthetic perspective and a moral one: as asking for an impossible decision to be made between the humorous and the horrendous, given that the moral or black perspective works at the expense of the humor while the humor aesthetically abates the blackness and moral considerations (see Henninger). Of the two stories analyzed, O'Connor's is more solidly founded on hope, despite its cruel proceedings.<sup>5</sup> Black humor is often quite entertaining but also apt to leave a taste of ashes in one's mouth.

On another count, the two stories differ radically. With "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," we know what is happening but are challenged to gain a perspective on these events: our reading becomes a hermeneutic task, epistemological in essence. "Every Day of His Life," which starts by entertaining and enchanting us, unfolds as two versions of the same story, versions mutually exclusive and respectively featuring a happy ending and a blackly humorous one. Thus, Hodgins offers an ontological puzzle. The blackly humorous version, in its mildest form, would probably consist of Mr. Swingler using the keys to the garage that he gets from Glad (they would presumably include the ignition key), leaving her stranded. Other apprehensions, triggered mainly by Mr. Swingler's and Glad Littlestone's mentioning of the possibility that he could be a murderer, are left to the reader's discretion and imagination. However, there is reason to hope that Mr. Swingler is just a sardonic type of person, fundamentally glad to settle down with Glad. Thus, the world of the text has a tendency to divide into several worlds, none of which can, with total assurance, be identified as the "real" one on the text's

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is the ancient iconic dimension of the grotesque that harbors the hope. Studying a cave drawing featuring a man with antlers at his head, we may be led to surmise that the prehistoric artist wished to express brotherhood between different forms of life.

ontological plane – why not then speak of a plurality of postmodern textual worlds? According to Brian McHale, modernist fiction is dominantly epistemological and postmodernist fiction dominantly ontological. In fact, Hodgins's story seems somewhat suggestive (playfully perhaps) of Derrida's *différance* at work, causing the text to exfoliate in differing versions deferring the reader's endorsement of a particular one.<sup>6</sup>

With Leon Rooke, we enter the domain of postcolonialism. The role of postcolonialism in American literature is assured by ethnic contributions to it, with writers fighting or commemorating the subaltern status of the groups they represent. As for the monuments of anglophone postcolonial fiction, however, one will rather turn to novels like *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The English Patient* (1992), respectively by Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Sri Lanka-born Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje: authors whose experiences include growing up on the rim of what was the British Empire. Canada, formerly part of the Empire and still a Commonwealth member, has proved a productive site for postcolonial writing. In this context, the once powerful impact of American literary modernism on Canadian letters appears to have become a thing of the past, which also means that the theoretical constellation of life philosophy, Heidegger, and Southern Renaissance grotesqueness will fade out of this essay. In fact, as the case of Leon Rooke suggests, Canada can teach, rather than learn from, the U.S. in matters postcolonial.

Rooke, born in North Carolina in 1934, is one of those *écrivains migrants* who have contributed to Canada's ongoing literary renaissance. Apparently, he had to first settle down on Vancouver Island (where the spirit of the Empire seems to haunt the air) to write the postcolonial story to be discussed here. "The Birth Control King of the Upper Volta" (1982) is a satire assailing glorified memories of the Empire as well as a lingering related notion that the white Anglo male is the world's sovereign. For the purpose of satire,

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, the term "magic realism," which preserves an imagistic ring (it was coined in the German art world of the 1920s – see Delbaere-Garant 41), is often applied to Hodgins's fiction. Apparently, magic realism thrives on the incongruous and implausible appearing in a basically realistic context. Mr. Swingler's drinking the ashes of his wife would be an instance of magic realism in Hodgins's text, augmenting its eerie dimension. It would seem that postmodernist writing – refusing to answer the question "*Between what is and what isn't. . . . Where is the dividing line?*" (8-10) that pops into the head of Hodgins's protagonist Spit Delaney – can easily accommodate magic realism.

Rooke makes extravagant use of the fantastic, creating a first-person narrator, or rather speaker, named "Adlai," a figure that functions as a refutation of imperial claims. The text opens with Adlai waking up in his cubicle on August 11: "The most extraordinary thing happened to me today. I woke up and discovered I had lost yesterday" (7). This temporal muddle will get clarified as derived from repression, as the seemingly lost day turns out to be that of the funeral of Adlai's mam, as he calls her. He had gone there accompanied by his landlady Mergentoire's thirty-year-old, mute and mentally retarded son Hedgepolt. Adlai treats Hedgepolt as if he were a normal person and in a fatherly manner. This appears instrumental in causing Hedgepolt to break into speech in the miraculous ending of the story, which also features an amazing postcolonialist vision on Adlai's part.

Elements of pathos and poignancy have been detected in Rooke's text (see Vauthier 124, 127), but its main drive is and remains satiric. Its protagonist-speaker launches into an eloquent discourse in which he unwittingly embarrasses himself in the zaniest manner. According to Northrop Frye, satire deals "less with people as such than with mental attitudes" (309). Rooke's satiric orientation explains why we can enjoy the deflation of his protagonist with a minimum of pity. Adlai's presumptions and weaknesses are not really exposed as the failings of an individual but add up to a parody of the latterday imperial mind. The text does not compel us to approach Adlai as a character but rather induces us to identify him as a figure through which the bankruptcy of the fading British Empire's colonizing endeavor is reenacted. Emulating – at the behest of his mam – his long-dead father, the Birth Control King of the Upper Volta, he has assumed a hopeless and ridiculous legacy.

Nonetheless, the text, in deconstructing Adlai's imperial make-up, benefits from a contemporary concern with identity that postcolonialism has promoted. Personal identity nowadays tends to be articulated in a pluralistic fashion, in terms of what has been called the "theory of pluralized 'subject-effects'" (Spivak 66). This theory foregrounds such subject identifications or markers as ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, age, class, status, and so forth, and usually sets them up as binary oppositions, such as white/nonwhite, man/woman, hetero-/homosexual, young/old, etc. Identity appears as never fixed, or "there," but ever emerging as its identifications are negotiated with corresponding alterity formations participated in, or at least presupposed by, the self. Since the subject is no more than the intersection point of such negotiations between oppositions representing contrasted groups in the population, personal identity also means constantly facing more

potent Others or being linked up with one's "inferiors." Such a model of identity apparently lends itself to satiric ends.

In Rooke's postcolonial story, Adlai's Empire, WASP, and macho-related claims and preferences all get annihilated. Consider the identity marker "age." Adlai, who tends to come across as an adolescent figure, is already forty-seven. He tries to appear youthful, though, devoting himself to hyperbolically reported morning exercises. Lifting barbells, he slides on "a ton. . . . – no trouble at all" (7). Apparently, this body-building program proves of no avail, for another inmate of the boarding-house, an Asian, later whirls past him on the stairs, yelling "Out of my way, fat man!" (14). Take status. Adlai's hopes for a white-collar job with "the Pole" come to nothing as that minority group member answers his call, addressing him as "the nincompoop" (14). Making light of this discomfiture, Adlai, with pseudo-Darwinistic male pride, expresses his preference for his position of an outdoors, hard-hat, blue-collar worker. Later we realize that he does nothing at all. Adlai's identity markers also involve the text's female figures. The long visits of his mam in the cubicle may be read as projections of his continuing dependence on her, which dilutes his status as a male. Adlai's father, proudly remembered by his mother, would then be a projection of a projection. However, the text does not really encourage such psychological conjectures, given its generally fantastic and frantic nature promoting its satiric aim.

Adlai has a love affair with haughty and bad-humored Greta Gustafsson, alias Garbo, who exists in the cubicle as a poster on the inside of the door. This does not encourage consulting with Dr. Freud, modernism's culture hero, but had better be attributed to postmodernist high jinks – or, even more, to the text's postcolonial thematics, in which Adlai's status as a chip off the old imperial block is called into doubt by his doubtful sex life. The wild, spittle-flying, and fingernails-tearing coupling of Adlai and Greta on the cubicle floor, the speaker intimates, was "[t]he first time ever" (27); but landlady Mergentoire's reproof, "I could shoot you . . . for what you do up there" (28), seems to allude to a masturbatory episode, in which case the identity marker "sexual preference" would dwindle to autoeroticism. Adlai's "affair" with Greta also involves his social status, the class angle. He admits that he is not sufficiently a go-getter to satisfy Greta, who manifests her disappointment by constant contemptuousness and moroseness: "Greta deserved better than I could give her. She deserved, in the least, a silver frame" (8) – clear ontological evidence of Rooke's "post-modernist sensibility" (Garebian 5).

The text's tone and stylistic brilliance would deserve ample comment, serving its satire as they do. Put summarily, Adlai is, to a large extent, an

accumulation of incongruously used catch phrases, encrusted stereotypic notions, as well as a quaint mixture of pithy colloquialisms and hilariously tame, educated-sounding utterances. Rebuffed by the Pole, Adlai politely and gently wonders, “Why is the Pole addressing me in this unseemly fashion?” (14). When mam heroizes the Birth Control King – “They broke the mold, you know, when they made him” – he confirms her appraisal: “He stood tall, that he did.” He also fancies himself as mam’s champion against “the black African hordes” already on their way: “Crossing the water on rafts and matchstick canoes, beaming their great white teeth and kicking their great black legs,” plus intending, of course, “to gobble up our jobs and steal our women and make a garbage hole of our neighbourhoods” (21). But let us move on to the core of the text’s satire, its lambasting of white ethnocentricity.

There is evidence that Adlai’s father was not such a hotshot either: more of a last-ditch defender actually than a founder of the Empire. His specialty was selling birth control to the Roman Catholic part of the population of the Upper Volta (a French colony before it became independent). Every black converted to birth control, every contraceptive sold, meant “he’d saved another white child his rightful spot in the world” (22). When the Upper Voltans resisted his missionizing, as mam explains, Daddy became so filled up with vitriol that he flung himself into the first river. But was Adlai himself saved a spot by Daddy? The son remembers old stories to the effect that he was a pre- or extramarital baby and even “tar-brushed” (33), a rumor that the evidence of his mother’s skin, constantly darkening with age, appears to confirm. Is Adlai colored himself? He who, as mam hoped, would take up “Daddy’s mighty cudgel” for warding off dark-skinned invaders of the west (22). There it goes, Adlai’s whiteness, his basic identity marker.

Yet, the author – tongue in cheek, it would seem – furnishes a happy ending for the speaker-protagonist and the new family that constitutes itself around him. This consummation comes about when Adlai, upon Mergentoire’s request, confirms her words that they are “all one big family,” addressing Hedgepolt thus: “She’s said a mouthful, son” (35). This leads to Hedgepolt’s utterance of the word “*Dad-dee*” (35), which he follows up with language that quickly improves as he goes on. Adlai, the text may suggest, has found his spot. But can he shed his dependence on mother and mistress? As Greta’s voice from upstairs invites him to scrub her back, he has a desire to tell her to go home to her own people but says nothing. Moreover, his concluding meditation, in which he realizes that so many people depend on him, ends thus: “Oh, mam, they do” (38).



As critics, we should be wary of unconditionally joining in the love fest with which the story culminates. Adlai, a xenophobe and would-be colonialist, experiences a complete, though somewhat mock-epiphanic conversion. With his vision, inspired by the joyful family events, of “legion upon legion of matchstick canoes” (36) coming across the water, manned by the peoples of the Upper Volta and beyond, blacks whom he deliriously welcomes and by whom he is acknowledged as their king and boss, he, for all practical purposes, has become a rabid western postcolonialist. Also, he is not so different from the western critic of colonialism whom Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” suspects of being “complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self’s shadow” (75). In fact, all these blacks “*going no place but UP UP UP!*” (37) strike one as replicating Adlai’s own ambitions, in a more zealous and presumably more efficient fashion. Given the newcomers’ uniform appearance and westernized outlook, one tends to agree with Spivak’s view that “the colonized subaltern *subject* is *irretrievably* heterogeneous” (79, second emphasis added), as well as with her disenchanting answer to her essay’s title question: “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (83). Adlai’s conversion to postcolonialism thus contains elements of criticism of western postcolonialism in hinting at an epistemic reversal: the recolonization of emancipated Africa in terms of western and global materialism.

To conclude, this analysis of three North American stories conveys an entwining of cultural areas and literary history. The Southern Renaissance – arguably the crest of modernist American fiction – is represented by O’Connor’s story, whose impact on Hodgins’s text testifies to the traditional Canadian awareness of canonized American literature. Nevertheless, Hodgins was not overwhelmed by his American modernist model but created a text typifying moderate Canadian postmodernism. Finally, Rooke’s story does not bring to mind the writer’s antecedents in the American South, but, in satirizing the Empire mystique, demonstrates the assimilation of Canada’s cultural heritage by an American migrant turned postcolonial Canadian writer. The triad of texts treated here strikes as a parable of Canada’s strengthening voice in the American/Canadian cultural dialogue.

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THOMAS L. MCHANEY

## Voice Not Place

*Leon Rooke Makes a Success in Canada*

Leon Rooke has every reason to be rooted in what some perceive as the archetypal sources of Southern writing. Rooke knew from childhood of the racism, the exploitation of poor whites in both agricultural and mill-based economies, the pride of independent mountain people, and the mixed blessings of dramatic Southern landscapes marked by scary microclimates, bloody war, and thoughtless exploitation. He was nurtured in two particularly dramatic places in the South – the Carolina mill town, Roanoke Rapids, where exploitation went back to the 1890s, and that was the inspiration for the movie *Norma Rae*, and the university town where modern intellectualism and liberalism fought against engrained racial and economic customs and political resistance to social change. The Chapel Hill sociologists, one should remember, were perceived as the enemy even by the supposedly enlightened poets and critics who came out of Nashville in the 1920s; yet the drama that was – and is – the American South, was expressed brilliantly by sociologist Howard Odum in the second paragraph of his monumental *Southern Regions of the United States* (1936): “It is desired . . . to explain something of the dramatic struggle of a large and powerful segment of the American people for mastery over an environment capable of producing a superior civilization, yet so conditioned by complexity of culture and cumulative handicaps as to make the nature of future development problematical” (1).

Born, educated, and trained as a writer in North Carolina, Leon Rooke resettled in mid-career in British Columbia and became a highly regarded and much honored Canadian writer. He has published over 300 short stories, seven novels, almost a dozen collections of stories, and written or directed a large number of dramatic works, and despite the tariffs repressing the sale of Canadian work in the United States, unless the writers have an American publisher, his books can now be purchased from Canadian publishers on the World Wide Web.

Rooke’s emigration to Canada had nothing specific to do, apparently, with seeking liberation from the American South – what the novelist Pat Conroy describes (in the context of Thomas Wolfe) as “fleeing the South with your hair on fire” (Conroy). Though Rooke had sought out other climes in which one might write – New Orleans and San Francisco, for example –

and had served as a mail clerk in Alaska during his military service, North Carolina held him for a long time and enriched his literary life. His mother worked at a weaving machine in one of the mills that drew workers from the coves and hollows of the Appalachian Mountains and repressed any efforts at unionization. Economic exploitation and racial segregation were the norm.

Rooke published poetry and sports writing as a high school student, and after attending a small college near Thomas Wolfe's hometown Asheville, he transferred to Wolfe's alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, still in the 1950s and 1960s one of the few liberal, intellectual, and artistic oases in the Sahara of the Bozart. Rooke soon shifted his major from journalism to dramatic arts and was mentored by the community of writers and writing teachers at Chapel Hill. Two of them – Max Steele and Jessie Rehder – taught creative writing classes but were not widely published; however, like the never-published William Blackburn at Duke University in nearby Durham, who taught William Styron and Reynolds Price, they were inspiring and supportive of young writers.

Writing poetry, short fiction, and drama for radio, television, and the stage, Rooke also did some acting while in Chapel Hill and helped start a short-lived literary magazine, *Reflections*. He co-edited *The Anvil*, a politically progressive publication that expressed anti-war sentiments and calls for political justice during the periods of Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam protests. Rooke was deeply engaged in efforts to end segregation in Chapel Hill movie theaters and other businesses. He pursued graduate work in the Radio, Television, and Motion Pictures program at UNC-Chapel Hill, where his mentor was Asheville-born John Ehle, a prolific writer who published a variety of fictional and non-fictional works, including a seven-volume series of novels set in his native Appalachian mountain culture. Ehle earned some notoriety among North Carolina's conservative political establishment as a vocal foe of segregation and an activist for combating Southern poverty and creating arts education for high school students, causes in which Rooke participated.

Both Ehle and Rooke had the model and influence of North Carolinian Paul Green, a 1927 Pulitzer Prize winner for his play "In Abraham's Bosom." Green, who also lived in Chapel Hill, carried on the tradition of UNC professor Frederick Koch, founder of the Playmakers Theater at the University in the 1920s. Koch had emphasized folk voices and theater drawn from local experience and proselytized for a people's theater. In a great tribute to Koch, the renowned liberal UNC teacher, university president, and politician Franklin Porter Graham wrote:

Inspirer of plays expressing the lives of tenant farmers, industrial workers, Negroes, people of the mountain coves, the Piedmont, the pine barrens and the tide waters – plays of all the people. He was the champion of the democratic spirit and of the free and noble imagination. He inspired in all the eternal quest of the human spirit for a freer and better world. The man became an idea, the idea became a movement, and the movement became a national institution – the folk drama of America. (Graham)

Thomas Wolfe (who once joked that a folk play was one in which the characters all said “Hit ain’t”) [qtd. in Kennedy 48] had written and acted in plays for Koch, and so had Green, who after his days on Broadway wrote and promoted outdoor theater based on local history – his “The Lost Colony” still plays in the summers on the North Carolina Outer Banks. Rooke may not have read the 1945 history about the Carolina Playmakers entitled *Pioneering a People’s Theatre* in which Graham’s remarks appear, but through his college influences he doubtlessly understood the sentiment that reflected an animating spirit still alive in the Chapel Hill of his days there.

In 1962, Rooke’s short novel *The Line of Fire*, set in the Alaska of his military service, was published in volume 5 of Saul Bellow and Keith Botsford’s annual, *The Noble Savage*. In 1967, he met Constance Raymond, a Ph.D. student in English who edited *The Carolina Quarterly*, UNC’s prestigious student-edited literary magazine, and in 1969, the year Louisiana State University published Rooke’s first collection of stories, *Last One Home Sleeps in the Yellow Bed*, he and Constance married and they moved to British Columbia where, having finished her doctorate, she was offered an academic position at the University of Victoria and soon took over as the editor of the university’s literary journal, *The Malahat Review* (Rooke, “Biography”).

It is, in fact, a wonder that Rooke fairly early found a way of his own that did not suffer, but in effect thrived, when at the age of thirty-five he became established in the westernmost landscape of Canada, in Victoria, British Columbia, as part of an urban university culture where his wife made her living. Rooke’s success in Canada obviously derives from his talent, his strong opinions, and his work-ethic; he had written a body of mostly apprentice work before he left North Carolina, but he had also published a large volume of complex and highly-regarded work since he became a Canadian writer. The questions this essay asks, then, bearing in mind the differences between western Canada and the American South: Is Rooke a Southern writer in Canada (such as the Mississippian Elizabeth Spencer was in Montreal)? Did Rooke bring any of what might be called a typically Southern perspective with him into Canada? Did he escape Southern literary influences? The Mississippian-

born writer Elizabeth Spencer, who wrote and taught writing in Montreal for many years, has observed, for example, that Southern women writers strongly influenced Canadian women writers (Prenshaw 126).

On one level, these questions have much to do with that “sense of place in fiction” that Eudora Welty wrote about and that chauvinistic scholars and literary journalists have been misunderstanding ever since: the prioritization of place in defining Southern fiction based on the belief that the American South benefits from a greater proportion of place than other places. I was curious to see whether Rooke put any emphasis upon Southern “place” in what he wrote when he lived and wrote in his home state, and whether, if he did, this continued to appear in his writing after his emigration to Canada. Or whether, indeed, he depicts Canadian places, Canadian voices, and even Canadian “oddities” in emulation of how Southern writing is perceived as dealing with place, voice, and character.

The quick answer, based upon my reading of the later Rooke, is that whether in Carolina or Canada, Leon Rooke has almost always advanced his stories not on the basis of place but on the basis of voice – and largely on voice, or voices, that seem divorced from – even disinterested in – what we call “sense of place.” Critics disposed to the myth of Southern writing may feel some regret for him: to them, his case might seem a bit like what Quentin Compson says about the figure of Thomas Sutpen evoked in Rosa Coldfield’s long bitter monologue in *Absalom, Absalom!* – that it was the voice of Rosa Coldfield that Sutpen haunted, whereas a more fortunate ghost would have had a house (4). But when we read the great and diverse volume of Rooke’s work since his arrival in Canada, and also read what other writers say about him, regret is not in order. Voice, it turns out, is the triumph of his fiction. Voice, and never place (which, one should recall, even Welty values as only “one of the lesser angels” of the art of fiction [Welty 116]).

In 2004, Branko Gorjup, a literary critic who is a long-time friend of Rooke, published a marvelous anthology, *White Gloves of the Doorman: The Works of Leon Rooke*, which contains essays by a truly international cast of scholars. A great many of the contributions in this book reflect upon voice as the distinctive feature of Rooke’s oeuvre. Russell Brown, a Canadian scholar, observes that Rooke’s Canadian reception began with a 1979 essay titled “At Home in All Voices” by Clark Blaise, another cross-border Canadian who spent much of his career in Iowa running the International Writers Center at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and who has himself published a volume of “Southern” stories.

A reader of Rooke's considerable oeuvre would have to affirm that "at home in all voices" is a true judgment about his work again and again. This is already evident in *The Line of Fire*, the early novella published in *The Noble Savage*. Writing about an American military unit sent to battle a forest fire on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska, Rooke employs a standard first-person point-of-view, but before it is over, the narrative voice that begins the story hands off the last words to a fellow soldier named Gode who sums up in a voice more like the eccentric ones that Rooke would exploit in his later work. The hand-off is indirect: "Gode, I learned," the narrator says, "when he's sleepy likes to talk. There were times when I could not tell if he was talking to me or to himself. . . . There was a cold wind off the lake and I zippered the bag so that only my nose was outside. Busy with that, Gode's first words escaped me, but, until I fell asleep, I listened to him" (248). And here is what the narrator heard him say:

Isn't it of basic significance that, say, art is so abstract today and they the artists will say no man it's not abstract at all that's just the way it is man – life! And you're looking yes sir at a mirror? Or is that only a fragment of the grand play, the royal dream, the big hoax, the "all-right-America-you-might-not-make-it-in-practice-but BY-GOD-YOU-GOT-IT-IN-PRINCIPLE!" . . . take this artist I know Hite; all his canvases show muddled heads and all his sculpture looks like some pig freed from a medieval torture rack. Why? I ask him. Because, he says, man, I'm trying to wiggle into a meaning. Trying to shake that old core, loose, man, I mean that vicious core. And because I'm in pain, man. Because I don't know who told me but the boat left this morning and, man, I ain't on it and I don't know how to swim. Because I'm standing on the pier alone. I'm standing on it and I'm alone. And not only alone but bored too and restless and I'm this way when I wake up and when I go to bed and whether I'm with my best girl or my ninety-seven year old aunt. (251-52)

Compare this with a voice from Rooke's 2009 volume, *The Last Shot*, in a story titled "The Yellow House":

Eons back, in the dark ravages of time – I should have told you this at the start, pray, forgive me – our ancestors established a cemetery off there at the dome of the hill, such a pretty resting place, but over the centuries the leaning stones gradually crept downhill, fanning off to sit among the arcade of coconut palms on one side, the lagoon waters on the other. Advancing our way through a savannah of tall grasses which hid away a barn or two, sheds specific to ancient days when at least some of us must have eked out a small living, satisfied somehow freehold arrangements peculiar to the time and place, in any event these graves now shock up against the backside of our very dwelling. This sprawling cemetery a city until itself, it might be said, though said in error, since so much of ourselves repose there. (22)



In “Gator Wrestling,” from the same collection, a character named Prissy Beatrice Thibidault consents to be bedded by Brasher Leslie Coombs, a girlfriend, but says “I’m not taking off my clothes.” They will have to be discreet because Brasher’s brother, Ganger Lee Coombs,

was Prissy’s most deadly enemy. Anytime he saw Prissy he threw her to the ground and jumped on her, crying, “I the jury.” He would sit on her and take out a book and read it as though she did not exist. Through whole afternoons. He had done it on Main Street, in the schoolyard, on her own front porch, and in the cash ‘n’ carry aisle of Coombs A-1 Meats . . . Ganger had slung her down and sat on her all over town, people strolling by and most often saying not a word. Sometimes saying, “Wha’cha reading, Gange?” To which Ganger replied, if he did at all, “Mister William Faulkner, 1897 to 1962.”

“Is that Fawkna any good, Gange?”

“Can’t talk to you now. I’m reading.” (132)

The invocation of Faulkner – title not supplied – is fired off by Rooke with apparent mischievous intention. Rooke is not afraid to stand on the tracks of the Dixie Limited dominated by the man who made a chapter out of “My mother is a fish” in a novel narrated by fifteen different voices and who named Snopes family characters Wall Street Panic and Montgomery Ward. Canadian critical commentary on Rooke such as that printed in Branko Gorjup’s *White Gloves of the Doorman* has not ignored the impact of Faulkner, but the influence noted has little to do with Faulkner’s use of Southern history, culture, and geography and everything to do with those formal elements of Faulkner’s fiction that inspired the magic realism that spread from South America to the Canadian north (Gorjup 15, 240). Faulkner’s rootedness allowed him the liberty to imagine a richly-rendered, farm-based, and history-drenched landscape in a fictional county as large as four north Mississippi county units whose people can read even the invisible palimpsest of footprints on a dusty country road. Leon Rooke is not concerned with this kind of world. He gives us the crazy repetitions of the unbidden noises in people’s heads, intimations not of place but of the strange instant drama of human consciousness, the peregrinations of the mind conjuring stories with freestyle verbal extravagance. Voice, not place, drives his fiction.

Jeet Heer, a Toronto journalist, after observing recently that Rooke “belongs in the small, select company of Canadian masters, a peer of Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, and Clark Blaise,” pointed out that there was “scarcely an unnecessary word” in Rooke’s writing: “The stylistic variety on display is remarkable: aside from his impressive resurrection of Flannery O’Connor’s flint-eyed portrayal of shiftless poor whites . . . we also get a

sentimental story about angels told by a narrator who is as bluff and breezy, as clubby and cool, as Anthony Trollope unfolding a tale about the doings of a small town vicarage.” Rooke, in other words, writes like the best of the best. No wonder that Heer, in his article, felt that Rooke needed no further introduction. But the evidence suggests otherwise.

Up against its Southern neighbor, The United States of America, Canada has had placed upon it something like the burden Chicago bears against the entitlements of New York City. Chicago is the Second City; Canada, in what is called North America, is the Second Country. Copyright laws and tariffs protecting American publishers keep many Canadian books from crossing the southern border easily. And ironically, when a Canadian book festival wanted copies of Rooke’s first book, published by Louisiana State University Press, the situation even worked the other way, for the books were stopped at the Canadian border because the proper paperwork for import had not been done.

Rooke, as a consequence of the longtime difficulty of acquiring Canadian books in America, is not as widely read in the US as he is in his adoptive country, but Branko Gorjup, introducing his anthology of interviews with Rooke and critical work about him, has lamented that even in the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite Governor General’s awards and other Canadian literary prizes and all Rooke’s activities on behalf of other Canadian writers, Leon Rooke is not fully canonized in Canada either (Gorjup xi). Canadian scholar Russell Brown may have an explanation for this: Rooke is a difficult writer, and his stories – mostly fantasies or paranoid delusions – are “weird.” What they lack, apart from other traditional features of the short story, is closure: “these stories leave us with a feeling of bafflement that becomes part of their overall effect. And sometimes I think these stories can’t possibly give us a sense of conclusion because of the way language and voice have operated so powerfully throughout them” (Gorjup 16-18).

This judgment may be just insofar as the common reader is concerned, a reminder that Rooke’s achievement is not so different, perhaps, from a generation of contemporaneous American and even Southern writers who did not find a wide readership for a long time. For example, Rooke’s points of view and his characters resemble those of Texas’s Donald Barthelme, Mississippi’s Barry Hannah, and North Carolina’s Fred Chappell, all of whom with which Rooke’s work might profitably be compared. In fact, the documentary film about Rooke that comes as a DVD with Branko Gorjup’s volume pans the contents of the book shelves in Rooke’s study and lingers over

a whole row of Hannah's books. Like Hannah, Rooke takes a little getting used to.

Leon Rooke indirectly demonstrates that place is indeed one of the "lesser angels" of fiction writing and that stories which haunt a voice, instead of a house, can be not merely effective but thrilling. His writing also demonstrates that a lot of the work by writers such as Faulkner, O'Connor, McCullers, Hannah, Chappell, or Cormac McCarthy is perhaps misperceived when defined as the so-called "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque" and could be more creditably interpreted under the rubric of surrealism and its descendants. Such an interpretation, I suspect, inspires the judgment about him by a contemporary French fiction writer and painter, Pierre Pelot, who declares, "I think Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy, and Leon Rooke are among the best authors in the world." It apparently also inspires an Internet reviewer of Rooke's most recent book, *The Last Shot*, to write the following:

Magic realism in the short story, unless executed at a high level, often seems to be nothing but a gimmick adopted to relieve a writer of the chore of creating interest in a straightforward, realist narrative. It declares the story's originality with a blast of trumpets, shouts, "look at me, I am new." This is, no doubt, why it has become a staple of our little magazines. But there is no such cheap trickery here. Rooke's stories are above all vocal performances; they are about voice. (A.J.)

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MARCEL ARBEIT

## I, Canadian

*Elizabeth Spencer's Montreal*

There can never be a competition among southern U.S. writers about who has spent or will spend the most time in Canada, as any such contest would have a sure winner in advance: Elizabeth Spencer (born 1921), the novelist and short story writer from Carrollton, Mississippi, who spent twenty-eight long years there, from 1958 to 1986, when for both health reasons and homesickness she returned to the South, finding a new home for herself and her British-born husband, John Rusher, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In her magnificent memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart* (1998),<sup>1</sup> her three decades in Canada are squeezed into less than five pages. She briefly describes her arrival in Montreal before the cruel winter of 1958, one rich in blizzards, and she takes the snow boulders she saw for the first time as a southern child's Christmas wish fulfilled manifold. From the very beginning, she appreciated the multicultural atmosphere of that city inhabited by people "from all over Europe, as tribally numerous as Indians" (LH 315). While understanding that local writers, often newcomers from various parts of the world, are striving to build a Canadian literature, "distinctly different from that of the elephant of a neighbor to the south or the British and French across the ocean," she "never found any part to play" in these attempts, even though she was, in her own words, "quickly accorded a place among the English writers and never felt especial rejection by the French" (LH 322).

Only a few of Spencer's short stories written in Montreal were published in Canadian magazines, both popular (*Montrealer*, *McCall's*, *Chatelaine*) and literary (*Journal of Canadian Fiction*, *Ontario Review*); the majority of them found, like the four novels she wrote during that period, American publication, either in the prestigious and lucrative *New Yorker*, to which she became a regular contributor, or in far less profitable southern quarterlies, most

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth *Landscapes of the Heart: A Memoir* will be cited in the text as *LH*.

prominently in the *Southern Review*. No more than five of her short stories written before 1990 were set in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

In 1965, her seventh year in Montreal, she honestly admitted in an interview: “I have never been able to write about Canada. . . . I just have not been able to reach it” (Tolliver 3), and later she repeated the statement in slightly modified versions many more times. She saturated her need for the southern environment by returning to Mississippi at least once, but usually twice or three times a year, even though just for a short time (Smith 140–41). Among the things she missed most, she emphasized the vernacular speech of African Americans and “Mississippi’s green and the lush outdoors” (Tolliver 4); as she half-jokingly recalled in her essay “The Home Voice in a Foreign Land” (1988), she could hardly cope with the fact that in Canada “‘fields of snowy white’ definitely did not refer to the cotton crop” (126).

That might create an impression that, for Spencer, Canada was only a foreign place where she could make her southern memories more vivid. But in a 1968 interview with Josephine Haley for *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, after a mild complaint that in Canada she felt “out of touch with American society,” for the first time she verbalized a very important affinity between Canada and Mississippi: “Canada, like Mississippi, serves as a sort of counterpoint to American society as a whole” (Haley 16). She did not explain her point – actually, this was the final sentence of that interview – but it became obvious that in her mind both Canada and the South, represented by her native state, were seen as culturally superior to the mediocre mainstream “America.” It took some time before she touched upon a much more specific similarity in her writings regarding the southern/Canadian scale: the similarity between the cities of New Orleans and Montreal.

Spencer set her novel *The Snare* (1972) in New Orleans, partly under the influence of one of her favorite southern novelists, Walker Percy, from whom she had been receiving occasional friendly and admiring letters since their meeting in 1970 (Spencer, “Remembering Walker” 505), and what she said about that city in 1973 is also valid for Montreal: “Nobody enjoys New Orleans as much as a small-town southerner. It’s our cosmopolitan, European city. The excellent food, the atmosphere, [and] something of the French

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, I deliberately omit “Madonna” (1983), a landlady’s narration of the story of a fugitive young couple, as I see it as an early draft of the chapters in *The Night Travellers* introducing Madeleine, Jeff’s lover. In “The Skater” (1988), the theme of Canada as a refuge is present through the character of a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe, but the focus is primarily on the mid-life crisis of the female protagonist.

past remaining there excite people” (Cole 43). In 1974, she elaborated on the resemblances in more detail:

Montreal . . . is a French-speaking city, and . . . I find that French-Canada had much to do with the opening up of New Orleans and the surrounding country. . . . In checking names in the New Orleans phone book . . . I found many, many of the same names that I found in the Montreal phone book. So, you have a cultural overlap here. (Weaver 51)

Eventually, Spencer did start writing about Canada and not only because she had been living there for such a long time. “Canada isn’t that different from us, you know. It’s a whole lot colder, but many of the same blood streams are there,” she said in 1981 (Kitchings 108), and five years later she added: “Parallels abound between French Canada and the South – a conquered society with different customs having to exist in terms of a larger, controlling nation” (Phillips 126). This time she did not align the whole of Canada with the South against the hegemony of oppressive “mainstream America” (she never said “the North”), but emphasized the links between two cultures that used to be powerful and were now threatened with destruction by globalization. The link she made between the South and French-speaking Canada enabled her to domesticate an environment that she had previously considered strange and foreign. Even her disagreement with the idea of the liberation of Québec, fueled by the infamous *Vive le Québec libre!* utterance by Charles de Gaulle in Montreal in 1967, stemmed from the parallels she found between the South and Québec, especially with regard to the secession of the southern states in 1861 that had brought so much pain and suffering. Indeed, the political tensions and animosities in Montreal contributed to her return to the South, as, in her opinion, the constant English-French conflicts “turned a beautifully welcoming international city into a battleground of name-calling and demands for change” (LH 330), and for her, like for many Americans who were promptly returning to the United States, the FLQ, instead of Front de Libération du Québec, stood for “Folks Leaving Québec” (LH 331). Spencer summed up her disappointment at the development of the political situation in Canada in the following way:

The outsider, once so happy to be part of an open-minded, evolving country, one delighting in the arts and building new centers for performance and exhibition, now had a box seat on a conflict in which he felt no visceral interest. (LH 331)

Considering Spencer’s sentiments about Canada, it is no surprise that, in her fiction, Montreal (and sometimes Canada in general) is shown as: (a) a multicultural place, (b) a haven for the oppressed and the hunted where one can vanish of one’s own accord without a trace, and (c) a place of solitude



and isolation. In Spencer's fiction, these three points grow into rich themes, enabling her to operate a set of potent and original symbols that help her to grasp better the powers of the city (or the whole country), both those that are life-giving (or life-returning) and those that are sinister.

All three themes intersect in "I, Maureen" (1976), which appeared for the first time, significantly, in that year's *New Canadian Stories*. The protagonist is a twenty-five-year-old woman who, against the expectations of everybody, including herself, marries one of the richest Montrealers, Denis Partham, and has two children with him, "beautiful, like children drawn with a pencil over and again in many attitudes, all pure, among many Canadian settings" (342). Although she is aware that she has everything "any woman in her right mind could want" (341), she perceives her life as an icy fairy-tale, a set of frozen pictures, a monstrous, clichéd story of an ugly duckling who got a prince; with self-irony she says about herself, "From the age of two, I looked run-down" (341).

That is why one day, after living through an epiphany, she runs away from their luxurious Lakeshore residence to launch a new existence in another quarter of the city, the much poorer and much more multicultural East Montreal, getting in touch with her children only twice, when her daughter is confirmed and when her son is taken to hospital with a serious case of peritonitis. The character of Maureen, the woman who builds a new identity and clings to it at any cost, has an obvious southern literary predecessor: Edna Pontellier from Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899).

Like Edna in Chopin's novel (which is set in New Orleans and draws on the clash of two cultures, the Creole Catholic and the English Protestant), Maureen is not willing to spend the rest of her life as a rich housewife, a mere appendix to her influential and intelligent (in this case French-Canadian) husband, nor does she want to make caring for her children or the social duties expected from her the meaning of her life.<sup>3</sup> She describes her life with Denis as suffocating and unbearable: "Before I knew it, he had enveloped me all over, encased me like a strong vine" (343).

However, unlike Kate Chopin's Edna, Maureen comes to an understanding of her plight not gradually, but in a brief moment of blindness caused by the refraction of light from a shard of blue-green glass two boys from the neighborhood were about to throw into a lake. The irony of Maureen's "awakening" does not get lost in Spencer's narrative. Maureen chooses, as

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<sup>3</sup> See also Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* (144-45).

her shelter, a city quarter that is not just French, but “also Greek, Italian, Oriental, and immigrant Jewish” (346), one where people live in ethnic tolerance. Still, while demanding tolerance from the Parthams, she herself is far from unbiased – whether toward people speaking with an accent; toward those who, like her, are unable to assimilate; or, especially, toward her in-laws, who might be a little pretentious but love her dearly. At first she does not take her psychoanalyst seriously, as he speaks with a thick accent, bears a foreign-sounding name (Miracorte), and never talks about his roots. When Carole Partham, her sister-in-law, enters Maureen’s East Montreal apartment to join her in her voluntary exile, at least for a month, while her husband is on a business trip, Maureen ridicules her inability to shed her “indefinable air of class” (351). Among her own motives to leave her husband is also a desire for revenge on the Parthams who, in her opinion, epitomize the old aristocracy. At the same time, she is blind to the malice of others – for example, the boys on the beach who throw bottles and stones into the lake, obviously trying to cause people harm.

Although Maureen is Canadian, she looks at Montreal through the eyes of a stranger. The early climax of the story follows a boating accident when, at that time still an obedient wife, she observes those who are carrying the limp body of her husband, presumably dead, toward her. The situation is an innovative variant of a scene in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* in which Kate Cutrer, the protagonist’s cousin, survives the car accident that left her fiancé dead, but instead of having a nervous breakdown or making a vain attempt to revive him, she turns herself into an onlooker, part of the crowd, and then leaves. Although Maureen’s husband survives the accident, his wife’s reaction is very similar to Kate’s: she retreats, runs backward, and, sprawled on the ground, she observes “the bluest of July skies in which white clouds had filled in giant areas at good distances from the sun” (344).

The story culminates in the scene of a several-day-long snow calamity during which, with the outside temperature having fallen to minus forty degrees Celsius, Maureen daily climbs the hill on which the Montreal hospital stands. The municipal buses, like inanimate Sisyphuses, try to transport their passengers up the hill, but, unlike the mythical Greek sufferer, they give up and “stand dull and bulky” in their “moaning impotence” (356). To get there, Maureen takes on identities of different animals that “wing, creep, crawl, hop” (358). Although, in that part of the story, she refers to herself as “I (human)” instead of “I (Maureen),” having lost her intolerance and selfishness, at least for a while, she progresses “at snail pace, at bug size” (357), comes through the blizzard “ant-sized” (357), and perceives a nurse in the

hospital as “a white rabbit” (356). The winter scenery allows Spencer the use of symbols she would not be able to employ in a story set in the South, but the tale is still unmistakably southern and can be put side by side with “Sir Rabbit” from Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples* (1949), a collection Spencer holds in such esteem that she once tested a new acquaintance of hers by giving her the book, “and if she didn’t like it, I doubted we’d have much in common” (Phillips 122).

One of the prominent characters in Welty’s *The Golden Apples*, King MacLain, suddenly vanishes without a trace. The whole community discusses his possible whereabouts and from time to time he is reported to have been seen in various nearby or distant places. The longer he is gone, the more important he becomes, but when finally, after many years, he returns, he is regarded as only little more than an ordinary old citizen. Although Maureen refuses any help from the Parthams, she is closely watched by them. Unlike Welty’s King MacLain, she is more important when present than when absent, even during her voluntary East Montreal exile. To his father’s displeasure, the son, whose name is never mentioned in the story, makes “a ‘religion’” of her (360), firmly believing that it was her days with him in the hospital that saved his life. Even though Maureen resorted to her shell, the city never swallows her completely.

Spencer wrote two stories set in Montreal in which people literally disappear, temporarily or even permanently. The earlier of them, “The Search” (1979; in *Chatelaine* it originally appeared as “The Searchers”), introduces the Davises, parents looking for their daughter Mary, who moved to Montreal with her draft-evading boyfriend during the Vietnam War: “She went to college, fell in love, eloped, and vanished” (403). The Davises stay in Auberge de la Province, a cheap hotel in East Montreal run by a homosexual couple, an English Arab and a blond Frenchman. During their week in Montreal they do not find a single clue leading to Mary: they only have a pleasant talk with the proprietor of a French restaurant and cause a minor scandal when Mrs. Davis is found to have repeatedly thrown bags of garbage out of the hotel window, the desperate act of a mentally disturbed person’s desire to get rid of her emotional waste and put an end to her mourning. On their return journey to the States, Mrs. Davis recalls a story she once read, the story of the search for a woman whose footsteps were found in the sand beside a river but then suddenly stopped: “There was no sign of a struggle, no sign of a body. There was nothing” (405). In Montreal, there are so many footsteps of various refugees and immigrants that it is impossible to find the ones sought after. Moreover, as the restaurant owner points out, “The people

are quiet, they ask very little” (404), even though the city looks and sounds like the “United Nations” (405). Communication between people here often goes beyond the use of language; the mutual understanding is instinctive. Mrs. Davis watches children playing ball and with surprise she notices that they talk “in three or four languages at least. I could hear French, English, and something else – Spanish or Italian – then another I’d no idea about. Yet the game went on” (405). In such a multicultural environment, it is easy to disappear; on the drive back to the United States, Mrs. Davis is even willing to admit that her daughter was a mere ghost: “I just wonder . . . if she ever existed at all” (405).

In the story “Jean-Pierre” (1981), it is a French Canadian who temporarily vanishes. In leaving his domestic space, Jean-Pierre is much closer to Welty’s King MacLain than any of Spencer’s other characters. After only one month of dating, this Québécois owner of two apartment houses in East Montreal marries Callie, a librarian ten years younger than him, who speaks only basic French. Their marriage is a mystery, especially to Callie’s relatives and friends, in whose opinions the Québécois are just “awful” (6). Living with a Québécois inevitably means that one will wind up “with fifteen brats and not even good French” (6). Callie herself perceives the French Canadians through a set of stereotypes and truisms: they are “treated as inferior by the English” and prefer “a life unmarred by violating eyes and scarring comments” (5). When Jean-Pierre departs in early June, one year after the wedding, leaving only a brief note saying that he will “be gone a while, c’est nécessaire” (11), Callie becomes completely isolated, her only companion being a stray cat. She receives mysterious phone calls, mostly in French, which she cannot understand, and is unable to answer. Once she even thinks that a woman on the phone is speaking about her and Jean-Pierre’s son, though she tells herself that maybe she just did not catch the words correctly. At that time, her husband’s absence makes him even more present to her. His mysterious vanishing made “his thoughts . . . all-important. They filled the sky; they overweighed the world” (13). At the same time, the city, especially the quarter where she lives, otherwise welcoming and pleasant, turns into an enormous gutter in her mind:

Montreal was muggy, overcast, and dirty that summer. The trees in the residential streets looked cool and full, but downtown near her own apartment, along Sainte-Catherine, vomit dried in various shades of green all day outside the tavernes, and all dogs seemed afflicted with diarrhea. (14)

When she reads Emily Dickinson's poems, especially those concerning death and grief, Jean-Pierre loses his sharp contours for her: he is "somebody she'd married in a dream he hadn't had" (17). Only a new friend of Callie's, a young Jewish man named Simon, can explain to her that Jean-Pierre's departure was a typical instinctive reaction of the human animal in danger. Natives of Montreal cannot hide in their own environment, although it is successfully used as a shelter by strangers; their only alternative is the countryside: "[T]he Québécois, if they get in trouble or get scared, they take to the bush. . . . They go to places like Chicoutimi, Rimouski, Rivière du Loup, from there upriver, downriver, into the woods" (21). When Jean-Pierre unexpectedly returns without confirming the speculation that he spent the time in the north of Canada, he behaves as if he had never left. Things seem to go back to normal, but Callie's cat can feel something sinister in him. It is scared, its heart is beating fast, and it even spits at Jean-Pierre, who, a moment later, draws a parallel between himself and the cat: "He stays because he belongs to you. . . . If he left he would come back" (24).

In 1992, Spencer published *The Night Travellers*,<sup>4</sup> her only novel partly set in Canada. In this book the three characteristic features of Montreal – that is, a point of the intersection of many cultures, a shelter, and a place of isolation – are seen in a more complex way, even more so because the story is set in the late 1960s, during the escalation of both the Vietnam War and the protests against it. Unlike the spiritual émigrés in "I, Maureen" and "Jean-Pierre" suffering from existentialist malaise, the novel introduces real ones from the United States. Spencer comments on life in Montreal and elsewhere in Canada primarily through two female narrators: Mary Kerr, the main protagonist, whose love for an anti-war activist and underground journalist, Jeff Blaise, brings her from her native town of Kingsbury, North Carolina, into Canadian exile;<sup>5</sup> and Gerda Stewart, a New Yorker who moved to Canada years ago because of Gordon, an English-speaking owner of several tenement buildings in Montreal. The two women meet after Mary's suicide attempt in one of Gordon's houses; Gerda and Gordon take Mary in as a surrogate daughter, and when she is detained – attempted suicide was a crime in Canada until 1972 – they pay her bail.

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth cited in the text as *NT*.

<sup>5</sup> Mary and her daughter Kathy also appear, as slightly different characters, in "A Fugitive's Wife" (1987), but the story takes place in Key West.

Gerda tries to make Mary's life in a city from where "there is nowhere else to climb but to the Pole" (*NT* 123) as comfortable as possible. It is too cold here, but at least "Canadians, unlike their climate, are mild by comparison, though the French keep boiling up with anger over one thing or another" (*NT* 127). While the influx of immigrants makes Montreal the crossroads of many different cultures, Gerda and her husband live in isolation: "I find friends here . . . but it is hard to relate them to anything except comfortable living. There is no center to their thinking" (*NT* 161). After their two adult sons leave, adopting their parents' opinion that "Montreal's a dead city. . . . The French are out to ruin it" (*NT* 304), Gerda, with her recently discovered desire to tell stories, sticks to her diary, and when Mary suddenly leaves for the country, she compensates for the cold of the Canadian winter by building a greenhouse. She also plans to see an ophthalmologist, since she has noticed a defect in her vision. "One of my eyes is out of focus with the other" (*NT* 128), she says, and her eye troubles are symbolic; she lost focus long ago when she adopted the secure position of a non-participating observer.

Still, as a chronicler, she acknowledges the ethnic and class *mélange* in certain parts of Montreal. On Sainte-Catherine Street she registers the

[k]aleidoscope of thrusting faces, no one race, polyglot, changing, . . . all different shapes, thrusting and hurrying, Oriental, Arab, Jew. French, English, bums, beggars, cheap girls, nice girls, housewives, the seeking and the sought, sucked into buses, plunging through Metro doors, dodging traffic, ignoring lights. (*NT* 129)

Although she calls Montreal her home, it has always been a place where she and her husband stayed and performed their duties: "Here we live, work, raise children, speak proper English to one another, a swirl of every language jabbering and echoing around us, unheard within our walls" (*NT* 124). The only reason to go to St. Laurent, the center of French and immigrant life, is "some restaurant that's good" (*NT* 272). Gerda would never visit a counter-culture bar like The Purple Window, where the regulars are, in her words, the "[r]ags and tags of the human race" (*NT* 321).

Unlike Gerda, Jeff's occasional lover, Madeleine, a native Montrealer, realizes that it is the influx of war objectors from the United States that has made the city more open: "Young America is here on a Montreal street because of principles about a little Asian country nobody knew anything about ten years ago" (*NT* 210).

The English-speaking Gerda and Gordon had always mentally detached themselves from the mix of cultures on the streets of Montreal. Thus, it is not surprising that it is Gerda, not Mary, who is the first to draw the parallel

between Québec within Canada and the South within the United States. Like southerners, French Canadians “relate to something, their own past, their families, their language” (NT 161). Paradoxically, Mary, who was born into her mother’s distinguished southern family, the Harbisons, with its long tradition of local influence and wealth, finds family ties bothersome and speaks about the place where her mother lives as “*the land of the dead*” (NT 156; Spencer’s italics).

In spite of that, Mary, arriving in Canada with her draft-dodging husband, has her preconceptions of that country based on stereotypes similar to those embraced by Gerda years earlier; the country is simply “grand,” and there is “all that cold in the winter” (NT 153). Mary’s southern past did not prepare her to be immediately open to all the available cultural influences, but, fortunately, she is a dancer with professional ambitions, which makes her seek contacts within multicultural artistic communities. As Spencer said in a 1996 interview, “If a person were attached to poetry or writing or sculpture, you could always find others within the art world and make a community for yourself” (Entzminger 614). But, as Terry Roberts aptly notices in his analysis of the novel, “all emotional gypsies [are] seeking a home” (126), not just a community. This is why, while not trying to understand the country and its political direction, Mary establishes close contacts with individuals, especially with Leonard and Hilda, a Jewish couple still living in the shadow of the Nazi holocaust, and Estes Drover, a gay Spanish dancer maintaining a rocky relationship with his querulous Arab lover. Although, at the beginning of her relationship with Jeff, she “reserved a silent right not to be any more interested in politics than time permitted” (NT 37), she makes political statements through her dance routines and performances. She can hardly speak French, which makes it difficult for her to find a regular job. Still, after becoming a part of Montreal’s underground cultural life, she adopts a Québécois identity as a cover. Now she is no longer Mary Kerr, or simply Mary, as she wanted to be addressed after her escape from the South, but Marie Carée, another name which echoes “caring.” For Catherine Seltzer, who discusses Spencer’s complicated concepts of home and community, it is proof that through adopting a French-sounding name, Mary “recognizes herself as both American and Canadian” (168). While Mary’s suicide attempt, a result of her feelings of isolation and her lack of belief in reunion with her husband, was an act of selfishness, as her death would have left her little daughter Kathy motherless, later she does not hesitate to return secretly to the United States to steal the child from her own mother, who has her in her custody.

In *The Night Travellers*, Americans, even the most unprejudiced ones, do not try hard enough to understand Canada; they are too immersed in the problems of their own big country. Mary knows that Canadian communities are, like southern ones, far from homogeneous, yet still she often simplifies matters, for example, when she accuses Canadians of hypocrisy and too much reserve: “Oh, yes, Canadians are really against that war, but when they meet somebody, they act like you’ve got leprosy” (NT 211). Jeff’s teacher and idol, Ethan, who initiated Mary’s escape to Canada and is otherwise very open-minded, once said laconically about Canadians: “These are foreign people” (NT 241). Even for Jeff, traveling at night on the Trans-Canada Express, Canada is merely a “massive land like something in a trick mirror, broad at the base, the head narrowing” (NT 289). In this context it is difficult to join Sel y who’s done the honest thing and refused to fight it in her opinion that Canada “suggests a utopia of sorts to Jeff,” as there is no idealization of that country on his part. On the other hand, Seltzer is right when she notices that for the endlessly roaming anti-war activist, the country definitely is “a tabula rasa . . . , a site of possibility and reinvention” (162). This applies not only to him, but also to Mary, who, after her suicide attempt, regains her identity through her artistic activities, thus turning the potentially “abstract space” (a term used by Seltzer 166) into a very concrete one.

At one point, Jeff draws a parallel between the United States before the Civil War, divided on the issue of slavery, and the United States of the 1960s, when the dividing line was the Vietnam War. He does this in one of his letters he writes to Mary, “Believe that it’s another civil war, the one we were still talking about down South. . . . Only now we can’t secede” (NT 259). For him, the grapevine conspirators who secretly passed information, warned people, and organized the escapes of activists bear a resemblance to their 19th<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors involved in “the underground railroad” helping slaves from the South to escape. Still, it was Canada, not the United States, that in 1970 came close to a civil war, with the FLO fighting, often by violent means, for the separation of Québec.

Canada, which did not extradite draft dodgers to the United States, became a regular shelter for young American males who were not ready to die for their country. In her study of Canadian immigration, Valerie Knowles claims that a total of between 80,000 and 200,000 war resisters and deserters escaped from the United States to Canada during the Vietnam War, reversing the direction in which well-educated people were crossing the border for the first time in history (186). Although it is not specified in the novel, it is ob-



vious that Jeff and Mary do not apply for landed immigrant status and permanent residency, which would legalize their stay in Canada, but, like deserters from the US Army, who only rarely obtained such a status, they “remained fugitives, living underground” (Knowles 214). Jeff’s unwillingness to live abroad is one of the reasons why he is risking repeated border crossings: instead of living in Canada with his wife, he spends most of the time in the United States among rioters and protesters as an underground journalist, writing “From the Front Lines” (281), as he calls his regular column.

In November 1969, when Richard Nixon was elected president in the United States, the cooperation between the police and intelligence services of both countries increased, “Canada playing patsy to the powerful bully to the south” (NT 309). Even though the focus was more on Toronto, an English-speaking city with a more extensive drug scene, directly connected in people’s minds with American hippies and beatniks, Montreal was also in their scope. Nevertheless, for Mary and Jeff, it becomes a place where they can stay in the anonymity they desire and, if there is a need, vanish into thin air like “friendly spirits” (NT 323), as they occasionally saw themselves. During the brief period when Jeff lives with Mary in Montreal, from March to November 1969, teaching simultaneously at two high schools, he merely changes his name to Geoffrey Blaylock, dyes his blond hair black, and grows a beard; still, he seems to be safe in the ant-hill of the city, even though, at that time, he is on police lists not only as a war objector but also as a terrorist who helped to blow up a munitions plant near Sausalito.

Mary gets used to life in Montreal, and when she is sent to the country, a hunting lodge a few miles from St. Vincent-en-Campagne near St. Ange, she is extremely unhappy. While Jeff accepts Ethan’s assumption that the country is a better hiding place, free of police traps, in the changing political climate in Canada, Mary has a different opinion: “I know how to hide in Montreal. Not even a rabbit can hide in a field of snow” (NT 274). Like an animal, in the country she almost becomes the prey of one of the hunters who is spending a weekend in the lodge and who turns out to be a government-related agent. Even before one of the hunter’s colleagues warns her, she hides with Kathy in the snowy woods and, falling to catch her slipping daughter, sprains her ankle and breaks her arm. Rescued by the very hunters that posed a danger for her incognito, she feels like “some bundled-up game that had been shot” (NT 230).

Another one of Mary’s trips to the country, this time with Jeff, ends in complete disaster: a deserted cottage, which they break into and where they spend several days, burns down mysteriously on the day of their departure.

Jeff later explains to a group of friends and acquaintances, trying to refute an accusation of having set the cottage on fire: “[W]e just quietly and with great respect did what we’ve been doing in your country for some years now: we refugeeed in it” (NT 322). At that point it becomes more than obvious that the idea of the countryside being safer for refugees than a big city is wrong. The cottage in the woods bears a fairy-tale quality: it looks like “a gingerbread house” (NT 311) offering a refuge to lost or abandoned children, but as every child knows, there is always a witch in such houses. The price for the few happy days in the cottage is the loss of their cover. Jeff is never sure whether it was really a bolt of lightning that caused the fire, or whether the blaze was a part of the police scheme to frame him. In any case, if not literally, then symbolically there was “a shadow of some sort off in the woods” (NT 324) that traced him, put him out of balance, drove him back to the United States, and finally had him sent to Vietnam. The shadows could also have been summoned by his father-in-law Fred, who wants Mary to return to her mother. Yet there is an irony in this imagery, as earlier it was Jeff and Mary who were noiselessly stepping from the shadows. When Mary meets Jeff for the first time, “he was there at the edge of some thick trees. It was like the shadows got together and made him up” (NT 139). Years later, even Estes, the owner of a Montreal dance studio, notices Mary’s “gift of becoming invisible” (NT 301).

The evidence of Mary’s gradual assimilation in Canada is her growing demand for a surrogate family that would neither require her to abandon her husband nor force her to shed her southern identity. At the end of the novel, she clings to Estes mainly because, being gay, he is willing to play exactly the role she needs to cast in her real-life performance, that of a protector of her and her daughter. Then Mary can live like Maureen or Jean-Pierre: she no longer sees the city as a gathering place for expatriates and, by ignoring its mosaic of cultures, accepts it primarily as an amiable space where everybody does what he or she likes. Unlike the alienated native Montrealers in Spencer’s short stories, Mary decides that her life without Jeff is not isolation but the anonymity she prefers.

Like Mary Kerr, Elizabeth Spencer left the South for Italy and then for Canada at the peak of civil unrest, although at that time the reason was not a war abroad but the attacks against desegregation and racial equality. When she chose Montreal as her new place of residency, she became invisible for many southerners. Many of her books went out of print and reappeared only when she returned. By the time *The Night Travellers* was published, she was once again firmly rooted in the South; like Jeff Blaise from that novel, she

decided not to live in exile any more, even though she used to claim that you did not have to live in the South to stay southern – “you could be southern elsewhere, in Florence, or Paris, or anywhere you found yourself” (Smith 141). During her long stay in Montreal, she did leave her southern identity, as well as her stories, memories, and accent, untouched, although at the same time she did become, at least a little, Canadian. This is evident not only from the occasional Canadian settings of her works and from her ten years of teaching at Concordia University in Montreal, but also from the many good friends she made in Canada, including the curator of manuscripts at the National Library in Ottawa, which prompted her decision to deposit her papers in Canada instead of at the University of Kentucky in Lexington where her early texts are stored, or in the Mississippi Archives, which offered to take the collection (Zacharasiewicz 155).<sup>6</sup> The researchers from the South and elsewhere who occasionally visit the manuscript collection can feel the same sparks of the North that flash through the fiction she wrote during her prolific and rich Canadian years.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Library of Ottawa also holds copies of all of Spencer’s papers deposited in Kentucky. See also Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, “The South and Beyond: A Conversation with Elizabeth Spencer” (*Conversations* 205-06).

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NAHEM YOUSAF

## Michael Ondaatje's New Orleans in *Coming Through Slaughter*

In his 1976 novel *Coming Through Slaughter*, Michael Ondaatje takes as his subject the New Orleans jazz musician Charles "Buddy" Bolden who lived from 1877 to 1931. The writer's seeming lack of immediate connection to the subject has given rise to a few questions like novelist-interviewer Colum McCann's: "How did you come to write *Coming Through Slaughter* about Buddy Bolden – an African-American jazz musician in turn-of-the-century New Orleans – when you were born in Sri Lanka, went to school in England, and were living in Toronto?" McCann distinguishes between Ondaatje's supposedly natural subject matter and a setting that is deemed to be so far away from his experience. His question, though seemingly designed to prompt Ondaatje to speak about the sense of place in fiction, nods to an axiomatic assumption that a novel published early in a writer's career will be based in a place that is well known to the author. Taking a different perspective, one of Ondaatje's most searching and revealing critics, Sam Solecki, refers to location in Ondaatje's fictions as predominantly symbolic, "places and societies radically different from his own" ("Making" 255). In Ondaatje's novel, as I read it, New Orleans is less a setting in terms of detailed socio-geographical knowledge and more a theme, as imagined in fiction and communicated through music and as infused by imagery of that city's cultural mystique.

New Orleans is a vehicle for Ondaatje to imagine a version of Buddy Bolden that has, in turn, inspired others to imagine him similarly. Despite his now legendary status, little is known about Bolden's life in New Orleans, and Ondaatje was intrigued by that fact. Following Ondaatje, another Canadian, Stefan Berg, who had been introduced to New Orleans jazz in Toronto, was influenced by Ondaatje's novel to create a version of the "first man of jazz" that extrapolates on *Coming Through Slaughter* but that translates the story into a different form: the graphic novel. I turn to Berg's 2007 work as an addendum to thinking about Ondaatje's and as an example of how images of Bolden continue to circulate in Canadian texts.

Canadian writers have often been fascinated by the city, images of which have circulated through stories as different as John Murrell's *Death in New Orleans* (1998) and Marnie Woodrow's *Spelling Mississippi* (2002), which

cross national borders and boundaries to explore, through this particular milieu, what Larry McClain described as “an imperfect acculturation to national ideology and the oppositional power that springs from this peripheral identity” (243). A prolific playwright, Murrell was born in the U.S. South but settled in Calgary in 1969. His drama deploys a Canadian cultural anthropologist as the focalizing character through which to explore not only the city and its people but her own Canadian heritage. Woodrow’s novel explores a Toronto woman’s obsessive fascination with a New Orleans native, tangling the two women’s different heritages and experiences with the city’s French Quarter. In each case, Canadian protagonists travel to New Orleans on a quest for self-knowledge and discover as much about identifying as Canadians as they do about the city. It is unsurprising that Ondaatje should have fixed on a New Orleans story if, like Thomas Bonner Jr., he conceived of the location as “the only major postcolonial city remaining in the United States” and a place where beginnings and endings merge (Bonner 5, 13). Ondaatje’s own Dutch-Ceylonese heritage generated a preoccupation with complex cultural legacies that are threaded through the writer’s oeuvre, notably in the autobiographical *Running in the Family* (1984) and most overtly in colonial terms in *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), which returns to Sri Lanka wracked by civil war in the 1980s. Ondaatje’s fiction could be said to realize a line in his poem “Spider Blues,” in which the poet decides he will “swivel to new regions where the raw of feelings exist” (*Rat Jelly* 64). Stefan Berg intervenes creatively in the same story and with similar attention to what Ondaatje, in his “Author’s Note” to *Coming Through Slaughter*,<sup>1</sup> refers to as the “private and fictional magnets” that drew him to the subject and to the city (*Slaughter* 158).

In 1976, Ondaatje enjoyed creative license in imagining the story of the legendary cornet player in his homeplace. Few facts were known. Ondaatje has revealed he came across the story of Bolden in a newspaper article, in the form of a cryptic reference to “Buddy Bolden, who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade” (Witten 9). He was aware of a single extant photograph of Bolden’s band from 1905; as he was writing his book, no other image of the man was available.<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje used that image and the

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to *Coming Through Slaughter* will be abbreviated to *Slaughter* in this text.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Marquis’s *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* includes a portrait of Bolden that he discovered of which Ondaatje was apparently unaware (see xviii, 146-47)

legend of Bolden losing his senses in his music and went on to research images and sounds of the city to dramatize his life. What could not be historically known about the man had prevented Bolden from finding a secure place in cultural histories. The enigma was complicated further because Bolden needed to be read against the musical grain insofar as in the period in which the classical ragtime style of jazz was building and being played from printed music, Bolden's syncopated style of improvisational playing was a local phenomenon, especially his dirty blues and lewd signature songs, or "ratty music" as Louis Armstrong referred to it later (Brothers 28, 148, 155). Bolden was never recorded and, as cultural critic Luc Sante has noted, he also "missed the leap of the New Orleans sound to Chicago, and beyond" (179).

Ondaatje visited New Orleans for only a very few days in 1973 to research the novel, which was published two years before the first biography of Bolden by Donald Marquis. In *In Search of Buddy Bolden* (1978), Marquis turned to city records to try to penetrate the truth of a man as fabled, he pointed out, as New Orleans pirate Jean Lafitte or voodoo queen Marie Laveau, but as little known. Marquis makes no mention of Ondaatje, but the Canadian's quest-fiction may be read alongside the biography for the elements of a New Orleans story each of the two recovers. It seems noteworthy that critics have misremembered the order in which these two books appeared, assuming Ondaatje followed Marquis rather than allowing that, while Marquis began researching Bolden in the 1960s, the Canadian published his version of the musician's life first.<sup>3</sup> Both writers came to some of the same conclusions. It is agreed that Bolden was born in 1877 and that he was established as a musician around 1895 but that by 1906 the first concrete indications of mental illness were causing concern and that he broke down in the Labor Day parade and was later sectioned, remaining in the Louisiana State Insane Asylum at Jackson until he died in 1931. Given that the Canadian writer passed only a few days in the city, while New Orleans-based jazz historian Marquis trawled local libraries and archives and interviewed musicians, it is immediately evident that the Canadian's is a very different New Orleans story. This essay begins to tease that out.

Winner of the Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1976, *Coming Through Slaughter* has been celebrated as "a paradigmatic Canadian fiction in its refusal of the European and American tradition of the novel" (Barbour

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Daniel Hardie mistakenly has *Coming Through Slaughter* published in 1979, a year after Marquis's biography (25).



103). Again, taking a different perspective, Solecki wonders whether Ondaatje may be a particular kind of Canadian writer, enjoying an “anomalous status within our literary culture” (*Spider Blues* 7). Ondaatje’s relationship to Canadian-ness as defined by his critics is somewhat like Bolden’s to New Orleans, and like the city as traditionally depicted: at once familiar and strange. Annick Hillger, for example, believes Ondaatje’s texts “resonate with [other] Canadian texts that are concerned with the quest for self” and that it is up to the reader to “sound the intertexts” (221). I would argue that Ondaatje’s conception of New Orleans is similarly intertextual. As embedded in *Coming Through Slaughter*, the referential and the “real” derive as much from fantasy and tall stories told by New Orleanians as they rely on the scant documentary evidence that Ondaatje uncovered; both are interwoven in the novel. This is a disquieting union that accounts for the affective quality of reading a fiction that is a haunting and disturbing evocation of Bolden’s creativity as a form of self-harm. Similarly, while each of Ondaatje’s fictions explores a different landscape – North Africa, Italy, and India in *The English Patient* and Northern California and France in *Divisadero* – that landscape is as much psychological as representational. “His mind became the street,” the reader is told of Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* (42). As Ondaatje has said, a poetic principle is at work in such descriptions.<sup>4</sup> In the case of *Coming Through Slaughter*, his novel-writing is also informed by local lore, that is to say by New Orleanians’ stories of Bolden’s talent, his suffering, and his loss to music.

While Marquis’s biographical trajectory reports some of the oral histories about Bolden in an effort to pinpoint his character – with one person he interviews alleging that Bolden “broke his heart when he played” (99) – Ondaatje’s entire project is premised on capturing mood and mystique. New Orleans is a creative spur to Ondaatje, and this novel engages what W. Kenneth Holditch has called “the New Orleans literary mystique” (137). Ondaatje writes with metafictional self-consciousness:

Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body, and you like a weatherbird arcing round in the middle of your life to exact opposites and burning your brains out. . . . The excesses cloud up the page. (*Slaughter* 134)

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<sup>4</sup> See Ondaatje, qtd. in Birnbaum (2010).

Literary critics have wrestled over its modernist and postmodernist qualities, and they have pursued the extent to which Bolden's story may be read as a disquisition on Ondaatje's own literary aesthetic or even as a self-portrait.<sup>5</sup> However, they have not read the novel as an evocation of New Orleans's uncanny mystique,<sup>6</sup> acknowledging that inherent in that mystique is, as Holditch has asserted, a "strong and pervasive sense of foreignness" (137), a feeling that persists throughout this novel.

Bolden's life in the city is what local lore has made of it since he died. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White describes the historical past as "uncanny": "both known and unknown, present and absent, familiar and alien, at one and the same time." In this construction, the historical past contains "all the attributes that we might ascribe to the psychological sphere of 'the imaginary'" (89). If read in this way, *Coming Through Slaughter* is a typical New Orleans narrative. New Orleans fictions from George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) through *The Vampire Chronicles* of Anne Rice are infused with notions of the uncanny, the unfamiliar, and the strange. The problems posed by this novel may be read back through such stories in which the city's violence and its spookiness are compulsively reiterated – and not only in the city's literary tradition. Ondaatje has said that "[t]he novel has been quite slow in picking up what the other arts are doing . . . they have been doing things that are much more suggestive, much freer of chronological sequence" (Menand 94). Expressed as a collage of tall tales, oral histories, and hospital files, Ondaatje's text provides an embedded fictionalization of a life shrouded in myth. *Coming Through Slaughter* jumps around in time, plays with point of view, and relies on stories within stories in its attempt to "find" Bolden. The quest motif was becoming a typical journey undertaken

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<sup>5</sup> For Solecki the novel is "the story of Michael Ondaatje, it is the work in which he most explicitly declares that a fictional character created by him is really a self-portrait" (254).

<sup>6</sup> The single critic to foreground New Orleans is Joel Deshayé. In "Parading the Underworld of New Orleans in *Coming Through Slaughter*," he fills out Ondaatje's metaphor that New Orleans is "a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (136) by noting the ordinances that the Louisiana legislature put in place post-Reconstruction, such as the 1890 segregation of streetcars, the 1900 outlawing of the grandfather clause to disenfranchise black voters, and Bolden's identification with Storyville. Following histories like Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns's *Jazz: A History of American Music* and Marquis's study, Deshayé situates Bolden within a historically segregated city rather than the more diffuse cultural imaginary within which I see as Ondaatje's creative impetus.

in Ondaatje's writing, specifically that in which he recovers a dead or disappeared subject, as in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). In this novel, Ondaatje does not attempt to explain the causes of Bolden's madness (alcohol for Marquis as well as most music historians). Instead, fragments of thin fact and much thicker myth are woven together in a sideways glimpse of one of the founding fathers of the New Orleans sound.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, looking back over Ondaatje's writing career, Louis Menand has recognized that it is not easy to follow the chronology of a life story in his work. "He is not telling stories," Menand posits, but "using the elements of storytelling to gesture in the direction of a constellation of moods, themes, and images . . . He is trying to change the medium" (92). By eschewing realist literary strategies, Ondaatje turns rather to what Robert Kroetsch in his essay, "The Exploding Porcupine," once described as "the bookness of book," an idea through which a writer might "violate the constellation of narrative," thereby creating what Kroetsch calls "a grammar of violence" (113). In the novel, a grammar of violence is recited through various memories of the man (true or embellished) and textured by a musical adrenaline so that the metaphor Ondaatje's Bolden uses – "*Put your hand through this window*" (Slaughter 91) – is at once a leap of faith in creativity, a sudden violent act involving pain and the tearing of flesh, and a metafictional nod to the author's penchant for breaking the frame. Finally, with a chilling undertone, Ondaatje attributes the metaphor through which Bolden sets up a grammar of violence to his own writerly endeavor:

The thin sheaf of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, "Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade..." What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (*Slaughter* 134)

This metaphor for creativity is translated into the maddened music Bolden is playing according to Ondaatje – music by which he reaches both the heights of jazz bravado and the depths of suffering continually emphasized in local musical lore.

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<sup>7</sup> Bolden played in Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans that had disappeared by 1917. Traces remained in the photographs of prostitutes taken by E. J. Bellocq, whom Ondaatje makes a significant character in Bolden's life in the novel. Bellocq's photographs were published in 1970 and provide another creative source for Ondaatje in contriving his New Orleans story.

New Orleans music is significant in conjuring culture and place. For writers as well as musicologists, musical styles and lyrics exemplify the way in which the city has served as a location for a melodramatic history of mystery and crime, sin and suffering. The character of Webb, Ondaatje's witness to Bolden's playing, is struck that Bolden's musical repertoire is shot through with violence and crime. He notes that Bolden's "whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change . . . was about bodies in the river, knives, lovepains, cockiness. Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (*Slaughter* 43). Ondaatje has Bolden leave the city to escape this plot's unwinding. While Marquis's biography would go on to show that he never left New Orleans, Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* enjoys two years of relative calm in Shell Beach, Louisiana, until Webb finds him and brings him "home to a nightmare" (106). Only an hour's drive from New Orleans, in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century setting, its distance and quiet make Shell Beach seem a world away from the frenetic hub of Bolden's life in jazz. Temporarily at least, he feels that "[u]nder the sunlight I am the only object between water and sky" (68). He feels he can be "anonymous and alone . . . with no history and no parading" (86). Ondaatje has his subject leave because only when he does can the pull of the city's imaginary be felt full force. This "plot" derives not a little from Frank Lewis, clarinet player with Bolden's band, and his reported observation that "He tore apart the plot – see his music was immediately on top of his life" (37). As soon as Webb seeks him out, full of stories about the past, Bolden feels "ridiculous here" now that Webb has reached him even "this far away" and "could tilt me upside down till he was directing me like wayward traffic back home" (86). Five days after returning to New Orleans, Ondaatje's Bolden is so maddened by the plot of his song that he is felled by it. While Webb believes that leaving New Orleans will be a "contemptuous" form of "landscape suicide" (22), Bolden pleads: "All that music. I don't want that way anymore. . . . What have you brought me back to, Webb?" (101).

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In a study of the city's music-led tourist industry, Connie Atkinson, founding editor of music journal *Wavelength*, does not mention Bolden (151). That he has often been missing from what the New Orleans tourists know and love

should not come as a surprise. In the 1990s, when Atkinson wrote “Shakin’ your Butt for the Tourist: Music’s Role in the Identification and Selling of New Orleans,” the tourist board’s refrain was “Come Join the Parade.”<sup>8</sup> It is an invitation that would have resonated with sadness rather than joy for those tourists who had heard the story of the so-called “first man of jazz” collapsing in the middle of a parade. In that sense, Bolden was not always deemed fit to sell the city, though his story has since been differently imagined and inflected. Louise McKinney (yet another Canadian writer fascinated by New Orleans and its music), in her 2006 cultural history of the city, mentions the legend familiar to musicians, that,

when Buddy Bolden practiced his trumpet from the front yard of his home at 2309 First Street, where he lived from 1887-1905, you could hear him all the way across town. The story may be apocryphal, but the house is still there. . . . On a quiet morning in the French Quarter, from the vantage point of Jackson Square, you can indeed hear a horn from a long distance away. (41)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bolden has become the mysterious ghost that haunts the city, at least for those who choose to seek out his legend.

It is no surprise, then, that New Orleans jazz history should intrigue a writer who focuses on the creative-destructive relationship of the artist to his art. Critics have *almost* touched on the potential importance of New Orleans to Ondaatje when noting writers he admires or allusions he makes. Both Sam Solecki and Manina Jones, for example, read *Coming Through Slaughter* back through Ondaatje’s poem “White Dwarfs” (1973),<sup>9</sup> which celebrates among its silenced heroes the self-destructive writer of detective fiction, Dashiell Hammett:

And Dashiell Hammett in success  
suffered conversation and moved  
to the perfect white between words  
. . . .  
there are those burned out stars  
who implode into silence  
after parading in the sky  
after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway (*Rat Jelly* 71)

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<sup>8</sup> Of course the “funky butt” Bolden sang about was much more distasteful than the energetic image of dance in this context.

<sup>9</sup> See Solecki, *Nets*, and Jones, *Varieties*.

Hammett's "burned out star" shines again in Bolden, but critics fail to also note Hammett's obsession with New Orleans as an intertextual connection that underscores a route by which Ondaatje could have found his way to Bolden. New Orleans-born writer Lillian Hellman, Hammett's companion for some thirty years, remembered that "he knew more about . . . New Orleans music, food, and architecture than my father who had grown up there." Cle-anth Brooks famously called New Orleans a city of the mind; it is a city to which writers have always come as literary apprentices. New Orleans literature has never been solely or even mainly indigenous; it has always also been written by those who migrated to the city, those who came as purposeful literary pilgrims, and those, like Ondaatje, who spent the briefest of times there.

In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje is clearly fascinated by the underbelly of New Orleans, its volatility as "the City of Night" according to whose lore doom is always imminent. The trope of New Orleans as courtesan becomes most apparent when its prostitutes in Storyville are described as "the sum of the city" and a metaphorical extension of Bolden's desperate blues. In selecting Bolden as emblematic of the city's reputation for danger and sensuality, specifically through jazz's origins in its red-light district, Ondaatje was following Ralph Ellison, though it may not have been apparent to him at the time of writing, and Ellison's definition of blues as "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe, expressed lyrically" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 78-9). In *Invisible Man*, Ellison had his protagonist listen to Jelly Roll Morton's version of Buddy Bolden's blues until his editor Albert Erskine suggested Ellison change the reference to something more contemporary: Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?"<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, an allusion to Bolden remains in Ellison's Epilogue to the novel:

With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, 'Open the window and let the foul air out... Of course Louis was kidding, *he* wouldn't have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air's horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and diversity and I'll be up and around with mine. (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 468).

This vestigial, if inexact, allusion fuses the narrator's invisibility with that of Bolden, unnamed here and hidden behind Armstrong, just as Ondaatje (as

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<sup>10</sup> See Yaffe (69-70); although Yaffe posits that Bolden was "rendered catatonic" by syphilis (150).

Solecki was the first to point out) stands behind Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ellison's description of the blues as raw and agonizing, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues" 78) illuminates the effect that Ondaatje creates. Ondaatje's story soars to the jagged peaks Ellison describes but then, in painful detail, falls into maddened despair like the music Bolden is reputed to have played.

Tellingly, in a novel that continually shifts between first- and third-person narration, Ondaatje is liberal in his use of phrases from musical biographies of New Orleans and from transcripts of interviews with musicians, like those by Frank Amacker from the 1960s in the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University library as reproduced in the novel (152-55). Ondaatje's imagined Bolden develops out of snatches from this evolving story told in the words of locals, usually musicians, who knew or heard of him. Jelly Roll Morton described Bolden as "the best and the loudest and most loved jazzman of his time" and "the most powerful trumpet player I've ever heard, or ever was known" (qtd. in Sante 183), a phrase that Ondaatje reproduces wholesale in the novel. Ondaatje also polishes a colorful image from Louis Jones and makes it shine: "When he bought a cornet he'd shine it up and make it glisten like a women's [sic] leg," and makes his borrowing apparent by using Jones as an epigraph (Barker 15). Some scenes in *Coming Through Slaughter* derive from "A Memory of King Bolden," an oral history by Mr. Dude Bottley who, in 1965, related his memories of Bolden to Danny Barker, one of New Orleans' best loved musicians and a guitarist with the Cab Calloway Band. Barker believed that living with a talent that could only be expressed "loudly and without restraint or caution . . . at Protestant churches, dances, parades and games of sport" (Shipton vii) contributed to the onset of Bolden's insanity. In this memory-text, "King" Bolden is mythologized as a folkloric figure first by Dude Bottley and again by Barker who rewrote this article many times, a factor which further complicates the "terraces of character"<sup>11</sup> on which Ondaatje builds his picture of Bolden. Bottley seems most disturbed when he remembers (or imagines) spying on a drunken Bolden playing "mixed up music on the hymn for the Lord or the blues for the devil" (Barker 42). Ondaatje reiterates that idea in the novel in a scene in which he replays Dude Bottley's story as mediated through Brock Mumford's oral history,

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<sup>11</sup> Ondaatje muses that "someone's name holds terraces of character" (*Handwriting* 55).

“which some believe and others don’t believe at all” (80). In the novel, Brock/Bottley goes to Bolden’s barber shop and discovers him playing “real strange”: “He’s playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together” (*Slaughter* 81). Ondaatje borrows precise descriptions from Bottley, as in the image of Bolden putting his “hat over the bell of his horn” (81) to create this mélange of styles. This scene depicts Bolden’s blues as popularized by musicians in New Orleans, including Louis Armstrong, who was only six when Bolden was confined:

Some saying you went mad trying to play the devil’s music and hymns at the same time, and Armstrong telling historians that you went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy. The excesses cloud up the page. (*Slaughter* 134)

While Ondaatje’s Bolden drinks, and to excess, it is the self-destructive force that is inextricable from his creativity in both mind and city – each “the place of his music” – that fuses Ondaatje’s connection to his subject as he walks the city’s streets in 1973: “When he went mad he was the same age as I am now” (*Slaughter* 133).

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In *Coming Through Slaughter*, the parade in which Bolden collapses follows his two-year exile from the city and maps his breakdown on to his return. In Ondaatje’s version, parades frame the story of Bolden’s life so that his musical beginnings and endings merge, to borrow Thomas Bonner’s phrasing.<sup>12</sup> The first parade is Bolden’s coming to birth as a public performer during which he captivates the crowd. That moment is witnessed by Webb who watches his “nervous friend walk jauntily out of the crowd into the path of a parade and begin to play. So hard and beautifully . . .” (*Slaughter* 36). In the final parade, Bolden’s physical and mental crash is precipitated by a young woman dancer entranced by his music but who catches him off guard so that he feels she is “testing me taunting me to make it past her” (130). As his playing speeds towards a crescendo, Bolden feels as if the dancer takes control, “this hearer who can throw me in the direction and the speed she wishes

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<sup>12</sup> Bonner uses it to epitomize “the matters of writing and writers in New Orleans” (13).



like an angry shadow” (130). The image is a reprise of Webb directing him, “like wayward traffic back home” from Shell Beach (86).

Buddy Bolden’s demise, as imagined by Michael Ondaatje in 1973, continues to have resonance. This same dramatic scene was reprised by Ondaatje in his adaptation of his novel into a play, a further mediation of his New Orleans story that was performed in Toronto from 5-27 January, 1980 at the Theatre Passe Muraille.<sup>13</sup> The creative force of Bolden’s life in New Orleans remained with Ondaatje; following the play, he also adapted *Coming Through Slaughter* into a screenplay, although, even as a successful writer of screenplays and director of films, Ondaatje has yet to produce or direct this one. In 1986, British jazz musician Humphrey Lyttleton created three fantasy-performances with Bolden at the center, the first a contest between Bolden and his jazz nemesis John Robichaux (a relationship referenced in the novel), and the third a cornet solo. It is the second that hinges on *Coming Through Slaughter*. Entitled “Buddy’s Last Parade,” it is a performance in which Lyttleton acts out Bolden’s role in the Labor Day parade that ended for him with his breakdown at the music’s crescendo. One critic credits Marquis’s biography and jazz archivists at Tulane for making such a creative venture possible but forgets that, even before Marquis’s research put Bolden back on the musical map, Ondaatje had already imagined this manic and melancholic performance in detail (Hardie 198-9). Lyttleton *re-imagined* a scene that did not exist except in the single line from the newspaper out of which Ondaatje first imagined it.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, *Coming Through Slaughter* takes on new resonance. New Orleans music, the art form that Ondaatje celebrates while lamenting Bolden’s demise, suffered a near fatal blow when those neighborhoods that were traditionally home to musicians were destroyed. Many jazz and blues musicians scattered around the country, with some 3,000 still displaced, it was estimated, two years after Katrina (Briggs). Others were supported by charities including the Musicians’ Village project launched by Harry Connick, Jr. and Wynton Marsalis. Musician Bob French is pictured in a poster to promote the project with Connick stating:

Now I’ve been playing with Bob since I was five years old. Here’s Bob close to 70 years old, sitting there with a snare drum in his hands [next to] a house that’s collapsed on top

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<sup>13</sup> Dates provided by Barbour (236).

of a car. Here's a musician who doesn't have a house, doesn't have anything anymore, who's a hero of mine. ("Connick Helps")<sup>14</sup>

Post-Katrina, *Coming Through Slaughter* is still an elegy, but not only, I would argue, to Buddy Bolden, of whom Luc Sante opines "he achieved worldwide fame as a ghost" (177). It may also be re-read in the light of more recent musician "heroes" as an elegiac tale of a city flooded by more recent losses to its musical history. In August 2010, exactly five years after Katrina hit, a report released by Sweet Home New Orleans, the coalition of charities supporting musicians, found that performances had dropped by half from pre-Katrina levels and musicians' earnings were down by 43% (Fensterstock). While the music is coming back, and HBO's *Treme* celebrates the city's continuing love affair with music,<sup>15</sup> re-reading *Coming Through Slaughter* feels even more like a typical New Orleans story of a city saturated by loss.

Tall tales abound as to how loudly Bolden played, but when Ondaatje's character narrates his own breakdown, it ends in a blank wordless page in the "perfect white between words" of "White Dwarfs." Ondaatje admitted on publication that "I'm really drawn to unfinished stories. There's all those empty spaces you can put stuff in" (qtd. in Witten 10).<sup>16</sup> The literal white space of the blank pages that Ondaatje deploys towards the end of the novel conveys an implosion into musical silence. Bolden's biographer Marquis would uncover that he may well have played his cornet during the 24 years he spent in the asylum, but Ondaatje had already chosen to depict that time as shrouded in silence. This is one of the most tenacious and enigmatic images that continues to fascinate those who pursue Bolden's story.

Bolden's silence is captured again by Stefan Berg, the Canadian printmaker, whose wordless graphic novel, *Let That Bad Air Out: Buddy Bolden's Last Parade*, was published in 2007. Berg's silent tribute may take its title from Jelly Roll Morton's "Buddy Bolden's Blues" ("I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout 'Open up that window and let that bad air out'"), but it visualizes his last jazz parade as first imagined by Ondaatje. This time a series of prints blocked out as woodcuts traces the musician going "mad into silence"

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<sup>14</sup> See Musicians' Village.

<sup>15</sup> For a survey of the city's cultural revival, see Helen Taylor, "After the Deluge: The Post-Katrina Cultural Revival of New Orleans."

<sup>16</sup> Jon Raymond calls Ondaatje's early work "feral" and "unclassifiable, . . . [f]ull of jump cuts and odd juxtapositions," and finds that "the text floats in white space" (24).

(*Slaughter* 108) during the course of a parade pictured just as Ondaatje described. Like Ondaatje, Berg imagines his subject out of a series of apparent contradictions; he creates a silent novel about music and expresses the energy of the parade and the kinetic force of Bolden's playing in still images. Berg conveys something of the inner violence that characterizes Ondaatje's Bolden, but it is reflected in the monochrome precision of his linocuts as "the sensation of raw emotions, of exposed nerves and explosive actions" (Berg 11). *Let That Bad Air Out* may be read as extending Ondaatje's metaphor for what happens to Bolden, and it captures the loss of his music in the novel: "The sun has swallowed the colour of the street. It is a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (*Slaughter* 134). Berg's use of black and white is idiomatic in its creation of Bolden dressed in a distinctively striped shirt in contrast to the dark-suited marching band against which he stands out. Their dark and contemplative faces are contrasted with Bolden's agonized expression. Berg's depiction of Bolden's face lined with the white heat of concentration singles him out in each frame until he fades to black. His breakdown remands him into black silence with the final image that of his cornet shining out of the darkness. Having cited *Coming Through Slaughter* as an intertext, Berg's final scene is "less part of a history book" and more closely related to Ondaatje's fiction.

In 2007, while Berg reworked Bolden's story, Ondaatje's version of Bolden was again in the news. A "jazz interview" he had recorded with Tom Vitale in 1993, in which he revealed that the silence, or the "hole," at the heart of Buddy Bolden's history was "most potent" for him as a writer, was repeated on National Public Radio.<sup>17</sup> NPR's reprise of Ondaatje's interview coincided with news of two films being made about Bolden in 2007. While one project fell by the wayside, the other resurrected Bolden's story once again. Paul Maslansky's plans to film *Coming Through Slaughter* were not realized, but *Bolden!* (the loud exclamation mark signaling the force of the legend as well as his playing) was filmed in New Orleans with Wynton Marsalis of New Orleans's first family of jazz as one of the executive producers and Anthony Mackie as the title role. *Bolden!* provided the New Orleanian actor with an opportunity to extend his previous cameo as Buddy Bolden in *Louis* (2010), the biopic of Louis Armstrong made by the same production team. To this day, *Bolden!*, a feature-length drama, is still in post-production,

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<sup>17</sup> Tom Vitale talks to Ondaatje and Jerry Granelli on NPR, Morning Edition, 3 Aug. 1993. The program was repeated on 15 December 2007.

but it should prove yet another way of communicating the story that Canadian Ondaatje was the first to imagine in fictional form.

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CAROLINE ROSENTHAL

## Culinary Transgressions

*Food Practices and Constructions of Female Identity in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's The Cure for Death by Lightning and Fanny Flagg's Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*

The analysis of food practices in specific cultural settings helps us to understand universal patterns of cultures and, among other things, can serve as an epistemological tool for investigating the construction of personal, as well as collective, identity. At the same time, however, food and eating are physical needs that order and ordain our everyday life. This essay looks at the representation of food practices and eating orders in two contemporary novels, Fanny Flagg's 1987 novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* – set in Alabama in the 1920s/30s and, in a parallel story, in the 1980s – and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's 1996 novel, *The Cure for Death by Lightning* – set in rural British Columbia in the 1940s. Both novels use the representation of food and food practices as a way to represent convincingly regional spaces and communities and to firmly root their characters in those spaces. Flagg and Anderson-Dargatz both create reality effects by minutely describing the production, preparation, and consumption of food in a certain region in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and both show that different identities are created for men and women in those processes. At the same time, though, the authors draw on food to undermine and subvert the symbolic orders that produce regional and gendered identities. Before looking at the two texts – one set in the American South and the other in the Canadian North-West – I would like to make some general remarks about the significance of foodways and regional spaces.

While in the past they were often belittled and not taken seriously as academic subjects, the study of both food and regionalism have received renewed interest in recent decades due to major shifts in cultural studies. The first shift concerns a deepened interest in everyday life, an interest that stems



from feminist theory – which has been interested in the unrecorded, the hidden, the micro-histories beneath the grand narratives – as much as from a changed understanding of space.<sup>1</sup>

Thinkers like Henri Lefèbvre or Michel Foucault have made us aware that space is not given but made, and made over, in the daily interaction of people living in those spaces,<sup>2</sup> and human geographers, such as Mike Crang are now interested in diverse temporalities of certain spaces and thus in the rhythms of quotidian life.<sup>3</sup> The banalities of day-to-day life – one of which is eating – are nowadays regarded to reveal crucial information about human existence. Another reason why food, for the longest time, was not seen as an important field of study is that Western philosophy in its mind-body split has traditionally privileged the mind. Recent medical and cultural studies tend to claim, however, that the mind-ruled autonomous subject is as much a fiction as the self-contained body, because countless exchanges are going on between body and environment and in-between individual bodies.<sup>4</sup> Viruses or food enter us, pass through us, and leave us. As, for instance, the work of Elizabeth Grosz has shown, bodies do not simply exist in space but the relationship between bodies and spaces can be understood as a way of co-building.<sup>5</sup> Such a co-building implies that bodies are made in a specific region through specific cultural practices – one of which is cooking – and in turn shape that regional space. Regions are the result less of geographical or political boundaries or of climatic conditions than of the ways in which people inhabit and shape the land through their daily practices and routines. Cooking is not only a daily activity but one that is often associated with the domestic space of women and hence is a gendered activity. Both of the novels I am going to look at deal extensively with cooking and intertwine the making of local space and of gender identity. And yet, as gender identity is something we have to work at continuously, they show how, in the sense of Judith Butler, the repetition of those acts also allows for shifts and subversions of normative gender roles (1997). Both novels reveal their respective regions to be a place of conflicting discourses and competing subjectivities. They are

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<sup>1</sup> See Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life” (2000).

<sup>2</sup> See Henri Lefèbvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations of a Sociology of the Everyday* (2008) and *The Production of Space* (1991); or Michel Foucault, “The Language of Space” (1995) and “Questions on Geography” (1986).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, his “Rhythms of the City: Temporalised Space and Motion” (2001).

<sup>4</sup> See Deane W. Curtin, “Food/Body/Person” (1992).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, her article “Bodies – Cities” (1992).

places which, in the words of social geographer Doreen Massey, rely on a “double articulation” (118). Places in themselves are already articulations in the sense that they are not given but culturally signified, and the people who come to a region as subjects are also immersed in various discursive fields that they bring to the place.

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In her novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, Fanny Flagg first of all uses food on a narrative level to intertwine the two different time- and plot-lines in the book. There is Evelyn Couch’s story – the story of a woman who in the 1980s finds herself in the midst of a severe midlife crisis. Her children are grown, have left home, and show no interest in her at all. Her husband, Ed, regards their marriage as a convenience at best and prefers TV dinners, which Evelyn dutifully prepares for him, to shared meals. Evelyn herself is an obese woman in her late forties who feels too young to be old but also too old to be young and eases her emotional starvation by stuffing herself with candy bars. She feels cheated because she has fulfilled the role of being a good girl and a lady – never raise your voice, defer to everybody, especially men – by the book, but instead of being rewarded with happiness, she perceives herself as worthless, abandoned, and empty. Evelyn eats to fill the void in her life and desperately longs for some human attention and bonding. Her life changes when, during one of her weekly visits to the nursing home where they go to see Ed’s aunt, she meets Ninny Threadgood, a woman in her nineties with whom she starts chatting. Evelyn has, as the Canadian writer Carol Shields once put it, “a narrative hunger” (19-20), a certain need for alternative stories, for escape routes from her dire life, and she gobbles up the stories that Mrs. Threadgood tells her about the good old South. Gradually, in the encounters between the two women, storytelling and eating merge as Evelyn always brings something to nibble on. But what she brings changes from store-bought industrial food with little soul factor to home-made southern cooking and culminates in the eponymous fried green tomatoes that Evelyn cooks and brings for her friend. Storytelling and eating both turn from mere consumption into nurturing processes, which allow Evelyn to grow and become the master of her own fate.

In contrast to Evelyn’s initially disturbed relationship to food and eating, in the stories of Idgie and Ruth, which Mrs. Threadgood feeds her, cooking is a way to establish a nurturing and supportive community. Idgie saved Ruth from her husband, a brutal wife-beater, and probably enters into a lesbian

relationship with her. No sexual activity between the two women is ever mentioned in the book, but their love and care for each other is emphasized time and again. The only scene that spells out sensuality between the two women is significantly a burlesque scene in the kitchen where they smudge each other with cooking ingredients. As some critics have rightly pointed out, Flagg's novel became a bestseller – and the subsequent movie a blockbuster – because it challenges hierarchies of class, gender, sexuality, and race without radically questioning them.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless Ruth and Idgie need to create a space for whatever relationship they are having that will be tolerated by society – and the café turns out to be the perfect camouflage. At the time in which the novel is set, it is one of the rare businesses in which women are able to make a living of their own. More importantly though, the specific foodways create a sanctioned female identity so visibly, safely, and securely that it allows Idgie and Ruth to veer and stray from prescribed norms undetected – and food plays an important role in this. Flagg uses food in the novel to authenticate a region. The recipes in the book – Skillet Cornbread, Fried Ham with Red-Eye Gravy, Grits, Snap Beans, Candied Yams, Fried Okra, and Fried Green Tomatoes – are as Southern as can be, but what is perhaps more important is that she draws on the topos of home-cooking as a style of preparing food that is synonymous with authenticity and purity. In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes has commented on the “Frenchness of Steak,” meaning that food always signifies much more than what it actually refers to – his example represents not only a piece of beef but a national identity through the way it is prepared and through the status it holds in a society.<sup>7</sup> Home-cooking in the 1930s, did not only refer to a certain style of cooking but entailed family values and a WASP, middle-class identity with clear-cut gender differences. Restaurants that featured home-cooking, Jan Whitaker maintains, signified a sanitized and secure space free of deceptions. Food that was produced simply and without frills automatically was understood to be wholesome and therefore was not to be questioned.<sup>8</sup> This context of home-style cooking is established and used by the two female characters in Flagg's novel. They create a safe space within the regional identity of the South and then subvert it.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Shari Zeck in “Laughter, Loss, and Transformation in *Fried Green Tomatoes*” (1998).

<sup>7</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957).

<sup>8</sup> See Jan Whitaker, “Domesticating the Restaurant: Marketing the Anglo-American Home” (2005).

Although, as the Ku Klux Klan forcefully reminds them, blacks are not to be served in their restaurant, Idgie and Ruth bend the rules by selling food at reduced prices out the back door to blacks and hobos. They frequently undermine race and class barriers. Idgie, for instance, who throughout the book is depicted as a tomboy through her attire, dresses up as a man and jumps freight train at nights, throwing supplies to the black people living in the slums along the railroad tracks. The authorities cannot get a hold of the Robin Hood-like person they call “Railroad Bill” – probably because they keep looking for a black man while nobody suspects Idgie’s sex-gender charade (*Fried Green Tomatoes* 330).<sup>9</sup> The novel abounds with instances of cross-dressing and with moments when characters use gender or race expectations as a masquerade and feed people their own stereotypes and expectations in order to hide their true motives. The shift from a woman’s typical role as caretaker and server to that of the provider and feeder in the book challenges, as Lindenfield has pointed out, patterns of male dominance and concepts of power.<sup>10</sup>

Under the disguise of good old Southern home-style cooking that caters to the needs of the community to consistently reinvent itself, Idgie and Ruth create a community of people living on the fringes of society. The café also becomes the cover-up for the biggest threat to this community. Ruth is pregnant when she leaves her husband, and Frank Bennett comes to Whistlestop to forcefully claim his son after he is born. Sipse, the black cook, who is babysitting that night, in self-defense kills him with an iron skillet. The old and frail woman knocks the bully dead with – of all things – a kitchen utensil, and, as we learn toward the end of the novel, Big George and his son apparently chop up the body and put him in the hog boiling pot for their barbecue. Barbecue, of course, is one of the most typical and popular of southern foods, and the two detectives who come to the café to investigate Frank Bennett’s murder after his truck is found truly relish it. When one of the detectives, unaware that all the while he is probably eating Bennett’s corpse, compliments Big George on the barbecue, he perfectly emulates the subservient “nigger” and smilingly says: “Thank you, suh, I’d hafta say, the secret’s in the sauce” (*FGT* 366). Ruth also saves Idgie from further investigation by

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<sup>9</sup> All quotes refer to the 1992 (New York) edition of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and will appear in the main body of the text abbreviated as *FGT*.

<sup>10</sup> See Laura Lindenfield, “Women Who Eat Too Much: Fertility and Food in *Fried Green Tomatoes*” (2005).

buttering up the investigator with the Southern belle charm she suddenly procures and by serving him food.

Eating orders become most visible when they are broken, when we are made aware of what we declare as food or not. Food is not something natural but something culturally defined. Not all edibles or all things that could provide us with bodily sustenance are considered food, as the philosopher Deane Curtin observes in the book *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*. Snakes, dogs, or human flesh are definitely matters that can sustain and nurture us, however, they are not considered food in our culture because, in the words of Curtin, “food stands in a special relationship to the self” (9). We patrol and control what we eat because food crosses the threshold of an allegedly autonomous self. In other words, we become what we eat, not only physically but symbolically and spiritually. When the detective ironically eliminates the evidence he is looking for by eating Frank Bennett’s corpse, an oppressive patriarchal and racist system devours itself, and cannibalism turns from an offensive into a subversive act. In the introduction to the book *Food and Cultural Studies* (2004), Bob Ashley claims that western civilization started with differentiating humans from pigs. He continues: “This distinction is then closely policed through various taboos and symbolic forms which dramatize the disruption of the opposition between civilization and piggishness as a descent into anxiety and danger” (2). Ironically, in Flagg’s novel, order in the community is re-established when a taboo, the eating of human flesh, is broken. In their “piggish,” racist, and sexist behavior, Bennett as well as the obnoxious detective have vaulted themselves outside of the established eating conventions of that community. In the logic of the novel, their uncivilized behavior likens them to pigs and they end up where they belong. This is why, tongue-in-cheek, the readers can sympathize with the perpetrators and not the victim of the crime.

Hence, while food serves to signify a region with all its inherent gender and racial codes, the café turns into an almost heterotopic place in the novel, real but different from all other places in that society. Within and through their cooking, characters in the book find ways of stepping out of prescribed roles and gain a limited amount of control over who they are beyond what society offers to them. It is those stories that encourage the listener, Evelyn Couch, to take her life into her hands, to start dieting, and to decide, at long last, to tear down walls in her house so that she can have a room of her own, telling her husband, when he objects, for the first time to shut up. And it is Evelyn, in the end, who inherits the recipes from the café. Recipes are miniscule narratives that contribute to making and maintaining the cultural

memory of a community – and recipes also play a major role in *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, the second novel I am going to investigate.

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Gale Anderson-Dargatz's novel is narrated by Beth Weeks who recounts the events of one summer of her adolescence. Her recollections are triggered and guided by her mother's scrapbook, a collection of recipes, remedies, and newspaper clippings that now belongs to Beth. As her legacy from her mother, the scrapbook becomes not only the engine of narrative but the raw material from which Beth spins her own story. In the prologue, Beth tells the reader: "The scrapbook was my mother's way of setting down the days so they wouldn't be forgotten. This story is my way" (*The Cure for Death by Lightning* 1).<sup>11</sup> Beth regards the randomly collected everyday materials in her mother's scrapbook as "evidence" for the strange events she is going to tell (*CDL* 2). The gist of the story, those parts that are difficult to translate into words and into a coherent plotline, are contained in her mother's recipes. In her narrativization of the events, Beth – to speak with Hayden White – has to choose a mode of explanation and emplotment in order to tell the events as a story of a particular kind – and that is exactly what the narrator is grappling with.<sup>12</sup> As in Flagg's novel, cooking and storytelling coincide in Dargatz's novel, and recipes are also being passed on as a way of female bonding and as an alternative female historiography. But unlike Flagg's novel, *The Cure for Death by Lightning* does not resolve the strange events into a tidy story but rather into one that stretches and bursts the seams of regionalism or realism.

The story takes place in the midst of the Second World War and is set in rural British Columbia where the Weekses run a dairy farm. Life on the farm and in the small community is related very realistically by, among other things, paying close attention to the production, preparation, and consumption of food. However, some of the events Beth relates are so monstrous and bewildering that she either cannot fit them into a rational world view anymore or needs to block them out in order to survive. Events like her classmate

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<sup>11</sup> All quotes refer to the 1996 (Toronto) edition of *The Cure for Death by Lightning* and will appear in the main body of the text. *The Cure for Death by Lightning* will be abbreviated as *CDL*.

<sup>12</sup> See Hayden White, "The Narrativization of Real Events" (1981).

Sarah Kemp being molested and murdered, or Beth herself being sexually assaulted by her classmates, by Coyote-Jack, by one of the farm hands or, worst of all, being regularly raped by her father. The mode of magic realism allows Dargatz to tell a story realistically, while at the same time not entirely victimizing her protagonist by offering her escape routes. One of the qualities of magic realism is that it does not simply contrast reality and magic but rather shows that what we consider magical or realistic depends on cultural and individual context and cannot always be easily separated.<sup>13</sup> Beth, for example, frequently experiences the sexual assaults on her as attacks by coyote, the cunning trickster-figure of Native mythology. The coyote tales enter into the novel via Bertha Moses and her daughters who live on the Indian reserve not far from the Weeks's farm. Bertha's stories frequently counteract Western views and provide Beth with alternative epistemologies: An anthropocentric world view with man as the crown of creation and in control of life is substituted with a spiritual view where humans are part of the landscape, for instance, and a teleological, rational way of interpreting things is supplemented by one that accounts for the irrational, inexplicable, and horrifying. In Fanny Flagg's novel, food connects the two different time- and plot-lines of the novel, while in Dargatz's book, in my reading, the scrapbook and cooking can be seen as ways of mediating between dichotomies of Western thinking such as real and fantastic, logical and magical, or cognitive and corporeal.

Although Maudie Weeks, Beth's mother, does not spell out the story, her scrapbook sets the mood and tone for it. The novel's title refers to one of the remedies Maudie recorded. In the scrapbook, the cure for death by lightning appears, as Beth relates in the novel's opening sentence, "under the recipe for my father's favorite oatcakes" (*CDL* 1). The extraordinary, irrational, and impossible – namely to resurrect the dead – is marked down next to an everyday and very down-to-earth recipe. Life and daily work on the farm are represented realistically in the novel; the daily chore of cooking is by no means romanticized but depicted as the energy-sapping work it was at the time. The women have to provide food for the men when they come in hungry from the field work, and we get a notion of what that meant, for instance by detailed descriptions of how to kill, clean, and cook a chicken. At the

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<sup>13</sup> On magic realism see Wendy B. Faris, "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" (1995), and Lois P. Zamora, "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in US and Latin American Fiction" (1995).

same time, this procedure is described as a skill and an art. Cooking is often portrayed as a daily task that nonetheless harbors creative potential and often offers a soothing and therapeutic function in the book as well. Kneading dough, for example, is described as physically demanding work, though Beth also says “the rocking motion was hypnotic, calming. I pushed the day’s events into that dough, brought them up, and beat them back down again” (*CDL* 101). Baking is not only a physical but a contemplative task – a way to process the events of the day. This meaning-making sensuality involved in cooking is also palpable in the way Beth describes her mother’s recipes. Every page in Maudie’s scrapbook has its own shape because, due to a lack of paper, she recorded her recipes on “scraps of wallpaper, bags, brown wrapping” – and its own scent – as the traces of everyday usage have inscribed themselves onto the space of the page: “almond extract or vanilla, butter or flour . . . or my mother’s perfume, Lily of the Valley” (*CDL* 2). Although the scrapbook is not a diary, it is a form of life writing. Recipes are miniscule cultural narratives in a new historicist sense because they provide intimate information about spaces and orders of times gone-by. Cookbooks, as Traci Marie Kelly maintains, can be regarded as culinary memoirs of their time as they tell stories of a particular kind and contribute to community building.<sup>14</sup> Rather than setting things down in words, the scrapbook contains the essence of Maudie’s life and thus transcends the duality of the body/mind split by evoking sensuality and corporeality as much as what the philosopher Lisa Heldke has called “culinary knowledge.” To her, cooking is a “thoughtful practice” that defies the distinction between theory and praxis because it requires both contextual knowledge and physical experience (qtd. in Curtin 10). An experienced baker, for example, knows just how much moisture to add to dough depending on whether it is a humid or a dry day. The success of a recipe hence depends on theory – the ingredients and procedure set down in the text – on the one hand, and on a sort of practical knowledge, on the other.<sup>15</sup>

Maudie’s scrapbook is her form of writing and, amidst her daily farm-work, certainly the only room of her own she is going to get. Her collage turns into a micro-history, into an alternative female historiography, which she is passing on to her daughter. The scrapbook may not revive those who

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<sup>14</sup> See Traci Marie Kelly, “‘If I Were a Voodoo Priestess’: Women’s Culinary Autobiographies” (2001).

<sup>15</sup> See also Lisa M. Heldke, “Food Politics, Political Food” (1992).



have been struck dead by lightning, but it certainly turns into a manual for female survival, for sensuality, for pleasure amidst abuse and violence. When, toward the end of the novel, the conflict Beth's father has had all along with their neighbor over property boundaries escalates, Beth goes into the house and bakes: "All hell broke loose, and I decided to make cake. Honey cake, a pound cake, my mother's own recipe. . . . It was a nothing-to-it-cake, as rich as sin, heavenly to a hungry, worried belly" (*CDL* 219). Worry is alleviated by food elsewhere in the novel, too. Beth is heart-broken when her father callously drowns a litter of kittens that Beth wanted to keep and then even asks her to bury them. Her mother can't find words but shows sympathy instead by serving Beth heated cream on a slice of bread, sprinkled with sugar. Beth knows that this is "child's food" and that she is no longer a child, but she enjoys it nonetheless, saying: "By the time I finished the bowl, I'd forgotten to hate my father" (*CDL* 44).

Last but not least, the space of the kitchen itself in the book frequently turns into a realm for a signifying-over, for inscribing women's daily practices into a patriarchal space, thus changing that space. Women in the novel are exposed to diverse forms of male violence on a daily level. Beth's father returns from the First World War an emotionally crippled man with no compassion or sympathy for other people or, in fact, creatures in general. The violence that is frequently committed against women in the novel is mirrored in what happens to the female animals kept on the farm: Beth catches her brother one night penetrating a cow from behind, and another time she is forced to assist her father in taking out a cow's ovaries to fatten her up for the market. For hours, Beth has to watch the cow's agony only to witness how, in the end, the wound turns septic and the animal dies. In this male-dominated world where female bonding is difficult, Maudie's kitchen frequently turns into a place where Bertha Moses and her daughters come to visit. It is also the place where Maudie speaks to her dead mother, venting the emotions and worries of the day. The scrapbook as a form of life writing and the kitchen as a place where women not only do their daily work but talk, communicate, and alleviate their worries, provide women in the novel with a way to establish a discursive and real place from which to articulate identities that lie outside of patriarchal discourses.

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Both *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *The Cure for Death by Lightning* draw on culinary knowledge and on recipes as a form of encoding knowledge that provides alternative histories and epistemologies as well as a different sense of being in the world and hence an ontological security. While *The Cure for Death by Lightning* is a coming-of-age novel, one narrative strand in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* focuses on a woman facing menopause. In both novels, those female protagonists grow and develop through partaking in certain food practices. Cooking becomes an expression of self and of empowerment as well as a way to preserve a female tradition by handing down recipes.

As I have shown, both authors use the representation of foodways to describe a region and its inherent gender codes, while at the same time creating alternative spaces for women through cooking, but the mode of representation vastly differs in the two novels. Flagg draws on a fairly conservative regionalism, which realistically represents a region with great attention to local color and which tongue-in-cheek reverts to the tradition of the tall tale in the South. While the book certainly offers alternative spaces to women through food and cooking, it stays within the parameters of traditional regionalism, which Laurie Ricou has defined as a genre determined by three r's: rural, realist, and retrospective (950). Flagg's book, in other words, does not question the nostalgia inherent in a lot of regionalist fiction and thus also does not fundamentally challenge the sex and race codes on which such regionalism hinges. Dargatz, in contrast, writes in the style of a new, disrupted, and questioning regionalism and provocatively resorts to the narrative mode of magic realism in which the irrational and supernatural organically grow out of the plausible and realistic, questioning, as a result, the universality of realism. What is real, the novel makes us aware of, depends on the cultural as well as individual perspective of individuals and is by no means universally applicable. Dargatz describes a region without inscribing a longing to return to that place and its oppressive and crippling race and gender codes. Cooking in *The Cure for Death by Lightning* does not only create a temporary alternative place in a certain region at a certain time but turns into a truly transgressive action because it goes beyond certain norms and rules set by patriarchal society. Beth's mother's recipe book is a manual for survival, but it also guides Beth into her own cooking and writing and into forming a female identity beyond the codes of the place she grew up in.

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ENVOI



LAURIE RICOU

## South by Northwest

*Southern / Comfort; west coast ease.* (Compton 167)

Waldemar Zacharasiewicz's two primary research interests make for what at first seems an odd juxtaposition. That oddness speaks a tribute to his intellectual adventuring, and to his inaugurating, even on the occasion of his (nominal) retiring, a novel field of inquiry.

While Canadian-American comparisons are inevitable – and in Canada apparently *essential* to a sense of selfhood – Canadian connections to the capital S South might seem the least obvious or productive. That region's clichéd associations with heat, horses, plantation decorum, cross-burning, and swamps perhaps deter us. The prairies/Great Plains share a topography; the Maritimes and New England share a history; the central provinces and states share some really big lakes and a seaway; salal and Sasquatch thrive in the Pacific Northwest on either side of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. But what connects us to the big South?

In September 2010, the most obvious answer might be big oil. Tar sands oil is really dirty and hard to refine without using way too much water, water becomes “waste” stored, inadequately, in big swamps; Gulf oil comes to the surface way too easily, even from miles deep in the ocean, and can't be contained. We have the big oil blues. And it sounds not only south to north but everywhere on our blue planet.

This musing trends to apology because the South-in-Canada topic that seems most engaging to me requires writing about a form, the blues, I'd only thought about for maybe thirty minutes (preparing to teach Dionne Brand's “Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater”) before I started formulating these comments. Moreover, I do not read music, have never played an instrument (other than my vocal chords), and have shied away from teaching much African American writing. But Wayde Compton's 49<sup>th</sup> *Parallel Psalm* fascinated me from the day I opened it. Where and how did it fit with the misted evergreen of my Cascadian region? Blues was obviously a crucial motif – why and how? Before I get to Compton, let me review some of the connections that at first I thought might someday grow up to become essays on the topic assigned for the colloquium.



## THE BLUENESS BLUES

Frankie Thibidault, the narrator of Clarke Blaise's story "The Salesman's Son Grows Older," could have been a Montrealer, enriched in "both . . . languages," or a Duke University Southerner, "a man of breeding." Instead, he grows – not *up* but only *older* – bewildered:

What calamity made me a reader of back issues, defunct Atlases, and foreign grammars? The loss, the loss! To leave Montreal for places like Georgia and Florida; to leave Florida for Saskatchewan; to leave the prairies for places like Cincinnati and Pittsburgh and, finally, to stumble back to Montreal. . . .(155)

In another guise, as Paul Keeler, Blaise's lost narrator reads Faulkner for hours on end intent on avoiding thinking of winter (42). When Keeler travels to Europe, he finds it "too open"; he "can't handle it." As he explains, "I'm just not ready for someone to call 'Guten Morgen' when I think I'm alone" (127).

Well, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz is a Montrealer, and a Southerner, at home in Georgia and Florida, reads Faulkner to find his way up north, and is always receptive to a hearty *Guten Morgen*. Crossing borders has not left him bewildered but has instead challenged him to give the world a North American education. Like Frankie learning to swim in Fort Lauderdale, Waldemar, student of southern writing, exults at "sink[ing] into the dancing blueness, the cold Canadianness of the water" (136).

## WINGHAM BLUES

Robert Thacker, tentatively teasing out some "shared sympathy of place," in citing a 1972 interview with John Metcalf reminds us that Alice Munro identifies primary influences among "'writers of the American South . . . Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers . . . Reynolds Price . . . Wright Morris.'" Why, he asks, have influences so explicitly identified by Munro received so little attention? (A neglect which I note is extensively addressed in these proceedings. . . .) And Thacker goes on to wonder (note the comments were written in 1994) "if this gap is not in some way a reflection of anti-American attitudes on the part of many Canadian critics" (La Bossière 134, 137).

In a 2001 interview, Munro raves about Welty's *The Golden Apples*: "It is so good, it is so good, and I read it over and over again. And not really to find out how she did it, just to sink into it. . . . I don't know what I read it for.

I read it for just transcendence, almost to get into that world.” But then the blues set in: “I even felt, as I got older, that I shouldn’t read it too often, because there are writers who can absolutely mesmerize you so you’re echoing things they do without even knowing it, so you stay away from them when you’re writing. When I was writing *lives* [*Lives of Girls and Women*], I felt that especially, and I would read Time Magazine instead of reading a book then. Because I guess I felt so unsure of my voice. . . . You know, the thing about writing is. . . . It’s just constant despair.” (Thacker 2005, 141-42) How would we describe influence in a sentence? Maybe it’s that muted sense of rural and small town inbreeding, a lingering social veneer of unthinking gentility, and yet somewhere suppressed, ignored, even willfully undetected, a tormenting mystery hiding in apparently unremarkable, ignorable solitude. Alice Munro has got the Welty Wingham blues.

#### JELLY ROLL BLUES

The Patricia Café was established in 1917, and is known in 2010 as Pat’s Pub and Brewhouse. The Patricia Hotel is at 403 E Hastings Street, in Strathcona, one of Vancouver’s oldest neighborhoods. East Hastings is the center of Canada’s poorest community. Jelly Roll Morton lived in the hotel from August 1919 to January 1921 and performed regularly in the Café. As Vancouver had, Canadian literature adopted Jelly Roll in 1962 when A. J. M. Smith twisted syntax to jam improvisational piano into the confines of the Shakespearean sonnet.

‘Cry at the birth

Rejoice at the death,’ old Jelly Roll said,

Being on whisky, ragtime, chicken, and the scriptures fed. (96)

“[D]eath . . . makes life’s worth” is the core of Jelly Roll’s wisdom: but to cry at the birth is the essential message of the blues, the song of a life of woe.

Jelly Roll comes from New Orleans and California to play the blues on East Hastings, in some sense following the road south to northwest variably complicated in Compton’s poem. It remembers perhaps the journey of Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, prominent black business man and politician in British Columbia whose life journey Compton documents in a stark poem consisting

solely of dates and place names: “Philadelphia 1823 // San Francisco 1850 / Victoria 1858 //Little Rock 1871” (68).

### WAVIN’ FLAG BLUES

K’naan, Somalia-born, Canadian rap artist takes hip hop music (derived from the traveling singer/poets of Africa via oral traditions of trans-Atlantic slave culture) back to South Africa, where one of his songs became the unofficial anthem of the 2010 World Cup. Born in 1978, he left Somalia at age 13 fleeing the civil war, settled in New York, and then moved on to become part of the Somalia-Canadian community in Rexdale, Ontario.

Out of the darkness, I came the farthest  
 Among the hardest survival  
 Learn from the streets, it can be bleak  
 Accept no defeat, surrender, defeat

When I get older, I will be stronger  
 They’ll call me freedom, just like a wavin’ flag  
 And then it goes back, and then it goes back  
 And then it goes back (K’Naan)

### HUC(K)ANUCK BLUES

Silvia Söderlind, meticulously unpacking the complex presence of *Huckleberry Finn* in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, concludes that “frontier and its promise of freedom are illusory”: “could we not propose that, under his many disguises, Huck was always a Canuck?” (La Bossière 86). How would we describe the influence in a sentence? Maybe it’s that muted sense of rural and small town inbreeding, a lingering social veneer of unthinking gentility, and yet somewhere suppressed, ignored, even willfully undetected, a tormenting mystery hiding in apparently unremarkable ignorable solitude.

And it’s a Canuck, the Canadian Shreve, who asks in *Absalom, Absalom!* “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. [even] Why do they live at all” (174).

## THE GREAT DISRUPTION BLUES

Pelagie Bourg, called Le Blanc, suffered “fifteen years in the fields [of Georgia] under a heavy southern sun and the boot of a brutal cotton planter, who swung his whip with the same contempt on his black slaves and the poor whites,” to purchase “a cart and three teams of oxen” in order to carry her people home to Acadie (2004,13). In a tintamarre of hundreds of multiplying, varying stories, Antonine Maillet celebrates our heroine of ancestral return. “It had been a long journey to the south, yes,” reflects Pelagie-la-Charette near the end of the novel, “but [you know within the babble] the circle was closing again.” (2004,240) Or, with a distinctly more ambiguous bluesy view in French: “un long voyage dans le Sud, eh oui, mais la boucle se refermait” (1979, 326).

49<sup>TH</sup> PARALLEL BLUES

the counter  
 conspiracy  
 to make a black northwest be. (Compton 18)

So, evidently, the U.S. American South, its writers, cultures, and artists, echo in Canadian literature in more ways than my initially puzzled reaction to our theme – “how bizarre!” – would allow. And we heard of many more, more tellingly, over the three days of our meeting in Vienna.

Wayde Compton’s book-length poem is rooted – however rootless it might be – in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest where I have concentrated most of my work on literary regionalism in the past 25 years. Yet, it is a poem that disrupts almost every conception of region, and literary region, that I might have had prior to opening the book. And it does so, if obliquely, by listening to the African American voice(s) in British Columbia.

*49<sup>th</sup> Parallel Psalm* is a compendium of forms and styles. It would take more than these pages just to list them, let alone discuss and celebrate them. But we can get a sense of the core and zest of Compton’s work by concentrating on the subject and strategy of the Blues in the book. By so doing, South goes Northwest: a defining musical idiom migrates, tracking and covering the Black diaspora, Africa to the Deep South to Pacific shores and then to Canada.

The poem shuffles the history of the black community in British Columbia along a rough chronological line. It's a history that distrusts history,<sup>1</sup> and the best history of its subject – by which I don't mean the most factual or thorough, but the most involving, the most challenging, and especially the most surprising. Compton's history begins with the repressive, racist legislation passed in California in the 1840s, follows the migration of blacks to British Columbia in 1858, and later uncovers in that utopian destination yet another growth of racist culture and policy, recreates the black music scene in 20<sup>th</sup> century Vancouver, and ends in more dreaming near its date of publication (it's dedicated to two black men who died in 1998). The Pacific history is primary, but inevitably Compton must incorporate the history of slavery, the African diaspora – and the millennia long dream of home (including the Northern Kingdom as a version of Zion).

Often documentary, and sometimes a file of quotations, the poem embraces story, fantasy, myth, found poems, a host of lyrical variations, and much concrete and non-verbal signing. One page reproduces the author's (suspect? criminal?) fingerprints; some pages have no words, only numerals. So, when I foreground the blues in this appreciation, I do so recognizing the hybrid and polyvocalic conception of the book – and by implication the capaciousness of blues as a form.<sup>2</sup>

The poem is in seven sections. The opening section, "Cast," implies a dramatic structure for the whole: a *dramatis personae*, five acts, plus an embedded story that might parallel the function of intermission in the theatre. "Cast" introduces us to seven characters. If we include the fantasy prose parable, "The Blue Road: A Fairy Tale," the poem shapes and plays seven titular blues. The sevens (do they have a function in blues? in a 7-tone scale, as Newton wanting seven colors in his harmony? in voodoo?) keep reminding the reader of the spectrum, of the colors in a rainbow, a repeated, if compromised, symbol of covenant and hope (and diversity) in the poem.

Compton titles six of the songs (and one story) in the book as "Blues," and uses the term blue/blues over 65 times elsewhere in the work. Most musical histories locate an uncertain origin (because blues is purely an oral

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<sup>1</sup> The epigraph to Part 2 is from Derek Walcott: "I met History once, but he ain't recognize me" (29).

<sup>2</sup> The first African slaves were brought to the United States in 1619, so the blues synthesizes and absorbs many languages, cultures, experiences, and periods of the African Diaspora (Weissman).

form) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and very early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when post-Civil War reconstruction ended and federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877. Whatever the complexities and unknowns, some prominent aspects of blues reverberate powerfully in Compton. The blues arose in an atmosphere “of suffering, privation, and inequality.” At its heart, blues is therefore the music of “complaint. Blues are “functional,” often work songs, rather than solely or primarily aesthetic. They are closely tied to the African American spiritual, and hence, for an oppressed people, packed with the “imagery of freedom from bondage on earth, and ‘escaping’ to a promised land.” Its voice, often unaccompanied, is more talky than melodic (Weissman).

### THE BLUES AS FORM

Genres stretch and absorb. The blues, like a “poem” or “bildungsroman,” grows eclectic and capacious.<sup>3</sup> But let me isolate some formal and thematic features that might inform the Northwest’s South. Not that I want to claim Compton deliberately sets out to mimic such features. Indeed, so parodic and irreverent and visionary is the poem – and so clearly does it reach toward Black forms that succeed and extend Blues, such as hip hop and sampling (the first character to appear in the poem is DJ) – that homage rather than formal model is more applicable.

Yet testing Compton’s blues pieces against some generally received characteristics of the form provides a way of probing his method and message. Overarching is the poetics of representing an exclusively and purely oral form on the page, a commonplace challenge, at least since Robert Browning. Blues typically depends on a call and response form. Peter Muir quotes William Handy’s definition: “‘the performance of musical phrases or longer passages in alternation by different voices or distinct groups, used in opposition in such a way as to suggest that they answer one another.’ . . . Each vocal line of the stanza is responded to by an instrument” (205). “Blues,” Muir goes on to explain,

is internal: it describes, or at least is generated by, the singer’s inner turmoil. . . . Blues . . . incorporated emotive aspects of the black musical idiom. One of these was call and

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Muir, in his study of popular blues, defines his focus as “titular blues,” that is any work “titled (or subtitled) blues” (2).

response, a device carried over from Africa into African American slave society and manifested in a variety of cathartic genres, such as the field holler, ring shout, and spiritual. (206)

While historically an individual calls and a group responds – and this convention is surely adapted in Compton’s choice of *psalm* as the title of his poem – Muir notes that the individual voice in blues often answers his own call with a response, usually instrumental, and maybe vocally tormented.

I suppose the basic pattern of three line, two phrases per line (Muir gives the example “Frankie and Johnny were lovers / O, Lordy how they could love”) where each line might be thought to have a call and internalized response (205), fits. But, and the observation might reflect my limited knowledge of music, Compton seems little concerned with closely following traditional formal patterns (for example, the Blues’ preference for an AAB rhyme scheme). His use of mnemonic patterns of repetition and his preference for short lines do link his print blues to oral blues singing (204-5).

#### FRAMEWORK BLUES

“Crucial Blues,” the first of the titled blues pieces in the book, is, as the poem phrases it “recalcitrant / in lamentation” (40). There is some repetition of phrases (as in the opening lines of the standard blues) but nothing of a consistent pattern and no rhyme scheme. Compton does quote and parody an R and B classic: “sittin on the dock of the bay wastin time” (40). The lamentation evokes the primary narrative of the poem (recall that the Otis Redding song leaves home in Georgia headed for Frisco Bay), a state of continuous crossing (hence the Latinate pun on crucial). The Pioneer Committee, the group of blacks originally seeking to migrate from San Francisco to British Columbia, proposed to “un / earth us some new some / where,” but the singer immediately observes ruefully that “no one uses the word *home*” (41).

That suspended “un-” at the end of a line, the negating suffix that becomes reified, a noun, a universal, is a recurring strategy. Compton keeps foregrounding negativity and denial, however zestily (think blues!). “Crooked Blues” (crucial, crux, cross) is the most sustained song of deprivation:

ain’t no God  
damned Moses  
come to this here parting of sorrows.  
ain’t no flock, no con

gregation, ain't got  
nothing (127)

“Alley Blues” is the sparest blues in the poem. It might be nostalgia blues, a longing song for the vitality of the lost Hogan’s Alley, center of black music in British Columbia. The poem opens with a version of the two-part line; it then repeats the rhyme or half rhyme abab’ xx bb:

no congregation. pasts to shake.  
to lose.

.....

fools

running

the place. renting us  
ramshackle truths.

*alley blues.* (132)

#### GEORGIA (STRAIT) ON MY MIND

One of the 49s at play in Compton is the 49ers, the defining date of California’s Gold Rush, maybe most prominent in the poem “Pyrites,” and its storiying of fool’s gold. Southern blacks go west in this period, dreaming. As Compton has it:

folks dropped their to  
ols in the field to run. some  
from as far as Mississippi, Carolina, Tennessee. re  
moved out to California, (75)

No home in Georgia; no home in Frisco; the black community brings its music to British Columbia to realize a new *where*. Compton’s poem both documents the presence of that music, and uses it to extend the community’s search.

Connected here in mobility, inevitability, and maybe naturalness are the birds and plants in Compton’s poem. The customs officer who asks at the border “are you moving any fruits or seeds or trees / of knowledge” (106) is monitoring a losing battle. The weeds know no border. So the Canada Geese the blues singer empathizes with in this poem are resident, we know, in New



Orleans City Park in winter. And the Canada Geese in Georgia, that used to be migratory, en route to Florida, are now, at least 45,000 of them, permanent residents in the state. Horrifyingly, perhaps because they are known as such a pest, a border guard sighting a tiny starling “chop[s] the bird in half in mid-flight” (88). Since its introduction to North America in the early 1890s this bird has thrived, numbering some 200 million from Alaska to Mexico. To my mind that halved starling is a survivor, maybe especially because its plumage is glossy black *blue*, and it is one of the fabulous mimics able to sing the songs of at least twenty other species. It is allied with the other crucial bird in the poem, “the bohemian waxwings . . . whistling / their words / tween up and down” (22). The waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*) is seldom sighted in the south. Maybe it appeals for its nomadic nature, and surely for its Icarian association with flying too close to the sun – another blues motif.

#### CROSSING BLUES

“Red Light Blues” is the fourth (or fifth) titular blues in *Psalm*. Playing riffs on the semiotics of traffic lights and crosswalks, it may be the most pedestrian, quotidian of the named blues in the series. Each of the blues in the book sings a lament about being in transit. The singer is always in between as is his community, enroute to some uncertain destination, moaning that the place left behind, the shifting place through which they move, and the destination, cannot be a home. Characteristically, the blues will sing some ordinary, banal experience as an emblem of desperation; in this poem the routine anxious boredom of crossing through urban traffic calls up, if obliquely, the torment of the Middle Passage, the callous trafficking of African slaves across the Atlantic. The core theme of “Red Light Blues” is that “your destination / is the crossing” (146), an ambiguous state or narrative that incorporates the complex motif of the cross throughout the poem: Christianity, crucifixion, Ku Klux Klan, anger, the x of unknown quantity, the x of identification and signature, the x of error.

That the poem begins with a red light, hinting at prostitution, but the title also invokes a “light” blues, and hence one of the most playful poems in the book. The in-betweenness of the crossing is extended – and layered in meanings – by the in-betweenness of the poetic. Compton is constantly alert for the fragmenting of syntax and segmenting of morphemes that will reveal a

concealed alternative. At the end of the first stanza he splits the verb *invoking*: “in // voking blood perhaps” (146), and so pushes us to read the Latin root (the poem is full of attention to Latin, as it is to Classical mythology), meaning “to call.” Here, it’s a calling for blood, a revenge theme, and a reminder of racism rooted in appeal to bloodlines. Toward the end of this poem, Compton reinforces vengeance: he invokes, if you wish, the originary pattern of the blues (explicit in “Jump Rope Rhyme,” 39). The singer laments and identifies with “the wild / goose chasers, after // rainbows and caul / drons of response / and arrival” (147). Splitting the syllables of cauldron, itself an instrument of testing, allows us to hear the call and response running through the poem:

the hand offends me. [call]  
 the white man eternally gives the go a  
 head. [response] (146)

The traffic light signals STOP with the color red. No yellow caution, or green for “go” appears. In this environment, no blues. Hence the blues: the signal is always to inhibit and prevent. The sign allowing the pedestrian to proceed is a *white* walking figure, but the signal seems here to show always the red (read) hand (and hence the literate print society). Indeed, as the poem notes, the communication here is *not spoken*, no call or response. The meaning is solely in the *unwords*: “in pictographs, glyphs, i / cons. X.” Even if you don’t speak the language, you know the message: deception, and imprisonment, and always negative “con-” (146-47).

#### MUD DOG BLUES: A CON-CLUSION

The Yale Hotel on Granville Street bills itself as Vancouver’s home for rhythm and blues. On a September Monday night, the audience is sparse – “the joint was packed last time we played here” the group begins – but Mud Dog is giving it as if this were the duo’s last performance. As in one of Mud Dog’s own compositions from their first CD, it’s a “Devil’s Ride” they’re on, a frenzied holding on to a precarious balance, bodies twisting in response to the guitar’s contortions.

Just a few meters from us is a solo dancer, dressed all in black, black ball cap backwards on his head. Black white man absorbs the frenzy, moving in several directions at once, now thumping his hands on the wooden rail, now

shimmying low near limbo land. But after three numbers he steps down from his platform, staggers out on to the sidewalk, leaving most of a full pint on the table. He's on the road, and we see no more of him.

A dapper Colonel Sanders sits just in front of us, eyes fixed on the band. For white guys in search of the moody blues, this southern gentleman fits our expectation. He's sporting a wholly coral-colored suit – with matching fedora, and cherry red patent leather shoes – ample enough for his ample body. Black shirt, black pocket handkerchief, coral tie patterned in waves. Now Sanders is up at the bar flirting, first turning to the woman on his right, then to his left; now he's back lounging against a post grooving on Mud Dog; then he's off to the far back corner to regale a full table of visitors. I ask a young German woman at the next table – she's been talking to him at the bar – who this icon is. “He's from Scotland,” she tells us, “on his way to Alaska.” Now he's back at the bar: either everyone knows him, or wants to know him. Now he sits at table by himself for five minutes, and then he's over at the pool table. Maybe we are the only ones in the bar staying put? The blues audiences are as restless as the bluesman on his endless road.

The younger member of the duo, Steve Sainas, has apparently just bought a new/old guitar, a '74 Dobro, and he's really lovin' the brassy banjoish sound he's getting out of it. He spends most of the intermission break playing little meditative riffs to himself, testing each of the four or five guitars he has lined up beside him. Mud Dog Senior, Christopher Allen, has a drawerful of harmonicas at his elbow, and he often switches instruments (and voices) four or five times during a single piece. Mouth organ and voice seem to be his only instruments. But with instrument and microphone wrapped tightly in his big hand, he produces an astonishing range of sounds. In the second set, Mud Dog covers Neil Young; then gives us a charged version of “Take a Load off Fannie.” Allen leans into Sainas's throbbing guitar, almost brushing against it, generating a wailing, ebullient, yearning response to the guitar's call, drumming, dancing, dynamic. Then a relentless version of The Doors' “You can't always get what you want.” This bit of ethical wisdom seems just right – and not quite. Where Compton calls on blues, directly and obliquely, he acknowledges as well the limitations of his own voice – maybe he doesn't quite achieve what he wants. And reading the whole book as a “long” blues, a song that celebrates and documents the African diaspora, and that laments the ongoing exile that in subtle ways sustains the persecution and confinement of the slave experience of the U.S. South. We're still a long way from what we want. At the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, sound parallel blues.

Still, we novices are surprised at both the quality and intimacy of the music. As we get up to leave, we shout thank yous. And the guitarist calls us to more blues. “We’ll be back here October 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> – with a full band.”<sup>4</sup>

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