

ERASING THE NATION: CANADA'S NATIONAL LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION*

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ABSTRACT

One of the great paradoxes about contemporary Canadian literature in English is that, at the same time it is consolidating its international reputation, many of its writers continue to make a conscious effort not to have their works identified with the geopolitical space called Canada. The main object of this article, however, is not to explore why Canadian writers would compose works like *Generation X*, *The English Patient*, or *Oryx and Crake*, but rather to investigate the reasons Canadians would insist on celebrating those texts as *Canadian achievements*. That is, it examines why Canadians would champion writers who, at times, make such overt attempts to mask where they are from.

KEY WORDS: Canadian literature, continentalism, diasporic, globalization, national, postnational, transnational.

RESUMEN

Una de las grandes paradojas de la literatura canadiense contemporánea en inglés es que, al tiempo que su reputación se consolida a un nivel internacional, muchos de sus escritores continúan haciendo un esfuerzo deliberado para que sus trabajos no se identifiquen con el espacio geopolítico llamado Canadá. El objetivo principal de este artículo, sin embargo, no es tanto explorar por qué los autores canadienses componen novelas como *Generation X*, *The English Patient*, o *Oryx and Crake*, como es investigar las razones por las que los canadienses insisten en celebrar esos mismos textos como logros *canadienses*. Es decir, este trabajo examina por qué los canadienses defienden y se identifican con escritores que, a veces, tratan de una forma tan explícita de enmascarar su procedencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura canadiense, continentalismo, diáspora, globalización, nacional, post-nacional, transnacional.

“What happens to a national literature when the very idea of the nation has been set in doubt?”

Jonathan KERTZER

One of the great paradoxes about contemporary Canadian literature in English is that, at the very same time it is establishing an international reputation,

many of its writers continue to make a conscious effort not to have their works identified with the geopolitical space called Canada. We have long had the phenomenon of the sort of émigré authors that critics like Pico Iyer (2002) praise and prize, self-declared transnationals who can live in the country for decades, take up citizenship, but never really engage with its political or intellectual life. No less significant, though, is the case of Canadian-born or raised writers, who are embraced by their fellow citizens as national icons, yet frequently produce texts in which Canada is either treated as a foreign country or is completely effaced. The main object of my article is not to explore why Canadian writers would compose works like *Generation X* (1991), *The English Patient* (1993), or *Oryx and Crake* (2003), but rather to investigate why Canadian critics would insist on celebrating those texts as *Canadian* achievements. I have no objection to continentalism, a political option that I consider perfectly legitimate. However, I am perplexed that Canadians would champion writers who, at times, make such overt attempts to mask where they are from.

In his influential 1998 study *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada*, Jonathan Kertzer makes the convincing argument that the “nation is inescapable, and cannot be banished by theoretical degree” (35). Despite the fact we live at a time when it is common to dismiss the nation as peripheral to our globalized selves, he contends that the national remains essential to the understanding of any collective endeavour, particularly in a country like Canada. Kertzer admits that Canadian history, including Canadian literary history, is not unitary, for there “have always been challenges to the nationalist ideology, first made in the name of regionalism, modernism, or cosmopolitanism, now made in the name of feminism, ethnicity, postmodernism, or post-colonialism” (22). As he notes, “[b]eyond the nation lie more nations, differently conceived” (193). Yet his point is precisely that these challenges to mainstream Canadian nationalism do not transcend the national but simply reflect other national visions. That is, while groups “differ drastically in their faith in authenticity, they all assume that a literary community, however combative, will produce ‘our’ literature, however conflicted” (23). Interestingly, one group whose politics Kertzer does not examine in any detail is that of established Canadian writers who often set their works outside the country, notably in the United States, and strive to inscribe their texts into other literatures. The reason for this gap is probably that these writers tend not to advertise their political stance. On the contrary, many of them present themselves as proud Canadians. Yet they produce works that at best, are nationally ambiguous, and, at worst, affiliate themselves with separate national traditions.

The contemporary ambivalence about the national of course is not restricted to Canadian literature. Rather, it seems to be a world-wide phenomenon, affecting

* This article was written partly with the support of a Standard Research Grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), to which I would like to express my gratitude.

not only small nations but even some of the “major” ones (Csicsery-Ronay 236). For example, in an essay she wrote in the early 1990s about “Decentering Community and Nation,” Mary Louise Pratt explores the rise of a transnational or postnational literature in the United States. Struck by the publication by mainstream presses of numerous literary texts by U.S. residents that have very little to do with the country’s life and culture, Pratt ponders to which national tradition those works belong, beyond what one of her friends playfully terms “California” literature (84). Her conclusion is that they are part of a new category of literature that not only circumvents “altogether the question of the national” but operates as if “the traditional homology of the cultural and national” did not exist or apply (84). Pratt unnecessarily complicates her argument when she conflates the postnational with the global, as reflected in the drive by the editors of anthologies of world literature or the directors of international film festivals to include works from around the world. Clearly, the desire for inclusiveness is not analogous to postnationalism, as Pratt herself concedes when she alludes to the declaration by the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti that he does not play “world music, but African music” (Pratt 85); for what Kuti is demanding is an acknowledgment of his national or continental specificity, the very geographic specificity so often occluded in postnational texts. Still, it is difficult to dispute Pratt’s contention that the “transnationalization of culture at the global level has coincided with the dissolution of correspondence between culture and the national *within* the metropolitan nation-states” (86). This dissolution is evident in the existence of a growing body of literature by writers who politically and legally may be citizens of a country but who have little involvement with the sociocultural life of the polity where they happen to reside or who pretend to be citizens of other countries.

If what Pratt terms “the implosion/explosion of the national” (86) is manifest in literature produced in the United States, it is even more pronounced in that written in her native land. After all, Canada has to deal not only with the postnational wave in general but also with its proximity (cultural as much as spatial) to the United States, which has long led many Canadian writers to pass as Americans by producing essentially “transnational” texts (Mount 144). A conspicuous example of the effacement of Canada’s national specificity is provided by Douglas Coupland’s emblematic novel *Generation X*. The text’s treatment of Canada is problematic throughout, but never more so than in the opening paragraph:

Back in the late 1970s, when I was fifteen years old, I spent every penny I then had in the bank to fly across the continent in a 747 jet to Brandon, Manitoba, deep in the Canadian prairies, to witness a total eclipse of the sun. I must have made a strange sight at my young age, being pencil thin and practically an albino, quietly checking into a TraveLodge motel to spend the night alone, happily watching snowy network television offerings and drinking glasses of water from glass tumblers that had been washed and rewrapped in paper sheaths so many times they looked like they had been sandpapered. (3)

Coupland is a respected Canadian writer. He was born to a military family at a Canadian base in Germany and raised in Vancouver, the city with which he is



usually identified. He has set several of his subsequent books in Canada and often expresses pride in his country, even declaring: “It’s never felt as different to be a Canadian” as it has since the turn of the millennium (*Souvenir* 114). Or, as he boasts to an interviewer, “[w]e went from being boring little Canada to a sexy country of sin overnight” (qtd. in Birnbaum, n. pag). However, there is very little celebration of Canada or Canadianness in his first novel. Perhaps because Coupland used to think that “Canadian stuff was slightly inferior to American stuff—and that being Canadian was being a watered-down version of being American” (*Souvenir* 114)—he elects to set *Generation X* largely in the United States and to relate most of the action from a U.S. perspective. The novel’s opening scene is certainly disconcerting from a Canadian standpoint, as the author’s homeland is othered, and a visit to Canada’s heartland is presented as a journey to the depths of nowhere.¹

Coupland’s work, including *Generation X*, has been praised by Karen Skinazi for its “Canadianation” of U.S. culture, for injecting “Canadian elements (people, values, practices, vernacular, and so on) into a foreign context and thereby mak[ing] that context richer, since the Canadian elements cannot be subsumed into a mononational discourse” (n. pag.). Coupland, elaborates Skinazi, “*Canadianates* the American landscape, extending the notion of ‘America,’ or the New World (a term he favours) to include both Canada and the United States, separate but overlapping entities that suggests a cosmopolitan idea of ‘(re-attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance)’” (Skinazi, n. pag.; Coupland, *Polaroids* 8). In *Generation X*, Coupland himself emphasizes his text’s ostensible cosmopolitanism. He writes that “where you’re from feels sort of irrelevant these days” and that his three youthful protagonists belong to “an enormous global group,” what he terms “the poverty jet set” (4-5). Yet one cannot help but notice that the one Canadian member of the group, Dag Bellinghausen, is the only one with “dual citizenship” (4), and presumably divided loyalties. Also, while it may be true that one’s geographic origins have become irrelevant, one’s spatial location has not. The bulk of the novel transpires in a specific space, the desert of Palm Springs, California, a place that may not have much history but clearly has a distinct culture. Indeed, *Generation X* would appear to be most accurately classified as a California novel, not in the sense of being proudly deterritorialized, as Pratt’s friend would have it, but because it is so profoundly engaged with the alienated reality of life in Lotus Land in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

From a Canadian perspective, *Generation X* is very much a specimen of what the novelist and critic Stephen Henighan terms “free trade fiction,” a significant body of writing that he asserts reflects the fact the contemporary Canadian political and literary establishments have come to see the country’s culture “as em-

¹ Incidentally, this uncertainty about the national identity of *Generation X* is shared by the taxonomists at the Library of Congress, who place Coupland’s novel, not with Canadian texts, but with U.S. ones, at: PS3553 0855 G46.

barrassing baggage to be jettisoned in the quest for global competitiveness” (134). Henighan identifies such attempts at denationalization in several novels, the most prominent of which is Michael Ondaatje’s 1992 international best-seller *The English Patient*. Henighan has serious reservations about the text’s “neutering of the past into harmless, ecstatic visions,” but what most disturbs him is its “eradication of the particularities of Canadian history in favour of a continentalist vision that had little currency during the period when the story takes place” (139, 144). He illustrates his point by showing how Ondaatje has a character incongruously state that “I’m from Upper America” and his narrator “speaks of ‘North American troops’ in a war that Canada entered two years before the United States and under very different conditions” (143-44; Ondaatje 76, 41). Henighan also claims that, while “the Canadian writer of the [nineteenth] century addressed a foreign reader, the contemporary Canadian writer pretends to be a foreigner. We have arrived at the brink of a new form of alienation” (37-38). However, this form of literary denationalization is considerably older than Henighan seems to realize. It definitely precedes the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, which links Canada, the United States, and Mexico in an economic alliance. As Nick Mount has demonstrated, the proclivity of Canadian writers to camouflage their national origins is at least as old as Confederation. Moreover, some of the country’s most popular writers have engaged in the practice, everyone from Bliss Carman to Charles G.D. Roberts (Mount 69-79, 128-38). In fact, what is most striking about the tendency of Canadian writers to erase the national in their works is not the newness of the custom but its long history, a history that is underscored by a series of thematic affinities, not the least the denigration of the border between Canada and the United States.

The Canada-U.S. border is presented as being extremely porous in *Generation X*. Thus the text’s Canadian protagonist, Dag, hails from Toronto, but moves south with no discernible difficulty. Similarly, one of the sisters of the main narrator faces no apparent obstacles as she migrates from Portland, Oregon, to the interior of British Columbia, where she “runs a lucrative feminist dairy farm in the allergen-free belt” (135). Still another person, we are told, went to “a party in Canada but woke up the next morning in the United States, a two hour drive away, and he couldn’t even *remember* driving home or crossing the border” (48). The frontier between Canada and the United States seems to be of so little consequence in Coupland’s fictional universe that his characters cross it back and forth as if it did not exist. As Skinazi observes of another of his novels, “border-crossing into the United States *does not happen*, even when it does” (n. pag.). Curiously, that is not how Coupland depicts the U.S.-Mexico border. As the three central characters prepare to move from California to Mexico at the end of the novel, the narrator states that the border denotes “a newer, less-moned world, where a different food chain carves its host landscape in alien ways I can scarcely comprehend. Once I cross that border, for example, automobile models will mysteriously end around the decidedly Texlahoman year of 1974” (171). That is, some international borders are real. The one separating Canada and the United States is just not one of them.

The presumed unreality of the Canada-U.S. border is a particularly common trope in Indigenous literature. Thomas King, for one, has stated that the





international line between Canada and the United States “doesn’t mean that much to the majority of Native people in either country. It is, after all a figment of someone else’s imagination” (*Truth* 102). The artificiality of the frontier is something he often explores in his work, never more poignantly than in the short story “Borders.” The story relates the trials faced by a nameless Blackfoot woman as she travels with her young son from their reserve in Alberta to visit her daughter in Salt Lake City, Utah. Everything goes well until they reach the international line. However, when the U.S. border guard asks the woman about her citizenship, she replies: “Blackfoot” (137). Initially, the guard takes the situation humorously. He tells the woman that he realizes that her people live in both countries but, in order for the police to keep their “records straight,” she must declare if she is on the “Canadian side or American side?” To which she responds, “Blackfoot side” (138). For the U.S. guard there are only two options when it comes to citizenship, U.S. and Canadian, and thus when the Blackfoot woman refuses to choose one of the two, she and her son have to return “to where [they] came from” (139). The woman and the boy get in their car and head back toward Canada but, when asked by a Canadian border guard about her citizenship, she again declares: “Blackfoot.” The Canadian guard informs her that “I’d be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to be American or Canadian” (141). The Blackfoot woman, though, refuses to accept the logic of her interlocutor’s argument, and so she and her son are caught in the territorial no-man’s land between the two border stations, an area tellingly centred on the duty-free shop. Their plight eventually attracts the attention of the media, who inquire what it feels “to be an Indian without a country” (145). With television cameras filming them, mother and son once more head toward the U.S. border and, as usual, the woman identifies her citizenship as “Blackfoot” (146). This time the guard lets them through, and they finally head for Salt Lake City.

Judging by “Borders,” as well as by his comments on the subject elsewhere, one cannot help but conclude that King considers the international line between Canada and the United States not so much unnatural as farcical, since apparently the only way one can ascertain that one has crossed from one country to the other is because of the different “flagpoles” (“Borders” 134, 147). Yet his own publishing history suggests that the border between Canada and the United States is not totally arbitrary, for the two countries are shown to have distinct cultures. In his story “A Short History of Indians in Canada,” first published in 1997 in the Canadian magazine *Toronto Life*, King concocts a phantasmagorical narrative about a businessman named Bob Haynie who is making his first trip to Toronto. Finding himself unable to sleep, at three o’clock in the morning he decides to explore the city. More specifically, he takes a cab to Toronto’s financial centre, Bay Street. But no sooner does he start savouring “the smell of concrete” and “the sound of skyscrapers,” both of which he loves, than “a flock of Indians fly into the side of the building,” barely missing Bob (1). As he looks around, more Indians keep hitting the pavement all around him, and he has to “leap[] out of the way of the falling Indians” (2). Although the out-of-town Bob is unprepared for the incident, it is obviously not uncommon, for before long two men jump out of a city truck and start cleaning up the scene. The two men, whose names are Bill and Rudy, “bag” the

dead Indians and, after they “tag” the living ones, “[t]ake them to the shelter. Nurse them back to health. Release them in the wild” (3). Bill and Rudy are self-described experts on Indians. They “got a book” to identify to which nation the Indians belong, which they usually can do through the “feathers” the victims wear. Bill and Rudy also tell Bob that the reason the Indians crash against the skyscrapers in such numbers is that they are “nomadic” or “migratory” peoples, and “Toronto’s in the middle of the flyway [. . .]. The light attracts them” (3). Apparently, the falling Indians have become a major tourist attraction in Toronto, luring visitors from as far away as Alberta, who do not always manage to spot them. So Bob is extremely pleased with his outing. As he tells his doorman when he returns to the hotel, “I saw the Indians” and they were “spectacular” (4).

While “A Short History of Indians in Canada” is not a particularly upbeat narrative, it is very much a Canadian one. It is full of references to Toronto places, from hotels to streets, and to Canadian First Nations. However, something curious happens when King writes the story for the U.S. market. To begin with, he changes the title to “A Short History of Indians in America,” by which he means, not the continent of that name, which would include Canada, but only the United States. Also, while the central character remains a businessman named Bob Haynie, he is now visiting, not Toronto, but New York City and, instead of staying at “the King Eddie” (“Canada” 1), he is a guest at “the Park Plaza” (“America” 32). In addition, when his inability to sleep leads Bob to seek “some excitement” in the middle of the night, he makes his way to “Wall Street” (32), rather than to Bay Street. Finally, the falling Indians now attract visitors not as far away as Alberta but as “Florida” (34). Indeed, even the types of Indians Bob encounters are different. Whereas in the Canadian version of the story the first Indians that he spots are identified as “Mohawk” and “Cree” (“Canada” 2), those in the U.S. version are “Penobscot” and “Delawares” (“America” 33).

Like any other writer, King of course has the right to disseminate his work whichever way he pleases. Nevertheless, one cannot help but notice how the transformation of “A Short History of Indians in Canada” to “A Short History of Indians in America” de-Canadianizes the text. Perhaps even more significant, the national metamorphosis undergone by his narrative seems to undermine his frequent claims that the border between the two countries is “an artificial marker of difference” (Groening xvi). If it were really true that there are no major political and cultural dissimilarities between Canada and the United States, he would not have had to change his story so substantially in order to appeal to a U.S. audience. Moreover, King’s cultural translation is not particularly successful. The white experts on Indians in both versions of the story are called Bill and Rudy. It has long been noticed that those happen to be the first names of W.P. (Bill) Kinsella and Rudy Wiebe, two white writers who have written extensively about Indigenous peoples in Canada, and who incidentally have clashed publicly on the politics of voice appropriation (Groening 6-7). “A Short History of Indians in Canada” thus could easily be read as a satire on those whites who present themselves as experts on Indians, and who continue to make a living out of Indians even as the latter kill themselves. But the names do not function in the same way when the story is relocated to the United



States, since they are not associated with specific writers. In fact, what the cross-border migration of King's story underlines is that Indigenous peoples play a much less central role in the U.S. imaginary than they do in the Canadian one. While the ethnoracial discourse in the United States is fixated on "the black-white argument" (Rodriguez 29), the one in Canada is dominated by the idea of belonging to the land, which for the majority of the populace is possible only through some kind of affiliation with Indigenous people. This reality gives Indigenous people in Canada a prominence that they do not have south of the border, and explains both why the "national" translation of King's story was necessary and why it was not likely to succeed. The Canadian reality cannot be transposed to another country merely by changing the names of cities or hotels.

Notwithstanding the tendency of writers like King and Coupland to make light of the international line between Canada and the United States, the irony is that the line is becoming increasingly more real—regardless of how Canadians may feel about it. As Helen McClure writes in her essay "How Far Is the Canadian Border from America? A Case Study in Racial Profiling," ever since the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the people of the United States have become extremely anxious about their national security, as they no longer consider that their country is "safe, strong, and impenetrable" (509). This is a development that has had major repercussions for Canada, which is now perceived by its southern neighbours as being unable to ensure its territorial integrity. Moreover, McClure asserts that prior to "9/11, the focus was on the porosity of the Mexican border, primarily in regards to illegal immigration, but also for drugs. Post 9/11, much of the focus has shifted to the Canadian border's potential for leaking in terrorists" (511). Indeed, since that fateful date, Canada has been transformed into "a frightening other" in the eyes of the people and politicians of the United States (521). They see Canada as a haven for terrorists and, as a consequence, have attempted to determine "who is and who is not 'truly' a Canadian" (519), excluding anyone born in an Arab or Muslim country. The magnitude of the conflict between the two countries is conspicuously illustrated by what McClure terms the attempts by the United States to "securitize[]" its northern frontier. Or, as she phrases it, instead of treating "Canada preferentially," the current U.S. administration "pushes Canada further away, moving the border metaphorically away from America" (521). In short, contrary to what writers like Coupland and King imply, the border is becoming more, not less, real.

Needless to say, the militarization of the frontier between Canada and the United States is not likely to have much impact on those Canadian writers who do not even acknowledge the border's existence but simply set their texts in other countries and inscribe them into other national traditions. Contemporary Canadian literature, particularly the novel, has received much praise for its reputed worldly rootlessness, the fact that one may find in it the whole globe—with the apparent exception of Canada. According to the aforementioned Pico Iyer, Canadian writers at the turn of the millennium focused mostly on "Italian priests and Zoroastrian landlords, Japanese grandmas and the uncertain affiliations of Egypt before the war" (120) and the "best thing" about them, as about contemporary writers in



general, was that “no one seemed to know where they were from” (168). Not everyone, though, sees the absence of Canada from the works of many Canadian writers as a sign of emancipation, either political or intellectual. Henighan, not surprisingly, considers the trend nothing less than a form of “neo-colonial self-abasement” (77). However, even someone like Chelva Kanaganayakam appears troubled by this development. A specialist in multicultural literature, Kanaganayakam wishes to expand the “margins” of Canadian literature to include writers born and raised outside the country and whose work is centered on their native lands. Yet he remains rather self-conscious about the lack of “Canadian referents” in their writing (2). As he notes, if one rejects the “symbiotic relation between the nation and a varied body of writing” (1), what makes one’s work part of that national tradition? In other words, it seems difficult to imagine a national literature that does not bear an intimate connection to a specific landscape.

In a way, the tendency of well-known immigrant writers like Rohinton Mistry and M.G. Vassanji to set their works elsewhere is understandable. Nancy Huston contends that the place where you spend your childhood determines your true identity, and that you cannot really outgrow your formative years. In her words, “[y]our childhood stays with you all your life, no matter where you go” (7). If this is true, if one is so indelibly shaped by one’s childhood, then those writers who grew up outside the country cannot be expected to respond to the local landscape in the same way as those who grew up there. But it is much more difficult to rationalize why Canadian-born and raised authors would efface the national in their works. This is particularly true when the writers in question have acquired a reputation as nationalists, as is the case of Margaret Atwood. Atwood, who was born in Ottawa in 1939, first gained national prominence in 1972, with the publication of her immensely popular *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. More a manifesto than a scholarly survey, *Survival* was intended to explore “[w]hat’s Canadian about Canadian literature” and why Canadians should care (11). Among the conclusions reached by Atwood is that:

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (18-19)

For Atwood (or at least the early Atwood), there is a direct connection between a national literature and a national landscape, the landscape that has shaped its writers. Indeed, collectively, the works produced by those writers ostensibly constitute a national map, both for themselves and their fellow citizens.

The phenomenal success of *Survival* can be attributed not only to what Atwood says, her formidable ability to capture the national zeitgeist, but also to the way she says it. Atwood manages to be simultaneously politically incisive and witty. For instance, as she discusses the failure of the bulk of early Canadian writing to convey the complexity of its geographical location, she writes: “A person who is



'here' but would rather be somewhere else is an exile or a prisoner; a person who is 'here' but *thinks* he is somewhere else is insane" (18). As she rightly points out, a main characteristic of colonial and diasporic writing is its lack of engagement with the local, the "here." Ironically, this lack of engagement with the "here" is also evident in much contemporary Canadian writing, not the least in Atwood's own work, such as the novel *Oryx and Crake*.

Published in 2003, *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopian meditation on the way humanity's love of technology in general and bio-engineering in particular culminate in an apocalypse that wipes out most of the world's human population. The bulk of the novel is set in what used to be North America. Yet while there are numerous references to U.S. history and places, such as the sinking of "eastern coastal cities" (75), the "interstate highways" that are being turned to sand by a tar-eating microbe (261), and the decrepit condition of "the Empire State Building" (268), there is virtually nothing about Canada. The author's homeland has been reduced to a handful of fugitive allusions, the most memorable of which are a popular soft drug called "Vancouver skunkweed" (104) and a "Gated Vacation" resort in Moosonee, on "the western shore of Hudson's [sic] Bay," where the new elites now travel in the summer to escape the heat (217). Some Atwood critics have tried to transform Canada's absence in *Oryx and Crake* into something positive, claiming that the fact "no Canadian city [is] listed in the catalogue of worldwide catastrophe" described in the text suggests Canada may have been spared (Howells 93). However, I am not persuaded that Canada's non-presence in a work by one of its best-known writers, and set over its historical territory, is a reason for celebration. Rather, I interpret Atwood's erasure of Canada as an acknowledgment that what transpires in the "here" of her homeland is of little consequence to the world, which is why she devotes most of the narrative to the United States.

One question that remains unanswered is why the author of *Survival* would come to write a novel about the near-destruction of the world, focus mainly on North America, yet elect not to explore how Canada is affected by the calamity. A possible explanation is the work's genre. Science fiction, as others scholars have pointed out, distrusts the national, since it is largely informed by "the political perspective of the dominant technopowers, for whom national cultural identity represents an obstacle to political-economic rationalization" (Csicsery-Ronay 218). As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues, until now "we have seen only the science fiction futures of the nations that think they are empires. We must wait to see whether the nations who think they are nations will imagine different futures" (237). Yet I suspect that the absence of Canada in *Oryx and Crake* has less to do with the generic demands of science fiction than with an authorial awareness of the nature, and spatial location, of her readership. Atwood clearly knew that her best-selling work until then had been *A Handmaid's Tale*, a text which happens to be both science fiction and set mainly in the United States. So she not only wrote *Oryx and Crake* for the United States, but she pretended to be a member of that national community. The consequences of her decision in terms of Canada and the Canadian literary "tradition" (Atwood, *Survival* 237) are inescapable. If a work of literature is either "a mirror" or "a map," as she used to contend (*Survival* 15, 18), it is hard to

imagine what Canada we are supposed to glimpse in *Oryx and Crake*, except one that is meant to remain invisible or unarticulated. No less significant is the matter of whether the erasure of the national is the price that writers from small countries must be willing to pay in order for their work to have a chance to attain universality; or, rather, if it simply reflects a global neo-colonialism and a failure of the imagination.

My temptation is to conclude that the tendency of Canadian writers to create the impression that their works are American is just a reflection of economics, of their trying to appeal to the much larger U.S. market by disguising their (foreign) origins. However, I'm not fully convinced that this is the only reason for the phenomenon; or perhaps even the main reason. It is possible that one of the explanations why Canadian writers strive to pass as something other than Canadian is that they are uncertain about their national specificity. In her thought-provoking article "Ghost-National Arguments," which is written largely in response to Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation*, Sylvia Söderlind asserts that what is "fundamentally missing" in English-Canadian discourse is a recognition of "the role Quebec has played in English-Canadian thinking about nation" (674). According to Söderlind, Quebec is central to the way Canadians see themselves, since the presence of a sizable French-speaking population in the country is "the only thing that differentiates Canada from the United States." However, "this alien within, on which Canadian self-definition depends," cannot be acknowledged because of its essential foreignness (680). The inability of Canadian writers and critics to deal with the country's nature, she concludes, has produced "a sense of lostness" among Canadians, not only of having "gone astray" and not "know[ing] where you are" (687) but also of not being quite a real nation. As Linda Griffiths states in one of her famous exchanges with Maria Campbell, "[t]he lack of a sense of place makes you feel ghostly" (95). Perhaps this is the situation reflected by the texts discussed in this article, notably *Oryx and Crake*. In light of the continual challenges to the Canadian state by Quebec, Canadian writers (like their fellow citizens) have become uncertain about the political viability and legitimacy of their country. For some of them, the way they have elected to deal with this dilemma has been by pretending the country no longer exists as an autonomous entity.

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