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SPECIAL ISSUE
Canadian Fictions of Globality

INTRODUCTION

[...] what unsettles the world must also unsettle Canada—a post-colonial country whose cities are among the most ethnically diverse on the planet, and where the rate of environmental change has pitched us all into unknown territory. We are a people who remember and forget simultaneously, slowly learning to share a land that persistently eludes a single language.

Madeleine THIEN, Introduction to *Granta* 14

Such are the words by the Canadian novelist Madeleine Thien in her introduction to the November 2017 issue of *Granta*, co-edited with Catherine Leroux. Before their bilingual introduction implements Canadian state policies, online readers are welcome into the volume by an explicit invitation to delve into the numerous ways in which the contributors' imaginaries address issues of place, reconciliation, belonging and truth in present-day Canada, which might construct a broad avenue into new times. Yet contemporary Canada must be discomfited by what perturbs the rest of the globe, in Thien's words borrowed above, and that involvement with the world will reconfigure the ways of imagining Canada's present and future alike, a re-articulation in view of the global, but also in the eyes of the global. This may be construed as a gesture to pursue the worldly approval and recognition of a domestic effort of global civility which evinces how, from inside out and outside in, geopolitical and human borders are endowed with a tangible permeability which further complicates the ongoing multiplication, and parallel erasure, of territorial and imaginary boundaries. The condition of the present flag-bears that frontier permeability in its display of globality, the social condition born out of the productive intersection among some of the pillars supporting globalization. The flows of people(s) and goods, or cultures, the opening of markets, the time/space compression, or environmental concerns related to the depletion of natural habitats all come to constitute a conglomerate of circumstances that to a higher or lesser extent impregnates our everyday realities. A tangible presence of technological media completes the panorama with their intervention in our everyday, quotidian scenes. The intersections of all these vectors hold sway prominently in early 21st-century Canadian literary production, sharpening its current internationalism and modifying the landscapes of its worldwide distribution and readership. Thien and Leroux's edition of *Granta* is a consequence of, and attests to, that global appeal of contemporary Canadian writing, increasingly aware of its reflections in global mirrors.

Issue 78 of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*: "Canadian Fictions of Globality" aims at analyzing how a minute, singled-out field of sociological

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overtone ingrained in the all-encompassing dynamics of globalization is being engaged with in the fictional (and critical) literary production ascribed to present-day Canada. The scholarly responses next tackle globality from various angles: is it a condition of the postmodern present? Given Canada's nuanced relation with the international parameters of culture from its genesis, is globality a *fiction* of newness worth appending to cultural manifestations for marketing purposes? Is the presumed irrelevance of borders so apparent, when everyday news seems to suggest otherwise? In the wake of the increasing visibility of globalized communities, which new mechanisms are adopted to demarcate community boundaries anew after their transgression? The Canadian narratives selected by the contributors for this volume embody a mandatory groundwork for their multifarious materialization of global imaginaries and their production of a plethora of answers to the questions above. However, the production of these imaginaries also goes hand-in-hand with an ostensible marketing gimmick that turns cultural manifestations into commodities that enable the state-sanctioned multicultural order, which is then launched overseas as a powerful icon of the global alignments of isochronic pieces. Accordingly, Canadian fictions may reproduce globality inside the boundaries of the state –in their presentation of locally-coloured realities from elsewhere, in their adoption of globalized concerns like ecology and the relevance conceded to human designs of interspecies' coexistence, for example, and outside, in their promotion of Canada as the epitome of a microcosmic global society, one that allots space for its own counter-arguments. Many of the debates with deep roots in Canadian society are indeed filtered into our critical globality in the materialized emphases, for example, on the national and global impulses in parallel, as well as the local zeal and the enthusiasm for the international designs mapped by recent Canadian narratives. As Robert Zacharias (21) and Lawrence Hill (183) have seen in their contributions to this issue, it is not strange, therefore, that the severe localism of Alice Munro's fiction has been awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize, whereas Madeleine Thien's 2016 *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, with hardly any inclusion of Canadian settings or motifs, has been awarded, among others, the renowned Canadian Giller Prize.

As some of the essays that the reader may find after this introduction confirm, within the coordinates of globality, the abiding revision of discourses of sameness and difference is prolific to eventually make room for multifaceted approaches to Canadianness from the various ends of shifting politics of location; from diverse gender or sexual configurations, as well as ethnic belonging, or (post-) human embodiments. The diversity of intersections that the fictions scrutinized in this volume may draw on the contemporary map replicates the situations from which the assembled scholars write about Canada: the views from Canadianists nationwide are complemented by those writing from France, Norway or Spain. From our specific spot off the African coast, midway between the former European transatlantic routes to America, our own geographical position in the Canary Islands also bespeaks a history of global transit, which incidentally has left intertextual traces in our present as academics attentive to any presumed horizontal flow of cultural influences with no intervention of power asymmetries in contact zones and transactions. The voices that this special issue features are also used to transcontinen-



tal contact, to meet *en route* thanks to the provisionality provided by national and international forums inside and outside Canada, in Europe and in America, or by funding programs hosted on both sides of the Atlantic. This issue is therefore nurtured by how contemporary critical writing is ineluctably imbricated in the movements of global culture, however oxymoronic the relation between the two terms appears, a maze of junctures where economic, political, cultural or environmental factors tightly intersperse. Their confluence seems to suggest that the global is neither the antithesis of the local, nor that of the national. Instead, and as a result of their compressed spatio-temporal proximity, they are all dragged into hybrid grounds which deform the traits historically defining these terms at their *origin*, to advocate new, transient and transitory morphologies.

In fact, the proliferation of narratives of metaphorical and literal displacement bring to the fore a remarkable degree of mobility between local and global zones, urban and rural sites, metropolises and depopulated areas, thus averting easy one-to-one identifications between thematics and settings. Reading back and forth the essays presented next, terms like *hemispheric* are prodigal in an attempt to place the focus on the commonality of concerns along continental geopolitical spheres. They strive for visibility with others like *transoceanic* and *transcontinental*, which bring to mind echoes of time present, but also past, and therefore somehow dismiss the presentism attributed to the current global modes, while putting forward the pressing urgency to historicise globalization processes, and the equally pressing insistence on their materiality in the areas sometimes affected by the political, economic, cultural and military expansion of Europe. That expansionist impulse is nowadays moulded by neocolonial powers, sometimes shielded by an apparent altruistic restoration of liberties and fundamental rights elsewhere. Those interventions are also under the critical focus of globality for their forceful erasure of political borders, first, and second, for the personal and national reconstruction of boundaries accompanying them to face, for example, the massive arrival of displaced populations to western countries, which trigger once again conflicts of assimilation and integration often tied to situations of contingent adjacency. Challenges to neoliberal projects of diversity and integration are abundant in the shape of post-human queries, while dystopian and speculative narrative modes open windows for (not so) distant realities that may convey a reflection about our daily societies, as some of the contributions have insightfully detected in their analyses.

Given the attention to the various border transgressions that it couches, this issue has afforded to dismantle the thematic/critical boundary between the essay and the interview section on the one hand, and, on the other, the generic frontier separating the interview and the final review. Conducted by Ana María Fraile-Marcos, the interview section presents readers with Lawrence Hill's reflections on the current internationalism of Canadian writing and that of his own recent fiction. Hill also accounts for the importance of his visits to Spain in his literary production and explains how the historical racial conflicts set in the Spanish mainland have shaped his views on the critical construction of race. His steady commitment to represent racialized subjectivities within and beyond Canadian boundaries, or his involvement in the process of adapting his fiction to screen within the frames of



the present-day interconnectivity of writers and their wide-ranging audiences, are all ingrained in the designs of globality. The general field of Black Canadian writing also seems to be a paradigmatic reflection of such a design, as the review section suggests. Readers will find there Sara Casco-Solís and Ana María Fraile-Marcos' analysis of Winfried Siemerling's *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History and the Presence of the Past*, which provides an updated and rigorous examination of Black Canadian writing to eventually resituate it within the global parameters of black diasporic cultural production. Their review of Siemerling's book further enhances the author's own viewpoints included in his essay, which turns out one more thematic and critical overflow informed by that porosity of borders featuring globality, and shaped in this case by a vigorous, contemporary critical interest in Black Canadian studies. Situated between the essays and the final review, a dependency on precedent and following information to be *global* in content and scope also propels the interview section, which follows the group of essays.

In the opening contribution, "The Long History of CanLit's New Globality, or: When *The History of Emily Montague* Became Canada's First Novel," Robert Zacharias adopts the ambivalence of our suggested "fictions of globality" to discuss the problematic newness with which our key theme is habitually endowed, thus interrogating the *contemporary* constituent of the global in the case of Canada. With especial reference to Frances Brooke's novel, usually regarded as the igniting spark of the national literary tradition, Zacharias underlines its material history of transoceanic origins and its appropriation within the scope of nationalist campaigns to eventually hold that the condition of the global often predates the coinage of an adequate terminology to describe it. In turn, Claire Omhovère makes the Canadian north, one of the usual intertexts oft-brandished by nationalist endeavours, the target of her article "Snow White and the Polar Bears in the Age of Global Heating: A Reading of Mark Anthony Jarman's 'My White Planet'". She isolates the ecological concerns central to globality and Jarman's 2008 short story to analyze the ethical implications conveyed by human interventions in the surrounding landscape to capitalist ends and worldwide consequences. In the context of a parodic rewriting of "Little Snow White" (1812), Jarman's text seems to offer an incursion into a world ravaged by technological dependence and the human degradation of natural environments, a recurrent concern in some of the essays.

Crossing the American continent from north to south and beyond, María Jesús Llarena-Ascanio's critical approach in "Another Way of Naming Elsewhere?: Transnational and Hemispheric Stories by some Canadian and Argentinian Authors," highlights thematic parity and the common use of narrative techniques in some contemporary fictions by a number of writers, joined, among other factors, by their immigrant origin and their international careers. Her analysis detects a thematic iterativity seemingly indebted to similar experiences of past trauma, political repression, colonialism and passage to new settings, where the equilibrium between demanded assimilation and memory preservation looms large. Situating thematics along and across political borders and languages opens the panoramic view widely to embrace an ampler path to methodological, critical and imaginative hemispheric cross-feeding. The geographies of Continental America intersectionally cross with



those of Europe in Winfried Siemerling's "Austin Clarke: 'Membering Home and the Black Atlantic,'" where, with special attention to the chapter "The Green Door House," Siemerling reads the Barbadian Canadian's 2015 memoir, ambivalently titled *Membering*, to shed some light onto his strategies of experiential repossession at imaginative and spiritual levels. They allow the novelist to freely revisit the enclaves branded by the presence of transatlantic slavery, Siemerling states, in an act of interweaving personal and collective histories to attempt to reconstruct a sense of belonging and memorial ownership across the black Atlantic.

The two articles that follow delve into dystopian worlds, which pose a different defiance and give a number of ethical responses to present-day realities. In "Thank you for Creating this World for all of us: Globality and the Reception of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* after its Television Adaptation," Pilar Somacarrera-Íñigo critically reads the success achieved by the TV screenplay of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel. The series was boosted in its first season by Atwood's personal involvement in the televisual script and, as Somacarrera-Íñigo contends, by a massive bulk of internet news items and social media lobbying, not to mention the coincidental public filtration of a number of misogynist comments by US President Donald Trump. Appropriated rapidly by a conglomerate of Trump's opponents as a reflection of his potential, the television series has been globally marketed, disseminated and consumed within the porous borders of globality and its constituents of worldwide interconnectivity. Diana Brydon's "Risk, Mortality, and Memory: The Global Imaginaries of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*, and André Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs*," in turn, scrutinizes these three recent Canadian novels in sight of an overall critique of the metanarrative of human(ist) progress, and as a way to reflect on issues of creativity, mastery and purity *vis-à-vis* our inescapable mortal condition to finally elucidate how it co-opts questions of personal agency. Brydon's appreciation lets us see alternative engagements with the construction of community boundaries, or group and individual subjectivity when the nation-state appears either perilous or helpless to face potent global flows.

Finally, to close this volume, three affect-based approaches triangulate readers' interest and present them with the plausibility of post-human love, the counterdiscursive yield of human emotions against the 'war on terror' metanarrative, and the urgency of responsive agency through trans and queer lenses. First, Kit Dobson's "More or Less Human: Resilience, Vulnerability, and Love in Neoliberal Times," develops a theoretical frame for such an emotion to focus next on Dionne Brand's 2014 novel *Love Enough*, and eventually argue that Canadian fictions of globality incorporate post-human tools to defy the solidification of the prescriptive forms of human embodiment dictated by neoliberal governance. Second, Belén Martín-Lucas' "Masculinity in the Metanarrative of the Global War on Terror: Shauna Singh Baldwin's *Transnational Critique*," proposes a feminist and decolonial examination of *We Are not in Pakistan* (2007). She reads through a wide range of reactions within the post 9/11 aura of global shock to be analysed in relation to representations of masculinity, and concludes the existence of a frequent transcultural commonality of emotions across class and race that might provide a strategic angle to deconstruct recent neoimperialist moves. Through its transCanadian perspective and affective



emphasis, this essay links finally to Libe García Zarranz's "Where Is the Transgender in the TransCanadian? Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek Shraya's Response-Able Fictions," which tracks the presence/absence of the transgender cultural production within such a referential scope. Impelled by the growing presence of racist and transphobic reactions, García Zarranz matches the critical need to contest homo/transphobic attitudes from the premises of ethical responsibility and sustainable productive action, which materialize in her reading of Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) and Shraya's *She of the Mountains* (2014), multimodal critiques of the violence inflicted on trans and queer collectives.

To end, I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to all contributors and referees for having found some space within their maze of in-progress work schedules, which were in the end tensile enough to accommodate one more article, and for their generous supply of time to write their papers and unfailingly face a number of subsequent revisions. They have indeed made it evident that academics know how to compress space and time, as our early 21st century increasingly demands from those of us living in the interstices of globality.



ARTICLES

THE LONG HISTORY OF CANLIT'S NEW GLOBALITY, OR: WHEN *THE HISTORY OF EMILY MONTAGUE* BECAME CANADA'S FIRST NOVEL

Robert Zacharias
York University

ABSTRACT

This essay engages the “globality” of Frances Brooke’s 1769 novel *The History of Emily Montague* as a means of historicizing Canadian literature’s ostensibly recent emergence as a globalized body of writing. I argue that the complex temporalities at play in the construction of national literary traditions have worked to obscure the lines of continuity in the globality of two key periods in the field: the post-1960 institutionalization of English Canadian writing as “CanLit,” which has recently risen to some prominence in the international cultural sphere, and the first emergence of literature in Canada, which was always already international in form and practice. Brooke’s novel, published in England a century before Canadian Confederation yet routinely identified as “Canada’s First Novel,” holds a privileged position within both periods, and offers a compelling opportunity to explore the anachronistically long history of contemporary Canadian literature’s recent globality.

KEYWORDS: Canadian literature, CanLit, globality, Frances Brooke, literary history.

LA LARGA HISTORIA DE LA NUEVA GLOBALIDAD DE LA LITERATURA CANADIENSE,
O CUANDO *THE HISTORY OF EMILY MONTAGUE* SE CONVIRTIÓ
EN LA PRIMERA NOVELA DE CANADÁ

RESUMEN

Este ensayo aborda la «globalidad» de la novela de Frances Brooke *The History of Emily Montague*, fechada en 1769, como un medio para historizar el surgimiento aparentemente reciente de la literatura canadiense como un corpus literario globalizado. Argumento que las temporalidades complejas que entran en juego en la construcción de las tradiciones literarias nacionales han servido para oscurecer las líneas de continuidad en la globalidad de dos períodos clave en el campo: la institucionalización de la escritura anglófona canadiense después de 1960 como «CanLit», que goza de una cierta prominencia reciente en el ámbito cultural internacional, y la primera aparición en Canadá de la literatura, que siempre fue internacional en su forma y práctica. La novela de Brooke, publicada en Inglaterra un siglo antes de la Confederación canadiense pero habitualmente identificada como «la primera novela de Canadá», ocupa una posición privilegiada en ambos períodos y ofrece una oportunidad convincente para explorar la historia anacrónicamente larga de la reciente globalidad de la literatura canadiense contemporánea.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura canadiense, CanLit, globalidad, Frances Brooke, historia literaria.



Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* is an epistolary romance written by an Englishwoman and published to modest success in London in 1769 before disappearing to history, only to resurface in print and scholarly interest 150 years later as "Canada's First Novel". The book begins by signalling a set of global linkages that will shape the narrative to come:

To John Temple, Esq; at Paris

COWES, April 10, 1766

After spending two or three very agreeable days here, with a party of friends, in exploring the beauties of the Island, and dropping a tender tear at Carisbrook Castle on the memory of the unfortunate Charles the First, I am just setting out for America, on a scheme I once hinted to you, of settling the lands to which I have a right as a lieutenant-colonel on half pay. (1)

Brooke immediately establishes the primary audience for her book and the homeland of its protagonist: the writer, Ed Rivers, is "setting out" from England, naturally. Importantly, she also underscores the economic "scheme" that Ed is following on route to "America," waiting just until the second letter to gesture to the "wealth of a Nabob" and thus the superior, trade-based wealth of British India upon which the conclusion of the novel will turn (2-3). She notes the rank and class of the protagonists, too, key within the colonial legal framework that enables Ed to confidently cross an ocean to take "the lands to which I have a right". Finally, the date of the letter allows us, reading centuries later, to appreciate the fleeting nature of its portrait of an expanded global politics, for in announcing his travel to "America," Ed refers to the momentarily enlarged British colonies of North America: the recently concluded Seven Years War had just granted much of New France to the British, and the American Revolution that would sever the British North American colonies in two was less than a decade in the future. Canadian Confederation, of course, was a dream yet to be had.

This essay will engage Brooke's novel as part of a larger effort to place critical pressure on the rhetoric of newness in discussions of Canadian literature's globality. I have argued elsewhere that the transnational turn in literary studies needs to be historicized within the particular contexts of its invocation, and that within Canadian literary studies it has often been mobilized internally to affirm the import of the national frame (see Zacharias). In this essay, however, I want to consider the recent success and scholarship that demonstrates the ways in which Canadian fiction has, indeed, gone global, and to begin thinking about how this recent globality may shift or extend the various internationalisms that have long attended the production and reception of Canadian writing. Historicizing Canadian literature's globality is complicated, however, by the paradoxical temporalities at play in the construction of national literary traditions, which have worked to obscure the lines of continuity between two key periods in the field: the post-1960 institutionalization of English Canadian writing as "CanLit," which has recently risen to some prominence in the international cultural sphere, and the first emergence of literary writing in English in what is now Canada, which was always already international. As



a novel that holds a privileged position within both traditions, Brooke's *History of Emily Montague* offers an intriguing place to explore the anachronistically long history of contemporary Canadian literature's new globality.

1. SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF CANADIAN LITERATURE

The History of Emily Montague is made up of 228 letters that detail the courtship of three couples, including two in Britain's newly acquired colony of Quebec: the sensible Ed Rivers and the unfailingly proper Emily Montague, along with the philosophizing and flirtatious Arabella (Bell) Fermore, and the somewhat underdeveloped character of Captain Fitzgerald. Ed's witty sister, Lucy Rivers, and his roguish friend John Temple, also letter-writers, remain in England. The letters offer detailed accounts of the landscape, culture, and (occasionally) the politics of British North America, but by the novel's end all six young lovers are happily married and in England. If some have seen Brooke's presentation of assertive English women as promisingly feminist, the novel's derogatory representations of the local French and First Nations populations have been justly critiqued.¹ Few have taken the novel to be great literature, and Brooke herself conceded that it is far too long, complaining she had been pressured to lengthen the novel to justify its cost and in doing so "ruin'd the work" (qtd. in McMullen 113). She also gave her massive sentimental novel what must be among the least inviting epigraphs in all of Canadian literature: "A kind indulgent sleep / O'er works of length allowably may creep". And yet nearly 250 years later, *Emily Montague* is in print and of scholarly interest, in large part due to its anachronistic title as Canada's first novel.

Exploring the various ways in which *Emily Montague* can be understood as both a Canadian *and* an international novel—in its authorship, its publication and reception, and, of course, in its plot—can help us better understand what is at stake in the rhetoric of newness that surrounds the globality of contemporary Canadian literature. The significance of what Paul Jay calls "global matters" in contemporary literary studies is widely acknowledged; Jay's declaration that over the past fifty years, "nothing has reshaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism" (1) is likely the most-quoted claim to this effect. And yet, perhaps in part because of the enthusiasm of this embrace, the terminology that literary scholars use to discuss the economic, political, and cultural links that transcend national borders remains notoriously imprecise. Manfred B. Steger's work on globalization, invoked in the call for papers for this special issue, is helpful in this regard. Steger is careful to define his terms, including "globalization" as the "growing worldwide interconnectivity" (17); "global imaginary" as "people's growing consciousness of thickening globality" (11); and "globality" as "a social condition characterized by

¹ On the novel's presentation of gender see Rogers, and McMullen (99-105); on the novel's postcolonial elements, see especially Moss.



tight global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections and flows that make most of the currently existing borders and boundaries irrelevant” (emphases in original, 11). While Steger goes on to acknowledge that the “spatial expansion of social relations and the rise of the global imaginary are gradual processes with deep historical roots” (19), he does not take time to consider how these historical processes are often asynchronous, so that the international network of cultural, economic, and social ties that underpin our contemporary sense of the global may have a longer history than does our awareness of their effects—that is, that the global imaginary may be much newer than globality itself.

Before turning to the particular forms of globality inscribed in Brooke’s novel, it is worth pausing to note that the issue of Canadian literature’s global or international reception has long troubled Canadian critics. Writing in 1943, E.K. Brown suggested that “the problem of Canadian literature” was precisely that it remained a decidedly *national* phenomenon. Insisting that, yes, “[t]here is a Canadian literature,” Brown had to concede that it has, sadly, “stirred little interest outside of Canada” (3). Noting that Morley Callaghan, Thomas Chandler Haliburton, and a few others had been able to garner some acclaim in England and the United States, Brown acknowledges that such individualized appreciation does not make a tradition:

To the reader outside Canada such works as have been mentioned have not been important as reflections of phases in a national culture; the interest in the work has not spread to become an interest in the movements and the traditions in the national life from which the work emerged. Canadian books may occasionally have had a mild impact outside Canada; Canadian literature has had none. (4-5)

In defining Canadian literature’s “problem” in terms of a threshold that can be met only once the appreciation of individual Canadian books has coalesced into the international recognition of Canadian literature as a tradition, Brown is participating in what was already at this point a longstanding habit of looking for validation from “outside Canada” to affirm the significance of the arts within the country.

If the descriptions of Canadian literature’s recent successes beyond its borders are to be believed, however, it seems the “problem” Brown identified for Canadian literature has been solved. Not only is it “going global” (Brandt), with its “scene and the themes hav[ing] become international” (Kuester 8), but it has attained “immense international acclaim” (Sugars, “World” 81). “Literature in Canada [...] has arrived at the centre stage of world literature,” agrees Reingard M. Nischik (1). Pilar Somacarra Iñigo recounts this arrival with admirable enthusiasm: the “momentum of world-wide splendor began in 2000,” she writes, starting with Margaret Atwood’s Booker Prize win, which was quickly followed by Yann Martel’s Booker win in 2003 (a year in which three of the five books shortlisted were by Canadians) (140). UK-based Canadianist Gillian Roberts’s nuanced discussion of Canadian literature’s prize culture offers a list of additional “Canadian writers [who] have been internationally lauded” of late (4), adding Austin Clarke, Rawi Hage, Lawrence Hill, Michael Ignatieff, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Alistair



MacLeod, Anne Michaels, Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Mordecai Richler, and Carol Shields (140-41). Most recently, Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* was shortlisted for the 2017 Booker, and of course, no scholar interested in Canadian literature's arrival can fail to note Alice Munro's winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013.

Recent scholarship, moreover, suggests that the international appreciation of Canadian literature is not strictly a matter of bestselling individual books or awards ballots. Recent scholarly collections and special issues published in Canada have demonstrated the interest in the field exists beyond its borders by increasingly showcasing international scholarship on Canadian writing—including recent collections such as Marta Dvořák and W.H. New's *Tropes and Territories: Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writings in Context* (2007); Eva Darias-Beautell's *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts: Narratives of English Canada* (2012); Brydon and Dvořák's *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue* (2012), and Tanti *et al.* *Beyond 'Understanding Canada'* (2017);² as well as the upcoming special issue of *Canadian Literature*, entitled “Rescaling CanLit: Global Readings”, guest edited by Eva Darias-Beautell of University of La Laguna (Spain). Moreover, interest in the field in Europe continues through the efforts of the International Council for Canadian Studies, and is evinced through collections such as Antor *et al.*'s *Refractions of Canada in European Literature and Culture* (2005); Eugenia Sojka and Tomasz Sikora's *Embracing Otherness: Canadian Minority Discourses in Transcultural Perspective* (2010); Pilar Somacarrera's *Made in Canada, Read in Spain: Essays on the Translation and Circulation of English-Canadian Literature* (2013); and others, including this special issue of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*. What is more, there is evidence that this appreciation of Canadian literature as a tradition abroad goes beyond the interest of dedicated scholars: the Autumn 2017 issue of *Granta*, one of the UK's leading literary magazines, was a special issue dedicated entirely to Canadian literature; and Canada has recently been announced as the “Guest of Honour” at the prestigious Frankfurt Book Fair in 2020. All this would seem to suggest, as Danielle Fuller and Susan Billingham claim, that Canadian literature has “achieved critical mass and is now an international phenomenon” (114).

It is perhaps ironic, then, that the intensity of the celebration of Canadian literature abroad is more than met by the condemnation of the institution that supports and shapes that literature in Canada. The full details of what a recent *Globe and Mail* article calls the current “epic CanLit war” (Lederman) are beyond the scope of this paper, but a few lowlights should be sufficient. In 2017, the Editor of The Writers' Union of Canada's magazine was forced to resign after he appended a piece entitled “Winning the Appropriation Prize” to a special issue of a magazine dedicated to Indigenous writers; the editor-in-chief of *The Walrus* resigned shortly later, following his expression of support for the prize. Celebrated author Joseph Boyden has faced

² Precedent for this work includes Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik's *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1985.



a very public reckoning about his questionable claims to Indigenous identity, and a major Canadian literature conference saw one of its keynote speakers announce he was “breaking up” with the field due to its “anti-black white supremacy” – a move that was subsequently echoed by scholars lamenting the “unbearable whiteness of CanLit”.³ There is a broad-based reckoning underway regarding sexual violence in Canadian literary culture, as well, prompted by high profile sexual assault cases under investigation in creative writing programs at Concordia and University of British Columbia. After a host of high profile authors (including Atwood, Martel, and Ondaatje) signed an open letter penned by Boyden protesting the firing of the UBC department chair, they were met with a public counter-letter in which more than 600 signatories declared themselves “shocked and appalled” that “no support was expressed for the female complainant or for the other female students” in the original letter. All this and more continues to play out in the pages of the country’s literary journals, as well as popular magazines and national newspapers.⁴ Multiple critics have taken to referring to the “CanLit Dumpster Fire” in print, and a collection of essays entitled *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* is forthcoming.⁵ In an opening editorial to a recent issue of *Canadian Literature*, Laura Moss and Brendan McCormack sum up this mass of criticism by quoting a tweet by fellow academic David Gaertner: “If this is #CanLit,” Gaertner writes, “let it burn” (n.p.).

These startlingly different views of the current state of Canadian literature reflect the range of ways that the term “Canadian literature” signifies today, of course, but they are linked, I will argue, by the institutionalization of Canadian literature – or what is often called “CanLit”. It is clearly no longer the case, as Brown and others once suggested, that “Canadian books” are not recognized as belonging to a national literary tradition, or that “Canadian literature” as a tradition cannot claim even a “mild impact outside Canada” (Brown 5). But it is equally clear that celebration of Canadian literature abroad stands in rather jarring contrast to a new “problem” that the field is facing here at home. How, exactly, do these very different perspectives on the field signify? What is the relationship between individual texts circulating abroad under the title of “Canadian literature,” and the institutional frameworks that support CanLit scholarship? What might these differences tell us about the globality of national literatures today? And what could all this possibly have to do with Brooke’s novel, written two hundred years ago?

³ The speaker was Rinaldo Walcott; the conference, which I helped to organize, was *Miki-naakominis / TransCanadas: Literature, Justice, Relation*, held at the University of Toronto in 2017. See also Barrett *et al.*

⁴ Julie Rak maintains a website with primary sources for context on much of these issues: <https://sites.google.com/ualberta.ca/counterletter/context-for-the-galloway-case>.

⁵ See Elliott and Rak. *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, edited by Julie Rak, Hannah McGregor, and Erin Wunker, is forthcoming from Book*hug in 2018.



2. THE LONG HISTORY OF CANADIAN LITERATURE'S NEW GLOBALITY

Even if book sales and cultural capital were our only guides for assessing Canadian fiction's global stature, works such as Lucy Maud Montgomery's phenomenally successful 1908 novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, would be ample reason to insist upon its longevity.⁶ And yet if the specific terminology of "globality" is new, concern with the social, economic, and cultural implications of connections between Canadian literary production and "the world" is certainly not. Indeed, as Carole Gerson argues in a valuable 2009 article entitled "Writers Without Borders: The Global Framework of Canada's Early Literary History," one useful way of testing the "newness" of Canadian literature's recent globality is to remind ourselves of the conceptual and material links that connected the earliest Canadian texts across borders and oceans. Gerson demonstrates that "Canadian participation in the international culture of best sellers and blockbusters is less an innovation of the late twentieth century than a continuous feature of our national cultural experience" (17), and convincingly lays out the various ways in which seventeenth through nineteenth century "Canadian" texts—from the poetry of Robert Hayman to the exploration narratives of Samuel Hearne and James Cook, from the travel writings of Anna Jameson to the poetry of Oliver Goldsmith and onwards—were clearly informed by the international and imperial contexts in which they were written and through which they circulated.⁷

The arrival of Confederation in 1867 might tempt us to leap to the Canadian modernists' invocation of cosmopolitanism for the field's next global linkages, but there is no need. Between Nick Mount's account of the "expatriate origins of Canadian literature", in which many writers moved to New York in the Confederation period in order to work with "a transnational and in some cases transatlantic membership and audience" ("Expatriate" 248), and Tracy Ware's discussion of such writers' "cosmopolitan nationalism" (296), it is clear that even the most committed of Canada's literary nationalists were self-consciously working across the new country's borders. With recent work in postcolonial, diaspora, and hemispheric studies working to position a wider swath of early Canadian writing within an expanded international framework—including, perhaps most prominently, positioning black Canadian writing within a larger and longer black Atlantic—⁸ it is difficult to disagree with Gerson's conclusion that "from the earliest colonial times to the present, Canadian culture has always been situated within the complexities of larger international contexts" ("Canadian" 76).

⁶ For a discussion of how fame—both within and beyond Canada—impacted early Canadian authors including Montgomery, see York, 32-98.

⁷ Noting *The History of Emily Montague* in passing, Gerson describes Brooke's novel as "the product of a seasoned London author who cannily exploited the exotic setting she encountered when she accompanied her husband to British North America" ("Writers" 18).

⁸ Key scholars here include Rinaldo Walcott, George Elliott Clarke, and David Chariandy.



It will not be new, of course, to suggest that pre-1867 literature in Canada was a thoroughly colonial affair, or that this early history continues to inform the present. Still, it is important to link this colonial past within an elongated history of English Canadian literature's contemporary globality. Indeed, if "globalization" is to be understood as the "growing worldwide interconnectivity," as Steger suggests, it is necessary to acknowledge the contact zones of colonialism as fundamental in our efforts to historicize the "social conditions" of our current globality. Calling globalization a "new word for an old process in dire need of a careful historical interpretation" (6), for example, Anthony Hall insists the "date 1492 marks the moment when our current era of globalization began" (4), for it is "the beginning of an era when four continents—Europe, Africa, and the Americas— began to merge into a transatlantic cultural complex" (5). If we understand colonialism as central rather than secondary to the "current era of globalization," it is clear, as Gerson argues, that the "[g]lobalization of Canadian writing began centuries ago" ("Writers" 29).

Consider just how thoroughly this merging is reflected in both the context and content of the very first English-language novel written in British North America: *Emily Montague* was written and set in the decade between the Seven Years War—its global arena included Europe, North America, and India—and the American War of Independence, when Britain temporarily occupied the vast majority of North America. Brooke's own tenure in North America was a direct consequence of this colonial moment, for she arrived and departed in Quebec as the wife of a chaplain to an English garrison. It was written in the latest fashion of British letters for an international audience, drawing on the popularity of epistolary novels and travel narratives in this period. As Gordon Bölling writes, it was "[w]ritten specifically for England's literary market," and offers "narratives of distant Canada [that] catered to the expectations of a European public" (19). The fact that the earliest novel in North America was written in English is itself a consequence of imperial history—as is the fact that it was later translated into both French and Dutch. The novel's "enthusiastic imperialism" (Merrett 95) has been widely noted, too,⁹ with Brooke's rendering of the Indigenous population as "noble savages" and the French as "indolent" croquets, all secondary characters in dire need of British civility, and the "sublime" Canadian landscape thoroughly domesticated as a site for British romance. As Laura Moss writes, the "love story is inseparable from the story of colonial expansion" (454). And of course, the major protagonists each cross the ocean twice—first to explore the "new world", and then to return home— transatlantic lines that are retraced by many of the letters themselves, emphasized by a time lag Brooke uses for dramatic irony (McMullen 94).

Less obvious but equally significant is the novel's portrayal of a growing global economy powered by a fundamental shift toward a credit economy underway in this period—the very shift which, as Steger notes, was laying the foundation for what would become the "capitalist world system" (30-31). The British econ-

⁹ Most recently, see Moss and Devereux.





omy underwent a massive readjustment with the increasingly complex demands of imperial trade, including the creation of the Bank of England, the country's first standardized banknotes and the introduction of paper money, the evolution of a system of public credit, and an explosion of growth in joint-stock companies set up to finance the risky, but often fantastically rewarding, trade in imperial goods.¹⁰ Like other texts from this time –this is the period in which Jonathan Swift coined the term the stock “bubble,” and novels were being published with titles like *The Adventures of a Banknote* (1770)– *The History of Emily Montague* directly engages this fast-changing imperial economy. Indeed, Brooke's novel turns explicitly on these economic shifts and emerging global financial systems: when the book opens, Ed boasts of his “four thousand dollars in the funds” (i.e. stocks in the national debt, 47), but he travels to Quebec specifically in search of a more tangible wealth. The colony, he believes, is “a rich mine yet unopen'd. [...] I do not mean of gold and silver, but of what are of much more real value, corn and cattle” (20). By the novel's end, however, Ed's Lockean efforts to enrich himself via British North American land have failed outright, and he returns to England to win new riches in an outrageous *deus ex machina*. Years earlier, we discover, a Colonel Willmott had left his pregnant wife in Paris and ventured to India, where he “acquired very rapidly a considerable fortune” (335). At the novel's close, the colonel returns home to England determined marry his daughter (whom he has never met) to the son of an old friend to whom he is indebted. This, of course, is the very marriage that has already taken place, so that while Emily and Ed thought themselves “poor” when they married, they now find themselves having –as Ed wrote in the novel's second letter– “procur[ed] the wealth of a Nabob” (2-3).¹¹ After hundreds of pages detailing an English love story on one side of the planet, Brooke resolves her novel by bringing her protagonists home to London and pointing to the massive joint-stock company that was busy remaking the global economy on the other.

If it is true to the point of being obvious that the “new” globality of Canadian fiction has a long history stretching back into this colonial period, it is also true that critical frames emphasizing the newness of contemporary globalization make it disconcertingly easy to downplay or ignore this fact. There is, however, another perspective from which this long history can itself be understood as being surprisingly recent. Such historicizing, valuable as it is, can be seen as the product of the relatively new institution of Canadian literary studies –the very institution that we are being told is now on fire– which has its origins, we are told, a century after Confederation.

¹⁰ On the repercussions of the “financial revolution,” see Pocock, and Laura Brown.

¹¹ The OED helpfully defines “nabob” as “a British person who acquired a large fortune in India during the period of British rule”. See also Merrett's discussion of the novel's staging of a “conflict between romance and money” (100), and Binhammer's argument that Brooke “tries to narrate a plot of infinite wealth accumulation”, but “ends up laying bare the contradictions at the heart of this emerging liberal economic theory” (298).

3. THE SHORT HISTORY OF CANLIT'S OLD GLOBALITY

Historicizing English Canadian literature's globality is complicated by the fact that it has had to begin several times over its short life. I have been following one strain of critical convention in framing pre-1867 texts, including Brooke's novel, as "early Canadian literature", but of course this is a deeply contested chronology that requires scholars to reach back past the creation of the Dominion of Canada to teleologically claim pre-Confederation writing as part of the later nation's history. Some have sought to position early English, French, and Indigenous narratives from North America as "colonial literatures" antecedent to a Canadian literature that properly begins with the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, but such an approach clearly continues to rely on the borders of the Canadian state for its engagement with such work. Unsurprisingly, scholars of French-language literature in Canada have been suspicious of *any* critical positioning within the English-dominated framework of Canadian literary studies, while Indigenous scholars such as Thomas King have outright rejected the inclusion of traditional "Native" stories as part of the cultural lineage of historically hostile nation-states, rightly noting that frameworks clearly "assume that the starting point for [...] discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America" (40).

A third and increasingly common strain of critical convention, however, has been to recognize as antecedent the early writing and stories in the northernmost half of North America, to acknowledge as aspirational the romantic nationalism that led writers and critics to repeatedly declare the arrival of a Canadian literary tradition throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, but to insist that something called "Canadian literature" cannot be said to have been established until after the latter half of the twentieth century. Smaro Kamboureli's opening passage in her introduction to *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*, is exemplary of such an approach:

Canadian literature: a construct bounded by the nation, a cultural by product of the Cold War era, a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonialist legacies, a literature that has assumed transnational and global currency, a tradition often marked by uncertainty about its value and relevance, a corpus of texts in which, albeit not without anxiety and resistance, spaces have been made for First Nations and diasporic voices. (vii)

Here, the key historical moment is neither colonial contact nor Confederation but the Cold War. This is, as Richard Cavell writes later in the volume, "a vantage that understands 'Canadian literature' not as embodying a particular canon of texts but as an institutionalist (statist) and thus economic (cultural/industrial) phenomenon" (85).

This is Canadian literature as "CanLit". These are terms that have a complex relationship to each other, and if they cannot be fully equated, it is not quite clear exactly where they differ. Writing in answer to the question "What is CanLit?" in the *New York Times*, Douglas Coupland suggests, "CanLit is when the Cana-



dian government pays you to write about life in small towns and / or the immigration experience". He's not entirely wrong, but others have been more helpful. "CanLit, as we have come to call it for the sake of brevity, but also affectionately, and often ironically [...] has been subject to a relentless process of institutionalization" (1), reports Kamboureli, adding that it "has, more or less, always functioned as a referent to Canadian literature in English" (ix). "CanLit," writes Diana Brydon, is the "informal shorthand for Canadian literature that names it as an established formation" (2); "CanLit," suggests Nischik, is the "institutionalized canon of Canadian literature" (1).

The study of English Canadian literature as "CanLit" is now one of the major critical avenues for engaging writing in Canada, as scholars have shown an interest not only in individual literary works but, as E.K. Brown anticipated, "[...] in the movements and the traditions in the national life from which the work emerged" (5). Such scholarship has focussed on the material, cultural, economic, and political histories of literary studies, emphasizing the role of the government policies and programs, as well as universities, awards culture, and critical methodologies in promoting and shaping national literary studies. It has been fostered through productive clusters of research –Cynthia Sugars singles out Smaro Kamboureli's TransCanada Institute as being "central in consolidating this field of inquiry" (8), and Frank Davey emphasizes Milan Dimić's earlier conference series "Towards a History of the Literary Institution in Canada"¹²– but, as the recent *Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* notes, "the institutionalization of Canadian literature as a category or discipline" has become one of the field's primary critical interests (Sugars, "Introduction" 8).

While both a full theorization and survey of research into the institution of Canadian literature is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth taking note of its temporal and spatial assumptions.¹³ There is, for example, widespread agreement as to the period Canadian literature emerged as an institution. When Margaret Atwood describes the 1960s as "a hinge moment" for writing in Canada (39), for instance, it is no coincidence she offers as evidence the fact that "CanLit" became a term" (42); Nick Mount's hagiographic account of what he calls the "CanLit boom of the 1960s", in *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*, barely bothers to venture before 1959. Richard Cavell names Canadian literature a "Cold War literature" (85), but Barry Cameron is even more specific: "the full institutionalization of Canadian literature as a recognizable and relatively autonomous discourse did not take place until the mid- to late 1960s", he writes, "when it became thoroughly inscribed in

¹² Though its self-conscious engagement with French-language writing is an important difference, HOLIC's approach to the field clearly anticipates the TransCanada project by several decades. In the interest of full disclosure, I should note I completed my PhD under Kamboureli's supervision in the TransCanada Institute at the University of Guelph, and have been active in its various projects.

¹³ Paul Martin's exploration of "the Canadian literary institution" in *Sanctioned Ignorance* is helpful in its theorization of the institution via Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Dubois. See especially 53-93.



both the agenda of Canadian publishers and the curriculum of Canadian university departments” (124).¹⁴ There are no shortage of other examples of this chronology, but here again Coupland is memorably blunt: “CanLit was invented in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s,” he writes, “the time when Pierre Trudeau was Prime Minister and Canada was busy trying to decolonize itself from mother England” (n.p).

Scholars have confidently dated the beginning of CanLit with such precision because there is a broad consensus as to its key events. The 1951 Royal Commission on the National Development of the Arts, Letters, and Sciences –better known as the Massey Commission– resulted in a new set of state-funded initiatives supporting the arts as a means of establishing a distinct Canadian identity, highlighting the need for a national literature and instigating the influential Canada Council for the Arts and the National Library. Post-war nationalism was further encouraged by plans for the Canadian centennial celebrations and Montreal’s hosting of the 1967 World Fair. In 1959, the first journal dedicated to the field, *Canadian Literature*, was established, followed by Carl F. Klinck’s influential edited collection, *Literary History of Canada* (1965). The incorporation of “Canadian literature” as a university subject began in earnest during the 1960s, in which students could study the newly christened “Canadian classics” being identified and published by McClelland & Stewart’s “New Canadian Library” series, launched in 1958. Northrop Frye was still willing to declare there was no such thing as Canadian literature as late as in 1965, but the essay in which he did so –this is the famous “where is here?” piece– was promptly canonized as one of the new field’s defining critical texts.

The chronology above will be familiar to any scholars who have engaged research examining Canadian literature as an institution, much of which has focussed on the field’s methodological nationalism. It is worth noting, however, that the lines of continuity between early and late Canadian literary globality can be found within the heart of the nationalizing forces propelling the emergence of CanLit as an institution. Not only was the Massey Report explicit in its goals of mobilizing literature as a “defence” against the American cultural imperialism, for example, it also looked to use it for the “projection of Canada Abroad” on the grounds that “ignorance of Canada in other countries is very widespread”. Insisting that the “promotion abroad of a knowledge of Canada is not a luxury but an obligation,” the Commission recommended the state formally foster “exchanges with other nations in the fields of the arts and letters”.¹⁵ Over the next fifty years, Canada’s federal government did just that, through a series of modest but sustained funding programmes incentivising the development of Canadian studies outside of the country. These efforts supported the interdisciplinary study of Canada in nearly fifty countries since the 1970s (Tanti *et al.*, xii), and were reaffirmed in the 1995 formalization of the “projection

¹⁴ As both Margery Fee (22-23) and Paul Martin point out, critics have had a tendency to overstate the absence of pre-1960 university courses in Canadian literature as part of this chronology (19).

¹⁵ See Chapter 27.



of Canadian values and culture” as one of the three “pillars” of Canadian foreign policy. These incentives included the recently cancelled “Understanding Canada” program, run through Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which helped to fund international conferences, sponsored international student research and travel, and organizations such as the longstanding International Council for Canadian Studies.

Scholars outside Canada have rightly noted that Canadian literature’s circulation abroad is complicated by the politics specific to each country,¹⁶ but it is hardly surprising to find others expressing some hesitation about their complicity in Canada’s soft diplomacy goals. Danielle Fuller, reflecting on her transatlantic readings of CanLit, concedes she “had the unsettling sense that we were also cultural goods made by or in Canada, and thus a part of a state-funded nationalist CanLit project” (67). Indeed, as the editors of a recent collection note, such programs have been part of the “diplomatic and economic scaffolds that supported the [...] circulation of Canadian literature within global circuits” –the specific trajectory of which have been shaped by state policies predetermining the countries in which such research could receive funding.¹⁷ The “popular belief that Canadian literature has become a ‘world literature,’” they conclude, “is the result of diplomatic, cultural, and academic programs” (Tanti *et al.*, xxvi).

Recognizing the relatively recent establishment of Canadian literature as an institution that circulates both within and beyond the nation, however, does not mean we must fully accept the rhetoric of newness that sometimes accompanies such work. There is, after all, no shortage of pre-1960 authors and critics who believed themselves to be engaging Canadian literature as an institution, including, for example, the editors of the more than thirty English-Canadian literary anthologies Robert Lecker catalogues as being published before 1945. D.M.R. Bentley’s accusation that “TransCanada is but the latest [...] iteration of a long continuity of presentist bridge-burning and earth-scorching” (28) is certainly overstated, but he is not alone in his concern that an emphasis on the recent institutionalization of Canadian literature risks overlooking the texts and concerns that precede this period. Frank Davey, for example, surveys a number of influential recent collections and notes just a “handful of references to pre-1970 writing,” warning that “even when making generalizations about the entire literature, the critics may seem to be referencing only the last five or six decades of publication” (32). Julie Rak’s vehement critique of Mount’s *Arrival* expresses a similar concern, albeit with different politics. Mount’s study implies “that before the 1960s [...] there was no Canadian lit-

¹⁶ See Yoko Fujimoto’s account of how Canadian literature gets “lost in Japanese Translation”; Belén Martín-Lucas’ account of how South-Asian Canadian authors in Spain are “read as ‘Indian’ books, not as Canadian ones” (88); and the essays gathered under the heading “Reading Publics” in Tanti *et al.*

¹⁷ Of the twenty-three associations for Canadian studies that were eligible for funding from the Canadian government, fourteen are in Europe and North America; there are none in Africa, the Caribbean, or the Middle East, aside from Israel (Tanti *et al.* xiv).



erature at all,” Rak writes, resulting in a “cluster of sweeping generalizations” that “reproduces assumptions about white, homophobic, sexist, settler Canada, *and it celebrates them*” (n.p., emphasis in original). The point is not that Mount is unaware of earlier writings—he has, after all, written a full book on the literature of Canada’s Confederation period—but rather that the shape and politics of his engagement with Canadian literature in this text is a result, in part, of his willingness to grant it an abbreviated chronology as “CanLit”.

Although part of my argument in this essay has been that historicizing declarations of Canadian literature’s globality is valuable to help us avoid the pitfalls of presentism, I want to close by turning to Brooke’s novel to note yet another complication that arises when one attempts to historicize the field’s globality: its emergence as the earliest of Canadian novels during the field’s institutionalization. Gerson is surely right to point out that “the Centennial era implicitly proclaimed a break with Canada’s literary past, creating a fissure that continues to inform developing critical frameworks about the globalization of culture” (“Writers,” 29), but it is also important to recognize the ways in which the relatively recent institutionalization of Canada’s literary past into something widely discussed as “early CanLit” complicates any effort to construct a straightforward chronology of the field. It was only once Canadian literature moved into universities as a field of study and into the catalogues of publishing houses, after all, that earlier texts and contexts coalesced to emerge as the old history of a new tradition. Brooke’s 1769 novel had largely disappeared to history before its resurfaced in the twentieth century as “Canada’s first novel,” first as part of a small *Canadians* series in 1931.¹⁸ It was not until after the Second World War that Brooke’s novel was fully resuscitated through a series of nationalizing publishing projects that attended Canadian literature’s ongoing institutionalization as CanLit, including McClelland & Stewart’s *New Canadian Library* series (1961; 1995; 2008); the *Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts* series (1985); and the *Canadian Critical Editions* series (2001). Since then, it has enjoyed the critical attention that is fitting to a “first” novel in a tradition, although, as Dermot McCarthy notes, this attention has “not dealt with the problem of the novel as originary object—with its selection by the tradition to begin the tradition that selects it” (n.p.).

Here, then, is yet another “problem of Canadian literature” in the context of its newfound globality: if it is true that the global economic, cultural, and political lines drawn by the publishing history and plot of Frances Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague* should serve to remind us that the fiction of Canada’s globality is several centuries old, the novel’s post-1960 emergence as “Canada’s first novel” should remind us that even this long globality has a history that is surprisingly short.

¹⁸ The novel’s first Canadian edition was published in Ottawa’s Graphic Press’s “*Canada Series*,” in 1931 (Edwards xlvi).



4. CONCLUSION

My goal in this essay has been to begin a process of complicating the rhetoric of newness that often surrounds Canadian literature's emergence on the global stage. I turned to Frances Brooke's *History of Emily Montague* to remind readers of the depth and scope of global linkages undergirding even the earliest novels in Canadian fiction, but also to note the complex temporalities at play in the novel's reclamation as an originary text within a relatively recently institutionalized body of writing. By noting how the nationalizing forces that enabled Canadian literature to "arrive" in the 1960s were also working toward the "projection of Canada abroad," I have tried to link the Canadian literature that has apparently "arrived at the centre stage of world literature" (Nischik 1) with the CanLit "dumpster fire" that is burning in Canada. Ultimately, my hope is that engaging the long history of Canadian literature's new globality might help us better identify, understand, and perhaps even solve some of the problems in CanLit today.

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SNOW WHITE AND THE POLAR BEARS IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL HEATING: A READING OF MARK ANTHONY JARMAN'S "MY WHITE PLANET"*

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ABSTRACT

Set in an age when globalization goes on a par with the rise of ecological perils, Mark Anthony Jarman's "My White Planet" (2008) relies on a parodic subversion of the Brothers Grimm's "Little Snow White" to consider the responsibility human beings incur when introducing changes in the environment that will have repercussions on the whole planet. If fairy tales do not mimetically reflect how human beings inhabit the world, but instead propose interventions that lead to a better adequacy between the two, their retellings are endowed with great ethical relevance during periods of historical mutation when the old ways no longer offer guidance and the future seems uncertain. The present essay will show that Jarman draws upon the resources of the fairy tale genre to encourage a critical revision of Canada's northern myth and the manifold forms of exploitation it has encouraged.

KEYWORDS: Canadian literature, ecocriticism, fairy tale studies, landscape studies, petrocultures.

BLANCANIEVES Y LOS OSOS POLARES EN LA ERA DEL CALENTAMIENTO GLOBAL:
UNA LECTURA DE «MY WHITE PLANET», DE MARK ANTHONY JARMAN

RESUMEN

Ambientado en una época en la que la globalización avanza a la par que el aumento de los peligros ecológicos, «My White Planet» (2008), de Mark Anthony Jarman, enarbola una subversión paródica de «Little Snow White» de los hermanos Grimm para evaluar la responsabilidad en que los seres humanos incurrir al introducir cambios en el medio ambiente con repercusiones planetarias. Si los cuentos de hadas no reflejan miméticamente cómo los seres humanos habitan el mundo, sino que proponen intervenciones que conducen a una mejor adecuación entre los dos, sus reescrituras están dotadas de gran relevancia ética durante los períodos de mutación histórica cuando los modos antiguos ya no ofrecen orientación y el futuro parece incierto. El presente ensayo mostrará que Jarman recurre a los recursos del género de los cuentos de hadas para alentar una revisión crítica del mito del norte de Canadá y las múltiples formas de explotación que ha fomentado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura canadiense, ecocrítica, estudios sobre cuentos de hadas, estudios del paisaje, petroculturas.

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The 'opening' of the Northwest Passage, as envisioned by the European Space Agency satellite in 2007, drew an orange loop straight through the sea ice, clearing a passage in the icescape and in the imagination that had been dreamt of, and searched for, over a century ago. The dream of a passage has passed into metaphor, explicating the folly and desire of white man's exploration, set against the backdrop of maritime empires and colonial relations. The passage emerges now as the hot underbelly of that dream of expansion; a line seared through the ice, illuminating global heating. The empire of man, or Anthropocene, expanded to the limits of the atmosphere.

Kathryn YUSOFF, "Navigating the Northwest Passage"

The 2007 opening of the Northwest Passage predated by a year the publication of Mark Anthony Jarman's *My White Planet* (2008).¹ The titular reference to whiteness calls attention to the adjustments made necessary when five centuries of exploration came to an end with an event that displaced "the folly and desire of the white man" (Yusoff 299) onto a different ethical plane, as dreams of infinite expansion became thwarted with the realization of the smallness of the planet and its vulnerability to human activities. In plain, positivist terms, the globe has never been any other colour but blue, at least since that other momentous day in world history when humankind was given the first satellite views of the earth to behold in wonder.² Viewing the planet as "white" can only result from a subjective and increasingly relative perception. The possessive form narrows the perspective to a hegemonic and geographical standpoint equated with that of a fraction of the globe's population, or with a location where the world may indeed look entirely clad in white, but only when observed from regions where snow still endures. In this sense the phrase also smacks of the environmental Darwinism that originally informed Canada's model of a white civility in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when embracing the country's Nordic character was valued as the ultimate test in the selection of Canada's immigrant populations, discouraging groups allegedly weaker in body or spirit from settling in Canada (Coleman 24). The enduring impact of the discourses that have constructed the Far North as the spatial foundation of the national identity, welding race and geography together, has received sustained scholarly scrutiny in past decades, from Sherrill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North* (2001) to the

* My gratitude goes to Christine Lorre-Johnston for our stimulating discussions about Jarman's work and her offering to share with me an early version of her interview with him before it went through publication. See Lorre-Johnston.

¹ For Frye the Northwest Passage was a geographical reminder of Canada's inception as an obstacle to naval exploration (226). Even when they disagreed with Frye's vision of the geographical determinism thwarting Canada's development, subsequent critics also used the phrase to stress the endurance of a colonial disregard for local realities: "Everything written on the Canadian Arctic is, in effect, a northwest passage, the expression not only of the traditions but the geography and history of another world" (Moss 40).

² The first full-view photo of the globe, the famous "Blue Marble" shot was taken on December 7, 1972 from the spacecraft Apollo 17. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photos/milestones-space-photography/>.

more recent collective volume *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature, and the Historical Geographies of Whiteness in Canada* (2011).

Jarman's short story approaches this legacy through a provocative parody of "Little Snow White" (1812). The fairy tale first recorded by the Brothers Grimm became a planetary success with Walt Disney's animated film adaptation (1937), feeding young audiences worldwide a work ethic resting on a clearly gendered division of labour (Zipes 203). Jarman relocates the encounter between Snow White and the seven dwarves in the Arctic, one of the few places where snow endures on the planet, although it is melting fast. Seven men working on a remote station reminiscent of the installations of the DEWLine,³ rescue a starlet adrift in an offshore oil-rig's emergency lifeboat. Once the young woman has been revived, she stays with the team, slowly recovering from the amnesia caused by her ordeal. But the men's *esprit de corps* fast erodes when disagreements start to appear among them regarding the conduct they may adopt with their ward. When the situation deteriorates, Snow White, as the narrator likes calling her, convinces him to take her back to the shore in the hope that a passing cruise ship may spot and rescue them. Their plan is met with luck and she boards the ship that will take her south, while her guardian returns to the line station. Back in Hollywood, the young woman resumes her career on TV sets, and waves through the screen to the seven dwarves who saved her from death's icy jaws.

Although the story could very well have ended at that point, it moves on to include a puzzling coda in which the polar bears that have been lurking in the preceding pages now surround the surviving men: "They know us, big carnal carnivores peaking in at our parts. It's love. They spy us in the window and are *nostalgic for the happy future* when they will have us in their arms" (Jarman 45, emphasis added). This variation upon the customary ending of the fairy tale recasts the romantic formula of the disenchanting kiss into an encounter with the animal spirit of the North⁴ which it nevertheless postpones to an already obsolete future. The temporal aporia simultaneously announces and erases the possibility of everlasting happiness, keeping in suspension the signature of the fairy tale. Jack Zipes rightly emphasizes that "fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action –to transform the world and make it more acceptable to human needs while we try to change and make ourselves fit for the world" (2). If fairy tales do not mimetically reflect how human beings inhabit the world, but instead propose interventions that lead to a better adequacy between the two, their retellings are endowed with great ethical relevance during periods of historical mutation when the old ways no longer offer guidance and the future seems uncertain: "So massive and daunting are the environmental crises facing us –facing the earth– that nothing short of

³ The stations of the Distant Early Warning Radar Line were built all over Alaska and the Canadian North during the Cold War to detect the first signs of a Soviet invasion, when rallying the help of its closest neighbour was necessary for the USA to eavesdrop on the USSR and the rest of the Eastern block. Most of the DEWLine installations were dismantled or abandoned after 1985.

⁴ The Greek *arktos* means "bear," the name the Romans also gave to the North star, *Ursa Major*.



a massive re-imagining, a shift in the imaginary will work” (Ricou 168). Set in an age when globalization⁵ goes on a par with the rise of ecological perils, “My White Planet” works from a parodic subversion of “Little Snow White” to reflect upon the responsibility human beings incur when introducing changes in the environment that will have repercussions on the whole planet. The subsequent sections will show that Jarman’s short story draws upon a most didactic genre to encourage a re-imagining of Canada’s Far North and of the stories attached to this region of the globe.

1. THE STORY AND ITS GENERIC AFFILIATIONS

“Seven of us examine her. Seven men and our Snow White” (Jarman 26). The afterthought inspires a narrative line that diverges from the plain sequence of events in which a castaway is found, saved and ultimately returned to Hollywood’s limelight: “I have a final golden vision of her at a microphone, many microphones aimed at her, rented jewels on her sunny neck” (Jarman 25). No sooner has the story begun than it rushes to its denouement. The first page thus condenses everything one needs to know about the outcome of an Arctic adventure which boils down to a sensational news item in this stunted form. The short story genre allegedly allows for extreme forms of compression, viz. the episodic format, condensed time-structure, fragmented narrative and open-endedness brought to perfection by Modernist writers (Nischik 37). But in the present case, the short cut may also suggest that the story lies elsewhere, perhaps in the fantasies that people the narrator’s solitude, as he reminisces how the men brought the inanimate woman back to life and the lazy days of her convalescence. Because of this, “My White Planet” first comes through as a collage of erotic reveries. Daydreams about the senseless body the men lifted out of the sea prompt time-honoured associations of female forms with the ebb and flow that gave birth to the Venus Anadyomene: “Her sodden hair and skin, that naked ass coming up into view like a frozen white planet, my lovely planet” (Jarman 42-43). As Donald Barthelme in his novella *Snow White* (1967), Jarman embraces the postmodern conundrum of “creat[ing] new art’ out of the junkpile of the text” (Nealon 125), and resorts to an “aesthetics of trash” (McCaffery 19) that recycles literary motifs and occasionally degrades them, as in the passage above where the planet has its cosmic dimension further reduced to the proportions of a woman’s sumptuous bottom. Much like the beauty spots that adorn Barthelme’s heroine and are reproduced in a vertical line of dots on the story’s first page (Barthelme 3), the freckles on the castaway’s face and “black and white Dalmatian ice” in Jarman’s version put a blemish on the pristineness the princess and her namesake originally

⁵ The term first appeared in the 1960s (Steger 9), but Jay traces the beginning of popular public discussion of globalization back to the turn of the new millennium (23). Jay further insists on the forces of imperial expansion which, from the Renaissance onwards, have paved the way for the rise of globalization. The Northwest Passage makes this historical conjunction geographically visible.

stood for (Jarman 26 and 40). If we are entering the precincts of the fairy tale, someone has been here before. The narrator ushers us into a well-trodden territory, signposted with allusions to the inscriptions that have constituted the fairy tale into a literary *topos*. The explicit reference to a videotape of the Disney classic is preceded by a less obvious (or perhaps more donnish) hint when the narrator reflects that the amnesiac woman is “a blank slate for [him] to write on, to create” (Jarman 34 and 29 respectively), a nod to Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretation of “Little Snow White” on which later feminist critics elaborated to demonstrate the “intertwined rules of sexual reproduction and narrative production” informing the tale (Bacchilega, “Cracking” 4).

References to the Disney adaptation, to Barthelme’s postmodern parody, and to the critical attention the original tale and its avatars have received effectively inscribe “My White Planet” within a genealogy of texts and images, which indexes the plasticity of a genre remarkably tolerant of revisions and transformations (Bacchilega, Introduction 16). The proliferation of intertextual echoes sharply contrasts with the silence of the woman serving in Snow White’s stead and the unreadability she opposes to the men’s desire in this new version of the tale: “Sometimes she kisses us, sometimes she studies the seven of us, one after the other. What does she think?” (Jarman 36). The question does not befit the morphology of the tale in which characters embody formulaic functions rather than psychological motivations (Bacchilega, “Cracking” 11). But it resonates in a context where interrogations about the moment we cross the limits of the fairy tale into another, adjacent universe of fiction, namely the tale of anticipation in which wonder shades into darker, dystopian tones.

“My White Planet” comprises allusions to historical events that, although they are never elucidated or precisely dated, call forth images audiences the world over now associate with international terrorism and military retaliation:

We inhabit a line station secretly functioning after the accord, but something went dead after June 11. Our dishes and software seem without flaw, but our screens remain blank, thoughtless. No printouts. No officiant plies us with coded orders or fervent denials or demands our narrow circumspect data. Is everyone erased in a war or did a budget-conscious computer take us out in bureaucratic oversight? We are paid puppets, but no one is pulling the strings and no cheque is in the mail.

(Jarman 26-27)

No year anchors the date in a specific time period, yet the day of the month, 6/11, eerily mirrors the precedent of 9/11, also evoked through the “engine’s martial music” of the airplanes that fly over the line station (Jarman 31, 33). But the secrecy surrounding the men’s occupations and their sophisticated electronic equipment hark back to a more distant past, the operations of the DEWLine and Cold War strategies, a period also conjured up through the documentaries and newsreels the men are watching on the History Channel (Jarman 33 and 39). Distinctions between past and present blur into a pervasive climate of fear, the result of several references to an airborne terror that seem to simultaneously recall and announce an imminent planetary conflict, while the men go on performing enigmatic daily duties in a “listening post where [they] don’t listen” (Jarman 45).





The isolated setting and the men's predicament cannot fail to evoke a number of postcolonial dystopias that have heralded the crumbling of empires in the wake of Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe* (1938). Like Buzzati's Lieutenant Drogo, the magistrate in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and the soldier in Peter Carey's "A Windmill in the West" (1980) were sent out by a central state authority to a remote frontier outpost to keep watch over a border where law and order are challenged by insidious forms of alterity. The men's isolation gradually causes their mental stability to alter and the authority they embody to disintegrate, as the dividing line between what lies inside and outside their consciousness becomes blurred. A similar process of degradation occurs in "My White Planet" as danger draws closer every time another man loses his life to the harsh conditions of an extreme environment. Their gruesome ends have their Gothic precedents in the classics of northern lore: "When you enter Arctic narrative, you enter every narrative of the Arctic ever written. When you enter the Arctic in person, you become part of the extended text," explains John Moss when reading his own exploration of Arctic space contrapuntally against the texts that have constituted the region into a setting for male tales of self-aggrandizement (105). Sherrill Grace's analysis of the Canadian North as a "chronotope" ("Gendering") and then as a "discursive formation" (*Canada*) has thrown light on the accretion of texts accounting for this phenomenon. The two concepts Grace successively borrows from Bakhtin and Foucault help her delineate the northern narrative that has been informing "the image of a distinctly Canadian identity comprising hardy, virile masculinity, intellectual, spiritual and racial superiority (of white, northern European stock), and imperialist authority" (Grace, "Gendering" 165), and expose its foundations in southern views of the Arctic, from classical antiquity to the exploration age and the artistic productions of the present. Grace's comprehensive approach re-injects a historical dimension into a space which Western colonizing discourse has sought to represent as conveniently devoid of a human presence, immutable and homogenous, the passive recipient of the transformations a more temperate civilization had in store for it.

How does "My White Planet" relate to the *topoi* constitutive of a northern narrative in which each voyage of discovery tends to turn into an enterprise of recovery, to adapt Aritha van Herk's formulation (87)? As with his handling of fairy tale and dystopian motifs, Jarman's take on Canada's northern myth causes a collision between the past and the present, pointedly recalling that Canada's polar regions have long been on the course of the emissaries of expanding empires:

We found a wooden ship on our lost satellite, stuck in ice, perhaps beached deliberately centuries before, lost men, food still on their table. Did the stiff-legged bears pick them off one by one, eating the years? *Slopes of scree and ravens spying on us behind their formal wear, their Aztec razor faces.*

I walk her to the wooden ship, as if we are courting, to show her the frozen Norwegian rat lying on ballast stones, stones and rats being there so long a time, born in Europe, *Eurocentric rats*, going nowhere now.

Have you been here almost as long? she wonders.

(Jarman 29-30, emphasis added)

The incongruous (though euphonious) combination of “Aztec” and “razor” brings into sharp focus the ravens presiding over this scene of re/discovery and, along with their anthropomorphized profile, the populations who came over the Bering Strait some 18,000 years ago, slowly drifted south, and settled the Americas. The raven is a common enough species in the Arctic, but it is also the bird of creation, a prominent Trickster figure in Inuit mythology as in many other North-American indigenous cultures. The birds’ presence opens a temporal dimension that contradicts the woman’s amnesia and her falsely naïve question. Indeed, there may be some truth in the insinuation that the men do belong in this frozen tableau, insofar as they are part and parcel of the same enterprise of conquest and paranoid surveillance. This implication is further underscored by the narrator’s ironical use of “Eurocentric,” another anachronism bridging the gap between twenty-first-century critical recognitions and nineteenth-century persuasions when neither sailors (nor stowaway rodents) had the slightest qualm about the ideology they contributed to propagating. The resulting time-warp causes the short story to integrate a long-term perspective on a region caught in the historical development of globalizing forces that one would be mistaken to regard as a nascent phenomenon simply because they have been accelerating since the turn of the millennium (Jay 33).

Bestowing the name of Rasmussen on the story’s villain sends another strong signal to the reader. When the Danish explorer first travelled the Northwest Passage by dog sleigh from Greenland to Alaska between 1922 and 1924, his prodigious victory against the geography of the Arctic put an end to centuries of competition between the European powers to trace the polar route that would give them fast and direct access to “the ocean current to Cathay” (Van Herk 82). It is then no coincidence that the character that goes by the name of Rasmussen should also embody the endurance of a male discourse of imperial domination over a colonial space conventionally gendered as female. For Rassy, as the others nicknamed him, is also the first one to suggest a gambling game to decide who will lay hand on Snow White’s “blue-route map of veins and fine skin. [...] [H]er skin ice-water tight, her hip, her perfect white shores” (Jarman 28). The geographical metaphors fusing land and woman harken back to the foundations of Canada’s northern myth in which the Arctic is endowed with female attributes, a cruel yet alluring force whose cold embrace only the bravest among men could withstand, as Atwood (1995) has detected. Because this *topos* was the object of sustained critiques in the closing decades of the twentieth century from scholars and writers alike, it is remarkable to see it resurface three decades later in Jarman’s short story, albeit in a degraded, parodic form.⁶ Does this mean that the counter-discursive assaults of the previous century have somehow failed and that southern stories about the North are bound

⁶ Atwood, Grace and Hulan developed complementary approaches to the conventions of Canada’s northern narrative, showing how it consolidated into a national myth during Canada’s formative years, before moving on to explore its subsequent revisions, especially in women’s writings, from the 1980s onwards.



to follow the same course? In this respect, the narrator's sexual fantasies would seem to perpetuate the gendered expression of a century-old logic of territorial exploration followed by occupation and control. Or could the rhetoric of excess displayed in "My White Planet," beginning with a claim of ownership that is so emphatic it almost sounds desperate, encourage another reading—one that does not interrogate the foundations but the outcome of a northern narrative premised on relations of exploitation?

2. DWARFED

Whether they are part of the fairy-tale or its dystopian transformation, the characters have their stature belittled. In the first instance, the "dwarves" the woman greets from the Emmy Awards (Jarman 44) do not so much resemble the diminished men who intervene as mediators in Snow White's socialization (Bacchilega, "Cracking" 5), than Disney's heigh-hoing miners digging from early morn till night, before the evening sees them repair to a spotless home. Although the nature of the men's labour is never disclosed, their industriousness retains them at the line station long after work instructions have stopped reaching them: "An electronic detection system warns us if bears are sneaking close while we're working outside the Quonsets with our big hoods up, wind singing loud as jets" (Jarman 31). But when they do leave the line station to head for the coast, the narrator and his protégée turn their backs on the fairy-tale setting and re-enter the northern narrative as "dwarfs,"⁷ their presence barely noticeable in the immensity surrounding them:

It's uphill and downhill, a plodding broken hike, and unreliable ice in the straits. The two of us follow *the old stone cairns, dwarfs in the vast landscape, lunar explorers, endless lost horizon and cliffs like calipers*, white mountains, wracked spinning shore, wind penetrating like a wish, but the sky clear and no bears taking a lively interest. (Jarman 40, emphasis added)

As with the vigil of the pre-Columbian ravens over the ice-bound ship, the simile "like calipers" is both visually arresting and historically relevant since it conjures up the image of two huge rock faces portioning the immensity of the sky, but also the measuring gaze of those who have preceded the couple on the same terrain. A similar effect is achieved by the unexpected use of the word "scrimshaw" in a subsequent description: "White mountains far away, and dark lines of whalebone scrimshaw" (Jarman 45). Because the word refers to the carving art sailors developed on whaling ships, it aptly describes a landscape of black lines chiselled on a white background, while also recalling the presence of the sea mammals and (once)

⁷ The spelling difference calls attention to the story's different generic regimes, "dwarves" takes us back to the quaint diction of the Grimm original whereas "dwarfs" is more suited to a realistic context. Disney, however, did not retain the old-fashioned spelling in their 1937 adaptation of the tale.



abundant fish-stocks that originally drew European fishing boats to the cold waters of the Northwest Atlantic, and the Arctic beyond. In the passage cited above, the Gaelic “cairn” works to the same effect insofar as it is used preferably to the more local *inukshuk*. Both are directional markers, but the stones the Inuit have for so long been stacking up in the shape of a person to offer guidance and reassurance on the tundra, humanize the Arctic landscape in a way a line of cairns cannot quite match. In this sense, *inuksuit*, the plural form of *inukshuk*, are also miniature men whose benevolent presence is remarkably absent from a story in which the figure of the dwarf possesses a far more ambivalent value. If fairy-tale dwarves are associated with the exploitation of a passive nature and the development of a capitalistic economy of extraction,⁸ this power relation is reversed in the northern narrative whenever the Arctic actively dwarfs southern attempts, no matter how unobtrusive, to master its geography, viz. the domestication of the wild which begins as early as in the incipit with the landscaping gaze embracing “this garden of stone and ice abutting water’s wind-wrenched green map” (Jarman 26).

As the animal emanation of the Arctic, the polar bear embodies the formulaic duality of the North, the seduction of its embrace, but also its recalcitrance against intrusions from the south and the forms of exploitation they prepare for. The bears’ ubiquitous presence (or worse, their absence for, in this case, they must be hiding close) obsesses the characters who see the animals rise ungainly to the window of the men’s shelter to observe their human preys (Jarman 45). In fact, the white bears are the only true giants in “My White Planet,” and their huge silhouettes, as they tower above him, call to the narrator’s mind the ambivalent memory of a love laced with fear, when “the world [was] a snapping laundry line, your mother a giant in blue sky” (Jarman 43). It is remarkable that the vulnerability of infancy, triggered as it is by the prospect of a bear’s smothering embrace, should also be part of the anxieties the fairy tale traditionally alleviates, every time a happy ending brings the reassurance that even the weakest or the most humble can prevail in the face of inordinate hardship, provided one is courageous or astute enough.

The reassuring potential of fairy tales has probably received as much scholarly attention as its flip side, the shaping of gender and social attitudes inherent to them (Bacchilega, Introduction 7). In the present case, however, the tale’s comforting message loses much of its original efficacy, troubled as it is by the interference of the other genres the story draws upon. Because of its affiliation to the northern narrative and its dystopian avatars, “My White Planet” is rendered more place-specific than the fairy tale formula can tolerate every time a vivid detail adds definition to the story’s spatial and temporal coordinates. According to Jolles, it is the

⁸ The dwarves’ occupation became more specific with each rewriting of the Grimms’ transcription. In the first printed version, they are mining “for ore and gold,” an addition to the 1810 manuscript which mentioned a nondescript mine. The diamonds and rubies glittering in the Disney animated movie constitute a further embellishment, with a didactic nugget embedded in the “Heigh-Ho” lyrics for good measure: “It ain’t no trick to get rich quick / If you dig dig dig with a shovel or a pick” (Zipes 65).



non-descript character of the fairy tale that defines it as a “simple form”: its general terms (a forest, a castle, a king, once upon a time, *etc.*) make it all encompassing. When particularities narrow its relevance –as is the case with specific dates and locations or a conspicuously original style– the tale will gain in actuality, but lose in generality and therefore tend towards the sophisticated form of the short story (Jolles 113). As a result of this, Jarman’s Arctic has none of the timeless, everlasting quality found in a ballad by Robert Service or a Lawren Harris landscape. Instead a number of strategic synecdoches (as shown by the use of “Aztec,” “caliper” and “scrimshaw”) intersperse the narrative and point to the Arctic’s first period of settlement, the exploration age and its present-day exploitation. These tropes unobtrusively restore a historical depth to the space against which this tale of survival can be measured as in turn formulaic and singular, the object of *déjà-vu*, but also an attempt to destabilize and inflect the *topoi* long associated with the pristineness of the Arctic.

There is perhaps no better indication of the morphing of the fairy tale into a dystopian short story than in the screens and mirroring surfaces that proliferate in “My White Planet.” Although these windows upon the world initially keep the men in touch with what lies beyond their outpost, the same surfaces gradually come to materialize their vulnerability: “I remember the naked white body rolling in icy seawater, the window into the self-righting oil-rig lifeboat, that window like a TV and we stared in like the bears stare in at us. Outside the window it’s death” (Jarman 42). The fairy-tale’s perspective on the future is obstructed here, for the window in “My White Planet” does not frame a birth to come but reflects fantasies of consumption and destruction. Put differently, Snow White’s lifeboat is already a glass casket. Meanwhile, down South, the Evil Queen’s magic mirror has become mute, leaving the team to their own devices: “Nothing over satellite anymore, food stopped in our mouth as the satellite feed stopped: no death star, no blues channel, no idea what’s out there still”, we read. “May 1 brought brief pictures of Ho Chi Minh, stigmata, a Warhol banana, an AK-47. What is happening out there past the clouds of mosquitoes?” (Jarman 31).

Jarman writes of a connected Arctic awash with information. The polyptoton food/feed is a clear indication of the role played by the image diet that sustains McLuhan’s global village all the way to the North Pole. But when the team stops receiving messages after the mysterious incident reported on 6/11, it is as if “the authority in the mirror” (Bacchilega, “Cracking” 3) had lost its power. The stream of messages thins to a trickle then stops. Computer screens go blank, the flow of emails also dries out, and the VCR breaks down: “Our cranky VCR works for a while, we’re happy again, then *nothing* again. Snow so industrious on the screen” (Jarman 34, original emphasis). The last sentence foregrounds the porosity between landscape and infoscape, when the latter has surreptitiously come to replace the former in a multi-connected electronic universe.

But once their connection with the South stops and their actions are no longer monitored, the men’s labour routines become less constraining and vast stretches of time open they have trouble filling. The team compulsively watch the few TV channels that still operate or the VCR when the latter can be coaxed into



playing old recordings. It is illustrated books, however, that provide the ultimate reservoir of visual stimulation and simulation the narrator craves:

Now in the afternoons I read to her, our orphan, from old British picture books and periodicals.

[...]

These are farmkids chasing a greased pig.

This is a bi-plane.

This is a black bathing suit, a red guitar.

This diamond ring [sic]. (Jarman 29, original emphasis, see also 32, 34, 38)

In the various lists that dot the story, a litany of deictic pronouns bring into existence a cluttered consumer world where consumer goods and energy stand in high demand. Every time the narrator points to a picture, his gesture triggers a dialectical opposition between here and there, close and far, warm and cold, through which the South gains consistency as a noisy, temperate but most of all separate world against the silence and absence that implicitly define the North from a southern perspective: “First a video channel, then a shopping channel. Ads for heroic pickup trucks bashing and splashing through rivers, the mad colours of a lost world. When did I last drive anything with wheels and a heater? Did the world go away or did we? Its whisper-quiet ride, its no money down o.a.c” (Jarman 38-39). What happens, however, when the two worlds collide or, rather, when one intrudes into the other, challenging the distance that guarantees their distinct, yet mutually dependent existence?

3. BREAKING ICE

The arrival of the cruise ship on the Arctic shore is staged in slow motion with a display of the verbal pyrotechnics Glover has analysed as characteristic of Jarman’s style (114). The short story reaches its climax at the exact moment when the spell is broken and Snow White is released from the land of (dis)enchantment to resume her existence as an entertainment princess in Hollywood:

Then she says she sees its smokestack in the bright icebergs. [...]

Bright daytime but I fire the flare and half a day later the confident hull smashing black and **white** Dalmatian ice just for her, smokestack’s lipstick red stripe just for her, ice shot through with zigzags, shadow lines, the ice a **white** kitchen floor suddenly buckling up, a **bright breaking** world roaring below sous chefs grinning at the ship’s rail and **white** shag stateroom where **Brooklyn** tourists **bray** *Hope we see a bear!!* **Buffets**, fresh Italian **bread**, pepper steak, **blueberries**, green eyes and the exact shadow of this ship laid on the ice. (Jarman 40-41, added emphasis in bold, italics in original)

The ship’s arrival causes collisions at several levels: phonic ones with the many alliterations in /b/ that bridge the gap between the tourist crowd and the local predators, the domestic space of the kitchen and the wilderness, hot and cold coming here together into a turmoil of sensations upsetting the structural opposi-



tion between the raw and the cooked with which human societies came into existence, according to Levi-Strauss (1969).

The collision is also a visual and olfactory one between Arctic ice and the splash of colours and fragrant smells that sail into the picture along with the ship, the impact causing, once again, an unexpected contamination. As the ice cracks and dark seawater seeps through, whiteness gets redistributed across the latitudes, and clearly becomes a southern privilege synonymous with the affluence and power concentrated in the temperate zones of the globe. The ship's "white shag stateroom," for instance, is resonant with the erotic fantasies the bear's white fur prompts in the narrator's mind, "squinty black eyes hiding in that expanse of white rug (*and I think of her naked on a fireside rug, bearskin, jealous of Malibu, the old highway*)," which announces the ultimate displacement of the bear's feral aura onto Snow White when she reappears on a screen with Prince Charming by her side: "On TV we see her on Infotainment Tonight. She is shackled up with one of Jack Nicholson's sons. [...] The cameras love our dream girl and Junior winks, their teeth white as bears on ice" (Jarman 45 and 42, original emphasis). Both the television and the icebreaking ship facilitate the circulation of people, information and values across long distances and along smooth channels of communication, proffering objects of desire to the view of audiences across the world, encouraging consumption on a global scale.

It seems no coincidence then that the close-up on the princely couple's glistening teeth should find its counterpart in the red stripe which turns the ship's smokestack into a sexy, open mouth. The detail is important enough to deserve an earlier mention preparing for the arrival of the ship, when the narrator first casually remembers that "[a] big boat with a stripe the red of lipstick used to call once a year" (Jarman 39). The colour cannot fail to evoke Snow White's crimson lips, the promise of a budding sexuality, but also the Evil Queen's smirk and the bright apple with which she tempts her rival. If the smokestack resembles a mouth, a question arises as to what it may in turn exhale or devour, lipstick throwing a seductive gloss over the appetites of the ship and her passengers. A parallel may here be drawn with the opening of Rudy Wiebe's "The Angel of the Tar Sands" (1982) in which "candy-striped chimneys" blow out dark smoke that vanishes instantly in the crisp blue sky of Fort McMurray (188). Nods to "Hansel and Gretel" (1812), another Grimm fairy tale, frame Wiebe's story, cautioning those who would be tempted to see in the Canadian North an immense gingerbread house oozing out oil, "sweet and clear like golden brown honey" (191). As in the above, the red stripe gracing the curvaceous smokestack encircles the invisible presence of a resource which is going up in smoke, yet remains necessary to operate the ship and keep her passengers comfortable in the various guises of food, clothing, heating, lighting, information and entertainment.

Without the power of oil, none of the tourists on the cruise ship could have ventured so far up North to enjoy spectacular views of its icebergs and charismatic fauna, preserved for as long as the cold will last. The arrival of the ship occasions a lavish display of colours, sounds and smells that appeal to the senses while obliterating what makes this extravagance possible. In this sense, the landing perfectly illustrates the productive paradox formulated by Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson



and Imre Szeman in their introduction to *Petrocultures*: “The importance of fossil fuels in defining modernity has stood in inverse relationship to their presence in our cultural and social imaginaries, a fact that comes as a surprise to almost everyone who engages in critical explorations of energy today. ... Fossil fuels have managed to be hidden in plain sight” (5). For scholars concerned with the far-ranging transformations made necessary by the exhaustion of fossil fuels and the energy transition, the challenge resides in “making visible this socially invisible substance” (6). In this respect, stories certainly have a role to play in creating an awareness of oil problematizing what has so far remained a puzzling absence in the fiction written in countries that are the world’s largest energy consumers, a point made by Amitav Ghosh (2002) as early as 1992.

Is our culturally inured indifference to oil the reason why some of the short story elements may easily pass unnoticed, although they play a decisive role in its outcome? The offshore oil-rig disaster that initiates the plot, the prime reason why the woman ended up in an emergency lifeboat, is kept outside the scope of the narrative. Scattered remarks, however, instil the story with a pervading sense of exhaustion, as with the team’s dwindling stock of fuel, or the persistent sound of airplanes flying overhead, “until the fuel drains, flying on fumes, vapours wavering like ghosts inside steel rivets” (Jarman 28 and 33 respectively). But scarcity definitely sets in after Snow White has departed along with the promise of abundance she stands for –the cornucopia of warmth and wealth fuelled by invisible oil, extracted up North but consumed down South:⁹

In the cold hangars and Quonsets we’re down to the last barrels of naphtha, diesel (someone is sniffing it), the last juice crystals while on the cruise ship they eat strawberries from Mexico. I could always fry up some liver I suppose, end it all with poisonous liver, but I like it here, these contorted icefields have become my vast home [...], Adam and Eve now gone from the postwar suburb. (Jarman 43)

When he decides to head for the line station, the narrator turns his back on the hyper-consumption encouraged by the agents of globalization –the ubiquitous strawberries made available by NAFTA clearly feature among them. The hint to the postlapsarian era that began after WWII, points to the limits of an Edenic fantasy premised on a boundless access to the earth’s resources and disseminated worldwide with the development of global networks of communication. With this move, the man follows in the footsteps of the countless romantic heroes who have sought refuge in the Arctic away from the corruptions of their own time, often losing their life in the process, a possible scenario suggested here by the closeness between “vast home” and “last home.” The story, however, opts for a different course, one

⁹ Oil is conveyed south through invisible pipelines, which poses further difficulties: “The representative dilemma of confronting everyday oil’s representative banality is tied to its sheer opacity [...] and confirms the added challenge of depicting multiple extremely productive but relatively unspectacular objects and routes of transmission. As a rule, pipelines are dull” (Macdonald 42).





that contemplates the possibilities for survival in the Arctic after the fairy tale has ended, and Snow White has been shipped back to the land of ravenous consumerism: “I jump on my tiny trampoline, do pushups, fat boiling on burners, eating shorebirds when I can catch them. We are alone up here, we’re watching out for those two polar bears. They want us, they love us so much, and they do anything they want” (Jarman 44). The narrator’s routine combines the rituals of a muscular masculinity with an ascetism inspired of traditional Inuit living, one which, ironically enough, the global reach of petromodernity has all but eradicated.¹⁰

It is hard to fight off the malaise that arises whenever indigenous resourcefulness is called upon to rescue the white men who seek refuge in the wilderness to survive the “advancing decadence, greed and rapacious cruelty of white civilization” (Atwood 44), and thereby earn a certain measure of indigenization for themselves. This element is undoubtedly present in “My White Planet”, but it is undercut by further irony when indigenization faces the prospect of a polar bear’s embrace. The ultimate replacement of flirtatious Snow White by two hungry polar bears¹¹ calls attention to the distinction the team strived to maintain between desire and need –the law of culture and the call of nature– when confronted to their own carnal appetites: “The old rules don’t apply here. [...] We’ve been good. We’ve been stupid. Why can’t we just do what we want?” and, further on, “Would it have been so bad to breathe of her? Would the world have ended?” (Jarman 35, 43). To these radically ethical questions, the short story proposes a revealing answer in the scene where the narrator waves his paramour away, and forsakes all hopes of claiming the white planet all for himself: “No one will ever know me the way she could have –I’m a prince and a janitor both. We killed Rassy because of her” (Jarman 41). The revelation of the collective murder perpetrated by the team reinstates the limits a human community will oppose to its members’ boundless desires to create a space where the individual stands protected from the competing desires of others. The narrator and central character of “My White Planet” emerges in extremis as ethically responsible when he renounces his princely claim to his “charcoal-eyed dream girl” (Jarman 27), her kingdom and its riches, to embrace the position of janitor, caretaker and keeper of the passageway.

The English “janitor” stems from the Latin word for door, *ianua*, from *ianus*, arched passageway, which is also the name of Janus, the guardian god of portals, doors and gates, the patron of beginnings and endings often represented as having two faces, alternatively showing a sunrise or a sunset (*OED* n.p.). In ancient Rome, Janus’s temple was open in times of war only, when the empire was facing uncer-

¹⁰ “Petromodernity refers to a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum” (LeMenager 60).

¹¹ I am aware, even as I am writing this, that polar bears are indeed starving to death in the Canadian North, a consequence of global warming that could hardly have been anticipated a decade ago, although efforts to document the disintegration of Arctic and Antarctic ice shelves date back to the mid 1990s. See National Snow and Ice Data Center. *State of the Cryosphere*. <https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/sotc/iceshelves.html>.

tain prospects. Jarman is also writing of a dangerous liminal moment when the white man's planet has seemingly shrunk down to the proportions of a tiny trampoline, gravity pulling the man back to its small spherical surface every time he tries to rise higher. "Exactly how little you need –I'm still waiting to find that out," the man finally admits (Jarman 43). The short story postpones the answer indefinitely. But the didactic rhetoric of the fairy tale, as it casts an ironic light on the remains of Canada's northern narrative, balances its more dystopian accents with a sense that the world can indeed be re-enchanted, should one take a stand against the destructive consequences of ravenous models of consumption upon its most fragile environments.

The interlocking of land and ice that went on blocking access to the Pacific even after Knud Rasmussen first crossed the Northwest Passage has by now ceased to be the obstruction against which the West so long exerted the conjoined powers of science and the imagination. Although the position of Canada's Arctic lands arguably remains the same on a world atlas, their positioning has shifted in geostrategic, environmental as well as symbolical terms. The opening of the Northwest Passage and the attention this event focussed on the effects of "global heating," as geographer Kathryn Yusoff provokingly puts it in the epigraph, have made it impossible for Canada to continue imagining its most northern reaches as inaccessible, their remoteness and extreme climate insulating them from southern excesses. Cultivating views of the Arctic as a sanctuary, a reservoir of clean air and dazzling ice swathed in eternal silence, its self-regenerating pristineness immune to all forms of degradation, has become both untenable and problematic in the sense that they obfuscate environmental challenges of planetary scope. These transformations encourage us to reconsider the strategic place of Canada in the context of globalization where expressions of national positioning, far from being obsolete, call for an urgent redefinition so active care for the environment may replace century-old patterns of triumphant exploitation.

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'ANOTHER WAY OF NAMING ELSEWHERE': TRANSNATIONAL AND HEMISPHERIC STORIES BY SOME CANADIAN AND ARGENTINIAN AUTHORS

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ABSTRACT

Transnational and gothic discourses have for some time been paired in critical invocations of the unhomely or spectral legacies of imperialism and globalization. This legacy, which appears in the form of unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from diasporic migration is readily figured as an *ostranenie* which haunts the characters of some Argentinian and Canadian storytelling from within and without. The writers of these stories are first or second generation migrants who developed their writing career in the host country. This essay tries to analyse these transnational stories which we will call hemispheric and which bear some resemblance in Canadian and Argentinian writing, for different political and traumatic reasons, in their cinematic deployment of the *homeSpace* horror, childhood memories and physical and psychological boundaries which chain us to our ancestors' memories.

KEYWORDS: identity, displacement, memory, hemispheric stories, transnationalism, Canada, Argentina.

'OTRA FORMA DE DENOMINAR A CUALQUIER PARTE': HISTORIAS TRANSNACIONALES
Y HEMISFÉRICAS DE AUTORES CANADIENSES Y ARGENTINOS

RESUMEN

Los discursos transnacionales y góticos han ido de la mano en los últimos estudios críticos sobre el transterrado o el legado espectral del imperialismo y la globalización. Este legado, que aparece en los rastros perdidos de la memoria y las historias interrumpidas que resultan del viaje migratorio, se muestra en la literatura canadiense y argentina con extrañamiento y defamiliarización. Estos escritores desplazados desarrollaron sus carreras en el país de acogida y escriben historias transnacionales que llamaremos hemisféricas y que muestran cierto paralelismo en estos dos países por diferentes razones políticas y traumáticas a través de un desarrollo cinematográfico del horror en el espacio doméstico, los recuerdos de la niñez, y las fronteras físicas y psicológicas que nos impiden liberarnos de la memoria de nuestros padres y abuelos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: identidad, desplazamiento, memoria, relatos hemisféricos, transnacionalidad, Canadá, Argentina.



During the last decade of the twentieth century, many notable changes took place in both Canadian and Argentinian literatures. This was a period of opening from what had been an emphasis on writers of the so-called canon to what used to be the Other, that is, the migrant who left the political turmoil in Argentina, like Clara Obligado, Sylvia Molloy, or Rodrigo Fresán, and the immigrant to Canada from countries other than the British Isles or Ireland. This change began in the 1980s, and certainly in the 1990s such writers began to achieve the recognition long due to them, not only with the general public in terms of book sales, but also by winning major literary awards.¹ By the end of the 1990s the idea of texts being set in other countries had become something of a norm. These writers would not have been what they are today without having migrated. The migrant narrative had arrived and became a major force in both literatures.

Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Rohinton Mistry, Madeleine Thien, Hiromi Goto, Shani Mootoo, David Chariandy and Kim Thúy were generally residents in the new countries and they could no longer be grouped together as having one discourse; the voices were as varied as the styles they employed. This essay will try to analyse some transnational characteristics that define these writings which we will call *hemispheric*, drawing on Siemerling and Phillips Casteel's groundbreaking collection *Canada and Its Americas: Transnational Navigations* (2010). In the last few decades, Canadian literature has been catapulted onto the global stage, gaining international readership and recognition. *Canada and Its Americas* challenges the convention that the study of this literature should be limited to its place within national borders, arguing that these works should be examined from their perspective of their place and influence within the Americas as a whole. This concept expands the horizons of American literatures, and suggests alternative approaches to models centred on the United States, and analyzes the risks and benefits of hemispheric approaches to Canada. Revealing the connections among a broad range of Canadian, Latin American, Caribbean and diasporic literatures, we believe such writing can be successfully integrated into an emerging area of literary enquiry. Globality thus reveals exciting new ways for thinking about transnationalism, regionalism, border cultures, and the literatures they produce. We will try to see the hemispheric connec-

¹ Some of the most important literary awards have gone to Michael Ondaatje, Booker Prize and Governor General's Award (1992; 2000), Giller Prize (2000); Shyam Selvadurai, Books in Canada First Novel Award, Lambda Literary Award (1994); or Hiromi Goto, Commonwealth Writers Prize (1994). Shani Mootoo was shortlisted for the Giller Prize (1997; 2004), whereas Rohinton Mistry won the Governor General's Award (1991), and Giller Prize (1995). Madeleine Thien, in turn, won the Governor General's Award and Giller Prize (2016), Kim Thúy, the Governor General's Award (2010), and David Chariandy was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award 2007, Commonwealth Writers' Prize (2008), City of Toronto Book Award (2008). Valeria Correa-Fiz won the Claudio Rodríguez Prize (2016); Ariana Harwicz, longlisted, Man Booker International (2018); Marcelo Luján, Santa Cruz de Tenerife (2016), Dashiell Hammett (2016); Andrés Neuman, Alfaguara (2009), shortlisted, IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (2014) and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2013); Samanta Schweblin, Tigre Juan (2015), Ribera del Duero (2015), and shortlisted Man Booker International (2017); Clara Obligado, Lumen (1996), Setenil (2012), and Juan March (2015).



tions to some Argentinian writers who left their native land for political or familiar reasons, such as Sylvia Molloy, Clara Obligado, Andrés Neuman, Samanta Schwablin, Valeria Correa-Fiz, Florencia del Campo, Ariana Harwicz or Marcelo Luján.

Aspects of globality, ambivalence, liminality, mimicry, boundary dissolution and epistemological destabilization characterize the negotiations that occur in Canadian and Argentinian locations, which seem to invite gothic figuration, not only in terms of the monstrous or grotesque, but also in terms of subjective and national interiority and unsettlement (Sugars and Turcotte, Introduction viii). In many of these works there is an aura of unresolved and unbroachable guilt as though the traumas of the past have not been thoroughly assimilated. The uncanny, which is linked to the paradox of home and unhomeliness, is one of these gothic manifestations. These tropes may be used to convey the ways in which Canadian and Argentinian national projects are inherently haunted, as a mediation of forgotten histories or to initiate forms of cultural mourning.² Paul Gilroy's conceptualizing of the black Atlantic has been particularly useful to relate to the work of Latin American theorists to produce a global and hemispheric approach to the literatures and cultures of the Americas. There is a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, a black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something globally unremarked before. This mode of storytelling is preoccupied with the fringes, the unspoken, the peripheral, and the cast aside. It is populated with monsters and outcasts, villains and victims, specters and the living dead. It enacts and thematizes ambivalence, offering a possibility of mediations into real-world politics, since it "exposes the Gothic reality of modern identity, and by failing to represent an adequate solution it forces its readers to address them in real life, thus (ideally) using literature to encourage social change" (Sugars and Turcotte xv). This is especially clear in examples of ecofeminism and the uncanny, which materialize and familiarize haunting and trauma by merging the real world with the otherworldly. We will see how there is a Canadian and Argentinian articulation of a transnational revisioning of their traumatic histories, to embrace their national meta-narratives, to articulate globality and to *write back* to nationalist paradigms in order to challenge dominant literary, political, and social narratives. Since the 1990s, the discourses of multiculturalism, border studies, diaspora studies, and cosmopolitanism have been invoked in various ways to help underwrite a transnational approach to literary studies (see Jay). Over the last twenty years, gender has become a crucial object of analysis in the study of globalization. Every culture is shaped by other cultures, and agency has more to do with the intelligent and imaginative negotiation of the cross-cultural, on the one hand, and variously enabled and circumscribed by gen-

² In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida talks about a notion of *hauntology* that may replace ontology in that it defines a process of return of suppressed knowledge (hence the tropes of spectres/ghosts) that constantly suspends ontological certainties (10). Hauntology is tied to memory and historicity, on one end, and to a notion of future justice, on the other, for the project involves the recognition of a politics of memory that can effect social and historical transformation (Darias-Beautell 402).



der, on the other. We do want to advocate other approaches based on a global and hemispheric reframing of the origins, production, and concerns to look closely at how the production has increasingly become transnational, and how it has become engaged with a set of issues related to globalization (Jay xi). Border studies in the Americas can thus provide a model for how to remap the geographical spaces of literary and cultural studies. Paul Jay links Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) to the transnational turn in English in order to underscore how it deals with a range of issues about mobility and displacement and thus shift the reader between multiple locations, engaging a new model of migration characterized by that back-and-forth moving of people across borders, as Vassanji's or Mistry's, at once insisting on the importance of location and deterritorializing the aspects in which their characters operate (Jay xi). Colonialism and dictatorship in the Americas are linked to masculinity and storytelling, a counterdiscourse that these Argentinian and Canadian authors' narratives use to undo that power through critical and fictional texts that complicate simple national narratives and narrow myths about purity and belonging.

There is a shift of emphasis in contemporary diasporic writing, for many new texts are set in the native land and feature reversed migration back to a home place by a Westernized protagonist who does not so much want to return home as to write back home. This is the case not only of a first generation of diasporic writers such as Ondaatje, Mistry, Obligado or Molloy, but also of those who have published in the 2000s, such as Goto, Mootoo, Thien, Chariandy, Thúy, Neuman, Schwebelin, Correa-Fiz, del Campo, Harwicz or Luján. They provide powerful counter-discursive accounts of the Canadian and Argentinian metanarrative which will probably reassess the nations's remembered past through gothic accounts of memory loss, trauma, and testimony, as in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1998), Kim Thuy's *Mãn* (2013), Madeleine Thien's *Simple Recipes* (2001), David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* (2007), Schwebelin's *Siete casas vacías* (2015), *Fever Dream* (2014), or Marcelo Luján's *Subsuelo* (2016). We have turned our attention to fluid collectivities that attend to variously "glocal" locations (Sugars and Ty 10), particularly in the context of transnational displacement, violence and amnesia. These authors demonstrate that the divide between remembering and identity is not so easily established, as they consider, for example, the theme of memory loss and Alzheimer's disease a way of exploring a larger societal and cultural concern with the uncertain boundaries between memory, history, and selfhood.

Canadian diasporic writing is anew within the context of a new inter-American transborder integration, which has substantially changed the field of identity politics, the very concept of ethnicity and the need for its redefinition, as well as the various cultural/literary practices of a collective and individual dynamic identity construction (Zorc-Maver and Maver 119). This imagined *frontera* has enabled many writers such as Clara Obligado in her stories *El libro de los viajes equivocados* (2011) or *Salsa* (2002), to see their own culture from the point of view of heterogeneity and messiness, subalternity and hybridity, in order to focus on the conceptual possibilities related to borders, border-crossings, and borderlands, frequently not even a geographical but an imaginary space of contact. It is really the border



within ourselves that must be crossed and embraced, for maps are metaphors and not the territory.

The subsequent reterritorialization of hemispheric Americans seems to depict, however, people lost between countries and languages, in their complex citizenship caught between the desire to run away and to belong: “En aquellos años uno se marchaba sin la esperanza de volver. La única promesa era no olvidar” (Thúy 47). These migrant writers share culture, memory and repertoire of linguistic signs, and incorporate a hemispheric awareness into their poetics. This contextual broadening is always enriching in the treatment of the *homeSpace* which functions as both a site of identity construction and performance, and a site of disruption, resistance, and alienation (Brydon 6). This hemispheric turn taking place in the 1990s has tended to pay attention to minority and marginalized discourses, so American literatures and cultures become plural and multilingual. The writers we focus on may contribute to the possibilities of rethinking a hemispheric approach to the Americas. The border with the U.S. making the point that national boundaries are a consequence of settlement and not primordial facts of thinking and belonging (Siemerling and Phillips Casteel 16).

This diasporic experience can be public or private, where the writer plays a conscious role of mythmaker and folk historian who preserves the collective tradition. In Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1982) the writer returns to Sri Lanka and encounters his past, evoked either in specific historical events, as in Neuman’s *Una Vez Argentina* (2014) or Piglia’s *Los Diarios de Emilio Renzi* (2015b), or in evocative scenery and imagery, as in Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1992), Charandy’s *Soucouyant* (2007), or Obligado’s *Los viajes equivocados* (2011). These writers loosely hang together but as segments of an unfinished jigsaw puzzle: not quite fitting but belonging together as they complement each other in time and space, and together they span the literary record of a collective experience (Vassanji 63). These remains of the past are also frequently assembled by the imagination to form a new, and kaleidoscopic design which, as Homi Bhabha states, “does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (*Location* 7). The negotiation of place and the attempt to re-create a home through a fragmented memory is uncertain, “la identidad personal se basa en la memoria [...] no hay memoria propia ni recuerdo verdadero, todo pasado es incierto y es impersonal” (Piglia *Formas breves* 50-51).³ For these writers the intersection of language and place creates, therefore, an “unfixed self” (Mishra 154), where the landscape against which the ‘I’ can authentically figure is at stake (Warley 22). Some of the themes in texts such as Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* (1994), or Neuman’s *Fractura* (2018) arise from the cultural shock

³ See the Introduction to *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi. Los años felices*. Piglia here develops this idea of a non-existing narrator, all depends on the reader’s belief in what he or she is reading, is it true or false, real or imaginary? Is the contemporary writer a spy, a chronicler or a witness?



of return to a place and language almost forgotten, to construct meaning for the survivors of catastrophe, “those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self” (*Anil’s Ghost* 55, 56). These are novels of terrorism, as they create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror, ask the reader to engage in an act of reconstruction, and piece together stories and psychologies. In *Running in the Family*, *Soucouyant* and *Una vez Argentina* several moments come into being when the impression of an objective world encounters the expression of the internal world of the narrator. Both *Anil’s Ghost* and *Fractura* provide an examination of identity reflective of the cultural clashes that are an inevitable consequence of such an interweaving of nationalities, histories and border divisions. Both explore the notion of nationality as a construct and examine the role played by syncretism and hybridity incorporating and transgressing boundaries in a way that invites interrogation from a transnational perspective. The political struggles mirror their personal ones as “[o]ne can die from private woes as easily as from public ones” (*Anil’s Ghost* 202).

Hemispheric storytelling uses its own resources to turn displacement and *ostranenie* into an ordinary family tragedy as in *Fever Dream*, *Subsuelo* or *Simple Recipes*, developing an aesthetics of the everyday that is based on the limited, confused viewpoint of an ordinary narrator-protagonist, as in *Màn*, *Viajes equivocados* or *en breve cárcel* (1981). Sometimes everyday objects reflect a far-away reality, as in *Siete casas vacías* or *La condición animal* (2016), even with the narrator’s search for an adequate metaphor to encompass the complexity of his or her personal life in a global context, as in *Running in the Family*, *Soucouyant*, *Funny Boy*, *Una vez Argentina* or *Fractura*. Another approach is ecocriticism, an interpretive framework whose focus on geography and ecology also serves to problematize geopolitical boundaries in *Precoz* (2016), *Fever Dream* and *Fractura*. The result is experimental beauty, as in Neuman’s words:

Me es hermoso el desgarro porque une las orillas,
 nos concentra
 en desdoblarnos siempre para poder ser uno.
 [...] Necesario el desgarro,
 porque renuncia a hundirse
 pero ama los pozos
 y nos tiende sus manos como dos hemisferios.
 Con el pulso ambidiestro
 navego celebrando los puntos cardinales
 que mudarán mi origen,
 y sucede el naufragio porque debe
 y la vida es el barco
 y yo soy el ahogado y el mismo que me salva. (“Las Orillas” 73)

These literary attempts at national remembering are important national cultural interventions: “Personajes imaginando lo que recuerdan, recordando lo que imaginan. ¿Es verdad? ¿Es mentira? No son esas las preguntas” (*Una vez Argentina* 23). The question, and answer, lies, for Drucaroff, deeply rooted in a number of



“thematic stains” (488) when dealing with displacement, the disappeared, the “filicide imaginary,” or the false memory in their endless search for footprints that unveil their recent past traumas. Argentina, like Canada, is a country in which a certain portion of its cultural production is exile in nature. Many significant works of Argentine literature have been written in exile and published originally in exile, where they have shown the degradation of culture and society caused by the grim facts of political life in Argentina under military authoritarianism. Short stories by Obligado, Fresán or Neuman, have all helped to disrupt the silence that had previously prevented an international awareness and a public denunciation of such a tragic period of Argentine history. They are linked together by commonly denouncing the silence by alluding to nameless characters who must sift fantasy from reality. These wandering figures searching for their identity represent the nature and extent of human suffering in a world that denies them their very humanity (Lubarsky 41-42).

What Drucaroff terms “New Argentinian Narrative” (95) analyses the renaming of the silenced trauma of the last military dictatorship which was banished in the new generation of writers born in the 60s and 70s. Elsa Drucaroff names them “prisoners” to define their position against their previous generations, which has made them escape from a secluded and constrained social discourse to become something new, “una narrativa verdaderamente nueva y, en muchos casos, valiosa, además de un movimiento dinámico y crítico de la sociedad argentina” (185). The last thirty years of Argentinian writing renames memory, and finds, either thematically or formally, beauty in the naming from elsewhere, that is, it hides its political and traumatic scars being elusive, elliptical, amphibian, but with an intense historical and social consciousness as Neuman affirms (“Narrativa” 3). Their writing has its own way of looking at the world, of renaming the Argentinian past significantly and with new eyes. They are political and diverse but coincide in the metaphorical transposition of a historical trauma, “es interesante subrayar la simbólica mención –y aceptación de la existencia– de un trauma político, tanto en su vertiente colectiva o nacional como en el aspecto personal o familiar,” Neuman says (“Narrativa” 4).

In 1976 Clara Obligado arrives in Spain with a devastated and dialogic voice which needs to settle down in a *homeSpace*, or third space, and which can only be deployed in stories of globality and in-betweenness. To be a foreigner, she states, is “por un lado, una realidad dura y, por otro lado, el símbolo de una manera de estar en el mundo que es muy propia de nuestro tiempo: provisional, azarosa, descentrada” (Agraso 63). Language, Spanish language, falls us apart, you are not born an exile or a foreigner, but it sticks to your skin like a wound. *El libro de los viajes equivocados* is a series of intertwined stories without an explicit temporal or spatial nexus but which connect to each other and constitute a complex generic and metafictional research that comprises the history of humankind where numerous issues are confronted: executions in the dictatorship, the conflict with the mother, an aristocratic childhood or the gender troubles. Obligado lies somewhere between Piglia or Fogwill and Caparrós or Pauls. Her tone and amphibian approach, in fact her condition of displaced migrant, is closer to Neuman than to the writers of her own generation who seemed to possess absolute certainties within the homeland. However, “las generaciones nuevas se manejan en la duda, que nada tiene que ver



con la desinformación, la resignación o el desinterés, y que permite una profundidad reflexiva particular” (Drucaroff 158). As Ana María Shua summarized it, “una de las formas que adopta la memoria (del pasado reciente) es un género que, aunque reconoce raíces en nuestra tradición, trae también una novedad muy importante: es la narrativa del horror” (qtd. in Drucaroff 296). When Obligado published *Salsa*, one of the first texts which fictionalized the migratory experience in Spanish literature, nobody from the academia was ready for its hemispheric excentricity so common in twentieth-century North American literary experience.

Obligado’s stories show uncomfortable truths deployed from a liminal space where identity is always questioned, displacing the monolithic and central discourse of broken images and indeterminate fragments to be reordered in *La muerte juega a los dados* (2015), with its multiple viewpoints that the reader has to relocate in a self-fictional *multiverse*, or *Petrarca para viajeros* (2015), where the central figure is the passage, to sail adrift while living at random, a historical introspection into this century’s calamities where death and prosecution get on trains which have lost all innocence or romanticism. The diasporic feeling of writers like Obligado is that of alienation, invisibility, even paralysis, which is reflected in agonic closed spaces, a continuous journeying in search for a final place, fighting against demographic indeterminacy, and finally, illness and death.

In *Salsa*, Obligado shows the difficulties of linguistic exile through the squizofrenic impulse to use different versions of the same language: “traduciendo siempre. Perdóname (perdoname) estoy hecha polvo (reventada), además tengo el grifo abierto (la canilla) y te oigo fatal (como la mona),” we read. “Agotador, coño (mierda), tenía que serenarse (tranquilizarse) ya (de una buena vez) [...]. Vivía en dos planos, en dos idiomas [...]. Todo nos une, pensó Viviana, menos el idioma (25-26). In *Bariloche* (1999), *Una vez Argentina* (2014) or *Fractura* (2018) Neuman also challenges his own bilingual self in the characters who speak different dialects of Spanish. Elena in *Talking to Ourselves* (2014) reflects with sarcasm on the different ways of saying and behaving in sexual intercourse:

In order not to feel inferior in the face of Ezequiel’s scientific knowledge, I made a list for him of the different verbs in Spanish that describe an orgasm. In Cuba, for example, they say *venirse-to draw near*. I like that verb because it suggests moving towards someone. It is a verb for two. And essentially unisex. In Spain they say *correrse-to run*. Which implies almost the opposite. Taking off at the end, moving away from the other. It is a verb for men. In Argentina they say *acabar-to end*. It sounds like an order. Like a military exercise. A Peruvian woman friend calls it *llegar-to arrive*. Put like that, it sounds almost like utopia (and it often is). As though you were far away or needed more time. Her husband says *darla-to give it*. Curious. That sounds like an offering. Or, being pessimistic, like a favor done to you: here, take this. In which case it doesn’t surprise me that my friend never arrives. In Guatemala they say *irse-to go*. A clear statement of abandonment. They need only add: after you’ve paid. In other countries they say *terminar-to finish*. Frustrating. It sounds like someone barges in and interrupts you halfway through. Here, though, perhaps we are frontier people, we say *cruzar-to cross over*.



Are there places where they name women's orgasms? Where they say *I'm drowning, I'm dissolving, I'm unravelling, I'm irradiating?* (56)

HomeSpace and journeying are central themes, not always simply recalled or experienced in positive ways, which is especially relevant considering the childhood traumas of sexual harassment which take place within the home, as in the case of Lyuba in *Los viajes equivocados*, or Thien's Paula, whose "father was standing beside our bed. He was touching her hair" ("Alchemy" 75), or Anil's brother who, as Eva's brother (*Subsuelo* 121, 233), demanded sexual favours (*Anil's Ghost* 68). This liminality and intermediateness, represented by the questioning of what is real and what is unreal, is ultimately strengthened by the use of global space, as in the claustrophobic basement of del Campo's *La Huésped* (2016), the country house in Luján's *Subsuelo*, Correa-Fiz's "Una casa en las afueras," in *La condición animal*, in the journeying in Thien's "Dispatch" (2016) or Neuman's *Talking to Ourselves*. Ideas about staying, leaving and journeying, or depictions of the road trip and liminal spatiality are integrally associated with notions of home or its visible absence.

Short stories have two tales within, the explicit plot, and the secret, elliptical and fragmentary tale, "de pronto aparece un desvío, un cambio de ritmo, algo externo; algo que está en el cuarto de al lado," says Piglia (*Formas breves* 127). This mysterious next room reveals an otherworldly landscape, an unresolved conflict with our liminal neighbour, the unknown immigrant next door who may reveal something unknown or uncomfortable. Narrating is an act of revealing, of foreseeing the unexpected within the familiar, the guilt of the disappeared: "todo lo que ya sucedió y todo lo que sucederá en el cercano y espantoso futuro inmediato: todo; incluso la mudez absoluta y definitiva de una madre ante lo imposible, ante lo que nadie nunca quiere que suceda," an omniscient narrator affirms in *Subsuelo* (236). The repetitive statement "A nadie le importa dónde aparecen los muertos" (223) in the novel recalls the dead of *Anil's Ghost* by Ondaatje and *Fractura* by Neuman, a collective memory of the disappeared which expands in concentric circles where the detection story, as Renzi in Piglia's *Diaries*, tries to unveil a wounded memory:

Se ha bunkerizado dentro de sí mismo [...]. Su claustrofobia es vertical [...] el margen donde flotan sus ideas y recuerdos [...]. En su condición de maniático, sabe que cada espacio posee un equilibrio secreto y cualquier desajuste puede perturbarlo [...]. Watanabe avanza como un detective que investiga el crimen cometido en su propia habitación [...]. Todas las cosas rotas tienen algo en común. Una grieta las une a su pasado. (*Fractura* 23-25)

Mental or physical disease in the *homeSpace* can be seen as a resource to question self-consciousness of our no-place in the world, a physical and psychological dislocation which, in the case of Correa-Fiz, Schweblin, del Campo or Neuman, have admittedly literary influences in Kafka, Flannery O'Connor, Sylvia Plath or Virginia Woolf. In Neuman's *Talking to Ourselves* Elena comes back to her *no-place* as a wounded carer.



When I don't look after anyone, no one looks after me [...]. When I open the front door and hang my bag on the coat stand, I realise how big this house is going to be. I walk through its emptiness [...]. I, too, am missing here [...]. I am the only visitor and also an intruder.

There is no one here. No one in me. The person who cries, eats, has a nap, goes to the bathroom, is someone else. (85-86)

As our subjectivity is tied to otherness, self fiction and autobiography are key components in these narratives as in del Campo's nameless protagonist who cries "¿[e]s la existencia del otro lo que sostiene la propia?, ¿cuál es la terrible enfermedad que nos acecha y hace posible que normalicemos lo que interna e individualmente no resulta natural?" (*La huésped* 80). The use of the first person is born in confusion and ambiguity, in painful memories, in private territory. As Judith Butler asserts in *Undoing Gender*, "[d]espite all our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal for a 'we,' for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all" (20). Charriandy, Neuman and del Campo show us how identity is thus involved in corporeal changes, and sickness gives way to the questioning of our subjectivity to our no-place in the world, our permanent guilt at trying to live our own lives despite responsibility and family ties:

By caring for our sick person, we are protecting their present. A present in the name of a past. What am I protecting of myself? This is where the future comes in (or hurls itself out of the window). For Mario it is unconceivable. He can't even speculate about it. The future: not its prediction but the simple possibility of it. In other words, its true liberty. That is what the illness kills off before killing off the sick. (*Talking to Ourselves* 83)

Mental and physical disease can be menacing but triggers our thoughts towards identity processes and depict other ways of naming the narrative experience to design an effective body order, to analyse different forms of self figuration so as to educe the textual strategies, generic attributions and perceptions of the self that inform autobiographical texts: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?" Butler wonders (*Precarious* 20). Neuman and del Campo add the fact of the pain and guilt of being a woman-carer who suffers the pain, who is demanded to stay with the sickening family, the inability of going on with her own sexual life, of escaping the chains of being female, wife or daughter. Showing the hospital documents within the fictional experiment, as with the family photographs in *Running in the Family*, parodies objectivity and reliability in *madre mía* (2017) by Florencia del Campo, who wonders whether the bed-ridden sick mother is a manipulating monster: "[l]a familia puede ser a la persona lo que un tumor al cuerpo" (171).

In Luján's *Subsuelo* the family is the core of evil, characters are made of loss and secrets, silences and lies. At the background is the country house, invaded by ants, where "[n]adie sabrá nunca cómo llegaron aquellas hormigas hasta allí," we read,



“cómo y porqué se había producido esa suerte de suicidio colectivo” (127). Indeed, the metaphoric oracle of a tragic end. Or in Correa-Fiz’s amphibians, “*nos enfrentamos a una plaga de anuros genéticamente modificados* [...] La violencia se intuía por el silencio y la exasperante lentitud de las cosas” (“Criaturas” 145-146; emphasis original) which will announce the stillborn baby, “no estamos nunca preparados para que el dolor nos manosee” (“Criaturas” 159). This return to family, to parentless childhood, to childless selves, is a return to the past in multifarious forms also evident in *Running in the Family*, *Soucouyant*, *Una vez Argentina*, *La muerte juega a los dados*, or *en breve cárcel*; to toxic traumas as in *Fractura*, *Fever Dream* or *La condición animal*, to sexual encounters which come to the fore in *Funny Boy* or *Precoz*. Deadly sickness is no less prevalent in *Soucouyant*, *Talking to Ourselves* or *madre mía*, as articulated in the present enunciation, where mediation takes place, where collective memory pleads to restore our own scars through the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*, as Neuman’s *Fractura* shows us: “¿hasta qué punto un daño es reparable? ¿No valdría la pena hacer algo diferente? ¿Por qué disimular los desperfectos en sus banjos y no integrarlos en su restauración? Todas las cosas rotas, piensa, tienen algo en común. Una grieta las une a su pasado” (24-25).

Posthumanism, as the de-centering of the human, nurtured by scientific developments can be related to the persistence of social and political practices that assume or seek to re-instate the primacy of the individual even and especially in the face of death and dispossession. Sometimes those assumptions are part of a challenge to the power of governments and of warmongering and other corporate interests, which *Anil’s Ghost*, *Fractura*, *Fever Dream* or *La condición animal* posit, and the very individuation through which they operate compounds the injustice that is being done, as seems the case in *Salsa*, *Soucouyant* or *Funny Boy*. In the last thirty years of Canadian and Argentinian hemispheric storytelling there has been a dialogue with insights drawn from a broad range of feminist, intercultural, globalized and post-colonial writing produced, a transversal discursive exchange which provides new insights towards the growing contestation of its humanist claims, “as a consequence of the re-centering of the world away from other Europe-centred paradigms” (Braidotti and Gilroy 3).

Likewise, there is a continuous rendering of the racialized and gendered body in terms of what contemporary theorists refer to as “posthuman embodiment” as underlined by Braidotti (“Contested”). How do conflicting notions of humanity and of what counts as human relate to the numerous instances of exile, dispossession, and eviction that have taken place during the last century? How do they affect our understanding of belonging to real and imagined homelands? (Braidotti and Gilroy 4). To what extent these hemispheric works open up new possibilities for a global recomposition of Humanity on fundamentally new grounds: a posthumanist cosmo-politics? Neuman’s *Fractura* does with its globalized characters who move between Tokyo, Paris, New York, Buenos Aires and Madrid. The real focus for Braidotti lies in a change of paradigm brought about by the emergence of posthuman discourses. This posthuman turn, since the 1970s, is materialist and non-foundationalist: it marks the convergence of antihumanism with post-anthropocentrism but moves beyond them both in a more complex direction, overcoming



the limitations of both humanism and antihumanism (Braidotti 19). Animal studies and eco-criticism have grown into rich and well-articulated fields providing the new ontological grounds for knowledge production that “include relation to organic and inorganic non-human others, scientific and technological advances, ecological and social sustainability and the multiple challenges of globalization, including poverty and structural injustice” (Braidotti 23). Accordingly, posthuman bodies “are not slaves to master discourse but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context” (García Zarranz 46). Hiromi Goto’s female protagonists address the potential for marginalized subjects to counteract hegemonic structures by finding power through the transgression of multiple boundaries as it is also the case in Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, Harwicz’s *Precoz*, Correa-Fiz *La condición animal* or Schweblin’s *Fever Dream*. In Goto’s *Half World*, as we read,

Melanie turned to the water once more and stared at the distant shore. Industrial cranes, with their bright orange legs and long necks, look like mechanical giraffes. In her peripheral vision she could see the crow hop closer and begin picking at its meal. Melanie’s stomach grumbled. She was hungry [...] almost hungry enough to try the abundant mussels exposed on the rocks, but she knew the water was filthy with chemicals, tanker sludge and heavy metals. (17)

García Zarranz highlights the transcorporeal qualities of the scene portrayed here where the technological, the human, and the animal worlds collide, pointing to the negative, and often toxic, consequences of excessive industrialization on both human and non-human bodies (47). And this is an everyday reality for Goto’s fiction, Schweblin’s, Correa-Fiz’s, Harwicz’s, and many other low-income populations subjected to high levels of toxic material in their work places or the cities they inhabit. These writers are thus “positioning an anti-capitalist critique against current issues such as the negative impact of economic globalization on both environmental degradation and material human bodies and other organisms” (García Zarranz 48). The same reflections can be seen in Schweblin’s *Fever Dream*, Luján’s *Subsuelo*, Harwicz’s *Precoz*, Correa-Fiz’s *La condición animal* or Neuman’s *Fractura*. These protagonists are portrayed as collective selves to the world they live in. García Zarranz calls these bodies “phantom bodies” since, despite their hyper-visible materiality, “[...] their deviance from the norm [...] reduces their agency into merely haunting presences” (49).

Rahul K. Gairola (2017) also analyses the malevolent spirits in Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* as “otherworldly duppies” or spectres of dissent. In a similar vein, the voice and tone, paralleled to Schweblin’s David in *Fever Dream*, destabilize, on the surface, the very notion of a national identity as an organizing principle of citizenship, sexuality and worldliness in their fictions but, like the iceberg, we must plumb into the depths of these texts to flush out the queer and tragic spectres that circulate the narratives through persistent hauntings (Gairola 19). These posthuman bodies are contaminated, deadly, queer bodies. Goto and Mootoo, as



Schweblin, Harwicz, Correa-Fiz or Luján do, pose a critique of how contemporary societies are populated by troubled creatures whose experiences of embodiment and corporeality are depicted in terms of lack, trauma, and fear. The potential for agency between the social norm and the embodied experience is explicit in Judith Butler's work on gender and desire,

The 'I' becomes, to a certain extent, unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this 'I' fully recognizable. There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living. (*Undoing Gender* 4)

Over the last two decades Argentina's rural communities have reported skyrocketing rates of birth abnormalities, miscarriages and cancer. In the same period, genetically modified soy has blanketed the region. This is the landscape in which Samanta Schweblin's unsettling novel *Fever Dream* unfolds. Schweblin writes in a spare and highly impressionistic style that embraces instability: of space, identity and the reader's trust. It is a deeply transnational work, about parental love, rapacious industrial agriculture and historic trauma, whose narrative instability viscerally recreates the insecurities of life in Argentine countryside today and certainly a metonymy of worldwide agricultural crisis. *Queer*, in these stories, is the potentiality to produce a political critique of systems that refuse to allow certain bodies a viable form of existence. Schweblin, as Mootoo, Harwicz and Correa-Fiz, does blur the boundaries between the natural and ethereal worlds in everyday life experiences of nature, thus also interrogating the constructed boundaries between *natural* and *unnatural* social articulations of sexuality. These themes of the supernatural also emerge in *real spaces*, transforming into comfort zones for characters who must take refuge from the ugliness of the material world in del Campo: "Camino y con cada pisada siento que doy un martillazo. Hay que romper todo: todo está lleno de bichos, no es solo azulejos y baño. Es todo. Lleno de bichos y mierda. Esto se ha contaminado" (*La Huésped* 83). These characters live on and across various physical and psychological borders: "nunca entendemos el dolor del otro sino en la parte que se parece al nuestro" says the narrator in Correa-Fiz's "Lo que queda en el aire" (63).

These boundary crossings emphasize not only the multiplicity of identity, but also the decolonizing politics in the hemispheric landscape. The very definition of humanity and globality depends on both the construction and the exclusion of the non-human, the uncivilized, the savage, the animal. Huggan and Tiffin call for a revision of the Humanistic world view and conclude that "a postcolonial environmental ethic, necessitates an investigation of the category of the 'human' itself and the multiple ways in which this anthropocentric construction has been and is, complicit in racism, imperialism and colonialism". According to them, "[t]he key



issue is no social justice without environmental justice; and without social justice – for all ecological beings– no justice at all” (10).

Braidotti, in turn, rightly pleads for affirmative politics grounded on immanent interconnections, a transnational ethics of place. What we need are embedded and embodied, relational and affective cartographies of the new power relations that are emerging from the current geopolitical and post-anthropocentric world order: class, race, gender and sexual orientations, age and able-bodiedness are more than ever significant markers of human ‘normality’ (36), she explains. The sites of multiple identities and histories, visible through travel, through distance from the site of erasure, call attention to the importance of geography, of place and space and the multiple transformations various bodies go through during the process of acquiring identity: “No tener cuerpo es un deseo errado. La piel, la carne cuentan; son como un palimpsesto donde se inscribe nuestra historia,” narrates Aldo in “Nostalgia de la morgue” (106). These global, gothic discourses have “for some time been paired in critical invocations of the *unhomely* or *spectral* legacies of imperialism and globalization”. As Sugars and Turcotte claim, “[t]his legacy, which appears in the form of unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from the experience of colonial oppression, diasporic migration or national consolidation, is readily figured in the form of ghosts or monsters that ‘haunt’ the nation/subject from without and within” (vii).

How do we rename the horror, the violence, the silence. How do we, prisoners of a post-memory, rename the others, “¿quién sino ellos, los poetas disidentes que luchaban por la revolución, eran los fantasmas futuros que se agitaban en el brocal de la puta noche? Les habían tendido trampas, los habían pescado uno a uno y torturado hasta la confesión. La mayoría estaban ya muertos, desaparecidos” (“Leviatán” 139). Neuman’s *Una vez Argentina* provokes an exceptional event in the development of the new Argentinian narrative, inasmuch as it reconstructs the narrator’s historical memory and recovers the certainty that there was a past. In the opinion of Drucaroff, “lo que acá se logra construir con autenticidad es lo que resulta de veras genuino, porque sí se ha transmitido de la vieja a la nueva generación: el terror [...] [l]o siniestro irrumpe y con él, la posibilidad de que nada sea como nos decimos que es, sino como tememos recónditamente” (310). The truths and lies, the secrets and guilt, the injustice of having to rename what has been stolen from us, our family history. Painfully enough, Neuman rewrites and edits *Una vez Argentina* ten years later to add his aunt’s Silvia’s real account before emigrating to Spain,

Durante las sesiones de tormento, Silvia había averiguado cosas de su cuerpo que hubiera preferido no saber. Una de las más inesperadas había sido su capacidad para dañarse a sí misma: no siempre las descargas de la picana le habían causado más dolor que los golpes de su propia cabeza y su propia espalda contra la superficie donde la maniataban. En algún momento esto le había parecido revelador, pero no supo bien de qué [...]. Mientras a mi tía la torturaban, a su esposo lo habían obligado a mirar. Y, una vez tras otra, le habían preguntado cómo demonios era posible que un alemán le hubiese hecho un hijo a una judía. (28-29)



This is the new way of naming our scars, haunted by global space and time, without any territorial prejudice. In *Bariloche*, for instance, a blurred subject allegorizes a common burial in cosmopolitan non-places, the junkspace where the disappeared cry for justice,

La vista se le perdía en un horizonte de fragmentos extrañamente organizados, de millones de cabezas asomadas desde la tierra hacia la fría noche, buscando algo de oxígeno. A Demetrio le costaba entender, Dios santo, cómo podía haber tanta, tanta mierda, mejor dicho, más que moverse como criaturas individuales, los desperdicios lo hacían con tendencia a fusionarse, era tan uniforme todo, el nylon, la mierda, el silencio [...]. La Mierda Única, un mar de ahogados. (166-167)

This new war through renaming has made these authors express a painful narrative construct, in the killing ants in Luján's *Subsuelo*, the soya fields in Schweblin's *Fever Dream*, or Alzheimer disease in *Soucouyant* and *Siete casas vacías*, the breathless and stinky room in Flor del Campo's *La huésped*, in the reconstruction of collective memory through the kintsugi art in Neuman's *Fractura*, in the unable carers in Neuman's *Talking to Ourselves*, Chariandy's *Soucouyant* or del Campo's *madre mía*, in Correa Fiz's statement that nothing is what it seems: "Se asomó al espejo del agua y una arcada le hizo verificar la pesadilla: los peces estaban disputándose un trozo de carne. En el centro del pozo resplandecía un brazo blanco. Vomitó, cayó de espaldas, se fisuró un tobillo. Dijo que creía haber perdido el conocimiento hasta la medianoche" ("Leviatán" 141), similarly, in Harwicz's narrator's words: "Me despierto con la boca abierta como el pato cuando le sacan el hígado para el foie gras. Mi cuerpo está acá, mi cabeza más allá, afuera una cosa golpea como una arcada (*Precoz* 7). *HomeSpace* itself serves as a repository of the past and itself cobwebbed memories even as it is materially, and territorially, anchored in the present: "Adentro el fuego, afuera la nieve, el cuerpo adentro, la mirada afuera" (*La Huésped* 89).

The obscure area these writers are exploring is desperation at all levels, material and sexual, through a new way of naming the inherited past, a post-memory, which generates an aesthetics which moves and scandalizes:

Es preocupante ser patética en un país donde no hablan tu idioma [...]. Estoy sola y enterrada en mi patetismo [...]. No puedo más, me lo repito una y otra vez en la negrura del búnker, en el silencio de la nieve, mientras intento conciliar el sueño con sabor a óxido que me dejó la cena. Todo se está oxidando en este sitio [...]. Ellos habitan en estas manchas; las llevan en la piel como marcas naturales. (*La Huésped* 57, 60)

These writers destabilize the physical world shattering the notion of safe space. Identity is thus destabilized in a profound way: "[s]i quieres sobrevivir deshazte de tu identidad" (Thúy 24). Our space is haunted by uncanny characters, ghostlike figures of our past. We live on land we cannot trust: families are destroyed, motherhood is frustrated, an aura of psychological menace and otherworldly reality surrounds us. As the pace of cultural globalization accelerates, the hemispheric



literary studies have undergone a dramatic and ethical transformation in Canadian and Argentinian narratives. This ethical and transnational turn that we have been witnessing in the last twenty years has come to dominate the contemporary global fiction and reshaped it as what can be considered the New American Narrative.

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AUSTIN CLARKE: 'MEMBERING HOME AND THE BLACK ATLANTIC

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ABSTRACT

In his memoir *Membering* (2015), Clarke employs associative memorial practices as recuperative textual strategies to make himself a(t) home in Toronto and a black Atlantic-cum-Mediterranean geography and history marked by the afterlife of slavery. “Membering” fragmented histories and fusing personal experience with diasporic dispersals, Clarke’s interventionist critical memory imaginatively lays claim to the wealth reaped from diasporic dispossessions, transforming victimization into rightful ownership and a sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS: Austin Clarke, *Membering*, memory, slavery, history, imagination, myth grounded in truth, possession, spirits, home.

AUSTIN CLARKE: REMEMBRANDO EL HOGAR Y EL ATLÁNTICO NEGRO

RESUMEN

En sus memorias *Membering* (2015), Clarke emplea prácticas asociativas de corte memorístico como estrategias textuales recuperativas para construirse un hogar y sentirse como en casa, tanto en Toronto como en una geografía e historia del Atlántico negro y del Mediterráneo marcadas por las consecuencias de la esclavitud. Remembrando historias fragmentadas y fusionando experiencia personal con dispersiones diaspóricas, la memoria intervencionista de Clarke reivindica imaginativamente la riqueza obtenida de las desposiciones diaspóricas, transformando así la victimización en legítima propiedad y sentido de la pertenencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Austin Clarke, *Membering*, memoria, esclavitud, historia, imaginación, mito basado en la verdad, posesión, espíritus, hogar.



When Austin Clarke's memoir *Membering* appeared in 2015, I had occasion again to reflect on a writer whose work I had come back to time and again over the years. It was instructive to follow Clarke's early wrestling with Toronto life, to read the entertaining accounts of his Harlem adventures looking for Baldwin but finding—and interviewing—Malcolm X, and of his involvements in politics; and it was enlightening to read the analyses of his own early novels, including his observations on the (lack of) models in that period, on the meaning of literary ancestors, and on CanLit and the Toronto literary scene at the time.

Among these autobiographical and literary riches, however, a short chapter a little after the halfway mark of the text attracted my particular attention. Entitled "The Green Door House," it begins with a reflection—seeming unconnected or even out of place at first as one peruses the following paragraphs—about the singular power of music to conjure, without warning and with great force, a vast amount of memories and emotions that come to the listener with sudden immediacy. Writes Clarke:

I find myself sometimes, at odd moments, with no preparation for my recollection of song, nor any indication that the words of the verses have still remained in my memory; but when these snatches of memories come to me, like a spasm of history, I recall most of the lyrics, and certainly that part which must have struck me as relevant, or personally touching, when first the 'membering of the tune struck me. (251)

The power of the aural also shines forth in an earlier comment by Clarke in the volume; memorizing jazz pieces like Miles Davis' "Flamenco Sketches" (1959) and Coltrane solos in their entirety used to lighten his winter walks in the absence of an unaffordable Walkman (241). Now, however, he cites the uncontrollable, overpowering, and irruptive force of Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" (1987). Suddenly, "like a spasm of history," other past instances flood Clarke's memory, and moments where her artistry, like that of Ray Charles on another remembered occasion, seemed to vanquish racial animosity, and signaled to him that "once more a black American was showing the light to the vast, overwhelming white America" (252).

After this opening, the associative registers of the narrative shift from sound to sight, and only later in the chapter and the volume will the connection with the opening reveal itself obliquely—although a sense of the compositional intricacies and frequent tonal re-codings of jazz transitions lingers throughout. The shift is heralded by the chapter title's reference to the colour green. Clarke now recounts his attraction to a house "conspicuous for its green-painted door, cut vertical into two halves, so that only half opened to let you enter; and this house has stood out in my attention because of the way the lights settle on it, in a soft sensual sensation. This house," Clarke continues, "pulled me toward it, in a trance-like communication, to face the spirits and the myths of my history" (252). We could note that the door, cut vertically into half, also limits entrance, blocking as much space as it opens, hiding as much as it reveals, while nonetheless letting you enter. But it is the light that works



its strong visual effects on Clarke's 'membering and imaginative capability. It does so especially as the sun strikes the house "at the four o'clock angle of romance and seduction" (253) that foreshadows communion with "the spirits and the myths of my history". Some of the associations evoked by that phrase become clearer as the text progresses, but the modular force of light here lets his mind range widely—like a solo by Trane—over a number of locations and recognizable themes, only to come "home," as we will see, in several surprising turns. The evocative force of light takes Clarke to the primordial role it has in Italian painting; and hence to its revelation, on a palazzo wall in Vicenza, of a Roman numeral that in his mind translates into 1492— "the year Christopher Columbus 'discovered' me in Barbados, and others like me, in the Caribbean" (253).

Columbus, we know, did not call on the author in Barbados, while historians will be quick to point out that he also neither 'discovered' nor discovered Barbados (instead of Pedro a Campos in 1536). The nature of Clarke's first statement will perhaps guide us, however, also not to read the second one literally—and in addition to look in a similar way at the somewhat improvised transposition from Roman to Arabic numerals "according to my memory". I will return to this rather important point, but for now suffice it to say that the modular transition to 1492 and Columbus, together with the connecting motive of the blue waves of the sea, allow Clarke to initiate a chain of associations leading his memories through earlier travels, to Havana, Venice, Paris, and finally Bordeaux. The sequence traverses a black Atlantic-cum-Mediterranean geography, guided by a theme that offers an extended meditation on the link between wealth and the slave trade.

Havana's Malecón, facing "the same water that Christopher Columbus travelled", with its dilapidated grandeur reminds Clarke of the city's former splendor; but it also leads him to wonder about "the profits made from the Atlantic trade that came across the Atlantic Ocean" (254). During a subsequent trip to Venice, Clarke marvels about its water-based architecture and magnificence, yet feeling again impelled to ask: "where did all this Venetian wealth come from?" (255). His answer includes not only trickery and trade but, more specifically, the slave trade. Although Venice had other sources of income, it is indeed true that it was active in the Mediterranean slave trade; in an all-important turn, however, Clarke will add: "But this is speculation. I do not have papyrus and old tomes to check against my fancy, and my fantasy. My narrative is built upon the strong foundation of myth. But there is the same pull, the same importance of light, the same hidden spirits in the buildings that surround me, in Toronto; and on the Malecón, and here in Venice. Who has the ownership of this history?" (255).

During a subsequent visit to Bordeaux, Clarke notes that the light on the city's water-facing buildings reminds him of the Malecón; his host surprises him by responding voluntarily: "These buildings you're seeing, all along this way, are the profits from the slave trade" (259). Although speaking "without prompting," the French host seems to have caught the gist of Clarke's earlier musings about light: "It makes me feel I've been here, before. And I know I have not been here before. In a different sense. But I also know I have been here, before" (258).



1. "IN A DIFFERENT SENSE"

"In a different sense": one facet of this amplification appears as Clarke remembers a trip to Amsterdam, where he tours the canals. Again it is the light on the canal houses that reminds Clarke of Havana, Venice, Bordeaux, and also of the Wharf in Barbados' Bridgetown: "All this history and history of architecture here in the Netherlands is bound up in slavery. 'Bound up' is the ironical intransitive verb. My history touches all of them: buildings in which I was tied up and flogged, but in which my spirits lived on" (261). Clarke's use of the pronoun "I" tells us that, before physically arriving in Bordeaux for instance, he feels he has been there indeed, in a metonymic sense that also nourishes Langston Hughes's speaker in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"—an all-encompassing "I" that has witnessed waterways and civilizations from a black perspective, and that has retained, accumulated, and remembered the significance of that presence and experience (Hughes 4).

But there is a further facet of this "different sense" evoked by Clarke, a sense that comes to the fore in connection with the green-door house. Clarke has mentioned the house also in the context of the other cities, adding at some point that he finally bought it and added a green awning over the green door (Clarke 258). We learn that he is "thinking that this house, the one with the green door, built in 1863, could have been the residence of a man who fled to Canada, on the Underground Railroad, and who became 'a shoemaker.' And I turn the pages of history and of speculation faster," Clarke adds, "in order to get to the narrative of myth grounded in truth. And to see whose truth I am using; and whose truth it is" (259). What Clarke is telling us is that the "narrative of myth," which in his memory leads across so many water-connected locations like a jazz musician's solo across key and chord changes, is "grounded" in a certain kind of positional truth that is not limited by facts; as he explains, "I add to the 'facts' of that history, the real truth, the 'narrative' coached by the spirits and the myths, and I conclude that the man who lived in this green-door house, in 1876, three years after it was built, was a slave" (261). Clarke tells us that he bought the house after having passed it for fourteen years, and wonders whether the slave who became a shoemaker could "deliberately, and from the grave, have sent those spirits to alert me, and have me join them?" (262).

There is a sense of a homecoming here as the chapter modulates back to its opening motives of voice-and-light-induced memory and of the green-door house's ability to pull the author, "in a trance-like communication, to face the spirits and the myths of my history" (252). The force field of that "trance-like communication" has indeed determined the composition of the chapter, with its modal transitions ranging in transformative ways, and "in a different sense," across the reigns of factuality and truth. Clarke in his own distinctive style does here what other writers have done in their own ways to get to the bottom of things, and with the help of an imagination "grounded in truth" extract and create meaning from the multi-form surfaces and appearances of reality. Clarke's reference to light, romance, and seduction, for instance, evoke the seductive effects that Nathaniel Hawthorne, in "The Custom House," ascribed to the moonlight, a medium which for him "spiritualized" the daily objects around him and was "the most suitable for a romance-



writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests” (and ghosts), creating a space “where the Actual and Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (24). The text Hawthorne thus introduced, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), also explored deeper historical truths with the help of a wide-ranging imagination. Clarke’s distinction between “facts” and “the real truth” also evokes, however, Toni Morrison’s reflections on this matter; as she writes in “The Site of Memory” (1995), “the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (93). And if we want to home in further on Clarke’s specific handling of the communicative traffic between meaning and the past, his ending reminds us of the more possessive force of the particular spirits that are active in his chapter, and which continue to “ride” him, as he says: those spirits call him to his green-door house, a home whose vertically divided door also opens on the black Atlantic and its history. These possessive spirits are of Caribbean ancestry, as becomes clear when Clarke refers here to his mother’s knowledge about “slavery and skeletons and witchcraft”; accepting this knowledge, Clarke concludes his chapter with the assertion that the “shoemaker’s spirits ride me across the Atlantic Ocean, to the Malecón, to Venice, to Bordeaux, and now to Amsterdam” (262).

2. HOME

Yet it is not only that the improvisational journey of Clarke’s chapter “homes” back to the opening motives of the evocative force of light and the pervasive yet often surprising presence of memory; the chapter also speaks about a house that Clarke made his home. At a first glance, the “vertical” dimension of this home reveals an “unhomely” and gruesome reality: “So, each time I enter the right-hand half of the green door of the house, built in 1863, I think of all those other houses in Cuba in the Caribbean, in Bordeaux in France, in Venice in Italy, and in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, erected from the help of my sweat and floggings, from the bones in the basements with skeletons” (261). The house thus succeeds indeed in making him face “the spirits and the myths of my history”; but this space also turns out to be home.

Here Clarke surprises us with another turn in his associative journey, a further modulation that makes space, in his “myth grounded in truth,” for both the historical consequences of slavery and a notion of home. While referring at length to the brutality of French slavery in Haiti, Clarke can nonetheless write: “I am home in Paris”. The city for him “reflects a relationship, that, in spite of its viciousness and its inequalities [...] involved me, in presence, in colour, in voice, and ironically, in labour and the profits made from my labour.” As a consequence, Clarke comes to “think of the most foreign and unusual cities, as home. Havana. Toronto. Venice. Manchester. Bordeaux. Toulouse. Amsterdam. Paris. (257). With this distinctive turn, Clarke takes personal possession of the “myths of my history.” He lays claim to the wealth and splendor created by the enslaved, in a perspective that transforms victimization into rightful ownership. In a subsequent chapter that returns to some of these motives, “The Culture of Chains,” Clarke makes this re-coding of memory



—a constant presence evoked by sound, light, and a “vertical” imagination— even more explicit. Recalling his visit to Amsterdam a second time, he remembers traveling its canals “in such a way that I feel I am going through the intestines of a city that fed upon the land and upon the people that came from islands in my part of the world; and in this shocking realization, I am not angry, I am not ashamed, I am not feeling as if I am a victim. I feel I am a partner. A senior partner. It was my ‘wealth’ of skin and sweat and culture that made the ‘wealth’ of Amsterdam and the Netherlands” (278).

Clarke’s re-coding of the associations of victimization into a perspective that includes not just proprietorship, but indeed *senior* partner status with its concomitant claims to control, reveals a way of living “in the wake” (Sharpe) that also articulates insistent forms of belonging; it is a narrative “built upon the strong foundation of myth” that claims ownership of history as a form of home (but may also yet continue to be present in claims for material reparations). Hortense Spillers is among those who have tried to spell out the stakes and challenges in changing the kinds of myth that Clarke’s ‘membering is working to transform. Certain designations, writes Spillers, “are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. [...]. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time; over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness” (Spillers 203). Clarke’s celebratory meditation and memory-driven improvisation on the motive of the green-door house put the “marvels” of his “own inventiveness” to incisive use. In the process of “‘membering,” we see Clarke make himself a(t) home in Toronto and its history while connecting his experiences to a transnational sense of belonging that manages to distill resilience and pride from a history of dispersal and devastation. Having taken possession of his abode, and responding in “trance-like communication” to the spirits of history in acts of ‘membering that bring forth transformative “myth grounded in truth,” Clarke in the end “knew that I was wise in purchasing the green-house door” (260).

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“THANK YOU FOR CREATING THIS WORLD FOR ALL OF US”: GLOBALITY AND THE RECEPTION OF MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE* AFTER ITS TELEVISION ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the reception of Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) after its adaptation into an award-winning television series produced by Hulu in 2017. The reception of the show is studied through a selection of English language articles published online, which are analysed in the light of Manfred B. Steger’s theories on globality. The television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* has had a global impact thanks to its dissemination through the social media and internet news outlets and because of the random concurrence of certain social processes. The news items I analysed polarize themselves into those who argue that *The Handmaid’s Tale* series holds up a mirror to Trump’s America and those who reject this belief. In both categories, the commentators are co-opting a cultural product for ideological or political purposes.

KEYWORDS: globality, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, reception, television series, adaptation, Trump’s America.

‘GRACIAS POR CREAR ESTE MUNDO PARA TODOS NOSOTROS’: LA GLOBALIDAD Y LA RECEPCIÓN DE *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*, DE MARGARET ATWOOD, DESPUÉS DE SU ADAPTACIÓN TELEVISIVA

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la recepción de la novela *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) de Margaret Atwood tras su adaptación en 2017 a una serie de televisión producida por Hulu que ha obtenido numerosos premios. La recepción de la serie se lleva a cabo a través de una selección de artículos en inglés publicados en línea (*online*) que se analizan bajo la perspectiva de las teorías de Manfred B. Steger sobre la globalidad. La adaptación televisiva de *The Handmaid’s Tale* ha tenido un enorme impacto global debido a su diseminación a través de las redes sociales y de las noticias publicadas en internet, y también gracias a la concurrencia de ciertos procesos sociales. Los artículos periodísticos que he analizado se polarizan entre los que argumentan que *The Handmaid’s Tale* refleja la América de Trump y los que rechazan esta opinión. Mi tesis es que en las dos categorías los articulistas están apropiándose de un producto cultural con intenciones ideológicas o políticas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: globalidad, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, recepción, serie de televisión, adaptación, América de Trump.



How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's preoccupation with globality started in the early 1980s before the term *globalization* experimented a meteoric rise since the middle of the decade. In *Bodily Harm* (1981), the political thriller she published before *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood suggests that the military coup taking place in the small Caribbean island of St. Antoine is susceptible of affecting the entire planet. Recently, in her Introduction to the new Vintage edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* published with a cover from the Hulu TV adaptation, she has reaffirmed her belief in the global consequences of any political event: "*It can't happen here* could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances" ("Introduction" n.p. Emphasis in original). In a world where political and economic changes taking place in one country can affect the entire planet, globalization has become the defining buzzword of our era in both the academy and public political life (Lemert *et al.* xxxi). Ashcroft *et al.* define it as the process whereby individual lives are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate worldwide (462). Just as the debate about globalization has produced a voluminous literature, the term has been used confusingly in the media and academic literature to describe a process, a condition, a system and an age. In order to avoid this confusion Manfred B. Steger suggests adopting three different but related terms in relation to globality: first, globality as a *social condition* characterized by tight global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections that make borders irrelevant; secondly, the term *global imaginary* is used to refer to people's growing consciousness of thickening globality. Finally, we need to take into account that globality is a spatial concept signifying a set of *social processes* that transform our present social condition of conventional nationality into one of globality (11-12). In addition, as Paul Jay notes, globalization is linked to the development of electronic media, the rise of transnational corporations, and proliferating forms of entertainment that easily leap national boundaries (2).

Within the field of culture, Suman Gupta refers to the alignments between literary and global industries as one of the procedures bringing together literary studies and globalization (867). In fact, if literature and literary studies have become *transnational*, to borrow Paul Jay's term (1), it is largely due to the current dissemination of literary texts through feature films and television series. The effect of this kind of diffusion is the transformation of literary texts in global narratives that reach out to every corner of the world. As Shannon Wells-Lassagne points out, adaptation has always been central in the television landscape, but perhaps never more so than now; and what is novel and interesting about recent television adaptations is their reception (4). The new golden age of television, also known as the Peak TV era, is ravenous of content, given the multiplication of sources for television fiction, be it broadcast networks, cable channels, satellite television or non-broadcast sources



like Netflix, Amazon, or web series on YouTube. This cultural industry generates a huge number of responses, in the social media or news items, be it print or online.

Within the realm of Canadian Literature, 2017 has seen the adaptation of two Margaret Atwood's best-selling novels –*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* (1996)– into television series, linked by their common concern with the recuperation of women's narratives. However, due to scope constraints I will focus on the ways in which Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel –about the transformation of the US democratic system into a theocratic dictatorship in which women with viable ovaries are forced to become child-bearers for the elite– has become a global narrative after the release of the series because of its capacity to transform itself and tune in with current affairs.

In fact, one of the characteristics of *The Handmaid's Tale* is its susceptibility to adaptation which Margaret Atwood has commented on: “*The Handmaid's Tale* has taken many forms. It has been translated into 40 or more languages. It was made into a film in 1990. It has been an opera, and it has also been a ballet. It is being turned into a graphic novel” (“Introduction” n.p.). *The Handmaid's Tale* was the first novel of Atwood's to be produced as a full-length feature film in the United States, directed by Volker Schlöndorff with screenplay by Harold Pinter and starring Natasha Richardson, Faye Dunaway and Robert Duvall. The film received mixed critical reviews and was relatively unsuccessful at the box office (Stein 78-79, Kilkenny n.p.). On the other hand, The MGM/ Hulu series, launched in April 27, 2017 obtained a plethora of awards and raised Hulu subscriber signups by 98% (Kilkenny n.p.). The second effect of the series was the spectacular rise in the sales of the novel which became Amazon's most sold book in 2017 (Kilkenny n.p.). In Spain Atwood's book was featured in the lists of most sold books in the five weeks following the release of the series by HBO (Cultural Supplement of the Spanish national newspaper *El Mundo*), and returned to the list after being broadcast in open television by the channel Antena 3 in the summer of 2018. This rise in the sales of the novel should be related to what Steger calls the tight global economic interconnections brought forward by globality (11).

The global response to *The Handmaid's Tale* series has been described as “awe-inspiring” (Miller qtd. in Jasper n.p) and includes not only print and online outlets in media from all over the world but also responses in the social networks which the scope of this article does not allow me to discuss. Instead, I will explore the reception of the series in a selection of articles and reviews written in English and published online. The articles have been selected because their content has to do with the various social processes taking place during the production and airing of the series. The chosen material also sheds light on the global imaginary in the mind of the makers of the series. I will also follow the reception of Season One of the series during the months following the broadcasting of the series until February 2018. Before I delve into the analysis of the online material in the third section of the article, I will provide some preliminary information on how Atwood's 1985 novel was turned into an award-winning global television product in the next section.



2. THE HANDMAID'S TALE FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

As I shall explain in the next section of this article, the reception of *The Handmaid's Tale* Hulu series was largely influenced by the new wave of global Anglo-American feminism which has emerged at the January 2017 Anti-Trump Women's March.¹ But the story of "How MGM birthed 'The Handmaid's Tale' for TV," (Littleton) already had a gender component. Steve Stark, President of MGM TV, started to think of adapting Atwood's novel in the autumn of 2011. Stark wanted a female writer for the script because he was convinced that "no male writer could do justice to the dystopian tale of a future America where women are subjugated in brutal conditions under a twisted theocratic regime." (qtd. in Littleton n.p.). During this process, he received a phone call from Bruce Miller, a veteran drama writer and devotee of Atwood's novel who desperately wanted to work on the series. Convinced that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a "female-centred, feminist book," (Bilton n.p.) he solved his dilemma by hiring Reed Morano as the director of the first three episodes of the series. The female component of the series was further strengthened by giving the protagonist role of Offred/June to the well-known Peak TV star Elizabeth Moss who acted as producer together with Margaret Atwood. The result of this combination of talent and the strategic promotion of the series was a sweeping success at the Emmy Awards. The series was nominated for eleven of the categories and took eight, including Lead Actress (to Elizabeth Moss), Supporting Actress (to Ann Dowd for her role as Aunt Lydia) and Outstanding Writing for a drama series for Bruce Miller, the showrunner.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* Linda Hutcheon suggests that the element of change is paramount to adaption (52). Along this strand of thought, a few lines about how the Hulu series differs from Margaret Atwood's novel are in order because, as Glenn Willmott points out, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a story about power whose message is clearly grounded both in the presentational power of its media and in the representational power of its narrative events (170). As Laura M. Browning observes, *The Handmaid's Tale's* disquieting world remains largely unchanged from page to small screen. The show has been described as being more "chilling" than the series (Browning *et al.* np.) to the extent that some viewers have reported to find it too horrifying to watch, whereas they did not feel that way when they read the novel.²

According to Hutcheon, external cultural contexts govern how the adapter will present the work to an audience (25). Hence, Hulu's adaption of Atwood's

¹ I have deliberately left out the discussion of the #MeToo movement in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* series because its connection to the show, although it has been pointed out by D'Ancona, is clearly less obvious than that of the January 2017 Women's March. In addition, the controversy it has generated, including a response by Margaret Atwood (see "Am I a Bad Feminist?"), is outside the scope of this article.

² These are the impressions of a relative in her sixties without a background in literary studies, and a student in her early twenties enrolled in my Postcolonial Literatures course during the academic year 2017-18.



novel into a TV series purports to be more inclusive of LGTB and African-American audiences, by assigning a lesbian gender identity to a character that did not have it in the novel (Ofglen, played by Alexis Bledel), and featuring black actors in the roles of Moira and Luke, June's husband.³ Apart from these contextual details, I have selected three main differences between the novel and the Hulu TV series which have the potential to inform the reception of the latter. The first difference is that the real name of the protagonist Handmaid is given away as the first episode ends –“My name is June”. Atwood, however, clarifies that it was her intention to keep the name of the narrator a secret:

Why do we never learn the real name of the central character, I have often been asked. Because, I reply, so many people throughout history have had their names changed, or have simply disappeared from view. Some have deduced that Offred's real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium/dormitory, “June” is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought but it fits, so readers are welcome to it if they wish. (“Introduction” n.p.)

By changing this detail about the narrator's name, Bruce Miller achieves the effect of making the viewer “identify with the protagonist and make her feel like a real person” (qtd. in Bilton n.p.). The second difference between the novel and the show is that in Atwood's novel Gilead is clearly a regime of the past with respect to the future of Gilead or to a “second projected future,” as Arnold E. Davidson refers to it (113). The Historical Notes, as Atwood reminds us, are “the account of a symposium held several hundred years in the future, in which the repressive government described in the novel is now merely a subject of academic analysis” (*Moving* 336). However, in Bruce Miller's show, “Gilead takes place in the present, it's today” (qtd. in Bilton n.p.), a fact which inevitably imparts a contemporary relevance to the series. The third aspect I have highlighted as different in the textual and televisual narratives is that in the novel the suspension of the Constitution following the assassination of the President and the shootings in Congress was “blamed on Islamic fanatics, at the time” (*THT* 162).⁴ In this point, Atwood seems prescient about the restriction of civil liberties undertaken in the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the series, however, the account of the suspension of democracy provided in Episode 3 is just attributed to unlabelled “terrorists”. This decision echoes the complete absence of allusion to Islamic countries on the part of the production team when they talk about the series.

³ About these changes, Emily Nussbaum observes that “well-meaning [but] muddy the message” and that “The result is an odd trade-off: we get brown faces, but the society is unconvin-
ingly color-blind” (n.p.).

⁴ Quotations from a 1988 print edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Seal Books will be integrated in the main text with the abbreviation *THT*.



3. IS *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* SERIES ABOUT TRUMP'S AMERICA?

When Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in England in 1984, and wondered whether she “would be able to persuade the readers that the United States of America had suffered a coup that transformed an erstwhile liberal democracy into a literal-minded theocratic dictatorship” (“Introduction” n.p.), she could hardly imagine that her fictional world would migrate, in Matthew D’Ancona’s words “from the creative construct to the realm of the thinkable” (n.p.).

Before tackling how internet media have turned *The Handmaid's Tale* into a global narrative which has been appropriated by ongoing globality-related social processes, I would like to argue that Atwood’s novel depicts a society already experimenting globalization processes. First of all, it is the global control of IT technologies that allows the Gilead regime to dismiss women from their jobs and block their bank accounts as described in Chapter Twenty-eight of the novel (*THT* 161-171) and faithfully rendered in Episode Three of the Hulu series. D’Ancona associates this use of technology to subordinate women overnight to the power of digital manipulation and cyberwarfare to distort the democratic process in Trump’s America. Incidentally, the use of fake news is already present in Atwood’s novel (*THT* 19, 78).

The internet articles about *The Handmaid's Tale* series I have selected polarize into two groups: the first one affirms that Hulu’s show is an “unexpectedly timely” adaptation of Atwood’s novel which is relevant for Trump’s America, and the second category rejects this view. Daniel Fienberg’s review of the series for *The Hollywood Reporter* is representative of the first trend of opinion as it states that “the 30-plus-year-old work has become a story for the very time and place we’re living in” (n.p.). In his review published in *The Washington Post*, Hank Stuever not only describes the adaptation as timely but also as “essential viewing for our fractured culture” adding that “lying about terrorist attacks and threatening the Constitution are just the beginning of the numerous, much-discussed parallels to our 2017 political nightmare” (n.p.). This kind of opinions are to be expected from media like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The Washington Post* which support political views (those of the Democratic Party) antagonistic to those of Trump just as a large sector of the US entertainment industry does.

The view that the novel –and hence, the series, in which Margaret Atwood has participated in various ways, including a cameo, cast as one of the Aunts– has immediate relevance for Trump’s America has been largely encouraged by Atwood herself. During the months before the launching of the TV series, she gave interviews and wrote articles for the global media, speaking about the novel in every public event she took part in. On March 3, 2017 she dedicated a large section of her acceptance speech for the Honorary Doctorate she received at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid to discuss *The Handmaid's Tale*, even venturing to speak about “a president who seems prepared not only to flout the rules of his own country but to remain steadfastly ignorant of what those rules even are” (“Honorary” 42). A few days after delivering this speech, *The New York Times* published the text which would become the introduction to the new edition of her novel under the title “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”.



In it Atwood issues a warning that, “[i]n the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades, and indeed the past centuries” (“Introduction” n.p.). Interviewed by Pat Morrison for *Los Angeles Times*, Atwood remarked that although the shooting of the series had started before the American election, “then the election happened, and the cast woke up in the morning and thought, we’re no longer making fiction –we’re making a documentary” (n.p.). Therefore, Atwood voluntarily or involuntarily participated in a very ingenious promotion strategy devised by the makers of the series. This strategy is based on what Steger calls the social conditions of globality which makes borders irrelevant (11). Given the impressive diffusion of her views through conventional press media and the social networks, Atwood issued this new reading of her 1988 novel as a mirror held up to the America of Trump with a global imaginary in mind.⁵

It was not only Margaret Atwood who tried to persuade the potential readers of her novel and spectators of the series that *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be linked to contemporary events in Trump’s America. According to Rich Lowry, the view was also pushed by everyone involved in the show production and is partly responsible for the eight Emmys won by the series (n.p.). The persuasiveness of this reading was incremented thanks to the coincidence of the production of the series with the airing of the notorious Access Hollywood tape in which Trump uttered the misogynist line “Grab them by the pussy,” leading to a global feminist reaction in the January 2017 anti-Trump’s Women March. At that march, when the series had not even been broadcast yet, protesters held signs that read, “Make Margaret Atwood fiction again” in response to Trump’s famous “Make America Great Again” and other slogans inspired by the novel (“*The Handmaid’s Tale* is not an instruction manual”). Bruce Miller capitalized on this kind of connections and the global dimension of this march to publicize the series. He explicitly compared the anti-Trump Women’s March with some of the visuals in the show: “You are seeing exactly the same signs, exactly the same images and you’re also seeing Capitol police with guns, not firing them, thank God, but it’s the same thing” (qtd. in Lowry, n.p.). If this was not enough, 2017 was the year of the “Handmaid’s protests” where, as Christine Hauser recounts it, women’s rights activists have been wearing red robes and white bonnets based on Margaret Atwood’s novel and created by Ane Crabtree for the series, to fight back the cutback of reproductive rights across the United States. That the Handmaid’s costumes have become global icons has not escaped Miller, who has noted that “the visual connotes a whole political point of view, which is really fascinating” (qtd. in Jasper).

The internet articles stating that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not about Trump’s America are as numerous as those that affirm that it is. A number of the news items

⁵ A slightly abridged version of Atwood’s *New York Times* article with a different title appeared in the Spanish newspaper *El País*: “*Maldita Profecía*” (1 May 2017). This title, which can be translated as “Damned Prophecy”, also encourages reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a prediction.



I consulted focus on the way in which *The Handmaid's Tale* series has become a comforting fiction against some of the new challenges for women in our society. Most of these articles focus on the political context of the first publication of the novel to argue that the show's rendition of the plot offers an outdated idea of what the fight for women's rights should look like today. From the channel Globalization and Politics of the US news web *piqd*, Erika Wilk contends that the conflicts faced by women today are related to "Neoliberalism", rather than "Traditionalism" (n.p.). Along the same line of thought, Angela Nagle contends that in contemporary America women are not being forced to have children for an authoritarian traditionalist state but, instead, "they're being compelled not to by far more insidious forces" (n.p.). These forces, Nagle argues, include "a total hegemonic fusion of the corporate and the countercultural, of progressivism, modernity, and the market," complex social processes brought about by globality.

According to Ross Douthat, *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel) should be read as "an alternate history" rather than "an exercise in futurism" (n.p.). This "alternate reality" was inspired by the Reagan-era and its feminist thinkers who merged with Christian conservatives in their critique of pornography and fears about rape and male predation. This interpretation coincides with that of feminist critics of the novel, such as J. Brooks Bouson who observes that *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects on the antifeminist messages given to women by the fundamentalist New Right of the 1980s (135). Reading the novel in this kind of context, it is easy to understand why Gilead did not see itself as misogynist but, rather, as aiming to protect women and liberating them, using the words of Commander Waterford, from the "meat market" of "the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates" (*THT* 205). As Emily Nussbaum points out, Offred's mother's second wave feminism was ironically transformed in the world of the novel into "Biblical fascism sold with faux-feminist icing" (n.p.). But as the authors of the articles who do accept the view that *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects contemporary US suggest, Trump's America is substantially different from Reagan's as far as the situation of women is concerned.

Another current of opinion emerging from the articles that do not accept the comparison between the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Trump's America is that the place depicted in the novel and in the series is not the US but an Islamic country. Breaking with the strand of opinion favored by the makers of the show, Reed Morano asserts that the show is about how women are treated in "other countries" (qtd. in Lowry, n.p.) but she does not mention which ones. Some commentators (Lowry, Nagle) venture a possible comparison with Saudi Arabia. From outside the United States Seth Frantzman is more candid about the hypocrisy of Western governments and Western feminists who go out on "Handmaid" protests while condoning the regime –Iran– which most resembles the situation depicted by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, because of economic and colonialist interests. Whereas pictures of women protesting about their reproductive rights in the US dressed as Handmaids have been disseminated around the world, "nothing happens," remarks Frantzmann, "when women are arrested in Iran for exercising such a basic human right as showing their hair". Frantzman further asserts: "With women's bodies politicized and controlled by men; secret police watching everything and running clandestine



brothels for the elites, while women wander about in their red burkas, Iran is a real-life version of the television series *The Handmaid's Tale*". Rebecca Hawkes writing for *The Telegraph* also delineates the similarities between the clothing habits of *The Handmaid's Tale* and those of Iran: "Iran's Islamic Republic, which has been in power since the country's 1979 revolution, compels women to wear the veil [...] but is also guilty of many other human rights abuses towards women and men" (n.p.). In the Historical Notes of *The Handmaid's Tale* a parallelism between Iran and Gilead is put forward in one of Professor Pieixoto's publications titled "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth Century Monotheocracies, as Seen Through Diaries" (*THT* 282). Although Atwood acknowledges that many different strands feed into the novel ("Introduction," n.p.), she fails to mention that one of them is Iran.

CONCLUSIONS

When Bruce Miller accepted the Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Drama series for *The Handmaid's Tale* on September 17, 2017, he thanked Margaret Atwood "for creating this world for all of us" (Television Academy n.p.). Although Miller was probably referring to the fictional universe of the novel he recreated in the series, the word "world" inevitably evokes the global dimension of the series, which I have approached in this article through its reception in internet media. In addition, through the phrase "all of us," Miller was not only referring to himself and the cast and production team present with him on the stage, but also to global viewers of the streaming network. *The Handmaid's Tale* series is thus a product of globality, having been created by the television division of one mainstream American entertainment corporation –MGM– in competition with larger studio competitors to be broadcast throughout the world. As a television streaming network, Hulu partakes in what David Held calls the transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power which is characteristic of globality (qtd. in Steger 15). Furthermore, having been produced in the US, the show contributes to the dissemination of American culture which is one of the mandates of US Neo-imperialism.

The Handmaid's Tale has been adapted into a variety of cultural products but clearly none has had the global impact of the Hulu TV series. The explanation for this worldwide success lies, on the one hand, on its skillful dissemination in the hands of two agents working intentionally and, on the other, on a confluence of random circumstances. The first agent is Margaret Atwood who forcefully promoted her novel before the release of the series through speeches and publications. The second agent is what Lemert *et al.* call the "global communicational conglomerate" (xiii) of social media –Atwood is active on Twitter– and internet news outlets which have marketed and continue to market the series with global economic consequences. The third factor, which D'Ancona calls "luck" (n.p.) is the concurrence of certain social processes before and after the series was aired. These processes are the revelation of the Access Hollywood Tape in October 2016 containing Trump's notorious



misogynist comment which provoked the January 2017 Women's March, and the coincidence with the President's war against the public funding of contraception measures which prompted women dressed as Handmaids to protest all over the US.

The news items I analyzed in this article polarize themselves into those which argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* series holds up a mirror to Trump's America and those that reject this belief. The articles defending the first view are ideologically close to the Democratic Party, supported by much of the US show business industry. Those that disagree with the identification between the novel and contemporary America invoke the different contexts in which the novel and the series were published. *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel) was published during the Reagan era during a backlash on women's rights due to a rise of religious conservatism but, as Douthat and Nagle contend, in the "Post-Protestant secularized" times of Trump's America (n. p), where women face different challenges, the tenets put forward by the series do not hold. The controversy is endless and one cannot help wondering whether the ongoing debate is not another way of merchandising the series. In whatever case, one thing is sure, we will never read the novel again without connecting it to the series.

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RISK, MORTALITY, AND MEMORY: THE GLOBAL
IMAGINARIES OF CHERIE DIMALINE'S *THE MARROW
THIEVES*, M.G. VASSANJI'S *NOSTALGIA*, AND
ANDRÉ ALEXIS'S *FIFTEEN DOGS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines three contemporary Canadian novels that depict global risk society through a speculative fictional form that asks the question “What if?” Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* (2016) imagine dystopian worlds ravaged by climate change to critique humanist ideals of Progress. André Alexis’s *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) uses the animal fable to address what it means to be a mortal animal. Each asks what an awareness of risk means for agency and ethics: for Indigenous people in *The Marrow Thieves*; for Torontonians in the context of a heightened global apartheid in *Nostalgia*; and for dogs wrestling with a god-granted human intelligence in the contemporary Toronto of *Fifteen Dogs*. In negotiating risk, each fiction turns to the roles of memory, creativity, and alternative forms of subjectivity and community in ensuring survival. Each novel finds fragile yet necessary steps toward alternative futures in the ability to imagine otherwise.

KEYWORDS: global Imaginaries, risk society, mortality, memory, community, art, Canadian speculative fiction.

RIESGO, MORTALIDAD Y MEMORIA: LOS IMAGINARIOS GLOBALES
DE CHERIE DIMALINE EN *THE MARROW THIEVES*, M.G. VASSANJI
EN *NOSTALGIA* Y ANDRÉ ALEXIS EN *FIFTEEN DOGS*

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina tres novelas canadienses contemporáneas basadas en la sociedad del riesgo global usando un modo ficticio especulativo que inquiere: «¿Qué pasaría si?» *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), de Cherie Dimaline, y *Nostalgia* (2016), de M.G. Vassanji, imaginan sociedades distópicas devastadas por el cambio climático para analizar los ideales humanistas del Progreso. *Fifteen Dogs* (2015), de André Alexis, usa la fábula animal para abordar qué significa ser un animal mortal. Cada una profundiza en las implicaciones de una conciencia de riesgo para la agentividad y la ética: para los pueblos indígenas en *The Marrow Thieves*; para los habitantes de Toronto en el contexto de un apartheid global intensificado en *Nostalgia*; y para los perros que luchan con una inteligencia humana otorgada por Dios en el Toronto contemporáneo de *Fifteen Dogs*. Al negociar el riesgo, cada ficción recurre al papel de la memoria, la creatividad y las formas alternativas de subjetividad y comunidad para garantizar la supervivencia. Las tres narrativas dan pasos sutiles, aunque necesarios, hacia futuros alternativos con la habilidad de imaginar de una forma distinta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: imaginarios globales, sociedad del riesgo, mortalidad, memoria, comunidad, arte, ficción especulativa canadiense.



1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines three contemporary Canadian novels to consider the ways they depict global risk society (as theorized by Ulrich Beck) in relation to key issues of enduring concern for Canadian society that are taking new forms as a result of changing world dynamics. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) is a post-Truth and Reconciliation dystopia that addresses the continuing heritage of settler colonialism and its residential school system to locate survival for Indigenous communities in a restoration of community and language through a renewed relation to the land. M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016), also a dystopia, addresses the post-9/11 security state in the context of shifting border imaginaries, intensified internet surveillance, and multicultural religious engagements with human mortality, reincarnation, and promises of immortality both religious and technological. André Alexis subtitled *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) "an apologue", locating its story within the Greco-Roman tradition of the moral, animal fable to address universal questions about the meaning of life, art, nature and nurture. Each asks what an awareness of risk means for agency and ethics: for Indigenous people fleeing urban areas for the Canadian north in the dystopian future of *The Marrow Thieves*; for inhabitants of Toronto in the context of a heightened global apartheid in *Nostalgia*; and for dogs wrestling with the burdens and pleasures of a god-granted human self-consciousness in the contemporary Toronto of *Fifteen Dogs*. Each asks about the meaning of life in the awareness of imminent death and what survives the individual.

Looking back on history, contemporary scholars are now emphasizing what postcolonial scholarship always knew. In a 2018 article, "Postcolonial Theories as Global Critical Theories" Ina Kerner usefully outlines the methodological approach I take here. In her view, postcolonial theories bring four important features to global critique: "the transcendence of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism, self-reflexivity, transdisciplinarity, and an emancipatory, transformative agenda" (1). She outlines a program that integrates the attention paid in postcolonial studies to colonial history, global entanglements, and global power relations (4). To this, I would add only the reminder that such features characterize much fiction as well as theory deriving from colonial relations such as current struggles within Canada to acknowledge and decolonize its settler colonial legacies and renew its democracy. Kerner further points out that the kinds of postcolonial theorizing endorsed in her article "draw on Western as well as non-Western thought in order to address problems of our postcolonial present, and to shed light on the discursive and institutional formations that brought them into being and that enable them to live on" (4). Each of the texts chosen for analysis here demonstrates the ways in

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which certain elements of such critique function in fictional form. If there are any answers to be found in these texts, they are not to be found in politics or economics. They reside in the human needs for creativity, art, and connection. Nation-states are depicted as no longer meeting such needs, yet there is little beyond small scale regroupings to supply them.

Each fiction begins with a speculative inquiry based on asking the question: “What if?” But unlike much speculative fiction, they do not ask “what if the world were different?” Instead, they ask how a shift in the current order might enable a deeper insight into the way things are, heightening and intensifying understanding of what already is, and leaving the future open for readers to negotiate. Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* and M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* depict imagined near futures continuous with colonial and capitalist exploitations of the past, where the ravages of climate change are inequitably distributed among the poor and the racialized. André Alexis’s *Fifteen Dogs* raises questions about identity, ownership, and belonging that are taking on new resonance in the context of contemporary posthumanism and animal studies. Each in its own way questions humanist exclusions of racialized or animalized others, while leaving other categories of marginalization, such as constructions of women, intact. *The Marrow Thieves* and *Nostalgia* are told in the first person; *Fifteen Dogs* by an omniscient narrator who has access to the actions and inner thoughts of gods, dogs, and humans. In form and the reading experiences they offer, their dissimilarities are striking. Yet each provides insight into some of the diversity of Canadian global imaginaries in the present.

As noted by Walter D. Mignolo, referencing Edouard Glissant, “the imaginary is all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world” (Mignolo 23). The globality of *The Marrow Thieves* may be understood through Mignolo’s understanding of the “modern/colonial world system” in terms of “internal and external borders rather than centers, semiperipheries, and peripheries,” Mignolo explains that these “are not discrete entities but rather moments of a continuum in colonial expansion and in changes of national imperial hegemonies” (33). The globality of *Nostalgia* engages in a similar attention to shifting internal and external borders, mediating between colonialisms old and new, encompassing transnational migration, and ongoing friction between Eurocentric America and its others. *Fifteen Dogs* explores the borders between species as it oscillates between the planetary perspectives of the Greco-Roman universe and the small-scale relations between humans and dogs in contemporary Toronto. Three globalization theorists in particular provide me with insight into these texts. In a series of books, *Risk Society* (1992), *World Risk Society* (1999) and *World at Risk* (2009), Beck provides insights into how perceptions of risk have evolved in response to globalizing processes. In addressing how each of these novels postulates risk, I am further influenced by Arjun Appadurai’s belief that globalization is providing the world with “a new role for the imagination in social life” (4). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s validation of the productivity of friction and her attentiveness to the centrality of scale in understanding global connections also underlies the analysis that follows.



2. DIMALINE'S *THE MARROW THIEVES*: AN INDIGENOUS DYSTOPIA

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* is a Métis-authored dystopia that is addressed to young adults but rewarding for all readers. A young boy tells about his participation in the flight of Indigenous peoples from settled areas to find hoped-for survival in Canada's North. Along with *Nostalgia* and *Fifteen Dogs*, it employs a version of what Darko Suvin identifies as a "novum," an innovation "validated by cognitive logic" (63), which in his view is a distinguishing feature of science fiction, a genre that includes the kind of dystopian and speculative fictions embraced by Dimaline, Vassanji, and even Alexis because each is "interpretable only within the scientific or cognitive horizon" (67). For Suvin, it is the novum that is the determining feature. If "the novum, is hegemonic, that is, so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic" (70), then the alternate reality created meets his terms for the genre. In *The Marrow Thieves* and *Nostalgia*, the novum is a scientific invention designed to prolong certain human lives at the expense of others in a fundamentally unequal society. In *Fifteen Dogs*, the triggering intervention is presumed to be divine rather than scientific in origin but it too serves to alter presumed natural functions, in this case mingling canine memory with human intelligence in the minds of the dogs. In each case, cognitive estrangement is created, casting mortality and immortality, local and global, in a new light.

The novum upon which the dystopic vision of *The Marrow Thieves* is premised is the invention of a device that kills indigenous people to steal their dreams in order to heal members of the dominant Canadian society who have lost the ability to dream. The plot describes a future of continued colonial oppression in which Canadian government Recruiters incarcerate Indigenous people for processing in a system "based on the old residential school system" (5). Older Métis forced to flee refer to the pressure as a "New Road Allowance" (6). Families and individual refugees flee north, where they hope they will "find home" (6).

Whereas earlier colonial dispossession took the land and children's bodies to "kill the Indian in the child" (Young), this new colonial system literally crushes people to death, distilling their bone marrow to steal their ability to dream. What enables such violence is the continuing belief that "they don't think of us [Indigenous people] as human, just commodities" (203). In other words, there is a global context of intensified exploitation and misery built upon taking colonial modernity and its capitalist system of structured inequalities to its logical conclusion. Perhaps this is why the only allies to the Indigenous struggle are the two black nurses who help the Indigenous leader Isaac, whom his husband Miigwaan has thought dead, to escape the government facilities. The young narrator, French, recognizes these nurses as Guyanese by their speech, recalling that "After the weather got violent and the islands were battered, the West Indian population here had swollen" (223).¹ Even

¹ Guyana is not an island but it is a mainland territory usually grouped with the British West Indies. This error may remind us that French's education has been cut short by the attacks



within the challenges wrought by climate change, the dominant struggle is between imperialist/capitalist/white hegemony and the resurgent colonized of the world.

I see *The Marrow Thieves* as participating in contemporary global discussions about the future that the dominant global system of dispossession, dehumanization, and climate change denial is preparing for everyone, if on a highly inequitable and differential basis. Yet despite the traumatic stories of each of the people who come together in their desperate flight north, the book provides hope through the communal bonds they forge and through their rediscovery of the ancestral wisdom built into their ancient Cree language, its songs, and the alternative understandings it encodes. The elder who embodies their hope is a fluent speaker, and that gives her enormous power of resistance. Her dying word to them is “Kiiwen... go home” (211) yet her own name is Minerva, after the Roman goddess of wisdom. Is there hope here for some pre-Christian global restructuring on an alternative basis, returning people wherever they are to ways of reciprocal respect and dwelling with the land? *The Marrow Thieves* is about the quest for home and for family, and it finds the key to that search in the wisdom of the elders and the indigenous language through which it is expressed. But it is not a backward-looking search. The characters make family within and beyond traditional notions of filiation and compulsory heterosexuality. In this sense, they “make kin” along lines advocated by Donna Haraway, when she argues: “My purpose is to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (“Anthropocene” 161). Survival for Dimoline’s characters comes through a remade community, renewing traditional bonds and forging new ones.

3. VASSANJI’S *NOSTALGIA: A SYMPTOM OF OUR TIMES?*

In its focus on embodiment, spirituality, wonder, and power within a dystopian near future, *The Marrow Thieves* is part of a current global trend, in which the “necropower” (Mbembe) of state and global forces is both experienced and resisted through the body. Mbembe concludes his influential essay by discussing the creation of “*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40 italics in original). This describes the status of Indigenous peoples fighting for survival in *The Marrow Thieves* and that of the inhabitants of the fictional Maskinia beyond “the Long Border” in *Nostalgia* (12), but it also haunts those in the First World who have undergone a process termed “rejuvenation”. The novum here is the medical innovation that enables prolonged, almost endless life through the eradication of old memories and the installation of new ones in new bodies. In many ways, as the two central characters of Frank Sina and Presley Smith experience

but also, perhaps, that Canadians remain somewhat insular, with little knowledge of the rest of the world.



it, life after such a process is another kind of “death world”. The process is expensive, and thus only available to those who can afford it, or as readers learn later, to those the state wishes to neutralize, such as Sina and Smith. The title of the novel refers to a glitch in this new system in which old memories leak out to compromise the implanted identities. In this way, *Nostalgia* locates necropolitical state power in the body, not just through its ability to rewrite the identities of those it deems threats, but also through the novel’s presentation of nostalgia. Here, nostalgia is not presented as a characteristic of particular individuals but rather as “a cultural practice, not a given content ... [which] depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present” (Stewart 253). Nostalgia takes various forms in the text but it is always a relation of power. Designed to mitigate risk from a state perspective, it also creates new threats.

These threats take two forms. On the one hand, from the state perspective, difference and dissent are by definition threats to state security, which it seeks to neutralize. This is a view of nostalgia as a form of double loyalty associated with immigrants that the novel critiques. At the same time, Vassanji shows the ways in which the mechanisms of the security state, particularly its use of artificial intelligence, threatens not only individual lives but also their genuine forms of community-making that embrace diversity over conformity. Vassanji has expressed his impatience with “academics who work with formulas”, adding that “[i]n Canada the formulaic and simple-minded terms (in relation to writers or writing) ‘immigrant,’ ‘multicultural,’ ‘nostalgic’ are often used and are quite infuriating” (Desai 197). I see *Nostalgia* challenging such stereotypical views of immigrants as always nostalgic for a lost homeland, while also confirming Svetlana Boym’s insight (as summarized by Timothy Bewes), that nostalgia is “not an individual sickness but ‘a historical emotion,’ a symptom of our age; a yearning for a different time as much as a faraway place” (Bewes 167). In this sense, nostalgia functions as a global imaginary in this text. Later in the paper, I will analyze how the dog, Atticus, expresses such a yearning for a lost idealized world in response to a complex present of dramatic change in *Fifteen Dogs*.

Nostalgia’s first-person narrator, Dr. Frank Sina, first takes a medicalized and individualist view of nostalgia as a sickness that science has not yet learned to eradicate completely. He defines it as a bodily ailment in which submerged memories resurface to cause severe mental distress. Along with the other doctors and expert technicians of his future time, he calls it “Leaked memory syndrome,” and defines it as “a malady of the human condition in its present historic phase”, explaining that “Reminders of our discarded lives can not [sic] yet be completely blocked [...]” (5). Yet as his story unfolds, the novel reveals that what the state sees as an inability to adapt on the part of some of its citizens in fact affords a clearer analysis of the injustices that prevail.

If designated disposable bodies are crushed for their essence to revive the privileged and enable their sleep in *The Marrow Thieves*, then in *Nostalgia*, it seems at first that the patterns are reversed. In this future society, the rich in the First World, beyond the “Long Border” (12) that separates them from a devastated Mas-kinia, can pay to discard their old lives, renovating their bodies and their minds into



new, more pleasing forms for longer term survival, while the poor and the young are doomed to live and die a single life. These local inequities are troubling enough in their many implications for thinking about human identity and social justice. However, a more sinister story is gradually revealed, as both Sina and his patient, Smith, learn that they too, as previous inhabitants of the colony, Maskinia, have been involuntarily transformed through this process, treated as disposable lives and deprived of their previous identities in pre-emptive strikes to ensure the supposed security of the colonial state. Years earlier, when Amirul, described as “The Warrior” in Sina’s journal (written secretly after he learns the truth) had arrived on a secret mission from Maskinia, he was captured and disappeared, to emerge years later as the fictional creation (named Presley Smith) of the sinister Dr. Arthur Axe. Sina too has a manufactured past and a new, prolonged life courtesy of Dr. Axe. Only later does Sina learn that he is (or was originally) Amirul’s cousin, Elim, an idealistic doctor and teacher who was also made to disappear when he travelled to the West to negotiate Amirul’s release in a prisoner exchange many years ago (222).

In other words, the new technology enabling the erasure of earlier identities in the service of prolonging life also works as a military device for making pre-emptive strikes against anything imagined to be a threat to the current order. The Orwellian echoes of *1984*, possibly signaled by the new last name, “Smith,” assigned to Amirul, seem very clear. This is a society that employs a form of doublespeak in casting the total obliteration of memory as a blessing rather than a curse. Its employment of tactics for destroying memory and use of computer screens to monitor thinking are more advanced, but work on the same principles as the systems employed in *1984*. Ironically, Sina feels nostalgia for the false memories implanted by Dr. Axe (55). What he feels for Maskinia is more complex and changes during the course of his discoveries. In contrast to his own mercenary relationship with Joanie, he imagines Maskinia as a place of warm communal attachments and shared purpose, if not without its own gender-based violence, food insecurities, hazardous waste (courtesy of a defective nuclear reactor made in Canada), and fears of imminent attack.

Sina (Elim in an earlier life) is both a version of Dr. Frankenstein, in the work he currently performs, which links him to Arthur Axe, and also, like Smith, a version of Shelley’s Creature, himself the creation of Axe (whom he calls “the mysterious Author X” [182]) before he learns his actual name). Of X’s creations he writes “there is one signature this author leaves, where he deliberately, a conceited god, gives himself away—the sophisticated, cunning allusions that don’t sound quite right (51). They can be found in both Smith’s and Sina’s profiles, emphasizing their patchworked composition.² Both Dimaline and Vassanji express a deep suspicion of where humanity’s technological inventiveness is taking the human race and the earth on which we depend for our lives. In *Nostalgia*, just as the old individual self

² Of Smith, Sina writes: “It looked as though more than one résumé or personality had been scrambled together” (26). There is a mistake in Sina’s biography, listing him as born in Yellowknife, Yukon, but Yellowknife is not in Yukon (28).



is cut off from access to the new, until those constructed borders are breached by a mysterious phrase, “It’s midnight, the lion is out” (1), so the world of a future Toronto, in which the action takes place, is separated from the devastated third world colony of Maskinia by a rigidly policed border. Sina writes: “That war-torn country lies safely away from us behind the Long Border, and yet it never ceases to preoccupy us” (12). He continues: “It’s our Other, our Id [...] our constant dark companion on the bright path of our progress” (12). Nuclear devastation, hunger, extreme poverty, all appear to be confined behind that Border, which is policed not just by the military and its surveillance systems but also by a media that maintains its racist justifications and encourages public complacency in the West. Civilized and savage construct one another; indeed, the obnoxious television host calls Maskinia, Barberia (recalling Canada’s previous government’s invocation of “barbaric customs”). The colonial relation of “intimate enemy” identified by Ashis Nandy, morphs with technological interventions into ever more sophisticated forms, as Sina initially internalizes and expresses the implanted racisms and beliefs that characterize his Toronto world, until his leaking memory gives him access to fragments of his lost self. Through the stories of Sina, Smith, and the journalist, Holly Chu, the novel shows how, “under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred” (Mbembe 40).

Their stories complicate binaries of Us and Them in troubling ways. Sina learns he was wrong in assuming that “Progress proceeds one way –forward” (123). In an effort to evade the ever-present surveillance and preserve a record of his story, he reverts to handwriting, turning to the old ways as do the central characters in *The Marrow Thieves*. Just as *The Marrow Thieves* is ultimately concerned with the entangled health of the soul of a people and the individual persons who comprise it, so *Nostalgia* asks, through Sina: “Can the soul (or the heart) be transmitted across generations?” (85). By the end of his story, and through its continuities with that of the journalist Holly Chu, it seems possibly so. The book’s epigraph from the *Aeneid* first poses this question through its depiction of “spirits destined to live a second life/in the body.” Different theories of reincarnation, derived from Hinduism and Buddhism, motivate other characters in the text (94), further complicating Sina’s secular story and its investigations of how past traumas and ideals may survive into the present.

In *Nostalgia*, as in *The Marrow Thieves*, the technologies of the future reproduce (and possibly represent) the colonial strategies of control, taken to a higher level. Just as the Residential and colonial schools took children from families at an early age, cut them off from language and tradition, and instilled new understandings of their identity, as lesser others, so Elim and Amirul’s consciences were voided so that they could become colonialism’s “mimic men”: the ideal immigrants who express and share colonialism’s willful amnesia about the violence of colonization in return for a small part of its privilege. Yet that amnesia is leaky and memories return to challenge the view of Canada as a multicultural utopia. Those memories are not, however, a nostalgic return to an idealized past but only fragments resonant with loss. In the end, both Sina and Smith choose death over rejuvenation into new false identities. Two other characters choose suicide in search of a better life, one



through the new technology, the other through a spiritual belief in reincarnation. Sina keeps asking himself why, when he has everything a person could need, he is not happy. Radha, the one character in *Nostalgia* who generates happiness (204) believes “all life is connected” (210) and shows Sina “alternative ways of perceiving the world” (211) beyond his own “materialist faith” (211). He can acknowledge her views but “cannot quite understand them (211). What he learns is what Dionne Brand’s poet-speaker claims in her long poem *Inventory*: “happiness is not the point really it’s a marvel, / an accusation in our time [...]” (100). Although Brand’s poem celebrates the “marvel” when it unexpectedly appears, within the global contexts of destruction invoked by her poem, even happiness functions more powerfully as an “accusation”.

4. ANDRÉ ALEXIS’S *FIFTEEN DOGS*: IMAGINING BEYOND MASTERY

If Indigenous people and Maskinians are denied full humanity according to Eurocentric standards, and treated as disposable people in these texts, then dogs fulfill this function in *Fifteen Dogs*. To turn from Sina’s dystopian Toronto to Alexis’s apologue, *Fifteen Dogs*, is to turn to a different way of engaging similar questions about the meaning of life, the nature and value of happiness, and especially the nature of human consciousness. As the novel’s epigraph from Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to a Dog” suggests, the central question in this novel is “why?” – “why is there day, why must night come [...]”. To pose this question, *Fifteen Dogs* first asks: what if? What if dogs were granted the human consciousness necessary to ask Neruda’s question? What light might such an intervention throw on the conventionally understood borders separating the divine, the human, and the canine? This novel’s *novum* involves a wager between Apollo and Hermes made in a contemporary Toronto tavern. Arguing in “ancient Greek,” they speculate about “the nature of humans” (13). Wondering “what it would be like if animals had human intelligence” (14), and arguing whether such an attribute would be a “difficult gift” (Hermes) or “an occasionally useful plague” (Apollo), they grant “human intelligence” (15) to the fifteen random dogs they find in a clinic nearby. Their test for winning the wager is whether or not any one of the dogs granted such a gift will die happy.

At a time when several African-descendent writers are choosing to locate African gods in North American settings, as Nalo Hopkinson does in *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Alexis chooses ancient Greek gods for his intervention and the classical apologue for his literary form. Even more so than Vassanji, Alexis has always refused stereotyping as either an immigrant or a racialized writer. He claims this Greco-Roman heritage for himself and feels free to imagine present-day Toronto as the laboratory for their experiment. This novel is intensely local in that it takes place entirely in Toronto, for which local maps appear at the front of the text. Yet it is also global in that it imports Greek gods to influence a local story, incorporates their planetary perspectives, and asks questions about the meaning of life that are generally accepted as universal. Alexis suggests that any city is “a correlative of the minds that made it” (91). His fifteen dogs and the humans they encounter reveal



the imagination of the city as he conceives it, as experienced from a dog's eye view, in which smells take precedence over other modes of engagement.

Both the dogs' relations among themselves and their relations to humans are upset by the gods' experiment, but I would argue that even more than a new language and a new form of thinking, the deepest change for the dogs stems from the gods' careless decision to allow them to retain their memories. As in Dimaline's and Vassanji's texts, memory plays a dual role as both an enabling and an inhibiting resource, depending on how it is mobilized to deal with change. Previously established borders between canine and human become confused with the god's gift, and memory intensifies this confusion. The dogs remember, and then increasingly think they remember, what it feels like to be a dog without this new gift.

Certain dimensions of dog experience remain unchanged. Working through his unhappiness, Atticus realizes he still has key elements of the canine that make him a dog: he has his senses; his physical self is unchanged. Using his new human intelligence, he concludes that the canine in him was "being obscured by the new thinking, the new perspectives, the new words" (93). These new elements cloud his ability to access his old self, which he increasingly recalls with a crippling nostalgia. If language proves the key to home in Dimaline's and Vassanji's novels, then it is language that Atticus believes denies him the old ways of being.

The text may be read as inviting a collision between allegorical and posthumanist modes of reading. As in conventional apologues, the dogs function as analogues for human tendencies. But the text's insistence on the qualities of dogs that they still exhibit makes it difficult to see them as simply symbols for something else. Humans and dogs may both be animals but in this text, there is an insistence on dogs as their own kind of animal. There is so much of them that still belongs to the world of dogs, and distinguishes them from humans, that they are still dogs, even if they are dogs placed in a peculiarly difficult situation. In particular, while each has been a companion animal with a human "master" before the transformation, that role is not seen as defining in this text. Despite generations of domestication, these dogs do not on the whole see their relations with humans as either definitive or even primary, even though some of the intertexts their experiences suggest may privilege that relation.

Once granted human intelligence, the dogs may remind readers of Franz Kafka's Red Peter from the story, "A Report to an Academy", as discussed by J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*. There is a similar insistence on the animality shared by animals and humans as well as a certain respect for their embodied difference. *Fifteen Dogs* might also be read as in part a response to the first question explored in Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003). Haraway asks: "1) how might an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously" (3). This question seems most relevant to the relationship between the human Nira and the dog Majnoun but otherwise does not seem to be centrally what *Fifteen Dogs* explores. Its central interest seems to lie in the reciprocal relations between mortality and creativity. Yet the question of embodied identity and what Haraway calls "naturecultures" (1, 3) certainly inflects this text's



attitudes to ethics, reciprocity, and art. If the story of Majnoun and Nira seems to suggest the ethics of what Haraway terms elsewhere “making kin,” then the story of the opportunistic dog Benjy shows its limits. Yet even here, Majnoun and Nira have a reciprocal relationship that is described as particular to these two individuals. It may carry potential for expansion into Haraway’s ethic but it is still far from her claim that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time) [...]” (“Anthropocene” 162). Although we are told that belonging matters deeply to Prince, he copes best of all the dogs with his exile from the pack and with his new life as essentially a masterless dog. Prince seems to be the dog most comfortable in his dual identity as dog and poet, taking delight in all aspects of his world, his new language, and the opportunities it affords him for learning.

Through dramatizing the dilemma of dogs endowed with a puzzling change in their consciousness and their circumstances, *Fifteen Dogs* reflects allegorically on the resistance to change that characterizes many reactions to globalization today. Because they still have their memories of how they experienced the world before the gods intervened, some of the dogs lament a loss of old ways and seek a return to a purer, simpler ideal of what it means to be a “real” dog, even if it requires “cleansing” (93) the pack of any dogs unable or unwilling to perform the pure canine anymore. Atticus, the pack leader, expresses these views most forcefully, concluding that the dogs must turn their backs on the gift and “learn to be dogs again” (32). Atticus has “a notion of what an ideal or pure dog might be: a creature without the flaws of thought. As time went on, he attributed to this pure being all the qualities he believed to be noble, sharp senses, absolute authority, unparalleled prowess at hunting, irresistible strength” (95-96). When he prays to the “Great Dog” (96) he believes must embody these qualities, Zeus eventually responds. The omniscient narrator explains: “the gods are compelled by rhythm –as is the universe, as are all the creatures in it” (96). In Atticus’s mind, purity of being and mastery are inextricably linked. Zeus appears to approve. When Atticus asks how he can be a better dog, Zeus explains that Atticus is no longer a dog, but adds: “You are mine and I pity your fate” (96). Despite the violence and suffering that Atticus’s obsession with what he has lost costs the other dogs and even himself, the narrative suggests that there is a certain nobility to his devotion to this lost cause and to what Alexis Shotwell, in another context, aptly terms “a purity politics of despair” (195).

In *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Shotwell suggests an ethos humans could use “to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene: roughly, the moment that humans worry that we have lost a natural state of purity or decide that purity is something we ought to pursue and defend” (3). Although she is addressing an environmental concern with a lost purity of the natural world, such an ethos of purity also seems appropriate to Atticus’s despair at his loss of an original canine purity, an understanding he is only able to conceive by virtue of his new human-derived self-consciousness. In other words, that purity is manufactured in retrospect, as a human desire for a lost innocent past. Throughout history, such obsessions with purity have functioned to validate various forms of group identity, usually taking recourse in nostalgia for a lost past or fall from grace. For Atticus, it



comes in the form of seeking to protect the purity of the dog, something he remembers (or thinks he does) yet feels he is losing as the new language takes hold. As Shotwell specifies, to be against purity, as she argues we should be, is “to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled and homogenous” (15). To attempt to embrace purity instead of recognizing complexity and complicity is to misrecognize the way things are. One might argue, for example, that for centuries, the fates of dogs and humans have been entwined. *Fifteen Dogs* recognizes these entanglements and shows that to seek such purity is a self-defeating endeavor, yet there is also an elegiac tone to the novel as a whole, which seems to lament the lost purity of a physical way of being in the world uncontaminated by self-consciousness and the awareness of time passing.

This ambivalence about human intelligence is expressed by every dog in the text except for Prince, who is the only dog to successfully combine the best of canine and human ways of sensing and knowing the world. Significantly, he is also the only dog not obsessed with either purity or mastery. A mutt himself, he is the only dog not born in Toronto, depicted as already in exile from a prairie paradise and his first human master, Kim, before his second exile from the pack of transformed dogs. Unlike the other dogs, he moves from human to human, retaining his independence and taking equal pleasure from composing poetry in the new language and in the delights of his senses, until vindictive Apollo deprives him of these and he has only his thoughts and his poetry left. But that is enough for Prince. He is grateful that he was given the ability to create this beautiful language, privileged to glimpse its depths, and hopeful that “it was a gift that could not be destroyed” (168). Feeling pleased, Hermes grants Prince a final gift. Hearing the voice he loved, “Prince’s soul was filled with joy” (171). As he bounds toward Kim, the narrative concludes with the assurance that “In his final moment on earth, Prince loved and knew that he was loved in return” (171). The stories of Prince and Majnoun explore the nature of love, affirming that despite the pain it causes it is infinitely more precious than the power wielded by the gods. As the narrator puts it: “On the one hand, power; on the other, love” (170). Just as the gods’ power is linked to their immortality, so the animal (human and dog) feelings of love are deeply entangled with their mortality and the inevitability of death. Love for Majnoun and Prince is not only tied to a particular person, but also entangled with the joy they feel in learning to communicate across differences: Majnoun in an evolving, reciprocal relation with Nira, and Prince through composing his fifteen poems commemorating the names of each of the dogs who together received the gift of this language.

In their early discussions, Apollo believes that “humans have no special merit, though they think themselves superior” (13). Hermes argues that “the human way of creating and using symbols is more interesting than, say, the complex dancing done by bees” (14). Although Apollo finds human language, when compared to that of the gods, to be “too vague” (14), Hermes counters that their communicational misunderstandings are at least “amusing” (14). The novel validates each of these contentions. The only human who seems at all admirable is also the only human who refuses to think herself superior to Majnoun. Readers have no access to the language of the gods. It appears to be too far beyond our limited capacities for understand-



ing. Prince's poetry is translated from the language of these dogs into English for the book's readers. For the other dogs, it shows that puns, linguistic play, and different levels of meaning may create both pleasure and annoyance according to the levels of receptivity in the listener. There is black humour and divine retribution in Benjy's hubris, which leads him to fatally misunderstand human behavior. His fate conforms to an idea of justice affirmed by Atticus and engineered by Zeus yet questioned by the agony of his death, manipulative and arrogant as he was. The unfairness of Majnoun's prolonged suffering further reinforces the arbitrariness of Fate as depicted in this text. Prince's god-inflected bodily suffering, and his endurance, recall the biblical story of Job. In recording fifteen deaths, each sad in its own way, the novel may be seen as an extended inquiry into the nature of mortality. From the beginning, Prince has reacted differently from the other dogs, feeling "as if he had discovered a new way of seeing, an angle that made all that he had known strange and wonderful" (27). His wonder sustains him through all his trials until Hermes rewards him in the end.

The novel asks to what extent the drive to purity is linked to the drive for mastery. The gods are obsessed with mastery. The price for losing the wager is to serve as slave to a master for a year. They struggle with the Fates over who has final mastery over the lives of mortals. Like the gods, the dogs are portrayed as dependent on hierarchy so that those who are dominant actually need those who are subordinate for the pack to function. When they purge themselves of the weakest members, the remaining dogs find their social cohesion weakened, because the powerful need the weak to maintain their kind of order. The text argues that the desire to dominate is ingrained: in Benjy, we are told it is "strong and instinctive and belonged to the unquellable depths of himself" (63-64). Even Majnoun assesses relations in this light. His most acrimonious disputes with Nira are about this matter. Where Alexis stands on this crucial question is unclear. His text wonders if something so deeply engrained in the human's animal nature, in that of dogs, and in that of the gods, can be loosened to develop the kind of transformative understandings of subjects and objects envisioned by Haraway. Such a question resonates even more deeply in the novel's linking of dominance to the males of both the human and dog species. The dogs assess the humans in terms of what they know about dogs. But whether Alexis endorses, critiques, or simply records these views is uncertain. Certainly gaps in inter-species and cross-species communication characterize much of this text. Yet each of the fictions analyzed in this article also finds hope in the transformative potential of the imagination even as they show how its power is feared by those who seek to exercise mastery.

5. CONCLUSION

In *Fifteen Dogs*, only the friendship and love that develop between Nira and Majnoun come close to answering what for Julietta Singh is the driving force of her 2018 book *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglement*: "What kind of subjects –and what kind of objects– can we be for ourselves and



for others if we loosen the hold of mastery?" (94). *Nostalgia* offers this as an open question, a challenge posed to Sina by Radha but never fully answered. *The Marrow Thieves* offers a solution through a return to North American indigenous languages and the alternative ontoepistemologies they enact. The central characters in *The Marrow Thieves* see first Miranda and then Isaac as holding the key to their survival –and their return to home– through their fluency in Cree. Although Isaac is not an Elder, Rose suggests: "The key doesn't have to be old, the language already is" (227). For Sina in *Nostalgia*, Smith's mysterious words that begin the novel, "IT'S MIDNIGHT, THE LION IS OUT" (1: capitalization in the original) provide the first clue, but it is not until Sina hears Smith speak a foreign language that he realizes this is "A language I felt instinctively I should remember and understand but didn't. The key was missing" (202). He finds the key through reading Amirul's diary. The search for the key to unlock the mystery and find a way home drives both these texts. For Rose and French, home will be made together in the unknown future. For Sina/Elim, it will come through regaining his memories, and handwriting his story to record them, before these memories kill him (252-254). *Nostalgia*, however, does not conclude with Sina's story but with Dr. Axe and his assistant, Tom, discussing Sina's decision to refuse the treatment that would have destroyed his memories but enabled him to survive. Axe asks what made Sina drop his successful career to "return home? What is home, after all?" (256). *Fifteen Dogs* does not use the language of the key nor does it seek answers in memory. But language, creativity, and the question of happiness are linked to questions of belonging as each dog wrestles with the change in destiny wrought by the caprice of the gods. I have argued that in negotiating risk, and considering the nature of mortality, each fiction turns to the roles of memory, creativity, and alternative forms of subjectivity and community in ensuring survival. The nation-state is both unable to contain global threats and is itself a danger in Dimaline's and Vassanji's texts, and irrelevant in Alexis's, yet the only alternatives they offer are retreats into small scale communities and art, retreats they posit as fragile yet necessary steps towards imagining alternative futures.

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MORE OR LESS HUMAN: RESILIENCE, VULNERABILITY, AND LOVE IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the question of what it means to be human in a post-human context. Tackling the quandary of whether there might be such a thing as post-human love, the article turns to recent trends in affect theory and critical approaches more broadly in order to understand what is at stake in developing a theoretical understanding of love itself. These issues are, in turn, analyzed through Dionne Brand's 2014 novel *Love Enough*. This analysis strengthens the article's argument that fictions of globality produced in Canada play a role in challenging the ongoing reconsolidation of the normative modes of human embodiment enforced under neoliberal forms of governance.

KEYWORDS: globality, affect theory, post-humanism, love, Dionne Brand.

MÁS O MENOS HUMANO: RESILIENCIA, VULNERABILIDAD
Y AMOR EN TIEMPOS NEOLIBERALES

RESUMEN

Este artículo intenta responder la pregunta de qué significa ser humano en un contexto posthumano. Al examinar el dilema de si podría haber algo como el amor poshumano, el artículo trata más ampliamente el pensamiento reciente sobre la teoría del afecto y el pensamiento crítico para comprender lo que está en juego en el desarrollo de una interpretación teórica del amor en sí mismo. Estos problemas, a su vez, se analizan por medio de la novela *Love Enough* de Dionne Brand, publicada en 2014. Este análisis refuerza el argumento del artículo de que las ficciones de globalidad producidas en Canadá juegan un papel en el desafío a la reconsolidación actual de los modos normativos de representación humana aplicados bajo las formas neoliberales de gobierno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: globalidad, teoría del afecto, post-humanismo, amor, Dionne Brand.

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This essay is an outcome of an urgent project in the contemporary moment of new political and social barriers to movement and to participation in something like a democratic order. It is a moment in which I am interrogating Canada's role in current global shifts through literary texts and, in particular, through Dionne Brand's 2014 novel *Love Enough*. As I witness new, disturbing political alignments formulating themselves internationally, I find myself wondering once again about the ways in which the bodies of human animals are organized, about how that organization continues to prioritize some bodies ahead of others, and about whether self-organization through a revitalized concept of love might play a role in contesting oppression. Canadian fictions of globality play a role, I argue, in interrogating the ongoing reconsolidation of a normative mode of human embodiment that this essay seeks to challenge. My subtitle, "resilience, vulnerability, and love in neoliberal times," is a signal of, I hope, a shift in the direction of my recent work toward affirmation and constructive ways of finding and building communities in spite of the odds. The question that guides this thinking, and at which I will arrive in full by the end of this piece is as follows: is there such a thing as post-human love? It may sound like a simple question, but I contend that it is a difficult one, and one with high stakes, too.

In this essay, I am interested in the ways in which the category of the human can be used as a label of discursive control, or as a way to wield power in a global order that uses power with perhaps more firmness than ever. What power does the concept of the human hold in a world of new walls and barriers? In another article linked to this one, I quote trans writer and performer Ivan E. Coyote, who, in their 2014 collaborative project with Rae Spoon, entitled *Gender Failure*, writes the following: "I get really tired of being mistaken for a monster" (210; see Dobson, "Untold"). Who is mistaken for a monster? When and under what circumstances? What does that mis-takenness mean? The word "monster," etymologically, comes to English from Latin via French: a *monstrum* is a divine omen or a sign, something out of the ordinary. The word's meaning has shifted over time to signify an unusual, non-human animal, something monstrous, negative, shunned. The term is linked to the word "demonstrate," as well, for to demonstrate is to reveal an omen or a sign. What, then, does it demonstrate to be monstrous? What does Ivan E. Coyote's supposed monstrosity reveal, demonstrated as it is in their case in each and every gender binary space –spaces into which they do not and cannot easily fit? And what, in turn, is revealed any and every time that the body of a human animal (or indeed any animal) is marked as monstrous? The trope of perceiving oneself to be somehow less-than-human is remarkably common in contemporary writing. What, discursively, is at stake in demonstrating which humans are humans –and which humans are somehow less, other, or monsters?

The insights of people working in the terrain of post-humanism might quickly note, as Rosi Braidotti does, that the label of "human" is one that has its own history, one that indicates many things to us that are not neutral. For Braidotti, the term is definitively tied to the European Enlightenment, and hence carries a great deal of euro-centric baggage. To imagine that the "human" as a straightforward term in a global order is, following Braidotti's logic, highly suspect. She documents



how the term goes right back to Leonardo da Vinci's Vetruvian Man, and shows that da Vinci's and his contemporaries' assessments of what constituted the human, or the human norm, continues to underwrite what it means, today, to be human. When Frantz Fanon writes, then, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), that "the black is not a man" (8), he observes a troublesome norm, a norm that the concept of the human can indicate: the term "man" has been defined, *a priori*, to exclude a man who is black. And when, in *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), Glen Coulthard builds on Fanon's thinking in order to critique the politics of Indigenous recognition, arguing that recognition by the state continues to rely on the antecedent settler community in order to simultaneously grant and delimit Indigenous selfhood, he notes in the process precisely how controlling the dominant concept of the human can be. He suggests how the settler human, which has granted itself the status of determining who is human enough to perform acts of recognition, then uses the concept in order to limit Indigenous bodies at the very same moment at which recognition occurs. When such Indigenous bodies seek to align themselves outside of the liberal, capitalist order imposed upon the northern communities that Coulthard studies, they are deemed to be other, lesser, not-quite-fully human.

This essay, then, attempts to work through the problematics of the human for the bodies of human animals operating in Canada today and to push back against the restrictions that the term can impose, even to the point of embracing a post-human articulation of the body. This situation, in my view, is one that is vital. While it is a potentially vast topic, I limit myself in my thinking to specifically how the trope of the less-than-human operates in texts, and to how, in turn, one might respond to that trope. This line of reasoning leads me to the question of love in Dionne Brand's *Love Enough*, but requires a series of other routes in order to get to that point. When Ivan E. Coyote notes that they are routinely taken to be "a monster" rather than a human, for instance, they note exactly where the limitations to a politics of recognition might lie and begin to suggest what lies beyond the human as we have so far known it. In their case, the limits of recognition fail Coyote at the moment when gender dimorphism is not only expected, but also enforced through mechanisms like segregated washrooms and government documentation systems. In other cases, the boundaries of the body might be enforced in other, still violent manners. In her study *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics* (2017), Libe García Zarranz writes of the War on Terror's "climate of fear" as follows: in this environment, she states, "endless references to toxic bacteria, virus, disease, contagion, and suspicious liquids have permeated both political and cultural discourse as a strategy to manage those disposable, and often racialized, populations, such as the refugee or the migrant", in other words, those "who do not conform to normative conceptualizations of the subject" (22). Bodies that fall outside of the normative, she argues, are policed in a variety of ways, all of which serve to hierarchize and prioritize more normative bodies ahead of others in a necropolitical strategy of determining late capitalism's winners and losers. In invoking this contemporary climate, García Zarranz echoes others, like Elizabeth Povinelli, who argues that, under neoliberalism, "any form of life that is not organized on the basis of market values is characterized as a potential security risk" (22). In this neoliberal climate,



the priority falls upon organizing bodies in terms of the market, and then in harshly excluding those bodies that are deemed to be less market-worthy. William E. Connolly puts the situation as follows: “neoliberalism is a form of biopolitics that seeks to produce a nation of regular individuals, even as its proponents often act as if they are merely describing processes that are automatic and individual behaviour that is free” (59). What happens, however, to those bodies that cannot be produced as “regular individuals”? What about us “irregular” individuals? What of those bodies that lie distinctively, even defiantly, outside of such a “regular” economy? Therein lies the core of my investigation.

The Canadian framework in which I write this article –and within which this special issue is couched– importantly signals Canada’s insider / outsider status in a global neoliberal politics headed by a faltering United States; it is, I find, fertile ground for theorization. While I concerned myself previously with developing a transnational framework for my studies, this new work shifts the field (see Dobson, *Transnational*). I concern myself in different ways here with four particularly difficult, intersecting, axes of oppression: first, I concern myself with the gendered body, and in particular statements like Ivan E. Coyote’s that demonstrate ongoing dehumanization, even in the wake of a “benevolent” nation-state that has sought to recognize and include genders beyond the binary. Second, I am concerned with migration; both of these issues firmly enter into Brand’s novel, as well as in my other investigations (see Dobson, “Neoliberalism”). Third, I consider the ways in which the technologically post-human or cyborg body might rescript what it means to live in late capitalism. Here, literary investigations like Larissa Lai’s *Automaton Biographies* (2009) and Douglas Coupland’s *Player One* (2010) extend how the human body has been thought up to this point, all the while showing the limitations to how the post-human body exists in relation to the marketplace that seeks to contain it (see Dobson, “Dystopia”).¹ Finally, I retain an ongoing concern with Indigenous discourses, such as Lee Maracle’s book *Talking to the Diaspora* (2015), which seeks acknowledgment of the ways in which diasporic bodies in Canada – a category that Maracle uses to include all non-Indigenous Canadians – have attempted to hijack the notion of the human in order to place Indigenous bodies outside of or adjacent to it.

In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003), Judith Butler argues that “life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it” (43). Resisting the narratological, as well as teleological directives placed upon the body might be one way to reconceive of the human, or even to conceive beyond the human. Elizabeth Povinelli, in her work, looks for what she terms “spaces of otherwise” (6), thinking that, in a slightly different vein, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice echoes in his new monograph, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), when he asks readers to “imagine otherwise”. Conceiving beyond the human as we have thus far known it, however, presents us with myriad new challenges.

¹ One might similarly read the convergence of the characters Bedri and Germain with the technology of the automobile in Brand’s *Love Enough*.



Braidotti notes that technological capitalism is post-anthropocentric in that it seeks to include all aspects of human life within the marketplace, hence de-prioritizing human life in the manner upheld by Enlightenment discourse. This de-prioritization is undertaken in the name of exploiting the body for new, market-driven purposes, and may well impede the flourishing of human animals. At the same time, Braidotti observes that the challenge “consists in grabbing the opportunities offered by the decline of the unitary subject position upheld by Humanism” (54). How might the human be resisted, or even overthrown, in a manner that does not align with the dictates of technologically driven market forces? How, in other words, might a careful dismantling of the human be used not to magnify the monstrosity of the market-embedded body, but rather to create possibilities for rupture and renewal?

My provisional answer to many of the bleak portrayals of what it means to be less-than-fully human, or what it means to be unrecognized as a sufficient form of life by the dominant forces governing today, is to turn to the concept of love. While we might seek this concept in many places, I turn here to Dionne Brand’s novel *Love Enough*. I argue that the novel stages particular forms of love in order to locate the affective elements needed to confront injustice and maintain political attachments. In order to do so, I first turn to the anti-racist feminist thinker Sara Ahmed, who is deeply suspicious of love. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), one of the most powerful analyses of the book arrives when Ahmed notes the ways in which hate groups in online and other environments habitually declare themselves to be based upon love. So, for instance, she notes the ways in which racist Aryan organizations declare themselves to be, in fact, groups devoted to the love of a so-called traditional society that is perceived as being under threat. According to the logic that she analyzes, it is not so much that racist groups hate particular minorities, but, rather, in their view it is because they love a supposed historically pure version of their country that they seek to expel minority groups. Ahmed notes not simply that this declaration is a perverse reversal of what we might understand love to be, but also that such moments reveal that the logic of love can be used to exclude as much as to include different bodies. Love, in other words, can be dangerous, and so I hope to use the term advisedly in considerations of globality and its discontents. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed focuses upon the ways in which discourses of happiness (of which love is perhaps the most obvious example) are used to reproduce social norms: the happy housewife, the happy family, and so on. She identifies herself instead with figures whom she calls the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, and the melancholic migrant, and argues against happiness because of its frequent complicity with violent forms of normativity.

Indeed, there is a growing recent academic literature on questions of love that can open up what might be at stake in Brand’s novel. A range of thinkers has recently considered the question of love, from Alain Badiou and Michael Hardt to bell hooks and Lauren Berlant. For Badiou, contemporary concepts of love tend to be very shallow, limited to concepts of romance and marriage scripts, when in fact it is something that philosophy needs in order to innovate, to find the spaces in which we might continue to hope (11). In this context, he asserts, we need a new conception of love, one that is “an existential project: to construct a world from a



decentered point of view other than of my mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity” (25). This love is risky: it is, in Badiou’s own sense, an event, and it involves the possibility of the losses that we may have experienced as lovers. Yet love, for Badiou, is a means of producing a truth; it is a truth procedure (38). As such, “to love is to struggle” (104): one loves because one seeks the possibility of the construction of a truth, a truth that is outside of the solipsistic, individualistic self of liberalism: love is, indeed, a space of possibility.² For Michael Hardt, similarly, love contains within it the possibility of change. He writes that “a political love must be a revolutionary force that radically breaks with the structures of social life we know, overthrowing its norms and institutions [...] it must provide mechanisms of lasting association and stable social bonds” (6). This love is non-normative, embracing of difference and the nomadic Deleuzian structures that Hardt invokes; he wishes for new institutions of love that facilitate and organize “the return of joyful, beneficial social encounters” (12) in lieu of the stasis that neoliberal normativities generate. As such, to love is to open and expand beyond the world as we have known it and it is a key to reconceiving how we might relate to the global flows of late capitalism.

Bell hooks’ conception of love is, in contrast, a very broad one. hooks notes that social justice movements tend to emphasize a version of a love ethic (xix) and she posits that such an ethic can inform our intellectual endeavours as well. In this context, she suggests that “we would all love better if we used it as a verb” (4), in the context of lives of becoming that require a forgiving heart if we are to make change. As such, she suggests that “there can be no love without justice” (19; see 30), and the tandem of love and justice permeate her thinking. She argues that contemporary capitalism is incompatible with many forms of love (72), and, as such, suggests that love may, indeed, maintain a revolutionary power. Quoting the monk and writer Thomas Merton, she goes on to argue that we cannot be fully human without loving (75-76). To love in a revolutionary way is to break the bonds of inhuman domination, to wrest autonomy from the instrumental logic of late capitalism, and, as such, to become a posthuman subject shedding the skin of liberal humanism. It is to move away from normative ideals and to dwell in possibility.

Lauren Berlant, though, is less optimistic and will lead us back to Brand and, in turn, Ahmed and my opening question in this piece. “[W]ho is to say,” Berlant writes, “whether a love relation is real or is really something else, a passing fancy or trick someone plays (on herself, on another) in order to sustain a fantasy?” (7). Love, Berlant notes, is already circumscribed; it has become “a way of imagining particular utopias of gender and sex” defined by western mass culture (17). Berlant sees love as structured by melancholia, by an unshifting attachment to an object that may provide pleasure as part of the ego’s search for ideal objects to replace forms of primary loss. These narratives, too, have been subsumed to the narratives of capital:

² One book that is very much worth a further discussion elsewhere, and that falls under that umbrella of liberal thinking, is Martha Nussbaum’s *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (2015), published by Belknap Press.



“the reduction of life’s legitimate possibility to one plot”, the plot of the bourgeois family analyzed by Marx, Berlant argues, “is the source of romantic love’s terrorizing, coercive, shaming, manipulative, or just diminishing effects –on the imagination as well as on practice” (87). But here an important distinction is key: Berlant opens up space between love and what she terms “romantic love,” leaving the possibility that there may be more to love than meets the eye.³ She concludes by noting that “despite everything, desire / love continues to exert a utopian promise to discover a form that is elastic enough to manage what living throws at lovers” (112). In spite of severe doubts, then, love remains as a concept that recent theorists whose thinking rests within the frames of globality do not seem to be able to shake; indeed, it may be one of the few concepts or affects that maintains a sense of constructive possibility.

It is at this juncture that Dionne Brand stages her intervention with the novel *Love Enough*. This novel reflects, I think, critic Paul Barrett’s recent claim in his book *Blackening Canada* (2015) that Brand’s work rewrites losses and absences “as containing the conditions of possibilities for new subjectivities” (27). Brand’s lengthy history of writing poetry, fiction, and non-fiction about diasporic and queer bodies, in this novel, seems to move very clearly toward an inquiry into the intertwined political and personal possibilities of love. The novel can be described as a series of interconnected character vignettes, each of which touch, in one way or another, on the question of love. There are, in essence, three linked dyads of characters. First is the dyad of June and Sydney, middle-aged lovers of very different political stripes; second is the friendship between two young men, Bedri and Germain; and third is the friendship between two young women, Lia and Jaspreet. Other characters –family, lovers– touch these three dyads, yet they remain the core of the novel. The first dyad, on which I will be focusing here, consists of the relationship between practical, pragmatic Sydney, who works at a retail outlet in Barrie, Ontario, north of Toronto, and the political, nostalgic June, who works at an archive for women’s history in Toronto. The key question for these two lovers is whether Sydney’s pragmatism suffices for June, who wishes only to receive “one embrace each day and one kindness each week” from her lover (113-14).

Early in the novel, Sydney and June argue during a run along the lakeshore. During this run, the argument, and the subsequent silence that follows upon it, the narrative reasons that love is what counters the toxic effects and affects of the world. Brand writes:

No argument in the world is ever resolved. Resolving would suggest some liquid in which arguments could be immersed, perhaps love. But it must be love enough. The consistency of the mixture would have to be a greater portion of love. So many decilitres of love to dissolve so many millilitres of the other stuff. And the trouble is, this “other stuff,” this toxic material, is sometimes flammable. These other ingredients are random and personal, like childhood or desire and they don’t necessarily

³ A future conversation might also analyze Luce Irigaray’s *The Way of Love* (2002), translated by Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluhàcek, and published in 2002 by Continuum, in this context.



mix well with love. Love is not as durable or pliable as one is led to think anyway. Love can be indefinable all on its own. (5)

That love is required in greater proportions than the toxic affects around us, no doubt, reflects the world that we inhabit. It is in this context that Sydney and June later find themselves arguing in the morning over something half-heard on the radio: June hears the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio announcer stating that the City of Toronto has plans to send a hundred musicians to the intersection of Jane and Finch in an act of musical compassion and beauty, while Sydney immediately believes that the radio has claimed that it will send a hundred police officers, given that neighbourhood and intersection's long reputation for being troubled. Even though June turns out to be right, the question of how to deal with a world of toxic affects remains unresolved: we may celebrate, as I do, the invocation of music, but is that act of love merely a drop in a sea of toxins? Or is it, in some sense, love enough?

Such questions animate June and Sydney's relationship. June's history is one that is filled with lovers, many of them refugees and revolutionaries thrown into Toronto by the global flows of colonization. This history has left her with a changed vocabulary, one that leads her to hesitate to ever use the word love. Her experiences have made her wonder if, as lovers, we expect our "own reflection in the lover's face" (8), every love becoming instead a misrecognition. As such, she is not quite in love with Sydney, and is vague about her past, about her different lovers –Tamil, Nicaraguan, Chilean. She refuses many of the conventions of love and intimacy and finds, notes the narrator, that "it's difficult to say anything conclusive about love" (55). Love changes; it exists in time. In the 1970s and 80s, for June, it meant sleeping with refugees (56), but, over time, it evolves to become something bigger than the personal. The quotidian, at the end of the day, becomes banal: June remembers her Tamil lover, now living in London, bringing the narrator to note that "love is love. It wears off. At the end there is a certain wonder at how you had become caught up in the domestic drama of it all" (115). For Sydney, on the other hand, sex means a great deal; she is "June's first lover without a cause" (133). Sydney is described as the lover who "wants to risk all of it, like now" for June (30). Her love of June is "simple" (173), sexual, and bold, but not romantic in the ways that June, perhaps nostalgically, expects.

Late in *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed returns to the question of love. Her analysis of happiness has shown that normativity is generated through invocations of happiness, particularly through oft-repeated scripts like the everyday statement "I just want you to be happy", through which a speaker invokes a particular concept of happiness. This happiness, Ahmed argues, is based upon normativities that exclude feminist, queer, and migrant bodies, inter alia. It is a happiness that is used in order to control others. Unhappy bodies, Ahmed continues, are problematic and are frequently read as being at fault, as lying outside of the rightful quest for happiness. It is in this context that love resurfaces: Ahmed argues that the politics of marginalized bodies involve veering from the script or path of happiness. And, moreover, "if to challenge the right to happiness is to deviate from the straight



path, then political movements involve sharing deviation with others. There is joy, wonder, hope, and love in sharing deviation. If to share deviation is to share what causes unhappiness, even joy, wonder, hope, and love are ways of *living with* rather than *living without* unhappiness” (196; italics in original). The invocation of love is important in this passage: the statement appears at first to be a contradiction to her earlier distrust. However, Ahmed suggests that we need to be specific about what it is that we mean by love. She sees and attends to the risk of love; similarly, she distances it from happiness and reclaims it from hetero-patriarchal racial normativity. The scripts of love, instead, must be multiple.

What, then, is the final articulation of love that Brand leaves us with in *Love Enough*? June and Sydney, after a night of sex, wake up and begin arguing, first about a proposed pipeline project, and then about their relationship. The argument revolves around the definition of love. Sydney tells June that “you think it’s deep, that’s why you can’t do it” (173), while June feels like “all the people in [the] world had agreed on a lethal definition of love. It was full of rapture and betrayal and intrigue and she was no good at that” (173). The definition of love opens up, June accusing Sydney of being “superficial” (174) in her conception, while Sydney accuses June of obfuscation. June confronts Sydney for her failure to fulfill the request for an embrace per day and a kindness per week, while Sydney says to June that she “collect[s] sadness” (178). The conversation falls to silence; “it is the silence of ending” (179) and, possibly, the end of their relationship. And yet, Sydney realizes as she soothes June, “someone has to” collect sadness (179). Their incompatible visions of love may not, in the end, signal an impasse. The book ends with the following: “[t]here is nothing universal or timeless about this love business, Sydney now suspects for the first time. It is hard if you really want to do it right” (180).

The forms of love that we witness in *Love Enough*, I contend, offer a possible glimpse of post-human love, and a way to think through the trouble of being labeled more or less human. As such, the novel is evidence of a fiction of globality produced in Canada that is a response to a troubled world. The question of post-human love might demonstrate what is at stake when some bodies are labeled monstrous, in other words. When Sydney and June wrestle with their relationship, they are, in part, wrestling with something akin to Michael Warner’s worry in *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) that queer love is rife for being appropriated back into liberal visions of normalcy (and the human) via marriage scripts and the narratives of the “good life” against which thinkers of affect like Lauren Berlant write. For there to be love enough, in other words, to counter the toxins of neoliberalism is insufficient: it must not only exist in adequate quantities, to extend Brand’s metaphor, but also in the right formula. The formula for love that has been promoted thus far may well be part of the toxic mix –and hence be dysfunctional for Brand’s struggling lovers. Post-human love, on the other hand, might pick up from queer studies and affect theory in order to push back at the scripts of recognition that delimit and constrain the non-normative body. In *Gender Failure*, the resolution that comes, limited though it might be, arrives when Ivan E. Coyote and Rae Spoon both learn, slowly, and through many acts of suffering, that their trans bodies are bodies whose worth is intrinsic, rather than determined by the world around them, the world that



deems them to be only more or less human. In that dynamic, I wonder anew, and to conclude: can there be such a thing as post-human love? I hope that there can be, and that we might begin to usher it into the world.

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MASCULINITY IN THE METANARRATIVE OF THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR: SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S TRANSNATIONAL CRITIQUE*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a feminist critique of the globalized metanarrative on the so-called 'war on terror,' through an analysis –from decolonial and feminist perspectives– of Shauna Singh Baldwin's short story collection *We Are not in Pakistan* (2007). Focusing on the contrasting depictions of masculinity portrayed in a selection of her stories, I intend to reveal the complexities in the gendering of a metanarrative that attempts to mobilize affects of fear and revenge. In contradiction (that is, as counter-discourse) to the dominant rhetoric of stereotypical Islamophobia, Baldwin's characters point out surprising comparisons and parallelisms across cultural differences, revealing common links and shared affectivity among characters of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Vocally political, her narratives provide a transCanadian perspective on violent neoimperialism after 9/11.

KEYWORDS: War on terror, masculinity, neoimperialism, 9/11, Shauna Singh Baldwin.

LA MASCULINIDAD EN LA METANARRATIVA DE LA GUERRA GLOBAL CONTRA EL TERROR: LA CRÍTICA TRANSNACIONAL DE SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una aproximación crítica a la metanarrativa globalizada de la llamada «guerra contra el terror», a través del análisis –desde perspectivas feministas y decoloniales– de la colección de relatos *We Are not in Pakistan* (2007) de Shauna Singh Baldwin. Centrándome en las diversas descripciones de masculinidades en una selección de relatos de esta colección, mi intención es desvelar el complejo mecanismo de género que opera en esta metanarrativa basada en los afectos del miedo y la venganza. En contradicción (es decir, como contradiscurso) con la retórica dominante islamofóbica, los personajes de Baldwin establecen sorprendentes comparaciones y señalan paralelismos entre distintas culturas, exponiendo vínculos comunes y afectividades compartidas entre personajes de distinto origen étnico y racial. De carácter abiertamente político, los relatos de Baldwin proporcionan una perspectiva transcanadiense sobre el neoimperialismo violento tras el 11-S.

PALABRAS CLAVE: guerra contra el terror, masculinidad, neoimperialismo, 11-S, Shauna Singh Baldwin.

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The authors we celebrate [...] were the stubborn ones who explored forbidden themes and unspeakable conflicts. The prose that is their legacy reminds us of much we prefer to forget.

Shauna SINGH BALDWIN, *Reluctant Rebellions*

Shauna Singh Baldwin's words above refer to the social (and political) responsibility of writers to bring uncomfortable 'truths' – "forbidden themes and unspeakable conflicts" – to the spotlight. In similar spirit Stuart Hall claimed that "the work that cultural studies has to do is mobilize everything it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, *profoundly and deeply anti-humane in their capacity to live with difference*" (18; emphasis added). I find this a most urgent task in the current necropolitical (see Mbembe) context that feeds directly on the epistemologies of interested ignorance that sustain racism and sexism (Sullivan and Tuana; Medina), preventing and in fact forbidding mutual respect and solidarity across acknowledged differences. In line with Jasmin Zine and Lisa K. Taylor, I firmly believe literary analysis helps us "learn to read the world through different regimes of truth" (14). The metanarrative of the war on terror constitutes a good terrain to study competing regimes of truth and how they are institutionalized. As Mona Baker has explained:

the choice of *terror* rather than *terrorism* [...] offers a good example of the discursive work required for the successful circulation and adoption of narratives in general and meta-narratives in particular. 'Terrorism' refers to one or more incidents that involve violence, with localized and containable impact. 'Terror', on the other hand, is a state of mind, one that can rapidly spread across boundaries and encompass all in its grip. It may be that a narrative must have this type of temporal and physical breadth, as well as sense of inevitability or inescapability, to qualify as a meta- or master narrative. *Terror* indexes these features much better than *terrorism*. (45)

Undoubtedly, 9/11 has become a totemic moment often used to mark the beginning of a new era, and the foundational mythical element of a narrative of terror, as Mona Baker has argued, "aggressively sustained and promoted through a myriad of channels across the entire world, thus rapidly acquiring the status of a super-narrative that cuts across geographical and national boundaries and directly impacts the lives of every one of us, in every sector of society" (45). Literary fiction is one of those channels, and, as Juanjo Bermúdez de Castro proposes, the literary critic should ask "to what extent 9/11 fictions become an active agent of acquiescence in the process of re-writing the historical event of 9/11 in concordance with biased geopolitical interests" (12). Given the high cost in lives this metanarrative produces, I believe it is necessary to offer "a direct challenge to the stories that sus-

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tain these patterns [of domination]” (Baker 6). In this paper I will examine Shauna Singh Baldwin’s counter-narratives to this dominant discourse in her collection of short stories *We Are not in Pakistan*, published in Canada in 2007, which has been described as “a study in cultural contrasts” (Reiswig n.p.).

Shauna Singh Baldwin was born in Montreal to Sikh parents, raised in India, and now living in Milwaukee (Wisconsin)¹. Her works offer surprising comparisons and parallelisms across cultural differences, revealing common links and shared affectivity among characters of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. This is not to suggest that differences are inconsequential in her fiction; on the contrary, cultural differences often produce experiences of dislocation in hostile contexts for many of her characters. However, and despite the difficulties and misunderstandings, transcultural and transnational alliances are not only possible, but often successful. It is for this emphasis on complex interrelations across borders that she can be considered a transCanadian author, in Libe García Zarranz’s understanding of the term²:

As a border concept, ‘transCanadian’ is thus construed relationally through an inseparable mixture of coalitions, ruptures, entanglements, tensions and alliances. [...] the realm of the transCanadian certainly becomes a porous borderland; a site of paradoxical entanglements where nation, transnation, narration, history, ecology, economy, and citizenship are rendered unstable valences, always in the process of becoming, and thus susceptible to change and transformation. (García Zarranz 9)

We Are not in Pakistan is a collection that “explores the realities of trans-global citizenship” (Sikh Heritage Museum n.p.) taking into consideration all those factors. Through the focus on individual characters in each of the stories, the narratives reveal the consequences of events and political actions on a global scale, from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster to the so-called ‘Global War on Terror’. Regarding the second, the 9/11 attacks, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the transit bombings in London, illegal incarceration of racialized suspects and deportation of migrants are mentioned in the stories in which different characters offer clashing ideological positions. The ‘war on terror’ is a recurrent thread linking most of the stories and a central topic in “Fletcher”, “The View from the Mountain”, “We are

¹ The essays collected in Baldwin’s latest book to date, *Reluctant Rebellions* (2016), offer personal views of the author regarding her diasporic background, her feminism, her Sikh religion, and the war on terror. In this article I have avoided heavily relying on her personal views as expressed in the essays in order to foreground here the literary expression of political critique in her short stories.

² Libe García Zarranz redeploys Roy Kiyooka’s original coinage of the term TransCanada in his *TransCanada Letters* and *Pacific Rim Letters* and Smaro Kamboureli’s influential extension of the term in her TransCanada project, which included the TransCanada Institute at U of Guelph (2007-2013) and the TransCanada Series (with Wilfrid Laurier UP); see García Zarranz pp. 8-9, and Kamboureli and Miki.



not in Pakistan”³, “This Raghead” and “The Distance Between Us”. I agree with Manjeet Ridon’s assertion that this collection’s “political commentary on mostly American and international matters highlights Baldwin’s interest to offer new ways of understanding Canadian literature’s place and influence in and beyond Canada” (n.p.). Through this strategy of kaleidoscopic perspectives, Baldwin can contest, from a transCanadian stance, different aspects of the hegemonic narrative that mobilizes, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, the “affective politics of fear” (74-80) and showcase contrasting reactions in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in diverse locations, from the angry racism of accommodated white Americans to the high vulnerability, dispossession and risk of any one suspect of being Muslim in North America. Although the stories dealing with the post 9/11 context are all set in the U.S., Canada is recurrently mentioned in them, either as place of residence of an extensive South Asian diaspora in permanent contact via the phone or the internet (Baldwin, “We Are not” 149), the desired shelter they apply to for asylum (“We Are not” 150) or the source of cheaper medicines (Baldwin, “This Raghead” 191). Little references here and there to Celine Dion or to a French Canadian Grand-mère help maintain in the reader’s mind the cross-border connection with both English Canada and French Canada.

Most of the stories feature transnational characters who need to negotiate their place in a ‘foreign’ location and engage in intercultural dialogue. As one of her narrators indicates, “Context, nuances, qualifications, time frames” (Baldwin, “The Distance” 244) are crucial, and each story pays close attention to the historical trajectories that have engendered current events. Thus, allusions to the American troops in the Pacific and Mediterranean during the “Good War” (i.e. World War II; in “This Raghead”), in Nicaragua during Reagan’s mandate (in “The View from the Mountain”), Korea and the first Gulf War (in “Rendezvous”), or Vietnam (in “The Distance Between Us”) contextualize the contemporary battles within the longer history of American wars in foreign territories that Salah Hassan has defined as “never-ending occupations”:

One can see a repeating pattern from the 1890s occupation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the mid-twentieth-century occupation of Germany and Japan to the early twenty-first-century occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In every one of these cases, the U.S. presence was ostensibly temporary, aimed at overthrowing an unjust dictatorship, yet quickly took the form of a permanent military presence. (2)

Therefore, the stories portray the ‘war on terror’ not as a new phenomenon suddenly erupting after 9/11 2001, but as the intensification and global expansion

³ The story that gives title to the collection focuses on female characters and for this reason it will not be part of my analysis here. I have analyzed this story in the comparative article “Trans-generational Affect and Cultural (Self)Acceptance in Two Trans-Canadian Short Stories”.



of ongoing colonization that stems from centuries ago.⁴ As Jasbir Puar indicates, there is in the post 9/11 context “a burgeoning ease with the notion of the United States as an empire” (1). Following Jasbir Puar, I read “9/11” in these narratives as

an event in the Deleuzian sense, privileging lines of flight, an assemblage of spatial and temporal intensities, coming together, dispersing, reconverging. The eventness of September 11 refuses the binary of watershed moment and turning point of radical change, versus intensification of more of the same, tethered between its status as a ‘history-making moment’ and a ‘history-vanishing moment’. (xviii)

1. NEOIMPERIALISM

Ne imperialism is most visible in the story “The View from the Mountain”, which recalls US neo-colonial interventions in Central America through the characters of a rich white American entrepreneur in the tourism industry, Ted Grand,⁵ and his Costa Rican staff manager, Wilson, who is the narrator. While discussing the deployment of American troops to Nicaragua ordered by Ronald Reagan to ‘help his friend’ the president of Costa Rica, Ted says “It’s all about interests. There’s no friendship, only interests” (128), an attitude that summarizes his own approach to life. Ted totally disregards the criminal corruption of the local elites: “Trust a gringo not to care that he was building on blood-soaked land” (125). As the good neoliberal capitalist that he is, Ted believes that “Destruction is an opportunity for change” (131); but only when destruction takes place somewhere else, not in his own country. When the twin towers are attacked in New York and George Bush Jr. declares he is on a crusade, Ted cheers him on, and “he was still cheering a month later when that man Bush dropped bombs on people in Afghanistan” (133); and he kept “Cheering his country’s troops through the liberation of Iraq” (136). His employee Wilson, who has recently lost his wife and little daughter in a house fire, soon realizes that the deaths of Americans are much more “grievable” (see Butler) than those in Afghanistan, Iraq or Costa Rica: “norteamericanos seemed much more valuable than my Madelina or Carmen ever were. I watched so many wearing or weaving flags, but only for los Estados, though CNN said people of many countries died in the towers”⁶ (Baldwin, “The View” 133). Baldwin sharply criticizes, through Wilson’s words, the interested ignorance of the hegemonic citizens of America, their myopic vision of the world and very limited know-

⁴ British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent is explicitly mentioned in the story “The Distance Between Us”.

⁵ Although Baldwin’s collection was published many years before Donald Trump’s rise to the presidency, Ted Grand resembles him so much that I wonder whether Baldwin was thinking of him while composing this fictional character.

⁶ Although the term “norteamericanos” would include also Canadians, the sentence makes clear that in this story it refers to U.S. citizens only.



ledge of their own history, as when Wilson ponders that Ted “seemed to believe no people ever, anywhere, at any time, had suffered as great a tragedy as norteamericanos. Could I blame him? All he ever read was *USA Today*. And the many stories he read me to improve my English featured only norteamericanos. No norteamericano, no story. As if the rest of the world was inhabited by non-persons and monkeys” (138). While Wilson wants “all those deaths to matter” (133), Ted becomes more and more infuriated and paranoid, constantly watching the tv where “retired generals debated pre-emptive strikes” (134), and violently orienting his anger towards Wilson and the rest of hotel workers in Costa Rica whom he now distrusts as potential terrorists about to use anthrax on him, even though Wilson assures him that “We are your friends, not your enemies” (134). Contrary to this view, Wilson is grateful to the friends who have helped him survive at his lowest moments: “They had no reason to help me. I said –not to Ted, because I didn’t wish to offend him, but to myself– that I hoped I never thought like him” (128). Wilson’s ethics of solidarity contrast with Ted’s egocentric attitude. Baldwin thus makes the small-scale relations between Ted and his workers reproduce the larger political picture with the escalating of aggression between the US and its targets; in spite of their former “friendship”, Ted unilaterally breaks his agreements with Wilson in the same fashion that “Ted’s president had also decided he was not bound by previous agreements –larger ones, international ones. Ted was just following a bad example” (136). Ted’s affective response, his misdirected anger, illustrates the mobilization of fear and its intensification into hatred that Ahmed locates at the heart of patriotic discourses of love for the nation, in a narrative of retaliation that “*allowed home to be mobilised as a defence against terror*” (Ahmed 74; emphasis in the original). In this xenophobic view of the homeland, the racialized migrant epitomises the ‘foreign threat’. Revenge and protection of one’s “homeland” is of course a dominant trope in the metanarrative of the war on terror, as we have seen in more recent responses to terrorism in Europe and the U.S.

2. XENOPHOBIC HOMONATIONALISM

The xenophobic discourse prevalent in dominant media representations is recurrently portrayed in all of the stories dealing with the post 9/11 context. It is most explicit in “This Raghead”, as its title manifests, a story that voices the racist opinions of Larry Reilly, a 78 year-old veteran from “the Good War” (190) where he was injured by a kamikaze in the Pacific and his much admired brother was “killed in action off the coast of North Africa” (190), that is, quite far away from their homeland. While googling for information about his brother’s missing ship, he finds out it had been reached when transporting explosives and bombs; he then reads about other ships with Japanese soldiers perishing or thousands injured on merchant ships in Bombay, “But those do not cause his tears” (195-96). This proves that, like Tom Grand, Larry dismisses the suffering of anyone non-American. Besides, Larry blames all evils of contemporary American society on immigrants, despite the fact that his own Irish family had come to America through Ellis Island. Larry shows



explicit sexism, racism and xenophobia, compiling a large catalogue of derogatory labels such as “kike”, “kraut”, “frog”, “wop”, “buck” and “peacenik”, among others, though he himself was once called “mick” (197); those who look Arab are, to his eyes, all terrorists and receive the pejorative epithet “ragheads”⁷.

Larry’s views of immigrants reproduce conservative xenophobic discourse; he is of the opinion that “nothing is free –freedom isn’t free, either” (191) though the “*Goddam immigrants nowadays, they have it easy*” (191; italics in the original). Moreover, it is a relief for him to think that there will not be much left in Social Security for the pension of his new cardiologist, Dr. Balkhtiar –though there won’t be much for his own grandchild, either– a comment that serves as a witty measure of Baldwin’s acute perception of neoliberal economic policies dismantling those social services that have been so crucial in guaranteeing a livable life, most especially for women. As Larry reflects, “Medicare is progress” (191), but it should be exclusive to ‘true Americans’⁸.

Larry expresses his patriotism as a “good American” by supporting George Bush Jr. no matter what: “we get behind our President in a time of war. The government always knows something we don’t” (190). In contrast with his opinions, a resident in the compound for the elderly where he lives loudly vents her criticism of George Bush Jr.’s policies: “You line up right behind Bush along with the other sixty-two percent, sheep all of you”, she shays. “You approve of him, just like the Germans got behind Hitler. And look what happened to them –they followed that madman right over the edge. I didn’t vote for your smiley warmonger, nor did the majority in this country” (190), and when Larry invokes terrorism she does not hesitate to claim that “It’s Bush who’s the terrorist” (190) while slamming her door. Larry thinks “terrorist” again when he sees “the raghead at the adjoining clinic”, Dr. Bakhtiar. Baldwin criticizes once more the role of the media in promoting this hatred discourse when she adds that “He can’t not think ‘terrorist’ –he’s been watching enough Fox and CNN to hear it every three minutes” (190),⁹

⁷ Jasbir Puar records that “In the early 1900s, the term ‘rag heads’ was already being used in the northwestern United States to refer to turbaned men, mainly Sikhs” (274). The confusion between Sikh and Muslim turbans led to numerous cases of “mistaken identity” aggressions in the U.S. immediately after 9/11, which led to campaigns on the part of Sikh communities to disassociate themselves from Muslims at a time when “The turban [was] accruing the marks of a terrorist masculinity” (Puar 175). More on this will be commented when discussing the character of Karan Singh in “The Distance between Us”.

⁸ Taxes and social services for citizens is another recurrent topic in Baldwin’s stories, with frequent references to Medicare, education, pensions, roads and other public services, defending the idea of communal contribution to the welfare and the need to pay taxes to benefit everyone. This is prominent especially in “This Raghead” and “The Distance Between Us”, as will be further discussed below.

⁹ This is also a recurrent theme in Baldwin’s stories: the endless repetition of the images of destruction and death of attacks in the US and UK. In “The View from the Mountain”, Ted Grand also spends hours watching the CNN and becomes paranoid, while in “The Distance Between Us”, Karan comments on the covering of the bombings in London and the saturation of repeated images of the dead and the “smug photos of suspected Muslim men” (229), adding that “[i]n 2001, one of his





and he refers to the medical assistant as “the terrorist’s secretary”. In the paranoid way of the post 9/11 context he fears the doctor’s touch because “*the raghead could be gay*” (192; italics in the original), thus reproducing the stereotype of the homosexual terrorist analyzed at length by Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), where she affirms that queerness is endowed upon bodies suspect of terrorism and “a generalized rubric applied to populations” in such a way that the terrorist “is always already pathologically queer” (169). In his paranoia, Larry thinks that “Maybe the raghead kills Americans slowly, turning up the heartbeat, turning up the pace, till millions of hearts drop dead from exhaustion” (192). At the end of the story, Larry in fact suffers a heart attack and he is first attended by a Black security guard in his building who, like Larry’s own brother, has just lost a brother blown in Baghdad; this parallelism shocks Larry, and “Faces collide and combine in his mind” (197) when he becomes aware of his unexpected bonding with “the coloured guy” (197). As he is being carried to an ambulance, he notices that Dr. Bakhtiar’s “warm brown hands buttress Larry’s cold clammy hand. Right this minute Larry needs this raghead’s skills, his experience *and all his compassion*. So this time, Larry doesn’t pull away” (198; emphasis added). The narrative thus closes presenting the white American bigot in need for help from his ‘enemy’ and becoming a bit more humane through interracial contact, both physical and emotional, with both men.

Homosexuality is also approached explicitly in “Fletcher”, a narrative focalized, in posthumanist fashion, through the eyes and opinions of a Lahsa Apso with that name who favours “cross-breed loving” (106). In this story two American men confront their views over the war on terror: Martin, a Jewish and gay New Yorker, versus Tim, a prototypical pro-Bush WASP from one of “the fly-over states” (107). Like Ted and Larry in the previous stories, Tim reproduces the discourse of dominant white masculinity, with offensive generalizing comments about “the Ayatollah types [...] those Moslem fundamentalists” (112). The conversation between the two men clearly shows their polarized positions; I will reproduce it here as a self-explanatory example of the polemicist spirit in Baldwin’s counter-discourse:

Martin says to Tim, “Makes you wonder what we’ve been doing to cause so much hatred, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, we haven’t done anything they wouldn’t do to the tenth power in our position,” says Tim bristling. “If the ragheads were on top, you think they wouldn’t blow up more than the World Trade Center? They think they’re going straight to heaven when they blow themselves up. I say lock ‘em all up and sterilize them.”

Tim expects Martin to nod in agreement – he thinks everyone agrees with him. [...]

“Lock who up?” says Martin, leaning forward. “All Arab Americans?” [...]

“Nah, just the foreigners,” says Tim.

colleagues said the scene of the planes and the twin towers was replayed so often that her five-year-old thought all the planes were falling from the skies and crashing into buildings” (229).

“That’s how the Nazis began, with just the foreign Jews. Gradually, they turned fear to hatred.”¹⁰ (112-13)

Martin’s response, “they turned fear to hatred”, points out the mobilization of affects regarding the love for the nation that Sara Ahmed has analyzed in detail in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), where she exposes how love for the nation is expressed through hate towards perceived foreigners:

Such narratives work by generating a subject that is endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject. The presence of this other is imagined as a threat to the object of love. This narrative involves a rewriting of history, in which the labour of others (migrants, slaves) is concealed in a fantasy that it is the white subject who ‘built this land’. [...] The narrative hence suggests that it is love for the nation that makes the white Aryans feel hate towards others who, in ‘taking away’ the nation, are taking away their history as well as their future. (43)

Martin furthers points to this mechanism of hate when he responds to Tim’s “anyone who can’t speak English should be sent home” with “You sound like you hate lots of people who are already at home” (Baldwin, “Fletcher” 113). Intolerance is thus reassigned by Baldwin to the bigot white supremacist, in contradiction of the liberal gesture studied by Wendy Brown which, in the rhetoric of justification of the war on terror, has appropriated tolerance as a quality of the civilized West versus the intolerant barbaric fundamentalist Oriental other (Brown 6-7): “in the aftermath of September 11, political rhetorics of Islam, nationalism, fundamentalism, culture and civilization have reframed even domestic discourses of tolerance –the enemy of tolerance is now the weaponized radical Islamicist state or terror cell rather than the neighbourhood bigot” (6). In “Fletcher”, the intolerance of bigot Tim is contraposed also to the more classic liberal tolerance of Colette, which she attributes to her being of French Canadian descent¹¹: “Accepting gayness is so New York or California, she might forget where she is –in a subdivision in the heart of the Bible

¹⁰ The comparison between Islamophobic prosecution in the context of the war on terror and the Nazi genocide is, as we can see, recurrent in the collection, and has been commented upon by Baldwin in her essay “Ruthless Terrorist or Valiant Spy” in relation to her novel *The Tiger Claw* (2004), set in occupied France during the Second World War: “Just as in the book, where Noor searches for her beloved Armand Rivkin, who has been rounded up as a terrorist and locked away in a camp, some woman in Afghanistan waits and prays for news from Guantánamo Bay about her husband or lover. Just as Noor was trying to send her Armand a message in 1943, some woman is trying to reach her ‘enemy combatant’ husband through the International Red Cross, hoping he is alive after two years in prison, hoping he has not been tortured” (*Reluctant Rebellions* n.p.).

¹¹ Colette’s self-complacency in this comparison proves she is not that much more tolerant than Tim; Baldwin treats her with ironic –humorous– benevolence, portraying her as a neoliberal postfeminist obsessed with ‘catching’ Tim as a husband: “Colette says some women still need men. Or maybe they just need husbands, unlike Gloria Steinem’s generation. Perhaps, genetic mutation being what it is, there are by now fish who need bicycles and Lhasas who need snowboards” (103).



belt. *It's her French-Canadian side*; Tim would have shown this man the door right away" (107; emphasis added).

Tim's racist tirades reproduce the vindictive discourse that served to endorse the Patriot Act and its suspension of the civil rights of suspects of terrorism. In the face of such intolerance of difference, Martin concludes "Sometimes I think we humans deserve to be annihilated [...] for what we do to one another for profit or love or religion" (114).

3. WRONGFUL SUSPICIONS

The final story, "The Distance between Us", provides the perspective of the suspect terrorist figure to depict the effects of the new policies on the lives of racialized migrants in the US, vulnerable to deportation or incarceration in Guantánamo, sent into oblivion without further notice to their relatives. The story narrates the degradation in the life of Karan Singh, a Sikh university professor in Santa Barbara who had secured a green card through a 'marriage of convenience' to an American woman, Rita, so that he could afford paying his PhD fees. Twenty-three years after their separation, an unknown of daughter suddenly comes to visit him, what she sardonically describes as her own "Shock and Awe bombshell" (233).

The story registers the many aggressions against anyone resembling a Muslim in the US, with references to Guantánamo prisoners, Sikh men being beaten, deportation, monitoring of emails by CIA and FBI, professors in Middle Eastern Studies being denounced¹². Karan, now "the only faculty member with turban and beard" (227) at University of California Santa Barbara, has applied for tenure and citizenship, and both are compromised in this paranoid context, when his Dean has asked him to register with Homeland Security with the suspicious question, "You don't have anything to worry about –right?" (224). Like Ted, Larry and Tim in the preceding stories, the dean's is the xenophobic "voice of America": "The dean, a supposedly educated man, seemed to believe that the constitution was suspended and would be for the foreseeable future. He didn't think it could protect foreign-born people or non-citizens in a time of war. *National origin, he said, that was the key*" (239; emphasis added). It is highly ironic that the "citizenship" that is so much praised by the White American characters and guarded by the vigilant INS is in fact one more expenditure that can be bought by the 2,500 dollars Karan pays to his wife Rita. Still, racial difference and the visible marks of his Sikh religion –the turban and the beard– are insurmountable obstacles to being considered an American, as Puar denounces: "Despite the taxonomies of the turban, its specific

¹² In her essay "Writing in a Time of Terrorism", Baldwin explains that "Bill HR3077 of 2003 affects academic writing, as it sets up an 'advisory' or 'monitoring' body on Area Studies departments that receive federal funding. It would make it illegal to criticize the government and allows the government to decide whose voices are mainstream" (*Reluctant Rebellions* n.p.).



regional and locational genealogies, its placement in time and space, its singularity and its multiplicity, the turban-as-monolith profoundly troubles and disturbs American national imaginaries and their attendant notions of security” (175). Karan envies his daughter’s freedom, and how she simply takes it for granted: “*You are born here*, he wants to tell her. *You cannot be deported. You have light skin; you will never understand*” (Baldwin, “The Distance” 241; italics in the original). But she does understand, and she replies reminding Karan of the colonial foundations of the US with the historical fact that “if you are not Native American, you’re descended from immigrants too” (248).

Karan is the target of numerous hate crimes: his house is often vandalized and he is repeatedly insulted in public spaces, being mistaken for a “Fucking Ay-rab” (234) and shouted the classic “Go home, Bin Laden”¹³ (229), to which he politely replies “I am home, mister”, a trite ignorant insult that Baldwin mocks with the narratorial comment “Karan is much better looking [than Osama Bin Laden] –plenty women would agree” (230). When his new house is burnt down by his adolescent neighbour, it is Karan who is charged with criminal assault for having jumped on the boy and smeared mud on his face, which opens the gate of deportation or prison. Even at his lowest moment he still thinks of the slum inhabitants seeing their homes bulldozed, the villagers displaced when a new dam is built, of tsunami survivors, or the masses of people killed in previous wars. His thoughts are with the dispossessed, and not of “Self-interest, the American creed” (269). As he explains to his daughter Uma, “If not my turban, people like that kid will find other things to hate or envy. This is about economics and power. The rest –just cover” (269). Karan’s ambivalent participation in “American” society is directly put in relation to the war; he wants to be a good citizen, but the case becomes more difficult every day since “fear has replaced love”¹⁴ (239): “He used to have his taxes completed by January, when paying them was a privilege, the price he paid for smooth roads, clean water, future Social Security. But he’s been procrastinating since he began paying for two wars, torture and detention. Still, he pays. Because he’s one of the good kind, the hard-working White collar immigrant” (236). He knows “he should be so grateful

¹³ Although Amy Reissig has written in a review that “While white, middle-class conservatism is a valid view to excavate, lines like ‘Go home, Bin Laden’ or ‘Bastards! Nuke the lot’ simply feel clichéd, which mars Baldwin’s artistry” (n.p.), these scenes of abuse are no exaggeration and simply reproduce common experiences among Sikh men in North America, as Puar registers: “Since September 11, 2001, Sikh men wearing turbans, mistaken for kin of Osama bin Laden, have been disproportionately affected by backlash racist hate crimes. Let us ponder for a moment the span of violence: verbal harassment (being called ‘bin Laden’, ‘son of Bin Laden’, ‘Osama’, especially on the phone and while driving” (178-79). For a more exhaustive list of racist wrongs against Sikh men see Puar’s chapter “*the turban is not a hat*” in *Terrorist Assemblages*, pp. 166-202 and Baldwin’s *Reluctant Rebels*.

¹⁴ Baldwin is keen to expose the economic roots of wars, usually hidden under layers of cultural, religious and ethnic clash narratives; in relation to the riots massacring Sikhs in India in the 1980s, she has Karan “explore the economic rationale underlying the pogroms” (*We Are not* 244) devised by Indira Gandhi’s government.



to live in the land of the free and the home of the brave. But there were bad times... Some very bad times after 9/11" (238). For instance, his five-day detention in solitary confinement in Sacramento, where he is "interrogated" and harassed without an apology: "This happened in God Blessed America. It happened to him" (239). After this experience he realizes that no one will come to his help, no one will claim a relationship with a suspect; and also, that the cases are so numerous that he cannot find a civil rights attorney because they are "swamped with Guantánamo cases or simply unwilling to take up his" (239). In this hostile context only Uma, his newly discovered daughter, comes to bring him a different attitude, and when he feels "the solidness of her arms closing around his waist" in their goodbye, he asks her to phone him so that "the distance between us won't seem so much" (270); this is a final scene that once more reasserts the possibility of bonding across racial, cultural, and generational distances.

CONCLUSIONS

As I hope my analysis has helped to reveal, Baldwin's narratives propose an ethics of transnational solidarity to counter hegemonic racist and sexist capitalist tenets sustaining militarized globalization. The metanarrative of the war on terror exploits 'freedom and democracy' as fundamental pillars of its civilizing mission, but the actual war *of* terror has in fact restrained, when not simply cancelled, the freedom and democratic rights of citizens; it has also appealed to feminist ideals, while in fact reaffirming and reinforcing classic ideals of aggressive and violent masculinity dependent upon the symbolic emasculation –in the form, for instance, of deturbanding of those targeted as 'barbaric others' (Puar 179).

During Donald Trump's presidency the loss of civilian lives in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria has skyrocketed, proving, in words of Glenn Greenwald, that "Trump's War on Terror Has Quickly Become as *Barbaric and Savage* as He Promised" (n.p.; emphasis added). And he is not alone in the crusade; recent bombing raids over Syria involving European, Asian and American forces continue to demonstrate the global character of this ongoing conflict and the nil value given to the lives of most civilians, refugees and those forcefully displaced. In the face of such blatant despoliation for the lives of those who suffer the consequences of our old and new colonialisms, the direct challenge to the hegemonic narrative of the war on terror continues to be an urgent task. Baldwin engages with this difficult critique from a transCanadian complex perspective that allows her to explore diverse and contrasting political positions. As Ridon emphasizes, "Baldwin's perspective of here now is global, but the diversity also highlights that the characters and their lives are interconnected by their humanity and the desire for connection, particularly when struggling against displacement and isolation" (n.p.). In my opinion, "planetary" would be a more appropriate term than "global" to define Baldwin's perspective, given her ethical stance and her emphasis on cosmopolitan interrelatedness (see Moraru) in the stories. Despite the terrible events and personal conflicts these characters confront, hope is still a ringing note in the collection, showing Baldwin's firm belief in



cross-cultural resistance and solidarity, as expressed in her essay “Ruthless Terrorist or Valiant Spy?”:

each of us is presented a choice at every moment, to acquiesce or resist, to be faithful to the values of love and justice or to compromise our principles for the sake of comfort and advancement. [...] Reading about amazing acts of resistance, I learned that even in a total war against empathy like the one waged in Nazi Germany, not everyone succumbed. The Nazis could not outlaw kindness, concern, and compassion. Activists, concerned Americans, writers, and others who protest show me the same is true in our times. (*Reluctant Rebellions* n.p.)

It has been my intention with this article to contribute to the academic activism demanded by Stuart Hall in order to learn to live with difference which, he adds, is the message of cultural studies, “a message for academics and intellectuals but, fortunately, for many other people as well” (18); by bringing to the fore Baldwin’s contra-discourse of the hegemonic metanarrative of ‘the global war on terror’ I wish to value her contribution as a transCanadian literary author, but also to invite readers and critics to explore other forms of cultural counterdiscourse, because we also have a choice “to acquiesce or resist” the cultural narratives of our times.

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WHERE IS THE TRANSGENDER IN THE TRANSCANADIAN? KAI CHENG THOM AND VIVEK SHRAYA'S RESPONSE-ABLE FICTIONS*

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to activate a much-needed discussion about the place of transgender literary production within the field of transCanadian literature, in its multifaceted iterations. The motivation behind it sparks from the imperative to respond, while simultaneously being accountable for the narratives we produce as feminist researchers in a moment of increasing racism, transphobia, and social divisiveness in Canadian literary communities. Departing from this desire, this article turns to Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek Shraya's ethico-poetic storying and worlding through the lens of queer and trans philosophers Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and Susan Stryker. Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) and Shraya's *She of the Mountains* (2014), I contend, pose a critique of the multiple modes of violence targeting racialized queer and trans communities, while simultaneously situating response-ability as an ethical compass from which to navigate, and not drown, in this global era of indifference.

KEYWORDS: transgender, transCanadian, response-ability, Kai Cheng Thom, Vivek Shraya.

¿DÓNDE ESTÁ LO TRANSGÉNERO EN LO TRANSCANADIENSE? LA RESPONSHABILIDAD
EN LAS FICCIONES DE KAI CHENG THOM Y VIVEK SHRAYA

RESUMEN

Este artículo busca activar una necesaria conversación sobre el lugar de la producción literaria transgénero dentro del campo de la literatura transcanadiense, en sus múltiples versiones. Mi motivación surge del imperativo de responder a, y de ser responsable de, las narrativas que producimos como investigadoras feministas en un momento de creciente racismo, transfobia y división social en las comunidades literarias canadienses. Partiendo de este deseo, este artículo se aproxima a la obra ético-poética de Kai Cheng Thom y Vivek Shraya a través de la perspectiva de la filosofía *queer* y trans de Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, y Susan Stryker. Propongo que las ficciones de Thom y Shraya, como ilustran los libros *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) y *She of the Mountains* (2014), plantean una crítica a la violencia contra comunidades racializadas *queer* y trans, al mismo tiempo que sitúan la responsabilidad como brújula ética con la que navegar, y no ahogarse, en esta era global de la indiferencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: transgénero, transcanadiense, responsabilidad, Kai Cheng Thom, Vivek Shraya.

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there are no words in your mouth
but there's a pen in your head
you want to tell the truth
but you told stories instead
–Kai CHENG THOM, “in your mouth” (2017)

Ethics is [...] about responsibility and accountability for the
lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.
–Donna J. HARAWAY (2007)

Opening up to a new field of studies is a moment of “absolute feeling” (131), to borrow the words of Vivek Shraya’s protagonist in *She of the Mountains* (2014): a moment of exhilaration, but also doubt; possibility, but also hesitancy; learning, but also inadequacy. Touching upon new methods demands an ethical response-ability, particularly when we seek to engage in transdisciplinary work. I here follow feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad when she boldly claims that “Theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings” (“On Touching” 207). Following this line of enquiry, this essay seeks to activate a much-needed discussion about the place of transgender literary production in Canada within the field of transCanadian literature, in its multifaceted iterations (see Kamboureli and Miki; Martín-Lucas; García Zarranz). The motivation behind it sparks from the imperative to be response-able, that is, to respond, while simultaneously being accountable for the narratives we produce as feminist researchers in a moment of increasing racism, transphobia, and social divisiveness in Canadian literary communities.¹

In “Sowing Worlds” (2013), Haraway characterizes our current epoch as one of urgency; a messy time that demands that we “[s]tay with the trouble!” (117). In order to do so, we need to put reciprocity, accountability, and response-ability at the centre of critical enquiry when we unlearn prescribed worlds and listen to untold stories in an age of global neoliberalism. The pressing demand to stay with the trouble stands at the core of Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek Shraya’s fierce storying and worlding (Haraway “Sowing”), as I claim in this article. In different but related ways, their fictions are populated by queer and trans subjects and communities whose survival largely depends on the ability to respond to violence. This unus-

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¹ I am here thinking of recent debacles such as the Appropriation Prize or the UBC Accountable. See the forthcoming *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, co-edited by Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak, and Erin Wunker, for a critical analysis of these controversies.



tainable mode of life is, in this case, ordinary, so these populations cannot afford to look away but must stay in the present and remain immersed in troubled waters. This process, I argue, demands response-able modes of ethical intervention that would destabilize terror in its multiple iterations. Thom and Shraya's counter narratives, as illustrated in *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) and the already mentioned *She of the Mountains*, pose a critique of the violence targeting racialized queer and trans populations. Simultaneously, they situate response-ability as an ethical compass from which to navigate, and not drown, in today's global age of indifference.

I here use the hyphen following queer philosophers Donna Haraway and Karen Barad who have unravelled the subtleties and entanglements intrinsic to the term responsibility, now spelled "response-ability". Haraway, who has written extensively about shared suffering and responsible conduct, aptly contends that we need to "open passages for a praxis of care and response—response-ability—in ongoing multispecies worlding on a wounded terra" ("Awash" 302). *Response-ability* here entails the capacity to respond, while simultaneously being accountable for your actions. In related ways, Barad discusses this formulation in terms of agency: "agency is about response-ability, about the possibilities of mutual response, which is not to deny, but to attend to power imbalances" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 55). This article is a first attempt to tease out the many shapes a praxis of response-ability can take, including the ruptures, paradoxes, and tensions that emerge when response-ability is represented in queer and trans texts produced by transCanadian writers.

What happens then when we put the transgender and the transCanadian in touch? Deploying a material feminist approach, Barad persuasively contends that "[t]ouching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other" ("On Touching" 215). Following Barad, I want to put the transgender and the transCanadian in "touch" in ways that enable response-ability. I will argue that transCanadian literature shares a "decolonization imperative" (Lai, 31) with transgender writing, particularly with racialized trans positions, which are those who "appear at the interstice of transnational sexualities and genders, modernization and globalization, and through the networks of global gay human rights discourse and Anglo-American transgender liberation" (Salah 202). Thus, a potential coalition between transgender and transCanadian methodologies could open novel ethical spaces of critical enquiry in relation to gender, violence, colonization histories, and their complex entanglements. As poet and scholar Larissa Lai reminds us, "[t]he radical work of coalition building is the building of relation, and the production of narrative, theoretical, or poetic content at the site of relation—always a struggle" (4-5). I would like to emphasize that I also understand coalition to be a shifting assemblage of potential alliances, but also frictions, which demands response-able approaches and methodologies.

The prefix "trans", with its aesthetic and ethical possibilities and ruptures, has certainly occupied a central position in my research. In the introduction to *Trans-*, the 2008 special issue of *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, guest editors Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore provide an excellent example of coalition work when they explain how their goal seeks "to take feminist scho-



larship in expansive new directions by articulating the interrelatedness and mutual inextricability of various ‘trans-’ phenomena” (12). This expansive rendering of the prefix “trans”- interests me for the purposes of this essay, so I here turn to the suggestive genealogy of the prefix that Victoria Pitts-Taylor and Talia Schaffer provide in their “Editors’ Note”:

Trans-: Transgender, transnational, transspeciation, translation, transformation. Trans- as connection: ... transatlantic, transhistorical. Trans- as violation: transgression, transsection. Trans- ... as folded into structures of power as well as a movement of *becoming*. [...] trans- as a way of seeing and thinking. (9)

My own preoccupation with the politics, poetics and ethics of the *Trans-*, with its possibilities, its paradoxes, and its ruptures, has accompanied me for some time, finally materializing in my book, *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions* (2017). I here draw from material feminisms, critical race studies, non-humanist philosophy, and affect theory to propose a cross-border ethic through the lens of post 9/11 feminist and queer transnational writing in Canada. In particular, I consider the corporeal, biopolitical, and affective dimensions of border crossing in the works of Dionne Brand, Emma Donoghue, Hiromi Goto, and Larissa Lai. The book sets a dialogue between the numerous ramifications of the transnational in connection to the related designation of the transCanadian, which I trace back to the work of Japanese Canadian writer, photographer, and filmmaker Roy Kiyooka, and his *TransCanada Letters* and *Pacific Rim Letters*.

Honouring this multiple heritage, CanLit scholar Smaro Kamboureli has refashioned the term through a number of groundbreaking initiatives: she founded and directed the *TransCanada Institute*, and she is the editor of the *TransCanada Series* at Wilfrid Laurier Press, which counts with 11 volumes at present, including *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (2007), co-edited with poet Roy Miki. Other scholars who have also contributed to the development of the formulation “TransCanadian” are Belén Martín-Lucas, through her 2014 work on feminist speculative fiction (“Dystopic”), and Eva Darias-Beautell, who leads the international *TransCanadian Networks* project. Following their work, I understand transCanadian writing as a complex assemblage of glocal, transnational, and diasporic processes that beg readers to think alongside and beyond the nation simultaneously. As a border concept, the formulation transCanadian is thus construed relationally through an inseparable mixture of coalitions, ruptures, entanglements, tensions, and alliances. In my own formulation, transCanadian writing has a deliberate feminist ethical and political stand: to interrogate power structures and hegemonic orientations ranging from neoliberal impulses, environmental crisis, patriarchal tendencies, white supremacy, and compulsory heterosexuality. This constant interrogation of borders unsettles and potentially queers Canadian literature, opening spaces for tracing alliances with trans literary production.

Thinking simultaneously through feminist, queer, and trans fictions and methodologies is also, to me, a question of response-ability; an ethical strategy to counteract the necropolitics of indifference that characterize this global age –a



neoliberal age where minoritized communities are simply rendered disposable. It is with this ethical impulse in mind that I now turn to Kai Cheng Thom's work. Of Chinese ancestry, Thom is a Canadian trans woman-identified writer, performance artist, and therapist based in Toronto. As she blatantly puts it in her interview for the digital site *Everyday Feminism*, "we live in a disposability culture –a society based on consumption, fear, and destruction– where we're taught that the only way to respond when people hurt us is to hurt them back or get rid of them" (n.p.). The neoliberal machinery behind this politics of disposability works brilliantly: it paralyzes resistance and action, while simultaneously activating modes of oppression and exclusion. As a result, racialized and migrant transgender populations often live unsustainable lives with no access to care, something that Thom problematizes by putting risk, violence, and unpredictability at the centre of her work. Simultaneously, in poetry collections such as *a place called No Homeland* (2017), Thom seeks to interrogate and challenge this perverse logic by activating cross-border modes of storytelling that combine the poetic and the aesthetic, with the political and the ethical realms.

Thom's work, as illustrated in *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars. A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*, also insists on developing sustainable modes of collective response-ability, while simultaneously asking an urgent question: how can we activate empathetic and sustainable ways of living and feeling together, particularly in the case of communities with different political, ideological views? In similar ways to Audre Lorde², Thom's *Fierce Femmes*, which was Lambda Literary Award finalist for transgender fiction in 2017, crosses the borders of memoir, biography, YA fiction, and poetry as a strategy to find new ways to tell a story, in this case, the stories of trans girls of colour³. The book opens up with an episode of failed response-ability. The narrator, a young trans girl living in the city of Gloom, connects her longing to start a new life with a day she recalls when a group of mermaids die⁴. Because of human degradation, the mermaids gathered at the edge of the shore dying, while humans witnessed and tried to help. The creatures, however, demanded humans to stop: "Eeerrrrggghhhnuuugghff [...]. Thaaaaargghhhnnnk yeeuuuurrghhhh," she sighed. And all over the beach, the rest of the mermaids were thanking the humans who were trying to save them, and telling them *enough*. There was nothing we could do now to fix the mistakes we had made" (15, empha-

² Lorde's biomythography –history, myth and biography– has influenced generations of writers, including Kai Cheng Thom. As she claims in an interview for *TeenVogue*: "someone can pull from the roots and skeleton of their own life, but also mythologizing it in order to express greater truths" (de la Cretaz, n.p.).

³ In the back cover of Thom's *Fierce Femmes*, the Arab-Canadian poet Trish Salah celebrates the cross-border genre of the book, which combines poetry, memoir, prose, and fairy tale. As Salah boldly contends, "The first lie is that this book is a memoir, the second is that it is not".

⁴ Abjection and pain were usually deleted from sanitized versions of Andersen's fairy tale "The Little Mermaid" (1837). As children's literature scholar Nat Hurley claims, "from the mainstream media accounts to the medical literature and community organizations, transgender children, it would seem, are obsessed with mermaids" (258).



sis original). As a direct consequence of humans' long-term unsustainable practices and inability to act with response-ability, the mermaids all die. Recalling feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's words, "'Enough', or 'not going too far' expresses the necessity of framing, not the common sense morality of the mainstream cultural orthodoxy. 'Enough' designs a cartography of sustainability" (23-4), thus testing our ethical thresholds. In Thom's response-able fictions, non-normative creatures have no access to storytelling and survival as a direct result of our politics of indifference.

As I mentioned earlier, Thom aptly talks about a culture of disposability where abject populations such as trans women are systematically rendered disposable and thus dehumanized by those in power: they are rendered monstrous and non-human. This indifference and negligence translates into lack of access to healthcare and to a sustainable way of life. How to relate to each other in sustainable ways is at the core of *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*. Trans girls are found dead every year in the City of Smoke and Lights, where part of the narrative takes place. Located in the heart of downtown, we find the Street of Miracles, where a community of trans femmes work, live, and try to survive. The police are depicted in the book as an instrument in the hands of those authorities that remain indifferent. They are biopolitical agents that regulate without care, as Lucrecia, one of the protagonists, explains: "What can we do? [...] The police won't do anything. We're nothing to them, remember? They couldn't care less if we live or die" (66). According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in Manitoba, as of 2013, 71 killings of trans people had been reported in North America, two of which were reported in Canada and 69 of which were reported in the United States" (McInnes 2017). In Ontario, 20% of trans people experience physical or sexual assault due to their identity, and 34% are subjected to verbal threats or harassment. 24% of trans Ontarians reported having been harassed by police (Bauer and Scheim 4).

Thom's fictional memoir problematizes this brutal reality by putting ethics at the centre of her fictions. During one of the riots, the narrator kills a policeman, which generates feelings of guilt and remorse. She is reminded, however, by the gang leader, that she has "a responsibility" to her "sisters" (121) to continue fighting back. What does this kind of responsibility entail? What is the role of ethics here? She needs to be accountable to the rest of the community. Paying homage to Audre Lorde's legacy, one of the femmes, Valaria, resents Lucretia, another femme, for her complicity with power structures: "You could set the master's house on fire, and instead you dance for scraps at his table" (98). However, after several episodes of violence, it is through storytelling that the femmes in the city manage to create alliances and sustain intimacy. In one of the scenes in the book that takes place in an old Cabaret, Kimaya, one of the protagonists, shares with the community the power of storytelling: "Dear femmes... I've brought us all together on this darkest of nights so we can tell our stories. We live in difficult and dangerous times, it is true. But as long as we have our stories, and we have each other, then we have hope. And this is the greatest magic of all" (139). Storytelling thus enables these women to hear each other, to feel each other, to touch each other's lives. In fact, the narrator is brought into this sense of community and is almost demanded to have her voice out. When Kimaya hands the narrator the mic, she squeezes her arm: "A pulse of



heat radiates up from her fingers and through my shoulder into my body. It cracks the ice cubes in my blood” (141). Touching, literally and symbolically, entails an ethical encounter in that it enables response-ability, as conceptualized by Barad: it demands the reader to care, to respond, and be affected, while simultaneously stressing a sense of accountability and responsibility for the Other, in this case, the transgender subject.

In May 2014, 86 scholars, poets, and community-based writers compiled the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, titled “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies.” This trans archive becomes an excellent navigational tool to begin to trace the range of methods and preoccupations of trans scholarship. As a feminist and transnational scholar striving to navigate CanLit’s troubled waters, I am particularly interested in fleshing out the ethical possibilities of a “trans poetics,” a term that “refers to diverse interpretative and compositional strategies attentive to relational movements between/across/within linguistic, embodied, affective, and political domains” (Edwards 252). The entanglement of material, affective, and ethical forces, which lies at the heart of trans, queer, and feminist transCanadian writing, is further enmeshed in racialization processes. As Susan Stryker claims, race and racism are “broadly understood as the enmeshment of hierarchizing cultural values with hierarchized biological attributes to produce distinct categories of beings who are divided into those rendered vulnerable to premature death and those nurtured to maximize their life” (“Biopolitics” 40-41). In this perverse necropolitics, some transgender subjects are now slowly legally recognized, becoming “rights-bearing minority subjects within biopolitical strategies for the cultivation of life from which they previously had been excluded” (“Biopolitics” 41), whereas racialized queer and trans populations become more and more vulnerable. It is imperative, then, to counteract these oblique and direct violences by forging response-able modes of aesthetic, sociocultural, and ethical intervention, as Vivek Shraya creatively does in her work, to which I now turn.

In related ways to Kai Cheng Thom, Shraya, a Calgary-based IndoCanadian trans-identified poet and musician, crosses the borders of genre and gender in multiple ways. Her creative archive includes an impressive range of audiovisual work⁵, the poetry collection *even this page is white*, which was Lambda Literary Award finalist for transgender poetry in 2017, and incursions in queer YA and children’s literature with titles such as *God Loves Hair* (self-published in 2011/republished by Arsenal Pulp in 2014) and *The Boy and the Bindi* (2016). In this essay, I will focus on Shraya’s roman-à-clef novel, *She of the Mountains*, published in 2014 to wide critical acclaim.

The novel opens up with a creation story from Hindu mythology: “In the beginning, there is no he. There is no she. Two cells make up one cell. This is the mathematics behind creation. One plus one makes one. Life begets life. [...] We are

⁵ Shraya’s films include, among others, *I want to kill myself* (2017), *Holy Mother My Mother* (2014), and *What I LOVE about being QUEER* (2012). For further information about her films and other visual work, see the author’s website at <https://vivekshraya.com/films/>.



never our own. This is why we are so lonely” (7). Echoing Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), which draws on Chinese mythology, Shraya interweaves the first-person narration of Parvati, the Hindu goddess of love, with the third-person narrative of a young IndoCanadian man struggling to make sense of his body, sexuality, and desire. Starting at school, he is subject to multiple modes of homophobic violence, which generate feelings of pain, longing, shame, alienation, and fear; unsustainable affects that block the development of his subjectivity. These microaggressions, sociologist Sonny Nordmarken contends, “scrutinize, exoticize, sexualize, or fetishize” racialized queer and trans peoples (130). Being subjugated to myriad modes of violence certainly makes the protagonist feel monstrous and abject for his difference: is he gay? Is he queer? Is he human? Shraya’s narrative, in response, demands an ethics of response-ability to account for these micro and macro aggressions against racialized queer and trans subjects.

In his perceptive examination of Shraya’s short film and photo essay, *I want to kill myself* (2017), Tobias B.D. Wiggins aptly claims that “Not only have these violent legacies been enacted from the outside (through colonial histories of institutional psychiatry, for example), but we also sometimes find their lingering presence housed quite intimately and corporeally” (671). I believe this is the case with the protagonist in *She of the Mountains*. Significantly, it is only through the touch of another that he begins a process of desubjugation⁶:

After years of hiding and being unseen, her touch was a deep thawing, a permission to feel, a memory of heat lost long ago. [...]. Next to her body, he had grown into his own body in ways he hadn’t thought possible [...], revelling in its colour and even deriving pleasure from it. Next to her body, he felt a seamless, integrated connection to his own. Next to her body, he felt hope. (55, 119)

This moment of touch in the novel allows the protagonist to work *together with* his vulnerability to unravel desire and pleasure as response-ability; ability to respond to the porosity of bodily and affective thresholds he is part of, while being accountable for this new knowledge in relation to her. “All touching,” Barad boldly contends, “entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the Other is touching all Others, including the ‘self,’ and touching the ‘self’ entails touching the strangers within. Even the smallest bits of matter are an unfathomable multitude” (“On Touching” 214). Being in touch with another body, in this case that of a racialized woman, is ultimately an ethical entanglement that activates multiple forms of recognition and identification. As queer philosopher Judith Butler puts it in *Undoing Gender*, “if there are no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it

⁶ In her introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Stryker explains how Foucault’s conceptualization of “subjugated knowledges,” that is “knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity,” is precisely the kind of knowledge that transgender people [...] have of their own embodied experience, and of their relationships to the discourses and institutions that act upon and through them” (13).



is not possible to persist in one's own being, and we are not possible beings; we have been foreclosed from possibility" (31). This moment of touch in *She of the Mountains* then enables the possibility for self-stylization and desubjugation; in other words, a moment of worlding.

Sandy Stone, a founder of trans studies, reads the emergence of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* in 2014 not only as a coming out story, but a moment of "reading oneself aloud" (92), with its dissonances, ruptures, and pleasures. Becoming legible to oneself allows the development of self-government, which would be a necessary step for the activation of response-ability. After being in touch with the other, the protagonist in the novel begins a process of bodily and affective transformation that climaxes when he touches himself:

Why had he never thought to apply the same ardour to his own body? What would happen if he did? [...] Words and flesh were replaced by absolute feeling [...]. With no mirror or person to reflect himself back to him, he studied his body with curiosity. [...] Could it be that all this time he and his body were actually teammates, were partners? (128, 131)

This moment of recognition in *She of the Mountains* entails language and corporeality to be replaced by affect. The process from misrecognition to recognition also entails a momentary transcendence from the body, which is required to fully begin to comprehend a new corporeality or transmateriality. As Barad claims, "Every level of touch [...] is itself touched by all possible others. [...] Hence self-touching is an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self. Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is" ("Transmaterialities" 399). The protagonist in *She of the Mountains* eventually embraces himself and confesses: "*I don't like myself when I am not with you. He finally said the words to her. And I want to*" (133, emphasis original). I would argue that the deliberate ambiguity of the pronoun "her" here opens the possibility for a transgender reading of the outcome of the story.

This moment of transition and transmateriality is mirrored by Parvati's transformation into the goddess Kali at the end of the novel:

I watched this being who had erupted from my brow get on her knees, open her mouth, and drink the red river that surrounded us. With every drop of blood, she became more excited, her black skin more radiant. At one point she looked at me... and I understood that she hadn't manifested to kill. It was pleasure she sought, the sweet savour of life. (115)

Parvati's moment of becoming, in my view, indirectly helps readers visualize the narrator's bodily and affective battle, while simultaneously allowing for a moment of expression and freedom. These paralleled moments of self-creation and posthumanist rebirth, which echo Stryker's performative essay, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix" (1994), enable the formulation of a response-able ethics where monstrousness and difference are reclaimed. As Barad reminds us, "monstrosity, like electrical jolts, cuts both ways. It can serve to



demonize, dehumanize, and demoralize. It can also be a source of political agency. It can empower and radicalize” (“Transmaterialities” 392). Despite myriad obstacles, Shraya’s protagonist fights dehumanization and is able to form his subjectivity instead by subjugating his body to change and thus, surviving. Thom aptly argues that

Because the challenge of survival is ever-present in so many queer peoples’ lives, queer communities are good at catching the now in our vision. And we have to be specific. I really mean queer people of color –particularly trans– and femme-identified black, Latinx, and indigenous people. Many of these folks are really struggling for basic necessities. So when we do art or organizing, we have to talk in a material way about what’s happening right now. (qtd. in Schwartz n.p.)

By saturating their poetry and fiction with queer and trans subjects and communities that are rendered illegible by normative ways of seeing, Thom and Shraya map response-able ethical paths in the quest for social justice. The ability to respond and be accountable, Haraway reminds us, “should not be expected to take on symmetrical shapes and textures for all the parties” (*When* 71). This is something crucial in Thom and Shraya’s ethico-poetical experimentations given that any kind of coalition work, as I mentioned at the opening of this essay, contains fractures, tensions, and paradoxes. And yet, it is urgent that we respond by devising new forms of relationality and storytelling to counteract current dominant politics of indifference.

The Black lesbian poet and activist Audre Lorde wrote endlessly about the poetic, the socio-political, the cultural, and the ethical dimensions of difference. In her important essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” published in 1983, Lorde claims: “those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference –those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older– know that survival is not an academic skill. [...] It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths” (99). Lorde’s politics of difference crucially seek to turn racism, sexism, and indifference into response-ability as praxis for social justice. Her anti-racist politics radically clash with the current climate of indifference that prevails not only in the US, exacerbated by Donald Trump’s rhetoric and practices, but also in Canada, where Indigenous claims remain largely unheard by governing powers, and Europe, where the systematically ignored plight of refugees leads to displacement and, in many cases, death. Rather paradoxically, this indifference not only leads to passivity and conformity, but also actively feeds racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. In contrast, as I have attempted to tease out in this article, Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek Shraya’s response-able fictions mobilize, in different ways, alternative modes of living compassionately, which, as Barad contends, “requires recognizing and facing our responsibility to the infinitude of the other, welcoming the stranger whose very existence is the possibility of touching and being touched, who gifts us with both the ability to respond and the longing for justice-to-come” (“On Touching” 219). The centrality of ethics is unquestionable here, so I will (not) close this essay with some open questions: what does it mean for minoritized populations to live and die under a dominant politics of indifference? In which ways is this indifference social, political, and economic? Is



this indifference also a cultural matter? And if it is, and I think it is, how us feminist scholars in the contested field of CanLit can actively contribute to transforming this indifference into response-ability?

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MISCELLANY

HYBRID MYTHOLOGIES: IDENTITY AND HERITAGE IN THE POETRY OF LOUISE ERDRICH

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the presence of aboriginal and classical myths in the poetry of Louise Erdrich, tokens of her double cultural heritage –Native American and German-American– and examples of her perception of identity. The aim of this article is to research the symbolic connotations attached to Western and aboriginal myths, and to study Erdrich's appropriation of such stories. By doing so, she creates a hybrid mythology that contrasts with a contemporary background. Her poetry is an exercise of self-ethnography that empowers her hybrid heritage instead of relying in an artificial reconstruction of an ideal or mythological past, while denouncing the environmental and psychological consequences of colonization.

KEYWORDS: revisionist mythmaking, identity, cultural heritage, ethnography, colonization, Native American, hybridization.

MITOLOGÍAS HÍBRIDAS: IDENTIDAD Y HERENCIA EN LA POESÍA DE LOUISE ERDRICH

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la presencia de mitos nativos y clásicos en la poesía de Louise Erdrich, que actúan como testimonios de su doble herencia cultural –nativo-americana y germano-americana– y ejemplos de su percepción de la identidad. El artículo ahonda en las connotaciones simbólicas de los mitos occidentales y nativos y la apropiación que hace Erdrich de los mismos, creando una mitología híbrida que contrasta con un trasfondo contemporáneo. Así, su poesía funciona como un ejercicio de auto-etnografía que reivindica su herencia híbrida en lugar de llevar a cabo una reconstrucción artificial de un pasado idealizado o mitológico, a la vez que denuncia las consecuencias ambientales y psicológicas de la colonización.

PALABRAS CLAVE: reescritura revisionista del mito, identidad, herencia cultural, etnografía, colonización, nativo-americano, hibridación.

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As the daughter of a Ojibwe Indian mother and a German-American father, Louise Erdrich (b. 1954) has always explored identity and heritage in her writings. Better known as a novelist, she began writing poetry in the 1980s. Since then, she has authored three volumes of poems; *Jacklight* (1984), *Baptism of Desire* (1989), and *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems* (2003).

Rather than tracing the exact origin of the Native American myths used by Erdrich, the aim of this article is to research the symbolic connotations attached to Western and aboriginal myths, and to study Erdrich's appropriation of such stories. Why does she incorporate certain myths and mythmaking into her poetic process? What does her choice say about her heritage? What does this approach transmit in terms of identity and ideology? These are the questions I will attempt to elucidate.

1. CRITICAL APPROACH TO IDENTITY AND HYBRIDIZATION

Any attempt to conceptualize identity is deemed to be reductionist. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to definitions of identity and cultural identity employed by postcolonial theory. For Stuart Hall, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 223). Identity, then, is a negotiation between past and present, individual and society. In fact, the notion of cultural identity alludes both to the individual and the social, as it has two differentiated aspects: from a communal perspective, individuals locate themselves in a shared culture, whereas, from the personal perspective, individuals distinguish themselves from the rest of individuals around them (Hall 224-226). Therefore, the location and the community of the individuals affect their cultural identity, but they do not define it exclusively. Hall mentions that the notion of a common "oneness" that underlines more superficial differences has played an important role in the post-colonial struggles. In the 1970s, the Négritude movement supported the idea of a unified racial identity that all Black peoples shared. For Négritude writers, this distinctiveness also included culture and personality (Ashcroft et al. 178-179). From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Red Power movement and the American Indian Movement claimed for more rights for Native Americans within the general context of the Civil Rights movement. They advocated for a pan-Indian identity to which all the aboriginal peoples of North America could relate. However, this interpretation of identity exposed Native Americans to the dangers of essentialism. In fact, a literal or malicious interpretation of the Indian pan-identity could perpetuate some of the stereotypes Native Americans were fighting against. Many Native American writers started to explore cultural identity as part of a multi-faceted reality. For instance, Native American author and feminist activist Paula Gunn Allen links the notion of a cultural identity shared by Native Americans to the idea of recovery and rebuilding of traditions:

The women and the men of Native America are busily rebuilding their traditions, and the one most in need of rebuilding at this time is the way of the mothers and the grandmothers, the sacred way of the women [...]. We are recovering our



heritage and uncovering the history of colonization –the history of gynocide that weakened the tribes almost to death. And we are busily stealing the thunder back, so it can empower the fires of life we tend, have always tended, as it was ever meant to. (Gunn Allen n.p.)

The interesting fact about Allen is that for her, that common “oneness” includes not only traditions and heritage but a revealing of the history of colonization. Cultural identity is then understood as a resistance against oblivion, an act of unveiling and an exercise of sorority.

The notion of heritage plays a fundamental role for Gunn Allen in the “rebuilding” and recovery of Native American cultural tradition. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) defines heritage in its webpage as “diverse cultures, traditions, and histories and [...] the important contributions of Native people” and has promoted in schools the initiative of the Native American Heritage Month. Although traditions, oral narratives and myths play a prominent role in most Native American communities, the fact of celebrating such heritage as the exclusive source of knowledge of these peoples touches the realm of exoticism. Although the authors of the Native American Renaissance celebrated such heritage, younger generations explore Native American heritage in a more ambivalent way. It is the case of Sto:Loh nation author Lee Maracle, who takes a different stance to that of Gunn Allen by explicitly refusing essentialism and the recovery of fake traditions based on the studies of white anthropologists. Maracle believes that Natives should “build a new society based on the positive histories of both” (116). With this statement, Maracle brings to the forefront the idea of Native American identity as a bi-cultural or hybrid product. Based in Canada, Maracle considers colonialism has been an ongoing process since the 15th century, when French and British expeditions explored, and later settled, along the Atlantic Coast (Maracle x-xi, 43-51). As a result of colonization, Westerners tried to eradicate certain aspects of Native American culture, with a tremendous impact on Native American identity. This is the reason why some postcolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Edward Said or Homi K. Bhabha agreed upon the fact that colonial identity is constructed rather than given (Loomba 201). However, postcolonial identity becomes a different matter in which the agency of the individual is exhibited. A clear example is how different tribes have stopped using the names they were erroneously given in colonial times. As Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer mention, “writers over time have changed how they identify themselves, as when Louise Erdrich moved from identifying herself as Turtle Mountain Chippewa to Turtle Mountain Ojibwe” (Porter and Roemer xxvii).

Although Maracle considers colonialism is still an ongoing phenomenon, she believes in choosing what is best from both worlds. This echoes Stuart Hall’s definition of how identity should be considered: “a ‘production’ which is never complete but always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 222). As appealing as might seem, the idea of the subject’s agency in creating a mixed identity has been rejected by some critics. Paul Gilroy, for instance, distrusts the notion of hybridity or intermixture, as it “presupposes two anterior puri-



ties [...] I think there isn't any purity; there isn't any anterior purity [...] that's why I try not to use the word hybrid [...] Cultural production is not like mixing cocktails" (Gilroy 54-55). However, postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha has explored in detail the notion of hybridity and liminality applied to postcolonial identity. Bhabha calls "third space" the ambiguous area that develops when two or more individuals or cultures interact. For Bhabha, this space "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force" (Bhabha 2006: 208). Bhabha agrees with Gilroy as he also maintains that cultures cannot be original or pure. But, unlike Gilroy, he believes that the colonizer/colonized subjectivities are interdependent and construct each other. In this sense, culture has no fixity and the same cultural signs "can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha 2006: 208). Bhabha defines the third space as a site for encounter and negotiation of difference:

It is in the emergence of the interstices –the overlap and displacement of domains of difference– that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated [...] The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha 1994: 2-3)

It is in this third space where hybrid identity is positioned, in the space in-between cultures, the site for renegotiating meaning, nationness, community interest and cultural value. Author and critic Trinh Minh-Ha has also worked in a similar direction: In *Framer Framed* (1992), she explains that: "the notion of displacement is also a place of identity: there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of color and the writer; there are only diverse recognition of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity" (Minh-Ha 157). For Minh-Ha, the self is also negotiated through difference as there are no "pure" identities.

The works of Native American author Louise Erdrich can be studied within this theoretical framework of hybridization. Although sometimes literary criticism may have celebrated Native American authors emphasizing a common exoticism, critics have been less homogenizing in the last decades. For Arnold Krupat, Native American literature, "whether oral, textualized, or written, are mixed, hybrid; none are 'pure' or, strictly speaking, autonomous. Native American written literature in particular is an intercultural practice" (Krupat 21).

As we will see in the next sections, Erdrich's poetry is a good example of an intercultural practice in which the poet negotiates her multicultural, hybrid identity. Erdrich explores and celebrates it from a double perspective: by exploring Catholic traditions and Ojibwe heritage through their myths, and by creating her own hybrid mythology. As we will see, Erdrich manipulates Ojibwe and Catholic myths and traditions in order to design her own mythic and poetic universe. In



this sense, Erdrich matches Alicia Ostriker's definition of revisionist mythmaking, by means of which "women poets deviate from or explicitly challenge the meanings attributed to mythic figures and tales" (Ostriker 1986: 215). By doing so, Erdrich negotiates her selfhood and her womanhood within the hybrid identity that myths and traditions represent. To understand how this negotiation works, a selection of Erdrich's poems would be analyzed in the next sections within the context of revisionist mythmaking and hybridization as exposed in the previous lines.

2. NATIVE HERITAGE AND CATHOLIC FAITH: IDENTITY AND MYTHMAKING

Erdrich's poetry emphasizes her Ojibwe heritage through her Native culture, myths and stories. Not in vain, Erdrich's main literary focus is "the world of the mixed-blood Ojibwe," as Rebecca Tillett has pointed out (Tillet 70). But, instead of being set in a remote, mythical past, or being conceived as folkloric representations of the Native mindset, myths acquire an everyday dimension, as they are part of Erdrich's portrait of contemporary Native American life. Besides, she also makes use of Western myths taken from the Classical and Catholic tradition, evoking her double heritage. In fact, "all factors of Erdrich's background, including mainstream/American/Western Civilization and Chippewa culture contribute to her source material", as Jane Hafen has argued (Hafen 148).

Erdrich was raised in the Catholic faith, even though she declares herself an agnostic. She discussed the influence of the Old Testament in her early years: "I was very young when I started reading, and the Old Testament sucked me in. I was at the age of magical thinking and believed sticks could change to serpents, a voice might speak from a burning bush, angels wrestled with people" (Halliday qtd. Kurup 22). It is interesting to notice that she places the emphasis on the narrative and imaginative power of the religious text: myths put imagination into motion, they exist outside dogma as independent stories. As such, they become an important part of the storytelling and poetic processes, acquiring a thematic presence.

Erdrich became familiar with Native American myths during her childhood in Wahpeton, in the North Dakota-Minnesota border, next to the Red River Valley¹. In 1991, she recalled in an interview those early days as filled with the stories shared by her family and her community: "The people in our families made everything into a story [...] People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another [...] I suppose that when you grow up constantly hearing the stories rise, break and fall, it gets into you somehow" (Chavkin 175).

¹ Wahpeton could be the town that appears some of her poems. Argus, the fictional town in which many of her novels are set –*The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), *Love Medicine* (1984), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994)–, might have been modeled after Wahpeton. Erdrich does not give an exact location for Argus and the real Wahpeton never appears in her novels. For more information about geography in Erdrich's novels, see Beidler and Barton 10-16.



Even though Erdrich began her literary career writing poetry, she does not consider herself a poet, but “a storyteller, a writer” (Coltelli 45). Already in the mid 1980s, she declared that her poetry had influenced her storytelling process, as she tried to transfer to her fiction part of what poetry could do “metaphorically [...] sensuously, [and] physically” (Coltelli 45).²

In any case, her continuous commitment celebrating Ojibwe myths and storytelling reveals in her poetic works “the environmental consequences of colonization on the natural world”, relating to “the cultural confusion and identity struggles of the colonized subject” (Kurup 92). This, as Erdrich’s biographer Seema Kurup has pointed out, is “a consequence of the assimilation policies of Euro-American institutions in the New World” (Kurup 92). In this sense, her heritage is an instrument to perform social criticism, to denounce the unbalanced relationship between colonizer and colonized that has shaped the lives of the Ojibwe people.

3. OJIBWE MYTHOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY IN ERDRICH’S POETRY

In *Jacklight*, her first volume of poetry, Erdrich presents a wide range of speakers, as if she were willing to capture the multiple reality of Native American life and traditions from different points of view. In “Jacklight”, the poem that opens the collection, Erdrich chooses a collective “we”, adopting the position of a spokesperson for a whole people. In other poems, the collective “we” turns into a changing “I”, a mutable self: a mythical wood-woman, as in the poem “The Woods”, a sequestered Westerner, as in “Captivity” or a doe, a female antelope, in “The Strange People.” She goes as far as impersonating one of the most famous Native American mythical figures, the *windigo*, in the homonymous poem. That is, whether contemporary, mythical, historical or autobiographical, this plurality of voices hints at the multiple identities and multiple masks the writer adopts while trying to recreate the lives and heritage of the Ojibwe people.

Going back to “Jacklight”, this opening poem brings into focus two essential keys to decode Erdrich’s poetry: on the one hand, there is her attitude to Native American and Euro-American history, on the other, there is the inclusion of explanatory texts before the poems. The title refers to a Chippewa word used for both flirting and hunting game. The poem presents a kind of origin myth where natives are born out of nature: “We have come to the edge of the woods, / out of brown grass where we slept, unseen / out of knotted twigs, out of leaves creaked shut, / out of hiding” (Erdrich 1984: 3). When they come out of the woods, they encounter the colonizers, a “faceless, invisible” crowd which is reduced to a general “them.” This

² Tillett maintains that, even if Erdrich has seemingly abandoned her interest in poetry in the last years, her fiction is essentially poetic in terms of style, producing “strikingly visual imagery” (Tillett 70).



binary opposition is an inversion of the traditional colonial accounts in which natives usually are an unnamed, underrepresented crowd, referred as simply “them” versus “us.” This reversal of terms becomes more complex when we turn to the title: how do we interpret this “jacklight”? Are the colonizers the prey or the hunters? The poem might be pointing out at a possible reconciliation, asking “them” to put down their guns and equipment and take “their turn to follow us” (Erdrich 1984: 4). Are the natives wooing them, when they try to lure them into the woods, or do they plan to hunt them? The question remains unanswered. Interestingly enough, the poem “The Red Sleep of Beasts”, reverses the terms: this time, the speaker is a collective “we” that represents the colonizers, the first pilgrims that killed thousands of buffalo in their first incursions into the West: “We used to hunt them in our red-wheeled carts”, says the speaker (Erdrich 1984: 80). Using ellipsis, buffalo are consciously unmentioned, leaving open the possibility that the poet is discussing also the “red” people, not only the “red beasts” (Erdrich 1984: 80).

In “The Red Sleep of Beasts”, Erdrich implies that the frontier myth is a Western construct that romanticizes a bloody past built upon the suffering of the Native peoples and environment. This idea is emphasized by the fact that the poem is included in a section entitled “Myths”. Similarly, in “Dear John Wayne” she condemns how Western films show a limited and often humiliating portrait of Native Americans. The actor John Wayne, an icon of popular culture, represents the colonizer that has spread a “disease” (Erdrich 1984: 13) and has dispossessed a people of their own identity, creating a negative perception of themselves in the minds of contemporary Natives. In this sense, Erdrich shares a similar notion of history with the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha: instead of seeing colonialism a past event, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present. It is with this “intrusion” that we constantly transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations (Bhabha 1994: 1-9).

Another key that reappears in many occasions throughout Erdrich’s poetry is the short explanatory text at the beginning of the poems with information about their content. In the case of “Jacklight”, it is a quotation taken from an anthropology treaty of the 1950s that explains the term; in the case of “The Red Sleep of Beasts”, it is an excerpt from a letter by a missionary from the 1840s. Erdrich seems to appropriate this kind of texts with a revisionist intention, turning them into a tool of self-ethnography, dismantling their hegemonic discourse power, recovering and incorporating them to her personal poetic universe, as part of her double heritage.

She also uses this framing device in the poem “Windigo”, included in the section “Myths”. In this occasion, the text is not taken from any other source, but it seems to be a note written by the poet herself. In the Ojibwe and Cree tradition, the Windigo is a much-feared cannibalistic being, the personification of winter famine or other winter perils.³ According to the explanatory text, this frozen demon has

³ The windigo is described in many different ways, but usually it is portrayed as a “giant with bulging eyes, a mouth filled with long, jagged teeth, and a heart of ice. Sometimes moving as a



a man “buried deep inside” that can be released by a young girl “by forcing boiling lard down its throat” (Erdrich 1984: 79). The poem, highly musical, resembles a dark nursery rhyme in which the monster lulls and lures the child. The intentions of such an ill-famed monster remain nevertheless ambiguous: “Oh touch me, I murmured, and licked the soles of your feet. / You dug your hands into my pale, melting fur” (Erdrich 1984: 79), exclaims the Windigo, seemingly craving for some tenderness. Even though the monster steals off the child, it remains uncertain if it yields to its cannibalistic impulses or it returns the kid home, unharmed. However, the preliminary text suggests that it is finally redeemed and that its monstrous self “melts” after human contact.

Animals, so important in Native American mythologies, are recurrent elements in Erdrich’s poetry. It is the case of the birds that appear in “Whooping Cranes”⁴. In aboriginal and other different mythologies, birds symbolize the soul, and they are considered messengers between earth and heaven. Erdrich manipulates these basic mythical figures to create a new, syncretic myth. The “hole of heaven” at the beginning of “Whooping Cranes” alludes to the entrance to heaven in many Plains origin myths (Stirrup 41). However, the allusion might be a Biblical reference as well: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). We also find an easily identifiable Classical reference in the description of the child in the poem, who is found “in a ditch / sucking tea from a bottle” and grows “strange and secret [...] kissing his own face in the mirror” (Erdrich 1984: 73), an allusion to the myth of Narcissus (Hafen 151; Stirrup 42). One day, when the adoptive mother holds him toward heaven “so that his mother could see / you have managed to keep him fat” (Erdrich 1984: 73), he metamorphoses into a white crane and joins a flock that passes flying. Finally, the cranes cross the heavenly gates “and the sky closed after them” (Erdrich 1984: 73). Is this Native heaven or Christian heaven? The question, again is not clearly answered, even though the child’s ascension might be a Christian reference. For Erdrich’s scholar Jane Hafen, the child is a mediator, “an intermediary between the two cultures” (Hafen 151). Furthermore, mythical time and present time overlap in the poem; for Erdrich, this simultaneity is frequent on Native territories, as she explained in an interview: “Don’t you, when you go on Indian land,

whirlwind, the creature stalked the northern woods during winter, hunting humans just as human hunted animals”. As a result of famine, those people who had become cannibals were said to have “turned windigo” and were expelled from the band or killed (Lynch 124). The windigo reappears in several of Erdrich’s novels including *Tracks* (1988) and *The Antelope Wife* (1998). Deborah L. Madsen discusses colonialism in Louise Erdrich’s fiction as “Wiindigoo logic”. The settlers’ “insatiable land hunger” is represented by this monster that, the more he eats, the more he wants. See Madsen 48.

⁴ “Because of their ability to fly, birds were seen as intermediaries between humans and the sky spirits –as messengers that could carry prayers and pleas up to the gods and return with the gods’ blessings and guidance. Powerful fliers such as Eagles and Hawks were especially associated with sky spirits” (Lynch 14).



feel that there's more possibility, that there is a whole other world besides the one you can see and that you're very close to it?" (Chavkin 98).

In the poem "The Strange People", the female speaker metamorphoses into a doe at night. During her mythic wanderings in the woods, she meets "him", a hunter. The notion of jacklight reappears here as an extended metaphor that permeates the whole volume of poetry: does it refer to flirting or hunting? Both options are possible: the doe is chased by the hunter in the woods, and she is later carried to his house, where the animal metamorphoses into a "lean grey witch" (Erdrich 1984: 68) that confronts the hunter, even though his fate remains unknown. On the other hand, the woman goes back to her antelope self and to the woods, "asleep in clean grasses", suggesting a possible dissolution in nature. Once again, the poem is framed by an ethnographic text that records a Native story about the antelope, the so-called "strange people". On account of their beauty, they are sometimes chased by hunters who never return. Erdrich's antelope-witch seems a rereading of this earlier account, where the terms hunter-prey are reversed. If in "Windigo" the beast was redeemed, in "The Strange People", a seemingly harmless animal reveals its dark nature.

In several poems, the identification with certain animals (cranes, antelope, frogs, and owls) expands to the whole ecosystem with the mythologization of the space of the wood. Places of birth and rebirth, the woods are the cradle where the ancestors, "the tree people" lived, as in the poem "I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move." However, the wood also represents the female body, as in the poem "The Woods", where the woman is, again, the hunter of the male intruder, chasing and possessing him. These female characters might be mythical rewritings that present an empowered woman, in control of her fate and choices and even dominating men. Such vision reverts the figure of the passive Indian woman in Western tradition and the role played by women in most mythologies, as an exercise of "feminist antiauthoritarianism opposed to the patriarchal praxis", as Alicia Ostriker has pointed out (Ostriker 1986: 235).

Apart from incorporating Native American myths with a clear revisionist intention, Erdrich also includes new myths in the narrative poems devoted to Potchikoo, a series started in *Jacklight* and expanded in the volumes *Baptism of Desire* and *Original Fire*. These are prose poems that recall Erdrich's narrative style (Kurup 95), seemingly adapting the storytelling rhythms, humor and themes of Native American tales. Old Man Potchikoo is a mythic character of Erdrich's invention. She tells the reader about his life, his deeds, his death, his adventures in the afterlife, and his resurrection. Potchikoo is a potato boy, born out of a woman raped by the sun when she was digging in a potato field. Erdrich writes about his first love, Josette, the wooden Indian girl of a tobacco shop in Minneapolis who is brought to life when he puts a cigarette on her lips, an ironic appropriation of the stereotype of the impassible Indian.⁵ Then the reader learns of his premature old age, after hold-

⁵ Jane Hafen calls it a "wonderful play with the Noble Savage stereotype" (153).



ing back a fart for too long in mass, and about his mythical mud daughters, born out of the river. Finally, he dies after his daughters sit on his lap and block the sun from him: "He hardly knew it when all three daughters laid their heads dreamily against his chest. They were cold, and so heavy that his ribs snapped apart like little dry twigs" (Erdrich 1984: 78). However, his deeds continue in the afterlife. In the Potchikoo poems, supernatural events coexist with contemporary Native American issues and Catholic references. The character of Potchikoo may be inspired by the traditional trickster in Native American folklore; the so-called Old-man is a type character in many Native American legends, the protagonist of different "why-stories", the kind of folktales that are used to explain natural phenomena, animal morphology and behavior, or the origin of certain myths. Potchikoo could be also inspired by Nanabozho, the "powerful and benevolent culture hero who figures in a multitude of legends, sometimes appearing as a deceitful trickster" (Lynch 65). Regardless of its cultural source, Potchikoo embodies a monomyth, the mythical hero whose adventures, according to the great mythologist Joseph Campbell, follow a "standard path", a "formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*" (Campbell 28).

Potchikoo, who "claims that his father is the sun in heaven that shines down on us all" (Erdrich 2003: 35), goes to Christian heaven when he dies. Saint Peter denies him the entrance on account of being "Indian" and refers him to the Indian heaven, which is "just a simple pasture gate of weathered wood" (Erdrich 2003: 42). He spends some time there and, when he is bored, he finds his way back to the world of the living. With his supernatural birth and resurrection, Potchikoo recalls a Christ figure. This might be an example of mimicry. Mimicry, according to Homi Bhabha, is the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994: 86), becoming a "blurred copy" of the colonizer. It "represents an *ironic* compromise" (Bhabha 1994: 85) because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. In this sense, Erdrich might be reversing the terms in the colonizer/colonized equation, mimicking Christian conventions of heaven, hell, and even the figure of Jesus Christ, who reappears in several poems of *Baptism of Desire*: "The Saviour", "Orozco Christ" and "Christ's Twin."

Consequently and by reversing the terms, "cultural symbols emerge as relativized through replacement" (Biróné Nagy 195). Creating her own myths, Erdrich manipulates Native and Christian tenets that speak of her multiple identities but also about her disposition to occupy a liminal third space, borrowing Bhabha's term. Hers is a liminal territory where she can experiment "defying categories" (Kurup 95). By doing so, Erdrich creates a new genre in her Potchikoo poems, half-way between prose and verse, folktale and social manifesto, Native and Christian, grotesque and humor.

In the volume *Baptism of Desire*, Erdrich plays again with the ordinary and mythic approach of *Jacklight*, even though spirituality plays a more important role and serves as a unifying thread. Catholic and Native values mingle and collide in this volume, where Western myths have a more evident presence. "Hydra," written while Erdrich was pregnant, evokes her unborn child identifying it with the ser-



pentine water monster of the Classical tradition. At the beginning of the poem, the presence of the child echoes that of a snake [...] “uncoiling through the length of my life” (Erdrich 1989: 41). The speaker compares herself to Mary, delivering her child at Christmas in Nazareth. The Classical hydra also transforms itself into the snake of the Genesis, and it is also called “snake of the double helix” (Erdrich 1989: 46) a possible allusion to the DNA and the X chromosome. It seems that Erdrich embraces this mutable being at the same time that she embraces her motherhood and her mixed origins; she discusses the possibility of descending “into the basement of my Polish grandmother” or returning “to Wahpeton, North Dakota /, on All Soul’s Night [...] and embraced the high school band leader” (Erdrich 2003: 46). Hers is a space-time travel to her origins, to her childhood and youth. These antecedents seem to converge in a mythological present:

If I finally learned to crochet
And began the world’s longest scarf,
My need to perfect myself, my legacy.
If I died at the needles... (Erdrich 1989: 46)

The fear of needles evokes the fear of maternal death, while the allusions to knitting evoke a well-known figure of Classical tradition: Ariadne and her infinite thread, which becomes for Erdrich a new umbilical cord and a metaphor for her literary legacy. In fact, towards the end of “Hydra”, she writes: “Snake of hard hours, you are my poetry” (Erdrich 1989: 47). For the poet, motherhood and poetry become examples of a full womanhood. Thus, far from the evil connotations of the Lernaean monster and the Biblical snake, Erdrich’s hydra is a powerful symbol of female energy that she is glad and ready to embrace⁶.

Moreover, Catholic figures play a prominent role in this volume, especially female figures; there are poems devoted to Mary Magdalen, Teresa de Jesús (“Avila”), or Saint Claire. When these poems were compiled in *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems*, they all appeared within the section “The Seven Sleepers”, an allusion to the Christian legend of the seven sleepers of Ephesus. Some of these poems begin with the typical explanatory note, reflecting Erdrich’s interest in the imaginative and storytelling potential of such stories. In the case of “Avila”, the framing text is a footnote of a biography of Teresa de Jesús, mentioning her brother, Rodrigo, who “emigrated to America in 1535 and died in a fight with Natives on the banks of the Rio de la Plata” (Erdrich 2003: 107). The poem is an imaginary letter sent by Rodrigo to her sister, recalling their childhood together and their brotherly love, ignoring more pious themes. Rodrigo’s presence seems to suggest how every

⁶ In *Writing like a Woman*, Alicia Ostriker discusses the importance of recording the experience of motherhood for writers. Poems involving the motherhood theme were scarce before the 1960s, and in the 1970s they had bad reputation among some feminists, who considered motherhood a patriarchal trap. Ostriker maintains that this is a subject “of incalculably vast significance to humanity, about which virtually nothing is known because writers have not been mothers” (Ostriker 1983: 131).



contact with Western civilization is tainted by trauma and violence, even if there is a connection with a saint.

Together with these Christian myths, we find several poems that take the form of “heathen” prayers, such as “The Buffalo Prayer” or “Rez Litany”, where Erdrich blames Euro-American colonizers for wreaking havoc on Native Americans with their assimilation policy: “Let us now pray to those beatified / within the Holy Colonial church / beginning with Saint Assimilus, / patron of residential and of government / boarding schools” (Erdrich 2003: 123). In the poem, she ironically thanks the “colonizing” saints that brought illnesses, miserable conditions and harmful policies to the Native Americans in the past, such as “Saint Bloatinus and Saint Cholestrus”, “Saint Macaronia and Saint Diabeta”, “Saint Microcephalia” “Saint Tremens” and “Good Saint Bingeous who fell asleep upside down on the cross and rose on the third day without even knowing he had died” (Erdrich 2003: 124). These are clear examples of what Rebecca Tillett calls the “lengthy and troubled history of federal-Indian relations and the assimilative intentions of Euro-American culture” (Tillett 70).

Besides the explicit and bitter criticism of these two poems, Erdrich’s poems “do not seem to indicate conflict between Indian / Catholic worldviews, but rather, an objective acceptance of both”, as biographer Frances Washburn has pointed out (Washburn 41). In a similar way, her approach to spirituality seems to be syncretic, an attempt to bring together Native and Christian faith. The poem “The Seven Sleepers” points out in that direction. In it, the speaker looks for a godly presence in nature:

I seek you,
Nameless one.
My god, my leaf.
I seek you in the candles of pine and in the long tongue
furled in sleep. I seek you in the August
suspension
of leaves as steps of sunlight
tottering through air (Erdrich 2003: 97)

4. CONCLUSIONS

Erdrich applies a revisionist mythmaking to Ojibwe and Catholic traditions in an attempt to “subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit” (Ostriker 1986: 211). Erdrich revises Western and aboriginal mythical characters, decontextualizes legends, and recreates metamorphoses and heroic journeys, calling into question conventions from different perspectives: by challenging the gender stereotypes associated to myths; by recontextualizing them through the incorporation of contemporary and ordinary elements of Native American life; by reversing Western colonial discourse, subverting stereotypes and using mimicry; and by appropriating texts by white ethnographers, undoing their hegemonic power. To sum up, by creating, in short, hybrid forms which tell us about a



multiple heritage and identity that defy an easy classification and go beyond traditional binary oppositions.

Joseph Campbell maintained that myths could not be manufactured, ordered, or invented. At the same time, he also claimed that they were “spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source” (Campbell 3). Erdrich definitely knows about the germ power of Native American and Western myths. She is not a manufacturer but a manipulator who effectively dismantles certain stereotypes and connotations attributed to myths and traditions. She joins other feminist Native writers such as Lee Maracle, who rejects an essentialist revival of traditions and aims at building a new community based on the positive histories of colonizer and colonized. Erdrich’s exercises of self-ethnography become a way of looking at herself from a double identity, of presenting myths as an insider and an outsider, as a subject and an object at the same time. This is a way of empowering a hybrid heritage instead of relying on an artificial reconstruction of an ideal or mythological past, denouncing at the same time the environmental and psychological consequences of colonization. Both historic and identity struggles are represented through a multiplicity of speakers that tell us about a hybrid culture that, despite its challenges, is finally embraced. This plurality of voices and perspectives corresponds to the multiple aspects and narratives of Native American life that refuse to be captured into a fixed, hegemonic portrait, making, in Ostriker words, “the cultural change possible” (Ostriker 1986: 213). That is the true power of Erdrich’s new hybrid mythology.

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INTERVIEW

“THE CHALLENGE OF HEART AND IMAGINATION”: IN CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE HILL

«EL DESAFÍO DEL CORAZÓN Y LA IMAGINACIÓN»:
EN CONVERSACIÓN CON LAWRENCE HILL

Ana María Fraile-Marcos
University of Salamanca

Lawrence Hill was born in 1957 in Newmarket, Ontario. He is the son of a black father and a white mother from the U.S. who moved from Washington, D.C. to Canada in 1953, where they became influential Civil Rights activists. His mixed-blood heritage plays a relevant role in his approach to race, ethnicity, identity and belonging. Hill is the celebrated author of ten books, including the non-fiction works *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of African-Canadians* (1993), *Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Negro Women's Association* (1996), the memoir *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001), *The Deserter's Tale: The Story of An Ordinary Soldier Who Walked Away from the War in Iraq* (2007) –in collaboration with Joshua Key–, *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning* (2013) and his 2013 Massey Lectures published as *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (2013). Hill's novels include *Some Great Thing* (1992), *Any Known Blood* (1997), and the much-acclaimed novels *The Book of Negroes* (2007) and *The Illegal* (2015). *The Book of Negroes* –also released in the U.S. in 2007 by W.W. Norton & Company under the title *Someone Knows My Name*– won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' prize for best book, as well as both CBC Radio's *Canada Reads* competition and Radio-Canada's *Le combat des livres*. The book was also turned into a six-part television miniseries. *The Illegal* won the 2016 edition of *Canada Reads*, making Hill the first writer ever to win the competition twice.

The following interview took place in my office in a mild, sunny afternoon on February 28, 2017, as an audience of about two hundred students and Faculty

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gathered at the theatre *Juan del Enzina*, eager to listen to and engage in conversation with the award-winning author for the second time in two consecutive days.¹

Ana María Fraile-Marcos: First of all, Larry, I'd like to thank you for accepting to inaugurate our 2017 Guest Speaker Series. We're truly honoured. This is a momentous year for us, as we set out to celebrate the pioneer role of our University in establishing English in Spain as a Higher Education discipline sixty-five years ago. You have particular links to Salamanca, and I'd like to count you among the plethora of writers –from Fernando de Rojas, Cervantes, Fray Luis de León, Beatriz Galindo, Teresa de Jesús, Nebrija, Lucía de Medrano, and Góngora, to Unamuno, Carmen Martín Gaité, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, Jorge Luis Volpi, Antonio Colinas, among many others—who have found inspiration here. Incidentally, Salamanca is also the birthplace of Canadian author Yann Martel. Could you, perhaps, start this conversation on a personal note by talking about the part that Salamanca has played in your vocation to become a writer?

Lawrence Hill: Sure, and thank you for inviting me to Salamanca and to the interview. It's wonderful for us in Canada that you have this Department of English Studies. It gives Canadian writers the opportunity to be read, understood and appreciated in Spain. As for Salamanca and my experiences here in 1985, when I was 27 years old, I worried that I was getting old and that I should do something about it before I got too old, and so I quit my job. I was a newspaper reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press*. I was a parliamentary correspondent covering the Supreme Court in Canada and Canadian Parliament for a newspaper in Ottawa, and I left my job –I quit my job– and I moved to Spain with my wife –my first wife– and we came to Salamanca after a week or so of travel, and I rented an apartment in Paseo Canalejas, and stayed for a few months until it got too cold and then I moved further south into Andalusia. But I stayed here for three months, and it was a time to write. I wrote all day, I wrote every day. I knew that I wasn't ready to publish yet, but I told myself that I would spend one entire year writing all day, every day, and see if after one year I still felt that I could make this my life. So it was a year of experiment, it was to discover –not so much to discover my talent, but to discover whether I felt that I could truly live this way for a whole life and if I had it in my heart and in my brain to live as a writer and to *work* as writer. So it was a year of discovery for me: a disco-

¹ Lawrence Hill's lectures "Faction: The Merging of Fiction and History in *The Book of Negroes*" (Feb. 27, 2017), and "*The Illegal*: Creating imaginary nations to engage fictionally with international refugee issues" (Feb. 28, 2017) can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xAqj9TCaPk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RssEF483lKw>, respectively. This interview would not have been possible without the support of the research project "Narratives of Resilience" (MINECO/FECYT, FFI2015-63895-C2-2-R) and of the English Department at USAL. I am also grateful to Lidia Cuadrado-Payeras for her help with the transcription of this interview.



very of Spain and of the Spanish language, but also a discovery of my own creative heart. And so, for me Salamanca and Spain represent not just a wonderful city and country but also the beginning of the movement into a writing life that I began formally at the age of 27. It was a big risk to quit my job and to just move to Spain with no guarantees of anything. It's very hard to make a life as a writer, and so it was a risk to quit a good job and to come here but it was worth doing, and I was very happy here.

AF: Welcome back!

LH: Thank you!

AF: [laughs] Now, in the book that resulted from your CBC Massey Lectures, *Blood: The Stuff of Life*, there are frequent references to historical events such as the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, the Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish Civil War, all of them contributing to the Spanish "black legend". Would you say that your travels in Spain at different periods have inflected your views about race, for example?

LH: Yes!

AF: –which is a central concern of yours?

LH: Yes, they have affected and influenced my views of race and how I understand race to be perceived. I should begin by saying that I am a novelist, so I'm not a sociologist or an expert in matters of race but it's something that I've been reading about and writing about for decades as an artist. As far as I'm concerned, race is an artificial construction, it's a way of imposing a social hierarchy on people and it's completely unrelated to science. It's only constructed in order to create hierarchies between people. One of the things that interested me in writing about race, as a novelist and as an essayist is in what ways do we falsely, fictitiously, equate race and blood. And in our language, in our social policies—even in our policies with regard to blood donation—in various formal government rules, we have incorporated notions of blood and race. So I tried to investigate the origins of how we think about race, and how we think about race as being part of the blood, which is ridiculous: my blood is no different than yours, except for our blood types. I'm very interested in the origin of this. Although I'm not sure, I've never found any instance earlier than the Spanish Inquisition in which we first start reading about the equation of blood and race. In reading about the rules of *la limpieza de sangre*—cleanliness of blood—I discovered that during the Spanish Inquisition *los Reyes Católicos* [the Catholic Monarchs of Spain, Isabella I of Castille and Ferdinand II of Aragon] even created this way of finding whether you could be a Spaniard or whether truly you were Arabic or Jewish and would have to be burnt at the stake or deported or tortured or killed, have your property stolen from you, and even if you tried to pass, if you were tempted to become a Catholic and hid your origins for generations, still these rules of *la limpieza de sangre* were meant to determine who truly had Spanish blood and who did not. And it's a ridiculous and utterly frightful way of thinking about human beings, but it's the first time in my understanding of history that human beings are equating blood and race,



and saying your race is lodged in, or is housed in, your blood. That just so happened to be in Medieval Spain because that's the first instance I found of it, so that's very interesting to me.

And of course, issues of race and identity continue to pervade in Spain today just as they do in Canada and in every other country, and whether that has to do with the Roma people or whether it has to do with North-African refugees or other African or Middle-Eastern refugees –issues that we're facing too– issues of racial identity continue to be present in both of our countries. Just yesterday in Salamanca I saw people demonstrating in the streets here in favour of letting more refugees in into the country and with lines such as “No person is illegal.” Basically, people being activists and trying to argue that Spain should be more generous with regards to receiving refugees. These issues continue to be important today.

AF: Certainly, they are, and we'll get to that in a minute when we discuss your latest novel, *The Illegal*. But before we do so, I'd like to dwell on your analyses of race and racial identity for a little bit longer. In your book *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* you explore from an autobiographical perspective the paradoxical denial of racial identity while growing up in Canada and the pervasiveness of the notion of race ingrained in all facets of society. If Daniel Coleman draws attention to the centrality of the notion of a culturally hegemonic *whiteness* in the emergence of a literary canon that would support a specific ideal Canadianness, your book situates the question of identity in the border zone of mixed-race subjectivity, destabilizing fixed notions of identity and proving how race is a social construct. Mixed-race subjectivity continues being an important site to think about Canada's collective ethos and identity, which become more complicated when mixed-race enters the equation, as George Elliott Clarke's recent claim of Indigenous ancestry illustrates. Are you aware that Clarke now uses his term “Africadian”² to denote “a Métis who identifies with African-American culture” (Clarke, “Indigenous Blacks” 402) and claim his own indigeneity?³ The embodied identity that Clarke claims as a mixed-race Aboriginal Black is politically charged and complicates the current debates in Canada over the need to de-colonize the culture.

LH: Sure. Well, I didn't know specifically that George Elliott Clarke had claimed Indigenous identity, I wasn't aware of that particular claim, so I can't talk about his specific case because I don't know much about that exactly.

² Clarke coined the term “Africadian” to denote the particular historical experience of colonization, discrimination, oppression, miscegenation, adaptation, and resilience of blacks in the Maritimes, arguing that “African-Canadian culture and literature have domesticated –nationalized– their influences enough to create an aboriginal *blackness*, even if this mode of being remains difficult to define or categorize” (Clarke, *Odysseys* 13).

³ In the ensuing controversy, Paula C. Madden contends that Clarke's espousal of African identity is “a statement of claim against the land and territory of Mi'kma'ki” (Madden 100).



AF: Well, it was just an example to illustrate how mixed-race subjectivity works as a productive contact zone for the cultural, political and social debates going on in Canada at present.

LH: It's well known that in the history of Canada and the United States there was a great amount of mixing between black and indigenous people. There was a great amount of mixing between white and indigenous peoples too, and of course between white and black, but specifically, something that most Canadians don't know, is that there was also a lot of mixing between indigenous and black people. So, it's hardly a surprise that George is making this statement. In my own family, I'm also told –I don't know this factually– but I'm also told by my father and my grandparents that there was also an indigenous person in my own family tree, on my grandparents' side, but I never have claimed... I think you're the first person I've ever said this to, in a public interview, that I have this indigenous ancestor, and I haven't said it because I don't make that claim. It would be preposterous for me to say that I have an Indigenous identity: I do not, and I would never claim it. Did I have an indigenous ancestor who married a black ancestor? Apparently yes, but do I claim that identity? No, I do not. I mean, Indigenous and Black identities are constructed in very different ways, and one has to establish them in very different ways, so I would never claim such a thing. One of the things I've thought about often while watching the Joseph Boyden controversy unfold is how differently Black and Indigenous identities are constructed.⁴ You know, identity is an active performance, and it's an active establishing something that's considered to be valid, and the way to establish that clearly is different in Indigenous culture than it is in black culture.

One of the most painful things is, when a person who's attempting to identify with a specific culture, whether it's Indigenous or Black, is being told within that cultural group that they do not belong. That is extraordinarily painful for people and I think, in a way, that's more painful emotionally that encountering unexpected moments of racism from time to time. It's more damaging emotionally, and one of my preoccupations as an essayist and novelist is the pain that that person might feel in being told, "no, you don't belong." So that's very interesting, and so there are collective identities and individual identities and identity is a performance in a certain way. Sometimes you can fake it and change your identity: sometimes people believe it, sometimes they don't, sometimes you're exposed...

There was a woman who was the head of the Washington chapter of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peo-

⁴ Joseph Boyden became arguably the most celebrated Indigenous author in Canadian history after the publication of his debut novel *Three Day Road* in 2005. However, in 2016 doubts were raised about the nature of his Indigenous identity. For more on this, see Eric Andrew-Gee.





ple in Washington and a few years ago –her name was Rachel Dolezal– it came up that she was not black, that she was white. There’s no reason why a white person can’t be the head of a local chapter of this activist organization, many white people are involved with the NAACP, but she said that she was black. Her parents outed her, her parents said, “we’re both white, she’s lying,” her parents brought her to public attention and unveiled her, in a way, and exposed her, and she was met with an incredible amount of ridicule and derision. And it seemed to me that the ridicule and the derision was excessive, that the bad that she did seemed to be exaggerated in relation to the good that she did as an activist in this organization, and I was very interested in why the response was so negative, so hostile. Partly, I think it’s because she was a woman.

Some men have done this and have not been criticized nearly as firmly as she was. If you think about *Black Like Me* (1961), which was a non-fiction book written by a Texas journalist by the name of Howard Griffin who underwent a series of medical treatments to change his skin color so he could pretend to be a black person in trouble in the States to explain to America what it meant to be black. He’s a white man, explaining to America what it means to be black, because he’s changed his skin color artificially for a short period of time. Well, did anybody challenge his ability to do this? The book was a massive best-seller, one of the most monumental publishing sensations of the 1960’s in the United States, and nobody expressed the vitriol that Rachel Dolezal faced in her situation, and so I think the gender has something to do with this. Of course, it’s a different time too, this was 1961 and Rachel Dolezal was sometime around 2014 or 2015. It’s a very complicated issue, but people respond in very different ways, sometimes very emotional ways, to the way other people define their race.

I’ll end that little meditation if I can by saying that my stepdaughter, who is seventeen, came into my life when she was three, and she’s white and has Jewish ancestry, and for a while, when she was about four or five she’d say to my wife, her mother, who is also white, “I’m a little bit black, right, because Larry is black,” and her mother had to tell her “No, you can’t go around telling people you’re black because your stepfather is black,” but I found it very interesting that the child wanted to do this, and the child wanted to do this out of love for her stepfather, and so who are we to say that she couldn’t be or couldn’t become black? People often create, let’s call them “false identities,” and move into altered identities, and sometimes they’re very successful. Sometimes they do it to save their lives, during the Holocaust, in slavery, other times they do it for economic advancement... “passing” is a very interesting thing and a very fraught thing. So it’s a big question you’ve asked.

AF: Yes, your train of thought reminds me of the dichotomy between the homonyms descent/dissent, right? Or consenting to the essentializing and fixed identities conveyed by biologically descending from or belonging to a race vs. freely adopting and performing a given identity that may differ from

the one one is born into. Playing with the phonetics of the words “descent” and “dissent” is also a way of disturbing fixed notions about race.

You’ve been recently appointed Professor of Creative Writing at Guelph University. Creative Writing courses are common in North-American universities but it’s only now that Spanish universities are beginning to offer Master degrees in Creative Writing –the University of Salamanca among them. In your view, what makes a writer? Can writing be taught? It may become a profession, but what are your thoughts about teaching creative writing?

LH: Well, it’s a complicated question. If we think about a painter, a seventeen-year-old, a twenty-two-year-old, young woman who wants to become a professional painter, is she going to develop her skills as a painter in a vacuum, in complete isolation to other painters? Probably, if she’s going to be very good, and if she’s going to truly be a highly accomplished professional painter, she’s probably going to be studying painting. She may not study it formally, in a university environment –perhaps she will, perhaps she won’t– but she will most certainly be spending time with other artists, spending time in their studios... I don’t think any rational person would dispute that a painter who wants to become great is going to learn from their masters, is going to learn certain techniques from their masters, and somehow, although we accept that a painter will learn from their masters, we are resistant to the idea that writers can also learn from other more experienced writers. Somehow we ask ourselves questions like “well, can this be taught?” Of course it can be taught. I’m not saying that creative genius can be taught, but technique –there’s so much to do with technique– and contacts and business, and social contacts... And unfortunately, the reality of publishing in North America today is that if you don’t know anybody, if you don’t have any contacts, it will be harder for you to enter the publishing market, so there are business concerns as well as artistic concerns that lead many young people, or not so young, to decide to do, say, a Master’s degree in Creative Writing. So yes, I think a great deal can be taught. Things as elementary as manipulating point of view... Often a young writer, or a writer any age who is starting to write for the first time whether they’re fifty or fifteen, they will not understand a very elementary notion: that every story has to have a point of view, or several points of view, and they’ll slip accidentally, unintentionally, between points of view without being conscious of what they’re doing, so it’s revolutionary and it’s sort of life-altering for a young writer to be told, “By the way, who’s telling your story? Make a decision and stick with it,” or, “Whether it’s one person or five, understand who’s telling your story, and if somebody is going to take over and supplant the first narrator, well, what will be the reason and why?” So things like that are very significant, but many young writers don’t understand that until they start to write, so yes, I think there’s much that can be taught. Is it necessary to study Creative Writing? Absolutely not. Does it help? Sometimes. Sometimes it doesn’t –sometimes a creative writer is emotionally damaged in the course of doing an MFA programme and it does not help their creative process. It takes a



certain kind of confidence to be assessed, to be criticised... Maybe there's a sense of competition among students. Not everybody is going to thrive in a Creative Writing programme and I have developed a sense of the type of person who is likely to thrive versus the type of person who's not, but it can be very helpful, not just in developing your artistic abilities but also in developing a professional network that you can use to launch your career.

AF: Right. So, what about your own beginnings as a writer? What were the main obstacles or difficulties that you faced?

LH: Well, I guess that the base obstacle was one of finding time, and committing to the time that it takes to develop the writing skills and that's a difficult thing if you're a university student –I was studying Economics–, or if you're busy working, trying to make a living, or if you have children, if you're a young mother with three children and have a job too, when do you find the time? These are all issues that writers have to deal with and I think one of the most significant ones is clearing your schedule and taking the time to write. I was very lucky to come over twice to Spain for two years each time to write and also to take time to write in Canada. So one of the biggest obstacles was committing to taking the time with all the economic risks that are associated –quit my job, live on my savings with no guarantee that it would be a financial success and also, you know, if you're a writer you don't earn a living usually, or certainly not for the first many years. If you're a doctor or a bus driver you'll earn a living while you're doing your work, but if you're a writer you may earn nothing or almost nothing, or you might spend five years on a book and earn a tiny amount for it. And so, writers have to think about how to live while they're writing, so I do believe that one of the greatest obstacles, perhaps even more for women than for men, is to find time to say “no” to their families, and find other ways to take care of their families, if they have families, and to say “no” to economic commitments in the work front and to take the time to write.

As for the skill of developing the art form, I started quite early by writing letters to my parents: I had to write letters for the things I wanted. My father was an immigrant, and immigrants are worried that their children may not succeed and they want their children in Canada to be professionals, they want their children to be doctors and lawyers and engineers so they won't face any of the economic insecurities –or racial– that their parents faced in the countries that they fled. Writing letters to my father made me very passionate about writing because I got to have the things I wanted if I wrote good letters, so it made me very excited about writing. It wasn't a sterile classroom activity, it was to get things I wanted, like a pet cat or a pair of running shoes or permission to stay out later at night. I had to write letters, so the writing was an act of passion, persuading this man that I deserved to have things, so I became passionate about writing as an instrument of self-improvement [laughs], to get the material things I wanted as a boy. It seems a bit funny, but it was a great way to write because I was writing with passion and gusto, to convince somebody who was hard to convince. It was



a good technique. And also, I wrote a lot of letters to friends when I was travelling –there was no Internet, I’m very lucky– so I used to write letters when I travelled and the letters were very lively and funny and they helped me become a more relaxed writer, to write with speed, it helps you relax.

AF: Yes, humour is also interspersed in your novels and essays, even when you’re portraying dire situations...

LH: Yes, and you can’t get that humour if you’re trying to be very careful and perfect in every sentence, you have to learn to let it go, and to, as I say, “let it rip,” and take a few chances and relax. You have to relax to write well, and then later, to come back and do all the hard work of rewriting but you have to relax, and so just spending the time learning to relax and be comfortable –comfortable in your own heart, and be free of self-criticism, that’s a hard thing to learn.

AF: Talking about hardships, you’ve mentioned in several occasions that writing involves lots of work, that it’s kind of painful because it doesn’t come naturally, it means writing and rewriting and revising and a lot of time put into it. How do you approach your writing, what are the elements of your writing that make more trouble for you? Is it character construction, or is it finding the right tone for the character; or is it the structure, or the research that involves recreating a historical setting?

LH: Well, you know, even though writing is hard, I take great pleasure in it, it’s what I’ve chosen to do and nobody is making me write, it’s my choice to write and it’s my love and I feel lucky to have such a love. Many people do things that they don’t love at all and they have no choice in the matter, or little choice, so I do like to remind myself that I’m very fortunate to do something that I love to do even when it’s difficult. I guess, well, research is not really very hard. I mean, any person who has a basic education can learn how to research. Nor is writing a clean sentence. I mean, if you’ve been practising writing, surely you can learn how to write a clean sentence or an efficient paragraph. I think by far the greatest challenge for the novelist is the challenge of heart and imagination. The challenge, I guess, is to be personal, and to have colour, and to have idiosyncrasies seeping into your work, and to be creative, playful and draw on the heart and the imagination. Again, it’s kind of like a painter: if you have great skills with your paintbrush but you have nothing to show, what value will the painting have? I think the same can be true of writing. Often I read novels and they’re splendidly written in terms of sentence structure, but they don’t move me, or engage me, or move my heart because they fail to capture my imagination. So I would say that by far the biggest challenge for me... I mean: there are tools, and there’s heart. The two have to be developed, and it’s difficult, but the heart is a challenge, and the job of novelists is to emphasise the people. Even people you don’t like, even characters who do despicable things: you have somehow to find a trace of humanity and not ridicule your characters but bring them to life and show them some dimensionality. You know, there’s a character that I wrote who was pretty two-dimensional in *The Book of Negroes*,



his name was Robinson Appleby, and he was the first slave owner of Aminata, the protagonist, and when it came time to film the book in South Africa, the actor who was playing Robinson Appleby, this fairly two-dimensional character in the novel, looked at me and said: “Come on, Larry, give me something to work with here!” And I thought it was a brilliant thing to say, “give me something to work with,” like “I’m playing this character, give me something so I can bring some humanity into my role as a monster slave owner.” So I had to give him something more in the script so that he felt he had something to work with as an actor. And that’s a very good lesson for a novelist: you have to give something to your characters, even the ones you detest, even the ones who are doing terrible things, and that takes a lot of heart, so I would say that the biggest challenge is that of the heart.

AF: Among the various developments that have taken place in Canadian literature since the 1970s is the shift from the focus on nationalism and local matters and settings, to a concern with the global or with the intertwining of both the local and the global –although I tend to think that, as a colonial nation, Canadian writers of all times have been aware of this. Would you say that a chronological analysis of your novels corroborates such a perception? For example, from *Some Great Thing* which is mostly based in Winnipeg in the early 1970’s, to *Any Known Blood*, with its trans-Canadian focus back and forth in history and mostly across the US-Canadian border and then to *The Book of Negroes* with its drawing of the Black Atlantic slave trade triangle, and more recently *The Illegal*, which chooses to leave aside the Canadian soil altogether and focus on the issue of refugees and asylum-seekers, a topic of huge global urgency.

LH: That’s a very interesting question. In my own case, yes, what you’re saying is very true, that there’s been a gradual movement more and more out into the world in my works. I don’t disagree with your observation about the evolution in those four novels towards a more and more global perspective, but I should add that, even in *Some Great Thing*, all the main characters in the novel, they go to Cameroon and so although the rest of the novel is set in Winnipeg, Canada, they go to Cameroon. And in *Any Known Blood*, the main character goes to Africa –he goes to Mali– and so he moves across the seas for an important but relatively short scene in the novel. So even in the earlier novels you have these characters who are leaving the Americas and are going to Africa for short periods of time, for a momentous event in their lives, and then finally further out into the world with *The Book of Negroes* and *The Illegal*. But I would say that some of the most successful and respected Canadian writers examine places and peoples who are outside Canada. Esi Edugyan’s novel, which won the Giller prize, *Half-Blood Blues*, is set in Germany and France before, during and after the II World War. One of our most respected writers is a fellow named Rohinton Mistry and his novels are set in India. He’s an Indian immigrant in Canada, his novels don’t take place in Canada at all, they’re set, as far as I recall, entirely in India, and he’s been hugely successful in Canada. Austin Clarke



and Dionne Brand, you know, have also often ventured away from Canada to situate their works, and so it's really very common for at least some successful Canadian writers, especially in the last 20 or 30 years, to reach further and further abroad and to write outside of the traditional canon of Canadian literature. It's true Alice Munro, whose work I very much enjoy, is set in Huron, Ontario, and she's probably our most respected writer internationally, having won the Nobel Prize, and she's an astoundingly capable writer and her stories are set in Huron, Ontario, but very many writers today, including young writers who are getting a lot of attention, are setting their novels outside Canada, so that's, I think, something interesting to Canadians, and Canadians are finding something rich and special and satisfying in encountering themselves more universally, with stories set in other countries.

AF: Would you say that Canada's self-conscious multiculturalism has increased Canadians' interest in the world outside its borders?

LH: Absolutely, it does and for us that's one of the reasons why Canadian writing is so interested in events and peoples around the world. I should say that the last winner of the Giller Prize, which is the most prestigious prize for fiction in Canada, was won by Madeleine Thien. Her novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is set during the Cultural Revolution in China, during the Tiananmen Square Massacre in China, and a little bit to the national side in Vancouver too, so it's a novel that examines connections between Canada and China, but mostly set in China. And there again we have a contemporary novel, very successful, which is concerned mostly with things happening in other places. So yes, I think the interests of novelists and poets and creative non-fiction writers reflect the make-up of the country.

AF: Going back to your work and its national and international reception, *The Book of Negroes* has just been translated into Spanish as *El libro mayor de los negros* by the renowned Mexican poet Pura López Colomé. It was also adapted into a TV series, as I think *The Illegal* will be, too? I'd like to know your views about the work of translation and adaptation. As your novels are being translated into several different languages, or adapted to the screen, what are the main challenges you envision during these processes of genre mutation and, perhaps, transculturation? do you feel that you're somehow losing control of your work?

LH: First of all, I want to be a sentimentally positive person. Sure, I could say I'm losing control but I prefer to think that I'm gaining wonderful opportunities to reach readers or television viewers in other countries or other media, and I'm thrilled by the idea of being approached by other artist, be it a translator or a filmmaker who loves –hopefully– what I've done and wants to translate it or to adapt it to film. For me it's a great honour. There's no greater honour than to be recognised by other artists who wish to work with your work in their own way, and yes, of course there's a loss of control but I don't think that's something to worry about. If you want control, just stay home and write your own novels, which is what I do, but when your



work enters the world, there's lots of ways to lose control. I mean, when my book enters your hands, you're the reader. In a way, it's as much your book as mine, your experience in reading the book is as fully valid as mine is in thinking about the book, and so it belongs in a certain way to you, especially if you care about it and it enters your heart, in your own way. And so, my general attitude about translation and the film adaptations is entirely positive. Maybe that's because I've had good experiences, and perhaps I might complain more had something terrible happen, but I've been very fortunate and I feel that it's a real honour to be engaged with by other artists, but also to reach people in other formats. Sometimes, somebody will see a film and then go read the book, and I can reach people that way too –the book will always be there, and so the film doesn't take anything away from the book, it just offers a new interpretation of the book in another medium. So, no, I don't think about issues such as loss of control because it'd just take me to a negative place. I'd rather think about it as a great compliment and as an honour, and often I've felt that I've learnt a lot from translators, too. Translators, they show you your own mistakes, even more than editors. Your book may have been edited five times and you might have rewritten it ten times, and then it's published in your own maternal language, and then a translator will come along and say, "By the way, you made a mistake on page 61," which nobody saw! But the translator will see. So it's a bit humbling too, it's great. So the translator can correct mistakes that you make that you didn't catch. It always happens. There's always five or ten things that the translator will find that nobody else saw.

AF: Although the figures of the refugee and the migrant are central to your previous novels, in *The Illegal* you leave aside the historical perspective to project our economically and politically polarized current global reality on the imaginary countries of Zantoroland and Freedom State. Could you talk about the challenges of writing a novel that functions as a parable about the risks and consequences of historical imbalances and present neoliberal *liquid modernity*?

LH: Well, I can speak of the emotional approach, and I can also speak of the technical approach. Emotionally, there was a similar desire [to that in my previous novels]. And the desire was to give a face to people who are generally faceless, to give a voice to people whose voices are not often heard, and unfortunately, in the 21st century, say –I won't speak for Spaniards, but I'll speak for Canadians– when we collectively in Canada think about slaves and slavery, we generally think of a slave as a person who has no face, no hands, no lovers, no particular skill... They're just a faceless person in chains. You think of shackles around the wrist, you think of a person bound, but you don't see a face, you don't see eyes, you don't hear a voice. And I was looking to shatter this mask that sort of covers the slave, and allow a person to see a possible human being. Aminata wasn't a slave in her primary identity, she was a woman who happened to be enslaved from a short period of time in her life, maybe for about one fifth of her life she's enslaved, but she's a girl



and a woman and a mother and a midwife and a lover and a person who learns many languages, a person who becomes highly literate and so forth, a grand traveler of the world; she's many things, she's not just a slave, and I wanted to give her a personality and a voice, especially since that's something that most slaves don't get. And I wanted, in *The Illegal*, the same emotional register. I wanted to give a sense of humanity to not just a refugee but to an undocumented refugee, one without papers who would often be vilified or hated or imprisoned, incarcerated if caught, even in a country such as Canada, which prides itself on its human rights record, but which denies in many respects its own difficult historical record and difficult contemporary situation too; and so, the emotional need was to show a person moving, either voluntarily or involuntarily—not that different in some respect—from one country to another, to show a sense of adaptation, to show a sense of loss of home, a sense of dislocation, but always to try to show a person and to give a humanity to a person whose humanity might be ignored. And today, when we think of millions of refugees living in Turkey or Lebanon or crossing the Mediterranean Sea and some of them, thousands of them, drowning in the sea, taking their lives in their own hands, it's hard to recognize that humanity. It's frightening. And so the easiest thing is just to shut these people out of our hearts and not think about them as possibly our own mothers or daughters. Not to imagine their humanity makes it easier to shut them out of our hearts and of our countries, and so the emotional desire was similar in both books: to give humanity to someone whose humanity has been ignored and denied.

But the writing techniques were completely different. First of all, *The Book of Negroes* is narrated in one person's point of view. I was looking for a quiet, sedate, almost biblical tone, I was looking for a tone of language that would not interfere with the reading, that would fall into the background, that would be deeply personal and a little bit biblical in the sound. *The Book of Negroes*, the Book of Exodus... I really was thinking about a quiet, meditative, narrative voice. Whereas with *The Illegal* I had multiple points of view. It's a very rockish, rambunctious, loud, confident narrative that erupts, and it's very playful and deliberately a bit hysterical, sometimes a bit over-the-top, a bit outrageous. I wanted to be playful and funny and irreverent and satirical in moments. I wanted to kind of bust out of the obligations and the austere historical fiction writing tone. I thought I needed to be more playful. I'd had enough of the austerity in the voice of *The Book of Negroes* and I needed, emotionally, myself, as person, to write in a different way. I thought, "now I want to do something else," so part of it just responded to my own needs as a person, to be more playful, and so I set the novel in fictional places to rid myself of any obligation to write "specifically" and "authentically." I use those words between quotes because I have a quarrel with the need to be authentic. I think sometimes it can interfere with the creative process. But anyway, I satisfied the need to be starkly authentic or accurate in *The Book of Negroes*, and in *The Illegal*



I just wanted to invent a world and not to be limited by specific socio-political realities, let's say Canada's or the United States', and so I felt the best way to be playful and to create an allegory, in a way, was to just invent a country –two countries.

AF: Which are nevertheless kind of recognizable...

LH: Oh, yeah –I mean, they're real, but I thought for me to borrow from some of the things actually going on around the world, there's a little bit of Australia, a little bit of France, a little bit of South Africa, certainly a little bit of Canada and the United States in that novel, and of various African countries, too. So, I was just sort of borrowing from things that I've come to know and understand to create two competent countries that would reflect my preoccupations and also, I was writing about a dystopia. I was imagining a world amok with xenophobic hatred, and we weren't particularly at that moment yet in the United States –unfortunately we seem to be there now– or Canada, but I wanted to imagine countries, say, that had elected the equivalent of the Front Nationale, or now, of course, Donald Trump, and I wanted a country that had a campaign whose government had been elected promising to catch and deport refugees and destroy their communities. I wanted to write a novel that had a government, a major parliamentary democracy, predicated on notions of hate and xenophobia, and at the time, the best way to do that seemed to be to invent countries.

AF: You're talking about capturing the contemporary context and concerns in fiction, but you also write essays and non-fiction. What is it that you need to express through the non-fiction writing that you cannot in fiction and vice-versa?

LH: Well, I mean, the books, in several ways, they all examine the same sorts of things, whether it's non-fiction or fiction, I seem to keep coming back to issues of identity, belonging, migration, individual and collective identity... So sometimes I feel I can get at that best by writing fiction, which is what's closest to my heart, it's what –I'm not saying it's more important than non-fiction: it isn't, it is not more important, it's just I seem to do it better than write non-fiction and I spend more time in it; but sometimes an essay is better for me; and sometimes I will write something in a novel and then I'll come back and examine it in an essay. I've done that many times, for example, in my novel *Any Known Blood* there was a scene in which the Ku Klux Klan comes to burn a cross and they threaten the life of a black man who's promising to marry –who's planning, I should say– to marry a white woman. And that scene actually reflected a real moment in history in Ontario when this very thing actually happened, and after I wrote the novel I wasn't terribly satisfied with how I'd depicted that scene, and I felt I'd like to come back to it and really examine it for thirty or forty pages in a long essay, about what actually happened when the Ku Klux Klan came to this city called Oakville, Ontario, in the early 1930's, or around 1930, and threatened the life of this black man, what happened; to examine the court records, to examine the newspapers, to really talk about it in more



depth, which you can't do in the novel. And so sometimes I want to come back to something and really dig into it and peel it back. In the novel, you have to move more quickly, but sometimes I have returned to the same subjects in my essays, and just examined them in a more intellectual way.

AF: Maybe one last question, ... and that's about your future writing projects. Would you like to talk a little bit about that?

LH: Well, I'll just mention quickly two creative writing projects. I'm writing for the first time in my life a children's novel, and I'm quite enjoying that. So I've been working on that here in Spain. It's an allegorical children's novel which I'm having fun writing, and I hope to finish that in the next few months. It's such a pleasure to move in different ways and try different forms of writing and take roads and feel challenged, and try new things. So, I had this children's story that I'd been thinking about for years, and I'm finally writing that, now that *The Illegal* is finished. But the more major, long-term, multi-year project is to write a new novel about the building of the Alaska highway in Northern Canada during World War II. It was a highway that was over two-thousand kilometers long, built in very difficult conditions—minus 50 degrees Celsius in the winter, burning heat and mosquitoes in the summer—and many thousands of African American soldiers built this highway during the war in Northern Canada, so it sort of fits into my interest, which is the movement of African peoples across the border between Canada and the United States. It's about an aspect of Black Canadian history that's fairly unknown, maybe almost no Canadians know the story that thousands of black people were building this highway in Canada in the II World War, racially segregated as they were. It's a very interesting story that enriches the breadth of how we can understand Black history in North America. So that's the big project, to write about the African Americans from the Deep South who were building the highway in Northern Canada for about a year, in 1942-1943.

AF: So, you're still bringing to our attention events that have been obscured by history.

LH: Yes, I like to do that. I like to go to a place that we don't know about—most of us do not know about—I didn't know about until the last five of ten years, and to dramatize these sort of forgotten elements of Black history.

AF: It's such a pleasure talking to you. Now, we need to move on, as it's time for your lecture. Hopefully, we'll continue this conversation with the audience after it. Thank you very much, Larry.

LH: Thank you.

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REVIEW

REASSERTING THE CANON OF BLACK CANADIAN LITERATURE. *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History and the Presence of the Past*. By Winfried Siemerling. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2015. 540pp. ISBN 978-0-7735-4507-6).

Winfried Siemerling's latest book, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History and the Presence of the Past* (2015), offers a thorough re-examination of Black Canadian writing and cultural studies, relatively new fields of study if compared with the well-established traditions of the African American canon and postcolonial literatures from Africa and the Caribbean.¹ Siemerling's well researched and elegantly written book contributes to reverse the critical neglect of this body of literature both in diasporic studies—such as Paul Gilroy's influential *The Black Atlantic* (1993)—and in Canada, until the groundbreaking research of scholars such as George Elliott Clarke.² Engaging with the historical dimensions of Black Canada from its beginnings to the present, Siemerling's book thus follows previous endeavors to resituate the study of Black Canada, and presents a global (re)consideration of African Canadian polyphony. It focuses on the work of as diverse authors as Marie-Célie Agnant, André Alexis, Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, Austin C. Clarke, George Elliott Clarke, Wayne Comp-

ton, Esi Edugyan, Lorris Elliott, Gérard Etienne, Lorena Gale, Claire Harris, Lawrence Hill, Dany Laferrière, Suzette Mayr, Emile Ollivier, M. NourbeSe Philip, Mairuth Sarsfield, and Frederick Ward, among many others, representing the variegated Black geographies in Canada and beyond, while underlining the relevant role of past historical events in the construction of Black identities.

Siemerling's volume is organized in two complementary parts: "Early Testimony and the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century" and "The Presence of the Past". This division seems appropriate as it follows the evolution of Black Canadian literature and history from the early slave documents and testimonies to the contemporary Black Canadian authors whose fictional accounts shed light on the past so as to come to terms with both the past and the present. Previous to these two sections, Siemerling includes a well-researched but concise introductory chapter intended to contextualize Black Canada, demonstrating its interconnection with many other times and spaces of the Black Atlantic. This initial chapter is the one that non-specialist readers who are unfamiliar with Black Canadian history may find particularly illuminating, since it is here that some of the most important theoretical and conceptual frameworks are explained. Siemerling persuasively explores the major milestones which heralded Black Canadian criticism as an emergent field of study.

Part I, "Early Testimony and the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century", includes two chapters framed around the retrieving of slave narratives in Canada. Siemerling mainly focuses on the eighteenth century Black works recording slavery in Nova Scotia and the substantial body of Black writing produced in Upper Canada/Canada West, which became the background of the nineteenth century Black writing as a

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² See, for instance, Clarke's *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*.



result of the massive Black immigration to Upper Canada at that time. Despite the lack of narratives by former slaves evoking Canadian slavery in the eighteenth century, chapter two strives to show various documents recording early slave testimonies, particularly in Nova Scotia, so as to assert the continued practice of slavery in New France, where slavery began in what we know as Canada today. This chapter revolves around the historical “Book of Negroes”, deemed as an official document which offers the testimonies of Black slaves in Canada. In a similar vein, the works written by Black people who arrived in Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century are included in this chapter and therefore analyzed by Siemerling in an attempt to highlight the transnational nature of Canada. Thoroughly researched, the chapter considers other narratives such as John Marrant’s *The Journal* (1790), a travel narrative which offers useful insights into the life of Nova Scotians and highly contributes to the reconsideration of the Black Atlantic.

Moving into the nineteenth century, Chapter 3, “The Black Canadian Nineteenth Century”, Siemerling foregrounds the outpouring of an entire genre mainly written by border-crossers engaged with the abolition of slavery in the United States and the consequent emergence of Canada as the “land of liberty”. Drawing attention to the period before the abolition in 1834, Siemerling explores the figure of Susanna Moodie as a pivotal example of canonical settler writers whose works are highly influenced by the presence of Blackness in Canada. While Moodie’s duality leads her to criticize the country as though she were a stranger, other border-crossers such as Henry and Mary Bibb who wrote in the period between the abolition of slavery and the United States Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, hopefully represent Canada as the “sweet land of rest” (Siemerling 96). Consequently, the developments in the 1850s accelerated Black immigration to Canada, resulting in what Siemerling called “The Black Canadian Renaissance”. The anti-slavery activist Mary Ann Shadd was the most representative figure in this Black Canadian context. Shadd portrays Canada as a strategic site for emigration where Black people can fight for their rights.

Her literary response engaged in struggles for liberation and racial integration which resulted in an active Black self-transformation. However, Shadd’s portrayal of Canada as a perfect space for liberty and transformation was challenged by Martin Delany who understood Canada as a temporary solution to Black immigrants. Along with these groundbreaking authors, Siemerling analyzes other Black figures deemed as models of resistance against slavery and racism in Canada after the outpouring of the Civil War in 1861.

Part II, entitled “The Presence of the Past”, consists of three chapters which foreground the necessary juxtaposition and integration of earlier Black Canadian contexts, history, and literature with the contemporary Black Canadian cultural expressions. Accordingly, in Chapter 4, entitled “Slavery, the Black Canadian Nineteenth Century, and Caribbean Contexts in Contemporary Black Canadian Writing”, Siemerling offers a compelling examination of a corpus of significant works written by Black authors who contribute to the re-articulation and integration of Black diasporic communities in Canada. This is clearly visible in Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* (2007), a neo-slave narrative that inscribes through the voice of a Black woman the diasporic lives of slaves and ex-slaves in Nova Scotia in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War. Also dismantling the myth of a slavery-free Canada, George Elliott Clarke places slavery at the center of his outstanding play *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), in an attempt to engage the reader with the controversial and radical story of slave resistance in Canada. Furthermore, Siemerling explores the ways in which such an historical past is connected with the Caribbean context, as Caribbean Canadian authors redefine Caribbean Canadian spaces by evoking the legacies of slavery in their works. In particular, Makeda Silvera’s and Austin Clarke’s writings intertwine Caribbean Canadian time-spaces and show the continuities between slavery times and present-day domestic workers who immigrated to Canada.

Turning the gaze towards other Black geographies in Canada (Chapter 5), Siemerling explores Black musical traditions, institutions, and communities in the history of Black Anglo-



phone Montreal through Caribbean-descended Montreal musicians such as Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones. Jazz is an icon of Montreal Black history which, albeit elided in some literary expressions, is often placed at the center of historical novels such as Mairuth Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair* (1997). These developments become the hallmark of the Africadian Renaissance, a term coined by Clarke that highlights the significant role of Black experiences in Canada. Africadian Renaissance was highly propelled by the symbolic recuperation of Africville in Halifax, a place that intertwines the past and the present. Siemerling concludes this chapter by discussing texts from the Black Canadian prairies and closes with a (re)discovery and therefore (re)consideration of British Columbia as a Black space. Wayde Compton's writing, which often evokes the use of hip hop as a practice of Black British Columbians, contributes to the depiction of the history and culture of Blacks in this region. Finally, in the last chapter of the volume, Siemerling aptly reconsiders most of the works mentioned in previous chapters, summarizing his reconstitution of the Black Atlantic.

The Black Atlantic Reconsidered manages to explore and redefine Black Canadian writing in a language that appeals to both non-specialist and academic readers alike. In the Appendix, Siemerling provides a timeline gathering the titles and authors mentioned in his book, which provides a clear idea of the development of Black Canadian literary history. The timeline is divided into two parts, including the earlier works and documents in the first part and the most salient works published after 1960 in the second part. In

addition to Siemerling's valuable insights about Black Canadian diasporic writing, history and culture, the book provides a useful bibliography with notes and references to the most significant studies in the field. Besides challenging previous genealogies of the Black Atlantic, Siemerling's comprehensive volume is an indispensable tool for the study of Black Canadian literature and culture. As a complement, the website companion to *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* (<http://www.blackatlantic.ca>) presents a compilation of many of the primary and secondary texts, including historical documents, information about authors, scholarly and newspaper articles, and other relevant websites, constituting a useful tool for individual readers, researchers, teachers and students. All in all, Siemerling's historical survey of Black writing is an essential reference to understand not only this relevant body of cultural production, but also Canadian history, the transatlantic Black diaspora and Modernity at large.

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