

**Narrative, Genre and National Myth in Postmodern
Canadian Historical Fiction**

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Mei-Chuen Wang

Summary

This thesis investigates the expansion and continuing proliferation of Canadian historical fiction during the past three decades, and makes a case for reading a number of these novels as postmodern historical fiction. Characterized by the postmodern tendency to problematize history and cross genre boundaries, the novels discussed here are nevertheless rooted in their Canadian context.

To establish a theoretical framework, the thesis reviews the reconfiguration of history in contemporary critical theories and its impact on the writing of history and historical fiction, and investigates the debate over Canada's postcoloniality. In the textual analysis, I address the questions raised by the interaction between postmodern problematization of history and local concerns in the selected novels. What narrative strategies are employed to launch an epistemological and ontological questioning of history? Are alternative reconceptualizations of history offered after the problematization? How do these texts achieve genre transgression through narrative devices and what is the purpose of this? What meta-narratives of national history are challenged? What national myths are subverted and dismantled? Are some other myths accidentally reasserted in this deconstructive process? What effects does this historical revisionism or scepticism have on the understanding of Canadian national identity?

The focus of the discussion is on the relationships between formal experimentation and thematic concerns and the ways these texts interweave general critiques of history and its representation with specific investigations into the Canadian context. Finally, I propose explanations for the flourishing of contemporary Canadian historical fiction by taking into account both the combined theoretical framework and the complexities and subtleties of the texts under scrutiny. The thesis concludes that the authors of these novels have complicated the postmodern questioning of history at a variety of levels and made that questioning accommodate the novelists' concern with Canadian specificities.

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Introduction

The 1960s saw the beginning of the flowering of Canadian literature, a phenomenon often attributed to the rise of cultural nationalism, the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts (1957), and the government's support for publishers and artists. Major writers, such as Margaret Laurence, Hugh MacLennan, Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Leonard Cohen, Timothy Findley, Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, and George Bowering, contributed to this frenzy of literary production. In the 1970s, rising literary figures, such as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Jack Hodgins, Daphne Marlatt, and Matt Cohen, began to take centre stage and helped to sustain and enrich cultural production in Canada. Since the 1980s, Canada has witnessed the occurrence of another interesting literary phenomenon — the proliferation of historical fiction.¹ This does not mean that there was no historical fiction before this decade. In fact, historical tales were always part of Canadian literature, and many were produced during the colonial and post-Confederation eras.² Oliver Goldsmith Jr.'s *The Rising Village* (1825), John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832), Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), and William Kirby's *The Golden Dog* (1877) are some of the most important examples of historical fiction in the nineteenth century. These novels deal with issues that are common in invader-settler colonies: the experience of settlement in the new land, the cultural conflict between new and old worlds, the critique or support of British colonialism, and the

¹ This phenomenon has been noted by critics. See Martin Kuester, *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *The American Historical Review*, 103: 5 (1998), 1503-16; Herb Wyile, *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002), and *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007); Marta Dvorak, 'Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), pp. 155-76.

² For a brief overview of Canadian historical fiction (both in English and French), see Dennis Duffy, *Sounding the Iceberg: An Essay on Canadian Historical Novels* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1986). Duffy divides the writing of historical fiction into three periods: from 1832 to 1919, historical romances predominated; the fictions produced between 1919 and 1966 were concerned with such themes as the preservation of society against hostile forces and national reconciliation; from 1970 to 1983, with the appearance of the authors who were to become leading figures in the writing of historical fiction, the novels seemed more complex and various.

encounter between Europeans, Native populations and the wilderness.

Before the rapid expansion of historical fiction in the 1980s, novels with strong historical concerns and themes had attracted public and critical attention: Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941), Thomas Raddall's *His Majesty's Yankees* (1942) and *The Nymph and the Lamp* (1950), Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), Hodgins's *The Invention of the World* (1977), and Findley's *The Wars* (1977). These books are interested in re-examining historico-political events that have fashioned Canadian society into its present form or have become New World myths, in interrogating the cross-cultural relationship with First Nations peoples, in exposing the underlying ideology of Eurocentric assumptions, in contesting master narratives of Western culture, in finding new ways of storytelling, in expanding what counts as history, and in destabilizing the borders between history, biography and story. All these issues continue to be explored in works produced in the following decades.

The fascination with fictional or fictionalized representation of history moved to the foreground of the Canadian literary landscape in the 1980s, achieved prominence in the 1990s, and proliferates in the twenty-first century. Both established and emerging writers have contributed to the production of this particular genre: Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980); Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987); Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988); Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994); Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996); Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981); Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983); Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* (1986), *Away* (1993), and *The Stone Carvers* (2001); Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* (1991) and *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (2001); Thomas Wharton's *Icefields* (1995); Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* (1996) and *The Last Crossing* (2002); Wayne

Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) and *The Navigator of New York* (2002); Fred Stenson's *The Trade* (2000) and *Lightening* (2003). The thematic range has been extended to cover experience of non-British immigrants, specific regional histories, and life stories of historical figures who assumed cultural rather than political significance. Many of the novels present historically marginalized or silenced perspectives, looking at history from the bottom up. It is noteworthy that this wave of writing is characterized by tendencies to scrutinize traditional ways of representing history, to challenge established history with alternative versions, to reveal and probe elements left out by official history, and to cross boundaries between genres. Some of these works are grouped into a subcategory called postmodern historical novels in terms of their transformation of the historical novel as a genre and problematization of history in general.

Prompted by this particular literary phenomenon, this thesis explores the formal experimentation and historical revisionism or scepticism in contemporary fiction. By examining certain key novels, it addresses the following questions: What narrative strategies are employed to launch an epistemological and ontological questioning of history? What assumptions about history as a scientific discipline are problematized? Are alternatives offered in the reconceptualization of history after the problematization? If yes, what are they? How do these texts achieve genre transgression through narrative devices and what is the purpose of this? What meta-narratives of national history are challenged? What national myths are subverted and dismantled? Is it likely that some other myths are reasserted in this deconstructive process? What effects does this historical revisionism or scepticism have on the understanding of Canadian national identity? These questions relate formal issues to thematic concerns, which include both general critiques of history and specific investigations into the Canadian context.

The phenomenon, of course, has attracted critical attention. In the chapter on historiographic metafiction in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), Linda Hutcheon analyses the postmodern aesthetic and political strategies employed in novels whose increasing self-consciousness reveals the writing of history as a discursive construction involving the maintenance and reproduction of social power and control. Frank Davey concerns himself with the withdrawal from politics and retreat into narrow individualism or extra-social visions in *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone Novel Since 1967* (1993), but most of the novels scrutinized by him are as much about the writing of history as they are about the past. In *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (1992), Martin Kuester examines the re-visioning of history through parodic structures in the works of Findley, Bowering and Atwood, and connects their writing with the postcolonial impulse of former colonies to create or recreate distinct local identity. Manina Jones's *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-Collage' and English-Canadian Writing* (1993) explores how the formal strategy of recontextualizing historical documents opens up space for alternative discourses and negotiations among writer, reader, and historical material. In *Paths of Desire: Images of Exploration and Mapping in Canadian Women's Writing* (1997), Marlene Goldman reads images of exploration and cartography at the intersection between feminist theory and postmodern theory in several acclaimed historical novels. Marie Vautier's *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction* (1998) adopts a comparative approach to contemporary historical novels in French and English and draws on discursive practices from postcolonialism and postmodernism to elucidate the formulation of New World Myth as a challenge to European versions of past events. Herb Wyile looks into the political concerns and textual strategies of the historical fictions published over the last decade and a half in *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (2002). Finally, Marc Colavincenzo's "Trading Magic for Fact," *Fact for Magic: Myth and Mythologizing in Postmodern Canadian Historical Fiction* (2003) discusses the

techniques that some Canadian postmodern historical fictions use to mythologize history and grant mythical significance to the histories in question.

With this long list, it seems that considerable or even ample work has been done on Canadian historical fiction. Nevertheless, these studies hardly overlap with one another in the selection of texts for analysis: only a few works like *Burning Water*, *Ana Historic*, *Obasan*, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, or *Famous Last Words* are considered repeatedly. This indicates both the abundance of contemporary Canadian historical fictions and the demand for further research into this field. This thesis is indebted to these previous studies and seeks to cover texts that have not received adequate critical attention and to provide fresh perspectives on texts that have won great critical acclaim. Despite the common interest in narrative strategies, this thesis differs from Colavincenzo's, Kuester's, or Jones's studies in its emphasis on the Canadian specificities presented in the texts selected for scrutiny. It also differs from Davey's *Post-National Arguments* in its foregrounding the political commitment in these texts, from Goldman's *Paths of Desire* in its inclusion of texts that deal with issues beyond the discourses of exploration and settlement, from Vautier's *New World Myth* in its investigation of the dismantling of New World Myth and Canadian national myth, and from Wylie's *Speculative Fictions* in its attempt to explain the flourishing of contemporary historical fiction by examining the possibility of Canadian postcoloniality and its relationship with postmodern questioning of historical discourse and practice. This thesis argues that the novels to be studied have complicated the postmodern questioning of history at a variety of levels, and made that questioning accommodate the novelists' concern with the specific Canadian context.

Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of this introduction is divided into two sections. First, I will provide a brief

review of the definition of the traditional historical novel and then look at how the epistemological and ontological questioning of history in contemporary critical theories has radically challenged the underpinnings of history and how this questioning has impacted upon the writing of contemporary historical fiction, especially the subgenre of the postmodern historical novel. Second, I will examine the debate over the postcolonial condition of Canada. Both postcolonialism and postmodernism have a strong interest in history while there is a tension between postmodern questioning of history and postcolonial demand for history. An investigation into the debate can put the novels surveyed here in a broader historical context and might help to explain the revival of the historical novel in Canada after the 1980s. The two sections combine to form a theoretical framework for the textual analysis in the following chapters.

In Chapter One, I explore the ways in which Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* dramatize competing interpretations to reveal history as a site of contestation and power struggle. Chapter Two focuses on Findley's *The Wars* and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, analysing how the boundaries between history, fiction and biography are blurred and how certain generic conventions are manoeuvred to disclose their own ideological assumptions. Chapter Three investigates the reinscription of the ex-centric in history and the recapitulation of the heteroglossic nature of historical accounts in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and Sweatman's *Fox*. Chapter Four concerns the deconstruction of New World myths, the conflicts faced by new immigrants in terms of gender, class, race and ethnicity, and the meaning of being Canadian in Urquhart's *Away* and Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*. In Chapter Five, focus is shifted to the genealogical recounting of family history as a process of imposing meaning and the renegotiation of identity for individuals from ethnic minorities within the racist white Canada in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Marilyn Bowering's *To All Appearances a Lady*. All ten novels

exhibit varying degrees of formal experimentation; therefore, discussion of their narrative strategies, whether they are explicitly or implicitly postmodern, will constitute a significant part of each chapter.

In the conclusion, I will try to provide tentative explanations for the proliferation of contemporary Canadian historical fiction since the 1980s by taking into account the debate over Canada's postcoloniality, the tension between postcolonialism and postmodernism in relation to history, and the dynamics of postmodern and postcolonial forces as demonstrated in the novels scrutinized here. This is only one possible approach to historicizing and contextualizing this unusual literary phenomenon, but it sheds light on the contradiction between the scepticism about history and the flourishing of fictional writing that depends on history.

It has to be admitted that this study does not consider works by Native, African, or other ethnic writers. I want to avoid tokenism and the selection principle is not authorship, but whether these novels can be categorized as postmodern historical fiction engaged in examining the making of history in all its various manifestations and relating this concern to the specific Canadian context. Of course, there are other novels that can meet this standard, but the current selection is best suited for my particular interest in genre transgression, power struggle in historical representation, investigation of national myths, and negotiation between identity and family history.

Delineating Postmodern Historical Fiction

To understand the features of postmodern historical fiction, we need to do some archaeological research into the prototype of the genre which the new wave of writing has relied on, modified and metamorphosized. In *The Historical Novel* (1937), Georg Lukács

argues that the historical novel arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a response to the dramatic changes resulting from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars and that it was Sir Walter Scott who founded this genre with the publication of his *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* in 1814. The so-called historical novels before him were historical only in terms of their external choice of theme and costume. They lacked the 'derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age', a feature that characterized Scott's novels and constituted the classic form of the historical novel.³ The genre was not a brand-new invention but 'the direct continuation of the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century.'⁴ In other words, the historical novel remains part of the realistic literary tradition. Interestingly, what Lukács regards as realistic representation of history does not amount to a duplication of the language or the mode of thought and feeling of the past. Scott's faithfulness consists in the 'authentic reproduction of the real components of historical necessity', which, according to Lukács, refers to

the complex interaction of concrete historical circumstances in their process of transformation, in their interaction with the concrete human beings, who have grown up in these circumstances, have been very variously influenced by them, and who act in an individual way according to their personal passions.⁵

Historical necessity appears similar to Hegel's 'spirit' (*Geist*), which can be understood to indicate both the way a particular culture or period sees the relations between individuals and the world, and the structure of belief and action for a particular age. Insofar as historical

³ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 19. Jerome de Groot recently published a new book of the same title, which offers a genealogical account of the genre and reviews the critical debates surrounding it. One chapter is devoted to the discussion of postmodernism and the historical novel. It came out too recently to be used in this study, but it is a further proof of burgeoning interest in historical fiction. See de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 31.

⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, pp. 58-59.

necessity is successfully reproduced, it hardly matters whether all the details are accurate or not. In fact, anachronism is not only allowed but even necessary.⁶ Though rooted in socio-political reality, the historical novel in Lukács's configuration has actually deviated from the mimetic assumptions of the realistic mode. What should be faithfully reproduced is not the language, thought, feeling or behaviour of a specific past period, but the essential elements in the interaction between individuals and the historical forces that shape them. What counts is 'the authenticity of the historical psychology of his characters.'⁷ It is the spirit of the law of history rather than historical precision that must be captured. The cult of facts is just 'a miserable surrogate.'⁸ This standard of authenticity sounds more modernist than realistic. Lukács's realist historical novel does not act as a mirror reflecting the past although it is expected to furnish faithful representations of concealed past actuality. A question inevitably arises as to how the spirit or essential elements of a specific epoch can be uncovered or defined. Despite this ambiguity, the historical novel serves for Lukács as a good artistic form to grasp the peculiarities of historical characters and events and to convey historical truth. This is the age of innocence for the historical novel, with unshaken faith in the past as a given waiting for its core to be revealed and replicated, and confidence in language as an immediate medium for accurate representation.

The historical novel formulated by Scott and theorized by Lukács is neither elegiac nor nostalgic; it carries tangible political implications orientated towards the present. Believing that transformations of history take the form of transformations of popular life, Scott always begins by depicting how significant changes affect everyday life and what kind of material and psychological effects are produced on individuals in reaction to these changes. Working

⁶ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 61. Lukács argues that 'Scott's "necessary anachronism" consists, therefore, simply in allowing his character to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done. But the content of these feelings and thoughts, their relation to the real object is always socially and historically correct' (p. 63).

⁷ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 60.

⁸ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 303.

up from this basis enables him to delineate the complicated ideological, political and moral movements stemming from such historical changes. Scott, as Lukács contends, 'aims at portraying the totality of national life in its complex interaction between "above" and "below."' ⁹ Transformations of popular life, the 'below', provide the material basis and artistic expression for what happens 'above,' that is, historical developments. *Waverley* presents real historical events and conflicts to demonstrate 'the ways in which those events set the scene for Scott's contemporary culture (some sixty years on, as the subtitle of the novel indicates).'¹⁰ The connecting of past events in the story with contemporary culture engenders a sense of historical continuity, which presupposes a view of history as developmental and progressive. In this light, the classic historical novel has political significance in the attempt to accomplish a triple mission: commitment to representation of the past, placement of the present in context through that representation, and establishment of inevitable historical progress in between.

Scott began to lose his popularity in the 1880s.¹¹ The dwindling critical interest, as Elisabeth Wesseling notes, results from the changes in the attitude of Victorian critics and the professionalization of history. On the one hand, Victorians found fault with Scott's shallowness in characterization and morals, for Victorian realism demanded that novelists be able to combine an all-inclusive and accurate depiction of the exterior circumstances of their characters with a display of moral judgments in the analysis of their interior life. Historical novels like Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* or George Eliot's *Romola* gained more favour due to their lessons in morality. On the other, history, in the process of becoming a scientific discipline, started to set higher standards for the recounting of the past and became

⁹ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 49.

¹⁰ Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 88.

¹¹ John O. Hayden, *The Critical Heritage*, quoted in Elisabeth Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1991), p. 55.

less tolerant of Scott's anachronisms and errors in chronology, while historians expressed growing dissatisfaction with anachronistic psychology.¹² Scott's brand of historical novels was rejected both by Victorian critics, for its deficiency in characterization and moral acumen, and by historians, for its lack of accuracy. Nonetheless, during the nineteenth century, the genre still occupied 'a *complementary* position' with respect to history in that it functioned as a means of propagating historical knowledge, although it 'was designed for the telling of a thrilling tale of high adventure within a historical setting, which was to entertain the reading public and to rouse their curiosity.'¹³ The underlying assumption was the validity and value of historical knowledge, a category that is problematized in contemporary historical fictions.

But how does this problematization come into being and how does the historical novel become an arena for the tackling of intricate epistemological issues? In the first place, it has to do with poststructuralist and deconstructive reconfiguration of language as a closed, arbitrary and self-referential signifying system. Theorists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and others have engaged in a careful deconstruction of the model of language as a transparent and neutral medium for referring to an external world. The confidence in the immediate correspondence between the language used to signify and the thing being signified has been undermined. Emphasis is shifted to the fact that language as a system of signs brings into operation a free play of the signifier, activated by what Derrida calls *différance*, which means that the signifying process takes effect depending on difference between signifiers instead of the reference to the signified and meaning is forever deferred through an endless chain of signifiers, a chain that 'comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.'¹⁴

¹² Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet*, pp. 55-57.

¹³ Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet*, pp. 32, 73.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1967), pp. 278-94 (p. 289). Derrida elaborates this term *différance* in various works, notably in his essay 'Différance' and in interviews collected in *Positions*. See

This theorizing of language as an autonomous system also discards the traditional concept of intentionality. Language is no longer seen as a tool used to express thoughts or feelings and to refer to an external reality, but rather as what is essential to structure an individual as a speaking subject. The subject does not create the meaning of the words to convey intention; on the contrary, intention is determined by the given meaning of the words. The Cartesian relation between the subject and the objective world and the faith in the subject's ability to capture or reflect that world are relinquished to a linguistic determinism, which denies not only the humanist notion of the individual as a unitary and autonomous subject but the possibility of representing empirical reality through language. The repudiation of reference as the basis of language and of the subject in control of the production of meaning in language has posed epistemological and ontological questions about the conventions of historical practice, undermining in particular the assumption that history provides a truthful account of the past.

It is the mistrust of the mimetic model of historical representation that most critics draw on to characterize certain historical fiction as postmodern. Colavincenzo defines this subgenre as 'fiction which, within the framework of a historically conditioned situation, challenges the claims and assumptions [. . .] on which historical practice and its view of history and the past are based.'¹⁵ Likewise, Wesseling remarks that postmodern historical fiction raises critical doubts about the objectivist epistemology of historiography, but rather than seeing it as a unique feature of postmodern historical fiction, she contends that modernist writers have already launched this epistemological scepticism through their fascination with

Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 3-27; *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971).

¹⁵ Marc Colavincenzo, "Trading Magic for Fact," *Fact for Magic: Myth and Mythologizing in Postmodern Canadian Historical Fiction* (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2003), p. 48.

self-reflexivity and subjectivization of history.¹⁶ Whether postmodernism is a legacy or an abrupt departure from modernism should not obscure the fact that what distinguishes postmodern historical fiction from the traditional historical novel consists in the distrust of historiography's positivist claims for objectivism, scientism, and authenticity.

In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale defines what he calls postmodernist revisionist historical fiction as follows: it highlights the transgression of the ontological boundary between the real world and the fictional world (or what he calls the projected world); its revisionism consists, first, in the attempts to revise, reinterpret, and even contest the content of the official history and, secondly, in the modification and even transformation of the conventions and norms of historical fiction.¹⁷ McHale's subcategory is, however, concerned only with the rewriting of history and the problematizing of the reliability of official history. Although he suggests at the end that in such novels 'history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming "true" history — and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle,'¹⁸ the challenge to the underlying assumptions of historiography remains unexplored.¹⁹ For McHale, there exists the boundary that separates the real from the fictional although he admits that inserting real-world historical figures into the fiction world violates this ontological boundary and arouses a scent of scandal. It seems that McHale still trusts the mimetic ideal in transposing the real into the fictional, which is evidenced in his usage of the terms 'projected worlds' and 'fictional projects'. What contemporary theories strive to problematize is precisely the differentiation between the real and the fictional and the faithful transposition of the former into the latter. The fictional world is not the projection of the real world just as the historical figures in the novel are not

¹⁶ Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet*, pp. 85-89.

¹⁷ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. 90.

¹⁸ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 96.

¹⁹ Colavincenzo, "Trading Magic for Fact", p. xv.

duplicates of the real-world persons. The historical figures in the 'projected' world are themselves discursive constructions.

McHale depends upon Roman Jakobson's conceptualization of the dominant to differentiate postmodernist fiction from modernist fiction, contending that the former interrogates ontological questions whereas the latter is preoccupied with epistemological questions. But the two dominants do not belong to exclusive categories. As McHale emphasizes, 'push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions' and vice versa.²⁰ Postmodernist fiction foregrounds ontological questions, pushing epistemological implications into the background but never allowing them to be forgotten. Nevertheless, it seems that McHale's definition of postmodernist fiction cannot be applied either to what Wesseling or Colavincenzo defines as postmodern historical fiction or to what he himself terms as postmodernist revisionist historical fiction, for in either case it is epistemological interrogations that come to the fore. It would be more appropriate to say that postmodern historical fiction, with its primary interest in representing the past and in problematizing that representation, is preoccupied simultaneously with ontological and epistemological questioning. But how does the epistemological and ontological problematizing dismantle the presumptions underpinning history as a scientific discipline?

Drawing on Barthes's conceptualization of myth as a process that transforms culture into nature, Colavincenzo regards historical discourse as myth.²¹ It is through this naturalizing process that historical discourse assumes the authority of objectivity and authenticity. Though never referring to historical discourse as myth, Barthes examines the naturalizing process by exposing how 'the *reality effect*'²² that underpins historical discourse and opposes it to

²⁰ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 11.

²¹ Colavincenzo, "*Trading Magic for Fact*", p. 1.

²² Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley

fictional discourse is in actuality an illusion. He considers historical discourse to be a speech act, which necessarily involves two participant entities — the receiver and the speaker or writer. To establish objectivity, the historian must “‘absent himself’ from his discourse.”²³ Any sign referring to this speaker or writer is systematically repressed and made invisible. In this way, the historian is able to pretend that his individuality plays no part in the act of recounting of the past. He takes on, to use Foucault’s wording, ‘a faceless anonymity’ and substitutes ‘the fiction of a universal geometry’ for his individual perspective.²⁴ As a consequence from this absence, ‘history seems to *tell itself*.’²⁵ To put it simply, the historian achieves the claim for objectivity by deliberately ‘erasing’ himself from historical discourse. Through the act of self-erasure, the historical statement seems to assume the status of objectivity and impartiality.

But seeing historical discourse as a speech act foregrounds the existence of the producer of speech, who has always already been a subject, occupying a position in a particular time and space. This is what Foucault calls ‘the unavoidable obstacles’ of the historian.²⁶ To restore the historian as a producer of speech is a way to historicize and contextualize the historian, rejecting the idea that this producer can be a subject occupying an ‘outside’ position in relation to his object. Subjectivity necessarily gets involved however the historian endeavours to efface himself. Foucault argues that the objectivity of the historian ‘inverts the relationships of will and knowledge.’²⁷ That is to say, what really motivates the historian is the will to knowledge, and ultimately the will to power. By effacing his individuality and adopting a mask of objectivity, he submerges this personal will and fills its place with the

and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 139.

²³ Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History’, p. 131.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), pp. 139-64 (p. 158).

²⁵ Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History’, p. 131.

²⁶ Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, p. 156-57.

²⁷ Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, p. 158.

illusion that the past and the historical knowledge about it are out there waiting to be revealed and told. Yet the fact is that the past is always already lost. It is this absence that makes the representation of the past desirable and necessary.

Curiously, in seeing historical discourse as a speech act, Barthes pays little attention to the other participating entity — the addressee, the reader, or the receiver. He only mentions in passing: ‘In historical discourse, the signs of reception or destination are commonly absent.’²⁸ What role the receiver can play in this mutual connection remains underinvestigated. A supposedly two-participant activity is reduced to a soliloquy, with the receiver slipping into oblivion. Yet ‘the signs of reception or destination’ that Barthes does not elaborate further are exactly what attracts the attention of postmodern historical novelists, who strive to restore the two-participant activity and explore the potential that the receiver can realize in the act of reimagining the past.

Hutcheon proposes a similar argument with a different emphasis. Using the model of enunciation, she foregrounds the role of the receiver in the enunciating act, arguing that postmodern texts thematize the interactive process between the producer and the receiver in order to demonstrate how the meaning of a text results from the joint act of reading and writing. It is the process, instead of the product, that concerns postmodern texts. Enunciation includes a speaker who enunciates, a listener who is addressed, a discourse or utterance delivered by the speaker, a time and a place in which this act takes place.²⁹ The point is that any enunciating act always occurs in a specific context. Therefore, for Hutcheon, the model of enunciation helps to contextualize and historicize postmodernism. Hutcheon elaborates the

²⁸ Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History’, p. 131.

²⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 74-86. See also Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. (Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 61-77.

importance of contextualization in postmodern theory and practice in terms of enunciation with a view to defending postmodernism against the accusation of being ahistorical, asocial, and apolitical. Hutcheon prefers to label as ‘historiographic metafiction’ those novels that self-consciously engage with the epistemological investigation of representing the past, emphasizing that they demonstrate typical postmodern contradictoriness and indeterminacy by ‘work[ing] *within* conventions in order to subvert them.’³⁰ Her historiographic metafiction demonstrates ‘skepticism rather than any real denunciation’ in relation to empiricist epistemologies.³¹ Indeed, writers of postmodern historical fiction enjoy creating sophisticated narrative designs to highlight the role of the receiver, the process of meaning production, and the significance of context. Their novels do work within conventions in order to subvert them. Nonetheless, to what extent they celebrate contradiction and indeterminacy as Hutcheon argues demands further examination.

Another feature of postmodern conceptualization of history lies in the denial of continuity and progression in historical development. The linear model of historical thinking is questioned while history begins to be seen as characterized by discontinuity and contingency. Thus a new model of historical research is demanded. As Foucault argues, traditional history ‘aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity — as a teleological movement or a natural process’, whereas ‘effective’ history, a new way to study history, focuses on ‘the singular randomness of events’, dealing with events ‘in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations.’³² To dissolve an event into an ideal continuity is to insert it into a preset framework, in the light of which the meaning of the event is established. It is an act to impose an external order upon singular events and connect them together within a presupposed framework. To study an event in terms of its unique

³⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 5.

³¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 106.

³² Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, p. 154.

features runs counter to the notion of constructing a comprehensive view of history. It is concerned more with singularity and particularity than with commonality and universality. It fragments historical knowledge, creates a rupture between past and present, and negates the belief that the present comes as an inevitable consequence of the past. Foucault's history radically refuses to pursue the origin; in fact, it rejects outright the notion of origin.

To pursue the claim to objectivity and impartiality, historical practice, in addition to the historian's self-effacement, strives to suppress the role of interpretation, which is regarded as opinion rather than as knowledge. Nevertheless, the interpretative aspect of historiography is ineluctable. For Hayden White, a historical account is 'at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative.'³³ Moreover, interpreting never produces only one final outcome; it rather gives rise to a multiplicity of possibilities. As White argues, 'most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings.'³⁴ Yet what really needs repressing is less the interpreting act than the multiple interpretations and diverse meanings the act renders. It is precisely the multiplicity of interpretation that threatens claims to objective truth and undercuts the authority of history.

Postmodern historical fiction prefers to underscore this process of interpretation and explore its potential for multiplicity, especially when it comes to understanding the so-called historical evidence and filling in gaps in the historical record. Never a neutral activity, the process of interpretation necessarily involves exclusion and domination. "Pure" interpretation, the disinterested inquiry into anything whatsoever, is unthinkable' because

³³ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 51.

³⁴ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 85.

‘interpretation presupposes politics as one of the conditions of its possibility as a social activity.’³⁵ Politics has to do with power, and power can never be free of violence. Foucault offers a very militant explication of this act — ‘interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules.’³⁶ Interpretation functions as a means of grasping power. The politics of interpretation and its inevitable conflict and violence is what postmodern historical novelists like to thematize.

The authority of history is further undermined by the blurring of the boundaries between history and fiction. Both are now redefined as linguistic entities, belonging to the order of discourse.³⁷ White suggests that historical narrative should be read both as ‘an extended metaphor’ and ‘a symbolic structure.’³⁸ Historical accounts consist not just of factual statements but of poetic and rhetorical elements. History depends on emplotment to configure historical situations and endow them with meanings. Yet the mechanism of selection begins to work even before interpretation or emplotment can take place in historical writing. When facing the historical evidence, the historian could not include all the pieces in his construction of the past but has to determine their relevance and what relations exist between them. Therefore, the historian must first ‘prefigure the field — that is to say, constitute it as an object of mental perception’ before he can bring to bear on the evidence ‘the conceptual

³⁵ White Hayden, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 59.

³⁶ Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, p. 151-2.

³⁷ According to Lionel Gossman, history writing used to be viewed ‘as an art of presentation rather than a scientific inquiry, and its problems belonged therefore to rhetoric rather than to epistemology.’ The concept of history as a literary genre remains valid until nearly the end of the eighteenth century. See Gossman, ‘History and Literature: Reproduction of Signification’, in *The Writing of History: Literary Forms and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 3-39 (pp. 4-5).

³⁸ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 91.

apparatus he will use to represent and explain it.³⁹ White describes this prefigurative act as ‘poetic’; it is an act constitutive not only of the process that determines what can become objects of historical knowledge, but also of the concepts that he will employ to explain these objects and configure what kinds of relationships they sustain with one another.⁴⁰

Although it may remain debatable whether ‘poetic’ is an accurate word to describe the prefigurative act, White’s conceptualization makes it clear that selection comes into operation even before any attempt at historical writing is made. To determine what can become objects of historical knowledge is to make a judgment about what objects possess epistemological value. It requires a subject, positioned in a particular time and place, to carry out this evaluation. Consequently, White’s prefigurative act reconfirms the inescapability of subjective arbitrariness and selectivity.

White also contends that history shares the same discursive conventions with fiction:

The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like — in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play.⁴¹

Emplotment or narrativization in history writing performs a cognitive function, which ‘is not just to relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of interrelationships of

³⁹ White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 30.

⁴⁰ White, *Metahistory*, p. 31.

⁴¹ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 84.

many different kinds as a single whole.’⁴² The narrative representation of that ensemble is traditionally accepted as an accurate imitation, but that ensemble is just one of many possible combinations of interrelationships in past actuality, and the historical narrative ‘a product of imaginative construction’ like fiction.⁴³ In other words, narrativization is no neutral rendering of the past, but a device to tell us in what directions to consider the events and charge our reading of them with ‘different emotional valences.’⁴⁴ It also imposes an illusory unity on the diversity of historical evidence to provide a coherent, homogeneous picture of the past. Historical evidence, the base of historical narrative, is no longer seen as the transparent residual presence of the past but as already textualized and shaped by the signifying system at the time of its creation. The effacement of individual imagination in the construction, the repression of multiple possibilities, and the suppression of heterogeneous historical sources constitute part of the procedures of authentication. Revealing the role of narrativization furthers blurs the boundary between history and literature.

The disclosure of the operating system that creates a sense of historical veracity and verisimilitude leads Munslow to call history ‘a counterfeit undertaking.’⁴⁵ As a whole, the theoretical problematization puts history in a very awkward situation by sabotaging its claims to objectivity and authenticity. What is the use and worth of history if it cannot hold up a mirror up to the past? Why bother to write about the past if what happened is believed to be unknowable? This epistemological and ontological scepticism about history has made it impossible to write history in the traditional sense, leading to the declaration that contemporary culture has reached the end of history. From a postmodern perspective, however, the end signifies a sense of liberation engendered by the collapse of the grand

⁴² Louis O. Mink, ‘Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument’, in *The Writing of History: Literary Forms and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 129–49 (p. 144).

⁴³ Mink, ‘Narrative Form’, p. 145.

⁴⁴ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 127.

narratives of one universal history, a sense that may have intensified the desire to write about the past in literature. In investigating the renaissance of the historical novel in Britain, A.S. Byatt contends that the negation of, or at least grave doubt about, the traditional function of history produces a sense of prohibition on the writing of history, but it is exactly because of this that novelists renew the interest in writing historical fiction.⁴⁶ Some writers may like the challenge caused by the prohibition, but it is also possible that the dethronement of history in contemporary critical theories, especially the undermining of the hierarchy between history and literature, provides them with more confidence and freedom. It is not easy to pinpoint why historical fiction has flourished in the past few decades, but the paradoxical phenomenon that the proliferation of historical fiction and the rise of postmodern historical novels coincide with the undermining and subversion of history can give some clues.

The radical reconfiguration of history shifts the focus to the act of writing history, alerting postmodern historical novelists to the textuality of historical evidence and historical narrative, to the ontological gap between the past, its traces and its representation, and to the nature of representing as a mediating and structuring act rather than as a mimetic model. Exploring these issues and their implications has become the chief preoccupation in postmodern historical fiction. For postmodern writers, historical practice is no longer accepted as conveying unproblematic historical knowledge but reconceived of as a discourse of power and legitimation, playing a crucial part in the construction of social, political, and cultural relations. Nor is the past seen as something out there, waiting to be uncovered and reproduced, but as a discursive construct resulting from the competition for power and domination. Recognition of legitimation and its resultant exclusion in history writing explains why, in many postmodern historical novels, the problematization of history is often accompanied by a strong tendency to tell obscure or untold stories of the past from the

⁴⁶ A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 11.

perspectives which have been marginalized in or excluded from the making or writing of traditional history.

This echoes Wesseling's observation that the most striking of postmodern historical fiction is not so much its self-reflexivity as its wilful falsifications of history.⁴⁷ While conventional historical fiction is expected to speak where the historian falls silent and fill in the gaps in historical records without violating established facts, postmodern historical novelists tend to produce deliberately counterfactual versions of history through conspicuous anachronisms or divergences from canonized history. It is a strategy motivated by a keen awareness of the contingency of history. The exposure of that contingency undermines the legitimating function of historical discourse and, most importantly, serves as the necessary precondition for disrupting the status quo. For Wesseling, the key political significance of postmodernism lies precisely in this 'utopian anticipation of the future.'⁴⁸

That the proliferation of historical fiction coincides with the radical epistemological and ontological questioning of history points toward a submerged yearning for the past and the real, in spite of the theorizing of their status as a discursive construction. Aware of this ambiguity, Allen Thiher notes that the postmodern novel is a product of the tensions between the denial of the text of the real and the disbelief in history, on the one hand, and the desire for the real and 'the need for a structure that can allow the writer to measure deviance and proclaim the need for political and ethical discourses', on the other.⁴⁹ Despite the sense of

⁴⁷ Elisabeth Wesseling, 'Historical Fiction: Utopia in History', in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1997), pp. 203-11 (p. 203).

⁴⁸ Wesseling, 'Historical Fiction', p. 203.

⁴⁹ Allen Thiher, 'Postmodern Fiction and History', in *History and Post-War Writing*, ed. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), pp. 9-31 (p. 29). Sally Bachner offers a less radical view of postmodern historical fiction, arguing that despite the 'essentially reformist critique of historiographic practice' mounted by postmodern historical fiction, this dismantling is 'rarely proposed with any seriousness or sincerity', for the reevaluation of historiographic practice aims to 'produce richer, more sensitive, even truer historical accounts'. See Bachner, "He had Pushed his Imagination into Buddy's Brain", or, How to Escape History in *Coming*

liberation arising from the problematization of history, some postmodern historical novelists seem to be struggling between the negation of and the desire for the past. Whether the dialectic of desire and negation leads to any resolution, their engagement with rewriting history is in various ways and to varying degrees politically committed.

So far, I have discussed how critical retheorization of historical discourse undermines its underlying assumptions, especially the claim to objectivity, authenticity and progression, and thus, by destabilizing the boundary between history and literature, reshapes and facilitates the writing of contemporary historical fiction. This is the postmodern side of postmodern historical fiction. Now I have to return to a more fundamental, though belated, question in order to demarcate what constitutes this subgenre and to clarify the selection principle of this study: what defines a novel as historical? Lukács has already pointed out that what characterizes a historical novel is the ‘derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age’ rather than the inclusion of erstwhile events or personages.⁵⁰ Later critics like David Cowart elaborate on this concept and tend to emphasize the role of historical consciousness in the historical novel. I find this definition particularly appropriate to my project:

I myself prefer to define historical fiction simply and broadly as fiction in which the past figures with some prominence. Such fiction does not require historical personages or events [. . .] nor does it have to be set at some specified remove in time. Thus I count as historical fiction any novel in which a historical consciousness manifests itself strongly in either the characters or the action.⁵¹

Through Slaughter, *Rethinking History*, 9: 2/3 (2005), 197-220 (p. 198).

⁵⁰ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 19.

⁵¹ David Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 6.

This pragmatic definition allows the postmodern historical novel to accommodate works of fiction that interrogate and challenge the assumptions of historical practice and consciousness while not necessarily involving references to specific historical events or figures. I avoid using 'historiographic metafiction' because the term may exclude novels that display a postmodern questioning of history while lacking the obvious self-consciousness of metafiction. It is not necessary to discard it, though. Hutcheon's term is illuminating if seen as a sign of the variety within the category labelled as postmodern historical fiction.⁵² All the novels examined here are historical fictions written in the light of epistemological and ontological questions posed by postmodernism, but not necessarily examples of historiographic metafiction. After explaining the selection principle for this study, I will look at the context where these works are produced.

Is Canada Postcolonial?

The postmodern obsession with history is not unique; history also occupies centre stage in the postcolonial field. Yet the ways the two fields deal with history are not always identical. Therefore, an investigation of the debate over Canada's postcoloniality is a prerequisite for exploring the relationship between postmodern problematization of history and postcolonial yearning for history, on the one hand, and the production of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, on the other.

The arguments for including invader-settler countries like Canada, Australia and New

⁵² Colavincenzo takes historiographic metafiction as 'nothing other than historical fiction given a postmodern twist' while Fludernik contends that it is 'simply the updated late-twentieth-century version of precisely the same genre (the historical novel) which has meanwhile adapted to twentieth-century conceptualizations of the novel and of the historical'. See Colavincenzo, "*Trading Magic for Fact*", p. 47; Monika Fludernik, 'History and Metafiction: Experientiality, Causality, and Myth', in *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature*, ed. Bernd Engler and Kurt Muller (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1994), pp. 81-101 (p. 93).

Zealand in postcolonial studies have been presented in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989).⁵³ Using the term 'postcolonial' 'to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present', the authors argue that in common with postcolonial literatures of Indian or African nations, settler-colonial literatures emerge in their present form from the experience of colonization and foreground the tension with the imperial power when attempting to assert their differences from the assumptions of the metropolitan centre.⁵⁴ They share the concern with displacement, which engenders 'a profound linguistic alienation', a gap between the experience of place and the language available to describe it.⁵⁵ In Canada, English as a native tongue cannot prevent such alienation because it is an imported language whose vocabulary, categories and codes are found to be inappropriate or inadequate to describe the physical conditions or the cultural practices developed in the new land. Yet the problem of language helps to distinguish settler-colonial literatures, where difference is inscribed in subtle changes of language and where alienation will not dissolve 'until the colonizing language has been replaced or appropriated as English', from other postcolonial literatures, whose task is to overcome the gap caused by 'the linguistic displacement of the pre-colonial language by English.'⁵⁶

Besides, settlers have to create their 'indigeneity' in the new land whereas other postcolonial

⁵³ Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin's *After Europe* (1990), Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin's *Decolonising Fictions* (1993), and key essays by Stephen Slemon and Alan Lawson also argue for the inclusion. The term 'settler colony' has been replaced with 'invader-settler or settler-invader colony' in order to foreground the fact that from the point of view of indigenous peoples, settlement was in fact an invasion.

⁵⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

⁵⁵ Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 9-10. Displacement results from settlement, enslavement, migration, or imposition of a supposedly superior racial or cultural model on the indigenous populations, and besides linguistic alienation, it creates a crisis in the identifying relationship between self and place, a crisis that compels the negotiation of identity in terms of the dialectic between place and displacement.

⁵⁶ Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 10. The book makes a distinction between English, the 'standard' version of the metropolitan language that functions as a norm and designates all variants as inferior impurities, and English, the linguistic code that has been transformed and subverted by different communities in the postcolonial world. See *The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 7-8.

peoples face the problem of reconstructing a pre-colonial past to counter the system imposed by the colonizer.⁵⁷ Constructing indigeneity, either by appropriating Native cultures or by effacing their existence, foregrounds the tension between the Indigenous and settler populations. In fact, the imposition and suppression of an alien racial or cultural model makes Indigenous writing in settler colonies bear more similarities to other postcolonial writing than to settler-colonial literatures. Despite the loose definition of ‘postcolonial’, the discussion of settler-colony postcolonialism in *The Empire Writes Back* can be read as a useful introduction to the primary ideas that have been and are to be developed in related studies.

Stephen Slemon approaches the issue from a historical perspective, tracing the genealogical use of the term ‘postcolonial’ in different critical fields. The term is ‘an outgrowth of what formerly were “Commonwealth” literary studies’ but also employed to articulate the literary nature of Third- and Fourth-World cultures; the institutionalization of these two critical fields gives rise to the project of identifying the scope and nature of anti-colonialist resistance that can occur in literary writing.⁵⁸ Excluding ex-settler colonies from the field ignores the historical role of Commonwealth literary criticism in the formation of postcolonial studies and conflates the project of identifying anti-colonialist resistance with the studies of Third- and Fourth-World literary writing. Moreover, Slemon emphasizes that since resistance is never simply a reversal of power but ‘always *necessarily* complicity in the apparatus it seeks to transgress’ and since this ambivalence is the condition of settler-colonial writing, settler cultures should not be excised from the postcolonial domain.⁵⁹ The attempt at excision signifies a failure to recognize the reach of colonialist power and the range of anti-colonialist

⁵⁷ Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 134.

⁵⁸ Stephen Slemon, ‘Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World’, *World Literature Written in English*, 30: 2 (1990), 30–41 (p. 32). For the history of how Commonwealth literary criticism became postcolonial as a rejection of New Criticism, see Slemon, ‘Reading for Resistance in the Post-Colonial Literature’, in *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies — Then and Now*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen, and Anna Rutherford (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 100-15.

⁵⁹ Slemon, ‘Unsettling the Empire’, p. 37.

gestures.

Antagonism towards inclusion highlights settler societies' complicity in colonialism. Anne McClintock argues that settler colonies 'have not undergone decolonization, nor [. . .] are they likely to in the near future.'⁶⁰ Their dismantling of empire remains incomplete because they inherit the 'continued control over the appropriated colony' and still function within the old imperial ideology in the relation to Indigenous peoples; to describe them as postcolonial is a 'fiat of historical amnesia.'⁶¹ Other opponents disqualify settler colonies from the postcolonial domain for their political privileges in relation to the Empire, their implication in global capitalism, and their racial and ethnic composition. As Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman argue:

That these were not simply colonies was formally recognised at the time by Britain in granting them Dominion status. Economically and politically, their relation to the metropolitan centre bore little resemblance to that of the actual colonies. They were not subject to the sort of coercive measures that were the lot of the colonies, and their ethnic stratification was fundamentally different. Their subsequent history and economic development, and current location within global capitalist relations, have been very much in a metropolitan mode, rather than a (post-)colonial one.⁶²

Broadly speaking, the arguments against inclusion limit the relation between colonizer and colonized to a simple binarism of the West and the Rest, of the white and its racial others,

⁶⁰ Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"', *Social Text*, 31-32 (1992), 84-98 (p. 89).

⁶¹ McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress', pp. 87, 85.

⁶² Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 'Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), pp. 1-20 (p. 4). Their nominating of 'actual colonies' suggests that the colonization in settler societies is 'inauthentic'.

neglecting the fact that colonialism as power relations takes a variety of forms which produce diverse colonized experiences and trigger different patterns of resistance. In contrast, proponents seem to deploy the term 'postcolonial' in such a loose and diffuse way that its meaning threatens to evaporate. Even so, the growing tendency is to see ex-settler colonies as postcolonial and to distinguish different orders of colonial experience rather than conflate invader-settler and other postcolonial societies as equally victimized, and attention is shifted to local specificities.

Three collections make substantial contribution to the study of Canadian postcoloniality. Brydon's special issue of *Essays in Canadian Writing*, entitled *Testing the Limits: Postcolonial Theories and Canadian Literatures* (1995), 'provides a flexible but ultimately bounded definition of what the postcolonial means (and could mean) within the specifically Canadian context.'⁶³ She emphasizes that the postcolonial concern with identifying colonial mentalities and resistant agendas preceded the circulation of the term in its present expanded usage in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and that the argument for exclusion in fact attempts to erase the history of Canadian contributions to postcolonial studies. But such confirmation of Canadian postcoloniality cannot be found in *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature* (2003), which energizes lively and informative discussion and debate that lead to more complex questions rather than straight answers. In *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism* (2004), Cynthia Sugars selects essays that simultaneously show various conceptualizations of Canadian postcolonial experience and provide 'a sense of the history of postcolonial theorizing in Canada as well as a sense of the current directions this critical discourse has taken.'⁶⁴ In their polyphonic form, these volumes reveal not only

⁶³ Diana Brydon, 'Introduction: Reading Postcoloniality, Reading Canada', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 56 (1995), 1-19 (p. 14).

⁶⁴ Cynthia Sugars, 'Introduction: Unhomely States', in *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), pp. xiii-xxv (pp. xv-xvi).

the lack of consensus and uniformity among critics but the diversity and complexity of issues involved in the discussion.

Unsurprisingly, the critique of the application of postcolonial theories to Canada foregrounds the victimization of Native populations. Gary Boire criticizes the erasure of the Native presence in some modernist texts, which are often celebrated for their postcolonial articulation of a Canadian identity. Their attempt 'to evolve a decolonized poetic' duplicates historical amnesia, producing a 'historically and politically whitewashed version of Canada's own colonizations of the void.'⁶⁵ Such nationalist writing achieves decolonization in relation to the Empire but duplicates the act of colonization by annihilating the already colonized Natives in literature. Erasure is not the only form of linguistic colonization. What Terry Goldie calls semiotic control in white texts — a signifying process which continuously reproduces and circulates the image of Native peoples — serves to incorporate the racial other and facilitate the indigenizing process of invader-settlers.⁶⁶ Arun Mukherjee, 'the most vocal opponent of reading Canadian literature in general as postcolonial,'⁶⁷ suggests that only two groups can be seen as producing postcolonial Canadian literature: Native writers and non-white Canadians from colonized countries.⁶⁸

Interestingly, the victims of Canada's complicity in colonialism are not always the formidable opponents in this debate. 'Post-colonial', as Thomas King notes, 'might be an excellent term

⁶⁵ Gary Boire, 'Canadian (Tw)ink: Surviving the White-Outs', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 35 (1987), 1-16 (pp. 3, 12).

⁶⁶ Terry Goldie, 'Semiotic Control: Native Peoples in Canadian Literatures in English', in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 191-203 (p. 194).

⁶⁷ Laura Moss, 'Is Canada Postcolonial? Introducing the Question', in *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*, ed. Laura Moss (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003), pp. 1-23 (p. 15).

⁶⁸ Arun Mukherjee, 'Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?', *World Literature Written in English*, 30: 2 (1990), 1-9 (p. 2). But Mukherjee is aware of the rising tendency to apply the term in a totalizing and assimilating way, she warns that it is inappropriate 'to categorize these writers a priori as resistant postcolonials, as subalterns and marginals'. See Mukherjee, 'How Shall We Read South Asian Canadian Texts?', in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 249-63 (p. 261).

to use to describe Canadian literature, but it will not do to describe Native literature.’⁶⁹ Native writers do not deny Canada as postcolonial but reject the applicability of postcolonial theories to their work and culture. Lee Maracle also contends that Native writing is ‘nowhere near a post-colonial literature’ because colonialism continues to be their condition.⁷⁰ Native thinkers use ‘postcolonial’ to ‘describe a symbolic strategy for shaping a desirable future, not an existing reality.’⁷¹ For King, the term assumes that ‘the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America’ and that the struggle between colonizer and colonized ‘is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature’, while denying the Native ‘traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization.’⁷² Obviously, Native writers incline to understand ‘postcolonial’ as a chronological marker rather than as a political position committed to resistance and decolonization, and stress that experience of colonization is not the only factor determining the nature of Native writing. It is noteworthy that in distinguishing between Native and Canadian literatures, King and Maracle resist the tendency to subsume their writing under the national label.

By contrast, non-Native critics have little hesitation in categorizing Indigenous cultures as postcolonial. Hutcheon argues that the Native culture ‘should be considered the resisting, post-colonial voice of Canada.’⁷³ Judith Leggatt sees the Native rejection of the label as resulting from misinterpretation of postcolonial theories and maintains that the alternative models posited by King or Maracle for the study of Native writing resemble the theories they criticize.⁷⁴ Their arguments depend on the understanding of the term as a political practice

⁶⁹ Thomas King, ‘Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 183-90 (p. 185).

⁷⁰ Lee Maracle, ‘The “Post-Colonial” Imagination’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 204-08 (p. 206).

⁷¹ Marie Battiste, ‘Unfolding the Lessons of Colonization’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 209-17 (p. 212).

⁷² King, ‘Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial’, p. 185.

⁷³ Linda Hutcheon, ‘“Circling the Downspout of Empire”: Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 71-93 (p. 76).

⁷⁴ Judith Leggatt, ‘Native Writing, Academic Theory: Post-Colonialism Across the Cultural Divide’, in *Is*

that develops strategies to combat continuing colonization. The disagreement between Native and non-Native critics foregrounds the lack of a commonly accepted definition of the term and suggests that a dialogue has not been established between Native creative writers and academics of Native literature or postcolonial practitioners.⁷⁵

Proponents of the debate conceptualize the postcolonial as characterized by resistance to imperialism, arguing that since Canada shares with conventionally accepted postcolonial nations a history of struggle for a post-independence national identity, it should be included in the postcolonial field. They also emphasize that the ambiguity of Canada as both colonial subject and agent makes contributions to postcolonial studies by highlighting the necessity of differentiating patterns of colonization and resistance. The emphasis on local particularities enables the postcolonial discussion in Canada to shift focus from a comparative mode between Canadian culture and those in other ex-colonies to a close investigation of the complexities within Canada itself.

In 'English Canada's Postcolonial Complexities', Donna Bennett draws attention to features specific to Canada, such as the status of French Canada, the regionalism of Prairie writing by non-British European settlers, and the recent multiethnic writing. The postcoloniality of French Canada lies in its resistance first to the British Empire and then to the dominance of English Canada, but while English Canada strives to construct indigeneity to assert its difference from the metropolitan centre, French Canada resists by affirming its Euro-French

Canada Postcolonial?, ed. Moss, pp. 111-26 (p. 113).

⁷⁵ Leggatt has come to realize that the academic interpretation of Native creative writing is 'an act of translation from an indigenous mode of expression to a Western one' and risks imposing the cultural norms of Western academia on Native texts. See Leggatt, 'Native Writing', p. 121. The academic colonization has to do with the continuing preponderance of white critics and students of literature in the Canadian academy. Susan Gingell provides some insightful observations about the institutionalization of postcolonial studies in the Canadian academy. See Gingell, 'The Absence of Seaming, Or How I Almost Despair of Dancing: How Postcolonial Are Canada's Literary Institutions and Critical Practices?', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, ed. Moss, pp. 97-110.

heritage as ‘an anticolonial act of resistance.’⁷⁶ However, if Native peoples refuse to be identified as postcolonial in terms of the continuing colonial subjugation imposed by English Canada, so does French Canada, but their similarity should not be overstated since French Canada, like English Canada, has played and continues to play the role of imperial power to Native cultures. The ongoing ambiguity of French Canada as both colonial subject and agent is more complicated than that of English Canada.

Bennett argues that non-British European immigrants who settled in the Prairies between Confederation and the Second World War brought ‘another — albeit temporary — kind of internal postcoloniality’ when they ‘asserted a kind of separatist claim on cultural identity different from that of the Québécois or even the Natives.’⁷⁷ By blending Continental traditions, British characteristics, and the starkness of Prairie life, they produced Prairie realism, a kind of writing rooted in regional anxieties about cultural and political exclusion from the English power structure.⁷⁸ This postcolonial resistance was temporary as their difference was eventually modified and Canadianized while their European heritage enriched Canadian culture. Bennett also considers the rise of multiethnic minority writing after the 1960s in postcolonial terms even though she admits not all the ethnic writers come from postcolonial countries. This literature, in its accounts of immigrant experience and cultural otherness, deals with a struggle very similar to ‘the postcolonial condition of belonging to two cultures *within* the same country’ — the condition of ‘what it means to identify oneself both as Canadian and as a person from a culture that exists as a *de facto* colony.’⁷⁹ Its assertion of difference and differentiation challenges the nationalist assumptions incorporated

⁷⁶ Donna Bennett, ‘English Canada’s Postcolonial Complexities’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 51-52 (1993-1994), 164-210, (p. 173). I include the discussion of French Canada to show the complexity of Canadian postcoloniality. A full interrogation is beyond the scope of this thesis. For more discussion of the relation between contemporary French Canadian writing and postcolonialism, see Sylvia Söderlind, *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian Québécois Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

⁷⁷ Bennett, ‘English Canada’, p. 185.

⁷⁸ Bennett, ‘English Canada’, pp. 185-86.

⁷⁹ Bennett, ‘English Canada’, p. 191.

into the previous postcolonial model, and ‘may actually act as a countervailing force to English Canada’s conceiving of itself as a postcolonial culture.’⁸⁰ In identifying regionalism and ethnic writing as internal postcolonialism, Bennett has extended her definition of the term ‘as a viewpoint that resists imperialism — or relationships that seem imperialistic’ to resistance to different kinds of domination.⁸¹

Although Bennett includes nationalism as part of Canadian postcoloniality, it has become a tricky issue in postcolonial theories. Some critics confirm that nationalism enables (ex)colonies to inscribe a distinct national identity as resistance to an imperial authority, whereas others, especially those celebrating hybridity and creolization, condemn nationalism for its assertion of the supposed authenticity and homogeneity of a national culture which has turned into an imperial, or at least hegemonic, power that represses internal diversity and oppresses ethnic minorities. Lawson warns that in settler societies cultural nationalism has been used as ‘a strategic disavowal of the colonizing act.’⁸² In setting up the dichotomy between the imperial and the national, the settler culture constructs itself as a homogeneous entity, regards itself as the colonized, and thus denies its complicity in colonizing Natives. The homogenizing impulse of nationalism is one of the reasons why Native writers like King reject postcolonialism. But not all Natives dislike the nationalist agenda. Margery Fee advocates ‘Aboriginal pan-ethnic nationalism’ as ‘a move towards greater equality for the First Peoples.’⁸³ According to Brydon, some Native writers in Canada insist on self-definition and resist appropriation of their stories and cultures, but their strategies ‘prove self-defeating because they depend on a view of cultural authenticity that condemns them to a

⁸⁰ Bennett, ‘English Canada’, p. 191.

⁸¹ Bennett, ‘English Canada’, p. 168.

⁸² Alan Lawson, ‘Postcolonial Theory and the “Settler” Subject’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 56 (1995), 20-36 (p. 30).

⁸³ Margery Fee, ‘What Use Is Ethnicity to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada?’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 267-76 (p. 274).

continued marginality and an eventual death.’⁸⁴ It is ironic that Native nationalist resistance to appropriation should be invalidated by a practitioner of theories that champion resistance to imperialist theft and plunder. On top of this debate is the complaint that postcolonial theories are too cosmopolitan to pay attention to nationalism.⁸⁵

Since the end of the Second World War, the target that Canadian nationalism addresses has been redefined as America rather than Britain. The cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, with thematicism as the major trend, was characterized by anti-Americanism and formed ‘part of Canada’s postcolonial drive to construct an autonomous national identity.’⁸⁶ However, for Mukherjee, these nationalists appropriate anticolonial vocabularies to represent themselves as the colonized while forgetting they have victimized others and their nationalism is ‘a racist ideology that has branded [nonwhites] un-Canadian by acts of omission and commission.’⁸⁷ This nationalist agenda was also rejected by French Canadians who had maintained, and still persist in maintaining, their distinctiveness from the Anglophone community by recuperating French traditions. Despite the criticisms about its assimilating tendency, cultural nationalism took America as the other against which Canada had to, and would continue to, define itself. The passage of Bill C-58 in 1977 represented a victory for cultural nationalists in the fight against American cultural domination.⁸⁸ Though serving as the primary spur to Canadian nationalism in this period, America is not always

⁸⁴ Diana Brydon, ‘The White Inuit Speaks: Contamination as Literary Strategy’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 94-106 (p. 95). Lee Maracle is one of such nationalist Native writers who describe cultural appropriation as stealing. See her ‘The “Post-Colonial” Imagination’, p. 208.

⁸⁵ For Enoch Padolsky, Canadian pluri-ethnicity exposes the limitations of postcolonial theories, especially ‘the absence of local, communal or national ethnic dimensions in the analysis of Canadian ethnic minority writing’, and the tendency to see ethnic writers as ‘serving post-colonial strategies of “hybridity” and creolization. See Padolsky, ““Olga in Wonderland”: Canadian Ethnic Minority Writing and Post-Colonial Theory’, in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 235-48 (p. 245).

⁸⁶ Bennett, ‘English Canada’, p. 194.

⁸⁷ Arun Mukherjee, ‘Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature, and Racial Minority Women’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 56 (1995), 78-95 (p. 89).

⁸⁸ Bill C-58 is the amendment to the Income Tax Act which eliminates tax deductions for advertising placed in American media and directed at Canadians; it is a discriminatory measure against American border television stations which have large Canadian audiences and are heavily supported by advertising revenue from Canadian firms.

conceived of as a threat to Canadian economic and cultural independence. As Sarah Corse notes, it has been an ally in Canada's attempt to distinguish itself from Britain and to establish a North American identity.⁸⁹ Yet the free trade agreements between the two nations have renewed anxieties in the cultural communities.⁹⁰ For Clarke, Canada has slid from its postcolonial status, achieved through 'a much more successful resistance to (and rejection of) "Britain First-ism"', 'into a neo-colonial submission to US imperialism.'⁹¹ Canada as 'an assembly of feuding (cultural) nationalisms, (neo)colonialisms, and (economic) imperialisms', and its ambivalent relationship with America will pose new challenges to discussions of Canadian postcoloniality.⁹²

Is Canada postcolonial? Brydon's reply best illustrates the lack of consensus:

It depends. It depends on the definitions; it depends on who is asking the question, and from what position, in space, time and privilege. Postcolonial if necessary, but not necessarily postcolonial.⁹³

Or as Neil Besner asks, 'Whose Canada is postcolonial [. . .]?'⁹⁴ Despite these controversies, I agree with Brydon that it is possible and necessary to define Canadian postcoloniality and postcolonial theory is 'a productive perspective through which to interrogate contemporary historical and disciplinary formations.'⁹⁵ To deny Canada as a postcolonial nation is to erase

⁸⁹ Sarah Corse, *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p. 55.

⁹⁰ They mean the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (1989) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994).

⁹¹ George Elliott Clarke, 'What Was Canada?', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, ed. Moss, pp. 27-39 (pp. 31, 38).

⁹² Clarke, 'What Was Canada?', p. 34.

⁹³ Diana Brydon, 'Canada and Postcolonialism: Questions, Inventories, and Futures', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, ed. Moss, pp. 49-77 (p. 49).

⁹⁴ Neil Besner, 'What Resides in the Question, "Is Canada Postcolonial?"', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, ed. Moss, pp. 40-48 (p. 45).

⁹⁵ Brydon, 'Canada and Postcolonialism', p. 50.

its former status as a British colony and its history of decolonization. This thesis argues that it is fruitful to acknowledge Canadian postcoloniality, not as a fixed identity but as a relational concept which can vary from case to case and therefore must be applied with caution, and that postcolonial frames of interpretation not only help to recognize the forms of anti-colonial resistance unique to Canada, but also foreground Canada's own unsavoury colonial history of theft and oppression in relation to Native peoples and minorities and facilitate distinctions between different orders of internal colonial experience. The purpose of reviewing the arguments over Canada's postcolonial status is to historicize the novels analysed in this study and, more broadly, the production of Canadian historical fiction at the intersection between postcolonialism and postmodernism.

* * * * *

By reviewing the theoretical rethinking of history and its impact on history writing and contemporary historical fiction in the first section, I have tried to delineate the general concerns and features of postmodern historical fiction in order to establish points of reference for the textual analysis of the novels under scrutiny. The examination of the debate over Canada's postcoloniality in the second section serves as another theoretical basis and provides the historical background for understanding the production of these novels. With this combination of postmodern context and postcolonial background, I hope to avoid a rigid, totalizing framework which might obscure the specificities of postmodern historical fiction produced in the Canadian context or the particularities of individual texts. My readings of these selected texts are animated by these established theoretical considerations as much as by the questions that I have outlined. In the following chapters, I will explore how their authors deploy and adapt the formal or thematic characteristics of postmodern historical fiction to accommodate local difference and diversity and to express their postcolonial

concerns, and how they in turn drawn on Canadian singularity to create a critical distance from the assimilating tendency of postmodernism.

Chapter One

History, Representation, and Power in *Alias Grace* and *The Englishman's Boy*

Juxtaposing Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) with Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* (1996) allows for a wider view of the issues that postmodern questioning of history has called into attention. While both novels draw on the fictionalization of nineteenth-century historical incidents to investigate the relationships among history, representation, and power, they consider different aspects of these relationships, foregrounding their complexity. Atwood subjects historical documents — traces of the past — to scrutiny, exposing them as discursive constructions conditioned by a variety of factors, and problematizing the traditional distinction between fictional and factual accounts. The past is presented as only textually accessible, and language, due to its potential for heteroglossia, is revealed as a site of conflict rather than as a transparent medium capable of unproblematic referentiality. The sense of contestation shown at the linguistic level permeates every act of representing the past, and historical documents are interpretations necessarily implicating power struggle. *Alias Grace* dramatizes the irrecoverability of the past through the paradox that the abundance of source texts reinforces a historical enigma instead of shedding light or guaranteeing authenticity. *The Englishman's Boy* also examines the play of power in historical representation but connects it with the construction of national identity. Its scepticism about history foregrounds the operations of temporality, perspective, and interpretation, and discloses the process by which historical accuracy is produced by and within different modes of representation. Moreover, by reconfiguring both history and national identity as sites of contestation rather than as givens, the novel explores the nationalist appropriation and commodification of history in the American cultural industry while intending to be a cautionary tale about the danger and violence that will arise from the establishment of a unitary national identity in the Canadian context. Taken together, the two

novels propose a range of forms that power struggle can take in historical representation.

Atwood looks back on the nineteenth century to confirm the existence and significance of Canadian history and sees that past and its accessibility from a postmodern perspective while continuing her constant preoccupation with the subjection of women to various forms of power and with their ability to develop psychological strategies of resistance to entrapment and constraint. Vanderhaeghe chooses a Canadian historical incident from the same century, displaces it into another national territory, and employs postmodern techniques of fragmentation and discontinuity to test its postcolonial potential and colonialist appropriation. Both novels display a postmodern sensibility in terms of their problematizing history but adapt it to accommodate their postcolonial concern with Canadian particularities.

Alias Grace

Alias Grace is Atwood's first attempt to fictionalize a historical figure and to problematize the validity of historical knowledge through its ironic use of historical documents.¹ Many critics have recognized its postmodern sensibility and techniques. Jennifer Murray notes that in *Alias Grace* 'the desire to return to the past, to its resources and knowledge, is confronted by the awareness that there is no "real" access to the past, no key to unlock it, no guarantee of its authenticity.'² In addition to questioning history and its representation, this postmodern text highlights its own textuality as it plays with inside and outside. Earl G. Ingersoll compares the novel to 'an onion whose leaves the reader peels away, expecting to discover

¹ It is through Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* that Atwood first came across the story of Grace Marks, an infamous convicted murderess in the nineteenth century, and her CBC television script *The Servant Girl* (1974) was based on this version, portraying Grace as a female fiend who tempted her fellow-servant James McDermott into murdering their employer and his housekeeper. In these early years, Atwood had not yet realized the need to question the validity of the written accounts of historical events and persons. Her scepticism about the nature of historical records begins to surface in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) despite the absence of references to specific historical events or figures. She continues to explore the constructed nature of history in *The Robber Bride* (1993).

² Jennifer Murray, 'Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 26: 1 (2001), 65-83 (p. 66).

the “heart of the matter,” only to find “nothing” in the center.’³ It is the leaves and the peeling process that count. Moreover, according to Vevaina, Atwood’s earlier modernist view of the self gives way to a postmodern celebration of ‘multiple selves’, embedded in a reality that is presented ‘as essentially surreal, absurd, inchoate, dynamic and most importantly, ambiguous.’⁴

The novel has been classified as an example of historiographic metafiction due to the self-reflexive element that foregrounds the problems of historical and biographical reconstruction.⁵ It displays all the features that Hutcheon has outlined to distinguish this new subgenre from the traditional historical novel delineated by Lukács: the protagonists are ex-centrics, ‘overtly specific, individual, culturally and familially conditioned’; the use of historical details aims not to achieve historical faithfulness but to question the possibility of faithfulness; the attempt to validate or authenticate the fictional world with the presence of real historical personages and ‘to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand’ is thwarted.⁶ Its protagonist Grace Marks occupies an ex-centric position that is multiple in terms of gender, class, age, race and criminality: a young female servant; a convicted murderess; half-English and half Irish, but always identified as Irish. Atwood emphasizes in ‘Author’s Afterword’ that the novel is ‘a work of fiction, although it is based on reality’, and to highlight this point, she provides a long list of the archives and

³ Earl G. Ingersoll, ‘Engendering Metafiction: Textuality and Closure in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 31: 3 (2001), 385-401 (p. 390).

⁴ Coomi S. Vevaina, ‘Quilting Selves: Interpreting Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, in *Margaret Atwood: The Shape-Shifter*, ed. Coomi S. Vevaina and Coral Ann Howells (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998), pp. 64-74 (pp.65-66). By contrast, Fiona Tolan does not perceive *Alias Grace* as a pure celebration of the postmodern fragmented self because there is a feminist drive to establish an authentic feminine voice. Therefore, she argues that by presenting Grace as managing ‘to be both a unified authority and a patchwork of voices’, ‘Atwood negotiates a position on feminine subjectivity that remains something of a compromise between essentialism and anti-essentialism’. See Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 224 & 250.

⁵ Burkhard Niederhoff, ‘How to Do Things with History: Researching Lives in Carol Shield’s *Swann* and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35: 2 (2000), 71-85 (pp. 71-72).

⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 113-14.

books she has referred to.⁷ What makes this novel unusual is the deployment of numerous excerpts from historical documents, like witness accounts, confessions, newspaper reports, all of which serve ‘to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations.’⁸ Moreover, the juxtaposition of the historical data with fictive narratives points to ‘the past as already “semioticized” or encoded, that is, already inscribed in discourse and therefore “always already” interpreted (if only by the selection of what was recorded and by its insertion into a narrative).’⁹ The novel asks not only the epistemological question of how we know the past but also the ontological question of the status of the traces of that past.

Based on the real Kinnear-Montgomery murders that took place at Richmond Hill on 23 July, 1843, *Alias Grace* does not seek to solve this murder mystery but instead sets its main plot at the Governor’s house in Kingston in 1859, telling the story about the interaction between Grace Marks and the young (fictional) psychologist, Dr. Simon Jordan, hired from America to investigate whether her amnesia is feigned or not. Their interaction takes the form of interview. Into their conversations in a sewing room are interpolated sections of Grace’s internal monologues and descriptions of the events that happen to Simon during his sojourn. The novel in fact consists mainly of two narrative strands, the first of which is Grace’s story narrated by her own voice in internal monologues and in her conversations with Simon. She recounts in chronological order important events in her life: the impoverished childhood in the North of Ireland, the harsh conditions during the voyage across the Atlantic, the traumatic loss of her mother at sea, the abuse at the hand of her alcoholic father, her close friendship with Mary Whitney when working as a servant in a wealthy household, the tragic death of

⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), p. 461. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

⁸ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 123.

⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 97.

Mary from a botched abortion, her first seizure of loss of memory, and her job in the house of Thomas Kinnear and his mistress Nancy Montgomery. When it comes to the double murder, Grace denies any memory of the killing of Nancy but describes in detail how she is intimidated into cooperating with James McDermott and how she finds Kinnear lying dead on the floor with the latter standing over him after hearing the report of a gun. The second narrative strand, chiefly given in third-person narration, follows Simon's psychological development triggered by the investigation into Grace's amnesia. Compared with the first one, it contains more different textual elements: meetings with Reverend Verringer, a member of the petition committee who employs Simon to examine Grace; correspondence between Simon and psychologists involved in Grace's case; private letters between him and his mother as well as a friend; an interview with the historical lawyer, Kenneth MacKenzie.

Linear progression is broken from the very beginning of the novel when in a voice 'disembodied and out of context', Grace announces 'This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story' (p. 6).¹⁰ This indicates that Grace's story is narrated retrospectively but the exact time and place of that narration is not given. What follows is a chapter comprised of a ballad recounting the double murder. Then Grace's first-person voice begins to relate what she is doing in the Governor's parlour of 1859. In other words, Grace's story is a recollection of another recollection: she recalls her encounter with the doctor in 1859 and in their conversations she looks back at her life before incarceration. Temporal removals are highlighted. Their talk sessions break off with Simon's abrupt departure because his fear of being entrapped by his landlady with whom he is having an affair. His report that Grace's amnesia is genuine depends not on the observations made in their interviews but on the unexpected discovery in a session of Neuro-hypnosis conducted by Dr. Jerome DuPont, in

¹⁰ Coral Ann Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 31.

which a different voice identifying herself as Mary Whitney admits doing things Grace has no memory of, such as seducing James and enjoying the sight of Nancy being strangled to death with her kerchief. Simon's story ends up ironically with his loss of memory caused by a head wound and with his belief that the fiancé his mother chooses for him is called Grace. His amnesia puts him under the total control of the women he has long strived to shun. The main plot closes with Grace recounting her pardon in 1872 and her married life in the United States with Jamie Walsh, who has testified against her in the trial but who now begs her to forgive him for contributing to her conviction and imprisonment.

The novel is divided into fifteen numbered sections, each starting with a title page containing the name of a particular quilt pattern and its illustration. The names of the patchwork patterns do not always correspond with their juxtaposed visual images. For example, in Section III, the image below the pattern name 'Puss in the Corner' is a perfectly symmetrical pattern consisting of geometrical shapes; in each of the four corners is a grey square. The puss is nowhere to be found.¹¹ The discrepancy between the verbal description and its visual referent undermines the referentiality of language. Grace herself has mused on this 'artificial' connection at the sight of an American steamer named the *Lady of the Lake*:

Then something came clear to me which I used to wonder about. There is a quilt pattern called Lady of the Lake, which I thought was named for the poem; but I could never find any lady in the pattern, nor any lake. But now I saw that the boat was named for the poem, and the quilt was named for the boat; because it was a pinwheel design, which must have stood for the paddle going around. And I thought that things did make sense,

¹¹ According to Sharon R. Wilson, this pattern featuring no cat 'presents Grace as the sly puss, invisible to others and possibly invisible to herself'. See Wilson, 'Quilting as Narrative Art: Metafictional Construction in *Alias Grace*', in *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, ed. Sharon Rose Wilson (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003), pp. 121-34 (p. 128). This article offers a detailed explanation of how the quilt names comment ironically or humorously on the section content.

and have a design to them, if you only pondered them long enough. (p. 340)

'Lady of the Lake' is also the title of this section, in which Grace recalls how she and McDermott flee from Kinnear's house to Lewiston in the United States. As Magali Cornier Michael notes, the way Grace makes sense of the quilt name 'reflects her imposition of an unquestioned linear logic' but she is not conscious of her own role in creating this sense or design.¹² A metonymic relationship can be set up between boat and pinwheel, but there is no connection, metaphorical or metonymic, existing between the boat and the poem. The way Grace inserts the boat as a middle term to bridge the gap between the visual and the verbal discloses arbitrariness and contingency. Here the single verbal phrase has several referents: Walter Scott's poem, a quilt pattern, and a steamer. There can be a fourth one if we take the Arthurian Legend into consideration, but this one does not occur to Grace. The association she can create depends on the scope of her knowledge and consequently is very likely to vary as she learns more. The multiple referents make room for a multitude of meaning, which makes language a site of contestation.

Drawing on Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, Cristie March investigates how physical objects in *Alias Grace*, especially those intended by Simon as catalysts for confession, fail to elicit meaningful communications between him and Grace but instead transform into a linguistic space in which intersections of heteroglossic meaning come as a consequence of the discrepancy in the significance that the two characters try to attach to an object.¹³ Simon brings Grace a variety of items in the hope of activating associations that would lead to the recovery of lost memory about the murder of Nancy. His efforts are frustrated by Grace's

¹² Magali Cornier Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork: The Case of Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47: 2 (2001), 421-47 (p. 431).

¹³ Cristie March, 'Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object in Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 22: 2 (1997), 66-82 (p. 66).

refusal to follow the directions of association he intends:

This week he's attempted various root vegetables, hoping for a connection that will lead downwards: Beet — Root Cellar — Corpses, for instance; or even Turnip — Underground — Grave. According to his theories, the right object ought to evoke a chain of disturbing associations in her; although so far she's treated his offerings simply at their face value, and all he's got out of her has been a series of cookery methods. (p. 90)

Convinced that his object-word relationships are the right combinations, Simon suppresses the heteroglossic implications of Grace's speech.¹⁴ It never strikes him that the association of ideas is personal and contingent. When he presents Grace with an apple, she thinks of 'Mary Whitney, and the apple peelings we threw over our shoulder that night, to see who we would marry. But I will not tell him that' (p. 40). Even if Grace chose to share her memory, Simon would have difficulty making sense of it since this association does not follow the chain he has desired. That is why he tries to lead her answer by saying 'And is there any kind of apple you should not eat?' (p. 40). Grace knows the answer he wants but deliberately withholds it: 'The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige' (p. 40). She creates her own route of association that Simon cannot decipher, resisting the information game he attempts to lure her into playing. Sometimes the game just eludes her: when Simon puts a potato on the table, Grace is at a loss: 'I don't know what he expects me to say about it, except that I have peeled a good many of them in my time, and eaten them too' (p. 97). Unaware that Simon intends the potato to trigger the association of 'Root Cellar — Corpses', she thinks 'Dr. Jordan is a little off in the head' (p. 97). Whether Grace misunderstands the objects intentionally or not, their different

¹⁴ March, 'Crimson Silks and New Potatoes', p. 76.

associations suggest the heteroglossic nature of language, transforming the objects into a space where the characters compete for the power to determine or limit the scope of meaning.

By disclosing language as a site of contestation due to its potential for heteroglossia, Atwood destabilizes the very foundation of history writing. The use of epigraphs is also part of her investigation into the textuality of history. Each section title page is followed by two to four epigraphs from a multitude of sources. The first one or two epigraphs are always quoted from nonfictional writing, such as Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*, newspaper reports, records from the Kingston Penitentiary, William Harrison's 'Recollections of the Kinnear Tragedy', and letters from historical persons. The others are excerpts from poetic and fictional texts by writers like Basho, Brontë, Dickinson, Browning, Tennyson, Rossetti, Longfellow, Patmore, Hawthorne, and Poe. Michael points out that 'Atwood disrupts the epigraph's traditional function' by grouping various quotations to form 'a kind of patchwork epigraph that resists pointing the reader in any one direction.'¹⁵ Placed side by side, these epigraphs enter into 'active and, at times, dissonant dialogue' with the fictional narratives as well as with each other, leading to a questioning of one another's validity.¹⁶

The epigraphs to Section XI make a good example. While the first quotation from 'CHRONICLE AND GAZETTE, Kingston, August 12th, 1843' reports in third-person narration that Grace, 'instead of exhibiting any traces of broken rest and a guilty conscience, appears quite calm, with her eye full and clear as though she slept sound and undisturbed', the second from Moodie's book presents her as acknowledging that 'though I have repented of my wickedness with bitter tears, it has pleased God that I should never again know a moment's peace' (p. 347). It is noteworthy that the words Moodie puts into Grace's mouth are

¹⁵ Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork', p. 431.

¹⁶ Michael, 'Rethinking History as Patchwork', p. 432.

retold to her by Kenneth MacKenzie. The two contradictory accounts of Grace's demeanour are followed by a third epigraph, taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter', in which an unnamed man tries to clarify his feelings for a woman as a 'lurid intermixture', 'a wild offspring of both love and horror that had each parent in it' (pp. 347-48). The juxtaposition of excerpts from historical records with those from fictional writing undermines the hierarchy of credibility that has been established to distinguish them. It is one of the narrative strategies deployed in *Alias Grace* to blur the boundary between fiction and history. Atwood has commented on the fictionality of the historical records about the case: 'I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history)' (p. 464).

In the novel, the fictional narratives surrounding Grace provide metacommentary on these contradictory written accounts, launching an investigation into the status of the traces of the past. The quotations from historical records serve paradoxical purposes. On the one hand, they are properly attributed and referenced; therefore, their status as historical documents is validated. In turn, they lend a feeling of verifiability to the fictional narrative. On the other hand, instead of assimilating these historical data into her fictional writing, Atwood deliberately separates them from the body of the text to foreground the fictionalizing process and make visible the suturing of fiction and history. The result is 'a text whose stitches and seams are anything but "blind," being so obtrusive as to be unmistakable.'¹⁷ Atwood makes it explicit which historical documents have been referred to in her characterization of the fictional Grace and then subjects the epistemological and ontological status of these documents to scrutiny. In Susanna Moodie's report, Grace admits to MacKenzie that she has been haunted by the memory of Nancy's death: 'Since I helped Macdermot to strangle [Nancy] Montgomery, her terrible face and those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left me

¹⁷ Ingersoll, 'Engendering Metafiction', p. 385.

for a moment' (p. 347). Atwood makes use of this statement in her novel with a twist so as to expose the problems of eyewitness accounts. When asked by Simon whether she remembers telling MacKenzie about having been followed by the eyes of Nancy, Grace insists there is a misconception on the part of his lawyer:

I did not say eyes, Sir; I said peonies. But Mr. MacKenzie was always more fond of listening to his own voice than to someone else's. And I suppose it's more the usual thing, to have eyes following you around. It is more what is required, under the circumstances, if you follow me, Sir. And I guess that was why Mr. MacKenzie misheard it, and why Mrs. Moodie wrote it down. They wanted to have things done properly. But they were peonies, all the same. Red ones. There is no mistake possible. (p. 359)

Simon pretends to understand but 'he looked as puzzled as ever' (p. 359). His failure to make sense of Grace's red peonies becomes blatant when he asks MacKenzie about her being haunted by Nancy's bloodshot eyes, with her insistence upon the listener's misconception completely forgotten. The lawyer not only denies that Grace has admitted to strangling Nancy but also attributes the red eyes to Moodie's imagination: 'As for the eyes, what is strongly anticipated by the mind is often supplied by it. You see it every day on the witness stand' (p. 376). Gaps and transformations take place between what Grace says and what Simon understands and remembers; therefore, his retelling is not an exact repetition but always something re-mediated. Besides, as Grace's comment on MacKenzie and Moodie shows, components resisting or countering common sense are either deleted or replaced with what seems more 'understandable' or 'plausible'. This episode suggests that both firsthand and retold accounts are products of (re-)mediation and retelling involves a triple process of sifting through what has been received, of leaving out what is beyond comprehension, and of

imposing coherent meaning on what has remained. Grace learns this knack of retelling from MacKenzie, who asks her not to tell the story as she could actually remember it, 'which nobody could be expected to make any sense of; but to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed' (p. 357). She is required to leave out the parts she cannot clearly remember, and in particular to hide the fact that she cannot remember them. What matters then is narrative proficiency, which Grace performs excellently in interviews with Simon: 'I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour' (p. 353). Her statement suggests that retelling as a narrativizing process of interpretation entails filtration and supplementation.

Grace also comes to realize how preconceptions determine understanding of her acts: 'for they'd already decided I was guilty, and once people make their minds up that you have done a crime, then anything you do is taken as proof of it' (pp. 354-55). At the trial, Jamie Walsh, from whom Grace expects to gain some sympathy, seals her fate by pointing out that she is wearing the dead Nancy's garments. In the eyes of Grace, his testimony, given 'in a straightforward manner which it was difficult to doubt', is an act of revenge: 'He felt betrayed in love, because I'd gone off with McDermott [. . .] and he would do all in his power to destroy me' (p. 360). But twenty-nine years later when they meet again in the United States after Grace's release, he tells her that 'he'd come to be of the opposite persuasion, and had been overcome with guilt for the part he'd played in my conviction' (p. 451). That Grace keeps dressing herself up in Nancy's clothes is an act 'viewed with horror by the press and public', but MacKenzie admits to Simon that he regrets failing to turn the same act to good advantage at the trial: 'if I'd had my wits about me, I would have advanced that very fact as evidence of an innocent and untroubled conscience, or, even better, of lunacy' (p. 375). Grace herself does not conceive of her act as a sign of innocence or guilt but strains to neutralize

any moral judgment on it: 'although it was true this box and the clothes in it had once been Nancy's, they were hers no longer, as the dead have no use for such things' (p. 354). These examples show that different and even contradictory meanings can be attached to the same act, depending on the relationships between the act and its interpreters.

The novel even questions the validity of newspapers as a source of historical documents. Grace tells the reader that she is called McDermott's paramour and accomplice because 'newspaper journalists like to believe the worst; they can sell more papers that way, as one of them told me himself' (p. 355). Instead of providing objective and disinterested reports, newspapers sensationalize her case by combining sex with violence and turn her into a commodity. Atwood also explores how witness accounts can vary with personal concern or desire. Verringer petitions for Grace because he believes her to be a victim of the corrupt systems in the Penitentiary and the Asylum. He dismisses Moodie's 'colourful description' (p. 78) of Grace's confession in the Penitentiary, regarding her insanity as a result of mistreatment during incarceration. He invalidates Dr. Bannerling's report of Grace's sanity with his political orientation: 'A Tory, of course, of the deepest dye — he would have all the poor lunatics chained up in straw, if he had his way' (p. 79). Shocked by Verringer's indignation and fervour, Simon perceives his assiduous petitions as motivated by love for Grace, a speculation that ironically echoes his own sexual fantasy. Another example shows how witness accounts lose reliability when conflicts of interest are involved. Dr. Bannerling describes Grace as 'a creature devoid of moral faculties, and with the propensity to murder strongly developed' (p. 435) and her madness as 'a fraud and an imposture' (p. 71). However, his professional credibility as a psychiatrist is thrown into question by Grace's accusation of sexual harassment.¹⁸ Grace sees herself victimized by Dr. Bannerling, but considering

¹⁸ This is seen in her monologue: 'Remain quiet, I am here to examine your cerebral configuration, and first I shall measure your heartbeat and respiration, but I knew what he was up to. Take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard, Mary Whitney would have said, but all I could say was Oh no, oh no, and no way to twist and turn, not

Atwood's slippery characterization of Grace, her reliability is compromised.

The novel also scrutinizes the validity of firsthand accounts. When Simon comes to believe Grace's amnesia about the murder and is impressed by her minute recollection of the details surrounding it, MacKenzie casts doubt on his conclusion: "How did you check her facts? In the newspapers, I suppose," says Mackenzie. "Has it occurred to you that she may have derived her corroborative details from the same sources?" (p. 373). Verringer also points out to Simon that Moodie is inclined to embroider what she has set down and that her description of Grace has been deeply influenced by Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.¹⁹ Disclosed as subject to a variety of influences, such as interests, desire, political orientation, other source texts, or literary conventions, eyewitness accounts can be anything but unmediated reflection of reality; the immediacy they are believed to enjoy and convey is also undermined. By problematizing their status as historical documents and as primary sources for any further history-writing, Atwood destabilizes the assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and transparency of representation that history claims to have achieved.

Grace accuses journalists of exploiting her case, but the sensationalism of newspapers is not only commercially motivated but also has a lot to do with the social position of those who run them and those who read them. As Judith Knelman notes, contemporary newspapers that registered shock and horror at the double murder were largely owned by and published for the class depending on servants; therefore, they 'quite naturally considered the case from the

how they'd fixed me, trussed up to the chair with the sleeves crossed over in front and tied behind' (p. 34).

¹⁹ Atwood states the same point in the Afterword: 'Moodie can't resist the potential for literary melodrama, and the cutting of Nancy's body into four quarters is not only pure invention but pure Harrison Ainsworth. The influence of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* — a favourite of Moodie's — is evident in the tale of the bloodshot eyes that were said to be haunting Grace Marks' (p. 462). Faye Hammill also discusses how the authority of Moodie's account of the Kinnear case is discredited by Simon and Dr. Bannerling, whose arguments are in turn 'undermined by their patronizing vocabulary and association of female authorship with hysteria and sensation'. See Hammill, 'Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and "The Moodie Bitch"', *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 29: 1 (1999), 67-91 (pp. 74-75).

perspective of potential victims.’²⁰ Collective fear that other servants might be inspired to commit similar atrocities seems to lurk beneath the harsh treatment of the offenders. It means that a variety of interests are implicated in the newspaper accounts of the case. Newspaper reports are therefore mediated texts that ‘do no more than record what people think is happening’ and that ‘are not conduits to any hidden “truth” or “history” but simply blurring images of retreating reality captured from different perspectives.’²¹

Likewise, political agendas influence Grace’s treatment at the hand of the newspapers. As Atwood has discovered in her research, the double murder took place in 1843, when the aftermath of the 1837 Rebellion was still felt in Upper Canada. The merits and demerits of William Lyon Mackenzie remained a major concern in editorials of the time: the Reform newspapers supporting Mackenzie were inclined to clemency toward Grace while the Tory newspapers defaming him also defamed her because of her involvement in the murder of her Tory employer, which was ‘an act of grave insubordination.’²² Her Irish background further complicates the politicization of her case:

There is still a widespread feeling against Grace Marks; and this is a most partisan country. The Tories appear to have confused Grace with the Irish Question, although she is a Protestant; and to consider the murder of a single Tory gentleman — however worthy the gentleman, and however regrettable the murder — to be the same as the insurrection of an entire race. (p. 80)

If the Upper Canada Rebellion mounted a challenge to the British colonial government, the

²⁰ Judith Knelman, ‘Can We Believe What the Newspapers Tell Us? Missing Links in *Alias Grace*’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 68: 2 (1999), 677-85 (pp. 677-78).

²¹ Knelman, ‘Can We Believe What the Newspapers Tell Us?’, p. 684.

²² Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’, *The American Historical Review*, 103: 5 (1998), 1503-16 (p. 1514).

double murder stirred not only anti-Irish prejudice but also disturbing memories of British imperialism. Grace is aware of this:

I thought it very unjust when they wrote down that *both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission*. That made it sound like a crime, and I don't know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such. (p. 103)

Ironically, despite the protest, Grace herself downplays her Irishness: she can recall her birthplace 'only in scraps, like a plate that's been broken'; she puts great emphasis on her Protestantism: 'But of course our family were Protestants, and that is different' (p. 103). Stephanie Lovelady takes Grace's lack of a strong Irish identity as a consequence of premature separation from any family that can help reinforce her national identity.²³ However, the cause is more complicated than it appears to be. In *Grace*, the absence of ethnic solidarity originates from her in-betweenness. Protestantism disassociates her from the Catholic Irish, who in the eyes of the English are 'superstitious and rebellious Papists who were ruining the country' (p. 128), whereas being from Ireland prevents her from integrating into the mainstream English community. Being Protestant Irish amounts to occupying an awkward position between the British colonizer and the Irish colonized, never fully accepted by either side. Yet Grace is triply othered owing to the mixed marriage of her parents.²⁴ Back in Ireland, the national origin of her father John Marks makes him unpopular and probably his family marginalized in the Protestant Irish community: 'Being an Englishman, he was none too welcome even among the Protestants, as they were not fond of outsiders' (p. 105).

²³ Stephanie Lovelady, 'I Am Telling This to No One But You: Private Voice, Passing, and the Private Sphere in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 24: 2 (1999), 35-63 (p. 45).

²⁴ There is another form of othering by Simon: 'He is in the presence of a female animal; something fox-like and alert' (p. 90); 'He felt as if he was watching her undress, through a chink in the wall; as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat' (p. 91). In their first encounter, Grace utters a very abrupt sentence, 'I am not a dog' (p. 39), perhaps because she has sensed his tendency to dehumanize her. Simon also describes the governor's daughter as 'A healthy young animal' (p. 86). His dehumanization of women is closely related to sexuality.

In Canada, anti-Irish feelings meant that the fact of being from Ireland overshadows Grace's Protestantism and her English origin. 'Irish' becomes a convenient label, seen as synonymous with deviant and even criminal. This in-between space allows Grace little opportunity to develop either Irish or Canadian identity.

In one sense, Atwood politicizes Grace just as the press did at the time of the murders, but with the intention of exploring the underlying factors that cause the contradictions among all the existing written accounts about this historical event. The controversies about the historical Grace make her sceptical of the traces of the past:

There is — as I increasingly came to discover — no more reason to trust something written down on paper then than there is now. After all, the writers-down were human beings, and are subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases.²⁵

This is echoed by Grace, who tells Simon “[j]ust because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God’s truth’ (p. 257).

The isolation of excerpts about Grace as epigraphs points to a noticeable phenomenon. Despite the abundance of historical documents surrounding the historical Grace Marks, she is in fact rather silenced. The written accounts about her are given by people other than Grace herself, except the confession put out by the *Star and Transcript*, a confession which the fictional Grace denies having made: ‘This is not really my Confession, I say, it was only what the lawyer told me to say, and things made up by the men from the newspapers’ (p. 101). In recollecting what has happened during the trial, Grace portrays herself as a dummy

²⁵ Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1514.

manipulated by various ventriloquists:

What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day? Because now we are almost there. I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said, for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too; and that sort are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just their wooden doll. And that's what it was like at the trial, I was there in the box of the dock but I might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head; and I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out. (p. 295)

She has been previously rendered mute and impotent because of her inferior position in the class structure. When deciding to leave after Mary's death, she is intimidated by her employer into hushing up the name of the gentleman who gets Mary pregnant: 'she asked me to swear on the Bible that even if I did [know the man], I would never divulge it, and she would write me a good reference' (p. 198). In the Lunatic Asylum, medical authority deprives her of voice. Only after Grace learns how to keep her mouth shut does the medical authority agree to admit her sanity: 'At last I stopped talking altogether, except very civilly when spoken to, Yes Ma'am No Ma'am, Yes and No Sir. And then I was sent back to the Penitentiary' (p. 32). The first encounter with Simon reminds Grace of the repressive power of medical authority:

He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is; although with Dr. Bannerling all of the answers

were wrong. (p. 40)

When the listener expects to hear only the answer desired, it is a form of silencing, for it is not the speaker's message that gets through but the listener's intention or desire that is substantialized. Furthermore, whether Grace can give the right answer, that is, the answer demanded by her audience, also turns into a question of life and death: 'That is what they wanted me to say. Mr. MacKenzie told me I had to say it, to save my own life' (p. 317). Another method of silencing is to discredit the words of the speaker: 'A woman like me is always a temptation, if possible to arrange it unobserved; as whatever we may say about it later, we will not be believed' (p. 29). Grace's marginality, at least threefold due to her servant/prisoner/patient position, makes her more vulnerable to different forms of silencing.

Although Simon encourages Grace to tell by emphasizing that 'it wasn't what he wanted me to say, but what I wanted to say myself, that was of interest to him', she has been already disciplined to keep hushed: 'as it was not my place to want to say anything' (p. 67). Actually, there is little difference between him and Dr. Bannerling in that he also expects the desired answer from Grace: 'she's told him only what she's chosen to tell. What he wants is what she refuses to tell' (322). Feeling that 'the very plenitude of her recollections may be a sort of distraction' (p. 185), he is frustrated with the failure to pry the 'right' answer out of Grace. Like the male historian in *The Handmaid's Tale*, who ignores the suffering the narrator has gone through as a woman under an oppressive patriarchal regime, Simon takes no interest either in her personal experience as a maid or in similar struggles of working-class women such as her mother, Mary or Nancy. In this sense, Grace is silenced because her voice cannot reach him, or, to be more precise, because he screens out the information undesired for the purpose of his medical research, which, as the novel unfolds, turns into voyeuristic interest. The hypnotized Grace, in a different voice claiming to be that of Mary Whitney, mocks

Simon's hypocrisy, confronting him with what he most desires but never articulates — whether she is McDermott's paramour — and accuses him of turning a deaf ear: 'You're the same, you won't listen to me, you don't believe me, you want it your own way' (p. 403).

Grace (or Mary perhaps) is silenced in the sense of not being heard.

Her imposed silence stands in sharp contrast with the public descriptions of her, the quantity and inconsistency of which bewilder Grace:

I think of all the things that have been written about me — that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (p. 23)

She has no control of the ways in which she is constructed in the public rhetoric. A sense of frustration and powerlessness overwhelms her: 'It was my own lawyer, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie, Esq., who told them I was next door to an idiot. I was angry with him over that' (p. 23). Though creating the image of Grace as lacking intelligence is MacKenzie's tactic to defend her, his discursive violence inevitably renders Grace mute.

The public constructions of Grace, as Gillian Siddall notes, are ‘symptomatic of broader Victorian ideas of femininity and sexuality, and Grace becomes a titillating figure through which the public can articulate and consolidate those ideas.’²⁶ They reflect contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women, especially the splitting of women into categories of prostitutes and Madonnas, demons and angels. Through the fictional Grace, Atwood explores how these notions of gender in nineteenth-century Canada shape and regulate women’s lives, but she further complicates the situation with issues of class. As mentioned above, the silencing process imposed on Grace has a lot to do with her debased social position in the class system; being a female servant makes her more subject to economic and sexual exploitation. For her female employer, her value may lie more in her physical labour, but in the relationship with male masters, her body transforms from a replaceable item in the capitalist system of exchange into an erotic object. Thus, the boundaries between classes, or to be precise, between male master and female servant, become ‘an eroticized topography for transgressive desire.’²⁷ This is manifest in the relationships between Mary and the anonymous gentleman who impregnates her, between Nancy and her male employers, and between Grace and Kinnear. Though never eliminating the possibility of women’s complicity in this transgressive desire, Atwood makes it explicit that the eroticization of class boundaries originates more from the social inequality between two parties. As Mary warns young Grace: ‘The worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are entitled to anything they want’ (pp. 164-65).

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood explores the difficulties that a female ex-centric such as Grace has to

²⁶ Gillian Siddall, “‘That is what I told Dr. Jordan . . .’: Public Constructions and Private Disruptions in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*”, in *Margaret Atwood*, ed. Harold Bloom, new edn (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2009), pp. 127-42 (p. 128).

²⁷ Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, ‘The Eroticism of Class and the Enigma of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 22: 2 (2003), 371-86 (p. 371).

confront in an attempt to articulate herself while highlighting issues of gender, class, ethnicity and race. Despite her primary concern with women's victimization under different forms of power, she never depicts women as completely innocent victims but always grants them a certain degree of agency that allows for resistance and negotiation of selfhood. Grace is no exception. Even though her life story is not what Simon would like to hear about, in telling it with her own voice she takes control of what is to be divulged and seizes the opportunity to narrate the imposition of silence caused by her multiple marginality. Her oral story-telling, with a superfluity of detail, strikes Simon, who however cannot shake the suspicion that she is lying despite her candid and sincere manner. MacKenzie assumes that Grace falls in love with Simon and interprets her skilled storytelling as an attempt to 'keep the Sultan amused', to 'forestall your departure, and make you stay in the room with her as long as possible' (p. 377). Yet Grace's monologue reveals that she is the one in control of how much Simon deserves to know: 'But I do not say any of this to Dr. Jordan. And so forth, I say firmly, because And so forth is all he is entitled to. Just because he pesters me to know everything is no reason for me to tell him' (p. 216). In MacKenzie's view, Grace tells stories to please Simon, whereas Grace takes the doctor as 'a considerable diversion in my life of monotony and toil' (p. 381). The hierarchical relationship between doctor and patient is temporarily overturned.

Grace's marriage to Jamie Walsh, however, deprives her of that power. Her storytelling becomes compulsory, a way to fulfil her audience's desire rather than a means of self-representation and self-construction. Her sadomasochistic husband, who believes his testimony contributes to her conviction, is aroused by hearing about her former sufferings: 'As for Mr. Walsh, after I have told him a few stories of torment and misery he clasps me in his arms and strokes my hair, and begins to unbutton my nightgown' (p. 457). She is not only required to repeat again and again her experience of victimization, which she would rather

forget; she also has to exaggerate it. Though speaking in her own voice, Grace becomes a ventriloquist's doll again, acquiescing in her master's definitions of her identities as an obedient wife and a victim wrongly convicted of murder. Now she can articulate herself only in her mind to an imagined Simon: 'I have often thought of writing to you and informing you of my good fortune, and I've written many letters to you in my head' (p. 441). With Simon, her message never really gets through but she enjoys a high degree of autonomy; with Jamie, she only follows orders. Marriage metaphorically mutes Grace.

Deprived of the power to control her storytelling, Grace has no choice but to resort to quilting as an alternative means of articulation. The first quilt she has ever made for herself is the Tree of Paradise, into which she will sew three particular triangles: one from Mary's white petticoat, another from Nancy's pink and white floral dress, and the other from her own faded yellowish prison nightdress. The pattern is a symbol of integration, recognizing their common entrapment resulting from being working-class women, even though a few pages earlier, Grace admits her anger at Mary and Nancy 'for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it' (p. 457).²⁸ She blames the victims for their own victimizations. However, behind this shifting of responsibility lies a fury at her own powerlessness. The yearning for power is tangible in her subversive interpretation of the Biblical story referred to by her first quilt:

The pattern of this quilt is called the Tree of Paradise, and whoever named that pattern said better than she knew, as the Bible does not say Trees. It says there were two

²⁸ This integration is limited and cannot be extended to all working-class women. Grace, after becoming Mrs. Walsh, begins to see servants as intruders: 'Mr. Walsh wanted to employ a girl as well, but I said I would prefer to do the work of the house myself. I wouldn't want to have a servant listen at doors; and also it's much easier for me to do a task right myself the first time, than to have someone else do it wrong and then do it over' (p. 455). She is speaking like Nancy but there is a difference: Nancy usurps the power of the lady at Kinneer's house while Grace is legally granted that power through marriage. As for the role of Grace as a working-class intruder in bourgeois space, see Roxanne Rimstead, 'Working-Class Intruders: Female Domesticity in *Kamouraska* and *Alias Grace*', *Canadian Literature*, 175 (2002), 44-65.

different trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge; but I believe there was only the one, and that the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death.

(p. 459)

Grace intends to sew into it 'a border of snakes entwined', which 'will look like vines or just a cable pattern to others' but which will be snakes to her because 'without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing' (pp. 459-60). The intrusion of the snake into the Garden of Eden disrupts God's monopoly, providing the possibility of choice as well as disobedience. Satan's temptation may be strong, but it is Eve who accepts it and takes decisive action to eat the forbidden fruit. Grace's reading celebrates Eve's agency, rejecting both the nostalgic longing for innocence/ignorance and the conventional view of her as a weak creature seduced to bring about the fall of humanity.²⁹ It also indicates her desire for agency and power. Release from prison returns her physical freedom but fails to grant her a proportional degree of agency due to her ex-centric position in terms of gender, class, race, age and criminality. Although Grace's marriage is Atwood's invention, the episode foregrounds that her upward mobility in class terms imposes on her a different form of captivity and sexual exploitation, to which she has been subject before the murders and during imprisonment.

Atwood admits that there was a lot of invention in *Alias Grace* since there were many gaps in the historical accounts, and that she was frustrated 'not by what those past recorders had

²⁹ Ryan Miller argues that Grace's reading inverts the Christian Genesis and recalls Gnostic ideas. See Miller, 'The Gospel According to Grace: Gnostic Heresy as Narrative Strategy in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Literature and Theology*, 16: 3 (2002), 172-87 (p. 178).

written down but by what they'd left out.'³⁰ At the same time, she keeps known facts unchanged, but because 'few facts emerge as unequivocally "known"', she had 'to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible' (p. 465). Her novel 'seems to wrap up all the details in a neat package [. . .] as in the conventional historical novel.'³¹ But 'the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma' (p. 463). The play with the conventions of this genre demonstrates Atwood's continuous interest in experimentation across genre boundaries. In fact, *Alias Grace* also incorporates fictive autobiography, Gothic romance, social realism, melodrama, epistolary form, and detective thriller while challenging their conventions. Staels reads it as an antidetective novel because the novelist refuses to reveal the offender, a strategy deliberately frustrating readerly expectations of the genre.³² Simon starts like a detective with the ambition to solve the mystery with scientific discipline but ends in failure to 'state anything with certainty and still tell the truth' (p. 407), with his intellectual ground unsettled in the last encounter with neuro-hypnotized Grace. Marie-Thérèse Blanc treats the novel as 'an adversary trial', considering Grace not a Scheherazade figure but rather a skilled lawyer employing litigation tactics to contest accounts of her as murderess.³³ Both figures depend on narrative proficiency to sway their audience, the former to prevent death and the latter to win freedom; both highlight the discursive power rather than mimetic function of language. The novel 'fractures the realist text's claims to portray a coherent *knowable* world and solve issues of representation.'³⁴ All these genre transgressions echo each other in subverting and undermining established conventions.

³⁰ Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', pp. 1514-15.

³¹ Karen F. Stein, *Margaret Atwood Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), p. 109.

³² Hilde Staels, 'Intertexts of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46: 2 (2000), 427-50 (p. 432).

³³ Marie-Thérèse Blanc, 'Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and the Construction of a Trial Narrative', *English Studies in Canada*, 32: 4 (2006), 101-29 (p. 105).

³⁴ Susan Rowland, 'Imaginal Bodies and Feminine Spirits: Performing Gender in Jungian Theory and Atwood's *Alias Grace*', in *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality*, ed. Avril Horner and Angela Keane (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.244-54.

Though agreeing with Hutcheon on the ‘postmodern paradox of complicity and critique’ as characteristic of Atwood’s stance on issues of genres, Howells refuses to regard *Alias Grace* as historiographic metafiction, arguing instead that ‘Atwood writes a historical novel in a postmodern context’ and structures her historical fiction with parodic principles according to which the generic traditions are accommodated to a new context.³⁵ Similarly, Alan Robinson comments that ‘her scepticism in *Alias Grace* is epistemological rather than ontological.’³⁶ His argument is based on Atwood’s remark that ‘although there undoubtedly was a truth — somebody killed Nancy Montgomery — truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us.’³⁷ The novelist never denies that events did occur in the empirical past, but her scepticism is both epistemological and ontological in that she poses questions not only about how we know the past but also about how traces of the past, through which it can be known, come into being. ‘The past is made of paper’, comments Atwood, sharing the postmodern view that, in Hutcheon’s words, ‘its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality.’³⁸ To highlight that textuality, she juxtaposes excerpts from written accounts concerning the double murder with quotations from fictional writing. Thus it is through manipulating the interplay between invention and known facts in historical records that Atwood exposes textual traces of the past as discursive inscription, already semiotized or encoded.

The rich source texts about the case of Grace Marks lead to ‘a deepening sense of historical uncertainty’ rather than a ‘progressive illumination of an enigma.’³⁹ Atwood explores how

³⁵ Coral Ann Howells, ‘Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood’s Novels’, in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impacts*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), pp. 139-56 (p. 150).

³⁶ Alan Robinson, ‘Alias Laura: Representations of the Past in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*’, *Modern Language Review*, 101 (2006), 347-59 (p. 347).

³⁷ Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1515.

³⁸ Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*’, p. 1513; Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 16.

³⁹ Jennifer Murray, ‘History as Poetic Indetermination: The Murder Scene in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *Etudes Anglaises*, 56: 3 (2003), 310-22 (p. 321).

various encoding processes engender contradiction and inconsistency between the written accounts from which few facts emerge as unequivocally known, and at the same time preserve the resultant historical indeterminacy. But the most significant part in Atwood's scepticism is the revelation of power relations as essential to all history writing. An ex-centric like Grace Marks was recorded in official history just because her behaviour posed a threat to her contemporary society, challenging the authorities of every kind. However, despite the abundance of accounts about her, she was silenced. All the representations of her were mediated by those in more privileged positions than her. It is as if every writer on the case were writing under the alias of Grace, except Grace herself. Through fictionalization, Atwood gives her a voice so that she can both construct her selfhood, however slippery it is, in her own terms and articulate the imposition of silence caused by her marginality and otherness. Her self-construction thus can enter the discursive field, in competition with other accounts, themselves contradictory and unreliable, that have tried to fix the meaning of her life.

Besides questioning how the past can be known and how its textual traces are discursive constructions involving encoding processes and power struggle, *Alias Grace* tries to respond to the social context at the time of its writing and therefore needs historicizing. Howells reads the novel as 'Atwood's intervention in debates around multiculturalism and her reply to the backlash against it as a policy in the early 1990s', for the novelist shows the Anglo-Canadian society in the mid-nineteenth century was no less diversified than today, and beset by similar conflicts arising from issues of gender, class, race and ethnicity.⁴⁰ But it is also an attempt to counter the myth that there is no Canadian history: 'history, for us, either didn't exist, or it had happened elsewhere, or if ours it was boring.'⁴¹ It is not that Canadian history never exists but that it has been repressed:

⁴⁰ Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*, p. 39.

⁴¹ Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 1508.

Many things we were not told about in school, and this is where the interest in historical writing comes in. For it's the very things that *aren't* mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us. *Why* aren't they mentioned? The lure of the Canadian past, for the writers of my generation, has been partly the lure of the unmentionable — the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo.⁴²

The proliferation of Canadian historical fiction since the 1980s is not nostalgic but rather a reaction to the return of the repressed. Atwood joins the trend to investigate questions of Canadian heritage and identity after what is buried or unspeakable comes to light. By bringing in the Irish question, her historical fiction 'challenges myths of English-Canadian colonial innocence', exposing Canada's complicity in British colonialism;⁴³ by casting a backward glance at the condition of the Protestant Irish community, it reveals the racial and ethnic heterogeneity within English Canada. On the whole, it makes an effort to reconfigure the connections between past and present and as Howells suggests, can be seen 'as Atwood's own elaborate alias for her broad socio-historical project aimed at uncovering scandalous secrets, which may be a necessary stage in refiguring nation and identity.'⁴⁴ Atwood herself has stated the purpose of writing historical fiction as follows: 'by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves.'⁴⁵

The Englishman's Boy

The Englishman's Boy explores the representation of history and its relationship with the establishment of national identity by portraying the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873, a

⁴² Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 1509.

⁴³ Howells, 'Transgressing Genre', p. 150.

⁴⁴ Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 1512.

historical incident in which a posse of wolfers, crossing the Canadian-American boundary to recover stolen horses, ended up assaulting an Assiniboine camp. The account of this event is woven into the fiction of the Englishman's boy, who joins the wolfers in the hunt and delivers the eye-witness account of the incident fifty years later at the request of fictional Harry Vincent, a Canadian seeking his fortune in Hollywood. The Englishman's boy remains anonymous.⁴⁶ It is not until the middle of the novel that the reader can identify the boy as Shorty McAdoo. Sections of the boy's story alternate with Harry's recollections of his sojourn in early 1920s Hollywood. Harry recalls thirty years later, in 1953, how he is hired by the eccentric film mogul, Damon Ira Chance, to track down and interview the cowboy Shorty McAdoo in order to create an epic Western incarnating Americanness and how he is frightened away by Chance's nationalist appropriation of Shorty's story in his movie *Besieged*. Both the boy's story and Harry's memoir reach their climax with death. The former is closed with the massacre while the latter culminates with the murder of Chance by Wylie, a boy living with Shorty.

The alternate narratives are enclosed by a frame story, consisting of two sections that begin and end *The Englishman's Boy*. The first section, in which two Assiniboine warriors, Fine Man and Broken Horn, succeed in lifting horses from white men, appears at first sight to be irrelevant to the two main narratives that follow. Only later can the reader make sense of the relationship between the frame story and the main narratives. The novel begins in 1873, when the stealing of horses takes place, and closes in the same year, when the two warriors arrive triumphantly at their camp with the horses. Between the two sections of the frame story, the reader moves back and forth between 1923 and 1873, and occasionally jumps to 1953. This narrative structure is designed to foreground the crucial role of temporality, perspective and

⁴⁶ Because of this anonymity, I refer to this narrative as the story of the Englishman's boy or the 1873 story instead of Shorty McAdoo's story so as to distinguish it from the oral account given by him to Harry in 1923 Hollywood. I will discuss later what this anonymity implies.

interpretation in the representation of history. Vanderhaeghe's use of the Western genre also contributes to the investigation of the recounting of history and the construction of national identity while at the same time exposing the imperialist ideology underpinning this genre.

Strictly speaking, the label of the Western can only be applied to the story of the Englishman's boy, while the novel as a whole is a hybrid of reminiscences and adventure stories. This hybridity enables Vanderhaeghe to subvert the Western genre both from within and from without. The 1873 story is an omniscient third-person account, focalizing the perspective of the Englishman's boy. This Western story has no heroic figures as protagonists. All we have is a posse of wolfers, depicted as selfish, bloodthirsty, belligerent, and ultimately racist. Their leader, Hardwick, is an aggressive Indian hater. As one wolfer remarks, 'Hardwick, [. . .] I swear to Christ you're happy as a pig in soft shit that them Indians lifted our horses. You're just looking for an excuse to take a crack at them.'⁴⁷ To reclaim the stolen horses might be his job, but he is more concerned 'to punish the Indians' and happy he is 'doing the Lord's work' (p. 53). Hardwick, as well as most of the other wolfers, has no hesitation in abandoning Hank, a farmer who is the last recruit to the gang, in the wilderness when he is found useless and troublesome in their chase after the horse thieves. Vanderhaeghe deliberately blurs the distinction between these wolfers and the Indians they despise when they first come into sight in the story of the Englishman's boy. In fact, the boy at first glance identifies them as Indians just because they are on foot and '[w]hite men didn't go abroad without horses' (p. 52). He takes out his rifle and lays it across his knees, which can be deciphered as an action either of self-defence or of readiness to attack. But when they approach, he becomes uncertain and anxious: 'it was only God's guess whether they were white or red' (p. 52). The boy's reaction suggests that hostility towards Indians can arise

⁴⁷ Guy Vanderhaeghe, *The Englishman's Boy* (London: Anchor, 1998), p. 53. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.

purely out of racialist stereotypes since having never confronted any real Indians until that moment, he has no grounds for either fear or aggression. By blurring the distinction and dramatising the boy's reaction, the novel problematizes the dichotomy between white and Indian on which the Western depends.

As for the focalized character, the Englishman's boy, Reinhold Kramer considers him to be a John Wayne figure because 'he is a silent male, not a chatterer; he knows horses; [. . .] he will only fight if provoked; once provoked he will not retreat; he will kill if he must.'⁴⁸ However, the boy seldom behaves like a typical Western hero. He blackmails a hotel proprietor into accommodating the sick Englishman by threatening to set fire to the premises. He keeps silent about deserting Hank even though he feels sorry for him. He lacks the courage to confront Hardwick even though he does not want to perpetrate the gang rape after the slaughter. This protagonist hardly fights against injustice. In contrast, Scotty, one of the two Canadians in the posse, seems relatively courageous in refusing to commit the crime even when he is humiliated by Hardwick, creeping back to his corner, 'where he huddled himself up sobbing, meek as an orphan' (p. 285). The climactic war between the wolfers and the Assiniboine is also portrayed as meaningless. It could have been prevented if Hardwick had not insisted on taking back Hammond's horse and had agreed to accept the Assiniboine's offer of two horses as a token of peace. The novel presents a Western devoid of typical heroes or deeds.

Vanderhaeghe provides more powerful critiques of the Western genre when subverting its conventions from without. They are made explicit in the exchanges between Harry and Chance, exposing most of the ideologies that underpin this typical American genre and

⁴⁸ Reinhold Kramer, 'Nationalism, the West, and *The Englishman's Boy*', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 67 (1999), 1-22 (p. 13).

foregrounding its role in the construction of American national identity. Chance claims to ‘make pictures rooted in American history and American experience’ (p. 25) just like his idol, D.W. Griffith, whose movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, is acclaimed by him as an American *Iliad*. His ambition is to make an American *Odyssey*, an epic Western that can fully incarnate the American spirit, which he defines as ‘a frontier spirit, restless, impatient of constraint, eager for a look over the next hill, the next peek around the bend in the river’ (p. 110).⁴⁹ He describes its destiny as ‘forward momentum’ or ‘[w]hat the old frontiersman called westering’ (p. 110). This forward momentum or westering creates a great civilization out of nothing: ‘The blood of America is the blood of pioneers — the blood of lion-hearted men and women who carved a splendid civilization out of an uncharted wilderness’ (p. 219). Chance’s rhetoric depends on a binary opposition between civilization and wilderness that is essential to colonialism.

Only through the eradication of the Indians can this forward momentum be accomplished. In Chance’s imagination, the Indians are demons waiting in ambush, ready to attack the frontiersmen at any moment: ‘Picture the lonely cabin in the forest, the eyes watching from the trees, waiting for their opportunity’ (p. 242). Between the frontiersmen and the Indians is a battle for survival: ‘Kill or be killed. They both understood compromise between them was impossible’ (p. 281). From the Indians’ point of view, however, this forward momentum amounts to an act of aggression, threatening their survival. Chance reverses the positions of invader and invaded, turning the frontiersman from an aggressor into a victim who must defend himself by killing. Harry tries to challenge Chance’s logic of reversed victimization: ‘Perhaps it was not up to the Indian to compromise. Ever consider that?’ (p. 281). When Chance visualizes his great epic Western, the reversal of power relations in this generic

⁴⁹ The implications of the American *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as well as their relation with Americanness will be discussed later. Here I focus on the novel’s critiques of the Western genre.

tradition is exposed. This reversal culminates in his appropriation of Shorty's story, transforming the Indian girl from a victim into an 'Indian Samson' (p. 239), who attempts to destroy her captors by setting fire to the building, whereas in the story of the Englishman's boy it is Hardwick who burns her to death. By changing the role of the Indian girl, Chance recolonizes her just as Shorty kills her again when telling her story for money. Westering as a physical colonization is followed by cultural colonization, which, as Chance's imperialist appropriation demonstrates, serves to justify the former, transforming it into a national myth. Moreover, the Western movie has become a mass-produced commodity that keeps duplicating the same imperialist attitude: 'the dime-a-dozen Westerns that every studio in southern California churns out like sausage' (p. 31). Therefore, Vanderhaeghe also highlights how the Western as a popular cultural industry continues to reproduce and spread racist and imperialist ideologies.

Another critique of the Western is developed in the frame story. Alison Calder argues that the literal placement of the Assiniboine story on the borders of the text performs two functions: to highlight the borderline status of the Assiniboine narrative and to supplement Shorty's story by pointing out that the white male perspective is incomplete.⁵⁰ In other words, the frame story serves to remind the reader of what the Western as a genre privileging white males must repress: the Indian or Indigenous perspective. Yet the arrangement of the Assiniboine story as bookends produces a strong alienating sense at the beginning of the novel since the first bookend seems so incompatible with the two main narratives that follow. Then, the other bookend shakes the reader up, plucking them from the white society in Hollywood back to the indigenous world thousands of miles away. It appears that Vanderhaeghe intends this frame story to establish a dialogue with the main narratives,

⁵⁰ Alison Calder, 'Unsettling the West: Nation and Genre in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 25: 2 (2000), 96-107 (p. 104-05).

especially the tale of the Englishman's boy, since it is the horse stealing in this part that triggers the wolfers' chase across the border into Canada. Nevertheless, the participants in this dialogue do not develop any genuine communication. No counterpoint is provided. The Assiniboine story, though presented from the Indigenous point of view, is not a retelling of private experience concerning the massacre. It is a tale of the two Assiniboine warriors' victory over 'foolish white men' (p. 11). It does not form a direct confrontation with the recounting of the massacre in the story of the Englishman's boy. This weakens Vanderhaeghe's anti-colonial critique of the Western genre.

There is another genre under scrutiny. Vanderhaeghe claimed to write a historical novel, which is 'also a cautionary tale that spoke to modern conditions, urged readers to contemplate and examine the making of history in all its various manifestations.'⁵¹ Through the account of a historical incident, *The Englishman's Boy* reflects critically upon how history is represented and what politics and ideology that representation involves. There are three modes of representation under examination in this novel: written, oral and visual. The narrative of the Englishman's boy is the written version. The oral representation is provided by Shorty and then transcribed by Harry in the 1923 story, but it is an implied version⁵² just like the visual representation, Chance's film *Besieged*. The imperialist reading in the film is made so explicit that the visual becomes the most unreliable of the three modes. Daniela Janes argues that Vanderhaeghe establishes a hierarchy of authenticity in historical representation with orality at the top and film at the bottom.⁵³ As a first-hand account, Shorty's oral narration of that historical event can claim the highest level of authenticity, but it is also the most vulnerable representation, susceptible to appropriation in subsequent

⁵¹ Guy Vanderhaeghe, 'History and Fiction', *Canadian Journal of History*, 40: 3 (2005), 429-30 (p. 430).

⁵² I refer to Shorty's oral tale as an implied version because it is only mentioned in the interview but not presented in the novel.

⁵³ Daniela Janes, 'Truth and History: Representing the Aura in *The Englishman's Boy*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 27: 1 (2002), 88-104 (p. 93).

reproductions. However, a closer examination suggests that *The Englishman's Boy* is more interested in exploring the mechanism involved in historical representation than in establishing the hierarchy of historical authenticity in different media. The exploration throws doubt on the notion of authenticity in history.

The oral representation is presented as a witness account of the Cypress Hills Massacre, but without details offered. The absence of the content in this oral version foregrounds the presence of the teller as a witness or participant and highlights the role of subjectivity in historical representation. Subjectivity is further emphasized in the process of transcription when Harry turns the oral representation into a written version:

He [Shorty] knew exactly what he wanted to say and would frequently request me to read back to him what I had written in my shorthand notes. He listened very intently and then he might add or omit some detail. (p. 196)

Neither Shorty's oral account nor Harry's transcription is presented in the 1923 narrative. Yet the act of adding or omitting suggests the indispensable process of selection in historical representation even though it is narrated by a person participating in the historical incident. Turning the transcription into a film script involves more inevitable loss: 'Maybe I've got too close to the material. It's tough to convey the feeling of McAdoo's story without dialogue, because I keep hearing his voice, the way he told it' (p. 228). The novel emphasizes that representation of history and its retelling in different modes entail subjectivity, selectivity and loss. Uncertainty and arbitrariness are also exposed when Shorty dictates the age of the Indian girl without valid knowledge: 'Put her down for fifteen. [. . .] She mightn't have been fourteen like I said first. I'm more comfortable going high than low' (p. 197).

Chance's visual version, which can be inferred only through his conversations with Harry, demonstrates how ideology and power play a determining role in the interpretation of historical materials. He intends his film to fit his political agenda — 'to rewrite the history of the foreigner, erase completely those sentimental flowers of memory and light their minds with the glory of American lightning' (p. 282). He aims to convert immigrants into what he considers to be Americans. The film becomes a means of assimilation, erasing the immigrants' past and reinscribing a new national history in their mind. His appropriation of Shorty's narrative is over-determined by his patriotism and xenophobia.

Like his idol, Griffith, who believes that 'the motion-picture camera would end conflicting interpretations of the past' (p. 26), Chance is convinced that historical accuracy can terminate disputes: 'Facts are of the utmost importance, Harry. If I can convince the audience the details are impeccably correct, who will dispute the interpretation?' (p. 219). For both, 'film would offer irrefutable proof as to what had really happened' (p. 26). However, it is an illusion that historical accuracy in the movie can terminate conflicting interpretations of the past by way of its documentary nature. His adoration of Griffith's film as an *American Iliad* is countered by Rachel Gold, a Jew who writes screenplays for Chance's film company and whom Harry works for. She comments contemptuously on its racist implications: 'To make movies portraying Negro as stupid, shiftless, and single-mindedly determined to slake his lust with white women. What a great public-relations job he did for the Klan and the lynching industry' (p. 133). Chance relegates the audience to mere passive receivers of his messages, forgetting that his interpretation in the film in fact becomes a text triggering off further interpretation. As Rachel's response demonstrates, the verisimilitude of the visual representation can never put an end to the process of interpretation.

If Chance believes that film has the authority to terminate contradictory understandings of the

past, it comes as no surprise that he treats film as a valid source of historical knowledge. He designates Griffith as 'the Great Educator' and *The Birth of a Nation* as 'America's history lesson on the Civil War', declaring '[w]hatever bits of history the average American knows, he's learned from Griffith' (p. 109). Yet what actually drives Chance to worship Griffith lies in the conviction that his idol is 'the man who has given America to Americans' (p. 26) and 'filled America's spiritual emptiness *with* a vision of itself' (p. 27). That is to say, America as a political entity has not been able to cultivate its unique national identity. Only in the making of this film does the identity materialize. Another reason Chance regards Griffith as his role model is that his head is not filled 'with Henry James's traitorous nonsense about the ineffable superiority of Europe' (p. 27). He rejects the idea that America is inferior to Europe. This of course has to do with Chance's patriotism, which has xenophobia at its core. Chance divulges to Harry why he finds little evidence of the American spirit in American pictures — 'Europeans making our movies for us' (p. 110). Heads of major studios in Hollywood come from Europe and hire Europeans to write film scripts and play lead roles. In Chance's view, they are not Americans, nor are they able to make movies embody genuine Americanness. By contrast, Griffith is an Abraham Lincoln figure, a self-made and self-educated man 'who had never forgotten his roots in backwoods Kentucky' (p. 27). Ironically, place of birth becomes the standard that determines what is American. An apparently patriotic concern turns out to promote an exclusive and discriminatory measure of Americanness. Chance's xenophobic formulation of the American spirit then betrays the underlying mechanism of exclusion in the construction of national identity.

Inspired by Griffith, Chance states again and again his ambition to make an American *Odyssey*: 'The story of an American Odysseus, a westerer, a sailor of the plains, a man who embodies the raw vitality of America' (p. 110). If Griffith creates in his film an origin myth about how the American nation comes into existence, then Chance endeavours to conjure up

a heroic frontiersman who incarnates the vitality of the American westward expansion. He is so confident as to declare: 'No one else but Griffith and me to make the pictures this country needs' (p. 111). The message encoded in this declaration can be deciphered as: Griffith brings the American national identity into being while he would determine its character. Interestingly, when Harry enquires what he means by 'spiritual Americanism' (p. 109) that he believes Griffith's American *Iliad* has produced, Chance has no definite answer: 'Perhaps it can't be defined in words, Harry. Pictures come closest to capturing its meaning' (p. 109).

The Englishman's Boy also exposes how 'historical accuracy' is arduously but factitiously produced in the filmic machinery and then how this constructed 'accuracy' is turned, with help from academic authority, into a selling point to promote the film. According to Chance, Griffith 'employed a large staff to research his period dramas and dunned archaeologists and historians for blurbs to *advertise* the "accuracy" of his movies' (p. 26, my emphasis). In a similar way, Chance, in his 'mania for authenticity', 'demands historical accuracy in every detail' (p. 213). He insists upon hiring four hundred '*real* Indians' instead of 'Mexicans in wigs' (p. 213) for actors in the picture, lays hands on all the Indian artefacts that can be bought from private collectors, commissions a stock-buyer to purchase a herd of buffalo, and requires 'an authentic adobe fort' (p. 215) to be built even before locations are settled on. 'It is a consuming passion that isn't satisfied cheaply', Harry comments ironically (p. 213). Moreover, Chance makes it explicit that if Shorty refuses to conduct himself as a hero for the movie, then he would be coerced into playing dead, and then Harry, 'as friend and biographer, could represent him to the press' (p. 199). Ironically, the person most entitled to be the arbiter of this 'historical accuracy' should be Shorty, who, however, is completely excluded from the production of the film and has no say at all in a film based on his life story. Chance's uncompromising requirement of authentic details seems capable of creating a strong sense of verisimilitude and realism. Yet it is exactly because of this verisimilitude and seeming

immediacy that the film is presented as the most unreliable mode of representation in the novel. Vanderhaeghe enriches a postmodern scepticism about the visual representation of history by disclosing how verisimilitude and realism are produced in the filmic machinery.

The three modes of representation display various degrees of subjectivity in the narrating of history. The oral representation always signifies the presence of a speaking subject in a particular context, whereas the visual mode has no single subject as the activator of the representation. In the movie, subjectivity is diffused to such a degree that it almost vanishes. Subjectivity in the written mode is recovered to a minimal level but not as highlighted as it is in the oral account. The story of the Englishman's boy is told by a third-person omnipresent narrator with a detached voice. This story strives to imitate historical realism, encouraging the reader to accept the story as an objective account. Nevertheless, the question of subjectivity arises when we try to figure out the connection between this seemingly objective narrative and the subjective oral story alluded to in Harry's first-person account of his encounter with Shorty. Who is this omniscient narrator? Is it likely to be Shorty or Harry? The fact that the narrator remains anonymous and omnipresent suggests that Vanderhaeghe is concerned with the process by which the historian must repress the subjective, emotional elements in historical materials in order to achieve the appearance of objectivity. Not only is the subjectivity of participants in historical events effaced, but the historian must also erase his or her presence from the representation and avoid identifying with the figures presented. The detachment of the historian from his or her objects has to be consciously maintained. Vanderhaeghe emphasizes this by ensuring the third-person narrator never refers to the Englishman's boy as Shorty McAdoo despite the focalizations from the boy's perspective. The repression generates the impression of objectivity and scientism, allowing the historian to present the past as if it were speaking for itself. But it is never a complete repression and leaves traces behind.

Wyile argues that Vanderhaeghe 'wants Shorty's version to ring true' by contrasting this version (the story of the Englishman's boy), whose origin and subjectivity are erased, with Chance's overtly distorting and imperialist interpretation of it.⁵⁴ However, the origin and subjectivity of this account have not been completely effaced since it is referred to as Shorty's version. Shorty's subjectivity is still present in the focalization. The novel suggests that however objective a historical narration appears to be, it is always already perspective-determined. Recognizing history as 'a subjective enterprise', Vanderhaeghe underlines the significance of perspective in the representation of history by juxtaposing the story of the Englishman's boy with the frame story, in which the omnipresent narrator privileges the viewpoint of Fine Man, one of the two Assiniboine.⁵⁵ It is impossible to avoid choosing a particular perspective in narrating the past.

The story of the Englishman's boy is not the only written version that recounts the event although it is the only one completely presented. Shorty's oral recounting is first transcribed in the interview by Harry into shorthand notes. The transcript then becomes the material for a photoplay, which Harry has 'rewritten five or six times', but each writing sinks him 'deeper in a mire of confusion and uncertainty' (p. 228) because he finds it very difficult to convey the feeling of Shorty's oral tale without dialogue. His photoplay is for silent film and 'expected to be quickly written, rough-hewn scenes, a blueprint for a shoot' (p. 228). But Chance then has it rewritten to fit the political agenda of his *American Odyssey*. The juxtaposition of all these versions, though some are mentioned only in passing, indicates the multiplicity of historical representation. Moreover, it alerts the reader to their own process of reading and interpretation. Reading history, like representing history (either in oral, written,

⁵⁴ Herb Wyile, 'Dances with Wolfers: Choreographing History in *The Englishman's Boy*', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 67 (1999), 23-52 (pp. 33-34).

⁵⁵ Wyile, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 35.

or visual form), is no innocent act, but necessarily activates the workings of selection and interpretation arising from particular perspectives.

The novel also subjects temporality to scrutiny. Representing the past is always an act removed in time and space from the occurrence of a historical event. In Shorty's case, a lapse of fifty years exists between the historical massacre and its recounting, while Harry begins to write the reminiscence about his encounters with Chance and Shorty in Hollywood about thirty years later. In narrating the 1923 episode, where the present tense is mainly employed, Harry pretends most of the time to report the events taking place thirty years ago as if he were on the spot. Nevertheless, the voice of old Harry in 1953 keeps intruding into the recollection. For example, recalling his first journey to meet Chance, Harry addresses the reader, comparing the deserted early stage of the movie colony with its contemporary impressions: 'Contrary to what you might expect, in the early twenties Hollywood was a ghost town after dark' (p. 18). Or when reflecting on his relationship with Rachel, he confesses puzzlement about his secret affection for her even after so many years: 'Thirty years later I still do not know why I loved her with a husband's love rather than the blind passion women like her seem to require — only that I did' (p. 138). The emphasis on time lapse draws attention not only to the specific moment when the act of reconstructing is being undertaken, but also to the agent performing that act.

Recounting the past is always determined by the present perspective. The repeated insertion of old Harry's voice into the narrative of young Harry serves a double function: to reinforce the ontological and epistemological boundary between the past, a forever lost object, and its current representation, and to emphasize the fact that the only access to the past lies in the form of representation. By highlighting temporal removal, *The Englishman's Boy* displays what Hutcheon describes as part of postmodern politics — 'an intense self-consciousness [. . .]

about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past, about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency.’⁵⁶ Interestingly, the sense of time lapse in reconstructing the past is reduced to some degree in the story of the Englishman’s boy, in which it is impossible to determine when the act of recounting takes place since the reader cannot identify the omnipresent narrator either as Shorty or as Harry. Nonetheless, unlike Harry’s reminiscences written mainly in the present tense, the narrative of the Englishman’s boy is presented in the past tense, which also implies the necessary removal in time in narrating the past.

The narrative strategies in *The Englishman’s Boy* serve to examine how objectivity is achieved through the erasure of subjectivity, how interpretation is essential to the understanding of historical events and their recounting, how historical authenticity is artificially constructed, how perspective plays a crucial role in the representation of the past, how temporality influences historical representation, and how issues like class, ethnicity and ideology get involved in the reading of the historical event. Vanderhaeghe does launch an ontological and epistemological questioning of historical representation even though his strategies are not as annihilating as those in some highly celebrated postmodern novels like Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*.

While problematizing the process of historical representation, Vanderhaeghe also intends his cautionary historical novel to examine certain myths about the Medicine Line, the Canadian wilderness, and Canadian national identity. As the border separating Canada from America, the Medicine Line has gradually assumed important cultural significance. In the nineteenth century, black slaves followed the North Star and took the Underground Railroad to Canada in a flight from slavery and oppression in the United States. Similarly, Native peoples sought

⁵⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 68.

refuge by crossing the Medicine Line, fleeing persecution by the United States Army. The image of Canada as a sanctuary was established. Moving north of the line amounts to entering a place of safety and freedom. The border turns into a symbolic line affirming the distinction between the degradation and violence of America and the safety and freedom of Canada. Vanderhaeghe plays with this stereotypical idea in Harry's first encounter with Shorty, who is thinking of heading north to Canada because '[t]hey got some space there' (p. 85). America has become very hostile as '[I]oitering law' and 'vagrancy law' (p. 81) discriminate against and criminalize members of the underclass like him. Canada, in contrast, represents a freer and friendlier space where he can still seek sanctuary. Nevertheless, as the novel unfolds, this benevolent image is countered by alternative versions. In the 1873 narrative, before the wolfers cross the border, the territory is depicted as 'the English Queen's country, no law, and a mighty congregation of Indians' (p. 126). It is a British colony, but an anarchic one occupied by barbarous Indians. Entering this wild space excites the wolfers:

Finding themselves north of the Milk seemed to lighten the boys' mood, they were now beyond reach of the Choteau County Sheriff, the United States Marshals, the army, or Indian agents. On the Canadian side of the line there were no meddlesome lawmen of any stripe whatsoever. (p. 162)⁵⁷

But in the eyes of Ed Grace, one of the two Canadian wolfers, this area neither belongs to Canada nor represents a utopian space with absolute freedom; it is a battleground of fierce

⁵⁷ This description runs counter to the impression that the absence of a Wild West in Canada resulted from the Mounted Police. It is because the novel dramatises the very historical incident that completed the establishment of the Mounted Police — the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873. The bill to create the North-West Mounted Police was passed in the Parliament during the spring of 1873, but the government wanted to put off the creation for another year. The Massacre hastened the creation. One of their tasks was to regulate the American whiskey traders and wolfers who were disrupting this territory. The force was reorganized as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police early in 1920. Romanticized as heroes who protected Indians from whiskey traders and other unscrupulous whites, the Mounted Police has become another national myth, helping to reinforce the self-image that Canadians treat First Nations more justly than the Americans. See Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), pp. 29-51.

commercial competitions and economic exploitation:

Once you cross the Milk River, you leave the States and John Law behind. Out here nobody can touch you. Indian agents, sheriffs, U.S. Marshals, their jurisdiction stops at the Medicine Line and north of the Medicine Line the treaties say you're in Canada, but they're dead wrong. You're in Whoop-Up country. Up here the Democrats and Republicans are the T.C. Power Company and I.G. Baker Company, clawing each other for booty, clawing to carry off every pelt of fur, every buffalo hide they can lay hands on.
(p. 182)

This passage overtly critiques the colonial exploitation, disclosing that it is commercial profit rather than official law that rules this space. Lawlessness and violence originate not from Indians but rather from commercial competitions and economical exploitation. Vanderhaeghe dismantles the myth of Canada as a space of safety and freedom by retrieving colonial history from oblivion.⁵⁸

Strangely, despite his own unpleasant experience in Whoop-Up country, Shorty's idea of Canada as a freer place is not much altered after fifty years and explains why he plans to take Wylie, the boy living with him, to Canada: 'It's his best chance' (p. 150). For him, Canada still provides more opportunity than America for the underprivileged like him and Wylie. In addition, this freer and friendlier Canadian space exerts some metamorphic power over him.

⁵⁸ Whoop-Up country is not the only site where Vanderhaeghe wants to retrieve the colonial past. The title of this novel has two meanings: one denotative and the other connotative. The Englishman's Boy certainly refers to the protagonist of the 1873 Western story and Shorty McAdoo in the 1923 reminiscences. But the word 'Englishman' seems to remind the reader of the fact that North America was once colonized by the British Empire, which then dominated both settlers and Indigenous peoples. In other words, America and Canada as British colonies used to be the Englishman's boys, but now they have taken the place of their former master, becoming agents of colonialism themselves. American imperialism is mainly chastised through the characterization of Chance while Canadian colonialism is made explicit in the Grace's description of Whoop-Up as a battleground for fierce commercial competitions and in the establishment of the North West Mounted Police, which Harry designates as '[a] mythic act of possession' (p. 309).

He shares with Harry his experience of going Indian, emphasizing how the Canadian wilderness transforms him:

I'd soured on folks, wanted shut of them, but lonesome country breeds lonesomeness. I sung every song I knew trying to drown out the Indian talking in my head. Every day I heard him plainer and plainer. The country done it to me. The sky was Indian sky, the wind was Indian wind, every last thing I laid my eyes on was cut to fit an Indian. (p. 150)

Calder identifies this experience as going mad, arguing that 'Canadian space appears here as destructive, since it allows "the Indian" in Shorty's head to take over.'⁵⁹ This is the very conclusion Chance draws from Harry's transcription of the interviews with Shorty: 'a lunatic lost on the plains' (p. 155). However, Shorty's own description suggests that he does not consider the experience of going Indian to be destructive. Instead, he believes he has gone through a genuine Indian vision quest, finding his creature spirit in the wilderness. Moreover, the Canadian wilderness has some mysterious healing power. The slaughter in Cypress Hills engenders repulsion and fear in Shorty, who can no longer trust people of the same race: 'I taken [sic] myself away from my own kind; I'd sickened on white folks. I seen a sign of them, seen bull teams, seen freight wagons, I hid' (p. 150). The five-month lonely wandering around the Canadian wilderness proves to be restorative, enabling him to cross the border and return to the white society. The admission of going Indian, however, does not mean Shorty accepts Indians as fellow humans. He emphasizes that 'Indian is a way of thinking' and 'It's country makes an Indian' (p. 150), identifying the wilderness as Indian and recognizing its transforming power. As for its aboriginal inhabitants, Shorty conceives of them as belonging to another order of existence:

⁵⁹ Calder, 'Unsettling the West', pp. 97-98.

Those wild Indians the army used to jail for scampering off the reservation, directly they was locked up, they shrivelled and died. Wild Indian got to run free. I'd guess you lock a wild Indian up between the covers of a book, same thing is going to befall them. He's going to die. (p. 144)

He entertains the same racist stereotypes as Chance does. The only difference is that Shorty believes it is impossible to tame or 'civilize' wild Indians while Chance regards Indians as part of the wilderness which threatens white civilization and must be conquered and even annihilated.⁶⁰

Although Vanderhaeghe challenges the myth of Canada as a place of safety and freedom by retrieving the violent colonial past in the Canadian space, his challenge depends on the dualism of civilization and wilderness that is characteristic of colonial discourse. Whoop-Up country is described as a wild place, capable of turning the civilized into the barbarous. Ed Grace tells the Englishman's boy about his 'regressing' transformation: 'I've been knocking around this country ten years — it changes a man. But I'm not all the way there yet. I'm not Tom Hardwick. I'm betwixt and between — half civilized, half uncivilized. A centaur' (p. 185). The way Grace distinguishes himself from Hardwick, who in his view has gone totally wild, points to a myth created in the novel: Canadians are more civilized than Americans. The

⁶⁰ The Indian as an uncontainable racial other is also demonstrated in Shorty's story about a Christian Indian girl educated by Methodists who have 'trained the Indian out of her' (p. 145). She marries a white man because after the education in a reservation school she could not accept a man of her own kind as her husband, and 'she had such a reputation as a righteous Christian by then it slipped folks' minds she was an Indian' (p. 146). Given the successful assimilating education, this girl is supposed to be tame. But according to Shorty's tale, the wild Indian is not completely banished from this girl since she cannot abide Christian shoes, wearing nothing but moccasins. At the death of her husband, she saws off her two little fingers because it is a convention in her tribe to remove a piece of flesh as a sign of mourning. Shorty relates this story to demonstrate that there exist no tame Indians no matter how they have been civilized or assimilated by white society. In spite of his encounters with Indians and his experience of going Indian, Shorty fails to understand Indians, who remain the alien racial other. Maybe it is not going too far to say that in Shorty's mind Indians appear more animal-like than human.

two Canadian wolfers, Grace and Scotty, are both depicted as trying to maintain some connection with civilization. Grace is born in old Ontario, living in a house with a piano and books, while Scotty claims to ‘have once been a gentleman’ (p. 115), believing that a Harris tweed coat can turn him back into a gentleman. He would like to buy the coat from the Englishman’s boy, who takes it from his dead former master. The coat is not only a sign of gentility but a symbol of civilization. Both Grace and Scotty strive to maintain a certain sense of civilization when confronted with what they believe to be the metamorphic power of the wilderness, whereas Hardwick is depicted as one who completely surrenders to that power and mocks their effort to remain civilized. In the 1873 narrative, the stereotype that Canadians are more civilized than Americans is thus reinforced while the myth of Canada as place of safety and freedom is undermined.

The 1923 recollections subject another myth to scrutiny — the absence of Canadian national identity. Though feeling guilty, Harry decides to conceal his true nationality from Chance and justifies doing so with his observation: ‘I have found that Americans, by and large, recognize no distinction between us. Why should I?’ (p. 112). He takes full advantage of ‘the invisibility of his Canadianness’ in order to get the well-paid job offered by Chance.⁶¹ However, if we listen carefully enough, it is not difficult to discover that Vanderhaeghe encodes a message of accusation in Harry’s comment, for it is Americans who recognize no distinction. That is to say, Canadians are invisible to Americans. Chance exemplifies this invisibility when appropriating Shorty’s recounting of the Cypress Hills Massacre for his American *Odyssey*: ‘The story of a great battle. [. . .] *Victory* in the face of overwhelming odds. America needs this example’ (p. 198). It never occurs to Chance that his hero of westering fights the battle within the territory of another country. The forty-ninth parallel as an international boundary does not exist in his understanding of American westering, which implies his American

⁶¹ Calder, ‘Unsettling the West’, p. 99.

imperialism. There is no such invisibility to Rachel, who, however, 'can't see the distinction' between Canadian and English and reproaches Harry for hiding his yearning for power behind 'this polite, fastidious English façade' (p. 174).

Behind Harry's self-justification for concealment lies a profound anxiety about the lack of distinctive Canadian identity. The anxiety surfaces in his heated debate with Rachel about what the American spirit is:

Canada isn't a country at all, it's simply geography. There's no emotion there, not the kind that Chance is talking about. There are no Whitmans, no Twains, no Cranes. Half the English Canadians wish they were really English, and the other half wish they were Americans. If you're going to be anything, you have to choose. (p. 176)

For Harry, Canada lacks a strong national literary tradition like American literature or something like the forceful Americanness elaborated by Chance, and cannot make its presence felt. The only feature he can think of when trying to define Canadianness sounds very vague and discouraging: 'In our hearts we preferred the riverbank, preferred to be spectators, preferred to live our little moment of excitement and then forget it' (p. 177). Yet the cause of his disappointment lies less in the lack of Canadian national identity than in the fact that it is an identity always overshadowed and obscured by the strong presence of its British metropolis and American neighbour.

Ironically, Harry does not fare well in the attempt to become an American and discovers at last that he 'didn't belong there' (p. 307). His flight from Hollywood back to Canada implies a conflict between Harry's passive Canadianness and Chance's aggressive Americanness; also, it reinforces the impression of Canadians as passive bystanders. In fact, remaining passive

and resigned is exactly what Harry is doing after quitting the job as Chance's scriptwriter. Despite disapproval, he never tries to prevent his employer's imperialist appropriation of Shorty's story whereas Shorty fights against the appropriation and seeks to buy his story back from Chance. Another similar stereotype arises from Harry's encounters with the major American characters, Chance, Rachel and Shorty: passive Canadians vs. aggressive Americans. Through Harry's description of his country, *The Englishman's Boy* contradicts the myth of the absence of Canadian national identity, but it is not very encouraging in that the image of passive Canadianness is hardened. However, it seems more likely that Vanderhaeghe intends Harry's withdrawal not only to criticize American imperialism but also to denounce Canadian cowardice in failing to confront American domination.

Besides, Vanderhaeghe is more concerned with the danger and violence stemming from the establishment of national identity than with the definition of Canadian national identity. As previously discussed, Chance's version of American identity is racist, colonialist, and imperialist. He insists upon what he believes to be the genuine American spirit, shamelessly appropriating Shorty's story to fit his own political agenda; he intends his film to perform assimilating effects on immigrants. For them to become Americans, their past must be deleted and their Americanness must be inscribed: 'Convert all those who can be converted — damn the rest!' (p. 241). His idea of conversion amounts to a process of repression, suppression and imposition. By dramatising Chance's ambition to create an American *Iliad*, the novel demonstrates how the construction of a unified national identity can do violence to those who cannot be co-opted into this enterprise.

The way Chance talks about the establishment of Americanness in immigrants — deleting and rewriting — indicates again the constructed nature of national identity. Vanderhaeghe further foregrounds it as a field of contestation by showing how national identity varies with

the person who is doing the construction. Chance's view of Americanness is countered by Rachel: 'But for myself, if I want a dose of the American spirit I'll go to Whitman, Twain, or Crane' (p. 176). Harry points out to her that 'Whitman is for the elite' (p. 176). Compared with Chance's film aimed at immigrants who cannot read English, Rachel's literary view seems too highbrow for Harry. Nevertheless, he does not deny Rachel's elitist view of national identity. He emphasizes its inaccessibility to the undereducated and to immigrants and thus celebrates Chance for his ambition to create a popular version. Their debate raises the question of whether national identity is located in popular culture or in highbrow literary tradition, and again confirms that the construction of national identity, like the writing of history, is a site of intense ideological struggles. Besides, the fact that the film mogul depends on money to produce a nationalist epic while the American Jew appeals to literature for the understanding of nationalist spirit also reminds the reader how knowledge and wealth can determine the construction of national identity.

As a generic hybrid, *The Englishman's Boy* incorporates the Western to subvert its ideological underpinnings, draws on the historical novel to examine the making of history in all its various manifestations, exposes the construction of national identity as a site of contestation in personal reminiscences, and retrieves the Indian presence from the margin of these generic traditions through a frame story of adventure. It accomplishes genre transgression and border-crossing, problematizes the authenticity produced by historical representation, and demonstrates, though negatively, that 'the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today.'⁶² Although most of the characters are American and Canada serves only as a geographical location for some of the actions to take place, the novel can be read allegorically in relation to Canada. By dramatizing Chance's mania for creating and reinforcing one particular national identity

⁶² Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p. 1516.

through the appropriation of history, the novel provides a cautionary tale about the danger and violence that will arise from the search for a unitary Canadian identity.

Chapter Two

Genre Transgression in *The Wars* and *Fugitive Pieces*

It may seem odd to place Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977) alongside Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), since at first glance there are few remarkable similarities between them. One presents the story of an English Canadian soldier on the European front during the First World War and the attempt of an anonymous researcher to unearth and reconstruct the soldier's past; the other dramatizes the traumatic experiences of two Jewish men of different generations in Europe and Canada during and after the Second World War. One has an impersonal third-person narrator narrating the soldier's story in the realist mode, and a nameless narrator reporting the progress of the research in the first-person narration; the other features a Holocaust refugee and a child of Holocaust survivors, who narrate in their respective memoirs the death, loss, suffering, and love they have been through and whose autobiographic accounts form a dialogue to show the after-effects of the historical calamity. Despite this apparent incompatibility, they do have something in common. In content, both set part of their stories in moments of crisis created by the two world wars and deal with war-related trauma by following the life stories of their protagonists. In presenting these fictional life stories, they call into question the concept of history as a metanarrative. In form, both engage in subverting genre conventions, laying bare their underlying assumptions. In their reconfigurations, the distinctions among history, biography, and autobiography are destabilized.

Yet the approaches taken by the novels are very different. Findley employs the biographic form for a soldier's story but creates the researcher's collection of information about him and investigation into related historical documents as a metafictional device to problematize the writing of biography and history. In *The Wars*, the boundary between biography and history is

blurred and the making of both is exposed. There are no unquestionable postmodern textual techniques in *Fugitive Pieces*, but Michaels undermines the generic conventions of biography through the two protagonists' respective critical reflections, foregrounding the mediating role of the biographical practitioner and shattering the myth of scientific detachment. More interestingly, the supposed autobiographical referentiality is dismantled through the juxtaposition of two first-person narratives and the invention of ghostwritten autobiography. The two novels, along with *The Englishman's Boy*, show how often the scepticism of contemporary Canadian historical fiction about history is related to genre transgression. Although *The Wars* predates the proliferation of such writing after 1980, I include it in this study to show that the tendency to challenge established discourses, either history or genre, began rather earlier and that contemporary historical fiction is not an abrupt departure from previous writing.

The play with genre should not obscure our view of the two novels' concern with issues that are Canada-specific. By dramatizing the mutiny of a Canadian soldier from an antiwar perspective, *The Wars* provides an alternative view to the nationalist understanding that the Great War plays a determining role in Canadian nation-building. By inserting the Native presence into the past of Toronto, *Fugitive Pieces* challenges the New World myth and the idea of Canada as a country without history. Through centring on two diasporic men's quest for belonging, it also deals with the immigration experience in Canada. In terms of genre and history, both novels are charged to varying degrees with the postmodern desire to subvert and deconstruct. Yet *Fugitive Pieces* pays a little more attention to the postcolonial condition of Canada than *The Wars* when it occasionally invokes the Native presence to disturb its diasporic subjects' perception of the Canadian landscape.

The Wars

Findley's fascination with the writing of history is exhibited in *The Wars* and *Famous Last Words* (1981). Integrating elements of factual history with the world of fiction, the two novels approach the issue of historical representation from a metahistorical perspective that allows for alternative visions of historical events and epistemological and ontological questioning of historiography. Hutcheon celebrates *Famous Last Words* as a classic example of historiographic metafiction because it exhibits an intense postmodern self-reflexivity while simultaneously remaining grounded in social, historical, and political realities.¹ As for *The Wars*, winner of the 1977 Governor General's Award, she mentions it as an illustration of how postmodern metafiction writers, with their self-conscious recourse to mimetic devices such as photography, cinema and tape-recording, resurrect reading as a dynamic and creative act that is essential in the production of meaning.² Whereas Hutcheon recognizes the novel's metafictionality, other commentators are more interested in its problematizing of historical practice through narrative strategies.³

The Wars consists of two stories: that of Robert Ross as a soldier during the First World War and that of a nameless researcher's efforts to unearth Robert's past from archives sixty years later. Findley's epistemological and ontological questioning of history goes hand in hand with a less overt attempt at genre transgression. One of the few commentators noticing the

¹ Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 13.

² Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, pp. 46-51. Elizabeth Seddon also argues that the textual structures of Findley's novels 'consciously anticipate the role of the reader' in the process of perceiving meanings. See Seddon, 'The Reader as Actor in the Novels of Timothy Findley', in *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, ed. and with an introduction by John Moss (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987), pp. 213-20 (p. 213).

³ Kuester, *Framing Truth*; Ronald Hatch, 'Narrative Development in the Canadian Historical Novel', *Canadian Literature*, 110 (1986), 79-96; Donna Palmateer Pennee, 'The Wars: Paradigms of Interpretation, or, The Ethics of Reading the Metafictional Text', in *Moral Metafiction: Counterdiscourse in the Novels of Timothy Findley* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991), pp. 38-60; David Williams, 'A Force of Interruption: The Photography of History in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*', *Canadian Literature*, 194 (2007), 54-73; Shane Rhodes, 'Buggering with History: Sexual Warfare and Historical Reconstruction in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*', *Canadian Literature*, 159 (1998), 38-53; Simone Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Storytelling: Narrative Strategies in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*', in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*, ed. Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985), pp. 11-39; Colavincenzo, "Trading Magic for Fact".

subversion of genre in *The Wars* is Bruce Pirie, who reads the novel as ‘a parody of romance.’⁴ One example of the play with romantic conventions is the theme of metamorphosis — the union of human and animal identities. Robert’s identification with the animal is seen in his killing of his superior officer, Captain Leather, in order to set free the horses from the barns under shelling. In romance, joining the world of animals indicates a regression of human identity, which Findley overturns by presenting Robert’s fellow-feeling with animals as ‘part of the human largeness and generosity’ and as a recognition of ‘one’s kinship with and duty towards all life, a recognition threatened by the “ethics” of war.’⁵ Pirie attempts to unearth ‘the beguiling shape of myth and legend’ behind the novel’s ‘elaborate realism’ which ‘seems to seduce the reader into accepting the authenticity of the account.’⁶ However, his reading of the novel as a parody of romance focuses on Robert’s experiences on the battlefield but completely overlooks the second strand of narrative, which disrupts the novel’s verisimilitude. The researcher striving to rebuild Robert’s life story is not mentioned in his analysis, nor is the way in which Findley interweaves the two narrative strands to reveal the ideological implications of documentary realism.

Evelyn Copley draws attention to the formal transformation Findley has achieved in the tradition of writing on the First World War, which presupposes that any commentary on war has to be based on firsthand experience.⁷ The privileging of experience in this war genre serves the claim to authenticity, creating the impression of the text as a direct reflection of reality. However, this immediacy is undermined in *The Wars*. With intertextual references, Findley invokes and breaks with this genre’s obsession with conveying facts, foregrounding

⁴ Bruce Pirie, ‘The Dragon in the Fog: “Displaced Mythology” in “The Wars”’, *Canadian Literature*, 91 (1981), 70-79 (p. 70).

⁵ Pirie, ‘The Dragon in the Fog’, p. 74.

⁶ Pirie, ‘The Dragon in the Fog’, p. 70.

⁷ Evelyn Copley, ‘Postmodernist War Fiction: Findley’s *The Wars*’, *Canadian Literature*, 147 (1995), 98-124 (p. 98).

the mediating process activated by an interpreting consciousness.⁸ Cobley celebrates this novel as ‘a highly skillful continuation and simultaneous subversion of the war genre.’⁹ Biography is another genre parodied. Vauthier mentions in passing that *The Wars* ‘pretends to be [. . .] a biography in the making.’¹⁰ Howells notes that it combines ‘the forms of fictive biography and historical novel’: biographical in depicting transforming moments of an individual, and historical in recording group consciousness in crisis situations.¹¹ In fact, it is through the combination of fictive biography and historical novel that Findley subverts the generic conventions of biography and exposes the underlying ideological assumptions about the writing of history in general.

If we take no account of the elaborate narrative structure of *The Wars*, the plot seems quite simple. In 1915, Robert Ross, a Toronto teenager growing up in a well-to-do but rather dysfunctional family, decides to enlist after the funeral of his hydrocephalic sister Rowena. He feels guilty at neglecting his duty to look after her and infuriated by his mother’s decision to kill Rowena’s beloved rabbits. In the training camp, Robert comes across Eugene Taffler, a senior soldier who has just recovered from wounds received at the front. During a visit to a whorehouse with fellow soldiers, Robert is shocked to witness Taffler engaging in sadomasochistic homosexual intercourse. On the voyage to Europe, he is appointed to care for the horses in the hold, replacing the ailing Harris. In a storm, one horse breaks its leg, and in putting it down, Robert injures his legs and breaks down. During the recovery, Robert

⁸ Cobley, ‘Postmodernist War Fiction’, pp. 99-100.

⁹ Cobley, ‘Postmodernist War Fiction’, p. 99. In contrast to Cobley’s stress on formal subversion, Diana Brydon is attracted by Findley’s attempt ‘to circumvent the established rhetoric of the genre, which determines what can and cannot be said’, contending that his challenge to the war genre lies in his fascination with articulating the unspeakable horrors of war. See Brydon, “‘It Could Not Be Told:’ Making Meaning in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 21: 1 (1986), 62-79 (p. 62).

¹⁰ Vauthier, ‘The Dubious Battle of Storytelling’, p. 15.

¹¹ Coral Ann Howells, “‘Tis Sixty Years Since”: Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* and Roger McDonald’s *1915*’, *World Literature Written in English*, 23: 1 (1984), 129-36 (pp. 130, 133). In a similar vein, Hutcheon describes this text as ‘a novel very much about the writing of history and biography’, placing emphasis on its self-awareness and self-reflexivity. See Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, pp. 210-11.

cultivates an intimate relationship with Harry and meets Taffler and his lover Lady Barbara d'Orsey.

In January, 1916, Robert finally arrives at the front, stationed in Flanders near the Belgium border and Ypres. By February, he has accumulated plenty of near-death experiences: he almost drowns in the dikes, escapes an air attack, suffers a gas attack immediately afterwards, and encounters a German sniper whom he kills in a moment of confusion. On leave in England, Robert encounters the newly crippled Taffler, who has tried to commit suicide. He has an affair with Lady Barbara and meets her twelve-year-old sister, Lady Juliet, who falls in love with him. Sent back to France, Robert is raped in the dark by his fellow soldiers in a bathhouse at Désolé. Robert survives an air attack while riding with an ammunition convoy to the front. When the stables at Battalion Signals are trapped in heavy bombardment, he disobeys Captain Leather to save the animals inside. But it is too late. All the animals are killed. The loss drives Robert to shoot Leather and desert the army. In his wanderings, Robert comes across an abandoned train with horses, which he sets free and leads to the abandoned barns at Bailleul. To drive him into the open, his captors set fire to the barn in which he and a great number of animals are trapped. Robert is badly burned and all the animals are destroyed. Held in the hospital at Bois de Madeleine, he refuses the offer of euthanasia from Marian Turner, the nurse looking after him. Eventually, he is returned to England to be court-martialled in absentia. Under the care of Lady Juliet, he survives another six years and dies in 1922.

Such a sequential recounting of the life and death of Robert Ross does little justice either to the experience of reading or to the narrative structure Findley designs for the novel. What matters is not the story itself but the way it is told. *The Wars* commences with a prologue and numbered sections and closes its five parts with an epilogue. This impression of neatness is



misleading in that the numerical order does not have a chronological narrative as a counterpart. The prologue fails to serve the purpose of supplying a framework or introductory information which helps establish the reader's expectations of what follows; nor do the first few numbered sections show any narrative progression or establish any cause and effect relationship with the prologue. As Laurie Ricou observes, the novel 'begins [. . .] four times, in four different ways' and the prologue is 'no prologue at all.'¹² The multiple beginnings increase readerly disorientation.

The prologue and the first sections build two narrative strands and set the pattern of how they relate within the novel. The two strands are connected through their common focus on Robert but separated from each other in time and space. The prologue introduces Robert in a scene given out of context, but subsequently his story, narrated impersonally after section 4, obeys chronology. This narrative strand is mainly set in 1915-16. The first three sections present the second strand, set about sixty years later, in which an I-narrator addresses a researcher as 'you', describing the difficulties encountered by the latter in the search for Robert's past. Both remain anonymous throughout the novel. What makes this narrator intriguing is that when narrating what the you-researcher is doing in the archives, the I-narrator repeatedly makes comments on the photographic documents and inserts Marian Turner's firsthand account of Robert. She and Lady Juliet are the only witnesses willing to talk about him, and the transcripts of their taped interviews become one of the I-narrator's primary documentary sources. The narrative pattern established here in Part One will be repeated until the end of the novel. Why does Findley interweave the two strands in such a complicated, non-chronological way? Why does he create this unusual anonymous narrator so eager to

¹² Laurie Ricou, 'Obscured by Violence: Timothy Findley's *The Wars*', in *Violence in the Canadian Novel since 1960*, ed., Terry Goldie and Virginia Harger-Grinling (St. John's: Memorial University, 1981), pp. 125-37 (pp. 129, 134). Vauthier also notices the multiplicity of beginnings. See Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Storytelling', p. 31.

report the actions of a you-researcher and to interpret the archives?

According to Vauthier, the two narrative strands are told by different narrators (an I-narrator who is also a historian, and an impersonal third-person narrator), and their coexistence limits the authority of each.¹³ Davey, in contrast, argues that the novel offers the story of an unidentified narrator's search into the history of Robert and the narrator's hypothetical reconstruction of that history and that the impersonal narration in the latter 'can be read as a second narrative voice of the I-narrator.'¹⁴ Such a reading establishes a clear connection between the two stories, but Davey does not explain why this narrator chooses to speak in two different voices in the same textual space. This nameless I-narrator compounds the difficulty of analysing the narrative voice through his use of the ambiguous 'you' in the first-person narration.¹⁵ Who is this 'you' he keeps addressing? John F. Hulcoop suggests that the pronoun 'you' can be understood as addressing either the reader or another researcher engaged in the same process.¹⁶ Vauthier acknowledges the ambiguity as well but insists on differentiating the I-narrator from the anonymous researcher, whom he addresses as 'you' so that the former is doubly removed from the object of his investigation.¹⁷ Brydon, however, identifies the I-narrator as the researcher and the use of 'you' as an attempt to bridge the gap between reader and writer and to invite the reader's active participation in making sense of

¹³ Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Storytelling', pp. 16-17 & 25-26. Pennee holds a similar opinion, calling the two narrators the principal narrator and the research-narrator. See Pennee, 'The Wars', pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ Davey, *Post-National Arguments*, p. 115.

¹⁵ I prefer to see the two narrative voices as male, and the reason will be given later in my discussion. Dagmar Krause notes that the narrator's gender has puzzled critics: Catherine Hunter and Joseph Pesch believe the narrator to be male while Pennee insists on a female voice; others claim the narrator's gender is not revealed. See Krause, *Timothy Findley's Novels between Ethics and Postmodernism* (Wurzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 205), p. 48. A rather extraordinary interpretation about this gender issue is proposed by Shane Rhodes, who takes into consideration the fact of Findley as a gay male writer and comes to the conclusion that the author creates 'an almost genderless and unknowable researcher' in order 'to erase the gay from his gay historiography'. See Rhodes, 'Bugging with History', p. 48.

¹⁶ John F. Hulcoop, "'Look! Listen! Mark My Words!'" Paying Attention to Timothy Findley's Fictions', *Canadian Literature*, 91 (1981), 22-47 (p. 33).

¹⁷ Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Storytelling', pp. 16-17.

the story's events.¹⁸ Davey proposes a similar reading, seeing 'you' as 'a familiar replacement for "we"' and its use as the I-narrator's endeavour to invite the reader to share his own research position.¹⁹ Whether the I-narrator aims to seek cooperation or win recognition from the reader through the use of 'you', or whether the 'you' and the I-narrator can be seen as one and the same, this narrative device must be considered in relation to the whole textual structure, especially the shift between two modes of narration.

In regarding the two stories as told by different narrators and the 'you' as a researcher other than the I-narrator, Vauthier multiplies the narrative layers in *The Wars* but leaves the connection between the three unexplored. Davey identifies the first-person and third-person narrative voices as spoken by one narrator, who is also the researcher addressed as 'you', but fails to take account of Findley's motivation for deliberately splitting the text into two narratives and creating a 'you' for the I-narrator to speak to. For him, these narrative layers produce 'little effect on the text overall.'²⁰ Although Davey's reductive reading of the otherwise densely layered texture remains questionable, his suggestion of one narrator with two narrative voices provides clues as to why Findley juxtaposes two storylines and has the I-narrator keep addressing the you-researcher. Taking a position between Vauthier and Davey, I would argue that in *The Wars* there is only one narrator recounting two stories from different perspectives.

Davey does not explain what tempts him to regard the impersonal narration as the second voice of the I-narrator, but textual evidence can be found to support this reading. There are several moments when the distinction between the impersonal narration and the first-person

¹⁸ Diana Brydon, "'A Devotion to Fragility': Timothy Findley's *The Wars*", *World Literature Written in English*, 26: 1 (1986), 75-84 (p. 68).

¹⁹ Davey, *Post-National Arguments*, p. 115.

²⁰ Davey, *Post-National Arguments*, p. 116.

narration tends to be uncertain and even blurred. For example, when trying to pick Robert out in one of the photographs, the I-narrator shifts focus from Robert's posture and appearance to his inner thoughts:

A Band is assembled on the Band Shell — red coats and white gloves. They serenade the crowd with 'Soldiers of the Queen.' You turn them over — wondering if they'll spill — and you read on the back in the faintest ink in a feminine hand: '*Robert.*' But where? You look again and all you see is the crowd. [. . .] Then you see him: Robert Ross. Standing on the sidelines with pocketed hands — feet apart and narrowed eyes. His hair falls sideways across his forehead. He wears a checkered cap and dark blue suit. He watches with a dubious expression; half admiring — half reluctant to admire. He's old enough to go to war. He hasn't gone. He doubts the validity in all this martialling of men but the doubt is inarticulate. It stammers in his brain. He puts his hand out sideways: turns. He reaches for the wicker back of a wheel chair. 'Come on, Rowena. There's still the rest of the park to sit in.'²¹

How can the I-narrator know Robert's inarticulate scepticism about the martialling? Moreover, the last two sentences depicting his act of pushing Rowena's wheelchair cannot be part of the static photograph. Here, despite the consistent use of present tense (tense is another way to distinguish the two modes of narration: the I-narrator uses present tense while the impersonal narration is presented in past tense), the narrative voice slips from the first-person narration into an omniscient point of view that can be identified with the voice in the impersonal narration. This description also indicates the narrator's tendency towards emplotment and hence the practice of imagination in decoding documentary sources. He

²¹ Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 6. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

creates a dynamic narrative for a frozen image, speculating on the actions happening in the photograph rather than providing an inventory of its content. Sometimes, the direction of slipping in the voice is reversed:

All through the prairie autumn Robert's parents showered him — almost perversely — with scarves and socks and mittens [. . .]. They also sent him food. [. . .] Robert also wrote to his father, saying he would like an automatic pistol. [. . .]

Lest Robert's having to ask for his own side arms make no sense to those of you who weren't around or haven't read this part of history, it should be pointed out that this was a 'people's army' — not an army of professionals. Officers provided their own uniforms and sometimes even their own horses if they so desired. [. . .] At any rate — many telegrams and letters were passed back and forth about this pistol. (p. 33)

A change in the narrative voice is discernible between the two paragraphs, especially the first sentence in the second one, which with its present tense sounds more like one of the I-narrator's utterances. Here, there is no doubt about the use of 'you'; the narrator speaks directly to the reader, not the unnamed researcher, explaining the nature of the army that Robert has joined. It is both an insertion into the flow of the omniscient narrative and a gesture foregrounding the temporal gap between the act of narrating and what is being narrated. Sometimes the direction of the slipping is difficult to determine, prompting more speculation about whose voice is speaking. In the scene of Rowena's funeral, the third-person narrator switches his tone in a bracketed statement:

Peggy's current beau was in uniform. He stood at attention. Robert envied him because he could go away when this was over and surround himself with space. (It was then,

perhaps, the first inkling came that it was time for Robert to join the army. But he didn't think it consciously.) All he knew was that his hands felt empty. In his mind, they kept reaching out for the back of Rowena's chair. (p. 18)

The omniscient point of view showing confidence in Robert's inner feelings gives way to a hesitant voice making a guess at Robert's motivation for enlisting, but then the voice reassumes certainty, assuring the reader that Robert has not come to realize his yearning for escape. It seems that here the I-narrator and the impersonal narrator have merged into one voice. After the bracketed sentences, the narration becomes impersonal again. Section 12 of Part Five provides another illustration of this ambiguity in the narrative voice:

Here is where the mythology is muddled. There are stories of immediate pursuit. But these are doubtful. Some versions have it that Robert rode through La Chodrelle at a gallop [. . .]. Far more likely is the version that describes the horses making a detour out around the woods [. . .].

At any rate, what happened was that Major Mickle went himself immediately to his signals office at La Chodrelle and sent word back to Bailleul that an officer of the C.F.A. had shot and killed one of his men and had then made off with a great many horses in the direction of Magdalene Wood.

It took some time, due to the confusion at Bailleul, to discover that the horses were indeed missing and that no authority had been given anyone to remove them [. . .]. Once this was established — Mickle was commissioned to give pursuit to the renegade horse thief and, within about four hours of Robert shooting Private Cassles, Major Mickle and forty men had taken after him on foot. (pp. 209-10)

The I-narrator begins by claiming to be evaluating the plausibility of the various versions of what happens after Robert runs away. Then with the tense changing from present to past, the narrator reports with assurance the actions taken by the army to handle Robert's case. The last paragraph quoted above can be read either as the I-narrator's re-establishment of this part of history or as the third-person narrator's recounting of one episode in Robert's life.²² The blurring between two voices in these moments suggests that the two stories are recounted by one and the same narrator. But why does Findley's narrator speak in two different voices? Does not shifting between modes of narration usually generate disorientation, let alone increasing difficulty of reading and understanding? What does the juxtaposition of two narrative strands aim to convey or achieve?

To answer these questions, it needs to be noted first that considering the episodes respectively recounted, the two narratives exist side by side not to contradict but to complement each other.²³ A careful comparison between them shows that it is exactly through their juxtaposition that a relatively complete version of Robert's story can be re-established, although the way they interweave chops the larger text into fragments that require considerable effort from the reader to piece them together. Many parts of the I-narrator's narrative, especially the descriptions of photographs and interview transcripts, help to bridge the gaps left in the impersonal narration, which in turn provides the framework for the fragments of the first-person narration to fit in.

In Part Two, Sections 10 and 12 cooperate to tell what happen between Robert, Harris, Taffler,

²² Vauthier also analyses the ambiguity in this section, noting that the last two paragraphs shift back to the third-person narration while the rest has grammatical marks of the I. See Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Storytelling', p. 18.

²³ Vauthier argues that the two narratives 'dovetail and overlap without inconsistency'. See Vauthier, 'The Dubious Battle of Storytelling', p. 22. But some trivial inconsistencies do exist. I will return to this point later.

and Lady Barbara at the Royal Free Hospital. Section 10, narrated mainly by the impersonal narrator, begins by describing the house in Kent where the injured Robert and the critically ill Harris spend their first week in England. This opening is chronologically connected to the end of Section 28 of Part One, where their voyage across the Atlantic stops and they are both carried away in stretchers. The impersonal narrator continues to explain why Robert takes his embarkation leave in London — to keep Harris company in the hospital and to obtain a Webley automatic his father has tried to procure for him. At this moment, the narrative voice modulates into the first-person narration, admitting the lack of some information: ‘The dates are obscure here — but it must have been mid-January, 1916 since Robert’s tour of duty began on the 24th of that month’ (p. 102). Then the voice changes back to an omniscient perspective, narrating Robert’s interaction with Harris and his first encounter with Lady Barbara. The transcript of the first interview with Lady Juliet constitutes Section 12, in which she recalls what Robert has said about Harris. With the episode in the hospital overlapping but not entirely the same, she brings the interview to an end with how Harris’s body is cremated by mistake and how the grieved Robert, with Taffler and Barbara, takes his ashes to Greenwich and scatters them on the river.

In the third-person narrative, where the events of Robert’s life are presented according to a more straightforward chronology, the detached voice pretends to assume an omniscient point of view and have access to all positions of focalization, with that of Robert privileged. This narrative exhibits traditional realist conventions. By contrast, the first-person narrative is far more disjointed. Its intimate voice reports the activities of the you-researcher, gives detailed descriptions of photographs, explains the background of the eyewitnesses, inserts sections of interview transcripts, provides information about the Great War, and makes comments on the research process. The intimacy creates a sense of immediacy. In content, the two modes of narration, despite some overlapping, constitute a complementary relationship, each providing

pieces of information that can be rearranged to fill in the blanks in the other. They work together to present a relatively comprehensive version of Robert's story. However, a tension arises from their formal juxtaposition, threatening the reliability of Robert's story. The mimetic model and the sense of immediacy fail in the reconfirmation of actuality. How do they develop a relationship that is simultaneously supplementary and undermining?

At first glance, it is the first-person narrative that at the outset strives to establish the authenticity of the impersonal narrative. After the prologue, the I-narrator opens his narration with 'All of this happened a long time ago. But not so long ago that everyone who played a part in it is dead. Some can still be met in dark old rooms with nurses in attendance' (p. 3). A number of witnesses survive; despite their refusal to talk about Robert, they confirm that he exists. The unavailability of firsthand accounts forces the anonymous researcher to turn to archives: 'In the end, the only facts you have are public' (p. 3).

It comes as no surprise that the researcher begins at the archives with photographs, a documentary form believed to reflect reality and therefore verifying again the existence of Robert. The introduction of Marian Turner, who 'remembers Robert vividly' (p. 9), and the insertion of her interview transcript serve the same purpose. Photographs and eyewitness accounts are used as incontrovertible documentary evidence to guarantee authenticity.²⁴ The insertion of Marian's interview at such an early stage performs another specific function — to justify the narrator's research into the life of an ordinary soldier, whose rebellion is described by Marian as '*un homme unique*' because 'he did the thing that no one else would even dare to think of doing' (p. 10). Paradoxically, the strategies used to reinforce a sense of reality betray the problems with the I-narrator's method of dealing with his material, undermining the authenticating effect the first-person narrative strains to produce for the third-person

²⁴ Cobley, 'Postmodernist War Fiction', p. 108.

narrative. The refusal of the surviving witnesses to talk about Robert proves the difficulty of collecting firsthand accounts, which suggests the deficiency of primary sources. The narrator even reveals that some of the archives are in danger of disintegration while those not included in them have been forever lost: 'As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you'll never find. This is what you have' (p. 4). Nevertheless, the shortage and fragmentariness of primary sources cannot thwart his determination to search for Robert, thanks to his faith that 'the corner of a picture will reveal the whole' and that 'a whole age lies in [these] fragments' (p. 3).

Photographs, whose authority originates from the presumption of veracity and immediacy, are perfect documentary evidence used to support factuality. For the I-narrator, they are miniatures of reality, mirroring an age and its historical transition. When poring over the snapshots of 1915, he comments on the changes in women: in one photograph, they 'still maintain a public reticence' (p. 4) but in another they 'abandon all their former reticence and rush out into the roadway, throwing flowers and waving flags' (p. 5). He pays close attention to the attire: 'Here for the first time, the old Edwardian elegance falters. Style is neither this nor that — unless you could say it was apologetic' (p. 4). His comments suggest that the viewer must own knowledge about one age and its change so as to be able to identify them in pictures. Therefore, it is not that photography provides knowledge but that it 'activates an already existing stock of knowledge.'²⁵ In other words, how pictures can make sense depends on the viewer rather than the images presented. What if photographs contain something the viewer has no knowledge of at all? Oddly, the point is exemplified by the I-narrator's response to a photograph of the Atlantic, in which there is a small white dot on the far horizon and above the dot one of the Rosses writes 'WHAT IS THIS?' (p. 8). The narrator reflects: 'All too clearly, the small white dot is an iceberg. Why whoever took the

²⁵ Cobley, 'Postmodernist War Fiction', p. 109.

picture failed to verify this fact remains a mystery' (p. 8). This 'mystery' shows that if the viewer has no existing knowledge to activate, the photographed image fails to make sense. However, what if the knowledge is wrong? How can the I-narrator be so certain that the white dot is an iceberg when he is not a witness?²⁶ The way the I-narrator interprets the photographic images raises questions about their nature, in particular their authenticating value.

Sometimes background knowledge enables the viewer to see photographed images differently. Speaking of the photograph of Barbara, Lady Juliet reveals to the nameless interviewer something different from public impression: 'You can see the sceptical eyes and the strange perpetual smile. I'll tell you a secret about that smile. It wasn't a smile at all. It was a nervous dimple on her left side' (p. 111). This example also suggests that photographs are susceptible to multiple readings and misinterpretation. Another instance shows how background knowledge allows the viewer to realize what is hidden from the photograph:

Thomas Ross and Family stand beside a new Ford Truck. [. . .] This picture will appear in the *Toronto Mail and Empire* [. . .]. The 'family' consists of Mister and Mrs Ross and three of their children: Robert, Peggy and Stuart. Rowena, the eldest, is not shown. She is never in photographs that are apt to be seen by the public. (p. 6)

The word family needs to be put in quotation marks because the I-narrator knows what has been excluded from the photograph. The absence of Rowena gestures to the problem of the framing and selectivity of photography, yet it does not shake the narrator's trust in photography as a perfect medium for capturing reality.

²⁶ As Cobley notes, 'what guarantee does the reader of *The Wars* have that the researcher's identification of this "fact" is accurate?' See Cobley, 'Postmodernist War Fiction', p. 113.

However, the I-narrator's reliance on photographs for factual accuracy is often disrupted by his tendency to make up stories for them:

He is wearing his uniform. Nothing is yet broken down. Every stitch is stiff as starch. The boots are new — the latest gift from his father. He carries a riding crop made of Algerian leather. [. . .] He is posed in mind and body. Only his left hand disobeys his will. Its fingers curl to make a fist.

Dead men are serious — that's what this photography is striving to say. Survival is precluded. Death is romantic — got from silent images. I lived — was young — and died. But not real death, of course, because I'm standing here alive with all these lights that shine so brightly in my eyes. Oh — I can tell you, sort of, what it might be like to die. [. . .] At most, the hero sighs his way to death while linen handkerchiefs are held against his wounds. His wounds are poems. [. . .] Medals — (there are none just yet, as you can see) — will sit beside this frame in little boxes made of leather lined with satin. I will have the Military Cross. *He died for King and Country* — fighting the war to end all wars. (pp. 48-49)

The description shifts from identifying the items in the picture to speculating about Robert's left fist as a signal of disobedience. The narrator even appropriates Robert's voice, declaring he dies for patriotism, a declaration denied later in the novel. Again, the I-narrator demonstrates his power to conjure up an active plot for a static photograph. This exemplifies Sontag's critical concept that photographs 'cannot themselves explain anything' but 'are

inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.²⁷ Obviously, despite the ability to freeze images, photographs fail to fix their own meaning.

In Section 3 of Part One, an image of Robert ‘*riding straight towards the camera*’ (p. 5) is inserted into the description of the photographs, and on it the narrator comments, ‘*You lay the fiery image back in your mind and let it rest. You know it will obtrude again and again until you find its meaning — here*’ (p. 6). It is placed at the point when the focus shifts from public snapshots of 1915 to those of the Ross family. Hulcoop suggests the adverb ‘*here*’ may refer specifically to this ‘*fiery image*’, which he identifies as ‘an *imaginary* photography’ since ‘no photographer is present to take pictures when Robert breaks out of the fired barn.’²⁸ York considers this image to ‘provide a living link between the researcher and the distant and mysterious world of the public photographs’ and believes ‘*here*’ refers to the next object in the archive the narrator is about to describe: a picture of Robert standing on the sidelines, watching a band play ‘Soldiers of the Queen.’²⁹ Yet it is more likely that the researcher-narrator takes this fiery image as standing for the essence of Robert’s life which he has striven to capture and that ‘*here*’ refers not just to a single picture as York has suggested but to all those private photographs in the archive, among which the I-narrator believes he can discover the true Robert and unravel the mystery of his mutiny.

Little agreement has been achieved in respect of the use of photography in *The Wars*.³⁰ This

²⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin: London, 1979), p. 23.

²⁸ Hulcoop, ““Look! Listen! Mark My Words!””, p. 33.

²⁹ Lorraine M. York, “*The Other Side of Dailiness*”: *Photography in the Works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Atwood* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1988), p. 82.

³⁰ From a postmodern perspective, Cobley contends that the researcher’s verbal representation of photographed images launches a process of substitutions, not only subverting the authenticity photography is meant to guarantee but also foregrounding ‘the slippery ground on which all meaning is produced’. Her reading echoes Sontag’s characterization of the photograph as ‘a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’. This is exactly the paradoxical nature of photography. Nonetheless, David Williams rejects this Derridean notion of slippery signification, arguing instead that in *The Wars* photography disrupts the traditional notions of cyclical or linear temporality by immobilizing or arresting historical moments and in seizing a historical moment, it tears the image from its context, creating a tension between distance and proximity in which the viewer can develop its

may stem from the fact that little distinction is made between how the I-narrator treats photographic images and how Findley presents their treatment by the I-narrator. Confusing these two layers allows Findley's critical reflection to pass unnoticed. The I-narrator trusts photography's capacity to fix the past. This confidence is undermined by the way he deals with them. Findley problematizes the nature of photography through the I-narrator's act of interpreting, in particular his dynamic emplotment of static images.

Eyewitness accounts are similarly employed to guarantee authenticity. To reinforce their factuality, the I-narrator depicts in detail how the you-researcher travels to Lady Juliet's home at 'number 15, Wilton Place — the St Aubyns' London address since 1743' (p. 108), and into the interview transcripts are inserted descriptions in brackets of what happens during the tape recording, such as 'PAUSE', 'LAUGHTER', 'MISS TURNER TURNED TO LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW AT THIS POINT. THERE IS QUITE A LONG PAUSE ON THE TAPE' (p. 10). It is an attempt to place the interviews in concrete context and to show they are given in their full forms. The I-narrator presents them as if they were live shows. However, like the photographs, these firsthand accounts betray the faults that call their reliability into question. One problem is the uncertainty of memory, as shown in Marian Turner recalling Robert after sixty years: 'my impression was of someone extremely well made who cared about his body. At least that's my memory of it — the way it was. You get them all mixed up, after so long a time' (p. 9). Transcription of these oral accounts does not amount to accurate duplication: 'There is an aspect of this interview which, alas, cannot survive transition onto paper — and that is the sound of Lady Juliet's voice' (p. 157).

historical significance. For York, photography, due to its ability to fix historical moments, is 'a type of surrogate memory', a requisite for preserving 'life-sustaining acts of courage such as Robert Ross's desertion' in a violent world. She affirms the photograph's capability to capture reality. See Cobley, 'Postmodernist War Fiction', pp. 112-13; Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 16; Williams, 'A Force of Interruption', p. 60; York, "*The Other Side of Dailiness*", p. 85.

The problems of selectivity and judgment are highlighted in Lady Juliet's second tape transcript. She emphasizes at the outset her role as an onlooker recording her observations of the events occurring sixty years ago and tells the researcher to treat her diaries as a source of information: *'I never took part, you see. Not ever, I was a born observer. [. . .] These diaries will tell you what you want to know, I think. But I warn you — I was ears and eyes and that was all'* (pp. 162-63). She reiterates her detachment in saying *'The conclusions are for you to make'*, but not everything put down in the diaries can be shared: *'I won't read everything'* (p. 163). When it comes to the physical aspect of Robert's affair with Barbara, Lady Juliet becomes very uneasy, stating that for fear of violating privacy she has determined what will be told and not told: *'I will tell you this and then one other thing and that is all'* (p. 175). Her role as an uninvolved observer is undermined when she admits to falling in love with Robert and feeling hurt at the sight of him with Barbara. Moreover, Lady Juliet in her seventies likes to insert her comments on Robert's behaviour during the interview. The most daring judgment is the twice-repeated claim that Robert's feeling for Harris is love: *'I think that Robert was in love with Harris'* (p. 113); *'Robert, though he never said so, loved Harris'* (p. 114). Her conclusion leads the I-narrator to describe Robert as being confused by his feelings for Harris in his impersonal narrative: *'The thing was — no one since Rowena had made Robert feel he wanted to be with them all the time. If what he felt could be reduced to an understanding — that was it'* (p. 104). The reduction in intensity — from Lady Juliet's speculation about Robert's love to his desire to be together — suggests the narrator has filtered out what he finds inappropriate in his primary sources.

Marian Turner also attempts to leave out something in her interview:

MISS TURNER IS ASKED IF SHE EVER CONVERSED WITH ROBERT ROSS.
THERE IS A PAUSE ON THE TAPE — AND THEN BESSIE TURNER IS HEARD

SAYING FROM ACROSS THE ROOM: ‘*Why don’t you tell him, Mernie? Why don’t you say it and get it off your chest?*’ (p. 215) ³¹

The secret Marian needs to confess is her offer of euthanasia to Robert, an offer arising from her desperation and guilt when more and more wounded soldiers are brought in the hospital and she sees no hope for the end of the war: ‘that night, I thought: *I am ashamed to be alive. I am ashamed of life.* And I wanted to offer some way out of life — I wanted grace for Robert Ross’ (p. 215). She is deeply moved by Robert’s reply ‘Not yet’, in which she finds ‘the essence of Robert Ross’ and which has become her motto ever since (p. 216). Having looked after Robert, both Marian and Juliet display strong personal involvement, which helps enhance the authority and authenticity of their firsthand experiences, but their attempt to leave out certain information cannot help but cast some doubt on their reliability.

Besides, the sentence ‘MISS TURNER IS ASKED IF SHE EVER CONVERSED WITH ROBERT ROSS’ raises a critical question as to the nature of the interviews. Marian is asked a question but by whom? Given the circumstances, it is the interviewer, the anonymous you-researcher, who puts the question, but this too logical answer alerts us to the unusual part of the interview transcripts: they appear more like monologues than interactions between interviewee and interviewer. The interviewer is muted and his presence is reduced to such a degree that in the transcripts he is nowhere to be found except in a few of the bracketed asides, such as ‘(YOU CHANGE TAPES)’ (p. 117). It is as if the interviewer were only an extension of the tape recorder instead of a persistent and curious researcher trying to unearth Robert’s past. This seemingly uninvolved role forms a stark contrast with the I-narrator creating dynamic narratives for static photographs. In one sense, this can be seen as an effort on the part of the researcher to remain detached from his sources and transfer authority to the

³¹ In this excerpt lies the only clue to the researcher’s gender as male: ‘*tell him.*’

witnesses, but this effort to efface interference from the researcher-interviewer is so deliberate as to arouse suspicion about the role he plays in interviews. Why does he leave out the questions when trying to solicit information from the witnesses?

The effort to report the interviews as they are in process contrasts with the I-narrator's appropriation of the transcripts. The two transcripts of Lady Juliet's interviews are arranged according to the time of tape recording, but the I-narrator chops that of Marian Turner's into three fragments to achieve his ends. The first fragment, in which Marian recognizes Robert as a hero, is used to authenticate his existence and to justify the research. The second one, placed after Robert's journey from the prairie back to Kingston, is a tiny extract with her comment on the after-effects of the war: 'It was the war that changed all that. It was. After the Great War for Civilization — sleep was different everywhere' (p. 46). Her sense of alienation echoes Robert's estrangement from the city of his birth: 'Where, in this dark, was the world he'd known?' (p. 45). Inserted between Robert's arrest and his return to England, the third fragment serves to fill in a gap in the impersonal narration, recounting the episode in the *Bois de Madeleine* hospital. The fragmentation of Marian Turner's interview transcript exposes the narrator's manipulative methods.

The resort to documentary sources in the first-person narrative generates paradoxical effects that result in a tension with the impersonal narrative. On the one hand, the accumulation of photographic archives and eyewitness accounts, as well as the inclusion of historical figures like Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, aim to reinforce a sense of factuality and to guarantee the reliability of Robert's story in the impersonal narration. On the other hand, authenticity is simultaneously undermined in that the way they are collected and treated by the I-narrator betrays their shortcomings as documentary evidence. Photographic records, seen as miniatures of reality, are in fact subject to speculation and interpretation, with no

single meaning guaranteed. The framing of any photograph suggests it 'must always hide more than it discloses', exposing the problems of exclusion and manipulation.³² What eyewitness accounts convey is subjective experience, as a result of judgment, interpretation and filtration, and as shown in Juliet and Marian, informants are likely to leave out certain things because of personal considerations. Moreover, with the I-narrator addressing the you-researcher, presenting archival material and reporting the ongoing research, the first-person narrative shatters the immediacy generated in the impersonal narrative, exposing the existence of an interpreting consciousness, which selects and arranges the details to reconstruct the past.³³

Speaking in two voices, Findley's narrator is a historian in a dilemma. On the one hand, he has become self-conscious about the constructed nature of history-writing, therefore foregrounding in the first-person narrative the interpreting consciousness and mediating process. He is the researcher addressed by himself as 'you'; in so doing he doubly removes himself from his subject, highlights temporal gaps between historical events, the act of constructing them, and their constructions, and historicizes his own position. By showing difficulty in collecting primary sources and uncertainty about certain events, he also admits his limitations. On the other hand, his faith in traditional historiography still lingers, limiting the extent of his self-consciousness. Despite the awareness of the constructedness of history-writing, he depends on photographs, eyewitness accounts, and other forms of documentation for authority and authentication without recognizing the fact that they are already products of mediation. He believes truth about the past can be 'discovered' among primary sources, in particular among photographs with their apparent objectivity and verisimilitude. His impersonal narrative demonstrates a persistent demand for a coherent

³² Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.

³³ Cobley, 'Postmodernist War Fiction' p. 104.

vision of historic events as a premise of meaning production in history-writing. Emplotment is still a requisite, and intransigent material must be shaped into a sensible order of narrative. He is a historian caught between modernist and postmodernist impulses, with the latter gaining the upper hand.

Kuester classifies Findley as a modernist ‘because, even if he cannot help living in a postmodern world, Findley still strives for a coherent universe and a coherent cosmology.’³⁴ This evaluation seems more applicable to his anonymous narrator. Even if the two narratives in *The Wars* complement each other to form a rather complete version of a lost past, it does not mean Findley desires a coherent vision of history. They in fact interweave in a way to interrupt and undermine each other. Cobley considers Findley to struggle between ‘a nostalgic yearning for certainty and order’, and ‘postmodern imperatives to counteract this nostalgia.’³⁵ But the ending of the novel demonstrates its preference for postmodern imperatives. The epilogue does not end with Robert’s death in the impersonal narration but shifts to the first-person narration, with the I-narrator contemplating another picture of Robert seated on a keg, holding a skull of some small beast, and describing the you-researcher’s glance at a photograph of ‘*Robert and Rowena with Meg*’ (p. 218). The you-researcher cannot determine the meaning of the first photograph: ‘You put this picture aside because it seems important’ (p. 218). With some material still awaiting exploration, the research has not been completed. The ending implies the version of the past just presented is provisional, subject to change. No certainty or ultimate truth of history is guaranteed.

The postmodern impulse to problematize historiography is interwoven with a challenge to the accepted significance of the Great War in Canadian history. This challenge is underestimated

³⁴ Kuester, *Framing Truths*, pp. 94-95.

³⁵ Cobley, ‘Postmodernist War Fiction’ p. 121.

by critics. According to Howells, Robert's forms of disobedience are redefined by Findley as 'signs of the heroic ability of human beings to resist and to survive.'³⁶ His mutiny, a punishable transgression in official judgment, turns into a story of moral heroism that affirms universal humanist values and 'goes beyond nationalism.'³⁷ Duffy, likewise, remarks that Findley pays scarce attention to the role of the Great War in Canadian nationalism.³⁸ Tom Hastings even contends that, considering the few Canadian references but frequent British references to the war in *The Wars*, 'its affinities — both chronological and ideological — lie with the sentiments of the British War Poets of the Great War years.'³⁹ However, the Canadian nationalist depiction of the Great War is not simply left out, as these critics suggest; Findley seeks to keep a distance from this myth, if not to dismantle it, through the antiwar propensities and historical setting of Robert's story.

The past the anonymous researcher reconstructs for a court-martialled and officially disgraced soldier like Robert offers a counter discourse to official history, retrieving muted dissenting voices. Robert enlists not out of patriotic sentiments but out of the longing to elude his family. Militarism is called into question and the absurdity of the war is exposed through the questioning of compulsory obedience, which is articulated by Robert's fellow soldier, Bates:

Bates [. . .] looked at Robert. Here was an unknown quantity — a child in breeches with a blue scarf wound around his neck whose job it was to get them out and back alive. This — to Bates — was the greatest terror of war: what you didn't know of the men who told you want to do — where to go and when. What if they were mad — or stupid?

³⁶ Howells, "'Tis Sixty Years Since", p. 133.

³⁷ Howells, "'Tis Sixty Years Since", p. 134.

³⁸ Duffy, *Sounding the Iceberg*, p. 65.

³⁹ Tom Hastings, "'Their Fathers Did It to Them": Findley's Appeal to the Great War Myth of a Generational Conflict in *The Wars*', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 64 (1998), 85-103 (pp. 96-97).

What if their fear was greater than yours? (p. 133)

His doubt and fear foreground military leadership as determined by chance instead of competence. A gas attack makes his deepest fear come true: 'He was quite convinced that Robert had lost his reason — but you have to obey a man with a gun — mad or sane. Here was the terror' (p. 139). This is when Robert orders him and other soldiers in the trench to piss on pieces of cloth torn from shirts and use them to cover their faces. Robert's eccentric command turns out to be a life-saving decision, but he does go mad sometimes: he fights with a comrade in confusion over who is in command of the guns when there are none.

The battle scenes in Part Three, where the narrative moves at a sluggish pace to show the agonizing slowness of time and psychological stress under siege, also comprise plenty of crazed acts. Some soldiers burn rats and mice alive; failing to stop them and even forced to watch their killing of a cat, Rodwell, Robert's fellow soldier, kills himself. War blurs the distinction between sanity and insanity. Robert's final act to save horses and to shoot his superior, seen as crazy rebellion in official history, is a desperate attempt to avoid senseless sacrifice and represents his personal resistance to the madness entailed by the machinery of war. By depicting the brutalization of men and the massive destruction in war, *The Wars* demonstrates its refusal to romanticize the Great War, allowing Eric Thompson to place it in the antiwar literary tradition inaugurated by Peregrine Acland and Charles Yale Harrison and developed by Philip Child, a tradition different from the 'clichéd romances by authors more interested in jingoistic patriotism.'⁴⁰

The antiwar tendency is reinforced by Robert's absence from Canada's greatest military moments of the First World War: the successful defence of Ypres in 1915, the Battle of the

⁴⁰ Eric Thompson, 'Canadian Fiction of the Great War', *Canadian Literature*, 91 (1981), 81-96 (pp. 92, 84).

Somme in 1916, or the capture of Vimy Ridge in 1917. The Great War has become a national myth that marks the evolution of Canada from colony to nation, and the death and destruction it caused was accepted as a tragic expense to be paid on the road to sovereignty.⁴¹ As Morton and Granatstein put it,

Even though Canadians fought as allies of the British, for Canada the Great War was a war of independence. By 1918, the self-governing colony that had trusted its fate to British statecraft was not only committed to speaking with its own voice in the world, it had won on the battlefield the right to be heard.⁴²

By removing Robert from the historical victories on the European battlefield, Findley refuses to participate in the myth-making of the war as a key moment in the establishment of Canadian nationhood and instead presents a historical moment seen from the bottom up. When Lady Barbara speaks of General Wolfe winning ‘*your country for us*’, which suggests her imperialist superiority, Robert’s reply is a direct rejection of seeing history from the privileged perspective: ‘*No, ma’am. I think we got it for him. We?*’ Barbara asked. *Soldiers, said Robert*’ (p. 120). With a mutinous soldier as the protagonist, Findley provides not only an alternative version marginalized by official history but a point of view that has been entirely excluded from patriotic accounts about the Great War.

Setting *The Wars* in the Great War, Findley acknowledges the significance of this war in Canadian history; limiting the narrative time to a period outside Canada’s greatest moments on the European battlefield, he enables his novel to avoid flag-waving patriotism; choosing

⁴¹ For the discussion of how memories of the war contribute to the nation-building of Canada, see Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

⁴² Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919*, quoted in Tom Hastings, “‘Their Fathers Did It to Them’”, p. 93.

an ordinary soldier as protagonist, he presents history not from the centre but from the margin; having this soldier disobey military commands, he challenges antiwar novelists' perception that 'the bravery of the fighting Canadian soldier is founded on stoicism and an almost inarticulate commitment to endure.'⁴³ Findley keeps deviating from general expectations of the war genre but he never forgets his political concern — providing alternative voices to counter official history. His refusal to participate in the mythologization of the Great War in nationalist terms echoes his problematization of history by dramatizing the historian-narrator struggling between the modernist vision of coherent and teleological history, and the postmodern impulse to question traditional historiography both epistemologically and ontologically.

Fugitive Pieces

Written in lyrical language and replete with poetic images, *Fugitive Pieces* is a novel that investigates the nature of trauma, memory, and history by dramatizing the effects of one of the historical catastrophes in the twentieth century — the Holocaust. Michaels's debut novel has received both national and international recognition, and enables her to join the ranks of such talented Canadian novelists as Atwood, Ondaatje, and Urquhart who started their writing careers as poets. The literary prizes it has garnered in Canada are: the Trillium Book Award, the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award, the City of Toronto Book Award, the Martin & Beatrice Fischer Award, and an Award of Merit from Heritage Toronto. It was also shortlisted in 1997 for the Giller Prize, Canada's highest award for fiction. Outside Canada, *Fugitive Pieces* won the Guardian Fiction Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction in the U.K., the Harold Ribalow Award and a Lannan Literary Award for Fiction in the U.S., and Giuseppe Acerbi Literary Award in Italy. These prizes demonstrate its appeal across cultural and national boundaries, perhaps reflecting its engagement with a subject of worldwide

⁴³ Thompson, 'Canadian Fiction of the Great War', p. 85.

concern, as well as its own border-crossing in terms of geography and culture.

Fugitive Pieces appears to be quite simple in form, employing few complicated narrative structures or strategies that can be described as postmodern or metafictional. It consists of a prefatory note and two autobiographies, narrated by two men from different generations whose lives have been transformed and distorted by the same historical event. The first two-thirds is Jewish-Polish poet Jakob Beer's memoir of how Athos Roussos, a Greek geologist, saves his life from Nazi persecution in Poland when excavating on the site of Biskupin, a prehistoric village submerged by water; how both of them survive the German invasion of Greece in World War II; how they attempt to start a new life by immigrating to Toronto; and how Jacob painfully and belatedly comes to terms with his unsettling and traumatic past. The second section is Jewish-Canadian professor Ben's account of his personal experience as a child of Holocaust survivors, his encounter with Jakob and his retrieval of the poet's notebooks, which come to constitute the first section. Both narratives centre round the devastating impact of Holocaust atrocities, dramatizing the struggle to create a means of articulating a historical experience that seems to defy the possibility of articulation and to understand the incomprehensibility of its occurrence.

The national and international success of *Fugitive Pieces*, however, cannot help but provoke some controversies. On the one hand, it has been widely recognized that the richness and ambition of this work makes an important contribution to the literature of the Holocaust. Méira Cook perceives Michaels's project in this poetic novel as 'an attempt to metaphorize history, memory, and narrative precisely in order to challenge the literal, to articulate catastrophe in language that is poetic and densely allusive.'⁴⁴ Metaphorization is an

⁴⁴ Méira Cook, 'At the Membrane of Language and Silence: Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*', *Canadian Literature*, 164 (Spring 2000), 12-33 (p. 16).

endeavour to make sense of the unrepresentable horrors of Auschwitz so that the healing process can be started. According to Susan Gubar, the accomplishment of *Fugitive Pieces* lies in its challenge to male-dominated approaches to the Holocaust 'by illustrating the complexity of bringing feminism, with its attention to gender and sexual politics, into the field of Holocaust studies, with its attention to trauma and racialized politics' while keeping men at the centre of imaginative and intellectual inquiry.⁴⁵ This poetic novel, Gubar argues, is a retort to Theodor Adorno's famous injunction that to 'write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'⁴⁶ by proposing that 'after the Holocaust it is barbaric *not* to write and read literature.'⁴⁷ Dalia Kandiyoti suggests that *Fugitive Pieces* succeeds in resurrecting the idea of place for Holocaust literature, which, owing to forced dislocation and displacement experienced by its refugee-survivors, is often associated with the notion of placelessness or place as permeated by loss, death and destruction.⁴⁸ Though still conceiving of place as a site of loss, Michaels paradoxically represents it as a ground of 'partial belonging' by 'making the places of exile signify with the refugee's own loss.'⁴⁹ She enables Jakob to discover a sense of partial belonging by connecting his own losses with those of others when immersing himself in the histories of his exilic places.

On the other hand, some critics have expressed deep concern about Michaels's aesthetic treatment of the Holocaust. Adrienne Kertzer complains that 'Michaels risks adopting a narrative strategy that tends [. . .] to distract and console many readers with the "beauty" of her story, the pleasure of her intensely woven language.'⁵⁰ Similarly, despite her appreciation

⁴⁵ Susan Gubar, 'Empathic Identification in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*: Masculinity and Poetry after Auschwitz', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28: 2 (2002), 249-276 (p. 250).

⁴⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*, quoted in Méira Cook, 'At the Membrane of Language and Silence', p. 12.

⁴⁷ Gubar, 'Empathic Identification in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*', p. 251.

⁴⁸ Dalia Kandiyoti, "'Our Foothold in Buried Worlds": Place in Holocaust Consciousness and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*', *Contemporary Literature*, 45: 2 (2004), 300-30 (pp. 300-09).

⁴⁹ Kandiyoti, "'Our Foothold in Buried Worlds'", p. 301.

⁵⁰ Adrienne Kertzer, '*Fugitive Pieces*: Listening as a Holocaust Survivor's Child', *English Studies in Canada*, 26 (2000), 193-217 (p. 203).

of Michaels's intricate metaphors, Cook notices that the use of beautiful and fragile images provides 'a highly romanticized icon' of what actually happens to the concentration camp victims and 'unwittingly conceals the decidedly unpoetic nature of genocide.'⁵¹ The most disapproving remark is made by Nicola King, who argues that *Fugitive Pieces* obscures the question of human agency by eliding the human with the geological or biological and offers only false consolation.⁵²

Despite controversies over the aesthetic treatment of the Holocaust, *Fugitive Pieces* is successful in representing the traumatic effects of this historical catastrophe by telling stories about the psychological difficulties that its refugee-survivors suffer. Tortured most of his life by nightmares about the death of his parents and his missing sister Bella, Jakob becomes obsessed with collecting and reading stories of Holocaust victims in order 'to give [Bella's] death a place.'⁵³ It is an obsession verging on monomania. Out of guilt for being alive, Jakob considers Bella's haunting a call for him to join the dead. Ben's parents 'found that the ordinary world outside the camp had been eradicated' (p. 205). Eating is no longer a pleasure for Ben's father, who 'ate frequently to avoid the first twists of hunger because, once they gripped him, he'd eat until he was sick' (p. 214). The Holocaust also cripples his ability to develop intimacy with his child.

Though centring on trauma, *Fugitive Pieces* also finds new ways to explore how history is configured in time and space, how memory intersects with history, and how language functions as a means of redemption for those traumatized subjects. Another less noticeable but still compelling feature is the novel's critical reflections on generic conventions. Reading

⁵¹ Cook, 'At the Membrane', p. 16.

⁵² Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 145.

⁵³ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 139. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Fugitive Pieces as an elegy, Donna Coffey is one of the very few critics to pay close attention to the issue of genre transgression in this fictionalized memoir of Holocaust experience. She argues that Michaels invokes a number of structural and thematic elements of pastoral and elegy but revises their generic conventions in a way that forces both to accommodate the trauma of the Holocaust. The principal device in pastoral elegy is the pathetic fallacy, in which the elegist finds a humanized and anthropomorphized nature capable of mourning in sympathy with him or her and in which nature's continuing cycles of life reflect the resurrection of the deceased or lost and initiate processes of compensation and sublimation, thus completing the mourning of the elegist. To redefine the pastoral elegy radically, Michaels declines to replicate in her narrative the regenerative powers of nature and the compensatory function of elegy that underpin this generic convention. As Coffey argues,

Not only does *Fugitive Pieces* reject the elegy's conventional depictions of nature by portraying nature for the most part as a site of wounding and waste, but also the starkest refusal of the novel to recreate the compensatory apparatus of the traditional elegy can be found in its imagery not of fertility but of infertility.⁵⁴

Infertility is best exemplified in the breakdown of family lines.⁵⁵ Neither Athos nor Jakob have biological children. A new generation is cut off before it can begin when a traffic accident kills both Jakob and his wife, thus terminating the latter's pregnancy, of which Jakob is not even aware.

The pastoral elegy is not the only genre that Michaels employs and subverts in *Fugitive Pieces*. The conventions of biography and autobiography are also called into question though

⁵⁴ Donna Coffey, 'Blood and Soil in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*: The Pastoral in Holocaust Literature', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53: 1 (2007), 27-49 (p. 34).

⁵⁵ Coffey, 'Blood and Soil', p. 35.

in a more subtle and sometimes even opaque fashion. There are two moments in the novel when biography is exposed as a genre that involves omission of information in the construction of the life story of its subject. In the first moment, Jakob remarks: 'Never trust biographies. Too many events in a man's life are invisible. Unknown to others as our dreams' (p. 141). This brief yet thought-provoking comment is made when Jakob recollects how Alex, his first wife, wakes him in the middle of a nightmare and soothes him back to sleep. Suffering from persistent nightmares, he suggests dreams, though invisible in the record of the biographical subject's life, do not lack significance or influence. In Jakob's case, nightmares originating from the tragic death of his parents and the disappearance of his sister Bella in childhood have been haunting him for most of his life and have produced disabling results in his personality, preventing him from having a fulfilled marital relationship with Alex. Jakob's emphasis on invisible events in a person's life in fact gestures towards a more general problem with biography as a genre — the limitation on the information or records about the biographical subject. That is to say, the raw material which biographers entirely depend on for their writing is by nature incomplete, and it follows that a biography could never be an exhaustive portrait of its subject.

Ben takes an unusual interest in biography. As he recalls deriving great comfort from the perfect preservation of the bog people he discovers as a teenager in *National Geographic*, Ben comes to realize in adulthood that the strong attraction of the bog people results actually from his own fascination with biography:

I see now that my fascination wasn't archaeology or even forensics: it was biography. The faces that stared at me across the centuries [. . .] were the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be. (p. 221)

Ben's fascination with biography arises out of a responsibility to speak for these anonymous people. It is also a sense of moral duty that attempts to give voice to the silenced victims of history. In fact, Ben has made a contribution to recording and remembering the Holocaust and its victims by narrating in his autobiographical account the stories of his parents and lost siblings, which would have been lost with their death. This passage shows that Ben attaches great significance to the act of writing biography. Ironically, right after this declaration of particular interest in biography comes a long paragraph that calls its credibility into question:

The hindsight of biography is as elusive and deductive as long-range forecasting. Guesswork, a hunch. Monitoring probabilities. Assessing the influence of all the information we'll never have, that has never been recorded. The importance not of what's extant, but of what's disappeared. (p. 222)

Given that Ben is a professor of 'weather and biography' (p. 211), it comes as no surprise that he draws an analogy between biography and weather forecasting and highlights the part of guesswork and its resultant sense of uncertainty in both activities. Running counter to the general assumption that the establishment of a biographical subject has to rely on verifiable facts or information, this passage places emphasis instead on the profound influence that what has not been documented can exert on the writing of biography. Thus what a biography can provide is not an accurate and authentic representation of its subject, but only a version out of multiple possibilities.

Ben continues to reflect on the fragmentary nature of biography that results not only from what Jacob calls invisible events but from the deliberate attempt of the subject to hide certain facts:

Even the most reticent subject can be — at least in part — posthumously constructed. Henry James, who might be considered coy regarding his personal life, burned all the letters he received. If anyone's interested in me, he said, let them first crack "the invulnerable granite" of my art! But even James was rebuilt, no doubt according to his own design. I'm sure he kept track of the story that would emerge if all the letters to him were omitted. He knew what to leave out. (p. 222)

Instead of seeing the case of Henry James as demonstrating the biographer's magical power to rebuild a life, Ben uses it to illustrate a darker and often ignored side of biography — how the subject can withdraw some personal information or obliterate certain documents in order to influence the way his or her life story is constructed by the biographer. Withdrawn facts or omitted documents fall into the category of what Jakob calls invisible events that gesture towards the limited availability of biographical material. In Ben's unconventional understanding of biography, the subject of inquiry possesses the power to manipulate its practitioners and their outcomes as well. His insistence on assessing the impact of unrecorded information highlights less the importance of what is missing than the multiple possibilities in the construction of a life. Therefore, biographies remain unfinished in the sense that missing personal information implies the potential for the construction of different biographies. 'Biography', as Susan Tridgell points out, 'by its nature is provisional, always open to revision and criticism.'⁵⁶

According to Cook, Ben takes special interest in biography because it is 'a process of retrieval and excavation, an archeological discipline that somehow yields up the subject of its

⁵⁶ Susan Tridgell, *Understanding Our Selves: The Dangerous Art of Biography* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 131.

inquiry [. . .] as whole, discrete, and perfectly preserved.’⁵⁷ Indeed, Ben’s fascination with biography is triggered by the bog people, whose perfect preservation appears both to testify to the recoverability of history and to prove that the past can be brought intact into the present. However, it is only an illusion generated by their seeming intactness. No matter how perfectly preserved the bog people remain, they do not speak: ‘They stared and waited, muted’ (p. 221). They depend entirely on either archaeologists or biographers to reconstruct their life, to tell their stories. Or as Ben says, they wait to be imagined. Biography by its nature is incomplete and fragmentary, not only because the raw material it relies on can be missing or deliberately left out, but also because the biographical subject is subject to a multiplicity of constructions which originate exactly from what is missing from the raw material. Biography can never succeed either in conjuring up one single subject of its inquiry or in yielding it up as perfectly preserved. Ben’s radical reconceptualization of biography denies its conventional claims for completeness, accuracy and objectivity.

Judging from his own comment, it is clear that Ben, in spite of his fascination, is well aware of the problems with biography as a genre. However, taking Henry James as an example, Ben diverts our attention from the role of the biographer to the possibility of manipulation by the biographical subject. In this regard, he is similar to Jakob, whose distrust of biographies arises from the existence of unknown events in a man’s life instead of scepticism about the biographer’s ability to represent the subject. Nonetheless, this diversion lasts only temporarily. As an expert on biography, Ben would not allow the biographical practitioner to sink into oblivion. But again, his understanding challenges the traditional belief in the role of this practitioner. Conventionally, the biographer must seek to be dispassionate, maintaining scientific detachment from the subject, just as a good biography has to obey the obligations to accuracy, faithfulness, and completeness. In stark contrast, Ben’s biographer is one who

⁵⁷ Cook, ‘At the Membrane’, p. 27.

carries out a search for identification with the subject of inquiry:

The quest to discover another's psyche, to absorb another's motives as deeply as our own, is a lover's quest. But the search for facts, for places, names, influential events, important conversations and correspondences, political circumstances — all this amounts to nothing if you can't find the assumption your subject lives by. (p. 222)

For Ben, the biographical practitioner's mission amounts to 'a lover's quest' that demands absorption and identification. This overturns the conviction that the biographer, a mere agent of truth or pursuer of facts, must remain emotionally detached from the subject of inquiry. Ben's reconfiguration reminds us of the male biographer in Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter*, who feels little guilt about identifying with his subject, Buddy Bolden, a jazzman whose life and career remain legendary and mysterious. It also emphasizes that the mediating and interpretive role of the biographer is impossible to avoid in actual practice. Ben's subversive reflection on biography poses urgent epistemological and ontological questions about its generic assumptions while he retains a more positive view of its practitioners. This refiguring of the biographer is related to the theme of ghostwriting, which raises questions about another generic tradition employed in *Fugitive Pieces*.

Gubar construes the ghostwriting motif in *Fugitive Pieces* as a demonstration of 'how post-Holocaust proxy-witnessing will attempt to keep memory of the Shoah alive during a period (soon to come) when there will be no survivors alive to attest for themselves.'⁵⁸ As a survivor of the Holocaust, Jakob not only provides witness accounts of the historical catastrophe but also speaks for his murdered parents and his missing sister Bella, as well as other victims whom death has deprived of their voices. After the death of Athos, Jakob

⁵⁸ Gubar, 'Empathic Identification', p. 271.

spends three years compiling his notes on the SS-Ahnenerbe and completes Athos's unfinished book, *Bearing False Witness*, a 'record of how the Nazis abuse archaeology to fabricate the past' (p. 104). For Gubar, Jakob's act of compiling amounts to ghostwriting Athos's book. Similarly, Ben, a Jewish Canadian born after the war in a new country far from the scene of these historical atrocities, testifies to and suffers from their profound and persistent traumatic effects on his parents, who, though surviving Nazi persecution, 'found that the ordinary world outside the camp had been eradicated' (p. 205). Ben travels to Greece, searching Jakob's house there like an archaeologist for his journals. In his section, he speaks to the lost poet while quoting lines from the latter's poetry and memoirs. But for Gubar, the most conspicuous proxy-witness and ghostwriter is Anne Michaels:

Not only the female signature on the title page but also the novel's opening dedication ("for J") and its prefatory paragraphs (about the "Poet Jakob Beer [. . .] struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993," who had "begun to write his memoirs" [1]) frame the first section as an actual autobiography of a real survivor that historical exigency caused to go unwritten until the task was adopted by the woman author who ghostwrote it for him.⁵⁹

A very strange but interesting idea comes out of this extract: a ghostwritten autobiography. How could such a ghostwritten work be understood in the generic conventions of autobiography? The opening dedication and the prefatory paragraphs of the novel attempt to create the impression that what follows is a genuine autobiography written by a historical survivor of the Second World War named Jakob Beer. However, this impression lasts only until the end of the first section. When the reader enters the second section, it seems to be a new story with new characters, apparently irrelevant to the previous one. It is only after a few

⁵⁹ Gubar, 'Empathic Identification', p. 271.

pages that the reader comes to realize they are encountering a second autobiography narrated by Ben, who explains how he gets to know Jakob and how he retrieves his two missing journals from Greece. The relationship between the two sections remains unclear until near the end of the novel. It is when Ben discovers the two journals and begins to read them that the relationship between the two sections is made explicit: Jakob's memoirs are comprised of the two journals Ben claims to have found in his section.

Gubar's interpretation of the opening dedication and the prefatory note takes into consideration neither the relationship between two main sections nor the connection of the prefatory note with Ben's narrative. In fact, the prefatory note plays a crucial role in understanding the whole structure and themes of the novel and therefore is worth quoting in full:

During the Second World War, countless manuscripts — diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts — were lost or destroyed. Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden — buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors — by those who did not live to retrieve them.

Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance alone.

Poet Jakob Beer, who was also a translator of posthumous writing from the war, was struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993, at age sixty. His wife had been standing with him on the sidewalk; she survived her husband by two days. They had no children.

Shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs. “A man’s experience of war”, he once wrote, “never ends with the war. A man’s work, like his life, is never completed. . . .” (no page number)

Lost or destroyed diaries, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts mean the disappearance of important documents from the historical or biographical record. Deliberately hidden narratives remind us of the case of Henry James though the hiding is done out of a desire to preserve them through the war. On the whole, the first two paragraphs echo both Jakob’s and Ben’s critical reflections on the incomplete nature of biography. The second paragraph also exposes another quality that characterizes history and biography — contingency. Some stories are ‘recovered, by circumstance alone’, just as Jakob’s notebooks are discovered by accident, when Ben is replacing books in the study after it has been rampaged through by Petra, an American girl he is having a love affair with.

The last two paragraphs quoted above imply that Jakob’s memoirs have not been finished since an automobile accident causes his sudden death. When Ben discovers his two journals, they are dated respectively ‘June 1992’ and ‘November 1992’, ‘four months before [Jakob’s] death’ (p. 284). Ben does not reveal in his section what happens to the journals after he takes them back to Canada. Nonetheless, given the fact that Ben retrieves them and repeatedly addresses Jakob as ‘you’ throughout his narration, it seems reasonable to infer that by putting Jakob’s section between the prefatory note and Ben’s narrative, Michaels would lead the reader to believe Ben compiles the poet’s memoirs. If it is the case, then it is worthwhile to make a comparison between Jakob’s relationship to Athos’s *Bearing False Witness* and Ben’s to Jakob’s journals. Compiling (p. 119) is the word Jakob uses to describe what he has done to Athos’s book, an act Gubar views as ghostwriting, while Ben’s relationship with Jakob’s memoirs remain mysterious. In fact, Ben uses both ‘notebook’ (pp. 255, 284) and ‘journal’

(pp. 261, 284) to refer to Jakob's records of recollections, while never mentioning whether they are organized narratives or random jottings. This ambiguity makes his role as compiler more noteworthy since if it is the latter case, he will have to involve himself more deeply in reconstructing the memoirs. Perhaps this is the reason why, as Nicola King observes, in stylistic terms 'the voices of Jakob and Ben are almost identical.'⁶⁰ Ben's possible compiling of Jakob's memoirs cannot help but cast doubt on the nature of autobiography. Can a compiled or ghostwritten autobiography still be considered an autobiography?

Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as '[a] retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality', and insists upon an absolute condition that there must be 'identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*.'⁶¹ This 'judicious and widely quoted definition' confirms the referential function of autobiography.⁶² This insistence upon identity leads John Sturrock to make the claim that '[a]nonymity means the death of autobiography.'⁶³ It also suggests that the proper name of the autobiographer is a guarantee. An autobiography compiled by a second person calls this referentiality into question, making the equation between the figure in a text and its referent in reality unstable and ambiguous, while a ghostwritten autobiography severs the connection within Lejeune's trinity and rejects the conviction of authentic self-representation in this genre. Brief though it is, the prefatory

⁶⁰ Nicola King, "'We Come After': Remembering the Holocaust', in *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, ed. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow: Longman, 1999), pp. 94-108 (p. 103). King attributes their 'almost identical' voices to the fact that both are clearly Michaels's voice, 'a voice which has found a way of expressing experience not directly hers', but I would suggest that it results from the process of compiling, which works in two directions — Ben inserts his voice into Jakob's unfinished autobiography while his own voice is influenced by Jakob's. It is one of the narrative strategies Michaels employs to question generic conventions. This inter-penetration of voices also echoes what Ben describes as 'a lover's quest' necessary in the writing of biography though technically he cannot be called a biographer.

⁶¹ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Contract', quoted in Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.

⁶² Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.

⁶³ John Sturrock, 'Theory Versus Autobiography', in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 21-37 (p. 27).

note in *Fugitive Pieces* attempts to create the impression that the novel is an actual autobiography written by a Holocaust survivor, but Ben's section, which seems at first glance irrelevant to the preface, challenges the supposed autobiographical referentiality in Jakob's section by implying it has been compiled.

Fugitive Pieces subverts and undermines the generic conventions of biography directly through the two protagonists' respective critical reflections. When Jakob draws attention to invisible events in a person's life, he exposes the incompleteness of biographical facts, questioning the credibility of biography as a faithful representation of its subject. To further damage this credibility, Ben makes an analogy between biography and weather forecasting to highlight the fact that both provide not certainty, but only probabilities deduced half from available information and half from guesswork. Moreover, by comparing the writing of biography with a lover's quest that depends on absorbing another's motives, Ben foregrounds the mediating role played by the biographical practitioner. The identification promoted by him for the biographer not only deflates the myth of scientific detachment but also echoes the undermining of the referential function caused by compiled or ghostwritten autobiography. The way Michaels challenges autobiography as a genre is far more roundabout — through the design of narrative structure. Compared with *The Englishman's Boy*, which encloses two interwoven narrative strands with a seemingly irrelevant frame story, or *The Wars*, which entwines two stories in a simultaneously supplementary and undermining relationship, *Fugitive Pieces* is very uncomplicated in structure, with the preface as the only specific narrative device followed by two seemingly separate narratives whose connection comes to light in the second narrative. Nevertheless, Michaels still succeeds in accomplishing genre transgression by employing simple narrative strategies.

While questioning the referential function of biography, the personal form of history, *Fugitive*

Pieces concerns itself with the connections between history, memory and power. Like Vanderhaeghe, who dramatizes the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873 in *The Englishman's Boy*, or Urquhart, who uses the 1868 assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee to reach the climax in *Away*, Michaels employs in her text several historical events such as the discovery of Tollund Man and Grauballe Man, the excavation and destruction of Biskupin, Captain Robert Scott's Antarctic expedition with Dr. Edward Wilson, as well as the Second World War. Rather than challenging the official versions of these events, she exposes the ways in which manipulation and exploitation take place in history, and proposes possible means of fighting against them.

Biskupin is the most obvious example of such manipulation and exploitation. Built more than two thousand years ago by the Lusatian people, this prehistoric fortified settlement is called the 'Polish Pompeii' to highlight its significance in archaeology and human history. Nevertheless, the Nazi soldiers smash its relics, bury it in sand, and destroy the documentation produced by the archaeologists working on the site just because 'Biskupin was proof of an advanced culture that wasn't German' (p. 104). The Nazi government establishes SS-Ahnenerbe — the Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance — not only to screen out anything that testifies to the existence of civilizations more ancient and progressive than the German race, but also to collect evidence that demonstrates Germanic superiority and ancient lineage. Athos is shocked to learn one of his former colleagues in school, employed by Heinrich Himmler (Head of SS-Ahnenerbe), 'found swastikas in every handful of dirt', 'presented the "Willendorf Venus" [. . .] as proof that "Hottentots" had been conquered by ancient Aryans', and 'falsified digs to prove that Greek civilization started in . . . neolithic Germany' (p. 104).⁶⁴ The critique of the SS-Ahnenerbe makes explicit how archaeological

⁶⁴ The 'Willendorf Venus' is a statuette about 11.1 centimetres in length, discovered in 1908 in a loess deposit about thirty meters above the Danube river near the town of Willendorf in Austria. Its dating has been revised several times: 15,000 to 10,000 BC on its discovery, 25,000-20,000 BC in the 1970s, c. 30,000-25,000 BC in the

discoveries can be abused to serve political and ideological purposes. The discovery and reburial of Biskupin also signifies the contingency and vulnerability of history. A teacher going out for a stroll found this site by chance because '[t]he Gasawka River was low and the huge wooden pylons perforated the surface of the lake like massive rushes' (p. 50). Submerged by water because of a change in climate, Biskupin resurfaced in 1933 when the level of the river dropped. Its excavation was interrupted by the Second World War, and then the Nazis decided to demolish it because it did not fit their political agenda. Violence, either natural or political, can be easily done to the remains of the past.

The tendency of the past to be abused and exploited for political purposes leads to Jakob's deep distrust of history:

Maps of history have always been less honest. Terra cognita and terra incognita inhabit the same coordinates of time and space. The closest we come to knowing the location of what's unknown is when it melts through the map like a water mark, a stain transparent as a drop of rain. (p. 137)

In the maps of history, there remains the unknown, which appears like a transparent stain, and this stain is memory. Jakob defines history in opposition to memory, relying on the latter for counteraction and redemption:

History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. History is the Totenbuch, The Book of the Dead, kept by the administrators of the camps. Memory is the Memorbucher, the names

1980s, and around 24,000-22,000 BC in 1990. See Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, 'Women in Prehistory: The Venus of Willendorf', available at <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/willendorf/willendorfdiscovery.html> [accessed 9 January 2008].

of those to be mourned, read aloud in the synagogue. (p. 138)

In Jakob's configuration, history means the official version of the story, the victor's history, while memory represents the personal experience, the victim's side of the same story. Official history conceals and represses; memory reveals and retrieves. 'Every moment is two moments' (p. 138) because one is for history and the other for memory. The same event signifies differently for the victor and the victim. History is amoral also because it fails to prevent the recurrence of past blunders or wrongdoing; instead, it only duplicates them: 'This is the duplicity of history: an idea recorded will become an idea resurrected' (p. 161). It is 'the poisoned well, seeping into the groundwater' (p. 161) and polluting the future. For Jakob, history not only tells lies; it is also a source of contamination.

However, the power of memory to counter history is undermined by its own instability and fragility. Jakob expresses deep frustration about how memory fails him when attempting to retrieve the past:

I tried to remember ordinary details, the sheet music beside Bella's bed, her dresses. What my father's workshop looked like. But in nightmares the real picture wouldn't hold still long enough for me to look, everything melting. Or I remembered the name of a classmate but not his face. A piece of clothing but not its colour. (p. 25)

Memory cannot but involve loss. Moreover, it can be replaced: 'Athos's stories gradually veered me from my past. Night after night, his vivid hallucinogen dripped into my imagination, diluting memory' (p. 28). Sometimes memory even runs out of conscious control: 'The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow' (p. 213). Despite these problems, memory testifies to the existence of the past even though it has been long

gone and serves as the theatre where the past can be reconstructed: ‘There’s no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. [. . .] Or as Athos might have said: If one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map’ (p. 193). With memory, Jakob is able to tell in his memoirs the stories of his muted parents and sister Bella, while Ben can record the suffering of his silenced parents. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels promotes memory as a powerful medium to counteract the amnesia of history. By presenting survivors like Jakob and Ben recording retrospectively their personal and family stories as well as those of other muted victims of history, she also celebrates imaginative writing like autobiography as an ideal medium not just for supplementing official history but for fighting against manipulation, exploitation and repression in history.

Besides the involvement of power, the temporality of history is also investigated. When pondering over Einstein’s theory of relativity, Jakob concludes: ‘The event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed’ (p. 162). To establish the meaning of an event takes into account not only when but also where it takes place. Considering the frequency of time presented in spatial terms in *Fugitive Pieces*, this conclusion comes as no surprise at all. Time and space are not two separate factors that need to be taken into consideration at the same time; they form a complex. Michaels proposes a new model of investigating the past and its imbrication with the present by radically reconfiguring the concept of time in terms of space and materiality. ‘Time is a blind guide’ (p. 5), Jakob starts his narration, recalling how he surfaces like a bog boy into the streets of underwater Biskupin and how his sudden appearance makes him look like ‘one of Biskupin’s lost souls’ (p. 5) in Athos’s eyes. Time is a blind guide because he leads a geologist from Greece to meet a Jewish boy in Poland, on the site where a prehistoric settlement is being excavated. This site is a space where two twentieth-century people from difference places find themselves face to face not only with each other but also with a city built more than two thousand years ago. The

juxtaposition of people with objects from different historical periods recurs in Athos's study:

His study was crammed with rock samples, fossils, loose photos of what seemed to me to be undistinguished landscapes. I'd browse, picking up an ordinary-looking lump or chip. 'Ah, Jakob, what you hold in your hand is a piece of bone from a mastodon's jaw . . . that's bark from a thirty-five-million-year-old tree. . . .' (p.23)

All these objects come from the past, from a variety of historical eras that have been estimated or remain indeterminable. This scene shows how time or the past becomes materialized in concrete objects. Astounded at the antiquity of the items he is holding, Jakob puts them down immediately, feeling 'scalded by time' (p.23). This materiality of time drives Jakob to declare 'it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old' (p. 53). Time is no longer intangible but can be measured by and incarnated in concrete instruments.

The image of a space occupied by a variety of anachronistic objects not only represents time in spatial and material terms but also disrupts the notion of linear temporality. In *Fugitive Pieces*, time even becomes pliable or bendable. Staring at the picture of a safety pin from the Bronze Age, Jakob is astonished to find this simple design has remained the same for thousands of years: 'I was transfixed by the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds' (p. 30). The one-way linear temporality is transformed into a malleable line so that it bends itself to make two points on it touch each other. This spatial refiguring of time aims to undermine the distinction between past and present, investigating how the past and the present occupy the same space. Jakob, whose life is crippled by his haunting, traumatic past, compares the inhabitation of the present by the past to an eroding process: 'Invisible, [the past] melts the present like rain through karst. [. . .] It steers us like magnetism, a spirit

torque' (p. 17). The past is never past but persists, having the present at its command. By redefining time in terms of spatiality and materiality, Michaels provides a non-linear and relative mode for the understanding of history.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, time receives a redefinition in terms of spatiality and materiality that defy linear temporality. This reconfiguring of time underscores the inhabitation of the present by the past. It is part of Michaels's endeavour to refute the prevalent idea of Canada as a country without history, countering Earle Birney's evocative line 'It's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted.'⁶⁵ The best example of this attempt is to be seen in the establishment of the antiquity of Toronto by recalling its geological past and by inserting the history of Native civilizations into its growth. It is 'a city built in the bowl of a prehistoric lake' (p. 89), and Jakob likens their weekly explorations of the city to a journey through time into the past: 'Like diving birds, Athos and I plunged one hundred and fifty million years into the dark deciduous silence of the ravines' (p. 98). A parallel is also established between Biskupin and Toronto to foreground this antiquity. Both Jakob's and Ben's sections start with the same chapter heading: 'The Drowned City', which refers to Biskupin in the former and Toronto in the latter. Biskupin goes underwater because of a change in climate. Weston, part of the Toronto metropolis where Ben's parents establish their first home in Canada, is flooded by the Humber River, flowing southeast across the city, due to Hurricane Hazel in 1954. When they read that 'stone spears, axes, and knives had been discovered in a farmer's field on the outskirts', Athos explains to Jakob that 'the Laurentian People were contemporaries of the inhabitants of Biskupin' (p. 102). Biskupin is an important archaeological site whereas in the bank of the Humber River is buried a past Ben's parents carefully keep from him to their last breath. It is after learning the existence of his siblings and the reason of his name — 'They

⁶⁵ Earle Birney, 'Can. Lit.', in *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verses*, ed. Margaret Atwood (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 116.

hoped that if they did not name me, the angel of death might pass by. Ben, not from Benjamin, but merely “ben” — the Hebrew word for son’ (p. 253) — that Ben goes back to Weston ‘to scavenge the Humber, collecting objects that had eroded from the early-spring banks — a souvenir spoon, a doorknob, a rusted mechanical toy’ (p. 253). But it is a past out of his reach and his excavation of the Humber’s sediment proves a futile effort: ‘I didn’t find anything I remembered’ (p. 253).

Ironically, inserting the history of First Nations peoples into the development of Toronto turns out to be an act of exposing the violence done to them. All the references to Native history — ‘remains of an Iroquois fortress’ (p. 89), ‘an Indian settlement under a school’ (p. 102), and ‘Baby Point, which had once been the site of an Iroquois fortified camp’ (p. 104) — are only traces left after the disappearance of Native communities. On the one hand, the depiction of the destruction of Native peoples by white settlers seems to echo the Jewish genocide in World War II, establishing a certain connection between Jakob and lost Native peoples. On the other hand, it shows that the modern city of Toronto is built on the ruins of First Nations’ civilizations, which is best exemplified in the Baby Point episode:

We [. . .] reached Baby Point in the early afternoon. [. . .] We stood on the side walk and imagined the Iroquois fortress. We imagined an Iroquois attack on the affluent neighbourhood, flaming arrows soaring above patio furniture, through picture windows into living rooms, landing on coffee tables that instantly ignited. I stood on the darkening side walk and transformed the smells of car wax and mown lawns into curing leather and salted fish. Athos, carried away, described the murder of fur trader Étienne Brûlé. Auto da fe. (p. 105)

Athos and Jakob can imagine the Iroquois attacking the affluent neighbourhood while in

reality the Iroquois have been long gone and the neighbourhood is built precisely where their fortified camp once set up. Meredith Criglington describes this scene as ‘certainly a revenge fantasy on behalf of the Iroquois.’⁶⁶ However, this revenge fantasy rather invokes images of violent and fierce Native peoples and reminds the reader of Frye’s garrison mentality. It is this association between violence and Native peoples that causes Athos to tell Jakob of Étienne Brûlé, a French explorer murdered by the Hurons in seventeenth-century Canada.⁶⁷ Athos’s recalling of the Native history in his understanding of Toronto does not necessarily lead to the adoption of a sympathetic or empathetic attitude towards Native peoples.⁶⁸ Instead, he and Jakob feel closer to the colonizer: ‘We empathized with the perplexity and grumpiness of Mrs. Simcoe, the genteel eighteenth-century pioneer wife of the lieutenant-governor, transposed into the wilderness of Upper Canada’ (p. 102). The reference to Mrs. Simcoe suggests that they share her sense of alienation from the environment, although for the former, it arises out of the confrontation with the Canadian wilderness while for the latter, the alienation emerges from the encounter with the urban space in which it is the former’s husband, John Simcoe, who laid the foundation for Toronto, ‘imposing order on it in the form of the orthogonal street-grid we reside in today.’⁶⁹ Mrs. Simcoe comes to stand for ‘a general state of disgruntledness’ whenever the two new immigrants find themselves ‘bewildered by the wordless signals that are the essence of every culture’ (p. 102). They feel more like the white settlers rather than the victimized indigenous people.

⁶⁶ Meredith Criglington, ‘The City as a Site of Counter-Memory in Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* and Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 81 (2004), 129-152 (p. 145).

⁶⁷ Étienne Brûlé (c. 1592-c. 1633) was an interpreter of the Huron language and had been living for years with Hurons. He was murdered by the Hurons c. June 1633. See Olga Jurgens, ‘Étienne Brûlé’, in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. Available at <http://www.biographi.ca/index-e.html> [accessed 10 January 2008].

⁶⁸ I disagree with Criglington, who argues ‘Jakob comes to sympathetically identify his plight with that of the First Nations peoples of the Toronto region, who saw their culture razed by European settlers’. See Meredith Criglington, ‘Urban Undressing: Walter Benjamin’s “Thinking-in-Images” and Anne Michaels’ *Erotic Archaeology of Memory*’, *Canadian Literature*, 188 (2006), 86-102 (p. 94).

⁶⁹ Germaine Warkentin, ‘Mapping Wonderland: The City of Toronto as Seen Through Its Writers’ Eyes’, *Literary Review of Canada*, 13: 10 (2005), 14-16 (p. 14).

In Jakob's first impression, Toronto is 'an evacuated city, a ghostly metropolis in the rain' (p.90). He has no excitement about this new world, feeling only 'a stunning despair' (p. 91). Toronto is never home to him despite moments of comfort: 'On these walks I could temporarily shrug off my strangeness because, the way Athos saw the world, every human was a newcomer' (p. 103). His sense of strangeness disappears only temporarily because their 'weekly explorations into the ravines were escapes to ideal landscapes; lakes and primeval forests so long gone they could never be taken away from us' (p. 102). Toronto is a foreign landscape for Athos, who on the last night in Greece describes their departure for Canada as 'In xenetia — in exile' (p. 86). Jakob remains a newcomer even after having lived in this city for years. Athos's death intensifies such strangeness: 'I sat at Athos's desk. In a small flat in a strange city in a country I did not yet love' (p. 115). In fact, until the end of his memoirs, Jakob never learns to identify with any particular land. 'The Way Station', the title that Michaels gives to the chapter recounting Jakob's life in Toronto, indicates its status as an immigrant city: 'a city where almost everyone has come from elsewhere' (p. 89). But the title also implies the role this city plays in Jakob's life — a stopping place on a journey. In Athos's family home on the island of Idhra, Jakob feels for the first time his 'English strong enough to carry experience', so that he is able to write to save himself. Yet Greece does not become home for Jakob: 'But I also knew I would always be a stranger in Greece, no matter how long I lived here' (p. 164). 'Terra Nullius', the chapter in which Jakob narrates his life on Idhra, means land belonging to no one. In fact, Jakob is terra nullius, claimed by no particular landscape. For him, as Howells notes, 'home is never a place but always a private relationship, and he remains a nomad to the end of his life.'⁷⁰ His home is Athos and Michaela, not Greece or Canada. Jakob fails to achieve the final stage of immigration — identifying with the adopted country — though in the birch scene with Michaela, he does

⁷⁰ Coral Ann Howells, 'Anne Michaels: *Fugitive Pieces*', in *Where Are the Voices Coming from?: Canadian Culture and the Legacies of History*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 107-17 (p. 113).

come to understand what intense identification with a place means.⁷¹ The couple also form a contrast between two types of immigrants. As a child of parents from Russia and Spain (p. 179), Michaela has accepted this new land as her home whereas Jakob feels he belongs to no particular country. It seems that Michaels intends this Jewish-Polish poet, moving between Canada and Greece, to demonstrate and foreground diaspora — a quality that has long characterized Jewish history.

Ben's narrative in one sense serves to complete this immigrating process. There are only four chapters in Ben's section and all of them repeat the headings in Jakob's narrative but in a slightly different order.⁷² Ben's self-account concludes with 'The Way Station', which describes his sojourn in Athens after the discovery of Jakob's notebooks and his return journey. And this chapter ends with Ben on a plane 'above the thick unmoving Atlantic', foreseeing his return (p. 292). Idhra is a stopping place on Ben's journey back home. The repetitive patterns in two sections in fact lead in different directions, which can be detected in the slightly rearranged order of chapter headings. This implies the difference between the two generations of immigrants. In Jakob, Michaels dramatizes the struggle of immigrants. As a first-generation immigrant, Jakob faces more difficulties in acclimatizing to the new country. One of them is to master its official language. Although in Greece Athos has started to teach Jakob the English language, Jakob is not well equipped for the daily life in Toronto: 'I could carry my own in a discussion of volcanoes, glaciers, or clouds in Greek or English, but didn't know what was meant by a "cocktail" or a "Kleenex"' (p. 95). He finally succeeds in mastering the subtleties of this adopted language, able to speak and write poetry 'in impeccable Canadian English' (p. 99). Nevertheless, mastering the tongue of a new country

⁷¹ It is also in the birch forest that Jakob for the first time is able to find peace with his traumatic past, feeling truly located in the present: 'This is where I become irrevocably unmoored. [. . .] I slip free the knot and float, suspended in the present' (p. 188).

⁷² In Jakob's section, the chapter headings are: 'The Drowned City', 'The Stone-Carriers', 'Vertical Time', 'The Way Station', 'Phosphorus', 'Terra Nullius', and 'The Gradual Instant'. In Ben's, they are: 'The Drowned City', 'Vertical Time', 'Phosphorus', and 'The Way Station'.

does not amount to achieving a complete identification with that land. Moreover, the fact that Jakob has lost his native tongue, Yiddish, highlights his experience of diaspora as a Holocaust survivor.

By contrast, Ben, a second-generation immigrant born in his parents' adopted country, speaks English as native tongue. But he encounters the same problem as Jakob — how to achieve reconciliation with the past so that the new country can replace the old one and become a genuine home. Yet a difference arises between them. Jakob's past is what he has gone through personally while Ben has to deal with the past inherited from his parents. Jakob fails in this attempt, unable to identify either Greece or Canada as his homeland. It is through the intimacy with Michaela that he at last comes to terms with the tragic past. Ben has less problem in accepting Canada as his homeland, but part of the past he needs to reconcile with is deliberately concealed by his parents. The concealed past gives rise to his unhappy childhood and emotional disconnection from his parents, especially his father. It is through reading Jakob's notebooks that Ben comes to understand the crippling effects of the Holocaust on its survivors and his parents' motivation for hiding part of the familial past from him. Ben achieves reconciliation with his past, and his homecoming successfully completes the immigrating process. Through a series of movements between different national boundaries, with Canada as the final destination, *Fugitive Pieces* proposes that Canada can become a new home to displaced Holocaust survivors because it is a society based on immigration which makes experience of diaspora or exile unexceptional. Michaels's debut novel not only belongs to the tradition of Canadian immigrant literature, but also creates a successful legend of immigration. However, this legend is not a product of historical amnesia. By repeatedly conjuring up images of lost Native civilizations, Michaels refuses to present Canada as a utopian space free of violence or conflict, or to reinforce the New World as a place without past. While preoccupied with the diasporic search for belonging, she does not

forget to imbed an implicit postcolonial subtext in *Fugitive Pieces*.

Chapter Three

Writing the Ex-Centric Back to History: *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Fox*

Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* (1991) share a concern with rewriting the history of the Canadian working class in the earlier twentieth century. Ondaatje combats historical amnesia by retrieving the contribution of immigrant workers to the modernization of Toronto and provides an alternative version by presenting history from the perspective of the marginalized working class and immigrants. He depicts the migration of his primary protagonist, an English Canadian, from the wilderness to the city as a journey of self-discovery that is interwoven with the revelation of the dark areas in official history. History is not only exposed as an arena for competing forces and as a site subject to continual re-inscription; it is also reconceptualized in terms of complex temporal and spatial transformations. To capture the variety of immigrant experience, Ondaatje juxtaposes the story of the main protagonist undergoing a reverse process of immigration with those of two other characters who are immigrants to Canada. The experimentation with a polyphonic form is fully developed in Sweatman's *Fox*, which seeks to accommodate as many different voices as possible by assembling various textual elements in its presentation of the complexity of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. While demanding more participation from the reader in establishing dialogic relations among the textual units and in the production of meaning, this heteroglossic novel discloses the dissenting voices that have been silenced in established history, and aims at a panoramic representation of a single historical event.

Unlike *In the Skin of a Lion*, which privileges the point of view of workers, *Fox* foregrounds class conflict by juxtaposing perspectives from strike opponents and proponents so that the ideologies they represent will echo, mock, qualify or challenge one another. In this way, all

the voices are contextualized without any single one dominating the others. Aware that the social and political unrest in the 1919 Winnipeg Strike stems from class division rather than from ethnicity and race, Sweatman depicts the helplessness and destitution of immigrant characters to counter the prevalent anti-immigrant sentiments employed by opponents to the strike as a rhetorical strategy to obscure the cause of the discontent. Moreover, she complicates the opposition between middle and working classes with gender issues, retrieving and reconfiguring the various positions occupied by women in class strife. The polyphonic form of *Fox* enables more female voices to be heard and their heterogeneity to emerge. Sweatman's fictionalized version compensates for the neglect of the role of women in critical studies of the strike.

In rewriting the class warfare occurring in the early twentieth century, both Ondaatje and Sweatman give voice to the ex-centrics that are marginalized in or excluded from official history, register the presence of the working class in Canadian history, provide alternative and sympathetic understandings of the social unrest resulting from the radical unionism in this period, and undermine the national imaginary of Canadian culture as classless. They both expose the repressive and oppressive forces in historical representation and propose new possibilities for making sense of the past. Taken together, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Fox* form a complementary relationship. Ondaatje features the perspective of immigrant workers, which remains relatively insubstantial in *Fox*, but Sweatman is successful in recapturing the diverse female voices that are peripheral to the male ones of *In the Skin of a Lion*.

In the Skin of a Lion

Ondaatje exhibits an extraordinary penchant for crossing the border between art and life, fact and fiction, and for transgressing genre distinctions. Hutcheon praises his writing for best

exemplifying the postmodern challenge to boundaries.¹ Based on a historical personage and made up of poems, prose sections, photographs, interviews and blank page, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) is his earliest postmodern work that frustrates any attempt at classification in terms of genre. In *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), Ondaatje rejects the traditional form of biography in representing the real jazz player Buddy Bolden and instead creates a collage including the only existing photo of Bolden, a résumé of unverified facts about him, interviews with his acquaintances, and selections from his medical records. The book exposes the process by which history, and in this case a personal history, is reconstructed out of fragments and demonstrates that the act of reconstructing necessarily involves fictionalization. Instead of illuminating the historical figure as a good biography is supposed to do, Ondaatje's work makes Bolden 'a character of legend, hearsay and tall tales who cannot be pinned down.'² The author applies the same postmodern self-reflexivity to the writing of his family history in *Running in the Family* (1982), which is also an assemblage of diverse textual elements, laying bare the selecting, ordering, and fictionalizing processes in the reconstruction of the past. In addition to the employment of collage as a narrative technique to challenge genre boundaries, all the three works manifest his interest 'in the postmodern metafictional mimesis of the actual process of writing, rather than "only" in the mimesis of reality.'³

However, the use of such postmodern techniques as collage to achieve genre transgression is much less obvious in *In the Skin of a Lion*, which tells stories about the building of the modern city of Toronto and the life of immigrant workers in the early twentieth century. With its apparently realist mode, it seems that Ondaatje has given up the penchant for

¹ Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 83.

² Colavincenzo, "Trading Magic for Fact", p. 147.

³ Igor Maver, 'Creating the National in the International Context: the Postmodernity of Michael Ondaatje's Fiction', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 17: 2 (1995), 58-66 (p. 61).

experimentation with narrative forms. Nonetheless, Hutcheon still designates *In the Skin of a Lion* as postmodern, maintaining that it is as successful as Ondaatje's first three works in destabilizing the distinctions between genres by presenting 'a confrontation between the conventions of the realist novel (and so-called objective history-writing) and the self-reflexivity of postmodern metafiction.'⁴ Igor Maver also notes that despite its 'return to a more traditional form of realism', this novel remains a postmodern text because 'Ondaatje still indulges in a postmodern reconstruction of reality.'⁵ The lack of experimentation with form does not mean the abandonment of Ondaatje's interest in genre transgression or his postmodern questioning of the boundaries between fact and fiction. The bildungsroman is the genre exploited and subverted in *In the Skin of a Lion*, but this has not received adequate critical attention.⁶ Although the novel presents the stories of three protagonists — Patrick Lewis, Nicholas Temelcoff, and Caravaggio — it in reality centres on the psychological development and socializing process of Patrick, which takes up five of the seven chapters.⁷ How does Ondaatje play with and contest the conventions of the bildungsroman through the depiction of Patrick's personal history?

According to Jerome Hamilton Buckley, the principal elements of the bildungsroman include 'childhood, the conflict of generations, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy', and the typical plot unfolds as follows: a child of some sensibility grows up in a provincial town, finds himself alienated because of the constraints imposed on

⁴ Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 93.

⁵ Maver, 'Creating the National', p. 64.

⁶ Both Smaro Kamboureli and Rod Schumacher point out that the novel presents Patrick's story in the manner of the bildungsroman, but they do not mention Ondaatje's subversive transformation of its generic conventions. See Kamboureli, 'The Culture of Celebrity and National Pedagogy', in *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004), pp. 35-55 (p. 48); Schumacher, 'Patrick's Quest: Narration and Subjectivity in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 21: 2 (1996), 1-21 (p. 4).

⁷ Nicholas's story is combined with the description of the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct in one chapter titled 'The Bridge' while Caravaggio has just one chapter focalized through (and named after) him. The relationships between the three sections will be discussed later.

him either by the repressive surroundings or by the hostility from his family (his father in particular), and leaves home to make his way independently in the city, where he goes through a variety of ordeals, reappraises his values, finds an accommodation between himself and the modern world, and finally reaches his maturity.⁸ At the core of this genre is, in Jeffrey L. Sammons's words, 'a sense of evolutionary change within the self, a teleology of individuality.'⁹ Despite the genre's emphasis on the self-realization of the individual, the completion of maturation depends on the interaction between the individual and the social circumstances. As Martin Swales emphasizes, the bildungsroman operates with the tension between a concern for individual potentiality and a recognition that practical reality is 'a necessary dimension of the hero's self-realization, albeit one that by definition implies a delimitation, indeed, a constriction, of the self.'¹⁰ Moreover, this genre is by nature 'bourgeois' owing to its 'many assumptions about the autonomy and relative integrity of the self, its potential self-creative energies, its relative range of options within material, social, even psychological determinants.'¹¹ And the tension between individual and society involves 'to a high degree a process of acculturation, of adapting to existing societal structures.'¹²

The events in Patrick's life are arranged in an apparently chronological way, and their development seems to follow the narrative pattern outlined by Buckley for the bildungsroman. The novel opens in the first chapter 'Little Seeds' with Patrick's childhood in a 'region which did not appear on a map until 1910.'¹³ A motherless child, he is intensely alienated from his

⁸ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 19-20.

⁹ Jeffrey L. Sammons, 'The Bildungsroman for Nonspecialists: An Attempt at a Clarification', in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. James Hardin (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 26-45 (p. 41).

¹⁰ Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 29.

¹¹ Sammons, 'The Bildungsroman', p. 42.

¹² Wulf Koepke, 'Bildung and the Transformation of Society: Jean Paul's *Titan* and *Flegeljahre*', in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. James Hardin (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 228-53 (p. 231).

¹³ Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 10. All further references are to

father, Hazen Lewis, 'an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus' (p. 15). Even after the father and the son risk their lives together to rescue a cow half-submerged in mid-river, they cannot offer each other consolation or solace: 'In bed later on, they do not acknowledge each other apart from sharing the warmth under the blanket' (p. 14). Young Patrick suffers not only alienation but also isolation:

He [. . .] wants conversation — the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place. (p. 10)

Unlike his father, whose isolation is self-willed, Patrick becomes withdrawn due to a lack of communication and community. At the age of twenty-one, he leaves the Ontario wilderness for Toronto, which amounts to a flight from provinciality, and launches his career as a searcher, tracking the missing millionaire Ambrose Small. The search leads him to a passionate love affair with the millionaire's mistress Clara Dickens, but the relationship leaves him deeply depressed when Clara abandons him to join Small. A few years later, when working as a dynamiter in the tunnel at the waterworks of Toronto, Patrick establishes a connection with the Macedonian community, replacing his previous isolation with a sense of belonging. Through this connection, he encounters again Clara's close friend, Alice Gull. Their reunion turns into an intimate relationship that also facilitates Patrick's admittance to the community, and with her and her daughter Hana, Patrick enjoys a kind of pleasant family life that he has never had with his father. It seems that after years of loneliness and isolation he at last finds a satisfactory accommodation between himself and society.

According to classic bildungsroman conventions, the protagonist, after a series of trials, is supposed to reappraise his values and come to terms with society. It involves compromise but at least the protagonist is anchored in some stable values or faith. Ondaatje has Patrick follow this pattern but in a subversive manner. Patrick's values are tested and reappraised. Yet it remains uncertain whether he comes to terms with society by making compromises. In a long conversation with Alice, Patrick makes explicit his mistrust of politics: 'I don't believe the language of politics, but I protect the friends I have' (p. 122). With 'a passive sense of justice' (p. 122), he rejects both mainstream values and Alice's political extremism. However, Alice is perceptive in pointing out the underlying assumption of his individualist attitude:

You believe in solitude, Patrick, in retreat. You can afford to be romantic because you are self-sufficient. [. . .] But you have a choice, what of the others who don't? [. . .] They can't afford your choices, your *languor*. (p. 123)

Despite her accusation, Patrick is not convinced of the justice Alice's political activism aims for. The dispute points towards a fundamental difference between them in relation to the New World myth: Alice believes only radical politics can change the status quo whereas Patrick clings to the concept that in Canada success results from hard work on the part of the individual, regardless of politics.

Although Patrick warns Alice that she won't be able to convert him to a follower of her 'grand cause' (p. 125), her observation — 'Like water, you can be easily harnessed, Patrick' (p. 122) — is correct. Alice's death in a bombing accident drives him to engage in violent activities of naming the enemy and destroying their power. At this very moment, Patrick's story starts to deviate dramatically from the bildungsroman plot as outlined above. His political activism begins with setting fire to the Muskoka Hotel. After five years in prison for

‘wilful destruction of property’ (p. 170), he plots again to dynamite the waterworks of Toronto that he and many of the Macedonian immigrants have laboured to build. He gives up the newly found accommodation, turning to antagonism towards society. The socializing process that is essential to the bildungsroman turns into the reverse. Patrick shifts from socialization to anti-socialization. However, his subsequent withdrawal from the plan to blow up the waterworks seems to suggest a turnaround in his anti-social behaviour. Whether Patrick will give up the antagonism remains uncertain. The novel closes with him and Hana at the point of departing for Marmora to pick up Clara, who asks for help after Small’s death. It is an ending without a definite conclusion. Ondaatje refuses to provide any psychological insight into Patrick after his confrontation with the historical Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works, in the waterworks.

By changing the process of acculturation from socialization to anti-socialization, Ondaatje subverts bildungsroman conventions. The indeterminate ending of the novel disrupts the ‘teleology of individuality’ that characterizes this genre.¹⁴ Although the reappraisal of his view about politics remains unfinished, Patrick does go through a critical re-evaluation of his understanding of what constitutes Canada. His journey to Toronto is described as an act of moving into a new territory: ‘He was an immigrant to the city’ (p. 53). Though belonging to the majority in terms of race and gender, Patrick joins the immigrant workers in the tunnel and lives in the Macedonian neighbourhood, from which many of the labourers in the waterworks come. A Canadian in origin, he becomes the minority within this ethnic minority in a big Canadian city and remains ‘deliriously anonymous’ (p. 112). But the Macedonian community welcome Patrick with open arms:

And suddenly Patrick, surrounded by friendship, concern, was smiling, feeling the tears

¹⁴ Sammons, ‘The Bildungsroman’, p. 41.

on his face falling towards his stern Macedonian-style moustache. Elena, the great Elena who had sold him vetch for over a year, unpinned the white scarf around her neck and passed it to him. He looked up and saw the men and women who could not know *why* he wept now among these strangers who in the past had seemed to him like dark blinds on his street, their street, for he was their alien. (p. 113)

At this moment, Patrick finds a sense of community and realizes his displacement in a place which he is entitled to see as home because of his Canadian origin. Interestingly, the shift from 'his street' to 'their street' suggests a subtle change in his attitude towards the immigrants: they are no longer 'like blinds on his street' but start to register their presence as subjects in his consciousness. It is not that Patrick has never realized their existence, but that their significance undergoes a profound transformation. In the backwoods of Ontario, young Patrick observes the foreign loggers, who come and go like migrant birds. Though curious, Patrick, like most of the people there, keeps them at a distance: 'No one in the town of Bellrock really knows where the men have come from. [. . .] The only connection the loggers have with the town is when they emerge to skate along the line of river' (p. 8). In fact, 'these strangers of another language' (p. 22), who 'do not own this land as the owner of the cows does' (p. 7), evoke both attraction and repulsion because Patrick also feels these aliens trespass on his world: 'Skating the river at night, each of them moving like a wedge into blackness magically revealing the grey bushes of the shore, *his* shore, *his* river' (p. 21, sic). In the wilderness, the alien loggers are seen as intruders, whereas in Toronto, Patrick finds himself taking their place, becoming an intruder among the Macedonian community. This paradoxical moment of displacement lets Patrick acknowledge that the immigrants have a rightful claim to the land just as he or the owner of the cows does.

Patrick's acknowledgement appears to be somewhat condescending. Learning *gooshter*, the

Macedonian word for iguana, Patrick seems to take the initiative in jumping the gap between himself and the immigrant community. His act arises from a practical need to buy food for the iguana left by Clara rather than a desire for integration. The attempt to make contact is soon dropped by Patrick and taken over by the immigrants, who 'then circled him trying desperately to leap over the code of languages between them' (pp. 112-13). However, they find it difficult to cross the language barrier and have to send for a boy, 'who spoke the best English' (p. 113), to facilitate the communication. Christian Bök argues that Patrick abandons his 'deliberate aphasia' at this particular moment.¹⁵ Nonetheless, a closer look at his attitude towards language will show this moment in fact starts another phase of his deliberate aphasia. Within the Macedonian community, Patrick is more 'a watcher' (p. 157) than a participant, which is manifest in the following scene:

In Kosta's house he relaxes as Alice speaks with her friends, slipping out of English and into Finnish or Macedonian. She knows she can be unconcerned with his lack of language, that he is happy. [. . .] He in fact pleasures in his own descant interpretations of what is being said. He catches only the names of streets, the name of Police Chief Draper, who has imposed laws against public meetings by foreigners. (pp. 132-33)

'Lack of language' means not only his silence but also his inability to communicate in languages other than English. Yet, while speaking English is an obligation of those immigrants to Canada, Patrick continues to enjoy his linguistic privilege, never forced to experience the difficult acquisition of the official language as immigrants have been. Although the reverse process of immigration leads to a double admittance, making Patrick accepted by the Macedonian community while at the same time enabling him to grant the

¹⁵ Christian Bök, 'Destructive Creation: The Politicization of Violence in the Works of Michael Ondaatje', *Canadian Literature*, 132 (1992), 109-24 (p. 119).

immigrants the claim to the Canadian land, Patrick remains Anglophone-centric, unable to feel empathy for the linguistic plight faced by the immigrants.

Ondaatje contextualizes the bildungsroman by interweaving Patrick's personal experience with the national history of immigration in Canada. The process of his self-discovery parallels the unearthing of a national past hidden from official history, a past gradually revealed when Patrick comes across the dead Cato, Alice's lover and Hana's father, in the quest for Alice's mysterious past. Learning the story of Cato, an activist executed in the wilderness near his birthplace because of his radical unionism, Patrick finds himself 'gazing into the darkness of his own country' (p. 157). The union battles have been long going on with Patrick unaware of them almost all of his life. The double discovery brings about a deep sense of alienation, undermining the comfort he has enjoyed in the relationship with Alice and the Macedonian community:

Patrick has clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations. He has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place. (pp. 156-57)

Like Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Patrick undertakes a physical journey that transforms into spiritual initiation. With passion for adventures in the 'blank' spots on the imperial map, Marlow travels from Europe, the so-called centre of civilization, to the African wilderness, only to come face to face with the corruption, dehumanization, and hypocrisy of imperialism and its civilizing mission. To lock away his past, Patrick leaves the wilderness for Toronto, in which he stumbles across the dark secrets excluded from the history he has been familiar with. Despite the reversal in direction, both make journeys into the heart of darkness. Ondaatje pushes back the boundary of the bildungsroman by melting an

individual's psychological development into the revisiting of a national history.

Ondaatje's challenge to the bildungsroman goes with a rethinking of narrative temporality. Although Patrick's story is presented in an apparently chronological manner, its linearity is repeatedly disrupted either by the omniscient narrator's comments on the protagonist's activities or contemporary historical events, or by other characters' anecdotes. The disruptions and intrusions constitute what Douglas Barbour calls the malleability of time in the novel: 'Although generally the text moves forward in time from Patrick's childhood to his middle age, within each section there are anticipations and retrospections that interrupt any smooth progress.'¹⁶ In other words, past and present events are juxtaposed to reveal the continuing presence of the past. In 'Little Seeds', eleven-year-old Patrick's fascination with summer insects is supplemented by a flash-forward describing how he searches for knowledge about them in Toronto:

Bugs, plant hoppers, grasshoppers, rust-dark moths. Patrick gazes on these things which have navigated the warm air above the surface of the earth [. . .]. Years later at the Riverdale Library he will learn how the shining leaf-chafers destroy shrubbery, how the flower beetles feed on the juice of decaying wood or young corn. There will suddenly be order and shape to these nights. (p. 9)

It is a metafictional technique that reminds the reader of the reconstructing process of storytelling itself. In fact, such self-reflexivity has been established since the very beginning of the novel. The opening vignette reads: '*This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning*' (p. 1). The girl 'gathers' it from a man who 'picks up and brings together various corners of the story' (p. 1). Therefore, the story is presented as a

¹⁶ Douglas Barbour, *Michel Ondaatje* (New York: Twayne, 1993), p. 181.

retelling of another retelling, highlighting the mediated rather than mimetic nature of narrative. The closing frame tale returns the narrative to a moment before the scene in the opening vignette occurs, with the man promising to tell the girl the whole story. Thus, the narration moves in a circular rather than linear manner. Gordon Gamlin sees the two-part frame story as Ondaatje's strategy to establish the novel as an oral narrative resisting closure.¹⁷ But given the repeated use of prolepses and analepses in the novel, the frame story is more part of the temporal schemes employed by Ondaatje to undermine linear teleology and expose the constructedness of narration.

An interesting disruption occurs in the beginning of the chapter 'Maritime Theatre', where the narrative voice jumps from Patrick's release from the Kingston Penitentiary to a list of events taking place around the world in the 1930s:

In 1938, when Patrick Lewis was released from prison, people were crowding together in large dark buildings across North America to see Garbo as Anna Karenina. Everyone tried to play the Hammond Organ. 'Red Squads' intercepted mail, tear-gassed political meetings. By now over 10,000 foreign-born workers had been deported out of the country. Everyone sang 'Just One of Those Things.' The longest bridge in the world was being built over the lower Zambesi and the great waterworks at the east end of Toronto neared completion.

At Kew Park a white horse dove every hour from a great height into Lake Ontario. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* opened in England and a few weeks later Dr. Carl Weiss — who had always admired the poetry of the expatriate American — shot Huey

¹⁷ Gordon Gamlin, 'Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and the Oral Narrative', *Canadian Literature*, 135 (1992), 68-77 (p. 68).

Long to death in the Louisiana capitol building. (p. 209)

Then the voice switches back to depict Patrick sitting inside Toronto's Union Station, 'the nexus of his life' (p. 209), and recalling how in this space he first arrives as an innocent young man and later watches Clara leave him for Ambrose Small. Juxtaposing Patrick's return and recollection with a variety of historical incidents around the world diverts the reader's attention from the progressive development in Patrick's story to the simultaneity and contingency of history. It echoes what Susan Spearey describes as 'the spatial contingency of the characters', which means that in 'The Bridge' Caravaggio, Temelcoff, Harris, and the nun (who later turns into Alice) are presented in spatially contingent positions without realizing the existence of each other in the same place or the ways in which they will come to influence one another.¹⁸ This is one of Ondaatje's tactics to undermine linear narrative.

The most conspicuous interruptions are the chapters entitled 'The Bridge' and 'Caravaggio'. In the former, the narrative switches from the building of the viaduct to Harris's inspection of the construction site and then to Nicholas's incredible feat of catching the falling nun in mid-air. Embedded in the description of the encounter between Nicholas and the nun are sections of Nicholas's daredevil work on the viaduct, his 'fast and obsessive studying of English' (p. 46), and the history of his forced immigration from Macedonia to Canada. In 'The Bridge', the focalization keeps shifting, and the narrative is so fragmented that the reader must piece together these scraps of information to establish Nicholas's story. It is noteworthy that when the novel progresses from the first chapter 'Little Seeds' to 'The Bridge', no connection is established between them. 'The Bridge' launches a new storyline, and the relationships among the characters in these two chapters remain unrevealed until later.

¹⁸ Susan Spearey, 'Mapping and Masking: The Migrant Experience in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 24: 2 (1994), 45-60 (p. 51).

The 'Caravaggio' chapter initially appears more neatly embedded in the main narrative in that it opens with Patrick and Caravaggio working together as prisoners in the Kingston Penitentiary. However, the reader's expectation is again unseated as the chapter soon leaves Patrick behind and starts a new narrative thread centring on Caravaggio rather than his relationship with other characters. The reader keeps coming across a series of beginnings of new stories, between which there is no cause and effect.

'I'm drawn to a form that can have a more cubist or mural voice to capture the variousness of things. Rather than one demonic stare,' Ondaatje declared in an interview.¹⁹ The rejection of a single, coherent perspective is made explicit in one of the two epigraphs to *In the Skin of a Lion*: 'Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.' This comes from John Berger's fiction *G* and points not only to the cubist voice Ondaatje yearns for but also to the metafictional orientation of the text. Due to this intense fascination with multiple points of view, Rochelle Simmons categorizes *In the Skin of a Lion* as 'a Cubist novel.'²⁰ Like the Cubists presenting an object as perceived from many points of view, Ondaatje creates stories told from multiple perspectives, which gives rise to the fragmentation of form in the novel. Ondaatje's fictional project aims at what Lamia Tayeb calls the postmodern 'poetics of re-alignment rather than chronologising.'²¹

The juxtaposition of varied and diverse stories raises questions about the origin of the narrative voice in the novel. The opening vignette, which seems to establish Patrick as the narrator, allows Fotios Sarris to declare that with Hana as the recipient of the story the novel's point of view might be more accurately seen as belonging to the listener rather than to the

¹⁹ Catherine Bush, 'Michael Ondaatje: An Interview', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 53 (1994), 238-49 (p. 248).

²⁰ Rochelle Simmons, 'In the Skin of a Lion as a Cubist Novel', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 67 (1998), 699-714 (p. 699).

²¹ Lamia Tayeb, *The Transformation of Political Identity from Commonwealth through Postcolonial Literature: The Cases of Nadine Gordimer, David Malouf, and Michael Ondaatje* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p. 53.

teller.²² However, other critics prefer to see the novel as presented by a third-person narrator that cannot be identified with either Hana or Patrick. As Vauthier notes, this narrator knows much more than Patrick, which is exemplified in the sentence ‘Patrick would never see the great photographs of Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad’ (p. 145).²³ Davey agrees on this point but emphasizes that the narrator ‘enjoys limited omniscience.’²⁴ In other words, Ondaatje’s narrator is not a fully omniscient and authoritative narrator of the kind favoured by the realist novel. The narrator sometimes assumes the skins of the characters and speaks in their voices. At one moment, Patrick’s thought is conveyed in the first person: ‘She could move like . . . she could sing as low as . . . Why is it that I am now trying to uncover every facet of Alice’s nature for myself?’ (p. 147). But the next sentence reads, ‘He wants everything of Alice to be with him here’ (p. 147). Hutcheon regards this example as the merging of ‘the narrative voices of the writing artist-figure and the memory-ridden protagonist.’²⁵ That is, it is a voice of doubleness. In other passages, it seems that more than two voices can be distinguished:

Daniel Stoyanoff had tempted them all. In North America everything was rich and dangerous. *You* went in as a sojourner and came back wealthy — Daniel buying a farm with the compensation he had received for losing an arm during an accident in a meat factory. Laughing about it! Banging his other hand down hard onto the table and wheezing with laughter, calling them all fools, sheep! (p. 44; emphasis mine)

Vauthier argues that this passage demonstrates a Bakhtinian hybridization of utterances, with

²² Fotios Sarris, ‘*In the Skin of a Lion*: Michael Ondaatje’s Tenebristic Narrative’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 44 (1991), 183-201 (p. 189); Schumacher, ‘Patrick’s Quest’, p. 18.

²³ Simone Vauthier, ‘A Story of Silence and Voice: Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*’, in *Multiple Voices: Recent Canadian Fiction: Proceedings of the IVth International Symposium of the Brussels Centre for Canadian Studies*, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1990), pp. 69-90 (pp. 84-85).

²⁴ Davey, *Post-National Arguments*, p. 143.

²⁵ Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 100.

the first sentence spoken by the narrator and then with the focus of perception shifting from Nicholas to Stoyanoff.²⁶ Yet the sentence before this complicates the issue of voicing even further:

Hanging under the bridge, [Nicholas] describes the adventure to himself, just as he was told a fairy tale of Upper America by those who returned to the Macedonian villages, those first travellers who were the judas goats to the west. (pp. 43-44)

This makes it more difficult to determine whose voice utters the sentence 'Daniel Stoyanoff had tempted them all'. Moreover, the abrupt insertion of 'You' increases the uncertainty of the utterance. Who is speaking? To whom does the 'You' refer? Because of this elusiveness in the voice and the juxtaposition of various stories, some critics conclude that the novel is narrated by multiple narrators.²⁷ Whether the novel is presented by a multiplicity of voices or by a voice of doubleness, Ondaatje creates a mode of narration that destabilizes any notion of conventional narration and rejects the possibility of unmediated reality.

The lack of obvious formal experimentation does not mean Ondaatje no longer tries to challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction or blur the distinctions between different genres. Nor does the apparently realist mode signal the end of his indulgence in the postmodern reconstruction of reality. Instead, realist conventions are manipulated to expose their own shortcomings. Through the employment and subversion of the bildungsroman, the elaborate schemes of temporality, and the creation of the indeterminate narrative voice(s), *In*

²⁶ Vauthier, 'A Story', p. 86. M.M. Bakhtin defines hybridization as 'a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor'. See Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.259-422 (p. 358). The passage in question is an encounter involving more than two linguistic consciousnesses, whose identities are difficult to pin down.

²⁷ Barbour, '*In the Skin of a Lion*', p. 182; Maver, 'Creating the National', p. 63.

the Skin of a Lion achieves genre transgression and fulfils postmodern self-reflexivity.

Another postmodern concern in the novel is the reconsideration of history. By presenting stories about ex-centrics, stories teeming with descriptions of the dehumanization of labour and of the dislocation of immigrants, Ondaatje seeks to redress the imbalance of official history from marginalized points of view.²⁸ He is also committed to dissecting the power politics in the writing of history and investigating how this power politics suppresses the voices of ex-centrics. If he pays close attention to the making of personal and family history in his previous books, in this novel, he problematizes the process of building national history and the writing of history through a rewriting of the modernization of Toronto in the first half of the twentieth century. *In the Skin of a Lion* establishes itself as a historical novel by interweaving into its narrative three major historical events that took place in Toronto between the 1910s and 1930s: the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct, the disappearance of the millionaire Ambrose Small, and the construction of the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant. In this specific setting, where fictional characters interact with historical figures, Ondaatje plays with historical documents and the gaps in the historical record in such a way that the power politics involved in the writing of history can be spotlighted. From the very outset, history is exposed as a site of contestation with a variety of parties competing for dominance, but only those in power can leave their marks on history:

²⁸ In fact, Ondaatje's description of labour is complicated and sometimes problematic. There are many scenes with workers toiling on the construction site of the bridge, in the tunnel or at the leather factory. The revelation of the dehumanization is accompanied by, as Faye Hammill argues, 'a tendency to romanticise labour' and to celebrate the achievements of heroic individuals. Patrick stands out among the diggers in the tunnel because of his special skills of dynamiting: 'Nobody else wants the claustrophobic uncertainty of this work, but for Patrick this part is the only ease in this terrible place where he feels banished from the world' (p. 107). The daredevil Nicholas is another solitary: 'His work is so exceptional and time-saving he earns one dollar an hour while the other bridge workers receive forty cents. There is no jealousy towards him. No one dreams of doing half the things he does' (p. 35). The images of Nicholas 'free-falling like a dead star' or as 'mercury slipping across a map' (p. 35) transform the worker into an aesthetic object, while the scene at the leather factory where Patrick once worked with dyers exhibits aesthetic qualities: 'That is how Patrick would remember them later. Their bodies standing there tired, only the heads white. If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration' (p. 130). The last quotation shows that the novel is not unaware of the danger of such aesthetic transformation. See Hammill, *Canadian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 162-63.

During the political ceremonies a figure escaped by bicycle through the police barriers. The first member of the public. Not the expected show car containing officials, but this one anonymous and cycling like hell to the east end of the city. In the photographs he is a blur of intent. He wants the virginity of it, the luxury of such space. He circles twice, the string of onions that he carries on his shoulder splaying out, and continues.

But he was not the first. The previous midnight the workers had arrived and brushed away officials who guarded the bridge in preparation for the ceremonies the next day, moved with their own flickering lights — their candles for the bridge dead — like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley.

And the cyclist too on his flight claimed the bridge in that blurred movement, alone and illegal. Thunderous applause greeted him at the far end. (p. 27)

The municipal officials would like to write their names into history through the ceremonies that announce the completion and opening of the Bloor Street Viaduct, but the cyclist competes with them to claim both the bridge and its history. Nonetheless, the cyclist's challenge is seen as 'illegal' and relegated to 'a blur of intent' in the photographs, a blur that will become unrecognizable with the passage of time. He ends up as 'a picture of a cyclist racing across' (143), mentioned in passing by Patrick in his search for references to the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct in the library.

However, such a blur is a luxury that cannot be granted to the workers actually constructing the bridge. Producing the space of the bridge, for which the officials and the anonymous cyclist compete, the workers are not even entitled to claim it in public. To further emphasize

its contested nature, Ondaatje has the workers perform at midnight a secret ritual of laying claim to the bridge, a ritual that is their memorial ceremony for those killed during the construction. Neither the ritual nor their contributions are recorded. Among all the references to the building of the bridge that Patrick can discover, 'the deaths of the workers [are] fleetingly mentioned', whereas reports about the development and completion of the project — such as 'Commissioner Harris' determination forcing it through', 'survey arguments', its opening ceremonies, and even 'the scandals' — and photographs that keep track of the process of its building abound in newspapers and journals (pp. 143-44). Ondaatje highlights the stark contrast between the effacement of the workers and the magnification of the viaduct under construction as follows:

Night and day. Fall light. Snow light. They are always working — horses and wagons and men arriving for work on the Danforth side at the far end of the valley.

There are over 4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution. The piers sink into bedrock fifty feet below the surface through clay and shale and quick-sand — 45,000 cubic yards of earth are excavated. The network of scaffolding stretches up.

Men in a maze of wooden planks climb deep into the shattered light of blond wood. A man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame. Drill smoke in his hair. A cap falls into the valley, gloves are buried in stone dust. (p. 26)

The faceless labourers become parts of the tools they are using, swallowed up by the network of scaffolding. They are objectified in such a way that they will be totally forgotten like the lost caps or gloves, buried in the dust of the valley: 'The articles and illustrations Patrick

found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge' (145). Despite their practical contributions to the bridge, which flaunts the modernization of the civilization established in this city, the labourers are easily discarded when no longer demanded. While presenting history as a site of contestation, Ondaatje makes it explicit that official history is always that of the dominant group or the privileged class. Competition to claim the bridge leaves Harris named and well-documented, the cyclist anonymous, and the labourers effaced. In the confrontation with Patrick, Harris admits not knowing the number of workers killed during the building of the intake tunnels of the water filtration plant because there is no record kept, but the plant is named after him instead of those sacrificing their lives for its construction. The effacement of the working class echoes the silencing of the radical union movements Patrick later stumbles across. His migration into Toronto is a journey into the heart of darkness in Canadian history, into the silenced history of the minorities and the underclass.

While exposing this effacing process in the writing of history, Ondaatje draws attention to the special role language plays in the Canadian context. In this novel, language is paradoxically depicted as a barrier and passport to community, power, and history. Though enchanted by the loggers skating with burning cattails in the dark woods, young Patrick does not trust 'these strangers of another language enough to be able to step forward and join them' (p. 22). Yet the Macedonian word *gooshter* secures him admission first into the immigrant community, whose language and culture remain foreign to him although he has been living among and working with them for a while, and then into the underworld of the immigrant workers inside the half-built waterworks. There, he watches the puppet show featuring a life-sized puppet in foreign costume, which turns out to be played by Alice:

Laughing like a fool he was brought before the authorities, unable to speak their language. He stood there assaulted by insults. His face was frozen. The others began to pummel him but not a word emerged — just a damaged gaze in the context of those flailing arms. He fell to the floor pleading with gestures. (p. 117)

The show presents a caricature of the immigrant's predicament. Like the puppet, the immigrants are rendered mute and powerless because they cannot speak the language of the authorities. Language thus becomes an efficient means of social control. In *In the Skin of the Lion*, English, the dominant language, serves to deprive the immigrant of voice: if they speak in public 'in any language other than English, they will be jailed. A rule of the city' (p. 133). It also strips them of identity: 'the labour agent giving them all English names. Charlie Johnson, Nick Parker. They remember the strange foreign syllables like a number' (p. 132). For the immigrant workers, who 'on average [. . .] had three or four sentences of English' (p. 130), the English names are as intangible as abstract numbers. The act of naming or renaming is an exercise and demonstration of power; it is also a performative activity that results in metamorphosis. Once a nun miraculously rescued by Nicholas when she falls off the bridge, Alice transforms into an actress involved in union activism after she takes her name mockingly from the parrot, Alicia, in the Macedonian café where Nicholas leads her after the accident. Since translation is a form of naming/renaming, Nicholas, 'because of his fast and obsessive studying of English', comes across in his dreams the metamorphosing power of language: 'In the dreams trees changed not just their names but their looks and character. Men started answering in falsettos. Dogs spoke out fast to him as they passed him on the street' (pp. 46-47).

To overcome the language barrier becomes one of the immigrant's priorities. Nicholas arrives in Canada without any knowledge of English, but he knows that '[i]f he did not learn the

language he would be lost' (p. 46). Ondaatje dramatizes in a rather humorous way how the immigrants learn the hegemonic language of their adopted country:

Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs or, until the talkies came, through mimicking actors on stage. It was a common habit to select one actor and follow him throughout his career, annoyed when he was given a small part, and seeing each of his plays as often as possible — sometimes as often as ten times during a run. Usually by the end of an east-end production at the Fox or Parrot Theatres the actors' speeches would be followed by growing echoes as Macedonians, Finns, and Greeks repeated the phrases after a half-second pause, trying to get the pronunciation right. (p. 47)

The irony is that despite their endeavour to overcome the language barrier, they are still silenced by official history. 'While immigrants in Canada', as Ajay Heble notes, 'found themselves being reconstituted in the likeness of a "pure" and homogeneous dominant culture, they also found themselves [. . .] denied access to the means of representation.'²⁹

When living in the 'southeastern section of the city where [. . .] he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew' (p. 112), Patrick undergoes a reverse process of immigration and a similar linguistic dislocation. He becomes a foreigner among the foreigners in his homeland, and his native tongue a minority language. 'There is', Vauthier argues, 'no contrast here between the Anglo-Celtic Canadian who masters the dominant language and the ethnic who does not', and the reversal of inside/outside and majority/minority here thus undermines the whole idea of centrality.³⁰ Unfortunately, the undermining is only partial. Patrick's position in the Macedonian community highlights the domination of English since it is their

²⁹ Ajay Heble, 'Putting Together Another Family: *In the Skin of a Lion*, Affiliation, and the Writing of Canadian (Hi)Stories', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 56 (1995), 236-54 (p. 239).

³⁰ Vauthier, 'A Story', p. 72.

common language. Moreover, unlike the immigrants, he is under no obligation to learn the language spoken around him. By depicting the linguistic predicament encountered by immigrants, Ondaatje foregrounds the ambiguity of English in Canada: as an official language, it serves as a necessary medium for communication between the authorities and immigrants and as a convenient bridge between minority groups; as a dominant language, it is a means of assimilation, oppression and suppression that threatens to silence immigrants and deprive them of their racial or ethnic identity.

With its skilful blending of historical and invented material, *In the Skin of a Lion* probes into the power politics involved in the writing of history. It investigates how the underprivileged are marginalized and silenced in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and language, exposing the problems of official history. After recounting Patrick's disappointment at the results found in the library, the narrator makes a statement, which can be taken as summarizing Ondaatje's view on the nature of history:

There were no photographers like Lewis Hine, who in the United States was photographing child labour everywhere — trapper boys in coal mines, seven-year-old doffer girls in New England mills. [. . .] Official histories and news stories were always soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass on his own lawn. Hine's photographs betray official history and put together another family. (p. 145).

By reinterpreting Toronto's history of modernization from the marginalized perspectives of the working class and the immigrants, Ondaatje likewise puts together another family that betrays official history and demonstrates that writing history should be 'a multivalent act of

re-imagining the past.’³¹ He reveals the excluding process in historical discourse, positing the past as an unstable entity subjected to continual reconstruction and re-evaluation rather than as a given to be discovered.

In the novel, history is also reconfigured in spatial terms. Ondaatje breaks away from the traditional view of linear temporal development and presents history as a consequence of the transformations of landscapes and individuals and their mutual influences over time. Space is no longer perceived as a neutral referent or a locus of historical events, and mapping as a spatial activity necessarily involves temporal transformations. Patrick ‘was born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910, though his family had worked there for twenty years and the land had been homesteaded since 1816’ (p. 10). The invisibility of Patrick’s birthplace on the map raises questions about the mimetic function of cartography, exposing it as a mechanism of imposing meaning on reality. It is owing to its economic worth — logging — that Patrick’s place of origin can be written into official Canadian history:

In the school atlas the place is pale green and nameless. The river slips out of an unnamed lake and is a simple blue line until it becomes the Napanee twenty-five miles to the south, and, only because of logging, will eventually be called Depot Creek. ‘Deep Eau.’ (p. 11)

Logging alters not only the outlook of the landscape but the status of this region in history, transforming it from an ‘empty’ space into a recognizable place. However, the region is already a site of contestation before logging inserts it into official history. For Armando E. Jannetta, ‘Deep Eau’ is a compound of English and French words that ‘emphasizes the

³¹ Branko Gorjup, ‘Michael Ondaatje’s Reinvention of Social and Cultural Myths: *In the Skin of a Lion*’, *Acta Neophilologica*, 22 (1989), 89-95 (p. 94).

natural quality and the harmonious co-existence of different nationalities and nature.’³² Such a reading fails to recognize that as a combination of two languages, the term indicates the two imperial powers encroaching into this space and taking possession of the land through (re)naming, which amounts to a gesture of linguistic appropriation. Without considering the mention of ‘Napanee’, Jannetta ignores Ondaatje’s attempt to retrieve the Native past that has been obliterated by European colonial powers. More aware of the power relations involved in these changes, Annick Hillger contends that the naming and renaming of the river reflects Canada’s colonial history: the Native name ‘Napanee’ is first replaced by the French ‘Deep Eau’, and then both are erased by the English name ‘Depot Creek.’³³ Onomastic changes represent the appropriation of space by different colonial powers. The continuously renamed river shows how space is never a neutral stage for power relations to take place but rather structured by power relations.

Space is also an object to be mastered. All the three major characters in the novel exhibit great competence in this. Nicholas has such a precise understanding of space that he can perform formidable tasks when working on the bridge and earn much more than other workers: ‘He does not really need to see things, he has charted all that space [. . .]. He knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across a map’ (p. 35). The intuitive knowledge of space enables him to rescue miraculously the plummeting nun. Patrick acquires his knowledge of space through practice: ‘Sometimes when he is alone Patrick will blindfold himself and move around a room, slowly at first, then faster until he is immaculate and magical in it’ (p. 79). His intention is to impress Clara. Yet in telling Clara not to move when he performs the skill, Patrick transforms her into part of the space he is controlling, making

³² Armando E. Jannetta, ‘Onomastic Devices in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*’, *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 13: 2 (1991), 92-103 (p. 95).

³³ Annick Hillger, *Not Needing All the Words: Michael Ondaatje’s Literature of Silence* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), p. 117.

'an overt bid to detain and possess her.'³⁴ His knowledge of space turns into an exercise of power. Surrounded by his whirling, Clara however finds it too oppressive and moves against his instruction. They collide, leaving her knocked over and him with a bleeding nose. Patrick's mastery of space is counteracted by Clara's resistance.

Spearey considers Caravaggio's control of space to be 'much more tentative.'³⁵ Although he has 'trained as a thief in unlit rooms', able to rearrange or dismantle furniture in the darkness and put everything back in place, his sense of the world is 'limited to what existed for twenty feet around him' (p. 189). However, the knowledge of space Caravaggio has developed through his craft displays more profundity than that of Patrick or Nicholas, and the approach he has adopted proves to be less oppressive and more effective. For him, space is neither static nor inanimate, but teeming with a multiplicity of continual and subtle movements:

Landscape for Caravaggio was never calm. A tree bending with difficulty, a flower thrashed by wind, a cloud turning black, a cone falling — everything moved anguished at separate speeds. When he ran he saw it all. The eye splintering into fifteen sentries, watching everything approach. (p. 183)

When breaking into a house, he becomes himself an encroaching force, and must be very aware of the play of various forces in space. '*Demarcation*' (p. 179) is the key to his intimate knowledge of space, and his way of controlling space relies on the effacement of boundaries between his body and the surroundings. 'He would never leave his name where his skill had been' so that he can remain 'invisible to all around him' (p. 199). His astonishing escape from prison results exactly from the eradication of borders and boundaries. Patrick and another

³⁴ Spearey, 'Mapping', p. 54.

³⁵ Spearey, 'Mapping', p. 54.

fellow prisoner paint him, covering every part of his body with blue so as to transform him into part of the blue tin jail roof. Removing the lines of demarcation aims to manipulate rather than take rigid control of space.

If eradicating the lines of demarcation characterizes Caravaggio's manipulation of space, then inscribing the landscape summarizes Harris's philosophy of mastering space. The construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the water filtration plant stands for his 'attempts to impose his vision of Toronto physically upon the city, in an ambitious bid to control space.'³⁶ Yet Harris yearns for something more than shaping the outlook of the city as he has envisioned; his charting of space amounts to an ambition to be written into history. He wants to leave personal marks not only on the landscape but also on history. In the confrontation with Patrick, Harris does not respond to his accusations of forgetting the workers building the plant, but diverts the conversation to his vision of the plant turning into a monument that will astonish generations to come: 'You watch, in fifty years they're going to come here and gape at the herringbone and the copper roofs. We need excess, something to live up to. I fought tooth and nail for that herringbone' (p. 236).

Harris is not the only one inscribing visions onto the plant. Forbidden to hold meetings and speak languages other than English in public, the immigrant workers transform the half-built waterworks into a chronotopic space, wherein they have 'illegal gathering[s] of various nationalities' and '[m]any languages were being spoken', thus 'all of them trespassing' (p. 115). Within this interstitial space is played the puppet show dramatizing their unspoken and unspeakable powerlessness caused by the lack of the authorities' language. The stage turns into a 'dangerous new country' (p. 116) that unifies these immigrants of various nationalities. Their carnivalesque activities in Harris's palace of purification counters his charting of the

³⁶ Spearey, 'Mapping', p. 58.

space, forming what Michael Greenstein describes as a contest between the immigrants' populism and Harris's palatial hubris.³⁷ Yet the implications are more complicated. Their clandestine and subversive utilization of the waterworks, though temporarily and secretly, transforms it from a mere infrastructure consuming their labour and lives into an entity indicative of their political dissent. The workers oppose not just exploitation by Harris's modernizing project but the silence and invisibility imposed on them by the authorities and official history.

By telling stories about the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant from the perspective of the workers, Ondaatje himself inscribes new meaning onto the Canadian landscape. By depicting these acts of construction as an attempt to master space and leave marks on history, he illustrates history as a complex of temporal and spatial transformations, entangled with power relations. By presenting their significance as subject to continual re-inscription, he reconfigures both history and space as sites of contestation. By dramatizing Patrick's migration into the city as a metaphorical journey into the dark areas of history, he exposes the exclusionary and repressive mechanism in the making of official history. *In the Skin of a Lion* not only provides alternative versions of history but problematizes the process of history writing. With Macedonians, Finns, Bulgarians, Greeks, Italians and so on abounding in the textual space, it registers the presence of cultural and racial plurality in early twentieth-century Toronto, reinforcing the impression of the Canadian mosaic.³⁸ Ondaatje is successful in adapting the form of postmodern

³⁷ Michael Greenstein, 'Ondaatje's Metamorphoses: *In the Skin of a Lion*', *Canadian Literature*, 126 (1990), 116-30 (p. 126).

³⁸ However, the heterogeneity of this multicultural mosaic is devoid of tension and conflict, and hostility exists only between the authorities and marginalized immigrants. As Batia Boe Stolar notes, 'the immigrants become a unified body politic' as 'the existing authority seeks to solidify and exert its control'. Davey also points out that in the novel differences are harmonized. In this sense, the political criticism Ondaatje intends his literary representation of this historical era to accomplish is more or less compromised. See Stolar, 'Building and Living the Immigrant City: Michael Ondaatje's and Austin Clarke's Toronto', in *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities*, ed. Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 122-41 (p. 127); Davey, *Post-National Arguments*, p. 156.

historical fiction to accommodate his concern with Canadian specificities.

Fox

If radical unionism is the dark history that Patrick steps into in *In the Skin of a Lion*, it comes out of that darkness and takes centre stage in Sweatman's *Fox*. In Ondaatje's version of the building of modern Toronto, unionism consists of individual acts of sabotage like Patrick's arson attack, and class conflict takes the form of personal confrontation between Patrick and Harris; labour activism serves as a catalyst for the development of Patrick's character and for his alternative understanding of national history. In Sweatman's rewriting of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, unionism is represented in the form of collective action. All her characters, regardless of class, gender or race, must get involved in these labour movements. Immigrants and the working class are the common concern in both novels, but their approaches are different. With ex-centrics as protagonists, Ondaatje provides a version of history seen from the bottom, while with a wider selection of characters Sweatman assembles in the same textual space a diversity of voices that engage in a constant interaction at a tumultuous historical moment. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the narration is fragmented through the shift of focalization among main characters. *Fox* takes this process of fragmentation further, chopping historical documents and mixing them with stories of a variety of fictional characters as well as historical figures.

Sweatman states that Bakhtin's essay 'Discourse in the Novel' played a decisive role in her choice of narrative form for *Fox* and that its 'paratactic, discontinuous, fragmented structure comprised of different voices' freed her from a linear plot.³⁹ This polyphonic form, for Sweatman, is 'the most appropriate way to write about a small-scale civil war, the General

³⁹ Wylie, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 167.

Strike in Winnipeg.’⁴⁰ In terms of formal experimentation, *Fox* resembles *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* more than *In the Skin of a Lion*. It is a pastiche containing sections of prose fiction, newspaper headlines, advertisements, excerpts from the mainstream and labour presses, letters, telegrams, song lyrics, entries from the fictional Canon’s diary, extracts from public speeches, quotations from the historical Rev. John Maclean’s diary, and passages from Karl Marx. The sections vary in length from a few lines to several pages. Some of them are independent units while others consist of subsections that are not always closely connected. Some sections have headings. Occasionally the headings are ironic commentaries on the contents. The structure seeks to accommodate as many speech types and individual voices as possible in one textual space, demonstrating the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia.⁴¹ The lack of linear progression and the juxtaposition of a multiplicity of textual elements demand the reader’s active participation in establishing dialogic relations among the sections and in the production of meaning. As a result, this extremely fragmented text becomes a marketplace with a variety of voices as well as ideologies intersecting one another. They may echo, qualify or contradict each other.

The difficulty in making sense of the fragmented structure and the multiplicity of perspectives is somewhat reduced by Sweatman’s chronological arrangement of events. Despite the rejection of a linear narrative, Sweatman employs a rather simple mode of temporality. *Fox* starts with Eleanor’s party on 22 December 1918 and ends with the Mounties’ shooting at the strikers on ‘Bloody Saturday’, although the exact date, 21 June 1919, is not given. To reduce temporal disorientation, dates are identified at irregular intervals. Some sections of prose fiction and the Canon’s diary entries are dated, indicating

⁴⁰ Sweatman, ‘Dialogue and Difficulty: Narrative as Performance’, quoted in Gabriele Helms, *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), p. 129.

⁴¹ Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, p. 263.

the passage of time. Readers can recognize the central historical events of the general strike, most of which are presented through quotations from newspapers: the assembly in the Walker Theatre on 22 December 1918, the first strike launched by the Building Trades' Council on 1 May 1919, the vote for the strike on 14 May, the night shift of the Hello Girls as the first to walk off the job, the beginning of the general strike on 15 May at 11 am, the establishment of the Citizens' Committee of 1,000 on 16 May, the forty-minute legislation passed on 6 June, the arrest of strike leaders on 16 and 17 June. This chronological arrangement anchors the multiplicity of perspectives presented and prevents such a wide and diverse range of textual forms from degenerating into a narrative muddle.

The chronological progression of events does not correspond with a single teleological narrative, which is what Sweatman strives to avoid.⁴² In one sense, *Fox* can be seen as a collection of short stories, which are not necessarily related to one another in terms of subplots or characters but all of which are related to the general strike. The various stories aim to provide a multiplicity of views about the historical event. Despite the lack of a single linear storyline, *Fox* follows two young middle-class women, Eleanor and her cousin Mary, both living in Crescentwood, a wealthy area in the south end of Winnipeg. The former becomes romantically interested in MacDougal, a Methodist minister supporting the socialist cause; the latter is engaged to Drinkwater, an up-and-coming capitalist who seeks advice from her father, Sir Rodney. But their stories are also chopped into pieces and alternate with a variety of textual scraps. In combination with this deliberate formal fragmentation is what Gabriele Helms identifies as 'the strategy of counterpoint', a strategy of juxtaposing different perspectives about the same event or counterpointing activities occurring simultaneously.⁴³ The former is exemplified in the characters' reflections on the future: Drinkwater 'looks into

⁴² Wylie, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 168.

⁴³ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, pp. 127-29.

the stark early spring night and he sees *the future*’;⁴⁴ ‘MacDougal sees the night’s lush wing descend. He sees *the future*’ (p. 80); ‘Mary breathes deeply, her hands [. . .] stroking, caressing, wakening, *the future*. And she sees, that it is *good*’ (p. 81); the Canon writes in his diary, ‘They could use me and I will do as I can by them. For the new. For change’ (p. 82); ‘Eleanor sees the future. *And it is missing*’ (p. 84).⁴⁵ Without considering the contexts of these reflections, which happen after the vote for the first strike on 1 May, Helms fails to notice the diverse attitudes toward the labour movement among these characters. Drinkwater’s reflection on the future occurs on his abandoned building site. The walkout of his employees at this moment has not yet become a threat, so he can envision the unfinished wood frames turning into ‘a finished house, expensive, brick covered with Virginia creeper, unabashed imitations, Tudor, Dutch colonial, Georgian’ (p. 78). It is at this moment that MacDougal comes across Drinkwater, whose complaint about the strike sets his face ‘afame’ (p. 79). The delight is so great that, when staring at ‘the bare bones of Drinkwater’s houses’, MacDougal ‘sees them topple and fall into dust’ (p. 79). The future he envisages is the collapse of capitalism. The two men form a contrast in attitude towards the strike in terms of class division, a contrast reinforced by the differences between the Canon and Mary in their reflections on the future. The Canon believes the strike is inevitable and will bring change and hope, whereas Mary rejoices at the prospect of marriage with Drinkwater, which will preserve her privileged position as a middle-class woman.

The paralleling of activities occurring at the same time is demonstrated in the section ‘Pale Wandering Baby’s Breath’: ‘MacDougal [. . .] has begun a letter to a Brother, but the words have wandered off and begun their own litany elsewhere’; ‘the children in the street lift brown bare arms in the scarlet heat, It’s snowing! It’s snowing, they cry’; ‘Across the thirsty

⁴⁴ Margaret Sweatman, *Fox* (Winnipeg, MB: Turnstone Press, 1991), p. 78. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

⁴⁵ Italics original in all these quotations.

river, Walter wonders if he should bother to plant the vegetable seeds or set the wilted seedlings in the garden'; 'And down the street Eleanor remembers last night's meeting, under the stars, the rhythms of revival' (p. 144). The simultaneity exhibits a strong sense of 'spatial contingency', characters positioned in different sites without realizing the existence of others and without relationships established among them.⁴⁶ This pattern recurs throughout the novel. On 22 December 1918, Eleanor is entertaining friends at a toboggan party while workers are assembling in the Walker Theatre to listen to speeches given by strike leaders like William Ivens, R.B. Russell, John Queen, Sam Blumenberg, or George Armstrong. One afternoon, when Eleanor and her friend Grace are sharing memories of her late brother Tony and speculating what he would have done if he had survived the war, a meeting is being held at the Labour Church with Fred Dixon and Williams Ivens giving talks about the evil of capitalism. Later, while the celebration for the passage of the forty-minute legislation is going on, MacDougal is reading late into the night in his bookstore. Towards the end of the novel, while Mary's sumptuous wedding to Drinkwater is in progress, the Special constables carry out raids, arrest the strike leaders, ransack their homes, and confiscate evidence of sedition and conspiracy. For Helms, these narrative counterpoints set up the opposition of 'private versus public, middle class versus working class, women versus men, and anti-strike versus pro-strike positions.'⁴⁷

However, by counterpointing activities that occur at the same time in different places, Sweatman foregrounds the simultaneity and spatial contingency of events, creating a narration that moves progressively and expands laterally, without being restricted by a mode of linear temporality. The strategy encourages the reader to establish dialogic relations among the events and perspectives juxtaposed, undermining the seemingly binary opposition

⁴⁶ Spearey, 'Mapping', p. 51.

⁴⁷ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 128.

suggested by Helms. The counterpointed events are not separate but related in one way or another. Eleanor's toboggan party depends on the wealth acquired through capitalism, which is being attacked in the socialist meeting in the Walker Theatre, whereas socialist activities like this become one topic of conversation in the party. The subject of the private talk between Eleanor and Grace is Tony, who dies in the Great War, while in the Labour Church, Dixon is criticizing the government for enforcing conscription to squeeze manpower for the Great War, arguing that 'it's wealth should be conscripted' (p. 32). The passage of forty-minute legislation in public leads to the violent invasion of MacDougal's private life in the bookstore and his detention. The wedding not only unites a man and a woman but also forms a coalition between Mary's father and husband-to-be. The coalition consolidates the cooperation and power of the employers, echoes the complicity between the employers and the government which allows raids on the strike leaders' houses and their arrest, and finally may well intensify the tension of existing class conflict, causing more inconvenience to Mary's future life. Through juxtaposition, the apparently separate events and perspectives serve as points of interconnection in a complicated network, demonstrating how public events and private lives affect each other.

Sweatman not only encourages the establishment of dialogic relations between the events narrated in various sections but also demonstrates how dialogism and heteroglossia actually operate at a verbal level by recontextualizing quotations from historical documents. Reinhold Kramer describes this tactic as the 'relining' of prose originals.⁴⁸ The transformation of Marx's sentences and the language of the Social Gospel into poeticized lines recovers 'the fervency of socialism in 1919' while the relining of an extract from John MacLean's diary reveals that his anti-strike rhetoric exhibits 'the coordinated powers of religious authority, the

⁴⁸ Reinhold Kramer, 'The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox*', *Canadian Literature*, 160 (1999), 50-70 (p. 53).

state, and race.’⁴⁹ As a result, the poeticized lines form a new dialogic relation with its original form of prose and the heteroglossia of both is further confirmed. Helms pays more attention to recontextualization, emphasizing that the act of retelling is always double-voiced since placing a quotation in a new context enables it to take on new meaning.⁵⁰ When foregrounding dialogism and heteroglossia, these poeticized lines also disrupt the process of reading, forcing the reader to pause and work to establish connections between what comes before and after.

The formal experimentation helps to illustrate Sweatman’s political considerations about the strike. She disrupts and complicates the opposition between middle and working classes with gender politics, retrieving and reconfiguring the multiple positions of women in class strife. Histories of the strike tend to ignore the role of women. As Mary Horodyski observes,

For all that has been written on women’s actions during the Winnipeg general sympathetic strike of 1919, it could be concluded easily that females were not there at all, that they passed the six weeks holidaying at Lake Winnipeg. The historiography of the strike has been male-centred, and like all of history which refuses to include women and renders them invisible, it has been severely biased and incomplete.⁵¹

The polyphonic form of *Fox* not only allows more female voices to be heard but also enables their heterogeneity to emerge. With women going on strike, being jailed for rioting, engaging in militant actions, despairing of feeding kids, prostituting themselves for survival, organizing the food kitchen at the Oxford Hotel for strikers, or, in some cases, feeling only

⁴⁹ Kramer, ‘The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike’, pp. 54, 57.

⁵⁰ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 134.

⁵¹ Mary Horodyski, ‘Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919’, *Manitoba History*, 11, (1986). Available at http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/11/women1919strike.shtml [accessed 12 February 2009].

inconvenienced by the strike, *Fox* 're-inscribes a wider range of women into the narratives of the Winnipeg General Strike.'⁵²

The interrelationship between gender and class is explored primarily through the characterization of Eleanor as one eager to step out of the private sphere allocated to women. Her 'unwomanly' interest in public affairs is not welcomed by men of her class: '*I wonder how they do talk, when I'm really not here, is it always so ordinary?*' (p. 4). Her support of the labour movement is made fun of by Drinkwater, who puns on the meaning of 'red', saying about 'Eleanor turning Red, and how Red will look pretty garish what with all the [. . .] fur Eleanor's so fond of' (p. 5). He attempts to exclude Eleanor from politics, thus reinforcing the distinction between men and women, public and private. But Eleanor tries to cross the class and gender border and enter the working-class world represented by MacDougal, whom she gets to know through her father and who takes her to socialist and labour meetings. She moves out of her father's lush house, takes part in the activities MacDougal engages in, and works in the kitchen of the Oxford Hotel as he expects her to. However, the more Eleanor gets involved in MacDougal's life and labour movement, the more she realizes that her gender and class leave her in an in-between space.

Her first encounter with labour activism is not pleasant; she is treated as a child by the men in the socialist meeting, who 'return her chilled little handshake condescendingly, playacting for a child' (p. 12). But the guest speaker's words compel her to reflect on the meaning of poverty and to recognize some connection exists between herself and the poor:

How can she give all her money away? She doesn't have any money, her friend Grace doesn't have any money, her cousin Mary doesn't have any money, it is all their fathers'

⁵² Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 127.

money and they say they've earned it and maybe they have too. Private property? Take it, she has none. (p. 14)

This moment of epiphany is cut short by MacDougal's return, and again 'she willingly becomes the little girl' (p. 14). MacDougal plays a paradoxical role in Eleanor's psychological development. In taking her to socialist meetings, he helps to strengthen her political enthusiasm, but his presence also prevents her from achieving full self-consciousness and exploring further the similarity between middle-class women and the proletariat. The epiphany does not vanish altogether but resurfaces later, leading to an identity crisis in Eleanor's search for selfhood:

But whereas tapestries, a desk with pigeon-holes for papers thin with the necessities of a big business, paintings and vases above and upon a grand piano, whereas all these things once gave Eleanor a *name*, the secure feet-on-the-ground knowledge of herself as *Eleanor*, daughter of, sister of, niece of, cousin of, member of — but owner of nothing, not really, it all belongs to Father, to her remaining brother who is running the firm in Toronto, to her uncles and their sons. (p. 68)

After realizing that middle-class women resemble the proletariat in terms of property, Eleanor also recognizes that she is defined in relation to men. In moving out of her father's house, she attempts to break away from the middle-class environment and the patriarchal world it represents: 'She has slipped out of his vocabulary' (p. 90). Eleanor tries to define who she is in her own terms by leaving the past behind:

She opens the window and stands there for a long time, breathing, her breathing marking the time, numbering the voices, her father, and her brother, her relations falling from her,

the voices departing from her, leaving her alone at the window looking out. (p. 91)

Though eager to get integrated into the socialist circle MacDougal has worked for by taking part in their activities, Eleanor fails to acquire the sense of belonging she yearns for. Instead, she finds herself caught in between:

She has recently discovered (and maybe this discovery has given her freedom) that she can indeed listen in a fragmentary way, skipping like a thin stone in and out of these conversations, alternating her listening with a conversation that she has begun with herself. In this way, Eleanor has discovered, she can listen and place the fragments that she takes from the men according to her own translation. And another thing: it doesn't matter anymore that her patterns of translation differ from MacDougal's or her father's. The men speak their public language, and it is a marvel, their absolute sentences, and Eleanor, living under and between, always outside, has a place she can furnish according to her own design. She has decided this is good. (p. 120)

Happy in that in-between space, Eleanor seems to have succeeded in defining herself in her own terms. Nonetheless, her newly gained confidence in negotiating between two men does not mean independence is fully achieved. In fact, Eleanor makes herself enter a relationship still dominated by patriarchy, this time dominated by MacDougal alone: 'Eleanor seeking an avenue in the maze, she would conform to MacDougal's vision, if only he will stay' (p. 140). All she seeks for through active participation in MacDougal's life is his recognition. Out of her father's vocabulary, Eleanor slips into MacDougal's.

Though allowing Eleanor to join his life and attend political activities with him, MacDougal treats her as an object to be kept under observation, and no true communication is ever

developed between them: 'MacDougal is consistently silent with Eleanor. He seems to enjoy listening to her; he watches her speak, but he watches as if he's in another room' (p. 11). He 'doesn't seem to expect her to know anything' (p. 68). When Eleanor speaks of finding a job, 'Why would you do that?' (p. 107) is his response, discouraging Eleanor's determination to gain independence. MacDougal's attitude is little different from that of his ideological antithesis, Drinkwater, who always seeks to neutralize Eleanor's political passion: 'He has learned to mimic precisely Eleanor's passionate vowels, dilutes her enthusiasms with sarcasm, drains a conversation of content' (p. 40). It is clear that for Drinkwater, politics is none of women's business, and they should not even talk about it: 'No use saying anything to Mary either, only bore her or what's worse she's have an O-pinion about it' (p. 72). Wellington Bateman, a friend of Sir Rodney's, exemplifies the same patronizing attitude toward women's ignorance in the way he treats Mary. Despite the thought that Mary 'has sense and the fine moral fibre of her race' (p. 18), he does not expect her 'to comprehend thoroughly the gravity of these matters' (p. 19). Even the pro-strike Canon, who admires women with Eleanor's 'rather peculiar ambitions', still believes '[i]t is just too much for their constitution' (p. 137). Despite differences in class and political orientation, these men hold similar views about gender roles.

Eleanor's increasing commitment to the socialist cause forms a contrast to Mary's apparent indifference. Self-absorbed and unsympathetic to the cause of the strike, Mary calls the strikers 'bleating workers' or 'bleating socialist[s]' (p.65) and cares only about the inconvenience. Her marriage to Drinkwater secures her privileged status in the class environment in which she has been raised. Unlike Eleanor, who crosses the boundaries of gender and class through voluntary participation in political activities, Mary is determined to remain within the private sphere women are expected to occupy. Yet she is not always an antithesis of Eleanor since she is rebellious 'in her own perverse way' (p. 60). As Helms notes,

she enjoys 'occasional transgressions of rules and boundaries', such as creeping into houses deserted by their neighbours during the summer vacation, sneaking out of the house to join a parade with Drinkwater without her father's permission, and premarital sex.⁵³ Young Mary does cross the class boundary at some moments in her relationship with Walter, a manservant in the Sir Rodney family: 'She bit him and pinched him and stole from him. She understood that nothing would ever be reported back to her parents', and before his departure for the Great War, 'she lay under his bed while he packed' (p. 60). In adulthood, she continues to enter Walter's room at will. Such crossing only proves her class arrogance. These are temporary transgressions that generate moments of excitement without actually threatening her social status. Though never seeking to subvert the rules and boundaries of her community, Mary yearns for a break from the patriarchal structures imposed on her. Just as Eleanor finds it satisfying to have her patterns of translation that differ from her father's or MacDougal's, Mary is happy to discover some momentary freedom in an in-between space:

Adroit, she is learning to carry on an outward conversation, with DW, or her father, or poor Walter, and at the same time have this other voice, a contradiction, a joke. It makes the green lawn roll out a little further, it patterns the blue sky like hand-painted wallpaper, over and over and over. She stretches in it. (p. 61)

Though forming a contrast in their attitude to the strike, the two cousins are similarly victimized by patriarchy and show some desire for rebellion. Their difference and similarity indicates the complex relations between gender and class. Eleanor's commitment to the socialist cause implies the possibility of establishing a coalition between the working class and the middle-class women in terms of their comparable situations in private property, whereas Mary's indifference suggests that though disadvantaged in comparison with men of

⁵³ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, pp. 136-37.

the same class, the middle-class women can be victimizers of the underprivileged class.

The economically advantaged Eleanor and Mary can decide how much they want to get involved with the political unrest, but non-involvement is never an option for working-class women. In the sketchy portraits of working-class women, many of whom are nameless, Sweatman highlights their desperate need for basic necessities of life, which not only forms a sharp contrast with the lavish and pampered lifestyle enjoyed by Mary and Eleanor but also exposes the wide disparity in the standards of living between rich and poor. In the section 'Rent', a woman describes how her sister Aileen sells sex to 'a *gentleman*' (p. 36) in order to buy food, pay her rent and afford the dress she is required to wear at work. Privation leaves no room for the two sisters to speculate about the morality of turning to prostitution. The sad story serves to justify the strikers' struggle for a living wage. In 'Fire', another unidentified woman makes a sarcastic comment on what is preached in the new church she and Aileen go to: 'Brotherhood. Tell me about it. I got Brothers lining up night after night and every one of them putting a dollar in the collection box, right? Brotherhood' (p. 66). In another episode, an anonymous woman narrator tells why she wants her unfaithful runaway husband back — not out of love but because she needs 'a man's earning' (p. 159) to feed her kids. It foregrounds the economic dependence of working-class women, which also suggests that they are little different from their middle-class counterparts when their men, either husbands or fathers, refuse to support them. But Aileen's case clearly indicates that working-class women are subject to double exploitation in terms class and gender. Their bodies are appropriated by capitalism as the means of production, and by men of all classes as instruments of desire. However, if prostitution is used by underprivileged women as a last resort for survival, marriage serves as the only acceptable means for middle-class women to gain economic security. This is what Mary is doing through marriage with Drinkwater. To maintain the security, she also has to fulfil the obligation of producing an heir, which turns her body into a

means of production for capitalism and patriarchy. Both marriage and prostitution are forms of trafficking in the female body.

But not all of Sweatman's working-class women characters are victims. In a rather light tone, a wife of one of the Strike Committee members expresses full support when following the Committee's instruction to store food in the expectation of a long siege:

Turnips! They'll have to be happy with turnips tonight. And turnips tomorrow. Enough to fill a bathtub. [. . .] Tommy's a Committee man, my how that man talks! He can talk too! Tommy's at the meeting and baby's next door. For how long? Enough carrots to last a couple weeks. (p. 92)

Women standing behind striking men are given a voice even though in this case gender division remains, with the wife confined to the private domain and her husband going out for public affairs.⁵⁴ To counterpoint the traditional gender roles of women and to highlight the role of women strikers, *Fox* devotes a section to the 'Hello Girls', the telephone operators who began the general strike four hours before the official starting point. Their action leads Horodyski to conclude that 'Women began the Winnipeg general sympathetic strike.'⁵⁵ Here Sweatman foregrounds their striking history since 1917 and reconfirms the reason for the strike by inserting into the narrative an episode of a lady investigator who fainted from hunger and fractured her hip after living for eight days on the telephone operator's ordinary wage when she tried to assess their request for salary increase. The episode is followed by a sarcastic remark that reveals the discrepancy between the traditional assumption of women as

⁵⁴ Horodyski notes: 'During the strike many women chose not to pass through boundaries into more dangerous ground and instead remained in their traditional places as wives and mothers. These women are often disregarded and rendered invisible because they were not dashing and daring heroines. When seen at all, they are viewed as martyrs standing behind the great striking man.' See her 'Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919'.

⁵⁵ Horodyski, 'Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.'

being under men's protection and the actual necessity for them to fend for themselves:

Put it down to the brutality of war, but something's made the Hello Girls say no. Maybe the scarcity of men makes them act more masculine. Maybe Womanhood gets stale, left too long. But it just doesn't seem fair, a woman paying her own way. Someone ought to take care of her. (p. 86)

Women were either forced or encouraged to work due to the labour shortage and the absence of male wage-earners during the Great War. With the end of the war and the demobilization of soldiers, women's labour was not as much needed as it had been. They were pressured to withdraw from the labour market and resume their places as protected wives and mothers, as if the appeal to traditional gender roles could solve all the problems. This is the stance adopted by the *Winnipeg Tribune* in the report quoted in *Fox*, titled 'One Girl Will Surrender Job To Soldier Boy' (p. 26). Again, to counterpoint the typical women's roles as represented by Mary, Aileen or the anonymous dutiful wife, Sweatman depicts a well-organized group of militant women attacking two delivery trucks driven by scabs and accords to them a strong sense of solidarity, a sense that is lacking in the description of their middle-class counterparts:⁵⁶

Some are here because the husbands are home from work, and some are here because the husbands don't have *any* work, but some are here because there are no husbands, just work, and the boss says he'll pay them a family wage but there isn't any family just them and the kids, and the kids are skinny and everybody's always tired. One of the ideas is they stick together because they're all alike. (p. 141)

⁵⁶ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 140.

Of these aggressive women, Helen Armstrong is the most conspicuous. In the food kitchen where Eleanor comes to help out at MacDougal's suggestion, she learns about her militant actions that lead to the charges of 'rioting', 'intimidation' or 'unlawful assembly' (p. 169) before being able to recognize this noted labour activist. The historical Helen was president of the Women's Labour League, which initiated and maintained the food kitchen supplying women strikers with free meals and played a crucial role throughout the strike.⁵⁷ The glances at the historical Helen and the depiction of women's attack on scabs constitute Sweatman's attempt to render visible women's militancy in the labour and socialist movements.

The multiple descriptions of working-class women establish dialogic relationships between themselves, revealing diversity among women of the same class. They also generate a different sense of interconnectedness with the sections revolving round middle-class women, highlighting the economic dependence of women in all classes. Undeniably, *Fox* accords much more focalization to Eleanor and Mary than to working-class characters, which leads critics to question Sweatman's political commitment. For example, Kramer holds that the 'aesthetic and lyric interpretation of Eleanor's politics as a product of romantic and sexual desire for MacDougal reduces the novel's political impact.'⁵⁸ This commentary seems tenable if the political impact he refers to is evaluated only in the light of class, but it becomes unjustifiable when gender is taken into consideration. The characterization of Eleanor serves as one of the strategies to rescue gender issues from oblivion in one of the

⁵⁷ According to Linda Kealey, both organized and unorganized working women were urged to support the strike largely through the efforts of Helen Armstrong, who arranged countless meetings for women workers which sought to form new unions and served as information sessions and strategy-planning occasions. See Kealey, 'No Special Protection — No Sympathy: Women's Activism in the Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919', in *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930*, ed. Deian R. Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey (St. John's: LLA Fur/CCLH, 1989), pp.134-59 (p. 137). Horodyski points out that studies of the strike tend to ignore the fact that the thousands of meals served weekly at the food kitchen provide clear evidence for the large number of women strikers and for their lower wages. See her 'Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919'.

⁵⁸ Kramer, 'The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike', p. 62. Wyile also argues that Sweatman's choice of protagonists blunts her political critique. See Wyile, *Speculative Fictions*, p. 103.

most notorious labour-management clashes in Canadian history.

The marginalization of gender issues in class conflict can be seen in the dinner scene when the four main characters meet Emma Partridge, who exhibits strong feminist concerns in her complaint about the unpopularity of the passage of women's suffrage and her advocacy of education as the only avenue to power for women.⁵⁹ Her audience, however, are not very appreciative: 'Drinkwater snorts', 'MacDougal is quiet', Mary never speaks, and Eleanor, despite her love for Emma, 'feels she must give Emma her eyes, but she's listening for MacDougal' (p. 42). Neither strike activists nor anti-strike proponents pay attention to her feminist enthusiasm, but her presence reminds the reader of the women's movements occurring simultaneously with but overwhelmed by the labour movements. Emma's passionate talk culminates in dissatisfaction with women's education: 'The poor benighted women in Home Economics, going to *university* for John's sake, to learn how to look after ten children on a farm? What they *should* be taught is how to *avoid* having one child after another without rest' (pp. 42-3). It is presented with a strain of irony since this 'Dinner' section, with characters enjoying a plentiful supply of food in a cosy dining room, comes after 'Rent', in which destitution forces Aileen into prostitution. The dialogic relation between the two sections encourages the reader to ask what education can do for women suffering privation, thus exposing the blind spots in the ideological assumptions of Emma's middle-class feminist stance.

In addition to gender, issues of ethnicity and race are foregrounded in the beginning of the novel. In her first date with MacDougal, Eleanor encounters a group of uniformed soldiers

⁵⁹ On 28 January 1916, Manitoba women became the first in Canada to win enfranchisement and to hold provincial office. Two years later, on 24 May 1918, suffrage was granted to all female citizens aged 21 and over. See Susan Jackel, 'Women's Suffrage', in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Available at <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com> [accessed 1 March 2009].

chasing off labourers and immigrants gathered at Market Square while at the same time 'shouting all the old slogans, Bolsheviki! Go back to Russia!' (p. 14). Anti-alien sentiments are clearly expressed by Wellington Bateman, who approves of the xenophobic violence perpetrated against 'the Huns' convening in honour of a dead German:

Well, it is a blessed mercy our boys were there to set things right. Just as the fun began, the soldiers made a rush for the firebrands. "Fritzie's are all the same to us!" they cried. The Socialists fled in terror. The Soldiers overtook them. The Socialists attempted to take refuge in the Austro-Hungarian Club. Our boys smashed it entirely. The aliens fled to the German Club on McGregor Street. Again, we smashed them right proper, and the windows of ten or twelve other buildings owned by Germans and Austrians, completely demolished. (p. 19)

The heading of this section, 'Canada Must Be British', makes an ironic comment on the Anglocentrism of the privileged class. Furthermore, the confrontation between MacDougal and Dominion censor Benstock makes it explicit that singling out immigrants as the instigators of industrial unrest is a political strategy employed by the government to tackle the discontent of the working class. When accused of sedition, MacDougal stresses that what the books in his bookshop advocate is not 'continental socialism' but 'the policies of the opposition party in the British House of Commons' (p. 24). Benstock replies: 'we intend to focus that blame away from the Government, we choose to lay the blame elsewhere, the foreign element will do nicely' (p. 24). The employers adopt a similar stance as shown in Sir Rodney, who, though aware that the strike leaders are British, still puts the blame on the alien and regards the labour and socialist movements as a threat to British democracy: 'But this Bolsheviki atheism is Russian, it originated in Russia and should be returned there before it

destroys everything constitutional' (p. 178).⁶⁰ The foreigner is made a scapegoat. Words like 'alien', 'revolutionary', 'red', 'Bolshevik', 'Hun', 'Jew', and 'Prussian', are used to ostracize strikers and their supporters. *Fox* dramatizes how language can be manipulated for the purposes of social exclusion and discrimination, which culminate in the hasty amendment to the Immigration Act during the peak of the strike.⁶¹ The new act allows any '*person deemed to be a revolutionary who was born outside of Canada*' to '*be summarily shipped back to the land of his birth*' (p. 171).

Obviously, 'alien' has become a highly charged term used by strike opponents and the government to deny the claims and rights of the strikers. In fact, the labour revolt of 1919 involved a fierce struggle for the right to define Canadian citizenship and nationhood. In his excellent research into the role of language and discourse in the history of the Winnipeg General Strike, Chad Reimer points out that while the Citizens' Committee of 1000 depicted the strikers as 'disloyal "aliens" and noncitizens', the *Western Labour News* also charged the employers as 'real aliens' because they brought in the alien to serve their own private interests and not the community.⁶² The category of 'alien' thus turns into a site of contestation in which both sides of the class divide compete to define its meaning in order to conceptualize their own citizenship and nationhood. Due to the absence of the alien rhetoric on the part of the working class, *Fox* does not present a direct discursive struggle as Chad has delineated, but in a clever way it calls into question the notion of 'alien' used by strike

⁶⁰ According to J.M. Bumsted, by 1919 there was a rapidly growing labour elite in Winnipeg. They had been born and grown up in the industrial centres of the British Isles. Though hardly ideologically homogeneous, they developed a working-class consciousness and knew how to articulate it. Many were members of the Labour Party of Britain, and most were socialists of one kind or another. They were often self-educated and very aware of the contemporary world of ideas and ideology. Among the major labour leaders, 55 percent were English-born, 25 percent Scots-born, 10 percent Welsh-born, 5 percent Irish-born, and only 5 percent Canadian born. See Bumsted, *The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919: An Illustrated History* (Winnipeg, MB: Watson and Dwyer, 1994), pp. 8-9.

⁶¹ Labour labelled this '40-minute legislation' because its three readings were passed in both the House of Commons and Senate within less than an hour. See Bumsted, *The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919*, p. 48.

⁶² Chad Reimer, 'War, Nationhood and Working-Class Entitlement: The Counterhegemonic Challenge of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike', *Prairie Forum*, 18: 2 (1993), 219-37 (pp. 231-32).

opponents to discriminate against immigrants, undermining their justification for anti-alien sentiments. At the dinner, when Emma's feminist rhetoric elicits little response from the four protagonists, they enter into 'a familiar discussion about everybody's origins and how many generations everyone has in Canada' (p. 43). Their ancestors are aliens to this land too, but now the term is utilized to stigmatize newly arrived immigrants. MacDougal's shocking answer foregrounds the Anglocentrism in the discussion and undermines the supposed homogeneity of being British: 'his grandparents left Scotland too, he says, it's obvious from his name, Scotch Gaelic, it means, "son of the dark stranger." Everyone stares at him' (p. 43).

The hostility towards immigrants is intensified in the opposition between returned soldiers and aliens, a rhetoric employed by strike opponents and mainstream newspapers like the *Winnipeg Citizen* or *Winnipeg Tribune*. Quotations such as 'CHOOSE BETWEEN THE SOLDIERS WHO ARE PROTECTING YOU AND THE ALIENS WHO ARE THREATENING' (p. 116) or 'WHO WILL GET THESE JOBS? ALIEN ENEMIES OR WAR VETERANS?' (p. 126), present the strike as a question of patriotism and depict the alien as a figure threatening national security and depriving veterans of their jobs. The impression that the veteran has fallen victim to the violence of malicious aliens is conveyed in another news excerpt: 'whether [Sergeant Fred Coppin] lives or dies, the fact remains that he was kicked with intent to kill, by three Austrians — men whose blood relations he and every other returned fighter fought in France' (p. 177).

To interrupt this discursive opposition, Sweatman makes it explicit that the social and political unrest in the 1919 Winnipeg Strike stems from class division rather than from ethnicity and race. It is a fact articulated, ironically, by capitalist Sir Rodney: 'These disturbances only serve to magnify the differences between classes. Fragments of the community organized wholly for their own benefit. Then, once they gain power, they want to

dictate what is right for the rest of us' (p. 77). It is by nature power struggle based on class strife instead of racial or ethnic difference. Sir Rodney is one of the employers refusing to replace the '*reasonable*' foreign labourers in his packing plant with returned soldiers (p. 51). His capitalist exploitation is matched by undisguised contempt: 'The immigrants have provided us with labour these past two decades and more. Yet, they are unruly, and in their ignorance they favour the radical solution' (p. 178). The prevailing anti-alien feelings invoked in the anti-strike language form a stark contrast to the helplessness and destitution of immigrants exposed in MacDougal's account:

Today at the Mission, we held classes for the immigrants. What did we teach them? Nothing. These people, mostly from the Ukraine, might speak three languages but none of them are English. Today we had a class in the management of finances, you might say, at least they learned the words for purchasing food. We intended to teach them some of the words for the bank, opening accounts, arranging loans. They haven't much use for banking though. It was a budgetary meeting for people with no money. (p. 69)

Between 1896 and 1914 Canada saw a rapid economic growth, and the Dominion government was willing to give businessmen a free hand in the recruitment of immigrants in order to meet labour needs. The phenomenon leads Donald Avery to conclude that during this period 'Canadian immigration policy served, above all else, the dictates of the capitalist labour market.'⁶³ During the Great War, labour shortage resulting mainly from the demands for increased war production was first relieved through securing industrial workers from the United States, but after the latter's entry into the war in 1917, this supply was suddenly cut. The implementation of conscription in the same year only exacerbated the difficult situation.

⁶³ Donald Avery, '*Dangerous Foreigners*': *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada 1896-1932* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 37.

Immigrant workers became again a convenient source of manpower for Canadian employers. The Dominion government also started to release non-dangerous interned prisoners of war into the labour market.⁶⁴ Unquestionably, immigrants have always been an object of economic exploitation throughout Canadian history. As the War came to a close, the high demands for production stopped and economic recession began. The return of veterans aggravated the rising unemployment. Then immigrants became once more a focus of social frustration and discontent.

In fact, the strike put immigrant workers in a very awkward position. As Horodyski notes, they 'seemed to be in the wrong whether they struck or scabbed.'⁶⁵ They were designated by employers and the anti-strike press as instigators of political and industrial unrest and as the enemy of the veterans. However, their relations with labour were sometimes very tense because they would usually work for less and were used by employers as strike breakers.⁶⁶ To sway the veterans to their side, the Strike Committee turned their back on fellow workers by leaving foreigners out of the Committee.⁶⁷ They even passed resolutions supporting the government's effort to deport 'undesirable aliens.'⁶⁸ The immigrants were imported and exploited by the government and business, used by employers as strike breakers, hated by the Great War veterans, and sacrificed by fellow labour activists. Even though *Fox* does not dramatize the betrayal of the immigrant workers by the Strike Committee or their dilemma of choosing between striking or scabbing, it indeed provides an articulate presentation of their victimization by the government, the employers, the anti-strike press and the anti-alien veterans through repressive force and discursive violence.

⁶⁴ Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners*, pp. 68-69.

⁶⁵ Horodyski, 'Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919'.

⁶⁶ Uduak Idiong, 'The Third Force: Returned Soldiers in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919', *Manitoba History*, 34 (1997). Available at http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/34/thirdforce.shtml [accessed 25 February 2009].

⁶⁷ Norman Penner, *Winnipeg 1919*, 2nd edn, quoted in Idiong, 'The Third Force'.

⁶⁸ Reimer, 'War, Nationhood and Working-Class Entitlement', p. 232.

In *Fox*, the returned soldiers play a crucial role in the anti-alien campaign; some of them become part of the repressive force used by the government and employers to quell the strike.⁶⁹ Under the Citizens' Committee's incitement, they enlist as the Special constables to 'see that Justice is served' and 'to protect the daughters and wives and mothers from thugs and aliens and revolutionaries' (p. 116). However, the violent nature of that seemingly sacred mission is fully disclosed when General Ketchen requests returned servicemen 'to join the militia, "to uphold constitutional authority," which is to say, Don't panic but if the Reds won't listen to reason, get your gun' (p. 115).

Although the anti-alien sentiments are revealed as a means of displacing the blame for radical labour movements, the victimized immigrant stays rather in the background throughout the novel. In fact, despite the repeated mention of aliens or immigrants, the novel depicts a very small number of immigrant characters: Anna Macovitch, a nurse working for MacDougal at the Mission; Stevie, her son, a messenger boy who appears periodically throughout the novel to deliver messages for the strikers; the nameless Mediterranean young man Mary meets at the City Hospital; Mrs Sokolov, the maid at Sir Rodney's house; Mrs Sokolov's daughter, whose name is uncertain even though Mary calls her Lydia in her confrontation with women strikers. Although the fleeting glimpses of the immigrants successfully foreground their plight and vulnerability among prevailing anti-foreigner sentiments, they remain insubstantial figures, lacking full characterization; their voices are hardly heard. It seems that they are again marginalized in the fictional world as they had been during the labour turmoil of 1919 by the government, the employers, the veterans and the Strike Committee. The closing event of the novel, however, tells a different story:

⁶⁹ Anti-strike veterans formed the Loyalist Returned Soldiers Association, whose members were sworn in as special constables and took the place of a regular disciplined force, which had fought hard for many years to get a living wage. See Idiong, 'The Third Force'.

Stevie smiles, like a flower in a battlefield, and walks across the street. It is as if the boy is enjoying the disruption, the men on the streets. He sees MacDougal waving to him, he goes to him. The Mounties come around from Main toward the hotel, firing into the air, into the crowd. Stevie, in the middle of the road, eager to receive a message from his friend this so-serious MacDougal. The bullet, the hot shell, in the boy's face, it shoots off the face, he falls. (p. 197)

Sweatman departs from the official historical record, inventing the killing of Stevie to replace one of the two documented deaths on Bloody Saturday. Though really worried by this deviation, she makes it clear that she intends Stevie's death to 'gain access to the tragic qualities of the strike.'⁷⁰ Stevie is described as a completely innocent victim in the suppression and his death as a meaningless loss, suggesting how the construction of an abject other makes the alien a scapegoat in the class strife of 1919.

Sweatman's primary concern with class issues is manifest in the choice of 'the most dramatic general strike North Americans had ever seen' as subject matter.⁷¹ Finding it 'very offensive' to 'think of a replication in Canadian literature of the idea of Canadian culture as classless', she creates a text driven by class tensions.⁷² The rewriting of the events during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 represents her deliberate attempt to shatter the myth of Canada as a country free of class strife. However, the class warfare launched by the general strike turns out to be more than a dispute between labour and business. It involves a bitter discursive struggle in discourse for the rights to define Canadian citizenship and nationhood and a construction of a racial and ethnic other as a scapegoat for all the anxieties and grievances

⁷⁰ Wylie, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 171.

⁷¹ Daniel Francis, '1919: The Winnipeg General Strike', *History Today*, 34: 4 (1984), 4-8 (p. 4).

⁷² Wylie, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 167.

dividing Canadian society.

Sweatman complicates the already difficult situation with gender issues. With the collage of multiple perspectives, *Fox* enables more women, whether pro-strike or not, to be represented or to speak in their own voices, thus reinscribing women in history. Although the novel mainly follows the lives of two middle-class women, its political critique is not as blunted as Wyile has suggested.⁷³ The depictions of their affluent and luxurious lifestyle not only confirm the exploitation and destitution of the working people but also highlight the huge gap in living conditions between two classes. The portrayals of Mary and employers like Drinkwater and Sir Rodney expose the self-interest and self-absorption that drive them to use any means to protect their economic, social, and political privileges. All of these help to heighten the class divide. Kramer holds that 'by focussing on Eleanor's political development, Sweatman inoculates the reader against more fundamental systematic change.'⁷⁴ However, the choice of protagonists could also be construed as cautious, and together with the deliberately restricted focus on working-class life, it constitutes Sweatman's effort to avoid appropriating voices. Highly conscious of her own position in terms of class and race, the author never pretends to be a mouthpiece for the working class or the alien immigrants: 'I felt invalid, like there was no way that as a WASP I could truly understand enough about the world to write well.'⁷⁵ Nor does she attempt to deal with them in a sentimentalizing or patronizing manner. Though the strategy of multiple perspectives prevents the novel from being 'simply a polemical indictment' of the employers, *Fox* 'leaves little doubt that the burden of responsibility for the confrontation ultimately rests solidly on their shoulders.'⁷⁶ It is not too difficult to observe that her rewriting of the confrontation leans towards labour. Yet

⁷³ Wyile, *Speculative Fictions*, p. 103.

⁷⁴ Kramer, 'The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike', p. 64.

⁷⁵ Wyile, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 166.

⁷⁶ Wyile, *Speculative Fictions*, p. 101.

the real political impact of *Fox* lies in the emphasis on the class divide, which undoubtedly encourages the reader to side with the working-class.

If *In the Skin of a Lion* creates voices speaking from the margin and rewrites the history of the building of the modern Toronto to counter the official history that ignored the contribution of immigrant workers, *Fox* collects a wide range of voices and ideological positions that give rise to dialogic relations. Whether the voices echo, mock, contradict, or challenge one another, their juxtaposition and intersection expose power struggle as inevitable. In *Fox*, history is explicitly represented as a site of heteroglossic contestation, which occurs before official history can silence dissenting voices to achieve a monologic version. Ondaatje's labour novel seeks to insert alternative, countering voices into history, foregrounding repressive and oppressive forces in historical representation. *Sweatman*'s discloses its multiple, conflicting and competing processes. Both texts re-examine the writing of history through specially designed narrative strategies, proposing new possibilities of comprehending past events. Nonetheless, they also show different attitudes toward historical knowledge. Reading Ondaatje's novel demands little background information about the history of Toronto or its immigrant population in the early twentieth century, but without some knowledge of the events of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, readers of *Fox* will find themselves at a disadvantage. Some references, such as those to the kitchen at the Oxford Hotel, or forty-minute legislation, are made without adequate explanation. This makes it difficult for the uninitiated to grasp their full significance, to establish the network they can have with other events or references, and to appreciate the richness they can add to the whole text. Due to its unique narrative structure, reading *Fox* is quite a challenge. Louis Reimer is honest in pointing out that 'its non-traditional bent will limit its appeal to readers with a taste for

literary fiction with an experimental flavour.’⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Louis Reimer, ‘Review of *Fox*’, *CM: A Reviewing Journal of Canadian Materials for Young People*, 19: 4 (1991). Available at <http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm/cmarchive/vol19no4/fox.html> [accessed 1 March 2009].

Chapter Four

The Renegotiation of New World Myth in *Away* and *Fall on Your Knees*

Jane Urquhart's *Away* (1993) and Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996) share a number of thematic concerns and formal features. In form, both are categorized as works of magic realism, a genre read by Slemon as a form of postcolonial discourse due to its encoded 'resistance to the massive imperial centre', and 'singled out by many critics as one of the joints of conjunction of postmodernism and postcolonialism.'¹ Rather than flaunting postmodern self-reflexivity or metafictional self-consciousness, they problematize history and reflect on their own textuality in such a subtle and sophisticated way that their participation in the epistemological and ontological scepticism characteristic of postmodern historical fiction can be difficult to recognize. In content, they tell family stories to explore issues such as New World myth, the home and abroad dialectic in immigrants' self-definition, diasporic nostalgia, internal postcolonialism in Canada, cultural assimilation, and the assertion or questioning of Canadian national identity. Listing these similarities is not to conflate the two novels, but to highlight that they remain distinct and unique despite the overlapping in these aspects. Their differences are even more intriguing. Though both concerned with Canada's postcoloniality, they give consideration to different aspects and reveal the internal conflict that a text can create when its decolonizing move in relation to one dominant power can turn unintentionally into an act of colonization inflicted on another disadvantaged group.

Away returns to the settler period and the Confederation era to reimagine the emergence of Canada as a nation, and to explore the nature of nationalism by dramatizing the hostility of

¹ Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', *Canadian Literature*, 116 (1988), 9-20 (p. 10); Hutcheon. "'Circling the Downspout of Empire'", p. 73.

the Irish-Catholic nationalist sympathizers towards Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a former radical Irish nationalist who became a leading advocate for a new nationality in Canada and was recognized as a Father of Canadian Confederation. While the victimization of the Irish by British colonialism, both in Ireland and Canada, is exposed, the complicity of Irish settlers in the oppression of Native populations is also spotlighted, and historical amnesia in nation-building investigated. By employing the figure of haunting ghosts, Urquhart challenges the New World myth that tends to see Canada as a blank space, and reinscribes the Native presence and history in a romanticized encounter between two ancient cultures. Nevertheless this decolonizing gesture is compromised by her transplantation of Celtic mythology. By presenting the tangled relationships between Irish Catholics and British colonizers, and between Natives and European settlers (whether they identify themselves as Canadian or not), *Away* demonstrates the complexity of Canadian postcoloniality.

While *Away* deals with the naturalization of Irish settlers as Canadian, *Fall on Your Knees* draws attention to the confrontation between Canadians descended from European settlers and immigrants from other parts of the world and its resultant collision of norms and values between Old and New Worlds. MacDonald not only dismantles the New World myth by exposing its discriminatory and exclusionary practices in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and religion; she is also interested in the persistence of this myth. Like Urquhart, she dramatizes the struggle of new immigrants between nostalgia for the faraway homeland and longing to identify with the new country. But while Urquhart revisits the history of Irish emigration to show the tension and conflict caused by racial, religious and political differences within what is accepted as white Canada, MacDonald undermines the image of Canada as WASP by recuperating non-European cultural and racial diversity in the regional history of Nova Scotia in the early twentieth century. She also notices the damage that English as a dominant language can inflict on minority groups. Besides the concern with

these Canadian specificities, she challenges hegemonic discourses about race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. All these issues are explored through a family saga that revolves around the problems arising from miscegenation and homosexuality, during a period when they were still social taboos.

When juxtaposed, the two texts provide a network comprised of the relations between Natives and settlers, British and Irish settlers, descendants of settlers and new immigrant arrivals. In this network, the pattern of colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, replicates. The two novels show that settler cultures are never able to discard completely their colonial legacies and complicate the discussion of Canada's postcoloniality as an invader-settler and immigrant society. This chapter will focus attention on how the two authors address the issues mentioned above in their personalized ways and how they supplement these postcolonial concerns with a postmodern subtext.

Away

Of the authors discussed in this study, Urquhart stands out for her sustained engagement with history over the course of her novels: *The Whirlpool* (1986), *Changing Heaven* (1990), *Away* (1993), *The Underpainter* (1997), and *The Stone Carvers* (2001). They all involve, to varying degrees, historical events or figures, whose impact upon Canadian self-definition is assessed through the dramatization of her characters' reactions to them. In an interview, Urquhart expresses her worries about the problems of history in Canada:

I was brought up in a country where Canadian history was not taught, or at least it wasn't taught to me. We learned a little bit about the explorers, but really even that was from the point of view of the Mother Country — a description, in other words, of how Britain seized and maintained its North American property. Our own past, as Canadians,

was not taken into any kind of serious consideration.²

Away tells the story of the O'Malleys migrating from Ireland to Upper Canada during the potato famine of the 1840s, sets this family saga against the historical formation of Canadian Confederation, and reaches the climax with the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, one of Canada's founding fathers, in 1868. It rewrites the history of Irish emigration, recuperates the voices of dissent that disturb the foundation of the Dominion, and reveals the tension and conflict before the two halves in the term 'Anglo-Celtic' can combine to form the core of English Canada. The novel is part of Urquhart's postcolonial undertaking to retrieve a past and represent it from a Canadian perspective, and to reinscribe Canadian history with its local specificities as a counter-discourse to the colonialist construction imposed by the imperial power. Her engagement with history exhibits a critical consciousness of the problems of writing about the past, disrupting the traditional discursive, epistemological and ontological boundaries between history and literature. Her work oscillates between the postmodern impulse to deconstruct and the postcolonial drive to recuperate and reconstruct. What distinguishes *Away* from many other contemporary historical novels partaking in the interrogation of traditional verities about history is its elaborate interpenetration of history and mythology. The two, as Urquhart emphasizes, 'purport to be different but are essentially dangerously alike' when it comes to the tale-telling aspect of history.³ In *Away*, she provides a realist, socio-political context of historical verisimilitude but fills it with episodes of magical, fantastic, and supernatural qualities conventionally associated with mythology. The inventive way of merging these heterogeneous narrative elements destabilizes the distinction between history and mythology, qualifying *Away* as a work of magic realism.⁴

² Wyile, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 84.

³ Wyile, *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 88.

⁴ Herb Wyile, "'The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness': Myth, History, and the New Dominion in Jane Urquhart's *Away*", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 24: 1 (1999), 20-45 (p. 24); Anna Branach-Kallas, *In the Whirlpool of the Past: Memory, Intertextuality and History in the Fiction of Jane Urquhart* (Torun:

In this hybrid text of history and mythology, the author returns to the period of exploration and settlement, and inserts Irish immigration into the encounter between British colonialism and Native cultures, so that she can explore how the New World is translated into home and how Canada as an invader-settler colony progresses to forge a national identity. Paradigmatic of the postcolonial complexities as delineated by Bennett,⁵ *Away* raises questions that are central to the debate over Canadian postcoloniality: Whose Canada is postcolonial? Are some groups in Canada more postcolonial than others? This interrogation is embedded in the dialectic between Old World and New World, through which the settlers negotiate their identity and their relationship with the new land. Urquhart is particularly intrigued by the way immigrants come to terms with their past in an alien place where they try to take root. As she says, 'while it is possible to leave an actual, physical geography behind, it is almost impossible to leave a mental space behind.'⁶ In this section, I will examine how Urquhart employs the figure of haunting ghosts in a romanticized cross-cultural encounter as a textual strategy to counteract the Eurocentric assumptions about Canada as a void, and how this decolonizing gesture is compromised by her transplantation of the Celtic mythology. I will also explore how she dramatizes immigrants struggling between the nostalgia for the Old World and the desire to identify with the new land in order to interrogate the nature of nationalism and unsettle the accepted notion of the New World. Finally, by exploring the significance of the frame story, which presents the main plot as an oral tale recreated from memory, I will look at the way these explicit postcolonial concerns are supplemented with a metafictional self-consciousness.

Early settler narratives usually characterize Canada as a blank space which lacks history,

Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikolaja Kopernika, 2003), p. 142.

⁵ Bennett, 'English Canada's Postcolonial Complexities', pp. 164-210.

⁶ Wylie. *Speaking in the Past Tense*, p. 87.

myth or ancient grandeur. Catherine Parr Traill complained about this in *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836):

As to ghosts or spirits they appear totally banished from Canada. This is too matter-of-fact country for such supernaturals to visit. Here there are no historical associations, no legendary tales of those that came before us. Fancy would starve for lack of marvellous food to keep her alive in the backwoods.⁷

A similar expression appears in Earle Birney's well-known poem 'Can. Lit.', published in 1962 during the revival of nationalist sentiment in Canada: 'It's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted.'⁸ Sugars points out that it is a perennial concern of Canadian writers and cultural critics to populate the Canadian landscape with distinctive Canadian ghosts in order to decolonize Canadian cultural expression.⁹ The figure of haunting ghosts appeals because it lends a place a history and a sense of authenticity and origin. In an invader-settler context, the construction of ghosts amounts to the creation of icons for national identity, and is a strategy to fill in the absence of cultural history, an absence diagnosed by the metropolis as a sign of inferiority. It is an anti-colonial gesture. Nevertheless, as Sugars remarks, the attempt to construct postcolonial ghosts to fill the Canadian space is highly problematic since it does not recognize the existing ghosts of indigenous mythology and legend that have haunted the landscape before the arrival of white settlers.¹⁰ The failure to acknowledge Native ghosts and the effort to create new ghosts or transplant foreign ones into the New World constitute an act of colonization. Consequently, the act of populating a landscape with ghosts is a process that

⁷ Catherine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), p. 128.

⁸ Birney, 'Can. Lit.', p. 116.

⁹ Cynthia Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts: Settler Nationalism in Jane Urquhart's *Away*', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 79 (2003), 1-32 (p. 1).

¹⁰ Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts', pp. 3-4.

decolonizes and colonizes simultaneously.¹¹ Sugars observes this ambivalence in *Away*, considering the novel a recent example of this tradition, whereas other critics celebrate it as an instance of Canadian postcolonial expression without mentioning this colonizing tendency.¹²

According to Sugars, the foreign ghost Urquhart transplants into the Canadian landscape is the Irish settler Mary O'Malley, who abandons her husband Brian, son Liam, and newborn baby Eileen to live in the wilderness. Even before her death, Mary has become a ghostly presence whom Liam sees flitting in the forest:

It was then that he saw his mother [. . .] slipping in and out among the pines on the opposite side of the stream [. . .]. Her form appeared and disappeared, multiplied, and then reduced itself. [. . .] As he approached she withdrew behind the cedars and spruce where thick black erased her.¹³

Death seals Mary in the wilderness. On thumping the last nail into her coffin, Liam catches another glimpse of her spectre: 'his mother was a silhouette standing on the shore of a shining expanse of water; one of several trees rooted in an alien landscape' (p. 186). Sugars argues that Mary is 'a prototype of the reluctant Canadian settler' and 'becomes the unsettled ghost haunting the Upper Canadian landscape' because of the displacement resulting from forced emigration and that 'her incorporation into the wilderness is uneasy.'¹⁴ However, Mary is not

¹¹ Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts', p. 9.

¹² For example, Wyile argues that *Away* raises postcolonial questions about immigration, identity, power and nationalism through the deployment of magic realism. Branach-Kallas considers *Away* a postcolonial work because it depicts the Irish experience of colonization in the 1840s and the protagonists' subsequent emigration and settlement in Canada. See Wyile, "'The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness'", pp. 24-25; Branach-Kallas, *In the Whirlpool of the Past*, p. 130.

¹³ Jane Urquhart, *Away* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), p. 158. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

¹⁴ Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts', pp. 13-14.

the only ghost transplanted into Canada, and her incorporation into the alien land is more successful than Sugars has diagnosed.

Back on Rathlin Island, off the northern coast of Ireland, Mary is 'away' after falling in love with a drowned sailor 'from an otherworld island' (p. 8), and her name changes to Moira.¹⁵ Through this mythic encounter, she internalizes the Celtic myths. When people on the island hope to get her back by marrying her to the sceptical schoolmaster Brian, Moira responds paradoxically: 'I am here but I am not here [. . .]. I will be your wife but I will not be your wife' (p. 57). With her arrival in the backwoods of Canada, Celtic mythology, as well as its ghosts or spirits, is also imported. After the birth of Eileen, she is away again, abandoning her family to live by the shore of Lake Moira, where she comes across the Ojibway Exodus Crow, a Native chief with prophetic abilities. He listens to her Celtic legends and myths, helps her to survive in the wilderness, returns her frozen body to her family seven years later, and, at Moira's request, tells them her story. It is through this cross-cultural encounter in the wilderness that Canada and Ireland become mythically linked.

Urquhart does not fail to recognize the existence of Native ghosts. Through Exodus's description, the landscape is populated with ghosts and spirits. People don't fish in Moira Lake 'because a great number of Iroquois had been slaughtered nearby and their bodies thrown into the lake, producing, it was rumoured, flesh-eating fish' (p. 177). Yet the encounter between Exodus and Moira not only allows for the transplantation of more Irish ghosts but also enables the establishment of commonality between Irish and Native cultures

¹⁵ I call Mary Moira when she is in the state of being away in order to foreground its connection with pre-Christian Celtic history and mythology. Urquhart explains the Celtic concept of 'awayness' as follows: 'I'm very curious about the concept that the Irish have of a person who is Away — someone who has been touched by the supernatural world. When such a person returns to the cottage kitchen, that person is not really back. The Irish sometimes believe that if a certain person has been touched by the supernatural, that what you have in that cottage kitchen is a supernatural being who has been disguised as that individual.' See, Jeffrey Canton, 'Ghosts in the Landscape: An Interview with Jane Urquhart', *Paragraph*, 13: 2 (1991), 3-5 (p. 4).

despite their geographical separation. Interestingly, the commonality depends more on pre-Christian mythology than on the two peoples' victimization by colonialism. It seems that the connection Urquhart would like to establish is not between Canada and Ireland under the rule of British imperialism, but rather between the land before it is named Canada and the pre-Christian Celtic Ireland. Exodus accepts Moira's being away and feels 'a great kinship with her' (p. 180) because he recognizes her as filled with manitou, which he and his people believe is 'the spirit that is in everything and that is moved by earth and air and water and light' (p. 180). His comprehension of being away relies on the similarity he finds between two cultures. He identifies the spirit of the lake, Moira's spectral lover, as 'her spirit guide' (p. 182) just as he finds his spirit guide in the crow. While Moira has no doubt about the Native belief in manitou, she explains that living by the lake is a reunion with her faery-daemon lover:

I am loved by the spirit of this lake [. . .] that shares my name — Moira. This spirit first found me when he lived under the waters of the Moyle [. . .]. Then when I lived on the large island he came to me in a dark lake near my home. In this land I thought he had forgotten me until I heard of the lake called Moira. Then I knew where he was. I will stay near him now until I die. (p. 181)

Caterina Ricciardi suggests that 'Mary re-discovers Irish mythology through the Ojibway's mythology' in the primordial landscape of Canada.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Moira's otherworld lover is not one of Exodus Crow's Native spirits but another transplanted ghost. In the new land, she rediscovers what has been forced to leave behind in the Old World and feels more at home in the Canadian wilderness than with her own Irish family.

¹⁶ Caterina Ricciardi, 'Away and the Meanings of Colonization', in *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*, ed. Laura Ferri (Toronto: Guernica, 2005), pp.65-77 (p. 74).

In the beginning of their encounter, Moira establishes connection with Exodus not by sharing the colonized experience they have in common, but by telling him ancient Celtic mythologies and legends circulating before the arrival of Christianity. For Exodus, 'it was as if his own mother were telling the stories of the spirits' (p. 180). Moira represents the pre-Christian Celtic mythological world that bears a remarkable resemblance to the faith of First Nations peoples. The connection is reinforced by sharing stories about the confrontation between Christianity and their respective native cultures. Moira tells the legendary return of the ancient poet Oisín to argue for the Celtic ways and beliefs with the first missionary to Ireland, 'Patrick of the Crooked Crozier' (p. 180), while Exodus relates how his grandfather's stories 'about the spirits that surrounded and protected his tribe' (p. 181) are scoffed by the first missionary visiting his people. Even their names are encoded with anti-Christian messages. The state of being away converts Mary into Moira, rejecting the association of her name with the ultimate icon of unselfish motherhood in Christianity, Mary the Virgin.¹⁷ Exodus is given the name because his mother does not like the story about 'making battles for land and sending down laws' in the book of Exodus but 'liked the sound of the word Exodus and wanted to give the name a better home' (p. 175).

Libby Birch argues that 'Mary clings to her mythological world as the only world in which she can truly find herself' because the transition from Gaelic to English and the immigration to Canada have done such damage to her communication skills that she has problems making herself understood.¹⁸ However, this is not the case. Dismissing being away as superstition, the Catholic Brian rejects Celtic mythology and fails to understand or appreciate the beautiful poetic language in Moira's songs and verses. In the wilderness, she is very communicative

¹⁷ Libby Birch, 'Irish Female Presence in Jane Urquhart's Fiction', *Canadian Woman Studies*, 17: 3 (1997), 115-19 (p. 118).

¹⁸ Birch, 'Irish Female Presence', p. 117.

and well understood by Exodus, who has no difficulty accepting her awayness and her mythical Celtic tales and who finds the songs she makes for ‘the water-spirit from the otherworld island [. . .] pleasing’ (p. 183). Only later do they talk about the ravages of colonial oppression their peoples suffer respectively under the British Empire: ‘After she had been in the forest for several winters she told him dark things; about the time of the stolen lands of her island, and of the disease, and of the lost language’ (p. 184). Exodus also reveals to her the seizure of his people’s land, mass slaughter of animals and abuse of their women by white men. The kinship between Moira and Exodus is initiated by the stories of the spirits, cemented by the shared response to Christianity, and then strengthened by similar suffering under British imperialism. In *Away*, not only is British colonialism condemned; Christianity is also exposed as part of the imperialist project and as a force that speeds up the destruction of native cultures. Nevertheless, the establishment of kinship between Moira and Exodus, thus between the Celtic and Native cultures, depends on a paradox: it is through their common oppressor’s language — English — that they can communicate and share the experience of deprivation.

Sugars contends that to equate the oppression of the Irish prior to their arrival in Canada with the near genocide of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples ‘is to mix contexts in such a way that Native oppression *within* Canada becomes obliterated.’¹⁹ *Away* forges a link between Native and Irish cultures, but the link is predicated more on the similarities between their mythologies than on their shared experience of colonial oppression, and therefore should not be construed as an attempt to legitimize the Irish settlers. In fact, except in the encounter between Moira and Exodus, Irish settlement comes under attack throughout the novel for its contribution to the displacement and dispossession of Native peoples.²⁰ Although the

¹⁹ Cynthia Sugars, ‘Settler Fantasies, Postcolonial Guilt: The Compromised Postcolonialism of Jane Urquhart’s *Away*’, *Australian-Canadian Studies*, 19: 2 (2001), 101-18 (p. 111).

²⁰ This will be discussed later.

mythical link is disturbing and debatable, the striking parallel between Native and Celtic mythologies is an anti-colonial strategy to recuperate a past under threat of extinction due to the invasion of Christianity and British colonialism. By conjuring up Native ghosts, *Away* recognizes the Native presence, rejecting the prevailing cultural expression of Canada as a blank space devoid of history or mythology. But at the same time, the novel also transplants settler ghosts into the Canadian landscape, undeniably setting in motion another act of colonization. This is the dilemma of invader-settler cultures like Canada when they strive to construct their national imaginary in a land where they are squatters. Though romanticized and contentious, the mythical link unsettles the Eurocentric assumption about terra incognita implied in the term 'the New World', highlighting the fact that Native history is as long as Celtic history, one of the most ancient civilizations in the Old World.

Undeniably, the cross-cultural encounter between Exodus and Moira is romanticized to avoid tension or conflict. It is likely that Urquhart intends their empathy-based understanding and harmony to demonstrate the importance of mutual respect for cultural difference and the possibility of peaceful co-existence between Natives and invader-settlers. But she does not suggest that shared experience of colonial exploitation necessarily leads to the establishment of affinity between colonized groups. This is dramatized in the encounter between Exodus and Brian, who supports the Irish nationalist cause and teaches the Irish language to his students in Upper Canada as a gesture of resistance to British victimization of the Catholic Irish. After Exodus delivers Moira's body and tells her story to her family (all except Liam, who refuses to hear), the conflict between Natives and settlers begins to surface. When describing the construction of the long table in his house and the flourishing of new manufacturing enterprises, Brian speaks 'aloud and with some pride' (p. 188), trying to impress Exodus with the advance of his civilization. It betrays his sense of superiority. Exodus makes no comment on his intention but replies: 'I wore this hat and brought this

pocket-watch to have a connection with the people that she came from. It is not the custom of my people' (p. 188). It is a polite way of telling Brian that he is not ignorant of white people and their culture. Brian misrecognizes Exodus's English costume as envy of white civilization, but for Exodus, the costume serves as a bridge to connect himself with Moira's people.

The costume is already a hybrid of diverse cultures: 'The cut of his coat was exactly like that of an English gentleman, but made of buckskin, and beautifully, though not extensively, decorated with beads' (p. 172). Exodus in his English costume appears like a typical mimic man in colonial literature, but by appropriating the dress code for his purpose, he is the materialization of the 'resemblance and menace' that Homi Bhabha characterizes as the nature of mimicry.²¹ Although Brian feels an affinity with Exodus in terms of oppression, he never realizes that for the Native populations, he and his family are invaders and not much different from British colonizers. In contrasting the empathetic understanding between Moira and Exodus with the interaction between Brian and Exodus, Urquhart foregrounds the settlers' complicity in colonialism and shatters the illusion that colonial exploitation can guarantee the forging of an alliance between groups of colonial victims.

The characterization of Brian, Liam and Eileen constitutes Urquhart's critique of settlement and exploration of the dialectic between New World and Old World in immigrants. The state of being away is read by Sugars as a metaphor for 'the dilemma of diasporic transplantation' and as a curse of nostalgia that is passed down through the O'Malley women.²² But Brian is also cursed and exemplifies the psychic condition of being away that immigration effects. In the backwoods of Upper Canada, he becomes a fervent follower of Irish Catholic political

²¹ Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-92 (p. 86).

²² Sugars, 'Settler Fantasies', p. 107. See also Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts', p. 11.

and cultural nationalism, idolizes McGee, who was initially an eloquent North American exponent of the Irish revolutionary cause, and teaches the Irish language to his students and children. He derives comfort from singing 'Irish revolutionary songs [. . .] — songs with such heartbreakingly beautiful tunes that his daughter, Eileen, had committed them all to memory by the age of thirteen' (p. 199). After the speech in Wexford denouncing Fenian political activism and 'the flaws in the Irish Catholic character that left that group open to manipulation by such creatures' (p. 199), McGee is seen as a turncoat and a traitor. The anger at McGee's 'betrayal' of the cause drives Brian to teach 'an entirely different history of the British Empire' (201) at his log school. Preoccupied with Irish nationalism and directing his gaze backwards to the old country left behind, Brian pays little attention to the here and now. There is a moment when he looks forward, hoping 'the stories of the old sorrows', under the influence of the new landscape, can be 'divested of power, far from their native soil' (167). However, it shocks him to discover that the old persecution of his race is duplicated in the New World: 'They brought the hate with them across all that ocean. [. . .] It hardly seems possible' (p. 198). It drives him to be more fixated on the old country and the revolutionary cause. Just as Mary is taken away by her fairy lover, Brian is claimed by his old country.

When Liam looks at the map of Ireland chalked at Brian's log school, he wonders about his father's obsession with the homeland and the preservation of his Irish heritage:

What was it that lodged the homeland so permanently and so painfully in the heart of his father? What terrible power had that particular mix of rock and soil, sea, grass and sky that its sorrows could claim him and cause him to draw its image on a wall built in the centre of a forest thousands of miles away. (p. 207)

Yet Brian's major achievement lies not in his subversive anti-colonial actions but in the

implantation of his nationalist aspirations and diasporic nostalgia in Canadian-born Eileen, who transforms from a girl 'innocent of identification with any group' (p. 200) into an enthusiastic Irish nationalist. Inheriting something of her mother's supernatural aura and having prophetic abilities like Exodus, Eileen is capable of communicating with a black bird which tells prophecies, and foresees the coming of Exodus. A mysterious connection exists between her and the wilderness, but it is gradually undermined as her father instills into her the obsession with Irish nationalism and as she indulges more and more in political fanaticism. Liam is worried about the influence of Brian's stories on Eileen:

But his sister, he knew, had digested the stories, their darkness [. . .], the sadness of the broken country [. . .]. She who was born into a raw, bright new world would always look back towards lost landscapes and inward towards inherited souvenirs. (pp. 207-08)

Brian succeeds in recreating the Irish landscape in his stories and transplanting it into Eileen's mental space: 'She thought she knew what each of these features of an intimate landscape looked like, even though they were far away in a country she had never seen' (pp. 331-32). After Liam sells their homestead in the forest to Osbert Sedgewick, one of his father's former Irish landlords, the bird disappears but remains at the threshold of Eileen's consciousness: 'The bird would be, in the future, something she almost remembered when she awakened at the most silent hour of the night with an unidentifiable feeling of great loss upon her' (p. 226). When the two siblings arrive at the Great Lake, the encounter with Aidan Lanighan in the Seaman's Inn strengthens Eileen's commitment to and romanticization of the revolutionary cause, on the one hand, and cuts her mythical link with the wilderness and her prophetic abilities, on the other: 'Her premonitions, which as a child she had never doubted, had completely deserted her' (p. 254). After the twin owners of the inn, both called Captains O'Shaunessy, tell her Aidan's dance is 'his petition to McGee' (p. 257), Eileen interprets his

dance in terms of political enthusiasm: 'Eileen read the gestures as demanding space, territory, a promised land, hills, the sky. She heard the dance shout passionate declarations and make pleas for justice' (p. 257). She projects her own nationalist ideal onto Aidan, creating a patriotic hero that does not exist: 'While he caressed her she told herself the brief, brutal story of his life, composed partly of the things the captains had said to her and partly of the songs she had sung' (p. 259). Aidan's deliberate silence facilitates Eileen's misreading of his attitude towards McGee. Driven by a desire to participate in the nationalist cause, she follows him to Montreal: 'I've come to help you ruin the traitor McGee' (p. 310). Her naïve romanticism leads her to invent a patriotic group to which she imagines Aidan belongs, and into which she yearns to integrate:

They were brothers-in-arms, fiercely loyal, and their arena was the new dominion. Though they were all men, she believed that she was one of them, that Aidan Lanighan's touch had guaranteed her a role in the theatre, the performances, that made up their lives. (p. 293)

After the assassination of McGee, Eileen's patriotic hero turns out to be a spy infiltrating Fenian activist to protect McGee. She comes to realize she has been away: 'So this is what it is to be away, her mother's voice told her. You are never present where you stand' (p. 345).

By dramatizing how the obsession with the Irish cause affects Brian and Eileen, Urquhart foregrounds the danger of looking back towards the lost landscape in a new land and the constructed and imaginary nature of nationalism. The Irish nationalist community invented by Eileen is 'composed of the few scraps of information [Aidan] had given her, the Celtic sagas of "old sorrows" her father had told to her, and the bizarre combinations of fact and fiction she read in the *Irish Canadian*' (p. 292). Newspapers are exposed as playing a

determining role in the construction of this imagined community. Brian's faith in Irish nationalism is reinforced through the *American Celt*; reading it leads him to idealize D'Arcy McGee as 'a wonderful champion of our people', representing the collective voice, which 'any Irish man, woman, or child should want to listen to' (p. 166). Eileen takes to reading the *Irish Canadian* after Aidan leaves for Montreal, considering it 'full of hidden messages from Aidan' and 'her only connection to the heat' (p. 285). The way Brian and Eileen perceive their Irish community through newspapers demonstrates Benedict Anderson's theorizing of the nation as an imagined political community, which becomes possible because of print capitalism.²³ Eileen finds assurance in this collective voice: 'The idea of the oneness of the tribe, the imagined collective voice, calmed her. There were no uncertainties' (p. 330). However, when McGee no longer speaks in favour of the Irish Catholics, that is to say, when he stops being a representative of that collective voice, he becomes 'the worst kind of enemy' (p. 339). As Eileen says to Aidan after McGee's speech, 'It's our voice, but he's betrayed it' (p. 340). In this way, the collective voice transforms into a means of repression and oppression, disallowing voices of dissent.

The assassination of McGee is a focus of considerable historiographic debates. Although historically Patrick J. Whelan, a Fenian sympathizer, was charged and hanged for the crime, many believe he was a scapegoat. 'Much of the evidence which hanged Whelan', as Isabel Skelton points out, 'was purely circumstantial, and he, to the last, maintained he was innocent.'²⁴ Urquhart notes in her acknowledgements that *Away* 'does not pretend to solve the mystery;' therefore, her presentation of the actual event is oblique. Patricia Smart takes the portrayal of the assassination in the novel as an interrogation of the claims of competing

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn (London: Verso, 1991).

²⁴ Isabel Skelton, *The Life of Thomas D'Arcy McGee* (Gardenvale: Garden City, 1925), p. 540.

nationalisms.²⁵ But it is also Urquhart's attempt to disclose the violence and oppression implicated in nationalism. In fact, the exclusionary and homogenizing impulse of nationalism is expressed by Captain O'Shaunessy in his attempt to claim Canada as an Irish nation: 'This was to be *our* nation, you see — that's at the heart of it. There's more of *us* in the bowels of the lakeboats or in the city factories, or on the roads, or building the canals' (p. 255). Urquhart chooses to involve Eileen in the assassination of McGee (she unknowingly gives Aidan's gun to Patrick) in order to shatter her naiveté about revolutionary politics and, more importantly, highlight the degree to which violence, physical or discursive, can be provoked by nationalism.

The critique of nationalism targets not only Irish nationalism but the Canadian nationalism promoted by McGee:

The country described by the speaker was one in which there would be no factions, no revenge for old sorrows, old grievances. Everything about it was to be new, clear; a landscape distanced by an ocean from the zones of terror. A sweeping territory, free of wounds, belonging to all, owned by no one. (pp. 337-38)

He envisages a nation where racial, social, and political borders disappear, reinforcing the stereotypical impression of Canada as the New World where troubles of the old countries can just be left behind. As Marlene Goldman observes, the appeal of McGee's vision lies in its discourse of liberal democracy which promises freedom to all immigrants, but the discourse in fact refuses to deal with entrenched inequalities resulting from racial formations and allows discrimination and exploitation to persist.²⁶ Yet Urquhart embeds her critique of

²⁵ Patricia Smart, 'Weighing the Claims of Memory: the Poetry and Politics of the Irish-Canadian Experience in Jane Urquhart's *Away*', *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 10 (1994), 63-70 (p. 63).

²⁶ Marlene Goldman, 'Encounters with Alterity: The Role of the Sublime in Moodie's and Urquhart's Historical

nationalism and her postcolonial concern through Eileen's reaction to McGee's speech. It is on hearing the words quoted above that Eileen suddenly recalls her 'dialogue with a blue-black bird', a past she forgets when Irish nationalism claimed her: "“There was a man,” she whispered to Aidan urgently, “a man called Exodus Crow. He knew things. He told me once — a long time ago — he told me there were no lords of the land”” (p. 338). The recollection gestures towards the historical amnesia that McGee's vision is predicated on. The last sentence of the speech quoted above amounts to a complete negation of Native populations and their history of oppression and displacement caused by colonialism and settlement. As McGee says he is speaking 'not as the representative of any race', Eileen feels that the power of McGee's voice 'should be harnessed' and that he betrays the 'Irish eloquence' that 'the race of his blood' endows him with (pp. 338-39). Her obsession with tribalism drives away the recollection: 'The bird in her mind flew away again' (p. 339). Just as McGee ignores the colonial legacy he has inherited, so Eileen forgets again the Native populations represented by Exodus and the Native notion of land, which conflicts with the idea of mastery and possession underpinning European settlement.

A contrast is formed between these settler characters in relation to the dialectic between New World and Old World. While Brian and Eileen remain fatally oriented toward the past and try to transport Irish nationalism into the new land, McGee, after renouncing his Fenian beliefs in favour of Canadian Confederation, becomes fixated on the future, trying to consign the past and the old country, together with its troubles, into oblivion. Aidan is likewise future-oriented, designating the homeland worshipped by sympathizers with Irish nationalism like Eileen as 'some kind of goddammed [sic] otherworld island' (p. 343). Whether the focus is on the democratic potential of the New World or the duplication of the old country in the new land, all of them suffer historical amnesia as they banish the Native populations from their

nationalist visions. Yet in the characterization of Liam, *Away* puts forward the strongest critique of historical amnesia and of displacement and dispossession originating from settlement.

It is tempting to see Liam as the only O'Malley who is not away, but he is, though in a different way from Moira, Brian or Eileen. From infancy, he would 'dig in the earth, caking the undersides of his delicate new nails with mud', and in Mary's mind, the 'field has claimed him' (p. 80). His dream in Upper Canada is to own a farm where he can make things grow. When Liam discovers from *The Canadian Geological Survey* at the log school that the existence of the Canadian Shield has frustrated his efforts to farm, he comes to believe that the enterprising men in town have been right to dismiss his father, who knows about the shield of rock but never bothers to tell him. By wiping the map of Ireland chalked by Brian, he 'reduced the final remnants of his beloved father to a grey smear' (p. 209). It is a gesture of jettisoning not only his father but his inherited culture. While Brian and Eileen look backwards, Liam seeks 'the forward momentum of change and growth' (p. 208), advocating the embracing of the here and now, as McGee does. His determination to settle down in the new land is expressed in his admonishment to Eileen: 'What does this Irish misery matter, Eileen? We're in Canada now, we're Canadian, not Irish. I don't even remember Ireland and you were born *here*' (p. 256). His assertion of Canadian identity is grounded on deliberate 'cultural amnesia.'²⁷ The novel renders his abandonment of the past and cultural heritage as equally problematic as Eileen's nostalgia for the faraway homeland. Sugars argues that Liam's industrious practicality 'makes him the ideal settler in the New World.'²⁸ But this ideal settler is depicted as aggressive and acquisitive, turning from a former victim of colonialism into a victimizer. As Ricciardi notes, 'Liam becomes *English*' because he has

²⁷ Smart, 'Weighing the Claims of Memory', p. 67.

²⁸ Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts', p. 16.

internalized the typically English attitude of the colonizer.²⁹ After purchasing a plot of ‘the lush land that bordered the Great Lake Ontario’ (p. 213), Liam threatens to evict the Doherty family squatting on his property, but Eileen questions his claim to the land:

‘I think that the English took the land from the Indians same as they took it from the Irish. [. . .] So now you’re going to evict some people from land you never would have had in the first place if the English hadn’t stolen it . . . and if they hadn’t stolen Ireland.’

‘Ireland doesn’t have anything to do with it.’

‘Yes it *does* . . . you bought it with an Irish landlord’s money.’ (p. 279)

While Eileen tries to establish an analogy between Ireland and Canada in terms of the embezzling of land and accuses her brother of becoming an accessory to the outrage, Liam defends himself by pointing out her complicity: ‘You live here too’ (p. 279). The argument highlights the fact that if the Doherty family are squatting on Liam’s farm, then the siblings are both squatters in the New World, whether they feel guilty about complicity with the embezzlement or not. Wylie notes that ‘Liam’s apparent neo-colonialist behavior and betrayal of his heritage is checked by his accommodation of his Irish squatter Thomas Doherty’ and ‘his marrying of Doherty’s daughter Molly.’³⁰ It is an idealized interpretation, disregarding the nature of exploitation in their relationship. Liam as a landlord grants the accommodation on condition that Thomas banishes the skunks from his property, while his marrying of Molly turns her body into a land where he can legally farm, not for crops but for offspring: “‘All I had to do,” Liam would say, “was hang my pants at the foot of the bed and she’d be

²⁹ Ricciardi, ‘*Away* and the Meanings of Colonization’, p. 75.

³⁰ Wylie, “‘The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness’”, p. 36.

pregnant” (p. 303). Regarding Liam’s marriage to the half-Irish, half-Ojibway Molly as ‘a dubious process of indigenization’ that redeems Liam and erases his imperialist ideology, Sugars argues that this is ‘one moment when the novel undermines its potential critique of invader-settler nationalism.’³¹ As Molly is described as one ‘who carried the cells of both the old world and the new in the construction of her bones and blood’ (p. 302), it is natural for Sugars to draw such a conclusion. However, a closer look at the characterization of Molly will show Sugars’s interpretation underestimates the subtlety of the novel’s interrogation of the variety of forms that invader-settlers take to erase Native civilizations.

Mixed blood seems to make Molly a perfect model of blending the Old and New Worlds, but the New-World part in her is whited out for the Old World to be inscribed upon. Though her mother is an Ojibway, Molly is entirely cut off from Native communities and has little knowledge of her maternal cultural heritage or history. The only lost past she knows is the invisible ‘O’Doherty Island’ (p. 274), an otherworld island Thomas implants in her mind as their lost homeland, but unlike Eileen, Molly hardly feels nostalgia for this imagined landscape.³² Depicted as ‘a woman who loved the actual, who never doubted her own uncomplicated perceptions of the world’ (p. 302), Molly is as practically minded as Liam, and their children are going to populate the new nation. The Native half in Molly is in effect erased while the Native root of the Canadian O’Malley family slips into oblivion as the family grows and prospers. Molly’s body becomes the paradigm of how the emergence of the invader-settler nation comes as a result of the eradication of the Native presence. Critics tend to see their marriage as the indigenization of the European, legitimating Liam’s stake in the land.³³ But it is the opposite way round: marriage authorizes Molly to continue to stay in

³¹ Sugars, ‘Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts’, p. 18.

³² Thomas leaves out the ‘O’ in his last name after migrating to Canada.

³³ Sugars, ‘Settler Fantasies’, p. 112; Claire Omhòvère, ‘Copies and (Ab)Originals: The Problem of Authenticity in Jane Urquhart’s *Away* (1993)’, *Anglophonia*, 21 (2007), 179-88 (p. 186).

Liam's property, and metaphorically to stay in the new invader-settler nation represented by Liam. Sugars argues that Molly's participation in the ritual of the skunks shows she 'still has a foot in a grounded indigenous mythology.'³⁴ This is misleading, missing Urquhart's allegorical use of the ritual. Molly maintains no link to Native or Celtic mythology. It is her father who plays the role of 'a skunk banisher [. . .] as an Irishman and a devout Catholic' and whose explanation of the ritual alludes to the exile and displacement when European settlement takes place at the expense of the Native populations:

Now, it's a sad thing about skunks [. . .] in that they have no patron saint of their own . . . they being native to North America and saints being native to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. And the poor little devils could never stow away to get across, in that their whereabouts is so easily detected. So they have to be contented with the saints of other animals. (p. 280)

In terms of the ghost figure, Doherty denies the existence of Native ghosts, rejects Native belief in what Exodus calls manitou, and conjures up Irish Catholic ghosts to expel the native creatures from their natural habitat. It is an allegorical re-enactment of Canadian settlement but highlights the act of invading and banishing the Native populations.

Away is a postcolonial text that investigates the historical amnesia that enables Canada to construct its invader-settler nationalism through the erasure of Native peoples and cultures. Political enthusiasm for the Irish cause disconnects the mythical link Eileen has had with Native and Celtic mythologies in the wilderness. When she is away, Exodus is forgotten while traces of the black bird, which she used to communicate with in the willow, flash across her mind and then pass into oblivion. Listening to McGee's speech, Eileen suddenly recalls

³⁴ Sugars, 'Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts', p. 18.

Exodus and his Native belief that 'there were no lords of the land' (p. 338), but the memory vanishes immediately. As she learns to embrace the here and now after the assassination of McGee, she becomes as complicit in the embezzling of the land as Liam, unable to recover the mysterious link forged in the encounter between Exodus and Moira, between herself and Exodus. Her betrayal of the link is more evident as she becomes another landlord of the farm after Liam's death. Eileen turns into a contributor to the invader-settler nationalist project and an accessory to Native exile and displacement.

Liam's disbelief precludes the establishment of relationships with the Celtic mythology represented by his mother or the Native beliefs articulated by Exodus. In their first encounter, Exodus says to Liam prophetically: 'But you, who will move forward and make the change, *must* hear the story' (p. 175). Settlers like Liam are going to populate the land, constitute the body of the rising nation, and determine what will be written down in the history, as they transform the New World into home. By refusing to listen to Exodus, Liam repudiates not only his Celtic past his mother wants him to know but also the local cultural heritage and history of the land his family is occupying. It is a gesture of whitening out the new land and of rejecting the mutual respect for each other's cultures as shown in the harmony between Exodus and Moira. There is a moment when he wants to listen, but it is too late: 'Each spring from then on, Liam would set out in search of Exodus [. . .]. He would not find Exodus and eventually, [. . .] he forgot that this had been his original intention' (pp.196-97). Exodus vanishes and never comes back. His disappearance echoes both Liam's denial of Native history and the exclusion of the Native presence from the Canadian national imaginary envisioned by McGee. Omhové notes that except the single shot in the episode of McGee's assassination, 'violence has been so far conspicuously absent from a novel addressing the

complex, conflictual metamorphosis of an invader-settler colony into a full-fledged nation.’³⁵

Yet what *Away* presents is not physical violence but the invisible colonial and nationalist violence, which is more potent and devastating.

The postcolonial subtext explored thus far is merged into a narrative told by Eileen’s granddaughter, Esther, from memory. In a linear and chronological fashion, the narrative follows the O’Malley family from 1842, when Mary starts being away in Ireland, to 1868, when Eileen returns to Liam’s Loughbreeze Beach farm by the Great Lake after the assassination of McGee. This oral tale is enclosed by a frame story, set in 1982, in which an anonymous omniscient narrator recounts the eighty-two-year-old Eileen’s storytelling in the farm and the activities going on in a nearby quarry. Unlike Atwood in *Alias Grace*, Urquhart does not juxtapose fictional narrative with historical documents to blur the boundary between history and fiction. Nor does she deploy explicit postmodern narrative strategies to expose the constructed nature of history as Findley has done in *The Wars*. *Away* lacks the cubist or mural voice Ondaatje creates for *In the Skin of a Lion*, or the heteroglossic model which Sweatman finds best conveys the polyphonic experience of the Winnipeg General Strike. Compared with the intricate interweaving of narrative strands in *The Englishman’s Boy*, the structure of *Away* appears to be relatively plain. Wylie would not describe this novel as postmodern because ‘it lacks the historiographic self-consciousness so prevalent in contemporary Canadian historical fiction.’³⁶

But that self-consciousness is not absent. Aware of the shared fictionality and narrativization in history and mythology, Urquhart incorporates the mythic and the supernatural into the realist and the historical to blur the distinctions between them. She then places this magic

³⁵ Omhovére, ‘Copies and (Ab)Originals’, p. 185.

³⁶ Wylie, “‘The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness’”, p. 38.

realist narrative in a frame story that betrays its constructed nature. Esther's telling is in fact a retelling. At twelve, she receives the story from old Eileen, who also tells it from memory. It seems that the passing down of stories from generation to generation serves to confirm the authenticity and validity of the oral legacy. However, despite the employment of the oral tradition, this novel does not provide an uncritical embracing of it. Urquhart explores the validity of oral history in a very subtle and oblique way. At the very beginning of the novel, the anonymous narrator in the frame story has pointed out that Esther is telling the story 'to herself and the Great Lake, there being no one to listen', but the sentences that follow arouse suspicion about the truth value of the story:

Even had there been an audience of listeners, the wrong questions might have been asked. 'How could you possibly know that?' Or, 'Do you have proof?' Esther is too mature, has always been too mature, for considerations such as these. The story will take her wherever it wants to go in the next twelve hours, and that is all that matters. (pp. 3-4)

Why are the two questions wrong? Why is Esther described as being too mature for these questions? How could maturity exempt Esther from answering the questions or from validating the story she is about to tell? This short but enigmatic passage, aimed at eschewing the problem of verification, only raises more questions about the validity of the story. This subtle questioning of oral history is made explicit in the Sedgewick brothers' hobby of collecting Irish folklore among the peasants: 'Several of the older men in the community kept their minds busy inventing new folklore to relate at their firesides during Osbert's and Granville's note-taking visits so as not to disappoint the young masters' (p. 41). This statement not only ridicules the stupidity and insensitivity of the landlords but also implies the possibility of fabrication in folklore. If folklore can be invented, so can Esther's oral history. This process of invention and reinvention comes to the fore in the frame story when

Esther is described as lying awake in the dark, 'recomposing, reaffirming a lengthy, told story, recalling it; calling it back' (p. 133). Her reconstruction of family history is presented as an attempt to impose order on the chaos of experience: 'what she wants is to give shape to one hundred and forty years' (p. 21). Without elaborate narrative devices, *Away* still succeeds in exposing the constructed nature of oral history, even though this historiographic self-consciousness is nearly submerged by its postcolonial subtext.

Sugars points out that *Away* is successful in recuperating a myth of Canadian 'beginnings' as an anti-colonial move, but regards its equation of the plight of the Irish settlers with Native peoples as particularly problematic.³⁷ However, this myth is what also comes under scrutiny when Urquhart dramatizes the formation of invader-settler nationalism and the struggle of immigrants between diasporic nostalgia for the old country and desire for identification with the new land. By paralleling the naturalization of Eileen and Liam as Canadian with the disappearance of Exodus and memories about him, the author foregrounds how the nation-building process is predicated on historical amnesia. The inclusion of the assassination of McGee exposes the potential for violence and oppression nationalism can develop. Urquhart does not equate the exploitation of the Irish settlers with the oppression of Canada's Native populations; instead, she highlights the tension and conflict that can arise from the encounter between these two groups of colonial victims. She makes explicit the ways settlers can participate in the colonial deprivation of Native peoples. What Sugars calls the myth of national origins is set against an awareness of the erasure of the Native presence. *Away* shows that settler cultures are never able to escape the colonial legacy. Yet while contributing to the Canadian nation-building romance, this novel explores with self-consciousness the effects of historical amnesia on invader-settler nationalism and unsettles the related notion of the New World.

³⁷ Sugars, 'Settler Fantasies', p. 105.

Fall on Your Knees

MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* weaves a multi-generational saga that undermines hegemonic discourses about race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, reassesses the regional history of Cape Breton Island, and unearths a portion of the national past that has been consigned to oblivion in official history. This disturbing genealogy revolves around miscegenation, raising crucial questions about origins and identity as well as rewriting the white master-narrative of English Canada. Although MacDonald does not feature specific historical events or personages as Vanderhaeghe, Sweatman, or Atwood do, *Fall on Your Knees* is still a historical novel in the sense that it folds documented regional and world events of the early twentieth century into the fictional family saga. The way it makes use of these historical materials is more similar to that in *Away* — as a frame of reference, within which stories of the fictional characters provoke critical thoughts on history, memory, cultural difference, and the establishment of Canadian national identity.

In *Fall on Your Knees*, the challenge to generic conventions is more revisionary than transgressive. Jennifer Andrews takes *Fall on Your Knees* as a work of magic realism because of its adhesion to many of the conventions of the genre, but she emphasizes that by presenting the story from a lesbian feminist perspective, MacDonald's 'depictions of sexual, racial, and national difference foreground the need to expand and redefine magic realism within Canadian literature.'³⁸ However, more critics regard this text as a Gothic novel which employs the generic conventions in such a creative manner that it differentiates itself from traditional Gothic fiction in many aspects. Gabriella Parro designates *Fall on Your Knees* as neo-Gothic not only because it uses 'irony and the grotesque' 'to disrupt or parody feminine myths of the "proper woman" or the femme fatale', but because it depends upon Gothic

³⁸ Jennifer Andrews, 'Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English-Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*', *Studies in Canadian Literature* 24:1 (1999), 1-19 (pp. 1-2).

conventions for investigation of racial relations in Canada — the haunting spectre of miscegenation in particular.³⁹ Howells points out that in addition to many conventional Gothic motifs, MacDonald replaces the traditional castle or abbey with the domestic space of the Pipers' house as 'the scariest Gothic place.'⁴⁰ Similarly, Pilar Somacarrera also considers *Fall on Your Knees* a revised Gothic text that goes beyond the stereotypes of this genre by using Gothic elements 'to enact psychological and social dilemmas and to deconstruct certain racial and sexual taboos.'⁴¹ This revised Gothic novel is at the same time a postcolonial text that unmasks the assumptions underpinning English canonical works like *Jane Eyre*. Somacarrera reads Materia's words in Arabic as MacDonald's narrative strategy to write back to Charlotte Brontë's silencing of the colonial subject incarnated in Bertha.⁴² Such a reading places this novel in the context of colonial relationship between Canada and the British Empire.

When labelling *Fall on Your Knees* as a magic realist text, Andrews also recognizes its postcolonial concerns because exploration of the collision between Old and New Worlds is an integral part of magic realism. MacDonald's text follows the convention by looking at the attempts at self-definition of a New World society, but it appears to be more subversive in that it exposes the New World as a deceptive concept by drawing attention to the political, social, and cultural limitations imposed on women and ethnic minorities on Cape Breton.⁴³ However, rather than just dismissing the notion of the New World as something that has lost its effectiveness or significance, MacDonald explores the persistence of this myth while expanding the idea of the Old World to include worlds outside Europe. The examination of

³⁹ Gabriella Parro, "'Who's Your Father, Dear?'" Haunted Bloodlines and Miscegenation in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 35: 2 (2005), 177-93 (pp. 178-79).

⁴⁰ Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*, p. 113.

⁴¹ Pilar Somacarrera, 'A Madwoman in a Cape Breton Attic: *Jane Eyre* in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39: 1 (2004), 55-75 (p. 57).

⁴² Somacarrera, 'A Madwoman', p. 60. Throughout the novel, Materia's Arabic words are untranslated. It is also one of MacDonald's strategies to keep linguistic and cultural diversity.

⁴³ Andrews, 'Rethinking the Relevance', p. 12.

Old and New Worlds in the novel reveals that the boundary between is never clear-cut and that their respective meanings vary in terms of race, gender, class and ethnicity. This section is concerned with MacDonald's reconsideration of these issues and the way she combines her postcolonial concerns with historiographic self-consciousness through strategies that undermine realist narration.

The first attempt MacDonald makes to dismantle the New World myth is to disclose the discrepancy between the optimistic openness evoked by the term 'New World' and the harsh reality individual characters have to face when living within it. MacDonald explains this discrepancy primarily in terms of gender, suggesting that the sense of freedom and opportunity implied in this term is meant for men, not for women. When first arriving at Cape Breton after a long journey from Lebanon, the six-year-old Materia hears her father celebrate Canada as a land of opportunity: 'Look. This is the New World. Anything is possible here.'⁴⁴ This announcement encourages her to dream of living a different new life in a foreign country thousands of miles away from home. However, it turns out to be an illusion for Materia, who comes to find herself still restricted by the traditional customs from the Old Country she and her family have left behind. At the age of four, she has already been betrothed by her father to a dentist in Lebanon and will be married to him when she turns sixteen. 'It's the custom,' replies Materia when James declares it is 'barbaric', 'backward' and 'savage' (p. 16). The New World cannot prevent immigrants from following the old customs they have brought with them even though the meaning of the customs are destabilized or questioned in the encounter with new cultures.

Undoubtedly, Mahmoud's announcement is aimed at his sons, not his daughters, but it does

⁴⁴ Ann-Marie MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996), p. 16. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

exert a profound influence on Materia, which is exemplified in her bold elopement with James: 'On the night of her thirteenth birthday, Materia climbed out her window and left the Old Country forever' (p. 16). For Materia, the life on Cape Breton Island is little different from that in the Old Country, and the home of the Mahmouds in this New World just a duplicate space of the Old Country. Through elopement, she runs away from her father's domination, seeking to find the freedom and opportunity that has been promised by the New World. She rebels against paternalist authority, rejecting the docile feminine role imposed on her by the traditional Lebanese culture that her family comes from. The elopement unquestionably mounts a direct challenge to Mahmoud's patriarchal authority. Yet what makes him so furious as to disavow his daughter is less that James is different in ethnicity and religion or that he is inferior in class. It is rather that he feels robbed by another man: 'It wasn't so much that the piano tuner was "*enklese*," or even that he was not a Catholic or a man of means. It was that he had come like a thief in the night and stolen another man's property' (p. 19). For Mahmoud, daughters are property for traffic with other men, and it is no use taking Materia back because 'she was ruined' (p. 19).

Nevertheless, Materia's escape leads nowhere. The rebellious act just removes her from one Old Country to another. James's world is not the New World that provides the liberation she has looked forward to. Just as Mahmoud asks her to be a submissive daughter, James expects her to take to perfect housewifery. The role assigned to her just shifts from a docile daughter to a dutiful wife. Nowhere in the marriage to James can she discover the so-called freedom of the New World. Materia continues her non-conformity by disobeying James's expectations. James builds her a hope chest out of cedar, expecting her to start sewing and knitting things to fill it just as his mother has done. He also wants her to learn how to cook. However, Materia does nothing other than wandering the shore and playing the piano. At first, James tells himself that she is still young and will learn in time, but then he discovers that she shows

no interest in housewifery. Materia keeps playing the piano in a way unacceptable to James to show her silent rejection of this traditional feminine role, but her music is dismissed as 'racket' and 'just discords' (p. 27) and her behaviour as childish tricks to attract attention. Cooking also becomes a means of resistance. Materia makes a bowl of molasses-cookie dough to provoke James because 'when he went to dip a finger in the dough the bowl had been licked clean' (p. 28). Unfortunately, all her acts of resistance provoke more oppression. James 'locked the piano and pocketed the key', saying, 'I'm not cooking anymore and I'm not cleaning. You do your job, missus, 'cause Lord knows I'm doing mine' (p. 28). He deprives Materia of her only consolation — music.

After realizing her escape has failed to liberate her from the limitations on women, Materia begins to feel nostalgia for the life in the Old Country. She transforms the hope chest — James's symbol of ideal femininity — into another means of silent rebellion and a medium through which she can recall her sheltered and happy childhood:

But she kept it empty on purpose, so that nothing could come between her and the magical smell that beckoned her into memory. Cedar. She hung her head into the empty chest and allowed its gentle breath to lift and bear her away . . . baked earth and irrigated olive groves; the rippling veil of the Mediterranean, her grandfather's silk farm; the dark elixir of her language, her mother's hands stuck with parsley and cinnamon, her mother's hands stroking her forehead, braiding her hair. (p. 29)

Materia's escape from the Old Country delivers her to a more oppressive and depressing life. Disillusionment and despair compel her to resume the role of 'a good woman', hoping her first baby will be a son so that her father, who 'would be hard pressed to disown a first grandson' (p. 35), will allow her to see her mother and sisters again. Materia also begins to

perform the duties of wife and mother. Nevertheless, the apparent resignation and submission has an undercurrent of struggle against patriarchal authority and control. On the one hand, she never openly defies James and speaks less and less in English. James misunderstands this reticence as evidence of Materia's illiteracy and idiocy. Her daughters have a similar impression that she 'couldn't speak English very well' (p. 2). 'This didn't used to be true,' explains the narrator, 'but it has come somewhat to pass simply because Materia doesn't speak English much' (p. 100). On the other hand, she begins to use more Arabic words, which provokes James to react violently:

'Now feed her.'

But the mother just blubbered and babbled.

'Speak English, for Christ's sake.'

'Ma bi'der. Biwajeaal.'

He slapped her. 'If she doesn't eat, you don't eat. Understood?' (p. 37)

Unable to comprehend the resistance implied by the change in Materia's use of languages, James starts to consider his wife a 'staring zombie' (p. 38) and finds biological explanations for her behaviour:

How had he been ensnared by a child? There was something not right about Materia. Normal children didn't run away with men. He knew from his reading that clinical simpletons necessarily had an overdeveloped animal nature. She had seduced him. That was why he hadn't noticed she was a child. Because she wasn't one. Not a real one. It was queer. Sick, even. Perhaps it was a racial flaw. (p. 39)

Skin colour begins to register and signify at this moment. Ironically, it is biological difference

that triggers off the attraction when they first meet each other. James with his blue eyes and fair skin is like 'a china figurine' (p. 13), catching Materia's attention, while he himself is charmed by her exotic appearance: 'The darkest eyes he'd ever seen, wet with light. Coalblack curls escaping from two long braids. Summer skin the color of sand stroked by the tide' (p. 13). Incomprehension of Materia's reticence makes James embark upon the othering process, 'producing Materia as the inferiorized Other.'⁴⁵ As a consequence, racial difference comes to assume discriminatory codes, facilitating the emergence and reinforcement of James's white supremacy. The othering process deteriorates into dehumanization as he sees Materia as 'bovine' (p. 77). 'Her dark body and soft mind allowed him to enjoy her in an uncomplicated way' (p. 73). Materia runs away from an old country where women are objectified but ends up in a domestic space where gender and racial bias worsens objectification and discrimination.

Materia's story suggests that the meaning of the New World is gender- and race-specific. Interestingly, while the idea of Canada as a New World where everything is possible is being dismantled, many of MacDonald's characters are depicted as believing New York City can provide more opportunity, freedom and equality than Cape Breton. It is not to create the impression of New York as a genuine New World, but rather to interrogate the persistence of this myth. These characters aspire to cross the border in the hope of starting a better life in another New World. Materia's parents are originally destined for this American metropolis: 'Waiting to see the Statue of Liberty loom up, to dock at Ellis Island before ferrying to the Blessed isle of Manhattan' (p. 400). However, the captain dumps them on the 'barren rock' of Cape Breton (p. 400). During a date, James tells Materia his dream of sailing for New York City, and she immediately expresses the desire to go with him. In their newlywed life,

⁴⁵ Katarzyna Rukszto, 'Out of Bounds: Perverse Longings, Transgressive Desire and the Limits of Multiculturalism: A Reading of *Fall on Your Knees*', *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 21: 2 (2000), 17-34 (p. 25).

Materia again suggests moving to New York right after James advises her to plant a garden or keep hens as most wives are expected to do. Her wish is rejected by James. For Materia, going to New York means to run away again from an Old Country, which now means their new house at 191 Water Street, New Waterford. But she is denied the second chance to escape. The craving for New York does not disappear but the harsh reality in marriage compels Materia to push it to the back of her mind. Later, when Materia discovers James's incestuous lust for his eldest daughter Kathleen, this repressed longing returns as a hallucination and as an attempt to flee from James:

She [. . .] is on a liner bound for New York City, the girl with the heart-of-flame hair at her side clinging to the rail. But the moment flees before Materia can get hold of it, a message telegraphed weakly over sagging distance of time and space. (p. 71)

Materia would like to run away with a daughter whom she has difficulty loving but who she senses will become another victim in the Piper household. Likewise, Teresa, who grows up in the black community, The Coke Ovens, and who 'wouldn't live anywhere else, except New York City' (p. 138), originally intends to 'move to New York City and have American children and a better life' (p.388). However, a workplace accident damages her husband's head and forces them to give up the emigration. These characters imagine New York City as a utopian space where they can enjoy more freedom and happiness. This American metropolis in one sense becomes a New World 'newer' than Cape Breton.

Ironically, those who dream of living a better life in New York can never make it, whereas those who don't are offered the chance to cross the border. Teresa's brother, Ginger, never thinks of moving to New York City but first makes a business trip there. This sojourn has profound effects on him. He feels as if the music heard there cast a spell over him. The music

transforms New York City into an uncanny place, which seems simultaneously familiar and strange:

Whenever Ginger is in a place that's filled with other black people it's as though he is relieved of a weight that he was unaware of until it came off him. He walked up Lenox Avenue feeling light. In Harlem Ginger felt happy but lonely too. Home and not home. (p. 380)

This transforming power is clearly demonstrated in Kathleen, who finds herself liberated in this American metropolis:

Kathleen is truly and utterly and completely Kathleen in New York. [. . .] She comes from an Atlantic island surrounded by nothing but sea air, yet in the man-made outdoor corridors of this fantastic city she can finally breathe. (p. 143)

Unlike Maria or Teresa, Kathleen has never imagined New York as a dreamland. Her feelings are rather mixed because the New York she has learned about from *Harper's Bazaar*, which she savours with 'a combination of delight and disgust', is a 'high society' that cannot get rid of 'philistines' (p. 119). James initially hopes to send Kathleen to study music in Italy instead of New York City, but the three years he spends in France and Flanders makes him realize that the First World War has turned the Old World into 'a graveyard' and '[t]he great music will immigrate to the New World. New York' (p. 132). Like Ginger, Kathleen travels to New York for practical reasons. It is described as a journey into the New World: 'When Kathleen steps onto Pier 54, she starts writing the book of her life in her head: *And then she arrived in the New World*' (p. 144). Here, no longer subject to her father's influence and restrictions, she begins to question why she is studying opera, considering the Metropolitan

Opera House of New York ‘a mausoleum’ (p. 548). She establishes contact with coloured people, cries for her mother when reminded of her hands and when hearing Arabic on a streetcar, and has sexual relationships. What James has discouraged or forbidden her from doing on Cape Breton, she now enjoys doing without guilt. Her lesbian relationship with Rose makes her feel reborn: ‘Making love with the New Yorker is an experience which announces to Kathleen that the present tense has finally begun’ (p. 206). Kathleen fulfils Materia’s dream by chance, living a life her mother has craved, a life free of restrictions imported from the Old Country. This New York sounds like a real New World where anything is possible.

However, just as Materia could never arrive at the New World she has yearned for by eloping with James, the new life Kathleen has found in this liberating space is only temporary. The same passage describing her newly discovered freedom foretells ominously that the present cannot break free from the past and that the New World is unable to discard the Old Country:

For Kathleen the Present is a new country, unassailable by the old countries because the Goths and Vandals of the old countries don’t even know the Present exists. But it is assailable. It will be breached. Kathleen is too young to know that. (p. 206)

James’s arrival in New York represents the invasion of the past into the present, destroying the new country Kathleen is enjoying. This border-crossing is not just a spatial movement; it also assumes temporal and ethical significance. Kathleen’s past comes back suddenly in the most horrendous form — incestuous rape. It is also James’s moral transgression. What Materia and Kathleen have gone through implies that any journey into the New World ends up as a vain attempt to leave the Old Country behind. In *Fall on Your Knees*, every New World society eventually turns into an Old Country, haunting and oppressing those who have

yearned for escape. The so-called New World keeps sliding like a mirage, remaining enticing but impossible to be grasped. Compared with Cape Breton, New York seems to provide more freedom, but it does not rid itself of racial or sex discrimination. Kathleen 'can't get into any of the interesting-looking places unescorted' (p. 550) while Rose's rare gift for music cannot be fully recognized because of her skin colour. According to Kathleen's music teacher, Rose has 'gone as far as she could go and it's best she redirect her gifts for her own sake', which is a statement that forces Kathleen to acknowledge 'music does have color' (p. 571). MacDonald deconstructs the New World myth by laying bare the social and cultural restrictions imposed on women and minorities either on Cape Breton or in New York, but she is aware of the persistence of this myth when presenting New York as another New World dreamed about by many of the characters.

Fall on Your Knees is also successful in unravelling what Howells calls 'English-Canadian colonial myths of whiteness and cultural unity.'⁴⁶ The presence of the African-Canadians, the Jewish people, and the Lebanese as well as Arabic immigrants undermines the stereotype of the ethnic or racial makeup of Cape Breton, overturning the impression of Nova Scotia as a white community. Even the notion of white is problematized and the heterogeneity of the so-called white people exposed: 'What James resented most was the *enklesse* nonsense. He wasn't English, not a drop of English blood in him, he was Scottish, and Irish, like ninety percent of this godforsaken island, not to mention Canadian' (p. 21). Despite his resentment at being identified as English, James himself tends to stereotype other ethnic groups and ignore their difference. He calls the Mahmoud family 'Filthy black Syrians'; when Materia tries to explain that they are Lebanese not Syrians, he replies, 'What's the difference, you're better off without them' (p. 21). Nonetheless, the label 'Lebanese' does not designate a community without inner diversity or conflict. Mahmoud regrets giving his most beautiful

⁴⁶ Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*, p. 104.

daughter Camille to 'dirty half-civilized' Jameel

because [in the Old Country] the crucial distinction between their two families would have been clear. The Jameels are Arabs. We Mahmouds are more Mediterranean. Closer to being European, really. Such distinctions are apt to get blurred in the new country, where you open wide your arms to a brother from home who speaks the same beautiful language as you. (pp. 385-86)

Ironically, just as Mahmoud looks down on Jameel, he himself is seen as inferior in every aspect in the eyes of his wife's family, who 'were doctors and lawyers, spoke more French than Arabic, considered themselves more Mediterranean, even European' (p. 400). His sense of superiority is relatively destabilized. The Lebanese community is thus subdivided into different groups that form a hierarchical structure in terms of wealth and language. These examples suggest that any categorizing leads to sub-categorizing and that the attempt to refer to a unified ethnic or racial community by giving it a specific identity always encounters resistance from inner heterogeneity or diversity.

The representation of ethnic and racial diversity on Cape Breton exposes the hidden multicultural and multiracial identities in Canadian history. The recovery of such heterogeneity is accompanied by a radical deconstruction of race and ethnicity as essentialist notions. As Melanie A. Stevenson observes, groups in the novel like to make ethnic and racial distinctions, but these distinctions are not permanently fixed and shift to suit people's personal and professional needs.⁴⁷ Corey Frost argues that this text demonstrates 'ethnic performativity', which regards 'ethnicity as a constantly performed construction rather than

⁴⁷ Melanie A. Stevenson, 'Othello, Darwin, and the Evolution of Race in Ann-Marie MacDonald's Work', *Canadian Literature*, 168 (2001), 34-54 (p. 43).

an essential attribute.’⁴⁸ Throughout the novel, the categorization of race and ethnicity is shown to be slippery and complicated by other factors, amongst which class plays a crucial role. This is evident as Teresa attempts to define the position of her employer’s family on Cape Breton:

[T]he Mahmouds aren’t really white, are they? They’re something else. They are somewhat colored. What this means in Nova Scotia at this time is that, for the Mahmouds, the color bar that guards access to most aspects of society tends to be negotiable. It helps that they have money. (p. 137)

Wealth can smooth the harsh effects of racism. Racial hatred is not directed towards the Mahmoud girls because ‘they’re nice girls and rich rich’ (p. 113). In contrast, Kathleen’s ‘white white skin’ (p. 39) counts for nothing; Materia’s darkness becomes the cause for racist prejudice against her despite the fact that Materia used to be one of the rich Mahmoud girls: ‘She may be peaches and cream but you should see her mother . . . black as the ace of spades, my dear’ (p. 113). Nonetheless, class difference is not the only reason for the outright discrimination against the Piper women. This malicious statement has to do with the anxiety over Kathleen as a child of miscegenation. Fear and hatred of miscegenation arise from the contamination of bloodlines it implies:

You know that sort of thing stays in the blood. Evangeline Campbell’s mother’s cousin knows a girl had a baby in Louisburg? Black as coal, my dear, and the [sic] both their families white as snow and blond blond. (p. 113)

⁴⁸ Corey Frost, ‘Intersections of Gender and Ethnic Performativity in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*’, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 35: 2 (2005), 195-213 (p. 195).

Miscegenation is perceived by the community of Cape Breton as an 'evil' that threatens 'the fabric of our nation' and leads to moral degradation 'by crossing nature's divide' (p. 277). Children of interbreeding blur the boundaries between ethnic or racial groups, undermining the biological justification of racial purity. At the same time, their existence points to the contingency and arbitrariness of skin colour as a major determinant of racial difference. That genetic inheritance selects colour at random is exemplified in Kathleen and Rose. With a dark mother and a white father, Kathleen turns out to look so white that 'Materia wondered where she'd come from. Surely she had been changed in the night' (p. 39). Rose is shocked to learn that Kathleen has a non-white mother, whereas it also shocks Kathleen to discover Rose's mother is white. They both determine each other's racial identity by skin colour, but the discovery of their parents' respective mixed marriage disrupts their initial racial categorization. Moreover, the contrast between Kathleen and Rose shows that skin colour as an indicator of racial distinction is easily manipulated to serve personal or communal interests. In New York, Kathleen denies the fact that she has a dark mother and makes use of her physical whiteness to enjoy social privileges. By contrast, the white community on Cape Breton, knowing her mother is dark, rejects her despite her whiteness. The border between white and non-white is further exposed as ambiguous. As mentioned above, wealth pushes the Mahmoud family towards the white side of the border whereas in Teresa's eyes they are 'somewhat colored' (p. 137). Likewise, Rose finds it difficult to determine which side of the border Materia should be placed:

'You look pure white.' [Rose says to Kathleen]

'I am pure white. My mother is white.'

'Not quite.'

'Well she's not colored.' (p. 589)

‘You said she’s not white.’

‘She got a year-round tan, that don’t count for colored.’

‘You said it did the other night.’

‘Yeah, well that’s a moot point, isn’t it, considering how you come out.’ (p. 596)

By foregrounding the contingency of biological difference as a determinant of racial categorization and the ambiguity of the border between white and non-white, MacDonald exposes race as an arbitrary social construct.

It is due to this alertness to the constructed nature of race and ethnicity that Rukszto celebrates *Fall on Your Knees* as ‘a text that counters the dominant multicultural discourse, rather than being inscribed by it.’⁴⁹ The novel recovers heterogeneity and hybridity without essentializing cultural diversity or identity. However, the representation of multiracial and multicultural identities is overshadowed by the domination of the English language. In the novel, MacDonald dramatizes the homogenizing effects that the domination of a single official language would have produced in minority communities in English Canada. Gaelic is James’s mother tongue, but English is necessary for social mobility. Therefore, James’s mother ‘made sure he was proficient [in English] as a little prince, for they were part of the British Empire and he had his way to make’ (p. 8). Aware of the power and necessity of English, James, like his mother, tries to ensure that Kathleen masters this official language by forbidding Materia to speak Arabic: ‘I don’t want her growing up confused. Speak English’ (p. 40). However, given that James himself speaks Gaelic with Kathleen, the motivation behind his prohibition is not just the concern with the acquisition of English. James’s double standard has to do with his white supremacy. Seeing Materia as a racial other inferior to him in every aspect, James makes Kathleen deeply ashamed of her mother and the language she

⁴⁹ Rukszto, ‘Out of Bounds’, p. 31.

speaks, which in fact is a deliberate attempt to deny her Lebanese cultural heritage. The Arabic language, which could have become one of Kathleen's mother tongues, is suppressed in the name of English and by James's racism. Materia gradually loses command of her native tongue because of being isolated from the Arabic community and prohibited from speaking Arabic to her family. Though later she can speak this language with Frances and Mercedes, it has become 'the Arabic of children' because 'she has lost some of her mother tongue too, through disuse' (p. 101).

Proficiency in English also becomes a measure of intelligence. James regards Materia as 'illiterate' (p. 62) exactly because she does not speak much English. He dismisses her as 'a sorry student' (p. 26) after she refuses to cultivate a love of reading English literature under his tutoring. James mistakes Materia's resistance to speaking the dominant language for a sign of 'idiocy' (p. 58). Later, he seeks to implant this love of reading in his younger daughters Mercedes and Frances, 'whom he has noticed for the first time' (p. 150) after Kathleen's departure to New York. After years of neglect, James assumes responsibility for their education: 'He leavens the weight of classics with fairy tales and rhymes' (p. 151). The little girls, 'bewildered by the strange names and long words' and 'by glimpses of wonderful worlds that unfold at his command', 'respond with as much reverence as they can muster' (p. 150-51). James has become more tolerant, allowing them to chatter in Arabic with Materia, but he still forbids them to speak it when they read together. Interestingly, it never comes into James's mind to teach them Gaelic, which has gradually faded from the Pipers' life. Kathleen is the last member of the Piper family who learns this language, of which her three younger sisters have no command at all. Although Mercedes and Frances are allowed to learn some basic Arabic from their mother, their acquisition is stopped by Materia's suicide. Lily 'has not even a rudimentary understanding of Arabic' (p. 285) or Gaelic. Nor does Frances's son, Anthony, who is brought up in an orphanage. In the Piper family, the English language

establishes absolute dominance whereas the mother tongues spoken respectively by James and Materia gradually die out: Gaelic due to disuse and Arabic because of deliberate suppression. The change in the languages used in the Piper family signifies a dilemma that all immigrants and their descendants would have to face sooner or later — the gradual disappearance of minority languages under the domination of the official language in the new country. By dramatizing the loss of minority languages among ethnic and racial minority populations, the novel foregrounds the damage that the domination of a single official language would have caused in a multiracial and multicultural society.

Although *Fall on Your Knees* is set in a time before the inception of the 1971 Federal Multiculturalism Bill and the 1988 Multiculturalism Act, it seems to provide a critical reflection on the problems that result from the contradiction between the practice of multiculturalism policies and the domination of official languages.⁵⁰ The loss of Gaelic and Arabic in the Piper family implies that the domination of the English language can lead to a gradual process of assimilation in which the cultural plurality that multiculturalism policies claim to preserve and promote is very likely to fade away. However, to counter the assimilation, MacDonald provides an alternative model that allows the coexistence of minority and official languages. It is exemplified in James's Jewish neighbours, the Luvovitz family, whose youngest generation 'speak French at home, English at school and Yiddish with every second shopkeeper. Real Canadians' (p. 649). They demonstrate what Liviu Cotrau observes: 'multiculturalism requires multilingualism.'⁵¹

MacDonald is successful in navigating what Smaro Kamboureli describes as the ambivalence

⁵⁰ The 1971 Multiculturalism Bill affirmed English and French as the two official languages of Canada. Since *Fall on Your Knees* does not deal with the problems caused by French as an official language, I focus my discussion on the domination of the English language.

⁵¹ Liviu Cotrau, 'Separatism and the Politics of Multiculturalism in Canada', in *Identity and Alterity in Canadian Literature*, ed. Dana Puiu (Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint, 2003), pp. 39-52 (p. 43).

of multiculturalism:

[W]hile multiculturalism is expected to facilitate the process of decolonizing the inherited representations of Canadian history, the literary tradition, and other forms of culture, it is also seen as essentializing race and ethnicity, namely assigning to racial and ethnic differences, as well as their various expressions, attributes that are taken to be 'natural,' and therefore stable.⁵²

When deconstructing myths of whiteness and cultural unity in Canada, *Fall on Your Knees* also succeeds in retrieving cultural plurality without essentializing race and ethnicity. However, the investigation of the contradiction between the practice of multiculturalism policies and the domination of a single official language draws our attention to the limits of multiculturalism, which has come close to becoming another Canadian national myth. By romanticizing the latest Luvovitz generation, MacDonald seems to suggest that real Canadians should be simultaneously multiracial, multicultural and multilingual, and that multiculturalism has to go hand in hand with multilingualism. Yet this idealized version of Canadians cannot be seen as a perfect solution to the problems resulting from the conflict between multiculturalism and monolingualism. This family is placed in the margin, in stark contrast to the Pipers, who take centre stage in the novel. Through depicting the fadeaway of mother tongues in the Piper family, MacDonald highlights the assimilating effects of a dominant language in a multicultural society. Her presentation of multicultural society in Nova Scotia is not blind to the problems of assimilation.

This critique of myths about the New World, white Canada, and multiculturalism is paralleled

⁵² Smaro Kamboureli, 'Introduction', in *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 1-16 (p. 12).

by a historiographic and metafictional self-consciousness, which is as subtle as that in *Away*. Compared with most of the novels discussed here, *Fall on Your Knees* appears to be less experimental in form, but due to a considerable number of disruptions to the apparently realist storytelling, it poses more challenges to the reader than *Away*. The novel is similar in structure to *Fugitive Pieces* in that they both have a prefatory note introducing preliminary information about what will unfold. What is special about *Fugitive Pieces*, constituted by two autobiographical accounts, is that its prefatory note seems irrelevant to the second account, making the connections among the three portions seem somewhat loose. The note in *Fall on Your Knees*, by contrast, maintains a close link with the whole narrative since it introduces the Piper family as protagonists. Another difference lies in the tone. Michaels's narrator speaks in a detached, impersonal voice, while MacDonald's addresses the reader. Identifying this intimate voice as Lily's, Howells argues that the narrative voice in the rest of the novel 'switches frequently between Lily's voice and omniscience.'⁵³ This is a reasonable conclusion given that the novel ends with Lily inviting Anthony to 'sit down and have a cuppa tea till I tell you about your mother' (p. 656).

However, a few peculiar things in the prefatory note make it difficult to pin down the narrative voice. This note is called 'Silent Pictures' because it consists of descriptions of several photographs and a silent moving picture. The narrative voice commences with 'They're all dead now. Here's a picture of the town where they lived' (p. 1), and the description of the second picture opens with 'Here's a picture of their house as it was then' (p. 2). At the outset, the narrator gives the description in a detached manner, and the act of referring to the Piper family in the third person seems an attempt to put some distance between the narrator and the Pipers. However, when it comes to the picture of Mumma, the narrator begins to speak in a tone of intimacy and share details that are not shown in the

⁵³ Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*, pp. 103, 106.

picture, thus reducing the sense of detachment:

Here's a picture of her the day she died. She had a stroke while cleaning the oven. [. . .] Of course you can't see her face for the oven, but you can see where she had her stockings rolled down for housework and, although this is a black and white picture, her housedress actually is black since she was in mourning for Kathleen at the time, as well as Ambrose. You can't tell from this picture, but Mumma couldn't speak English very well. (p. 2)

The voice continues to describe the other parent: 'Here's a picture of Daddy. [. . .] His hair is braided. [. . .] Those are braids that Lily put in his hair while he was asleep' (p. 2). The references to Ma and Daddy establish the identity of the narrator and create the impression that the narrator is about to give a witness or firsthand account whose reliability is assured by the intimacy between the narrator and the people being described. However, if the voice comes from Lily, then why does she refer to herself as 'Lily' instead of 'I'? An air of mystery surrounds the identity of this narrative voice.

Its reliability is further shaken when the narrative voice comes to describe the fourth picture: 'Other Lily is in limbo. She lived a day, then died before she could be baptized. [. . .] That's why this picture of Other Lily is a white blank' (p. 3). If it is blank, how can the narrator determine it is a picture of Other Lily? Here, the voice begins to sound a little crazy, arousing the suspicion that the narrator is making up a story about the picture. The voice becomes very excited when depicting the picture of Frances, and its narration builds up suspense:

And this is Frances. But wait, she's not in it yet. This one is a moving picture. It was taken at night, behind the house. There's the creek. [. . .] It's only fair to tell you that a

neighbor once saw the dismembered image of his son in this creek, only to learn upon his arrival home for supper that his son had been crushed to death by a fall of stone in Number 12 Mine.

[. . .] And certainly it's odd but not at all supernatural to see the surface break, and a real live soaked and shivering girl rise up from the water and stare straight at us. Or at someone just behind us. Frances. What's she doing in the middle of the creek, in the middle of the night? And what's she hugging to her chest with her chicken-skinny arms? A dark wet bundle. Did it stir just now? What are you doing, Frances? (pp. 3-4)

By presenting the creek as possessing some supernatural power and by piling up questions about Frances's act in the water, this enigmatic passage anticipates the climatic episode in the creek. Yet there is a subtle change in the narrative voice. By addressing Frances, the narrator still speaks in a tone of intimacy but starts to withhold information: 'But even if [Frances] were to answer, we wouldn't know what she was saying, because, although this is a moving picture, it is also a silent one' (p. 4). The voice no longer makes comments on this silent picture as it has done with the picture of Mumma or Other Lily. Interestingly, the passing reference to 'we' seems to suggest that now the voice identifies itself as one member of the audience watching this picture. MacDonald creates for 'Silent Pictures' a slippery narrative voice whose identity is difficult to pin down at certain points and thus draws attention to the issue of perspective in storytelling.

Another problem with this prefatory note is the gap between the verisimilitude of visual documents and their understanding. The reading of photographs is shown as a process of interpretation and narrativization that involves supplementation, arbitrariness and uncertainty. The narrative voice supplements the picture of Mumma by explaining that her housedress is

black because she is in mourning; it determines arbitrarily that a white blank is the picture of Lily; it increases uncertainty by piling up questions about France's act in the creek. 'Silent Pictures' begins with photos as hard evidence for family history as well as the past but ends with the subversion of their verisimilitude as well as authenticity by problematizing the process of interpreting them.

Nine books constitute the body of the novel. After the slippery narrative voice in the opening note comes a third-person, omniscient narrator who tells the story of the Piper family chronologically except for Book Two, Book Eight, and sections inserted between books. In Book Two, the night of Kathleen's death functions as a pivot in time, around which several narrative threads with different focalizations revolve. The omniscient narrator juxtaposes several versions of the tragic event on the night of Kathleen's death from the perspectives of different characters. The temporal linearity built in Book One is shattered. These versions are repetitive and fragmented in such a way that the reader can make sense of what actually happens only by piecing them together. Book Eight is composed of Kathleen's diary of life in New York but occasionally disrupted by segments of Lily's escape from Cape Breton to New York.

Each of the books, except Book One, has at least one small section appended or inserted that has little relevance to the episodes coming before or next. Though all centring on Kathleen, these sections are presented from different points of view and in diverse forms, disrupting the course of the narrative. They are unusual because they serve to fill the gaps left in the narrative, to form misleading impressions of certain events, and to overturn some previously created impressions. For example, near the end of Book One, James receives a letter from an anonymous well-wisher that makes him go to New York, but its content does not come to light until it is attached to the end of Book Three. Although the existence of Kathleen's diary

is revealed in Book One, and one of her diary entries is appended to the end of Book Four, its whereabouts remains unknown until the section inserted between Books Six and Seven. It is a letter dated 'October 29, 1932', from Lucy Morriss, who sends James Kathleen's diary at the request of Kathleen's former landlady in New York. The letter becomes the note in a package from New York that James receives in Book Seven. These sections not only provide pieces of information omitted in the chapters, helping clarify certain enigmatic points in the Pipers' family history; they also disrupt the apparently chronological narrative and the progressive process of reading. The reader is forced to take an active role in making sense of what happens by establishing connections between these inserted sections and the rest of the narrative. This structure also draws attention to the textuality of the novel.

Some other sections serve to create misleading impressions. The appended section of Book Two implies Kathleen gets pregnant by a New Yorker. The love affair is confirmed by the anonymous well-wisher's letter attached to Book Three and revealed as a mixed-race heterosexual relationship. The well-wisher even urges James to prevent her from 'yielding to the dark remnants of the beast in man' (p. 277). Kathleen's love affair is further validated first by her diary entry at the end of Book Four, and then by the short passage attached to Book Five: 'Kathleen [. . .] runs her hands up the diamond-studded shirt front and slips her thigh between the stripes of the wide black-and-tan pant legs' (p. 362). All these sections suggest a mixed-race heterosexual relationship. However, this repeatedly reinforced impression is overturned by Kathleen's diary in Book Eight, which discloses that her lover is Rose, a black woman, and that in their relationship she plays the seducer, not the seduced. Nonetheless, the revelation of their lesbian relationship leaves Kathleen's pregnancy unsolved and the diary ends with Kathleen's decision to close it forever because she is 'too happy to write any more' (p. 622). The truth — an incestuous rape that results in Kathleen's pregnancy — comes to light in the final book when the narrator shifts from Mercedes's 1939 call on Anthony in the

orphanage back to James's arrival at New York in 1918. Like Kathleen's diary, this embedded section contradicts some of the previously established impressions.

These anachronically inserted sections serve contradictory purposes. MacDonald employs this specific narrative structure to suggest the potential problems that can occur in the reconstruction of family history and of the past in general. These inserted sections are like newly unearthed historical materials, which can fill gaps or confirm some established facts. However, they are also likely to provide misleading information and cause their interpreters to draw incorrect inferences. Moreover, as the emergence of Kathleen's diary suggests, the discovery of new documents can even cause radical changes to the established history. Provisionality and constructedness in the writing of history are thus exposed.

MacDonald also investigates the role of memory in the reconstruction of the past, but it is an ambiguous investigation that exposes both the fallibility and the indispensability of memory. The problematization of the nature of memory is best exemplified in the observation of one of Frances's memories: 'But memory play tricks. Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable' (p. 319). Frances makes up several versions of Lily's birth, which result from her remembering, misremembering and forgetting of what happens on the night of Kathleen's death. This remembering, misremembering and forgetting has to do with the trauma she experiences that night. Despite its unreliability, however, memory is not completely denied as a means of retrieving the past and it can come back totally unexpectedly:

The more Frances tells, the more she remembers. As though it were all parked, waiting behind the flimsiest of stage scenery — a scrim perhaps — and suddenly exposed by a trick of light; the countryside dissolving to reveal the battlefield, present all along. (p.

521).

The unreliability of memory leads Mary Condé to argue that MacDonald ‘uses unreliable narration [. . .] to make the narrators more convincingly fallible, not to question the nature of reality.’⁵⁴ Memory is not the only thing that MacDonald attempts to examine in *Fall on Your Knees*. She repeatedly questions the ways in which the nature of reality is understood and represented. In the creek scene, the omniscient narrator establishes that Frances is trying to baptize the twins. In the eyes of James, however, it is a murder attempt: ‘Always at the back of his mind is the episode in the creek the night Lily was born and he caught Frances trying to drown her’ (p. 227). James comes to this horrible conclusion because he is there, seeing Frances plunge back into the creek and get the drowned boy baby out of the water. Yet another witness, Mercedes, makes a different statement when watching the episode from the window of her bedroom:

It’s Frances, down there in the creek. She’s holding something, cradling it — a bundle. And on the embankment there’s something moving. A small animal. A kitten. That must also be a kitten she’s holding. Frances dunks the bundle, then dives after it. What’s she doing? No! No, Frances loves kittens, she wouldn’t be drowning them. She’s giving them a bath. That’s what she’s doing. She puts the one kitten down and picks up the other one, but Mercedes doesn’t see what happens next because Daddy comes into the yard and up to the creek, blocking her view. (p. 181)

Although at first Mercedes also suspects Frances of drowning what she is holding, she discards this idea right away because she knows Frances loves kittens. The contrast between

⁵⁴ Mary Condé, ‘Who is the Victim in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall On Your Knees*’, *Recherches Anglaises et Nord-Américaines*, 33 (2000), 35-43 (p. 40).

James and Mercedes in their contradictory understandings of Frances's act in the creek suggests how preconceptions influence the understanding and judgment of observed events. This is also manifested in the scene of Materia's funeral, where Frances bursts out laughing while people around think she is crying. In this moment, Frances 'finds out that one thing can look like another. That the facts of a situation don't necessarily indicate anything about the truth of a situation' (p. 165).

MacDonald rejects more experimental narrative forms, like those employed in *The Englishman's Boy*, *The Wars* or *Fox*, because she believes that reading should be an enjoyable experience. As she explains in an interview:

I tend to use classical or more traditional forms and then turn them to my own purposes. But for me there are some things that never change, and that is the quality of enjoyment the reader experiences [. . .]. There's going to be no cheating, and it's not going to be a postmodern joke in the end.⁵⁵

The less experimental form in *Fall on Your Knees* provides a story playing itself out in an apparently linear manner, but the linearity is punctuated by inserted sections that serve to fill the gaps in the storyline, give misleading impressions of certain episodes, and even negate what has been told. The novel does give the reader a fulfilling story, but only at the final moment and after the reader endeavours to piece together the anachronic sections. Perhaps there is no cheating, but there is delayed revelation of crucial details. Despite the insistence on not playing postmodern joke, MacDonald shares the postmodern concern about the nature of history and reality. Though less experimental, the narrative strategies in *Fall on Your*

⁵⁵ Eva Tihanyi, 'Jane Eyre in a Cape Breton Attic — Eva Tihanyi Speaks with Ann-Marie MacDonald', *Books in Canada* 25: 8 (1996). Available at http://www.booksincanada.com/article_view.asp?id=304 [accessed 9 March 2008].

Knees enable MacDonald to launch a sustained questioning of history and reality. She succeeds in turning classic or traditional forms to her own purposes.

Chapter Five

Refiguring Family History as a Hermeneutic Narrative:

Disappearing Moon Cafe and To All Appearances a Lady

In his sociological survey of Chinese Canadian communities, Peter Li writes:

Aside from the indigenous people, no other racial or ethnic group had experienced such harsh treatment in Canada as the Chinese. [. . .]

By the turn of the century they had been virtually reduced to second-class citizens in Canada. Subject to social, economic, and residential segregation in Canadian society, they responded by retreating into their own ethnic enclaves to avoid competition and hostility from white Canadians.¹

Chinese immigrants were the only group forced to pay increasing head taxes upon landing in Canada; they were also deprived of citizenship rights until the spring of 1949.² The Chinese Canadian community suffered a long history of sex ratio imbalance because early Chinese immigrants were almost exclusively male labourers, brought over to do low-paid or dangerous jobs unfilled by the white European workforce.³ More indentured Chinese workers were recruited to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway between 1881 and 1885;

¹ Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 1-2.

² In 1884, Chinese immigrants had to pay \$10 head tax; in 1885, immediately after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a \$50 head tax was imposed on every person of Chinese origin entering the country; this head tax increased to \$100 in 1900 and to \$500 in 1903. \$500 was equivalent to two years wages of a Chinese labourer at the time. In all, the Federal Government collected about \$23 million from the Chinese through the head tax. See 'History', *The CCNC Redress Campaign*. Available at <http://www.cnc.ca/redress/history.html> [accessed 16 August 2009].

³ In the 1880s, the sex ratio among the Chinese in Canada was 1.2 percent female to 98.8 percent male; in 1924, the ratio was 6 percent female out of a total Chinese population of forty thousand in Canada. See Edgar Wickberg, et al., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Community in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), p. 26.

these sojourners, however, were forced to stay in Canada because the company withdrew its promise to pay their passage home.⁴ The great number of Chinese bachelor-labourers in Chinatown became a historical phenomenon in Canadian history. Discriminatory legislation culminated in the passing of the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which nearly eliminated Chinese immigration into Canada during the next twenty-four years.⁵

It is against this background that Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) and Marilyn Bowering's *To All Appearances a Lady* (1989) set their fictional accounts of Chinese immigrants. Drawing on rich historical materials, both books foreground the long history of anti-Chinese sentiments in British Columbia and register the Chinese presence in Canada by retrieving incidents significant for this minority group but in danger of slipping into oblivion in official history. Lee's frame story narrates the search for the bones of Chinese railway workers as a means of recognizing the part early immigrants played in the building of the nation, while Bowering creates an encounter between an English Canadian woman and a group of Chinese lepers isolated on D'Arcy Island to fight against historical amnesia about Canadian racism. Even as both novels deal with the transgression of cultural and racial boundaries, however, their approaches differ. Lee focuses on Chinese immigrants and their construction of a collective identity as a reaction to racial discrimination while simultaneously dramatizing how the offspring of miscegenation, despite their effort to search for identification, are marginalized in both majority and minority communities. Bowering meanwhile stages the conflict between Europe and its racial other and depicts hybridized subjects negating their minority heritage in the attempt to be integrated into the dominant

⁴ Between 1881 and 1885, the Chinese workers entering Canada directly from China were estimated to be 15,700 to 18,000. See Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, p. 22.

⁵ Between 1923 and 1947 when the Act was repealed, less than fifty Chinese were allowed to enter Canada. See 'History', *The CCNC Redress Campaign*.

white society.

Huggan argues that the two fictional accounts of the Chinese presence ‘challenge homogenizing myths of racial purity and/or superiority.’⁶ In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, racial purity comes under attack and Lee scrutinizes not only anti-Chinese racism in Canada but also the Chinese sense of racial superiority over European and Native Canadians. In *To All Appearances a Lady*, racism is first exposed as one cause of the violent confrontation between China and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century when western imperialists attempted to open the massive market in China. Bowering draws attention to how, in the Canadian context, racial superiority takes the form of institutional oppression of the Chinese, culminating in the dehumanization and abuse of Chinese lepers. Like *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, her novel captures the history of mistreatment of Chinese immigrants in Canada. However, Bowering’s attempt to register the Chinese presence is undermined by her failure to problematize the stereotypical association of leprosy with Chineseness; her exposure of the oppression imposed on this particular ethnic minority is weakened by the lack of a critical questioning of its underlying racist ideologies. Interestingly, the examination of racial issues targets not just the confrontation between Chinese and European Canadians. Both books take the Natives into consideration, thus avoiding reproducing the impression that minority immigrants in white Canada are always victims.

Another point of conjunction is the use of the genre of the family saga. Both authors have their protagonists tell family histories, but not in the traditional way of chronicling the lives and doings of a family or a number of related or interconnected families over a period of time. Rather, these are metafictional family histories in which the tellers piece together fragments

⁶ Graham Huggan, ‘The Latitudes of Romance: Representations of Chinese Canada in Bowering’s *To All Appearances a Lady* and Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*’, *Canadian Literature*, 140 (1994), 34–48, (p. 36).

from a variety of sources to rebuild the past in question. The process of reconstruction is presented as a discursive practice that involves acts of interpreting and emplotting the bare facts collected from the sources. There are mysteries unsolved, multiple possible explanations, or conclusions arbitrarily drawn. In both novels, the telling of family history is refigured as a hermeneutic process in which the teller, from a perspective conditioned specifically in time and space, tries to make sense of the past, and in which different interpretations can arise and compete for authority. It is an arena for contestation. What finally takes shape after this hermeneutic process is not a coherent, accurate or complete account of family history like the finished picture of a jigsaw puzzle, but rather a makeshift composite with some parts missing, some distorted, some misplaced, some not fitting, or some disputing one another. In their respective methods of formal experimentation, Lee and Bowering transform the conventions of family saga to accommodate a postmodern problematization of history. In this chapter, I will look at the narrative strategies formulated by the authors to foreground family history as a hermeneutic product, and the ways in which they place tales of domestic discord within a wider context of social struggle to investigate such issues as minority subjectivity, individual identity, miscegenation, and cross-cultural contact.

Disappearing Moon Cafe

The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) is one of the enduring symbols of Canadian identity. R.G. MacBeth declared in 1924 that ‘the country and the railway must stand or fall together.’⁷ Forty-six years later, Pierre Berton stated that Canada was ‘a rare example of a nation created through the construction of a railway.’⁸ Daniel Francis dubs Berton ‘our number one National Dreamer’, for his books, *The National Dream: the Great Railway, 1871-1881* (1970)

⁷ R.G. MacBeth, *The Romance of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, quoted in Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), p. 17.

⁸ Pierre Berton, *The National Dream: the Great Railway, 1871-1881*, quoted in Francis, *National Dreams*, p. 16.

and *The Last Spike: the Great Railway, 1881-1885* (1971), together with the television series based on them, ‘mythologized the history of the railway.’⁹ Historians are not the only ones who have enthusiastically woven a heroic narrative of nation building. The Newfoundland poet E.J. Pratt celebrates the same epic theme in his *Towards the Last Spike* (1952): ‘The east-west cousinship, a nation’s rise, / Hail of identity, a world expanding, / If not the universe: the feel of it / Was in the air — “Union required the Line.”’¹⁰ In ‘All Spikes but the Last’ (1957), however, F.R. Scott reprimands him for not acknowledging the contribution of Chinese labourers to the completion of the CPR¹¹ and deplores the injustice Canada made them suffer: ‘Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned? / Where are the thousands from China who swung / Their picks with bare hands at forty below?’¹² Ironically, F.R. Scott is likewise rebuked for erasing the Native and Métis presence in Canadian history in his poem ‘Laurentian Shield’ (1954), which rehearses the birth of the nation with the settlement of English-Canadians, repeating the literary vision of the Canadian landscape as a blank space: ‘This land stares at the sun in a huge silence [. . .] / Not written on by history, empty as paper.’¹³

Uncannily, the minorities the two poets render invisible in their myths of creation converge because of the CPR, which ‘was built chiefly on the backs of Chinese coolie labour, using land obtained for almost nothing from the Indians.’¹⁴ In the spring of 1885, when the

⁹ Francis, *National Dreams*, p. 16.

¹⁰ E.J. Pratt, *Towards the Last Spike*. Available at <http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/poems/texts/188/fr188annotated.html> [accessed 16 August 2009].

¹¹ In fact, Pratt mentions Chinese labourers in passing, when he describes the legendary act of hauling the *Skuzzy*, a sternwheeler built to move railway construction supplies, through the Hell’s Gate Canyon: ‘The last resource was shoulders, arms and hands. / Fifteen men at the capstan, creaking hawsers, / Two hundred Chinese tugging at shore ropes / To keep her bow-on from the broadside drift, / The *Skuzzy* under steam and muscle took / The shoals and rapids, and warped through the Gate’ (emphasis mine). As mentioned previously, the number of Chinese workers entering Canada from China between 1881 and 1885 is estimated at 15,700 to 18,000.

¹² F.R. Scott, ‘All Spikes but the Last’, in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Russell Brown, Donna Bennett, and Nathalie Cooke, revised and abridged edn (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 277.

¹³ F.R. Scott, ‘Laurentian Shield’. Available at http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/scott_fr/poem2.htm [accessed 16 August 2009].

¹⁴ Francis, *National Dreams*, p. 15.

North-West Rebellion, culmination of the discontent of the Métis and Native peoples struggling for survival and the right to the land, broke out, the CPR, which was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, offered its partially-completed line to transport troops from Ontario to quell the insurrection. After the rebellion was quickly put down, a grateful government authorized funds to complete the nation's first transcontinental railway. Initially a money-making proposition, the CPR became a symbol for the completion of Canada as a nation not only because it united the disparate regions but also because it helped crush the uprising that threatened the authority of the federal government. The effects were profound and long-lasting: Indians 'became subjugated, administered people' and it 'took native peoples of western Canada many decades to recover politically and emotionally from the defeat of 1885.'¹⁵ It would never occur to Chinese labourers, imported as a cheaper workforce, that the railway they helped build could have played such a crucial role in the suppression and oppression of the Aboriginal peoples. To some degree, it can be said that they became, though unintentionally, an accessory to Canadian colonialism.

1885 turns out to be a critical year for both minorities. For Native peoples, it stood for the beginning of full colonization by English Canada. Their defeat led to the completion of the railway, which meant cheap Chinese labour was no longer required. The same year saw the imposition of a head tax on every Chinese entering Canada, an initial enactment of a wide range of exclusionary policies and discriminatory legislation. The CPR then reneged on its contract to pay the Chinese workers' passage home. It is in the aftermath of these related historical events that Sky Lee starts her fictional narrative of the Wong family in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. The novel has achieved great critical and commercial success, attracting particular attention from the Chinese Canadian community. 'I've been waiting for

¹⁵ Bob Beal and Rod Macleod, 'North-West Rebellion', in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Available at <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com> [accessed 16 August 2009].

this book, didn't know who would write it, a novel that explores our history, confirms the process of building a chinese canadian presence,' Rita Wong writes in her review.¹⁶ Lien Chao praises the author's effort 'to decolonize the historically silenced community, to reclaim the denied collective history, and to redefine personal identities.'¹⁷ But what Lee has accomplished is more than a breaking of the historical silence imposed by racism upon the Chinese Canadian community, conducting the negotiation between personal identity and collective community, or, as Graham Huggan notes, opening up 'an agonistic space in which European and Chinese Canadians confront one another on contested "New World" soil.'¹⁸ The historical and social context in which she situates her multi-generational saga consists not just of conflict between white Canadians and Chinese immigrants, but of a complex confrontation involving at least three unevenly matched parties. Lee interrogates Chinese immigration in a framework within which the dominant white Canada and the marginalized Chinese minority confront each other at the expense of the Native peoples, the 'legitimate' residents of the land before it became the 'New World' for settlers of various origins. Therefore, any negotiation of personal and collective identity that her characters have strived for or any challenge to existing versions of Canadian history that has been mounted in the novel must be considered with regard to this tripartite system instead of a Chinese-European binary.

The Native presence is foregrounded in the prologue and epilogue of the novel, a frame tale composed mainly of Gwei Chang Wong's memories about his earliest years in the Canadian

¹⁶ Rita Wong, 'Review of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*', *West Coast Line*, 24 (1990), 135-37 (p. 135). That Wong puts 'chinese' and 'canadian' in lower case is not a mistake but rather an imitation of Lee's usage in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Lee uses indian, chinaman, canadian, chinese, english, french, german, and eurasian throughout the novel. The deliberate rejection of capitalizing these terms in their normal way could be her gesture to destabilize their assumptions about identity, and instigate the negotiations of new possibilities.

¹⁷ Lien Chao, 'The Collective Self: A Narrative Paradigm in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*', in *Cross-Addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany, NY: State of U of New York P, 1996), pp. 237-55 (p. 238).

¹⁸ Huggan, 'The Latitudes of Romance', p. 36.

wilderness, including journeys to search out the bones of Chinese CPR labourers and his encounter with Kelora and other Native peoples between 1892 and 1894. The significance of this narrative device will be discussed later. For now, I will focus on the formal structure of the novel, through which Lee creates a family saga in a metafictional manner. This feature of the novel has hardly been noticed by critics except Daniel Martin, who notes, in passing, that the novel's 'metafictional moments emerge in the spaces between Kae Ying's genealogical narrative and Lee's inclusion of factual history relating to Chinatown.'¹⁹ In fact, Lee employs more metafictional elements than Martin has pointed out. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* opens with the genealogical tree of the Wong family, followed by a table of contents listing prologue, seven numbered and titled chapters, and epilogue. The tree shows names of the ancestors and descendants with dates of birth and death, aiming to provide guidance on the relationships between the members, and together with the contents, it leads the reader to expect what follows will be a chronological account of the family history. However, Lee frustrates the expectation with a fragmented narrative pattern that runs counter to the two neat and straightforward charts. The prologue, seven chapters and epilogue are subdivided into smaller sections, which are marked with character names and years indicating focalizations and temporal settings, with a small number of exceptions that are headed by themes (The Bones, Babies, Story, Feeding the Dead) or genres (Letters, Telegram, Phone Call). Throughout the novel, the narrative not only leaps between points of time ranging from 1892 to 1987 but also keeps switching from one character's life to another's. The exact denominational and temporal references of the sections paradoxically highlight disruption in time and lack of linearity. The prologue and epilogue present nonchronologically the important events in Gwei Chang's life and his recollections in third-person narration. The first chapter introduces the thirty-six-year-old Kae Ying Woo, Gwei Chang's great

¹⁹ Daniel Martin, 'Ghostly Foundations: Multicultural Space and Vancouver's Chinatown in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 29: 1 (2004), 85-105 (p. 95).

granddaughter, whose account of her own life story and reconstruction of other family members' stories interweave to constitute the body of the seven chapters. Instead of celebrating a glorious lineage, her saga exposes incest, adultery, betrayal, greed, and misogyny, a family history full of 'assholes plugged with little secrets!'²⁰

Each section contains an episode. Lien Chao argues that this episodic narrative mode enables the writer to juxtapose community events with personal experience, 'achieving a narrative effect of equal interaction' and helping 'to facilitate the dialogues between the past and present, self and collective, male and female, without ordering the participants.'²¹ In fact, the episodic entries are more like pieces of a puzzle, waiting to be assembled by the reader. However, what finally takes shape is not a coherent and accurate account of family history but rather a makeshift picture with some pieces missing, some not fitting, and some contradicting each other. This process of piecing scraps together is exactly what Kae engages with when attempting to rebuild the past of her family. The fragmentation characterizing the way she has gathered the stories is reflected in her non-linear retelling. Kae's first episode is set in 1986, on the day when she gives birth to her baby. She starts the family history with enumeration of members but comes to acknowledge the difficulty of knowing the past: 'my maternal grandfather, or Gong Gong, puts me in a bit of a dilemma, because the family tree gets tricky here. Let's just say for now that Gong Gong died in 1972, maybe 1942' (p. 26). Her uncertainty is worsened by deliberately hidden secrets: 'Now I've found that nobody has told me the whole messy truth about anything!' (p. 27). In the hospital room, after making sure the baby is fine,²² her mother Beatrice decides to divulge part of the long buried past, which is another version of their family history:

²⁰ Sky Lee, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990), p. 215. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

²¹ Chao, 'The Collective Self', p. 250.

²² 'I see now the baby is fine. The doctor also said the baby is just fine. Ahh . . . I've waited a long time to make sure . . . for your sake, daughter,' says Beatrice (p. 29). It seems that she is still worried that she and Keeman may be sister and brother.

Thus, the story — the well-kept secret that I had actually unearthed years ago — finally begins to end for me with the birth of my son [. . .]. It took quite the sentimental occasion for my mother to finally loosen a little of her iron grip on her emotions in order to reveal a little of her past that she thought so shameful — the same past that has shaped so much of my own life, with evil tentacles that could have even wormed into the innocent, tender parts of my baby. No, no, it will not be so unless I make it so. And I will leave it boxed in our past — mine and my mother's, the four walls that we share! (p. 30)

By saying that the story 'finally begins to end for me with the birth of my son', Kae not only means the end of its concealment but implies that exposing the dark past is the only way to terminate its perennial influence. Worried that her son will be affected by that past just as she has been, Kae is determined to hide it, but before that, she also needs to heal herself by retelling it so that she can come to terms with her own past and her family heritage and then start to reconfigure her own identity. Her retelling starts quite tentatively: 'The story began, I guess, with my great-grandmother, Lee Mui Lan, sometime in June 1924, as she stood behind the cash register at the front of the even-now famous Disappearing Moon Café' (p. 30). The section headed by Lee Mui Lan then follows. Though never explaining why the story has to commence at that particular time, she comes to reflect on her own motives for starting the family history with Mui Lan at the end of this section:

Why do I need to make this ancestress the tip of the funnelling storm, the pinnacle that anchored chaos and destruction close to earth? Why do I need to indict her? Why not my grandmother, say? Both are dead. Actually, both are to blame (if you like that kind of thing), but since I've landed up paying dearly for their deeds, and I know of others

who've paid with their lives, isn't it my privilege to assign blame, preferably to the one I understand the least, the one farthest away from me and from those I love? (p. 42)

Kae makes clear her intention to single out the person responsible for her victimization, an act suggesting that her account will be a subject-dependent reconstruction and that historical accuracy is not her primary concern.

Instead of employing the chronological method of storytelling, Kae narrates in episodes, whose order is not randomly chosen but rather based on a connection similar to association of ideas. In Chapter I, Mui Lan's 1924 section is followed by Choy Fuk's in the same year, in which her worry about heirs of the Wong family becomes the subject of argument between mother and son. The third-person narrative in this section ends with the approach of Fong Mei, which brings the argument to a halt. Then the novel shifts to the section 'Hermia Chow, 1971', in which Kae recalls her first encounter with Hermia at the Peking Language Institute and her visit to Fong Mei's sister, who gives her the correspondence between the sisters dating from 1919. The apparently abrupt jumping arises from her metanarrative comment on Fong Mei at the end of Choy Fuk's section, a comment hinting at her adultery: 'if integrity is what really counts in the end, Fong Mei got lost in the snowstorm' (p. 51). The word 'integrity' triggers off the association, reminding Kae of her erstwhile suspicion about Hermia:

I wondered what it was like to be the misplaced bastard daughter of a gangster and his moll — no matter how moneyed. I would be afraid of an identity like that. Why was she in China? Not to learn the language surely. I imagined she was guilty of something, but what? Less than righteous family connections? (p. 55)

After this 1971 section comes 'Letters, 1919', which includes the newly-wedded Fong Mei's letter expressing her doubt about marriage and fear about new life in a foreign country, and her sister's reply from China, trying to convince her that it is women's destiny to fulfil traditional roles as wife and mother. Then the narrative switches forwards in time to the section 'Fong Mei, 1924', which recounts her humiliation by and resentment at Mui Lan's 'busy baby-bashing' (p. 66). The two sections are connected by the theme of women's role, but 'Letters, 1919' is inserted here because Kae intends the letters to prove her ancient lineage and compete with Hermia's 'yellowing, rice-papery pamphlet; a part of an elaborate tome [. . .]; a remnant of Hermia's immensely cultured heritage' (pp. 53-54).²³

Lacking chronological succession or notions of causality, this mode of associative narration cannot be driven by what Martin describes as Kae's 'determination to construct a linear and structurally organized family history.'²⁴ In fact, it is to a high degree characterized by synchronicity.²⁵ Kae tends to juxtapose multiple perspectives regarding the same event. When Mui Lan implements the plan to buy the waitress Song Ang as a surrogate mother, Kae provides accounts of reactions from the characters involved in it: Fong Mei's hatred towards Mui Lan and her 'loathsome living arrangement' (p. 123), her contempt for Song Ang, her fury at her husband, and her revenge by committing adultery with Ting An (an orphan adopted by the Wong family but in fact the son of Gwei Chang and Kelora); Choy Fuk's self-justification for accepting the arrangement, anxiety about his failure to get Song Ang pregnant, fear of losing face in Chinatown, and, out of desperation, pleading with Song Ang to be impregnated by someone else; Ting An's shock and anger when learning that the community is making fun of the plan, his sense of guilt in the face of Gwei Chang, and his

²³ Kae's obsession with heritage will be discussed later.

²⁴ Martin, 'Ghostly Foundations', p. 101.

²⁵ Eva Darias-Beautell suggests the novel displays 'narrative synchronies' but does not elaborate the notion. See Darias-Beautell, 'The Imaginary Ethnic: Anachronies, (Im)Mobility and Historical Meaning in *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Cafe*', in *Tricks with a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada*, ed. Rocío G. Davis and Rosalía Baena (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 191-208 (p. 192).

failure to defy Fong Mei's seduction; Song Ang's acquiescence out of gratitude for Mui Lan, rapid retreat from Chinatown to avoid scandal, and reluctance to agree to Choy Fuk's new scheme. These responses and reactions constitute the third chapter, 'Triangles', a heading that indicates precisely the complicated relationships among the characters and the synchronized juxtaposition of multiple perspectives.

Retelling is a process through which Kae makes sense of the family past. This is easily observed in her predilection for interpreting the behaviour and motives of the family members in the stories she is recounting. Sometimes her interpretations are blended into the omniscient narrative; sometimes, they are articulated in her own voice. In Chapter I, toward the end of Mui Lan's section, Kae shifts back to first-person narration, trying to comprehend her great grandmother's situation in 1920s Chinatown and her obsession with male heirs:

My dumb great-granny! I don't know why she wasn't asking more relevant questions, like where does one go for comfort and relief from such a barren life? But there probably were no halfway houses for women, no places to hide out from a rocky marriage. Ejected from a cloister of women into the stony society of Gold Mountain men must have been a bit like being smashed against a brick wall. She wouldn't have known what had shattered her. It wasn't just that my great-grandmother was pathetic — she became a tyrant. Having never been in control of her own life, she suddenly found herself in charge of many people's lives. Frustrated and isolated from the secluded life she understood, Mui Lan had to swallow bitterness, so she made her suffering felt far and wide [. . .]. A little boy who came from her son, who came from her husband, who also came lineally from that golden chain of male to male. The daughters-in-law who bore them were unidentified receptacles. From her husband's side, Mui Lan would certainly claim a share of that eternal life which came with each new generation of

babies. (pp. 41-42)

The commentary exposes the limitations of her ability to understand the past and her tendency to look at things from her contemporary perspective. Kae suggests Mui Lan should have escaped from her boring marriage but immediately realizes it was not a practical solution for a woman in the 1920s. Her interpretation of Mui Lan's insistence on having grandsons is also contradictory. How could Mui Lan, herself once a daughter-in-law, claim a share of the male lineage if her daughter-in-law is destined to slip into oblivion? This example indicates that Kae's interpretations of the past are contextually conditioned and subject to fallacious reasoning.

Kae also admits the play of imagination in the reconstruction, which is first seen in her portrayal of Fong Mei: 'This I do imagine. She was once a woman with finely tuned instincts, like cat's ears pointed in what I still believe were the right directions' (p.50). Sometimes, she speculates on alternative possibilities of the events in her retelling. After the 1924 episode in which Fong Mei is humiliated by Mui Lan and forced to accept the plan to find a surrogate mother, Kae, lying on the hospital bed of 1986, wonders: 'What if, maybe just for a second or two during this lengthy monologue, my grandmother's young eyes [. . .] had raised up to her mother-in-law as if to make bold?' (p. 84). She even creates the lines she thinks Mui Lan would have said to scold Fong Mei for her flash of disobedience: 'And don't believe for a moment, you foul female stench, with your modern-day thinking about rights and freedom — ah, that you're too good for this bargain. What are you but just a woman!' (p. 85). Absorbed so much in her imagination, Kae even interrogates the motive behind Mui Lan's misogynist speech: 'But my great-grandmother was a woman too. What did she mean by that? Was she referring to the substance we as women have to barter away in order to live?' (p. 85).

Besides moments of blurring the boundaries between her stories and her own speculations, Kae keeps reminding the reader of her role as a mediator in the retelling through her interspersed metanarrative comments. As her narrative unfolds, she also becomes more and more self-conscious about her storytelling. The most significant metafictional moment occurs in Chapter VI, 'The Writer', in which Kae struggles to transform her family story into written text:

To see one woman disintegrate is tragic, but to watch an entire house fall — that has the making of a great Chinese tragedy. I know I've had to turn my face away many times. In front of me, there is nothing to speak of except torpid text and a throbbing cursor on a black-and-white computer screen — electric shadows — but even this is too evocative of the old pain. I am afraid to look intently. I might turn to stone, petrified by the accumulated weight and unrelenting pressure of so many generations of rage. (p. 241)

Yet there are still some pieces missing, especially the part when Beatrice confronts Fong Mei with news of her marriage with Keeman and Suzie's impregnation by Morgan, Ting An's son and the sisters' half-brother: 'the final reckoning is deeply buried within my mother. She will not speak of it' (p. 242). But Kae fills in the gap with her made-up version of the confrontation. The section 'Feeding the Dead, 1986' reaches the climax of her imaginative reconstruction of the past. Still struggling with her writing, Kae considers creating 'a classic scenario of wailing women huddled together to "feed the dead"' (p. 252), a melodramatic scene in which Fong Mei, Mui Lan, Beatrice, Suzie, Morgan, Seto Chi (Beatrice's best friend and housekeeper, and Kae's nanny), Hermia and Kae herself confront one another with inquisitions, accusations, and confessions. She admits that it is 'a mean writer's trick' (p. 244) to bring characters back to face the embarrassing, distressing, or guilty moments in their life. Accuracy is not her guiding principle. Kae is very aware of her role as a writer and the power

she can wield over the telling of her stories:

That's the advantage of fantasy that writers have at their disposal, plucked straight out of life itself. On the other hand, we also have some distinct drawbacks, like emotions shrinking and expanding between people and themselves, between people and others, between people and their stories. In writing, I feel like a drunk weaving all over the road. The air can be made wavy and warped, hot with tension, full of mirages. Or details can be made to distract extravagantly, cling possessively. Information can cringe from pain, or reply in a cold, detached manner. How many ways are there to tell stories? Let me count the ways! (pp. 248-49)

The advantage of fantasy is shamelessly employed in Suzie's 1950 and 1951 sections in Chapter VII 'The Suicide', in which Kae has Suzie speak in her own voice instead of employing impersonal narration followed by metanarrative comments. However, near the end of the 1950 section, Suzie's first-person narrative about her difficult delivery is disrupted by episodes of third-person narration, which detail how Beatrice figures out Morgan and Suzie are brother and sister, and how Chi is shocked by Suzie's deformed newborn son in the hospital. Between the two episodes are some surrealistic descriptions: 'Suzie is on the verge of death again [. . .]. Suzie is worn out, gasping for air; I got slurped in. "I can't take any more," my dark, clammy moan' (p. 276); 'I am drifting, drifting high. There in the dark room, near the window, my body on a narrow bed' (p. 277). Generally, critics interpret these instances as Suzie's experience of internal split²⁶ or loss of psychic integrity,²⁷ but at the same time they are part of Kae's metafictional techniques. The mysterious 'I' can be

²⁶ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 56.

²⁷ Deborah Madsen, 'Bearing the Diasporic Burden: Representations of Suicide in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, and Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo*', in *China Fictions/English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, ed. A. Robert Lee (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 101-17 (p. 106).

identified as Kae, whose voice closes this section with ‘And I. I flit back to Suzie’s drugged sleep. I hover over her limp form for a while, and then whisper into her ear, “Strike three, you’re out!”’ (p. 278). It is another metanarrative comment that jerks the reader from the story in 1950 back to her present act of narration. Metafictional moments like this scatter throughout the seven chapters, pointing both to Kae’s self-consciousness as a storyteller and writer of her family history and to temporal removals of her retelling not only from past events she has narrated but from the occasions when they have been told to her by someone else.

There is another section headed by Suzie’s name in Chapter V ‘Identity Crisis’. It consists only of Suzie’s interior monologue, in which she apologizes to Beatrice for lying about her relationship with Morgan and narrates her worry and happiness caused by that relationship. Despite occasional metafictional moments, Kae makes Suzie a speaking subject in all her three sections in order to counteract the silence imposed on her story by her family.²⁸ Interestingly, Suzie’s death is not presented in these sections although it is Kae’s ‘unwholesome curiosity surrounding her demise’ (p. 257) that drives her to dig up and retell her story. Kae implies in the 1951 section that her aunt is gradually destroying herself by not eating, but right after this section, in her letter to Hermia, she clarifies that the cause of Suzie’s death is pneumonia, which she used to take as ‘a euphemism for that unspeakable crime of hers’ (p. 286). It deeply disappoints her: ‘Who wants to know that she botched it, succumbing instead to a slow, ignoble, wheezy death’ (p. 286). The implication of Suzie’s slow self-destruction indicates Kae’s tendency to dramatize the events she recounts. In fact, Kae never conceals her attempt to treat her ancestresses as warriors united by their common resistance to oppression: ‘I prefer to romanticise them as a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins. In each of their woman-hating worlds, each did what she could’

²⁸ Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 56.

(p. 196).

The epic tale of struggle against patriarchal oppression that Kae intends to weave by tracing the succession of her foremothers ends up as a history of betrayal and transgression. The affinity she believes to link mother to daughter and sister to sister is so fragile that the women become accomplices to the patriarchal order, which has subjugated and exploited them. By buying Fong Mei from China as a bride for her son and then paying Song Ang to get pregnant with her son, Mui Lan partakes in the traffic in women. Fong Mei turns into another overbearing mother like Mui Lan even though she successfully transforms her womb from a site of oppression into 'a means to rebel against a patriarchal order that exploits women and appropriates their reproductive labour.'²⁹ Her daughters, conceived outside the marriage contract, suffer for their transgressions. Unsure of Keeman's paternal parentage, Beatrice is haunted by the spectre of incest; Suzie commits incest with Morgan in ignorance of their true relationship and produces another child of transgression. Despite the scandalous secrets suffusing her family history and the possibility of violating the cultural code of the community, Kae is intent on retelling it:

Maybe this is a chinese-in-Canada [sic] trait, a part of the great wall of silence and invisibility we have built around us. I have a misgiving that the telling of our history is forbidden. I have violated a secret code. There is power in silence, as this is the way we have always maintained strict control against the more disturbing aspects in our human nature. But what about speaking out for a change, despite its unpredictable impact! The power of language is that it can be manipulated beyond our control, towards misunderstanding. But then again, the power of language is also in its simple honesty. (p.

²⁹ Martha Addante, 'Rupturing the Patriarchal Family: Female Genealogy in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*', *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 4: 2 (2002), 201-14 (pp. 205-06).

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For her, telling is the necessary way to bring about healing and change even though what has been told is likely to go beyond the control of the teller. Furthermore, Kae attempts to turn telling into writing to maximize the power of language despite its treacherous potential; she does not resist ‘the passage from orality to written text’ as Eva Darias-Beautell has suggested.³⁰ The original intention to conceal the family history at the beginning of her narrative — ‘I will leave it boxed in our past — mine and my mother’s, the four walls that we share!’ (p. 30) — converts into a writing project with ‘*House Hexed by Woe*’ or ‘*Temple of Wounded Women*’ (pp. 279-80) as proposed titles.

It comes as no surprise that Kae ends her family history with Suzie’s story because it is her resemblance to Suzie that prompts Morgan to approach her and initiates their incestuous relationship, a relationship which offers her the opportunity to learn the hidden secrets in her family, causes her identity crisis, triggers her obsession with authenticity and legitimacy, and arouses her curiosity about unearthing her family past. Her retelling, though almost twenty years late, is an attempt to compete with, if not negate, Morgan’s version of the past given in 1967 and 1968 and to prove her legitimate bloodline:

Too bad for my family that money couldn’t buy long life (prosperity couldn’t buy posterity either); too bad for me, I could have simply asked. Instead of dead, silent ancestors who kept me hanging by a million possible threads, someone would have told me — I’m sure. Instead of Morgan busy fraying the tapestry, I could have claimed my righteous inheritance to a pure bloodline. I wouldn’t have fallen in love/hate with his/my truth and wasted all these years trying to answer him. (p. 89)

³⁰ Darias-Beautell, ‘The Imaginary Ethnic’, p. 195.

Kae's quest for authenticity and legitimacy takes the concrete form of a return journey to the motherland China in 1971. There she displaces her worry onto Hermia:

Legitimate, traditional and conventional were the adjectives to wear in those days, especially when I suspected my own identity might be as defective. Worse still, I thought that they were the ones illegitimizing Hermia; not I. (p. 55)

The irony is that her return occurs in the middle of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a time when 'the traditional values had been turned inside-out in search of radical truths' (p. 55) and when the ruling party launched a cultural, social, and economical takeover under the banner of the socialist cause. The authentic Chineseness Kae seeks by going back to its place of origin is in the process of being dismantled. But before the encounter with Morgan, it is what Kae prefers to disassociate herself from: 'Chineseness made me uncomfortable then' (p. 89). In fact, she has lost contact with Chinatown, from which her family originates and prospers, and of which she has the same stereotypical impressions as white Canadians do:

I didn't ever go down to Chinatown except for the very occasional family banquet. And I certainly wouldn't ever let any dirty old man touch me! Those little old men were everywhere in Chinatown, leaning in doorways, sitting at bus stops, squatting on sidewalks. The very thought gave me the creeps. (p. 90)

Her description repeats the image of Chinatown as 'a place of thwarted desire.'³¹ Morgan's

³¹ Tanis MacDonald, "'Dead Girl-Bag': The Janet Smith Case as Contaminant in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 27: 1 (2002), 32-46 (p. 37). Critics disagree on how Vancouver's Chinatown is represented in the novel. Concerned with the problematic tendency to self-orientalization in fiction

research into the Janet Smith case and its impact and his story about Gwei Chang's careful intervention in the affair reconnect Kae with the earlier history of the Chinese Canadian community in Chinatown and enable her to understand the importance of support from the ethnic group an individual belongs to. Kae displays this understanding in explaining what Chinatown means to young Beatrice: 'Friends growing up in Chinatown were allies, necessary for survival; for those times they ventured out of "their place," and came back fractured' (p. 221). This also contributes to her obsession with authenticity and legitimacy, which continues to dominate her life until the recounting of her family history and her own past.

Kae's act of narration starts on 29 April, 1986 and ends with her phone call to Hermia in Hong Kong on 20 February, 1987. A gradual change in her attitude can be detected as her narrative unfolds. In the very beginning, she articulates her belief in how meaning and reassurance can be generated through attendance at family events:

I'm so very disappointed. I've been brought up to believe in kinship, or those with whom we share. I thought that by applying attention to all the important events such as the births and the deaths, the intricate complexities of a family with chinese roots could be massaged into a suant, digestible unit. Like a herbal pill — I thought I could swallow it and my mind would become enlightened. (p. 25)

by writers of Chinese origin, Maria Noëlle Ng criticizes Lee for recreating the stereotype of 'Chinatown as a gambling den and Chinese men as filthy, fanatical gamblers lacking refinement'. Rocio G. Davis interprets Lee's Chinatown as diaspora space, 'as both an ostensibly static place that characters struggle to escape from, while at the same time it produces and is marked by particular forms of travel and transitivity'. Martin argues that 'Lee refuses to align her local history of Chinatown within nostalgic narratives of the past' and that her novel resists multiculturalism's transformation of local ethnic enclaves into zones of consumption. See Ng, 'Representing Chinatown: Dr. Fu-Manchu at the Disappearing Moon Cafe', *Canadian Literature*, 163 (1999), 157-75 (p. 167); Davis, 'Chinatown as Diaspora Space in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*', in *China Fictions/English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, ed. A. Robert Lee (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 119-39 (p. 121); Martin, 'Ghostly Foundations', pp. 92, 96.

However, performing the dutiful role of a model family member does not bring out what she desires, but Kae hasn't given up at this moment: 'So, having swallowed the pill, here I am, still waiting. For enlightenment. Disappointed, yet eternally optimistic!' (p. 26). Teleological thinking characterizes her pursuit: 'There could be a definite purpose to human existence. We could have meaning to our lives' (p. 163). The metaphor of swallowing a pill suggests her passivity in the quest for meaning and assurance. Near the end of her narrative, she comes to realize the necessity of turning that passivity into action by creating meaning for her story instead of waiting for enlightenment:

It means that I have to give this story some sense of purpose [. . .]. I am the fourth generation. My actual life, and what I do in it, is the real resolution to this story. The onus is entirely on me. (p. 281)

Freedom is the ultimate meaning Kae imposes on her story of 'three generations of life-and-death struggles' (p. 281): 'Look at my horizon, Chi. Not a cloud in sight. The sky's the limit. I am free. Isn't that how the prophecy goes? After three generations of struggle, the daughters are free!' (p. 280). The sense of liberation enables her to make the decision to give up her successful career as an investment research analyst in Canada, to retrieve her teenage dream of becoming a writer, which Morgan mocks with 'What for? That's not very pristine chinese!' (p. 216), and to join Hermia in Hong Kong. Hermia has been waiting for this decision for sixteen years and in her telegram assures Kae that 'we could live happily ever after together' (p. 289). Now feeling empowered to pursue her own desires, Kae makes herself the resolution to the story of her foremothers. Her plan to fly to Hong Kong seems to complete the return journey that Fong Mei has longed for but never makes first because she does not want to give up her prospering business and then because Beatrice is pregnant. The entrance into a lesbian relationship also indicates the full acceptance of her sexuality that has

been long repressed since their first encounter in 1971.

Donald C. Goellnicht interprets Kae's decision as 'clearly a feminist triumph.'³² But it also implies that she is going to renounce her obsession with cultural authenticity and familial legitimacy, both of which are absent in Hermia. She is a bastard daughter who was born in Hong Kong, grew up in Switzerland, received professional training in England and cultural education in China, and now practices as a doctor for the poor in Hong Kong. A character usually under-analysed by critics, Hermia is an example of displacement and hybridity, displaying the multiple possibilities of identity: 'feminist, diasporic, lesbian, and socialist.'³³ By deciding to accept Hermia and thus her illegitimacy and hybridity, Kae begins to acknowledge her own illegitimacy and hybridity. Moreover, the journey to Hong Kong does not mean a return to the country of origin where cultural authenticity can be found since the convergence of Chinese ideology, British colonialism and global capitalism has long transformed this colonial city into a linguistically and culturally, if not racially, hybridized territory. 'What is unique to Hong Kong,' as Rey Chow notes, 'is precisely an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, of origins as impure' and its culture 'has always been dismissed by the mainland Chinese as too westernized and thus inauthentic.'³⁴ Therefore, the journey also signals the start of Kae's acknowledgement of hybridity and the abandonment of her obsession with authenticity and illegitimacy.

Guy Beauregard warns that it is problematic to see Kae's resolution as 'a moment of utopian diasporic wish-fulfilment' because the insecure political future caused by China's impending takeover of Hong Kong makes the utopian aspects 'highly provisional and far from

³² Donald C. Goellnicht, 'Of Bones and Suicide: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 46: 2 (2000), 300-30 (p. 315).

³³ Goellnicht, 'Of Bones and Suicide', p. 315.

³⁴ Rey Chow, 'Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s', *Diaspora*, 2: 2 (1992), pp. 151-70 (pp. 156-57).

“settled.””³⁵ In fact, Lee never presents Kae’s decision to join Hermia in Hong Kong as an optimistic resolution to her story of three generations of struggle. Indeterminacy and uncertainty surround Kae’s plan. Despite having booked the flight, she has not yet departed at the end of her first-person narrative. There is no assurance that Kae can arrive at the destination. Her journey may be aborted just as Fong Mei’s has been. Besides, by setting Kae’s return journey in 1987, Lee suggests both an insecure future and a possibility that after 1997 the hybridized Hong Kong, with its ineradicable colonial taint, will be overwritten by a power that regards itself as representative of cultural authenticity. The fact that Kae has just begun to recognize hybridity is overshadowed by Hong Kong’s unpredictable future and compromised by her own belated acknowledgement of illegitimate lineage: ‘Ting An is my grandfather, after all’ (p. 248). One critic contends that Lee, ‘instead of *critiquing* the white cultural hegemony of miscegenation, *celebrates* racial hybridity and sexual promiscuity.’³⁶ Nevertheless, what comes under attack in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is not only the idea of racial and cultural purity that both white and Chinese Canadians attempt to maintain at any expense but also their common racism and discrimination against Native Canadians. It is the marginalization and persecution of racial and cultural hybridity that Lee strives to present throughout the novel.

Kae’s scheduled journey is not the actual ending to the novel. The epilogue shifts the reader back to 1939 with Gwei Chang on the verge of death, reminiscing about his intimacy with Kelora in the wilderness. Goellnicht interprets the return to ‘the idealized passion of Gwei Chang and Kelora’ at the end as ‘an attempt to salvage an optimistic vision of hybrid Chinese-Native Canadian identity.’³⁷ Such a reading ignores the fact that all of Lee’s

³⁵ Guy Beauregard, ‘The Emergence of “Asian Canadian Literature”: Can Lit’s Obscene Supplement?’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 67 (1999), 53-75 (pp. 65-66).

³⁶ Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu, ‘Dystopic Here, Utopic There: Spatial Dialectics in Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*’, *NTU Studies in Language and Literature*, 19 (2008), 61-80 (p. 69).

³⁷ Goellnicht, ‘Of Bones and Suicide’, p. 314.

hybridized characters with known miscegenational background suffer marginalization. Kelora bears a very ambivalent relationship with the Shi'atko clan, from which her mother comes — 'although well loved, she had no rank' (p. 10) — and she lives in a cabin located at a point of frequent and fluid exchange of Indians and goods but detached from Indian communities. It is a liminal position that is neither fully separated nor actively involved and echoes her racial and cultural mixings. Her inheritance remains indeterminate: she is half Chinese and half Native according to the family tree, which names Shi'atko and Chen Gwok Fai as her parents, but half Native and half Caucasian according to her father, Chen, who tells Gwei Chang that he takes over what is left by a dead white man — his cabin, his wife and her daughter. Despite her indeterminate parentage, Kelora is 'a wild injun' (p. 4) in Gwei Chang's eyes. In their first encounter, the incongruity between her physical appearance and the language — Chinese — she speaks makes him 'indignant, unwilling to believe what he saw before him', and challenges his sense of racial superiority: 'It made him feel uncivilized, uncouth; the very qualities he had assigned so thoughtlessly to her, he realized, she was watching for in him' (p. 4). His feelings towards her are never unequivocal: 'his fear of her made him wince with love' (p. 12). Kelora's multiple hybridity thwarts his attempt to define her: 'Kelora was a strange one, with her own private language — neither chinese nor indian, but from deep within the wildness of her soul' (p. 19). Finally, Gwei Chang decides to reject her hybridity by abandoning her for 'a real wife from China' (p. 312) and by refusing to acknowledge Ting An as his son.

While Kelora stays in a liminal space, her son strives to escape that liminality by leaving the wilderness, where 'his pretty pale chinese face' (p. 155) distinguishes him from the Native communities, and entering Vancouver's Chinatown, where he 'couldn't help but feel a camaraderie with the orphan-men [. . .] who had suffered the same hardships' (p. 155). Ironically, the empathy Ting An seeks does not exist; he is marginalized, 'like a ghost', 'never

very visible' (p. 152). That his mother is an Indian is well known in Chinatown, where people 'readily accepted that he was a loner, more at home in the stables than with his own kind' (p. 152), a stereotypical impression that tries to foreground his 'savage' nature. The community where he hopes to find camaraderie and identification rewards him with alienation, desolation and loneliness, and Chinatown becomes a 'dead town' (p. 310) he has to escape. The ultimate denial is Gwei Chang's concealment of their true relationship, which comes to light only when Ting An is determined to leave him. The stories of these hybrid characters failing to integrate themselves into the communities their parents come from run counter to Marie Lo's argument that 'hybridized identities like those of Kelora and Ting An seem uniquely able to survive and navigate life in Vancouver.'³⁸

Some critics tend to ignore Kelora's marginality caused by hybridity and romanticize or overestimate the significance of her Native heritage and identity. For example, as Mary Condé notes, it is 'to Kelora, if anyone, that the Canadian land spiritually belongs', and by deserting her, Gwei Chang fails to grasp the chance 'to inherit Canada.'³⁹ Similarly, Lo interprets the interracial romance between Native and Asian Canadian characters as 'authenticating Asian Canadian claims to belonging' in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and

³⁸ Marie Lo, 'Model Minorities, Models of Resistance: Native Figures in Asian Canadian Literature', *Canadian Literature*, 196 (2008), 96-112 (p. 107). Another important hybrid character is Morgan, son of Ting An and a French Canadian. The teenage Morgan prefers to date Suzie rather than white girls, which Alison Calder interprets as his desire for connection with the Chinese community. But in fact, young 'Morgan never stepped into Chinatown' for fear of being 'mistaken for a chinaman himself' (p. 231). All his life, he oscillates between acceptance and rejection of Chineseness while the Chinese community tries to make him invisible: 'Remember, if nobody speaks of it, then it never existed. Damn clever, those chinese. Like I don't exist. Never have, have I?' (p. 216). Yet hybridity is not limited to biology. Born in Malaya of overseas Chinese parents and adopted by a Hindu family, Chi is described by Darias-Beautell as an 'epitome of cultural hybridity'. 'Her features seemed unmistakably chinese, but [. . .] she barely spoke english at all except with a thick tamil accent' (p. 175). To survive in Chinatown, she has to replace her hybridity with a cultural identity matching her physical features. Her case demonstrates the so-called authentic cultural identity as a construction that can be assumed and performed, thus problematising any essentialist notion of cultural purity. See Calder, 'Paper Families and Blond Demons: The Haunting of History in SKY Lee's "Disappearing Moon Cafe"', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 31: 4 (2000), 7-21 (p. 18); Darias-Beautell, *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fiction of Four Contemporary Canadian Women* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 62.

³⁹ Mary Condé, 'Marketing Ethnicity: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*', in *Literature of Region and Nation: Proceedings of the 6th International Literature of Region and Nation Conference*, ed. Winnifred M. Bogaards, Vol. II (Saint John, NB: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 1998), pp. 239-55 (pp. 246, 252).

Obasan.⁴⁰ Such readings reflect what Terry Goldie calls ‘indigenization’: ‘the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous [. . .] through writing about the humans who are truly indigenous, the Indians, Inuit, Maori, and Aborigines.’⁴¹ Nevertheless, this is exactly what Lee attempts to counter through the characterization of Kelora and the presence of Native peoples, which also demonstrates her ‘disavowal of the characteristic deployment of the trope of uncharted territory’ in other Canadian writing about the wilderness.⁴²

Indeed, the prologue provides a depiction that seems to romanticize the landscape and its Native inhabitants. The way Kelora leads Gwei Chang to move through the wilderness, and familiarizes him with it, reinforces her stereotypical role as a mystical Indian guide. Her ‘peculiar intuition for locating gravesites whose markers had long ago deteriorated’ (p. 18) amazes him and helps to complete his mission of collecting bones; her intimate knowledge and love of the terrain and environment teaches him to admire the land and its mountains which he once regarded ‘as barriers’ (p. 19). The life in the wilderness is described as achieving a delicate balance between ecology and economy, humans as existing in harmony with nature, and all Indians as peace-loving people without internal discord or conflict. It is noteworthy that all of these are presented through Gwei Chang’s focalization. This romanticized version of the wilderness, however, is undermined in the epilogue by his memory of the last summer with Kelora: ‘But Kelora told him that even with this abundance, her people faced famine later in the winter. “The harvests haven’t been as good as they used to be,” she said, “there still might not be enough to eat”’ (pp. 313-14). This takes place at the very moment when Gwei Chang feels contented to learn Indian ways. Kelora’s worry about her people makes him realize on the spot ‘how famine was the one link that Kelora and he

⁴⁰ Lo, ‘Model Minorities’, p. 97.

⁴¹ Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures* (Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), p. 13.

⁴² Neta Gordon, ‘Charted Territory: Canadian Literature by Women, the Genealogical Plot, and Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*’, *Narrative*, 14: 2 (2006), 163-79 (p. 171).

had in common', and re-evokes his stereotype of Indians as savages: 'In the next instant, he looked at Kelora, and saw animal. His stare hostile, as if he had just recognized her for what she really was. Then in that case, what was he except her prey' (p. 314). This episode, set in 1894, concerns not just their breakup but the hardship Kelora's people have been suffering. Their struggle for survival echoes the Native demands that gave rise to the North-West Rebellion in 1885, the failure of which disabled further resistance against colonial oppression.

For Lien Chao, the relationship between Kelora and Gwei Chang 'uncover[s] the lost kinship between the Chinese and the Native peoples in British Columbia.'⁴³ But it is the denial rather than rediscovery of this kinship that Lee has highlighted by closing the novel with Gwei Chang's painful memory of breakup with Ting An and Kelora and his confession of remorse to Kelora's ghost or his hallucination of her ghost before his death. It is also a narrative strategy to prevent the Native presence from slipping into oblivion after the seven chapters of Kae's metafictional construction of her family saga in the urban space of Vancouver, where Native people are nowhere to be seen except for the hybridized Ting An. The connection between the prologue / epilogue framework and the seven chapters remains indecisive. Some critics hold that Kae is the only narrator in the novel who also reinterprets Gwei Chang's memories;⁴⁴ some see the frame tale as an independent unit that Kae never learns about in her search for the past.⁴⁵ With the focalization of Gwei Chang, the prologue and epilogue are presented completely in third-person narration, with no insertion of metanarrative comments in Kae's first-person voice. If Kae does not narrate the stories in the prologue and epilogue, it means she has no knowledge of the affair between her great grandfather and Kelora. Then the

⁴³ Lien Chao, *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: TSAR, 1997), p. 96.

⁴⁴ Chao, 'The Collective Self', p. 243; *Beyond Silence*, p. 98; Helms, *Challenging Canada*, p. 52; Davis, 'Chinatown as Diaspora Space', p. 123; Madsen, 'Bearing the Diasporic Burden', p. 103.

⁴⁵ Gordon, 'Charted Territory', p. 172.

kinship between the Chinese and the Native peoples implied by their affair certainly will sink into oblivion with Gwei Chang's death since he divulges to no one but Ting An his relationship with Kelora and never acknowledges Ting An as his son in the Chinese community. Gwei Chang's concealment shows that he still clings to the belief of racial purity despite the remorse he experiences when on the verge of death. The irony is that what he endeavours to avoid turns into a reality without his knowledge. Choy Fuk, his child of pure Chinese lineage, is sterile. It is Ting An's children who continue the Wong name. The hybridity he has strived to repress returns uncannily to haunt the family forever.

If Gwei Chang's memories are reconstructed by Kae, then the employment of pure impersonal narration indicates her desire to remain detached from that part of history and her refusal to become as personally involved as she is when telling stories of the Wong women. Moreover, in choosing Mui Lan and Gwei Chang as the origin of the Wong family in Canada with traceable roots back in China, Kae ignores the alternative genealogy represented by Ting An and his ancestors. It seems that she would not formally acknowledge her hybrid great grandmother who has Native roots in the wilderness. Though she finally recognizes Ting An as her biological grandfather, Kelora is never mentioned throughout her first-person narrative and is only referred to as an Indian in her reconstruction of the family past, narrated in the third person. Obviously, whether Kae is ignorant of the interracial affair hardly matters, for either way she shows little intention of registering Kelora's presence in her family history. Therefore, Kae's apparent acknowledgement of hybridity and illegitimacy at the end of her narrative is problematized by her relegation of Kelora to the margin, and her renegotiation of identity through the retelling of personal, familial and communal history is compromised by the repression of the link with Native peoples. Lee closes the novel with Gwei Chang's memory of Kelora in the wilderness in order to highlight the Native absence and the complicity in racism of the Chinese Canadian community, though itself victimized by the

same ideology of white supremacy. Unlike the CPR coolie labourers, who participated in the subjugation and oppression of First-Nations peoples by accident, her Chinese Canadian characters consciously contribute to Canadian colonialism.

To All Appearances a Lady

Bowering sets *To All Appearances a Lady* on the border of the Canadian mainland from where she narrates journeys that cross boundaries between life and death, and between races, cultures, and nations. As protagonist Robert Louis Lam, a marine pilot aged 57, navigates through the tricky coastal sea of British Columbia, he simultaneously steers a passage into the mystery of his origins and the troubled waters of his past. It is a physical voyage transforming into a renegotiation of individual identity through the rebuilding of a family history embedded in confrontations between East and West in different territories. A child of mixed English and Chinese parentage, Robert never seeks to integrate himself into the Chinese Canadian community as Ting An in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* does; nor does he suffer from the oscillation between acceptance and rejection of his Chinese heritage as Morgan does. If Kae provides an account of her search for authentic Chineseness in reconstructing her female genealogy, then Robert reveals his lifelong disavowal of that Chineseness when unravelling the secret of his unknown paternity. His physical journey on the border corresponds with his drifting along the border between the two cultures he inherits.

Bowering asserts the Chinese presence through the narration of a family history that her protagonist endeavours to piece together from a variety of sources. In a metafictional mode, the reconstructing process is exposed both as a discursive activity in which Robert tries to make sense of the past by interpreting and emplotting the bare facts presented in the sources and as a hermeneutic process in which different interpretations compete for authority. This family history is embedded in larger historical currents, first in the confrontation in Hong

Kong between China and Europe at the height of imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and secondly in the encounter between Chinese immigrants and European Canadians in 1890s British Columbia, where increasingly discriminatory legislation tries to suffocate and banish the exotic other to maintain racial purity. Although Bowering lays bare the injustice of the exclusionary racial policies, her representation of China and the Chinese reproduces some negative stereotypes, failing to problematize their underlying assumption about white supremacy. In this section, I will explore what narrative strategies are employed to create a family history that reflects its constructedness and potential for multiple possibilities, how Robert attempts to negotiate a Canadian identity through repeated disavowal of his hybrid inheritance and locates his own life-story in relation to those of his ancestors during the reconstruction, and finally how the Chinese presence is registered negatively through the construction of an irreducible, threatening racial other that provides an imaginary justification for a history of mistreatment.

If Kae starts her family story at the birth of a new generation, Robert at the beginning of his narrative stuns the reader with the death of his hundred-year-old Chinese stepmother Lam Fan in the spring of 1957. What follows is his recollections of their arguments about where his home is, Fan's farmhouse where he was reared or the *Rose*, a recently purchased boat he is going to fix up, which indicates the novel's concern with belonging. Then Robert carries the papers left behind by his just-deceased stepmother aboard to start his first journey on the *Rose*. When anchored near the shore of D'Arcy Island, the ghost of Fan appears, launching Robert's investigation into a long withheld past. The structure of Bowering's novel seems less complicated than that of Lee's, with neither frame story nor non-chronological episodes. Divided into a prologue and fourteen chapters, with excerpts from *British Columbia Pilot, Volume I*, and the *British Colonist* as epigraphs, the narrative consists mainly of Robert's reconstruction of his family history from the papers and Fan's oral tales; it is a third-person

account interspersed with his conversations with the ghost, his first-person narrative of incidents occurring during the voyage, and his internal monologues. The interweaving of these elements and the constant shifting in time and space make the storyline as fragmented as Lee's. Although the voyage lasts only a few days, it frames a family saga ranging from 1845 to 1957 and involving violent encounters between East and West within different national boundaries.

The reconstruction begins in the middle of a labyrinth. Overwhelmed by the papers, which include legal documents, photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, essays and diaries, Robert admits to his incompetence for the task: 'Without Fan how would I ever learn the answers, for without her I could not even frame the questions.'⁴⁶ He is incapable of transforming the random materials into a sensible account: 'There were puzzles in the archive that I was reading my way through: names, places, dates, events. And I could not give it shape; I lacked the context' (p. 32). His family saga in fact comes as a result of collaboration with the ghost, just as Kae's family narrative is a composite of the oral stories gathered from different sources. Gaps exist in both narratives. Kae has to fill in the blanks by herself while Robert depends on the ghost, a participant of the past under reconstruction, to forge missing links: 'You start the work, and I will fill in the gaps' (p. 32). Yet aware of the difficulty of constructing the past from its traces, Robert does not expect the story of his parents to be complete: 'And if I did not yet have it all, at least I had the outlines of my map' (p. 33).

Robert traces his lineage back to his maternal grandfather, "Major" Thackery, an Englishman arriving at the Hong Kong colony in 1845 with reformist passions. The major becomes 'a local irritant' (p. 34) among the European colonists concerned only with doing

⁴⁶ Marilyn Bowering, *To All Appearances a Lady* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 9. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

business in China, because he opposes the legalization of opium in China, names his only daughter after the 1857 Indian Mutiny, and adopts Lam Fan, a Chinese girl abandoned by her father, who flees after his failed attempt to poison the Europeans. India and Fan become his 'experiments in progress' (p. 43), which leaves them excluded from both European and Chinese communities. After Thackery's death in 1890, the two women sail to the New World but Fan is stranded outside Vancouver Island because of head taxes. This is when Robert Louis Haack, a drifter from California, bumbles into their lives and solves the problem. Fan reunites with her uncle Lum Kee, whose friend Sing Yuen employs India as a bookkeeper for his restaurant and opium factory and later marries Fan.

With assistance from Sing Yuen and Haack, India starts charity work such as the rescue of child prostitutes in Chinatown. As a member and informer for the Workingmen's Protective Association (WPA), which prohibits its members from patronizing the Chinese and demands the suppression of their immigration into Canada by all legitimate means, Haack wavers between his loyalty to the association and his friendship with India and her Chinese friends. Financial difficulties drive him to leak information about the opium factory to the smuggler Jimmy Carroll, who frames him for the robbery of the factory and abducts India to D'Arcy Island. While Haack serves a seven-year prison sentence, India lives with a group of Chinese lepers quarantined on D'Arcy Island, where a suspected leper who is not part of the group rapes her and disappears mysteriously after the crime and where her belief in reform and progress is challenged because her goodwill prolongs the suffering of dying lepers. In 1898, upon her return to Vancouver Island, India meets the recently released Haack. They get married immediately, but one day later, Haack is arrested for theft and deported to California while India returns to D'Arcy. Signs of leprosy vanish miraculously from Ng Chung, the leper who offers consolation by sharing his sad life-story with India after the rape. The passion that has been suppressed because of leprosy is released between them. The rapist

reappears mysteriously. This time Ng Chung comes to India's rescue in time and kills the perpetrator. Unfortunately, Chung's leprosy returns. India has no choice but to leave D'Arcy with their newborn son when Fan and Sing Yuen come to search for her with Haack's letter and divorce decree. Soon after, India kills herself when her body begins to show symptoms of leprosy. The baby, named after her first husband, is adopted by Fan, who promises to preserve India's secrets and have the baby 'grow up in blessed ignorance' (p. 332).

The summary of the plot just given is an oversimplified version of what Robert pieces together from the papers and the ghost's oral accounts, omitting narrative elements that reveal the act of reconstruction as a process of making sense of the past, involving possibilities of misinterpretation or unsolved mysteries. When Fan says it is partly her fault for breaking up the major's marriage, Robert rebuilds this episode as follows: 'He acquired a second live-in child, another girl, a Chinese. And shortly after this event the major's wife left him' (p. 36). But Fan interrupts him, emphasizing it is a misunderstanding of her role, which irritates Robert: "'All right, Fan," I say testily [. . .]. "Have it your way, it's up to you to make me understand. *You* said so yourself. You told me that what happened was your fault"' (p. 36). Robert bases his reconstruction of the past on Fan's clues. In this case, he mistakes her statement 'It was partly my fault' (p. 35), placing the full responsibility for the breakup of the major's marriage on Fan. A few pages later, by following Fan's clue that 'Only partly, Robert Lam. The major did the rest by himself' (p. 36), Robert provides an altered version, reducing Fan's significance in the breakup and shifting more of the fault to the major:

She was cooed over and stared at, then neglected [. . .]. Except the major. [. . .] The child's life had come to dividing point, and at this fork in the road stood the major.

Lam Fan nods her head. So far so good. But what about the mother? What about the

major's wife?

Since there is no mention in the papers of her, I have to ask. And although Fan looks grim and stays silent, it isn't too difficult for me to guess the rest. For the major's wife had a baby in her arms whom her husband had christened after a seditious country. She had a husband on her hands whom her countrymen thought was a traitor to established British principle: a man who had lost the respect of his contemporaries. And now he had brought, into her home, and expected her to care for as her own, a baker's daughter, the child of a would-be murderer. [. . .] Everyone, even in the nineteenth century, even a woman bound to a husband, has a breaking point. And for India's mother, my grandmother, this was it. (pp. 41-42; emphasis mine)

By offering hints for Robert to flesh out, Fan steers the course of his narrative. The new version provokes no protests from Fan, who assumes the authority to determine the accuracy in Robert's reconstruction and who becomes the only source he can resort to whenever there are gaps in the papers. Interestingly, it has not occurred to Robert to question Fan as a reliable informant at this point. She is only a baby when the major's marriage breaks up. Sometimes the ghost has to prevent Robert's imagination from running wild by curbing his tendency to improvise or exaggerate, as seen in the introduction of Robert Louis Haack, his namesake:

He was a man, let me suggest, who was full of promise, but whose talents remained largely in the abstract: that is, neither he nor the world had found a use of them yet. He was a man [. . .] who was capable of almost anything, except discipline. (p. 76)

Fan interrupts with 'Don't overdo it [. . .]. I am warning you. Please listen to what I tell you' (p. 76). When the narrative progresses to the dilemma Haack has created for himself by

accepting India's request to collect debts for Sing Yuen, Robert and Fan get into an argument over his motivation for joining the anti-Chinese WPA. Fan's explanation is that 'He didn't like to be alone' (p. 90). Based on this clue, he explains Haack's action as follows:

For sometimes it does not matter what a man believes so long as it takes him to brotherhood, to escape from despair and loneliness, and gives him a family of sorts. Which was exactly the case with the Workingmen's Protective Association for poor Robert Haack. (p. 91)

This sympathetic description however angers Fan: 'I cannot believe that you are defending him. You are half Chinese yourself!' (p. 91). Then they start accusing each other of being swayed by personal interests in the interpretation of Haack's behaviour:

'But you have told me yourself he did not believe in it, he did not actually act.'

'Yes,' she admits despairingly. 'But he belonged to a group that persecuted men, women, and children. He reported on what he heard in Chinatown. He spied on the people who befriended him!'

'Aha!' I cry. 'So it's something personal you have against him.'

'No more than you have,' she says quietly. Which shakes me up.

Still, I feel compelled to go on. 'You have no proof. You are making it up. You never liked him. You never wanted my mother to have friends other than you.' (p. 92)

This time Robert does not misunderstand the clue, but Fan cannot accept the interpretation he has developed accordingly just because he refuses to be critical of Haack's involvement with an organization discriminating against the Chinese. She puts an end to the argument by showing condescendingly her understanding of Robert's motive for defending Haack but insisting on passing moral judgment: 'You want to admire him. You bear his name. There is nothing wrong with that. Just don't close your eyes to the truth. He was wrong' (p. 92). Fan's reaction to this sympathetic interpretation of Haack's behaviour indicates the inconsistency and arbitrariness in her perception of certain past events or actions. Nevertheless, her reasoning fails to convince Robert, who instead concludes in his mind that Haack is prompted by the craving for belonging: 'I still see his side of it. I know what it means to be on a ship with men and officers, to be part of a team, to belong. And I know what it's like without' (p. 93). It is an unspoken challenge to Fan's authority, pointing to the multiple possibilities that interrogating past actions will open up. It also suggests that Robert tends to comprehend the past in terms of his personal experience. Another cause of this argument lies in their different relationships to the Chinese community, with which Fan identifies herself but from which Robert has detached himself.⁴⁷ This leads to their opposite perspectives on Haack as a member of the WPA.

There is another argument over the explanation of India's sorrow when her assistance is rejected by a leper who prefers to die in peace rather than live longer in suffering. Robert thinks that 'she just feels sorry for herself' because she cannot get her way, but Fan accuses him of lacking sympathy, maintaining that India is frightened: 'She had never seen [death] come like that: welcomed, but surrendered to with a terrible struggle' (p. 206). Never getting to know his mother in person, Robert has no choice but accept Fan's statement on India's actions as the final word. As a witness to the past in question, Fan is able to banish Robert's

⁴⁷ Robert's relationship with the Chinese community will be discussed later.

interpretation without being questioned. Yet not everything in the past can be explained. For example, neither of them can make sense of Jimmy's return after the robbery: 'why on earth would Jimmy come back? Wouldn't it have been better for him to stay out of the country?' (p. 173). It becomes a mystery bothering Robert as well as Fan.

Conversations like these disrupt the progression of the family narrative, foregrounding the reconstruction of the past as a negotiating process that implicates uncertainty, arbitrariness or controversy. Robert himself keeps inserting into his story references to the major and India as his grandfather and his mother, an act showing he is doing the narrating.⁴⁸ The biggest interruption however comes from Fan, who keeps commenting on Robert's methods of narration. In describing India and Fan's departure from Hong Kong, he becomes too melodramatic: 'For so it is we sadly turn away from childhood! ("Robert Lam, we were grown-up women!")' (p. 55). When depicting the location of Sing Yuen's opium factory, he provides so many unnecessary details that Fan has to say 'Enough, Robert Lam' (p. 101). At another point, when Robert makes up the topics of conversations Haack would have had with Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scottish poet he encounters briefly in Monterey, California before entering British Columbia, Fan corrects his speculation: '(“No,” interrupts Fan. “Not this poet. He never talked about death. He was too sick”)' (p. 151). The ghost continues to curb and amend Robert's narrative despite her insistence that 'You are in charge, Robert Lam [. . .]. It is your story' (p. 103). However, as her opinion about Stevenson shows, sometimes her comments are not necessarily well-founded, which throws Fan's reliability into question. Moreover, these interruptions indicate the skills of emplotment in the retelling of the past, thus revealing its fictionality.

⁴⁸ He starts the major's story with 'India's father, "Major" Thackery, my grandfather' (p. 33) and then enters a third-person narrative mode by referring to him as Thackery or the major. The insertion of 'my mother' occurs repeatedly throughout India's story in the third person.

As part of the past in question, Fan makes herself the judge of Robert's reconstruction, invalidating his scepticism or alternative interpretations of the same events. However, Robert does not always surrender to her authority. In rebuilding India's first encounters with the lepers on D'Arcy, they get into another argument about whose interpretation is correct. Robert tries to humanize the lepers: 'They, as individual men, with personal histories, with wives and children and parents and sisters, were unlikely to harm her' (p. 186). Fan rejects this version by appealing to Robert's personal experience in the war:

'No, Robert Lam,' interrupts my stepmother. 'At this moment these men are dangerous. You forgot that they have seen no one but each other for months. And now India, a woman alone, comes along. What is there to stop them from doing what they like [. . .]?' You have forgotten, it seems,' she goes on, 'what you saw during the war. Did not men who lived together, who fought together, act as one? Did they not do things of which, as themselves, they would have been ashamed? Isn't that how it was?' (p. 186)

Her reasoning silences Robert. But a few pages later, on finishing the account of the encounter, he tells Fan proudly that the lepers bear his mother no malice despite their initial unfriendliness: '(“See, Fan? I was right. I knew they wouldn't harm her.” “You are right this time, Robert Lam, but maybe not forever”)' (p. 192). It is another moment of competition in reconstructing the past, but this time, Robert wins. Fan has to relinquish her authority to Robert because India's diary supports his interpretation. Throwing into question the authenticity that Fan can guarantee as a witness, the episode suggests that neither she nor Robert can avoid subjective interpretation in their reconstruction of the past and that subjectivity turns history into a site of contestation among multiple possible interpretations. This is especially so in the case of family history, which, as a private narrative of lives and doings of a family or a number of related families, is perhaps most likely to be subjective

because it depends primarily on accounts given by those personally involved. As the quarrel between Fan and Robert over Haack's motive for joining the WPA demonstrates, these personal accounts can differ from or run counter to one another. Subjectivity is also seen in the projection of Robert's own feelings onto the actions he is fleshing out. When it comes to what Haack's psychological state would be after India has discovered his position as informer for the WPA and the news of his name on the WPA's blacklist has been spread, Robert dismisses whatever Haack has felt as temporary effects of injured pride and deviates to elaborate on how injured pride works on individuals:

But hurt pride is self-increasing. It infects the core of being. We worry at it like a dog with a flea, until in self-absorption we consume ourselves, and what is left is only what we cannot stomach: it is the cannibalism of self-pity. (p. 133)

Fan is keen to recognize Robert's understanding of Haack's reaction as a reflection of his situation: 'Ho, ho, ho! [. . .] What is this? Has something touched a nerve? Does Robert Lam feel sorry for himself?' (p. 133). Though irritated, Robert does not deny her observation.

Fan is not the only one wanting to steer the course of the family narrative. Robert also manipulates his narration to serve certain purposes. He attempts, though unsuccessfully, to elicit Fan's lifelong secret of constant opium supplies by interpolating William Lyon Mackenzie King's investigation into the Anti-Asian Vancouver Riots of 1907⁴⁹ that led to the

⁴⁹ The first riot took place in Vancouver's Chinatown and Japantown on September 7, 1907. In his study, W.J. Wang describes this incident as 'the most spectacular moment within a long history of anti-Asiatic agitation in British Columbia', and argues that local English language media of the time downplayed the violence of the riots and ignored the long history of anti-Asiatic agitation, leaving 'a legacy of focusing on the perspectives of the rioters at the expense of the victims of the riot' in Canadian history. See Wang, 'Perspectives on the 1907 Riots in Selected Asian Languages and International Newspapers'. Available at http://www.instrcc.ubc.ca/1907_riot/index.htm [accessed 11 January 2010].

Opium Act.⁵⁰

His report was presented to Parliament on June twenty-sixth, 1908. And the law erasing the opium industry from Canada was passed in Parliament less than three weeks later.

A black day for my stepmother, Lam Fan. Although I can't recall it affecting her much. But then she had connections and contacts, a life of which I was ignorant.

'Keep trying, Robert Lam,' says Fan, [. . .] 'but don't imagine I will respond to your baiting. You're no good at it. You never were.' (p. 103)

Their interaction suggests that Robert's storytelling is not just a reconstruction of his family history from the papers and Fan's oral accounts, but has become an arena where they compete with each other for imposition of significance on the past in question and where they attempt to unearth secrets from each other, though more often than not Fan gains the upper hand.

Besides these interruptions, the narrative is further fragmented by Robert's internal monologues, which constitute another storyline revealing the troubled waters of his own past. As he pieces together a family history that exposes miscegenation, the personal story recounts how he has spent his lifetime seeking to conceal its resultant hybridity. When Haack hopes against hope that his relationship with the WPA could be kept concealed from India, Robert recalls his own secret: 'It was the day of the arrival of the news of the revolution in China. It

⁵⁰ The Opium Act of 1908 prohibited the importation, manufacture, and purchase of opium for other than medical purposes but allowed simple possession or use. Drug dealers instead of users were targeted. The Act was Canada's first anti-drug legislation, which had a close link to the public's fear of Chinese immigrants. King had four main concerns in his report: first, opium smoking was becoming more popular among white people; second, the Chinese were making huge profits in the opium trade since most dealers were Chinese; third, opium trade violated provincial pharmacy legislation; fourth, Canada had to participate in the international campaign against opium. See John Howard Society of Canada, *Perspectives on Canadian Drug Policy*, Volume 1. Available at <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/drugs/perspect/volume1/cover.htm> [accessed 13 January 2010].

was the day [. . .] that I, a boy, neither yellow nor white, cut myself off from my Chinese self, turned my back on it' (p. 93). The 1911 Revolution gives birth to the modern China, but the news provokes young Robert to disavow his Chinese heritage and to disassociate himself from his Chinese adoptive parents and the Chinese community by running away to work as a seaman and later by joining the navy, which grants admission not just because he looks 'European enough' but because '[n]o trace remains in Robert Louis Lam [. . .] of his Chinese father's heathen origins' (p. 250). Robert even changes the spelling of his surname at work from Lam to 'Lamb' (p. 14) to eradicate traces associated with Chineseness. It comes as a surprise to Robert that his grandfather converts Fan's name from Lum to Lam because the latter 'sounded better in English' while the former is 'too Chinese' (p. 40). As Fan explains, the major makes the alteration to dissociate her from a horrible past: 'He said it would [. . .] help the English forget about my father who had frightened them' (p. 40). Robert feels compelled to justify himself again by saying: 'Of course what counts [. . .] is not the name but the person who bears it. Changing a name doesn't change who you are' (p. 40). Changing a name may not change the person bearing it, but such an act indicates an underlying desire to assume a different identity. Being neither yellow nor white is an identity Robert would rather discard.

Fan's existence however reminds him of the mixed ancestry he has striven to repress:

I'd seen the faces of the others, too [. . .] when they met Fan. I suppose they'd never considered it — I took most of my looks from my European mother — but I was half Chinese. I'd I wanted to say that she was nothing to do with me. She was an absurd-looking old woman with a painted face, and her clothes were twenty years out of date. For the truth was I'd been ashamed of Fan. But in the end I hadn't denied her, at least I hadn't done that. (pp.14-15)

This episode occurs when he takes Fan out on his pilot launch, just months before her death. The cause of his embarrassment lies not so much in her odd appearance as in the fact of her being Chinese, leading him to consider the trip 'a mistake' (p. 14). Though Robert emphasizes he does not deny Fan, his unwillingness to acknowledge her is too obvious to be ignored. In fact, changing the name inherited from Lam Fan amounts to a form of denial, not only of her but of the racial and cultural heritage she represents. The major has already removed the name from its Chinese root by converting it to Lam. Robert's modified spelling doubles that removal. But even Lum Fan is a mistaken identity originating from the major's misapprehension of her father's name, Cheong Ah Lum, of which the family name should be Cheong instead of Lum. The major displaces and dislocates the deserted Fan from her origins first by misunderstanding her surname and then by altering its spelling. Despite the difference in how they get a new name — Fan's is imposed whereas Robert makes a voluntary change — both cases suggest that name changing involves a desire for transformation in identity. Robert accuses Fan of wanting him 'to be someone different' (p. 178), but it is he who refuses to accept himself as he is, as being both yellow and white.

The denial of his hybridity is accompanied by the need to be recognized as a Canadian. The question 'why Sing Yuen, at age sixty, had volunteered to dig trenches for the army, disappearing into the ranks of unremarked Chinese who had died in France at that thankless task' (p. 18) has bothered Robert all his life. Fan would not answer until she becomes a ghost: Sing Yuen 'felt that if the Chinese did well for Canada, they would be recognized as soldiers, as heroes' (p. 40). Robert believes the sacrifice of his adoptive father to be futile, but he himself joins the navy to serve his country in the Second World War. Both attempt to prove that they are worthy of Canadian citizenship. On learning that his tropic eye infection would cause loss of vision, fear of losing his future and the opportunity to demonstrate his value

propels Robert to commit rape: 'for what would become of me once I could not see, and had nothing to offer in the midst of a war' (p. 223). His crime costs two lives — the victim and her grandmother, who commits suicide after killing her granddaughter. It becomes his unspeakable guilt, which he never admits until he discovers his mother has suffered twice from the same outrage.

The effort to win recognition through disavowal of his Chinese heritage fails to bring Robert any sense of belonging in the white community he would like to integrate into. Despite his European looks, he is 'called "China" behind his back' (p. 29). Experience of alienation enables him to empathize with Haack's motive for taking part in a racist organization. After turning his back on Fan and Sing Yuen as well as the Chinese community they are closely related to, Robert finds no replacement for home and drifts into self-imposed exile: 'My home is the sea' (p. 9). Isolating himself on a ship provides more security: 'I always regretted our time in port and avoided going ashore. It was like being born, emerging from a perfectly comfortable womb into a cold, hostile climate' (p. 190). But his sense of security in ships is false, acquired at the expense of loss of freedom: 'It's just like being in prison, but with the added chance of being drowned' (p. 69). Robert spends all his life at sea. Fan is the only link between him and the land: 'My home is the sea, Fan [. . .]. I've told you a hundred times that if it weren't for you I wouldn't be here at all' (p. 9). It is very fragile and Robert cannot wait to sever it. Even before Fan's death, he has intended to sell her house, the last bit of the link, and lead a completely nomadic life aboard the *Rose*. It gestures towards his determination to leave behind anything reminding him of his mixed ancestry.

Nevertheless, as the narrative unfolds, some changes gradually take place. In the beginning, Robert shows little interest in the papers left by Fan. The appearance of her ghost compels him to read them. Haack's divorce decree discloses his illegitimacy: "I wish I hadn't asked,

Fan,” I said aloud. “Maybe your way, not telling me, was better.” I resented, far more than I had ever thought possible, being a bastard’ (p. 26). The shock creates an identity crisis in Robert: ‘I cried out loud, and I cried not for Lam Fan, nor for Sing Yuen [. . .], but for my mother. [. . .] I wanted her to save me from unhappiness, from self-doubt’ (p. 29). This desperate cry for help from his white mother indicates again the disavowal of his Chinese inheritance. Robert even blames Fan for his crisis: ‘Listening to your stories has turned me into a hypochondriac. I hardly know myself anymore’ (p. 176). However, toward the end of the novel, he happily announces his transformation to Fan:

‘It’s because of you that the future looks bright at this late date in my life. My conscience is clear at last, and I’m freed of the past. Can’t you see what that means? Anything is possible, anything at all! [. . .] I’m a new man. Reborn. I’ve got my family, my history, my sense of identity. Yes, it’s all due to you.’ (p. 301)

He also changes his mind about selling Fan’s house and gives up self-imposed exile at sea:

I can feel the pull of my life on land: the pilot station and the men I work with; the little house at Christmas Hill that I don’t think I’ll sell after all, at least not for awhile; there are the boundless possibilities of [. . .] friendship and companionship. Of knowing where I fit. For I’ve almost got the whole of it. There can’t be much more left. (p. 302)

It seems that the unmasking of his origins enables Robert to redefine what home is and to reconcile himself with his illegitimacy and hybridity. As he cannot wait to start his new life, Fan has her long concealed guilt to admit. They sail back to D’Arcy Island, where she leads Robert to the secret storage site of her opium and confesses how she found it under the dying Jimmy’s directions and how she unknowingly helped the rapist escape after his first attack on

India. Both stepmother and stepson need the voyage to clear their guilty conscience. After all the mysteries — Fan's opium source, the rapist's disappearance, India's death — are unravelled, Robert sets fire to the *Rose*, together with all the tins of opium and the papers recording information about his family, to give the ghost a send-off. The act suggests again his determination to abandon self-imposed exile. Nevertheless, the portentous ending of the novel overshadows Robert's new sense of identity and optimism about the future:

I follow the eastern shore of D'Arcy Island. I watch the ships and ferries sail through the strait. I wave at them, but they appear to take no notice.

I'm not sure what I'll do when I reach the part of the island where my mother and father once lived. I suppose I'll rest for awhile. My legs are shaking with tiredness, and the numbness in my face has returned.

Someone is bound to find me. I can always light a fire that will draw attention. There is nothing to fear on this island any longer, and mariners are curious persons. And I am a pilot; and if anyone does, I know the right signals to bring them. (pp. 335-36)

In fact, during the voyage, Robert suffers sporadic attacks of numbness that cause loss of control over his body, and, while steering the *Rose*, he falls asleep or loses consciousness several times, putting himself in danger. The return of the malady, which he conjectures is a 'small stroke' (p. 114), implies that he may not be able to send signals for rescue. The doctor examining him after an accident that almost kills him suspects arthritis, but the symptoms also sound like leprosy.⁵¹ If it is the latter case, the new future Robert looks forward to will

⁵¹ Carolyn See, 'Book Review — *To All Appearances a Lady*', *Los Angeles Times*, 09 July, 1990. Available at http://articles.latimes.com/1990-07-09/news/vw-117_1_robert-lam [accessed 20 August 2009].

never come true. Whatever his illness is, Bowering plants 'a final cruel irony' in the end of the novel.⁵² Considering his age and physical condition, Robert's rebirth is belated and surrounded with the threat of death. He may not be able to make it to Fan's house, which he now accepts as home. Like Kae's planned but not yet actualized flight to Hong Kong, Robert's return journey is full of uncertainty, but Kae is in her thirties and will take her baby to join Hermia, which signifies hope to a certain degree, while Robert, 'a middle-aged pilot on the road to retirement' (p. 27), has no one to reunite with except the 'small decaying farmhouse at the foot of Christmas Hill' (p. 9). Kae comes to terms with her incestuous origin by disclosing the secrets in her family and by transforming the oral story of her women ancestors into a struggle against patriarchal oppression, which she even materializes in written form in the hope that it will become the landmark of her new career as a pure writer. In contrast, Robert dematerializes his family history by burning the papers with the *Rose*, which eradicates all the evidence of his origins, making his acknowledgement of illegitimacy and hybridity problematic. The ending of the novel raises more doubt about his declaration of a new identity negotiated in terms of the revelation of his mysterious ancestry.

The family history recounted by Robert is neither male nor female genealogy but depends on India as an anchor point. By tracing India's journeys from Hong Kong to British Columbia, Bowering places this family saga in a broader context of conflict between East and West and 'clears a space to negotiate the tensions in Canada's hybrid (East/West) cultural inheritance.'⁵³ Though the focus is on the confrontation between European and Chinese Canadians, she rejects the prevailing vision of the Canadian land as a blank by drawing the Native presence into her fictional account of 1890s British Columbia to demonstrate that Canada's cultural hybridity is not dual but at least triple. On approaching the coast of

⁵² Joyce Marshall, Rev. of *To All Appearances a Lady*, in *Books in Canada*, 18: 7 (1989), 37.

⁵³ Huggan, 'The Latitudes of Romance', p. 37.

Vancouver Island, both India and Fan are shocked to see the division of the New World and its similarity with the old country they have crossed the Pacific to run away from. The scene changes from 'buildings — hotels, clubs, offices, and theatres — all built of stone' to 'the white canvas tents of the Indian encampment on an open muddy flat' and to 'grey wooden shacks stacked next to each other, on top of pilings', and the two new arrivals see

a crowded, tumble-down, dirty huddle of buildings from which white clouds of smoke issued. In and out between them, and up and down around the pilings, hurried Chinese laundrymen carrying baskets slung on poles, or with firewood gathered in their arms. It was, to Fan and India, a familiar picture, much like the Hong Kong settlement, also called Victoria, that they had recently left behind. (p. 74)

The scene indicates the presence and marginalization of the Native population and Chinese immigrants. In the novel, frequent references to Indian communities and their whaling traditions aim to prevent their effacement from the history of the West Coast, but the Native presence serves rather as a backdrop against which Robert's interest in historical whaling sites plays out. It is a presence that takes on little real substance. In comparison, Bowering employs historical data like head taxes and campaigns of the WPA to show how official exclusionary policies and unofficial discriminatory practices cooperate to create a potent climate of anti-Chinese racism during the last decade of the nineteenth century. D'Arcy Island, used as 'Canada's first and only Chinese leper colony'⁵⁴ from 1891 to 1924, stands for the climax of this xenophobic agitation, signifying what Diane Watson calls 'the rape of Chinese self-respect and honour by Canadians.'⁵⁵ With India stranded in this space of

⁵⁴ Renisa Mawani, "'The Island of the Unclean': Race, Colonialism and "Chinese Leprosy" in British Columbia, 1891 - 1924', *Law, Social Justice & Global Development Journal (LGD)*, 1 (2003). Available at <http://elj.warwick.ac.uk/global/03-1/mawani.html> [accessed 1 September 28 2009].

⁵⁵ Diane Watson, 'Continuities of Meaning', *Canadian Literature*, 130 (1991), 136-38 (p. 137).

enforced confinement for years, Bowering exposes the inhumane treatment of Chinese lepers and counters the attempt to wipe out their existence:

And once they were taken to the lepers' island, most usually under extreme protest, all their property was left behind to be absorbed by the government or by their relatives — money, land, books, letters, whatever they had gathered. And no record was kept, either of what was taken from them or of their names or origins. Not even by the Board of Health. (pp. 185-86)

By giving voice to Ng Chung, though it is a voice ventriloquized first by India in her diaries and then by Robert in his oral recounting, Bowering strives to neutralize the dehumanization of these suffering outcasts. Featuring D'Arcy Island constitutes the author's endeavour to thwart the intention of official history to consign this disgraceful historical event to oblivion and to write the doubly marginalized ex-centrics back into history.⁵⁶

Though revealing the injustice committed against Chinese immigrants, Bowering's anti-racism campaign is unwittingly undermined by the reproduction of certain negative stereotypes. The plan to destigmatize leprosy is not really actualized in that Bowering fails to dismantle the racialization of 'the most dreaded disease on earth' (p. 186) despite her awareness of racial discrimination in the treatment of its victims.⁵⁷ According to Renisa

⁵⁶ On Bowering's website, the origin of this novel is described as follows: 'While the idea for *To All Appearances a Lady* originated in hearing, as a girl, of the existence of Chinese lepers incarcerated on an island off the coast of Vancouver Island, the atmosphere of the story came from Bowering's sense that what she had been taught about where she lived didn't gibe with her observations.' Available at <http://www.marilynbowering.com/appearances.html> [accessed 1 August 2009].

⁵⁷ An episode shows Bowering's full awareness. She quotes a historical letter written by Mrs. Kerr, who suggested: 'Why not [. . .] send the Chinese lepers to the lazaretto at Tracadie in New Brunswick where lepers are cared for in humane conditions?' (p. 254). The answer from the city government was published in the *Victoria British Colonist* and quoted as follows: 'To do such a thing "would pollute the gentle Acadians whose hospitable forefathers caught the disease by rescuing shipwrecked sailors from the Levant who were cast upon the wild shores of the Bay Chaleur"' (p. 245). Established in 1849, the lazaretto at Tracadie, New Brunswick was Canada's first leper hospital, where sufferers received proper medical care, but D'Arcy Island's residents

Mawani, the resurgent interest in leprosy around the world had to do with the peak of colonial and imperial expansion in the 1880s and 1890s. Even though there was no remarkable prevalence of the disease during this time, it was conceptualized as a foreign disease that invaded and infected the colonizing populations through the bodies of non-white races from the colonies; colonial governments enacted enforced segregation as the principal technology of leprosy control and prevention. Although during this period the mode of leprosy transmission remained undetermined and intensely debated, ‘many medical professionals agreed that the origins of leprosy could be traced to Chinese workers who imported the disease from China, only to contaminate white and non-white populations alike.’⁵⁸ In British Columbia, ‘leprosy was almost exclusively thought to be a *Chinese disease*’ in popular and medical discourses and ‘bound up and inseparable from fears about unrestricted and unregulated Chinese immigration’; compulsory isolation and deportation became major strategies of racialized governance; the disease was turned into a convenient label to get rid of undesirable and unfit populations to keep Canada a white settler colony.⁵⁹

Instead of questioning the link between leprosy, race and colonialism, the novel reinscribes and reinforces the images of Chinese immigrants as a ‘leprous race’⁶⁰ and of China as a diseased place, full of corrupt and unhygienic habits that allow contagious diseases like leprosy to originate and rage. Ng Chung’s hometown Tientsin is described as a place where ‘[c]hildren went on dying in the epidemic’ (p. 239) and where ‘a plague of typhus swept through the shantytown along the river banks’ (p. 241), while in Hong Kong ‘lepers weren’t isolated, and their presence at the edges of the community hadn’t seem too worrying’ (p. 186). The major is depicted as succumbing to the plague, a disease his reforming program is

were provided with no medical treatment and with very little supervision apart from food supplies. It was not until 1906 that the government began providing medical attention and pain relief. See Mawani, “‘The Island of the Unclean’”.

⁵⁸ Mawani, “‘The Island of the Unclean’”.

⁵⁹ Mawani, “‘The Island of the Unclean’”.

⁶⁰ Mawani, “‘The Island of the Unclean’”.

supposed to prevent by placing emphasis on ‘better housing, more drainage, and cleanliness’: ‘an epidemic of this nature was inevitable unless there were strong and complete reforms of sanitation’ (p. 33).⁶¹ Robert identifies diseases as imported from the East:

In the year 1890, in that city of double aspect where the races faced each other across a boundary and [. . .] where [. . .] disease wore a foreign appearance, as ships arrived from the east flying the yellow quarantine flag, and a dress sent out from one of these to be mended led to an epidemic, and the doctors inoculated arm to arm as fast as they could but couldn’t catch up with the deaths; where, when a storm destroyed the earthworks of the Chinese cemetery on the waterfront, there were bones from hundreds of casualties. . . . (p. 91)

The stigmatization of leprosy is exemplified in Haack’s reaction at the sight of the grown-up child prostitute he helps India rescue from Chinatown: ‘for it was a kind of nemesis — justice with hindsight, justice retributive — that the young woman who regarded him bore the unmistakable hall marks of leprosy’ (p. 289). But what is this retributive justice for? Her forced prostitution or her crossing of the Canadian national border? Bowering unwisely restigmatizes the racial other by recementing the discursive connections between Chineseness and leprosy and by circulating the stereotype of Chinatown as a gambling and opium den where ‘the trade in girls was part of the fabric’ (p. 122). India’s death even demonstrates how contact with the racial other contaminates and how the affliction of leprosy is conceptualized as a form of punishment for racial and sexual transgression. Bowering’s effort to register the Chinese presence in Canada is undercut by the bleak and distressing depiction of Chinese

⁶¹ Although the story of India and Fan in Hong Kong ends in 1890, Bowering associates the major’s death with the outbreak of bubonic plague in 1894. It is an act reinforcing the impression of China as a diseased place. The plague continued its virulence in the colony for the next two decades. Explanations of the cause revolved around the unhygienic conditions of local populations. See E.G. Pryor, ‘The Great Plague of Hong Kong’, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 15 (1975), 61-70. Available at <http://sunzi1.lib.hku.hk/hkjo/> [accessed 9 October 2009].

immigrants and transcultural/transracial contact as contamination.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this study, I reviewed, first, the way in which the postmodern historical novel draws on the problematization of historical discourse in critical theories to challenge the boundary between history and fiction, and, second, the debate over the postcolonial status of Canada in order to set up a combined framework that enabled me to look at the specificities of postmodern historical fictions produced in the Canadian context. Here, I will deal with the tension between postcolonialism and postmodernism in relation to history in the hope of finding possible explanations for the burgeoning of contemporary Canadian historical fiction since the 1980s.

According to Hutcheon, there are several points of conjunction between postcolonialism and postmodernism. Two of them are the formal technique of magic realism and the thematic concern with history and marginality.¹ Magic realism not only challenges genre distinctions but highlights the local, the politicized, and the historical as it encodes gestures of anti-colonial resistance.² Thus, the formal technique echoes the thematic concern with history. Hutcheon compares postmodernism with postcolonialism to foreground the former's political potential. Yet her reconfiguration runs counter to the widely accepted perception that postmodernism 'suggests an aestheticising of the political' while postcolonialism 'foregrounds the political as inevitably contaminating the aesthetic, but remaining distinguishable from it.'³ Critics concerned with political agency tend to dismiss postmodernism for its predilection for aestheticization and lack of specific political agendas. Despite the contention surrounding its presumed politics, the postmodern epistemological and ontological questioning of history has strong political implications when it enables the

¹ Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout of Empire", p. 73.

² Slemon, 'Magic Realism', p. 10.

³ Brydon, 'The White Inuit Speaks', p. 95.

invalidation of metanarratives and the proliferation of what Foucault calls effective history.

In terms of history, both postmodernism and postcolonialism are politically committed. As a problematizing mode, postmodernism focuses on the deconstructing of history as a metanarrative without an ensuing proposal for reconstruction, but it presumes a politics of deconstruction as its agenda. Though emerging only in the past few decades, postmodernism has caused a crisis of cultural authority and initiated Europe's self-questioning by eroding the universalist claims of Western epistemology and ontology. Its scepticism about history and stress on relativism echoes the first stage of the postcolonial project to dismantle the master narrative imposed by the colonial powers. Nonetheless, the two enterprises head in different directions after deconstructing. Postmodernism proposes no alternatives to the already dismantled master narrative whereas postcolonialism continues to undertake the task of writing an 'authentic' national history to accomplish the decolonizing project.

Simon During defines postcolonialism as 'the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images.'⁴ Yet for Tiffin, contamination is inevitable because postcolonial perspectives are already informed by the imperial vision; therefore, postcolonial writers' attempt to establish or rehabilitate an independent identity against European appropriation or rejection necessarily 'involves the radical interrogation and fracturing of these imposed European perspectives.'⁵ Their primary strategy is the (re)writing of the history of postcolonial territories in their own terms since that history has been largely constructed by the colonizer, whose European master narrative of history 'will always seek to contain and

⁴ Simon During, 'Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today', *Textual Practice*, 1: 1 (1987), 32-47 (p. 33).

⁵ Helen Tiffin, 'Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 23: 1 (1988), 169-81 (p. 172).

confine post-colonial self-interpretation.’⁶ In nations like India, writers counteract European perspectives with indigenous systems although the authenticity of the rehabilitated systems remains contentious. In invader-settler countries, writers challenge the European master narrative of history by adopting the positions of those already marginalized or even erased from Western narrative and by launching a radical rereading of imperial records. In Canada, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, *The Scorched-Wood People*, and *Burning Water* are some examples of rewriting local history to contest the dominant Eurocentric interpretation of Canadian history. It is arguable that Native ways of seeing in invader-settler countries represent the alternative ontological systems that can be rehabilitated as a counter-discourse to colonialism. The problem of cultural appropriation arises when invader-settler societies make use of Native cultures to counter European master narratives of history. It worries Native writers and critics like Lee Maracle. Some white authors employing Native traditions to challenge British imperialist ideologies, such as Rudy Wiebe, have been accused of cultural appropriation. This is why Tiffin has to stress that settlers seek to subvert and undermine the hegemony of Eurocentric worldviews rather than challenge European perspectives with indigenous systems. Whether or not there are indigenous ontological systems to be recuperated as counter-discourses, history is recast as a site in need of redefinition rather than as an irrecoverably fixed entity, and its (re)writing is imperative to the construction of postcolonial and/or national identity.

Hutcheon observes that there is a difference in postmodern practice between America and Canada: American writers are deconstructing national myths and identity while Canadian writers cannot start to do so until they return to their past to discover the myths and identity, having first redefined their colonial history by dismantling British social and literary myths.⁷

⁶ Tiffin, ‘Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism’, p. 173.

⁷ Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 6.

They must undertake the postcolonial project of constructing national history and identity before being qualified for postmodern dismantling play. Contemporary Canadian historical novelists seem to be caught at the intersection between two forces: the postcolonial drive to (re)construct a group or national history after dismantling the one imposed by the imperial authority, and the postmodern impulse to deconstruct the underlying assumptions of history. Their overlap of challenging history can explain to a certain extent the proliferation of historical writing in Canada, but the phenomenon also has to do with the fact that the postcolonial project cannot be completed without the second stage of recuperating or establishing an alternative history to assert identity, a stage undoubtedly encouraging the writing of history and historical fiction.

That the postcolonial force has been part of Canadian history is suggested by John Richardson's *The Canadian Brothers* (1840), a historical novel identified as postcolonial for its articulation of a Canadian identity that is neither British nor American but as colonialist for its effacement of Native peoples.⁸ Considering the postcolonial complexities that have been delineated by Bennett, there are a great number of groups or communities which need to achieve identity by asserting their own histories. What makes the situation more complicated is that the imperial centre or the dominant power the groups have to resist is often multiple and that sometimes a dominated group can turn into an imperial power which must be opposed by other disadvantaged groups. This multifarious form of domination leads Clarke to describe Canada as 'a "state" of disadvantaged minorities': Natives to Canadians (both English and French), French Canadians to English Canadians, non-whites to whites, ethnic minorities to English and French Canadians.⁹ These complexities signify a long and strong presence of anti-colonial resistance in Canada.

⁸ Douglas Ivison, "'I too am a Canadian": John Richardson's *The Canadian Brothers* as Postcolonial Narrative', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?*, ed. Moss, pp. 162-76 (p. 175).

⁹ Clarke, 'What Was Canada?', p. 33.

The postcolonial and postmodern challenge to metanarratives enables those marginalized and silenced in the making of traditional history to start (re)writing history in their own terms. The cultural nationalism of the late 1960s and 1970s produced a literature trying to articulate Canadian national identity. Yet it is, according to Mukherjee, 'an all-white canon of works about small towns and wilderness, about white settlers pioneering on the frontier with the RCMP maintaining law and order', a canon 'taught and written about in universalist terms, thereby discounting its whiteness.'¹⁰ This white version provoked a backlash from Native, racial minority and white ethnic-minority writers, who challenge the universalist stance by writing from their specific positions as members of marginalized communities and by underscoring Canada's participation in the networks of international imperialism and capitalism. The outcome is the rise of contemporary multiethnic writing, which also received energy from multiculturalism policy and achieved prominence in the 1990s. The demographic change resulting from the increase of ethnocultural populations other than English or French (with a high proportion of Asians) is also contributing to this development. But as Howells notes,

By a curious logic of history the Canadian identity question so dear to the cultural nationalists is still the central question in the new wave of multicultural novels, though questions of identity have become more complicated. The old question of 'Where is here?' is transformed into 'Where am I?' or 'Who am I?'¹¹

All these tendencies seem to boost in one way or another the writing of Canadian historical fiction, whose proliferation after the 1980s counters the suggestion that the questioning of the

¹⁰ Mukherjee, 'Canadian Nationalism', p. 89.

¹¹ Coral Ann Howells, 'Writing by Women', in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), pp. 194-215 (p. 209).

old nationalist model enables Canadian literature to enter a post-national epoch, especially when much of this writing attempts either to probe and reveal the repressed elements of the national narrative or to construct alternative versions to disturb and undermine the official ones.¹² It is nationalist but in a very subversive sense because the aim is no longer to establish another master-narrative but to create a heteroglossic space where the term 'nationalist' is always under scrutiny and redefinition. Robert Kroetsch praises this decentring or disunity as Canada's 'saving unity.'¹³ Among this new wave of historical fiction, some texts, like those surveyed here, are distinguished to varying degrees by the postmodern consciousness of self-reflexivity. They problematize the underlying assumptions of historiography, contest what counts as history, expose the machinery (textualization, narrativization, emplotment) of historical representation, but never negate the significance of history writing. The authors participating in this literary trend continue to write about history but in a critical and discriminating way, just as they employ literary conventions but remain alert to their hidden ideologies.

The flourishing of the historical novel, however, causes anxiety about the commodification of history, which is a crucial issue in an age characterized not only by the decentring of metanarratives but by consumer capitalism. Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernism creates a crisis of historicity with flatness or depthlessness and drives the historical novel into an 'aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent', a situation 'in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.'¹⁴ It sounds like an elegiac lament for some authentic 'History' and mimesis in historical representation, suggesting that historical

¹² For example, see Frank Davey's discussion in *Post-National Arguments*.

¹³ Robert Kroetsch, 'Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy', in *Unhomely States*, ed. Sugars, pp. 61-70 (p. 66).

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 25.

fiction has become a retrograde aestheticizing of the past without political considerations. Nevertheless, for postmodern historical novelists, who acknowledge the occurrence of the past but stress its representation as a textualized and discursive construction rather than as an unmediated reflection, the disappearance of the historical referent signals the political potential for subverting and undermining metanarratives, an undertaking shared by postcolonial writers in the attempt to dismantle Eurocentric assumptions. Canadian historical novelists have little hesitation in seizing this liberating power.

However, not every writer can or will transform the potential into political commitment. Considering the prevalence of consumerism, a force excelling at commodifying, depoliticizing, and dehistoricizing cultural practices, it is dangerous to disregard Jameson's worry that postmodernism 'ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage.'¹⁵ Does the current proliferation of Canadian historical fiction run the risk of exploiting the allure of the past and incorporating the raw material of history just to produce marketable fiction? Noticing the relationship between Canadian historical novels and commodity culture, Wylie points out that though exhibiting an 'awareness of the dangers of "using" and aestheticizing history', most Canadian historical novels are in fact both 'critical of and complicit with consumer capitalism.'¹⁶ Yet Wylie fails to acknowledge the role of literary celebrity in commodity culture. Writers like Atwood, Ondaatje, or Rudy Wiebe, are major literary celebrities with large international audiences. The connections between their writing of historical fiction and the growing popularity of this genre deserve investigation. Moreover, the proliferation points towards a considerable readership interested in 'consuming' such kind of writing.¹⁷ Therefore, an exploration of the commodification of

¹⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 96.

¹⁶ Wylie, *Speculative Fictions*, pp. 221, 237.

¹⁷ In *Consuming History*, Jerome de Groot surveys the use of the past in a wide range of cultural phenomena

history must take account of the relationships between literary production, consumer capitalism, celebrity authorship, and readership. This area is underexplored and beyond the scope of this study, but further research into it needs to be undertaken so that the contextualization and theorizing of the flourishing of contemporary Canadian historical fiction can be more complete.

Though tentative, the explanations I have just proposed for the flourishing of contemporary historical fiction enable me to observe the different ways in which the novels analysed here display the dynamics of postmodern and postcolonial forces. As a point of conjunction, magic realism allows *Away* to subvert the historical verisimilitude typical of the traditional historical novel by blurring the boundaries between the historical and the mythic, to provide a mode for articulating the superposition of the past on the present, to demonstrate the destructive effects of British and Canadian colonialism, and to counter the prevailing accounts of Confederation as a key moment of nation-building. *The Englishman's Boy* dramatizes the absence of a distinctive Canadian identity while foregrounding the constructed nature of such identity, exposes the threat of American cultural imperialism and Canada's complicity in exploiting Natives, and makes explicit the involvement of power struggle and mediation in the construction of history. The two novels show how the postmodern and postcolonial impulses wrestle with one another.

Fall on Your Knees presents the conflict between nostalgia for the old country and longing to

and entities, and examines how the engagement with history in contemporary society is conditioned by processes of consumption and commodification. Though not focusing exclusively on fiction, his thesis suggests the direction that research into the commodification of history can take. In *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan inquires into the global commodification of postcolonial literatures, devoting some space to the critique of Canadian and Australian multiculturalisms in order to investigate the contemporary merchandizing of multicultural products. He explores similar issues even though his central preoccupation is with the booming alterity industry rather than the marketing of history. See de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008); Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

become Canadian, dismantles the image of Canada as WASP in the early twentieth century by recuperating cultural and racial diversity, and explores the damage that English as a dominant language can inflict on minorities. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* asserts the Chinese as well as Native presence while foregrounding amnesia in official history, provides a metafictional account of a family history, in which individual identity is renegotiated through a dialogue with repressed family and community past, and emphasizes a collective identity as essential to an ethnic minority in the face of racism. *In the Skin of a Lion* challenges official history by reinscribing the contribution of immigrants to the building of Toronto and dramatizes the identity crisis experienced by an underprivileged English Canadian when he encounters a Canada that is totally different from what he has been taught to expect. By Bennett's definition, the three novels, with their accounts of resistance to imperialist relationships or dominant powers, are postcolonial, but they also foreground the ambiguity of the label by showing the tendency of victims to turn into victimizers in the Canadian context. However, this should not obscure the undercurrent of their postmodern impulse to deconstruct metanarratives of history.

To All Appearance a Lady recounts the story of Chinese lepers to counter historical forgetting, underlines the role of narrativization in history, and stresses that even the reconstruction of family history can be a struggle between different interpretations. *Fugitive Pieces* is postmodern in its subversive use of the conventions of biography and autobiography and subsequent questioning of history as a mimetic model. Both are examples of historiographic metafiction, but reading them as postcolonial texts may be questionable since the first encodes little resistance while the second focuses on trauma and search for belonging, typical themes of diasporic writing. *Alias Grace* includes abundant historical documents, not to authenticate its story but to express scepticism about the knowability of the past and reconceptualize history as a site of contestation. The image of patchwork created by this text

becomes a postmodern metaphor for history and identity because faith in their authenticity is undermined. *The Wars* problematizes the conventions of history-writing by dramatizing the difficulty and mediation in transforming diverse archival fragments into a coherent and sensible account. *Fox* experiments with a polyphonic form to foreground the silencing process imposed on dissonant voices by official history. These novels display more of the postmodern force. Categorizing the texts as postmodern or postcolonial is a convenient method for identifying formal features or thematic concerns. Yet it can never exhaust the particularities of each text. Though placing these novels under an umbrella label, I hope I have been successful in offering readings which are not too reductive and which capture the complexities and subtleties of the texts.

Undeniably, some of these novels have received considerable critical attention, but I approach them by putting them alongside other, less frequently considered, novels in the attempt to propose alternative readings that can be elicited through the juxtaposition or to elaborate on the areas that have been underexplored. The novels in turn function as points of reference that help to produce more nuanced readings of the less-studied texts. I also juxtapose texts in unexpected combinations in order to open up new possibilities, and facilitate access to the richness and individuality of each text.

Both *Alias Grace* and *The Englishman's Boy* express scepticism about historiography and highlight the role of power struggle in historical representation. Whereas Atwood examines the entanglement at linguistic and discursive levels, Vanderhaeghe concerns himself with the appropriation and commodification of history for the purpose of assimilation, discrimination or patriotism. Atwood's highly acclaimed work and Vanderhaeghe's less well-known novel form a complementary relationship in demonstrating the many ways in which history can be problematized in postmodern writing. Despite the lack of apparent commonality in content

and form, the unexpected pairing of *The Wars* and *Fugitive Pieces* shows what different textual strategies can be employed to undermine genre conventions. Findley creates a metafiction that destabilizes the distinction between biography and history while proposing his metafictional biography as a counterpoint to the dominant discourse of the Great War in Canada. By inventing two fictional autobiographical accounts, Michaels blurs the boundary between biography and autobiography, casting doubt on their referential function, but this self-reflexivity aims to produce critical detachment rather than to deny the worth of such life writing. Michaels still intends her fictional autobiographies to fight against historical amnesia by preserving voices silenced in official history. Taken together, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Fox* supply a broader literary representation of the Canadian working class in the first half of the twentieth century and present alternative and sympathetic understandings of the social unrest resulting from the radical unionism in this period. Both are successful in re-registering the presence of the working class in Canadian history by telling stories from perspectives marginalized in or excluded from traditional history. The polyphonic tendency implied by Ondaatje is fully developed in Sweatman's critically neglected heteroglossic novel, which discloses the silencing of dissent voices in established history.

The dialectics between Old and New Worlds structures *Away* and *Fall on Your Knees*, both dealing with the relationship between new immigrants and old residents (either Natives or Canadians) and with the problems faced by new immigrants when they bring their inherited troubles to another territory. MacDonald dramatizes the conflict between white Canadians and non-European immigrants, exposes the constructed nature of race, ethnicity, and gender, reconfigures identity in terms of performativity, and challenges the national imaginary of non-racist Canada. While highlighting the persistence of British colonialism in relation to the Irish, Urquhart depicts the oppression of Irish Canadians to disrupt the supposed homogeneity of white Canada. But at the same time she also foregrounds the Irish settlers'

complicity in the colonization of the Native peoples. Both novels express explicit postcolonial concerns and show the complex postcolonial condition within Canada. To expose the institutional discrimination against Chinese immigrants, Lee and Bowering choose the time when head taxes and other related prejudiced practices were enacted as the beginning in Canada of the family history that their protagonists attempt to reconstruct, and explore the harmful effects caused by these exclusionary policies on the community and later generations. Lee reveals the importance for ethnic communities of establishing a collective identity to resist systematic oppression. Bowering focuses attention on the inhumane treatment of the Chinese lepers imprisoned on D'Arcy Island by the government to highlight anti-Chinese sentiments. Both authors touch on the issue of miscegenation and dramatize how hybridity places their characters in an interstitial space between two inherited cultures and generate traumatic effects in their search for identification. Lee's hybridized subjects strive to preserve their ethnic identity while Bowering's are determined to negate it.

Of course, the pairings are not absolute. *The Englishman's Boy* and *The Wars* can be drawn together in terms of their questioning of history or their similarity in narrative structure. The Irish question and British colonialism in the Canadian context can join *Away to Alias Grace* while *Fall on Your Knees* shares the concern about identity formation with *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. It is also possible to discuss magical realism as a point of conjunction between *All Appearances a Lady* and *Away*. Yet for me the current combinations enact a stimulating dialogue between juxtaposed texts and spotlight their respective particularities. Taken together, they constitute a literary map which is to a certain degree emblematic of the diversity and variety in Canadian contemporary historical fiction. The pairings allow this study to open up new possibilities for interpreting the acclaimed texts, as well giving the relatively neglected novels the critical attention they deserve. The design and comparative dimension of this thesis also illuminate the range of narrative strategies that have been

formulated in contemporary Canadian historical fiction to achieve genre transgression and problematize conventional assumptions about authenticity and objectivity in historical representation. Finally, the scope of this project acknowledges the many different ways in which the postmodern questioning of history is adapted to accommodate concerns with the specificities in the Canadian context.

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