

**“TOUCHING THE FUTURE: NATION AND NARRATION
IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH CANADA”**

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*ABSTRACT. This paper intends to revise Canadian narratives of identity vis-à-vis the changing nature of recent fictional production in English. Cultural nationalism no longer seems to hold in the face of the contradictory movements of globalization and fragmentation of the national culture. The writings of Rohinton Mistry and Thomas King can be seen, I will argue, as paradigmatic of the physical and cultural displacements implied by those two instances of change respectively. I will then focus on two recent and very successful novels, M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), which are partially or totally set outside Canada and have an emphasis on place as open text, as the site of complex negotiations of identity at the turn of the century.*

In his book *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, William New (1997) analyses the representations of place, site, space and land in Canadian culture. The fiction written in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, New notes, is often set abroad and exhibits an aesthetic of place and time radically different from the one written by the country's cultural nationalism. Instead of focusing on the meaning of an essential Canadianness, these texts often deal with the technologies of travel, information, and electronic communication, with the flow of people and cultural productions across literal and metaphorical frontiers, with the narrativization of history,

with the connections between national and international histories, and with the epistemological changes that these developments imply. If the texts are set in Canada, the Canadian territory is often represented as *other* space for the exploration of the notions of history, identity and culture.

This paper intends to revise Canadian narratives of identity vis-à-vis the changing nature of recent fictional production in English. Cultural nationalism no longer seems to hold in the face of the contradictory movements of globalization and fragmentation of the national culture. On the one hand, there is the increasing lack of coincidence between identity and place as experienced, for instance, by diaspora writers. On the other, there is the growing presence of Native Canadian voices which question the existence of a relation of sameness between nation and culture. The writings of Rohinton Mistry and Thomas King can be seen, I will argue, as paradigmatic of the physical and cultural displacements implied by those two instances of change respectively. I will then focus on two recent and very successful novels, M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). Like the also very successful *The English Patient* (1992), to which they owe much, these two novels are partially or totally set outside Canada across the Atlantic Ocean in Africa and Europe, exhibit a strong tendency towards the historiographic and have an emphasis on place as open text, as site of complex negotiations of identity at the turn of the century.

We are all familiar with the articulation of a Canadian identity in negative terms. Beginning in the late 1960s, the leading Canadian critic Northrop Frye and one of his most famous students and disciples, the well-known writer Margaret Atwood, put forward a national(ist) identity in terms of the very crisis of such identity (see, for instance, Frye 1971 and Atwood 1972). At the time, this effort expressed a desire for a much-needed Pan-Canadian identity then framed in opposition to British, French and American cultural forces and feebly found on/in the bilingual/bicultural model that led the nationalist movement of the 1960s. The process of nation construction was seen, in this way, as specially complex not only because of Canada's colonial history and geographical location but also because of the very double nature of the colonial powers and, moreover, the nation's own search for uniqueness in that bilingual/bicultural structure. As a result of the pressure put by these binary schemes, the argument goes, Canada's self-image has historically suffered from a lack of strength—the famous crisis of identity, allegedly a constitutive element of the Canadian character and paradoxically one that has given Canada the narrative needed to construct itself as a nation.

The scheme, however, has proved stronger than its designers had first thought in the 1960s. Although soon to be succeeded by the declaration of official multiculturalism, the binary structure introduced by the bicultural form of national identification seems to still dominate the official narrative of the nation. Today, that structure works, as Katarzyna

Rukszto (1997: 152-153) observes, to contain the difference produced by the growing multicultural counternarratives (Quebec, regionalists, natives, cultural minorities, new immigrants). It serves, in other words, to contain those counternarratives within a related formula for national identification: unity in/through diversity (see also Widdis 1997: 55-57).

At stake here is the construction of a national identity as predicated on laws of exclusion and inclusion which are constantly thrown off balance by the presence of other forms of identification and representation. Rukszto (1997: 154-158) selects the Flag Day incident in 1996 as an instance of the widening gap between the official pressure for unity and the Canadians' insistence on dis-identification. On February 15, 1996, Canadians celebrated the National Flag of Canada Day as a national holiday for the first time. The celebration was part of the "Citizenship Week," designed by the Chrétien government to sell and promote a pan-Canadian identity upon the already mentioned principle of "unity in diversity." Conversely, the day brought an unwelcome surprise. An incident happened between Prime Minister Chrétien and a demonstrator who was protesting against the cuts in unemployment insurance and, the following day, a videotape was circulated that showed Chrétien unfortunately grabbing the demonstrator by the neck.

Linda Hutcheon (1991) would certainly interpret the event as an instance of the typically Canadian irony. Irony is produced in the gap between what is said and what is meant, in the difference, in this case, between the intended meaning and the actual results of the celebration. The event also, most importantly, underlines the gap between what Homi Bhabha (1991: 291-322) calls the pedagogical and the performative functions of narrating the nation. The processes of this narration, the strategies of nation-building and the construction of a national identity, are especially evident in the Canadian case. As Rukszto (1997: 151), drawing on Bhabha's theories, points out, the official announcement of the Flag Day as a national holiday was designed to construct a sense of unity based on an equally constructed shared experience of the nation:

The argument here is based on the idea that the social narrative, such as the narrative of Canadian identity and belonging, produces meaning by appealing to subjects through its representations. The narrative is both a participant in and a product of historical and social relations. It allows individuals to see themselves in stories about "their" social/historical context.

It is the simultaneity of those two strategies, the narrative as participant (performative) and as product (pedagogical), that constitutes the people as nation by situating them within a discourse of cultural identification. The narrative of nation, in other words, constructs the people both as its object (sharing a common historical experience) and as its subject. The people see themselves in this way as both made by

and makers of the nation, a double (and contradictory) movement upon which the legitimacy of any national narrative depends (Bhabha 1991: 301).

In their repeated attempts to construct and promote a more or less coherent version of the nation, the different Canadian governments have given priority to artistic and cultural productions with a Canadian content, whatever that may mean. Although lately, and largely due to a lack of consensus about the meaning of Canadianness, the idea is losing supporters, Canadian-content policies are still applied officially and defended by a large sector of the population. Let us look, for instance, at Douglas Ivison's analysis of the situation in Canadian music (1997). Although Ivison recognizes the problems derived from the implementation of Canadian-content policies, he still argues for the presence, in Canadian songs, of culturally specific allusion, meaning by that, "vocabulary, names of places, people, or institutions, or references to contemporary or historical debates, issues, or incidents which those within the culture, English Canadians in this case, are presumed to recognize and understand, and which foreign listeners may be unable to identify or may at least recognize as signs of alterity" (Ivison 1997: 53-54).

The problem appears when the definition of English Canadian culture is unstable or unclear. The national references that Ivison presents as culturally identifiable and unified by consent—the Mounties, Tom Thomson's paintings, Jacques Cartier—are far from providing the desired images of the nation today. As many recent works of fiction seem to put forward, contemporary English Canada does not necessarily feel identified with that official iconography and concerns itself at least as much with places and cultures outside Canadian geography as with beavers, bears, maple leaves, and the wilderness. This, in turn, brings to the fore the question of what it means to be Canadian at the end of the century. And, in so doing, it implicitly puts forward, as Janice Kulyk Keefer (1996: 63) has argued, the need for a shift in the conception of the nation, from a dialogue, with its English/French binary model of a nation, to a *polylogue* or "the creation of a discursive arena in which the full range of ethnocultural and racial difference can be meaningfully articulated."

That shift is all the more necessary when we are increasingly dealing with a people who imagine their history and culture as different from the official account and often taking place out there, outside Canadian soil (see Turner 1995). In the process of writing the Canadian nation, the measure of temporality has definitely broken the apparent linearity of such national narrative, an event which, according to Bhabha (1991: 292), "produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories, like people, minorities, or 'cultural difference' that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity."

One needs only to think of the native population whose version of history often clashes with the narrative presented by the pedagogical strategies and whose idea of social and political representation is often cut short by the proposed performative strategies of nation narration. The identification of the country with the wilderness, for instance, has proven more than questionable from the point of view of the native production. Such identification was largely promoted during the first third of the century by Canada's most popular movement in painting, the Group of Seven, and gladly adopted by an official iconography badly in need of a sign of distinctiveness. Today, we see the paintings of the Group of Seven, with their representation of landscape without people or animals, with their sense of empty space, no longer as innocent choices but as consciously or unconsciously contributing to the equation between Indians and land, enabling thus the process of colonization of both (see Bordo 1997).

Contemporary native production parodies and contests most notions of Canadian identity as feeble and/or wilderness-related. In Thomas King's short story "The One about Coyote Going West" (1996), Coyote, the quintessential Native North American trickster, goes around "fixing" the landscape to her taste, putting some rocks here, some waterfalls there. In this story, the equation between Indians and wilderness is disturbingly dismantled by Coyote's shocking approach to the landscape. We thus see the creation of some televisions, vacuum cleaners, air humidifiers, portable gas barbecues, and department store catalogues in an apparently empty North American landscape, before the actual discovery of the Indians. "We need these things to make up the world," the text reads. "Indians are going to need this stuff" (239). The tale provides a sharp parody of Western narratives of discovery and national narratives of identity. Here, the directionality of progress, ironically incorporated in the story by the movement West, is reversed and we find people named Jacques Columbus and Christopher Cartier getting lost and the Indians, suffering from no crisis of identity yet, just waiting to be discovered, waving and calling "here we are, here we are" (King 1996: 234).

Another example that would contradict the narrative of the lack of a national identity is that of the ethnic minorities and new immigrants to the country who, taken together, represent more than 40% of the total population and who, more often than not, *do know who they are* and have a very strong sense of history and culture. The presence of these other texts of nation introduces a vacillating effect to the still dominant construction of Canada as a feeble nation just recovering from a long and historically justified identity vacuum. Instead, it draws our attention to other important sites of nation narration, to other different processes of narrativization of history, of culture, and thus of the nation.

Let us take Rohinton Mistry's collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), since it provides an excellent example of the changing relations between place and culture. The text negotiates the complexities of the diasporic experience as it incorporates the

contemporary emphasis on movement, literal and figurative, of travelling texts, writing and reading subjects. The stories portray the life of a Parsi community (already a diaspora back in India) both in India and in Canada. The collection traces a gradual movement from Bombay, India (the early stories are about the people living in an apartment complex called Firozsha Baag) to Ontario, Canada (to another apartment complex in Don Mills), the middle stories appropriately depicting the circumstance of the characters who leave Bombay for the West. The very last story, "Swimming Lessons," is structured as a double narrative and moves back and forth between the Canadian apartment building, where the narrator lives, and Firozsha Baag, in Bombay, where the narrator's parents live.

The connections between this last story's two narrative frames happen at first by association: A phone ringing in Don Mills is connected in the text to the sound of a doorbell in Bombay, or the aseptic waters of the public swimming pool where the narrator has registered for lessons act as a link with the polluted sea of Chaupatty beach in Bombay, where the narrator used to go to as a child. At one point in the story, however, the narrator sends the parents his first book, a collection of short stories whose reading becomes then the subject of the Bombay narrative. In this way, we begin to read the parents' interpretation of the very book we are reading, concluding with the closing story, with which both our reading and the text's reading of itself wonderfully coincide.

It is that fictional process reading itself, the portrayal of a fiction within a fiction within a fiction, that provides the formal structure for another most important negotiation: the negotiation of cultural dislocations, displacements, and transformation in both countries, India and Canada. The text posits the impossibility of defining identity in terms of either cultural origins or assimilation into a new culture alone. On the one hand, the readings of the stories about India and Canada necessarily modify the parents' experience of both. On the other, the Parsi immigrant narrator is as influenced by the host culture, the Canadian culture, as is the latter modified by the presence of the former.

The emergence of texts like Mistry's signals the need to move beyond purely nationalistic approaches to national literature and culture in general. It underlines the processes of construction of what we call tradition, the shifts in the nature of what is found important or meaningful by particular people at particular times and places, the presence of non-national forms of identification (see Rukszto 1997; also Seiler 1996). In the struggle over the question of a national identity and over the different forms of national belonging, the debates about the canon, multiculturalism, political correctness and immigration policies get intertwined. Mistry, a Parsi, part of Indian diaspora, and resident in Canada, won the Governor General's Award, Canada highest official prize, with his novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) about the Parsi community in Bombay. And he is only one among many recent immigrant writers who have also won important

national prizes. As Ranu Samantrai (1996: 34) wittingly argues, events like this one seem to explode the idea of a national identity,

impossibly stretching its boundaries to include places, people, and memories conventionally excluded from the Canadian mainstream. The fact that Mistry's work is also claimed by Indian fiction and by Parsis as Parsi fiction suggests a breakdown and an overlap of nations such that it is unclear where India ends and Canada begins. Far from coherent, self-enclosed facts of nature, nations and cultures (which themselves fail to coincide) are revealed as interpenetrating, not distinct from each other but made by, and making, each other.

In what follows I wish to briefly focus on two recent and very successful novels that capture and draw on, in my opinion, that transcultural approach to the processes of nation narration: M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). These two novels participate of an archaeological/genealogical notion of history and tradition, and are made up in the fashion described by Linda Hutcheon (1988: 13) as *historiographic metafiction*, that is, "fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in the historical, social, and political realities (...). These works," Hutcheon continues, "are not quite historical novels in the traditional sense, for they are also very metafictional in their attention to the processes of writing, reading, and interpreting." Both Vassanji's and Michaels's texts also implicitly break the boundaries of the nation by showing that identity depends on temporal and spatial paradigms that are always in flux.

Like Mistry, Vassanji is part of a double diaspora, coming to North America from the Kenya/Tanzania region where his family settled during colonial times, when Indians were transported as indentured labourers to British Africa and the West Indian colonies. This movement constitutes the first phase of the Indian diaspora starting a geographical displacement which is going to produce very complex and often contradictory allegiances (see Bharucha 1995; also Chelvakanaganayakan 1991). Set in a border territory between the German and the British colonies of East Africa, *The Book of Secrets* deals with those complexities in a very subtle way, constructing its narrative, as Allan Casey (1994: 34-35) points out, "against a tide of political change, depicting a web of ethnicities and cultures, and juggling a large cast of characters" from the early 20th century to the narrative present in 1988.

Vassanji's novel is structured as a historical research work featuring, in its opening pages, a map of British East Africa at the beginning of the century, and a prologue in which the narrator, Pius Fernandes, a retired history teacher, is given the diary of Alfred Corbin, a former British Commissioner to the region. The narrator's research about this diary constitutes the corpus of the book, divided into two main parts and interspersing

the contents of Corbin's diary with correspondence, historical documents and other miscellaneous information of the time presumably found by the narrator in his research. The book closes with an epilogue and a glossary of terms in Swahili and Indian languages.

The time span, 1913-1988, is strategically framed by the double-voiced structure of a diary within a diary: Pius Fernandes's personal notebook in 1988 provides the story's outer framework and a contemporary perspective on colonial life, while Alfred Corbin's diary, written between 1913 and 1914, marks the story's point of departure around the events of World War I, a time which also saw the beginning of the end of colonialism. The choice of a diary is indicative of the novel's intent on exploring colonial history, diaries providing sometimes the only written documents of life in many isolated postings. The further inclusion of personal letters, official correspondence, Memoranda, newspaper clippings, riddles and poems signals the text's subscription to a well-defined line of writing in contemporary fiction, "one in which the sorting, and not necessarily the finding, is the nature of the quest" (Redhill 1994: 22).

As soon as the book starts, the reader is filled with a sense of premature inconclusiveness. "Because it has no end, this book," the very first pages tell us, "it ingests us and carries us with it, and so it grows" (Vassanji 1994: 2). The description of Alfred Corbin's diary (Vassanji 1994: 7-8), with its yellowed, stained, or simply missing pages, its faded ink and often unreadable handwriting, adds little to rectify the initial impression that we are entering a world of secrets without the promise of revelation. The diary is given to our narrator by a former student, Feroz, who has found it bricked-up in the wall of the back room of his store in Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania). Its contents pose a number of questions both personal and historical:

Even before I began to pore over Corbin's entries which would subsequently so grip me, I could not help but feel that in some mysterious manner the book touched our lives; was *our* book. There was, I felt, much more than the contents of its pages; there was the story of the book itself. Written here amongst us, later perhaps hidden, and now found among us, it must have left a long and secretive trail, a trail that if followed would reveal much about the lives and times it witnessed, and tell us why the diary finally surfaced where it did. (Vassanji 1994: 7-8)

The narrative that follows will certainly reveal the trail of the diary, from its owner, Alfred Corbin, British Commissioner in the small town of Kikono (now Kenya) in 1913, to Feroz's back room in 1988. Other than that, however, the narrator's attempts at answering the questions posed by the contents of the private document are fraught from the beginning by the very structure of the narrative plot. The text's historical and cultural significance grows as the number of characters (sometimes only tangentially involved)

also increases to touch the very narrator, Pius Fernandes, and, with him, the reader. The multiple narrative layers move in unexpected directions, losing at times the point of reference, the origin of the story, the diary; then, also unexpectedly, recapturing it again. "The novel's style of opening out, rather than focusing in, on the diary's mystery," writes Michael Redhill (1994: 22), "is a courageous gambit which works because the novel charms us away from the narrowness of desiring an answer and into the realm of greater questions."

In Part One, the writing of the diary (and our reading of it) is interrupted by the events of World War I. The diary is then stolen by Mariamu, a member of the Shamsi community and one of Corbin's servant with whom he might have had, the text suggests, a sexual relation. After Mariamu is murdered in mysterious circumstances, her husband Pipa, a street seller from the German side (now Tanzania), keeps and worships it thinking, not knowing how to read English, that it contains the secret of their son (Ali), who is born with fair skin and grey eyes. The paternity of Ali represents the original (and unsolved) secret in the diary, but other secrets will appear as the plot opens out.

Part Two of the book deals with the relationship between Pipa and his son Ali in the post-war period and follows the life of Ali, who marries Rita, from Dar-es-Salaam to London. Rita, named after Rita Hayworth, happens to be one of Pius's former students and proves to be a good source of information in the narrator's research. It is Rita who presents Pius with a book of poems written by Gregory, a former school teacher at Dar and one of Pius's colleagues. The last section of this part reveals then hidden connections between Gregory and the Corbins, including personal letters between Gregory and Corbin's wife, Anne. These letters introduce, in turn, a new secret and give the story yet another twist. Like the very plot, the representation of subjectivity in the novel follows an inverse direction and, instead of trying to produce a unifying consciousness, it disperses the writing/reading subject through an ever wider range of texts and new characters. "Gregory would have understood this idea of fulfilment in the eventual dispersal of oneself," Pius reflects (Vassanji 1994: 316).

The Book of Secrets has thus many books inside. This type of books was kept in Ancient Arab cultures with the conclusions of the Muslim sages. The physical book was seen as the keeper of precious knowledge, as sacred in itself and was therefore worshipped (see Woodcock 1994). In Vassanji's novel, the diary of Alfred Corbin would provide the most obvious example of such a book and is thought of as trapping the soul of the people named inside it. But many other books of secrets follow: there is Richard Gregory's posthumous *Havin' a Piece: Collected Poems 1930-1967*, there is Alfred Corbin's memoirs *Heart and Soul*, there is Pius Fernandes's journal, there is the very book we are reading, a new book of secrets, tracing unexpected connections between the two narrators, "from the pen of a lonely man to the obsession of another" Pius writes,

“from ancient lives caught up in imperial enterprise and a world war to these, our times: and finally to myself, and the hidden longings of my past. At the end of it all, I too lie exposed to my own inquiry, also captive to the book” (Vassanji 1994: 8).

The Book of Secrets won the first Giller Prize, Canada’s richest fiction award. The story happens almost entirely in East Africa, a small section of it set in London, and Canada only appears in passim because one of Pius’s former students, Sona, now an active correspondent involved in the research of the diary, writes from Toronto. The characters are mostly African Indian Muslims, although there is the colonial British officer and the narrator himself, who is a Christian Goan. There is a subtle way, however, in which the history of these East African Indians becomes the history of Canada, for the 20th century has seen the second wave of Indian migration. Originally settled in East Africa as merchants, the independence of Kenya and Tanzania brought great confusion to the Indian diaspora, mostly loyal to the British Crown, and now discriminated, their properties sometimes confiscated, by the newly empowered African leaders. This time they moved to England, the United States, and Canada. Seen in this light, Vassanji’s novel is *about* Canada as it draws on important connections between national and international histories. Moreover, it pushes the boundaries of what we call national literature, expanding it to include places and cultures out there, beyond Canada’s borders (see Dyer 1995: 21).

Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) is another book of secrets. Set in Poland, Greece, and Canada, the novel starts, like Vassanji’s, with a discovery; and this time, a miraculous one: Athos, a Greek archaeologist excavating the Stone Age town beneath Biskupin in Poland, discovers and rescues Jakob, a Jewish boy who has been hiding in the mud of the drown city after the Nazis have murdered his family. Jakob is about to be taken for a bogman when tears from his eyes crack the mud covering his face. Such is the beginning of this extraordinary novel. Like Vassanji’s, Michaels’s text has a clear focus on discontinuities, interruptions, displacements, transformations.

Visually divided into two main parts, *Fugitive Pieces* announces the death of its first narrator, Jakob Beer, in the form of a prologue. The first part of the book reveals, then, the contents of Jakob’s private notebooks, telling us about the peculiar circumstances of his life: his hiding in the mud of the Polish town of Biskupin during World War II, his serendipitous rescue by the Greek geologist and humanist Athos Roussos, his secluded childhood as a refugee on the Greek island of Zakyntos, and his later life in Toronto as he becomes a poet and a translator. The narrative comes to being slowly through the magic codes of archaeology, geology, botany, cartography, music and poetry, dreams and nightmares, silence, “every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language” (Michaels 1996: 111). The narrator moves tentatively in this way trying

“to identify the invisible, what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications” (Michaels 1996: 109).

Ben, the Torontonion son of a Polish refugee couple, is the narrator of the second part. It will be Ben who, fascinated by Jakob’s poetry and having being profoundly moved by the poet’s sense of serenity on their first meeting, travels to Greece, after Jakob’s death, in search of the notebooks whose contents constitute the first part of the book. Although the reader will only gradually become aware of the connections between the two narrators, Ben’s attachment to Jakob seems inevitable from the beginning given Ben’s unlikely interest in weather and biography and his fascination for the perfectly preserved bog people (discovered at 12 in the *National Geographic*):

I drew the aromatic earth over my shoulders, the peaceful spongy blanket of peat. I see now that my fascination wasn’t archaeology or even forensics: it was biography. The faces that stared at me across the centuries, with creases in their cheeks like my mother’s when she fell asleep on the couch, were the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be. (Michaels 1996: 221)

Thus, through the reading of Jakob’s notebooks, Ben imagines who this peculiar person, once bog-boy to save his skin from the Nazi armies, might have been. The two narrators are haunted by the brutalities of World War II: Jakob by the death of his beloved sister Bella, Ben by an inherited fear, a fear whose cause, he will later discover, is also the death of a brother and a sister in the war. The two stories contain each other, are porous like Athos’s favourite stone, limestone, “organic history squeezed into massive mountain tombs” (32). Through the character of Athos, the novel posits history as prehistory. “Out of fertile ground, the compost of history” (161). This, in turn, succeeds in undoing threatening claims to the land, to origins and purity. “I could temporarily shrug off my strangeness,” says Jakob as he and Athos enjoy their weekly explorations into the Torontonion ravines, finding the living traces of prehistoric lakes and primeval forests, “because, the way Athos saw the world, every human was a newcomer” (103). Place is an open site for physical and imaginary explorations. “Michaels beautifully unifies the book’s different settings,” writes Diane Turbide (1996: 61), “the ancient city lying beneath Biskupin, Poland, where Jakob was born, a tiny Greek island and 1950s Toronto—by viewing them through the eye of a natural scientist.”

It is also Athos that offers the arguments for the novel’s implicit participation of a Foucauldian notion of history, its tacit dismantling of the narrative of progress and continuity. History is seen as archaeology, as genealogy and geology, as meteorology and botany, as porous limestone, as a series of interruptions, interconnected accidents, improbable coincidences:

“The spirit in the body is like a wine of glass; when it spills, it seeps into air and earth and light.... It’s a mistake to think it’s the small things we control and not the large, it’s the other way around! We can’t stop the small accident, the tiny detail that conspires into fate: the extra moment you run back for something forgotten, a moment that saves you from an accident - or causes one. But we can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see.” (Michaels 1996: 22)

The characters in Michaels’s novel seem often subject to this rhetoric of small accidents: Jakob is miraculously saved from the Nazis but dies when he is run over by a car. Other than the powerful historical narrative behind, there seems to be no large plot to their lives. “Since the uniting thread is the Holocaust,” Nancy Wigston (1996: 27) complains in this sense, “Michaels’ characters are often smaller than the landscape of horrors they inhabit.” And one must admit that the plot of *Fugitive Pieces* is not focused on the external but rather on the transformation of an individual consciousness (see Rubin 1997; also Kakutani 1997). Still, as Michaels herself comments, the novel explores the relationship between large historical events and everyday individual decisions. “And then,” says Michaels, “there can also be a great deal of plot buried in a small gesture, in walking across a room to open a door, huge plot implications in deciding to avert your eyes when you see an escaped prisoner across a field” (Tihanyi 1996: 7).

In times of great fragmentation, of a general skepticism, of the hypostatization of absence and the questioning of language, history and knowledge, *Fugitive Pieces* is about remembering, about human emotions and beliefs, about believing in language, the importance of naming, the preservation of history: “*One man’s memories then another’s, thousands whose lives it was their duty to imagine*” (279). The book carefully traces Jakob’s and Ben’s itineraries of (be)longing through love and hate and fear and stones and lullabies: “There is no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence... If one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map” (193). *Fugitive Pieces*, as Mark Abley (1996: 74) asserts, “is a book of love: a book to love.”

We seem to be living a time of transformations. The ongoing movement of people and information across barriers, both physical and metaphorical, has brought important changes in our approach to the notions of identity, nation, and culture. Contemporary Canadian fiction now seems to work with a notion of identity as highly textualized; that is, as made up of texts which, paradoxically, produce both centripetal and centrifugal effects on the individual subject. Similarly, many recent novels exhibit a very strong sense of history as historiography; that is, as text, as fiction, as narrative of identity. Thus, the very fictional texts often look very much like Pius’s notebook in Vassanji’s novel, containing Alfred Corbin’s diary as well as the narrator’s notes, scribbling, and

research about it; or like Jakob’s diary in Michaels’s book, containing poems, meteorological information, Athos’s historical research about the Nazi atrocities, cooking recipes. This process of intertextualization of identity is wonderfully condensed in the character of the English patient, in Michael Ondaatje’s best-seller of the same title (1992). The whole novel is haunted by the non-identity of this burned man who also, significantly, keeps a palimpsestic book with him, his only possession when found. The English patient, the text reads,

speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, the woman who bit into his flesh. And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus’ *Histories*, are other fragments—maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron. (Ondaatje 1992: 96)

In their “anonymous” erudition, these texts cannot be contained by the nation narration. They exhibit a degree of what Homi Bhabha (1994: 9) has called “unhomeliness,” which is not ‘homelessness’ but rather “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.” To be unhomed, according to Bhabha (1994: 7), is to establish a bridge, to dwell *in the beyond*, that is, “to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space ‘beyond’, becomes a space of intervention in the here and now.”

Contemporary Canadian fiction certainly participates of that revisionary act. The answers to the questions of identity, nation and culture it poses are complex and necessarily incomplete. The tendency is double and simultaneously to the very global and to the very local, to unify (the common background of the texts of a particular culture) and to differ (the very specific contexts of each text and each writing/reading subject). Whatever the results, the very process of questioning implies irreversible changes in the approach to any of the identitary categories involved. And, in so doing, this kind of fiction is moving ahead of time, almost *touching the future*.

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