

BEYOND THE EDGE OF THE CENTURY: THE POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINATION IN THE “NEW” FICTIONS OF THE CANADAS

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Shortly after some of the most renowned Canadian literary and cultural critics came to grips with the ways in which Canada could be labelled *postcolonial*, the term started to be reworked, under the impetus of national and international critiques that urged for a revision that went beyond the consideration of the country as a ‘second world’ (Brydon 1995), or a ground for settlement along with, or against, the First Nations, the only peoples that could be named postcolonial for their resistance to, and complicity with, some of the dominant forms that displaced their cultures (Hutcheon 1991; Bennett 1993-1994).¹ “There is a delicious irony in the fact that Canada’s dubious ontological status has found a reflection in other literatures of the postcolonial world and given Canada an international presence”, Magdalene Redekop states. “The openness to new constructions, the provisional nature of those constructions, the ironic play that affirms a mutual humanity”, she continues, “all these are part of what makes Canada a nation that welcomes creative invasion” (2004: 274). And, although that *invasion* has contributed to the reshaping of the Canadian postcolonial, the very term is inherently endowed with a penchant for self-revision.² First, the presumed homogenisation that has loomed historically over the term and the field of theory that it names has certainly triggered a reworking in Canada and elsewhere, coinciding with the coming of age of the discipline and the increasing relevance of fields, such as Subaltern, Queer Studies or Ecocriticism, which were initially built up, at least partially, on

30 postcolonial foundations. Second, the unstoppable power of the newly deployed relations between the local and the international in a global arena of analysis has relegated to a secondary ground some of the so far irreducible peculiarities of the two former scenes. All in all, the Canadian case deserves to be taken with the necessary cautions, since its specificity has been the reason for its being frequently overlooked or encapsulated with other, almost *but not quite* similar, situations of postcolonial subjectivity (Slemon 2003: 324n2). As a settler-invader territory (Brydon 1995), Canada offers a number of situations that few other Commonwealth zones have: the presence of the first Nations, diversified into particular ethnicities and endlessly displaced and wiped out by European invaders, the existence of a dual settler population linked to two pugnacious mother countries, internal rivalries between these peoples, and, once solidified as state, the establishment of a vertical mosaic/kaleidoscope whose roots date back to an officially bicultural social paradigm that largely ignored, when it did not obliterate, the multicultural diversity that Canada hosted from early on in its constitution as a dominion. Last, but not least, the proximity of the neo-colonial power *par excellence* to the Canadian borders is a factor to bear in mind, especially when the great bulk of the Canadian population lives near the US frontier. Given all these circumstances, it is not strange that, as Linda Hutcheon observes, when Canadians are asked in a survey, “as Canadian as...”, they responded “as possible, under the circumstances” (1991: 19). Although insignificant, the anecdote is symbolic of the lack of national consciousness that has been taken as the icon of a state that endlessly produces its own identity in a helpless process of fabrication, in the end symptomatic of a pervasive lack in the psychoanalytical sense (Keohane 1997).

This paper centres on the contemporary theoretical revision of the Canadian postcolonial to eventually propose a close relation between that revisionary strength and the creativity of the fictions indirectly touched by the recent Canadian multicultural presence. In consonance with previous historical periods, there is a heavy reliance on the rewriting of history and relevant historical moments for previous national-building processes. However, now the focus of these fictions is on the *Canadian*-Canadian engagement with the postcolonial, a thorough revision of the concept undertaken by the descendants of the oldest Canadian immigrants. In their novels already published in this century, the colonial, as much as the postcolonial, is a matter of degrees, and also of regional and communal histories veiled to favour the ossification of the national/state mirage.

The transcultural boom that occurred in the last twenty years of the past century endowed the revision of the Canadian postcolonial with a noticeable impulse. Thus, ‘new’ fictions like Lewis DeSoto’s *A Blade of Grass* (2003) or Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* (2003), even though they are located in contemporary South Africa and the Caribbean respectively, with almost no mention of Canada, have

contributed their bit to the rewriting of the Canadian nation in posing different, spatially and historically loaded circumstances with an immediate counterpart in the Canadian contexts of nation building. At the opening of the new century, the Canadian national ethos is more aware than ever of the relevance of community and region and the precarious balance in which they all have stood, and will stand to give shape to the conglomerate called nation-state beyond the turn of the century.

In frenetic succession, the last thirty years of the 20th century bore witness to the Canadian nationalist zeal of the 1970s, emblematised in novels like Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972), immediately followed by an ironic approach to the earlier constructions of nation and culture in the mid-eighties of the *Canadian postmodern* (Hutcheon 1988), represented in turn by historiographical metafictional works like George Bowering’s *Burning Water* (1980) and *Caprice* (1987) or Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). These historiographical claims were soon complicated by the space sociologically given to the multicultural agenda and its fictional offspring in texts like Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) or Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1995). The late nineties, once the transcultural deluge had solidified, were characterized by a literary and cultural affirmation supported on the shifting social relations opened by an ongoing *reecriture* of official histories, natural encounters, dual foundational myths and the public voicing of stories of colonialism in pre- and post-war Canada. Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995), Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996) or Kerry Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* (1998), on the day to day life in Vancouver’s Chinatown, the bloodiest episode in the Western expansion, and the contemporary psychological sequels of the Japanese eviction and segregation during WWII, easily stand together in this wide-ranging panorama of fiction at the end of the 20th century. As we move into the 21st, however, this *grosso modo* picture expands beyond the Canadian borders, opting for an eloquent dialogue between the national and the international, inside and outside the Canadian state. *One Hundred Million Hearts* (2003), Sakamoto’s latest text to date, for example, leads the way back to a mostly nebulous Japan for its second generation Japanese Canadian characters. “During the war my father learned to shoot a rifle, lunge with his bayonet and march the perimeter of Okayama Second Middle School, knees high and arms swinging”, the narrator Miyo recalls. “He had been born in Vancouver but sent to Japan for schooling, then to a farther away place he called Manchukuo. I couldn’t find it in my map of the world” (2003: 1).

From the 1990s on, the questioning of traditional models of national culture brought about by postcolonial theory within the kaleidoscope accounted for the implemented coalescence of multiple Canadas within the state space, all of them subject to continuous shape-shifting in their morphology depending on issues of

positionality and historical grounding within the state scenes. Narratives such as Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), on the intersecting marginalities of the Cape Breton Piper sisters and their family secrets (Rukszto 2000; Howells 2003: 103-125), or her newest, published after the opening of the century, *The Way the Crow Flies* ([2003] 2004), reveal the juxtaposed peripheries of the Canadian postcolonial. In the last of MacDonald's novels, Mimi McCarthy is of Acadian origin and the derangement of her people by the Anglos is a heavy weight on her consciousness that leads her to say repeatedly that she is very good at moving, being used to rapid packing and unpacking (MacDonald 2004: 84), now as the wife of a Canadian pilot, Jack. In their struggle with the English, the Acadians were the historical losers, as in the present of the novel are innocent teenagers accused of molestation and murder to conceal an international plot to host a Nazi scientist in Canada under US coverage, or as are the abused girls who are raped by their teacher. One of the victims, Madeleine McCarthy, imagines her first day at school in the Air Force base where they stay for a while in Southern Ontario in these terms:

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On the first day of school, the flag of our country will be raised. Not our flag, precisely, but the Red Ensign: the Canadian coat of arms, and in the upper left corner, the Union Jack. Canada does not have an official flag, we are not officially a country, we are just a dominion. What's a dominion we're not sure. It is the name of a grocery store chain. (MacDonald 2004: 34)

Madeleine's early confusion is however more seriously echoed in her father's military attitude that forces him to receive direct orders from the US Pentagon, thus obviating the national military hierarchy to surreptitiously shelter a war criminal.

A further instance of the multifarious Canadian postcolonial comes with Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* ([1998] 2000), which reconstructs the life of Joey Smallwood, the first Newfoundland premier, interwoven with the history of this territory up to its adherence to Confederation in 1948. Since the 17th century, Newfoundland has represented the most extreme case within Canadian national, nationalist and postcolonial problematics. Between 1600 and 1825, it was ruled by British governors that hardly ever lived on the island. When the rest of the country was flocking for Confederation between 1867 and 1871, Newfoundland was not, and did not even have colonial status until 1825. For almost a century, between 1855 and 1934, it was a self-governing colony of Britain, which fostered a timid nationalist awareness. The nationalist expectations reached their summit when its parliament was suspended in 1934, when there emerged the dual option of either accompanying the Confederate provinces or asking for a different status. It was in 1948 that Newfoundlanders opted for ascribing to

Confederation in a referendum that also gave Smallwood regional power. Through a text that mingles Smallwood’s first person narratives, historical reconstructions of daily affairs, clips from newspapers and other documents like personal letters or memoirs, we listen to the premier’s voice when explaining that “[p]erhaps we Newfoundlanders had been fooled by our geography into thinking that we could be a country, perhaps we believed that nothing short of achieving nationhood could we live up to the land itself [sic][...]. It seemed so nation-like in its discreetness” (Johnston 2000: 154). As a whole, the novel “[...] emphasises how nation, [...] is the product of an ongoing negotiation between its constituent parts”. It “use[s] allegory for more critical and postcolonial purposes, disrupting the unilateral semiotic correspondence on which it can rely and suggesting instead that the narrative of nation is subject to multiple readings” (Wylie 2002: 134-135). The segmentation of Newfoundlanders and their territory either in favour or against Confederation epitomises the continuous multiplication of periphery within periphery so conspicuous in the Canadian case, which makes it impossible to distinguish a single Canada, and advocates, instead, the plural existence of the Canadas.

Together with the echoes of Acadians and Newfoundlanders, the voices of the Natives resound anew but still tangentially in non-specialised critical forums: the Ojibwa in Ruby Slipperjack’s *Silent Words* (1992), the Beothuk in Johnston’s metafiction, or the Cree in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) prepare the ground for turn-of-the century novels like Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* ([2000] 2001), on the Haisla people on the coast of British Columbia. Through the eyes of the young female protagonist, her daily reality and her powers to see and talk to the dead can hardly conceal a political agenda concerned with claiming the rights of the First Nations, and, what is more, the appraisal of the Haisla culture and the denunciation of white settler oppression:

As we drove Mick played Elvis and homemade tapes that his friends had sent him, with songs like “FBI Lies”, “Fuck the Oppressors”, and my favourite, “I Shot Custer” [...]. Abba was absolutely forbidden in Mick’s cassette desk.

“She’s got to know about these things”, Mick would say to Dad, who was disturbed by a note from one of my teachers. She’d forced us to read a book that said that the Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices. My teacher had made us each read a paragraph out loud. When my turn came, I sat there shaking absolutely furious.

Mama told me it was just pretend, they eating people, like drinking Christ’s blood at Communion. (Robinson 2001: 68-69)

Double and treble forms of colonialism are reflected, refracted and multiplied in the eyes of the newcomers, the Natives and the WASP Canadian population.

Recently Quebec has finally achieved Ottawa's approval of a document stating its official acknowledgement as a nation in its own right while being attached to the Canadian state. In the early 1990s, Canadian fiction was commenting *in passim* on this impossible relationship of closeness and simultaneous independence. Two examples illustrate this. In "Wilderness Tips" ([1991] 1998), the piece-title in Margaret Atwood's well-known collection, George's thoughts on the matter are described:

George takes one more look at the paper. Quebec is talking Separatism; there are Mohawks behind the barricades near Montreal, and people are throwing stones at them; word is the country is falling apart. George is not worried: he's been in countries that were falling apart. There can be opportunities. As for the fuss people have made about language, he does not understand it. What's a second language, or a third, or a fourth? George himself speaks five, if you count Russian, which he would prefer not to. As for the stone-throwing, it's typical. Not bombs, not bullets: just stones. Even the uproar is muted. (Atwood 1998: 199)

34 Meanwhile, Kristjana Gunnars' novel *The Substance of Forgetting* (1992) described the English-French liaison as one of lovers trapped by a dynamics of willing fusion and parallel repulsion, where the eventual *jouissance* was synonymous with the loss of each group's identity. In the novel, these lovers remind us of a fluid Canadian state that is immune to the conspicuous stasis of such a formation. In turn, the slipperiness of nations in interaction, but refusing assimilation, is reminiscent of hide-and-seek love games. Mirroring the classical Canadian duality, Gunnars' lovers make of an abiding desire the principle whereby they exist: "Perhaps we are together because Jules is a Quebec separatist and we are in the United States" (Gunnars 1992: 15), the anonymous narrator dubitatively reflects. "Perhaps it is just his presence, one spirit desires the other, one language desiring the presence of another. Bilingualism. My English desires his French. Without the other language, my words have no significance" (Gunnars 1992: 47-48), she affirms later, letting us see the supplementary nature that imbibes the seemingly dual Canadian scene.

Taking into account this succinct fictional sample from the 1990s, and as further evidence of the theory-creative writing bond, it is not strange that a number of critical volumes on literature and culture proposed shortly after the turn of the century a paradigmatic change, a *refiguration* or *reconfiguration*, in Canadian society (Maufort and Bellarsi 2002), in the cultural/literary productions in fields as diverse, though related, as women's writing (Howells 2003) or the national literary canon, which is now read through queer lenses (Dickinson 1999), for instance, or *homotextually* (Goldie 2003). "If national identity is superseded or eroded by other identificatory markers", Coral Ann Howells affirms, "then it is

time to refashion that ‘ugly oversized dress’ into more appropriate dimensions, though not the time to throw it away and go naked” (2003: 203). And indeed, far from a transition of the nation into the *postnational* (Davey 1997), the 1990s adumbrated a new envisioning of the national collective immersed in a dialogue of moving borders, a new way for postcolonial Canadianness, since “[b]eing Canadian consists in a constant renegotiation of cultural boundaries” (Maufort 2002: 11). This common, and, for years, widely accepted view is no impediment to appreciating how Canadianness and the postcolonial condition share that continuous concern with rubbing out and drawing anew their limits, ever attentive to the ongoing changes in identity constitution.

Therefore, if a similar attention to revision binds Canadianness and the postcolonial condition, it is appropriate to wonder how this may affect postcolonial theory and postcolonial Canadian fiction, emphasising the ways in which their *newness* is being produced. In a general context, Kanishka Chowdhury asserts that *newness* features prominently in contemporary postcolonial theory by means of its concern with three different concepts. First, by drawing heavily on the work by Anthony Appiah concerning liberal cosmopolitanism; second, by relying on the ideas by Etienne Balibar, postnationalism; and third, by referring to disjuncture, based on the premises of diaspora and the movement of people/s across borders by Arjun Appadurai or Homi K. Bhabha. In Chowdhury’s view, these three approaches have dictated the path for much postcolonial theory, which in this form has parted ways with Marxist analysis, since it makes no room for the relevance of capital, market consumption and its assumptions (Chowdhury 2006: 135-138). “Contemporary postcolonial theoretical production [...], while offering much in its demystification of colonial ideologies and structures of power”, Chowdhury affirms, “has, in its modern incarnation, especially in its allegiance to the ‘new’, disavowed the Marxist tradition for an interpretive model that highlights cultural ambiguity, hybridity and cosmopolitanism” (2006: 130). This affirmation is also valid for much of the postcolonial theory produced in Canada, I would argue, which increasingly incorporates ideas proposed by ‘third world’ critics.

In Canada, the social models have officially implanted ideals like cosmopolitanism, certainly advocated by the contemporary trends of diaspora, the disjuncture of the transnational population, which in turn, has impelled a serious reconsideration of nation and culture in their most traditional guises. Much of the questioning of these conceptions of nation and its Enlightenment equation to the state was launched in the 1990s by postcolonial theory and its search for a wide-encompassing model of nation (Bhabha 1990, 1994), albeit free from the stasis inimical to the state. The Canadian postcolonial of the 1990s has undergone a process of specialisation, as Enoch Padolsky affirms (2004), since, on the one hand, the diversity of the population precludes a homogeneous postcolonial for all, and

on the other, the resonances of antinationalist tendencies in contemporary postcolonial theory forces the postcolonial in Canada to rather focus on issues of culture and national clashes. Undoubtedly, this reconsideration has been brought about by the difficult balance that the massive arrival of immigrants brought to the image of the nation-state. In theory, flows, cosmopolitanism and a presumed postnationalism define and have defined Canadian society, as well as the attempts made at its theorisation.

In many cases Canadian fiction and theory have unveiled their mutual dependence in such a form that it is not always easy to ascertain which goes first. The case of postcolonial theory and the fictions produced in Canada that can be labelled postcolonial is a further instance of that close liaison. Has postcolonial theory paved the way for the production of these fictions, or, conversely, have these fictions produced in the 1990s and on the edge of the century led postcolonial theory by the hand? Although it is impossible to affirm that every single novel includes some complicity with theoretical ideas, a vast number do. And, no less important, not all of them are by academics or writers well informed on the issues of academia. Finally, the fictions that can be said to unveil a serious questioning of ideas of nation and culture, the postcolonial condition of Canada, new views on the social models, etc. are not exclusively the literary production of immigrants in Canada or transcultural writers more or less directly concerned with the real counterparts of the fictional models of their books. This attests to that already mentioned symbiosis between theory and fiction, but now in the hands of authors that, traditionally, have been tangentially concerned with the political potentiality that a re-inscription of the postcolonial may have for their own location within the national spectrum.

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Increasingly, the mirage-like category *Canadian* is inflected imaginatively speaking with the different. This inflection, moreover, transcends the tokenism synonymous with a restraint of the foreign presence, and, consequently, the contention of difference that features cultural diversity (Bhabha 1994: 36). Now it is “*Canadian-Canadians* who ‘recognise’ other cultural groups, primarily for their ‘contributions’ to Canadian culture, identity and nation-building, and in so doing help to differentiate the Canadian project of nation-building from that of other nation-states” (Mackey 1999: 89). The fictions of the *Canadian-Canadian*, therefore, are increasingly sympathetic towards liberal cosmopolitanism, disjuncture and a presumed postnationalism that is continually adopted, reshaped and adapted to multiple necessities. These three concepts unfold in fiction in the variety of ways in which the ‘new’ imagiNation is being materialised.

The fiction produced since the beginning of the century has made of the Canadian ontological problem a question to be exhaustively addressed by rewriting and inscribing anew the myths of foundation or western expansion. This tendency is a

consequence of the fact that “Canada was created [...] out of ideas, out of conversation and imagination. [...] Canada is still a creation of the mind, as much, if not more so, than a physical and tangible space that we know through experience” (Martin 2006: 2). The telling of these experiences presents identities in perpetual change, narratives that sometimes supplement each other, views of any identity as inheritance, but also as performance. In showing such a field of contrast Canadian writing seems to state that “[...] [a]t the end of a century in which the world witnessed perhaps too much history, and wearied of it, there are signs of a renewed and reconfigured appreciation of it [...]” (Wylie et al. 2002: 1). Those new appreciations question once again the classical “where is here?” (Frye 1971: 220), the query that has nurtured a massive volume of creative and theoretical literature for more than thirty years, but now ready to explore the past with a renovated metatextual and metafictional acuteness on issues of foundation and settlement. Canadian new-millennium novels like Douglas Glover’s *Elle* (2003) or Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Last Crossing* ([2002] 2003), to which I now turn, revise different periods of the long colonisation of Canada, from the 16th century explorations of the St. Lawrence River to the late 19th century settlement on the western plains of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Whereas the former dramatises the abandonment of the historical Marguerite de Roverbal by her fellow explorers in Jacques Cartier’s third expedition up the Saint Lawrence, the latter is also a tale of expeditionary geographical and personal discovery, as Charles Gaunt comes to grips with himself while looking for his twin, Simon, seemingly stranded among the Crow Natives.

In Glover’s text, the fictional Marguerite de Roverbal, *Elle*, gives us her account of being isolated and turns her story into a vitriolic critique of the colonialist mentality of discovery and settlement (Wylie 2003). The creation of subjectivity produced by her memoir interweaves race, gender and sexuality, three elements that turn colonialism upside down, using for that purpose the same circumstances brought to the fore by the colonialist enterprise, that is, issues of supremacy, the encounter with the non-self and the struggle of forces that are inverted in *Elle*’s writing (Ball 2005: 86-87). Although she promptly claims that “I must be the first French woman to set foot in this world, the first of the General expedition to land, the first colonist in Canada” (Glover 2003: 37), her wayward gender sets her apart, quite near the non-European. Such a stance paradoxically enables her to go against the grain and undermine issues of foundation, the authority of the national fathers, and the very ontology of Canada. Thus, “[t]he mere existence of Canada constitutes a refutation of the first principle of Christian cosmology, expressed by St. Isidore in the seventh century, ‘that beyond the Ocean there is no land’” (Glover 2003: 58; Turner 1995: 1-18). This assumed marginality endows her with greater authority to question the basis of any national/state foundation:

And I wonder about a country founded by such disparate heroes as Richard and the Sieur de Roberval, who, if combined, still might not amount to a real man. Poor Canada, destined always to be on the edge of things, inimical to books and writing, plagued by insects in the summer and ice in the winter, populated by the sons and daughters of ambitious, narrow, pious, impecunious Protestants and inarticulate but lusty Catholic tennis players, not to mention the rest of the expedition [...], every kind of rogue except heretics, traitors and counterfeiters who were deemed unsuitable to the dignity of our pious expedition. (Glover 2003: 43)

In a different form, *The Last Crossing* complicates the construction of the west and its myth of exploration through a multivocal account of colonisation which undermines in several ways the duality self/other essential in the establishment of the nation. It depicts the expansion of a group of men that follow the tracks of the missing British man Simon Gaunt, who, as part of an evangelising mission led by Reverend Obadiah Witherspoon, vanishes in a snow blizzard in the 1870s, somewhere between present-day northern Montana and southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. In the polyphonic narration individually given by the group of seven questers, subjectivity and otherness are continually constructed and deconstructed, culture and civilisation defined by a temporary, partial otherness that uncovers nothing but hybridity in the origin of the early Canadian foundations. In this sense, and as a symbol of that hybridity, the origin of Simon's rescue party is the most diverse in being formed by Americans, a Canadian, the British Gaunt brothers, and Jerry Potts, the Scot-Cree pathfinder so fundamental in the white commercial dealings with the Blackfeet of the Northwest Territories.

Charles Gaunt falsifies the official story to avoid the shattering of the performativity of colonialist Englishness and assert his rights over the history of colonisation (Kuester 2000: 277-292; Bölling 2004). Charles' report once back in England after his incursion into the Canadian west leaves out part of the circumstances in which his second brother, Addington, died after having been involved in a murder. Most importantly, Charles' memory disremembers the fact that Simon was actually found, but did not want to leave his new life among the Crow. The account of Simon's preaching among the heathen and his *going* Native is concealed, not only because it questions the colonialist agenda of white superiority and evangelisation, but also because Simon's life with the Crow is shared with a man/woman healer. Their coexistence, however, disrupts Victorian morality as well as most of the precepts supporting the colonialist agenda. On the one hand, Simon's homosexuality directly interrogates the heterosexist construction of the male conqueror who demands and accomplishes the impregnation, literal and metaphorical, of the other, woman and land. Among the Crow, on the other hand, his life with the healer Talks Different counteracts the colonialist interest in reproduction and appropriation of the land and its natives.³ S/he and Simon have

adopted a child of dead Crow parents, he is now *Born of a Horse*, and it is the *bote* that claims “I am the one who saved him. Named him. He is mine” (Vanderhaeghe 2003: 350).

While *The Last Crossing* exposes the westward expansion as a reification of culture and nation that functions to preserve a mirage of originality, as well as the need to colonise the other, *Elle* disrupts the myth of the early foundation, the male explorer and his taming of the wild as the first step for civilisation and progress in North America. The differences of these *new Canadian-Canadian* fictions notwithstanding, they both show “Canada [as] a mental rather than a historical space. It was an idyllic construction of nature and adventure”, where “Europeanness as whiteness translates into Canada and this provides it with an imagined community” (Bannerji 2004: 289-90). More recently, as Bannerji goes on, “[f]ractured by race, gender, class and long-standing colonial rivalries, the construction of Canada entails two major forms of interconnected crises —that of citizenship and that of the legitimization of the national state formation” (2004: 292).

As the 20th century came to an end, the postcolonial theory of the 1990s, with its early emphasis on counteracting the centred state model, gave way to fields of theory and fiction or fiction/theory such as Gender/Queer Theory and Ecocriticism. In particular, I would like to engage the relevance of the latter by briefly examining Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass* (2005). The text renders Canada a territory apt for the continuous re-inscription of a subject in process that looks back onto nature to reconfigure the borders of its subjectivity and the ways in which it is determined by issues of site and place. As inheritance of the early postcolonialism, beneath this territory there lies an abiding questioning of the humanist subject as centre and motor of progress. In Canada, the taming of hostile nature implied the first step towards civilisation, whereas the second was the founding of a settlement in the clearing, indeed the cornerstone for the grafting on of the European civilisation and its reproduction. Many Canadian novels throughout the last thirty years have been critical of this approach to nature and landscape for its deployment of colonialist and patriarchal technologies of representation. In the early 1970s Marian Engel’s *Bear* (1976) turned the explorer into a female librarian, Lou, who rejects any form of settlement or domesticity, and opts in turn for a conciliatory integration in the environment of her voluntary exile. More recently, *Away* (1993), also by Urquhart, portrayed the establishment in Canada of an Irish family whose women have been *away* for generations, all of them following the trail of that first matriarch whose soul was robbed by a castaway thrown up by the waves onto the shores of Ireland. Once in Canada, she also opts for staying far from domesticity to live and die in the midst of the woods, far from the marital and familial regime. In different ways these novels formulated anew the role given to women in the colonialist production of civilisation, by rewriting a

historically inherited, assumed relation with the landscape, and, consequently, they posited the earliest basic ground for a recent ecocritical awareness in fiction.

Contemporary Ecocriticism aims at reformulating the distance mediating between the individual and the surrounding space, to eventually achieve a reconsidered public and private discourse of nation/community belonging. For all the relevance that nature and the wilderness have historically enjoyed in CanLit, it is not strange that Ecocriticism gains ground every day. As a critical mode, it consists basically of a return to nature in search of answers to the dilemmas posed by civilisation and human progress. As its name indicates, it also relies on an ecological consciousness allied with green postulates, and the denunciation of those human conducts endangering the survival of landscapes and their diversity. Scrutinising contemporary Canadian writing it is clear that nature has been and still is being read in several ways: from the enemy to be kept at bay in order to root civilisation in a distinctive catalyst other than the nationalist movements. It has also been considered as the negative counterpart of the definition of civilisation, as well as the foundational essence endowing with coherence and cohesiveness the collective self. And last, but not least, it is now the element that distinguishes the local from the *indistinguishable* global (Angus 1997).

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Somewhere between the local landscapes and the internationally common concern with ecology, human tracks in the colonial wilderness are still bound to the colonisation of the north, south, east and west. Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* opts for staying in the east to make of the Saint Lawrence River the vehicle for the telling of a story that links colonisation to environmental degradation, while also interweaving the pastoral and the apocalyptic featuring Ecocriticism (Garrard 2004: 6). With its attention to cartographical representation, two-dimensional and tactile, and the maps of human experience tailored around the 19th century Woodman settlers, the novel renders the return to nature that articulates the reverse of progress. In that inverse path the natural artist Jerome McNaughton and the map-maker Sylvia Bradley find their contemporary identities via the reading and investigation of the diaries written by the cartographer and historian Andrew Woodman. After his death in the contemporary Timber Island, Woodman inadvertently triggers a backward archaeological recovery and genealogical discovery of his ancestors through the interest hosted by his lover Sylvia and Jerome, the fence-portraitist, unwilling finder of Woodman's corpse within a floating iceberg during the spring thaw: "the day that you found Andrew you became the present, the end of the story, the reply to the last unanswered question" (Urquhart 2005: 75), Sylvia tells Jerome. And indeed, the novel leads us from the 20th to the 19th century and vice versa with intersecting tracks that cross on the contemporary deserted Timber Island, and on the flourishing timber trade centre that had been back in the 19th century, when boats departed from there and went

down the river to Quebec and upstream to load the valuable cargo of a flourishing wood industry.

Such a former industry is held responsible for the destruction of the landscape and the soil after deforestation. The present landscape of Timber Island and the surroundings are barren and Jerome goes there interested in the traces of the people who had lived there, still perceptible at such an enclave located exactly at the meeting of Lake Ontario and the Saint Lawrence. “Jerome [...] was drawn to the abandoned scraps of any material, peeling paints, worn surfaces, sun bleaching, rust, rot, the effects of prolonged moisture, as well as to the larger shifts of erosion, and weather and season” (Urquhart 2005: 11-12), we read in a passage where the decrepit human landscape parallels the previous natural decline that started at a moment of vigorous human activity. When the artist wanted a renewal of his identity induced by a return to nature, Jerome found that vitality in the abandoned landscape, although his search was for that essence that Canadian nationalist movements situated in nature (Berger 1966). “Grim was what Jerome was after. Grimness, uncertainty, difficulty of access—a hermit in a winter setting, the figure concentrated and small against the cold, blues, and whites and greys that made up the atmosphere of the landscape, the season” (Urquhart 2005: 10).

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Jerome’s trip to the recondite Timber Island echoes the journey in which the historian and geographer Andrew Woodman died. Woodman, a member of the old Woodman family involved in the timber exploitation, goes to the island looking for a communion with that same nature that his ancestors devastated. For Andrew, unlike Jerome, the visit to Timber Island was the occasion of the retaliation of nature: all the power that his ancestors used to change the landscape turns onto him, and that vengeful nature is eventually assuaged in that image of a frozen corpse enclosed within the iceberg crystal.

It took Jerome’s mind some time to interpret the visual information being transmitted. Some of the smaller icebergs had moved closer to the island during the night and were now lined up like docked rowboats near the shore. [...] Jerome [...] was about to pull the camera from his pocket when he noticed a large mass of ice that contained within it a blurred bundle of cloth that seemed both enclosed in the ice and emerging from it. [...] It was then that Jerome saw the outstretched hands, the bent head, the frozen wisps of grey hair and he heard his own voice announcing the discovery. ‘A man!’ [...]. (Urquhart 2005: 31)

However, Andrew’s stay on Timber Island was motivated by his will to find there traces of the family, although they were unavoidably linked to death and degradation: “Andrew never forgot that his own family was involved. He could never let go of the picture of a raped landscape” (Urquhart 2005: 99). And indeed, as the generations of Andrew’s forebears succeed one another and their timber

business declines, they open a hotel, The Ballagh Oisín, in the area, on one of the banks of the river. However, that hotel bears witness to rich soil turning into the barren sand that ends up by invading the hotel's facilities. "During the autumn that followed Marie's death, dunes had completely swallowed her flowerbeds at the rear of the house. [...] Furthermore, the last time that he had opened one of its ovens, Branwell [Andrew's grandfather] had been appalled by the sight of the tiny dunes that had formed inside it [...]" (Urquhart 2005: 280-281). The inner and the outer spaces blend to bespeak a decrepitude brought about by the Woodmans. "The old settlers [Andrew] had once told [Sylvia], had left nothing behind but a statement of labour, a biography of stones" (Urquhart 2005: 37).

Parallel to those maps of degradation that the novel creates, Sylvia also makes her own maps, translations into the tactile for her visually disabled friend Julia. These maps are her own way of transferring the realities around and inflecting them with her view. Jerome does the same with his art, and in both cases, nature or geography is the portrayed object. Nature also links them through their common concern with Sylvia's former lover; Sylvia, Jerome and Andrew belong to that peculiar saga of ambushed characters of Canadian literature that nature has charmed and, as a result, endlessly go back to it to live, and die as well. "Andrew felt that he had been destined to become a historical geographer", Sylvia tells Jerome. "He told me that the mistakes of his ancestors had made this a kind of dynastic necessity. Unlike his forebears, [...] he paid careful attention to the landscape, to its present and to the past embedded in the present" (Urquhart 2005: 77). Nature links the present and the past of Timber Island, therefore, but also Jerome and Sylvia through Andrew, himself tied to nature in life and death. The attention bestowed to it in *A Map of Glass* is part and parcel of the contemporary relevance of natural dilemmas, but it certainly reflects much of what the future should be, also in cultural and literary affairs. No less important, this attention to nature also reinscribes the subject within new angles of the national and cultural preoccupations connected to the space and site in which individuals dwell. Much of the literary production that appeared on and beyond the edge of the century is now exploring the blooming relations determined by individuals who did not consider themselves postcolonial, and their nexus to the space that they inhabit and the national formations that they constitute (Corse, 1997; Kertzer, 1998). These fictions are informed by theoretical postulates that advocate the changeability and fluidity of national entities, as well as the lack of univocal representations of the subject *vis-à-vis* nature, or the stories construed as the history of settlement and colonisation, to mention just two of the fields nourishing, as well as nurtured by, the early postcolonial of the 1990s, but now moving beyond the edge of the century.

Notes

¹. This paper was possible thanks to a generous Government of Canada Faculty Research Programme (2007). I am particularly grateful to Laura Ballesteros, Cultural Attaché at the Canadian Embassy in Madrid, Dr. Brian Corman, Head of the Department of English, and Tanuha Persaud, Assistant to Chair, at the University of Toronto. Thanks as well to Dr. Belén Martín Lucas, Elena Sánchez Hernández and the Centre for Canadian Studies at the University of La Laguna for their unfailing support all the way along. Finally, I am indebted to the anonymous referees of *Miscelánea* for their helpful suggestions.

². Moss (2003) and Sugars (2004) are the most recent examples of the contemporary interest in the revision of the Canadian postcolonial, thus carrying on much of the spirit that governed other groundbreaking works such as Hebble et al. (1997) or Verduyn (1998). Whereas the last two attempted to accommodate contemporary literary critique within the moving scene of Canadian ethnicities through accepted Canadian postcolonial lenses, Moss's work assembles essays that start by questioning the ontological validity of that frame, and Sugars'

reads the postcolonial as a tool to renovate state-centred models of nation and culture.

³. Simon's sexuality remains unclear till we find him among the Crow with the *bote*. Before, several clues scattered through Charles' representation of their infancy in England point towards it tentatively (Vanderhaege 2003: 202, 203). His sexual dissidence is in this case paired to his ideological dissent in joining the sect led by the Reverend Obadiah Witherspoon. Among the ruling principles of the group is the belief in the Red Indians' being descendants of the Tribes of Israel (Vanderhaege 2003: 213, 218). Although nothing is explicitly said on the group's sexual politics, through Charles' evasive references can be found comments like “[...] I saw one of the men casually place his arm on Simon's shoulders. [...] [T]he men appeared to be on familiar terms with him. Something about the scene I had witnessed struck me as sinister” (Vanderhaege 2003: 210). Although implicit, sodomy lurks in the atmosphere of Charles' description. Shortly before this passage, Simon had asked Charles to reflect on an excerpt from Rousseau's life in which a sodomite attempted to seduce him (Vanderhaege 2003: 203).

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Received: 3 August 2007

Revised version: 30 January 2008

