



# Canadian Landscapes Paysages canadiens

Edited by / Édité par

Judit Nagy / Anikó Ádám / Mátyás Bánhegyi / Dóra Bernhardt  
János Kenyeres / Mária Palla / Miklós Vassányi



KÁROLI GÁSPÁR UNIVERSITY  
OF THE REFORMED CHURCH  
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## INTRODUCTION



JUDIT NAGY

The 16 studies included in the volume *Canadian Landscapes/ Paysages canadiens* explore various interpretations of *landscapes* in Canadian Studies, offering unique perspectives in areas such as Canadian literature in English and French, Native Studies, cultural history, ethnic minorities, religion, urban studies, sociology, history, politics, and Canadian art.

Eva Voldřichová Beránková's study reveals how J. D. Kurtness develops her own original aesthetic through the gradual blurring of the human/ animal distinction, and how her work differs from the existing trends in the depiction of pre- and post-apocalyptic scenes.

Dalibor Žíla analyses three contemporary Québec novels, *Le fil des kilomètres*, *Le Poids de la neige*, and *Les ombres filantes*, written by Christian Guay-Poliquin. In all three novels, a dichotomy takes place between the inside and the outside, the outside being hostile. This study examines how the (post-)apocalyptic spatiality of these works is linked to abandonment, isolation, distance, fear, and a sense of threat.

Zuzana Malinovská proposes a critical reflection of Québec novelist Sylvie Drapeau's tetralogy, investigating the aesthetic power of her concise, poetic writing, which transforms referential landscapes into imaginary ones.

Andrea Szabó F.'s study centers around homes as interior landscapes in Alice Munro's short fiction. Instead of providing safety and protection, these homes are representative of the uncanny, fitting in with the tradition of Southern Ontario Gothic. Szabó F. argues that the analysed stories not only display patterns of continuity in Munro's writing, but they are also indicative of a change of the female protagonists' vision.

Pavína Studená looks into how, in her Manawaka cycle, Margaret Laurence challenges the Pioneer myths of conquering the landscape, and sees it as a means of transformation, a place where her heroines come "not to hide but to seek" as they repeatedly venture into their unconscious psychic landscapes to explore their inner Selves and search for their autonomous identities.

In her study, Ramona Pál-Kovács offers an ecocritical reading of Lise Tremblay's rural landscapes as presented in the short story collection *La héronnière* and in her novel *L'Habitude des bêtes*.

Anikó Ádám demonstrates how Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* paints a realistic, multi-faceted portrait of Montreal's Saint-Henri district. The second

part of the study examines the influence of Gabrielle Roy's novel on the neighbourhood, which is first aestheticized, then transforms into urban space, and finally is deemed cultural heritage.

Krisztina Kodó probes the dimensions of Indigenous landscapes through the analysis of Bill Powles and Drew Hayden Taylor's works as to how they manage to link history, spiritual symbolism, fantasy, and formulate a modern myth that fits intricately into present day multicultural/ global society.

In her reading of Samuel Hearne's *Journeys from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*, Laura Suszta proposes that not only did the landscape and the climate affect the Denesuline's daily practice of religion, but also their worldview and universal thinking, as well as their relationship to their own religion.

Marija Panić analyses the representation of food as part of the cultural landscape of French-speaking Canada in the works of Louis Hémon, Gabrielle Roy and Monique Proulx.

Judit Nagy aims to explore how the church is represented in selected works written by Korean Canadians. She argues that, while some members may find Korean ethnic churches confining, the strong community forming effect of the church is markedly present in these works at multiple levels.

Susan Siggelakis turns to historical landscapes: she examines the views of the editors of *The Colored American*, a Black-owned, abolitionist newspaper published in New York City during the latter 1830s. Using materials published therein, the author attempts to discern their editors' views on the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions, whereby colonists attempted to overthrow British imperial rule.

In his study, Sergej Macura discusses two noticeably different views of pristine Canadian territory as perceived through narratives of the first Franklin expedition into the Arctic. One is proposed by John Franklin's travelogue entitled *The Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819-20-21-22* (1824) and another by Rudy Wiebe's novel *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994).

Kenneth Alfred Froehling zooms in on the political landscape of the by-election of August 9, 1943 in the Montreal federal riding of Cartier, an intriguing episode of Canadian political history.

In his study, Don Sparling focuses on the artwork created during World War II, and specifically on landscapes in the broadest sense of the term as the genre that is often regarded as central to the Canadian artistic heritage.

Finally, as for cinematic landscapes, János Kenyeres argues that critics may be mistaken when they decry Armenian Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan's later work. Moreover, if we look at Egoyan's earlier films, we can see that the critical response they received was not always one of acclaim.

## INTRODUCTION

Modernist artists “re-defined landscapes by including industrial locations, busy streets or cafés, among several other subjects. Notably, A. M. Klein presented us with a ‘Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,’ of whom ‘each city has one, sometimes more than one,’ and who wishes ‘to look with single camera view upon this earth – its total scope’” (Kürtösi). Various landscapes conceived at various points in time “have been described in markedly different ways depending on the artistic views of the given historical period” (Kürtösi) and bearing the personal trademarks and vision of the artists themselves. The term *landscape* itself yields to an amazing cornucopia of interpretations and approaches, to which the volume *Canadian Landscapes/ Paysages canadiens* bears testimony.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Les 16 études incluses dans le volume *Canadian Landscapes/ Paysages canadiens* explorent diverses interprétations des paysages dans les études canadiennes, offrant des perspectives uniques dans des domaines tels que la littérature canadienne en anglais et en français, les études autochtones, l'histoire culturelle, les minorités ethniques, la religion, les études urbaines, la sociologie, l'histoire, la politique et l'art canadien.

L'étude d'Eva Voldřichová Beránková révèle comment J. D. Kurtness développe sa propre esthétique originale à travers l'effacement progressif de la distinction entre l'homme et l'animal, et comment son travail diffère des tendances existantes dans la représentation des scènes pré- et post-apocalyptiques.

Dalibor Žíla analyse trois romans québécois contemporains, *Le fil des kilomètres*, *Le Poids de la neige* et *Les ombres filantes*, écrits par Christian Guay-Poliquin. Dans ces trois romans, il existe une dichotomie entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur, ce dernier étant hostile. Cette étude examine comment la spatialité (post-)apocalyptique de ces œuvres est liée à l'abandon, à l'isolement, à la distance, à l'angoisse et à un sentiment de menace.

Zuzana Malinovská propose une réflexion critique sur la tétralogie de la romancière québécoise Sylvie Drapeau en examinant l'esthétique de son écriture concise et poétique, qui transforme les paysages référentiels en paysages imaginaires.

L'étude d'Andrea Szabó F. est centrée sur les paysages intérieurs dans les nouvelles d'Alice Munro : au lieu d'offrir sécurité et protection, les maisons sont représentatives de l'étrange dont la manifestation se révèle déjà dans la tradition du gothique du sud de l'Ontario. Szabó F. soutient que les histoires analysées ne montrent pas seulement de modèles de continuité dans l'écriture de Munro, mais qu'elles sont également révélatrices d'un changement de vision des protagonistes féminines.

Pavĺína Studená étudie comment, dans son cycle *Manawaka*, Margaret Laurence remet en question les mythes pionniers de la conquête du paysage et le considère comme un moyen de transformation, un lieu où ses héroïnes viennent « non pas pour se cacher mais pour chercher », et s'aventurent à plusieurs reprises dans leurs paysages psychiques inconscients afin de découvrir et d'explorer leur être intérieur et rechercher leurs identités autonomes.

Dans son étude, Ramona Pál-Kovács propose une lecture écocritique des paysages ruraux de Lise Tremblay tels qu'ils sont représentés dans le recueil de nouvelles *La héronnière* et dans son roman *L'Habitude des bêtes*.

Anikó Ádám montre comment le *Bonheur d'occasion* de Gabrielle Roy brosse un portrait réaliste et multiforme du quartier Saint-Henri de Montréal. La deuxième partie de l'étude examine l'influence du roman de Gabrielle Roy sur le quartier qui est d'abord esthétisé, puis transformé en espace urbain, enfin considéré comme un patrimoine culturel.

Krisztina Kodó explore les dimensions des paysages indigènes en analysant les œuvres de Bill Powles et celles de Drew Hayden Taylor. Elle démontre comment ces auteurs parviennent à relier l'histoire, le symbolisme spirituel et la fantaisie, ainsi qu'à formuler un mythe moderne qui s'intègre parfaitement dans la société actuelle, multiculturelle et mondiale.

Dans son étude du *Voyage de Samuel Hearne du Fort du Prince de Galles situé dans la Baie de Hudson à l'Océan Nord*, Laura Suszta propose une interprétation selon laquelle non seulement le paysage et le climat affectent la pratique quotidienne de la religion par les Dénés, mais aussi leur vision du monde et leur pensée universelle, ainsi que leur relation à leur propre religion.

Marija Panić analyse la représentation de la nourriture en tant qu'élément du paysage culturel du Canada francophone dans les œuvres de Louis Hémon, Gabrielle Roy et Monique Proulx.

Judit Nagy vise à explorer la façon dont l'église est représentée dans une sélection d'ouvrages écrits par des Canadiens d'origine coréenne. Elle soutient que l'effet le plus déterminant est celui du soutien de la communauté ethnique.

Susan Siggelakis se tourne vers les paysages historiques : elle examine les points de vue des rédacteurs de *The Colored American*, un journal abolitionniste appartenant à des Noirs et publié à New York à la fin des années 1830. À l'aide des documents publiés dans ce journal, l'auteure tente de discerner les opinions des rédacteurs sur les rébellions du Haut et du Bas-Canada, au cours desquelles les colons ont tenté de renverser le pouvoir impérial britannique.

Dans son étude, Sergej Macura examine deux visions sensiblement différentes du territoire canadien vierge, telles qu'elles sont perçues dans les récits de la première expédition de Franklin dans les régions sauvages de l'Arctique. L'une est proposée par le carnet de voyage de John Franklin intitulé *The Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819-20-21-22* (1824), et l'autre par le roman de Rudy Wiebe intitulé *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994).

Kenneth Alfred Froehling zoome sur le paysage politique d'une élection partielle : celle du 9 août 1943 dans la circonscription fédérale montréalaise de Cartier, un épisode intrigant de l'histoire politique canadienne.

Dans son étude, Don Sparling se concentre sur les œuvres d'art créées pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, plus particulièrement sur les paysages

au sens le plus large du terme, genre souvent considéré comme central dans le patrimoine artistique canadien.

Enfin, quant aux paysages cinématiques, János Kenyeres affirme que les critiques peuvent se tromper lorsqu'ils pensent que les dernières œuvres du cinéaste canadien d'origine arménienne Atom Egoyan sont inférieures aux précédents. En outre, si nous examinons les premiers films d'Egoyan, nous constatons que la réponse critique qu'ils ont reçue n'a pas toujours été élogieuse.

Les artistes modernistes « ont redéfini les paysages en y incluant des sites industriels, des rues animées ou des cafés, entre autres sujets. Notamment, A. M. Klein nous a présenté le poème "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape", dont "chaque ville en a un, parfois plus d'un"<sup>1</sup> et qui souhaite "regarder avec une seule vue de caméra sur cette terre – son étendue totale"<sup>2</sup> » (Kürtösi). Divers paysages conçus à différentes époques « ont été décrits de manières très différentes, correspondant aux points de vue artistiques de la période historique donnée » (Kürtösi) en portant aussi les marques personnelles et la vision des artistes eux-mêmes. Le terme même de *paysage* donne lieu à une étonnante abondance d'interprétations et d'approches, comme en témoigne le volume *Canadian Landscapes/ Paysages canadiens*.

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<sup>1</sup> « each city has one, sometimes more than one »

<sup>2</sup> « to look with single camera view upon this earth – its total scope »

# LES PAYSAGES DE J. D. KURTNESSE: POLÉMIQUE AVEC LES APOCALYPSES D'HOLLYWOOD<sup>1</sup>



EVA VOLDŘICHOVÁ BERÁNKOVÁ

## Résumé

Deux approches majeures de la mise en scène de l'apocalypse peuvent en général être distinguées dans la littérature et le cinéma : soit le moment spectaculaire de la catastrophe, ou bien son prolongement post-apocalyptique souvent lié à des tentatives de reconstruction d'un monde perdu. J. D. Kurtness, une romancière canadienne d'origine innue, en développant sa propre esthétique originale, ne s'inscrit dans aucune de ces tendances. Aucune boule de feu dans ses paysages infernaux, pas de lacs de soufre non plus, juste un effacement progressif de la distinction homme/ animal (*De Vengeance*), l'abandon de l'anthropocentrisme au profit d'une logique « post-humaine » (*Aquariums*), voire un glissement de la vie réelle vers un virtuel faussement réconfortant (« Les saucisses »). Cette fin du monde – si mise en valeur dans la production littéraire et cinématographique contemporaine –, on risquerait presque de ne pas s'en apercevoir. Elle a peut-être déjà eu lieu. En nous basant sur des écrits de certains sociologues de l'environnement (Anna Tsing), ainsi que sur des réflexions utopiques et dystopiques dans le domaine de l'écologie (Jean-Paul Déleage) ou sur des théoriciens de l'anthropocène (Pierre Fluck, Laurent Carpentier, Claude Lorius), nous allons essayer de saisir la spécificité des paysages kurtnessiens pour en dégager l'esthétique et l'éthique de l'auteure.

**Mots-clés:** littérature québécoise, Julie D. Kurtness, apocalypse, dystopie, paysages

## Abstract

Julie D. Kurtness is a young Quebec writer of Innu origin, who has distinguished herself by the strange dystopian universes that she depicts in her science fiction novels and short stories. The paper examines the nature of Kurtnessian

<sup>1</sup> Le présent article s'inscrit dans le Projet Européen "Beyond security: the role of conflict in building resilience" n. CZ.02.01.01/00/22\_008/0004595, financé par le Fonds Européen de Développement Régional, et dans "Cooperatio", le programme de soutien institutionnel de base pour la science et la recherche à l'Université Charles – domaine scientifique: Littérature/Études médiévales.

pre- and post-apocalyptic landscapes in order to distinguish them from contemporary commercial production – especially that of Hollywood – and from the traditional Christian imagery on the one hand and, to compare them to newly emerging “post-Anthropocene” aesthetics on the other hand.

**Keywords:** Quebec literature, Julie D. Kurtness, apocalypse, dystopia, landscapes

## INTRODUCTION

Deux approches majeures de la mise en scène de l’apocalypse peuvent en général être distinguées dans la littérature et le cinéma contemporains: soit le moment spectaculaire de la catastrophe, quelles qu’en soient les origines (chutes de météores ou de comètes, menace nucléaire, autres désastres naturels, épidémies soudaines, attaques de zombies, invasions d’extraterrestres etc.), ou bien son prolongement post-apocalyptique souvent lié à des tentatives de reconstruction d’un monde perdu (Gervais).

La philosophe et psychanalyste française Cynthia Fleury estime que les catastrophes planétaires constituent aujourd’hui une véritable esthétique, particulièrement prisée par nos sociétés qui s’avèrent de plus en plus obsédées par l’image:

Le spectacle de l’effondrement suscite une fascination immense, parce qu’il n’est pas synthétisable par l’entendement humain. Et pour la dynamique captologique de l’industrie culturelle, il est un objet idéal. Nous vivons sous l’emprise d’une telle saturation par les images, qui a créé cette mécanique addictive qui fait que nous avons besoin du spectacle de la catastrophe. Pour l’industrie du spectacle, de l’infotainment<sup>2</sup>, qui exige une captation permanente de notre attention, tout ce qui a trait à l’effondrement recèle une économie visuelle maximale (Fleury).

Parallèlement, l’une des raisons psychologiques susceptibles d’expliquer l’engouement de l’homme contemporain pour l’imaginaire de l’apocalypse se trouve analysée par Jean-Paul Engélibert. Selon ce professeur de littérature comparée, il s’agit, dans la production hollywoodienne notamment, de « procurer une certaine forme de jouissance chez le spectateur à la vue des catastrophes décrites, spectateur qui s’en sait pourtant protégé, *immunisé* par la fiction même » (Engélibert 42).

<sup>2</sup> L’infotainment (contraction des mots « information » et « entertainment », *divertissement* en français) désigne la tendance à traiter l’ensemble des programmes et des informations avec les procédés du divertissement. Cette méthode a pour but de rendre les informations plus facilement accessibles à un nombre plus élevé de personnes et donc de rendre le média concerné plus visible, plus vendu, plus vu.



En fait, cette théorie ne fait que transposer à notre époque la célèbre remarque de Lucrèce sur la propension morbide que nous avons à jouir, en toute sécurité, du drame ou du malheur d'autrui:

Quand l'Océan s'irrite, agité par l'orage,  
Il est doux, sans péril, d'observer du rivage  
Les efforts douloureux des tremblants matelots  
Luttant contre la mort sur le gouffre des flots;  
Et quoiqu'à la pitié leur destin nous invite,  
On jouit en secret des malheurs qu'on évite (Lucrèce 6–7).

Spectacles commerciaux, tapageurs, simplistes, hyperboliques, provoquant une curiosité malsaine, les fins du monde contemporaines ne s'inscrivent pas moins dans une très longue tradition remontant à saint Jean dont ils empruntent, d'une manière ou d'une autre, la dichotomie générale *apocalypse – rédemption*, ainsi qu'un certain message eschatologique:

En effet, ce schéma chrétien messianique peut être convoqué par la fiction pour le meilleur comme pour le pire. Pour le pire, quand il nous dit que nous serons sauvés quoi qu'il arrive et que l'on n'a pas besoin de faire quoi que ce soit. Pour le meilleur, quand il exige de nous ce que nous pouvons donner pour changer le monde. La double séquence apocalypse/rédemption vient aussi nous dire qu'un autre monde est possible. N'oublions pas que ce schéma chrétien puise sa source dans la révolte des opprimés contre l'empire romain. L'Apocalypse a servi aux premiers chrétiens à affirmer leur foi contre les persécutions, à guider une révolte contre les patriciens romains (Leclère).

Aussi paradoxal que cela puisse paraître à première vue, les fins du monde cinématographiques et littéraires débouchent souvent sur la catharsis ou, du moins, sur un certain espoir en l'humanité qui, grâce à la mobilisation de ses propres ressources (ou suite à l'intervention d'un Sauveur externe) parviendra à s'en sortir, survivra à l'épreuve tragique et n'en deviendra que plus forte. Après tout, le sens original du mot *apocalypse* veut bien dire *révélation* des desseins divins et du rôle que l'humanité jouera dans le plan de la Rédemption.<sup>3</sup>

Cette courte introduction nous a semblé nécessaire pour esquisser en grandes lignes le contexte actuel et pour montrer, dans la suite de l'article, à quel point

<sup>3</sup> « Révélation de Jésus-Christ, que Dieu lui a confiée pour découvrir à ses serviteurs les événements qui doivent arriver bientôt; et qu'il a fait connaître, en l'envoyant par son ange, à Jean, son serviteur, qui a attesté la parole de Dieu et le témoignage de Jésus-Christ en tout ce qu'il a vu. Heureux celui qui lit et ceux qui entendent les paroles de cette prophétie, et qui gardent les choses qui y sont écrites, car le temps est proche! » (*Apocalypse de saint Jean*).

les œuvres de Julie D. Kurtness diffèrent des schémas apocalyptiques auxquels les médias nous ont habitués.

#### JULIE D. KURTNESS

Tout d'abord, présentons rapidement cette auteure qui reste plutôt discrète concernant ses origines et sa vie privée: Julie D. Kurtness est une romancière et nouvelliste canadienne née à Chicoutimi en 1981, d'une mère québécoise et d'un père innu originaire de la réserve de Mashteuiatsh. Selon les données tirées de ses rares entrevues, malgré une année de microbiologie, puis un cursus complet en littérature française à l'Université McGill, jusqu'à l'âge de vingt-quatre ans, rien ne présageait une future carrière de dystopiste littéraire chez cette grande admiratrice du cinéma américain (*X-Files*), de jeux vidéo, de *fanfictions*, de Michel Houellebecq ou de Margaret Atwood. Même aujourd'hui, la jeune femme alterne des périodes d'écriture assez intenses (au moins 600 mots par jour) avec des études en informatique récemment entamées et l'exercice d'autres métiers.

Depuis son entrée officielle dans le monde des lettres, en 2005, Julie D. Kurtness a publié deux romans – *De vengeance* (2017) et *Aquariums* (2019) – et une dizaine de nouvelles dont «Mashteuiatsh, P.Q.» (2005) et «Le stylo» (2006) ont paru dans la revue *Moebius*, tandis que «Les saucisses» fait partie de *Wapke* (2021), premier recueil de textes d'anticipation autochtone au Québec. Il y a quelques mois, Julie D. Kurtness a signé sa dernière nouvelle d'anticipation apocalyptique, intitulée *Bienvenue, Alyson* (2022) et rédigée pour les éditions Hannerorak qui se spécialisent dans la création autochtone francophone.

Les œuvres de Julie D. Kurtness sont régulièrement lauréates des prix *Voix Autochtones*, *Découverte* du Salon du livre du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean ou *Coup de cœur* des Amis du polar. Il s'agit d'une auteure innue fort prometteuse qui, malgré sa timidité (*Solaris*), représente de plus en plus souvent le Canada francophone lors des lectures publiques, des festivals et des foires du livre internationales.

Sur le plan thématique, l'écrivaine a évolué des témoignages identitaires («Mashteuiatsh, P.Q.») vers des dystopies (*Aquariums*; «Les saucisses»; *Bienvenue, Alyson*) en passant par une période transitoire, consacrée à des récits policiers qui présentaient déjà certains symptômes inquiétants, voire apocalyptiques («Le stylo»; *De vengeance*). C'est donc à la fin de la phase policière et au début de la période dystopique que nous allons situer nos brèves analyses des paysages pré- et post-apocalyptiques dans l'œuvre kurtnessien.

POUR UNE NOUVELLE ACCEPTATION DE L'APOCALYPSE

Dès le premier roman de l'auteure, *De vengeance*, le paysage, tant urbain que forestier, joue un rôle très important, puisqu'il motive en partie le comportement meurtrier de la protagoniste. Puisque « notre temps est compté » (Kurtness 16), une jeune fille en colère contre une humanité de plus en plus égoïste et polluante se met à punir, puis à tuer ses semblables et à en tirer un plaisir de plus en plus intense.

Perchée en haut d'un sapin baumier qui « par miracle a échappé aux massacres des Noëls du dernier siècle » (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 10), elle épie les futures victimes de sa petite guerre écologique. La nuit, elle suit les chats du voisinage dont elle envie « [la] discrétion et la supériorité [des] sens » (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 63). Parfois, elle s'amuse à échanger des chiens entre propriétaires de différents quartiers ou bien à promener les bêtes la nuit, en secret. Quant aux êtres humains, elle les observe avec « la félicité du naturaliste devant un groupe de babouins » (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 100), puis elle se met à les étudier avec assiduité pour mieux pouvoir leur nuire.

Aux antipodes de l'anthropomorphisme traditionnel, l'héroïne se fait de plus en plus proche des animaux, voire de certains organismes microscopiques:

Ma stratégie est celle du microbe. Invisible à l'œil nu, je détail avant l'apparition des symptômes. [...] À force de se tenir dehors, on devient une sorte de bête. Le territoire nous appartient, parce que nous y sommes constamment. [...] Je connais la route, le rythme de la marche, la texture du sol, le temps exact qu'un trajet me prend, l'énergie demandée à chaque étape (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 106).

Et c'est à nouveau la cause animale, liée à la protection du sol, que l'héroïne indique comme à la fois la motivation principale et l'échelle opératoire de ses plans meurtriers:

Trop de gens à buter et, surtout, où tracer la ligne de ce qui est acceptable? Tuer tous les clients du McDo? Du PFK? Les producteurs agricoles? Les employés des abattoirs? Les dirigeants des multinationales agroalimentaires? Leurs actionnaires majoritaires? Les groupes de gens qui ont de l'argent de placé dans des fonds qui investissent dans ces multinationales? Les élus de gouvernements qui ne légifèrent pas? Ceux qui votent pour? (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 130).

En fin de compte, l'héroïne ouvre une chasse à l'homme en général. Sur une route forestière, elle abat au fusil quinze personnes inconnues, choisies au hasard, avant de se mettre à nu, s'enfoncer dans un lac et, nageant sur le dos, se fondre au paysage nocturne, apaisée et heureuse comme un fauve repu:

J'ouvre les yeux sur la tache laiteuse de notre galaxie. Des étoiles scintillent à un rythme irrégulier. Des lucioles prennent le redoux pour le printemps. Un signal imperceptible, un indice subtil de l'arrivée de l'aurore, et la forêt entonne son concert matinal. Des centaines de chants d'oiseaux s'élevèrent vers le firmament, une célébration dont seule la nature a le secret (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 156).

Une fois débarrassée des hommes, la nature semble soulagée et en quelque sorte délivrée, vengée par la jeune *serial killer* qui l'a enfin rejointe après des dizaines d'années d'errances au sein d'une civilisation techniciste et hostile à l'environnement.

Certes, tout au long du livre, Julie D. Kurtness fait jouer son ironie habituelle, de sorte que le lecteur hésite entre une vague sympathie pour la protagoniste misanthrope, d'une part, et une certaine inquiétude face à l'approfondissement de ses penchants morbides, de l'autre. Or, au moment où la jeune fille *bute* les visiteurs bruyants de la forêt, afin que cette dernière puisse végéter en paix, une question plus sérieuse se pose: qui sommes-nous pour troubler la quiétude de cette nature qui a été là des millions d'années avant notre brève apparition sur la Terre?

Dans une entrevue accordée, il y a quelques mois, au Salon du livre des Premières Nations, Julie D. Kurtness s'est laissé aller à la réflexion suivante:

Moi, j'ai très peu foi en l'humanité. Je pense que l'humanité a ses qualités, puis sa beauté intrinsèque, mais pas plus que tout le reste. Je pense qu'on est juste une partie du cosmique. [...] Notre histoire est récente, puis je pense qu'on va s'auto-annihiler bientôt. On va être juste un battement de paupières dans les grands cycles de notre système solaire. [...] Je ne m'en fais pas trop du sort de la race humaine. Tant pis pour nous (Salon du livre).

Le début du roman semble renforcer une telle lecture apocalyptique, puisque la narratrice s'y adresse au lecteur modèle qu'elle imagine comme un être post-humain:

Tu es une créature du futur, puisque le moment présent est déjà terminé. Je t'appelle créature, car les hommes et les femmes sont des catégories qui pourraient disparaître, comme la théorie des humeurs. Es-tu un amas de graisse? Es-tu un encéphale dans une jarre? Peut-être que mon texte a été converti en impulsions électriques, prédigérées pour un cerveau seul, sans organes, qui flotte dans un liquide nutritif et conducteur. Es-tu une machine? Es-tu un enfant? [...] Es-tu un réfugié intergalactique? (Kurtness, *De vengeance* 12-13).

Cette logique *post-humaine* s'accroît encore davantage dans *Aquariums*, le second roman de l'auteure. Une pandémie y condamne une expédition

scientifique à errer en pleine mer polaire dans une sorte d'arche de Noé contemporaine. La brillante biologiste du bord s'abandonne alors à des souvenirs-rêveries de son histoire personnelle, de ses ancêtres autochtones et de leurs périple dans les nuits glacées du Québec.

Deux changements frappent par rapport au roman précédent. Tout d'abord une proportion fortement réduite de l'espace accordé à des héros humains. Dans l'économie du récit, tout comme dans le monde apocalyptique que ce dernier met en place, la scientifique coincée sur le bateau ne s'avère pas plus importante qu'une vieille baleine orpheline qui a survécu à l'hécatombe des siens. Les angoisses et les espoirs humains ne sont nullement considérés comme supérieurs à la détresse des animaux et, à titre d'exemple, une relation mère-baleineau n'a rien à envier à l'intensité des rapports familiaux chez les hommes:

Le cordon cède et le placenta entame une lente dérive dans un nuage de sang. Le baleineau prend sa première inspiration. L'air glacial lui ouvre les poumons. Le choc est brutal. Sa mère est là, avec son lait tiède et ses caresses. Tantes et cousines nagent autour du nouveau-né, excitées par l'événement et les risques qui l'accompagnent. Chaque naissance est un moment de triomphe et d'inquiétude pour ces femelles. Heureusement, les meutes d'orques sont encore loin (Kurtness, *Aquariums* 25).

Le deuxième phénomène déconcertant consiste dans la *discretion* de l'apocalypse. Aucune boule de feu n'éclaire le paysage kurtnessien, pas de lacs de soufre non plus, même pas une fusillade écoterroriste comme dans le roman précédent. Juste un effacement progressif de la distinction homme/animal et l'enfoncement de la planète entière dans des eaux troubles qui rappellent tant le liquide amniotique qu'une solution de laboratoire. Cette fin du monde – si mise en valeur dans la production littéraire et cinématographique contemporaine –, on risquerait presque de ne pas s'en apercevoir. Elle a peut-être déjà eu lieu.

Le second roman de Julie D. Kurtness rappelle étrangement les théories du philosophe autrichien Günther Anders, le premier époux d'Hannah Arendt et un grand théoricien des destructions de l'humanité, qui caractérise certaines productions littéraires contemporaines comme des *apocalypses sans royaume*. Le Noé post-moderne qu'Anders a imaginé comme son porte-parole prophétise ainsi: « [a]près-demain, le déluge sera quelque chose qui aura été. Et, quand le déluge aura été, tout ce qui est n'aura jamais existé. Quand le déluge aura emporté tout ce qui est, tout ce qui aura été, il sera trop tard pour se souvenir, car il n'y aura plus personne » (Anders).

La dernière nouvelle de Julie D. Kurtness que nous voudrions mentionner ici, « Les saucisses », relève d'un imaginaire dystopique plus traditionnel, puisque l'auteure l'a rédigée sur commande et elle devait se conformer aux règles du genre. Le récit se déroule dans un univers post-apocalyptique où les personnes plus fortunées paient cher pour être vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre

branchées à des électrodes qui projettent dans leurs cerveaux d'extraordinaires aventures virtuelles, tandis que les employés moins chanceux travaillent à leur service, les entretiennent, lavent leurs corps et les débranchent au moment où le paiement du forfait arrive à son terme.

Avec un mélange d'humour et de cynisme désespéré, la narratrice post-humaine au corps touché par des radiations résume:

Nous sommes quelques centaines de milliers à prendre soin des millions de branchés. Plus personne ne se soucie de nous. Les lois, l'argent, le bonheur et les préoccupations sont maintenant dans un univers qui nous échappe. Le saccage, les inondations, les incendies, plus rien n'a d'importance ici. Les services sont minimaux: nous sommes de la grenaille, une nuisance, une arrière-pensée désagréable. Nul ne veut entendre parler de nous, de la planète, de la qualité de l'eau, de l'air, du sol, de la nourriture qu'on mange et de celle qu'on dépose à l'intérieur de leur estomac avec un tube de gavage. Leur monde a éliminé la souffrance, la culpabilité, l'incertitude (Kurtness, «Les saucisses» 153).

Malgré sa tonalité dystopique plus familière au lecteur, la nouvelle, une fois de plus, met en scène une apocalypse que les neuf dixièmes de l'humanité n'ont pas tout simplement remarquée (ou qu'ils refusent de prendre en considération), puisqu'elle s'est déroulée *seulement* dans le monde physique où les élites n'ont plus l'habitude de séjourner mentalement.

#### LE CADRE THÉORIQUE CONTEMPORAIN

Il nous semble important de mettre en parallèle les apocalypses esquissées par cette auteure innue, à la fois discrètes et dépourvues de la catharsis hollywoodienne, avec la réflexion d'un certain nombre de théoriciens contemporains qui travaillent sur les esthétiques du *post-Anthropocène*.

En 2000, le botaniste américain Eugene F. Stoermer et le Prix Nobel de chimie néerlandais Paul Josef Crutzen ont pour la première fois évoqué le terme d'*anthropocène*. Il s'agit d'une nouvelle phase géologique dont la révolution industrielle du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle serait le déclencheur principal et qui est caractérisée par la capacité de l'homme à transformer l'ensemble du système terrestre. Autrement dit, l'Anthropocène est l'âge des humains, une période de temps au cours de laquelle *homo sapiens* s'avère la principale force de changement sur Terre, surpassant de loin tous les facteurs géophysiques. Les désordres générés par cette suprématie humaine ont aujourd'hui de multiples conséquences: changement climatique, disparition des espèces, insécurité alimentaire, raréfaction des ressources vitales, migrations forcées et soudaines, précarité énergétique, etc.

De nombreux sociologues de l'environnement (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing), historiens de l'écologie (Jean-Paul Déléage) et théoriciens de l'anthropocène (Pierre Fluck, Laurent Carpentier, Claude Lorius) se sont depuis penchés sur ce phénomène qui a progressivement touché le domaine de la littérature (Gwennaël Gaffric), notamment celui du roman américain (Jean Hegland, Terry Tempest Williams, Pete Fromm, Wallace Stegner, John McPhee etc.).

Saisissant l'angoisse écologique contemporaine, les romanciers la transmettent, l'élèvent et donnent ainsi naissance à un nouvel imaginaire, celui de *l'après*. Or, ce qui est intéressant dans le cas précis de Julie Kurtness, c'est qu'elle ne tombe dans aucune de ces catégories nouvellement constituées de *littérature environnementale, récit activiste, polar écologique, thriller vert*, etc. Dépourvus de tout militantisme idéologique, ses paysages d'avant et d'après la catastrophe constituent une riposte, plutôt ironique et très personnelle, que cette jeune femme innue oppose tant au tintamarre hollywoodien qu'au pathos du messianisme chrétien.

Il se peut que le Sauveur – que cela soit le Christ ou Bruce Willis – ne vienne pas et que l'anthropocène s'achève d'une manière peu glorieuse. Il se peut même que l'apocalypse ait déjà eu lieu sans que nous l'ayons remarquée. Et alors? Tant pis pour nous.

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# PAYSAGES (POST-)APOCALYPTIQUES DANS LA TRILOGIE DE CHRISTIAN GUAY-POLIQUIN

—◀—  
DALIBOR ŽÍLA

## Résumé

Les trois romans de Christian Guay-Poliquin, auteur contemporain québécois, *Le fil des kilomètres*, *Le Poids de la neige* et *Les ombres filantes* se servent du motif de la solitude d'un homme lors d'une panne d'électricité mystérieuse, est exposé aux situations extrêmes et à l'hostilité de la nature dès son retour dans son village natal après une odyssée à travers un paysage apocalyptique, plus tard – dans le troisième volume de la trilogie, dans la forêt. Dans les trois romans, une dichotomie est observable entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur. Nous observons l'intérieur de la voiture, celle de la cabane, et de la forêt; espaces protégeant le héros anonyme contre le paysage hostile régnant dehors. C'est avant tout le village entouré de forêt qui fournit à la narration un espace serré coupant l'univers du village du reste du monde, comme c'est également la forêt plus tard dans la suite romanesque. L'espace de la protection, la source du bois et du gibier, mais aussi du danger et de la menace de l'inconnu de l'autre côté, ainsi que la forêt et son cadrage permet de construire un espace de tension. Dans notre article, nous analyserons comment la spatialité de ces œuvres liée à l'abandon, l'isolement, l'écart, l'angoisse et au sentiment de menace pour en juger de sa spatialité (post-)apocalyptique à travers l'optique de la littérature québécoise et de ses spécificités.

**Mots-clés:** Christian Guay-Poliquin, littérature contemporaine québécoise, paysage apocalyptique, spatialité

## Abstract

The three novels *Le fil des kilomètres*, *Le Poids de la neige* and *Les ombres filantes*<sup>1</sup> by Christian Guay-Poliquin, a contemporary Quebec author, use the motif of a lonely man, who is exposed to extreme situations and the hostility of nature as soon as he returns to his native village after an odyssey through

<sup>1</sup> *Running on Fumes*, *The weight of snow* and *The Shooting Shadows* (my translation; these novels haven't been translated into English).

an apocalyptic landscape. Later, in the third part of the trilogy, the forest takes the place of the village. In all the three novels, a dichotomy between inside and outside can be observed. We see the interior of the car, the cabin, and the forest as spaces protecting the anonymous hero against the hostile landscape reigning outside. It is above all the village which provides the narration with a space cut off from the rest of the world, as is the forest later in the trilogy. A space of protection, the source of wood and game, but also that of danger and the threat of the unknown, the forest and its borders allow for the construction of a space of tension. In our paper, we will analyze the (post-)apocalyptic spatiality of the above works in the context of Quebec literature, and how this spatiality relates to abandonment, isolation, separation, fear, and the feeling of threat.

**Keywords:** Christian Guay-Poliquin, contemporary québec literature, apocalyptic landscape, spatiality

## INTRODUCTION

Christian Guay-Poliquin, auteur vedette de la littérature québécoise contemporaine, a lancé sa carrière littéraire en 2013 par la publication de son roman *Le fil des kilomètres* chez La Peuplade. C'est dans la même maison d'édition québécoise que ses suites, *Le Poids de la neige* et *Les ombres filantes* sont parues plus tard. Couronnée d'emblée par un succès phénoménal, le deuxième volet de la *trilogie* lui a remporté le Prix du Gouverneur général. Le motif commun de ces trois romans est la survie: celle d'un homme exposé aux situations extrêmes et à l'hostilité de la nature dès le retour dans son village natal après une odyssée à travers un paysage apocalyptique, et plus tard, dans le troisième volume de la trilogie, dans la forêt.

Tout à travers les trois livres, dans la voiture, dans la cabane ou dans la forêt, une dichotomie entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur prend lieu. C'est avant tout le village entouré par la forêt qui fournit à la narration un espace serré, coupant l'univers du village du reste du monde, comme c'est également plus tard la forêt. L'espace de la protection, la source du bois et du gibier, mais aussi du danger et de la menace de l'inconnu de l'autre côté, la forêt et son cadrage permet de construire un espace de tension.

Cette dichotomie peut également être expliquée par le concept de « garnison mentality »<sup>2</sup> – un terme introduit par Northrop Frye (225). Selon lui, le regard des personnages est tourné vers l'extérieur qui les menace et de cette raison, ils essaient de construire les murs pour se protéger. De plus, à son avis,

<sup>2</sup> mentalité de garnison

l'identité canadienne se définit par rapport à la peur de la nature. En s'y inspirant, Margaret Atwood a développé l'idée de Frye en y ajoutant la notion de la survivance. Selon elle, la sensibilité canadienne se définit par rapport au statut de victime qui doit lutter contre cet état et contre les conditions hostiles de la nature (Atwood 32).

Dans notre article, nous analyserons la spatialité de ces œuvres liée à l'abandon, l'isolement, l'écart, l'angoisse, et au sentiment de menace pour en juger de sa spatialité (post-)apocalyptique à travers l'optique de la littérature québécoise et de ses spécificités. Nous les étudierons en lien avec le thème de la solitude à travers les relations entre les personnages et le rapport entre la nature et l'homme.

### LE FIL DES KILOMÈTRES

Celui qui nous raconte l'histoire d'une voix anonyme, mécanicien comme son père, a fini sa quête du bonheur dans une raffinerie de l'Ouest du pays où il est asservi à une corvée monotone. Tandis que le monde dépourvu d'électricité semble s'être arrêté de tourner, la panne le force à venir au secours de son père à l'autre bout du pays. Grièvement blessé lors de son arrivée lors d'un accident de voiture, où il tue malheureusement son père, il est obligé de passer l'hiver dans une cabane au-dessus du village avec un homme qui le soigne. Néanmoins, le printemps arrivé, le protagoniste quitte son village natal et il décide de rejoindre sa famille dans les bois.

Cette traversée nous fait penser au roman *La route* de Cormac McCarthy, auquel *Le fil des kilomètres* est d'ailleurs comparé dès sa parution (Grenier). Là, un père anonyme essaie de gagner le Sud ensemble avec son fils après une apocalypse d'origine indéterminée.

Comme tous les récits qui prennent pour thème le retour à la maison après une longue absence, celui-ci nous évoque aussi leur modèle éternel: *L'Odyssée* d'Homère. Sa quête du bonheur échouée, vaincu par ses combats intérieurs, le narrateur décide d'entamer son odyssée après dix ans de ses errances. Comme *Ulysse*, lui aussi a hâte de revoir son *Ithaque* natale pour s'assurer que son père est sain et vif et pour protéger sa survie.

Par le biais de ceci, ce roman s'inscrit dans la veine de la tradition nord-américaine des romans de route. Comme tel, le roman de route peut être saisi en tant qu'un héritage de l'époque des explorateurs et *Le fil des kilomètres* est aussi un récit d'exploration: l'exploration de l'âme du narrateur. Dans le cas de ce roman, il s'agit d'un type d'exploration vouée à l'échec où le héros trouve, ici presque, sa mort. Comme dans une tragédie, il est puni pour avoir lutté contre son sort et pour avoir quitté la garnison de son village paternel.

## LE POIDS DE LA NEIGE

Dans le village, la coupure du courant électrique représente pour ses habitants une invitation au retour à un mode de vie de garnison, car poursuivre la vie urbaine n'est plus possible, comme le démontre la description du décor post-apocalyptique dans les villes: voitures abandonnées, pillages, édifices fumants, attroupements et agitations. Au contraire, le village natal du narrateur semble offrir une chance de survie, protégé, qu'il est, par son éloignement et situé à l'abri au milieu de la forêt, qui forme un mur de protection et une frontière entre *deux mondes*. S'instaure ainsi une tension entre un monde sécurisé et un autre monde menaçant se trouvant au-delà, mais aussi entre un monde peuplé, le village, et un monde désert, la forêt. Le village du *Poids de la neige* évoque une nostalgie d'un monde d'antan et incarne un endroit hors du danger, habité par des paysans archaïques aux noms bibliques, où on peut échapper à la civilisation. Guay-Poliquin y reprend l'imaginaire récurrent dans la littérature canadienne des « [...] communautés petites et isolées entourées par une frontière physique ou psychologique [...] » (Frye 225).

La garnison du village représente un endroit où on peut survivre malgré, ou grâce à l'isolation d'un paysage hostile qui l'entoure et son vide menaçant. La colonisation et la survivance auraient donné naissance à un fort « [...] sentiment de l'aliénation qui s'empare de l'homme obligé à s'installer dans un espace inconnu et hostile [...] » (Gyurcsik 45) et qui transcende alors la nécessité de communautarisme et d'autosuffisance qui sont liés à la mentalité de garnison.

L'action *Du poids de la neige* place d'emblée le lecteur dans le huis clos d'une cabane. Arrivé au village qu'il voulait atteindre dans *Le fil des kilomètres*, le narrateur a un accident de la route dont il sort grièvement blessé. En échange de vivres et d'une place dans un convoi qui partira pour la ville au printemps, Matthias, un vieil homme piégé dans le village, a pour mission de le soigner, car le narrateur est désormais le seul mécanicien dont le village dispose. Étouffés par l'immobilité hivernale, également symbolisée par la perte de mobilité du héros en raison de sa blessure, Matthias et le narrateur doivent survivre ensemble à la cruauté de l'hiver et attendre l'arrivée du printemps, qui symbolise un espoir de renouveau.

Dans le chalet, nous y avons à la fois une convivialité entre les hommes isolés qui vivent une sorte du mythe de l'Amérique d'une cabane à part de tout cela à la manière de *Walden* de Thoreau (Frye 241) et la lutte de survie de l'autre côté. Quand la nature est calme, ils s'adonnent à la cuisine ou au jeu d'échecs, sinon ils souffrent du mal d'enfermement. Leur traumatisme de réclusion ou *cabin fever* comme il est appelé en anglais et où nous entendons le mot *cabane*, que le dictionnaire définit comme: « Tension nerveuse résultant d'une longue et rigoureuse réclusion » (Office québécois), représente un autre obstacle qu'ils

ont à surmonter. L'attente du dégel ne représente une simple hibernation, mais aussi une lutte psychologique entre deux hommes à travers le silence, la méfiance et la dissimulation qui résout même au conflit physique. Ils ne sont seulement les prisonniers de l'hiver, mais aussi, comme le dit le narrateur, « [...] prisonniers l'un de l'autre » (Guay-Poliquin, *Du poids de la neige* 64).

Quant au village, nous y sommes face un univers post-garnison québécois: une ancienne commune minière qui se dépeuple et où l'église ne sert plus que pour sonner l'alerte (Guay-Poliquin, *Du poids de la neige* 61). Néanmoins, motivée par le désir de survie et protectionnisme, ce milieu se réadapte au mode de vie de garnison très vite et forme une sorte d'organisation auto-suffisante, car la survivance est dans cet espace profondément enracinée dans le paysage et la mentalité des individus. Tout d'abord, nous y retrouvons une idéalisation de cette vie communautaire, liée aux souvenirs d'enfance du narrateur. C'est le mythe pastoral, une vision de l'idéal social.

Le mythe mis en scène ici est celui de la stabilité de la garnison, qui concerne l'autosuffisance du village par rapport à la civilisation. En dépit des apparences, les villageois ne parviennent plus à soutenir une garnison viable et leur communauté commence à s'effondrer: les maisons sont pétrifiées par la glace, la nourriture devient de plus en plus rare, les habitants sont malades et maigres, et certains quittent le village.

Rentré au village natal, mais demeurant un déraciné, le narrateur découvre qu'il ne peut pas reprendre l'existence de ses aïeux, les colons, il redevient alors explorateur, presque un coureur des bois. Après la solitude de la route et les grands espaces, la solitude de la cabane et les étendues sans bornes de son âme, pour achever son parcours identitaire, il va explorer la solitude de la nature inhabitée, vierge et immense représentée par la forêt, envisagée dorénavant comme une ressource et une menace à la fois, bref un lieu opposé à l'espace humain et provoquant la peur de l'inconnu qui s'y cache. Quant à l'immensité, comme celle des forêts, selon Gaston Bachelard, elle: « [...] est en nous. Elle est attachée à une sorte d'expansion d'être que la vie refrène, [...] » (Guay-Poliquin, *Du poids de la neige* 169). La forêt apparaît ainsi comme un lieu que la psychanalyse associe à l'inconscient et qui suscite notre imaginaire. Le narrateur s'y fixe une nouvelle raison d'être pour rompre avec son existence solitaire. Franchissant la barrière de l'inconnu et s'exposant au danger, il entre dans le bois, l'espace de l'inconnu.

#### LES OMBRES FILANTES

*Les ombres filantes* se servent de la spatialité des forêts qui sont devenues centres d'habitat après le blackout qui a rendu la vie dans la civilisation insupportable. Dans la forêt, il cherche à rejoindre le camp de chasse de sa famille. Rapidement, il est rejoint par un jeune garçon, Olio, qui l'accompagne dans

cette traversée qui nous fait penser au roman *La route* de Cormac McCarthy. Là, un père anonyme essaie de gagner le Sud ensemble avec son fils après une apocalypse d'origine indéterminée. Il y a un côté « Le petit prince » chez Olio. Guay-Poliquin le confirme: « Olio, c'est mon petit prince à l'envers » (Lapointe). Ce petit garçon blond qui sort de nulle part, qui pose des questions mais qui ne répond pas toujours quand on lui en pose, fasciné par l'aviation. Comme le garçon dans *La Route*, Olio est également porteur de la promesse d'un autre monde. Comme le dit Jean-Paul Engélibert, à propos de l'imaginaire de la fin du monde: « Il ne s'agit pas de sauver un monde passé, mais d'en inventer un autre » (137).

Refermé par la forêt, cet espace prend son côté mythique d'un lieu de secrets et de silence. Comme on le lit dans le livre:

Elle est le commencement et la fin. Elle précède les regards, elle leur succédera. Elle est l'épicentre, le nœud, le refuge et la geôle. Elle fascine autant qu'elle effraie. Sous sa chape, les rencontres sont rares et décisives. [...] Toutes les âmes rêvent de s'y perdre. Mais aucun être ne sort indemne de son étreinte. Elle est la solution la plus simple, la plus totale, la plus opaque aux calculs des cœurs inquiets (Guay-Poliquin, *Les ombres filantes* 9).

Bachelard parle à ce propos de l'immensité intime de la forêt: « Cette *immensité* naît d'un corps d'impressions qui ne relèvent pas vraiment des renseignements du géographe. Il n'est pas besoin d'être longtemps dans les bois pour connaître l'impression toujours un peu anxieuse qu'on *s'enfonce* dans un monde sans limite » (170).

La forêt donne ainsi le sentiment d'un emprisonnement désespérant, accentué par son mur des arbres qui façonnent et affectent la mentalité et la psychologie des hommes marqués par les sentiments d'écart, d'éloignement et d'indépendance. Ceci est aussi souligné par l'immensité de ce territoire insaisissable, inconnu à jamais et rempli de mystères, sur lequel Rachel Bouvet a écrit: « L'immensité est propice à l'abstraction, car l'aspect démesuré de ces espaces dépasse l'imagination; il est impossible de se les représenter concrètement, l'immensité demeure insaisissable par la raison » (64).

Cette terreur de l'immensité se traduit dans *Les ombres filantes* par le sentiment omniprésent de menace qui règne à l'extérieur de la cabane de chasse, dont le huis clos se transforme en un espace de sécurité, une spatialité doublement enserrée par la forteresse des forêts. S'instaure ainsi une tension entre un monde sécurisé et un autre monde menaçant se trouvant au-delà, mais aussi entre un monde peuplé, et un monde désert, la forêt.

La famille du protagoniste et leur communauté forestière des chasseurs aux noms propres à la mythologie gréco-romaine, se trouve refermée par la forêt,

un espace qui a son côté mythique celui d'un lieu de secrets et d'un univers de la disparition et déperdition. Comme le dit l'auteur lui-même:

Il y a quelque chose de l'imaginaire lié à la forêt, à la fois dynamique et mythique, qui est à la fois épouvanté et salvateur. C'est un lieu consacré et fuyant, où on retrouve le début et la fin. C'est l'espace total. Pour moi, la forêt, c'est le centre du monde, ça allait de soi. C'est le catalyseur de tension narrative par excellence, et ça faisait longtemps que je voulais écrire un roman forestier, dira-t-il. C'est le lieu des émerveillements et des craintes, un lieu de fascination (Desmeules).

La forêt représente dans le livre un lieu où l'homme se rend compte de son être à travers la nature qui détermine et conditionne les limites de ce qu'une personne peut endurer. Vers la fin du roman, après avoir quitté le campement de chasse, le mécanicien et Olio sont rendus au stade ultime de leur voyage vers la côte où ils croient retrouver une humanité qui se sert de l'électricité des éoliens, voilà une promesse de renouveau. Comme le dit Jean-Michel Durafour: « [...]: la pensée de la fin du monde, qu'on y succombe ou qu'on parvienne à la surmonter, n'existe paradoxalement pas sans l'espoir, [...] [...] revenir à un état antérieur d'équilibre [...]» (11).

## CONCLUSION

Constatons, pour conclure, que Christian Guay-Poliquin fait usage de stéréotypes de la nature hostile pour démontrer son omnipotence, dont ses héros sont les victimes, ce qui ressemble à la conception de la survivance d'Atwood, pour qui la sensibilité canadienne se définirait par rapport au statut de victime qui doit lutter contre cet état. Présent dans les trois romans de Guay-Poliquin, le thème tragique de la solitude et de la terreur de la nature après une panne d'électricité qui menace la survie des personnages puise largement dans le fond thématique qui explique le traitement canadien, ici québécois, de l'imaginaire de la fin qui y est décrit. Avec ses clichés tenaces de la littérature québécoise et ses images privilégiées – la neige, voire l'hiver, la forêt et la nature sauvage –, le topos littéraire de l'hivernité, donc de la nordicité comme telle, accentue la solitude effrayante des personnages au milieu de la nature sauvage d'un pays si vaste.

*Le Poids de la neige* présente ainsi une réappropriation et une quête du Moi par le narrateur. À travers de nombreuses péripéties, ce dernier cesse d'être une victime, et même s'il est de nouveau seul, il parvient à vaincre cet état et son statut d'échoué. Quant à l'esprit de garnison, le village représente un endroit où l'on peut survivre malgré, ou grâce à, l'isolement au milieu d'un paysage hostile qui le protège contre le chaos qui règne dans les villes. Néanmoins, ce

mythe de la stabilité de la garnison et de sa capacité de survivance à l'écart, dans la solitude, aboutit ici à un échec à cause du changement de la mentalité des villageois. Ces derniers ne parviennent plus à soutenir une garnison efficace et leur communauté commence à s'effondrer. Une rupture radicale s'opère avec le milieu rural d'avant, traditionnel et lié au terroir. La rupture est signalée par la dissolution des liens sociaux et de la collectivité, et culmine par un exode des villageois. La communauté n'est plus indépendante comme l'étaient les forts. La nature, cruelle et activement hostile, l'emporte.

Comme l'écrit Daniel Chartier: « Ainsi, l'hiver ouvre sur des territoires humains la possibilité du sacré et de l'initiatique: l'homme croit affronter la nature, mais il se rend vite compte que le seul véritable affrontement est intérieur » (18). Les personnages deviennent peu à peu habités par l'hiver. Les frontières entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur se brisent et le dehors envahit le dedans.

La forêt y prend le rôle d'un mur de protection et d'un lieu mystérieux où l'on n'ose entrer en hiver que pour y bûcher du bois. Cet imaginaire forestier d'une manière subtile forme les confins de l'univers du roman et le cadre spatial de la narration. Il est nécessaire pour établir la véridicité de l'univers créé, comme un lieu privilégié dans la littérature québécoise et l'imaginaire collectif des Québécois.

Quant au troisième volet, *Les ombres filantes*, de prime abord, on peut dire qu'il s'agit d'un roman d'aventures, qui s'inscrit dans la veine post-apocalyptique, devenue un courant littéraire de la littérature québécoise contemporaine. Au dire de l'auteur: « Ce qui m'intéressait, c'était l'idée de survie relationnelle. Comment être soi à travers les dynamiques familiales, et continuer à l'être quand ce rôle ne nous sied plus » (Lapointe). Quant à la fin du monde nous le pouvons y penser à la manière de Jean-Michel Durafour qui réclame que: « La fin du monde n'est qu'une autre manière de penser et de vivre le monde. Loin de tout pessimisme, elle ne propose rien d'autre qu'un éclairage sur notre présent débarrassé du *présentisme* [...] en lui redonnant un avenir, c'est-à-dire un sens et une espérance » (17-18).

Christian Guay-Poliquin n'utilise de ce motif que comme un arrière-plan, presque un prétexte à accompagner l'histoire qui l'intéresse vraiment, même s'il est question de la Panne et des hommes qui tentent de sauver leurs vies par tous les moyens possibles.

Si le protagoniste traverse la forêt, c'est pour rallier le camp de chasse de sa famille. Il espère y retrouver ses oncles et tantes, mais aussi une forme de bonheur liée à son passé, car il garde de ce lieu de beaux souvenirs d'enfance. Ce retour à l'enfance s'inscrit également dans la relation qui unit le narrateur à Olio. Leur union transforme un compagnonnage de circonstance en amour paternel et filial. La fin du roman, encore une fois ouverte, nous permet de croire qu'un quatrième roman pourrait s'ajouter au cycle.



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# LES PAYSAGES IMAGINAIRES DE SYLVIE DRAPEAU<sup>1</sup>

ZUZANA MALINOVSKÁ

## Résumé

Comédienne et écrivaine québécoise Sylvie Drapeau construit son univers romanesque à partir des paysages réels: physique (l'environnement) et psychique (le vécu traumatisant). Cette démarche apparaît clairement dans sa tétralogie autobiographique<sup>2</sup> agencée autour d'une histoire de famille jalonnée de drames. Je propose une réflexion critique sur la tétralogie en question. Mon intention est d'interroger la mise en mots du vécu, la puissance esthétique de cette écriture concise et poétique, qui – par le biais de la fiction et de la narration – transforme les paysages référentiels en paysages imaginaires. Après une brève présentation de l'œuvre qui – autant que je sache – n'a pas fait l'objet d'analyse à ce jour, comprenant aussi une interrogation sur le genre, j'essairai d'apporter quelques éléments de réponses aux questions ci-dessus (sans exhaustivité): Motif récurrent du fleuve, titre du premier volume, est-il une métaphore de l'existence, comme le titre du dernier volume, *La Terre*? Y-a-il des correspondances entre les titres qui renvoient à l'horizontalité (*Le Fleuve*, *La Terre*) et à la verticalité de l'espace (*Le Ciel* et *L'Enfer*)? L'évocation des paysages extérieurs, référentiels (la Côte-Nord avec les éléments naturels, comme le fleuve et la forêt, mais aussi l'usine d'aluminium) est-elle liée à la mise en relief des paysages intérieurs (les états d'âmes de la narratrice homodiégetique)?

**Mots-clés:** Sylvie Drapeau, tétralogie, paysages réels, paysages imaginaires, transformation

## Abstract

The Quebec writer, Sylvie Drapeau seems to base her fictional universe on real landscapes – both physical, external (the world she inhabits) and psychological, internal (her traumatic experience). The transformation of referential landscapes into imaginary ones is apparent in her autobiographical tetralogy built around a family history full of tragic events. In this article, I offer a critical reflection on the writer's literary strategies, after a brief presentation of

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<sup>2</sup> *Le Fleuve* (2015), *Le Ciel* (2017), *L'Enfer* (2018), *La Terre* (2019)

the tetralogy itself. In order to highlight the aesthetic power of Drapeau's concise, poetic writing, I focus on the way she puts her life experience into words and on the semantics of her literary landscapes.

**Keywords:** Sylvie Drapeau, tetralogy, real landscapes, imaginary landscapes, transformation

## INTRODUCTION

« Partie d'un pays que la nature présente à un observateur » (*Le Nouveau Petit Robert* 1615), le paysage est lié non seulement à la nature mais aussi à la culture et l'histoire d'un territoire<sup>3</sup>. Objet fréquent de représentation artistique, le paysage – qui par extension désigne aussi la vision des choses – est pourvu d'une forte dimension esthétique; l'œuvre de Sylvie Drapeau le montre bien.

Comédienne appréciée au Québec, Sylvie Drapeau est aussi connue, depuis la publication entre 2015 et 2019 chez Leméac de sa tétralogie, comme écrivaine. Les quatre volumes de son récit d'inspiration autobiographique – *Le Fleuve* (2015), *Le Ciel* (2017), *L'Enfer* (2018) et *La Terre* (2019) – sont construits autour de quatre décès prématurés de proches de la narratrice, double<sup>4</sup> de l'auteur. Les premiers et le dernier titre du cycle, *Le Fleuve* et *La Terre*, renvoient aux composantes observables du paysage géographique qui constitue l'arrière-plan de l'histoire familiale jalonnée de drames. Les deux autres titres, *Le Ciel* et *L'Enfer*, liés à l'imaginaire chrétien, ont trait aux paysages intérieurs, psychiques. *La Terre* avec *Le Fleuve* et *Le Ciel* renvoient à l'horizon, c'est-à-dire « la limite de vue qui semble séparer le ciel de la terre » (*Le Nouveau Petit Robert* 1101). L'axe imaginaire ciel-enfer suggère la station verticale. Partant de l'hypothèse des correspondances entre l'horizontalité et la verticalité des paysages représentés, résultat possible d'une conception esthétique, il s'agit de réfléchir – après une brève présentation de la tétralogie – sur les paysages imaginaires de Sylvie Drapeau.

## LA TÉTRALOGIE AUTOBIOGRAPHIQUE DE SYLVIE DRAPEAU

L'histoire familiale est racontée par la narratrice homodiégétique qui fait partie de « la meute », nom donné aux enfants d'une famille québécoise moyenne installée sur la Côte-Nord. Une distance temporelle, plus ou moins grande, sépare l'acte narratif des événements racontés. Adulte, la narratrice dédie chaque volet de son récit à l'un de ses proches disparus. Tout d'abord elle

<sup>3</sup> Conseil de l'Europe. *Glossaire du Système d'information de la Convention du Conseil de l'Europe sur le paysage*. 2018, n° 106 (Aménagement du territoire et paysage), ch. 17, pp. 44–47, <https://rm.coe.int/16802fc145>.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvie Drapeau révèle sa profession dans le dernier tome: « moi, actrice de théâtre » (*La Terre* 35).

s'adresse à son grand frère Roch, noyé dans le fleuve. Le présent d'énonciation met en relief la douleur que la narratrice ressent en relatant l'événement tragique survenu lorsqu'elle a eu cinq ans : « Te voilà qui reviens de si loin. Tu as sauté à l'eau dans un grand cri de joie féroce, sans savoir à quel point elle avait changé de l'intérieur [...]. Soudain tu disparaissais. Puis tu remontes à la surface et disparaissais encore, remontes, et t'enfonces de nouveau. Tu te débats, puis tu te fonds à l'ombre horrible, aspiré par elle » (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 29). Pivot de la narration dans *Le Fleuve*, la noyade met fin à l'enfance joyeuse de la fratrie. Pourtant elle constitue le début d'une série de malheurs qui s'abattent sur cette famille traditionnelle qui observe scrupuleusement les préceptes de l'Église. La mère de famille, meurtrie à vie et rongée par la culpabilité, est le destinataire du volet suivant, intitulé *Le Ciel* et construit autour de sa vie, sa maladie et sa mort. Antonyme du même imaginaire, *L'Enfer* est dédié à la mémoire du frère schizophrène suicidé. Enfin *La Terre*, volume centré sur la mort de la sœur, débouche sur l'apaisement de la narratrice qui, après sa fatigue professionnelle, se réconcilie avec le passé et retrouve l'envie de vivre. Dans ce volet, le plus intime du cycle, la narratrice-personnage dévoile son identité<sup>5</sup> : en se révélant comédienne, elle se rapproche du pacte autobiographique (Lejeune).

Le récit n'est pas linéaire, même si l'agencement de l'histoire respecte l'ordre des décès successifs. Les tranches de vie essentielles, disséminées sans chronologie dans les quatre volets, sont judicieusement organisées : la noyade, l'évènement-clé, est rappelée fréquemment. Sont souvent réitérés dans le récit les titres de la tétralogie. Cités directement ou rappelés à l'aide des champs lexicaux s'y rattachant (par exemple les vagues, le torrent, le marais, l'eau, enraciner, etc.), les intitulés interconnectés mettent souvent en relief une situation ou un état d'âme. Est ainsi souvent repris dans la narration le mot enfer, l'image du calvaire du frère schizophrène : « Les voix reviennent et te ramènent vers l'enfer [...] et nous ramènent vers l'enfer avec toi » (Drapeau, *L'Enfer* 73). *Le Ciel*, évoquant le décès de la mère, est rattaché, par le biais du verbe enraciner, au titre du dernier volet, *La Terre* : « Ta maladie [...] t'a envoyée au ciel. La mienne m'a enracinée » (Drapeau 80). Les titres suggèrent, à l'aide des champs lexicaux, les analogies entre les paysages extérieurs et les éphémères paysages de l'âme. Ainsi la narratrice épuisée éprouve « ce torrent d'émotions inconfortables » (Drapeau, *L'Enfer* 74), perçoit « les vagues de gris, avec l'angoisse » (Drapeau, *L'Enfer* 73), « sent la vague [la] traverser dans toute sa violence » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 37).

La narration avance en dépit de nombreux retours en arrière. La prolepse initiale du *Fleuve*, parole adressée au frère décédé, fait ainsi place à l'analepse qui évoque l'incontournable prière matinale. Cette scène emblématique, renvoyant aux titres *Le Ciel* et *L'Enfer*, souligne l'importance pour la famille de la

<sup>5</sup> Voir notamment la scène où les amis de son père « sont ravis de voir l'actrice de près, d'être servi par l'actrice » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 85).

foi chrétienne et de la pratique religieuse. Le récit alterne les scènes, quotidiennes et banales<sup>6</sup>, et les sommaires, voire les ellipses : elles résument notamment les situations douloureuses déclenchant des émotions si fortes qu'elles deviennent ineffables. Citons à titre d'exemple le cancer foudroyant de la mère, le coma après un AVC de la sœur, le suicide du frère malade dans une collision frontale qu'il avait provoquée, le *burn out* de la narratrice, etc. Les bribes du récit donnent à voir les différents membres de cette nombreuse famille : la mère, « très pieuse, ultra-catholique » (Drapeau, *L'Enfer* 20), soumise à son mari autoritaire, sacrifiant sa vie à la famille, qui noie son chagrin dans l'entretien de la maison et ne commence à vivre qu'après le départ des enfants pour la ville, au moment où sa maladie se manifeste; le *pater familias* intransigeant, dur avec ses enfants, qui trompe sa femme et ne lui a jamais pardonné la noyade de son fils aîné, qui ne jure que par le travail, prend la maladie de son cadet pour la faiblesse et demande à ses enfants de « légitimer leur présence sur terre » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 81); la sœur, garçon manqué, le frère « sombré dans le marais de la folie » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 15), ainsi que la narratrice, d'abord petite fille de cinq ans, puis jeune femme, mère de famille et comédienne épuisée qui, après avoir raconté la vie des proches, sort guérie de son *burn out*...

La reconstitution du passé familial est la mise à nu d'une expérience vécue déchirante, traumatisante. Contrepied d'un témoignage authentique, le monologue qui dévoile la complexité et l'ambiguïté des sentiments est un hommage aux disparus. Sylvie Drapeau les ressuscite par les mots, convaincue que ceux-ci – qui manquaient dans cette famille taciturne où « l'amour semblait être une denrée si rare » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 51) – ont le pouvoir de guérir les maux. Toutefois sa tétralogie autobiographique ne peut pas être réduite à l'autothérapie, même si son effet libérateur semble évident. Cette confession poétique, à la fois très sincère et très pudique, qui évoque les pertes et les deuils, la solitude et les souffrances mais aussi l'affection, la solidarité, l'espérance, la singularité des choses humaines, est un hymne à l'amour et à la vie.

#### « VOTRE ÂME EST UN PAYSAGE CHOISI<sup>7</sup> » OU LES C/CORRESPONDANCES

L'imaginaire de Sylvie Drapeau est fortement imprégné de paysages référentiels. Ainsi le fleuve, l'élément essentiel du territoire, est la première image de l'œuvre. Saisi par le regard, il est placé à l'incipit du volet au titre éponyme : « Il y a toujours eu le fleuve. Il était là, en bas de la colline sur laquelle était juchée notre maison. On pouvait le voir au loin, de la fenêtre de la salle à manger. Une forêt

<sup>6</sup> Les jeux d'enfants pendant les vacances scolaires, le dîner où la narratrice reçoit son frère schizophrène, le ménage à fond fait par la mère de famille, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Verlaine, vers tiré du poème « Clair de lune » du recueil *Fêtes galantes*, paru en 1986.

noire nous séparait de lui. Immuablement présent dans le paysage de l'enfance...» (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 7). Dominant dans le paysage géographique, formé également de la colline avec la maison familiale, la forêt et l'usine d'aluminium, le fleuve est identifié plus loin,<sup>8</sup> grâce au toponyme explicite permettant de situer l'action. Elle se déroule sur la Côte-Nord, région natale de Sylvie Drapeau, née à Baie-Comeau, ville sur la rive nord du Saint-Laurent. Toutefois, l'illusion du réel, renforcée par l'ancrage géographique précis et commandée par le geste autobiographique, est atténuée dès la première phrase du texte avec les figures de style qui poétisent l'énoncé: « Par beau temps, sur le fleuve, il y a comme des diamants qui flottent, qui pétillent et qui rient. Lorsqu'on remonte, lorsqu'on revient de ses profondeurs, à un moment, je suppose, toute cette lumière vous explose au visage.» (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 7). Loin d'être neutre, la description du fleuve est marquée par le regard subjectif chargé de sensibilité particulière. Le procédé de transfiguration poétique est systématique et s'applique également aux autres composantes référentielles du paysage, souvent rattachés les uns aux autres, comme l'illustre l'exemple suivant: « C'est la forêt derrière l'école, la forêt bleue, la forêt des maléfices, car elle creuse, elle creuse dans la Terre » (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 14). La répétition du thème central de la forêt, avec la reprise du verbe creuser créent le rythme de l'énoncé. Personnifiée, chargée d'affect et de valeurs, souvent contradictoires,<sup>9</sup> la forêt est mise en rapport avec la terre, mais, par sa couleur bleue elle renvoie aussi au ciel et au fleuve, reliant ainsi les trois titres de la tétralogie *Le Fleuve*, *Le Ciel* et *La Terre*.

Sylvie Drapeau pose donc un voile poétique sur le fond réel. Ses paysages extérieurs ne constituent pas un simple décor pour situer l'histoire inspirée de l'expérience vécue. Poétisés, ils deviennent signes aux multiples significations, révélateurs souvent des paysages intérieurs, psychiques. À ce sujet, l'excipit de la tétralogie est emblématique: « Le tragique me traverse, comme le fleuve traverse la terre qui nous a vues naître » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 98). La figure du style, devenue expression figée (la terre qui voit) suggère en même temps l'importance de la perception visuelle du paysage.

Inscrire l'intérieur des personnages dans l'image de la nature n'a rien d'original, on le sait depuis les poètes romantiques. Cependant, la reprise par l'autrice québécoise de cette stratégie s'avère efficace. D'autant plus que Sylvie Drapeau travaille méthodiquement la langue, la rendant imagée et musicale dans le prolongement de la meilleure tradition poétique. Tout se passe comme si elle s'inspirait de Paul Verlaine qui, dans son *Art poétique* (1884), revendique « de la musique avant toute chose », « la chanson grise où l'Indécis au Précis se joint », « rien que la nuance ». Soucieuse de « tordre le cou à l'éloquence », comme dirait

<sup>8</sup> Le Saint-Laurent n'est nommé qu'à la page 28 du premier volume.

<sup>9</sup> La forêt, « familière, car parcourue mille et mille fois, dans tous ses méandres » (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 12), est sécurisante mais aussi dangereuse, menaçante, surtout « la forêt bleue » (16), « marécageuse », « salissante » (14).

Verlaine (25), elle choisit les mots simples, souvent tirés du lexique courant, pourtant nuancés et insérés dans les phrases qui s'écoulent comme le fleuve. Ces mots constituent une langue originale qui signifie plus qu'elle ne dit. Ainsi par exemple le fleuve revêt plusieurs significations: il traduit les états d'âme et balise les situations-limites. Ainsi la mère, après le diagnostic fatal, se baigne dans le fleuve<sup>10</sup>; pour identifier le corps du fils suicidé, le père réticent doit rejoindre la ville par la route du fleuve (Drapeau, *L'Enfer* 89); la narratrice épuisée n'arrive pas à traverser le fleuve pour rendre visite à sa sœur malade, car « les crises de panique étaient si violentes qu'[elle] avai[t] peur de perdre la maîtrise de [s]oi-même et de glisser vers l'onde, d'être entraînée par le courant profond... » (Drapeau, *La Terre* 6). Avec la terre, le fleuve constitue l'élément identitaire, essentiel pour la narratrice attachée au pays natal même après son départ pour la ville: « Nous sommes nés au nord » (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 20), dit-elle, s'identifiant aux « gens de la forêt [...] forgés » par le fleuve, contrairement aux « gens de la terre » (20) habitant le sud, « un grand paysage plat, doux » (21). Séparant le sud « de guimauve fondant » (23), « si facile et confortable » (23) du « monde rude et froid » (25) du nord, le fleuve, emblème de l'identité collective, est aussi symbole de la frontière, réelle et imaginaire, entre la vie familiale avant et après la noyade, entre l'enfance et l'âge adulte ainsi qu'entre la vie réelle et la vie rêvée, l'une imposée par les contraintes de la tradition, l'autre délibérément choisie. Image du temps qui passe, le fleuve peut se lire également comme celle de l'émancipation et de la liberté: pour quitter la vie contraignante de la Côte-Nord et s'installer en ville, les enfants prennent la route du fleuve qu'ils doivent reprendre lors de chaque retour à la maison natale.

Nous avons vu que pour représenter les paysages extérieurs, l'écrivaine québécoise mobilise avant tout le regard. Ainsi, la forêt est noire ou bleue, le fleuve noir, la terre blanche en hiver, le paysage rouge en automne, « les lacs [...] si lisses en surface [...] débordant des jaunes les plus chauds, des rouges vins les plus voluptueux, des orangés tachetés de noir et de violet » (Drapeau, *Le Fleuve* 53). Toutefois ses évocations du paysage possèdent des dimensions sensorielles autres que la vue; l'odorat et le toucher, en premier lieu, mais aussi le goût et l'ouïe. Ainsi la voix narrative mentionne, entre autres, « les parfums envoûtants de conifères » (12), « les puissantes exhalations de la terre » (65), le printemps « avec les parfums vigoureux du dégel » (65), « les fumées de l'usine » (15), « la mousse spongieuse de la forêt » (12), « le bruit terrible du vent » (58), « l'odeur de la vanille » (85) qui, telle la madeleine proustienne, fait penser à la mère défunte.

C'est surtout le fleuve qui est saisi par plusieurs sens: « l'eau glacée » (26), « la glace salée du fleuve » (38), « l'air du fleuve » (26), « l'eau sombre » (29), « le fond sombre et glaiseux avec ses vaugelettes de sable ferme qui font si mal à

<sup>10</sup> « Ce même fleuve a l'air capable d'exaucer un vœu [...] il semble capable de te guérir » (Drapeau 2017, 56).



l'arche des pieds» (28), etc. La synesthésie permettant de capter les signes émis par les paysages, rappelle la démarche de Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) qui voit dans le poète l'intermédiaire entre l'homme et la nature. Rappelons son célèbre poème «Correspondances» (39–40):

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers  
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;  
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles  
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent  
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,  
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,  
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfant  
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,  
Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,  
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,  
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

L'incontournable poète français propose une approche singulière permettant d'interpréter le monde. Le décodage des signes se fait d'abord sur le plan horizontal par la perception sensorielle de la réalité – «les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent» – ensuite sur le plan vertical qui suppose une élévation vers la spiritualité. En harmonie avec l'imaginaire québécois dans lequel la nature joue un rôle très important, Sylvie Drapeau rejoint les correspondances baudelairiennes, inscrites dans les titres. *Le Fleuve* et *La Terre* renvoient à l'horizontalité et à la matérialité de l'univers représenté, tandis que *Le Ciel* et *L'Enfer* évoquent la verticalité et la spiritualité.<sup>11</sup> On pourrait affirmer que les composantes du paysage chez Sylvie Drapeau «laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles» (Baudelaire 39), tout comme la «nature» baudelairienne. La narratrice saisit les signes d'abord par les sens réunis: «J'aimais [...] l'air pur et la clarté du ciel, les parfums de la terre, la splendeur des couleurs à l'automne, le silence de l'hiver» (Drapeau, *La Terre* 19). Puis, en entrant en relation avec la spiritualité, elle leur attribue des significations «par esprit» (Drapeau, *La Terre* 19). Il appartient au lecteur de les déchiffrer et d'accéder, en passant par le monde des perceptions, au monde des idées.

<sup>11</sup> Même si le ciel peut se référer également au matériel, car pour l'observateur qui scrute l'horizon, le ciel semble se confondre avec la terre.

## EN GUISE DE CONCLUSION

La singularité de la conception esthétique chez Sylvie Drapeau est la poétisation des paysages. Indissociables de l’imaginaire, qu’ils soient extérieurs, révélateurs du territoire où se situent les actions, ou intérieurs, reflets des états d’âme, les paysages imaginaires de l’écrivaine québécoise sont porteurs de sens. Poétisés et chargés de symboles, les paysages ainsi représentés revêtent une fonction de catharsis : ils permettent de détourner l’attention du tragique en orientant le lecteur vers d’autres aspects de l’existence. Le récit des drames intimes est ainsi plus soutenable.

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# GARDENS OF HIS MAKING: THREE STORIES BY ALICE MUNRO



ANDREA SZABÓ F.

## Abstract

In my paper, I discuss three short stories by Alice Munro from her late career: “Vandals” (1994), “Runaway” (2004), and “Dimensions” (2010). Although these instant classics were published in different volumes, they show a remarkable unity in their thematic focus, the characters they line up, their setting and narrative structure, thus they can be seen as a group of stories, or even a story type in Munro’s later period. At the same time, these stories also show a remarkable shift in their conclusions, suggesting a similar shift in Munro’s vision. By examining them as stories depicting an idyllic garden akin to Eden and created by increasingly domineering Adam-like figures who grow more violent with each narrative, I will demonstrate how Munro’s female characters are tempted by the fruit of knowledge, why they opt for intentional blindness, and why the protagonist of the most recent short story breaks away from the Eden constructed by her Adam. The stories illustrate the delicate balance of continuity and innovation in Munro’s oeuvre as the subtle, sometimes barely perceptible changes in the recurring elements of the narratives both create a sense of continuity and give the reader an insight into how the writer’s perspective changes with time.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, Canadian literature, intentional blindness, Garden of Eden

## Résumé

Dans cet article, je discute de trois nouvelles écrites par Alice Munro à la fin de sa carrière: «Vandals» (1994), «Runaway» (2004) et «Dimensions» (2010). Bien que ces classiques instantanés aient été publiés dans des volumes différents, ils présentent une unité remarquable dans leur thématique, les types de personnages qu’ils mettent en scène, leur cadre et leur structure narrative, de sorte qu’ils peuvent être considérés comme un groupe d’histoires, ou même un type d’histoire dans la dernière période de Munro. En même temps, ces histoires présentent un changement remarquable dans leurs conclusions, ce qui suggère un changement similaire dans la vision de Munro. En les examinant comme des histoires décrivant un jardin idyllique proche de l’Eden, créé par

des figures Adam de plus en plus dominatrices et de plus en plus violentes au fil des récits, je montrerai comment les personnages féminins de Munro sont tentés par le fruit de la connaissance, pourquoi ces femmes optent pour un aveuglement intentionnel et pourquoi la protagoniste de la nouvelle la plus récente se détache de l'Eden construit par son Adam. Les histoires illustrent l'équilibre délicat entre continuité et innovation dans l'œuvre de Munro.

**Mots-clés:** Alice Munro, littérature canadienne, cécité intentionnelle, Jardin d'Eden

## INTRODUCTION

Based on critical discussion, Alice Munro's short stories seem to better lend themselves to individual scrutiny than to examination as a group of stories. This approach is partly dictated by Munro's own insistence recorded in one of her few early interviews: "I see everything separate" ("An Interview" 77), the stories do not "fit into any sort of pattern at all" (98), she even asks, seemingly in exasperation: "what on earth is this feeling that somehow things have to connect or ... have to be part of a larger whole?" (98). Yet, somewhat arguing with Munro's claim for a fragmented perception, Ildikó de Papp Carrington, one of her most perceptive critics, noted as early as in 1989 that "[c]learly recognizable patterns unify almost all of [Munro's] fiction" (3). However, another critic a few years later warned, "the relation of Munro's stories to groups, and these groups to each other, is a tricky matter to describe" (Carscallen viii).

These early insights notwithstanding, Munro scholarship for long has tended to discuss her short stories individually. Even book-length studies surveying her oeuvre have typically offered an interpretative reading of story after story in volume after volume, even though, often, the stories are thematically linked, and not so much comment on but rather refract one another (Trussler 183). This is true for those collections as well that are not unified by a single character such as Del in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Rose in *Who Do You Think You Are* or Juliet in *Runaway*. Moreover, I add, it is possible to notice recurring themes, situations, characters (besides the typical Munroian settings) not only in individual volumes but also across them, even if these patterns are difficult, if not to notice but rather, to fully uncover. James Carscallen in an early critical study explains why this is so: "The structure inherent in Munro's work is orderly like any structure, but in actual reading we come to it through what in a way is its opposite: associative connections like that of similar characters" (viii-ix). That is, to notice patterns and groups or groupings in Munro's stories, one needs to address both surface structure and, at a further remove, interpretation.

There is a long list of recurring themes in Munro, identified in critical discussions such as the complexity of human relationships, the intricacies of

memory and the impact of time on individual lives. Munro's frequent themes include coming of age, the negotiation of one's socially determined background, leaving home behind, the return to home, the mother–daughter bond, the sick mother, the feeling of shame, guilt, love, loss, the dynamics of family relationships in general, and the struggle for self-discovery and self-understanding. While the texts often encourage readings within the context of autobiography, they are aimed at understanding the universal human experience at the same time.

A remarkable feature of Munro's narratives is that they often feature so-called Munrovia characters, situations, and places. The female point of view is typical, and only rarely is there a male focalizer in her works. The reader is often given a glimpse of how a female protagonist discovers a truth previously inaccessible to her, how she gains some knowledge that fundamentally changes her outlook. At times, this realization is condensed into an epiphanic moment at the end of the narrative, a key element of the open closure in Munro's short stories. A recurring character type is the adult woman returning home, reminiscing and trying to understand her past experiences. The basic experience for many of her characters is the desire to fit in and the impossibility of doing so; protagonists often experience a sense of exclusion either because of their social status or some physical condition<sup>1</sup>; characters are overwhelmed by feelings of disappointment, loss, resentment, shame, and love.

Munro's works often reference or allude to the Bible, myths, ancient literature, 19th century English literature, historical events, and popular culture; her texts are in fact situated in a rich space of intertextuality. The settings of her stories are typically the main locations of Munro's own life: Southern Ontario and British Columbia.

These Munrovia themes, characters, and places proved to be of such a cohesive force in her fiction that a debate about the possibility of reading her volumes as novels long dominated critical discourse. In fact, it was only in the 1990s that the full force of her writing was widely recognized as short fiction and not as an intermediary step towards a possible future novel. In this light, some features of her fiction should also be reevaluated, for instance, the fact that characters in one story may very much resemble those in others. Rather than seeing them as one character reappearing in several stories, they could be seen as a kind of character that creates an opportunity for readers to reinterpret a theme, situation, character or chain of events; they in fact propel readers to reflect on similarities and differences with a twist. The subtle, sometimes imperceptible changes in recurring elements both create a sense of continuity in Munro's fictional universe and, at the same time, they may

<sup>1</sup> Not always their own, e.g., the mother's illness.

give the reader an insight into how the writer's approach changes throughout her career.

#### THE THREE STORIES: A MUNROVIAN SUBTYPE

In what follows I will offer a reading of three short stories appearing in three different volumes across a time period of two decades, arguing that the narratives discussed make up a group or grouping of *a type of* story in Munro's oeuvre. What justifies this reading is the striking similarities one finds not only in the setting but also in character types, situations, plotlines, narrative elements, and, most importantly, in underlying thematic preoccupations. The parallels are not remarkably striking on their own, nor are they overtly difficult to track, but because the obvious references are few and dispersed all over the narratives in asides, seemingly random remarks, they are easy to overlook. When considered, however, they open a new way to understand Munro's fiction. Yet, I do not argue that these short stories are mere rewritings, recycled material, more of the same. I argue for just the opposite: exactly because they approach an issue in a similar fictional framework contemplating fundamental human questions, the changes in their closures, the remarkable shifts for the central characters tell of the shift in Munro's overall vision, too.

The stories are "Vandals" published as the last narrative in *Open Secrets* (1994), and the first pieces in *Runaway* (2004) and *Too Much Happiness* (2009): "Runaway" and "Dimensions," respectively. The fact that all three stories are given prominent positions in their respective volumes already indicates their centrality in Munro's work; in addition, they garnered considerable critical attention immediately, which also attests to their recognition as instant classics. More importantly, the thematic convergence of the narratives is remarkable. All three stories explore what maintains a relationship, especially an abusive one, what individuals are willing, or able, to recognize as truth, how individuals react when intimating that they potentially come into possession of knowledge that may alienate them from or connect them to a significant other, what sacrifices individuals are ready to make, what prices they are ready to pay to maintain their loyalty, and to whom they accord their loyalty. But ultimately, the central question at the heart of the three narratives is why individuals do not seek knowledge, the truth, why they resist the obvious when their relationships are at stake.

All three short stories draw on the archetypal plot, characters and setting of the biblical Fall: in each narrative, the female protagonist is tempted to confront the secrets concealed within the silences in the center of the narratives. Resembling Eve, the naive heroine grapples with a choice: she can remain loyal to an Adam-like figure (an enigmatic, older, grim patriarch) by rejecting

the forbidden fruit (turning a blind eye to Adam's sin), or she can confront his sin, thus risking their relationship in their Garden of Eden (their home on a Canadian farm). In their home, literally a garden, a refuge from the outside world, from the judgement of others, a patriarchal figure rules over all. Here, time is suspended, and customary social rules do not apply. The temptation is personified by an older female figure (the serpent), driven by fundamentally good intentions. She observes Eve's reluctance with bewilderment, particularly in the later narratives. She cannot comprehend why the female protagonist resists the truth about Adam. However, the Eves in these narratives have molded their self-perception in their relation to their Adams, thus not only does leaving them represent disloyalty, but also a profound challenge to their own identity.

In all three narratives the female protagonists resist knowledge because knowing the truth would reveal slices of injustice and horror in their lives and that would threaten the image of their own self. In the three narratives presented, the concept of intentional blindness helps to unravel the themes of the stories. Intentional blindness is a defence mechanism, understood as a combination of several cognitive distortions, by which the human mind defends itself against information or facts that may be unpleasant or threatening to it. Its roots are often found in the search for self-protection and emotional comfort. Its function may be self-protection, i.e., the mind automatically blocks or suppresses information that may be threatening to the individual in order to protect the personality. It may also be a coping mechanism in that it helps the individual to manage or avoid stressful or unpleasant situations. When a person is confronted with information or beliefs that are contrary to reality, intentional blindness can help reduce cognitive dissonance, but it can also be used towards denying reality or truth in order to maintain a positive self-esteem, beliefs or relationships with others. Intentional blindness provides the individual with the opportunity to continue living in an illusion or within a familiar framework, which in some situations is the more emotionally comfortable choice, as by mobilizing it, there is no need to examine facts or information, the pre-existing belief system can be maintained, and thus the individual can maintain a sense of comfort and stability. Intentional blindness also provides the opportunity for the individual to use it as a mechanism to avoid taking responsibility for oneself or others. Understanding intentional blindness in this context offers a framework to understand the subtlety of the narratives and the compassion with which Munro constructs her characters, refraining from assigning blame to any one of them – regardless of the darkness these stories exude.

A discussion of the three short stories follows to demonstrate the archetypal setting and plot structuring the narratives as well as the protagonists' reliance on intentional blindness.

## "VANDALS" (1994)

"Vandals" is one of Munro's darkest narratives. The story is set in two timelines: past and present. In the past, Liza is a maternal orphan, who wanders with her little brother onto Ladner's estate next door, an open-air botanical and zoological garden of his own making. Ladner, a British veteran of World War II, immigrates to Canada for undisclosed reasons and starts a new life as a taxidermist there. Bea, a local dignitary's daughter, who finds fitting in her small town difficult, joins Ladner on the estate and, although she feels some tension, she stays with him: she learns "to live surrounded by implacability, by ready doses of indifference which at times might seem like scorn. So she explained her condition, during the first half-year" (269). In this taxidermist Garden of Eden, the couple and the kids live a seemingly carefree life filled with instruction about nature. In the present, the elderly Ladner is in hospital, Bea takes care of him and phones the now grown-up Liza asking her to check on the house in the winter storm. Liza returns to the place she spent her childhood at and, much to her husband's surprise, vandalizes the house in her care.

The reader gains an insight into the secret motivating the trashing through Bea's and Liza's memories. Ladner had sexually abused Liza and her now dead little brother, something that Bea, despite all the clues, does not realize, as in the past so in the present. Bea's intentional blindness also prevents her from realizing how much Ladner despises her. But Liza is not ready to face the truth of her abuse, either. As a born-again Christian, she has begun a new life and now she is compulsively clinging to her own new rules. Her vandalization of the house is a real surprise to her husband as well, familiar with her new converted self only. However, sensing that a secret lurks in the shadows of her actions, he quietly assists her.

What makes the story rare even in Munro's oeuvre is the fact that there are two protagonists with two stories that overlap. In one, Bea is an Eve to Ladner as Adam: significantly, in one scene she looks for morels but only finds rotten apples. She chooses to ignore Ladner's hostility and the child Liza and Ken's telltale behavior over the years. In the present time of the story, she escapes into solitary drinking and reminiscing about life with Ladner. She has been tempted by Liza to face the truth about Ladner. In the past, the child Liza asks her to act as their protector by giving her a gift, which Bea misinterprets; in the present, she is unwilling to visit the vandalized house – Liza's message that Bea misinterprets again – or communicate with Liza; instead, while drinking, she imagines writing letters to Liza about her dreams. In the other storyline, Liza is an Eve to Ladner as Adam, and Bea tempts her to face the truth of her past by asking her to go back to Ladner's garden, the place of her abuse. However, rather than acknowledging that their secret life together was marked by him abusing her, she chooses to direct her rage at the world of his own making.



Bea and Liza represent very different personalities and life routes. One is disorganized and vain “with a checkered career” (265); the other is maybe a little too organized: “[Liza] never drank alcohol now, she never even ate sugar. She didn’t want Warren eating a Danish on his break, so she packed him oat muffins that she made at home. She did the laundry every Wednesday night and counted the strokes when she brushed her teeth and got up early in the morning to do knee bends and read Bible verses” (276). Yet, neither Liza nor Bea is able to face the truth about their Adam. They both insist on their own narrative: Bea on her version of what love is, Liza on her reason to hate Bea: “I already told you what she did to me. She sent me to college!” (283), she tells her husband. And “[s]he didn’t like college, didn’t like the people there. By that time she had become a Christian” (276), notes her husband to himself.

#### “RUNAWAY” (2004)

In “Runaway,” Carla, a young wife and Clark, her older husband live on a rather isolated farm in a trailer, which Clark is constantly tinkering on. Carla alleviates Clark’s sexual disfunction by making up “dirty” stories to satisfy his sexual fantasies. In some of these, their then ailing, now dead neighbor, the nationally recognized poet Leon, is a protagonist. When they run into money trouble, Clark tries to persuade his wife to blackmail Sylvia, Leon’s retired wife by threatening her with airing Leon’s (fictive) sexual molestation of Carla. Carla does not dare confront her husband, but neither does she want to fall for an obvious lie, so she chooses to run away on an impulse when Sylvia, misunderstanding the situation, encourages her to start a new life. But Carla soon changes her mind and returns to her husband. It is only later that she realizes that it was her husband who had killed her missing pet goat Flora, probably to punish her for her disobedience and her attempt at running away. But she deliberately ignores this possibility: she chooses not to investigate what happened to Flora, no matter how much her loss may hurt.

In the story, the isolated farm acts as the Garden, Carla as Eve, Clark as Adam, and Sylvia as the tempter. Sylvia inadvertently lets Carla observe her marriage to Clark from a different angle by telling her about an incident with Flora. Flora is a pet, a surrogate child, a biblical scapegoat and a symbol of the relationship dynamic between Carla and Clark at the same time. In one scene of the narrative, she appears with an apple in her mouth, reinforcing her symbolic meaning and association with knowledge. At the start of the narrative she is already missing, as is at the end, but in a letter to Carla, Sylvia tells her that Flora reappeared when Clark brought her borrowed clothes back after the failed attempt at running away. Carla thus catches Clark lying about the goat when he tells her that he still cannot find Flora and although Carla faintly

suspects where Flora's dead body may be lying, she does not allow herself to even contemplate the possibility that Clark killed her, let alone go and check. While still sitting on the bus Carla thinks about how this is her second running away: the first was when she left her comfortable middle-class life behind for Clark's sake – a loser to her parents' mind – because she was searching for authenticity. There she realizes that the meaning of her life is her relationship with Clark. If she gives up this relationship, she will also need to accept her failure for the search of her authentic self as well as her parents' judgement of him and herself. She rather chooses to stay blind to Clark's lie (or deed), an act of disloyalty to her pet goat/ surrogate child, to justify the value of her life with him. Flora's sacrifice seems to bring new peace and prosperity into their world: the rain stops, riding students reappear, and the days of financial difficulties are over.

It is noteworthy that the name Flora also appears in Munro's earlier narratives in connection with hidden knowledge suddenly revealed to the protagonist. In an early narrative, "Boys and Girls" (1968), Flora is the name of the horse that the teenage girl narrator sets free when she learns that her father intends to slaughter her for food on the fox farm. The name Flora is thus closely intertwined in the two narratives with the mystery of life, death and violence. The name is also featured in "Friend of My Youth" (1991), where it always appears as fit for the speaker's intentions. It is through her that the main character understands that we all shape our stories about ourselves and others, to justify our existing beliefs.

#### "DIMENSIONS" (2009)

If "Vandals" is one of Munro's darkest narratives, "Dimensions" is definitely her darkest. The young heroine of the story is called Doree/Fleur – another Flora – and Lloyd, her husband, a former orderly, is the Adam figure. They live in "a town they picked from a name on the map: Mildmay. They didn't live in town; they rented a place in the country. Lloyd got a job in an ice-cream factory. They planted a garden. Lloyd knew a lot about gardening, just as he did about house carpentry, managing a woodstove, and keeping an old car running" (Munro, "Dimensions"). Maggie, the neighbor/friend and Fleur's therapist, Mrs Sand are the ones who tempt Doree/Fleur with the truth.

The plot here also revolves around the hidden horror of the past. The reader awakens slowly to the secret that Lloyd killed their three children to punish his wife for her disobedience. The secret is infanticide and an abusive marriage. Before the murders, Doree constantly finds excuses for her husband's behavior; after their children's death, she tries to erase her memories of her past life. She takes a new name (Fleur), moves to a new city and washes the past away (she

works as a chambermaid cleaning after other people). She wanders aimlessly through her life, and to her own surprise, she starts to visit her husband in the asylum for the criminally insane because “[w]hat other use could she have in the world ... why is she here if not to at least listen to Lloyd?” (Munro, “Dimensions”) It is here that he comes up with a seductive story that the children are living happily in another dimension. Although Doree/Fleur is intrigued by the possibility that her children do not have to be dead, that they can continue to live in another dimension, she eventually moves on, however promising this other, alternate reality may be. Yet, she acknowledges their children’s death not as a result of the temptation by a friendly community of women (Maggie and Mrs Sand) but as that of an accident she witnesses.

At the centre of all three narratives there is a heroine trapped in an abusive relationship, who deliberately ignores or avoids information, signs, memories that might suggest negative or disturbing possibilities about the enigmatic hero of the stories. In these stories, Munro’s Adams are dark romantic heroes, stern, secretive, unpredictable, always ready for controversy, men who live by their own rules. Bea thinks of life with Ladner as learning to live inside a man’s insanity.

She had a couple of friends then, to whom she wrote and actually sent letters that tried to investigate and explain this turn in her life. She wrote that she would hate to think she had gone after Ladner because he was rude and testy and slightly savage [...] She would hate to think so, because wasn’t that the way in all the dreary romances—some brute gets the woman tingling and then it’s goodbye to Mr. Fine-and-Decent?

No, she wrote, but what she did think—and she knew that this was very regressive and bad form—what she did think was that some women, women like herself, might be always on the lookout for an insanity that could contain them. For what was living with a man if it wasn’t living inside his insanity? A man could have a very ordinary, a very unremarkable, insanity, such as his devotion to a ball team. But that might not be enough, not big enough—and an insanity that was not big enough simply made a woman mean and discontented. Peter Parr, for instance, displayed kindness and hopefulness to a fairly fanatical degree. But in the end, for me, Bea wrote, that was not a suitable insanity. (Munro, “Vandals” 268–269)

In “Runaway” Clark is introduced as follows: “Clark had fights not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour. There were places he would not go into, where he always made Carla go, because of some row.” “‘You flare up,’ said Carla. ‘That’s what men do’ [responds Clark]” (Munro).

Likewise, in “Dimensions” Lloyd is introduced as a person who holds strong opinions and judgements about others. For him, people are either enemies or

allies with little room for reconsideration. Although Dorrie suspects that Lloyd has a tendency to view people through a lens of disdain, especially if he feels slighted by them, she knows that contradicting him is futile. So she never does. When Doree/Fleur starts to develop a friendly relationship with someone else, Lloyd's reaction is predictable: "It got worse, gradually. No direct forbidding, but more criticism" (Munro, "Dimensions").

The female protagonists of these short stories accept living according to their partners' rules even if they grapple with the toll of maintaining their loyalty to their partners. Also, because they perceive their bond as unique and deeply personal, which should not be subject to scrutiny from others, they are more reluctant to betray their partner's trust than care for their own emotional well-being. They are willing to make sacrifices in the name of deeply felt human connections and intimacy.

Thus the three stories exhibit a number of shared characteristics, such as types of characters and relationships, elements of plot, and a thematic focus on characters shaping narratives they resist revising. Moreover, they also show a strong thematic coherence. However, the differences in their endings signify a change in Munro's perspective. While in her earlier narratives the Eve-like female protagonists are hopelessly caught up in the complexities of loyalty, intimacy, and individual identity, Munro envisions a different possible resolution for her intentionally blind female protagonist in her most recent narratives.

In the first narrative, the secret remains a secret, and is at most preserved as a scar in the taxidermist's Garden of Eden<sup>2</sup>: both Liza and Bea unconsciously opt for intentional blindness because it offers greater emotional comfort. In the second story, Carla suspects Clark's secret but refuses to ascertain what happened to Flora, fearing that she would not know who she is without Clark. In contrast, in the third narrative, Doree/Fleur comes to the realization that although the alternative reality presented by her husband is tempting, it demands a higher cost than she is prepared to pay. On the one hand, if she succumbs to his narrative about different dimensions, her life as defined through her relationship to Lloyd remains tenable. All she needs to do is believe. On the other hand, this erases the reality not only of his brutal action but also that of her and her children's experience. This is what she intimates when she catches the scent of the freshly ironed shirt of the young man in the accident spread out like Jesus on the cross. The young man, who almost died, who she resuscitated, who is now lying on the roadside, is someone's son; this someone ironed his shirt fresh before he left for his ride, this someone takes care of him and cares for him. The materiality of his life, the fact that he can return home matters to them. Thus she resists Lloyd's dimensions offering consolation in belief.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The three initials carved into the wood at the scene of the rape on Ladner's estate.

<sup>3</sup> Just as earlier she resisted the Christian leaflet lady in Mrs Sand's office.

She chooses the painful truth of her husband's deed and her children's death instead, and thus she can start to take responsibility for herself by getting off the bus.

"Vandals," "Runaway" and "Dimensions" delve into the intricacies of relationships by exploring our willingness to confront truth, our reactions when facing knowledge that could potentially distance us from a significant other, the sacrifices we make out of loyalty, not so much out of loyalty to others but rather to our stories about who we are in relation to others. At the core of these stories lies the question why we resist knowledge or truth when our relationships, even if they are abusive ones, are at stake.

### CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, the three stories draw upon the archetypal elements of the biblical Fall. The female protagonists, reminiscent of Eve, are tempted to uncover hidden truths that lie within the stories' silences. They face a pivotal choice: remaining blindly loyal to an enigmatic but flawed patriarchal figure or acknowledging his sins and thus risking the termination of their relationship within a figurative Garden of Eden. These Eves struggle with the decision, as rejecting their Adams represents not only disloyalty but also a challenge to their own self-identity shaped by their relation to the patriarchs.

Munro stated on several occasions that she started writing as a child because she felt the ending of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" was so unfair. She wanted to write a happy ending to it by all means. In the process of becoming a writer, Munro started to show her characters in their complex relationships. So successful was she in distancing herself from happy endings, that only few of her narratives end happily. However, after she received the Nobel Prize and after she had twice announced that she was retiring from writing for good, she also said that she had surprised herself again by experimenting with happy endings. The conclusion of "Dimensions" can be regarded as one such experiment.

The three short stories represent a group of stories about all-consuming love, where the female characters give themselves over to the romantic narrative about passionate love. In these stories, the heroine's fulfilment in love is possible, paradoxically, at the very moment when she is completely dissolved in it. This is the concept of love in Del's teenage fantasies in the early volume of *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), it appears later in *Who Do You Think You Are* (1978), and in the stories of *Open Secrets* (1994) as well. The significance of this group of short stories lies in that it shows both continuity and change in Munro's vision. Throughout Munro's work, reality and knowledge are prominent issues. Between her early and later writings, we see a change in the way

characters interpret reality and the way they seek, accept or reject knowledge. The three stories question the impact of knowledge or its rejection on the individual: whether it alienates or connects with others, whether it has a price, and if so, what it is, and whether that price is worth paying. At the heart of each narrative lies the quest of a woman who – at least initially – is daunted because she senses that knowledge may reveal horrors in her life, challenge or jeopardize the image she has maintained of herself, of her loved one, of their life together. Through the examples of the three narratives presented, the paper has explored a Munroian rendering of the story of the Fall, where knowledge allows Eve to detach herself from an abusive Adam and, by leaving the illusion of romantic, passionate love, rather than believing *his* story of themselves, she can start spinning a new one of herself for herself. In the final narrative, this possibility is posited as a happy ending.

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THE RESONANCE OF MANAWAKA:  
LANDSCAPES OF RECONCILIATION IN MARGARET  
LAURENCE'S MANAWAKA SERIES

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PAVLÍNA STUDENÁ

**Abstract**

During the 1960s and 1970s, Prairie fiction and literary criticism predominantly adopted a regionalist perspective. However, with gender, class, and ethnicity in the spotlight, this perception of the region has shifted from a preoccupation with physical landscapes toward the explorations of individual spaces of people inhabiting this distinct region and their inner landscapes. In Margaret Laurence's Manawaka series, the vast expanse of the Canadian Prairies serves as a transformative literary landscape in which Laurence weaves together the stories of settlers and the Métis, representing both the dominant and marginalized communities. Laurence challenges the prevailing Pioneer myth of conquering uninhabited land by emphasizing the role of the landscape as a catalyst for transformation for her protagonists. By interweaving the region's mythological past into the protagonists' journeys towards self-discovery, independence and dignity, Laurence conveys the idea of reconciliation on both personal and national levels. This paper focuses on the opening and concluding Manawaka novels, *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *The Diviners* (1974), aiming to trace how Laurence employs various landscapes, whether Prairie, mythological, ancestral, or imaginary, as potent instruments aiding the protagonists – and metaphorically Canada itself – in the process of transformation and liberation. These landscapes also symbolize reconciliation with nature, colonial history, and Indigenous heritage.

**Keywords:** identity; landscape, Manawaka, Margaret Laurence, prairie fiction, reconciliation, transformation

**Résumé**

Au cours des années 1960 et 1970, la fiction et la critique littéraire des Prairies ont surtout adopté une perspective régionaliste. Cependant, avec la mise en lumière des questions de genre, de classe et d'ethnicité, cette perception de la région est passée d'une préoccupation pour les paysages physiques à l'exploration des espaces individuels des habitants de cette région distincte et de leurs

paysages intérieurs. Dans la série Manawaka de Margaret Laurence, la vaste étendue des Prairies canadiennes sert de paysage littéraire transformateur dans lequel Laurence tisse ensemble les histoires des colons et des Métis, représentant à la fois les communautés dominantes et marginalisées. Laurence remet en question le mythe dominant des pionniers, celui de la conquête d'une terre vierge, en mettant l'accent sur le rôle du paysage en tant que catalyseur de la transformation de ses protagonistes. En entremêlant le passé mythologique de la région aux voyages des protagonistes vers la découverte de soi, l'indépendance et la dignité, Laurence transmet l'idée d'une réconciliation à la fois personnelle et nationale. Cet article se concentre sur le premier et le dernier roman de Manawaka, *The Stone Angel* (1964) et *The Diviners* (1974), afin de montrer comment Laurence utilise divers paysages, qu'ils soient prairiaux, mythologiques, ancestraux ou imaginaires, comme de puissants instruments aidant les protagonistes – et métaphoriquement le Canada lui-même – dans le processus de transformation et de libération. Ces paysages symbolisent également la réconciliation avec la nature, l'histoire coloniale et l'héritage autochtone.

**Mots-clés:** identité, paysage, Manawaka, Margaret Laurence, fiction des prairies, réconciliation, transformation

#### INTRODUCTION

Margaret Laurence (1926–1987) stands out as one of the most significant Canadian writers and activists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, considered by many “a founding mother of Canadian literature,” who has given voice to the Prairies (Gunnars viii). In the vast expanse of the Canadian Prairies, where winds whisper untold stories across grass fields and rolling hills, Laurence crafted a literary landscape centred around the fictional prairie town of Manawaka. Nora Foster Stovel (1999) interprets Manawaka, inspired by Laurence's hometown, Neepawa in Manitoba, as “a moralized landscape” (195) where geography mirrors the social and moral ideals of its residents. In this setting, Laurence weaves both Pioneer and Métis mythology into her protagonists' journeys, offering a unique lens through which to view their quests for emancipation, independence, and dignity. More significantly, Laurence's Manawaka serves as a powerful medium for narrating not only the stories of individual characters but also the tale of Canada itself – its landscape, history, and society –, conveying the idea of reconciliation in both personal and national contexts.

The Manawaka series, comprising five interconnected books – *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), and *The Diviners* (1974) – reflects Laurence's creative artistry as well as her engagement with themes of decolonization, ancestral heritage, and human freedom. While earlier scholarship focused on Laurence's role in



shaping multicultural perceptions of Canadian national identity and her critique of patriarchy, more recent studies have explored the thematic depth of her works from a global perspective and their relevance in contemporary discourse.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to trace how Laurence employs various landscapes, whether Prairie, mythological, ancestral, or imaginary, as potent instruments aiding the protagonists – and metaphorically also Canada itself – in the process of transformation and liberation. These landscapes also symbolize reconciliation with nature, colonial history, and Indigenous heritage.

While each book within the Manawaka series can stand on its own, their full power lies in the collective message of reconciliation that the story arc conveys when taken as a whole. However, due to the limitations of space, this article discusses primarily the opening and concluding novels, *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *The Diviners* (1974), which provide a concentrated exploration of the transformative power of landscapes, both physical and metaphorical, on the protagonists. The intention is to offer a targeted analysis of specific narratives that encapsulate the essence of reconciliation, conceived in this context as the process of acknowledging and addressing historical conflicts, disparities, and injustices, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between individuals and their environment. *The Stone Angel* (1964), challenges the pride and superiority of settlers not only over others but also over nature, landscape, and wilderness. In contrast, the final book, *The Diviners* (1974), reveals (post-) colonial traumas and emerging multiculturalism. Focusing on the landscape-rich narratives of these two novels, the article argues that it is the narrative thread of reconciliation on both personal and national levels that binds the pieces of the Manawaka series together. Margaret Laurence's vision of Canada's future as a coexistence of Indigenous peoples, immigrants of diverse backgrounds, and descendants of the Pioneers, with a strong emphasis on humanity, remains highly relevant today.

#### EVOLVING PERCEPTION OF PLACE

During the 1960s and 1970s, Canada grappled with issues of cultural identity, multiculturalism, and a re-examination of its colonial past as both the colonizer and colonized subject. Canadian cultural identity, as it was then articulated, was torn between the desire to form a respected but culturally distinguishable presence in the global cultural arena and a postcolonial sense of cultural

<sup>1</sup> To mention a few, Andreea Topor-Constantin (2013) seeks parallelism between life and fiction in Laurence's work, while Laura K. Davis (2017) scrutinizes Laurence's involvement in the politics of decolonization and her imaginative reconceptualization of both Africa and Canada. Nora Foster Stovel (2020) focuses on Laurence's non-fictional texts and introduces Laurence not only as a crafted and versatile writer but also as an activist engaged in socio-political issues.

inferiority. This dichotomy was intensified by the geographical isolation of Canadian culture and, simultaneously, being endangered by its proximity to the culturally dominant United States. The wave of Canadian national sentiment, generously supported by government funding, contributed to the recognition of Canadian literature as a potent tool for promoting national confidence both within the country and on the global stage. However, critics like Kit Dobson (2009) argue that this movement disproportionately favoured white middle-class Anglophone Canadians, sidelining Canada's colonial history, particularly its treatment of First Nations. Furthermore, the focus on the English/French duality and the struggle to differentiate Canada from the United States overshadowed the cultural contributions of Indigenous Canadians and immigrants.

During this period, critics such as Northrop Frye<sup>2</sup> brought regionalist viewpoints to Anglophone Canadian literature and criticism, which became "preoccupied with nature and its archetypal significance in a way that ignored the fact that Canada was an urban nation" (Birns 235). English Canadian writers of that time dealt with the vast landscape and wilderness on a massive scale, frequently using it as a metaphor for a protagonist's struggles. However, the ascendancy of gender, class, and ethnicity as key analytical categories prompted a significant re-evaluation of the concept of place as a defining element of one's identity, diminishing its former prominence (Wardhaugh 5). This transformative shift allowed Indigenous stories to intertwine with prevailing Pioneer myths, giving marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples and immigrants a newfound voice in Canadian literature.

Although Laurence's Manawaka stories remain inherently tied to the region, the perception of place has evolved beyond the physical landscape, shifting towards the inner landscapes of Prairie inhabitants. Laurence's protagonists struggle to find the most appropriate language to articulate the sense of their self, often discovering it through the surrounding landscape. Navigating physical realities, they immerse themselves in unconscious mental landscapes to explore the intricacies of their inner selves against the backdrop of family histories and ancestral mythologies. Within this inner landscape, clashes between their autonomous personalities, societal expectations, and seemingly inescapable realities often culminate in rebellions against prevailing norms and conventions, reframing the protagonists' perceptions and beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> In the preface to *The Bush Garden* (1971), Frye suggests that Canadian identity is intricately tied to the specific region a person originates from, making it particularly difficult to define. According to Frye, national identity is "local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture," while national unity stems from political awareness of Canadian citizenship (ii). However, with emerging themes like urban populations and urbanscapes in Canadian literature, Frye's focus on locality and connection to the wilderness has been challenged and re-articulated in recent decades.

Consequently, the protagonists often embark on real-world adventures that facilitate transformative changes in life patterns and reconciliation with their former selves, symbolizing a broader journey toward reconciliation within Canadian society.

#### WILD LANDSCAPES OF MEMORIES

In her Manawaka fiction, Margaret Laurence consistently challenges the enduring myth of the Golden West. This myth romanticizes settlers as brave conquerors of untamed lands, offering a utopic and “soothing contrast to the harsh realities of the contemporary world” (Nash 69). Laurence, however, tells the stories of Pioneers and settlers alongside those of the Métis as representatives of the marginalized Indigenous population and bearers of their cultural heritage. In doing so, she subverts the simplistic portrayal of settlers as brave yet peaceful and hard-working individuals cultivating an uninhabited land, confronting it with the image of the Métis, dispossessed of their land and pushed to the margins of society. By engaging with Canada’s Pioneer past and its rigid dogmas, Laurence opens up the possibility of reconciliation.

The story of *The Stone Angel* (1964) revolves around a ninety-year-old Hagar Shipley, representing the generation of Laurence’s grandparents, children of the first settlers. Initially, Hagar rebels against her authoritarian Pioneer father, but as she ages, she eventually adopts his provincial conservatism, living confined by pride and social prejudice. Hagar thus stands for both narrow Puritan morals and a rebellious spirit against the provincial background they represent; although “it was, of course, people like Hagar who created that background, with all its flaws and its strengths” (Laurence, “A Place to Stand On” 18). Hagar’s journey towards inner transformation commences in her old age, triggered by the prospect of relocation to a senior home. The shock comes when her son Marvin, whose wife grows tired of constantly caring for the increasingly infirm Hagar, decides to sell the family house – a symbol of everything Hagar has gained in her lifetime. In defiance, Hagar escapes to the wilderness, represented by an abandoned fish cannery on the coast, where she is determined to assert her autonomy.

The physical challenges Hagar faces in the natural landscape as she struggles while seeking refuge mirror the internal conflicts which she carries within herself. Although Hagar’s climbing the difficult terrain and conquering the territory can be seen as a triumph over both the wilderness and her aging body, it also foreshadows the eventual shift in her perspective. Initially, she follows the Pioneer belief in dominating the surrounding landscape and defeating hostile Nature to find safety and security. The turning point comes when Hagar notices her fingerprint on a spongy spot on a piece of mouldered wood. Debra

Dudek views Hagar's act of peacefully imprinting her finger on nature as "simultaneous marking and being marked," signifying Hagar's growing acceptance of her identity as a part of the surrounding world (250). The moment of reconciliation with the landscape parallels Hagar's inner transformation – she starts to acknowledge, but also to question, her past, her experiences, and the environment that shaped her. Decorating her hair with dead June bugs further underscores Hagar's willingness to embrace the beauty of the natural world and to be transformed by it. Hagar moves from the Pioneer's perception of the landscape as an enemy that must be dominated to understanding that the natural landscape can enrich her life and be an integral part of her Self and vice versa.

Hagar's escape to the wilderness is not just a physical journey but also a psychological and emotional exploration of her identity and past experiences. Through Hagar's story, Laurence challenges the notion of settler supremacy and emphasizes the importance of embracing diversity and different perspectives. Hagar's dual journey through the material world and a landscape of memories unfolds in the present, with past recollections triggered by details like colours or scents. These recollections serve as portals to crucial moments of her life, allowing her to revisit and reconsider her past actions and beliefs, leading to her eventual reconciliation with her past self. This process resonates with the concept of "life review", the term coined by Robert Butler for a natural process involving the resurgence of past experiences and conflicts to be "surveyed and reintegrated" (66). Through this introspective journey, Hagar reconciles with her past mistakes and unresolved conflicts, facilitating personal transformation even in advanced old age. Amid wilderness, where Hagar confronts the challenges of nature and her own internal conflicts, her memories intertwine with the landscape, offering a space for self-discovery and reconciliation.

#### ANCESTRAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES

Unlike Hagar in *The Stone Angel*, who grew up in a pretentious brick house symbolizing Pioneer pride, Morag Gunn, the protagonist of *The Diviners*, had a starkly different childhood. Orphaned and raised by foster parents near the Manawaka town dump, Morag grapples with feelings of outcast status and a yearning to connect to her roots. Christie Logan, her foster father, weaves imaginative tales of mythical ancestors for Morag – Piper Gunn and his wife Morag, who led their people from Scotland to the new country –, a narrative steeped in the "legends of dispossessed newcomers [...] wandering people seeking deliverance in a new land" (Foster Stovel 200). Christie's storytelling provides little Morag with a sense of belonging, cultural heritage, and family mythology, nurturing her desire for a different life. Morag hopes to escape her

Prairie background by marrying Brooke Shields, a British literature professor. However, their marriage soon turns stifling, largely due to Brooke's patronizing behaviour and controlling nature. Some critics, such as Laura K. Davis, draw a parallel between Morag's experience and Canada's history of colonization. Imed Sassi likens Brooke to Prospero, embodying "the white patriarchal figure" who regards Morag as his possession (160). Amid Morag's struggles for autonomy, personal liberation intertwines with Canada's colonial traumas.

Ironically, it is within the confines of the cage of her home that Morag discovers her means of escape through books and writing. Starting to write her first novel, Morag uses storytelling as a refuge from marital constraints. She creates a heroine through whom she can realize herself, allowing her freedom to explore her identity as a woman, a writer, and a Canadian. In this narrative journey, Morag's writing, like Laurence's storytelling, becomes a reflection of the vast Canadian landscape, a canvas for coming to terms with identity, ancestral heritage, and past wrongs. Just as storytelling becomes a healing and transformative experience for Morag, Laurence offers her writing as a source of healing and reconciliation for Canada itself, connecting the inner landscapes of characters with the physical landscapes of their homeland.

The exploration of ancestral history at both national and individual levels resonates in Canadian literature during the wave of national sentiment of the 1960s and 1970s. As a successful writer, Morag embarks on a journey to Scotland in search of her roots. However, her true quest is not finding the ancestral land but rather discovering the landscape of Christie's tales. The motif of pilgrimage to Morag's ancestral country was inspired by Laurence's own journey to Scotland in pursuit of a deeper understanding of a distant past she had not personally experienced (Laurence, "A Place to Stand On" 6). However, Laurence's exploration goes beyond her ancestral history. Drawing from Laurence's experience with decolonization in Africa and her critique of the continued oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada, Davis argues that "by gender and by her own self-positioning, [Laurence] aligned and sympathized with the oppressed" (7). By writing about the Métis history as a white, middle-class writer, Laurence defies the norms of her time.

Despite Laurence's engagement with Indigenous themes, the Métis characters in her Manawaka fiction can still appear somewhat flat and schematic, primarily serving to challenge the Pioneer myth and warn of the potential loss of Indigenous cultural heritage and pristine Canadian wilderness. The Métis in the Manawaka texts often play a secondary role of "the Others" with whom the white majority is compared and contrasted. Daniel Coleman observes that in Canadian literature written by non-Indigenous authors, "Indigenous, or Métis figures are not central and fully rounded characters but usually ones whose function is to establish the roundedness, sensitivity, or civility of the British White character" (33). Britishness, as Coleman points out, is an

important aspect of Canadian self-definition, reinforcing a binary opposition in which “normative Canadianness is White and British” (34). Everything else, however much welcomed, accepted, or tolerated, is thus “the Other” and is usually marked accordingly with terms such as “multicultural”, “multiethnic” or in another way that emphasizes otherness and difference.

In *The Diviners*, Laurence highlights the character of Morag’s daughter Pique, the offspring of a Scottish-Canadian mother and a Métis father, to point out the coexistence of different cultural backgrounds in Canada and thus create a diverse and more inclusive literary landscape. Pique is a representative of the young generation in which Laurence sees hope of reconciliation. Like her mother, Pique embarks on a complicated journey to find her roots and come to terms with her mixed heritage. Through the character of Pique, listening to her father’s stories about her heroic ancestors fighting alongside Luis Riel for the Métis rights, Laurence reveals the tensions between Indigenous and settler cultures. But Pique’s father also tells her a poignant story of the Métis part of her family, a story whose fragments are embedded in all five Manawaka books: about his brother Paul, who had drowned at twenty-five and whose death was never properly investigated; about his sister Val, who died at twenty-seven as a drug-addicted prostitute; and about his second sister Piquette and her kids who tragically died in the fire at their shack in Manawaka. In this bitter summary, Laurence points out the unfair treatment and discrimination against Indigenous people and their social exclusion.

Pique’s identity as the descendant of both the settlers and the Métis means that she is placed between two cultural landscapes, without fully belonging to either. Drawing from the ancestral mythologies of both her parents, Pique embodies the emerging Canadian multiethnic feminine identity of the 1970s. Her journey of self-discovery interweaves with her connection to her ancestry, underscoring Laurence’s broader exploration of the transformative power of landscapes and storytelling. As Morag embarks on her pilgrimage to Scotland and Pique on her journey to Galloping Mountain to rejoin her Métis relatives, both quests transcend mere genealogy, evolving into searches for a deeper understanding of themselves and reconciliation with their ancestral heritage. The Manawaka series concludes with Pique’s song, which says “I can’t help but being torn. [...] But the valley and the mountain hold my name” (Laurence, *The Diviners* 382) and in which Pique embraces her Scottish and Métis heritage. As Sassi points out, Pique’s construction of identity works “through identification with land, with space, which has not been domesticated or acculturated” (168). Through the landscape metaphors of the valley, representing the Métis Prairie heritage, and a mountain of Scottish ancestry, Laurence underscores the importance of reconciliation – an embrace of both the triumphs and challenges of the past, as a crucial element in forging an inclusive Canada.

## OUTER AND DOMESTIC LANDSCAPES

Margaret Laurence's literary works consistently explore the symbolism of the house as a powerful representation of belonging and home. The interplay between the concepts of "home" and "house" exerts distinct influences on identity and the sense of belonging, as noted by Mary Douglas, who argues that "home" is "located in space" and involves bringing that space under control, while "house" represents the physical structure (289). Both elements significantly shape one's self-perception. Moreover, as Karen Macfarlane suggests, the recurring motif of the house as a symbol of one's identity resonates deeply with Canada's unsettled relationship with postcolonial tensions (223). Just as postcolonial narratives are often characterized by binary oppositions and contrasts, the protagonists' perception of home within Laurence's Manawaka texts also oscillates ambivalently. Whether raised in grand brick houses of pioneering ancestors or fringing-town shacks, Laurence's characters experience a sense of unbelonging and often escape to some kind of real or imaginary landscape.

In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar wanders through various houses in her landscape of memory, each embodying a different stage of her journey. From the imposing brick house of her childhood, through the worn Shipley place during her marriage and Mr. Oatley's house where she worked as a housekeeper, to the Vancouver house she bought herself, each house contributes to shaping Hagar's identity. Her emotional connection to her own house is profound; she sees it as an embodiment of her identity, as a repository of her experiences, memories, and personal autonomy. Hagar, both angry and desperate when realizing that she is losing her house and therefore the anchor to her identity, states: "If I am not somehow contained in [...] this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel* 34). Thus, when faced with the impending sale of her house, Hagar's fundamental sense of Self and belonging is threatened. Unable to face this threat, Hagar flees to the wilderness where she hopes to preserve her autonomy.

There is another layer of symbolism of the house in *The Stone Angel* that underscores the significance of acknowledging history and fostering intergenerational understanding. Hagar bought her house for the money inherited from Mr. Oatley, her former employer, who made a fortune smuggling Chinese women into Canada to evade the prohibitive head tax. In the hospital, where Hagar recovers from her adventure in the wilderness, she encounters Sandra Wong, a descendant of Chinese immigrants. Hagar suddenly realizes that Sandra's grandmother might be one of those women that Mr. Oatley assisted in bringing to Canada. Hagar thus contemplates that she might "owe [her] house to [Sandra's] grandmother's passage money" (Laurence, *The Stone Angel*

280). Hagar's ensuing sense of indebtedness compels her to transcend self-centredness and physical frailty and offer Sandra assistance, which Davis sees as "a reparative moment" resonating through generations (88-89). Hagar's story thus extends beyond her lifetime, weaving together ancestral stories in an attempt to reconcile with the complicated legacies of the past.

In *The Diviners*, Laurence deepens her exploration of the house as a symbol of identity and belonging and examines the intergenerational dynamics between the Pioneer settlers and their descendants. Laurence portrays the rebellion of her generation's women, who stand in stark contrast with their forebears, who were constrained by entrenched cultural and societal norms. Nonetheless, she also acknowledges the remarkable resilience demonstrated by the Pioneer settler women when confronted with the challenges of the Canadian wilderness.

Upon Morag's return from her transformative journey to Scotland, she relocates to a century-old cabin by the river, fully embracing life in the wilderness. Seeking guidance, Morag turns to Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Settlers' Guide*, a guidebook on the life of settlers published in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Traill embodies one of the essential Canadian myths of a "hardy settler woman living a tough life in great hardship, walking through the snow to help sick neighbours, ploughing, raising children and suffering from the cold and isolation with grit and determination" (Wisker 256). Morag regards Traill as a mentor and engages in mental debates with her. Initially, Morag holds Traill in high esteem, perceiving her as an indisputable authority. However, as she fails to match Traill's level of competence, Morag gradually grows weary of the archetypal ideal of the hard-working Pioneer woman that Traill represents. Morag's evolving perspective leads her to realize that despite their remarkable competence, the early settler women were also victims of their circumstances, forced to persevere amidst harsh conditions. Morag reflects on the toll these hardships took on them, pondering how many of those "women went mad? Loneliness, isolation, strain, despair, overwork, fear. Out there, the bush. In here, a silent worried work-sodden man, squalling brats" (Laurence, *The Diviners* 77-78). These introspective moments prompt Morag to reconcile with the Pioneer Woman archetype, embracing not only the Pioneer Woman's strength and endurance but also recognizing that she is no longer a threatening ideal. Instead, the Pioneer Woman becomes a symbol of resilience and adaptability, reflecting the enduring spirit of the women who came before her.

Laurence recurrently juxtaposes the ancestral houses of Manawaka's wealthiest and poorest residents, the settlers and the Métis, represented by the Tonnerre family, highlighting the stark contrasts of their histories and backgrounds. The first settlers, with their European perceptions and traditions, encountered a landscape that did not always conform to their established norms. In contrast,



the Métis emerge as “the progeny of Riel’s and Dumont’s comrades-in-arms from Batoche – and as such they are symbols of the not only valid, but also crucial part of Canadian history” (Kolínská 153). For the Métis, the Prairies hold a deep-rooted connection – a homeland that has sustained them for generations before being dispossessed. In *The Diviners*, the Tonnerre house is tragically transformed into a site of death for Piquette Tonnerre and her children when it catches fire, claiming their lives. This ancient shack, surrounded by discarded tin cans and old car parts, and yet a testament to the Tonnerre family’s enduring ancestral pride, turned into Piquette’s coffin and symbolically also into a sombre memorial for the Métis community.

Laurence’s utilization of the trope of the house illuminates the dynamics between individuals, their histories, and the perpetual human journey. The house in her texts not only serves as a representation of belonging but also bridges the divide between the past and future, providing a lens through which characters reconcile with their identity, ancestry, and belonging.

## CONCLUSION

As Thomas points out, in her essay “The Chariot of Ossian,” Margaret Laurence was firmly convinced that “writers must work out of their own roots in place and time, so, for her, both personal identity and nationality begin with place and region” (142). However, in Laurence’s literary landscape, the interplay between identity, heritage, and place expands the prevailing regionalist approach to Canadian literature of the 1960s and 1970s. Ancestral heritage emerges as a cornerstone of Manawaka narratives, inviting readers to traverse the dual realms of regional myths and reality. Through the protagonists’ journeys within the ancestral and mythological landscapes, the narrative invites readers to contemplate the enduring impact of the past on the present and future, encouraging a deeper engagement with the mosaic of human existence.

Yet Laurence’s narratives not only provide a portrayal of the protagonists’ individual growth but also serve as a mirror reflecting Canada’s collective journey toward reconciliation. Through the stories of her protagonists, who wander through various landscapes, real or imaginary, Laurence highlights the need for understanding one’s past in order to investigate, challenge, and ultimately reinvent and reconstruct it into a new emancipated identity. The personal stories of the protagonists parallel the stories of the Canadian nation, both coping with their settler past, (post-)colonial present, and multicultural future. In this way, Laurence’s approach stands as an early example of Canadian literature embracing and incorporating Indigenous history and culture, paving the path for more inclusive and diverse narratives in Canada’s literary landscape. Laurence not only seeks an outward reconciliation with the postcolonial

past but also attempts an inward reconciliation with the Indigenous population. Almost half a century ago, Laurence envisioned a future Canada characterized by the coexistence of Indigenous people, immigrants from diverse backgrounds, and descendants of the earliest settlers – an eloquent plea for reconciliation.

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LE CANCER DU VILLAGE: ANALYSE GÉOPOÉTIQUE  
DE LA HÉRONNIÈRE ET L'HABITUDE  
DES BÊTES DE LISE TREMBLAY



RAMONA PÁL-KOVÁCS

**Résumé**

«[...] la catastrophe qu'a été ma vie depuis que je suis revenu au village. Je n'arrive pas à m'enlever de la tête que c'est lui le responsable du cancer d'Aline. Elle a attrapé le cancer du village» (Tremblay, *La héronnière* 98–99). À la frontière de nature et société se trouve le village de Lise Tremblay – au Bas-du-Fleuve dans *La héronnière* (2003) et au Saguenay dans *L'habitude des bêtes* (2017). Espace liminal qui, par pur désir de survie, est en constant conflit avec les changements qu'apportent tous éléments extérieurs, les *étrangers*, mais aussi les animaux (les bêtes), et même les femmes. Niant sa nature liminale, le village affirme son identité en créant des forces centripètes qui tendent vers le centre, le pareil, l'uniforme et qui engendrent des lois pour garder son homogénéité. Il s'apprête à combattre tout ce qui contredit à ses lois sociales: « Tu t'habitues ou tu t'en vas » (Tremblay, *L'habitude des bêtes* 34). Les éléments perturbateurs en face du centre ne peuvent que subir leur sort, ainsi le village, par de multiples conflits et affrontements, éradique de son milieu la diversité et la multitude, et se veut en isolement total. Souvent, ces lois despotiques, non écrites, font fuir ceux qui ne veulent pas s'y soumettre: les étrangers, les femmes et les animaux. Ne restent que ceux qui veulent à tout pris être gardiens des «mœurs» du village, se bercer dans un passé idyllique où tout correspond à la volonté du groupe. Dans notre communication, nous proposons d'étudier les paysages ruraux de Lise Tremblay dans son recueil de nouvelles *La héronnière* et dans son roman *L'habitude des bêtes* en analysant d'un point de vue écocritique les structures du village, les lois de la nature et de la société qui régissent les personnages.

**Mots-clés:** analysis géopoétique/géocritique, écocriticisme, Lise Tremblay, liminalité

**Abstract**

“[...] the disaster which has been part of my life has been since I came back to the village. I can't get it out of my head that it is the village that is responsible for Aline's cancer. She had the cancer of the village” (Tremblay, *La héronnière*

98–99). Liz Tremblay’s villages, Bas-du Fleuve in *La héronnière* (2003) and Saguenay in *L’habitude des bêtes* (2017), are situated on the border between nature and society. A liminal space, which – in order to survive – is in constant conflict with the changes brought about by *outsiders*, animals (beasts) and even women. Denying its own liminality, the village asserts its own identity by creating a centripetal force to maintain its homogeneity. It prepares to fight anything that contradicts the social law “you get used to it or you leave” (Tremblay, *L’habitude des bêtes* 34). Since subversive subjects opposed to the center are condemned to suffer, the village strives to eliminate diversity and plurality through multiple conflicts and confrontations, thereby isolating itself completely. The only ones left are those who do want to submit and sink into an idyllic past where everything conforms to the collective will. They become the guardians of village *customs* at all costs. In our paper, we propose to study Lise Tremblay’s rural landscapes in her collection of short stories *La héronnière* and in her novel *L’habitude des bêtes* from an ecocritical point of view by analyzing the structures of the village and the laws of nature and society that govern the characters.

**Keywords:** geopoetic/geocritical analysis, ecocriticism, Lise Tremblay, liminality

## INTRODUCTION

Dans notre article, nous proposons d’étudier les paysages ruraux, notamment ceux liés au village, de Lise Tremblay dans son recueil de nouvelles *La héronnière* et dans son roman *L’habitude des bêtes* en analysant d’un point de vue *géopoétique* les espaces décrits, la structure du village, et les lois de la nature et de la société qui régissent les personnages. Nous partons d’une approche principalement *géocritique* ou *géopoétique* de l’espace et des paysages qui au fur et à mesure qu’on introduit les espaces naturels et leurs habitants tourne vers *l’écocritique*, méthode qui va au-delà du simple examen des espaces humains pour examiner notre rapport à la nature.

## COMMENT PARLER DES PAYSAGES LITTÉRAIRES?

Quelques décennies après le *tournant linguistique* qui dans les années 1960 proposait d’examiner tous textes littéraires en les dissociant de leur référentialité extratextuelle, leur auteur et le contexte historique et social dans lequel ils ont été créés, le *tournant spatial* propose de réintroduire le référent et la référentialité de la pensée en utilisant l’espace comme principe organisationnel plutôt que la langue ou le temps d’une narration chronologique. Dans cette ligne de pensée, l’histoire du récit se déploie non pas dans une chronologie traditionnelle, mais

dans l'espace hétérogène, une sorte d'*hétérotopie* que Michel Foucault définit comme un espace ayant « le pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles » (Foucault 758). La temporalité du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle donne sa place à la spatialité des 20<sup>e</sup> et 21<sup>e</sup> siècles (Collot). La géophilosophie de Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari s'intègre dans la lignée du *tournant spatial* quand elle affirme que la pensée « n'est ni un fil tendu entre un sujet et un objet, ni une révolution de l'un autour de l'autre. Penser se fait plutôt dans le rapport du territoire et de la terre » (82).

La nomadologie de Deleuze-Guattari<sup>1</sup>, développé dans *Mille plateaux* en 1980, introduit une nouvelle structure de la pensée qui, face à celle arborescente de l'appareil d'État, est celle du rhizome. L'appareil d'État est le centre, l'intériorité, l'institutionnalisé, tandis que le nomadisme (ou *la machine de guerre*) représente l'extériorité, la menace, l'autre. Les auteurs introduisent également l'opposition de l'espace *optique* (ou strié), lié à la vision et de l'espace *haptique* (ou lisse), lié au tactile, sans profondeur visuelle : « [D]ans l'espace strié comme dans l'espace lisse, il y a des points, des lignes et des surfaces [...]. Or dans l'espace strié, les lignes, les trajets, ont tendance à être subordonnées aux points : on va d'un point à un autre. Dans le lisse, c'est l'inverse : les points sont subordonnés au trajet » (597). Les deux espaces ne sont ni homogènes, ni finis, mais représente l'hétérogénéité et l'infini de manière bien différente. Pour visualiser cette différence, pensons aux exemples que présentent les arts textiles : la structure du strié est celle du tissu, du tricot, de la broderie, espace délimité d'au moins deux bords, tandis que celle du lisse est celle du feutre, du crochet ou du *patchwork*, espace qui à la limite peut exister sans début ni fin dans la toile infinie d'entrecroisements des points et des lignes.

Dans la lignée de la perception spatialisante du monde, nous introduisons deux tropes de la pensée : ceux de la carte et du paysage que nous adopterons pour encadrer notre analyse de l'écriture de Lise Tremblay.

Tandis que le paysage représente la perception du proche (du *haptique*), la carte nécessite une certaine distance de son objet d'étude. Ces deux tropes représentent bien les deux types de lecture d'un texte : celui du lecteur qui idéalement ne prend aucune distance et se plonge dans les paysages du texte ; et celui de l'académique ou le critique littéraire qui, en adoptant l'attitude d'un cartographe, trace les contours du récit, regroupe les thématiques et donne un aperçu – d'en haut – du texte, soit rend le lisse des paysages strié. Le sujet se perd dans le paysage, la limite entre perçu et percevant se dissout dans l'horizon. En tant que compréhension du monde, le paysage contient à la fois l'observant qui fait partie de ce monde même et l'observé. Les deux perceptions ne sont pas en stricte opposition, mais passe l'un à l'autre, et représente plutôt la démarche du lecteur qui ne fait qu'alterner entre les deux lors de sa lecture.

<sup>1</sup> Voir aussi White, Kenneth. *L'esprit nomade*. Grasset, 1987.

## L'ORDRE DU VILLAGE

Depuis la parution de son premier ouvrage en 1990, Lise Tremblay publie cinq romans: *L'hiver de pluie* (1990), *La pêche blanche* (1994), *La danse juive* (1999), *La sœur de Judith* (2007) et *L'habitude des bêtes* (2017); deux recueils de nouvelles: *La héronnière* (2003) et *Rand de la Dérive* (2022); et un récit: *Chemin Saint-Paul* (2015). Dès le début de sa carrière d'écrivaine, elle reçoit plusieurs prix littéraires, dont le Prix du Gouverneur général en 1999 pour son roman *La danse juive*, le Grand Prix du livre de Montréal et le Prix des libraires du Québec en 2004 pour son recueil de nouvelles *La héronnière*. Elle est l'objet de plusieurs travaux académiques et d'un dossier de *Voix et Images* en 2020.

On souligne souvent la singularité de l'œuvre de Tremblay dans la littérature québécoise. En effet, il est difficile de placer son écriture dans les genres traditionnels, par exemple, ses œuvres qui parlent des régions s'inscrivent difficilement dans les courants du terroir ou de l'anti-terroir traditionnels pour annoncer l'arrivé de l'écriture du néoterroir. (Entretien 25). Elle est souvent qualifiée d'écrivaine de la *désespérance*, même si celle-là, nous le verrons plus tard, est accompagnée dans ses derniers textes d'un sentiment d'espoir.<sup>2</sup>

L'écriture plutôt simple de Tremblay n'aborde pas ses histoires de l'extérieur. Celles-là naissent tout d'abord en l'auteure pour enfin, après plusieurs années, voir la page en forme de texte. Tremblay pratique une écriture proche pour dévoiler son univers par le biais de multiples paysages. Tremblay ne prend pas sa distance, elle ne cartographie pas dans son écriture, ainsi ne trouvons-nous pas de narrateur omniscient chez elle. La voix de la narration est très personnelle, intime; elle relève du proche, de l'espace *haptique*, du paysage.

De plus, il ne s'agit pas d'une auteure prolifique. Elle écrit peu et peu souvent, et pourtant ses œuvres évoquent un univers unique dans le paysage littéraire québécois. À travers des phrases simples, elle décrit un monde aux enjeux complexes: des paysages qui représentent sa compréhension du monde. Elle est aussi inspirée par des lieux réels pour son écriture: *La héronnière*, par exemple, évoque les Isles-aux-Grues, où elle avait eu un chalet; tandis que dans *L'habitude des bêtes* Tremblay s'inspire des lieux de son enfance et de sa retraite, où, après avoir habité 30 ans à Montréal, elle est revenue habiter.

Ce sont ces deux ouvrages qui font l'objet de notre analyse. *La héronnière*, dont le protagoniste est le village même, nous dévoile la structure de ce paysage, repris dans *L'habitude des bêtes* qui par sa narration intime nous introduit un nouveau rapport de l'homme à sa nature.

*La héronnière* est un recueil de nouvelles qui comprend cinq nouvelles, dont les deux premières, « La roulotte » et « La héronnière » ont le même narrateur, un homme du village (regard indigène ou rural), tandis que les trois autres sont

<sup>2</sup> Voir *L'habitude des bêtes* (2017) ou *Rang de la Dérive* (2022).



narrés par des «étrangers» venus au village : une ethnologue (regard exogène ou urbain) dans «Élisabeth a menti» et «La beauté de Jeanne Moreau», et un homme du village devenu étranger qui revient pour sa retraite dans son village natal (regard hybride ou néorural) dans «Le dernier couronnement» :

Les deux premiers points de vue font ressortir plusieurs oppositions : rural/ urbain, homme/ femme, manuel/ intellectuel. Le retraité, troisième point de vue, – parce qu'il embrasse à la fois le village et la ville, parce que son destin l'amène à comprendre sa femme après sa mort, parce que, manuel, il s'engage dans un travail intellectuel – offre une synthèse qui permet de réconcilier les oppositions. (Paré 458).

Par ces multiples regards se dévoile le vrai protagoniste du recueil qui est non pas une personne, mais un lieu : le village lui-même avec tous ses habitants. Peu à peu, en lisant les nouvelles, se dévoile l'univers d'un village sans nom avec ses lois qui régissent les interactions de ses habitants. Parmi ces lois, nous soulignons le secret, le mensonge, la honte et la peur des étrangers.

Dans le dossier de la revue *Voix et Images* consacré à Lise Tremblay au printemps-été de 2020, on trouve des analyses profondes de plusieurs de ses œuvres. Nous notons quelques éléments importants portant sur le village de Tremblay d'après les articles «La perturbation» de Francis Langevin et «Le conflit des codes et des classes dans *La héronnière* et *La sœur de Judith* de Lise Tremblay» de Martine-Emmanuelle Lapointe en y ajoutant nos propres observations.

Dès la première nouvelle, nous découvrons cette étrange dynamique entre les villageois et les étrangers. Ces étrangers peuvent être des simples écotouristes intéressés par la nature, des ornithologues arrivés pour le Symposium, des chasseurs ou des personnes de la ville qui viennent pour passer l'été dans leur chalet. Peu importe de quel étranger il s'agit, ils sont tous perçus comme l'«Autre» par les villageois, même si les chasseurs semblent le mieux intégrés dans l'ordre du village, les mieux acceptés et tolérés par les villageois. Les étrangers sont la clé pour la survie du village, alors on aime bien l'argent que cela apporte à son économie, mais il reste une certaine méfiance envers eux. Ce sont des éléments perturbateurs qui sont là pour déstabiliser l'ordre du village.

Ce village se trouve à la frontière de nature et société – au Bas-du-Fleuve dans *La héronnière* et au Saguenay dans *L'habitude des bêtes*. C'est un espace liminal qui, par pur désir de survie, est en constant conflit avec les changements qu'apportent les éléments extérieurs, les étrangers, mais aussi les animaux (les bêtes) et les femmes.

Niant sa nature changeante – entre un passé idyllique et un avenir incertain – le village affirme son identité en créant des forces centripètes qui tendent vers le centre, le pareil, l'uniforme – comme l'*appareil d'État* chez Deleuze-Guattari, ou même le *centre* dans la sémiosphère de Youri Lotman – et qui engendrent

des lois pour garder son homogénéité. Ces lois sont entretenues par la honte et le mensonge. La honte agit comme une sorte d'autorégulation, tandis que le mensonge est manipulateur et régit toutes interactions entre les villageois et les étrangers. Le village s'apprête à combattre tout ce qui contredit à ses lois sociales. Les éléments perturbateurs en face du centre ne peuvent que subir leur sort, ainsi le village, par de multiples conflits et affrontements, éradique de son milieu la diversité et la multitude, et se veut en isolement total des changements, un espace atemporel. Souvent, ces lois despotiques, non écrites, font fuir ceux qui ne veulent pas s'y soumettre : les étrangers, les femmes, les animaux, et même les jeunes qui ne retournent pas au village après avoir fini leurs études. Ne reste que ceux qui veulent à tout prix être gardiens des *mœurs* du village, se bercer dans un passé idyllique où tout correspond à la volonté du groupe, celle en grande majorité des hommes. Néanmoins, le dommage est fait, la dégradation de cet ordre a commencé et le changement est imminent.

Le village comme il l'était avant est déjà mort, seuls ceux qui ne veulent pas le voir et veulent le défendre à tout prix ne l'admettent pas. L'ethnologue, dans « La beauté de Jeanne Moreau, » elle, n'hésite pas à constater que « [l]e village était mort depuis longtemps, c'était devenu, peu à peu, un lieu de villégiature pour riches professionnels urbains en mal de tranquillité » (Tremblay, *La héronnière* 79). L'ordre du village est celui des hommes. La narratrice condamne Martine (à la beauté de Jeanne Moreau) pour ne pas être plus indépendante. Elle admet que Martine est « une femme magnifique, intelligente, mais [...] "laissée en friche" » (76). Cependant, plus tard dans le texte, elle l'« envie » pour sa « simplicité » : « Elle n'était que soumission et résignation. Pour Martine, le monde avait un ordre et un sens, celui du village. Je lui enviais sa sérénité. » (85) Mais Martine, elle aussi, comme autant de femmes avant elle, finit par quitter le village, acte qui surprend la narratrice : « Depuis quelques années, le village était déserté par les femmes. J'avais toujours pensé que la seule qui ne partirait jamais, c'était elle. Je ne m'étais jamais autant trompée sur quelqu'un » (89).

Les mouvements migratoires vont dans les deux sens : d'une part, il y a les visiteurs mentionnés, d'autre part on peut constater le départ des femmes et des jeunes. Cela dit, tandis que la migration vers le village est temporelle, celle vers la ville, elle, est permanente, ce qui déstabilise l'ordre fragile du village qui reste en combat contre cet exode.

L'atmosphère des nouvelles ne dépeint pas un village idyllique, on est loin de cette nostalgie de la vie simple, de ce retour à la nature qui est de nouveau à la mode.<sup>3</sup> Il se passe des choses derrière les sourires polis, des choses qui sont gardés en secret, même si tout le monde connaît la vérité. C'est le cas dans « La héronnière » où plusieurs des villageois connaissent l'assassin de Roger Lefebvre, l'organisateur du Symposium qui « pour un étranger, [...] a pris pas

<sup>3</sup> Pensons ici à l'exode urbain des quelques dernières années dû à la pandémie et au télétravail.

mal de place au village» (33). Et sinon, il y a les mensonges pour cacher la vérité: «la seule règle du village était le mensonge. Tout le monde sait tout et tout le monde fait semblant de l'ignorer» (77) – affirme la narratrice de «La beauté de Jeanne Moreau».

Ceux les plus sensibles de cette société sont à la fuite: les femmes quittent le village et les animaux sont chassés; ou, à cause de leur vulnérabilité, attrapent le «cancer du village». Le narrateur dans «Le dernier couronnement,» nouvelle clôturant *La héronnière* se lamente ainsi sur la maladie de sa femme: «La nuit, si je ne dors pas, je me lève et me mets à mon travail. Il n'y a que cela pour m'empêcher de penser à la catastrophe qu'a été ma vie depuis que je suis revenu au village. Je n'arrive pas à m'enlever de la tête que c'est lui le responsable du cancer d'Aline. Elle a attrapé le cancer du village» (98–99). Ajoutons ici que Dan, le chien du narrateur de *L'habitude des bêtes* meurt, lui aussi, d'un cancer. Cela ne semble pas être qu'une simple coïncidence.

L'image de ce cancer, le cancer du village, ne cesse d'apporter un certain malaise dans cet environnement. Elle nous hante. Cette amertume qui ressort des paroles du narrateur de la nouvelle, personnage médiateur entre le village et les étrangers, a été le déclencheur de nos recherches qui visent à comprendre comment cette métaphore représente les forces néfastes sous-jacentes à l'ordre du village.

C'est comme si le village décrit dans les nouvelles et le roman, ne pourrait qu'être toxique, venimeux, mortel. La stabilité tant désirée vient à un prix, tous ceux qui la menacent doivent subir des conséquences: «Tu t'habitues ou tu t'en vas» (34), ou tu meurs. En s'appêtant à se battre contre tous changements, le village est attaqué de l'intérieur par sa propre pourriture. Le cancer nous rappelle l'inévitable sort de tout être vivant. La mort est dans l'ordre de la nature et même si le village se veut de l'ordre de la culture avec ses structures sociales, il ne peut que se superposer sur les espaces naturels puisque l'homme relève à la fois de la nature et de la culture.

#### L'ARRIVÉE DES LOUPS

C'est dans cet ordre du village que s'inscrit l'histoire de *L'habitude des bêtes*, roman publié 14 ans après la publication de *La héronnière*. Cependant, au fur et à mesure qu'on avance dans la narration, nous constatons que le narrateur, au lieu de rester figé dans le regard exogène d'un étranger venu s'établir dans le village il y a quelques dizaines d'années, ne va plus se soumettre aux lois du village, mais va comprendre à l'aide de son chien une vérité plus profonde, celle liée aux lois de la nature pour enfin pouvoir affronter la mort en toute paix. C'est l'histoire du déplacement graduel du narrateur d'un être social vers un être naturel. Pour comprendre ce changement, nous adoptons un point de vue

écocritique puisqu'il ne s'agit plus que du seul rapport de l'homme à son espace (naturel ou social), mais de l'arrivée de l'environnement, la nature comme force perturbateur dans l'ordre social pour nous rappeler nos origines « naturelles ».

Stéphanie Posthumus dans une conférence présentée en 2005, intitulée *Pour une écocritique québécoise* explique que

[l]’écocritique intègre les prémisses du *nature writing* sans pour autant s’interroger sur ce qu’une telle intégration puisse représenter sur le plan méthodologique. D’une part, elle affirme que l’être humain, en tant qu’être social, est fondamentalement et nécessairement aliéné de la nature. D’autre part, elle embrasse le modèle écologique du monde qui montre que l’être humain est nécessairement intégré à l’environnement. Si cette contradiction ne pose pas de problème à l’écocritique, c’est que l’opposition entre l’être humain et la nature sert avant tout de principe méthodologique. Pour promouvoir le rétablissement du rapport entre l’être humain et la nature, il faut d’abord supposer l’existence d’une opposition originale (6).

Seul problème est que l’écocritique est encore dans son enfance et ne peut réellement offrir d’autre qu’une approche idéologique sans méthodologie élaborée (Vignola 11). En tant qu’« approche thématique » qui emprunte ses outils et ses modèles à d’autres disciplines, elle n’est tout de même pas dépourvue de potentiel pour un jour devenir un vrai outil d’analyse critique.

Si la géocritique nous incite à réintroduire les espaces réels dans nos discours sur la littérature (Westphal), et que la géopoétique nous invite à penser le rapport entre l’homme et la Terre, son environnement, et à examiner la culture par rapport à la nature (White), la géophilosophie, elle, nous introduit la pensée nomade qui se définit par rapport à l’espace parcouru et non pas par les structures préexistantes. On se demande alors si l’écocritique s’inscrira encore dans la pensée du « tournant spatial » en modifiant l’approche de la géopoétique pour étudier le rapport entre l’homme, la nature et ses espaces, ou si elle ne fera pas plutôt partie du soi-disant « tournant non-humain » qui « s’engage à décentraliser l’homme » pour se tourner vers le non-humain : « les animaux, les corps, les systèmes organiques et géophysiques, la matérialité ou les technologies » (Grusin vii, *nous trad.*). Elle peut en effet, dépendamment du point de vue, faire partie de l’un ou de l’autre selon l’orientation adoptée : « l’une, anthropocentrique, priorise l’humain, l’autre, biocentrique, privilégie les écosystèmes » (Paré 455). Dans notre article nous privilégierons une approche décentralisée de l’écocritique, ni complètement anthropocentrique ni purement biocentrique, mais une qui s’apprête à comprendre l’homme en tant qu’élément de la nature et la nature comme environnement de l’homme.

Le déclencheur, non pas de l’action, mais des réflexions du narrateur, l’arrivée des loups bouleverse le village qui se sent menacé. Les loups sont les

ennemis des villageois et des chasseurs. Pour comprendre cette menace, il faut d'abord comprendre ce que la chasse signifie dans l'ordre du village.

La chasse est un élément central des nouvelles et du roman. Elle est une importante source de revenus pour le village. Souvent on parle d'une certaine fébrilité lors des périodes de chasse, le village se réveille et est envahi par les chasseurs. Cette chasse s'inscrit dans l'ordre du village, ce n'est pas une chasse pour la survie ou pour se nourrir, mais pour tuer. Elle ne fait pas partie des lois de la nature, elle n'est qu'une pure passion des hommes; des villageois et des citadins pareils. Cette passion partagée envers la chasse est le point de rencontre entre les étrangers et les villageois.

La raison pour laquelle les locaux ne semblent pas être dérangés par l'arrivée des chasseurs c'est que la chasse décrit le rapport des villageois envers la nature qui est celui de la *domination*. Denise Paré dans son article « Habitats, migrations et prédatons » mentionne deux autres rapports à la nature qui sont présentés dans *La héronnière* à côté de la domination: celui des urbains qui est la *consommation* et celui des néoruraux qui est la *réappropriation* (465–466). À ceux-ci s'ajoute un quatrième rapport dépeint dans *L'habitude des bêtes* que, faute de mieux, nous désignerons comme « naturel », c'est-à-dire « relatif à la nature ».

L'individu dans ce rapport « naturel » ne se voit plus dans un ordre hiérarchique par rapport à la nature où l'un doit rester en pouvoir pour ne pas périr, il se comprend plutôt dans l'ordre de la nature où l'homme n'est plus au sommet de la pyramide (structure vertical arborescente), mais fait partie de la toile complexe du monde naturel (structure horizontale rhizomatique).

Deux des personnages principaux du roman participent d'abord à cette folie de la chasse et s'abandonnent à cette fébrilité, pour ensuite l'abandonner du jour au lendemain. Pour le narrateur, c'est l'arrivée d'un chiot qui sera à l'origine de ce changement: Dans ma vie, il y avait un avant-Dan et un après-Dan. Bien que ça puisse paraître loufoque, son arrivée avait été plus importante que mon divorce » (Tremblay, *L'habitude des bêtes* 56). Pour l'autre personnage qui s'appelle Mina, c'est probablement l'ombre de la mort, de la fin de la vie qui va l'a détournée de la chasse.

Le monde du narrateur est bouleversé par l'arrivée de Dan, un chiot qu'il reçoit d'un vieil Indien lors d'un de ses trajets dans la réserve. Avant l'arrivée de Dan, il vit la vie habituelle des étrangers et des villageois qui tourne autour de la saison de chasse:

En reprenant la route vers le chalet, j'ai vu que Dan s'était réveillé. Il était assis sur la banquette et regardais dehors. On était début septembre. La chasse allait commencer bientôt. Pendant des années, ça m'avait rendu fébrile. Je prenais deux semaines de congé. Je ne chassais que quelques jours. Le reste du temps, je transportais des chasseurs pour une pourvoirie. Il en venait de partout des États-Unis.

J'aimais cette effervescence, la voix plus haute des hommes. L'odeur de la terre mêlée à celle des chasseurs. Puis un jour, pas longtemps après avoir adopté Dan, ça ne m'avait plus rien dit. Et c'était exactement comme quand vous perdez le désir pour une femme. C'est le même corps, les mêmes seins, la même odeur, mais vous ne sentez plus rien. Il arrive même que vous ayez une vague nausée. C'est ce que j'avais ressenti. J'avais vendu le Beaver [son hydravion], laissé mon bureau de dentiste et ma clientèle à une Vietnamiennne. J'avais rénové le chalet et je m'étais installé ici (Tremblay, *L'habitude des bêtes* 27–28).

Pour Mina aussi, cela a été du jour au lendemain : Mina disait que, plus jeune, elle avait aimé cette fébrilité [de la préparation de la chasse]. Puis un jour, elle ne sait pas pourquoi, elle avait pris son camion pour aller en ville faire des provisions en vue de préparer la saison, et elle était revenue sans avoir rien acheté. Elle avait écrit « Fermé pour la vie » sur un vieux carton et avait abandonné la roulotte (Tremblay, *L'habitude des bêtes* 61).

Le narrateur est donc plus sous l'emprise du délire de la chasse, à travers la narration de cet étranger venu de Montréal, on assiste à une lente défaite des structures qui tiennent l'ordre du village. C'est un roman qui se termine avec l'espoir du changement : « J'allais mourir tranquille » (Tremblay, *L'habitude des bêtes* 164). C'est une sorte de dénouement heureux en écho à la désespérance de *La héronnière*.

Le narrateur découvre le vrai rapport avec la nature, et non pas celui abusif du village et de la chasse. Ou même celui des écotouristes ou ornithologues qui ne font que visiter le village et traitent la nature comme objet d'émerveillement et de beauté. C'est la compréhension des vraies lois de la nature, les loups, les bêtes, la mort, qui en fin de compte apportent avec soi la paix pour le narrateur et Mina. Ceux-ci réussissent à accepter l'arrivée incontournable de leur propre fin.

## CONCLUSION

Au début de notre article nous avons posé la question à savoir « Comment parler des paysages littéraires? ». Ce qui nous semblerait plus pertinent à présent ce serait de demander « Comment parler de la nature dans la littérature? ». Dans une époque où la crise climatique nous hante de plus en plus et que l'inaction est de moins en moins une option, la littérature peut-elle se permettre de ne pas être engagée? À présent, à force de devoir regarder en avant, nous ne pouvons pas nous empêcher de revisiter l'idéologie de la littérature engagée. Avec le retour du référent, revient la responsabilité des écrivains. Par le biais de la littérature, nous découvrons notre propre monde qui déclenche – nous espérons – un changement positif dans le lecteur. Cependant, est-ce cela assez pour voir le changement politique et sociétale nécessaire afin d'éviter les plus

grands dégâts du changement climatique? Probablement pas. Mais comme on le dit souvent : chaque petit compte. Et, somme toute, pour pouvoir atteindre ces changements désirés, nous devons réévaluer notre rapport à la nature, passer d'une structure hiérarchique de la dominance, la consommation et la réappropriation à celle horizontale du rhizome, entremêlé par autant de créatures et être vivants – et morts – sans début, ni fin, ni hiérarchie figé dans le temps, bref *naturel*.

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# UN PAYSAGE URBAIN PATRIMONIALISÉ: LE QUARTIER SAINT-HENRI DE MONTRÉAL

—◀—  
ANIKÓ ÁDÁM

## Résumé

*Bonheur d'occasion* de Gabrielle Roy (1945) marque un moment décisif dans l'histoire de la littérature québécoise, c'est le premier roman urbain où l'auteure dépeint un portrait à mille visages et réaliste du quartier Saint-Henri de Montréal. Un portrait, parce que ce quartier avait et a toujours un visage humain. L'étude, dans une première étape, vise à examiner ce paysage urbain à travers sa présence dans un texte littéraire, ayant une longue histoire économique, sociale, politique et culturelle. Dans une deuxième étape, nous souhaitons examiner le procédé qui, sous l'influence de la diffusion du roman de Gabrielle Roy, esthétise d'abord le quartier, ensuite engendre les transformations réelles de cet espace urbain pour l'introduire finalement dans une catégorie du patrimoine culturelle où se met en œuvre la mémoire collective. Ce paysage urbain, encore vivant, toujours très populaire, attire les touristes et devient sous leur regard un paysage muséifié.

**Mots-clés:** Gabrielle Roy, quartier Saint-Henri de Montréal, l'escape urbain, la patrimoine culturelle

## Abstract

Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) marks a decisive moment in the history of Quebec literature: it is the first urban novel in which the author paints a thousand-faceted, realistic portrait of Montreal's Saint-Henri district. It really is a portrait, because this neighborhood had and still has a human face. Firstly, our study is to examine this urban landscape with its long economic, social, political and cultural history through its presence in a literary text. Secondly, we wish to examine the process which, under the influence of the dissemination of Gabrielle Roy's novel, first aestheticizes the district, then engenders the actual transformations of this urban space and finally introduces it into a category of cultural heritage where collective memory is put to work. This urban landscape, still alive and popular, attracts tourists and becomes a museum landscape.

**Keywords:** Gabrielle Roy, Montreal's Saint-Henri district, urban spaces, cultural heritage

Le roman intitulé *Bonheur d'occasion* de Gabrielle Roy (1945) marque un moment décisif dans l'histoire de la littérature québécoise, c'est le premier roman urbain où l'auteure dépeint un portrait à mille visages à la fois réaliste et poétique du quartier Saint-Henri de Montréal. Un portrait, parce que ce quartier avait et a toujours un visage humain.

Notre étude vise à examiner ce paysage urbain à travers sa présence dans un texte littéraire, ayant une longue histoire économique, sociale, politique et culturelle. Une présence métonymique, puisque la description romanesque de ce lieu et de ses habitants attribue une forte valeur sémiotique à ce quartier, et soutient la stratégie narrative de l'auteure selon laquelle c'est ce lieu qui procure, comme un masque, une identité sociale et psychologique aux personnages.

Nous souhaitons examiner aussi le procédé qui, sous l'influence de la diffusion du roman de Gabrielle Roy, esthétise d'abord le quartier, ensuite engendre les transformations réelles de cet espace urbain pour l'introduire finalement dans une catégorie du patrimoine culturelle où se met en œuvre la mémoire collective. Ce paysage urbain, encore vivant, toujours très populaire, attire les touristes et, contrairement à beaucoup de quartier touristique, arrive à garder son caractère vivant et évite la muséification.

Après la période où la littérature orale québécoise est mise sur papier à la fin du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle, la littérature du terroir fait son apparition au Canada et, dans la deuxième moitié du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, elle tente d'offrir une réponse à la tentative d'assimilation du gouvernement britannique. Cette tentative n'a pas de succès, elle aboutira pourtant à la formation d'un gouvernement de coalition en 1842. L'idéologie de conservation prend forme. Les axes principaux de cette idéologie du terroir reposent sur trois éléments: la terre, la famille et la religion. Le roman emblématique de ce type de récit est le livre de Louis Hémon intitulé *Maria Chapdelaine: récit du Canada français* écrit en 1911.

Gabrielle Roy (1909–1983) juste après la deuxième guerre mondiale et suite à la grande noirceur, déconstruit dans son roman exactement ces trois piliers: l'agriculture laisse la place à la ville, à un quartier ouvrier; la famille, vivant avec neuf enfants dans la misère et la désespérance, est détruite, puisque c'est la guerre qui lui assure les moyens de subsistance, le fils et le père sont enrôlés; et la religion n'assure aucun soulagement, ni moral, ni spirituel.

Gabrielle Roy est née à Manitoba et est éduquée à l'académie Saint-Joseph (Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy*). Après une formation d'enseignante à l'École normale supérieure de Winnipeg, elle enseigne dans les écoles rurales de Marchand et de Cardinal et à l'École Provencher à Saint-Boniface.

En 1937, elle peut partir pour l'Europe et étudier l'art dramatique à Londres d'abord et ensuite à Paris. En 1939, elle doit revenir au Canada à l'aube de la guerre mondiale; elle s'établit à Montréal et gagne sa vie comme journaliste, tout en continuant son travail d'auteure. C'est en tant que reporter qu'elle

devient connue du grand public. Elle se fait un nom dans le *Bulletin des Agriculteurs*, notamment grâce à des séries de reportages publiés dans plusieurs numéros. Entre 1941 et 1945, les reportages de Gabrielle Roy brossent un portrait saisissant de Montréal (« Tout Montréal », 1941), couvrent l'exil de colons madelinots en Abitibi (« Ici l'Abitibi », 1941-1942) ou dressent un tableau des caractéristiques socio-économiques de diverses régions du Québec (« Horizons du Québec », 1944-1945)<sup>1</sup>.

Plus qu'un simple gagne-pain, la collaboration au *Bulletin* peut être envisagée comme le point de départ du parcours littéraire de Gabrielle Roy – comme nous explique Antoine Boisclair en citant le biographe de Gabrielle Roy –, c'est-à-dire à la fois comme un apprentissage décisif et comme une « première consécration [...] qui l'oriente définitivement vers l'écriture » (Boisclair 107), la compassion, l'intérêt pour les minorités culturelles et les colonies, mais aussi la fascination pour le nomadisme et les personnages solitaires ainsi que le goût des paysages et de la géographie. Du point de vue de l'écriture, c'est également en rédigeant ces articles qu'elle va acquérir un style personnel.<sup>2</sup>

Le *Bulletin des agriculteurs* permet à Roy de vivre un peu plus confortablement et de disposer du temps libre nécessaire à l'écriture d'un roman. C'est un projet auquel elle pense depuis un moment déjà et qu'elle a commencé à réaliser en 1941 ou 1942. Ce roman est le *Bonheur d'occasion* dont elle termine une première version durant l'été 1943, en Gaspésie, et qui marquera à jamais le paysage littéraire québécois. Inspiré par les reportages de Gabrielle Roy sur le quartier ouvrier de Saint-Henri durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, *Bonheur d'occasion* offre le portrait saisissant des classes populaires de la métropole, aux prises avec la pauvreté et le chômage. Publié en juin 1945, ce premier roman de Gabrielle Roy connaît un succès fulgurant et est célébré par la critique pour son réalisme et pour la qualité de la plume de son auteure. Ce premier roman urbain de la littérature québécoise a remporté plusieurs prix : *Le Prix Femina* 1947 en France et une médaille de l'Académie canadienne-française. Le 12 août 2017, la parution du roman *Bonheur d'occasion* a été désignée en tant qu'événement historique, en vertu de la Loi sur le patrimoine culturel.

L'histoire se déroule à Montréal, principalement dans le quartier ouvrier et défavorisé de Saint-Henri, entre février et mai 1940, au cours de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, alors que le Québec souffre encore des conséquences de la Grande Dépression. Florentine Lacasse, une jeune femme de 19 ans qui aide ses parents à subsister en travaillant comme serveuse au restaurant et qui rêve d'une vie meilleure, se fait inviter au cinéma par un client, Jean Lévesque. Elle se laisse charmer, mais Jean Lévesque, ambitieux et jaloux de son indépendance,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. entre autres : <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2441893?doc-searchtext=Horizons%20du%20Qu%C3%A9bec>, consulté le 30 août 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Roy, *Heureux les nomades et autres reportages* (1940-45).

ne veut pas poursuivre la relation et lui présente un ami, Emmanuel Létourneau, un soldat en permission, qui tombe véritablement amoureux de Florentine. Or, Florentine ne peut pas oublier Jean, et cette attirance invincible aura d'importantes conséquences sur sa vie. Parallèlement, l'histoire présente Rose-Anna, la mère de Florentine et Azarius son père, et leur vie de famille à Saint-Henri, difficile en raison de leur pauvreté.

Le thème central est la misère éprouvée par les Canadiens français des années 1930 et 1940. Cette misère incarnée par la famille Lacasse est illustrée par la description du quartier Saint-Henri, à Montréal. Malgré le côté sentimental du roman et les lueurs d'espoir, l'œuvre est souvent considérée comme pessimiste, comme en témoigne la dernière phrase : « Très bas dans le ciel, des nuées sombres annonçaient l'orage » (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 442).

Au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, le village devient connu sous le nom de Saint-Henri-des-Tanneries. Le premier canal de Lachine, d'une longueur de 14 kilomètres, est inauguré en 1825 mais n'aura que peu d'impact sur la croissance du village. Il faut attendre le passage de la voie ferrée *Montréal & Lachine Railroad* en 1847, premier chemin de fer desservant Montréal pour que Saint-Henri devienne, au milieu du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'un des plus importants centres industriels du Canada.



Figure 1. Gabrielle Roy entourée de neuf petits garçons du quartier Saint-Henri à Montréal. 29 août 1945. BAnQ Vieux-Montréal (P48,S1,P11917). Conrad Poirier

L'histoire de ce village représente bien le mouvement et le développement de l'industrialisation et de l'urbanisation du quartier, mais également de Montréal. Le quartier entreprend un important virage industriel au tournant du 19<sup>e</sup> et 20<sup>e</sup> siècles. Plusieurs usines, attirées par des primes offertes par la municipalité, s'installent dans Saint-Henri. Une gare y est également construite. La ville de Saint-Henri devient une commune autonome le 8 janvier 1894. Endettée, avec d'infrastructures rudimentaires (trottoirs en bois, routes non pavées,

éclairage aux réverbères) la ville choisit l'annexion à Montréal le 30 octobre 1905, devenant dès lors le quartier Saint-Henri.



Figure 2. Maison de la rue Saint-Augustin dans le quartier Saint-Henri à Montréal, 29 août 1945. BANQ Vieux-Montréal (P48,S1,P11923). Conrad Poirier

Le roman de Gabrielle Roy devient un vrai événement culturel qui alimente depuis la mémoire collective québécoise et invite écrivains et cinéastes de se replonger dans le milieu fourmillant de ce quartier toujours populaire, haut en couleur, et très poétique grâce aux destins humains qui donnent corps à cet espace urbain.

Comme nous en témoigne le recueil de nouvelles intitulé *Malgré tout on rit à Saint-Henri* (2012) de Daniel Grenier, réminiscence évidente et avouée du *Bonheur d'occasion*:

On dit qu'à Saint-Henri, tout est possible. Ici, les filles ressemblent toutes à des actrices de cinéma [...]. Toutes les lignes du métro convergent et le bruit de fond de l'autoroute n'empêche pas les gens de rêver à un avenir meilleur, à leur lointain pays tropical. On dit qu'ici des histoires s'écrivent, malgré tout, au milieu des obsessions débridées, des défaillances technologiques et des quiproquos. Sous les viaducs du CN et dans les replis de la fiction, on croise aussi bien des gangsters ineptes que des aînés en fugue ou des amoureuses désillusionnées (quatrième de couverture).

La vénération des écrivains pour ces lieux de culte est exemplaire de ces effets de représentation esthétisée, voire médiatisée, processus lors duquel une expérience visuelle se transforme en création artistique. Avec la métonymie où la population d'un quartier donne visage aux humbles maisons, aux rues, aux

carrefours des chemins de fer, l'écriture propose du lieu une vision nouvelle qui ne correspondrait pas avec l'espace urbain et architectural concret.

Il s'arrêta au centre de la place Saint-Henri, une vaste zone sillonnée du chemin de fer et de deux voies de tramways, carrefour planté de poteaux noirs et blancs et de barrières de sûreté, clairière de bitume et de neige salie, ouverte entre les clochers et les dômes, à l'assaut des locomotives hurlantes, aux volées de bourdons, aux timbres éraillés des trams et à la circulation incessante de la rue Notre-Dame et de la rue Saint-Jacques. [...] (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 37-38).

À l'issue de cette démarche d'intériorisation, les lieux font corps avec le scribe-contemplateur: parler du lieu revient à parler de soi. Parler de Saint Henri, représenter la rue Saint Augustin devient une question identitaire. Quand l'espace est impossible à percevoir sous sa forme concrète de lieu, le réalisme seul ne marche pas et cède la place à une perception intériorisée, symbolique, psychogène. L'esthétisation fait trembler le lieu, elle le déstabilise parce qu'elle néglige son caractère clos. Les procédés utilisés dans le texte pour décrire le milieu urbain, sont révélateurs du contenu sémantique qui lui est associé. Le quartier ne s'offre pas seulement au regard, il peut se visiter, être parcouru et exige la participation du corps au cours de cette expérience esthétique au sens propre du terme.

La maison où Jean avait trouvé un petit garni se trouvait immédiatement devant le pont tournant de la rue Saint-Augustin. Elle voyait passer les bateaux plats, les bateaux-citernes dégageant une forte odeur d'huile ou d'essence, les barges à bois, les charbonniers, qui tous lançaient juste à la porte leurs trois coups de sirène, leur appel au passage, à la liberté, aux grandes eaux libres qu'ils retrouveraient beaucoup plus loin, lorsqu'ils en auraient fini des villes et sentiraient leur carène fendre les vagues. Mais la maison n'était pas seulement sur le chemin des cargos. Elle était aussi sur la route des voies ferrées, au carrefour pour ainsi dire des réseaux de l'Est et de l'Ouest et des voies maritimes de la grande ville. Elle était sur le chemin des océans, des Grands Lacs et des prairies. [...] ce n'était autour d'elle que poussière de charbon, chevauchée des roues, galop effréné de vapeur [...] Étroite de façade, la maison se présentait drôlement à la rue; de biais comme si elle eût voulu amortir tout les chocs qui l'ébranlaient (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 34).

L'écriture de Gabrielle Roy met en œuvre la perception sensible, où s'entremêlent vision, odeur et ouï pour créer une atmosphère à la fois réaliste, familière et poétique:

La fièvre du bazar montait en elle, une sorte d'énervement mêlé au sentiment confus qu'un jour, dans ce magasin grouillant, une halte se produirait et que sa vie y trou-

verait son but. Il ne lui arrivait pas de croire que son destin, elle pût le rencontrer ailleurs qu'ici, dans l'odeur violente du caramel, entre ces grandes glaces pendues au mur où se voyaient d'étroites bandes de papier gommé, annonçant le menu du jour, et au son bref, crépitant, du tiroir-caisse, qui était comme l'expression même de son attente exaspérée. Ici se résumait pour elle le caractère hâtif, agité et pauvre de toute sa vie passée dans Saint-Henri (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 9).

La romancière manitobaine considère le Québec comme son pays; non seulement elle le désignera souvent dans son œuvre par les termes *maison, foyer, nid*, mais elle avoue qu'il lui a toujours inspiré un *sentiment de sécurité totale*. À travers l'admiration qu'elle voue à ses grands-parents Landry, ces éternels « chercheurs d'horizon (Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy* 45) » – comme elle les appelle –, le Québec prend dans son esprit une dimension quasi mythique. On voit bien que la création veut mémoriser, immortaliser son objet et le fixer dans le temps.



Figure 3. La place Saint-Henri avec ses tramways, ses barrières de traverse de chemin de fer et l'église de Saint-Henri démolie en 1969, 29 août 1945. BANQ Vieux-Montréal (P48,S1,P11914). Conrad Poirier

La patrimonialisation du quartier entamée par l'écrivaine québécoise est suivie de deux documentaires, toujours en hommage au roman *Bonheur d'occasion* et aux habitants du quartier Saint-Henri: le documentaire intitulé *A Saint-Henri le cinq septembre*, réalisé par Hubert Aquin en 1962 porte sur une tournée de 24 heures dans le quartier. On y découvre la simplicité de cette population franche, ni très riche, ni absolument pauvre, qui a commencé à décroître alors que Saint-Henri n'abrite plus les tannereries. Un deuxième documentaire le suit sous le titre *À St-Henri, le 26 août*, réalisé par plusieurs cinéastes documentaristes qui

veulent rendre hommage et à Gabrielle Roy et à Hubert Aquin en montrant le quartier et ses habitants avec beaucoup d'humanité. Il faut mentionner également l'adaptation sur grand écran du *Bonheur d'occasion* réalisée en 1983 par Claude Fournier, avec dans le rôle principal la belle Mireille Deyglun.



Figure 4. Rue Beaudoin à St-Henri, 29 août 1945. Archives nationales à Montréal, fonds Conrad Poirier (P48, S1, P11908). Photo: Conrad Poirier

*The Tin Flute* est le titre de la traduction anglaise du *Bonheur d'occasion* qui a été sélectionné comme *Book of the Month* de mai 1947 par la *Literary Guild of America*, le plus grand club du livre des États-Unis. À ses abonnés, la *Guild* a adressé un petit feuillet publicitaire appelé *WINGS, the Literary Guild Review*, pour annoncer la nouvelle sélection. C'est donc dans la livraison de mai 1947 qu'a paru, en anglais, sous la signature de Gabrielle Roy, le texte intitulé *How I Found the People of St. Henri, Ma rencontre avec des gens de Sant-Henri*, dans lequel la romancière relate la genèse de l'œuvre sélectionnée. Le manuscrit des aveux de l'auteure s'est perdu, n'a jamais été republié depuis, ni en anglais ni en français. Ce sera François Ricard qui édite ce texte précieux en 1996 dans les *Cahiers franco-canadiens de l'Ouest* (Roy 273 -279). Notre auteur y avoue que dans ce quartier elle était frappée par « un trop-plein d'atmosphères, et de personnages » (276). Et elle continue la description du quartier à milles couleurs, à mille bruits, à mille odeurs et à mille images, autant de vies et de visages :

Lorsqu'on s'y promène, il est difficile de savoir si l'on est d'abord frappé par la forêt de ses cheminées d'usines, le souffle bruyant de ses machines haletantes, ses églises en pierre de taille, ses couvents ou ses institutions paroissiales dont les imposantes constructions semblent vouloir régir les maisons entassées alentour. [...] Je me



souviens de l'orageuse soirée printanière au cours de laquelle, descendant à pied de Westmount, je me suis retrouvée pour la première fois sur la place Saint-Henri. Les timbres des tramways tintaient, un train filait à toute allure devant l'église; voitures, camions et piétons s'amassaient derrière les barrières de sûreté de chaque côté du square; le vent charriait à travers les rues étroites la plainte mélancolique d'une péniche. La fumée des locomotives flottait au-dessus des petites maisons de bois. Puis, soudain, au milieu de ce brouhaha, les cloches d'innombrables dômes et clochers se sont mises à sonner à toute volée (Roy, *Cahiers* 277).

En guise de conclusion je me permets de citer le biographe de Gabrielle Roy, François Ricard : « Ce qui reste d'elle, ce qui n'appartient qu'à elle, et ce en quoi, par conséquent, son œuvre est à la fois unique et universelle, c'est sa pratique exclusive et singulière du roman, c'est la foi entière qu'elle a mise dans le roman comme art, comme pensée, sinon comme morale, bref, comme sa seule patrie, non pas à l'exclusion mais du moins au-dessus de toutes les autres » (Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy* 494).

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INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPES: NATIVE HUMOUR  
AND IDENTITY CONTESTED  
THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE ARTS



KRISZTINA KODÓ

**Abstract**

Humour is an effective tool for communication that breaks down cultural boundaries. Canadian Native culture is an oral culture hence storytelling is one of its basic characteristic features whether we speak of literary works or artistic creations. Within the framework of the present paper I wish to probe the dimensions of Indigenous landscapes, hence the symbolic understandings that define or circumscribe the works of Bill Powless, a self-taught Mohawk artist from the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve, near Brantford, Ont., and Drew Hayden Taylor, Ojibwe writer and dramatist. Through their realistic portrayal of everyday life, they manage to link history, spiritual symbolism, fantasy, and formulate a modern myth that fits intricately into present day multicultural/ global society.

**Keywords:** humour, indigenous literature, Bill Powless, Drew Hayden Taylor

**Résumé**

L'humour est un outil de communication efficace qui abolit les frontières culturelles. La culture autochtone canadienne est une culture orale et la narration est donc l'une de ses principales caractéristiques, qu'il s'agisse d'œuvres littéraires ou de créations artistiques. Dans le présent article, je souhaite étudier les dimensions des paysages indigènes, c'est-à-dire les interprétations symboliques qui définissent ou circonscrivent les œuvres de Bill Powless, artiste mohawk autodidacte des Six Nations de la réserve de Grand River, près de Brantford (Ontario), et celles de Drew Hayden Taylor, écrivain et dramaturge. Par leur représentation réaliste de la vie quotidienne, ils parviennent à relier l'histoire, le symbolisme spirituel et la fantaisie, et à formuler un mythe moderne qui s'intègre parfaitement dans la société multiculturelle et mondiale d'aujourd'hui.

**Mots-clés:** l'humour, la littérature autochtone, Bill Powless, Drew Hayden Taylor

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of the 2022 CEACS conference entitled *Canadian Landscapes* proposes in its plural form a Canada that is a conglomeration of many varied perspectives and interpretations. The presenters successfully illustrated that Canada's many "Landscapes" expound a vast array of meanings. Accordingly, one can speak of political, geographical, cultural, and historical landscapes in general terms; further in-depth analysis allows for a more detailed examination of specific fields of study, hence for the purpose of this article, we can consider and examine Indigenous landscapes focusing on the interaction between the Indigenous peoples of Canada and their sociocultural environment that offers different mindsets and attitudes.

The past bears its imprint on the present and ultimately paves a path for the future. Indigenous culture looks back to thousands of years of rich oral culture. One that is deeply defined by a lingering ancestral heritage that was cut short by the settler European population through acculturation, forced relocation and residential schools, and ultimately led to extreme poverty, disease, alcoholism, prostitution, drug addiction and suicide. The Indian, as a stereotype, grew out of this traumatic historical past. The Indian stereotype has become a fixed label that projects the negative images onto today's Indigenous peoples.

As a reaction to stereotypical imaging, contemporary Indigenous authors and artists have published many works that look to their ancestral heritage as the foundation of their emerging voices. The paper seeks to investigate stereotyping and identity as it focuses on how Indigenous artists use stereotypes in their literary works and visual artistic representations to make their voices heard. One of the tools used in Indigenous writings and visual arts is Native humour, through which stereotyping is effectively contested. Thereby the literary and artistic forms and the use of Native humour are a central focus of the present article.

## CONTESTING NATIVE STEREOTYPING THROUGH NATIVE HUMOUR

Native humour as a distinct Indigenous feature is the basis of many critical essays, literary and artistic works, and tools used by stand-up comedians. The following is just a small segment of works that incorporate Native humour as a method of contesting stereotyping. One well-known personality both in Canada and the US is Ojibwe writer, playwright, essayist, and director Drew Hayden Taylor, who investigates Native humour in his documentary film *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew* (2000); a more recent work he edited, *Me Funny* (2006), explores humour, wittiness, and repartee dominant among First

Nations peoples by “defusing stereotypes and dispelling presumptions” (New, “They funny”). Thomas King’s *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012) presents a “curious account of Native People in North America,” as the subtitle suggests. The work challenges the widely accepted version of North American history by simply presenting the other, the Indigenous side with sufficient humour and sarcasm. Writer and playwright Tomson Highway’s *Laughing with the Trickster* (2022) offers yet another perspective of Indigenous myth and humour. The work is a compilation of Massey Lectures<sup>1</sup> held in five Canadian cities, which examine the influence of language and religion on people’s lives, and is filled with “thought-provoking, hilarious and ribald stories” (Gessell, “Laughing with the Trickster”). Bill Powless, self-taught visual artist, draws and paints scenes from everyday life using stereotypical images to highlight both the serious and the funny (Tribal Vision). Arigon Starr from the US is a Creator/Writer/Artist and member of the Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma; she has produced cartoons, drawings, and artwork for many organizations; her superhero comic book, *Super Indian Volume One* was released in April 2012, followed by *Super Indian Volume Two* in 2014. Both volumes have found success with the comics crowd – and with college and university campuses across the United States and Canada.

A follow-up to Taylor’s *Me ...* series is *Me Tomorrow* (2021), which looks to the future through a myriad of Indigenous voices. The volume contains essays by Lee Maracle, Drew Hayden Taylor, Romeo Saganash, Dr. Norma Dunning, Shalan Joudry, Clarence Louie, Tracie Léost, and other well-known Indigenous writers, educators, and activists. The question of where one thinks Indigenous peoples should be in ten or twenty years, or even a hundred years, is in focus and offers perspectives on the seventh generation, ideas on the unity amongst the tribes, mutual support for each other, the necessity of tackling poverty and giving the generations to come hope through education.

The Indian as a stereotype is based on generalisations which originate from distorted white conceptions; these have led to the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of Indigenous culture. One of the foremost stereotypes is that of the silent, stoic, serious Indian, who never laughs. Stephen Leacock, the foremost literary humourist of the early twentieth century, mentions the Indians in his book on humour: “[...] the Indian, probably the least humorous character recorded in history. He took his pleasure seriously with a tomahawk. Scientists tell us that humour and laughter had their beginnings in the dawn of history in the exultation of the savage over his fallen foe” (9). This definition of the Indigenous people is highly exaggerated and reflects white settler

<sup>1</sup> The Massey Lectures is an annual five-part series given in Canada by distinguished writers, thinkers and scholars who explore important ideas and issues of contemporary interest. Created in 1961 in honour of Vincent Massey, the former Governor General of Canada, it is widely regarded as one of the most acclaimed lecture series in the country.

ignorance. Margaret Atwood also comments on non-Natives' insensitivity to and misconception of Indigenous culture and their lack of humour: "[s]avage irony and morbid humour did sometimes enter the picture as a kind of self-flagellation device for whites, but on the whole Natives were treated by almost everyone with the utmost gravity. [...] The Native as presented in non-Native writing was singularly lacking in a sense of humour" (243–244).

Native humour is a rather precarious theme because it is unlike American or English humour, or that of other nations. This is simply because each nation has its own distinctive approach to and understanding of humour. And to understand a nation's humour one must comprehend the roots of its culture and history. It is widely acknowledged that humour can heal and release stress. Cynthia Lindquist Mala states that, "being able to laugh is a way to cope that promotes healing and unity. Indian humour is rooted in life lessons. It means laughing at the myriad of tests thrown at us since colonization" ("Very Good Medicine"). Humour, then, enabled Indigenous people to survive their hardships. Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. also comments that, "when a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anyone drive them to extremes, then it would seem to me that the people can survive" (169).

Through humour, Native comedians and writers sensitize their people to the still existing stereotypes and the major social-political issues prevailing within their own communities. Humour, then, strengthens the community, heals, and is ultimately a form of survival. Native humour is ingrained in Native culture and has been present since times immemorial. Laughter, thus, is a form of cultural survival, a means of coping with life, which also helped Indigenous people to survive colonization, strengthen togetherness, and belonging within their communities. Native humour has been transmitted orally for centuries from generation to generation. And within this oral culture, humour uses specific gestures, mimicry, and body language, which do not necessarily come across in a written form. Native culture remains an oral culture, and the written form is not a result of the former. For thousands of years Indigenous peoples have "known the land and created stories from one generation to the next for so long, updating them at each necessary step. These stories of the land and history have meant survival" (Joudry 95).

Indigenous people survived the ordeals of the past; Tomson Highway defines their traumatic historical past as "a dark and lonely road, a frightening one, filled with pitfalls, that almost killed us, as, indeed, it did do some of us" (975). Indigenous comedians and writers use humour to sensitize their people to the still existing stereotypes and the major socio-political problems in their communities. Jokes and storytelling, but also, for example, the creation stories, are a means of passing down knowledge to the younger generations. These creation

stories are about humorous mishaps with half-gods, mortals and the infamous trickster figure, who is to be found in every Nation, whether Cree, Blackfoot, Haida, Innu, or Anishinaabe. These stories are, according to Tomson Highway, interchangeable, just like the universal Trickster figure (721). Highway defines the trickster as an “insane, ridiculous, funny, hysterical, cowardly, clumsy, dishonest, deceitful, self-serving, arrogant, the ultimate over-the-top madcap fool. Strictly speaking, he has no shape, no physical dimension, not as a human, not as an animal; he was, [...] never anthropomorphized by the people who pay him homage” (798). Through contact with European settlers and the hostility Indigenous culture was faced with, the “Trickster figure could have disappeared forever” but it “hung on by a hair” and this was the “spark that Indigenous artists stoked to life” (929).

#### NATIVE HUMOUR AND NATIVE LITERATURE

Theatre has become an important medium for Indigenous writers as drama comes closest to storytelling, where humour is a major driving force. Contemporary Indigenous theatre provides a basis for oral traditions, ritual practices, and the formation of a new form of expression. This is a relatively recent development, which considers the works written and performed by Indigenous people discussing and depicting the culture and everyday life of Canada’s Indigenous population. As theatre in general, Native theatre also “provides the possibility of direct confrontation, brings people together, introduces thought-provoking ideas and fosters an openness to dialogue and change” (Hirsch 102).

Native theatre and drama are an experimental platform that combines Native American symbolism, rituals, beliefs and heritage with contemporary cultural trends and genres. The trickster figure, a relevant cultural entity in Indigenous culture is an integral element within Indigenous theatre and drama. The name of the trickster or trickster spirit differs from nation to nation: usually referred to as *coyote* in British Columbia’s southern interior (Highway 237); *raven* or *Weesaa-geechaak* in Cree; Nanabush or Nanabozho in Ojibway (Highway 725); and *Iktomi* (half-human and half-spider) of the Lakota Nation of South Dakota (Highway 818). The trickster figure traditionally connects the spiritual and the physical world and introduces the audience to the notions of magic, spirituality and the absurd. This allows for a dramatic range of the constant opposing entities of fantasy and reality on stage, as well as the projection of identities and stereotypical images as they adapt to the English language and non-native culture. The function of Indigenous humour, through the trickster, is therefore to “hold up a mirror to humanity in which we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, can see ourselves” (Hirsch 114).

Indigenous theatre is one of the best outlets for Native humour and some of the most well-known playwrights in the field are Drew Hayden Taylor, Tomson Highway, Monique Mojica, Daniel David Moses, Marie Clements, etc., who “have paved the way since the 1980s for many Native playwrights here in Canada” (Stella 139). Simply put, Indigenous theatre is “about telling stories” (Stella 138). As Thomas King says, “stories are everything we are and [...] the only way to understand the world is to tell a story” (*The Truth About Stories* 32). The plays written by Drew Hayden Taylor and Tomson Highway focus on contemporary themes set on the reserve and offer a glimpse of the Rez-milieu in Canada. Well-known examples of popular plays by Tomson Highway are *The Rez Sisters* (1988), *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989); while Drew Hayden Taylor’s iconic plays are: *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* (1991), *The Bootlegger Blues* (1991), *The Baby Blues* (1999), *The Buz’Gem Blues* (2002). The aim of these works is to tell a funny story. All the protagonists are stock characters, who represent the average Native person living in Canada today. But among such characters there is always the odd one out, who questions “whether one should live without any social restrictions or follow the unwritten social norms of the dominant white Anglophone Canadian” (Kodó 297). The works explore Indigenous transcultural identity and the ways in which Indigenous people move and connect across cultures, adopting or appropriating words, phrases, and behavioural attitudes to explore the depth to which Indigenous heritage (language and culture) can adapt to English Canada in a globalized environment, and vice versa.

Humour therefore is a “cross-cultural language,” which, according to Hirsch, acts as a weapon that can “bridge two worlds on one stage” (114), which is thus the basis of Indigenous plays. And “whether confronting annihilation in the physical or in the spiritual sense, the comic tenacity of Native playwrights suggests that the most deeply liberating function of humour is to free others to hope for the impossible” (Hirsch 114). However, these plays are written not only for Indigenous but also for non-Indigenous audiences.

One of the biggest obstacles that Indigenous people had to overcome was the use of English, which is very different from the language and worldview of Indigenous peoples. The language that Indigenous writers use is English, which is constantly changing, but if they want their voices to be heard, these writers and playwrights must adapt to the expectations of the dominant society. However, Drew Hayden Taylor says that the mastery of the English language is secondary, because “what Native people like me knew and were very comfortable expressing was their knowledge of oral storytelling. [...] Culturally, Native people knew how to generate and tell a story through dialogue. What is theatre but that?” (*Me Artsy* 161).

In their plays Taylor, and Highway use humour to highlight the importance of consciously maintaining both cultures, while also recalling and identifying



more profoundly with Indigenous culture, as this is essentially what ensures the survival of Indigenous cultural identity. In this sense, survival gains resilience, which allows for a greater dimension and an optimistic outlook. Thomas King's stories, according to Atwood, "ambush the reader. They get the knife in, not by whacking you over the head with their moral righteousness, but by being funny" (244). King, however, does not "romanticise the slaughtered Indians"; in *The Inconvenient Indian* he simply "deals with history in the same practical, unselfconscious way he blows his nose. He lays the actions out and lets them speak for themselves" (Atwood 246).

Drew Hayden Taylor has spent over twenty years researching and writing humour. Taylor states that "Native humour comes from five hundred years of colonisation, of oppression, of being kept prisoners in our own country" (*Me Funny* 69). But he adds that "humour kept us sane. It gave us power. It gave us privacy. Whenever two First Nations people got together, something magical was sure to happen: there would be laughter" (*Me Funny* 69). The documentary, *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew* (2000) directed by Drew Hayden Taylor endeavours to define and explain how Native humour can be understood. The film features well-known Native stand-up comedians who have become well-known names in the past two decades. Personalities like Don Kelly, who uses comedy to connect the stereotypes of the "apathetic Indian"; Thomas King, novelist, creator, and host of CBC-Radio's *Dead Dog Café* features satirical stories of Native issues, personalities and customs; Don Burnstick, a comedian whose humour comes from years of street life and whose words "laughter is good medicine" has become a catch phrase (*Cultural Diversity*); Herbie Barnes, actor and co-founder of a sketch comedy troupe; Sharon Shorty and Jackie Bear, a Whitehorse duo who portray Sarah and Susie – two elderly Native ladies who discuss their daily activities, love of bingo and Kentucky Fried Chicken. The film is a wonderful example of how the conventional image, or the stereotype of the stoic Indian may be contested to shed light on the healing powers of Native humour.

#### NATIVE HUMOUR AND NATIVE ARTS

Native humour, however, is not limited to Indigenous writings and the theatre. There are many outstanding artists at work in the field, but for the sake of the article the scope has been narrowed to view one particular Indigenous artist. Bill Powless is a self-taught visual artist, though he has taken a graphic and commercial art course at Mohawk College. He was born and raised on the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve, near Brantford, Ontario. Powless draws and paints using a "realistic style", and portrays images and "scenes from everyday life, both the serious and the funny" (*Tribal Vision*). Powless uses

Indigenous legends, spirituality and symbolism combined with his own imagination, which he links with his visions of the past and the future.

From among his many drawings and paintings perhaps the most controversial is *Indians' Summer* (1984) (see Figure 1). The black-and-white poster of the painting was used to promote an exhibition of Indian art in the summer of 1985 (Ryan 5). The figure in the painting is a heavyset Indigenous bather whom Powless saw on Manitoulin Island during the summer of 1984, where he was creating murals for the *Spirit of Sharing Native Arts* festival (Ryan 6). The piece shows a middle-aged Indigenous male figure seated on a bench with the sea and a large expanse of sky in the background. The figure has a "Buddha-like physique" (Ryan 6). The painting shows "too much exposed Indigenous flesh" (Ryan 9). The artist confronts and startles the viewer with an "up-close and intimate portrait of a massive, bronze, red man, who seems at risk of turning deep orange or salmon pink in the blazing sun. The notion of sunburn on such a grand scale seems rather absurd" (Ryan 8). The idea that the individual seems to savour the moment is highlighted by the man's eyes which "seem closed in sleep or deep reflection" (Ryan 6–7). Still, his small, rather ridiculous umbrella headdress with a solitary feather seems incapable of shading his eyes. The long black hair, strong masculine facial features and the solitary feather attached to his umbrella are stereotypical images that connect him to his Indigenous heritage, hence his Indianness. From his right ear a "single pendant disc, the size of a quarter, dangles" (7). His right-hand rests on his thigh and holds a double Popsicle, as a "symbol of summer refreshment, a Popsicle is, perhaps, more family-friendly than a can of beer" (Ryan 7).

The first drawing, which the artist later reworked into the painting, was given the title "Keeping Cool," which, according to Ryan, shows that "within the Western art historical tradition, naming a work of art signals a degree of conceptual completion" (8); and with reference to "certain Aboriginal traditions, a similar act of naming is believed to breathe life into a subject, thereby bringing it into existence" (8). When Powless reworked the pencil drawing into a painting, he changed the title, as well, to "Indians' Summer," which gives the work greater focus and "invites a range of interpretative readings" (Ryan 11). But the title "Indians' Summer," says Ryan, "functions much like a land claim, only in a temporal sphere, putting a new twist on the notion of 'Indian time' and a different spin on the concept of 'time sharing'" (11). The figure depicted in the painting is certainly an Indian since Powless uses the general stereotypes (long black hair, strong facial features, feather) jokingly, but with "respect and obvious affection, imbuing him with a positive life-force and a wry sense of humour" (Ryan 8). The work, however, rejects the romanticized notion of the Indian and through the stereotypical allusions manages to contest it and illustrate self-deprecating humour at its best.



Figure 1. Bill Powless, “Indians’ Summer”, acrylic on canvas 97x 177 cm, 1984, *Tribal Vision*, n.d. <http://www.tribalvisiondance.com/p/original-artwork-by-bill-powless.html>. By permission of artist.

Another drawing by Powless, titled *Fear of Wet Feathers* (1985) (see Figure 2), featured along with *Indians’ Summer* in an exhibition on Native art mounted by Hamilton artists in January 1985 (Ryan 11). Here, the traditional warrior facial paint, native dress, long hair, and feathers are contested with an image, the umbrella, taken from modern urban living. The romanticized notion of Indianness is contrasted with the humanist agenda. A recognition of the human being, the individual with its own fears contradicts traditional stereotypical perception, which claims that the Indian is stoic, brave and fearless. The drawing implies that Indians are just simple folk underneath the feather and paint, and the theme of traditional versus urban and global is shown by sarcasm and wry humour. The umbrella is a symbol of modern urban consumer society; the umbrella image distorts and disintegrates the strong warrior image. Thomas King’s humorous phrase comes to mind: “you’re not the Indian I had in mind” (31). Powless is highly ironic, satirical and uses self-deprecatory humour to get his message across to the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous population alike.



Figure 2. Bill Powless, "Fear of Wet Feathers", drawing, 1985, *Tribal Vision*, n.d.  
<http://www.tribalvisiondance.com/p/original-artwork-by-bill-powless.html>

*By permission of artist.*

The third drawing by Powless is titled *Urban Indian Lost in the Woods* (1995) (see Figure 3). This is a sardonic rendering of "Indians don't get lost in the woods". But the urban Indian has lost its touch with nature, tradition, heritage, and culture so he cannot find his way in the woods, which may metaphorically represent life itself. The drawing depicts a Native with the stereotypical longish black hair, strong male facial features, with only the feather missing, which would visually enforce his Indigenous heritage; he wears a white shirt which is torn, but his entire appearance shows signs of wear and neglect; he has smaller cuts on his fingers and face. The trees look like the iron bars of a prison, from which he is desperately trying to escape. The futility of his efforts is visible on his face and bleeding fingers. The Indian may represent the misery and hopelessness of Indigenous people in general, which is a consequence of acculturation, residential schools, and, in end effect, of white colonization. The work is a grim rendering of anguish and loss, which is made biting clear by the facial features of the man showing suffering, misery, loss and even panic. The unmistakable sarcasm and bitter humour are evident in the work, but it is directed perhaps not so much at the non-Native, but rather at Indigenous people. His aim is to raise awareness and strengthen Indigenous

identity by contesting these Indian stereotypes through reverence and ironic humour.



Figure 3. Bill Powless, “Urban Indian Lost in the Woods” acrylic on canvas board, 1995, Tribal Vision, n.d. <http://www.tribalvisiondance.com/p/original-artwork-by-bill-powless.html>. By permission of artist.

The above paintings and drawings are charged with gentle wry humour, but do we as a non-Indigenous audience understand their underlying hints? Powless remarked that those who saw his works displayed, and especially *Indians’ Summer*, “weren’t sure whether to laugh or not. Some people just broke out [in laughter], they couldn’t help it, [...]. I could see them trying to hold it back” (Ryan, 19).

Like Powless, Arigon Starr engages in collective memory resilience. Her work *Super Indian* (2012), a comic book, activates intergenerational memory, and the roots of genealogy go deep. The story is set on a reservation in the United States and relates how Hubert Logan obtained his superpowers. Is he the Indigenous version of Superman, the popular superhero? Starr elaborates, “[w]hen I tell people Hubert got superpowers from eating tainted commodity cheese, it usually gets a laugh, [...] Hey, it’s highly processed food! Could have happened to anyone!” (Starr, “Super Indian”). Within her work, Starr uses comedy, humour, and irony to explore social problems, combat racism, stereotyping and start conversations, but mostly to make people laugh. As in all Indigenous works, comedy is a form of healing and education that strengthens Indigenous identity. According to Starr,

[t]here aren't many if any Native superheroes that are created by Native people. The ones that have been out there stick to the stereotype with the leather and the feathers and the shaman sidekick kind of thing. My guy's not a sidekick. He's the main character, he's carrying the show, and he's Native. That just wasn't out there. It was strange to me that it wasn't out there (Sutton, "Art Talk with Arigon Starr").

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary Indigenous authors and artists offer a vast array of works that look to their ancestral heritage as the foundation of their emerging voices. Stereotypes, native symbolism, and humour are the elements through which these artists look toward the future in a global and transcultural world, in which their aim is to step out of the shadows that have been cast on them and strengthen their ancestral native identities through tools like literature and the arts, which educate Indigenous youth and link Indigenous culture with the contemporary world. Their aim is to assist people to better understand Indigenous issues and talk about them openly. Their works are self-deprecating humour at its best, which parallels a visual manifestation of gathering Aboriginal awareness and confidence (Ryan 21). Since the 1980s time has shown that critical satire is just one of the aesthetic strategies used by Indigenous artists to interrogate history and illuminate contemporary experience. And as for the future, the critical essays reveal a deepfelt optimism; Darrel J. McLeod (writer, educator, activist) says: "Indigenous people have only just begun to reclaim our space in the broader human context, and I'm filled with optimism and hope about the future. Let's paint it red" (21). As the Hopi proverb says, "[a] smile is sacred." Therefore, it is fitting to conclude with Don Kelly's comment: "[p]eople who know Indigenous people will say to me, you guys are funny. And if that's a stereotype, I'll take that one" (Howells, "These Indigenous Comedians").

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THE IMPACT OF LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE  
ON THE DENESULINE RELIGION  
AS DESCRIBED BY SAMUEL HEARNE (1745–1792)

—◀▶—  
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**Abstract**

Samuel Hearne (1745–1792) is credited with exploring the Coppermine River region. He captured the experiences of his travels in his work *Journeys from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean in the Years 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772* (1795), where he elaborates not only on the circumstances of his exploratory travels, but also on the natural phenomena and lifestyles of the Denesuline.<sup>1</sup> In the boreal and arctic regions of Canada, where the Dene live from October to May, temperatures do not rise above the freezing point and the soil is constantly frozen (*permafrost*) for most of the year. In the coldest period, the average temperatures can range from -25 to -30°C; in the milder months, it is between +8 and 10°C. The Dene nation must find the *modus vivendi* in such circumstances. But how did the climate affect their daily lives, beliefs and religion in Hearne's time? Could these harsh conditions have been the cause of some religious phenomena observable among the Dene? The explorer himself does not go into details regarding this question, but his descriptions provide a perfect starting point of exploration, beginning with the Dene rites for the dead and their complex and diverse taboo system. In my paper, I will argue that the landscape and the climate played a significant role in the formation of the 18th-century religious picture recorded by Hearne. It is not only the Dene's daily practice of religion that the landscape and the climate affected, but also their worldview, universal thinking, and their relationship with their religion.

**Keywords:** explorations, Samuel Hearne, indigenous nations, the Denesuline religion, climatic effects

**Résumé**

C'est Samuel Hearne (1745–1792) qui a fait la première exploration de la rivière Coppermine et de ses environs. Il a consigné ses expériences de voyage dans son ouvrage intitulé *Journeys from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean in the years 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772* (1795), dans lequel il

<sup>1</sup> The term *Dene* is also used to refer to the Denesuline.

décrit non seulement les circonstances du voyage, mais aussi les phénomènes naturels et le mode de vie des indigènes. Dans les régions boréales et arctiques du Canada, où ces indigènes vivent d'octobre à mai, les températures ne dépassent pas le point de congélation et le sol est constamment gelé (dit *permafrost*) pendant la majorité de l'année. Durant la période la plus froide, les températures moyennes peuvent même baisser jusqu'à 25-30 degrés au-dessous de zéro, par contre les mois les plus doux, elles augmentent de 8 °C à 10 °C. C'est dans de telles circonstances, la nation dénée doit survivre. Ces conditions difficiles, ont-elles pu être à l'origine des facteurs déclencheurs de certains phénomènes religieux? Dans mon essai, basé sur les notes de Samuel Hearne, j'essaierai d'esquisser mes réponses possibles à cette question.

**Mots-clés:** explorations, Samuel Hearne, nations indigènes, la religion des Dénésulines, effets climatiques

## INTRODUCTION

The myth of the Northwest Passage connecting Hudson Bay with the Pacific Ocean was definitively debunked by English-Canadian traveller Samuel Hearne (1745–1792) in 1772, when he set out from Hudson Bay and reached the Arctic Ocean on foot. Despite this, his name and his work – *Journeys from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean in the years 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772*, more commonly known by its shorter title, *Journey to the Northern Ocean* – will ring a bell to few. As the title of his book suggests, his ambitious undertaking was nearly four years in the making. During this time, he made three attempts, the first two of which failed. In November 1770, he set out on his third, longest but most successful *voyage of discovery*. In doing so, not only did he successfully reach the shoreline of the Arctic Ocean, exploring parts of northern Canada that had been previously unknown, but he also closed a chapter in the history of exploration: by following the course of the Coppermine River to the Arctic Ocean, Hearne confirmed that there was no Northwest Passage through the continent at more lower latitudes.

In this paper, however, I will not examine the journeys, but rather the indigenous nation without whom this exploration could not have happened. Based on Samuel Hearne's description, and using anthropological analysis, I will analyse the religious practices of the Denesuline First Nation and how they were influenced by the landscape and their climate.

## THE DENESULINE

Samuel Hearne distinguishes three indigenous groups in his travel accounts. In the early period these three were the “northern,” “southern” and “base”

groups.<sup>2</sup> A tribe of the Cree aboriginal nation are considered “southern” aborigines, while the Chipewyan, which is Denesuline with an emic term, are considered the “northern” aborigines. The last, “base” group refers, in my opinion, to a mixture of aboriginal peoples who were permanent employees of Fort Prince Edward. This is the conclusion Ken McGoogan reaches, although Hearne states that only the indigenous Denesuline were covered by the term (Hearne, x).

The Denesuline nation is a member of the Dene group, who inhabit the northern and Arctic regions of Canada (Sharp, xvii). Although the word *Denesuline* is not a Dene term, indigenous people refer to themselves by this word, the plural of which is not known or even used (Sharp, xv; Cook, xxi). At the time Hearne’s reader learned of this nation, they were in the midst of a great wave of migration – at least, this is the accepted view today. They had moved steadily northward from the Seal River up to the Great Lakes – Great Slave and Great Bear – and in the latter half of the 18th century, reached the Coppermine and Churchill Rivers (Smith, *Denesuline* 134).

Before the arrival of the Europeans, this indigenous nation most probably lived a nomadic or semi-nomadic life. This is supported by social anthropologist James Smith’s theory of migration (Smith, *Denesuline* 134), but there is also evidence from Hearne’s time that – despite the fact that much of their income was now derived from the fur trade – the Denesuline still followed the migration of deer in the area (Hearne, 139).

By the second half of the 18th century,<sup>3</sup> some of the Denesuline nation was still closely tied to the fur trade of the Prince of Wales’s Fort, although the Hudson’s Bay Company’s aim from 1749 on was to attract the natives to the area so that they would not even begin to work for the French (Smith, *The Hudson’s Bay Company* 76). However, the Company’s plan did not work out entirely successfully. Although Hearne was travelling with a group of Denesuline men who essentially helped him to survive, the author repeatedly mentions instances where members of the same nation robbed him (Hearne 45–46) or were not helpful at all (Hearne 31–32).

In the boreal and arctic regions of Canada, where the Denesuline live from October to May, temperatures never rise above freezing and the ground is permanently frozen for much of the year, with average temperatures ranging from -25 to -30°C in the coldest months to only +8 to +10°C in the mildest months.<sup>4</sup> The nation must find a way to live in these conditions. In addition to raw and often immediately consumed foods, their diet includes foods that are

<sup>2</sup> Later, in his native counsellor Mattonabee’s biography, he mentions a fourth group.

<sup>3</sup> That is, by Hearne’s time.

<sup>4</sup> Data obtained from the official meteorological website of the Government of Canada. Some data go back to 1840, but most are available only from 1960 onwards: [canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather.html](http://canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather.html).

almost simmered over a slow fire. Among the foods that are unacceptable for the stomach of the modern European man, but are for consumption in that harsh landscape, one can find the foetus of pregnant animals and the undigested contents of animals' stomach alike. The description of these meals suggests that the meal revolves around one key word: survival. In fact, Hearne's descriptions of the journey also include cannibalism. He claims to have encountered more than once an aboriginal who had resorted to this "terrible" act. However, contrary to the horror stories that were spreading, these natives did not cherish cannibalism, nor did they smile again once such an incident occurred, they became melancholic. Although such things do not happen in Hearne's travels, he mentions that some people refused to sleep in a tent with the natives for fear of being consumed during the night (Hearne 43).

The former nomadic lifestyle of the Denesuline meant that deer still played a very important role in their diet, even if their hunting was not always successful. Their hunting style did not differ much from the trapping techniques of indigenous peoples. Although bows were replaced by firearms in their daily lives, the bow and arrow remained the primary weapon for hunting, and they only used other weapons when they were unable to hunt with a bow and were in dire need of food (Hearne 213).

In some situations, they could not be selective about the food sources available, but it is still observed that some animals, such as moose or smaller mammals, make the stomach bitter due to the nature of their meat or their diet. And although Hearne's comments are based purely on his own observations, the fact that the Denesuline did not consume certain animals even in the coldest season may indicate that they did not eat them at other times, either.

#### THE IMPACT OF LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE IN THE DENESULINE'S TRADITION, HABITS AND RITUALS

In the next part of my paper, I will explore how the everyday experience of the Denesuline – as exemplified above through food – affected their worldview. The main focus of the study will be afterlife-related beliefs and burial customs, but I will also look at other religious practices to get the full picture.

First, let's look at the relevant elements of Denesuline mythology. Part of the Denesuline understanding of the world is how they viewed aurora borealis, or the northern lights. Surprisingly, unlike the group labelled "Southern Indians"<sup>5</sup> (Hearne 234), they did not associate the phenomenon with the dead, but developed the view that if the lights were bright, then there was an

<sup>5</sup> Probably the Cree indigenous nation.

abundance of deer up in the sky.<sup>6</sup> From Hearne's emphasis, as he notes that they had not yet ventured to try to hunt these deer, we can see how simple he found this interpretation (Hearne, 227).

*The Handbook of Native American Mythology* also links the northern lights with the dead. In fact, the Inuit of the area and, as Hearne's writing demonstrates, Native American tribes believe it is also connected with death. According to some Native beliefs, the dead are in a good mood when the light shines brightly (Bastian and Mitchell 50–51).

In contrast, Hearne mentions only in a footnote how to interpret the formation of the northern lights. Today the idea he describes here could be called an electric charge: "[e]xperience has shewn them, that when a hairy deer-skin is briskly stroked with the hand in a dark night, it will emit many sparks of electrical fire, as the back of a cat will" (Hearne 234).

A connected and relevant topic is the Denesuline encounter with death. If a dead person is found, then they immediately suspect that he/ she died a violent death: either another Indigenous person or an Inuk could have killed the deceased person. However, they do not bury the dead: "[t]he Northern Indians never bury their dead, but always leave the bodies where they die, so that they are supposed to be devoured by beasts and birds of prey.." (Hearne, 224). The lack of burials can be ascribed to two reasons: the freezing of the ground (permafrost) and the holistic worldview of indigenous cultures, according to which the dead must become one with nature and thus benefit from it (Friderers 58–59).

Hearne first states that indigenous people have no empathy for the dying, they laugh even at their most painful fellow sufferers, but right in the following paragraph he paints a very different picture, according to which the Denesuline do not wear mourning clothes, but they do mourn a close family member for up to a year in the lunar calendar. They mark this by tearing their clothes, crying, and making mournful noises. They often gather in small groups and cry together, supporting each other. On feast days, they do not join in the celebrations, only weep. They do not change their clothes, and they cut their hair (Hearne 224). The Denesuline display clear signs of grief at the death of their companions, constantly showing their suffering to others. The depth of their grief is shown by the fact that they cut their hair, which, based on Mary Douglas' theory, proves that they took the passing of their loved ones very seriously, believing that if they did not cut their hair, it would bring bad luck upon them (20).

Next, we will look at the complex Denesuline taboo system. First, in order to determine whether we can actually speak of a religious prohibition or just

<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, Hearne is more sympathetic to this idea, finding it romantic. The other, more common idea is that dead Denesuline relatives dance in the clouds.

of a set of moral rules, let us examine exactly what taboos can be found among the Denesuline and what their meaning is. The Denesuline must have regarded wolves and wolverines as manifestations of the supernatural as Hearne mentions several times that the nation did not kill them because it was considered a taboo. If someone did kill a wolf or a wolverine, he was despised by the others, and essentially became an outcast of the tribe. There are, however, several different explanations as to why the Denesuline would not kill those species. It could either be out of “silly superstition [...] no longer observed by many” (Hearne 225). Or, wolves and wolverines could also be regarded as totem animals. Hearne mentions that whenever they find a pack of wolves, the wolf pups are never harmed. As a matter of fact, they play with the pups, some of them paint their faces with red ochre and then carefully put them back in the den (240). This may imply that wolves were thought to be totem animals and the Denesuline tried to gain their goodwill by not harming their pups.

During his journey, Samuel Hearne explains this taboo by combining it with that of foxes and otters, claiming that they were considered “more than animals” (Hearne 145). However, he does not go into detail as to what exactly the indigenous might have considered them to be, his wording suggesting that they were regarded as supernatural beings, possibly shapeshifters.

In Chapter 9 of his work – written while Hearne was already in London – he elaborates on this prohibition. Here, too, he mentions this taboo along with that of several other wild animals. In the relevant passage, however, he traces its roots back to the Denesuline’s attitude to the dead. As has been mentioned, the Denesuline do not bury their dead but leave them in the care of carnivorous animals at the place where they died. As carnivores feed on the cadavers of the deceased, this could be reason enough for them not to eat these animals (Hearne 224). Also resulting from this practice, there was a widespread belief among indigenous people that their deceased siblings lived on in these animals in some form. Unfortunately, Hearne’s report does not go into any detail about what form this afterlife may take, but native animism suggests that it is to be conceived as a spiritual form. Thus the extension of the concept of taboo to the entire species merely speaks of the respect they have for all their deceased (Hearne, 224).

This, however, is in conflict with one of Samuel Hearne’s other statements, which Matonabee<sup>7</sup> backs up with his own words. One of the author’s justifications for the alleged lack of religion among the aborigines is that the aborigines have no concept of *the future*, namely, the time after one’s death and the afterlife. However, while we are talking about taboos concerning foxes and other predatory animals, this does not seem to be the case with wolves. If the

<sup>7</sup> Matonabee was the indigenous leader on Hearne’s third, successful trip. Hearne considered him his only aboriginal friend, and his work often refers to Matonabee’s responses.

Denesuline had not had any concept or belief of the afterlife, they clearly would not have imposed such a ban on these animals. If the deceased person were simply deceased, then eating the animal that consumed the dead body of the deceased, or an animal of the same species would not be a problem. Furthermore, without a strong vision of afterlife in a place as harsh as northern Canada, by creating and maintaining this taboo, the Denesuline were depriving themselves of a significant food source.

Another taboo animal is the moose. Again, Hearne does not share any details, however, he notes that the buffalo and the bison are very popular animals because all of their parts can be used. He compares them to the moose, which possesses similar qualities in most other tribes, but not in the Denesuline nation. Instead, Hearne mentions that they do not resort to moose meat out of respect for the animal (174). Dogs were also a strict taboo among the Denesuline. Any consumption of the animal's body entailed immediate punishment. So much so that it was considered unclean to eat any part of the animal's body and it was believed that anyone who did so would be unsuccessful when hunting (Hearne 211).

The influence of the environment can also be observed in other customs and traditions. Hearne's text refers to records of Matonabbee "purchas[ing] an other wife" (70) and to the prevalence of polygamy among indigenous people several times. James Smith also describes this custom among the Denesuline as a *brother-in-law marriage*. He sees it as a survival strategy<sup>8</sup> (Smith, *Economic Uncertainty* 81). At the same time, other historians, such as Kerry Abel<sup>9</sup> believe that it was not as widespread a practice as Hearne's description implies, but rather something that only successful hunters like Matonabbee could afford (20).

Adaptation to climatic conditions is not solely reflected in the belief system and religious concepts of the Denesuline, but also in their biology. Hearne places the native women's fertility below that of European women. "Providentially", he says, they have "only" five or six children, who are born every two or three years: "Providence is very kind in causing these people to be less prolific than the inhabitants of civilized nations" (Hearne 208). What Hearne is referring to as "Providence" is actually an evolutionary anthropological phenomenon. In environments characterized by harsh living conditions and inadequate nutrition, women's bodies have adapted to only be capable of bearing a child every two or three years. This adaptation ensures that pregnancies occur at intervals that maximize the chances of survival for both the mother

<sup>8</sup> "The practice of the levirate and sororate among the eastern bands, now rare (although permitted by civil law if it does not involve polygyny), is also indicative of the importance of the continuing association of families and groups."

<sup>9</sup> Adjunct professor of the department of History in Carlington University.

and the child, considering the challenging circumstances they face (Davis-Floyd–Cheyney 4).

Surprisingly, natural elements were not only linked with times of peace for the Denesuline. A relevant example here from Hearne's body of work is the Bloody Falls massacre. On 16 July 1771, scouting Denesuline parties of Hearne's expedition returned with a report that they had found a few tents full of Inuit. The group immediately prepared to attack, and ambushed the sleeping natives on July 17 at 1 a.m. Hearne accompanied the Denesuline but took no part in the attack, retreating a little further from the tents. Despite this, an Inuit girl was killed at his feet, which shocked him. Around twenty Inuit lost their lives this time, men, women and children alike (108–116). Before the battle, rituals were performed by the Denesuline to commune with their environment. One such ritual observed is what Hearne terms *superstition*. The day before the battle, the natives made themselves a shield decorated in the following way: "each of them painted the front of his target or shield, some with the figure of the Sun, others with that of the Moon, several with different kinds of birds and beasts of prey, and many with the images of imaginary beings, which, according to their silly notions, are the inhabitants of the different elements, Earth, Sea, Air" (Hearne 109).

Hearne believes the painting of the shields had to do with possessing the power of these creatures and phenomena in battle. And although the description mentions that they produced two colours, black and red, for the lack of time, Hearne himself assumes that in calmer times these shields could have been much more colourful (109–110). This may suggest that the practice of creating shield paintings belonged to the scope of Frazer's classic *sympathetic magic* (Frazer 31–32). The creatures painted on the shield include natural elements such as the sun or the air (Tylor 174–178). That such elements are inhabited by supernatural forces or spirits is an ancient concept among many indigenous peoples of the Americas, e.g. the Inca culture of Peru, the Inuit culture of Greenland (Vassányi, *Second Contact* 209–228; Vassányi, *Szellemlhívók és áldozárok*). What is interesting in Hearne's description though, is that the forces that reside in these elements are invoked in a battle.

Fishing also has its own customs and rituals, which cannot be ignored. Generally speaking, nets are made of deerskin, and the corners of the finished net are tied with beaks and feet of birds, and even otter legs. The function of these animal parts is not ornamental, but rather stems from their *superstition*, Hearne claims. Indeed, aboriginals believe that if these animal parts are not attached to the nets, they will not catch any fish, and throwing the nets into the water is useless (Hearne 217). According to folklorist Gary R. Varner, the talismans made this way are designed to "trap" the spirits and tie them to the net, to ensure the success of the fishing venture. And although Hearne does



not attach much importance to these objects, it can be assumed that these animal parts function in a similar way to the painted shields (104).

In fact, the Denesuline fish not only with nets, but also by angling. And just as fishing with a net has its own habits, you should not just throw a fishing line in the water if you want to catch fish. A medallion, like a small bag, is attached under the bait to ensure that the bait is successful in luring the fish to be caught. The natives put different parts of different animals in this bag. While it is not clear from the description whether there were any obligatory components prescribed to be in the little bag, what is known for certain is that each of them had to be changed according to the lake or river they were touching, and the range of components to be included in it was very wide. This medallion could contain otter teeth or moustache, beaver tail or fat, squirrel testicles, digested milk extracted from the stomach of an animal, or human hair (Hearne 217). This justifies Vagner's theory that these talismanic components must have fulfilled a certain role in the process of fishing, on the basis of which they were prepared (Vagner 104). Although Hearne's description does not allow us to draw a definite conclusion as to what exactly this role was, the Denesuline took this practice so seriously that once the medallion worked, they would use it again rather than make a new one (Hearne 218).

Similarly, Hearne mentions that during a hunt, a medallion was attached to the trap to mark its outline. As we have already seen in the case of the fishing net, it can be assumed that these pendants served a function similar to those applied to the net. Either they were used to "consecrate" the trap before the first hunt, or they were simply meant to ensure the success of the hunt (Hearne 212–213).

Going back to fishing, the first-caught fish was also a matter of great respect, and if that respect was neglected, the net was deemed worthless:

[...] but the first fish of whatever species caught in it, are not to be sodden in the water, but broiled whole on the fire, and the flesh carefully taken from the bones without dislocating one joint; after which the bones are laid on the fire at full length and burnt. A strict observance of these rules is supposed to be of the utmost importance in promoting the future success of the new net; and a neglect of them would render it not worth a farthing (Hearne 217).

Again, this is a ritual that ensures good luck. According to Georg C. Homans, such rites, which bring good luck and banish uncertainty about the future, are typical of the religions of indigenous peoples (Homans 164).<sup>10</sup>

Nothing in the explorer's writing better demonstrates that animism is a dominant feature of aboriginal religion. His description clearly identifies these

<sup>10</sup> Actually, Homans uses the word "primitive" to refer to indigenous populations.

webs as “personalities”. At the mouth of a lake or river, where, in his opinion, it would be easy to catch fish by stretching two or more nets side by side, in effect cutting off the fish’s path, the Natives place them further apart, for fear that the nets will become angry with each other if they are too close, and then none of them will catch any fish (Hearne 217). The animism described by Tylor (174–178) is clearly evident here, with jealousy and anger being attributed to impersonal objects.

But what exactly does a hunt look like for the Denesuline? The first step is to designate an area that will essentially be the end of the chasing line, a clearing, where they place sticks in the shape of a crescent, covered with moss and talismans. With the help of these sticks, they can guide the animals of prey, mostly the deer to run in one particular direction. The women and children drive the animals into this area, and the men settle down with their sharp weapons at a safe distance so that the mosses placed on the sticks will not give away their scent. Hearne reported that the success of this hunting method varied greatly, depending on the game population and the success of the shots (213–214).

Basically, the Denesuline hunting style does not differ much from the trapping techniques found in other indigenous peoples. However, it is interesting to note that although they replaced their bows with firearms in their daily lives, in Hearne’s time the primary weapons for hunting were still bows and arrows, and they only used modern weapons for hunting when they had failed to kill the game with a bow and were in dire need of food (Hearne 213). Gradually, the Denesuline slowly lost their traditional hunting tools, and the use of firearms became a commonplace. Interestingly, however, medicines were not adopted by the Denesuline from the Europeans as they believed that nature could provide the same healing for them, albeit over a longer period of time (Hearne 223).

## CONCLUSION

Samuel Hearne’s work – *A Journey to the Northern Ocean* – captured not only his explorations, but also the everyday life, customs and rituals of the Denesuline nation. In these records we read how the Denesuline people were affected by, and adapted to, their environment and climate.

In Denesuline mythology, natural phenomena appear in the stories, but unlike in the case of the neighbouring indigenous peoples, they associated these with their present, worldly lives rather than the afterlife. The influence of the environment on their burial customs seems evident. The permafrost prevents them from burying the dead, which is also quite a significant feature of their taboo system. The prohibitions on their eating habits and their hunting activities also demonstrate how their religion infiltrates and affects the

daily life of the Denesuline. Furthermore, within their belief system, they also incorporate natural phenomena by seeking to align themselves with these forces, aiming to harness their power and attributes such as speed, like we saw it on the shield painting. This implies a form of spiritual or cultural connection with nature, where individuals seek to emulate the characteristics of natural elements to enhance their own abilities or influence their surroundings. Hearne's work gives us an insight into this through a bloody example.

I have shown that the environment deeply influenced the Denesuline nation in many ways, from mythology to their everyday life. In addition to offering an insight into Denesuline customs and religious beliefs, it has been also pointed out how these customs and beliefs have been affected by the climate, from Denesuline burials to their taboo system, to hunting habits. Hearne's description also suggests that even women's reproductive ability was influenced by the harsh climate.

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DU « PLAT DE LARD ET DE POMMES  
DE TERRE BOUILLIES » AUX RESTAURANTS  
INTERNATIONAUX: LA NOURRITURE COMME  
ÉLÉMENT DU PAYSAGE CULTUREL DANS QUELQUES  
OUVRAGES QUÉBÉCOIS DU 20<sup>E</sup> SIÈCLE

MARIJA PANIĆ

**Résumé**

Il est notoire que la nourriture fait partie de l'identité culturelle (R. Brulotte, M. A. Di Giovine, *Edible Identities* 2016), ce qui est visible surtout dans la littérature où la description du quotidien des personnages contient les indices portant sur les habitudes alimentaires de leur communauté. Dès déjà le début du XXe siècle, la littérature québécoise incluait la description de la vie quotidienne des habitants du Canada francophone, afin de montrer au public les valeurs principales des personnages, surtout l'importance de leur identité francophone. Par exemple, Louis Hémon décrivait, pour le public français, le mode de vie des habitants de Péribonka: l'intérieur de leurs maisons, leur nourriture et coutumes, la technique du travail telle que la drave. Cet aspect a été représenté – de manière très pittoresque – également dans les versions cinématographiques du roman. En revanche, dans le recueil des nouvelles *Aurores montréalaises* (1996) de Monique Proulx, la représentation de la nourriture fait voir le melting pot qui s'opère dans la communauté francophone au Canada, vu que Montréal y est représenté comme une métropole moderne, incorporant le passé et le futur et abritant la population d'origines différentes. Notre discours vise à analyser la représentation de la nourriture en tant qu'élément du paysage culturel du Canada francophone dans les ouvrages de Louis Hémon, de Gabrielle Roy et de Monique Proulx, et de suivre ses transformations depuis le roman du terroir jusqu'à l'époque post-moderne dans la littérature québécoise du XXe siècle.

**Mots-clés:** le paysage culturel, Louis Hémon, Gabrielle Roy, Monique Proulx, les aliments, le développement urbain, la littérature francophone

**Abstract**

This paper examines the representation of food as part of the cultural landscape in some important works of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century fiction of francophone Canada:

Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1913), Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute* (*Bonheur d'occasion*, 1945) and *Children of My Heart* (*Ces Enfants de ma vie*, 1977), as well as Monique Proulx' *Aurora Montrealis* (*Les Aurores montréalaises*, 1996). What these works of fiction have in common is that they reflect the urban development and the rural flight in the French Canadian population during different phases of the past century. While Louis Hémon points out the importance of collective identity for French Canadians and shows eating habits as part of the cultural matrix, Gabrielle Roy shows the eating habits of immigrants and the consequences of the fast pace of life in a big industrial town. Monique Proulx writes about Montreal as a postmodern metropolis and shows its numerous faces, one of which is a multitude of restaurants demonstrative of national cuisines. At the same time, food may also be used as the indicator of class and that of new lifestyles (diets, vegetarianism) in her works. As will be shown, the three French Canadian authors pay much attention to food in their works as a reflection of anthropological, sociological and cultural phenomena.

**Keywords:** cultural landscape, Louis Hémon, Gabrielle Roy, Monique Proulx, food, urban development, francophone literature

## INTRODUCTION

Depuis quelque temps déjà, la nourriture fait partie des recherches anthropologiques, historiques, de l'histoire culturelle et d'autres sciences humaines et sociales, ainsi que des sciences naturelles. En effet, comme l'affirme l'UNESCO,

la nourriture a toujours façonné notre relation avec l'environnement [...]. Transmis de génération en génération, les processus liés à la collecte des aliments, à leur préparation et service – établis de longue date – font partie de notre patrimoine culturel, matériel et immatériel. Ils sont une source d'identité culturelle et de fierté, où chaque gastronomie véhicule une histoire unique, un style de vie, des valeurs et des croyances (UNESCO).

Comme le témoigne Gina Almerico, dans son article portant sur la culture et le patrimoine alimentaire, les choix alimentaires des individus ou des groupes sont révélateurs des points de vue, des passions, des connaissances, des partis pris; ils racontent l'histoire des familles, des migrations, de l'assimilation, de la résistance, et sont une composante importante de l'identité individuelle et collective (4). Selon Michael Di Giovine et Ronda Brulotte, éditeurs de l'ouvrage collectif *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage* (*Identités comestibles: la nourriture comme patrimoine culturel*), publié en 2016 chez Routledge, la nourriture est une composante majeure de l'identité individuelle et collective (1). Selon eux, la nourriture est étroitement liée aux émotions; l'alimentation

relie les personnes, à travers l'espace mais aussi à travers le temps, puisque les individus se souviennent des événements passés et de leurs expériences avec certains aliments ou plats, ainsi que celles de leurs ancêtres. C'est ainsi que la nourriture se transforme en patrimoine (1).

Ayant en vue ces perspectives des chercheurs contemporains sur la place détenue par la nourriture dans le paysage culturel, la présente contribution a pour but d'explorer la représentation des habitudes alimentaires dans quelques ouvrages représentatifs de la prose québécoise du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, traitant le sujet des migrations ville-campagne et du développement urbain en tant que phénomènes sociologiques et culturels majeurs ayant un rapport particulier avec la nourriture et la place qu'elle détient dans la société et la vie quotidienne. D'abord, nous nous pencherons sur le roman *Maria Chapdelaine* de Louis Hémon (rédigé en 1913 et paru au Québec en 1916), ouvrage représentatif du roman de la terre. Puis, nous traiterons d'un roman urbain : du chef-d'œuvre de Gabrielle Roy *Bonheur d'occasion*, publié en 1945; nous analyserons aussi son recueil de nouvelles intitulé *Ces enfants de ma vie*, datant de 1977, qui sera lui aussi représentatif en faisant voir le contexte des migrations étrangères au Canada dans les années 1930, ainsi que celui des migrations ville-campagne à la même époque. Nous clorons notre analyse par le recueil de nouvelles *Aurores montréalaises* de Monique Proulx, paru en 1996, représentant une métropole moderne dans le processus de la mondialisation (Proulx). Nous tenterons d'établir dans quelle mesure ces écrivains québécois représentent la nourriture et les habitudes alimentaires dans leurs ouvrages et dans quel objectif ; puis, quels sont les éléments de la culture alimentaire le plus souvent représentés (plats, produits du terroir, commensalité ou autres habitudes alimentaires). Enfin, nous devons considérer dans quelle mesure la nourriture fait partie du paysage culturel dans la prose francophone du Canada, qui met en relief les phénomènes anthropologiques et sociologiques tels que l'exode rural.

LA VIE À LA CAMPAGNE (FORÊT) ET L'IDENTITÉ COLLECTIVE :  
LA NOURRITURE ET L'ÉCRITURE ETHNOGRAPHIQUE  
DANS *MARIA CHAPDELAINÉ* DE LOUIS HÉMON

Le premier ouvrage qui s'impose à l'analyse est *Maria Chapdelaine* de Louis Hémon, roman emblématique de la région québécoise du début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. Rappelons que ce roman a été rédigé d'abord pour le public français en feuillets publiés dans le journal *Le Temps*. C'est pourquoi l'auteur, journaliste français, s'est donné pour objectif de représenter le paysage, le mode de vie et les coutumes des habitants du village de Pérignon. Cet aspect exotique subsiste aussi dans la première version cinématographique du roman, sortie en 1934 et réalisée par Julien Duvivier – avec Madeleine Renaud et Jean Gabin dans les rôles principaux

–, couronnée de prix cinématographiques prestigieux (premier lauréat du Grand prix du cinéma français en 1934, mention spéciale à la Mostra de Venise en 1935). Les paysages impressionnants, les vêtements et chaussures spécifiques des habitants du nord du Canada, la « drave », c'est-à-dire la pratique du « transport de troncs d'arbres flottés » (TLF), tout cela est représenté dans le roman, ainsi que dans sa version cinématographique, tournée en France. L'idée était sans doute de montrer au public français le mode de vie de la communauté franco-canadienne, modeste, travailleuse et fidèle aux valeurs conservatrices visant à la préservation de son identité francophone : celle de la famille, de la foi catholique et de la terre, ce qui a contribué à sa popularité en France (Boillat).

Quant à la place consacrée à la nourriture dans cet ouvrage, il serait opportun de citer deux passages du roman, focalisés sur les pratiques alimentaires du Canada français de l'époque. D'abord, dans le chapitre V, l'auteur, prenant le ton d'un auteur de documentaire, décrit la cueillette des *bleuets* : « Les forêts du pays de Québec sont riches en baies sauvages ; les atocas, les grenades, les raisins de cran, la salsepareille ont poussé librement dans le sillage des grands incendies ; mais, le bleuët, qui est la luce ou myrtille de France, est la plus abondante de toutes les baies et la plus savoureuse » (77–78).

L'usage même du mot *bleuët* (baies du genre *Vaccinium*), ne faisant pas partie du français parlé en France métropolitaine, même aujourd'hui perçu comme québécois, nous indique que le Québec y est ici décrit comme un *ailleurs*. La collecte de bleuets et leur préparation y sont décrites afin d'instruire le lecteur sur cette pratique. Ce produit du terroir (le terroir incluant, selon le célèbre chef cuisinier Alain Ducasse et son *Dictionnaire amoureux de la cuisine* paru chez Plon en 2003, les facteurs géographiques, climatiques, géologiques, humains, historiques, commerciaux (Dikas 234–236), faisant partie du paysage de la région du Lac-Saint-Jean, est donc mis en relief par l'auteur du roman, vu son importance pour la culture de la population francophone de cette région.

L'auteur nous donne davantage de détails sur la description de la cueillette de ces baies, en accentuant leur importance pour le paysage culturel, voire pour l'identité des Canadiens francophones :

Sa cueillette constitue de juillet à septembre une véritable industrie pour les familles nombreuses qui vont passer toute la journée dans le bois, théories d'enfants de toutes tailles balançant des seaux d'étain, vides le matin, emplis et pesants le soir. D'autres ne cueillent les bleuets que pour eux-mêmes, afin d'en faire des confitures ou les tartes fameuses qui sont le dessert national du Canada français (Hémon 78).

Une autre situation qui s'impose à l'attention du lecteur – étant liée au paysage culturel – est la représentation d'un repas traditionnel et de la commensalité (chap. IV). Citons-en une partie :



La soupe aux pois fumait déjà dans les assiettes. Les cinq hommes s'attablèrent lentement, comme un peu étourdis par le dur travail ; mais à mesure qu'ils reprenaient leur souffle leur grande faim s'éveillait et bientôt ils commencèrent à manger avec avidité. Les deux femmes les servaient, remplissant les assiettes vides, apportant le grand plat de lard et de pommes de terre bouillies, versant le thé chaud dans les tasses. Quand la viande eut disparu, les dîneurs remplirent leurs soucoupes de sirop de sucre dans lequel ils trempèrent de gros morceaux de pain tendre ; puis, bientôt rassasiés parce qu'ils avaient mangé vite et sans un mot, ils repoussèrent leurs assiettes et se renversèrent sur les chaises avec des soupirs de contentement, plongeant leurs mains dans leurs poches pour y chercher les pipes et les vessies de porc gonflées de tabac (66–67).

Hémon a donc réussi à esquisser les habitudes alimentaires et des plats représentatifs au public français et à y représenter brièvement le contexte sociologique et anthropologiques – le milieu familial, les habitudes alimentaires telles que la commensalité – et aussi les données économiques (la modestie et la rigueur de la vie des franco-canadiens).

Tout en mettant en valeur la tradition du roman de la terre, Hémon a réussi à introduire dans cet ouvrage emblématique les éléments documentaires, afin d'assouvir la curiosité de son public français au sujet des paysages canadiens ; la représentation des habitudes alimentaires des Canadiens français y contribue largement. Son roman expose déjà la confrontation entre la vie à la campagne et en ville moderne ; ceci s'avèrera être un des phénomènes majeurs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et trouvera son reflet dans la production littéraire du Canada francophone.

#### LES MIGRATIONS VILLE-CAMPAGNE ET L'IMMIGRATION :

#### LES HABITUDES ALIMENTAIRES DANS LES OUVRAGES DE GABRIELLE ROY

Nous examinerons maintenant la représentation de la nourriture dans le roman urbain *Bonheur d'occasion* de Gabrielle Roy. Ce roman fait passer en revue la vie de plusieurs personnages du quartier ouvrier de Saint-Henri, emblématique de Montréal de cette époque<sup>1</sup> et fait revivre au lecteur le quartier lui-même, en faisant défiler les noms des rues, des restaurants, des cafés, ainsi que les descriptions de leur intérieur. Ensemble avec Adina Balint (74), rappelons que la littérature québécoise n'existe pratiquement pas sans Montréal. La métropole de Québec est, dans l'œuvre de Gabrielle Roy, une ville bruyante, où la vie se déroule de manière rapide. C'est un lieu de rencontres, mais aussi de

<sup>1</sup> Dans l'interview publiée par Radio Canada, Gabrielle Roy s'exprime sur la dureté de vie des habitants de ce quartier notoire dans cette grande ville industrielle (Radio Canada).

séparations et de choix difficiles à opérer. La modernité de la ville par rapport à la campagne, ainsi que le changement de valeurs qui en est le résultat, est représentée tout le long du roman.

L'auteure n'a pas omis non plus d'y représenter la nourriture. Un lecteur attentif pourrait être surpris par le nombre de fois que l'auteure fait référence à la nourriture. À titre d'exemple, *sundae*, dessert traditionnel des États-Unis préparé à la crème glacée et au lait et napée au coulis de fruits ou sauces au chocolat, y est mentionné une dizaine de fois (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 15, 23, et *passim*). Ce n'est pas tout : on assiste même à sa préparation au début du roman (15–16). Lorsqu'elle décrit les sorties de ses personnages, Gabrielle Roy fait voir toutes les circonstances – les rues qu'ils traversent, les endroits où ils se dirigent –, mais aussi la nourriture, et cela même de manière très détaillée. Elle est représentée aussi à travers le type de magasins où les personnages se dirigent – il s'agit des restaurants rapides, des buffets à la gare, des restaurants gastronomiques, des cafés, des restaurants-épicerie, des tabagies, dont les noms sont cités par l'auteure – et les plats que les personnages consomment – « le potage Julienne, les hors-d'œuvre, une entrée de filet de sole, l'entrecôte, la laitue, les pâtisseries françaises » (83) –, et tout cela dans l'objectif de faire voir l'aspect sociologique et économique de la vie dans une grande ville de cette époque, ainsi que la psychologie des personnages. Nous apprenons, par exemple, le prix des hot-dogs et du coca-cola à l'époque ; que les jeunes ouvriers mangent plutôt aux restaurants rapides qu'au domicile... En outre, le personnage principal, Valentine Lacasse, est serveuse au restaurant rapide *Quinze-cents*.

La citation suivante nous paraît opportune pour illustrer le procédé de Gabrielle Roy. Elle nous fait voir l'ambiance du restaurant *Quinze-cents*, où travaille Florentine :

Dès qu'un client rassasié se levait, un autre prenait sa place ; le comptoir se meublait tout aussitôt devant lui, d'un verre d'eau fraîche et d'une serviette de papier ; une blouse verte se penchait sur lui, puis s'éloignait dans un craquement de coton empesé ; la serveuse lançait un ordre dans le téléphone de commande ; le monte-plats grinçait et une assiette bien pleine, fumante, apparaissait au bord d'une trappe percée sous le reflet des glaces et qui communiquait, on aurait dit, avec une caverne de vivres inépuisables.

Le tiroir-caisse sonnait presque sans interruption. Des consommateurs pressaient des serveuses ou réclamaient leur attention en claquant des doigts ou en laissant filer entre leurs lèvres des « pssst » insolents (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 101–102).

Ce restaurant est bruyant, ainsi que la ville ; le fait même de manger n'est plus intime, limité au foyer, au milieu familial. La consommation même des repas semble être réduite à son côté pratique. Évidemment, les habitants de cette ville se nourrissent pour vivre et le font rapidement, puisqu'ils sont pressés. Il

semble aussi que la nourriture est en train de perdre son statut identitaire, au moins en ce qui concerne l'identité collective, francophone et catholique, repliée sur le foyer et les valeurs familiales. Elle n'inclut pas nécessairement la commensalité ni l'idée d'appartenir à une communauté définie. Une autre identité émerge, notamment : celle des habitants d'une ville industrielle.

Ce décalage entre les valeurs de la ville et celles de la campagne est, d'ailleurs, représenté de manière évidente par le fossé des générations entre les deux personnages principaux féminins : Florentine et Rose-Anna Lacasse, sa mère ; cet aspect a été examiné par Novella Novelli. Fidèle aux valeurs traditionnelles, Rose-Anna reste liée au foyer, comme la majorité de femmes de sa génération issues du milieu rural. Par contre, sa fille perçoit ce mode de vie comme un « long voyage gris, terne, que jamais, elle, Florentine, n'accomplirait » (Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* 122). Dans cette même perspective s'inclut le dégoût de Florentine pour l'aspect misérable de la cuisine de sa mère, comme preuve de la misère dans laquelle vit sa famille et dont elle souhaite à tout prix s'échapper : « Depuis longtemps, elle ne voyait sa mère qu'à la maison, penchée sur la poêle de cuisine » (121). La cuisine représente, en effet, le lieu réservé aux femmes dans les familles traditionnelles – « elle, courageuse, ramassait déjà des poêles, des chaudrons, des marmites » (286) –, ce mode de vie était vu, par la génération de Florentine déjà, comme quelque chose de dépassé.

Dans son recueil de contes *Ces enfants de ma vie*, publié en 1977 et traitant de ses expériences d'institutrice dans les années 1930, la nourriture et les habitudes alimentaires sont représentées ici aussi comme composante naturelle de l'identité nationale, mais aussi du processus de l'assimilation. Elles y sont liées à certaines pratiques culturelles, à la ville autant qu'à la campagne, et permettent de reconstruire le paysage culturel de l'époque.

De cette manière, nous apprenons que les enfants des immigrants italiens mangeaient « l'ail, le ravioli, la réglisse » (Roy, *Ces enfants de ma vie* 30) ; qu'une institutrice offrait une pomme aux élèves pour les reconforter (22) ; que les élèves d'origine polonaise voulaient offrir aux institutrices une boîte de chocolats pour Noël (36) ; qu'en tant qu'institutrice, elle, à son tour, leur offrait « une poignée de bonbons, trois ou quatre noix de Grenoble, un orteil de Nègre, un fruit, pomme ou orange, et quelque petit sifflet de métal ou autre rien semblable » (43). Autant de détails marginaux de prime abord, mais précieux pour la reconstruction du contexte culturel de cette époque. L'écrivaine nous dévoile aussi l'aspect intérieur des magasins alimentaires dans les quartiers ouvriers à l'époque. Notamment, « le stock, faute d'espace de rangement, ou par négligence, reste interminablement en vrac, par terre, dans les coins, ou pêle-mêle dans des vitrines crasseuses, le chocolat voisinant avec le savon et les corn-flakes » (36).

L'objectif de la narratrice, en tant qu'institutrice, était d'assimiler les élèves immigrants dans l'environnement canadien (Chapman 68). Lorsqu'elle peint

les mœurs de la campagne, elle représente minutieusement les habitudes des personnages, ainsi que les plats qu'ils y préparent. Nous apprenons, par exemple, que les femmes habitant dans les parties rurales du Canada, à la lisière des grandes forêts, n'ont pas le temps de – citons les propos d'une élève de Gabrielle Roy – « faire le ménage, de ramasser aux moins le plus gros, ni même de faire son gâteau » (Roy *Ces enfants de ma vie* 112) ; que les paysans y ramassaient, bien entendu, des champignons (113). En occasion d'un dîner, on lui offrait une omelette (131–132) ; on pouvait y goûter de la gelée de *pembina*, offerte par un voisin, immigré islandais : il s'agit de *Viburnum trilobum*, c'est-à-dire de la viorne de l'Amérique du Nord, une espèce de baie rouge semblable à l'airelle ou canneberge. On lui a offert aussi des crêpes préparées à la maison (135), du café frais moulu et du beurre baratté à la maison (136). Gabrielle Roy décrit aussi l'ambiance du repas : « Ce que nous avons mangé pour souper, je ne m'en souviens guère. Cela n'avait pas d'importance. Ce qui devient inoubliable, ce fut le réconfort et la tendre beauté de cet intérieur, ces deux lampes allumées [...] » (135).

Dans la nouvelle intitulée « De la truite dans l'eau glacée », l'auteure nous décrit ainsi la rencontre, durant une excursion dans la forêt avec un élève aventurier, avec des truites qu'un Anglais, qui vivait dans une cabane, avait ensemencé dans un ruisseau (159). Dans le chapitre suivant de cette nouvelle, l'auteur nous fait découvrir l'ambiance d'un dîner formel dans la maison bourgeoise régie par le père de Médéric ainsi que les us et coutumes de ce milieu culturel.

Vedette d'une génération moderne des écrivains québécois, Gabrielle Roy, de manière réaliste, fait voir le quotidien de la société qu'elle représente, ainsi que le fossé qui existe avec la génération précédente, lié surtout aux valeurs de la vie en milieu rural. C'est la vitesse de la vie au milieu urbain qui l'emporte déjà et qui modifie les habitudes alimentaires.

#### LA NOURRITURE DANS LE CONTEXTE DE LA MÉTROPOLÉ ET DU MULTICULTURALISME : LES CONTES DE MONIQUE PROULX

Nous traverserons encore une quarantaine d'années pour nous pencher sur le recueil de nouvelles *Aurores montréalaises* de Monique Proulx, auteure récompensée québécoise. Le milieu qu'elle représente est celui d'une métropole moderne. Notamment, Montréal y est peint à travers son cosmopolitisme, ses lieux de mémoire<sup>2</sup>, tels que le quartier Saint-Henri, puis Mont Royal et d'autres, puis par les *non-lieux* (Augé 122), c'est-à-dire les espaces non-identitaires, interchangeable, où l'être humain reste anonyme (les cabines téléphoniques,

<sup>2</sup> Dans le sens de Pierre Nora.

le transport en commun, les hôtels). Multinationale, capable d'assembler plusieurs cultures, les vestiges de l'Histoire, le présent et le futur, cette ville réunit les traits caractéristiques d'une métropole, qui est, selon le *Trésor de la langue française*, la « ville principale d'un pays, d'une province ou d'une région ; ville dont le rayonnement et l'influence lui font jouer le rôle de capitale ». En plus, en tant que métropole moderne, elle rassemble les monuments du passé, mais aussi les immeubles modernes ; elle est notamment en constante mutation. En effet, son caractère de métropole moderne peut se résumer par les paroles du personnage principal de la nouvelle éponyme, « Les Aurores montréalaises » : « Montréal est une ville qui n'arrête pas de changer [...], est une ville qui additionne tellement les nouveaux visages que l'on perd toujours celui que l'on croyait enfin lui connaître » (Proulx 163–164). C'est pourquoi les nombreuses facettes de la métropole sont représentées de manière fragmentaire dans la littérature contemporaine, par exemple dans le roman *La Québécoise* de Régine Robin (Popović, “Prostor i konstrukcija identiteta”).

Comme l'on pouvait le prévoir, la nourriture y est, elle aussi, cosmopolite. Évidemment, l'idée de la nourriture comme composante essentielle de l'identité collective n'y subsiste pas. Les *usagers de la ville* – comme les sociologues et les urbanistes contemporains désignent des habitants des villes (Barthes) – sont aussi les *usagers de diverses cuisines nationales*. Par exemple, en se séparant, un couple doit partager les plantes aromatiques qu'ils ont cultivées : la sauge, le fenouil, le basilic, l'estragon (Proulx 103–105) ; ces herbes aromatiques ne dénotent ici ni une cuisine nationale en particulier, ni l'identité culturelle de cette nation. En effet, les personnages de ces nouvelles dégustent les spécialités de diverses cuisines nationales : on y savoure l'espresso italien, la retsina grecque (23), le sushi japonais (45, 47, 92 *et passim*), les baklavas syriens à l'eau de rose et à la crème de pistache (161).

Cette abondance d'aliments et de plats divers, parmi d'autres objets offerts à la consommation dans cette métropole moderne, est mise en relief dans la nouvelle « Jaune et blanc », sous la forme d'une lettre adressée de la part d'une immigrante chinoise à sa grand-mère : « Le foisonnement, grand-mère, fait maintenant partie de mon environnement quotidien. Il existe ici tant de vêtements aux lignes et aux couleurs disparates [...]. Il existe tant de spectacles et de restaurants, tant de saveurs de glace [...], tant de voitures et d'objets à vendre et à regarder » (56).

Pour la majorité de personnages et dans la plupart des contextes dans ce recueil de nouvelles, la nourriture fait tout simplement partie du quotidien. Nous découvrons les habitudes alimentaires des personnages : que les personnages y goûtent de la tarte au sucre (16), des huîtres de saison (20), boivent du café, du thé vert (30, 34), mangent des frites (79) et boivent du gin blanc (79). Dans le paysage culturel de cette grande ville, la nourriture dénote la différence de classe. Par exemple, un lecteur découvre, dans la nouvelle « La classe

laborieuse» que dans les milieux aisés à Montréal, on consommait du homard (155) du «saumon fumé, [les] pâtisseries de chez Le Nôtre, les fromages Bour-sault, les figues à deux dollars cinquante la pièce» (153–154). Ceci est mis en contraste évident avec le riz que doivent manger les habitants pauvres de cette grande ville (155): la différence des classes sociales est mise en évidence brutalement avec les choix alimentaires imposés par les conditions économiques.

Un fossé des générations est représenté ici aussi. Dans la nouvelle «Le futile et l'essentiel», la mère – Fabienne – rend visite à sa fille qui habite à Montréal, nommée Martine. La mère vient du milieu rural et appartient à la génération qui tenait beaucoup plus aux valeurs traditionnelles. C'est pourquoi elle ressent un manque dans les grandes villes et apporte, pour sa fille, de la nourriture traditionnelle :

Et elle sortait des entrailles de sa valise de provinciale des confitures de framboises et de prunes, des poires à l'alcool, du vinaigre de mûres sauvages, des marinades fruitées, des pains de ménage, du vin de gabelle, des noisettes, du sucre d'érable, des brioches, une catalogne tissée à la main, deux chandails, des gants et un passe-montagne assortis en laine rouge sur lesquels voletaient des bernaches noires. (43)

Dans la suite du texte, Monique Proulx souligne que la fille, de son côté, ne ressent aucun besoin pour cela, elle en est même un peu dégoutée. La même réaction se produit chez un journaliste accueilli par une petite-bourgeoise dans la nouvelle «Madame Bovary», quand elle insiste sur la qualité de ses gâteaux Paris-Brest et des tartes qu'elle prépare et auxquels elle tient trop (127), au point de s'y identifier (128). L'idéologie de la cuisine nationale comme marque cardinal de l'identité collective d'une famille ou d'un couple paraît désuète, arriérée ; elle est déconstruite par l'auteure des nouvelles, qui observe les nouvelles pratiques de vie des citadins et les met en relief.

En outre, pour la première fois dans notre corpus, nous avons la représentation des régimes diététique et végétarien. Par exemple, le visage de Fabienne, personnage de la nouvelle «Le futile et l'essentiel» était «anémié par l'âge et les diètes successives (40) ; sa fille, Martine, est végétarienne, et prépare du couscous aux légumes (42). En plus, elle fait très attention à ne consommer que de la nourriture saine: «elle mangeait des fruits, des graines, des oléagineux et des aliments lactés dans de très strictes proportions» (44). Il y aussi des magasins de nourriture bio (158, 164). Pour la première fois dans notre corpus aussi, nous trouvons les aliments incorporés dans des produits cosmétiques, tels que la masque aux concombres (91) et l'huile de pain aux pommes vertes (103).

À part les aliments et les boissons, les personnages de Monique Proulx consomment aussi de l'alcool ou en abusent, de même que du haschich: c'est une autre innovation par rapport aux autres ouvrages de notre corpus. Les

personnages des nouvelles « Jouer avec un chat » (29) et « Ça » sont en effet des alcooliques, tandis que les personnages de la nouvelle éponyme « Les Aurores montréalaises » prennent du haschich.

De cette manière, la métropole postmoderne représente un endroit de l'échange, des rencontres, mais aussi de la consommation et de l'alimentation. Dans ce domaine également, les lecteurs peuvent observer les rencontres entre le centre et la périphérie, entre le passé et le présent, entre la tradition et l'innovation.

#### EN GUISE DE CONCLUSION

Tout en étant représentée en marge et peut-être timidement, la nourriture et les contextes de l'alimentation sont soigneusement représentés dans ces productions de la littérature francophone du Canada, avec une conscience de son poids anthropologique et culturel reconnue chez les auteurs de toutes les époques mentionnées. Dans le corpus analysé, nous pouvons voir la nourriture décrite comme partie de l'identité nationale, comme produit du terroir et de culture, mais aussi comme élément qui change avec le temps, ainsi que la place qui lui est attribuée dans une culture particulière.

En effet, ce n'est pas avec exagération de dire que l'histoire culturelle du Canada peut être reconstruite aussi par la représentation des habitudes alimentaires de Canada dans le corpus analysé. Elles connotent le contexte du défrichement des bois, puis de l'émergence des villes industrielles, de l'immigration, et enfin de la mondialisation. Quoique de nombreuses vedettes de la cuisine canadienne – telles que la tourtière, la poutine, le pouding chômeur et d'autres spécialités de la cuisine québécoise (Imagine Canada) – ne figurent pas explicitement dans notre corpus, une esquisse de paysage culinaire, traditionnel et moderne, y émerge. La représentation de la nourriture devenait, au fur et à mesure dans les textes analysés, de moins en moins documentaire, ethnographique et témoin de l'identité collective, et plus en plus repliée sur les aspects psychologique, sociologique et économique, décrivant la population des villes et composant l'identité individuelle.

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# LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF ETHNIC CHURCHES IN THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN CANADA

—◀—  
JUDIT NAGY

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I will explore how the church is represented in literary works written by Korean-Canadian authors such as Jean Yoon, Ann Y. K. Choi, Christina Park and Ins Choi. As a starting point, in order to understand the importance of Christianity in the life of diaspora Koreans living in Canada, we will need to have a quick look at Christianity in modern Korea. Next, some important features of Korean-Canadian Christianity will be provided, with a special focus on the roles ethnic churches play in the diaspora. Last, I will present my analysis of literary works written by Korean Canadians, to demonstrate how prominently the church appears in these works and to establish in what light this happens.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Korean diaspora in Canada, literary works by Korean-Canadians

## **Résumé**

Dans cet article, j'explore la façon dont l'Église est représentée dans les œuvres littéraires écrites par des auteurs canadiens d'origine coréenne tels que Jean Yoon, Ann Y. K. Choi, Christina Park et Ins Choi. Pour commencer, afin de comprendre l'importance du christianisme dans la vie des coréens de la diaspora vivant au Canada, nous regarderons le christianisme dans la Corée moderne. Ensuite, nous présenterons certaines caractéristiques importantes du christianisme coréen au Canada, en particulier le rôle que jouent les églises ethniques dans la diaspora. Enfin, je présenterai mon analyse d'œuvres littéraires écrites par des canadiens d'origine coréenne, afin de montrer la place prépondérante qu'occupe l'Église dans ces œuvres et d'établir sous quel angle cela se produit.

**Mots-clés:** Christianisme, diaspora coréenne au Canada, œuvres littéraires écrites par des canadiens d'origine coréenne

## INTRODUCTION

About 25% of the total population of the Republic of Korea are Christians “with [approximately] 35 000 churches, 50 000 pastors and a growth rate unsurpassed in the world” (Couto 18). Thus it is not surprising that the Korean diaspora living in Canada considers the church a major communal hub, “a locus around which people congregate, meet and develop community” (Huh et al. 4). There is a lot more taking place at Sunday gatherings than the pastor delivering a sermon and attending to the spiritual needs of the church members. The organizing of businesses, matchmaking and networking are equally characteristic of such occasions. Moreover, Korean ethnic churches foster the preservation of cultural traditions and the provision of fellowship, social status and positions (Min 1370). As for the prevalence of the church in the Korean immigrant experience in Canada, Song suggests that “[t]he growth of Korean churches has been because half of the immigrants already come prepared to join a church. [...] Half of the remaining immigrants eventually call a church their ‘community centre’ where they seek support and assistance in adjusting to their new home” (24).

In accordance with the above, Korean diaspora literature produced in Canada boasts a cornucopia of church-related literary references. The paper aims to explore how the church is represented in selected works written by Jean Yoon, Ann Y. K. Choi, Christina Park and Ins Choi. I will argue that, while some members may find Korean ethnic churches confining, the strong community-forming effect of the church is markedly present in these works at multiple levels.

## CHRISTIANITY IN THE HOME COUNTRY

From the point of Christianity, the Republic of Korea<sup>1</sup> is quite unique as “a substantial proportion of the population has converted to Christianity in a country where other religions are already established” (Kim, *Routledge Handbook* 9). In fact, Christianity is the most popular religion among Koreans with a religious affiliation (Rausch and Park 12). The interaction between Christianity, Buddhism and shamanism is equally remarkable (Kim, *Routledge Handbook*), as illustrated, for instance, by the popular TV drama series *Goblin – Guardian: The Lonely and Great God/ Dokkaebi* which amalgamates heaven, the doctrine of predestination, reincarnation, ghosts lurking around, the character Samshin<sup>2</sup>, and Goblin’s mythical figure caught in between this world and the otherworld.

<sup>1</sup> No information is available on the DPRK. However, Kim states that “80-90% of North Korean migrants identified themselves as Christians, and around 70% continued to rely on church services” (*Routledge Handbook* 8).

<sup>2</sup> The protector of children in Korean folk religion until they reach the age of ten.

To make the picture even more complex, even though Confucianism is not considered a religion per se, “an overwhelming majority of Korean Buddhists and Christians continue to identify their convictions and practices as characteristically Confucian” (Kim, *Routledge Handbook* 9).

Historically speaking, Catholicism was the first Christian religion to arrive in the Korean peninsula through Chinese mediation in the eighteenth century. The figure of Peter Yi Seung-hun was central to the spreading of Catholicism among scholars and commoners including women (Rausch and Park 12). In the nineteenth century, Catholicism was perceived as a form of Western influence potentially undermining the rule of the government, and as such, was systematically persecuted (Rausch and Park 13).<sup>3</sup> Protestantism started to spread in Korea in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, with the first resident missionary, Horace Allen setting foot on Korean soil in 1884. Early Protestantism “focused on medical and educational institutions [...] as a means to encourage conversion and win state support” (Rausch and Park 13). Protestant missions enabled Koreans to start their own churches and to shape these according to their own needs. They also represented a ray of hope against the growing Japanese influence in the region, and allowed women to participate and become missionaries, which certainly contributed to their popularity. By 1907, the number of Protestants in Korea surpassed 100,000 and they played an important role in Korean resistance to the Japanese colonial rule (Rausch and Park 13). The division of Korea following WWII was a blow to Korean Protestantism as the North Korean regime was hostile to Christianity from the beginning. The post-war military regimes in South Korea also caused a rift among Protestants.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Protestants were energetically involved in rebuilding the country, their numbers grew exponentially and reached 10 million by 1987 (Rausch and Park 14). Still today, Protestantism is the leading Christian religion in the Republic of Korea: “Protestant churches and church-related institutions considerably outnumber other religious organizations, with Protestants having 55,104 in 2017, compared to [...] Catholics at 2,028.13. Protestants also run the most religious broadcasting stations, newspaper and magazine publishers, clinics, schools, and social welfare organizations” (Rausch and Park 15). They make up approximately 20% of the total South Korean population (H. Choi, “The Sacred and the Secular” 279).

<sup>3</sup> “Catholicism’s foreign connections, government fears that it would encourage rebellion, and the Catholic rejection of ancestor rites led to violent state-sponsored persecution of Catholics” (Rausch and Park 13). See also the film *The Book of Fish/ 자산어보* (2021) telling the story of Yak-Jeon Jeong and the Catholic persecution of 1801, in which Yi Sung-hun himself was executed.

<sup>4</sup> Essentially anti-Communist revivalists and evangelicals versus liberal Protestants and Minjung Theology (Rausch and Park 14).

## CHRISTIANITY IN THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN CANADA

As Noh, Kim and Noh observe, a “significant feature of the Korean[-Canadian] community is the Korean Protestant Church and other religious institutions” (xii). Given the status of Protestantism in the Republic of Korea, this may not be surprising. Similarly, the importance of Christianity in the home country is congruent with the fact that more than half of Korean-Canadians (57.2%) reported a Christian religion in the 2021 Census (Statistics Canada 2023), altogether 124,530 people out of 217,650. Within the community, first generation Korean-Canadians boast the highest percentage of Christianity (58%) followed by second and third generation Korean-Canadians with a respective 56% and 45%.

Korean immigration to Canada started to increase in the mid-1960s due to Pearson’s introduction of the “points system” and Canadian-South Korean immigration agreement, negotiated by Trade Minister Jeon Take-bo, who “was directly responsible for the first wave of Korean immigrants into Canada, many of them hand-picked from among the families Jeon had known through Christian circles connected to the UCC Korea Mission” (Kim-Craig 183). Ties between the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) and the United Church of Canada were conducive to the establishment of Korean ethnic churches. Sang Chul Lee, the founder of the first Korean-Canadian congregation was hired by Steveston United as a missionary to cater for the English-speaking Canadians and members of the Japanese minority in Vancouver in the 1960s. He soon became engaged in serving his fellow-Koreans in Canada:

Lee was motivated [...] by a need to provide a supportive community for the new immigrants. Koreans faced many challenges upon their arrival: from communicating in a new language, to learning new customs, to knowing what clothes to wear, to dealing with racist attitudes, to finding work in a society that did not recognize their expertise, to raising children in a new school system. The church was one of the only places where Koreans could understand what was said, and be understood in return. This sense of being understood had as much to do with shared experiences of migration as it had to do with language and cultural background. The fact that the church was an organization run by and for fellow Korean immigrants in the new land drew people in (Kim-Craig 181–182).

Bearing the name Toronto Korean United Church (TKUC), the first Korean church in Toronto was established at St. Luke’s United Church downtown Toronto on the corner of Sherbourne and Carlton Street in 1967 (Kim-Craig 181–185).

According to Park Seong Man, 382 Protestant and 17 Catholic ethnic Korean churches were established in Canada by 2007 (“Religious Participation” 13). Counting 392 ethnic Korean churches altogether, statistics published in *The Kukmin Daily* ten years later, in January 2017 show similar figures, making Canada a runner-up in the number of churches founded by Korean immigrants, right behind the United States (Yeong and Kim, “Worldwide, Korean Churches”).

#### THE ROLE OF KOREAN ETHNIC CHURCHES IN THE DIASPORA

The quotation by Huh et al. in the introduction draws on the social networking function of Korean ethnic churches: *congregate, meet* and *develop community* (4, my emphasis). Moreover, the church is also seen as a form of social support: “[n]ewly arrived immigrants were able to get support from more established community members, particularly in urban areas” (Huh et al. 4). Sang Chul Lee’s views on the mission of an ethnic congregation presented above are suggestive of similar ideas. His aim was to build a *supportive community* to aid its members to negotiate the challenges of learning the host country’s *language* and *culture*, and those of *the education system* and *work environment*. A *shelter, an enclave* with “*the sense of being understood*” (Kim-Craig 181, my emphasis). Commenting on the prevalence of the church in the Korean immigrant experience in Canada, Song, as quoted in the Introduction, also stresses *support* and *assistance with adjustment*.

Kim-Craig focuses on the importance of the congregation in the preservation of the mother tongue and the home culture: “with regard to the function of Christianity in preserving a distinct Korean culture, just as the early Korean congregations had done in Korea, Korean Christian communities in Canada used the church as a way to *preserve* and *promote their culture* and *language* in a strange land” (Kim-Craig 236, my emphasis).

The most comprehensive summaries on the role of Korean ethnic churches in the life of the diaspora come from Park Seong Man and Min Pyeong Gap. Park enumerates six such roles: “Korean ethnic churches serve *religious* as well as *social, educational, and psychological functions* for Korean immigrants, and Korean immigrants’ religious faith within Korean ethnic churches helps them *overcome the unstable adjustment periods* and *intensifies the ties of ethnic identity in the new host country*” (“Religious Participation” 11, my emphasis). Min’s roles include the organization of *businesses, matchmaking, networking*, fostering the *preservation of cultural traditions* and the *provision of fellowship, social status and positions* (“The Structure and Social Function”).

The sources mentioned in this section revealed a wide spectre of functions Korean ethnic churches fulfil, from the preservation of one’s language and culture to networking, to providing various forms of support to foster adjustment

to the host culture and, most importantly, “the sense of being understood” (Kim-Craigg 181).

#### LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

Now we will see how the Church is reflected in literary works written by Korean-Canadian authors and whether this is congruent with the historical and sociological sources presented in the previous passages.

First, we are going to have a look at Jean Yoon’s short story entitled “Halmonee,” which was published in the volume *Han Kut* (2007) written by Korean-Canadian women. The story presents a three-generational Korean immigrant family living in Canada. The grandmother, “Halmonee”<sup>5</sup> does not speak much English. Only her family and television connect her, very loosely, with the host culture. The only company she enjoys is that of the Korean preacher and his wife. She often calls on them on the pretext of dying:

There is a book in her hand with very large print. The pages are thin and elegant so you can see, like veins in the skin, the words on the opposite page. I think it is the bible she is reading, but maybe it’s a book of hymns. She doesn’t sing herself but she enjoys calling the preacher and telling him that she is dying [...] And when the preacher comes, he brings his wife, a neat lady with shoes that match her pale peach dress. They hold her hand and sing energetic hymns over and over (J. Yoon 18).

As the excerpt also illustrates, these hymns and religion serve as a solace for Halmonee in a strange host country she cannot identify with. The appearance of her book of hymns (*thin* and *elegant* pages) also reflects her reverence towards Korean Christianity.

Mary/Yu-Rhee, the main protagonist of Ann Y. K. Choi’s *Kay’s Lucky Coin Variety* (2016) comes from a Buddhist family but she does not practice her religion: “I told everyone I was a Buddhist, although I rarely went to the temple. As immigrant children, we led parallel lives and were bound by parallel expectations of great achievement, which ultimately led to a lot of conspiring against our respective parents” (A. Y. K. Choi 22). She regards Christianity as a feature of host culture education: “In six hours, I’d be back in my homeroom class. A shiver ran down my spine. I’d be standing for the national anthem, followed by Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” (A. Y. K. Choi 43). Her brother, Josh, on the other hand, sees Christianity as an opportunity to make friends, network and integrate into the host culture. Mary/Yu-Rhee is angry with him because she feels this is only an excuse to leave his share of work to her at the family-run convenience store: “I was angry the day

<sup>5</sup> “Halmonee” means “grandmother” in Korean.

Josh left for a summer retreat with his church friends. He'd be gone for a month. 'He's not even Christian,' I yelled at the TV before turning it off. Now I was stuck doing his share of work" (A. Y. K. Choi 97).

Christina Park's *The Homes We Build on Ashes* (2015) has references both to Christianity in Korea and in the Korean diaspora in Canada. To start with the first context, the novel mentions that during the Japanese occupation missionary schools served as an ideological refuge from the Japanese attempts at forcing their own culture and religion on the colonized (administration, Shintoism). "Christianity gave Koreans comfort and hope that traditional religions like Buddhism and Confucianism failed to provide and hence spread rapidly especially among alienated classes and women. Many Korean elites were also educated in private Christian schools" (I. J. Yoon, "Korean Diaspora" 211). When Nara, a nobleman's daughter, calls what is being taught a lie, she gets whipped by the Japanese who operate the public school she attends: "Nara was being hit on her legs. Then, a few strokes later, the sound shifted. [...] Nara was being whipped on her back now. She was ordered not to let out a sound on threat of a harsher beating" (C. Park, 29). After the incident, Nara's father sends her to a missionary school operated by Canadian missionaries. The school offers temporary protection from similar abuse, and in a case the missionaries notify the Canadian Embassy when teenage girls are held captive at the police station as potential traitors: "As the Reverend made note of the students the soldiers were singling out, his face turned a ghostly grey. [...] A day later, the Reverend went to see the students at the police station. [...] I have told them at the station that I had contacted the embassy and notified our ambassador of their arrests. [...] it makes things more official" (C. Park 41).

During the Korean war and after the Pusan fire of 1953, the church serves as temporary shelter for those who had to flee and also to those who lost their homes. At Nara's church in Pusan, church members hold extra church meetings in a member's house with a meal: "[t]he meetings were held to go over the administration of the church as well as to socialize outside the rigid religious setting" (C. Park 9). When Nara's house burns down in the fire while she is out helping others, church members help Nara rebuild her home. The reader also learns that the church Nara attends was "founded by Irish and American missionaries who had probably been Presbyterian. But it was, in part completed by American GIs who had instead most likely been Catholic [...] evidenced by the way they crossed themselves at the sight of death. And there was a lot of death so there was a lot of crossing" (C. Park 9).

When Nara immigrates to Canada, for these positive experiences, she feels at home in church unlike her older daughter, Sun-hi: "[e]ven though she had grown up in a church and survived by the good graces of God-fearing people, she deliberately pushed herself away from that belief system, which she perceived as either false, hard to believe, or close-minded. It was unclear if it was

the rules, the way of thinking, or the faith she could not accept, but with eyes wide open, Sun-hi made her choice and Nara had accepted it” (C. Park 229).

The novel offers a detailed description of First Presbyterian, the church Nara is attending in Canada:

It had also been a long time since Sun-hi had stepped foot in a church. It stood here on the corner, beside the busy, heavily travelled street, an old, grey weathered building that had settled on all four sides like a dilapidated, sagging barn or warehouse. Looking at it, it was hard to tell that it was a church. [...] If not for the sign saying First Presbyterian,” it would be hard to tell it was a place of worship (C. Park 233).

It is exactly its old-world patina with a touch of the home country that makes the church attractive to many ethnic Koreans of Nara’s generation: “[t]his church was rundown, like an old-world community infused by old world beliefs” (C. Park 233). Critical as it may seem upon first reading, this remark by Nara has two different implications. For Nara’s generation, the church is an enclave, a living memory of the home country, “a locus around which people congregate” (Huh et al. 4): “[w]hat Sun-hi mistook for neglect were in fact signs of good use: the carpet was well-trodden, the door was often open, the seats were sat in” (C. Park 234). However, for the younger generation, as represented by Sun-hi, the church appears to be something outdated; what catches her attention first is the dilapidated condition of the church building suggestive of decay: “Sun-hi wondered why or how anyone could feel inspired by these surroundings” (C. Park 234).

Sun-hi decides to attend worship mainly out of respect towards her mother so as not to let her down in front of her fellow Korean church members. Yet, deep inside she is also aware of the community-forming effect of ethnic churches and the sense of belonging they offer to their members:

[S]he knew she had to enter properly through the main entrance, glide her way next to Nara, show loving support, and demonstrate the appropriate level of daughterly deference. [...] [S]he went in and reluctantly made her way through the groups of worshippers standing in the back. [...] She was, after all, Nara’s daughter, and by association, *she was fully baptized into the community* (C. Park 235, my emphasis).

Finally, it must be mentioned that Nara’s worldview is very much like what we see in Korea: her first trance at the missionary school resembles a seer’s shamanistic ritual, she believes in reincarnation like Buddhists and experiences Christianity both as religion and culture through the missionary school, her supportive church community in Pusan, and First Presbyterian, the ethnic Korean church she attends in Vancouver.

Ins Choi’s *Kim’s Convenience* (2012) also boasts some church-related references. The first such reference appears in Choi’s introduction to the play, where



he mentions the establishment of the first Korean church in Toronto in 1967, their quick proliferation in the years following, and their importance for the community: "I've always considered the church and the store to be the *Umma* and the *Appa*<sup>6</sup> of Korean communities in Canada" (I. Choi xii).

In Scene Three ("Call Police"), Appa expresses his dislike of Mr. Shin, a fellow-Korean salesperson on grounds that his church attendance is motivated by his business endeavours: "He is pimping the Jesus [...] He is using church to selling Honda. Different church every Sunday, selling Honda" (I. Choi 15). Indeed, both in the positive and negative sense, ethnic churches serve as "community business centers," where goods, services are advertised and sold, important information is exchanged and even matchmaking takes place.

Ins Choi's play also describes the trend to relocate old downtown ethnic churches to the suburbs or, in some cases, to close them entirely. Centrally-located plots are sold to developers for erecting multi-storey apartment and office buildings that would bring more profit:

Umma: "This Sunday is last day. Last day for our church" Jung [Umma's son]: "The condo thing? They bought it?" Umma: "Church head office think waste of money to build new church. Not enough people. So, they closing our church and using money for mission work in North Korea. Bible say time to start, time to finish. When Moksanim<sup>7</sup> first start church, only six Korean church in Toronto. downtown, small, no money. Now, over two hundred Korean church, all move out of downtown, big buildings, lots of money. We is last Korean downtown church" (I. Choi 61).

In Scene Fifteen ("Hi Jung") a reference can be found to Corinthians 13:1–2 in the context of Jung and Appa's relationship: "What meaning is there even in sharing the message of God if it is shared without love?" (I. Choi 59). After a fight with Appa, Jung left home when he was sixteen. He took his belongings and emptied the safe in the store. He has not been on speaking terms with Appa ever since, which saddens Umma and makes her reminisce nostalgically about the church singing contest the Kims won as a family: "Umma: 'You remember church family singing contest? You was eight years old. Janet was six. We is stand up here church. You, me, Appa, Janet, all together, hold hands. We win first place. That is my most happy memory'" (I. Choi 60). The family singing contest also bears testimony to the community-forming effect of ethnic churches.

Another similar event in this respect is the soccer tournament Jung's church organized when he was a teenager: "Suyoung put up an old picture of the team [on Facebook], and he starts writing this play-by-play. [...] The Toronto inter-church annual tournament. Under 16 division" (I. Choi 63). An enumeration

<sup>6</sup> Umma means *mother*, Appa means *father* in Korean.

<sup>7</sup> Moksanim = pastor, minister.

of the churches involved in the tournament follows: Haninjangno Church, Dong Bu Church, Bethel Church, United Church, Young Nak Church. Jung was the captain of the winning team, which made him feel proud and successful unlike his current life.

### CONCLUSION

As the above analysis has revealed, literary works written by members of the Korean diaspora in Canada contain several references to the Church. For Jean Yoon's *Halmonee*, it represents close ties with the home culture. For Mary/ Yu-Rhee of Ann Y. K. Choi, it is the embodiment of host culture education, for her brother, Josh it is an opportunity to network, to reach out to the host culture and to escape from the chores the family-run convenience store entails. For Christina Park's *Nara*, the missionary school is a safe haven from the cruelty of the Japanese colonizers, the church community in Pusan offers her protection, temporary shelter and fellowship in the years following WWII, whereas First Presbyterian in Vancouver provides her with a sense of belonging in a strange new land, and reconnects her with her ethnic roots. Even for a skeptic like *Nara's* older daughter, Sun-hi, this connection is palpable. In the play *Kim's Convenience*, Ins Choi calls the Church the mother of the Korean Canadian community, also emphasizing its importance. Through references to activities such as the family singing contest or the inter-church soccer tournament, the community forming effect of the Church is foregrounded. Other important aspects mentioned are its business potentials and humanitarian endeavours, some prominent examples which include Mr. Shin's Honda sales, moving downtown churches out to the suburbs in order to sell the plot to developers, and using the money thus gained to finance North Korean mission work. In sum, the roles the Church plays in the analyzed works are diverse and mostly positive, especially in the case of the parents' and grandparents' generation. One commonly shared feature is the strong sense of belonging diasporic Church members experience.

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# REJECTING THE LANDSCAPE OF DISORDER: *THE COLORED AMERICAN* AND THE CANADIAN REBELLIONS



SUSAN SIGGELAKIS

## Abstract

This paper examines the views of the editors of *The Colored American*, a Black-owned, abolitionist newspaper published in New York City during the latter 1830s. Using material published therein, the author attempts to discern their editors' views on the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions, whereby colonists attempted to overthrow British imperial rule. The paper's stance on these revolts was influenced by Britain's hostility to slavery within its territories as well as the legal equality it guaranteed to Blacks. *The Colored American* opposed the rebellions and supported American neutrality on the disruptive hostilities in spite of the fact that rebel leaders drew on republican principles of the United States' Declaration of Independence to legitimize their movements. Because many Black abolitionists revered those same principles, the newspaper's stance posed a contradiction, one which the author attempts to resolve by examining the ideas of editor Charles Bennett Ray.

**Keywords:** *The Colored American*, abolitionism, Blacks, Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions

## Résumé

Cet article examine les opinions des rédacteurs de *The Colored American*, un journal abolitionniste appartenant à des Noirs et publié à New York à la fin des années 1830. En s'appuyant sur les documents publiés dans ce journal, l'auteur tente de discerner le point de vue des rédacteurs sur les rébellions du Haut et du Bas-Canada, au cours desquelles les colons ont tenté de renverser le pouvoir impérial britannique. La position du journal sur ces révoltes a été influencée par l'hostilité de la Grande-Bretagne à l'égard de l'esclavage dans ses territoires ainsi que par l'égalité juridique qu'elle garantissait aux Noirs. Le *The Colored American* s'est opposé aux rébellions et a soutenu la neutralité américaine dans les hostilités perturbatrices, en dépit du fait qu'afin que leurs mouvements soient légitimés, les chefs rebelles se sont appuyés sur les principes républicains de la Déclaration d'indépendance des États-Unis pour légitimer leurs mouvements. Comme de nombreux abolitionnistes noirs révéraient ces

mêmes principes, la position du journal posait une contradiction que l'auteur tente de résoudre en examinant les idées du rédacteur en chef Charles Bennett Ray.

**Mots-clés:** *The Colored American*, abolitionnisme, Noirs, les rébellions du Haut et du Bas-Canada

As the fourth American periodical published by African Americans, *The Colored American* of New York City had a notable, albeit brief history. During its existence between 1837 and 1841, it attempted to fulfill its stated motto of “Speaking in THUNDER TONES” by covering the issues of the day for its readership (Ripley 216). The subjects of articles ranged widely, from the treatment of the Cherokee nation, to the campaign for abolition, to the practice of judicial review. Its operation coincided with the late 1830s’ rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada by those opposing British, imperial rule. Despite the Black community’s affection for the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the principles of which the Canadian rebels appropriated for their own revolt, the newspaper’s writers rejected both the insurrection and, more broadly, Canadian republicanism. By presenting compelling arguments, they hoped to persuade their readership to do so, as well. Supporting British rule to ensure a haven for escaped slaves, though crucial, was only one of their rationales. Several secondary rationales reminded free Blacks that their core interests in stability and progress in the United States could be jeopardized by the overthrow of the established regime across their northern border.

The colonial rebellions against the British Crown began in 1837 in two different parts of British North America, one English speaking, in what is now Ontario, and the other, French-speaking Quebec. Key differences existed between the uprisings. For example, Quebec’s conflict was characterized by greater violence than Ontario’s and resentment against ruling elites there intertwined with the linguistic divide. Yet, the rebels in both shared an antipathy to the heavy-handed rule of their royal government and the absence of democratic representation. The Constitutional Act of 1791 had earlier divided what had been a single colony into two – Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec). Both had a governor, an appointed Executive Council, an appointed legislative council and a locally elected assembly. The assemblies were empowered to make laws over local matters. During the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, locals elected to the assemblies met infrequently and lacked expertise that might have enabled them to challenge the Executive Council.

As the colonies evolved from ‘pioneer conditions’ into more complex societies, passivity towards executive control was replaced by resentment (Bell 49). Advances in communications and transportation meant that average citizens could look beyond their own situations to the larger forces influencing their

fates. By the 1830s discord arose about the causes of and possible solutions to problems, particularly financial ones, which resulted in a conflict between the elected assemblies and the governor and his executive and legislative councils. To some degree, representative government did exist. Yet, the executive branch, the ultimate authority, disregarded the assemblies' preferences. The regime's separation of powers existed not to limit governmental power overall, but to maintain imperial control (Malcolmson and Myers 39). In both provinces, farmers, artisans and small merchants saw subversion of democratic self-rule.

The Jacksonian expansion of democracy to the 'common man' in the United States rendered the antirepublican character of British rule more evident. Harvest failures in both colonies in 1836 and a decline in public works expenditures in Upper Canada exacerbated discontent. In 1837 a banking crisis hit both Britain and the United States. Causes included a collapse in the inflated price of land, falling cotton prices and fiscal and monetary policies in both countries. Economic hardships beset almost all economic sectors in North America.

In Lower Canada, the British government's expenditures of revenues despite the express will of the elected assembly was but one of numerous actions drawing the ire of the provincials. Francophone and anglophone relations had been fraught since at least 1810, dating to the governorship of Sir Henry Craig, who saw francophones as threatening English control. He interfered with their presses and political leaders. Twice he dissolved the elected Assembly. Francophones feared the government's dissolution of their cherished identity. Also resented was the privileging of anglophones as civil officers and in economic arrangements.

By 1837, some in Lower Canada had had enough. The rebel Patriotes, headed by Assembly member Louis Papineau, began to call publicly for popular control over provincial expenditures. They compared explicitly their situation to that of Americans in 1775. Papineau admired greatly the authors of the Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. One biographer noted his "unstinted admiration for American institutions" (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*). Inspired by American republicanism of Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, he proposed that the legislative council be elected by the people directly. On October 23<sup>rd</sup> of 1837, he issued his own 'declaration of the rights of man.'

Throughout that autumn, the situation escalated into violence between Patriotes and Loyalists, with British troops being summoned. Despite inferior organization and arms, the rebels managed several victories. Several hundred Patriotes were killed, property was destroyed and hundreds of insurgents imprisoned. A flareup in November 1838 was quickly snuffed out. Its leaders were executed and scores transported to Australia.

Upper Canada's rebellion was not far behind. In December 1837, almost a thousand adherents followed leader William Lyon Mackenzie in a march on Toronto. A Scottish immigrant, he had founded his own newspaper, *The Colonial Advocate*, in 1824. With this mouthpiece he advocated constitutional reform. Throughout the 1820s, Mackenzie supported 'responsible government,' whereby the executive body acts pursuant to the will of the elected Assembly, not the Crown. Having held a seat in the colonial assembly and served as Toronto's mayor, he had experienced first-hand some of the offending imperial actions, such as when Lt. Governor Francis Bond Head interfered in the election of members to the assembly, establishing a conservative majority. An enduring irritant was the 'Family Compact,' the cohesive bloc of governmental officials connected by marriage, patronage, an arrangement assailed relentlessly by Mackenzie. In addition, long-standing political support for the privileged place of the Church of England resulted in its ownership of about one-seventh of the colony's land, creating resentment.

Mackenzie produced several documents in the latter 1830s which are modelled on, albeit not identical to, the United States' Declaration of Independence. His 1837 "Declaration of the Toronto Reformers" reads:

Government is founded on the authority, and is instituted for the benefit of the people; when therefore, any Government long and systematically ceases to answer the great ends of its foundation, the people have a natural right given them by their Creator to seek and establish such institutions as will yield the greatest quantity of happiness to the greatest number (McKay 18).

His was a republican vision. Mackenzie's draft constitution for Upper Canada resembled some of the newer state constitutions, such as Ohio's and Kentucky's, and the United States Constitution. All political power, he stressed, lies with the people, which they exercise through popularly elected representatives. Delegated powers should be limited and separated. Rights, including those of property, should be enumerated. The intent of its author to require official legal equality could not have been made clearer than in his draft's summative provision that "in all laws made or to be made, every person shall be bound alike..." (McKay 19).

This rebellion, though destabilizing, was foiled by local militia and British troops. Mackenzie fled to the U.S. with his lieutenants hanged or banished. For a while, he and other veterans of his failed army conducted raids from New York and Vermont, gaining support from Americans who were members of the 'Hunters' Lodges' there. In 1840, they torched the steamship *Robert Peel* in the Thousand Islands but their success was fleeting. Ironically, British military expenditures to suppress these revolts aided the late 1830s' economic recovery.



Julien Mauduit maintains that the diverse American press reactions to the rebellions reveal U.S. attitudes about republican ideals during a time of territorial expansion. He asserts that the hostilities prompted the question if Americans could uphold their 'republican morality' while grappling with difficult geopolitical issues (Mauduit 387). With the ideology of American republicanism situated in the Declaration of Independence, with its claims of universal equality, consent and natural rights, few could ignore that document's similarity to the Canadian rebels' proclamations. *The Richmond Enquirer*, for example, predicted bloodshed and suffering from the revolts but also pointed out that, in one of Mackenzie's addresses, "[t]he American Declaration of Independence is mentioned in terms of praise, and its principles held up for universal adoption. A parallel is instated between the course pursued by the people of Canada and that of the American colonies, show[ing] the exact similarity of their conditions" (2).

Although some antislavery newspapers supported the rebels, William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the foremost abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, did not. He opposed them and supported neutrality by the Van Buren Administration. Britain, having eliminated slavery in 1833, could not be condemned for heavy-handedness in the Canadas. British Canada was a refuge for the escaped slave. As early as 1819, the British government opposed officially the extradition of escaped slaves, which was reaffirmed in legal decisions. While Canada did not offer social or economic equality, Black citizens, after three years' residency, enjoyed legal equality with British subjects in suffrage and due process. They could serve on juries and pursue judicial remedies for injuries. The prohibition of slavery, non-extradition of escaped slaves and provision of civil rights simplified Garrison's choice to join in Van Buren's de facto policy of supporting the Crown.

Despite venerating the Declaration of Independence himself, Garrison dismissed the cloak of Declaration-like rhetoric with which the rebels draped themselves. His *Liberator* denounced the insurrection as a 'false' form of liberty. His newspaper pointedly reprinted an editorial, "Violation of Neutrality," by the Upper Canadian Governor Francis Bond Head where Head excoriated the rebels' American allies (Head 3).

For abolitionists like Garrison, slavery was the ultimate evil. British monarchical rule was preferable to the malignant, pro-slavery republicanism visible in the Texas independence movement against Mexico. Most of the Texas colonists of the 1820s and 1830s came from slaveholding U.S. states. Texas would likely become officially slaveholding, whether independent, as it became in 1836, or joined to the Union. This future was not lost on abolitionists. Republicanism, if adopted by an independent Canada, portended at the very least legal extradition of escaped slaves and, at worst, the adoption of slavery there.

*The Colored American* also supported unequivocally the British military response to the uprisings. It urged Black Canadians to support the Crown. Its contributors also expressed definitively the stakes for Black Americans were the British to vacate North America. Could they continue embracing the principles of republicanism as expressed in the Declaration of Independence yet deny support for a neighboring population's efforts to effectuate them? It seems they could.

*The Colored American* was predated by *The Weekly Advocate*, founded in January 1837. The paper's name change took effect in March 1837 when Samuel Cornish succeeded the original founders as editor. His aim for his acquisition was to make it a forum for Black issues, stressing the necessity for independent Black voices in a Black press.

Because our afflicted population in the free states are scattered in handfuls over nearly 5000 towns and can only be reached by the press—a public journal must therefore be sent down, at least weekly to rouse them up. To call all their energies into action—and where they have been down trodden, paralyzed and worn out, to create new energies for them [...] because without such an organ we can never enlist the sympathy of the nation in our behalf [...] it is ours to will and do... (Ripley 216–217).

The newspaper challenged Garrison's authority on antislavery and often tackled subjects deemed too inflammatory for reform-minded whites. Initially the paper succeeded. In one year, its editions, usually 4–6 pages, amassed over 1800 subscribers. It even attracted white abolitionist financial support and circulated across many states, across the Atlantic to Britain, and south to Jamaica and Haiti.

Yet, the newspaper did not attract as many Black subscribers as its editors thought fitting. In 1838, the paper reported that, although it was selling more than 2000 copies a week, if our people be taken as a body, and their patriotism judged by their support of the ONLY PAPER conducted by themselves, and consecrated to their interests, every intelligent mind would say they mostly deserve to be slaves" ("Our Noble Committee"). With this guilt-inducing broadside the paper's leaders hoped to stimulate Black readership.

The next years proved chaotic. Changes in ownership, editorial disputes and financial problems abounded. In 1838, proprietorship passed to a 28-member Committee of Publication, chaired by Thomas L. Jinnings, a well-known Black activist in New York City. Attempts to publish a Philadelphia edition failed. A libel suit weakened the paper, too. By March 1840 Charles B. Ray, a minister and former sales agent, was publishing the newspaper solo from his office.

During its short life, the paper was combative, attacking Garrisonians for rejecting political action against slavery. It lambasted the American Moral

Reform Society for including both blacks and whites as members. It criticized fellow Blacks for alleged shortcomings. Such stances alienated both subscribers and patrons. By 1842, it had folded. Though short-lived, it set a high bar for later Black newspapers.

As is evident throughout the pages of *The Colored American*, Blacks saw the Declaration as the expression of principles whose fulfillment, though in the 1830s still wanting, was tantalizingly possible. That is, if only white Americans would recognize that natural rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness extended to all. For example, on July 8, 1837, on the heels of Fourth of July celebrations in the United States, *The Colored American* published an article which read:

[M]ore than 60 years ago the different states of this Confederacy combined in publishing that very memorable document, "The Declaration of Independence" in which all men are declared to be free and equal and they pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to support the holy principle. Yet, strange inconsistency! After the lapse of sixty odd years of light and improvement the same great Confederacy continue to hold more than two millions of slaves, in a bondage most cruel... ("Serious Reflections").

Further evidence reveals more Black reverence for the Declaration. In August 1838, the newspaper published a report of the (Black) Cincinnati Union Society's meeting, at which a number of resolutions were passed. Resolution no. 9 read: "The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of Ohio – both on the side of Liberty and Equality when not misinterpreted" ("Cincinnati"). In a November 1839 piece, the writer(s) maintained that "Abolitionists seek nothing beyond what is contemplated in these honored declarations [the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence and the Kentucky Bill of Rights] that the blessings of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness may be left open to the enjoyment of all" ("Abolition Dying Away"). Editor Ray coauthored a speech at the 1840 Albany Colored People's Convention in which its authors concluded: "We ask only for a living manifestation of belief in the above doctrine [the Declaration's natural rights]; we already know too much of its dead letter" (*Minutes* 35).

Like *The Liberator*, *The Colored American* opposed the tactics and goals of the Canadian rebels, while ignoring their appeals to the philosophy of the Declaration of Independence. It backed the United States government's observance of neutrality regarding the conflict and urged punishment for American allies of Papineau and Mackenzie, describing them as "hotheaded, restless spirits on our frontiers" ("Canadas"). Clearly, its devotion to 'republican morality' came in second to more pragmatic concerns.

In 1838, the paper castigated those Americans who sided with the rebels “for what is called liberty,” echoing Garrison’s characterization (“Canadas”). Besides deploring the harm of the unrest to lives and property, this editorial presents its readers with the most persuasive reason to support the British: i.e. “[The Canadas are] the only spot on the continent upon which the fugitive slave can find a place to rest the sole of the foot, and should these ‘patriots’ succeed, the Canadas would soon be converted into a hunting ground for the slaveholders of the United States” (“Canadas”).

Once active hostilities commenced, Thomas Van Rensselaer, the newspaper’s sales agent and himself a former slave, penned an editorial. ‘T.V.R.’ as he signed his name, cautioned his ‘colored’ brethren north of the border against jumping into the fray. He wrote: “The American feeling of Independence has gone over into Canada, and broke out in a bloody insurrection. We hope our colored friends in that quarter will continue, on this occasion, as they have been heretofore, loyal subjects” (“Insurrection in Canada”). Any disruptive opposition to the Crown in which Black Canadians might participate threatened the positive portrayal of Black deportment by the Antislavery Society and other abolitionists, a portrayal that could enhance the prospects for Black integration in the states. At risk was not just the Canadas as refuge for the escapees, but the possibility for full acceptance into United States civil society. This would be an important concern of free blacks. If whites could see them as model citizens, the ‘reflective influence’ of Canadian society might thereby allow blacks to move from the margins of American society into its center (“Mistake Corrected”).

Another editorial projected an additional consequence of the expulsion of British rule from the Canadas for free Black readers.

In our humble opinion, the emancipation of the Canadas from British control would be fatal to the peace and solidity of the United States. We can hardly keep peace with the provinces now... our boundary lines, and such like things, would be a bone of constant contention, could not peace and amity in these matters be legislated across the waters. Make the Canadian independent government, and America will be the seat of eternal republican wars. But unite the Canadas and Texas to the United States, and the whole government will be as a sheet of rotten ice, upon the surface of angry waters (“Canadas”).

This author was clearly aware of the ongoing, violent, boundary controversy, called the Aroostook War, between Maine and New Brunswick in the 1830s. Free blacks, some of whom did own land and many more who wished to acquire it, could not help but understand that stability of territorial borders would be more congenial to farmland acquisition and secure title than a republican Canada. ‘Black agrarianism,’ an important movement of the time, was supported particularly by editor Ray, who urged free blacks to move to the

newly-opened Wisconsin lands. Having been designated a U.S. territory in 1836, Wisconsin bordered British Canada. Were the Crown ousted and the established practice of United States treaty-making with Britain abandoned, those lands lay vulnerable to Canadian republican designs.

In December 1837, the editors of *The Colored American* criticized some of their Fourth Estate colleagues for compromising American neutrality by supporting the rebels. Its author(s) attacked unnamed 'Western' newspapers who supported the "Canada patriots or more correctly the Canada rebels" ("Dangerous Spirit"). The newspaper's editors understood the potency of the press, whether for good or ill. Those 'zealots' expressing support for the uprisings, "will find to their sorrow when it is too late to recall the mischief they have done" ("Dangerous Spirit"). The editorial continued:

Their restless ambition and lust for power will result in a general explosion, and we shall very soon compromise, if we engage a rebellious spirit, southern and western, northern and eastern governments... Let us but pass resolutions and contribute our means to furnish men, ammunition and arms for the Canadian rebels and we shall soon find business and rebels too within our own borders. Citizens of the United States, BEWARE at this critical and trying period, how you encourage a restless, rebellious spirit in any one mis-step [sic] may be an overstep which may not be recalled ("Dangerous").

Whether this writer was exaggerating the danger of revolts against the U.S. or state governments, Black readers likely understood that civil disorder of any sort portended danger for those, like themselves, at the bottom of society. No doubt fresh in their minds was the violence of the so-called 'Tappan' riots in New York City, where whites targeted both blacks and abolitionists in 1834.

Yet another argument for imperial Canada was made by the editors linking the situation to the newspaper's consistent, anticolonization stance. Colonization was a popular national policy proposal which particularly worried free blacks, especially those with farms and businesses. By early 1839, an editorial writer, most likely Van Rensselaer, noted the national rivalry of Whigs with Democrats. He averred that the American people "wish to see the Canadas wrested from the British government" ("From a Fugitive"). The Whig political party, he claimed, was both pro-slavery and pro-colonization. Thus the party was supporting Henry Clay for President in the hopes that his election would initiate an official policy of "carry[ing] off these free blacks, by steam, with the surplus revenue" ("From a Fugitive"). Yet, with Canada remaining under British control and immigrants welcomed, "these enemies of equal rights [would] dare not undertake to force us, as they forced the poor Indians from their homes" ("From a Fugitive"). Not lost upon the readers was the reference to the treatment of the Seminoles, Choctaw and Cherokee tribes, all recent victims

of the United States government's Indian Removal Act. This writer connected logically British Canada's hospitality to refugees and the deterrence of forced colonization of both enslaved and free Blacks. Cited as desirable destinations for voluntary emigration were the Canadas, Hayti [sic] and the British Islands, all "infinitely superior asylums" at least when contrasted with "barbarous, pestilential Africa." ("Commercial Enterprise"). One would find there the "climate, moral habits, [and] equality of rights" appealing to those with commercial ambitions ("Commercial Enterprise").

The question arises whether the newspaper's conservatism on the Canadas meant it opposed other, popular revolutions. It did not. In 1837, editor Cornish praised the independence movements of the Greeks against Turks (1821–1832) and Poles against the Russians (1830–31). He asserted that, because these rebels, just like the Americans of the 1770s, had declared their grievances against their oppressors and their rights in writing, "they [were] worthy to be freemen" (Ripley 217). *The Colored American* also lauded the violent Haitian revolution against French colonial rule, highlighting the diverse republican society that it had produced (Yingling 344–345). However, as far as this newspaper was concerned, revolutions abroad were one thing, revolutions on one's border were quite another.

In sum, *The Colored American* throughout the latter 1830s depicts positively the continuation of British rule in Canada, not simply because it serves as a refuge for the escaped slave. Its editorials evince the effort to appeal to free Blacks for reasons they would view as relevant to their own interests as free but not yet equal citizens. While preserving imperial Canada as the 'North Star' terminus for the escaped slave was paramount, the paper's writer(s) clearly felt that republican overthrow there would engender risks far outweighing the benefits. True, British Canada was not ruled by popularly-elected legislators and lacked a 'Declaration' enshrining Lockean consent and natural rights. That likely discomfited at least some of the newspaper's editorialists and readers who ascribed to that sacred American creed. Ray, for example, admitted that he was a pragmatic royalist regarding the rebellions but was confident that Blacks would be able to realize the promise of the Declaration in the United States. Free Blacks, in his view, should reject a future in British Canada because of its foundation on 'unnatural assumptions of the feudal system' (*Minutes* 33). In holding this view, Ray was typical of many Northern Blacks who, prior to 1850, generally rejected emigration as a solution to their problems in the United States (Hepburn 101). Yet, as Ray and many free Blacks would surely have agreed, British rule served both continental and domestic stability, modeled racial integration, and helped deter United States governmental colonization. Given the circumstances, compromising ideological consistency for tangible benefits seemed a small price to pay.

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# JOHN FRANKLIN'S FIRST ARCTIC LAND EXPEDITION THROUGH A DOUBLE LENS: THE NATIVE COSMIC CONTEXT

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SERGEJ MACURA

## Abstract

This paper compares John Franklin's and Rudy Wiebe's versions of a minor episode from the former author's 1823 work about his dramatic Coppermine expedition, which in the latter's 1994 novel becomes the dominant plotline. The narrative lacuna is filled with a plausible love story between the English explorer Hood and the Tetsot'ine girl Greenstockings, which on a microcosmic level heralds the creation of a hybrid Canadian identity. The crucial difference between the English and the Natives lies in the Western disobedience to the power of nature, whose taboos the locals are reluctant to break.

**Keywords:** polyphonic narration, Native taboos, geographic discovery, John Franklin, Rudy Wiebe

## Résumé

Cet essai compare les versions de John Franklin et celles de Rudy Wiebe d'un épisode mineur de l'œuvre de 1823 du premier auteur sur sa dramatique expédition de Coppermine, qui dans le roman de 1994 du second devient l'intrigue dominante. La lacune narrative est comblée d'une histoire d'amour plausible entre l'explorateur anglais Hood et la jeune fille Tetsote, Greenstockings, qui, à un niveau microcosmique, annonce la création d'une identité canadienne hybride. La différence cruciale entre les Anglais et les autochtones réside dans la désobéissance de l'Occident à la nature, dont les autochtones sont réticents à briser les tabous.

**Mots-clés:** narration polyphonique, tabous autochtones, découverte géographique, John Franklin, Rudy Wiebe

## INTRODUCTION

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Royal Navy Captain John Franklin was sent on a long expedition to the north of Canada in order to help chart the seashore in the distant snow-filled lands now known as Nunavut. From 1819 to 1822 he

conducted an overland expedition from the western shore of Hudson Bay to the Arctic Ocean, and he surveyed part of the coast to the east of the Coppermine River in northwestern Canada. After his return to England, Franklin published *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819, 20, 21 and 22* (1823). This work found its new reflection and reassessment in Rudy Wiebe's novel *A Discovery of Strangers*, first published in 1994, with several Native points of view woven into the plot.

It is nothing new to read a fictional account of a historical event written in the especially palimpsestic postmodern age, and due to the different historical eras of their origin, the works necessarily exhibit divergent ideological points of view, sometimes to the point of being termed *revisionist* (Birkwood 25). We could name a few works which feature the original story reconsidered and seen from a new point of view: *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853), a chronicle of 19<sup>th</sup>-century pioneer life by Susanna Moodie, an English emigrant to Canada, rendered in Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996); Toni Morrison based *Beloved* (1987) on the story of Margaret Garner, a woman whose trial for infanticide was discussed in the newspapers in 1856; Anita Diamant wrote a revisionist history of one of the greatest stories ever told – the Bible itself. The story of Dinah, Jacob's abducted daughter, reappears in her novel *The Red Tent* (1997). Numerous other examples could be found, ranging from Hilary Mantel to Eric van Lustbader and Umberto Eco.

For the purposes of this research, we will consider *A Discovery of Strangers* within a subcategory of postmodern narrative fiction which draws on an earlier historical text and fills its lacunae with credible, though invented storylines; an approximate term would be "historical fiction". The title itself may sound ambivalent, in that it can refer to a discovery made by the anonymous narrating subject (who discovered some strangers), or to a discovery of somebody like the fictional narrator by certain strangers, two opposite views of one particular occurrence. The relational matters become even more complicated when the Canadian Natives engage in their cosmogonic story, where the first man and the first woman, or the first bear and the first bird, initially act as strangers to one another and then unfold the existence of hundreds of subsequent generations.

#### FRANKLIN'S VIEW

The two-volume travelogue was first published in 1823, and it gained such popularity that it already went into the third edition as early as the following year. John Franklin's historical account exemplifies the discursive practices which pertain to the age of high colonialism, or we may even freely say, imperialism, which was reaching its zenith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The introduction states that the objective was:

[D]etermining the latitudes and longitudes of the Northern Coast of North America, and the trending of that Coast from the Mouth of the Copper-Mine River to the eastern extremity of that Continent [...] I was to be guided by the advice and information which I should receive from the wintering servants of the Hudson's Bay Company, who would be instructed by their employers to co-operate cordially in the prosecution of the objects of the Expedition... (Franklin I ix-x).

Throughout history, we can predominantly hear Franklin's narrative and ideological voice, with the exception of two inserted texts by Dr John Richardson and Lt George Back, on the harshest period of the expedition, towards the end of their exploration. A Royal Navy officer naturally had acquired strenuous discipline in the years of previous service, and he planned on as few deviations from the plan as possible, knowing well the penalty for insubordination or failure. Although Franklin had specific objectives to accomplish, besides the unwavering naval-geographic register, he managed to intersperse the entire history with many descriptions of the natural surroundings which are conducive to a more enjoyable reading; we can only admire the discipline and stamina displayed on a daily basis, when apart from all the observations, he found the time to take in the view for the public that never even imagined what the countryside that far looked like. This is just a fragment of one among the many descriptions of the natural surroundings, tame by comparison with the extreme North that came later:

The surrounding country [around the Hayes River] is flat and swampy, and covered with willows, poplars, larch, spruce, and birch-trees; but the requisition for fuel has expended all the wood in the vicinity of the fort, and the residents have now to send for it to a considerable distance. The soil is alluvial clay, and contains imbedded rolled stones. Though the bank of the river is elevated about twenty feet, it is frequently overflowed by the spring-floods, and large portions are annually carried away by the disruption of the ice, which grounding in the stream, have formed several muddy islands (Franklin I 37).

The description of nature is worthy of quality fiction written by contemporary English novelists: Franklin begins with the broadest possible panorama, with a lot of details of geology and botany. Then he provides us with some focus on the dwellings, and almost without any exception, with the anthropological observations of the "savages" typical of the Western explorers of the age, although he often objectively stresses that they are "strictly honest" (Franklin I 102). Franklin demonstrates his abilities of a keen observer, even in the zone almost void of humans; as far as the Natives are concerned, he could see well the effects of poor health protection, combined with physical exertions, not abundant fowling or fishing seasons, and the inevitable effects of alcohol on

the indigenous population. The taste of innumerable hardships to come is given early in the narrative, at a depot called Rock House:

Here we *were informed* that the rapids in the upper parts of Hill River were much worse and more *numerous* than those we had passed, particularly in the present season, owing to the *unusual lowness* of the water. This intelligence was very mortifying, especially as the *gentlemen in charge* of the Company's boats declared that they were unable to carry any part of our stores beyond this place; and the traders, guides, and most experienced of the boatmen, were of opinion, that unless our boat was still further lightened, the winter would *put a stop to our progress* before we could reach Cumberland House, or any eligible post (Franklin I 49, my emphasis).

The author's vocabulary shows a cultivated style, not only a seaman's lapidary expression. We can conclude that the text was embellished with many epithets *post festum*, but this feature, coupled with an elegant turn of phrase, provides the reader with such mediation of the real events that we enjoy the very form of Franklin's expression. The travelogue would have been unpalatable if it had been reduced to mere chronological order of observations with a list of place-names visited. The advance through the Canadian wilderness is often halted with the onset of winter, and sometimes the northern territories lie under ice until June, so the expedition had to spend months in forts waiting for the thaw. Halfway through the history, an important "Indian" is introduced: "One of the guides, named Keskarrah, drew the Copper-Mine River, running through the Upper Lake, in a westerly direction towards the Great Bear Lake, and then northerly to the sea. The other guide drew the river in a straight line to the sea from the above-mentioned place, but, after some dispute, admitted the correctness of the first delineation" (Franklin I 318–319).

A minor character would serve as one of the principal driving forces in Wiebe's fiction, and thus create a visibly different plotline along the lines of romantic motivation and the Native point of view. The person from the Tet-sot'ine (Yellowknife) tribe is Keskarrah's own daughter, Greenstockings, aged 15, mentioned only twice in the second volume, and nowhere else:

While speaking of this family, I may remark that the daughter, whom we designated Green-stockings from her dress, is considered by her tribe to be a great beauty. Mr. Hood drew an accurate portrait of her, although her mother was averse to her sitting for it. She was afraid, she said, that her daughter's likeness would induce the Great Chief who resided in England to send for the original (Franklin II 27).

The author does not indicate how he came about the information that she had already belonged to two husbands, probably confining the source to an implied conversation with tribesmen, as rudimentary anthropological work frequently

exacts. It is plausible that draftsman and midshipman Robert Hood could have fallen in love with her after drawing a portrait in the camp. However, Wiebe developed an entire intricate love affair between the young girl and not only one man in his fiction.

### THE NATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The civilisational point of view in *A Discovery of Strangers* is dramatically disparate when set against Franklin's travelogue hypotext: the landscape itself assumes the features of an omnipresent supernatural being which provides the inhabitants with food, clothing, tools and other necessities, on condition that they should obey the strict rules and taboos of natural survival.

Chapter 1 bears the indicative title "The Animals in This Country" and alerts the postmodern reader to the powerful links between the Natives and wildlife, many species of which function as totemic animals in the respective tribes. Thus caribou, capable of withstanding even the northern winter, appear in the introductory pages of the novel, and recur throughout the text as the source of food and garments, but also as the paradigms of steadfastness and communal behaviour. In historical and geographical context, the motif is a mainstay of Tetsot'ine life, which Franklin was ignorant about before reaching those northern latitudes. According to Robert Janes, the tribe was indeed an edge-of-the-forest people. They spent their summers on the barren ground, customarily following the movement of the caribou and catching abundant amounts of fish in the numerous lakes, rivers and brooks. In the winter they would return to the forest edge, where they went on to hunt caribou, moose and some kinds of small game (Janes 41). A passage will serve well to illustrate the all-permeating force of life in the Native worldview:

Lying safe, alert in this instant of rest, they were reassured that when that blazing sun stands three times its height over the glazed levels of this lake, they will feel the restlessness of their young grow heavier within them. And then they will move again into their continual travel. [...] From every direction more and more of them will drift together, thousands and tens of thousands drawn together by the lengthening light into the worn paths of their necessary journey, an immense dark river of life flowing north to the ocean, to the calving grounds where they know themselves to have been born (Wiebe 3).

The narration in such instances gradually transports the reader into the sensations, and then even the thoughts of the animals the tribe draws its sustenance from; it is by no means an error on the narrator's part to declare that the caribou possess some knowledge of their own birth, which sets this novel far

apart from a plain exploratory history. In fact, *A Discovery of Strangers* covers the dialogical territory shared both by historiography and fiction, and we do not have to call it strictly “metafiction” because the narrator never breaks the fourth wall of illusion by betraying their presence to the reader. Even the animal minds lie wide open to the ubiquity of this psycho-narration, which never occurs in Franklin’s historical account.

Chapter 2, “Into a Northern Blindness of Names,” throws the reader alongside the English explorers wading into the “inexorable” (Wiebe 1) and “unrelenting land” (Wiebe 11) of the unmapped extreme north of the British Empire, as a conquering civilisation usually has little regard for the original signifiers and the relations they form with the so-called objective natural phenomena. Wiebe allows for the existence of an omniscient narrator in certain chapters, one closer to the Natives than to the invading Whites, a technique unimaginable in Franklin’s writing practice. The multiple point of view of *A Discovery of Strangers* sheds much light on the Native vision, through which the English are presented with “bandy legs and ridiculous clothes” (Wiebe 16), being too hierarchically oriented to the tribe’s taste, too selfish and always asking for assistance and food. The English may think that they have ventured into an utter void, a space with no identifiable elements of civilisation, but it only goes to show their own ignorance and lack of preparation before setting out into the Great North. For anybody immersed in the landscape, it is as natural as an Oxfordshire countryside trail is to a Briton, but they have to be reared in the ways of the North beforehand; semiotically speaking, the inhabitants must learn how to read and decode the “symbols” of the surrounding world, its figurative morphology, syntax and semantics, and only then can they use nature for their benefit. The ill-prepared, even haughty English begin to stumble with the provisions, logistics and deadlines as soon as they disembark from the ship, which painfully dots Franklin’s narrative on hundreds of occasions and conveys accurately the hardships over the protracted several seasons of mapping and other forms of measurement for His Majesty. The Natives also know adversity, but they view it not from an anthropocentric position, like the English explorers. They practice such communal life in the subarctic regions as eliminates much of unbridled egoism and the perilous situations it may cause if it fails to acknowledge the succour of nature.

A play of wolves near the tribal camp also prefigures events in the novel: a female dances with an alpha male, refusing the advances of another male, who gets regular serious warnings: “and the silver wolf would whirl on him, forcing him to creep back, crouch and fawn, even to roll over on his back with paws helpless in the air...” (Wiebe 5). The sympathy for the loser in the game is all too evident by way of human allegory: “When the white wolf finally permitted the silver male to mount her, the brown wolf sank down with his long, sharp head along his paws, watching them intensely” (Wiebe 5). When the pack kills

a caribou calf, the universal order comes to light and hints at the human dimension, perhaps seen from a more helpless pair of eyes than a scorned wolf possesses.

The portrait drawing offers an ample space for a narrative lacuna to be filled in by Wiebe's fictionalised, but convincing account of the kindling of amatory flame between the two young people; when both Keskarrah and Greenstockings arrive at Fort Enterprise to do business with the local merchants, the young man is dumbstruck with emotion:

"I ... she is the most ... beautiful woman I've ever seen ... I..."

Even very softly, Robert Hood can only say this because neither he nor they understand a single sound either can utter. He does not consider what they can obviously see; it is enough for him that the meanings of their two incomprehensible languages pass each other unscathed in the close warmth of these hide walls... (Wiebe 82).

Due to the absence of an all-covering, supremely assured narrative voice, the reader will have to make an additional effort in order to grasp the resonance of this text, now deprived of its traditional male-centred focus. The strenuous communication is established between two disparate communities, and only a reader aware of the advantages of polyphony will be rewarded with a fuller understanding of the role of both the Natives and the Westerners in the creation of a hybrid Canadian identity. While Hood is making her portrait, the girl's father is telling a creation story, as if to protect her from the possible bad medicine of "These Whites," and that motif also reinforces the wealth of cultural negotiation, quite absent from Franklin's report: "That was when Sky came to Earth and they lay together. Their joy began then, and all day they lay together and when they separated in the evening the ground appeared, because ground is nothing more nor less than their happiness together, born between them with rocks and sand and water running" (Wiebe 88–89).

The act of mating between a male and a female pervades the entire world-view of the Tetsot'ine tribe, and the chapters with cosmogonic plots demonstrate a consonant attitude towards the Native acceptance of the course of nature. The novel abounds in examples of isomorphic variations of this seminal encounter, whether it is between supernatural beings, between humans, or between animals, even the vegetable and mineral levels may play their part in the broader sense of the term. The main female character does not object to being courted by several men simultaneously, and she seems to enjoy these flirtatious activities just as much as any European coquette would; seaman John Hepburn explains in his deposition after the expedition that she was the very reason midshipmen George Back and Robert Hood fell out with each other. Hepburn mentions the reason Back and Hood had their abortive duel in the icy wasteland: "It was the usual matter of white men in primitive lands:

a woman of the country” (Wiebe 98). In fact, the historical source must be lent credence here, since Franklin spoke to several more reliable witnesses soon after the deed committed in the treeless wilderness, and Dr Richardson and seaman Hepburn were close to the spot when (in all likelihood) Iroquois *voyageur* Michel killed Hood from behind with a rifle:

[B]ut the conduct of Michel soon gave rise to other thoughts, and excited suspicions which were confirmed, when upon examining the body, I discovered that the shot had entered the back part of the head, and passed out at the forehead, and that the muzzle of the gun had been applied so close as to set fire to the night-cap behind. The gun, which was of the longest kind supplied to the Indians, could not have been placed in a position to inflict such a wound, except by a second person (Franklin II 338–339).

The explorers set out into the unknown territory not heeding Indigenous wisdom, accumulated over centuries of struggle with the extreme forces of the natural surroundings, to which Greenstockings makes a mental note: “Only Whites would enter the long darkness with such an interminable, annihilating walk. Only Whitemuds” (Wiebe 137). While she does not give that fact deeper consideration, but immediately flirts with the hunter Broadface in a vividly lascivious language, her father has already found an explanation in the animistic tradition of his people, ironic when placed in the appropriate European context: “[T]hey don’t need the animal circle that gives us life every day. They want to live inside straight walls, as straight as round trees can make them – maybe they have to live inside the crossed-together corners of the trees that gave them their endless sorrow and wrong!” (Wiebe 129). He goes on to say that crossing the trees is unnatural, and that the Whites even smear the trees with their first ancestors, so that multiple destinies are accumulated in a limited space – many conclusions like this may be found in the novel, and they dispel any romantic notion that the Native Canadians hold the unmistakable truth of all of life’s aspects. Simply put, the English explorers display arrogance in the face of clear signs of the oncoming winter, but Keskarrah remains imprisoned within his deterministic system of animals and plants as living beings coequal with man. At several places Back infantilises the Natives when he says that the expedition is made up of the King’s warriors, and that the tribe will be richly rewarded if they hunt enough caribou for the needs of the English (Aspenlieder 81). In comments like this, the two worlds of Europe and the Northwestern Territories could hardly be more apart and stranger to each other.

The process of geographic discovery is never actually the uncovering of an absolutely uninhabited land, which the Eurocentric “Adams” could name and shape to taste, but usually a friction-filled coexistence of the newly arrived



explorers and the aboriginal dwellers, which often ends in a misunderstanding: the travellers would like to draw out as much knowledge of the natural resources as possible, and the indigenous people never rush to break the mythopoetic taboos that they abide by. To the Tetsot'ine, the myth of the melting mountain (Wiebe 17) is a story of caution before nature's might, and to the Whites, that is a certain geological sign that the area can contain copper or other profitable ores. When they are given names, more often than not, the newcomers do not seem too bright-minded to the Natives:

These English. Who also tried to name every lake and river with whatever sound slips from their mouths: Singing Lake and Aurora and Grizzle Bear and Snare lakes and Starvation River, or the names of hunters, Longleg, Baldhead, Humpy, Little Forehead, and a hundred other things, or a thousand – it is truly difficult for a few men who glance at it once to name an entire country (Wiebe 22).

Even Greenstockings' original name has fallen into oblivion since the English met her and altered her identity in their own fashion.

The clash of the two cultures is well exemplified in an episode when the explorers want to send a signal to their party camping on a lake island, but a huge fire engulfs a few square miles of littoral growth; once again, the colonisers did not interpret the meteorological signs of the higher winds in the evening: "But the wind began to lift dangerously from the west. By midnight, when Back and the two men finally returned, the entire ridge south of the river was burning like an immense, long city" (Wiebe 69). The destruction of lush nature stands out as an interdiction in the Native myths, as exemplified in one of Keskarrah's stories, this time about the culture hero Blackfire, who amply availed himself of rabbits without eating them, on the track for his abducted wife: "He skinned it with a cracked stone but, hungry as he was, he couldn't eat raw rabbit. Since then every Person knows, no matter how hungry you are, you can't keep raw rabbit down, you'll just vomit and become weaker" (Wiebe 187). On the other hand, when they are not undermining the ecosystem, the English researchers unknowingly obstruct the natural flow of life's energy, like in Winter Lake, which Keskarrah considers to be a huge fish, but the trees prevent it from getting out. Now with a lot of trees burned, the escape is an unwelcome possibility (Wiebe 86).

Perhaps the most fundamental titular connection between the two works lies in the love relationship between Hood and Greenstockings, but it also connotes the cosmic principle of chance encounters of mythical progenitors, like mammals, birds or humans in the constant natural paradigm of everlasting urge. The power of narrativisation to unite such dissimilar entities as the Englishman and the Tetsot'ine girl confirms the oft-repeated thesis in post-colonial studies that Canadian history is essentially hybrid, and, moreover,

that it is through the subversion of historiographic fragments (passages of Franklin's narrative occurring throughout the novel as intermissions) that fiction can present a wider array of voices, ideologies, viewpoints and make for a truer polyphony in this modelled world. The conclusion of the novel underlines this mixing of systems of belief, with first Robert Hood and then his and Greenstockings' child acting as symbols of this cross-cultural vision (Langston 144). Although Hood never sees his child, he sincerely hopes that he or she will be brought to England and that Greenstockings will go through an Old Testament purification ritual, despite the fact that her tribespeople doubt God's power when the explorers cannot manage the life in the Canadian North. Although she plays a relevant role in the narrative, she never speaks through a voice of her own and we learn about her actions and words indirectly since Wiebe supplies the Indigenous population with a communal voice. This technique makes for a far more palpable equality of the Tetsot'ine and the English in comparison with Franklin's travelogue. Greenstockings decides to give birth at a tabooed place near the lake of the great bear, a cliff called Forbidden Rock, and her father wisely lets her go: "Keskarrah smiled at her when she left, and she understood him: it seems your child is like you – contrary" (Wiebe 255). Her thoughts that we read indicate a resilience far beyond Eurocentric models of thinking, for instance, when she views Hood as prey, in a love affair similar to a meeting of two primordial animals. Even the explanation of the baby's birth regresses into the mythical narrative of a child found in a caribou's footprint, thus completing the cycle of unity of all beings under the sun, and closing off the plot in the paradigm of a new life in harmony with the totemic animals, life-sustaining plants, and the natural habitat for all the humans who can comply with the ways of the Canadian North.

#### CONCLUSION

The intertextual dialogue between Wiebe and Franklin spans almost two centuries, and *A Discovery of Strangers* fundamentally offsets the absence of the Native point of view from the colonial narrative. While Franklin's journal views the Canadian North as an inhospitable virginal land that can offer infinite material resources, Wiebe's retelling of the expedition is anchored in the Native worldview, where man has to obey the natural laws as attested by the blurred line between mythology and history since time immemorial. With the perspective now shifted to the aboriginal inhabitants, the reader experiences the sorely absent other side of the encounter between the Tetsot'ine tribe and the English explorers. Rudy Wiebe allows the Native mythopoetic framework and collective thinking to embody all the participants in the storyline, thus

creating a more ethically solid narration which can contribute to a better understanding of the complex question of hybrid Canadian identity.

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# THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY: THE MAKING OF FRED ROSE, M.P.



KENNETH ALFRED FROEHLING

## Abstract

At a very contentious time in Canadian political history, a byelection was set for August 9, 1943 in the Montreal federal riding of Cartier, whose population was mostly, but not exclusively, Jewish and working class. A normally safe Liberal seat, now the political landscape was a perfect storm of the major political events of the time in Quebec: WWII and the second Conscription Crisis, the unpopularity of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, English vs French Canadian views of the war, anti-Semitism, the Communist vs anti-Communist battle on the Left, etc. In a bitter four-party battle, Fred Rose, the Labor-Progressive (i.e. Communist) candidate won the byelection, thus becoming (in) famous in the years ahead in Canadian history. My paper will use one major primary source, the newspaper archive of *The Gazette*, a major Montreal newspaper, whose owner and editorial board was Conservative, but who took an interestingly passive view to a Communist being elected to Parliament. The events surrounding this byelection show that major historical events made strange political bedfellows then, as they still do today.

**Keywords:** Canadian politics, Quebec, WWII, byelection of August 9, 1943

## Résumé

À un moment très controversé de l'histoire politique canadienne, une élection partielle est organisée le 9 août 1943 dans la circonscription fédérale montréalaise de Cartier dont la population est majoritairement, mais non exclusivement, juive et ouvrière. Ce siège libéral, normalement sûr, est le théâtre d'une tempête parfaite d'événements politiques majeurs de l'époque au Québec: La Seconde Guerre mondiale et la deuxième crise de la conscription, l'impopularité du Premier ministre Mackenzie King, les points de vue des Canadiens anglais et des Canadiens français sur la guerre, l'antisémitisme, la lutte entre communistes et anticommunistes au sein de la gauche, etc. Au terme d'une bataille féroce entre quatre partis, Fred Rose, le candidat travailliste et progressiste (c'est-à-dire communiste) a remporté l'élection partielle, devenant ainsi (in)célèbre aux cours des années à venir dans l'histoire du Canada. Mon essai

s'appuiera sur une source primaire majeure, les archives d'un grand quotidien montréalais, *The Gazette* dont le propriétaire et les membres du comité de rédaction étaient conservateurs, mais qui ont fait preuve d'une passivité intéressante à l'égard de l'élection d'un communiste au Parlement. Les événements entourant cette élection partielle montrent que les événements historiques majeurs ont fait d'étranges alliances politiques à l'époque, comme c'est encore le cas aujourd'hui.

**Mots-clés :** politique canadienne, Québec, Seconde Guerre mondiale, élection partielle du 9 août 1943

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” is often quoted in politics and diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> One can cite many examples in history where people, countries, etc. were regarded as enemies only to be later feted as allies and friends, particularly when a more feared and hated rival appeared. One of the best examples of this in history was the alliance of the Western allies with the Soviet Union after the latter was attacked and invaded by Nazi Germany and its Axis allies on June 22, 1941. The Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, had an iron grip on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by the mid-1930s and was unquestionably praised and followed by loyal Communists worldwide, while being feared and hated by capitalists, anti-Communists, anti-Stalinist socialists, etc. In Canada the Soviet Union, which had been regarded as an international pariah since 1918, suddenly became a heroic ally of Canada and Great Britain in their war with Germany.

The sudden switch in Canadian attitudes towards the Soviet Union forms only one part in the rise of Fred Rose. Rose was a Polish-born communist who arrived in Montreal in 1920, then joined and steadily rose in the Communist Party of Canada, and helped working class employees in sweatshops form trade unions in Depression-era Montreal in the 1930s. Montreal is where Rose entered both federal and provincial politics in the riding of Cartier, finally winning a surprising byelection victory there in August 1943, thus becoming the only Communist ever elected Member of Parliament in the House of Commons.

This paper will focus on the reasons why Fred Rose was able to win the Cartier byelection. The voter makeup of Cartier in the early 1940s and Rose's political activism will be described, along with the party programs of his three major opponents from the Liberal, CCF and Bloc Populaire parties, especially in relation to the issue of 'conscription.'<sup>2</sup> It will be shown that not only did Mackenzie King's Government fine-tune their previous antipathy towards the

<sup>1</sup> See Forrest Wickman's article "Fact Checking Spock: Was the 'Enemy of My Enemy' Guy Really Killed my His 'Friend'?" for a discussion of the origins of this proverb in *Slate*, 16 May 2013, at <https://slate.com/culture/2013/05/star-trek-into-darkness-fact-checked-was-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-guy-really-killed-by-his-friend.html>

<sup>2</sup> The Conservatives were held in such low esteem in Cartier that they did not bother to field a candidate.

Communists for their own utilitarian reasons (and vice versa the Communists with King), but even some newspaper editors did so too. *The Gazette*, a Montreal newspaper, will be a major source here. Finally, the results of the byelection will be presented with a conclusion.

Who was Fred Rose? This is not so mundane a question since Rose's birth name was actually Fishel Rosenberg, born in Lublin, Poland in 1907 to Jewish parents there.<sup>3</sup> His family arrived and settled in Montreal in 1920. This was fortuitous since Rose had already received French language instruction at the Gymnase Humaniste de Lublin before arriving in Montreal (Levy, *The Montreal Review*). This earlier education, along with the English language education Rose received at Baron Byng high school, made it possible for him to represent both francophone and anglophone workers in political and union activities beginning in 1925 (*The Gazette*, May 16, 1986, C1; Levy, *The Montreal Review*). Rose became an active communist and a major organizer of workers in working-class Montreal, where miserable conditions in the dressmaking sweatshops existed, especially after the calamitous effects of the Great Depression and the resulting unemployment occurred. But organizing labour strikes, especially by a Communist Party member, was then illegal under Article 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada. This led to Fred Rose and four other communists being arrested and charged under Article 98 in 1931, and Rose spent nearly a year in jail (Weisbord 27–28, 35). His imprisonment on behalf of the Montreal working class only boosted Rose's political profile and helped him start his first political campaign in the federal riding of Cartier in the October 1935 federal election. The federal riding of Cartier existed in the center of Montreal from 1925 to 1968. Its then population likely had a majority Jewish population, which was mostly working class, along with a large number of mainly working class French Canadian and Eastern European groupings.<sup>4</sup> Rose first ran there under the name Fred Rosenberg as a Communist and received 3,385 votes, finishing a clear but distant second from the Liberal winner in Cartier. He then ran in the August 1936 Quebec provincial election and received 578 votes in Montreal-Saint-Louis, finishing a distant third behind the Liberal winner.<sup>5</sup> By the

<sup>3</sup> It was not unusual then for Jewish families to change their names since it made their names more understandable and, for those Jews who wished to assimilate, get ahead in Canadian society.

<sup>4</sup> For the boundaries of Cartier see [https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en\\_CA/ElectionsRidings/Ridings/Profile?OrganizationId=1765](https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en_CA/ElectionsRidings/Ridings/Profile?OrganizationId=1765). For where Jews lived in Montreal, see Mordecai Richler's novel, *Son of a Smaller Hero* (Richler 14-15). Regarding Cartier's population, it is hard to find precise figures. Paul Masse, the Bloc Populaire candidate in the August 9th byelection, stated that the riding was 55% French Canadian, 25% Jewish, and 20% of Canadian of Hungarian, Polish and Slovak descent (*The Gazette*, July 30, 1943, 19). In contrast, The Canadian Forum had it at "approximately 55% Jewish, 35% French speaking and 10% other voters of mixed nationalities" (*The Canadian Forum*, September 1943, vol. 23, no. 272, 126).

<sup>5</sup> Rose's percentage of the vote in both elections were similar: 16.28% federally and 16.8% provincially. The boundaries of Cartier covered the then largely Jewish working-class district along The Main (the colloquial term for St. Laurent Blvd.) in Montreal.

end of the 1930s, Rose had developed a solid reputation and base of support among workers in Montreal, which would be vital in the future. Even though the French-Canadian working class was largely suspicious of Jews, and often even anti-Semitic, Rose was regarded by many French-Canadian militant workers as “un bon gars”, “un des notres”, “un ami”, etc., a reputation he justifiably earned because “Fred Rose was particularly interested in the unequal status of French Canada in Confederation, and the alleviation of economic disparity in the country” (Weisbord 56).

World War II officially began on September 3, 1939, breaking out less than two weeks after the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union. Communists worldwide had to see the war effort of Great Britain and France as one of capitalism and imperialism. The Soviet alliance with Germany had immediate repercussions on all Communists who toed the Stalinist line. The Soviet reversal from seeking an anti-Fascist front to being Germany’s ally in the destruction of Poland meant that Communists became even more feared by Canadians. The Communist Party was banned, certain Communists were arrested, and for three years Fred Rose and other loyal Communists had to go into hiding (Weisbord 112).<sup>6</sup>

The German-led invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 is regarded by many historians as the turning point in WWII. It was also the turning point in Allied relations with the Soviet Union, and all loyal Communists were then expected to support the Grand Alliance of the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and after Pearl Harbor, the United States. For Fred Rose and other Communists their political fortunes suddenly changed as the Soviet Red Army stood fast after suffering terrible losses against the Axis horde at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, and “the hero of hour was Uncle Joe Stalin... For the time being, Uncle Joe, benign, mustached, with a thick head of hair, a pipe, and a twinkle in his eye was adored on both sides of the world as a champion of freedom from Nazi oppression. In Canada, the Communist Party acquired a new legitimacy” (Watson 555). For the King Government it became diplomatically impossible to continue outlawing the Communist Party and seeking the arrest of their leaders in hiding. Fred Rose, on behalf of all 13 Communist Party fugitives, secretly met Undersecretary of State for External Affairs, Lester Pearson, on “a boat trip down the Ottawa River” and agreed to give themselves up to police on September 25, 1942. Rose and his fellow comrades voluntarily subjected themselves to questioning, and after 11 days in jail were released and allowed to resume their political activity (Weisbord 112).<sup>7</sup> Due to a legal technicality in Regulation 39C of the Defence of Canada Regulations, the

<sup>6</sup> The arrest and internment of both fascists, communists, etc. was done under section 21 of the *War Measures Act*.

<sup>7</sup> The 11-day stretch in prison had a comical feel to it with Ontario premier, Mitchell Hepburn, “bringing chocolates, like Santa Claus” to the prisoners (Weisbord 113).



prisoners signed an undertaking “not to participate in the Communist Party” (Weisbord 113). Therefore, the Labor Progressive Party (LPP) became the new party name which Canadian Communists would rally under in the future.<sup>8</sup>

The Cartier byelection was called due to the death of their sitting MP, Peter Bercovitch, on December 26, 1942. Bercovitch was – like all previous Cartier MPs – Liberal and Jewish. Cartier was considered a safe Liberal seat, where the Liberals had won 88.54% of vote in the 1940 federal election. However, the King Government was in political trouble by August 1943 in both English and French Canada, and the issues hurting them most were the manpower shortage in the military, and whether conscription should be used to solve this problem. *The Gazette* stressed this in an editorial entitled, “ONE ISSUE IN CARTIER, ONE ONLY” declaring “The only issue in Cartier is the war issue... It is important, in these circumstances, that the voters in Cartier should keep this issue clear, should not allow their perspective to be warped by unrelated appeals of any kind” (August 4, 1943, 6).

The above editorial on the importance of the conscription issue later became the accepted view of future Canadian historians, including Robert Bothwell, who wrote: “The conscription crisis was the most serious challenge for the (King) wartime cabinet. No other issue had the same emotional power... no other matter could have toppled the government.” (Bothwell 333).<sup>9</sup> In the Conscription plebiscite of April 1942, 65.6% of Canadian voters (but only 27.9% of Quebec voters) gave King permission to back out of his promise *not* to impose conscription. However, King really meant “conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription”. The Liberals wanted to avoid the pitfalls of the Conservative Borden Government in WWI, where the introduction of mandatory conscription of Canadian men for overseas forces decimated Conservative support among French Canadians in Quebec for generations. Maintaining national unity and unity among the English and French-Canadian ministers of his Liberal government was King’s priority, but his cautious maneuvering on conscription had many voters in English Canada become critical of him.

The Liberals were also in danger of losing seats due to labour difficulties in Canada. This combination of voter dissatisfaction over conscription and labour disputes meant there was a realistic possibility that the Liberals could suffer the same fate as the British Liberals after WWI, and this concern became apparent in September 1943 when a Gallup Poll of Canadian public opinion showed the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) with 29% support, and the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives tied at 28% (Bothwell,

<sup>8</sup> A new party label for the Communists meant that the “name Labor-Progressive would appeal to broader circles, that it would bring us votes in the parliamentary field, that it would re-assure those liberals ‘frightened’ by the term Communist.” (Avakumovic 152).

<sup>9</sup> For a description of the Conscription Crisis during WWI and WWII, see Robert Bothwell’s *Canada, 1900–1945*, pp. 119–137, 317–335.

329).<sup>10</sup> The Liberals, though, not only had to worry about the CCF outflanking them on the left, but they also faced the possibility of losing votes to the newly created anti-conscription party in Quebec, the Bloc Populaire. The Bloc Populaire was gaining popularity among French Canadians in Quebec, and along with the growing popularity of the CCF, posed a grave threat to the Liberals. To prevent either the CCF or Bloc Populaire from winning, it was realistic for the Liberals to have an ‘unofficial’ electoral understanding with parties like the LPP in order to divide the opposition vote.<sup>11</sup>

The Communists had their own reasons to see the CCF kneecapped politically too. Communists since the time of Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution had both a fear and loathing of Socialists, Social Democrats and other left-wing parties which might compete with them for the support among the working class. If Moscow ordered other Communist parties to form a progressive popular front with other left-wing parties against ‘bourgeois’ or ‘fascist’ parties, it was only because Stalin saw benefits in doing so. The relationship between the CCF and the Communists before and during WWII reflected these tensions.<sup>12</sup>

Canadian Communists disdained especially David Lewis, the CCF candidate in the Cartier byelection. Like Rose, Lewis was Jewish and born in the Russian Empire in 1909 in Svisloch, a town now in Belarus. His family settled in Montreal in 1921, and like Rose attended Baron Byng High School. Lewis, however, followed an academic route to success attending first McGill University in Montreal, then winning a Rhodes Scholarship to attend Oxford in 1932, where Lewis immediately took a leadership role in socialist and Labour circles there. Michael Foot, a future Labour Party leader, who knew Lewis at Oxford, said Lewis was “the most powerful socialist debater in the place... He had a very powerful influence indeed amongst students...” (Smith 161–162). At Oxford, Lewis gained a lot of experience in the Labour Club and in dealing with Communists, who in 1933 “were not yet ready to push for a popular front. The focus was not on co-existing with the Labour Club but on destroying it” (Smith 196). When Lewis returned to Canada in 1935 and took a leading role in the CCF, his experience made him determined by 1942 in “taking on the Communists.

<sup>10</sup> King foresaw this when the byelection results in the Quebec ridings of Stanstead (won by the Bloc Populaire) and Cartier came in. King felt the main cause was “the price ceiling policy and restrictions generally... Also bad handling of labour policies, National Selective Services policies, in particular.” King hoped that the four byelection losses would make “some of our people realize that labour has to be dealt with in a considerate way” (Pickersgill 570–571).

<sup>11</sup> The CCF benefited by such a strategy in the February 1942 federal byelection in the Toronto riding of York South where the Liberals did not field a candidate to avoid splitting the anti-Conservative vote, thus defeating King’s former nemesis, Arthur Meighen.

<sup>12</sup> The LPP newspaper, *Canadian Tribune*, in December 1944 stated, “The Social-Democratic ‘parliamentary cretins’ as Lenin called them, failed the working class precisely because they made parliamentary careerism the be-all and end-all of their activities” and then called for “nothing less than repudiation of the CCF by the labour movement and a resounding defeat of the CCF at the polls...” (Smith 303).

Communists were blocking a CCF alliance with unions. David saw support from labour as the key to power. But to get it, Communist opposition in unions had to be removed” (Smith 242). The stage was set for a confrontation between Lewis and Rose.

In addition to Rose and Lewis, there were two other major candidates in the running. Montreal-born Lazarus Phillips, a prominent member of the Montreal Jewish community, represented the Liberals. A solicitor in a Montreal law firm by profession, Phillips was also the national treasurer of the United Jewish and War Relief agencies. Paul Massé, the Bloc Populaire candidate, was a French Canadian born in Montreal, who actually lived in Cartier for some years. He was a practicing lawyer by profession and a member of the St. Jean Baptiste Society. Massé’s base were those voters who were strongly against conscription. A periodical critically commented that Massé’s party represented “the latest political expression of the more extreme French-Canadian nationalism” (*The Canadian Forum*, September 1943, 126). There was also an independent candidate running, Moses Miller, who was Jewish and a member of the B’nai B’rith, and not expected to win more than a few votes (*The Gazette*, August 9, 1943, 13).

The campaign in the Cartier byelection is a long topic, so it is important to focus on two key points: first, why the Liberals were routed; and secondly, why the LPP won in the end. As for why the Liberals were badly defeated: King had already predicted such a result before the votes were counted (see footnote 10); but even arguments about conscription and Liberal labour policies cannot fully explain why the Liberals went from 88.54% of the Cartier vote in 1940 to 21.97% in the August 1943 byelection. King himself complained the Liberals had “above all, no organization” in the riding (Pickersgill 570). Moreover, byelections are traditionally a safe way to punish a governing party for their ills, and by August 1943 there were enough scandals and issues to defeat the Liberals. A scandal that damaged them in Cartier was the electoral lists scandal uncovered by reporters of *The Gazette* and put on the front page of their Saturday, July 24<sup>th</sup> edition. The headline read in bold: “GAZETTE REPORTER BARE FLAGRANT IRREGULARITIES IN CARTIER VOTERS’ LISTS” and reported that 102 non-residents at the Hotel Dieu hospital were placed on the electoral lists along with dozens of other cases including the names of children and dead people (*The Gazette*, July 24, 1943, +1).<sup>13</sup> *The Gazette* reported that Phillips’s nephew, Lazarus Bavitch, was the chief returning officer in the riding, so the Liberals had the embarrassment of the RCMP coming to the riding to investigate things (*The Gazette*, July 27, 1943, 1). Another blow to the Liberals happened when

<sup>13</sup> *The Gazette* ran a large front-page photo and story showing three children of the Cote family on the voters’ list: Gizelle, 14, holding her 18-month-old sister, Raymonde, and standing next to her brother, Yvon, 4, who “did not know he was listed as a factory worker; Gizelle as a housekeeper; and that the infant was an ammunition worker.”

20,000 aircraft workers in Montreal went out on strike on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. The striking workers demanded “a retroactive cost-of-living bonus,” which the National War Labour Board did not have the power to grant (*The Gazette*, August 4, 1943, 1). The problem was that the cost of living in Montreal went up 20.6% in July 1943, which made living there more difficult (*The Gazette*, July 27, 1943, 6). Since many striking workers lived in Cartier, Liberal chances of winning evaporated by the final days of the campaign, despite a political endorsement by *The Gazette* (*The Gazette*, August 4, 1943, 6).

In contrast to the Liberals, the Bloc Populaire had a better chance at winning Cartier. Massé could count on a majority of the French-Canadian vote to make up for likely not winning any Jewish votes in the riding. However, the fact that Rose was already well known and respected by many French-Canadian workers meant this was not going to be easy. Moreover, many Jews and Anglo-Quebecers in Montreal feared a Bloc Populaire victory. The Bloc Populaire had no shades of gray when it came to the conscription issue – they were vehemently against it! For Anglo-Quebecers and Jews alike, who backed the war effort, this was abhorrent. Furthermore, many members of the Bloc Populaire were strongly anti-Semitic. While their provincial leader, André Laurendeau, was not really anti-Semitic, he did not denounce Adrien Arcand, the director of the fascist National Unity Party of Canada, who was then interned by the King Government, and the antics of his followers.<sup>14</sup> Watson writes that “Sadly, many Québécois were still quietly sympathetic to Arcand’s Fascists,” and on August 9<sup>th</sup> election day many French Canadian thugs attacked “drivers taking Rose’s constituents to the polls” (Watson 557).

As for the CCF, David Lewis had a very good résumé for many, but it was anathema to others. The fact that Lewis was Jewish was too much for those French Canadians, Hungarians, Slovaks, etc. in the riding who were anti-Semitic. Moreover, the name ‘Lewis’ was not necessarily Jewish, which the LPP jumped upon. Lewis himself accused Rose and the Communists years later for playing on racial prejudice during the campaign. He wrote, “Several of our canvassers were almost in tears as... Communist workers had persuaded Jewish voter who didn’t know me that, in view of my name, I must be English or Welsh, not Jewish...[and] to non-Jewish voters that, despite my name, I was Jewish and why should they vote for a Jew?” (Lewis 231–232).

The LPP had an advantage over the CCF in organization and money too. Lewis in his memoirs wrote, “The LPP machine was every bit as strong and as ruthless as the Liberals” (Lewis 231). The LPP had been well-funded due to the number of “Victory” clubs in Canada organized by Communists and their

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Watson wrote André Laurendeau was “a fair-minded and rigorous journalist – long the editor of *Le Devoir* – [whose] time in the Bloc would inevitably trouble him with that Party’s taint of racism” (Watson, 556).

sympathizers after June 1941. The LPP in Cartier were “spending even more money even more lavishly than the Liberal Party on meetings, radio and literature” and “their organization was good, with plenty of volunteer workers” (*The Canadian Forum*, September 1943, 126). The “Victory” clubs contrasted the LPP and CCF on the conscription issue, where the LPP was for it, whereas CCF policy, decided by M.J. Coldwell in 1943, called “for the conscription of the nation’s wealth as the necessary prelude to any further conscription of manpower” (Young 231). Additionally, Lewis was a new candidate who had not lived in the riding for 12 years. Though the CCF were successful in having large mass meetings in support of Lewis, to win the riding as some expected at the beginning of the campaign (including King) “would have required a well-trained, well-financed and numerous bands of workers” which the CCF did not have (*The Canadian Forum*, September 1943, 126–127). The CCF also had bad luck late in the campaign of losing support due to the fear of Paul Massé. “His presence, with the threat that Cartier might be represented by an anti-semitic, anti-war isolationist...frightened some of the Jewish vote into support of Phillips as the government candidate...” (*The Canadian Forum* 126).

Foreign events in the final days of the campaign aided Rose too. The war news seemed hopeful on the Eastern Front with the Soviet Red Army winning a string of victories against Germany. The front-page headlines in *The Gazette* before the vote read like this: RUSSIANS CAPTURE OREL AND BELGOROD IN DOUBLE TRIUMPH (August 6); and RUSSIANS ENVELOPING KHARKOV CUT BRYANSK RAIL LINK (August 9). *The Gazette* also permitted a large House of Seagram (a distiller of Canadian whisky) ad to appear in their newspaper on election day entitled “HOW LONG IS 3 WEEKS, IVAN?” The ad showed a friendly Red Army soldier lighting his pipe and smiling at the reader, with the advertisement full of praise for soldiers like Ivan (*The Gazette*, August 9, 1943, 2). The fact the LPP was for the Soviet Union and conscription meant they could also bask in this praise for ‘Ivan’ as voters went to the polls.

As for *The Gazette* endorsement of the Liberals, it was rather lackluster and hardly mentioned them at all. It was basically a rant against the CCF, recounting the sins of CCF leader, M.J. Coldwell and David Lewis for their prewar pacifism, using Coldwell’s remarks in 1937 that “young Canadians should be ready to go to jail before enlisting in any future European war,” then stating in the final paragraph, “We cannot convince ourselves that a great Montreal division such as Cartier wants Socialism or will tolerate socialization” (*The Gazette*, August 4, 1943, 6). The final four lines of the editorial asked the voters of Cartier to do their duty “by voting for Mr. Phillips” and giving an “emphatic reprobation of everything that is offered or implied in the candidature of Mr. Phillips’ principal opponent [i.e. Lewis]” (*The Gazette*, August 4, 1943, 6). *The Gazette* likely focused more on the CCF than LPP because they thought the CCF could actually win.

In the end the final results of the August 9<sup>th</sup> byelection in Cartier were:

Fred Rose (LPP)	5,789 (30.42%)
Paul Massé (BP)	5,639 (29.63%)
Lazarus Phillips (Lib.)	4,181 (21.97%)
David Lewis (CCF)	3,313 (17.41%)
Moses Miller (Ind.)	109 (0.57%)

The LPP's victory over the Bloc Populaire by 150 votes could have different explanations, but this author takes the view that Rose's winning margin was aided by two factors. First, Rose received anywhere from 500 to 800 French Canadian votes in the riding. In contrast, Massé received hardly any Jewish votes, and, in four polling stations, received none. Secondly, the voter turnout was only 50%. The low voter turnout meant many Liberals stayed home, which worked in favor of the LPP (*The Gazette*, August 11, 1943, 11,17); and the LPP was more organized and had plenty of enthusiastic volunteers to get out the vote on election day.

The epilogue of the making of Fred Rose, M.P., is mixed, but flows from the events of August 1943. For the Bloc Populaire their victory in the byelection of Stanstead and a close second in Cartier foretold only small winnings in the future – 4 seats in the 1944 Quebec provincial election and two seats in the June 1945 federal election. These seats were usually won by well-known French Canadians, like Laurendeau, and were fought on the issue of conscription. Once WWII and conscription ended, Bloc Populaire lost their *raison d'être* and their seats in the following elections too.

The Cartier byelection was also an omen for David Lewis and the CCF. Lewis took defeat in Cartier hard. He later wrote, "The result of the byelection was a shocker for me: first, that the Communist won and, second, that I came last...[It] so affected me that when it was later suggested that I seek the nomination in Winnipeg North... I refused. My reasons were simply that I could not take another Cartier campaign..." (Lewis 232). In fact, Lewis only won his first seat to Parliament in the 1962 federal election. The relationship between the Liberals and LPP became closer after August 1943, and "the unofficial Liberal–Labour coalition...gave the communists both a more respectable public image and the opportunity to gain on the CCF" and for both parties, "There was an undercurrent of sarcasm but an acceptance of bedfellows" (Weisbord 126–127). This understanding foretold the humiliating defeat of the CCF in the Ontario provincial election of June 4, 1945, and their disappointing results in the federal election held one week later, when the King Liberals were re-elected. As for Fred Rose, one must conclude this paper with the words spoken by his mother after he came home jubilant from his byelection victory,

“My son, I hope some good will come of this” (Watson 557). Unfortunately for Rose, it did not – but that is another story!

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# WORLD WAR II AND CANADIAN LANDSCAPES

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DON SPARLING

## Abstract

The Canadian War Museum in Ottawa houses one of the world's largest collections of war art. The largest part of this was created in the course of four official programmes, beginning in World War I and continuing down to the present, whose aim has been to commission works recording the contribution of Canada to the various conflicts in which its armed forces have been involved over the years. This article gives an overview of the programmes and then focuses on the work created during World War II, and specifically on landscapes in the broadest sense of the term as the genre that is often regarded as central to the Canadian artistic heritage.

**Keywords:** war art, armed forces, World War II, Canadian War Museum

## Résumé

Le Musée canadien de la guerre à Ottawa abrite l'une des plus importantes collections d'art militaire au monde. La plus grande partie de cette collection a été créée au cours de quatre programmes officiels, depuis la Première Guerre mondiale jusqu'à aujourd'hui, dont l'objectif était de rassembler des œuvres témoignant de la contribution du Canada aux différents conflits dans lesquels ses forces armées ont été impliquées au fil des ans. Cet article donne un aperçu des programmes et se concentre ensuite sur les œuvres créées pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, et plus particulièrement sur les paysages au sens le plus large du terme, genre souvent considéré comme central dans le patrimoine artistique canadien.

**Mots-clés:** art de guerre, forces armées, Seconde Guerre mondiale, Musée canadien de la guerre

One of Canada's great cultural treasures is the massive collection of works of art recording the country's military engagements over the past century, which is now housed at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. This has taken shape over time through four distinct initiatives. The first was the brainchild of Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, a hugely wealthy Canadian newspaper owner

resident in London at the time of World War I. In November 1916 he founded the Canadian War Memorials Fund, a private charity through which, in the next three years, more than a hundred artists were hired, a third of them Canadian and most of the rest British. A very few had been in active service before being included in the scheme; others were brought into the army in some capacity, while some remained outside the army structures. Altogether they produced close to a thousand works of art – drawings, prints, sculptures and above all canvases, many on a very large scale. The works dealt not only with the battlefields of Europe, but also with activities on the home front. This was in fact a Canadian scheme first, and its early success led to its being imitated by other Allied nations.

When World War II broke out in 1939, there was no immediate decision to imitate the World War I programme. However, many individuals felt something similar should be done, in particular Vincent Massey, scion of one of Canada's leading families, a well-placed and discriminating art collector, and Canada's High Commissioner in London. In his efforts he was aided by the Director of the National Gallery of Canada, H.O. McCurry, and C.P. Stacey, a Canadian historian, who had been appointed historical officer to the Canadian Army after the outbreak of war. Initially reluctant when it came to establishing a new programme, Prime Minister Mackenzie King finally gave his approval in 1943, and the Canadian War Records initiative was set up. This differed from the Canadian War Memorials Fund in two fundamental ways. First, it was an official programme, coming under the jurisdiction of the Department of National Defence. And second, only Canadian artists serving in (or inducted into) the armed forces were included. The total numbers involved were smaller: only 32 individuals were given war artist commissions. But the scope of the works they created was much broader: the artists worked with all three branches of the armed forces, and the nature of the war meant much greater visual diversity, as they were active not only in Britain and Europe, but also in Alaska, North Africa, the North Atlantic and the Pacific, and in addition covered the home front. And the way the programme was structured meant that far more items were acquired for the final collection – around 5,000 works.

The Canadian War Records programme was wound down in 1946 after the end of hostilities; as a result, no official visual record exists of Canada's part in the Korean War. But in 1968 the Department of National Defence established the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Programme. Practising artists were deployed to locations in Vietnam, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere to work alongside members of Canada's armed forces and record their life, often in connection with United Nations peace-keeping activities.<sup>1</sup> This programme continued for almost thirty years, during which around 600

<sup>1</sup> The UN peace-keeping forces originated in response to the 1956 Suez crisis and were the

works were created, but came to an end in 1995, the victim of widespread governmental funding cuts. However, it would seem that a war art programme had become part of the armed forces' DNA: in 2001, once the financial situation had improved, the programme was revived in a slightly altered form, as the Canadian Forces Artists Programme. This time the decision was taken to expand the range of artists to include musicians, actors, writers and media artists in addition to painters, sculptors and filmmakers. This programme is ongoing, and so far has involved around 80 individuals, who have produced more than 200 works in a wide variety of fields. High standards are ensured by the selection committee for the programme, which includes members named by the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian War Museum and the Canada Council as well as representatives of artists and veterans. The aim of the CFAP is to support "independent, creative works in various media, capturing daily operations, the men and women who serve [and] the spirit of the Canadian Forces". To do so, the artists are brought "wherever operational conditions allow," where they receive "the same food and lodging as the service members have to ensure a fully incorporate experience wherever possible" ("About the Canadian Forces Artists Program").

In addition to the acquisitions that came via these four initiatives, the Canadian War Museum also houses paintings and other items created during this same period outside the official programmes, as well as earlier works and objects dating back to the pre-contact era. Altogether these amount to some 13,000 items, making it second in size only to the war art collection at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, which boasts around 14,000 items in all.

In this article I will focus on the programme launched during the Second World War, when the bulk of the works created within the official programmes originated, showing how the artists' work reflected current trends in painting, the specific conditions of World War II and the terms under which the war artists were commissioned. I will also explore the differences between the work and experiences of the Second World War artists and their compatriots in World War I.

In all four avatars of the official war art programmes, landscapes<sup>2</sup> have played a key role. Not only is this "natural" – military conflict is shaped by and takes place in specific spaces – but more importantly, the landscape tradition has been central to Canadian painting in a way that is not true of, for example, British or American painting. Its beginnings can be traced back to the topographical skills that marked officers in the British Army: before the age of

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brainchild of Lester B. Pearson, at that time Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs and later the country's Prime Minister.

<sup>2</sup> In this article I use "landscape" in the broad sense of the term, to include such sub-genres as seascapes and skyscapes as well as works that imply a wider setting beyond the actual image.

photography they were trained in drawing so as to be able to produce accurate visual records of places and objects that were thought to have some military importance. But often their drawings were more than merely mechanical, revealing genuine esthetic feeling and at times real artistic talent, and many of the earliest depictions of the Canadian landscape come from their hands. This was augmented in the mid-nineteenth century by genre painting, as seen most notably in the prolific output of Cornelius Krieghoff (1815–1872), characterized by idealized scenes of village life and the surrounding countryside in Québec. The central position of landscape painting prevailed and even strengthened following the birth of an independent Canada in 1867 as part of efforts to “brand” the new dominion. It was no accident that the first President of the newly-founded (1880) Royal Canadian Academy of Art, Lucius O’Brien (1832–1899), was almost exclusively a landscape painter, or that one of his works, *Sunrise on the Saguenay*, was the first diploma piece in the Academy’s first annual exhibition and in fact the first work acquired by the National Gallery of Canada. At that point in time, however, a distinctively Canadian landscape tradition had not yet developed: the natural world was still being interpreted visually through second-hand, outdated European artistic conventions. But a specific space only exists for the imagination when it is captured in some original way in a new artistic form, whether verbal or visual. In the case of Canada, this only began to happen towards the end of the nineteenth century – take the examples of Archibald Lampman (1861–1899) in poetry and Homer Watson (1855–1936) in painting. As a result, the Canadian artists who were involved in the War Memorials Fund project at the time of World War I were among the first to be engaged in this project of “creating Canada” visually.

There were, in fact, two generations of artists in the programme. The older generation was represented by James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924) and Maurice Cullen (1866–1934). When young, both had gone to Paris, where they studied at prestigious art schools and learned the lessons of Impressionism and post-Impressionism, which they then employed, as pioneers, in their later work in Canada. Their winter scenes, in particular, which captured the way the sharp Canadian light interacts with snow, were pivotal in creating a distinctive Canadian landscape tradition. The most influential Canadian World War I artists in the younger generation were A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974), Frederick Varley (1881–1969) and David Milne (1882–1953). Jackson had trained in Montréal, Chicago and Paris, while Varley in Sheffield and Antwerp, Milne in New York. All had absorbed the lessons of Impressionism and post-Impressionism; Milne had actually exhibited at the 1913 Armory show in New York, where he was exposed to the European avant-garde and styles like Fauvism and Cubism. But none of this had prepared any of them for how to deal with what they confronted in Europe. Not just the unprecedented violence of the war, but also, as

Jackson later put it, “[w]hat to paint was a problem for the war artist. There was nothing to serve as a guide. War had gone underground, and there was little to see. The old heroics ... were gone forever ... The Impressionist technique I had adopted in painting was now ineffective, for visual impressions were not enough” (47).

Their great good fortune, however, was to discover among the war artists in the programme a number of English artists, such as Paul Nash, Wyndham Lewis and Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, working in modern styles such as Futurism and Vorticism. What they learned from these artists enabled the Canadian artists to produce landscape paintings that captured not only the horror of the war but also, almost perversely, it’s austere and at times elemental grandeur, lessons that they carried over into their treatment of landscapes in the post-war period.

Back in Canada, 1920 marked the emergence of the Group of Seven, with Jackson and Varley among its founding members. In short order, and despite the opposition of conservative painters and critics, it became the country’s leading art movement, its central subject was the land itself, in particular the North. The Group of Seven cemented landscapes as the central genre in Canadian painting, and works by its members became iconic. But the dominance of the group lasted little more than a decade: it disbanded in 1933 as individual members began to go their own way. Both professional and amateur painters began taking an interest in new movements in the art world. This was commented on by a leading Canadian art critic, Walter Abell, in a 1944 review of an exhibition mounted by the Canadian Army that showcased not the official war artists but works created in leisure moments after military duties by rank-and-file members of the army:

On the purely artistic plane, the exhibition offers two surprises. It is unexpectedly high in its general level of attainment and unexpectedly modern in its predominant point of view ... The dominance of a relatively modern point of view suggests that the country, or at least the younger art-minded section of the country, is more contemporary in its outlook than we had realized (101–102).

Abell’s “relatively modern” suggests the limitations of what Canadian artists were prepared to accept – for example, it was not until after World War II, in the 1950s and 1960s, that abstraction attained a recognized and respected place in Canadian painting, Various forms of representation remained the default mode, a factor both influenced by and sustaining the landscape tradition.

The circumstances and conditions shaping the work of the war artists in World War II differed considerably from those of their predecessors in the Great War. In the first place, those in the earlier war were given few instructions. The primary interest and ultimate purpose of the Canadian War Memorials

Fund had been clear: to create a body of paintings that would celebrate the contribution of Canada and Canadians to an Allied victory. Portraits of leading military figures were not a problem – the artists were simply assigned sitters – but when it came to depicting the Western Front, how the painters would go about this was usually left up to them: they were to make sketches of what they saw, and then back in England or Canada to create finished paintings based on the sketches. But the Canadian War Records initiative in the Second World War was much more organized and, not surprisingly as it was run by a government department, more bureaucratic. The artists were given “Operational Instructions,” instructing them to “prepare a plan to cover the activity you are going to record, with a time-table covering a week in advance” as well as possible steps in forming such a plan. Individual sections of the instructions gave details on what they were to do once they were actually *in situ* and working – for example, “After field sketches and notes have been completed, lose no time in securing additional details of topography, uniform, equipment, weapons and vehicles portrayed; and arrange for participants to pose as models” (“Canada’s War Artists’ Perspectives”). The same was true of subject matter: they should portray “significant events, scenes, phases and episodes in the experience of the Canadian Armed Forces”. The stated “intention” was that “your productions shall be worthy of Canada’s highest cultural traditions, doing justice to History, and as works of art, worthy of exhibition anywhere at any time” (“Doing Justice to History”). A lot of things for an artist to keep in mind when creating, many of them difficult to reconcile with each other.

The artists in the World War II programme were closer to the reality of war than those in the First World War. In the Great War, only A.Y. Jackson had seen action while serving in the ranks. Most of the other artists were kept far from the front lines, or only appeared on the battlefields long after actual fighting was over, where the only evidence of war they saw was the devastated countryside and ruined buildings. David Milne in fact arrived after the war was over – as he later wrote, he was unable to tell whether he was “the last soldier or the first tourist” (Silcox 114). The policy in World War II was to bring the artists as close to the men and women serving as possible: they should share in the experience of “active operations” so as to “know and understand the action, the circumstances, the environment, and the participants” (“Doing Justice to History”). In fact some of the artists were on active service in one of the three branches of the Canadian armed forces before being invited to join the programme, while most of the others were, in today’s terminology, “embedded” for shorter or longer periods in specific campaigns. For example, Will Ogilvy experienced the Sicilian Campaign in 1943 alongside a Canadian army unit; Charles Comfort and Lawren P. Harris shared the Canadian forces’ fiercely contested slog north in Italy in 1943-44; Alex Colville accompanied

the Canadian army through its liberation of the Netherlands in 1944-45: Tom Wood spent long hours on Canadian corvettes and frigates on the North Atlantic;<sup>3</sup> Orville Fisher was the only Allied war artist to take part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy. There was no need for embedding in the case of Miller Brittain, who was named an official war artist as late as 1945 but had already experienced almost three years of active service in the RAF as a bomb aimer, completing 37 operational sorties and being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

All these artists' experiences gave their work an immediacy and an authenticity that surpassed that of most works from World War I. It also affected the kinds of landscapes they created, both in subject matter and style. As Canada's leading authority on war art, Laura Brandon, writes,

[f]or the most part, the artists were not well prepared for this new subject matter; the landscape tradition, in which they had largely been trained, had equipped them poorly for the reality of war. Accuracy was paramount, and the degree to which the artists saw this as important can be seen in their thousands of detailed small sketches of equipment, vehicles, and uniforms ("Dispatches").

Given that so many of the artists had been trained in the landscape tradition, they naturally gravitated to it in their work, but at the same time, in line with both their instructions and the reality of the war, they brought in the world of objects, above all the new weapons of war. The landscapes from both wars bear witness to massive devastation, but the sense of stillness and emptiness so typical of the works from World War I is largely absent in those from the later war. Instead, there is an abundance of objects, and a narrative drive. If World War I could be characterized as a war still dominated by humans, World War II was very much a war in which machines were given equal time, and the artists' landscapes are littered with jeeps and tanks and planes, in action and at rest, being manufactured and serviced and destroyed, or just dug into the ground as shattered hulks. The theatre of war depicted in their paintings has a very different appearance from that presented in the works from World War I. This is a world on the move.<sup>4</sup>

One other major difference between the actual collections from the two world wars is their composition. The World War I collection includes relatively few preliminary materials: the organizers' main concern was the final, finished

<sup>3</sup> Though the five and a half years when endless convoys made their dangerous crossings across the Atlantic is referred to officially as the Battle of the Atlantic, Wood modestly claimed that most of the time things were just "boring" (*Canvas of War*).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted in passing that the ability to create a sense of movement and mobility was something that many war artists had to learn, as this was not part of their skill set as landscape painters: trees and lakes and hills do not move.

paintings, which they planned to house permanently in a custom-built memorial in Ottawa. In 1919 these were displayed in a series of exhibitions in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, where they drew very large, and for the most part admiring, crowds; the income from them enabled most of the costs of what was a private undertaking to be recovered. But the very title of the Canadian War Records initiative indicates an important concern of those behind this later initiative, and to ensure as complete a record as possible, in good bureaucrat fashion they also collected the artists' sketches and preliminary versions of the finished works.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to this, we have a much clearer idea of the artists' creative processes, and it comes as no surprise to learn that the final versions of the works often differ considerably from the original scenes and incidents. Details have been added or eliminated, perspectives shifted, two or more sketches combined, and so on. In other words, the artists were drawing on their own experience and creative instincts to produce works that reflected the styles that they had been working in, that they continued to develop or that they acquired by the sheer force of circumstances, styles that enabled them to convey the emotional force of what they were witnessing. In this, they went through a process of development and change that was similar to that of the First World War artists, for whom their time in the Canadian War Memorials Fund programme had also been a steep learning curve. As Jackson had explained, "The old type of factual painting had been superseded by good photography" (Jackson 48), forcing the artists to find new ways of capturing their subjects on canvas, and the new realities of World War II shaped the artists in a similar fashion.

If the artists shared a similar need to take account of the omnipresence of the new military technology in their landscapes, when it came to the ways in which they did so – that is, the styles they employed in treating their subject matter – there was great variety. Of course, many still worked in an essentially realistic fashion, tempered by what was by then the Canadian landscape norm. But a number of artists in the whole body of their work, or at least in the most interesting pieces they created, showed very clearly the influence of new styles. For example, many of Lawrence P. Harris's paintings are structured around a seemingly random juxtaposition of simplified forms – see, for example, his *Battleground Near Ortona*, with its pale dead horse in the foreground, billowing cloud of dark smoke at the back, a tank and some mechanical debris in between, and poking in from the left a few palm fronds. This, and many other paintings like it, clearly derive from an interest in Surrealism. Or Miller Brittain's *Night Target, Germany*, a pattern of colours and shapes that does

<sup>5</sup> This despite the passage in the Operational Instructions stating that "Cartoons and sketches" were only useful "for the re-creation of atmosphere, topography, and details of arms, vehicles, equipment, clothing, participants and terrain, of aircraft and ships" ("Dispatches").



suggest its declared subject, if barely, but is very close to being a piece of abstract art. Or the dynamic *The Hitler Line*, all Futuristic angles and pulsing colours, by Charles Comfort, a future Director of Canada's National Gallery. Or the eerily disconcerting atmosphere of many paintings by Alex Colville, a product of their ultra-realism, reminiscent in its way of Metaphysical painting and the work of Giorgio de Chirico.<sup>6</sup>

The artists drew on their varying styles to treat the subject matter of their landscapes, which often reflected the role played by the new technology in World War II – individual tanks and tank battles, landing boats, airplanes in the skies on bombing raids and on land being serviced, ships of all kinds engaged in the Battle of the Atlantic and the D-Day landings. One subject one would logically expect from war art would be depictions of dying and death. These, however, are very rare, for a number of reasons. First of all, and most simply, the aim of the official programmes was to celebrate the achievements of the Canadian military; openly depicting the deaths of Canadians would remind viewers of the cost of these achievements, while depicting the deaths of Germans might seem like gloating. More generally, recurrences of scenes of mass destruction, any overemphasis on the theme of death, run the risk of blunting the viewers' reactions: more is less. Realistic depictions may be so strong that there is a reluctance to view them at all, or if so, only for a few moments, and with strong revulsion. Ethical concerns may also come into play, either in the mind of the artist or that of the viewer. There are also practical factors. In the case of the Canadian artists in the World War I programme, most were always at a good remove from the actual action and actual death, while others were only able to view the aftermath of war. In World War II the situation was different – the artists were close to the fighting, at times part of it, and in many cases had strong emotional bonds to the soldiers and sailors and airmen themselves. Nevertheless, as was the case in the landscapes from the First World War, death is largely present tangentially in the form of the ruins and wreckage the fighting has left behind. But there are exceptions, and among them a few that are extremely powerful. Three examples might be mentioned.

Jack Nichols was an official artist with Canada's Merchant Navy in the North Atlantic and covered the Normandy landings in 1944. In several paintings he depicts German sailors who have been picked up in the dark in lifeboats after their ship sank: done in dark greyish-blue tones, they capture vividly a sense of the contingency of life in wartime. The same style is used for his most chilling painting, *Drowning Sailor*. All we see is the head of the sailor, in profile, one

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that it was through his work as a war artist that Colville honed his style to such a degree that he was already beginning to create the kind of puzzling, disconcerting paintings that were to make him one of the most internationally celebrated Canadian artists of his generation.

eye bulging in terror, his mouth wide open, helpless in the dark swirls of water that surround him and are pulling him inexorably down. Nichols had in fact witnessed a German sailor in exactly this situation; the work is a testimony to the unspeakable horror of such an end.

If Nichols depicts a deeply disturbing death, Alex Colville and Aba Bayevsky depict the deeply disturbing dead. In April 1945 the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was liberated by British and Canadian forces, who found there more than 13,000 unburied bodies and perhaps 60,000 sick and famished inmates. Less than two weeks later, Colville and Aba Bayevsky were sent to the camp as official Canadian war artists, their task being to record what they saw. Even as they were making their sketches of the dead in open pits, newly dead were being piled on top of those already there. The works the two artists produced are radically different, each powerful in its own way. Bayevsky's sketch *Belsen Concentration Camp – The Pit* is a miniature landscape. Done in watercolour and charcoal, it shows a reclining corpse in the foreground so emaciated that it might well be mistaken for a skeleton, and behind it decreasingly recognizable bodies, becoming mere piles of bodies/bones, and in the background what look like low hills, but are in fact the edges of the pits into which the bodies had been dumped. The effect is to universalize what we are seeing: this is not just the camp, but the whole world “out there”. For Bayevsky, who was Jewish, this experience was doubly searing: as he later said, “For the first time I became aware of man’s monstrous capacity for evil” (“Holocaust Art of Ava Bayevsky”).

The lines of Colville’s sketches from Bergen-Belsen are faint, making the emaciated bodies he is drawing almost ethereal. And the finished painting that he submitted to the War Records Office, *Bodies in a Grave*, is similarly understated. Both the bodies and the soil are painted in subdued tones of dull yellow and brown, linking the two together. The viewer’s first impression is that the four skeletal bodies, three of them horizontal and one at a slight angle to the others, are somehow floating; only close inspection reveals the strange perspective that creates this effect, bringing with it the realization that they are in fact lying on the ground. The effect is to make them both real and unreal: we are witnessing something that cannot be possible – yet it is. Every detail is there in the painting, but nowhere is Colville pointing to something we must notice: what he does is simply present to us what he sees as a witness. It is a very strange, supremely reticent painting, as though the painter had no right to intrude on what he is depicting, and as such hits one with unexpected force.

War paintings combine two functions: they are both historical documents and expressions of their artists’ creativity. As expressions of their artists’ creativity they live and are judged in a world shared with other works of art. But as historical documents they are “sites of memory” – in this case, both for

Canadians in general as well as for those who participated in the events themselves and their families and friends. Within Canada, interest in the country's military history has grown significantly over the past thirty years or so; the decision to renew the official war art programme in 2001 was only one of many expressions of this. Alongside this renewed interest in military history, war art's two functions have also met with increased interest. Appreciation of the artworks themselves has grown, with steadily increasing numbers of new books, articles and media treatments being devoted to them. And in step with this increased visibility – in both senses of the word – of the artists' work, more and more Canadians have been going to visit the actual physical "sites of memory" where they or those close to them fought, and when there, they are turning to the visual testimony of the war artists to expand and enrich their experience. Back in 1916 Max Aitken envisaged the Canadian War Memorial Fund initiative as a means of enhancing appreciation of the Canadian contribution to what he saw as the greatness and glory of the British Empire. The empire is now long gone, but the art works created in the successive projects his idea launched now help Canadians to gain a deeper understanding of Canada and of themselves as Canadians.

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## ON-LINE VISUAL RESOURCES

Only by seeing the works of Canada's war artist can they be fully appreciated. Thousands of images can be found on the Web, only a few clicks away, but in many cases the quality is very bad. This is a brief guide to the most useful sites for those wishing to view at least some of the paintings, and perhaps learn more about the artists themselves.

Canadian War Museum – <https://www.warmuseum.ca/>. There is probably more material on this site devoted to Canada's war art than anywhere else on-line, and a quick search for "war art" reveals this richness. However, there is one caveat. The articles are fascinating and very informative, but – something hard to comprehend given the specific remit of this museum – the images are often very small and faulty in their colouring.

Art Canada Institute – <https://www.aci-iac.ca/>. Again, a quick search for "war art" pulls up links to a host of lively and informed sites. And the quality of the reproductions is superb.

Mount Allison University – <https://www.mta.ca/library/courage/>. This is the link to a project at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, entitled "Courage Remembered", a comprehensive overview of Canada in the two world wars.

"Canada's War Artists" offers a wealth of information about artists from both wars and images of their works. It is, however, a slightly tricky site to navigate.

Wikimedia – [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings\\_in\\_the\\_Canadian\\_War\\_Museum\\_by\\_artist](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings_in_the_Canadian_War_Museum_by_artist). A list of links to high-quality images of paintings by twenty-two Canadian war artists in the Canadian War Museum, four of whom were official war artists in World War II: Alex Colville, Lawren P. Harris, and Molly and Bruno Bobak.

*Canvas of War* – [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GM\\_l4cWuBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GM_l4cWuBE). A documentary film from 2000 about the World War II war art programme, which explores the context and includes amusing and enlightening interviews with sixteen of the official artists, then in their seventies and eighties.

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ATOM EGOYAN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CINEMATIC  
LANDSCAPE OF CANADA:  
IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN *THE CAPTIVE*,  
*REMEMBER* AND *GUEST OF HONOUR*

—◀▶—  
JÁNOS KENYERES

**Abstract**

Atom Egoyan's positive critical reception seems to have faltered in recent years, and reading the reviews, one might feel that the Canadian director's recent films have lost some of the high artistic quality of his earlier movies. Jordan Hoffman describes the *The Captive* (2014) as "a weird disappointment" and criticizes it for "poor filmmaking," while Glenn Kenny expresses significant doubts about the director's abilities, even asking, "Has this guy forgotten how to direct a film?" However, it is advisable to approach these reviews with a degree of scepticism. In my paper, I will argue that on the one hand, critics can be wrong, and on the other, if we look at Egoyan's earlier films, we can see that the critical response they received was not always one of acclaim.

**Keywords:** Atom Egoyan, Canadian film, *The Captive*, *Remember*, *Guest of Honour*

**Résumé**

La réception critique positive d'Atom Egoyan semble s'être essouffée ces dernières années, et à la lecture des critiques, on pourrait avoir l'impression que les films récents du réalisateur canadien ont perdu une partie de la grande qualité artistique de ses premiers films. Jordan Hoffman décrit *La Captive* (2014) comme une "étrange déception" et lui reproche une "réalisation médiocre," tandis que Glenn Kenny exprime d'importants doutes sur les capacités du réalisateur, tout en se demandant: "Ce type a-t-il oublié comment réaliser un film?" Il convient toutefois d'aborder ces critiques avec un certain scepticisme. Dans mon essai, je soutiendrai que, d'une part, les critiques peuvent se tromper et que, d'autre part, si nous regardons les premiers films d'Egoyan, nous pouvons voir que la réponse critique qu'ils ont reçue n'a pas toujours été une réponse d'acclamation.

**Mots-clés:** Atom Egoyan, film canadien, *The Captive*, *Remember*, *Guest of Honour*

## INTRODUCTION

Atom Egoyan has made significant contributions to Canadian film over the past few decades, leaving a lasting mark on the country's cinematic landscape. This is true even though his positive critical reception seems to have waned in recent years, giving the impression that the Canadian director's recent films have lost some of the high artistic quality of his more celebrated works. Jordan Hoffman describes *The Captive* (2014) as "a weird disappointment," criticising it for "poor filmmaking," while Glenn Kenny expresses significant doubts about the director's abilities, and even asks, "Has this guy forgotten how to direct a film?" However, it is advisable to approach these reviews with a degree of scepticism. On the one hand, critics can be wrong, and on the other, if we look at Egoyan's earlier films, we can see that the critical response they received was not always one of acclaim. As Scout Tafoya notes, "The fact that he's been getting mediocre reviews for fourteen years might be proof that a director who once set the world on fire had lost his touch. It's equally possible that his experimentation in a popular form is an affront to his reputation as an iconoclast and what he appeared to stand for during his years in the spotlight." There are few directors in the history of cinema who have always been praised by the critics, and there are few directors who have been able to maintain the same high standards throughout their careers. With the exception of a few films (such as *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Ararat*), Egoyan himself has usually received mixed reception. And that is almost natural. When Károly Makk was asked in an interview by fellow director János Xantus why he could not maintain the exceptionally high quality of *Love [Szerelem]* (1971) in his subsequent films, Makk wisely replied that it was like the sun shining; it cannot be influenced much, not even by the greatest professional knowledge or good intentions (35:00).

This is also the case with Egoyan's recent films. There are more critical voices than praise, but often it is about expectations of style, while at other times, he is called upon to cling to a kind of documentary reality that he may wish to abandon. In addition, Egoyan's works require a certain amount of intellectual effort on the part of the viewer, and the layers of his films often only unfold after multiple viewings. While he addresses contemporary issues, he does so in a bold, perhaps overly provocative way. It is also true that, although he explores divergent themes and the films vary in their overall impact, his distinctive traits remain recognisable in his recent films, which may seem like a mannerism. Another criticism is that his films are overcrowded in terms of subject matter, with so much going on that it is as if we are watching several movies at once, hence the contradiction that they are often described as thrillers,<sup>1</sup> although this is only one of the several genres inherent in them.

<sup>1</sup> See Hoffman, Kiang and Zoller Seitz.

Following his first experimental works, Atom Egoyan made his feature film debut in 1984 with *Next of Kin*. Over time, his filmography expanded, reflecting a constant increase in budgets and the director's growing popularity with audiences. Egoyan's fourth film, *The Adjuster* (1991), brought him considerable recognition in the United States and was the first of many to be distributed by Alliance Communications, later known as Alliance Atlantis Communications, co-founded by Robert Lantos. His 1997 film *The Sweet Hereafter* won several awards and international acclaim. His later films, released after 2000, include *Ararat* (2002), *Where the Truth Lies* (2005), *Adoration* (2008), *Chloe* (2010) and *Devil's Knot* (2013). Best known for his arthouse style, Egoyan has made films about a wide range of themes, including traumatic loss, grief, obsession, manipulation, fantasy and sexuality, but also about identity and the search for truth, national and family history, the memory of the past, and the interplay between sexuality, technology and alienation, creating a complex and rich visual world.

The following analysis focuses on Atom Egoyan's depiction of trauma and identity, two key aspects of the director's cinematic world, and examines how they take on new forms in his recent films. The three feature films examined below, *The Captive* (2014), *Remember* (2015) and *Guest of Honour* (2019), were all made in the last decade. In one of these movies, one witnesses the lasting impact of a major historical event, whereas in the other two, small and local narratives take centre stage. *The Captive* presents the consequences of the actions of a psychologically deformed and sick person through the individual trauma and shock of ordinary people while also giving us a glimpse into the unfathomable mechanisms of evil. In *Remember*, Egoyan engages in a post-Holocaust theme but in a way that reimagines it outside of the familiar narrative while confronting the viewer with the protagonist's search for revenge and, ultimately, his identity crisis. *Guest of Honour*, by contrast, reveals the traumatic consequences of some bad choices made by ordinary people.

#### THE CAPTIVE – A FAMILY DRAMA IN THE FACE OF EVIL

What happens when someone loses a child? Or if someone finds themselves in a situation where that seems the most likely possibility? This trauma is one of the most dramatic of human situations and a recurring motif in world literature from ancient mythologies and the Bible to the present day. As Golden (152) writes, referring to Jasper Griffin's observation, "[t]he death of children is a constant theme in the *Iliad*, so much so that Jasper Griffin can write that the 'pathetic motifs: "short life" and "bereaved parents" dominate the architecture of the whole poem". *The Captive* is not the first film in Egoyan's oeuvre to explore this theme, with *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) showing how a tragic

school bus accident changes the lives of a small community. As is often the case in Egoyan's films, old secrets and sins are revealed as the film tells the poignant story of the aftermath through the fates of those affected.

In contrast to the communal aspects of *The Sweet Hereafter*, *The Captive* is a family story, in which a nine-year-old girl is mysteriously abducted from her father's van while he stops for a few minutes to go shopping. The parents do not know if their daughter is still alive, but the most likely scenario is that she has been murdered. All the while, however, the viewer knows that the girl is being held captive in a basement room by a particularly perverse figure who has been watching the suffering of the girl's mother for years with great relish via a video surveillance system. He also develops a strange, twisted relationship with the girl, both exercising power over her and clinging to her with a kind of sickening emotional attachment.

The excellent performances authentically portray the mother and father's trials and tribulations and their various coping strategies. The mother distances herself from her husband, holding him responsible for her daughter's fate, and the father refuses to see her in person, knowing that his presence would only inflame her emotions. They only talk on the phone, an intermediate medium that protects them both from emotional outbursts. The film contrasts the mother's helpless grief with the father's persistence in finding his daughter, and in this respect builds on traditional gender roles: the mother is overcome by emotional despair, while the father is characterised by action and determination. This contrast not only shows their different coping mechanisms but also follows the traditional image of male and female responses to trauma in the narrative structure.

Another strand of the story highlights the compassionate attitude of the police, the frustrations of the investigation and the emotional and psychological challenges involved, while we witness the police being almost completely helpless despite their best efforts. The female police officer has a deep empathy for the victims and is mainly portrayed as a psychologist, while her male colleague is on the wrong track and suspects the father of the crime. This flawed approach leads to years of inefficiency and no tangible progress in solving the case: the investigation proceeds at a snail's pace until the sudden solution as a result of the father's persistence.

The flow of the story is driven by the kidnapper, a twisted and perverse character whose portrayal in such a central role is a departure from Egoyan's typical cinematic world. While negative characters are almost inevitable in any movie, and evil often lurks in the background of Egoyan's films dealing with historical narratives, such as the sinister Turkish army officer Jevded Bey in *Ararat* and the war criminals in *Remember*, *The Captive* marks a new quality of evil with its depiction of the kidnapper. Moreover, the girl held captive and her parents are not the only victims: subscribers to a secret internet



channel can follow the fate of other kidnapped children and their families... To add to the mother's anguish, objects reminiscent of her daughter's childhood are placed in the hotel rooms she cleans. At the same time, Egoyan avoids direct depictions of paedophilia and child abuse, portraying brutality through the horrified expressions of the police and sparing the audience from graphic images. The film also shows the girl's subdued and almost affectionate attachment to her abductor, typical of Stockholm Syndrome (Hoffman), which makes her situation all the more appalling. The atrocities committed by the kidnapper and the subdued behaviour of the girl thus become shocking precisely because of the restraint with which they are presented.

The film is centred around the anatomy of evil, the kind of evil that is almost unimaginable to the average person. The movie does not seek to research the origin of evil, nor does it attempt to explain what is inexplicable in terms of normalcy. Instead, it merely presents its existence and displays the mechanisms by which it operates. The chief villain is motivated primarily by the gratification of his own desires, but also by the business interest derived from the video service associated with his activity. The evil character portrayed in the film is completely unaffected by any moral considerations. The sole drivers of his actions are purposefulness and practicality. Nevertheless, he also has emotions, and this is expressed not only in his obvious joy of domination and watching the suffering of others but also in his almost tender attachment to the girl he has abducted, despite the fact that their relationship is clearly a case of oppressor and victim. He is a formidable figure and lacks the banality of evil with which Hannah Arendt described Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann, according to Arendt, was an ordinary man, not driven by evil or psychopathic motives, but merely following orders without thinking of the consequences. However, the negative character in the film does not fall into this category, he is more like the diabolical figures of Iago and Macbeth.<sup>2</sup>

The film draws attention not only to the existence of paedophile networks but also to the dangers of the surveillance of people in today's world. Here, surveillance is not carried out by a state exercising power over its citizens, nor by a madman bent on world domination or plotting the destruction of the world, as in many dystopian or action films, but by a secret group of people who play with human destinies to satisfy their perverse desires.

<sup>2</sup> To use Arendt's own words, "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*" (Arendt 287).

*REMEMBER* – A POST-HOLOCAUST DRAMA

In contrast to the family-centred drama of *The Captive*, *Remember* explores the long-lasting effects of the Holocaust. The film centres around Zev Guttman, an elderly Jewish man with Alzheimer's disease, who is convinced by a fellow nursing home resident to seek revenge on the Auschwitz block commander responsible for their families' deaths. The ensuing search for justice ultimately leads to an Oedipal identity crisis reminiscent of ancient myths.

The film features several moving scenes. Zev, whose wife has recently died, has no memory of the tragic event due to dementia, so he is repeatedly confronted with the sudden pain of her death and has to relive the grief of losing her over and over again. In addition, some powerful images and scenes in the present remind him of the death camps of the past: the showerheads in the hotel room, the explosions in the nearby quarry, a dog on a leash, barking madly, and the loudspeakers in the bus station.

The film poses several ethical questions: Can the pursuit of justice against war criminals, decades later and in the twilight of their lives, still hold a valid purpose? Is revenge an adequate substitute for justice when the age of the accused makes it doubtful that a lengthy legal process can be brought to a conclusion? The film also questions the moral standing of those who, while enthusiastically supporting the Nazi regime during the war, were not directly involved in war crimes. And just as importantly, is it right for the audience to feel sympathy for a mass murderer who has made a new life for himself in the post-war decades and who appears on screen as a decent, even likeable person until the last minute? How can the viewer process this sympathy in the light of the whole story when the revelation is tragic, even if it only reveals the truth, the crimes committed?

In addition, *Remember* authentically portrays the vulnerability, challenges and sense of hopelessness associated with old age. It vividly explores the physical and mental decline that comes with ageing, pointing out the important social responsibility to assist the elderly in ways that are both effective and humane. Like so many other works by Egoyan, the film is multi-layered, and some see this as a flaw, as mentioned earlier. Jessica Kiang, for example, believes that there are several films condensed into *Remember*: "In fact the loss of memory of a survivor of the Holocaust, with its invocation to 'Never Forget' is so resonant and provocative, and so filled with paradoxes and tragic ironies, that it most certainly deserves its own film. But there's hardly room for that film in 'Remember,' which is much more concerned with being a standard, and fairly schlocky, revenge thriller." However, linking the Holocaust survivor's story with the genre elements of a revenge thriller can also be interpreted as a broadening of the narrative's interpretative horizons. In addition, unpacking the theme of amnesia in the context of the Holocaust helps to create a cinematic

experience that not only engages the audience but also raises important moral questions and has an emotional impact.

The film subverts familiar post-Holocaust narratives by addressing contemporary issues through its visual storytelling and the identity crisis at the heart of its plot. While not denying the historical atrocities, the film questions the oversimplification of categorising the world into good and evil. At the same time, it challenges the static nature of the roles of aggressor and victim, suggesting that these roles can change and even be reversed over time. *Remember* has the merit of emotionally involving the viewer in the world of the characters while leaving it up to the audience to make their final interpretations.

Until the end of the film, it appears that Zev's long-term memory works and his short-term memory fails him. Therefore, even his mission to find and kill the Nazi war criminal must be written down for him to ensure that he remembers it. The dynamics of memory and forgetting, of the necessity of identity change and its complete internalisation, and then its erasure from memory, in part perhaps due to Alzheimer's, might stretch the bounds of realism. However, Christopher Plummer's convincing performance lends credibility to these plot elements and allows the viewers to experience a suspension of disbelief and immerse themselves in the film's narrative.

#### *GUEST OF HONOUR* – A STORY OF GUILT AND REPENTANCE

The narrative of *Guest of Honour*, released in 2019, is no less complex than the two films discussed above, and the sound effects and visual elements are perhaps even more so. The plot revolves around a restaurant health and safety inspector and his daughter Veronica, a music teacher, who are ordinary people living far away from major historical events. The story of the protagonists, played by David Thewlis and Laysla De Oliveira, unfolds in different timelines.

The film reveals a complex family drama through a series of traumas. Told in a non-linear narrative, the story follows Veronica's life as a young girl, deeply affected by her mother's terminal illness and her father's secret affair with Veronica's piano teacher. When a fire breaks out in the piano teacher's house, Veronica does nothing to save her life. After the piano teacher's death, a romantic relationship develops between Veronica and the piano teacher's son, and years later, during their break-up, Veronica reveals to the young man the circumstances of his mother's death, and the confession leads to his suicide. Veronica, now an adult, tries to atone through penance for the two deaths that weigh on her conscience. When she is falsely accused of having a sexual relationship with an underage student, she accepts a prison sentence rather than defend herself, seeing it as atonement for her role in the deaths of her father's mistress and her son. The plot is further complicated when Veronika's father

visits her in prison. He learns why his daughter has accepted the sentence and tries to restore her honour. But she wants to serve her sentence so that she can go on living with a clear conscience.

In the film's framed narrative structure, Veronika, released from prison, tells a priest the story of her deceased father and family. The priest tells her that Veronika's ailing mother knew about and encouraged her husband's love affair with the piano teacher. This new development further complicates the web of guilt, penance, and family dynamics at the heart of the story.

What is most striking about the film is not the story that the viewer puts together, but the cinematic narrative through which the story unfolds. The film is characterised by the interplay of different moods, the mixture of comic and tragic elements, and the intricate collage of images, music, dialogue and sound effects in the diegetic layers of the story. The result is a complex work, both in its emotional impact and in its artistic execution. As Ben Kenigsberg notes, in *Guest of Honour* Egoyan revisits "his key obsessions (repressed trauma, the consuming effects of guilt, ambiguities of evidence) and an elegant, time-bending structure (layered flashbacks that tiptoe around big secrets)." However, Kenigsberg also points out that the central revelations of the film seem somewhat absurd, lacking in credible motivations. This is a valid observation, and there is indeed a general sense of forced complexity in both the plot and the characters' underlying motivations.

## CONCLUSION

From *The Captive*, which explores the dynamics of aggressor and victim, coping mechanisms and the nature of evil, to *Remember*, which deals with the aftermath of the Holocaust, to *Guest of Honour*, with its series of family dramas, Egoyan's films can be seen as a continuation of his earlier cinematic work. They explore hidden aspects of trauma and troubled identities and contribute to a broader understanding of how the past shapes and intertwines with personal and collective experiences in the present. The central themes and insights presented in these films are familiar, touching on issues and moral dilemmas that have been explored in Egoyan's cinema before. However, the meticulous portrayal of individual destinies and the new contexts in which they appear lend a sense of novelty to these themes. The lives of the characters are created with great attention to detail, bringing to life their unique experiences, struggles and perspectives. This personalised approach allows audiences to connect with them more intimately, allowing for an emotional engagement with their stories. In this way, the stories presented on screen contribute to an immersive and novel viewing experience. Egoyan uses a combination of cinematography, sound effects and dialogue to create a distinctive atmosphere that engages audiences. Therefore, while the main themes and conclusions of these works

may be familiar, their execution offers a new lens through which we can re-examine them. These films powerfully demonstrate the human desire for change and transformation, especially when the present is burdened by tragic and traumatic experiences, as well as the long and difficult process of starting over, where one may eventually succeed or face insurmountable obstacles.

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