

**AFTER THE END/S: CANLIT AND THE UNRAVELLING OF  
NATION, "RACE," AND SPACE IN THE WRITING OF MICHAEL  
ONDAATJE, DAPHNE MARLATT, AND ROY KIYOOKA**

by

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, as discourses of nation and literature came under attack, the study of Canadian literature (CanLit) entered a state of crisis. Theorists from various critical perspectives argued that socio-political changes to “the nation” necessitated reconsideration of the role of literature in Canada. New modes of writing and shifting reading practices presented scholars with the problem of thinking through the conceptual and methodological limits of the discipline. During this period, critical self-reflexivity became a crucial aspect of literary studies. Shifting focus onto writing from “marginalized” writers, scholars of feminist, postmodern, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures challenged conventional reading practices. While increased attention to writing by women, queer-identified writers, First Nations writers, and writers of colour mitigated the crisis, it left problematic structures intact, allowing the undisclosed legacies of an earlier nationalism to continue exerting undo influence on critical discourse.

To address the impasse in CanLit, critics might adapt Henri Lefebvre’s model of social space, in which culture is described as a reflection of space and an element in its production. For Lefebvre, studying representations of space (cultural expression) presupposes analysis of the representational spaces through which they circulate (institutions and institutional practices). Applying Lefebvre’s logic to literary nationalism as a representational enterprise (fact and process), critics might reformulate CanLit as a problem of texts and contexts, thereby keeping it open as an unfinished critical project.

To this end, the work of Michael Ondaatje, Daphne Marlatt, and Roy Kiyooka is vital. Specific publications from the late 1980s – Ondaatje’s *In the*

*Skin of a Lion* (1987), Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), and Kiyooka's *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* (1988) – focus on zones of conflict at the limits of national identity. In particular, the reception of these texts foregrounds the role contradictory identity formations play in the transformation CanLit qua social space. Taken together, these texts provide an opportunity to re-assess the future of CanLit and to locate its undisclosed limits, especially around the discourses of “race.” In the contexts they generate, “the nation” remains a site of contradiction and contestation – a trauma prefiguring the current crisis, not yet contained by it.



## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to:

Elizabeth Kelson who has shared everyday in the writing and living that is the substance of this work – whose grace is *the light that obtains here*.

Roy Miki – teacher, poet, friend – for teaching me that the writing is a gift, and whose courage, patience, and stamina continue to be an inspiration.

The loving memory of Isobel Lowry, née McArthur, who – as I recall it often – is at home looking out across her garden, the Beach, the Lake, beginning another story.

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I want also to acknowledge the support of my family and their willingness to continue believing in me over the long haul. Thanks Dane, Colleen, Gail, and Craig. And thank you to my grandparents, Audrey Moody (née Hoolihan), Emmerson Moody, and Gordon Lowry; your lives continue to shape the geographies I live and write about.

Finally, I want to mark a special friendship. To the one whose unflagging enthusiasm and keen attention to details has kept me grounded and moving through it all. To Louis, the terrier.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	
<b>"RACE," NATION, AND CRISIS IN CANLIT</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
<b>SPACE, LITERATURE, AND CONTRADICTION</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
<b>CITY AS SKIN: ENTERING TORONTO <i>IN THE SKIN OF A LION</i></b> .....	<b>115</b>
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<b>ONDAATJE, "RACE," AND THE SUBJECT OF WHITENESS</b> .....	<b>153</b>
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
<b>MARLATT'S <i>ANA HISTORIC</i>, REVISING HERSTORY</b> .....	<b>204</b>
<b>Chapter Six</b>	
<b>SEX, "RACE," AND THE COLONIAL SUBJECT OF <i>ANA HISTORIC</i></b> .....	<b>244</b>
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	
<b>KIYOOKA, RE:CANLIT</b> .....	<b>283</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>350</b>

But the living are wrong  
in the sharp  
distinctions they make  
Angels, it seems,  
don't always know  
if they're moving among  
the living or the dead.  
The drift of eternity  
drags all the ages of man  
through both of those spheres  
and its sound  
rises over them both.  
(Rainer Maria Rilke *Duino Elegies*, 25)

The light that obtains in any given place permeates what is  
made there. (Roy Kiyooka "With Roy Kiyooka," 22)

The end of all things is important (Tsunetomo, Yamamoto  
*Hakagure*)

**1**

## CHAPTER ONE

### “RACE,” NATION, AND CRISIS IN CANLIT

there is something exhilarating about the demise of the nation-state. At the same time, the state did, and still does, perform certain functions, for which there is as of now no substitute agency. It defines citizenship, controls currency, imposes law, protects public health, provides general education, maintains security, and more importantly guides the national economy ... In enumerating these functions, however, it becomes indisputably clear that the list is not a list of achievements but of failures. (Miyoshi “Borderless World?” 93)

Now, one may well wish to take a breath. Or let out a sigh: after the expiration itself, for it is a matter of spirit. What seems almost impossible is to speak *of the specter*, to speak *to the specter*, to speak *with it*, therefore especially *to make or to let a spirit speak*. And the thing seems even more difficult for a reader, an expert, a professor, an interpreter, in short, for what Marcellus calls a “scholar.” (Derrida *Spectres of Marx* 11)

#### I. THE END

To write about contemporary Canadian literature, here and now, is to enter a discourse in crisis. In the uncertain twilight of “the nation-state,” the difficulty of theorizing Canadian (English or otherwise) literature is exacerbated by the transformation of an array of international and transnational critical junctures. Shifting social, political, and economic imperatives that were once assumed to be external to “the nation”<sup>1</sup> are redrawing the limits of cultural discourse.<sup>2</sup> Faced with the strain of transforming nations and the consequent re-alignment of a host of national entities and processes, the attempt to write about (one) literary nationalism begs difficult questions of critical position and responsibility relative to a host

of new inter-, intra-, and trans-national ventures, old and new. For scholars working in the areas of English or Canadian literature, recognition of the problems of identity, of ownership and affiliation, of complicity with the hegemonic institutions of European colonialism and/or North American neo-colonialism, radically alters the nature and stakes of research and analysis.

Movements away from the formative paradigms – sociological, cultural, economic, political and epistemological – of the last century have made this crisis in positioning or authority appear all the more obvious and problematic. In the transition from one époque to another, whether one chooses to define it as a transition from modernity to post-modernity, colonialism to post-colonialism, nationalism to post-nationalism, Fordism to post-Fordism, the balance of power seems to have changed. The divisions of labour upon which Western academies are founded, and by which scholarship is sanctioned, can no longer be taken for granted. With an accompanying shift in demographics and the supposed opening up of the post-secondary education system to women, the working class, and various racialized communities, there has been increasing interest in the intersections of identity and subject formation on a variety of levels. One effect of the rise of “multiculturalism” within Canada, the United States, Great Britain and Australia, which has coincided with new patterns of migration, has been a growing lack of confidence in the value and efficacy of knowledge production. Shifting social relations in the elite cosmopolitan centres of the West have meant a return to questions of cultural politics across a plethora of academic sites. The apparent erosion of the powers of national governments seems to have imparted a new sense of urgency to debates about the function and meaning of not only the political economy but also of scholarly discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The mid-to-late 1980s marked a key moment in the dissolution of the post-war nation-state throughout the so-called developed world. During this transition period, which corresponds with the publication of the central texts discussed in this dissertation, Canadian critics and cultural theorists, like their counterparts elsewhere, began to turn their sights on socio-economic change. If, as economists argue, the 1970s marked a crucial interruption in the power of nation states to control their economies along nationalist lines, the 1980s brought serious challenges to the ideological sway of state-sponsored cultural nationalism. During this period, the interlinking of “nation” and “culture” that occurred with the emergence of a powerful postwar nation-state in Canada, the US, and Great Britain was no longer to be seen as a given. Following crucial economic changes, such as the abandonment of the Bretton-Woods agreement, the rising power of the OPEC nations, a mounting debt crisis, and the increased accumulation of Eurodollars, critics began debating what they saw as a sharp decline in the power of (key) nation-states, especially the US, to control national sovereignty and to protect the old areas of national socio-economic interest, including not only the economy but also culture. While the history (or histories) underlying the dramatic re-definition of the nation-state is long and intricate, the fact of the matter is that “the death of the nation” had become a critical concern for many academics across a range of critical junctures.

In Britain, for example, the “New Left” dubbed the époque “new times,” using Stuart Hall’s term to mark the rise of neo-racist, neo-conservative (Thatcherite) reforms but also to locate changes in cultural politics and/or new sites of resistance. If “new times” pointed to a series of ruptures in the temporal narratives of epistemological debate that were both socially problematic and philosophically fertile, they also attempted to describe a key



moment of intervention by and for cultural theorists. There, as here in Canada, socially engaged scholars and activists found themselves embroiled in new arrangements of cultural-theoretical contradiction; debates about which seemed to bring into focus crises in the representational power of inherited critical perspectives. The arrival of “new times” was seen to represent not simply the dawning of an era but somewhat ironically and much more problematically “the end of history” itself (see the collection of essays collected by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques under the title *New Times*). However, as Hall and other intellectuals of the “new” left were quick to point out, this apparent conclusion to an époque of modern capitalism was entirely different from the end of history foretold in Marxist theory. Instead, it was argued, the globalization of capital and culture – together with the emerging local resistances it was (re)shaping – called into question the historiography of dominant modes of knowledge production across a plurality of spatial-temporal nodes. In other words, “new times” marked an opening of cultural politics to radical critiques by scholars and intellectuals traditionally excluded from the debate. Writers of colour, aboriginal writers, gay and lesbian writers, often working in alliances that directly challenged the geographical divisions of labour between “developed” and “developing” nations, came together to provide strong opposition to established cultural elites and the critical movements that had grown up with them. Shaping not only the cultural politics of the mainstream but that of “the margins” as well, such new configurations of opposition and allegiance were instrumental in reformulating Marxist and feminist critiques.

Contrary to the popular rhetoric of despair percolating through the mainstream discourse on the “death” of the nation-state, the shift into the “new times” was multifaceted and multivalent – a series of beginnings more

than a clearly demarcated end. Highlighting the contradictory nature of civic nationalism, this period of transition and transformation brought to the fore the fact that, as emancipatory discourses, nationalisms have always tended to be invested with complex social aims. David Lloyd argues that because given nationalisms tend to stem from a quest for state formation that is shared by a variety of groups or movements, it often presupposes ambivalent often contentious political and ideological agendas and discourses: “the history of nationalist movements must be understood in terms of their constant inflection not only by conditions of struggle but by their interaction with allied but differently tending social movements” (183). In as much as “the nation,” in any given time or place, is invested with such oppositional interests, nation-states tend to depend on the effective containment of difference through the production of hegemonic narratives of uniformity and continuity, i.e., through the production of history and identity.

Therefore, in relation to the specificity of nations, replete as they are with the properties of diverse “emancipatory movements,” the task of describing a nation in decline becomes onerous. In decline, nations presuppose the unravelling of complex social desires and counter-currents. Thus, we might understand the profoundly contradictory responses to the arrival of “globalization”: the virulent neo-conservatism of 1990s social and economic policy reform alongside the radical resistance of so-called “marginalized” groups. The proverbial “two sides of the coin” – the despair and elation – that seem to attend to the death of the nation might in fact be seen as a vast oversimplification of tangled political responses to an equally complex conglomeration of social productions.

Writing in the moment of an emergent discourse, like Hall and the others of the “new” left in England discussed above, African America scholar Cornel

West saw “these last few years of the twentieth century” bearing witness to the arrival of “a significant shift in the sensibilities and outlooks of critics and artists,” which he called “the new cultural politics of difference” (147). For West, there was a proclivity amongst thinkers and artists of the new cultural politics

to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular, and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing. (147)

It was not that this negativity was entirely new, however, especially “in the history of criticism and art” (147); it was the way that this change in aesthetic ideals manifested itself. The new critical thinking about the relationship between history and culture pointed towards a divergent political moment, assuming specificity unto itself. West wrote,

what makes [these ideas/gestures] novel – along with the cultural politics they produce – is how and what they saw constituting difference; the weight and gravity it is given in representation; and the way which highlighting issues like exterminism, empire, class, “race,” gender, sexual orientation, age, nation, nature and region at this historical moment acknowledges some discontinuity and disruption from previous forms of cultural critique. To put it bluntly, the new cultural politics of difference consists of creative responses to the precise circumstances of our present moment – especially those of marginalized First World agents who shun degraded self-representations, articulating instead their sense of the flow of history in light of the contemporary terrors, anxieties and fears of highly commercialized North Atlantic capitalist cultures (with their escalating xenophobias against people of color, Jews, women, gays, lesbians and the elderly). (147)

West located this historicism within the emergence of a new global order. From the outset, the new cultural politics of these “marginalized First World agents” was seen corresponding with a new arrangement of elite political agendas, capitalist initiatives, and (nation-) state formations:

The thawing, yet still rigid, Second World ex-Communist cultures (with increasing nationalist revolts against the legacy of hegemonic party henchmen), and the diverse cultures of the majority of inhabitants on the globe smothered by international communication cartels and repressive postcolonial elites (sometimes in the name of Communism, as in Ethiopia), or starved by austere World Bank and IMF policies that subordinate them to the North (as in free-market capitalism in Chile), also locate vital areas of analysis in this new cultural terrain. (147-48)

In a large part, the creative response of artists and critics, noted by West, is predicated on a downsizing of national budgets and the consequent disappearance of government funds for culture and education. As such, West's "new cultural politics of difference" assumes a paradoxically reactionary position in relation to globalism and the dismantling of the welfare state.

The resurgence in critical theory and activism it describes develops out of highly ambivalent investments in the nation state. As West suggests, "the new cultural politics of difference" marks the re-integration of "global" concerns within the public spheres of "First World" nations. In so doing, "the new cultural politics of differences" points to a segmentation of the constitutive polity assumed in the monolithic narratives of national Culture and national History, not only in the United States but also throughout the world. While proposing new possibilities for alliances that work across the borders of earlier hegemonic paradigms, this "new cultural politics of difference," and the ambivalent neo-nationalism and post-nationalisms it gestured toward, were demanding or reawakening critical approaches to questions of identity. On the whole, it presupposed a new political awareness of the limits and potentials of identity as these had developed both within and against dominant nation states.

## OR THE UNIVERSITY IN RUINS

Not every one shared in the implicit optimism of West's "new cultural politics of difference." Even those scholars otherwise committed to the possibility of socially responsible studies of history and culture worried about the inherent unrest, about the seismic tremors that mark a major shift in the foundations of academic research and critique. Read as a reflection of significant socio-economic changes to "the nation-state," alterations in the discursive topography of Canadian studies in general point to a significant pre-occupation with the concerns of scholarly responsibility and the value of academic endeavours to society at large (Angus, Kertzer). The cool objectivity of scientific reason, which sanctioned both the hegemony of elite cultural institutions and critique, appears to have given way to an emergent obsession with the limits of objectivity that is marked by the proliferating discourse of ghostly revenants and spectral hauntings (Cf. Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*; Sprinker, ed. *Ghostly Demarcations*). If there has been a cause for celebration amongst scholars sharing West's social-political concern for "race" and identity politics, for others, the vast changes to both the public institutions and patterns of everyday life that define a national polity are a subject of despair. As emerging international networks and cross-cultural exchanges appear to render the links between scholars and their subjects difficult to fathom, the question of epistemology has become not only more pressing but also more anxiety ridden. Equipped with increasingly dated intellectual tools, such as the categories of "nation," "citizen," "immigrant," even "literature" are becoming, the dilapidated disciplinary divisions we have inherited, not to mention the divisions of labour to which they belong, make the prospect of "worrying the nation" (to use a phrase by Jonathan Kertzer)

or “thinking through” (to use another by Himani Bannerji) the process of globalization a vital, if fraught, undertaking.<sup>4</sup>

Contemplating these changes as he saw them developing in the first part of the 1990s, Bill Readings argued that what was at stake in the transition beyond the nation was no less than a crisis in the purpose and meaning of scholarly debate. He asserted that “the university” itself was on the verge of collapse, was already “in ruins.” In his controversial book on the demise of the modern university, *The University in Ruins*, Readings contends that, in turning away from the founding principles of Kant, Humbolt and the German Idealists, academics lack a strong cohesive purpose or tenable position with which to have their work make any significant difference to society. Offering an entirely different take on the new cultural politics from West’s, Readings despaired over the possibility of scholarly critique. Granting primacy to the negative cultural reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s, he maintained a vision of academic culture out of sync with the social moment. Readings reasoned that if “the University [was] developing toward the status of a transnational corporation,” we had better recognize the fact that teaching had become dependent on an as of yet indefinite system of value and exchange. Recognizing that “the situation in which we find ourselves now [was] one of both limitation and openness,” he grieved the ambivalent nature of this “openness”: “We are more free than we used to be in our teaching but we can no longer see what it is that our freedom is freedom from” (164). Whereas other scholars have argued that this period and the changes it witnessed were a sign of a powerful re-alignment of culture and politics, Readings was ultimately unable to fathom or accept the possibility that critical pedagogy – “a question of justice,” which he was careful to distinguish from the more objective “search for truth” upon which academic study, as he defined it, was

supposed to be founded (19) – might be organized around differential relationships with the structures and histories of power.

While there is little doubt that “the University,” as Readings recognized it, was radically altered by the budgetary restraints and conservative policies of the day, Readings fails to account for the historical specificity in which the Canadian, American, and British systems developed or the differences between them; instead, he prefers to frame the debate in more abstract, universal terms. Conceiving of the recent corporatization of post-secondary education as what he terms a movement away from “the idea of culture” and toward an empty “idea of excellence,” Readings argues that the rise of new academic paradigms – he uses as examples “interdisciplinary activity and Cultural Studies” (39) – were motivated by the bureaucratic impulse of the new technologies of power:

the appeal to excellence marks the fact there is no longer any idea of the University, or rather that the idea has now lost all content. As a non-referential unit of value entirely internal to the system, excellence marks nothing more than the moment of technology’s self-reflection. All that the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information. (39)

Focused as he was on the apparent shift in ideologies and the displacement of earlier liberal principles, Readings was unable to recognize the complex material relations at work in the transformation of the nation-state and consequent revalorization of debates of culture and knowledge.

In contrast with the profusion of critical responses described by West, Hall, or any number of other cultural theorists, Readings sees only a misguided debate over cultural content, or “canonicity.” Seeing “the University” as the product of a logical, more or less coherent historical development, Readings is unable to account for the contradictory social productions in-

volved. In assuming, as he does, that “the nation” had ceased to matter in any specific sense, Reading disparages the rise of what he sees as a “fundamental American anxiety that it in some sense means nothing to be American, that ‘American culture’ is becoming a structural oxymoron” (35-36). However, by invoking a historical narrative that grounds such a monolithic notion as “the University” in progressive ideology, Readings’ laudable attempt to articulate an alternative to an ethically bankrupt corporatization of information and education is mired in the limitation of his unexamined liberalism. Without accounting for the diversity of material relations and cultural politics that necessarily determine the actual manifestation of universities across and within nations, Readings could not allow that the deep divisions and fragmentation that made up something called “the academy” might in fact be working themselves out beyond the purview of a “public sphere.”<sup>5</sup>

#### REUNIFICATION

In another take on the transformation of national culture and the politics of emerging academic debate, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, Andreas Huyssen argues, contrary to Readings, that the same processes of cultural transformation that Readings felt were destroying “the University” might be read as harbingers of a more positive or constructive future. Taking the crisis in nation as a moment of possibility, Huyssen, in a manner cognizant of West’s “new cultural politics of difference,” suggests that the radical transformation of the spatial and temporal imperatives of everyday life called for a renewed attempt by scholars to bridge the gap between academic studies and social justice. He contends that the reconfiguration of socio-political contingency after the world historical “collapse of the Berlin Wall” in 1989 actually opened research to fundamental



questions about the value/s of knowledge production that might reinvigorate scholarly discourse. From an analysis of the historical events shaping current cultural studies, he concludes that the present technological age allows for and demands revision of the relationship between memory and forgetting – or “amnesia” as he refers to it – at the crux of contemporary critical discourse:

Both personal and social memory today are affected by an emerging new structure of temporality generated by the quickening pace of material life on the one hand and by the acceleration of media images and information on the other. Speed destroys space, and it erases temporal distance. The more memory we store on data banks, the more the past is sucked into the orbit of the present, ready to be called up on the screen. A sense of historical continuity, or for that matter, discontinuity, both of which depend on a before and an after, gives way to the simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the present. The perception of spatial and temporal distance is being erased. (253)

Despite this apparent erasure of “spatial and temporal distance” – in fact as one of its effects – the question of cultural memory and the role of the critical academic is brought back into the foreground of socio-political debate.

Huyssen warns that it is easy to get caught up in the utopian “fantasies of omnipotence,” and to lose oneself in “narcissistic” “channel-flicking” (253).

Rather than despairing, as Readings does, however, he suggests that the necessity of coming to terms with the problem of history, of the time and space separating scholars and their objects, should be a fundamental issue for new generations of scholars and the diverse communities from which they hail.

While its focus is specific to Germany and the re-alignment of identities within a socio-political space undergoing the pressures of “reunification,” Huyssen’s analysis raises key questions about social situation, academic affiliation, and cultural critique that are pertinent to a contemporary Cana-

dian context. The problem of how scholars write about a nation, a culture, or a people after the defining structures separating one from another, scholar from subject, have been smashed is germane to the current crisis in cultural nationalism, in general, and CanLit, more specifically. In making connections between various national configurations of academics, Huyssen is arguing for a transnational approach to culture that is firmly grounded in the specificity of inter-connected cultures or cultural locales. Thus, the networks, data banks and communications circuits to which he refers might be used to revamp meaning and structures of memory and community. Huyssen is not endeavouring to flatten the world onto the seventeen-inch monitors of the cosmopolitan academic; instead, he suggests that the erasure of distance and difference, the cracks in the foundation, is predicated on both a resurgence of social violence and the opportunity to reconfigure resistance to it. To turn away from these changes and the discourses they challenge, in effect to abandon nationalism to the extremes of the political spectrum, is an option open only to the most privileged purveyors of cultural knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

#### LITERATURE AND "RACE" AS OPERATIVES

As a counterpoint to the new idealism of globalism and the enthusiastic emergence of a "new world order," literary studies in particular has generated a prescient body of knowledge that reflects the larger crisis in academic discourse discussed above. Amongst post-colonial, feminist and "race" theorists, the 1980s and 1990s saw a growing concern with the relationship between literature and the larger social contexts in which it develops. Finding connections between entrenched divisions of labour and/or material disparities that describe the social and political realities of not only the so-called "developing nations" of the South and East but also the so-

called “metropolitan centres” of the North and West and the proliferation of English culture, a number of scholars have returned to the question of literature as hegemony. As Said, Spivak, Bhabha, and Viswanathan (amongst others) have made clear, English culture exists not simply as the expression of “sweetness and light” but as the reflection of a massive enterprise of hegemonic influence and self-validation for colonizing elites. These scholars suggest that the Victorian ideals that are the cornerstones of English literature: the darling of Arnold’s Manichean “Culture” must not be understood as a the face of a beneficent, somehow naively spiritual enterprise, but must be seen as part of a political project that was already “global” in scale:

To speak of culture, ideas, taste, morality, the family, history, art, and education as they [Ruskin, Tennyson, Meredith, Dickens, Arnold Thackeray, George Eliot, Carlyle, Mill] did, to represent these subjects, try and influence them or intellectually and rhetorically model them was perforce to recognize them on a world scale. The British international identity, the scope of British mercantile and trade policy, the efficacy and mobility of British arms provided irresistible models to emulate, maps to follow, actions to live up to. (Said 105-06)

Expanding on an earlier history of English Literature as the instrument of class division (Thompson, Williams, Eagleton), from an international perspective, postcolonial research makes it clear that literature was itself a key to systematic divisions of labour between a Western elite and subalterns from the East and South. Modeled as it is on the international political identity and military power of the British Empire, English Literature, as well as the settler literatures it fostered, such as Canadian literature, becomes one of the mechanisms of domination and exploitation. Thus, the ideals of creativity and (self-)expression to which proponents of literature often appeal

have been shown to be embedded in the quotidian workings of a white settler colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Literature, in the form of divergent literary nationalisms, has maintained a privileged place in and lives on through the development of modern nation states, especially in the US and Canada, bespeaks its contradictory nature. That it remains a site of contention in the recent cultural struggles suggests the complex intertwining of political purposes and investments assumed in the production and reproduction of national culture/s. As one enters the field of Literature, one moves into a “zone of contact” (to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s phrase) in which many of the fundamental concepts of everyday life – “culture, ideas, taste, morality, the family, history, art, and education” – are being redrawn to reflect a variety of different, often oppositional, identity constructions. As the meeting and exchange of people and cultures across new “global” or international networks are radically reshaping what is known as knowledge or learning, the value and function of a national literature, in our case Canadian literature, becomes an issue of primary importance. For all but the most removed academics, it has become obvious that CanLit, despite its progressive potential, is now, maybe always was, a difficult institution to defend. However, because literary studies have been at the hub of a matrix of discursive practices and institutions that are transforming themselves through the (post-national) discourses of globalization, Canadian literature continues to be significant to the development, and not merely the reflection, of contemporary culture – i.e., as both an ideal literary object and the materiality of its social production. Given the privileged position the state tends to give to the development of Canadian literature in Canada and abroad, the endeavour “to read Canadian writing,” which can be neither “good” or “bad” in and of itself, entails a theory of the

politics of position and intention that is, perhaps, pertinent to understanding and resisting the transformation of culture on a global scale.

## II. CANON DEBATE

In the context of the purported erosion of “national sovereignty,” the study of CanLit has turned its sights on the problematic legitimacy of literary nationalism. Since the late 1980s, although critics appear to have turned away from the use of “Canadian” in the titles of books and essays or to downgrade it in favour of other, hipper-sounding constructs, there has been a growing trend toward self-reflexivity. At more or less the same time as world historical events, such as the “end of the Cold War,” the accumulation of global capital, the emergence of a post-Fordist mode of production, the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the legislation of the Multiculturalism Act,<sup>8</sup> or the Japanese Canadian Redress Settlement, began reshaping the discourse of nationalism, scholars were asking fundamental questions about the epistemological underpinnings of CanLit. In retrospect, it seems that a shift in political reference rendered the virtue of “identifying Canadian” ever more tenuous, ever more ambivalent. Within literary circles, the proprietary nature of a national literature or culture became increasingly problematic. It is as though, in the context of a changing global polity, the desire for or recognition of a consecrated (English) Canadian subject had become fraught.

During the 1980s, Canadian scholars began to compare literary study to the breakdown of cultural authority, seeing the breakdown as a manifestation of the disintegration of the master or “meta-narratives” identified by Lyotard in his ground breaking *Postmodern Condition*. Reading Lyotard's

definition of “postmodernism” against Canadian history, Robert Kroetsch, whose essays on the subject were to provide the basis for a popular Canadian postmodernism, proclaimed Canada a “postmodern country” (22). Rather than identifying Canadian literature with the articulation of an autonomous, “autochthonous,” national subject capable of withstanding British and American cultural imperialism, as they had during the 1960s and 1970s, scholars recognized Canadian literature as a space of critique. The Canadian literature represented in the writing and criticism of Kroetsch, Hutcheon and other proponents of a postmodern CanLit was that which challenged positivism and fostered critical self-awareness. Revising the dominant model, these new theorists of CanLit set about redefining the discourse. While it was still rather uncertain and tenuous, Canadian literature was becoming subversive rather than resilient, deconstructive rather constructive. Academics identified and evaluated literary texts with respect to levels of thematic disruption and formal vanguardism. Literary texts were not asked to represent the spirit of a cohesive, historically identifiable nation, or more precisely they were expected to do so negatively – reflecting a nation of subversives, critics, malcontents. A text’s mimetic capacity to depict the will of the people and *our* struggle to “survive” a hostile and unforgiving landscape or social milieu (Atwood 32-33) became secondary to its deployment of idiosyncratic and disruptive textual strategies. The “incubus and cauchemar” (Fyre 141) in which Canadian culture was grounded and to which it provided an unique, at times profound response, shifted away from an essential struggle between the individual and the environment and became more and more a question of social struggle. Postmodern Canadian literature was celebrated because it attacked dominant ideologies, Canadian as well as British or American. Overall the “imaginative balance” Frye identified as being “characteristic of so

much of the best of Canadian culture down to the present generation”(9) was no longer a cause for celebration.

A postmodern conception of CanLit appeared to render earlier positive identifications of a nation or a people rooted in a landscape passé, unbearably naïve. Postmodern critics attempted to situate Canadian literature in the contingencies of social engineering, and not as an antidote to it. A decade earlier, Atwood saw literature in general as “a map, a geography of the mind” (18-19), and she wrote that

Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (19)

Postmodern CanLit, however, was outwardly sceptical of such a large-scale collective process of self-identification; it tended to translate such statements about *our* literature or *our* survival as being predicated on a false sense of origins. Kroetsch suggested, “Our genealogies are the narratives of a discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even. We wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions” (65). Having lost faith in the forward movement of cultural development, postmodern literature lost faith in the viability of Atwood’s map. As Kroetsch proposes it, CanLit had become a vehicle for revisions and re-articulations of “discontent” and not simply a way out of it.

However, in as much as the new critical models proposed an alternative to the cautious optimism of an earlier literary nationalism – the like of which was proffered in Frye’s or Atwood’s book length studies – the rhetoric of reversal and negativity upon which they often relied was itself

subject to conceptual shortcomings. The language of subversion and engagement that became popular with the emergence of a Canadian postmodern belies a problematic relationship with a quotidian cultural politics. While, on the one side, discussions of Canadian literature towards the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s took on a worldlier if slightly cynical tone, they continued to reflect the investments and sensibilities of the bourgeois, predominantly white academics with whom they were most popular. While Kroetsch is aware of "the impossible sum of our traditions," he continued to speak in the name of a national subject. In his essay "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue," Kroetsch criticizes a nationalist ideology but he does not ultimately move beyond the nation, nor does he abandon national identity as a category. Refusing to grant us the kind of homogeneity proposed in Atwood or Frye's conception of a "Canadian imagination" or a Canadian "geography," he nonetheless neglects to question his own recourse to a Canadian identity or "Canadian writing." He writes that "Canadian writing takes place between the vastness of (closed) cosmologies and the fragments found in the (open) field of an archaeological site," seeming to want to keep the idea of a national literature intact. Although he moves toward an international notion of Canadian culture barely imaginable in Frye's tentative early essays on the subject, Kroetsch's notion of Canadian literature remains connected to the same metaphoric ground. He continues to describe CanLit as an entity with its own identifiable characteristics. For better or worse, it would carry on contaminated by its own compulsive anxieties:

**It is a literature of dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story (and to be prophetic after all: this will be the case a century from now) comes compulsively to a genealogy that refuses origin, to a genealogy that speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the**



nightmare and the welcome of the dream of Babel. (71)

In the end, the difference Kroetsch, Hutcheon, and the other postmodern critics were asserting was qualitative, or descriptive. The image of CanLit was inflected with the language of Olson, Lyotard, Iser, Foucault, and Bakhtin, but it still clung to the distinguishable shards of thematic criticism and a longing for national identity. The question that remains is: what about this pluralistic update on the older CanLit puts it beyond the purview of the Frygian question? In the shift from "*cauchemar*" to "nightmare," how have the conditions that make Canadian literature possible changed? Granting a change in socio-economic imperatives, how have the material relations underpinning CanLit changed? What is the character of this new desire for a nationalist form?

As Lynette Hunter reminds us, even the so-called avant garde of Canadian literary culture is indebted to the government support of the Canada Council and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and thus it has tended to exist at a great distance from the literacy projects of marginalized communities (13-29). While the influx of a variety of theoretical perspectives from different national and "transnational" positions allowed representations of CanLit to begin to develop a more complex self-image in keeping with the country's emerging international status, the hegemonic structures of cultural nationalism remained more or less intact. Even as critical discourse took on contentious political issues around the questions of identity and representation, its tone was undercut by the liberal conceits of an older nationalism.

Simultaneously recognizing and defusing the impact of "new social models," influential critic/editor, Linda Hutcheon, claimed that, despite "a loss of faith," contemporary Canadian cultural and literary studies would

continue to rise above adversity. It would do so by assuming a new ethos of openness, a willingness to embrace difference and uncertainty, which Hutcheon saw as a reflection of “our” collective desire for progress:

In academic and popular circles today, books abound that offer us new social models, new frameworks for our knowledge, new analyses of strategies of power. This phenomenon does betray a loss of faith in what were once the certainties, the “master” narratives of our liberal humanist culture. *But the loss need not be a debilitating one.* (Hutcheon 23; emphasis added)

By the end of the 1980s, or so it would seem, critics no longer exhibited the overwhelming need to justify CanLit’s existence but began to find themselves cut adrift. Tossed on the international waters of literary studies – facing tempests of identity politics that had become central to feminist and post-structuralist theories of subjectivity and which marked the arrival of post-colonial and queer theory – it seemed to have completed some sort of arrival. While the radical new directions in literary scholarship were seen as an opening out to “new social models” and pointed to the arrival of a plurality of positions interweaving and unravelling critical discourses, Hutcheon’s optimism – an optimism shared by a large number of postmodern Canadianists – ultimately depended on an idealized break with the past. The rhetoric of postmodern criticism tended to belie over-generalized conceptions of Canada’s epistemological and sociological past. The extent to which the earlier “certainties” ever were is not altogether clear nor does a waning “faith” in national culture necessarily signal the same end for all.

#### A “CANON DEBATE”

As a way of analyzing the self-reflexive aspects of Canadian literature that were to follow the initial postmodern definitions and debates, we will look at “the canon debate” between Robert Lecker and Frank Davey. Their

arguments over the meaning and “value” of “the canon” represent an early attempt to shape understanding of Canadian literature to fit a new literary context. In fact, the exchange of essays that began in *Critical Inquiry* in 1989 and carried over into their subsequent book length studies of the topic throughout the first half of the 1990s still makes up a major portion of the debate. While it is safe to say that both sides of the debate are problematic, especially in terms of the conception of the link between political and literary representation, the tenor of the argument as it moves back and forth between Davey and Lecker provides a significant thread in the unravelling narrative of nationalist discourse. The fact that both scholars constitute Canadian literature as a site of public debate and propose CanLit as an institution rather than as the unmediated expression of a culture or people suggests a break with the more abstract theorizing of Kroetsch and Hutcheon. In attempting to move beyond definitions of what CanLit is and to talk about how it works, the Lecker-Davey debate is a useful site in the recent archive of Canadian literature; coming as it does on the brink of an emerging post-nationalism, it provides a crucial point of entry into the present of cultural nationalism.

In his response to Lecker's various depositions on the topic (“The Canonization of Canadian Literature,” “A Country without a Canon,” “Introduction,” “Response to Frank Davey”), Davey argues that Lecker is largely responsible for manufacturing a Canadian “canon debate”; he writes,

Although the Canadian canon, if one can even use that term, has been seen as fractured and contentious a construction as any element in Canadian culture, little direct attention had been paid to the word itself until 1989, when Robert Lecker ... delivered a paper on the subject to the annual meeting of the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English (ACUTE). (*Literary Power* 47-8)

Davey suggests that Lecker's essay, "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value" (delivered at the 1989 ACUTE conference and later published in *Critical Inquiry*) was a key moment in a rising debate. Now rather than looking forward to its emergence as a legitimate or semi-legitimate branch of literary studies, Lecker's argument grants Canadian literature status as an established institution.

Even though Davey criticizes Lecker's attempt to spark a Canadian "canon debate" for its lack of scholarly rigour and for gerrymandering its discussion along Canadian vs. US lines, he is willing to take up the gauntlet. Together these two unapologetic nationalists attempt to set the stakes for further discussion. The main point of contention between these two scholars is Lecker's argument that Canadian literature is the product of conservatism. For Lecker, the inculcation of a Canadian literary canon is identical with its institutions, which he believes were put in place to foster the hegemony of a national culture/literature. He holds that "the canon is the conservative product of the conservative institution that brought it to life. The power of the canon and the power of its members are inseparable: the institution is the canon; its members are the texts" ("The Canonization of Canadian Literature" 637). Without raising the issue of agency or for that matter taking the time to position himself in relation to this sweeping claim, he goes on to say that (other) Canadian critics have been duped into accepting "an image of [canonizers] themselves and their values" (637), which are identified as

a preoccupation with history and historical placement; an interest in topicality, mimesis, verisimilitude, and documentary presentation; a bias in favor of the native [sic] over the cosmopolitan; a concern with traditional over innovative forms; a pursuit of the created before the uncreated, the named before the unnamed; an expression of national self-consciousness; a valorization of the cautious, democratic, moral imagination

before the liberal, inventive one; a hegemonic identification with texts that are ordered, orderable, and safe. ("Canonization" 637-638)

In short, he suggests that the literary tastes of Canadian readers have been ruled by the dictates of an Anglo-Protestant status quo. Evidently, we (Canadian critics) had allowed ourselves to be coddled in this restrictive moral universe right up to 1989 (when Lecker makes his argument). However, in failing to acknowledge, let alone account for, writers like Ondaatje, Marlatt, or Kiyooka or any other so-called avant-garde writers, Lecker's vision of Canadian literature portrays a deep conservatism and/or desire for institutionalized discourse that undermines his expressed commitment to the values of public debate.

As Davey contends, Lecker's argument and the assumptions underlying it become troubling when the context of its delivery is taken into account. When one considers the very different audiences to whom the paper is presented, a number of its most strident criticisms take on a hollow ring:

This essay with its two incarnations and audiences presented readers with a number of interpretive problems. The first-person plural pronouns of its conclusion ... were hortatory in the context of the ACUTE audience which they addressed and included but became confessional and self-deprecating – a "colonial cringe" – when written to *Critical Inquiry's* subscribers. Its claim to "inquire into value" was readable in Canada as a Canadian effort to interrogate the role of nationalism in Canadian critical construction; in the United States context it seemed merely a false claim: the paper was now not about value at all but about the hegemony of conservative literary values in the writer's home country. (*Literary Power* 49)

Davey makes the valid point that in constructing this false monolith, Lecker misrepresents the larger historical and critical context into which the paper entered. Davey argues that, in limiting discussion to a handful of scholars associated with Frye and the thematic criticism his work fostered and by focusing on the 1978 Calgary Conference that produced a list of the top 100

books of Canadian literature, Lecker's essay performs a distortion of Canadian criticism and a "virtual erasure of Canadian writing before 1965" that "offered no position for someone like [Davey] and numerous others who had worked since the early 1970s to open Canadian criticism to regional, ethnic, and gender difference" (*Literary Power* 49). Davey asserts that Lecker's wilful misconstruction of Canadian literature – his misappropriation of US canon debate and misreading of John Guillory, Annette Kolodny, Allan Bloom, and Stephen Greenblatt amongst others – is undermined by Lecker's position as the editor of ECW, which as Davey points out has played a key role in producing, preserving, and disseminating precisely the type of canon under attack. In so doing, Davey locates Lecker's perplexing argument in a crisis of legitimization that was reshaping the political arena of Canadian literature. Davey reads its leaps in logic and theoretical hubris as a reflection of an unspecified personal anxiety coming out of Lecker's own relation to power (*Literary Power* 70).

Although, in a subsequent revision of his canon argument for an introduction to a collection of essays, *Canadian Canons*, wherein Lecker emphasizes the importance of a historical consciousness, his decision to base his research on Canadian criticism up to 1988 allows him to elide the critical and theoretical discourse framing its publication in 1995. In this reformulated, less polemical introduction, Lecker "reconfigures ... [his] own relationship to power in Canada" from being "the contestant for national power" to "an anglophone-Quebec outsider, excluded from the 'anarchy' of cultural debate within English Canada, and eager for a return to the Canadian nationalist conceptions that sustained anglophone Quebec during the F.R. Scott and Hugh MacLennan period" (Davey, *Literary Power* 69). While he seems to have backed off from many of his earlier contentions and the sweep-

ing generalizations about Canadian criticism, Lecker continues to maintain his central contention that CanLit has yet to generate much in the way of theoretical debate. Lecker concludes his revised introduction by quoting from Barbara Godard's statement that

generalized analyses of critical theory of the type produced in the United States and England by Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton have not been part of the Canadian scene. Critics have been less interested in the grammars or deep structures of narrative than they have in the reading of texts. (*Canadian Canons* 47)

He adds emphatically, "Nothing has changed."

While strictly speaking there are only a handful of book length studies of CanLit, it is clear that debate about the history and function of Canadian literature had been raging for nearly a decade, especially, but not only, in feminist circles. What one is left to understand from Lecker's slightly odd statement about the lack of change is that these debates – amongst feminists and writers of colour predominantly – were unrecognizable as debates about Canadian literature as he might choose to have it. Davey points out that, in fact, the essays collected in Lecker's *Canadian Canons* "belied his own thesis" put forward in the *Critical Inquiry* essay (*Literary Power* 67). Yet, Lecker continues to berate critics for failing "to question and theorize the values informing the works we study and the language we bring to bear on our study" (*Canadian Canons* 47). No matter how strongly he might feel about the hegemony of mainstream literary criticism in Canada, Lecker's argument pointedly ignores the development of a number of important interventions into the discourse. Lecker does in fact explicitly acknowledge Lorraine Weir's critique of the journal *Canadian Literature*, "Normalizing the Subject" (published in *Canadian Canons*); however, he ignores the larger feminist context that informs both her position and Barbara Godard's. As Davey argues,

Lecker's stance on the constitution of a Canadian canon begs serious questions about the deep schisms already running through CanLit circles.

For critics working in the field, Lecker's apparent disregard for critical positions that might disrupt his overly simplistic narrative is an affront to the reality of contemporary cultural politics. In the conclusion to his critique of Lecker, Davey makes a crucial move to locate the debate around a Canadian canon within larger international cultural formations:

Rivals to national constructions of canonicity are not necessarily contained within Canadian national borders, nor can nationalisms such as Lecker's be viewed as not themselves expressions of transnational romantic forces that informed the establishment of nation-states throughout Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The regionalism of Atlantic, prairie, and western Canada echo not only with W.C. Williams's "local pride" but with localist ideologies that have in various and not always attractive ways informed cultures from Texas and Western Australia to Puerto Rico, Singapore, and the Punjab. Feminist, aboriginal, and gay literatures develop both within the histories and institutional structures particular to their national and regional situations and within transnationally evolving theoretical discourses.  
(*Literary Power* 77)

In this gesture towards an expanded awareness of the various constituencies that "helped constitute, collectively, along with those nationalisms, the particular nation and canon Canadians live with" (*Literary Power* 77), Davey counters Lecker with a nod toward the intersecting identities of a new "global" culture. In a sense, however, Davey's own position is compromised by defaulting to an even more expansive liberal pluralism.

While his argument raises a number of crucial weaknesses in Lecker's attempt to initiate a canon debate, even when he recognizes that "national constructions of canonicity" extend beyond national borders, Davey tends to fold difference into the national. In so doing, the problematic of subjectivity central to feminist theory and "race"-based critical theory is subsumed in the



assumption of a national subject. Cultural politics for Davey is still predominantly a national question that assumes the conventional ideological divisions of liberal debate and a romanticized notion of the public sphere. Davey's essay is geared to unwinding Lecker's knotted attack on Canadian criticism and is as such not directly concerned with the complex problem of theorizing the intersections of "race," gender, and sexuality (even though his conclusion motions in this direction). One is led to ask how identity itself is played out in this exchange. Given Davey's own anxieties about the transformation of social and political debate and what he sees as an apparent disappearance of an engaged avant garde, one is left to wonder how the dynamic identity formations of "race," gender and sexuality that he invokes come into play in this highly abstract discussion of literature or culture.

The ironic effect of Davey's critique of Lecker is that it tends to legitimize the anxieties it strives to counteract. If Lecker's gestures toward a critical discourse on literary and cultural values can be read as an attempt to wrest debate away from feminists and writers of colour, then we might also argue that he is returning the issue of CanLit to a trajectory of white colonialism. And so his fascination with American and British canon theorists might be seen as an elision of the racialized writers and communities shaping debate in both countries. The fact that despite their differences the scholars he aligns himself with are all relatively safe and very white is telling. If the real point is to generate a similar contest in Canada to the one he identifies in the US and Britain, then where are Cornell West, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Min-ha, Edward Said, Stuart Hall, John Guillory? As Davey suggests, the fact that Lecker's work only makes oblique reference to mainstream Canadian scholars, and few if any refer-

ences to actual literary texts gives the appearance of neutrality while constructing a highly contentious description of Canadian literature.

In his counter argument, Davey refers to work by Aruna Srivastava and Arun Mukherjee, thereby acknowledging actual resistance to the hegemonic powers of the literary establishment already in place. He does not, however, take up the specific concerns they raise, i.e., he does not address the issue of racialization or the institutional forces of literary studies. Elsewhere in an interview with Beverly Daurio published as the Afterword to *The Power to Bend Spoons*, Davey addresses the problem of cultural power. Implicitly, he responds to a critique of CanLit by First Nations writers and writers of colour, who suggest that literary and cultural power in Canada has functioned in exclusionary ways to produce predominantly white writers and critics; he denies his own position of privilege ("Afterword"). Davey appears to be unwilling to recognize that his pluralistic notion of Canada is itself predicated on a foreclosure of identity politics; he demonstrates this by stating a discomfort with the fact that few of the sixteen writers discussed in *Post-National Arguments* are willing to take up clearly nationalist, clearly "Canadian" political struggles: a position that misrepresents more complex articulations of national culture – contrary to his assertions otherwise.

On a much less obvious but no less problematic level, one might argue that Davey's anxiety with the current state of cultural nationalism in Canada is tied to the perpetuation of a "Euro-Canadian" subject. For example, it is difficult not to read the final sentences in *Post-National Arguments* as anything more than an expression of white anxiety:

The strongest will towards community in these novels is expressed in their construction of First Nations peoples – of Big Bear in his efforts to protect a community of his own tribe, its white prisoners, its land, and its animals, of the two Indians of *Caprice* who labour to understand white social practice, of the

numerous Indians of *Slash* who work towards a pan-Canadian nation of peoples. But for the novels' Euro-Canadians, even for the good citizens of [George Bowering's imaginary town] Nicola, "the world [has] started to shrink." *Caprice's* twentieth-century narrator laments a community of difference that has vanished: "We are all Europeans now." (266)

Reflected in a knowledge or awareness of First Nations' history (as limited or mediated as that might be through the texts of Bowering or Wiebe), the once exalted image of the Canadian becomes vexed. Unable to maintain the difference between victim and victimizer, which is crucial to popular conceptions of Canadians as heroic weaklings,<sup>9</sup> Davey comes face to face with an image of Canada as yet another nation of the colonizers, face to face with complicity in the European systems of oppression with which he as a Canadianist is uncomfortable. The cultural-political promise of such a Canadian identity – which bore the distinction of being not British and not American – appears to have become untenable. Unable finally to disassociate a national identity from the history of state sponsored racism, Davey's ideal Canada collapses in on itself, leaving us with only post-national arguments of a fragmentary social sphere.

In other words, Davey seems willing to admit the limits of a national identity and the polity it has helped to construct, yet his contention that in general contemporary Canadian writing is apolitical suggests a lack of comfort with the possibility of variant nationalisms. The focus and tenor of his argument in *Post-National Arguments* is predicated on nostalgia for a Canadian literature that dealt with a geo-political reality he might recognize as Canadian. Even though Davey attacks thematic criticism and holds Lecker accountable for dismissing a critical discussion of literary experimentation, his focus on "books that have been important to particular Canadian audiences" and his interest in what he calls "Canada as a semiotic field" allow

him to exclude the writing of important writers of colour.<sup>10</sup> Thus Davey's position as a self-proclaimed spokesperson for politically and aesthetically challenging currents of Canadian writing rests on the dubious reassertion of a national subject, who he clearly differentiates from other non-white, non-native Canadians. The seemingly innocent slippage from Jeannette Armstrong's depiction of white culture in *Slash* to Bowering's humour inflected lament for a Canadian identity in *Caprice* bears traces of a nationalistic obsession with nativity that functions through the appropriation of a First Nations subject position (I will return to this problem). Confronted with a fundamental transition from a national – read white, Protestant, European – to a multicultural polity, Davey's otherwise insightful reading of Lecker's neo-conservatism is riddled with an inherent aporia concerning matters of “race” and his own anxious position as a figure of literary power.

#### RACIALIZED WRITING AND “EXPANDING THE CANON”

As Davey contends, the discussion of cultural hegemony was already much broader and more involved than Lecker's canon debate seems to want to allow. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s writers and critics from a range of critical positions had begun to focus on the practice of teaching and studying beyond a nationalist paradigm. In one such text, *Postcolonialism: My Living*, Arun Mukherjee revisits many of the issues and texts elided from the debate around a Canadian canon as both Lecker and Davey figure it. Mukherjee takes up the challenge of reconciling the proliferation of texts by writers from various racialized communities with the critical and pedagogical norms controlling the production and dissemination of literature in Canada. Mukherjee's book addresses the absence of writing by women of colour and First Nations women in the university classroom and before the reading

public, by offering a broader, more diverse, and definitely more contentious view of literary culture in Canada. In an essay on the difficulty of teaching the writing of First Nations and women of colour in undergraduate courses, “Canadian Nationalism, Canadian literature and Racial Minority Women” (in *Postcolonialism: My Living*), Mukherjee describes her own disillusionment with the institutionalization of Canadian literature. She lays out the problems that come to light when one attempts to introduce “racial minority writing” into a classroom full of students who, because of their schooling, are ill-equipped to meet the challenges raised by particular texts:

The eurocentric curricular diet that my students and I were fed throughout our educational life ensures that I can expect my students to come abroad with very little contextual knowledge required for responding satisfactorily to a text. Students know practically nothing about Aboriginal land claims and human rights struggles since contact. Some of them come with frighteningly racist views that I do not expect to change. (89)

To highlight this point, she goes on to quote directly from student papers that provide obvious racist responses to texts by Maria Campbell and SKY Lee. Mukherjee’s anecdotal discussions of her experience teaching on the front lines of a struggle between a new Multiculturalism and the older cultural nationalism draws attention to a much more contradictory and much more fraught view of CanLit.

While her sense of CanLit as an unfulfilled promise bears certain resemblance to the anxiety running through the Lecker-Davey debate, Mukherjee’s understanding of the social space of CanLit is marked by a consciousness of the violent oppression and construction of racialized peoples in Canada. Her argument builds on her experiences as a South Asian woman and as an academic of colour working in a predominantly white field. Mukherjee claims to be greatly disappointed with the way in which

“Trudeau’s message of a ‘just society’ and ‘cultural pluralism’” (69) has been played out:

Although Canadian nationalism of the sixties and the seventies is remembered for Expo '67 which commemorated the nation’s centennial, for the surge in anti-American feeling and the desire for Canada’s economic and political independence, and for the institutionalization of Canadian literature in schools and universities, it was the opening up of Canada to nonwhite immigration that registered most strongly with Canadians of colour. The striking down of racist immigration policies of the past was experienced by us as the most promising manifestation of the vision of a “just society”. (69)

She goes on to juxtapose Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community with the struggle with nationalism expressed in the poetry of Dionne Brand, and she asks

why is it that racial minority women have expressed such negative views about Canada? If nations are experienced as “imagined communities” and evoke discourses of kinship and home ... why does the narrator in Dionne Brand’s short story “At Lisbon Plate,” describe herself as “[a] woman in enemy territory”? (69)

Mukherjee argues, “Canadian literature, created, published, taught and critiqued under the aegis of Canadian nationalism promotes the settler-colonial view of Canada” (72). To move beyond the limits of mainstream notions of Canadian literature and Canadian culture, Mukherjee suggests the need for a more historically accurate model that might better reflect the diversity of multi-cultural identities that go into making this country what it is.

She takes issue with the practice of cultural nationalism, however, not the ideal. Mukherjee’s fond recollection of Trudeau’s promised “just society” makes it clear that she supports an expanded or appended notion of CanLit in which and through which teachers and students might interrogate notions of culture and difference. Thus, Mukherjee’s text reinforces a pluralistic

view of national identities to subvert the hegemony of the earlier Atwoodian or Frygian notions of what it means to be Canadian. In her attack on the popular romantic vision of Canadian literature that has portrayed itself as the expression of an essential identity – the victimized “soul” whose sense of beauty is inherently the product of a struggle to survive this inhospitable land called Canada – put forth by its most powerful publishers, critics, and scholars, Mukherjee pushes for a practice of “inclusion,” which is itself highly problematic. She reminds readers that “Although these environmentalist explanations of a Canadian identity, as well as the very obsession with a Canadian identity, have been challenged often enough, they have not been replaced yet by more inclusive theories of Canada and Canadian literature” (72-3). This critique of CanLit as the reflection of a euro-centric subject is important because it foregrounds overt problems of representation within the space of CanLit. Nevertheless, Mukherjee’s pluralist view ultimately allows certain hegemonic power imbalances that are inherent in Canadian literature to go unchecked. Her attempt to open Canadian literature, as an institutional enterprise, to a plurality of racialized voices is a significant movement towards the re-conceptualism of a particular form or representation of cultural production, which as she points out should be located historically in the development of Canadian immigration and foreign policy of the 1960s and 1970s. The weakness with Mukherjee’s argument, however, is that it tends to be more descriptive than theoretical; while she moves toward the personal and the pedagogical as key aspects of the debate, her discourse is dependent on a notion of representation that tends to override the complex materiality of social relations.

The issues of representation raised in this argument beg a deeper set of questions about the dominant modes of reception by which literature is and

was allowed to develop as the expression of a particular cultural identity that was in itself complicit with the neo-colonial apparatus of the Liberal Government whose ideology she upholds. Without situating the diversity her essay engages within a more precise conception of intersecting divisions of labour by which Canadian literature becomes a locus of power and knowledge during the period in question, her argument risks the commodification of difference in a manner that might make it even more palatable to the very cultural powers against whom she is writing.

In addressing the “race” blindness of the dominant discourses of Canadian literature, one might also question the way in which literature itself comes to be the reflection of a cultural identity. In the dominant multiculturalism of recent Canadian criticism, and Mukherjee’s essay might be included in this ideological camp, there is a continued attempt to fragment and destabilize an earlier exclusionary cultural model to fit a more inclusive, democratic ideal. Against the monologic of a white settler identity, critics have begun to see Canadian literature as a space of possibility – through and by which writers might represent an expanding scope of identities: witness, for example, the proliferation of anthologies claiming to represent the writing of various marginalized groups, including First Nations, racial minorities, lesbians and gays. As Kamboureli’s *Scandalous Bodies* demonstrates, the problem is far more complicated than these expansionary desires seem to suggest. On the one hand, these collections provide an important space for the development or even production of a wide variety of different types of writing, which in turn raise complex issues for their readers; on the other hand, these anthologies open the writing to appropriation by the literary establishment (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 131-174). Within the university, one often sees the inclusion of certain texts on the syllabus of an under-



graduate Canadian literature course as representative of “writing from the margins”; against the canonical writing of Robertson Davies, W.O. Mitchell, Margaret Laurence or Atwood et al, novels by SKY Lee or Joy Kogawa, for example, are placed as markers of difference. Yet, from the description and approach outlined in course descriptions, it is obvious that their differences are but adjuncts to the mainstream, metonymic reminders of an ideal multicultural mosaic.<sup>11</sup>

The dominance of a realistic localism mentioned by Mukherjee does not necessarily disappear in the updated view of Canadian multiculturalism. It can in fact be made to give way to another level of subdivision and/or heightened realism, which not only tends to be taken as a significant gesture of inclusion but also as proof of the sanctity of the ideological liberalism central to the history of literary nationalism within the cultural institutions of the nation-state. Literature, according to this ideological construct, continues to be seen as the reflection of an individual subject’s experience of the world and, as such, a representation of this individual’s struggle for meaning. This attempt to find language for the phenomenological is crucial to the dominant trope of postmodern discussions of marginalization. Since Robert Kroetsch’s seminal essays on the subject, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, the idea of the alienated “Canadian writer,” which is in some ways but an adaptation (or post-modernisation) of an earlier thematic criticism, has been fundamental to nationalist critics. In his notion that “all writing begins on the margins,” contemporary critics have been able to forge an inherent relationship between the Canadian psyche and its abjection. Accordingly, the writing of so-called marginalized writers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds can easily be made to reflect an “earlier” experience of alienation that has been treated as inherently Canadian by Kroetsch, Hutcheon and other

postmodern Canadianists, thus erasing the historical and cultural differences by which some people are racialized within the (current) cultural mosaic. In the popular notion that Canada is a country of immigrants, one hears neither empathy nor sympathy for the struggles facing many “new Canadians,” but rather the negation of cultural memories and specific histories of disenfranchisement or subjugation to the nation-state they might bring. Much of the writing done by writers of colour tends to be recast in terms of this “new Canadian” identity, i.e., to be taken as the work of an immigrant, one newly arrived on the scene of Canadian literature even when this writer has lived here for a lifetime,<sup>12</sup> thus negating the long history of racism and cultural supremacy by which this distinction is informed.

The exclusion or repression of specific cultural identities within academic discourse is not simply a mistake of history, something done often unwittingly by one’s predecessors. Contrary to liberal belief, the wrongs of the past cannot be expunged simply by learning to read or understand yet another set of stories of struggle – by learning to recognize yet another marginalized group. As Michel Foucault reminds us, the institutionalization of literature is grounded in a fundamental fallacy in which literature is deemed a form of expression. He argues that, in fact, literature comes into being through the repression of an ever-increasing quantity of texts. In his talk on “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault poses the issue of an ever expanding proliferation of language and discourse in terms of a pair of questions: “What is so perilous, then, in the fact that people speak, and that their speech proliferates? Where is the danger in that?” (216). In the apparent multiplicity of voices, which I would argue is analogous to the notion that a literary canon might be opened to an ever-expanding inclusion of different

writers, who represent a plurality of subject positions, Foucault hears anxiety. Instead, he offers the following hypothesis:

in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. (216)

In part, an inability or unwillingness to comprehend this “awesome materiality” enables the production of English, as a literary discourse, and has kept it outside critical study. In tending to rely on the abstraction of the cultural artefact from the quotidian struggles of the various societies that give it meaning, critics separate themselves from the struggles their work invokes. In an important sense, the inability to conceive of nationalism in literature in terms of either a contested present or contradictory past is connected to the performative function of the literary subject in relationship to the production and reproduction of power.

As Terry Eagleton posits it, cultural nationalism itself depends on the paradoxical marriage of critical irony and commitment. In “Nationalism: Irony and Commitment,” he writes that the nation is an identity category dependent on a dialectical opposition between a commitment to an emancipatory political ideal and the ironic possibility of its attainment. He concludes that literature (in this case Joyce’s *Ulysses*) draws out “the embarrassment of bourgeois ideology that it has never really been able to reconcile difference and identity, the particular and the universal” (31). Appropriating this critique of national ideology to our own purposes, we might see Canadian literature as the development of similar contradictory drives – first to establish salient cultural differences from the culture of English colonialism and second to resist the overwhelming forces of American imperialism. Yet,

what are the theoretical and political implications of this paradox? In his conclusion to this enigmatic essay, Eagleton backs away from his initial attempt to work through the paradoxes of literary nationalism, and he states, "it is a matter of trying to live that dialectic passionately, ironically, in all of its elusive impossibility rather than merely providing elegant theoretical formulation of it" (38).

Like Davey, Eagleton comes to the edge of the problem and then backs away. Irony overwhelms commitment, placing the critic in just the right place for further discussion. If we stop to consider Eagleton's argument in terms of Gauri Viswanathan's research on the origins of English studies in England, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, particularly her reversal of the dominant understanding of literature as beginning in the metropolis so that it might be carried to the colonies, this relationship between irony and commitment might take on an entirely different meaning. If, as Viswanathan argues, the study of English begins with the colonizer's desire to educate the people of the sub-continent so that they might take up functional roles in the modern bureaucratic machinery of the new capitalist power, then it is possible to suggest that the importance of a national identity, of identifying with and through an English subject, was instrumental in the creation of a subaltern readership who could not expect to see their agency reflected in the texts. Whereas Eagleton reads Joyce as an expression of the ambivalence of writing about home and country, a reminder of a certain critical fallacy of position and authority, Viswanathan's sense of a readership and its relation to the dominant culture ostensibly represented in literary texts is highly ambivalent. By what privilege does one take up an ironic position vis-à-vis the writer? Who has the right? After all, the problem of readership and the relationship between readers and writers

is by no means settled. As Eagleton himself demonstrates in his introduction to *Literary Theory*, literature comes into its own as an instrument of the state's will to dominate the Irish and the working classes, and as such it is open to expropriation and deconstruction; the position one is ascribed in the political spheres of nation determines the meaning of a dominant identity.

Thus, we might return to Mukherjee's postcolonial intervention into the development of CanLit. To argue, as Mukherjee does, that a colonial education leaves students unprepared to comprehend particular texts underestimates the power granted her students in re-assigning and re-articulating racism, and the complex resistance their presence within the system might enact. When impetus shifts from writer to reader, the function of identity in relation to literature takes on new meaning.

#### QUEERING "THE CANON"

This shift in focus from the subjective experience of individual Canadian writers, from a phenomenology of writing, to a more systematic analysis of "reading" as a public act, as that within and against which critical subjectivity is performed by calling into play the dialectic of identity and institutionality, is central to Peter Dickinson's revision or "queering" of the Canadian canon, *Queer Is Here: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*. His study details the erasure of queer sexualities in the institutionalization of a national literature. However, unlike Lecker, Davey, or Mukherjee, Dickinson does not ask for an extended canon; instead he offers a systematic reappraisal of the existing canon/s that tears apart many of the foundational narratives of the dominant cultural nationalism. Working with an approach that develops out of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler's ground breaking attempts to initiate a "queer theory" of

literary performance, Dickinson offers his Canadian “epistemology of the closet” (to borrow Sedgwick’s term), which seeks to transform “the absent presence of queerness in Canadian literature into a more manifest or embodied presence” (6). This is a provisional desire, and Dickinson is careful to qualify it as such. He argues for a strategically situated use of critical theory, telling his readers that

[he is] seeking to uncover, or “bring out,” what [he sees] as Canadian literary nationalism’s simultaneously othered and coupled discourse, to juxtapose against the predominantly nationalist framework of literary criticism in this country an alternative politics, one propelled by questions of sexuality and, more often than not, homosexuality. (3)

His study ponders how a queer identified reader might redress the hegemonic processes by which Canadian literature – qua semi-official discourse – appropriates and re-inscribes sexual differences within a nationalistic narrative of heterosexual desire and patriotic love:

As a signifying system, the Canadian literary canon seems to have no trouble incorporating homosexuality into its rarefied textual precincts, so long, that is, as it functions primarily as a means of re-eroticizing readers’ fundamentally heterosexual love for their country. But what happens when (homo)sexual dissidence is used to signal a somewhat more ambivalent attachment to the idea of nationhood? (6)

This radical pairing of literary nationalism with the “othered” discourse of homosexual desire enacts an important and insightful subversion of the hetero-sexist norms informing critical readings of various writers and texts that are both central to and excluded from what is popularly taken as a Canadian canon.

For our purposes, Dickinson’s research is valuable in its conception of Canadian literature as a dynamic space – what he calls a “precinct” – in

which reading habits are constructed in precarious relations to power.

Dickinson's claim is that

the identificatory lack upon which Canadian literary nationalism has historically been constructed – the “where” of Frye’s “here,” for example – is in large part facilitated by if not wholly dependent upon a critical refusal to come to grips with the textual superabundance of a destabilizing and counter-normative sexuality. (4)

This study raises important questions about the function of academic and literary discourse in limiting access to a particular representational mode, but it also recognizes the power and influence of invisible and not so invisible queer subjects in the creation of a literary canon. It opens debate up around literary nationalism by way of what we might refer to as a study of the micro-politics of literary power and provides a key point of departure in the study of Canadian literature.


Demonstrating how Canadian literature functions as a repression of ((homo)sexual) difference even as its practitioners are ideologically bound to believe in literature's power of expression, Dickinson's text situates a politics of academic “performance,” a term he borrows from the re-appraisal of speech act theory presented by Butler and Sedgwick's interrogation of queer subjectivity. Taking the research and pedagogy of both queer and post-colonial literature beyond the binaries of inside and outside, centre and margin, Dickinson's “personalist” approach to the subject presents a highly ambivalent, often-contradictory image of a national subject. In performing (Canadian) literary studies, the critic performs a subject whose difference is simultaneously interpellated and radically contested in the act. While Dickinson's own “outing” – i.e., his self-identification as a “queer reader” – is central to the critical narrative he proposes, the effect of this revisionary reading of CanLit from a position within identity politics radically alters the viability of

“straight readings.” Situating himself and his critique firmly within the purview of a recognized canon, Dickinson demonstrates how CanLit exists in contradiction, not as an alternative to it. The multivalent currency of his literary analyses are thus bound in the temporal and spatial dynamic of both personal desire and institutional drives, which do not free the scholar from responsibility; rather they demand ever more vigilance to the shifting ground of academic research. Demonstrating how the control of identity functions as an integral part of literary nationalism, Dickinson’s study brings the canon debate into the arena of “race” and gender politics, both of which are crucial to the emergence of queer theory (Cf. Sedgwick, Butler, Frankenberg, Dyer), fundamentally redefining what is at stake.

### **III. RACISM AS FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE IN CANLIT**

As critics begin to deploy new literary theories in the study of CanLit, as the awareness of Canadian culture becomes mediated by emerging international relations, the relationship between scholar and his or her cultural object takes on heightened significance, thus posing new questions for the study of literature. If there is growing discomfort with the discourse of nationhood, witnessed in a tendency amongst scholars to avoid terms such as Canadian literature or Canadian literature in English altogether, then the emergent popularity of Multicultural, Feminist, Postcolonial, First Nation, Asian-Canadian, Queer, Diasporic, or Postnational theories open key sites from which to study the formation of hegemonic nationalism. However, one is also warned that these new discourses might also be co-opted in the development of a new hegemony. Paradoxically, the expanding critical lexicon might serve the purposes of a regenerative rationalization of dominant culture. While the





lack of confidence in the inherited discourse points to a crisis in the representational modes of nationalism, it does not necessarily signify their demise. Like the nation-state, literary nationalism is capable of absorbing difference. If, as Anne McClintock argues, the discourses of nation feed on adversity or the expropriation of alterity, they also depend on it. Newer, slightly more awkward sounding, constructions like "Canadian Canons" (Lecker), "Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada" (Dickinson), or "Diasporic Literature in Canada" (Kamboureli) all point to increasing recognition of plurality, difference, and diversity within Canadian literature. However, despite the fact that these studies of Canadian literature draw attention to the hegemonic power of literary nationalism, they run the risk of placing a renovated vision of literary production against an older more homogeneous conception of the field. In so doing, they assert a compromising dialectic that might allow CanLit to remake itself by reproducing some of the deeper structures of cultural nationalism. As the notion of Canadian literature falls from favour, there is an increasing danger of erstwhile Canadianists becoming too involved in the internal fragmentation of the field, and, by becoming too focused on the microscopic detail, losing sight of the larger social issues brought to light by critical theories of "race," gender, and sexuality, thereby shoring up the discipline against outside influences. Consequently, there is a danger that as Canadianists begin making forays into other non-national or transnational areas of cultural study and analysis, we leave the hegemonic divisions of labour intact, so participating in the further appropriation and colonization of knowledge.

In the specific context of CanLit, it is crucial to understand how the legacies of colonialism continue to exert an impact on the material relations producing writing and literature as they are passed on through government

support for the arts, the publishing industry, secondary and post-secondary curricula, and the mass media – all of which are crucial to the Canadian book trade.<sup>13</sup> The opening up of the discipline to new fields of writing by women, people of colour, First Nations, lesbians, and gays bears the promise of a movement towards greater inclusivity and sustained critique. On the other hand, as I am arguing, the fact that extended research on literary nationalism as a form of “race” relations or (multi)cultural engineering takes place outside mainstream critical debate has meant the status quo (read white-identified, read liberal) maintains a tenacious grip on cultural hegemony. It is relatively common to see unfortunate terms like “Canadian First Nation’s writing” and “Canadian Postmodern” bandied about with much aplomb by critics who show little concern for the shortcomings of a nationalist lexicon. Although the discourse on “hyphenated” identities – Asian Canadian, South Asian Canadian, African Canadian, Japanese Canadian, or even Anglophone Canadian – as well as the critical hybridity they posit, springs from active resistance to “Canadian culture” and/or “Canadian literature” as homogenizing categories, mainstream multiculturalism threatens to empty the terms of critical utility. The national aspect of these hybrid identities threatens to consume the differences they mark and resist. By foregrounding the cultural politics of literary production, however, critical theory might return to the differential historical relations that are embedded in the continued production and reproduction of national culture, especially as they are related to issues of “race” and racism.

#### REFOCUSING ON ISSUES OF RACE

Given the radical transformation of cultural debate in Canada and its investment in the economic de/stability of various state apparatus (e.g.,

schools, arts organizations, and community groups), the fact that, beyond the rather limited canon-debate discussed above, there is a relative dearth of critical discussion of CanLit as an epistemological undertaking is troubling. On the one hand, the re-mapping of political-cultural boundaries and re-conceptualization of the space of Canadian cultural production are contingent on renewed interest in disciplinary divisions across which academic subjects are performed. On the other hand, until recently, this discussion has been carried on outside or on the so-called margins of the field of CanLit and has become an adjunct to it. If, contrary to neo-conservative rhetoric, the emergence of global markets and communications networks do not signal the obsolescence of national culture but are in fact tied to a resurgence or re-organization of national elites and elite nations now controlling the flow of capital (Lloyd, Miyoshi, Ahmad, Chatterjee), then it bears remembering that the most significant attacks on the sanctity of the national are not undertaken to dismantle various policies and institutions within the polity of the nation but to strengthen the hegemonic hold of elite cultures. The supposed instability of “Canadian” culture – assumed, for example, in media representations of “Asian” immigration, “white flight,” and “the brain drain” – is not the effect of intrusive foreign elements bent on undermining the national polity. “The nation” is not under attack from without as much as it is being transformed from within. Redefining “Canadian” identity – as well as the complex arrangement of cultural constituencies associated with it – might best be seen in the context of a number of cultural-political re-articulations re-shaping “the nation,” “nationalism,” and “citizenship” across a range of inter-determinant contemporary sites.

Engagements in the theoretical conception of transnational or extra-national identity formations, especially those of “race,” gender, and sexuality, have already redrawn the lines around national debates. For example, the recent developments in the sphere of “race” politics – manifest in the debacle over the *Writing Thru “race”* conference in Vancouver, the fallout at the Pen International Conference in Toronto, debates about the appropriation of First Nations culture and history, and the media construction of Neil Bissoondath as a spokesperson for assimilation and the neo-conservative establishment, to name a few key events – have established Canadian literature as a site of controversy. Yet, despite the important work on these and other related issues done by Mukherjee, Brand, Bannerji, Roy Miki, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Monica Kin Gagnon, Scott Toguri McFarlane, Ashok Mathur, and Fred Wah (to name some examples) there has been relatively little research done specifically on the functionary implications of nationalist discourse. Within the area circumscribed by CanLit, few scholars have written about the effective limits of this national identity formation. Roy Miki, one of those who has specifically tackled the question of “race” as it pertains to CanLit, argues that in spite of recent developments in post-colonial theory and in spite of the fact that more texts by First Nations writers and writers of colour are finding their way onto course syllabi and into academic studies, little has been done to theorize “The representational limits of the multiple – and multiplying – social, cultural, political, linguistic, historical and institutional configurations that intercept the capacity of the reading subject and the evaluation of texts” (*Broken Entries* 169). Miki suggests that there needs to be more “theoretical work that can articulate what texts do, what is done to texts, and the implications for anti-racist practices” (*Broken Entries* 169).

As Miki is suggesting, the shortcomings of many of the arguments about the nature of literary nationalism in Canada is that they assume an unproblematic view of literature and nationalism in relation to the larger socio-political struggles – the so-called “global” transformation – with which they are embroiled. In spite of the multifaceted critiques of dominant modes of literary and cultural analysis by feminist, post-structuralist, postmodern and post-colonial critics, there are only a few attempts to theorize CanLit as a literary nationalism. While there have been interventions in the field of Canadian literary studies from a range of academic and non-academic perspectives, CanLit as an epistemological undertaking has not itself commanded the critical attention it warrants. The divisive nature of academic discourse has meant that studies of the relationship between “race” and literary/cultural nationalism by writers of colour and First Nations writers is not taken seriously within the mainstream. In his research on race and the publishing industry in Canada, Mathur has pointed out that discussions of “race” are often relegated to positions on the fringes of the main debate. Various special panels at academic conferences, “special issues” of literary journal, and “special topics” courses in graduate schools have been invaluable in generating of critique, enabling access to scarce resources, and fostering alliances amongst academics and activists; however, the tangential placement of these occasional events vis-à-vis institutional structures tends to delegitimize contentious criticism. It has been argued that in taking an interest in diversity without any sort of political commitment to addressing the systemic problems inevitably raised by racialized writers and scholars, white academics have effectively maintained a safe distance from these critiques (Mathur, Miki). Within feminist circles – even those that are ostensibly committed to radical critiques of the dominant order – there have been problem-

atic responses to discussions of “race” or calls for the consideration of crucial differences amongst white women, women of colour, and First Nations women.

The discussion of CanLit itself is divided along “race” lines. On the one hand, First Nation scholars and writers in conjunction with counterparts in other racialized communities have begun to forge relationships and critical interest in other areas of cultural studies beyond the pale of national debate. On the other hand, a majority of predominately white scholars are contenting themselves with extending the discourses of literary nationalism into various fragmentary subdivisions. As an upshot of this, it appears that there has been a re-entrenchment of conservative nationalist values under the rhetoric of pluralism and inclusion. Between the critical extremes, multiculturalism and post-nationalism seem to provide ideological sanctuaries from which to further the study of writing in Canada without properly questioning the values inherent in such a practice. The result, as I am suggesting, is a divestiture of CanLit as a legitimate topic for critical discourse.

In his critique of contemporary cultural praxis, Mathur challenges the prevalence of a sanctimonious gesture politics, which he defines as an emerging “rhetoric of approval.” He argues that institutions of CanLit seem to need work by Writers of Colour and First Nations writers to legitimize Canadian literature or (Canadian) Multicultural Literature. Yet, he argues, the concerns they raise and the changes they propose are usually ignored. Empty gestures of inclusion – i.e., the apparent willingness to publish racialized writing in special issues of literary journals as long as it meets the criteria set by white editors, the inclusion of First Nations and of Colour performers as part of the entertainment at academic conference, the tokenization of individual writers on course syllabi – has become endemic to the contempo-

rary Canadian literary and publishing establishment. Mathur argues that mere recognition of cultural differences on the part of reading audiences, publishers, editors, reviewers and academics has amounted to very little progress. He suggests that while there is a declared acceptance of racial and cultural difference, which often postures itself as a form of radicality but which is, in essence, “just a rhetoric of approval, support in principle without what i’d call any ‘radical’ risk taking” (2), this “rhetoric” often functions to elide the need or desire to address the systemic problems at the heart of institutionalized racism. The mere recognition of racial injustice, or as Mathur calls it “lip-service” to the problems of exclusion and inequity, does not assure change. Any real movement of this sort will take a high level of critical self-awareness and theoretical vigilance to critical practices.

#### RACE AND NATION

To work through these problems, scholars must find ways speak to the function of “race” in the development of Canadian culture, a development which I have argued is ongoing despite rhetoric to the contrary. To put it another way, racism must not be understood as simply an additional problem or schism within a particular nationalism but addressed as an integral aspect of modern nationalist movements in general. For example, Etienne Balibar maintains that historically racism and nationalism function together and are bound constitutionally (37). According to Balibar, the “entanglements of nationalism and racism” demand careful consideration of the polymorphous nature of interpolated identities: emphatically racism is “a historical system of complementary exclusions and dominations which are mutually interdependent,” and, as such, “racism always presupposes sexism” (49) – not to mention a host of other divisive practices including

classism and homophobia. The realization that “the connection between nationalism and racism is neither a matter of perversion ... nor a question of formal similarity, but a question of historical articulation” (Balibar 50) leads to a crucial redefinition of the task of cultural critique. It suggests that the dissolution of nationalism under the auspices of an emergent multiculturalism might well function as a cover for the re-deployment of a racist hegemony. Thus, what is popularly touted as the “death” or “erosion” of “the nation” and/or nation-state might be understood as another “historical articulation” of racism, and paradoxically nationalism. Despite the ruse of organic metaphors of decay, the socio-political project of nation formation is not fundamentally at odds with globalization. Just because the modern nation-state might be seen as the outgrowth of European colonialism and industrial capitalism, it does not logically follow that its apparent obsolescence is tantamount to the termination of earlier social injustices. There is little disputing the fact that the concentration of capital has continued into the twentieth first century, that the “bourgeois capitals in the industrial world are now as powerful, or even more powerful than before” and that “the logic they employ, the clients they serve, the tools available to them, the sites they occupy, in short, their very identities, have all changed” (Miyoshi 82). As the identities of capital change, shifting away from investiture in nationalism, so too does the nature of racism. It continues to find new modes of articulation that bridge the national and the global.

The somewhat discomfiting cohesion between the trajectories of nation and the continued development of racism does not sit well with the liberal critics who have, at least in the realm of CanLit, tended to be overtly and ardently nationalistic. Perhaps it is for this reason that the issue of “race” has remained outside the more mainstream discussions of literature and



identity central to the discourse Canadian literature. Within the fields of critical “race” theory and postcolonialism, however, scholars have undertaken to re/contextualize literature and literary studies in ways that bring nationalism back into the picture. One could say that, all around the perceived periphery of CanLit, research has begun to reframe national identity formation in ways many of those working inside the field have not yet begun to imagine, not to mention “think through” (Bannerji). Willing neither to accept Canadian nationalism as a kinder gentler nationalism, which has been proposed by Charles Taylor (“The Politics of Recognition”; *Reconciling Solitudes* 59-119) or Will Kymlicka (15-126), nor to wait for literary nationalists to work through issues of “guilt” or “privilege,” a number of scholars are already theorizing systemic “racism” – or as Scott Toguri McFarlane has referred to it, CanLit’s “haunt of ‘race’” – in ways that radically challenge both CanLit and the politics of location it involves.

In returning to questions of critical positioning and performance, the focus shifts from who should or should not be read and onto how texts are read. Critical discussions of “race” tend to worry less about the struggles of a given writer or text and more about the way that texts (and writers) are produced and reproduced within and against institutions, thus reversing one of the features of much multicultural criticism. In “Race Research: A Ten Point Primer,” an important essay of the space of “race” in literary studies, Miki critiques CanLit. Locating CanLit within the colonial enterprise of English (Literature), Miki contends that

To enter English (and Canlit) studies is to cross over into the bounded institutional discourse of requirements, specialisation, required reading lists, qualifying exams where the invisibility of “race” coexists with quotidian pressures to align one’s critical methodology and research with dominant literary values.  
(*Broken Entries* 176)

He points out that within this “bounded institutional discourse,” radicality does not necessarily name effects or performance but rather becomes a “construction” serving “disciplinary unity and coherence” (*Broken Entries* 176). Thus, the sanctioning and celebration of difference and subversion that are central to liberal humanist discussions of literature – and for that matter Canadian nationalism – frequently belie systemic racism. To make this point, Miki discusses the popularity of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, one example of a racialized text that has entered a literary mainstream and is now required reading for many high school and university students. He argues that the desire amongst teachers and academics to “know” the history of Japanese Canadian uprooting (through literature) must be seen as contiguous with the racist history of the nation state and the production of whiteness.<sup>15</sup> In Kogawa’s text and others by “of colour” and First Nations writers, readers – particularly white readers – find (post-/multicultural) nationalism as a way out of the morass of racial violence. Miki demonstrates how texts by racialized writers that can be made to fit narratives of forgiveness and reconciliation can be made to sanctify the present of Canadian cultural politics. The linear history of national progress – cheered as it is by rhetoric of tolerance and generosity that has come out in support of multicultural policies during the 1970s and 1980s – provides readers with an opportunity to reconcile the racist history of a Canadian nation-state with neo-nationalist promise of well-orchestrated plurality. The act of relegating racial violence to the past by recasting the spaces of conflict in the scenic landscapes of a postcard Canada is crucial to the popular belief that Canadians, as “a people,” are on the whole morally superior to our much maligned colonial predecessors, the British and Americans. The situation, however, is much more complicated than this. As Dickinson makes clear, the

story of CanLit, like the story of the nation to which it belongs, remains open for rereading.

#### IDENTITY POLITICS

During the late 1980s, this process of rereading began with new modes of thought that challenged both the ideological divisions of academic study and their objects of focus. Not only did the master narratives of cultural nationalism come under attack, but so too did the critical discourses that had historically challenged their authority. More specifically, feminist and Marxist theorists found themselves exposed to new confrontations. Across the range of critical discourses anchored in literature as a mode of cultural production and development, the issues of “race” – including problems of “race” relations, racism, anti-racism, racialization, and deracination – became especially important to a new generation of cultural thinkers, artists and activists. As “race” theorists Robert Miles and Richard Delgado point out, this period of historical upheaval and intense civil rights debate saw the emergence of thinking about “race” as a theoretical instrument of social change, which in turn led to a greater commitment to understanding of “race” as a social construction. During the 1980s, various writers and theorists of colour wrote about the way in which cultural production, particularly in terms of literary texts, was complicit with the structuring and restructuring of institutional forms of racism and anti-racism both.

For example, African Canadian writer and cultural critic, Dionne Brand, reflecting on the changing critical consciousness amongst academics and feminists, is critical of the radical rhetoric of postmodernism popular in contemporary literary circles. She suggests that the rise of this new mode of criticism was yet another hegemonic reversal or appropriation of Black cul-

ture and the civil rights movement by the white establishment, rather than, as proponents would have it, a logical development in the articulation of anti-authoritarianism. In "Bathurst," a retrospective essay on Black Power and anti-racist activism in Toronto during the 1970s and 1980s, Brand comments on what she sees as a fundamentally different relationship to history itself. Brand refuses to accept the efficacy of blurring certain originary distinctions, a notion that was gaining popularity amongst scholars of continental theory. Instead, she contends that, within the nation, critical positions were and continue to be contingent on certain incontrovertible historical conditions and so can, in effect, be seen in terms of an unequal distribution of cultural capital. Access to social power, Brand argues, remains clearly divided along "race" lines.

Redrawing Dubois' "color line,"<sup>16</sup> extending it across a number of the national borders, of Canada, the US and the Caribbean, Brand posits "nation" and "identity" as contested sites of cultural struggle. Brand argues that (Canadian) history takes on entirely different meanings relative to questions of cultural identity and/or racial identification:

by the time we hit this moment white people were flying out of their history and Black people toward theirs. It might be necessary for white Canadians to eschew their past, running from ethnic wars in Europe, ethnic hierarchies and poverty. For them the romance of making a new life without the past is compelling, so the idea of a Canadian - something to be filled in ready-made with a flag and an anthem and no discernible or accountable past (despite colonisation by the British and the French) - appeals to white Europeans needing an empty space, a space without a painful history, a past antiseptic and innocent ... Black people on the other hand, living in Canada, and coming to Canada, living in the United States or the Caribbean had and have the task of the necessary retrieval of our stolen history. (79-80)

In this sense, history and culture can no longer be considered synonymous with some coherent "past." As property, that which has been stolen, they

were not to be seen as distant events that could be made to unfold in a logical narrative of progress to which all “Canadians” might lay claim equally.

Brand, like her counterparts in England and the US, re-situates the narrative of nation formation within a much longer temporal trajectory, and she assigns it a much more geographically intricate pattern of unequal developments. Resisting the notion that History and the Nation had become outdated concepts, writers like Brand offer a critique that continues to be relevant to cultural debate. In the light of an emergent discourse of “race” theory, the will to “an imaginary community,” to borrow Benedict Anderson’s often recycled phrase, becomes inseparable from the constructions and contradictions of contemporary cultural politics. In as much as capitalism makes possible the emergence and development of modern nation states, it is responsible for a network of colonial infrastructures that continue to determine relationships within and between nations. Therefore, in as much as “the birth of the nation” was, and still is, instrumental in the racialization of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, its “death” begs a perplexing set of questions about the role of states in the production of global culture and identity.

#### **IV ONDAATJE, MARLATT, AND KIYOOKA**

To examine the way that CanLit continues to signify through the new disciplinary divisions that are replacing it, this dissertation focuses on texts by three writers who are and have been crucial to the formation of new (sub)fields of study. However, rather than arguing that these three writers, Daphne Marlatt, Michael Ondaatje, and Roy Kiyooka, form a vanguard, or

that their writing embodies a new direction in the cultural production of the nation, I begin from the notion that the critical significance granted these three writers is in part a product of the cultural modalities their writing contests. In the hands of certain readers, Ondaatje's postmodernism, Marlatt's feminism, and Kiyooka's border crossings can be made complicit with the institutionalization of critical perspectives (Miki, McFarlane). In many cases, the radical isms with which they are most readily identified are used to neutralize the complex institutional challenges their writing proposes. Leaving the self-referentiality of the writing unheeded or unchecked, scholars risk foreclosing on the institutional critiques underwriting all three writers' texts, albeit in very different ways.

To begin thinking through the absorption of Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Ondaatje into the annals of CanLit, I will discuss the critical discourse that has grown up around their individual texts and the contexts in which they have come to be framed. The following chapters grapple with a resurgent, if un-named or unacknowledged, nationalism and a consequent re-articulation of racist practices. In place of a centre-periphery model upon which CanLit and its counter currents are often conceptualized, I propose a broad definition of the nationalist project, one that runs through not only the texts but more importantly the critical contexts in which they are disseminated. From the outset, it is vital for me to state as clearly as I can that I read these three writers as "Canadian writers" and that I do so with an awareness of the problematic reference such an act of naming suggests. Refusing the notion that Canadian literature ever was or could be a homogeneous enterprise, I prefer to bring Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka together as a "centre" – one that never held nor can ever hope to hold – in order to counteract more mainstream discussions of marginality.

Thus, the core of this dissertation is divided across three inter-connected analyses, or case studies in CanLit. Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six concentrate on critical discussions of two novels published within a year of each other: Chapters Three and Four, as one section, look at the reception of Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*; Chapters Five and Six, as another section, at Marlatt's *Ana Historic*. In each of these two sections, my reading attempts to chart the limits of a critical discourse that has grown up around the respective novels. In particular, I focus on the way in which the novels have engaged critical discourse with the issues of self-reflexivity and the politics of representation, especially around issues of "race," "race relations," "racialization." As an aspect of their critical reworking of master narratives of nation building, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Ana Historic* present readers with highly ambiguous depictions of racialized subjects, and in a sense demonstrate the paradoxical centrality of "race" in the dominant discourse of nation. I, therefore, discuss the function of racialized identities in a discourse marked by explicit investments in something akin to West's "new cultural politics of difference" – on the part of both writers and readers. Contrary to the espousing of cultural politics, however, I suggest that there is a desire to read these novels within a framework – still heavily indebted to cultural nationalism – that effectively elides contradiction in the name of difference and Multiculturalism.

In the final section, Chapter Sevens and Eight, the discussion changes critical perspectives somewhat. While I am still concerned with the issues of reception and the institutional framework of CanLit, my discussion attempts to theorize CanLit as it is imagined in and critiqued throughout Kiyooka's writing. Shifting focus away from prose fiction, this final section returns to the question of CanLit in an attempt to open the debate onto questions of

poetics and tradition. Reading from Kiyooka's *October's Piebald Skies and Other Lacunae*, a long "pome" which fuses the death of Canadian poet, bpNichol, to a discourse on Japanese Canadian Redress, this chapter attempts to off-set the literary historical narrative by which Ondaatje's novel and Marlatt's are constructed as radical departures from nationalist tradition. Arguably the two novels dealt with in Sections Two and Three are relatively conventional, and as such they allow scholarly readings that overlook some of the critical or institutional challenges they raise; in Kiyooka's case, however, it is much harder to get the writing to conform to conventional literary expectations. Despite the fact that the writing of all three writers shares many of the same thematic and aesthetic concerns, Kiyooka's texts pose certain problems that are difficult to reconcile with the dominant nationalist modes of literary criticism, the effect of which is to make CanLit, as a scholarly approach, less practicable, and I will argue more vital. Relative to both thematic and formal elements of his writing, the location of a national identity or critical sensibility becomes a much more charged issue. I will argue that the particularities of textual production and consumption are highlighted in such a manner as to demand greater critical awareness of their own complicity vis-à-vis histories of dominance and exploitation – in part explaining why Kiyooka's readers, in general, tend to adopt a very different approach to the problem of critical positioning than Ondaatje or Marlatt's.

While the writing of Ondaatje and Marlatt locates contradictory spaces – temporal-spatial matrices – in the narrative of nation, their texts tend to offer readers/critics the possibility of resolving the inconsistencies raised. Granted, the moments of identification with both the troubled past of a "national consciousness" and its redemptive future are fleeting and (as my



analysis will demonstrate) are undercut by other aspects of these texts. Nevertheless, the habit of reading certain types of conflict back into a national framework, which as theorists of nation suggest is simultaneously retrospective and prospective (Anderson, Nairn), allows contradictory aporia to remain outside an academic purview. On the other hand, the related social history and cultural geography engaged in Kiyooka's writing draws attention to the limits of what is commonly recognized as "Canadian" and counters the enfolding drama of multicultural development. Kiyooka does not permit the reader to transcend the contested ground of national and international geographies the way nationalist ideology seems to require: throughout his work, racism and nationalism figure not as antithetical ideologies but, as Balibar suggests, embedded struggles. Because Kiyooka's texts have yet to generate extended critical discussion, despite recognition from high profile readers and editors and his affiliation with many of the most prominent writers of CanLit (including Marlatt and Ondaatje), one is confronted with the problem of critical bias within official discourse. I contend that in spite of official acclaim (Kiyooka was nominated for a Governor General and received the Order of Canada) and international recognition (he was twice chosen to represent Canada in world expositions: in Sao Paulo and Osaka), his texts pose fundamental problems for Canadian critics supposedly committed to a more expansive or pluralistic view of Canadian literature. His ambivalent identification with/through "white" (WASP) culture, engagement with critical modernism – rather than a stylistic postmodernism – and sustained attacks on the norms and icons of "Canadian culture" all undermine the critical foundations of literary nationalism. While Kiyooka cannot be read in – his work resists appropriation into the latent nationalism of multicultural or aesthetic postmodernism – neither am I willing to read him out.

This is not to say that I read Kiyooka against, or as a radical alternative to, Marlatt and Ondaatje; rather, in choosing to bring the three together under the auspices of this critical rethinking of CanLit, I intend to make space for a different conception of a specific section of CanLit. What I propose is to read Kiyooka back into alignment with Marlatt and Ondaatje and, in so doing, to challenge notions of CanLit as a cultural dominant. The argument that the national culture always already bears the trace of a radically contradictory set of literary practices provisionally centres the canonical novel. Instead, Kiyooka's work focuses readers on a materialist poetic that draws out ruptures in the radical possibility of CanLit, or so I suggest. Conjoined with the preceding chapters which debate the theoretical limits of CanLit through a revision of the critical contexts issuing from the work of Marlatt and Ondaatje, the concluding chapter on Kiyooka posits a revision of CanLit that calls into question the connections between (anti)racism and (an often unacknowledged) (neo-)nationalism. Looking backward at CanLit as a contradictory and contested space, this allows for a move towards a present marked by complex theoretical engagements in literary nationalism at the intersection of identity politics. Working against the grain of literary history, these three writers form a matrix through which to begin deconstructing dominant modes of reading.

As I have claimed, the three writers whose work comprises the core of this dissertation have been chosen in largely because their writing calls attention to complex issues of cultural identity and literary nationalism. Taken as a whole, the body of work addressed here might be seen as representative of writing by subjects positioned across a range of identity formations that are both folded into and openly contest the boundaries of the national. Marlatt identifies as a Vancouver writer, an immigrant, a colonial, a lesbian

and a feminist; Ondaatje identifies as an immigrant writer, a Sri Lankan, and a Toronto poet; and Kiyooka, amongst other things – photographer, poet, painter – identifies as Japanese Canadian, “Asian Americano,” prairie artist, and working-class. Emphatically, all three are Canadian writers. Invoking a popular regionalism, these writers might be taken as individual representatives of the West Coast (Vancouver and Saltspring Island), the Prairies and West (Calgary, Regina and the West Coast) or Centralist (Toronto) writing, but neither does their work fit comfortably within such definitions. Moving beyond the limits of a parochial nationalism, each of these writers portrays a sense of space and geography that extends beyond the scope of one nation: Ondaatje writes about the US (New Orleans and “the West”), colonial Australia, Ceylon and Sri Lanka, Italy, Great Britain, and post-partition Pakistan (Lahore), Marlatt about England, Mexico, Malaysia; and Kiyooka about various cities and regions in Japan (Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, “Honshu’s Backcountry,” and Okinawa). With each writer, locations outside the conventional geography of nation become integral to re-conceptions and/or interrogations of Canada’s civic and ethnic identity formation. In sum, the writing of Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka has been chosen because it engages with the problems of social production: their texts not only represent geographical locations of conflict and the attendant histories of spatial contradiction, their sense of textuality also tends to draw the performance of the writing into a direct relationship with these contradictions.

Recognizing the plurality of their positions, however, is not to argue that they constitute some variegated whole; inasmuch as these writers are multicultural, they are not Multicultural, in the sense of conforming to official norms. While my argument will engage with their somewhat ambiguous affiliations with hyphenated nationalisms – Anglo-Canadian, Asian Cana-

dian, and Japanese Canadian – it will do so to test the equation of certain differences in order to challenge the purview of a liberal pluralism that endeavours to flatten disparity into a “mosaic.” In spite of their overlapping differences and engagement in a “new cultural politics of difference,” it is dangerous to assume essential similarities or a shared cultural position amongst all three writers. The fact that their texts foreground interrelated issues of critique – through interrogations of borders, cultural projects, identity formations, and colonial histories – renders problematic any such attempt to read the writing of Kiyooka, Marlatt, and Ondaatje under the sign of a unified Canadian identity. Yet, as I have argued, neither should one read these writers as forming some sort of outside, distant from the mainstream concerns of Canadian culture. Instead, this dissertation holds selected texts up against the body of scholarship through which they are read to focus on how Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Ondaatje – as disciplinary objects/subject – have been and continue to be disseminated in CanLit.

The unravelling thread winding its way through this dissertation is a string of questions. How does one continue to read Canadian literature after the apparent dissolution of cultural nationalism and/or the culture of the nation-state? By what logic do we include writers as “diverse” as Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Ondaatje under the umbrella of any new critical or cultural ventures? In what ways do their texts reflect on a “crisis” of nation? What do they have to say about the possibility of moving beyond it? Is it, in fact, possible to think through the writing outside of the sway of nationalist discourse? By what right might we assume or abandon nationalist discourses?<sup>17</sup> To begin seeking the terms for answers to these questions, however, this study proposes to read CanLit through Lefebvre’s theory of space as social production. Placing CanLit within a social dialectic in which the writ-

ing and the critical context are examined together, it examines the way in which the critical challenges proffered by Kiyooka, Ondaatje, and Marlatt have been taken up. Reading their movement into the contradictory social spaces of national history and geography, points at which nationalist discourses break down or come into conflict with other modes of thinking, my readings follow three very different writers as they propose terms for an engaging and critical cultural politics. Refusing to turn away from literary nationalism or to look forward to postnationalist possibilities, these readings embrace CanLit as a dynamic and contradictory enterprise, not yet a fait accompli, not yet a lost cause.

#### NOTES

- 1 The terms "the nation" and "the nation-state" are of limited use in defining specific cultural paradigms; from here on, when either appears in the singular, the quotation marks are assumed.
- 2 Arif Dirlik, amongst others, points out that, as "new pathways for the development of capital cut across national boundaries and intrude on national economic sovereignty" and "supranational coordination transforms the function of the nation-state from without" (31), the localisms that nations once produced and organized are undergoing a process of redefinition.
- 3 For an insightful discussion of the relationship between the apparent demise of the nation-state and changes in academic production see Masao Miyoshi's essay "Globalization, Culture and the University."
- 4 While Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation* is shot through with problematic anxieties about the disappearance of an easily identifiable national subject, his phrase provides a useful way of locating the scholarly malaise I am attempting to describe. The second phrase, "thinking through," is in the title of Bannerji's collected essays on "race," gender and class politics. It bespeaks the idea of a "situated critique" that brings Marxist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist theory to bear on questions of cultural analysis and production specific to but not limited by a Canadian polity.
- 5 For an interesting take on Readings' article see Jerald Zaslove's essay "The Lost Utopia of Academic Freedom."
- 6 For discussion of Canadian nationalism in relation to a revamped Leftist politics see Ian Angus's *The Border Within*. For a reactionary view of the same political situation see Bercuson, Bothwell and Granatstein's *Petrified Campus: The Crisis in Canada's Universities*.
- 7 Two significant essays in my own thinking about the relationship between postcolonial theory and CanLit are Diana Brydon's "Canada and Postcolonialism:

Questions, Inventories, Futures” and Roy Miki’s “Altered States: Global Currents, the Spectral Nation and the Question of ‘Asian Canadian’.”

- 8 What I mean here is that the development and legislation of official Multiculturalism is “international” in the sense of being indispensable for the Liberal Government’s reworking of foreign and immigration policies.
- 9 I have in mind Atwood’s influential paradigm of Canadian literature and culture in which she portrays us as a country of survivors who in spite of overwhelming adversity – being cut off from the powerful centre and left to make it on our own in this inhospitable land – manage to hang on. One might also think of Frye’s notion of Canadian culture as a beautifully precarious “Bush Garden” that is able to withstand the adversities of environment and the insensitivity of one’s neighbours. Or, to invoke Doug Jones’ salient metaphor, it is difficult to imagine that butterfly sunning itself on the rock re-transforming itself into a predatory eagle or angry bull.
- 10 I am indebted to Arun Mukherjee’s chapter on the problems of reading South Asian texts within a nationalist framework (*Postcolonialism* 24-40); she makes the point that Davey’s criteria allows him to exclude South Asian novelists Moyez Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry from his analysis. Mukherjee sees this methodological oversight as endemic to the white literary establishment’s unwillingness to deal with texts from writers whose “race” or ethnicity puts them outside a Euro-Canadian mainstream; she writes, “if one of the foremost Canadian critics does not know how to make sense of these novels in the Canadian context, it would be futile to expect anything from those who review for newspapers and journals. The usual procedure is to give a plot summary of sorts, comment on things such as characterization, narrative pacing, etc., and then end on some sort of encouraging note. Canadian writers, on the other hand, are attributed with the power of giving voice to Canadian experience” (*Postcolonialism* 35).
- 11 For a powerful discussion of this dangerous phenomenon, see Charmaine Perkins’ “Anymore Colourful and We’d Have to Censor It”: Speaking of “Race,” Subjectivity, and Institutionalized Violations.
- 12 Mathur remarks on the tendency of interviewers and reviewers to fixate on the fact that his biography tells them he was “born in Bhopal” – even though he only lived there for one year before moving to Canada. See his interview with Larissa Lai (117).
- 13 It is interesting to note the participation of a number of Canadian writers and critics in the organized resistance to the Conservative government’s signing of the Free Trade agreement. This event – discussed in Davey’s *Post-national Arguments* – is an anomaly in the liberal mainstream and marks one of the few times the practitioners of CanLit have engaged in materialist critique.
- 14 In addition to Miki’s collection of essays, or interventions into the discourses of CanLit through “race” theory and politics, *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing*, there have only been a handful of book length texts that pick up the problem of Canadian literature as an explicit theme. They are as follows: the Telling It Collective’s *Writing the Circle*, Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli’s *A mazing Space*, Barbara Godard’ *Gynocritics*; Lecker’s *Canadian Canon/s*; Davey’s *Canadian Literary Power*, *Post-National Arguments*, *Reading Canadian Reading*; Mukherjee’s *Postcolonialism: My Living*, Dickinson’s *Queer is Here: Nationalism, Sexuality and the Literatures of Canada*, and Kamboureli’s

*Scandalous Bodies; Brand's Bread Out of Stone, Bannerji's Thinking Through, Marlene Nourbese Philip's Frontiers and A Genealogy of Resistance.*

- 15 Miki argues that, rather than functioning as a present tense critique of institutional structures, readings of Kogawa's novel tend to default to a progressivist mythos: "look how far we have come in shedding our racist pasts." Thus, the text has become an apology for the developments of post-war nationalism and the consequent emergence of Canadian multiculturalism.
- 16 I'm referring here to W.E.B. Dubois' contention that the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would be dispute over the division of African Americans from the Euro-Americans according to racial distinctions, i.e., would be the colour line.
- 17 My sense of the multiplicity of subject positions subsumed in and provided by the constitutional we of liberal cultural politics and its relation to this discourse on the transmutation of Canadian literature is borrowed from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of the function of the US Constitutional subject (named in the phrase "We the people") in relation to "academic subjects" and what she refers to as "A Transnational Study of Cultures." In "The Question of Cultural Studies," she argues that "a constitution can operate only when the person has been coded into rational abstractions manipulatable according to the principle of reason" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 260). In effect, the abstract collective agency invoked "is apart from either the subject or the universal-in-singular ethical agent" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 260). In fact, as Spivak makes clear, the subject of collective agency depends on "paralogical legitimation [which] is not 'teleological' (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 260). In times of crisis, it is established vis-à-vis an "originary ruse" that asserts not only the legitimacy of the subject but also the documents upon which or through which it is guaranteed. While it is clear that, in speaking of Canadian literature, one is referring to an entirely different set of political and scholarly parameters, this by no means suggests the sanctity of a "we the readers of Canadian literature." In one sense this discourse that we have embarked upon might be seen as but a small gesture in broaching or uncapping the complex interconnections between what we might provisionally call a "Canadian" public sphere in relation to public spheres elsewhere. If the nation upon which nationalism is predicated is in some sense a priori "international" - i.e., is the creation and fragmentation of cultural and economic powers that extend beyond and between the "modern European nations" - the question of "Canadian" culture or "Canadian" literature can not be separated from the Colonial rule upon which or in the name of which its difference comes to be written, nor can it be separated from the "migrancy" (to use Spivak's term) it engenders and seeks to control.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SPACE, LITERATURE, AND CONTRADICTION

every society produces a space, its own space . . . Any "social existence" aspiring or claiming to be "real," but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the "cultural" realm. It would fall to the level of folklore and sooner or later disappear altogether, thereby immediately losing its identity, its denomination and its feeble degree of reality. (Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 53)

What, déjà sighed, do you have against the word "consciousness"?

Bonsai frowned: angloamerican cultural imperialism. mediocrity! i prefer the word "awareness." i like the where in awareness, i like the space & nothing of it. "consciousness" is too visible, positivist, also I don't like the sound of it, *shush*, it's sticky! (jamila ismail, *scared texts* 175)

Within Canada, nationalism continues to propose the divisions and subdivisions of (English) literature. As both an ideological construct and a finite set of material relations, "the nation" exerts a powerful influence on the writing and reading of Canadian literature. It affects the issues written about, but also the production, reproduction and distribution of that writing *qua* literature. As I argue in Chapter One, the fact that "the nation" is undergoing dramatic social, political and economic re-conceptualization does not mean that English Studies, or more specifically Canadian literature, ceases to matter, only that the pedagogical dilemmas it poses have shifted and that scholars and critics are left to account for new cultural-political situations. In the context of globalization, the problematic histories and/or political function of literary nationalism have taken on new meanings and, I



contend, new urgency. It is my position that as an ideal, one that still holds considerable sway over the production of Canadian culture, Canadian literature remains a vital, if not wholly positive, site with which to locate discussion of the complex matrix of (uneven) social relations. A matter of critical concern for both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, nationalism exists as a sore spot in the development of contemporary literary discourse.

To forestall “the end of Canadian literature” or the arrival of “post-national arguments” (Davey), this dissertation proposes a unique approach to the subject. In an attempt to reinvigorate debate around the legacies of literary nationalism, it comes at CanLit through the problems of epistemology and methodology, proposing an analysis of Canadian literature in light of a theory of space as social production, outlined by French Sociologist Henri Lefebvre and picked up by various Social Geographers (Harvey, Soja, Gregory). I argue that to better understand the transition and/or fragmentation of CanLit critics might address the topic through a conception of the social and material relations underlying and legitimizing literary reception and interpretation. Rather than focusing on Canadian literature from a more obvious “historical” perspective, this chapter argues for a conception of CanLit as “(social) space,” which is to say that it develops an understanding of literary criticism as an embedded discourse, a discourse always already embroiled in the contradictory productions and reproductions of culture and hegemony.

Lefebvre argues that space *qua* social production might best be thought of as being comprised of three distinct yet interrelated aspects: “spatial practice” (social), “representations of space” (mental) and “representational spaces” (physical). From this schema, I sketch a critical methodology

that is picked up in my case studies of Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka. Adapting Lefebvre's ideas to a specific field of study, I describe CanLit as a nexus of literary *representations of space* (texts) and *representational spaces* (contexts) intrinsic to the shifting *spatial practice* – the “post-national” or “global” developments discussed in the preceding chapter.

This chapter then has three main functions: to describe and discuss Lefebvre's notion of space, to attempt to rationalize my use of this theory in relation to literature, and to establish the basic methodological framework through which my analysis of these three writers proceeds.

#### (SOCIAL) SPACE

In his seminal book, *The Production of Social Space*, Lefebvre explicates a conception of space as lived experience. He theorizes that space is the embodiment of dynamic social processes, taking issue with the prevalent discourses on the subject, in which space is conceived of as a neutral container in which things are seen to exist and actions said to “take place.” Against the abstract space of philosophy or the physical space of the applied sciences, Lefebvre proposes a conception of social space as a network of interlocking and overlapping social forces that unites mental and physical space. Attempting to describe what he means by “(social) space,” he suggests that the term is more or less redundant because space always already presupposes social value and function. For Lefebvre, space is never wholly abstract; it is never an entirely objective category. Despite the fact that space cannot itself be reduced to the status of object, it provides the possibility in and by which things materialize. He writes,

let us consider for a moment any given space, any “interval”

provided that it is not empty. Such a space contains things yet is not itself a thing or material "object." Is it then a floating "medium," a simple abstraction, or a "pure" form? No – precisely because it has a content ... any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships – and this despite the fact that a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products). (*Space* 83)

According to Lefebvre, space can never be completely consumed, nor can it be extrinsic to the relations of production. Rather "(social) space" is inherent to the broadest spectrum of social, political, economic, and cultural enterprises. Therefore, he argues, the management, codification, and reproduction of space is at the heart of modernity and its transformations, not as a more temporally based theory would have it, extrinsic to them. Space, as Lefebvre describes it, is much more than the stage upon which the events of history are played out; rather it is the active staging and re-staging of diverse temporalities or histories and contradictory spatialities.

The central proposition, around which Lefebvre's study is established, is "the production of space," a proposition that he admits is composed of two complicated terms, neither of which "has ever been properly clarified": *production* and *space* (*Space* 68). In an endeavour to reground critical theory in a dynamic re-articulation of Marxism, Lefebvre returns to the notion of production as key proposition. Taking his cues from the "fertile" "ambiguity" of Marx and Engel's conception and use of the term, he claims that, within classical Marxism, the concept of production "has two senses, one very broad, the other restrictive and precise" (*Space* 68). He contends that there is a capacious, indeterminate use of the word in which "humans as social beings are said to produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world" (*Space* 68) and a narrow use in reference to things, or the production of specific products. Thus, production, as a concept, assumes the nature of a dialectic, but one that refuses rational resolution: "Production in the Marxist

sense transcends the philosophical opposition between 'subject' and 'object', along with all the relationships constructed by philosophers on the basis of that opposition" (*Space* 71).

Since Marx and Engel's early attempt at grappling with the term, however, production has come to take on a more utilitarian meaning and has become increasingly consumed with the descriptions of things. By Lefebvre's account, the notion of production has become debased: "the most 'orthodox' among the Marxists ... are firmly and exclusively committed to the study of production in the usual sense of the production of things, of 'goods', of commodities" (*Space* 88). Lefebvre firmly opposes what he sees as the tendency in "economic science (or, rather, attempts to elevate political economy to the rank of a science) [to become] swallowed up in the enumeration and description of products (objects, things) – in the application of them to book-keeping" (*Space* 89). He takes issue with the prevalence of "specialists waiting to divide up these tasks," maintaining that

When no heed is paid to the relations that inhere in social facts, knowledge misses its target; our understanding is reduced to a confirmation of the undefined and indefinable multiplicity of things and gets lost in classifications, descriptions and segmentations. (*Space* 81)

For Lefebvre, "All productive activity is defined less by invariable or constant factors than by the incessant to-and-fro between temporality (succession, concatenation) and spatiality (simultaneity, synchronicity)" (*Space* 71). Ultimately, he proposes that it is through a reworking of the concept of the latter, of space, that intellectuals might effectively intervene in the development of late capitalism.

Space – polyvalent and multifaceted – thus becomes central, vital to the reformulation of critical thought. In the guise of "(social) space," it as-

sumes both the (mental) space of the philosophers and the (physical) space of architects and geographers while offering a third term. Like production, space is neither subject nor object:

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal or ideal about it as compared, for example, with science, representations, ideas or dreams. Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. (Lefebvre, *Space* 73)

We might best think of social space as being embedded in the material without being reducible to it. In that it provides for the structuring of socio-economic relations and is encrypted in complex systems of value, which shift with time and across a host of contradictory social sites, space is both interdictive and permissive simultaneously. In a sense, it is both the history and future of possibility as they converge on the present. For this reason, attempting to think through social space “implies a great diversity of knowledge” (Lefebvre, *Space* 73). However, accepting this notion does not entail acquiescing to the fragmentation of critical knowledge across a plethora of specializations; Lefebvre argues that as contradiction, as the site of social struggle and the creation of value/s, a discourse of social space might propose a coherent set of theoretical and methodological problems around which critical thought might be organized, provisionally and temporally. In ascribing a priori a social importance to space, Lefebvre envisions space as being “inherent to property relationships (especially the ownership of the earth, of land) and also closely bound up with the forces of production (which impose a form on that earth or land)” (*Space* 85). Because

of its dual nature, space has been crucial to the expansion of European capitalism. Placing space within the trajectory of bourgeois modernity, Lefebvre writes,

As it develops, then, the concept of social space becomes broader. It infiltrates, even invades, the concept of production, becoming part – perhaps the essential part – of its content. Thence it sets a very specific dialectic in motion, which, while it does not abolish the production-consumption relationship as this applies to things (goods, commodities, objects of exchange), certainly does modify it by widening it. Here a unity transpires between the levels which analysis often keeps separate from one another: the forces of production and their component elements (nature, labour, technology, knowledge); structures (property relations); superstructures (institutions and the state itself). (*Space* 85)

#### AS A QUESTION OF EPISTEMOLOGY

The conception of space is not merely a 'new' philosophical or sociological concept; it involves a thorough re-articulation of theory itself, as a simultaneously pedagogical and methodological undertaking. If, as Lefebvre contends, space carries the formal and material aspects of previous social productions forward into the performative present of analysis, its conception is strategic: the "knowledge that we hope to attain [of it] would have a retrospective as well as a prospective import" (*Space* 91). Refuting what he sees as modernism's fragmentary and segregated idealization of space, Lefebvre maintains that the microscopic division and subdivision of space correspond with an emergence of new intellectual and artistic paradigms that come into appearance during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and which are carried over into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A key facet of Lefebvre's messianic discourse on space is his contention that with the spread of the Enlightenment, space becomes a more or less static concept and that the rational parceling of space effectively kills it as an instrumental category.

Space is occluded in modern critical thought; it is subsumed in the prioritization of the temporal over the spatial.

Lefebvre begins from the premise that the occlusion of social space has been fundamental to the rise of modern bourgeois society. He asserts that in as much as modernity gives rise to "a new consciousness of space," aesthetically and socially, modernity also witnesses its colonization and commercialization (*Space* 125). According to Lefebvre, the hegemony of official knowledge was able to cover over contradiction by proffering a new "sought for 'science of space'," which could objectify space according to the dictates of capitalism. The control and management of space is at the crux of expansionary capitalism and is, therefore, an important point of intervention. Despite, or perhaps because of, the apparent success of bourgeois culture, however, Lefebvre contends that space remains crucial to theories of resistance.

He argues that, in order to wrest it from the dominant order, critics must acknowledge the following aspects of space as it is constructed in the mainstream. First, thinking about space "represents the political use of knowledge," which is integrated "in a more or less 'immediate' way into the forces of production, and in a 'mediate' way into the relations of production" (*Space* 8). Second, "It implies an ideology designed to conceal that use, along with the conflicts intrinsic to the highly interested employment of a supposedly disinterested knowledge" (*Space* 9). Third, ideas about space tend to embody "a technological utopia, a sort of computer simulation of the future" (*Space* 9) it seeks to control.

Refusing to separate Western epistemology from the geo-political expansion of capital upon which it is focused and, in essence, depends, Lefebvre's theory attempts to resist the emergence of a highly specialized critical discourse. In attempting to revamp or revitalize Marxist critical theory, he takes

issue with post-structuralist theory, Foucault and Derrida specifically. In place of their disjunctive critical practice, Lefebvre asks us to imagine “a *truth of space*,” one that is “generated by analysis-followed-by-exposition.” And in imagining “a truth of space” capable of counteracting the hegemony of “a *true space*,” i.e., space knowable by and through objective analysis, we might produce a theory of (social) space capable of exposing the dominant spatial practice/s of Western neo-capitalism, or so Lefebvre suggests. This might then allow for radical alterations to the subdivision of the human and social sciences, resisting the tendency of critical discourse to narrow its focus onto increasingly microscopic fields of study. A comprehensive theory of space would “imply the necessity of reversing the dominant trend towards fragmentation, separation and disintegration, a trend subordinated to a centre or to a centralized power and advanced by a knowledge which works as power’s proxy” (Lefebvre, *Space* 9).

Eschewing both the scientific and economic biases of historical materialism, Lefebvre favours a revision of classical Marxism in terms of the quotidian and the cultural (for a more thorough development of this idea see Lefebvre’s *The Critique of Everyday Life* or his *Introduction to Modernity*). In attempting to articulate a theoretical approach with which to challenge the rationalization of everyday life, Lefebvre endeavours to re-calibrate critical theory through an understanding of Marxian notions of culture. He claims that the “*modus operandi*” of his theory is based on an understanding of Marx’s notion of history as a struggle with a vanishing, or “vanished,” present.<sup>1</sup>

The categories (concepts) which express social relationships in the most advanced society, namely bourgeois society, writes Marx, also allow “insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements [bourgeois society] built itself up, whose



partly unconquered remnants are carried along with it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significances within it.”  
(66)

In this way, Lefebvre's theory of space takes critics back into the problem of epistemology – the past, present and future of knowledge production – not as an unfolding tale of progress or enlightenment but as a zone of contact between conflicting social movements and contradictory productions of space. As such, Lefebvre's discussion moves between the universal and the particular simultaneously in an effort to sketch out a methodology of critical positioning that might respond to the diverse particularities of an ever-expanding capitalism. Rather than describing space as an imaginary entity outside the struggles and contradictions of intellectual discourse, he strives to bring critical theory back into the realm of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Resisting the separation of mental and physical space by attempting to disclose the workings of an emergent neo-colonial hegemony, Lefebvre proposes social space as a liminal zone, an in-between space in which the act of knowing becomes reconnected with lived experience, by foregrounding contradictions between abstract theory or ideology and material relations.

An important aspect of Lefebvre's work is that it attempts to re-introduce an organized critique of dominant (capitalist) culture that is from its inception counter-hegemonic and strategic. Lefebvre's theory, while firmly locating itself within the discursive trajectories of European philosophy and social thought, looks toward the limits of Western epistemology. Viewing the fragmentation of scholarly discourse into increasingly more specialized disciplines as a reflection of the hegemonic drives of postwar bourgeois society, Lefebvre provides an impetus for studying the highly localized sites of domestic life central to new global regimes of power. However, when he talks of turning the tide of contemporary thinking back onto the complex problems of

international politics, he does not seem to foresee the ascension of a unitary "working class." He recognizes that

Such a reversal [of the trend towards fragmentation] could not be affected without great difficulty; nor would it suffice, in order to carry it through, to replace local or "punctual" concerns by global ones. One must assume that it would require the mobilization of a great many forces, and that in the actual course of its execution there would be a continuing need, stage by stage, for motivation and orientation. (9)

From the outset, Lefebvre's theory of space remains open to revision and re-orientation across disciplinary boundaries and social positions.

#### SOCIAL SPACE AND POSTMODERNISM

In a period marked by the professionalization of scholarship and the development of elite enclaves of specialized discourse, Lefebvre's endeavour to provide a rationale for the study of social space seems almost inconceivably vast, yet it has provided an important catalyst for discussions of critical theory throughout the academy. On the one hand, his design is set out to counter the master narratives of Western expansion by providing a theoretical problem that is global in scope and which of necessity involves collaborative, interdisciplinary approaches to highly specific sets of questions. On the other hand, the desire to comprehend these narratives depends on the location of sites of contradiction that constantly draw attention to the limits of capitalist hegemony. For critics of contemporary culture, critics who inevitably find themselves caught between the overlapping imperatives of the global and local, social space provides an invaluable means for conjecture on and intervention in (post)modern social thought. According to Jameson

What Lefebvre wanted to stress ... was the correlation between these hitherto universal and formal organizational categories –

which for Kant presumably held good for all experience throughout human history – and the historical specificity and originality of the various modes of production, in each of which time and space are lived differently and distinctively (if that is indeed the way to put it and if, as against Kant, we are capable of any direct experience of space and time). (365)

Moreover, this attempt to hold together the complex dynamic “did more than correct a (modernist) imbalance”; it provided, and continues to provide, an important catalyst in thinking through the problematic relationship between the location of scholarship and the history of colonial repression. In a sense, Lefebvre's theory allows for a re-mapping of the relationship between the so-called margins and the centre. As well as challenging the dominant philosophical categories of a Kantian space-time, it re-valorizes the need to address the multiplicity of critical positioning:

it also acknowledged the increasing share, in our life experience fully as much as in late capitalism itself, of the urban and the new globality of the system. In effect, Lefebvre called for a new kind of spatial imagination capable of confronting the past in a new way and reading its less tangible secrets off the template of its spatial structures – body, cosmos, city, as all those marked the more intangible organization of cultural and libidinal economies and linguistic forms. The proposal demands an imagination of radical difference, the projection of our own spatial organizations into the well-nigh science-fictional and exotic forms of alien modes of production. (Jameson 365)

In daring to “imagine” an outside that is neither removed from nor beyond the scope of Western thought, but intrinsic to its struggles for control of divergent social productions, Lefebvre's writing of space posits an essential aporia.

The “radical difference” presented in his work has had a substantial impact on scholars from across a variety of disciplines, including history, cultural studies, art history, social geography, and literary theory. The possibilities opened up by Lefebvre's writing have provided critics with fundamental theoretical problems and have led to a number of book length studies of

social space in various forms, including those by David Harvey, Edward Soja, Fredric Jameson, Derek Gregory, Rosalind Deutsche, and Kristin Ross. In general, since the late 1980s, both coincidentally and as a direct reflection of the translation of Lefebvre's writing into English, the question of space has become increasingly important to cultural and literary theory. Jameson claims that "[t]he notion of predominance of space in the postcontemporary era we owe to Henri Lefebvre" (364). Whether or not this overstates the case, whether the ascendance of space can be traced directly back to Lefebvre's work or not, it is clear that the concept has undergone a kind of renaissance.

Preceding English translations of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* in 1991, Kristin Ross in 1988, Edward Soja in 1989, and David Harvey in 1989 all drew attention to Lefebvre's seminal theory. In each case, Lefebvre's concept of social space, often in conjunction with his related work on everyday life, was used in an attempt to locate a particular configuration of the urban as a manifestation of a new global politics. Following Lefebvre's lead, these scholars attempted to re-articulate Marxist theory through a heightened awareness of space and spatiality. In *Postmodern Geographies*, Soja championed Lefebvre as a sociologist who might provide geographers with the theory needed to rework the discipline, i.e., to take it beyond what he saw as a rather limited empiricism. Drawing heavily on Lefebvre's notion of social space, Soja described a new geography capable of responding to the dramatic socio-political changes that had begun reshaping the human science. In fact, Soja's argument went one step further; positing a critical "reassertion of space into critical social theory," he envisioned geography itself as one of the principal concerns of postmodern thought. Challenging the "rising historicism and the parallel submergence of space" during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the description of which it should be remembered is at the centre of Lefebvre's

study, Soja argued both that critical theory had become waylaid in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and that, until the 1960s, studies of geography had been reduced to mere “eddies” outside the mainstream. He states that

The socialist critique consolidated around the historical materialism of Marx while a mix of Comtean and neo-Kantian influences reshaped liberal social philosophy and provoked the formation of new “social sciences” equally determined to understand the development of capitalism as an historical, but only incidentally geographical, process. This rise of a despatializing historicism, only now beginning to be recognized and examined, coincided with the second modernization of capitalism and the onset of an age of empire and corporate oligopoly. It so successfully occluded, devalued, and depoliticized space as an object of critical social discourse that even the possibility of an emancipatory spatial praxis disappeared from view for almost a century. (4)

Reiterating Foucault’s assertion that space had become “dead,” “fixed,” “undialectical” as a result of the nineteenth century’s fixation on time, Soja asserts that “[s]pace still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical; time as richness, life, dialectical, the revealing context for critical social theorization” (11). He argues that it is the responsibility of social geographers, therefore, to rectify the situation, to put space back on the critical agenda, as it were.

Thus, Soja makes a crucial movement toward aligning Lefebvre’s notion of social space, which as Kristin Ross and David Harvey make clear is entirely dependent on an engagement with modernity, with the problem of post-modernity. For Soja, space as an object of analysis and as a means of rethinking of critical discourse is indispensable in addressing the ruptures that began re-shaping Western modes of thought from the late 1960s and 1970s on. Soja’s re-consideration of the time-space binary in favour of a more dynamic, socially relative conception of both time and space not only opens up the discipline of geography to the problems of critical theory and historical

materialism, but it has also been instrumental in repositioning social geography at the forefront of contemporary critical discourse. In attempting to reconcile Lefebvre with Foucault, Soja takes the discourse of social space beyond the realm of a more circumscribed Marxism.<sup>3</sup> Glossing over the obvious differences between them, Soja suggests that together these two theorists have enabled a generation of geographers to begin counter-balancing a “historicism of theoretical consciousness that ... has tended to occlude comparable critical sensibility to the spatiality of social life” with “a practical theoretical consciousness that sees the lifeworld of being creatively located not only in the making of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes” (11). By bringing together Foucault’s powerful critique of historiography and Lefebvre’s theory of social space, Soja proposes a lively debate about the social forces reshaping our lived environment and the global sphere concurrently.

In the shift from history to geography, Soja proposes an important shift in cultural perspectives to what might be called a new Asian Pacific region and away from the Euro-centrism of conventional cultural studies – a change crucial to all three of the writers under consideration in the dissertation. However, beyond pointing toward the paradigm shift in which the postmodern Los Angeles arises and attempting to re-imagine a different sense of the global within the geography of a Pacific rim, Soja is unable to account for the complex and contradictory historical trajectories in which the city comes into being. Defaulting to the ideals of layering and bricolage, rather than attempting to follow through the lines of contradiction and political struggle assumed in his case study, he fails to locate his discussion of a postmodern geography within the neo-colonial contexts he imagines for it.

How, the question remains, does geography come to function as an extension of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century regimes of power? How can a postmodern geography move beyond the binds of complicity and hegemony?

Whereas Soja provides an valuable argument for the re-conceptualization of geography and the limits of Marxist notions of space, his text leaves open these and more questions about the role of a “spatial imagination” in resisting the centralizing forces of a new world order. Although his work has been influential in bringing Lefebvre into a North American context and does in fact set out a number of important questions about the primacy of a particular line of historicism, his attempt to read Lefebvre as a theorist of postmodernism is problematic. Likewise David Harvey, whose influential *The Condition of Postmodernity* has also been important in establishing Lefebvre's reputation in an English speaking context, tends to assume Lefebvre as a theorist of postmodernity.<sup>4</sup> While the debate about postmodernity is beyond the context of this dissertation, it is important to note that in positing the notion of social space as a key aspect of contemporary socio-cultural change and, consequently, critical theory, Soja and Harvey proffer very different approaches to the problem of postmodernity. Where Soja upholds the arrival of the postmodern as central fact of late 20<sup>th</sup> century life, Harvey is much more cautious in his use of the term, much more resistant to it. Harvey's contention is that the experience of space and time together – referred to throughout the text as “space-time” – has been integral to the transformation of modern society and is not in and of itself new. His concern with the culture, or as he calls it the “condition,” of postmodernism is marked by a somewhat more tentative approach to epistemology than Soja's. For Harvey, more so than Soja, it is Lefebvre's attempt to re-formulate or re-articulate a specifically Marxian notion of lived experience that makes his work vital to

contemporary debates. In both cases, however, key political aspects of Lefebvre's theory are elided – not only the context in which his work on social space is conceived, but also for our purposes the critical engagement it presupposes.

Despite this shortcoming, Harvey's interpretation of Lefebvre's concept of social space offers an interesting departure from Soja. Harvey de-emphasizes the fact of the occlusion of social space within critical theory and focuses more on the role its management plays in the emergence of Fordist and post-Fordist culture. In fact, his assertion that social space is and has been crucial to the systematic control and accumulation of capital is closer to Lefebvre's critique. For Harvey, like Lefebvre, the experiential "compression of time-space" is a key social phenomenon of modern life:

I use the word "compression" because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us.... As space appears to shrink to a "global village" of telecommunications and a "spaceship earth" of economic and ecological interdependencies – to use just two familiar and everyday images – and as time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is (the world of the schizophrenic), so we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds. (240)

Echoing Lefebvre, he states, "Each distinctive mode of production or social formation will, in short, embody a distinctive bundle of time and space practices and concepts" (204); to understand the postmodern condition, therefore, critics need to understand the carryover from earlier modes of production. Thus, a key difference between Harvey and Soja is their engagement with the so-called modes of production narrative.

In both cases, their conception of social space and concomitant re-articulation of critical theory proposes a more or less homogenous subject of



scholarly discourse. While Harvey and Soja both take on the questions of epistemology and methodology, they tend to be confined by the imperfect historicism they critique. Ironically, they neglect to address the question of space as it comes to inform their own critical projects. In this way, they do not grapple with the problematic limits of the present tense discourses with which they are working. In both cases, they use Lefebvre's ideas to challenge the dominant discourse and to explain particular social phenomenon, but in so doing they do not fully consider the methodological questions their writing proposes. Granted it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe one's scholarship in terms of desire and intention; however, the question, as Lefebvre suggests from the outset, is one of strategy and position. Thus, the question of space, why it is suddenly of importance, how current discourses are mobilizing around it is of acute importance.

As Derek Gregory, writing five years after the publication of these two texts, suggests, in refusing to think through the limits of their Eurocentric historicism, they fail to recognize, let alone engage with, the phenomenological subject of their own discourses. Harvey and Soja – and to a degree this critique might be extended to Lefebvre, as Gregory suggests – do not deal with the problematic history of Western capitalism. Gregory claims that while Harvey and Lefebvre's arguments run much deeper into the currents of resistance ingrained in modernity than Soja's does, neither Harvey nor Lefebvre deal directly with the problematic history their conceptions of space or space-time invoke. The focus of their discussions, and in particular the epistemological foundation for the notion of the production of space, is deeply embedded in the modes of production narrative central to Marxist historiography, which Harvey adapts and Lefebvre critiques, a model which has been discredited for its inability to account for differences of "race" and

gender endemic to colonialism. Gregory asks, “[W]hat ‘history’? Or rather, *whose* history?” Thus, he underlines the emergence of the production of space at the various junctures posited by these scholars; he argues that both “Lefebvre and Harvey reconstruct what is often described as ‘the rise of the West,’ a set-piece of historical hubris” which severely limits the political utility of their theory (369).

However, despite his problems with Harvey and Soja, and despite the fact that he challenges Lefebvre for a similar Eurocentrism, Gregory is not altogether dismissive of Lefebvre or his ideas. The analysis of Lefebvre’s discussion of social space that develops out of Gregory’s critique of *The Postmodern Condition* continues to propose social space as a useful way of thinking through a culturally located deployment of critical theory. According to Gregory, the limits of Harvey and Soja’s respective accounts of spatial thought might be found in part in their misapprehension of critical practice. If the experience of the “compression of space-time” is variable and is in fact constantly shifting with the transformation of modes of production and the intrinsic social orders, then the subject produced by this compression must also be considered variable, the knowledge of it mediated. In attempting to theorize something as complex and dynamic as social space (as it is defined by Lefebvre), it is crucial to understand that the position of the subject relative to a given power structure and social formation might also dictate the meaning or value of the spatial object or critique. Furthermore, the variable experience and knowledge of space is bound to the unequal distribution of (cultural) capital. Gregory points out that neither Harvey’s nor Soja’s conception of social space properly accounts for cultural specificity; neither adequately addresses the fact that geography itself is one of the key tools of colonialism. Although both scholars acknowledge the relationship between

the centralization of power and the control of physical space through the hegemonic dominance of mental space, they do not make the connection between contemporary social geography and/or cultural theory and its remobilization.

In attempting to develop the discourse on social space, Gregory credits feminist and postcolonial scholars for redrawing the parameters of the debate. He suggests that any move to take the critical discourse on space beyond descriptions of postmodern geography and description of class disparity needs to consider the problems of gender, ethnicity, and "race." Because space is neither static nor anterior to the social processes of social and psychic development, the dialectic relationship between time and space, the lived experience of everyday life, is deeply embedded in complex processes of identification and subjectivity. In understanding the relationship between the individual and his or her experience of space, the questions of gender and "race" pose particular problems for the concept of social space, coming as it does out of a revamped Marxism. Seen as a series of strategic social forces, it becomes very difficult to separate space from dominant questions of cultural production. Due to the interdependence of fundamental dualisms – for example, public and private life, home and away, culture and economics, or even reading and writing – it is fair to say that the categories upon which knowledge production exists are prone to shift with spatial practices and the representations of space.

In her discussion of the relationship between bodies and space from a feminist perspective, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz argues that

The subject's relation to space and time is not passive: space is not simply an empty receptacle, independent of its contents; rather the ways in which space is perceived and represented

depend on the kinds of objects positioned “within” it, and more particularly, the kind of relations the subject has to those objects. Space makes possible different kinds of relations but in turn is transformed according to the subject’s affective and instrumental relations with it. (93)

In this sense, the material relations of culture, the geographical distances separating and connecting scholars – producing and obscuring bodily differences between us – and the spatial contingencies upon which social life is orchestrated are themselves fraught with the problems of identity formation. Thus, recent studies of gender and sexuality have focused on social space as an important theoretical category. Taking the concept of social space beyond the limits of Lefebvre’s sociology and into different cultural-political sites, feminist theorists and cultural geographers, in particular, provide an important context for re-examining Lefebvre’s initial ideas. As Daphne Spain argues, space is a key factor in the construction and control of almost all social differences, including gender. In her *Gendered Spaces*, Spain focuses on the relationship between social status or “gender stratification” and the control and constructions of “architectural and geographic spatial contexts” (3). She argues that the consideration of space in addition to social, psychological, economic and biological interpretation and analysis is important in helping scholars to discern the causes and effects of social stratification. Working with the hypothesis “that initial status differences between women and men create certain types of gendered spaces and that institutionalized spatial segregation then reinforces male privilege” (6), Spain goes on to address the way in which societies have tended to use not just physical spaces but ideas about space to restrict women’s social movement and development. Denying women access to spaces of knowledge and the knowledge of space, societies have consistently been able to reinforce male power and privilege. While its focus on geographic and architectural manifestations of deeper social divi-

sions does not deal with the complicated issue of defining the term space itself, Spain's argument provides an important assertion of the problematic role of spatial consciousness in encoding social power by controlling access to culture. Spain's notion of gender as a spatial construct might allow us to speculate on the role of space in the creation and maintenance of difference across a network of social relations and/or intersectional identity formations, which include gender but extend beyond it.

## LITERATURE

### AS SOCIAL SPACE

To date, discussions of Lefebvre's work can be largely located within the nexus of a revitalized Marxism and the critique of historical materialism; however, Lefebvre's concept of social space needs to be developed in relation to particular modes of cultural production – in our case literature. It might provide a point of entrance into literary debates on postcolonial and feminist theories of subjectivity. Thus, we might assume that, like gender, sexuality and "race" are also key aspects of the production of social space. In fact, as a number of critics have suggested the control of space through a complicated web of identifications and interpolations is especially important in nation building (Stoler, Bannerji, McClintock). Without direct recourse to Lefebvre, a number of influential literary theorists have picked up the notion of space, or social space. In addition to Jameson, Grosz, and Ross, works by Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said grapple with the question of space, making it a crucial aspect of their divergent attempts to think through the representation of repression and resistance in literature. In Edward

Said's influential *Culture and Imperialism*, there is a considerable amount of attention devoted to the question of "social space" as a dominant aspect of 19<sup>th</sup> century British and French fiction (62-80); without specifically crediting Lefebvre, Said uses a concept of space very similar to the one we have been discussing. His "contrapuntal readings" of British and French literature attempt to redress the elision of colonial spaces from the discussion of mainstream literature. Challenging the dominant trend in literary criticism to overlook questions of imperialism and colonialism in the work of various well known novels by writers such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, Said argues that the geographical imagination of European scholars tends to propagate an illusory difference between the centre and margin, which is related to the functional ideology of orientalist thought.

In his discussion of "Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation," Homi Bhabha reads the imaginary boundary between the centre and margin as both a fundamental aporia in the edifice of modern European culture and as a site of difference, in effect a "third space." Avoiding the binary logic of a bourgeois commodification of space into the *here* and *there* of a carefully orchestrated private/public split, Bhabha imagines "cultural globality" in a metaphoric of space. Displacing and replacing a fragmentary and provisional temporality, within the geography of borders and arrival, Bhabha reads Jameson's notion of a "third space" into the representational politics of postcoloniality. He suggests that "the non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existence" (218). Criticizing Jameson for returning the "class-subject" to the politics of the global, Bhabha nonetheless maintains "the problem of global space" as a central concern (223). What is

at issue here is the way in which Bhabha's postcolonialism moves towards space as a problem of "translation" and "incommensurability."

Within the realm of literary theory and the fervent discussions of "race," identity formation, and representation, the problem of space is invested with a number of highly contradictory social meanings. In the context of literary studies, therefore, the power of Lefebvre's vision might be seen as two-fold. Not only does he begin to sketch out a methodological approach to the divisions of labour between what might be termed *symbolic* representations and the cultural contexts in which they are given meaning. He also attempts to theorize a situational epistemology wherein critical knowledge is itself always already complicit with its object – the critic always already assumed in affiliation with a community or larger cultural formation. Thus critical theory, as discussed by Lefebvre, is of necessity the product and domain of a great many social forces, all of which are brought to bear on the subject a priori, as Bhabha might argue. Theory can never be the sole undertaking of the individual scholar but is the cumulative production of the culture or cultures with which the scholar is associated – upon which his/her work comments and in whose interests it is undertaken. It is, in this way, not only strategic (as Lefebvre determined) but also a matter of translation.

Lefebvre hypothesizes that "if space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production," which is by definition larger than individual desire or ability. He makes the following fundamental assertion:

The "object" of interest must be expected to shift from *things in space* to the actual *production of space*.... Both partial products located *in space* – that is, things – and discourse *on space* can henceforth do no more than supply clues to, and testimony about, this productive process, a process which subsumes signifying processes without being reducible to them. It is no longer a matter of the space of this or the space of that: rather, it

is space in its totality or global aspect that needs not only to be subjected to analytic scrutiny (a procedure which is liable to furnish merely a infinite series of fragments and cross-sections subordinate to the analytic project), but also to be *engendered* by and within theoretical understanding. (*Space* 37)

Therefore, theory, as Lefebvre understands it, brings space into being through the contradictory conceits of analytical distance or “objectivity,” as well as through the potentiality they facilitate. For better or for worse, space is already present in the desire to locate an object/subject of analysis, and space comes to be encrypted in the specificity of representational discourse. The space of theory, i.e., that produced by and for theoretical discourse, functions to decipher and encode mimetic representations of social space while simultaneously maintaining its own generative capacity and/or social viability. Lefebvre carries on to say that

Theory *reproduces* the generative process – by means of a concatenation of concepts, to be sure, but in a very strong sense of the word: from within, not just from without (descriptively), and globally – that is, moving continually back and forth between past and present. The historical and its consequences, the “diachronic”, the “etymology” of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it – all of this becomes inscribed in space. The past leaves its traces; time has its own script. Yet, this space is always now and formerly, a *present* space, given as an immediate whole complete with its associations and connections in their actuality. (*Space* 37)

The function of the critic both determines and is determined by the social space of critique; as such, criticism is bound in a complex intersection of debt, debenture, and promissory assertions and is, in a fundamental sense, the product of the individual's social situation. This assertion calls into question the “neutrality” of critical discourse while, at the same time, re-legitimizing it, in that the critic's position vis-à-vis the intellectual and institutional structures in which s/he is working or against which s/he



struggles are always already at stake – inscribed, decoded, and translated in the act/s of knowing.

Thus, the study of literature and culture are intrinsically both productive and deconstructive. It is an aspect of the expansion and development of bourgeois capitalism but never fully reducible to it. In as much as the central issues of CanLit have to do with the politics of locale, the representation of difference, or the development of a national psyche/culture, there is a fundamental prioritizing of spatial concerns; however, these concerns are contingent on a complex politics of positioning and the fractured temporality of cultural production. That the materiality of cultural objects tends to exist below the level of official discourse, or outside its established boundaries, does not mean that these objects – in the case literary texts – are separate from the production and reproduction of social space it seeks to manage. Instead, we might think of this fundamental aporia as an aspect of a dominant ideology that has attempted to control cultural knowledge and production – an ideology that, as Lefebvre and others have suggested, has no interest in disclosing the operative social divisions by which it has come to flourish.

Conventionally, the study of literature has been based on a binary that separates the aesthetic or the ideal from the socio-economic relations of its production.<sup>5</sup> Literary studies have tended to function as part of a large-scale despatialization of culture, thereby fulfilling a fundamental role in the development and expansion of a modern European bourgeoisie. For example, Timothy Brennan reminds scholars that “we study literature in a discipline with its roots in a philological tradition first formulated with the idea of nations in mind, in the very period when modern nation-states were first being formed” (44). Brennan holds that despite the fact that “the study of national-

ism has been a minor industry in the disciplines of sociology and history since the Second World War” it is still “rare in English to see ‘nation-ness’ talked about” the way it is in the literatures of Latin America, Germany and Italy (47). However, changes in the field of literary and cultural studies, especially postcolonialism, have begun to call this into question. The advent of postcolonial cultural studies have returned attention to the historical roots of modern culture and its role in the development of European colonialism in such a manner as to re-inscribe literature within a context, or what we might refer to here as a spatiality, of uneven development. While Brennan seems to be somewhat uneasy with discussions of “race” and colonialism, usurping the “nation” as a valid field of study or object of literary analysis, his argument paves the way for further study of the complex relationship between these subjects.

One of the key points of much postcolonial scholarship is that scrupulous control of both the means of production and the instruments of scientific knowledge has allowed “the West” to establish an idealized distance between itself and its colonial counterparts. Ironically, however, this metaphorical distance between home and away, which is predicated on an irreducible difference between the self and a racialized other, belies an increased interdependence of the metropolitan centres and their so-called “peripheries.” It appears, contrary to liberal notions of progress and economic development, that the expansion of universal education and the consequent emergence of many of the central modern disciplines around which academic knowledge is organized, from English literature through sociology to biotechnology and pharmacology, are complicit with the expansion and redeployment of colonialism.<sup>6</sup> The assumption that scholarship is above or can somehow transcend the material relations of everyday life, that scholars can shake the intersec-

tional differences effecting both the will to knowledge and its potential value, is bound to a willful acceptance of the “sanctioned ignorance” at the heart of neo-colonial school systems (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 2).

Within the fields of English literature, the radical realignment of critical self-reflection has not come easily. If, as post-structuralist philosophy demonstrates, the difference between the subject and object is a fundamental aporia upon which not only knowledge but also the professor of that knowledge is both (re)produced and controlled, then the concept of the reader depends on the awkward division of thought and thinking. This is not to say that all knowledge is relative, as many of the opponents of “deconstruction” are quick to assume – neither can we say that it is not. Rather it holds that the (deconstructive) habit of focusing on the performance and dissemination of texts, which I am suggesting is a powerful point of convergence between Lefebvre and critical post-colonialism, entails a different type of critical vigilance.

To this end, I have argued that the dominant tropes of postmodern Canadian literary studies must be rethought and that the issue of nationalism always already extends beyond the parameters of any solitary nation or state. Instead, I choose to begin from the notion that CanLit is an element in the globalization of culture. As Spivak points out, the pre-occupation with marginality, which I have suggested is crucial to CanLit, is itself central to the development of contemporary knowledge production, and as such, it is in danger of foreclosing debate. In an essay entitled “Poststructuralism, Marginality,” Spivak contends that contrary to popular ideology, the figure of the marginalized belongs at the centre of Western thought and has since the dawn of the enlightenment. Without the colonial other – always already raced, gendered, and sexualized – the modern subject is inconceivable. In the

last sentence of this essay on the problems of interpretation and critical location within the academic centres of “the West,” Spivak cautions that “Our agency must not be reinscribed through the benevolence of the discipline” (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 75), which throws open a series of complex questions of identification. In asking her readers to place themselves relative to the reproduction of a critical text, Spivak’s final warning begins to unravel her entire argument. This sentence begs questions as to which we the collective subject of her “our” might refer. Is it “the particular voice of the marginal” in the previous sentence?<sup>7</sup> or does it invoke the broader category of postcolonial teacher, assumed in her recourse to the abstract “Pedagogy” subject of the previous sentence? Following her antecedent further back into the discussion, it is apparent that “our” might most directly refer to the postcolonial viewer of Mrinal Sen’s film *Genesis*. Enacting the similar dis/re-orientation to the one she locates in Sen’s meticulous use of subtitles and translations, Spivak’s text leaves the reader hanging on a catachresis that suggests a kind of spatial collapse, which in turn undermines critical distance but which also draws difference into the contiguous areas of scholarly argument. Momentarily displaced, the all too familiar tools of our trade become difficult to recognize.

Similar to Lefebvre’s argument that critical discussions of space originate of necessity in strategic negotiations with the problem of positionality, Spivak’s refusal to grant “the benevolence of the discipline” – which this careful ambivalence attempts to make clear is and is not her own – marks a response to the crisis of representation facing contemporary cultural criticism. The charged relationship between the active subject and his/her location vis-à-vis the object of analysis – which has for the most part remained outside the ken of literary studies in all but the most idealistic form – becomes cen-

tral to the postcolonial critic. This reverses focus: the fundamental issue of the discourse becomes not the text but the act of its construction. In locating herself in the liminal between of Marxist historiography and post-structuralist theory, Spivak draws out the foundational crises of the discipline only to offer the arduous task of working within the purposeful sphere of catachresis. Borrowing a phrase from Peggy Kamuf's Derridean analysis of the philosophical questions underlying the institutionalization of literature and its role in the development of "the university," we might say that Spivak's radical re-conceptualization of literary studies within the field of cultural studies works upon "the division of literature" not as historical fact/event but as an on-going will to power, which I am contending parallels Lefebvre's argument that the production of space, into which the critic has no choice but to enter, is of necessity strategic and provisional. Thus literary knowledge, the questions asked and the objects constructed around these - in our case the exigency of literary nationalism in the face of globalism and the possibility of re-reading the critical production of Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka - assumes the priority of the contradictory struggles with nationalism, colonialism, and the micro-politics of Literary Studies.

#### IN DECONSTRUCTION

If, as Lefebvre's work suggests, the importance of space as methodological problem unfolds from the desire to study the "appropriation," which in *The Critique of Everyday Life*, he refers to as a "theory of needs" (104) at the heart of everyday life, this unfolding might then propose a crucial site at which various, even contradictory trajectories of contemporary critical theory and pedagogy come together. Lefebvre's anecdotal examples, especially in *The Critique of Everyday Life*, belie a problematic dependence on the figure of the

other – the woman baking bread (57), Algerian labourers working at the Renault factory (42-43), “New China” (44). Although his critique of the colonizing forces of dominant culture is dependent on a representation of radical political struggles which must be differentiated from those assumed in the geography of the French or continental quotidian with which his work is primarily interested, it is, however, suggestive of a fruitful connection between the engagements of German critical theory (Kant, Hegel, Marx) and postcolonial theory. Taking this connection beyond a purely semiotic overlap, one might argue that in prefiguring recent attempts to access cultural development in terms of a global re-circulation and redistribution of people and capital, Lefebvre’s sociological approach to the politics and culture of everyday life offers a valuable set of methodological questions with which to challenge and extend discussions of postcoloniality.

Although his work may be riddled with gender and “race” blindness that mark post-war continental theory, it should not be dismissed off hand. Lefebvre’s attempt to articulate a critical undertaking with sufficient scope to embrace the multitudinous contradictions of bourgeois knowledge production as it was developing in the post-war period poses a useful counterpoint to the critique of postcolonial theory proposed by Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. Recourse to his dialectical conception of space as an integrated series of social drives in which the critic/philosopher is always already implicated (positioned albeit provisionally in terms of both geography and history, and as deconstructionists would argue, constituted by the critical venture), rather than space as an inert container of historically identified objects and events, is an important corollary to Spivak’s postcolonial critique of postcolonialism. As Spivak argues, the all too common dismissal of European or continental theory – in particular that of Marx, Hegel, and Kant – for its acknowledged

debt to “the Other” neglects the specific differences embodied in the deployment of their philosophies. She suggests that “to imagine that the positioning of the other remains the same in all their work is to assume that the only real engagement with the other is in the ‘objective’ social science disciplines, after all”(9). Homogenizing alterity and otherness under the names of “Eurocentrism,” “Imperialism” and “the West” performs an essential elision that simultaneously simplifies and disengages instruments of constructive resistance – of which literature might be one. She writes,

My point is that we in the humanities, dealing with the position of the other as an implied “subject”(ive) position, must also vary our assumptions upon the text with which we are dealing. Paradoxically, every questioner who enters the book trade does so as a species of “native informant” or has been trained from infancy, for hours every day, even if reactively, in some version of an academic culture that has accommodated these three fellows [Kant, Hegel, Marx], often in their radical margins but sometimes in their conservative centers. I write in the conviction that sometimes it is best to sabotage what is inexorably to hand, than to invent a tool that no one will test, while mouthing varieties of liberal pluralism. (9)

It is precisely this opportunity “to sabotage what is inexorably to hand” that is afforded by an engagement with literary nationalism through a theory of social space, or so this dissertation maintains. Risking an identification with this self-styled mimic, in effect re/inscribing Spivak’s deconstructive project within the realm of Canadian culture, over-lapping it onto Lefebvre’s notion of space as an always already contested reality, I hope to raise questions about the exigencies of “race” and gender politics informing not only my (own or apparent) scholarly position but also this context through which it comes into being. Recognizing my own assertions of difference as a form of wishful thinking, I begin with the double bind of positionality as a manner of reinvigorating debate within and about a “Canadian” context. I am arguing that Spivak’s assertion that the subject of postcolonialism is constitutional to

colonial discourse and not anterior to it might lead back into the politics of disciplinary positioning. Thus, we might also argue that CanLit names a traumatic complex of cultural initiatives that presuppose an accumulation of spatial controls and critical possibilities. To this end, the conception of social space provides an important way of addressing issues of resource distribution and uneven cultural development, not only in the fields of cultural geography but also in those of cultural and literary studies. In as much as it might be conjoined with critical postcolonialism and critical “race” theory, space is fundamental in attempting to theorize the meaning and values of contemporary cultural production and reproduction.

In attempting to move back and forth between the writing of Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka and the critical discourses that surround it, my study points towards a moment and a space within the much larger transformation of “the nation,” which as I suggested is a subject in transition. If, as I have argued, the referent “Canadian” prioritizes a geographical sense of identity (i.e., proposes space as a primary aspect of selfhood) transforming in response to, perhaps in anticipation of, major paradigmatic changes to the material relations, cultural apparatus, and lived experience of a national polity, then the central focus of English studies in this country is also in the midst of dramatic reconfiguration. Both the space we are writing about and the social space in which our discourse resonates are interconnected matters. If moreover, the process of transformation raises important issues about the self-reflexive knowledge of the discipline of CanLit, it also raises question about the production, reproduction, and control of a particular complex of social spaces.

In a Derridean analysis of Literature, “the University,” and the current crisis in knowledge,<sup>8</sup> *The Division of Literature or the University in*



*Deconstruction*, Peggy Kamuf argues that the institution of Literature is both dependent on and resistant to the centralizing drives of the university. She contends that its divisionality – and I am thinking of CanLit here – is itself instrumental in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. She argues that the mutability of literature and the adaptability of literary studies have allowed the university to develop as an instrument of modern culture and authority. The problem of inclusion – i.e., the ethical and disciplinary questions of what should be studied and by whom – gives way to the structures of exclusion, or “*spacing* by means of which the distinctions (among different disciplines, but also between the institution and what it is not) are set out, that is, both held apart and together” (Kamuf 75). As such, the question of culture, to which literature has been bound almost from its inception, functions through the establishment, perpetuation, and reinterpretation of ideological boundaries and/or scholarly divisions. As Kamuf suggests the space barriers proposed by the construction of scholarly institutions are crucial to the creation of cultural capital: they establish both the why (justification for) and the how (means of dissemination) by which culture is produced and protected.

Taking her entrance from post-structuralist theory, Kamuf argues that literary criticism might remain vital to the political reorganization of the university despite rhetoric to the contrary. Asserting that the walls of “the university” stand “in deconstruction” – i.e., are already fissured with the traces of ruin – Kamuf enlivens the debate about the current state of affairs by raising ethical questions about the supposed roles and responsibility of literary critics, theorists or otherwise self-identified readers of literature. She holds that

the “literary” remains a stage for the appearance of what does

not present itself without difference from itself at any decidably present moment (past or present): this is the condition of any practice with literary texts, even the most "historicized" ones, but it is a condition that literary study does not easily acknowledge. (37)

Continuing with this somewhat slippery language of deconstruction, Kamuf says that "literature" depends upon a "*historicality* ... without which there could be no history of literature, but which is not reducible to a set of historical truths, however provisional" (37). This historicality, she argues, "suspends the very possibility of the institutions of knowledge" (37). This suspension not only undermines the positivist pretensions of scholarship but also – and this is crucial to my thesis – their disappearance. It is in "holding it in reserve, re-presenting that which is not altogether past and gone, repeating the traces of something that appears once more" (Kamuf 38) that literature keeps the question of culture open.

Thus, Kamuf's notion of literature in deconstruction draws attention to institutional formations that are important to this study of Canadian literature as a contradictory and ambivalent social space. Granted there are significant differences between the model of the university presented in Kamuf's essay and the one assumed in my conception of CanLit as a state-funded and socially sanctioned undertaking. Her argument, however, does provide an important counterpoint to the prevalent despair about the lack of support and influence given to academic studies of culture. Against the prevalent nostalgia for an older more cohesive form of scholarly institution (and the static conception of space it depends upon) – like that underlying Readings' *The University in Ruins* and the Lecker-Davey exchange discussed in Chapter One – Kamuf dares scholars not simply to imagine a new division of literary studies but to begin situating this discussion in the difficulties of reforming the university. Her argument suggests that literature is a peculiar enterprise

with a distinct relationship to a specific space or set of spaces. The fundamental pre-occupation with the difference between literature in the vernacular and the classics is not simply a matter of epistemology but it continues to provide “the spacings” essential to contemporary debate. The space of literature and the space of the university always already collide at the formation of official culture and its breaks.

To develop this notion, Kamuf recalls Hegel's 1809 commencement speech, in which he justifies the reopened *Gymnasium* to “the well-to-do burghers of Nuremberg” as a paradoxical failure and paradigmatic articulation upon which the development of literature and the university are founded. In this speech, Hegel argues that Cultural formation or *Bildung* – the central occupation or responsibility of *the Gymnasium* as opposed to the technical or practical training offered in the *Trivialschule* – depends on walls separating classical languages and literatures apart from “so-called Things and, among these, everyday sensible objects that are incapable of supplying any cultural material” (Kamuf 78). Kamuf points out that the object of study, as Hegel conceived of it, depends on the appropriation and re-inscription of foreignness. She contends that the construction of the foreign across a complex schema of cultural difference substitutes time-space as a means of organizing and valorizing “cultural capital.” In this sense, the production of culture involves a process of commodification by which the object is codified as existing outside the social, existing in space but separable from it. Thus, Hegel's concept of the cultural object might be critiqued through Lefebvre's notion of social space:

Cultural formation [*Bildung*] must have a prior material and object that it works on and reforms. We must acquire the world of antiquity to possess it but, even more importantly, so as to have something to work on. However, in order for it to become an *object* [Gegenstande], the substance of nature and of spirit must

come to stand over against us, it must have received the form of something foreign. (Kamuf 79)

Paradoxically, as Kamuf suggests, Hegel's conception of education, at least as it is proposed here, is based on a kind of cultural tautology of the foreign as that which is recognized as both being inside and outside the domain of the scholar. Like space itself, it is an entity that must be mastered but its mastery must remain in abeyance. Thus, the formative split between the educational subject and the object of study comes in fact to be manufactured by the very institutions that hold it, yet it remains paradoxically at the limits of institutional grasping. As Kamuf suggests, because of this fundamental aporia, i.e., the incommensurability of knowledge and culture, the division of labour is bound to further divisions of labour, and the formation of culture becomes dependent on an elaborate production and reproduction of social space. Simultaneously building walls and subdividing them in an attempt to valorize and protect essential ideals, namely the objectivity, knowledge and culture of a self-identified master class or "race," the consumption of culture, which following Lefebvre's notion that consumption has always already been produced, entails careful control of the means of production.

In relation to literature in general or to CanLit more specifically, this institutional contradiction necessitates an often invisible but nonetheless insatiable desire for consumable texts. Reflecting on the institutional history of academic study, Kamuf writes,

It seems, then, that there are two kinds of walls, which we might call indigestible and digestible. The indigestible wall sets the study of classical languages and literatures off from foreign influences, in particular the demand for practical, technical formation. It is realized or materialized in the wall of brick and mortar – that is, a hard-to-digest, hard-to-infiltrate substance – that surrounds the *Gymnasium*. Once in place, it allows the activity programmed within to develop freely, which... does not mean without walls, but rather with a freedom to digest, to appropriate those other walls that are foreign languages and

literatures. (80)

In protecting the structures of English Literature, those who have access to them, who can work within their walls, are not as self-obsessed as one might like to assume. In fact, the whole project of literary study, in as much as it pertains to a formation of culture, is dependent on establishing and maintaining “foreign languages and literatures.” We might say it hungers for them:

The dividing wall of *Bildung*, therefore, is itself divided between that which effectively separates or holds apart so as to prevent contamination, and that which poses itself as a separation only in order to be overcome. The question, of course, is whether this division between two kinds of walls – this wall within the wall – is itself digestible or indigestible. (Kamuf 80)

#### CONCLUSION

The divided subject of the disciplined study of literature, indebted as it seems to be to the needs of capitalism and “the nation,” underscores an ambivalent relationship to the foreign and alterity. In speaking of the history and authority of literary knowledge, we always already assume the issue of cultural location – always already assume a student/scholar complicit with the institutional transmission of knowledge, safeguarding scholarly convention but, finally, engaged elsewhere or otherwise. It might seem as though the reification of the foreign, and with it the programmatic separation of the university from everyday life, has fallen out of favor with the majority of contemporary critics; however, this is only an apparent reversal. Returning

to Lefebvre's model of space, it is possible to argue that in as much as cultural formation assumes the management of identity through the proposition of a temporal linearity by which generation follows generation and "antiquity" is passed down, it also depends on the scrupulous control of both the representation of space and the representational space in which it functions. The Hegelian dialectic, as Kamuf reads it, proposes a mastery of and over the foreign that makes possible the ascendant subject of university education. This subject, which lies outside the culture of everyday things – protected behind the walls of the university, removed (temporally and spatially) from the dominant order of bourgeois society – is crucial to the expropriation of culture and knowledge. The self-conscious drive to legitimize national culture then rests on the perpetual appropriation of difference. That which is perceived as being outside or on the margins remains fundamental to the re-organization or re-division of the study of literature. Hence, the fervent interest in the establishment of a (new) multi-ethnic Canadian culture and/or identity; hence, the unease.

If we think of CanLit not as the collection of things – texts or ideas – held in space by established borders, distinguishing or separating the national from the other national or international enterprises, but rather as a present-tense social process by which discursive boundaries come into being, then the problem of locating oneself in and through the various trajectories of an outmoded cultural nationalism takes on generative significance. In as much as a national past is comprised of both hegemonic victories and failures, certainties and contradictions, the present of contemporary cultural theory is haunted by the modern promise of "order-building" and "identity-building" with which it is entangled (Bauman 5-17). To speak of a purely Canadian text or for that matter to distinguish a specifically Canadian con-

text is fallacious because it rests on the never quite realized dream of the post-war nation state and/or the specious ideology of cultural autonomy that propelled it. As I have argued, the nominal Canadian text or critical context is always already an international problem, a dialectical engagement with the expansionary powers of postwar capitalism and the incomplete history of European colonialism.

Acknowledging the international nature of Canadian culture or identity – rooting scholarship within the larger cultural formations reshaping and undermining “national sovereignty” – should not however suggest that there is or might be equivalence amongst nations, nationalisms, citizens, or citizenships. In fact, a discussion of the temporal-spatial matrix of Canadian cultural nationalism presupposes a complex network of debts and investments that underwrite the development of self-identified and interpellated subjects within and across various political situations and/or social spaces. The role of modern state-affiliated nationalism has been to encode cultural value by promoting certain identities and occluding or disqualifying others. It should, therefore, go without saying that within a given nation-space cultural norms come into being through a complicated series of breaks with, reflections on, and endorsements of external national identities. In general, however, the contradictory nature of these extranational ties is systematically forgotten in the process of developing a coherent, and thereby useful, sphere of national relations and/or subjects – in Canada’s case, bi-cultural and multi-cultural.

If nations and the identities they most readily identify are always already partial and interdependent, i.e., reliant on a shared system of borders or “walls” and the communications networks that define them, then they both are heavily conditioned by the changing dynamics of space. In particu-

lar, the hyphenated identities that mark both the limits and possibilities of the system of naming brought into being by nationalism – and now its predecessors – suggest a crucial point of intervention into current debates about culture. Focusing on contemporary cultural politics, therefore, we might say that the dominant assumptions of Canadian multiculturalism as a conglomeration of ethnic nationalisms is both practicable and untenable because it longs for a system of geo-political borders that it is both capable of overcoming and remaining indifferent to what is outside it. Thus, the attempt to find order in the description or depiction of a Canadian plurality tends to ignore the contradictory histories that bring scholars together in conflict.<sup>9</sup> It obscures the variability of epistemic location and hegemonic differentials splitting debate across national and (post)colonial positions.

Thus the question that needs to be asked is how an engagement with CanLit – not as inert container/category but rather as charged social construct/determinant – might take us back into Canadian culture as a set of contested social processes and/or products. In developing arguments around the receptions and interpretation of texts by Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka, I aim to focus on how critical exigencies function to further complicate the possibility of post-national argument. Following Lefebvre, I am suggesting that this type of social production needs to be understood to be functioning across three interconnected but distinct levels: “spatial practice” (physical space), “representations of space” (mental space), “spaces of representation” (social space) (*Space* 33). If this triad proposes social space, the lived, as encompassing both the perceived and the conceived, then any given space might best be understood dialectically. Thus the act of knowing, the object known, and the values ascribed to them are social, and as such negotiated and mediated within economic systems.



In the chapters that follow, I will use Lefebvre's model of space in order to analyze the relation between the textual representations of specific geographical spaces, each of which is important to the larger national context in question, and the representational spaces in which these symbolic gestures become re-inscribed. Thus, not only do I propose to read the critical discourse that is generated around the work of each writer, but more to the point, I will attempt to look at how this discourse itself depends on reproducing and controlling identity as an aspect of the larger social space. The following chapters chart the trajectories of a recurrent nationalism as it flows into and across the performance of different subject positions. At times as an explicit concern, at others as an underlying modality or unacknowledged assumption, the nation exists as a fundamental element of both critical discourse and the literary texts in question. What is of interest is how this now contentious category continues to divide the discipline. Reading literary texts back into their critical contexts, I will attempt to find cracks in the walls of the contemporary institution; with the problem of the foreign in mind, I propose to come back at the divisions of literature from the inside. Reading CanLit as a reflection, or better microcosmic projection of global transformations, the following chapters look at the process by which writing is sequestered, shut out, or caught on the fence of on-going cultural developments.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This notion offers an interesting point of intersection or overlap between Lefebvre's sociological critique of post-structuralism and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's attempt to develop an understanding of "Post-colonial Reason," as a fundamental critique of Western thought from a postcolonial perspective, and vice versa.
- <sup>2</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve into Lefebvre's thinking about *la vie quotidienne*, it is important to acknowledge that his *Critique of Everyday Life* is a precursor to his discussion of social space. In particular, his notion that the rise of post-war consumerism amounted to a re-focusing of state powers in an effort to "colonize" everyday life. As "the other of history," Lefebvre conceived of "everyday life"

as a key battleground upon which bourgeois society could continue to dominate and produce desire for even greater industry. Discussing the importance of Lefebvre's "notion of everyday life (or its synonym, 'social space')" (8) to her work, and explaining the relationship between these two important critical concepts, Kristin Ross offers the following:

Social space, for Lefebvre, can be understood as a kind of recoding of his initial concept of everyday life. Another way of saying this is that everyday life – what remains when all specialized activities have been eliminated – is primarily (but not entirely) a spatial concept. Like the state for Marx, everyday life for Lefebvre is only *modern* everyday life: the product of the great nineteenth-century European migration to urban centres and the waning of unifying styles disseminating from church and monarch. Everyday life is born in the nineteenth-century in the same gap or rift that separates a private, domesticated world from a public, institutional one... the importance of Lefebvre's concept of everyday life lies in its introduction of a third term into the most important philosophical opposition of the twentieth century: the opposition between the phenomenological and the structural. Everyday life is neither the realm of the intentional, monadic subject dear to phenomenology; nor does it dwell in the objective structures—the language, institutions, kinship structures – that are perceptible only by bracketing the experience of the individual subject. Neither the subjective (biographical) nor the objective (the discursive) but both: literally and *dans tous les sens*. (9).

- <sup>3</sup> It is important to note that Lefebvre has critiqued Foucault for not being able to link his work to a more coherent programme. The argument is that Foucault fails to recognize the importance of space (presumably Western Europe) in laying the groundwork for his research on micro-sites of power and as such fails to work through some of the key conceptual limits in his otherwise powerful historiography. Lefebvre is dismissive of his works: he calls Foucault's analyses "a lot of pin-prick operation which are separated from each other in time and space. It neglects the centre and centrality; it neglects the global" (*The Survival of Capitalism* 116; qtd. in Elden). This, however, begs certain questions about the structuralism of what appears to be his own positivist bias or need to maintain universal categories. However, his use of the term "the global" – not as a finite entity but as a site of struggle and contradiction – does raise an important point of entrance into Foucault's work from a postcolonial perspective. I might take this a step further to develop a relationship between Laura Stoler's attempt to raise the spectre of "race" in the later work of Foucault, thereby forming a provisional bridge between postcolonialism and Foucault's project. (I am indebted to a paper by Stuart Elden, "Henri Lefebvre and the Production of Space: 'There is a Politics of Spaces because Space is Political,'" for bringing Lefebvre's critique of Foucault to my attention.)
- <sup>4</sup> While Lefebvre's work on the city (collected in *Writings on Cities*) and his discussion of *La Vie Quotidienne* were very influential amongst a generation of continental thinkers and were, in fact, engaged with the radical transformation of French society during the 1960s, which culminated in May 1968 (Kofman and Lebas), it is dangerous to assume that his work is itself an example of postmodern thought. While his intellectual development – perhaps especially his association with and break from Guy Debord and the Situationists – does provide insight into the convergence of various trajectories of social thought during the nascent era (if we can even label it as such), a convergence integral to the concept of post-modernity or more clearly postmodernism, it must be remembered that Lefebvre was a thinker and/or critic of modernism and modernity. Significantly, neither Soja nor David Harvey, for whom Lefebvre is primarily a theorist of the postmodern, grapple with his writing on

Modernity (*Introduction to Modernity*). To be fair, it should be noted that Lefebvre's *Introduction to Modernity* had not been translated into English at the time Soja and Harvey were writing their books.

- 5 The power of this ideologically based differentiation, or division of labour, has been so powerful that even the material relations represented within literary texts tend to be considered of secondary importance. For this reason much of the work of Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial criticism has been to draw attention to the obvious inconsistencies in the dominant literary discourse – to make visible the relations of production represented in texts.
- 6 I'm thinking here of a number of influential scholars who point out that the "mainstream has never run clean" (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 2) and whose work muddies the waters by challenging ontological and sociological distinctions between "centre" and "margin." There is Edward Said's work on *Orientalism*, which was an early text demonstrating the strong connection between the emergence of particular modes of European philological and historical discourse and the expansion of European Imperialism during the late 19th and early 20th century. Also important is Said's later *Culture and Imperialism*, which ties the subject of Imperialism to the study and practice of English Literature: taking issue with the "powerful if imprecise notion that works of literature are autonomous" and that "English literature is mainly about England," Said argues that "the literature itself makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe's overseas expansion, and therefore creates what Williams calls 'structures of feeling' that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire" (14). Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* offers a crucial challenge to the originary myths of European nationalism that overturns the temporal primacy of the European nation-states and reverses the geographical flow of ideas from colonies to metropolis. Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* demonstrates the importance of travel writing to not only the expansion of empire but also to the emergence of what she terms Europe's "planetary consciousness" in both scientific and cultural thought. Guari Viswanthan's *Masques of Conquest* locates the emergence and institutionalization of English literature in British struggle to create and maintain its colonial bureaucracy in India, thus radically revising the Arnoldian idealism and grounding it in the violence of Empire. In spite their differences in historical and geographical scope, each of these texts suggest the growing awareness of the ties between literary studies and social space.
- 7 Spivak's penultimate sentence reads, "Pedagogy here must try to retrench from that outside the presence of a banal globality, which must not be retranslated into the autonomy of the art object or its status as ethnic evidence, the particular voice of the marginal." (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 75)
- 8 Bercuson *et al*, Allan Bloom, Lawrence Grossberg and many others have been writing about the demise of the university from a variety of ideological positions across the political spectrum.
- 9 For example, we might look at the problem of a hyphenated subject. Considered spatially, rather than historically, hyphenated identities cannot refer back to some ethnic or national antecedent, but become matters of contingency and continuity. Within the rubric of multicultural identifications, the equation of national identities (French, English, German, Japanese) with racial (Black, White, Asian, Indigenous), ethnic (Indo, European), linguistic (Franco, Chinese, Anglo), or religious (Sikh) identities all under the auspices of a "Canadian" becomes highly problematic. The divergent and contradictory categorizations of a multicultural identity hunger for an oversimplified set of geographical distinctions, which actively elide the very contingency and co-incidence ethnic diversity assumes. For example, the endeavour

of critics and anthologists to portray recognized identities, such as Asian Canadian, Japanese Canadian, alongside Italian Canadian or for that matter Anglo-Canadian, as proof of some essential "immigrant experience" or cultural sensibility shared by all the peoples of Canada is ideological. It not only propounds a blatant denial of a long history of racism and economic disparity in Canada but it further legitimizes certain cultural imperatives that are vital to the expansion of capitalism globally. The frames of reference for these hyphenated identities – their relative positions vis-à-vis the production of space – are fundamentally different; each bears traces of different strategic investments in the ideology and materiality of national identity. Whereas Asian Canadian might be derived from a lengthy engagement in the cultural politics of the country and bears the marks of a historical repression or expulsion of a racialized community within the body politic of a non-hyphenated nation, Anglo-Canadian is more or less redundant; in effect, it names the anxiety of a cultural elite. As I have already argued, these multiple identities point to a national (multi-cultural) subject through the reproduction of a linear history that usurps the fragmentary temporality of social space.

2

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**CITY AS SKIN: ENTERING TORONTO**  
***IN THE SKIN OF A LION***

One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the *locus* of the collective memory. This relationship between the *locus* and the citizenry then becomes the city's predominant image, both of architecture and of landscape, and as certain artifacts become part of its memory, new ones emerge. In this entirely positive sense great ideas flow through the history of the city and give shape to it. (Rossi 130)

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins... they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. The practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized power in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility... The networks of these moving intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces; in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (de Certeau 93)

One of the salient features of Michael Ondaatje's writing is the way in which it presents critics with the complex interplay between subjects and social space.<sup>1</sup> The power of Ondaatje's writing – at least as far as that might be gauged through critical responses to his work – stems from his penchant for attaching highly imaginative texts to particular, provocative contexts. His ability to situate idiosyncratic narratives in recognizable settings or locales imbues the writing – prose and poetry – with an uncanny ability to speak to a variety of contemporary critical concerns simultaneously. Winding themselves through holes in the dominant discourses of modernity,

Ondaatje's evocative narratives often return to the problematic of geography as a site of political upheaval and hegemonic forgetting, bringing contradictions of space into the textual present. By moving into particular locales, i.e., entering fraught "zones of contact" (Pratt), such as the colonial frontiers, cities, ghettos and war zones with which his narratives engage, Ondaatje's writing leads us into discontinuities in the (hi)stories of development or progress, locating aporia in the inherited forms and conventions of both the realist fictions and official histories with which he is working.

Throughout his career, Ondaatje's writing has returned to the contingencies of place and space, inscribing in them the mutability of identity and self-knowledge, of being, rooted and rootless. His writing has become a fixture in the critical discussion of contemporary Canadian literature, postmodern strategies of resistance, and the encoding of difference. In offering readers intricate, highly ambivalent depictions of the struggle with belonging, Ondaatje's writing proposes heterogeneous, multi-layered texts through which various theoretical questions and a diversity of discourses can be located. To put it as directly as possible: in as much as Ondaatje's writing is about space, about the struggle to represent space, his texts perform and are themselves part of the performance of social space. Recalling Lefebvre's conception of "the production of space" outlined in the previous chapter, we might say this: in as much as they locate and describe geo-political sites of conflict and struggle, Ondaatje's texts become part of an intricate web of social control and resistance. His writing presupposes geographies of power by which readers and writer are implicated and complicit, though not necessarily in the same ways.

In the following two chapters, I attempt to chart Ondaatje's endeavour to inscribe a particular social space within and alongside the geo-political boundaries of CanLit. My reading of *In the Skin of a Lion* focuses on Ondaatje's experimentation with the topos of the city. I suggest that, in effect, his representation of the process and history of urbanization particular to a depression-era Toronto draws CanLit into an ambivalent and contentious struggle for, what Lefebvre terms, *la droit a la ville*, or the right to the city (*Writing on Cities* 63-184). As Ondaatje infiltrates the archive and moves deeper into the history of Canadian culture, his writing leads readers back into a fundamental critique of the present. Returning to the ethnic and class disparities of the 1920s and 1930s, which were responsible for constructing the modern city in which the novel is written, Ondaatje develops an important image of the development of a new "Multicultural" city. However, the overlap, his juxtaposition of the historical present of the 1980s and the 1920s, raises as many questions as it provides answers. His imaginary reconstruction of RC Harris' Toronto – symbolized in the figures of the Bloor (St. George) Viaduct, the Waterworks, and the workers who built them – presents readers with many of the problematic concerns of the present. In attempting to find a living presence, or nation, in the fragmentary and artificial constructs of the past, Ondaatje's texts are haunted by the struggle to come to terms with a contested cultural politics of identity, intertwining writer and reader in the conflux of an ongoing social development.

#### A POSTMODERN ONDAATJE

CanLit scholars have discussed Ondaatje's tendency to overlap binary relationships between inside and outside, narrator and audience, present and past. They have suggested that this joining of contradictions focuses the



problematic interdependence of literary dualities – fact and fiction, writer and reader – and weaves them into the fabric of the narrative. This interplay between opposing forces has led critics to posit Ondaatje as a representative figure of contemporary literature. Linda Hutcheon, attempting to come to terms with what she sees as a characteristic ambi- or polyvalence of contemporary Canadian writing, cites Ondaatje's works as an example of what she coins "postmodern metafiction," which is described as being "overtly aware of the twin processes involved in their production: creation and their reception" (45). The contradictory force of these "twin processes" are, for Hutcheon and other postmodernist critics, the driving impetus behind the political aspects of Ondaatje's writing; the so-called self-referentiality they describe, comprises a large part of its critical acumen (Hutcheon, Kamboureli, Kroetsch, Jones, Bowering). Time and again, Ondaatje's writing is read as engaging with the dogmatic presuppositions of a dominant society: the paradoxical power of his writing rests on the expropriation of fundamental differences – between fact and fiction, the public and personal, the past and present. Within the literature of contemporary CanLit, Ondaatje's texts are seen as masterly affronts to the violent will to order of official history, dominant culture, civilisation, that raise the question of contest to the level of literary apotheosis, or high cultural coup.

In his essay on "A Great Northward Darkness: The Attack on History in Recent Canadian Fiction," George Bowering sees Ondaatje as one of a group of Canadian writers, coming into prominence during the 1980s, who were "engaged in a dispute regarding which came first" history or fiction: the "possession of knowledge" or "the act of shaping" (*Imaginary Hand* 3). In re-asserting the primacy of desire, process, and contingency, these writers had set about problematizing the more static identities of "the individual," "soci-

ety,” and “culture.” In a spirited reading of *Coming Through Slaughter*, Bowering tells us that

Ondaatje did not come to the novel to “bring his characters to life” or to tell the story of a representative black horn player because he loves jazz. Ondaatje is trying to save his soul as a writer, and he knows that he has to rip up his book the way Bolden could rip it up blowing his brains out through bent brass in a parade through New Orleans. To do that he has to blow faster than time, higher than history. (*Imaginary Hand* 11)

Blowing “faster than time, higher than history” himself, Bowering constructs an endearing image of the Canadian poet that has become a popular one amongst Ondaatje readers.

Robert Kroetsch offers another opinion on Ondaatje's paradigmatic figure of the artist as outlaw – here the unrecorded Buddy Bolden whose jazz is remembered only through the most provisional and circumspect verbal descriptions; elsewhere the figures of Billy the Kid, of the author himself in search of a missing father, of Patrick the lost “searcher,” of Hana who nurses the dead and dying, and of Anil the forensic pathologist haunted by the ghosts of her own past. Providing an important counter-point to Bowering's description of Ondaatje, he tells us that the writing presents the reader with “the quest for a missing person” (111) that undermines the stasis of memory and identity. This quest, Kroetsch contends, depends on a mutual abandonment of the conventional historicism of the novel: in Ondaatje's writing “the model of history (and the traditional novel was often, traditionally, the history of a person) is replaced explicitly, by the methods of archaeology” (111). This shift from the desire to fictionalize the “history of a person” to the endeavour to “uncover past lives” (111) is for Kroetsch a shift in responsibility extending beyond the boundaries of the writing proper and necessitating an alternative conception of reading, a more active engagement in the construc-

tion of meaning on the part of readers. In order to bring the text to life, "We must, ourselves, as readers, participate in the archaeologist's quest" (112). To punctuate his point, Kroetsch offers his own idiosyncratic re-examination of the archival image from which Ondaatje is working, the cover photo of Bolden and his band which adorns the cover of *Coming Through Slaughter*:

Here is the 'real thing', anticipating, refusing, creating, destroying, the fiction that is to come. Photo: arrest. Killing. Going. The camera as weapon. With, but against, the novel. The positives of the negatives. Realized in acid. Ruined in acid. The reader, being read. (112)

In his inimitable way, Kroetsch's solo further asserts the legitimacy of Ondaatje as a key figure in the emerging Canadian postmodern. Riffing on a notion that is central to another well-received discussion of Ondaatje, Kroetsch develops the problematic of reading Ondaatje and "being read." While the punctuation of his fragmented sentence – "The reader, being read" – does not allow us to easily fold it back into a more transparent discourse, Kroetsch's attempt to shift focus away from Ondaatje's virtuosity and onto the act of reading does pose an important problem for contemporary readers of CanLit, a problem which, it should be noted, is at the centre of my own attempts to grasp its reception – albeit in a markedly different form.

With Kroetsch and Bowering, Hutcheon's discussion of postmodernism has been instrumental in both legitimizing a particular type of Canadian writing and in furthering the reputation of Ondaatje as an important Canadian writer. In a chapter of *The Canadian Postmodern* entitled "The Postmodern Challenge to Boundaries," Hutcheon uses Ondaatje's work to flesh out her conception of postmodern literature as an engaged practice. Using Ondaatje's tendency to frame the act of reading at key moments in his narratives, she describes an inherent bond between feminist "life writing" and

postmodernist "bio-texts" (to use Bowering's term). Inculcating Ondaatje's radical potential by providing an association with feminism, she draws out the self-referential aspects of his writing as exemplary of a postmodern engagement with the boundary between "art and life." For Hutcheon, Ondaatje's propensity to involve the reader in the performance of meaning, to push the bounds between the private and the public, is a manifestation of the contested "boundaries between men and women" (81), crucial to feminist criticism and cultural critique. Developing her contention that in a desire to represent the "tension between art and life" (80) feminist and postmodernist writers are united, Hutcheon argues for a consideration of male representations of gender as a defining characteristic of her conception of a "Canadian postmodern."

Suggesting an affinity between Clark Blaise's *Lusts* and Ondaatje's novels, Hutcheon grants Ondaatje a position of privilege within a pantheon of contemporary Canadian writers, both male and female. For her, *Lusts* provides an important postmodern version of the *Künstlerroman* that is "playing with and contesting the boundaries between men and women, but also between art and life, fiction and autobiography" (81). However, she goes on to say that

Blaise is not alone in this kind of challenging: recent works by Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood, Susan Swan, Rudy Wiebe, Timothy Findley, and, perhaps most obviously, Michael Ondaatje attest to the attraction of boundaries and margins as sites of novelistic investigation. And the issue of gender often enters the discussion, as we shall see again later. Ondaatje has, in fact, been described as a writer, fascinated with borders, including those between art and reality. But he has combined his challenge to the life/art boundaries with a defiance of the limits of conventional literary genres. (81)

While the awkward flow of Hutcheon's paragraph, the fact that gender is tacked on almost as an afterthought, gives away the troubling logic of this

equation of various boundary discourses, her writing betrays a strong desire to invest postmodern writing in general and Ondaatje's specifically with an essential element of radicality or political subversivity.

This flimsy argument is built on a desire to push beyond what Hutcheon sees as "a cliché of postmodern criticism that a literary text's self-reflexivity has led to a general breakdown of the conventional boundaries between the arts" (78) and to stake a claim for postmodern CanLit as a site of political resistance. The contention that postmodern Canadian literature is politically challenging stands on her notion that in addition to these conventional boundaries, "other boundaries are being challenged too, including those between genres, and even those between art and what we call life or 'reality'" (78). Without broaching the theoretical questions raised by the last of these massive generalizations, or for that matter the categorical difference between modernism and postmodernism upon which her thesis hinges,<sup>2</sup> Hutcheon opines that "Life can now (more or less safely) be let in again" (78). While her language leaves the question of agency open, making it difficult for us to guess whose life will be let in or for that matter who might do the letting, she locates a key issue for readers of CanLit, one in which Ondaatje's writing, as an effect of its position in the forefront of a politically engaged Canadian literature, plays an important role.

Even though Hutcheon's assertion of an interest in the boundary or border between life and writing as a key overlap between "women's writing" and the fiction of "male postmodern writers" raises many more questions than it answers, Hutcheon's seminal critical formulation of a "Canadian Postmodern" projects an important problematic, which she correctly identifies as being at the centre of Ondaatje's writing. Describing Ondaatje's work as compromised by its accessibility, Hutcheon presents an ideal Ondaatje

with which to regenerate a particular version of CanLit and/or Canadian culture. While her suggestion that his writing “is both historical and ‘performative’” and “does seek to represent a reality outside literature” (83) provides a fair analysis of his work, or so I believe, it is her own apparent inability or unwillingness to confront the politics of identity that informs her position as a spokesperson for the new Canadian (postmodern) literature. In claiming that “one of the major connections between life and art is the performing narrator, whose act of searching and ordering forms part of the narrative itself” (83), she finds that this element of Ondaatje’s work embodies “the postmodern desire to situate even the most self-reflexive of its performances within history” (84).

As in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, in this bio- or historico-graphic metafiction [*Running in the Family*] we experience that postmodern performance (which Ondaatje had seen in Cohen’s work) in our act of reading the fragmented text. (84)

Yet, Hutcheon does not attempt to locate this “act of reading” within either the history of Canada’s cultural politics or the contemporary space imagined in her critical project.

In assuming an essential identification between feminism and postmodernism, she performs an elision of other key differences. Aligning Ondaatje with a generalized, might we even say universal, notion of difference, Hutcheon frames a dangerous paradigm by which Ondaatje’s (apparent) radicality is allowed to consume differences amongst readers. In a sense the “accessibility” of his writing is taken as license to identify with the performing narrator, reifying and eliding Ondaatje’s identity differences. She establishes Ondaatje’s self-reflexive texts, his “life writing,” as a point of intersection in which we – unproblematically and unapologetically “Canadian” –

come into contact with a living breathing author, where we enter the space of cultural production. And yet without attempting to think through the difficult and contradictory politics of position that inform not only the construction of a writer's identity but the readers' as well, this idealized image constructs Michael Ondaatje as a postmodern Canadian writer, ultimately allowing nationalism, in conjunction with a rather problematic sense of postmodernism, to contain critical issues raised in the writing. This manner of reading Ondaatje allows for the historical specificity not only of his textual engagements but also of his authorial existence to be absorbed into the collective subject of CanLit. His difference, our diversity: exotic, multi-cultural, yet comfortably familiar.

#### WISDOM OF PLACE

Every place has its own wisdom. Come.  
Time we talked about the sea,  
the long waves  
"trapped around islands" (Ondaatje "Tin Roof" 169)

In as much as they foreground a desire to break with the inherited narratives of history and literature, Ondaatje's texts have come to occupy an important place in the vanguard of socially aware CanLit. Notwithstanding certain habitual moves amongst Canadian critics to project their own liberal nationalism onto Ondaatje's writing and to thereby quell certain misgivings about the ethical or social efficacy of literary practice, his texts do locate various problems for the reformation of contemporary literary nationalism. Moving between the personal and the public, Ondaatje's texts present readers with a nexus in which to interrogate the relationship between self and society, including our own complicity in the construction and repression of identity. The fact that his writing self-consciously positions itself relative to

public discourse has meant that his texts have become events in which readers confront the ambivalent intersections of personal and public memory. Foregrounding his penchant for arriving constantly at the crux of self (construct and construction) and place, landscape and geography, scholars have created an image of Ondaatje as a quintessentially Canadian writer. Posing questions about the responsibility of the individual vis-à-vis the construction and representation of marginalized communities, his writing is germane to our consideration of contemporary nationalism/s. However, as I argue, recourse to an assumed Canadian cultural identity – multicultural or not – performs an elision of some of the deeper issues of identity posed in his texts. The tendency to see Ondaatje as a more or less un-problematically Canadian writer forecloses debate on his critique of the dominant discourse.

As we – a divergent and fragmentary society of readers – are presented with various events and interpretive aporia in Ondaatje's writing, the representation of identity formations raises questions about the relation of individuals to collectivity or community (even when that presentation appears to be "transparent"). In some instances, depending on one's critical location, these questions may be quite different from those assumed in the prevalent debates of nationalism. Being asked to consider who *he* is, i.e., to assess or evaluate the identity of the narrator as the figure relates to the historical identity of the writer, we are faced with the problem of who we might think we are. Or who we might be. Despite the fact that these concerns around collective identity run parallel to the discourses of civic nationalism, the collective subject they imagine cannot be dissolved into the subject of an ethnic pluralism, or multicultural nationalism. Just as it is dangerous to assume an equation between citizen and nation, between a representative



individual and the space s/he is seen to inhabit, it is dangerous to idealize difference between writer and readers, to see us all sharing the same position in the political debate. The drive to collapse all difference under the heading of a unitary entity called Canadian literature necessarily subordinates diversity, often disparity, to the ideals of citizenship – an emergent public subject.

The complexity of Ondaatje's engagement with the representational politics of cultural nationalism has not been lost on all readers. In one of his enigmatic *Errata*, Bowering draws a connection between his own contradictory sense of Canadian culture and Ondaatje's writing. Arguing for a more socially aware reading of contemporary literature that refuses referential reading habits and addresses the materiality of the writing, Bowering proposes an approach that takes account of the formal as the place of writing. He writes,

The problems with the historians, or let us say the way they chose to work, is this: they did not study what people are, but what they did. They were more interested in time than place. So literary historians did not much address what books are, but rather who wrote them and how they fit into the time of their societies. Hence the deprivileging of literary form – the very place where the writer of the poem or fiction found himself.

Bowering sees that historians and literary historians tend to work with preconceived notions of society which downplays the difference amongst people (within a nation say) and the tools (or techniques) we have inherited and use. Using Ondaatje's writing as an example, Bowering describes his notion of the "biotext" as an alternative to the hegemonic constructs of official history and literature:

Michael Ondaatje, in "Rock Bottom," created biotext, or it got created for him. Readers of *Running in the Family* know right away that they are not getting history, not getting autobiography. Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an extension of him. (*Errata* 24)

While the terms of Bowering's argument are somewhat difficult to decipher, his sense of the text as having a life of its own is useful. Suggesting, that in making certain formal decisions, Ondaatje enters into the problems of place, Bowering's sense of writing – qua "biotext" – coincides with Lefebvre's notion of social space. Both are comprised not only of representations of space-time (bio) but also of the contradictory social productions (texts) that correspond to both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic drives of knowledge construction. His attempt to move beyond the temporal, "time," and towards the spatial, "place," of the writing echoes Lefebvre's interest in asserting space as a dynamic aspect of critical theory. Bowering's problematic conclusion that "biotext is an extension of him" proposes an ethics of reading in which the writer both is and is not a living presence: regardless of his death or life, his text, like his property, belongs to someone, someplace. Thus, we might say that for readers of Ondaatje, the historical discourses with which he chooses to work, the archive, become extensions of not merely the author's life but of the social network in which they exist, i.e., they are points of contact between writers, readers and the historical present. Situated at the nexus of life and text, rather than the boundary between them, Ondaatje's writing challenges the problematic conception of the literary text as commodity or object – product rather than production. Although his texts, especially the later novels, are recognizably conventional, they actively disavow certain aspects of literary convention. As Bowering suggests, "Reader's of *Running in the Family* know right away that they are not getting history, not getting autobiography" – what they are left with both resembles and defies a literary text.

As Lynette Hunter notes, this is an aspect of Ondaatje's concern with genre. She argues that Ondaatje's writing engages with the question of genre

in order to examine the “appropriate location for the individual and how it may be determined by memory”; Ondaatje “re-presents the problems of the ‘self’ in terms of contesting memories and their relationship to communication” (197). In representing a search for “self,” his writing takes up the dominant images and myths of place in a manner that tends to call attention to the social function of literary and non-literary genres both. So doing, he affixes his texts to the particularity of space, not only as it is represented but also as it encounters representation. It is the ambivalent relationship between the individual and the public, metonymically realized in the relationship between a writer and a reading public, that keeps the question of identity not merely open but firmly rooted in the problems of place particular to a North American context.

As Hunter points out, Ondaatje’s writing is specific to a cultural context in which the fascination with identity is tantamount. His writing comes out of an engagement in and awareness of the quotidian details of popular culture:

Ondaatje... focuses on the generic and conscious literary devices that we are taught by our culture to recognize and use in an attempt to define self. He is an acute observer of cliché, classical allusion, contemporary intertextual reference, into all of which he explodes rapidly flowering images taken from the central cultural metaphors of North American obsession: cowboy, stars in space, jazz, sex. All of his narratives, whether prose or poetry, tell about the terrible destructive search for a fixed personal identity that will challenge the way that the state/public history forgets and erases individuals. Yet at the same time as the search for a reconstruction of history that will validate that image of self-identity, there is hovering around all the narratives the central person elusive, carrying a history that responds only to the immediate. (Hunter 205)

As Hunter suggests, Ondaatje “controls myth in order to examine it” (206): he re-circulates popular culture (always within a particular context) in order to pull it apart. More often than not, we see his writing representing quests

for knowledge in the contingencies of a place and time rather than in the immutability of truth. If, in his narratives, “the structure of the detective story is foregrounded as a conscious device,” the drive to discovery is thwarted, “Answers are only posited to indicate their inadequacy” (Hunter 206). Thus, Ondaatje’s writing resists the conceits of discovery, which are central to conventional modes of history and literature, while engaging with them. Recreating the desire for knowledge and intimacy (with the past), his texts ultimately turn “from questions about truth to pursuing the tensions between the historical fixity of identity and personal ambivalence” (206). Borrowing one of Ondaatje’s most powerful metaphors, we might say that his writing smuggles the question of historicism into the space of CanLit in the skin of a lion. Vice versa, we might also say he brings the question of CanLit into the realm of history. Rather than finding or representing an individual capable of fulfilling the needs of a national literature or culture, however, the writing holds the line between the inside and outside of an imaginary place.

If the image of missing person or displaced subject is prevalent in Ondaatje’s work, there also tends to be an equally important, no less problematic, concern with the space in which s/he both appears and disappears. While this feature of the writing has garnered less commentary, it is important to our understanding of Ondaatje’s critique of nationalism. More often than not, the search for identity takes place in a zone of conflict and marginalization. A roster of his characters conjures up a litany of dramatic locales: Billy the Kid and the “Wild West” (*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*), Eliza Fraser in the colonial Australian Outback (*The Man with Seven Toes*), Buddy Bolden and Storyville (*Coming Through Slaughter*), the “immigrant” writer-narrator going “home” to Sri Lanka (*Running in the Family*), the Anglo-Irish outlaw Patrick and the working class, Greek and Macedonia

neighborhoods of Toronto's 1920s East End (*In the Skin of a Lion*), Hana and Kip in war-torn Tuscany (*The English Patient*), Anil in a civil war ravaged Sri Lanka (*Anil's Ghost*). In each case, the character's physical location, the geography s/he inhabits or moves through, is an important element of his or her psychic development. At times, their surroundings provide regenerative stimuli, at other times degenerative. Working through this provisional list of characters and texts, it is apparent that Ondaatje's representation of space is dependent on a strong sense of what we might call historical geography: a propensity to develop narratives around recognizable spaces which are both integral to and marginalized in certain key moments in the historic expansion of European culture. The American Frontier ("Wild West"), New Orleans (the "birth place of Jazz"), the Australian "outback," Toronto's East End, bombed out Tuscany, divided Sri Lanka: these spaces are the sites of conflict between two or more vastly different historical forces or social trajectories. In each instance, the narrative takes its cues from a specific point or break in the progression of "Western development." In various shapes and forms, these are "contact zones" (Pratt 1-14), in which the modernizing push of industrialization meets with resistance from older, adverse modes of production. Inevitably, Ondaatje's narratives are set on the cusp of a disappearing social order.

The social, cultural and economic relations that are brought to bear on the characters, the ebbs and flows in the tide of history, provide the ur-text against which the actions and movements of the main characters are brought into focus. Like de Certeau's "*Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban (text) they write without being able to read it," Ondaatje's characters are both presented with and present a deeply encoded movement of personal and social desires. Ondaatje habitually depicts

the idiosyncratic lives of imaginary individuals taking place in specific locations, which are easily identified, in and with the archive of culture.

Ondaatje's demonstrated fascination with the figures of history seems to shift back and forth from an interest in historical personages – like Billy the Kid, Eliza Fraser – to an interest in historical sites – Storyville, the Bloor St. Viaduct or R.C. Harris Filtration Plant, the Villa San Girolamo, the ruined Buddhist temples of Sri Lanka. This trajectory marks a movement from hero to monument.<sup>3</sup> The problem of subjectivity, the dichotomy between the public individual and the private self, this dilemma of identity, seems to come to depend more fundamentally on the specificity of particular spaces. In depicting the development of a character's sense of self, he relies more and more on the cultural history of particular social and architectural milieus.

If, as I am claiming, the interaction between the subject and his/her space is particularly vital in Ondaatje's writing, it is because of the fact that his sense of space, both the manner in which it is represented and the spaces his texts choose to represent, is inflected or invested with the dialectical forces of an embodied social commentary or critique. In as much as struggles are manifest within the rich and highly symbolic sites of historic conflicts, their interactions with the monuments and monumental spaces further elaborate an on-going social script that assumes and informs the present of their performance or reception. Characteristically, Ondaatje's writing does more than merely represent these sites of conflict and contradiction; it expropriates these architectural monuments, reframing them within the present, while reframing the present within the historical trajectories they assume. If as the narrator of *Tin Roof* says, "Every place has its own wisdom," the equation of wisdom with place does not necessarily suggest an essential, unequivocal bond between the two. The wisdom of place, as Lefebvre's theory of

social space suggests, is subject to the forces of hegemony, is itself negotiated, mediated, and contingent. By and large, the wisdom of place is relative to the groups who inhabit that space and the individual desires it both accommodates and induces. If we understand place as the idealist manifestation or representation of space, then we might also speak of the process or production by which it comes into being and by which it gains value.

THE CITY – CONSTRUCTION, MEMORY, LOCI.

*In the Skin of a Lion* – arguably one of Ondaatje’s most formally conventional texts, if not his first novel – takes readers beyond the problematic identity of the individual, into a complexity of identity formations that gather in and move through the creation of the city: Toronto 1920-30s, Toronto 1980-90s. In focusing on the city, this text brings together a complicated web of topics and contextual discourses, including modernist aesthetics, urban planning, localism, folklore, class-consciousness and identity politics, which ultimately confound attempts to place Ondaatje’s writing firmly within the traditions of a Canadian literary nationalism. Somewhat paradoxically, metropolitan Toronto, the setting and subject of the novel as well as the site of its inscription and publication, is a node in a much larger social sphere than that described by the political boundaries of the nation states, or for that matter by the imagined community of a national culture. The urbanization of Toronto undertaken during the first few decades of the 20th century figuratively and literally lays the ground work for the transformation of the city during the 1970s and 80s. In the self-reflexive overlapping of the present (of inscription) with a specific past, *In the Skin of a Lion* draws a direct connection between the formation of Toronto as national centre, which it was becoming during the 1930s, and the development of Toronto as a “world class

city,” which it became in the 1970s and 1980s. Framed by the topology of the city with which it is engaged, Ondaatje’s historicism, i.e., that which both underlies and is challenged in the novel, locates itself within a geography of national development. It is important to recognize that, within the context of the Trudeau era Multiculturalism it reflects, Ondaatje’s depiction of Toronto might be said to reflect various national, international, transnational initiatives that converge on the problems of cultural identity and migrations.<sup>4</sup> At the crux of the novel is the problem of Toronto being and becoming a multicultural city. As a representative topos within the new geography of a state sponsored Multiculturalism, Toronto could no longer be simply multicultural.

In as much as Ondaatje’s novel supposes a critique of national identity, it wrests nationalism from its imaginary agrarian roots and replaces it firmly within the trajectories of urbanization and industrialization. *In the Skin of a Lion* reverses the country-city binary: shifting focus from idealized landscape onto the unruly socioscapes of the city, it performs a modernist critique that is reminiscent of Raymond William’s *The Country and the City*. Representing both urban and rural Ontario in terms of labour politics (the most notable example of which is the novel’s depiction of Cato and the Finnish loggers), Ondaatje’s novel opens up questions of nationalism to a complicated layering of identity differences. Asserting prevalent ethnic differences as differences of class and power, Ondaatje turns the rhetoric of nationalism back on itself, the Russian bridge-builders, Finnish loggers, Italian thieves, contest the primacy of an as yet unfinished WASP hegemony.

In concentrating on this history of Toronto, Ondaatje’s writing draws our attention to the construction of the modern metropolis, both ideological and material. It is important to recognize that during the 1920s and 1930s



Toronto had begun to develop into the sprawling urban centre that it would become in the 1970s and 1980s. According to one social scientist, "By the 1920s... a new urban form was beginning to take shape; it was no longer the compact and dense industrial city but a core city surrounded by a ring of suburbs such as in Montreal and Toronto – the metropolis was in the making" (Isin 99). In this period, the "seeds" (to recycle Ondaatje's heading) of Toronto's growth within a modern Canadian society and economy were sown – as were those necessary for it rise to the (self-proclaimed) status of 'world city' during the 1970s and 80s. The construction of the Bloor Viaduct, upon which the novel opens, and of the water filtration plant, around which the major events of the narrative are organized, were key events in the expansion of Toronto beyond its historic centre-core; both monuments are symbolic of Toronto's infrastructural development. During this period, the east Toronto neighborhoods in which the characters live and work (in particular the Beach) are in the process of being consumed in the urban expansion. The viaduct enabled the city to expand east across the Don Valley; in extending communication networks it allowed the municipality to incorporate a number of Eastern "villages" or suburbs into the larger Metropolitan whole. The filtration plant was designed to connect the entire area to a good supply of clean drinking water. Together these two massive projects of urban development represent the rationalization of a heterogeneous social space, an undertaking which is both dependent on growing working class communities whose labour it requires and threatened by the presence of the "foreign" elements they represent.

At the centre of *In the Skin of a Lion* then is the struggle for control over the new city and the representation of its inhabitants. On the one hand, there is the city commissioner's dream realized in "the marble walls, the

copper-banded roofs” (109) of the Waterworks. The narrator tells us that Harris liked to think that in building the Waterworks, he “was providing jobs as he had in the building of the Bloor Viaduct, the St. Clair Reservoir” (110). Against the harsh reality of the depression, of its massive unemployment and wide-scale poverty, however, it is clear that

Harris was building it for himself. For a stray dream he'd always had about water, water they should have taken across the Bloor Street Viaduct as he proposed. No one else was interested in water at this time. Harris imagined a palace for it. He wanted the best ornamental iron. He wanted a brass elevator to lead from the service building to the filter building where you could step out across rose-coloured marble. The neo-Byzantine style allowed him to blend in all the technical elements. The friezes depicted stylized impellers. He wanted herringbone tiles imported from Siena, art deco clocks and pump signals, unfloored high windows which would look over filter pools four feet deep, languid, reflective as medieval water gardens. (110)

From the narrator's perspective, the mammoth structure with its Orientalist flourishes is seen to represent not only the self-consuming pride of the town fathers but also an attempt to rewrite the future in their own image:

[Rowland Harris] pulled down Victoria Park Forest and the essential temple swept up in its place, built on the slope towards the lake. The architect Pomphrey modelled its entrance on a Byzantine city gate, and the inside of the building would be an image of the ideal city. The brass railings curved up three flights like an immaculate fiction. The subtle splay on the tower gave it an Egyptian feel. (109)

Juxtaposed with this dream, or immaculate fiction, Ondaatje's narrator posits a grim image of the workers on whose labour it depended. The narrator tells us “This was the other tentacle of his dream. The one that reached out and clung to him in a nightmare where faces peered out, working in that permanent rain of condensation” (110). Harris knew these faces from the photographic images of the city's official photographer, Arthur Goss, but he himself was removed from their reality.

He was a man who understood the continuity of the city, the daily consumption of water, the speed of raw water through a filter bed, the journeys of chlorine and sulphur-dioxide to the island filtration plant, the 119 inspections by tugboats each year of the various sewer outfalls, and the approximate number of valves and caissons of the East Toronto pumping stations, and the two miles a year of water-main construction - from the St. Clair Reservoir to the high-level pumping station, and the construction of the John Street surge tank... (110-111)

Harris' dream, consumed as it is by the workings of water and machinery, presupposes another set of dreams, which have all but disappeared from the official memory his buildings have come to represent and were self-consciously attempting to describe.

At a later point in the narrative, the text returns to the struggle for the city as a problem of representation, class and the recording of history. We see Patrick looking for "information on those who actually built the bridge," but he finds only facts about the material used, "every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete" (145). Outside the official archive, outside Goss' commissioned images, the faces and names of the workers has been systematically eradicated. The narrator laments the fact "There were no photographers like Lewis Hine" (145) in Toronto at the time. Making a curious equation between Hine's "great photographs" and the depiction of the working classes, the narrator tells us that "Official histories, new stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle." Presenting readers with the problematic relationship between art and human suffering or social justice, Ondaatje's text falls into a reverie about the definition and efficacy of art. Quoting Judith Mara Gutman's essay on Hine, "Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become," the text detours back to 1066 and the Bayeux Tapestry.

which was begun two years before “Constantin the African brought Greek medicine to the western world. The chaos and tumble of events” (146).

At this point in the novel, shifting discourses fast and furiously, it is as if the author intervenes. Finding ourselves confronted, without warning or preparation, with this contextual detail for a 900 year old tapestry, we are left to grapple with the link between Hine’s photography, the representation of class struggle, ethnicity and the making of history, art, and literature.<sup>5</sup> Apparently as a form of apology for the digression – from Patrick at the Riverdale library to Constantin the African and the Bayeux Tapestry – the writer-narrator suggests that “The first sentence of every novel should be: ‘Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.’ Meander if you want to get to town” (146). The etymological pun momentarily destabilizes the specificity of Patrick’s location: in the wandering logic of this piece of narrative the Don River is suddenly equated with the Turkish river Menderes, suggesting an altogether different context than the one at hand. The relatively transparent allusion to Hine’s photographs becomes lost in overlapping histories of Empire. The figure of the missing workers is re-inserted in a much longer history of oppression, and more to the point, it collides with a rich history of linguistic and aesthetic complexity.

Ondaatje’s depiction of the city – his portrayal of Toronto as a contradictory locus of class and ethnic animosity – does more than simply challenge the idyllic regionalism popular in the conception of a Canadian identity or culture, as it was construed during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. It also brings to the fore the problematic tendency of literary critics and historians to see themselves aligned with the forgotten, the downtrodden. To put it more directly: the circuitous flow of the writing seems to ask us: yes but how do you recognize these missing workers? It is fine to realize that there is more to the

story than meets the eye, more to the story than Harris and the city commissioners would have us see; however, the form of their re-appearance is as equally important as their initial disappearance.<sup>6</sup> In a sense this ambivalence – the uneasy movement back and forth between Harris’ dream and the nightmarish history of the working-class communities – problematizes the collapse of literary fiction onto the historical fiction of the urban development. It re-situates CanLit in relation to a critical discourse of city life or a modern critique of urbanism (with which the work of Lewis Hine might be associated).<sup>7</sup> It is the intersection of the literary critical discourse and the problematic space of the city in progress that informs Ondaatje’s powerful critique of mainstream discourse.

Thus, Ondaatje’s depiction of Toronto is difficult to reconcile with the progressive nationalism of contemporary CanLit because of the interpretative problems it poses, not only the picture it develops. In fact, we might argue that his decision to focus on the city and to foreground class struggle and ethnic diversity relies more on a sense of modernist critique than it does any contiguous strain of Canadian literature. Within the various fields of literary and cultural studies, the city is a topos that holds a special place in the emergence of modern and post-modern critical discourses. As the limit of cultural development and the expansion of modern industrial capital, the city as an abstract concept as well as a historical specificity has generated a large body of critical theory. Contrary to the underlying presuppositions of nationalism and its predilection for a particular regionalism built around a hierarchy of landscapes or idealized locales, the city is always already beyond the scope of a single national consciousness. As de Certeau argues, the city is essentially unintelligible; it exists as the proof and apotheosis of civilized culture, but it also brings into being many of its shortcomings. The drive

behind modern art and architecture is founded in a long history of attempting to rationalize the city as a site of wealth and power, a desire to create and obfuscate particular constellations of social interactions. Looking back on the Medieval and Renaissance periods, de Certeau argues that “the desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it,” and that the mastery of the artists was to represent “the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed” (153). In attempting to satisfy this drive for perspective, the great master painters of the renaissance were constructing a fiction that is still at work in our attempts to conceive of the city as a readable fiction; de Certeau says that this fiction “made a medieval spectator into a celestial eye,” that “It created gods” and that this “same scopic drive haunts” modern users of architecture and urban planning (153). Ultimately, our attempt to “read” the city and to give it meaning is connected to this conceit of god making. Thus in Ondaatje’s narrative, the construction of the Bloor Viaduct and the R.C. Harris Filtration Plant stands as powerful symbols to the hubris of their creators. They represent a drive for a greater concentration of capital and political control that is contingent on control of both the representations of space (ideal) and representational space (social).

In the streets and below the surface of the city, spatial practices confound the fixity of authoritative identities. *In the Skin of a Lion* draws attention to the way that

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world’s debris. Even if the literary form and the actantial schema of ‘superstitions’ correspond to stable models whose structures and combinations have often been analysed over the past thirty years, the materials... are furnished by the leftovers from nominations, taxonomies, heroic or comic predicates, etc. that is, by fragments of scattered semantic places. These heterogeneous and even contrary elements fill the homogeneous form of the story. Things extra and other... insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. One thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the

constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve order. (de Certeau 107)

As much as it comes out of or is informed by Ondaatje's archival research, the novel is informed by a sensitivity to everyday rumours and/or the gossip of neighborhoods. Beneath the veneer of a historically accurate – i.e., verifiable – depiction of reality, the text opens itself onto the ebb and flow of common knowledge, akin to what E.P. Thompson refers to as “customs,” contradictory local practices that shape official “constructed order” but which can not be subsumed within it.

One set of important ruptures or tears in the surface of this order, the concept of the city of Toronto, becomes apparent through the novel's depiction of the contiguous ethnic relations at the centre of Ondaatje's drifting, elliptical narrative. Against the rhetoric of a new pluralism (Multiculturalism), the text proposes a much more contradictory image of an existing social space defined by conflicts and allegiances that confound current ideas about Canada's ethnic and racial formation. For local historian, Randall White, the expansion of the modern metropolis during the 1920s is synchronous with the development of Toronto as a multi-ethnic urban centre. He writes that during this period the “cultural demography in Toronto started to become a complicated subject”:

In the first two decades of the twentieth century for the first time in the official city's still youthful history, significant numbers of non-British migrants were coming to Toronto. They had backgrounds in Europe beyond the United Kingdom, even beyond such European places as Germany and France, and even (to a much smaller but still noticeable degree) in parts of the world beyond Europe altogether. *By 1920, the broader multiculturalism that would blossom so boldly after the Second World War had put down its first deep roots.* (22; emphasis added)

In spite of the fact that the ethnic diversity of Toronto of the 1920s is an important precursor to the Toronto in which Ondaatje was writing, few critics have theorized the overlap between the two Torontos. Critical response to the novel tends to assume certain similarities between the present and the past, reading the obvious link between the two cities as a kind of apriori element of Canadian multiculturalism. Published in 1993 (five years after Ondaatje's novel), White's statement takes Toronto's emergence as a 'world' city for granted and in so doing belies a popular conception in the newness of Canadian multiculturalism, which tends to be based on simplified versions of the past. However, as White points out, the roots of current multiculturalism date back at least as far as the early part of the century and are integral to the development of modern urban culture. The current multiculturalism, as the novel suggests, has as much to do with colonialism and the drive to build a modern industrial society as it does with the rhetoric of postwar liberalism.

Rather than presenting readers with a depiction of Toronto as the backdrop against which an identity, or ethnicity, emerges, Ondaatje's novel presents a vision of Toronto which constantly undermines the fixity of various ethnic identities and clearly demarcated social formations. It is important to note that Ondaatje's conception of the city is unique in the comprehensive nature of its vision. While there is an abundance of writing that represents various ethnic neighborhoods and the emergence of particular ethnicities, little of it focuses on the problem of ethnic urbanity on a larger level.<sup>8</sup> That Ondaatje's narrative is not restricted to a single neighborhood or ethnic enclave but concerns itself with the development of an ethnically and racially diverse labouring class is an important aspect of its critique of multiculturalism. Ondaatje's conception of the city - i.e., his willingness to write a novel of significant political and aesthetic scope to attempt to em-



brace something as complex as representing the urban – is significant to the emergence of contemporary Canadian identity formations. Social Geographers S. H. Olson and A. L. Kobayashi argue,

In each generation Canadian society is rebuilt and the “place” of immigrants in Canadian society is redesignated. They become embroiled in the unresolved conflicts of earlier groups and subject to social definition within the dominant ideology of the time.” (141)

Thus, Ondaatje’s attempt to grapple with the issues and struggles of the earlier immigrant groups needs to be seen in relation to the ongoing social definition and ideological conflicts of contemporary society. These stories are part of a weaving and an un-weaving of urban culture that refuses finally to allow identities to be consumed by an ideology of simple pluralism. In a sense, the novel’s anti-climax, Patrick’s unexploded bomb, might be read as a symbolic depiction of certain unresolved tensions between the myth of “ethnic diversity,” upon which official cultural policy is built, and everyday life.

#### ON THE BEACH

To develop a more thorough understanding of the complexity of Ondaatje’s representation of the city, I would like to conclude this chapter by attempting to locate the novel within the specificity of a particular social space and/or moment in the history of “race relations” in Toronto. I would like to turn to a discussion of confrontation that took place on a stretch of beach adjacent to the R.C. Harris filtration plant and which has been recorded in the city archives. According to Dennis Duffy, whose essay, “A Wrench in Time: A Sub-Sub-Librarian Looks beneath the Skin of a Lion,” provides insight into Ondaatje’s particular, if somewhat idiosyncratic, use of archival material, there was an altercation between a “foreign” worker or security guard and a

group of “local Beach-ites” on this site 69 years ago. While representation of this event is not apparent in the text of the published novel, Duffy contends that its traces can be felt in Ondaatje’s writing. He argues that this event provides a subtext to *In the Skin of a Lion*; reading the archive against Ondaatje’s idealized history, Duffy points to certain creative elisions that he feels enrich our understanding of Ondaatje’s sense of politics and his craft as a postmodern writer.

In the spirit of what he refers to as creative teamwork, Duffy has examined the city archives and unearthed a series of documentary “items,” of which this incident is one, which demonstrate “the narrative’s mythopoeic force.” Because Ondaatje’s “Jackdaw-like” novel “assembles, from among various details of Toronto’s history, a structure ultimately visionary and artistic and visionary in scope”(129), Duffy feels that it is important to address the sources of his fiction. Duffy asserts (I think reasonably so) that in looking at the historical material available to Ondaatje, critics might better assess what he calls – hearkening back to Keats – Ondaatje’s “hand” or artistic genius. To demonstrate the particularity of Ondaatje’s revisionary technique, while attempting to account for various representational conundrums posed by the novel, Duffy focuses on four related historical incidents that he sees as being consistent with Ondaatje’s obvious interest in the representation of class struggle and social stratification. While each of Duffy’s four items are interesting and do provide critics with a way into the question of Ondaatje’s use of archival material, for the sake of brevity, I will confine discussion to one of the items: Item 2, the confrontation between some local residents and a security guard at the site of the waterworks (mentioned above).

From Duffy's version of this story he has uncovered in the official archive, we learn the following details:

On Christmas day 1933, some strolling local residents are "basking in the almost spring-like sunshine, with hearts filled with thoughts of peace, goodwill to men, and the dinner to come." Because work on the site [the lake shore construction site of the new filtration plant] is shut down for the holidays, they trespass onto the shoreline. There they encounter "a gesticulating foreigner," who asks them if they can read enough English to obey the sign and stay clear of the site. (126)

He describes how the "local residents," who were incensed by the incident, draft a pamphlet or "flyer" expressing their xenophobic outrage:

the anonymous "Beach-ites" circulate an account of their treatment - entitled "Nip the Nuisance in the Bud" - at the hands of the "gesticulating foreigner" that reaches the office of the commissioner, who bucks the complaint back to C.W. Power, project manager for northern construction. He quickly informs the commissioner that the watchman was an ordinary workman who took the job temporarily because no regular guard wanted to work on the holiday - and that, by the way, the man has been fired. (126-7)

In unearthing the "Beach-ite" flyer, Duffy believes he has found documentary proof of the class struggle and ethnic conflict that, for him, defines the Toronto of Ondaatje's novel. What is remarkable about this reading is not so much the presumption it makes about what has transpired, but the way it assumes a homogeneous readership who might be appalled by the incident but who nevertheless have come to expect it from their predecessors, who are of course more intolerant and more racist than we are. Duffy's liberalism does not allow him to question the function of this document in the archive. It does not allow him to make any direct connections between the prevalence of racism in the contemporary city and the archivist's need to remember or preserve information pertaining to the Christie Pits Riot earlier that year: the city's first "race" riot.

While Duffy's interpretation of this bit of history does in many ways fit with Ondaatje's depiction of language politics in the East End, it fails to address its own predilection towards a race blind critique of class division. In assuming that we are more knowledgeable, more progressive than the various individuals involved with the event, whose records compose the archive, Duffy constructs a narrative that over-simplifies the remarkably diverse identity formations alluded to. Assuming that the "foreign worker" is the victim of a callous norm, that he has been sacked by a cohesive group of locals with immediate access to the machination of bureaucratic office, Duffy's narrative glosses over a complexity of political wills and social agents, the subtle distinctions between which or whom are woven into the fabric of Ondaatje's novel. In representing this specific social space in terms of a two-dimensional struggle between a powerful elite and weak working class, which hinges on a binary opposition between the local and foreign, Duffy's argument is flawed by the fact that it supposes to read the archive transparently. It posits an us and them in which the reader is asked to make a rather problematic identification with the image of victimized foreigner, or other, while disassociating him/herself from the ruling power. Neither wondering about his own position as literary historian nor for that matter attempting to come to terms with the ambivalent function of the archival record with which he is working, the critic constructs a simplified version of history against which to read Ondaatje's subversive intent (an act which ultimately legitimizes literary scholar and literature alike).

Duffy's account of this beach front confrontation leads us to imagine that in as much as he might have been able to diffuse the situation, "the watchman" has made a tactical blunder that ends up with him losing his job. His short description of the event suggests that the worker – twice a

“gesticulating foreigner” in Duffy’s text – was unable to navigate the political predisposition of these local xenophobes, whom we might suppose were related to the notorious Beachers whose racism precipitated the Christie Pits riot. Unable or unwilling to read the ethno-linguistic identity of the strollers, the worker asks them whether they could read English; this, we are led to believe, offends the self-proclaimed locals. From the details given, however, it is difficult to say whether the strollers were more upset by the presence of the guard or his offensive question. In retrospect, given that this is an archival document, we might suspect that this event was part of a much larger context of racism, but Duffy does not seem to be interested in developing this discourse. The episode, as it is being recalled, seems to focus on two aspects of the encounter: the fact that it represents a victimized “foreigner” and the fact that the issue of English was central to the conflict.

Rather than assuming a priori that these Beachers are part of the dominant order, I wish to suggest that their relation to power might still be more tenuous than Duffy suggests. The stroller’s ability to assume a “local” identity for themselves and to likewise determine who is “foreign” to the neighborhood should not be taken for granted. In the context of the expanding city, the position of these residents was much more a matter of conflict and uncertainty than it might seem retrospectively. When we consider this site as a zone of conflict not only between the city and the workers, but between the city and the residents whose homes and common properties were seen to be under seige, the issue of cultural diversity becomes much more ambivalent.

When we compare this extra-textual or contextual incident to the novel itself, as Duffy asks that we do, it is apparent that the event echoes Ondaatje’s concerns around the hegemony of a WASP cultural elite. However,

the punch line, “that, by the way, the man has been fired,” deflects questions of linguistic diversity, folding the issue of “English” back into a story of exploitation and class division that presumes a cohesive ruling class. In the novel, the interrelated problems of language and culture are more difficult to reconcile. One might recall Ondaatje’s description of a typical Saturday evening at the Fox Theater (a mere ten-minute walk from the site of the altercation). Instead of an assumed Anglo-majority, the novel paints a picture of a much more heteroglot social space. The narrator tells us that

Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs or, until the talkies came, through mimicking actors on a stage... Usually by the end of an east-end production at the Fox or Parrot Theatres the actors’ speeches would be followed by growing echoes as Macedonians, Finns, and Greeks repeated the phrases after a half-second pause, trying to get the pronunciation right. (47)

Against the hegemony of Anglo-Canadian cultural nationalism, Ondaatje’s novel presents a very different picture in which the dictates of popular culture were tailored to the likes and needs of the ethnic audience. The narrator describes an incident in which “a Sicilian butcher took over” when “the matinee idol Wayne Burnett dropped dead during a performance”; we are told that this butcher knew “his lines and blocking meticulously, and money did not have to be refunded” (47). Eschewing the colonial legacy of British culture and music, these new Canadians enjoyed various forms of American and African American entertainment:

Certain actors were popular because they spoke slowly. Lethargic ballads, and a kind of blues where the first line of a verse is repeated three times, were in great demand. Sojourners walked out of their accent into regional American voices. Nicholas, unfortunately, would later chose Fats Waller as his model and so his emphasis on usually unnoticed syllables and throwaway lines made him seem high-strung or dangerously anti-social or too loving. (47)

*Meander if you want to get to town.* If it has become a *lingua franca*, it is, as the novel suggests, in large part through the efforts of the workers themselves. Duffy's presentation of the conflict in terms of a more straightforward division of classes and/or cultures, in which English is taken for granted as the *status quo*, over-simplifies the socio-linguistic space *In the Skin of a Lion* portrays.

If we are to trust Duffy's account, the strollers took issue with the fact that they were barred from enjoying a winter walk along a stretch of beach-front they might reasonably have considered their own – in a sense common – property, regardless of the municipal transformations it was undergoing. The presentation – first within the pamphlet and secondly within Duffy's argument – of the “gesticulating foreigner” leads one to speculate on how this ethnic figure functions in terms of the larger class struggles and property battles that were at the heart of Harris' plans for the modernization or urbanization of Toronto. In focusing on this figure of the other – intrusive in the one account and victimized in the second – we lose sight of one of the central issues at stake in this confrontation. That is, in assuming a proprietary division between the strolling locals and the worker, we displace a series of complex ethnic differences and contradictory class relationships that inform our knowledge of this space. While this faction of “Beach-ites” was apparently upset by this foreign imposition on what they take to be communal space, their anger was also directed towards the works department, under whose authority this security guard was employed.

It is important to remember that access to the beach is restricted not by this outsider but by “the city,” as a result of their plans for urban expansion. We might remember that this confrontation took place in the context of a large scale rezoning of Toronto to include an erstwhile suburb or cottage

community within the greater metropolitan plan – to which, as I have already suggested, the novel's two main sites – the Bloor Street Viaduct and R.C. Harris Water Filtration Plant – were crucial. In spite of the fact that these massive construction projects would have provided infusion of cash into the community,<sup>9</sup> they would also signify an official intrusion into a way of life that had until the 1930s been figured around the ideals of a relatively small and isolated part of the city. In the place of leisure and recreation (the waterworks was built almost on top of the Fallingbrook Amusement Park), the neighborhood is in the midst of a clearly rationalized plan to develop the city works and to appropriate the lived spaces of a community into its development. There is little doubt that many of this old resort community, which had existed not simply outside but upon the economic margins of the city, felt themselves being swallowed up beneath the newly paved streets and well mowed parks of the expanding city.

Rather than assuming the normative position of the “Beach-ites” – i.e., that they are naturally aligned culturally and politically with the commissioner and the ruling elite of the city – we might read this incident as a struggle for control of a particular social space. When the strollers find their way blocked by one who is identified as an outsider, they do not, or so we are led to believe, approach the commissioner directly; neither do they send him a letter or meet with him in person. Instead, a flyer or pamphlet is circulated publicly. This decision on the part of the locals is paradoxically suggestive: firstly, of their lack of power to influence the workings of the city planners through direct political channels or personal affiliation; secondly, of their ability to capitalize on factional divisions amongst the city dwellers and to use the inherent instability of the emerging elite to their own public gain. Viewed in this light, “the Beach-ites” invocation of ethnic superiority (as they



assume it) is highly suggestive of the way tension within various ethnic groupings comes to be absorbed into the formation of a dominant culture. Despite obvious class or material differences between constituent communities of the renovated city, the ideal of whiteness belies contradictions within the ideal identity formations of the nation. The figure of the “gesticulating foreigner” should not be read simply as the image of the ethnic worker but might also be read as a confabulation of a politically vulnerable segment of the burgeoning city.

If the strollers' ability to influence the material well-being of the worker bespeaks a particular type of privilege, their apparent need to do so publicly through the production and dissemination of the literature pamphlets undermines the assumption of their cultural authority. The pamphlet, the construction and circulation of the fictions of place of which it is representative, is indicative of a much more tentative sense of their own agency or social power. In his reading of this archival narrative, Duffy presents a straightforward example of xenophobia, good old-fashion Canadian bigotry - that tends to under-estimate the powerful voices of subversion running through the writing of the city. The heteroglossia of ethnic diversity and social struggle depicted in the novel rests on a much more contingent sense of the private and public city. Guarding and defying the plans of the city commissioners, this figure of the moonlighting workman confounds the reading practice of the newly formed postmodern literati. If he becomes an image of a scapegoat who is sacrificed to appease, perhaps, the will of “the citizens,” he is also the figure of the native son upon which the new multicultural subject of literary nationalism depends. A revenant, this figure of the foreigner returns to the city to haunt the sanctity of the local with the memories of the past. The site of his dismissal refuses to allow itself to be folded into the promise of either

city or state. Local, urban, national, the space of inscription is itself at the heart of the matter.

#### NOTES

- 1 The issue of genre, which, it has been suggested, is an integral part of Ondaatje's aesthetic (Hutcheon, Hunter, Bowering), is an aspect of this interplay. Genre, defined as expectations (Burke), or the formal encodings of situations (Miller, Giltrow), provides a nexus between individual speaking and the social desire to find or make an articulation meaningful. Thus in putting into play the questions of genre or situation into play, as he does throughout his work, Ondaatje foregrounds the problematic of intention as a political act. I note this in passing because it corresponds with and expands my ensuing discussion of space and spatiality in his writing. However, the constraints of my argument, plus the fact that my discussions centres on one novel, puts the question of genre and genre theory beyond the scope of this dissertation.
- 2 For a strong critique of Hutcheon's somewhat troubling leaps of logic and her apparent disregard for the theoretical underpinnings of many of the terms of her debate, including not only modernism and postmodernism, but also poststructuralism and feminism, see Lorraine Weir's "Normalizing the Subject," and Davey's "Contesting Post(-)modernism."
- 3 It is true that many of his latter narratives still bear the residue of this earlier fascination with the icons of history and pop-culture; I'm thinking of the figure of Ambrose Small in *In the Skin of a Lion* and Katherine in *The English Patient*. Likewise, the earlier texts, as I have suggested, make use of notable settings. In the case of *Coming Through Slaughter*, both aspects of history coalesce in the figure of Buddy Bolden who is for all intents and purposes inseparable from the place in which he lives, the New Orleans that is synonymous with his name. The point that I am trying to make is that, as we follow the path of Ondaatje's development as a writer, the problematic of space becomes more and more an issue of consideration.
- 4 It is important to recognize the fact that the research and writing that went into this book were funded by a variety of granting agencies, including The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Ontario Council of Arts, York University and the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. As such, *In the Skin of a Lion* is in part representative of various arts initiatives that were instrumental in the realization of something that we might loosely define as Canadian culture, the exception being the Guggenheim Foundation perhaps.
- 5 Someone needs to write an essay on Ondaatje's fascination with the history of race. This image of Constantin the African suggests an interesting reversal of white supremacist narratives of European culture.
- 6 To date most of the criticism of this novel is predicated on a more or less obvious desire to read the novel as a candid depiction of reality (Davey, Beddoes, Mukherjee, Duffy).
- 7 It is important not to idealize Hine or his work. His images, while powerful, are themselves steeped in the romantic rhetoric of the city as an evil place (a rhetoric that I believe is by and large resisted in Ondaatje's text). As Ondaatje himself notes in another quoted passage from Gutman, Hine's work was based on the problematic

desire "To locate the evils and find the hidden purity" (quoted on 145) in the images of the exploited, workers, women, children.

- 8 According to S.L. Olson and A.L. Kobayashi's essay on ethnicity and the city in Canada, this problem is not restricted to literature: "Little has been written by geographers and urban historians about the specific ways in which ethnocultural groups have redefined Canadian urban character. An exception is a collection of articles on ethnic enclaves in pre-war Toronto, which treats the ethnic neighbourhood as 'ambience' and seeks to 'comprehend the group's sense of groups' and to assess the concepts of neighbourhood and ethnic networks in terms of 'the changing significance, for the immigrant and each succeeding generation of various community institutions'" (143).
- 9 Family legend has it that my Great Grandfather, George McArthur, was able to hedge against the city's plans to amass enough capital to establish a real-estate company, McArthur and Sons, by buying up "tax sales" and holding onto property slated for expropriation. During the period in question, George McArthur was to transform himself from piano tuner to real-estate speculator with enough ready cash during the depression to buy the home of one of the new city's chief architects, H. Addison Johnson. Johnson, one of the most prolific architects of the period, built the Marine Terminal, now refurbished as the Queens Quay Terminal Warehouse, the Tip Top Tailor Building, the Park Plaza Hotel, and the Medical Arts buildings; he was well known for his work with the poured concrete techniques used in the construction of both the filtration plant and the viaduct. Thus Johnson's home – now the house my parents live in and which I grew up in – was but 300-500 m from the construction site, so that the confrontation between the "Beach-ites" and the security guard would have taken place on the short stretch of beach. Again, according to family legend, Johnson's house included a private tennis court on the beach and was the site of ostentatious parties during the 1920s.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ONDAATJE, "RACE," AND THE SUBJECT OF WHITENESS

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – this calls for quite a different schooling. (Benjamin "A Berlin Chronicle" 598)

*Demarcation, said the prisoner Caravaggio. That is what we all need to remember (Ondaatje In the Skin of a Lion 179).*

The issue of identity is a central concern in Ondaatje's writing, yet in spite of critical recognition of this fact, there has been little theoretical discussion of the complexity of the writer's intricate performance of subjectivity. With a few notable exceptions (for example Gerry Turcotte's "Fears of Primitive Otherness": 'Race' in Michael Ondaatje's *The Man with Seven Toes*," and Arun Mukherjee's chapter "The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness" in *Oppositional Aesthetic*), Ondaatje's depiction of racialized subjects has received only limited attention. While his background as a Singhalese émigré and/or Canadian immigrant is noted as an aspect of his writing,<sup>1</sup> more often than not, critics treat this as an incontrovertible fact, rather than a problematic issue of performance. For the most part, Ondaatje's family history and background are exoticised; they are seen as adding to the experience of reading, but not as an issue for discussion or theorizing.<sup>2</sup> Thus the question of racialization is collapsed into ethnic difference, allowing Ondaatje to be absorbed into the fabric of Canadian literature. Critics make connections between the author's life and his writing when it can be seen as directly relevant to the content of his work, most notably in the context of *Running in the Family*, *Handwriting*, and *Anil's*

*Ghost*. However, the colonial aspect of this past and present (in the case of the two latter texts) is seldom brought to bear on the problem of Ondaatje's own identity.

Arun Mukherjee points out that critics idealize the fact of Ondaatje's South Asian birth.<sup>3</sup> She expresses concern about an apparent lack of "cultural baggage... brought with him when he came to Canada" in his writing, and she argues that "he does not write about his otherness" and that his writing shows "no trauma of uprooting" (114). Despite these shortcomings on the part of the writer, however, Mukherjee asserts, critical response to the work demonstrates a kind of historical and cultural blindness that oversimplifies the issue of Ondaatje's "otherness" (as Mukherjee puts it). Although her critique of his modernist aesthetic and of his having "simply refused to address himself to the particular needs of his community" (132) is troubling for the manner in which it prioritizes social realism and/or rhetorical transparency while assuming a static sense of social space, Mukherjee's argument raises a fundamental dilemma in Ondaatje's writing:

The question, then, is whether Ondaatje's work contains more than "the heat and the mountains and the jungle" of Sri Lanka that the white critics are unable to see in their ethnocentrism. For surely, Sri Lanka has more to it than the three things mentioned above. It consists of seven million human beings who ostensibly must have a world view unique to them. (114)

It appears that Ondaatje's wariness around giving public interviews (Fagan 115; Finkle 90) and a lack of public identification with other writers of colour has allowed mainstream, predominantly white readers, to claim him as one of their own. Yet, it is impossible to say that Ondaatje is not interested in "race" as an issue. In fact, I would contend that it is the crucial element of his writing. Instead of chastising him, as Mukherjee does, it might be more

interesting and timely to look at how his writing circulates and how it comes to be read as quintessentially “Canadian” writing.

Ondaatje's consistent ability to situate himself within various centralist undertakings – publishing with Anansi, Vintage, and McClelland & Stewart, editing self-consciously Canadian ventures such as *The Long Poem Anthology*, *From Ink Lake: An Anthology of Canadian Short Stories*, or even *Brick*, and speaking about himself in the media as a Canadian writer – is both problematic and intriguing. On the one hand, the question of how one writes about issues of “race” is much more multifaceted and contingent than Mukherjee's critique assumes; on the other hand, we are left to wonder how and why CanLit seems to be so drawn to this one writer. How and why is it that the racialized figures that run throughout Ondaatje's writing continue to generate debate while disappearing from view? Although Ondaatje has allowed himself to move into and through the mainstream of CanLit, he is certainly no apologist for a dominant ideology – he is no Neil Bissoondath. Yet, for the most part, the “raced” subject featured in many of his texts exists outside the parameters of the critical discourse.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Ondaatje's engagement both with the historical record of Toronto's development and the problematic representation of working classes is predicated on an ambivalent presentation of ethnicity, and implicitly racism. In this chapter, I will attempt to address the prevalent desire on the part of critics to position Ondaatje as a “white” writer, to read his texts as productions of an avant-garde, yet fully nationalistic, CanLit. While what we might refer to as his “hyphenated identity,” – i.e., Ondaatje's identity as an ethnic or immigrant writer – is used to locate Ondaatje within the purview of Canadian Multiculturalism and portray his writing as “new” and vital, it also allows for critical positivism to

prevail. The end result of this process is to see Ondaatje as proof of a cultural idealism, in which “race” and ethnicity are perpetuated as essential facts of one’s existence rather than constructs. Consequently, the performative elements of the writing are never explicitly engaged or theorized. Paradoxically, Ondaatje’s writing, as various postmodern critics have discussed it, is associated with aesthetics of subversion, yet the representational aspects of cultural politics are taken for granted. Following Hutcheon’s early attempts to champion his work as an example of a new aesthetically engaged or engaging (postmodern Canadian) literature, Ondaatje is put forward as a “political writer” only to have the complex aspects of such a claim or designation fall from view.

In part, this aporia in the critical discourse surrounding Ondaatje’s writing is the product of the writer’s ability to “pass” for a “white” writer. Despite the ambivalence of this identification, it is seldom argued that his writing is informed by a “race” politic. In general, Ondaatje is not identified as a writer of colour; his bi-racial background does not figure in readings of his work. While I have no desire to “out” Ondaatje as a racialized writer and would in fact argue that any such claim is suspect, both theoretically and politically, I am pointing to this issue as a discrepancy in the critical discourse. Furthermore, I am suggesting first that because the problem of personal history or his identity as a racialized writer is seldom picked up, it remains an important critical concern; secondly, that this omission is significant to the broader topic of contemporary CanLit as a space of racial contradiction and conflict. If, as I argued in the previous chapter, his writing takes us into specific zones of racial contact, then his writing is a key site in the unwinding discourse of a national identity. When we spin the problem of identity around, i.e., turn it back on the readers, shifting the burden of repre-

sentation away from the writer, the critical discourse surrounding Ondaatje's writing becomes a fascinating place in which to locate and further develop our understanding of the function and presuppositions of CanLit. Rather than becoming fixated on the actual identity of the writer and getting too caught up in the essentialist trap of racial positivism, we might think through the way his ambivalent passing both performs and undoes the dominant "race" codes of CanLit. Reading his texts as statements on the problematic construction of "whiteness" rather than "colour," we might re-situate this novel, or our interpretative performances of it, within the purview of a much more contradictory and contentious discussion of CanLit as a space of "race."

PATRICK: WRITER AS READER, SEARCHER

In attempting to read the cultural-political significance of Ondaatje's writing, we are left to address a relatively complex production of social space in which Ondaatje becomes a public figure of national importance – cultural and literary. The question of identity cannot hinge simply on Ondaatje's ability to represent history fairly and accurately. More to the point, it is a question of how the history of the disenfranchised might be addressed through his writing, or more properly *in literature*. The issue of how our critical judgments fit into the complex web of power relations at stake in the novel is crucial to the writing; it flows through the discourses it invokes. As readers have pointed out, one of the fundamental aspects of Ondaatje's self-reflexive technique is its tendency to foreground the act of reading. Thus, a central problem in interpreting Ondaatje has to do with where one enters into the political space provided by the novel.



While there are various characters in *In the Skin of a Lion* associated with creativity and artistic development – a constant concern in Ondaatje's writing – including Caravaggio, Temelcoff, and perhaps even Alice, it is Patrick who most obviously reflects the figure of the writer. As the central character in the novel, he is a provocative portrayal of the novelist: searcher, labourer, exile, and demolition expert. Not only the idealized contemporary artist (bricoleur, critic, mimic, activist), he is also a representation of the reader. Seeing Patrick hunched over the library tables at the Riverdale public library, pouring over photographs, sifting through Cato's letters, tracing lines on a map, it is as if we are looking at an image of Ondaatje doing research for the very novel we are reading. At the same time, however, we are presented with an image of the researcher as professional critic trying to make sense of the intertwined narratives of fact and fiction: attempting to reconstruct a life or lives from scraps of stories, images of people we don't know, or might. Patrick sees what Ondaatje sees, and in turn, the text shows us where to look for the clues upon which the narrative might be based, bringing us into the process by which a text comes to life.

Arriving in the city not as an overseas migrant but as naturalized citizen, Patrick's Anglo or Scots-Irish background should precede him. It should, we might want to believe, place him firmly within the ethnic mainstream. Yet, Patrick is caught up in the lives and communities of those with whom he shares little by way of language or culture. The Toronto Patrick enters and to which he becomes a member is a city of labourers. His allegiances, which develop slowly, are not with those of his "own kind," whoever we might like to think they would be. In the movement from Clara to Alice, Patrick's relationship to the city, to the people of the city, shifts from a pursuit of greatness, wealth, and fame as it is figured in the character of

Ambrose Small, to one of anonymous gratitude, alliance, and mutual dependence. If at the beginning of the novel, Patrick is one amongst a multitude of searchers committed to the dream of finding Small and collecting a handsome reward, by the end, his priorities have shifted. This is not to say that he becomes selfless or that he has become “a man of the people,” a kind of working class hero; rather that as he moves into the city and begins to find his place in it, he is embroiled in a complex web of relationships and responsibilities that make it difficult to distil his action into a pure sense of either individualism or communitarianism. The ambiguity surrounding Alice’s death and the ambivalent closure upon which the novel ends, the failure of his suicide mission and his return to Clara, suggest an intricate overlapping of communal desires and personal actions.

Read through the screen of ethnic identity, the figure of Patrick challenges many of the assumed differences between a homogeneous “whiteness” and ethnic or racial heterogeneity. The name Patrick Lewis posits a complicated network of symbolic references or allusions. The semiotic slipperiness Patrick, or “Paderick” as his Macedonian neighbours call him, opens the issue of identification to the flux of cultural significance and/or hybrid identities. Patrick Lewis: the collocation of the patronymic and the given name poses a convergence of disparate ethno-cultural narratives. Both names carry with them interesting ethnic and religious overtones, and potential contradictions.

Do we read Patrick as the Anglicization of the Gaelic Padraig – itself the bastardization of the Latin *Patria*? Is it an allusion to Saint Patrick, the patron saint of the proud, new world “Paddy”? The equation of Patrick and the root *Patria*, the unspecified home or native land it recalls, opens up a multiplicity of representational possibilities. Is he named in memory of Eng-

land, Ireland, and Scotland? Has the name been translated into the English from another Eastern or Northern European language? Is it a matrilineal legacy, commemorating a lost father, brother, uncle? Is it homage, perhaps, to a favourite sister, grandmother, or aunt, Patricia? Is the sacred land – Patria – to which the name gestures a homestead rather than a homeland, i.e., not a country at all but a farm in the Western Ontario countryside the character leaves behind in coming to the city, or some other pastoral origin? Do we choose to recognize Patrick as a Roman Catholic name and Lewis as an Anglican one? Do we read this religious difference across the ethnic divide separating of English and Irish, itself an operative difference in the divisions of labour so apparent in the history of Toronto's East End? Alternatively, can it not, perhaps, be read as marker of some other persecution – the Roman Catholics in England or the Quebecois in Canada? Patrick Lewis: the name suggests a kind of benign neutrality – we might say it has a nice “Canadian” sound to it – but like all proper names – given and inherited – it is underwritten by particular histories, specific genealogies that are forgotten in the homogenizing drive of civic nationalism.

Surely, however, these signs would have been obvious to those with whom he comes into contact. The people of the historical city he comes to would have read his family name and background: “Patrick” and “Lewis” markers of class and ethnicity. Choosing not to change his name as Alice Gull does, preferring not to take a new name to better fit his surrounding, Patrick carries the traces of this family memory with him. In a novel, in which David Caravaggio, the thief, resonates with the full splendour of the apocrypha of Western art, are we to imagine Patrick Lewis as a neutral name? Following, as he does, the demonstrative and performing Alice down into the underground of a working class Toronto or through the looking glass

social mobility, do we dare assume authorial neutrality? Ondaatje's sensitivity to the networks of meaning that converge on a single word infuses the act of naming with an ambivalent power. Moving across the boundaries between private and public connections – as he does in his use of Judge Sheard's name, or the character of Anne Wilkinson, or his appropriation of the published words of other artists or writers – Ondaatje's text confounds clear distinctions between the factual and the fictive. The inside and outside of his texts seem to slide together, making it difficult finally to draw a line between the name and the social act of naming – between the representation and representational spaces.

The intricate web of nativity and migration spun in and through Ondaatje's careful choice of allusions might in fact draw us into the contentious problem of Canadian colonialism and/or the possibility of a postcolonial CanLit. As a result of the polyvalence of his figures and, as I have argued, the social spaces they simultaneously absorb and occupy, the question of whether one reads the text as colonial or postcolonial, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, has to do with one's relative stake in the argument. In this case, Patrick seems to highlight a certain tension between the conception of Canada as a multi-cultural space and the political reality or materiality of a national homeland. It foregrounds the question of being born into place, *natio*, native, crossing it with the politics of departure and arrival, family status and the generational investments of European capital and culture. Drawing out the paradox assumed in a cultural-political identity based on geography, the figure bears traces of the unresolved struggles for proper land rights and claims about the representational powers of official narratives. In trying to determine where Patrick belongs, to which culture or people, we are implicitly taking up the questions of ownership and historical memory that

are central not only to the establishment of a Canadian identity but also to First Nations, Chinese Canadians, and other ethnic groups whose land and property claims continue to challenge the Federal government's continued attempt to control or manage the discourse on "race," identity, and the rights of citizens. Rather than assuming that Patrick's nativity belongs to Canada, i.e., reading him as a figure of a stable identity, I would argue that the question of belonging, which is invoked throughout the narrative, remains unanswered. Ultimately, the novel leaves the issue pending, forcing readers to make certain arbitrary distinctions between the proper name Patrick Lewis and its fictitious correlative. In the context of Canadian history and culture, if the name Patrick, as I am suggesting, bears the traces of a fundamental dis/ease within the discourses of migration and nativity that underscore the formation of a national identity, it holds the contradictions of an ongoing struggle with proprietary claims to citizenship. Within the semiotic field of literary studies, Patrick is a place of marked indeterminacy, a symbolic point of intersection between Old World legacies and New World individualism that cannot be framed entirely. It draws *us* into the politics of culture referred to and imagined in Ondaatje's writing.

By dint of his name and the lonely position he takes up on the edge of both the immigrant communities he lives and works in and the dominant culture that spawned him, the figure of Patrick represented in the novel provides a complex point of intersection between Ondaatje and his readers. If we assume Patrick's identity to be simply and irrevocably that of the "white" male, we miss the complex ethnographic and historiographic significance at the centre of the novel. Contrary to the notion that Patrick's is "coaxed out of his own reclusivity" (Beddoes) and into the community of ethnic workers with whom he becomes friends, I would suggest that Patrick's life, as it is

presented to us in fragments throughout the novel, is remarkable for the way in which he attempts to fit himself into his new community. It is worth recalling that within the cultural geography of Toronto during the 1920-30s, sectarian, and class divisions amongst the various Irish, Welsh, Scottish and English communities, as well as those of other ethnic nationalities, would have been clearly demarcated. For many newcomers these social enclaves, the established neighbourhoods, would have provided not only emotional shelter but also economic opportunity. Contrary to the assumed homogeneity of a national (English Canadian) space, the city that Patrick arrives in is anything but familiar. In as much as Patrick is a clearly Canadian character – “hey Canada” the workers hail him – he is by no means transparently Anglo or WASP. Showing no allegiance to any particular group or more importantly religion, the stability of his position vis-à-vis a so-called mainstream society should not be taken for granted.

To the contrary, I would argue that Patrick bears the traces of Ondaatje’s apparent proclivity for figures of ambiguous identity and/or racial indeterminacy. Rather than taking it on faith that Patrick is “Canadian” in the sense that he carries no visible markings of the ethnic or racialized subject, as most readers seem to assume, I would like to posit a reading of Patrick as a figure of mixed or at least a highly ambivalent racial background, who like the author himself is allowed to pass for white. Again, it is important that I am clear on this matter: I am not attempting to discover Patrick’s true racial identity. I am only suggesting that the “whiteness” with which he is associated, and of which he is ostensibly a signifier is in no way stable. Patrick is “white” as an effect of the performance of certain “race” blind critical presuppositions prevalent amongst contemporary readers. In order for Patrick to represent a kind of racial or ethnic neutrality (against

which ethnic diversity is signified), we must actively forget the historical specificity of class-consciousness, ethnic difference, religious affiliation, and the complicated shifts in colonial attitudes towards “race.” I don’t mean simply that the Irish, Italians, Macedonians, Greeks, along with various other European groups were not “white,” but that their assimilation into the racial mainstream itself is a matter of complicated contingencies and uneven developments throughout a wide range of urban, suburban, and rural dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

While it is obviously beyond the scope of this dissertation to properly develop the complex socio-historic narrative of racism in Toronto between the 1920s and 1980s or the way that official Multiculturalism radically changed racial signifiers without eradicating bigotry, it is important to recognize the field upon which *In the Skin of a Lion* enters. Following the figure of Patrick back into the labyrinthine network of cultural significances, we might posit a symbolic connection between the figures of Patrick and Saint Patrick, between Ondaatje’s figure of the prodigal son, exile and returning hero, and his popular namesake. That St. Patrick is an important cultural icon hardly needs reiterating. That the Irish throughout the diaspora, regardless of nationality, adore St. Patrick is also self-evident. But it bears remembering that, like William of Orange, St. Patrick has been invested with totemic powers and as such is associated with violent struggle, colonialism, and “race” relations.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he is a common figure of popular culture. Like Ondaatje’s Patrick, St. Patrick embodies a convergence of myth and history. Par excellence, St. Patrick is a figure of contradictions. He is both a modern hero of (ethnic) nationalism and a figure of classical mythology. In various guises St. Patrick can be traced back to a time well before the birth of modern Europe to the Roman conquest of the British Isles almost 1500 years ago.<sup>6</sup> More than simply the prodigal son who returns to Ireland to rid the

island of snakes (read: the unruly or uncivilized chieftains of an ancient Ireland), Patrick was a missionary for the Catholic Church. His return to Ireland was part of the Roman plot to subdue the political unrest and to re-establish religious orthodoxy. From history, we learn that Patrick was an escaped or appropriated slave who finds his way to Rome and ascends in the Church of the Holy Roman Empire mainly to be given the mission of returning to his "homeland." He is the slave, turned subaltern, turned native informant, turned hero – his allegiances shifting with time and across space.

Likewise, Ondaatje's central character takes on a mythic quality. From the opening pages of the novel, the narrative invests Patrick with a kind of inscrutability. "If he is awake early enough," it begins conditionally, "the boy sees the men walk past the farmhouse and down First Lake Road" (7). Developing out of the liminal space between the specificity of a singular event and the longer *durée* of history, the narrative holds together the repeated or cyclic events of this yet unnamed boy's youth and the intimate details of personal memory. We are told that Patrick goes to the window to watch a group of "Thirty loggers, wrapped up dark, carrying axes and small packages of food" and that he hears "their boots on gravel" (7). We learn then that

the boy who witnesses this procession, and who even dreams about it, has also watched the men working a mile away in the grey trees. He has heard their barks, heard their axes banging into the cold wood as if into metal, has seen a fire beside the creek where water is molecular and grey under the thin ice. (8)

And yet there is no explicit statement of the boy's feeling towards these men, simply the metaphoric comparison of the sound of the axes "banging into the cold wood as if into metal" and the statement that "For the boy the end of winter *means* a blue river, *means* disappearance of these men." On the other hand, we are told that the farmer, the boy's father, takes "silent comfort" in



the “companionship” of this “strange community.” Moreover, it is suggested that the loggers are conscious of their precarious social position on the edge of the town. When they “put their thin-gloved hands” on the cows to “receive their heat as they pass,” we are told that “They must do this gently, without sense of attack or right” because, the logic of the narrative suggests, “They do not own this land as the owner of the cows does” (7). While Ondaatje’s omniscient narrator knows the details and thoughts of each of these figures, the nature of the information provided about each of the actors is marked by categorical differences. As stated, we know the farmer’s feelings about the men, that he takes comfort in their presence. We are given the boy’s sensual impressions of the event – the minutiae of what he sees and hears – and some idea that it will be of significance for later in life. In the case of these men, the loggers, however, the narrative describes their actions as a group, while at the same time in the two sentences mentioned above, the narrator acknowledges their legal position, their lack of rights as workers rather than owners.

Patrick’s identity is forged through negotiation with the different subject positions described in this opening sequence, i.e., between the self-awareness of his land-owning father and the class consciousness ascribed to “the men,” the “Thirty loggers,” “this collection of strangers,” “the silent gauntlet of men,” “this strange community” whom Patrick only knows through observation. Ultimately it is up to the reader to decide whether Patrick finds his place in relation to the men, to decide how his arrival in the city and participation in the labour movement takes him beyond the pale of his father’s ethnocentricity. We are left to decipher the significance of Patrick’s protest, to interpret and evaluate his “failure” to exact his revenge on R.C. Harris. In juxtaposing the brutality of historical fact or documentary evidence with the

imaginary details of his everyday life, the novel suggests a context for Patrick's development. If he is to be read as an agent of resistance, then we must also learn to read his movement through a complex field of class, ethnic, and racial contradiction. Bringing together historical facts – such as the fact that loggers often died “of pneumonia or from the sulfur in their lungs from the mills they work in during the other season”(8) – with a highly romantic narrative, the novel demands an awareness of social space that constantly interrupts the unifying history of a national culture.

#### THE SPACE OF THE READER

If the ambivalent and problematic relationship between the reader (the professional critic) and the public figure (Michael Ondaatje) is at the heart of his writing, it is also at the heart of the scholarly discourse surrounding it. If the fragmentary nature of Ondaatje's narratives suggests the disappearance of a cohesive “author,” as many critics have suggested, it leaves readers with the problem of constructing identity. However, when critics attempt to resolve this textual ambivalence by substituting a national subject for the “missing person,” they perform an elision of other textual possibilities, an elision which forecloses on historical differences – the possibility of other readers and/or ways of reading that contradict a nationalist script. To put it another way, we might say that the absence of a coherent centre in Ondaatje's writing has led critics to construct an idealized reader that fits with a national narrative and that, in so doing, critics tend to foreground notions of “the reader” (in the singular) that ignore differences of “race,” differences put into play by Ondaatje's performative figures. As Smaro Kamboureli has pointed out, this drive for a deeper meaning, some hidden structure below the absent or fragmentary surface narrative, is a critical

imposition that speaks the critic's own desire for a coherent subject – Michael Ondaatje.

She suggests, however, that the writing challenges this imposition by layering discourses. In her view, “Ondaatje’s ambivalent distance from his documents has given rise to a number of interpretations that tend to privilege the documentary material at the expense of the textual evidence provided in the poem” (*Edge of Genre* 186). In a discussion of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Kamboureli argues that the text’s opening page, “a blank square, perhaps the frame of an absent photographic image,” is emblematic of Ondaatje’s narrative strategy (*Edge of Genre* 184). For Kamboureli, this “white space becomes a figure of a narrative that is both present and absent, a discourse without subject. It is a gap for the reader to fill” (*Edge of Genre* 185). Yet, in attempting to fill this gap, to render it meaningful, we arrest the discursive flow the text enacts. When the reader steps back to examine the frame, to give it meaning in relation to the discourses that frame it, we step outside the text. As we attempt to determine the identity of the absent subject – rendered present in the empty (“white”) space – we take part in the popular construction of Billy the Kid. We become complicit with the fantasy of identification in which he is named into existence, thereby refusing the significance of this blank space. The “white space” stands as both an invitation to interpret the text and as the limit of our ability to do so (Garret-Petts and Lawrence 151-159).

Kamboureli’s argument is significant for two reasons. First, it problematizes critical responses to Ondaatje’s work in terms of the need to control the flow of discursive valences opened by the writing. Secondly, it draws attention to Ondaatje’s spatial practice: his complex engagement with the overlap between text as space and the social spaces of its performance. In

the sections that follow, I argue that readers continue to ignore this feature of Ondaatje's writing and so ignore his polyvalent use of historical document. This critical oversight enacts an avoidance or elision of concerns with racial identity formation within Ondaatje's writing. The "white space" identified by Kamboureli, i.e., Ondaatje's reminder of the limits of critical perception, finds its way in various guises into the later work. In the context of *In the Skin of a Lion*, this "white space" no longer takes the form of an empty page, "a photograph of whiteness, of whatever leaves no graph, no mark when printed" (Kamboureli, *Edge of Genre* 185). Instead, it is the much larger space of inscription, the Toronto framing this fragmentary narrative, which becomes "the 'negative' of narration.... becomes in Derrida's words an *exergue* - what lies 'outside the work,' 'inscription,' 'epigraph'" (Kamboureli, *Edge of Genre* 185). In turning his focus from the figure of the outlaw to that of an emergent urban community, Ondaatje shifts his focus from document to archive, from page to repository.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the problem of locating *In the Skin of a Lion* in terms of the (official) history with which it engages, namely the urbanization of Toronto and 1930s class politics, is exacerbated by Ondaatje's pre-occupation with the problems and literary conventions of mediation. In refusing to draw the line between fact and fiction, between the historical past reflected in the text and the present of its inscription, the novel refuses to maintain an acceptable distance between a writer and his readers. In the spirit of its main characters, the novel transgresses. Making itself at home in the tropes and allusions of a contemporary CanLit, it trespasses on the consecrated property of a nouveau bourgeois literary elite; it finds itself lost in their stacks of books, documents, and photographs from which history (in the singular) has been and is meticulously constructed. At

home in the play of postmodern conventions, tangential reflections, trivial banter of an ever-emerging everyday life, it nonetheless bears witness to the sensibilities of a much older history and politics of subversion – with them it smuggles itself back into the heart of the city. Caravaggio, the thief of maps and fine documents; Patrick, the (re)searcher, class traitor, explosives expert; and Alice, the actor, organizer, activist – all are suggestive of a diversity of positions that are barely visible beneath the myth of a metropolitan Toronto, none of them entirely commensurate with the ideal split between victim or vanquisher. Despite the will to power of an emergent industrial elite to re-engineer the city in its own name – say Canadian or Anglo-Canadian – these ghosts continue to mix and mingle with the newly arrived. Their archive, which is neither stored nor compiled in the City of Toronto Archives, imperfectly filed in basements of branch libraries, Riverdale, Beaches, Greenwood, inflects the unofficial voices of the different communities and neighbourhoods through which they passed. It stands to be read in the continued fight for the right to the city, invisible for the most part in the telling of history. It accents the intermingling speech of the ones yet to disappear beneath the homogenizing differences of Canadian Multiculturalism. Black, White, Irish, English, Jewish, Asian, South Asian, Greek, Armenian, Portuguese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Ethiopian, Mohawk, as each identity comes to be inscribed on the map of the city, the history of differences and careful distinctions between us and them, between the mainstream and margin, New Canadian and Old, belies a much greater anxiety than imagined by critics of CanLit.

It is important to be clear: *In the Skin of a Lion* is not a history of working class communities in Toronto at the beginning of the Depression. It is not in fact a historical novel in the typical sense of the term; it does not borrow a

ready-made historical reality upon which the narrative and characters of the author's imagination are allowed to come to life. *In the Skin of a Lion* is a revisionist act of writing that calls into account the historical and cultural norms that have come to stand in opposition to literary discourse. From the standpoint of class analysis and the question of material relations to the means of production, which are necessarily aspects of any serious attempt by either writer or critic to address the issues of social justice, the point is not how well or whether in fact Ondaatje's novel is a fair representation of working class life in the early twentieth century. Instead, the questions that might better be addressed from a contemporary critical position are: What is the significance of re-inscribing the particular histories and the communities within the social fabric of the 1980s that produced this literary text? How does Canadian Multiculturalism propose to address the historical development of a modern – read urban, manufacturing-based – polity? How are critical approaches to contemporary Canadian writing mediated by the problematic histories and constructions of new identity and a revised cultural politics? By what logic does the writer re-inscribe “race” and class within the always already political project of imagining the city? How do its denizens come to form the basis for a “nation” and/or its renovated citizenry?

As I have suggested, the tendency amongst Ondaatje's readers to discuss the novel in terms of radical politics vs. formalist experimentation, or critical subversion vs. postmodern aestheticism, over-simplifies the complex historical and cultural relations that inform not only the novel's inscription but also its reception and dissemination at the hands of professional academics and teachers of Canadian literature and culture. Critics like Hutcheon, Kroetsch, Bowering, Barbour, and Mundweiler (amongst others) approach Ondaatje in terms of his mastery and development of craft. In this

conception, however, his texts are of interest for the way in which they engage and subvert the normative practices of literary convention, be they the lyric poetry, the epic, the novel or popular romance, and the problem of cultural politics is left aside.

#### ONCE MORE TO THE FIGURE OF PATRICK

To explore the complexity of the issues involved in the historical underpinnings of the novel, to frame this confrontation we have been discussing, we might look once again at the novel's central character and his interactions with the so-called "foreigners" he meets in the city. For Patrick Lewis, coming to Toronto means leaving the comfort of a Canadian countryside and entering a new world. It means entering a different social space with a different set of linguistic connections and barriers. Upon arrival at Union Station, Patrick notices "a man well-dressed with three suitcases, shouting out in another language" (54). Returning three days later, he sees the same man; while the man has changed suits, he is standing in the same place "unable to move from his safe zone... as if one step away was the quicksand of the new world" (54). This emblematic figure presents readers with a problem of reconciliation. His fixity does not coincide with the fact that he has changed his clothes – he has left and returned to this "safe zone." Nor does his apparent linguistic isolation mesh with diversity of language groups that make up Patrick's city. Read in the context of Patrick's arrival into Toronto's multilingual – Greek, Macedonian, and Russian – neighbourhoods, this figure might also reflect Patrick's alienation. Returning to the station three days later, Patrick sits on the bench and "speaks out his own name," but it "struggled up in a hollow echo and was lost in the high air of Union Station"(54). The narrative leaves us to wonder about the affinity between

these two figures. Rather than establishing an essential difference between the Canadian born Patrick and this figure of the well-dressed “foreigner,” the narrative suggests a similarity. In this moment of ambivalence, the novel stages a reversal, leaving us to ponder the common perception of Toronto as a predominantly English-speaking city. This confusion of originary identities – Ondaatje’s unwillingness to distinguish between the immigrant and the newly arrived, not quite urban(e) WASP son – destabilizes the popular image of Canada as a homogenous society. In terms of prevalent “race” codes, it challenges the vision of Canada as predominantly “white” country.

This is not to say, however, that Patrick’s cultural displacement projects some sort of objective truth. Nor is it necessarily consistent with the dilemma of the English-speaking locals discussed in the last chapter. In fact, Patrick chooses a neighbourhood – for reasons that are unclear in the novel – in which he is an outsider. Finding himself amongst people with whom he shares little ethnic or cultural affinity, he is nevertheless “at home”:

The southeastern section of the city where he now lived was made up mostly of immigrants and he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew, deliriously anonymous. The people on the street, the Macedonians and Bulgarians, were his only mirror. (112)

His isolation is in fact a comfort. His growth as an individual seems to be predicated on a movement away from his Anglo-Irish roots. Rather than the inculcation of a kind of parochial Englishness, Patrick’s self-development points toward a more extensive sense of cultural awareness and identity. His search for identity is ultimately a search for a more broadly defined or cosmopolitan sense of self. It is only as an adult, while reading Cato’s letters, that he learns the identity of the Finnish loggers with whom he shared his childhood landscape. As an adult, he learns to decipher the unacknowledged



social networks he has been and is living amongst and to find his place in them.

A significant moment in Patrick's development comes when he learns *gooshter*, the Macedonian word for iguana. Finally, he begins to bridge the divide between himself and those living around him and begins to fit in to the new city. Eventually, Patrick becomes a part of the group when he finds himself overwhelmed by their "friendship, concern." He cries publicly in their midst. Inadvertently exposing himself and his loneliness, Patrick is invited to "The waterworks at eight, Sunday night. A gathering." Therefore, we return to the site of confrontation discussed in the last chapter.

This time, however, approaching it through the novel, following Patrick back into the site of conflict, we are presented with an entirely different manner of interpreting the events. This "gathering," like the confrontation, takes place on a religious holiday. Released from their duties, the workers reclaim the work site as their own. No doubt aware of the fact that allies will be present to "guard" the building, Patrick's new friends take over the Harris' Waterworks; its subterranean recesses provide the ideal location for their speeches and performances. Thus, we might re-consider the "gesticulating foreigner" of the archive against this meeting of organizers and activists, reading him as someone protecting rights other than those of the commissioners and planners. Encouraging us to imagine another layer to the historical documentation, Ondaatje's novel represents a space of contradiction and opacity. Turning the tables, re-inscribing the site within a much richer dynamic of class conflict, one that denies a uniformity of agency and/or identity, the novel challenges us to read the worker from a different perspective. Rather than protecting the interests of his employer, the guard might well have been a lookout for his comrades.

The apparent discrepancy between the archival record of the conflict (with its assumptions about ownership) and the event depicted by Ondaatje presents readers with an important impasse. Representing this fictional event as though it were real, Ondaatje's text resists the primacy of the archival fact. Rather than an assumed similitude between historical fact and the fiction, upon which Duffy's conception of the novel's political potential rests, Ondaatje's text presents readers with the problem of having to construct a historical narrative against which to read the fictional one. In a sense, the juxtaposition of the two scenes – the history narrated in Duffy's essay and the one depicted in Ondaatje's fiction – provides a possible response to the question raised in Duffy's argument about Ondaatje's use of historical fact. The event does not appear in the novel because it oversimplifies the complexity of linguistic, cultural, and political relations represented, and therefore contradicts the story Ondaatje chooses to tell. Read in this way, the intruding strollers become lost between the various communities who are using the waterworks as a meeting ground and the ruling classes. The "Beach-ites" are neither equal in class or stature to their neighbour Commissioner Harris, who we are told lives on Neville Park Boulevard, which is but two streets to the West of the waterworks – i.e., two streets in the direction from whence the strollers came – nor are they part of the larger conglomeration of (ethnic) communities to which the worker would, one might speculate, belong.

From Duffy's description of the pamphlet, there would seem to be no awareness on the part of these locals of the multitudes depicted in the novel as taking refuge within the cavernous building, the "illegal gathering of various nationalities" to which Patrick is invited. As the novel suggests, "the noise of machines camouflaged their activity from whoever might have been passing along Queen Street a hundred yards away" (115). Like Harris who is

confused by Patrick's mention of "meetings in your unfinished waterworks" (238) and who asks "What meetings? What do you mean? (239) – these locals seem not to know of any such meetings, or so we might assume. Reacting as they do to the watchman's interdiction, the stroller would have been lost amongst the throng of people who "An hour after dusk disappeared into the earth... came in silence, in small and large families, up the slope towards the half-built waterworks. Emerging from the darkness, mothlike, walking towards the thin rectangle of the building's southern doorway" (115). Unaware even that the waterworks is the site of political organization and polyglot celebrations and protesting the city's expropriation and redevelopment of their neighbourhood, these locals find themselves caught between both the official and the illegal uses of this space they claim as their own.

Duffy's attempt to make historical sense of the novel, comparing and contrasting it to the documented narratives held in the City's official archive, overlooks the complex and contradictory nature of the social space at issue. Reading *In the Skin of a Lion* as the depiction of class struggle, in which one side (the workers) is pitted against another (the city planners), Duffy's narrative fails to address the complexity of cultural politics at stake. Duffy's essay actually shies away from the political aspects of the writing. By way of conclusion, caught as he is in the impasse of knowing and not knowing how or why the novelist might choose to ignore such a ripe piece of archival recording, Duffy returns to the aesthetic. He maintains that "Ultimately, the text's subject is the art of narrative" (129), and in so doing he relegates the novel to the realm of postmodern stylistics. In drawing attention to Ondaatje's "idiosyncratic" "authorial imagination" (137), Duffy finally devalues the political consequence of Ondaatje's complex engagement with the intersection of literature and history, culture and critique, in the construction of the city.

Caught in the liminal space between fact and fiction, Duffy ultimately abandons the problematic of reading with which he begins his quest.

While Duffy's essay suggests that this dichotomy between the aesthetic and class politics is transcended by Ondaatje's genius as a writer, other critics have argued the exact opposite. Faced with political subjects he seems to court and upon which his writing seems to depend, they have criticized Ondaatje for recourse to the techniques of a high literary culture. His aesthetic mastery is taken as a sign of a lack of deep conviction, becomes in and of itself indicative of a political failure or an abdication of sorts. To address this critical condescension, we will return to the question of identity as an issue amongst readers of Ondaatje's work. Further we need to develop this reading of the complexity of Ondaatje's representation of the city, not merely as a zone of conflict between classes, but as a particularly fraught social space in which the role and responsibility of the writer-critic to his or her subject matter cannot be taken for granted.

#### THE FIGURE OF ONDAATJE

From time to time, the notion that Ondaatje's experimentation with literary genre and form belies his commitment to any political position or ideology is an issue amongst Ondaatje's readers. In fact, we might generalize by saying that more often than not Ondaatje is criticized for his failure to represent accurately the lives and desire of a particular group or community (Mukherjee, Davey, Beddoes, Turcotte). For instance, Julie Beddoes' writes that "the postmodern aesthetic practices [of *In the Skin of a Lion*] neutralize – or even oppose – its tentative thematizing of a radical class politics" (206). Beddoes' argument about the aestheticization and ultimate conflation of sex and violence undermines the serious nature of the subject matter Ondaatje

has chosen to write about. For Beddoes, the self-reflexive literary techniques adopted by the text do a disservice to the groups represented in it. In this sense, Beddoes' essay offers a serious challenge to the attempt to read postmodern literary gestures as political subversion. Moreover, her critique of Ondaatje's representation of Patrick's political development through his relationship with Alice runs counter to Linda Hutcheon's attempt to read Ondaatje as a pseudo-feminist. Lacking the usual reverence for Ondaatje's craft, Beddoes takes issue with the novel's problematic representation of gender and the reality of violence (especially against women). Overturning the argument that Ondaatje's genius is to rise above the obviously or overtly political, Beddoes concludes that in "*In the Skin of a Lion* the repeated privileging of the formal over the historical ultimately asserts that it does not matter whose experiences are represented" (211).

While her critique raises important issues about Ondaatje's recourse to female characters and his careful encoding of sexuality, Beddoes' argument, like Duffy's, does not allow for the complex historicism involved in representations of subversion and marginalized communities. She does not address the notion of complicity between the writer and the reader; she fails to address the manner in which Ondaatje's writing foregrounds history (and literature) as the sites of conflict and mutual responsibility, as production; instead she assumes a more or less stable sense of history. While I hesitate to argue that Ondaatje does in fact deal sufficiently with the complex representation of gender and violence, I would suggest that Beddoes' argument functions through the conflation of authorial intention with identity, thereby confining the novel to a binary relationship which disregards the way in which violence and destruction (Alice's death at the hands of the very group she supports) are portrayed as communal acts.

In criticizing the text, in fact when we speak of a writer failing to do this or that, we must also address the role and responsibility of the critic. If one is to accept the idea that the author has a direct responsibility to the individuals and communities represented in the work, in as much as a given author takes or is granted political agency within the field of a particular discursive formation, then we must also respect the way in which an engagement with historical subjects and personages becomes doubly difficult. Not only must we accept the fact that Ondaatje's novel is indebted to the various immigrant and working class groups represented in his novel but also that his writing speaks to the complex and contradictory nature of historical fact.

To dismiss the novel because it fails to correspond to either historical accuracy or the radical spirit of the subjects dealt with in the narrative, one must be clear on what one takes both history and Ondaatje's identity to be. One must clarify the relationship between literature, or more specifically Canadian literature, and history, i.e., between fiction and fact but also interpretation and knowledge. Ultimately the opposition of the aesthetic and the historical performs an epistemological erasure of cultural difference; the continued misrepresentation and hegemonic control of the images of particular groups within our society, First Nations, women, gays, lesbians, and various ethnic or racialized minorities does in fact depend on the sanctity of historical record. To be clear, the suggestion that a given literary text, poem or novel, is or is not politically effective runs the risk of eliding the political implications of the reader's position within the debate in which s/he has entered.

In another reading of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Frank Davey takes Ondaatje to task for the way in which his main character is made to speak

with the knowledge and sensibilities of its middle-class author. Davey's contention is that

the text is struggling with problems of representation similar to those evident in *The Diviners* and *The Temptation of Big Bear*: how can one use a widely published novelist's powerful position to "represent" both artistically and politically those who are excluded from power, without appearing both to be in a custodial or paternal relation to these and to be making "use" of the unempowered to create bourgeois art? (*Post-national Arguments* 146)

While this claim posits a series of important and difficult questions for the academic readers of the text, Davey stops short of serious theoretical discussion of the problem. Instead, he concludes that the novel suffers from an inability to overcome the author's own access to "literary power":<sup>7</sup>

in each text [Ondaatje's, as well as those of Laurence and Wiebe] various structural and discursive signs remain to remind the reader that the constructor of these texts has remained the more textually empowered – has assigned words, deployed literary convention, and commanded knowledge far beyond the ken of the characters. (146)

Without explaining how it is that an author might in fact move beyond his/her own textual empowerment, how in fact an author comes to stake a claim over his/her "text," Davey misuses the theoretical language his essay invokes.

For Davey, the problematic politics of Ondaatje's novel are not simply a formal failure on the part of its "constructor" to deal convincingly with the narrative framework suggested by the italicized opening, the apparent self-reflexivity of the first sentence of the novel, "*This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning*" (1). He argues, paradoxically, that "the force of [the text's] answer [to Davey's question about the "affiliation" of the narrator with its characters or its "signator"] is subverted

not only by the complexity of the novel's discourses but by the very framing elements themselves”:

If Hana drives the car to Marmora, can she be the non-driving young woman who the prologue says gathers the story? The reliability of both this young woman and her informant is also specifically cast into doubt by the frame. She is hinted to be ingenuous – she might believe “in that field is a castle”; Patrick is said to be “tired... elliptical... overexcited”; only a “faint light” illuminates his narrative. How either this excitable man or his sixteen-year-old listener could gather a story into the elaborate and varied discourses of *A Skin of a Lion* [sic] remains exceedingly unclear. Without the framing passage, however, responsibility for the narrative moves entirely to its signator; it becomes a text not of Hana and Patrick's 1938 consciousness reconstructed in 1987, but entirely of one in 1987; it represents, not the experiences of a disempowered Patrick Lewis, narrated in part on behalf of his less-articulate fellow workers, but the selections and inventions of an urbane, highly educated late-twentieth-century professional writer. (*Post-national Arguments* 145)

What Davey fails to recognize are his own assumptions about the progress of Canadian intellectual development. His somewhat conventional suggestion that Ondaatje's writing is too complex, too discursively aware, too well crafted to properly reflect the language abilities of the historically isolated working class is more a statement of Davey's interest in class politics, his own inability to see beyond the ideological notions of progress and class which are endemic to the liberal-nationalist outlook that pervade his writing. Within the novel itself, there are few examples of the “less-articulate fellow workers” Davey imagines. In fact, Patrick, Alice, Hana, and Cato, not to mention the nameless individuals who come to hear the political speeches and who attend the theatre productions in an attempt to develop their English proficiency, all suggest an intellectually active and linguistically diverse social space. Like his father, who is described as sending away for pamphlets and books to assist him in his knowledge and his craft, Patrick's employment as a searcher is predicated on his own ability to use writing and



history. In one scene, Alice reads to Patrick from one of Conrad's published letters, a letter "complaining about Tory views on Spanish liberal insurgents of the 1830s, based in London" (134); in so doing she is providing not only Patrick but also the readers with both a historical and a literary context in which to view the struggles depicted in the novel, which is suggestive of the literate nature of the communities to which Cato belongs. Furthermore, one wonders how or why Davey is compelled to dismiss Cato's journal, which is carefully delivered to Alice through a complex array of exchanges and transactions that finally place it in the mail.

Instead, we might read this crucial, if fictitious document, as a representation of a powerful and wilful use of literature to chronicle the conditions and struggle of the working classes - in this novel, the loggers and miners Cato gives his life attempting to organize. The archive Hana keeps, and from which Patrick reads Cato's fate, is suggestive of the notion that the facts and documents of class struggle, like those of various ethnic and racial minorities, remain outside the official archives from which histories come to be written. While Davey would no doubt argue that these examples are but figments of Ondaatje's "late-twentieth century" education and his training as a "professional writer," one is reminded of the complex historical perspectives offered by Marxist, feminist, African American, and other anti-colonial researchers who challenge the popular belief that history is with the records of agency maintained in the archives and literature of the ruling elite.<sup>8</sup> To argue as Davey does, that late-twentieth century Canadians are necessarily more literate, more aware of a wide "variety of discourses," is an obfuscation of not only the complex socio-linguistic environment that was Toronto in the 1920s and 1930s but also the contradictory function of language and writing in the cultural resistance. As Duffy points out in his essay, Toronto of the day had

six newspapers – in fact, he suggests that it was no mistake that Hemingway was in the city as a journalist. Furthermore, the literary or textual base of much socialist or communist organizing is ignored in Davey's account.

Davey's contention that Ondaatje appropriates a working class sensibility is further confounded by the way in which the novel renders problematic the distance between its historical material and the present of its inscription. The initial framing device, the italicized story, with which Davey takes issue, is crucial to how readers place themselves in relation to the novel. While Davey suggests that the first page and the last are part of the same frame, the typographic conventions and narrative structure of the novel clearly differentiate the two. The initial narrative fragment is separated from the rest of the novel with italics and is spatially distinguished from the main narrative (including the final passage). While there is a definite echo or rhyme between the two passages – in that they both include a woman, a man, and an automobile bound for Marmora – the first gives us very few clues about the identity of the character or the historical period it refers to; the second explicitly names Patrick and Hana, which clearly situates it within the novel's chronotope. As Davey points out, the first passage has the man in the driver's seat and the second concludes with Hana preparing to drive away in "the Ford." Apart from the general reference of the abstract nouns – man, young woman, car – and the geography, a road from Toronto to Marmora, the majority of textual clues or markers suggest that these two parallel scenes are in fact connected to entirely different narratives: that of Hana and Patrick in 1937 and that of Michael Ondaatje in 1987. That the narrative ultimately finds its way back to the general geography of the opening sequence must not be conflated with the idea that the novel achieves a narra-

tive closure. There is no direct indication of whether the couple gathering the narrative on the four-hour car journey ever reaches their destination.

Ondaatje's "failure" to provide Davey with a coherent representation of or engagement in "the political"<sup>9</sup> has to do with what Davey sees as the individualist nature of his characters, most especially Patrick and Caravaggio but also Temelcoff. Davey points out that the main characters in the text appear to shun collective action. For Davey, the main figures – Patrick, Caravaggio, and Temelcoff – are solitary individuals. At times, the narrative description of these characters does support Davey's argument. For example, Patrick is first the individualistic searcher and then a demolition expert; in both jobs, he lives and works on the edge of communities. Likewise, Caravaggio is the thief who chooses to work alone, and who in spite of the fact that he needs a partner, can only abide a small red fox terrier because, as he puts it, "I can never work with someone else" (203). Moreover, Nicholas Temelcoff, like Patrick and Caravaggio, has a particular genius that sets him apart from the other workers: we are told, "Temelcoff is famous on the bridge, a daredevil. He is given all the difficult jobs and he takes them. He descends into the air with no fear. He is solitary" (34). However, one might argue that their solitude is the direct result of occupational choices, is a labour requirement rather than personal desire. Their "individuality" is described in the context of their work; they do not have access to the time and space for the kind of privacy Davey's critique seems to assume. These three men are solitary workers, their seclusion bound by the demarcations of class privilege. In describing their trades, the novel suggests that these three male characters are each part of a special order or fraternity. In many ways, their work is similar to that of the artist or the writer, demanding solitude and extreme concentration but ultimately dependent on a strong connection to others.

While it is true that Patrick, Temelcoff and Caravaggio work alone, when they relax, they do so in the company of others who share their occupations or affiliations. During the day, Caravaggio congregates with the other thieves to be “lectured with great conservatism on the art of robbery” (191). At night, he like the others of his profession – and we are told that there are many, that the “cafes in the west end of Toronto were full of these men” – plies his craft with a singular precision. In comparison to the amateur thieves – “the shitters” who defecate on desks because they “could not control themselves,” whose “discipline focused on the idea of robbery” and have “no governor of the body” (190), Caravaggio is a “professional thief who turn[s] from this gesture to a medicinal clarity in his survey of the room. Detailed receipts memorized, key pages razor-bladed. At the centre of the symmetrical plot was this false act of madness” (190-91).

Patrick is a professional searcher who must compete with a multitude of other desperate men who are chasing the missing millionaire for the promise of a large ransom. Ironically, his individuality brings him into the community that leads him to Small. Because he is willing to study certain letters ignored by the Police, Patrick is “befriended by the sisters [of Ambrose Small] at their house on Isabella Streets” (60). Ultimately, the sisters lead Patrick to Clara Dickens: “Clara knew him best, they told him” (60). Clara leads Patrick to Small. Thus, Patrick’s search, while solitary in the sense that he was working alone is entirely dependent on his ability to navigate the social spaces surrounding the elusive Small. Despite his skills or aptitude for both jobs, Patrick’s “choice” to work first as a searcher and then later as a dynamiter is mitigated by economic necessity rather than personal freedom or individual desire. He is one of the “hordes of the otherwise unemployed”

who were being hired because “In these hard times any hope of a ‘gusher or strike’ was worth pursuing” (59).

In a similar manner, Temelcoff works alone, but his ability to find work and his position within the working class is connected with his migration to Canada and the relationships he develops consequently. The novel suggests that Temelcoff’s existence in Canada is contingent on his ability to escape war in the Balkans, a journey that (I will argue below) is anything but individualistic.

Davey’s suggestion that these three characters are representative of “emphasis on individual action and mistrust of collective politics” (150) needs to be tempered by a comparison of the lives of the men themselves as they are presented throughout the course of Ondaatje’s novel. Temelcoff leaves the Balkans “with three friends” “after his village was burned” (45); to survive a deadly fever, the three men “slept embracing each other” (45); to keep strong, “an Italian” teaches him to drink animal blood (45). In fact, Temelcoff’s memory of his entrance into Canada is predicated on the experience of a collective subject, marked in the text as the plural they:

[he] remembered landing in Saint John and *everyone* thinking how primitive it looked. How primitive Canada was. *They* had to walk half a mile to the station where *they* were to be examined. *They* took whatever *they* needed from the sacks of the two who had died and walked toward Canada. (46; emphasis added)

Like the Finnish loggers mentioned in the opening pages of the novel, Temelcoff’s experience of Canada is filtered through his connection with the group. Davey’s assumption of the characters’ individualism glosses over a relatively complex set of narrative strategies and stylistic problems.

Davey argues that the “kinds of resistance to capitalist oppression the novel chooses to represent” (148) tend to favour individualism, and he dis-

misses these “voluntary acts of kindness” as the figments of Ondaatje’s imagination, or “false consciousness.” The question that might be raised however is what type of action does Davey imagine to be truly collective? Along what clear lines can we expect the characters to act that would provide a more logical response to the social injustices they experience? These seemingly unconnected, to Davey apolitical, acts are, as I am arguing, crucial to Ondaatje’s depiction of social struggle. The fact that the narrative is driven by these somewhat haphazard acts of “kindness” rather than premeditated collective actions is an important aspect of Ondaatje’s novel. These gestures of human kindness set out a system of inter-relationships that propose the formation of a network of class-conscious resisters; regardless of the clearly demarcated ethnic or linguistic differences that separates them, Temelcoff, Caravaggio, Patrick, Alice, Hana and Clara develop a complex web of mutuality. In a sense, Patrick’s final assault on the waterworks – Harris’ monument to the wealth and prosperity of Toronto during the 1920s – ends with a whimper. The great class conscious attack on the rich that Davey seems to want is finally nothing but a good story that Patrick tells to Hana on the road to Marmora, a story about the good old days.

#### CARAVAGGIO: ESCAPING ACROSS A GEOGRAPHY OF CANLIT

Paradoxically, on closer examination, these “voluntary acts of kindness” provide readers with a perspective on the complexities of community and cultural resistance. For example, we might look more closely at Patrick’s attempt to save Caravaggio from his attackers by calling figures from a square dance. In this passage, Ondaatje presents the reader with a highly symbolic response to sectarian violence. Patrick’s illogical, perhaps uncontrolled, response to the premeditated attack of these men functions as

a representation of the complex relationship between a symbolic form, the square dance, and the history and culture of resistance. In effect, this scene is shot through with double inscription. Patrick's ejaculated "calls" work not only to warn Caravaggio and to help him choreograph his survival, but they also suggest a connection to the history and signification of the folk tradition of which the square dance or "set dance" is part.

We are told, as the attack begins, "all language dries up" (184). The square dance call wells up: "His father's language emerging from somewhere in his past" (185). Patrick sings or calls out an elaborate code as a set of instructions with which the blind-folded Caravaggio might attempt to resist or survive the attack: "*Allemande left your corners all*" (184) both describes the situation and directs Caravaggio around and away from his assailants by describing a safe position within the square of his cell; likewise "*Birdie fly out and the crow fly in, crow fly out and give birdie a spin*" and "*Honour your partner, dip and dive*" (185) are commentary on and explicit instructions for the dancer's movement. This square dance alludes to other folk or set dances, many of which bear the traces of inter-cultural struggle and exchange, their language – terms such as "allemande" – the product of conflict, resistance, and assimilation. Patrick's recourse to a kind of musico-poetic response might also be read as a counterpoint to the premeditated violence of these aggressors who are described as having "evolved smug and without race" (184). It is a strategic shift in modes of discourse to one that is less explicit but no less functional.

The attackers' aggressive greeting, "Hello wop" (185), with which the piece ends, conjures up another passage in the novel. It stands in stark contrast to the earlier description of "Saturday afternoons [when] the dye washers and cutters, men from the killing beds, the sausage makers, the

electrocuters – all of them from this abattoir and tannery on Cypress Street – were free” (135). In the leisure of this bath afternoon “the thirty or so of them knowing little more than each other’s false names or true countries” greet each other by nationality, “*Hey Italy!*” (135). However, the narrative posits a difference between the “true countries” of the men and Patrick’s Canadian identity – “There was a *sense of relaxation* among all of them. *Hey Canada!* A wave to Patrick. *It was Saturday*” (135; emphasis added) – suggesting both a disparity between new and old world nationalities and a somewhat uneasy or occasional acceptance/acknowledgement of his presence amongst them. In a sense, the novel re/places Patrick’s Canadian identity within a spatial context that problematizes the temporality of the national subject. The normative subject is conceived of within a larger international system of migration – “Birdie fly in, crow fly out” – that renders its specificity relative to a real politick of everyday life and class struggle. Ondaatje’s presentation of these meetings, both the prison attack and the Saturday afternoon at the baths, resists the popular notion of Canadian as having come out of, i.e., transcended over time, the histories and conflicts of European ethnicity. It resists the assumption of rationally organized identity formations or divisions constructed on clearly designated ethnic or class lines. Against the multi-cultural ideal in which Canadian signifies a neutral identity free of “race,” class or gender distinction and is capable of maintaining a multiplicity of hyphenated identities, these two passages suggests the contradictory emergence of a particular “without race” position of privilege. In essence, Patrick takes up a tenuous position on the edge of the various Russian, Italian, Macedonian, and Greek communities of Toronto’s East End. The song with which he assists Caravaggio provides an interesting commentary on the highly problematic inter-relationship between the creative and the historical within the



context of what might be seen as an emergent form of racism or cultural superiority.

Read from the perspective of counter-hegemonic historiography – Marxist, feminist, Queer, and postcolonial – Ondaatje’s “fictional history” becomes more than a positivist attempt to add the lives and experiences of the disenfranchised to the dominant discourse. More than simply expanding the parameters of Canadian literature to include writing about the working class and ethnic minorities who come to be forgotten in the “Official histories and news stories” of Toronto’s metropolitan expansion, this novel challenges the dominant discourse, which the narrator dismisses as being “always as soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass on his own lawn” (145). *In the Skin of a Lion* begins to unravel the line between fact and fiction, history and literature. However, rather than taking it as an attack on the one (fact/history) from within the bounds of the other (fiction/literature), this novel performs a critical intervention within the emergence of the post-modern or multi-cultural canon/s to which it is ascribed. In addition to the historical records and documentary fact, Ondaatje’s narrative also makes use (or abuse) of literary archives.

The forgotten details and stories from the building of Toronto, which have caught most critics’ attention, are offset by quotations from popular song, art criticism, and Canadian literature. In his acknowledgments, Ondaatje specifies that he has had permission to print lyrics for “Up Jumped You with Love” and “I Can’t Get Started,” lines from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, sentences from Judith Mara Gutman’s essay, “Lewis Hine and the American Social Conscience,” two sentences from the journals of Anne Wilkinson, and lines from Martha Ostenso’s novel *Wild Geese*. Coupled with his explicit re-

use of these few fragments of text, there is also a level of the literary arcana running through the novel – references to a young Al Purdy, Anne Wilkinson herself, *Judge Sheard's Jokes*, written by the grandfather of Sarah Sheard to whom the novel is dedicated. Thus as much as this is a revision of the historical account of Toronto's modern development it is a somewhat playful re-conceptualization of Canadian writing.

There are two aspects of Ondaatje's engagement with Canadian literature that are central to my argument about the novel's place in the development of postcolonial approaches to Canadian writing. The first of these has to do with the figure of Anne Wilkinson: specifically, Ondaatje's cryptic appropriation of the sentences from her journals (mentioned above). The second has to do with the depiction of Caravaggio: for it is this figure of the thief who is most deeply embedded in Ondaatje's engagement with Canadian literature and it is Caravaggio who is credited with having spoken one of Wilkinson's sentences. Furthermore, Caravaggio is the only main character in this novel referred to in explicitly racialized terms. In the context of his portrayal of Caravaggio, Ondaatje's appropriation of the writing of not only Wilkinson, but also Ostenso and Purdy, provides readers with a crucial point of entrance into the issue of "race" in this novel. Ondaatje's re-inscription of an imaginary space or literary landscape central to a particular tradition of Canadian literature broaches the complex subject of identity formations.

According to his acknowledgements, Ondaatje's novel employs "two sentences" from Wilkinson's journals: "Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of things" (163) and "Demarcation.... That is all we need to remember" (179). However, his text does not specify where exactly these sentences occur, leaving it to the reader to deduce. The fact that the text does not attribute either of the sentences to Wilkinson or her character,

but rather ascribes the former to Alice and the latter to Caravaggio, makes this sort of deduction far from obvious. Without an intimate knowledge of Wilkinson's somewhat obscure text there might be a tendency to read over the sentences; only the *demarcation* of the text, the fact that they are both in italics, draws attention to these sentences.

The cryptic nature of their referent does not take away from the bearing these sentences have on their speaker. Alice's utterance of "Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of things" comes to Patrick as a memory. In the light of his mourning and the nature of Alice's death, this statement takes on an ironic significance. It is as if Alice's accidental death, the result of a co-incidence of extreme misfortune, we are lead to believe, shatters Patrick's illusions about their growing old together: "There was always, he thought, this pleasure ahead of him, an ace up his sleeve so he could say you can do anything to me, take everything away, put me in prison, but I will know Alice Gull when we are old" (164). The sentence conjures up the chain of loosely related, seemingly coincidental events that brought Alice and Patrick together: her fall from the Bloor Viaduct only to be caught in the darkness by Temelcoff, an ensuing friendship with Clara, and Patrick's distraction from the pursuit of Ambrose Small. One might argue that the life and death of Alice Gull is the thread tying together the entire plot of the novel; her figure is the emphatic enactment of this loose structure of things and events. The explosion that wrenches her from Patrick's life solidifies his connection with the other characters of the book, Temelcoff, Caravaggio, Hana, and perhaps even in the end R.C. Harris.

The second sentence – *Demarcation, that is what we all need to remember* (set off in italics in the text) – functions like a refrain in the last section of the novel, and as such it is crucial to the unfolding of its final episode. In

much the same way that the character of Alice becomes a realization of the first sentence, the figure of Caravaggio is firmly connected to this second one. Again, Patrick recalls Caravaggio uttering this statement. He is reflecting on the day of the escape when Caravaggio, Patrick, and Buck work at painting the roof of the Kingston Penitentiary. In the context of the scene, Caravaggio is apparently commenting on the problem of painting an “intentional blue roof” – which made “the three men working on it [become] uncertain of the clear boundaries” between roof and sky. “They could not move without thinking twice where a surface stopped. There were times when Patrick Lewis, government paintbrush in hand, froze. Taking a seemingly innocent step.” In addition to signifying an apparent or obvious difference between two things – the prison roof and the sky – the use of *demarcation* suggests also the struggle between competing unions over a contract and/or “job.” The painting of the roof perhaps? The term *demarcation* resonates with the double inscription of class politics and colonial history. Historically, the *demarcation line* of 1496 was the historical line dividing the New World between Spanish and Portuguese interests or lands. At the base, the word is inflected with issues of ownership and proprietary relations between competing economic units.

This particular term, particularly in the context of the phrase in which it surfaces, functions to suggest a convergence of class politics and colonialism. A historically accurate reading of this indirect quotation would be to say that, through the voice of Caravaggio, Ondaatje has borrowed/stolen Wilkinson’s writing. Within the field of literary scholarship, we are bound to ascribe ownership to the individual from whose journal the words appear to be lifted; however, within the logic of the novel itself, the reverse might also be said to be true: Wilkinson has stolen Caravaggio’s language. If we consider the time line of the novel, this phrase appears before Caravaggio meets

Wilkinson. In fact, in the scene referred to above, this phrase of Caravaggio's provides the abstract basis for his plan; realizing as he does that demarcation makes visible, he realizes also that it can be used to render himself invisible. In having himself painted the blue of the prison roof, Caravaggio is able to escape by vanishing from sight. It is worth noting that the authorities do not in fact admit that he has "escaped"; instead, they tell Giannetta, his wife, only that he has disappeared (199). It is on his escape that he meets the figure of Anne Wilkinson. From the narrative, we learn that when Caravaggio meets Anne, "She sits across from him laughing at the story of his escape, not fully believing it" (201). We might extrapolate from this that Caravaggio has repeated this phrase – after all, it is the cornerstone of his masterly plan – and that later it comes to appear in Wilkinson's journal. We are led to imagine that Wilkinson has picked this story up from the escaped thief. Thus, Ondaatje's novel undermines the originary moment of the very material his novel appropriates and rewrites literary history within the frame of fiction.

To develop the significance of this meeting with Wilkinson, it is useful to consider Caravaggio's encounter with another figure of Canadian literature. During his escape, Caravaggio turns up in Trenton where he meets a young boy who helps him to remove the blue paint. As Caravaggio is preparing to leave, the boy gives him a note with his name, Alfred, written on it. When Caravaggio apologizes for having nothing to give in return, the boy tells him "just remember my name." This puzzling exchange does not appear to have a direct bearing on the plot itself: while the young Al is helpful in cleaning the paint off this thief and does provide him with companionship, for all intents and purposes the boy disappears from the narrative after Caravaggio goes on his way. However, for readers versed in the localism of Canadian

poetry, the boy's name and the fact that he is in Trenton suggest an homage of sorts to Al Purdy. In a sense, this passage fits with the one in which Caravaggio meets up with the figure of Anne Wilkinson to establish a kind of literary map of his escape route. From Trenton to Bobcaygen, Caravaggio moves through two landscapes of Canadian literature. As a kind of counterpoint to the historical archive out of which the urban events of the novel are collected, Caravaggio's escape takes place within the sanctified spaces of an agrarian literary tradition.

At the risk of undervaluing the complexity of this literary sleight of hand, one might argue that this figure of the thief moving through the landscapes of Canadian literature can be read as a reflection of Ondaatje's own presence within the centralist tradition of Canadian letters. The fact that Caravaggio speaks Ondaatje's re-appropriation of Wilkinson's journal entries and shares Purdy's slightly skewed sense of landscape suggests an affinity between writer and character. This affinity is heightened by Ondaatje's description of Caravaggio's gentle teachers, "the company of thieves... who looked refined and wore half-moon glasses" (191). This passage depicts Caravaggio as an acolyte or devoted artisan rather than as a common criminal:

Caravaggio was welcomed into their midst and lectured with great conservatism on the art of robbery.... They were protective of their style and area of interest. They tried to persuade the young man that what *they* did was the most significant but at the same time they did not wish to encourage competition.... He was in awe of them, wanted to be all of them in their moments of extreme crisis. He hung around them not so much to learn their craft but to study the way they lived when they stepped back into the world of order... he was fascinated only by character. (191)

Thus, he learns his way into the art of thievery by shadowing these men "in order to watch their performances." He learns to be comfortable in other

people's houses, at home in their absence, "high up on the bookcases... as still as a gargoyle against Trollope and H.G. Wells" (198). Like Patrick who is "always comfortable in someone else's landscape" and who enjoys "being taught the customs of a place" (138), Caravaggio learns to inhabit a space to which he makes no claim of ownership.

#### CONCLUSION

The racialization of Caravaggio, which is a much more explicit enactment of the ambivalence underlying the figure of Patrick, prefigures his escape through the imaginary landscape of Canadian literature. His journey over this literary landscape on his way to the city follows Ondaatje's description of his attack at the hands of the bigots, "smug without race." As we follow Caravaggio's escape, he meets first the figure of Al Purdy and then Anne Wilkinson. Within the thematic tropology of 1970s Canadian literature, this escape fits the Atwoodian model. On one level, Caravaggio's "survival" is based on his ability to escape through the wilds. His borrowing of a paragraph from Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, with which the description of the prison attack begins, further suggests Ondaatje's indebtedness to this tradition. However, in reading Ondaatje's novel this way, in ascribing it certain primacy within the space of Canadian literature, we lose sight of the fact that Caravaggio is running from a racist attack. Interpreting Caravaggio's journey in terms of this more mainstream sense of Canadian literature, there is a danger of losing sight of the issue of "race," which is integral to this scene. The discursive layering, in fact the highly allusive nature of this section of the novel, points to a kind of double inscription – by which the character of Caravaggio both articulates and disavows the hegemonic subject of literary nationalism.

In the critical discussions of Ondaatje's writing the issue of "race" is rarely taken up. Canadian critics appear to be hesitant to discuss it in relation to Ondaatje's work or to identify Ondaatje as "a writer of colour." Kamboureli's recent anthology of multi-cultural writing in Canada, *Making a Difference: Multicultural Literature in Canada*, foregrounds Ondaatje's identity as an immigrant of Ceylonese or Sri Lankan descent, but it does not explicitly mention the subject of "race." Although it mentions Ondaatje's history and offers a quotation in which he identifies himself "as belonging to the generation of writers that 'was the first real migrant tradition... of writers of our time - Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Rohinton Mistry'" (qtd in Kamboureli, *Making a Difference* 194), there is no suggestion how the fragment from *In the Skin of a Lion* anthologized speaks to this tradition Ondaatje sees himself fitting into. How do we begin to read this novelistic depiction of class struggle amongst various European ethnic communities in relation to Ondaatje's implicit self-identification with this particular group of writers? How do we read it in relation to CanLit or the emergence of a Multicultural CanLit?

In resisting the essential categories of identity by which much of the critical understanding of literature is figured, *In the Skin of a Lion* offers readers a highly complex site by which to theorize the function of "race" in the development of a "white" subjectivity as it is figured against the backdrop of European ethnic communities. One might say that Ondaatje's novel "reverses the gaze" and throws the question of "race" back on the readers. If working backwards, contemporary critics tend to think of "whiteness" (when it is thought about at all) in terms of a kind of homogenous Western or European subjectivity, this novel points towards the history of this emergent racial identity. As a number of postcolonial critics have suggested the assump-



tion that “whiteness” signifies some kind of neutral position in opposition to various racialized identities is itself one of the master tropes of modern “racist” thought. As “race” theorists have made clear, the tendency to assume that racism is solely concerned with the construction of others, “people of colour” and First Nations, obfuscates or again naturalizes the fact that “whiteness” is itself a construct. In “returning the gaze,” cultural theorists have argued that the formation of a “white subject” and the attendant system of social value to which it is connected is dependent on a series of differences in which “race” functions. As such “whiteness” is part of the complex and violent history of Western racism; it is a social construct with which divisions of labour and social values are controlled.<sup>10</sup> A common suggestion made within the circles of anti-racist activism and pedagogy is that more work needs to be done understanding this historical fact. The argument that “race” is only an issue in texts that deal specifically with a racialized subject or character or conversely which articulate overt racism depends on the facile conflation of “whiteness” with an absence of racial significance.

If as George Elliot Clarke argues, “The general incoherence of color-based identity in Canada permits Canadian whiteness to exist... as an ethereal force... a kind of ideal whiteness, ready for export” (100), then the question left open is how does this floating identity, the ethereal force of whiteness, come to depend on the hegemonic control of “race” discourse? By what means does the assumption of “whiteness” as a neutral position, something that simply is rather than something that comes into being (in place and time), effect that construction of a racialized other. According to Clarke, the popular conception of Canada as a nation that has developed free from a US style history of “race” conflict is in itself a particular kind of racism. The oft rehearsed notion that Canada is or has been a predominantly “white coun-

try" that came to be peopled by the descendants of European settlers is but part of a recurrent struggle for self-creation, which pits a national identity off against various non-European immigrants and First Nations people. With the emergence of state sponsored Canadian Multiculturalism and a revamped notion of citizen articulated in the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which provide the historical context into which this novel is published, racial difference comes to be re-conceived in terms of immigration and arrival. In the dominant discourses of cultural production, racialized identities are taken to be extrinsic to the emerging multi-ethnic "Canadian," a residue of histories and conflicts beyond the borders of this (post) modern nation state. Thus in the popular histories of Canada's multi-cultural literature, "race" continues to have a silent function. *In the Skin of a Lion*, in focusing on European immigrants and the social struggle of the working classes, does more than legitimize the notion of Toronto as a "white" city. It brings to light a complex set of discourses and identity formations that continue to shape the development of multiculturalism in Toronto specifically and Canada in general. In spite of the fact, that both geographically and historically the city comes into being through the expropriation of First Nations land and culture, that it is illegal for people of Chinese ancestry to vote, that there are restrictions placed on the hiring of "white" women in "Chinese businesses," that neighbourhoods and a number of high profile institutions – the University of Toronto, the Granite Club, the Royal Canadian Yacht Club – have by-laws barring "Jews" and "Catholics," that night clubs paid different rates for African American and African Canadian performers, there is a complacency amongst readers of Ondaatje's novel in acknowledging the ethnic and racial reality of Toronto during the 1930s. As I have suggested already, the space or neighbourhood in which much of the action in the novel takes

place is the spawning ground for a group of fascist sympathizers who walked the streets wearing black arm bands and who were to instigate the Christie Pits riot of 1933. In reading *In the Skin of a Lion* as a novel about the working class without paying some heed to the manner in which labour politics and ethnic identity are connected, without acknowledging the racism rampant within the closed social circles of the ruling class but also in various labour movements, critics perpetuate the idea that Toronto, like the nation of which it would come to be the social and economic centre, developed outside racism. The question that needs to be addressed in the discussion of this novel is how it is that critics have come to see discontinuity, rather than continuity, between the ethnic divisions depicted in it and the systematic creation of race-based privilege that we now recognize as the downside of national politics.

In adding the figures of Patrick and Caravaggio to the writing of the city, Ondaatje's novel does more than simply expand the scope and texture of what has become Toronto. The struggle these two characters undergo suggests a re-conception of the multicultural citizen that has been emerging in and through the development of Canadian cultural politics during the 1970s and 1980s. The question that I have attempted to open in my reading of this novel is the relationship between the development of the racialized subject and the emergence of "whiteness" as a historically contingent position of privilege – the invisible identity in the cultural mosaic of a new Canadian Multiculturalism.

#### NOTES

1. Ondaatje's "ethnicity" is a prevalent topic in the literary reviews of his work, especially those dealing specifically with the recent release of *Anil's Ghost* and

*Running in the Family* (see for example, Young, Richler, Wachtel). It is also noted in various anthologies in which Ondaatje's writing is collected (Kamboureli ed.).

2. In "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," Eleanor Wachtel opens the question of Ondaatje's displacement from Sri Lanka to England and then to Canada, and Ondaatje's responses are fascinating. Particular responses to questions about migration, borders, and identity might be developed more fully. For example, his discussion of the appearance of Kirpal Singh suggests something of the author's grappling with the figure of a racialized subjectivity. First Ondaatje tells Wachtel that he is surprised when the character arrives in the book, and then in response to a series of questions about Canadian identity, he returns to a notion of the idea of "international bastards" articulated in *The English Patient*. He says, "There are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That's one of the book's main stories. Those migrants don't belong here and find a new home." and he goes on to say, "The element is also in *In the Skin of a Lion*, in which everyone's trying to get home. Even Caravaggio escapes in order to go home, which is the first place the police would look for him" (260).
3. In reference to the general commentary on Ondaatje's "biotext" *Running in the Family*, Mukherjee writes, "Just as India seems to evoke the image of sacred cows wandering through the streets in the white man's mind, Sri Lanka seems to trigger the images of untamed nature" (*Oppositional Aesthetics* 114).
4. See Noel Ignatiev's "Immigrants and Whites" for a discussion of the ambivalent "racial status of [European] immigrants" and the historical development of "white" as a social category" (16).
5. It is significant that Saint Patrick's Day has become a fixture of the New World experience. Against the racialized "Paddy" of Old World England, who with Blacks were disenfranchised from the mainstream culture, unable to work or live a decent life amongst the English, Saint Patrick maintains something of Irish strength. While the carnivalizing North American celebrations tend to belittle the figure, St. Patrick is after all still a Saint. In light of the complex history of British colonialism and domination, Patrick is a richly indeterminate figure; both saviour and traitor, he is a sign around which communities form - dubious genius of the "race," symbol of the fighting Irish, saviour of the persecuted Roman Catholic.
6. The story of St. Patrick dates back to the earliest written history of Ireland and is itself an important part of the development of Ireland as political entity, united under the rule of the Holy Roman Empire. It is a narrative rich with layers of colonial conquests and betrayals. According to the literature, "a young Romano-British boy, aged about 16, named Patricius, son of Calpurnius, a decurion (local magistrate) perhaps from Carlisle (Luguvallum)" was captured by Niall Noigiallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages) "one of the first historical rulers in Ireland" (Fry and Sommerset Fry *A History of Ireland* 26). Nevertheless, after six years of slavery in Co. Antrim, the boy is able to escape to Gaul, where he ends up studying in the monastery at Tours. Eventually Patrick is made a bishop in 432 and "possibly because of his knowledge of Irish, he was chosen to take over from Palladius" in Ulster as head of a mission to bring Ireland into Christianity (33). However, in spite of Patrick's vision of bringing Ireland into the fold of the Catholic Church and the relatively widespread acceptance of Christianity, the geography of Ireland and the cultural attitudes of the indigenous population, the Irish developed their own forms of Catholicism that were "unaffected by the changes and improvements in the continental orders" (34).
7. See the interview between Beverley Daurio and Davey, "Power to Bend Spoons." This essay provides a useful, if somewhat ironic, counterpoint to Davey's

accusations about Ondaatje's position, in that Davey disavows his own power as a writer, scholar and editor to influence cultural production or awareness in this country.

8. This is an important aspect of the historiographic critique of the Subaltern Studies Group (see Guha and Spivak ed.). For further discussion of the complex issues at play here see Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," and Ranajit Guha's *Dominance with Hegemony*.
9. Davey's conception of the relationship between literature and politics as it is articulated in *Post-national Arguments* is highly problematic. Of the novels he discusses, only two or three present the kind of vision Davey would define as being "political."
10. For book length studies of this project see Laura Ann Stoler's "race" and the *Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Sherene H. Razack's *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, "Race" and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*, and Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: "Race," Gender, and Sexuality in Colonial Contest*.

3



## CHAPTER FIVE

### MARLATT'S *ANA HISTORIC*, REVISING HERSTORY

an old given (narrative) suddenly makes new sense in a different context and with a different kind of hearing. (Marlatt *Readings from the Labyrinth* 62)

Some novels are in circulation for years before they find their way into academic discourse; others are institutionalized almost from the moment of their publication. In the case of Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*, this process had begun almost before the novel was in print. Marlatt's reputation as a first class poet and her growing renown as a feminist theorist meant that the release of this novel, her first novel, was cause for celebration. Marlatt's affiliations with a number of the country's most respected writers and literary theorists – not only those on the West Coast with whom she had made a name for herself as a poet during the 1960s and 1970s but also feminist writers and critics from Ontario and Quebec with whom she had aligned herself throughout the 1980s – invested the publication with a certain amount of institutional, dare we say canonical, clout a priori. This is not to say that the warm reception the novel received was undeserved or that Marlatt herself was some sort of darling of the academic literati: it was; she wasn't. Rather, in order to understand both the impact of *Ana Historic* and the tenor of the discussion it generated, it is useful to consider the context into which it entered CanLit. For Marlatt, as a feminist active in the identity politics of the period, the writing was conceived of as a public act dependent on a community of women reading and writing. This meant that Marlatt's novel not only spoke to a particular reading public but also that it was

granted proprietary importance amongst these readers. In a sense, the novel was read and written about as though it belonged to a group – feminists, but not exclusively – and critiques of the novel were publicly dismissed.<sup>1</sup> To be fair, the enthusiasm this novel generated and has continued to generate in the twelve years since its publication is testament to the power of Marlatt's writing; however, as I am suggesting, it is also an indication of a public desire for a particular type of writing. As much as the publication of *Ana Historic* was a milestone in Marlatt's career, its popularity bears witness to the emergence of particular constituencies within the field of contemporary Canadian literature, especially those identifying themselves with and through the (then) new poststructuralist and/or French-feminist theory.

Marlatt's ability to create characters – Annie, Ana, and Ina – who might speak to readers who were themselves struggling against the strictures of a patriarchal society, struck a chord. Marlatt's genius for bringing feminist theory to life in fiction allowed her readers to locate this theory firmly in CanLit. Thus, the novel's subject matter and the focus of its critique mark it as part of a powerful counter-discursive feminism that severely challenged the hegemony of the dominant white patriarchal nation. In the context of an emergent feminist opposition to the ideals and conventions of literary nationalism (for example, see collections of critical essays edited by Barbara Godard, *Gynocritics*, or by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, *A Mazing Space*), *Ana Historic* could be read as articulating a vital challenge to the mainstream. The fact that the novel self-consciously immerses its readers in the history and politics of Vancouver as a site of colonial struggle and national development has meant that it is particularly well suited for both critical exegesis and inclusion in university syllabi. In fact, the novel has provided academics and students with a way into a diversity of topics, in-



cluding feminist historiography, psychoanalytical theory, life writing, colonialism, and queer theory.

In spite of the avant-garde slant of Marlatt's prose style, *Ana Historic* has been popular with critics. Reworking "old scripts" by giving them "a different kind of hearing," Marlatt's novel presents us with a distinct vehicle for revising and re-assessing inherited discourses and political ideologies. While the particularity of Marlatt's poetics might be said to resist the realism of earlier nationalist literary models, giving critics a break from the parochial concerns of an older thematic criticism, the narrative topoi around which the novel is written embrace (if to subvert) many of the recognized themes of Canadian culture. The wilderness, the building of the CPR, British immigration: all underscore Marlatt's experimental prose. Encouraging its readers to address the quotidian effects of the seemingly unapproachable theories of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, it nonetheless kept everything grounded in a space (place-time) recognizably Canadian. Marlatt's relatively straight forward narrative, her more or less explicit representation of the coming into being of a lesbian subject, and her ideological attack on "the dominant culture," not only enabled theoretical readings to develop themselves out of the ground of Marlatt's narrative, but demanded it.<sup>2</sup>

The power or influence of this novel stems from the geo-historical location with which it is concerned; Marlatt shares Ondaatje's knack for locating the narrative within a rich geo-historical setting, a key site in not only the historical development of the nation but also its contemporary transformation. Marlatt's ability to affix the *coming into being* of a lesbian-feminist<sup>3</sup> subject to a particularly important locale in the regional history of Canadian nationalism is an important aspect of her attempt to explode the dominant narrative of place in which Vancouver is inscribed. By engaging with and re-

imagining a clearly nationalistic geography, Marlatt's novel has lent itself to the same contentious debates around issues of a "Canadian postmodern" (discussed in earlier chapters). Adding the questions of gender and sexuality to the critical conception of a national and/or multicultural subject, it provides a vehicle with which to extend the contemporary debate of difference, *différance*, and cultural politics. The novel challenges the representational limits of rationalist historiography, re-casting Vancouver's historic growth from *Milltown to Metropolis* (as the title of the Alan Morley text from which much of Marlatt's historical information is gleaned puts it) in terms of a lesbian-feminist telos (Ana-Zoe), and thus it performs a crucial intervention within the "master narratives" (to recite a phrase popular in the criticism) of Canadian culture, history and literature. Self-consciously setting out to resist the hegemonic engendering of a national subject, Marlatt's novel expropriates centralist assumptions about the original nature of Canada's East-West expansion; in so doing it re-inscribes Vancouver within the "margins" of popular history. Yet in attempting to critique Vancouver's identity as the Western terminus of the CPR, Marlatt's novel opens CanLit to a much larger geography of colonialism.<sup>4</sup>

Situated as it is and was in the midst of a historically significant dialogue between Québécoise feminists and Anglo-feminists about the intersecting politics of space, language, and bodies, *Ana Historic* occupies a key position in the development of contemporary Canadian literature, especially as it continues to attempt to come to terms with the issues of "race," gender, and sexuality. Adhering to the propositions of a new "writing in the feminine," a translation and resituating of *l'écriture féminine* within a specifically Anglophone Canadian context, *Ana Historic* is presented as a multi-layered text around and through which to organize feminist thinking on a number of

theoretical and mimetic questions. Presenting itself as women's writing, not merely a book written by a woman but the imaginary welling up of an community of women lost and forgotten beneath the suppositions of a masculine discourse characterized as individualistic, heterosexist, and rationalist, *Ana Historic* revolves around the problematic construction of a female subject in a colonial space.

Against the idealized image of women writing presented throughout the novel, we are left with certain questions about the relationship between the development of a lesbian-feminist subject and various other racialized subjects. Early in the novel, Annie imagines Ana setting out to write alone in her cottage:

her tapping there, looking for a way out of the blank that faced her - blankety-blank - and not that tug either, the elliptical tug of memory which erased this other. She was looking for the company of another who was also reading - out through the words, through the wall that separated her, an arm, a hand -  
(45)

This necessary, maybe even probable fiction of the lonely schoolteacher writing prefigures Annie's own act of writing. The narrator tells us "so she began, 'a woman sitting at her kitchen table'"(45). So Annie's writing begins, flowing out of Virginia Woolf's well-known metaphor for women's writing. She imagines Ana having a room of her own where she is free to write after or before her daily responsibility while Annie herself is more constricted. Her writing takes place downstairs from but not quite out of earshot of her son, "Mickey's radio in his room." As she begins to imagine new possibilities for herself, Annie is aware of her husband, Richard's typewriter busy upstairs" (45). Thus, Marlatt's primary image of women writing suggests a trajectory across time; the shared experience of imagining one woman writing moves toward a community of women writing.

Determining and determined by the unique history of a national culture with which it is critically engaged, this novel represents a significant encoding of colonial space: it is for all intents and purposes a re-deployment of nationalist ideology in the ambivalent and contradictory past of Canadian land claims and identity battles. If Marlatt's prescient gestures – from her opening knock to its closing prose poem – have constructed a faithful and committed community, we might say a “company” of readers, the question remains how this constructed identity conforms to or resists the historical limitations of its author and readers. The ensuing responses to the novel, the continuation of Ana and Annie's metaphorical writing, reflect the particular dynamism of an emergent representational space. By responding to and on some level dictating the language of feminist critique, this novel was from the outset embroiled in social struggles with the problems of not only gendered identity but racialized identities as well.

As with Ondaatje's *In the Skin of the Lion*, Marlatt's *Ana Historic* was especially important to a new theoretically inspired and socially engaged readership. It is therefore a key text around which to locate contemporary debates about the relationship between nationalism and the intersections of feminism and colonialism. In the sense that Marlatt's novel has been crucial to the re-conception of contemporary CanLit, it remains a significant site in which to interrogate literary debates around reading praxis and the representation of dissident identities. If with the publication of *Ana Historic*, Daphne Marlatt not only becomes one of the key figures in the development of feminist discourse in Canada but also, somewhat paradoxically, an important voice in the emergence of “multicultural” writing, then *Ana Historic* remains an essential sign with which to read the development of postcolonial discourse and the ongoing critique of nationalism.

ANA HISTORY, ANA FICTION

you misspelled her name

A n a

that's her name:  
back, backward, reversed  
again, anew (43)

The popularity of Marlatt's writing has allowed her characters Ana and Annie to enter the discourse as positive figures. In the eyes of its readers, the novel's fragmented narrative delineates an exciting representation of feminist theory as a crucial mode of resistance to a dominant history of nationhood. Ana and Annie's determination to throw off a putative gender identity in favour of a lesbian-feminist self-identification is emblematic of the development of a more theoretically and politically engaged Canadian readership. The novel's intertwining of "queer" narratives of resistance and empowerment with Marlatt's unique prose style placed the novel at the centre of a developing academic discourse. In addition to being able to re-imagine the possibility of an alternative, lesbian sociality, Marlatt's writing refuses or resists the stylistic norms of realist fiction and history, thereby allowing readers to explore different modes of expression. If the narrative posits new possibilities, dares to imagine a community beyond the confines of history as it is constructed in the name of a male subject, it is the texture of Marlatt's writing – the evocative power of her poetic prose – that has made this novel cause for celebration.

For many readers, *Ana Historic* is more than a good novel. It suggests alternatives to the static conceptions of an official historiography: an un-

writing of *history*, re-imagining it in a fundamentally different form. Where Marlene Goldman writes that *Ana Historic* “adds another historical layer”(33), Annette Grisé argues that “Marlatt rewrites hystery into a herstory text, a narrative of Canadi-ana, our history told ‘back, backward, reversed / again, anew””(43). Blurring of the lines between inside and outside, between *Ana Historic* and the self-reflexive references to Ana/Annie’s writing, these two readers indulge in a popular conception of Marlatt’s novel as type of feminist historiography. Grisé suggests that “Ana’s journal and Annie’s novel both act as strategies of resistance to the dominating ‘historic voice (voice-over)””(91). Subverting the dominant and dominating voice of male reason by positing a fictional “genealogy of lost women”(Goldman 33), *Ana Historic* does not simply attack history, it mimics and distorts it in order to overturn its authorial power. In this way, her readers suggest, Marlatt’s narrative represents an alternative history but also another way of knowing history. Revising and rewriting history with an ear for the linguistic and semiotic flow of women’s experience, it functions as an exploration or a recovery of Foucault’s “subjugated knowledges” that resist the closure of truth – the full stop of fact. If, as Goldman suggests, “in tracing her life and the lives of her foremothers, Annie gives voice to the experience of women not considered worthy enough to be inscribed in the ‘book’ of History”(34), it is this act of “giving voice,” the manner in which it is imagined into place, and not just the voice given, that gives Marlatt’s novel its power.

In another critical discussion of Marlatt’s evocative tropes, Lola Lemire Tostevin connects Marlatt’s subversive intent to the plurality of voices or narrative threads the novel unravels. Challenging her narrator’s own rational assertion that “a book of interruptions is not a novel,” Marlatt seems to want to allow her prose to spill over the boundaries between polite modes of dis-

course. The fragmentary narrative posits itself as the possibility of a story that unites reader and writer in the act of creating something as yet unwritten, but nevertheless insistently present. Tostevin says that the novel's "two stories" (Ana Richards' story and the story of Richard's Annie) flow together, visible "Against the blank page of history that wrote her off" – i.e., the documented Mrs. Richard, Richard's Annie, but also the alienated subject of woman within the historical narrative. They perform

an unspoken urge [which] insists itself into words as Marlatt not only retrieves Mrs. Richards from absence, but insures that the contemporary Annie Richards' personal history which is also her mother's history is not repeated. (37)

Thus, as Tostevin suggests, one of the key thematic ideas in Marlatt's text is the proposal of women's writing as a simultaneous writing and unwriting, a refusal to repeat the same old story by which women are written in, initiated. Annie reflects on the memory of her dead mother:

to repeat history, to put me through what you went through. left for years at boarding school, even over the summer holidays, your parents off somewhere in India – did you wear bras under your tunics and blazers? Surely by age sixteen? Did they issue them along with the uniform? I never thought to ask who initiated you. Who brought you your first bra? and how it was done. (62)

The prose breaks in the middle of the sentence, shifting focus from the public to the private; this paragraph enacts the refusal to become caught up in a simple retelling of the known events. Shifting the focus and the blame from society, Annie's history, her story, is comprised of these two narratives, which refuse finally to be reconciled. This is one of the novel's central tropes. Internalizing and reformulating a meta-discursive critique of dominant culture, the novel hinges on its own ambivalent relationship with the stories it is unwilling to repeat.

Upon its arrival, the fact that *Ana Historic* was Marlatt's *first novel* was considered to be quite important. The subtitle and the obvious genre distinctions it posits have been discussed numerous times; Marlatt's decision to work in a more or less straight forward prose form is often seen as a key aspect of the novel's critical power. Because Marlatt's writing career might be characterized in terms of both experimentation with and resistance to inherited literary forms or genres, this break was significant. Critics were quick to read authorial significance into the fact that this text announced itself as "a novel." The clear categorization of the writing – which is marked not only by the phrase on the book's cover but throughout the narrative itself – draws attention to an ambivalent relationship to literary conventions that are/were shared by a number of her colleagues, friends, fellow and sister writers. More than a simple statement of fact, or advert for the book's contents, "a novel" presumes a position within a meta-discourse that encompasses the author's career and points to the larger social sphere to which the publication belonged, at least initially.

In an early interview with Marlatt, "On *Ana Historic*," George Bowering opens with the issue of the novel's "subtitle." He asks, "*Ana Historic: A novel*. Is this a first novel, or another novel?" Marlatt responds that this is her "first novel, because it's the first fictional book of prose." Taking issue with an earlier attempt by critics to read *Zocalo* as a novel, Marlatt differentiates between the more autobiographical text "based on what had actually happened" on her travels through a province in Mexico (with Roy Kiyooka) and the novel which is drawing more heavily on the "invented"(96). Throughout the interview, Bowering and Marlatt come back to the question of the novel's form; they feel that this is an important problem because it is related to the larger identity concerns raised in the text. Both writers agree that the issue



of form is central to the thematic issues addressed in *Ana Historic*, including immigration, gender, and sexuality. The ambivalence of the subtitle, the novel's ironic pronouncement of its own genre designation and apparent uneasiness with the category, is fundamental to Marlatt's critique of history. It is as if, in naming itself a novel, while systematically rewriting "the history," the text hopes to co-opt the creative process to radically different ends. Counterposing invention and the static fact – "what is fact?" Annie asks, "(f)act. the f stop of act"(31) – Marlatt's novel dwells on the limits of both discourses simultaneously. Bowering points out that the plurality of stories within the novel are an amplification of "a choice of fictions" that are themselves already present in the historical archive, "a choice of fictions" that flood the space of history with a diversity of f/acts, subverting the monologic of masculine libidinal economy.

On one level, the return to history underlying Marlatt's feminist resistance to the "larger culture's narratives [which] perpetuate [sexist] cultural assumptions" (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 63) corresponds with the theoretical conception of the novel as a popular genre that is not only conversant with the dominant ideology of bourgeois society but also resistant to it. For example, Bakhtin's theory of the novel suggests that the novel is a literary form that has grown out of earlier preliterate modes of cultural expression, which have not or cannot be completely consumed by the rationalism of a dominant culture and discourse. He suggests that novels are repositories for a heteroglossia of social voices resistant to the homogenising drive of a bourgeois culture. Adapting the idea of the carnival, which he sees as a form of social protest and at least popular opposition to the status quo of Christian culture and authority, Bakhtin suggests that the novel exists as an ambivalent zone of conflict between hegemonic powers of the cultural authority and

the working poor. This theoretical conception of the novel, which non-coincidentally was popular amongst postmodern theorists (Hutcheon and Kroetsch were two of the earliest Can Critics to apply Bakhtin), lends itself to readings of Marlatt's writing.<sup>5</sup> Marlatt's writing assumes the focus and perhaps even the postures of history but subverts them by exposing them to the differences and sensibilities of her literary audience: that is by opening the monologic of history to the dialogic of feminist writing and critique. The problem, however, is that the ambivalence upon which her critical intervention rests needs to be theorized in more depth. Interlocking the lives of Ana Richards, Ina, and Annie Richards, Marlatt not only contaminates the archive with a confluence of feminine voices, desires and knowledge, she also invests literature with a powerful kind of referentiality that confounds the lowly appearance of the literary genre with which she is working. Her novel posits a subversion of the restricted and restricting frames of the historical record. The fiction of their being, in a sense its possibility, performs a celebration of the confusions, ambiguities, and sublimated possibilities erased within the empirical insistence on a monologic of fact. Adding "a choice of stories" to the historical narrative and/or cultural record, blurring the boundaries between genres, however, is not identical with political resistance. Yet, the fact that *Ana Historic* is a novel has been cast as a major aspect of Marlatt's representational politics. That her writing was a response to "the difficulty" posed by the patriarchal bent of "our most important cultural narratives (the scriptures, heroic tales, official histories, legal judgments and classic stories our culture hands down to us)" (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 63) is important and does provide a key entrance into the politics of Canadian Literature.

Riffing on the many possible permutations presented by Marlatt's creative collocation of history and literature, Peter Dickinson recounts the vari-

ous significances given to the title throughout the text:

*Ana Historic: A novel*: women written by history, history re-written by women translated, "back, backward, reversed / again, anew" (43). *An ahistoric novel*: documents, records, facts – "(f)act. the f stop of act" quoted out of (con)text, juxtaposed, re-cited / re-si(s)ted "in the ongoing cinerama" of fiction (31). *A novel (of) histori(c)/ana*: anecdotes, gossip, a collection of memorable sayings, that which is "suspect at the archives. 'inauthentic,' fiction possibly, contrived later" (30). In translating History into her story – Mrs. Richards's but also Ina's, as well as here – Annie is essentially rewriting what remains unwritten, working from only the barest outline of a source text, the sum total of a life encapsulated by two fleeting references in the archival registers of 1873 and 1874. (146)

For Dickinson, as for many other readers, the novel's awareness of itself as a novel and as a political gesture, an ahistorical act, functions as a critical marker of its difference. Allowing itself to make a dangerous leap of the imagination, to posit a reality outside the documented history, to read women's writing into the archive, *Ana Historic* is an important text because it dares to see a place for a lesbian-feminist subject in the history of Vancouver, while at the same time refusing to accept the tenets of the history or the methodology it is grounded in. It is a monstrous translation of the possible and probable outcomes codified in the historical record that does not take the past for granted, as something settled (a fact).

In the ensuing years since the publication of Marlatt's novel, the revisionary and imaginary propositions it proffers have become important to the literary history and development of contemporary CanLit. Punning on the notion of novelty, *Ana Historic: A Novel* was as much representative of a formal break or development in Marlatt's writing as it was of the emergence of a new reading public. Her collaborative *Steveston* (with photographer Robert Minden), *Rings*, or *What Matters* might be read as early examples of Marlatt's struggle with the issues of gender, and *Touch to My Tongue* and her

collaborative *Double Negative* (with author Betsy Warland) might prefigure this novel as earlier examples of Marlatt's exploration of lesbian-feminist writing. However, *Ana Historic* is the first major work, especially from the perspective of a reading public, to grapple with the topics of gender and sexuality. While earlier texts struggle with particular themes or issues that are crucial to the conception of a feminist aesthetics or literature, including subjectivity, motherhood, marginalization, *Ana Historic* provides the most overt reply to the question "what did it take for woman to write her own script, conceive of herself as the positive hero of her own life?" (63). Ironically this new script depends, or so I would argue, on both the public appeal of the novel as a form and its conventional association with feminist literature. Whereas the earlier poetry is grounded in Marlatt's phenomenological understanding of language as essential to knowing one's place and one's self, *Ana Historic* represents a movement into a much more socially based aesthetic. Granted community has been important to Marlatt from the beginning of her career; her work on "oral history" – *Steveston, Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End, Steveston Reconsidered* – is certainly grounded in a desire for community, or to have community be a basis for the writing. However, this sense of community is fundamentally different from the ideals she develops in her self-consciously feminist writing, in which her sense of marginalization, her tenuous position on the edge of particular social spaces, is understood to be an effective sexual identity. If in *Steveston*, for example, Marlatt is aware of herself as a female figure, seeing herself as an object of the men's desire, she continues to see herself as an outsider, an individual interloper whose presence in the predominantly Japanese Canadian fishing town is curious, even remarkable. Her identifications, if they can even be called as such, tend to be for the natural place, for the salmon, for the fishing boat, exploited in

man's greed. In *Ana Historic*, Marlatt sets out to create an imaginary community of women, united in the experience of oppression and, more importantly, in their resistance to this experience. The fact that it did so in a public form, as the novel is, actually on a social and material level allowed such an imaginary community to come to light.

Over time, however, the novelty of this novel has faded; the string of semiotic explosions its title once set loose seem now to be dated. The importance of this break in the narrative of Marlatt's development as a writer (to readers and writer) has become over-determined, even conventional. The possibilities suggested in the struggles of Ana, Ina, Annie, Zoe and the other women of the novel – their ability to connect with each other and the ultimate disaffection separating them – have been absorbed into the discourse and taken on categorical importance. The re-visionary power of the text – the opportunity for self-reflexivity and the interrogation of social norms it afforded – has been neutralized by the rhetoric of self-congratulatory subversion. For the most part, the liberal idealism of Canadian postmodernism and white feminism has leached Marlatt's text of its contradictions. For a reader returning to the novel twelve years after its publication, the development of queer and post-colonial theories of identity and the shifting of focus away from national to trans-national or trans-cultural spheres of political engagement make it difficult to maintain an entirely positive slant on the novel's political intent, as it was first conceptualized and upheld in the criticism. The radical departure this novel represented has been folded into the establishment and institutionalization of white feminism within Canadian literature. As numerous feminist, post-colonial and "race" theorists have argued, the belief in an imaginary community of women writing and rewriting themselves out of the repressive patriarchal narratives of marriage, heterosexuality, and

nation formation, is itself riddled with social privilege. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, Marlatt's political vision is based on romanticized notions of community and differences that privilege gender differences over those of "race," sex, and class. Although it is important to acknowledge the text as an "outing" or significant examination of sexual politics within the hetero-normative spaces of Canadian literature, culture, and history, it is also important to recognize, especially in retrospect, the representational politics that surround its acceptance into a literary mainstream.

#### THE NOVEL AS DOCUMENT

Although, nine years later, the Anansi republication of *Ana Historic* still bears the subtitle, the situation and significance of the gesture have changed radically. While it no doubt matters that this is "a novel," the socio-historical changes, as well as the discourse that has grown up around the novel, mediate our reading of this statement. The fact that Marlatt has since published a second novel, *Taken*, and is at work on another, changes things dramatically. In dwelling on this point of difference between *Ana Historic: A Novel* published by Coach House and *Ana Historic: A Novel* republished by the House of Anansi, I want to insist on the historical novelty of Marlatt's novel in order to problematize a particular strain of her criticism. My contention is that while this text provides critics with an important way into the crucial issue of a lesbian inflected nationalism, it must be re-read across more than a decade of literary and culture theorizing of identity formation that re-invests certain performances with an entirely different political effect than was or has been imagined. From our perspective a full twelve or thirteen years after the fact of Marlatt's initial publication, it is safe to say that *Ana Historic* has developed a history of its own. The radical intervention

it proposed in 1988, and for which it has been celebrated must be reconsidered. Reading the reception of the novel against the development of contemporary CanLit during the 1990s not only allows for but also necessitates the re-examination of critical assumptions about the nature and function of Marlatt's re-inscription of a lesbian subject within Canadian literature and history. Re-examining the novel through current theories of the relationships between nationalism, gender, sexuality and "race" might facilitate a re-thinking of CanLit within the space of contemporary cultural politics. Marlatt's experimentation with alternative ideas of space and history, not as the bedrock of fact, but as socially constructed and contested categories of oppression, might then take us back into the complex dynamics of racialization, sexualization and class stratification integral to the development of contemporary cultural nationalism.

To better understand the conventional nature of Marlatt's decision to write "a novel," it is crucial to consider *Ana Historic* within the larger literary context in which it is published. In addition to providing an important and viable means for exploring and subverting the dominant discourses of local and national conceptions of Vancouver as heroic space in the Westward expansion of Canada, it is crucial to see how the novel conforms to the desires and expectations of its reading audience. If Canadian literature is divided by a politics of form, as Lynette Hunter points out, it is important to be aware of the fact that the decision to write a novel not only enabled Marlatt's entrance into the literary mainstream but paradoxically allowed for the inculcation of particular tastes within the mainstream, in particular those of professional readers: editors, publishers, academics. For writers like Marlatt and Ondaatje, making the move to write fiction, especially in the form of a novel, might be seen as facilitating their acceptance by a wider national audience.

While there are any number of mitigating factors in the rise to fame, including stylistic maturity, artistic integrity, and individual genius, we should not discount the shifts in the reading habits or dissemination of literary texts. The fact that, in Canada, novels outsell books of poetry means that they tend to be substantially more influential on “a reading public.” Yet, while this is an apparent truism, it belies an economics of form that is slightly more complex. Given the structure of Canada Council juries and of government funding for arts and education in Canada, there is an equally apparent need for “high culture,” i.e., for Canadian writing recognized as having an appropriate level of intellectual or artistic content as well as social relevance. If poetry matters, it tends to do so amongst a relatively small number of (professional) readers who are responsible, at least in part, for honing and developing the tastes of Canadians. Novels, on the other hand, tend to be by far the most “important” literary commodities. Thus, when a writer who already has academic credibility, like Marlatt and Ondaatje do, decides to write a novel, that novel is bound to generate discussion. While both writers have been associated with what we might for lack of a better term call an avant-garde, their recognition outside the prescribed spaces of literary production coincides with the publications of their first novels. From the perspective of a national audience or reading public, Marlatt and Ondaatje’s novels tend to represent radical departures from the norm; however, from another point of view, these texts demonstrate a much more acceptable or palatable form of writing.

It is precisely the production of a reading audience that I want to tie to the popularity of Marlatt’s crossover text, *Ana Historic*. In spite of the qualitative differences in the subject matter and in their stylistic approaches to the problem of writing “a novel,” the publication of Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of the Lion* (1987), and Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* (1988) might be read together as



indicators of a shift in the larger field of CanLit toward postmodernism, multiculturalism, and feminism. Marlatt's prose works which prefigure and foreshadow the novel – *A Month of Hungry Ghosts*, *How Hug a Stone*, and *Zocalo* – all maintain a technical edge that was and is incommensurable with the demands of a larger reading public; the fact that these texts were marketed as books of poetry or experimental prose, rather than as novels, meant that they were subjected to relatively small scale distribution – even if readers wanted to they would have had trouble obtaining them. The novel, on the other hand, is a much more public genre and as such provides opportunity for much wider distribution, which in turn is crucial to Canadian critics looking to disseminate their ideas across a larger national audience. Thus in relation to the earlier work, *Ana Historic* is a literary site that presupposed a wider reading audience from the outset, a fact that must not be discounted in discussions of its political focus, intention or effect.

*Ana Historic*, in as much as it was seen to be a revision of the hegemonic and monolithic narratives of a national culture, could be touted as a new kind of writing representative of a new cultural politic. In retrospect, it is possible to say that readers in Canada, both amateur and professional, had begun to develop a taste for texts like Marlatt's that challenged the normative ideals of the so-called mainstream, but which were also relatively easy to read or teach – relatively easy, that is, to consume. This is not to take anything away from Marlatt, or for that matter, from Ondaatje whose work might be similarly categorized; rather it is to draw out a particular aspect of the novel as a popular genre: i.e., that it tends to be more approachable. Furthermore, the shift toward a narrative based prose-style also corresponded with a shift in audience focus. The stories that Marlatt began to tell, and again we might note a similar trajectory in Ondaatje's oeuvre, were both

more fundamentally Canadian in the topos and more radically contradictory to the overall development of national culture. While Marlatt had already written about her lesbian sexuality in earlier work, *Ana Historic* is the product of a more thorough thinking through or depiction of lesbian-feminist ideals. As I have suggested, the power of this novel stems from Marlatt's genius for developing a language and narrative by which contemporary feminist theory might come to life; however, it was her decision to move into the mainstream by publishing a playful, yet nonetheless unapologetic novel, that seems to have cemented Marlatt's reputation within the emerging discourse of literary nationalism.

The abundance of "multicultural" and "feminist" anthologies published during the 1980s suggests both the development of a reading public and the effects of government programmes promoting cultural diversity in the arts in Canada.<sup>6</sup> The cultural and sociological reasons for this shift are by no means obvious, and I think it is very dangerous to assume that there was some sort of liberalization of Canadian culture during the time. The point that I am making is simply that novels like *Ana Historic* and *In the Skin of Lion* corresponded to trends in the literary marketplace that were felt within and beyond the academy. Approaching the problems of difference – of sexuality, gender, "race," ethnicity – by embracing a more public form meant that both these writers would get more exposure. For the readers of CanLit concerned with establishing a symmetry between the sociological changes to contemporary Canadian culture and a national literature, the appeal of the novel, as opposed to lyric poetry, long poems, documentaries, or various other bio and auto-biographical forms of experimental prose, was rooted in the fact that texts fitting this genre would have a wider appeal.<sup>7</sup>

From the standpoint of the growing publishing industry, that *Ana Historic* could be advertised as a novel was significant. In addition to enacting a kind of semiotic playfulness associated with Marlatt's writing and/or marking this text as a key moment in her career as a writer, the announcement that this was "a novel" might also be read through the history of small press publishing in Canada. For a press like Coach House, this novel is connected with a fairly important broadening of distribution, or at least a significant shift in focus away from the more edgy concerns of small press publishing. It represents a movement away from not only a commitment to avant-garde poetry upon which it had made its name, but also a shift away from emerging writers in favour of a more established, mid career writer.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is important to remember that the title and subtitle – *Ana Historic: A Novel* – would have functioned to help market the text, or to situate its distribution for less savvy readers. Having more or less established itself by publishing poetry collections as well as book length poems during the 1970s and 1980s, it was no doubt financially important for Coach House to differentiate this book from other books of poetry by Marlatt and other readers in the Coach House stables. On the other hand, the designation "a novel" offered readers a clue as to how to position this novel in the overall spectrum of new writing, connecting this book with texts by Gail Scott, Lola Lemire Tostevin and Nicole Brossard published during the same period. This novel was part of a larger group of texts that came to shape a kind of lesbian feminist cross-national CanLit. As much as the cover blurb would provide readers with a clear declaration of the publisher's intention to distinguish it from poetry or other less popular genres of writing, it would also serve as an indicator of the book's place within an emerging circle of Canadian writers who were attempting, through the revitalization or expropriation of the novel, to interro-

gate the hegemonic discourses, or master narratives of a patriarchal mainstream.

#### A NECESSARY FICTION

Even though Ana Richards is a product of Annie Richard's imagination and *Ana Historic* is the invention of Daphne Marlatt, an act of fiction, the novel's attempt to reclaim "story telling" as a feminist trope allows for a blurring of their distinctions. Following the rhetoric invested in Annie's discussion of her need to create a viable fiction for Ana, mirrored as it is by Marlatt's own statements about the novel and about feminist writing in general, critics have tended to become conversant with a kind of feminist positivism. While I don't wish to embroil myself in the popular debate about Marlatt's essentialism, I do want to talk about the way that readers have tended to literalise Marlatt's highly idealized fiction. Reading truth-value into her ideologically saturated narratives and imagery, Marlatt scholars have failed to analyze the historical foundations of their own discourse or the notion of historicism assumed in the critique of dominant culture. It is possible to argue that these stories are necessary fictions, strategic narratives with which to resist the phallogocentrism of dominant discourse: i.e., to challenge and subvert both masculinist presuppositions about language and truth (phallogocentrism) and the rationalist notions about the primacy of writing or document (logocentrism) upon which they are based. It is necessary, however, to submit as well that their designation as such, their claim to fiction, is itself contingent on the specificity of history and culture, in short on social space.

The novel as an inherited form is but one of the scripts these characters, Annie, Ina, and Ana must break free of. In Marlatt's discussion of this

novel, it is apparent that the formal ambivalence we have been discussing is critical to the politics it attempts to articulate. Ina's insistence of the difference between fact and fiction, i.e., between Annie's attempt to reclaim the "real" Mrs. Richards through an action of invention and the historical reference to her as a schoolteacher and later wife to Ben Springer, is figured in terms of Annie's perversion or "wilful desire to obscure the truth"(55).

Clearly, "a novel" is not history, and yet as Marlatt and her characters recognize it is historical. Within the realm of Marlatt's feminist poetic, the novel is an act of invention with the potential of becoming a serious intervention in the public conception of women's lives. What is less clear is how the productive dialectic with which she engages – the overlapping of history and literature, or fact and fiction – depends on a reification of a particular set of differences against which it works. The double inscription of the terms "novel" and "history" are central to what Marlatt herself talks about as "writing the body," her particular translation of Irigary's notion of *l'écriture féminine*. As such, *Ana Historic: A Novel!* is both the disavowal of history and literature, a challenge to the hegemonic difference separating the two, and simultaneously the re-inscription or performance of a specific cultural tradition.

Writing a novel in and about Vancouver or the lesbian sexuality of its first female schoolteacher – "by all accounts a Lady" – may well be inconceivable within the strict heterosexist narratives of colonial development and the domestication of this imperial outpost. This impossibility, the unspeakable reality Marlatt's novel sees itself describing, depends on central images of illness or abjection. The monstrous fiction Annie dares to write is a necessary alternative to the story she has inherited; as much as it is her way out of the bind of her marriage, it is her way out of the mother-daughter bond. Annie's struggle is a counterpoint to Ina's struggle to live her own life beyond the

strictures of provincialism – that pressure on her to uphold the “virtues” of colonial wife and mother and to assume her “proper” place in the narrative of empire. Annie’s freedom is grounded in her ability to understand and resist the trauma Ina suffers. As it is portrayed in the novel, Ina’s hysteria and the attendant shock treatment she is subjected to are symptomatic of the conflicted space she inhabits on the doubly determined border zone: of nation and empire. Yet, Annie’s freedom depends on the simultaneous articulation of both Ana’s and Ina’s realities, as far as she understands them. In this sense, it is possible to argue that Annie’s fiction, which is also an idealized version of Marlatt’s own fiction, functions through the circumscription and victimization of Ina. At the same time as *Ana Historic* presents itself as a narrative of liberation it succumbs to pressures of liberal discourse and confines Ina to herstory.

The Vancouver Ina arrives in and the one Annie grows up in is a complex and contradictory space in the developing narrative of nationhood. Within the social and the literary histories of post-war Canada, Vancouver exists as a particular site/cite in the discursive formation of a counter-hegemonic localism or resistance to nationalism. Marlatt’s connection with a social network of writers and thinkers opposed to the dominant conception of Canadian nationalism should not be discounted as it informs and, perhaps, renders problematic the assumptions of her lesbian-feminist poetic. In the years preceding *Ana Historic*, Marlatt had made a name for herself as a poet. Before she was cast as a prototypical Anglophone Canadian feminist, she was associated with the Tish group at the University of British Columbia. Her engagement with the politics and aesthetics of what we might term an open form poetics (after Charles Olson), based as it is in the problems of writing the body in place, are well known. Early on in her career, Marlatt had

developed a sense of the innate connection between writing and the body indebted to the Olsonian ideals of “projective verse.” Her position within various constellations of West Coast writing communities helped to establish her reputation within the avant-garde of Canadian poetry. Her particular brand of proprioceptive writing with its distinctive sense of the line and the materiality of the written spoken word came to the fore in such books as *Rings* and *What Matters*. Marlatt’s sense of a process poetics and her interest in documentary forms are evident in *Steveston* and the longer prose works such as *How Hug a Stone* and *Zocalo*. Her sense of perception and place, and to the primacy of the phenomenological i/eye of a subject coming into being, can all be traced back to the earlier writing.

During the 1980s, however, Marlatt’s sense of self and more particularly her sense of language began to undergo a dramatic shift as a result of her involvement in a new community of feminist writers and theorists from across the country. In order to understand this transition, I want to look at one of her early comments on the origins of her writing. In her short introductory essay “Of the matter,” Marlatt outlines briefly some of the early stylistic concerns that she sees informing the writing collected in *What Matters: Writing 1968-1970*. Looking back across the decade that separates the composition of the poems from their publication in 1980, Marlatt recalls a deep connection between what she refers to as a “senseless and immaterial” life and the matter of language:

Making sense became the work generated by the fear that if I could not make sense of what was happening then my life was indeed senseless & immaterial.

Yet at the same time I was writing poems, both short- & long-line, composing out of a poetic that taught me language, its “drift,” could ground my experience in the turn of a line as tense, as double-edged, as being felt. (8)

Poetry is about making sense of the world one is in. Careful attention to the peculiarities of her vernacular might “ground” her in the living breathing language of lived experience.

Interestingly, this sense of lived experience does not yet come to depend on the recognition or explicit naming of gender as a matter of difference. At this point in her career, the pervasive sexism that Ana and Annie resist does not appear to warrant clear articulation. Even though it is organized around implicitly feminist concerns, such as childbirth and her divorce from Al Marlatt, *What Matters* defines a sense of alienation in relation to the divisions of nationalism, what Marlatt calls her “feeling estranged” from Vancouver. While it is significant that Marlatt’s epigraph invokes Mary Daly’s attack on the phallogocentricism of Genesis – “In the beginning was not the word. In the beginning is the hearing” – the poems appear to draw most heavily on a kind of Olsonian localism or symbiotic connection between the body and ecology. As she presents it in the introduction, her isolation comes out of what she continues to remember in universal terms of “a common condition, being alive at this point in time, or as alive as consciousness & an effort to fight off the closed terms of our culture will allow”(7). She tells the reader that

the writing in this book resonates, much of it, with what is known as alienation, living as i was in another country, & feeling estranged (which of us was the stranger in that struggle for the real) in my marriage & among friends. I was moved by the issues raised, & raging around us, by members of my generation – the Vietnam war, freedom of speech, equal rights, environmental ravages. (7)

Neither the specific problematic of gender difference, nor sexuality, surface in her conception of her own subjectivity as it might relate to the writing.

Here, Marlatt does not engage with the gender assumptions embedded in language itself, an idea that informs Daly’s statement and which is a key



element of her own later, explicitly feminist writing. Her introduction does not pick up on the etymology of the book's title; she locates "matter" in what she calls a "dialect" or linguistic commonality rather than materiality or motherhood. Grounding "what matters" in the language of home, the rhetoric of the local, she addresses an opportunity to question the *material* relations dividing access to language. Central feminist ideas, such as mother tongue, *materlingua*, Kristeva's semiotic, however, do not yet enter into Marlatt's explicit conception of language:

*What Matters? what is the matter? or what is the matter with you? In the dialect i grew up speaking the latter question always implied that you were missing, meaning "not all there." It took me a while to junk the last two words & arrive at the necessity of asking the first. & so to be present to a place I could take on as home (with the response-abilities that implies), in a language i share with others – engaged, as definitive, & as quick, as the bodies we touch each other in. Of such matters, a celebration: that we are here, together, at all. (8)*

She imagines language itself as a cure or remedy for an alienated subjectivity, but does name her ailment, better trauma, in terms of gender or sexual difference. In the connectivity of place and poem bodies are brought together; however, this coming together – as pre-cursive and allusive as it might be to the critical sensibilities adopted in Marlatt's later feminist-lesbian poetics – maintains an un-gendered/un-demarcated universality.

Marlatt's conception of the motivation behind these poems invokes an age and a place. She mentions "equal rights," anti-war protest, free speech and environmentalism to counter-balance her uneasiness being "in another country" outside Canada. Her sense of self and her involvement in these larger social concerns are threatened by her detachment from a national space, from "a place I could take on as home." Although the issues she cites and her identity as a woman do posit a commonality of experience that ex-

tend beyond national boundaries, it is her sense of alienation – from a city and a nation – that appears to most effect the language of her writing. This is by no means a suggestion that Marlatt was unaware of or somehow did not experience oppression. For when she recalls this community of her friends and writers in Vancouver, a few years later, she admits to feeling cut off from the concerns of many of her male counterparts without going into the politics of the isolation.

In a public forum on the role and influence of the *Tish* group and her particular sense of her own place within this poetic and social movement, Marlatt expresses her early reservations with the heady machismo of the early *Tish* writers, Bowering, Davey, and Wah. She talks about how she felt outside the circle and the sexism of their early work. Responding to a question about her relationship to the group and her sense of its significance, Marlatt takes issue with Frank Davey's notion of "marginalization" as having stemmed from a general lack of interest, on the part of the larger society, in the writings and goings on of a bunch of young poets out west in Vancouver. She tells the audience that she

felt even more marginalized. I was very interested in what was going on in the Writers' Workshop [a kind of informal gathering of Vancouver poets], and in *Tish*, but it was hard for me first of all to grasp all of what was going on, and I felt very much at a disadvantage at the Writers' Workshop meetings, because I was coming from so far afield. (98)

At this point "far afield" seems to refer to her North Shore upbringing and the fact that she was younger than the guys. But she makes light of the fact they – the guys – were writing poems about "their cars. Women and cars"(96). Joking about sexual orientation, saying "I certainly wasn't writing about what *men* were wearing, and how they looked as they walked around the campus"(96), Marlatt does not yet draw on the connection between the

proprioceptive approach to writing and her own nascent sense of *l'écriture féminine*. Instead, she talks of “the focus on process” and a shared concern with linguistics, which is ascribed to her experience in Robert Creeley’s creative writing class at UBC (1963-64). Ultimately, however, she claims that it was Olson’s “emphasis on writing out of your own place” that taught her the value of “listening to her ‘own voice’”:

Getting into *this* locale, and writing out of *its* history and geography, as well as your history in it, was very crucial to me, partly because as an immigrant I was coming from outside it anyway, and was fascinated, wanted to know a lot more about it.... That sense of claiming territory, that was very crucial. All the endless discussion about the line, and what the line was, and where the line ended, and how you maneuvered a line break, was extremely important, and that was where I first began to listen to my own voice, and to the voice of other people speaking. Having spent years trying *not* to listen to my own voice, and trying to get rid of the Britishisms in it, it was a real turn-around to realize that that was what I had to start listening to. That was first base. (97)

This passage offers readers an interesting link between “claiming territory”(as a writer) and the metaphorical immigrant experience at the centre of *Ana Historic*; nonetheless, it does so without raising the issue of the alienating effects of gender and sexual difference.

Marlatt’s involvement with *Tish* and the localist poetics of her earlier work remains, at least at this point in her career, outside the concerns of her emergent lesbian feminist identity. While we might take her involvement in the *Tessera* editorial collective and her participation in various feminist conferences as signifying a clear feminist outlook and/or poetic, these earlier statements on her own writing provide a stark contrast to those published in the later portion of the decade, including *Ana Historic*. The letters published in the special Marlatt issue of *Line* (1989) and republished in *Readings from the Labyrinth* (1998) make clear that *Ana Historic* represents the culmination

of her thinking through feminist theory and was integral to her identification with a lesbian-feminist cultural politics. In a letter dated October 22, 1981, Marlatt writes to Barbara Godard about her excitement at having attended the Dialogue conference at York and having heard what was “going on in Quebec”(23). While she claims to “love it, love what Nicole Brossard & Louky Bersianik are doing”(23), Marlatt complains of not possessing the “presence of mind to say more about conditions as i feel them: that silence of the wilderness . . . the redneck attitude towards culture that the wilderness frontier [Vancouver] has”(23). Despite certain problems with the biases of male counterparts, her allegiances are still firmly grounded in the local space in which she is writing. She is reticent to name gender as a key issue in her writing. Instead she prefers to focus on the idea “that a male poet in this society is enough of a perversion, & attacked as such, that us women poets *have* felt a camaraderie there, despite the [gender] differences”(23). Marlatt goes on to hold up Vancouver as a writing space in which “women and men have fought together”(23). Again we see fission between her recognition of gender as a key issue and her ability to define herself and her writing as a reflection of it. In stark contrast with her later work, Marlatt seems uncomfortable expressing gendered differences and sexual orientation. Thus, it might be said that *Ana Historic* involves more than a formal break or a shift in narrative focus; it might be understood as a significant event in Marlatt's struggle with and break from the earlier writing community in which her writing developed. As I have attempted to demonstrate the overlap between her burgeoning sensibility as a feminist writer and theorist was at odds with her earlier conception of both her writing and herself. While there are obvious parallels between the two poetics, it was important to Marlatt and her readers to keep them separate. Thus the publication of *Ana Historic* and the narrative figures it

traced seem to have provided a necessary vehicle for a rewriting of her own history as a writer. In order to be a lesbian-feminist writer it became necessary not to be an acolyte of Olson, Duncan, and Creeley and to break from a particular poetic community and the problem of writing out of place.

#### CHANGING, RE:WRITING HERSTORY

Marlatt's initial hesitation to openly identify herself as a feminist and/or lesbian seems to be a hesitation to abandon a gender blind localism and to disassociate herself from a community of Vancouver writers. In addition to the important and, in retrospect, obvious personal struggles involved in Marlatt's coming into being as a lesbian-feminist writer, the transition that effectively resulted in the novel, *Ana Historic*, is also a movement from one poetic discourse to another: from the localism of an "American" (San Francisco / Vancouver) avant-garde to the nationalism of the emergent feminist community connected across the Canadian barriers of two official languages (Anglophone / Francophone) and an East to West geography (Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver). With the publication of *Touch to My Tongue* (1984) and her increasing participation in the feminist discourse/s that developed across Canadian literary circles during the 1980s, Marlatt's sense of her difference as a woman and a lesbian and the relationship between the writing and her lived reality as such came to the foreground in discussions of her texts. Thus *Ana Historic* represented a "poetic coming out" (Williamson 173). Recounting a brief history of Marlatt's coming to terms with the problematics of gender and sexuality as they come to bear on writing and literature, Williamson goes on to emphasize that Marlatt's meeting with Nicole Brossard in 1981 at the Dialogue Conference, and her conversations with Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei, and Gail Scott which were

to lead to the founding of *Tessera*, a important feminist journal throughout the period of the 1980s and early 1990s; she also cites Marlatt's involvement with the 1983 Women and words/Les femmes et les mot Conference. Thus, Marlatt's transition from "language poet" to "lesbian-feminist writer" owes a lot to the emergence of feminist thought and women-centred events in the public sphere during this time:

more public readings in feminist bookstores and women's spaces, women writers workshops and retreats, women-only anthologies, feminist participation in government granting agencies, the extension of feminist publishing houses and periodicals, the development of feminist book distribution networks, and increasing interventions by feminists within the academy to identify sexist critical and institutional practices. All of these activities enabled and were enabled by women like Marlatt who worked to make possible a feminist public sphere through editorial, organizational, teaching and creative work. (Williamson, "Sounding a Difference" 173)

The process of delimiting Marlatt's feminist writing from earlier poetic concerns, however, is highly problematic; Marlatt's awareness of gender and sexuality are obviously important throughout her career – albeit in less overt or thematic ways. Still we might posit *Ana Historic*, especially in as much as it is her first novel, as a key rupture Marlatt's life work. Even though she begins to identify herself and her writing with *l'écriture féminine* during the early 1980s, there is little indication, at the time, of the groundswell of feminist attention her work would receive. While it is arguable – in fact a number of critics including Lorraine Weir, Williamson, Brenda Carr, Lola Lemire Tostevin and others have done so – that Marlatt's interest in the marginalized experiences of various minorities as well as her engagement with bio-centric notions of language and writing bespeak an on-going coming to terms with her own lesbian identity, it is crucial to remember that this act of critical revision, akin to what Marlatt herself terms a "salvage," is in large

part facilitated by her movement away from a poetry of place (replete with “response-abilities” and/or resistance it might involve).

While Marlatt herself has attempted to find consistencies between her earlier indebtedness to the poetics of Olson and the other Black Mountain writers by claiming a particular allegiance to Robert Duncan, especially as a homosexual role model, which she describes in terms of his sense of the line and his having shared the HD of *Trilogy* with her, it is important to see *Ana Historic* as a break from an earlier poetic and its attendant conception of the social. Without subscribing to a reductive nationalism that tends to divide Marlatt’s influences across American vs. Canadian lines, I would argue that her movement away from the aesthetics of localism towards feminism is crucial in coming to an understanding of the fit between *Ana Historic* and nationalist discourse. Paradoxically, Marlatt’s movement into a particular type of writing made her more accessible to more mainstream audiences, which in turn allowed her writing to be associated with a discourse of radical cultural politics.

#### THE PROBLEM OF ABJECTION

In a recent collection of critical essays and commentary on writing, gender and sexuality, *Reading from the Labyrinth*, Marlatt goes back over the ground of her literary work. Culling journal entries, letters, and conference notes to fill in the spaces between critical essays, Marlatt provides readers with a fascinating pseudo-archive of the struggle through and with language and subjectivity over a period of approximately 15 years. For the purposes of my attempt to draw attention to a crucial break in Marlatt’s writing, this collection stands as a testament to the process of her critical self-revisions. Beginning with “musing with mothertongue” and concluding with “for the

private reader: interplay in the public realm”(1996), *Readings from the Labyrinth* charts Marlatt’s development as a lesbian-feminist poet committed to the ideals of a particular constituency of CanLit feminists. Throughout and between the critical essays, the reader catches a glimpse of the pivotal role *Ana Historic* played in Marlatt’s coming to consciousness as a feminist writer. In a journal entry dated “Vancouver. April 21. 83” that is placed in the interstices of her first examination of a feminist-lesbian subject, “musing with mother tongue,” and an essay on the problems of immigration and writing, “Entering In: The Immigrant Imagination”(written for a panel discussion at the Learned’s in which Marlatt teamed up with Sam Selvon and Michael Ondaatje), the figures of Ina and Annie make an early appearance. In the contexts of “colonialism, feminism, otherness, isolation & eccentricity (madness)”(*Readings from the Labyrinth* 14-15), these two figures symbolize Marlatt’s coming to terms with these issues in her own life. Responding to a passage from Barbara Godard about the importance of “the hitherto unsaid,” “feminist concerns & the avant-garde,” which is itself framed within a discussion of colonialism, Marlatt writes,

– yes that is what I want to work with, these cross-cuttings or intersections (colonialism, feminism, otherness, isolation & eccentricity (madness), Ina’s struggle, & Annie’s not to repeat it – the public/private split – Annie’s feelings of “belonging” to this place, Vancouver – as well as being “Canadian,” what that might mean?) cross-cut with her displacement as a woman” (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 15)

It is clear from the slippage back and forth from her own experiences of growing up in Vancouver to the struggles of her two characters that Marlatt sees this novel as instrumental to the development of a private self and public persona. While it is clear from the writing that this separation of the public and the private is one of the fundamental aspects of patriarchal



discourse, it is equally important to notice Marlatt's obvious intervention in the creation and recreation of her public/writerly image. Ina and Annie's shared feelings of alienation and isolation as well as the very different responses to the situation they find themselves in become symbolic representations or recreations of Marlatt's struggle to come to terms with her own history as an immigrant and her obvious anxiety vis-à-vis her mother. Thus Annie posits a categorical difference from her mother, a complete rupture in the discourse of inheritance. Still referring to Annie, she continues,

- unlike her mother she uses her immigrant experience as a way of belonging by seeing it thru a feminist lens & fusing love-of-place with love of a woman (in the *body*, because the body doesn't speak in systems of power, its "speaking," an upheaval, breaks out through the codes that repress it) (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 15-16)

The decision to belong becomes a key to Marlatt's conception of resistance. The idealized body of a woman in the guise of places – another mother country – provides a way out of the repressive codes of colonialism, but, and this is the point that I want to make, it imagines an alterity completely separated from the culture and history which spawned it. In the space of a Canadian national identity, Ina the erstwhile colonizer becomes colonized, while Annie and her chosen mother, Ana, are depicted as existing beyond the confines of this historical legacy. Through an act of imaginary self-creation, Annie takes herself outside the social reality with which her narrative is concerned; establishing absolute boundaries between the colonial world of the abject Ina and the liberated circle of women into which Annie makes her final leap, Marlatt posits an essential difference upon which the novel is hinged. It is this assumed break or idealized rupture between the past and present, which, as I am suggesting, is central to a meta-discursive revision of

Marlatt's biography, that allows for or enables the critical elision of certain political differences. If Ina's illness is aggravated by her unwillingness or inability to make the transition from the social elite of colonial Malaysia to life in a middle-class bedroom community of North Vancouver, on the fringes of a developing nation, Annie's freedom is grounded in an assumed lack of responsibility to it. Marlatt writes,

for [Ina] the unbridgeable gap between these two:  
dancing to jazz on a tropical terrace  
vs. ironing sheets in a N. Van kitchen (to opera yet)

What she fails to mention, however, is the fact that the world of bobby socks and rock and roll into which Annie escapes is also a culture of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

The somewhat reductive representation of both gender and colonization to matters of choice and enjoyment belies a crucial aporia in both the novel's conception of the differences separating women, as well as those uniting them, and the critical responses to the issues of colonialism brought up in the text. The figure of Ina, her illness, remains outside the complex relationships of power by which bodies come to speak. Marlatt associates emigration with exile and what she calls an "old-world nostalgia" for "the place left, the 'old country', 'home' and [being] preoccupied with recreating that place" ("Entering In" 17). As a corollary, "The immigrant imagination seems to me, on the contrary, to embrace the new place it enters" (17). Marlatt depicts this "entering in" in the language and topos of colonial exploration: "It seeks to enter into its mystery, its this-ness, to penetrate it imaginatively even as it enters from outside" (17); yet, this penetration challenges the masculinist conquest of "the new place," Vancouver or Canada. As it does in the novel,

her desire to fit into, to simultaneously lose herself in this new place forms a fundamental nexus of the writing:

I loved this place, loved the woods out our back door, the Grouse Mountain streets, the dark inlet and the beckoning glitter of lights "overtown." I dreamed harbour dreams, Stanley Park dreams, Lonsdale Avenue dreams and nightmares. I wanted to "belong." to be "from" here but found there were differences not easy to bridge. (19)

The differences refer to her dis/ease with gender proscription and obliquely to her self-identification as a lesbian. She writes of a "city which was then (1951) much more monocultural than it is today," much less than the "multicultural situation" she had left behind in Penang (19).

One is left to speculate on the nature of these "not easy to bridge" differences. In the context of both the novel and Marlatt's personal history, the social space of this city, Vancouver, becomes intertwined with the problematic of sexual identity. Situated as it is between journal entries discussing, first, the "intransigent language," "the hitherto unsaid" of a feminist avant-gardism and, second, a generative "textual matrix" that avoids the objectifying thrust of the direct quotation, this talk is curiously framed. The relationship between the alienated experience of place and/or space and the denial or sublimation of this other form of connection, i.e., the communal experience of a lesbian-feminist desire, is left unresolved. The reader is challenged to see connections between the unspoken sexual difference this immigrant self brings to the place of heterosexual cultural imperatives; the demands on her to take up her part in the carefully contrived rituals of growing up Canadian elide the categorical differences the novel open up. In the critical context of Marlatt's "coming out," sexual difference remains unspoken, lurking below the surface of text, circulating through the theory we bring to it.

As I have suggested, an important impetus for the critical reception of Marlatt's writing stems from the author's own statements on her intentions. Marlatt's engagement with French and Québécoise feminist writing and theory, her struggles with and interpretation of *l'écriture féminine* or "writing the body" have legitimized feminist readings that have centred on a general conception of oppression, language, and the positive relationships between women. In spite of the fact that recently critics have begun to adapt the language of post-colonial and queer theory to discuss the novel,<sup>9</sup> there has been little critique of Marlatt's revisionist fiction, little theorizing of the function of "race" and class in her depiction of colonial and neo-colonial Vancouver. While new approaches have shifted the focus, pointing to the fact that in a colonial space there are other issues at stake than gender difference, the function of Marlatt's imaginary subjects remains unchallenged, Annie and Ana's complicity with the structures of power un-noted. If the characters Zoe, the engaged and engaging reader with whom Annie ends up coming out, and Birdie, "Vancouver's first madam" and love object of the liberated Ana, function as role models, the other characters, Ina, and First Nations women Harriet and "Virgin Mary," function as foils, abject subjects against which the narrator struggles: Ina, the negation of the lesbian-feminist subject whose mental breakdown is predicated on her failure to break free from the strictures of male bondage; and the First Nations women existing on the periphery, always on the edge of society, who exert a powerful influence over Annie and Ana both. The nature of this influence, however, remains undisclosed. In the next chapter, therefore, we will look at the interactions between these characters, positive and negative, powerful and subjugated, as a crucial representation of Marlatt's lesbian-feminist refashioning of Vancouver as a site of resistance.

## NOTES

1. I'm thinking about Lola Lemire Tostevin's early criticism of Marlatt's use and depiction of gender in the novel. Throughout the discourse this critique is cited and dismissed. For a recent example, see Susan Knutson's discussion of "essentialism" in her *Narrative in the Feminine* (5-22).
2. In a footnote to an early essay on "Daphne Marlatt's 'Ecology of Language'," however, Lorraine Weir warns against reading Marlatt's development of a "lesbian poetics" out of context – i.e., to read it as a radical break. Weir argues that any such assumption would "trivialize two decades of her production, a time during which her feminist ecological poetics gradually came together. The revolutionary energy of such recent texts as *Touch to My Tongue* and *Ana Historic* is no greater than that of *Steveston*"(63)
3. My use of the term "lesbian-feminist" assumes the quotation marks. While this term is relatively common in Marlatt criticism, it is used in a more or less unproblematic sense. Rather than functioning as a marker of the difference between a feminist and lesbian subject, the hyphenated term suggests a conflation of differences and ultimately an elision of queer subjectivity. As I will argue more fully in the following chapter, despite the obvious representational limits of the novel, the conflation of sexual and gendered differences do in fact leave this novel open to generative queer and post-colonial theorizing. In particular, Peter Dickinson's "queering" of Marlatt's writing provides a useful example of critical theory thinking through the problematic performance of sexuality, gender, and "race" in CanLit
4. In an interview with Janice Williamson, Marlatt discusses an interest in "colonialism." She tells Williamson, "it is difficult to write of my childhood experience or my parents' experience [in Malaysia] without sounding like an apologist for colonialism, definitely not what I want to do" ("Sounding a Difference" 54).
5. Having written on these topics a decade ago, I include myself in this group. An early essay I wrote on *Ana Historic* makes use of Bahktin's theory of "the carnival" to examine the image of "the material body," or so I called it.
6. The fact that multiculturalism in Canada has tended to be defined by the government in cultural rather than economic terms has meant that much of the funding for multicultural programmes has been channelled into the arts and education – both of which play a key role in the creation of a readership for Canadian literature. For general discussions of multiculturalism in Canada, see Will Kymlicka's *Finding Our Way*, Smaro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies*, Charles Taylor's *Multi-culturalism*, and Strong-Boag *et al's* collection of essays *Painting the Maple*. For discussion of multiculturalism in the context of racialized writers and the problems of cultural critique, notable essays by Scott McFarlane, especially "The Haunt of Race" and by Michael Mundhenk and Jerald Zaslove, "Voices of Silence – Peoples of Invisibility," have been useful to me, and so have the more lengthy studies of the subject presented in Roy Miki's *Broken Entries*, Dionne Brand's *Bread Out of Stone*, Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Frontiers and A Genealogy of Resistance*, Monica Kin Gagnon's *Other Conundrums*, and Ashok Mathur's *Rhetoric of Approval*.

7. A few of Ondaatje's earlier works might well be read as novels – *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family* being the obvious examples. With Marlatt, however, the movement into the writing of a novel is more abrupt. Ondaatje himself considered *In the Skin of a Lion* his first real novel. See the Ondaatje chapters preceding.
8. Whether one believes, as Victor Coleman's panegyric, "The Day They Stole the Coach House Press," suggests that "[t]he enemies of poetry stole the Coach House Press," it is relatively clear that during the late 1980s Coach House Press underwent a significant transformation and pitched itself into the national sphere in a much more direct manner. While there is a relative wealth of information on the early years of Coach House Press, relatively little has been said about the period after 1985, except that the editorial collective of the press had become more interested in financial stability and viability than the erstwhile ideals of poetic experimentation and counter-cultural edginess. Sarah Sheard's award winning article on the transformation of Coach House during the time she was involved with the press, 1978-93, mentions a gender imbalance and hints at a hidden or politely controlled attitude toward gender differences but does not expressly deal with the issues involved in the demise of Coach House Press or the rebirth of Coach House Books. Robert Fulford cites Frank Davey's article from *Open Letter* and seems intent on treating it as an issue of economic outlook. What is missing from this picture, though, is the explicit reference to the fact that throughout the 1980s Coach House had begun publishing more women and feminists and had clearly positioned itself in relations to a feminist poetics and politics. The silence around these issues or the positing of rather simplistic binaries on which Coleman's lament rests belie an intricate history and struggle with the cultural politics of the period.
9. Recent critical discourse is shifting the focus away from the mother/daughter dialectic and onto a series of problematic axes of difference. In Céline Chan's "Lesbian Self-Naming in Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*," Green & LeBihan's "Speaking Object: Daphne Marlatt's Pronouns and Lesbian Poetics" (1994), Zwicker's "Daphne Marlatt's 'Ana Historic': Queering the Postcolonial Nation" (1999), and Peter Dickinson's *Here is Queer* (1999), the tendency amongst earlier readers to prioritize gender issues over sexuality has been called into question. The shift in focus away from the generalities of gender difference and onto the specificities of sexual identity amongst women as well as across genders allows critics to engage the novel in much broader configurations of discourse. Borrowing from Eve Sedgwick's axiomatic insistence that "the study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender," we might say that growing critical interest in Marlatt's sexuality, i.e., reading the novel as a lesbian text rather than or in addition to reading it as a woman's text, draws out the theoretical import of thinking gender and sexuality separately. The development of more relational understandings of these two categorical differences has also meant that critical discussion is faced with addressing the intersectional dynamic of other differences, namely "race" and ethnicity, but also "race" and class.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SEX, "RACE," AND THE COLONIAL SUBJECT OF *ANA HISTORIC*

to claim that sexual difference is more fundamental than racial difference is effectively to assume that sexual difference is white sexual difference, and that whiteness is not a form of racial difference. (Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 182)

This chapter begins by highlighting three scenes from the heart of Marlatt's novel, *Ana Historic*. These three scenes are integral to the emergence of a lesbian subject in the novel and suggestive of a complex convergence of identificatory axes that come to bear on the theoretical underpinnings of Ana's and Annie's "coming out." They have been chosen because they provide important moments in the novel's attempt to address "race," and less explicitly, class. Bringing questions of historicity, historicism, and subject formation to bear on the development and representation of Vancouver, a social space marked by its functionary role within British colonialism and later the expansion of global capital, Marlatt's novel raises important issues about the relationship amongst a complex of inter-related identity formations, including not only nation and gender, but also sexuality, "race" and class. In terms of postcolonial theories of nationalism and subjectivity, Marlatt's attempt to write through the limits of dominant discourse offers an important route back into a labyrinth of power-laden modalities at work in both the representation of space and the representational space surrounding the text. Invoking the problematic progression or *bildung* of this novel, one might say that these three scenes, which have to do with birthing, sexuality, and class relations between women, are key moments in the novel's

movement towards a climax – the much discussed “not a bad end” in which Annie and Zoe cross the threshold of sexual union but also in which the novel opens out onto the reader’s time/space.

I have chosen to begin with these three scenes not only because they provide a backdrop for Annie and Ana’s “coming out,” but also because they foreground a series of differences that are elided when this novel is read against the normative assumptions of Canadian feminist writing. The heavily demarcated social spaces and interactions figured in each scene become extrinsic to the idealized circle of women into which the two main characters enter and which is integral to the critical discourse discussed in the previous chapter. Organized around the Manichean binaries of a patriarchal colonialism – town/bush, public/private, and professional/domestic – these scenes and the characters depicted in them are positioned according to strict spatial divisions that are eventually blurred in the final scenes of the novel. It is in the hierarchies of suppression, marginalization, and victimization, that the main characters are situated: Ana (British schoolmarm who, despite her Mrs. moniker, is sexually naïve), Annie (a typical Canadian teenager who is subjected to the oppressive heterosexist gender and cultural imperatives of 1950s Vancouver), Ina (the immigrant mother / colonial memsahib who is diagnosed as a “hysteric” and subjected to shock therapy), Harriet (a First Nations woman who works silently as a domestic labourer in the home of Jeannie Alexander), and “Virgin Mary” (a First Nations woman whom Ana refers to as an “Indian crone” and who is represented as a denizen of the “bush,” a gatherer). Of these characters, only the first two, Ana and Annie, are able to escape patriarchal oppression.



PASSAGE #1

PATHS CROSS: A REMEMBERED MEETING

In a short section entitled "Walking to Gastown," Annie imagines Ana walking through the bush on her way to town to confront one of the school trustees about the rude behaviour of his son. Walking along the mile long trail from her cabin to the town centre, Ana is "gripped" by an unexplained "wariness." The narrator muses, "What was she afraid of? Not the deer, who were as startled as she. Not bears or cougars – she had never seen them, though stories abounded. Madmen then? Drunken seamen, Indians running amok?" (96). Her fear – Ana's sense of trepidation, the emotional uncertainty and physical vulnerability Annie "remembers" her having – is somewhat ambivalently associated with her position as a solitary school mistress who inhabits the limits of colonial society. The fact that Ana is physically moving through the bush on the outskirts of Gastown, which is itself at the edge of the social space of Empire, seems to presuppose a series of threatening possibilities. Unprotected by certain social codes that define and safeguard her as a lady, beyond the (over)protective gaze of the town's few "Gentleman," Annie imagines Ana defenceless, unarmed against the advances of the insane, the working-class, and the native. Thus, her fear of men is described in clearly demarcated terms. And yet within the narrative, Ana's fear remains unassigned and so becomes caught in the novel's thematic linking of fear and identity, the portentous question of homosexual, specifically lesbian, desire. Ana's unnamed fear echoes Annie's teenage obsession with a Frankenstein figure lurking in the closets of their West Vancouver home, the unidentified subject who haunts the novel from the opening – "who's there?" – the monstrous possibility toward which the narrative and its characters are moving, Ana/Annie's affinity for communities of women and lesbian partnership.

This scene follows an earlier scene in which Ana defends the rights of the Siwash children in her class to a fair education and to protection from the bullying of one of the older children, Fred Miller. Ana is walking to town because she has decided to confront Constable Miller about his son's misconduct. As she walks, she muses. In the midst of attempting to imagine Ana's thoughts, Annie's fiction remembers an earlier meeting with Ana:

Once she had been frightened by the Indian crone they called the Virgin Mary, who had risen like an apparition out of *the* bush, and joining the trail with her basket of shoots, roots, whatever they were, had given her a singularly flat look, a look not at her but through, as if she were a bush or fern. At first she had thought the old woman was blind, but no one blind could find the path like that. There had been a large amount of sky in those eyes. It was the look of mountains, when she could see them through fog and cloud, snowy otherwheres she had forgotten about until they were suddenly on a clear day, perfectly present. She would like to know what those eyes saw. (96)

Though the motif of the gaze, especially women gazing upon women, will return a number of times towards the end of the novel, the significance of this chance meeting, the effect of this woman's "blind" gaze, is not explicitly developed. In the novel, "the Indian crone they called the Virgin Mary" makes her appearance and vanishes. In an interesting transference, Ana's fear of the "uncivilized" men is transformed into this vision of another lone woman living and working in the same geographical locale. However, rather than making a connection with this "apparition out of the bush," Ana does not communicate with this woman nor does Annie speculate on her thoughts upon meeting the schoolteacher. Her presence is both a reminder of the existence of other women who dwell outside the parameters of Ana's white settler society and the background against which Ana's journey to selfhood is figured. Imagined as unspeaking memory, this First Nation woman wells up as a kind of absolute, inscrutable otherness. Neither her look nor the purpose for "joining

the trail” is clear to Ana, who does not know or who can not tell the difference between the “shoots, roots, whatever they were” and has no sense of their purpose. And yet, in the “flat look” of this figure, Ana see herself as “a bush or fern.” Paradoxically, she is imagined or imagines herself as part of the very landscape reflected in “those eyes” she cannot read. The “crone’s” lack of involvement in the greater concerns of Empire and Justice to which Ana’s walk to town is devoted place her beyond the pale of progressive society, but her presence seems to be an important precursor of Ana’s wild escape from the confines of history.

#### PASSAGE #2

#### ADORING M/OTHERS

While the “crone they called the Virgin Mary” drifts out of the narrative shortly after she appears, the figure of the Virgin returns a few pages later. In the midst of reminiscences about her childhood home in North Vancouver and an argument with Ina about the fate of women, “that path that led to marriage or death, no other fork in the trail” (99), Annie remembers being the Virgin in a Christmas pageant, recalls acting out a proto-sexual nativity scene before the adoring gaze of neighbourhood mothers:

i remember Claire who lived in the brown house on the corner with its living room large enough for a Christmas pageant, parts for every kid on the block. i was Virgin Mary. “now *imagine*,” she stressed, “you’re a very pure young girl and you’ve just had a baby, a divine baby sent from God. your own body has had *God* living in it in the form of a baby – now can you imagine the look on your face, a look of rapture of wonder even!” (101)

In this scene, we are presented with an essential element of the novel: the narrator’s sexual fascination with her own body. Annie’s memory of her own

coming into being as a sexual subject is bound ambivalently to both the social role she has been given and the adoration of the other women:

after i got over the embarrassment of anyone talking so freely about being pregnant, i tried, i really tried. but it was like sitting for a photograph, my body constrained, modest and blushing (immodestly i thought about being pregnant and what that would feel like), the Wise Men and Shepherds bowing before me, the doll in my lap. All i could see was myself, my body present to the world, its sudden potential. i tried to find the "human heart in the role," or perhaps it was the inhuman heart - i tried very hard to look pure. (101)

Her sexual coming into being is dependent on her performance and the ironic perversion of social desires. This short tableau provides a fundamental point of entrance into the novel's representation of ritualized attitudes towards sexuality and motherhood. In reproducing an image of the Judeo-Christian framework in which Annie's coming into adulthood would be inscribed, the novel provides us with a key example of the way in which sexuality, especially that of the girls/women, is socially performed. In Claire Pott's spacious West Vancouver living room, the women and the children participate in an elaborate signifying ritual that yokes social purpose to the clear divisions of gender roles and sexual sacrifice, at least on the part of the young women. We might say that this scene depicts Annie's initiation into the highly ambivalent and paradoxical world of gender difference. In the part of the virgin mother, this child/adult becomes the idealized representation of a particular future that is removed from the protean squalor of social/sexual labour. Repeating the dominant myth of not only European Catholicism but also white colonialism, Annie is momentarily released from her own body - she's encouraged to imagine herself in the role of pure domestic fulfillment. The ideal of birth, of giving birth to a male child, the symbolic crowning of the figure of Christ, subsumes the sexual act necessary for its production.

Ironically, Annie remembers the gaze of the mothers and the responsibility of imagining herself pregnant as a sexual act. Subverting the social logic by which birth is given priority over sex, the myth's skewing of the temporal logic of nature, Annie imagines pregnancy as a sexual act. Figuratively this scene provides another semantic connection to the thematic monster. Etymologically "monstrous" is linked to *monster*, *portent*, and *demonstrate*, and it suggests warning, in the sense of making visible the portentous - awe-inspiring and terrible. Thus the pregnant body as a visible sign of sexual activity becomes an indicator of social privilege or abjection according to the social position of the mother. In this nativity scene, Annie's teenage fear of "showing" is temporarily assuaged by her participation in this portentous social drama. In the midst of these mothers, who are of necessity both sophisticated sexually and properly adoring, Annie imagines another sexual dynamic beyond the one ritualized or idealized in this nativity scene: a lesbian desire that passes unrecognized or unacknowledged. The monstrous proposal of a lesbian desire transgresses the sanctity of the play, recasting it in terms of Annie's pre-conscious or latent homosexual desire.

In spite of Annie's fond recollection of seeing herself as a sexual being and being seen as such, she also remembers Ina's hostility towards the hypocrisy of the other mothers. She refuses to participate in the fiction.

after the clapping, after the mothers dispersed for tea and cookies, complimenting each other on their children's performances, walking up the road with you i said, "well, what did you think?" you looked silly," you said, "with that sheet on your head and that soulful look on your face." (101)

For Annie, Ina's momentary lucidity is counter-posed to her ultimate acceptance of "that other fiction," the image of the perfect mother and perfect wife that drove her mother crazy. Paradoxically Ina is able to see through the

superficial looks with which the daughter is mesmerized; she is able to read something else into this scene. However, in Ina's case, this seeing through the falsehoods and misrepresentation of motherhood is not liberating. In contrast to Annie's ability to read herself into a newly imagined circle of women, the shared intimacy of their bodily knowledge and feminine desire to break free of the confining phallogocentric narrative, in which their pleasure is conflated with the objectifying desires of the men, Ina's insights have the opposite effect. Like "the crone they called the Virgin Mary," Ina functions as a figure of abjection. Her constant resistance to Annie's narrative and the running commentary between mother and daughter do not amount to expression of Ina's subjectivity; rather they are portrayed as proof of her victimization at the hands of her husband, the doctors, and the colonial society from which she is incapable of freeing herself.

#### PASSAGE #3

##### THE BIRTHING: "FIRST," "WHITE"

In this final episode, I want to look at Marlatt's representation of the "first white birthing at Kum-Kum-lee" (127). This scene provides readers with one of the master tropes of the novel: that in the act of giving birth women are also giving birth to themselves. It functions as a climactic lead into the novel's portrayal of Annie's ultimate arrival at and acceptance of her lesbian self, Marlatt's much debated "Not a Bad End." The nativity pageant gives way to the novel's attempt to re-imagine the historical birth scene, the result of which seems to push Ana beyond the limits of historical fact and into the arms of Birdie Stewart, Vancouver's "first Madame." This, in turn, seems to seal Annie's fate by freeing her from the bonds of her marriage.

For Annie, who is imagining Ana's participation in it, the power of this scene lies in both its representation of a communal "labour" and the idea of being "born in." In response to the historical record of this birth and the photos of "Hastings Sawmill. House of Jeannie Alexander, first white mother'," Annie writes,

to be born in, enter from birth that place (that shoreline place of scarlet maples, since cut down) with no known name – see it risen in waves, these scarlet leaves, lips all bleeding into the air given (birth), given in greeting, the given surrounds him now. surrounds her, her country she has come into, the country of her body.  
to be there from the first. indigene. *ingenuus* (born in), native, natural, free(born) – at home from the beginning. (127)

The highly problematic conflation of this "first white" birth with the coming into being of the novel's a/historical alternative – the interconnectedness of women across the divisions and separations of a dominant patriarchal social structure – provides readers with one of the most explicitly racialized moments in the text. Within the racially diverse locale that was Hastings Sawmill and/or Gastown during the period 1880-1890, the social significance of the Alexander's birth corresponds to a colonialist pre-occupation with miscegenation and the maintenance of white supremacy. If, as a number of theorists have pointed out, the cult of motherhood within a colonial space is figured around "race," or more specifically the propagation of a master "race" (Dyer, McClintock, Stoler), the historicity of this birthing scene is intrinsically a part of the dominant narrative of Canada as a white nation. Marlatt's imaginative rendering of the historical "fact" is a re-inscription of the documentation of a colonial pre-occupation with its own social production and through the reproduction of white bodies. Yet, within the novel, the cultural significance of this birth, which in the name of the Queen and the country is explicitly described as a "white birth," remains

implicit. The monstrosity of Ana's lesbian subjectivity bears the full weight of Annie and Marlatt's social critique. Placing this narrative of one historical birth within an a/historical narrative of women giving birth to each other, this radical intervention seems to preserve the racialized subtext.

The punning on labour and the class-consciousness it invokes do not finally extend to an overt "race" consciousness on the part of the character, or the novelist. The scene is shot through with Ana's recognition that it is "Harriet, the Indian girl" (114) who is responsible for keeping the Alexander household running and attending to Jeannie Alexander's needs. However, the importance of this fact is displaced in the scene's metaphoric climax, by which "this secret space between our limbs" becomes a "mouth speaking flesh" (126). The essential difference, a woman's ability to give birth and in the act to give birth to this community of woman, functions as Ana's initiation into another social reality beyond the hetero-normative social structures to which she belongs as a wife or daughter, and in which she works as a teacher. In her diary, Ana writes, "I had never before seen a woman's body truly at work. – Not *labour* as we commonly use it – I mean its inner work, this bringing forth" (125). Harriet's labour, the paid labour of the domestic – available and valued through a strict division of economic privilege across "race" lines – gives way to another form of labour. The historical divisions separating Harriet from the other women, which hinge on the colonial investment in this particular birth and on the performative nationalism by which it might be inscribed in the official history of Vancouver, are subsumed in the novel. Marlatt's text expropriates it as a metaphoric birthing scene, a paradigmatic moment in the feminist writing of the period. Thus according to Zoe, "the real history of women... is unwritten because it runs through our bodies: we give birth to each other" (131). In making this connection, tapping



into the unwritten, unspoken alterity of a lesbian existence, Marlatt's novel ostensibly frees Ana and Annie from history. But at what cost? What privileges of class and "race" permits this heroic outing? By what critical vigilance might we maintain the novel's initial power to overwrite the hegemonic narratives of a phallogentric order?

**"QUEER" TEXT: READING A SPACE BETWEEN LESBIAN-FEMINIST**

Reformulating the novel's feminist/nationalist poetics in terms of sexual and racial identity opens *Ana Historic* to a different set of cultural-political imperatives. Working with the novel as a queer text – i.e., heeding Marlatt's statement that *Ana Historic* is "among other things, a coming-out novel" – produces a different set of demands upon our reading of it. Invoking Judith Butler's notion of the performative nature of sexuality and sexual identity, in which gender difference is but an element, we might return to the problematic hyphenated, "lesbian-feminist" subject central to both the novel and the critical contexts in which it has circulated. However, in re-framing the question of representation – of how one might begin to write beyond the frame of a dominant discourse – in terms of a division, rather than presupposed connection between sex and gender, our discussion of the novel necessarily engages with a different set of issues and imperatives. Queering the novel, approaching *Ana Historic* as a performance of a homosexual desire that draws attention to the ambivalent even provisional constructions of gender – i.e., coming at it through queer rather than feminist theory assumes an alternative practice of "reading." According to Butler, who borrows the inflected term from the language of drag balls, a "reading" suggests a comparison with a notion of reality as it might be gauged within

an indentificatory category or against an ideal performance (129). The act of “reading” involves a clear understanding of certain recognizable standards – in the case of the balls, the normative social identities that proscribe to the more obvious “feminine” examples, such as the executive, the Ivy League student, the butch queen, and the soldier – and a sense of mimetic failure – of never being quite able to live up to the standard, of not quite “passing.” Thus on the one hand, a “‘reading’ means taking someone down, exposing what fails to work at the level of appearance, insulting or deriding someone” (129). On the other hand, the perfect performance is unreadable: “[f]or a performance to work, then means that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide” (129.).

In making a “monstrous leap” of imaginative paradigms from *Paris Is Burning* to *Ana Historic*, from the drag performance of queer identities that criss-cross gender privileges with those of class and “race” to Marlatt’s literary performance of lesbian subject, my purpose is not to *deride* or *insult*. Rather it is to draw attention to the social categories upon which Marlatt’s queering of the master narratives of Canadian history depends. Contrary to the tendency amongst readers to highlight the radical alterity of Marlatt’s lesbian-feminist vision, this “reading” attempts to read against the grain of her adaptation of literary and historical conventions. As Zoe reminds Annie, history does not write Ana off as much as it “wrote her *in...* listed her as belonging” (135). In the three scenes discussed above, we are presented with an equally conventional set of characters or identities: the young and “pretty widder” walking into town, lady-like beneath the predatory stares of men; the suburban, middle class North Vancouver mothers who come together to re-enact a Nativity play; the Victorian household in the throws of birthing “the

first white” male, complete with the domestic servants, take-charge midwife, and absent husband. Marlatt’s lesbian subject comes into being through a complex identification with each of the female characters as they are presented. Paradoxically, Annie’s self-discovery seems to depend on negotiating a series of gender stereotypes and clichéd social space. Re-inflected in Marlatt’s narrative these character types and spaces are invested with a kind of performative quality that simultaneously reifies and subverts a dominant discourse. In reading Annie and Ana’s movement through these scenes, we might understand them not as repudiated but re-articulated episodes upon which a radically different lesbian subject comes into being. For Annie, writing through both the set pieces of settler culture and her own white middle-class upbringing functions to reclaim particular hegemonic events. Re-imagining herself as a woman attracted to and attractive for other women, Annie’s radical departure from the strict divisions that held her captive in a heterosexual marriage draws on the constructive power of gender divisions. Her narrative simultaneously draws attention to the constructedness of heterosexual identity while using or re-inscribing it. Thus, Marlatt’s, like Annie’s, lesbian-feminist subject comes into being through a careful representation and re-orchestration of social norms and categories, not the least of which are those infused with the “race” and class privileges of a subject who is gendered and sexed as a white settler woman.

Focusing on questions of sexuality shifts discussion away from language as trope and into discourse as social space, as the cultural impetus always already assumed in the act of speaking or the performance of difference; in turn, this shift allows for a reprioritizing of the material aspect of writing. Queering the text, i.e., re/placing the novel in the purview of a discourse on sexuality, might allow critics to address the cultural and material

differences that underlie its performance. In the space called CanLit, the act of reading Marlatt's "lesbian novel" might then allow for a reframing of questions of power and privilege that extend beyond Manichean binaries of gender difference.

Within the hegemonic structures of a national literature, such as Canadian literature, and the ensuing institutionalization of difference, the inculcation of certain normative desires is dependent on the prioritization or management of textual effects, in as much as 1. a *text* is understood as a social experience involving not only a writer and readers but also a series or network of institutional prerogatives,<sup>1</sup> and 2. its performance can be seen as the simultaneous display of individual impetuses and an invocation of authorizing structures. As such, certain texts, in particular those seeking to resist and reconfigure codified subject positions, often represent the social order in highly stylized forms against which a transgressive subject is *read* into being. In a chapter dealing with the film *Paris Is Burning* and the radical aspects of drag performances (mentioned above), Judith Butler argues that the re-presentations of gender, "race," and class privileges fundamental to drag performances comprise a complex response to the traumatic effect of interpellated subjectivity. Butler points out, however, that

at best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence of being implicated in the very regimes of power one opposes. (124)

Thus the crucial point is not that drag is a priori subversive, that drag balls and the elaborate performances of gender are in themselves beyond the strictures of heterosexual social imperatives, rather that "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness

and originality” (124). We might say that in re-figuring interdiction – prohibitions against various forms of sexual and social deviance – drag balls, in which performers and audience work together, contest conceptions of agency through a queering of the hetero-normative social order. Shifting discourses somewhat, we might say that the formal/spatial qualities of the drag balls manifest the contradictory fissures belying a dominant production of a particular social space.

For our purposes, Butler’s discussion of the way in which drag balls “reflect on the imitative structure... [of] hegemonic gender” provides a point of entrance into the complex inter-relationship between gendered “race” and raced gender as they pertain to sexuality. In drawing attention to the convergence of inter-related social distinctions which are brought to bear on heterosexual mating rituals, the drag ball enacts a critique of socially constructed ideals around not only gender but also “race” and class – ideals incidentally elided from or naturalized through popular notions of “true love” and “physical attraction.” In making the connection between *Ana Historic* and Butler’s analysis of *Paris Is Burning*, I do not intend to suggest that Marlatt’s novel is some sort of drag performance. The representation of lesbian subjectivity must not be conflated with a gay male identity. What I am suggesting is that in choosing to read this novel as a “queer text,” one is confronted with the problematic signification of various dominant social structures, such as marriage, birthing, education, family, and immigration. If, following Butler, it is possible to say that the performance of a queer subjectivity does not simply constitute an alternative position exterior to the social order but often functions to undermine hegemonic identity formations through representation, or reflection, then the question that I am attempting to pose is two-fold. In what way does *Ana Historic* demonstrate the

constructedness of identity? And how does this re-presentation allow readers to “reflect on” the functional interaction of class and “race” in the construction of whiteness?

As I have argued, the subversive lesbian-feminist subject with which the majority of the novel’s readers have concerned themselves is sanctioned by the legitimizing discourses of Canadian nationalism. The novel’s trajectory back in time, Annie’s imaginary journey, through colonialism, patriarchal nationalism, and into an awakening or emerging lesbian-feminist community can not be read as lines on a map. The slippage from the fictive to the factual, and the novelistic to the autobiographical, may also reverse, flooding the critical distinctions with the politics of personal trauma and risk. For example, in an entry dated “Saltspring Aug 89,” Marlatt responds to what she sees as attacks on the novel from Lola Lemire Tostevin and Frank Davey. She argues that in foregrounding what is mistaken for a kind of essentialism, the novel attempts to undo certain heterosexual constraints on a lesbian subjectivity:

something about what’s foreground, what’s background for each of us – that in the foreground women occupy in the novel, their differences (refracted through Annie’s desire) are the pull of connection too. For A.[nnie] this works across the generational divide – how putting unnoticed fragments together from an earlier woman’s life (mere background in the old frame) leads to a shift in perspective that radically alters that same frame she grew up inside, makes it possible for her to see beyond it (128-129)

Within the literary framework in which *Ana Historic* functions as an intervention, this argument provokes questions about the relationship between Marlatt’s historiography and the cultural politics of her avant-garde poetics.

As Peter Dickinson argues in his chapter on the subversive nature of Marlatt's adaptation of "fiction theory," a term coined by Nicole Brossard, the emergence of a particular type of textually and formally engaged approach to literature and sexuality provides a crucial moment in the queering of Canadian literature and the over-riding politics of place. He writes that

The sex-gender paradox at the heart of patriarchal/nationalist discourse (where a narrative of origins is reduced to the level of an active male protagonist and the passive female space through which he moves, and where a male plot can only be refracted through a female setting or landscape) is exposed as a flawed ideological construction in the theoretical fictions (and fictional theories) of lesbian-feminist writers like Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, who repeatedly return to the body as the site from which to anatomize the tropes and images used to other women and through which to re-member an alternative genealogy... of sexual difference. (132)

Thus for Dickinson lesbian-feminist writing radically intervenes in the dominant conceptions of a nation space, taking readers beyond the simple binary of a here and there, the internal as well as external boundaries of the nation. In conjunction with its performance of a radical translation and re-inscription of the historical Mrs. Richard/Mrs. Springer within the narrative of a lesbian subjectivity coming into being, Marlatt's writing, the poetic and cultural concerns articulated therein, also reaches across the divide between "the two solitudes." Her sense of the liberatory power of a lesbian self engaged in women's writing and a concomitant attempt to realize a poetics of French-feminism align Marlatt's fiction with that of Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Gail Scott. And so, according to Dickinson, in addition to undermining the identificatory categories of a dominant heterosexist society, Marlatt's writing might be seen to work against and across, rather than within, the formative divide separating Anglo-Canadian literary culture from Quebecois literature. Taking issue with attempts to classify *Ana Historic* as

“historical metafiction” (Hutcheon’s term) or “documentary-collage” (Jones), he argues that the novel “also defies, or rather exceeds, the representational boundaries – not to mention the *national* economy – circumscribing the two standard generic designations from most contemporary English Canadian writing” (146).

In establishing a strong political and aesthetic connection with women writing elsewhere in Canada, Marlatt’s queering of a national narrative both subverts and re-establishes notions of community and nation. For Dickinson, Marlatt’s writing, like Brossard’s, offers critics an important disruption in the patriarchal discourse of nationhood:

The horizon line in lesbian-feminist translation is, like the barrier/slash in fiction/theory, fluid and diffuse, inviting continuity and encouraging collaboration rather than imposing false limits and reinforcing the myth of solitary authorship; it is a reading which is also a rewriting, and a writing which is also a rereading; it is “the leap beyond that borderline of words, beyond the edge of the page... beyond the separateness of two languages, two minds” (Marlatt, “Translating MAUVE” 29). And in the case of Brossard and Marlatt, it is the leap beyond the separateness of two nations (English Canada and Quebec), a passage booked between the common ground of gender, the shared territory of sexuality.... (Dickinson 154)

Having begun with Anne McClintock’s reminder that nations are first and foremost gendered spaces, Dickinson’s argument concludes in the assertion that Marlatt and Brossard’s writing suggests a “translational, transnational feminist poetics” that implies “the need for expanding our imaginative horizons to accommodate communities other than the ubiquitous nation-state” (154).

The question Dickinson’s chapter leaves un-answered is how Marlatt’s writing functions within a postcolonial critique of nation. The “trans-national” argument he proposes is itself dependent on the popular conception of a Canadian identity having formed out of the two solitudes of Anglophone



and Francophone social spaces. In spite of the supposedly radical critique this queering offers, it does little to extend its scope across national boundaries. He acknowledges the importance of colonialism to what he terms Marlatt's devotion

to deconstructing the specific myths of Canadian nationalism but also to unpacking the more general cultural assumptions behind the paternalistic narrative of British imperialism, particularly as that narrative has unfolded along both the Eastern and Western shores of the Pacific Rim. (155)

However, Dickinson does not pick up on the function of "race" and class in her text.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, this seminal chapter offers readers a place to sort out the problematic confluence of various identificatory axes. Leaving us to muse on the communal subject of "*our* imaginative horizons," Dickinson appears to want to leave the key to the troubling relationship between nation and sexuality open.

#### THE QUESTION OF COLONIALISM

In spite of the emancipatory ideals of Marlatt's lesbian-feminist poetic, postcolonial (re)readings of *Ana Historic*, like those proposed by Dickinson, Zwicker, Tiffin, and Whitlock, problematize the inter-relation of "race," class and gender within the construction of particular geographical and historical spaces. In shifting critical focus away from the novel's representation of a transcendent feminist subject, postcolonial and queer approaches necessitate revisiting the particular problem of representing historical and cultural differences. In the three scenes with which I began this chapter, the figure of the abject is other to the central subjects of the novel. The woman "they called the Virgin Mary," Harriet, and Ina – all are represented as figures without any real sense of agency. The aboriginal women, the workingwomen, and the

colonial mother or memsahib function as atavistic contingencies through which Ana/ie come to identify them/herself.

Adopting McClintock's concept of the divergent temporalities spatialized within or against the hegemonic trajectory of a new "national time" that comes into being during the Victorian period, we might say that these three figures of abjection inhabit "anachronistic space" that is at once antagonistic to and product of the historical emergence of Canada as a modern industrial nation. Underlining the colonial heredity of Canadian nationalism, *Ana Historic* returns to a problematic space in the birth of a new nation, an ambivalent limit in the progression of a national myth. In Annie's imagination, Ana inhabits "the bush" just beyond the boardwalks and sawdust streets of Hastings Mill. Sleeping and writing away from the strict division of genders and classes, Ana takes strength/inspiration from her surroundings. In the paragraphs following the one excerpted as Passage #1 (above), Annie imagines Ana arriving on the edge of the clearing and preparing herself to meet the gaze of the men in town. Recalling the figure "they called the Virgin Mary" who is carrying a "basket of shoots" in the paragraph above, Ana "let go of the fern she had been weaving through her fingers – what would it be like to weave roots into baskets? What skill would it take of a different order?" (96). Then rousing herself from the daydream, she "checked her hands for tell-tale dust. Time to put on your gloves, Ana, look respectable" (96). Rehearsing the language of self-discipline and social power, she prepares for her confrontation with Constable Miller, father of the school bully, reassuring herself of her own social position and/or power as a respectable woman: "Remember it's a role, a part to play. *Mrs. Richards*, if you please. A woman of some authority, surely" (97). Symbolically donning the white gloves of the respectable colonial "lady," Ana's arrival in town is con-

nected with her determination to seek justice for “Lily and Danny and the Kanaka boy” (92-93) in front of the school board. Her desire to fight for the removal of a bigoted pupil is contingent on Ana’s ability to maintain a certain level of class distinction.

It is interesting to note how her arrival in this anachronistic space of the nation, her entrance into this moment of active resistance to the racist and sexist violence of the local authorities, is itself prefigured by the dictates of colonial law – “Let me tell you, Master Miller, the Government of this Colony declares that Siwash and Scot are both registered pupils of this school” – and her own class privilege. As she dismisses the boy from the school, she conjures up an image of his father. She pictures “The Constable’s red face with handlebar moustache, ex-logger, muttering expletives about her” (93), which is both terrifying and somewhat empowering; his description bears simultaneous traces of a complex criss-crossing of gender (“handlebar moustache”), class (“ex-logger”), and racial (“red face”) identities against which Ana reads her own tenuous authority. Neatly covering her hands, Ana erases any “tell-tale” evidence of her own labours and emerges into a clearly demarcated colonial space.

In her position on the edge of town, Ana is situated on the edge of history. Slightly removed from but not entirely beyond the male gaze of the lumbermen and prospectors, she is away from but not quite out of sight of the concerns of the emerging port. In the logic of the colonial teleology of Canada as a modern industrial nation, Ana’s movement through space, both the wild spaces of “the bush” and the more obviously social spaces of the town, is both baffled by, in the sense that she has been written out of the official history, and consistent with the march of progress. If, on one level, Ana’s journey and her eventual decision to stay in Gastown with Birdie

Stewart represent a reversal of the traditional movement through the colonial space, on another level, it reveals the contradiction inherent the “colonial journey” as Anne McClintock describes it. If this journey is “figured as proceeding forward in a geographical space backward in historical time” (McClintock 30), Ana’s progress – metonymically representative of the plot development of both Annie’s and Marlatt’s novels – hinges on the ambivalent temporality of a colonial space at the edge of Empire. Ana’s, Annie’s, and Marlatt’s respective movements through the geography of Vancouver are figured as movements back in time. Marlatt’s movement into place – a journey that takes the reader from a contemporary (postmodern/post-expo) Vancouver through the North Shore suburb of post-war Vancouver and back into colonial Gastown or Granville – takes us into a “prehistoric zone of racial and gender difference” (McClintock 30). Overturning the typical logic of the male explorer/speculator pushing off into the woods, ever extending the maps of empire and nation, Annie’s revisionary drive is counter-balanced by Ana’s spectral return to the heart of the new City.

For the postcolonial critic, however, this bi-directional narrative of return raises critical problems about the novel’s representation of racial difference that are at the crux of the colonial project from which Ana, Annie and finally Marlatt are attempting to break free. As McClintock and Ann Laura Stoler (to name but two notable contributors to the field of colonial studies) have demonstrated, gender difference within the European colonial spaces functions within a matrix of sexual and racial differences that invest domesticity, and with it the family and motherhood, with class privileges. In a colonial “contact zone,” such as Vancouver, the physical presence of a “white woman” would have signified both the promise of colonial expansion, which in the case of Canadian history and geography was never far removed

from the promise of national development, and the threat of miscegenation. In a Victorian social order, the control over the female sexual body was therefore a matter of the state. Domesticity, as Stoler (who is following up on Foucault's inquiry into the intersection of "race" and sexuality) demonstrates, must not be considered exterior to the political concerns of the colonial administration but a necessary component of the control and maintenance of colonial power. In fact, the somewhat tenuous agency granted to women in a colonial space was conditional upon their ability to carry out the dictates of metropolitan disciplines of family and motherhood. For this reason rather than having little or no power vis-à-vis the patriarchy, women, at least in as much as they might themselves be said to have the benefits of good breeding, were responsible for attending to the "white man's burden." Whether they were stationed in the metropolis or the colonies, European women of "class distinction" were looked upon to conserve the "purity of the race." This expectation meant both creating and maintaining a recognizable system of differences with which this elite group of women could distinguish themselves from other women, working class, aboriginal and of colour. In addition to the cultural demands placed on women by institutions such as church or state-sponsored education, class privilege often coincided with a strong sense of social or "moral" responsibility. According to McClintock, women often took it upon themselves to protect "the nation" from the dual threats of racial and class degeneration (46-48). The social, political and cultural exigencies involved in transforming this male-dominated mill-town into an urban centre of commercial enterprise, i.e., Vancouver as a 20<sup>th</sup> century metropolis, would have meant that the interaction between women of Ana's stature would have been heavily invested with social meaning. Annie's ultimate trope – Ana's refusal to follow the line written for her in the history

and her decision to become self-employed, teaching piano in rented rooms in Gastown – is suggestive of an entirely different socio-economic sphere.

This utopia, the solitary cabin in which Ana exists as a soul sister to Atwood's Susanna Moodie and Virginia Woolf's proto-typical woman writer – Ana's "bush garden" – is not that far beyond the phallocratic steel of the rumoured railway. The economic and social position of the colonial school-marm in the space of the new province would have been tenuous. It is likely that she would have been subjected to more severe hardship than Annie imagines for her. In this way, Mrs. Richard's marriage to Ben Springer might also be read as a liberation of sorts from life as a single woman subsisting on the outskirts of this colonial outpost. Contrary to Annie and Marlatt's notion that history has written Ana off, that with her marriage she enters into a contract in which she has surrendered her agency or subjectivity, we might also read the fact of her inclusion in the historical narrative as a *de facto* celebration of class power – her own and Springer's. For surely, marriage is only an event of historical importance when it solidifies the colonial state; one need only ask where the stories of the other marriages – amongst the working class, between white and non-white – are told to see this. Opening the dominant narrative, we might wonder about Ana's responsibility to the burden of nationhood. How the stature of an educated white woman would have resulted in her being pitted against other working women, Blacks, Asians, First Nations, and mixed "race," living in and around Ana's "milltown." How even in moments of charity, her economic and social survival would have been contingent on the assertion of her difference from other women.

## THE FIGURE OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN

As I have argued, the novel attempts to establish a direct relationship between Ana's lesbian consciousness and her commitment to socially progressive or egalitarian ideals. Yet Annie's narrative provides a highly problematic representation of the native women. Her imaginative recreation of Ana as a lesbian "foremother" tends to idealize the figure of the aboriginal as a silent inscrutable presence who bears witness without speaking, or for that matter being asked or expected to speak. Thinking about "the crone they called the Virgin Mary," Ana fixates on the empty or vacant gaze, belying her own fascination with a "monstrous" desire to see and be seen differently:

At first she had thought the old woman was blind, but no one blind could find the path like that. There had been a large amount of sky in those eyes. It was the look of mountains, when she could see them through fog and cloud, snowy otherwheres she had forgotten about until there they were suddenly on a clear day, perfectly present. *She would like to know what those eyes saw.* (96; emphasis added)

This "blind" stare suggests a reversal and re-inscription of the Lacanian "mirror stage," a psycho-analytical description of the process of individuation through which the gendered subject comes into being by way of a process of self-recognition in which s/he is reflected by the mother's gaze/body. Apart from being a key instance of Marlatt's adaptation of French feminist theory, especially in terms of her engagement with an Irigarian revision of Lacan's theory from a lesbian position, this scene brings together the issues of "race," class and sexuality as they come to bear on the psychic development of the novel's central figure/character. In replacing the gaze in the body of a woman, i.e., in making it come between two women, Marlatt's novel works to resist the patriarchal sexual imperative by which women are always already objects of desire. Yet this "look" is described as appearing to be "blind"; it is a

gaze that does not seem to see Ana. Pre-occupied with the woman's "look," Ana does not recognize that it is she who is, in fact, the purveyor of the gaze, she who is staring at this woman, and she who can only read an external space, the wilderness reflected back at her.

This "look," the gaze of this First Nations woman "they called the Virgin Mary," is part of a symbolic web weaving together an alternative conception of the land or place. Throughout the novel, the forest and land around Gastown are seen inflected by the male desire for profit and property. This passage recalls an earlier scene in which the "otherwheres" Ana sees reflected in this woman's eyes are referred to as "Sheba's paps." Reflecting on the conventional erotics of heterosexual male desire and the naming of the land, Ana records that "Cap. Soule yesterday insisted on escorting me, pointing out this and that - D'ye see those two peaks beyond the Inlet? He says, Sheba's Paps they call 'em'" (31). Yet in this scene, Ana is reassigning the gaze; "those eyes" that see beyond the immediacy of the present fixation on value and extraction toward "snowy otherwheres" have become part of the sexual drama in which Annie imagines herself as a participant. One is left to speculate on the sexual nature of this meeting. At this point in the novel, Ana's sexual orientation is still unclear. A few pages later she sees herself as an object of desire, "a grouse flushed from the bush" (102).

Does Ana see herself as the "snowy otherwheres?" The key problematic to reading this novel as subverting the dominant colonial paradigms through which its narratives develop has to do with the way we approach the issue of whiteness, in particular the way in which this novel represents and/or undermines the dominant codification and privileging of bodies marked both "white" and "female." The question that remains open in the reading of *Ana Historic* is the manner in which Marlatt's lesbian subject resists the



hegemonic conflation of an imaginary white female body with the paradoxical ideals of sexual purity. In a sense, we are left to work through Annie's obvious fascination with the idealized figure of Ana, the colonial ancestor upon whom her own sexual identity rests. We are left with the highly complex relationship between not only the general categories of "race" and gender or "race" and sexuality, but more specifically whiteness and lesbian. How and where does the term white enter the equation of "lesbian-feminist"? How is a "white feminist" subject linked to or assumed in Marlatt's "lesbian" subject? Given the highly charged significance of racial categories to the codification of sexual reproduction within a colonial framework, one might argue that in going back into the contested area of sexual desire and perversion, *Ana Historic* leads us back into a space of racial ambiguity and hegemonic struggle. Yet how does Marlatt's lesbian subject resolve or further develop the contradictory tensions between being "immigrant" (as Ina and Ana are) and "being born in" to the nation, between being white and being "native"?

#### WHITENESS

One of the operative issues in attempting to read this novel as a postcolonial text, i.e., as part of the trans and international projects of decolonization, is that of racialization and the text's re/inscription of hegemonic whiteness. The history and the geography with which Marlatt is engaging is very much circumscribed by the historical imperatives of European colonialism and the racist practices of a dominant minority. Arguably, by dint of its position at the Western extreme of both Canada and the British Empire, in conjunction with the fact that this young city's position vis-à-vis contact with First Nations people and cultures as well of those of Asia, has meant that Vancouver has come to play a crucial role in the production and

reproduction of Canada as a “White Nation.” Historically the development of Vancouver and BC as social spaces has been contingent on the careful demarcation of a racialized geography with officially legislated enclaves organized around the racial identity of their dwellers, including not only Chinatown (Anderson), or any of a number of reservations, but also the British Properties (Ley). The careful politics of containment described in the segmentation of the city and surrounding province into a network of racialized contact zones has not been entirely effective at quelling disparities between citizens. The history of the colonial function of Vancouver can be traced through a series of “race” riots or conflicts that marks its 125 year old existence. If class struggle was a determining factor in the development of Toronto throughout the twentieth century, racism is at the centre of Vancouver’s coming into being. Thus I might suggest that Vancouver has become and is a key site in both the production of “whiteness” as it relates to a Canadian cultural and political identity formation and a resistance to it. Like all North American cities, Vancouver is an operative site in and through which to theorize the on-going attempt to construct and employ “whiteness” as a privileged category.

Before going on with my reading of Marlatt, it is necessary to tie down my conception of whiteness – what I mean by such phrases as “whiteness” or “the social construction of whiteness.” Whiteness, like any of a number of racial identities with which it is implicated and upon which it depends, does not refer to any one or other set of essential biological differences, but it is an hegemonic ideal that has been continually constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed over the last three to four centuries. “Race” theorists have pointed out that to be “white” – i.e., to be considered, able to pass as, or self-identify as such – has come to mean that, despite a plethora of internal dif-

ferences and grades/shades of privilege separating individuals across cultural milieus, one enjoys a particular set of privileges or access to socio-cultural power unavailable those who are not “white,” those to whom this primary identity is putatively denied.<sup>3</sup> In his ground breaking study of “the representation of whiteness,” Richard Dyer argues that whiteness, unlike other categories of racial identity, functions through a paradoxical or ambiguous neutrality, a kind of in/visibility that has over time come to be taken as “natural” or “neutral.” Dyer writes that because it has a tendency to disappear in many contexts, including within academic discussions of identity politics, the study of whiteness raises certain epistemological and methodological problems that take it beyond the scope of the various other categories of interest:

one [can] not do the kind of taxonomy of typifications that had been done for non-white peoples. One cannot come up with a limited range of endlessly repeated images, because the privilege of being white in white culture is not to be subjected to stereotyping in relation to one’s whiteness. White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability and so on, but the overt point of such typification is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race. (13)

One might take issue with Dyer’s conception of whiteness for his tendency to prioritize “race” above all other identity formations: “gender, nation, class, sexuality and so on.” It should also be acknowledged that “white culture,” as Dyer uses the term, tends to confine discussion to a Euro-American social dominant, which ultimately destabilizes the category. What happens, for example, when his term is placed in highly complex and differentiated historical and cultural situations? For example, how does one talk of the primacy of whiteness in Ireland, the Balkans, or Hong Kong, or any of a number of other social spheres in which ethnicity (religious or linguistic

differences) is a dominant social concern? However, despite the theoretical questions raised by over-isolating whiteness as a cultural construct, Dyer's argument is valuable for the manner in which he brings "race" theory to bear on dominant modes of cultural criticism. In demonstrating the way that whiteness has been and continues to be fashioned by a variety of mainstream cultural projects, including both "high" and "low" culture and the arts, Dyer's research reconfirms the notion that "race" is not an unfortunate side effect of history and progress but an essential element of both.

Opening the reading of *Ana Historic* to questions of the construction of whiteness forces readers to move beyond the relatively straightforward problem of representing "otherness" (in this case First Nations women) and into the highly complex function of "race" within the construction of a (white, Canadian, lesbian, feminist) self simultaneously subjugated and subjugating, marginalized and privileged within the larger social space. As the unacknowledged identity/privilege upon which Marlatt's feminist-lesbian subject depends, whiteness might also be said to sanction the transgressive forces of her self-identified subject. In reading through a postcolonial lens, one is challenged to rethink the assumption – on the part of the writer and the majority of her critics – that "Canadian" and "white" or "of European descent" are natural equivalents. Rather than accepting the historical fallacy about the primacy of the European settler, we might do well to remember that, contrary to popular opinion, the establishment of a "white" culture or nation was (and still is) hard fought. In the context of Ana's position on the outskirts of a pre-confederation (pre)Vancouver social space, the ascendancy of European culture and/or nationalism is by no means to be taken for granted – is not yet a done deal.

Far from existing outside the contradictory machinations of “race” formation, Ana’s existence both in the official discourses of history and beyond them in Annie’s monstrous leap of the imagination is inflected with racial privilege. In fact, if we read against the grain of the novel’s movement towards a narrative climax, it becomes clear that many if not all the key sites Marlatt has expropriated from the historical and archival records are infused with a colonial pre-occupation with miscegenation, white supremacy, and the propagation of a white “race.” According to Dyer, whiteness as a social construct is dependent on and integral to three key elements of Western culture and thought as it has developed from the Enlightenment: Christianity, Race, Enterprise. Thus we might argue that the thematization of the Virgin Mary as a counterpoint to the “first white birth” is consistent with the racial concerns of empire. In fact, the historical figure that is at the centre of the novel is itself part of a story of colonial expansion and the establishment of a white “civilizing” culture upon which the business interest of both nation and Empire had come to depend: as the first school teacher and then as the wife of “the manager” of the sawmill in Moodyville, Mrs. Richards is remembered and recorded for her role in its dramatic originary moment.

The characters of Harriet and the woman “they called the Virgin Mary” function as a kind of foil against which Ana’s lesbian-feminist self emerges. Ana, as Annie imagines her and as she is presented in the novel, struggles with the over-bearing father. Her letters “home,” which function to describe her coming into a new consciousness, allow us to follow her break from the strict role imperatives of her assumed social position, as an educated British woman, a “white lady.” Ana’s ultimate refusal to do what history seems to demand she must is predicated on a desire “to be born in.” In the language of the early travel narratives, we might say that these letters and the thoughts

they convey vis-à-vis the birthing scene describe how Ana “goes native.” As I have suggested, however, this desire to be native is predicated on the erasure of indigenous culture. If we follow Marlatt’s counter-narrative, Ana breaks with history to take rooms in Gastown and to teach piano; in so doing she enters the homosocial world of Birdie Stewart and her brothel. Giving up the privileges of her class position, Ana enters into the zone of racial and sexual ambivalence; yet, however tenuous her new existence might have seemed to a proper Victorian lady, Ana’s economic survival might be said to depend on the very same cultural pedigree from which she ostensibly breaks. Her freedom rests on her being a piano teacher, a rather ambiguous liberation given the fact that her financial well being still depends on Victorian tastes and attitudes about music, about the relationship between owning a piano, being able to play it, and social status. Thus the figures of Harriet and “Virgin Mary” depict a kind of idealized native who inspire Ana to resist certain hetero-normative assumptions about what is fitting for a woman of her social stature.

In the case of Annie, who is ultimately responsible for bringing Ana to life and imagining the possibilities of a lesbian-feminist life on the frontier, it is the colonial mother, Ina, who functions as an image of the abject. Ina’s hysteria is symptomatic of both her gender and the fact that she is an “immigrant.” Ina’s refusal to “fit in” to this new place (West Vancouver in the 1950s) is, or so the novel suggests, at the centre of her psychological instability. While her mother’s hysteria is presented as the product of an overbearing patriarchal order in which “her place” becomes synonymous with a domestic space organized around a set of social responsibilities (*her* housework, *her* thrift, *her* appearance), Annie suggests that it is Ina’s unwillingness to establish relationships with the other women (the friend Clair Potts, the other

neighbours, her daughters) that ultimately lead to her surrender. Annie asks, "what did you dream, Ina... what did you imagine of a future so far way from your parents' house in the tropics, their dogs, their servants" (98). She chides her mother for being unable to connect with the places she lived in, for not knowing where "home" was:

endless games of Ouija at the mahogany table, tipped-up sherry glasses gliding mysteriously under fingers' touch, letter by letter spelling out your fate: 'you will die insane in a foreign country.' you were already in a foreign country where you didn't belong. you had already been left in one, left at boarding school in a country they called 'home' which was nothing like the India you remembered. they left you there in England with strangers and brought you out to another foreign country, another army posting into the colonies. 'it wasn't real,' you said, 'that life.' real life had to do with bills and snow, with sawdust and fever thermometers and bargain clothes. (98)

According to Annie, Ina's dejection comes from her inability or unwillingness to project herself into the progressive future migration to Canada presents: "the life you chose, opening up your future to it so your children wouldn't have to leave, so they could grow up in a country to which they belonged" (98). Thus it is Ina's self-sacrifice that leads to Annie's desire and ability to embrace the narrative of nation. The colonial mother is a skin she sheds in Annie's coming to being as a progressive (lesbian-feminist) Canadian woman. As a counterpoint to Ana – the new women/heroine who is able to break free from History and to enter some other space outside the confines of the official record – Ina is a figure of failure. Not her own, perhaps, as much as that of her society, the effect of her being sentenced to a life of constant displacements, first in "the Tropics" and then later in Canada.

In the precursor to the final section of the novel, Annie attempts to finish the dialogue with Ina. As if to break free from the memory of her mother and the pain of her lonely existence, Annie claims the present as a

kind of absolute difference separating them. She recognizes that stories don't end with the death of the person – she tells Ina “(yours hasn't ended with you.)” – Annie says

she [Zoe] catches the thought flit across my face, asks gently, what is it? and i know why i'm here.

here, Ina, in a way you couldn't be. wandering around the empty house of your body, sleeping pills in hand. (132)

Positing lesbian desire as an ultimate difference, or threshold to cross, Annie's relationship with Zoe is figured as a release from both the past and present of heterosexist imperatives. In stark contrast to the dialogue between the mother and daughter, Annie and Zoe

talk about the last century when scientists first established that women had eggs equally necessary to the making of a baby. how, before that, they saw the womb as a sort of compost heap waiting to nourish the man's 'seed' which already contained a minute and perfectly-formed human being. we talk about woman seen as soil(ed), base matter, material without soul (air), or at least a soul so opaque, so burdened with men's need, it barely has strength to rise. we talk about what Ange is going through, what we went through, in the language of a different period: the development of women's alienation from their bodies, suppressed hysteria, the 'wandering,' the absent womb. and how it surfaces... (132-133)

Shifting away from or beyond the dialectical exchange in which she and Ina have been engaged from the outset, Annie's talk embraces an entirely different mode of discourse. She and Zoe share in a mutual recognition of the violence separating women from themselves and their bodies; Annie moves into a recognizably feminist discursive space, and yet Ina haunts the text.

The romantic climax of the novel, the narrative progression towards Annie and Zoe's sexual embrace, is counterpoised with the excerpts from a scientific description of electroshock therapy. In a horrifying analysis of the mother's treatment for mental illness, these short excerpts become part of an



increasingly fragmentary textuality. Mirroring the “glissando” of the shock therapy, the novel might almost be said to fly apart, unravelling itself before an inevitable end. Annie’s fragmentary memories of the traumatic loss of her mother, of her childhood, of Ina returning placated from the hospital, lead her finally to

“Zoe!”

She writes

break the parentheses and let it all surface! falling apart, we are,  
i am. we have fallen apart. the parts don't fit. not well. never  
whole. never did.

Zoe!

Paradoxically, the interpellated Zoe seems to name simultaneously the possibility for cohesion, connection, coming together, and the flying apart of family, of her marriage, of her identity, of the very possibility of narrative closure. Taken in the spirit of her new name, Annie Torrent, we might say that this novel flows outward into the spray of words invoked in the final poem:

reaching you now trees out there, streets you might walk down,  
will, soon. it isn't dark but the luxury of being has woken you,  
the reach of your desire, reading us into the page ahead. (np)

However, in allowing ourselves to become caught in the lure of this imaginary outside, we risk resolving the complex and contradictory issues raised in Marlatt’s attempt to write through the issues of sexuality, gender, and immigration. Ina’s dissolve into Zoe leaves unspoken the highly problematic function or meaning of Ina’s tenacious hold on her colonial identity. Allowing ourselves to be overcome with a desire for connection and the erotics of possibility, we risk forgetting the social space from which and in

which Annie and Zoe's union takes place, "the streets you might walk down, will soon."

Throughout the novel, Ina's connection with Malaysia and Annie's desire to escape the stigmata of her immigrant identity stand as an alternative set of differences, alternative to the gender divisions against which the characters struggle, alternative to the sexual difference Annie comes to accept. Annie remembers that "it was the walls that closed in on you, picture windows that never opened, doors that stayed shut against the cold" (136) that effected Ina's sense of isolation. For Ina, Canada had "none of the openness of that stone house in the tropics with its verandahs and archways through which people came and went, all kind of people, dogs, bats and cheechas running in and out" (136). For Annie, "we exchanged this for Canada and lost our place in the tropics, which was not truly ours and where we had no rightful place" (136). What Annie fails to acknowledge is that Canada and this "place in the tropics" are in fact a part of the same geography of British Imperialism. Annie's assumption to the contrary that she does in fact have a "rightful place" as a Canadian citizen here in British Columbia confounds her colonial critique.

In moving through these issues of ethnic and racial identity, describing and representing a colonial space such as Vancouver was and is, as background to the main romantic thread, the novel's narrative performs a somewhat ironic normalization of sexual desire. If, as a number of scholars of nationalism (Lloyd, Anderson, Gellnor) suggest, the nation exists with a continuous attempt to control internal difference as a means of resisting external threats, then we might say that the nationalist bent of both *Ana Historic* and the feminist discourse through which it has been read provide a necessary balance to the subversive intent of a queer desire. In extending outward

to include Annie and Zoe's union within the ever-expanding purview of a national (multicultural) identity, the story of Canada from which the novel flows, while contested, is allowed to move forward. As many critics have suggested the novel's representation of lesbian love does call into question the patriarchal norms of a Canadian nationalism; however, it doesn't ultimately call into question the nationalism and/or the ethnocentrism of a particular field of lesbian-feminist criticism. In one of the final scenes of the novel, the figure of the Queen surfaces as a symbol of beneficence, signifier of this new "world of connection" Annie finds her self in:

it is an old house in the East End, a house that is layered with people's lives, a history of cooking smells, of mildewed wood, dream-soaked walls. she shared it with two other women (i hadn't imagined...). Eunice and Zoe were talking at the kitchen table while they folded and applied stamps to a pile of flyers (i hadn't imagined her working...) Zoe cut her sponge in half so i could join them. Norah came back with four cappuccinos from a café down the street and we sat together, hundreds of tiny images of the Queen passing under my thumb, music i'd never heard running under the sound of their voices, so used to each other, half-phrases, jokes, retorts, half-silence when the words spun on inside our heads – 'our' in body, i was there too, listening to the play of it, though i didn't say much. i wanted to listen, as i used to listen in the woods to the quiet interplay of wind, trees, rain, creeping things under the leaves – this world of connection... (151)

Finally, the novel gives way to the idealization of women working together. Romanticizing the transience of this house, the economic forces that bring these women together to work around the kitchen table, Annie is oblivious to the socio-political realities of the space into which she has moved.

The reader is left to speculate on how we get from Marlatt's acute interest in and knowledge of the local geographies of Vancouver's ethnic neighbourhoods to Annie's infatuation with the new "our" she has come into.

## NOTES

1. My understanding of the term "text" is based on both the post-structuralist construct as it was developed by a diverse group of French theorists including Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, and on a Butlerian notion of the performative it has given rise to. For an in-depth discussion of the historical and methodological significance of "text" and "textuality" as these terms pertain to the study of cultural objects see John Mowitt's *Text*.
2. Dickinson's discussion leaves the issue of "race" for the chapter that follows. He goes on to pick up the situatedness of these affiliate spaces – "gender or nation (or "race" or sexuality or class, for that matter)" – in relation to Dionne Brand's "politics of dislocation" (155).
3. A number of texts go into the problematic function of "whiteness" in Canadian society; in particular, see book length studies by bell hooks, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Himani Bannerji, Dionne Brand, and Sharene Razack.

4

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**KIYOOKA, RE:CANLIT**

**1.**

**“UNTIDY NOSTRUMS”: *OCTOBER’S PIEBALD SKIES & OTHER LACUNAE***

The twilight of memory, then is not just the result of a somehow natural generational forgetting that could be counteracted through some form of a more reliable representation. Rather, it is given in the very structures of representation itself. The obsessions with memory in contemporary culture must be read in terms of this double problematic. Twilight are both: generational memories on the wane due to the passing of time and the continuing speed of technological modernization, and memories that reflect the twilight status of memory itself. Twilight is that moment of the day that foreshadows the night of forgetting, but that seems to slow time itself, an in-between state in which the last light of day may still play out its ultimate marvels. It is memory’s privileged time. (Huysen 3)

This isolation of objects colludes, generally unconsciously, with the dissociation and concealment carried out by the economic system as it separates production from circulation and both from consumption. (Canclini 62)

Roy K. Kiyooka’s *October Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* is a remarkable if somewhat idiosyncratic work of CanLit. Like Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* and Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, this text speaks directly to a particular site in the development of a contemporary Canadian polity. Like the novels by Ondaatje and Marlatt, Kiyooka’s long poem reflects a strong concern with the construction of history within a particular social space. Like these other two texts, Kiyooka’s text engages with “the city” as a critical locus in the construction of national identities and the politics of culture this entails.

However, unlike these other two texts, *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* presents CanLit not as a backdrop or allusive framework but as a central, critical anxiety. In fact, the intersections of Canadian culture, Multiculturalism and literary praxis provide the thematic and rhetorical focus of Kiyooka's text. Whereas *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Ana Historic* gesture toward a readership or readerships and are, as I suggested, well-suited for academic readings, Kiyooka's text resists them. It problematizes its own reception, raising issues of responsibility and complicity that cannot be comfortably folded into the dominant discourses of CanLit – even the most “progressive” or politically aware. If the context of reception figured in Marlatt and Ondaatje's texts is highly stylized and ancillary to a core narrative, it is fully present in Kiyooka's text.

As is characteristic of Kiyooka's writing, the problems of reading and the materiality of the text are highlighted in specific ways. As is the case with Kiyooka's better known works – *StoneDGloves*, *Transcanada letters*, or *Pear Tree Pomes* – *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* speaks directly to the reader or groups of readers and the social space of literary/artistic production in a manner that draws attention to the epistemological boundaries and critical frameworks with which we are used to reading. In foregrounding the differences – or “walls” as they are figured in *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* – between readers, the text is presented in a manner that lays bare the incommensurability of “race” politics, multiculturalism and nationalist discourse. Focusing on the coincidence of bpNichol's death and the ratification of Japanese Canadian Redress, locating these two disparate events or discourses in the particularities of Vancouver's downtown east side – the neighbourhoods in which Kiyooka lived and worked, Chinatown and Japantown – the text opens CanLit onto the problematic performance of

“racialized” identity or identities. But in opening CanLit, i.e., in bringing it directly into the present or presence of a “Japanese Canadian” history and geography, Kiyooka’s writing performs a vital critique of the dominant ideological and methodological structures of the emerging culturalism. To put it plainly, *October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* is a poem (Kiyooka’s spelling) that cannot be read into the trajectories of Canadian cultural nationalism, nor does allow itself to be read outside them.

Before moving into Kiyooka’s *October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* and working through the text, I want to focus on the issue of Canadian Multiculturalism, using it to reframe my discussion of Ondaatje’s and Marlatt’s writing and to set the stage for my reading of Kiyooka. Unravelling this line from the earlier discussion through a critique of Canadian Multiculturalism that is at the heart of Kiyooka’s text and the critical contexts it engages, I want to lead into speculations on the disjointed present-past of CanLit. To do this, it is crucial to reiterate a number of points about the limits of contemporary critical discourse touched on so far, and to begin thinking more directly about the relationship between literary reception and the re/generation of the hegemonic discourses of “race” and culture.

To this end, I want to say a few words about an important context of Kiyooka’s *October’s Piebald Skies*, i.e., the relationship between Japanese Canadian Redress and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. As critics have pointed out, the Act provided for the political use of a diversity discourse to control various communities within the nation. In a sense, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act allowed for the appropriation of multiculturalism into government policy, which enabled the Liberals to respond to a number of political demands – demands for redress from Japanese Canadians uprooted and interned during the Second World War and for repayment of the head



tax collected from the families of Chinese Canadians – without incurring the immense costs inevitably involved in official settlements. Contrary to what some proponents might argue, the fact that one or two of these conflicts have since been decided (at least officially) “in favour” of “minority group” interests does not necessarily prove either the efficacy of the act or its cultural beneficence.<sup>1</sup> Multiculturalism, as it is passed down through official discourses, has evolved as a mechanism of social control, which is primarily geared toward the re-casting of cultural difference and disparity amongst groups of citizens in terms of equitable diversity; it counterpoises the ideological (diversity) with the material (difference) in order elide powerful contradictions in the cultural and economic dynamics of the nation (Derksen; Bannerji, *The Dark Side of Nation*; McFarlane, “The Haunt of Race”; Miki *Broken Entries*; Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies*).

Summarizing this fundamental critique of multiculturalism, Derksen writes that

criticisms of multiculturalism argue that it has remained merely symbolic, reducing ethnic and racialized cultures to folklore and sponsoring celebrations of “red boot” ethnicity while never actually alleviating the real inequities within Canadian society. This criticism of multiculturalism charges that it cannot forcefully address racism (and sexism as a link in the system of labour) precisely because, as a policy and a law, multiculturalism fails to recognize race and ethnicity as socially constructed and rather deals with them as natural. The result is that multiculturalism does not seek systematic changes that challenge the categories (and the use of these categories) of race and ethnicity. (np)

Thus, a limited understanding of the social construction of the very identity categories they invoke confounds contemporary studies of Canadian (multicultural) society. Ironically, the inculcation of multiculturalism through government policy and state sponsorship for the arts places the majority of arguments for plurality and the recognition of cultural diversity

on difficult ground. By neglecting to deal directly with the ideological over-determination of certain identities within the sphere of Canadian cultural politics, literary studies are complicit in a systemic refusal “to recognize race and ethnicity as socially constructed.”

In a more recent essay on the subject, Roy Miki writes,

The Multiculturalism Act (1988) can be read as the space of the “other” for the liberalism enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In the inscription of the terms “race” and “racial” as essentialized signs in a national social text, people of colour, or “non-whites,” are produced as ethnic and racial identities that differ from the constitutional base. The relativization of culture in what gets called “the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society” (Canada, *Multiculturalism Act* 13) removes its forms from the political sphere, laying the foundation, as Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, for a “radical falsification.” (*Broken Entries* 149)

Thus critics of literature are left with the difficult task of reading through the problematic effects of this “radical falsification.” If, as Miki argues, the Act transforms “the past” or history into “an apolitical ‘heritage’” (149), critics are left with a much more fraught relationship between history and culture than they might initially have supposed. In light of Multiculturalism’s sleight of hand by which “race” both appears and disappears through a careful manipulation of history, the operative binary underlying the radical critique proposed in both *Ana Historic* and *In the Skin of a Lion* – i.e., the fundamental difference between history and fiction – is itself called into question. In the case of Ondaatje’s novel, we have seen how this critical oversight has had the effect of re-inscribing ethnicity within a larger cultural mosaic that purports to represent a plurality of cultures that feed into the natural evolution of contemporary Canadian society. In failing to recognize Italian, Greek, Macedonian, or Irish ethnicity as interpellated identities, and which as such are instrumental in the formation of “white society,” critics

have neglected to pick up on Ondaatje's sophisticated critique of the "race" politics underlying contemporary culturalism; thus, the normalizing drive of literary nationalism has for the most part elided Ondaatje's own ambivalent struggle with the subject of "race."

Likewise, in Chapters Five and Six, I analyse a similar process of historical misreading, arguing that scholarly discussions of Marlatt's lesbian-feminist subject in process generally disregard the novel's representation of First Nations women and its consequent normalizing of a "white settler" or "immigrant" sensibility. The major difference in Marlatt's case is that my discussion is concerned more with the proliferation of liberal feminist than postmodern reading practices – though both are heavily dependent on the ideology of multiculturalism. Despite the obvious differences, both discourses share a commitment to the interrelated ideals of pluralism and national identity. As an effect of the writers' ability to "pass" for white Canadians or their constructions as such – even if and when the writers themselves might identify otherwise – readings of *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Ana Historic* are inclined to ignore the historical conflicts amongst the racialized communities represented in the texts, and almost without exception, they have a propensity to avoid the different histories that might be brought to bear on the social space under consideration. For all intents and purpose, scholarly readings of Ondaatje and Marlatt tend to juxtapose history with an antithetical fiction. While both authors are praised for their imaginative reworking of Canadian history, the f/actual basis for the writing is often taken for granted. Both novels are held up as representations of a "real" cultural plurality or "true" multiculturalism, as representations of the other of a dominant historical narrative. Their fiction becomes history as it might have been or how the reader might like to imagine it and the dominant narrative be-

comes a masculinist dream – *his* story, not *hers*. In so doing, complex social struggles and multivalent notions of agency are elided. The problem is that counterbalancing historical fact with a fictional everyday life tends to function outside any kind of dialectical logic; in essence, it re-affirms the binaries their progressive criticism strives to undo.

To move beyond this critical impasse, I am changing tack and turning away from my discussion of critical discourse, at least momentarily, to offer a reading of Kiyooka's *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*. From the outset, I have worked with critical texts. Locating my argument around scholarly praxis rather than the explication of literature *per se*, I have discussed blind-spots in the published responses to two fictional representations of Canada as a culturally diverse social space. I have argued that a “cultural politics of difference,” an ideal shared, at least superficially, by the majority of feminist and postmodernist interpretations of Marlatt and Ondaatje, demands a level of critical/theoretical vigilance to the dialectical relationship between a politics of location and a mimetic ideal, i.e., between the material and ideological differences separating scholars from their object. Throughout I have maintained the position that cultural nationalism is an unfinished project, and as such, the legacies of “the nation” – however amorphous, protean, or ambivalent they might be – continue to pose important problems for literary studies, haunting not only the dominant discourses of Canadian multiculturalism, but also the discourses of resistance. The spawn of cultural nationalism lives on as important reminders of the possibilities and pitfalls of identity formation.

## A POETIC DISCOURSE

Kiyooka's work exists as a vital contradiction in the narrative of literary nationalism. The image/problem of Canada as it develops throughout his poetry poses a fundamental counterpoint to the vision of Canada that circulates, acknowledged and unacknowledged, through Canadian literature. Taken together, Kiyooka's success as an artist, the depth of his oeuvre across a wide variety of media, and his constant vigilance to the politics of cultural production contest the ideological constructs that underwrite the shape-shifting hipper sibling of Canadian literature, CanLit. This is not say that I want to "discover" or "rediscover" Kiyooka as a forgotten or otherwise "marginalized" poet of an erstwhile avant-garde. My overall thesis is built on a resistance to the notion that Canadian culture or literature ever did or ever could form a coherent centre. If it is possible to refer to a literary mainstream, one that is composed of a relatively finite conglomeration of writers, editors, publishers, and journalistic endeavours, it is only so because of the sway of a particular ideological construct, which when taken within the parameters of the liberal discourses is seldom seen as such. Of necessity, Canadian literature, in as much as it comes to be intertwined with the proliferating currents of literary production (or what we might more comfortably call "writing") in Canada, and in as much as it is always already hegemonic, is tied to a divergence of contradictory issues. Thus in maintaining "the nation" and with it Canadian literature as a contradictory social space, it is necessary, as I have argued, to rethink the popular discourses of marginality and silence. Although the centre-periphery distinction might be useful in modeling cultural geographies and economic development, within Canadian literary studies it has a tendency to slide into

motifs of overcoming and transcendence that are central to liberal nationalism and its reworking of territorial expansion onto culture.

I propose to hold Kiyooka up as a “Canadian” poet. Because his writing speaks directly to the problematic relationship between writer and reader, I want to read *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* as a bellwether of CanLit, where it has been and where it might be going. Reflecting what the poet refers to as “this bounty of plain thoughts,” Kiyooka’s poetry, or rather his “pomes” – i.e., the truly singular chapbooks, occasional writings, “divertimentos,” “autumnal scrolls,” or various other literary gifts/objects that become the mainstay of his later work – move through the limits of poetic discourse. These exceptional objects offer a poetic language wrought by “the whole unsung realm of the common noun /and all its agglutinated peregrinations,” as he puts it at the outset of *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* (277). Kiyooka’s vigilance to the intersections of everyday life and the realm of poetry does more than allow readers to rethink the relationship between institutionalized conventions and the ephemera of the quotidian; it commands it. One might argue that because “Kiyooka’s life project was to live, as intensely as possible, in relation to what was immediate and near at hand – and to articulate that intimacy in his art and writing” (Miki, *Broken Entries* 57), his pomes propose a critical attentiveness to the relationship between lived experience and poetry itself that frames a reader’s response. While this textual “self-reflexivity” may appear to be relatively commonplace amongst a generation of Canadian poets, and is, as I have argued, significant to the writing of Marlatt and Ondaatje, it is taken to the point of apotheosis in Kiyooka’s work.

I have chosen to centre Kiyooka’s writing within a working definition of CanLit in order to lay bare my own problematic attempt to grapple with

critical location vis-à-vis contemporary “race” politics. In as much as Kiyooka is a Canadian writer, he is a Japanese Canadian writer; his texts and the critical circles in which they are disseminated are not merely reflections of Japanese Canadian history and a long struggle to redress a racist government’s uprooting and internment of Canadian citizens during the Second World War. They are also key sites around which a vibrant communal culture has formed and continues to flourish.<sup>2</sup> Kiyooka’s writing serves as an important reminder that national culture is inherently concerned with the construction and management of “racial” identity, inherently contradictory, and preternaturally diverse. As I have argued, the discussion of national culture as a social space involves both the strategic limits of the analyst and the possibility of alternative spatial productions. Such a nexus has drawn me toward a somewhat impossible conception of CanLit as being formed on the affects of aporia. In drawing out various aspects of the contradictory relationship between institutional drives and particular subject position/s, I hope to conclude by keeping the questions of subjectivity and positioning open. In this sense, this dissertation hangs on the highly charged question of who owns their own national identity that is at the heart of Kiyooka’s writing and responses to it.

As critics look forward to new configurations of state-sponsored cultural programming, it is important to recall that Canadian nationalism is founded on a breach of trust, not a shared privilege. In response to a letter from Mr. Pickersgill, Commissioner of Japanese Placement, Muriel Kitagawa takes issue with the difference between Japanese Canadians and the national populace at large. Faced with the government’s not so polite offer of “assured assistance” for any Japanese Canadians “who desire repatriation” (as the 1945 letter carefully puts it), Kitagawa writes the following statement

about being Canadian, a statement that not only clarifies her own claim to national identity, but I would argue one that fundamentally reworks nationalism as a construct and lays bear many of the hidden assumptions that still control the discourses of cultural identity, multiculturalism and immigration:

We chose Canada long before you ever thought to ask us to choose. We chose Canada then, and we choose Canada now, with our eyes wide open to the probable consequences of our choice. Are we not afraid of the future, the "future" you mention in your letter? Yes, sometimes we are afraid. When there are children depending on us, there is fear. But that fear does not lessen our love for our country. Perhaps because of that very fear, and because we are dispossessed and fenced in, we cling to our last reality, our native Canada. Perhaps because events have made our choice conspicuous and because you have never been asked to choose, our claim to Canada has a deeper, more understanding love of country than yours... In choosing Canada we take the evil with the good, and taking the good we share the responsibility to eradicate the evil. (204-5)

It is precisely here on the ethical line between choosing good or evil and the complex differences inflected in that choice, which as Kitagawa points out is more often than not a lack of choice for those in power, that I am attempting to re-situate literary nationalism. As I turn to Kiyooka's writing, I am returning to an ethical question: by what name or right might one talk of writing as "Canadian literature" or "Canadian culture"? Or, as the case necessitates: by what name or right might one decide *not* to talk of "Canadian literature"? Who might choose?

This is not to say that "Canadian" can or might exist a priori culture or politics, that one's relationship to it might be predicated on a positive sense of geography or location. Rather, in attempting to re-affirm the national, in the specific context of Canadian literature, I am arguing for a return to a highly problematic dialectic of modernity, a dialectic which has yet to be properly theorized in the context of CanLit, and which will continue to configure cul-



tural discourse across the critical sites of an erstwhile political project if it remains unaddressed. As a consequential subsidiary of the emerging global order, the (re)production of the national, together with germane localisms, must be seen in light of the transformation of political and cultural imperatives. I must be clear that I am not attempting to identify or otherwise differentiate a particular localist position/tradition from which to resist the forces of globalization; instead I am attempting to keep open the question of location as a crucial point of intervention in the redistribution of cultural capital. As Hardt and Negri argue, this type of a return to the local "is both false and damaging... because the problem is poorly posed"(44); they argue against a growing trend amongst critical theorists to assert "the local" as being extrinsic to the development of "the global." Hardt and Negri see many current "Leftist" critiques of "globalization" assuming a "false dichotomy between the global and the local" in which the former becomes synonymous with homogenization while the latter names heterogeneity.

Contrary to such arguments, my re-assertion of the national as a site of contradiction does not rest on a belief that "Local differences pre-exist the present scene and must be defended or protected against the intrusion of globalization" (45). My contention is that Canada is a contested matrix of cultural relations and material productions, replete with conflicted sites of social production that are akin to what Lefebvre refers to as social space or Hardt and Negri term the "*production of locality*." They contend that, rather than assuming an original or static position anterior to the dynamics of cultural struggle,

What needs to be addressed, instead, is precisely the *production of locality*, that is, the social machines that create and re-create the identities and differences that are understood as the local. The differences of locality are neither preexisting nor natural but rather effects of a regime of production. Globality similarly

should not be understood in terms of cultural, political, or economic *homogenization*. Globalization, like localization, should be understood instead as a *regime* of the production of identity and difference, or really of homogenization and heterogenization. (45)

Their study of the problems of post-modernization and/or globalization, which they refer to under the conceptual heading "Empire," postulates an integrated model of cultural development (which it might be noted approximates the scope and drive of Lefebvre's writing about social space):

The better framework, then, to designate the distinction between the global and the local might refer to different networks of flows and obstacles in which the local moment or perspective gives priority to the re-territorializing barriers or boundaries and the global moment privileges the mobility of deterritorializing flows. It is false, in any case, to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense *outside* and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire. (45)

The forces of globalization are then a re-deployment of outmoded international relations of modern colonialism and modernization, and the local – the politics of place it most often assumes – is always already implicated in the formation of political structures. At issue here is the variable relationship of these divergent flows. If Canada is a will to territory, and not as nationalists seem to believe a right to place, it is so through the careful, often violent management of property rights and political identities.

Concluding with a reading of Kiyooka, I do not intend to confirm any sort of essential identity or positive difference. I am hoping, instead, to foreground a particular set of literary negotiations with the cultural politics of identity that are, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate in the two previous chapters, often elided in contemporary discussions of CanLit.

AN ISSUE OF ADDRESS

The colophon to *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* provides an example of Kiyooka's unique approach to both writing and publishing:

written & printed  
648 - keefer street, vancouver bc  
in an addition of forty of which  
no two are alike: to commemorate our  
redress & the memory of  
bpNichol. september/october '88

This acknowledgment of the time and place of composition and publication frames the poem in terms of particular social space. Providing the details of production, and a brief note about the poet's intentions or inspiration for writing the poem, this colophon is less a subversive gesture than it is a reminder of the personal aspect of the writing. Throughout the poem, these concerns come together in a highly developed sense of poetry as a social act and material practice that is grounded in the specificities of time and space.

Reworking a kind of modernist persona – an urban wanderer akin to but not identical with Benjamin's flaneur or Eliot's Prufrock – Kiyooka's "perambulatory" musing weaves together the place and time of poetic production. Taking us through the streets of Vancouver's Chinatown and dilapidated Japantown, the narrator-poet takes us on a journey from his home on Keefer St. to his studio on Powell St. – the private and public worlds of the artist. Following him as he makes his way around the October streets of Vancouver, we see the poet-narrator sort through a complex set of interrelated events and personal emotions. As he considers the death of bpNichol and the poetic experimentation with which his life and work is associated, Kiyooka's thoughts move toward the present future of redress and the painful past to which it would speak.

Beginning in a lyric mode, the poem sets out as rumination or exploration, and winds its way into a discourse on the politics of redress. From the tentative opening lines –

subtle,  
as a breath  
compost

– the poem slowly stretches out into a journey through the immediate present and past of composition. In many ways, similar to an older perambulatory Stephen Dedalus, Kiyooka's persona sets out wandering through what looks like a stream of consciousness. The “subtle” change in season leads the narrator into thoughts of winter and shelter:

october tolls  
the dank  
hibernaculum

Caught on the cusp of this change in weather, he wonders

is this Indian Summer's promissory  
note to that old scapegoat, 'body'... does this  
flask of heat anneal the long downward  
spiral into the forebodings of our winter estate...

Blake-like, this lyric poet asks the “little bird” he sees “chirpin” on a telephone line” to “grant [him] this bounty of plain thoughts,” to take him into “the whole unsung realm of the common noun / and all its agglutinated peregrination/s” (277).

It is only with the utterance of a short prayer that the poem seems to orient itself to the matter at hand, the oratorical occasion marked in the colophon:

as i live and breathe my breath is beholden  
to our uncommonly commendable origins. o  
little bird! i meant to be as brief as you

but your chirp posits a syntactical hullabaloo

The mention of purpose signals an on-coming eulogy or elegy for his late young friend. Turning this corner, the poem appears to find its way into the matter of death with which it is pre-occupied. The intentional commemorative aspect of the pome is cast in a paradoxically light, even playful tone. Eschewing the ominous or plangent chords more befitting to the funerary subject, Kiyooka's text refuses solemnity and proceeds instead in a kind of celebration of Nichol's poetic gifts. Like the bird – "this comma preening itself / in mid-air" – the dead poet still "conjugates [his] own vernacular" outside the strictures of formal necessity or even literary politesse. As it says,

bp gone  
and left an unfettered  
alphabet

Kiyooka pays homage to bpNichol the poet. Rather than focusing on the achievements of the man, Barrie Nichol, the pome moves around the issues of personal loss, grief, and sorrow. It picks up on *bp* as a poetic entity, engaging in a linguistic drift that sets in motion a play reminiscent of Nichol's fascination with his own name – a fascination that is at play throughout Nichol's poetry and especially *The Martyrology*. Kiyooka's homage returns to a "letteral" language that is bound to be familiar to readers of Nichol's "life long poem" (who, it should be noted, were a primary/initial audience for Kiyooka's pome).<sup>3</sup>

Fashioning an image of the poet of *The Martyrology* within his own hagiographic universe – at once a system of discovered Saints, such as St. And & St. Reat, and a record of influence or homage to St. Ein – Kiyooka reworks the parameters of Nichol's "life long poem," extending it beyond the confines of the writer's physical or historical life. Despite the obvious conven-

tionality of such homage – i.e., of alluding to key elements of the honoured poet's oeuvre – Kiyooka's nod to Nichol's *The Martyrology* takes on an important difference. *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* distinguishes itself by being about much more than the tragic passing of bpNichol or the singularity of his work. In fact, by inserting these funerary musings into the cultural-historical moment, his reflections on Redress, Kiyooka's eulogy begs questions of positionality and subjectivity. If we choose to read this pome, as I am doing here, as an attempt to reconcile CanLit with a shifting political sphere or cultural situation, then we need to come to terms with the relationship between the momentousness of the two events chronicled in the pome and the spatial or social contexts in which they are given meaning. Nichol's death provides a counterpoint to the ostensible triumph of Redress; within the abstract frameworks of a national polity, these two valences give way to the intersection of distinct cultural-historical narratives, exposing a set of ideological presumptions that contradict a more civil discourse. In responding to the death of bpNichol in the context of the government's capitulation to the demand for Redress from the Japanese Canadian community, in overlapping the accidental tragedy of an individual's death on what could seem to be the logical closure of a particularly difficult and objectionable chapter in the history of the nation state, this pome provides a powerful context in which to theorize the politics of contemporary cultural production.

It is important to notice how, in Kiyooka's pome, the death of the poet takes on shades of the transience of language itself. We might say that in rereading the "letteral" presence of the poet en passant, Kiyooka opens up the bedrock of language itself as Nichol and his followers conceive it. Broaching the somewhat controversial subject of the politics of Nichol's poetic, *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* resituates the alphabet (and with it bp)

within a long history of culture, not before it. Challenging Eurocentric notions of language and the Roman alphabet as somehow existing a priori to thought, Kiyooka's image of an alphabet in flux, in which letters "molt and die" – like the "birds" falling from the trees, wires, buildings to rot in the gutter underfoot – unbinds history from a narrative of progress or the accumulation of order. The alphabet, like the traditions of culture and poetry beholden to it, has yet to be written; the plasticity of purpose ultimately refuses its retrospective grammar.<sup>4</sup> As the letteral count might wane, from twenty-six letters to twenty-four as *b* and *p* fly off, so too do the "great poets" "molt and die" beyond the kenning of new generations of readers. Attuned, as literary critics are, to recognizing rupture, cataclysm, and crisis, our work often remains oblivious to the quotidian flow of writers and texts. The minute details or poetic particularities that infuse Kiyooka's writing with much of its force are lost beneath the labour of classification and exegesis. And yet his writing continues as a reminder of the somewhat strange circumstances of favour that place a "bpNichol," or for that matter a "Roy K. Kiyooka," before us – circumstances that may well be as (un)remarkable as a change in seasons.

Justifying this strangely gleeful opening perhaps, the pome returns to the moment of Nichol's lamentable passing –

bp gone  
and left an open-ended  
discourse

This time making the quantum leap from letter to discourse, the narrative circles more closely to the edifice of literature itself. Read one way, bp's passing seems to reflect a sense of possibility, his legacy "an open-ended / discourse" we might move into. On this level, the passage from "bp gone" to

discourse appears to be a kind of counter-point to the somewhat fatalistic stanzas preceding it; from loss we arrive at the presence of “mirth” –

this verb  
prostrating itself  
in verse  
praises the realm  
of mirth (278)

The solemnity of the eulogy is brought down to the realm of mirth; hinging as it does on the line between act and action, performance and script, i.e., between speaking and have been spoken, writing and literature, “discourse” becomes “this verb.” Throwing down “in verse,” it arrives at a fundamental dialectic with which this poem engages: that between the past and the performative present with which it is intertwined.

In returning to the operative verb in Kiyooka’s “bp gone / and left,” it is possible to read this statement against the grain. The size and intricacies of his poetry suggest that Nichol’s legacy is certainly “an open-ended / discourse”; in fact, many of his readers have made such claims. However, read dialectically, i.e., against the history of an emergent cultural discourse in which “open-ended” resonates with other positive “claims” about the anti-authoritarian nature of language itself, the terrible irony of Nichol’s death is that it is embroiled in a re-activation of the popular post-structuralist buzz phrase “the death of the author.” The coincidence of the historical “death” with the theoretical “death” jams the gears of many of the popular conceptions of Nichol’s writing as paradigmatically anti-authoritarian. In the face of personal loss, the death of the author takes on a much more finite and theoretically complex signification.<sup>5</sup> So we might also read “left” as having departed from; thus Nichol’s departure from that which is on-going or open ended suggests an aporia in contemporary critical discourse. Entering his-



tory, the death of the person overshadows the mirth Nichol's poetry unleashes. Without history, without authority, without the symbolic structures against which poetic discourse might advance its subversive intent, the playful poem, Nichol's postmodern "bio-text," is not much more than fancy. Positioned as it is next to prose musings on the significance of redress, Kiyooka's lyric implicates *The Martyrology* in the very master narratives from which it was supposed to have departed, and with it a central discursive trajectory of contemporary CanLit.

In placing bpNichol's "open-ended" discourse in a socio-historical context that is bound to the systematic foreclosure of the rights of Japanese Canadians, Kiyooka's *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* constructs a complex conception of history and historiography, which in turn becomes the subject of a poetic discourse. Marking both the death of the poet and official recognition of the state's transgressions vis-à-vis its citizens of colour, this poem refuses one of the fundamental differences in contemporary CanLit, the difference between whiteness and racialized identity formations. It entangles this self-reflexive moment of CanLit in the development and deployment of an emergent multicultural nation-state and the on-going machinations of a racist colonialism. The death of a white poet coincides with the birth of a Japanese Canadian subject, or at least, this is one way to read the re-inscription of a hyphenated "Japanese Canadian" identity into the official record. In as much as Redress enacts an official recognition of racial difference, not as a natural fact, but as a social process, this re-articulation of "Japanese Canadians" within the body politic as legitimately (or officially) aggrieved subjects or citizens not only represents a significant development in the recognition of the rights of racialized identity formations in general but also provides an opening for a radical intervention in the construction of

whiteness. If, as I have argued in the previous chapter, national identity depends on the “naturalization” of what is supposed to be an un-raced subject, the construction of the white subject tends to be taken for granted within mainstream discourse. While historians have traced the ideological underwriting of Canada’s early attempts to form itself as a “white nation,” racism within the discourses has often remained a thing of the past. However, the problem of racialized identity formations, which I am suggesting comes to light in Kiyooka’s juxtaposition of these two different discourses (one literary the other historical/sociological), works both ways. Faced with the prospects of the emergence of a racialized citizen, occasioned in part by state legislation, such as Redress and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, and in part by the anti-racist work of various racialized communities, white politicians and academics are left to contend with the power and privilege they have been afforded historically. But Kiyooka’s careful conflation of discourses smudges the line between a “race” neutral CanLit and Canada’s fraught history of “race” assumptions and cultural hegemony.

In Kiyooka’s pome, poetry or literature are seen to be complicit with the workings of power. As commentary on the role and responsibility of the artist vis-à-vis the public sphere, *October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* recasts “race” as a key concept with which CanLit might yet come to terms. Juxtaposing the historical internment of Japanese Canadian subjects and/or the government’s encroachment on the lives of a group of interpellated citizens through the mobilization of discourse, Kiyooka’s writing not only contests the liberationist rhetoric of a “postmodern Canadian literature” but also takes readers back into the unresolved dialectics of modernism. It en-folds us in the not yet moribund processes and politics of modernization.



Thus, the pome simultaneously unsteadies certainty vis-à-vis the conventions of mourning and of celebration. Because it does not respect various conventions of occasion or propriety, its focus on the convergence of these two categorically separate events edges on the inappropriate; it blurs the lines of ownership. The historical coincidence of these two events – 1/ the sense of loss occasioned by the untimely death of his younger friend and poet, bpNichol, and 2/ the Federal Government's long overdue recognition of its own legal and financial responsibility regarding the uprooting and internment of Japanese Canadians – seems to take the poet back into a emotionally difficult, even traumatic, space in which the personal and the political fail to remain distinct, each encroaching on the other.

Yet in allowing these two events to reverberate off each other, in borrowing from Nichol's bequeathed poetic as a way into the political discourses of social justice and fit remuneration, Kiyooka does not simply suggest comparisons or similarities between these two emotionally charged moments of communal significance. The fact that the pome never reconciles its two discursive strains keeps it open questions of fit, in a manner demanding an awareness of one's somewhat uncomfortable position in relation to the private communities to which and from which the pome might be said to speak.

Rather than allowing readers to transcend the various barriers separating us from each other, the pome proposes a series of walls:

Walls that plunder midnight's roseate dreams  
Walls that benumb our bestial hearts  
Walls that startle us Walls that sleep us  
Walls haunted by twigs mud timber uncut stone  
Walls of Lascaux's birds beasts & hunters

Neither oblivious to the fortitude and longevity of these walls, nor able to penetrate them, language, in the guise of the "The Alphabet" becomes a

testament to them:

The Alphabet climbs the distaff walls of timbrel-time  
The Alphabet declines times hallowed conjuration

Walls of perdurable eternity  
Walls of our acrimonious estate

Walls of compacted mud  
Walls of scorched mirth

Walls of abomination  
Wall of putrefaction

Walls of unsurpassing black  
Walls of blinding whiteness

Walls of unnamed abstentions  
Walls of cauterized syntax

Walls of perfidious vernaculars  
Walls of paradisiacal intent

Walls of our dumbfound abundance  
Walls of our penurious estate (284)

Language in the form of poetry bears the traces of this myriad of parsimonious constructs. The proverbial writing on the wall describes the highest intentions and lowliest actualities. The poet concludes this section with a Blakean "Vision"; suggesting a connection between his own particular brand of prophetic writing and Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,"

Kiyooka writes:

In a Vision I was given under the tall fir tree in  
Charmain's garden: The walls of the Holy City were built of  
Bricks, each clay brick shaped and placed by hand.  
Each brick bearing a fabled Signature. Let the Dead turn into  
Mortar. Let the Living inscribe their Names on the  
Pentecostal wall. In that fiery Vision I was given the walls  
Of the Holy City were built on top of catacombs. Now  
All you can trace of its earthen remains is the handiwork of  
A forlorn God caressing an armful of syllibant stones.  
Moan moan to your heart's content, the wind said, burnishing  
A thicket full of broken bricks. In my sleeplessness  
I've been haunted by a vision I'd been given under a fiery tree  
In that unmitigated nightmare – all the clay bricks  
We built the wall of our Holy City with turned a tumultuous

Wind into a vast encampment of squatters' shacks.  
And there layer by layer all the bricks bearing our signature/s  
Re-enact a hazardous C o v e n a n t . (283-4)

Reading this Vision allegorically, we are left to speculate on the identity of the signatories. Presumably the "our" here is that of the Japanese Canadians invoked in the colophon. If so, the final "hazardous C o v e n a n t" to which this Vision speaks might be read to suggest not only the Redress agreement but also the legislation of a nation. Thus the plural "signature/s" – the absolute differences between signatories – point toward an insurmountable difference between the parties involved. This gesture might in fact be read as pointing outward toward the larger social sphere of citizenship into which one community enters, simultaneously appearing and disappearing before the pleasure the state.

In the context of this pome, Redress is a highly ambivalent document. For the poet-narrator, the government's willingness to come to terms with "those of us who were, to all intents and purposes, so recently dispossessed" bespeaks the possibility of a terrible debt. He writes, "perhaps / our next act-of-intransigence will consist of our taking / a stand beside them, for holy reparation's sake" (282). In this pome, Kiyooka marks a powerful critique of the emergent Multiculturalism, choosing to read the apparent enfranchisement of the Japanese Canadian community against the grain of First Nations' rights to entitlement and/or any similar reparations. He takes issue with "the whole Pedagogy of the 80s" and what he calls a "secular/ specular ideology – that will shaft itself on its own / empowerment /s" (282). Invoking the question of Genocide,<sup>6</sup> i.e., telescoping the present moment of nationalism into the larger history of colonialism and the systematic expropriation of aboriginal lands and title, Kiyooka turns the moment of celebration back on itself. Despite the state's apparent willingness to recognize the

issues of social justice and equality across cultures, in his discussion of it, “our redress” is riddled with the difficult questions of tokenism and selling out. The poet-narrator commands the reader/s to

ask a norival morrisseau how fire water burned the angel  
out of his throat, ask a noel wuttunee about epithets . . .

This spurs him on to wonder

what about their heartless immolation on reservations?  
what about all their aboriginal entitlements?

what about all the gone Indians in a computer megalopolis?  
what about the unimpeachable “Indian” in ourselves? (282)

In the heat of this polemic – for at this point in the pome it is as if Kiyooka has dropped all poetic pretensions – Powell St. is still a site in which the quotidian crimes of capitalist greed and social engineering play themselves out, only now it is allowed to do so under the guise of multiculturalism:

... is it any wonder that the heart of “japtown” goes on being  
pisst and shat upon. Is it any of our business erstwhile  
Canadians that the unsigned bottom-line belongs to all those we  
just brushed past with downcast eyes waiting in the drizzle for  
their meager sandwich. Those who unlike us have very little to  
be dispossessed of: those to whom our “Redress” isn’t even a  
bread and butter issue. Is it any wonder when I think of the eko/  
logical ravages wrought by our vociferous use of petro/chemical  
I tend to think of our Redress as a token, political stratagem:  
like, let’s get this “minority” off our back so we can get on with  
the establishment’s business. (282-3)

Rather than singing praises of multiculturalism and allowing the pome to get caught up in the bonhomie of historical moment, or its grief for that matter, *October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* remains vigilant to the ignominy of complicity.

It is possible to argue that Kiyooka’s engagement in the quotidian concurrence of historical events demands a more or less unflinching glimpse

into the social expectations and/or political assumptions around which such officially sanctioned acts of remembering take place. The scent of the poet's "untidy nostrums" lingers as a reminder of material differences constituting and constituted by these two established communities – the "naturalized," hyphenated and renovated Canadians and the aboriginal communities upon which the wealth and stature of the mainstream depends. As the incense of mourning seeps into jubilation, the unholy stench of victory and commerce – the smoking conflagration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the wafts of napalm from the forests of North Vietnam and Northern BC, the nitrous fumes from the still burning pulp mills, strip mines, and chemical dumps – permeates the air. These diverse, seemingly distant materialities, soured as they are by disparity and the failed magnanimity of an emergent new World Order, do not merely enter Kiyooka's poetry as represented; rather they provide the key context within which it demands to be read. What I mean is that Kiyooka's description of the local presupposes that a national sphere be figured in an international flow of cultures and capital. In placing these two different rhetorical occasions next to each other, Kiyooka's text resists certain readings of either event; intersecting one community (CanLit) with another (Japanese Canadian) the poem enacts a reintegration of political identities and/or cultural contexts that draws attention to irreconcilable differences of location and position in its readers. The "borderblur" conditioned by an aesthetics of juxtaposition contaminates discursive or disciplinary purity.



## 2.

### MATTER IN HAND: KIYOOKA'S "MINDFUL" PARTICULARS

"Culture" has ceased (if ever it was – which I doubt) to be a decorative addendum to the "hard world" of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world. The word is now as "material" as the world. (Hall, "New Times" 128)

Behind this tree-braille on the slivered moon-pear of a page is his "screech" and behind that some solitary hollering of the pome poem as proper, as in *proprio*, vessel for any world preserved jar of memory keeps listening for. (Wah, "PEARAGRAPHS 97)

The issue is not one of coming to an end and starting over. In fact, if we look back on the relatively short history of CanLit, it becomes clear that ending is a strength, something "we" seem to be good at. Grounded as the discourse is in the tropes and ideologies of nationalism and liberalism, the prospect of being finished with the past and moving on toward a brighter future – of charting new territories and surviving in wild spaces beyond the pale of "our" ancestral cultures and the knowledge or wisdom these might have otherwise imparted – has had a powerful, lasting effect. The conceits of beginning again, I would argue, are built into the mainstream culturalisms upon which literary studies in the country are founded. But the avoidance of debt and the responsibilities of the establishment cannot be simply willed away. The posture of youthful exuberance and commitment to change is difficult if not impossible to maintain. The self-congratulatory notes that run through CanLit and into the newer multicultural enterprise become strained. An addiction to the "untidy nostrums" with which cultural nationalists have been able to fold difference into (Canadian) unity come at a cost. But what cost?

As my reading of Kiyooka's *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* in has suggested, the concomitant developments of social justice and nationalism, hinging as they do on an entirely unreliable Multiculturalism, continue to pose problems of retribution and a more careful or mindful sharing of material wealth and access to resources – which as we have learned are always already cultural and economic.<sup>7</sup> At stake are precisely the issues of mourning and melancholia that haunt Kiyooka's remarkable long pome. If it is improbable or imperceptive to wonder aloud about the proper protocols for mourning the death of both the poet-friend and the death of idealism, it still might be necessary to learn to grieve, or more properly to respect the grief of others as a fundamental aspect of the national culture with which we work. Without an awareness of the concrete walls the both construct and restrict language as social space, reading will only ever continue to begin again. While this eternal recurrence has been comforting to CanLit – witness the popularity and growth of postmodern Canadian literature as an industrial enterprise – it is bound to perpetuate the some old social violences and to justify new ones.

Thus what is central to *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* is not simply what Kiyooka juxtaposes or how his discourse revitalizes CanLit through a radical rereading of Nichol's book of saints, but more importantly the performative context he enters with this poem. If, as I have suggested, the paragram marks a crucial opening for the logical connection between the two streams of the pome, it does so through a gesture toward the moment or act of composition. In Kiyooka's writing, like Nichol's, this compositional moment provides an inherent logic rather than an imposed one. Looking back across the scope of Kiyooka's incomparable oeuvre, one might notice an increasing interest in the occurrence of the accidental – even “unsightly” – within the

context of a visually or aesthetically challenging composition. A key aspect of his later work, especially his photography and literary texts, is the coincidence of the highly “personal” and the public, as we have seen in *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*. In fact, I might go so far as to argue that the handmade test forms a powerful element of its critique. The juxtaposing of various materials and/or narratives that might on first glance seem awkward or inappropriate challenge readers and viewers to constantly re-examine their own relationship with the material text. When one is holding a chapbook published in a run of 40 (*All Amazed in the Runnels of His 60 Winters; October's Piebald Skies*), 11 (*Struck from the Heat of a Cold December Sun*), 30 (*An April Fool's Divertimento*), “26 plus 9” (*Gotenyama*), or 21 (*A February Postscript: to October's Piebald Skies*), one is prone to think about the routes it has travelled – the hands it has passed through. Before it was “collected” into the posthumous edition of his writing *Pacific Windows, Wheels*, which is arguably one of Kiyooka's major poetic undertakings and achievements, existed only in a manuscript form and was for all intents and purposes lost to the archive. Reading it now (in either form), we gain a powerful sense of both the poet's own relationship to language and the larger context in which a text of this sort might circulate.<sup>8</sup> If his earlier texts display a keen sense of the text as an aesthetic object – indeed I would include *Nevertheless These Eyes*, *StoneDGloves*, *Transcanada Letters*, *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine*, and *Pear Tree Pomes* amongst the most visually appealing books of poetry published in Canada – these latter chapbooks take the issue of the material text one step further. In fact, I am hesitant to refer to these small run publications as “chapbooks” at all because the term suggests a kind of valuing that infuses the work with somewhat less public importance or social stature. Granted such “ephemera” might and does often take on

monetary value with the passing of time, that value is usually only of significance to the collector or expert, and is usually a direct reflection of the “success” of the artist’s other work across a much larger public sphere. Thus Kiyooka’s decision to work at home with his canon copier and not to publish another book after *Pear Tree Pomes* in 1987 is remarkable. When we consider that in excess of half of his output as a poet was self-published in this way and that this writing represents the work of a “mature” poet who had been nominated for a Governor General’s Award for literature and named to the Order of Canada for his work as an artist, the problem of reading Roy Kiyooka’s work, as opposed to that of Daphne Marlatt or Michael Ondaatje, is clearly that of thinking through CanLit as a social space. While all three writers did at one time move through similar publishing circles clustered around Coach House in Toronto and Talonbooks in Vancouver, it is important to note a significant divergence. As Ondaatje and Marlatt’s careers have more or less followed the trajectory of literary success, beginning with small press publications and gradually reaching the point where their work enters into the publishing mainstream, Kiyooka’s goes in precisely the reverse direction. Contesting both the cultural logic and rhetoric of inclusion that is and was supposed to go with multiculturalism, the path of Kiyooka’s writing is one of increasing isolation.

However, rather than ascribing to a much causality to a particular event or set of events, rather than getting ourselves too caught up in a narrative of époque and transition, which will put us back into a narrative of ending, we might look at the progression within a much broader sense of both Kiyooka’s poetry and his artistic production in particular. The commodification and demarcation of textual production or creative output across various rational boundaries is something that is contested through-

out his work. When we forget that the poetry prefigures and speaks to the photography or that the poetry itself is underwritten by Kiyooka's studies and experimentation in visual art, we elide an ever-present aspect of the work. Crossing disciplines and mixing media is not something that Kiyooka's discovers a particular moment in his career; rather, I would argue, it is a problem and ideal that his work moves toward and explores more fully over the years. As Kiyooka says in *October's Piebald Skies*, he had become "sick of 'ideologies' and 'genres'" (282). But this sickness itself becomes a driving force. The simple problem of identification, whether or not we want to see him as painter, photographer, poet, musician or performer, is an integral part of the message and the praxis of reading it proposes.

To contextualize his long-standing dis/ease with the political beliefs and formal structures of Canadian arts and letters, we might look at Kiyooka's idiosyncratic *Transcanada Letters*. This is a text that draws much of its aesthetic and rhetorical power from the use of recycled personal letters, grant applications, arguments with publishers, editors etc. to narrate, often implicitly, the artist-poet's uphill battle to secure a spiritual and/or material base from which to work as a "Canadian" artist. Chronicling his travels back and forth across the country from Halifax to Long Beach on the West Coast of Vancouver Island, Kiyooka's poetic essays, essays in poetics, or plain old fashion epistles (depending upon one's preference) chart a historical journey behind the scenes of artistic and literary production. The sheer heft of this text and the apparently haphazard organization of the book make it difficult to reconcile with the conventions of travel narrative, long pome, and personal chronicle. While the pattern of the writer's life provides the obvious skeleton for the book, the truly remarkable collection of personal correspondences and archival documents overwhelm the possibility of any kind of narrative thread

beyond the most basic or banal assertion of facts. As reader/s sorts through the various details of Kiyooka's existence as an artist – his letters to friends, family, lovers, curators, hiring committees; invoices requesting payment, accommodations, or reimbursement; packing lists and catalogues – we are privy to a host of insights on both the creative process and the community interactions that they both require and perform. In addition to letters to a long list of writers and artists including “Doris/ Jack” Shadbolt, “Phyllis” Webb, “S h e i l a” Watson, “Frank D[avey],” “Michael” Ondaatje, “daphne” Marlatt, and a host of others, the letters provide insight into the economic and social realities of the cultural politics of the period.

In one characteristically remarkable letter (dated “12. 22<sup>nd</sup>. '68”) Kiyooka begins, “Dear Peg and Jim / let me a prairie boy tell you abt snow even this grey Montreale snow” (np). Then he appears to get side-tracked:

... or shall I tell you abt how  
our lottery has drawn blanko and to make up for  
the lost millions our property taxes will go up  
an average 23% I-N-F-L-A-T-I-O-N is when you cant  
save a fucken centavo even if your income exceeds  
10thou (np)

But again he changes tracks. He writes, “to hell with the snow” and then launches into a discussion of protests at the university he's working at because, as he says,

... I want to tell you HOW  
the Blacks at Sir George have finger'd their Bio/  
Prof viz “racism” Now we're having a closed-circuit  
re-lay-showing the academic tribunal how  
they are trying to prove the charge-of-racism, etc.  
every last one of us is involved: ...

Suddenly the weather becomes a statement on the situation at hand, and we see again Kiyooka's re-appropriation a favourite “Canadian” trope to spell out

his own frustrating sense of complicity with the system upon which he is financially dependent:

... I was going to tell you all abt snow  
but have ended up telling you the Black/s what  
a prairie born Jap-boy knows abt racisms and other  
tenuous demarcations based on the ubiquitous rites-  
of-colour ...

It becomes apparent that these three issues – the snow, the harassment charges at Sir George Williams, and Kiyooka's experience of Canadian-born "racisms" – are all tied into a fourth, financial hardship. The letter carries on, "I have applied for a / yrs leave without pay and I wld if I cld pray that / the C.C. [Canada Council] our Medici might bless me." After recounting Kiyooka's horrific experience working "each winter during the war / on the killing floor at Swift Canadian in Edmonton," his pleasure at "Michael O's" review of *Nevertheless these Eyes* and his own process of revisions, Kiyooka concludes,

... its snowing again my white  
van is heapt with it, again let 'it' then tell you all  
abt itself how the very night hides under its silences –  
its awesome white silences

Hanging, unpunctuated half way down the white page, the letter seems almost to taper off into the very "white silences" of which it speaks.

How does one reconcile Kiyooka's clear sense of himself as a racialized subject lost in the predominantly white spaces of a nascent CanLit? Given the date of the letter and the 30 plus years that have passed, there is a desire to read the vacuum of which this pome speaks as a thing of the past. After the identity battles of the 1980s and 1990s, critics might want to list this "silence" amongst the other silences that have been heard. And yet Kiyooka himself has not been silent, nor have others of his generation. Throughout

the *Transcanada Letters* and throughout his other works, this “white silence,” which is markedly different from the silences of women, of Japanese Canadians, of other communities of colour, of First Nations people so popular in the markets of mainstream multiculturalism, returns to haunt the progressive literary audience. How does one read images like *Hoarfrost* (1959-60) or those of the *Zodiac Series* (1965) outside the discourses of racism and protest? How is it that these images are relegated to the obscure networks of friendship and mutual trust? I’m lead to wonder whether Kiyooka’s passing reference to Ondaatje is simply that, or is it something of the counter currents of CanLit that come to be subsumed in the whiteout of a supposedly multicultural '80s?

In fact, we might argue that the concern with the relationship between the private and political, the awkward aesthetics of the quotidian in which the two coincide, is central to the anti-racism Kiyooka’s work proposed and continues to propose. Turning to the last of his official books, *The Pear Tree Pomes*, it is apparent that Kiyooka’s sense of poetry as a form of knowledge and communication imagines a counterpoint to the relatively static views of poetic invention upon which literary studies, even those with an interest in so-called avant-garde poetry, are based. One lonely pear tree “as old as the oldest house on / the block” (7), the book and the pomes it holds attest to an older sense of artistic and/or creative endeavour, rooted not in passing fancies of the young but routed in the settlements and migrations of families and communities. Kiyooka’s pomes, the fallen and bruised fruit of this tree that stands as a testament not only to the cycle of seasons, but also to the almost forgotten dreams of another community in whose place the poet finds himself. Throughout the pomes, the internal order of a household, “this small





participation. The reader or receiver of Kiyooka's often epistolary pomes tends to be placed in the somewhat awkward position of having the work refer directly to a particular historical place or time in which the reader/receiver him/herself might be an active agent. While it may be true that many "postmodern" texts appear to highlight or reframe the material context of their production and reproduction, Kiyooka's sense of the cultural object and, more importantly to my argument, his sense of the social space through which these objects circulate and are given value – and in fact become objects – presupposes an entirely different relationship between reader/s and writer, performer and audience/s. Unlike the texts of Marlatt or Ondaatje, which as I have demonstrated engage in a similar topological blurring of the boundaries between production and reproduction, or between inside and outside of the text, but which ultimately situate themselves within the industrial machinations of the publishing industry, Kiyooka's work is much more self-consciously constructed to subvert the conventions of print capitalism.

Both *Pear Tree Pomes* and *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*, incorporate a specific audience or literary circle—the self-styled “avant-garde” associated with Coach House Press and an overlapping or cross-fertilization of writing communities in Vancouver and Toronto. This audience, who is both addressed in the texts and is implicated in their production, holds within it a particular knowledge base that is elemental to their unfolding narrative, and it is also held within their critique. One might argue that the commitment to and investigation of specific branches of contemporary poetics allow the texts to rise above their ostensible subject matter. Namely, Kiyooka's experimentation with the ideals of “language poetry” and an emergent feminist praxis of “writing the body” save these pomes from the quagmire of lovelorn angst. *Pear Tree Pomes* takes a rather unlikely position at

the intersection or, better, divergence of these two distinct yet highly charged discourse formations against which such “self” indulgent writing would be suspect, to say the least. And yet the highly personal subject matter of this long pome raises certain questions about the proprietary nature of the private and/or personal as they relate to creative practice. In essence, Kiyooka's choice of focus, the dis-union of a couple of relatively well known poets, enables the pomes to be read as commentary on the politics of contemporary “postmodern” poetics. However, in so doing, these pomes critique the limits of “language poetry” that are laid bear with the emergence of contemporary cultural politics, or more specifically race politics.

Furthermore, these pomes interrogate the assumptions of contemporary feminist theories of language and identity. Though Kiyooka's explicit references to Marlatt's sexuality, to the fact that she is “leaving [him] for a woman,” do not sit comfortably with the rhetorical tropes of essential gender difference and would have placed the pomes in opposition to the divisionary dogma of 1980s feminist CanLit, they do provide an important, early intervention into the emerging debates of feminism and gender politics from a racialized perspective.

The fact that Marlatt and Kiyooka move in the same literary circles, that their writing was published by the same press that published *Pear Tree Poems*, Coach House Press, make it very difficult to separate the narrative of separation from the literary context in which it is being played out. As a carefully constructed cultural artefact, these pomes give readers only the most cursory glimpses into the private lives of two people. In representing or attempting to represent the private sexual lives of two individuals, however, the pomes bring a confluence of sexual, racial, and gendered differences to

bear on the self-reflexive gaze of CanLit. At a key moment, Kiyooka reflects on all the people listening in on the pomes:

thinking about all the eavesdroppers

e /g the poets! the birds up in the pear tree monitoring  
the daily round-of-awe for a small pome's sake:

thinking about a 'you' i once knew and your preserved pears  
" " about a small 'me' and my pitiless fruit  
" " about all the frost-bitten pears hugging its hearth

the old midden in unsurpassing rhetorick proclaimed -  
**I COMPOST THE LANGUAGE-TREE:  
TAKE YOUR CLUES FROM ME! (51)**

Thus Kiyooka intertwines the primary object of the pomes, this "‘you’ i once knew," with a plurality of "poets" eavesdropping on "the daily round – of-awe" – his heartbroken musings. In so doing, the somewhat ambivalent reference of this second person-plural pronoun, the "you," both situates the lost lover in a specific context and elides her individuality. Further complicating this conflation of referents and/or contexts, the fact that the object is held in quotation marks suggests a somewhat ironic commentary on the relationship between poetry and speech.

To borrow one of the key terms Kiyooka returns to in *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*, we might say that his "slant vernacular" continues to infuse the cultural artefacts he so carefully produced. In learning to read Kiyooka, one is learning to read elements of the handmade as conscious gestures toward the subversion of the aesthetic object and/or the commodification of art. What appears accidental or haphazard could just as easily be intentional: For example, chemical (fixer) stains on the photo of his daughter in "a portrait of three generations" begs consideration.<sup>9</sup> The fact that the stain would have most likely been apparent as soon as the photo was dry and would have therefore been obvious before it was framed suggests

something of its longevity, or lack thereof. Literally speaking, the poet is disappearing with each exposure to the light. Against the archival concerns prevalent amongst “fine art” photographers,<sup>10</sup> Kiyooka’s print might be read as an entirely different type of statement. Or, in another case, the photo sequence/poem focusing on the fall of the pear tree (part of “Pacific Windows”), Kiyooka uses orange dynamo tape to affix the text to the space between the photos. This patently low-tech gesture might appear makeshift or tentative until one takes into account the time and effort involved in using a dynamo gun to write anything of this length. The irony is that the time taken to make the object is inversely proportional to the archival permanence of the piece.

Reading these two aspects of Kiyooka’s writing – the handmade and the archival – as a vital aspect of its critique of cultural nationalism, Scott Toguri McFarlane has argued that the particularities of Kiyooka’s craft challenge the hegemony of Western epistemology. Kiyooka’s engagement with both the history of the nation and the historical context of his own creative acts places Kiyooka beyond the scope of contemporary cultural studies of a metropolitan West. In his critique of CanLit and the dangerous appropriation of Kiyooka’s work into the archive of institutionalized studies of culture, McFarlane offers an important intervention into the fields of literary and art historical scholarship simultaneously. Taking the dominant trope of Kiyooka’s *StoneDGLoves* to be the unravelling or decomposition of the cultural object itself, McFarlane attempts to locate the highly problematic relationship between intellectual labour or property and the almost forgotten physical or manual labour of the Japanese labourers to whom the discarded gloves belonged. Demonstrating Kiyooka’s complex relationship to the ownership, authority invested in, and archive of his work, McFarlane unpacks the

colophon, which according to Roy Miki is a “characteristic” element of Kiyooka’s poetry.

In attempting to work with some of the fundamental problems of literary modernism and the notion of an artistic “project,” McFarlane’s discussion raises questions about the boundaries between various genres and disciplines germane to a text that many readers would recognize as post-modern in its stylistic and semiotic playfulness. Foregrounding issues of race and the dubious identification of Kiyooka as a Japanese Canadian writer, McFarlane’s paper turns the discussion back on the literary academics gathering to consider Kiyooka’s work in order to examine the politics of knowledge and the unacknowledged claims and rights of ownership. McFarlane discusses the juxtaposition of a photographic image, a fraying knot, and the author’s statement of copyright:

photos &/or poem can be reproduced  
by anyone – for whatever reason, copy-  
rights, like worn out gloves, are  
obsolete  
only the imagination is real.

Reading against the grain of dominant approaches to contemporary Canadian literature, McFarlane reads Kiyooka’s apparent desire to waive his authorial copyright not simply as a license for the reader – “anyone” – to lift – for “whatever reason” – the words and images of the text. Instead, this gesture is taken as a creative opening, but one that according to McFarlane is shot through with political responsibility.

In the context of the poem from which it is taken, the series of poems and photos of *StonedGloves*, this colophon and the assertion of the end of copyrights it proffers comprise an ethical demand on the reader/republisher, “anyone” who re-prints the poems, for “whatever” *publication* purposes. In

this sense, Kiyooka's gesture of authorial abdication, the gesture of opening the text onto untold possibilities, draws the reader back into the material relations upon which or out of which literature depends.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of Kiyooka's history as a Japanese Canadian artist sent to represent Canada at the Osaka 1970 World Exposition, this authorial gesture toward and the subversion of one of the basic tenets of print capitalism is a refusal to accept the divisions of labour by which the reader may assume a position outside the realm of capitalist labour power. In refusing to conform to the usual conventions of literary re/production and to protect his own material interests, or more accurately the interests of the publisher, Kiyooka's gesture refuses the division between artistic production (the writing of the text) and consumption. It is a refusal which, as McFarlane's suggests, negates the logic of cultural identity – an objective space on a grid of genetic codings – and posits instead a series of questions around the assumed here/there of national culture – not simply what these codings might be said to refer to but also how they are used or given value within a system of labour divisions and cultural divides.<sup>6</sup>

The specificity of Kiyooka's identity as a racialized subject within the political and cultural space of the nation are intertwined in the artistic creation of the text of *StoneDGloves* and its material production signified by the non-standard colophon. The invitation to duplicate and redistribute either images or poem highlights the social nature of the text's production. In drawing attention to the normative structures of modern print capitalism, Kiyooka's text speaks to a plurality of readers who inhabit a variety of temporal-spatial nexus anterior as well as exterior to the writing. Arguably this is precisely function of any colophon; however, as we have seen elsewhere, Kiyooka's gesture connecting the textual (the photo-poem) and the extra-

textual (its use) refuses the carefully determined differences between the intrinsic literary value of the text (its ability to reflect the individual genius or artist-poet) and its extrinsic socio-economic value. Challenging the conventions of the book trade, Kiyooka's colophon crosses the line between ownership of the text as intellectual property, registered by copyright, and its existence as a common space of social creation. In moving outside the strict spatial divisions of the book trade, transgressing the conventions by which literary texts are organised to reflect the interests of producer and consumer, *StoneDGLoves* provides readers with a way of thinking through the various inter-relations and boundary crossings it thematizes: the strict divisions between medium, genre, and geography that allow the subdivisions of cultural and literary knowledge that constitute a field such as CanLit.

Put another way, we might argue that Kiyooka's book lengthy photopoem is created outside or alongside the idealized exchange of culture by which the reader plays the role of consumer and the writer producer. In refusing the copyright conventions, *StoneDGLoves* makes apparent the actual space of the performance of the poems. Furthermore, when we consider that it was a catalogue to his installation at the National Gallery, "StoneDGLoves: Alms for Soft Palms" (1970), we might even go so far as to say that this authorial gesture enacts a refusal of the originary nature of the event, thereby undermining the momentous nature of the actual or institutional performance of the work. As a metonym of re- or dis-orientation, *StoneDGLoves* points to a particular re-conceptualisation of literature as a spatial praxis. The inscription of copyright becomes fraught with the very reality it attempts to safeguard against. Reading against the grain of the conventional colophon, we might say that in attempting to guard against the misuse, abuse, or even



theft of the owner's intellectual property, copyright actually makes the re-appropriation of the literary or cultural material conceivable as such.

Behind this digression into but a small aspect of Kiyooka's text is my hypothesis that one way of addressing the emergence of contemporary Canadian writing out of or through the remains of Canadian Literature – the emergency facing its practitioners – is to develop a more thorough understanding of the complex social relations by which it has come into being, starting with the relationship between literature and the cultural practices with which it is related. To return once more to the problem posed by Kiyooka's *StoneDGLoves*, we might think of the text as an explicit resistance to and critique of the juridical powers of the nation-state and the disciplinary impetus they help (at least in part) to found. While the usual understanding of copyright, as a form of patenting or otherwise safeguarding intellectual property for the owner (author or publisher), is dependent on normative notions of history (an original copy of the manuscript or image is registered at a certain point in time after which reproduction is bound by legal or contractual system of rights), the power of this historical assumption is dependent on the power of the (nation) state to protect the property rights of its citizens.

Always already bound within the sphere of a national or international space, the act of copyright, which attempts to uphold the linear history of inscription followed by reproduction, is deeply embedded in the powers of the state. Its value depends on a particular conceptualisation of space that valorizes certain types of exchange, which are both temporal and spatial as well. In order for the law to have sway, the actions of the parties involved (writers, publishers, sellers, and readers) are bound by social agreements about how and when, but also where the text is reproduced. Our use of the object is expected to correspond to a particular network of practices that produces

certain institutions. For example, one might take Kiyooka's own favourite method of producing literary texts – his canon copier – as a key figure in describing some of the contradictory effects of copyright. If one, as Kiyooka does, relinquishes certain proprietary rights, then s/he frees the user of the text from a particular temporal logic of consumption; the reader is entrusted with the responsibility for the text's re/production and distribution. The copier is now the publisher while the publisher is simply another copier. As such, not only does Kiyooka's colophon reverse, or at least defer, the time line, but it also places the user/producer in an entirely different social space vis-à-vis the everyday experience of the cultural and artistic object. According to Walter Benjamin, "mechanical reproduction" strips the art object of its pseudo-theological quality, what he calls its "aura." "This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (*Illuminations* 221). Release from "the domain of tradition," Benjamin points out, must be understood as both a temporal and spatial detachment indicative of a major shift in perception:

the contemporary decay of the aura... rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. *The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to*

*reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.* (223; emphasis added)

Whether this act of destruction, as Benjamin sees it, is negative or positive is not our concern here. Benjamin's conception of the radical shift in cultural production underlines not only the development of modern literacy – with its laws safeguarding intellectual property and the ownership of knowledge – but also a new spatial arrangement that radically shapes our position as scholars and teachers of English. As “the masses” are brought closer to the “object” through the technological developments and market expansion of “print capitalism,” its “aura” – the object's social value or intangible presence bestowed on it by the careful organization of pre-modern cultural spaces, including “the book,” “the work of art,” or “the performance” as well as “the gallery,” “the academy” or the “concert hall” – is displaced. The masses who are reckoned to be physically absent from these sites of high culture, as they move into the sphere/s of cultural re/production, take on increased significance in the overall design of a dominant (national or international) identity. Paradoxically this undifferentiated body of bodies becomes the locus of cultural sensibility.<sup>4</sup> Its entrance into the space of reading and writing becomes a contradictory site in struggles over controlling the means of production. If, as Benjamin states, the expansion of the presses corresponds to the fact that “an increasing number of readers become writers” (232), the hegemonic structures of print capitalism, which as Benedict Anderson has shown is instrumental to modern state-craft, become even more dependent on the construction of new traditions or fields of reception to counter balance them. In conjunction with the proliferation of writing, there is a simultaneous necessity on the part of the hegemonic powers of the state to control the dissemination of information and ideas. Faced with the possibility of overwhelm-

ing the established channels of communication, new divisions or streams are needed.

Thus Benjamin's argument suggests a change in focus from the individual artist or producer of culture to its reproducer or "the masses" – who it should be noted are unruly, unpredictable and quite likely unsympathetic to the ruling order. In his research on the development of the modern disciplines of the humanities during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Foucault challenges us to think of "literature" not as a form of expression but as an instrument of selection to respond to the overflow of writing beginning in Europe toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Coinciding with the rise of literature, there has been a complex production of social spaces – for example, schools, universities, libraries, and book clubs, which become responsible for extending a of system of normative ideals down into the depths of everyday life. In England and its colonies, as much as it was entrusted with certain practical/functional values in developing and maintaining bureaucracies, the praxis of reading was also tied to the disciplining of bodies.<sup>5</sup> Against the rising tide of literate bodies, English assumes an even greater political purpose (Guillory, Said, Viswanathan). Faced with the daunting task of preserving a system of property and ownership, as well as the possibility of reproducing it, "universal education" depends on the careful management of student identities. If, as these scholars suggest, modern English grows out of a concern with bodies in space rather than "artistic expression," its praxis is highly contingent on local determinants. English in England, Ireland, India, Canada or the US and Jamaica is successful in as far as it can adapt to the local "customs and commons," in as far as its divisive strategies can be made at home again. The learned appreciation of the genius of a few recognised poets comes to depend

on highly individualised structures of racism, class struggle, and gender division.

The position of the critic must be considered part of the production of knowledge, not anterior to it. It reflects the changing social relations of the nation state and its unravelling antecedents. Where we are. Where we are coming from. Where we might hope to be?

if out of the air  
a piece of cloth falls into your hands,  
wipe your eyes with it

if out of the ground suddenly  
a pair-of-gloves appears on your hands,  
use them to bury these words

Then ask your breath "where"  
words come from,  
where StoneDGloves go? (Kiyooka)

Here, I would like to return to the concluding sections of *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*. For Kiyooka, two events separated in time and space are connected to an acute sense of Canadian identity and the racism it presupposes. The concomitant uprooting and internment of Japanese Canadians alluded to in his reference to a "cold winter morning," and the culmination of the US "superiority" in the Pacific theatre are exemplary of the nation's racialization of an Asian-Canadian subject:

Hoping  
against hope I'll hear his unabashed voice – i keep repeating  
my own peevish biography: My grade 10 teacher fought with  
the British at Vimy Ridge and taught us History as if "he" had  
in deed, co-authored it. "I" never got to finish high school  
and kept that fact from myself and others longer than i care to  
recount. Don't ask me how it felt working night-shift on the  
killing floor of the swift canadian plant during those thwart  
war years. Don't ask him how it felt to be "finger-printed" &  
registered as an "enemy alien." Ask if you can locate him, that  
dumfounded "yellow kid."

For Kiyooka here and there collapse in on each other in a manner that eludes speaking or at least direct articulation. In a statement prepared for a Japanese Canadian / Japanese American Symposium in Seattle, May 2 1981, Kiyooka talks about an ambivalent relationship to English. He says that he “must have learned the efficaciousness of silences” from his father. But then he says,

it's taken me all these years to understand the gravity of his silences and, to abide the depth of my own and where it might take me.... where I'm coming from, silences are the measure of all that remains unconditioned in our lives.

Like that “spunky kid” lost twice under the weight of the official designation “enemy alien,” these still unspoken silences offer an important resistance to state sanctioned identity formations. In the aporia of addressing the racialization of Asian bodies and the consequent bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki exists a formative crisis in the institution of literature. The internal contradictions of “Canadian culture” or “English” are depicted against a foil of international struggles. The central issue of subject formations is seen as part of ongoing negotiations with colonialism. Ondaatje's text, like Kiyooka's, works with the fractures of time and place – ruptures in the linear logic of nationalism.

In *Transcanada Letters*, ostensibly writing to Ondaatje. apropos “a true canadian literature,” Kiyooka says,

...let the mind take a tumble. let it fumble a brand new world into existence if it truly can. meanwhile i've been told in all sorts of ways that I ought to be more mindful of each breath i suck in and even mindful of each breath i let out 'cause the nuclear age wont ever let us off the hook, the double-hook of an endangered species and the end of the earth. (238)

### THE END: A THRESHOLD DISCOURSE

...non-sententious because it speaks from a moment in medias res, from in-between unequal and often antagonistic sites without the certainty of imagining what happens or emerges at the end. From that perspective, the perspective of the "edge" rather than the end, it is no longer adequate to think or write culture from the point of view of the liberal "ethic" of tolerance, or within the pluralistic time frame of multiculturalism. (Bhabha 57)

Throughout the preceding chapters, this study has examined contemporary Canadian literature by analyzing critical response to three writers: Roy K. Kiyooka, Daphne Marlatt and Michael Ondaatje. Although these three writers share numerous private and public relationships that go beyond mere literary associations, I have avoided analyzing the direct connections amongst them or their work. Keeping the overlapping personal and professional ties outside this discussion, this study has focused instead on each individual writer or his or her single text as a kind of case study by which to read critical context/s. In so doing, I have attempted to evade the dominant methodological narratives of influence or affiliation. For the most part I have steered clear of re/classifying their writing within a precise literary category or genre. While there is good reason to discuss the writing of Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka historically, and while I do in fact begin by invoking the years in and around 1988 as a kind of watershed, I have avoided constructing a detailed and coherent history for fear of granting too much originary power to these three writers. It is, of course, important to grant each their creative due, and I have endeavoured in my readings to respect the

powerful performances of agency their writing represents and hope these readings have demonstrated the continued vitality of the texts to discussions of CanLit. Nonetheless, the purpose of this study has been to maintain a focus on reading and/or the social space in which their writing is disseminated.

From the outset, my intention has been ... to articulate a way of thinking through the problematic of reading – in a sense to sketch out a critical theory of reading as a spatial practice. From time to time, I have analyzed specific formal strategies, highlighting certain features of each of the writer's text or texts when it was necessary to understand the critical arguments that had developed around a text or passage. With Marlatt and Ondaatje's novels, I focused discussion on key scenes or tropes in order to look at the ways in which critical response has constructed particular interpretations and to argue that alternative readings are possible. In the case of Kiyooka, my analysis shifted away from a discussion of critical context per se to perform a close reading of his poetic text, *October Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*. This was/is justified, I believe, by a lack of critical engagement – outside a relatively small network of scholars – with his poetry. Compared to the work on texts by Marlatt and Ondaatje, for example, there is nowhere near the body of scholarship on Kiyooka's writing (in fact, I am unaware of any other critical discussion of *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*). Furthermore, Kiyooka's unique poetic sensibilities amount to a critical practice, or so I have argued, in which the issue of reception is foregrounded, particularly in terms of a national literature. Working across an apparent or often assumed divide between representations of space and representational spaces – categories which Lefebvre suggests are themselves inter-determinant and interdependent – this study has endeavoured to sketch out an



image of CanLit in which writing and reading are intrinsically bound, as Kiyooka's *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* has shown, are inseparable from a production of social space.

The shared connections these three writers have with specific literary groups, their involvement in the production of particular literary journals, literary presses, and other literary endeavours – such as editorial projects, conferences, or readings – has by and large been on the margins of this discussion. Nor have I made much of the demographic or sociological connections between them. While it may be possible, as Kamboureli does, to read these writers as representatives of a Canadian multicultural literature, I have resisted this categorization, except to develop specific points of critique raised in the texts or my readings of them. I am fundamentally suspicious of invoking any kind of master category by which Ondaatje, Marlatt and Kiyooka might be taken as representatives of cultural difference – a construct which I have argued throughout appears to be crucial to the transformation and re-invigoration of an unchecked unreflected literary nationalism. For how does one argue that Marlatt and Ondaatje are immigrant writers without eliding questions of “race”? Is it possible to categorize Ondaatje and Kiyooka under the rubric of “Asian Canadian”? Why would we want to avoid it? Or for that matter what are the ethics of reading Ondaatje as a “writer of colour” or as a “racialized” writer? While there is, as I suggested in the Marlatt section, an important historical intersection between gender politics and “race” politics, it is unwise to assume equivalences between the two. How might the issue of sexuality or performance of queer identities come into play? These are all important questions, yet they are questions that continue to be subsumed in debates about the inevitability of a post-national literature.

It is crucial to read these writers in terms of their place within history and, in particular, to situate their concern with processes of urbanization within the trajectories of contemporary Canadian writing, especially as they pertain to the thriving literary scenes of Toronto and Vancouver during the 1970s and 1980s. It might be possible to uncover a fascinating web of interconnections and affiliations that would provide a powerful behind-the-scenes look at CanLit, and there is little doubt that such a narrative is and would be invaluable to understand the complicated networks of literary influence that are subordinated to the concerns of a national culture. The nature and meaning of these personal interactions might well serve to reconnect CanLit to the exigencies of everyday life, and in so doing they might help to explore contradictions in the historical narratives of literary nationalism, contradictions that continue to be embedded in the fragmented and fragmentary discourses of contemporary literary studies. However, this type of literary history is also beyond the limits of this speculative study of CanLit as a critical discourse. Nevertheless, it is something to which this study looks forward.

I raise the problematic of personal history – the everyday connections between Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka – first to acknowledge a crucial aspect of their social life and the literary space they inhabit, and secondly, in order to move toward positing the quotidian as a significant aspect of literary interpretation. This element of literary production is particularly clear in Kiyooka's writing, as I have attempted to demonstrate. The specificities of reference and production with which his work engages demonstrate a vital, contradictory force that is lost in more homogeneous conceptions of CanLit. The particularity of everyday life, especially as it affects and is the effect of cultural politics, is fundamental to coming to terms with Kiyooka's response to various hegemonic deployments of nationalism and multiculturalism.

Attending to the complex issues his writing raises proposes, in turn, a different way of seeing particular trajectories in the disjunctive histories of literary and cultural production that are occluded in the more mainstream conceptions of literature as a narrative of national development. In particular, Kiyooka's writing – the time-space in which it is and was present – provides a fundamental force in the reappraisal of not only the writing of Marlatt and Ondaatje but also literary nationalism. To read his contemporaries outside the sway and focus of his work, to argue that a sustained critique of “race” politics and colonialism is recent to literary debate in Canada (an arrival of the 1980s or early 1990s), to assume a kind of cultural political vacuum around issues of “race,” class, or even globalization – is to ignore central aspects of another CanLit explicit in Kiyooka's writing but present also in the critical aspects of Marlatt and Ondaatje's as well. Any such acts of reading risk denying the strength of a CanLit embroiled in conflict/s and contradiction/s – one that always already underlies *new* modes of literary and cultural critique.

In the two previous chapters, we saw how critical response to Ondaatje and Marlatt's novels has tended to function through an elision of the cultural politics of reading. In locating radicality in the textual, creating a fundamental distance between representations of space and the representational spaces from which they necessarily issue, critical discourse has come to depend on an unexamined division of labour, which in turn normalizes or neutralizes the critic's own position/s. Even though it is a cliché to accuse literary scholars of a lack of engagement in the cultural situations their work describes, the question of location such an engagement requires is crucial to thinking through the re-deployment of cultural nationalism in the fraught spaces of CanLit. In as much as contemporary approaches to literary pro-

duction in Canada espouse an oppositional stance vis-à-vis a dominant cultural order – as is the convention with many post-modern, feminist, and post-colonial studies – the question of critical position or location is fundamental to how literary texts are read. Given the uncanny ability bourgeois culture has to absorb dissent and discord into a hegemonic order, the intersections between theory and practice, reading and writing, and consumption and production are crucial to struggle and resistance. By entering into this liminal space – the various local sites of conflict – critical discourse has already become directly involved in the workings of power – complicit but not entirely contained. Locating critical theory on this shifting divide – the illusory difference between product and production at the centre of Lefebvre’s writing about social space – focuses attention on the importance not only of vital literary works but also of their dissemination through emerging discourse formations.

In Chapter Three, I argued that Ondaatje uses structural and thematic devices throughout *In the Skin of a Lion* that remind the reader of his or her own mediated relationship to the historical events re-animated by the narrative and that, in continuously foregrounding the performative present, Ondaatje’s text opens out on certain critical contradictions that keep discussions of the novel vital. Converging on the historical development of Toronto and the roles played by various ethnic communities in it, the focus of the novel highlights key issues in the emergence of Canadian multiculturalism; however, as we have seen, the idealized pluralism underwriting critical response to the novel tends to gloss over the problematic issues it raises, particularly around “race.” Thus Ondaatje’s critique of cultural authority and the functionary aspect of documentary evidence flows both ways; the novel not only locates the archive (past) as an instrument of social control in and

through which an Anglo elite fabricates images of ethnicity and national identity, but it also situates CanLit (present) as a determining force in the social geography of an “immigrant’s” quest for emancipation from the strictures of an emergent whiteness – by which I am of course referring to Caravaggio’s escape from prison.

For the most part, readers fail to grapple with the ideological assumptions of a nascent multiculturalism that informs both the novel’s production and more profoundly its circulation. What tends to elude post-modernist or multicultural readings of *In the Skin of a Lion* is the way in which contemporary concerns with cultural plurality or diversity may themselves be complicit in the re-construction of social differences, as a means of containing dissent and the histories authorizing it. What we see in these readings of Ondaatje is analogous to what we see in not only the feminist readings of Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* but contemporary CanLit in general. As I have attempted to demonstrate by way of a critique of the so-called “Canadian canon debate” and then throughout this dissertation, this tendency to underestimate or downplay the fractiousness of the cultural present is a problem basic to contemporary literary practice. During the short period of time separating the publication of Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, Marlatt’s *Ana Historic*, and Kiyooka’s *October Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*, the idea of Canadian culture takes on a new weight. In particular, the discourse of cultural pluralism that is essential to literary studies begins to undergo a fundamental transformation. While it might be argued that the emergence of multiculturalism – the name given to an amorphous conflux of pluralistic socio-political ideals – develops more or less simultaneously across notable international locales, including Canada, Great Britain, the United States and Australia, the fact that multiculturalism (and the ideals it comes to name)

has become enmeshed in the interconnecting discourses of social planning and government policy means that it defies specificity. The term has indeed come to take on vastly different meanings across a gamut of cultural-political situations, meanings that can vary both within nations and between them.

In Canada, the institutionalization of cultural pluralism under the auspices of multiculturalism has been strongly effected by the development of state interventions in cultural programming and community development. With the ratification of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988, multiculturalism becomes entangled in complex juridical discussions about the rights of the individual vs. the rights of particular groups and in heated debates about government spending. In this context, the term ceases to perform in a relatively straightforward descriptive manner and becomes an integral part of the state's re-engineering of "Canadian society" through government sponsored cultural programmes or initiatives. While it is risky to ascribe too much originary power to Federal cultural policy, it is nonetheless crucial to recognize the hegemonic potential of the term "multicultural" in the development of contemporary literary praxis, including the writing, publishing, and reading of CanLit. In an important sense, the influence of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act pervades the space-time captured in the self-reflexivity of the writing discussed here. Not only did it set the stage ideologically, but also official Canadian Multiculturalism controlled access to important material resources. Thus, it provides a specific social dynamic with which these texts are engaged and upon which they continue to provide radical commentary.

As critics of liberalism note, official Multiculturalism cuts both ways. Not only does it constitute recognition of the type of socio-ethnic diversity

many readers see reflected in contemporary writing, especially in novels like those by Marlatt and Ondaatje, but it also provides a powerful framework with which to comprehend cultural difference. If the Canadian Multiculturalism Act does provide a valuable political and legal platform for the development of much needed community-based initiatives, then it is also an instrument of the state that is designed to manage and rationalize ethnic development within a new political economy of culture. As such, official Multiculturalism can be seen as a historical response to a crisis of legitimization brought on by a shifting demography and changes to Canada's international position within a "world economy." Picking up on socio-historical critiques of state-sponsored cultural policy outside the field of literary study and bringing them to bear on the cultural politics of CanLit, Jeff Derksen has argued that the endorsement of cultural pluralism codified in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act needs to be understood as an opportunistic gesture by the Trudeau government, one that enabled the Liberal government to deal with unhappy factions within the nation and to address a contradiction "between universal rights and group rights, or between the politics of equal recognition and the politics of difference" (np) made apparent by these conflicts. From its inception, the Act is, at least in part, an attempt to suppress fractious political differences between constituent groups within the national polity:

Within the national bilingual and bicultural framework, the Multicultural Act [sic] was designed to maintain the cultural heritage of all groups within a pluralist population, and the rights of members of "minority" groups to equality with members of the two "charter" groups. Out of this, official multiculturalism seeks a "unity in diversity" stance that allows "ethnics" to celebrate their cultures while still remaining full participants within Canadian culture. Conscious of the need to construct and manage a national identity through a balance of the universal and particular, multiculturalism tries then to accommodate demographic diversity by having such diversity be a founding

principle of a national identity: out of this formation, the metaphor of cultural mosaic, the favoured official metaphor, arises. Within the discourse of multiculturalism, the acceptance of “our” cultural pluralism is the key to national cultural and social unity. (Derksen np)

Not only does this idealized conception of ethno-cultural harmony seek to defuse separatism in Quebec by subsuming it in or overwhelming it with an imaginary plurality, it also provides the government with a powerful Act of legislation by which to damage control legal challenges from other groups in the nation. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act facilitated an unfolding of liberal social and economic planning through the masterly re-deployment of national unity as a key ideological term. Cloaked in the guise of a multicultural diversity rather than a bi-cultural difference, nationalism could be re-tooled to serve an emerging order and to protect the material well being of the status quo.

This critique of multiculturalism not only situates readings of *October's Piebald Skies*, *Ana Historic*, and *In the Skin of a Lion* within a particular socio-historical context that, as I have argued, tends to be lost in liberal positivism, but it also allows for a re-centring of critical elements of the writing – available in the writing of Marlatt and Ondaatje but most prevalent in Kiyooka's. His response to Japanese Canadian Redress and attack on the inculcation of multicultural ideology are germane to current debates about the transformation of culture and politics in Canada. Contrary to the dominant conceptions of official multiculturalism that flow through contemporary CanLit, Kiyooka's writing – *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* as well as a number of other important interventions in the field of contemporary Canadian literature and culture, including *StoneDGloves*, *Wheels*, *Transcanada Letters*, not to mention the second unpublished volume of this magnum opus *Pacific Rim Letters* – proposes a unique understanding of the



government's involvement in cultural development and "race" politics, an understanding that is vital to critical pedagogy and in the re-conceptualization of post-national and postcolonial literature already underway.

I have argued that Kiyooka's elegy, *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*, occasioned as it was by the coincidence of the Japanese Canadian Redress settlement and the untimely death of poet bpNichol, offers readers an important means of thinking through the problematic questions of ethnic and racial identity, especially as they correspond with government policy and the history of Canadian nationalism. The text also raises the question of how these might be brought to bear on an idealized image of CanLit as a space of counter cultural articulation. Kiyooka's somewhat eccentric long poem introduces a personalist account of the issue of Canadian cultural nationalism which contests the popular contemporary ideal of unity in diversity, which Derksen points out is fundamental to Canadian Multiculturalism.

Written "to commemorate our / redress & the memory of / bpNichol" (290) - *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* brings two seemingly unlinked events together under the auspices of poetic mediation. Juxtaposing his thoughts on Nichol's untimely death with those of his own disrupted youth, Kiyooka's narrative unhinges the conventions of mourning. Refusing the idyllic pastoral tropes common to the funerary occasion, the poet-narrator finds himself lost in musings about the traumas of childhood:

looking down on a perambulatory powell street

... i wish i could spell out how it truly felt to be 16 in '42.  
i wish that spunky kid would talk a blue streak without  
the intervention of 46 intrepid winters. i mean i wish that  
spunky "yellow kid" welled-up in me utterly unsolicited.  
But if truth be known that kid died twice before he came  
to manhood. The first time it happened his whole back got  
crispt when his nightgown caught on fire as he & his brother  
jostled for the warm place in front of the open gas flame  
on a cold winter morning. The second time it happened when  
the A Bomb got dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (281)

This "kid who died twice before he came to manhood" haunts both the narrative of lost innocence befitting to remembering Nichol's life and the narrative of progress that is part of mainstream celebrations of Redress as a moment of national redemption or atonement. The pome suggests a lack of comfort with more positive views of Canadian multiculturalism and the government's commitment to human rights, and it reflects on the nature and meaning of contemporary poetry, in a specifically Canadian context. Centring loss and trauma, *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* both keeps nationalism alive – thereby providing an important counterbalance to the fragmentary trajectories of Canadian literature that begin imploding in the wake of an emergent multiculturalism – and refuses the rhetoric or discourse of development upon which it has come to depend.

"October's piebald skies" presage the return of another "intrepid winter" (281). The rain-soaked city bears witness to a sense of loss and promise, and yet it is also "a ruined garden" holding out the unlikely promise of another, "the utterly beclouded face, the one that / hasn't found its own reflection" (287). The streets the poet-narrator moves through and the walls he is surrounded by speak of a present history of segregation and of forgetting, but also of recollection and of a need to address the still unresolved "entitlements" of "all the peoples comprising / the far flung 'dene nations'" (280-281) amongst whom he lives and works. Attempting to find his way through the

maze of mixed emotions and cross-purposes, the poet-narrator seems to be struck by an overwhelming sense of contradiction. In the short section that directly precedes and frames his musings on the “kid” who “died twice.” Kiyooka offers the following few lines under the allusive heading “autumn briefing/s:”

in the pisst-up against entrance  
to my powell st. studio – a swirl of crispen  
leaves half obscuring a heap of shit.  
"is this a sign of our acrimonious economy?"  
i ask myself – stooping to scoop it  
up in a handful of leaves and depositing it in  
the gutter between two trucks. then  
i head upstairs to fetch a bucketful of water  
to flush out my

october exegesis (281)

He asks “do the soi-distant stars really care ‘who’ / shits in anybody’s doorway?” The question seems to suggest a kind of futility, and yet it also leaves the problem of proprietary relations open. In this too tactile image of the poet stopping to scoop a handful of (human?) shit, there is a refusal to give in to the apparent squalor of his surrounding. He passes through the doorway only to return with a bucketful of water to finish the job of cleaning up. Metaphorically, the work of clarifying a passage between studio and street is an act of poetry, a bucketful of water “This October gutter swills with” (283).

In attempting to situate the act of creation within a specific social context, we might read the prevalence of doorways – the thresholds, the streets, and city spaces – central to *October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae*, *Ana Historic* and *In the Skin of a Lion* as a common pre-occupation with entering into or crossing over the threshold of particular cultural political ventures. In a sense these images provide an interesting overlap in the symbolism and rhetoric of all three texts. In *Ana Historic*, Marlatt’s weaving to-

gether of the historical and contemporary Vancouver culminates in a series of threshold scenes through which Ana and Annie enter into the space of new beginnings. The erotic opening out with which the novel ends, which is prefigured in Ana's visit to Birdie Stewart, enacts of moment of self-recognition that the novel has been building to since its opening trope: "Who's there?" Annie's arrival at Zoe's home in the east end of Vancouver, and her decision to embrace lesbian desire provide a climax, a moment of celebration, to which the novel has been moving. In another sense, as I argued, it depicts a crossing over into a new world that has been symbolically important to the development of a lesbian-feminist CanLit writing. Likewise in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, the narrative builds toward Patrick's eventually trespassing against the WASP establishment. In this case, however, Patrick storms Harris fortress in order to tell his story, or more precisely Alice's story and the story of Temelcov and Caravaggio. Ondaatje's framing of this narrative within a larger narrative that is itself told while driving out of the city suggests something of a release. In the context of the critical discourse in which it is read, this release provides a kind of metonymic welling up of stories that release us from the rigid ethnic divisions and class structures of a historical Toronto, and which seems to have signalled the arrival of a new multiculturalism.

However, how then do we read Kiyooka's fumbling, excremental exegesis – his hesitation at the door of his studio? Toward the end of the pome, the narrator-poet shifts focus. Referring to another door, this time the front door of his Keefer St. home in Chinatown, as he waits for "Halloween revelers," he says,

the small  
insistent rain spooked my front door – &  
all the would-be Halloween

reveller/s stayed in-doors watching a sit-com as  
a few plaintive firecrackers fizzled (289)

The event for which he has prepared himself does not come. The celebration –  
a ritualistic act of worship and mourning that recalls other time-places and  
remembers thousands of autumns past and winters future – is foregone.

Kiyooka's doorway remains unfathomed. We are left with a prayer "that next  
october's alacritous faces will repeal / the weatherman's retort" (289).

Against the seasonal gloom, the poet looks forward to and back on another  
October:

let  
baited-breath  
reign (289)

The "aged poet" "put[s] the candies back in the jar / peel[s] an apple," waiting  
for another season of change.

The pome ends with a dense, almost opaque lyric sequence that seems  
to return to the immediacy of details and a desire for improvisational forms:

parchment epiphanies

yuki  
and koto  
raga -

each  
scintillant  
mote

loops  
of pellucid  
white

verb/s  
mantling  
gorgon

throat (290).

Coming to rest on an ambivalent conflation of act and action – throat as body and verb, location and the desire for articulation – *October's Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae* leaves us to ponder this one most basic threshold. We end in the beginning at the conflux of speech. Throating this plaintive critique – the absence of revellers, the communities trapped inside, dead and gone, or returning

subtle,  
as a breathing  
compost... (275)

#### NOTES

- 1 If we take the example of the Japanese Canadian Redress settlement, it is possible to argue that the government's decision to concede to the demands of the Japanese Canadian community had as much to do with the fact that Trudeau failed to be re-elected as it did with any kind of political commitment to the ideals of either a "Just Society" or multiculturalism. The fact that community activists were compelled to contest the government commitment's to human rights by re-appropriating Trudeau's slogan and reworking it into "Justice in our Time" is indicative of a fundamental contradiction in Liberal cultural policy. According to Roy Miki, settlement was, largely, the result of the Conservative government's desire to live up to its campaign promise to deal with the problem. For a specific discussion of the issues around Japanese Canadian Redress, see Miki's chapter entitled "Redress: A Community Imagined" (*Broken Entries* 15-27).
- 2 While I have no desire to work anthropologically, i.e., to read Kiyooka as some sort of "native informant," I feel that I am bound out of respect to acknowledge inherent cultural differences between my position as a white scholar and the racialized community or communities to whom I am deeply indebted. As I have learned to be wary of the essentialisms behind such gestures and have been taught to recognize the manner in which both admissions of culpability or good intentions can re-appropriate disparity into manageable difference, thereby assuaging contention and radicality, I can offer little more than a sincere thank you to those friends and readers who have supported the writing of this dissertation and with whom I have travelled through the difficult decade. I hope that if any good can come from this scholarship, it will. Any errors or misjudgements in my own peculiar form of nationalism are my own; the insights – if I have managed to hold onto them – belong to those who have shared the struggles and their friendships.
- 3 I'm referring to the fact that a draft of this poem was first prepared and read as part of an impromptu wake for bpNichol at the home of George Bowering. As a matter of course, the majority of the participants would all be friends or admirers

of Nichol's "life long poem," and as such would be cognizant of Kiyooka's engagement with Nichol's textual poetics.

- 4 For an interesting essay on the politics of "race" and Nichol's exploration of a "letteral" that is valuable in the context of this poem, see Mark Nakada's essay "Gift(s)/Given(s): Undiscovered Countries in *The Martyrology*."
- 5 In essay entitled "'Turn This Page': Journaling bpNichol's *The Martyrology* & Returns" (*Broken Entries* 77-100), Miki has grappled with the problems of returning to Nichol's writing after the poet's unexpected and untimely death. A feature of these mediations is Miki's attempt to come to terms with the discomfiting collision of Nichol's actual death with post-structuralist tropes of "the death of the author" that had informed Nichol's and his readers theorizing of subjectivity. See also Lowry "Where Do We Go from Here? The Romance of Beginning *The Martyrology* Again."
- 6 My use of genocide alludes to Ward Churchill's important text, *A Little Matter of Genocide*, which ties in the continued victimization and eradication of First Nations people with the nuclear arms industry, not only in the US but in reserves in Canada as well. Thus the "immolation" of which Kiyooka is speaking begs to be read as a description of the current situation rather than as any sort of exaggeration of the past.
- 7 I'm referring here to the manner in which First Nations people and to an extent other racialized communities, particularly the Japanese Canadian community, have been able to make a strong case for culture as property. While there is no end in sight for this uphill struggle against the dominant precepts of European colonialism and the ensuing capitalism/s that have followed in its wake, it is important to read the discourse around land claims as a fundamental intervention in the political economy of culture in this country, and one would hope elsewhere. Although the coming election in BC threatens to make a mockery of the thirty years of legal battles with which the Gitksan, Wet'suwet'en and Nisga'a have been able to rewrite the codes of government and ownership by which they have been robbed of land and livelihood, language and culture, the impact of these struggles is sure to have an impact on the power of corporations and governments for years to come. One might also think about the ongoing fights of indigenous people around the world to resist the inculcation of (Western) Intellectual Property Rights and an economic system for the rationalization and capitalization of everything from planting methods to genetic information through alternative ways of understanding the relationship between culture, knowledge, and ownership. A few references that might be of use are Vandana Shiva's *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, Rosemary J. Coombe's *The Cultural Life Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*. I am also indebted to conversations with Scott McFarlane for bringing this issue to mind; for a discussion of the relationship between IPR, genetic engineering and Canadian or Asian Canadian writing, see McFarlane's "Faking It: a Brief History of Hybridity and Human Biology."
- 8 When we are confronted with this complex text and the fact that Kiyooka spent fifteen years reworking it for publication with Coach House Press, a publication which was promised, even advertised in *Twenty/20* (a catalogue chronicling twenty years of Coach House), but which never materialized, we are thrown back into contemporary CanLit as a publishing venture. Reading between the lines, we are left to wonder how and why a book such as this has been abandoned. What decisions spurred Coach House to take *The Pear Tree Pomes*, which had been submitted at the same time, but not *Wheels*? Was it an issue of form (lyric as

opposed to something much less easy to pin down)? Content (a failed relationship with Daphne Marlatt, another Coach House writer, as opposed to a back country trip in Japan)? Financial? But surely David Bolduc's colour prints adorning *Pear Tree Pomes* would have been at least as costly as b&w reprints of the artist's photographs. We will probably never know. In any case, *Wheels* is a text that deserves a much more careful handling than it received.

- 9 Thanks to Naomi Sawada at the Belkin Gallery at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver for going through the storage and pulling this and other of Kiyooka's works for me.
- 10 Ansel Adams is an excellent example of this type of artist. His meticulous experimentation with and writings on the processes of photography still stand as testaments to the craft.
- 11 Inciting Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, in turn an attempt to address the politics of cultural heredity and the responsibility of the scholar vis-à-vis his or her inherited archive, McFarlane's reading of *StoneDGloves* challenges readers to think through the highly problematic notions of archive as historical repository as well as the dissolution of Western cultural imperialism. For McFarlane, any attempt to read *StoneDGloves* must deal with the history of alienation with which Kiyooka's text engages. Without careful consideration of the racial and cultural histories buried in the (metaphoric) ground around the gloves, the reader-critic, especially one working within the sphere of Canadian nationalism, risks the appropriation of difference. This argument highlights 1. the ethical dilemmas facing critics working within a field of literature still loosely held under the auspices of Canadian Literature; 2. the need to think through the labyrinth of cultural divisions upon which its discursive structures are based; and 3. the constant unravelling of our desire to project the work beyond the contradictory relationships of knowledge and capital.



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