

Visible Minorities In Canadian Literature

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Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

CANADIANS, BECAUSE THEY ARE OF SO MANY COLOURS,
ARE ESSENTIALLY COLOURLESS,
IN THE BEST SENSE OF THE WORD.
Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions*.

When talking about the literature of visible minorities in Canada, we cannot yet refer to a body of literary work. What exists is a collection of authors who are considered members of minorities because of their native ancestors or their foreign origin or —compli-

cating the distinctions— because of their contact with them (note the multitude of connotations of the word Indian). More general patterns have yet to be defined. That is, a particular world view exists, but it is difficult to differentiate it from the rest of Canadians, when Canada as a nation is characterized by its cultural pluralism with its different resulting hybrids and heterotexts.

With the conflict of national identity that Canada is experiencing, the general patterns that would help us recognize the cultural production of its inhabitants originating from there are scarce. Elements like the vast expanses of space, its cold climate, hockey, the new feminism, a profoundly reflexive character, the constant presence of na-

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ture, its abundant resources and menacing forces tell us little about the diversity of ethnic groups, races and languages that make up this nation.

So, one of the challenges Canada faces in this millennium is consolidating its national identity. It has been sought in the supposed constants in its different manifestations of art, among them literature. Here, up until now, two more or less hegemonic cultural categories have predominated. I am referring to the Quebecois and the Anglophones, representatives of white political supremacy, with its resulting racism, manifest in the appropriation of the discourses that they themselves legitimize and in which the so-called “visible minorities” barely count.

In my attempt to approach the authentic Canadian aesthetic, I face the increasingly complex problem of the impossibility of putting Francophones and Anglophones together in the same category. The two traditions diverge, not to mention that many Quebecois motifs like Catholicism and family disfunction are barely or completely unrelated to this Anglo-Saxon exploration of the darkness of human relations when day-to-day living has become rarified thanks to the technological imperative. More than being almost diametrically opposed to each other, this stylistic dialectic is complicated by the presence of many other poetical variants, whether aboriginal or racial: the literature of the minority groups, from aspects as determining as the language in which they are written. This is what makes them “visible,” since they differ physically and culturally. Given that in Canada, different communities occupy common spaces —when the first nations are

not confined to reservations— the inclusion of both native and immigrant visible minorities becomes important to the development of Canadian letters.

In principle it is possible to identify common traits among Anglophone and Francophone writing in the work of authors like Himanni Bannerji, Dionne Brand, Ian Iqbal Rashid and M. Nourbese.¹ In their work is also found—to cite just a couple of cases—nature in its different manifestations and that “fortress mentality” that is so often used to describe being Canadian. Nevertheless, in the literature of visible minorities, landscape, so important for the two dominant cultural groups, is neither beautiful nor does it move anyone to thought, but rather suggests a threat: snow appears as something oppressive. One does not take refuge from a climate (more cruel when one is from the tropics, for example), one protects one’s self-esteem. And, as Christl Verduyn has said:

for many Canadians, “the place of imagination” is, as the title of Dionne Brand’s recent novel suggests, “in another place, not here”. There exist, thus, disjunctions between place and identity, place and culture, between nation and imagination that are of consequence when discussing Canadian identity.²

It could be ventured that works like those by Afro-Canadians—for example, the Afro-French—could hardly be described as creating a school in and of themselves since, in addition to there being few authors in this category, they relate events that concern very few people, the minori-

ties. These minorities must either mature as the Chicanos did in the United States, broadening out their unifying vision at the same time that they preserve their culture and join it to the other, or they will be condemned to extinction. However, the opposite argument could be made after simply reading Louise Halfe’s new book; the reverent attention she pays to the voices of her Cree ancestors has led her to sing an epic through which she seems to pay tribute to the origins of all of Canada: the protagonists of *Blue Marrow* (1998) include aboriginal or native people, explorers who came to the continent to trade in furs, the Jesuit colonizers and even the Métis, whose identity is questioned by the Constitution itself because it apparently does not recognize them. I say that it suffices to read these poems of Louise Halfe to confirm how the literature that has been called “minority” literature is very visible and, contrary to what is commonly thought, is outstanding for its power to include and for skill that is by no means minor.

SNOW ON THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

The essential theme of Canadian studies is identity. Its two basic questions would be, “Who are we?” and “How do the parts relate to each other and to the sum of the parts?” These questions could apply to the analysis of discourses like literature to start off with individual histories and infer the role of the social actor. We would then be confronted with an ambiguous, complex and multiple aesthetic impression: that the two more or less dominant cultural categories (Anglo-Saxon and Quebecois,

not to mention French), express a unified conception in crisis when faced with the emergence of other voices. And the question that we still have to come to grips with, in the words of critic and poet Himanni Bannerji “is much more than cultural or historical. It is one of the power — ‘the power to define what is Canada or Canadian Culture’.”³

This same author also suggests that an examination of texts written by non-Anglo-or-Quebécois Canadians conjures images of fear, imprisonment and oppression: “Depending on one’s social location, the same snow on the Canadian landscape... can seem near or far, disturbing, threatening or benign.”⁴ This very negative imaginary is denounced in Ian Iqbal Rashid’s *The Heat Yesterday* and the works by Selena Amati and Hiren Mistry, or in the collection of letters, *Sharing Our Experiences*, whose editor, Arun Murkheje, in “Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature and Racial Minority Women,” explains that, “If Canada is ‘enemy territory’ for Brand’s black female narrator and prison for Bannerji’s poetic persona, it is occupied territory in the writing of aboriginal women.”⁵ This kind of claustrophobia contradicts the image of the Canadian nation — internationally accepted and, even more, promoted— as a “communion” of diversities living together in a shared territory. As the titles suggest, the threat is not so much nature with all the fury of a raped mother earth, but a racist society. This means that that recurring figure in the history of Canadian letters known as “the fortress mentality” stems from the need for self-protection in closed social circles, if not burrowing into oneself to the point of autism.

But it is also not enough to face the presumably hostile social, cultural and economic relations among the different groups. The exacerbated cult of ethnicity engenders antagonisms and polarizes the differences among races and nationalities, as well as leading to self-pity if not self-exclusion —there are cases like that of George Elliot Clarke who, despite the fact that his family has lived for decades in Nova Scotia, considers himself semi-Canadian and even, ironically, quasi-Canadian. Also, at times the notion of “Canadian” erroneously implies only the descendants of the pioneers who arrived during the nineteenth century. In *The Saga of the Fine-Toothed Comb*, James H. Grey points out how among Anglo-Saxons there have also been important differences and that they have also grouped together with the pretext of helping each other but with the aim of first excluding undesired others, whether they be English, Irish, Scots and even Poles. In this work, Grey writes:

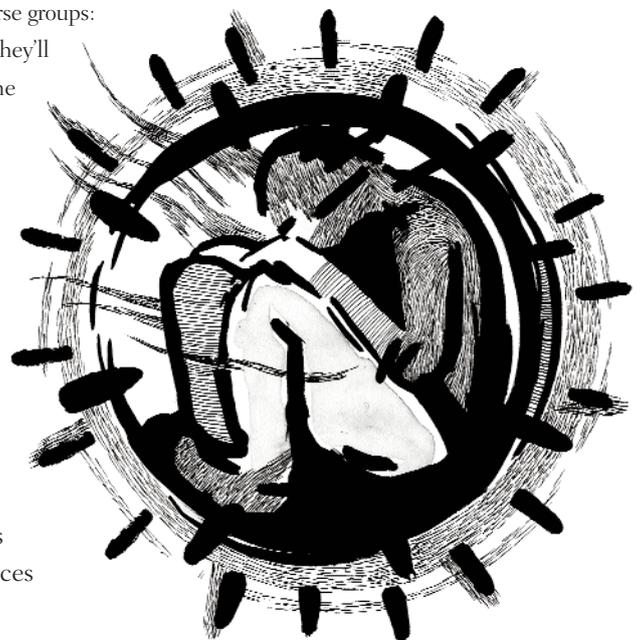
It was curious how one catch phrase was used by so many diverse groups: “Let one of them in and they’ll take over the place.” The Presbyterians used it against the Catholics, the Catholics used it against the Jews. The Irish and English used it against the Scots and all the Anglo-Saxons used it against all the aliens.⁶

This author also points here to language differences

and, in a funny comparison, argues that for Anglo-Saxons it is very difficult to learn the many languages in which school children like to insult each other: so, paradoxically, they are at a disadvantage because, while the newcomers very rapidly learn the obligatory English, the Anglophones can hardly compete against the other, practically inaccessible codes they are faced with.

ULYSSES WITHOUT ITHACA?

Migrant cultures that refused to be transient, both in their novels and short stories and in their poetry, immigrants show everything from uncertainty about the present to relief about having left behind a past full of aggression. In all their writing, ambition and nostalgia, lamentations and hopes appear with the same frequency: from their departure to their arrival and including the adaptation that makes improvement of their capabilities possible and the reflection about the new nationality that they have made their own, this is



the way many of their works develop, parallel to their personal history. For example, we can compare poetic pairs in verse like the following (both published in *Home and Homeland*):

...So I must remember. It cannot be hid

Nor hurried from. As long as there abides

No bitterness; only the lesson learned
And the habit of grace chosen, accepted
Home, we discover, is where life is
Not Manitoba's wheat
Ontario's walled cities
Nor a B.C. fishing fleet.

Home is something more than harbour—

Than father, mother, sons;

Home is the white face leaning over
your shoulder

As well as the darker ones.

Home is labour, with the hand and heart,
The hard doing, and the rest when done;
A wider sea than we knew, a deeper
heart,

A more enduring sun.

(From Dorothy Livesay, "Call My People Home")⁷

versus:

Hybrid

Of mythical roots

The soil of your motherland sticks on
your soles

A graft is forever a foreign body

That bears within the stigmata of origin....

You are what feeds you

You are what makes of your life

You are what you share

You are what you receive

Hybrid

Voyager from a universe out of time

A world that is no more and never was

You are moulded from the lost motherland

You are nourished by the chosen soil
Graft of a stateless life
Hybrid.

(From Jacqueline Barral, "The Immigrant")⁸

Or we can look at narrative passages like the following, both from Nell Hanna's "Where the Hearth Is":

Nicholas [the Deusch] was amazed. Everyone was laughing. Suddenly it struck him as funny too and he laughed more heartily than anyone. It was not so much the incident of the pie that seemed funny as the realization of the fact that he or anyone would start a rousing fight over so small a thing. That seemed completely ridiculous to him now, and he laughed again unrestrainedly, as if in relief, almost as if something dark and heavy had been lifted from his heart. —Poor Dutchy thinks it's funny— said someone as they all left the table.⁹

versus:

—Ah sure, I know. It was like that back ..., but you'll have to forget that now. This is O.K. You'll get to like it after a while. It's big and free. Free, Nick, you understand that, don't you? You told me yourself how it was in old Russia. Nobody'll ever take your land away here even if they give it to you for nothing, and lots of things like that. Look at the way all you folks built that grand church of yours and hold German services in it every Sunday. Nobody's going to stop you. You see we vote for our government here. You don't even know the word "vote" but you will when you take out your papers.

All you got to do is work, work like hell, maybe, but it is O.K. Say you don't know the national anthem yet ... Two lines specially I like. Now listen carefully. "Thou land of hope for those who toil—toil means work and work hard—Thou true north strong and free."¹⁰

C.D. Minni, in *Dollar Fever: the Diary of a Portuguese Pioneer*, confesses, "I am impressed by the size of this country. I have travelled such a great distance that I feel like Ulysses, lost."¹¹ Thus, just like the hero of Ithaca, the first dream of many immigrants seems to be to return to their native land, but they ended up staying, thus reaffirming their loyalty to a culture that is not just the civilization of their fathers that they left behind, but also that of the one they arrived to.

In *Being Brown*, Rosemary Brown alludes to Quebecois racism toward people with dark skin, particularly those from abroad. Her autobiography begins with her parents' decision to send her to Canada to study to avoid U.S. aggressions not only from WASPs but also from other non-Anglo groups toward Afro-Antilleans. But the young Jamaican girl would be rejected because of an attitude that, while cooler than that of U.S. Anglo-Saxons, is no less violent. Here, then, the trope of confinement, which leads to the creation of cultural imaginary different from the surroundings, is owed to being both Afro-Antillean and a woman.¹²

I will not deal here with distribution networks or explore the aesthetic misfortune that often precedes the development of almost any narrative school, that the speaker must first crank out edifying pamphlets fit for political campaigns to only later dis-



cover

little by little

his/her literary vocation.

But it should be told how those Latin American writers who were born or emigrated to the United States, or simply moved to the Anglo-Saxon part of their own country (this is the case of the Puerto Ricans), have had to affirm their presence through works that, even if of doubtful quality of style, have been useful—and I would almost say obligatory—in concretizing their own voice.

THE ABORIGINAL ROOTS

Literature with aboriginal roots expresses the intimate relationship between the First Peoples and nature and the most varied forms of inanimate life. Coming to a great extent out of the oral tradition, they often contain moral teachings to harmonize the links between the Native and his/her surroundings, whether real or metaphorical. Similar to other cultures like the Asians' in terms of their closeness to the land, the most recent version of this literature sometimes tends toward

a blurring
between life and art, letters and religion.

Aboriginal literature seems to have functioned as a link between the present and the past of their authors' situation, at the same time that many tribes have discovered that they are related because they share analogous beliefs. We could apply what Thomas King correctly noted about Harry Robinson and his story "An Okanagan Indian Becomes a Captive Circus Showpiece in England" to the thinking about literature written by Natives in general:

That is a fine example of interfusional literature, literature that blends the oral and the written. In a traditional oral story, you have the stories, the gestures, the performance, the music, as well as the storyteller. In a written story, you have only the word on the page. Yet Robinson is able to make the written word become the spoken word by insisting, through his use of rhythms, patterns, syntax, and sounds, that his story be read aloud, and in so doing, the reader becomes the storyteller.¹³

In addition, in authors like Jeanette Armstrong and Peter Blue Cloud,

we can clearly see Judeo-Christian scatology substituted by a conception that tends toward equilibrium and harmony. Sometimes contemporary-ness and traditions are combined as co-existing realities in a spiritual—if not magical—present; the resulting atemporality suggests a profound communion between beings and things and especially among individuals, and goes beyond the cohesion of the nuclear family, something rare in Anglo-Saxon authors, and also beyond the reservations. This is what happens in the novels of Joan Crate.¹⁴ Although today's problematic condition of the Métis also cannot be eluded, the personification of the forces of nature and the propensity to abstraction while weaving fables survive, as can be seen in the work of Maurice Kenny.¹⁵ I think it pertinent to underline another aspect already sensed by Thomas King: the non-usefulness of traditional forms when the present is divorced, indifferent or even antagonistic to them; I am referring here to Beth Brant, Richard G. Green and Jordan Wheeler who

do not use traditional native characters, nor do they make use of elements from oral literature, or create a strong sense of Native community. Instead, these writers imagine Native people engaged in a broad range of activities which do not, in and of themselves, satisfy the expectations conjured up by the notion of "Indianness".¹⁶

Their respective stories (about the engagement of an aboriginal orphan woman to an Afro-Canadian, the sardonic hunt by a raven and a beach romance while surfing) are not very authentically indigenous by orthodox standards.

AESTHETICS IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

But orthodoxy is not a very viable approach to multicultural literature; it is better for us to read the mixture.

What is more, given that many poets and prose writers are becoming bilingual —like Spanish-speaking writers in the United States— they have created pan-Hispanic or pan-Native readerships, parallel to their fellow countrymen. So, they can be found in English, Spanish or French, translated or written in the original.

Just as an example, compare the following fragments from a writer whose ancestors emigrated from Calcutta to Trinidad and who has lived in Canada since 1973: Neil Bissoondath. Bissoondath opposed multiculturalism not because he was xenophobic or because he attempted to import the U.S. melting pot idea; he made a critique of it in the hope of its truly contributing to the construction of a pluralist society. So, in *Selling Illusions*, he writes:

the multiculturalism interests me rather as an official government policy and, more particularly, as a government-sanctioned mentality: as a way of looking at life and at the world; for the ways in which it shapes our sense of self and our place in human society.... I offer criticism as a way of contributing to the necessary discussion on the shaping of an increasingly unhappy and divided land.¹⁷

More recently, he wrote in his story "A Land Worth Loving" that

In the end, my passion for my country is not mine alone. It is a passion that devolves to my daughter and the future

is hers. Canada is a grand country, and it is that grandeur that I wish to leave to her: its beauties, its immensities, its incomparable diversities, diversities which include the duality that is her heritage from both her parents, for in her are blended white and brown, francophone and anglophone, native-born and naturalized.¹⁸

Thus, writing by visible minorities not only harbors their cultural heritages, but also communicates traditions. But there is no common style: the circle of readers has broadened out but the form has not become generalized. What is of interest here is the re-appropriation of their respective voices, the fact of not appreciating them through negation or as mere characters by Anglophones or Francophones, reduced to a stereotype no more uncommon because it is picturesque. Even so, a few traits distinguish them, such as their enormous strength, a result of the tension among the different presences that inhabit a single space.

The creations that are a product of minority experiences contain within themselves the promise of a communion: the aesthetic of a harmonious global village. **MM**

NOTES

¹ See particularly George Elliot Clarke, *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-American Literature* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997); Antonio D'Alfonso, *In Italics—In Defense of Ethnicity* (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1996); Mordecai Richler, *The Great Comic Book Heroes and Other Essays* (Toronto: The Canadian Publishers/McClelland and Stewart, 1978); Marlene Nourbese Phillips, *She Tries Her Tongue* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1989).

² Chrystl Verduyn, "Disjunctions: Place, Identity and Nation in Minority Literatures in

Canada," Caroline Andrew, Will Straw and J. Yvon Thériault, eds., *Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens* (Montréal: Association d'Études Canadiennes, 1998), pp. 164-176.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵ Arun Murkheje, ed., "Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature and Racial Minority Women," *Sharing Our Experiences* (Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women/CACSW, 1993), p. 166. This council no longer exists.

⁶ James H. Grey, *The Saga of the Fine-Toothed Comb*, p. 91.

⁷ Dorothy Livesay, "Call My People Home," Peter Fanning and Maggie Goh, eds., *Home and Homeland. The Canadian Immigrant Experience* (Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley Publishers Limited and Rubicon Publishing Inc., 1993), p. 78.

⁸ Jacqueline Barral, "The Immigrant," Peter Fanning and Maggie Goh, op. cit., p. 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ C.D. Minni, *Dollar Fever: the Diary of a Portuguese Pioneer*, quoted in Peter Fanning and Maggie Goh, eds. op. cit., p. 61.

¹² For more on this, see the work of George Elliot Clarke, like *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-American Literature* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997) and, specifically, Makeda Silvera, ed., *The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1995).

¹³ Thomas King, *All My Relations. An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction* (Toronto: The Canadian Publishers, 1990), p. xii.

¹⁴ A complete anthology that includes a representative sample of Canadian aboriginal women authors is *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1990).

¹⁵ About Inuit writers, see, for example, *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Thomas King, op. cit., p. xv.

¹⁷ Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 7.

¹⁸ Thomas King, op. cit., p. 8.