

Disappearance and Mobility

A TransCanada Institute Issue

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Do books have nationality? Can they claim citizenship? What's their passport to global circulation? What happens when the locality a text represents does not coincide with that of the text's author? Do we read Rohinton Mistry's *Mumbai* the same way British readers read Frances Brooke's *Quebec*? Do *The Golden Dog* and *Life of Pi* share similar travel histories as texts? How do we engage with the ambivalences of the cultural and political mobilities Indigenous and diasporic texts perform? How do we negotiate as critics cultural distances across space and time, across the multiple inscriptions and displacements they undergo through representation? Can we engage with the challenges we are presented with at the present moment without reproducing the amnesia tactics that have been part of national pedagogies while, at the same time, not succumbing to the perils of historicism, "the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in its historical development" (Chakrabarty 6)? Can we execute cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary transactions productively without "faking it," i.e., without either pretending to know more than we do (or we can know) or mollifying our anxieties by virtue of our use of terms that have gained cultural, critical, and political currency? Can we bring the kind of cosmopolitan knowledge¹ to bear on Canadian literature that would avoid casting our specialization area of CanLit studies in "provincial" terms?

These are some of the directions that the five essays and one interview collected in this TransCanada issue point toward, at least for this reader. They invite us to consider the risks and gains our critical act entails when we take into account not only how and what a text means but also how

it circulates in the world and within the particular milieus in which we encounter it, when we situate our readings in the context of the various shifts that Canadian literature has undergone as an institution. The debunking of the national myth of homogeneity in the face of both internal and external pressures such as transnational and global forces; how Canadian literature as an institution is inflected by Indigenous and diasporic literatures; and how the shifting terrain of such critical discourses as those of postcolonialism and multiculturalism affect the production and study of Canadian literature—this was the critical framework proposed as the focus of this issue. Though the contributions included here enter these critical terrains from different vantage points, they nevertheless converge in the recurring theme we encounter in them—that of mobility. From the mobility of early Canadian (and non-Canadian) authors to the kinetics of bodily affect, from the cultural movements made possible by diasporic counterpublics to the blurring of the boundary between authenticity and responsible representation in Indigenous writing, Canadian literature as an institution, these essays suggest, is no longer conceived, to appropriate Arjun Appadurai's words, as an "immobile aggregate of traits" (7). Rather, it is a product of continuous cross-cultural transactions.

For example, Carole Gerson's essay focuses on the conditions that account for the global dissemination of early Canadian literature, and shows that the global circulation of Canadian literary texts, far from being a phenomenon we typically associate with contemporary literature, has been "a continuous feature of our national cultural experience." Gerson's study not only brings into relief the specificities of a historical phenomenon, the global circulation of texts in the nineteenth century, it also draws attention to the frequently encountered blind spots in our reading acts, that is, the tendency to imbue things contemporary with a fabricated uniqueness that privileges the present. Globalization, of course, especially with regard to the circulation of texts, did not signify then in exactly the same fashion that it does in the twenty-first century. If the transnational conglomerates of publishing houses make it easier today to secure foreign rights for domestically published texts, the circulation of Canadian texts in the nineteenth century was certainly symptomatic of, and thus facilitated by, the "family" history that English-language markets shared with the Empire.

Moreover, as Gerson's article implies, the flow of texts from one national market to another does not necessarily speak of a fluid cosmopolitanism. Behind the phenomena of global circulation lie uneven economic

conditions. The global mobility of texts in this context is, in actuality, a circulation that takes place within decidedly circumscribed geopolitical and cultural borders. Thus it is not entirely different from the mobility ascribed to the kind of “world literature” David Damrosch talks about, “literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). But while world literature also “involves shifting relations both of literary history and of cultural power” (24), the reception and transmission politics that characterize it, according to Damrosch, appear to be quite different from the conditions that gave nineteenth-century Canadian authors or British authors with affinities to Canada access to the global (i.e., English language) market at the time. In this light, the elsewhere-ness (Hugh Kenner) Gerson identifies as the space literary texts aspire to inhabit is a product of disjunctive flows created as much by the contingencies that shape their circulation as by the development of the fields in which this literature is studied. These flows create what Appadurai calls “process geographies” that are always “shifting,” for they are responsive to “the variable congeries of language, history, and material life” (7, 8). Such “areas” may appear to rely on conceptual and cultural coherences as they develop in tandem with a nation-state’s narrative of progress, but the local imaginaries they produce are invariably disrupted from within and without.

The space produced by the tensions and attractions that constitute the binary between the domestic as mundane and the foreign as cosmopolitan is created, as Gerson argues, at least in part, by the presumed ability to know in advance the target readership’s expectations elsewhere. Whether we define this travel of people and traffic of cultural imaginaries, of embellished and even invented histories, as cosmopolitan or transnational, this movement is marred, to echo John Urry, by the tourist’s gaze. That such literary products, for example Frances Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague*, whose status as the first Canadian novel went undisputed for a long time, have so easily been claimed as Canadian, or, conversely, that the commercial success of some nineteenth-century Canadian authors, not unlike that of Margaret Atwood today, meant a bracketing of their Canadianness, shows the elasticity of cultural identifications. Not always signs of hybridity, such displacements speak to the deterritorializing of content in ways that compel us to question as much what constitutes authenticity as the boundaries of our areas of study and those of our critical methods. In this context, deterritorialization may mean a loss of what is taken to be authentic but also forces us to confront the very circumstances that put discourses of

authenticity in circulation. Deterritorialization as an effect of transaction, then, may also yield gains and usher in new critical idioms.

Some of the nineteenth-century writers, such as Susanna Moodie, may have enjoyed, as Gerson writes, “a double audience,” but the trajectories they pursued were not always informed by what many scholars today would call a cosmopolitan ethic. Thus, some books travelled while their authors stayed at home, and while the books enjoyed good sales elsewhere, their authors lived in poverty. The lack of a reciprocal relationship between the success of books as commodities and the livelihoods of authors certainly shows that mobility is not by default a coveted condition. Moreover, some texts may have to pay a price for their global mobility, in that their reception elsewhere may see their national “traits” evacuated. But is this necessarily a bad thing? If yes, why? And how does this marketing practice compare to the critical tendency to read Indigenous and diasporic literatures as anthropological or cultural case studies? If the travel history of the nineteenth-century texts Gerson chronicles speaks both of their authors’ agency and of the complex conditions that granted them their elsewhere, Tanis MacDonald’s essay on the pedagogical challenges in teaching Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water* within home territory unsettles the notion that the nation is a comfortable and homogeneously conceived home. Locality here may refer to the easily recognizable (by some) terrain of a particular town, but above all signifies the spaces we inhabit as teachers and critics, and the politics of (self-) location. MacDonald employs Derrida’s notion of aporia to engage with the pedagogical and ethical issues raised when crossing from one culture to another. Cross-cultural transactions in the case of this Indigenous text, as she demonstrates, rely on what remains unspoken. Trying to read what is unspoken, yielding to the difficulties and challenges of this Indigenous novel as an aporetic text, prevents MacDonald from reducing it to a mere signifier of its culture. It is by focusing on its literariness that she is able to engage with the incommensurability of the text’s networks of cultural and familial relations.

Along the same lines, Kit Dobson engages with the conditions and expectations (applied from different sectors) that shape the circulation and reception of texts by Indigenous writers and writers of colour in the cultural marketplace. Here the critical lens shifts from the politics of representation as experienced by a white teacher of King’s novel to the mis/representation of an Indigenous author, Eden Robinson, who both identifies as Haisla and resists full disclosure of the particularities of her nation for cultural and ethical reasons. What Dobson calls the “de-specification” of First Nations

writers, in this particular instance Robinson's resistance to being seen as a spokesperson for her nation, frustrates the expectations of certain reading practices, but also shows the ability to talk from within a particular space without reifying, distorting, or betraying it. Robinson's resistance to being subsumed into the category of Indigenous writing as a Haisla, by withholding signs of authenticity and thus thwarting the white or non-white reader's search for signs of authentication, is not to be confused with the kind of resistance that writers like Neil Bissoondath and Evelyn Lau articulated in the early nineties in relation to discourses of multiculturalism and ethnicity. The removal of codes of cultural identification is not the same as adopting a universal position or, say, being a diasporic subject and calling oneself Canadian while leaving the category Canadian undisturbed. It gestures, instead, toward a discourse of the not-yet, and does so by calling attention to perspectival, cultural, political, and methodological shifts. This entails, in part, practising a criticism that is suspended between different epistemes, striving to understand the alterity of texts not by ferreting out the referentialities we might assume are lurking there, and which we tend to take as guarantors of authenticity—the critic as sleuth but also the critic posturing as a paragon of ethics—but by ceding to the irreconcilable relationship between fiction and reality, conceding that, as I argue elsewhere, a turn to ethics is not an ethical act by default.

These questions of reading and cultural intervention that are invariably inflected these days by the discourses of ethics and responsibility are also raised in Guy Beaugard's interview with Roy Miki, which focuses, among other things, on the making of Miki's book *Redress*. Resisting "the standard historical voice, the voice of the historian," Miki "creat[ed] a narrative" that "involv[ed]" him "in a kind of fictional interpretation based on . . . documents and facts." If Dobson situates his reading of Robinson in the larger context of the discourses of the vanishing Indian, Miki identifies the trajectory that led him to write *Redress* as a discourse that produces a similar kind of disappearance. When redress "is born as a discourse," he says, there is the risk of "no longer hav[ing] control over where that discourse is going to go or how we are going to be framed in it." Parallel to the shift he notes here, from being "unredressed" to being "redressed," another movement Miki observes, one away from the "immediate ties to the history of the nation and towards globalizing discourses or discourses around globalization," demonstrates the challenges we face as critics when dealing with questions of restitution and reconciliation. The overall relief expressed when such

movements take place often signals a desire to embrace a “global sphere, where we can reinvent new liberal values.” Yet, while “redress in the form that Japanese Canadians initiated it disappeared into that sphere,” Miki notes, it also “started to reappear in different forms,” as is the case with the Korean comfort women redress movement. This is yet another instance of how deterritorialization may have enabling effects. It is also another moment in the issue that shows that, although these contributions come from different spaces, they revolve around issues that emerge from within the tensions that link the contemporary to the historical.

A recurring element in these essays that complicates productively the politics of cultural mobility lies, as Morton’s and Corr’s essays exemplify, in how we situate the literariness of diasporic texts in relation to the histories of marginalization they address. Stephen Morton’s notion of diasporic counter-publics, which he develops through his attention to the “formal strategies” employed by Roy K. Kiyooka in his *StoneDGloves*, Roy Miki’s *Random Access File*, and Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, produces “a site of reading which questions and challenges the social and political grounds upon which diasporic subjects are marginalized in the global economy, as well as the Canadian public sphere.” Thus, for example, the secret messages inscribed by the Sonias in Lai’s novel on the soles of a special edition of cross-trainer shoes offers “a crucial counterpoint to the exchange of commodities in the global economy, and to the regulation and control of migrant labour power.” And echoing the strategies of despecification and of what is left unspoken in the essays mentioned above, the withholding of the diasporic body in Kiyooka’s text wittingly constructs a different space, a space of remains and therefore of disappearances, that resonates with, while cancelling out, “the dehistoricized representation of racialized subjects.”

In this essay mobility is present in the Sonias’ labour and the cultural and political work to be performed by the inscribed shoes that will walk places, as well as in the labour of the absent workers in Kiyooka’s poem whose stoned gloves Kiyooka archives visually and verbally. The construction and production sites in these texts do not grant the diasporic body a recuperative agency, as Morton argues. Rather, their formal and political strategies posit the diasporic body as a figure that resists containment, that translates its disappearance that resulted from its marked visibility in the hands of the state into an act that grants it, instead, mobility in its own terms.

Mobility in John Corr’s essay is also configured through a reading of diasporic bodies that are capable of producing spaces similar to those

Morton defines as counterpublics. Working with what he calls “affective coordination,” a concept that evokes, among other things, the kinetics that help synchronize different bodily parts to “create an overall increase in ability,” Corr demonstrates the ways in which Dionne Brand’s novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, produces “alternative, diasporic mapping[s].” Here, too, mobility calls to mind deterritorialization in the double sense that I employed the term above. The “grace” that characterizes the way the novel’s protagonists, Elizete and Verlia, love each other is an eloquent response, an affective and bodily retort, to the displacement inflicted on them, a powerful and effective indictment of the constraints of, among other things, bourgeois love. What’s more, the affect this grace produces, as Corr’s reading of the various possibilities of the term “coordinate” demonstrates, does not merely reveal an oppositional strategy. As he writes, “the maps to belonging that the protagonists chart do not simply stake a claim according to dominant territorial logics. . . . these characters are blocked from settling into ‘place.’”

Whether the transactions these essays engage with speak of the clash of different modernities or belatedness, of the restlessness that comes when modes of readings that promised renewal reach an impasse, or of flows of movement through fluid borders, they suggest interpretive courses that demand we move beyond our habitual grammar of reading practices. Remaining vigilant to the various ways in which the cultural texts we study and teach are always already processed may not promptly lead to radical alternatives but will certainly help us keep on our toes.

I would like to acknowledge my collaboration with Paul Danyluk at the beginning stages of this special issue. Paul, a doctoral student when we began to plan this project, withdrew from academe to pursue other interesting trajectories in life. Paul, we miss you at TransCanada Institute, and we wish you all the best.

NOTE

- 1 Cosmopolitanism is a loaded, and variously defined, term. My use of the term here is indebted to its nuanced readings offered in such studies as *Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002); *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1998); and Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006).

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