

Transatlantic Figures in *The Imperialist* Public Sentiment, Private Appetite

“It would have been idle to inquire into the antecedents, or even the circumstances, of old Mother Beggarlegs. . . . And why ‘Beggarlegs’ nobody in the world could tell you” (Duncan 43). So begins Sara Jeannette Duncan’s 1904 novel *The Imperialist*, with this enigmatic figure who continues to be something of a mystery insofar as students and scholars rarely recognize Mother Beggarlegs as a Black woman. And yet she *is* identified as such and generates a particular effect in the novel’s eponymous character: “The name invested her with a graceless, anatomical interest, it penetrated *her wizened black* and derisively exposed her; her name went far indeed to make her dramatic. Lorne Murchison, when he was quite a little boy, was affected by this, and by the unfairness of the way it singled her out” (43, emphasis mine). Scholars have observed the real-life antecedents of other characters in the novel, and Frank Davey refers in passing to “the old black vendor of taffy and gingerbread” (423), but no one seems to have sought an antecedent of Mother Beggarlegs. A possibility is, nevertheless, identified in a letter from one of Duncan’s contemporary readers, quoted in Thomas Tausky’s 1980 monograph on Duncan and his 1996 critical edition of the novel: “In the [18]70s I was a boy living in your city . . . my mind lingers along the Old Market place on Dalhousie St. [*sic*] especially on Market day. I still can see that dear old Black mammy, with her basket of Gingerbread covered with little caraway seeds & sugar” (Tausky, *Imperialist*, 286 n1). Whether or not Duncan had this particular person in mind is less important to this essay than 1) the long-standing *non*-recognition of racialized difference as a key ingredient in the novel’s opening scene, and 2) the apparent lack of memory in Duncan’s novel about Mother

Beggarlegs' antecedents in the diaspora of transatlantic slavery and abolitionism. Together, these observations suggest the success of a white, Anglophone national pedagogy: a pedagogy through which Canada has sought to differentiate itself from the United States (and before that, British North America from New France) by way of silence on its own history of slavery and racism against people of African descent as well as self-congratulation on being the terminus of the Underground Railroad. A white settler-colonial inheritance of "the moral advantage" of the British Empire (Duncan 130), or the "moral capital" Britain earned in the abolition of the slave trade (Brown), seems to be an inexhaustible fund from which white Canada still draws.

Despite Duncan's relegation of Mother Beggarlegs to "a group of odd characters, rarer now than they used to be, etched upon the vague consciousness of small towns as in a way mysterious and uncanny" (43), this essay examines the semiotic functions of this character's presence in Duncan's exposition of everyday life in a rapidly industrializing Ontario town at the end of the nineteenth century. In one sense, to inquire into Mother Beggarlegs' antecedents really would be "idle"—because transatlantic slavery severed family lines—but it would also be regressive in Duncan's "go-ahead"¹ town of Elgin *and* unsettling in a novel whose idealistic hero advocates an explicitly white Imperialist nationalism for Canada. Such inquiry would remind us not only of other fractures in the novel that would threaten Canada's "destiny" as a nation (see Devereux, Kertzer, Tough), but also demonstrate Canada's participation in the white supremacy practiced by Britain (see Coleman) and the US (see Antwi, Ferguson).

This co-existence of an assumed "moral advantage" with everyday practices of racism is itself an antecedent of Lorne's idealism, insofar as Britain's moral leadership in abolition was arguably for its own later gains in the "scramble for Africa" (Brown, Drescher). Yet the contradiction is covered over on the novel's first page when the eponymous hero is characterized as *different* from the "untrounced" boys of Elgin for his feelings of injustice: Lorne Murchison was affected in his youth by the "unfairness" of the way the name of Mother Beggarlegs "single[s] her out" (43). The narrator observes, "with the invincible optimism one has for the behavior of lovable people," how "his kind attempt at colloquy" with old Mother Beggarlegs "is the first indication" she "can find of that active sympathy with the disabilities of his fellow beings which stamped him later so intelligent a meliorist" (44). In marking this difference between Lorne and the other boys, the text provides

the first of innumerable signs that Lorne's idealism will not be shared by his fellow Elginites, for whom "sentiment" is no obstacle at all to the pursuit of personal gain, social mobility, and material progress because it is understood as "a thing by itself" (90).

Given that sentiment cannot be "a thing by itself," Lorne's sentiment will defeat him, just as "sentiment" defeated the women writers of abolitionist (and other) romances in the romance-realism debates about which Duncan was acutely aware (see Dean 14-17). Lorne is on the fringe of Elgin in the novel's closing pages just as Mother Beggarlegs appears at the edge of the text as a member of a group "rarer now than they used to be" (44)—objects of "a sentiment of affection" that is now "an anachronism of the heart" (90). His early sympathetic engagement with Mother Beggarlegs makes him a small "I" liberal just as his later economic protectionist sympathies are out of sync with the local electorate's desire for free trade. These traits also make him an early representative of the cultural nationalists, like those who institutionalized Canadian literature in the 1970s, insofar as he develops into the young professional who, in the novel's free trade debates, most insists that Canada should not become like the US. Lorne is idealistically unaware of Canada's entanglements in a political realist history that precedes and exceeds his vision. He is also so affected by his fellow citizens' vote for free trade and the loss of his marriage prospects that he must be sent away—to Florida—to convalesce (Duncan 295). In this go-ahead town that "produced" him (Duncan 60), Lorne has failed to distinguish a public sentiment of loyalty to Britain from the private appetite for upward mobility and consumption at the lowest personal cost. Despite the "public sentiment" (Duncan 45) displayed in Chapter One, then, the public measure of appetite in the election plot, and its ample evidence in the novel's representations of everyday life, erases moral advantage as a means of national distinction.

And so, although for Duncan's narrator "[i]t is hard to invest Mother Beggarlegs with importance" (44), I argue that her function in introducing us to Lorne through sentiment makes her a very important index to Canadians' assent to the manufacturing of national differences between Britain, America, and Canada *in the midst* of the novel's displays of their common allegiance to capitalist values. Lorne's feeling for injustice in relation to an old Black woman is demonstrated *in a marketplace encounter with her*, and so unsurprisingly the novel repeatedly figures social, emotional, political—and religious²—relations between individuals and families through the market's language of profits, losses, speculation, investment, and debt. The fact of Mother Beggarlegs'

presence in the novel points us to the rise and management of capitalism through African slavery in the Americas, to an absence of difference among the European empires and subsequently an absence of difference between Canada and the US. Economic protectionism and free trade—the subject of debate in the novel’s election plot—were first practiced as intermittent political and/as economic arrangements between empires in the transatlantic circuit of slave labour and goods (Drescher). And it was in the abolition of the slave trade, then of slavery, that mercantilist capitalism was morphed into industrialized capitalism, that peasants, artisans, and other economic migrants became factory workers, and many white British immigrants to Canada—like John Murchison, himself an economic migrant—became owners of property and profits. Such changes occurred amidst, and relied on, the circulation and symbolic value of Black labour long after actual slavery was abolished. This essay looks to the symbolic, or figurative, implications of Mother Beggarlegs’ early presence and rapid disappearance from the novel. She is a citation of slavery and abolition history in Duncan’s story of “the making of the nation” (79).

The purpose of this return to *The Imperialist* is neither to discredit this particular novel, which I think is brilliant, or the very rich body of scholarship on Duncan, nor is it to say again, as Cecily Devereux so succinctly puts it, “*The Imperialist*, not surprisingly, is imperialist” (186). Rather, the purpose is to attend to the pedagogical necessity of reading closely the *figurative* dimensions of a work of literature as marks of history’s incorporation into the everyday-ness represented therein. This novel remembers old Mother Beggarlegs on the Queen’s Birthday when she “helps” (44) the narrator to remember an era before the Murchison family could afford to give their children money to celebrate. She is also remembered in the novel’s interweaving of the discourses of sentiment, business, economics, war, “race,” and evolution and adaptation, to represent the texture of everyday values across thirty years of change in the colony. Through the figurative recurrence of such discourses in the novel, we can find the structure of feeling by which assent to overlook contradiction in the colony’s search for political autonomy is secured under such names as “business” and “opportunity” (used no fewer than one hundred times and thirty times, respectively, across the novel’s thirty-three chapters).

Limited to the close reading of just a few portions of the novel’s first chapter, this essay identifies only some of the many threads in the novel’s weave that are tied to the facts and the effects of transatlantic slavery and

abolition. I use this textile-texture metaphor deliberately, not only because the novel's ending relies on the same metaphor when it "lose[s] the thread of destiny" for "Lorne and his country" (296), but because looms and weaving are simultaneously metonyms for the labour and economics of wool and cotton production, and for the Scottish and African diasporas in Canada's history. They are key metonymical ingredients in the story of modernity, of industrial revolutions and everyday life, in Britain, the US, and Canada. In other words, they are antecedents for Duncan's manufacturing town of Elgin and its residents, its making of owners, classes of workers, and the free trade outcome of the novel's election. Such history would have been part of the everyday-ness of Duncan's early biography; that she knew about the invention and effects of the cotton gin is a certainty, given that her first professional writing assignment was to submit articles to selected newspapers, on both sides of the Canada-US border, on "the New Orleans Cotton Centennial, the World's Fair of its time" (Tausky, *Sara* 1). By opening her novel with an encounter between a first-generation Scotch-Canadian white boy and an old "Black mammy" in a southwestern Ontario town, Duncan flags how the making of Canada is inextricable from its economic and/as racial history.

Names and Naming

Though *Mother Beggarlegs* is not referred to beyond the novel's first two paragraphs, the terms of her introduction circulate metonymically in scenes about names and their relation to origins, status, and the probable futures of selected residents of Duncan's Elgin.³ Typical to the novel's density and economy of exposition, Chapter One also observes social distinctions being re-made in the Dominion in commentary on family names, religious and political affiliation, and degrees of economic mobility. The account of the names and naming of the Murchison children articulates some of those "social principles" of Elgin (79) that will produce the obvious later contrast in the scene of names and re-naming of the "Indians" who are given the vote but, according to Mrs. Murchison, can "never" be trusted (270; see Kertzer, *Tough*). Despite the narrator's humorous account of the history of Elgin's settlement from which these social principles derive—"Any process of blending implies confusion to begin with; we are here at the making of a nation" (79)—the novel's first chapter is very clear about "where to draw the line" (80).

Recurrent scenes that address names and naming recall the first person to whom we are introduced in Elgin: *Mother Beggarlegs*. The novel not only

discourages inquiry into the gingerbread vendor's "antecedents, or even circumstances" (43), it also undermines further inquiry by commenting thus on her *name*: "And why 'Beggarlegs' nobody in the world could tell you. It might have been a dateless waggery, or it might have been a corruption of some more dignified surname, but it was all she ever got" (43). While the "untrounced young male[s] of Elgin" shouted "insultingly 'Old Mother Beggarlegs! Old Mother Beggarlegs!'" Elgin's "[s]erious, meticulous persons called her 'Mrs.' Beggarlegs, slightly lowering their voices and slurring it, however, it must be admitted" (43). Yet recognition of the "wizeden black" that "derisively exposed her" also particularizes her identity. There are two ways, then, in which the name "invests" her with far more significance than is suggested by the "graceless, anatomical interest" to which others' use of this name reduces her in young Lorne's sympathetic eyes (43). Indeed, this anatomical interest, drawing attention to what twentieth-century federal rhetoric will call "visible" difference, actually facilitates inquiry into her antecedents and present circumstances.

As Maureen Elgersman notes, "re-naming . . . was one of the important aspects of the seasoning of slaves" and "one of the most basic tenets of the institution" of slavery (8). In this sense, Canada's history with the peculiar institution begins as early as the re-naming of the second known Black man to arrive in (what would become) Canada, "Olivier LeJeune, named after the trading company's clerk and the priest who taught him his catechism" (Elgersman 7). (That this name is French does not obviate the need for attention to the continued presence of Black people and slavery in British North America after France's defeat by Britain, though the defeat allows Duncan's narrator to be particularly ironic about, when not dismissive of, the French presence in Elgin; e.g., 80). That no one in Elgin knows the gingerbread vendor's actual name, or how she came by her current name, suggests that the history of slavery in Canada was history deliberately forgotten by Duncan's representative Canadians in the last decades of the nineteenth century, even though the loyalty to Britain echoed in Lorne Murchison's characterization goes back to the migration of United Empire Loyalists (UEL) with their slaves and free Black men and women who fought alongside the British against the US colonies in the American War of Independence (see, e.g., Hill). One UEL ally in particular, Joseph Brant, Mohawk leader of the Six Nations (the novel's Moneida "Indians") after whom Duncan's birthplace, Brantford (the novel's Elgin), is named, brought Sarah Pooley, a Black domestic worker, from the US to the Six

Nations reserve with his family (Elgersman 92-93). White descendants of white UELs are identified in the novel: for example, Squire Ormiston, the Indian Agent (treated sympathetically), as well as the patrician forerunners of UELs, the Filkin sisters (treated less sympathetically, with their French connections), who come from “Nova Scotia” (81) where African diasporic roots run deep. But the narrator reserves her affection for John Murchison, an immigrant from northern Scotland, and his family, who illustrate the rapidity of the upward mobility enabled in Canada in the final decades of the nineteenth century, i.e., the period between John Murchison’s emigration and his family’s current success.

The novel’s citation of refugees from the American Revolution (and the War of 1812) leads us to a likely answer to why the name “Beggarlegs.” In “The Question of ‘Begging’: Fugitive Slave Relief in Canada, 1830-1865,” Michael Hembree notes the following of the migration of free Black people and fugitive slaves into Canada West from the US: “once the fugitive slave crossed the Canadian border, the question of aid became problematic. . . . Many Northern free blacks had the opportunity to prepare for their move to Canada,” but, “For the fugitive slave, fresh from the Southern plantation, the ordeal of the escape did not end at the Canadian border. Fugitives often arrived exhausted and destitute . . . Their needs were genuine, and the flood of refugees in the early 1850s overwhelmed the existing sources of aid” (314-15). Given that “By 1860, the black population of Canada West had reached at least forty thousand, and probably three-quarters of that number were fugitive slaves,” the need for assistance was great, but “the numerous appeals tested the limits of Anglo-American philanthropy” (Hembree 315, 317). Whether or not Mother Beggarlegs was a former slave, her place in Elgin at century’s end—making and selling cookies and taffy—satisfies a colonial sweet tooth formed by the transatlantic trade in slave-made sugar (see Mintz).

In the context of a novel that considers the *future* of the transatlantic circulation of goods and profits, and particularly the question of charity in the form of taxes and tariffs, it becomes equally interesting to learn from Hembree that fundraisers for the relief of Black settlers in Canada “tapped philanthropic sources in the Anglo-American antislavery network” (316). Similarly, given Lorne’s early sentiment for Mother Beggarlegs and his later political interest in protectionism in foreign relations and economic policy, it is pertinent to learn that philanthropic protectionism entered into the refugee relief efforts when the needs of Black immigrants became greatest after 1850 with the Fugitive Slave Act: some American anti-slavery

advocates insisted that relief be directed only towards free Black men and fugitive slaves who stayed in the US, while British abolitionists “kept their contributions within the empire” (Hembree 317). Thus, when Duncan’s narrator tells us that “such persons [as Mother Beggarlegs] contributed little to the common good” (43), the irony deepens at how we are introduced to Lorne Murchison via his sympathetic response to the unfair treatment of the gingerbread vendor. His boyhood sympathy, and his later desire to ameliorate the circumstances of England’s poor through trade protectionism, represent his failure to understand the incompatibility of government economic policy with social relief.

Meanwhile, evidence and memory of Black settlement in Canada West, and its antecedents in slavery and racism, seem to have been reduced to this sole Black presence in Elgin, a representative of “the group of odd characters, rarer now than they used to be, etched upon the vague consciousness of small towns as in a way mysterious and uncanny” (Duncan 43). Perhaps old Mother Beggarlegs’ rarity speaks to how after 1865 (the end of the American Civil War), some sixty percent of Black refugees had returned to the US precisely because they did not find Canada free from racism (Thomson 46-47).

Workers and Smutty Faces

By repetition and association, Mother Beggarlegs also functions in relation to forms of May 24, “Victoria Day,” celebrations that are not only frowned upon by Elgin’s polite society as excessive, but also ironically exposed to indicate how such celebrations in the colony have less to do with felt sentiment for the Crown and more to do with conspicuous consumption.

Such a day for the hotels . . . such a day for the circus . . . such a day for Mother Beggarlegs! The hotels, and the shops and stalls for eating and drinking, were the only places in which business was done; the public sentiment put universal shutters up, but the public appetite insisted upon excepting the means to carnival. (Duncan 45)

But “Polite society . . . preferred the alternative of staying at home and mowing the lawn, or drinking raspberry vinegar on its own beflagged verandah; looking forward in the afternoon to the lacrosse match” (47). With typical ironic implication, the narrator leaves it to readers to draw the line at impolite society, but in case we need instruction, she takes to the sidewalk to observe the public appetite on this Queen’s Birthday.

From an aside on the scale of “discrimination” and “choice” at Snow’s ice cream parlour—“(Gallantry exacted ten-cent dishes, but for young ladies

alone, or family parties, Mrs. Snow would bring five-cent quantities almost without asking, and for very small boys one dish and the requisite numbers of spoons)” (45)—the narrator moves seamlessly to a cautionary tale about unintended semiosis. Ever alert to how Elgin draws its lines, she distinguishes between a “soft felt hat,” worn by a pastoral Corydon in search of a mate (45), and “a dark green one, with a feather in it” (46): “here was distinction, for such a hat indicated that its owner belonged to the Independent Order of Foresters [IOF], who would leave their spring wheat for forty miles round to meet in Elgin and march in procession, wearing their hats, and dazzlingly scatter upon Main Street” (46). Here is the caution: “It is no great thing, a hat of any quality; but a small thing may ring dramatic on the right metal, and in the vivid idea of Lorne Murchison and his sister Advena a Robin Hood walked in every Independent Forester” (46). As Misao Dean explains, the IOF was a “non-profit ‘fraternal’ society that offered sick benefits, disability, and death benefits to subscribers. It was promoted in Ontario in the 1880s by Peter Martin (Oronhyatekha), a physician born on the Six Nations reserve near Brantford” (Duncan 46 n1). This example of co-operation represents what factory workers’ unions would try to secure from owners, so we shouldn’t be surprised that the narrator ironically remarks on Lorne and Advena’s reading thus:

Which shows the risks you run if you, a person of honest livelihood and solicited vote, adopt any portion of a habit not familiar to you, and go marching about with a banner and a band. Two children may be standing at the first street corner, to whom your respectability and your property may at once become illusion and your outlawry the delightful fact. (46)

Respectability and property are the cornerstones of capitalist democracy and polite society, and not to be risked in the short or long term! By the time Lorne is in his twenties, these values will be sufficiently developed in Elgin to tilt the election to a victory for free trade and a defeat of Lorne’s vision by which taxes would redistribute the wealth among “the British race” (Duncan 225).

But there is an undertow to the irony here because it opens a gap not only between the narrator and her characters, to which the criticism has richly attended, but also between the narrator’s pedagogy, her obvious affection for the Murchisons, and the historical knowledge available through figurative language and semiotic movement. This undertow gathers force in the structure of Chapter One, where significance is produced by relations of synecdoche and contiguity, by association and proximity. The narrative moves metonymically from respectability and property, to illusion and outlawry, to an excursion by train that crosses the border into the US; it

features the working classes who arrange their own “deal” to take this train and the phenomenon of “social combination” that can lead to a decline in standards and social distinctions.

Treated with characteristic irony, the May 24 train excursion in Chapter One is nevertheless different in tone from the ironic narration of an earlier period of social mobility in the Dominion, i.e., before the rise of factory manufacture and the migration of Black people from the American South to the American North. In that earlier period, which is narrated in Chapter Five, grandsons of former aristocrats “married the daughters of well-to-do persons who came from the north of Ireland, the east of Scotland, and the Lord knows where. It was a sorry tale of disintegration with a cheerful sequel of rebuilding, leading to a little unavoidable confusion as the edifice went up. Any process of blending implies confusion to begin with” (Duncan 79). But Chapter One’s narration of possible “social combination” of the middle class with Elgin’s factory workers must be understood in the temporality of the novel’s election plot *in the present* and in the cultural geography of anti-US sentiment. That the period of “unavoidable confusion” is in the past, is distinct from the achieved progress of Elgin’s middle class who are now a generation or more beyond the period of “unavoidable confusion,” provides a degree of nostalgia for mercantile capitalism: “The valuable part of it all was a certain bright freedom, and this was of the essence. Trade was a decent communal way of making a living, rooted in independence and the general need; it had none of the meaner aspects” (80). But in the period of Lorne’s childhood—that is, at the time of his encounter with Mother Beggarlegs in Chapter One—Old World class attributes are being redistributed across Elgin’s growing middle class in such a way that the lines of social distinction are drawn, on one side, at a declining aristocracy associated with Britain, and on the other at wage slaves, associated as they are with the northern US terminus of the Grand Trunk Railway. These lines of distinction are made visible in Chapter One’s account of how *impolite* society celebrates Victoria Day: the account of the May 24 train excursion will end with “smutty faces” of factory workers, an aristocrat’s son who “loved stoking,” and a middle class that will decide against proximity to either social extreme (47).

To demonstrate Chapter One’s semiotic movement from Mother Beggarlegs to metonyms for “blackface” entertainment, to the evidence of upward mobility of the Murchisons, *and* the spatialization of this movement across the Canada-US border, I quote at length below. Note how money is not only an actual object that changes hands; it also literally and figuratively

modifies and classifies the people it touches by whether or not they have it, how they have acquired it, and how they choose to dispose of it:

A cheap trip brought the Order of Green Hats to Elgin; and there were cheap trips on this great day to persuade other persons to leave it. The Grand Trunk had even then an idea of encouraging social combination for change of scene, and it was quite a common thing for the operatives of the Milburn Boiler Company to arrange to get themselves carried to the lakeside or "the Falls" at half a dollar a head. The "hands" got it up themselves, and it was a question in Elgin whether one might sink one's dignity and go as a hand for the sake of the fifty-cent opportunity, a question usually decided in the negative. The social distinctions of Elgin may not be easily appreciated by people accustomed to the rough and ready standards of a world at the other end of the Grand Trunk; but it will be clear at a glance that nobody whose occupation prescribed a clean face could be expected to travel cheek by jowl, as a privilege, with persons who were habitually seen with smutty ones, barefaced smut, streaming out at the polite afternoon hour of six, jangling an empty dinner pail. So much we may decide, and leave it, reflecting as we go how simple and satisfactory, after all, are the prejudices which can hold up such obvious justification. There was recently to be pointed out in England the heir to a dukedom who loved stoking, and got his face smutty by preference. He would have been deplorably subversive of accepted conventions in Elgin . . . (Duncan 46-47)

The normative position from which a middle-class perspective narrates the new social distinctions for the Canadian nation is evident in several places here: for example, in the reduction of the efforts of a socialist collective, the Independent Order of Foresters, to a feature of their appearance ("Green Hats"); in the synecdoches by which "hands" identify workers and "half a dollar a head" reduces people to financial units in a statistical herd; in the pun on "common" that typifies the undignified behavior of factory workers who take part in "social combination," and arrange for a reduced price for it, too; in the explanation that people from the industrialized northern US (the "other end of the Grand Trunk"), among whom are also many Black economic migrants from the US South, are unlikely to understand "the social distinctions" of their betters in Elgin; and in the "obvious justification" of prejudices both against and within factory workers about their proximity to the Blackness of slavery.

If we needed a succinct tutorial on the parameters and stakes of restoring "social distinctions" out of the "social confusion" of the Dominion's past, on the consequences of the shift from mercantile to industrial capitalism, and on the future implied for Canada, we would find it here in this small sketch of the transatlantic circuitry in the nation's making. This sketch includes a reference to how working for factory wages was once considered a form of

slavery for white workers and how the white practice of blackface managed such anxieties among a new working class (see Roediger, Antwi “Lack”, Ferguson). Like the aristocrat who chooses stoking and a black face, those smutty faces of the boiler factory *aren't really* Black people; but neither are they to be mistaken for or considered equivalent to the white middle class. That Duncan's contemporary readers would have recognized the everydayness of these racialized citations here is confirmed in a later chapter by her use of the phrase “cake-walk,” where the narrator once again brings together a taste for manufactured goods (86), “the propriety of mixture” (87), and Lorne's first encounter with his political adversary, the Conservative Walter Winter: “Voting on purely party lines, the town had lately rewarded him [Walter Winter] . . . by electing him Mayor, and then provided itself with unlimited entertainment by putting in a Liberal majority on his council, the reports of the weekly sittings being constantly considered as good as a cake-walk” (87). Originating in pre-Civil War plantations, the cake-walk became enormously popular in minstrel shows in the last decades of the nineteenth century: a dance competition in which a cake was often the prize, it is the origin of such turns of phrase as “takes the cake” and “piece of cake” (Gandhi).

From the streets of Elgin, Canada, then, to the US end of the Grand Trunk Railway, to a British aristocracy in decline, and the Canadian factory worker on the rise, this cross-border, cross-class, and transatlantic excursion by which Duncan shows us the spectrum of Elgin's social values demonstrates figuratively the epidermal limits to social blending permitted in the Dominion.

Names and Naming, *Redux*

The narrator seamlessly turns from the public face of this Victoria Day to the private sphere of the Murchison kitchen for our first detailed introduction to the whole of the Murchison family and their circumstances at the time of Lorne's adolescence. Here we find

one of those domestic crises which arose when the Murchisons were temporarily deprived of a “girl.” Everybody was subject to them in Elgin, everybody had to acknowledge and face them. Let a new mill be opened, and it didn't matter what you paid her or how comfortable you made her, off she would go, and you might think yourself lucky if she gave a week's warning. Hard times shut down the mills and brought her back again; but periods of prosperity were very apt to find the ladies of Elgin where I am compelled to introduce Mrs. Murchison—in the kitchen. (47-48)

In the history fondly remembered by the narrator in Chapter One, the Murchisons “could never have afforded, in the beginning, to possess it [the

aristocratic Plummer Place], had it not been sold, under mortgage, at a dramatic sacrifice” (60); the family has yet to prove that they are not only “of” but “in” Elgin (60). Yet, they *are* nevertheless typical Elgin householders in their “domestic” crisis, *and* they are also not the only Elginites who desire—and go after—the opportunity for upward mobility. The servant gone for the May 24 holiday, “the Murchisons had *descended* to face the situation” (48, emphasis mine, since the narrator will shortly emphasize another pun that slips the family by in their distress at the injustice of the servant’s actions):

Lobelia . . . had scurvily manipulated the situation—her situation, it might have been put, if any Murchison had been in the temper for jesting. She had taken unjustifiable means to do a more unjustifiable thing, to secure for herself an improper and unlawful share of the day’s excitements, transferring her work, by the force of circumstances, to the shoulders of other people, since, as Mrs. Murchison remarked, somebody had to do it. Nor had she, her mistress testified, the excuse of fearing unreasonable confinement. (48)

When Mrs. Murchison discovers that the “girl” did not finish the ironing before she left, “Five shirts and *all* the coloured things” (48), the word coloured, coming so soon after “fearing unreasonable confinement” (the servant wasn’t shackled, after all, but she did escape), takes on a different function in the complex play of racial citation established by the presence of a Black woman in the novel’s first sentence, five pages before.

The Murchison family’s sense of injustice on this day, and the astonishment with which Mrs. Murchison meets Advena’s explanation that the servant left because “She objects to rag carpet in her bedroom” (48), will dissipate quickly, however, in Mrs. Murchison’s nostalgia for the days when her rugs were made by her own hands (i.e., when she couldn’t yet afford manufactured ones):

“Rag carpet—upon my word!” . . . “It’s what her betters have to do with! I’ve known the day when that very piece of rag carpet—sixty balls there were in it and every one I sewed with my own fingers—was the best I had for my spare room, with a bit of ingrain in the middle. Dear me!” she went on with a smile that lightened the whole situation, “how proud I was of that performance!” (48-49)

The injustice is felt most keenly in the narrational temporality—the space of nostalgia—between Mrs. Murchison’s past when she could not afford more than a rag carpet made by her own hands and the current moment of not getting her just returns on capital expended in hired help, especially now that she configures herself as one of the servant’s “betters.” The narrator, with self-reflexive irony, takes the opportunity to introduce the names and

naming of the Murchison children into this space, and therein she returns to injustice, a topic first raised in reference to Mother Beggarlegs. Its treatment, however, will continue to be humorous and to present the Murchisons, and especially the young Lorne, in the best possible light.

The story of the names and christenings of the Murchison children segues seamlessly from that earlier time when Alexander Mackenzie “roared” at his christening to his

weeping now, at the age of seven . . . behind the wood-pile. His father had cuffed him for importunity; and the world was no place for a *just* boy, who asked nothing but his *rights*. Only the wood-pile . . . stood inconscient and irresponsible for any share in his *black circumstances*. . . . Poor Alec’s *rights*—to a present of pocket-money on the Queen’s Birthday—were *common* ones, and almost *statutory*. How their father . . . could evade his *liability* in the matter was unfathomable to the Murchisons; it was certainly *illiberal*; they had a *feeling* it was *illegal*. (50-51, emphases mine)

This vocabulary of legal statutes and rights would have been prominent in those American newspapers that John Murchison is typically reading (alongside local and British periodicals) when we see him in the family home. The circulation of such vocabulary that Duncan employs so ably here was an effect of the American Civil War and Emancipation, though we also know that such rights (e.g., of African Americans to vote) were selective and unstable. When talk of rights gets Alec nowhere, Oliver turns to the language of money: “Eph Wheeler, he’s got twenty-five cents, an’ a English sixpence an’ a Yankee nickel. An’ Mr. Wheeler’s only a common working man, a lot poorer’n we are” (51).⁴ Failing to shame his business-owning father into liberality, Oliver turns to inflation as justification: “Give us our fifteen cents each to celebrate with. You can’t do it under that . . . Crackers are eight cents a packet this year, the small size” (51). When inflation fails, Oliver consults his siblings and comes back with a final offer: “‘Look here, father,’ he said, ‘*cash down*, we’ll take ten’” (52). Oliver’s attempts to speak business, like Alec’s understanding of a right to pocket money, are as naive—but telling about everyday discourse—as the young Lorne asking old Mother Beggarlegs “sociably one day, in the act of purchase, why the gilt was generally off her gingerbread. He had been looking long, as a matter of fact, for gingerbread with the gilt on it, being accustomed to the phrase on the lips of his father in connection with small profits” (43-44). Oliver and Alec will come to understand that business is business, not kindness, not sociability, not philanthropy, and certainly not a limited form of socialism of the sort Lorne the Liberal candidate thinks he will find in Imperial economic

protectionism. They will in time become the “sons” in “John Murchison and Sons” (Duncan 57), but Lorne will have to be rescued by the narrator, and “not without emotion,” from a convalescent oblivion (Duncan 296), a final proof that “A sentiment of affection” for Britain is “unrelated to current conditions . . . an anachronism of the heart” (Duncan 90).

But in his boyhood days, the redistribution of Lorne’s modest wealth worked. Chapter One ends with an IOF form of co-operation in miniature to enable the children to celebrate this 24th of May holiday. Lorne pools his own earnings of “thirty cents” with Alec’s “four cents,” and his mother secretly tops up the fund so that “the Queen isn’t going to owe it all” to Lorne (53). Lorne’s selfless leadership in this childhood scene of redistribution of resources, like “his kind attempt at colloquy” (44) with Mother Beggarlegs, will not survive his double defeat, in courtship and in politics, at the novel’s close, when Lorne’s own “black moment” (294), in which he utters an imprecation, just as Mother Beggarlegs did (44), requires the narrator’s intervention.

Irony upon Irony

“Even Duncan’s penetrating and clever irony does not get in the way of her fondness, or ours, for the Murchison family and their fundamentally intelligent, honourable ways,” observes Teresa Hubel (438). As the abundant scholarship on *The Imperialist* attests, Duncan and her narrator are as much individuals as their characters are, and whether or not we see the narrator as inseparable from Duncan, her predilections and taste for irony are omnipresent and provide as much of the enjoyment of the novel as the humour at her community’s expense. As such, the narrator becomes one of those “individuals, rather than bureaucracies, nations, [or] governments,” in a novel about “processes of colonization and the ideas of imperialism in the past” (Devereux 188). The gap between the narrator’s pedagogy and the knowledge history provides—the gap through which I locate some of the deeper ironies tied to Mother Beggarlegs and “etched upon the vague consciousness of small towns as in a way mysterious and uncanny” (Duncan 43)—may be more than a means to see how the text “inscribes and problematizes its own sense of power” (Devereux 188).

While *The Imperialist* is Duncan’s only “Canadian” (and canonical) novel, like her other works it is also a novel of international relations, and one that defines *Canada*’s antecedents explicitly in transatlantic and cross-border terms. Mother Beggarlegs signals the presence of peoples of African descent in British North America in ways that ironize not only “the moral

advantage” in which our imperialist hero believes, but the moral sentiment with which Duncan’s narrator invests him when introducing him through his “kind attempt at colloquy” (44) in a marketplace encounter with Mother Beggarlegs. But getting this irony, as well as being alert to its implications as productive of an unrecognized source of ambivalence in Duncan’s novel, also depends on recognition that Mother Beggarlegs is a person descended from the African diaspora of slavery and a businesswoman whose wares contribute to the community, despite the narrator’s assertion that “it was clear that such persons contributed little to the common good, and, being reticent, were not entertaining” (43).

The scholarship on the novel has amply addressed its narrator’s skill in irony and, more recently, the novel’s amnesia and ambivalence (e.g., Dean, Coleman, Kertzer) about its settler-*post*-colonial “white liberal guilt” (Devereux 188). I have tried here to attend to how this amnesia and ambivalence circulate beyond the Indigenous past and presence these scholars have addressed in the novel, to descendants of both enslaved and free people of the African diaspora whose relationship to the history of southwestern Ontario and the colony speaks in particular ways to Elgin’s politics *and* Canada’s present. The irony deepens when we keep a sufficient distance from the narrator’s irony to recognize how, between the past of John Murchison’s arrival and the story’s present in which Lorne’s ideals are defeated, seamless shifts in narrative temporality work against recognition of how the Murchisons are no longer “too good for their environment” (76). Their attachments to Empire in the novel’s present have become, like the Milburn-Filkins’—even though wielded with none of the UEL’s ostentation or snobbery—a matter of symbolic capital, no more.

By remaining alert to the transatlantic and cross-border dimensions of the novel cited through Mother Beggarlegs’ presence and the cues we are given in Lorne’s boyhood relation to her—wherein, despite his sympathy, his naive use of a business trope only reminds Mother Beggarlegs that despite her freedom, her profits are small indeed—we may find in microscopic detail the foundations and practices of white liberal guilt. “The politicization of personal life,” a process Jon Kertzer illustrates in an example of the novel’s “interplay of romantic and political loyalties” (14-15), occurs, then, not only in relations between characters *in* the novel but between the narrator and reader, between narration and what gets narrated perhaps beyond the narrator’s control—but not beyond a reader’s ability to learn. In this sense, the “here” of the making of a nation is always also “now” in the act of

reading this novel from the past, in the politicization of personal life between the narrator, history, and a reader.

The Imperialist is productive of reading our own time, after the media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement was displaced—and the gains for African Americans by two terms of the first African American presidency—by the election spectacle of an openly racist President of the United States. The increasingly public acts of overt racism in the US draw renewed attention to the question of Canada's perceived moral advantage. And renegotiations of NAFTA, this time with the US taking the protectionist position and Canada promoting (as the majority of voters in Duncan's novel do) the advantages of freer trade for all, provide a new layer of irony to the reading of a novel justly celebrated for its irony.

NOTES

- 1 Duncan frequently uses this adjective, e.g., pp. 58, 83, 92. The OED defines “go-ahead” as follows: 1) “*colloq.* (orig. U.S.). Displaying or characterized by eagerness to proceed with something; headlong; (sometimes) hasty, precipitate”; and 2) “*colloq.* (orig. U.S.). Displaying or characterized by initiative and energy; enterprising; receptive to or enthusiastic about new ideas, progressive; (more generally) associated with or expressive of entrepreneurialism, enterprise, etc.” The term's origins in the US fit the narrator's sympathy with Lorne's anti-US, pro-Imperialist election position.
- 2 See Chapter 9, especially, for Dr. Murchison's calculations.
- 3 See, for example, the scene of the naming of the Murchison children in Chapter One (49-50); the citation of the names Delarue and Leveret in relation to changes to “lines of demarcation” in Elgin's history in Chapter Five (79-82); and the names under which the novel's Indigenous characters were christened and vote in Chapter Thirty-One (274).
- 4 Note the transatlantic denominations of the amounts.

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