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Trauma Plots
Reading Contemporary Canadian First World War Fiction in a Comparative Perspective

(Trans)National Memory and Trauma Paradigms

In the wake of the centenary of the First World War and of recent reassessments of Canada in various theatres of war, it is urgent to reconsider the wide-ranging Canadian contributions to what I refer to as a *transnational trauma paradigm*, by placing this specific legacy of violence in a comparative framework. The purpose of my article is to examine Canadian novels about the First World War published in the past forty years in relation to this transnational paradigm. My contention is that as with much contemporary British, French, Irish, and Australian fiction, the dominant theme of recent Canadian Great War novels is war trauma and its aftermath. This in itself is not a revelation. What is revelatory is how the Canadian works of fiction analyzed below depart from the national metanarrative of sacrifice to include marginalized voices from the war front and the home front, proposing new ways of reading the traumatic impact of the First World War that echo in other national literatures. As Jay Winter and Antoine Prost remind us, "every nation has its own Great War" (193), yet the 1914-1918 conflict was also a global one that radically transformed lives all over the world. Winter and Prost see the future of war studies in comparison, and stress the importance of transcultural dialogues in reinterpreting the conflict (193).[1] It is particularly important at this historical moment to read war studies in transnational contexts in order to bring into relief unexpected overlaps and divergences in the way people all over the globe responded to the war and remember it today.

If, for obvious reasons, Canadian scholars tend to examine this historical and literary tradition in the Canadian context, aiming to identify its distinctive

national characteristics, it is perhaps easier for non-Canadians to place this specific legacy of violence in a comparative framework. By highlighting "connections in dissimilarity" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 18), such an approach might also disclose a productive, intercultural dynamic between different national responses to the war at its centenary. The research perspective adopted here is inspired by Astrid Erll's concept of *transcultural, transnational* or *travelling* memory "directed towards mnemonic processes unfolding *across* and *beyond* cultures" (9). In this article, I provide a broad-based overview survey of a number of trends in contemporary Canadian World War I fiction, departing from a notion of national culture conceptualized as an exclusive heritage, to deal with both sites of memory (or *lieux de mémoire*) and travels of memory (*les voyages de mémoire*) (Erll 11). Canadian World War I literature thus becomes a site of memory which engages with the heterogeneous narratives of Canadian memorial heritage, yet which is synchronously traversed and reshaped by the flows of transnational imaginaries.

Historically, the Great War has been seen as a catalyst of Canadianness. For generations of Canadian historians, the capture of the impregnable Vimy Ridge on 9 April 1917, during which four Canadian divisions fought together for the first time, was a foundational battle that shaped modern Canada. Its strategic significance was limited, yet the story of Vimy soon metamorphosed into "the birth of a nation" (Vance, *Maple* 103; Zacharias). As Jonathan F. Vance skillfully demonstrates in *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War (*40-41), key to Canada's myth of the Great War, shaped in the post-war years, was the idealization of the fallen who gave their lives in a crusade for a righteous cause. The combatants formed a community of sacrifice, which had the power to atone for the sins of the world. With few exceptions, early Canadian war literature contributed to popularizing this idealized vision of war. Vance emphasizes that, although used by the elites to maintain the status quo, the myth primarily fulfilled a consolatory function for a society devastated by war (*Death* 262-67*)*. This metanarrative was not radically challenged until the 1970s, when scholars began to question the strategic triumphs of the Canadian Corps, as well as to explore the wider resonance of the war.[2] At approximately the same time, after at least forty years of near absence in literature, the history of the First World War became a source of inspiration for Canadian writers and playwrights.

The emergence of a significant body of fiction about the First World War at the end of the twentieth century also attracted the attention of Canadian academics. While earlier interpretations were limited to specific literary

works, Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977) in particular,[3] Dagmar Novak's *Dubious Glory: The Two World Wars and the Canadian Novel* (2000) placed Canadian war writing in a coherent perspective of historical continuity. Furthermore, two studies published at the war's centenary offer insightful analyses of recent Canadian war writing. In *Landscapes of War and Memory: The Two World Wars in Canadian Literature and the Arts, 1977-2007* (2014), Sherrill Grace examines the spectre of the two global conflicts in Canadian culture by focusing on the role of the contemporary reader as a witness. Grace contends that Findley's *The Wars* had a strong impact on the development of contemporary Great War literature in Canada, as it "established a number of tropes and narrative strategies for remembering and representing that war" (*Landscapes* 11). In her view, several post-1977 Canadian works aim to revise historical records, but also urge the reader to reconsider what it means to be Canadian and human today (*Landscapes* 16). In *Catching the Torch*: *Contemporary Canadian Literary Responses to World War I* (2014), Neta Gordon in turn engages with the transformations of the Canadian myth of the Great War in novels and plays published over the past twenty-five years,

> and the concurrent myth that a number of Canadian values were forged during the events of that war—values such as a sense of duty toward the just cause, a quiet, communal strength, a disinterest in ostentatious personal heroism, and a sense of pride that Canadian soldiers could be counted on to fight while remaining morally committed to mediation and peace (4).

In Gordon's opinion, some Canadian novelists and playwrights radically question the mythical construction of the conflict and expose its horrors, yet synchronously approach it as "a site of cultural progression" (14). Even those Canadian writers who attempt to reinterpret the war from the perspective of marginalized "others" often "celebrate the way the nation came together in grief" (117).

The "return" of the Great War as an important theme in popular culture since the 1970s is not a uniquely Canadian phenomenon. Due to numerous films, television documentaries, books, theatrical plays, and songs, the Great War has become a significant cultural point of reference in Western Europe, North America, and Australia. With time and the changing ethics of memory, many nations tend to reassess the neglected traumas of marginalized social groups and to question the metanarrative of remembrance (Alexander 10-11). By saving the memory of the conflict from oblivion, First World War literary, cinematic, and artistic representations situate the war as a vital component of individual and collective identities.

Significantly, however, although produced in very different cultural contexts and shaped by specific national traditions, these popular representations usually maintain an image of the war as trauma, focusing on the suffering of soldiers and societies (see Wilson 47). As a result, images of mud, craters, and wire, as well as shell-shocked soldiers cowering in the trenches to clamber heroically "over the top," have become part of a transnational memory of the Great War (Sokołowska-Paryż and Löschnigg 7-8).[4]

Yet, the centrality of trauma in recent World War I fiction is also a product of the "wound culture" characteristic of late modernity, what Mark Seltzer calls "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (3). Trauma, broadly understood as extreme individual and collective suffering caused by limit events, has become "a privileged site for identity" in contemporary cultural discourses, from fiction and life writing to photography and film (Luckhurst 64). Trauma theory, influenced by Holocaust and post-Vietnam War studies, serves today to explicate earlier and later traumatic histories. Depending on the theoretical school, traumatic memory either is situated beyond conscious recall or, on the contrary, can be retrieved, verbalized, and modified.[5] Consequently, as noted by Roger Luckhurst (79), trauma often engenders a crisis of representation and thus a radical challenge to the capacities of literature, yet at the same time it paradoxically generates retrospective narratives that attempt to verbalize the traumatic past and its sequels in experimental ways. Furthermore, recent trauma narratives can be viewed in the frame of the theories of the ethics of care as proposed by such distinct philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler, which conceptualize individual and collective identities in terms of vulnerability and interdependence. As a result, according to Susanna Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, drawing the reader's attention "to the wound of the Other, or to the Other as wound," the spectacle of trauma creates a community of suffering that redefines humanity as a relational concept (12).

Trauma Plots

Several Canadian novels, such as Findley's *The Wars* (1977), Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* (1997), Jack Hodgins' *Broken Ground* (1998), Allan Donaldson's *Maclean* (2005), and Frances Itani's *Deafening* (2003) and *Tell* (2014), approach the First World War as a cataclysmic event and thus contribute to an "intensification of atrocity consciousness" (Luckhurst 89). This concern with psychological wounds characterizes much contemporary

World War I fiction published in other countries as well. The symptomatology of trauma is key, for instance, to British writer Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) and *Another World* (1998). Yet, what distinguishes Donaldson's *Maclean* and Itani's *Tell* from other trauma novels about the First World War is their complex representations of the processes of *acting out*, i.e., the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event, and *working through*, i.e., the disengagement from the traumatic past (see LaCapra 58, 142-43). By using non-linear, interruptive techniques, Itani and Donaldson attempt to illustrate the aporia of traumatic memory and the paralyzing power of flashback. Whereas Itani's *Tell*, through its focus on the veteran's healing and reintegration, can be classified as a "harmonizing narrative," using Dominick LaCapra's terminology (13), Donaldson's *Maclean* examines the spectral power of war, which continues to haunt and disable the protagonist many years after the conflict. Maclean's bitterness and anger caused by the social marginalization of veterans are echoed, perhaps more than in Barker's fiction, in such French novels as Pierre Lemaitre's *Au revoir là-haut* (2013*; The Great Swindle* [2015]) and Gisèle Bienne's *Le cavalier démonté* (2006). Trauma serves in these texts as a vehicle for a critique of biopolitics and the neglect of ex-servicemen in the post-war years, as well as the erasures of collective memory. With detailed attention to specific national contexts of repatriation and reintegration, this historical fiction exposes the failure of the nation-state to assume responsibility for traumatized veterans. Yet, by doing so, it also signals the current transvaluation of the war survivor, who deserves empathy and respect as a powerless, tragic victim.[6] This contrasts with the attitude to ex-servicemen in the post-war years, when especially those suffering from shell shock were often seen with hostility as unsettling reminders of the horrors of the front. Consequently, by exploring the forgotten stories of traumatized veterans, these fictional texts "provide an inroad into how national identities and social memories are shaped" (Montgomery 10).

Itani's *Deafening* and Hodgins' *Broken Ground* in turn explore the problem of survivor guilt, defined by Robert J. Lifton (115-79) as the survivor's identification with the dead and a sense of moral transgression resulting from participation in unjustified slaughter. Itani complements the national war story by giving a voice to a stretcher-bearer, a perspective previously neglected in official accounts of the conflict. As a result, *Deafening* provides a particularly affecting testimony of the emotional pain of medical personnel when confronted with mutilation and mass death at the front. While it is usually the suffering of the wounded that is foregrounded in war literature (Acton and Potter 2), Itani

explores the moral and emotional breakdown of the carer. The extremes of resilience and emotional dyscontrol illustrated in *Deafening* challenge the Canadian cliché of eager acceptance of a war conducted for a higher cause. In this, Itani challenges the shift in public representations of the valour of war. Immersed in a world of suffering and death, Jim, the male protagonist of the novel, experiences a traumatic shock, accompanied by shame for being healthy and unscathed. Witnessing violence shatters not only his own moral integrity, but also his trust in communal bonds and values. Itani's concern with survivor guilt, a category of trauma which emerged as a focus from Holocaust studies and was reconceptualized after the Vietnam War, redefines the ethical crisis of the First World War in ways more familiar, yet disturbing, to contemporary readers.

These ethical dilemmas are broached with exceptional depth in *Broken Ground*, where Hodgins depicts the protagonist's struggle to accept his own culpability for the horrors of war. The novel asks important questions about the impossible necessity of confronting ethical responsibility for the brutality of the war zone, both the violence of others and one's own, when war memories challenge the integrity of the self and survival appears, in Cathy Caruth's terms, "a betrayal into life" (*Literature* 67). The entangled roles of victim and perpetrator, as depicted in the novel, have become important ethical issues at the turn of the twenty-first century in contexts beyond Canada. They are also central in British First World War fiction, for instance Robert Edric's *In Desolate Heaven* (1997) and Louisa Young's *The Heroes' Welcome* (2014).[7] Like Hodgins, Young depicts the veteran's emotional devastation and slow recovery after the loss of his men at the front, while Edric's protagonist is a broken man who punishes himself for the horrors committed at the front and the moral catastrophe caused by the conflict. Although located in very different historical contexts, the three novels explore the brutalization of bodies and minds following the destabilization of the human in the war zone. Hodgins' protagonist is particularly sensitive to the collapse of ethical values at the front and the painful realization that the war did not bring a better world. He is determined to expose the implicit connections between the world of organized violence and middle-class culture. Nevertheless, as Grace points out, Hodgins "explores the postwar failures of Canadian society as much as the endurance and hope that enabled veterans and their families not just to carry on, but to help build the new nation" (*Landscapes* 456). His portrait of the multi-ethnic Returned Soldiers' Settlement on Vancouver Island stresses communal bonds and the veterans'

determination to survive in spite of various adversities. Similarly to Young's novel, while paying tribute to the First World War soldiers and their families, *Broken Ground* shows, moreover, how traumatic memory can become the foundation of community when trauma victims use their alienation to create an ethos that separates them from those who never went to war.

Findley's *The Wars* and Urquhart's *The Underpainter* stand out of the corpus of post-1970 World War I literature by engaging, in the most ambitious ways, with what Roger Luckhurst describes as "the impossible possibility of an aesthetics of trauma" (81). The complex structure of Findley's text, consisting of several levels of narration, including diaries, recordings, transcripts, and historical research, illustrates the difficulties of writing about the war confronted by those who did not experience it directly. The reliance in Findley's novel on sophisticated aesthetic means to convey the evasiveness of the conflict for the post-war generations is shared by masters of French war fiction, such as Claude Simon and Jean Rouaud. Simon in *L'Acacia* (1989; *The Acacia* [1991]) and Rouaud in *Les Champs d'honneur* (1990; *Fields of Glory* [1998]) also employ non-linear structures, narrative fragmentation, and metafictional comments to signal a sense of distance of the 1914-1918 conflict to the narrator's (and the reader's) present. The three novels can be seen as examples of what LaCapra (179) refers to as post-traumatic writing, which highlights the problematic aspect of representation in relation to catastrophic events. The loose, apparently incoherent structure of *The Wars*, which, nevertheless, provides a powerful testimony to the horrors of the front, thematizes the difficulty of comprehending trauma and the process of writing about it. The central protagonist, Robert Ross, appears marked by an excess of knowledge, which remains beyond the possibility of narrativization. This enigmatic figure, maimed and silenced at the end of the novel, becomes an emblematic witness to the atrocities of history, "a history [that] can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 18). In this way, according to Grace, Findley warns us about the easy acceptance of war myths, particularly that of the birth of Canada in bloodshed and slaughter ("Remembering" 234). Findley exposes the fallacy of colonial ideologies; Robert's ultimate desertion, as well as his radical shift of loyalties, undermines any attempts to give war a coherent meaning. As one of the first novels to question the hegemonic memory of the Great War, *The Wars* has inspired other Canadian writers and can be therefore seen as a *catalyst*, according to the typology of roles played by works of fiction in

the performance of cultural memory proposed by Anne Rigney (351). At the same time, however, although relying on incertitude, inconclusiveness, and contingency, *The Wars* might be paradoxically classified as a *stabilizer* of cultural memory (Rigney 350), as the confrontation of trauma with the limits of representation has become a significant motif of First World War writing and remembrance itself in Canada and beyond.[8]

In Urquhart's *The Underpainter*, the *Erasure* series of paintings, produced by the American protagonist Austin, both enacts and erases the past, thus illustrating the way memory repeats and simultaneously effaces the traumatic event. The particularly complex process of mediation in the novel (see Grace, *Landscapes* 113) signals the opacity of trauma and the ethical problems connected with the representation of the survivor's traumatic experience. Imprisoned in the memories of catastrophe, and struggling against their toxic impact many years after the Armistice, the Canadian protagonists, Augusta and George, function in *The Underpainter* as, applying Caruth's terminology, "self-erasing inscriptions of history" (*Literature* 78). Their desperate efforts to keep the past at bay contrast with the attempts of the fictional artist to recapture their experience and to render, in painting and in writing, the mimetic and anti-mimetic poles of traumatic memory, and thus to simultaneously reveal and conceal the violence of war. Urquhart engages here in a critique of trauma art, which "does not simply supplement the witness's account but manages, in the operation, to annihilate the witness" (Gordon 107). Importantly, *The Wars* and *The Underpainter* radically deny any sense to war, an important departure from the excess of meaning attached to the myth of nation-building in the earlier Canadian imaginary of the 1914-1918 conflict. Both novels produce troubling knowledge about the traumatic past and refuse any sentimental consolation.

Writers such as Findley, Urquhart, and Itani, as well as the less well-known Mary Swan and Michael Poole, have foregrounded in their novels the victimization of women serving during the First World War. Susan R. Grayzel (11) suggests that the image of the home front as a serene, feminized domestic sphere, defined by contrast to the violent front lines, became popular during the 1914-1918 conflict. Such clear divisions helped maintain the illusion of a war waged for the protection of women and children. Propaganda insisted on a radical separation of genders to protect the status quo, yet in reality many women served in the combat zone and many men never left their homes. In Urquhart's *The Underpainter*, Swan's *The Deep* (2002), and Poole's *Rain before Morning* (2006), the lethal impact of war

is depicted from the perspective of female nurses, who are exposed to life-threatening situations and are deeply transformed by the visceral knowledge they acquire at the front. Together with Australian writer Thomas Keneally (*The Daughters of Mars*, 2012) and British writer Louisa Young (*My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, 2011), Canadian authors give voice to forgotten heroines of the conflict and contribute to a reconceptualization of the relation between war and gender. By exploring the traumatic impact of war on women, they also question the dominant focus on the emotional wounds suffered by men in war and trauma literature.[9]

The suffering of women at the home front—mothers, wives, fiancées, sweethearts, and sisters of the men fighting at the war front—has been disregarded for a long time in war remembrance, focused on the combat zone and the combatant's experience. However, according to Winter, thinking in a global framework, "the story of family life in wartime is the most powerful vector of transnational history. War tore families apart and reconfigured them in myriad ways. In all societies at war, the pressures on families to adjust to new circumstances differed not in kind, only in degree" (46). The disruption of family life, the intimate tragedies of women separated from their lovers/husbands, and the difficulty of surviving the war have become important topics of World War I fiction and have been movingly explored by writers such as, for instance, Anna Hope (*Wake*, 2014) in Britain, Alice Ferney (*Dans la guerre*, 2003) in France, and Brenda Walker (*The Wing of Night*, 2005) in Australia. Findley in *The Wars*, Urquhart in *The Stone Carvers* (2001), and Itani in *Deafening* supplement this body of women-centred texts by illuminating female war experience in Canada. As Grace points out, Findley's portrait of a suffering mother, who rebels against the savagery of war and inexplicably loses her sight when her son is injured in Europe, challenges the false separation of the fronts and the ethics of war ideologies which required mothers to accept serenely the death of their sons (*Landscapes* 134, 137). The representation of Klara's heart-rending grief after her lover's death in Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* bears little comparison to any other recent novel about the First World War. Living in a village of German immigrants of whom very few enlisted, Klara is isolated in her pain. She has to censor her sorrow, as she was not married or officially engaged to Eamon and therefore has no right to display her grief. As a result, she suffers from profound dejection, which disconnects her even more from the community. It is only by travelling to France and by working as a stone carver in Vimy that she manages to find consolation. Urquhart reaffirms here

the centrality of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial as the epitome of the nation's grief, yet she also rewrites the national myth by including alternative points of view, such as her heroine's (see Zacharias 128; Fahey 418). In this respect, by disguising her female protagonist as a man to be accepted in the team of stone carvers working on the monument, Urquhart exposes the relation between war art and gender. Pat Barker in *Toby's Room* (2012) also depicts a woman artist who challenges men's exclusive access to the "truth" of war. Both Barker's and Urquhart's female protagonists suffer agonizing pain after the death of their loved ones and they both translate their loss into art—painting (*Toby's Room*) and carving (*The Stone Carvers*). While the art scene was dominated by male artists in the war and post-war years, Barker and Urquhart imagine female figures who reconfigure the substance of war art and, in Urquhart's case, even the texture of a national memorial. In a larger sense, the two novels thus undermine the dichotomy between women as passive grievers and men as inspired artists, and both are important feminist reassessments of gender clichés.[10]

Itani's deaf protagonist Grania is an exceptional figure as a person with a disability, she is particularly vulnerable in a time of war. However, her deafness is also empowering. The parallels Itani draws between Grania, who loses her hearing as a child, and her husband Jim, who is paralyzed by war's deafening noise, highlight the issue of belatedness in the processing of traumatic experience. Itani is careful, however, not to conflate the two traumas, each of them retaining its specific opacity. The title of the novel also implicitly refers to extreme events and our inability to process and comprehend them. Significantly, Grania's experience of exclusion as a person with a disability enables unexpected solidarity with the veterans returning from the front, an ethical and thought-provoking vision of analogies in difference. Moreover, *Deafening* radically questions a dichotomy between military front and home front. The novel depicts a small Canadian community in Ontario devastated by loss and absence. Awaiting news about their loved ones, the female protagonists of the novel experience profound anxiety. Their lives are grim and miserable because of economic privations in wartime Canada, too.[11] In Grania's sister, Tress, Itani explores the distress suffered by women who had to assume responsibility for the men returning from the front. While Grania manages to communicate with Tress' husband, Kenan, her sister is incapable of reconnecting with the injured veteran. The desolation of no man's land is thus transposed into the lives of the protagonists, which become "barren" in the emotional sense, deprived of vitality and hope (Itani, *Deafening* 15).

Post-war readjustment does not only apply to the returning men in Itani's novel, but also to women, who have to face entirely new challenges. For Tress and her husband, the aftermath of the conflict is marked by ceaseless suffering, stress, and bitterness. The war continues to take its toll when Spanish influenza reaches Canada; Grania barely survives, while her beloved grandmother succumbs to the disease. By focusing on female protagonists during the war, both Urquhart and Itani contribute to what Claire Tylee refers to as "an imaginative memory of the First World War which is distinctively women's" (16). Their sacrifice, suffering, and psychological disorders deserve remembrance side by side with the combatant's story—both men and women are *deafened* by war. In this fiction, "trauma is not a category that encompasses death directly, but rather draws our attention to the *survival* of subjects in and beyond sites of violence" (Rothberg, "Preface" xiii). The purpose of such literature is not to portray men and women as "interchangeable" victims (Silverman 14) of the first modern war, but to place their different experiences of suffering in relation to each other, and thus reconceptualize the sequels of extreme violence.

A redefinition of war trauma in terms of emotional and social wounds indirectly related to the battlefield can also be found in French-Canadian World War I fiction. Louis Caron, in *L'Emmitouflé* (1977; *The Draft Dodger* [1980]), and Daniel Poliquin, in *La Kermesse* (2006; *A Secret between Us* [2007]), address the disruption the Conscription Crisis of 1917 caused in French-Canadian communities.[12] Caron's novel retraces in a realistic manner the destiny of two Francophone deserters against a background of persecutions and denunciations in French Canada. Constantly on the run, trying to evade the English-Canadian soldiers by hiding in the woods, Nazaire, the central protagonist, is overwhelmed by an increasing anxiety and sense of alienation. Many years after the war he still suffers from a traumatic disorder. The novel reiterates the French-Canadian martyrology by placing the experience of French Canadians within a broader perspective of ethnic conflicts dividing English and French Canada since the eighteenth century. As to Poliquin, with bitter irony he examines the hypocrisy of both English Canadians and French Canadians during the war. He wonders at the decisions of Francophone volunteers and compares them to other peoples of the British and French Empires who, in the moment of early-twentieth-century crisis, pledged allegiance to the colonizer in spite of the centuries of oppression. The protagonist of the novel, who joins the Princess Pats for materialistic reasons, returns, traumatized, to Canada, only to discover

that he has become an outcast from his home community (see Gordon 150-59; Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski, *Comparing* 113-24). The Canadian historical context is of primary importance in both Caron's and Poliquin's texts, yet the image of war as productive of sharp divisions within the colonized community echoes, for instance, in Irish novels such as *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) by Jamie O'Neill, *The Canal Bridge* (2005) by Tom Phelan, and *A Long Long Way* (2005) by Sebastian Barry. Such fiction then serves to valorize the war effort of marginalized groups, whose contribution was erased from collective memory due to the dominant, anti-colonial agenda. Their experience of pain can be properly commemorated only today, when it is finally verbalized by new "carriers" (Alexander 10-11) of trauma whose ideological interests differ from the mainstream.

Furthermore, postcolonial World War I fiction might prove particularly effective in illustrating Cathy Caruth's famous statement that trauma has the potential to bridge gaps between different cultural experiences ("Trauma" 11). This ethical promise is aptly realized in *Three Day Road* (2005), in which Joseph Boyden reinterprets the Canadian war story from the perspective of two Indigenous protagonists. He thus pays tribute to a group mainly absent from the collective imaginary. The novel juxtaposes the story of Cree snipers, Xavier and Elijah, with a plot centred on Aunt Niska, which places European colonization of North America in a historical perspective. In this way, Boyden draws thought-provoking parallels between the First World War front lines and the trauma of genocide confronted by First Nations in Canada. The war appears in the novel as the apogee of colonial violence, a culmination of the mass violence used so far by European colonizers in relation to non-European peoples. Boyden thus contrasts the European conception of trauma as a reaction to a single stressor or event with trauma conceptualized as structural violence and quotidian oppression (see Craps 49). Moreover, the process of witnessing is complicated in the novel by the narrator-protagonist's alterity and the cultural shock he suffers when confronted with a system of values different from his own. Several times in *Three Day Road*, Xavier contrasts the world of white soldiers, in which human death is stripped of dignity, with his own culture, in which even acts of violence towards animals require complex rituals. Deeply traumatized by the war, he becomes an unwilling witness, confronted with the necessity to testify from inside his own annihilation.[13] The spiritual figure of the Windigo functions here as a metaphor of the transformation of soldiers into bloodthirsty beasts. While it is possible to interpret the protagonists' mental wounds in

reference to Western trauma theory, the novel also depicts non-Western strategies of coping with trauma, such as the sweat lodge ritual or Niska's healing narrative. Crosscutting colonial war memories have been explored in other national contexts, e.g., in Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* (1995) and J.-M. G. Le Clézio's *Le Chercheur d'or* (1985; *The Prospector* [1993]), yet *Three Day Road* remains a particularly powerful vision of the entanglement of apparently distant histories in the context of the First World War.

Conclusion: Rescaling Canadian Literature

The Great War appears a privileged point of reference in the Canadian "wound culture," which inspires reflection on the trauma of the past but also addresses present concerns, proposing alternative values and identities. The literary exploration of the legacy of the 1914-1918 conflict in Canada signals perhaps more openness, in comparison with other national literatures, to the inclusion of multicultural and other marginalized voices. There are more women in Canadian contemporary Great War fiction than in contemporary French and Australian war writing, and the voice of Itani's disabled female protagonist remains unique. The dialogical ethics of trauma, which illuminates "other" traumatic experiences and disparate responses to limit events, seems a distinctive feature of contemporary Canadian World War I literature, which thus acquires the power to "broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy" (Alexander 24). Sherrill Grace (*Landscapes* 45) and Neta Gordon (5) are certainly right in suggesting that the sacrificial narrative, with its powerful affective potential, occupies a special place in Canadian First World War fiction. Nonetheless, the exploration of traumatic aftermath reconfigures the war in terms of its seminal effects—disastrous, transformative, and often unspeakable—sustained by individuals, society, and nation. The focus on shattered selves/communities, as well as the critique of the nation-state, represents a most radical departure from the earlier efforts to "confer meaning on the meaninglessness of war" (Gana 78). By resisting emotional closure, Canadian trauma plots ultimately situate the Great War as an extreme event that resists fixed interpretation.

Although the war has not produced identical responses in Canada, France, Britain, Ireland, and Australia, certain points of convergence between cultures, which "share a common, if unequal, history" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 313), prove, in my view, illuminating, too. As Ross J. Wilson argues, trauma "provides a means for contemporary populations to experience and feel the events of the First World War as a continuing disturbance" (55). Contemporary trauma

plots seem to offer a paradigm for conceptualizing extreme forms of violence for generations that have lost any direct, familial connection with the first global conflict. The question of historical accuracy is less important here, however, than literature's capacity to produce an affective response in the reader. It is true that the global "wound culture" is saturated by communalities of trauma, at the cost of its trivialization. Nevertheless, the novels mentioned above challenge us to rethink our settled assumptions about war, the boundaries of the human, and remembrance of catastrophic events. In thought-provoking ways, they reconceptualize the meanings of trauma itself, "involving dislocation of subjects, histories, and cultures" (Rothberg, "Preface" xii).

Reading Canadian WWI literature within the context of transcultural overlaps may provide an important framework through which to approach the rescaling of Canadian literature. A transnational perspective complicates the notion of "single memory cultures," questioning territorial and temporal lenses we impose upon the complexities of remembering (Erll 8). The First World War appears a shared site of memory, which encourages us to look beyond established assumptions and methodologies and to create new interpretations, displacing earlier ones. If memory "travels," as demonstrated above, it does so in response to local and global transformations, and "fluid negotiation[s] between the desires of the present and the legacies of the past" (Olick 159). Comparative perspectives on the Great War are usually Eurocentric, focused on the French-British or German-British contexts. Here it is important to see that Canadian novels also inscribe themselves within a transnational cultural tradition, which they supplement with their own (re)visions.[14] Reading Canadian First World War fiction in a comparative perspective establishes a dialogue between the local and the global, and shows how Canadian trauma plots respond to, and synchronously reconfigure, the ethics and aesthetics of contemporary transnational Great War literature.

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NOTES

1 The transnational framework seems more applicable to the First World War than the remembrance of other conflicts, starting with the Second World War. See Whitehead 148-49.
2 See Gordon (7-12) and Grace (*Landscapes* 11, 23, 26) for discussion of the most important academic works on Canadian military art and culture. Note that the return of the war

as an important theme in fiction coincided with the Vietnam War and a postmodern questioning of Canadian national metanarratives.

3 Because of lack of space, I cannot mention all of them here. Most inspiring in my case were studies by Diana Brydon, Anne Geddes Bailey, and Peter Webb. It is also important to acknowledge the special issue of *Canadian Literature* (no. 91, 1981) devoted to Findley's *The Wars*. Attempts to analyze early Canadian World War I literature in a transnational perspective were made, for example, by Evelyn Cobley and Colin Hill.

4 In spite of the efforts of revisionist historians, particularly in Britain, who deplore the misrepresentations of the conflict popularized in fiction (Wilson 43-45; Bond 63-82).

5 For a history of the concept of trauma, see Luckhurst 19-76.

6 This shift in the approach to war survivors is mostly due to the works of Robert J. Lifton and Judith Lewis Herman after the Vietnam War. See Luckhurst 62-65.

7 For a detailed comparative analysis of *Broken Ground* with these two British novels, see Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski, *Comparing* 88-134.

8 When discussing the roles played by fiction in the maintenance of cultural memory, Ann Rigney places Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) in the latter category, claiming that it has provided "a cultural framework for later recollections of the First World War" (350). See Geddes Bailey and my "Narratives" for a discussion of the critique of imperialism in *The Wars*.

9 On "the implicit gendering" of trauma, see Kaplan 24-41.

10 For a broader comparative reading of women's trauma in Canadian, French, and British fiction, including Itani's *Deafening*, see Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski's *Comparing Grief* (52-87; 137-56).

11 See Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski, "Sharing," for a discussion of the representation of the home front in *Deafening.*

12 The remembrance of World War I in French Canada radically departs from the English-Canadian emphasis on glory and nation-building. The Conscription Crisis deepened dramatically the gap between Anglophones and Francophones, and the war generated further tensions between the two groups. As a result, the number of literary responses to the conflict by French Canadians is limited (see Djebabla-Brun).

13 See Felman for an insightful discussion of the witness surrounded by death. I have consciously decided not to address the claims of cultural appropriation that have been made about Joseph Boyden here as my focus is on the thematics of the novel rather than authorial identity. A full and deep discussion of the complex topic of cultural appropriation is not possible here.

14 Findley's novel was published in the Penguin Modern Classics series, while Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* was longlisted for the Booker Prize. Both novels have been translated into French and other languages. Itani's *Deafening* has become an international bestseller, and has been translated into Polish as well.

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