Marie Vautier

Postmodern Myth, Post-European History, and the Figure of the Amerindian

François Barcelo, George Bowering, and Jacques Poulin

Most studies of Québécois and English Canadian literature in the 1960s and early 1970s, from Gilles Marcotte's *Une Littérature qui se fait* (1962) to Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972), thematized the question of national identity. In the late 1970s, the structuralist approach refuted thematics and related questions of nationalism and identity to concentrate on the more formal aspects of literary works. In the 1980s, poststructuralism, deconstruction—and, more importantly to my argument here, the emergence of postmodernist and postcolonial theories and practices—opened the door to renewed interest in the question of national identities in these two literatures. As Linda Hutcheon notes, the "entire question of Canadian identity has become a kind of playground—or battlefield—for the postmodern as well as the post-colonial defining of 'difference' and value" ("'Circling the Downspout of Empire,'" 166).

Historiographic metafictions[1] such as François Barcelo's *La Tribu*, George Bowering's *Burning Water* and Jacques Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues*—all published in the early 1980s—investigate and destabilize the double problematic of myth and national identities. These novels flaunt their use of techniques considered as markers of postmodernist fiction in their challenges to history and to historiography, and in their investigations of autoreferentiality; intertextuality; playful self-reflexivity; parody; irony; and multiple, often contradictory retellings of the same event. They also thematize many concerns of postcolonial practice: the centre/margin debate; place and displacement; language, speech and silence; written versus oral history; and

multiple challenges to eurocentric world views. It has been proposed that Max Dorsinville's expression "post-european" may prove to be a more useful term than "postcolonial," as its "political and theoretical implications have much to offer" (Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, 24), and I have chosen to employ it in much of my discussion.

In "Circling," Hutcheon makes a lengthy but "crucial" digression to address a basic question: *can* Canada be considered a postcolonial country? The punctuation mark in the title of Albert Memmi's earlier essay, "Les Canadiens français sont-ils des colonisés?" signals the equally problematic situation in Quebec. As Hutcheon argues, "when Canadian culture is called post-colonial today, the reference is very rarely (at least explicitly) to the native culture, which might be the more accurate historical use of the term (*Splitting Images*, 75). Furthermore, the postcolonial situation in Quebec is debatable on two fronts: Quebec has not as yet achieved the political independence which motivated the use of the "colonisé" argument in much of its literature of the post-war years, and its first-world status as a mainly white, industrialized "nation" is not comparable to the third-world situation of most of France's former colonies. Much to the dismay of the authors of the postcolonial study *The Empire Writes Back*, the fertile field of cultural complexity and the characteristically Canadian "perception of a mosaic [have] not generated corresponding theories of literary hybridity to replace the nationalist approach" (36).[2] Arun Mukherjee's *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition* (1988), Joseph Pivato's *Contrasts* (1985) and Jean-Michel Lacroix and Fulvio Caccia's *Métamorphoses d'une utopie* (1992) underline the social, political, and ideological concerns of what is often called "writing by ethnic minorities" in English Canada and Quebec, but little critical attention has been focused on the postcolonial thrust of historiographic fictions from what is known as "the mainstream."

This lack of scholarship is perhaps due to the particular posteuropean situations of English Canada and Quebec, which have been addressed respectively by Diana Brydon and Max Dorsinville, in "Re-writing *The Tempest*" and *Caliban Without Prospero*. Whereas most postcolonial theorists illustrate the colonized/colonizer relationship with the Caliban/Prospero metaphor, Brydon argues that English Canadians tend to see themselves in Miranda, the "dutiful daughter of the empire" ("Re-writing," 77). Prospero's values, she notes, "are internalized by Miranda but redefined through her interaction with Caliban" (86). English Canadian re-writings

of *The Tempest* are clearly different from those of other ex-colonies: they show how "Canadians have internalized the process of their colonization: they are themselves Prospero and what he has colonized is a vital part of themselves" (87). It is for this reason, suggests Brydon, that English Canadian texts find it harder to reject outright the imperial/colonial legacy. In many contemporary novels from English Canada, a self-conscious postcolonial urge *to* myth co-exists with a postmodern play *with* myth, and the search for national identity, which William H. New calls that "congenital art form" in Canada, forms an ironic backdrop to it all (*Among Worlds*, 101).

Many contemporary texts from Quebec also struggle with internalized politico-historical myths. This struggle is largely ignored in comparative Canadian or English-language postcolonial studies, where it is assumed that the question of "national identity" in Quebec has long been resolved. The upheaval of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s brought about social, cultural and literary reforms which prepared the field for what Dorsinville calls novels of ambiguity. These works reflect "the consciousness of the complexity of life the French Canadian never had access to when either the cult of Messianism or *le pays* meant a belief in simple creeds and answers, a reduction of life to religious or secular dogma" (*Caliban Without Prospero*, 181). The nationalist concerns of most Québécois literature of the early period of "la modernité" (1960-75) are relatively homogenous, as Micheline Cabron has argued in *Une société, un récit* (1989). Even in the early 1960s, however, postmodern writers such as Jacques Godbout signalled the need to rework Quebec's historical myths of identity.[3] Contemporary Québécois texts do address the social and ideological heterogeneity of contemporary Quebec, as Sherry Simon, Pierre l'Hérault and others propose in *Fictions de l'identitaire au Québec* (1991).[4] The posteuropean thrust evident in many contemporary novels from both English Canada and Quebec involves a rewriting of "the myths that write us" (Brydon, "Myths," 1)—a self-conscious effort to decolonize the mind.

A traditional myth is often perceived as a special narrative, most frequently a classical or a religious story, which is seen as eternal, universal, and, especially, transhistorical. In Mircea Eliade's view, myth serves to establish, reinforce and legitimize the validity of human beings' existence—to answer, as Eric Gould notes, "questions concerning the self and its place in the world" (*Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, 34).

One function of traditional myth, then, is to attempt to make unified sense of the world. The dominant Christian belief system and the eurocentric myth of the superiority of the European colonizer have long informed the mythological universes portrayed in English Canadian and Québécois literary canons. These European-based world views no longer suffice; hence, the creation, in narrative, of posteuropean myth.

Posteuropean myth involves a challenge to the teleological and ahistorical qualities of traditional myth. Thus, in posteuropean texts, an investigation of myth might well point to the decentering and destabilizing properties of myth—factors that would work against the eurocentric notion of mythic universality. In *La Tribu*, *Burning Water*, and *Volkswagen Blues*, a posteuropean attitude is evident in three major re-examinations of traditional eurocentric myth. In these texts, one finds a parody of the myth of the superiority of the European explorer, a disempowering attack on eurocentric theories of myth-criticism, and a foregrounding of the role of the Amerindian figure as an element of postcolonial discourse.[5] It is this third aspect of posteuropean myth that constitutes my main concern here: these texts' problematic yet intriguing portrayal of the Amerindian figure as a device of postcolonial discourse. Although the historical colonization of the Amerindian and Innuit peoples by the British and French is openly signalled in these contemporary texts, they sometimes *use* the figure of the Amerindian and/or the Métis to further the postcolonial arguments of the non-native cultural majorities of their traditions. My investigation centres on what Terry Goldie calls the "image" of the Amerindian in these works—rather than on "the people the image claims to represent" (*Fear and Temptation*, 6).

Language issues are often thematized in postcolonial fictions, as the act of colonization frequently involves the imposition of a foreign language upon an indigenous people. (Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," 12) There are differing colonial situations—and therefore different linguistic struggles—as D.E.S. Maxwell has shown us.[6] In New France, the French colonists did impose their European language upon the indigenous peoples—a linguistic imposition that was continued by the British and then by the English Canadians, to the point that the first non-native language of the majority of Innuit and Amerindians living in Quebec today is still English.[7] The French speakers, however, were colonized linguistically in their turn by the British, and the struggle for the survival of French as a

living language is an ongoing one in Quebec. Writers of francophone fiction in Quebec and those from settler colonies such as English Canada face a similar challenge: modifying what was originally an imported language and working within literary conventions established elsewhere. The rage to write in "joual" during the Quiet Revolution was in part a response to an unarticulated linguistic and literary pressure to conform to French standards. In this sense, joual may be seen as the language of *de*colonization: a "socio-linguistic form of protest akin to Caliban's interjectory 'Uhuru' in [Aimé] Césaire's *Une Tempête*" (Zabus, "A Calbanic Tempest," 48). Barcelo's post-nationalist, posteuropean fiction is not written in joual, but in standard French, as are most contemporary texts from Quebec. *La Tribu*'s postcolonial approach to linguistic battles involves a blurring of the boundaries between linguistic/cultural groups and an ironic look at Quebec's history of passionate debates around language, culture and identity.

The Clipocs, the tribe of the title, are first presented as "primitive" Amerindians.[8] Discussing the relationship between allegory and history, Slemon has proposed that postcolonial allegorical writing "not only constitutes a challenge to prevailing theoretical assumptions about what kind of cultural grounding is required for allegorical communication to take place, but also, that it is helping to change our received ideas of history" ("Post-colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," 158). Although Barcelo's novel is dedicated to nine Amerindian tribes in Quebec, and although the text does address contemporary Amerindians concerns, its political allegory is centered in large part on non-Amerindian Québécois society. On an allegorical level, this small tribe can be seen partially as a microcosm of French-speaking North Americans of European descent. Thus, the Clipocs' territorial area is similar to Quebec's geography, the tribe's history recalls political events from Quebec's past, and some tribal leaders strongly resemble—and parody—Québécois politicians. Politically correct, the tribe has a female chief, Mahii, who oversees a period of rapid technological and social reforms. The invention of ice skating, the hockey puck, and social systems such as family allowances and unemployment insurance, further blurs the divisions between "primitive" Amerindians and twentieth-century Québécois.

In the New World, the tribe adopts a cabin boy, Jean-François, who has been abandoned by his shipmates, all of whom are explorers from the "Vieux Pays." Jean-François, called Jafafoua by tribal members, is unable to

learn their language. The first indication of the "québécitude" of the tribe—and of the many complex cultural reversals in this novel—is that its members *choose* to speak "vieux-paysan" instead of Clipoc. Rather than portraying the linguistic colonization of the Clipocs by the Vieux-Paysans—the usual "colonisé" argument—the narrator describes the willingness of the Clipocs to absorb Jafafoua's language and customs.

Lengthy passages in *La Tribu* are devoted to tribal debates over bilingualism. Some Clipocs argue for the intellectual stimulation provided by a bilingual or multilingual society, whereas other oppose bilingualism on the grounds that language is not just a method of communication but the very *soul* of the tribe. Barcelo's ironic descriptions of these debates and his overuse of political clichés manage to convey a certain post-Referendum (1980) ennui, underlining the fact that the tribe is tired of discussing language rights. Toward the end of the novel, the Clipocs have a problematic identity: they appear to speak the same language and practice the same religion as the Vieux-Paysans, and seem to be aligned with the latter in their on-going cultural struggles against a large and powerful country to the South. They are nonetheless distinct from the Vieux-Paysans: there is both antagonism and cooperation among constantly shifting groups. Episodic blurring of cultural and linguistic boundaries constitutes a posteuropean exploration of heterogeneity in Barcelo' work. The novel's retellings of problematic linguistic and cultural relations among various yet inseparable groups raise several issues, including the ongoing, unresolved issue of Amerindian rights. It has been suggested that the term postcolonial can hardly be applied to Quebec, given the confrontation between Natives and non-Natives at Kanesatake (Oka) during the summer of 1990.[9] I would argue, however, that Barcelo's novel, which predates the crises at Kanesatake and Kahnawake by almost a decade, does address certain postcolonial concerns of contemporary Québec.

The narratorial play with history in *La Tribu* presupposes a general knowledge of the traditional version of events, along with a tacit acknowledgement that the traditional version of events needs to be re-examined in the here and now. The novel strongly suggests that there is a need and a place for alternative apprehensions of the past. By placing an indigenous people who are made to resemble ironically the majority of Québécois in the foreground of the story, the narrator first emphasizes the history of the peoples of the New World and jolts the traditional focus of the "roman his-

torique," which is usually on the historical voyages of the Old World explorers. (It is easy to discern the symbolism of the political message in the first chapter, where the Clipocs skilfully and deliberately explode the explorers' boat and kill all on board.) Thinly disguising the history of the Québécois collectivity in stories about this seemingly autochthonous group, Barcelo then critically examines the worn-out historico-political myths that inspired much nationalist literature in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution. For instance, the detailed stories of the poor treatment meted out to the Clipocs by the Vieux-Paysans at the end of the novel constitute a narratorial criticism of the Québécois policy toward the Amerindian peoples who live within Quebec's boundaries today, as well as an obvious comment on the historical French colonization of New World Amerindian tribes. In fact, the narrator not only ironically comments on the former patronizing attitude of the Europeans vis-à-vis the New World, but also satirizes the New World's equally patronizing treatment of its own indigenous peoples, of its immigrants, and of Third World nations. Thus, in a parodic reference to Canadian gifts of indigestible food to famine-stricken areas of Africa, Mahii offers to provide relief supplies to a neighbouring tribe, proposing: "qu'à tout le moins on offrit aux Niox ... des surplus de lait en poudre lorsque la faim les tenaillerait" (*La Tribu*, 129).

James Clifford has argued that the West's approach to ethnographic allegory is often one of salvaging—that is to say, "The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text" ("On Ethnographic Allegory," 112). The *slippage* among what has traditionally been perceived as separate or separable groups in Barcelo's fictional allegory, however, provides a textual space in which to explore various manifestations of cultural representation. Signalling a certain postcolonial acceptance of heterogeneity, the novel's re-examination of the history of New France, of the nationalist assumptions of the 1960s and of worn-out historical myths also makes room for *other* ideologies, decrying what has recently been described as the need to proclaim oneself "Québécois-francophone-de-souche." (Jacques Godbout, "Qu'est-ce qu'un Québécois?" 236).

In contemporary Québécois literature, the previously sacrosanct concept of the "collectivité" has begun to be the focus of a postmodern thrust to disunity. The utter lack of *any* fixed racial, linguistic or religious boundaries in *La Tribu* permits this novel's re-telling of conflicts of the past to offer ongoing commentary on the social issues of the present. This posteuropean text

demonstrates an openness toward cultural multiplicity by underlining the constantly changing nature of the Clipocs: are they "primitives"? Innuit? Amerindians? Québécois? Other? Postcolonial cultures, as Brydon points out, are more receptive to heterogeneity than the European cultures which have dominated cultural theory to the present day ("Myths" 7). The characteristic postcolonial insistence on cross-cultural awareness has become practice in this text. *La Tribu*, then, through its frequently parodic re-tellings of past events, promotes a heterogeneous approach to political history and to society. The use of the Amerindian figure in the novel, along with the novel's deliberate installation of a continual slippage regarding the "identity" of that figure, permits an examination of those issues which are foregrounded in much postcolonial literature. Thus, this text critically addresses language issues, the foreshortening of history, the problematic notion of a national collectivity, parodies of government and politicians, and absurd, de-stabilizing re-creations of history which open up space in the text for various colonial and postcolonial relationships to be explored.

The Clipocs have no interest in recording events for posterity. Although Ksoâr, the self-appointed poet/scribe of the tribe, "invents" writing, the other Clipocs see no need to write things down. This tribe's apparent lack of appreciation for its past would seem to support the notion that the past is useless, and that the Clipocs—like the Québécois—should release their "légendes vieillotes" into the past and gladly embrace the present (212). The narrator of this novel, however, chooses to re-tell (together) the distant and recent past of both the Clipoc tribe and the Québécois people. On the one hand, the obvious parodies of "primitive" and/or Québécois myths of the past seem to be an invitation to escape from the stasis of a mythology into a praxis of the here and now. On the other hand, that praxis involves the re-telling of historico-political events, thereby positing a need for that past, along with an acknowledgement that there exist other, non-eurocentric versions of that past.

Although the double focus of George Bowering's *Burning Water* is the story of George Vancouver's explorations of the West Coast and the self-conscious narratorial interventions about the writing of such a story, a surprising number of passages in the novel refer to the original inhabitants of the New World. Bowering's use of the Amerindian figure as an element of postcolonial discourse is problematic. On the one hand,

the conversations among Indians[10] in *Burning Water* subvert the European clichés of the monosyllabic "savage"; mock the eurocentric, anthropological image of the myth-laden "primitive"; disrupt the notion of the progressive flow of historical time; and upset the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. On the other hand, while Bowering's play with language in the novel does indicate his interest in the problematics of communication and translation between different linguistic and cultural groups, the Indian figure is used to illustrate mainly non-Amerindian points of view. Bowering is aware of the theories of Benjamin Whorf (who is obliquely referred to in *Burning Water* [143]) and his colleague Edward Sapir. These linguists based their theory of linguistic relativity on studies of Nootka and other North American Indian languages. According to W.D. Ashcroft, "Sapir proposed the exciting and revolutionary view that what we call the 'real' world is built up by the language habits of a group, and that the worlds in which different societies live are quite distinct, not merely the same world with different labels attached" ("Constitutive Graphonomy," 65). Bowering's interest in language issues is evident in the Indians' anachronistic flaunting of twentieth-century psychological jargon and contemporary obscenities. The Indians speak like twentieth-century Vancouverites. By contrasting their agreeable, idiomatic, and familiar conversations with stilted passages supposedly taken from eighteenth-century journals—whose authors, the narrator notes, "were fond of nouns and Latinate abstractions" (*Burning Water*, 101)—this text installs a linguistic tension between "them" (the eighteenth-century British) and "us" (people who sound like twentieth-century inhabitants of the New World). This opposition, of course, is political—in that the "us" are Amerindians who have come close to losing their voice in "our" New World culture. Elsewhere in the novel, Indians who can discuss "relative concepts" and "unsubstantiated rumours" with sophistication in English respond to Vancouver's queries about the Northwest Passage in rudimentary Nootka with English of another type: "Many portage. Many days eating chickens on the flat land past the highest mountains" (144). Ashcroft argues that postcolonial literature's "appropriation of English, far from inscribing either vernacular or 'standard' forms, creates a new discourse at their interface" (61). Bowering's flaunting of different linguistic norms, which parody both linguistic and racial stereotypes, is an example of this type of postcolonial writing. However, Bowering's "use and abuse" of the Amerindian figure appears to be more concerned with presenting the tensions between the

world views of white twentieth-century North Americans ("us") and those of Europeans ("them") than it is with exploring and understanding Amerindian world views. This text uses parody to undercut eurocentric world views, but, as Hutcheon has noted, there are inevitable complicities in the use of parody.[11] Speaking as a Haida/Tsimpsian and a woman, Marcia Crosby argues in "Construction of the Imaginary Indian" that in the case of Bowering's work: "One can only parody something that is shared .... For me [Crosby] as a native reader, Bowering's approach is not radical, but a continuation of The West's assumed right to use native figures ... in a search for its own 'roots'" (271-2).[12] Her criticism centres on Bowering's undermining of one of the novel's characters, Menzies—that otherwise perfect "eighteenth-century man"—by his portrayal of Menzies' sexual use of an unnamed Amerindian woman. Crosby argues that although "the ideological dimension of Western discourse has changed to one of self-criticism, in this case it is still about a particular 'self,' and not about First Nations People" (271). Bowering's construction of the "Imaginary Indian," which exploits stereotypes to subvert eurocentric attitudes, is perhaps not as accommodating of various levels of cross-cultural representation as is Barcelo's text.

Given Bowering's stated interest in myth and the vehemence with which he refutes much of the myth-criticism of Northrop Frye,[13] it is not surprising that a subtext of myth is found in many allusions to the Indian figures in *Burning Water*. The novel ironically explores certain accepted truisms about myth and related notions of madness, "primitives" and gods. The young Indian artist at first believes that the white men are deities. However, the numerous gaffes made by the explorers belie that first impression. When the British are attacked by unfriendly Indians, they try to deflect the attackers' wrath by declaring themselves to be invincible gods, but the Indians' derisive reactions reveal their disbelief: "'Aeh, shit!' ... 'They say that you should go and be gods in your own land. They say you are not permitted to step your sacred Mamathni feet upon their mother'" (231). This last reference to the Amerindian Earth-Mother myth is of course misunderstood by the British: "'We don't care about their old women' ... 'By their mother they mean the continent,' said the guide" (231-2).

Penny Petrone notes that in Renaissance Europe, the figure of the Indian was "comprehended either in the negative and unflattering image of 'sauvage', or in the romanticized image of primeval innocence—the 'bon'

sauvage, a Rousseauesque pure being" (*Native Literature in Canada*, 2). The concept of the Amerindian as a "primitive," myth-ridden creature easily dominated by European technology is parodied—and frequently inverted—in Bowering's novel, as is the European literary myth of the noble savage: "Before the white 'settlers' arrived there were lots of impatient Indians. It's only in the last two hundred years that Indians have been looking patient whenever there were any white men around" (92). Elsewhere, the narrator often has white men acting in a "primitive" manner:

> Magee stepped out of the nearby copse with a donkey loaded down with supplies. He held his hand up, palm forward.
> "How!" he said, in a deep voice.
> The two Indians made their faces look patient.
> "What is this 'How'?" asked the first Indian of his companion.
> "Search me," said the second Indian. "But we may as well go along with him." (199)

The narratorial discussion of the Amerindian figure in *Burning Water*, however, remains focused on the subversion of eurocentric myths and does not open up much space for a political discussion of the English Canadian/Amerindian relationship. As Crosby has argued, there "is a difference between using a theoretical critique and being used by it" (271). Although *Burning Water* makes considerable use of postcolonial theories regarding language, place and displacement, the postcolonial thematic of "identity" is played out ironically by contrasting eurocentric/"New World" cosmogonies, and the figure of the Amerindian is employed mainly to this end.

In Jacques Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues*, the representation of the Amerindian figure centres on one character, La Grande Sauterelle (infrequently called Pitsémine), who has French Canadian and Montagnais antecedents. As she travels from the Gaspé to San Francisco in a Volkswagen van, she educates its owner, a Québécois author known only by his pseudonym, Jack Waterman, about the inadequacies of traditional historiography, especially as it concerns the Amerindian presence in North America. Gilles Thérien notes that the Métis figure is to be found everywhere in Québécois literature in the 1980s, and that its presence is demonstrably linked to cross-cultural representations of contemporary Québécois society. ("L'Indien du discours," 365-6) *Volkswagen Blues* is Poulin's sixth novel and the first in which the action is situated beyond the boundaries of Quebec; that fact

alone reveals a willingness to explore "l'altérité" (The Other).[14] The novel contains an extended discussion of cultures and identities that can no longer be seen, in Pierre L'Hérault's words, as "*pures*, mais nécessairement *métisses*, non contraintes en des frontières étanches, mais en quelque sorte transfrontalières, lieux de croisement, de confluence" ("*Volkswagen Blues*: traverser les identités," 28). Compared to Barcelo and Bowering, Poulin makes relatively little use of irony, allegory, or humour in his use of the Métis figure and his extended retelling of Amerindian, American, and Québécois history. Instead, multiple intertextual references to historical and literary works, along with Poulin's subtle and understated rendering of interpersonal relationships, thematize postcolonial concerns such as oral versus written history, place and displacement, and the Foucauldian relationship between political power and the "truth" about the past.

Volkswagen Blues presents an overdetermined portrayal of La Grande Sauterelle as an active, capable, informed, well-read, passionate, fun-loving (if sometimes angry) mechanic. In marked contrast, Jack Waterman is a passive, observant, self-deprecating and frequently inadequate author. Jack is between books and on the trail of his long-lost brother Théo, who is frequently linked to the "heroes" of the history of New France and of "l'Amérique," from the *coureur de bois* Etienne Brulé to the American poets of the "beat" generation. While the ambivalent Québécois/American relationship is undoubtedly a main intertextual concern, it is Poulin's forthright portrayal of the complex and ambivalent relationship between the two main characters that most strongly marks this novel's postcolonial discourse. Simon Harel has discussed the changing reception of the "représentation de l'étranger" in contemporary Québécois literature:

> "on peut avancer que cette extra-territorialité (par exemple la menace de l'exode rural dans le contexte du roman du terroir) suscite un phénomène de repli défensif, une volonté de refonder un espace restreint qui serait associé à une identité stabilisée. Dans ce roman de Poulin [*Volkswagen Blues*], l'extra-territorialité n'échappe pas toujours à une consolidation défensive. (*Le Voleur de parcours*, 160)

Indeed, Poulin's novel explores changes in the relatively homogenous Québécois ideology of identity in the 1960s by signalling the characters' *struggle* to come to an acceptance of socio-cultural heterogeneity.

All of Poulin's works are characterized by nostalgia for childhood and simpler times. In *Volkswagen Blues*, Jack's adherence to eurocentric myths of the past learned in childhood is constantly challenged by his travelling com-

panion. Although Jack slowly comes to appreciate La Grande Sauterelle's alternate versions of history and follows her lead in learning about the cultural diversity of "l'Amérique," he is a reluctant student. For instance, his perception of Etienne Brulé as a French-Canadian hero and explorer does not withstand La Grande Sauterelle's portrayal of the same man as a sadistic transgressor of Amerindian law. Jack, however, is reluctant to lose the security provided by his personal/political/historical mythology, as is illustrated at the end of the chapter which discusses Etienne Brulé: "And for Jack, in his heart of hearts, it was as if all the heroes of his past were still heroes" (*Volkswagen Blues*, 58). L'Hérault's reading of *Volkswagen Blues* sheds light on this ambivalence. He proposes that both characters are isolated by their necessarily irreconcilable versions of the historical past (represented by the two very different maps of America on display at the Museum in Gaspé) but available to each other in the present (represented by the road maps of America which they consult during their shared road-trip). For L'Hérault, each character "se déplace, non seulement par rapport à l'autre, mais aussi par rapport à lui-même, dans un mouvement de décentrement qui va de l'unique au multiple.... il faut de plus préciser qu'il y a une force d'attraction qui agit dans le récit pour lui donner une direction: celle du multiple, représentée par Pitsémine/La Grande Sauterelle, la Métisse" (34). However, a sense of unresolved ambiguity dominates the reflections on the presence of the Métisse as Other in this complex novel. For instance, although L'Hérault's perspicacious reading of the novel frequently assigns a double onomastic appellation to La Grande Sauterelle/Pitsémine, the text itself uses only the francophone denomination.[15] Although the critical reception of *Volkswagen Blues* generally praises its emphasis on "négociation" (L'Hérault, 30), on being "recueillante" (Pierre Nepveu, *L'Ecologie du réel*, 216), Poulin's main focus is on the struggle and the difficulties of reconciliation with the notion of heterogeneity. This is perhaps evident in the parallel Jonathan M. Weiss has drawn between the Volkswagen van (*the wagon of the people*) and the little red car in the mural by the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, which the travellers visit in the Detroit Institute of Art. ("Une lecture américaine de *Volkswagen Blues*," 94) Jack and Pitsémine/La Grande Sauterelle decide that the red car is a symbol for happiness and that "Rivera wanted to express something very simple: happiness is rare and getting it requires a lot of trouble, fatigue and effort" (*Volkswagen Blues*, 71). Immediately after the viewing both are tired and depressed. Co-habitation in the constantly shift-

ing "world" of l'Amérique—represented here by the inclusion of a Mexican revolutionary—is demanding and difficult, and this episode may be read as a foot-dragging reluctance on their part to arrive at transcultural acceptance.

Jack's reluctance to fully accept the Other is also evident in his sexual inadequacy when La Grande Sauterelle initiates lovemaking on the Continental Divide, and his subsequent dream in which she appears as an extraterrestrial. She too is troubled by problems of self-identity. As a child, she was rejected by Amerindians and non-Amerindians alike because of her transcultural identity. As an adult, her explorations of androgyny, proper names (Québécois vs. Amerindian), and retellings of Amerindian history all point to her fascination with her own gendered and cultural identity. According to Bernadette Bucher, the Métis figure is "à la fois ceci et cela, le même et l'autre" ("Sémiologie du mixte et utopie américaine," 308), and thus offers the possibility of a less confrontational perception of difference and multiplicity. Nepveu has proposed that the Volkswagen in this novel can be seen as "une métaphore même de la nouvelle culture québécoise: indéterminée, voyageuse, en dérive, mais 'recueillante'" (216). Be this as it may, the Volkswagen van stays with La Grande Sauterelle, who decides to live in San Francisco for a while, because "that city, where the races seemed to live in harmony, was a good place to try to come to terms with her own twofold heritage, to become reconciled with herself" (*Volkswagen Blues*, 211). Jack, however, decides to return to Quebec. At the end of the text, he *has* expanded his personal mythology, feeling that "somewhere in the vastness of America there was a secret place where the gods of the Indians and the other gods were meeting together in order to watch over him and light his way." It is through *writing*, however, that he will strive to integrate his experiences of socio-cultural heterogeneity, eventually producing the novel that, we are given to understand through multiple intertextual references, is none other than *Volkswagen Blues*. Poulin's novel is a courageous exploration of the unease felt by those who are struggling to eventually come to an acceptance of the Other. In keeping with its posteuropean focus, *Volkswagen Blues*' non-traditional ending is neither mythic nor the stuff of fairy tales: "on ne s'épouse pas comme dans les contes de fées; on ne meurt pas comme dans la tragédie; on ne se suicide pas comme dans le drame shakespearien. On se quitte plutôt banalement, sans drame, emportant quelque chose de l'univers de l'autre: Pitsémine garde le Volks; Jack ramène les dieux de Pitsémine" (L'Hérault, 40).

In his conclusion to *Orientalism*, Edward Said asks if "the notion of a distinct culture ... always get[s] involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')" (325). Recent debates about "cultural appropriation" tend to sustain this either/or stance. However, it would appear that the fictional works discussed here do not apprehend socio-cultural distinctions as always already separable into this self/other dichotomy. I have no quarrel with Lenore Keeshig-Tobias' argument at the 1992 Vancouver conference on postcolonialism that Amerindian stories are the property of First Nations Peoples and should therefore only be told by them ("The Identity of the Native Voice"). I remain intrigued, however, by the presence of the Amerindian figure in contemporary non-Amerindian literature. Challenges to traditional, eurocentric notions of myth issue an invitation to the reader to consider the flexible and indeterminate nature of posteuropean myth and the related ongoing question of national identities. These texts explore transcultural identities in part through their use of the Amerindian figure as an element of postcolonial discourse. Although that use is exploratory and sometimes problematic, the figure of the Amerindian and the Métis can facilitate a textual discussion of pluralism in political identity. A cognizance of the limitations of the binary "us"/Other argument in these novels leads to an awareness of multi-tiered postcolonial situations and indicates various degrees of willingness to explore heterogeneity.

NOTES

[1] For a discussion of this term and related concepts, see Chapter Four of Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern*, "Historiographic Metafiction" (61-77).

[2] See also the panel discussion on postcolonialism and postmodernism held at the meetings of the Learned Societies in Victoria in 1990 and subsequently published in *World Literature Written in English* (Mukherjee et al.).

[3] See, for instance, Jacques Godbout's "Novembre 1964/Faut-il tuer le mythe René Lévesque?"

[4] Sherry Simon writes: "Si au Québec la culture a longtemps désigné le lieu d'un consensus identitaire, l'expression d'une appartenance collective totalisante, elle est aujourd'hui de plus en plus marquée du signe de l'hétérogène. C'est le caractère organique à la fois du domaine culturel et de son lien à la communauté qui est aujourd'hui mis en question" (9).

[5] A fourth eurocentric "myth," that of the central god of the Christian faith, is strongly challenged in many posteuropean works. Although the texts by Bowering and Poulin occasionally seek to subvert the hegemony of Biblical myth, only Barcelo's *La Tribu* offers

an extended parody of the Christ-myth in its stories of the wonder-child of the tribe, ironically named "Notregloire."

[6] In "Landscape and Theme", Maxwell discusses the two major categories in Commonwealth countries: "In the first, the writer brings his own language—English—to an alien environment and a fresh set of experiences: Australia, Canada, New Zealand. In the other, the writer brings an alien language—English—to his own social and cultural inheritance: India, West Africa ... Viewing his society, the writer constantly faces the evidences of the impact between what is native to it and what is derived from association with Britain, whatever its form" (82-3).

[7] Normand Delisle writes: "Il y a au Québec 48 600 autochtones, dont 57 % connaissent au moins l'anglais comme autre langue et 25% le français" ("Les langues autochtones," 3).

[8] The quotation marks around the word "primitive" in this paper signal both accurate citation and ironic distancing, given Barcelo's play with the usually oppositional "primitive/ civilized" argument.

[9] Quebec's position, proposes Carolyn Bayard, "made the formerly colonized 'Nègres Blancs d'Amérique' (see Vallières) look like the colonizers in their turn" ("From *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* [1961] to Kanesatake [1990]: A Look at the Tensions of Postmodern Quebec," 21).

[10] Daniel Francis, in *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, states: "Indians, as we think we know them, do not exist. If fact, there may well be no such thing as an Indian.... The Indian began as a White man's mistake, and became a White man's fantasy" (4-5). Bowering, however, uses the term "Indian" in his novel, and I use it in my discussion of his work in the following paragraphs.

[11] Hutcheon notes that parody's "appropriating of the past, of history, its questioning of the contemporary by 'referencing' it to a different set of codes, is a way of establishing continuity that may, in itself, have ideological implications" (*A Theory of Parody*, 110). For Hutcheon, however, modern parody, which works through "repetition with critical difference" is "endowed with the power to renew" (114-15).

[12] I thank Carole Gerson for bringing Crosby's text to my attention.

[13] See Bowering's "Why James Reaney is a Better Poet 1) Than Any Northrop Frye Poet 2) Than He Used to Be."

[14] Much has been made of Poulin's alternative approaches to "québécitude," of his investigations of "l'altérité" (The Other). Poulin is frequently perceived as a marginal writer in mainstream Québécois society (see Nicole Beaulieu's "L'écrivain dans l'ombre,"), but he has attracted much critical attention in recent years, with *Etudes françaises* (23.1; 1985-86), *Voix et Images* (43; automne 1989) and other journals devoting issues to his work.

[15] The third person narration in the novel is equally problematic, installing a depersonalized distance between the reader and the text.

WORKS CITED

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures.* London: Routledge, 1989.

Ashcroft, W.D. "Constitutive Graphonomy: A Post-Colonial Theory of Literary Writing" *Kunapipi* 11.1 (1989): 58-73.

Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature.* Toronto: Anansi, 1972.

Barcelo, François. *La Tribu.* Montréal: Libre expression, 1981.

Bayard, Caroline. "From *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (1968) to Kanesatake (1990): A Look at the Tensions of Postmodern Quebec." in Mukherjee et al. 17-29.

Beaulieu, Nicole. "L'écrivain dans l'ombre." *Actualité* 10.4 (avril 1985): 73, 75, 77-8.

Bowering, George. *Burning Water.* 1980. Toronto: General Publishing, 1983.

——. "Why James Reaney is a Better Poet 1) Than Any Northrop Frye Poet 2) Than He Used to Be." *Canadian Literature* 36 (Spring 1968): 40-9.

Brydon, Diana. "The Myths That Write Us: Decolonising the Mind." *Commonwealth* 10.1 (Autumn 1987): 1-14.

——. "Re-writing *The Tempest.*" *World Literature Written in English* 23.1 (Winter 1984): 75-88.

Bucher, Bernadette. "Sémiologie du mixte et utopie américaine: l'hybride et le métis indien dans l'imaginaire européen." in Thérien *Figures,* 307-322.

Cambron, Micheline. *Une société, un récit: discours culturel au Québec (1967-1976)* Montréal: L'Hexagone, 1989.

Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Allegory." in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* Eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley, U California P, 1986.

Crosby, Marcia. "Construction of the Imaginary Indian." *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art.* Ed. Stan Douglas. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991. 267-291.

Delisle, Norman. "Les langues autochtones se portent mieux au Québec que partout ailleurs au Canada." *Le Devoir* mercredi 12 août 1992: 3.

Dorsinville, Max. *Caliban Without Prospero: Essay on Quebec and Black Literature.* Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1974.

Eliade, Mircea. *Aspects du mythe.* [Paris]: Gallimard 1963.

Francis, Daniel. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture.* Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992.

Godbout, Jacques. "Novembre 1964/Faut-il tuer le mythe René Lévesque?" *Le Réformiste: textes tranquilles.* Montréal: Quinze, 1975. 69-73.

——. "Qu'est-ce qu'un Québécois?" *l'Actualité* 13.11 (octobre 1988): 236.

Goldie, Terry. *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures.* Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989.

Gould, Eric. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.

Harel, Simon. *Le Voleur de parcours: identité et cosmopolitisme dans la littérature québécoise contemporaine.* Montréal: Préambule, 1989. coll. l'Univers des discours.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms.* New York, Methuen, 1985.

——. "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism." *Ariel* 20.4 (October 1989): 149-75.

——. *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies.* Toronto: Oxford, 1991.

——. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction.* Toronto, Oxford, 1988.

Keeshig-Tobias, Lenore. "The Identity of the Native Voice." Presentation given at the conference "Postcolonialism: Theory and Practice," hosted by the Programme in Comparative Literature, U British Columbia, March 20-22, 1992.

Lacroix, Jean-Michel et Fulvio Caccia, eds. *Métamorphoses d'une utopie.* Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne nouvelle; Montréal: Editions Triptyque, 1992.

L'Hérault, Pierre. "*Volkswagon Blues*: traverser les identités." *Voix et Images* 15.1 (automne 1989): 28-42.

Marcotte, Gilles. *Une Littérature qui se fait.* Montréal: HMH, 1962.

Maxwell, D.E.S. "Landscape and Theme." *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture.* Ed. John Press. London: Heinemann Educational, 1965. 82-9.

Memmi, Albert. *Portrait du colonisé.* includes "Les Canadiens français sont-ils des colonisés?" [Montréal]: L'Etincelle, 1972.

Mukherjee, Arun P., *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literature, criticism and cultural imperialism.* Stratford, Ontario: Williams-Wallace, 1988.

Mukherjee, Arun P., Thomas King and Caroline Bayard. "Post-colonialism and Postmodernism: A Panel." *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (Autumn 1990): 1-29.

Nepveu, Pierre. *L'Ecologie du réel: mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine.* Montréal: Boréal, 1998.

New, William H. *Among Worlds: An Introduction to Modern Commonwealth and South African Fiction.* Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1975.

Petrone, Penny. *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present.* Toronto: Oxford, 1990.

Pivato, Joseph. *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian Canadian Writing.* Montreal: Guernica, 1985.

Poulin, Jacques. *Volkswagen Blues.* Montréal: Québec/Amérique, 1984.

——. *Volkswagen Blues.* trans. Sheila Fischman. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage, 1979.

Simon, Sherry, Pierre L'Hérault, Robert Schwartzwald and Alexis Nouss. *Fictions de l'identitaire au Québec.* Montréal, XYZ, 1991.

Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse." *Canadian Literature* 116 (Spring 1988): 9-24.

—. "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23 (1988): 157-68.

Thérien, Gilles, éd. *Les Figures de l'Indien.* Les Cahiers du département d'études littéraires, no. 9. Montréal: Université du Québec à Montréal, 1988.

—. "L'Indien du discours." in Thérien, *Figures*, 355-67.

Vallières, Pierre. *Nègres blancs d'Amérique: autobiographie précoce d'un terroriste.* Montréal, Parti Pris, 1968.

Weiss, Jonathan M., "Une lecture américaine de *Volkswagen Blues.*" *Etudes françaises* 21.3 (hiver 1985-86): 89-96.

Zabus, Chantal. "A Calabanic Tempest in Anglophone & Francophone New World Writing." *Canadian Literature* 104 (Spring 1985): 35-50.

Liliane Welch

Nursing Home

Her eyes rest on his middle-aged face
but her memory disperses
their unfinished tie.
The drifts of loyalty and affection
must have made a channel for
puzzlement in her night, even so,
for though she cannot find her way
through the snow flurries to recognition,
she remains stranded on her son's name.