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The Use of Weather Images by Canadian Ethnic Short Story Writers

Abstract

The article features Canadian ethnic writers' use of weather images and involves the discussion of some numerical insights as well as the examination of such qualitative markers as image role. It will be demonstrated through the contrastive analysis of the weather images employed in a sample of classic (1945-1979) and contemporary Canadian mainstream and ethnic (1980-2000) short stories that, going hand in hand with literary globalization, multiculturalism is an influential factor forming the fictional weather scene.

Résumé

L'article s'occupe de l'utilisation des images de temps dans les nouvelles canadiennes multiculturelles. Il présente des résultats numériques ainsi que des observations qualitatives comme le rôle des images. Ceux-ci nous amènent à conclure que, en tandem, le multiculturalisme et la globalisation littéraire sont des facteurs importants quant à la formation de la scène de temps littéraire.

1. Introduction

The present article aims at examining Canadian ethnic short story writers' use of weather images, both with regard to quantitative and qualitative features, and in contrast to classic and contemporary Canadian mainstream writers. Factors which may facilitate "literary weather change" include multiculturalism, literary globalization and, through the alteration of the regional weather map, perhaps even global warming, as my earlier research results seem to hint. The current article will offer an attempt at estimating to what extent the first factor contributes to the process.

2. Methodology

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Obviously, even a partially quantitative examination entails the problem of taking a sample. Based on Canadian literary trends and tradition in terms of the genre of the short story as put forward by Benson and Toye, Kröller and W. H. New, it is reasonable to create three distinct groups of stories for observation characterising the period 1945-2000: that of ethnic writers of the 1980s and 1990s, that of mainstream writers of the same period, and, finally, that of classic mainstream writers from the post-war period leading up to the end of the 1970s. Twenty stories are taken to represent each of the aforementioned groups, making for a sample of sixty. As for the criteria for selection, three principles have been applied. First, single author books have been neglected on the grounds that selecting a story from such a volume would leave much room for manipulation as the story best approximating our expectations for the given period could be selected. Next, literary magazines as a primary source have been left out on account of their unlimited variety and oversupply of stories composed by a great number of relatively unknown writers, which would inevitably lead us to problems of Canadian literary canonisation. However careful the selection process, though, it has to be emphasized that a certain degree of subjectivity will remain in the case of any such sample.

As a third principle, the database of ethnic stories from the 1980s and 1990s has been put together taking demographical-cultural tendencies into consideration as provided by Statistics Canada (Figure 1).

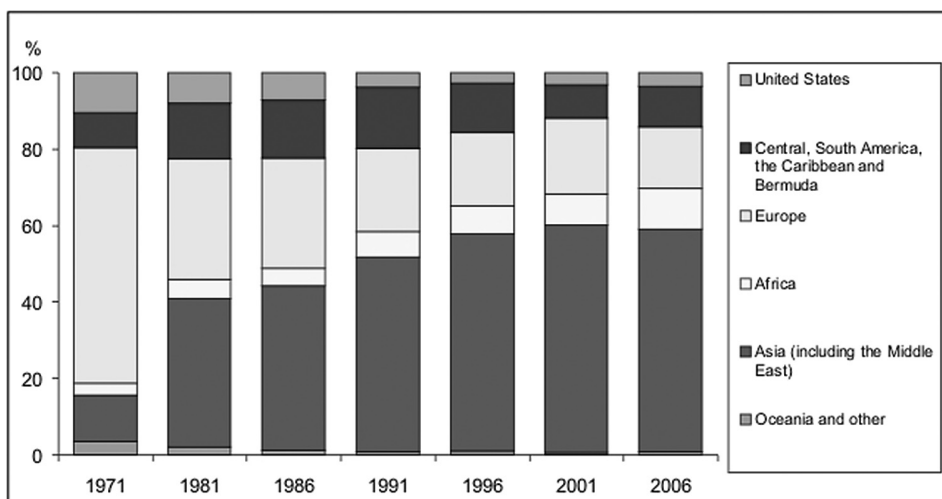


Fig. 1: Region of birth of recent immigrants to Canada, 1971 to 2006

Source: Statistics Canada

As for the composition of the mosaic, the Government of Canada website on Canadian multiculturalism relates for the 1990s that “in recent years, a vigorous immigration policy has attracted a growing number of applicants from non-traditional sources such as Asia, Africa,



Central America and the Caribbean” (“Canadian Multiculturalism”). Within the non-traditional sources, Asia assumes a distinguished position, as “over the last three decades, there has been a dramatic change in the sources of immigration into Canada – shifting from Europe, which has dominated historically, to Asia and, to a lesser degree, the Caribbean and Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa” (Resnick, 58). Naturally, this distinctive position also reflects itself in the Canadian literary mosaic.

The data provided by the 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 Censuses¹ hint that, within those of European descent, Italian and German heritage still represent a cultural influence to reckon with, whereas Spanish and Portuguese speakers furnish a cultural link primarily with Central and South America. Admittedly, such a sample will not guarantee any well-based inference regarding weather image use for the individual ethnic groups, but neither has this been envisaged as an aim: ethnic composition has been observed solely to estimate the overall effect of multicultural writers on literary weather.²

3. Analysis

The discussion of the findings will commence with three general facts. First, out of all regions, stories set abroad seem to dominate the ethnic story group of the sample when contrasted with either of the two mainstream sets,³ for which Yasmeen Abu-Laban provides the explanation that the immigrant writer’s is “a mindset that encourages identification with the ancestral homelands and discourages identification with Canada, so that *There* is more important than *Here*” (260). One projection of *There* dominating over *Here* could be the ethnic writer’s choice of a setting outside Canada. Second, among the Canadian regions depicted by Canadian ethnic writers, Ontario is discernibly the most popular: nine out of the twenty stories examined are set there.⁴ This ranking is also reinforced by the Government of Canada website on Canadian multiculturalism: “[i]t is noteworthy that much of this diversity is concentrated in Ontario, particularly in the metropolitan region of Toronto” as well as in other metropolitan areas (“Canadian Multiculturalism”). The latter quotation sheds light upon the third general finding, equally: an urban setting seems to prevail in ethnic stories, especially in the ones set outside of the writer’s the country of origin.

To continue with a few numerical insights regarding weather images in the sample, stories written by ethnic Canadian writers between 1980 and 2000 can boast the lowest total and average weather image figure when compared with both the contemporary and the classic mainstream story sets. Moreover, the number of winter-related images (snow, frost, ice, cold) for

- 1) As the ethnic short stories analyzed cover the last two decades of the 20th century, this period forms our primary statistical focus regarding the composition of the population.
- 2) Out of the twenty stories in our sample for Canadian ethnic writers of the 1980s and 1990s, eight represent Asia, two the Caribbean Islands, one Asia and the Caribbean, one Africa, two Central and South America, five Europe (including Germany and Italy) and one the Middle East.
- 3) Eight stories are exclusively, and two are partially, set abroad in the ethnic sample.
- 4) Ontario is represented by nine stories in the ethnic sample (out of which eight are urban), the Prairies by two (one urban, one rural). British Columbia by two (both urban) and Quebec by a single (urban) story. As for the ethnic writers included, nine are entirely and three partly Ontario-based.

the selection of ethnic stories also lags behind the respective values for the two control groups (classic mainstream /1945-1979/ and contemporary mainstream /1980-2000/ Canadian short stories). Here it has to be added, however, that the ratio of winter-related images to the total image number in the two contemporary story groups is roughly the same (Figure 2).

	snow (percentage of weather images)	sun (percentage of weather images)	total weather image number	winter-related weather image number	average weather image number
Mainstream (1945-1979) 'classic'	22%	7%	829	420	41.4
Mainstream (1980-2000) 'contemporary'	7%	16%	503	128	25.1
Ethnic (1980-2000)	6%	13%	343	99	17.1
Total	14%	11%	1675	647	28.0

Fig. 2: **Distribution of weather images in the three subsets of short stories**

To measure the significance of a given weather image in a short story, one can distinguish between central and marginal roles. An image has a central role in a story if it plays an organic part in forming the short story plot or bears undeniable consequences with regard to the protagonist's life. In the same story, one weather image may fulfil a central role while another is assigned a marginal one. In this case, the story will be considered central for overall image role because there is at least one weather image playing a central role in it. Out of the three story subsets, mainstream classic ranks the highest in the number of central stories, amounting to 75% and dominated by winter-related images over universal ones in a ratio of three to one. Both the contemporary mainstream and the ethnic stories of the sample reveal a considerably lower central role content while concurrently testifying to the domination of universal images, such as rain, the sun or storm. At the same time, the existing difference in central role content between the two contemporary story groups – a respective 55% and 25% – is not to be overlooked, either, as it may be an indication of weather securing a firmer place in the consciousness of contemporary mainstream writers than in that of their contemporary ethnic peers.

Some of these findings are in support of ethnic writers' weather image use following a track separate from that of the contemporary mainstream group, thus providing motivation for theories such as ethnic resistance to the dominant mainstream culture, or the exotic as ethnic differentia specifica translating into "[i]mmigrant writers [being] quite deliberate and explicit about importing foreign wares with the implication that their contribution is 'exotic'" (Kröller, 219). Some of the other findings displayed above, however, imply that there is a certain existing correlation between the two contemporary story sets, ethnic and mainstream, pointing towards literary globalization and other repercussions of a shared reality.



To be able to tell more, an investigation into the nature of the typically Canadian image of snow and that of the characteristically universal sun follows. Figure 2 displays frequency data for snow and the sun measured in each of the three story subsets of the database which seem to confirm the idea of “literary weather change” taking place in the last two decades of the 20th century.⁵ However, the respective 1% and 3% discrepancy for snow and the sun between the two contemporary story subsets leaves the question open whether, as discussed above, they represent the same or separate trends in image use.

To ascertain what image function reveals about this dilemma in its ethnic context, the first step will be to consider the roles fulfilled by snow and the sun in the ethnic story subset. Snow proves marginal in all seven stories in which it is seen. It surfaces as an emotive exponent in four instances: it is partly linked to sadness⁶ in André Alexis’s “Letters”, it manifests itself as the imaginary snow angel print of the woman pressed to the wallpaper in the heat of the moment in Evelyn Lau’s “First Sight, A Love Story”, it makes the symbolic substance of Canada’s cold welcome of immigrants in Judy Fong Bates’s “My Sister’s Love”, and, finally, Ferguson in Ven Begamudré’s “Word Games” compares WASP patriotism to dirty snow. Though only appearing in a single instance, snow plays a central role through the embodiment of a portent foreshadowing the approaching death of Eric McCormack’s protagonist in “The Third Miracle”. The conventional snow-death parallel is evoked twice: snow serves as a teaser of war memories in Dennis Bock’s “Olympia” and, more originally, as a projection of the surreal Norwegian Wendigo ghost of the mysterious book trying to victimize Geoffrey in André Alexis’s “Letters”. In this story, snow is also likened to a piece of clothing in a conventional simile: “From where I sit, I can see Laurier bridge. It is as white as your woollen sweaters” (201). Finally, snow appears in its physical reality, closely connected to mobility, and more loosely to comfort, two Climate Severity Index⁷ factors: “Snow like ass outside. [...] Hermit old car ain’t starting and anyway, too much snow [...] one foot snow and cold cold. Minus fifteen degrees and with wind chill like minus thirty” (Persaud, 40, 49).

As the above examples also demonstrate, these snow roles seem to be predominantly negative. More conspicuously, images like WASP patriotism pictured as dirty snow, or snow as the materialization of Canada’s cold welcome towards immigrants both in the physical and in the symbolical sense create an air of ethnic resistance to the dominant culture, which the highlighted subjects – alienation, isolation, discrimination – and the low snow image content in the ethnic story set can also support. In comparison to contemporary mainstream snow use, there is a shade less variety, but equal attention is paid to the physical effects of the image, and the sample can boast a small number of original image applications, too. To provide an example, when Jodie, the delicate and sensual young Asian woman of Evelyn Lau’s “First Sight, A Love Story” is pressed to the bedroom wall by her adulterous lover, the imaginary

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- 5) In the database, too, snow has the highest number of images (Figure 2), the sun ranking second whereas the sun is present in 70% of the stories topping the list as opposed to a mere 55% for snow.
- 6) “It is a day of falling snow and silence. I have rarely felt so sad. [...] [T]he view of the city [...] on a day like this, is like a view of my own soul” (Alexis, 201-2).
- 7) The most modern and complex indicator of such a nature is the Climate Severity Index, which is composed of the following four factors: safety, mobility, the comfort of individuals and their psychological state (“Climate Severity Index”).

print her body leaves on the wall is compared to a snow angel: “He wraps his hands around her shoulders and pushes her against the wall. Her shoulder blades dig into the wood as though he is trying to make an outline of her there, a snow angel, on the bedroom wall” (Lau, 383). Snow angels are typically made by North American children in the freshly fallen snow. The application of this image for the given context reflects Jodie’s build and her child-like clinging attachment to her lover, described in detail in the setting and development of the story, respectively. Moreover, through the word *angel*, the image also shows the complexity of the protagonist’s situation, shifting between innocence (the association with the whiteness of snow and with children making snow angels) and guilt (the print on the bedroom wall is suggestive of fallen angels).

Similarly to their counterparts in the contemporary mainstream story set, references to the sun provide a more subtle image input. As for their role, emotive exponents dominate, while the overall image effect is brighter than in the case of snow. Yet, curiously, all sun images with the potential of connecting to immigrant experience are rather negative. Both Bannerji and Persaud employ the image of winter sunshine without warmth to illustrate Canada’s indifference towards immigrants in their respective stories “On a Cold Day” and “Canada Geese and Apple Chutney”. Ternar’s sunshine is *rare* or *fake* (272) like the happy moments of an immigrant’s life. As an embodiment of justice out of reach, Begamudré’s sun helplessly watches a humiliated Indian pupil turn away from his racist teacher to stare into it in “Word Games.” Such image use may be seen as a projection of resistance to the weather-conscious dominant culture in the post-colonial reading (Young 22-23).

However, the ethnic sample can boast quite a few sun universals, too, which tip the scales in favour of literary globalization. First, the parallel between sunshine and happiness surfaces in M. G. Vassanji’s “In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon”, in Hiromi Goto’s “Canadian Culture 201” and in Judy Fong Bates’s “My Sister’s Love”. Second, Apollonian sun impulses and the sun-lust connection are exploited in four stories: an image representing Monika’s element of glamour in Dennis Bock’s “Olympia”, manliness and virility in Evelyn Lau’s “First Sight, A Love Story” and a refuge from adulterous temptation in M. G. Vassanji’s “In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon”, whereas the “lustreless” sunshine of Shree Ghatage’s “Deafness Comes to Me” (559) may reflect the narrator’s feeling sexually unattractive. Next, the sun-God/Nature relationship appears in three stories. In Begamudré, God “put[s] a piece of sun into every orange” (75), the sun’s rays symbolize the hopeful presence of God experienced in Nature in Judith Kalman’s “The County of Birches”, and Ernest Hekkanen’s monk blots out the sun “to mute the direct effect of the sun’s rays” (166), demonstrating his divine ability to control Nature in “The Mime”. Last, in the same story, the sun denotes time through the point of reference “as early as sunrise” (160) and by marking a new day in Goto’s “Canadian Culture 201”. For the stories examined, the ethnic sun image use hereby presented testifies that, in comparison with the contemporary mainstream control group sample, image meaning for the sun appears to be more positive, which, again, may be seen as a form of cultural resistance (i.e. not complying with literary pessimism) or as a geo-cultural consequence (i.e. pleasant sunshine and/or attached positive myths in the mother country predispose(s) ethnic writers to use the image in an optimistic sense).



As no central image of snow or the sun can be found in the ethnic story subset of the sample, a second step towards resolving whether it diverges from the contemporary mainstream subset may be to examine what images function in the five central roles of the ethnic category and in what way. Rain is used to realize structural enhancement in two stories, both composed by writers of European descent. In Dennis Bock's "Olympia", lack of rain forms an allegory for family tension, which is relieved upon the arrival of the first drops. Eric McCormack's "The Third Miracle" has a frame of rain, both predicting the impending misfortune and acting as heavenly lament for the deceased on the occasion of his funeral. Fog preventing vision permeates Leandro Urbina's "The Night of the Dogs", building a parallel with government officials' abuse of power. The hurricane of Yeshim Ternar's "Wedding Ninotschka" furnishes a central metaphor for immigrant life: "I asked Farhad why he had put that photograph [of a hurricane in the Caribbean] on his wall. 'Is it because that's how you feel here?' [...] in a refuge, the most violent storms explode in our soul" (285). The only winter-related central image, cold, becomes the central metaphor of Himani Bannerji's "On a Cold Day", representing the invisibility of the immigrant through the chilly atmosphere of urban indifference and faceless anonymity.

With the exception of Bock's story, where rain brings relief, all the above works display a negative central weather image. Two of these images – both by writers of non-European cultural background – connect directly to the immigrant experience. Expressing the immigrant-dominant culture relationship in terms of negative weather images could also be a form of cultural resistance in the case of a weather-sensitive dominant culture. So could the low weather image and central weather role count of contemporary ethnic Canadian writers. Yet, compared to the corresponding classic mainstream data, contemporary mainstream weather image use also shows some decline, even if not to the same extent.

The findings presented in the "Analysis" section imply that it may be a futile quest to separate multiculturalism and literary globalization as causes of 'literary weather' change: they seem to be inseparable processes at work, existing in a Hillis Milleresque reciprocal obligation,⁸ which Abu-Laban also reinforces:

[C]ontemporary globalization [ensures] that cultural intermingling and hybridization of identity will define the lives of many Canadians. Given the growing multicultural reality, it is almost inevitable that there will be concern over the extent to which national symbols [...] reflect this reality. There is a validity in developing symbols [...] that are inclusive of the reality of ethnocultural and multiracial diversity in Canada. (Abu-Laban, 270)

Importantly, Abu-Laban represents a view of literary globalization as cultural exchange, hybridization rather than Westernization ("Digesting Globalization"). In this light, the above quotation is also suggestive of a certain interaction between the contemporary mainstream and ethnic group; therefore, to turn the issue around, the decreasing weather image frequency and the universalization of weather in the contemporary mainstream set may also result partly from the interaction of the two groups.

8) That is, they are so entangled that it is impossible to judge where the one ends and the other begins.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism itself may provide cultural flows that, in turn, prompt the movement of certain ideas and images. “It has been observed [that] over the last three decades Canada has become far more ethnically diverse than at any other time in its history” (Marger, 482), which the colourful and varied literary mosaic of the country also seems to reflect.

Abu-Laban holds that “[g]iven the significance of global cultural flows and recent immigration patterns to Canada, we can expect that the multicultural as well as multiracial reality of Canada will grow,” which may result in “the sense among many Canadians of having a hybrid identity” and in the feeling that they “have been shaped by various national and ethnic cultures” (264-65). This interaction may explain why the contemporary mainstream and ethnic story sets show similar tendencies in many respects as regards the employment of weather images. Still, a certain divergence is noticeable, potentially owing to contemporary mainstream writers’ cultural heritage of weather-consciousness and multicultural writers’ “multiple cultural affiliations contained within their Canadian national identities” (Kröller, 210).

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