



reviews | comptes rendus

**Petr Kyloušek, Klára Kolinská, Kateřina Prajznerová, Tomáš Pospíšil,
Eva Voldřichová Beránková and Petr Horák**

***Us-Them-Me: The Search for Identity
in Canadian Literature and Film***

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Petr Kyloušek et al.

My-Oni-Já: Hledání identity v kanadské literatuře a filmu

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My-Oni-Já (published in Czech) or its English/French version, entitled *Us-Them-Me*, is a collective work by six prominent Czech Canadianists. The volume sets out to respond to the calls for a better understanding of the way postmodern hybrid identity has been formed and how the changes in individual and collective identity have been reflected in Canadian literature and film.

Because the nation-state has lost its unique status and this has made the study of national culture less valid, the authors of this volume decided to abandon, to some extent, the classic vertical exploration of historical roots of national identity and rather opted for its horizontal exploration, which goes beyond the modern national boundaries. The Canadian context serves them as a rewarding laboratory, where the study of different relationships between modern me, collective us and “*the Others*” or foreign them (p. 6) is exceptionally diverse. Applying diverse methodological strategies – a diachronic approach, taken in a historical review of the philosophical tradition of looking at tolerance, otherness and mutual recognition (Chapter I) as well as in

a historical overview of English and French language Canadian literatures (Chapter II), is aptly combined with a non-diachronic approach focusing on case studies of selected English and French literary texts (Chapter III and IV) and of Canadian cinematography (Chapter V) – the authors comprehensively expose the reader to the complex and multiple-rooted reality of Canadian identity. They set up a unique dichotomy structure allowing for an implicit comparison and confrontation of the quest for identity in both Canadian linguistic worlds and skilfully illustrate what is challenging about comparative cultural work: to find fruitful points of comparison while honouring what is unique and distinctive about each setting.

After a brief preface, the volume opens the discussion on identity, quite unusually, with a treatment of the philosophical background to the emergence of the concept of identity. Petr Horák’s review of key concepts and theorists of the Euro-Atlantic philosophical tradition provides the reader with a solid and very useful theoretical setting for further research in literary texts and film works. The section of

this chapter on the Canadian situation offers unfortunately only a brief discussion of two different philosophical traditions (*laïcité* and *communitarism*) in the treatment of the Self and the Other in Quebec and in Ontario.

The historical overview provided by Petr Kyloušek and Klára Kolínská in Chapter II examines the historical roots of these different patterns of identity models from the French and English perspectives, in this unusual order. The authors contend that “studying the question of identity inevitably foregrounds the Francophone aspect (...) and French-Canadian literature is better suited to study identity models (...) in order to formulate general and theoretical conclusions” (p. 10). In the French-Canadian part, Kyloušek draws on the diachronic theoretical framework of phenomenology, axiology and French literary criticism, in order to denominate four historical models of identity in Quebec society. The subsequent literary analysis of selected French-Canadian works (Chapter III) takes advantage of this very authoritative and comprehensive theoretical background. Kyloušek demonstrates that many works written during the crucial period of the Quiet Revolution contributed to re-imagining Canadian identity, often by revisiting Canadian history and models of the 19th century (p. 57). Moreover, he clearly proves that, for example Aboriginal literature in French, or immigrant literature, has overcome the national model and has drawn nearer to post-national and rhizomatic identity. The English-language part of the historical overview cannot benefit from the same theoretical basis as the French-language part, because Anglophone identity has a different genesis (p. 249). Kolínská clearly proves that the Anglophone quest for identity evolved much later and was much more ambiguous than the Francophone questioning on identity, and is marked by the absence of several

identity models emblematic of French-Canadians.

Both the English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature analyses in Chapters III and IV share the common ground of questioning the intersection of me-us-them; however each of them uses a different methodology and identifies different identity-linked issues that are emblematic of their respective settings. In French-Canadian literature Kyloušek and Voldřichová Beránková identify as crucial constitutive images of otherness *l'Anglais*, American, French, Aboriginal and immigrant. The English-Canadian literature case study analysis by Kolínská and Prajznerová focuses less on the object of triangulation points of identity (with the exception of the study of Aboriginal English literature) and offers the quest for identity via the treatment of such aspects as genre and regionalism. They succeed in redefining the concepts and methodological categories of post-colonial Canada and well document that the question of post-coloniality is transformed into the question of postmodernity (p. 56). Although the volume does not offer explicit comparisons, these implicit comparisons of “internal” approaches (p. 247) allow Kyloušek, in the concluding chapter, to draw five main conclusions which represent the eloquent synthesis of the book, valuable for the level of their abstraction and disciplinary crossover. It aptly questions the changes that have taken place in the nature of Canadian identity, the relations between the two majorities and minorities, the First nations and immigrants.

In order to “overcome the language barrier” (p. 10) demarcated by the preceding chapters, Tomáš Pospíšil’s film analysis in Chapter V does not take a similar approach and does not separate both Canadian cinematographic worlds. Although this approach is partly justifiable for the purposes of this volume, the



author does not take into account the same desire of Quebec filmmakers to affirm distinctiveness and their specific sensitivity to questions relating to identity as was observed in the literary analysis of Francophone literature of this book. Thus, it cannot be said that Pospíšil fully succeeds in avoiding the pitfalls of the selective and imbalanced approach toward Quebec cinema. Pospíšil's opinion that "Canadian feature film production (...) survives on the margins, mostly neglected by the Canadian general public (...)" (p. 209), neglects the box-office numbers of the successful Quebec home-grown film industry, whose share is about 10 times the share held by domestic English-language features across Canada (Yakabuski, 2009). Despite this criticism, the strength of Pospíšil's essay is the wealth of information it provides about an impressive variety of themes, genres and authorial approaches in Canadian cinematography and the importance of state-supported

institutions and their role in "cultivating and educating the public" (p. 243) in order to affirm Canada's own national identity.

In conclusion, all chapters are well written and represent a lucid exploration of the theme of identity. Chapters I, II and VI might also be useful for non-literary oriented readers and can be highly recommended also to students of the history and politics of Canada. The authors' search for identity through a reading of Canadian history and philosophy and its reinterpretations in a wide range of literary texts and film is a compelling cross-disciplinary attempt to build a bridge between the traditional approaches to capturing the newly emerging postmodern multi-faced reality of Canada. Some methodologies leave to future scholars important opportunities to follow the path undertaken and to reinterpret other angles and features of Canadian identity in literature and film.

Michelle Gadpaille

"As She Should Be" – Codes of Conduct in Early Canadian Women's Writing

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Michelle Gadpaille's *"As She Should Be" – Codes of Conduct in Early Canadian Women's Writing* is a highly commendable and readable academic study. A stellar piece of research in its own right, it fills a research gap in both Canadian literary history and "conduct book literature" of the 19th century. This monograph is a truly new and fresh contribution to literary studies – a welcome addition to Canadian social and literary studies.

Despite being relatively short, *"As She Should Be"* is not wanting in detail or argument; it is stylistically impressive, flows well and is thus accessible to all readers. Gadpaille avoids jargon in her hunt for literary and social meaning. Another positive is that the book is not hampered by any ideological bias, and neither is it limited in scope by the methodology chosen. Moreover, Gadpaille manages to address the broader social context of