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Articles

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Beyond Hodgins and Kroetsch: Other Spaces of English-Canadian Magic Realism

Abstract

The article offers a tentative analysis of six recent magic realist novels written in English by Canadian female writers of different ethnic origin, and set in different parts of the country, and beyond it. The female authors use magic realist techniques to open up for examination new spaces as they intertwine with the "classic" magic realist concern with memory. The condition of exile, which in many different planes dominates in some of the novels, often generates, but also results from, nostalgic approaches to the past. At stake is the recovery of memory, in all its different aspects; the memory lost as a result of social and/or personal trauma, but often encoded in the landscape itself. Significantly, in the process of negotiating the identities of the protagonists in multicultural contexts, all novels to a certain degree both criticize and revalorize the traditionally female spaces of family, domesticity, and spirituality, often redefining them at the same time. The writers are interested in particular in the self-construction of their protagonists within this domestic/multicultural context.

Résumé

Cet article offre une analyse expérimentale de six nouvelles du réalisme magique écrites en anglais par des auteurs féminins canadiens d'origine ethnique différente, qui se déroulent dans des parties différentes du pays et en dehors. Les auteurs féminins utilisent des techniques magico-réalistes pour s'ouvrir à l'exploration de nouveaux espaces qui se lient à la préoccupation magico-réaliste "classique" avec la mémoire. La condition de l'exile, qui prévaut souvent dans quelques unes de ces nouvelles sur beaucoup de niveaux différents, mais aussi est le résultat d'une approche nostalgique du passé. La récupération de la mémoire est mise en cause, sous tous ses aspects différents ; la mémoire perdue résultant d'un trauma social et/ou personnel, mais souvent codée dans le paysage même. D'une manière significative, dans le procès de négociation des identités des protagonistes dans des contextes multiculturels, toutes les nouvelles critiquent et remettent en valeur les espaces traditionnellement féminins de la famille, de la vie familiale et de la spiritualité en les redéfinissant en même temps. Les écrivains s'intéressent particulièrement à l'auto-construction de leurs protagonistes au sein de ce contexte familial/multiculturel.

The ecstatic enthusiasm for magic realism as epitomising Canada, characteristic for the beginning of the 1980s and best exemplified by Geoff Hancock's article "Magic or Realism: The Marvellous in Canadian Fiction" has now subsided. Nevertheless, the genre itself has enjoyed renewed popularity among North American critics, marked by the publication of numerous articles on the topic,

and perhaps most significantly, by the landmark anthology of critical texts *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Zamora and Faris [eds], 1995), and more recently, by Wendy B. Faris's book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004). However, most critics writing about the genre in the Canadian context focus on the same set of novels written in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Among those, Jack Hodgins' works (in particular *The Invention of the World*, 1977) and Robert Kroetsch's novel *What the Crow Said* (1978) are the most popular subjects of critical considerations¹ and thus have become the paradigmatic Canadian magic realist novels. At the same time, British Columbia and the Prairies, where the novels are set, have acquired the status of "magical" spaces. Thus, the marginalization of East-Coast writers, ethnic minority and women writers in critical discussions on magic realism in Canada noted by Jennifer Andrews (7) persists even though magic realism is often treated as a genre particularly well suited to the expression of minority group concerns, and praised for its decolonizing capacity²: issues of primary concern for many Canadian critics.

My aim is to tentatively examine some of those "other," as yet inadequately explored spaces as presented in six recent magic realist novels written in English by Canadian female writers of different ethnic origin, and set in different parts of the country, and beyond it. While I focus on different facets of memory as the key issue of magic realism, I also point to other areas of convergence in the novels. I assume, with Stephen Slemon, that magic realism might be treated not only as a postmodern, but also a postcolonial genre/mode, and that as such it is a medium which allows for a productive engagement with differently conceived power-issues, including "the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity" and thus constitutes a venue for the silenced and marginalized to "enter into the dialogic continuity of community and place" (Slemon, 422). The novels selected for discussion fall within a broad definition of magic realism as presented by Faris in *Ordinary Enchantments*. These are: Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993; Native Canadian [Salish/Cree] author; set in B.C.), Jane Urquhart's *Away* (1993; white author; set in Ontario), Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996; author of Lebanese descent; set in Cape Breton), Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996; white author; set in B.C.), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996; author of Trinidadian descent; set in the Caribbean), and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000; Native Canadian [Haisla] writer; set in B.C.).

While the authors do not rely so much on irony, burlesque, and surreal interludes as Kroetsch and Hodgins do, they often incorporate multiple literary genres and modes into their novels, often reworking them (e.g., bildungsroman in *Cure* and *Monkey Beach*, or the gothic in *Fall*, *Cereus* and *Monkey Beach*), and making the texts richly intertextual. Like other magic realist works, the novels interrogate, though to a different degree, the boundaries between the knowable and the unknowable, and focus on issues of memory as related to time and space. Communities feature as importantly as individuals. At the same time, female authors when exploring variously conceived ex-centric fields, tend to privilege in their discussions questions related to gender and sexuality, especially as they intersect with race-related issues. Significantly, the family framework is

foregrounded as the milieu responsible for the emotional and intellectual formation of female protagonists, though at the same time often a cause of trauma: a feature absent in the two novels by Hodgins and Kroetsch. The nature of the trauma is often sexual (incest, rape), and this most intimate violation tends to mirror or be symptomatic of other violations on the social and cultural level. Thus, for example, in *Cereus* the abuse inflicted by Chandin Ramchandin on his daughter mirrors the colonial trauma, reflecting his cultural uprootedness and racial self-hatred.

The writers are interested in particular in the self-construction of their protagonists within this domestic and multicultural context through the medium of memory and inter-cultural interaction, as well as in variously conceived issues of colonization and decolonization. Such complex negotiations of (often hybrid) identity conceived as “not an essence but a *positioning*” (Hall, 395) constitute an important focus of these novels. In this context, some deal more or less overtly with issues connected to problematics of nation, in particular the coexistence and clash of cultures. This problematics is developed in a particularly complex and effective way in *Fall*.

The condition of exile, which in many different planes dominates in some of the novels selected for discussion, often generates, but also results from, nostalgic approaches to the past: “Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near” (Hutcheon). The nostalgia tends to coexist with the memory of multi-layered trauma and abuse: personal (often related to sexuality; especially rape and incest) and social (community disintegration, epidemics, migrations, wars), and is often figured through variously conceived souvenirs. The familial and social bonds, both past and present, are often, though not necessarily nostalgically, underlined through repetitive everyday household chores, in particular cooking and recipes.

The story of Beth Weeks, the protagonist of *Cure*, unfolds at the intersection of multiple disasters: international, communal and personal. The retrieval of the fractured world before it is reborn and reconfigured is possible thanks to Beth’s mother’s scrapbook: the repository of personal, family and, to a certain extent, communal memory. This “private place” which allows the mother to make sense of everyday experience and find refuge from it, signifies by means of verbal and non-verbal fragments and traces of everyday life organized through association rather than chronologically. It records events and feelings only obliquely, metonymically, and in a sense constitutes their material equivalent. Only later Beth, by writing the book we are reading, imposes a linear, chronological narrative structure on the fragmented record of experience, providing the traces with a significant context.

The scrapbook, but also the treatment and presence of ghosts and the figure of Coyote in the novel itself, effectively oppose the narrator’s aim not only to retrieve her version of the past, but also to separate the past from the present seen as the reconstituted world. The scrapbook has a palimpsestic nature as it is composed as a complex overlay of multiple “texts” of the present over the past, which is, of course, continuously redefined. Additionally, the old letters, flowers, boxes used simply as writing material, nevertheless introduce new contexts, as do

physical traces, creases and smudges, left when the book is used. Likewise, spectral presences, the ghost of Beth's grandmother, to whom her mother talks incessantly, or the ghosts of the homesteader's children killed by Coyote, question the assumed pastness of the past.

The recipes, which are foregrounded in the novel, function not only as anchors of memory, but also as a unifying element holding together the fragmented narrative of the scrapbook. They allow Beth, in her linear rendition of the past, to ground multiple, evanescent experiences in concrete detail, and to attach them to the actual acts of cooking, baking, eating, as well as to particular flavours, scents and textures. For Beth, the process of making sense of experience includes the common, repetitive ceremonies of cooking and baking, and in the course of the novel they acquire a clearly therapeutic function (Anderson-Dargatz, 101, 218). Like in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, food is infused with the soul and feelings of the cook (though the connection is not literalized in Anderson-Dargatz's novel as it is in Esquivel's) and it becomes a vehicle of memory.

The recipe- and food-mediated link between mother and daughter is also clear in *Fall*. Lebanese recipes are smuggled to Materia from her mother, who pretends she does not know they are destined for her daughter, proclaimed dead, in keeping with tradition, for the sin of rebellion. They confirm the emotional attachment between the two women, and are important elements in Materia's nostalgic extension of the idealized family image into her construction of Lebanon, where her family comes from, as paradise lost.³ After her death, when her own daughter Francis is pregnant, she salvages Materia's old maternity dress and almost magically recreates perfectly the recipes in the process of reaffirming the obscured link with her mother, her culture, and tentative rebuilding of the fractured home and family unit.

Materia builds the edenic image of lost Lebanon on the basis of vague memories and her parents' stories. The object of her longing, the lost referent, exists only as a mental construct propped up by gustatory, olfactory, auditory, and visual aids: foods, smells (cinnamon and cedar in particular), Lebanese music, pictures. Her only consolation, after she had been symbolically exiled from the Garden (i.e. stable family context) by her father, is the hope chest in the attic, which exudes the smell of cedar, evoking images of imagined Lebanon. Even though it is brand new, it becomes for her souvenir of the irretrievable home. Filled with Materia's otherwise not articulated sorrow and longing, the chest, and the attic where it is placed, soon become a repository of the collective memory of the family.

Even though it is so oblique and fragmentary, the scrapbook in *Cure* remains the most eloquent expression of the mother's feelings and thoughts, providing also a way of dealing with minor problems and major traumas of life. Consequently, it becomes for Beth the lens through which to nostalgically view the past which, marked as it was by fear and abuse, should perhaps remain immune to nostalgic renditions. Through the scrapbook the mother becomes the locus of nostalgic memory, which can be attributed to the scrapbook's status of a souvenir. In *Cereus* the photograph of Mala's mother and her lover Lavinia, acquire a similar status as the only element of the happy past that survives the break-up of the family. "The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of

longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia" (Stewart, 135). Beth, by *writing* her own scrapbook, underlines the affinity between a scrapbook as a souvenir and a book, which, according to Stewart, share the ability to contain things of great "interior significance" within "an exterior of little material value" and to "transcend their particular contexts" (139). Thus Beth marks both the continuity with the past and reliance on memory, and a break with her mother's public inarticulateness, characteristic for her generation of women.

Nostalgia resulting from exile dominates the plot of Jane Urquhart's *Away*. While the men in the novel are present- and future-oriented, the women are "plagued by revenants" and locked in the past represented by their attachment to "abandoned geographies" and "inherited souvenirs" (Urquhart 208).

The nostalgic space of *Away* resembles to a certain extent nostalgic spaces of *Monkey Beach*. The texts, though in many ways crucially different, contain an image of the lost wholeness of culture and cultural, mostly oral, lore that gave cohesion to traditional communities. Thus they participate in the tendency stressed by Faris: "a sense of cultural loss and recovery often generates magical realist fiction" (134). Fragmentation on the individual and social level forms the core experience of the marginalized communities, which is accompanied by the disintegration of cultural memory. In Urquhart's and Robinson's novels the image of the lost wholeness has a clear ecological component. The disintegration of the traditional community is accompanied by forced alienation from the land, the loss of the knowledge that allows survival in the open, but also emotional survival (stressed in *Monkey Beach*), and the obliteration of the landscape itself (stressed in *Away*), and with it, the obliteration of "geographical" memory that resides in it. The play of fragmentation and wholeness is crucial for the understanding of both novels.

In *Ravensong*, a text that resists nostalgia, is likewise a dirge on the disintegration and erasure of a traditional, Native, community, and an attempt to recapture it in words. Urquhart's "abandoned geographies" are here echoed in the image of the villagers not only losing the communal feeling, but also physically leaving the village, and with it clearly leaving behind the old ways, and the reliance on nature and community bonds for survival. The "ravensong, powerful almost inhuman" (Maracle, 198) is a grieving song, though, specifically for the victims, especially the children, and thus the future, lost to numerous epidemics the village suffered; the communal fight with the epidemics providing the best example of the traditional role of the community.

While the novel bemoans the tragic aftermath of the white colonisation of North America, it also, with its protagonist, looks for the "why of things", and for a larger context, which is provided by the magic interludes revealing the history of white invasion to be the plan of Raven gone awry. The task at hand is to drive "the people out of the houses to immerse themselves in the transformation of the world of the others" (Maracle, 44) and to make the white and Native communities to learn from one another, thus delivering "Raven to the whole earth" (Maracle, 191). Visions of little Celia, the presence of Raven, cedar and the earth, and the general context of the oral transmission of clan and personal history provide for

the vision of omnipresent, though endangered, cultural memory, residing in the people, but also in the natural world itself.

In the case of *Away*, Esther, the teller of the story, makes connection between her own recalling and reaffirming the story of her progenitors and the bardic tradition of circulating history by memorizing it (Urquhart, 133) and spreading it by word of mouth. She recognizes the strength of memory and decides to “put aside ephemeral, destroyable books” (134), and by telling the story attempts an act of healing. The attempt is a failure, and at the end of the novel “under the glare of artificial light the fossilized narratives of ancient migrations are crushed into powder” (356). Commenting on the meaning of the inherited state of being “away” that women of the family experience, Cynthia Sugars maintains that it is constituted by the “concerted attempt to “presence” the past” and that it “functions as a metaphor for the migrant’s state of mourning” (11).

Sugars’s analysis of *Away* as both imaging and rejecting an act of cultural colonization (by, metaphorically speaking, filling the land empty of ghosts with transplanted ghosts), and at the same time “shamelessly revelling in a mix of colonial nostalgia and postcolonial melancholy” (25) points to the essential difference between *Away* and *Monkey Beach*. As Sugars concludes: “the state of being away is not only to be haunted by a lack of ghosts—or, perhaps, overwhelmed by a surfeit of inauthentic ghosts—but to *be* a ghost as well. This is particularly noteworthy since being “away” is, after all, the opposite of indigeneity” (24).

The indigenous presence is marked in *Away* by the figures of Exodus Crow and Molly as hybrid figures of reconciliation. Exodus Crow, whose name suggests the conflation of white and indigenous culture, brings Mary’s corpse back to her family and “indigenizes” her story of being “away” as a version of a woman on a vision quest, staying close to her spirit-guide. Urquhart dramatizes the double status of the colonized colonizer that the transplanted Irish community has, sidestepping the problems involved in equalizing the plight of the Irish and Native Canadians by creating Molly, a descendant of an Irishman and an Ojibway woman, “who carried the cells of both the old world and the new in the construction of her bones and blood” (302). Molly embodies the idealized, though, even in the novel, unrealized future of interracial fusion of body and spirit. The fusion is reflected in the double source of magic in the novel: while it is grounded most firmly in the Irish mythology, it also employs Native beliefs, by making a crow Eileen’s guiding spirit. In spite of its attempts to the contrary, the novel enacts the settlers’ “impossible necessity for incorporating the Other, for becoming indigenous in order to belong in the land they have conquered” (Godard, 190).

That the landscapes of settlers are haunted by Native ghosts, is most clear in *Cure*. By employing Native characters and the figure of the Coyote in particular as central to the plot, though residing in the margins of the white community, the novel not only provides a revision of “the white wilderness narrative” (Howells, 2003, 167), but also an example of the familiar Canadian literature motive summarized by Godard, whereby, “identity for [the] white person is acquired

through this encounter with alterity, knowledge of the self attained through the wisdom of the not-I" (190).

The wisdom, in the form of Coyote and Native Coyote stories, is the medium through which Beth resolves dramatic problems of adolescence. Beth is a marginalized character inhabiting multiple border zones, which explains her receptivity to Native stories. Her family lives on the edges of the white town, close to the Indian Reserve and the bush, between civilization and nature, which opens Beth to multiple cultural influences. Her age, her hovering between childhood and adulthood, between innocence and knowledge, between heterosexuality and homosexuality, suggest malleability and openness. Coyote stories that Beth learns from Bertha, a Native head of an all-female "clan", and the advice Bertha provides, allow her to accommodate fears connected with her budding sexuality, and to deal with sexual abuse at home and outside of it. They also provide her with a language in which to express them, as in the white discourse sexuality functions only as the unspeakable, as the silent void. Bertha's role as a Native female spiritual guide that she plays for Beth and her granddaughter Nora is comparable to a certain extent to the role of Ma-ma-oo in *Monkey Beach* and Ella in *Ravensong*. All of those character, though to a different extent, function as emotional and intellectual anchors for the protagonists, and as conveyors of cultural and family memory to the lost adolescent caught in-between cultures or altogether alienated from her culture. The figures provide another example of the reconstitution and revalorization of the traditional female spaces of domesticity and spirituality in the novels.

Coyote, as Beth perceives the figure, is a kind of a shape-shifting male demon, prowling the wilderness, taking possession of men and changing them into sexual predators. While Bertha is aware of the complexity of the Trickster figure, which she tries, without much success, to convey to Beth, she also recognizes that Coyote stories can be, and are, used as cautionary tales to contain wayward girls, thus playing more or less the same role as Mrs Bell's moralizing. Even though Bertha herself warns the girls of the dangers of wandering the literally and metaphorically conceived wilderness, she also stresses the empowerment that comes from the ability to face the danger: "There is always something out there to get you. Know that, but don't be scared. Go hunt it down, so it don't get you" (Anderson-Dargatz, 168).

By taking Bertha's advice and confronting Coyote-Jack and then her father, Beth expels Coyote: a crucial step in her process of growth. Thus she banishes also the disturbing indigenous ghosts from the landscape, in a sense obscuring once again the Native presence. Her process of growth is completed as Beth finds a niche in traditional, though interracial, coupledness, and decides to write the story down. Nora, the mixed-race lesbian other, and Beth's lover, is banished, not to be heard of again, though her memory remains inscribed in the landscape itself (Anderson-Dargatz 297).

Interestingly, four out of the six novels under consideration figure the concern with alternative configurations of race and sexuality through images of interracial lesbian unions, though the texts use them for different purposes. In *Cure* the lesbianism indicates a space of emotional safety and sexual exploration for two

adolescent girls suffering abuse at home. Thus, with the resolution of her domestic problems, Beth distances herself from Nora. The mature relationship between Rena and German Judy in *Ravensong* underlines the possibility of Natives and whites living together, and reaching a certain understanding, at the same time serving to show the deep cultural rift between the two communities, and the intolerance present also within the Native community (the couple is shunned by some, and German Judy simply ignored: “she’s white and so she don’t count” [Maracle, 97]).

In *Cereus* and in *Fall* the interracial lesbian union, as the ultimate challenge to male authority, shatters the world of the male characters and precipitates incest and abuse. In *Fall*, for both Katherine and her partner Rose, it seems to have the additional overtone of domesticating and exploring on a different plane the relationship with the marginalized, racially different mother. As Howells notes, in *Cereus*, the elopement of Lavinia Thoroughly, the daughter of a white preacher in the Caribbean Lantanacalara, and Sarah, native to the island, additionally challenges the oppressive colonial discourse: “a discourse of female desire transgresses colonialism’s prescribed racial and sexual boundaries” (Howells, 2003, 153). While the two characters simply disappear, their union, now in the open, is symptomatic of Lantanacalara life: as one of the characters maintains “almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else” (Mootoo, 238). As Heather Smyth claims, the novel, through the image of the lesbian couple, but more significantly through the figures of Tyler, Otoh, and Mala, “presents sexuality as a fluid form of identity and parallels sexual indeterminacy or outlaw sexuality with other forms of border-crossing identities”, at the end envisioning “a utopian community of queer subjects and both implicitly and explicitly [linking] their stories to a project of imaginative decolonization” (147). In a sense, an alternative model of a family is thus constructed.

In all novels, the process of the recovery of the gaps, silences and erasures left by traumatic experiences is central to the plot. The process consists in fact in the the recovery of memory: personal and/or cultural. Thus *Monkey Beach*, another coming-of-age story, for example, follows a different trajectory than *Cure*: it fills empty spaces with ghosts and magical presences, thus indicating the protagonist’s “coming of age” through the recovery and acceptance of the obscured space of Native culture.

In *Monkey Beach* the key issue affecting the life of Lisamarie is the lack of an explanatory framework which would allow for mourning and reconciliation with death. The Haisla community she belongs to no longer has any meaningful connection with traditional beliefs, and this lost reference has not been successfully replaced by Christianity. Hence neither the otherwise competent and caring family nor the community can help Lisa to deal with the tragic deaths of her uncle Josh and Ma-ma-oo. Interestingly, even her gift to commune with the spirit world is affected by multicultural influences not only by muffling her openness to it, but also by colouring what she sees: the cedar spirit that appears to her comes often dressed as a leprechaun. At the end, as she accepts her gift (running in the female line of her family, though consciously suppressed by her mother) and the position of a seer, though she is not adept at using it to her

benefit, she partially recovers and accepts Haisla heritage, and listens to the call of the ghosts to stay alive, even in the face of the revelation that Jimmy, her brother, is indeed dead. The haunted wilderness, in which the Native heritage is encoded from the very beginning in the form of stories attached to topographical landmarks and plants, remains a dangerous and magical place, peopled by carnivorous ghostly presences and the elusive sasquatch; at the same time it is domesticated, as home of the ancestral spirits and benevolent, though sometimes misleading guide spirits.

The female authors of the six novels use magic realist techniques to open up for examination new spaces as they intertwine with the "classic" magic realist concern with memory. At stake is the recovery of memory, in all its different aspects; the memory lost as a result of social and/or personal trauma. Significantly, in the process of negotiating the identities of the protagonists in multicultural contexts, all novels to a certain degree both criticize and revalorize the traditionally female spaces of family, domesticity, and spirituality, often redefining them at the same time.

Endnotes

1. Cf. for example Delbaere-Garant; Durix, 115-135; Boldrini; and Biagiotti.
2. For a broad discussion of this claim, and of views opposing it cf. Faris, 133-169.
3. A broader discussion on the role of food in the two novels can be found in Lewis.

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