

CANADIAN LITERATURE AS AN AMERICAN LITERATURE: CANLIT THROUGH THE LENS OF HEMISPHERIC AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES

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Abstract

This paper addresses the noticeably low presence of Canadian literature in hemispheric American literary research. The fact that hemispheric literary studies focuses on a comparison of the United States and Spanish America is partly because of Canada's marginal position in the Americas, its lack of identification with the continent, and Canadian scholars' reluctance to engage in hemispheric studies due to their insecurity concerning cultural identity and the discipline's potential imperialistic impulses. By examining a representative history of Canadian literature and several literary studies for intersections and tangencies between Canadian literature and other literatures of the Americas, this paper will demonstrate that there are natural links between them, which make a transnational comparative approach to Canadian literature both legitimate and desirable.

Key words

Canadian literature; hemispheric American literary studies; literatures of the Americas; intersections; tangencies; influences

Introduction

Under the influence of cultural globalization, the disciplines of cultural and literary studies are changing dramatically. As the concept of the nation is being interrogated as "a suitable framework for cultural identification" (Wylie 2010: 48), and cultures are increasingly viewed as circulating "beneath and beyond the level of the nation" (Carter 2007: 119), scholars and critics are increasingly adopting transnational approaches to the study of literature and culture. They are exploring the connections and mutual influences between countries at different levels of cultural life. Examining transnational relationships is also at the core of hemispheric American (or inter-American) studies: a discipline that encourages thinking of the nations that comprise America from a comparative and hemispheric perspective. The transnational dimension of inter-American studies

links the discipline to “transatlantic studies”; however, while the discipline of transatlantic studies focuses on the relationships between the countries in the Americas and the European countries from which their cultures have descended and studies linguistic, cultural, and racial affinities between them, inter-American studies is more interested in the relationships among individual countries in the Americas and their cultures and literatures, and it is based on the assumption that there are evident comparative and genealogical parallels between them (see McClennen 2002; Straub 2016). This means that transatlantic studies emphasizes differences among New World countries thanks to their different cultural heritages, whereas inter-American studies claims that they all share a common denominator – the Americanness (in continental terms) of their experiences. In addition, inter-American studies rearticulates the concept of America to uncover previously silenced perspectives within the conceptions of American culture that often centre on the dominant and all-important United States, while “denying or eliding all consideration of the socio-politico-historical interrelationships that pertain between the United States and its hemispheric neighbours” (Johnson-Roullier 2008: 4).

Although Canada is part of the American continent – and should therefore be an object of interest for those involved in hemispheric research – it cannot escape one’s attention that this northern country seems to be underrepresented in this discourse. As the Canadian literary scholar Albert Braz notes, inter-American studies is oriented mainly “along a United States–Hispanic America axis,” and researchers have simply focused on Latin America in relation to the United States, hardly ever turning their attention further north (2010: 119). According to Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel (2010), this trend is also observable in two essay collections which are often quoted as having been crucial to the establishment of inter-American literature as a field: *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (1990) and *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality* (1997). Neither of these works mentions Canada much. In the former, English Canada is not represented at all, and French Canada only features in a study by René Prieto; it is a similar case with the latter work. This may mislead the reader into thinking that inter-American literature – the existence of which both books seem to advocate – really only concerns the literatures of the United States and Spanish America. Indeed, French Canadian and Brazilian writing, which are at least slightly represented, are referred to as “marginal” or “minor” literatures on the back cover of *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* They are thus given second-class citizenship in the inter-American project. Such omissions bring Siemerling and Casteel to the conclusion that “if the Americas do have a common literature, it is one that largely excludes Canadian writing” (2010: 8).

The present paper aims to identify the factors which contribute to the exclusion of Canadian literature from hemispheric American literary studies. It suggests that this exclusion is linked with Canada’s position in the continent, its lack of sense of continental American identity, its cultural insecurity, and the fact that inter-American studies is largely a US-based project.

Despite being aware of the pitfalls of the comparative transnational approach to Canadian letters which hemispheric American literary studies proposes, this

paper attempts to show why it is meaningful and desirable. In addition to the fact that the story of the development of Canadian literature is similar to those of other literatures of the Americas – given that they all experienced colonization, saw European cultures implanted in indigenous environments, and sought liberation from colonial (Eurocentric) literary modes and autonomy in literary expression – Canadian literature and other American literatures seem to be interlinked and mutually influenced due to a continuous cultural exchange which is stimulated by travelling and migration. These claims shall be supported in an examination of W. H. New’s *A History of Canadian Literature* (1989, 2nd ed. 2003) and several other studies for intersections and tangencies between Canadian and other American literatures. Although New’s book has been criticized for paying considerably more attention to English Canadian literature and neglecting its French Canadian counterpart (see Nischik 2008), and for giving just a cursory treatment to “‘other’ Canadians” (Kamboureli 1994: 12–13), it has been chosen here because it is one of the first literary histories of Canada to reflect the culturally plural character of Canadian literature. Earlier histories of Canadian literature (e.g., Carl F. Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada* from the 1960s) only presented Canadian literature as a fusion of the English and French literary traditions (see Fitz 2011). New, on the other hand, “includes a section on Native literatures, asserts cultural plurality throughout, and describes the emergence of multiculturalism in Canada” (DeCook 2002: par. 13). He also attempts to situate Canadian books and authors in cultural and social contexts that transcend the nation, and he shows how they interact with European writers as well as with those from the Americas. This aspect of the literary history is highlighted by Earl E. Fitz in “Canadian Literature in the Early Twenty-First Century: The Emergence of an Inter-American Perspective,” where Fitz commends New for examining Canadian letters “in a more inter-American context” (2011: 2) and for enumerating examples of Canadian literature’s points of contact with other literatures of the Americas. Since the references to the inter-American nature of Canadian literature in New’s history are quite scanty, and Fitz (2011) does not further develop them, this paper intends to expand on and supplement them using other sources. By pointing to numerous intersections between Canadian literature and other American literatures, this paper aims to explore the aspects of Americanness that Canadian literature shares with other literatures on the continent.

There are, of course, conceptual problems with the term “American literature”. The concept of what is “American” is ambiguous and can be understood as a signifier of both national (US) and continental identity; furthermore, using the term “New World literature” as a synonym for the purposes of disambiguation, as suggested by Larry Shouldice in his 1982 article “Wide Latitudes: Comparing New World Literature”, is only a partial solution because it does not address all the problems of the definition of American literature that he has identified. If we define American literature as a body of writing produced by American writers, Shouldice (1982) explains, we almost immediately stumble upon the question of who qualifies as an “American author”. He mentions colonial writers as an example and asks if they should be considered in the context of the literatures of their mother countries or regarded as “the first fruits of a new series of national

literatures” (Shouldice 1982: 47). Shouldice (1982) also raises the question of the relevance of one’s place of birth and citizenship. If an author was born outside of the Americas, but lived and worked in the Americas and wrote about them for a considerable part of their life, should that author be included in the canon of American literature? And what if a writer who was born on the American continent never addressed American reality in their writing? Should they be seen as an American author? All the questions that Shouldice (1982) asks point to the haziness at the centre of the concept of American/New World literature and the impossibility of its unequivocal definition; therefore, the existence of mutual influences between Canadian literature and other literatures of the Americas are going to be used as a sufficient reason for arguing that Canadian writing should be studied as a member of “a community of literary cultures related to each other by virtue of their origins, their sundry interrelationships, and their sociopolitical, artistic, and intellectual evolutions” that, according to Fitz, constitute American or inter-American literature (1991a: xi).

Canada’s absence in inter-American studies

As has already been mentioned, there are several reasons behind Canada’s invisibility in inter-American discourse. One of these is Canada’s marginal position in the Americas. Indeed, Braz has labelled Canada “a country without a continent” (2010: 132) – the reason for this being that it does not identify with the American continent and is largely invisible to other American countries. In his collection of essays entitled *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, Mexican American author Richard Rodriguez claims that for the United States, “Canada is the largest country in the world that doesn’t exist” (2003: ch. 7). Americans hardly ever think about Canada or hear from it. Canada is their “good neighbor”, who, unlike the southern one, is so trouble-free that it is relegated to the margin of their attention (Rodriguez 2003: ch. 7). Indeed, Americans have very little knowledge of Canadians (see Boswell 2011); William Watson even goes as far to say that “most Americans have no idea that we [Canadians] are here” (qtd. in Wylie 2010: 49). This imbalance in knowledge and interest, which is to a large extent a reflection of asymmetric power relations between the United States and Canada, is also replicated in other American countries. South Americans are indifferent to Canada as well. For them, as Jorge Luis Borges says, it is a country so culturally and geographically distant that “it almost doesn’t exist” (qtd. in Braz 2010: 131). In addition, Canada’s cultural and linguistic similarity and geographic proximity to the United States means that it is not considered to be different enough to be thought of as a separate entity to its southern neighbour (see Sadowski-Smith and Fox 2004). To use Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau’s frequently referenced and picturesque metaphor to describe Canadian–American relations: if you are a mouse sleeping next to an elephant, you risk being unseen by someone standing in the doorway of your bedroom – especially if you are sleeping on the wrong side of the bed; however, just as it is hard to see Canada from Latin America, it is difficult to see Latin America from Canada. The elephant blocks vision in both directions.

As a result, Canadians are not used to thinking of themselves in continental terms; their belonging to the American continent does not seem to be part of their self-definition. As Braz points out in his review article entitled “Canada, America, and the Americas: The Quest for a Continental Identity in the New World”, Canadians do not seem to be bothered “that the people of the United States have appropriated the word America as if *they* were the only Americans” (2008: 121). Unlike other American nations, Canadians do not claim to be Americans. The reason is that while Latin Americans understand their Americanness in the sense of Americanity as a transnational continental cultural identity, Canadians view Americanness as a sign of national belonging and therefore deny being Americans. As a nation, they have always defined their identity in opposition to US Americanness. Since the outside world has often equated US and Canadian experiences, the recognition of Canada’s specificity vis-à-vis its southern neighbour has been “crucial to [the country’s] cultural survival” (Wyile 2010: 56). Maybe this is the reason why a lot of Canadian cultural theory relies on a negative definition of Canadian identity as being a contrast to American identity: for example, Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Pierre Berton’s *Why We Act like Canadians: A Personal Exploration of Our National Character* (1982), and Katherine L. Morrison’s *Canadians Are Not Americans: Myths and Literary Traditions* (2003).

Since Canadianness is not built on solid foundations, Canadians seem worried that embracing Americanity would endanger it. Some literary scholars point out that the “Canadian” part of Canadian literature appears particularly under threat. As Herbert Wyile writes, “Canadian literature [...] is still a fairly new phenomenon” (2010: 52). It is generally argued that it was only in the 1960s – an era marked by a surge of cultural nationalism – that Canadian literature emerged as an independent and thriving literature. Until then it had been characterized by colonial mentality, a “lack of self-confidence, and lack of a supportive domestic readership” (Wyile 2010: 52). Now that Canadian literature has shed “its status as terra incognita” (Wyile 2010: 49) and has finally scored some achievements on the world’s literary stage (for example, more and more writers are being awarded prestigious literary prizes), its Canadianness is being destabilized – if not outright questioned – by postcolonial, postnational, and transnational trends in literary theory and criticism. Some critics even bemoan the death of a distinctly Canadian literature (see Henighan 2002). As hemispheric literary studies is an example of these tendencies, it is no wonder that Canadian literary scholars regard this field with suspicion and believe that it could lead to the eclipse of Canadian literature.

Apart from this, there is another reason for Canadian scholars to be wary: hemispheric studies originated in the United States. The discipline had its inception about eighty years ago with the Berkeley historian Herbert Eugene Bolton, who argued in his presidential address to the American Historical Association on “The Epic of Greater America” that the history of the United States cannot be studied in isolation from the histories of other American nations, because the historian then loses sight of “many of the larger factors in [its] development” (McClennen 2005: 404). Although comparative inter-American scholarship has also taken root in other parts of the world (including Europe) since then, the field

is still “dominated by a country that appropriated the name of a continent for nationally limited purposes” (Siemerling and Casteel 2010: 9). It is US academic institutions and their departments of English and history that have contributed most to its development (McClennen 2005). In their introduction to *Canada and Its Americas*, Siemerling and Casteel point out that “America” continues to signify “the United States” in many academic articles in the field of hemispheric studies and that it seems unlikely this tendency will ever be dislodged from the centre of “this academic enterprise” (2010: 10; see also Braz 2008). With the United States as the central signifier and all other national contexts relegated to the margins, as Siemerling and Casteel note, the concern that “hemispheric American studies is driven by an imperializing impulse” on the part of this superpower (2010: 10), which means that it only further reinforces and reifies the political and cultural dominance of the United States, does not appear unsubstantiated.

CanLit and other American literatures: intersections

Although, as demonstrated above, there are factors which explain (if not justify) the absence of Canadian literature in the study of hemispheric American literature, there are numerous intersections between Canadian letters and other literatures of the Americas which substantiate the application of the inter-American approach to the exploration of Canadian literature.

One of the common denominators of all American literatures is the presence of Indigenous traditions. It is not an exaggeration to claim that Indigenous literature, in Fitz’s words, “unifies the American experience as nothing else can” (2013: 125). It is a cultural heritage that all cultures of the Americas share. Indeed, it is “the oldest form of literary expression” (Fitz 2013: 125) which was available long before the arrival of the first Europeans; however, not all countries have acknowledged its importance equally. As Fitz (2013) points out, the countries of Spanish America and Brazil embraced it as a part of their literary traditions long ago, whereas Indigenous writers in the United States had to wait until the 1960s to be accepted into the canon (125). Although New’s *A History of Canadian Literature* (2003) recognizes the importance of Indigenous traditions to Canadian literature by placing its beginnings in the pre-contact period, it has not always been like that.

It is true that white settlers in the territory of today’s Canada displayed a fascination with Indigenous traditional narratives from their early encounters with Indigenous people, as is evidenced by the number of transcribed native legends and myths available and their penetration into settler writings; however, as Klára Kolinská (2009) points out, Indigenous literature in its written form only achieved a degree of autonomy in Canada in the early 1960s (171) which was linked with changes in the political climate of the country. Indigenous people had finally been granted the right to vote in federal elections without being required to give up their “Indian” status, which meant that they had, after years of disregard and oppression, finally acquired full citizenship. Together with a general growing self-awareness of ethnic minorities in Canada, this resulted in an explosion in

Indigenous writing in the 1970s and 1980s. This was aided by the establishment in 1980 of the first Indigenous-owned and focused publishing houses – Theytus Books and Pemmican Publications – which have helped Indigenous writers carve out their own literary identity. Support for the emergence of new Indigenous voices in literature has also come from a number of Indigenous organizations. New (2003) mentions the Enow'kin Centre, a creative writing centre in Penticton, BC, which was established by Jeannette Armstrong and Greg Young-Ing and which publishes the literary journal *Gatherings* (311). New (2003) also acknowledges the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in Regina as well as the Toronto-based Native Earth Performing Arts Company and the Company to Re-establish the Trickster (311). This renaissance has produced a lot of important names in contemporary Native Canadian literature – including Jeannette Armstrong, Thomas King, Lee Maracle, Ruby Slipperjack, and Thomson Highway – thus making it an integral part of the Canadian cultural scene.

Although Native Canadian literature is characterized by diversity, which is the result of the cultural differences that exist between Indigenous peoples in Canada, as New (2003) emphasizes, there are certain topics that recur in the texts produced by Native Canadians. They often “foreground racism and ways to control racism, particular historical incidents and their consequences, and the plight of reserve poverty and urban isolation” (311). The experience of racism and cultural oppression because of ongoing colonization is a central link which also binds together the many culturally diverse Indigenous peoples across the Americas. As Simon J. Ortiz (1997) writes, most of them “have resisted physical removal and annihilation, destructive assimilation and acculturation, and the outright loss of land, resources, and human capital” (xii). A hemispheric study of Indigenous literature in the Americas therefore appears justified and important.

Having said that, literary development in the New World has not merely been influenced by Indigenous cultures. Literatures in the Americas have cross-fertilized each other as ideas do not recognize political boundaries. New (2003) mentions, for example, the influence of William Faulkner on Jack Hodgins, Ernest Hemingway on Morley Callaghan, and other US writers on Canadian authors. Although Canadian literary figures are a bit reluctant to acknowledge the influence of US writers on their work (see Thacker 1993), a complete list of them would be very long. This influence, however, always appears one-way; the influence of Canadian authors on US letters is never discussed. This is not surprising as, according to a recent study which compared the selection of literary texts in English programmes at two secondary schools – one in Massachusetts, United States, and the other in Ontario, Canada – Canadian teachers of literature teach US literature more frequently than Canadian literature, while their US colleagues never seem to include Canadian texts in their curricula (Skerrett 2010). This imbalance in knowledge attests to where the main centre is located and in which direction the centrifugal forces have spread. However, as Fitz (1991b) shows, the number of Canadian writers exerting influence on authors in the United States is on the rise, with Margaret Atwood and Mordecai Richler being two prominent examples.

The impact of American writers on their Canadian counterparts is not as surprising as that of Latin American authors. According to Fitz, New's recognition

of the importance of some Latin American authors – especially those writing in the vein of magic realism – to Canadian letters adds a hemispheric dimension to “Canada’s critical perspective and sense of self” (2011: 2). Geert Lernout (1985) takes notice of the impact of Colombia’s Gabriel García Márquez on the Canadian authors Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins. Tom Wayman and other Canadian poets with leftist leanings, on the other hand, show immense admiration for the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; Wayman praises him as “one of the greatest poets of our century and I think of all world literature” (Keitner 1983).

This sentiment, shared by many, may lie behind a certain fascination with Chile that is particularly traceable in Canadian poetry. Chile figures prominently in the poetic work of Tom Wayman, Andrew Suknaski, Patrick Lane, Patrick White, Pat Lowther, Gary Geddes, Lorna Crozier, and Mary Di Michele. Canadian poets, sensitive to human rights abuses and prone to identify with the world’s victims (Sagaris 1994), responded in their poetry to the brutal military overthrow of Salvador Allende’s democratically elected socialist government in 1973 and the horrors perpetrated by Ernesto Pinochet’s dictatorial regime. Some of them travelled to Chile themselves; Peter Klaus (1998) points out that some Canadian writers – such as Gary Geddes, Pat Lane, Lorna Crozier, and Mary Di Michele – were present in Chile on a regular basis even during Pinochet’s rule. Others placed themselves in Chile using their imagination.

South American travel also inspired other Canadian authors. New writes that Dennis Gruendig, Eli Mendel, Earle Birney, and George Ryga found it to be “a stimulus for political comment” (2003: 227); however, instead of reflecting Latin America and constructing an image that would mirror its heterogeneity, they imposed a homogenizing identity on it and used it to project their own leftist political beliefs and principles (Arellano 1994). Brazil became a source of inspiration for the poet P. K. Page, who followed her diplomat husband to the country when he was appointed Canadian ambassador. Her *Brazilian Journal* (1987) is suffused with Brazil’s seductive exoticism, which, as Kevin McNeilly (1998) demonstrates, has a transformative effect both on the poet’s self and the language of her poetry. The Montreal journalist and poet Lake Sagaris, also mentioned by New (2003), made Chile her permanent home and Latin America the subject of much of her writing. Her *Medusa’s Children* (1993) compares the islands of Newfoundland and Chiloé from a historical and cultural point of view. Mexico – at once magical and infernal – emerges out of the fog of hallucinations in Malcolm Lowry’s novel *Under the Volcano* (1947), an early version of which was composed during Lowry’s stay there in the second half of the 1930s. According to Hugh Hazelton, the book “caused a considerable stir in Mexican letters” (2010: 220). Louis Dudek’s long poem *En México* (1958), although starting with an uneasy confrontation with Mexico’s misery and squalor, finds a new form of wisdom in the fertility of its natural world. A trip to Mexico also inspired Hugh Garner’s novella-length story *Violation of the Virgins* (1971) and Daphne Marlatt’s short novel *Zócalo* (1977).

There has also been a lot of cultural exchange on Canada’s border with the United States. New draws the reader’s attention to the nineteenth-century US writers Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry James, who, when vis-

iting Canada, were puzzled over “[its] seeming difference from the United States and its seeming sameness” (2003: 51–52). Canada continued to attract US authors in the twentieth century as well, being seen as “the last frontier and the lost innocence of their own world” (New 2003: 52). Its northern wilderness features prominently in many short stories and novels by Jack London and in northern romances by James Oliver Curwood and his followers. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, twentieth-century US writers tend to see Canada through rosy glasses. In their idealized rendering, it seems to be “an alternative to the disappointments of their own country”; it is depicted as a refuge for social and political dissenters and for women on a quest of self-exploration (Doyle 2015). On the other hand, there are also quite a few Canadian narratives with an inter-American dimension. New particularly points to novels by Quebec writers who “engage with whatever a *pure laine* mindset had previously defined as ‘other’” – besides others, “‘America,’ conceived of continentally and embracing Mexico and the United States” (2003: 290–291). The pioneering works in this respect were Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* (1984) and Nicole Brossard’s *Le désert mauve* (1987). Both novels feature characters driving across a part of the United States in search of themselves; Poulin’s protagonist gains an understanding of who he is by discovering the mixed cultural history of North America. Encounters with America and the penetration of Americanness into the cultural milieu of Quebec are also the subject of works by Francois Barcelo, Monique LaRue, and Jacques Godbout (New 2003).

Canada also became home to many authors with Latin American connections, who New refers to as “recent arrivals,” which means that they are mostly first-generation immigrants and “not the sons and daughters of generations of previous immigrants” (2003: 329). As Hugh Hazelton (2007) writes, the first immigrant writers from the region of Latin America had arrived and individually established themselves in Canada by the 1960s. They included the Uruguayan writer Gloria Escomel; Ludwig Zeller and Renato Trujillo from Chile; the Brazilian visual artist and novelist Sergio Kokis; and the Puerto Rican poet Rafael Barreto-Rivera. Since, as Hazelton explains, their arrivals “evolved in isolation from other Latin Americans” (2007: 7), they often adopted one of the official languages of Canada as a means of expression, or they wrote both in their native languages and either in English or in French. As they often wrote about their respective home countries, they brought them closer to Canadian readers.

Things changed when military dictatorships in South America saw a large influx of refugees in the 1970s. This was when the “large-scale literary activity by Latin Americans in Canada” began (Hazelton 2007: 7). The group of immigrants who made the most substantial contribution were Chileans who arrived in Canada after the bloody coup d’état that deposed Salvador Allende as Chilean president in 1973. Naín Nómez, Jorge Etcheverry, Gonzalo Millàn, and Leandro Urbina were some of the names mentioned by New (2003), but a complete list would be much longer as the number of writers in the Chilean diaspora in Canada is truly astonishing. The prominence of Chileans among the Latino-Canadian authors is, according to Julio Torres-Recinos, also due to “their ability to join together in various initiatives to promote and disseminate their works” (2013: 6).

One example is a 1982 bilingual anthology entitled *Literatura chilena en Canadá/ Chilean Literature in Canada*, edited by Nómez and released by Ediciones Cordillera, an Ottawa-based publishing house set up by Urbina. It was the first anthology of Latin American writing to appear in Canada. Quite a few of these authors had been established writers in their home countries, and they continued to write in their native languages both for the expatriate communities in Canada and for the audiences they had left behind. Some produced their masterpieces in Canada, and a couple of them – such as Millán's *La Ciudad* – are important examples of Chilean poetry as such (Etcheverry 1989). As Etcheverry and Nómez were also involved in literary criticism, they drew parallels between Canadian and Quebec cultures and those of Latin America (Hazelton 2010).

Chile is not the only South American country that contributed to what Hazelton calls “Latino-Canadian literature” (2007: 3). The wave of migration from Argentina in the 1970s and the 1980s produced figures such as Margarita Feliciano, Nela Rio, and Pablo Urbanyi. In the 1980s, El Salvador, within another wave, contributed names such as Alfonso Quijada Urías, Óscar Armando Tobar, and Ernesto Jobal Arrozales. Torres-Recinos notes, however, that they were not as well organized as the Chileans because they were “scattered across the country” (2013: 8). From Mexico there came Gilberto Flores Patiño and Martha Beatriz Bátiz Zuk; from Peru Paolo de Lima, Guillermo Rose, and Borka Sattler; and from Bolivia Alejandro Saravia.

Thematically, the writing of Latin American writers in Canada is not dissimilar to the literature produced by other groups of immigrant authors. As Hazelton (2007) points out, their first works written in exile are teeming with memories of their homelands, and, as a result, the focus seems to be on the political and economic aspects of life in these countries and the theme of family relationships. As time passes, feelings of loneliness and nostalgia usually set in, lending a rosy hue to their memories. The writers seem to forget the political instability and economic hardships that drove them out of their native countries, which they now often present as “mythical paradise[s] lost” (Hazelton 2007: 20). They may even dream about returning “home,” but since this is not always a real possibility due to political or economic reasons, they gradually come to terms with the new environment and their works often acquire Canadian references and themes. At this stage, having acquired sufficient language skills, they may even decide to abandon Spanish or Portuguese as their language of writing in favour of English or French, or they may become bilingual. However, as Hazelton warns, “complete assimilation [...] is virtually impossible” (2007: 20). This is also highlighted by Guillermo Verdecchia, a Canadian playwright with Argentinian roots, in his well-known play *Fronteras americanas* (1993) where “the central character ultimately discovers [...] that he lives ‘on’ the border [...] rather than on one side or the other” (New 2003: 330). Given the thematic focus of most Latino-Canadian literary texts, it can be concluded that they have the potential to provide new perspectives on Canadian society and culture to readers in Latin American countries and to Canadian audiences as well. These readers can also benefit from the writers’ invaluable insights about Latin America.

Conclusion

As can be seen, Canadian literature has not developed in isolation from other literatures of the Americas. Due to quite a lot of common history, it shares with them many aspects that are typical of literatures in the New World; despite primarily being a transplanted European literature which has acquired most of its unique features in interactions with the New World environment, Indigenous cultures have also left their footprint. Although Canadian literature is fully autonomous now, European literary theory still exerts influence on its shaping as do literary trends from the United States. At the same time, globalization and migration have contributed to the creation of interconnections between Canada and the other countries of the Americas. The works of Canadian authors display influences by other American writers, and Canadian literature now includes voices from Latin American diasporas in Canada. Due to these factors, not exploring the literatures of the countries of the Americas “collectively, à la the comparative method” (Fitz 2011: 1) would be a missed opportunity.

Of course, this does not mean that the study of Canadian literature and culture should be abandoned altogether. Certainly not; however, combining a national approach to literary study with the inter-American perspective has the potential of providing a different (and perhaps more complete) view of authors and their texts. It might be meaningful and enriching for Canada’s national context because one’s image is usually subject to change when confronted with the perspectives of others. The inter-American approach might also offer refreshingly new insights into issues like migration, race, hybridity, ethnicity, national identity, gender, and a plethora of other topics that are relevant for the study of the Americas. For an in-depth hemispheric understanding of these issues, Canada must be included in inter-American research. Without it, no picture of the continent of America will ever be complete.

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