My Night Or Yours? The Literary Life of a Nation

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Ironically, Depression and chronic unemployment played a key role in the development of twentieth century American literary culture. As part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the Federal Writers Project was short-lived, but at its peak in 1936 it employed more than 6500 writers, whose work resulted in 800 titles. In the process, the notion of an American "cultural commonwealth," of the primacy of folklore, oral history, and minority cultural forms were highlighted, while such writers as Ralph Ellison, John Cheever, Saul Bellow, and Zora Neale Hurston promoted and were themselves immersed in the idea of a socially conscious public art that documented the immediacy of American life during a crucial decade. Their experience contributed to a documentary literary tradition that Canada lacks. The idea of the "Great Canadian Novel" cannot, therefore, have the same resonance as it does in the United States, where one writerly goal continues to be a kind of all-purpose, encyclopedic text capable of taking the full measure of the land and its people.

Even before the inception of the Federal Writers Project, John Dos Passos pioneered the documentary method in *U.S.A.*, a mammoth work begun in the 1920s that begins this way:

> The young man walks fast by himself through the crowd that thins into the night streets; feet are tired from hours of walking; eyes greedy for warm curve of faces, answering flicker of eyes, the set of a head, the lift of a shoulder … muscles ache for the knowledge of jobs, for the roadmender's pick and shovel work, the fisherman's knack with a hook…

An epic list of nobodies who are somebodies follows, their specificity and variety being what Dos Passos aims to enliven under cover of what he calls the "cold glistening electric night." This nocturnal tableau motivated Jack Kerouac's love for the "tired faces in the dawn of Jazz America," and later, gave shape to the denizens of Tom Waits' "dark warm narcotic American night."

This dialogue among writers who share – even horde – their nocturnal visions and the people that inhabit them has no counterpart in Canadian letters. The earliest would-be epics of Canadian experience are poetic, follow European forms, and focus not on people but on things – natural monuments like the Laurentian Shield or such human accomplishments as the transcontinental railroad. Canada is celebrated as a wide expanse, a site of wonders both natural and manmade, which become its epic features rather than the jostle of eyes, shoulders, and aching muscles in Dos Passos' portrait of the American metropolis.

In the last thirty-five years Canadian literature has acquired some of the newsreel immediacy of Dos Passos' experiments, but not in order to take the measure of an entire people. Rather, communities, their specific identities and neighbourhoods, including Montreal's Main, Toronto's West Indian streets, or Vancouver's Japan and Chinatowns have entered our literary landscape. Recent Canadian novels convey citizenship as *local* rather than *global*, as a communal narrative rather than a national one. It's as if the corners of Bloor and Dovercourt, Rachel and St. Lawrence, or Vancouver's Commercial Drive were principalities of their own, each with their own history, rituals of acceptance and exclusion, as well as their own literary and linguistic heritage. The Canadian nation state remains an abstract and official presence, a backdrop against which these minor principalities define themselves.

An early exception to this trend can be found in the work of Montreal poet and novelist A.M. Klein. Famously dissatisfied with his reception in Canada, Klein published in 1948 two startling documents in favour of Canadianness as a shared experience – the northern mythic counterpart to Kerouac's "Jazz America." *In The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* Klein goes beyond his beloved Montreal for symbolic currency, employing the prairie grain elevator as

> an absolute. Because
> always this box flowers over us
> with all the coloured faces of mankind…

More remarkable is a pamphlet entitled *Huit Poemes Canadiens*, which includes an essay introducing Klein as a "Poète juif parmi nous." In a prefatory note to the poem "Parade of St. Jean Baptiste," Klein explains that his recent poetic experiments contribute not only to an understanding of Canadian citizenship, but to a new shareable Canadian language:

> Ce poème, l'un d'une série d'essais, peut s'interpréter comme un "langage bilingue" quoi-que le vocabulaire de la poésie est plutôt d'origine latine et Normande. Chacun des mots (à l'exception toutefois d'articles ou de mots auxiliaires) ont une consonnance synonyme à ceux de la langue française.

The first lines of "Parade of St. Jean Baptiste" convey the extent of Klein's foray into shared language:

> Bannered, and ranked, and at its stances fixed
> the enfilade with vestment colors the air.
> Roll now the batons of the tambours round
> ruminant with commencement…

A more cynical view might hold that Klein's efforts court the utopian possibilities of a multicultural ideal, without acknowledging its challenges. (Strangely, as Klein promoted the myth of a shared Canadian voice, he suppressed his usual reliance on Jewish motifs and language, most notably Yiddish.)

We might view the local quality of contemporary Canadian fiction, its love of the communal over the national, as the return of the suppressed; if not the return of Klein's Yiddish, then the assertion of Japaneseness, of a Native imaginary view, of a Caribbean voice as parts of a tradition increasingly focused on the particularities of Canadian life. In this sense, our literature of the last three decades has acted as screen on which new and shifting notions of citizenship are introduced.

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A striking example of these shifts can be found in Joy Kogawa and Kerri Sakamoto's fictional response to the internment of Canadian Japanese during the Second World War. Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998) are the literary descendants of earlier historical studies, such as Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (1976) and Barry Broadfoot's *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame: The Story of the Japanese Canadians In World War II* (1977). Sakamoto's novel explores what cultural critics call post-memory – the presence in a younger generation of "memories" of their elders' experience. In an interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sakamoto remarked on how the Ontario landscape of her childhood "was surrounded by bungalows that, from an airplane, look like photographers of the old tar-paper shacks of the internment camp built on the valley floor of the Rocky Mountains." Similarly, Kogawa recalls how her girlhood experience of the Alberta internment camps made it nearly impossible to "come to terms" with the Prairies, "a place without trees, and with wind, it felt like hell to me." Landscape, in each of these cases, is marked (and marred) by painful history, so that one can only live in such space as a figure at remove from the mainstream. *Itsuka*, Kogawa's 1992 novel examines the terms of Japanese-Canadian citizenship by reflecting on the 1988 agreement by the Canadian government to pay reparations and to apologize for its wartime and postwar treatment of Japanese Canadians.

Kogawa, however, does point in an interview to a sense of shared experience among other Canadians whose history includes government abuse:

> Japanese-Canadians who went through the political process of attempting to publicize their story and gain redress…developed political wings, as they say, a form of new consciousness. After the redress movement many joined in alliance with native peoples and created an identification and moved on in a kind of solidarity.

The representation of First Peoples in Canadian literature has undergone phenomenal change in the past thirty-five years, in part because Native writers have taken the subject for their own. George Ryga's 1967 play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* caused a sensation with its condemnation of Canadian treatment of Natives, portraying the development of what Kogawa calls "a form of new consciousness." It also created an archetypal figure in Rita Joe, which young urban natives had a stake in, even though she was created by an Albertan of Ukrainian ancestry. More recent work, such as Thomas King's 1994 novel *Green Grass, Running Water* portrays a cultural divide between native and mainstream Canada, with the vantage point having shifted almost entirely to that of a Native point of view: the Alberta landscape, its local language and culture represent a Canada apart, a territory through which non-Natives travel like boobs abroad. In a sharply comic scene, King's native characters lampoon visitors named S. Moodie, A. Belany, and J. Richardson, who stand in not only for a past tradition of Canadians who wrote about Natives, but for all Canadians who haven't a clue about the particularities of Native life. King's decentred landscape is the obverse of Klein's land of a "langage bilingue." It demands an intense sense of history, a cultural and linguistic awareness, and it insists on the reality of borderlands within the larger nation, across which one can pass like a boob out of the past or as a more astute contemporary traveller. Much of the pleasure in reading King's fiction comes from his ability to show us that in this dilemma there is not only civic responsibility but great humour.

The novels of Sakamoto, Kogawa, King, and others operate a bit like the guidebooks American authors penned for the Federal Writers Project, in order to portray life in each state and their far-flung localities. In the American case, national calamity and New Deal optimism inspired a nation to develop a shared public art that included an attention to the makings of minority cultures. In Canada, postwar prosperity and an increasing multicultural reality brought about a related outcome. Whether our fiction will lift the Canadian night – be it dark, warm, electric or otherwise – to the status of a shared myth remains to be seen.

[34] See, for example, Alain Pelletier, "Politics and Ethnicity: Representation of Ethnic and Visible-Minority Groups in the House of Commons," Ethno-cultural Groups and Visible Minorities in Canadian Politics, Kathy Megyery, ed. Volume 7 of the Research Studies for the royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991) p. 101-160; Simard, "La representation des groupes ethnoculturels dans la région montréalise."

[35] See, for example, Black, "Representation in the Parliament of Canada"; and Political Participation Research Network.

[36] Henry Milner, "Civic Literacy in Comparative Context," Policy Matters 2.2 (2001); also, this magazine.

[37] See www.torontoyouth.com.

[38] See Philip Haid, Elder C. Marques and Jon Brown, "Re-focusing the Lens: Assessing the Challenge of Youth Involvement in Public Policy," (June 1, 1999) www.iog.ca.

[39] See Sylvia Bashevkin, Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[40] Sayers and Jetha's interviews with ethnic minority politicians point to "the permeability of Canadian parties."

[41] Daiva Stasiulis, "'Deep Diversity': Race and Ethnicity in Canadian Politics," Canadian Politics in the 1990s, 4th ed., Michael S. Whittington and Glen Williams, eds. (Peterborough: Nelson, 1995) p. 203-204.

[42] Stasiulis, p. 201.

[43] Tossutti, p. 23; See, also, Sayers and Jetha.

[44] See, for example, Anver Saloojee and Myer Siemiatycki, "Formal and Non-Formal Political Participation by Immigrants and Newcomers," Canadian Issues (April 2003) p. 42-44.

[45] Kymlicka, p. 120.

[46] See Erin Tolley, "Supplement, Substitute or Stepping Stone?: Understanding the Electoral and Non-Electoral Participation of Immigrants and Minorities" paper presented at the Sixth National Metropolis Conference, Edmonton, Alberta (March 21-24, 2003).

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[1] Respondents were divided into the following groups: sex (male, female); age (18-34, 35-50, 51 years and over); education (high school or less; some post-secondary or more); and annual household income (less than $40,000; $40,000-69,999; $70,000 or more).

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[1] Kymlicka,. Norman, (2000), in their article "Citizenship in Culturally Diverse Societies: Issues, Contexts Concepts", distinguish between "common citizenship" and democratic citizenship Kymlicka,. Norman, 2000: 10).

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