

CIRCULATING GENRES
AND THE EMERGENCE OF A
TRANSCONTINENTAL POSTMODERN

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Two Nations, One Genre?

*The Beginnings of the Modernist Short Story
in the United States and Canada*

In view of the fact that there is no comparative study of the American and Canadian short story yet,¹ I want to focus, in this article, on the state of the short story in both countries at one particular period of time, the crucial period of the beginnings of modernism. This means that I will deal with the period of the American short story that was dominated by writers from the Midwest (Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald) rather than by Southern writers, who came to the foreground in the Southern Renaissance² as of the 1930s (Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor). I will thus be interested in the period of "high modernism" around World War I and the 1920s, and I hope that my comparative approach to the North American short story at this particular developmental stage will provide a useful historical context for several essays in this volume that deal with later North American short story writers.

I understand "modernism" as a periodizing concept within the arts, here a literary period of international relevance which is characterized by a network of interrelated historical, technological, intellectual, and aesthetic developments, and which resulted in innovative interrelated forms and styles of expressions in the arts and literature. Since the fundamental transformation of societies of the western hemisphere as of the late 19th century was a multinational phenomenon, including an increasing traffic of all kinds (also intellectual and artistic) across regional boundaries, questions of (cultural, literary) similarities, commonalities, and differences between different cultural regions arise.

Among the major technical innovations in the modernist short story are: a decisive turning away from "plot stories" ("Poison Plot," Sherwood An-

¹ Nischik, *The Canadian Short Story*, and Nischik, *History of Literature in Canada* repeatedly draw cross-connections.

² See esp. ch. 1 of Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance*.

person) toward a looser, seemingly “formless” structure and towards the inner worlds of the characters (subjective narrative focalization); an aesthetic of the glimpse rather than of broader views (“slice-of-life stories,” Anderson); epiphany (James Joyce) as an instant way of understanding and development; allusion and ellipsis (“iceberg-principle,” Ernest Hemingway); an indirect, symbolistic rendering of information, in particular concise, objectifying images to indirectly convey feelings and emotions (“objective correlative,” T. S. Eliot); narrative economy and stylistic succinctness; in-medias-res beginnings and open endings; and a greater focus on the narrative process rather than product. As to motif and theme, the modernist short story often deals with what Frank O’Connor called “submerged population groups,” with lonely, alienated, disillusioned post-war characters, often in the framework of the “initiation story,” which was particularly popular at the time.³ Earl E. Fitz formulates in general: “Characterized by its preoccupation with consciousness, identity, and perception, the literature of modernism is less concerned with action and event in the external world than with the way a mind reflects on itself and on the universe surrounding it” (121).

In the United States and Canada, the short story entered the modernist period under completely different preconditions and with totally different histories behind it. In the United States, the beginnings of this genre go back to Washington Irving in the 1820s. In the period of the American Renaissance around the middle of the 19th century, the American short story saw a first peak with writers and classical narratives that supported the evaluation that the short story was a US-American genre invention (Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville). It saw another flourishing in the period of naturalism and realism in the late 19th and partly the beginning of the 20th century, with well-known writers such as Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather. The genre was thus in full swing in 19th-century America and started vigorously into the 20th century, with many authors who have become canonical today.

The healthy state of the American short story was supported by a wide range of possibilities and indeed a demand for magazine publication of individual stories: “The beginning of the 20th century saw a huge growth in the

³ For an interesting theoretical approach to the modernist short story in general see also Dominic Head (*The Modernist Short Story*) who argues that “the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism” (1).

popularity and sales of the short story. . . . In 1885 there were around 3,300 magazines in the United States which published short stories. By 1905 this figure had risen to 10,800” (Scofield 107).⁴

The situation was quite different in Canada, where writers, especially avant-garde writers with a modernist writing style, had to look for publication venues outside their country, turning to European and American magazines. As Ken Norris states, “it was not until the 1960s that avant-garde literary magazines began to appear in Canada, some fifty years after the outburst of radical European Modernism” (9). No wonder then that the Canadian short story in the modernist period was still close to its beginning stage. In fact, one could argue that it was only then that the Canadian short story was coming into its own. There had been first beginnings at the end of the 19th century by writers such as Isabella Valancy Crawford, Susan Francis Harrison, and Gilbert Parker. Today these writers are mainly known for their less formulaic stories reprinted in anthologies of Canadian short fiction. All in all, however, in 19th-century Canadian short fiction, plot-driven adventure stories and formula writing were the order of the day, with two significant exceptions: Duncan Campbell Scott’s short story collection *In the Village of Viger* (1896, set in Quebec), which, with its largely realistic depiction of characters and of complex psychological states, brought realism to Canadian short fiction, as in a way did the animal story popularized by Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton. Their naturalist or realist wild animal stories came to be seen as the epitome of Canadian short narratives around the turn of the 19th and into the 20th century, not least because they fitted the popular image of Canada as dominated by nature and wildlife.⁵

It took two decisive and devoted innovators like Sherwood Anderson in the United States and Raymond Knister in Canada to usher in the modernist short story in North America.

⁴ This rise in significance does not only refer to the commercial magazines but also to the little magazines. See also Willa Cather’s statement in her essay “On the Art of Fiction”: “Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand – a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods – or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values” (939-40).

⁵ Both Roberts and Seton were still publishing collections of animal stories in the 1930s. For a brief survey of early Canadian short prose see Nischik, *The Canadian Short Story* (3-5).

Although Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) also published seven novels, his main literary achievements lie in the short story.⁶ The publication of his short story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio*, in 1919, revolutionized short story writing, and Anderson, himself influenced by Ivan Turgenev⁷ and stylistically by Gertrude Stein,⁸ became an influential model for many contemporary and later short story writers (such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, J. D. Salinger, and Raymond Carver).⁹ Anderson published more than seventy short stories, most of them reprinted or first published in his four short story collections: *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919),¹⁰ *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921; including "I Want to Know Why" and "The Egg"), *Horses and Men* (1923; including "I'm a Fool" and "The Man Who Became a Woman"), and *Death in the Woods* (1933). Anderson's short story oeuvre thus clusters in or around the 1920s, when he was at the peak of his short story creativity.

Born in Ohio, a largely self-educated man and voracious reader without a college degree, Anderson brought a new aesthetics to the short story. He was in life-long opposition to the commercialized magazine or plot stories, written for effect and to please the masses:

There are no plot short stories in life. . . . The popular magazines are but factories for efficient standardization of the minds of people for the purpose of serving the factories. . . . The writer is but the workman whose materials are human lives . . . The Modern Movement . . . is in reality an attempt on the part of the workman to get back into his own hands some control over the tools and materials of his craft. . . . To take the lives of . . . people and bend or twist them to suit the needs of some cleverly thought out plot to give your readers a false emotion is as mean and ignoble as to sell out living men or women. (Anderson, *The Modern Writer* 23, 31-32, 39)

Anderson coined the phrase of "The Poison Plot" (Anderson, *A Story* 255) to characterize what he detested, namely the overemphasis on plot in stories.

⁶ See, for instance: "Most of his novels are now seldom read. Even during his lifetime, it seems to have been understood that whatever enduring name Anderson would have would depend on his short fiction" (Small xi).

⁷ See Turgenev's book of related sketches *Annals of a Sportsman*, an Anderson favorite. See also Judy Jo Small (8-9).

⁸ On literary relations between Stein and Anderson see Linda W. Wagner, "Sherwood, Stein, the Sentence, and Grape Sugar and Oranges."

⁹ For a long list of American writers apparently influenced by Anderson, see Robert Allen Papinchak (ix).

¹⁰ Including well-known stories such as "Hands," "Paper Pills," and "Adventure."

He preferred grasping for that always elusive “large, loose sense of life” (qtd. in Curry, “Anderson’s Theories” 100). In *A Story Teller’s Story* he stated:

There was a notion that ran through all story telling in America, that stories must be built about a plot and that absurd Anglo-Saxon notion that they must point a moral, uplift the people, make better citizens, etc., etc. The magazines were filled with these plot stories. . . . “The Poison Plot” I called it . . . as the plot notion did seem to me to poison all story telling. What was wanted I thought was form, not plot, an altogether more elusive and difficult thing to come at. (255)

Anderson was thus after a kind of narrative that suited, indeed conditioned, his material and pondering narrators and that seemed natural to the story told, posing questions rather than giving answers and solutions.

In his numerous essays, notebooks, autobiographical writings (diaries, memoirs), and letters Anderson also, if diffusely, delineated something like a poetics of the short story. In contrast to the plot-oriented short story poetics still influential at the time, Anderson favored an anti-constructivist, intuitive, moment-oriented, and “organic” view of short story writing. In *The Writer’s Book* he states: “The short story is the result of a sudden passionate interest. It is an idea grasped whole as one would pick an apple in an orchard” (qtd. in Curry 85).¹¹ Anderson associated the conception of a short story with “moments that bring glory into the life of the writer” (*The Writer’s Book* 91), thereby also implying the high status short fiction had for him. The form of the short story correlated with his view that the “true history of life is but a history of moments. It is only at rare moments that we live” (qtd. in Papinchak 3).

Anderson wrote the first fifteen of the twenty-two stories collected in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) within one year between fall 1915 and fall 1916.¹² Half of the *Winesburg* stories were first published in the little magazines *The Masses* (New York), *The Little Review* (Chicago/New York), and *The Seven Arts* (New York) between 1915 and 1918 before they were collected in *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919. The modernist American short story, that is, was thus created as of 1915, simultaneously with modernist American poetry, and

¹¹ *The Writer’s Book* was left uncompleted at Anderson’s sudden death in 1941, but one of the most important aspects of this text is the insight it provides concerning Anderson’s aesthetics of the short story; see Martha Mulroy Curry, *The “Writer’s Book”* (lii-lxv).

¹² “The Rabbit-pen” (which remained uncollected) was Anderson’s first ever short story to be published and the only one to appear in the respected commercial magazine *Harper’s* in 1914. It was written to prove that he was able to write successful commercial stories; this story was a kind of antithesis to the modernist short story he then set out to create.

around 1920, the modernist short story had been established by Sherwood Anderson in the United States, with Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald then also publishing important short story collections.

The Canadian Raymond Knister (1899-1932) – like Anderson a writer of short stories, poetry, novels, and literary and cultural criticism – started to publish his innovative short stories just a few years after Anderson. His earliest stories appeared in the American avant-garde literary magazine *The Midland* in the years 1922 and 1924 as well as in the Paris avant-garde magazine *This Quarter*¹³ in 1925. Knister was able to place only one story in *The Canadian Forum*, a few stories in the Canadian popular magazines *MacLean's Magazine* and *Chatelaine*, and a series of sketches in the *Toronto Star Weekly*, all in the 1920s. Knister died by drowning in 1932 when he was just thirty-three years old; at that time he had only published twenty-seven of the several hundred stories he had completed.¹⁴ Some twenty of his stories were printed posthumously; thus he never saw a collection of his stories published.¹⁵ Canadian publishers and literary magazines were few and far between, and not only were they not open to modernist experiments but not even open to Canadian literature in general. Knister did not tire of complaining of the situation of serious writers in Canada.

At the same time, Knister worked toward alleviating the situation. He wrote perceptive essays in which he expressed general poetological statements that are reminiscent of those of T. S. Eliot (Eliot had published his seminal essays “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “Hamlet and His Problems” in 1919). Similar to Anderson, Knister made a point of linking up to contemporary Canadian and international writers who were also involved in the modernist project (see his extensive correspondence). He worked very hard to make a living as a creative writer in Canada against all odds, supporting himself by journalism, freelancing for several newspapers, writing numerous reviews (mainly for American newspapers) and several important essays. At the time of his early death, Knister had reformed the Canadian

¹³ Knister was appointed Canadian correspondent for this magazine and became associate editor of *The Midland*. He was also the first Canadian writer who published in *This Quarter*, alongside such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound.

¹⁴ On the circumstances of Knister's early death and the myths surrounding it see the article by his daughter Imogen Givens (1979-80).

¹⁵ So far, three collections of Knister's stories are available, see bibliography.

short story, published imagist poetry and two novels,¹⁶ and was hopeful for a budding Canadian literature.

Similar to Anderson, Knister's lasting contributions (next to his poetry) lie mainly in the short story and in an innovative poetics. A voracious reader, he did not think – in contrast to many of his fellow Canadians at the time – that an awareness of international literary developments would hamper the further evolution of Canadian literature. At the same time, Knister was involved in the formation of the Canadian canon, especially concerning the short story. His first published book was the anthology entitled *Canadian Short Stories* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928), for which he – after spending several years reading all the Canadian short stories he could unearth – selected seventeen texts to show a beginning of a national history of the genre. The book also includes an important introduction (“The Canadian Short Story”), a useful list of Canadian short stories hitherto printed in magazines (comprising 280 titles), and a list of books of short stories by Canadian authors (comprising 91 titles). Knister opens this introduction as follows, showing his awareness for being part of a cultural threshold situation (and using imagery that reflects his involvement with farm life):

At the outset of a new era there is opportunity to look back upon the old; and in nothing have we more clearly passed an epoch than in the short story, here in Canada. Literature as a whole is changing, new fields are being broken, new crops are being raised in them, and the changes apparent in other countries show counterparts in our development. (xi)

Like Anderson, Knister criticizes the commercialization of short story writing: “The general materialism had imposed a false aesthetics, on this continent” (xiii). He denounces the “Americanization” (meaning commercialization) of the genre, against which he would like the Canadian short story to take a stand (Knister, “The Canadian Short Story”). At the same time, Knister recognizes the unrivaled excellence of contemporary American short fiction and relates its significance to the large number of short stories published in the United States and their distribution in widely circulating popular magazines (see Knister, “Democracy and the Short Story,” written in 1920, first published in 1975).

Although both Anderson and Knister also wrote short fiction set in the city (see, for instance, both Knister's and Anderson's texts set in Chicago), they are mainly known for their stories in a rural or small-town setting –

¹⁶ Another one was published posthumously in 2006.

Anderson with reference mainly to the Midwest and, to a much lesser extent, the South (Anderson wrote twelve stories set in the South),¹⁷ Knister probably with reference to southwestern Ontario (mostly unspecified). Both writers were born and raised in a rural context, and both of them, although they also traveled or stayed abroad for a while, remained faithful to their country of origin and did not emigrate or become expatriate writers, as so many of their colleagues did at the time.

Significant parallels as well as differences concerning Anderson's and Knister's short stories become apparent in a direct comparison of their narratives. I have selected two of their best and best-known stories, with a similar theme, similar motifs, and some similar narrative techniques. As to production, publication, and reception of these stories, Sherwood Anderson's "I Want to Know Why" (set in Kentucky and upstate New York) was composed in August 1919 and was first printed three months later in H. L. Mencken's magazine *Smart Set*. The story was then included in Anderson's second short story collection, *The Triumph of the Egg*, of 1921 and went on to develop into one of his canonical stories, often reprinted, taught, and analyzed. Raymond Knister wrote "The First Day of Spring" (set in a rural, otherwise unspecified area) in 1924/25; although it is a competent story, it was not printed until 1976, half a century after its conception. Accordingly, in the still scant Knister criticism, there is practically no detailed treatment of this story, apart from one recent, excellent reading by Julia Breitbach of 2007. In other words, whereas "I Want to Know Why" is recognized as a "classic" of the American short story today, "The First Day of Spring" is still being established as an important early step in the development of the Canadian short story.

Both "I Want to Know Why" and "The First Day of Spring" are initiation stories, "uncompleted initiation stories" in Mordecai Marcus' terminology, in the sense that the process of coming to grips with a new level of awareness

¹⁷ With one exception – "A Meeting South," a New Orleans story – Anderson's southern stories are all set in the Upper South: Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. His published Upper South stories are: "These Mountaineers"; "A Meeting South"; "Brother Death"; "When We Care"; "Justice"; "A Dead Dog"; "I Want to Know Why"; and "Senility". Two more stories have a likely, though unspecified Virginia setting: "A Sentimental Journey" and "A Jury Case." Finally, two of his unpublished stories – collected posthumously in *The Sherwood Anderson Reader* – are also set in the Upper South: "Nobody Laughed" and "Daughters." In fact, one could call Anderson a border narrative writer of the regional and his stories a cultural marker of the Mason-Dixon line: his Upper South stories dovetail with his lower Midwest stories set in southern Ohio, Indiana, southern Illinois, and Iowa.

of self and world is still going on at the end of the stories. Both texts deal with the slow awakening of sexuality and with turbulent, diffuse emotions of their teenage male protagonists. The initiation into the adult world of these main characters is coupled with painful disillusionment and a gnawing lack of understanding on their part. Either story also makes use of autobiographical elements of their authors' lives: the farm life Knister experienced when growing up and later working on his German father's farm in southwestern Ontario, and the racetrack of horses as Anderson's passion especially as a boy.¹⁸ In both stories, animals play a crucial role in the protagonists' development, also by means of the modernist device of symbolic displacement. In Anderson's story, the boy narrator perceives his beloved racehorses to exude a covert sexuality; the animals are then later linked directly to a prostitute ("the one that was lean and hard-mouthed and looked a little like the gelding Middlestride but not clean like him" [12]), and particularly to the horse trainer, Jerry Tillford. The boy briefly feels love towards Tillford during their non-verbal communication about racehorses before his affection turns to hate when he sees Jerry enjoying the same rapport with a prostitute as he had earlier with him about the fabulous stallion Sunstreak. A similar displacement concerning human being and animal is at play in the Knister story, where the horse Cherry is described as a "long-haired bay mare with trim legs," holding "her head high" (3). At the epiphanic end of this text, the boy's stroking of "the warm nose of a colt" while whispering to the animal "You're going to be broken in" (8) is an oblique reference also to his own initiation into the adult world – which had just taken place due to a painful event brought to the narrator's attention by his father: the schoolgirl the boy had been longing for from a distance was pregnant and got married to another boy and had most probably killed their baby in a pig trough (7).

Whereas the striking similarities between both stories thus mainly concern theme and motif, the significant differences between them are mainly connected to style and technique or, to put it differently, to the extent to which an innovative modernist writing agenda is implemented in each of these texts. For one thing, Anderson is the better stylist. He is known to have been a heavy reviser. He claimed that rather than revising portions of a text,

¹⁸ See the parallels between "I Want to Know Why" and a statement on horses in Anderson's *Memoirs*: "Tears came into my eyes and a lump into my throat. It was my first love. Oh the beautiful, the courageous and aristocratic creatures. I grew sick with envy of the drivers" (qtd. in Small 209).

he would throw away an entire manuscript and write it anew from scratch until he was satisfied with it. In this way, he had spent ten years working on his other well-known initiation story, "Death in the Woods" (1926; Curry, "Anderson's Theories" 102-05). While Anderson was about forty-five years old at the time of writing "I Want to Know Why," Knister was twenty years younger and had not yet developed such a meticulous approach to writing. Many of the stories from the beginning of his career were still unpublished at the time of his early death; had he lived, they would surely have profited from later revisions.

Although both stories are told by youthful first-person narrators, Anderson's verbal style is much more authentic and gripping, more "modern." The narrative has a convincing oral and vernacular touch not least because of Anderson's intense study of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In contrast, Knister's story is written in a more formal, indeed partly poetic, style which altogether comes across as more conservative than Anderson's. For instance, Knister writes:

The blue of the sky softens, the air lifts, and it is as though the lightness of a life above the earth were being made ready, an entering spirit to pervade the uncoloured and frost-clogged flesh of the world; or perhaps it is as though this flesh had suddenly sighed in its sleep, an exhalation intoxicating to men and beasts. (3)

Compare this with Anderson, who already sounds a bit like J. D. Salinger (or, rather, Holden Caulfield) some thirty years later:

Well, I must tell you about what we did and let you in on what I'm talking about. Four of us boys from Beckersville . . . made up our minds we were going to the races, not just to Lexington or Louisville, I don't mean, but to the big Eastern track we were always hearing our Beckersville men talk about, to Saratoga. We were all pretty young then. (6)

Both passages are taken from close to the beginnings of the stories, and they also demonstrate another difference between the two texts: whereas Anderson uses an in-medias-res beginning, which was innovative at the time,¹⁹ Knister opts for a conventional exposition in an omniscient narrative voice:

It had been a mild winter, and yet when March came, and days in which wheels threw the snow like mud in stretches of road where snow still lay, the world was changed.

¹⁹ See the non-referential sequence signal right at the beginning: "We got up at four in the morning, that first day in the East" (5).

This change was more than seeming. Who misses the first day of spring? Snow may linger on the ground and return, but the new smell is there, more potent perhaps than it is ever to be in lush days of blossoms. (3)

After the two opening paragraphs in an omniscient voice, the Knister story shifts, rather abruptly, to a first-person perspective.

Such differences in structure and in the narrative process significantly influence the reader's reception of both stories. Anderson's text, with its many digressions, apparent "formlessness," disorderliness, and fragmentariness, as well as the open question posed by the story's title, reflects the confused protagonist's state of mind. His text integrates modernist tenets into the narrative process more decisively than Knister does in his story.

My comparative investigation of the beginnings of the modernist short story in the United States and Canada has thus garnered the following results: First, the modernist short story developed at roughly the same time in both countries. Second, this happened in an entirely different generic historical context, with the American modernist short story developing as an important innovation in an already extensive history of a genre "invented" in the United States in the 1820s, and the Canadian short story still close to its beginnings at the time after tentative starts in the 1880s. Third, whereas the innovative short stories by American writers could find American venues for publication even if American writers also published in Europe, Canadian modernist writers had practically no publication options in their own country; they had to turn to American and European magazines and publishers. Fourth, the modernist American short story was altogether more successful and accomplished than the Canadian short story of the period, which was not as technically advanced and influential, even in its own country, as its American counterpart. Fifth, whereas the American short story developed rather quickly during the later 1910s, the development was much slower and more halting in Canada.²⁰ Sixth, the direction of influence was largely one-sided at the time, with Canadian writers very much aware of American writing, while Americans paid hardly any heed to Canadian developments in the genre. Morley Callaghan, who once significantly called himself an "American writer" (22), was clearly an exception.

Thus the colonial time lag difference between both countries of some one hundred years, amongst other factors, also showed in the development of the

²⁰ Thus realism had entered the Canadian short story decisively only in the 20th century, with Sara Jeannette Duncan and Frederick Philip Grove.

modernist Canadian short story. Yet, as we saw, the Canadian modernist branch of the genre did start to develop at about the same time as in the United States, if haltingly and more modestly so, and the explosion of short story writing in Canada as of the 1960s would hardly have been possible without the early practitioners of Canadian short story writing during this period²¹ paving the way. Comparing the American and Canadian short story as of the 1960s would yield different results. But that is another story.

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²¹ Knister, Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, Ethel Wilson in particular; see Nischik, "The Modernist English-Canadian Short Story."

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DIETER MEINDL

Canada/American South in the Short Story

Flannery O'Connor – Jack Hodgins – Leon Rooke

This essay deals with three short stories respectively involving modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. The successive and overlapping literary currents indicated yield the contours of a cultural scenario in which these three stories – by Flannery O'Connor, Jack Hodgins, and Leon Rooke – reflect the growing stature of English Canadian literature in its North-American context. Around and during World War II, American Southern modernism – the Southern Renaissance – figured as North America's foremost movement in Anglophone fiction. Since then, modernism has given way to the two "post-isms" referred to, highlighted here by two writers with western Canadian backgrounds: Hodgins, who, though influenced particularly by Southern modernist Flannery O'Connor, can also be considered a Canadian postmodernist; and Rooke, who, hailing from the American South, absorbed Canada's colonial heritage as a resident of British Columbia during the 1970s and 80s and is presented as an accomplished postcolonialist Canadian writer here.

The first text to be analyzed, O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953), poses the problem of the relationship between modernism – an international or at least western literary trend – and regionalism. In *The Last of the Provincials* (1947), Maxwell Geismar, dealing with *modern* American fiction (as it used to be called), emphasized its strongly rural strain. This modernism, after affecting Midwesterners such as Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, gave rise to an unforeseen flowering of American fiction peaking in, of all places, the South, then the most backward region of the U.S. It was as if Faulkner, O'Connor, and company dug such deep roots into their native soil that they reached a subterranean layer of universal meaning. Tapping an underground reservoir can also serve as a figure to convey the course philosophical thought had been taking since the 19th century with Schopenhauer unearthing the blind, unreasoning "life-will," Bergson bringing to light the *élan vital*, and Nietzsche delving into the Dionysian dimension. These thinkers all herald Heidegger's existential ontology, according to which *Dasein* (the human being) spontaneously participates in the all-encompassing *Sein* (Being), but can hardly talk or think of it without reducing

it to an object of the subjective and limited mind. Seeking to overcome western philosophy by exposing it as metaphysics, Heidegger created his own metaphysics, a downward, existential metaphysics according to which “thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where man has strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous . . . than the ascent” (231). All those pre-rational nether worlds form a vast current of *Lebensphilosophie*, or life philosophy, coinciding with the gradual collapse of the transcendent Christian other world “up” there or “beyond.”¹

But how can literature convey Being, total life inaccessible to the rational mind, preceding language (which always differentiates), and underlying the individual, the only agency that speaks? Significantly, modernism simultaneously promoted skepticism toward language and experimentalism in writing. Generally, the fading of the traditional religious superstructure left “only” life to write about. The more enterprising among the modernists, though, did not limit themselves to convey life piecemeal, in conformity with the basically concrete and specific subject matter of narrative, but strove to develop stratagems for suggesting the totality and motion of life. The modernists’ dedication to their craft is well known – but this “new religion” frequently conveyed a metaphysical aura surrounding its fundamental subject matter, life.

Turning to our first text, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953) by Flannery O’Connor, a Catholic writer best known for her portrayal of ultra-Protestant preacher figures, we might ask how the modernist-regionalist syndrome displaying a post-Christian existential metaphysics would pertain to her writing. Generally, O’Connor’s membership in the modernist guild is suggested by her reliance on the mode of the grotesque, which Mikhail Bakhtin views as expressing “life as a whole” (50): a creditable view, given that

¹ In *The Matrix of Modernism*, Sanford Schwartz deals with most of the thinkers mentioned and observes “a global shift from the developmental (or ‘before-and-after’) paradigms of the nineteenth century to the structural (or ‘surface-and-depth’) paradigms of the twentieth.” Schwartz’s reach seems somewhat short, though, when he views the thought subtending modernist writing as resulting from a shift from “conceptual abstraction” and “the instrumental conventions that shape ordinary life” to the representation of “immediate experience” and “the original flux of concrete sensations” (5). However, his watchword “experience” is felicitously equivocal by suggesting both subjective experience and a reaching down to life as such, a descent from *Bewusstsein* to *Sein*, as it were.

the grotesque strives for comprehensiveness by canceling rational distinctions between human, animal, and plant, as well as the animate and the inanimate, and by conflating such tonal polarities as the comic and the tragic, humor and horror, glee and gloom (cf. Meindl, *American* esp. 14-20). The very title of the O'Connor text to be analyzed, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," can be construed as alluding to an existential dimension that we all share. The all-encompassing nature of life is also hinted at in the story's pastoral farm setting: "A fat yellow moon appeared in the branches of the fig tree as if it were going to roost there with the chickens" (148) – one of the text's many specimens of the iconic grotesque working to fuse rationally separate spheres. The fact that this story bestows the same name, Lucynell Crater, on a mother and her daughter also involves the grotesque mode. Bakhtin views the grotesque as not separating the body from the world or other bodies, treating the body as a principle of growth that exceeds its own limits in performing natural functions to which its orifices and protuberances are suited. Lucynell II would thus be an extension of Lucynell I (note that "crater" designates an orifice). If a view of two women in one strikes anybody as preposterous, this is exactly the point: the grotesque disavows the individual by expressing life's oneness and change, thus doing away with rational delimitations and distinctions.

Another stratagem suggesting existential all-inclusiveness is a character's incompatibility with life, for life as such, in narrative, can more easily be conceived *ex negativo*, by default, than represented directly. O'Connor's oeuvre contains two character sets that denote enmity to life: the fanatic evangelical preacher and the worldly agnostic urbanite. In the text at hand, the two types are conjoined. The story's protagonist, Shiftlet (a richly suggestive and presumably false name), is both a village theologian and an automobile-fixated tramp wearing "a black town suit" (145), thus representing the modern mechanical spirit as well as transcendence of this world. Shiftlet is also something of a ham actor. As he appears at the farm where Mrs. Crater lives with her daughter – deaf-mute, feeble-minded, and close to thirty in age – his listing figure is silhouetted against the evening sky, with his whole arm and his truncated one swung up and the whole figure forming "a crooked cross" (146). Shiftlet, God's self-appointed deputy, judges the world to be "almost rotten." This nicely exempts him from judgment and jibes with an egotism reflected by his triple use of the grammatical first person in his first words, a comment on the sunset: "Lady, . . . I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening" (146). Also, he casts himself as a critic of progress and human presumption when he tells about an Atlanta doctor

who has extracted a human heart to study it: “Lady, . . . he don’t know no more about it than you or me” (147). This episode harks back to the motif of the human heart, dark and impossible to gauge, in Hawthorne, Melville, and Joseph Conrad: an intertextual innuendo quite applicable to O’Connor’s opaque protagonist. To boot, Shiftlet strikes one as a homespun philosopher of the Cartesian dispensation, emphasizing the mind-matter dichotomy: “The body, lady, is like a house: it don’t go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move” (152). This tradition of thought reached a stalemate in the 19th century when epistemological primacy was bestowed upon either the cognizant subject (idealism) or the object world (materialism). Shiftlet himself seems emblematic of the philosophical quandary in question as “[h]is face descend[s] in forehead for more than half its length and end[s] suddenly with his features just balanced over a jutting steel-trap jaw” (146). The philosophical stalemate (derived from the mind’s subject-object structure sustaining what is now sometimes summarily called *Bewusstseinsphilosophie*) was dissolved, or rather undercut, by *Lebensphilosophie*, which gives epistemological precedence to life (which can do, and long did, without the human mind) and to which Shiftlet lays a problematic claim, as it were, with his “look of composed dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly” (146). His statement that “a man ha[s] to escape to the country to see the world whole” (148) suggests that he may have an inkling of what life in its entirety and growth is. So much for Shiftlet, the preacher-prophet-philosopher.

At the same time, Shiftlet is a thoroughly worldly and practical person. Significantly, he fixes up the broken-down farm in no time. But what he really cares about and craves is the old car that has sat there for fifteen years. He gets the heap up and running within two days. His very name “Shiftlet” marks him as akin to automobiles, just like “Sparks” and “Speeds” (147), other names he intimates he could have used for himself. With his spiritual pretensions and materialistic talents, it is small wonder that he keeps contradicting himself. He asks rhetorically “if a man was made for money, or what” (148), and lays claim to “a moral intelligence” (149). Yet he is soon engaged in a silent financial deal with Mrs. Crater, who is “ravenous for a son-in-law” (150) to take care of her afflicted daughter. The mother offers him a farm and a car, in addition to her big, rosy-faced, blue-eyed daughter, an innocent woman in several senses of the word. The fact that he is able to teach only one word to his bride – “bird,” associable with flight – bodes ill for that marriage. Aptest of symbols for existential integration, marriage here conveys

life in a symbolic and privative fashion: through a sermonizing schemer who, in forsaking his mentally afflicted wife, betrays life *per se*.

As a crafty rationalist and a ranting theologian, Shiftlet cannot be in tune with life. In fact, modernism, in reaching toward the existential sphere – call it life, *élan vital*, or *Sein* – throws doubt on reason as well as God. Properly speaking, our text can be called neither religious nor irreligious. What it conveys is a sense of the sacredness of life that both Émile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade regarded as the beginning of religion (see Meindl, “Flannery”). Such sacredness manifests itself in the mother’s anguished good-bye to her daughter, as tears run along the dirty creases of her face and (symbolic of the bond of bodies) she clutches at her daughter’s wedding dress. So Shiftlet sins against life when he dumps his dozing wife in a roadside eatery, alleging she is a hitchhiker he has picked up and for whom he cannot wait to wake up, to which the attendant, a boy impressed by Lucynell’s pink-gold hair and half-shut blue eyes, responds by murmuring: “She looks like an angel of Gawd” (154). The mention of God at the story’s epiphanic moment does not oblige us to reconsider the view of modernism advanced here. The notion of god(s) has a place in post-Christian modernist metaphysics. Heidegger says this about nearness to Being: “In such nearness, if at all, a decision may be made as to whether and how God and the gods withhold their presence and the night remains, whether and how the day of the holy dawns, whether and how in the upsurge of the holy an epiphany of God and the gods can begin anew” (218). It is precisely in the secular sphere that the sacred achieves its quality of pure and transient vision.

Shiftlet’s dealings with God involve no sense of the sacredness of life. Having disposed of his wife, he picks up a young hitchhiker to whom he, who has just betrayed a mother’s trust, sentimentally rants about mother love, whereupon the boy tells him to go to the devil and jumps out of the slowly rolling car, yelling: “My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking polecat” (156). This decidedly grotesque allegation, expressed by way of animal metaphors, gets closer to the all-embracing nature of life than Shiftlet’s sentimental drivel. The insult confirms Shiftlet in his view of the rottenness of the world. As a thunderstorm draws up, he beseeches the Lord to “[b]reak forth and wash the slime from this earth” (156). However, God seems to turn against the betrayer of a farm girl. A turnip-shaped cloud, the color of the hitchhiker’s hat, covers the sun, and Shiftlet races a shower pursuing him into Mobile, Alabama. This story ending intimates that God is on the side of life, that is, the young, who seem to bear it away in this story: Lucynell II,

the youngest of all in terms of her mind, receives the young attendant's adoration; the hitchhiking boy administers a sound rebuke to Shiftlet, who, given his long list of former occupations, appears untrustworthy when giving his age as twenty-eight. Shiftlet reaches Mobile – getting nowhere, for he has been mobile and shifting all his life. He is on the move again, but hardly in step with life's motion.

Modernism was still establishing itself in Canadian writing when it was caught up by the advent of postmodernist fiction.² This state of affairs is reflected by the use of the term "post-realist fiction" at that time (see the title of George Bowering's essay). However, post-realism, if such a term is needed, is identical with modernism, which succeeds realism and which did exist in Canada, incipiently at least. It is instructive that Herman Melville, a symbolist, proto-Modernist, and, with "Bartleby the Scrivener," an outstanding practitioner of the grotesque, as early as 1857 stood the whole idea of realism on its head when, in *The Confidence-Man*, he articulated a claim that the most lifelike literary characters are those that do not make sense: "that author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts . . . and . . . at variance with itself . . . may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to facts" (10: 69-70). Later, the consummate modernist William Faulkner would evidently feel unhampered by psychological consistency and social conditioning in drawing his characters – justly, for when, like Faulkner, one conceives of "man as a part of life" (Gwynn 5), one can expect veritably anything from an individual.

Eminent among modernist genres is the short-story cycle. One thinks of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and, given an interest in Canadian letters, of Hodgins's *Spit Delaney's Island* (1976). Hodgins's cycle is notable for its radical subversion of the reader's expectations; its surprising revelations are apt to provoke the not inappropriate comment "c'est la vie." In "The Trench Dwellers," Gerry Mack, apostate from the Mackens, a Vancouver Island clan, does not, as one expects, end as a loner, but shackled up with a mainland backwoods woman with already a dozen multi-ethnic children – as a father to the human community, as it were. In "By the River," a backwoods farmer's wife, intent on welcoming her husband returning from a trip, walks to the railroad stop along a river. Finally, the reader realizes that she has walked by the river every day for six months, following the same

² Robert Kroetsch says hyperbolically that "Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern" (qtd. in Pache 75).

route as the river. But she is ultimately very different from the river, because the river, unlike her, is ever changing, thus symbolizing life, whereas her days have become repetitive. Interest in the mentally afflicted, also manifest in “Three Women of the Country” in *Spit Delaney’s Island*, had been a conspicuous feature in the fiction of the Southern Renaissance. Such figures, often petrified in routines, may strike one as personified displacements of the *Erkenntnisträger*, the cognizant subject that, in modernism, abdicates its prime epistemological position, yielding it to life entire. Yet life’s sacredness still extends to them, as Faulkner’s famous “idiots” in *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Hamlet* would suggest: Benjy, bellowing when reminded of his lost sister, and Ike Snopes with his lyrically rendered love for a cow. Such grotesque figures appear generally related to a philosophical interest in how humans participate in life, life *in toto*, while the rational mind – singular, subjective, and individual – better serves to differentiate between life’s particles in thought and speech. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben says: “. . . everything happens as if, in our culture, life were *what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided*” (13; emphasis Agamben’s). The reason for this continuing concern with total life could be that this notion, which undergirded literary modernism, still attracts attention as the last grand master narrative prior to the advent of postmodernism and postcolonialism.³

Hodgins’s creative use of the fiction of the Southern Renaissance has been ably demonstrated, notably with regard to the palpable influence of O’Connor’s “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” on Hodgins’s “Every Day of His Life” (1968), his first published story.⁴ The present writer views Hodgins’s text, on the one hand, as emblematic of the strong and lasting presence of classic American literary modernism in English Canadian fiction seeking its way after World War II, and, on the other, as breaking away from

³ The reverse may also be the case. Recourse to modernism (Agamben strongly relies on Heidegger), as the system preceding the postmodern one, may indicate the latter’s decline and point to a different matrix of thought. Postcolonialism, as regards the wish of ethnic and other subaltern groups for more presence, ill accords with the postmodern vision of a universe of interrelated signs devoid of essentialist presence. Life’s totality as an ultimate metanarrative in modernism is hinted at by François Lyotard when, in a context involving Proust and Joyce as well as abstractionism in art, he views them as attempting something of which no presentation is possible: “We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it” (78).

⁴ See Zacharasiewicz, “Development” (esp. 177).

its American model and going beyond O'Connor to what may be called moderate postmodernism.

"Every Day of His Life" deals with a whirlwind courtship. Big Glad Littlestone – a single woman trucklike in build and with a little son, Roger – and Mr. Swingler, whose mobile disposition is indicated by a "road map stamped in red on the white parts" (93) of his eyes, woo and win each other within hardly two hours on a summer day. The wooing is nothing if not purposive and has symbolic overtones as she offers him an apple and, later, self-made dandelion wine, balancing the full glasses and her imposing person up a ladder onto the rooftop of her house, from where Mr. Swingler is painting a mountain off in the distance: a story that seems innocently comical as well as magical at first glance, a comedy even in the old structural sense, which Northrop Frye has taught us is "the integration of society" (43) by founding a new family. However, to the perceptive reader, Mr. Swingler sooner or later starts manifesting traits that render him suspect. Granting that he, a Jack of all trades, may also be a dedicated artist, why would he travel so light as to have to borrow a pad of paper, a pencil, and a water color set from Glad? A baleful note is struck with his harsh response to Glad's second mention of her car: "I've been here more than an hour, most of the time sitting right up here on this roof, and I still haven't seen that car you keep on talking about" (95). His allegation that she harps on the subject of her car is suggestive of a preoccupation on his part. Having been shown the car behind the window of a side-building, Mr. Swingler appears henceforth determined and succeeds. After his brash proposal and Glad's belated hesitancy to give herself to a man she does not know at all, the story concludes with her consenting to their going to town right away to get the marriage licence. His are the last words in the text: "If you'll just give me the keys to the garage . . . we'll be on our way" (97).

A sinister version of the story emerges in the text, spreading like a blot of black ink. Connoisseurs of Southern literature may find Mr. Swingler, given his diminutive figure, rubber-ball eyes, and receding chin, reminiscent of the gangster and murderer Popeye in Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary*. Also, Mr. Swingler's wisecracking manner is not exactly endearing. Catching sight of Roger behind the screen door of the house, he stops his chewing for a second to ask "What's that?" (89), treating the child as a thing. He laughs off Glad's second thoughts about marrying so rashly: "Lady, . . . You made up your mind to catch me the minute I walked inside your gate. I could've been a murderer for all you cared" (97). Having previously learned from him that he is a widower who has drunk his cremated wife's ashes, she now asks him

whether he would repeat the stunt, should she die, whereupon he wisecracks: “Miss Littlestone, after the first time there’s nothing to it” (97). Glaringly mismatched as these two may look, they at least share a sense of humor. For this reader, there is no way to decide whether Mr. Swingler will opt for truck-like Glad or abscond with her car.

“The Life You Save May Be Your Own” depends on the grotesque, to which, as Bakhtin points out, clings an age-old life-affirming message, whereas “Every Day of His Life” appears suffused with black humor. Though both seriocomic registers, black humor and the grotesque are not indistinguishable. The grotesque displays humor and horror in tension, with the emphasis between the two varying. Black humor has been viewed as based on a stalemate between an aesthetic perspective and a moral one: as asking for an impossible decision to be made between the humorous and the horrendous, given that the moral or black perspective works at the expense of the humor while the humor aesthetically abates the blackness and moral considerations (see Henninger). Of the two stories analyzed, O’Connor’s is more solidly founded on hope, despite its cruel proceedings.⁵ Black humor is often quite entertaining but also apt to leave a taste of ashes in one’s mouth.

On another count, the two stories differ radically. With “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” we know what is happening but are challenged to gain a perspective on these events: our reading becomes a hermeneutic task, epistemological in essence. “Every Day of His Life,” which starts by entertaining and enchanting us, unfolds as two versions of the same story, versions mutually exclusive and respectively featuring a happy ending and a blackly humorous one. Thus, Hodgins offers an ontological puzzle. The blackly humorous version, in its mildest form, would probably consist of Mr. Swingler using the keys to the garage that he gets from Glad (they would presumably include the ignition key), leaving her stranded. Other apprehensions, triggered mainly by Mr. Swingler’s and Glad Littlestone’s mentioning of the possibility that he could be a murderer, are left to the reader’s discretion and imagination. However, there is reason to hope that Mr. Swingler is just a sardonic type of person, fundamentally glad to settle down with Glad. Thus, the world of the text has a tendency to divide into several worlds, none of which can, with total assurance, be identified as the “real” one on the text’s

⁵ Perhaps it is the ancient iconic dimension of the grotesque that harbors the hope. Studying a cave drawing featuring a man with antlers at his head, we may be led to surmise that the prehistoric artist wished to express brotherhood between different forms of life.

ontological plane – why not then speak of a plurality of postmodern textual worlds? According to Brian McHale, modernist fiction is dominantly epistemological and postmodernist fiction dominantly ontological. In fact, Hodgins's story seems somewhat suggestive (playfully perhaps) of Derrida's *différance* at work, causing the text to exfoliate in differing versions deferring the reader's endorsement of a particular one.⁶

With Leon Rooke, we enter the domain of postcolonialism. The role of postcolonialism in American literature is assured by ethnic contributions to it, with writers fighting or commemorating the subaltern status of the groups they represent. As for the monuments of anglophone postcolonial fiction, however, one will rather turn to novels like *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The English Patient* (1992), respectively by Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Sri Lanka-born Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje: authors whose experiences include growing up on the rim of what was the British Empire. Canada, formerly part of the Empire and still a Commonwealth member, has proved a productive site for postcolonial writing. In this context, the once powerful impact of American literary modernism on Canadian letters appears to have become a thing of the past, which also means that the theoretical constellation of life philosophy, Heidegger, and Southern Renaissance grotesqueness will fade out of this essay. In fact, as the case of Leon Rooke suggests, Canada can teach, rather than learn from, the U.S. in matters postcolonial.

Rooke, born in North Carolina in 1934, is one of those *écrivains migrants* who have contributed to Canada's ongoing literary renaissance. Apparently, he had to first settle down on Vancouver Island (where the spirit of the Empire seems to haunt the air) to write the postcolonial story to be discussed here. "The Birth Control King of the Upper Volta" (1982) is a satire assailing glorified memories of the Empire as well as a lingering related notion that the white Anglo male is the world's sovereign. For the purpose of satire,

⁶ In addition, the term "magic realism," which preserves an imagistic ring (it was coined in the German art world of the 1920s – see Delbaere-Garant 41), is often applied to Hodgins's fiction. Apparently, magic realism thrives on the incongruous and implausible appearing in a basically realistic context. Mr. Swingler's drinking the ashes of his wife would be an instance of magic realism in Hodgins's text, augmenting its eerie dimension. It would seem that postmodernist writing – refusing to answer the question "*Between what is and what isn't. . . . Where is the dividing line?*" (8-10) that pops into the head of Hodgins's protagonist Spit Delaney – can easily accommodate magic realism.

Rooke makes extravagant use of the fantastic, creating a first-person narrator, or rather speaker, named “Adlai,” a figure that functions as a refutation of imperial claims. The text opens with Adlai waking up in his cubicle on August 11: “The most extraordinary thing happened to me today. I woke up and discovered I had lost yesterday” (7). This temporal muddle will get clarified as derived from repression, as the seemingly lost day turns out to be that of the funeral of Adlai’s mam, as he calls her. He had gone there accompanied by his landlady Mergentoire’s thirty-year-old, mute and mentally retarded son Hedgepolt. Adlai treats Hedgepolt as if he were a normal person and in a fatherly manner. This appears instrumental in causing Hedgepolt to break into speech in the miraculous ending of the story, which also features an amazing postcolonialist vision on Adlai’s part.

Elements of pathos and poignancy have been detected in Rooke’s text (see Vauthier 124, 127), but its main drive is and remains satiric. Its protagonist-speaker launches into an eloquent discourse in which he unwittingly embarrasses himself in the zaniest manner. According to Northrop Frye, satire deals “less with people as such than with mental attitudes” (309). Rooke’s satiric orientation explains why we can enjoy the deflation of his protagonist with a minimum of pity. Adlai’s presumptions and weaknesses are not really exposed as the failings of an individual but add up to a parody of the latterday imperial mind. The text does not compel us to approach Adlai as a character but rather induces us to identify him as a figure through which the bankruptcy of the fading British Empire’s colonizing endeavor is reenacted. Emulating – at the behest of his mam – his long-dead father, the Birth Control King of the Upper Volta, he has assumed a hopeless and ridiculous legacy.

Nonetheless, the text, in deconstructing Adlai’s imperial make-up, benefits from a contemporary concern with identity that postcolonialism has promoted. Personal identity nowadays tends to be articulated in a pluralistic fashion, in terms of what has been called the “theory of pluralized ‘subject-effects’” (Spivak 66). This theory foregrounds such subject identifications or markers as ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, age, class, status, and so forth, and usually sets them up as binary oppositions, such as white/nonwhite, man/woman, hetero-/homosexual, young/old, etc. Identity appears as never fixed, or “there,” but ever emerging as its identifications are negotiated with corresponding alterity formations participated in, or at least presupposed by, the self. Since the subject is no more than the intersection point of such negotiations between oppositions representing contrasted groups in the population, personal identity also means constantly facing more

potent Others or being linked up with one's "inferiors." Such a model of identity apparently lends itself to satiric ends.

In Rooke's postcolonial story, Adlai's Empire, WASP, and macho-related claims and preferences all get annihilated. Consider the identity marker "age." Adlai, who tends to come across as an adolescent figure, is already forty-seven. He tries to appear youthful, though, devoting himself to hyperbolically reported morning exercises. Lifting barbells, he slides on "a ton. . . . – no trouble at all" (7). Apparently, this body-building program proves of no avail, for another inmate of the boarding-house, an Asian, later whirls past him on the stairs, yelling "Out of my way, fat man!" (14). Take status. Adlai's hopes for a white-collar job with "the Pole" come to nothing as that minority group member answers his call, addressing him as "the nincompoop" (14). Making light of this discomfiture, Adlai, with pseudo-Darwinistic male pride, expresses his preference for his position of an outdoors, hard-hat, blue-collar worker. Later we realize that he does nothing at all. Adlai's identity markers also involve the text's female figures. The long visits of his mam in the cubicle may be read as projections of his continuing dependence on her, which dilutes his status as a male. Adlai's father, proudly remembered by his mother, would then be a projection of a projection. However, the text does not really encourage such psychological conjectures, given its generally fantastic and frantic nature promoting its satiric aim.

Adlai has a love affair with haughty and bad-humored Greta Gustafsson, alias Garbo, who exists in the cubicle as a poster on the inside of the door. This does not encourage consulting with Dr. Freud, modernism's culture hero, but had better be attributed to postmodernist high jinks – or, even more, to the text's postcolonial thematics, in which Adlai's status as a chip off the old imperial block is called into doubt by his doubtful sex life. The wild, spittle-flying, and fingernails-tearing coupling of Adlai and Greta on the cubicle floor, the speaker intimates, was "[t]he first time ever" (27); but landlady Mergentoire's reproof, "I could shoot you . . . for what you do up there" (28), seems to allude to a masturbatory episode, in which case the identity marker "sexual preference" would dwindle to autoeroticism. Adlai's "affair" with Greta also involves his social status, the class angle. He admits that he is not sufficiently a go-getter to satisfy Greta, who manifests her disappointment by constant contemptuousness and moroseness: "Greta deserved better than I could give her. She deserved, in the least, a silver frame" (8) – clear ontological evidence of Rooke's "post-modernist sensibility" (Garebian 5).

The text's tone and stylistic brilliance would deserve ample comment, serving its satire as they do. Put summarily, Adlai is, to a large extent, an

accumulation of incongruously used catch phrases, encrusted stereotypic notions, as well as a quaint mixture of pithy colloquialisms and hilariously tame, educated-sounding utterances. Rebuffed by the Pole, Adlai politely and gently wonders, “Why is the Pole addressing me in this unseemly fashion?” (14). When mam heroizes the Birth Control King – “They broke the mold, you know, when they made him” – he confirms her appraisal: “He stood tall, that he did.” He also fancies himself as mam’s champion against “the black African hordes” already on their way: “Crossing the water on rafts and matchstick canoes, beaming their great white teeth and kicking their great black legs,” plus intending, of course, “to gobble up our jobs and steal our women and make a garbage hole of our neighbourhoods” (21). But let us move on to the core of the text’s satire, its lambasting of white ethnocentricity.

There is evidence that Adlai’s father was not such a hotshot either: more of a last-ditch defender actually than a founder of the Empire. His specialty was selling birth control to the Roman Catholic part of the population of the Upper Volta (a French colony before it became independent). Every black converted to birth control, every contraceptive sold, meant “he’d saved another white child his rightful spot in the world” (22). When the Upper Voltans resisted his missionizing, as mam explains, Daddy became so filled up with vitriol that he flung himself into the first river. But was Adlai himself saved a spot by Daddy? The son remembers old stories to the effect that he was a pre- or extramarital baby and even “tar-brushed” (33), a rumor that the evidence of his mother’s skin, constantly darkening with age, appears to confirm. Is Adlai colored himself? He who, as mam hoped, would take up “Daddy’s mighty cudgel” for warding off dark-skinned invaders of the west (22). There it goes, Adlai’s whiteness, his basic identity marker.

Yet, the author – tongue in cheek, it would seem – furnishes a happy ending for the speaker-protagonist and the new family that constitutes itself around him. This consummation comes about when Adlai, upon Mergentoire’s request, confirms her words that they are “all one big family,” addressing Hedgepolt thus: “She’s said a mouthful, son” (35). This leads to Hedgepolt’s utterance of the word “*Dad-dee*” (35), which he follows up with language that quickly improves as he goes on. Adlai, the text may suggest, has found his spot. But can he shed his dependence on mother and mistress? As Greta’s voice from upstairs invites him to scrub her back, he has a desire to tell her to go home to her own people but says nothing. Moreover, his concluding meditation, in which he realizes that so many people depend on him, ends thus: “Oh, mam, they do” (38).

As critics, we should be wary of unconditionally joining in the love fest with which the story culminates. Adlai, a xenophobe and would-be colonialist, experiences a complete, though somewhat mock-epiphanic conversion. With his vision, inspired by the joyful family events, of “legion upon legion of matchstick canoes” (36) coming across the water, manned by the peoples of the Upper Volta and beyond, blacks whom he deliriously welcomes and by whom he is acknowledged as their king and boss, he, for all practical purposes, has become a rabid western postcolonialist. Also, he is not so different from the western critic of colonialism whom Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” suspects of being “complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self’s shadow” (75). In fact, all these blacks “*going no place but UP UP UP!*” (37) strike one as replicating Adlai’s own ambitions, in a more zealous and presumably more efficient fashion. Given the newcomers’ uniform appearance and westernized outlook, one tends to agree with Spivak’s view that “the colonized subaltern *subject* is *irretrievably* heterogeneous” (79, second emphasis added), as well as with her disenchanted answer to her essay’s title question: “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (83). Adlai’s conversion to postcolonialism thus contains elements of criticism of western postcolonialism in hinting at an epistemic reversal: the recolonization of emancipated Africa in terms of western and global materialism.

To conclude, this analysis of three North American stories conveys an entwining of cultural areas and literary history. The Southern Renaissance – arguably the crest of modernist American fiction – is represented by O’Connor’s story, whose impact on Hodgins’s text testifies to the traditional Canadian awareness of canonized American literature. Nevertheless, Hodgins was not overwhelmed by his American modernist model but created a text typifying moderate Canadian postmodernism. Finally, Rooke’s story does not bring to mind the writer’s antecedents in the American South, but, in satirizing the Empire mystique, demonstrates the assimilation of Canada’s cultural heritage by an American migrant turned postcolonial Canadian writer. The triad of texts treated here strikes as a parable of Canada’s strengthening voice in the American/Canadian cultural dialogue.

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THOMAS L. MCHANEY

Voice Not Place

Leon Rooke Makes a Success in Canada

Leon Rooke has every reason to be rooted in what some perceive as the archetypal sources of Southern writing. Rooke knew from childhood of the racism, the exploitation of poor whites in both agricultural and mill-based economies, the pride of independent mountain people, and the mixed blessings of dramatic Southern landscapes marked by scary microclimates, bloody war, and thoughtless exploitation. He was nurtured in two particularly dramatic places in the South – the Carolina mill town, Roanoke Rapids, where exploitation went back to the 1890s, and that was the inspiration for the movie *Norma Rae*, and the university town where modern intellectualism and liberalism fought against engrained racial and economic customs and political resistance to social change. The Chapel Hill sociologists, one should remember, were perceived as the enemy even by the supposedly enlightened poets and critics who came out of Nashville in the 1920s; yet the drama that was – and is – the American South, was expressed brilliantly by sociologist Howard Odum in the second paragraph of his monumental *Southern Regions of the United States* (1936): “It is desired . . . to explain something of the dramatic struggle of a large and powerful segment of the American people for mastery over an environment capable of producing a superior civilization, yet so conditioned by complexity of culture and cumulative handicaps as to make the nature of future development problematical” (1).

Born, educated, and trained as a writer in North Carolina, Leon Rooke resettled in mid-career in British Columbia and became a highly regarded and much honored Canadian writer. He has published over 300 short stories, seven novels, almost a dozen collections of stories, and written or directed a large number of dramatic works, and despite the tariffs repressing the sale of Canadian work in the United States, unless the writers have an American publisher, his books can now be purchased from Canadian publishers on the World Wide Web.

Rooke’s emigration to Canada had nothing specific to do, apparently, with seeking liberation from the American South – what the novelist Pat Conroy describes (in the context of Thomas Wolfe) as “fleeing the South with your hair on fire” (Conroy). Though Rooke had sought out other climes in which one might write – New Orleans and San Francisco, for example –

and had served as a mail clerk in Alaska during his military service, North Carolina held him for a long time and enriched his literary life. His mother worked at a weaving machine in one of the mills that drew workers from the coves and hollows of the Appalachian Mountains and repressed any efforts at unionization. Economic exploitation and racial segregation were the norm.

Rooke published poetry and sports writing as a high school student, and after attending a small college near Thomas Wolfe's hometown Asheville, he transferred to Wolfe's alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, still in the 1950s and 1960s one of the few liberal, intellectual, and artistic oases in the Sahara of the Bozart. Rooke soon shifted his major from journalism to dramatic arts and was mentored by the community of writers and writing teachers at Chapel Hill. Two of them – Max Steele and Jessie Rehder – taught creative writing classes but were not widely published; however, like the never-published William Blackburn at Duke University in nearby Durham, who taught William Styron and Reynolds Price, they were inspiring and supportive of young writers.

Writing poetry, short fiction, and drama for radio, television, and the stage, Rooke also did some acting while in Chapel Hill and helped start a short-lived literary magazine, *Reflections*. He co-edited *The Anvil*, a politically progressive publication that expressed anti-war sentiments and calls for political justice during the periods of Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam protests. Rooke was deeply engaged in efforts to end segregation in Chapel Hill movie theaters and other businesses. He pursued graduate work in the Radio, Television, and Motion Pictures program at UNC-Chapel Hill, where his mentor was Asheville-born John Ehle, a prolific writer who published a variety of fictional and non-fictional works, including a seven-volume series of novels set in his native Appalachian mountain culture. Ehle earned some notoriety among North Carolina's conservative political establishment as a vocal foe of segregation and an activist for combating Southern poverty and creating arts education for high school students, causes in which Rooke participated.

Both Ehle and Rooke had the model and influence of North Carolinian Paul Green, a 1927 Pulitzer Prize winner for his play "In Abraham's Bosom." Green, who also lived in Chapel Hill, carried on the tradition of UNC professor Frederick Koch, founder of the Playmakers Theater at the University in the 1920s. Koch had emphasized folk voices and theater drawn from local experience and proselytized for a people's theater. In a great tribute to Koch, the renowned liberal UNC teacher, university president, and politician Franklin Porter Graham wrote:

Inspirer of plays expressing the lives of tenant farmers, industrial workers, Negroes, people of the mountain coves, the Piedmont, the pine barrens and the tide waters – plays of all the people. He was the champion of the democratic spirit and of the free and noble imagination. He inspired in all the eternal quest of the human spirit for a freer and better world. The man became an idea, the idea became a movement, and the movement became a national institution – the folk drama of America. (Graham)

Thomas Wolfe (who once joked that a folk play was one in which the characters all said “Hit ain’t” [qtd. in Kennedy 48]) had written and acted in plays for Koch, and so had Green, who after his days on Broadway wrote and promoted outdoor theater based on local history – his “The Lost Colony” still plays in the summers on the North Carolina Outer Banks. Rooke may not have read the 1945 history about the Carolina Playmakers entitled *Pioneering a People’s Theatre* in which Graham’s remarks appear, but through his college influences he doubtlessly understood the sentiment that reflected an animating spirit still alive in the Chapel Hill of his days there.

In 1962, Rooke’s short novel *The Line of Fire*, set in the Alaska of his military service, was published in volume 5 of Saul Bellow and Keith Botsford’s annual, *The Noble Savage*. In 1967, he met Constance Raymond, a Ph.D. student in English who edited *The Carolina Quarterly*, UNC’s prestigious student-edited literary magazine, and in 1969, the year Louisiana State University published Rooke’s first collection of stories, *Last One Home Sleeps in the Yellow Bed*, he and Constance married and they moved to British Columbia where, having finished her doctorate, she was offered an academic position at the University of Victoria and soon took over as the editor of the university’s literary journal, *The Malahat Review* (Rooke, “Biography”).

It is, in fact, a wonder that Rooke fairly early found a way of his own that did not suffer, but in effect thrived, when at the age of thirty-five he became established in the westernmost landscape of Canada, in Victoria, British Columbia, as part of an urban university culture where his wife made her living. Rooke’s success in Canada obviously derives from his talent, his strong opinions, and his work-ethic; he had written a body of mostly apprentice work before he left North Carolina, but he had also published a large volume of complex and highly-regarded work since he became a Canadian writer. The questions this essay asks, then, bearing in mind the differences between western Canada and the American South: Is Rooke a Southern writer in Canada (such as the Mississippian Elizabeth Spencer was in Montreal)? Did Rooke bring any of what might be called a typically Southern perspective with him into Canada? Did he escape Southern literary influences? The Mississippi-

born writer Elizabeth Spencer, who wrote and taught writing in Montreal for many years, has observed, for example, that Southern women writers strongly influenced Canadian women writers (Prenshaw 126).

On one level, these questions have much to do with that “sense of place in fiction” that Eudora Welty wrote about and that chauvinistic scholars and literary journalists have been misunderstanding ever since: the prioritization of place in defining Southern fiction based on the belief that the American South benefits from a greater proportion of place than other places. I was curious to see whether Rooke put any emphasis upon Southern “place” in what he wrote when he lived and wrote in his home state, and whether, if he did, this continued to appear in his writing after his emigration to Canada. Or whether, indeed, he depicts Canadian places, Canadian voices, and even Canadian “oddities” in emulation of how Southern writing is perceived as dealing with place, voice, and character.

The quick answer, based upon my reading of the later Rooke, is that whether in Carolina or Canada, Leon Rooke has almost always advanced his stories not on the basis of place but on the basis of voice – and largely on voice, or voices, that seem divorced from – even disinterested in – what we call “sense of place.” Critics disposed to the myth of Southern writing may feel some regret for him: to them, his case might seem a bit like what Quentin Compson says about the figure of Thomas Sutpen evoked in Rosa Coldfield’s long bitter monologue in *Absalom, Absalom!* – that it was the voice of Rosa Coldfield that Sutpen haunted, whereas a more fortunate ghost would have had a house (4). But when we read the great and diverse volume of Rooke’s work since his arrival in Canada, and also read what other writers say about him, regret is not in order. Voice, it turns out, is the triumph of his fiction. Voice, and never place (which, one should recall, even Welty values as only “one of the lesser angels” of the art of fiction [Welty 116]).

In 2004, Branko Gorjup, a literary critic who is a long-time friend of Rooke, published a marvelous anthology, *White Gloves of the Doorman: The Works of Leon Rooke*, which contains essays by a truly international cast of scholars. A great many of the contributions in this book reflect upon voice as the distinctive feature of Rooke’s oeuvre. Russell Brown, a Canadian scholar, observes that Rooke’s Canadian reception began with a 1979 essay titled “At Home in All Voices” by Clark Blaise, another cross-border Canadian who spent much of his career in Iowa running the International Writers Center at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and who has himself published a volume of “Southern” stories.

A reader of Rooke's considerable oeuvre would have to affirm that "at home in all voices" is a true judgment about his work again and again. This is already evident in *The Line of Fire*, the early novella published in *The Noble Savage*. Writing about an American military unit sent to battle a forest fire on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska, Rooke employs a standard first-person point-of-view, but before it is over, the narrative voice that begins the story hands off the last words to a fellow soldier named Gode who sums up in a voice more like the eccentric ones that Rooke would exploit in his later work. The hand-off is indirect: "Gode, I learned," the narrator says, "when he's sleepy likes to talk. There were times when I could not tell if he was talking to me or to himself. . . . There was a cold wind off the lake and I zippered the bag so that only my nose was outside. Busy with that, Gode's first words escaped me, but, until I fell asleep, I listened to him" (248). And here is what the narrator heard him say:

Isn't it of basic significance that, say, art is so abstract today and they the artists will say no man it's not abstract at all that's just the way it is man – life! And you're looking yes sir at a mirror? Or is that only a fragment of the grand play, the royal dream, the big hoax, the "all-right-America-you-might-not-make-it-in-practice-but BY-GOD-YOU-GOT-IT-IN-PRINCIPLE!" . . . take this artist I know Hite; all his canvases show muddled heads and all his sculpture looks like some pig freed from a medieval torture rack. Why? I ask him. Because, he says, man, I'm trying to wiggle into a meaning. Trying to shake that old core, loose, man, I mean that vicious core. And because I'm in pain, man. Because I don't know who told me but the boat left this morning and, man, I ain't on it and I don't know how to swim. Because I'm standing on the pier alone. I'm standing on it and I'm alone. And not only alone but bored too and restless and I'm this way when I wake up and when I go to bed and whether I'm with my best girl or my ninety-seven year old aunt. (251-52)

Compare this with a voice from Rooke's 2009 volume, *The Last Shot*, in a story titled "The Yellow House":

Eons back, in the dark ravages of time – I should have told you this at the start, pray, forgive me – our ancestors established a cemetery off there at the dome of the hill, such a pretty resting place, but over the centuries the leaning stones gradually crept downhill, fanning off to sit among the arcade of coconut palms on one side, the lagoon waters on the other. Advancing our way through a savannah of tall grasses which hid away a barn or two, sheds specific to ancient days when at least some of us must have eked out a small living, satisfied somehow freehold arrangements peculiar to the time and place, in any event these graves now shock up against the backside of our very dwelling. This sprawling cemetery a city until itself, it might be said, though said in error, since so much of ourselves repose there. (22)

In “Gator Wrestling,” from the same collection, a character named Prissy Beatrice Thibidault consents to be bedded by Brasher Leslie Coombs, a girlfriend, but says “I’m not taking off my clothes.” They will have to be discreet because Brasher’s brother, Ganger Lee Coombs,

was Prissy’s most deadly enemy. Anytime he saw Prissy he threw her to the ground and jumped on her, crying, “I the jury.” He would sit on her and take out a book and read it as though she did not exist. Through whole afternoons. He had done it on Main Street, in the schoolyard, on her own front porch, and in the cash ‘n’ carry aisle of Coombs A-1 Meats . . . Ganger had slung her down and sat on her all over town, people strolling by and most often saying not a word. Sometimes saying, “Wha’cha reading, Gange?” To which Ganger replied, if he did at all, “Mister William Faulkner, 1897 to 1962.”

“Is that Fawkna any good, Gange?”

“Can’t talk to you now. I’m reading.” (132)

The invocation of Faulkner – title not supplied – is fired off by Rooke with apparent mischievous intention. Rooke is not afraid to stand on the tracks of the Dixie Limited dominated by the man who made a chapter out of “My mother is a fish” in a novel narrated by fifteen different voices and who named Snopes family characters Wall Street Panic and Montgomery Ward. Canadian critical commentary on Rooke such as that printed in Branko Gorjup’s *White Gloves of the Doorman* has not ignored the impact of Faulkner, but the influence noted has little to do with Faulkner’s use of Southern history, culture, and geography and everything to do with those formal elements of Faulkner’s fiction that inspired the magic realism that spread from South America to the Canadian north (Gorjup 15, 240). Faulkner’s rootedness allowed him the liberty to imagine a richly-rendered, farm-based, and history-drenched landscape in a fictional county as large as four north Mississippi county units whose people can read even the invisible palimpsest of footprints on a dusty country road. Leon Rooke is not concerned with this kind of world. He gives us the crazy repetitions of the unbidden noises in people’s heads, intimations not of place but of the strange instant drama of human consciousness, the peregrinations of the mind conjuring stories with freestyle verbal extravagance. Voice, not place, drives his fiction.

Jeet Heer, a Toronto journalist, after observing recently that Rooke “belongs in the small, select company of Canadian masters, a peer of Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, and Clark Blaise,” pointed out that there was “scarcely an unnecessary word” in Rooke’s writing: “The stylistic variety on display is remarkable: aside from his impressive resurrection of Flannery O’Connor’s flint-eyed portrayal of shiftless poor whites . . . we also get a

sentimental story about angels told by a narrator who is as bluff and breezy, as clubby and cool, as Anthony Trollope unfolding a tale about the doings of a small town vicarage.” Rooke, in other words, writes like the best of the best. No wonder that Heer, in his article, felt that Rooke needed no further introduction. But the evidence suggests otherwise.

Up against its Southern neighbor, The United States of America, Canada has had placed upon it something like the burden Chicago bears against the entitlements of New York City. Chicago is the Second City; Canada, in what is called North America, is the Second Country. Copyright laws and tariffs protecting American publishers keep many Canadian books from crossing the southern border easily. And ironically, when a Canadian book festival wanted copies of Rooke’s first book, published by Louisiana State University Press, the situation even worked the other way, for the books were stopped at the Canadian border because the proper paperwork for import had not been done.

Rooke, as a consequence of the longtime difficulty of acquiring Canadian books in America, is not as widely read in the US as he is in his adoptive country, but Branko Gorjup, introducing his anthology of interviews with Rooke and critical work about him, has lamented that even in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, despite Governor General’s awards and other Canadian literary prizes and all Rooke’s activities on behalf of other Canadian writers, Leon Rooke is not fully canonized in Canada either (Gorjup xi). Canadian scholar Russell Brown may have an explanation for this: Rooke is a difficult writer, and his stories – mostly fantasies or paranoid delusions – are “weird.” What they lack, apart from other traditional features of the short story, is closure: “these stories leave us with a feeling of bafflement that becomes part of their overall effect. And sometimes I think these stories can’t possibly give us a sense of conclusion because of the way language and voice have operated so powerfully throughout them” (Gorjup 16-18).

This judgment may be just insofar as the common reader is concerned, a reminder that Rooke’s achievement is not so different, perhaps, from a generation of contemporaneous American and even Southern writers who did not find a wide readership for a long time. For example, Rooke’s points of view and his characters resemble those of Texas’s Donald Barthelme, Mississippi’s Barry Hannah, and North Carolina’s Fred Chappell, all of whom with which Rooke’s work might profitably be compared. In fact, the documentary film about Rooke that comes as a DVD with Branko Gorjup’s volume pans the contents of the book shelves in Rooke’s study and lingers over

a whole row of Hannah's books. Like Hannah, Rooke takes a little getting used to.

Leon Rooke indirectly demonstrates that place is indeed one of the "lesser angels" of fiction writing and that stories which haunt a voice, instead of a house, can be not merely effective but thrilling. His writing also demonstrates that a lot of the work by writers such as Faulkner, O'Connor, McCullers, Hannah, Chappell, or Cormac McCarthy is perhaps misperceived when defined as the so-called "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque" and could be more creditably interpreted under the rubric of surrealism and its descendants. Such an interpretation, I suspect, inspires the judgment about him by a contemporary French fiction writer and painter, Pierre Pelot, who declares, "I think Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy, and Leon Rooke are among the best authors in the world." It apparently also inspires an Internet reviewer of Rooke's most recent book, *The Last Shot*, to write the following:

Magic realism in the short story, unless executed at a high level, often seems to be nothing but a gimmick adopted to relieve a writer of the chore of creating interest in a straightforward, realist narrative. It declares the story's originality with a blast of trumpets, shouts, "look at me, I am new." This is, no doubt, why it has become a staple of our little magazines. But there is no such cheap trickery here. Rooke's stories are above all vocal performances; they are about voice. (A.J.)

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MARCEL ARBEIT

I, Canadian

Elizabeth Spencer's Montreal

There can never be a competition among southern U.S. writers about who has spent or will spend the most time in Canada, as any such contest would have a sure winner in advance: Elizabeth Spencer (born 1921), the novelist and short story writer from Carrollton, Mississippi, who spent twenty-eight long years there, from 1958 to 1986, when for both health reasons and homesickness she returned to the South, finding a new home for herself and her British-born husband, John Rusher, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In her magnificent memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart* (1998),¹ her three decades in Canada are squeezed into less than five pages. She briefly describes her arrival in Montreal before the cruel winter of 1958, one rich in blizzards, and she takes the snow boulders she saw for the first time as a southern child's Christmas wish fulfilled manifold. From the very beginning, she appreciated the multicultural atmosphere of that city inhabited by people "from all over Europe, as tribally numerous as Indians" (LH 315). While understanding that local writers, often newcomers from various parts of the world, are striving to build a Canadian literature, "distinctly different from that of the elephant of a neighbor to the south or the British and French across the ocean," she "never found any part to play" in these attempts, even though she was, in her own words, "quickly accorded a place among the English writers and never felt especial rejection by the French" (LH 322).

Only a few of Spencer's short stories written in Montreal were published in Canadian magazines, both popular (*Montrealer*, *McCall's*, *Chatelaine*) and literary (*Journal of Canadian Fiction*, *Ontario Review*); the majority of them found, like the four novels she wrote during that period, American publication, either in the prestigious and lucrative *New Yorker*, to which she became a regular contributor, or in far less profitable southern quarterlies, most

¹ Henceforth *Landscapes of the Heart: A Memoir* will be cited in the text as *LH*.

prominently in the *Southern Review*. No more than five of her short stories written before 1990 were set in Canada.²

In 1965, her seventh year in Montreal, she honestly admitted in an interview: “I have never been able to write about Canada. . . . I just have not been able to reach it” (Tolliver 3), and later she repeated the statement in slightly modified versions many more times. She saturated her need for the southern environment by returning to Mississippi at least once, but usually twice or three times a year, even though just for a short time (Smith 140–41). Among the things she missed most, she emphasized the vernacular speech of African Americans and “Mississippi’s green and the lush outdoors” (Tolliver 4); as she half-jokingly recalled in her essay “The Home Voice in a Foreign Land” (1988), she could hardly cope with the fact that in Canada “‘fields of snowy white’ definitely did not refer to the cotton crop” (126).

That might create an impression that, for Spencer, Canada was only a foreign place where she could make her southern memories more vivid. But in a 1968 interview with Josephine Haley for *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, after a mild complaint that in Canada she felt “out of touch with American society,” for the first time she verbalized a very important affinity between Canada and Mississippi: “Canada, like Mississippi, serves as a sort of counterpoint to American society as a whole” (Haley 16). She did not explain her point – actually, this was the final sentence of that interview – but it became obvious that in her mind both Canada and the South, represented by her native state, were seen as culturally superior to the mediocre mainstream “America.” It took some time before she touched upon a much more specific similarity in her writings regarding the southern/Canadian scale: the similarity between the cities of New Orleans and Montreal.

Spencer set her novel *The Snare* (1972) in New Orleans, partly under the influence of one of her favorite southern novelists, Walker Percy, from whom she had been receiving occasional friendly and admiring letters since their meeting in 1970 (Spencer, “Remembering Walker” 505), and what she said about that city in 1973 is also valid for Montreal: “Nobody enjoys New Orleans as much as a small-town southerner. It’s our cosmopolitan, European city. The excellent food, the atmosphere, [and] something of the French

² In this article, I deliberately omit “Madonna” (1983), a landlady’s narration of the story of a fugitive young couple, as I see it as an early draft of the chapters in *The Night Travellers* introducing Madeleine, Jeff’s lover. In “The Skater” (1988), the theme of Canada as a refuge is present through the character of a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe, but the focus is primarily on the mid-life crisis of the female protagonist.

past remaining there excite people” (Cole 43). In 1974, she elaborated on the resemblances in more detail:

Montreal . . . is a French-speaking city, and . . . I find that French-Canada had much to do with the opening up of New Orleans and the surrounding country. . . . In checking names in the New Orleans phone book . . . I found many, many of the same names that I found in the Montreal phone book. So, you have a cultural overlap here. (Weaver 51)

Eventually, Spencer did start writing about Canada and not only because she had been living there for such a long time. “Canada isn’t that different from us, you know. It’s a whole lot colder, but many of the same blood streams are there,” she said in 1981 (Kitchings 108), and five years later she added: “Parallels abound between French Canada and the South – a conquered society with different customs having to exist in terms of a larger, controlling nation” (Phillips 126). This time she did not align the whole of Canada with the South against the hegemony of oppressive “mainstream America” (she never said “the North”), but emphasized the links between two cultures that used to be powerful and were now threatened with destruction by globalization. The link she made between the South and French-speaking Canada enabled her to domesticate an environment that she had previously considered strange and foreign. Even her disagreement with the idea of the liberation of Québec, fueled by the infamous *Vive le Québec libre!* utterance by Charles de Gaulle in Montreal in 1967, stemmed from the parallels she found between the South and Québec, especially with regard to the secession of the southern states in 1861 that had brought so much pain and suffering. Indeed, the political tensions and animosities in Montreal contributed to her return to the South, as, in her opinion, the constant English-French conflicts “turned a beautifully welcoming international city into a battleground of name-calling and demands for change” (LH 330), and for her, like for many Americans who were promptly returning to the United States, the FLQ, instead of Front de Libération du Québec, stood for “Folks Leaving Québec” (LH 331). Spencer summed up her disappointment at the development of the political situation in Canada in the following way:

The outsider, once so happy to be part of an open-minded, evolving country, one delighting in the arts and building new centers for performance and exhibition, now had a box seat on a conflict in which he felt no visceral interest. (LH 331)

Considering Spencer’s sentiments about Canada, it is no surprise that, in her fiction, Montreal (and sometimes Canada in general) is shown as: (a) a multicultural place, (b) a haven for the oppressed and the hunted where one can vanish of one’s own accord without a trace, and (c) a place of solitude

and isolation. In Spencer's fiction, these three points grow into rich themes, enabling her to operate a set of potent and original symbols that help her to grasp better the powers of the city (or the whole country), both those that are life-giving (or life-returning) and those that are sinister.

All three themes intersect in "I, Maureen" (1976), which appeared for the first time, significantly, in that year's *New Canadian Stories*. The protagonist is a twenty-five-year-old woman who, against the expectations of everybody, including herself, marries one of the richest Montrealers, Denis Partham, and has two children with him, "beautiful, like children drawn with a pencil over and over again in many attitudes, all pure, among many Canadian settings" (342). Although she is aware that she has everything "any woman in her right mind could want" (341), she perceives her life as an icy fairy-tale, a set of frozen pictures, a monstrous, clichéd story of an ugly duckling who got a prince; with self-irony she says about herself, "From the age of two, I looked run-down" (341).

That is why one day, after living through an epiphany, she runs away from their luxurious Lakeshore residence to launch a new existence in another quarter of the city, the much poorer and much more multicultural East Montreal, getting in touch with her children only twice, when her daughter is confirmed and when her son is taken to hospital with a serious case of peritonitis. The character of Maureen, the woman who builds a new identity and clings to it at any cost, has an obvious southern literary predecessor: Edna Pontellier from Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899).

Like Edna in Chopin's novel (which is set in New Orleans and draws on the clash of two cultures, the Creole Catholic and the English Protestant), Maureen is not willing to spend the rest of her life as a rich housewife, a mere appendix to her influential and intelligent (in this case French-Canadian) husband, nor does she want to make caring for her children or the social duties expected from her the meaning of her life.³ She describes her life with Denis as suffocating and unbearable: "Before I knew it, he had enveloped me all over, encased me like a strong vine" (343).

However, unlike Kate Chopin's Edna, Maureen comes to an understanding of her plight not gradually, but in a brief moment of blindness caused by the refraction of light from a shard of blue-green glass two boys from the neighborhood were about to throw into a lake. The irony of Maureen's "awakening" does not get lost in Spencer's narrative. Maureen chooses, as

³ See also Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* (144-45).

her shelter, a city quarter that is not just French, but “also Greek, Italian, Oriental, and immigrant Jewish” (346), one where people live in ethnic tolerance. Still, while demanding tolerance from the Parthams, she herself is far from unbiased – whether toward people speaking with an accent; toward those who, like her, are unable to assimilate; or, especially, toward her in-laws, who might be a little pretentious but love her dearly. At first she does not take her psychoanalyst seriously, as he speaks with a thick accent, bears a foreign-sounding name (Miracorte), and never talks about his roots. When Carole Partham, her sister-in-law, enters Maureen’s East Montreal apartment to join her in her voluntary exile, at least for a month, while her husband is on a business trip, Maureen ridicules her inability to shed her “indefinable air of class” (351). Among her own motives to leave her husband is also a desire for revenge on the Parthams who, in her opinion, epitomize the old aristocracy. At the same time, she is blind to the malice of others – for example, the boys on the beach who throw bottles and stones into the lake, obviously trying to cause people harm.

Although Maureen is Canadian, she looks at Montreal through the eyes of a stranger. The early climax of the story follows a boating accident when, at that time still an obedient wife, she observes those who are carrying the limp body of her husband, presumably dead, toward her. The situation is an innovative variant of a scene in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* in which Kate Cutrer, the protagonist’s cousin, survives the car accident that left her fiancé dead, but instead of having a nervous breakdown or making a vain attempt to revive him, she turns herself into an onlooker, part of the crowd, and then leaves. Although Maureen’s husband survives the accident, his wife’s reaction is very similar to Kate’s: she retreats, runs backward, and, sprawled on the ground, she observes “the bluest of July skies in which white clouds had filled in giant areas at good distances from the sun” (344).

The story culminates in the scene of a several-day-long snow calamity during which, with the outside temperature having fallen to minus forty degrees Celsius, Maureen daily climbs the hill on which the Montreal hospital stands. The municipal buses, like inanimate Sisyphuses, try to transport their passengers up the hill, but, unlike the mythical Greek sufferer, they give up and “stand dull and bulky” in their “moaning impotence” (356). To get there, Maureen takes on identities of different animals that “wing, creep, crawl, hop” (358). Although, in that part of the story, she refers to herself as “I (human)” instead of “I (Maureen),” having lost her intolerance and selfishness, at least for a while, she progresses “at snail pace, at bug size” (357), comes through the blizzard “ant-sized” (357), and perceives a nurse in the

hospital as “a white rabbit” (356). The winter scenery allows Spencer the use of symbols she would not be able to employ in a story set in the South, but the tale is still unmistakably southern and can be put side by side with “Sir Rabbit” from Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples* (1949), a collection Spencer holds in such esteem that she once tested a new acquaintance of hers by giving her the book, “and if she didn’t like it, I doubted we’d have much in common” (Phillips 122).

One of the prominent characters in Welty’s *The Golden Apples*, King MacLain, suddenly vanishes without a trace. The whole community discusses his possible whereabouts and from time to time he is reported to have been seen in various nearby or distant places. The longer he is gone, the more important he becomes, but when finally, after many years, he returns, he is regarded as only little more than an ordinary old citizen. Although Maureen refuses any help from the Parthams, she is closely watched by them. Unlike Welty’s King MacLain, she is more important when present than when absent, even during her voluntary East Montreal exile. To his father’s displeasure, the son, whose name is never mentioned in the story, makes “a ‘religion’” of her (360), firmly believing that it was her days with him in the hospital that saved his life. Even though Maureen resorted to her shell, the city never swallows her completely.

Spencer wrote two stories set in Montreal in which people literally disappear, temporarily or even permanently. The earlier of them, “The Search” (1979; in *Chatelaine* it originally appeared as “The Searchers”), introduces the Davises, parents looking for their daughter Mary, who moved to Montreal with her draft-evading boyfriend during the Vietnam War: “She went to college, fell in love, eloped, and vanished” (403). The Davises stay in Auberge de la Province, a cheap hotel in East Montreal run by a homosexual couple, an English Arab and a blond Frenchman. During their week in Montreal they do not find a single clue leading to Mary: they only have a pleasant talk with the proprietor of a French restaurant and cause a minor scandal when Mrs. Davis is found to have repeatedly thrown bags of garbage out of the hotel window, the desperate act of a mentally disturbed person’s desire to get rid of her emotional waste and put an end to her mourning. On their return journey to the States, Mrs. Davis recalls a story she once read, the story of the search for a woman whose footsteps were found in the sand beside a river but then suddenly stopped: “There was no sign of a struggle, no sign of a body. There was nothing” (405). In Montreal, there are so many footsteps of various refugees and immigrants that it is impossible to find the ones sought after. Moreover, as the restaurant owner points out, “The people

are quiet, they ask very little” (404), even though the city looks and sounds like the “United Nations” (405). Communication between people here often goes beyond the use of language; the mutual understanding is instinctive. Mrs. Davis watches children playing ball and with surprise she notices that they talk “in three or four languages at least. I could hear French, English, and something else – Spanish or Italian – then another I’d no idea about. Yet the game went on” (405). In such a multicultural environment, it is easy to disappear; on the drive back to the United States, Mrs. Davis is even willing to admit that her daughter was a mere ghost: “I just wonder . . . if she ever existed at all” (405).

In the story “Jean-Pierre” (1981), it is a French Canadian who temporarily vanishes. In leaving his domestic space, Jean-Pierre is much closer to Welty’s King MacLain than any of Spencer’s other characters. After only one month of dating, this Québécois owner of two apartment houses in East Montreal marries Callie, a librarian ten years younger than him, who speaks only basic French. Their marriage is a mystery, especially to Callie’s relatives and friends, in whose opinions the Québécois are just “awful” (6). Living with a Québécois inevitably means that one will wind up “with fifteen brats and not even good French” (6). Callie herself perceives the French Canadians through a set of stereotypes and truisms: they are “treated as inferior by the English” and prefer “a life unmarred by violating eyes and scarring comments” (5). When Jean-Pierre departs in early June, one year after the wedding, leaving only a brief note saying that he will “be gone a while, c’est nécessaire” (11), Callie becomes completely isolated, her only companion being a stray cat. She receives mysterious phone calls, mostly in French, which she cannot understand, and is unable to answer. Once she even thinks that a woman on the phone is speaking about her and Jean-Pierre’s son, though she tells herself that maybe she just did not catch the words correctly. At that time, her husband’s absence makes him even more present to her. His mysterious vanishing made “his thoughts . . . all-important. They filled the sky; they overweighed the world” (13). At the same time, the city, especially the quarter where she lives, otherwise welcoming and pleasant, turns into an enormous gutter in her mind:

Montreal was muggy, overcast, and dirty that summer. The trees in the residential streets looked cool and full, but downtown near her own apartment, along Sainte-Catherine, vomit dried in various shades of green all day outside the tavernes, and all dogs seemed afflicted with diarrhea. (14)

When she reads Emily Dickinson's poems, especially those concerning death and grief, Jean-Pierre loses his sharp contours for her: he is "somebody she'd married in a dream he hadn't had" (17). Only a new friend of Callie's, a young Jewish man named Simon, can explain to her that Jean-Pierre's departure was a typical instinctive reaction of the human animal in danger. Natives of Montreal cannot hide in their own environment, although it is successfully used as a shelter by strangers; their only alternative is the countryside: "[T]he Québécois, if they get in trouble or get scared, they take to the bush. . . . They go to places like Chicoutimi, Rimouski, Rivière du Loup, from there upriver, downriver, into the woods" (21). When Jean-Pierre unexpectedly returns without confirming the speculation that he spent the time in the north of Canada, he behaves as if he had never left. Things seem to go back to normal, but Callie's cat can feel something sinister in him. It is scared, its heart is beating fast, and it even spits at Jean-Pierre, who, a moment later, draws a parallel between himself and the cat: "He stays because he belongs to you. . . . If he left he would come back" (24).

In 1992, Spencer published *The Night Travellers*,⁴ her only novel partly set in Canada. In this book the three characteristic features of Montreal – that is, a point of the intersection of many cultures, a shelter, and a place of isolation – are seen in a more complex way, even more so because the story is set in the late 1960s, during the escalation of both the Vietnam War and the protests against it. Unlike the spiritual émigrés in "I, Maureen" and "Jean-Pierre" suffering from existentialist malaise, the novel introduces real ones from the United States. Spencer comments on life in Montreal and elsewhere in Canada primarily through two female narrators: Mary Kerr, the main protagonist, whose love for an anti-war activist and underground journalist, Jeff Blaise, brings her from her native town of Kingsbury, North Carolina, into Canadian exile;⁵ and Gerda Stewart, a New Yorker who moved to Canada years ago because of Gordon, an English-speaking owner of several tenement buildings in Montreal. The two women meet after Mary's suicide attempt in one of Gordon's houses; Gerda and Gordon take Mary in as a surrogate daughter, and when she is detained – attempted suicide was a crime in Canada until 1972 – they pay her bail.

⁴ Henceforth cited in the text as *NT*.

⁵ Mary and her daughter Kathy also appear, as slightly different characters, in "A Fugitive's Wife" (1987), but the story takes place in Key West.

Gerda tries to make Mary's life in a city from where "there is nowhere else to climb but to the Pole" (*NT* 123) as comfortable as possible. It is too cold here, but at least "Canadians, unlike their climate, are mild by comparison, though the French keep boiling up with anger over one thing or another" (*NT* 127). While the influx of immigrants makes Montreal the crossroads of many different cultures, Gerda and her husband live in isolation: "I find friends here . . . but it is hard to relate them to anything except comfortable living. There is no center to their thinking" (*NT* 161). After their two adult sons leave, adopting their parents' opinion that "Montreal's a dead city. . . . The French are out to ruin it" (*NT* 304), Gerda, with her recently discovered desire to tell stories, sticks to her diary, and when Mary suddenly leaves for the country, she compensates for the cold of the Canadian winter by building a greenhouse. She also plans to see an ophthalmologist, since she has noticed a defect in her vision. "One of my eyes is out of focus with the other" (*NT* 128), she says, and her eye troubles are symbolic; she lost focus long ago when she adopted the secure position of a non-participating observer.

Still, as a chronicler, she acknowledges the ethnic and class *mélange* in certain parts of Montreal. On Sainte-Catherine Street she registers the

[k]aleidoscope of thrusting faces, no one race, polyglot, changing, . . . all different shapes, thrusting and hurrying, Oriental, Arab, Jew. French, English, bums, beggars, cheap girls, nice girls, housewives, the seeking and the sought, sucked into buses, plunging through Metro doors, dodging traffic, ignoring lights. (*NT* 129)

Although she calls Montreal her home, it has always been a place where she and her husband stayed and performed their duties: "Here we live, work, raise children, speak proper English to one another, a swirl of every language jabbering and echoing around us, unheard within our walls" (*NT* 124). The only reason to go to St. Laurent, the center of French and immigrant life, is "some restaurant that's good" (*NT* 272). Gerda would never visit a counter-culture bar like The Purple Window, where the regulars are, in her words, the "[r]ags and tags of the human race" (*NT* 321).

Unlike Gerda, Jeff's occasional lover, Madeleine, a native Montrealer, realizes that it is the influx of war objectors from the United States that has made the city more open: "Young America is here on a Montreal street because of principles about a little Asian country nobody knew anything about ten years ago" (*NT* 210).

The English-speaking Gerda and Gordon had always mentally detached themselves from the mix of cultures on the streets of Montreal. Thus, it is not surprising that it is Gerda, not Mary, who is the first to draw the parallel

between Québec within Canada and the South within the United States. Like southerners, French Canadians “relate to something, their own past, their families, their language” (NT 161). Paradoxically, Mary, who was born into her mother’s distinguished southern family, the Harbisons, with its long tradition of local influence and wealth, finds family ties bothersome and speaks about the place where her mother lives as “*the land of the dead*” (NT 156; Spencer’s italics).

In spite of that, Mary, arriving in Canada with her draft-dodging husband, has her preconceptions of that country based on stereotypes similar to those embraced by Gerda years earlier; the country is simply “grand,” and there is “all that cold in the winter” (NT 153). Mary’s southern past did not prepare her to be immediately open to all the available cultural influences, but, fortunately, she is a dancer with professional ambitions, which makes her seek contacts within multicultural artistic communities. As Spencer said in a 1996 interview, “If a person were attached to poetry or writing or sculpture, you could always find others within the art world and make a community for yourself” (Entzminger 614). But, as Terry Roberts aptly notices in his analysis of the novel, “all emotional gypsies [are] seeking a home” (126), not just a community. This is why, while not trying to understand the country and its political direction, Mary establishes close contacts with individuals, especially with Leonard and Hilda, a Jewish couple still living in the shadow of the Nazi holocaust, and Estes Drover, a gay Spanish dancer maintaining a rocky relationship with his querulous Arab lover. Although, at the beginning of her relationship with Jeff, she “reserved a silent right not to be any more interested in politics than time permitted” (NT 37), she makes political statements through her dance routines and performances. She can hardly speak French, which makes it difficult for her to find a regular job. Still, after becoming a part of Montreal’s underground cultural life, she adopts a Québécois identity as a cover. Now she is no longer Mary Kerr, or simply Mary, as she wanted to be addressed after her escape from the South, but Marie Carée, another name which echoes “caring.” For Catherine Seltzer, who discusses Spencer’s complicated concepts of home and community, it is proof that through adopting a French-sounding name, Mary “recognizes herself as both American and Canadian” (168). While Mary’s suicide attempt, a result of her feelings of isolation and her lack of belief in reunion with her husband, was an act of selfishness, as her death would have left her little daughter Kathy motherless, later she does not hesitate to return secretly to the United States to steal the child from her own mother, who has her in her custody.

In *The Night Travellers*, Americans, even the most unprejudiced ones, do not try hard enough to understand Canada; they are too immersed in the problems of their own big country. Mary knows that Canadian communities are, like southern ones, far from homogeneous, yet still she often simplifies matters, for example, when she accuses Canadians of hypocrisy and too much reserve: “Oh, yes, Canadians are really against that war, but when they meet somebody, they act like you’ve got leprosy” (NT 211). Jeff’s teacher and idol, Ethan, who initiated Mary’s escape to Canada and is otherwise very open-minded, once said laconically about Canadians: “These are foreign people” (NT 241). Even for Jeff, traveling at night on the Trans-Canada Express, Canada is merely a “massive land like something in a trick mirror, broad at the base, the head narrowing” (NT 289). In this context it is difficult to join Sel y who’s done the honest thing and refused to fight ittzter in her opinion that Canada “suggests a utopia of sorts to Jeff,” as there is no idealization of that country on his part. On the other hand, Seltzer is right when she notices that for the endlessly roaming anti-war activist, the country definitely is “a tabula rasa . . . , a site of possibility and reinvention” (162). This applies not only to him, but also to Mary, who, after her suicide attempt, regains her identity through her artistic activities, thus turning the potentially “abstract space” (a term used by Seltzer 166) into a very concrete one.

At one point, Jeff draws a parallel between the United States before the Civil War, divided on the issue of slavery, and the United States of the 1960s, when the dividing line was the Vietnam War. He does this in one of his letters he writes to Mary, “Believe that it’s another civil war, the one we were still talking about down South. . . . Only now we can’t secede” (NT 259). For him, the grapevine conspirators who secretly passed information, warned people, and organized the escapes of activists bear a resemblance to their 19thth-century predecessors involved in “the underground railroad” helping slaves from the South to escape. Still, it was Canada, not the United States, that in 1970 came close to a civil war, with the FLO fighting, often by violent means, for the separation of Québec.

Canada, which did not extradite draft dodgers to the United States, became a regular shelter for young American males who were not ready to die for their country. In her study of Canadian immigration, Valerie Knowles claims that a total of between 80,000 and 200,000 war resisters and deserters escaped from the United States to Canada during the Vietnam War, reversing the direction in which well-educated people were crossing the border for the first time in history (186). Although it is not specified in the novel, it is ob-

vious that Jeff and Mary do not apply for landed immigrant status and permanent residency, which would legalize their stay in Canada, but, like deserters from the US Army, who only rarely obtained such a status, they “remained fugitives, living underground” (Knowles 214). Jeff’s unwillingness to live abroad is one of the reasons why he is risking repeated border crossings: instead of living in Canada with his wife, he spends most of the time in the United States among rioters and protesters as an underground journalist, writing “From the Front Lines” (281), as he calls his regular column.

In November 1969, when Richard Nixon was elected president in the United States, the cooperation between the police and intelligence services of both countries increased, “Canada playing patsy to the powerful bully to the south” (NT 309). Even though the focus was more on Toronto, an English-speaking city with a more extensive drug scene, directly connected in people’s minds with American hippies and beatniks, Montreal was also in their scope. Nevertheless, for Mary and Jeff, it becomes a place where they can stay in the anonymity they desire and, if there is a need, vanish into thin air like “friendly spirits” (NT 323), as they occasionally saw themselves. During the brief period when Jeff lives with Mary in Montreal, from March to November 1969, teaching simultaneously at two high schools, he merely changes his name to Geoffrey Blaylock, dyes his blond hair black, and grows a beard; still, he seems to be safe in the ant-hill of the city, even though, at that time, he is on police lists not only as a war objector but also as a terrorist who helped to blow up a munitions plant near Sausalito.

Mary gets used to life in Montreal, and when she is sent to the country, a hunting lodge a few miles from St. Vincent-en-Campagne near St. Ange, she is extremely unhappy. While Jeff accepts Ethan’s assumption that the country is a better hiding place, free of police traps, in the changing political climate in Canada, Mary has a different opinion: “I know how to hide in Montreal. Not even a rabbit can hide in a field of snow” (NT 274). Like an animal, in the country she almost becomes the prey of one of the hunters who is spending a weekend in the lodge and who turns out to be a government-related agent. Even before one of the hunter’s colleagues warns her, she hides with Kathy in the snowy woods and, falling to catch her slipping daughter, sprains her ankle and breaks her arm. Rescued by the very hunters that posed a danger for her incognito, she feels like “some bundled-up game that had been shot” (NT 230).

Another one of Mary’s trips to the country, this time with Jeff, ends in complete disaster: a deserted cottage, which they break into and where they spend several days, burns down mysteriously on the day of their departure.

Jeff later explains to a group of friends and acquaintances, trying to refute an accusation of having set the cottage on fire: “[W]e just quietly and with great respect did what we’ve been doing in your country for some years now: we refuged in it” (NT 322). At that point it becomes more than obvious that the idea of the countryside being safer for refugees than a big city is wrong. The cottage in the woods bears a fairy-tale quality: it looks like “a gingerbread house” (NT 311) offering a refuge to lost or abandoned children, but as every child knows, there is always a witch in such houses. The price for the few happy days in the cottage is the loss of their cover. Jeff is never sure whether it was really a bolt of lightning that caused the fire, or whether the blaze was a part of the police scheme to frame him. In any case, if not literally, then symbolically there was “a shadow of some sort off in the woods” (NT 324) that traced him, put him out of balance, drove him back to the United States, and finally had him sent to Vietnam. The shadows could also have been summoned by his father-in-law Fred, who wants Mary to return to her mother. Yet there is an irony in this imagery, as earlier it was Jeff and Mary who were noiselessly stepping from the shadows. When Mary meets Jeff for the first time, “he was there at the edge of some thick trees. It was like the shadows got together and made him up” (NT 139). Years later, even Estes, the owner of a Montreal dance studio, notices Mary’s “gift of becoming invisible” (NT 301).

The evidence of Mary’s gradual assimilation in Canada is her growing demand for a surrogate family that would neither require her to abandon her husband nor force her to shed her southern identity. At the end of the novel, she clings to Estes mainly because, being gay, he is willing to play exactly the role she needs to cast in her real-life performance, that of a protector of her and her daughter. Then Mary can live like Maureen or Jean-Pierre: she no longer sees the city as a gathering place for expatriates and, by ignoring its mosaic of cultures, accepts it primarily as an amiable space where everybody does what he or she likes. Unlike the alienated native Montrealers in Spencer’s short stories, Mary decides that her life without Jeff is not isolation but the anonymity she prefers.

Like Mary Kerr, Elizabeth Spencer left the South for Italy and then for Canada at the peak of civil unrest, although at that time the reason was not a war abroad but the attacks against desegregation and racial equality. When she chose Montreal as her new place of residency, she became invisible for many southerners. Many of her books went out of print and reappeared only when she returned. By the time *The Night Travellers* was published, she was once again firmly rooted in the South; like Jeff Blaise from that novel, she

decided not to live in exile any more, even though she used to claim that you did not have to live in the South to stay southern – “you could be southern elsewhere, in Florence, or Paris, or anywhere you found yourself” (Smith 141). During her long stay in Montreal, she did leave her southern identity, as well as her stories, memories, and accent, untouched, although at the same time she did become, at least a little, Canadian. This is evident not only from the occasional Canadian settings of her works and from her ten years of teaching at Concordia University in Montreal, but also from the many good friends she made in Canada, including the curator of manuscripts at the National Library in Ottawa, which prompted her decision to deposit her papers in Canada instead of at the University of Kentucky in Lexington where her early texts are stored, or in the Mississippi Archives, which offered to take the collection (Zacharasiewicz 155).⁶ The researchers from the South and elsewhere who occasionally visit the manuscript collection can feel the same sparks of the North that flash through the fiction she wrote during her prolific and rich Canadian years.

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⁶ The National Library of Ottawa also holds copies of all of Spencer’s papers deposited in Kentucky. See also Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, “The South and Beyond: A Conversation with Elizabeth Spencer” (*Conversations* 205-06).

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NAHEM YOUSAF

Michael Ondaatje's New Orleans in *Coming Through Slaughter*

In his 1976 novel *Coming Through Slaughter*, Michael Ondaatje takes as his subject the New Orleans jazz musician Charles "Buddy" Bolden who lived from 1877 to 1931. The writer's seeming lack of immediate connection to the subject has given rise to a few questions like novelist-interviewer Colum McCann's: "How did you come to write *Coming Through Slaughter* about Buddy Bolden – an African-American jazz musician in turn-of-the-century New Orleans – when you were born in Sri Lanka, went to school in England, and were living in Toronto?" McCann distinguishes between Ondaatje's supposedly natural subject matter and a setting that is deemed to be so far away from his experience. His question, though seemingly designed to prompt Ondaatje to speak about the sense of place in fiction, nods to an axiomatic assumption that a novel published early in a writer's career will be based in a place that is well known to the author. Taking a different perspective, one of Ondaatje's most searching and revealing critics, Sam Solecki, refers to location in Ondaatje's fictions as predominantly symbolic, "places and societies radically different from his own" ("Making" 255). In Ondaatje's novel, as I read it, New Orleans is less a setting in terms of detailed socio-geographical knowledge and more a theme, as imagined in fiction and communicated through music and as infused by imagery of that city's cultural mystique.

New Orleans is a vehicle for Ondaatje to imagine a version of Buddy Bolden that has, in turn, inspired others to imagine him similarly. Despite his now legendary status, little is known about Bolden's life in New Orleans, and Ondaatje was intrigued by that fact. Following Ondaatje, another Canadian, Stefan Berg, who had been introduced to New Orleans jazz in Toronto, was influenced by Ondaatje's novel to create a version of the "first man of jazz" that extrapolates on *Coming Through Slaughter* but that translates the story into a different form: the graphic novel. I turn to Berg's 2007 work as an addendum to thinking about Ondaatje's and as an example of how images of Bolden continue to circulate in Canadian texts.

Canadian writers have often been fascinated by the city, images of which have circulated through stories as different as John Murrell's *Death in New Orleans* (1998) and Marnie Woodrow's *Spelling Mississippi* (2002), which

cross national borders and boundaries to explore, through this particular milieu, what Larry McClain described as “an imperfect acculturation to national ideology and the oppositional power that springs from this peripheral identity” (243). A prolific playwright, Murrell was born in the U.S. South but settled in Calgary in 1969. His drama deploys a Canadian cultural anthropologist as the focalizing character through which to explore not only the city and its people but her own Canadian heritage. Woodrow’s novel explores a Toronto woman’s obsessive fascination with a New Orleans native, tangling the two women’s different heritages and experiences with the city’s French Quarter. In each case, Canadian protagonists travel to New Orleans on a quest for self-knowledge and discover as much about identifying as Canadians as they do about the city. It is unsurprising that Ondaatje should have fixed on a New Orleans story if, like Thomas Bonner Jr., he conceived of the location as “the only major postcolonial city remaining in the United States” and a place where beginnings and endings merge (Bonner 5, 13). Ondaatje’s own Dutch-Ceylonese heritage generated a preoccupation with complex cultural legacies that are threaded through the writer’s oeuvre, notably in the autobiographical *Running in the Family* (1984) and most overtly in colonial terms in *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), which returns to Sri Lanka wracked by civil war in the 1980s. Ondaatje’s fiction could be said to realize a line in his poem “Spider Blues,” in which the poet decides he will “swivel to new regions where the raw of feelings exist” (*Rat Jelly* 64). Stefan Berg intervenes creatively in the same story and with similar attention to what Ondaatje, in his “Author’s Note” to *Coming Through Slaughter*,¹ refers to as the “private and fictional magnets” that drew him to the subject and to the city (*Slaughter* 158).

In 1976, Ondaatje enjoyed creative license in imagining the story of the legendary cornet player in his homeplace. Few facts were known. Ondaatje has revealed he came across the story of Bolden in a newspaper article, in the form of a cryptic reference to “Buddy Bolden, who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade” (Witten 9). He was aware of a single extant photograph of Bolden’s band from 1905; as he was writing his book, no other image of the man was available.² Ondaatje used that image and the

¹ Subsequent references to *Coming Through Slaughter* will be abbreviated to *Slaughter* in this text.

² Donald Marquis’s *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* includes a portrait of Bolden that he discovered of which Ondaatje was apparently unaware (see xviii, 146-47)

legend of Bolden losing his senses in his music and went on to research images and sounds of the city to dramatize his life. What could not be historically known about the man had prevented Bolden from finding a secure place in cultural histories. The enigma was complicated further because Bolden needed to be read against the musical grain insofar as in the period in which the classical ragtime style of jazz was building and being played from printed music, Bolden's syncopated style of improvisational playing was a local phenomenon, especially his dirty blues and lewd signature songs, or "ratty music" as Louis Armstrong referred to it later (Brothers 28, 148, 155). Bolden was never recorded and, as cultural critic Luc Sante has noted, he also "missed the leap of the New Orleans sound to Chicago, and beyond" (179).

Ondaatje visited New Orleans for only a very few days in 1973 to research the novel, which was published two years before the first biography of Bolden by Donald Marquis. In *In Search of Buddy Bolden* (1978), Marquis turned to city records to try to penetrate the truth of a man as fabled, he pointed out, as New Orleans pirate Jean Lafitte or voodoo queen Marie Laveau, but as little known. Marquis makes no mention of Ondaatje, but the Canadian's quest-fiction may be read alongside the biography for the elements of a New Orleans story each of the two recovers. It seems noteworthy that critics have misremembered the order in which these two books appeared, assuming Ondaatje followed Marquis rather than allowing that, while Marquis began researching Bolden in the 1960s, the Canadian published his version of the musician's life first.³ Both writers came to some of the same conclusions. It is agreed that Bolden was born in 1877 and that he was established as a musician around 1895 but that by 1906 the first concrete indications of mental illness were causing concern and that he broke down in the Labor Day parade and was later sectioned, remaining in the Louisiana State Insane Asylum at Jackson until he died in 1931. Given that the Canadian writer passed only a few days in the city, while New Orleans-based jazz historian Marquis trawled local libraries and archives and interviewed musicians, it is immediately evident that the Canadian's is a very different New Orleans story. This essay begins to tease that out.

Winner of the Books in Canada First Novel Award in 1976, *Coming Through Slaughter* has been celebrated as "a paradigmatic Canadian fiction in its refusal of the European and American tradition of the novel" (Barbour

³ For example, Daniel Hardie mistakenly has *Coming Through Slaughter* published in 1979, a year after Marquis's biography (25).

103). Again, taking a different perspective, Solecki wonders whether Ondaatje may be a particular kind of Canadian writer, enjoying an “anomalous status within our literary culture” (*Spider Blues* 7). Ondaatje’s relationship to Canadian-ness as defined by his critics is somewhat like Bolden’s to New Orleans, and like the city as traditionally depicted: at once familiar and strange. Annick Hillger, for example, believes Ondaatje’s texts “resonate with [other] Canadian texts that are concerned with the quest for self” and that it is up to the reader to “sound the intertexts” (221). I would argue that Ondaatje’s conception of New Orleans is similarly intertextual. As embedded in *Coming Through Slaughter*, the referential and the “real” derive as much from fantasy and tall stories told by New Orleanians as they rely on the scant documentary evidence that Ondaatje uncovered; both are interwoven in the novel. This is a disquieting union that accounts for the affective quality of reading a fiction that is a haunting and disturbing evocation of Bolden’s creativity as a form of self-harm. Similarly, while each of Ondaatje’s fictions explores a different landscape – North Africa, Italy, and India in *The English Patient* and Northern California and France in *Divisadero* – that landscape is as much psychological as representational. “His mind became the street,” the reader is told of Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* (42). As Ondaatje has said, a poetic principle is at work in such descriptions.⁴ In the case of *Coming Through Slaughter*, his novel-writing is also informed by local lore, that is to say by New Orleanians’ stories of Bolden’s talent, his suffering, and his loss to music.

While Marquis’s biographical trajectory reports some of the oral histories about Bolden in an effort to pinpoint his character – with one person he interviews alleging that Bolden “broke his heart when he played” (99) – Ondaatje’s entire project is premised on capturing mood and mystique. New Orleans is a creative spur to Ondaatje, and this novel engages what W. Kenneth Holditch has called “the New Orleans literary mystique” (137). Ondaatje writes with metafictional self-consciousness:

Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body, and you like a weatherbird arcing round in the middle of your life to exact opposites and burning your brains out. . . . The excesses cloud up the page. (*Slaughter* 134)

⁴ See Ondaatje, qtd. in Birnbaum (2010).

Literary critics have wrestled over its modernist and postmodernist qualities, and they have pursued the extent to which Bolden's story may be read as a disquisition on Ondaatje's own literary aesthetic or even as a self-portrait.⁵ However, they have not read the novel as an evocation of New Orleans's uncanny mystique,⁶ acknowledging that inherent in that mystique is, as Holditch has asserted, a "strong and pervasive sense of foreignness" (137), a feeling that persists throughout this novel.

Bolden's life in the city is what local lore has made of it since he died. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White describes the historical past as "uncanny": "both known and unknown, present and absent, familiar and alien, at one and the same time." In this construction, the historical past contains "all the attributes that we might ascribe to the psychological sphere of 'the imaginary'" (89). If read in this way, *Coming Through Slaughter* is a typical New Orleans narrative. New Orleans fictions from George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) through *The Vampire Chronicles* of Anne Rice are infused with notions of the uncanny, the unfamiliar, and the strange. The problems posed by this novel may be read back through such stories in which the city's violence and its spookiness are compulsively reiterated – and not only in the city's literary tradition. Ondaatje has said that "[t]he novel has been quite slow in picking up what the other arts are doing . . . they have been doing things that are much more suggestive, much freer of chronological sequence" (Menand 94). Expressed as a collage of tall tales, oral histories, and hospital files, Ondaatje's text provides an embedded fictionalization of a life shrouded in myth. *Coming Through Slaughter* jumps around in time, plays with point of view, and relies on stories within stories in its attempt to "find" Bolden. The quest motif was becoming a typical journey undertaken

⁵ For Solecki the novel is "the story of Michael Ondaatje, it is the work in which he most explicitly declares that a fictional character created by him is really a self-portrait" (254).

⁶ The single critic to foreground New Orleans is Joel Deshayé. In "Parading the Underworld of New Orleans in *Coming Through Slaughter*," he fills out Ondaatje's metaphor that New Orleans is "a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (136) by noting the ordinances that the Louisiana legislature put in place post-Reconstruction, such as the 1890 segregation of streetcars, the 1900 outlawing of the grandfather clause to disenfranchise black voters, and Bolden's identification with Storyville. Following histories like Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns's *Jazz: A History of American Music* and Marquis's study, Deshayé situates Bolden within a historically segregated city rather than the more diffuse cultural imaginary within which I see as Ondaatje's creative impetus.

in Ondaatje's writing, specifically that in which he recovers a dead or disappeared subject, as in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). In this novel, Ondaatje does not attempt to explain the causes of Bolden's madness (alcohol for Marquis as well as most music historians). Instead, fragments of thin fact and much thicker myth are woven together in a sideways glimpse of one of the founding fathers of the New Orleans sound.⁷

Indeed, looking back over Ondaatje's writing career, Louis Menand has recognized that it is not easy to follow the chronology of a life story in his work. "He is not telling stories," Menand posits, but "using the elements of storytelling to gesture in the direction of a constellation of moods, themes, and images . . . He is trying to change the medium" (92). By eschewing realist literary strategies, Ondaatje turns rather to what Robert Kroetsch in his essay, "The Exploding Porcupine," once described as "the bookness of book," an idea through which a writer might "violate the constellation of narrative," thereby creating what Kroetsch calls "a grammar of violence" (113). In the novel, a grammar of violence is recited through various memories of the man (true or embellished) and textured by a musical adrenaline so that the metaphor Ondaatje's Bolden uses – "*Put your hand through this window*" (Slaughter 91) – is at once a leap of faith in creativity, a sudden violent act involving pain and the tearing of flesh, and a metafictional nod to the author's penchant for breaking the frame. Finally, with a chilling undertone, Ondaatje attributes the metaphor through which Bolden sets up a grammar of violence to his own writerly endeavor:

The thin sheaf of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, "Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade..." What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (*Slaughter* 134)

This metaphor for creativity is translated into the maddened music Bolden is playing according to Ondaatje – music by which he reaches both the heights of jazz bravado and the depths of suffering continually emphasized in local musical lore.

⁷ Bolden played in Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans that had disappeared by 1917. Traces remained in the photographs of prostitutes taken by E. J. Bellocq, whom Ondaatje makes a significant character in Bolden's life in the novel. Bellocq's photographs were published in 1970 and provide another creative source for Ondaatje in contriving his New Orleans story.

New Orleans music is significant in conjuring culture and place. For writers as well as musicologists, musical styles and lyrics exemplify the way in which the city has served as a location for a melodramatic history of mystery and crime, sin and suffering. The character of Webb, Ondaatje's witness to Bolden's playing, is struck that Bolden's musical repertoire is shot through with violence and crime. He notes that Bolden's "whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change . . . was about bodies in the river, knives, lovepains, cockiness. Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (*Slaughter* 43). Ondaatje has Bolden leave the city to escape this plot's unwinding. While Marquis's biography would go on to show that he never left New Orleans, Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* enjoys two years of relative calm in Shell Beach, Louisiana, until Webb finds him and brings him "home to a nightmare" (106). Only an hour's drive from New Orleans, in the early 20th-century setting, its distance and quiet make Shell Beach seem a world away from the frenetic hub of Bolden's life in jazz. Temporarily at least, he feels that "[u]nder the sunlight I am the only object between water and sky" (68). He feels he can be "anonymous and alone . . . with no history and no parading" (86). Ondaatje has his subject leave because only when he does can the pull of the city's imaginary be felt full force. This "plot" derives not a little from Frank Lewis, clarinet player with Bolden's band, and his reported observation that "He tore apart the plot – see his music was immediately on top of his life" (37). As soon as Webb seeks him out, full of stories about the past, Bolden feels "ridiculous here" now that Webb has reached him even "this far away" and "could tilt me upside down till he was directing me like wayward traffic back home" (86). Five days after returning to New Orleans, Ondaatje's Bolden is so maddened by the plot of his song that he is felled by it. While Webb believes that leaving New Orleans will be a "contemptuous" form of "landscape suicide" (22), Bolden pleads: "All that music. I don't want that way anymore. . . . What have you brought me back to, Webb?" (101).

In a study of the city's music-led tourist industry, Connie Atkinson, founding editor of music journal *Wavelength*, does not mention Bolden (151). That he has often been missing from what the New Orleans tourists know and love

should not come as a surprise. In the 1990s, when Atkinson wrote “Shakin’ your Butt for the Tourist: Music’s Role in the Identification and Selling of New Orleans,” the tourist board’s refrain was “Come Join the Parade.”⁸ It is an invitation that would have resonated with sadness rather than joy for those tourists who had heard the story of the so-called “first man of jazz” collapsing in the middle of a parade. In that sense, Bolden was not always deemed fit to sell the city, though his story has since been differently imagined and inflected. Louise McKinney (yet another Canadian writer fascinated by New Orleans and its music), in her 2006 cultural history of the city, mentions the legend familiar to musicians, that,

when Buddy Bolden practiced his trumpet from the front yard of his home at 2309 First Street, where he lived from 1887-1905, you could hear him all the way across town. The story may be apocryphal, but the house is still there. . . . On a quiet morning in the French Quarter, from the vantage point of Jackson Square, you can indeed hear a horn from a long distance away. (41)

In the 21st century, Bolden has become the mysterious ghost that haunts the city, at least for those who choose to seek out his legend.

It is no surprise, then, that New Orleans jazz history should intrigue a writer who focuses on the creative-destructive relationship of the artist to his art. Critics have *almost* touched on the potential importance of New Orleans to Ondaatje when noting writers he admires or allusions he makes. Both Sam Solecki and Manina Jones, for example, read *Coming Through Slaughter* back through Ondaatje’s poem “White Dwarfs” (1973),⁹ which celebrates among its silenced heroes the self-destructive writer of detective fiction, Dashiell Hammett:

And Dashiell Hammett in success
suffered conversation and moved
to the perfect white between words
. . .
there are those burned out stars
who implode into silence
after parading in the sky
after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway (*Rat Jelly* 71)

⁸ Of course the “funky butt” Bolden sang about was much more distasteful than the energetic image of dance in this context.

⁹ See Solecki, *Nets*, and Jones, *Varieties*.

Hammett's "burned out star" shines again in Bolden, but critics fail to also note Hammett's obsession with New Orleans as an intertextual connection that underscores a route by which Ondaatje could have found his way to Bolden. New Orleans-born writer Lillian Hellman, Hammett's companion for some thirty years, remembered that "he knew more about . . . New Orleans music, food, and architecture than my father who had grown up there." Cle-anth Brooks famously called New Orleans a city of the mind; it is a city to which writers have always come as literary apprentices. New Orleans literature has never been solely or even mainly indigenous; it has always also been written by those who migrated to the city, those who came as purposeful literary pilgrims, and those, like Ondaatje, who spent the briefest of times there.

In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje is clearly fascinated by the underbelly of New Orleans, its volatility as "the City of Night" according to whose lore doom is always imminent. The trope of New Orleans as courtesan becomes most apparent when its prostitutes in Storyville are described as "the sum of the city" and a metaphorical extension of Bolden's desperate blues. In selecting Bolden as emblematic of the city's reputation for danger and sensuality, specifically through jazz's origins in its red-light district, Ondaatje was following Ralph Ellison, though it may not have been apparent to him at the time of writing, and Ellison's definition of blues as "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe, expressed lyrically" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 78-9). In *Invisible Man*, Ellison had his protagonist listen to Jelly Roll Morton's version of Buddy Bolden's blues until his editor Albert Erskine suggested Ellison change the reference to something more contemporary: Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?"¹⁰ Nevertheless, an allusion to Bolden remains in Ellison's Epilogue to the novel:

With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, 'Open the window and let the foul air out... Of course Louis was kidding, *he* wouldn't have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air's horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and diversity and I'll be up and around with mine. (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 468).

This vestigial, if inexact, allusion fuses the narrator's invisibility with that of Bolden, unnamed here and hidden behind Armstrong, just as Ondaatje (as

¹⁰ See Yaffe (69-70); although Yaffe posits that Bolden was "rendered catatonic" by syphilis (150).

Solecki was the first to point out) stands behind Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ellison's description of the blues as raw and agonizing, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues" 78) illuminates the effect that Ondaatje creates. Ondaatje's story soars to the jagged peaks Ellison describes but then, in painful detail, falls into maddened despair like the music Bolden is reputed to have played.

Tellingly, in a novel that continually shifts between first- and third-person narration, Ondaatje is liberal in his use of phrases from musical biographies of New Orleans and from transcripts of interviews with musicians, like those by Frank Amacker from the 1960s in the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University library as reproduced in the novel (152-55). Ondaatje's imagined Bolden develops out of snatches from this evolving story told in the words of locals, usually musicians, who knew or heard tell of him. Jelly Roll Morton described Bolden as "the best and the loudest and most loved jazzman of his time" and "the most powerful trumpet player I've ever heard, or ever was known" (qtd. in Sante 183), a phrase that Ondaatje reproduces wholesale in the novel. Ondaatje also polishes a colorful image from Louis Jones and makes it shine: "When he bought a cornet he'd shine it up and make it glisten like a women's [sic] leg," and makes his borrowing apparent by using Jones as an epigraph (Barker 15). Some scenes in *Coming Through Slaughter* derive from "A Memory of King Bolden," an oral history by Mr. Dude Bottley who, in 1965, related his memories of Bolden to Danny Barker, one of New Orleans' best loved musicians and a guitarist with the Cab Calloway Band. Barker believed that living with a talent that could only be expressed "loudly and without restraint or caution . . . at Protestant churches, dances, parades and games of sport" (Shipton vii) contributed to the onset of Bolden's insanity. In this memory-text, "King" Bolden is mythologized as a folkloric figure first by Dude Bottley and again by Barker who rewrote this article many times, a factor which further complicates the "terraces of character"¹¹ on which Ondaatje builds his picture of Bolden. Bottley seems most disturbed when he remembers (or imagines) spying on a drunken Bolden playing "mixed up music on the hymn for the Lord or the blues for the devil" (Barker 42). Ondaatje reiterates that idea in the novel in a scene in which he replays Dude Bottley's story as mediated through Brock Mumford's oral history,

¹¹ Ondaatje muses that "someone's name holds terraces of character" (*Handwriting* 55).

“which some believe and others don't believe at all” (80). In the novel, Brock/Bottley goes to Bolden's barber shop and discovers him playing “real strange”: “He's playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together” (*Slaughter* 81). Ondaatje borrows precise descriptions from Bottley, as in the image of Bolden putting his “hat over the bell of his horn” (81) to create this *mélange* of styles. This scene depicts Bolden's blues as popularized by musicians in New Orleans, including Louis Armstrong, who was only six when Bolden was confined:

Some saying you went mad trying to play the devil's music and hymns at the same time, and Armstrong telling historians that you went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy. The excesses cloud up the page. (*Slaughter* 134)

While Ondaatje's Bolden drinks, and to excess, it is the self-destructive force that is inextricable from his creativity in both mind and city – each “the place of his music” – that fuses Ondaatje's connection to his subject as he walks the city's streets in 1973: “When he went mad he was the same age as I am now” (*Slaughter* 133).

In *Coming Through Slaughter*, the parade in which Bolden collapses follows his two-year exile from the city and maps his breakdown on to his return. In Ondaatje's version, parades frame the story of Bolden's life so that his musical beginnings and endings merge, to borrow Thomas Bonner's phrasing.¹² The first parade is Bolden's coming to birth as a public performer during which he captivates the crowd. That moment is witnessed by Webb who watches his “nervous friend walk jauntily out of the crowd into the path of a parade and begin to play. So hard and beautifully . . .” (*Slaughter* 36). In the final parade, Bolden's physical and mental crash is precipitated by a young woman dancer entranced by his music but who catches him off guard so that he feels she is “testing me taunting me to make it past her” (130). As his playing speeds towards a crescendo, Bolden feels as if the dancer takes control, “this hearer who can throw me in the direction and the speed she wishes

¹² Bonner uses it to epitomize “the matters of writing and writers in New Orleans” (13).

like an angry shadow” (130). The image is a reprise of Webb directing him, “like wayward traffic back home” from *Shell Beach* (86).

Buddy Bolden’s demise, as imagined by Michael Ondaatje in 1973, continues to have resonance. This same dramatic scene was reprised by Ondaatje in his adaptation of his novel into a play, a further mediation of his New Orleans story that was performed in Toronto from 5-27 January, 1980 at the Theatre Passe Muraille.¹³ The creative force of Bolden’s life in New Orleans remained with Ondaatje; following the play, he also adapted *Coming Through Slaughter* into a screenplay, although, even as a successful writer of screenplays and director of films, Ondaatje has yet to produce or direct this one. In 1986, British jazz musician Humphrey Lyttleton created three fantasy-performances with Bolden at the center, the first a contest between Bolden and his jazz nemesis John Robichaux (a relationship referenced in the novel), and the third a cornet solo. It is the second that hinges on *Coming Through Slaughter*. Entitled “Buddy’s Last Parade,” it is a performance in which Lyttleton acts out Bolden’s role in the Labor Day parade that ended for him with his breakdown at the music’s crescendo. One critic credits Marquis’s biography and jazz archivists at Tulane for making such a creative venture possible but forgets that, even before Marquis’s research put Bolden back on the musical map, Ondaatje had already imagined this manic and melancholic performance in detail (Hardie 198-9). Lyttleton *re-imagined* a scene that did not exist except in the single line from the newspaper out of which Ondaatje first imagined it.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, *Coming Through Slaughter* takes on new resonance. New Orleans music, the art form that Ondaatje celebrates while lamenting Bolden’s demise, suffered a near fatal blow when those neighborhoods that were traditionally home to musicians were destroyed. Many jazz and blues musicians scattered around the country, with some 3,000 still displaced, it was estimated, two years after Katrina (Briggs). Others were supported by charities including the Musicians’ Village project launched by Harry Connick, Jr. and Wynton Marsalis. Musician Bob French is pictured in a poster to promote the project with Connick stating:

Now I’ve been playing with Bob since I was five years old. Here’s Bob close to 70 years old, sitting there with a snare drum in his hands [next to] a house that’s collapsed on top

¹³ Dates provided by Barbour (236).

of a car. Here's a musician who doesn't have a house, doesn't have anything anymore, who's a hero of mine. ("Connick Helps")¹⁴

Post-Katrina, *Coming Through Slaughter* is still an elegy, but not only, I would argue, to Buddy Bolden, of whom Luc Sante opines "he achieved worldwide fame as a ghost" (177). It may also be re-read in the light of more recent musician "heroes" as an elegiac tale of a city flooded by more recent losses to its musical history. In August 2010, exactly five years after Katrina hit, a report released by Sweet Home New Orleans, the coalition of charities supporting musicians, found that performances had dropped by half from pre-Katrina levels and musicians' earnings were down by 43% (Fensterstock). While the music is coming back, and HBO's *Treme* celebrates the city's continuing love affair with music,¹⁵ re-reading *Coming Through Slaughter* feels even more like a typical New Orleans story of a city saturated by loss.

Tall tales abound as to how loudly Bolden played, but when Ondaatje's character narrates his own breakdown, it ends in a blank wordless page in the "perfect white between words" of "White Dwarfs." Ondaatje admitted on publication that "I'm really drawn to unfinished stories. There's all those empty spaces you can put stuff in" (qtd. in Witten 10).¹⁶ The literal white space of the blank pages that Ondaatje deploys towards the end of the novel conveys an implosion into musical silence. Bolden's biographer Marquis would uncover that he may well have played his cornet during the 24 years he spent in the asylum, but Ondaatje had already chosen to depict that time as shrouded in silence. This is one of the most tenacious and enigmatic images that continues to fascinate those who pursue Bolden's story.

Bolden's silence is captured again by Stefan Berg, the Canadian print-maker, whose wordless graphic novel, *Let That Bad Air Out: Buddy Bolden's Last Parade*, was published in 2007. Berg's silent tribute may take its title from Jelly Roll Morton's "Buddy Bolden's Blues" ("I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout 'Open up that window and let that bad air out'"), but it visualizes his last jazz parade as first imagined by Ondaatje. This time a series of prints blocked out as woodcuts traces the musician going "mad into silence"

¹⁴ See Musicians' Village.

¹⁵ For a survey of the city's cultural revival, see Helen Taylor, "After the Deluge: The Post-Katrina Cultural Revival of New Orleans."

¹⁶ Jon Raymond calls Ondaatje's early work "feral" and "unclassifiable, . . . [f]ull of jump cuts and odd juxtapositions," and finds that "the text floats in white space" (24).

(*Slaughter* 108) during the course of a parade pictured just as Ondaatje described. Like Ondaatje, Berg imagines his subject out of a series of apparent contradictions; he creates a silent novel about music and expresses the energy of the parade and the kinetic force of Bolden's playing in still images. Berg conveys something of the inner violence that characterizes Ondaatje's Bolden, but it is reflected in the monochrome precision of his linocuts as "the sensation of raw emotions, of exposed nerves and explosive actions" (Berg 11). *Let That Bad Air Out* may be read as extending Ondaatje's metaphor for what happens to Bolden, and it captures the loss of his music in the novel: "The sun has swallowed the colour of the street. It is a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (*Slaughter* 134). Berg's use of black and white is idiomatic in its creation of Bolden dressed in a distinctively striped shirt in contrast to the dark-suited marching band against which he stands out. Their dark and contemplative faces are contrasted with Bolden's agonized expression. Berg's depiction of Bolden's face lined with the white heat of concentration singles him out in each frame until he fades to black. His breakdown remands him into black silence with the final image that of his cornet shining out of the darkness. Having cited *Coming Through Slaughter* as an intertext, Berg's final scene is "less part of a history book" and more closely related to Ondaatje's fiction.

In 2007, while Berg reworked Bolden's story, Ondaatje's version of Bolden was again in the news. A "jazz interview" he had recorded with Tom Vitale in 1993, in which he revealed that the silence, or the "hole," at the heart of Buddy Bolden's history was "most potent" for him as a writer, was repeated on National Public Radio.¹⁷ NPR's reprise of Ondaatje's interview coincided with news of two films being made about Bolden in 2007. While one project fell by the wayside, the other resurrected Bolden's story once again. Paul Maslansky's plans to film *Coming Through Slaughter* were not realized, but *Bolden!* (the loud exclamation mark signaling the force of the legend as well as his playing) was filmed in New Orleans with Wynton Marsalis of New Orleans's first family of jazz as one of the executive producers and Anthony Mackie as the title role. *Bolden!* provided the New Orleanian actor with an opportunity to extend his previous cameo as Buddy Bolden in *Louis* (2010), the biopic of Louis Armstrong made by the same production team. To this day, *Bolden!*, a feature-length drama, is still in post-production,

¹⁷ Tom Vitale talks to Ondaatje and Jerry Granelli on NPR, Morning Edition, 3 Aug. 1993. The program was repeated on 15 December 2007.

but it should prove yet another way of communicating the story that Canadian Ondaatje was the first to imagine in fictional form.

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CAROLINE ROSENTHAL

Culinary Transgressions

Food Practices and Constructions of Female Identity in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's The Cure for Death by Lightning and Fanny Flagg's Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café

The analysis of food practices in specific cultural settings helps us to understand universal patterns of cultures and, among other things, can serve as an epistemological tool for investigating the construction of personal, as well as collective, identity. At the same time, however, food and eating are physical needs that order and ordain our everyday life. This essay looks at the representation of food practices and eating orders in two contemporary novels, Fanny Flagg's 1987 novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* – set in Alabama in the 1920s/30s and, in a parallel story, in the 1980s – and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's 1996 novel, *The Cure for Death by Lightning* – set in rural British Columbia in the 1940s. Both novels use the representation of food and food practices as a way to represent convincingly regional spaces and communities and to firmly root their characters in those spaces. Flagg and Anderson-Dargatz both create reality effects by minutely describing the production, preparation, and consumption of food in a certain region in the first third of the 20th century, and both show that different identities are created for men and women in those processes. At the same time, though, the authors draw on food to undermine and subvert the symbolic orders that produce regional and gendered identities. Before looking at the two texts – one set in the American South and the other in the Canadian North-West – I would like to make some general remarks about the significance of foodways and regional spaces.

While in the past they were often belittled and not taken seriously as academic subjects, the study of both food and regionalism have received renewed interest in recent decades due to major shifts in cultural studies. The first shift concerns a deepened interest in everyday life, an interest that stems

from feminist theory – which has been interested in the unrecorded, the hidden, the micro-histories beneath the grand narratives – as much as from a changed understanding of space.¹

Thinkers like Henri Lefèbvre or Michel Foucault have made us aware that space is not given but made, and made over, in the daily interaction of people living in those spaces,² and human geographers, such as Mike Crang are now interested in diverse temporalities of certain spaces and thus in the rhythms of quotidian life.³ The banalities of day-to-day life – one of which is eating – are nowadays regarded to reveal crucial information about human existence. Another reason why food, for the longest time, was not seen as an important field of study is that Western philosophy in its mind-body split has traditionally privileged the mind. Recent medical and cultural studies tend to claim, however, that the mind-ruled autonomous subject is as much a fiction as the self-contained body, because countless exchanges are going on between body and environment and in-between individual bodies.⁴ Viruses or food enter us, pass through us, and leave us. As, for instance, the work of Elizabeth Grosz has shown, bodies do not simply exist in space but the relationship between bodies and spaces can be understood as a way of co-building.⁵ Such a co-building implies that bodies are made in a specific region through specific cultural practices – one of which is cooking – and in turn shape that regional space. Regions are the result less of geographical or political boundaries or of climatic conditions than of the ways in which people inhabit and shape the land through their daily practices and routines. Cooking is not only a daily activity but one that is often associated with the domestic space of women and hence is a gendered activity. Both of the novels I am going to look at deal extensively with cooking and intertwine the making of local space and of gender identity. And yet, as gender identity is something we have to work at continuously, they show how, in the sense of Judith Butler, the repetition of those acts also allows for shifts and subversions of normative gender roles (1997). Both novels reveal their respective regions to be a place of conflicting discourses and competing subjectivities. They are

¹ See Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life” (2000).

² See Henri Lefèbvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations of a Sociology of the Every-day* (2008) and *The Production of Space* (1991); or Michel Foucault, “The Language of Space” (1995) and “Questions on Geography” (1986).

³ See, for example, his “Rhythms of the City: Temporalised Space and Motion” (2001).

⁴ See Deane W. Curtin, “Food/Body/Person” (1992).

⁵ See, for example, her article “Bodies – Cities” (1992).

places which, in the words of social geographer Doreen Massey, rely on a “double articulation” (118). Places in themselves are already articulations in the sense that they are not given but culturally signified, and the people who come to a region as subjects are also immersed in various discursive fields that they bring to the place.

In her novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, Fanny Flagg first of all uses food on a narrative level to intertwine the two different time- and plot-lines in the book. There is Evelyn Couch’s story – the story of a woman who in the 1980s finds herself in the midst of a severe midlife crisis. Her children are grown, have left home, and show no interest in her at all. Her husband, Ed, regards their marriage as a convenience at best and prefers TV dinners, which Evelyn dutifully prepares for him, to shared meals. Evelyn herself is an obese woman in her late forties who feels too young to be old but also too old to be young and eases her emotional starvation by stuffing herself with candy bars. She feels cheated because she has fulfilled the role of being a good girl and a lady – never raise your voice, defer to everybody, especially men – by the book, but instead of being rewarded with happiness, she perceives herself as worthless, abandoned, and empty. Evelyn eats to fill the void in her life and desperately longs for some human attention and bonding. Her life changes when, during one of her weekly visits to the nursing home where they go to see Ed’s aunt, she meets Ninny Threadgood, a woman in her nineties with whom she starts chatting. Evelyn has, as the Canadian writer Carol Shields once put it, “a narrative hunger” (19-20), a certain need for alternative stories, for escape routes from her dire life, and she gobbles up the stories that Mrs. Threadgood tells her about the good old South. Gradually, in the encounters between the two women, storytelling and eating merge as Evelyn always brings something to nibble on. But what she brings changes from store-bought industrial food with little soul factor to home-made southern cooking and culminates in the eponymous fried green tomatoes that Evelyn cooks and brings for her friend. Storytelling and eating both turn from mere consumption into nurturing processes, which allow Evelyn to grow and become the master of her own fate.

In contrast to Evelyn’s initially disturbed relationship to food and eating, in the stories of Idgie and Ruth, which Mrs. Threadgood feeds her, cooking is a way to establish a nurturing and supportive community. Idgie saved Ruth from her husband, a brutal wife-beater, and probably enters into a lesbian

relationship with her. No sexual activity between the two women is ever mentioned in the book, but their love and care for each other is emphasized time and again. The only scene that spells out sensuality between the two women is significantly a burlesque scene in the kitchen where they smudge each other with cooking ingredients. As some critics have rightly pointed out, Flagg's novel became a bestseller – and the subsequent movie a blockbuster – because it challenges hierarchies of class, gender, sexuality, and race without radically questioning them.⁶

Nonetheless Ruth and Iddie need to create a space for whatever relationship they are having that will be tolerated by society – and the café turns out to be the perfect camouflage. At the time in which the novel is set, it is one of the rare businesses in which women are able to make a living of their own. More importantly though, the specific foodways create a sanctioned female identity so visibly, safely, and securely that it allows Iddie and Ruth to veer and stray from prescribed norms undetected – and food plays an important role in this. Flagg uses food in the novel to authenticate a region. The recipes in the book – Skillet Cornbread, Fried Ham with Red-Eye Gravy, Grits, Snap Beans, Candied Yams, Fried Okra, and Fried Green Tomatoes – are as Southern as can be, but what is perhaps more important is that she draws on the topos of home-cooking as a style of preparing food that is synonymous with authenticity and purity. In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes has commented on the “Frenchness of Steak,” meaning that food always signifies much more than what it actually refers to – his example represents not only a piece of beef but a national identity through the way it is prepared and through the status it holds in a society.⁷ Home-cooking in the 1930s, did not only refer to a certain style of cooking but entailed family values and a WASP, middle-class identity with clear-cut gender differences. Restaurants that featured home-cooking, Jan Whitaker maintains, signified a sanitized and secure space free of deceptions. Food that was produced simply and without frills automatically was understood to be wholesome and therefore was not to be questioned.⁸ This context of home-style cooking is established and used by the two female characters in Flagg's novel. They create a safe space within the regional identity of the South and then subvert it.

⁶ For instance, Shari Zeck in “Laughter, Loss, and Transformation in *Fried Green Tomatoes*” (1998).

⁷ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957).

⁸ See Jan Whitaker, “Domesticating the Restaurant: Marketing the Anglo-American Home” (2005).

Although, as the Ku Klux Klan forcefully reminds them, blacks are not to be served in their restaurant, Idgie and Ruth bend the rules by selling food at reduced prices out the back door to blacks and hobos. They frequently undermine race and class barriers. Idgie, for instance, who throughout the book is depicted as a tomboy through her attire, dresses up as a man and jumps freight train at nights, throwing supplies to the black people living in the slums along the railroad tracks. The authorities cannot get a hold of the Robin Hood-like person they call “Railroad Bill” – probably because they keep looking for a black man while nobody suspects Idgie’s sex-gender charade (*Fried Green Tomatoes* 330).⁹ The novel abounds with instances of cross-dressing and with moments when characters use gender or race expectations as a masquerade and feed people their own stereotypes and expectations in order to hide their true motives. The shift from a woman’s typical role as caretaker and server to that of the provider and feeder in the book challenges, as Lindenfield has pointed out, patterns of male dominance and concepts of power.¹⁰

Under the disguise of good old Southern home-style cooking that caters to the needs of the community to consistently reinvent itself, Idgie and Ruth create a community of people living on the fringes of society. The café also becomes the cover-up for the biggest threat to this community. Ruth is pregnant when she leaves her husband, and Frank Bennett comes to Whistlestop to forcefully claim his son after he is born. Sipse, the black cook, who is babysitting that night, in self-defense kills him with an iron skillet. The old and frail woman knocks the bully dead with – of all things – a kitchen utensil, and, as we learn toward the end of the novel, Big George and his son apparently chop up the body and put him in the hog boiling pot for their barbecue. Barbecue, of course, is one of the most typical and popular of southern foods, and the two detectives who come to the café to investigate Frank Bennett’s murder after his truck is found truly relish it. When one of the detectives, unaware that all the while he is probably eating Bennett’s corpse, compliments Big George on the barbecue, he perfectly emulates the subservient “nigger” and smilingly says: “Thank you, suh, I’d hafta say, the secret’s in the sauce” (*FGT* 366). Ruth also saves Idgie from further investigation by

⁹ All quotes refer to the 1992 (New York) edition of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and will appear in the main body of the text abbreviated as *FGT*.

¹⁰ See Laura Lindenfield, “Women Who Eat Too Much: Femininity and Food in *Fried Green Tomatoes*” (2005).

buttering up the investigator with the Southern belle charm she suddenly procures and by serving him food.

Eating orders become most visible when they are broken, when we are made aware of what we declare as food or not. Food is not something natural but something culturally defined. Not all edibles or all things that could provide us with bodily sustenance are considered food, as the philosopher Deane Curtin observes in the book *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*. Snakes, dogs, or human flesh are definitely matters that can sustain and nurture us, however, they are not considered food in our culture because, in the words of Curtin, “food stands in a special relationship to the self” (9). We patrol and control what we eat because food crosses the threshold of an allegedly autonomous self. In other words, we become what we eat, not only physically but symbolically and spiritually. When the detective ironically eliminates the evidence he is looking for by eating Frank Bennett’s corpse, an oppressive patriarchal and racist system devours itself, and cannibalism turns from an offensive into a subversive act. In the introduction to the book *Food and Cultural Studies* (2004), Bob Ashley claims that western civilization started with differentiating humans from pigs. He continues: “This distinction is then closely policed through various taboos and symbolic forms which dramatize the disruption of the opposition between civilization and piggishness as a descent into anxiety and danger” (2). Ironically, in Flagg’s novel, order in the community is re-established when a taboo, the eating of human flesh, is broken. In their “piggish,” racist, and sexist behavior, Bennett as well as the obnoxious detective have vaulted themselves outside of the established eating conventions of that community. In the logic of the novel, their uncivilized behavior likens them to pigs and they end up where they belong. This is why, tongue-in-cheek, the readers can sympathize with the perpetrators and not the victim of the crime.

Hence, while food serves to signify a region with all its inherent gender and racial codes, the café turns into an almost heterotopic place in the novel, real but different from all other places in that society. Within and through their cooking, characters in the book find ways of stepping out of prescribed roles and gain a limited amount of control over who they are beyond what society offers to them. It is those stories that encourage the listener, Evelyn Couch, to take her life into her hands, to start dieting, and to decide, at long last, to tear down walls in her house so that she can have a room of her own, telling her husband, when he objects, for the first time to shut up. And it is Evelyn, in the end, who inherits the recipes from the café. Recipes are miniscule narratives that contribute to making and maintaining the cultural

memory of a community – and recipes also play a major role in *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, the second novel I am going to investigate.

Gale Anderson-Dargatz's novel is narrated by Beth Weeks who recounts the events of one summer of her adolescence. Her recollections are triggered and guided by her mother's scrapbook, a collection of recipes, remedies, and newspaper clippings that now belongs to Beth. As her legacy from her mother, the scrapbook becomes not only the engine of narrative but the raw material from which Beth spins her own story. In the prologue, Beth tells the reader: "The scrapbook was my mother's way of setting down the days so they wouldn't be forgotten. This story is my way" (*The Cure for Death by Lightning* 1).¹¹ Beth regards the randomly collected everyday materials in her mother's scrapbook as "evidence" for the strange events she is going to tell (*CDL* 2). The gist of the story, those parts that are difficult to translate into words and into a coherent plotline, are contained in her mother's recipes. In her narrativization of the events, Beth – to speak with Hayden White – has to choose a mode of explanation and emplotment in order to tell the events as a story of a particular kind – and that is exactly what the narrator is grappling with.¹² As in Flagg's novel, cooking and storytelling coincide in Dargatz's novel, and recipes are also being passed on as a way of female bonding and as an alternative female historiography. But unlike Flagg's novel, *The Cure for Death by Lightning* does not resolve the strange events into a tidy story but rather into one that stretches and bursts the seams of regionalism or realism.

The story takes place in the midst of the Second World War and is set in rural British Columbia where the Weekses run a dairy farm. Life on the farm and in the small community is related very realistically by, among other things, paying close attention to the production, preparation, and consumption of food. However, some of the events Beth relates are so monstrous and bewildering that she either cannot fit them into a rational world view anymore or needs to block them out in order to survive. Events like her classmate

¹¹ All quotes refer to the 1996 (Toronto) edition of *The Cure for Death by Lightning* and will appear in the main body of the text. *The Cure for Death by Lightning* will be abbreviated as *CDL*.

¹² See Hayden White, "The Narrativization of Real Events" (1981).

Sarah Kemp being molested and murdered, or Beth herself being sexually assaulted by her classmates, by Coyote-Jack, by one of the farm hands or, worst of all, being regularly raped by her father. The mode of magic realism allows Dargatz to tell a story realistically, while at the same time not entirely victimizing her protagonist by offering her escape routes. One of the qualities of magic realism is that it does not simply contrast reality and magic but rather shows that what we consider magical or realistic depends on cultural and individual context and cannot always be easily separated.¹³ Beth, for example, frequently experiences the sexual assaults on her as attacks by coyote, the cunning trickster-figure of Native mythology. The coyote tales enter into the novel via Bertha Moses and her daughters who live on the Indian reserve not far from the Weeks's farm. Bertha's stories frequently counteract Western views and provide Beth with alternative epistemologies: An anthropocentric world view with man as the crown of creation and in control of life is substituted with a spiritual view where humans are part of the landscape, for instance, and a teleological, rational way of interpreting things is supplemented by one that accounts for the irrational, inexplicable, and horrifying. In Fanny Flagg's novel, food connects the two different time- and plot-lines of the novel, while in Dargatz's book, in my reading, the scrapbook and cooking can be seen as ways of mediating between dichotomies of Western thinking such as real and fantastic, logical and magical, or cognitive and corporeal.

Although Maudie Weeks, Beth's mother, does not spell out the story, her scrapbook sets the mood and tone for it. The novel's title refers to one of the remedies Maudie recorded. In the scrapbook, the cure for death by lightning appears, as Beth relates in the novel's opening sentence, "under the recipe for my father's favorite oatcakes" (*CDL* 1). The extraordinary, irrational, and impossible – namely to resurrect the dead – is marked down next to an everyday and very down-to-earth recipe. Life and daily work on the farm are represented realistically in the novel; the daily chore of cooking is by no means romanticized but depicted as the energy-sapping work it was at the time. The women have to provide food for the men when they come in hungry from the field work, and we get a notion of what that meant, for instance by detailed descriptions of how to kill, clean, and cook a chicken. At the

¹³ On magic realism see Wendy B. Faris, "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" (1995), and Lois P. Zamora, "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in US and Latin American Fiction" (1995).

same time, this procedure is described as a skill and an art. Cooking is often portrayed as a daily task that nonetheless harbors creative potential and often offers a soothing and therapeutic function in the book as well. Kneading dough, for example, is described as physically demanding work, though Beth also says “the rocking motion was hypnotic, calming. I pushed the day’s events into that dough, brought them up, and beat them back down again” (*CDL* 101). Baking is not only a physical but a contemplative task – a way to process the events of the day. This meaning-making sensuality involved in cooking is also palpable in the way Beth describes her mother’s recipes. Every page in Maudie’s scrapbook has its own shape because, due to a lack of paper, she recorded her recipes on “scraps of wallpaper, bags, brown wrapping” – and its own scent – as the traces of everyday usage have inscribed themselves onto the space of the page: “almond extract or vanilla, butter or flour . . . or my mother’s perfume, Lily of the Valley” (*CDL* 2). Although the scrapbook is not a diary, it is a form of life writing. Recipes are miniscule cultural narratives in a new historicist sense because they provide intimate information about spaces and orders of times gone-by. Cookbooks, as Traci Marie Kelly maintains, can be regarded as culinary memoirs of their time as they tell stories of a particular kind and contribute to community building.¹⁴ Rather than setting things down in words, the scrapbook contains the essence of Maudie’s life and thus transcends the duality of the body/mind split by evoking sensuality and corporeality as much as what the philosopher Lisa Heldke has called “culinary knowledge.” To her, cooking is a “thoughtful practice” that defies the distinction between theory and praxis because it requires both contextual knowledge and physical experience (qtd. in Curtin 10). An experienced baker, for example, knows just how much moisture to add to dough depending on whether it is a humid or a dry day. The success of a recipe hence depends on theory – the ingredients and procedure set down in the text – on the one hand, and on a sort of practical knowledge, on the other.¹⁵

Maudie’s scrapbook is her form of writing and, amidst her daily farm-work, certainly the only room of her own she is going to get. Her collage turns into a micro-history, into an alternative female historiography, which she is passing on to her daughter. The scrapbook may not revive those who

¹⁴ See Traci Marie Kelly, “‘If I Were a Voodoo Priestess’: Women’s Culinary Autobiographies” (2001).

¹⁵ See also Lisa M. Heldke, “Food Politics, Political Food” (1992).

have been struck dead by lightning, but it certainly turns into a manual for female survival, for sensuality, for pleasure amidst abuse and violence. When, toward the end of the novel, the conflict Beth's father has had all along with their neighbor over property boundaries escalates, Beth goes into the house and bakes: "All hell broke loose, and I decided to make cake. Honey cake, a pound cake, my mother's own recipe. . . . It was a nothing-to-it-cake, as rich as sin, heavenly to a hungry, worried belly" (*CDL* 219). Worry is alleviated by food elsewhere in the novel, too. Beth is heart-broken when her father callously drowns a litter of kittens that Beth wanted to keep and then even asks her to bury them. Her mother can't find words but shows sympathy instead by serving Beth heated cream on a slice of bread, sprinkled with sugar. Beth knows that this is "child's food" and that she is no longer a child, but she enjoys it nonetheless, saying: "By the time I finished the bowl, I'd forgotten to hate my father" (*CDL* 44).

Last but not least, the space of the kitchen itself in the book frequently turns into a realm for a signifying-over, for inscribing women's daily practices into a patriarchal space, thus changing that space. Women in the novel are exposed to diverse forms of male violence on a daily level. Beth's father returns from the First World War an emotionally crippled man with no compassion or sympathy for other people or, in fact, creatures in general. The violence that is frequently committed against women in the novel is mirrored in what happens to the female animals kept on the farm: Beth catches her brother one night penetrating a cow from behind, and another time she is forced to assist her father in taking out a cow's ovaries to fatten her up for the market. For hours, Beth has to watch the cow's agony only to witness how, in the end, the wound turns septic and the animal dies. In this male-dominated world where female bonding is difficult, Maudie's kitchen frequently turns into a place where Bertha Moses and her daughters come to visit. It is also the place where Maudie speaks to her dead mother, venting the emotions and worries of the day. The scrapbook as a form of life writing and the kitchen as a place where women not only do their daily work but talk, communicate, and alleviate their worries, provide women in the novel with a way to establish a discursive and real place from which to articulate identities that lie outside of patriarchal discourses.

Both *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *The Cure for Death by Lightning* draw on culinary knowledge and on recipes as a form of encoding knowledge that provides alternative histories and epistemologies as well as a different sense of being in the world and hence an ontological security. While *The Cure for Death by Lightning* is a coming-of-age novel, one narrative strand in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* focuses on a woman facing menopause. In both novels, those female protagonists grow and develop through partaking in certain food practices. Cooking becomes an expression of self and of empowerment as well as a way to preserve a female tradition by handing down recipes.

As I have shown, both authors use the representation of foodways to describe a region and its inherent gender codes, while at the same time creating alternative spaces for women through cooking, but the mode of representation vastly differs in the two novels. Flagg draws on a fairly conservative regionalism, which realistically represents a region with great attention to local color and which tongue-in-cheek reverts to the tradition of the tall tale in the South. While the book certainly offers alternative spaces to women through food and cooking, it stays within the parameters of traditional regionalism, which Laurie Ricou has defined as a genre determined by three r's: rural, realist, and retrospective (950). Flagg's book, in other words, does not question the nostalgia inherent in a lot of regionalist fiction and thus also does not fundamentally challenge the sex and race codes on which such regionalism hinges. Dargatz, in contrast, writes in the style of a new, disrupted, and questioning regionalism and provocatively resorts to the narrative mode of magic realism in which the irrational and supernatural organically grow out of the plausible and realistic, questioning, as a result, the universality of realism. What is real, the novel makes us aware of, depends on the cultural as well as individual perspective of individuals and is by no means universally applicable. Dargatz describes a region without inscribing a longing to return to that place and its oppressive and crippling race and gender codes. Cooking in *The Cure for Death by Lightning* does not only create a temporary alternative place in a certain region at a certain time but turns into a truly transgressive action because it goes beyond certain norms and rules set by patriarchal society. Beth's mother's recipe book is a manual for survival, but it also guides Beth into her own cooking and writing and into forming a female identity beyond the codes of the place she grew up in.

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