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ENCOUNTERS WITH CANADIAN WOMEN'S WRITING, THREE TIMES

It has been one of the legacies of some two decades of feminist literary criticism that our daily lives, our experiences as gendered subjects, can and should relate to our reading practices and habits. These things used to be kept apart, but feminism brought the body into the library (and the classroom) with a vengeance. Not just any body either: female bodies, and female bodies of certain kinds. What follows is about the body of the reader and the body of the text, and about how my career as a student, reader, critic and teacher of Canadian women's writing relates to those 'kinds' of bodies which have triggered reading passions. Three encounters shape this discussion, although it will be encounters of the third kind and their legacy in the shape of future work which are the focus of attention.

The first encounter with Canadian women writers — Margaret Atwood and Audrey Thomas — was in an honours course at University of Queensland in 1974. This was one of the very first courses on women's writing to be introduced in Australia, and there was little critical reading to be had, although Josephine Donovan's Feminist Literary Criticism and Susan Koppelman Cornillon's Images of Women collection would become available shortly after. Like many others, I found a sense of liberation in feminist criticism, through being invited, allowed, asked to read autobiographically. As Doris Lessing put it in The Small Personal Voice, read what I have written and test it against your own life, your own experience, invoke the authority of experience. Feminist reading was to be visceral, we were to read with our hearts and minds and bodies, the body of the reader and the body of the writer and

the body of the text; the female text and the female tongue were brought into a new and exhilarating relationship. We read for our lives. Existing literary landscapes were reconfigured by what was later called gynocriticism, and new literary scenarios emerged, to *our* taste. Feminist journals, publishing houses, criticism, curricula, degree programs invented and shaped a new, a-mazing literary space. Feminism became a source of cultural capital, and socioeconomic power, in publishing and academia.

As Shirley Neuman has pointed out, Canadian women writers are very good at female bodies. When I first read Atwood, Thomas, and Margaret Laurence shortly after in that first encounter the fact that these were of Canadian origin did not signify at all. They were women writers and how this might intersect with their place as national subjects did not signify. In retrospect I can see that what we found exhilarating was that unremitting emphasis on real bodies at the expense of the symbolic in Canadian women's writing: on the exhaustion and exhilaration of labour, on bleeding and crowning and suckling and washing as positive, sensuous experience mediated by a female relation to language. (Neuman 1986, 400) It was this 'unsanitised textual world' which was read for the authenticity of female experience. There and then, that tended to place the female body above all the definitive edge of feminist consciousness and critique, in particular the reproductive body which both then and now both characterises and caricatures women. Elsewhere I have gone back to that early example of a feminist curriculum and argued that it does signify that the presence of an extraordinary number of what I would now call postcolonial fictions from settler sites were on that 70s agenda - alongside Thomas and Atwood were Christina Stead and Doris Lessing, Janet Frame and Henry Handel Richardson. It is of course no accident that those fictions which represent the maternal body and erotic body with such gothic force and anxiety should emerge from spaces where the process of white invasion and settlement required the careful management of women's bodies, and of gender and sexuality more generally. In later encounters this particular 'take' on the maternal body and the mother tongue, its relationship to both colonisation and decolonisation, has been germinal to the placement of Canadian women's writing. (Whitlock)

My history as a feminist reader, then, began with Canadian women's writing, in a context where I and many like me learned to read and respond to textual embodiments that seemed to represent my experience. However this way of reading, which seems so 'natural', is, in fact, an epistemological shift with a particular, feminist history.

The second encounter with Canadian women's writing was closer, and involved reading with an eye to national traditions and characteristics. As a graduate student at Queen's in the 1980s, a student in search of a thesis, Susanna Moodie became a preoccupation, a way of understanding not only herself but also myself. That first encounter, with Atwood and Thomas, was filled with the exhilaration of discovering that unsanitised body in the text, a body which resembled one's own for its unreliability. The affair with Moodie, my second encounter, has been more complex

over the years. For she is not, of course, a foreign body to me. She is in fact a vehicle I have used to explore the constructions of whiteness as a race and Englishness as an ethnicity in discourses of national identity both in her time and in my own. This body resembles my own in its history, in the politics of its location. This is to say that reading Canadian women's writing, and writing critical narratives about it, have been crucial not only to my own sense of placement as a gendered subject but also the sexual, racial, and ethnic identifications which are further implications in subjectivity. Moodie has been a point of entry into the politics of whiteness.

Many things have been hinged onto Moodie's westering journey by feminist critics in particular: an entry into Canadian landscape and language, into women's tongue and into maternity as both a female and a colonial settler subject. For many of us Moodie has been part of a process of 'mapping ourselves' as gendered and/or national subjects. *Roughing It in the Bush* is an entry into Canadian writing and discourses of Canadianness which privileges Atlantic crossings and Atlantic connections. These are metaphoric and metonymic of that ongoing trafficking of bodies and theories between Canada and western Europe, in particular those metropoli of Montreal, Toronto, Paris and London. To warp Paul Gilroy's title, this is something of a white atlantic, although Canada's white diaspora also extends of course much further east across western and central Europe, and west into Canada itself.

Reading Canadian women's writing has for me, and many of my generation, been worked through in a process of reading autobiographically, of reading with and through our skins. By 'skin' there I am thinking of Sidonie Smith's discussion of skin as borderland between text, self and life, and the profound in-bodiness of subjectivity. (Smith 1994) Of course part of the elation of becoming a feminist reader from the very start was feeling free to identify oneself, and others, as gendered subjects. The gendered body of early feminism has been replaced by the 'located' subject which emerged following the realisation that the body of the writer, the text, and the reader were not located at a single intersection of gender difference but a more complex, discursive arrangement of differences. Similarly the mimetic reading practices associated with identification have given way to more complex arguments about the relationship between reader, text, narrator, and author.

Neverthless, the origins of feminist literary criticism in that process of mapping ourselves through texts, of seeking valorisation of our own daily lives, our own experience, has remained a touchstone — it is a marker of truth in feminist discourse. It is also part of a resistance to the splitting of the personal, the private, from more public forms of discourse — such as the academic paper for example. The assertion of the body's presence, speaking autobiographically for women, for emotion, against the language of abstraction which constitute women in absence and silence is fundamental to feminist discourses. (Miller)

However this thinking about encounters has been prompted by a sense of restlessness, a deepening sense of the privileges and limits of my own reading T. This was suggested by several things. Although it is some ten years since 'politics of

location' debates have required feminist critics to attend to many bodies and to 'foreign' bodies, the problem of moving towards more plural ways of writing, reading and teaching remains evident in Canadian feminist criticism. How does it move to embrace, to recognise processes of decolonisation in a substantial way? Susan Rudy Dorscht addresses this issue by observing that in Canada the dominant version of reality is that powerful persons are white, middle-class and heterosexual. (Dorscht 131) She doesn't add 'male' to this list, although elsewhere she infers that women critics are more likely to be attuned to the unseen, the unread, the unheard and the uncited. This case can be well made if we compare - as Dorscht does - the contributions of eminent men and women who write about Canadian Literature. As she suggests Linda Hutcheon, Shirley Neuman and Barbara Godard have been amongst those academics who have taken an interest in issues of material and metaphorical marginality and oppression. However the question of how feminist criticism might move to be accountable to a national formation produced by late imperial culture, a formation which is uniquely fractured following various processes of colonisation within Canada, in Africa, and in the Caribbean, remains open. The epistemological shift to authenticity and the authority of experience which was central to the emergence of feminist literary criticism remains embedded; and it emerges in some profoundly conservative ways of thinking about the self, experience and identity. Dorscht argues that decolonising means writing into the English language experience and syntax, and ways of thinking, being and seeing, that are not only foreign to it but also rendered unthinkable, invisible, unspeakable: 'Decolonizing is a truly radical unhiding of the hidden'. (134) The 'agonizingly difficult work' which she suggests this involves includes questioning why the white, middle class women who have gained power and authority in the practice of feminist criticism have been relatively slow to pursue 'foreign' agendas.

As Claire Harris pointed out in 'Poets in limbo' some ten years ago, the Canada I live in is not the nation most other artists know (115). It is a nation unknown, and unvisited, by many readers too. Still. The feminist canon of contemporary Canadian women's writing suggests only slight interest in decolonisation and diaspora, for they are conceived as minority experience. As Sidonie Smith concludes, skin matters. Not 'skin' understood in terms of colour alone, this isn't just black and white, but 'skin' in the sense of our cultural location in the body and in the body politic, the boundaries we construct in the way we imagine and read for our own identities and identifications, our own placement in daily lives and how these relate to others.

Our daily lives, that freedom to read for and of ourselves, is then a pleasure and a danger for feminism. It has given emotional and intellectual power to feminist reading and teaching, but 'the small personal voice' has also tended to set boundaries close to home. One way this will change, I suggest, is when readers like me rethink the terms of our own subjectivity and experience, the interrelationship between those three elements: auto (self) bio (life) and graph (text), the I of the reader and the I of the text. As Elspeth Probyn suggests, feminist theory has reached the stage where it must not only assert but also problematise 'the self': 'The self that I propose here is a

doubled entity: it is involved in the ways we go about our everyday lives, and it puts into motion a mode of theory that problematises the material conditions of those practices.' (Probyn 1993, 1) Like many feminists, Probyn is reluctant to give away the hard won right to speak personally and experientially, that sense of gender as processes that proceed through experience, however she is also concerned to get beneath the skin, to radically rethink how we use and position ourselves, to move beyond uses of the self as reflections of 'me' in favour of representations which constitute us as new kinds of subjects discovering places from which to speak, imagining other articulations of how we might be caught up in each other. What is at stake is feminism's capacity to hold both experience and difference in view. This necessitates, she suggests, moving beyond personal criticism (the question of Who am I?) in order to examine the terrain of the question 'Who is She?' (143) Spivak makes the same point slightly differently: 'There has to be another focus: not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?' (Spivak 1996, 150)

To return to Canadian women's writing and criticism with this in mind, the kind of collaboration in the feminine which Barbara Godard calls for at the conclusion of her review of the *Tessera* project is similarly concerned to both sustain and extend the boundaries of experience as a grounding of feminist knowledge. What, she asks, are strategies for writing the syntax of race and ethnicity? How can we imagine a transformative project which reads one cultural and racial text through another, which emerges from a new country? Godard goes on to suggest that this work can occur only when ideas of identity and experience are transformed, to make different links between past and present, connecting images within different networks to make something different in the process and thus intervene in the future (1994, 302). Reading or interpretation, she says, is to project oneself into the lines which are reframed, reanimated by desire. For both Probyn and Godard, we must begin to work at the very edges and ends of our selves to envision change, we must engage our imaginations more fully, we must begin to engage with multiple identifications not only around us, but also within our own histories, our own skins. (Probyn 6)

Following these remarks, let me now sketch a third encounter with Canadian women's writing. I will move to another edge. I will leave Moodie on the deck of the *Anne* and I will no longer enter Canadian landscape, language and literature across the Atlantic and up the St Lawrence. Instead I will look to the other side, out of Europe, where the continent frays into the Pacific and a maze of islands. Ironically it is the crossing I myself always make into Canada — across the Pacific, island hopping from Australia through Hawaii or Japan to Vancouver. However this journey I make as a passenger has not been the passage I have taken as a reader and critic.

Canadian women writers have been making this passage for a while. The vehicles for my transit will be two fictions, Daphne Marlatt's *Taken* and Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Like the geografictione of *Places Far From <u>Ellesmere</u>*, both *Taken* and *Chorus* move to the north western rimlands. Here, so far west they are east, they find borders where quite different kinds of migration of self and subjectivity can occur,

where narratives are in the process of holding past and present, memory and history, self and identity together in a tentative and experimental way. This is the edge of empire which remains so little explored in Canada and elsewhere, however the complexities of colonialism, imperialism and postcolonialism across these Pacific rimlands are profoundly unsettling and unspoken. Marlatt characterises it as a place of unfinished stories, of many levels of connection and responsibility. Here writers like Marlatt and Goto find fertile ground for the reconfiguring of Canadian history, identity and subjectivity, beginning with the self but moving on to different networks, imagining those other articulations of how we might be caught up in each other.

Both of these fictions are autobiographic (not autobiography), they address the problematic of speaking the self in theory by practice. Each deconstructs how the self is mapped in relation to time and space, place and history, by reconstituting migrations in and around the self through narrative. In a lecture at Leeds in 1996 called 'Only a Body to Measure Reality By: Writing the In-Between', Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt spoke about writing the female body both as a measure of reality and as a marker of difference. Here Marlatt's comments are a useful background for thinking about Taken for she questions now we begin to understand that there is not one margin but many, an expanding universe of subjective locations, how do we register the shifting quality of such a way of being in the world? 'Out of the relatively unwritten spaces of the page, women have emerged with distinct faces, so many different "hers" each reading and looking to recognise her own way of being. A woman writer conscious of this shift finds herself other in a city of others, called on in crowded streets to negotiate a differently articulated way of being in the world." (Marlatt 1996) Marlatt goes on to make a crucial point about this shift to a sense of difference. For it is not only recognising others 'out there', it is also taking account of 'the differences she finds within herself'. (14) The kind of writing in-between which Marlatt is reaching towards here imagines that binary opposition of self and other giving way to interactions ('collaborations' Godard may say) where the 'I' is in ongoing processes of transformation, interrelation, mobile and shifting. To return to Probyn, this is in pursuit of imagining the complex ways we might be caught up in each other, examining the complication of my history in yours, and analysing the relations between. To return to Dorscht, this is the 'agonizingly difficult' work of decolonisation, and it must begin with the self. It is no accident that thinking about contemporary Canadian writing should bring us to this pass, for Canada is uniquely striated and fractured by the ongoing legacies of Euro American imperialism. There are, one critic recently suggested, at least five distinct but overlapping contexts to which the term 'postcolonial' might be applied in Canada. (Moore-Gilbert, 10) The pressure to articulate different ways of being in this late imperial society is, then, urgent.

The theoretical grounds for rethinking the self in feminist theory is well established, by Probyn among others. My interest here is not theoretical so much as practical. How do we begin to use the power we have as critics, teachers, reviewers to open the canons and curricula of Canadian women's writing? The battleground is not

on the grounds of theory but practice. The categories of 'race' 'gender' 'ethnicity' 'sexuality' will no longer do, for they perpetuate ways of thinking about the self and others which maintain a coherence and separation which stifles thinking about how we are 'caught up in each other'. The way forward in practice I want to model here takes quite literally the idea of using texts as transits, bringing them together as vehicles to move across boundaries to explore connections and intersections. This way of 'connected reading', of threading texts together, can unravel some of weft and warp of categories which have been important to feminist criticism: 'Canadian Literature' 'ethnic writing' 'lesbian writing' 'women's writing' and so on. It does so to place the feminist critic alongside Daphne Marlatt, conscious of herself on a street in a city of others, and how this will affect her practice as a writer and a reader and a teacher of Canadian women's writing.

It is also no accident that both fictions I am connecting here — *Taken* and *Chorus of Mushrooms* — are Beds of Tales, that is, narratives which are in part spun from the most intimate sphere. Marlatt's nest of bodies and Goto's futon are situated at the point where boundaries between self and other are at their most fragile and able to be breached, where flesh can melt. This is the primary site, a liminal space where we do get caught up in each other, one to one, where we can narrate and enact various desires and identities. For Marlatt and Goto one's daily life can only be understood and represented by moving on from this intimate space to the public sphere, to bring together histories, narratives, mythologies and spaces which are kept apart in more traditional formulations of subjectivity and identity.

These Beds of Tales are embedded in both Canada and the Orient, contact zones, where complex implications of language, cultures and histories occur. As Marlatt's narrator insists, a wet morning on her Gulf island coexists with the late afternoon of the desert amidst the Gulf war, they coexist and she and her lover are complicit in what is happening there. These places are not equivalent, but they are synchronic nevertheless. The Gulf war is personal, and so is that earlier war in the Pacific, which is the time of her own beginning. In these fictions both Vancouver Island and Nanton Alberta, the island and the mushroom farm, are enmeshed in complex histories of migration, dispossession and war, and these histories continue to be embodied in later generations. The work of the narrators in these texts is to come to terms with the forms of that embodiment, how the orient tracks from the past into the present, under the skin and in language.

Of course skin matters. There is no equivalence between the recollections of the orient which are encountered in these fictions. Marlatt goes back to the relatively privileged place of her parents and grandparents, part of the imperial bureaucracy in the Straits Settlements. Muriel/Murasaki looks back to migration from Japan, and a long, cross generational process of working through silences in Alberta. How traces of the orient have marked them in their Canadian experience is very different.

We can amplify this by making a quite different transit and connecting Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* to *Taken*, triangulating the reading I am making here. Shirley Lim's memoir gives voice and embodiment to the

nonya British subjects Marlatt's child narrator glimpses in the streets of Penang: for as Marlatt's narrator sits in the toddler's wading pool at the Penang Swimming club further south, down the Straits of Malacca, the child of Lim's memoir was eating ubi kayu and finding sea horses. To read these in collaboration is to begin to explore the complex implications and hybridities of colonial culture, both then and now, here and there. These are the connections, the complicities and unfinished stories Taken insists on, the colonial stories that perpetuate a making strange. For Lim too, the impurities, the ruptures of stable and singular identities in Empire can become a source of agency: 'So I have seen myself not so much sucking at the teat of British colonial culture as actively appropriating those aspects of it that I needed to escape that other familial/gender/native culture that violently hammered out only one shape for the self. I actively sought corruption to break out of the pomegranate shell of being Chinese and girl.' (65)

Remapping is happening here, and the co-ordinates of class, race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality are too clumsy to configure the multiple and unstable ways in which we may be like or different from each other. The borders have shifted, the orient is no longer at a distance 'over there', at the peripheries. Diverse cultures, histories and languages post colonialism gather along the Pacific Rim and are also 'in here', embedded in personal identifications and national histories, emergent at the centre of our daily lives, and in the cities and cultures we inhabit. (Chambers, 2) This is, in part, why *Chorus of Mushrooms* is so powerful as both a work of fiction and a transformative project. Many of the tropes and themes which operate as boundary markers of ethnic and migrant writing are here: orality and aurality, generational dislocation and conflict, home and homesickness, the loss of the family patronymic. One of the important differences is that these refuse to be contained as a minority issue, and the text works to produce uncanny effects which unsettle originary myths of all kinds in pursuit of 'corruption' and illegitimacy.

So, for example, in Chorus both points which anchor a binary opposition between a land of origin and a land of settlement — Japan and Canada in this case — are dismantled. There is no idyllic past homeland lost through emigration: Naoe experiences exile and is both an agent and a victim of foreign occupation and aggression well before she lands up in a windy Alberta hallway. There is no unified national subject: no homeland to be accessed through nostalgia, and no arrival in a melting pot where a process of assimilation or integration leads to the acceptance of a national subjectivity. The geographies of Chorus are quite different, and are constructed in language through symbolic spaces: in the beds where tales are spun, mystery parcels of food consumed, where lovers caress and exchange stories. There are also the beds where the mushrooms grow, 'silent hum of wet darkness', like birth and semen, where salamanders survive against the odds, and new subjectivities emerge. These warm, fertile, dark beds is the opposite of the empty, windy hallway where there is only Obachan's incessant chatter. This monologue is the opposite of the intercourse and dialogue where tales are spoken and heard, where 'listening becomes telling, telling listening'.

In a quite different context, Sneja Gunew questions what kind of subjectivity is created when unified points of origin — such as national identities — are dispensed with, when a cultural domain and symbolic order which is constituted not just in language but in dress, food and behaviours is left behind and entry into a new symbolic order is required. 'Are we left with an empty space and a vacated subjectivity?' (Gunew 1994, 114) The discussion she pursues here is useful for thinking about *Chorus*, where the loss of the father and the patronymic, and Obachan's exile in the hallway, is succeeded by the 'chrysalis time' and the emergence of female custodians of a multi-culture, a rich hybrid of customs, cooking, costumes and tongues. Language, behaviour, food, dress are all important sign systems in the novel, and part of imagining a regeneration through new kinds of subjects and places from which to speak. This displaces the kind of settlement and assimilation which characterises the middle generation — the weiners and beans, honey smoked ham and permanent wave.

It is the honey smoked ham, and this middle generation, which brings me back, one last time, to *Taken* and the practice of reading these fictions through connection. I have suggested here that *Chorus* unsettles any fantasy about the national subject in terms of sameness, origins and authenticities. *Taken* reminds us that writers who are themselves settler subjects can, in quite different ways, produce similar uncanny effects. Here the strange emerges through ghosts of the past which tend to remain suppressed in both national and personal histories. Marlatt unsettles the whiteness of the past by foregrounding whiteness itself as an ethnicity. Although the diasporic webs and connections she pursues to achieve this effect are very different to the threads of *Chorus*, she is no less aware that to fantasise about Canadian subjects in terms of identities, resemblances and sameness is to strategically forget what are quite recent histories. Although the sign systems of dominant ethnicities of whiteness — which operate no less in terms of customs, cooking and tongues — tend to remain invisible or 'empty', they can be brought into the open by the kind of insistence on connections and responsibilities which *Taken* pursues.

As a feminist critic one navigates a number of currents: the ongoing circulation and production of texts, the ongoing development of theories of reading and the production of gender in discourse, and the messy unwinding of one's own life. Feminism freed us as writers and as readers to read texts for our lives, to speak personally. Can it now offer us passages out of our lives, to reach beyond the boundaries and reconceptualise our own autobios?

My argument has been not just about finding more complex articulations of subjectivity in texts or in particular writers, like Marlatt and Goto, but also finding capacities for releasing more complex autobiographics through our reading practices. This is especially important for those of us who are part of the relations of exchange that govern the production and marketing of texts, the development of curricula, the education of other readers. If we are to stop being the readers and reviewers who leave Claire Harris in limbo, if we are to do more than offer *Chorus of Mushrooms* as an example of 'An Immigrant Story' in the week we 'do' ethnicity in class (although I

should say that it is one of its own self-rehearsals), we must unravel histories, memories, and identifications differently. We need to imagine the more unstable and impure versions of the T in our own autobios. The reasons for — to return to Lim — pursuing corruptions and illegitimacies are compelling. In these times of late imperial cultures Canadian society is marked by residues of multiple and complex formations of colonialism, imperialism and decolonisation. Furthermore we know that as gendered subjects the grounds of our making and remaking in discourse are complex and ongoing.

Through literary texts in that first encounter I read to understand how my experience is gendered; in those second encounters I read out the seeming transparency of my own ethnic and racial identity, how whiteness matters. Encounters of the third kind will, to paraphrase Marlatt and Brossard, continue to assert the Body and its lived experience to Measure Reality By, however they must also move on to pursue Writing and reading the In-Between, an autobiographics of reading where alterities meet in new grafts. In this way we might further the cause of a Canadian feminist criticism which is accountable to all the women who write and live in Canadian space, and which imagines the ways our bodies and our skins are caught up in each other.

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