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taking issue

Unreliable Citizens: Gender, Nation, Interpretation — Gillian Whitlock

Any discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its own enunciation and address will be, within the patriarchal order, precisely indifferent, a reflection of male domination. (Stephen Heath, 1978, p.53)

As the epigraph suggests, this paper considers ways in which the question of sexual difference problematises and complicates our discussion of national literatures or, more particularly, the comparison of two literatures - Australian and Canadian. Speaking in what Barbara Godard calls a 'third order language' (Godard, 1985, p.305), I shall attempt to give an overview of the criticism of these literatures in comparison. There have been a series of writings which see 'AustCan' as a particular field; an intersection which has a special logic or, as Reg Watters called it, an 'original relation' (Watters, 1959). Here, I want to place these writings in a kind of historical trajectory, and to consider some problems in the present configurations of comparative, post-colonial readings.

To do this I shall draw on a collection of essays about Australian and Canadian literatures edited by Russell McDougall and myself - *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives* (McDougall & Whitlock, 1987). This is the second book-length publication in the area - the first being John Matthews' *Tradition in Exile* (1962) - and its object is to claim the intersection of Canadian and Australian literatures as a particular territory, a subset in the larger terrain of what is coming to be known as post-colonial literary studies.

The 'field' we are concerned with has already been the object of some satire. In her novel *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (1974) Marion Engel presents the frustrated, unrewarded, would-be academic Sarah Bastard, who chooses to do her PhD on Australian and Canadian literatures. She finds this is fraught with problems. English departments don't recognise it; she finds more 'bad' literature than any postgraduate student should be asked to cope with; and taking on AustCan produces a personal and acute sense of dispossession and exile. It is, she decides, a 'bastard territory'. In *Comparative Perspectives* we proceed to adopt this as a useful label for our comparative method.

Like most bastards, AustCan isn't often claimed or acknowledged in its own right. The comparison sometimes appears to be little more than an unrelated series of articles, rarely produced and hard to find in obscure journals. These occasions often yoke together - sometimes with violence - single authors

(Atwood and Astley, Leacock and Lawson) in a way which displays the ingenuity of the critic rather than the sociocultural logic of the comparison.

What we try to do in the book is to preface the publication of a set of new comparative essays and bibliography with some discussion of the *history* and *logic* of the comparison. Its logic has, of course, always tended to draw on the shared colonial origins of Canadian and Australian settlement. Both were uneasily placed between 'first' and 'third' worlds as 'settler colonies'; this has left an ongoing inheritance which the AustCan comparison takes as its starting point. In the Introduction to the book we establish that this bastard, cross-national territory has a history and an identity of sorts. We don't give it a pedigree but we do give it a past.

We discern three instances when attempts were made to formulate the AustCan comparison: in the nineteenth century, the 1950s and most recently as a subset in the emergent 'post-colonial' discourse of critics of 'new' literatures.

As is the case with most offspring, AustCan begins in vague yearnings and a sense of affinity. Certainly the British colonisers had a strong sense of an 'original relation'. This was sometimes hierarchically inflected to Australia's disadvantage; so when things became particularly bad in Upper Canada Catherine Parr Trail consoled herself that things must be worse in Botany Bay. In his enthusiasm for the Australian poet Henry Lawson, Australia's eminent colonial literary critic A.G. Stephens sent some of the bush bard's work to Vancouver. Stephens himself, with a rare sense of comradeship between colonial offspring, looked directly to Canada for a comparison of the national literature he cherished in Australia. Unfortunately in the 1890s the people of Vancouver must have been projecting a genteel facade. They found Lawson's verse 'disgustingly rough'. In return, A.G. Stephens later commented in his travel notes that the men of Ontario were appallingly British.

That a sense of difference prevailed was unfortunate. It scotched the rare attempts to move between Australia and Canada without the British detour. Other attempts at comparison tended to be organised under the imperial gaze. For example, Douglas Sladen's *A Century of Australian Song* (1888) and William Lighthall's *Songs of the Great Dominion* (1889) were published as companion volumes in Britain. Despite Sladen's contention that Australian literature was a literature of the horse, Canadian literature of the canoe, each of these editors conceives of the national literature within a supra-national cultural formation, a culture of Empire. Each of these collations are directed to the interest of Englishmen at Home. Australian and Canadian literatures are presented as sibling rivals, competing for the attention of a 'parent' culture. These is a sense of a larger, cross-national cultural formation but it is firmly centred on Britain.

The most concerted attempt to gain recognition for the Australian Canadian comparison occurred in the Dominions Project during the 1950s. This was a programme of academic initiatives and exchanges which explored the shared cultural patterns of the two national literatures. By this time Australia and Canada were located in a more complex imperial maze than before and the Dominions

Project was generously funded by the United States - the Carnegie Foundation - yet it still looked to Britain for its point of reference: the 'centre'. This was spelt out by Brian Elliott in 1955:

If A is Australia, B is Great Britain, and C is Canada, then let ABC be a triangle. A cultural relationship is enclosed.

There are certain similarities in the situation of poetry in Canada and Australian which make interesting comparisons. But there are also obstacles to mutual understanding which need to be overcome. It is at present only possible to bring the two Dominion traditions into a focus by relating them simultaneously to their common origin. At least, it seems easier to see reason in both if we work by triangulation. There is more sense in the triangle ABC than we can as yet make of the straight line AC. The shortest distance between the points is not yet the most practicable route to critical appreciation.

If we attempt to follow the course of the straight line AC, we may become bewildered and lost. Only from the point B can a broadly impartial view be taken of both Australian and Canadian Poetry. And who, in this country or in Canada, is capable of taking what point of view? [Elliott, 1955, pp.32-34]

I shall not spell out the particulars of the Dominions Project here. However, in the archives of the HRCC and its Australian equivalent the AHRC, in personal letters and memoirs, we find in the fifties an attempt to foster the comparative study of Australian and Canadian literatures. Most significantly, the momentum of the Dominions Project was carried into a more ambitious comparative enterprise-Commonwealth Literature. (This is spelt out by Robert McDougall in his essay 'A place in the sun'.) So a specifically Australian-Canadian dialogue broadened into the notion of a Commonwealth cultural formation, institutionalised in ACLALS.

Situated as we are now, almost forty years later, in something of a revival of Australian Canadian Studies, McDougall and I argue that the 'Commonwealth' label is problematic. It implies a 'chip off the old block' notion for the white settler colonies in particular; the imperial gaze is omnipresent as earlier in the nineteenth century; it bequeaths a critical language redolent with organic and evolutionary metaphors - 'new' literatures are branches, stems, epiphytes of the old English stock, fated to follow in the path of the Master Literature. It is also historicist in its tendency to systematise a universal history with a complex but nevertheless coherent unity. As Edward Said has argued, European knowledge of other societies has tended to be cast in the historicist mould, which means that one human history is seen to unite humanity which culminates in or is observed from the vantage point of Europe or the West (Said, 1985, p.22). From this vantage point the non-European is seen as Other, peripheral; the periphery emerges as spaces of exile measured in relation to the European centre.

Some recent work in AustCan tries to break consciously with the imperialist cast of thought manifest in earlier formulations of the comparison. Some ways in which it might do this were adumbrated in articles by Diana Brydon and John Matthews in 1979. In her 'Australian literature and the Canadian comparison' (Brydon, 1979) Diana Brydon considers that models of fragmentation and

decentralisation (for example the Hartz thesis) might be particularly appropriate for literary criticism in post-colonial contexts. In his 'Colonial societies in search of identity: lifeboats for the Titanic' (Matthews, 1979) John Matthews celebrates the reversal of centralist, imperialist presumptions. He argues that in the demise of the metropolitan centre, writers and critics of the (lapsed) Commonwealth may find a language appropriate to the post and neo-colonial condition. For writings emanating from what Dennis Lee has called 'space which is radically in question for us [Lee, 1974]' forms of interpretation which value polyphony, ambiguity, multiplicity, self-contestation produce an appropriate congruency of matter and method of analysis in Matthews' view.

Types of decentred, non-linear perspective and the notion that the Empire can develop literary and critical discourses to 'write back' and dismantle master narratives have become increasingly important in post-Commonwealth forms of reading and interpretation. In our collection of essays, metaphors of makeshift, rhizomes and archipelago deconstruct and unpack the lineal, organic pattern of earlier Commonwealth perspectives. In this way writers are tending to take up what Said has identified as the mode of a post-colonial or post-Orientalist discourse. Said proposes that intellectual activity outside of imperialist discourses will need to move to plurality and multiplicity, to a decentred consciousness, to openly marginal and oppositional praxes; to 'regard analysis as in the fullest sense being *against* the grain, deconstructive, utopian [Said, 1985, p.25].

An example of this is Stephen Slemon's (1988) reading of 'Magic realism as post-colonial discourse'. Slemon reads texts by Hodgins and Kroetsch in the context of a post-colonial cultural framework, and in terms of a theory which assumes that comparative analysis across post-colonial cultures takes as a starting point the idea that the act of colonisation initiates a kind of double vision or 'metaphysical clash'. This binary opposition within language has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population.

So, in reading magic realism as a post-colonial mode of representation, Slemon argues that features of the genre - its foreshortening of history, its thematic foregrounding of gaps, absences and silences, its dismantling of binary opposition, its recuperation of fragments marginalised by imperialist's centralising cognitive structures - these are ways in which the texts are metonymic of post-colonial culture as a whole. Slemon presents the project of post-colonial studies as a reading of texts in terms of a cross-cultural imagination which is a way the empire writes back, as it were. This post-colonial imagination and discourse values difference, polyphony, pluralism. It tends to employ various deconstructive ways of reading which 'dethrone' the centred, objective authoritarian perspective of imperialist discourse - for example Said's decentred discourse; Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic imagination: the doubled, ambiguous voice which prevents the establishment of unified truth in favour of 'polyphonic form' marked by heteroglossia, poly-glossia, the demise of the unified world view which was the mark of the Emperor's reign.

Others have taken up this point. Diana Brydon¹ has turned to Todorov's 'heterological mentality' and Harris' 'harlequin cosmos' as seeds of a change in values which seeks to highlight fragmentation, gaps, silences, rather than unities and the 'pleasing whole'. Kataryna Arthur has suggested that the critical practice of Deleuze and Guattari may be particularly appropriate to the analysis of Australian and Canadian texts. Alan Lawson finds that doubleness pervades critical discourses in Australia and Canada, arguing that binarism, 'the state of interphase', is a residue of a distinctively 'second world' inheritance.

We come, then, to a point where the bastard territory seems to have found an appropriate voice or, at least, a series of strategies whereby matter and method come together. This discourse speaks to and against the centre, a process of remaking in which, to return to Slemon, the shreds and fragments of colonial legacy and otherness are transmuted into new codes of recognition where the silenced and the marginalised of our dominating systems can find voice and place, our 'real' cultural heritage. Britain, the Emperor, is dethroned, displaced.

But is he? There are questions to be asked about the extent to which deconstructive practices are an adequate or appropriate method for post-colonial literatures. This is a point to be developed further elsewhere. What I want to take further here is the more general and political question about different forms of imperialist discourse, and the necessity for those of us in bastard territories to be alert to problems of using nation-based categories.

It is important to note how broadly Said identifies imperialist forms of interpretation. Racism, sexism, imperialism are, in his theory of Orientalism, different faces of the same praxis. In each case difference, be it produced by race, gender, ethnicity, nation, is the basis of discrimination, and the self-aggrandisement of the Emperor figure.

Gender produces a particularly clear formulation of this. There has been a pervasive metaphorical elision of the colonised, the non-European and the female as colonialist, racist and sexist discourses have reinforced and legitimised each other throughout European colonisation (Carr, 1985, p.46). Frequently the difference of coloniser/colonised, Europe/Other has been represented in terms of sexual difference. For example, the colonisation of virgin land reproduces images of sexual possession. As Annette Kolodny points out, 'the European discovery of an unblemished and fertile continent allowed the projection upon it of a residue of infantile experience in which all needs - physical, erotic, spiritual and emotional - had been met by an entity imaged as quintessentially female [Kolodny, 1975, pp.53-54]'. American Indians, Aborigines, Orientals are routinely feminised in the representation. This kind of conjunction and collusion of imperial and gender-based difference places them as variant forms of the same grammar. In the language of the Emperor women occupy the same symbolic space as non-Europeans: 'The conqueror writes the body of the other and inscribes upon it his own history [Richon, 1985, p.8]'.²

The intersection of different forms of imperial discourse has profound implications for the way we deal with our contemporary literature. This seems to

me particularly important for those of us who choose to write about second and third world literatures, in which so many different forms of imperial fiction are inscribed. Fault lines of race, gender, class and ethnicity striate even these colonised margins to produce double colonisations, or spaces where forms of difference intersect and compound. It is especially difficult to recognise and dethrone the Emperor when several faces are in view, when forms of difference are neither singular nor mutually exclusive. These are the kinds of intersections which complicate, for example, Jack Healy's essay² on representations of the Indian and the Aborigine in Australian and Canadian literature; which emerge when Diana Brydon works in what she calls the tangle of ethnicity and gender; or when Helen Tiffin and Jennifer Strauss take quite different strategies in relation to gender and nation in *Turtle Beach* and *Bodily Harm*. Or it is apparent in the kind of dilemma which faces Russell McDougall when, in discerning national metaphors in Australian and Canadian poetry and fiction, he reinscribes and gives new valency to some Australian nationalist mythologies which describe the 'typically Australian' in a way which takes little note of the gendered terms being invoked.

I give these as examples of the difficulty of unboxing ourselves from imperial fictions, given that these are fed by a number of kinds of domination and difference. This becomes a problem for Said's vision of life beyond imperial discourses. As we have seen, the Emperor is hydra-headed and the pluralism which Said advocates as a response does not allow for the conjunction, the intersections within imperialist discourse. In practice, pluralism tends to allow the invested groups - blacks, women - to take up their own particular form of discrimination whilst allowing everyone else to get on with their own business. So sexual difference becomes part of a large category of 'difference' into which a number of marginalised groups can be assimilated in a liberal fashion. This form of pluralism tends to work as neutralisation - it allows white Anglo-Saxon males in particular to 'respect', say, feminism, whilst not bothering to engage with it in their own enunciation. As Heath argues, indifference produces reinscriptions of difference, perhaps particularly persuasively. In this way even whilst they seek to challenge and displace European hegemonic values, post-colonial critics may reinscribe and naturalise patriarchal assumptions/imperial fictions, and so give new valency to old myths of domination - *The Boys' Own Annual*.

It is no accident that it is women working in the area of Australian and Canadian literatures who are inclined to explore this multifaceted nature of imperialist discourse. For women writers and critics have access to a speaking position as outsiders. Women are, as Virginia Woolf pointed out, able to be notoriously unreliable citizens, able to recognise the many forms of patriarchal and imperialist discourse within which they are inscribed; able to resist penetration by the master codes. As Virginia Woolf exhorts women in *Three Guineas*: 'let us never cease from thinking - What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them... Where is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men? [Woolf, 1938, p.72]. Formulations of the nation in particular often deserve

a sceptical response from those of use who choose to be, or are cast as, unreliable citizens. Embedded in notions of 'our' heritage, 'our' literature, 'Canadian' writer, 'Australian' author are strong, normative assumptions. For example, George Bowering, in his article 'Baseball and the Canadian imagination', observes 'It should not surprise anyone to look into the trunk of a Canadian writer's car and see a [base]ball and a bat, a glove and some turf shoes... [Bowering, 1986, p.124]. he is right, of course, in noting that this is a 'recognisably Canadian' code. And as usual what is 'recognisably Canadian' tends to relegate women to the bleachers.

Yet there they are not necessarily silent observers. To return to Woolf we can choose to question and subvert the ceremony, we can recognise the imperial procession and label it for what it is. Two recent Canadian articles give good examples of how the voices from the bleachers can question the rules of the game and rewrite the codes. In her 'Epi(pro)logue: in pursuit of the long poem' Barbara Godard (1984) dismantles the agenda of a recent conference on the Canadian long poem, much of which she sees as being conducted within an imperialist rhetoric, indifferent to women. In reading the long poems of Marlatt and Webb, Godard goes against the grain of the canonical tradition of the Canadian long poem, a process of canonisation which encodes 'a male/imperial fiction'. Likewise Aritha van Herk (1986), in her recent 'A gentle circumcision', cuts into some male tales concerning the genealogy of Western fiction traditionally based on Grove, Ross, Mitchell, Webb and Kroetsch. Like Godard, van Herk sees definitions of what is Canada, of what is canonised as acceptable in the national literature as the product of Boystown; chapped up tightly in his own myths, the Emperor Rides Again.

Australian equivalents to this questioning of the national literature are found in papers by Sue Sheridan (1985) and Jennifer Strauss (1986). In looking at the formulation of Australia's dominant discourse on cultural nationalism in the 1890s, Sheridan notes that this formulation marginalised the very popular fiction of a number of women writers, who were dismissed as feminine and un-Australian. The ongoing marginalisation of women's writing - even when not offensively feminist - is clear in Jennifer Strauss' survey of Australian literary anthologies, which routinely under-represent the work of women writers. In Australia, as in Canada, at the level where critics constitute national canons, histories and traditions, women are excluded, sent to the bleachers as it were. There is some evidence to suggest that women have been absorbed more thoroughly into the Canadian literary culture than the Australian. Beryl Donaldson Langer (McDougall & Whitlock, 1987) points out that it is possible for women to be accorded 'first rank' status in the Canadian artistic/literary hierarchy, whereas in Australia this place has often been obtained under male pseudonyms and/or as expatriates. In both Australia and Canada it is not unusual for women to have the lion's share of the contemporary market - certainly this seems to be the case at present. However, this does not contradict my point that it is at the level of deep structures - the formulation of national

literary canons, traditions, values and typologies - that women's writing is trivialised and marginalised.

These few examples in which Australian and Canadian critics assume the role of the unreliable citizen suggest ways that gender and nation are interdependent; discourses of imperialism, nationalism and sexism are part of the same praxis of domination. For those of us engaging in Australian and Canadian literatures with a method appropriate to a post-Commonwealth and non-nationalist perspective, indifference to this issue is not an option. To fail to recognise and act upon the intersection of sexual and nation-based forms of difference, for example, is to fall into one of the fault lines which make the margins themselves insecure. Residing comfortably in pluralism, a field of 'differences' or exulting in the free play of signifiers can eschew recognition of the valency of difference and discourse. Male and female, Indian and White, are not merely different, these differences are loaded at the level of representation, interpretation and social experience. Forms of deconstructed reading, decentred perspectives, avoidance of binary oppositions are not in themselves adequate. We also need to be aware of structures of power, rule and domination. Our readings of the national literatures must not be comfortably indifferent.

It caused me some concern to originally address this issue of gender and power in Calgary of all places. What I knew about the West prior to arriving there was Aritha van Herk's description, which made me feel I was entering Marlboro country.

I come from the west. Kingdom of the male virgin. I live and write in the Kingdom of the male virgin. To be a female and not-virgin, making stories in the Kingdom of the male virgin, is dangerous [van Herk, 1986, p.59].

Well, I am female and making stories in His Kingdom. He is quite right to see us as a threat for, located as we are as unreliable citizens in the interstices, bitches in a bastard territory. we can pull at the loose threads of the ceremonial garb educated men wear; we can unravel imperial fictions of all kinds and make new stories. It is for us to make sure that even whilst the Emperor continues to speak, he always wears no clothes, so displaying his shortcomings to all.

Notes

1. These papers by Brydon, Arthur and Lawson are forthcoming in the Badlands collection, currently being edited by Alan Lawson and Aritha van Herk.
2. In this paper I have referred to a number of essays published in *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives* (McDougall & Whitlock, 1987). They are J.J. Healy, 'Literature, power and the refusals of Big Bear: reflections on the treatment of the Indian and of the Aborigine'; Russell McDougall, 'Sprawl and the vertical'; Diana Brydon 'Discovering "Ethnicity": Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Mena Abdullah's *Time of the Peacock*'; Beryl Donaldson Langer, 'Women and literary production'; Jennifer Strauss, 'Being there, being here'; and Helen Tiffin, 'Voice and form'.

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