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## **BODIES OF CANADA**

Conceptualizations of Canadian Space  
and the Rhetoric of Gender

## **C-OR(P)GANISMES DU CANADA**

Conceptualisations de l'espace canadien  
et la rhétorique du genre

Guest-Editors / Editeurs Invités  
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# BODIES OF CANADA

## Conceptualizations of Canadian Space and the Rhetoric of Gender

*[T]o be gay (or lesbian or transgender or intersex or intertextual or any of the vast array of peregrinations from the ho hum, humdrum orthodoxy of heterosexuality) and Canadian is to be doubly queered. (LaBruce, 2006: 15)*

While conceiving the original call for papers for the present—'Canadian'—issue of RIAS, the editors' main focus had been on discourses of space and gender. Our primary reason for this was that within the context of Canadian culture and literature the correlation between these two concepts has been strikingly manifest. In early English-Canadian texts, one often observes a 'feminization of space' (Best, 1995: 183) which is, however, characteristic of the literature of colonization in general. The process of taking over and possessing a foreign land implies, as W. H. New asserts, 'penetration (of continent, of body)' (1997: 114) which is typically construed as feminine, i.e., unknown, unfamiliar, and potentially hostile. What appears to be characteristic for Canadian literature specifically is a suspicion that such penetration is neither satisfactory nor complete, regardless of how strongly one wishes this to be so. All the same, the feminization of the Canadian landscape brings hope of its domestication and taming as 'the female body delivers a conception of bounded, mappable space, space which can still be understood as totality even if it is internally fractured or carved up' (Best, 1995: 184).

Likewise, this interconnection between woman's body and space, represented as a territory to be conquered and a space

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to be shaped, is strikingly present in Québécois literature, just one example being the metaphor of 'femme-pays' so dear to Québec's national poet Gaston Miron, as well as the nationalist discourse. According to Diane Lamoureux, the modern national narrative of Québec aims at identifying 'la belle province' with its territory and 'unlike French-Canadian nationalism of the previous period, Québec's modern nationalism sees territoriality as a basis to construct the nation and the frontiers of the future sovereign state' (1999: 29). This transition from 'ethnic nationalism to civic nationalism' (Lamoureux, 1999: 29) is marked by the rejection of femininity that is seen as external and its transformation into 'feminine nature entirely constructed on the basis of the concept of maternity' (Lamoureux, 1999: 33).

The dialectics of exclusion and reappropriation of femininity is at the heart of the social contract which interlaces, according to Pateman, with 'the sexual contract' (1998: IX), where it is only in the private sphere that woman can reach citizenship. Fundamentally devoted to reproducing and bringing up future (male) citizens, she is dismissed from the public sphere being reserved for her (?) brothers with whom she can only fraternize.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when Rousseau talks about women, this 'precious half of the Republic, which makes the happiness of the other,' (2004: 8), he evokes their 'chaste influence, solely exercised within the limits of conjugal union, is exerted only for the glory of the State and the happiness of the public' (1923). Reading bodies of Canada now must certainly challenge the codification of social roles characteristic to the modern narrative and open onto the largeness of what we (want to) understand as Canadienness.

In this collection of articles on Canadian and Québec literatures, we have been interested in the form that such a feminized body/space takes in light of theoretical explorations which have focused on decentralization and disunity

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1. As Derrida claims in *Politics of friendship*, 'the patriarchy may include cousins and sisters but [...] including may also come to mean neutralizing. Including may dictate forgetting [...] that the sister will never provide a docile example for the concept of fraternity' (2005: viii).

(of identities, cultures and nations), and dominated current debates on Canadianness—namely discourses of the postmodern, the feminist, and the postcolonial. The articles collected here, however, demonstrate that the bodies of Canada are, above all, queer. Many of our contributors chose ‘queer’ as a broad theoretical ground upon which conceptualizations of Canadian space and the rhetoric of gender intersect. In fact, the affinity between the two adjectives—‘Canadian’ and ‘queer’—has been the subject of an ongoing debate which has gained momentum since the publication of the groundbreaking collection *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context* (2001), edited by Terry Goldie. Not only does this volume show ‘the possible range in academic studies of gay and lesbian cultures in Canada’ (Goldie, 2001: 6), but it also points to the openness of the term ‘queer’. Whereas most frequently the term itself functions as a designation for non-normative sexualities, it actually subverts all ‘proper definitions’,<sup>2</sup> and as such urges one to reassess various kinds of ‘norms’. In this sense, queer theory often parallels existing conceptions of Canadianness, founded on the notions of fragmentation and unfixedness. In Jason Morgan’s words, ‘Canadian nationalism is demonstrated to be queer because it transgresses the normative basis of the nation’ (2006: 223). The transgressiveness of this ‘queer’ idea of ‘Canada’ and its ‘bodies’ is reflected in the recent popularity of the prefix ‘trans-’ in the field of Canadian studies: the shift from ‘multiculturalism’ to ‘transculturalism’, the launch of the TransCanada project, the resulting publication of the seminal *Trans.Can. Lit.* (Kamboureli and Miki 2007) and, on a more institutional scale, the final report of the Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences in Québec published by Bouchard and Taylor. ‘Trans’—meaning ‘across, beyond, through’—‘connotes movement to “the other side” of something [...], into another state or place [...], a transcending of a border’ (Sikora, 2010).<sup>3</sup> Such ‘peregrinations’

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2. *Proper Definitions* is a title of Betsy Warland’s collection of ‘theorograms’.

3. Coincidentally, as Sikora remarks, etymologically, ‘queer’ comes from an old Germanic word also meaning ‘across’.

seem to facilitate ex-centric playfulness, subversion of centers, and de-marginalization of various minorities.

Indeed, the Canadian voices heard in this collection often belong to gender, sexual, and/or ethnic Others, and the analyses presented here focus on how Canadian authors unfix the notion of identity in ways that speak to the complicated materiality that 'queerness' identifies. Significantly, problematic Canadian selves, whose 'queerness' is debated in the articles of the present issue, inhabit equally problematic and 'queer' Canadian bodies. Inscribed in, and repetitively illustrative of, the Canadian landscape, these bodies are concurrently too large to contain and too fragmented to characterize. As Aritha van Herk remarks in the opening essay, 'Bawdy Bodies: Bridging Robert Kroetsch and bpNichol', 'the [Canadian] nation is so overwhelmingly large that we (Canadians) don't know how big we are or might be, how small we need to grow to understand the space we occupy' (van Herk). Canada's body is then 'large and unwieldy', and because it is so, it is also difficult to characterize in conventional terms—therefore, strangely, the notion of 'queerness' often provides a context for understanding. The point is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, where the writer depicts her fat heroine, Joan Foster, as devoid of any distinguishing characteristics ('all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two')—a 'huge featureless blur' (Atwood, 1982: 82). Like Foster—playing 'kindly aunt and wisewoman to a number of [popular] girls in the class' (93)—'Canada is too big to be anything but benevolent and placid' (van Herk). The body of Canada that looms out of van Herk's paper is, therefore, kinky—or queer—rather than bawdy, one that is too unbounded to be penetrated and too gigantic to tender pleasure.

Within Western culture, the obsession with size that van Herk mentions with reference to Canada is a markedly feminine preoccupation. If, however, the author talks of 'a woman's experience' at all, she 'tells it slant', in her own autobiographical poems that complement her analysis but which themselves are not the object of interpretation. Conversely, her reading concentrates on two 'indubitably and self-consciously male'

Canadian poets, Robert Kroetsch<sup>4</sup> and bpNichol. Both are viewed as 'embodiments of the unwieldy male body aching to subvert identity, yearning to map by touch and tenderness [...] and, therefore, as transgressively unmasculine. Both poets 'articulate bodies preoccupied with language because the space of the nation cannot be drawn' (van Herk). A similar concern with language is a fundamental aspect of Eva C. Karpinski's article, 'Bodies Material and Immaterial: Daphne Marlatt's Ghost-Writing and Transnationalism in *Taken*', although here the body is 'indubitably female'. Moreover, Marlatt's writing is also actively involved in 'bridging', i.e., in establishing links, connections, and collaborations. As a 'leading practitioner of *écriture au féminin*' (Karpinski), she remains in a dialogue with such Quebec writers as Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Madelaine Gagnon, as well as representatives of the so-called French feminism<sup>5</sup> for whom the body is the foundation of writing.

Marlatt's development of 'a transnational feminist critique that explores the linkages and connections among nations, heteropatriarchies, colonialisms, and militarisms' (Karpinski) springs from her awareness of various separations which characterize the experience of the body marked by gender, sexuality, nationality, race, and personal history. Like Alberta author Janice Williamson, Marlatt plays with the form of her texts, as well as with the 'phantom limb of memory' (Karpinski). Her fragmentary narratives, often taking the form

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4. Soon after the present issue of *RIAS* had been submitted for publication, Robert Kroetsch died tragically in a car accident on June 21<sup>st</sup> 2011.

5. It needs to be noted, however, that the notion of French Feminism, according to Christine Delphy, is 'a pure and simple *invention*' (1995: 19) characteristic of the English and American feminist thought, which has little to do with the feminist movement in France. Indeed, of the French Feminism's 'Holy Trinity' (Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray) two theorists are outside the feminist debate in France and do not profess to be feminists. According to Delphy, the notion of French feminism misidentified French women writers such as Cixous and Leclerc with French feminist thought. This remark seems to be particularly important in the context of Québécois feminism of the seventies which, on the one hand, was significantly inspired by French *femmes écrivains* and, on the other hand, considered them as feminists.

of a series of snapshots, speak, however, 'against separations' (Karpinski), and are 'a place of return, of the dead, of "you/I" or ghost selves' (Karpinski). Such 'ghost selves' simultaneously represent connections between life and death, the past and the present, the so-called 'real' and the memorized, and point to the liminality and transgressiveness of the body.

Liminality is also the main focus of Małgorzata Myk's 'Traversing Gendered Spaces with Nicole Brossard's Lesbians: Figurations of Nomadic Subjectivity in Picture Theory'. Brossard's bodies are 'unearthly' because the roots holding them are 'aerial', which enables the 'traversing of spaces' mentioned in the title of Myk's essay. The particular body, however, around which the analysis revolves, is marked as 'lesbian' and thus appears to be 'differently female'. For Brossard, the lesbian body is 'a figure of transgression capable of displacing and resignifying patriarchal codes' (Myk). Employing the tenets of 'nomadic politics' ('a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections' [Braidotti qtd. in Myk]), Myk proposes a dialogue between Nicole Brossard, Rosi Braidotti, and Elizabeth Grosz, and hence reads their texts as interconnected and complementary.

A similarly enriching exchange—between Trinidadian Canadian writer, Dionne Brand, and American feminist poet, Adrienne Rich—is a starting point for the fourth essay in this collection: Laura Sarnelli's 'Overlapping Territories, Drifting Bodies in Dionne Brand's Work'. The lesbian body as conceptualized by Brand maintains its subversive qualities and becomes a 'site of resistance to the cultural violence and silence into which it has been forcibly cast' (Sarnelli). The discovery of the eponymous 'overlapping territories' is made possible through the liberating 'loca-motion' of the drifting body—which replaces the search for its proper 'location'—and 'the erotic energy of the excess produced by two female desiring bodies looking at each other' (Sarnelli). Importantly, Brand's questioning of fixed 'locations'—or stability of 'homes'—springs from the fact that she speaks from the position of a triple marginalization, namely, one of a black/lesbian/woman. Therefore, she writes against neo-colonial,

patriarchal, and heteronormative discourses, in order to move from ‘being placed to becoming place’, and envisages the black lesbian body as engaged in the process of becoming a ‘bridge between spaces and geographies always already fluid and floating’ (Sarnelli).

The concepts of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality are central to Jess Huber’s ‘Queering Bodies, Queering Boundaries: Localizing Identity in and of the Body in Hiromi Goto’s *The Kappa Child*’. In Goto’s novel, the questions of ‘nationality, ethnicity, community and identity formation’ within the Canadian context are translated into ‘the concrete lived experience’ of the narrator’s body’ (Huber). By means of othering, or queering, of this body, ‘Goto provides a model for the openness that comes with [...] an acknowledging of what is happening corporeally, bodily, on a daily basis as opposed to self definition by vague and abstract concepts like nations and sexuality’ (Huber).

Even though Huber’s essay attempts to delineate possible ways out of positions of oppression, it also points to the problematic nature of Canadian multiculturalism. As such, it addresses the question of whether the discourse of Canadianess—originally constructed around the civilizing mission of two founding nations whose cultural superiority to the colonized remained unquestioned for a long time—can indeed avoid ‘a devaluing or ignoring of the “marginalized challenges” [...] of the ex-centric’ (Hutcheon, 1989: 17). In the same vein, although ‘queering’ of the body/nation has been described mostly in terms of discursive playfulness, Huber makes it very clear that what underlies ‘queering’ is the painful experience of alienation, marginalization, and oppression, shared by many ‘Canadians’.

The interconnected concepts of ‘marginality’ and ‘liminality’ have long been inscribed within English-Canadian academic discourses of identity, and have been appreciated for their transgressive potential. Undoubtedly, they have proved to be effective interpretive tools. Questions appear, however, about the relatedness of these notions to the actual, lived experiences of other (than Anglo-) Canadian bodies (for instance,

the bodies of the Quebecois). Accordingly, Isabelle Lachance's 'La Sourisquoise en ses plaisirs. Analogie entre la femme sauvage et la Nouvelle-France chez Marc Lescarbot', studies the parallel representations of New France and the Souriquois (Micmac) woman in Lescarbot's *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*. Here too, the native woman, inscribed in the yet unexplored but perceived as fully explorable landscape, becomes a useful representation of the colony's potential. Depicted as modest and welcoming, she is, like Pocahontas, a colonialist fantasy and an element of the colonial propaganda.

The closing article of this issue—Vanja Polic's 'Tenderness of Space and Outlandish Woman. *The Tenderness of the Wolves* and *The Outlander*'—discusses a similar analogy 'between the body of text and the body of colony' (Polic). In this context, stereotypical images of the Canadian landscape, as empty and hostile 'backwoods', 'are [...] used to reveal both the space and women as sites of inscription by a white European man [...]' (Polic). Within the new colony, the woman's body 'is a site of power discourse', and is appropriated, together with the land, to become a "womb of empire" whose function [is] to populate the colony with white settlers' (Polic). The article then emphasizes the parallelism between the rhetoric of topography and that of the body, the same juxtaposition which inspired this issue of RIAS.

The analogy between the two seemingly divergent notions is particularly evident when texts that address them touch upon issues of literal or metaphorical liminality, concerns that many of our contributors chose to discuss. In the context of the ongoing debate over Canadian identity, which has revolved around bringing into existence an image of Canada that would inspire a sense of unity among the citizens of the country, the liminal body becomes a transgressive counter-image. Even though the papers collected here approach the concepts of body, space, and gender differently, they all suggest the 'queerness' of the various bodies of Canada and their invisible parts 'connected to an interiority of hope' (van Herk) which goes beyond the (in)famous Canadian longing for unity.

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