

NEITHER CHUCKWAGONS, NOR SASKATOONS, AND A MISSING MARLBORO MAN: POSTCOLONIALISM, REGIONALISM AND THE INEFFABLE CANADIAN WEST

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1. Introduction: the global/local lens of the Canadian postcolonial

Early debates on the Canadian postcolonial were built *grosso modo* on the ruptures that contemporary nations and culture/s produced on the body of the state, or the country's peculiar postcolonial condition (see Hutcheon 1991; Bennett 1993-94; Slemon 1990; Brydon 1995; Lawson 1995).¹ Currently no one questions the relevance of these arguments, largely because their revisionary energies helped to mould, for example, a spatially charged nature of the *domestic* Canadian postcolonial. Accordingly, what Sugars terms the multiple *intra-national forms* of postcolonialism gave impetus to the settler-invaders' representation of their place in the new reality, as much as for the consequences of white colonisation, the *disease* it produces in aboriginal peoples, or, for instance, the immigrant experiences of dislocation (2004: xiii). In the last few decades Canadian postcolonialism has been attempting to reconcile regional peculiarities, historical specificity and spatial differences to eventually emphasise provisional locality as the adequate lens through which to envision the newly revised postcolonial (see Brydon 2014), an in-process concept branded with emergent dialogues from (provisional) centre to (provisional) periphery, or among replicating centres/peripheries that can challenge primeval locations of knowledge, place and site. This local emphasis is

apparent at a moment in which, thanks to past and present discussions on the global, the Canadian postcolonial cannot avoid its contamination from international debates on cosmopolitanism, diaspora and newness (see Brydon 2004; Chowdhury 2006; Brydon and Dvorak 2012), all three concepts embedded in a world dynamics fostering the ongoing revision of premises in and outside Canada. “The theoretical field of postcolonialism is far from static and [...] accounts of Canadian postcoloniality are being continually revised and complicated”, foretold Sugars shortly after the opening of the new century already advancing the axial guidelines governing these recent debates. “Discussions of Canada as postcolonial have slipped into discussions of postcolonial communities within contemporary Canada”, she sentences to later conclude that this is “a move that is paralleled in the context of postcolonial theory worldwide” (2002: 28). The immediate aftermath has materialized in a number of critical volumes whose structural axes underline the importance of dialogue, cross-talk and transnational nurturing to study Canadian cultural manifestations *vis-à-vis* American or transcontinental paradigms of theory (see Dobson 2009; Siemerling and Phillips Casteel 2010; Brydon and Dvorak 2012), in such a way that this globalising system of “friction and flow”, in Brydon and Dvorak’s words, comes to query the presumed autonomy of literature and the nation.² Thus, the contributors to their collection, *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*, “analyze the ways in which Canadian imaginaries, [...] are shifting in response to globalizing pressures” (2012: 1-2).

Once regarded as the antagonist of the nation, globalization is now decidedly leaving its imprint on the form in which we conceptualize the nation in Canada, and, as Kit Dobson has observed, “it seems that the national and the global are [...] interlocking scales of capital. The existing arguments that seek to read Canadian Literature in relation to globalization or transnational studies have made inroads in discussions of Canadian literature but have not yet been articulated in depth” (2009: x). A further step in the process of that articulation has been based on contradicting the popular views of globalization as synonymous with deterritorialisation. I would argue, in contrast, for emphasizing the *global in the local* or, in other words, for analyzing how the international bears on the local to stimulate its eventual reshaping, and triggers a new approach to space, and a reinterpretation of place (Derksen 2009: 10). Nevertheless, the timely opening of the Canadian postcolonial to a *worldly* dimension attentive to locality goes hand in hand with a historical phase in which some critics have already described the situation of postcolonial theory either as a field infiltrated by anxieties and indeterminacy (Miki 2004: 89), situated at a dead end (Hardt and Negri 2000: 137), or presently reorganising its agenda to incorporate environmental or ecocritical concerns (Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Mason et al. 2014), for example.³

Thus, “while the field needs to move beyond a ‘politics of blame’ and challenge itself to think how it might become more relevant for the masses whose situation it hopes to alleviate”, Camille Isaacs sustains, “the ‘job’ of postcolonial theory has not yet been completed since marginalised groups continue to be marginalised and new forms of Othering continue to emerge” (2005: 233; see Brydon 2004). As Sugars has more recently pointed out, in Canada, and possibly anywhere else, the dynamics to be avoided should be the prescriptive replacement of one model for another, since “[t]he turn to intranational constituencies (regions, ethnicities, sexualities, etc.) or to transnational models is potentially as prescriptive and homogenising as the national formations that such discourses aim to circumvent” (2010: 39). In this state of affairs, the question “Is Canada Postcolonial?”, firstly launched in the 1990s, far from being outmoded, continued to fuel research work after the turn of the century (see Moss 2003; Bessner 2003; Brydon 2003; Pennee 2003), as new nuances and perspectives gain relevance and others wither.

In line with this contemporary revisionist trend of postcolonial theory, this paper addresses one of these forms of othering, a vested representation of the Canadian west and the prairies, which aims at keeping at bay the spectrum of fragmentation that poses a threat for the hermetic body of a national literature and culture. That othering process, conversely, contributes to the two-fold effort, pedagogical and performative, that Homi K. Bhabha (1990) has detected underlying the narration of the nation. Indeed, “[i]n postcolonial Canada where national unity has been a matter of political negotiation rather than the consequence of geographical uniformity, the preeminence of region has been viewed by some as an impediment to the fostering of a literature of universal scope, the cause of an endemic tendency in Canadian literature to fracture along regional lines” (Omhoveré 2007: 40). Traditional patterns of history and fiction have unified the west under a recurrent attention to ossified issues of landscape, human progress, homesteading, or taming of the wild, parameters of iteration to maintain a narrative of white settling. From different angles and perspectives, the prairies and the west have been renewed from the late 1960s by authors like Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering or Aritha van Herk, who critically approached and reshaped the master narratives of history and tradition, decomposed the founding myths designed from and by the centres of Canadian culture, and unveiled the constraining images devised for the plains in parallel. These writers’ renovation is now reinvigorated by a different way of tackling of time/space: provincialism, communication technology, cultural change and globalization have transformed the plains, thus creating the need for a new definition (Calder and Wardaugh 2005: 13-14), one that unifies the former prairies and the west in just one single economic and social experience. In the plains and elsewhere in Canada, and to judge from a vast number of the works of fiction produced in the last quarter of the 20th century, it is perceptible that time and place

have lost part of their hegemonic structuring potential, thus giving a sense of urgency to the desire to reshape national history. As part of that process, it then follows that in the western regions such a narrative has been mostly defined by coordinates to a greater or lesser extent modified recently, like the oral tradition of Native North Americans, the textual settlement of immigrants and the print or screen capitalism that characterized the 19th-20th centuries, and the last decade, respectively. “At a time when the Canadian prairies are undergoing extensive cultural, economic and political transformation”, Calder and Wardaugh explained ten years ago, “it is necessary to offer new theoretical frameworks for understanding the area” (2005: 16). On the one hand, an alternative model of time that interrogates the equation between starting point and white settlement; on the other, an extension of the former prairie’s spatial limits to draw attention onto the fact that these newly included zones also fit into the prairie ontology and its defining traits.

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As the region’s space/time triggers an ongoing process of negotiation, it causes a further disruption of the supporting axioms of a national literature and canon. “The narrative of the nation-state is a powerful modern enunciation that defines the ways in which we configure space and time”, Erin Manning explains. “[W]ithin the narrative of the nation-state, space is delineated as a stable modus of containment while time is located as a linear organization of the events that take place within this receptacle” (2003: xxx). Their different histories and stories notwithstanding, common traits between the Canadian west and its US counterpart seem to have traversed the border, the displacement making the hegemony of the political nation-state recede against the regional trans-frontier impulses. As Felske and Rasporich think, “the identity and identities of the Canadian West are resilient, kept alive by unique landscapes, by changing relationships with other regions in Canada and around the world, by its diversity of cultures and by its ongoing processes of community building” (2004: 1).

The acceptance of negotiation at the core of regional identities is part and parcel of a very Canadian penchant for continually rethinking and adapting to new realities in transformation, nation, culture and their coterminous policies being by no means an exception, since they have a long history as shape-shifters. “The history of making culture in Canada is also the history of making *and* troubling the cultural imaginations of the nation itself”. As affirmed by Jeff Derksen, “at the present moment we stand at a nexus where our previous narratives about national cultures, multiculturalism, the role of the state and the possibilities of culture have been simultaneously expanded and fragmented”. Such premises lead him to conclude that “the distance that a national, state-shaped notion of culture has travelled in Canada [...] has indeed been great” (2013: viii). I agree with Derksen

that part of that great distance travelled in Canada is a contribution provided by the processes of globalisation, which now affect how we (de)construct the nation, how we produce and perceive notions of place and space, but also how writers, readers or critics produce and consume literary artefacts. The region and its ethos are also prey to the force that the market impels in its representation, its adaptation to film and online circulation; its eventual consumption in mobile devices, and endless reproduction across social networks the world over. As Debjani Ganguly concluded shortly before the end of the first decade of the century, the present century is rendering globalism “the state-of-the-art literary paradigm”, one materialised in a two-fold appearance: first as a field featuring a transnational production, circulation and reception of texts; and second, as a discipline requiring a theoretical/methodological approach that collapses “the Eurocentric underpinnings of the comparative literature discipline and the Nation/Empire literary studies models of the last century” (2008: 119). Therefore, globalization, market drives and the contemporary ways of producing and consuming literary texts are going to be fundamental in dismantling the historical concept of region to mould it in response to the demands of the new century.

2. Region: the productive juncture of time and space

Calder and Wardhaugh’s *History, Literature and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* (2005) opens by dismissing the separation between the prairies and the west to immediately posit the existence of the Canadian plains at the intersection of the vectors of space and time. These two elements were previously identified by George Woodcock (1980) as the seminal coordinates engendering the discourse of regionalism, which he finds less constraining than nationalism. “A confederation of regions” ([1981 (1980)]: 38), Canada is a scene with a dubious national hold, in his opinion. Yet Woodcock could neither bear in mind the recent pliability that globalism has predicated on the discourse of nation, nor foresee the scope of the newly revised demarcations of the Canadian postcolonial. These shifting posts make the time/space juncture all the most productive, a local (non)place that, as Calder and Wardhaugh sustain, is the ground for the consciousness of “existing as a prairie subject”, as well as the stance of the writer that (re)produces that consciousness. The intersection of time and space witnesses as well the interaction of factors associated with them such as culture, history and geography and the multifarious relations that they deploy (Calder and Wardhaugh 2005: 5). These implications informing region can be produced inside the region as such, and internalised by the locals that, in turn reproduce them; or created outside it, in a supranational scene where the region mirrors or absorbs the state identity politics.

In this frame of Canadian state fracture, the prairies have historically been the *beyond*, the other of the Europeanised east (see Angus 1990; 1997), repeatedly construed in turn as the embodiment of culture and economic development; the prairies, meanwhile, have been the land of the permeable, imprecise limits where the untamed inhabits and menacingly looms over the individuals and their own self-conception of settling and settlement; the plains are, in other words, the non-location where the definition of the community is unlikely, were it not for an endless play of difference and deferral of the self/other binary. Such is the unstable representation of the prairie in fictions like Martha Ostenso's classical *Wild Geese* (1925), Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941), or W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1981). In different ways they confirm that the defiance the plains pose to the state's self was heightened during the last century by their hosting of immigrants from all over the world, this added to their historical reception of Canadian settlers and homesteaders from every ethnic background. Their defining characteristics have come down to more recent narratives like Alice Munro's "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (2001), to which we now briefly turn to engage with its representation of prairie space.

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In the course of a conversation between its protagonist, Johanna Parry, and a Canadian railway employee in charge of cargo transport, Munro's story lets us know that "[a] lot of places out there it's all Czechs or Hungarians or Ukranians" (2001: 4). The *out there*, a vast geography of self-deconstructive limits, veils a rather pejorative echo of, not to say a warning about, the diverse ethnic origin of prairie inhabitants. Cultural markers in open friction opens up for Parry a territory that menaces her subjectivity, leaving the imprint of a modern colonising effort, while situating her at a level not dissimilar to that of non-Wasps, all of them struggling with a landscape that erases eastern manners and is bound to haunt the newcomer Parry. As Marlene Goldman states, the prairie settler is the embodiment of haunting in being first directly threatened by the *unsettling* presence of the woods, the Native, and, finally, by the unjust, remorseful possession of a territory viciously taken from its rightful inhabitants (2012: 42). In Munro's title-piece, the deceived Parry mirrors former settlers-invaders, and crosses the line between her Wasp origin and that of recent immigrants, the privilege of her ethnicity undone on account of her gender position. Originally from Glasgow, Parry, an orphanage internee sent to Canada as a participant in an education plan, pursues a promise of dubious materialisation, when ferried westwards by the love letters written to her by a couple of local teens who map out for her a paper liaison with Ken Boaudreau. Dazzled by the girls' high hopes, Parry sends by train to the *unknown*, Gdynia in Saskatchewan, the furniture that will support her future of domesticity in the west, where according to the CPR worker, "[t]owns out there, they're not like here. They are mostly pretty rudimentary affairs" (Munro 2001: 5).⁴ And, although

initially propelled by her will to cease being the local spinster, Johanna corroborates once there: “[t]here was a discouraging lack of formality, or any sort of organisation, to this place [...]”. And the most discouraging of it all, an overwhelming feeling of solitude, since “[n]obody was out in the yards, and why should they be? There was nothing to tend, only clumps of brown grass and once a big burst of rhubarb gone to seed” (Munro 2001: 42), she concludes, sorrowful at the apparent lack of civilisation to judge from an uncared for train station, the spot where she meditates on her dislocation and her ambivalent role, dispossessed of authority and exerting the authority over the local space and its dwellers that the power of representation endows her with. “What was of more concern to her was that there did not appear to be a town”, we know through a distant view given by the narrator’s access to Parry’s mind. “The station was an enclosed shelter with benches along the walls and a wooden shutter pulled down over the window of the ticket office” (Munro 2001: 41).

As Munro’s Johanna notices in her particular depiction of how nature erases the traces of settlement, nature in prairie fictions, like Adele Wiseman’s *The Sacrifice* (1956) or Laura Salverson Goodman’s *The Viking Heart* (1923), dispenses a distinct identity for the human collective and erases the traces of that community as well; nature is one and many. “[T]he west manages to remain a veritable monster of indifference and mistress of camouflage. It continues to practise its role as escape artist and tightrope walker, ineradicably beautiful, and oh-so silently eloquent”, describes the Albertan writer Aritha van Herk (2004: 16). “The West is beginning to blunder beyond its appropriate edges”, she goes on, “starting to step over the boundaries of signification”. Van Herk affirms that he was at pains to validate before a non-Canadian some of the symbols usually attributed to the West from outside, namely the shooting of the tiny red berries called saskatoons, the pioneer entertainment of schooner or chuckwagon racing, and the well-known Marlboro Man, recurrently featuring on the inviting billboards disseminated across the Canadian plains (van Herk 2004: 21). All these signifiers, seemingly transcending region, and national-state borders, imply an intended reification of culture that can hardly stand the pressure of renewal in a global world: the death of the cow-boy image, the extinction of the pioneer, not to mention the personal and legal reinforcement of anti-tobacco narratives, largely replaced by metanarratives of personal health and care. A bombardment of mass media viral messages has reported the Marlboro actors dead from lung cancer (see Pearce 2014), while in a newly digitalised version of its classical anthem “Go West” (1997), the band, The Pet Shop Boys, keeps designating the west as the land of gay liberation and inviting their fans again and again to head for this enclave of promise, and to counter there the stereotypical masculine presence of the silent cowboy that personalised the values of the cigarette brand.⁵ As suggested above, globalism has brought about a further

splitting of intra-national constituencies into regional and intra-regional ones, in parallel with their intersections with factors of gender and sexuality.

And, while van Herk tellingly expresses the impossibility of *grasping* the west thanks to the bleaching of its classical signifiers-signifieds, which become extinguishing loci of meaning, R. Douglas Francis has tackled the tough theorisation of the west region, once again materialising the contradictory moves of territorialisation and deterritorialisation to which Canadian culture has always been prone. In his effort to territorialise the west, Francis has distinguished firstly a formal regionalism, indebted to issues of environmental determinism of the individual; secondly, a functional regionalism, underlining the dynamic character of the region in its being dependent on economic, social and/or political relations established by the locals with other Canadian regions or internationally; thirdly, a mythic regionalism upholding the region as a mental construct. Finally, Francis concludes by affirming the existence of a postmodern perspective relying on the ineffability of region, whose essence cannot be portrayed in any form (2004: 29-49), thus partially reaching common ground with van Herk. In Francis' study, however, the landscape is the primordial element, since its shifting image has historically given way to different assumptions about nature, and consequently, to different conceptions of region. Previous to Francis, Henry Kreisel had asserted that "all discussions of literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind" (1968: 171), an affirmation later ratified by Laurie Ricou when he stated that prairie literature has its basis in the psychological impact and the determinism consequent on the confrontation with the surrounding landscape (1973: xi; see Ricou 1983). Much of that space directly influenced the creation of a sense of collective self by opposition, out of which there emerged the national consciousness, and the national literary consciousness, this latter transcending regional markers, as repeatedly pointed out by a long list of Canadian authorities during the nationalist boom and later (see Frye 1971; Atwood, 1972; Angus 1997). "Canadian nature is, first and foremost, a physical challenge", Irmscher proposed. "But it is also, because it follows none of the established rules, a challenge to the powers of the writer" (2004: 95), who automatically takes up a problematic stance from which to contribute to the twofold pedagogical/ performative effort of nation-state making via its bond with the preservation of culture. Not in vain, "[i]n Canadian literary history and criticism, literature has been to culture as culture is to nation", Renée Hulan writes. "Literature affirms the presence of culture, and culture in turn grants the nation legitimacy" (2003: 3), thus culture is one of the sustaining pillars of the nation as well as the most effective tool to deconstruct its ideology (Manning 2003: xxi). The writing of the prairies was prompt to adopt this role within the project of the Canadian nation-state and its pedagogy of a fractured territory of diversity under a precarious national unity.

3. The ineffability of the west

In the age of the local/global, the borders between the west and the prairies have blurred to admit a similar set of iterative basics in the representation of the landscape, on the one hand, and the interaction between the individual and the space around, on the other. In the meantime, the performative impulse of nation building increasingly shows its complacency with playfulness and the ironic inclusion of narratives that interrogate its own existence, in this way incorporating a very postmodern trend of deconstructive erasure and eventual ineffability.

In the US and Canada, the colonisation of the west acquires a unique morphology to become a “New World Myth”, one that “exchanges its traditional functions as transhistorical master narrative [...] for a function characterised by postmodern indeterminacy, complex postcolonial attitudes, a questioning of history and a developing self-consciousness that creates provisional and relative identities” (Vautier 1998: xxi). In different guises, these traits equally characterise Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy* (1997 [1996]) and Thomas Wharton’s *Icefields* (2005 [1997]) to be examined next. They also host a postmodern myth of westering that, through a double game of absence/presence, inscribes stories that analyse their own manufacture and fallibility. From the late 1990s of their launch, these novels anticipated many of the postcolonial trends of theory of the early 21st century: embedded in deeply local realities and inflected by the global scene, *The Englishman’s Boy* and *Icefields* produce a fracture in the time/space linearity of the national narrative; these novels intertextualise and play with a national illusion in times of national revisions. The reading and writing of the Canadian West that their pages contain is self-reflexive and brandishes an ongoing reflection on its participation in the discourse of nation. From the moment of their publication at the turn of the century, these novels look back to immediately look forth; they echo the voices of groundbreaking postmodern narratives of the west like Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man* (1969), Aritha van Herk’s *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (1986) or George Bowering’s *Caprice* (1988) and their *territorialized* self-conscious deconstructive impulses. They reuse the metafictional tendencies of the 1980s and 1990s and the growing awareness on the history-making processes and their role in the conformation of postcolonial societies in general, and Canadian societies in particular. Yet they also paved the way for a revision of the national through global lenses that opt for scrutinizing first the local grounds, thus simultaneously laying down the paths for much of the postcolonial theory produced in the initial decades of the present century.

The Englishman's Boy, to date Vanderhaege's "most daring and accomplished book" (Cooley 2002: 1162), dramatises different periods of the national and cultural definition in the US and Canada, paying special attention to western history and geography as bodies in dynamic processes of change and intervention. It brings to the fore the film-making of the western myth to support a 20th century American national self. In the novel, the Canadian script writer Harry Vincent is hired by the Hollywood film tycoon Damon Ira Chance to trace the life of the once legendary cowboy Shorty McAdoo as told by himself. In the 1920s, the present of the story, a decrepit McAdoo earns his living as a secondary actor in B-class western movies, but some fifty years earlier, the same McAdoo was a direct witness to some of the expansion episodes. Chance intends Shorty's western hardships to be the basis of the epic movie attempted by his studios: "Remember the frontier—how savagery answered savagery?" he questions. "Picture the lonely cabin in the forest, the eyes watching from the trees, waiting for the opportunity. The lonely hunter on the plain, naked in his solitude. The children hatched in the corn patch, the mutilated man in the grass. The wife raped. The barn burning, the cattle slaughtered, the carrion crows descending", he exhorts Shorty to follow his mediating prompts. "We did not fail that test" (Vanderhaege 1997: 255).

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The scriptwriter's search for the former cowboy's autobiography, however, is then rapidly mediated by Chance's interest in transforming some of the narratives that could undermine the reinforcement of the national consciousness being attempted. Such is the case of his biased rewriting of the Cypress Hills Massacre to exonerate the American fur traders involved in the slaughter of a group of Assiniboine Natives.⁶ The episode is one of those presented through the quasi-anonymous Englishman's Boy, a young McAdoo, who in effect offers the point of convergence between the present and past scenes of the novel.

Much of the story presented in *Besieged*, the title of the movie by Chance's studios, is a white-biased rewriting of the Cypress Hills Massacre. For Chance, the gang-rape of a Native girl proves especially troublesome, and, in control of the final product, demands from a reluctant Harry: "Rewrite it. Change the girl. The enemy is never human" (Vanderhaege 1997: 256). Unable to cope with Chance's demands for falsification, Harry will leave the script unfinished, and Chance takes upon himself the rewriting of McAdoo's life. At a moment of an American national crisis, the 1920s with a sense of decline after the economic boom brought about by WWI and accentuated by the 1929 crack, *The Englishman's Boy* portrays the performative impulse driven by the ideal of nation in its portrayal of the Hollywoodian film-making of a western epic. "It is the movies that have the chance of making everybody—the immigrants, the backwoods Kentuckian, the New York cab driver, maybe the Ivy League Professor, all feel [...] what it means to be American. The Constitution

and the Declaration of Independence are all very well, but constitutions make states, they don't make a people" (1997: 181). Chance's *Besieged* attempts to follow the paths of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), but here the cultural myth of the conquest of the west historiographically exhibits the process of its own fabrication, not to say falsification, in a classical, Canadian postmodern metafiction (see Hutcheon 1984; 1992; 2002; Colavincenzo 2003; Morrison 2003: 3-52). "Birth became America's history lesson on the Civil War. For the first time, everybody, rich and poor, Northerner and Southerner, native and immigrant, found themselves pupils in the same history class [...]. If Lincoln was the Great Emancipator, Griffiths is the Great Educator" (1997: 107).

In the course of its action, *The Englishman's Boy* criss-crosses the US-Canadian political borders and in its displacement comes to make of the cultural and national myths intertexts of its plots, while it also creates maps of continuous displacement that defy the coordinates of a unified nation and/or culture (see Kuester 2000). "I feel some guilt that I have not confessed to Chance that he is seeking help for making the great American film from a Canadian [...]. I have found that Americans [...] recognise no distinction between us" (1997: 111), reveals Vincent. The text envisions the west as a myth that is now more than ever aware of its condition, while acknowledging its power to homogenise the collective on both sides of the border. The megalomaniac film tycoon reveals in *The Englishman's Boy* that "myths are the only spurs to action, [...] a complex of pictures which express the deepest desire of a group. [The myth] is there to motivate people" (1997: 270).

Thomas Wharton's *Icefields* is a novel in which the postmodern western myth helps undermine the colonialist gaze through a revisionary and deconstructive reading of western space, portrayed as in continuous flow. As a matter of fact, *Icefields* presents the reader with stories that overlap, intertwine and impinge on each other to bring about false beginnings and partial ends, exactly like the process of freezing and thawing of the glacial territories in which the novel takes place, and whose morphology comes to shape the book's structure. Nevé, Moraine, Nunatak, Ablation Zone and Terminus are the sections that model the narrative as well as any glacier according to an accumulation of stories/sediments, and their fragmentation; Nunatak implies an observation vantage point, Ablation narrates the death of an explorer and Terminus proclaims both narrative culmination and the end of the glacier (Omhovère 2005: 46).

The glacier contaminates with its iterative temporality the many stories disseminated, producing a centre in continuous erasure; it locates all these accounts on the outskirts of Jasper, and, as a consequence of their very multiplicity, produces the opposite effect of dispersal and globalization of the local: the stories of the last Snake People of the area, the South Asian echoes brought to Jasper by the Victorian

Lord Sexmith and his Indian butler with his British accent, the narratives of biological preservation and the presence of progress in the form of a blooming tourist industry at the beginning of the 20th century. All that is rapidly called into question by the influence of a local myth that swirls around the tangible, casting doubt on itself. The spectre of uncertainty, thus, overshadows most of the stories told here, decentering history, the subject, and location. All that seems to be the side effect of an uncertain and repetitive geography, since “glacial dynamics reminds the observer that, far from being a static subject to behold, the landscape is subjected to erosion, and is produced through time, as are cultural representations of the landscape” (Omhovère 2005: 46; see Banting 2010).

The novel covers a time span between 1898 and 1923. It opens when Dr. Edward Byrne, a member of an exploration team, falls into a crevasse while climbing Arcturus Glacier. This accident leaves Byrne inarticulate for a while and unable to narrate what he saw in the icy darkness of the fissure, seemingly a female winged figure, blurred and of unclear origin. Rescued and lodged in a nearby hut till eventually evacuated to Edmonton, and later back to Britain, Byrne gets to know his temporary nurse Saravasti, the daughter of the local Snake woman, Athabasca, and Viraj, the former South Asian butler of the famous Victorian explorer of the region, Lord Sexmith. The conflation of the shock produced by being trapped in the crevasse and his inability to come to terms with the mythical stories told by his carer return Byrne to a pre-symbolic stage from which he is unable to understand the space and the local cultures around. Once back in England he recovers from that experience of ineffability by putting all the fragments together, and eventually returns to Jasper and becomes the chronicler of the progress of the area, narrating its evolution from mere stopover in the onward displacement west to a promising land of spa resorts after WW I.

The inadequacy of the English language to present the Canadian space proves as relevant as the juncture of space and time is productive, which balances the conflation of fact and fiction nourishing the novel, and both unmark their corresponding boundaries in a mutual act of self-reflexivity. Actual events such as Collie's expedition merge with others that are false, just as real and imaginary maps coalesce altogether with the visible and the characters' visions. Thus, in “A Note to the Reader”, we find that “this book is a work of fiction”, but turning the page, the reader finds two maps of the area, one of which is real. Similarly, in the section “Acknowledgements”, the author declares that he has used, among other sources, “Edward Byrne: A Life on Ice” by Yoshiro Kagami, which turns out to be a fictional reference (Wylie 2002: 292n34).

This calling into question of facts also overshadows the transparent representation of maps, on the one hand, and the clear demarcation of spatial benchmarks, on the

other. Maps are given a mythical quality that transcends their category as simple representations of geographical space on paper. It suffices to say that Lord Sexmith's expedition in search of new routes for gold is fuelled by the maps on Athabasca's palm. No less important, when seemingly established, certain spatial references may be subject to erasure, any location is questioned from several angles. Etymologically speaking there is no agreement on the origin of the name Jasper, "an early surveyor spelled it Jespare in his published journal. What local meaning this phrase has I don't know", Trask confesses. "But on one old map the region is labelled Despair, which might be a further corruption of the original French phrase" (Wharton 2005: 86). Neither is there any consensus on the physical spot that it occupies for Byrne, who, once back in the area after his period in Europe during the First War, finds the distance between the log houses and the riverbank greater than he had remembered it (Wharton 2005: 74). As with Jasper, some of the famous landmarks to which travellers have flocked are uncertain: Mount Arcturus remains to be conquered, and so does Mount Brown: "Find it or prove it a hoax", a fictional Collie explains. "It's been on every map in the empire for sixty years as the highest on this continent" (Wharton 2005: 18).

Icefields describes two contradictory movements, one repetitive predicated on the glacier space, and one linear which moves forth, as if drawn by the unquestionable path to progress. In Wharton's novel the ossified image of the Canadian plains, exemplified in Jasper's surroundings, cannot stand aloof any longer and gives in to the power of tourism, and early globalisation; the translation of cultural signifiers and the looming presence of sameness and the hybridity of spaces that globalisation has made popular. In his path through the dying glacier, Byrne finds a Calypso Orchid from some tropical climate. How it has come to Alberta remains a mystery, but its presence certainly speaks of the arrival of people from distant latitudes whose access to the regional space requires translation and interpretation, as well as an obvious customization of space for the sake of a booming industry that has transformed the frozen glaciers into zones of therapeutic treatments. In this state of affairs, an interpretation of space as mobile as the discourses predicated on it proves essential for the creation of postmodern myths of the west. These myths, with their volatile nature, their shiftiness and the impossibility of reifying signifiers are fundamental for new readings of the plains and the west.

From Margaret Laurence's *Manawaka Cycle* to *After the Harvest* (2005), Jeremy Podeswa's film adaptation of Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, now more *globalised* than ever; from her microcosmic *Agassiz Stories* (1987) to Sandra Birdsell's Mennonite diasporic *The Ruslander* (2001), prairie fiction has become a mosaic of many colours, whose polychromatic palette has been diversified centripetally by fictions such as Gail Anderson-Dargatz's family-farm narrative *The Cure for Death*

by *Lightning* (1996), or centrifugally by Margaret Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down With Peter* (2001), both of which reflect the productivity of the time/space juncture. Like Vanderhaege's text or Wharton's, these novels are inextricably connected to the local, and launched onto a global scene; in different forms, their times shatter the linearity of the national narrative and its supporting historical pillars, which are now set against each other with the consequent revealing of seams and unravelling of stitches. These novels produce a highly original reading of region, which, from its self-conscious reflection on its fabrication, playfully blinks at the national mirage of unity in times of dispersal and fracture. That reading of the Canadian West reflects on its own ontology and, from the intersection of its space and time, ruminates on its contribution to the discourse of nation. The nation, in turn, now read from transnational perspectives has relaxed its discursive limits to let the global impinge on its production. From the region to the international arena, inside out and outside in, the Canadian postcolonial brings about an abiding revision and reformulation of its premises to open its doors to the shifting realities of 21st-century Canadian societies.

Notes

¹. Brydon (2007) notices that students and critics of CanLit have been reiteratively analyzing the nation, and it is time to shift the critical attention onto the state to wonder how institutions encourage or constrain literary work, or, for example, if CanLit itself has become an institutionalized body with the mechanisms of book publishing, academic reviewing and teaching contributing to the solidification of a canon, and this, in turn, to the boosting of the nation-state paraphernalia. "The nation-state, which in Canada has a distinctive history that has shaped our culture and our values, is one of these institutions that should be neither dismissed nor underestimated", Brydon asserts to conclude by advocating a multiple-approach perspective that never loses sight of the literary. "Attention to the interactions of institutions, citizenship, and literature should complement but not replace attention to other dimensions of literary study" (2007: 3; see Pennee 2003).

². Launched in 2011, the Spanish *Canada and Beyond: A Journal of Canadian Literary and Cultural Studies* is fuelled by this transcultural impetus and directly tackles many of the issues that advocate a revision of nation in transcontinental terms (see <http://canada-and-beyond.com>). I am indebted to an anonymous referee for reminding me of the focus of *Canada and Beyond* and suggesting some other views that s/he may find reflected in this paper. I am also grateful to a second referee for providing me with a number of comments on previous versions of this paper that I have tried to incorporate through these pages.

³. The sense in which the term *worldly* is being used here is close to Edward Said's (2004: 41), as generally synonymous to *international*. In contrast, Spivak (1985) inscribed *worldly* in the implementation of imperialist policies, since for her it helps identify colonized spaces as marginal within an imperialist design (see Sugars 2010: 32; 45).

⁴. Although certainly outside the scope of this paper, Munro's story is home to a multitude of conflicting gender narratives, from the wayward trip by Parry to the futility it presumably announces, unveiled by the rapid, inescapable equation between herself and the furniture, both transported to displace a life of lonely domesticity in the east onto the west accompanied by a potential, as yet unaware fiancée, who accepts her when presented with no other option. The present and future lives that the protagonist envisions are however equally determined by the powerful alliance between patriarchy and the narrative of (western) colonization and the dual sketch of women's lives in both, a constraining reality far from mitigated by the crossing of space, from Ontario to Saskatchewan ending in Salmon Arm, B.C. Munro's fiction has recently been adapted to screen by Marc Poirier. The film *Hateship, Loveship* (2013), starring Kristen Wiig and Guy Pearce, was directed by Liza Johnson for the New Orleans-based IFC Films, produced by Dylan Sellers and premiered at the Toronto Cinema Festival (see Scott 2014).

⁵. Originally by the American The Village People, "Go West" (1979) did not reach the popularity of other hits of theirs. The remake issued by Pet Shop Boys in 1993, however, rapidly gained the status of a gay anthem that portrayed the west as a site free of sexual repression, and endowed with potential liberties, epitomized in the US city of San Francisco. The iconography with which the official video presented the single also extolled an image of communism in need of expansion over the west (see <http://www.petshopboys.co.uk/>), thus making the national and international coordinates of the west conflate. The encouragement to go west firstly launched by the photographer John P. Soule (1828-1904) to young American men also bespeaks the classical alliance of colonization, patriarchy, and, no less important, capitalism (see [\[mera.com/cgi-bin/librarium2/pm.cgi?action=app_display&app=datasheet&app_id=2400&\]\(http://historicca.com/cgi-bin/librarium2/pm.cgi?action=app_display&app=datasheet&app_id=2400&\)\), all of them governed by a reproductive zeal that the hymn by the British band definitely contests: it allures \(gay\) men to the west and exhorts them to establish there a land of communal well being, thus displacing and undermining the supporting pillars of the classical westward expansion, based, among other elements, on the settling of a \(heterosexual and heteronormative\) community in ongoing reproduction.](http://historicca</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁶. In 1873 a group of US wolfers, fur traders known to have poisoned buffalo carcasses and later to have collected the pelts of wolves and coyotes that had fed on the venomous meat, lost some horses while staying near Fort Benton. They blamed the Nakoda or Assiniboine who lived nearby and, seemingly drunk and intending to forcefully recover their property assaulted the Indian camp and killed some twenty. After being reported to the Canadian authorities, they fled south and were eventually exonerated by the American courts. The area between Montana, Alberta and Saskatchewan witnessed the almost free smuggling of whisky to sell it to the Natives of the area, as American and Canadian desperadoes infringed the Canadian law (see Vanderhaege 1997: 168). Similar irregularities and crimes against the British regulation, once the Hudson Bay Company lost its power on the zone, led to the creation of the Western Royal Canadian Mounted Police. *The Englishman's Boy* presents the account of the Blackfoot freighters and robbers to be read against the testimony of the wolfers, one of whom was the Englishman's boy later known as McAdoo. Winner of six Gemini Awards, Vanderhaege's novel on the making of a film script was turned into John N. Smith's CBC TV movie in 2008, starring Nicholas Campbell (see <http://www.canada.com/story.html?id=d38ad91c-4760-4f1c-b53e-030ec6d429c6>).

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