

“SPACE” INVASION: JEWISH CANADIAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE RESHAPING OF CANADIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Almost as quickly as the Canadian canon was put together with land as its central motif, it began to be dismantled in favour of new approaches to “space.” The (ab)use of land in Canadian writing became quickly linked to patriarchal and imperialist systems of control masked behind a guise of “universalism.” Jewish Canadian women writers provide an excellent example of space’s advantageous provision of unfixed, renewable literary images and a shifting environment within which one can work out complicated questions of identity. By setting fictional works in “Jewish chronotopes,” writers such as Anne Michaels and Nancy Richler in *Fugitive Pieces* and *Your Mouth is Lovely* demonstrate that a multicultural Canada will function when the spaces—even those outside of Canada—belonging to all its citizens are represented in Canadian literature.

KEY WORDS: Jewish Canadian Women Writers, Canadian literature, Canadian canon, Anne Michaels, Nancy Richler, multiculturalism, chronotopes.

RESUMEN

Casi al tiempo que se construía alrededor de “la tierra” como motivo principal, el canon canadiense empezaba a ser desmantelado por posiciones derivadas de los nuevos acercamientos al concepto de “espacio”. El (ab)uso del motivo de la tierra en la escritura canadiense se asoció rápidamente a sistemas de control patriarcales e imperialistas disfrazados de “universalidad”. Las escritoras canadienses de origen judío nos proporcionan un ejemplo excelente de la capacidad de propuestas literarias que se pueden establecer a través de la metáfora espacial, así como de la actual atmósfera cambiante en la que se pueden negociar complicadas cuestiones identitarias. Al ambientar sus trabajos de ficción en “cronotopos judíos”, escritoras como Anne Michaels con *Fugitive Pieces* y Nancy Richler con *Your Mouth Is Lovely* demuestran que un Canadá multicultural será posible sólo cuando todos los espacios—incluso aquellos fuera de Canadá—que pertenecen a todos sus ciudadanos estén representados en la literatura canadiense.

PALABRAS CLAVE: escritoras canadienses judías, literatura canadiense, canon canadiense, Anne Michaels, Nancy Richler, multiculturalismo, cronotopos.



1. INTRODUCTION: CONQUERING CANADIAN LAND

Images of Canada in the popular imagination inevitably include a vast wilderness and infinite, uninhabited areas. W.H. New, in *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence and Power in Canadian Writing*, observes: “Canadians, of course, have long thought of themselves in connection with the land. As scores of writings indicate, they are fascinated by distance and scenery, park and farm, property and region, river system and mountain range, ‘cottage country,’ [...] —all this in a largely urban society” (New 17). When Canadians began to think about who they were with the passing of the *Canadian Citizenship Act* in 1947,¹ it was assumed that one’s *Canadianness* came from adopting the characteristics of the landscape. A Northerner, a Maritimer, a Torontonion, then, became designations that brought with them certain connotations. With such a picture of itself and in a country so great, it naturally followed that Canada’s regional variation became one of the factors in its (now notorious) lack of a coherent national identity.

All nations are constructs; they are comprised of a fragile web of mythologies representing the “truths” of how they wish to be perceived (see, for example, Francis). Canada is, to use Anthony D. Smith’s term, a “nation by design.” Its conscious attempts to rise above its marginality —and the sense that its people did not know who they were— became evident when the creation of a literary culture and the institutionalisation of Canadian literature in schools and universities began to take place. Canadian nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s was marked by the country’s centennial, the Montreal Expo in 1967, economic security, a disdain for America’s attempts at cultural imperialism, and the refusal of first-generation immigrants who felt more at home than ever in Canada to get less than their due. The opening up of the gates for “non-preferred”² sources of immigration and the rights demanded and achieved by non-white immigrants gave Canadians a feeling of a promising future and the sense they were a fair, just, and peaceful society.

Despite the different ways people were living, writers and literary critics embraced this hopeful period and tried to uncover the Canadian identity by articulating through cultural products the Canadian “way of life.” What the ever-increasing body of Canadian works seemed to share was a recognition of the influence of land and landscape. Well-suited to the national consciousness that was in want of being developed, titles such as *The Mountain and the Valley*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*,

¹ As an invader-settler society, Canada was given the British nation as a provisional, temporary source of nationness until it achieved its own. Questions of nationalism arose after the passing of the 1947 *Canadian Citizenship Act*, and were then further exacerbated over the next two decades by other factors such as post-World War II immigration, Quebec nationalism, fear of American imperialism, and growing demands from peoples of the First Nations.

² “Non-preferred” immigrants included Asians, Blacks, Jews and some Southern Europeans, as opposed to the “preferred” British, American and Northern European immigrants. To learn more about Canada’s closed immigration policies, see Abella and Troper.

The Stone Angel, *People of the Deer*, and *The Last Barrier* were promptly compiled in a canon by chiefly white male professors, bureaucrats, editors, publishers and critics who, in trying to advance their own careers and justify their roles as canon-makers, were necessarily conservative (Lecker 5). Nonetheless, contextualising Canadian literature in order to define the national identity was considered crucial. The result was a rather quickly established canon, created within less than two decades.³ Consequently, Canadian wilderness and the need to take control of it became inseparable from the nation's literary products and, thereafter, with Canadian identity. Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality," describing all models of Canadianness as defensive ones,⁴ or Margaret Atwood's theory of survival which proposes that the underlying theme of all Canadian fiction is that of colonial victims trying to survive (Atwood), came to describe this consciously chosen collection of Canadian works.

Land in literature is never neutral, however; it is a reflection of how people choose to identify it. Meant only as a means to confirm a Canadian identity, New argues that it is retrospectively evident that the works collected into the Canadian canon began to (ab)use land as a medium through which plays for power could be enacted. Land was the battleground where the centre exuded its hegemony over the margin in struggles between men/women, European/First Nations, clearings/wilderness, property/nature and East/West. It was thus only a matter of time before land would be challenged as the central trope in Canadian literature. Necessarily, the works in the WASP male-dominated canon were contested by minority and First Nations authors by writing from the specificity of their community's experience and questioning the supposed universalist stance paraded by canonised voices (Mukherjee 164). What was once called universalist has since been deemed "white."

In 1971, Canada became a multicultural nation,⁵ an official recognition that there is not one way to be Canadian. The conventional treatment of land in

³ Publishing houses were also conspicuously involved in its codification. For instance, McClelland and Stewart's *New Canadian Library* series began in 1957 under the direction of Malcolm Ross. This is a collection of paperbacks specifically designed for accessibility in the classroom and was from its inception a means to teach the Canadian classics (a selection which was not yet made). The first four titles chosen for printing were Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*, Morley Callaghans's *Such is My Beloved*, Stephen Leacock's *Literary Lapses*, and Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*. (Please note the flavour of the authors' names). This series, as the first of its kind, defined which works would henceforth be deemed classics. The irony, however, was the backwards reaction that it enlisted, for the more unknown something was, the more it sold when it was eventually included in the series. Inclusion did much for profitability and ensured for the author a place in the canon. See: Lecker 187.

⁴ Frye describes the Canadian imagination as consisting of "small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological 'frontier' [...] such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality (Frye, 829).

⁵ In Pierre Trudeau's famous speech to the House of Commons in 1971, he proposed the concept of multiculturalism, to be lodged within a bilingual framework, in order to include the ever-increasing minority populations in the idea of what it means to be Canadian. In 1982, multiculturalism



Canadian literature was recognised as a stifling means of containment, a subtle subscription to patriarchal and imperial systems of control. New literary images that were unfixed, renewable, and flexible were being demanded by those who had truly begun to envision a Canada as a multicultural mosaic, a nation of belonging and equality for all groups. Almost as quickly as the Canadian canon was put together, it began to be dismantled in favour of new approaches to “space.”

Out of this desire to find a shifting environment within which one can work out complicated questions of identity, Jewish writing in Canada always provided a challenge to the tenuous hold Canadian literature had on land. Defiantly urban, works by early Jewish writers such as Mordecai Richler and Adele Wiseman addressed their Jewish communities in Montreal and Winnipeg, focussing on the immigrant experience of navigating through the new world burdened by old world values. Although it can be argued that the Jewish ghettos were somewhat “garrisoned,” the city is a text, amenable to revision, and therefore never stopped contesting the static image of wilderness as a foe to be conquered.

For the next few decades, the trend whereby Jewish writers textually explored Canadian cities as a means of understanding a hybrid identity continued. More recently, however, the spaces required for this investigation seem to belong to other times and places; subject matter is being replaced with stories from a past even older than arrival. Jewish Canadian women writers in particular have begun to sift through Jewish history in the hopes of “re-creating places of origin that have since been erased from the world” (Burstein 801). However, as Henri Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space*, no place ever completely disappears. The result is what can be called, to play with a term from Mikhail Bakhtin, “Jewish chronotopes.” These can be defined as socio-historical space-and-times, such as the *shtetl*, the Shoah, pre-Inquisition Spain, or, as in the following examples, the Russian Empire and a Canadian city, where there was once a Jewish presence that in literature becomes the site for an examination of Jewish life as valuable and intrinsic to that time and space. Situating their works in Jewish chronotopes, Jewish Canadian women writers preserve the collective past and create an identity for the present by participating in the continual revision of Jewish historiography. In so doing, they reveal layered histories and allow multiple voices to be heard.

By illustrating through their overlapping and stratified understanding of space how there are innumerable ways of being Jewish, these women writers also indicate that there are a myriad of ways to be Canadian. Jewish Canadian writers such as Anne Michaels and Nancy Richler treat space in their novels as something to be transgressed, reshaped, and shared. Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) is comprised of Shoah survivor Jakob Beer’s fictional memoirs, relaying his path of healing that began with his rescue and subsequent adoption as a child by the Greek

lism was officially adopted into Canada’s constitution in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Bill C-93, the official *Multiculturalism Act*, followed in 1988.

archaeologist Athanasios Roussos (Athos). Jakob and his surrogate father move from Poland to Greece and finally to Toronto, a city harbouring a wealth of histories. The Jewish chronotope of post-war Toronto demonstrates that, as a place of refuge for some of the Shoah's survivors, the only way to compete with those who "devoured time as well as space" (Michaels 104) with their concept of *Lebensraum* is to recover repressed memories (Criglington 13). In Nancy Richler's *Your Mouth is Lovely* (2002), Miriam, a young exiled Jewish revolutionary, in hopes of giving her child a sense of identity and personal history, tries to find her voice by composing her life story. Miriam's quest parallels Canadian literature's own struggle to come into its multicultural literary voice; it is a slow realisation that a single story—of a life or a national identity—can be told in a number of ways, drawing from diverging, competing, interwoven and often contradictory narratives.

2. THE JEWISH CHRONOTOPE IN *FUGITIVE PIECES*

Jewish Canadian women writers such as Anne Michaels have demonstrated that space has replaced land's centrality in Canadian literature. As a group, their understanding of space is manifested in Jewish chronotopes, thus requiring a brief explanation of this literary phenomenon. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests in his theory of chronotopes that it is through each "genre"—a tool for perceiving reality through a particular socio-historic setting⁶—that a distinctive understanding of time, space and human action is conveyed. When this understanding is conceptualised in literary expression, it becomes a chronotope. Chronotopes suggest that the ever-changing present alters the relationship to the past; the present is re-orientated when looking backwards.

Literary chronotopes, as ideal sources of memory, propose a similar method of looking backwards through time. Rather than passively recording histories, they present "history as a permanent reactivation of the past in a critique of the present, and at the level of content offers a textual anamnesis for the hitherto ignored, unacknowledged or repressed pasts marginalised by the dominant histories—feminist narratives, ethnic narratives, non-heterosexual narratives" (Middleton and Woods 77). The chronotope is thus a realm of memory rooted in a real socio-historic time-space that offers a podium for the hushed voices of the past and, in Walter Benjamin's words, "blast[s] open the continuum of history" (Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 396). Meredith Anna Criglington demonstrates how Anne Michaels's novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, through its idea of "spatial consciousness" which is in direct opposition to the nineteenth-century conviction of an accumulating past, also rejects the idea of inevitability and suggests instead the existence of space and simultaneity

⁶ Examples of quotidian genres are telephone conversations or shopping lists.

(Criglinton 11). By engaging in memory and employing chronotopes, the goal of novels such as *Fugitive Pieces* is to recover the pasts that have been silenced and subdued.

The function of chronotopes is that they materialise time and space. Michaels's work also demonstrates time made palpable in what she has called the "gradual instant." In *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob explains: "Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant" (77). Defining the concept in an interview, Michaels elaborates on how the tangible evidence of change only appears sudden: "[...] in the present moment, a mountain seems permanent, static, but is, in fact, part of a geological narrative, even though the process is infinitesimally slow" (Gorjup 2). The earth, too, is not immutable as time and space were once considered.

Einstein's theory of relativity, where space and time are woven into a single fabric and space-time is always a variable, is thus introduced as leitmotif in the novel. Indeed, as Yi-Fu Tuan demonstrated in the 1970s, "place [is] time made visible" because one's experience determines how space will be perceived (Yi-Fu Tuan 179). In *Fugitive Pieces*, Athos gives Jakob hope by teaching him to look to the ground, backwards through vertical time: "Redemption through cataclysm; what had once been transformed might be transformed again" (101). Michaels seems to be rooting her concept of possible redemption in the philosophy of Walter Benjamin. When history is viewed as progress, then the past is necessarily sacrificed to the future, an idea to which Benjamin is opposed. For Benjamin, history is the interruption of time, not its culmination. He objects to the Enlightenment's idea of progress and believes continuity in history to be merely an illusion. His aim is to save the past from the one-dimensional interpretation of the victorious side. Bakhtin's theory, like Benjamin's, by giving equal significance to space as well as time, also suggests multiple pasts and a plurality of voices. Each past has as much right to be voiced as any other. In literature, the chronotope becomes a channel for Benjamin's "messianic time"—the redemption of history—because it gives the past a chance to speak. The opportunity for restitution is thus presented through rectifying former silencing.

3. FUGITIVE PIECES AND THE MULTICULTURAL CITY

Time is the fourth dimension of space, so when Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* says: "I was transfixed by the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds" (30), Anne Michaels entreats her readers to see the *pasts* that history's winners left unwritten. It is not just space and time that are essential to a chronotope, but also the memory attached to them; it is dedicated remembrance that breathes life into chronotopes. As Bakhtin suggests, all temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable, influenced by emotion and values (Bakhtin 243). Michaels's view of memory is thus an ethical one: "History is amoral; events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers" (138).



What individuals choose to remember determines who they are. It is how one works with the raw material of space-time that an individual's identity begins to take shape. Since "space and time have gained subjectivity by being oriented to man," this fabric can be worked and reworked to construct an identity (Tuan 123). By portraying post-war Toronto as a Jewish chronotope —a city with a lively Jewish population embracing the wave of arrivals knowing far too much death— Michaels demonstrates that the multicultural Canadian city is one of many spaces in which a Canadian identity can be rewritten.

When Jakob and Athos move to Toronto where Athos has accepted a job in the geography department of the University of Toronto, they take weekly walks which are to them "escapes to ideal landscapes; lakes and primeval forests so long gone they could never be taken away from us" (102). During their walks through ravines and to ancient First Nations sites, Athos and Jakob "collapse time" (159) as they look through the earth's layers towards the past. As a chronotope, the city of Toronto bears concealed and "forsaken worlds" (89), and it is there that Athos decides to write *Bearing False Witness*, "his conscience" (104), the work that will come to define him. *Bearing False Witness* exposes the atrocious actions of the *Ahnenerbe*.⁷ He writes the academic treatise, "thick as a small dictionary" (209), in order to right the wrongs of abused history and provide reconstructions of the now-vanished landscapes and cities that were victims of Nazi *Lebensraum*. Athos and Jakob understand this need to prevent the loss of the past and are what Benjamin has dubbed "subjects of knowledge," that is, one who recognises that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious" (Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 391). In *Bearing False Witness*, Athos fights against linear historiography by exposing repressed memories. Meanings and interpretations become important to this hermeneutics of the past. Jakob finds a twin sufferer in Athos, bound by their compassion for landscapes that expose a history of affliction and which encourage them to reveal hidden pasts. It is their spatial explorations of many places' layered narratives, stories and memories that allow Jakob and Athos to investigate their own identities.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, memory is at morality's front because it acts as a realm of intercession. Memory is a spatial form that indicates the possibility of simultaneity, of multiple frames of reference, and of the coexistence of the past and present (Criglington 18). In *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels exposes, through use of physical metaphors, the power of the earth's memory. She explains the need to turn the earth's deposits into analogy:

I think metaphor also has to be firmly, firmly grounded in physical reality. So for me, an abstract metaphor is a useless thing. It has to be concrete, physical. It has to work as a concrete, physical image first, and then move into the abstract. And it's

⁷ The *Ahnenerbe* was the "Ancestral Heritage Research Group" formed by Nazi Heinrich Himmler in 1935 to prove the superiority of the Aryan race through archaeology and other sciences.

a way of ...it gives more of a chance to find some, in this case, some peace, or some way of living with certain events. For Jakob, the idea that the earth or stones can actually hold memory physically —concretely hold memory— provides a certain respite for him, because in a way he knows if he's not carrying it, it will be carried elsewhere. (Michaels, personal interview)

As Jakob Beer's memoirs that form the first two-thirds of the novel make evident, the present is never free of the past. Athos's gift to Jakob is that he "confirmed that there was an invisible world, just as real as what's evident. Full-grown forests still and silent, whole cities, under a sky of mud." (49). However, land is important to *Fugitive Pieces* only in so far that it is affected by time, memory and one's relationship to it. In other words, land in *Fugitive Pieces* is the physical representation of spatial history, a retainer of countless stories. The land that manages to heal Jakob is not the majestic but also terrifying wilderness of the early Canadian canon; it is a space within which one can assert an identity by selecting stories to retrieve from the past.

Toronto, as a chronotope of a city, is a space that bears traces of repressed or "failed" histories (Criglington 13). The cityscape, "an endlessly layered urban space," is a material form of memory and its ruins make readers consider the invisible worlds that were destroyed in the course of history-making (Kandiyoti 322). Toronto is not just a "new world," but also a very old one (Kandiyoti 324). Toronto's pasts, its revealed spaces of buried and abandoned voices, become part of Jakob's history. When Athos helps him review the Hebrew alphabet, he explains to Jakob that: "It is your future you are remembering" (21), and the same happens when they search through Toronto's layered history. Not only does Jakob take on Toronto's pasts, but Toronto also adopts his. Toronto, as the chapter heading suggests, is "The Way Station." It is a port city necessarily marked by its comings and goings, a space that supports exchange, negotiation, mediation and fluidity.

What the theme of space-time relativity in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* means for multiculturalism in Canada is a recognition that immigrants and members of various ethnic or minority communities have a differing experience of Canadian space. Canadian women writers in general have traditionally been known to display a "multivoiced aspect of Canadian fiction" in order to metaphorise Canada's "problem of identity [that] may not be the problem of having no identity but rather of having multiple identities, so that any single national self-image is reductive and always open to revision" (Howells 126). Chronotopic literature such as *Fugitive Pieces* thus reveals otherwise suppressed histories and memories belonging to those who were long denied a voice. If Canadian literature comes to accept all cultural or national spaces of memory, articulating space as a part of a multilayered Canadian history, then a truly "unified" national identity of multiculturalism will emerge. *Fugitive Pieces*, a novel that crosses the borders of three nations and digs deep through the earth to find hidden meanings, demonstrates that a multicultural Canada needs space as its central literary motif precisely for its subjective, inclusive, and unfixed qualities.



4. FINDING A VOICE IN *YOUR MOUTH IS LOVELY*

Novelist Nancy Richler also employs Jewish chronotopes in her fiction, thus substantiating space's relevance and predominance over land as the chief trope in Canadian writing. Richler's *Your Mouth is Lovely* recounts the fictional memoirs of the political convict Miriam in the wake of the failed revolution of 1905. As she wastes away with tuberculosis in Maltzev, a prison in Siberia, Miriam is determined to write out her life story for her daughter, whom she barely caught a glimpse of after delivering her while in police custody. Miriam undertakes this arduous task so that the child can one day understand the mother she will never meet. Growing up in the 1890s, Miriam is an intelligent but lonely girl in a Ukrainian shtetl, whose frail bird-like frame can barely sustain the weight of the cursed stories that comprise her past. As a result of her mother's suicide by drowning the day after her birth, she is raised by a superstitious wet-nurse until her widowed father remarries and finally reclaims her. In Aaron Lev's and his new bride Tsila's home, Miriam enters a house full of love and knowledge, a space of comfort and calm drastically juxtaposed to the shame and alienation she is made to feel in the town. A series of accidents lead her to join the revolutionary movement in Kiev.

Richler's *Your Mouth is Lovely* features the revisioning of narratives—biblical, cultural, familial and political—that shape its characters while they fight to have their voices heard. Even the novel's title is part of a prayer for eloquence and wisdom, for a “smooth [...] tongue” (Richler 61). Miriam's need to write her life story as she sits in a Siberian *katorga* seems to be an admission that people can only understand themselves when they know where they come from. One revisits the past in order to root his or her identity in a particular space and time; identity is who people are, and historiography is how they came to be (Gilman 3). That Miriam's life is a constant struggle to resolve and understand both mimics how the novel is the product of a writer who, from her position in twenty-first century Vancouver, seeks to connect to a cultural past she only knows through narratives. As Richler explores the Russian Revolution as a Jewish chronotope, she is contributing to a Jewish identity for a Canadian present by providing one of many possible histories. She also confirms that questions of Canadian identity need not be solved in a strictly Canadian space.

Throughout the novel, Miriam is guided by an irrepressible need to discover her voice and thus a means to tell her story. As a small child, lost amidst a crowd of noisy children in the wet-nurse Lipsa's house, she is virtually anonymous. Significantly, the day she moves in with her father and stepmother Tsila, she develops a sore throat that prevents her from speaking. As her illness worsens, her voice threatens to disappear altogether, until Tsila promises: “Your daughter will speak, Aaron Lev. I will lead her to words.” (34). One of Tsila's offerings to Miriam is to teach her how to defy the narratives of the past that threaten to silence and disfigure her. As Tsila restores her to health and helps Miriam find her voice—physically and emotionally—she also heals Miriam of her debilitating past by uncovering some of its buried truths. What Miriam learns is that a single story can be told in a myriad

of ways. Miriam also ascertains that the voice she has found is not hers alone. It encompasses the call of those who have disappeared, those whose voices were once unjustly suppressed by the Czarist regime.

The most important moral that Tsila teaches Miriam is that “‘The beauty of life is not always obvious.’ [...] ‘But it must be found. That is our task here. To find the beauty of His work and make it manifest’” (166). Tsila’s wisdom comes in direct conflict with the revolutionary motto that inverts a kabbalistic maxim in its efforts to justify “necessary” political assassinations: “destruction births creation” (4, 180). Ominously, the dynamite Wolf gives his new friend Miriam to hide is “[o]nly seven pounds, but powerful,” (180) —exactly the weight of a healthy newborn baby. Miriam is at first unable to believe in Tsila’s love of life. When she sees a window of opportunity, she spontaneously runs off to Kiev in an attempt to get rid of the burden of her past in the anonymity of a big city. The stories she has chosen to see are the family’s tales of death and disappointment, their miscarried dreams. Yet the more destruction Miriam witnesses while in Kiev, the more she comes to value Tsila’s words and her stories of faith. In her memoirs, Miriam tells her daughter, whom she has named Hayya, which means “life”: “It was life I turned my hopes to [...] which I placed all my faith and dreams for the future. Remember that, if not my name” (145). Miriam is explaining to Hayya that to truly honour someone’s memory, one must commemorate the deceased’s life and all it contained, not just that person’s death.

5. NARRATIVE FREEDOM

The Jewish revolutionaries in *Your Mouth is Lovely* want to rewrite history and thus become a part of it. They know that “there was another life beneath the one that was obviously visible” (187) and they plan to unbury it. In order to uncover the layered pasts, which will reveal the lives and stories of the marginalised, the Jewish *narodniki* need to rework the narratives that have, until then, shaped their people. For example, it is explained to Miriam that even though it is said Jews stay up all night on the holiday Shavuot to study the Torah, in order to demonstrate a devotion that was not shown when they fell asleep at Mount Sinai, the Jews have never really woken up: “As a people we’ve tended to dwell in the past and ignore the future. For centuries we’ve done that, and where has it gotten us?” (105). To rewrite history, they know, these revolutionists need to forge a new future by rebuilding society. They echo Walter Benjamin, who insists that “[t]he concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (Benjamin, “N9a,1” 473). The utopian society they hope to achieve will refuse the imperial interpretation of history and accept different readings of the past. Revolution will not bring progress, but it has the potential to create subjects of knowledge who will continually look to save from the past stories that will benefit the future. When the voices of the revolutionaries cried out in unison for change, these voices also included those of the starved, the oppressed, the incarcerated and the murdered that had once been so unceremoniously silenced.



Miriam knows that consumption will conquer her in the end,⁸ an inevitability of loss that haunts the pages of *Your Mouth is Lovely*. Though she has spent several months preparing her life story, she forces a fellow inmate to promise that she will burn it after Miriam is dead. Miriam feels the letters to her daughter will be safer “unfastened from the static order I’ve imposed on them, free to form and reform all the truths of who I was, I am. And then you’ll understand,” she appeals to her daughter Hayya, “If you’ll just remember to raise your eyes to look” (336). Miriam is liberating her memories of narrative form so that in the future they can be sought out, put together, and revealed. A linear account of her life as recorded in her Siberian memoirs could never divulge an “official” truth. It would be better, as in the legend Tsila once told her about, to set the words free. She describes this tale:

When the temple was destroyed the letters of the Holy Scrolls flew into the sky. Tsila didn’t tell me what the letters did up there, or if they sprouted wings, but I imagined that they did sprout wings and then turned into birds. I would watch the birds that wheeled and dove in the marshes and fields around me and know that they were the scattered letters of the Holy Scrolls, the secret of creation, *forming and reforming* in the sky, and we just had to lift our eyes to see it. (emphasis added, 306)

Narratives have the power to create and to destroy lives. Writing one’s life and family stories may “coalesce in a single act,” as Paul John Eakin suggests (179), but Miriam’s act of sabotage on her own life story also emphasises the importance of retrieval from absence. Retrospectively, one can see that Miriam’s entries have been leading up to her decision to burn the memoirs:

I had hoped, when I started, to create for you what my own mother denied me. An understanding of who I was, how I lived, how you came to be. A voice from the silence of death. But as I’ve put my pen to paper, day by day, week by week, I see only the gaps in what I’ve written, the distortions, the falseness of trying to impose one version of truth on a life. / Here, for example, are several versions of one moment, each one as true and as false as the next: your father was faithless, but I was taken with him anyway. I had no love for your father but took pleasure in his touch. I was a girl and your father violated my innocence. I took pride in luring your father from Bayla. (335)

There are always many versions of the truth; if one moment cannot be judged as finite, then how can an entire history? Miriam does not want to fix and contain her life. She does not want the responsibility of imposing shackles onto her story. She never really felt as though she were the author of her life as she lived it, and though she knows she must take responsibility for her actions, hers is a complex tale made up of a web of relations.

⁸ In 1912, as Miriam writes her memoirs, she is suffering from consumption. It can be assumed that, due to the poor prison conditions and lack of treatment, she will not live long enough to see 1917’s general amnesty that would have freed her of her life sentence.

Miriam changes her mind about presenting her daughter with a written life because she learns in exile that she does not need a printed testimony to prove that she exists—she needs only to be remembered. Although Miriam believes that people can only know who they are if they know where they come from, she concludes that she is not denying her daughter a historiography, but rather creating for her a space of interpretation within which she is to unravel her roots. It is only within absence that buried truths can be found. Mothers and daughters may be bound by family stories, but a mother's story does not equal a daughter's destiny, because, though these narratives influence a child's life, they do not forbid being read in a variety of ways. Miriam will die in Siberia, but she will not be forgotten due to the stories about her that Hayya will want to salvage from the past. To properly honour the dead, one must seek out the stories of their lives. Hayya will then have the choice of which stories to adopt. In this way, though the revolution may not have brought restitution, in Walter Benjamin's terms, there is still the chance of messianic redemption by saving the past from obliteration.

Miriam's longing for a voice and her choice to destroy its written incarnation symbolises Richler's attempts with *Your Mouth is Lovely* to tell only one of the many pasts that belongs to Jewish history. Miriam's story, like any story in a Jewish chronotope, can be told in a thousand ways. It is also interdependent with the stories of others: the female prisoners in Miriam's cell, the Russians alongside whom she fought, the Canadian reader moved by her account. If identity is who people are and historiography is how they came to be, it must be noted that the suffix "graphy" suggests that what is written needs to be *read*, underscoring the importance to identity of narrative. Community is not bound to place, and the identity of a place is also unfixed (See, for example, Massey). There is no solitary story behind the present Canadian identity, and all the times and spaces of Canadians' various pasts are valuable since they belong to those included in the definition of a multicultural Canada.⁹ Land as the focus of Canadian literature is limited to its constructed, human-made borders. Canadian literature therefore needs to represent the identity provided to Canada through its constitutional multiculturalism by including the varied spaces that are important to its people.

6. CONCLUSION: REDEFINING CANADIAN SPACES

Canada has a spatial history because its pledge of multiculturalism has replaced a static view of the past by allowing immigrants and ethnic or cultural groups to inhabit—through their narratives—more than one space. That Anne Michaels

⁹ I have taken this argument up in more detail in "Adopting Canada: The Multiculturalism Debate and the Writing of Michael Ondaatje," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* [Journal of Canadian Studies] 27.2 (2007): 43-57.

and Nancy Richler employ Jewish chronotopes in their novels is an expression of their comfort with straddling time and space. Since collective memory greatly informs collective life in the present, Jewish Canadian women writers who engage in Jewish chronotopes are helping to create a Jewish-Canadian identity for the present. In turn, Canada's multicultural identity is further enriched by their cultural contributions.

Space allows for deviations from what was once seen as universal because it defies the laws of physics where land cannot: space allows stories to be non-linear, multilayered and intertwined with those of others. To be Canadian by the alleged stipulations of multiculturalism is to house and encourage a range of competing voices, preventing dissolution into a single monologic truth. The support of numerous voices includes those that may be spoken in a space outside of Canada and beyond the present age. Multiculturalism encourages dynamic contact with former ancestral spaces as perceived in the collective memories of its various communities. In so doing, it accentuates that identity is fluid and relational, and informed and shaped by selected narratives. Identity is never monolithic, nor are the narratives that influence it. Land at the centre of Canadian literature has thus been forced to shift; the "universality" of the canon has been challenged.

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