

OUTING THE CANON. TERRY GOLDIE. *Pink Snow: Homotextual Possibilities in Canadian Fiction*. Peterborough (Ontario): Broadview, 2003.

From the turn of the century on, a number of critical volumes on Canadian culture and fiction have insisted emphatically on a more or less overt *reconfiguration* or *refiguration* of the national and postcolonial identities of Canada. Accordingly, we would be bearing witnesses to, on the one hand, a significant reshaping of the borders that delimit the aforementioned categories, and on the other, new ways of imagining these identities<sup>1</sup>.

Aspiring neither to an explicit reconfiguration nor refiguration from its title, Terry Goldie's *Pink Snow: Homotextual Possibilities in Canadian Fiction* (2003) proposes a somehow similar transformation, but of the literary canon, which is inextricably connected to the forms of imagining a national tradition. In its eleven chapters dedicated to John Richardson's *Wacousta, or the Prophecy: A Tale of the Canadas* (1832), Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* (1941), W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1967), Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Scott Symons' *Place D'Armes* (1967), Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* (1970), Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1978), David Watmough's *Thy Mother's Glass* (1992), Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), *Pink Snow* traces a curvaceous path along the way of the Canadian literary tradition to eventually accomplish a further turn on itself and analyse a number of texts that have hardly entered the disputed scope of the Canadian canon. Going in and out of that site of contest, Goldie's study negotiates anew the borders of that territory, especially through the section

entitled «Conclusion», which, far from being a closure, discusses some gay writers like Peter McGehee, Stan Persky, Sky Gilbert and Dennis Denisoff. Finally, the section «L'Envoi» examines the future that lies ahead of marked sexual options, once projects like the Queer Nation have vanished.

Before these concluding remarks, the distinct symbol of Canadianness, snow, dyes pink to embrace a mode of reading that Goldie terms *homotextual*. Such an analysis decodes the silences and gaps covering issues of male-to-male desire in the texts, and, needless to say, is nourished by recent queer theory. Like Goldie's reading, queer theory «confounds the categories that license sexual normativity through its demonstration that (homo)sexuality is a discursive effect», and, as such, likely to be intervened, remoulded and contested.<sup>2</sup> Much of the same can be stated on the national spirit underlying the ossification of the literary canon. If, as the author states in his opening, outing is the process whereby someone's dissident sexuality is publicly revealed (4-5), here the canon undergoes that process of unveiling the counter normative desire in some of its master texts. Then, in *outing the canon*, its constituents and the texts that have never crossed its threshold are located at a similar level; every identity is relative, and sexual identities are no exception. Therefore, the sexual other lies within the self, producing one of the most telling refigurations and reconfigurations seen recently in the field of Canadian studies.

As Goldie explains in his introduction, his objective is not the creation of a homosexual literary tradition in Canada; he avoids biographical references on private lives to centre on the possibilities displayed by a markedly gay reading (2-3). As a result, the author intends to inscribe a distinctly minority representation in texts taught and published from a heteronormative stance that supports the myth of a mas-

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Maufort & Franca Bellarsi, eds., *Reconfigurations: Postcolonial Literatures and Canadian Identities* (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2002) and Coral Ann Howells, *Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (New York: Macmillan, 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> James N. Brown, «Queer Theory,» *Encyclopaedia of Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. John C. Hawley (Westport: Greenwood, 2001) 370.



culinist construction of tradition, not to mention the consequent, and, biologically speaking, necessary, feminisation of nation and land. Only in this way, it is possible to uphold the myth of the conqueror, the penetration and domestication of the landscape, and eventually, the setting and the further reproduction of the establishment, the people and the nation. Nevertheless, in this notion of progress as biological reproduction there is no place for male-to-male desire. In this way, the literary canon, as pedagogical/performative instrument for the (re)production of the nation as one, coherent collective, reveals its vested grounds, ones that Goldie exposes in his sexualised exegesis.

The parallel deployment of masculinity and nation and/as collective in these texts reveals productive, since it is possible to appreciate how these formations go hand in hand or part ways when the configuration of masculinity does not fulfil the ideal heteronormative. Then, both entities bifurcate and the spectre of otherness provides the necessary tools for the regeneration of the group's borders. The fear of otherness and the expulsion from the collective imaginary guides chapters one, two and three, on John Richardson's *Wacousta*, Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* and W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. While in «The Guise of Friendship», the camaraderie between Colonel de Haldimar and the *gone-native* Wacousta, formerly the British soldier Reginald Morton, is interpreted as a homoerotic bond *disguised* through the presence of the disputed Clara, "Not Precisely Gay in Tone" reads the ways in which the heterosexual establishment of Horizon polices Mrs. Bentley's and her husband Philip's accomplishment of gender and sexual normativity. The interdiction in the pages of Ross' diarist is the same that silences Brian's attraction for Ben in *Who Has Seen the Wind*. "Pursuing the Homosocial Ideal", as the third chapter is entitled, reveals the suffocating lack of space for dissidence between the female land and the male order of the establishment, the polarity being paramount for the working of the gender categories that ease the reproduction of the collective. This structure, as Goldie shows, is common to other stories by Mitchell, even more prone to a queer reading,

but significantly, there is no mention of *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* (1981), a text also apt to such a sexualised approach.

If the young Brian opts for repression and asexuality in the light of the prohibited desire, David, the artist and protagonist in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, purports to perform the heterosexual, but his failure leads him to a more fruitful closeness to Toby. "The Pain of David's Body," chapter four, as well as "How Am I Queer?," chapter seven devoted to Davies' *Fifth Business*, tackle some other aspects of a presumed homosexuality that, without being far from the national or collective construction, relegate it to a secondary order. First, unknowing is underlined as a creative and conflicting motor in David's artistic text, and then, the disruption of the social order is brought to the fore in Goldie's analysis of Dunstan Ramsay, Davies' protagonist. On the one hand, very much as Brian does in Mitchell's text, David respects the homosocial and homophobic order of his Nova Scotian community, but instead of asexuality, develops a powerful knot to Toby. His incapacity to create, very much in keeping with his inability to openly live without the communal control, transforms David into an outcast whose target of climbing the nearby mountain is accomplished as previous to his death. Although, as Goldie states, "[...] there is certainly no defining point at which he can be said to be gay" (91), it is hard to overlook the connection between his unfulfilled desire and his eventual demise.

On the other, Goldie's reading of *Fifth Business* brings back the Renaissance image of the sodomite as a fracture in the social order, which is metonymically embodied in marriage and reproduction. Ramsay, like David, can hardly be called gay, but his mixture of repulsion and homophobia for the queer in its many versions makes him also a *queer* one. The game of performance in which he enters with his sexual partner, the androgynous Liesl, reveals that his horror of queers hides his attraction for them. In this aspect of performing, he is not different from David, and both of them render queer theory and Goldie's homotextuality a field not only of arguable possibilities, but also, of scarce certainties.

Uncertainty is precisely one of the consequences of the pervasive questioning of language and referentiality brought about by *Beautiful Losers*. “Producing Losers,” chapter five, states that the novel is not about homosexuality, but about the sex of men (95). And indeed, although men have same-sex sexual intercourses in its pages, Leonard Cohen’s text is more akin to a total interrogation of identity, be it class, gender or sexuality. Not in vain, *Beautiful Losers* and its radical postmodernism of the late 1960s resorted to everything unorthodox, from scatology to lack of closure, to erase the marks of identity. Reading the novel through queer lenses is not only possible, but of necessity, given this volume’s concern with queering the canon.

The novels by Symons, Findley and Watmough studied in chapters six, eight and nine are examples of the paradoxical functioning of the literary canon as far as sexuality is concerned. The three of them happen to be gay, Symons and Watmough dedicating more prominence to sexual orientation in their novels than Findley. Indeed the paradox sharpens when realising that Symons is a defender of conservative Quebecois views of nation as a coherent collective, whereas Watmough, in a quasi ethnographic form, depicts the lives of bourgeois gay men on the West Coast. Chapters six and nine, “The Canadian Assoul” and “What is Davey Bryant Doing Here?” ascertain that Symons’ belonging to a presumed Canadian nobility heir to postulates of ethnic purity, and Watmough’s Cornish Saxon ethnicity were more prevalent than their sexual dissidence when the literary establishment allowed their coming into the canon. Findley’s *The Wars*, nowadays more entrenched in the dominant curriculum than Watmough’s or Symons’ fictions, offers a different perspective. As deeply ingrained in the context of World War I, it problematises a number of values that highly contributed to the strengthening of a national Canadian spirit around the war. Findley’s Robert Ross’ dissidence goes beyond the sexual and enters into the terrain of treachery and desertion. Although seldom does Goldie deal with these reasons in “The Canadian HomoSEXual,” they were of relevance when hindering the novel’s former inclusion in the disputed canon.

Speaking from their ethnic otherness, Selvadurai’s and Highway’s texts will hardly be considered as *Canadian* without a modifier clearing up their belonging to the South Asian or Cree social groups. *Funny Boy* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* are examined in the last two chapters, “The Funniness of the Funny Boy” and “Eaten Up,” where Goldie reads their postcoloniality more clearly than in any of the precedent fictions. Are they more postcolonial than Findley’s or Richardson’s, to name but a few? At least, in different ways, and this adds to their ex-centric character. The coming of age of the Sri Lankan gay and the brutality with which the Residential Catholic System overwhelmed the First Nations’ cultures and subjectivities are indeed issues to be dealt with *otherwise*, distinct from Watmough’s middle-aged men and their personal crises of identity. From the almost end of the book, these two chapters also remind the reader and critic of the dangers of any homogenisation, be it of gender, sexuality or the post-colonial condition, and Goldie’s analysis of these texts proves very aware.

Through his reading of authors like Mitchell together with Symons or Highway, Goldie’s homotextual approach denaturalises the heterosexual matrix underlying the Canadian literary tradition, and subsequent assumptions linking the national spirit to biological reproduction and heterosexuality. This project of interrogating established identities has led the way of postcolonial and gender critiques for years, and, presumably, it will continue to do so in the light of studies like *Pink Snow*. Like a part of queer theory, homotextual readings, create “[...] a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of cultural production and reception.”<sup>3</sup> They also broaden the way in the prevalent deconstruction of the national spirit and its performative and pedagogical instruments, thus helping in the steadfast re(con)figuration of nations and peoples.

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, “Queer Theory” 373.