

A male giant violating the Earth: communal spirit, sexual dissidence, and regional colour in twentieth-century Canadian prairie fiction¹

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ABSTRACT

When it is still a matter of debate, the gendered and sexual dimension of the national discourse is currently fostering attention onto the gendered constituent of other modern collectives like region or locality. In the light of the opening of the national entity to these features, this paper explores the collective constitution in the regional sphere through a sample of twentieth-century Canadian prairie fiction. This scope uncovers as a territory of gender and sexual ambivalence where the symbolic communal narrative is confronted with the semiotic traces deriving from the individual's attachment to the (mother-) land. For the sake of its own renewal, the communal self puts in practice an abiding mechanism of self-regeneration that lays bare the dynamics of reproduction of the same and homogenisation of the different, while it endlessly displaces an other erected in terms of sexuality and dissidence from the communal heteronorm.

Key words: community, region, sexuality, sexual dissidence, Canadian fiction.

Un gigante violando a la tierra: espíritu comunal, disidencia sexual y color regional en la ficción de las praderas canadienses en el siglo XX

RESUMEN

Cuando aún es un debate abierto, la dimensión genérica y sexual del discurso nacional ha atraído cierta atención hacia la relevancia del constituyente genérico en la formación de otros colectivos modernos como la región o la localidad. A la luz de la apertura de la entidad nacional a estos rasgos, este artículo explora la constitución colectiva en la esfera regional a través de una muestra de la ficción canadiense de las planicies escrita en el siglo xx. Este ámbito sale a la luz ahora como uno de ambivalencia genérico-sexual en el que la narrativa comunal simbólica choca con las huellas provenientes del apego semiótico individual a la (madre) tierra. En aras de su propia renovación, el ser comunal pone en práctica un mecanismo de auto-regeneración que descubre la reproducción de lo idéntico y la homogenización de lo diferente, mientras que desplaza a un otro cimentado sobre un patrón de sexualidad y disidencia de la heteronorma comunal.

Palabras clave: comunidad, región, sexualidad, disidencia sexual, narrativa canadiense.

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*“I mourn the loss of an age of innocence”
How I Spent my Summer Holidays.*

The reconceptualisation of the discourses of nation and nationalism sharpened in the post-Cold War period gave prominence to gender and sexual orientation and exposed the phallogocentric nature of the old discourses of nation. The new gendered dimension of the nation challenges the binary partition between public and private spheres, emphasises the interrelation between masculinity, femininity and the constitution of the modern collective, and evinces the recurrent recourse to the female individual for national and state consolidation (Ranchod-Nilsson & Tétreault 2000: 1-17)². Therefore, it is not only that “every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms” (Anderson 2000: 2), but every national and communal definition has a gender/sexual agenda demanding critical attention. In a country like Canada where the post-Enlightenment European national entity has been unable to cope with the disparity of the social groups gathered under the political state, and where any national foundation is always competing with the relevance of regional entities, a study of the intersection between sexuality and the constitution of the regional and local community is in place. It shows, on the one hand, the transformations undergone by the nation, since “national identities shift and change. The idea of a nation is a fantasmatic imagining that misrepresents the diversity that exists within the borders it names” (Eisenstein 2000: 35). On the other, it unveils that, unlike the national one, the regional and/or local community is a territory where the masculinist narrative of the symbolic organisation coalesces with semiotic disruptions construed as the attachment and influences of the (mother-)land³. This should not lead to a binary consideration of the Semiotic

² Yuval-Davies is more assertive when establishing the role of women in the modern national community as “bearer of the collective” (2000: 27). For Tracey Sedinger, the tension between feminist demands and the masculine hegemony in the discourse of nation has resulted in the tendency to imagine the feminine as a collective willing to part with the national formation (2002: 53). Significantly, whereas the narrative of national belonging is masculine and masculinist, the nation is usually produced as a female entity, a mother or wife (Martín Lucas 2000: 163); a female body either in need of penetration or protection from being penetrated. “Woman has often represented in imaginary form” the nation, Tracey Sedinger affirms, “but because women form a paradoxical class whose solidarity cannot be forged through symbolic identifications, the nation-trope remains unsuitable for the representation of women as a social collective” (2002: 54). The national construction in the feminine ensures the existence and preservation of an entity that can be mastered and likely to accept the imposition of male sovereignty (see Eisenstein 2000; Howells 1987; McClintock 1995; Yuval-Davies 2000). Therefore, as Anthony Easthope states, “[...] nationalism is masculine in the way it marks such a hard line between inside and outside, treating the body and the ego as fixed, self-sufficient”. For him, nationalism “fits perfectly with the masculine ego and the masculine body, so that each overlaps and confirms the other” (1990: 56).

³ The relation mother-baby that Kristeva has defined as semiotic illustrates here the special relation that the individual has with the surrounding land in prairie fiction. In the same form that fluidity and lack of boundaries characterise the maternal, and the child has to constitute itself as linguistic entity to enter into the paternal symbolic, the prairie appears as a realm of unregulation, sexually luring the subject to the non-entity of the semiotic. The censored sexual drives gain strength in the sight of the mother(land), and their repression informs the communal unconscious in opposition to which the conscious organisation is established (see Kristeva 1989). Therefore, the subject is always between two confronted dispositions that make of it a *questionable* entity (Roudiez 1989: 17), of uncertain affiliations. As it happens in the constitution of the individual subject, entry into the communal symbolic is compulsory under the threat of castration, which “constitutes the symbolic field and all beings inscribed therein” (Kristeva 1990: 198).

and Symbolic processes, since any gendered identity stems from a difficult balance between them. However, the struggle between the symbolic territorialisations of communal subjectivity and its semiotic deterritorialisations taint regional prairie fiction with a distinct local colour.

Much Canadian fiction of local and regional flavour portrays a community based on the elaboration of a pattern self/other. In this sense, national, local and personal identities share the figuration of the other or the emptying out of this category for the safekeeping of the ideological border of every identity⁴. It is through the fashioning of this mirage of identity that gender and sexual orientation are *manipulated* in the fabrication of the national or communal imaginary. As a result, stereotypical configurations of gender and sexuality (e.g. heteronormative masculinities and femininities, reproduction-oriented sexualities, etc.) are willingly included within the communal spirit, whereas certain sexual practices and atypical gender formations (e.g. homosexuality, bisexuality, domineering femininities, submissive masculinities, etc.) are either reduced to a level of otherness and/or dissidence (see Dollimore 1991), or subjected to discursive interdiction (e.g. pederasty, zoophilia). This implies that the creation of the communal subject and its other is mediated by the articulation of regulating desires that locate these figures in a zone between the public discourse of community and the seemingly private discourse of sexuality.

This paper examines the bearing of sexuality on the constitution of the communal and regional spirit. This scope uncovers as a territory of gender and sexual ambivalence where the symbolic communal narrative is confronted with the semiotic traces deriving from the individual's attachment to the (mother-) land. First, a discussion of *Wild Geese* (1989 [1925]), by Martha Ostenso, and two short stories by Sandra Birdsell, "The rock garden" and "Night travellers", (1984 [1982]) brings about the ways in which the community resorts to a two-fold mechanism of homogeneity and difference for its self-definition. In that process of identification, the position of border occupied by women and their bodies is essential, since the biological reproduction of the group or an imposed moral and social cohesion largely rest on the control of the space of the female body. Finally, we analyse W.O. Mitchell's *How I Spent my Summer Holidays* (1982 [1981]) and Sinclair Ross' *As for Me and My House* (1991 [1941]) in order to postulate

⁴ Turner (1995) affirms that the Europeans emptied out the category of the other in their encounter with the land and the people of America, thus giving the colonisers a supremacist stance to appropriate space, culture and the natives' territories. Angus (1997) defines English-Canadian culture as based on the necessity to keep the border between the Other and 'one's own'. Conventionally, this Other, as opposed to the other, is not an alter ego but a radical opposite to the self and fundamental in its constitution (Angus 1997: 105). As opposed to their others, Quebec or the Native Canadians, English Canadians have problematically located this Other in the wilderness. For Angus, the distinction between self/Other is based on the split in/out, which is basically European, but in Canada the wilderness, the outside sphere, is *inside*, in the origin of the settlement. This principle is essential in the Canadian philosophy of the wild and in its difference from the American frontier mentality. The latter relies on a negation of the Other by means of its conquest and following settlement whereas the former keeps the border visible intending a circumscription of the self (Angus 1997: 125-129). This double consciousness is presented in Canadian fiction in a recurrent on the border situation or through movement between the settlement and the frightening beyond. Atwood's *Surfacing* (1971), Marian Engel's *Bear* (1978), Jane Urquhart's *Away* (1993) and Munro's "Meneseteung" and "A wilderness station", in *Friend of my Youth* (1990) and *Open Secrets* (1995), respectively, are some examples among many others.

that the communal self relies on the figure of its other, the sexually different and/or dissident. The ways in which these two novels deal with issues of sexual dissidence show an intimate connection between identity and otherness, subjectivity and its collapse, as well as a direct relation between them and sexual practices.

The intersection between the local colour of the fictions discussed in the following pages and the global world in which these narratives are marketed underlines that “[i]n a late capitalist world influenced by fragmentary postmodern styles of thought, sexual identities are undergoing such rapid transformation that the sexological and psychoanalytic classifications that were once readily accepted are starting to look redundant” (Bristow 1997: 11). Simultaneously, the proliferation of local communities in Canadian fiction proves that the cohesion of the communal and its rupture are a frequent topos attesting to the overwhelming connection between the local community and its power on the actions of the individual as well as the individual’s importance in preserving the moral, social frontiers of the community⁵.

Many of these invisible frontiers are inextricably connected to the bodies of women. The policing practices the body is subjected to have been allied to the patriarchal surveillance of the female body, as a means of protecting the female or the biological reproducer of the community (Yuval-Davies 2000: 27)⁶. The grafting of biology, sexuality, difference and communal homogeneity on women’s bodies strengthens the assumption that, like any group subjectivity, “nationhood is constructed in and through psychic identities that institutionalise difference. People live and experience their identity through their bodies; the physical and psychic knowing of their sex, gender and race. Women are the boundary subjects defining this process” (Kristeva 1993: 35).

⁵ The well known microcosmos of Elgin in Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *The Imperialist* (1904), Mariposa in Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1911), Hanratty and Jubilee in Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1971) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), Nadeau in Carol Shields’ *Swann* (1987), Hasting Mills in Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* (1988), Carona in Sandra Birdsell’s novel *The Chrome Suite* (1992), Agassiz in her short-story cycles, or Manawaka in the five novels that Margaret Laurence included in her regional sagas underline the local colour of much of the fiction published in Canada in the twentieth century.

⁶ In Canada, such vigilance became apparent in the enactment of the Janet Smith Bill, which forbade immigrant Chinese men to work beside white women. The origin of the segregationist decision was in the murder of a white woman, Janet Smith, allegedly committed by a Chinese, though never solved (see Chan 1983). The promulgation of the act was a racist attempt to prevent the contact between the theoretically external to the community and the reproductive vehicle of the white sector. The community acquired in this way a presumed coherence in terms of skin colour. A number of fictions produced by the Chinese-Canadian community and chronologically situated in this period include references to Janet Smith. Such is the case of Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1991) or Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995). The articulation of the law took place in a sexual and social context deeply influenced by the ideas put forward by Havelock Ellis. In the six volumes forming his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1913), Ellis constructs female sexuality as irremediably subordinated to the masculine one. Thus, pairs like agency/passivity and conqueror/conquered structured a heterosexual intercourse, the first element corresponding to a male ascription. Force is never delegitimated to consummate the conquest and there is certain emphasis on the role of victim attributed to the woman, who, nevertheless, enjoys being conquered. According to Ellis, much of the male arousal rests on this feature of submission of the female counterpart (quoted in Jackson 1991: 57). Paternalism and protection underlie the promulgation of any similar law, which reifies the female body, turning it into a centre of possession and pleasure, and adopting the narrative of the erotisation of female oppression (Jackson 1991: 52-81). This unveils itself as an entanglement of social and historical circumstances whose presence can be detected back to Rousseau’s work and even earlier (see Seidler 1991).

Ostenso's *Wild Geese* partially engages the mentioned surveillance on the female body, as sexual desire and the patriarchal constraint of the human collective all conflate on the novel's heroine, the young rebellious Judith Gare. The novel presents us with a micro-community of farmers inside Oeland, a town stranded in the prairies of Manitoba and mostly populated by first and second generation Norwegian Canadians. The open confrontation that Judith maintains with her father Caleb unveils the strange relation between father and daughter as well as Caleb's subjugation of his terrified wife Amelia and the rest of his offspring, Ellen, Charlie and Martin. Unlike her tamed brothers and sister, Judith employs her body and the free ride of her sexuality to interrupt the text of the compulsory communal cohesion. "[S]he had a great, defiant body, her chest high and broad as a boy's; her hair was wild-locked and black and shone on top of her head with a bluish lustre", notices the newly arrived teacher Lind Archer. "[H]er eyes were in sullen repose now, long and narrow; her lips were rich and drooped at the corners. She wore overalls and a heavy sweater, and stood squarely on her feet, as if prepared to take or give a blow" (Ostenso 1989: 8).

In connection with the already mentioned interruption, the knot between Judith and Caleb undermines the Freudian design of the Oedipic and the bearing of desire on the organisation of family and community. Instead of the expected approach to the desired object-father, Judith is willing to break the bond, and it is Caleb that shows a strange obsession with dominating his daughter. His impossibility to do so undermines his masculinity, which is no longer the solidified basis of the social organisation. Hence that masculinity cannot help being threatened by Caleb's almost sexual tie to the land. Judith, in turn, seems to be in the middle of the Freudian archetypal structure: whereas she repudiates her mother Amelia for her evident castration, which prevents her from disputing Caleb the control of the phallus, she also hates Caleb for his iron-fisted rule and possession of the family's lives. The father's excess of authority fails to conceal, however, a patent sexual incapacity that renders him unable to approach his wife. Thus, "Caleb's sexual frustration is rooted in his inability to possess his wife, who has had a child previously, and who, though she submits to his sexual needs, denies him the passion he seeks. Perversely, he seeks solace in the land and his sexuality turns death seeking" (Arnason 1989: 306). Indeed, that sexual incapacity that questions Caleb's masculinity and his link to the prairies intertwine at the end of the novel in his returning to the (mother-)land and being literally swallowed by the Gares' swamp.

Judith also breaks the schema of paternal authority in a different way. Echoing the path of her biblical antecedent, Holofernes' murderer, Judith intends to behead her father. And, even though her attempted decapitation of Caleb fails, *Wild Geese* attains the eventual interruption of the Canadian romance of the wild prairie and its masculine overtones by giving prevalence to Judith and her body, her escape from the law of the father, and her dissent with the community of farmers that disregard her as the overtly sexual⁷. For the observer Archer, "the high romance which had attended her

⁷ This rupture of the romance of the land that Woodcock terms "the regional idyll" (1981: 31), has been considered as a typical feature of post World War I Canadian fiction. In complicating in many and different ways the issue of the benevolent land and its relegation of women, regional novels by female writers like Laura

setting out for this isolated spot in the north country was woefully deserting her. She had never before looked upon the naked image of hate. Here it was in the eyes of a seventeen-year old girl” (Ostenso 1989: 10).

Judith’s fierce opposition to the father and her acquired and defended agency are supported by her physical might. That power binds the girl to the land in a semiotic nexus that challenges the symbolic constitution, defies the paternal order and ruptures the patriarchal organisation of family and state. In the same sense, Judith epitomises the uncontrolled of the maternal drives, the antithesis of the conscious and the presumed rational. In this respect, nothing is more telling of the Kristevan choric tie with the mother(-land) than Judith’s lying naked in the middle of the woods revitalising the forbidden bond. Her image, as close to the land, but unwilling to possess or be possessed, reminds one of the absence of phallocentrism implied in this binding:

not knowing fully what she was doing, Judith took off all her clothing and lay flat on the damp ground with the waxy feeling of new, sullen vegetation under her. She needed to escape, to fly from something – she knew not what. [...]. Oh, how knowing the bare earth was, as if it might have a heart and a mind hidden here in the woods. The fields that Caleb tilled had no tenderness, she knew. But here was something forbiddenly beautiful, secret as one’s own body. (Ostenso 1989: 61)

Despite being an outsider in the Gares’ place, Archer is prompt in assessing the split between Judith and her father, as well as the impossibility of conciliation between the female land she embodies and the masculine community of which he is an emblem. Like these two, the patriarchal symbolic that rules the communal formation and the gender unmarked semiotic stand apart from each other as processes in which the subject passes from the non-constitution to being a linguistic entity. In Lind’s words, “Judith, vivid and terrible, who seemed the embryonic ecstasy of all life; and Caleb, who could not be characterised in the terms of human virtue or human vice, and a spiritual counterpart of the land, as harsh, as demanding, as tyrannical as the very soil from which he drew his existence” (Ostenso 1989: 35). Significantly, however, the land to which Caleb is attached does not seem to be the one that Judith cherishes as the overriding principle leading her desires. In contrast, Caleb’s masculinity depends on the control of his subdued femininity that he sees reflected in the land and his daughter. To have both of them at bay is the form in which his masculinity survives its border, negative identification. In other words, Caleb’s masculinity is imprisoned between, on the one hand, the female entities of his daughter and the land, and, on the other, his performance of the father and gatekeeper of the moral law of the family and community. According to what he says, “Judith, yes, she was a problem. She had some of his own will, and she hated the soil ... was beginning to think she was meant for other things... getting high notions, was Judith. She would have to be broken. She owed him something... owed the soil something” (Ostenso 1989: 20). In his

Goodman Salverson’s *The Viking Heart* (1923) or Adele Wiseman’s *The Sacrifice* (1956) turn that idyllic affair with their setting into the intertext of other concerns like the settlement of Icelandic and Jewish communities in Manitoba.

struggle to control things feminine around him, Judith's unaccepted relation to Sven Sandbo is a challenge for Caleb. When he surprises them making love in the surrounding woods, where the realm of the land deprives Caleb of his patriarchal dominance on the household, he imprisons his daughter and provokes her attempted parricide. As it happens between Caleb and his daughter, the sexual intercourse between Sven and Judith reproduces the contest between men and the land of the prairies. Not in vain, the novel is prolific in images that parallel Judith to bulls awakening to their sexual might, tied stallions and the land of the vast emptiness unwillingly hosting men. Judith herself, while riding across the family's property, claims:

here was the prairie, spare as an empty platter – no there was the solitary figure of a man upon it, like a meagre offering of earth to heaven [...]. The sky above it all was blue and tremendous, a vast country for proud birds that were ever on the wing, seeking, seeking. And a little delicate wing that was like a woman, [...], but could in a moment become a male giant violating the earth. (Ostenso 1989: 138)

The powerful image of the prairie simultaneously serves to describe the ways in which the symbolic organisation of the regional and local community *rapes* the maternal binding to the earth. As in Judith's graphic scene, the symbolic phallus penetrates the limitless field of the maternal relation to constitute the subject as social entity. This social subject, in turn, protects that same constitution by banning any irruption of the semiotic unregulated desire. Caleb's control of his female tie to the land and the sexuality of his daughters and wife reinforce the existence of a process of identification in which the masculine needs the other for its self-constitution. In that process of desire and suppression, the other, be it the maternal, the female or the land, has to be controlled for the personal masculine and communal identity to survive. Yet the other, here materialised in Judith's free sexuality and her non-acceptance of the role of community reproducer, needs to be there for the process of identification to proceed. Caleb's interest in dominating Judith and her will can only stem from the acknowledgement of her body as essential for the community and its reproduction, but also from the role that her body and sexuality play in his own mirage of self and identity. As Sidonie Smith states in a wider context:

[r]einvested in limits and impermeabilities, the body serves as the margin joining and separating the subject and the other, the inner and the outer [...]. It is this politics of the body's borders that determines the complex relationship of individuals to their bodies, to the bodies of others, to fantasies of the founding subject, and to the body politics. (1994: 269)

Sandra Birdsell's short-story cycle *Night Travellers* provides another instance of that identification in process of renewal as the family formed by the Métis Maurice Lafreniere, the Mennonite Mika and their children continually negotiate their hybrid site in the thirteen stories that form the collection. Yet it is "The rock garden" and the title-piece "Night travellers" that directly address the vigilance on women's bodies and their relevance as border for the cohesion of the community. In "The rock garden", the unexplained proliferation of small rocks in the family's yard arouses the suspicion

of one of the Lafreniere girls, the narrator Lureen, whereas her sister Betty is more concerned with an overt flirtation with the neighbour Laurence. Extremely jealous of the attention paid by the boy to her older sister, Lureen reports the event to her mother so that Mika will put an end to the interest the teenager has taken in Betty. Betty's *unladylike* behaviour, Mika sustains, has come from Maurice's family side, where women are "hard and coarse", giving men the impression that they do not deserve respect, "that you're Fair Game. Like a female dog in heat" (Birdsell 1984: 65).

Meanwhile, the mystery of the river rocks unveils that they are Mika's. Tired of her family duties, the mother dedicates a whole day to painting the stones of her rock garden. While in the story of that title, Mika protects her daughter's body from being appropriated by the non-Mennonite Laurence, in "Night travellers", it is her own body that becomes a site of contest. Narrated from her own perspective, the story now solves the puzzle of the rocks by unravelling that Mika picks them up at night when she leaves home to furtively meet her lover James. On her way to him, she is surprised by her father, who has realised that his daughter is maintaining an illicit affair when her husband is working out, and reproachful, he rebukes: "[w]e are a community'. [...]. 'People united by our belief, like a family. When one member hurts, the whole family suffers'" (Birdsell 1984: 82). In letting the outsider James cross the body/border of the Mennonite community, Mika has transgressed the law of cohesion and has been unfaithful to her husband, retaliating in this way for the infidelity that Maurice concealed from her in the story "Boundary lines". However, she is prey to symbolic patriarchy in attributing women the role of border and blaming on *other* women, Maurice's Indian relatives, the trespassing of the border for disposing of their bodies. In so doing, Mika homogenises the female difference of Mennonite and Métis women for the perpetuation of the communal spirit. In Birdsell's stories, like in the local communities of many Canadian regional fictions, the materiality with which sexual practices govern the bodies on which they inscribe indicate that the body turns into a threshold for social relations with what lies outside the communal, or into a metonymic frontier that may allow the entrance in the social realm of threatening others (Butler 1993: 1-2; see Caplan 1991). These *others* do not necessarily have to be tabooed sexualities, but can also include any practice that transgresses the heteronormative code. Accordingly, and as Butler comments in the context of homosexual practices, "if the body is synecdochal for the social system *per se* or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment [...]" (1990: 132).

In contrast to the bodies/borders provided by women in Ostenso's and Birdsell's fictions, two novels distanced from each other by forty years, W.O. Mitchell's *How I Spent my Summer Holidays* and Sinclair Ross' *As for Me and My House*, exemplify how sexual dissidence is at the core of the heteronormative community, which uses that dissidence to differentiate itself from the threatening other and construct an illusion of coherent subjectivity. As part of that process, the different is banished, thus returning the seemingly homogeneous community to its normalcy. Whereas Ross uses covert homosexuality to cross the border of the religious and lay human collective of Horizon, Mitchell reads sexual dissidence through the naïve eyes of his infantile narrator, Hugh. Consequently, in both novels sexuality turns out to be "[...] much more than a facet

of human nature, the seat of pleasure and desire". These novels advanced the contemporary relevance of sexuality as "[...] a principle of explanation whose effects can be discerned, in different ways, in virtually any stage and predicament of human life, shaping our capacity to act and setting the limits to what we can think and do" (Glover & Kaplan 2000: xii; also Weeks 1991: 3).

While in Birdsell's stories Mika and her husband have agreed not to talk about Maurice's Métis family, and in Ostenso's "[...] the Indians were always ready to predict evil for the white settlers" (1989: 175), Mitchell's fiction purports an alliance between the indigene and the rupture of the heteronormative rule. This locates the racialised body and the dissident sexual body at similar levels, where the instances of difference and dissidence lead to the formalisation of a perverse dynamics. Accordingly, every discursive formation inherently contains its opposite, suppressed but necessary for its own definition, and therefore, the white contains the red, the heterosexual, the homosexual and the masculine is indebted to the feminine (Dollimore 1991: 33).

Reading *How I Spent my Summer Holidays* in this way offers the possibility of appreciating how the Métis Kingsley Spurgeon Motherwell represents in his hybridity a threat to the community. His difference and dissidence from the collective self are retrospectively reconstructed by Hugh in his travel from Toronto to his Saskatchewan homeland, from the present to "the events on the summer of 1924 [that] accelerated the irreversible corruption of my innocence. That was the year I was twelve, and there should have been a rage in Heaven" (Mitchell 1982: 4). The biblical echoes with which Hugh opens his narrative are a prelude to the connection that the novel makes between the sexually banned, madness, and their presence in the God-fearing town. As the novel progresses, however, those connections gain strength, since the town makes room for a mental hospital, a conspicuous brothel and a Christian sect, the Holy Rollers, but also for illicit relations between their public representatives as observed, and not fully realised, by the group of candid male teenagers that enjoy their summer vacation swimming naked in the local river. They constitute a voyeuristic spectacle for the eyes of the mental sanatorium patients, a place "[...] phallic with cat-tails, frogs nudging their snouts and bump eyes through a green gruel of algae [...]" (Mitchell 1982: 8). This landscape of corrupted naivety is reinforced by Hugh's dream at the opening of the novel, which introduces the spectre of pedophilia: "[t]here is an operating-room objectivity, yet not for humanitarian reasons; there is no mistaking the ominous intent here. They are child anuses, small and closed. Now they have opened like mushroom to reveal their chocolate gills" (Mitchell 1982: 2).

The bizarre sexual practices are confirmed in the course of the novel as immersed in the everyday activities that define the town's life. Hugh, as a direct spectator of how the community renews its assumed self by linking it to the virginity of the surrounding space, also bears witness to the continuous undermining of that self because its other, far from being outside, lives inside it. In the child's words, "here was the melodramatic part of the earth's skin that had stained me during my litmus years, fixing my inner and outer perspective, dictating the terms of the fragile identity contract I would have with myself for the rest of my life" (Mitchell 1982: 8). Much of that identity contract is fixed in sexual terms. As a teenager, Hugh is enslaved by a view of masculinity defined by strength, rudeness and the visibility that materialises in his genitals. Hence

the rituals of swimming naked turn into the form in which he and his chums formulate precepts of leadership and manhood. Bathing naked and comparing his body to his friends' allows Hugh to define himself as (ab)normal, and to his misfortune, he happens to see himself as inferior to his peers. "I was *all* small, particularly where it mattered most to me" (Mitchell 1982: 9), he says. His performance of masculinity as visibility appears faulty, as it is evident when in the company of Peter D. Cooper, he whitens the front of his body with clay. When his partner imitates him, it is clearly stated that their masculinity is iterative, imitative and has a collective basis (see Butler 1990, 1993), but significantly, the boys dye their whole bodies white except their crotches and penises, where the traditional performance of adult masculinity requires that the pubic zone be darkened by hair.

In the same way that Hugh's performance looks for models, he also searches for the myths from which to differentiate his masculinity. His will of body acknowledgement leads him to masturbation and the consequent stigma. Once he learns that the practice is socially banned, the child is prompt in assuring the involuntary nature of his ejaculation while he was trying to enlarge the object of his inadequate masculinity. "I also hoped that no one would ever find out what I have done; I tried not to think about it for fear that people might guess it from my face [...]" (Mitchell 1982: 11). In the boy's mind, the linkage between a deviated masculinity and masturbation fosters that between madness and onanism, which leads the reader back to the scenery of the mental hospital.

It is precisely in this ambience of *official abnormality* that the model of masculinity he imitates most, the Métis Kinsley Spurgeon's, dazzles Hugh. King replaces Hugh's father in the child's value scale, despite the fact that the community has never accepted his presence. Aware of his border position, King seems to cultivate it by mirroring the white, two-fold impulse of *fear and temptation* (see Goldie 1989) as embodied in his personal commandment, "Thou shalt not shalt not" (Mitchell 1982: 23). Some years Hugh's senior, King rapidly initiates a homoerotic relation with the boy where the almost paternal image with which Hugh endows him is not incompatible with sexual appeal. In this context, Hugh's words uttered from the present acquire a special sense: "I hoped then that he would not haunt me for envy. I hope now that he has haunted me for over half a century – only for love" (Mitchell 1982: 28). Such a paterno-filial liaison is obscured by the presence of Bella, King's wife and part-time prostitute in the local brothel, giving way to one of the structures of male-male-female triangulation of desires that frequently populate Canadian fiction (see Dickinson 1999). In this case, Hugh projects his desire onto King, who, in turn, desires Bella, although this might conceal a mutual attraction for Hugh. This desire is shaped in phallic form when, after swimming with King, Hugh recalls the vision of the Indian's naked tattooed body in which a serpent departs from his groin to reach his chest. The Biblical resonance attached to the serpent as the embodiment of evil and temptation and the sexual implications of an uncertain image that equivocally describes King's penis and tattoo overpower Hugh's presumed innocence:

Now I could get a good look at the serpent: vein blue and faint rust-pink and green it came out of the black bush of his pubic hair; scaled and about half as thick as my wrist, it coiled around his belly button and then up under his left nipple and across his chest

to loop round his right nipple. The flat head with its almond eyes and forked tongue was cradled in the hollow of his throat just over his sternum. (Mitchell 1982: 21)

Racialised and extremely sexualised, King's image oscillates between the other and the Other of the community (Angus 1997: 106), the alter ego of the communal self and the fierce opposite to any communal subjectivity. The figure of the Indian stands for the outsider who cannot be permitted entry into the group that defines itself by opposition to him. In this same context of censoring the different, the dissident and the abnormal, Hugh's father does not say a word in the local gazette on William Lyon Mackenzie King's visit to town arguing that he is a "covert pedophiliac". He, in turn, favours Wilfried Laurier for being French and liberal, he justifies (Mitchell 1982: 31).

Rather than political preference, this act of semi-institutional silence covers the interdiction of the sexually dissident and the extremely sexual, the same constituents that overshadow the fatal events in the novel. Thus, when the mental patient Bill the Shepard escapes and is sheltered by the boys in their cave, he is given a lamb for his personal and morbid tranquillity by the group of benefactors. Their silence of the episode is similar to the one found in the sudden end to Mrs. Inspector Kydd's fondness for Hugh's mother. Much the same happens with Kydd's friendship with Bella, Bella's death, allegedly a crime committed by Bill, and with Bill's murder by an enraged King who is eventually secluded in the mental hospital. The silenced representation of the community's sexual other in all these cases, present *but not quite*, is finally instanced in the figures of Mr. and Mrs. Inspector Kydd, whom the group of boys usually see galloping across the prairie and hunting coyotes. Significantly, they do so riding black, lashed, and sexually willing studs, and followed by Alsatian dogs whose sexual might Hugh frequently reports. The extreme sexualisation of the two figures incarnating the axes of communal order is parallel to sexual dissidence, since Mrs. Inspector Kydd is a lesbian. Her sexual orientation unveils once again the already mentioned perverse dynamics of the other within the same.

As Mitchell's fiction silences the sexual other as a means of sustaining the communal subjectivity, Ross's classic *As for Me and My House* brings to the fore how that same interdiction is present in the diary of its protagonist, Mrs. Bentley. She strives with her own pages to conceal her thoughts and avoid the despondency resulting from revealing the sexually censored and the consequent community's disdain. In the novel, Mrs. Bentley, who lacks a first name and therefore acquires her identity in terms of her marriage to the vicar Philip, portrays in depth her husband's lack of affection, his silences as well as Philip's attraction for Steve Kulanich, an orphan of Catholic Hungarian origin⁸. Because of his religious affiliation, Steve suffers the community's distrust,

⁸ For Dickinson (1999: 18), *As for Me and My House* exemplifies literary travestism. Drawing on Madeleine Kahn's *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (1991), Dickinson sees Ross' text as a vehicle for the gendered-sexually indeterminate space between author and writing-subject. This space produces an evident rupture between authors like Defoe or Richardson and their protagonists Roxana and Clarissa. Accordingly, Ross' novel further exemplifies that literary travestism, here sharpened by the unavoidable intentional fallacy that immerses the author's life and homosexuality in his creation. Keith Fraser's *As for Me and My Body: A Memoir of Sinclair Ross* (1997) delves into Ross' biography, and is as to date the text that has paid more attention to his homosexuality.

and Philip Bentley, its Protestant authority, takes upon himself the child's protection, an action that locates him on the margin of a "fundamentalist town" (Ross 1991: 146).

As for Me and My House is set at the end of the 1920s in the Saskatchewan town of Horizon, a name conjoining a presumed visibility, and, at the same time, a slippery tangibility, like Mrs. Bentley's evanescent figure. When the new preacher and his wife occupy the post left by the previous vicar, Mrs. Bentley tackles the year-and-a-half-span narration covering the Bentleys' period in Horizon. Through this document that both reveals and conceals information, we learn that Philip is an unsuccessful painter and writer whose incapacity to create has a bearing on his introverted character. His frustrations determine Philip's attitude to his wife and render futile her attempted access to her spouse: "I wish I could reach him", Mrs. Bentley explains, "but it is like the wilderness outside of night and sky and prairie, with this one little spot of Horizon hung up lost in its immensity. He's as lost and alone" (Ross 1991: 34). In the midst of her desperation Bentley had recourse to her husband's writing as a door to Philip, "[...] and all through his clumsy manuscript I read himself" (Ross 1991: 39-40). Yet, instead of the way to Philip, she found there an obtuse set of reflections that reinforced his impenetrability. Philip's devoting his life to God is in the end a sign of the openness that he pursues, but that increasingly immerses him in a hermetic shell, isolates his wife and reinforces the idea that the vicar's masculinity goes hand in hand with "an essentially negative identity learnt through defining itself against emotionality and connectedness" (Seidler 1990: 7).

Mrs. Bentley's diary does not only portray Philip's artistic concerns, but also the author's veiled insecurities. Her complexity as a character relies on her ability to hide herself in her pages where she masks her fears as irrelevant tremors. However, the first meeting between Philip and Steve and the anxiety it arouses in her is difficult to obviate: "[c]ritically, for a minute, he and Steve looked each other over", narrates Mrs. Bentley. "Philip's eyes were narrowed a little, his mouth relaxed and absent, as if his vision just then were taking all his energies of concentration. He didn't see either Paul or me. We waited without a word till they were finished" (Ross 1991: 54). Philip and Steve come across each other in a scene charged with sexual symbolism. The child is admiring the stud ridden by Paul Kirby, the local intellectual, in the sight of Mrs. Bentley who is also subjected to some attraction for Kirby, as reflected in her diary. Suddenly, the unknown Steve and Philip develop certain personal closeness, and Philip displacing Kirby in Steve's interest, is prompt in alluring the Hungarian orphan to his cart and horse. The presence of the stallion as a sexual icon and masculine symbol is relevant since that masculinity charms Steve, and helps Philip Bentley in gaining his attention⁹. Pages before, the diarist had annotated: "[Philip] likes boys – often I

⁹ As can be noticed, the stud as sexual symbol and icon of masculinity is recurrent in most of the novels seen. In *Wild Geese*, Judith's untamed femininity is compared to the power of the horse; in Mitchell's novel, the sensual/sexual Kydds usually ride their powerful studs across the empty plains, and in Ross' text, Kirby's horse and what it represents attract Steve locating him between Kirby and Philip. Another classic prairie novel, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* (1990 [1970]), organises its parodic deconstruction of masculinity and the western myth of the cowboy as Hazard Le Page and his stud Poseidon criss-cross Alberta. Significantly, when looking for a name for his horse, Le Page sorts out "Posse, Poesy and Pussy" (Kroetsch 1990: 13), the latter punning on his horse's masculinity and the mares' genital organ.

think, plans the bringing up and education of *his* boy. [...] For I know Philip, and he has a way of building in his own image, too” (Ross 1991: 9)¹⁰. Indeed, the riding of a horse comes to stand for Steve’s expected preamble to an adult masculinity. In this sense, the acquisition of a horse for the Hungarian confronts Philip and Paul, while leaving Mrs. Bentley with no voice in the contest. Although both agree that Steve needs a male horse, a mare is unwillingly purchased in the end. Noticing the evident gender disparity and the irrelevance attached to herself and the mare, Mrs. Bentley thinks: “[i]n an hour or two the sorrel would have been Sleipnir or Pegasus anyway, but for a mere mare Minnie has to do” (Ross 1991: 140).

Irrelevant as it might appear, the horse deal has some other indirect implications. First and foremost, it underlines that Mrs. Bentley’s voice is only articulated in her pages. And second, it suggests that this articulation, far from escaping from the limits of the gendered social organisation, produces a mediated utterance. Consequently, her pages are subjected to moral silences and, no less important, to her impossibility to assume that Philip does not desire her. Steve and then the parishioner Judith West, Philip’s lover, displace her to the margin of her husband’s interest, a realisation that, although latent, has always been part of her marital organisation. It is not striking then that Mrs. Bentley concludes: “[...] women weren’t necessary or important to [Philip] as to most men [...]. For a while, before understanding the lie of the land, I even read theology. Submitting to him that way, yielding my identity – it seemed what life was intended for” (Ross 1991: 22). And although these words consider Philip’s disdain as part of the reigning patriarchy, Mrs. Bentley does not retain in her diary the suggestion that Philip’s contempt for women goes a step further: “There are times when I think he has never quite forgiven me for being just a woman” (Ross 1991: 31). Moreover, she steadily fulfils her moral obligation to remain beside her husband.

Aware that Steve drives away most of Philip’s affections, Mrs. Bentley rejects him initially, although she increasingly realises that through him, she can reach Philip or set him apart. “I like Steve, and at the same time I resent him. I grudge every minute he and Steve are alone together” (Ross 1991: 69), explains Mrs. Bentley to later conclude: “[s]o instead of resenting Steve I ought really to be sorry for him. When their ride’s over and they are back on earth he’ll have scant pasturage from Philip” (Ross 1991: 70-71). The appearance of Philip Jr., born from Philip’s adultery with Judith West and named after his father by Mrs. Bentley, who in this way appropriates rights on both the baby and his father, produces the effect of transacting power onto her hands. Philip Jr. is her tool to have Philip near but no quite, punishing him for his unfaithfulness. Instead of viewing Philip and his wife as the two sides of the same character (Dickinson 1999: 19-20), it is in place to see Mrs. Bentley as the radical contrary to Philip; the vicar is a gendered/sexual other that endows her with her own sense of self, the signifier of that desire that the distance between herself and

¹⁰ The relation between same-sex mentor and disciple has its antecedents in the Greek organisation of male societies on bonds of teaching, learning and moral nurture that usually included a sexual side. This was considered as part of the pupil’s cultivation (see Sedgwick 1985; Halperin 1990).

Philip increases¹¹. The union that never happens between them, however, would jeopardise Mrs. Bentley's individuation and the independence that she has painfully achieved with her autobiographical narrative. Increasingly conscious that the space she lives in sentences her to remain near Philip, Mrs. Bentley represses her desire for Kirby and redirects it onto a double dynamics of desire/repulsion that propels her writing and existence (see Kroetsch 1989: 73-83, 1991). "And [Philip] himself, he's thirty-six. A strong virile man, right in his prime. Handsome too, despite the tired eyes, and the ways his cheekbones sometimes stand out gaunt and haggard" (Ross 1991: 14), claims the diarist shortly after the opening of her text. Later, however, she asserts, "[f]or hypocrisy wears hard on a man who at heart really isn't that way. As far back as I can remember it's always been there, darkening, draining him, but while in *Horizon* now it seems to be gathering for a crisis [...]. But he is a poor actor and his voice and look speak for him" (Ross 1991: 21). Mrs. Bentley's writing also hides the dissident sexual attraction that Philip feels for Steve; it traces her intentions to cover what her mind contrives and she silences. All in all, if Philip gets blurred in her pages, so does Mrs. Bentley; complex character and unreliable narrator (Kroetsch 1991: 217; New 1989: 177), distant but seemingly accessible as the image the town's name brings to mind.

In all these narratives the same structures of identification that rule the establishment of the national identity work within the regional and local collective. The special situation of that collective, somewhere between the paternal symbolic communal constitution and the semiotic unwriting of that formation, make it a territory of overwhelming ambivalence. As the fictions dealt with show, a number of ruptures in the symbolic territorialisation unveil its cooptation of sexual dissidence or its operations of homogenisation of female difference for the sake of communal homogeneity and reproduction. These manoeuvres also put the emphasis on the needed other within the constructed self and the working of the perverse dynamics. Ostenson's words on the symbolic rape of the maternal referred to in the title of this paper underline the release of the cancelled desire for the forbidden other, the process of non-constitution and the sexual lures it arouses in the symbolic self, and the eventual liberation of the repressed unconscious. *Wild Geese*, "The rock garden" and "Night travellers" illustrate how the community homogenises women's difference to turn them into biological reproducers and/or thresholds for the contact with the different. In all of them the body plays a part in being the site of the sexual practices that define sameness and otherness, identity, difference and dissidence. *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* and *As for Me and My House* exemplify how the societies where they are set create their own identity in

¹¹ Dickinson (1999) insinuates that Philip and Mrs. Bentley are Ross' alter ego, a male and a female side of the same author. In suggesting that doubleness, nevertheless, he is prey to the same intentional fallacy that he detects in some other critics' approach to *As for Me and My House*. Dickinson resorts in the end to Ross' sexual orientation to read the gender complexity presented in the novel. All in all, his idea acquires a special sense when, scattered through Mrs. Bentley's text, we find reflections like "[r]ight to my face *Horizon* tells me I am a queer one" (Ross 1991: 203). Yet what could be interpreted as a covert outing put in the locals' mouth must be taken cautiously, since the meaning of *queer* in this sentence makes it rather a synonym for *strange*. For a slightly different view and a more in-depth analysis of other ambiguous terms, see Bentley (2001).

opposition to the stigmatised practices of homosexuality, which in Mitchell's fiction interacts with the ample field of abnormality.

Regionalism in these fictions contains the traces of the semiotic fluidity, and "[...] unlike nationalism, which is a matter of rigid and artificial political forms and boundaries, [...] is not limiting, any more than true confederalism" (Woodcock 1981: 37). Yet this bipolar reading of nationalism and regionalism is constraining and inaccurate in the light of the changes undergone by any national formation in the global arena. When Woodcock pointed out that "[...] Canada can only be understood in regional terms. We are not a unitary nation. We are in cultural terms, as we should be in political terms, a confederation of regions" (1981: 38), he overlooked the present situation of Canada as an intercultural and multicultural state. His words also highlight the now questionable necessity of the post-Enlightenment national entity based on the cultural union of its people. Last, but no less important, neither did he notice that, through the multicoloured Canadian glass, region, nation and sexuality, far from being separate, hermetic factors, abidingly transform their appearance and make their intersection one of the most productive fields in Canadian studies.

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