

Ironic visions of the North: The problem of the ethnos in The Incomparable Atuk

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ABSTRACT

Canada has a long tradition of humorous writing, which in recent times has focused on the Canadian inferiority complex, visible in the anxiety caused by the 'Canadian identity' question. Given the postmodern condition of Canada—decentralized politically, fractured socially, and subject to Trans-societal cultural processes—Canadian culture seems to offer productive terrain for using irony to combat a nostalgic conception of the past as unity. In *The Incomparable Atuk*, Richler uses irony to deride the politics of representation of ethnicity. Focusing on the irony used by Richler to underscore the duplicity of Anglo-Canadian society, this paper examines how irony can be used to make the dilemma of identity more fathomable. From this perspective, the paper moves on to more ontological and epistemic questions concerning the existence, or the possibility of existence, of Canada as a nation.

*That Canada is an odd national entity is likely
clear to the rest of the world, if not to Canadians —
What other nation has, as its composite national hero
and colourful symbol, a policeman in a funny costume?*
(Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary
Canadian Ironies*, 1991: 1.)

1. In comparing Canadian writers and the American literary tradition, Robert Kroetsch muses on the similarities and differences between American and Canadian patterns of perception. In attempting to create their own literary

forms, both American and Canadian writers have situated their experiences as caught between Old and New Worlds. However, while American writers conceived of themselves as caught between European civilization and the spiritual promise of the Western frontier, Canadian writers saw (or see) themselves as caught ‘between *north* and *south*’ (Kroetsch, 1983: 11).

In much of Western imagination, uncharted land was thought of as either empty or demonic. In the United States, the frontier was the place from which Europeans extended themselves out into the empty wilderness in order to urbanize it, as the inevitable course of history (Manifest Destiny). In Canada, the confrontation between the north and the south created a borderland—rather than a frontier. The task of the settlers hovering along the 49th parallel was to transform savage land into civility. These differing ways of inhabiting both physical and mental space emerge in the differing treatment that questions of identity receive in both countries. For Canadians the question is not *who* they are, but rather *if* they are (Kroetsch, 1983:13).

In this paper, I analyze the comic imagination of Mordecai Richler’s 1963 *The Incomparable Atuk*. I first examine how this urban ethnic writer uses irony as one way of representing the Canadian dilemma of identity. In many ways, this 1960s satire on the Americanization of Canadian society seems to prefigure the current postmodern ‘ethnicization’ of discourses, in which the ethnic has recovered its original meaning of *national* or *tribal* from a period in which one of the meanings of the term (*pagan*) had become prominent. Then this original question develops into another more ontological consideration—If there exist so many different ethnoi in Canada, does the ‘we’ exist?—and even into an epistemic issue—In a world of contingencies, can the ‘we’ exist?

2. IRONY AS THE SIGNIFIER OF THE CANADIAN DILEMMA OF IDENTITY

In *Splitting Images*, Linda Hutcheon (1991: 142) maintains that when (Canadian) ‘artists today look to examine the notions of subjectivity, “Truth”, or representation, they seem unable to avoid confronting the manipulating and fabricating powers of the mass media, and this is where irony often enters ...’ Media sensationalism is certainly the starting point for Richler’s anti-foundational satire of Canadian identity. *Atuk*, in fact, begins with a scene in which the manipulating and fabricating Twentymen, a Montreal magnate, stages a dockside press event in which many crates—empty all but one—are being wheeled into a private railway car. The success of the media event is ensured by keeping secret the contents so that none of the on-looking crowd, or even the Toronto-based Jean-Paul McEwen, ‘the most astute journalist in Canada’, could find out ‘what, if anything, was in which crate’ (p.1).

In effect, Richler, who is the story's narrator, begins with an event which is actually a non-event. From this point on, the reader is presented with a series of ironic discrepancies —involving either what is expected in the determined situation or in the underlying motives of the characters.

Richler's verbal irony in assigning Atuk the *misnomer* of *the incomparable* is soon revealed by the author-narrator. Atuk is introduced to the reader as 'some Eskimo' whose plane delays the landing of Jean-Paul McEwen's chartered plane at Toronto, where Atuk, we learn, has been flown for a literary party celebrating his first book of poetry. In a passage abounding in ironic references to Canada, Richler recounts how Atuk, the Eskimo poet, was 'discovered' (p. 2):

Atuk, the incomparable, came to Toronto from Baffin Bay in 1960. As every Canadian schoolboy now knows it was out there on the tundra that the young Eskimo had been befriended by a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman who had fed and clothed him and taught him English. At first Sgt Jock Wilson, generous to a fault but no man of letters, had discouraged Atuk from writing poetry. He had pointed out to the lad that verses would not get him the bigger, better igloo he craved and what's more, his writing was ungrammatical. But when Atuk persisted Sgt Wilson showed his poems around to the fellows at the local trading post. The clerks, as he expected, could not detect even a feeble talent, but a visiting advertising executive, Rory Peel, was impressed. 'It's a gasser', he said. 'A real gasser.'

Canada has few cultural signifiers, but the mountie and the Inuit are certainly two quintessential exemplars. Richler uses these iconic characters to set up the structural irony which develops as the story progresses. In this initial passage, which establishes the context for the rest of the book, Richler juxtaposes these two principal characters, both of whom, at the end, turn out to play diametrically opposite roles to those presented in this initial description. The mountie represents the genteel law-and-order government agents who helped to civilize the Canadian West, which, in the Canadian psyche, performs the role of the antithesis to the violent American cowboy who dominated the American West at gunpoint. The mountie, the eternal figure of the virtuous administrator of the law —tender, but strong, and ALWAYS fair— persists as a central icon of Canadian pride but also as a source of frequent humor.

Atuk is, too, a culturally ambiguous figure; we can conceive of him as the 'noble savage' —wild but also primevally spiritual. As well, he represents Wild Man, the incarnation of that distinctively Western myth characterizing 'the Other', an exoticized being who is at the same time wild and primevally erotic.

The qualifying adjective of Atuk's name, the *incomparable*, increases in ironic significance as he becomes more and more involved in capitalistic

society. At first, it would seem that a poetry-writing Eskimo might indeed be one of those unique literary personae whose descriptions of the aboriginal world would permit Anglo-Canadians to sap the spirituality of 'primitive' cultures, to return, although vicariously, to a primal state of oneness with nature. But, as it later turns out, Atuk is just as avid a pursuer of money and sex as everyone else. But there is another, more profound type of structural irony underlying the figure of Atuk: he is at once marginal **and** typical. As an Eskimo, he is a heathen and therefore outside the mainstream Anglo culture, and yet, Eskimos are surely one of the most typical of Canadian icons, appearing on posters, mugs, clothes, and other souvenirs.

The comic confrontation of the mountie and the Eskimo is surrounded by language which careens from one register to another: from the hearsay of 'as every Canadian schoolboy knows'; to the disdain of nature, except as fantasy artifact, 'out there on the tundra'; to the condescending affection in 'pointed out to the lad'; to the more prescriptively Protestant resonances of 'generous to a fault'; and, finally to the echoing of commercial and utilitarian values in Rory Peel's base expression 'It's a real gasser'. A self-conscious Jew who judges the behavior of Jews and gentiles alike, Peel's primary role is the commercialization of Disneylike cultural fantasy.

In this first chapter, the reader also meets Harry Snipes, the editor of *Metro*, the magazine for cool Canucks, an obvious parody of the kitsch magazines running stories about non-events, most invented (e.g., 'I Married an Intellectual Cockroach in Calgary'). Norman Gore, the university professor who helped Atuk elaborate his book of poems, admires the primitive in Atuk while at the same time despising him:

Though he [Gore] adored the chunky little primitive, he was not blind to the sly side of his nature. A certain un-Presbyterian shiftiness. It would be enlightening, he thought, to see what might come of a savage innocent in Toronto. No —too cruel.

'Go back to the Bay, Atuk. You will only be corrupted here'. (p. 4)

One other major character is Betty Dolan, who has become 'Canada's darling', because she was the first woman to swim Lake Ontario in less than twenty hours. Betty, a squeaky-clean righteous girl-scout type, had, by her accomplishment, proved true the American motivational motto: 'What you dare to dream, dare to do'. The naturalness with which both Betty and the Canadian public accept this aphorism as true signal the degree to which Canadian society has already been co-opted by American progressivist jingoism. Richler has the journalist McEwen tell us that Dolan 'had swum the lake because it was there' and a well-known psychologist muses that her feat probably responded to 'man's historical-psychological need to best nature'. Dolan, who donates all her

money to charity, is incorruptible —until she meets Atuk. He introduces gin into her carrot-juice health tonic and sex into her bedroom. Betty has vowed to help him ‘overcome’ his shamefully guarded secret: he is ‘unable to make love’. As Betty ‘loves to help everyone’, she succumbs to Atuk’s appeals for aid, and finds Christian values even in this seduction:

How utterly wonderful, she thought, that indulging in the funny stuff could be such a generous and Christian thing to do. There was truth, after all, in her mother’s saying time and again, that there was no joy greater than helping others. (p. 23)

Betty’s fate is all downhill and near the end of the book, we read in McEwen’s column a piece on Dolan’s life as a continual sex encounter: ‘The beautiful girl, having fallen —so to speak— once, is now falling for others as well. She thinks she is helping those other men!’ Betty has changed, but no enlightenment has taken place, Christian or otherwise.

Several of Richler’s other main characters suffer transformations, but they are cosmetic ones as well. There is no inner revelation. At the end of the story, the mountie, who has become a transvestite, enters a beauty contest but then discovers his love for Jean-Paul McEwen, the journalist. Both McEwen and the mountie are relieved when the latter removes his female disguise, revealing that they do actually constitute a heterosexual couple after all and neither is, therefore, homosexual.

Atuk, who has turned into a money-groveling cultural puppet, panders to the Canadian collective psyche’s need for him to embody an instantiation of nature. When it is discovered that he had once eaten the bones of an American Colonel who had been exploring the North, Atuk is demonized by some, but then finally supported by the Canadian public at large, who convince themselves, in a self-congratulating fashion, that they are defending the Eskimos from American intervention (p. 170):

They [the Americans] would impose conformity on all of us. Take back your minks, we say. Your homosexual playwrights can stay home. We don’t need your pipe-lines. But, above all, leave our Eskimos alone.

Here Richler sees an opportunity for dramatic irony. The reader, but not the Canadian public nor Atuk, discovers that the latter will be done in not by the Americans, but by the Canadians themselves. Twentyman has decided that Atuk is more valuable as a martyr; if Atuk lives, he might constitute a threat to Twentyman’s power. Once dead, Twentyman himself would be able to manipulate Atuk’s image at will. Twentyman had already seen that Atuk knew how to take advantage of his image of the primitively pure. As martyr, Twentyman could use Atuk to play upon Canada as caretaker of pristine,

majestic nature (versus the destructive America). All the while, Twentyman and his business partners continue to despoil Canadian nature and thus, the irony of Twentyman's name. Demonstrating behavior that is diametrically opposed to the guilelessness of *Everyman*, Twentyman and his partners do not represent the common person of Toronto; they rule it.

Before Atuk loses his head, literally, in a ridiculously superficial television quiz show called 'Stick Out Your Neck' (participants who answer incorrectly suffer the guillotine), he plays on the primeval as artifact, addressing the public in broken English and clichés:

Is much sadness for me here. Man against man. Ungood. Tell them back at the Bay, Atuk will try to die tall, even as the Old One taught us in happier hunting days. (p. 170)

Richler has Atuk engage in verbal irony by deliberately misrepresenting himself to the Canadian public. But as Atuk does so, he sets up, with his own figure, a structural irony, which foregrounds the theme of Canadian polity as an idealistic delusion. The reader begins to suspect that Canada is actually an artifact, created by government agencies, business magnates and the media.

3. IRONY AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Richler's use of various types of irony denotes a profound distrust of the certainty of identities, of both collective and individual subjects. In order to come to some understanding of what is now a widespread sense of social crisis in the Western world, I discuss three different aspects of Richler's imagined community: 1) his individual characters' reliance on emotional icons; 2) the collective identity (Canadian polity) as artifact; and, 3) the problems of ethnos.

The characters in *Atuk* seem to participate in Canadian polity through media stereotypes, which they use as a source of power and inspiration that will help them to flee from the shallowness of their daily lives. We see that their reliance on media-created opinions and emotional icons and the lack of a discriminating comprehension of their own experiences is the cause of alienation from the self and from one's culture. Theirs is a politically destructive condition, which isolates people, not only in relation to what they understand about their own social values, but also in terms of how well they can communicate with each other. When it is revealed that Atuk has eaten the bones of the American colonel, we are told that 'the Americans expected swift justice' (p. 166) —an attitude guaranteed to arouse Canadian indignation. Richler shows how easily critical judgement can be swayed by media figures, who play upon Canadian feelings of self-depreciation. A CBC commentator announces (p. 167) that

'Johnny Canuck has been roused from his slumber. From coast to coast he speaks... The voice is an angry one'. The intellectuals were 'only a hop, skip and a jump behind'. An important novelist states: 'This is not a banana republic'; a University of Toronto psychologist points out: 'Atuk's act was one of symbolic revenge. Culturally, economically, the Americans are eating our whole country alive' (p. 168).

There are suggestions that American society is an unconscious invention, an artifact, a situation of which Americans are naively unaware (p. 179): 'What the Eskimo does in his land is not our affair —and certainly not Uncle Sam's. The trouble with the affluent society to the south of us is that they have been ruined by status-seeking and hidden persuasion and dream-merchants'. Here, Richler again uses irony of situation in order to point out to what extent Canadians themselves, unable to recognize the constructed nature of representation, fail to understand that their own society is equally an artifact.

Canadian society as artifact is socially constructed between the border to the North and the border to the South. The figure of Atuk, representing the inscrutable North, sets up one of the polar opposites between which, in Richler's depiction, Anglo-Canada oscillates in order to establish an identity for itself. The other polar entity is to the south, the United States.

The North is awe inspiring, but dangerous; the Arctic is sublime, but 'terra incognita', not only 'unknown', but also 'unknowable'. It is populated by uncivilized, uncouth peoples, such as Atuk, who like Wild Man, is supposedly stronger and hardier as well as more sexually potent than 'civilized' males. Canada must maintain the North as both border and icon —for which Atuk is token. By preserving the border of the North, Anglo-Canadians can perpetuate their connection with nature and thus maintain their self-image as uncorrupted and taintless. The Northern border is, in effect, essential for the maintenance of the Southern one.

The South, because it represents a bankrupt world, the ultimate in artifact, is also dangerous. At all costs, Canadians must avoid slipping into American modes of behavior, especially liberal capitalism. In *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness*, Ian Angus (1997: 132) supports the view of Canada as defined by two poles, the United States and the wilderness:

English Canada may be defined through this metaphor of the New World encounter with wilderness combined with the invention of a border separating us from the United States —a border in the wilderness. Maintaining the border is the beginning of a new civilizing project that does not reject the wilderness, but embraces the *abjection of the self* that the wilderness proposes. [my italics]

This ironic doubleness of border is reflected in what Hutcheon (1991) sees as two typical public manifestations of Anglo-Canadian demeanor, *self-*

depreciation, in acknowledging the opinion of the dominant culture, especially with regard to the United States but also in relation to other dominant 'world-class' cultural formations, and *self-congratulation*, for thrift and hard work (Calvinist principles) while still maintaining a more 'caring' society.

As Hutcheon (1991) explains in *Splitting images*, these two types of behaviors provide opportunities for ironic undercutting: *irony self-depreciating* and *irony self-congratulating*. Richler incorporates both forms of behavior into his story. Atuk uses self-depreciation to seduce Betty Dolan, who in turn uses self-congratulation to excuse what her life as 'everybody's mistress' has become. Part of the literary strategies that enhance the humor in *Atuk* is that Anglo-Canadians recognize that, in the case of Atuk, self-depreciation is just a strategy, a false identity, and in the case of Betty Dolan, the self-congratulating attitude leads Betty to construct, in reality (not mentally), quite an opposite identity to the one she publicly professes.

In Richler's depiction of Canada, both the South and the North borders are blurred. Canadians are not more 'one with nature' than any other nationality, and they are just as much involved in postfordian capitalism as the citizens to the South. It is a theme which had concerned Richler in previous works.

Richler seems to foresee that Canada will increasingly be constructed around the individual. Such a situation offers little hope that social and political processes will be able to construct and maintain a community. The problem of building a Canadian identity from disparate ethnic communities had been the theme of Richler's 1955 novel, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, in which the main character tries to assimilate his Jewishness with his Canadian citizenship. His next novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), deals with stereotyped attitudes which force the Jewish hero, Duddy, into unethical, antisocial behavior. It has been argued (Birbalsingh, 1995: 105) that in *Atuk*, Richler's purpose was to 'propose an integrated Canadian identity within a comprehensive English-speaking culture that embraces the whole of North America'.

My reading of this work is less optimistic. Richler's characters do not seem to be able to find a common grounding which might bind them together in some form of consensual contract. On the one hand, they are heavily influenced by Canadian icons which keep them separate from the United States, and on the other, the Canadian State, by sustaining the 'mosaic' cultural metaphor, lends credence to the merit of separate ethnoi.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of ethnos has become newly prominent. In the 1990s, we are now all too aware of the relativism of culture. We have had to acknowledge that there exists no god's-eye view and that every cultural perspective is a perspective from somewhere (Haraway, 1991). The reader is not really sure whether the Canadian public supported the cannibalistic Atuk because they wished to 'stand up' to American dictates ('... leave our

Eskimos alone'), or whether the adoption of this viewpoint actually did respond to the cultural relativism manifested in their public pronouncements ('What the Eskimo does in his land is not our affair.').

In either case, as Richler sees it, the result is a type of moral stagnation. In a manifest parody of Mark Anthony's speech, in which the latter ironically interpellates Caesar's murderers as 'honorable men', Richler might seem to be goading Anglo-Canadians into some type of action: 'Friends, Canucks, countrymen,' he [Snipes] went on, 'use your noggins...'. On second thought, the reader realizes that this ending is another one of Richler's ironies. Firstly, it is Snipes, Twentyman's right-hand man, who is addressing the public; he is using what will now become the martyrdom of Atuk in order to accuse the United States, 'the country of origin of the show's sponsor'. Secondly, the intertextual reference to Shakespeare's work (murderers being addressed as 'honorable men') signals Twentyman and Snipes as traitors too.

It is possible that a second voice underlying Snipe's belongs to the author, who might truly be admonishing Anglo-Canada for its indiscriminating attitude. But there are no solutions offered in this denouement. Individual human action seems a folly. More than contesting such problems of workable polity, this ending appears to portray what is today known as the post-national state. The critic Davey (1993: 266) describes it as: 'a state invisible to its own citizens, indistinguishable from its fellows, maintained by invisible political forces, and significant mainly through its position within the grid of world-class postcard cities...'

In a final irony, the world-class postcard city of Toronto portrayed in *Atuk* is undercut by the majestic sublimity of the Canadian Arctic depicted in Lawren Harris' painting 'North Shore Baffin Island' (c 1930), placed on the paperback cover of the 1989 M & S edition. At once, Harris' art work invokes the idea of the 'higher national consciousness' which surrounded the Group of Seven painters (Housser, 1932, quoted in Hill, 1995: 221). But, irony's double-voicing always allows for the converse: a questioning of the Group's work as Canadian icons, of the theatricality and poster-like effects with which they depicted the rawness of Canadian landscape, creating a Whitmanesque quality.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I wish to address the nostalgia involved in representing the past as idyllic—a nostalgia for times when homogeneous communities supposedly did exist. As Muñoz Molina (1996) has stated, nostalgia is an act of disremembering. In this case, the disremembered would be Canada as a mosaic—many different cultures, but all cooperating in nationhood. The conceptualization of Canada as a mosaic of separate cultures is based on the

now outdated anthropological perception of the 1960s and 1970s in which the world of human differences is to be conceptualized as a diversity of separate societies each with its own cultural system.

As we can observe in Richler's novel, social and economic processes have connected even the most isolated local settings with a wider world. In this postcolonial world of mass migrations and transnational flows of capital, cultural difference is increasingly deteriorating. I am sure that Richler, as errant Jew, would have no trouble with this idea. In fact, in Richler's novel we see Torontonion society as a battlefield of cultural positions —many linked to individual capital gains.

Atuk seems to be a forerunner in presenting new ways of understanding identity and cultural difference which this postcolonial situation forces upon us. The novel suggests that any associations of place, people and culture are not natural facts. They are the result of the active processes of social agents. Cultural groups are no longer (if they ever were) communal units of order. The apparently immediate experience of community has always, in fact, been constituted by a wider set of social and spacial relations. Some anthropologists now suggest that it is fundamentally mistaken to conceive of different kinds of supralocal identities (diasporic, refugee, migrant, national, etc.) as spatial and temporal extensions of a prior, natural identity rooted in locality and community.

The cultural is a contested political field where much is contingent. However, I do wish to avoid one pitfall implicated in the idea of contingency; contingency cannot be equated to cultural relativism (Rorty, 1979). The acceptance of contingency is not equal to the endorsement of irresponsibility. Active social agents have to do the 'place-making'. It is true that this is a difficult process, but if your agenda is action, it is easier if you are not looking backwards in time. Any immigrant can tell you that.

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** All quotes from *Atuk* are from the 1989 McClelland and Stewart edition.

