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Towards a Francophone Community (review)

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(Review)

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It is the sea that links Harry's Elderberry Bay residence in British Columbia with the fishing village of his childhood, symbolically merging both topographies to suggest an affinity between two seemingly disparate geographies and to indicate that, as an immigrant, he has found in Canada a home away from home. The novel opens with Harry dreaming: "*Though he lives by the sea now, the sea in this dream is invariably the other one, that of his earliest childhood*" (1; italics in the original); and it is to the sea, in a mystical ending reminiscent of the fantastical bent of *Cereus*, that Harry and Rose return in their bid to cross numerous divides to secure their love. As with the rising tide that deluges the village in Harry's dream, the sea erodes social and geographical barriers and lines of demarcation. The land itself carries symbolic overtones. Harry is, significantly, a landscape gardener — a job that allows him to literally put his own mark on his adopted land — rooting himself in the country by tilling its soil. In the chapter titled "Landscaping," Mootoo offers a compelling portrait of a man fitting himself to an alien landscape. On the invitation of his white Canadian friend Kay, Harry takes a trip into the wilderness of Canadian "postcards and tourism posters" (42). It is not the usual terrain for people who look like him, "the dark-skinned island people" (38), but as he surveys his surroundings, "[p]ride coursed through him; he had become an insider" (42), and such scenery was part of his backyard. Under the majestic ice-capped mountains, ethnic and racial differences that mark him as an outsider in this landscape slip away as he realizes that "he instinctively knew the names of the formations around him" (43).

He Drown She in the Sea moves along at a fast pace, but slows down at the right moments to develop the finer points of character and dialogue. The language is lilt-ing and musical, simultaneously capturing a Caribbean ethos with authenticity and painting the British Columbia landscape in recognizable colours. With her third novel already optioned by House of Anansi Press, it will not be too long before readers can dig into the next delectable treat from Mootoo.

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Robin S. Gendron. *Towards a Francophone Community*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. 191 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$75.00 hc.

Robin Gendron's *Towards a Francophone Community* chronicles the complicated relations between the Canadian government and the French-speaking world in the

years following the Second World War. As Quebec began to establish international relations of its own in the 1960s, it became embroiled with the federal government in a protracted struggle over who could claim the right to legitimately represent French Canadians internationally. And for a while – much to the dismay of officials in Ottawa – Quebec appeared to be winning. Quebec nationalists had long argued, Gendron states, that Quebec needed to forge international relations of its own in the 1960s because of the federal government's long-standing neglect of French-speaking countries, a neglect which cut Quebec off from relations which it deemed to be of crucial cultural significance. For Gendron, this argument – which has been tacitly accepted by scholars of Canadian foreign relations – is in profound need of revision.

Towards a Francophone Community, therefore, sets out to demonstrate that Canada did indeed have an active interest in the wider French-speaking world, an interest which stretched back to the years following the Second World War. This relationship, however, was fraught at its inception. In its attempts to save NATO from implosion, Canada worked hard to maintain its relationship with France, often rendering it deeply complicit in the crimes of the French empire. Even if Canadian officials at times expressed sympathy for Third World decolonization, the Canadian government placed higher priority on defending its imperialist allies and protecting larger “Western interests.” Canada, for example, knowingly supplied arms to the French military for use in its vain attempts to maintain colonial rule in Indochina, and it consistently supported French rule in Tunisia and Morocco. As Gendron explains, as “long as France remained intent on maintaining its position in North Africa, the Canadian government concluded that it had to protect France from its attackers” (24).

Gendron's research also demonstrates that the general thrust of Canadian foreign policy towards French Africa did not change much in the early 1960s. During the bloody and drawn-out Algerian war, Canada refused to demonstrate any support for Algerian independence until, of course, France, judging that the war could not be won, had done so itself. When French paratroopers massacred Tunisian civilians who were advocating a withdrawal of French forces from their ostensibly sovereign country in 1961, Canadian diplomats in Paris pushed to have Canada punish Tunisia diplomatically, and the Canadian government opposed the holding of a special session of the United Nations to discuss the crisis. When sixty-six countries voted in the United Nations to condemn French actions, Canada abstained (58-60).

The story of Canada's efforts to avoid antagonizing its NATO ally by supporting French imperialism grew more complicated with the election in Quebec of the reformist Liberal government of Jean Lesage. As the Quebec government began to attempt to represent French Canadians internationally, Gendron demonstrates, France began to bestow upon Quebec treatment usually reserved for sovereign countries. The Canadian government, worried that other French-speaking countries would do the

same, began to offer aid and support to the newly independent countries of French Africa. Because of Quebec nationalism at home, the Federal government sought to reach out to French African countries abroad. Yet, still constrained by its fear of France, the Canadian government did not feel completely free to pursue its own agenda in French Africa until 1966, when France withdrew from NATO's military command. Because it hesitated for so long, Canada had little time to establish close relations with the emerging francophone community, and, therefore, could only watch in dismay as Quebec began participating in major international conferences – conferences generally reserved for sovereign countries – in the late 1960s.

Gendron provides a rich and detailed study of this largely untold story of Canadian foreign relations. His argumentation is nuanced and his research meticulous. Yet there is much that is missing. For a study which deals exclusively with the fumbling efforts of the Quebec and Canadian governments to gain influence in Africa, race goes virtually unmentioned. And for a work describing a world dominated by men, he is silent on gender. This is, therefore, not only a story of high politics, but also one which uncritically adopts the language of power. As the line separating his analysis and that of the western officials that he chronicles is profoundly blurred, he naturalizes the very categories of oppression that fuelled the decolonization of French Africa – and spurred political movements in both Quebec and English Canada – in the first place. He writes of the “nationalist problem” in Algeria, and of de Gaulle returning “to rescue his nation in its time of need” (30, 44). When the Canadian government could not staff new French-speaking postings in French Africa, it is due to the “English-dominated culture” of the Department of External Affairs, not because of a long tradition of the systematic exclusion of francophones from positions of power in the federal civil service (55). Those who demanded complete independence for African countries are “extreme nationalist elements” (69); sub-Saharan Africa is less “politically advanced” (62). Canada needed to endeavour to “protect broader Western interests” from “communist encroachment” (35, 55).

Overall, what is lacking in this study is not research, but reflection. There is no doubt that Gendron's important work teaches us much about the details of Canada's relations with France, Quebec, and French Africa in the aftermath of the Second World War. But, leaving aside historiographical and theoretical debate, situating itself only within the realm of Canadian diplomacy towards Africa, uncritically making use of the terms and vocabulary of the subjects which he studies, Gendron does not explain its overall meaning for Canadian history. This said, his findings do provide an important base upon which future explorations of Canada's complex, multifarious, and contentious relationship with empire can build.

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