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*Recalling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary
and Cultural Production (review)*

Stella Algoo-Baksh

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Jennifer Blair, Daniel Coleman, Kate Higginson, and
Lorraine York, eds. *Recalling Early Canada: Reading the
Political in Literary and Cultural Production*. Edmonton:
University of Alberta Press, 2005. 412 pp. \$43.00.

A collection of twelve diverse essays, *Recalling Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production* marries and foregrounds Canadian cultural production prior to World War I. It interrogates the view of history as a chronological progression toward a superior present and its emphasis on present-day predilections. Instead, it valorizes a view of history in which a sense of the present is constructed at least partly on probing what has been erased or unacknowledged in the past. The essays concern themselves with examining novels and poems in conjunction with non-canonical works such as personal letters and journalism. More importantly, they dissect received writings in relation to other media such as photography, carvings, family letters, and captive narratives. Because of the growing availability of hard-to-access texts and scholarship of Canada's past, the political agenda of the methods utilized to make materials accessible and the extant orthodox interpretations are contested. Viewing the Canadian nation as a deliberate, limiting construction of the status quo, the essays convincingly expose its hidden agenda and secret underpinnings. Important questions apropos the control of Canadian content, queries pertaining to centring and marginalization and the questionable practice of highlighting and consolidating what is conventionally labeled national culture are plumbed, with both the political implications of the means by which material of the past is made accessible and the interpretations of such material being is constantly debated.

The essays do not espouse any particular agenda but powerfully delineate how historical recall is essentially multi-dimensional and absolutely political, thus interrogating Michael Bliss and Jack Granstein's centralist views which claim that attention to differences within Canada has resulted in the loss of a common view of the nation's public history, that the selectivity of social historians who view events from the vantage points of feminism, multiculturalism, regionalism, and such like have produced unhelpful history which privileges the parts over the whole. This notion taken by Bliss and Granstein, it is noted, is rooted in their insistence that historical works foster nation building. However, Paul Hjartarson's "Wedding 'Native' Culture to the 'Modern' State" and Anne Milne's "Writing (Canada) on the Body" investigate the ramifications of

Bliss and Granstein's premises. Hjartarson's essay questions the exclusion of the Tsimshian carver and painter Alexcee from narratives of early Canada, revealing that such exclusions disempowered or erased the voice of the indigenous. This idea is further developed in J.V. Emberley's probing essay which views the archive as an extensive photo album, another arm of colonization which de-privileged the kinship systems of the indigenous. Her essay effectively demonstrates how the meanings of past photographs of First Nations families undergo metamorphosis when they are re-contextualized, specifically apropos the history of residential schools in Canada. Adam Carter, in his trenchant essay "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the National Ode," shows how the past as losses continually affect the present, while the essays by Cabasjsky, Stacey, and Venema indicate that altering of the past, the idea that the present must be read with more than just a nod to the past, offers new and intellectually stimulating ways to view past material. These writers highlight and emphasize the danger and folly of ignoring or viewing early Canadian forms such as the pastoral and the romance as simple and unsophisticated. Their arguments are augmented by Fiamengo's probing essay on Sara Jeanette Duncan where the contributor notes that it is highly erroneous—and dangerous—to view Duncan's oeuvre as feminist writings subverting the patriarchy when in reality her work is bedeviled by ambiguity and indeterminacy.

Another contributor, Anne Milne, explores the adoption of *le cheval* as Canada's national horse and deems it a propagandist symbol. She passionately asserts, using the horse as a metaphor, that it embodies the privileging of Canadians of European descent and the exclusion of non-Europeans (symbolized by other breeds), their histories, and their voices. Kate Higginson turns her lens to the widowed invader-settler women during the Northwest Rebellion in 1885. She cogently argues that they are emblematic figures (similar to the American Jessica Lynch) and that this construction of them militated against their being able to represent themselves, limited them as individuals, and also facilitated the white's less than humane treatment of the Cree and Métis. Adam Carter's revisionist's essay tackles G.D. Robert's nationalistic poems, drawing attention to their portrayal of Canada through solely Eurocentric eyes. Like Carter, Cecily Devereux's revisiting of Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie* shows that even in this poem the distance between the colonizer and colonized is maintained to foster the privileging and valorization of the dominant class and its goals.

Foucault's "What is an Author" succinctly encapsulates the primary issues raised by essays in this collection with regard to cultural productions:

"What are the modes of existence of this discourse?"

"Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?"

"What placements are determined for possible subjects?"

"Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?"

This collection of valuable and intellectually stimulating essays is itself an archive, documenting new ways of viewing early Canada, using fresh and diverse methodologies and questioning the limitations and political agenda of those methods employed in the past. There is a risk, though, that the highly abstract theoretical content of the collection might appeal only to an academic readership, a limitation of audience that probably militates against the very notion of inclusion underpinning the collection. One must suggest, however, that this book should be required reading for all graduate students, especially those in Canadian and postcolonial literature. Diehard ossified academics buried in moribund, myopic ways of viewing Canadian nationhood are well advised to give this book a wide berth.

Stella Algoo-Baksh

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Jill Didur. *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
ISBN 13:978-08020-7997-8. 220 pp. \$53.00.

Jill Didur's *Unsettling Partition* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of academic work on the 1947 partition of India that critically reflects on the relevance of literary texts for understanding the complexities of partition. As its title implies, Didur in her book attempts to "unsettle" questions regarding gender, partition, and nationalist politics. But instead of assuming that literary texts fill in the gaps in existing historical knowledge about the partition, she views literature as a "particularly appropriate place to consider how experience is mediated and the specific limits of what can be known about that experience" (140). Additionally, she attends to the "'performative power' of language mobilized in the act of reading with an emphasis on how literature intersects with the spheres