Home-Work

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The Culture of Celebrity and National Pedagogy

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I

I'M ON PAT BAY HIGHWAY, Wednesday morning, the twentieth anniversary of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, driving home after dropping a friend at the Swartz Bay ferry terminal. Naturally, I'm listening to CBC. Mary Walsh is hosting the most recent “do” about Canadian literature. “The Battle of the Books,” an ad in the Globe and Mail calls it, a literary competition imaged as warfare in keeping with the times. The panel, consisting of the novelists Leon Rooko and Nalo Hopkinson; lead singer of the Barenaked Ladies, Steven Page; actor Megan Follows; and the former prime minister Kim Campbell, is to decide on the book that the entire nation ought to read. As Campbell puts it, the winning book should have the capacity to engage the whole nation in conversation. The contenders are Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, George Elliott Clarke's Whylah Falls, Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, and Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion.

After the usual CBC repartee, Mary Walsh discloses the contents of the ballots. This is the first morning of The Battle, and it's The Stone Angel that is eliminated. Listening to the panelists explain why they voted as they did, some of them admitting that they have not read all of the selected
titles, I find their process of elimination to be as whimsical and arbitrary as the rules of Ondaatje's Elimination Dance. As I'm switching off the engine in the carport at home, I'm listening to Rooke's husky voice. He explains why he voted against In the Skin of a Lion. It's "stunningly written," he declares, "Ondaatje's blue-collar novel." A very apt phrase, it seems to me: "Ondaatje's blue-collar novel," with the emphasis placed on the author's name, ironizes what Ondaatje in scare quotes—"Ondaatje" as signator, to echo one of Frank Davey's reading tropes—stands for: the internationalization of Canadian literature, a writers' writer become a writer of the world, avant-gardism subsumed by commodification. In the Skin of a Lion is not the kind of "blue-collar novel" that aspires to be read either as an indictment against industrialism or as an inspiration for readers to rally against the exploitation of poorly waged immigrants. After all, its protagonist declares that "I don't believe the language of politics, but I'll protect the friends I have" (122). His loyalty to friends gets him involved in events that could be seen as instances of political activism, but they are not marked by the kind of altruism and political idealism blue-collar heroes are likely to be imbued with. But this is not the reason why this "blue-collar novel" fails for Rooke; he finds it too romantic, the love relationships too "gooey." "Yes," Mary Walsh joins in enthusiastically, "Ondaatje cannot write dialogue." How Canadian, I think to myself, to affirm, while knocking down a peg or two, the celebrated status of a national author.

This snippet of panel talk is symptomatic of the state of cultural affairs in Canada today. Twenty-five years ago or so, the Writers' Union and writers' guilds, among other groups across the country, were still lobbying the mass media and ministries of education for wider representation of Canadian books. Today, first-novel authors are offered large advances; many novels are simultaneously released in Canada and in foreign editions; writers like George Elliott Clarke and Rohinton Mistry, who would have had a difficult time finding a publisher not too long ago, are virtually household names; and authors like Russell Smith have regular columns in national newspapers. Never mind that the average number of homegrown novels a Canadian high-school student has read by graduation time is a mere five ("School's Out"). After all, the local has not only undergone multiple fragmentations; it is already subsumed by what Arif Dirlik calls "global localism" (34), and we inhabit as much real as virtual
space—not to mention that reality, if we agree with Baudrillard, is a matter of competing simulacra.

But this is no reason to plunge into melancholy. Canadian literature has indeed reached new heights of prominence. Consider the many literary festivals and prize-giving occasions, gala events that get full and extensive media coverage. The fact that prizes like the Giller award for fiction, the Griffin for poetry, and the Charles Taylor for literary non-fiction have substantial capital value may be one of the reasons for the attention garnered by literature today. Even poetry, whose marketing value has always been low if not non-existent, has become a weekly feature of the Globe and Mail. And if, in this post-Gzowski period of media-CanLit romance, we fly on Air Canada, we can read the winners of CBC's poetry competition in En Route, or experience momentary surprise upon coming across, in the same magazine, the glamorous photo-portrait of a Canadian poet known, among other things, for her activism against racism. No, Marlene Nourbese Philip has not become a fashion model; she is the artist-of-the-month feature.

To put this otherwise: we've reached that point of modernity when the binaries of cultural logic are dissolved, without their tensions necessarily being resolved or erased, when the materialization of the dream of progress has been fulfilled or indefinitely deferred, depending on whether we are, say, on Richard Rorty’s, David Hollinger’s, or Jürgen Habermas's side, or look at world affairs today through a Derridean, Foucauldian, or Jamesonian lens. Modernity may or may not have run its course, but its progressivist and positivistic logic is certainly re-figured as the telos of global culture, a telos that grants teleology a new meaning, for it recognizes no borders or destinations since its goals are those of profit-making and of converting everything, including human genes, into commodities.

Lest we university professors feel left out of this effortless circulation of culture, let's admit that academics, including humanists, are no longer simply the object of irony or derision for their indulgence in arcane knowledge or their use of theory. As I'm reminded by the Globe and Mail, “Canada's universities are anything but aloof ivory towers” (Valpy A1). Indeed, philosophers like Mark Kingwell expound on the virtues of cultural studies in newspapers; words like postmodernism and deconstruction have become naturalized in the lexicon of media discourses; what I still call the Learned's receives its own modicum of media exposure; and the brain
drain or gain in the domain of the Canadian academe often warrants front page news.

It is not, then, only Canadian literature that seems to have reached its apotheosis at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Canadian academics themselves—at least post–September 11, as a recent study declares—have "garner[ed] newspaper, TV and radio exposure worth almost $25-million in advertising" (Valpy A10). The synecdochic relation of academic discourse to actual capital not only shows that corporatism has infiltrated university culture today—one of the reasons why universities are no longer the intellectual ivory towers they used to be but are, instead, becoming the new colonies of capitalist logic—but also illustrates that intellectual discourse has lost its critical distance from marketing fields and the global economy. This is the case not only because, as Masao Miyoshi says, "[t]he technical complexity of the TNC [transnational] mechanism requires academic expertise in sophisticated research, explanation, and management of immense information data" (96), but also because humanists, too, including postcolonial critics, are susceptible to the same powerful, opaque as well as transparent, sensible as well as nefarious, forces that drive globalization. The efficacy of humanist discourse is already curtailed before it is launched, the result being that humanists are put in the position of playing the role of "explicators" at best, or "apologists" at worst (Miyoshi 96). Still, undoubtedly, one of the effects of the globalization of culture, in the context of my argument here, is that both literature and the humanities have achieved a visibility and circulation they never enjoyed before.

Ours has become a culture of celebrity—yet another naturalized phrase in today's popular as well as academic discourse. In an ironic reversal of the tropes that mark the Canadian pastime of deriding our neighbours in the south for their fetishization of success in the realm of popular culture, it would seem we have followed suit, yet once again. But if this is really the case, if Canadian culture has reached, if not exceeded, the visibility we wanted it to attain, at what cost, if any, has Canadian literature achieved this status of celebrity? What are the implications of this shift from, what Henry Giroux calls, "the spectacle of politics" to "the politics of the spectacle" (63)? How does the Canadian culture of celebrity relate to what Stephen Slemon identifies as "professional postcolonialism" (27), namely our persistent attempt to introduce cultural differences into our discipline, and translate them (both cultural differences and the disci-
pline of English) into the classroom? And how are both the culture of
celebrity and professional postcolonialism imbricated, if they are, in the
machinations of national pedagogy?

I'm not going to volunteer answers to all these questions—they are
too loaded, too complex in their discursivity to deal with in a single essay.
Instead, I have opted to tease out only a few of their implications, albeit in
my usual circuitous fashion.

II

That there is a tight relationship—structural, ideological, and material—
between cultural production and the representation of the nation, between
institutions producing and disseminating literature (e.g., publishing houses,
newspapers, think tanks, and universities) and the apparatus of the state
(e.g., ministries of education, the Canada Council, provincial arts coun-
cils, and the SSHRC), is a given. The entire corpus of Canadian criticism
today, together with the debates that take place in institutional contexts,
especially in the Humanities, in critical journals and public fora, testifies
to that. Irrespective of whether we wish to adopt, revise, or refute, say,
Robert Lecker's neo-humanistic view of the Canadian literary canon;
Frank Davey's culturalist semiotics of that same tradition; Jon Kertzer's
liberal humanist nostalgia for a renewed nation; Linda Hutcheon's
postmodern interpretation of the contradictions inherent in Canadian
literature; Roy Miki's rigorous critique of racialization; Diana Brydon's
postcolonial analysis of literature and institutions; or Barbara Godard's
poststructuralist account of what informs and distorts the formation of
literary history in Canada—literature has irrefutably emerged as a major
player in the transformation the Canadian state has been undergoing in
this era of global market economies.

"Literature," Barbara Godard wrote recently, "works no longer in
the service of the nation's identity . . . but to further its economic security
in an era of global capitalism. 'Culture,' first disembedded from precapitalist
traditional life ways and positioned as a countervailing force to industry . . . is now an autonomous and self-regulating field of social reproduc-
tion and domain of value positioned asymmetrically as a counterforce to
democracy within an all-encompassing 'economy' to whose ends it is
subordinate” (221). The contradiction in Godard’s argument that literature is autonomous and self-regulating yet subordinate to economy is a telling instance of the paradoxes that inform, on one hand, the location of culture in Canadian society today and, on the other, the complicity that marks the relationship between the institutions that facilitate and disseminate the production of literature and the state itself. And yet, this may not be a contradiction at all, but the effect of an undeclared differentiation that she skips over.

Culture has never been autonomous and self-regulating. Even when, for example, Arif Dirlik traces the “cultural turn” of the last two decades . . . to a new awareness of culture not just as a function of material structures but as an autonomous force itself in the making of modernity” (22), a change he links to the operations of global capitalism, the autonomy he has in mind is decidedly gauged by various contingencies. Culture has always been a multivocal sign implicated in the making of national narratives, if not of nations themselves. This becomes apparent in the ways in which culture has been defined at least by one major postcolonial critic, Edward Said. The various definitions of culture Said provides to frame his argument in Culture and Imperialism do not cancel each other out. If anything, the more he attempts to elaborate on their differences, the more the distinctions he makes collapse into each other.

Said begins with a definition that we could, in turn, define as disciplinary: culture encompasses “all those practices, like the art of description, . . . that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms” (xii). A view of culture that shares the same ideological tradition as humanism, it is what has shaped, too, the tradition of our profession. English has undergone dramatic changes, especially in the last part of the twentieth century, and it would be more accurately defined today as English Studies, but the notion that literature has somehow intrinsic value, a principle crucial to this view of culture, continues to be inscribed, directly or subliminally, in our discipline.

The second definition of culture Said attempts to offer is the Arnoldian one: culture as “a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought” (xiii). Still maintaining its autonomy from society, as far as Said is concerned, this notion of culture is granted instrumentality, the ability to play a significant role in the pedagogy of citizens. Significantly, this definition, too, is humanistic in origin. Despite its presumed ability to
school society, it preserves its autonomy but also claims for itself a utility whose directionality speaks of a one-way influence, a monologic form of instruction. This hegemonic role of culture that underlines Arnold’s “demand for an intellectual deliverance” of the public (20) becomes apparent when we examine it in the context of Kant. In *Conflict of the Faculties*, he writes:

> Enlightenment of the masses is the public instruction of the people in its duties and rights vis-à-vis the state to which they belong. Since only natural rights and rights arising out of the common human understanding are concerned here, then the natural heralds and expositors of these among the people are not officially appointed by the state but are free professors of law, that is philosophers who, precisely because this freedom is allowed to them, are objectionable to the state, which always desires to rule alone; and they are decried, under the name of enlighteners, as persons dangerous to the state. (153)

The philosophers of law, in this context, are the producers and custodians of culture. The affiliation of culture with law is, then, a double symptom of its universality and of the hegemonic function of its pedagogical role. Thus, in keeping with the Enlightenment logic, culture, in Said’s second definition, renders the state a panopticon inhabited by “subjected sovereignties.” For Foucault,

> [h]umanism invented a whole series of subjected sovereignties: the soul (ruling the body, but subjected to God), consciousness (sovereign in a context of judgment, but subjected to the necessities of truth), the individual (a titular control of personal rights subjected to the laws of nature and society), basic freedom (sovereign within, but accepting the demands of an outside world and “aligned with destiny”). In short, humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts the desire for power: it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized. The theory of the subject (in the double sense of the word) is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us. (221-22)

If the utility of this view of culture lies in its imperative to restrict the power of the people, the knowledge to which they are exposed is by
default constrained, and pedagogy, in turn, is shown to be the practice that facilitates this process. Thus the benevolence that underscores the humanistic goal of edifying people is synonymous, to borrow William Spanos's words, with the imperial intention "to annul the force of desire of a colonized or territorialized otherness" (End 60). The pedagogy that disseminates, while being produced by, this view of culture is not, then, a pedagogy that liberates the citizen; rather, its aim is to fashion the political unconscious of people in terms that serve the raison d'être of the state. It is not surprising, then, that Said sees this second definition of culture as gradually becoming "associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state." This kind of culture "is a source of identity," he argues, a "sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another" (xiii). It is this notion of culture that is affiliated with national narration and canonization, that, for example, John Guillory problematizes in *Cultural Capital*, and that, eventually, gave rise to the culture wars and debates in the humanities departments of American and Canadian universities. This culture erects borders, while simultaneously preserving its universal and imperial signature. Interestingly, as Said points out, this idea of culture, despite its alignment with the nation, is "somehow divorced from, because transcending, the everyday world" (xiii).

But if this is the case, if indeed this kind of culture is as politically neutral as Said seems to think it is, how different is his second definition of culture from the first one? Said's elucidation of this point doesn't help much; it may disclose his persistent commitment to developing an oppositional critical practice, but it also reveals one of the contradictions in his work. He refers to the "difficult truth" (xiv) he, like "[m]ost professional humanists" (xiii), "discovered," namely, that many of his favourite French and British artists take no "issue with the notion of 'subject' or inferior races so prevailing among officials who practiced those ideas as a matter of course" (xiv). These are the artists who have created the very classics that occupy the privileged centre of, in Spanos's apt phrase, "the panopticism of post-Enlightenment literary discourse" (End 48). Far from lacking a politics, these texts embody the knowledge humanistic pedagogy circulates; theirs is a politics that can be both visible and invisible, the politics of cultural orthodoxies, the doxa of the state, in other words, what is constituted as normative. It is this body of works—we can call them classics, masterpieces, Western literature—that comprises as much the cultural
capital of the nation as the object of critique for the postcolonial projects of some critics like Said.

Said's attempt at defining culture is intended to suggest the complicity that stains the postcolonial critical enterprise, an important thing to keep in mind in view of the righteousness that characterizes, at least in my view, certain kinds of postcolonial criticism and practices today. It is also a gesture toward apologia for his dealing precisely with the kind of works that are the reservoir of the very Enlightenment values he sets out to deconstruct. We might agree, then, along with Rosalind O'Hanlon, Benita Parry, Jonathan Arac, and Aijaz Ahmad, among others, that Said's own critical enterprise "commutes between" the recognition that the subject is decentered and culture is hybrid and the desire—a diasporic desire at that—to insist on the need of "conserving specific structures of communal subjectivity invented by dominated peoples" (Parry 30). This ambivalent ethos, together with the fact that, at the same time Said bemoans the perils of nationalism, he argues for what Gregory Jusdanis calls "the necessary nation," demonstrates the irreducible paradox that marks his project: namely, that it stands at the crossroads of postmodernity and modernity.

Rather than positing this ideological, and methodological, quandary as the Achilles heel of Said's work, as some critics have already done, I would like, instead, to look at it as a paradigmatic instance exemplifying the genealogy of what I believe haunts the culture of celebrity in Canada. Despite its varied domains of performance and production, what I call the culture of celebrity here participates in the same syntax of national pedagogy, thus sharing, in a fashion, a similar ethos and ideology with respect to its relation to the nation.

III

Though primarily seen as a product of modernity, national pedagogy does not come into being in that phase of Western thought that was shaped by the Enlightenment. In the same way that the construction of what Martin Bernal has called the "Aryan model" in Black Athena originates with the ethnographic and romantic movements in Germany, the humanist period of the Enlightenment that gave rise to the civilizing project of Eurocentric colonialism is itself the product of Roman imperialism. As Spanos, among
a few others, has shown via Heidegger's Parminedes, the colonization and appropriation of Greek thinking by the Romans was applied to their intention to "win the hearts and minds" of extraterritorial Others to the essential principles informing [the Roman] way of life (Americas 65). It is significant for my purposes here that this colonization project, according to Spanos, employed as its fundamental instrument eruditio et institutio in bonas artes, that is, "scholarship and training in good conduct" (xix–xx). This not only demonstrates the validity of "Said's claim that humanist culture is complicitous with imperialism" (65), but also bears historical, philosophical, and philological witness—something I do not have the space to go into—to the fact that the genealogy of modernity points not to the aletheia of Greek thought but, rather, to the reductive Roman translation of aletheia into veritas. To put it simply: the unconcealment signified by aletheia, namely an "open" and "errant" inquiry, a play of differences, what Spanos calls an "agonistic Greek paideia," is rendered as a "correctness," a matter of "the True and the false" (121), implemented through "the production of a dependable manly citizenry" whose sole goal is to "establish," "legitimate," and perpetuate the hegemonic values of the state (xix–xx).7

In light of this genealogical context, we cannot afford to see national pedagogy as a means in the service of the Enlightenment project, a discursive practice that leads people to maturity in the Kantian sense of producing modern subjects, or, as Margery Fee has put it, the “organic process” through which “national cultures develop . . . beginning with infancy and moving toward maturity” (21). In the Enlightenment, national pedagogy is emancipatory, synonymous with Bildung. As Holland and Lambropoulos say, it is “the principal social technology that has supported and (re)produced the individual as autonomous self in modernity” (5). In her dissertation, “Subjectivity, Bildung, Pedagogy: ‘Coming of Age’ in Modernity,” Jackie Heslop traces the genealogy of Bildung as the “spectre” that “haunts the expertise of pedagogical science” which “grounds and legitimizes the discourses—as well as many counterdiscourses—of contemporary education” (Chapter 7, 1). It is through this master narrative that national pedagogy figures, to echo Arnold, as a “mighty agency of deliverance.” What is elided, though, when we see national pedagogy solely as an Enlightenment project, is its role as a power instrument of, to quote Spanos again, “cultivation . . . intended to inscribe in the ‘young’ a
relay of colonialisms extending from" the private sphere the subject inhabits, “through consciousness, language, gender, and race, to civil, political, and international society” (Americas 121).

Understood not merely as a “cultivation” project that has gone awry, but as a mission consonant with colonialism, national pedagogy loses any semblance it may have of benevolence, and, instead, is shown to be a pedagogy of coercion. In this context, national pedagogy seems to be akin to the concept of empire as articulated by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Empire, in their joint study of the same title, is “an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity... It is a regime with no formal boundaries that operates on all registers of the social order. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits” (xiv—xv). Considered in this light, national pedagogy has a permeating power that does not recognize boundaries. It gathers into its domain everything, including those discourses it seeks to cancel out, a strategic gesture in Michel de Certeau’s sense of it. It is my contention that only if we approach national pedagogy from this double genealogical perspective, and acknowledge its ghostly ability to seep into and absorb the totality of what constitutes it, will we be able, on one hand, to appreciate fully its symbolic violence and, on the other, to re-inscribe, if not reinvent, our subjected subjectivities in a posthumanist context. This is essential as a tactic—again in de Certeau’s definition of the word—that may enable us to make sense of national pedagogy as an “imperium of affect.”

The “imperium of affect”—Emily Apter’s expression—encapsulates what I have been trying to articulate so far: that is, national pedagogy as an imperial project with at once a decidedly imperialist lineage and a globalizing intent. I would like to quote Apter at some length:

The world of affect seems to take up where the critique of performativity leaves off. That is, at the point where antiessentialism has become a given and the market in identity-production is oversaturated. The imperium of affect marks a return to “easy”; to feelings washing about in a depoliticized space of the transnational commodity... Affect is about ethnic and racial particularisms that have lost their hard edges and become substitutable formulas or caricatures of nation, race, and gender... [It is] about the indiscriminate, loving embrace of “others.”... Affect stages political
events with realist expectations; that is, with perfect foreknowledge of the basic immunity of "the system" to its viral attacks. . . . [Affect] alludes to what happens to oppositional discourse when it turns into "happy" multiculturalism. (19)

It is within the domain of this imperium of affect that the culture of celebrity operates. The product of similar political and material economies, the culture of celebrity is imbricated ideologically and materially in its operations.

Invariably triumphalist in its representation, the culture of celebrity is the avatar of national pedagogy. It is what translates the panopticism of national pedagogy into public spectacle. In that, it depends for its affect on Jeremy Bentham's principles of supervision, "axial visibility" and "lateral invisibility" (Foucault 200—01): that is, it is at once manifest and unverifiable. This doubleness is what guarantees its hegemony. And its hegemony, like most hegemones, is at once disciplinary and laudatory. Produced as much through the collaboration of different institutional structures as through various subliminal processes, it promotes formative narratives that hijack dissention and appropriate differences. Though it doesn't foster a unified aesthetics as such, it nevertheless advances a discourse of values which, more often than not, materialize the uneasy coexistence of modernity and postmodernity. Thus, though it is highly visible, and unabashedly posits itself as the self-evident best of what the nation has to offer, it remains loudly mute about the ideology of the knowledge it transmits, and strategically shies away from adopting a monologic aesthetic. It is through all these, and other, traits that the culture of celebrity executes what I take to be its fundamental function: the manufacturing of public memory.

Public memory, according to Roger Simon, "is grounded in a shared pedagogy of 'rememory' [Toni Morrison's concept], a decidedly social repetition or, better, a rearticulation of past events suffused with demands of remembrance and learning across generations, across boundaries of time, space and identification" (62). Cultural memory has already become a major trope through which we address some of the more pressing concerns of our time. However, despite the fact that, as Michael Roth writes, memory "is the key to personal and collective identity," memory is also what "makes it extremely difficult for people to share the past . . . [and thus] have confidence that they have a collective connection to what has gone before" (qtd. in Simon 62). The culture of celebrity is
maximally equipped to reconcile the disjuncture caused by this twofold role of memory. The public memory it engineers reconstructs the nation in the political unconscious of the citizens by eliding certain parts of its history while foregrounding others.

IV

Let me return to “The Battle of the Books.” The battle is over, and, though not every Canadian, as Campbell predicted, may be reading the winner, the faithful listeners of CBC will have already heard it read on the air. The winner, or, as one journalist put it ironically, “the survivor” of the battle, is *In the Skin of a Lion*. If my reading of the tropes that inform the culture of celebrity is right, then *In the Skin of a Lion* deserves the distinction.

Though located within a clearly defined historical time and place, it fabricates a spatial economy of knowledge and power which, despite its historiographic structure, reproduces the nation’s symbolic violence. Ondaatje touches history with a gentle hand. He doesn’t want, at least in this novel, to disturb too much history as national artifact, nor does he keep the effects of history in the closet. Nevertheless, he is certainly masterful at translating effect into affect. What has been celebrated about the Ondaatje oeuvre—and the culture of celebrity, I should say, always works toward the construction of oeuvres; witness the examples of such literary celebrities as Robertson Davies, Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and Timothy Findley—that is, his poetics of violence and characters who thrive on the edge, relies on his romantic aestheticization of failure and the eroticization of politics. More specifically in terms of my overall argument, the great success and appeal his work enjoys is, at least in part, contingent on the fact that Ondaatje writes postmodern novels that reproduce, and continue, the project of modernity. The ambivalent coexistence of postmodernity and modernity is, I think, an important element of the culture of celebrity. Take as an example Carol Shields’s *The Stone Diaries*. Structured like a *Bildung*, it is a novel in which the maturity its protagonist reaches is crowned by depression. Postmodern in its formal and narrative aspects, it embraces, thematically, the tenets of modernity. Ironically, though, most critics do not recognize this novel’s contradictory impulses; they assume that there is unity between its aesthetics and its themes. We find a similar tension between postmodernity and modernity
in most novels that become part of the culture of celebrity. Richard B. Wright's recent novel, _Clara Callan_, too, which won virtually all prizes given to fiction in the year of its release, exemplifies this phenomenon.

Ondaatje's work is a case in point, too. From Buddy Bolden to Caravaggio, if not the English patient, from Billy the Kid to Anil, his characters surface from the margins of history to claim a place for themselves in the surplus of history. As Davey has argued, “[o]ne general ahistorical model of Canadian society—rich and poor, exploiter and exploited—yields to an even more general but implicitly patriarchal one in which all men appear to have some access to sensuous visionary experience which can link them with a universal human fabric” (155). Thus the novel showcases differences only to harmonize them (Davey 156).

How this harmonization of differences is practised and what it signifies become apparent in _In the Skin of a Lion_. Aligned with the _Bildung_ tradition, the novel opens with a section entitled “Little Seeds.” In it, the protagonist, Patrick, a young boy at the time, has his first intimations of what the world is about. He is the son of Hazen Lewis, a single father. Hazen Lewis is a logger, “an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus” (15). Though Patrick does not grow to be as solipsistic as his father, he inherits his father's isolationist character. Heredity, together with the ways in which Patrick both embodies and supersedes it, can be seen as an allegory of the incestuous relationship of modernity and postmodernity, of the former's presumed disinterestedness and the latter's self-reflexiveness, of the nation as family and as an assembly of differences. Patrick, we read, “has clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations. He has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place” (156–57). Canada, to echo Homi Bhabha, as an unhomely house, and the house of fiction as an uncannily familiar site. Still, in the novel's exploration of Patrick's self-formation, these “strangers” occupy a parasitic location both emotionally and historically, for they inhabit, as Dennis Duffy has shown, the Toronto slums. Like Arthur S. Goss's photographs that document the modernization taking place in that period by “employ[ing] the rhetoric of artistic nationalism” (Duffy 14), photographs that served as an inspiration for the novel, Ondaatje's narrative remains nourished by the same legacy of modernity and the colonial logic of Westernization.
The novel as a record of Patrick’s coming of age may memorialize, as so many critics hasten to notice, the as yet unnarrated story of Macedonian immigrants, but it falls short, I believe, of “redress[ing] the imbalance of official history” (Barbour 179). Still, though Barbour begins his study of the novel by claiming that Ondaatje “joins a large group of contemporary postcolonial writers” who seek to “inscri[be] the ‘unhistorical’ memories of immigrant populations” (179), he states that the “liberal sympathies of the text often clash with its leftist political agenda” (200), and concludes by asserting that, though the “stories are there, [and] the ordinary people whose effort has built the country have been named,” the novel “refuses to pretend that this naming can replace the official histories; at best it can supplement them and demonstrate the contingency of their truths” (205). Irrespective of the intentionality that drives the narrative, it is precisely the attempt to engage with some of the immigrants in Toronto at the time while reiterating the imperial power that contributes to the formation of official culture that puts this novel in the service of national pedagogy, that accounts, at least in part, for why it emerged as the winner of “The Battle of the Books.”

The immigrants’ representation in the novel is a clear manifestation of the imperium of affect. “The southeastern section of the city where [Patrick] now lived was made up mostly of immigrants and he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew, deliriously anonymous. The people on the street, the Macedonians and Bulgarians, were his only mirror” (112). This self-reflexive occasion is not so much an instance of desiring or fetishizing otherness, as it is a lesson in how efficacious the imperium of affect can be. Patrick, confident in his white skin (even though he may not be aware of it because of its normativity) and nationality, can afford to delight in his anonymity. But if it is his anonymity that he sees reflected in these immigrants, theirs does not necessarily signify the same thing. Their anonymity is the kind that points to the opposite of liberation, for they remain subjected to the material and political effects of the hegemonic society they inhabit. A synonym of their parasitic presence in Toronto, their anonymity remains largely unthematized. Instead, it is adopted as a trope that fulfills Patrick’s own need for invisibility.

If invisibility has a certain allure for Patrick, it is not only because someone else’s vanishing act provides him with employment or sends him on the way to what is going to be the big love of his life, but precisely
because he occupies a spectatorial position, a position that coincides with
the novel’s narrative perspective: it is his story that also narrates the story of
those immigrants. And it is his gaze, a gaze similar to that constituting the
culture of celebrity, that constructs their image. Interestingly, the politics
that characterizes this gaze, a politics that constantly shifts from being that
of the spectral to being that of the spectacle, is what aligns the culture of
celebrity to national pedagogy. Thus only as long as these immigrants are
represented as spectres of themselves can they become a mirror of Patrick’s
image. Patrick’s self-image needs their otherness, an otherness whose repre-
sentation evokes the same “pictorialist values” that Duffy argues character-
ize Goss’s images (115):

That is how Patrick would remember [the immigrants he works with] later. . . . If he were an artist he would have painted them. . . . What did it
mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the
east of the city five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the
painting tell? That they were . . . Macedonians mostly. . . . That during
the day they ate standing up. That they had consumed the most evil smell
in history, they were consuming it now, flesh death which lies in the
vacuum between flesh and skin, and even if they never stepped into this pit
again—a year from now they would burp up that odour. . . .

They were the dyers. They were paid one dollar a day. . . . All of these
professions arrived in morning darkness and worked till six in the evening,
the labour agent giving them all English names. . . .

For the dyers the one moment of superiority came in the showers at the
end of the day. They stood under the hot pipes, not noticeably changing
for two or three minutes—as if, like an actress unable to return to the real
world from a role, they would be forever contained in that livid colour,
only their brains free of it. And then the blue suddenly dropped off, the
colour disrobed itself from the body, fell in one piece to their ankles, and
they stepped out, in the erotica of being made free.

What remained in the dyers’ skin was the odour that no woman in bed
would ever lean towards. Alice lay beside Patrick’s exhausted body, her
tongue on his neck. . . . (130–32)

This is vintage Ondaatje, the best evidence why this book materializes the
intentions of national pedagogy. Present in their redolent flesh, none of
these immigrants is named in these three pages that I have quoted from
here. And the shifts from the dire conditions of their living to the erotics of taking a shower are so subtly executed that it takes a second read to notice that what has started as a critical exposition of immigrant labour has been used as a prop to stage an intimate erotic moment between Patrick and his lover. The “erotica of being made free,” then, is a luxury that only Patrick has the privilege to experience. The anonymous Macedonians remain just that, anonymous, smelly, and emasculated, therefore undesirable.

With the exception of a couple of immigrants—notably, Nicholas and Caravaggio—the Macedonians, whose history this novel is supposed to have made known, are represented collectively. We read of Macedonian cake, of a Macedonian-style moustache (113), of Macedonian pantaloons, of a Macedonian night, yet we would be hard pressed to define what constitutes Macedonian culture. It is precisely this undifferentiated particularity, this levelling of differences, that fulfills the project of national pedagogy. Their difference is named but only insofar as it can be imag(in)ed by someone who occupies a dominant spectatorial position—yet another example of how public memory works.

It becomes apparent, then, that the historicization that the culture of celebrity acknowledges operates according to the requirements of modernity. It offers an amnesiac representation of history, the kind that is articulated “in the negative: Why could [they] not achieve that which [others] have achieved? Ironically, the answer to this question,” Dirlik argues, “more often than not, has been . . . translated into the vocabulary of tradition as ‘because tradition held [them] back’” (Dirlik 27). Ondaatje enables the Macedonians’ entry into dominant discourse, but he does so by representing history in drag. From Caravaggio dressed as a woman or taking on the persona of a rich man, to Patrick pretending to be a guerrilla, to the cloaking of unsavoury labour practices in erotically charged language, this novel’s narrative is marked by the “vested interests” of official historical discourse.

V

The public memory engineered by national pedagogy through the culture of celebrity is not necessarily the kind mobilized by a nostalgia for the past. Memory, in this context, is not ana-historic; rather, it has a proleptic function. It engages the past but it does so in order to restructure the
present and remember the future. The cohesiveness of the national imaginary that emerges from it is not the same as the cohesive nation of that past. While that cohesiveness depended on constructing an imaginary homogeneity, the cohesive nation of the present has moved beyond a genetic sense of national kinship; instead, it depends on—in fact it celebrates—the politics of difference. It is, technically, a transcultural nation, a nation at once of “heritage groups,” indigenous peoples, and many diasporas, but one that sees “the affirmation of difference as an end in itself” (Dirlik 41). The premise prevailing in Canadian criticism that Canada is a postcolonial state is just that: a premise. As Diana Brydon writes, “the post does not refer to the end of colonialism, but rather to what was formed under colonialism and remains after official colonialism is abandoned and colonialism begins to be recognized as a major component of modernity” (5). If in its earlier configuration the nation was self-defined by the very limits it set, by its various technologies of inclusion and exclusion, today it posits itself as a nation of plenitude, hence the euphoria induced by the culture of celebrity.

NOTES

1. Douglas Malcolm also talks about Patrick’s political activism, but our readings are diametrically opposite. See his article, “Solos and Chorus: Michael Ondaatje’s Jazz Politics/Poetics.”

2. See, for example, their essays in the recent volume, What’s Left of Enlightenment?: A Postmodern Question (Baker and Reill). Enlightenment, Passion, Modernity: Historical Essays in European Thought and Culture (Micale and Dietle) also addresses similar issues.

3. This year’s Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities (formerly known as the “Learneds”) was announced (advertised?) by its own five-page “partnership marketing supplement” in the Globe and Mail.

4. As with some other aspects and manifestations of cultural and academic life, there is a belatedness that characterizes the presence of the academe in the Canadian mass media when compared to that in the United States.

5. See also Arac, Ahmad, and O’Hanlon.

6. For Jusdanis, the nation is “necessary” in that it “allow[s] peoples to look for collective inner strength, to preserve their identities in the face of perennial change, and to strive for justice.” Though his defense of the nation, which he presents as a long-overdue and necessary “apology” (3) for the many ways in
which the nation has been vilified, does not lose sight of the fact that nationalism “continue[s] to agitate . . . as a twin-headed force, releasing chaos into the world and leading to internecine strife” (15), it is fraught with problems, as becomes apparent, at least to this reader, in his brief section on Canada which concludes with the facile statement that “[i]t is instructive that Atwood [in Survival] connected the essence of Canadian literature with cultural survival. . . . The anxious questions posed by Atwood over the existence of an autochthonous literature have to do with the very essence of being Canadian” (148). If there is anything that allows him to reach this unproblematized, and obsolete, conclusion it is that his Canadian research material is limited to the late 1960s and early 70s (Richard Gwyn’s 1995 Nationalism without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian being the only recent reference).

7. See also Spanos’s “Heidegger’s Parmenides.”

8. While strategy, for de Certeau, “transform[s] the uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (36) and contributes to “an economy of the proper place” (55), tactic is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (37). Rey Chow is one postcolonial critic who has employed de Certeau’s distinction with constructive results. As she says, strategy is appropriated by “those who are committed to the building, growth, and fortification of a ‘field.’ A text, for instance, would become in this economy ‘a cultural weapon . . .’” (16). While “a strategic attitude . . . repeats what [it] seek[s] to overthrow,” her critique engages “the tactics of those who do not have claims to territorial propriety or cultural centrality” (25). She never loses sight of the fact that “as intellectuals the battles we fight are battles of words” (17).

9. See, for example, Mellor, “The Simple Container of Our Existence.”

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