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Getting In and Out of the Dark Room: In Search of April Raintree as Neutral Ground for Conflict Resolution

DANIELLE SCHAUB

Classical black-and-white photography and Polaroid photography share one major prerequisite with regard to their finished product, namely a negative exposed to light. In other words, for both systems, the positive print cannot come into being without the negative film. But unlike Polaroid photography whose negatives become useless once peeled off the positives, classical black-and-white photography features negatives of a different nature. The film negative in classical black-and-white photography can be used with much greater flexibility. The making of a positive print involves the negative in a greater combination of variables subjected to manipulation and control, non-existent in the case of Polaroid photography. These images serve as a metaphor for ways of reading Canadian texts within heterogeneous groups experiencing strife and controversy.

Owing to its heterogeneity, Canadian literature can elicit expressions of empathy, repression, trauma, anger, and healing. Such texts deal with what Diana Brydon defines in this volume as “issues that matter enough to get people angry” (57), and I would add, “or sad.” For a foreign reader, Canadian texts of resistance enable the externalization of numbing alienation and traumatic experience in the safe literary distancing of other cultures, other times, other bodies. By analyzing the strategies used in such texts, students from different geopolitical contexts can examine how dif-
different cultural groups depict antagonism, self-discovery, and, at times, even healing and growth. Simultaneously and specifically, such approaches can help open empathetic communication between groups that are ambivalently delineated by prejudice, fear, longing, hate, and desire.

Examined in this way, Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* allows for a psycho-literary and psychodramatic interplay of self and group communication in heterogeneous Israeli classes with Beduin, Christian, Druze, Jewish, Muslim, and other self-identified students. The negotiation of space and place for the Métis within the Canadian national framework allows Israeli students from diverse communities and foreign students to apprehend conflicts they face in their own lives. The analysis of their response shows how by reading texts about people involved in conflictual situations different from, yet similar to, their own, Middle-Eastern students look at their predicament with a less jaded eye. The pedagogical impact of the literary approach afforded by Canadian literature cannot be overlooked, for the introduction of Canadian texts empowers students, enabling self-expression and inspiring unfeigned respect for opposed views. As they find constructive language to express themselves and their concepts of one another, they become aware that they carry a heavy load of stereotypical thought.

*In Search of April Raintree* depicts the lives of two Métis sisters, almost identical twins except for their age difference and their skin colour. Assigned to foster homes on account of their parents’ alcoholism, April, the paler of the two, idealizes White society. She perceives that her dream of extreme upward mobility remains contingent on divorcing herself from her Métis past, and especially on distancing herself from her younger sister. April’s darker sister, Cheryl, romanticizes the Métis tradition, idealizing a return to a pure Aboriginal culture. Cheryl angrily criticizes April’s estrangement from her people, but becomes dangerously embroiled in the very cycle of violence, drugs, drink, and prostitution that April seeks to escape. After a generous divorce settlement from her adulterous White husband, April lives well until the announcement of Cheryl’s hospitalization. Having lost contact with her sister for an extended period, she discovers that Cheryl is lost to alcohol, drugs, anger, and apathy. She attempts to re-establish her maternal older-sister relationship with Cheryl. April’s approach to life drastically changes when she is gang raped by men who mistake her for Cheryl in a racist and misogynist act of punitive
violence. While Cheryl blames herself for April's traumatized post-rape condition, April is too focused on her pain to recognize Cheryl's terrible sense of guilt. Cheryl commits suicide and April finds herself the sad inheritor of her sister's diaries. Yet Cheryl's narratives help April realize that in order to overcome the trauma of her childhood and her experience of rape, she must accept her Métis heritage as integral to her configuration of a new self—even if that new self is highly motivated and shaped by values attributed to White Christian culture, values inherited from her good foster parents, the Dions. Through the diaries, April also discovers that Cheryl had a son. At the end of the novel, April determines to adopt her sister's child and to provide him with a better self-image. She also personalizes her involvement in the Métis community, joining in a struggle against alcoholism, which she sees as a primary destructive threat to her people.

When we read *In Search of April Raintree* in my literature classes, I ask my students to keep a running journal of their reflections. At the end of the reading, each student writes a free-style essay. In it they identify the character with whom they most relate and discuss how their literary experience reflects their own perception of identity and conflict in Israel. Typically, the participants have strong responses that reflect cultural clashes separating and joining them. One of the tasks I give them in class involves a sheet with anonymous reflections taken from their writings. I ask them to read the statements and match the probable identities of their authors. We discuss our findings and experiences at several levels, with some interesting results.

I have included the text of this exercise in an appendix to this essay. My handout to the class contains 14 journal excerpts and 14 identities to match. When I give my handout to the class, I give them the following instructions:

You will have 10 minutes for this task. Read the extracts and, without consulting anyone else, attempt to assign each statement a probable author. Work individually otherwise the next part of the activity becomes pointless. After ten minutes, I will ask you to turn to the person sitting next to you. Each one of you will be given two minutes to discuss how the texts and this task have affected you. Then we'll have a general discussion of your experience and matched entries/identities.
Many of my students thought they knew one another well enough to predict which person would likely say one or another statement. They were often mistaken. The students' answers implied that at some level their expectations were unconsciously fraught with their own prejudices. When making decisions under pressure, they fell back on stereotypes. This exercise helps both to confirm and trouble the borders of cultural expectations. The answers we got show that nothing is purely black and white, that grey dots infest every area, even from within a minority position.

Returning to my metaphor of photography, even a field as binary as black and white photography produces borders that blur and merge. The photograph of a glass ceiling in Vienna (see Figure 1) shows clear demarcations between the black and the white. No doubt, the metal frame delimits the glass panes in a clear-cut manner. Yet when blowing up one section of the photograph (see Figure 2), the eye perceives how dots of white invade even the seemingly black areas and vice versa. Moreover, the dividing line, the border, becomes ever more complex when looked at in detail, affording an analogy to close-up visions of identities. Even when identities seem to be inscribed in black and white, the blackness and the whiteness are never pure, always discontinuous and temporary, threatening to bleed over and fade into the other. This in part helps explain why certain elements in our cultures often fear exposure to other cultures: they fear their purity will be lost and the borders of difference might break down.

In discussing Culleton's novel, some Muslim Arabs identify with Cheryl, saying that her story reflects their own or that of their brothers and sisters in the Occupied Territories. They find negative characters styled as White akin to some Israeli Jews. But not all Israeli Muslim Arabs feel this way; some identify with April, enjoying their life in Israel, and while sympathetic to those on the other side of the Green Line, they confess feeling somehow estranged from them. Some expressly speak against the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and have humanistic views, such as the young Muslim female student who wears the symbols of the three major monotheistic religions and conducts seminars about the Holocaust. Druze and Beduin students, both members of communities whose men serve in the Israel Defence Force, sometimes feel awkward about the conflict because they have sworn allegiance to the State of Israel while maintaining their cultural Arab identity. Christian Arabs are also divided in their perspectives. While some have assimilated into Israeli society and find themselves

FIGURE 2. Detail from Figure 1. Photo: D. Schaub.
much like April, others claim that Cheryl represents the position of Christians in the Palestinian Territories amongst the Muslims who out-number them and with whom they sometimes struggle for space and place. Amongst Jewish students, opinions vary widely. Different immigrants and minority groupings identify with Cheryl as the unwanted other. Moroccan, Russian, Ethiopian, Yemenite Jews, and others sometimes see the dominant culture as less accepting of them than of long-term residents of Polish and German descent. Yet even the privileged old-timers oppose one another in matters of politics, religious practice, choices of secular lifestyle, and views about what the State of Israel should strive to be.

Needless to say, because of the variety of views expressed, mediating the discussion involves strenuous attention not to let relations degenerate to a point of no return. Heated discussions, however, demonstrate that voicing anger and frustration—about being othered, about not having equal rights—helps everyone feel better, more so than becoming violent. Sometimes when class discussions reach a peak in tension, I ask the students to enact, as in psychodrama, the role of the character in Culliton's novel that they least identify with. I ask them to put in words and body language what the other side fails to see about this estranged position. Dramatic action, following the model proposed by the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, forces the students "to examine problems and issues raised" by that character while "facilitat[ing] insight, personal growth, and integration on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels" (American Society). At other times, I ask the students to engage in sociodrama and enact a passage from the book, giving each student the part of a character with views diverging from his/her own. At times, the students choose to represent a character with whose views they agree, making the most of the "natural and automatic process" involved in psychodrama, "externalising their internal world onto a theatrical stage" so as to solve a conflict they themselves experience (Yablonsky 3-4). While enacting a part, the students are given "the opportunity to practice new and more appropriate behaviors, and evaluate its effectiveness within the supportive atmosphere of the group" (National Coalition). By dramatizing some positions and "mov[ing] very fully into [others'] subjective world without judgement" (Brodie), the students understand the problematic nature of dividing lines. Because of the discussion after each dramatic improvisation, these exercises help students develop empathy with people
and positions other than their own. In this way the students engaged in reading *In Search of April Raintree* succeed in at least recognizing the falsity and dangers of belief systems based on binary oppositions. After going through this process, my students usually reach the conclusion that everyone feels trapped by stereotypical definitions of belonging.

Then they feel ready to move on and work together against prejudice. At this point I mention B.Z. Goldberg’s project of bringing together Palestinian and Jewish children as part of his film *Promises* (*Haftachot*). The film shows superbly that when brought together children forget dividing lines, enjoy one another’s presence, and play together regardless of identity. Notions of belonging to one community or another no longer matter when children engage in fun activities. At this point the students come up with projects promoting multicultural education that challenge binary modes of thinking.

Binary thinking may well be deeply embedded in our cultures, if only to control chaos, but we can become aware of its existence in ourselves. We can challenge ourselves to think more creatively, communicate more openly, struggle to create new identities that complicate divisions between “us” and “them.” In this respect, I would like to mention that a number of my students have pointed out that characters like the Dions (April’s first foster family), the Steindalls (Cheryl’s second foster family), Roger (April’s friend), and other White characters in the novel display warm, unquestioning acceptance that provides April with valuable lessons in faith, understanding, and forgiveness. A number of students have also noted that April does not get any support from the Métis elders, that in a state of cultural deprivation her parents have failed to pass on any values from a Métis perspective. Some students have pointed out that even Cheryl’s immersion in Native culture does not strengthen her sufficiently to survive.

These recognitions open up discussions about our abilities to draw strength from diverse cultural sources, at whatever opportunity may arise. Such awareness alerts us that we can enrich one another with our own developed skills in negotiating reality—including how to struggle, together and peaceably, to change reality if necessary. Through April’s final acceptance of her people, the students realize that one can sometimes get the strength to accept and draw upon one’s native culture thanks to the enrichment provided by a culture different from one’s own. Important
messages come across: April may be in a sorry position as a child, losing her family, but the book shows how even the "real" Whites go through difficult experiences too, such as the Dions who lose their maternal figure. April learns another positive lesson, namely that it is good to cry and share one's loss. She realizes that her presence helps the Dions overcome the loss of Mrs. Dion to cancer. Even when April faces abuse in her second foster family, the deRosiers, which initially causes her to abandon faith, she returns to religious principles to forgive herself and others as an adult. Both April and Cheryl invent a past. April invents a White past, obliterating the story of her parents. Cheryl claims a romantic Aboriginal past. But both prove problematic. Both attempts at identity formation rely on a binary black-and-white approach that is analogous to trying to obtain a positive print while destroying the original film negative. Both April and Cheryl try to be purely one identity or the other, and attempt to destroy elements of the other culture that invade these identities.

To return to my consideration of the photography metaphor, I am reminded again that the line of demarcation between the white and the black is anything but clear. Opposites blur into one another. When my students first encounter *In Search of April Raintree*, they have no idea that it will shape their concepts of self and other. This text and the process of reading we undergo help the students understand that we are kept in check by narratives that ignore the many common issues we have with divergent groups, and the many differences we have with people defined by those narratives of our own culture. When they become conscious that the poor in the Beduin, Christian, Druze, Jewish, and Muslim quarters all live in more difficult conditions than their rich rulers; that sometimes religious people of different cultures have more values in common than they have with their own secular groupings; that secular people in one group share more interests with secular people of different cultures than they do with their religious peers—all of this teaches students that imagining pure black and white does not help facilitate progress.

When I opened my essay with an allusion to photography, I deliberately left the reader hanging as to why the negative can stand alone as a thing for itself and in itself while the positive cannot exist without the negative. The approach to reading *In Search of April Raintree* that I have outlined shows that individuals produced by culture are in many ways like a negative: a product of culture and biology. But in the process of making
the print, individuals can consciously choose to empathize with other cultures while maintaining what they feel is most important about their source culture. In photography, the positive can undergo a series of deliberate and controllable changes. It can be colour washed, lightened, darkened, blurred, have elements added or erased, be printed on grainy paper, and so on.

When April attempts to erase her Métis origins completely and invents a pure White past, her situation is analogous to trying to make a positive print without having a film negative to start with. Only after Cheryl's death does she realize that she cannot formulate herself without her film negative, that is, without accepting her past. At the end of the novel, she realizes that by accepting her past, she has the ability to shape and foster her identity. In order to do so, she must accept her past and embrace all or any aspects of other cultures that will help her to build a more viable sense of self. Like April, the students who read the text as I have outlined discover that they must become self-conscious print-makers of both themselves and the reality that their children and they themselves will face.

APPENDIX

Responses from Students to Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*

*Handout — Page 1*

**IDENTITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CORPUS**

a. 19-year-old Muslim female active in Holocaust programmes
b. 21-year-old female Yemenite Jew
c. 22-year-old female Muslim Arab with family in Jenin
d. 23-year-old female Ethiopian Jew
e. 25-year-old female Sabra (5th generation in Israel)
f. 26-year-old male Druze (has served in the Israeli army)
g. 27-year-old male Ashkenazy leftist
h. 27-year-old male English volunteer on a kibbutz
i. 29-year-old female right-wing Israeli
j. 30-year-old male Beduin (reserve officer/Israeli army)
k. 30-year-old female Orthodox (mother)
l. 30-year-old female Russian immigrant
m. 32-year-old female Christian Arab living in Haifa
n. 42-year-old female Moroccan Jew (mother)

Handout — Page 2

1. I identify with April when she feels torn between her roots and her desire to belong to white society. I also see how by not sticking to my people, I could progress more, have better living conditions, struggle less.

2. Like April, I find myself criticizing two cultures; when she says, “I became quite good at it, seeing all the negative sides and criticizing them [the whites] to high heaven to myself. It came to me that I had criticized the native people and here I was doing the same thing to white people. Maybe that’s what a half-breed was all about, being a critic-at-large” (125) I feel like that too. They are just trying to wipe us out. But then we also get extremely violent at times. Where is this fight taking us?

3. I feel like Cheryl. We have been betrayed and let down. Why should life be so hard for us when they have everything? We’re not given a chance to get out of our difficult life conditions. We’re going to remain stuck in our hole.

4. While I was reading the novel, I kept thinking of unpleasant aspects about my people. I also don’t like how my people live. They’ve lost their self-respect, don’t fight for their rights and have lost all hope. They have no jobs, or jobs that don’t pay well and there is a lot of family violence and even drinking or taking drugs out of despair.

5. I like Cheryl a lot. I like the way she wants to fight for the rights of her
people and what she writes. She is right when she criticizes the whites; they have robbed them of everything. We too should fight and get what’s ours.

6. I think Cheryl exaggerates. If her people really wanted to live differently, they could do something about their lives. And April’s attitude is wrong too. Why should she envy what others have? Perhaps she could find it within herself to improve things. Nothing comes free of charge. You have to earn what you get in this life.

7. I feel like Cheryl. We’ve also lost a lot. We’ve lost our traditions, our habits, our homes. And we also don’t have an easy life. Maybe if we put up a tougher fight things will change and we’ll regain our pride. And I hope that we won’t be defeated the way Cheryl is in the end.

8. I’m not sure either April or Cheryl are right. Why should there be tension? Cheryl is aggressive against the whites but doesn’t try hard enough to improve things for her people. And April only wants what the whites have. It’s like here. Why fight and not try to make things better? Sometimes there are better solutions than fighting.

9. April and Cheryl stand at opposite ends. But couldn’t they have a better time if they weren’t engaged in a pointless struggle? It’s like things over here. Isn’t there enough space for everybody? Can’t both people live side by side without hating each other? I don’t understand what the whole fuss is about.

10. I feel upset about the tension between Cheryl and April. They come from the same family and yet they can’t agree. It’s like the tension between Israelis and Palestinians. We too come from the same family and have a lot in common. When we struggle against each other, we struggle against ourselves.

11. I can’t accept Cheryl’s position. She makes claims to land that make no sense whatsoever. Once the whites negotiated the land it became theirs. Why should they give it back? They’ve developed towns, cultivated the land. They shouldn’t give in. Besides where would they go? Back to Europe or wherever they originally came from? That’s unlikely.

12. I feel like April but I’m disgusted with her at the same time. I want to assimilate and get all the benefits of the majority but I feel guilty that I might be abandoning my people.
13. Cheryl is right when she wants to discover her roots and keep her people's traditions. But she's wrong because she thinks that celebrating her culture means she has to fight against the whites. This is what burns her out and causes her to die. She's too angry and can't forgive.

14. It's good that Cheryl gets the opportunity to live with people who give her books about her cultural background and history. They help her develop pride and a sense of identity that her parents irresponsibly failed to do. But she makes a great mistake by mixing her wonderful spiritual revelation with politics and anger. The wisdom of the elders is lost on her.

NOTES

1. The laws of light exposure are virtually the same with a difference: once a black-and-white negative has been exposed, the markings of light cannot be erased from it, but, technically, the film could be double exposed or overexposed to admit more light markings. Admittedly, this is not common practice.

2. I have used the approach discussed here with texts such as Neil Bissoondath's *Digging Up the Mountains*, Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Cheryl Foggo's *Pourin' Down Rain*, Thomas King's *Medicine River*, Lee Maracle's *Ravensong*, and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

3. For more information on psychodrama, see Blatner, and Blatner and Blatner. Shorter explicative texts about psychodrama can be found on the Robert Brodie Home Page, the Web site of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, and the Web site of the National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Associations. The use of the term psychodrama here includes sociometry (a technique that highlights acceptance and rejection while seeking group cohesion), and sociodrama (a technique that involves group drama on social issues). A related technique that involves both text and enacting, dramatherapy also allows one to slide in and out of text and reality, and those involved in the therapy have to find ways of empowering themselves through their interaction with the text whether written or imagined (see Jones). For an exploration of plays in the context of bibliotherapy and enacting, see Jenkins.

4. The students participating in the course are in their second, third, or fourth year, and will eventually graduate with a BA in English Language and Literature as well as a Certificate of Education.

5. I entirely agree that keeping a journal, as Arun Mukherjee notes in her essay in this volume, helps students "negotiate their identities" through the text (191).
6. The key to the quiz is as follows: 1=n, 2=g, 3=b, 4=l, 5=c, 6=m, 7=d, 8=e, 9=h, 10=a, 11=i, 12=f, 13=j, 14=k.
7. For instance, in a community course at Oranim, the Academic College of Education, a BA-granting institution in the north of Israel, the educator divided the students along Jewish/Arab lines after a workshop where opposing views were voiced along those lines, thereby causing a rift in a class that had until then handled the contraries with much ease and tolerance. It took quite some time to rectify the situation as a delicate balance had been upset.
8. The dividing line between psychotherapy, sociodrama, and dramatherapy in this case proves rather thin.
9. Alienation resulting from restrictive definitions of belonging particularly affects people who have moved from country to country. Theirs is a fragmented vision of the self, where all the terms of the complex equation must be present for the sum to be correct. In referring to their approach as a nomadic experience, Rosi Braidotti rightly alludes to the cross-fertilization from one vision to another, akin to the experiential enrichment afforded by the multiple adjustments nomads have to make to different surroundings.
10. In particular, spatial polarities organize our thinking around binaries such as up/down, in/out, etc., binaries that have social and political implications with regard to notions of belonging.

WORKS CITED