Introduction

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Life of Pi: Reception of a Canadian novel

The nominees for the 2002 Booker Prize included three Canadian books: Carol Shields's *Unless*, Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. The news was welcomed in Canada with great satisfaction, but because none of the authors was born in the country, media at home and abroad launched an intense investigation of how to determine the "Canadianness" of a writer. Depending on the nationality of the commentator, these reflections ranged from the congratulatory and envious to the suspicious and defiant. The *South China Morning Post* described Mistry as "born in Mumbai but liv[ing] in Canada" and Martel as a "Spanish-born writer living in Canada," although it did identify the American-born Shields as Canadian. Responding in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, Charles Foran insisted that national labels must yield to creative identities because "their presence *is* the country" and "Choose Canada, and you are Canadian."[1] American and British papers alike ascribed these and other writers' remarkable success to the Canadian government's active deployment of literature as part of its Foreign Affairs portfolio and they praised its protectionist attitude towards the publishing industry. One expatriate Canadian journalist chimed in, declaring that the country's standards of living and personal liberty provided the "prerequisites for fine writing,"[2] a conclusion that may well come as news to writers from countries where literature has flourished despite (or, as some might argue, because of) adverse conditions. In contrast to commentators who drew a direct link between Canada's specific situation and its cultural boom, a long-time British observer of the Booker Prize concluded that the Canadians' success was not so much a national achievement as it was part and parcel of the Commonwealth's triumph over British metropolitan culture. Confirming Graham Huggan's and Luke Strongman's suspicions about the imperial legacy of the Prize,[3] this commentator went so far as to compare winner Yann Martel's "punching and high-fiving" with the excitement

generated by "the gorgeous troupe of Maori dancers" on the occasion of Keri Hulme's win in 1985 for *The Bone People*, and he suggested that the Canadians' ascendancy was a logical sequel to the time when "the Antipodean literary tradition was all the rage."[4]

This description suggests that Martel is an "exotic" writer and therefore a natural Booker winner, but subsequent events also reminded observers that Canada occupies an ambivalent position between colonized and colonizer. Days after Martel had won the award, a controversy erupted over his use of the work of Jewish Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar. Accusations of plagiarism raged for a week over the worldwide web, with textual evidence examined by literary reporters from one end of the globe to the other, and Martel responding to the charges in interviews and chatroom-style conversations with his readers until the matter had been cleared up and had exhausted its usefulness as a news item. In Scliar's view and that of his supporters, Martel's alleged theft of ideas merely confirmed the insouciance with which western authors have long appropriated for their own success the work of writers from developing countries, and Brazilian newspapers were quick to produce lists of previous such cases. There was no question here of approvingly celebrating Canada's "coming of age," but rather the assumption that it had long taken its place among the established nations and adopted their paternalist attitude towards less privileged cultures.[5] Together with the discovery that the Booker-winning British edition of *Life of Pi* contained revisions (extensive or not depending on who was consulted) that did not appear in the original Canadian version, the discussions surrounding Martel's book are worth dwelling on in some detail, because they usefully illustrate some of the practical and philosophical complexities attending the study of Canadian literature. Other contemporary literatures, British writing included, also feature authors that are difficult to classify, Zadie Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro, and W. G. Sebald among them. In addition, there are characteristics, such as its position between colonizer and colonized subject, that Canada shares with other settler nations like Australia. Indeed, government reports on the situation of Canadian culture such as that of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963–9) have habitually drawn comparisons with South Africa, Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, and Norway to highlight areas of common concern with other nations. But its official bilingualism combined with the exceptional multicultural demographics that have been emerging since the 1978 Immigration Act also place Canadian culture in a situation of its own.

As the winner, Martel underwent special scrutiny for his Canadian credentials, although he has no doubts about these himself and responded to an interviewer's question "I assume you consider yourself a citizen of the

world?" with an unequivocal "No. I'm Canadian."[6] Born in Salamanca, Spain to Québécois parents who moved their family to wherever their diplomatic postings subsequently took them, Martel was variously referred to by the press as "Spanish," "Canadian," "Montréalais," and "Québécois." His French Canadian pedigree was examined painstakingly because he writes in English and, although it was nominated for the Governor-General's Award in 2001, *Life of Pi* was virtually unknown in francophone Quebec when the Booker was announced, with the translation not scheduled to appear before 2003.[7] His father, Emile Martel, won the Governor-General's Award for his collection of poetry *Pour orchestre et poète seul* (1995), and his uncle, Réginald Martel, is a distinguished literary critic long associated with Montreal's *La Presse*, but Yann Martel's own preference for English proved to *indépendantiste* author Claude Jasmin that he was a "Québécois 'assimilé'," one who "refuse sa réalité."[8] RadioFrance by contrast insisted that Martel had been prevented only by his family's circumstances from acquiring the necessary proficiency to write in French. To forestall any criticism of the linguistic preferences of someone they were eager to "repatriate" into international francophone literature, the French media explained that schools in France had refused to accept him after he had received his early schooling in English during his father's posting in Costa Rica. They also cited the testimony of his parents, now retired and both working as translators (including translating their son's award-winning novel), as proof that Martel's French is beyond reproach. Meanwhile the English Canadian media were interested in using his French Canadian background to prove his *Canadian* credentials. To do so, they appropriated the insistence, frequent among Quebec's *indépendantistes*, that a family must document its extended presence in the province, preferably from a period pre-dating the Conquest, in order to prove that its genealogy is legitimate or *de souche* (or *pure laine*). Tellingly, the "here" in the *Globe and Mail*'s Sandra Martin's spirited defense of the author's passport credentials is Canada, not Quebec, when she points out that his father's family has lived in the country since the seventeenth century and his mother "is descended from settlers who came here in the 19th century."[9]

French and English

Martel's cool reception at the hands of Quebec critics and the need both in Canada and abroad to establish a genealogy for him arise from a number of historical complications. France was Canada's first colonial power, beginning in the sixteenth century with Jacques Cartier who claimed the territory along the Saint Lawrence River between the Gaspé Peninsula and

Hochelaga (now Montreal) in the name of François I and who returned to France accompanied by the captured Iroquois leader Donnacona and his sons. Hopes of finding rich deposits of minerals and a Northwest Passage to the Indies were, however, not realized, a disappointment that quelled official interest in the colony for the next fifty years or so and one that lingers on in the mocking name "Lachine" (a city now incorporated in Montreal and the place from where Cavalier de la Salle set forth in 1669 to find a direct route to China). Samuel de Champlain established a settlement in 1608 that allowed him to consolidate the kinds of commercial contact with the Indigenous population required to ensure the necessary supplies for the fur trade. Activities were soon extensive enough to justify the formation of trade companies like the Compagnie des cent-associés, but administration of the colony only became a success under Louis XIV, when its management was tightly organized to mimic that of France and the Intendant Talon oversaw vigorous developments in agriculture and local industries. Expansionism propelled exploration in the Great Lakes and Mississippi regions, often against the forceful opposition of the Indian nations who also kept a close eye on French settlements.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, New France extended from Newfoundland and Acadia (now Nova Scotia and parts of New Brunswick), along the Saint Lawrence and Saguenay Rivers and into the area of the Great Lakes and the mouth of the Mississippi, with trading posts and scattered settlements in the West extending all the way to the foothills of the Rockies. In the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, however, New France had to make extensive territorial and other concessions to the English, who by then had also established substantial trade interests in North America. The Acadians – farmers, fishermen, and trappers of French origin settled in parts of what are now the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick – were one casualty of the Treaty of Utrecht. Their territory was ceded to Great Britain, but they refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the new authorities, agreeing to an oath of neutrality instead. After they repeated their refusal in 1755, an estimated three-quarters of the 13,000 Acadians were deported to parts of what are now the United States and elsewhere, with families separated deliberately to undermine attempts to reconstitute themselves as a community, although substantial numbers later managed to return to their former settlements. Despite a remarkable flourishing of commerce and trade during the years of peace that followed the Treaty, New France ("quelques arpents de neige," to cite Voltaire's dismissive description) did not receive the attention from France, financial or otherwise, that was required to address its specific needs. Conflicting interests between the English and French came to the fore again during the Seven Years' War, often referred to as the first global war because it involved

large parts of both the new and old worlds. Its decisive event for New France was the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the "Conquest," when the English under James Wolfe defeated the French under the Marquis de Montcalm. The Treaty of Paris in 1763 ceded the colony to England.

Following the resurgence of French Canadian nationalism during the Rebellions of 1837, brought on by widespread dissatisfaction with British leadership, Lord Durham's Report on the Affairs of British North America (1839) declared that he found "two nations warring in the bosom of a single state" and that, as French Canadians were "a people with no literature and no history,"[10] it would be best to assimilate them. The Report led to the Act of Union (1841), bringing Upper and Lower Canada (the predecessors of modern Ontario and Quebec) together under one government. Its anti-French legislation, affecting the use of the French language, education, and civil law, together with the Report's insulting dismissal of their culture, spurred French Canadian intellectuals into action, so that by the time of Confederation in 1867, when the British North American colonies of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Canada (that is, the earlier union of Upper and Lower Canada) were joined in a Dominion, francophone authors were engaged in extensive historical and cultural recovery work. Although the Constitution Act of 1867 recognized English and French as official languages in Parliament and Canadian courts, there was legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which seriously restricted the official use of French outside Quebec.

As outlined in greater detail in E. D. Blodgett's chapter on francophone writing, concerns about the survival of French culture continued to rankle, however, until the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism undertook to study the question systematically, recommending that the 28.1% of Canadians who cited French as their mother tongue in the 1961 census (the figure dropped to 22.9% by 2001) be assured public service in their language and that government business be generally conducted, and documents made available, in both English and French. For some Quebeckers, these recommendations and their implementation in the 1969 Official Languages Act were too little too late. Activities of the separatist *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) culminated in the events of 1970, the so-called October Crisis, when the FLQ kidnapped British trade commissioner James Cross and Liberal politician Pierre Laporte, and executed Laporte. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act, under which more than 450 people were arrested, many of them prominent members of Quebec's cultural community. A vivid, although often overlooked, introduction to the tensions simmering between English and French at the beginning of the sixties, as well as to the ways in which historical events apparently long past continue to affect the relationship of the

two language groups, is provided in *Chers ennemis/Dear Enemies* (1963). This is a dialogue between journalist Solange Chaput-Rolland and novelist Gwethalyn Graham, which includes impassioned exchanges over the Deportation of the Acadians in 1755 and the Conscription Crisis of 1942 (when the government reversed its pledge to avoid conscription, following a plebiscite during which Quebec voted strongly against the reversal). Chaput-Rolland provides numerous dramatic examples of the ways in which she and her language become invisible as soon as she leaves her province, and sometimes even within it. Indeed, when she writes about the predominance of "speaking white" – that is, English – her language often rises to the level of poetic manifesto, making it reminiscent of the famous poem "Speak White" recited by Michèle Lalonde during the *Nuit de la poésie* held in support of those arrested under the 1970 War Measures Act. In a more recent example of how history continues to haunt relationships between English and French, Michel Basilières's novel *Black Bird* (2003) features the eccentric "Desouche" family at the time of the October Crisis in Montreal. The book is all the more remarkable as the author, bilingual like Yann Martel, writes in English and comments throughout on the cultural baggage and creative potential of both languages.

Although the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Report underlined "the undisputed role played by Canadians of French and British origin in 1867,"[11] it also performed important groundwork in assessing "The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups," to cite the title of the relevant volume. It was these "other ethnic groups" that were to create the distinctive demographics that characterize the Canada of today and that make it increasingly daunting to maintain the earlier demarcations along "racial" (a term which, the Report hastened to point out, "carries no biological significance"[12]) and linguistic lines. The difficulty of slotting Martel into clear national or linguistic categories "tickled" fellow-writer Ken Wiwa's "transnational, translocated, postcolonial bones,"[13] as he was making one of his own regular journeys back to Nigeria, and it would have confirmed travel-writer Pico Iyer's often-repeated impressions of Canadian literature and the society it represents as perfect expressions of contemporary "multiculture."[14] The figures certainly bear out Iyer's observations. According to the 2001 census released in January 2003, 18.4% of all persons living in Canada are foreign-born, up from 17.4% in 1996, and 16.1% in 1991. While European immigration topped the list before 1961, it has now dropped to 20%, compared to over 50% from Asia, including the Middle East. Toronto in particular features ethnic diversity unparalleled by any other large city in North America or Australia, with 44% of its population born outside of Canada and with China, India, the Philippines, and Hong Kong at the

top of the source countries, but "multiculture" is also high in Vancouver (37.5% foreign-born) and Montreal (18.4%). As a 2001 special issue of the *Canadian Geographic*, entitled "The New Canada," pointed out, the distribution of ethnicities in Canada mirrors closely the composition of the world's population, a phenomenon apparently not duplicated in quite this way in any other nation.

In the media, these developments tend to be described as recent and rather sudden, but it is an illuminating exercise to read through the essays collected in historian William Kilbourn's classic *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom* (1970) – published, ironically, in the year of the October Crisis – and to realize just how closely their national and international assessments of Canada's potential as "model-builder" overlap with the current enthusiasm. *The Economist*'s Barbara Ward published her essay "The First International Nation" in the *Canadian Forum* in 1968, shortly after the release of the first two volumes of the Report prepared by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. She writes that the country might, "with lucidity and daring," "show . . . a way forward to the score of states . . . who harbour a number of 'nations.'" The Report pointed out that even at the time of the 1961 census almost 41% of Toronto's population were foreign-born, and that the percentage of Canadians who were of neither British nor French extraction had risen from 11% in 1881 to 26% in 1961. However, as noted above, the great majority of these were still European, and Canadian literature continued to be dominated by these origins throughout the seventies and eighties, even while the composition of the Canadian population was undergoing radical changes. Thus, teachers encouraging their students to research their ethnic backgrounds through the country's literature were able to refer them to works by and about Scandinavian, German, Austrian, Italian, Ukrainian, and Hungarian immigrants, but it was not until the watershed publication of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) that students of non-European immigrant origin were beginning to have a choice of appropriate books to turn to. Even so, it took almost another decade for the explosive appearance of internationally acclaimed works from a wide range of cultural backgrounds to provide Canadian literature with its current diversity. Works by writers of European origin also underwent profound changes. Nino Ricci's bestseller *Lives of the Saints* (1990) set the signal by spending as much space on describing the Italian location of the hero's origins as it did on his Canadian destination. In its assertiveness, this was a significant departure from the amnesia (or retreat into folklore) that, for many legitimate reasons, characterized much earlier "ethnic" writing. Myrna Kostash's ongoing investigation, in *All of Baba's Children* (1977) and elsewhere, of the shifting meaning of "Ukrainian" in Canadian society provides an excellent

illustration of the factors that influence immigrants' denial of, or pride in, their culture of origin.

Both multicultural demographics and the international success of Canadian culture have been linked to legislation under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1968–79, 1980–4), and the two are closely interrelated. A signpost for the former was the Immigration Act proclaimed in 1978, which formulated a broad political, cultural, and humanitarian mandate, and asserted nondiscrimination as one of its fundamental principles. In its turn, official sponsorship of Canadian culture received a strong impetus earlier in the decade when President Richard Nixon's government imposed a 10% tax on imports into the United States, and Canada began to look for alternative trade partners in Europe, Asia, and South America. For the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), culture and tourism became important tools in boosting interest in Canada. Generous programs in translation, book promotion, and teaching were put in place, and embassies like Etienne-Joseph Gaboury's Chancery in Mexico City (1982) were designed as showcases of Canadian culture and scenery, with auditoriums, libraries, and galleries to provide further information.

In its activities, DFAIT was able to draw on the ground-breaking work of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (more commonly known after one of its chairmen, Vincent Massey, as the "Massey Commission"), in the course of which Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent suggested that the Commissioners also concern themselves with the question of "[m]ethods for the purpose of making available to the people of foreign countries adequate information concerning Canada."[15] Clearly guided in their concerns by the recent war, the Commissioners looked at how Winston Churchill's invocation of "the traditions of his country" provided powerful ammunition in rallying "the British people in their supreme effort" (*Report of the Royal Commission*, p. 4). By contrast, the 1951 Report painted an alarming picture of the state of Canadian cultural industries as offering no such focal point in times of emergency and proposed a wide-ranging program of initiatives to improve the situation, resulting in the establishment of the National Library in 1952 and of the Canada Council, a funding body with the purpose of fostering work in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, in 1957. Although the definition of culture used by the Commissioners was sometimes backward-glancing in its elitism, the Report raised fundamental questions about the nature and business of homegrown culture, many of which came to the fore in the following decades: the role of Canada's dual colonial heritage, the pervasive influence of American culture, and the crucial significance of communication in a country vast enough to have six different time zones. At some of its most poignant moments, the

Report leaves the lofty stance of an official document and simply lists, in apparent awe at the magnitude of the required effort, the thousands of miles of landlines and axial cable required to enable communication and thus hold the nation together. The conclusion was, however, that no matter what the complications might be, Canada required a confident culture of its own not only to ensure self-sufficiency but also to make it a strong and desirable ally. A recent exemplary investigation of Canadian cultural politics, including its roots in the Massey Report, is Katarina Leandoer's *From Colonial Expression to Export Commodity: English-Canadian Literature in Canada and Sweden, 1945–1999* (2002), a study that is also alert to the problems of government sponsorship which may not place creativity at the top of its priorities. Leandoer's focus, as the title says, is Sweden, but many of the author's observations have broader application as well.

The Multiculturalism Act of 1988 may be seen as a sequel to the Immigration Act, ensuring the rights of new Canadians "to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage."[16] Some commentators, however, dismissed this policy as an ill-considered ploy in domestic and international politics which would only serve to add further divisions to existing ones. One of the most vocal critics was Trinidad-born Neil Bissoondath whose highly controversial *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, originally published in 1994, generated enough debate to require a revised and updated version in 2002. By contrast, other observers surmise that Trudeau's policies were a shrewd act of *realpolitik* to challenge Quebec separatism, both by creating a multicultural population little interested in the traditional disagreements of the two "founding nations," and by using foreign cultural policy as a showcase for federalism, thus counteracting Quebec's efforts to establish its own international network. The outcome, needless to say, is perceived as either positive or lamentable depending on the observer's background.[17] While the Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism found that citizens "in the 'others' category"[18] had little interest in, or were reluctant to express views about, the relationship between anglophone and francophone Canadians or its effect on Confederation, it is true that Canadian unity has since received emphatic support from recent immigrants, leading to Parti Québécois leader Jacques Parizeau's infamous suggestion, causing much embarrassment to his party, that the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty was narrowly defeated by "money and the ethnic vote."[19] Support for national unity ranges from the complex civic work of organizations like the privately run Laurier Institute, which was instrumental in defusing the racial tension that threatened to erupt in the wake of large-scale immigration preceding the return of Hong Kong to China,[20] to some new citizens' enthusiasm for the country's much-debated national

symbols. This was a remarkable departure from the findings of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission, which found that few "others" had an "opinion on the issues of a new national flag and a national anthem for Canada."[21] The Maple Leaf flag was adopted after acrimonious parliamentary debate (among other things over the allusion to the French fleur-de-lys in the shape of the maple leaf) in 1965 and "O Canada," periodically questioned for its lack of inclusiveness even now, did not become the national anthem until 1980, but Hong Kong immigrant Bun Law's Canadian Flags Campaign has distributed hundreds of thousands of flags across the country for free. The family of Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, a distinguished journalist, writer, and publisher, left Hong Kong after the Japanese invasion in 1941 and its members are therefore by no means recent arrivals; indeed, when she was first appointed to Rideau Hall, Clarkson was bitterly criticized for allegedly denying her Chinese roots. Since then, however, she has been called "simply the best" because, among other accomplishments, she has made herself into a model for immigrants' aspirations while expressing an unconditional allegiance to Canada.[22]

Native writing and internationalism

Although Penny van Toorn's chapter on Aboriginal writing will discuss these topics in detail (as well as surveying the relative implications of "Aboriginal," "Native," "First Nations," "Indian," and "Métis"), it is important to underline at this stage that the internationalization of Canadian literature goes hand in hand with, and derives impetus from, an increase in publication by Native writers. The 2001 census noted a 22 percent rise since 1996 in the number of people who identified themselves as Aboriginal, the result of both strong birth rates and greater assertiveness. These figures coincide with a remarkable ascendancy in literary activity and the political activism to which it is linked. The only texts by a Native author in a late 1970s anthology much used in university courses were a handful of poems by Pauline Johnson, complemented by excerpts from several explorers' reports describing massacres of missionaries, traders, and enemy tribes by Native people, causing one of my own students, a Haida, to leave the classroom in protest. Here too the availability of texts and the educational work they make possible lagged behind political events, also initiated under Trudeau. There had been no Native representation on the Massey Commission, and Native people were mentioned only in passing (and then with sometimes ill-concealed condescension), including one "Nootka Indian [who] traveled 125 miles to tell us about the vanishing art of his race and how in his view it might be saved" (p. 10). Some of the Native actors in George Ryga's controversial