

Introduction

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Madeleine Thien, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and Global Writing

In 2016, Madeleine Thien published *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (the title is a quotation from the Chinese Communist Internationale), an ambitious historical novel about three families, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre. The frame narrative is delivered by a member of the most recent generation, a young woman – named Jian Liling in Chinese and Marie Jiang in English – who grows up in Vancouver and becomes a mathematician. Her investigations into her family history provide a suspenseful thread as well as gradually revealing the reasons for her own psychological detachment. This detachment, for a time, protects her from the collective trauma pressing on her life: one version of the book cover shows what appears to be a daughter leaning affectionately against the empty silhouette of her father. Marie’s Chinese is sketchy and as a child she is unable to fathom the silences around her, but the narrative seeks to compensate for the gaps by including an array of alternative sign systems: ideograms, mathematical formulae, literary works that function as means of secret communication, and, above all, musical scores. In connection with her earlier novel *Certainty* (2006), Thien has spoken at length about the need to translate *all* of the symbols of cultural exchange to come even remotely close to mutual understanding.¹

The weight of painful experience originating in another time and on another continent virtually displaces the sections of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* that are set in Canada, an approach similar to that adopted in Kim Thúy’s *Ru* and David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*, both published in 2009 and both, like Thien’s novel, highly acclaimed. Using a more compact format than Thien’s 450-page sweep, these works describe the escape of Vietnamese “boat-people” and the destructive heritage of Caribbean slavery respectively, experiences that follow their characters on to Canadian soil. Shortlisted for the 2016 Booker Prize, Thien’s book instantly received a great deal of

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attention, always an opportunity to study any difficulties the international press might have in understanding the multitude of backgrounds a Canadian passport can imply. In contrast to 2002, when reviewers floundered over the citizenship of Rohinton Mistry, Carol Shields, and Yann Martel, there were no such confusions this time: typically, Thien was described as “a Canadian writer of Malaysian-Chinese heritage.”²

Ironically, she has at times been classified as “Other” at home in Canada. Thus, a brief controversy a year before the nomination had the *Globe and Mail*’s columnist Russell Smith list Thien as one of several Canadian writers whose “very liberal sprinkling of non-English words” creates “a kind of near-creole.”³ In response, she chastised Smith via Twitter for going by “the colour of my skin” rather than taking the trouble of accurately citing her work to date.⁴ *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* does, of course, feature a great many “non-English words,” but – as illustrated above – “near-creole” does not begin to cover their intention. Supported by social media, assertive writers like Thien seek to educate reviewers and journalists in the categories with which the writers themselves do or do not identify. The implied understanding of global writing is not that it is an instrument of homogeneity but rather that it is ideally one of mutual respect and responsibility

Life of Pi: Reception of a Canadian Novel

The matter-of-fact acceptance of Thien’s Canadian citizenship by the international media contrasts with the response to the three Canadian nominees of the 2002 Booker Prize, and the latter remains an instructive commentary on the evolution of Canadian literature since the introduction of official multiculturalism in 1988. The three Canadian books involved in 2002 were Carol Shields’s *Unless*, Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*, and Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*. None of these authors has as strong a presence in the 2016 literary scene as they had then. Shields died in 2003, and a few posthumous publications, such as a graphic novel (2016) with Patrick Crowe based on Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*, have appeared subsequently. Mistry’s most recent publication is a story, *Scream* (2008), and Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil* (2010) and *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016) have not confirmed the success of *Life of Pi*. In 2002, the news of these authors’ nomination was obviously greeted with great satisfaction in Canada, but because – unlike Thien – none of the authors was born in the country, media at home and abroad launched an intense investigation of how to determine the Canadian credentials of a writer. Largely dependent on the nationality of the commentator, these reflections ranged from the congratulatory and envious to the suspicious and defiant. The *South China Morning Post*

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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.”⁵ 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 toward the publishing industry. One expatriate Canadian journalist chimed in, asserting that the country’s standards of living and personal liberty provided the “prerequisites for fine writing,”⁶ a conclusion that may well have 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,⁷ 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.”⁸

This description suggests that Martel was seen as 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 the Jewish Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar. For a week accusations of plagiarism raged over the World Wide 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 the controversy died down. In the view of Scliar and his supporters, Martel’s alleged theft of ideas merely confirmed the insouciance with which western authors have long appropriated for their own purposes 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 toward less privileged cultures.⁹ The discussions surrounding

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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 who 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, which 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 (1963–1969), have habitually drawn comparisons with countries such as 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 had 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."¹⁰ 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 at the time when the Booker was announced, with the translation not scheduled to appear before 2003.¹¹ His father, Émile Martel, had won the Governor General's Award for his collection of poetry *Pour orchestre et poète seul* (1995), and his uncle, Réginald Martel, was 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."¹² 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 since he had received his early schooling in English, during his father's posting in Costa Rica. They also cited the testimony of his parents, by then 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

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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 Sandra Martin's spirited defense, in the *Globe and Mail*, of the author's passport credentials is Canada, rather than Quebec, as she points out that his father's family has lived in the country since the seventeenth century and that his mother “is descended from settlers who came here in the 19th century.”¹³

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 not realized, however – 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

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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, a conflict often referred to as the first global war because it involved large parts of both the new and old worlds. The decisive event for New France in this period 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, caused 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,”¹⁴ 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.

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As outlined in greater detail in E. D. Blodgett's chapter on francophone writing, concerns about the survival of French culture continued to rankle, until the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism undertook to study the question systematically, recommending that the 28.1 percent of Canadians who cited French as their mother tongue in the 1961 census (the figure dropped to 21.0 percent by 2011, and it is anticipated to decline further) 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 subsequently 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 1960s, 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 cites 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 another 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,"¹⁵ it also performed important groundwork in assessing "The Cultural

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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 present-day Canada 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”¹⁶) and linguistic lines. The difficulty of slotting Martel into clear national or linguistic categories “tickled” fellow-writer Ken Wiwa’s “transnational, translocated, postcolonial bones,”¹⁷ as he was making one of his own regular journeys back to Nigeria (he moved back there in 2005 and died in London in 2016), and it would also have confirmed travel-writer Pico Iyer’s often-repeated impressions of Canadian literature and the society it represents as perfect expressions of contemporary “multiculture.”¹⁸ The figures certainly bear out Iyer’s observations. According to the 2011 census, 20.6 percent of all persons living in Canada are foreign-born, up from 18.4 percent in 2001 and 16.1 percent in 1991. This is the highest proportion among G8 countries though behind Australia’s 26.8 percent. While European immigration topped the list before 1961, it has dropped to 13.7 percent (from 20 percent in 2001) compared to 56.9 percent from Asia (up from 50 percent in 2001), including the Middle East. Toronto in particular features ethnic diversity unparalleled by any other large city in North America or Australia, with 46.0 percent of its population born outside of Canada and with South Asians, Chinese, Blacks, Filipinos, and Latin Americans at the top of visible minorities, but “multiculture” is also high in Vancouver (40.0 percent foreign-born) and Montreal (22.6 percent).¹⁹ In 2017, projections indicate that, by 2036, “nearly one in two people in the country” could be an “immigrant . . . or second-generation” immigrant citizen, and “up to 40 percent” of Canadians are expected to be “members of a visible minority.”²⁰ A 2001 special issue of the *Canadian Geographic*, entitled “The New Canada,” pointed out, that the distribution of ethnicities in Canada at that time mirrored closely the composition of the world’s population, a phenomenon apparently not duplicated in quite the same way in any other nation.

In the media, these developments tend to be described as 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 more recent 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

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lucidity and daring,” “show . . . a way forward to the score of states . . . who harbour a number of ‘nations.’” In early 2017, the ban on immigration from certain countries implemented by the Trump administration provoked the most recent conclusion that, by contrast, “Canada [is] Leading the Free World” in its own policies.²¹ The Bilingualism and Biculturalism Report pointed out that even at the time of the 1961 census almost 41 percent 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 percent in 1881 to 26 percent in 1961.

However, as noted above, the majority of these citizens were still European, and Canadian literature continued to be dominated by these origins throughout the 1970s and 1980s, 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 began 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 give Canadian literature its current diversity. Works by writers of European origin also underwent profound changes during this time. 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 investigation, in *All of Baba’s Children* (1977) and elsewhere, of the shifting meaning of “Ukrainian” in Canadian society illustrates 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 introduced under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1968–79, 1980–4), and the two are indeed closely inter-related. 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 percent 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),

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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 Étienne-Joseph Gaboury's Chancery in Mexico City (1982) were designed as showcases of Canadian culture and scenery, with auditoriums, libraries, and galleries to supply further information. The cancellation, in 2012, of DFAIT's "Understanding Canada" program by Stephen Harper's Conservative government was a blow to the promotional and cooperative spirit of these ventures.

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."²² Clearly guided in their concerns by the recent war, the Commissioners looked at how Winston Churchill's invocation of "the traditions of his country" generated 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 the 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. The result was the establishment of the National Library in 1952 and, in 1957, of the Canada Council, a Crown corporation dedicated to fostering work in the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

Although the definition of culture used by the Commissioners was sometimes backward-looking 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. An 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*