

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Bears, Bodies and Boundaries in Douglas Glover's *Elle: A Novel* Rūta Šlapkauskaitė

Historically, road and quest stories have presented us with archetypal narrative models of transculturation, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as ‘a phenomenon of the contact zone’ constituted by ‘the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures ... whose trajectories now intersect’.<sup>1</sup> Encounters with the Other have always been part of the nature of European travel writing, particularly when depicting the unfamiliar, the mysterious, and the desirable qualities that have long been associated with the Orient and the Americas. Late medieval and Renaissance literatures abound in explorers’ accounts of European voyagers’ fascination with or repulsion at manifestations of the (largely incomprehensible) ‘strangeness’ of the Other. One may think of Marco Polo’s stories about China or John Mandeville’s inspiring tall tales about Oriental locations he never, in fact, visited. The extent to which travel writing and alterity have been pivotal to Western cartography, especially as pertaining to early colonisation, has been meticulously studied in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvelous Possessions*, where he shows us how deftly the discourse of the marvellous was used in establishing the European colonial presence in the New World. At the heart of the early Western quest for dominance, Greenblatt points out, lay the experience of wonder, which institutionalised Europe’s imperial desires and legitimated its political campaigns and ensuing assets. More importantly still, wonder operated as a hermeneutic practice in facing all forms of alterity and coming to terms with it: ‘The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of the experience.’<sup>2</sup> In this, wonder served as a fundamental means of transcultural communication between the Europeans and the Natives as well as a mode of cultural, political and economic appropriation.

The praxis of wonder as regards the marvellousness of the New World is perhaps nowhere as suggestive as in what was to become Canada, or in Jacques Cartier’s words, ‘the land that God gave to Cain’. Here, we are reminded of Europe’s reluctance to let go of its medieval imagination, which projected monstrosity onto all that was remote, alien and potentially hazardous. W H New’s *A History of Canadian Literature* makes a case in point by saying that ‘a Giacomo Gastaldi (fl. 16<sup>th</sup> century) map of 1556 depicts the “Isola de Demoni” north of Newfoundland, ornamenting it with a humanoid creature with wings and a tail. Onshore and off, these maps filled blank spaces with lizards, sea monsters, beasts and beastmen.’<sup>3</sup> The alterity of the space that is foreign both culturally and intellectually is emphasized here by resorting to the conventions of the marvellous, whereby it is not only perceived within the framework of the binary opposition Us vs Them, but is also given the value of

<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London & NY: Routledge, 2003) 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991) 20.

<sup>3</sup> W.H. New, *A History of Canadian Literature* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2003) 19.

Rūta Šlapkauskaitė. Bears, Bodies and Boundaries in Douglas Glover’s *Elle: A Novel*. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

aberration, anomaly and deviance. Susan Sontag extends a similar remark in her essay on travel writing, suggesting that

to be foreign was to be abnormal, often represented as physical abnormality; and the persistence of those accounts of monstrous peoples, of ‘men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders’ (Othello’s winning tale), of anthropophagi, Cyclopes, and the like illustrates to us the astonishing gullibility of past ages.<sup>4</sup>

While we need not agree with Sontag that the practice of demonising the unfamiliar was an exclusive sign of historical naïveté, we should, I think, be alerted to the ideological dimension that the bias of the marvellous in cultural representation entailed. Rather conspicuously, the marvellous has always been the territory of the marginal, the alien, and the deviant. In recent decades it also became the intellectual province of the postcolonial inquiry. An often-confusing terrain of scholarly endeavour, as testified by publications such as Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic* and Cynthia Sugars’s edited collection of essays titled *Unhomely States: Theorizing English Canadian Postcolonialism*, postcolonial studies have nevertheless been instrumental in explicating the link between the historical practices of political, economic and cultural appropriation and the discursive formation of the Other in the West. Thus in postcolonial terms, the praxis of wonder, which accompanied the imperial subordination of cultural difference, may be described as a distinct mode of perception which rendered alterity as simultaneously strange and familiar, in other words, marvellous, and, of course, available to the European observer.

For Huggan, this mode of aesthetic perception in cross-cultural encounter defines the mechanism of exoticism, a hermeneutic procedure ‘which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’.<sup>5</sup> The term gains particular valence in debates over current consumerist attitudes to cultural difference in discourse whereby transcultural fictions court public interest by promoting stereotypical representations of cultural difference as merchandise to be purchased, sanitised, consumed and forgotten. Huggan’s observations seem to extend Greenblatt’s comments on the discourse of the marvellous in Renaissance Europe, even if Huggan uses his ideas to scrutinise the postcolonial field rather than analyse the discursive laws of colonial history as Greenblatt does in his *Marvelous Possessions*. Huggan’s suggestion that ‘... cultural difference also has an aesthetic value, a value often measured explicitly or implicitly in terms of the exotic’<sup>6</sup> raises important points about the nature of transcultural relations and the human ability to understand and adequately respond to otherness. The fact that Huggan identifies exoticising practices within the postcolonial field itself opens up a new debate around issues of postcolonial agency and the asymmetrical nature of cultural dialogue so key to our understanding of contemporary transcultural (not singularly ethnic minority) narratives.

---

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) 274.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London & NY: Routledge, 2001) 13.

<sup>6</sup> Huggan 13.

Sarah Brouillette's recent study *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace* provides a wonderfully perspicacious critical response to Huggan's arguments and a powerful reconsideration of the politics of literary marketing. On the one hand, she agrees with Huggan's observation that 'The postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location.'<sup>7</sup> At the same time, though, Brouillette remains duly critical of Huggan's generalisation about 'an unspecified global reader in pursuit of exotic access to what is culturally other'<sup>8</sup>, pointing out that the global marketplace, in which transcultural narratives circulate, condition the rise of authorial self-consciousness which simultaneously accedes to capitalist demands and exposes the mechanism of the culture industry, thus challenging the reader's own values and cognitive procedures. In other words, both writing (literary criticism and fiction) and reading in the postcolonial field are imbricated with complicity in exoticising practices, which makes the field's epistemological apparatus as ambivalent as it is.

For Brouillette, the 'tourist gaze' and the 'commodifying spirit' are at the heart of the postcolonial aesthetic mediated as it is through the codes of global capitalism:

Writers are marketed to appeal to specific subject positions or as representatives of particular political locales, they have frequently used their works not to suggest their distance from the material or the political, but to register precisely the connections between the two, beneficial or otherwise. In their texts narratives of all kinds are already commodities; there is little space of separation from the market, but there is a continual engagement with its boundaries and implications, and with its many diverse and often conflicting audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, this also instigates a complicitous relationship between the author and the reader as they meet in the shared ideological terrain of aesthetic aspiration, cultural accommodation and political commitment. While iconic scholars like Edward Said, Homi K Bhabha and the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* seek to educate their readers about the textual strategies of appropriation and abrogation in postcolonial discourse, Brouillette's analysis of global market relations suggests that today's writers and readers already share a common matrix of references as well as views about cultural operations and they seek to 'exempt themselves from certain undesirable practices'.<sup>10</sup> This is to say that contemporary transcultural fictions acknowledge their complicity in the highly stratified, asymmetrical space of 'contact zones', orchestrating an intricate dynamic between whatever happens to be centre and periphery at a given time. Arguably, then, the contradictory nature of transcultural narratives exemplifies the paradox of literature where the underlying principle is that of ambivalence, unpredictability and uncertainty, whether aesthetical, cultural or

---

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Brouillette 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Brouillette 74-5.

<sup>10</sup> Brouillette 43.

ideological. This echoes Juri Lotman's ideas in *Culture and Explosion* about the correlation between art and external reality in culture conceived as a semiosphere: 'unpredictability in art is simultaneously a cause and a consequence of unpredictability in life'.<sup>11</sup>

The unpredictability and ambivalence of transcultural experience is the focus of Douglas Glover's Governor General-winning tale *Elle: A Novel* (2003). This historical novel takes up the story of a sixteenth-century French noblewoman Marguerite de la Rocque de Roberval, who becomes marooned on the Isle of Demons by a family relative who is also the commander of the colonial expedition she has joined on her father's demand. Much in line with the postmodern drive of Glover's fiction, Marguerite is the narrator for the majority of the novel, constructing her narrative as a memoir that challenges the official representations of her experience: 'I write this memoir as a protest against all the uplifting, inspirational and exemplary texts claiming to be about my life. I am myself, not what they have written' (114). In protest to multiple simplifications of her life story, the narrator resorts to Greek and Native myth, Rabelaisian humour, derision of the Church, sexual banter and 'the wild and eerie laughter of the otherwise silenced "madwoman in the attic"',<sup>12</sup> as Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein put it in their analysis of postcolonial comic writing. Her narrative is thus to be read as a critical commentary on the social codes of her time as well as a rethinking of discursive strategies through which European explorers conceived the image of *terra nulla* that would become Canada: 'It is bigger than Europe, empty of people and strange as the moon' (28).

Glover's choice of a female narrator and protagonist suggests his acute awareness of the complexity of early colonial history and the verbal nature of representations of the past. Although otherwise complicit in the French colonial enterprise, his Marguerite is marginal in a number of ways: as an unmarried woman in a highly hierarchical and patriarchal society, as female rebel keen on breaking the laws of social decorum, as a castaway on a periphery of the colonial world and finally, as a writer, whose voice is drowned in the narrative deluge of her male counterparts. In this sense, the novel reads simultaneously as a historical metafiction and a story of a female coming-of-age. The narrator's Canadian quest for survival is rearticulated in her quest for authorship: the journey she takes through the wilds of Canada is also the intellectual and emotional journey that we follow when reading her story. The book she is writing becomes a testimony to her role as a historical subject in a male-dominated society as well as a manifestation of her new identity as an explorer.

Arguably, though, it is through her role as a European explorer that Glover's novel uncovers the ambivalence of Marguerite's experience of the 'contact zone'. As John Clement Ball has convincingly shown in his article 'Canadian Crusoes from Sea to Sea',<sup>13</sup> in isolating its protagonist on an island and scrutinising her complex relationship with the alien environment, Glover's narrative self-consciously and

---

<sup>11</sup> Juri Lotman, *Culture and Explosion* (Berlin & NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004) 77.

<sup>12</sup> Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (eds.), *Cheeky Fictions. Laughter and the Postcolonial* (Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2005) 9.

<sup>13</sup> John Clement Ball, 'Canadian Crusoes from Sea to Sea: The Oceanic Communities of Douglas Glover's *Elle* and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*', *Moveable Margins: The Shifting Spaces of Canadian Literature*, ed. Chelva Kanaganayakam (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2005) 85-103.



ironically reconsiders the ideological legacy of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. A female Crusoe, Marguerite seemingly borrows from the matrix of imperial conquest, yet at the same time subverts it by exposing her own oppression as a female: 'What do you do with a headstrong girl? ... Kill her, maim her ... Forget her' (29). Likewise, *Elle* partakes of the conventions of male explorers' accounts, which are suggestive of the imperial agenda the protagonist's own narrative is measured against:

I had read *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, mostly for his description of the land of Lamory, where everyone goes naked, women give themselves freely to any man, and adults eat children, a novel form of population control. I knew Dicuil's account (in *De mensera orbis terrae*) of St. Brendan's voyage to the Fortunate Isles, with his Irish monks in their peculiar round boats, carrying their books, bells and crosiers. I had dreamed of the Northmen's Thule, the Isles of the Blest written of by the ancients, Anthilia, Saluaga and the Isle of the Seven Cities, Satanaxes. I had seen five savages from Brazil in Paris, looking like Tartars with their fierce tattoos and empty faces. (31)

Marguerite's remarks about unfamiliar places, the Brazilian 'savages' and later the indigenous people of Canada are characteristic of her aristocratic upbringing steeped in the idea of Europe's cultural superiority, which explains her inability to 'read' the faces of people who constitute the cultural Other in Paris. However, as her wanderings on the island continue, *Elle's* protagonist is made to rethink her own categories of knowledge, perception of *alterity* and the boundaries of the discourses about the world available to her: 'I have entered a place where old definitions, words themselves, no longer apply' (37).

As a postmodern novel, *Elle* falls within the fault lines of what Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern historiographic metafiction, as Glover's protagonist shares her views on books ranging from Erasmus's treatise, Marguerite de Navarre's *Mirror of a Sinful Soul* to François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a story Rabelais writes while treating Glover's narrator after she is brought back to France. In fact, it seems that Marguerite's personal experience on the alien shore contributes in no small measure to the Rabelaisian imagination: 'He has just finished a third book about the giants Gargantua and Pantagruel but despairs of publishing it in the present atmosphere of suspicion, excessive religious zeal (irrespective of what religion), ill humour, illiberality and lack of irony' (186). We may also be duly reminded of Rabelais' conception of the world as co-extensive with the spirit of sixteenth-century geographical explorations for, as Mikhail Bakhtin points out,

Rabelais' famous contemporary Jacques Cartier advanced a new plan: to shift the itinerary to the north polar regions. In 1540 Cartier made his way to Canada. In 1541 Francis I sent him to colonize this newly discovered territory of North America. So Rabelais, too, changed his hero's itinerary and made him sail to the northwest, to the polar regions, to which Cartier was pointing.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1984) 397-8.  
5

This historical isomorphism complicates our reading of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as it brings to light the ideological ambiguity of the Rabelaisian discourse. For while courting comic effect by parodying ‘all the elements of medieval teachings and sacraments’,<sup>15</sup> Rabelais’ masterpiece simultaneously dismantles the structures of oppressive power and sustains their dynamics. Perhaps in doing so the book itself becomes an embodiment of the ambivalence of the carnival festivities from which it borrows its imagination. An analogous ideological ambivalence resonates in Glover’s fondness for Rabelaisian humour in *Elle*. By using Rabelais as a linchpin for narrative (often humorous) set-ups, the novel operates as a palimpsest which foregrounds a critical inquiry into the discourse of geographical exploration and its role in the colonisation of the New World. Yet the novel also shows a concern for travesty as a source of both humour and crossover identities (from Latin *trans* ‘over’ + *vestire* ‘to clothe’; Italian *travestire* ‘to disguise’) in that Glover ‘disguises’ Pantagruel’s spirit in the figure of his female protagonist who completes the original itinerary (which was Cartier’s itinerary in the first place) and thereby solicits our critical attention to the ambivalences of the heterogeneous discourses underlying the imperial dreams of Rabelais’ France.

Marguerite’s account of her journey and physical ordeal in the wilds of colonial Canada is rendered through a narrative taste for what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, discursive structures rooted in the culture of the medieval marketplace where comic rituals of the feast of fools were used to dismantle the prevalent social order by temporarily suspending ‘prohibitions and hierarchical barriers’.<sup>16</sup> The ideological fulcrum of the carnival spirit, as Bakhtin shows, is the subversion of authority (particularly that of the Church) by way of mockery and a penchant for obscenity and the grotesque. The carnivalesque, in other words, may be seen as a temporary legitimisation of the transgressive that was particularly associated with the life of the body and its ‘material bodily lower stratum’.<sup>17</sup> Glover’s protagonist has a similar gift for tugging at the beard of the feudal and ecclesiastical world. For one, she gleans comic purpose from her description of the General who maroons her on the island: ‘His hair is cropped short like a sheep pasture, but his moustaches hang long and lank down the sides of his thin dour mouth. A strip of black beard sprouts beneath his lower lip’ (27). In lampooning the General and thus denigrating his authority on board, Marguerite bites the thumb of the patriarchal society that puts constraints on her social identity as a woman in medieval Europe. Her sense of freedom and rebellion find their carnivalesque expression in the excessive pleasures of the flesh she shares on the ship with her suitor Richard:

But remembering a certain apostate nun I saw burned last summer drives me to my peak, and I come, shouting Hail Mary. My body heaves voluptuously. At the same moment, Richard, the so-called etc., vomits toward the shit bucket and the inquisitive rat, then lies there spent, feverish, the colour of parchment. (21)

---

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin 379.

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin 89.

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin 395.

Marguerite's verbal dexterity partakes of the grotesque, which, as Bakhtin observes, 'was the basis of all the abuses, uncrownings, teasing, and impertinent gestures (as pointing at the nose or the buttocks, spitting, and others).'<sup>18</sup> Characteristically, the comic footprint of this rhetoric is twofold, for it brings together the opposing poles of life and death. Marguerite's sexual pleasure derives, at least partly, from her memory of a nun's death, which is suggestive of her sexual passion (the nun was burned, thus sharing in the Passion of Christ) as much as her invective attitude towards ecclesiastical power. By directing our gaze at the nether regions of the body and its fluids, Glover also highlights the metaphorical implications of the body in *Elle*. The discourse of obscenity Marguerite uses is suggestive of Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body, which is conceived as 'a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed.'<sup>19</sup> Much like Marguerite's sexual fantasy, the grotesque body merges life and death; it is a body that is conscious of its own deconstructive and transitive force, a body in need of the Other.

This may explain why Glover uses the body as a metaphor for Marguerite's colonial agency: the body as a sexual territory becomes coextensive with the colonial map of the Canadian wilderness. Predictably, Glover mocks the geographical exploration of the colonial territory through a carnivalised depiction of his protagonist's sexual activity. Desire is at the heart of Marguerite's colonial effort:

Founding a colony in the New World is like the act of love. You make camp in the heart of the other. Nothing is the way you expected it. You have to learn to talk another language. Translation fails. The languages get mixed up with each other. You're both disappointed. You ask yourself why you came there in the first place. You both feel invaded. You try harder and harder to make the other person do as you want, all the while feeling that this defeats the purpose. You would rather be alone. The thing you love seems altered, even dead. You are not the same as you were before you fell in love. When it's over, you leave part of yourself behind. If you survive, you are worse off than when you started. (108)

While extending the metaphors of love and translation to colonisation is symptomatic of Marguerite's ambivalent position in the colonial quest (being a woman she is both the subject and object of the discourse of power), her observation about the reciprocity of the epistemological shift taking place in the encounter with alterity suggests that Glover is primarily interested in the bilateral effect of transculturation in the course of which 'you are not the same as you were before'. In this sense, transculturation unfolds as an act of metamorphosis, in which disparate cultural consciousnesses collide and become aware of their own epistemological constraints.

Marguerite's observation that 'Translation fails.' seems to be crucial here for it reminds us of Lotman's observations about the semiotic structure of culture. For Lotman, culture is a semiosphere, a heterogeneous space composed of different languages, each of which constitutes 'a cluster of semiotic spaces and their

---

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin 341.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin 317.

boundaries'.<sup>20</sup> The boundary is key to the efficiency of the dialogue between cultures and different languages within the same cultural universe. In Lotman's words, 'The boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into "our" language, it is where what is "external" is transformed into what is "internal"'.<sup>21</sup> To use Pratt's terminology, the boundary is not unlike a 'contact zone', where the communication between Self and Other takes place. In Marguerite's case, her body becomes the ever-shifting boundary whose range she examines every time she encounters the cultural Other in the New World. Her perception of failed translation may be attributed to her ambivalent status both in France and in Canada. As a French aristocrat, she is promised access to power, yet as a woman, she is made cognizant of her disenfranchisement. Similarly, as an imperial subject in the colonial territory, she embodies the 'imperial eyes', to use Pratt's phrasing, yet as a single European woman in the Canadian wilderness she finds herself vulnerable to the reality of cultural difference. Her identity is effectively constituted by *liminality*: 'You go on a journey, but instead of returning you find yourself frozen on the periphery, the place between places, in a state of being neither one nor the other' (167).

The protagonist's journey over the ocean and across the Canadian wilderness is a powerful evocation of etymological memory: the young woman is literally subjected to transculturation, thrown beyond the parameters of her own culture, in the sense of 'trans-' as Latin 'across, over, beyond'. Stranded on the Isle of Demons, Marguerite resorts to the scanty vocabulary of the 'savage' tongue as taught by Jacques Cartier: 'The native word for girl is *agnyaquesta*. For friend, *aguyase*. Pubic hair, *aggonson*. Look at me, *quatgathoma*. The moon, *assomaha*. Give me supper, *quazahoa quatfream*. Testicles, *xista*' (44). This may be read as her attempt to move beyond the familiar linguistic universe and connect with the alien world. Curiously, the words she has learned testify both to her reliance on the European cultural codes, which posit her as 'superior' to the Natives (notice the imperative constructions she employs), and her rebellious nature as signalled by the fair share of sexual *argot* not necessarily instrumental to her survival. Ironically, she also soon learns that Cartier's glossary, much like the European idea of the New World, is not adequate for the North American reality: 'They speak a different language here. Or maybe M. Cartier made up those lexicons out of his imagination' (78). Glover mocks the colonial discourse that invented the New World, turning his female protagonist into a voice of the boundary on which transcultural experiences are inscribed and examined. In so far as she embodies the consciousness of the boundary, Marguerite's thoughts reflect the ambivalence of power dynamics in the process of the cultural dialogue: 'Or maybe the savages purposely misled him. Okay, okay, let's give him *aguyase*, I have bird shit on my face' (78). On the one hand, her discourse steps into the territory of obscenity to challenge Cartier's authority on the meaning of the unfamiliar cultural world, thus simultaneously bringing to doubt the whole conception of her cognitive universe. On the other hand, though, she remains within the shackles of the binary opposition Us/Them, unable to look at the Native inhabitants as 'different' rather than 'savages'. Substantially, then, the ideological ambiguity of Marguerite's rhetoric is contiguous with the aura of the 'grotesque' that surrounds her body. She welcomes

<sup>20</sup> Juri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London & NY: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1990) 124.

<sup>21</sup> Lotman *Universe* 136-7.



the Other, but only to the extent where it can be assimilated to the boundaries of the Self.

The context of colonial history in *Elle* emphasises the incommensurability of the process of transculturation. The novel juxtaposes two models of the experience of the 'contact zone': Marguerite's somewhat privileged narrative and the haunting silence of the Native girl, Comes Winter, that Cartier has brought from Canada. While Glover's protagonist survives her quest, the indigenous woman is shown slowly dying in the captivity of 'civilisation': 'There are dark stains down her breast, a bracket of dried blood inside one nostril. Her dark skin is ashen with pallor. She smells sourly of death' (177). What most compromises Marguerite's triumph is the inaccessibility of the Native girl's own epistemological terms: her silence taints Marguerite's (and our) transcultural understanding by denying us the possibility of knowing her mind. Marguerite's voice displaces that of the indigenous girl's much like the 'contact zone' in the Canadian wilderness becomes displaced in the 'prison' of the French household, which remains beyond access to the language of the Other and thereby beyond understanding. Although likened to her French counterpart in terms of her gendered marginality and migration, the Aboriginal girl gains her presence and meaning in the narrative only through bodily gestures as interpreted by Marguerite. It is her body that mirrors the boundaries of the 'contact zone', bemoaning the destruction of selfhood that her encounter with the French colonists has brought about:

She coughs till it seems something will snap inside her slender frame. She gags, spits blood, heaves, clutching her ribs with bone-thin fingers, her eyes inward and terror-struck. Will I drown? they ask. Will it be now? So far from home? ... When the New and the Old World meet, first we exchange corpses. (178)

Symptomatically, Comes Winter gains meaning primarily as an object of the imperial gaze, whose observations paradoxically reiterate Marguerite's own sexual 'heaving' and 'clutching' on her way to Canada. In effect, the Aboriginal woman is an inversion of Marguerite herself, as she, too, finds herself in exile, living with a foreign man, and fighting for survival. Their connection is further reinforced in Marguerite's taking over of the care of a bear that the indigenous girl looked after in Cartier's home.

The figure of the bear is central to Marguerite's experience of Canada and its cultural universe. Her confrontation with and slaying of a female bear in the wilderness is followed by her meeting of Itslk, an Inuk hunter, who stays to live with her. With her lover Richard and her nurse Bastienne dead, Marguerite is left all alone except for the child she is expecting, a child that will also die upon birth. In her starving solitude she meets 'a man with tennis rackets on his feet' (78). She tries to speak to the man using Cartier's 'vocabulary', but the man does not seem to understand: 'In my confusion, I think I tell him to come to bed. It doesn't matter, he doesn't seem to understand ... It is always thus when one encounters another – child, father, friend, enemy, savage, astral being. A world of confusion, just like love' (78). Ironically, when the man does respond, he addresses the narrator in French and not only explains that he is hunting a bear in order to save his community from starvation, but also comments on her sexual appeal: 'I don't like to mention it, but you are so

ugly it will be difficult to sleep with you. (Laughter)' (80). What is particularly interesting here, is our awareness of the Native man's aesthetic gaze which challenges the female protagonist's colonial quest and the relations of power entailed in it as well as reminds her of her own vulnerability as an object of male desire: 'I feel suddenly naked, shy' (79).

Marguerite's relationship with Itslk lies at the heart of the novel's problematising of transculturation. In so far as they are elements of two distinct cultural worlds, their engagement with each other is suggestive of a dialogue between cultures, where each party seeks to understand the Other. This is especially true of Itslk, who examines the objects he finds with Marguerite: 'He brought me my English Bible. What's this? he said. These are words, I said, pointing to the text. He put his ear to the pages and listened intently, looked disappointed' (85). In line with what Lotman says about cultural translation as an assimilation of foreign elements into one's own cultural system, Itslk attempts to explain the phenomena associated with Marguerite by way of translating them into his own cognitive universe. Yet again, translation fails because as part of an oral culture, he does not share in the code of conventional reality accepted by the societies of writing. Similarly, when looking at Richard's tennis racquet, Itslk recognises the image of his own snowshoes: 'He brought in Richard's tennis racquet. And this? he asked. He pointed to his snowshoes' (85). In this we are made aware of the contingency of the meaning of things on the cultural system of which they are a part.

Marguerite, too, develops an awareness of the contingency of cultural categories and her reliance on Eurocentrism:

Instead of all the appurtenances of civilized life, I have Itslk (as close as I can come to spelling his name), my fat, bustling, talkative savage paramour. I use the words 'savage' and 'paramour' ironically. Itslk insists that all the savages live south of us, up the Great River. His people live to the north and call themselves the People, as if they were the only ones. (83)

Itslk's suggestion that the 'savages' live south of his people is reminiscent of Lotman's proposition that 'Every culture begins by dividing the world into "its own" internal space and "their" external space.'<sup>22</sup> Thus, Marguerite's own earlier observations about the wildness of the alien territory may also be considered in light of the structural mapping inherent to all cultures. As she faces the reality of the Canadian wilderness, though, Glover's protagonist comes to realise that the alien space makes her question her own habitual ways of thinking: 'The Old World is based on a dream of order, with God at the top and descending through the angels to men to the nobler animals to plants to inanimate objects. Once this vision was real to me, but now I am of the opinion that it is only a hopeful metaphor' (107). As she struggles to survive, eating up the salt fish, the seabirds and even the books in her possession, the narrator becomes aware of the extent to which the otherness of the alien territory has invaded her own body: 'I cannot bear to look at myself covered as I am with red mud, insect bites, scrapes, calluses and bruises. In my own country, I would be laughed at and taken for a savage' (49). She becomes conscious of both the

---

<sup>22</sup> Lotman *Universe* 131.

limitations of her Old-World identity and the transformative effective of her experience in the wilderness.

The transformative force of the cross-cultural encounter affects both Itslk and Marguerite. In truth, one may say that transculturation gears Itslk towards his meeting of Glover's protagonist because his hunting of the bear is a response to the European 'visitors' who intruded into the life of his family and community and disrupted its natural flow: 'They gutted, split and salted the fish and left them on the racks to dry ... The men made free with his wife when she visited, but the hunter did not mind because there was a custom in his land about sharing wives. Though the visitors seemed not to understand the custom and laughed at him and abused his wife' (92-3). At the same time, his interaction with the intruders uncovers his own gift for languages (and thus a potential understanding of the Other's terms): 'I can speak a little Basque. Not so much. You speak Portuguese? We could practise together. I don't like the Spanish, always making the sign of the cross' (80). Arguably, Itslk's exposure to cultural difference suggests that transculturation need not, strictly speaking, be seen as an axiological term. If anything, Itslk's experience shows that cultural constructs are capable of accommodating otherness without complete assimilation, so long as they seek understanding rather than appropriation and eventual subjugation. Itslk's suspicion that Marguerite may be a cannibal becomes an ironic reminder of her role as a colonial agent in Canada: 'He says he dreamed I had turned into a cannibal and was going to eat him' (88). In fact, the narrative abounds in imagery (presented in similes) suggestive of the protagonist's starved mind: Bastienne's face is compared to 'an old turnip' (25), Richard's death is accompanied by a sudden appearance of a seal (56), her dead baby is visualised as a fish (102). Eating is a denied pleasure Marguerite is looking for everywhere on the island. Glover extends the metaphor of colonisation as cultural ingestion, building the ambiguity of cannibalistic activity around the female agent of the colonial quest.

It is in this respect that Marguerite's experience of transculturation unveils its own ambivalence as well. Facing the interface of two cultural systems, French and Aboriginal, her metamorphosis may be related to Lotman's idea of 'explosion'. For Lotman, culture is a mobile system generated by 'dynamic (explosive) and gradual processes'.<sup>23</sup> Explosion is an outcome of the unpredictability, which results from the intersection of different semiotic systems in a cognitive framework. Such explosive cultural phenomena have the power to remodel both individual and collective consciousness. But, as Lotman points out,

The transformation, which occurs at the true moment of explosion, having been filtered by the lattice of the modelling of consciousness which converts the random into the regular, does not as yet complete the process of consciousness. This mechanism must also include the act of memory, which allows us to return once more to the moment preceding the explosion and to replay the entire process retrospectively. There are now, three layers of consciousness: the moment of primary explosion, the moment it is realized by the mechanisms of consciousness and at the moment of its redoubling in the structure of memory. The last layer is the mechanism of art.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Lotman *Culture* 8.

<sup>24</sup> Lotman *Culture* 150.

Within the context of Glover's novel, the 'explosive' reach of Marguerite's experience in Canada is made manifest most evidently in the episodes of her encounter with the she-bear and a female shaman who teaches her how to turn into a bear. The parallel between Marguerite and the bear is foregrounded throughout the entire narrative: in the beginning we discover that her family coat of arms features 'two bears rampant over a field of waves' (32), the narrator observes the Bear constellations in the Canadian sky (49) and she recurrently claims that her situation is 'unbearable'. Finally, she confronts a white bear in the Canadian wilderness: 'The bear is skin and bones, mostly bones, much as I am myself.' (68) Another inverted image of the protagonist, the bear operates as a sacrificial figure suggestive of Marguerite's loss of her old identity and attainment of a new one: 'Oh bear, I think. Oh, my saviour bear. Then I forget myself and thank the Lord Cudragny for his bounty and fall asleep and dream I am a bear, young and strong, hunting seals along some distant arctic coastline' (71). The bear's blood, one might say, inscribes her with transcultural knowledge, which is later extended in her apprenticeship as a shape-shifter. The protagonist's partaking of the bear's identity – having learned to shape-shift – may be interpreted as an act of the Lotmanian 'explosion', which reshapes her own cognitive world (her sense of cultural identity) as much as the cultural universe to which she returns. After all, the 'explosive' force of transculturation affects both the peripheral world of the colonies and the imperial centre.

The most immediate impact of transculturation on the imperial world emerges as Marguerite returns to France to practice shape-shifting and eventually kill the man who abandoned her on the Isle of Demons: 'Beside myself (or not myself) with rage, dim-eyed, scenting blood, I slash the General's moaning form' (201). Her memory of the events in the wilderness as well as her need to arrange them into a story are suggestive of the completion of the 'three layers of consciousness' Lotman observes in the consequence of cultural explosion: 'I have told my story over and over to anyone who will listen, have alienated erstwhile friends, lovers and well-wishers' (195). In effect, it is because her story has an 'explosive' force that it alerts us to the ambivalent nature of the transcultural experience, suggesting that engagement with cultural difference always brings us to the edge of the cognitive universe we inhabit and prompts us to expose ourselves to the unpredictability of cultural translation, which is bound to result in a deconstruction of familiar codes and perceptions. This may not, as Glover shows, altogether subvert the dominant dynamics of power, but it reminds us how instrumental discourse is in mediating our knowledge and understanding of cultural sameness and difference.

Marguerite's experience of the 'contact zone' poses a serious question about what it means to be savage and civilised, emphasising that these concepts are not givens, but rather discursive constructs through which we organise our cultural space. Glover refuses to uphold the simplistic opposition familiar vs strange as representations of the dichotomy Western civilisation vs indigenous Other, pointing out that Marguerite's transcultural experience uncovers her own alterity she has not been aware of. While offering a powerfully symbolic commentary on European colonial practices, the novel focuses on the impact these practices had not only on the indigenous populations, but also on the colonial settlers themselves. For Glover,

discourse is the ‘contact zone’ par excellence, a topos of storytelling that initiates ‘explosive’ epistemological shifts in readers who allow their minds to travel and metamorphose. In this sense, transculturation may be conceived as a defamiliarisation of patterns and codes of the cognitive universe (both one’s own and that of the Other) that results in ‘epistemic transcoding’<sup>25</sup> in the course of the encounter with alterity, fictional as much as empirical.

---

<sup>25</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1999) 242.