

Territories of Literary History: the Shifting Boundaries of Francophone Literature in Canada

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Abstract

The writing of literary history opens up a range of questions about territory and boundaries. While recognising the energising role of Quebec nationalism in the emergence and affirmation of Québécois literature in the second half of the Twentieth Century, it is important to recognize the effects of such a national(ist) narrative on the shape of literary history, on its focus, its inclusions and exclusions. No single narrative can account for the complex literary history of Francophone literature in Canada. The enduring impact of Canada's colonial past on the indigenous population, on the two settler communities and on subsequent waves of inward and outward migration has resulted in a literary and cultural life which needs to be viewed from a range of different perspectives. This article will begin to explore how notions of territory might contribute to a more flexible and inclusive understanding of the literary histories of Francophone literature in Canada.

Keywords: literary history; territory; Quebec; Francophone; nationalism; Canada; colonialism; migration; boundaries; indigenous population

Résumé

L'écriture de l'histoire littéraire soulève de nombreuses questions sur le territoire et les frontières. Tout en reconnaissant le rôle dynamique du nationalisme québécois dans l'émergence et l'affirmation de la littérature québécoise dans la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle, il importe néanmoins d'admettre les conséquences d'un tel schéma narratif sur la forme d'une histoire littéraire, sur son objectif, sur ses inclusions et ses exclusions. Aucun récit national(iste) ne peut raconter l'histoire complexe de la littérature francophone au Canada. Les effets durables de l'histoire coloniale du Canada sur la population autochtone, sur les deux peuples colonisateurs et sur les vagues successives d'immigration et d'émigration sont évidents dans une vie littéraire et culturelle qui présente de nombreux aspects. Cet article propose une réflexion sur la contribution de la notion du territoire à une conception plus souple et plus inclusive de l'histoire de la littérature francophone au Canada.

Mots clés : histoire littéraire ; territoire ; Québec ; francophone ; nationalisme ; Canada ; colonisation ; migration ; frontières ; peuples autochtones

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Abstract: While recognising the energising role of Quebec nationalism in the emergence and affirmation of Québécois literature in the second half of the twentieth century, it is important to recognize the effects of such a national(ist) narrative on the shape of literary history. The enduring impact of Canada's colonial past on the indigenous population, on the two settler communities and on subsequent waves of inward and outward migration has resulted in a literary and cultural life, which needs to be viewed from a range of different perspectives. This article will explore how notions of territory might contribute to a better understanding of the literary histories of Francophone literature in Canada.

Key words: literary history, territory, Quebec, francophone, nationalism, Canada, colonialism, migration, boundaries, indigenous population

Résumé : Tout en reconnaissant le rôle dynamique du nationalisme québécois dans l'émergence et l'affirmation de la littérature québécoise dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, il importe d'admettre les conséquences d'un tel schéma narratif sur la forme d'une histoire littéraire. Les effets durables de l'histoire coloniale du Canada sur la population autochtone, sur les deux peuples colonisateurs et sur les vagues successives d'immigration et d'émigration sont évidents dans une vie littéraire et culturelle qui présente de nombreux aspects. Cet article propose une réflexion sur la contribution de la notion du territoire à une meilleure de l'histoire de la littérature francophone au Canada.

Mots-clés : histoire littéraire, territoire, Québec, francophone, nationalisme, Canada, colonisation, migration, frontières, peuples autochtones

Traditionally, or at least since the early nineteenth century, literary history based its territory on that of “the nation.” It was within the structure of the nation that the complex variations on the relationship between language, literature and territory were played out. But in his 2006 study, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Haun Saussy comments on the “sea-change taking place in literary studies¹”. The profound changes that are reshaping the whole literary field, from its modes of production to its manner of consumption, also have far-reaching consequences in the more specialized area of literary history. As Lawrence Lipking wrote in 1992: “The new literary history seems potentially free and as wide as the world²”. Even the choice of a topic is much more problematic when the very boundaries between literatures, or, indeed, between the literary and the non-literary, seem to be disappearing. Indeed, as Lipking declares: “Literary history used to be impossible to write; lately it has become much harder³”.

There are many reasons why this is the case, but it is partly because we cannot ignore the radical effects on the production, circulation and consumption of literature in a postmodern, postcolonial and postnational, globalizing world. Graham Huggan asks whether literary histories “with their conceptual legacies of continuity and coherence, can accommodate such postcolonial/postmodern disruptions, such global flows and internal fissures⁴”. And while the literary field, the territory of literature, has become ever more open and inclusive, at

¹ Haun Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, p. 160.

² Lawrence Lipking, “A Trout in the Milk,” in Marshall Brown, ed., *The Uses of Literary History*, Durham, NC, Duke UP, 1995, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 39.

the same time, many of the traditional components and methodologies of literary history (including categorization by period or genre and the notion of canon) have been undermined and questioned. This article will therefore reflect on some of the ways in which the concept of territory might throw light on the activity of literary history and how literary history might be seen both to create and defy territorial boundaries. In particular, how might notions of territory help us to reconceptualise the literary history of Francophone Writing in Canada?

In a recent article, Sylvia Söderlind refers to the familiar generalization that while geography is at the base of the Anglo-Canadian literary imagination, history is at the base of Québécois and Acadian literature⁵. This is linked to the crucial impact of the national trauma experienced in the mid-eighteenth century by both the inhabitants of *La Nouvelle France* and of *Acadie* at the *Conquête* and *Le Grand Dérangement*. Histories of francophone literature in Canada tend to take their shape, their periodization and aspects of their rhetoric from these traumatic moments, their aftermath and the nation's reemergence.

Yet geography, in the sense of a place mapped and named, and territory, in literal and metaphorical senses, are both deeply embedded in all accounts of the literary history of Francophone Canada. Any literary history maps a territory not only by what it includes, but by what it excludes. That starts with the way we choose to label or delineate any corpus or tradition of literature. What specific territory is implied or evoked when one speaks of the history of *la littérature canadienne de langue française*, of *la littérature québécoise*, of *la littérature francophone au Canada* or, indeed, of *l'écriture migrante en français* or *l'écriture-monde en français*? How differently do we conceive of territory when

⁵ Sylvia Söderlind, "What's in a Nation?" *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, vol. 41(1), 2008, p. 4.

we speak of *la littérature acadienne*, *la littérature franco-ontarienne*, *les littératures francophones de l'Ouest* or *la littérature amérindienne francophone*? Each of these terms suggests a different mapping and also a different historical context, structure or periodization. Traditionally, most of these have been constructed according to some sort of national narrative. As Homi Bhabha argues: “Literary histories [...] *are* national narratives of a kind, textual constructions of the nation: they are part, that is, of the negotiable field of meanings, signs, and symbols, that is associated with national culture, national identity, national life⁶”. The very notion of a national narrative takes on a particular complexity in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies. Much of Bill Ashcroft’s work in postcolonial studies focuses on the very particular positioning of the literatures of settler societies such as Australia and Canada and, hence, the distinctive role of their literary histories. He stresses the significance of the act of writing literary history: “Even when a substantial body of texts has been written in the settler colony, the task of compiling a national literary history has usually been an important element in the establishment of an independent cultural identity⁷”. For the Francophone population of Canada, of course, the situation is more complex still. Not only does the national narrative of Franco-Canadian, like that of Anglo-Canadian settlers, have to recognize the ambivalent placement of settler cultures both in relation to their respective centres of Empire and to the indigenous populations whose territories they themselves invaded and settled; the specific colonial history of Francophone Canadians means that they themselves have also been placed in a position of *colonisés* under British rule,

⁶ Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 3.

⁷ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd edition, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 132.

the effects of which have resulted in unequal relations between the two so-called founding cultures and languages.

Literary histories have served a number of functions over the years but it is commonly accepted that the rise of national literary histories as a genre coincided in the western world with the rise of nationalist movements in the nineteenth century. According to the German philologist J. G. Herder, it is the possession of a common language that ensures the unity of a people:

Without its own language, a *Volk* is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms. For neither blood and soil, nor conquest and political fiat can engender that unique consciousness which alone sustains the existence and continuity of a social entity. Even if a *Volk*'s state perishes, the nation remains intact, provided it maintains its distinctive linguistic traditions⁸.

Education plays a central role in ensuring the transmission of the historical consciousness of a people. The function of literary history as a tool of nation-building can be seen as a logical development of such a definition of national consciousness in the context of Francophone Canada. Indeed, while E. D. Blodgett argues that “not all literary history is explicitly organized around the nation,” he continues: “Somewhere, however, the nation is present, if only implicitly, and in most cases the nation is the dominant⁹”. The specific way in which literary history has served as a national narrative for Francophone Canadians has of course developed over time. One of the earliest literary historians of French-Canadian literature was Monseigneur Camille Roy, author of what was the most enduring and influential

⁸ Johann Gottfried Herder, “Ideas Toward a Philosophy of the History of Humanity, 1784-1791”, in F. M. Barnard, ed., *Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 57-58.

⁹ E.D. Blodgett, *Five Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003, p. 4.

history of Francophone Canadian literature in the first half of the twentieth century, the *Manuel d'histoire de la littérature canadienne de langue française*¹⁰. His particular vision of the nation went far beyond Quebec. In the Introduction to his *Manuel* he details the Francophone presence in North America as follows:

*Au Canada ils occupent surtout la province de Québec, où sur une population totale de 3,319,640 ils comptent pour 2,695,032. Cette province est restée, avec sa langue, ses mœurs, ses institutions, la Nouvelle-France de l'Amérique. Les groupements importants de population française qui, en dehors de la province de Québec, se sont formés dans l'ancienne Acadie et les provinces de l'Est (244,993), dans la province anglaise d'Ontario (373,990), dans les provinces cosmopolites de l'Ouest (168,381), et dans les États-Unis, y exercent une influence toujours grandissante. C'est au milieu de ces populations françaises du Canada que devait se développer, au dix-neuvième siècle, [...] une littérature qui porte la marque des influences historiques, sociales, et géographiques, qui ont ici peu à peu modifié notre âme française*¹¹.

Clearly for Roy, the plurality of the territories in no way diminishes the unity of the literature (*une littérature*) and the common identity indicated by “*notre âme française*.” He understands national identity essentially in cultural and spiritual terms, based on language and shared values rather than on a specifically delineated territory or on political aspirations. The mission of the French-Canadians was to be faithful to the Catholic culture and values of pre-revolutionary France; indeed,

¹⁰ This version of Roy's *Manuel* was published in 1939, one of the 21 editions of his literary history that he produced between 1909 and 1962. Together with the companion volume *Morceaux choisis d'auteurs canadiens* (Montréal, Beauchemin, 1934), Roy's *Manuel d'histoire de la littérature canadienne de langue française* was a standard textbook in Francophone Canada until the *Révolution tranquille*. Roy himself became a professor of Canadian literature and recteur of Université Laval from 1924-1927 and from 1932-1943. Camille Roy, *Manuel d'histoire de la littérature canadienne de langue française*, 21st ed., Montréal, Beauchemin, 1962, <http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/encyclopedia/Introroylit.htm>, site visited September 1st 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; The population figures cited refer to 1931.

to this end, the *Manuel* displays a general hostility to Enlightenment philosophy and to contemporary French literary techniques. This distancing from some of the moral, cultural and literary values of France helps to confirm a general shift of focus in Roy's narrative away from France and towards the affirmation of a specifically French-Canadian literary identity.

The shape of the narrative shifts, of course, with the rise of Quebec nationalism, with its political, future-focused and separatist-project and the engagement of Quebec writers with the goal of cultural and political self-definition. From Roy's more fluid and diverse sense of territories inhabited in the past, shaped by a particular set of values, by language and by faith, we move to a desire for a national, political, territorial identity.

While recognizing the energizing role of Quebec nationalism in the emergence and affirmation of Québécois literature in the second half of the twentieth century, it is important to acknowledge the effects of such a narrative on the shape of any literary history, on its focus, its inclusions and exclusions. Equally, since the failure of the 1980 referendum and the rise of "official multiculturalism", many commentators see the nation-based discourse of the mid-twentieth century giving way to post-national debates, in a post-colonial era and under the growing influence of globalization. Does this mean that nation-based literary histories are now obsolete? Indeed, is it still possible to write literary history?

In this context it is interesting to see how one of the most recent literary histories of Quebec literature, *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* jointly authored by Michel Biron, François Dumont and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge and published in 2007, has addressed questions of nation and territory. In fact, the authors announce from the start that their focus

will be on the literary texts, rather than on literary institutions, offering a series of re-readings: “faire prédominer les textes sur les institutions; proposer des lectures critiques; marquer les changements entre les conjonctures qui distinguent chacune des périodes¹²”. The authors thus distinguish their aims from those of Maurice Lemire and colleagues, whose edited series *La Vie littéraire au Québec*¹³ presents literary life as part of a wider network of social and cultural institutions. Rather, they see themselves as offering a re-reading of Québécois literature and its texts last done in comparable detail by Pierre de Grandpré in his four-volume *Histoire littéraire de la littérature française du Québec*¹⁴. As Perkins argues, literary history is indeed different from history precisely for this reason: “Literary history is also literary criticism. Its aim is not merely to reconstruct and understand the past, for it has a further end, which is to illuminate literary works¹⁵”. Nevertheless Biron, Dumont and Nardout-Lafarge stress that their interest is primarily literary, while acknowledging that the structure and the subdivisions of the work are broadly nation-based: “La périodisation de l’histoire de la littérature ne peut être totalement indépendante de l’histoire sociale et politique, mais nous avons cherché, ici encore, d’accorder un statut central aux œuvres, en signalant les transitions proprement littéraires¹⁶”. In fact the list of contents demonstrates the underlying presence of the nation, or of nation-related concerns. The main sections are as follows:

¹² Michel Biron, François Dumont and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge, *Histoire de la littérature québécoise*, Montréal, Boréal, 2007, p. 11.

¹³ Maurice Lemire et al., eds., *La Vie littéraire au Québec*, 6 vol., Sainte-Foy, Québec, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1991-2010.

¹⁴ Pierre de Grandpré, ed., *Histoire littéraire de la littérature française du Québec*, 4 vol., Ottawa, Librairie Beauchemin, 1967-1969.

¹⁵ David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 177.

¹⁶ Michel Biron, François Dumont and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

- 1: *Les écrits de la Nouvelle France* (1534-1763)
- 2: *Écrire pour la nation* (1763-1895)
- 3: *Le conflit entre l'ici et l'ailleurs* (1895-1945)
- 4: *L'invention de la littérature québécoise* (1945-1980)
- 5: *Le décentrement de la littérature (depuis 1980)*

The periodization is clearly based on the emergence of the nation, with references to *la Nouvelle France*, *la nation*, and to France (through relations between the neo-colonial centre and the Canadian periphery). The rise of *la littérature québécoise* (1945-1980) is cut short by the date of the first referendum, after which the narrative moves into the new and uncertain territory of the postcolonial, postnational, multicultural. As the authors point out, at different stages in its history Québécois literature will address national issues differently.

The authors acknowledge the fact that the term *la littérature québécoise* is used with a certain elasticity, being used retrospectively to incorporate all precursors, including texts written during the French regime of *la Nouvelle France*, which are not included in all literary histories of Francophone Canadian writing. The term is also used inclusively, with occasional references to works written by Anglophones, to a selection of migrant writers, and to other writers whose identity as *Québécois* might at least be queried. But, in addition to a necessary selectivity, there is also arguably a certain degree of marginalization of what fits less easily into the category of Québécois Literature. Only a few pages are devoted to Francophone writing in *Acadie* and Ontario, and no mention is made of Francophone literature in the Canadian West; there is very little reference to the indigenous peoples other than as part of the history of the establishment of *la Nouvelle France*, the book does not discuss Métis writers, and generally the authors choose to concentrate on relatively high, mainstream culture.

Biron, Dumont and Nardout-Lafarge are conscious of the fact that writing a literary history of Quebec literature is not a straightforward task: “*on n’écrit pas l’histoire littéraire du Québec comme on écrit l’histoire littéraire de la France, de la Russie ou de l’Angleterre. Dans ces traditions influentes, structurées autour d’œuvres universellement reconnues, l’histoire littéraire semble aller de soi*”¹⁷. While I agree that the two tasks are quite different because of those literatures’ respective positions in the literary field, I do not think that the writing of any literary history can be assumed to “*aller de soi*.” It is not possible to write a literary history in the twenty-first century without a critical awareness of the constructedness of literary historical narratives and the fundamental changes that challenge those narratives today. Clearly no single narrative can account for the complex literary history of Francophone literature in Canada. The enduring impact of Canada’s colonial past on the indigenous population, on the two settler communities and on subsequent waves of inward and outward migration has resulted in a literary and cultural life which needs to be viewed from a range of different perspectives and with an understanding of territory which is flexible and shifting.

While Québécois literature comprises a substantial literary corpus across a range of genres, it is nevertheless, arguably, only the name of a phase of literary production and of a particular, nation-based territorialization of Francophone Canadian literature. Its literary history has been narrated in a way that necessarily constructs a form, a developmental pattern, against a *fond*, and excludes as it constructs. Any nation-based narrative constructs a specific kind of literary history which cannot easily accommodate those aspects of literary activity which do not fit the model, which might question the focus and extend the territory

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

(as might the inclusion of Francophone minorities outside of Quebec, indigenous writers, or the shifting population and plurilingual work of migrant writers). Nation-based narrative sees literature as a development in parallel (at times *en avance*, at times *en retard*) to the historical development or emergence of a nation. This development is often expressed through images of the child growing to adulthood, attaining its full voice and autonomy, or through natural images (trees, rivers, etc). Yet in the last two decades such teleological narratives have been questioned. Huggan argues: “Developmental models of literary history are now widely seen, not least by literary historians themselves, as being terminally outmoded, while the twin fortresses of the literary canon and the historical period are increasingly under siege¹⁸”. He continues with a question: “Should the search be for new, revisionary, or alternative literary histories; or should it rather be for alternatives to literary history as a record of changing cultural forms?¹⁹”

So how has literary history responded to postmodernism, to the loss of grand narratives and the undermining of teleological literary histories; to postcolonialism with its critical reassessment of the dominant role of European cultures, its analyses of the changing power relations between centre and periphery; to globalization and the effects on cultural and literary life of the shift from the national to the global?

Arguably Denis Hollier’s edited volume *A New History of French Literature*²⁰, first published in 1989, offers one response to the artificiality or even impossibility of a continuous historical narrative and as such might provide a model for other literary histories. The format of his

¹⁸ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature...*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁰ Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2001.

edited volume is a chronologically ordered set of 199 essays, each focused on a specific historical moment, literary or cultural product, debate or issue. The framing of each essay follows the same pattern: firstly a date (whether by day, month, or year) by which to order the chronology; secondly the event associated with the date (most commonly referring to the publication of a work but also to significant historical or political landmarks); thirdly a heading, which becomes the running header for the essay and draws out the deeper significance of the occurrence. Examples of the pattern are as follows:

1782, May

Four Years after Rousseau's Death, the First Part of His
Confessions Is Published in Geneva.

Autobiographical Acts

1922, 18 November

Death of Marcel Proust

Death and Literary Authority

1949

Simone de Beauvoir Publishes *Le deuxième sexe*

An Intellectual Woman in Postwar France

The heading in the third line then acts as the *point de départ* for a brief essay on topics such as: "The Origin of French Tragedy", "The Birth of French Lexicography", "Literature and Collaboration" and "French Feminism." Each essay is roughly five pages long and includes a bibliography of between five and twelve items. This organization avoids both a continuous historical narrative – which "artificially homogenizes literature into linear chronologies" – and alphabetically ordered encyclopedia – which "introduces masses of often irrelevant information". "But both individually and cumulatively they [these

essays] question our conventional perception of the historical continuum²¹. Yet, does this wonderful volume (of 1,158 pages) significantly disrupt or redraw territories? I tend to agree with Jonathan Arac who argues that: “This self-consciously postmodern organization presupposes a solidly established tradition of French literary history that gives the implicit background against which the new undertaking is comprehensible in its difference²²”. For the reader without a background in traditional literary history, it may be that the text reads differently. Hollier concludes his opening essay “On Writing Literary History” with the declaration that “This *New Literary History of French Literature* has been written from both sides of as many borders as possible²³”. But with its many cross-references and its supplementary chronology, this work is perhaps more a brilliant and fresh presentation of the literary history of a mostly metropolitan France, its choice of highlights and perspectives reviving and revising rather than totally abandoning the familiar narrative.

Postcolonialism has inspired many distinctive and provocative analyses of colonial and postcolonial literatures from a theoretically informed position, and in many cases there are issues of territory involved. The work of postcolonial critics tend, however, to come into the category of literary criticism rather than literary history and most either propose re-readings of canonical work, or are applications of post-colonial theory to issues such as the discipline of English Studies, canonization, hybridity, language, racism or marketing, as they concern the literary field. Graham Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*²⁴ and Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

²² Jonathan Arac, “What is the History of Literature?”, in Marshall Brown, ed., *The Uses of Literary History*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1995, p. 23.

²³ Denis Hollier, *op. cit.*, p. xxv.

²⁴ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London, Routledge, 2001.

in the *Francophone World*²⁵ are notable examples of the latter trend²⁶. Huggan's work *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*²⁷ is a fine example of the application of postcolonial theory to the analysis of a selective literary corpus. Many postcolonial critics also adopt a comparativist approach, comparing and contrasting works from cultures with different colonial histories, as one might with works by Anglophone and Francophone Canadians.

The last challenge to which literary history is responding is that of globalization. Arguably, this is the source of the renewed interest in "world literature" and in "*une littérature-monde en français*". Emily Apter suggests that the growth of interest in "world literature" is inspired essentially by a questioning and distrust of national literatures, long evident in the discipline of comparative literature, but given new impetus in the age of globalization. She lists a number of different approaches to the study of world literature:

"Global literature" (inflected by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi), "cosmopolitanism" (given its imprimatur by Bruce Robinson and Timothy Brennan), "world literature" (revived by David Damrosch and Franco Moretti), "literary transnationalism", (indebted to the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and comparative postcolonial and diaspora studies (indelibly marked by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Françoise Lionnet and Rey Chow, among others)²⁸.

David Damrosch, a leading advocate of world literature as a way of reading, argues that it can draw "new lines of comparison across the

²⁵ Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World*, Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2005.

²⁶ Watts uses the term "Francophone" here to refer to sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.

²⁷ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature...*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Emily Apter, "Global Translation: The 'Invention' of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933", in Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature*, London, Verso, 2004, p. 78.

persisting division between the hyper-canon and the counter-canon of world literature²⁹. This in turn, he claims, will create a new canon that crosses the “conflicted boundaries of nations and of cultures³⁰”. However, Apter suggests that so far there have been few methodological solutions to the problem of making valid comparisons between works from radically different languages and literatures³¹. And as Christopher Prendergats points out in his essay in the same volume, no literary history, he argues, can adopt a world-wide view because that would be a view from nowhere, unlocated in geographical, historical or ideological terms: “A literary geography underpinned by that kind of complacent transcendentalism merely forgets (or ‘ends’) history, typically issuing in the tacky Third Way clichés of a dominant strand of globalization theory³²”. Instead, he argues: “What is needed is a proliferation of competing but also mutually nuancing predicates, description that is thick rather than thin, though this of course is all too easily said³³”.

Arguably, one area in which there is an interesting development of new ways of conceptualizing literary history in a comparative framework is in an ongoing project focussing on East-Central European culture and literature. Here precisely we have an example of what Prendergast terms “description that is thick rather than thin³⁴”. In her paper, “US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature,” Letitia Guran suggests that this project

²⁹ David Damrosch, “World Literature in a Post-Canonical, Hyper-Canonical Age,” *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization. The 2003 ACLA Report on the state of the Discipline*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52-3.

³¹ Emily Apter, *op. cit.*

³² Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature*, London, Verso, 2004, p. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

offers an alternative mode of conceptualizing literary history by adopting a “trans-national, multicultural, and postcolonial perspective³⁵”. The result, she argues, is that by bringing together examples of literary practices in a region that has been divided over the years by various political, linguistic and cultural differences, “the History destabilizes the power-generated polarity between the hypercanon and the marginalized works and insists instead on the cooperative dimensions of those texts that supported co-habitation between various groups and cultures in the region³⁶”. Such an approach which transcends national boundaries and yet compares within specific geographical and historical frameworks may indeed be a productive way of bringing together a series of different local perspectives in new combinations and juxtapositions.

Another product of the altering relations between literature and national boundaries is the emergence of *une littérature-monde en français*. Significantly for my current discussion, a number of Francophone or bilingual writers from Canada signed the manifesto “*Pour une littérature-monde en français*,” including Wajdi Mouawad, Nancy Huston, Dany Laferrière and Jacques Godbout. The manifesto stated that *une littérature-monde en français* signalled not only the end to national literatures, but also to neo-colonial relations between the centre and the peripheries: “*le centre [...] est désormais partout, aux quatre coins du monde. Fin de la francophonie. Et naissance d’une littérature-monde en français*³⁷”. The manifesto continues:

³⁵ Letitia Guran, “US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature,” *Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 8(1), 2006, p. 2, <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/7>, site visited August 20 2010. The International Comparative Literature Association project “History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe,” is organized and its volumes edited by Marcel Cornis Pope and John Neubauer.

³⁶ Letitia Guran, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Étonnants Voyageurs, « Pour une littérature-monde en français », *Le Monde des livres*, March 16, 2007, <http://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/spip.php?article1574>, site visited May 17, 2013.

le temps nous paraît venu d'une renaissance, d'un dialogue dans un vaste ensemble polyphonique, sans souci d'on ne sait quel combat pour ou contre la prééminence de telle ou telle langue ou d'un quelconque "impérialisme culturel". Le centre relégué au milieu d'autres centres, c'est à la formation d'une constellation que nous assistons, où la langue libérée de son pacte exclusif avec la nation, libre désormais de tout pouvoir autre que ceux de la poésie et de l'imaginaire, n'aura pour frontières que celles de l'esprit³⁸.

But as with world literature, here too the newly opened territory remains vast, vague, unmappable, a leap out of this world and into the world of the *esprit*. And while the desire to embrace a different form of freely circulating universalism is perhaps understandable for those who feel their work transcends the particularity of national identities, there are few signs that Paris has actually lost its powerful position in terms of the production, distribution and promotion of literature in French.

Having questioned the nation-based narrative of literary history, but also questioned the usefulness of new global narratives, perhaps we need to revisit the notion of territory in order to re-imagine the literary history of Francophone Writing in Canada? This can and has been done thematically, by studying textual representations of territory. Marilyn Randall summarizes one such approach as follows:

Two divergent ways of inhabiting and possessing territory, and consequently identity, traverse the history of Francophone writing in Canada. On the one hand, identity is linked to territorial occupancy and *sedentariness*; on the other hand, identity is transient, shifting and unstable, finding its expression in a tradition of *nomadism* where possession is achieved by a passing through, by migration, rather than by settling. These two metaphors are as old as French Canadian literary tradition, and continue to this day³⁹.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Marilyn Randall, "Writing Home: A Territorial History of French Canadian Literature," *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, vol. 41(1), 2008, p. 21.

Indeed, many new and subtle variations on the theme of the representations of space and territory continue to be explored by critics such as Simon Harel⁴⁰, Sherry Simon⁴¹, Pierre Ouellet⁴² and François Paré⁴³.

But territory is not only significant on a thematic level. As has been seen, by its association with nationhood, it has long been a structuring device of literary history. Yet the boundaries of any “national” literature are drawn and redrawn. The term “Québécois literature” can assimilate, either by the retrospective extension of the term to all so-called precursors, or by obscuring the difference and specificity of authors. Gabrielle Roy, Louis Hémon, Antonine Maillet, Anne Hébert, Bernard Assiniwi, Régine Robin, Robert LePage, Dany Laferrière, Nancy Huston, Ying Chen – all of these writers have more complex relationships to territory and to language than being simply exponents and products of a genealogy of Quebec literature, in its rise towards nationhood. If they are part of a phenomenon called Québécois literature, then each belongs to that literature in different ways. One can say the same of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexandre Dumas père, Albert Camus, Marguerite Duras, Azouz Begag, Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco as subjects of the literary history of France. Equally such terms can be used to exclude. As Söderlind argues with reference to Canadian literature:

Any critical practice that uses an adjective like ‘Canadian’ to delimit its object of study is inevitably engaged in a nation-defining, if not a nation-building enterprise, and the inclusions and exclusions effected by a critical community will reveal something about the kind of nation it prefers to imagine⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Simon Harel, *Voleur de parcours*, Montréal, Le Préambule, 1989; Simon Harel, *Les Passages obligés de l'écriture migrante*, Montréal, XYZ, 2005.

⁴¹ Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City*, Montreal, London, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.

⁴² Pierre Ouellet, *L'Esprit migrateur. Essai sur le non-sens commun*, Montréal, vlb éditeur, 2005.

⁴³ François Paré, *La Distance habitée*, Ottawa, Le Nordir, 2003.

⁴⁴ Sylvia Söderlind, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

The relationship between literary history and territory is more complex than that implied by the equating of nation and territory; the territory of literature is not unitary but plural; it involves contact between territories, ambivalences and multiple belongings to different literary territories. In fact, I would argue that time and space, history and territory are always implicated one in the other with the writing of literary history. That favorite postcolonial metaphor of mapping can only be conceptualized in relation to time, maps being historically located and open to change over time. As Huggan argues, the notion of cartography is frequently adopted in the discourse of postcolonial studies, performing two key functions:

the desystemization of a narrowly defined and demarcated “cartographic” space allows for a culturally and historically located critique of colonial discourse while, at the same time, producing the momentum for a projection and exploration of “new territories” outlawed or neglected by dominant discourses which previously operated in the colonial, but continue to operate in the post-colonial, culture⁴⁵.

So, if literary history is also to an extent a cartographical exercise, this suggests that there are two key tasks for today’s literary historians: either to offer a critique of the specific practices of earlier literary histories as products of specific contexts and functions or to open up new territories for analysis previously marginalized from works of literary history. As literary historians we need to recognize both the specificity of the local and its complex relationship to the whole/the world, to language/other languages, to other texts. No single narrative can encompass all of the breadth of literary activity. Rather we need a

⁴⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 410; The reference here is to the extract included in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *ibid.*, p. 410. For the full text of this article see: Graham Huggan, “Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection,” *Ariel*, vol. 20(4), 1989, p. 115-129.

complex and plural approach, in which local, specific histories tell different stories, but together contribute to a process of literary history writing, so building up a series of perspectives on the different fields in play on which literature operates as a cultural activity.

But the very territory of literary history also needs revisiting. It is a space that is often managed through processes of exclusions, simplifications, shaped by the selection, hierarchisation and evaluation of the various kinds of literary activity. So territory not only needs to be plural as series of overlapping but also porous fields of activity. Also the very shaping factors at work in the construction of the territory of literary histories need to be questioned: canons and their ongoing construction and revisions; different markets and modes of dissemination; the role of various forms of validation (book prizes, curricula, electronic libraries and reading lists); the flow between cultures that is operated through translations, adaptations, human contact and mobility. It is only by constantly questioning the shape, organizing narrative and processes of literary history, that we can begin to open up the territory of literary history and begin to inhabit it differently⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ On the notion of habitation see Bill Ashcroft, "Habitation", *New Literary Review*, n° 34, Winter 1997, p. 27-41.

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