

Transnational space and the discourse of
multiculturalism : contemporary Canadian fiction

Victoria Cook

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Central Lancashire

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**Transnational Space
and the Discourse of
Multiculturalism:
Contemporary Canadian Fiction**

by

Victoria Cook

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Central Lancashire

September 2006

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“In the world through which I travel,
I am endlessly creating myself.”

Frantz Fanon

Black Skin, White Masks

London: Pluto Press, 1986 p.299

ABSTRACT

This dissertation engages in a study of the construction of identity as “process” in four contemporary English-Canadian novels. The novels under discussion are: *Cereus Blooms at Night*, by Shani Mootoo; *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martell; *Fugitive Pieces*, by Anne Michaels; and *Childhood*, by Andre Alexis. These texts offer representations of characters whose lives are lived within and between multiple nationalities, whilst at the same time, each novel is contextualised through its relationship to Canada. The thesis engages with the debate surrounding national identification and literature by examining the way in which individual authors represent a variety of cultures and ethnicities within an apparently “Canadian” text.

Questions are raised as to whether a postcolonial conceptual framework is appropriate with regard to the texts under consideration, which are seen to reflect changing perceptions of individual and collective national identities. As a consequence, what follows is an exploration of new, transnational models of analysis in relation to each of the novels. This transnational approach enables the investigation of the “multiple” and “fluid” cultural identities that are made manifest in these novels. As a

result, the thesis shows that the four examples of contemporary Canadian fiction under scrutiny offer a “transnational space”, where individual and collective identities may exist in a continual state of process.

The transnational perspective taken for this thesis reveals that the discourse of identity is one of fluidity and process. At the same time, one of the overriding motifs regarding the characters in these novels is their overwhelming desire to belong. Each of the four novels displays a concern with crossing and transcending traditionally “fixed” cultural divisions, be they of genre, race, religion, gender or sexuality; what is more, they frequently exceed accepted temporal and spatial boundaries. Finally, this thesis confirms that national identity, in these four novels at least, is being refashioned to reflect a pluralist Canada, in which cultural differences co-exist.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation engages in a study of the construction of identity as “process” in four contemporary English-Canadianⁱ novels, all published since the mid-1990’s. The novels under discussion are: *Cereus Blooms at Night*, by Shani Mootoo (1996); *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martell (2001); *Fugitive Pieces*, by Anne Michaels (1996); and *Childhood*, by Andre Alexis (1998). Each of these texts offers representations of characters whose lives are lived within and between multiple nationalities, whilst at the same time, each novel is contextualised through its relationship to Canada. The central argument of this thesis considers these novels to be “emblematic of the multivoiced narrative of Canadianness at the present time” (Howells, *Contemporary* 9). The dissertation is written from the perspective of one who is working outside of Canada: a matter of self-location that recognises the “inescapable double bind” of complicity for the white critic of multicultural discourse (Kamboureli, “Signifying” 212). It is from this somewhat ambivalent viewpoint that the Canadian literature examined here is put forward as occupying a transnational theoretical space.

Eva Mackey has described Canada as *The House of Difference*,ⁱⁱ because of the way in which cultural pluralism has become institutionalised as a key feature of its national identity. Difference, in the form of cultural diversity and ideological pluralism, is not inherently destructive: on the contrary, the heterogeneity of much Canadian narrative discourse is a result of a creativity that is concomitant with nonuniformity. The merging of differences, the syncretism and hybridity that occurs as a result of cultural clashes and convergences, is becoming increasingly apparent in today’s diasporic world.

clashes and convergences, is becoming increasingly apparent in today's diasporic world. Homi Bhabha points out that "the very concept of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions . . . are in a profound process of redefinition" ("Location" 5). It is this notion of "process" that is central to this study, particularly with regard to its effect on the representation of individual and collective identity in the Canadian novels that are under scrutiny. Furthermore, as chapter one makes clear, this "redefinition" of the concepts of nationhood is creating the demand for new, and what are determined here as "transnational", theoretical approaches to Canadian literature.

The four novels that provide the focus for this thesis have already been described as "Canadian"; in other words, they are regarded here as being part of a canon of "Canadian literature". This is a description that immediately categorises them by means of a national referent, where to do so is to identify them as "belonging" to a specific country, as being in some way intrinsically "Canadian". Yet each of the narratives involves countries and cultures other than that of Canada alone, with some barely mentioning Canada at all. It is also worthy of note that in terms of nationality of authorship, only one of the novelists, Anne Michaels, was actually born in Canada, and she is frequently categorised as a "Jewish-Canadian writer".ⁱⁱⁱ The "Note on the Author" in *Childhood* confirms that André Alexis "was born in Trinidad in 1957 and grew up in Canada" (269). Yann Martel was born in Salamanca, Spain to Canadian parents, and grew up in a number of countries including Costa Rica, France, Spain and Mexico.^{iv} Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland, grew up in Trinidad and is now a Canadian citizen.^v In

fact, it is possible to describe all of these authors as, in some way, “hyphenated Canadians”, whose lives are negotiated in the context of cultural diversity.

Of course, in the wake of Barthes' declaration regarding the “death of the author”, there are those who might consider such biographical information to be without relevance for the analysis of the texts. However, as Howells rightly argues, the significance of the author's biographical data “is not entirely extratextual” when exploring representations of cultural and racial difference; indeed, however difficult it may be to decipher, “the writer's signature is on the text” (*Contemporary* 3). Likewise, Mary Condé contemplates the way in which an author's “identity as a writer” can have an effect on the text itself (“Flight” 63). Clearly, cultural background contributes to the material conditions of production of a novel, and may play an important part not only in the creative process, but also in the reader's responses to the texts.

Susan Swan describes Canadian writers as having become “an international tribe of multiple perspectives” who are part of “the world wide Diaspora of ideas” (9). The publicity materials on the cover of each of the novels chosen for this thesis show that every one has become an “international bestseller”, and has been either short-listed for, or awarded, a number of prestigious literary prizes both in Canada and abroad. It is true to say that in many ways these texts appear to have multiple affiliations to countries other than Canada. This dissertation explores how these novels represent national identification with regard to their status as “Canadian fiction”, and what the effect might be of contextualising them in this way.

Although it is clearly impossible to generalise from such a small sample, evidence is given that suggests the heterogeneous nature of national identity in these texts is symptomatic of much broader changes taking place. It is appropriate at this juncture, therefore, to situate the selected novels within their wider literary context.

Literary Context

To a certain extent, the desire to contextualise invokes a need to generalise; however, it is true to say that over the last decade, novels by authors such as Alexis, Martel, Michaels and Mootoo have become part of a growing body of literature that is “remapping the boundaries of what constitutes Canadian Fiction” (Howells, “Writing” 212). Pico Iyer argues that novels such as these signal the arrival of a transnational form of identification that offers a potential model for the world (77-80). The four texts that are the subject of this study can therefore be seen as part of a trend, which has emerged from the outburst of new fictions that erupted in the 1970’s through to the mid-1990’s in Canada. During this time, the work of a large number of writers including Eva Hoffman, Joy Kogawa, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje, Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand, and many others, raised important concerns and gave voice to previously neglected and marginalised groups.

It should be borne in mind that the prolific literary production of the era from mid-1970’s to mid-1990’s seems to have occurred as the result of a serendipitous convergence of factors. For example, one of the central concerns of the postwar era –building a strong, independent Canadian national identity – intensified in the period just prior to the seventies, due to

the Centennial year celebrations of 1967. At this time, “culture” was appropriated as a political tool, with the government implementing large increases in funding for the arts. Moreover, this rise in Canadian nationalism coincided with the burgeoning of North American second-wave feminism, with women writers seeking to “renegotiate their positions through the imaginative dimensions . . . of the novel” (Howells, *Canadian* 195). A further factor in fostering the environment of cultivation and growth, which encouraged writers from sectors that had previously been marginalised, came in the announcement of a government “Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework” in 1971, which subsequently prepared the ground for the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, assented to in 1988. This resulted in further “government initiatives to fund both literary development and access to publishing” (Hunter, *Outsider* 35). Lynette Hunter suggests that the literary phenomenon of this period may indeed be attributable to this type of funding, which allowed significant growth in the publication of previously unheard voices (*Outsider* 35). This, in turn, has encouraged and continues to encourage writing that offers “new ways of reading” and “new relationships between writer, text and reader” (Hunter, *Outsider* 35).

Authors in this particularly productive period were engaging with key motifs such as memory and history and cross-cultural, diasporic experiences, through an abundance of revisionist historical fiction, amongst other genre. This fiction works to subvert previous perceptions of history as a sequential, unified and exclusively definitive “story” about the past, particularly in relation to Canada as a nation. Instead, novels such as Kogawa’s *Obasan*, Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* and Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* depict the past as

“fragmented, self-conscious and discursively and generically heterogeneous” (Wylie, *Speculative* 4). Indeed, Ondaatje foregrounds this notion when he quotes from John Berger in one of the epigraphs for *In the Skin of a Lion*, confirming that “never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.” As a novelist, Ondaatje and others like him emphasise the multiple, marginalised, and often conflicting facets of the historical narratives that are behind the “nation-building” project of Canadian history.

The mid-1970’s through to the mid-1980’s were, therefore, a period of challenge to the “traditional causal, closed, linear nature of narrative history” in Canadian literature, through work that Hutcheon has termed as “historiographic metafiction” (*Canadian* 14, 22). These are novels that question systems and ideologies that had previously been taken for granted and contribute to a distrust in once overriding metanarratives such as religion, for example, or the Canadian state, as is the case in Kogawa’s *Obasan*. Howells argues that *Obasan*, published in 1981, “marks the entry of racial minority women’s fiction into the Canadian mainstream” (“Writing” 204); and clearly it is a landmark text that subverts official versions of history and challenges traditionally constructed definitions of the Canadian “WASP”. Canadian writers such as Kogawa engaged in a struggle to re-articulate history at this time, and in doing so developed a number of narrative techniques, which offer subversive ways to explore “the multiple marginalities of race, immigrant groups and gender” (Hunter, “Introduction” 7).

Hunter suggests that the work of Canadian writers in the period from the 1970’s to the mid-1990’s offers a range of strategies, which not only “criticize, oppose, and challenge” the stability of the meta-narratives of the

nation-state, but also “build new ground for the articulation of different voices” (271). The new ground that these writers have created is, quite possibly, the fertile soil that has allowed the growth, since the mid-1990’s, of “a new kind of fiction based on multicultural realities” (J. Stouck, “Canadian” 1). Indeed, it is possible to argue that the work of Canadian authors in the 1970’s, 1980’s and early 1990’s opened up what Howells calls “spaces for a revised rhetoric of Canadianness” in fiction (*Contemporary* 1). Canadian novelists since that time have continued to engage with concerns regarding history, memory and cross-cultural exchanges, and their narratives are manifestly rooted in what has gone before. There is, however, perhaps a sense in which “transgression” rather than “subversion” has become a key focus in the way in which these concerns are dealt with. For example, as Wyile argues, texts such as *Obasan* may be interpreted as interrogating and challenging “official” history, whereas more recent fiction engages with history in a manner that is “more subtle and less insistent,” whilst remaining sceptical and indeed, “speculative” (*Speculative* 263). Indeed, for many contemporary Canadian novelists, there appears to be a permeable boundary between present and past; not only are the present and future represented as being inextricable from what has gone before, but, as Hiromi Goto so aptly writes in her novel *The Kappa Child*, “the saturation of the past with the present is [also] an ongoing story” (215).

Howells’ monograph, *Contemporary Canadian Women’s Fiction: Refiguring Identities*, published in 2003, charts the “significant changes that have taken place in Canada’s literary profile” since 1995, which, as she says, “refigure the nation” (1). Howells locates this point in time as heralding “the

beginnings of a shift and the introduction of new cultural coordinates into the mapping of Canadian literary traditions" (*Contemporary* 11). One of a number of factors that may have contributed to this trend in Canadian fiction since the mid-1990's is that large international presses began to publish more "multicultural" novels, as the focus shifted towards international marketing. Some evidence of this is reflected in Stephen Henighan's controversial and scathing criticism of the changes that have taken place in Canadian fiction during the 1990's, entitled *When Words Deny the World* and published in 2002.^{vi} In it Henighan argues that there has been a "reshaping of the Canadian English-language novel," following the instigation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 (146). This polemical work is clearly intentionally controversial and has provoked a great deal of criticism, yet in spite of this, Henighan's critics generally concur with his opinion that English-Canadian literature has experienced a number of changes over the past decade, including becoming more "globalised" and "cosmopolitan" in content.

Another factor that may have had some influence with regard to changes in the past decade, is that in 1997-8, the Canadian Government's Multiculturalism Department started a writing and publication program designed to support minority writers. Howells argues that this program continues to be "remarkably successful in bringing new writers to visibility" (*Writing* 197). Whether or not it is due to funding, NAFTA, or other factors, there has undoubtedly been a proliferation of novelists from previously marginalised groups through the latter part of the 1990's. What is more, Howells confirms that as a consequence, there has been "an unprecedented diversification of the Canadian literary scene" (*Writing* 205).

The representation of identities in Canadian fiction appears to be becoming increasingly “fluid” and there is a new significance being placed on issues of ethnicity and race, gender, sexuality and nationality. Published between 1996 and 2001, the four texts that are the focus of this thesis reflect the current emphasis on “refiguring” the idea of what it is to be “Canadian”. Furthermore, they are symptomatic of a trend, which sees writers engaging in the enterprise of representing “Canadianness” in far more diverse and disparate ways than has been known previously. The characters in Cyril Dabydeen’s short story collection, *North of the Equator*, occupy the space in-between two worlds: one an adopted home in Canada and the other a birthplace somewhere across the equator. Anita Rau Badami’s novel *Tamarind Mem* spans India and Canada in its cultural and physical context, whilst Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* explores life between China and Canada. However, it is not simply the setting, or the cross-cultural nature of these novels that registers a move towards a redefinition of national discourse within a pluralized Canadian space. Rather, it is the growing understanding that authors such as Badami, Chong, Dabydeen, and many others are producing texts in which identity “is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, “Cultural” 222).

Historically, landscape has played a major role in defining Canadian identity, and while the geographical frame of reference in these “multicultural” novels may move beyond the confines of Canada, the question of Canadian identity remains a central concern. Iyer describes the Canada of the twenty-

first century as a place that no longer offers a straightforward form of identification, but is itself the subject of new and fluid identities; it is “one of the in-between spaces,” a place where people “put together shattered pieces to make a stained-glass whole” (79). W. H. New suggests that it is possible to examine Canada’s “changing cultural character, and to see it afresh, by rereading the land” in Canadian fiction (*Land* 20). Many examples of contemporary Canadian writing, including those examined in this thesis, occupy transitional spaces and, as Jordan Stouck argues, Canadian geography is “being expanded to include non-traditional urban spaces and even non-Canadian terrains” (“Canadian” 4).

The novels selected for this study are evidently a product of their wider Canadian context, as it has been outlined here. These narratives can be seen to have emerged from the outpouring of work that took place from the mid-1970’s to the mid-1990’s, and to be part of a growing body of work since that time, which engages with the difficulties and contradictions of identification in Canada’s culturally pluralist society at the beginning of the 21st century. This study argues that there is a need to identify new methods of theorising the way in which “national” identity is represented in these texts, and offers a way forward through a transnational approach. There now follows a brief examination of the scholarly debate surrounding multiculturalism that both informs and underpins this thesis with regard to literary criticism of Canadian fiction.

Scholarly Critique

Canada was the first country in the world to make an official commitment to the ideology of multiculturalism, and as such it offers a fruitful setting for the ongoing debate that surrounds both multicultural policy and politics. As has already been discussed, government policy with regard to multiculturalism has, and continues to have, a great deal of influence on literary production in Canada. Smaro Kamboureli is unequivocal in her acceptance of this fact, when she declares that “it is indisputable that the state’s multiculturalism policy, together with some of the ways it has been implemented, has facilitated the development of ethnic literary discourse” (Scandalous 94).

The concept of multiculturalism is, of course, used variously: politically, as official government policy and by diverse groups as a strategy for power, inclusion or legitimacy; as a description of society as being culturally diverse; ideologically, in terms of a belief in equality and the acknowledgment of difference. It is difficult, therefore, to define the term “multiculturalism”, even in relation to the apparently narrow field of scholarly practice; after all, by its very nature the sheer scope of the concept seems to defy all attempts at any detailed definition. At a very simplistic level, it is possible to argue that the ideal of multiculturalism embraces notions of belonging, acceptance, fairness and equality, whilst the practice of multiculturalism raises concerns with power and privilege, challenge and resistance, centre and margin, assimilation and universalism.

Kamboureli suggests that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988

recognizes the cultural diversity that constitutes Canada, but it does so by practising a sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them. (*Scandalous* 82).

In other words, although multiculturalism offers an acknowledgment of diversity, and indeed the suggestion that difference is laudable and should be celebrated, there is no intention to disturb “the conventional articulation of the Canadian dominant society” (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 82). There is a sense, therefore, in which multiculturalism, if viewed “uncritically”, may be seen to assure rather than avoid the assimilation of difference, in that it may disguise an underlying belief that Canada’s future success, or even survival, relies on the nation being a coherent and homogenous community.

For Himani Bannerji, amongst others, the issue at stake is one of power, unequally held among Canadians and concealed within the “mechanism of multiculturalism” (“On the Dark” 1). Dionne Brand is also well-known for her sincere and effective criticism of “the racist underpinnings of Canadian society” and “the dominant construction of Canada as white” (“A Working” 220). In an interview with Beverly Daurio, Brand argues that in Canada, “work by peoples of colour has to prove universality; a white writer is never asked to prove that”, presumably because they are seen to “belong” automatically (“Language” 14). The Canadian Multiculturalism Act claims to promote “the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins” in the “shaping of all aspects of Canadian society” (Canadian Multiculturalism Act 371). However, to some critics it may actually be seen as

a means to name as “marginal” those who do not belong to either of Canada’s “founding” nations of England or France.

Marlene Nourbese Philip is of the opinion that French and English cultures are at the heart of Canadian multiculturalism, and that the “lesser satellite cultures” form a collectivity around them (*Frontiers* 181). According to Nourbese Philip, an historical overview of Canada shows it to be a nation founded on a belief system that places “white Europeans at the top of society and Native and African people at the bottom” (*Frontiers* 182). What is more, she is convincing in her argument that “this belief system is, historically, an integral part of the cultural fabric of Canada” and remains so today (*Frontiers* 183). Nourbese Philip believes that at best, multiculturalism provides a means for immigrants to “indulge their nostalgic love of their mother countries,” while at worst it “unwittingly perpetuate[s] racism by muddying [the] waters between anti-racism and multiculturalism” (*Frontiers* 186). Clearly Nourbese Philip is one of many critics who remain sceptical about the efficacy of multiculturalism in providing equality for people of all races and colour in Canada.

Bannerji argues that “multiculturalism may be seen less as a gift of the state of ‘Canada’ to the ‘others’ of this society, than as a central pillar in its own ideological state apparatus” (“On the Dark” 4). Feminist critics such as Bannerji, Nourbese Philip and Brand have been key in addressing the concerns raised by multiculturalism, particularly with regard to the growth in representation of marginalised voices in Canadian fiction. Moreover, through their work and the work of like-minded intellectuals, the associations of

multiculturalism have been broadened to include not only race and ethnicity, but areas such as gender, class and sexuality.

There has been a great deal of vigorous and intense debate, which has drawn attention to the myriad ways in which minority-group writers may be silenced or rendered invisible within a hegemonic, multicultural Canada. One highly publicized example of this is the debate pertaining to the issue of “appropriation of voice and culture,” which took place in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s (Stasiulis 36). The issue was raised as a result of a decision by the Women’s Press to reject three stories on the grounds that they were racist, because they took as their subject matter the cultures and lives of colonized peoples in Third World countries and yet were written by white women (Stasiulis 39). Opinion was divided as to the appropriateness of this action, as well as to the implications of the “guidelines” that were issued subsequently, which many writers saw as being restrictive of their freedom of imagination. Daiva Stasiulis rightly points out that the “voice” argument brings to light the difficulties involved in censorship of any sort, and that “the whole notion of ‘authenticity’ is slippery, limiting and prone to essentialism” (55). It is, as Stasiulis argues, problematic to assume that some individuals are “the legitimate ‘keepers’ of culture” by virtue of their birth or cultural identity (55). The resulting impasse in debates on “authentic voice” meant that the focus has shifted to ways of facilitating greater access for the voices of minority writers, an approach that has proved to be very productive in creating “multi-ethnic movements for anti-racist action” (Stasiulis 42).

It is apparent that although the official policy of multiculturalism in Canada may have led to the increase in literature by diasporic authors, this is

not necessarily an “unequivocal sign that multiculturalism has succeeded” (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 94). Be that as it may, according to Jonathan Kertzer, he and his fellow Canadians still have cause for optimism, because such “ongoing tensions will sustain the nation, as long as we feel they are worth worrying over, by providing a site where meanings can be contested” (*Worrying* 198). Eva Hoffman shares in Kertzer’s positive outlook, when she suggests that “the literature of this new nomadism or diasporism... is a transnational literature in which multiple cultural references collide and collude and in which their interplay is seen as exactly that—robust, vital play” (“New” 56). The four novelists who are the focus of this study are part of the growing number of “mainstream” Canadian writers with “hyphenated” identities, whose work transgresses boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Their work gives tangible form to the cultural clashes and disjunctions that are part of their Canadian multicultural context. It is apposite at this point to examine in more depth the context of the relationship between nation and literature in Canada.

Nation and Literature

There follows a brief examination of the association between nation and literature, as it expressly relates to Canada; indeed simply the idea of a Canadian canon is one that has been the subject of much critical debate. Herb Wyile stresses the importance of interrogating the relationship between “nationalism and canon making” and urges critics not to accept “as natural and unproblematic the adjective Canadian in the phrase *Canadian Literature*” (“Regionalism” 156). There are those such as Robert Lecker who call into question the very existence of a Canadian canon and what actually

constitutes Canadian literature. In confronting these questions, Lecker points out that “our belief in canon and our imaginative construction of it are far more important than its actual presence, even if such presence could be identified” (“Making” 12). To put it another way, the idea of a national literary hegemony has great possibilities regardless of whether or not such a body of work actually exists. Conversely, if there were no canon, there would be no grounds for debate, no structure for the expression of difference regarding literary value; indeed “without canons, there is no alterity” (Lecker, “Making” 59). This dissertation engages with the debate surrounding national identification and literature by examining the way in which individual authors represent a variety of “ethnocultural perspectives” within an apparently “Canadian” text (Howells, *Contemporary* 1).

Sarah Corse points out that early Canadians had no need of a specifically “Canadian” literature, “because Canada had no overwhelming sense of Canadian-ness” (35). Although there are obvious exceptions to this general rule, broadly speaking, it is true to say that “Canadians were content reading British or French literature and understanding their own cultural expressions as a development within one of these traditions” (35). The long, complex and problematic relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada – along with the Official Languages Act 1969 (making Canada officially bilingual) – has resulted in the separate development of French-Canadian writing and the English-Canadian canon. It is true to say that “the study of ‘Canadian’ canon formation is in fact the study of Anglo-Canadian canon formation with only occasional references to francophone literature” (Corse 49). A consequence of this divergence has been a more comparative

approach between the two separate literatures, rather than a consideration of them as two parts of a single national literature. Furthermore, there is a range of literature in languages other than English or French and, of course, that of First Nation writers, which further complicates any discussion of what can be seen to constitute a canon of Canadian literature. Thus issues are raised regarding Canadian national identity through the study of canon formation alone.

According to Corse, “national literatures are the cornerstones of national cultures” (1), and she goes on to discuss the relationship between nation and literature as being part of “a social construction that performs powerful and important cultural work” (3). The idea of “nation” and “nationality” as being constructed modes of identification is one that is underpinned by Benedict Anderson’s influential book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson describes nations as “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). This “communion”, a collective consciousness known as nationalism, is a cultural phenomenon that is traditionally defined in relation to the way “Self” and “Other” are perceived and located: as such, national literatures are assumed to be reflections of the ideologies, experiences and characteristics that are peculiar to each nation.

Corse describes how the formation of a Canadian canon can be seen as being inextricably linked with the construction of Canada in nationalist terms. Naturally, there had previously been signs of the need for a

specifically “Canadian” literature. Indeed, as early as 1867 Thomas D’Arcy McGee sensed that:

The books that are made elsewhere, even in England are not always the best fitted for us. . . it seems to me we do much need several other books calculated to our own meridian, and hitting home to our own society. (16)

The notion of a distinctive national literature being of immense cultural value is already evident here. However, Corse rightly argues that it was not until Canada separated from Britain in the mid-1960’s and adopted its own national flag that the desire for a national literature became a focus of concern.

Linda Hutcheon agrees with Corse’s opinion regarding the emergence of a Canadian canon, and it is generally accepted that the 1960’s “saw the flowering of Canadian fiction” (*Canadian* 1). The two decades after World War II showed “an unprecedented increase in state intervention, control, and surveillance of culture, and the state-sponsored production of national identity” (Mackey 54). As a result, the way in which Canadian writers envisioned their society in national terms took on great significance during this time, and this was consistently reinforced through Canadian literary critique. In 1983 Frank Davey wrote his provocative essay “Surviving the Paraphrase”, suggesting that literary analysis in Canada had become dominated by what he termed ‘thematic criticism’: in other words, the focus of such criticism came to be on what literary works had to “‘say’ about Canada and Canadians”, rather than on their meaning (3). He argues that attempting to define literature in terms of its “Canadian-ness” does not expand the

understanding of the text, but merely serves to restrict the type of novels that are discussed to those that are considered typically “Canadian” in their content; for Davey a “national identity’s existence and a national literature’s significance” should be “assumed, rather than argued” (“Surviving” 7). The implication here is that Canadian literature has moved beyond the need to demonstrate its immanence, or its worth, but there are also connotations within this statement of an ontological relationship between literature and national identification – between narration and nation – a correlation that continues to be the subject of interrogation.

In a discussion about the meaning of the term “Canadian”, however contingent that label may be, Imre Szeman speaks of “a continual unending dialectic of literature and the nation” (32). Back in the 1960’s, Northrop Frye observed that this dialectic inscribed Canadian identity as being less worried by the question “Who am I?” than by the problem of “Where is here?” (“Conclusion” 826). Today, Canadian writers continue to be concerned with the question of “Where is here?”; as members of a settler-invader colony, it would appear to be a concern reflective of a colonial preoccupation in which “there” is placed as central in relation to an unknown “here”. The question is also significant with regard to Canada’s ambivalent relationship with the USA, in that whilst its alignment with North America helped it to separate from Britain, Canada’s cultural and economic independence is under continual threat of being engulfed because of its proximity to the United States.

Taken in this context, it is possible to place Canadian literature within a postcolonial contextual framework, particularly if one adopts the definition used by Bill Ashcroft et al, in which the postcolonial approach encompasses

“all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day” (*Empire* 24). To do so, however, has been the subject of much critical debate; indeed there are those, such as Hutcheon, who suggest that the condition of postcoloniality should rightly belong to the indigenous inhabitants of a “second world” nation like Canada (“Circling”). Devereux argues that the term “‘post-colonial’ supplanted ‘Commonwealth’ as a designator for [Canadian] writings” because it indicated a “temporal *and* political separation” from previous political and imperial connections to the British Empire (179-180). There are, most certainly, a wide variety of ways of considering the relationship between Canada and the Imperial West, often dependent on one’s points of reference.

Alan Lawson acknowledges that “it is not adequate to speak of a single, unmodified, unspecified postcolonialism” (“Postcolonial” 20). This challenge to postcolonialism as a singular, homogenous and unified entity is being reflected in its theoretical application, through contemporary literary and cultural criticism of the work of Canadian writers. Robert Fleming, for example, offers a postcolonial reading of Catherine Parr Traill’s *Canadian Crusoes*, which problematises received colonialist, nationalist and reductive readings of this text. Whilst he admits that the conclusion “implies stasis and Eurocultural hegemony”, he maintains that “the individuals - Catherine, Hector, Louis and Indiana - whose story this is have changed, and will continue to change, as a result of their interaction” (Fleming 217). Thus, Fleming clearly acknowledges that the linear temporality between “Old” and “New” worlds is disrupted, and he demonstrates a postcolonial perspective that welcomes the refiguring of identities and representative augmentation.

Ajay Heble suggests that contemporary Canadian historians have “shifted away from an interest in national identity” towards a reinterpretation of history from the more local perspectives of ethnicity, gender and class (236). This reflects a movement that can be detected in the work of contemporary Canadian novelists and literary critics away from the representation and interpretation of “national characteristics” towards a renegotiation and new understanding of self-representations and previously repressed and suppressed histories. Heble uses Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* as an illustration of writing that offers “an alternative to the filiative tendency that seeks to define national identity in terms of cultural purity and homogeneity” (243). Although Ondaatje’s concerns in the novel are not explicitly with the imperial or the colonial, Heble’s reading reveals an underlying resonance with the desire to find new models of self-representation through the recuperation of suppressed histories.

In 1995, Arun Mukherjee commented that there needed to be “more inclusive theories of Canada and Canadian literature” and that “we do not hear any concerted responses to what Aboriginal and racial minority writers tell us about Canada and Canadian literature” (“Canadian” 83). The voice of aboriginal and racial minority writers has been making itself heard more and more in the realm of fin de-siècle Canadian fiction, and as a result there is now a great deal of attention being paid to the type of “inclusive theories” of which Mukherjee speaks. Specific notice is being taken of readings that attempt to define the cultural discourse of an increasingly diasporic modern world in more appropriate ways. Attention is now being given to specific

areas of postcolonial writing in Canada, such as Helen Hoy's reading of texts by Native-Canadian women, *How Do I Read These?*

Whilst postcoloniality provides a useful conceptual matrix for the process of "writing back", there is a sense in which the question "Who am I?" has come to exceed and transgress national boundaries, not only in terms of cultures and topographies, but also in the disruption of the narrative continuum of past and present. Bhabha suggests that contemporary culture is in "a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience. Increasingly, 'national' cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities" (*Location 6*). The discourse of these cultures is not necessarily international in nature, however, in the sense that it is not the result of nations being brought together. It could be said that "transnational" is a more appropriate term, in that there is a moving beyond the idea of nation itself.

Dennis Walder considers what happens "after Post-Colonialism", suggesting that literary criticism should be concerned with "class and gender", as well as the "race dimensions of its subject" (208). For Walder, contemporary writers resist

the mapping of themselves by the knowledges of the past, implicated as they are by the empires of the past; while reaching towards an uncertain future in which – is it conceivable? May be we need new concepts for this – in which the silenced and oppressed reinscribe themselves in a changing history, language and theory. (208)

Thus, it becomes clear that questions are being raised as to the validity of a postcolonial conceptual framework with regard to those texts that reflect this changing perception of individual and collective national identities. This dissertation examines some of these questions further in the first chapter, and explores new, transnational models of analysis in relation to each of the novels, in the chapters that follow.

The need for a “transnational” perspective has been recognised for many years, albeit not always from a Canadian perspective. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American intellectual Randolph Bourne wrote a piece entitled “Trans-National America”. Charles Molesworth’s introduction to Bourne’s work in a recent anthology describes his writing as “extremely prescient”, and suggests that “it is fair to say that even today the thinking on multiculturalism and its political and social forms has rarely gone beyond Bourne’s formulations” (1731). Bourne urges his readers to reject the “melting pot” metaphor, which he says will result in a culture that is “washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity” (1736): he envisages instead a world in which a variety of cultures co-exist, “inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse” (1737). In the past, notions of the American “melting pot” have been set in opposition to those of the Canadian “mosaic”; however, the “mosaic” metaphor, too, is increasingly being replaced by ideas concerned with hybridity and multiculturalism.^{vii}

The first chapter of this dissertation establishes the present situation as one in which “ethnicity becomes a function not of return but of reinvention, not of recuperating a single self but of maintaining a series of selves in transit” (Siemerling, “Writing” 22). Thus, cultural identification is seen to

function as a matter of “ongoing process”, rather than being understood as a singular or fixed “end product”. Stuart Hall endorses this perception when he suggests that rather than “thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact . . . we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (“Cultural” 222). The first chapter determines that this is particularly the case in the Canadian fiction chosen for this study, and argues that the transnational approach, first muted by Bourne, offers a useful starting point for the examination of the cultural complexity of these novels.

Clearly it is impossible to give a comprehensive overview of “identity as process” in contemporary Canadian literature; therefore, four texts have been chosen for the particular aspects of identification that they offer, such as gender and sexuality, religion, and race and ethnicity. A chapter has been dedicated to each of the texts, and the organising principle for these four chapters is that of a movement towards Canada. The analysis begins with Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which is almost wholly set on a fictitious island, and offers only the briefest glimpse of Canada at its close. This second chapter provides an examination of Mootoo’s novel, focusing on gender and sexuality or, to be more specific, transgender and trans-sexuality, with regard to national identification.

The third chapter deals with Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*. The majority of this novel takes place in the Pacific Ocean, with Canada positioned as an “absent presence”, being paradoxically at both the centre and the margin of the text. One of the main concerns of this chapter is Martel’s use of creation mythology in the re-envisioning of the concepts of nation, nation-state and

nationality. The central character, Pi, engages with the cultural practices of the Hindu, Christian and Islamic religions simultaneously, a transgression of apparently “fixed” ideological divisions that is explored here in relation to notions of identity as process.

Chapter four examines the relationship between identity and memory in Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*, where individual and collective memory are interpreted as being integral to the continual construction of the “Self”. It is a novel that spans the Atlantic, being located in Poland, Greece and Canada, with Canada positioned in terms of its role as a “Way-Station”. The novel is read here as providing a textual representation of the association between place and history that subverts traditional spatial and temporal boundaries, and explores the possibility of time as a “vertical” axis. Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces* offers the paradox of a representation of identity that includes both the yawning expanse of cultural difference and the intimate co-existence of cultures that are inseparably intermingled.

The fifth chapter explores the role of racial and cultural origins in the construction of individual and collective identification in André Alexis’ *Childhood*. It examines the way in which Alexis represents some of the contradictions and disjunctions involved in living as part of the multicultural citizenry that forms Canada. *Childhood* is deeply concerned with the desire for a “fixed” identity, and the need for “belonging”, particularly with regard to national identification. The novel is set wholly in Canada, and yet the transnational reading offered here shows it to challenge and exceed the boundaries of the nation-state, moving beyond such limitations to encompass other cultures and backgrounds.

Finally, the conclusion draws together the key findings of the thesis. It sums up the central issues that have been raised in the adoption of a transnational perspective for the interpretation of the four texts. There is some consideration as to the strengths and weaknesses of the transnational approach taken for this analysis and an indication as to other avenues of exploration that have had to remain untouched. The thesis shows that the construction of liminal and culturally hybrid identities within these texts are reflective of Canada's changing national self-image. Howells confirms this and notes that in Canada these changes involve a move away from "essentialist notions of authenticity and origins to an emphasis on identities as contextual, shifting, doubled or split, and possibly multiple" (*Contemporary* 20). The evidence of this shift towards the formulation of identity as "process" rather than "product" is demonstrated in the fiction that Canada is producing at the present time.

This dissertation explores new ways of understanding a literature that reflects the Canadian experience, shaped as it is by many diverse peoples. More than forty years on from when Frye considered Canadian literature's engagement with national identity to be one of asking the question "Where is here?", the answer must surely now be contingent upon who is doing the asking. "Where is here?" becomes predicated on "Who am I?" This reversal signals a change of emphasis that raises numerous possibilities with regard to identification, as is reflected in the analysis undertaken here. This thesis examines novels that take place in a "post-national space", where locations are "as interchangeable as postcards", and in which "discourses are transnational" (Davey, *Post* 259). Steven Vertovec rightly maintains that

“transnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition” (“Transnationalism” 573). This thesis begins, therefore, by outlining the theoretical conceptual framework that provides the basis for the transnational analytical approach that follows.

ⁱ The term “English-Canadian literature” is used throughout this thesis, in preference to “Anglo-Canadian” or “Anglophone”. This is because it is felt that the prefix “Anglo” carries with it a sense of cultural bias, particularly with regard to Canada’s bicultural status, rather than simply conveying the idea of Canadian literature written predominantly in English.

ⁱⁱ Eva Mackey is a Canadian social anthropologist. Her monograph, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, offers an analysis of the construction of national identity in the current milieu of cultural politics in Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is evidenced through the inclusion of Michaels’ work in Michael Greenstein’s anthology of *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada*.

^{iv} For further information on Yann Martel see British Council Arts website on contemporary writers at: <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors> accessed 31.07.06.

^v Mary Condé discusses Mootoo’s identity as a writer in “Flight from Certainty in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*”.

^{vi} Stephen Henighan’s examination of Canadian fiction in the decade of the 1990’s is discussed in more detail in chapter one of this thesis.

^{vii} Ideas discussed with David Stouck in email correspondence with the author 22.11.2002.

CHAPTER ONE

Jonathon Kertzer points out that “‘nation’ is an old word used to describe a slippery idea” (6). In fact, one of the major problems in addressing issues regarding nation and nationalism is the difficulty posed by the lack of agreement amongst scholars regarding the definition of the concepts themselves. These are often dependent on either “subjective” or “objective” factors, or indeed both, and such arguments also involve the relationship of nation and nationalism to ethnicity and statehood. Walker Connor argues that there is confusion caused by the tendency towards “interutilization of the words state and nation”, with both words being used interchangeably. He points out that there is, in fact, a definite distinction between them – while “state” is clearly a political concept, easily defined in quantitative, territorial terms, “nation” is more difficult to define as it involves an abstract “essence” associated with “feeling”, “intuition” or some sort of “sense” of belonging (“Nation” 379).

The etymology of the word “nation” reveals the Latin root “nasci”, meaning “to be born”, which clearly connotes the idea of a blood relationship. Connor points out that whilst it is often denied that “the notion of shared blood is a factor” in the conception of nation, an “intuitive sense of consanguinity” underlies most groups’ claim to nationhood (“Nation” 380). As a result, there is a certain perception of nationality that may involve the emotional, if irrational, conviction of a sense of lineage that can be traced back to some vaguely distant progenitor: faint echoes of a generic Adam and Eve, whose offspring have multiplied to become one vast national family, all of whom are

interrelated in an unsubstantiated, yet psychologically powerful way. Thus, it becomes apparent that ethnic and national discourses frequently revolve around the “myth” of a “common origin” (Yuval-Davis, *Gender* 26). In this way “nationality” may be defined in terms of “ethnicity”, in that the Greek root “Ethnos” refers to “a group characterized by common descent” (“Nation” 386). The elision between nation and state, then, is one that results in some confusion, where nationalism could be seen as loyalty to the state, or alternatively as a type of familial allegiance to the nation.

Theorists such as Hans Kohn and Ernest Gellner have suggested that there are two competing components to nationalism: ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism.ⁱ Kohn argues that in the case of “ethnic” nationalism it is not the state that creates the nation, but the nation that creates the state – in other words, a nation is unified through the pre-existing characteristics of its members. On the other hand, “civic” nationalism, as Ignatieff explains, “maintains that the nation should be composed of all those – regardless of race, colour, creed, gender, language or ethnicity – who subscribe to the nation’s political creed” (3). The latter would appear to be “inclusive” in its outlook, whilst the former is predicated on an exclusive and isolationist perspective. “Nation-building” is invariably focussed on creating viable states; however, this is often problematic for state unity, where a single state comprises a number of nations, and psychological barriers divide state populations. Furthermore, the term “nationality”, in the sense of citizenship of a state, may become confused with membership of an ethnic group or race. Different methods are frequently adopted for the acquisition of nationality – through birth, naturalisation, or conferment: consequently, individuals may

legally have dual nationality, or through birth or immigration find themselves to have complex and interwoven national identities.

As a result of the synonymous use of the terms “nation” and “state”, the understanding of “nationality”, with regard to individual identity, is often obfuscated, both for the individual and for the society in which he or she lives. Notions of political allegiance and citizenship can be seen as being inextricably bound up with ethnicity and ancestry, hence the ubiquitous and highly controversial use of hyphenation with regard to nationality/citizenship in Canada. For the second or third generation “hyphenated Canadian” author, for example, identification as a Canadian invariably continues to be imbued with ethnic origin. Yar Slavutych describes himself thus: “by nationality . . . I am Ukrainian and by citizenship, I am Canadian” (Balan 139).

Debates about nationality, nationhood and nation are, in themselves, distinct from issues concerning a country’s postcolonial status. However, the relationship between these debates is significant with regard to cultural production. Stephen Slemon argues that the terms “nation” and “nationhood” are “inherently monolithic ones”, which may “conceal important differences between constituent groups within the ‘postcolonial’ nation” (181). This is particularly the case with nation-states such as Canada, which were once colonies of an imperial power, but may also be considered colonisers in their own right.

The categorisation of fiction in terms of nation and the complexities involved in the idea of a specifically “Canadian” literature have already been discussed in the introduction. It has been established that the literary production of these countries is frequently classified as “postcolonial” – a

positioning that may be seen to have developed from the comparative study of what was once labelled “Commonwealth” literature. This chapter explores some of the problematics of this classification further. Over recent years this situation has been the subject of much debate, which is unsurprising considering that, both from a pedagogical and a critical perspective, the term “postcolonial literature” is employed to cover five “regions”: Africa, Australia-New Zealand, Canada, the Caribbean and South Asia.ⁱⁱ The assumption here is that within this vast breadth of scope, there is a “‘common experience’ of colonialism” (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 5). As Slemon wryly observes: “‘Post-colonialism’ is a portmanteau word – an umbrella thrown up over many heads, against a great deal of rain. Confusion necessarily abounds in the area” (183).

Kalpna Seshadri-Crooks suggests that postcolonialism “faces its major criticisms and attacks against its very legitimacy and political viability from within its own ranks,” not least because “the field itself remains indefinable” (4). In many ways, it is this very indeterminacy that enables a wide range of literature to be encompassed within the arena of postcolonial studies. However, the legitimacy and heuristic value of adopting a postcolonial stance in the study of the literary discourse of “settler- invader” countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand does indeed raise difficulties. Postcolonial discourse, as a theory of resistance or “writing back”, is essentially one of liberation. Donna Bennett describes postcolonialism as “a point of view that contains within it a basic binarism: colonial opposed to postcolonial” where postcolonial is a perspective that “resists imperialism” (168). Sylvia Söderland describes one of the underlying problems of the term

“postcolonialism” as being that it “may well be based on an imperial assumption that any writing of importance produced by former subjects must be focused on their contestatory relationship to the absent master” (*Margin* 6). However, the notion of “coloniser” and “colonised”, “oppressor” and “oppressed” becomes obfuscated in the case of “settler-invader” countries. Arun Mukherjee contends that postcolonial theory “suppresses internal hierarchies and divisions in these societies” (*Postcolonialism* 19). The relationship between Canadian literature and postcolonialism has, therefore, been the topic of a great deal of critical discussion. Indeed, Bruce King reflects on how “the study of post-colonial theory [has] replaced the study of post-colonial literature” (17). The polemic has reached such an extent that the question *Is Canada Postcolonial?* forms the title of a recent collection of essays, edited by Laura Moss, which are written by some of Canada’s most eminent scholars.

Outside of Canada, “there is down-right antagonism, often, for those who suggest that Canadian literature can be read in conjunction with postcolonial theories” (Moss 3). For example, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, editors of *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, argue that nations such as Canada should be excluded from this area of study because of “their implication in contemporary capitalism” and their “historical relation” to colonialism (4). There are also those within Canada, such as Linda Hutcheon, who suggest that the condition of postcoloniality might, more appropriately, belong to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada. Slemon affirms this view, pointing out that “white settler ‘Canadians’ . . . may be differently located within ‘post-colonialism’ from the aboriginal or First Nations ‘Canadians’

whose land they retain" (181). Certainly, native writers' work is now being theorised in its own right,ⁱⁱⁱ and perhaps, "in view of the damage done to Indian culture and people by the French and British colonizers and the process of colonization, theirs should be considered *the* resisting, post-colonial voice of Canada" (Hutcheon, 75 original italics). Moss confirms that for many First Nations people, "Canada is emphatically not 'post-colonial' but is still actively engaging in colonial practices" (10). Moreover, although it is beyond the remit of this study, yet another dimension is added if the anticolonial struggles of Quebec are taken into consideration. It is apparent, therefore, that situating and evaluating Canadian literature within a postcolonial framework is, at the very least, complex and controversial.

A postcolonial approach to scholarly inquiry in the area of Canadian literature brings with it a number of associated difficulties, firstly with regard to its definition in terms of subject matter, methodology and period; secondly, in the legitimacy of its application to Canadian literature as a whole; and thirdly in the uncertainty as to exactly what the term denotes. Victor Ramraj articulates some of the questions raised regarding the term "postcolonial", He asks whether it is a concept "based on the relationship between the empire and the colony as given from the perspective of the former colony" or whether it is:

simply a chronological term. Is it simply post – that is 'after' – colonialism, suggesting a particular phase in history? Or is it more spatial than temporal? Is it a term that is used euphemistically for the Third World, for particular places?

(Ramraj 212-3)

These questions are a reflection of the broad and inclusive use of the term. The rapid growth in the field of postcolonial studies over the past few years – not only in relation to literary studies, but also in the areas of political science, history and other related fields – is also indicative of its capacity for “inclusivity”.

There is clearly evidence that a postcolonial matrix provides a useful point of entry into the study of some Canadian texts. However, a lack of clarity as to the defining factors involved in what “makes” a text postcolonial is one of the major difficulties involved in this approach. For Moss, “clarifying the role of critical approaches to Canadian culture is increasingly important for critics dealing with the rapidly changing shape of Canadian literature” (3).

Postcolonial studies has come to include a range of different “postcolonialisms”, in order to accommodate the diversity which it encompasses. As a result, a variety of theoretical and critical methodologies have emerged, which do not necessarily exhibit any common thread. Indeed, Diana Brydon argues that

an unresolvable opposition is developing between those postcolonialisms that seek to challenge binary modes of thinking as implicitly imperialist and those postcolonialisms that continue to operate within binary models. (“Introduction” 12)

It could be argued that this particular binary opposition is, in itself, an essentialising reduction of the complexity of difference that exists within the constituencies presently positioned under the rubric of postcolonial studies.

The absence of any precise definition of what constitutes postcolonial theory in relation to Canadian fiction remains problematic. Brydon suggests

that “part of the problem lies in the range of meanings assigned to ‘the post-colonial,’ which can designate a subject matter, a period, or a methodology, none of which has yet been satisfactorily established” (“Introduction” 13). Indeed, as long as “postcolonial” remains a “portmanteau word”, covering a multiplicity of theoretical positions, there will be a tendency towards universalism. Furthermore, it is not enough to simply acknowledge the differences and disjunctions involved. W. H. New warns against the dangers of assuming that merely to “*recognise* difference is to act even-handedly,” as recognition does not “automatically free people from the hierarchies of authority” (19).

Robert Budde argues that “the language of [Canadian] postcolonial theory, while having potential to focus and create progressive political activity, also, especially when used selfishly by white academics, has the power to over-generalize, depoliticize, and disenfranchise” (283). He goes on to question whether the lack of engagement with specific areas of difference might not signify an evasion of issues such as race and ethnicity. The tendency towards subsuming rather than confronting difference is often far from obvious. Echoes of this notion can be found, for example, when, through the voice of Susanna Moodie, Margaret Atwood insists that “we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here”, in as much as this could effectively be seen to constitute a denial of the existence of disjunction within Canada as a multicultural society (*Journals* 62). Furthermore, Smaro Kamboureli’s in-depth discussion of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act posits even this legal document as a sign of “the dominant society’s tendency to

regulate difference" (101). She observes that when "treated as a sign of equality, ethnicity loses its differential role" (101).

In their introduction to *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft et al assert that "beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english [sic]" (*Empire* 9). This claim may well be true; however, in the neat side-stepping of the issues of historical and cultural difference, there is a refusal to acknowledge what Mukherjee refers to as "the power differential between first world and third world societies," and those "within a society" (*Postcolonialism* 7). The erasure of difference through postcolonial theorising is of particular concern in relation to Canadian literature. The discourse of a country where "the multiple identities which make up the nation are constantly at battle with each other, and in which the boundaries, inclusions and exclusions of identity are unstable and constantly changing" (Mackey 13), requires an approach that reveals rather than elides its heterogeneity.

Herb Wyile notes that postcolonial critical practices "assert uniformity" within Canadian literature and have been used to "lend postcolonial literatures such as that of English Canada a certain national cohesion and distinctiveness within the larger English tradition" by "denying internal difference" ("Regionalism" 143). The problem with this "unitary theorising" (Mukherjee *Postcolonialism* 8) is that it speaks about "all" the literary production of postcolonial society as one and thereby flattens distinctions. The resulting impression is that the novels being written form a coherent field, which is dominated by resistance to an imperial centre and strategies of

subversion. Texts which explore the complex, non-unified identities of those who are differentiated through race, culture, gender or class, who cross boundaries, and disrupt the notion of a homogenous Canadian body politic are “beyond the ken of postcolonial theory which is so heavily invested in making the colonial experience its central premise” (Mukherjee *Postcolonialism* 9).

It is possible that the term “post-colonial” can be considered not only as universalising by its inclusivity as a descriptive category, but also in both the denotative and connotative aspects of the term. Seshadri-Crooks claims that “the term itself has become suspect: a catchall phrase for a post- (read fashionable) Third Worldism” (4). The ubiquitous usage of the prefix “post” is one that necessarily positions cultural discourse within a chronological framework; after all, “post” is a designation that implies a period in time that is “after”. There is, indeed, a proliferation of “posts” in contemporary cultural studies: post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-nationalism, and so on. Anne McClintock believes this phenomenon to signal a “widespread, epochal crisis in the idea of linear, historical progress” (10). Arguably, this modern “crisis” in the traditional notion of “linear” history is reflected in the contemporary Canadian novels that are the focus of this dissertation, as will become clear in the chapters that follow.

The spelling of “post-colonial,” whether with a hyphen or as one word, is of considerable consequence in the ongoing debate in the field regarding the specificity of the term. Neil Besner asserts that “postcolonial . . . is a term that is stitched together so that it seems always and insistently to allude to what came before – the colony – as a necessary precondition for its

existence" (44). In what Slemon has referred to as "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism," the use of the hyphen between the two words has been contested, particularly since it foregrounds the separation of the prefix "post" from its referent "colonial". For McClintock, the prefix "confers on colonialism the prestige of history proper; colonialism is the determining marker of history" (11). Bill Ashcroft, a highly-respected proponent of "post-colonial" studies, admits that the use of the hyphen "can be misleading" in that it may suggest the "situation in a society 'after' colonialism" (*On* 10); and it is argued here that its use undeniably emphasises this historical, chronological aspect. The hyphen, therefore, becomes a statement of particularity, concerning the historically and culturally grounded nature of the experience it represents. For this reason, this dissertation makes use of the non-hyphenated form of the term, where it is considering the postcolonial paradigm as an "amorphous set of discursive practices" (Ashcroft et al, *Post-colonial* xv). With or without the hyphen, however, the term remains problematic here, when approaching the novels under analysis.

One of the reasons for this is that these texts cross temporal and spatial boundaries, moving beyond the binary oppositions of a traditionally envisaged "Eurocentric" paradigm. Whilst the impetus of postcolonial studies may be towards challenging the binary structures of Western historicism, the two parts of the term, "post" and "colonial", nonetheless metaphorically reinforce the binary oppositional stance of "colonial/postcolonial" that it "sets out to dismantle" (McClintock 10). The term has a temporal orientation, which envisions a series of stages from "precolonial" through "colonial" to "postcolonial". Thus, a sequential development is set up that echoes the trope

of Enlightenment and may be seen as re-inscribing an imperial conception of linear progress. This perception is underpinned by Derek Gregory's discussion of that "precocious prefix," when he describes it as tracing "the curve of the postcolonial from the inaugural moment of the colonial encounter . . . From that dispersed moment, marked by the 'post,' histories and geographies have all been made in the shadow of colonialism" (7). Viewed from this perspective, "postcolonialism" becomes a totalising concept, which reasserts "Western control over time and space" (Ashcroft, *On* 13).

Akhil Gupta argues that "the postcolonial condition is distinguished by heterogeneous temporalities that mingle and jostle with one another to interrupt the teleological narratives that have served both to constitute and to stabilize the identity of 'the West'" (17). However, as McClintock points out, the temporal perspective of the term reduces the production of "political nuance" because it "effects a recentering of global history around the single rubric of European time" (11). In other words, the multiplicity of global culture is made subject to its chronological position with regard to the central marker of colonialism as part of a singular, Eurocentric history. Paradoxically, then, it would appear that the term "postcolonialism" may act to encompass the very ideas of development and "Enlightenment" that it seeks to challenge.

As has already been mentioned, it is the very inclusivity of the postcolonial paradigm that allows for its use with regard to Canadian literature. Susan Gingell describes the "most energizing aspects of postcolonial or New Literatures in English" as being the "hybridizing of conventions of cultural production" and the "elasticity of English" as writers "indigenize it to a variety of geo-cultural contexts". She is concerned, however,

that even those critics “with ancestry or immediate roots in other cultural traditions besides the dominant Western ones, feel prompted or pushed to standardize their discourse generically and linguistically” when it comes to writing about these texts as “postcolonial” (102). If such standardisation is a consequence of reading these novels as postcolonial discourse, then, in Gingell's words: “what richness might we be losing as a result?” (102).

Canada clearly shares certain characteristics with other settler-invader nations and comparative analysis with these cultures often proves to be of heuristic value. However, there are certain factors, such as Canada's official policy of bilingualism, which combine with “exceptional multicultural demographics”, to “place Canadian culture in a situation of its own” (Kröller 2). There is evidence, therefore, that from a critical perspective, the work of contemporary Canadian authors is not necessarily best served by inclusion within the postcolonial field.

Mukherjee finds that “categorical constructs like ‘oppression’ and ‘resistance,’ and ‘mimicry’ and ‘hybridity,’ provide ready-made frames that allow critics to compartmentalize postcolonial writing” (*Postcolonialism* xvi). Moreover, she argues that this practice is restrictive, pointing out that there is a need to produce theoretical readings of Canadian fiction that “contextualize texts in terms of their specificities of history and culture” (xvi). This is particularly the case with regard to the contemporary Canadian literature that provides the focus for this thesis. In order to understand these texts more fully, it is necessary to have knowledge of the relevant specificities of history and culture which inform them. Gingell suggests that “cultural outsiders” need to learn as much as possible about the contexts of the work that they are

studying: they should remain “open to the idea that there are things we do not and will not know, and to the likelihood that we will not even know that we don’t know them” (108). As Mukherjee makes clear, there is a gap between “the reading of someone unfamiliar with historical and cultural contexts and one who brings a prior knowledge of these to the texts” (*Postcolonialism* xvi). It is imperative, therefore, that this study adopts a theoretical approach that encourages the exploration of this gap and its effects on both the text and the reader.

The reading experience of someone who brings prior knowledge of a particular culture and history to the text may detect resonances that remain undisclosed to those who are uninformed. For these readers, such resonances may signal an internal “code”, a familiarity which thereby alters their relationship to the text with regard to its racial aspects. An example of this can be found in André Alexis’ novel *Childhood*, when Thomas, the narrator, tells his reader that “here, in this household, buljol and sugar cake belonged” (139). According to Mukherjee, buljol is “a favourite Caribbean dish made with salt cod, onions and tomatoes” (*Postcolonialism* 93). The reader who is aware that buljol is made from salted cod may well experience the text very differently from one who is not. Salt cod is a “signifier loaded with cultural and historic memory for Caribbean Canadians. That was the food for slaves, and, later, indentured workers” (*Post* 94). Those people who know what buljol is and have eaten the dish are identified as being part of, or at least associated with, a particular cultural group and therefore the concept of “belonging” becomes racialised and changed. Likewise, sugar also carries with it these types of signifiers for particular groups of people. Thus, for some

readers there is a certain intertextuality that will affect their reading and understanding of the text, whilst for others there is not. The “gap” between these readings requires further interrogation in terms of the representation of cultural identity.

Mukherjee points out that food is a “powerful carrier of group memory” and as a result, specific cultural memories “are brought into action when literature refers to food” (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 94). Whatever the background of the reader, Budde suggests that when a postcolonial approach is taken in these circumstances, “the temptation is to focus entirely on this racialized aspect . . . on the author behind the writing, and on the difference that they potentially represent, rather than on the ways in which their writing deconstructs the very notion of racialization in [Canada]” (288). Once more it becomes clear that other approaches may be more productive in the analysis of this type of fiction.

Developments in Postcolonial Studies

Current research in “postcolonialism” with regard to “immigrant” English-Canadian fiction is developing in a number of ways in order to engage with these sorts of concerns. Mridula Nath Chakraborty recognises the way in which “interrogations of colonial discourse and its creation of Others have been foundational to postcolonial studies” (127). However, she considers recent changes within the postcolonial field to offer a “new kind of orientalisng gaze that operates on the will-to-know the Other: through the market economy of first world consumption masquerading as globalisation” (127). In other words, this type of postcolonial theorising may be seen as complicit with the notion of “cannibal culture”, in which difference is consumed as a commodity.^{iv}

Many critics have argued that “postcolonial modes of representation often find themselves embroiled within the same exotifying structures that they seek to resist” (Brydon, “Canada” 51). Huggan, for example, considers “the postcolonial exotic” as being “both a form of commodity fetishism *and* a revelation of the process by which ‘exotic’ commodities are produced, exchanged, consumed; it is both a mode of consumption *and* an analysis of consumption” (264, original italics). Chakraborty argues that from such a perspective,

so-called third world texts make the transition from being national allegories, in the Jamesonian sense, to being representative of the migrant, the marginal, and the minority. The Other, in pluralistic democracies, becomes fetishised and multiply produced as an object of desire, while at the same time being socially articulated/discriminated against through the politics of difference (127-8).

Contemporary Canadian “postcolonialism” can be seen here to reflect what Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva describe as the “booming Otherness industry” (12). It does so, in as much as it may be understood to occupy an ambivalent position, in which the voice of the immigrant writer is adopted as being that of “the subaltern and/or Native informant” (Chakraborty 129), thereby constituting a representation that stands as a substitute for the “ethnic Other”. As Mukherjee explains, often there is “an unproblematic conflation of ‘postcolonial writers’ with ‘postcolonial people’” (*Postcolonialism* 12). This conflation allows the focus to shift to cross-cultural similarities, thereby

flattening differences and ignoring the significance of those culturally-shared narratives which are unique to a particular text.

Recent theorising, then, has seen some critics steering away from an “oppositional stance” such as that found in “a classic postcolonial term like ‘writing back’” (R. Smith, 4). Instead, there are moves towards investigating “new kinds of side-by-sideness,” which examine what Rowland Smith has referred to as “the possibility of sharing cultural experience rather than ‘resisting’ the imposition of alien forms of culture” (4). There remains the difficulty, though, that this new type of approach arguably carries with it the problematics of the term “postcolonial” that have already been discussed. Besner maintains that a postcolonial perspective can be “too easily tied to one conception of the past” and, indeed, “to a specific reading of one kind of past” (44). Although the intention may be to offer a fresh outlook, “postcolonialism” brings with it a legacy that seems to “insist on conserving that which [has been] left behind, and carrying it forward” (Besner 43). Moreover, as Brydon points out, these new strategies of postcolonial theorising may not be accepted so readily if one adopts a “sophisticated understanding of complicity” (“Canada” 63).

The charge of complicity within the field of postcolonial studies is not new, and theorists such as Gayatri Spivak repeatedly draw attention to the complexities involved. Brydon acknowledges that there is a “high level of discomfort with complicity as a theoretical concept, within Canadian culture and within postcolonial theory” (62-3). She sees the need for an on-going awareness of “the privileging of crossing limits in reading to understand over recognizing the limits in reading to stop, pause and puzzle” (63). In other

words, attention must be given to the dangers of placing the pursuit of understanding over the recognition of the creativity produced by difference. It is necessary for literary critics involved in cross-cultural research not only to examine the disjunctions and discontinuities that are the product of cultural limits, but to appreciate the aesthetic value in their existence within a text. Positionality, both of the author and the critic, is a key issue for the postcolonial theorist in this respect – particularly with regard to Canadian texts such as those that are the subject of this thesis.

According to Sherene Razack, a postcolonial perspective requires a “politics of accountability as opposed to a politics of inclusion,” which necessitates the examination of complicity with “privilege and penalty” (*Looking* 170). Rather than “assuming too easy an intimacy” (Brydon 63), or striving towards a somewhat clichéd desire to “build bridges,” there is a need to allow limits to “do their productive work” (Sommers xi). George Elliott Clarke displays a certain cynicism towards those who engage with the critical trope of “bridge-building”: in fact, he argues that it is now “so common in post-colonial criticism, it suggests the entire field is about – in essence – *race relations*” (183, original italics). Brydon too asks why it is that “bridge-building and border-crossing are so celebrated these days . . . in some forms of post-colonial theorizing”; she points out that “good intentions alone are no guarantee” of non-appropriative, cross-cultural criticism (63). The movement towards a politics of inclusion using a “postcolonial” framework may be seen, therefore, to be problematised by the notion of complicity and the inherent complexities of the term itself.

In the late 1980's Ashcroft et al acknowledge that in Canada, "the model of the 'mosaic' has been an important cultural determinant," and yet "where its acute perception of cultural complexity might have generated a climate in which cross-national or cross-cultural comparative studies would be privileged, little work of this kind seems to have been done" (*Empire* 36). Some twenty years later Magdalene Redkop discusses recent "developments in Canadian literary criticism" ("Canadian" 273). She argues that where "environmental determinism" ("Canadian" 271) and "thematic" criticism were once the main focus of Canadian critical attention, "the act of bridge building" is now "a crucial feature of the idea of Canadian national literature" (273). It is arguable that the growing interest in "bridge-building" over the past decade, may be seen to reflect the need to fill a lacuna in the theoretical conceptualisation of literature in Canada.

There is an increasing acknowledgement of the challenges and advantages that arise from "the writer's being situated on the bridge between cultures" (Keefer 105). It is a position that allows engagement with cultural discourse from a variety of perspectives, thus enabling the replacement of "a temporal lineality with a spatial plurality" (Ashcroft et al, *Empire* 36). Indeed, as Redkop observes, there are "any number of Canadian writers who would be quick to play fast and loose with that swaying bridge, noting how it unsettles the linear constructs of literary history" (273-4). From the cross-cultural perspective of the "swaying bridge", the work of these "hyphenated" Canadian authors may be construed as providing a representation which is "at one and the same time a site of resistance, a site of complicity, and a site of generative creativity" (Vautier 275). Such work often encapsulates multiple

facets of national identity simultaneously, and therefore requires a dialectical approach that pays attention to the concomitant existence of difference, which is neither separatist nor subsuming in its perception.

Enoch Padolsky expresses concern that the “growing diversity” of Canadian literature makes “traditional approaches less and less adequate in providing a general literary critical framework” (25). Furthermore, Heble judges “recent developments in Canadian cultural and literary history” to signal an obvious “need to move beyond a nationalist critical methodology” (“New” 79). Padolsky also contends that in spite of “evidence of an accommodation of Canadian cultural diversity, Canadian criticism has not yet made an equal adjustment to the larger critical framework” (24). Clearly, alternative models of critical analysis are required in this area, which move forward from a traditional postcolonial stance, bearing in mind the changes that are taking place in contemporary Canadian literature.

It is true to say that very few Canadian authors would use the term “postcolonial” to describe their own writing; however, many do recognise the significance of national identification in relation to their work – a factor that will be explored in more depth shortly. Stuart Hall argues that “identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point” (“Ethnicity” 16), and it is this ongoing process - the continual changes wrought by the crossing and re-crossing of national and cultural boundaries – that forms the focus of the perspective put forward in this dissertation. This thesis demonstrates that the notion of identity as “process” is one of the central concerns of each of the texts under consideration: each reflects the

paradoxes, disjunctions and conflicts that are a part of life as it is lived in an increasingly globalised and multicultural society.

As has already been pointed out, national identity is of particular importance with regard to Canadian fiction. Mukherjee asserts that, in general, nationalist critics in Canada argue that it is not enough to simply have “Canadian content in one’s work”, or to carry a Canadian passport; “only ‘birthright Canadians’ can be considered Canadian writers” (“Canadian” 75). The consequence of this type of criteria has been that, up until recently, the work of non-Canadian born writers has been consistently marginalized, set apart from the main body of canonical Canadian literature, into, amongst others, a category known as “immigrant writing”. The restrictive exegesis inherent in the project of nation-building frequently places writers’ work outside of the mainstream. However, there are many contemporary writers who, whatever their ethnic heritage and, indeed, wherever their writing is set, see themselves and their work as, above all, Canadian. Spanish-born Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi* was awarded the Booker Prize in 2002, and Kröller points out that “as the winner, Martel underwent special scrutiny for his Canadian credentials” (2). In the huge publicity that followed, Martel was variously described by the press as “Spanish,” “Québécois,” “Montrealais” and “Canadian”, because he was born in Salamanca, to Québécois parents who were Canadian diplomats. One interviewer, apprised of Martel’s cosmopolitan upbringing, assumed that he must consider himself “a citizen of the world”, Martel’s response was an unequivocal “no. I’m Canadian” (Sielke 30).

The brief biographical information about the authors, given in the introduction, reveals what has controversially been termed their “hyphenated”

status, be it cultural – as in the case of Anne Michaels, a “Jewish-Canadian” – or ethnic, such as André Alexis, a “Trinidadian-Canadian”. Smaro Kamboureli discusses the way in which “many Canadians reside within the space of the hyphen; whether it is immediately perceptible or not, fully embraced or brimming with ambivalence, the hyphen is the sign of diaspora” (*Scandalous* 101). Naturally, there are Canadian writers, Anne Michaels and George Ryga among them, who consider their cultural and ethnic origins to be “a very personal thing,” which should be disregarded in relation to their work (Ryga 148). However, it is possible to argue that “the lack of concern for ethnicity and status may itself be a response by a writer to his or her ethnic minority status” (Padolsky 28).^v Others writers, such as Janice Kulyk Keefer, herself of Ukrainian origin, embrace this marginal space as being key to their identity and their writing. For Keefer, one of the main advantages for the writer who lives “between cultures” is that as a consequence, he or she is “free to defend, to redress wrongs – not just in the adopted but in the home culture as well” – and, not only that, but it is this very position that “makes him or her Canadian” (105).

Trinidad-born Neil Bissoondath insists that he does not wish to be known as a “hyphenated Canadian,” preferring instead to be called a “Canadian author” (Sankar 7). Here, the designation “Canadian” is one that displays a “multicultural” resonance, which obviates the need for hyphenation. In the past, Bissoondath has been critical of the Canadian government’s multicultural policies.^{vi} However, in an interview with Aja Norgaard, he argues that “Canadian” national identification has now moved beyond being placed in a “pigeon-hole” to include “all kinds of spheres,” and it is “because of that

variety” that he “accept[s] the label” (3). Significantly, Bissoondath considers being termed a Canadian writer to actually be the same as calling himself a “global writer” (Norgaard 3). The ability to equate “Canadian” with “global” once more foregrounds the multicultural aspect of Canadian identification. It is reasonable to suggest that this reflects the international success of the work of non-Canadian born authors, and the way in which it is currently being accepted into the “mainstream” of canonical Canadian literature.

There are an increasing number of people, who, like Bissoondath, believe that “individuals should have the freedom – from the culture and circumstances into which they were born – to shape themselves in the image and likeness of their choice” (Sankar 7). It is this type of freedom that enables Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan-Canadian, to write what he considers to be “Canadian novels set exclusively in Sri Lanka” (Cooperman 8). In an interview with Liza Cooperman, he explains that the appellations “Sri Lankan,” “Canadian,” or “Sri Lankan-Canadian” do not fully express where his “writing identity” comes from; indeed, it is not “‘Sri Lankan’ or ‘Canadian’ but precisely from the space in between” (8). Selvadurai is similar to many other contemporary Canadian authors who have varied cultural backgrounds, in that he finds his creativity springs from the internal dialectic between the different cultures that shape his identity. For authors such as Selvadurai, this “space-in-between”, which is “represented by the hyphen,” is intrinsic to the way in which their writing is produced (Cooperman 8). Selvadurai illustrates this concept very clearly when he describes how the different parts of his identity “jostle and rub up against each other like tectonic plates, pushing up towards the eruption that is [his] work” (Cooperman 8). Thus, taking Selvadurai as a

case in point, while a novel may be set exclusively in Sri Lanka, the way in which the content is moulded – through the inclusion of a theme such as feminism, for example – may be drawn from the life he lives in Canada. Of course, feminism is not an exclusively Canadian theme, but the point is that a writer's work is often influenced concomitantly by his or her cultural and ethnic roots and by the societies in which he or she lives. As Selvaduri argues: "while my material might be Sri Lankan, my thoughts and attitudes, indeed my craft as a writer, have been shaped by my life here in Canada" (Cooperman 8). In this way, the conjunctions and disjunctions of Selvaduri's bicultural identification can be seen to be inscribed within the text.

An increasing number of Canadian novels, by authors of mixed cultural backgrounds, reflect this type of complexity. According to Jordan Stouck, "contemporary Canadian writers are creating a new kind of fiction based on multicultural realities, on mingled homes and migrancy" (1). Clearly migration is not a modern phenomenon; however, as Damian Tambini explains, "it now occurs in a new context: unlike previous generations, migrants are media literate and able to bring their culture with them" (199). Factors such as the advance of the technological age, greater access to travel, and the growth of the "global" economy, can be seen to be making their mark on contemporary cultural production. This is reflected in Coral Ann Howells' monograph on contemporary Canadian women's fiction, published in 2003, the subtitle of which, *Refiguring Identities*, is, in itself, a comment on what is now happening. In her introduction, Howells speaks of the "significant changes that have taken place in Canada's literary profile since the early 1990's" (1); furthermore, she asserts that today's writers "share in the enterprise of telling stories that

recognize the differences concealed within constructions of identity in contemporary multicultural Canada" (2). Arguably, therefore, the cultural context of these novels and the material conditions that have inevitably influenced and affected their production, are of great significance in gaining an insight into the way they represent identification in terms of national affiliation.

Howells rightly draws attention to the fact that over the past decade or so, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* has been "a major factor for making Canadians and non-Canadians think again about what being Canadian means" (*Contemporary* 1). Indeed, as she points out, the "traditional image of 'white' Canada" is actually quite outdated, because the "concept of Canadianness" has changed (*Contemporary* 1). Stephen Henighan also comments on this change in perception in his criticism of the novel *Fugitive Pieces*, when he assesses its popularity in the mid-1990s as being due to a "slide away from nationalism into a yearning for cosmopolitanism" (147). These societal changes are undoubtedly being reflected in the contemporary cultural production of Canada; in the current milieu, therefore, it is unsurprising that they are reflected in the literary discourse which ensues.

The evidence of these changes has given rise to growing critical interest. For example, in 2002 *The Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* published a special issue entitled *A Canadian Post/national*, which specifically addresses some of the issues involved. In the introduction to this volume, Jordan Stouck asserts that "in the new fiction, Canadian nationalism has little presence" ("Introduction" 1). She detects a desire among Canadian authors to establish a sense of national identification,

“without adopting the limitations of nationalism and traditional concepts of identity” (“Introduction” 3). Keefer describes the present situation as one in which a Canadian writer can write about “Bombay, Sri Lanka, Trinidad . . . and still be intensely Canadian” (105). It is this paradigm shift within English-Canadian literature, from a previously “Canadian” national focus towards a diverse, multicultural and indeed “transnational” representation, which in Jonathan Kertzer’s words is now *Worrying the Nation*^{vii}. Stouck observes that in the past

Canadian literature and criticism has historically been characterized by two contradictory impulses: one towards asserting a unifying national identity, something like an *idée fixe* about what it means to be Canadian, and another towards the preservation of diversity. (“Introduction” 1)

It now appears that literature in Canada is entering another phase that embraces both of these impulses, through novels that offer “new and highly suggestive models of identity” (“Introduction” 1).

There are, of course, those who bemoan the fact that these changes are taking place within Canadian fiction and question the underlying reasons for them. Henighan considers “the rash of Canadian novels with non-Canadian settings” to be “evidence of the middle class’s need to transform itself in order to ‘belong’ to the evanescent globalized world while still clinging to a certain residual imagined community” (178). Furthermore, for Henighan “if you live in Canada, globalization means Americanization” (134), thus revealing an anxiety over American cultural hegemony as a fundamental cause of the changes that are taking place.

Henighan sees the 1990's onwards, in Canada, as being "a time of wrenching cultural change, even of collective trauma," and he denounces Canadian novelists for having responded to this "annihilation of our intimate selves . . . with averted eyes" (137). His controversial book *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing*, provoked a great deal of debate when it was published in 2002 and therefore bears some further examination here. This polemical attack suggests that commercial pressures, combined with the power of the major publishing houses and the instigation of the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, have resulted in a "self-negating literature" (156), which he disparagingly terms as "Free Trade Fiction" (133). Henighan berates two particularly successful Canadian writers, Michael Ondaatje and Anne Michaels, for producing this type of novel. Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is described by Henighan as eradicating "the particularities of Canadian history in favour of a continentalist vision" (144). He accuses Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* of assuring "a Canadian bourgeoisie in the midst of relinquishing its national culture of that culture's triviality, promising that cultural weight resides elsewhere" (150-151).

Henighan analyses these novels as being representative of "the reshaping of the Canadian English-language novel" (146), following the "aftermath of the passage of the Free Trade Agreement" (144). In his opinion, "as the ship of Canadian identity sank, ethnic belonging bobbed to the surface for many as the most convenient spar to cling to" (144). Shane Neilson comments of this quote, that "some would argue that the ship of Canadian identity never set sail"; furthermore, he points out that Henighan provides little

or no evidence to support his argument that NAFTA has had “the cataclysmal, racinating, stultifying effect” which he maintains it has had (7).

Henighan is clearly successful in his intention to be controversial, and his text has elicited some vehemently oppositional responses. However, there is general agreement on the part of his critics that the focus of English-Canadian literature has undergone some profound changes since the 1990’s, and has indeed become more “globalised” and “cosmopolitan” in content. Aida Edemariam acknowledges that Henighan has a point regarding issues of commercialisation and change, but argues that he “does not take into account that the works he attacks . . . reflect Canadian reality,” not least because “Canadians believe they are participating in a new culture” (25). “Reading a novel about a faraway place *written by a Canadian*” may, as Henighan suggests, represent “a last tenuous homage to a disappearing self” for the Canadian reader, but the fact remains that national identity continues to be a vital factor with regard to the contemporary fiction being produced in Canada (178).

Jordan Stouck considers the possibility that Pico Iyer may be right when he suggests that Canadian literature may have “arrived at a new, transnational identity which can be a model for the world” (“Introduction” 3). The Canadian novels that provide the focus for this thesis certainly reflect a concern with the notion of a “transnational” form of identification. The settings for the narratives include the fictional and the “foreign” and yet Canada remains an undeniable presence within all of them. To read “transnationally” makes it possible to read Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* as Canadian literature, despite that fact that Canada “is only mentioned in

passing in Mootoo's novel" (Moss 6-7).^{viii} Almost all of Martel's *Life of Pi* takes place adrift in the ocean; however, Canada provides a figurative trope of "the promised land" that again enables the text to be read as Canadian literature. The same is true of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, a novel which spans the Atlantic in its setting and yet positions Canada as a "Way Station," a place of refuge and healing for the central protagonists.^{ix} Moreover, while Alexis' *Childhood* is set wholly in Canada, the central premise is one of a search for emotional roots that crosses ethnic, racial and national boundaries, thus broadening its Canadian geographical frame of reference to encompass a "transnational" space.

Howells suggests that this type of fiction requires

a refiguring of the whole design of tradition, where borders shift between centers and margins and where writers might be positioned 'in between' or across boundaries in a more mobile figuration of Canadian literature that recognizes the diverse range of ways of being and writing Canadian. (22)

Padolsky also identifies an urgent need to develop a "cross-cultural and pluralistic approach to Canadian literature" (25). In order to examine these novels more fully, therefore, this thesis adopts a "transnational" perspective in relation to the concept of Canadian identification. It is important to point out at this juncture that what is being proposed here does not purport to be a transnational "theory" of literature as such, in as much as it is not an attempt to create a system of commonly applicable rules, nor does it aim to establish universal elements that are apposite to this particular genre of Canadian writing. Rather, what is being put forward is a transnational conceptual matrix,

which provides a means of examining the exertion of national influences on the discourse of identification, as revealed through the work of these contemporary Canadian authors.

The analysis of contemporary fiction increasingly reflects the difficulties and challenges of theorising the way in which “national” identity and “nationality” are represented in narrative. Where postcolonial thinking is predicated on notions of dominant and subservient cultures, a transnational perspective is concerned with revealing the parameters of national formations. It examines areas of disjunction and liminality through an approach to area studies that does not privilege one over another; instead it deconstructs national identification whilst concomitantly acknowledging its power and influence. The suggestion is that the desire for identification within a community remains of great importance, and that there is a continued impetus and pressure towards cultural hegemony – however, there is also the recognition that traditional identities are increasingly being affected by the transgression of boundaries and the forces of difference.

Undoubtedly, much of the transnational analysis undertaken in this study could be subsumed under the rubric of a variety of postcolonialisms. However, as has already been discussed, a postcolonial positioning of these texts may result in a universalising of difference, where a transnational perspective enables an exploration of the local and particular in relation to the global, whilst concomitantly recognising the interrelationship between both. Furthermore, a postcolonial approach has an inherent tendency towards positioning a text within an imperial, or indeed, historicist context: the analysis of the novels under examination would be limited by being situated in this

way, as they challenge traditional notions of linear time and boundaries of time and space. As Padolsky argues, the growing diversity of Canadian literature “makes these traditional approaches less and less adequate in providing a general literary critical framework” (25). Therefore, the transnational approach adopted here aims to more fully take account of the fact that Canadian literature emerges from, and exists in “a multi-ethnic society in which various groups tend to be ‘inter-dependent’, and yet, reflect culturally specific concerns” (Padolsky 25).

As I have argued elsewhere, a transnational perspective “situates itself at the intersection of boundaries” (Cook, “A Spectre” 105). Moreover, “it occupies a position that does not so much transcend lines of demarcation, as reflect the ideological and cultural constructions of national, individual and group identity, from the point at which these formations both converge and diverge” (Cook, “A Spectre” 105). In doing so it draws partially on the field of social science, which although not wholly aligned with the issues involved in literary studies, theories and criticism, does serve to shed some light on the developments that are taking place. Winfried Siemerling considers the possibilities of this type of interdisciplinary discourse in his examination of some of the effects of globalisation and “ethnic revival” on Canadian literature (3). He concurs with the generally accepted opinion that literary studies has much to gain from the inquiries of social scientists, regarding “both the changing composition of the groups to which belong the participants in the overall ‘literary communication’ and the ever-different roles that specific categories come to play in socially mediated processes of identification” (2-3). The process of globalisation creates frictions and difficulties, paradoxes and

ambiguities through the crossing of borders, and it is these disjunctions and ambiguities that are the focus of this approach.

Globalisation and Transnational Identification.

Sociologists such as Anthony Smith and Ralph Grillo are concerned with the way in which “‘global homogenization’ . . . is matched by a powerful revival of ‘ethnicity’” (Grillo 230). Smith argues that one of the reasons for this is that the concept of a “‘global culture’ represents a contradiction in terms” because it would, by definition, be essentially “memoryless and presentist, or simply a *mélange* and pastiche of other rooted and specific cultures” (261). According to Smith, no culture can flourish without “collective memories and traditions, neither can cultural identities and communities exist without their distinctive symbolic codes” (*Myths* 261). Furthermore, he believes a “pastiche culture” could not “withstand its own disintegrative tendencies” (261). As a consequence, Smith argues that national identity and ethnicity remain “a most important, if contested” factor (*Myths* 261). Montserrat Guibernau also contends that “the present revival of ethnicity responds to a need for identity, . . . of a local, rather than a global, character” (131); for Guibernau, “cultures interpret the world and create meaning, thus providing individuals with a sense of identity” (131). Paradoxically then, as globalisation increases, so too does the individual’s desire for national identification, and this phenomenon can be seen to be reflected within the novels under examination in this thesis.

The dialectic between the “local” and the “global” is particularly relevant for those whose personal identification encompasses more than one nation or culture. Is it possible that for these people, there may be “viable identity

formations that are both collective and not limited by the exclusivity of nation-state formations?" (Miki 96). Stuart Hall considers just such a possibility in his article "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference". Hall argues that there is now "a new conception of our identities" which has "not lost hold of the place and the ground from which we speak," yet is "no longer contained within that place as essence" ("Ethnicity" 20). For Hall, the "new ethnicities" are "neither locked into the past nor able to forget the past. Neither all the same nor entirely different. Identity *and* difference. It is a new settlement between identity and difference" ("Ethnicity" 20, original italics). These "new ethnicities" may be construed as occupying what Homi K. Bhabha terms as "that Third Space" which "though unrepresentable in itself . . . constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity," so that "even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (*Location* 37). This, then, is a liminal space and by exploring it, "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" (Bhabha, *Location* 39). As Bhabha argues, this is "the world of transnational relations that we are poised to occupy" ("Unpacking" 204). Bhabha's "Third Space" could be said to be inhabited by people who are "carriers of a 'transnational culture', not confined to a single nation or state" (Grillo 231). The fictional representation of this type of person is very pertinent to the issues of identity that are being explored in this study.

Clearly, globalisation and migration have facilitated the growth of cultural hybridity and syncretism and this has resulted, to a degree, in what is now frequently referred to as "postnationalism". According to Jean Chrétien,

in a speech made at the start of the new millennium, "Canada has become a post-national, multicultural society". Indeed, the expression "postnational" is one that is increasingly being used with regard to Canada, perhaps because it appears to discount the boundaries and divisions of both individual and collective ethnic identity. The implication of using such terminology is that Canada has in some way outgrown its settler-invader origins, to become, as Besner puts it, "something variously and plurally postnation" (44). Some critics are now putting forward the concept of a "postnational technopolis", or "global village", in which "nation" is rendered obsolete (Kertzer 164 -166).^x What is of relevance here is that the term "postnational" is sometimes used in conjunction with, and even interchangeably with, "transnational" with regard to contemporary cultural production.^{xi}

It is apposite in this regard, therefore, to briefly examine the choice of the term "transnational", as opposed to "postnational" or "international" for example, in the approach taken for this dissertation. One of the foremost factors in avoiding the use of "postnational" is that of the prefix "post", which means that the label is predicated along lines of temporality, as with every other "post-discourse". In addition, while theory may claim that "nation" is no longer a viable conceptual tool, as far as this dissertation is concerned, it remains a discursive necessity. This stance is supported by Kertzer's monograph, *Worrying the Nation*, which provides a convincing argument for the case that the concept of nation continues to be of relevance in Canadian literature (162-167).

Spivak is one of the most influential postcolonial theorists of the present day, and she is unconvinced by arguments regarding the

disappearance of the nation-state, and forcefully declares the notion of “postnationalism” to be “Northern radical chic” (*Critique* 375). Instead, she speaks of the need for “mind-changing”, in order to achieve “that impossible, undivided world of which one must dream” (*Critique* 382-383). Spivak once famously asked “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In her recent discussion of the exigencies of globalisation, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, she now insists that in order to be heard, the subaltern must become “transnationally literate” (378). Shyamal Bagchee suggests that Spivak’s book highlights the point that “much can be achieved in and through the study of literature, or through *literary* methods of analysis” (3, original italics). Evidently literature and literary analysis provide a unique opportunity for developing new ways of understanding how, in this age of globalisation, the idea of nation continues to be a defining condition of modernity. Bagchee accurately interprets Spivak as maintaining that reading literature provides “an invaluable training in cultivating the imaginative sympathy essential to a transnationally literate person” (3).

The definition of “transnational” is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers; multinational”; it can, therefore, be seen to denote the impetus of this perspective regarding national identification. The aptitude of the term is further underlined by Stephens, when she makes a useful distinction between “internationalism” – which aims to “bring nations together” – and “transnationalism”, which “seeks to go beyond the nation form itself” (607). The prefix “trans” has its etymological roots in the Latin for “across, to or on the farther side of, beyond, over” (OED). It is often used with regard to

geographical elements, being combined with adjectives such as, “transatlantic”, “transpolar”, “transcontinental”. Its chief uses also include “from one place, person, thing, or state to another”; examples here include: “translate”, “transmute”, “transform”, “transcendental”, “transfer”, “transport”. Therefore, when the prefix is combined with “national”, it can be seen to not only connote movement beyond physical, geographical boundaries, but also the instability, uncertainty and change involved in problematising these boundaries, thus making it singularly pertinent to this perspective.

The term “transnational” has been accorded certain negative connotations particularly in relation to its association with global corporations and capitalism. As Smith points out, “the great transnational companies with their huge budgets, armies of skilled personnel, massive investments, far-flung markets and advanced technologies” are “the main carriers of capitalist modernity. Their dominant position and preponderance over all but the largest states represents a new stage of capitalism” and the notion of a “new imperialism” (*Nations* 16) The power that such vast transnational companies wield, the accompanying culture of mass-consumerism, and the possibility of cultural homogenisation, is seen by many as a cause for concern. There is, therefore, an associated negativity with the term “transnational,” which accurately reflects some of the frictions and difficulties, paradoxes and ambiguities, revealed through this approach.

Moreover, Grillo argues that the term “transnational” is an appropriate category of identification in the twenty-first century and agrees with Prina Werbner when she suggests that for “transnationals”, “loyalties are anchored in translocal social networks and cultural diasporas rather than the global

ecumene” (12).^{xi} According to Robert Gross, there is now a need for “transnational thinking” (384), in a world where “intellectually, people cross borders as they please” (390); he describes a global culture that becomes “increasingly a transnational *mélange*” (392). Paul Giles also suggests that a transnational theoretical approach is necessary for twenty-first century area studies for which the “most challenging features” are “the relinquishment of bounded space; the gradual emptying out of national identity; the conflict between local and global; and the multiplicity of languages” (“Trans-Atlantique” 24). The ability to address these features renders a transnational approach particularly apposite to the literature under scrutiny in this study.

Scholars working in other national literary fields, such as English and American literature, are now also concerned with “transnational” issues. For example, Stephen Greenblatt wrote in 2001 that “English literary history . . . has ceased to be principally about the fate of the nation; it is a global phenomenon” (53). Similarly, Giles suggests that

American literature should be seen as no longer bound to the inner workings of any particular country or imagined organic community but instead as interwoven systematically with traversals between national territory and intercontinental space (“Transnationalism” 63).

Given models of transnational subjectivities and economies, it may indeed be possible to conceptualize a “transnational literature” – that is, a literature that is not housed in a single national language or national identity – whilst at the same time recognizing the significance of nation with regard to that literature. Clearly, the very nature of the concept “transnational” is one that defies

ascription to any one national culture, thus there is evidently latitude for its application in the area of Canadian literature.

It has already been established that a transnational perspective is expressly suited to the field of Canadian fiction. There are several reasons for this, not least of which is the bilingual and bicultural foundation of Canada as a nation-state. Moreover, as Jonathan Kertzer argues, "Canadians have continually tested the limits of pluralism in order to secure a more permissive form of nationality, which would allow for regional and ethnic disparities yet also offer a practical cohesiveness to the country" (198). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the work of contemporary Canadian writers reflects both these disparities and this cohesiveness. Mukherjee emphatically claims that

ethnic minority texts inform their readers, through the presence of other languages, as well as a whole repertoire of cultural signs, about the multicultural and multilingual nature of Canadian society. The texts affirm and celebrate the cultures they represent . . . These texts help us see how ethnicity, language and culture are intertwined. (*Postcolonialism* 102)

A transnational approach becomes a particularly useful heuristic tool, where languages other than English are used within English-Canadian fiction. The novels that are the subject of this thesis have, to a greater or lesser degree, some element of the "multilingual," in that they include non-English words and phrases that are not always translated for the reader. It is interesting to note that this is increasingly evident in the penultimate and final novels, bearing in mind that the sequence of the novels charts a movement towards Canada.^{xiii}

These texts are not “universal” insofar as they appear to refuse transparent access by creating gaps in comprehension, and requiring a specific type of hermeneutic effort from the reader. Mukherjee explains that for Canadians, the “linguistic texture of such works is closer to our lived experience of a multicultural and multilingual world where the sound and rhythm of other languages routinely reaches us without our fully decoding them” (*Postcolonialism* 103). There has been criticism of “postcolonial” writers for “mixing their English with their native tongue”, the suggestion being that “the untranslated words create a barrier between the reader and the text” (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 98). However, from a transnational perspective this admixture of languages signifies the retention of cultural heritage – a moving across and between cultures – and as such, provides a reflection of the “reality of a multilingual, multicultural earth” – as well as the syncretism that occurs when people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds come together (Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism* 98).

The broad overview given here has shown that Canadian literature is “a discourse that moves beyond the post-colonial literature of resistance, and inscribes a process of dislocation and displacement, which requires interrogation from a new perspective” (Cook, “From” 32). There is no doubt that the field of postcolonial studies has grown rapidly in the last few years and has acquired “a certain institutional cachet” (Seshadri-Crooks 4). However, as Ashcroft notes, “there has hardly been a more hotly contested term in contemporary theoretical discourse” (*On* 7). This chapter has demonstrated that “post-colonialism means many things and embraces a dizzying array of critical practices” (Ashcroft, *On* 7), but remains problematic

with regard to the work of the “hyphenated Canadian” authors under examination here.

Redekop finds there to be a “delicious irony in the fact that Canada’s dubious ontological status has found a reflection in other literatures of the postcolonial world and given Canada an international presence” (274). This international presence has been further enhanced by the recent success of authors such as Michael Ondaatje and Yann Martel. The “mainstream” popularity of writers like these, who have Canadian national identity and yet are of multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds, challenges the marginalizing of fiction that would once have been categorised as “immigrant writing”. Canada is “a nation that welcomes creative invasion” because of its “openness to new constructions, [and] the provisional nature of those constructions (Redekop 274) – it is this type of “creative invasion” that has led to the “new kind of fiction based on multicultural realities” (“Introduction” 1) that is the focus of this thesis.

In terms of critical analysis, the multicultural contours of these texts are of great significance. Indeed, as Misrahi-Barak points out, the fact that they “straddle several cultures and backgrounds at once cannot escape the notice of even the most cursory reader” (43). Therefore, an interpretive methodology is required that allows critics to consider fully the intertwined, interdependent and disparate nature of the material. Migrant writers “blur frontiers and boundaries” in their fiction, and in doing so, they “show the way to the definition of self that, like their writing, can only be paradoxical and multiple” (Misrahi-Barak 51). A transnational framework presents a “pluralistic approach to majority and minority writing in Canada”, which Padolsky maintains “offers a

much needed and highly promising perspective on Canadian literature” (38). Furthermore, this type of methodology is “simply more complete, offering a more comprehensive view of how the diversity and complexity of Canadian society and culture are reflected in Canadian literature” (Padolsky 38).

It is clear that the type of fiction that is emerging within English-Canadian literature at the present time requires a theoretical response that is able to facilitate its analysis and interpretation as fully as possible. Of course, any attempt to apply a theoretical model to a text may be considered, of itself, a neo-colonial action, in that it imposes a particular set of ideas in order to deconstruct the narrative. By its very nature, to embark on literary criticism is to enter into a system of power, where the narrative is placed as “the Other” – “virgin territory” that must be conquered, mapped and understood – in order for it to be subsumed within the “Self” of an established literary canon. What is needed, as Satya Mohanty argues very convincingly, is a “discursive and epistemic relationship that will be ‘non-colonizing’” and will, therefore, allow for “a mutual exploration of difference” (109).

Obviously, achieving such a relationship is no straightforward matter. As Roy Miki points out in his discussion of the study of Canadian literature and culture, “disciplinary positioning, and declarations of neutrality and objectivity, are no longer – and never really were – a guarantee that the effects of our research will not feed into hierarchic relations of power” (97). What is more, Mohanty acknowledges that “a simple inversion of the relationship of hierarchy is not enough” because – particularly in the case of Canada – the coloniser-colonised relationship is “necessarily complicated and multiply determined” (110). Above all, it is vital to recognise that critical

analysis is subject to the contingencies of location, in order for it to be possible to “envision more malleable methods to negotiate the intellectual and social shifts” that are occurring (Miki 97). Attention must be paid, therefore, to the complex dimensions of knowledge production and consumption that are inherent within the work of critical analysis. The adoption of a transnational critical perspective in this thesis, acknowledges these complexities, and allows the interpellation of power structures that can neither be ignored nor avoided.

Chantal Mouffe considers that it is important for “the construction of democratic identities to have a framework that allows us to think of difference as being the condition of both possibility and impossibility to create unity and totality” (112). A transnational framework presents the opportunity for abandoning “the dangerous illusion of a possible resumption of otherness in a unified and harmonious whole, and to admit that the other and its otherness are irreducible” (Mouffe 112). Bauman suggests that at the present time there is “an almost universal agreement” in intellectual circles that “difference is good, precious and in need of protection and cultivation” (55). The transnational critical approach posited here does not universalise difference, nor does it merely recognise difference. Rather, it confronts differences and disjunctions, and acknowledges their potential as a site of creativity. Moreover, it envisions the modern conceptualisation of nations as “imagined communities,”^{xiv} as one that “complicates stable positions of here and there as well as who and how one belongs” (Macpherson, “Canadian” 20).

Canada and contemporary English-Canadian fiction provide a demonstrably appropriate context for this thesis. Kertzer endorses Canadian

literature as a fitting topic for investigation with regard to current concerns surrounding nation and national identity. In his view, “if the nation is a fractured, contested public space, then so much the better for literary critics” (195). He goes on to stress the importance of “studying how nation is imagined: how it defines a body of writing as national; how it informs and validates that literature” (195). This dissertation engages with these issues, through a transnational conceptual matrix, which enables the investigation of the “multiple” and “fluid” cultural identities that are made manifest in these novels. Hall argues that “the future belongs to those who are ready to take in a bit of the other, as well as being what they themselves are” (“Subjects” 299) – the future, it would seem, will belong to those who are transnational.

ⁱ Hans Kohn is credited with crystallising the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism. See *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background*. Ernest Gellner also employs this differentiation in his work on nationalism, see *Nations and Nationalism: New Perspectives on the Past*.

ⁱⁱ See Arun Mukherjee, "First World Readers, Third World Texts: Some Thoughts about Theory and Pedagogy" (*Postcolonialism*) for an in-depth discussion of pedagogy and postcolonial theory.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Helen Hoy's *How Should I Read These?* examines texts by Native-Canadian women writers.

^{iv} See Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*, in which Root expands on the work of Indigenous critic Jack Forbes. For further discussion of the concept in this thesis, see *Life of Pi* chapter, page 115.

^v It is noteworthy that Jars Balan's discussion of "Ukrainian influences in George Ryga's *Work*" stands alone as a piece of critical analysis, although Ryga himself denies the importance of his ethnicity in relation to his writing.

^{vi} See Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. This book was highly controversial when it was published in 1994. It generated sufficient debate to warrant an updated and revised version, published in 2002.

^{vii} Jonathan Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada*, addresses some of the issues surrounding the idea of nation as a viable literary category and the use of literary history in the project of nation-building.

^{viii} The notion of reading *Cereus Blooms at Night* as Canadian literature receives further exploration in the chapter that focuses on this novel.

^{ix} See chapter on *Fugitive Pieces* (page 140) for a detailed discussion of Canada as "Way Station".

^x This is clearly a relevant topic, and although arguments as to whether or not Canada is "post-national" are largely outside the remit of this thesis, the subject is touched upon in the chapter on *Life of Pi*.

^{xi} For example, see Frank Davey's monograph, *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*.

^{xii} Pnina Werbner provides a useful overview of current thinking by leading European sociologists and anthropologists regarding "Transnationalism," culture and hybridity. See "Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity". *Debating Cultural Hybridity Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*.

^{xiii} The multilingual nature of *Fugitive Pieces* and *Childhood* are dealt with more explicitly, from a transnational perspective, in the chapters pertaining to each of the novels.

^{xiv} Benedict Anderson has contributed a great deal to the concept of "nation" and "nationalism" as a construct. In his seminal text, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, he describes nations as "imagined communities" because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6).

CHAPTER TWO

***Cereus Blooms at Night* – Shani Mootoo**

The texts under scrutiny in this thesis explore the possibility of moving beyond the constructed boundaries of the Canadian nation and nationality, into a transnational space – where multi-layered identities exist within the paradox of the “one in many, of the place of non-place, of a global parochialism” (Werbner 119). This dissertation concerns itself with “how the nation is imagined: how it defines a body of writing as national; [and] how it informs and validates that literature” (Kertzer 195). The novels dealt with here are shown to be a part of the changing profile of literary English-Canadian production, by writers “whose voices challenge the traditional definitions of what being Canadian means and what constitutes Canadian literature” (Howells 10).

This examination of a selection of contemporary Canadian fiction, from a transnational perspective, commences with Shani Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*. The location of the novels concerned acts as the organising principle for this thesis, in its exploration of the relationship between nation and literature. The sequence in which the four novels are considered is that of a movement towards Canada, and it is therefore appropriate to begin with *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which is set on the fictive Caribbean island of Lantanacamara. In fact, the novel itself only mentions Canada very briefly at the end. Howells accurately suggests that Mootoo’s text constructs an “ambitious narrative agenda that begins by implicitly questioning definitions of a ‘Canadian’ novel,” an agenda that is considered here to reflect the changes currently taking place in Canadian literature (148).

It has already been made clear that current trends in contemporary Canadian fiction are towards settings that are not confined to Canada's national borders. It is important, therefore, to explore further Howells' argument that Canada is "located outside the text" in *Cereus*, thus displacing "territoriality as the marker of Canadian identity" (148). According to Kertzer, the displacement of Canada within Canadian fiction is part of Canada's "riddle of national identity" (139), in which "ethnicity both relies on and disrupts nationality" (142). Paradoxically, for a multicultural society such as Canada, "ethnicity is the ground of nationality, yet in the course of history it deterritorializes its native ground" (Kertzer 143). The "dislocation" of Canada with regard to the setting of *Cereus*, may be seen, therefore, as an indication of "the multiple cultural affiliations that are figured within Canadianness" (Howells 148). Mootoo's novel suggests that there are new answers to Kertzer's question, when he asks "what makes a story Canadian?" (134).

It may well be the case that one of the answers to this question lies in a "transnational" conceptualisation of what it is to be "Canadian" in terms of literature. This concept sees transnational identification as an ongoing process, existing here within the framework of Canadian national identity. A. B. McKillop advises that "a more fruitful way of conceiving of an 'identity' for Canada is by expanding the term to incorporate within it the potential for contradiction, diversity, and paradox" (6). Thus, by "expanding" the notion of "Canadian" using a transnational perspective, *Cereus Blooms at Night* reflects the conflicts and disjunctions that occur as a result of Canada's diverse ethnic and cultural construction. Indeed, Kertzer suggests that national identity in Canada tries to "secure a workable coherence for the country without

imposing homogeneity or hypostasising a national essence" (197). Drawing on this notion, therefore, a transnational reading of *Cereus* as a "Canadian" text allows coherence, whilst at the same time moving beyond Canada's traditional borders. The principal focus of this chapter is encapsulated in McClintock's statement that "all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender" (353). In order to facilitate this examination of Mootoo's representation of Canada more fully, it is divided into three main sections: "Gender and the Nation-State", which looks at the role of transvestism in the novel; "Family and the Nation-State", which explores the way in which the novel questions accepted familial functions; "Subverting the Coloniser/Colonised Boundary", looks at the difficulties that arise when identification occupies the liminal space between coloniser and colonised.

Gender and the Nation-State

Kamboureli argues that in Canada, "the cohesive nation of the present has moved beyond a genetic sense of national kinship; instead it depends on – in fact it celebrates – the politics of difference. It is, technically, a transcultural nation, a nation at once of 'heritage groups,' indigenous peoples, and many diasporas" ("National" 52). The text of *Cereus* offers a metaphorical representation of this transcultural reality by challenging traditional gender constructions and thus "fixed" notions of individual and collective national identity. As Amy Gutmann rightly states, "individual identity is partly constituted by collective dialogues" (7). Indeed, human identification is not formed in isolation but, as Charles Taylor confirms, is negotiated dialogically in relation with others (34).¹ Culture, from this perspective, becomes a

fundamental part of the construction of human identity. The novel is seen to reflect the construction of individual and collective identity with regard to Canada. It moves beyond the gendered binaries of nation and state, and in doing so, disrupts these boundaries and exposes the difficulties and disjunctions of living with the contradictions and paradoxes that ensue.

The narrator of the novel, Tyler, occupies a liminal position in society as the only male nurse on the island of Lantanacamara. He is a homosexual transvestite who works in the Paradise Alms House, a rest home, where he is the sole caretaker for Mala Ramchandin. Tyler forms an empathetic bond with Mala, who is an elderly woman driven insane through childhood abuse, and it is Mala's past life that provides the central theme for the narrative. Through Mala, Tyler meets Otoh, the "son" of Mala's childhood friend, who, although born a girl, has convinced everyone that she is, in fact, a boy. Tyler and Otoh fall in love and begin a romance that defies the labels of heterosexuality or homosexuality. This transgression of traditional demarcations of gender and sexuality marks the novel as a site of contestation and renegotiation of identity, which is read here as being based on interchanges of transnational individuality.

In order to begin to examine *Cereus Blooms at Night* in the light of this fluid understanding of collective and individual identification, it is necessary first to establish the association between nation, state, and gender constructions and sexuality. Lenore Lyons argues that "nations, along with their citizen-subjects, are not only gendered but also sexualised" (79). The concept of nation has been the subject of scrutiny for some time, and texts such as Anderson's *Imagined Communities* have contributed to a questioning

of essentialist attitudes, so that nationality can no longer be conceived of as a “given”. Anderson draws attention to essentialist understandings of both nationality and sex/gender when he notes that “in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender” (5). What is more, as Parker et al note, “nearly every aspect of Anderson’s account of the nation raises issues of gender and sexuality” (5). Current debates regarding sexuality, in contemporary sociological theory, focus on “the constructed character of gender” as their central premise (Butler x). Nationality, like gender, is constructed within a system of differences - both being defined in relation to that which they are not. McClintock argues that “nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*” (353, original italics). It is possible, therefore, to draw parallels between nationality and gender through their deconstruction as categories of identification within *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

Close analysis of the novel indicates that where national identification draws on gender and sexuality, it becomes subject to subversion. The theoretical arguments with regard to the association between nation, state and gender have generally centred on the dichotomous construction of biological gender; however, these binary oppositions are problematised in *Cereus*. The complex character of Tyler is a key factor in this regard, in that as a transvestite, he transgresses the boundary between male and female. “Not a man and not ever able to be a woman,” Tyler is “suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence” (83). Marjorie Garber comes to the very astute conclusion that “the transvestite is a sign of the category crisis of the immigrant, between nations, forced out of one role that

no longer fits . . . and into another role, that of a stranger in a strange land” (79). Indeed, Tyler stands as a metaphor for the stranger who occupies what Bhabha has termed as “that Third Space”, where “‘purity’ of cultures are untenable” and where, as he says, there is “no primordial unity or fixity” (*Location* 37). Kertzer confirms that, as a nation, Canada reflects this notion of a “third space”, in that nationhood in Canada provides “a site where meanings can be contested” (“Worrying” 199). Canadian national identity is ubiquitous in its pluralism and lack of fixity, because “it is too inchoate a site to be grasped in a single image” (Kertzer, “Worrying” 199). Canadians, Kertzer concludes, “live in the midst of a paradox”, and they are able to do so because it is their own paradox (“Worrying” 199). From a transnational perspective, therefore, Mootoo’s representations of complex and liminal modes of identification, which exceed traditional boundaries, offer a means by which the novel can be seen to reflect its context as Canadian fiction.

Butler, amongst many others, agrees that the idea of a whole, fixed and stable identity is an illusion – one that is contingent upon the function of power and the desire for agency, to ensure the continuation of dominant ideological identity practices that limit and define. She contends that the body is less “a ready surface awaiting signification”, than a “set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (44). It is when these boundaries are redrawn and the ideological structures displaced, that sex and gender are shown to be performative acts; and, conversely, when sex and gender are performed subversively, that seemingly “fixed” forms of identification – be they individual or collective – become fluid and shifting.

Mootoo utilises this performative aspect of sex and gender in the construction of her characters' identities in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. For example, Tyler indicates his inability to conform to traditional "fixed" forms of identification, when he describes the strong temptation he feels to play the "performer dying for the part" of the "romantic victim" (16). The performance of Tyler's biological gender as a male requires that he must "kill" his inclination to dress as a female. Yet in acknowledging his desire to be "victim" rather than "victor", Tyler can be seen to be assuming the very traits he avers to be required to reject. Here, Tyler can be seen to reflect the idea of Canada as "a marginal and defenceless victim"; a metaphor which, as Mackey argues, draws on "highly gendered images" and contributes to "the feminisation of nationhood" (9 -10). According to Berland, these kinds of gendered metaphors have "long been a staple of Canadian culture" (522). The "feminised Canadian," Berland argues, has been instrumental in the circulation of "fictions, metaphors, and interventions which render Canadian culture as closer to nature, aesthetically highbrow, non-violent, uncorrupted, committed to public good but powerless before the masculine figures of (external) authority" (523). Tyler longs for the part of the feminised victim and thus for identification with the nation, and yet, at the same time he is placed outside the nation by the requirement to exhibit masculine traits.

It is clearly not possible to argue for the complete concomitance of national and female subjectivities – not only because of the inherent dangers of this type of generalisation, but more particularly, because such identifications are shifting, unstable and contradictory in themselves. However, an extension of the metaphor of the "feminine nation", in the light of

traditional and essentialist notions of gender, places it in a position of being defined through its binary relationship to the masculine and patriarchal. The association between “nation” and traditional constructions of the female is coterminous with Connor’s argument that “the national bond is subconscious and emotional rather than conscious and rational in its inspiration” (“Beyond” 384). Here the concept of “nation” is identified as an abstract perception involving “feeling” and “intuition” (“A Nation” 379), qualities which are traditionally regarded as being aligned with the feminine. In contrast, Connor describes the “state” as “the major political subdivision of the globe,” which is “easily conceptualised in quantitative terms” and is both “tangible” and “territorial” in nature (“A Nation” 379). Here the “state” is connoted as corresponding to empirical traits such as “logic” and “rationality”, which have conventionally been associated with the masculine. Hence, a dialectic is set up between the “feminine nation” and the “masculine state”.

The alignment of the state with the masculine and authoritarian is exemplified by Max Weber’s use of the concepts of “patrimonialism” and “patriarchalism” to describe traditional forms of state government authorityⁱⁱ (347-348). Ralph Grillo draws on these concepts in his discussion of “Pluralism and the Patrimonial State” in the historical context of social anthropology (27-36). He refers to states from areas as geographically diverse as Africa, Mesoamerica and the Ottoman Empire and comments that “in the patrimonial state, ethnic and cultural difference did not, normally, pose any great difficulty so long as the groups which constituted the polity . . . paid their dues, literally and metaphorically” (216). The “patrimonial” state, then, may incorporate difference, in terms of the feminine nation in order to ensure

that its authority is upheld and maintained. In this respect, the state embodies a traditional paternalistic role, as head of the family members and occupier of the most powerful position in the hierarchy.

The emphasis on gender and sexualities in *Cereus* problematises traditional notions of the formation of identity based upon gender delineations that construe masculine logic and security – aligned here with the “state” – as “protecting” the feminine nation. Tyler acts as a masculine figure of authority in his protection of Mala and, as such, may be seen as the patriarchal state “protecting” the nation. It is Tyler who removes the straps that restrain Mala when she first enters the nursing home, and the staff there are aware that he is “protective of her” (25). However, he also performs in the role of the female, both in nursing and caring for Mala, and as the one who requires protection. Paradoxically, it is Mala who provides Tyler with this protection, simply by accepting him as he is and encouraging him to explore his femininity. For example, she steals a nurse’s uniform for him and encourages him to put on the “calf-length dress and the stockings” (82). Mala allows Tyler the freedom to reveal his identity as a transvestite, and thereby become a metaphor that articulates cultural contradiction, displacement and disjunction.

This is particularly relevant with regard to Canada in terms of the troubling of the interrelationship between female “nation” and masculine “state”. Kertzer points out that Canada does not conform to the modern ideal of the “composite ‘nation-state’ in which cultural and political forms correspond effortlessly” (6). Although “Nation-state” is a term frequently utilised, only around ten percent of those entities considered to be nation-states actually fulfil the denotative meaning of the term (Connor, “A Nation” 384). Indeed, as

Kertzer rightly argues, “the incongruity of the modern nation-state is especially clear” with regard to Canada (8). The conflation of the terms “nation” and “state” has already been addressed to some degree, and much of the debate surrounding gendered readings of nation and nationalism is party to the “interutilisation” of these terms.

Tyler’s lack of a distinct gender identity, may be seen to be reflected in Canada’s lack of a defined national cultural identity. In turn, it is possible that such a lack of national identity de-stabilises the relationship between nation and state and this, as will become clear, is also reflected in *Cereus*. Anthony Marx points out that “when nationalism coincides with an existing state it provides legitimacy, spreading acceptance and support for the state’s claim to a monopoly of coercion. . . nationalism implies the ideal of a ‘nation-state’ in which mass allegiance and institutional power coincide” (7). With regard to Canada, however, the conflicts and difficulties between “mass-allegiance and institutional power” frequently serve to threaten the survival of the nation-state itself. According to Mackay, the State’s reaction has been to propose multiculturalism in response to “the threat of Québec separatism” and “demands for recognition by immigrants and other minorities,” in order to “construct a unified and distinct national identity to differentiate itself from the USA and Britain” (70). There are those, such as Kamboureli, who agree with Mackay in arguing that “multiculturalism” in Canada has become a tool in the project of nation-building, and whether or not this is the case, the fact remains that the relationship between “State” and “nation” in Canada continues to be troubled and problematic.

A transnational approach reveals that characters such as Tyler serve to expose the disjunctions and contradictions that occur in a pluralist society. Garber points out that “cross-dressing is about the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation”, and its representation in literature is a means of exposing such dislocation. The federal government of Canada legitimates the multiple ethnicity of the nation through “the state’s multiculturalism policy” (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 94). However, as Kamboureli points out, there is “a difference between multiculturalism as legislated by the state and multiculturalism as it operates within the state” (*Scandalous* 94-5). This difference is highlighted in the contemporary fiction being produced in Canada, in that novels such as *Cereus* demonstrate that the product of multiculturalism is not necessarily to incorporate difference, but may actually expose difference. The traditional patriarchal role of the state is challenged and transgressed in this regard, and this is reflected in the problematising of gender identification that Mootoo represents through Tyler and other characters, in her novel.

Tyler is, in fact, a paradox – peripheral to the events he relates and yet concomitantly central as the “I” who brings the narrative into being. Tyler claims that his intention is “not to bring notice to myself or my own plight” (3), but he then goes on to point out:

However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of events, I am bound to be present. I have my own laments and much to tell about myself. It is my intent however, to refrain from inserting myself too forcefully. Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the

understanding that to erase them would have been to do the same to myself. (3)

The pursuit of the “self”, the desire for identification, is one from which the “I” cannot escape, as to do so is to cease to exist. Tyler’s entry into the text, his “insertion”, is a metaphorical form of penetration – a sexual act of “re-production”, through which he is written into existence. By his own intervention, then, Mootoo portrays Tyler as inscribing himself onto Mala’s story. Thus, Tyler enters into “the discourse of recognition”, where the formation of identity and the self take place in “a continuing dialogue and struggle with significant others” (Taylor 37).

Charles Taylor discusses the way in which the “politics of equal recognition” has taken on a much bigger role in the public sphere in recent times (36-7). The desire to be recognised, to have equality of respect and value for different cultures, is of particular significance with regard to Canada. Taylor believes, with good reason, that it might be possible for multinational societies such as Canada to “break up, in large part because of a lack of (perceived) recognition of the equal worth of one group by another” (64). On the other hand, one of the problems of multiculturalism in Canada is, as has already been noted, the tendency towards an homogenisation of difference. Taylor, speaking as a Canadian, explains that “by implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same” (71). Through her narrator, Mootoo demonstrates that in spite of internal differences and contradictions, the desire of the individual, or indeed the nation, is to articulate and define an identity that is true to itself, and to authenticate that identity.

This desire can be seen in Tyler's assertion that "I am the one who ended up knowing the truth, the whole truth" and, furthermore, that he is the author of that truth in "recording it here" (7). His words resonate with the language used when swearing an oath in a court of law, and as a consequence points out the irony of his being witness to the events of Mala's life. The legal process had failed to bring any evidence against her for the murder of her father, and as a result "Mala Ramchandin was never tried in court" because her case was dismissed (7). In this respect, Tyler is positioned as a central figure in the narrative, thus subverting his role as the marginalised "outsider" (6). There are also connotations here of the Western Christian tradition, which places great emphasis on truth and equates it with God. This is encapsulated in Jesus' claim to be "The truth" (John 14.6). Christianity is a belief system that exalts the creative power of the word: "in the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God. . . all things were made through him" (John 1, 1-3). In the opening sentence of the novel, Tyler states his belief in "the power of the printed word". Hence, he can be seen to echo this precept of origination and may be understood as appropriating the creative power of the word. By ascribing notions of truth and creator to the black, transsexual Lanatanacamarian native, Mootoo is also problematising the patriarchal dominance of the state.

Howells notes that many of Mootoo's protagonists in the novel exhibit the "condition of always being 'in-between'" (159). Mala and Tyler find a "camaraderie" in their "shared queerness", which enables Tyler to come to terms with his liminal condition, and opens the way for him to form a relationship with the alluring Otoh (52). As a couple, Tyler and Otoh perform

their gender roles subversively and their relationship “enacts a kind of liberation from conventional sexual identity categories as old binaries are discarded” (Howells 160). As has already been mentioned, the relationship between Otoh and Tyler crosses and recrosses the boundaries of gender and sexuality. On the surface their relationship is normatively heterosexual, therefore, the crossing of gender boundaries in the text offers a deconstruction of such essentialist notions of nationality. Furthermore, the “transgression” of fixed delineations implicit in notions of “transgender” and “trans-sexuality” are interpreted here as being coterminous with a “transnational” perception of identification, particularly in terms of the novel’s Canadian context.

The character of Otoh is particularly important in this regard. Although Mootoo uses the masculine pronoun to describe Otoh, his is a liminal identity, in that he performs as a male, but was born a female. When he was five years old, Otoh’s parents “hardly noticed that their daughter was transforming herself into their son” (118), so much so, that eventually his mother “apparently forgot she had ever given birth to a girl” and his father “seemed not to remember he had fathered one” (118). What is more, “the transformation is flawless”, and the entire village, including those who had attended his birth, appear to believe him to be a male (118). As an adult, Otoh is “the object of desire of almost every Lantanacamaran woman, regardless of her age” and leaves a number of the men “shocked and annoyed by their own naggingly lascivious thoughts of him” (145). Thus, Otoh’s liminality crosses the expected boundaries of identification, and highlights the disjunctions that occur as a result.

Otoh subverts traditional divisions of age, gender and sexuality through a shifting process of identification that is also revealed through his name. Otoh begins life as Ambrosia, but changes his name to Ambrose when he transforms himself into a boy at the age of five. Eventually, his “ability to imagine many sides of a dilemma” of “weighing ‘on the one hand’ with ‘but on the other’” results in him being called Otoh-boto, and he finally assumes the nickname Otoh. Mootoo indicates that it is this propensity for a very heightened type of empathy that enables Otoh to be accepted as a male. This trait also enables him to cross temporal and spatial boundaries, so that he finds himself “being both mother and father to his own pappy” (155). Clearly, the complexity of the construction of Otoh’s identity offers a great deal of scope for interpretation in this regard, however, the focus here is in relation to national identification. The figure of Otoh encompasses the roles of mother, father and child, and therefore enacts difference within the collective and familial identification of nation.

Family and the Nation-State

According to McClintock, discussions regarding nation and national identity frequently centre on lexis from the semantic field of the familial and the domestic (357). Consider how people often refer to their country of origin as their “homeland”, speak of their “motherland” or “fatherland”, and describe their first language as being their “mother tongue”. Foreigners are often referred to as having “adopted” a new country and in Britain, for example, matters to do with immigration are dealt with by the “Home Office”. The Canadian parliament, like that of Britain, has a “*House of Commons*” and

historically in Canada the “relationship among nations . . . was represented in family terms” (New 27). The relationship between nation and gender may be identified in the etymological roots of the word ‘nation’, which stems from *natio*: to be born.

Ignatieff’s use of *Blood and Belonging* as the title of his book, which deals with the effects of ethnic and civic nationalisms, draws on the perception of nationality as signifying membership of a vast family. In his seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon comments that “there are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation” (141); parental authority and familial characteristics are reflected in and projected onto the social environment. The construction of nation manifestly exhibits the influences of traditionally gendered family relationships. Indeed, the eminent Canadian scholar, W. H. New, speaks of the “family tree model of Mother Country and Her Children” which “reaffirms as virtuous a kind of ‘protective’ political authority” (59). The concept of “motherland” or “fatherland” in terms of Canadian identification is particularly complex in this respect, in that it has two “founding” nations, France and Britain, an aboriginal population, and has multiculturalism written into its constitution. It is a settler-invader society and, as such, occupies the position of both “coloniser” and “colonised”. Thus, its colonial legacy leads New to describe himself as “a grandchild of Empire” (15), and combines with present day circumstances to produce a “national family” in which the roles are, at the very least, both conflicted and confused.

These problematic roles are reflected in the family life of Mala Ramchandin, who is the daughter of Chandin, the adopted son of the

Reverend Thoroughly. Tyler first encounters the family long before he assumes the role of carer to the elderly Mala, when he is about ten years old. Evoking the oral tradition of story-telling, Tyler learns of the Ramchandin family from his Cigarette Smoking Nana – a fleeting presence in the novel, who nevertheless is placed in opposition to the person Tyler describes as his Bible Quoting Nana, a woman he could not get close to as he was “not turning out to be boyly enough for her church-going satisfaction” (26). The conversation arises out of Tyler’s concern over categories of identification with regard to family relationships:

Could a nephew be the father of his uncle? . . . Or could a mother ever be any other relationship to her child? Could she be the father? . . . Could your sister be your brother too? Could your brother be your father? (26)

There are obvious concerns here with positionality within the family, and these are further compounded by the transgression of binary constructions of gender identity. The questioning of accepted familial functions and the confusion between feminine and masculine roles may again be seen to reflect a blurring of the boundaries between “nation” and “state”. Kamboureli draws attention to the way in which “the present climate of Canadian cultural politics seems to have reached a check-point – that point in time and space fraught with the ambiguities that surface when difference disrupts the dialectic of centre and margin” (93). Dominant ideologies, and conventional systems of power are being challenged and disturbed.

Michael Billig discusses the way in which political rhetoric appropriates the deixis of “home”, which “invokes the national ‘we’ and places ‘us’ within

'our' homeland" (107). Using this type of familial collective identification configures a relationship between the language of "home" and the nation; indeed, Billig suggests that national space is conceptualised as a "homely space, cosy within its borders; secure against the dangerous outside world" (109). Nation, therefore, may be ascribed feminine traits, in that it metaphorically performs a "home-making" role, which has traditionally been assigned to that of the female gender. Moreover, Nira Yuval-Davies discusses cultural reproduction and gender, arguing that women play a significant part "as symbolic border guards", "as embodiments of the collectivity" and as "cultural reproducers" (23). Indeed, the female can be seen as a repository of cultural ideologies and a reification of the symbolic means for the production of an ethnic national collectivity. Consequently, this feminine perception of nation as "home-maker" is one that encompasses the "matriarchal" position of upholder and communicator of cultural mores and values.

Mootoo explores the crossing of boundaries and transgression of cultural taboos from a feminine perspective, in portraying a blossoming emotional and sexual relationship between Mala's mother, Sarah, and Lavinia, the daughter of the Reverend Thoroughly. Sarah's children are "anxious to see Aunt Lavinia", and the two women make no attempt to "conceal their closeness from Pohpoh and Asha" (61). Indeed, Mala, identified here as a child by the use of the name Pohpoh, is clearly aware of the sexual nature of the relationship between her mother and Lavinia: "Pohpoh turned her head away when she saw them facing each other once, and she felt them come together and hug. She imagined them kissing. She imagined Papa finding

them kissing" (61). The relationship breaches sexual, racial and moral boundaries, and as such forms a threat to the "legitimate" family of the nation-state. The consequence of such actions is to place the women outside the protection of the masculine state, and therefore Lavinia plans to take Sarah and her children "some place where [they] can be a family, where [they] will never be separated" (63). Theirs is a lesbian, interracial bond that troubles the gendered, heterosexual discourse of the nation-state and, as will become clear shortly, is bound up with the legacy of colonialism.

George Mosse confirms that there is a clear relationship between nationalism and sexuality, as regards notions of respectability: that is, the acceptance of what is considered "decent and correct" (1), or indeed "normal or abnormal behaviour, sexual or otherwise" (3). According to Mosse, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a coming together of the concepts of nationalism and respectability into an alliance that "assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control" (16). The "outsider", the one who does not "belong" or conform, in terms of gender, sexuality or race, is conceived of as a threat to society, and such a person becomes stereotyped as part of the "so-called inferior race filled with lust" (Mosse 134). The contemporary nation-state of Canada struggles to resolve the conflict between the need for the cohesion that is provided by respectability and nationalism, and the emerging power of a society formed by diverse identities, which "will no longer be subsumed under monolithic national citizenship" (Wright 230).

The relationship between Sarah and Lavinia is unavoidably sterile, and their inability to produce children between them echoes the difficulty inherent in the project of nation-building for a settler-invader country such as Canada. The biological function of women as the “producers” of children, and therefore as progenitors of nation is brought to the fore here. Rob Nixon points out that women may “serve in a double sense as the bearers of the nation, carrying in their wombs the hope of perpetuity while also incarnating national values” (77). Women’s reproductive role in ethnic and national discourse is clearly of relevance in the construction of boundaries, such as those of “insider” and “outsider”. This is particularly so in regard to the myth of “common origin”, where people of a particular nationality have a psychological notion of interrelationship. Yuval-Davis argues that nationalist projects place women in a central position with regard to the embodiment of discourses that are constructed around dividing the world between “us” and “them”, between membership and non-membership of specific groups or ethnic communities (22). The creation of new citizens is necessary in order to maintain and expand the “imagined community” of the nation. As Mackey points out, in Canada “immigration was essential for nation-building, yet also perceived as potentially dangerous if it threatened the development and maintenance of a national population and a national identity” (32).

When they try to gain their freedom, Sarah and Lavinia are forced to leave behind Sarah’s children to the care of their father, in order to make their escape. Sarah has no choice but to abandon her children, and Lavinia is cut off from her parents and family, who will “never accept” the situation (63); this is a price they pay to be able to live out their true identification as a lesbian

couple. In doing so, both women metaphorically lose their nationality, as it is represented in the “home-making” role that holds the cultural mores of the feminine nation. All over the world, women have long faced difficulties over citizenship rights, which have historically been tied to their marriage status. For example, for many years and in many countries, women lost their legal right to citizenship when they married men from outside their own countries.ⁱⁱⁱ The women eventually escape the masculine “authority” of the patriarchal state through their “cross-cultural” relationship, which crosses conventional lines of sexual-orientation; as a result they move outside the scope of “nationalist paternalism [which] remains outrageous and oppressive” (Williams 149).

Sarah and Lavinia’s final destination is never confirmed, but it is intimated that they may have fled to the Shivering Northern Wetlands and from there perhaps to Canada (*Cereus* 270). Their disappearance is evocative of Jennings’ suggestion that Canadians “choose to make themselves invisible, in a willed absence that has much to do with enabling transformation” (20-1). Canada, as an absent presence within the novel, can be seen to provide the role of a metaphorical “promised-land” here, a place with no “national identity” of its own, where identity confusions and boundary transgressions are manifold: it becomes a place of refuge, where the “experience of constant otherness can be positive” (Dennis & Howells 4). However, Ayelet Shachar raises the possibility that “a multicultural citizenship model”, such as that of Canada, “raises potential conflicts among three components: the identity group, the state and the individual” (67, original italics). Shachar claims that “the paradox of multicultural vulnerability”, is not just a theoretical possibility;

rather, “the tension between multiculturalism and citizenship is part of the lived experience of millions of women” (77).

The situation with regard to Canada can be seen to problematise the notion of the feminised nation as upholding and communicating the cultural ideology of the country. According to Hutcheon, “Canadians – be they of British, Italian, Somali, Chinese or Pakistani origin – have only the paradoxically multiple model of multiculturalism in which to configure their sense of self-in-nation” (“Cryptoethnicity 248). Indeed, this lack of a unified national cultural discourse means that “there is no stable centre to English-Canadian culture” and “there are no clear borders either” (Kertzer 39). Furthermore, Kertzer argues that this lack of cultural identity means that Canadians are haunted “by a palpable absence that marks our peculiar identity crisis” (38). Mootoo’s novel may be seen to reflect this lack of Canadian cultural identity in the absence of Canada as a territorial locator within the text. Canada as “feminine” nation carries a cultural ideology that is multiple, disunited and largely absent, and this absence is reflected by the absence of Canada within Mootoo’s novel.

Paradoxically, however, Canada does have an “absent presence” throughout the text. The narrative, recorded through the voice of Tyler, is Mala Ramchandin’s “story”, which is then sent out as “an open letter to her long lost younger sister Asha in Canada” (Howells 150). The novel begins with Tyler’s “ardent hope” that Asha Ramchandin will “chance upon this book, wherever she may be today” (3). It is only in the closing pages that the reader learns that the final contact from Asha “was a card from Canada” (266). Canada can be seen here to play the role of a metaphorical “promised land,” pervading the

text through its “imagined reader,” Asha, who is the intended recipient of the epistolary form. Asha, as representative of the “feminine” Canadian nation, “frames” the text – Tyler addresses her briefly at the beginning, middle and end of the novel - but she is an elusive figure. Her existence in the text is largely through Mala’s childhood memories of her, and Asha’s own letters to Mala. In Canada, Asha’s ethnic roots remain important to her, and she attempts to maintain contact with Mala in Lantanacamara, saying: “Think of you every day . . . I miss you. I am well and happy – except that I wish I knew how you were” (266). In the present, she is now an adult and a Canadian, and yet at the same time, Asha’s childhood self in Lantanacamara continues to exist through the medium of Mala’s memories. Therefore, a transnational perception of Canadian identity in *Cereus* involves moving beyond Canada’s borders to examine the simultaneous existence of ethnic identification.

The reader is told at the outset that Asha Ramchandin “could, for all anyone knows, have changed her name” (3). There is a resonance here with what Hutcheon describes as “cryptoethnicity”, in regard to the female and Canada. Hutcheon is a Canadian of Italian descent, and “was born a Bortalotti” (247). She argues that both she and women of her generation share “a hidden or, more accurately, a silenced marker” of their ethnic heritage, because they were married “at a time when social custom meant taking their husbands’ surnames” (“Cryptoethnicity” 247). Thus “Canadian” identification may “mask” multiple ethnic identities for women and, consequently, following this line of argument to its logical conclusion, the “feminine” nation, under the patriarchal authority of the state, may also “hide” the ethnicity of its members. However, Hutcheon goes on to argue that “in the

very fact of the encrypting there is a potential challenge to purist, imprisoning boundaries,” and it is this challenge which may, in fact, prove liberating (253). The suggestion is that “Canadian” becomes a “nominal” term, which may “eradicate foreignness in the name of universal naturalisation” and yet, also offers the possibility of rendering everyone “foreign” in relation to everyone else (Hutcheon 252). In this respect, therefore, a transnational understanding of Mootoo’s text provides a challenge to the “fixity” of national identification and reveals the “Canadian” feminine nation as multiply ethnic.

The masculine state may attempt to draw on the “emotion” of the feminised nation and the feeling of attachment labelled “nationalism” in order to uphold its position. Connor confirms this when he points out that multi-ethnic states frequently use the emotion identified with love of nation, by adopting the “idiom of nationalism when attempting to inculcate loyalty” (“Beyond” 387). However, the Canadian “State” is reluctant or unable to utilise the notion of a “national culture”; indeed, Kamboureli argues that the Canadian government is “unwilling to acknowledge an official culture” (*Scandalous* 98). She points out that the 1971 White Paper on multiculturalism states that “although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other” (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 98). The denial of any official, specifically Canadian, culture, may be seen to reflect – or possibly be one of the causes of – what Hutcheon has termed Canada’s “infamous and perpetual identity crisis” (“Cryptoethnicity” 248). Notwithstanding the validity of this argument, however, Mackay contests that national identity in Canada “is not so much in a constant state of crisis, but that the reproduction of ‘crisis’ allows the nation to be a site

of constantly regulated politics of identity" (13). Either way, it is perhaps this very "crisis" of identity that is being reflected in the work of contemporary Canadian writers, and more specifically in the work under scrutiny here. Mootoo's text adumbrates this crisis in the way in which it tests the boundaries and crosses the divisions of collective and individual identities, through the issues of transgender and trans-sexuality. *Cereus Blooms at Night* also reflects the difficulties posed for identification in the crossing of boundaries between coloniser and colonised.

Subverting the Coloniser/Colonised Boundary

The differentiation between gender categories – and the balance of power between male and female – can be seen to be reflected in the discourse of nationalism. Theorists often struggle to answer the pertinent questions that nationalism raises, including the reasons behind the passion that the nation may inspire and the "fanatical sacrifices which have been made in its name" (Connor, "Nature" 385). While it is true that such depth of emotion cannot be adequately rationalised, what is of concern here is the way in which these concepts are aligned with the traditional binary divisions of gender, so that the state may be read as metaphorically "protecting" the ethnonational collectivities within its boundaries. Smith affirms this interpretation when he concludes that "the state has been increasingly charged with the protection and enhancement of the health, education and culture of the nation and its citizens" (*Myths* 259). Patriarchalism, then, appears to dominate the dialectic of the nation-state and it is from such a

perspective that both collective and individual identities become subject in their construction to the notion of gender power relations.

It could be argued that “state fatherhood specifically requires . . . the intimate articulation of the traditional family with the modern state, and the ostensible homology of one to the other” (Heng 355). Thus the interrelationship between nation and state is acknowledged as a familial bond: a “heterosexual marriage” between the two, within a traditional patriarchal hegemony, and commonly referred to as the nation-state. As has already been made clear, *Cereus Blooms at Night* subverts this type of convention and moves beyond traditional gender demarcations and conventional sexual relationships to explore the possibilities of transnational syncretism through the troubling of fixed categories of identification. According to Mosse, the family may be read as “a cheap and efficient surrogate for the state, controlling the passions at their source” (20). However, the family relationships explored in *Cereus Blooms at Night* frequently overturn this notion of the family as “the policeman on the beat” and as “an indispensable agent of sexual control” (Mosse 20).

From a postcolonial perspective, such patriarchal authority may be seen in the influence of the Wetlandish missionaries on the island, which stands as a figurative trope for that of the imperial coloniser; this is embodied in the character of the Reverend Ernest Thoroughly. Condé comments that the “thoroughly earnest” Reverend “does not move beyond caricature” (66). In fact, his stereotypical portrayal as a “rigid” and “austere” man, who adopts an Indian boy named Chandin Ramchandin, is one that foregrounds the social, familial hierarchy, putative of the patriarchal hegemony of imperialism. If the

Reverend Thoroughly is seen as a metaphor for patriarchal notions of empire, his adoptive son Chandin may be interpreted as a representation of the colonised nation – however, from a transnational stance, this is far from a full interpretation. The complex figure of Chandin encompasses both centre and margin and his relationships reflect the multi-faceted nature of the situation regarding the nation-state of Canada.

The setting for the novel, Lantanacamara, is a fictitious island reminiscent of Trinidad during the colonialist era^{iv}. Condé discusses the subversion of the “real” and the “imaginary” with regard to Mootoo’s “mythical version” of an existing nation – a situating of the narrative in an interstitial space that “is” and “is not”, which in itself is an evasion of fixity (64). It is possible to see the colonial nation of Lantanacamara as being juxtaposed, by Mootoo, with the imperial centre of the Shivering Northern Wetlands – which in all probability is a representation of colonial Britain. The patriarchal influence of the coloniser is revealed through the structures and society of Lantanacamara and the Christian missionaries who live there. That this colonising imperial state is one which exists in the past and is made present through a fictive discourse demonstrates a concern with liminality – occupying what Bhabha terms as that “space of intervention – in *between* past and present, haunted memory” (“Unpacking” 203-4). By locating the novel in this interstitial place in time and space, Mootoo foregrounds the gendered relationship between the feminine nation and the patriarchal authority of both past empire and present-day state. Indeed, parallels can be drawn with notions of belonging as regards the Canadian nation, its colonial past and the modern nation-state.

Chandin is complicit in his socialisation into the cultural mores of the coloniser – he plays cricket, dreams of living in a “stone and mortar house with special rooms for this and that – a library, a pantry, a guest room . . .” (53). The changes he makes to his demeanour are, in part, a result of his aspirations to marry the Thoroughly’s daughter, Lavinia. The colonial offspring turns to the feminised nation of the coloniser for the giving and receiving of cultural ideology, so that “the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Fanon, *Black* 18). Despite his efforts, however, Chandin is given a “very definite place” within the family hierarchy, a marginal position that gives the appearance of inclusion whilst paradoxically manifesting difference (33). He is “the only non-white person” in the Reverend’s seminary; the others had all come from the Wetlands “to get first-hand experience in a tropical climate among non-Christians” (41). Although he feels he is accepted by his peers, he has doubts as to whether that is because of his position within the Thoroughly family, or the fact that he is “of the race that it was their mission to Christianize” (41). Chandin comes to constitute “the figure of colonial otherness” that Bhabha describes as being neither “the colonialist Self” nor “the colonized other, but the disturbing distance in-between” (*Location* 45).

Chandin abandons his origins and is “eager to have his Indian name replaced” with the approval of his adoptive mother, Mrs Thoroughly (32). However, Reverend Thoroughly refuses to name him, suggesting instead that as “a Christian teacher, theologian and missionary. . . Chandin’s own name would win his people’s trust” (32). Naming is, in itself, a political act as is demonstrated through the “imperial fixation on naming”, which expresses the

power to control origin (McClintock, *Imperial* 29). What is more, the significance of Thoroughly denying Chandin a name is further underlined by Irigaray's suggestion that it is "only the father's name that marks the child as his" (23). Consequently, the withholding of a new name from Chandin may be seen as symbolic of Thoroughly's repudiation of Chandin's right to acceptance within his adoptive family.

Howells rightly argues that when Chandin falls in love with Lavinia, "the disastrous ambiguities of his position become apparent: as adopted 'son' he is both a member of the family and outside it" (153). The Reverend Thoroughly admonishes Chandin, saying, "I have performed as your father and my wife as your mother" (39). The use of the word "performed" here is a clear indication of a lack of depth and sincerity to the parental role, which places the relationship in doubt. He goes on, "you are to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more. A brother. A brother protects and helps and supports and comforts his sister" (39). The Reverend refuses to allow Chandin to truly become a member of the family – to become a "son-in-law" – by marrying Lavinia. Howells reads "the confused kinship relations" taking place here as foreshadowing "the nightmare of incest in the next generation", in that he is revealed as "'an in-between unnamed thing' within colonial discourse", prior to the abuse he inflicts on his own family (153). Frustration drives Chandin to marry Sarah, a woman of his own race; however, he continues to desire Lavinia, and the dichotomy of his existence as both coloniser and colonised causes conflict between them. The lesbian relationship, discussed previously, which forms between Sarah and Lavinia iterates the possibility of moving beyond this dichotomy. The women's escape from Chandin's patriarchal

authority and subsequent disappearance can be seen to offer Canada as a potential “promised-land”, a liminal space where such conflicts can coexist.

Whilst Canada may serve as a mythical promised-land within the text, the fictitious island of Lantanacamara subverts the idea of “Paradise”. The unruly and magical beauty of the “fairly-tale” island, filled with “nature’s tropical wonders” (217), is represented through the figure of Mala Ramchandin, Chandin and Sarah’s daughter. Mala eventually comes to reside in the ironically named Paradise Alms House, Paradise, Lantanacamara, and her identification with the island is one that is reiterated frequently in the novel. For example, she is described as having “become one with the trees, shrubs, weeds, fences, thorns, water and mossy ground” (162) – a use of listing that underlines her complete oneness with nature and the place in which she lives – and a little later:

[Mala] sat in a rocking chair beside the tree, her eyes closed.
Her figure was all but lost in the blueness of the mudra’s trunk.
She wore a petticoat, greens and browns and light blues, that
blended into the background of leaves and gnarled, twisted
limbs. (167)

Condé points out that Mala “is the character who comes closest to being a personification of Lantanacamara” (69). In her role as the feminised nation, Mala is linked symbolically with the land and subject to the possession of the patriarchal state, in concurrence with McClintock’s observation that “women are the earth that is to be discovered, entered, named, inseminated and, above all, owned” (31). Mala’s father, Chandin, becomes a recluse and an alcoholic when he is rejected by his wife, and forces a sexual relationship onto

his daughter. The abuse begins “in a kind of nightmare fantasy when he mistakes Mala for his lost wife, but then continues in the full rage of consciousness not out of love but out of hatred and a mad lust for possession and domination” (Howells 153). This incestuous act of rape transgresses widely-held cultural taboos and engenders a deconstruction of the relationship between nation and state.

The two defining characteristics of this transgressive sexual relationship – incest and rape – require separate attention. Gayle Rubin asserts that the prohibition of incest ensures that mothers, sisters and daughters must be given in marriage, thus creating a “wide network of relations” (173), which results in a collectivity of individuals connected together by a “kinship structure” (174) – an interrelationship that is concomitant with the consanguinity of the ethno-national bond. It is in these circumstances that women can be seen as the progenitors of nation and the “crucial boundary markers for nationalism, outlining the limits of the nation” (McCrone 123). Rubin affirms women as the bearers of cultural identity, because all cultures seek to reproduce themselves: she contends that “the incest taboo and the results of its application constitute the origin of culture, and is a prerequisite of culture” (176). It is possible, however, that incest may be seen as a way of securing cultural mores: for example, Ptolemy XIII ruled Egypt with his sister-wife Cleopatra from 63-47 BC, reigning jointly as King and Queen until she had him put to death.^v For these ancient Egyptians, incest was a method of ensuring the purity of the royal lineage and by inference the cultural ideologies of the country. In the light of these conflicting notions regarding incest, the relationship between Chandin and Mala may be

seen to problematise the reproduction of national culture and the relationship between nation and state.

The second aspect of this incestuous relationship is that of rape and the significance of the violence inflicted on Mala by her father. The imperial “desire to name” (McClintock 28) is one that is widely recognised as an act of “cognitive appropriation” (Jacobs 4). Chandin refuses Mala her adult name and instead names her as the child, Pohpoh: as such she is positioned as virgin territory, which is possessed and colonised through male patrimony. McCrone posits women’s sexuality as being used as “a border guard” (123), which under the control of males, marks the borders between ethnicities: “thus ethnic biology, ethnic culture, and ethnic territory converge in their beings” (Nixon 77). One of the consequences for women of carrying the responsibility of such symbolism has been that of systematic wartime rape such as that carried out by Serbian men on Muslim women.^{vi} This type of sexual assault on women has been interpreted as a “direct assault on the identity of the entire community” (McCrone 124).

Chandin’s rape of Mala may be construed as a brutal transgression of national and sexual borders: employing lexis from the semantic field of warfare, Mootoo describes the phallus as a “weapon” (240), and it is used to penetrate and defile the “inner sanctum of the patriarchal homeland” (Nixon 78). Thus the complexities of Canada’s position as both “coloniser” and “colonised” are brought to the fore. It presents a paradox, in that the incestuous relationship between Mala and Chandin reveals the gendered family of nation as producing a culture that is inbred and inviolate and yet, at the same time, marks “a homeland that in every sense, is no longer

impregnable” through the rape of the feminized nation by the patriarchal state (Nixon 78). Thus the “marriage” of nation to state is problematised and rendered unstable.

Mackey describes how it has become common for the Canadian nation, and the land in particular to be constructed as

a natural, pure, fertile yet vulnerable woman, constantly defending herself from the more masculine and aggressive hulk of the United States – the southern neighbour who sought to rape her natural resources and colonise her culture. (10)

However, here the threat to the Canadian nation is not external but internal, from within the family of the nation-state; indeed, far from protecting the nation, it is the state itself that damages the nation. It should be borne in mind, however, that Chandin is himself a victim of the coloniser, who goes on to iterate colonial violence in this act of appropriation. The reasons behind Chandin’s attack on Mala are extremely complex. She is being courted by a young man, Ambrose, and Chandin perceives this as a threat, afraid that having lost his wife, his daughter will also be taken away from him: “I ent go let nobody tief my woman again. No man, no woman, no damn body go tief my property again” (238). Stuart Hall argues that to understand the effects of globalisation, it is necessary to consider “how those forms which are different, which have their own specificity, can nevertheless be penetrated, absorbed, reshaped, negotiated, without absolutely destroying what is specific and particular to them” (“Local” 28-9). Cultural pluralism in Canada maybe seen as part of an endeavour to control and limit representations of national identity; “Canadian multiculturalism”, as Mackey points out, “stage manages’

independence and cultural diversity within the 'whole framework' of the nation" (166).

The episode between Chandin and Mala breaches cultural boundaries. This heterosexual, intergenerational sexual exchange subverts binary distinctions between "Self" and "Other": as the daughter who assumes the place of her father's wife, Mala forms an endogamous "marriage" with Chandin, through which she simultaneously occupies the positions of both mother and daughter. As Angela Brüning comments, "the abused body named Pohpoh and the adolescent Mala exist side by side" (3). These two identities come together in the liminal space of Bhabha's "haunted memory" ("Unpacking" 204), when Mala saves her childhood self, Pohpoh.

"They coming after you, run, run!" Mala shouted to the child, who, in her imagination, had already escaped the yard's confines. Her mind filled with sounds of voices and footsteps following Pohpoh. "Yes, Pohpoh, you take off and fly, child, fly!" . . . At the top of the hill Pohpoh bent her body forward and, as though doing a breast stroke, began to part the air with her arms. Each stroke took her higher until she no longer touched the ground. (200)

Mootoo articulates an elision between past and present, where the dual existences of adult and child inhabit a world in which the feminine nation seeks to free her progeny from the oppression of patriarchal tyranny. Whilst Mala remains trapped by the governing laws of the state, she engineers the escape of her childhood self, who takes flight, soaring upwards until "down

below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea" (201).

Clearly, airborne flight becomes symbolic here of the need to escape from abuse and repression. This symbolism has echoes in the well-known motif of the flying Africans, which can be found "in diverse communities of the Americas: in the United States, and throughout the Caribbean and Latin America" (Reyes 37). There are many folk tales that draw on this symbolism, but one of the most prevalent is that of the Ibo's Landing, which tells of a group of Ibo tribe's people who were taken from Africa by slave traders. The Ibos "once confronted with the realities of slavery onshore, just turned around, walked into the water and marched (or flew) right on back to Africa" (Rice 94). Rice confirms that stories such as this frequently "feature heroes and heroines, who by magical means alter their status and through sheer force of will, wing their way home" (88).

Mala embodies her nation's cultural and ideological values, and yet, through her childhood self, Pohpoh, is released from subjugation to the state. It is worth noting, however, that the price of this new found freedom is the inhabitancy of permanently dislocated space: in crossing the boundary between earth and sky, she has literally become the "outsider", occupying what Werbner has termed "the place of non-place" ("Place" 119). Hence, "the flying symbolic" becomes what Rice calls "a dynamic explicator of a multitude of diasporan lives" (117). Moreover, it shows that such travel "is not confined to the physical movement between continents, but includes the imaginative leap across oceans and even upwards into space" (Rice 117). Thus the novel offers the utopian possibility of transcending the territorial boundaries of nation

and state and “basking in the cloudless sky” of a transnational existence (200).

In conclusion, it is clear that multiculturalism calls for “the recognition of cultural diversity” (Grillo 192). Grillo argues that “it is an emergent phenomenon, the outcome of a multiplicity of international, national, and perhaps above all local and specific accommodations on a range of issues” (193). Multiculturalism, that is living in a pluralistic society, has a profound effect on individual and collective identification, and, as Mootoo’s novel demonstrates, it is not an homogeneous process that can be universally defined. The articulation of gender relationships with contextual, structural, local and national factors, and individual agency, produce differentiated narratives and strategies of transnationalism. *Cereus* addresses the multiple issues of living within a multicultural reality such as that of Canada. According to Howells, “the liminality of Mootoo’s Indo-Caribbean-Canadian text is symptomatic of that ‘liminality within the nation-space,’ which is now being written into Canada’s literary history” (161). Shani Mootoo’s novel problematises and transgresses the gender dichotomy of the nation-state, and calls into question the fixity of various categories of belonging.

According to Levene, “The logic of the nation-state, [is] a logic which actually does not need toleration because, having nicely tidied up or airbrushed out the elements that do not or will not fit, there is nothing sufficiently different to tolerate” (“Patterns” 40). However, a transnational perspective reveals the “blindspots” and “limitations” of “the parameters of national formations” and the conflicts that result (Giles, “Transnationalism” 1).

These cultural clashes are evidence of diversity and offer the possibility of growth as Anthony Marx points out:

Conflictual process may be the way forward, imposing terrible costs before the world learns to avoid the temptations of exclusionary cohesion and of hypocritical pretensions of toleration not actually observed. Only then might we be able to embrace the more difficult path of forging cohesion of an inclusive “us” without an “other”. Only then might we become truly modern and liberal. (*Faith in Nation* 203)

Mootoo’s novel embraces the notion of individual and collective identification as a constructed and conflictual process. According to Dennis and Howells, “Historically, Canada has always been peripheral, first to Europe, then to the United States . . . it is obliged to acknowledge that it is not the norm from which others deviate, but just one among a plethora of different societies” (4). Mootoo’s character Tyler is “on the periphery of Miss Ramchandin’s story” and “uses that marginal space to establish himself as the center of his own life story” (Howells 150).

The territorial displacement of Canada into a marginal space by Mootoo produces a text that allows “transnational” identities to become the central focus of the novel. *Cereus Blooms at Night* tells “the story of Mala Ramchandin” by “fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts”, and in the same way, contemporary Canadian fiction is seen here to be constructing a transnational literature from the diverse elements of the metaphorical Canadian mosaic (112). Where Mootoo places Canada almost “outside” of the

text in her novel, the next chapter examines the way in which Yann Martel represents Canada as both centre and margin in *Life of Pi*.

ⁱ Charles Taylor's essay, "The Politics of Recognition" together with the accompanying commentaries and discussions, provide a useful interrogation into the controversy surrounding multiculturalism. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton U P, 1994. 25-73.

ⁱⁱ Patrimonialism refers to an authority relationship in which the leader controls an administrative staff selected from his "patrimony" and based on personal loyalty to the leader. In this type of social entity, political power, through the administrative apparatus, includes the command of all resources, both political and economic, and obedience to the state is achieved by compulsion rather than compliance. Patriarchalism, on the other hand, involves a leader who is without the means of physically compelling obedience – that is, without an administrative staff: therefore, political/social relations within a patriarchal entity tend toward the "communal," whereas social relations in the patrimonial entity, outside of the relationship between members of the administration and the leader, can tend toward the "associational". One of the distinguishing characteristics between a patrimonial and patriarchal entity is that the latter is composed entirely of "members" while the former is composed of those who belong to the "administration" and those who do not but are compelled to belong to the social entity through the threat of force. For a more in depth discussion of patrimonialism and patriarchalism see Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Cyril Hill, writing in the 1920's states that "if an American woman marries an alien who is ineligible to citizenship, she loses her American Citizenship" (727). What is more, Hill confirms that at this time at least another twenty-four countries had similar citizenship laws. See Cyril D Hill, "Citizenship of Married Women." *The American Journal of International Law*. Vol 18. 4. (October 1924) 720-736.

^{iv} Mary Condé affirms this in her article "Flight from Certainty in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*" in *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*. Eds. Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001. 63-70.

^v See *Hutchinson Encyclopaedia*, London: Helicon Publishing Ltd. 1997.

^{vi} See David McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow's Ancestors*. London: Routledge, 1998 and Rob Nixon, "Of Balkans and Bantustans: Ethnic Cleansing and the Crisis of National Legitimation." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. London: U of Minnesota P, 1998. 69-88 for a more in-depth discussion of systematic rape in warfare.

CHAPTER THREE

***Life of Pi* – Yann Martel**

The second novel to be examined here is *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. As has been mentioned previously, winning the 2002 Booker Prize established *Life of Pi* as a “mainstream” Canadian text, in spite of the cosmopolitan identity of its author, Yann Martel, and the fact that Canada is barely mentioned by name in the narrative. The novel is largely set in the Pacific Ocean. However, where the Canada of Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* is located almost outside of the text, in Martel’s novel it is placed at both centre and margin through its construction as an “absent presence”. *Life of Pi* is positioned here in this dissertation, therefore, because the “promised land” of Canada becomes a step nearer, an achievable aim at the end of a long and arduous journey. The novel is seen here to offer an account of a “transnational existence,” and to document and represent the dynamics of cultural change involved in the current redefinition of cultural identity in Canadian fiction.

This chapter uses a transnational approach to examine the way in which the central character, Piscine Patel, encompasses an interwoven complexity of identities, which are in a constant state of flux. It focuses on how the narrative reflects the notion of location within dislocation, of living in a liminal zone that encompasses both “Self” and “Other”. This concept is seen to resonate with contemporary perceptions of Canadian national identity, in that it is coterminous with Hardin’s claim that “Canadians do not assert their nationalism by looking for it . . . They assert it by not finding it” (26). According to Kertzer, the pluralistic nature of Canadian society ensures that “no totalizing

definition of nationhood" can be considered satisfactory (199). Whilst having a "shared story" or "meta-narrative" has traditionally "been basic to nationhood," the Canadian novelist and critic Robert Kroetsch suggests that "Canadians cannot agree on what their meta-narrative is" (21). Indeed, Kroetsch argues that for Canadians, "all is periphery and margin, against the hole in the middle. We are held together by that absence. There is no centre. This disunity is our unity" (31). *Life of Pi* is a Canadian text that explores the paradox of a "permissive form of nationality" that allows for multicultural fragmentation and yet also offers "a practical cohesiveness to the country" (Kertzer 198).

This thesis has already established the difficulties encountered when a postcolonial approach is taken regarding the literature of a "First World" country such as Canada, which encompasses the role of both "coloniser" and "colonised". The transnational perspective taken here reveals that *Life of Pi* is neither the narrative of the "coloniser," nor the "colonised," but of the one who lives "in-between". It does so through the examination of three central issues. Firstly, it demonstrates how the novel subverts traditional notions of a "fixed" collective or individual identity, challenging accepted binary oppositions, so that "Self" and "Other" become part of a "transnational" dialectic. Secondly, this chapter interprets the novel as re-envisioning the concepts of nation, nation-state and nationality, using creation mythology. Finally, there is an exploration of the way in which the text problematises the trope of Canada as a metaphorical "promised land."

Life of Pi reflects the way in which national identity has moved beyond fixed, obfuscated and dichotomous forms of identity, such as that of the "hyphenated Canadian", into a "process of identification" that refuses fixity.

This notion of “identity as process” transcends the boundaries of transcription to nation or state, so that cultural identification becomes dislocated into a new transnational space. Pnina Werber observes that we have “moved beyond the old discussions that start from certain identities, communities and ordered cultural categories into uncharted theoretical waters” (“Intro” 4). It is just such a voyage that is undertaken by Piscine Patel and his family, when they leave their native India and set sail for the metaphorical “promised land” of Canada, on the Japanese cargo ship *Tsimtsum* (90).

Challenging “Fixed” Notions of Identity

Melucci describes how “the multiple experience of the self obliges us to abandon any static view of identity, and examine the dynamic process of identification” (64). A brief overview of the novel uncovers how its structure reflects this notion of individual identity as a continuous “process of identification”. The text is split into three sections: Part one is entitled “Toronto and Pondicherry”; Part two, “The Pacific Ocean”; and Part Three, “Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán Mexico”. At the beginning of the book, an italicised “Author’s Note” – a combination of fact and fiction – provides an air of “authenticity” to the fictional memoir that follows. The first chapter opens in the present, giving the reader a glimpse of the central protagonist and narrator, Piscine, known as Pi, living and working in Canada. It then moves back in time to Pi’s childhood in Pondicherry in India, where he lives with his family at their zoo. Here, as will be discussed later, “fixed” notions of identity are problematised with regard to Pi, by factors such as his name and his adoption of the Muslim, Hindu and Christian faiths simultaneously.

Throughout this first part of the novel, Martel interrupts Pi's narration of his childhood memories with short, italicised chapters, which give comments by "the author" regarding his visits to interview Pi in Toronto. Although the focus is on the "Indian" influences that are part of Pi's lifestyle, and little reference is made to any "Canadian" aspects, the effect is to "ground" or "place" the narrative in the "fictional reality" of present day Canada. Thus, as the title "Toronto and Pondicherry" suggests, the first section of the novel juxtaposes Pi's present life in Toronto and his past life in Pondicherry, drawing both nationalities into the same "transnational" space. This section forms around a third of the novel, until Pi's family decide to emigrate to Canada, taking many of the animals from the zoo with them. Part one closes in the present, with Pi being portrayed as a contented family man. Indeed, the "authorial" character informs the reader that "this story has a happy ending" (93).

This "settled" scene is immediately juxtaposed with the sinking of the boat that Pi and his family are travelling on to Canada. In this second section, "The Pacific Ocean", the narrative is literally and figuratively "at sea," in that it is not "anchored" to any specific place. There are no references either to Pi's past in Pondicherry, or to his present in Toronto, and there are no interruptions by the "author" whatsoever, thus suspending the "reality" created in the first section. Pi is left alone on a lifeboat with a zebra, a hyena, an orang-utan and a tiger called Richard Parker. The allegorical tale of Pi's experiences on the lifeboat with the animals forms the majority of the novel and, as will become clear, provides an exploration into the crossing of boundaries regarding traditional notions of national identification.

In the third and final part, "Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán Mexico," Pi reaches Mexico and from there the reader learns he will be taken to Canada, although Canada again receives only a passing reference. This section begins and ends with comments from the fictional "author," living in Canada, thus once more "grounding" the narrative both temporally and spatially. The denouement of the novel has Pi revealing an alternative "true" story of his months adrift at sea, although neither story is confirmed as being the actual train of events. The way in which the novel refuses closure and the cyclical nature of the plot is not, of itself, remarkable. However, when this structure is placed within the context of national identification, the text can be seen to refuse "location" within the national boundaries of Canada, and yet there is a continual return to Canada, which remains an underlying presence. Furthermore, if the structure of the novel is seen as representing Pi's national identity from birth to the present day – two-thirds of it is spent in dislocated space, whilst the other third blurs the boundaries of his various national and cultural modes of identification. Transnational identification is constructed here as an ongoing process that exists within the framework of a "Canadian" national identity, whilst encompassing the "Indian" ethnic identity of Pi's childhood and his dislocated time adrift in the ocean.

The "multiple self" (Melucci 64), represented by the character of Pi, seeks to "give things a meaningful shape" (285) and asks that the "author" tells his "jumbled story" in "exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less" (285). This is indeed the case. However, the chapter structure appears contrived and is imposed on the narrative in a somewhat awkward and obvious manner. Chapter ninety-seven, for example, consists of only two

words: "The Story" (291). There is a resonance here with what Melucci describes as the need "to anchor oneself to something essential which is permanent and has visible confines" (65). The text is bounded by the fixed parameters of its structure, just as the complexities of cultural identification are contained by the concept of Canadian national identity. From a transnational perspective, therefore, the construction of the novel can be seen to echo the notion of a Canadian national identity that provides cohesion for a diverse ethnic and cultural background.

Hall argues that "identity is within discourse." It is "a narrative of the self; it's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are. We impose a structure on it" ("Ethnicity" 16). The novel evidently imposes a "structure" on Pi's story, and yet it is a story of contested meanings – the ending of the novel offers no resolution, no way to "prove which story is true and which is not" (317). Whilst both the novel and its central character may be located within the boundaries of Canadian national identification, both also exceed and transgress the limitations of its boundaries. Kertzer suggests that Canadians need to "diversify [their] sense of what a nation is and should be, and through that diversity find ways of dwelling in Canada" (200). Read as specifically "national" literature, *Life of Pi* provides a transnational representation of such new and diverse ways of being identified as "Canadian".

"Canadian writing," according to Kroetsch, "is the writing down of a new place" (41) and "writers in a new place conceive of themselves profoundly as namers" (41). Naming constitutes a key factor in the concept of identification; indeed Kroetsch asserts that writers "name in order to give focus and

definition. They name to create boundaries. They name to establish identity” (41). Names are capable of providing verification; they have the power to distinguish, substantiate and confirm, and above all they confer identity. A transnational approach shows how naming may also be used to problematise the accepted boundaries of identity.

Early in the novel there is an explanation as to how Piscine was given his name in deference to a friend of his Indian parents, who had spent two years in Paris “thanks to the Colonial administration” (10). Mamaji, a swimmer, considered the swimming pools of “Piscine Molitor” to be “the crowning aquatic glory of Paris, indeed of the entire civilised world” (11). Piscine, therefore, becomes emblematic of the complex inter-connection between the Indian nation, French and British colonialism, and global civilisation. However, Piscine’s name is corrupted by his peers into “pissing” and used to taunt him. Thus Piscine is placed outside of traditional forms of collective identity and made “Other” by the subversion of his name.

Because of this incessant taunting, Piscine decides to call himself by a new name, in what J.U. Jacobs refers to as a colonial act of “cognitive appropriation” which has “never been innocent” (4). Piscine plans to name himself into a new identity, to enable him to “escape” into “the beginning of a new time” (21). On the first day at his new school, the pupils are asked to identify themselves by “the stating of names” (22). Rather than speak his name, Pi chooses to write himself into existence by putting on the blackboard:

my name is
Piscine Molitor Patel,
known to all as

– I double underlined the first two letters of my given name –
Pi Patel. (22-3)

This is “a liberating and self-creating action,” which affirms his identification within his ancestry by assimilating his origins into his new persona (Cook, “Exploring” 6).

Pi gives further emphasis to this change in his identity when he adds “ $\pi = 3.14$ ” and draws “a large circle . . . sliced in two with a diameter, to evoke that basic lesson of geometry” (23). Pi’s previous name “Piscine Molitor,” the place, provided him with an identity that was “fixed” spatially. However his new name, Pi, and the corresponding use of the symbol π , foregrounds a lack of fixity with regard to identity, in that it transcends “spatial” and “temporal” boundaries. The name Piscine is transformed from the “location” of geographical space into the “dislocation” of an irrational and transcendental number. Pi is, of course, an irresolvable number, one that is sometimes described as “eternal,” which in mathematical terms may be seen as being “outside of time”.¹ Thus Pi moves beyond the limitations of traditional, stable notions of identity into a form of identification that is limitless in nature.

The symbol, the number and the man who is credited with its discovery, Pythagoras, are attributed mythical qualities. As a “sign” Pi becomes the expression of the “Signifier” plus the “Signified” which Barthes interprets as “myth”, the function of which is to “empty reality” (143). Through this “defiant act of self-naming” (Cook, “Exploring” 6), Pi undergoes a process of what Bhabha calls “cultural translation” (282); he embarks upon a mythical quest that has no resolution, except to express the notion of an identity

permanently in process. Paradoxically, Pi finds a means to “locate” his identity through the irresolvable mathematical problem that is π :

And so, in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge (24).

There is a parallel here with the way in which Pi eventually finds refuge in becoming part of the Indian diaspora in Canada.

Pi declares that the one thing he hates about his “nickname” is “the way that number runs on forever,” because for Pi, “it’s important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go.” (285). Transnationally, therefore, Pi begins with a “French-Indian” name, which he both maintains and transforms within the irresolvable mathematical concept represented by the Greek letter π , and eventually “locates” within a Canadian nationality. Just as Pi’s name provides him with a means of identification that encompasses the notion of identity as an unceasing process, so his choice of national identification, as a Canadian, incorporates the transnational nature of his cultural construction. According to Davey, there is no “homogenous” Canada. Rather, Canada exhibits “the condition of contemporary nationhood, in which a multiply-focused process loosely contained by a national boundary interacts with globally circulating constructions and processes” (*Canadian* 290-1). The character of Pi demonstrates this type of “contemporary” perception of Canadian national identity.

Of course, the idea of a specific “Canadian national identity” is, in itself, problematic. Tambini argues that “it is fair to say that passport holding is a very stable aspect of identity,” in that the “bureaucratic status of citizenship”

provides a means of belonging (209). However, such citizenship does not mean that collective identity inevitably reflects ethnic or national identity in terms of cultural difference. Moreover, the “sharing of cultural practices does not in itself necessarily imply a sense of collective identity” (Tambini 210). It is clear that traditional conceptions of national belonging and collective identity are undergoing profound changes in Canada. Canada’s development of a “pluralist national identity” is due to a situation in which “the multiple identities which make up the nation are constantly at battle with each other, and in which the boundaries, inclusions and exclusions of identity are unstable and constantly changing” (Mackey 13). According to Kertzer, it is “precisely because Canada has so many conflicting constituencies that we need a national space in which to meet, dispute, and negotiate” (189). Martel affirms the notion that in Canada, conflicting structures of cultural practice do not necessarily preclude the security afforded by citizenship. This becomes apparent in the spiritual journey that Pi makes: one which is mimetic of a migrant construction of nationality, where the individual moves from a “fixed” nationality to a transnational mode of identification.

Cultural difference and diversity are never more pronounced than when concerned with religion. *Life of Pi* focuses on this problematic area through Pi’s syncretic acculturation of three of the largest global religions: Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Pi tries to convince his mother that it is possible to adopt more than one faith:

“I don’t see why I can’t be all three. Mamaji has two passports. He’s Indian and French. Why can’t I be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim?”

"That's different. France and India are nations on earth."

"How many nations are there in the sky?"

She thought for a second. "One. That's the point. One nation, one passport."

"One nation in the sky?"

"Yes or none. There's that option too, you know. These are terribly old-fashioned things you've taken to."

"If there's only one nation in the sky, shouldn't all passports be valid for it?"

A cloud of uncertainty came over her face. (73-4)

Martel ruptures deeply ingrained ideological divisions through his representation of Pi as engaging with multiple faiths. His approach to these three faiths involves syncretism rather than hybridity, in that they are not merged into a new, amalgamated concept, but are combined whilst concomitantly retaining their individual characteristics and practices.

The parallel is overtly drawn between nationality and the cultural practices of religion. Thus, in offering a polytheistic conception of religion, which demonstrates the transgression of insider/outsider divisions, the possibility of a "transnational" existence, where "all passports are valid" is also raised. Pi's multicultural approach, his "one nation in the sky," is challenged by his three religious mentors and his parents, in terms of his religious pluralism. They assert that "he can't be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose" (69). The conflicts and disjunctions between the three religions are recognised and acknowledged; however, Pi persists in his belief that "all religions are true" (69). Eventually, Canada provides Pi with the

freedom to practice all three of his religions. His house in Toronto is “a temple,” filled with a range of devotional artefacts from a variety of faiths and places. These include a “brass statue of Shiva,” pictures of “Ganesha,” “a plain wooden cross” and “the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe” (45) and “a wooden Christ on the Cross from Brazil” (46). There is no mention of any Canadian cultural artefacts, but Canada remains an “absent presence” throughout the descriptive passages of his life there. Kertzer argues that Canadians are haunted “by a palpable absence that marks our peculiar identity crisis” (38). It is this absence, this lack of any clear indication of “Canadian-ness,” which creates a space coterminous with Bhabha’s “Third Space” (*Location* 37). This space in turn allows for “the enunciation rather than the erasure of difference” (Mackey 73).

It is clear that in order to envisage a world with the potential for becoming a single community, Pi’s “one nation in the sky,” the idea of nation itself must be recognised as a construct. In his seminal text *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson, as noted in the introduction, describes nations as “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Speaking with the immediacy and intimacy of the first person, Pi narrates his spiritual biography, beginning with the rather startling comment: “we are all born like Catholics, aren’t we – in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God?” (47). Thus Pi initiates his religious identity in a “place of non-place . . . a typical transnational formation” (Werbner, “Place” 119). His narrative of origin commences in a liminal area.

This conception of displacement becomes located by means of a familial relationship, which embodies a connection with nation and nationality – Pi describes being brought by an aunt into a Hindu temple, “a sacred cosmic womb, a place where everything is born” (48). Anderson discusses the way in which religious thought “concerns itself with the links between the dead and the yet unborn, the mystery of re-generation” (11); he draws parallels with nationalism, in that it emerges from an “immemorial past” and moves into a “limitless future” (12). In the same way Pi’s birth into Hinduism reflects his association with both religious and civic rites and rituals, for it is his “original landscape . . . those towns and rivers, battlefields and forests, holy mountains and deep seas where gods, saints, villains and ordinary people rub shoulders, and, in doing so, define who and why we are” (50). This “original” faith is not abandoned by Pi but remains a constant element of his identity.

Pi declares, “[I have] been a Hindu all my life. With its notions in mind I see my place in the universe. But we should not cling!” (49). His identification as a Hindu is clear, and yet it is not bounded or fixed. He goes on to affirm his openness to diversity in recounting that “I was fourteen years old – and a contented Hindu – when I met Jesus Christ on a holiday” (50). There are obvious connotations in this statement of “journey”: physical, in terms of temporal and spatial dimensions; physiological and emotional, in the change from childhood to early adulthood; and, of course, spiritual. However, it is not a “linear” journey, but one of syncretism, in that he does not leave behind any of the faiths that he encounters.

Whilst Hinduism provides Pi with an emotional, familial identification, and is concerned with history – “a relay race run over many centuries” (57).

Christianity involves his mind, in that his education is gained from a “Christian school” (51). He describes it as a “religion swift as a swallow”, which “expresses itself in the instant . . . in essence it exists only at one time: right now” (57). His experience of “Islam followed right behind hardly a year later” (58), which, for Pi, is a very physical faith involving the whole body, a “callisthenic communion with God” (60). Thus Pi’s spiritual identification involves his whole being – emotion, mind and body. It is holistic, interdependent and transcends cultural difference.

According to Partha Chatterjee, “‘Indian nationalism’ is synonymous with ‘Hindu nationalism’”. Moreover, the majority “community” in India is Hindu; “Islam or Christianity come from outside and are therefore foreign” (210). Conversion to Christianity has been perceived in India as “an integral feature of the colonial threat to indigenous society and culture”, which affected the “shape of Hindu religion, how it defined its boundaries and maintained its own identity” (Zavos 82). In blurring these boundaries, Pi moves beyond the formations of nation into a transnational citizenship. This spiritual transcendence is echoed in the physical journey that Pi makes from India, via the Pacific Ocean to Mexico and, eventually, Canada. He faithfully executes various rituals and practices of his multiple beliefs throughout his journey, and continues to adapt and change according to his circumstances. Thus the character of Pi represents a processual conception of identity, which transgresses cultural boundaries.

The multivalent and fluid nature of an identity such as that of Pi is one that resonates with the diversity and pluralism which have “an institutionalised place, in the cultural politics of national identity in Canada” (Mackey 3). There

are, however, contradictions and ambiguities regarding the way in which multicultural “tolerance” works in the construction of national identity within Canada. As Kertzer points out, “if there is no stable centre to English-Canadian culture, there are no clear borders either. Inclusion and exclusion are equally difficult” (39). Roland Robertson considers the possibility that “a world-system containing relatively independent politically organized units stimulates, or even ‘requires,’ the development of culturally protectionist strategies – in the form of attempts to close a national culture to external influences” (69). He goes further in suggesting that the search for national identity “encourages conflicts within societies” (69). This in turn means that “political-ideological and religious movements arise in reference to the issue of defining societies in relationship to the rest of the world and the global circumstance as a whole” (69-70).

What Martel’s fictive representation suggests is that, paradoxically, Pi’s religious “inclusivism” may be interpreted as being coterminous with the rise of capitalism and the “demise of the great stories of salvation” (Melucci 62). In other words, “a growth-bound economy dependent on cognitive innovation cannot seriously link its cultural machinery to some doctrinal faith which rapidly becomes obsolete” (Gellner 142). It must instead create a syncretic ideological system, which moves beyond separate doctrines and global “relativism” into a pluralistic type of “global village” that stresses the role of humankind as the central common factor. It is this type of ideology that is “imagined” in this text as a transnational identity “whose grounding premise” is “Canada’s heterogeneity” (Mukherjee, “Canadian” 92). Although Canada remains largely invisible, it provides location for the novel, and for Pi, thus

“identity for Canada . . . incorporate[s] within it the potential for contradiction, diversity and paradox” (McKillop 6).

The incorporation of cultural difference and the contradictions and complexities of living within a collective mode of identification are explored in the *Life of Pi*. From a transnational perspective, the novel examines the way in which cultural differences are subsumed in the attempt to form a “civilised” society, which is encompassed here within the nation-state of Canada. Zygmunt Bauman discusses the blurring of difference between “domesticated and wild – the familiar and the strange, ‘us’ and the strangers” (54) in relation to the construction of identity. Bauman suggests that “the question is no longer how to get rid of the strangers and the strange, but how to live with them – daily and permanently” (55). This is a key issue with regard to a pluralist society such as Canada. Martel uses Pi to recount a number of incidents, which result in various animals “coming to surprising living arrangements” (84): rhinoceros and goats, stoats and rats, golden agouti and spotted paca, to name but a few. These unusual examples of co-habitation also extend to the “freak suspension of the predator-prey relationship” (85), including dogs acting as foster mothers for orphaned lion cubs and circus lions accepting the dominance of the ringmaster.

The case is also given of a small brown mouse, put in the terrarium as food for the vipers, which “built itself a nest, stored the grains we gave it in various hideaways and scampered about in plain sight of the snakes” for several weeks (85). The explanation given for this type of bizarre collective behaviour is that some sort of “lack” or necessity within the community is being met – the “need of companionship” (85); the desire for a leader; the

absence of a mother figure. All the creatures involved willingly incorporate difference in order to achieve fulfilment because “the fiction guarantees their social well-being and staves off violent anarchy” (86). This is not a utopian view of social unity, however; indeed, Martel describes how the mouse was eventually “bitten by a young viper but devoured – and immediately – by an adult”; afterward the snakes went back to consuming all the mice fed to them. The mouse is useful precisely in its capacity as a stranger, protected by its very difference: once the mouse becomes the same as the other prey, it is commodified and therefore consumed.

According to Eva Mackey, “Canada is the ‘very house of difference’”, and she suggests it has developed “a pluralist national identity” as part of a “flexible strategy” to “manage diverse populations” (12-13). By inscribing multiculturalism into its constitution, Canada can be seen to incorporate difference, in order to maintain a unified nation-state. There are those who claim that “Canada has no identity at all, or at least not a real one” (Mackey 9), and that it is this “lack” of identity that has brought issues such as “pluralism” and “tolerance” to the fore. Indeed, “diversity is often considered one of Canada’s defining characteristics, a characteristic that distinguishes it from all other nations” (Mackey 101). However, as Martel’s trope of the mouse demonstrates, it is possible that difference may actually also be commodified and consumed, in what Root regards as an act of cultural cannibalism.ⁱⁱ Root states that “the cannibal is able to live and grow where there is a void – which is to say, an absence of a particular element (or cluster of elements) that is necessary to the cohesion and balance of the whole” (16). Canada has been “consistently considered in some sort of ‘crisis of identity’” – a crisis which

opens up a void that must be filled (Mackey 8). It is possible to suggest, therefore, that Canada consumes and absorbs the multiple national identities of those who are its citizens so as to fill this void, so that “multiculturalism” and “plurality” become its mode of national identification.

Opposition of “Self” and “Other” Subverted

A transnational approach to this text not only reveals the disjunctions, contradictions and paradoxes of living “in-between” nationality, of being both “Self” and “Other,” but also moments where the “Other” is internalised by the “Self” for the sake of preservation of that “Self”. The isolation Pi experiences on the lifeboat parallels a national “isolationist” ethnocentrism, which creates a void that demands more consumption and accumulation in order for it to be filled. Difference between “Self” and “Other” is accentuated in establishing a dominant global ideology that in turn reveals a “lack”; this, then, requires the “Other” to be internalised in an attempt to satisfy the perceived need. An example of this concept is apparent in the development of a global food culture, where the eating of ethnic and exotic foods – once thought to indicate a sophisticated palate – is now a generally accepted part of everyday Western life. The internalisation of the “Other” has become so commonplace in this respect that it is no longer considered unusual for a Frenchman to eat a Chinese meal. This type of commodification and consumption is, of course, allegorised by Martel in the cannibalistic actions of the French chef (307-310). The Frenchman literally consumes and incorporates cultural difference, in the guise of the Taiwanese sailor and the Indian woman, Pi’s mother. She

provides the embodiment of Pi's culture and nationality, the "motherland" of his birth.

Pi's response to this loss of nationality is to take on the cannibalistic role himself, by killing the cook and removing and consuming his vital organs:

I stabbed him in the stomach. He grimaced but remained standing. I pulled the knife out and stabbed him again . . . He dropped like a stone. And died . . . I stabbed him repeatedly. His blood soothed my chapped hands. His heart was a struggle – all those tubes that connected it. I managed to get it out. It tasted delicious . . . I ate his liver. I cut off great pieces of his flesh.

(310-11)

The void that is created by the loss of ethnic national identity is filled by the consumption of another form of national identification. Moreover, Pi's cannibalistic action also has other complex cultural implications, in that it involves consuming both "Self" and "Other" – the cook has already eaten Pi's mother. Here the traditional binary oppositions between insider and outsider are problematised and subverted; the consumer is now the consumed, and the boundaries and divisions made apparent by cultural difference are crossed and re-crossed. From a transnational perspective the character of Pi reveals the difficulties and disjunctions of the process of identity, as it is lived between and within multiple nationalities.

It is worthy of note that the Frenchman is complicit in his own death: "The knife was all along in plain view on the bench. We both knew it. He could have had it in his hands from the start. He was the one who put it there" (310). It seems that a dominant ideology may provide the tools for its own

destruction: the “decline of the modern state” means that there is now the opportunity for “society to be given the power to decide its own existence and control its own development, framed by new relations among the components constituting planetary reality” (Melucci 69). The complex relationship between the global and the local in terms of cultural identity is brought under scrutiny here – who feeds off whom? According to Roland Robertson, there is “much to the argument that it is the particular which makes the universal work”, but “it is also the case that cosmopolitanism depends on localism” (178). Likewise, from a transnational perspective, the universal and the particular are intimately linked and interwoven.

The move towards the incorporation of the entire planet into one whole, complex and interdependent system has not expunged the human “need and duty to exist as individuals” (Melucci 61); rather, it has strengthened and increased this need. Ultimately, every collective community is composed of individuals who are searching for a firm foundation for their personal identity. As Melucci comments, “we search for permanent anchors, and question our own life stories” (62). For the migrant, such as Pi, establishing a personal multicultural territory involves the quest for a transnational mode of identification. The diasporic journey and cultural clashes experienced by Pi result in difficult choices and continual change. The need to choose, although associated with freedom, also threatens security and fosters unpredictability: “uncertainty has become a stable component in behaviour . . . we cannot act without choosing among the possible options” (Melucci 62). Choice involves rejecting more than can be accepted and the desire is to take up all the options. As Melucci argues, “here the self fragments as it seeks to deny the

partial nature of every choice by separating out its inner reality” (63). It is the inner reality of an existence played out in the “maze of globalised spaces in-between” (Schulze-Engler 13), that is examined when Pi finds himself adrift on the lifeboat.

The group on board initially comprises one human being, Pi Patel, and a variety of creatures: a zebra, a hyena, a tiger, an orang-utan, a rat and swarms of flies. On board the “mother ship” each group had shared the same territory, although they had largely remained segregated from one another. On the lifeboat, however, there are no such barriers or divisions, and eventually the result is the annihilation of all the group members apart from two: Pi Patel and the tiger Richard Parker. Close analysis of the text shows a dystopian vision of a world that has been compressed into a “single place” (R. Robertson 6). Globalisation, when defined as a concept that imagines the world as a whole, implies a certain sense of “unity” that may falsely lead to a somewhat idealistic notion of a move towards social integration and “world peace”. Roland Robertson argues that this is misleading, and instead uses the term “global unicity” in an attempt to indicate that globalisation is not of itself either a “good” or a “bad” thing (6). The impetus towards a cosmopolitan society, without national affiliation, is one that is problematised through the trope of the lifeboat – this place of refuge clearly becomes an area of contention and a site of confrontation. The construction of collective and individual identity is examined, not only through the dialectic between the “Self” and the “Other”, but also as regards an internal division between “Self” and “Self”, confronting what Smaro Kamboureli terms as “the split self” (89).

Melucci suggests that “the variability and the excess of opportunities that characterise a global society” are problematic for the “continuity of the self, and the boundaries of the self” (64): the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker problematises both of these aspects of the “Self”. In terms of the actuation of the “Self,” the Bengal tiger is emblematic of Pi’s nationality of birth, his Indian ethnic origin. In this respect Richard Parker can be seen as a symbol of nationalism. Pi states that:

It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness. (162)

Anderson calls attention to the fact that nations inspire such devotion in people that they will kill or die for them, and the reasons behind such love and sacrifice are to be found in the “cultural roots of nationalism” (7). Furthermore, Guibernau argues that nationalism “appears as a reaction to two intrinsic constituents of modernity that are closely linked to globalisation: radical doubt and fragmentation” (132). It is in the doubt and fragmentation caused by the loss of Pi’s national identity that nationalism becomes significant. Moreover, it is in confronting and learning to control the animistic externalisation of his ethnic nationalism that Pi finds a coherent cultural heterogeneity. In doing so he manages to come to terms with living with the paradoxes and contradictions of a transnational existence.

Whilst Pi is adrift in terms of a “located” nationality, Richard Parker continues to accompany him, a constant reminder of his “cultural roots”. On reaching a new land, however, Pi describes how “Richard Parker, companion

of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life" (285). Nevertheless, there is a caveat to this disappearance because, speaking to Pi in Toronto, the character of the "author" points out that even "after all these years, Richard Parker still preys on his mind" (42). Although separated from his Indian cultural roots, they remain a crucial component of Pi's transnational identity.

The Demise of the Nation-State

Jordan Stouck discusses Canadian literature as a site of "negotiation within the emerging Canadian post/national" (3). She argues that Canada defines itself "in terms of diversity over unity, individual over communal, relative over absolute, multiculturalism over melting pot" and as such "concepts of national identity" have become "contingent, uncertain and highly personal" (3). It is argued here that, as Canadian literature read from a transnational perspective, *Life of Pi* may be seen to explore the role of Canada in a "post/national" world. The myth of the nation-state is predicated on the human need for "belonging", on the instinct for survival, and on the desire for security, be it physical, emotional or spiritual. In *Life of Pi*, Martel examines the fears and insecurities of those who face the loss of the traditional ideological metanarratives that govern society and that form national communities. Over a decade ago, Frank Davey saw Canadian fiction as appearing to announce "the arrival of the post-national state" (*Post-National* 266). Furthermore, he points out that this state is "invisible to its own citizens" and "maintained by invisible political forces" (266). Martel does indeed situate Canada as an "absent presence" within the novel; however, he can also be seen to propose

a post-national model of Canadian identity, which offers cohesion and yet embraces diversity.

The ship on which Pi and his family set sail is named the *Tsimtsum*. It is Panamanian-registered, but its officers are Japanese and its crew “Taiwanese”, making it a floating representation of the globalisation wrought by capitalism. This ship embodies the means by which global interconnections and political and economic migrancy have become major factors in forming the diasporic, culturally hybrid world. It is possible to see the *Tsimtsum* as emblematic of the notion of the Nation-state itself, a vessel that carries a unified national identity, which is able to cross boundaries and yet remain contained and isolated, protected from external challenges: the ship is “bullishly indifferent to its surroundings. The sun shone, rain fell, winds blew, currents flowed, the sea built up hills, the sea dug up valleys – the *Tsimtsum* did not care. It moved with the slow, massive confidence of a continent” (100). The community it carries is international,ⁱⁱⁱ diverse and multicultural, and yet located.

This collection of disparate entities is encompassed within the “Ship of State.”^{iv} They are held together as a group, both by their location and by their mutual purpose in journeying to another place. In fact they could be said to “belong” to a metaphoric nation, interdependent and sharing a common “nationality”. Antony Easthope asserts that “national unity, nation as unity, is an effect. . . of the process of collective identification, with a common object which is accompanied by identification of individuals with each other” (22). The “citizenship” of those onboard the “*Tsimtsum*” is created and maintained through the need to coexist, to belong, and although culturally plural, the

conceptualisation is one of a bounded space. Barthes discusses the mythology of ships, describing them as being “an appropriation of the world. . . an emblem of closure”; he speaks of “the ship as the habitat of man . . . a round smooth universe” of which he is “at once the god, the master and the owner” (66-7). The ship is presented as an emblem of security and a means of “appropriation of the world” (Barthes 67), rendering its members reliant on their group identity as protection from the outside world.

The common bond that unifies this disparate yet connected group of “citizens” is further emphasised in the clear resonances with an allegorical interpretation of the biblical myth of Noah’s Ark. In order to save humankind from the flood, Noah is instructed by God to build an Ark and to take on board his wife and family and two of every kind of creature; eventually the flood waters recede and they are saved, thus ensuring the survival of their offspring and the re-population of the earth. Pi’s family, their animals and the other passengers aboard the “Tsimtsum” can be seen to echo this creation story, in that they are being rescued from their previous lives, from a nation that is undergoing profound political change, and from the literal and figurative seas that surround them, in order to make a new life elsewhere.

It is particularly significant here to note that the Hindu, Christian and Islamic scriptures, which are at the heart of the three faiths practiced by Pi, all have their own versions of a flood myth. Indeed, the myth of a great flood “is encountered in one or another form in virtually every part of the world” (Nghiem Van, “Flood” 304). Almost every culture has its own tradition of a great deluge, which can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the devastation and ultimate recreation of civilisation. In drawing obvious parallels

with this mythology, Martel appears to be deconstructing the nature of the nation-state, which attempts to inculcate its citizens with the perception that they are of one “family”. There is one key difference, however; unlike Noah’s Ark, the “Tsimtsum” sinks. As Antonio Melucci observes, members of contemporary society are “the bewildered witnesses to the demise of the great stories of salvation” (62).

Melucci goes on to assert that “the nation-state, which enclosed multiple peoples and cultures within the boundaries of a centralised political order, is tottering” (68). According to Tambini, “the institutions of national citizenship are experiencing a decline in their ability to provide for equality, liberty and civic participation” (201). The sinking of the “Tsimtsum” allegorises the phenomenon of the destruction of the systems that have conventionally controlled the shaping of individual and collective identities. The “ship of state” is home to a culturally plural society, in which the various groups are held within clearly demarcated boundaries: the animals are kept “confined to their cages” with “hatch covers over their bay” (104); the paying passengers are assigned their own quarters below decks, as are the members of the crew; the officers are to be found up on the bridge. Indeed, they are “the only people on the ship who spoke English, the masters of destiny” – theirs is the language of the West and of power (104). As a metaphorical Ark, the cargo ship provides a place of refuge and a means of escape, a way of transcending boundaries, and an opportunity to belong to a diverse and pluralistic community.

Yet the ship’s systems break down. The machinery that powers the ship fails, and there follows an invasion by external forces, represented by the sea water that is “surging from below like a riotous crowd” (103). Also, in the

ensuing chaos, anarchy breaks out below decks, in the form of “shrieking” animals that run amok, “terrified, out of control, berserk” (104). There is a resonance here with Wright’s contention that the modern nation-state is being “eroded from above by globalization, and from below by demands of identity politics” (213). He points out that in Canada, the “autonomous power accorded to emerging diverse, self-conscious primary identity groups” may mean that these “diverse identities will no longer be subsumed under monolithic national citizenship” (236). According to Michael Billig, it can be argued that nationalism has changed its role. It is no longer “a force which creates and reproduces nation-states; it is one of the forces which is destroying nations” (139). The narrator describes how “the ship sank. It made a sound like a monstrous metallic burp. Things bubbled at the surface and then vanished” (97). Martel emphasises the sound, through repetition of the phrase, on a number of occasions at various points in the narrative, thus evoking the idea of consumption and notions of the nation-state as having fallen prey to both interior and exterior forces.

The name of the cargo ship, the “Tsimtsum”, is of particular importance in the context of this allegory. The word “tsimtsum” is of kabbalistic Jewish origin, dating back to the mid-sixteenth century. The word literally means “contract”. The kabbalists imagined that before the cosmos could be created, God had to withdraw or contract. As Daniel Matt explains, if God “pervaded all space, how could there be room for anything other than God?” (80) – hence, the need for divine shrinkage to give rise to the vacuum that would then be filled by the universe: “The primordial void carved out by *tsimtsum* was a pregnant void, the site of creation” (Matt 80). In naming the ship “Tsimtsum”

Martel once again draws on creation mythology. The omnipotent nation-state, as an all-consuming force for globalisation and cultural hegemony, is emptied out, reduced “to a pinprick hole” (101), thus allowing space for the creation of new systems and forms of collective and individual identities.

Whilst the sinking of the “Tsimtsum” does suggest the destruction of the nation-state, it also leads to the appearance of another society, created from the remains of the old. Pi finds himself on a lifeboat with a zebra, a hyena, an orang-utan and a tiger. The allegorical story that follows resonates with some psychoanalytical interpretations of flood myths. Eleanor Bertine, for example, suggests that in terms of psychoanalysis, the flood stands for the unconscious, which she describes as

the greatest peril to consciousness, while also being a source of regeneration. The flood comes at the moment of crisis. To the majority it spells destruction, to the hero rebirth. Which it shall be depends upon whether the spark of divine wisdom within him enables a man to orient himself positively to the experience of the waters, accepting them as a suprapersonal reality capable of bringing renewal. Such an orientation or adaptation is symbolized by the ark or chest or boat. In this he may ride out the deluge and emerge to a new heaven and a new earth.

(203-4)

The figure of Pi may be seen to offer a metaphorical representation of “the hero” – read here as being someone who can adapt to the effects of globalisation, and use them to his advantage. In fact, Pi embarks on a process

of identification that incorporates a number of cultures, reaffirms his polytheistic beliefs, and eventually results in him emerging as a Canadian.

Besner argues that “Canada has recently re-imagined itself” and has become “something variously and plurally postnation” (44). Homi Bhabha speaks of

how easily the boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the Western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality providing a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent. (149)

This is clearly demonstrated in *Life of Pi* when, from within the destruction of the ship, a new vessel emerges, a lifeboat, and a very different sort of community – one that exists within a liminal zone of dislocation. Wright acknowledges that “Canada’s historic weakness as a national state” has now “left open the space for new identities” (232). Furthermore, he points out that ultimately, “a recognition of the multiplicity of identities rather than insistence on universal national citizenship may provide the only alternative to violent disintegration in Canada” (Wright 233). The “violent disintegration” of the community on board the lifeboat results in the representation of “a world and a nation in which social structures no longer link regions or communities” and where “individual alienation has become normal” (Davey, *Post-National* 266). It is a world in which the only alternative model to the power and protection of the nation-state is that of the vulnerable individual, the transnational who constantly seeks location within an “imagined community”.

Canada – “the Promised Land”?

Davey discusses the discourse of Canada as “an individual space, or a space that permits individuals” (238) and it is in respect of the latter that Canada provides the figurative trope of a “promised land” for Pi. As Ignatieff points out, being part of a nation-state is a significant form of belonging, for “without a nation’s protection, everything that an individual values can be rendered worthless” (6). Pi discovers an “island” that appears to offer him protection from the dangers and terrors of his landless existence at sea. The motif of the island is one that evokes a wide range of interpretive possibilities – not least of which being the overwhelming desire for refuge, such as that which is to be found in the concept of a “homeland”.

Pi describes waking from sleep to the sight of an island formed of algae and floating in the ocean.

I opened my eyes.

In the near distance I saw trees. I did not react. I was certain it was an illusion that a few blinks would make disappear.

The trees remained. In fact, they grew to be a forest. They were part of a low-lying island. I pushed myself up. I continued to disbelieve my eyes. But it was a thrill to be deluded in such a high-quality way. . .

I blinked deliberately, expecting my eyelids to act like lumberjacks. But the trees would not fall.

I looked down. I was both satisfied and disappointed with what I saw. The island had no soil. Not that the trees stood in water. Rather, they stood in what appeared to be a dense mass

of vegetation . . . Who ever heard of land with no soil? I felt satisfaction because such a geology confirmed that I was right, that this island was a chimera, a play of the mind. . . The current gently pushed the lifeboat closer to the illusion. (257)

When Pi tests the land with his foot, however, the apparent mirage turns out to be solid and he believes he is saved: mistakenly so, it transpires, as the island itself proves to be a living and inhospitable entity from which he must ultimately flee.

The acceptance of the illusion of nation as reality, indeed the tendency to hypostasize the concept of nationalism, gives rise to an impression of cultural “rootedness”, just as the trees on Martel’s island appear to be rooted on land. However, this “was not an island in the conventional sense of the term – that is a small landmass rooted to the floor of the ocean – but was rather a free-floating organism” (271); in other words, whilst “nationalism” may be conceived as arising from links with an historical, unseen and immemorial past, it could, in fact, be seen as a self-perpetuating and self-sufficient cultural construct.

Life of Pi offers an insight here into the concept of nation as an “imagined” community; one that is envisaged in terms of an “ethnic” nationalism, which denies access to any form of interloper. A clear opposition is set up in the novel, between the island as a subversion of an edenic space, and “a utopian Canada, humane and non-directive, racially tolerant” and accepting of difference (Davey, *Post-National* 55).

Hans Kohn suggests that “nationality is a state of mind” (18), one which is expressed through the conception of a nation-state. The invisible discourse

of Canada, which pervades this novel, imagines a community of multiplicity and heterogeneity. The trope of the island foregrounds the “imagined” nature of the construction of national identity. For example, despite the visual evidence before him, Pi cannot accept the reality of the existence of the island until he steps upon it: “it was then that I believed” (258). However, his belief is clearly not rational or solidly based because in doing so, Pi goes on to confess that “the only thing that sank was my mind; my thought process became disjointed” (258). Connor asserts that “the national bond is subconscious and emotional rather than conscious and rational in its inspiration” (“Beyond” 384). The island is not actually land. It has neither soil, nor substance, but in his need to survive, Pi suspends his disbelief and allows himself to accept it as real. In the same way, Martel’s representation of nation can be seen to be one that is, of itself, both illusory and elusive, whilst at the same time remaining necessary for human survival. It is a conceptualisation that captures the intangible essence of nation as a psychological bond that both joins people together and at the same time separates them from all others.

The island has all the basic requirements necessary for physical survival. Martel describes it in terms of a lush, natural haven, “ a great green plateau with a forest in its centre” (265). The algae that constitutes it offers “delicious” (259) sustenance, there is fresh water available and the trees shelter Pi during a severe storm. The island also sustains “an entire nation of meerkats” (275), a vast community whose human characteristics confer feelings of companionship and society onto Pi. This place, then, meets all of the essential necessities of life, and offers protection from the terror and violence of being adrift in the lifeboat; Pi has metaphorically found the

potential for a new nationality. However, it is only a temporary refuge. Pi, as an observer and an outsider, is isolated from the monocultural community of the island. In order to belong he must be consumed by the nation – absorbed so as to become an integral part of it.

Ultimately, as a “transnational,” this is not an option for Pi because his mode of identification transgresses the boundaries of a fixed nationality. Despite meeting his basic needs, the island does not prove the safe haven that Pi imagines it to be – it transpires that the island is actually carnivorous. Close examination of the fruit from the tree reveals “an unspeakable pearl at the heart of a green oyster. A human tooth” (280). There are thirty-two “fruits” on the tree in all, “a complete human set” (281). Pi realises that a person must have died in the tree and over a period of time been digested by the acidity it produced. Once again Martel draws on creation mythology in order to deconstruct the nation-state, by drawing a parallel between Pi’s “consumption” of the fruit from the tree and the biblical narrative of the fall of Adam and Eve. Adam eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and discovers his nakedness; in other words, he becomes aware of himself in relation to others as part of humanity. Having eaten the fruit, Adam and Eve feel the need to clothe themselves and are compelled to leave the garden of Eden, thus becoming isolated from each other and from God. When Pi discovers the fruit, he, too, gains knowledge, in the revelation of the dangers of fragmentation and isolation. In an increasingly globalised world, the nation-state embodies a potentially destructive force. Albeit imaginary and elusive, the ideology of nation and nationalism is envisaged here as a malignant entity, intent on the

absorption of the individual, the annihilation of particularity and the consumption of difference.

The teeth that Pi reveals are connoted as precious through the metaphor of the pearl – treasure that holds the essence of individual identity. Teeth are the structures of the body most resistant to fire or putrefaction and archaeologists are able to identify skeletons, using dental remains to provide details of age, gender, and possible cause of death. The arrangement of the teeth is unique to an individual and can be as useful as fingerprints for identification purposes. These teeth, though, are each contained separately, isolated from one another, thus dispersing what was once a single identity so that it has become fragmented and ultimately unrecognisable. As has already been mentioned, change, particularly with regard to identity, involves risk; it threatens security and presents the possibility of loss. Moving from one cultural context to another demands making a choice between those elements that are to be accepted or rejected, and this is something that Pi resists.

Melucci describes how this process puts the self through a “profound process of transformation which splits it into multiple units” (63). After his discovery of the fruit, therefore, Pi leaves in his lifeboat, preferring to “perish in search of his own kind than to live a lonely half-life of physical comfort and spiritual death on this murderous island” (282-3). The victim on the island chooses to accept the security it offers, and in doing so rejects all other possibilities, the result of which is the total fragmentation and consumption of his identity. Pi, on the other hand, refuses the “fixity” of existence on the island and accepts instead the risk of the unknown, in order to maintain the multiple

facets of his transnational identity. Eventually, it is Canada which provides him with the means to remain culturally plural and “whole”.

The process of enculturation, through which the individual must learn cultural adaptation to survive, is interpreted here as one of consumption, destruction and dissolution. Models of national citizenship that demand a coherent set of shared attributes are problematised. The island is devoid of any external influences:

The air of the place carried no flies, no butterflies, no bees, no insects of any kind. The trees sheltered no birds. The plains hid no rodents, no grubs, no worms, no snakes, no scorpions; they gave rise to no other trees, no shrubs, no grasses, no flowers. The ponds harboured no freshwater fish. The seashore teemed with no weeds, no crabs, no crayfish, no coral, no pebbles, no rocks. With the single, notable exception of the meerkats, there was not the least foreign matter on the island, organic or inorganic. It was nothing but shining green algae and shining green trees. (271)

This list of negative attributes and the total lack of any form of life other than the meerkats, the algae and the trees emphasises the sterility of an isolationist existence that is without diversity or difference. There are echoes here of Bourne's "melting pot" metaphor, which he says results in a culture that is "washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity" (1736). He envisages instead a “trans-national” world in which a variety of cultures co-exist, "inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse" (1737). This co-existence of cultures is made possible with regard to

Canada through the paradox of Hardin's postulation that Canadians assert their national identity "by not finding it" (26).

It is of significance that Martel refers to the island as "leviathan" (272). Clearly "leviathan" has a number of connotations in this context, but it is of particular relevance here that "Leviathan" is the name of a famous political treatise by Thomas Hobbes, published in the mid-seventeenth century. In it Hobbes argues that humankind's natural state is one of conflict and, in order to rise above this state, it is necessary to sacrifice individual liberty for the sake of "leviathan", otherwise known as "the organism of political society, the commonwealth" (OED). *Life of Pi* challenges this traditional perception of the nation-state as the "omnipotent Leviathan" (Wright 214).

Wright suggests that the nation-state is "increasingly seen as an institutional formation of the past, eroded under pressure from globalization, local identity politics, and the contradictory demands of differentiated citizenship" (214). However, in his view "the study of Leviathan can be 'eschewed' too much," (236). It is argued here that *Life of Pi* provides a fictive representation of the ways in which transnational identity is being "accommodated within new plural constitutional structures in Canada" (Wright 236). On the other hand, Wright contends that it is "equally plausible" that a "central state claiming to act according to national interests" will come to suppress such plurality in the event of the threat of crisis to Canadian nationality (236). As Wright very pertinently asks, "do we confront the demise of Leviathan or Leviathan in repose?" (236).

In conclusion, Pi's search for location for his transnational identity does not find fulfilment on board the Tsimtsum, the lifeboat or the island, but in the

“absent presence” of a Canadian national identity within the text. It is possible to argue that Martel offers Canada as a concept, as what he calls “the better story”, which stands as a metaphor for multicultural society, and in doing so glosses over the difficulties and traumas wrought by globalisation (317). The novel constructs a transnational model of individual national identification, which is placed within what Davey refers to as “the post-national culture” of Canada (*Post-National* 262). Moreover, Davey argues that “the transnational world constitutes individual opportunity” for “growth and creativity” (*Post-National* 264). This chapter has shown *Life of Pi* to reflect identification as a process in the cultural context of contemporary Canada. It is a context that shifts “from one end of the diaspora to another” and requires a readiness to “move from differently translated worlds, each with its own inflection” (Hall, “Subjects” 299).

The novel demonstrates the ways in which transnational identification moves beyond national boundaries and exposes the conflicts and disjunctions of living in a globalised society. The tensions that exist around notions of cultural and ideological conflict are not easily resolved. However, as Paul Giles points out, “transnationalism can probe the significance of cultural jagged edges, structural paradoxes . . . and illuminate our understanding” (“Transnationalism and Classic” 65). A transnational analysis of *Fugitive Pieces* in the following chapter reveals Canada as a liminal zone, where both spatial and temporal boundaries are disrupted.

ⁱ Some mathematicians maintain the philosophical tenet that numbers and the relationships among them exist outside of time, and so are in that sense eternal. Hilary Putnam, for example, comments that “when one speaks of the ‘existence of numbers’ one gets the picture of mathematics as describing eternal objects” (10).

ⁱⁱ For a detailed discussion of this argument, see Deborah Root’s *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*. Oxford: Westview Press, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ “International” is used here to denote the bringing together of a variety of nations and nationalities, as opposed to “transnational,” which, in this context refers to that which is above and beyond the idea of nation itself.

^{iv} The ship of state is an important ancient trope which, as David Miller observes, reaches back as far as Sophocles’ *Antigone* (“American” 188).

CHAPTER FOUR

Fugitive Pieces – Anne Michaels

This chapter takes a comparative view of the way in which notions of identity can change in relation to those of place and geography, through the textual analysis of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. The previous chapters have shown that the collective and individual identification provided by nationhood and nationality is continually being called into question in these Canadian texts. The movement towards Canada, which provides the ordering principle of the novels considered for this thesis, situates the Canada of *Fugitive Pieces* as neither central nor marginal in the text, but somewhere "in-between". The first two texts dealt with in this dissertation, *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *Life of Pi*, place Canada as a type of metaphorical "promised land". Canada, as a location, is somewhat peripheral to Mootoo's text and, although realisable, is far from central in Martel's. *Fugitive Pieces* is located in Poland, Greece and Canada, with Canada taking the form of a metaphorical "Way Station", and therefore both literally and figuratively encompassing both centre and margin.

As discussions intensify about the concept of "nation" as a construct, internationalisation and globalisation are becoming ever more important factors with regard to identity. Bhabha suggests that contemporary culture is in "a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience. Increasingly, 'national' cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities" (*Location* 6). In other words, the discourse of contemporary culture may be seen to be refiguring conventional notions of "national" identities. This refiguring is particularly noticeable in the

literary production of the national culture of Canada, which claims multiculturalism as one of its key principles. *Fugitive Pieces* reflects these changes in its representation of nation and identity within the text.

It is particularly appropriate to adopt a transnational conceptual framework for the interpretation of this novel, because the text draws widely on a breadth of national cultures, creating a symbiotic relationship between them. This is a relationship which, for example, allows the pouring of fresh water in Canada to become a reification of “not only the Greek lament ‘that the dead may drink’ but also the covenant of the Eskimo hunter, who pours fresh water into the mouth of his quarry” (120-1). Such is Canada’s position as a point of cultural interface in the novel, that it provides the first of the three central concerns of this chapter. This is dealt with under the sub-heading “The Way Station”, so-called because it provides the title of two chapters in the novel, the first set in Toronto, the second in Athens. The second part of this chapter, “Place and Memory”, shows how human identification is intimately linked in the novel with place and time through memory so that “the present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative” (48). The third and final section, “History and Vertical Time”, examines Michaels’ concern with history as a powerful discourse that is neither reliable nor fixed. She challenges the veracity of History through the notion of “Vertical Time”, which again provides the title of two of the novel’s chapters and is considered here to be key to a transnational understanding of the text.

Michaels’ novel clearly resonates with Nicola King’s opinion that “the question of identity is intimately bound up with the processes of memory and writing” (121). The association between identity, memory and writing is a key

focus of the text from the outset. Its short preface draws attention to the “countless manuscripts – diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts” that were “lost or destroyed” during the Second World War. The loss of these narratives echoes the loss of identity of those “who did not live to retrieve them,” while “other stories” remain “concealed in memory, neither written or spoken” (i). The preface goes on to describe the death of the poet, Jakob Beer, “a translator of posthumous writing from the war,” who was “struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993, at age sixty” (i). Michaels immediately renders Jakob an “absent presence” in the novel by preceding the narrative with the announcement of his death. Thus, Jakob’s identity is founded, from the outset, on absence and concealment. Furthermore, the reader is told that “shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs” (i). It is these memoirs, written to an imaginary son or daughter, that form the first section of the novel. Thus, Michaels explicitly underlines the relationship between memory, writing and identity.

It is through the written inscription of Jakob’s memories that the identity of Jakob Beer is revealed in the first part of the novel. The deceased, and therefore absent, Jakob is able to write himself into existence for future generations through his memoirs. These hidden memoirs are found by Ben, a Canadian university professor, who goes to Greece in search of Jakob’s hand-written notebooks. Moreover, Beer continues to be an absent presence in the second part of the novel; set in the present, it gives the first-person narration of Ben’s own memoirs, addressed to the deceased Jakob. Using the “fugitive pieces” of the lives of the characters, a dialectic is set up in the novel

between past and future, so that memory, writing and identity become inextricably linked. Indeed, as Michaels points out through Ben,

the hindsight of biography is as elusive and deductive as long-range forecasting, guesswork, a hunch . . . Assessing the influence of all the information we'll never have, that has never been recorded. (222)

The recording of information – of memories – is shown to be of the utmost importance with regard to identification, not only in terms of what is known, but also in relation to what can never be recovered. *Fugitive Pieces* demonstrates that national and cultural identity are subject to construction through memory, and to the gaps and absences of memory. This contemporary Canadian novel reflects the way in which cultural and national identities in Canada have become part of a closely-woven “biography of longing” for both the individual and the nation (17).

The Way Station

The novels under scrutiny in this dissertation are resistant to the “binary bind of colonial/postcolonial”, which, as Robert Budde points out, “neatly packages central Canadian racist ideologies and, more often than not, places the racialized subject safely in the ‘Third World,’ in the ‘Orient,’ or back overseas” (285). *Fugitive Pieces* is a text that particularly reflects this resistance in that the “racialized subject” evades the fixity of national identity, encompassing multiple cultures and moving beyond the dialectic of centre and margin, whilst encompassing both. According to Stephen Slemon, “ex-colonial settler literatures” are problematic because of their “ambivalent position within

the First-World/Third-World, colonizer/colonized binary" ("Unsettling" 236). This liminal position is one that is very relevant to the situation regarding Canada, and is clearly reflected in Michaels' narrative. Terry Goldie is convincing in his argument that almost all Canadians "are immigrants or children of immigrants", and that Canada should therefore be positioned "in light of the subjectivity produced by being the second world" (310). Goldie is referring here to Alan Lawson's view that settler-invader cultures, such as Canada, occupy a "Second World" of discursive polemics.¹ The term "Second World" has a certain resonance with Michaels' construction of Canada in *Fugitive Pieces*, in that it offers "another realm to inhabit" (29). Moreover, the text offers a transnational perception of Canada, as a "realm" that is "big as the globe and as expansive as time" (Michaels 29).

Lawson describes the way in which "Second World" writing has an "inherent awareness of both 'there' and 'here' and the cultural ambiguity of these terms" ("Cultural" 69). *Fugitive Pieces* can be seen to reflect this awareness, in that it has three locations – Poland, Greece and Canada – with each country being constructed in relation to the other, through the narrative of history and memory. Moreover, there is a sense in the novel, in which individual identification, through the metanarrative of archaeological history, is related to the earth as a whole. Thus, in a world where "every human" is "a newcomer", identity moves beyond specific nations or nationalities (103). In this respect, nation and nationality become "stopovers", resting places in terms of identity, and national and cultural boundaries are continually breached. From a transnational perspective, the trope of the way station is one of liminality, a paradoxical place of displacement, which challenges "the

hegemonic force of the concept of 'nation'" (Slemon, "Unsettling" 238). Frank Davey describes Canada as "a nation in which social structures no longer link regions or communities, political process is doubted, and individual alienation has become normal" (*Post* 266). This perception of Canada as a "post-national state" that is "invisible to its own citizens" and "indistinguishable from its fellows", resonates with Michaels' concern with the notion of "The Way Station" (*Post* 266).

Parallels are overtly drawn between Canada and Greece in the opening lines of the first "Way Station" chapter, through a comparison of two of these major cities: "Like Athens, Toronto is an active port . . . a city where almost everyone has come from elsewhere . . . bringing with them their different ways of dying and marrying, their kitchens and songs" (89). This conception of the way station is one in which cities such as Athens and Toronto appear to exist interchangeably, and national borders are therefore rendered permeable and shifting. Peopled by travellers, the way station is a place where everyone is a "stranger". These "strangers" are, as Madan Sarup suggests, "unlike an alien or a foreigner" (102). In fact, the stranger "is not simply a newcomer, a person temporarily out of place. S/he is an eternal wanderer, homeless always and everywhere" (Sarup 102). The "stranger" is an individual for whom identification is a continuous process, whose identity does not have the "fixity" offered by place.

Identity for the stranger is perceived here as an ongoing journey, constantly in flux and unfettered by boundaries of space and time. As Bauman rightly states, "strangers are no longer authoritatively preselected, defined and set apart;" instead, they are now "as unsteady and protean as one's own

identity; as poorly founded, as erratic and volatile” (54). In this respect, individuals may be “strangers” not only amongst those they live with, but also, as Kristeva confirms, “strangers” to themselves.ⁱⁱ There is much truth in Sarup’s argument that at any one time, “individuals inhabit simultaneously several . . . widely divergent social worlds” (102). As a result, at any given time, the individual is not completely “at home” in any single one of these worlds and is “uprooted” from each. The experience of the stranger, therefore, is one that is common to the modern individual and as such is universal, and indeed transnational, in nature. Indeed, this notion of the stranger has particular resonance with the “individual alienation” mentioned previously, which Davey argues is commonly felt by Canadians in the current milieu (*Post* 266).

Bauman comments that “today’s strangers are by-products, but also the means of production, in the incessant – because never conclusive – process of identity-building” (54). The migrant is the quintessential stranger in terms of individual identification, and Jakob Beer is a fictional embodiment of this. He is a Polish-Jew, a first-generation survivor of the Holocaust, who is rescued by a Greek archaeologist, Athos Roussos. Athos smuggles the young Jakob out of Poland, back to the island of Zakynthos and from there they move to Canada. The first “Way Station” chapter details Jakob’s encounter with Canada as a place of refuge, respite and painful adjustment. He remains there until after Athos’s death, living “in a small flat in a strange city in a country I did not yet love” (115). Jakob is a “stranger” and continues to be so throughout his life. However, the use of the word “yet” is significant here, in that Jakob’s relationship with Canada – his “Way Station” – is maintained after

he leaves the country. He continues to return to Canada every year and eventually falls in love with and marries a Canadian.

The second “Way Station” chapter of the novel is narrated by Ben, the child of concentration-camp survivors, a man haunted by his parents’ past. Ben’s parents were originally from Warsaw and fled to Canada after they were liberated, having found that “the ordinary world outside the camp had been eradicated” (205). Unlike Jakob, Ben did not experience the devastating effects of the Second World War at first-hand, and yet, his parents’ traumatic memories deeply affect his life, crossing boundaries of space and time: “my parents’ past”, he says, “is mine molecularly” (280). His identity is deeply interwoven with “the fine lines of pain, the tenderly held bitterness, the mesh of collusions, the ornate restrictions” that are the present-day legacy of past horror (249). It is only when he travels to Greece to look for Jakob’s hand-written memoirs that he finds some solace: “In my hotel room the night before I leave Greece, I know the elation of ordinary sorrow. At last my unhappiness is my own” (292). Athens becomes a “Way Station” for Ben – a liminal place of healing – where he finds location in the dislocation of being a stranger in “a foreign city”, before eventually returning to Canada and a prospective reconciliation with his past (289). He feels “companionship” with those who are taking advantage of the shelter provided by “tavern, oasis, country inn on the king’s highway. Way stations” (290). Michaels draws comparison with “Dostoyevsky and the charitable women in Tobol’sk. Akhmatova reading poetry to the wounded soldiers in Tashkent. Odysseus cared for by the Phaiakians on Scheria” (290). Dostoyevsky and Akhmatova both suffered exile and punishment for their art, and Homer’s mythical character, Odysseus,

spends ten years lost at sea before returning home to his wife. The common link that Michaels foregrounds between these three great figures of literature is their experience of respite on their respective journeys, and the universal need for a way station.

Collective ethnic and cultural identification, for a second-generation Jewish-Canadian such as Ben, is both complex and multiple. Canadian nationality does not provide him with a single “fixed” mode of identification. Indeed he describes his Canadian wife, Naomi, as “a foreigner, a stranger in our midst” (249). Naomi, Ben says, “blundered” into his family with “her openness, her Canadian goodwill”, indicating that these apparently “national” characteristics are ones that he and his family do not share. As a consequence, Ben appears to set himself apart from his own nationality. Ben’s identity is a construct that is infused with the ethnic and cultural background of his family, making him a “stranger” in his own land. His character, therefore, can be seen as a representation of the “individual alienation” present in Canadian society (Davey, *Post* 266). Both of the central protagonists of *Fugitive Pieces*, Ben and Jakob, require a space in which to come to terms with their fractured individual and collective identities, caused by either their own, or their family’s displacement. For these “strangers”, nation becomes a “stop-over” – a temporary place of belonging – a way station.

The character of Jakob allows Michaels to explore the nature of “strangerhood” further, through the “process” or journey of his individual identity, and his deep-seated desire for location. Following Athos’s death, Jakob goes back to Greece, the place where “from the first, [he] felt at home”

(164). The connotations of “home” evoke a sense of belonging; however, this is a “feeling” and is held concomitantly with a sense of estrangement, as Jakob acknowledges: “but I also knew I would always be a stranger in Greece, no matter how long I lived there” (164). In spite of his efforts “over the years to anchor [himself] in the details of the island”, Jakob continues to be a “stranger” both in terms of nation and his personal identity (164).

Nations, in the form of Poland, Canada and Greece, provide Jakob with “Way Stations” – temporary respite on his metaphysical journey – but it is through his relationship with the character Michaela that Jakob finally achieves his quest for “belonging” and discovers the paradox of location in dislocation. He describes how Michaela allows him to “become irrevocably unmoored”, to “slip free the knot and float, suspended in the present” (188). Where previously Jakob had struggled to find ways to “anchor” himself to place, to find a means of fixity, he is now able to drift as “the river floods” (188): “it is not on Idhra or on Zakynthos but among Michaela’s birches” that Jakob feels “for the first time safe above ground” (189).

When Jakob first meets Michaela, he is struck “by a feeling of homecoming” (178). Sarup suggests that “homecoming” has significant connotations with regard to the migrant, because it is an arrival “after a long absence, or an arduous or heroic journey” (94). The relationship between nation and the familial language of “home” has been discussed previously.ⁱⁱⁱ As a “stranger” Jakob finds his “home”, not in nationhood as such, but in the recognition of his “strangerhood” that is provided by Michaela. This is not the end of his journey but the beginning of another stage. There is a mutual crossing of boundaries, so that they “enter” the land of each other’s past and

both become “the foreigner, agape at an unfamiliar landscape” (186). Jakob describes how he crosses “the boundary of skin into Michaela’s memories, into her childhood” and begins the process of identification as a couple (185).

Michaels draws on the semantic field of territory in Jakob’s explanation of his relationship with Michaela: “I enter the landscape of her adolescence” and “show her the land of my past as she was showing me hers” (186). This is a mutual and transnational exchange of the identification offered by place, which signals a transcendence of boundaries that both encompasses and challenges the role of nation with regard to identity. Jakob’s description of their “coming together” warrants quotation at length here. He says it was

as unexpected, as accidental, as old Salonika itself, once a city of Castillian Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian. Where before the war you could hear muezzins call from minarets across the city, while church bells rang, and the port went quiet on Friday afternoons for the Jewish Sabbath. Where streets were crowded with turbans, veils, kippahs, and the tall sikkes of the Mevleves, the whirling dervishes. (183)

Salonika was a cosmopolitan city, a centre of culture and commerce that presented a “kaleidoscopic variety” of the world’s languages: a pluralistic society that exceeded the boundaries and divisions of nation, its population “comprised a multitude of religions and ethnicities” (Goodman 1). The comparison between Jakob and Michaela’s relationship and the multicultural plurality of Salonika foreground the transnational aspect of their joint identity as a couple. This shared understanding of continuously being “the foreigner”, “the stranger” gives them a “collective identity” – a sense of belonging – such

as that experienced in the “Way Station”. It is significant in this regard, that Michaela is a Canadian, so that once again Canada is positioned as a source of respite and belonging for Jakob. Jakob metaphorically “enters” Canada through the person of Michaela, and she, in exchange provides Jakob, the “stranger”, with a “transnational” means of identification.

Bauman states that strangers are “indispensable signposts in a life-itinerary without plan and direction” and, furthermore, that “they must be as many and as protean as the successive and parallel incarnations of identity in never-ending search for itself” (54-5). The concept of the stranger is therefore key with regard to identification for a multicultural society such as that of Canada. From a transnational standpoint, the stranger traverses divisions between nations, crossing and re-crossing cultural boundaries and the exclusivities of ethnicity. The stranger is one whose identity is persistently in transit, encompassing the inevitable contradictions and disjunctions that are the result of cultural clashes. One of the consequences of such an existence is that it calls attention to the immediate and particular, whilst remaining within the realm of the universal. This is reflected in the position of Canada as a “Way Station” in *Fugitive Pieces*, confirming Davey’s argument that in many contemporary Canadian texts, “Canada is an undifferentiable site in the human condition; the local is finely detailed but situated in a homogenous human situation” (259).

Place and Memory

From a transnational perspective *Fugitive Pieces* situates Canada in terms of a “Way Station” – a nation peopled by “strangers” – and thereby

reflects contemporary perceptions of Canada as a “post-national” society. Furthermore, the novel illustrates Jordan Stouck’s contention that “in the new fiction, Canadian nationalism has little presence” (1). The identification of *Fugitive Pieces* as a “Canadian” text raises the issue of the relationship between national identity and literature. This association has already been discussed in the introduction to this thesis, with regard to Corse’s argument that “national literatures are the cornerstones of national cultures” (1). Duncan Bell agrees that “representation practices” are “inherently bound up in the process of national identity formation: to mould a national identity” (69). He rightly argues that “the construction of stories about identity, origins, history and community is crucial” in the process of building national identity (Bell 69). However, as has already been established here, national identity with regard to Canada is a complex issue. It is necessary, therefore, to shift the focus of this analysis slightly, and consider the way in which *Fugitive Pieces* constructs collective and individual cultural identities through memory in relation to place, within a transnational framework.

Texts such as W. H. New’s *Land Sliding* confirm the significance of the thematic use of geographical space in Canadian literature: “Canadians, of course, have long thought of themselves in connection with the land” and historically landscape has often been seen as having a defining role within Canadian fiction (New, *Land* 17). Indeed, Dennis and Howells comment that in Canada:

The vast majority of the population live in urban and suburban settlements that occupy only a tiny proportion of the land surface and have only occasional contact with the vast non-urban area.

In these circumstances, it is little surprise that landscape is drenched in mythology, nor that novelists have paid so much attention to the role of landscape in shaping and mirroring personal identity. (12)

Furthermore, Stouck argues that, “given its historical role in defining Canadian identity, landscape and the politics of place” further contribute to what she terms “fraught identity processes” in Canada (“Introduction” 4).

As a Canadian writer, Michaels may be seen to conform to this preoccupation with landscape, place and identity. However, a change of emphasis is signalled in her narrator’s assertion that “there are places that claim you and places that warn you away” (157). This anthropomorphic representation of the land indicates a reversal of the roles of place and identity, as they have operated previously within colonial and postcolonial discourse. This novel moves beyond a traditionally defined Canadian geographical frame of reference, to offer a broadening of national boundaries that reflects contemporary concerns with regard to collective national identity and individual nationality through memory.

Anthony Smith argues that “memory, almost by definition, is integral to collective cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities” (*Myths* 10). *Fugitive Pieces* interrogates this concept through a fictional representation of the disjunctions that occur when individual and collective memory transgress traditional boundaries of space and time. According to Bell, there is a problem in “the temporal assumptions embedded in the concept of collective memory, the belief that such “memory” can transcend the individual consciousness and

enter into the public realm, outside time" (73). It is Bell's contention that there is a necessity for memory to be founded on actual experience, rather than shared knowledge of that experience; however, this is clearly arguable in the light of Michaels' text. Indeed, French historian, Pierre Nora, confirms that collective memory plays a key role in forming national identity. His monumental project on France's national and cultural history is called *les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-1993), and in it he concludes that

today France is its own memory or it is nothing. The country is not the end result or the uncertain outcome of the history of the state, but rather the summary and actualization of a series of representations that the French call *lieux de mémoire*.

(*Rethinking xxxvii*)

Memory is considered here to be of the utmost importance in the formation of a country's national identity. Naturally, this has repercussions when considered in the light of Canada's pluralistic society, and this is evident in the representation of national identification within *Fugitive Pieces*.

One of the ways in which Michaels represents the possibility of the transmission of memory is through the character of Ben. His wife, Naomi, claims that "a child doesn't have to inherit fear," but, as has already been mentioned, Ben insists that "my parents' past is mine molecularly" (280). Indeed for Ben, there is no way that Naomi "can stop the soldier who spat in my father's mouth from spitting into mine, through my father's blood" (280). Ben's father's experience of the Holocaust becomes translated into Ben's own memory and experience. One incident in particular clearly illustrates this. When he is around seven years old, Ben throws away a rotten apple, which

his father finds in the garbage. Ben describes how his father “fished it from the bin, sought me in my room, grabbed me tight by the shoulder, and pushed the apple into my face” (214). He remembers the way in which his father “pushed it into my teeth until I opened my jaw. Struggling, sobbing, I ate. Its brown taste, oversweetness, tears” (218). Michaels draws a comparison between this image and that of Ben’s memory of his father who ate frequently to avoid hunger pangs because,

once they gripped him, he’d eat until he was sick. Then he ate dutifully, methodically, tears streaming down his face, animal and spirit in such raw evidence, knowing he was degrading both . . . There was no pleasure for my father, associated with food.
(214)

The similarity between both the language and the images, which Michaels uses here, foregrounds the transmission of memories from generation to generation, from individual experience to collective memory and vice versa.

Nora makes a very pertinent argument when he states that “the atomisation of a general memory into a private one has given the obligation to remember a power of internal coercion” (“Between” 16). It is precisely this coercive aspect that Michaels brings to the fore in this incident. What is more, “the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals” (Nora “Between” 16). In other words, for those individuals who are estranged from their cultural heritage for whatever reason, there is an imperceptible and yet insistent and irresistible need for them to remember their origins. Ben confirms this, pointing out that “years later, living on my own, if I threw out leftovers or

left food on my plate in a restaurant, I was haunted by pathetic cartoon scraps in my sleep” (218). Once these memories are transmitted, they become new lived experience because, as Nora testifies, “once this incontestable memory has been interiorised, it eventually demands full recognition” (“Between” 16).

“Images,” Ben says, “brand you, burn the surrounding skin, leave their black mark. Like volcanic ash, they can make the most potent soil. Out of the seared place emerge sharp green shoots” (218). Here, memories are seeds that are planted and continue to live and grow in the next generation. In this way, Ben’s identity can be seen to incorporate a “reflective consciousness of personal connection with the past” and the “collective cultural identity” of his parents (Smith, *Myths* 208). Michael Kenny points out that an awareness of cultural history “both derives from and helps to create the memories of individuals”, and as such there is “a merging of individual and collective history” (431). *Fugitive Pieces* examines the way in which it is possible for past individual experience to enter a collective consciousness, and transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, so as to become part of the lived experience of later generations; so that collective memory becomes present experience for the individual.

Like Nora, Anthony Smith supports the notion that “collective memory” is transmissible from individual to individual and generation to generation. This transmission ensures the continuation of the national or cultural bond that separates “Us” from “Them”, those who are “foreign” from those who “belong” (Smith, *Myths* 208). However, Michaels problematises these binary oppositions – that place the individual in one collectivity rather than another – through the perspective of the stranger, the one who occupies the liminal

space in which to be “foreign” is actually to “belong”. Michaels’ engagement with this is demonstrated in the following incident where Jakob, recently arrived in Canada, is walking through Toronto one evening:

In the new coolness and new quiet, a thread of memory clung to a thought. Suddenly an overheard word fastened on to a melody; a song of my mother’s . . . The words tumbled out of my mouth, a whisper, then louder, until I was mumbling whatever I remembered. . . my spirit shape finally in familiar clothes and, with abandon, flinging its arms to the stars.

But the street wasn’t empty as I thought. . . A forest of eyes, of Italian and Portuguese and Greek ears. . . On dark verandahs, a huge invisible audience. . . There was nothing for it but to raise my foreign song and feel understood. (109-10)

The songs that Jakob sings draw on his collective cultural memories, such as the traditional Polish dance of the mazurek and the Yiddish folk song “How does the Czar Drink His Tea” (109). These songs represent Jakob’s cultural past, which is drawn into the present through memory, to become part of a “new” transnational moment that subverts the “foreign” and “other” into a shared sense of belonging. This is a “new” form of identification, which enables Jakob to “shrug off [his] strangeness because, the way Athos saw the world, every human was a newcomer” (103). In other words, viewed from an historical perspective, shared cultural memory may be seen as only an instant, and every individual becomes an immigrant into world history.

Smith explains that “codes, symbols and myths and the associated historical memories of common past experiences . . . are the main features of

collective cultural identities in most societies" (*Myths* 127). Indeed, it is generally accepted by modern theorists of nation and nationalism that commonly held ideas and ways of understanding both real past events and ancient myths of origin work towards locating a collectivity within a shared history. Canada's constitutional multiculturalism renders this location of a national collective identity problematic. However, Bell argues it is essential to "separate out the concepts of memory and myth rather than subsuming them under the monolithic notion of collective memory" (66). He considers there to be a "conceptual confusion" between the notion of collective memory and what he calls "mythscape" (66). Bell defines the notion of a mythscape as

the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples' memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The mythscape is the page upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re) written; it is the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present. (66)

In this respect, "mythscape" constitutes a political tool – a representational strategy – employed in the project of "nation-building", in order to "mould a national identity – a sense of unity with others belonging to the same nation" (Bell 69). The term "mythscape" is potentially useful; however, the concept is problematic when used in relation to Canada, bearing in mind the apparent lack of any essentially "Canadian" national identity.

Michaels' narrative challenges Bell's delineations regarding representations of individual and collective identity, through the

interpenetration of “collective memories” and “mythscape” that cross national and cultural boundaries. Henry Kreisel argues that “the heirs of one cultural tradition” can “transmit the values of that tradition,” whilst at the same time bringing “a uniquely valuable perspective to the exploration of other themes and other realities of the Canadian experience” so that “a new level of understanding” can be reached (11-12). The “Canadian experience”, or indeed the Canadian “mythscape”, is one that is shaped by a huge, transnational diversity of peoples and cultures. Likewise, *Fugitive Pieces* draws on the collective memories of a range of cultures, thus creating a mythscape that is not specific to any particular nation, but is transnational in nature.

A transnational approach reveals the complexities of a mythscape in which cultural and ideological identifications exist through, of and within each other through memory. The text demonstrates how, when an individual is acculturated into multiple collective cultural identities, the need to cultivate shared memories, from each of these cultures, becomes of even greater significance. Jakob Beer provides a fictional representation of “transnationality”, which is constructed through just such a cultivation of cultural memory. Thus, for a “transnational” individual such as Jakob, whose life spans a number of places and cultures, collective cultural memory has the effect of giving a sense of “belonging”, of being able to locate oneself in terms of place, whilst at the same time engendering a dislocatory aspect to identification. For example, Jakob claims that “if one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map” (193); in other words, it is possible to locate oneself in spatial terms through memory, even without a

specific nationality. On the other hand, collective remembrance may also result in dislocation. This can be seen in the way that Jakob's collective cultural memory, which combines his own experience in Poland with the fate of the Jews in Greece during the Holocaust, leaves him displaced and isolated:

These nightmares, in which my parents and my sister drowned with the Jews of Crete, continued for years, continued long after we'd moved to Toronto.

Often on Zakynthos and later in Canada, for moments I was lost. (44)

Although Jakob has a shared cultural mythscape through his Jewish heritage, this identification does not necessarily serve to locate him.

Nicola King discusses the "function of memory and the ways in which it is reconstructed in narrative and implicated in notions of self-identity" (1). Although King recognises the need "to resist the notion" that "collective or national memory works in exactly the same way as individual memory", nevertheless, she questions the "assumptions about the functioning of memory" that "underpin the ways in which a culture positions itself in relation to the past" (5). There are two contrasting models of memory within psychoanalytic theory, which, drawing on the work of Sigmund Freud, "inform the different ways in which the processes of memory are reconstructed in narrative" (King 11). The first develops Freud's analogy of memory as archaeological excavation^{iv} – the idea that "the past still exists, 'somewhere', to be rediscovered by the remembering subject" (King 13). The second refers to a term frequently used by Freud but never developed by him into a

consistent theory, namely “Nachträglichkeit” or “afterwardsness”.^v This concept makes explicit the fact that “memory, operating as it does in the present, must inevitably incorporate the awareness of ‘what wasn’t known then’” (King 12). In other words, the process of memory is one of continuous revision and reworking, in the light of later knowledge and experience. Both of these models of memory can be seen to resonate with Michaels’ narrative.

The first, “archaeological” model of memory as recovery of a “pure” past – may be seen to relate to the nationalist desire for an “idealised organic past” (King 5). This mode of remembering has an element of “nostalgia”, of regret regarding the disappearance of a “true” and somehow inaccessible past. In this way, archaeological memory can be seen to appertain to Bell’s conception of mythscape, where collective cultural memories act as “hidden treasures” of the past, which may be uncovered and utilised for “nation-building” in the present. Where an individual’s mythscape crosses national and cultural boundaries, such as that of Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces*, archaeological memory facilitates the coexistence of more than one cultural identity. The transnational mythscape of Jakob’s youth draws on his collective and personal archaeological memories, rather than his immediate past, for as Jakob points out, “to go back a year or two was impossible, absurd. To go back millennia – ah! that was . . . nothing” (30).

Walter Benjamin enlarges upon Freud’s archaeological notion of memory when he considers the textual nature of memory and insists that language is “the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred” (314). There are clear parallels here with the way in which Jakob describes his rescue from the Germans by Athos

Roussos, the geological archaeologist engaged in excavating the buried city of Biskupin. Jakob flees the death and devastation that has taken place in his home and conceals himself in boggy ground in the woods, until hunger eventually forces him to emerge:

Bog-boy, I surfaced into the miry streets of the drowned city . . . I squirmed from the marshy ground like Tollund Man, Grauballe Man . . . Dripping with the prune-coloured juices of the peat-sweating bog. Afterbirth of earth.

I saw a man kneeling in the acid-steeped ground. He was digging. My sudden appearance unnerved him. For a moment he thought I was one of Biskupin's lost souls. (5)

Jakob's physical burial and subsequent "resurrection" parallels the metaphorical burial and re-emergence of his cultural identity. Jakob's Jewish identity, in the form of his memories, is excavated from the earth – brought back to life from the grave, through the Greek Christian Athos.

When Jakob's parents are murdered, he encounters the potential eradication of his Jewish cultural identity; in order to survive, Jakob can be seen to endeavour to relinquish his Jewishness.

I knew suddenly my mother was inside me. Moving along sinews, under my skin the way she used to move through the house at night [. . .] She was stopping to say goodbye and was caught . . . it was my responsibility to release her, a sin to keep her from ascending. I tore at my clothes, my hair. She was gone." (8)

The loss of Jakob's mother opens up the possibility of the loss of his ethnic identity, and his first instinct in the face of this loss is to bury himself in the ground – to become one with the land of his birth – to return to his “mother earth”. “I knew what to do,” Jakob says, “I took a stick and dug. I planted myself like a turnip and hid my face with leaves. . . I was safely buried” (8). Benjamin argues that “he who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (314). This metaphoric identification with the land is one in which Jakob buries his Jewish ethnicity within his Polish nationality.

There is an intimate link between the earth, in terms of place, and identity, through this archaeological notion of memory. This is foregrounded in Michaels' reference to the archaeological phenomena of the “perfectly preserved bog people”, which also appears much later in the novel (221). Ben describes how, when he was twelve years old, he “befriended a Chinese girl . . . an Irish boy and a Dane” (221). He discovered these “bog people” in the pages of the *National Geographic*, and as a child derived “a fascinated comfort from their preservation”: so much so, that he “drew the aromatic earth over [his] shoulders, the peaceful spongy blanket of peat” (221). Although these people each have an individual nationality, they share a “transnationality” in that they belonged to the earth, the “bog”. The ground itself becomes a place of refuge, which holds a diverse and multicultural population.

Ben, like Jakob, metaphorically seeks the comfort and safety of belonging to the earth – earth that does not absorb or destroy individual features, but rather buries, hides, protects and thereby preserves individual

identity. However, the people who were excavated from the peat, whose faces stared at Ben “across the centuries” were “the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be” (221). Benjamin’s analogy regarding archaeological memory equates the ground with language and, therefore, to extend this analogy to a transnational context, memories from one culture – however well-preserved – once excavated from the medium of the language of that culture, become anonymous and silent. For Ben, his Jewish heritage means that within his Canadian identity, the buried memories of the Holocaust are perfectly preserved, yet silenced, innominate and unspeakable.

This analogy also holds true when, as an adult living in Canada, Jakob looks at “photographs of the mountains of personal possessions” that were stored in the concentration camps (50). He fantasizes “the power of reversal”, imagining that “if each owner of each pair of shoes could be named, then they would be brought back to life” (50). It is clear that although archaeological memory may preserve an image, such images are only brought to life through language. It is significant that Jakob chooses to record the events of his childhood in English, “a language foreign to their happening” (101). His reason for doing so is because “English could protect me; an alphabet without memory” (101); by using English, Jakob is able to articulate the painful collective memories of his past from a liminal position that is outside of memory. Michaels’ text suggests that there is a complex relationship between language and memory in the construction of identity. Moreover, the narrative explores both the conjunctions and disjunctions that occur when individual identity crosses national and cultural boundaries.

After his “burial”, Jakob is “resurrected”, re-born into another family through Athos, who becomes Jakob’s “koumbaros”, his spiritual father. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, the koumbaros is a role of honour: he stands as the child’s godfather, and acts as the groom’s best man at his wedding. Jakob, then, takes on a new and transnational existence, through Athos, in which Jewish, Christian, Greek, Polish and Canadian cultural identities co-exist.^{vi} The integration of these cultures has its metaphorical representation in the means by which Athos rescues Jakob:

The man excavating in the mud at Biskupin, the man I came to know as Athos, wore me under his clothes. My limbs bone-shadows on his strong legs and arms, my head buried in his neck, both of us beneath a heavy coat. . . In our strange coupling, Athos’s voice burrowed into my brain. (13)

Jakob’s Polish national identity is subsumed within his newly acquired Greek nationality. The intimate proximity of the two characters moves beyond a simple bringing together of cultures towards a syncretic state of being that is concomitantly unified and yet separate. This “unity in disunity” is further emphasised in Jakob’s description: “We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me” (14). Jakob carries his sister, Bella, as a memory – she is the constantly absent presence of the Jewish Holocaust victim and symbolic of his Jewish heritage.

Jakob’s cultural past is, therefore, integral to the ongoing construction of his personal identity in the present. The concept of the self that is constructed through the narrative of Jakob’s memoirs not only draws on moments of unchanged “archaeological” memory, but also on the process of

memory as “Nachträglichkeit” or “afterwardsness” (King 12). King argues that “Nachträglichkeit” suggests that “the construction of the self is a provisional and continuous process, rather than the ‘recovery’ of an ‘original’ identity” (17). Jakob’s acculturation does not obliterate his Jewish and Polish identities; indeed, once he is in Greece, Athos encourages him to keep alive his Jewish heritage – to cultivate these cultural memories through language. He tells how “Athos didn’t want me to forget. He made me review my Hebrew Alphabet. He said the same thing every day: ‘It is your future you are remembering’”(21). Jakob’s cultural heritage is concomitantly part of both his future and his past, an intrinsic element of an identity that is continually in process. Athos teaches him “the ornate Greek script, like a twisting twin of Hebrew. Both Hebrew and Greek, Athos liked to say, contain the ancient loneliness of ruins” (21). The collective remembrances of both cultures “contain” the ability to locate Jakob within a shared history, thus breaching traditional geographical boundaries, whilst enabling identification.

Yet, Jakob’s sense of identification is also dislocated by his cultural memory: “slowly my tongue learned its sad new powers. I longed to cleanse my mouth of memory. I longed for my mouth to feel my own when speaking his beautiful and awkward Greek” (22). Although Jakob is learning to understand and speak the Greek language, the memories of his Polish and Jewish cultures work to render the process of acculturation problematic. This cultural disjunction is repeated when Jakob moves to Canada and begins to learn English: “The English language was food. I shoved it into my mouth, hungry for it. A gush of warmth spread through my body, but also panic, for with each mouthful the past was further silenced” (92). The desire for location

within a new national culture, through the power of communication, is countered by a need to cultivate the collective cultural memories that construct the ongoing process of Jakob's identity. Therefore, while collective memory is patently an essential element in the identity of the protagonists, it is evident there is a sense in which the novel recognises that such remembrance may, paradoxically, act both as a force for location and dislocation within the individual.

Michaels represents the co-existence of Jakob's multi-cultural remembrances very powerfully, through this description of Jakob's continuing accretion of language:

Suddenly a word seemed to become itself and a quick clarity penetrated; the difference between a Greek dog and a Canadian dog, between Polish snow and Canadian snow. Between resinous Greek pines and Polish pines. Between seas, the ancient myth-spell of the Mediterranean and the sharp Atlantic.
(100)

This recognition of difference reveals a transnational multivalence that does not privilege one culture over another, nor does it universalise or particularise. Language becomes a mode of salvation for Jakob: "write to save yourself", Athos tells him, "and someday you'll write because you've been saved" (165). Jakob does indeed "save" himself through his writing, in that his existence in the novel is brought into being through his memoirs. Furthermore, Jakob's occupation as a "translator of posthumous writing from the war" is one of salvation, of making memories – in the shape of diaries and memoirs – accessible, so that lives that would otherwise have been lost are recovered (i).

The role of memory is clearly of significance with regard to individual and collective and identification, it is therefore pertinent to move on now to examine memory in relationship to history within the novel.

History and Vertical Time

Fugitive Pieces provides a textual representation of the relationship between territory and history, which explores the complexities of individual and collective identity construction across space and time. According to Nora, “memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events” (“Between” 22). Michaels’ novel clearly distinguishes between history and memory, claiming that “History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral” (138-9). Indeed, not only is history portrayed as devoid of morals or principles in *Fugitive Pieces*, but it is also metaphorically represented as a malignant disease: “history only goes into remission while it continues to grow in you until you are silted up and can’t move” (243). What Michaels seems to be saying here, is that history may appear to be “suspended” whilst it is being lived in the present moment; however, events of the past can continue to have a cumulative, and possibly detrimental, effect on contemporary existence: “History,” Jakob claims, “is the poisoned well, seeping into the ground-water” (161). Moreover, it is *how* different events are remembered, the way in which they continue to affect the living, through individual and collective memory, which may confer a “moral” distinction between history and memory. Thus a dialectic is set up between history and memory, between the factual nature of historical events and the effect their recollection has in the present: a dialectic

that problematises boundaries, not only between fact and fiction, history and story, but also those of time and space.

Fugitive Pieces clearly engages with history from two different perspectives, “not only the history of men but the history of the earth” (32). Bill Ashcroft contends that “history is the most ‘imperial’ of discourses” (*On* 148), which is “grounded on the imperial *telos* of progress and civilization, the *telos* of order . . . an end or goal to which the great transcendent movement of history is directed” (*On* 131). Michaels appears to posit the “history of men” in just such terms, in so much as history is represented as a means of appropriation, through the organisation, or “mapping” of time. Furthermore, her narrator points out that “maps of history have always been less than honest” (137). Thus, historiography is defined as a possible means of control and possession that is open to manipulation:

the Nazis abused archaeology to fabricate the past. . . It wasn't enough to own the future. The job of Himmler's ss-Ahnerbe – the Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance – was to conquer history. . . . [they] falsified digs to prove that Greek civilisation started in . . . Neolithic Germany!” (104).

The notion of history as a factual “record of events” is subverted here – a foregrounding of the relationship between history and truth, in which human, and indeed national, history is revealed as a powerful discourse that is neither reliable nor fixed.

The response of Athos, the geological archaeologist, to this Nazi fabrication is to write a book, *Bearing False Witness*, in which he attempts to reveal “everything that's been destroyed: the relics, the careful

documentation" (105). The textual link between territory and history is made explicit, in that Athos's writing "restores the geological past and so preserves 'space' from the aftereffects of Nazi expansionism; he resurrects the 'Polish Pompeii'" (Estrin 289). This discursive action emphasises the notion of history as a construct and, moreover, draws attention to "the narrativity which makes historical writing 'historical'" (Kellner 27). In other words, the textual nature of history is brought into focus through Athos's desire to "re-present" the truth. It is from Athos that Jakob learns "the power we give to stories to hold human time", confirming that history as narrative is vested with the authority to impose temporal boundaries – boundaries that may consequently be rendered permeable through fiction (32).

Bill Ashcroft argues that "the post-colonial writer finds that it is impossible to live outside narrativity, and therefore to live outside history; that it is impossible either to reject history or re-invent it" (*On* 149). Therefore, for Ashcroft, the only "'post-colonial' option is to interpose, to interpolate history" (*On* 149). This would suggest that the imperial notion of history is an overriding metanarrative, for which there is no alternative. It is possible to question and subvert such a narrative, to interrupt it or insert into it, but not to exist outside of it: from such a position, postcolonial resistance may indeed be the only option. However, if one adopts a transnational stance, Michaels' alternative perspective of history as "the history of the earth" (32) offers a means of constructing history through its relationship to place as well as time. This opens up the possibility of transcending temporal and spatial boundaries, in order to consider historical events in terms of their reciprocal effects, in a way that moves beyond an imperial understanding of history. Put another

way, the “history of the earth” is a metaphysical perception, which enables a form of “transubstantiation” of history that is neither linear nor chronological but instead exists concomitantly with the present.

The concept of transubstantiation is appropriate in this context for several reasons. The word derives from Latin – *trans* – meaning “across”, and *substantia* – meaning “substance”: it is employed in Roman Catholic theology to denote the mythical changes that are said to occur during the ceremony of the Eucharist, when the bread and wine are changed in substance into the flesh and blood of Christ, even though the elements appear to remain the same (Jackson 1). In *Fugitive Pieces* the earth itself is imperceptibly changed in some way through the events of history. For example:

The landscape of the Peloponnesus had been injured and healed so many times, sorrow darkened the sunlit ground. All sorrow feels ancient. Wars, occupations, earth-quakes; fire and drought. I stood in the valleys and imagined the grief of the hills. I felt my own grief expressed there. It would be almost fifty years and in another country before I would again experience this intense empathy with a landscape. (60)

Here, place itself becomes charged with the emotions that are a product of historical events; time and place interact so that the landscape in some way “contains” history, and “truth speaks from the ground” (143). The term transubstantiation also connotes something of the mythical and spiritual elements that abound in relation to the perception of history through place. History, from this perspective, becomes transnational since it is engaged in a mystical dialectic with place that moves beyond the control of any individual or

collective national interest, and crosses temporal and spatial boundaries without restriction.

Michaels draws on the notion of “transubstantiation” when her narrator compares the process of the immigrant moving between one culture and another to that of the work of the translator and the poet with regard to language:

Translation is a kind of transubstantiation . . . The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications. (109)

The use of the word “transubstantiation” conveys something of the mystical and indefinable changes that occur in the process of identification for the immigrant: particularly so in a society such as Canada where individuals' lives span several cultures. Collective cultural memory becomes a complex issue involving, as it does, the “codes, symbols and myths” of a multiplicity of places. All of these cultures inevitably produce collective memories that not only co-exist alongside each other amongst the groups that form the multicultural nation, but also within the individual citizens themselves. *Fugitive Pieces* reflects these transcultural complexities, the “mysterious implications” of the way in which collective remembrance works paradoxically to both locate and dislocate identity within temporal and spatial boundaries.

Fugitive Pieces is a text that shifts centres and margins and crosses boundaries – one that recognises the human need to belong to a new place in terms of national identity – and yet also expresses the power that nationality exerts where place holds past identification in the present, through memory.

Michaels expresses this complex relationship in somewhat mystical terms: “we long for place; but place itself longs. Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediment, Eskers of ash wait to be scooped up, lives reconstituted” (53). The notion that human memory is “encoded” within place suggests that there is a reciprocal link between memory and place. Moreover, there is a resonance here with a biblical understanding of the creation of humankind. The book of Genesis states “for dust you are and unto dust you shall return” (Gen. 3. 19). Thus a spiritual dimension is evoked that moves identification with place beyond the solely corporeal into the realm of myth. This intimate and intertwined connection between humanity and the earth, the desire for location and the location of desire, resonates with modern anxieties regarding displacement and living as part of dispersed ethnic groups.

Bell suggests that in order to “mould a national identity – a sense of unity with others belonging to the same nation – it is necessary to have an understanding of oneself as located in a temporally extended narrative” (69). This being the case, it is pertinent to ask what the effect would be if one were to attempt to mould a transnational identity: does spatial dislocation necessarily result in a disruption of the subject’s temporally extended narrative? According to Linda Warley et al, it is “only by investigating both time and space [that] can we fully articulate what it means to be *situated* human beings” (“Introduction” 3, original italics). Michaels’ text engages with this investigation, claiming that

terra cognita and terra incognita inhabit exactly the same coordinates of time and space. The closest we come to knowing the location of what’s unknown is when it melts through the map

like a watermark, a stain transparent as a drop of rain. On the map of history, perhaps the water stain is memory. (137)

Through the exploration of the role of memory, *Fugitive Pieces* offers a representation of the co-existence of multiple cultural identities, which does indeed problematise traditional notions of space and time.

The construction of identity through memory is key with regard to the character of Jakob. Using his own memoirs and the memories of those who knew him, Jakob's very existence in the novel relies on what Derrida refers to as "anamnesis" (15); or memory as "a continuous process of re-remembering" (King 21). In other words, the narrative reconstruction of the deceased Jakob's identity is constantly ongoing. The text is always in the process of being written: original events that took place in Jakob's life are remembered and then "re-remembered" in the action of writing. However, as was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Jakob's identity is founded on absence. He tells his reader: "I did not witness the most important events of my life. My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound" (17). Attention is drawn to the significance of "sight", of having the physical ability to see in order to bear witness. Here Michaels addresses a fundamental difficulty for those who can only draw on collective cultural remembrance in the construction of a transnational identity. This difficulty is particularly associated with "those who were born a generation after", or the so-called "hyphenated Canadian" (162). Ben, as a second generation Canadian, confirms this when he describes himself as having been "born into absence . . . abandoned by roots" (233).

The text subverts the assertion that an “event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed”, when Jakob states that the gas chambers were witnessed not only “by those who lived near the incinerators”, but also “by those who were born a generation after” (162). Indeed, as Jakob’s experience of his family’s death makes clear, paradoxically, even those who are present are not necessarily able to act as witnesses because they did not “see” anything. In other words, to witness an event, or indeed, to remember an event, one does not have to have actually “seen” it. Derrida examines the relationship between blindness and memory in his *Memoirs of the Blind*. Jakob’s “story must be told by a blind man,” and for Derrida,

blind men explore – and seek to foresee there where they do not see, *no longer see*, or do *not yet see*. The space of the blind always conjugates these three tenses and time of memory. But simultaneously. (5-6)

The individual who has a transnational mode of identification, whose identity has its roots in more than one nation, is in the position, or indeed “space”, of the “blind” in terms of trying to locate him or herself within a temporally extended narrative. The simultaneous nature of this space, which implies the transgression of temporal and spatial boundaries, will be dealt with shortly. It is important at this juncture to examine more closely the association between blindness and time.

The opening sentence of the main body of the novel states that “time is a blind guide” (5). There is, of course, a long historical tradition of the “blind prophet”, as is exemplified in the figure of Tiresias, who appears in Sophocles’ tragedy, *Oedipus*. Tiresias goes blind because he has seen what he should

not see; he is a figure who represents the transgression of traditional boundaries of identification.^{vi} In recompense for his blindness, Tiresias is given the gift of prophecy. Therefore, "Time", as the "blind guide", potentially has the gift of foresight, which implies the ability of time, through history and memory, to foreshadow the future. Indeed, Michaels' narrator claims "every recorded event is a brick of potential, of precedent, thrown into the future" (161).

Norman Ravvin argues that in modern Jewish-Canadian writing there are often "points of confluence between the contemporary world and the past," which reveal "each writer's way of contending with continuity and loss, with identity and assimilation" (6). Michaels' novel supports this contention, in that it repeatedly collapses temporal and spatial boundaries, thus foregrounding these crucial "portals", on points of confrontation between past and present (Ravvin 6). According to Ravvin, "they are magical, these crossing places" because they allow writers to make "worlds appear and disappear" (6). Indeed, it could be argued that it is these "portals" that allow Michaels' narrative access to a transnational mythscape, where her protagonist can, in a single sentence, move across space and time: from Toronto "to Biskupin, to the house on Zakynthos, to the forest, to the river, to the burst door, to the minutes in the wall" (111-2). It is at the point of confrontation between past and present, where memory interpolates the process of identification and allows entrance into a world beyond the boundaries of space and time.

Michaels asserts that "history and memory share events; that is they share time and space. Every moment is two moments" (138). Nora provides an affirmation of this concept when he argues that "memory and history, far

from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition” (“Between” 8). Whereas history is always a representation of what no longer exists, “memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present” (Nora, “Between” 8). The duality of memory, in which past events exist both as history and as part of the present moment, is one that resonates with a transnational mode of identification. Past events, cultures and nationalities continue to exist within the present for those, like Jakob, whose lives span more than one culture or nationality. In this situation, identity becomes “de-centred” so that, as Stuart Hall points out, “we cannot find within ourselves as individual selves or subjects or identities the point of origin from which discourse or history or practice originates” (“Ethnicity” 11). The result is a split “between the self of the present, and the specular representation of the self that inhabits the memory” (Cook, “A Spectre” 108). An example of this occurs when Jakob is watching the candles of the Easter procession on Zakynthos:

I watched and was in my own village, winter evenings, my teacher lighting the wicks of our lanterns and releasing us into the street like toy boats bobbing down a flooded gutter . . . I watched the Easter procession and placed this parallel image, like other ghostly double exposures, carefully into orbit . . . even now, half a century later, writing this on a different Greek island, I look down to the remote lights of town and feel the heat of a lamp spreading up my sleeve. (18)

Here there is a threefold manifestation of this phenomenon: writing in the present, Jakob is reminded of a memory within a memory – a moment when

he becomes self-consciously aware of his past haunting his present. These “parallel images” then bring to mind the first memory even more vividly in the present. Memory is able to catch together past and present, so that “every moment is two moments” (140). Michaels’ text offers a representation of the way in which identity evolves, through a complex relationship between time, place and the notion of textuality itself.

King makes the cogent observation that in *Fugitive Pieces*, “memory is layered, like the strata of rock which hold the memory of the earth” (142). Moreover, just as the earth has fault lines, points of weakness that are prone to collapse, so Jakob describes being “transfixed by the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds” (30). Michael Holquist employs the term “temporal palimpsest” to describe the way in which the present action of a novel is layered on top of and penetrated by “the past action of all the characters who comprise the cast of the novel’s present” (130). *Fugitive Pieces* does indeed provide a “temporal palimpsest” in which “the present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative” (48). Moreover, the text of *Fugitive Pieces* can be seen to reflect this in the temporal construction of the novel, in that the present forms only a small part of this “narrative of catastrophe and slow accumulation” (48).

Beneath the fragmented surface of this densely figurative text lies the unseen and the unsaid, requiring a depth and scope of reading that, like the novel itself, is unencumbered by the limitations of space and time. Jakob describes how

the shadow past is shaped by everything that never happened.

Invisible, it melts the present like rain through karst. A biography

of longing. It steers us like magnetism, a spirit torque. This is how one becomes undone by a smell, a word, a place, the photo of a mountain of shoes. By love that closes its mouth before calling a name. (17)

The word “karst” refers to a type of terrain, usually formed on carbonate rock such as limestone, where groundwater dissolves and enlarges openings to form a subsurface system of caves and streams below ground.^{viii} Thus the past is conceived of as a force that both has a profound effect on, and is affected by, the present. The knowledge of “hindsight” opens up the past, illuminating what is known and exposing what remains unknown, and memory becomes a vital constituent in the construction of the “Self”; indeed, it is a means by which the “Self” can be deconstructed or “undone”.

Clearly, time in *Fugitive Pieces* does not necessarily progress along a linear continuum. Rather, the novel subverts traditional perceptions of historical or horizontal time, as is foregrounded through Michaels' choice of chapter title, “Vertical Time”, which occurs in both part one and part two of *Fugitive Pieces*. Bakhtin examines the concept of “vertical time” in contrast to historical time in “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”. The “temporal logic” of vertical time consists of sequential time being compressed within a single moment, in which past, present and future occur in simultaneity rather than in succession (Bakhtin 157). Michaels draws on this concept throughout the novel, and both of her protagonists frequently experience moments of “verticality” with regard to time (Bahktin 157). In the first “Vertical Time” chapter, Jakob's narration of his own past moves seamlessly between his memory of being in Athens with Athos and his memories of being a small boy

in Biskupin. The two time periods are barely differentiated by the use of ellipses, and the present moment, in which Jakob is writing his memoirs, makes no obvious impact on the text. There is no delineation, therefore, between what was, what is and what is to come. Moreover, without temporal boundaries, spatial boundaries also cease to exist. According to Bakhtin, a vertical world is a world of “contradictory multiplicity”, and as such it offers the possibility of a transnational existence (156). Jakob enters into what Bakhtin calls “an environment outside time altogether”, where disjunctions and contradictions are able to co-exist, where it is possible for him to be concomitantly Polish, Greek and Canadian; insider and outsider; coloniser and colonised; stranger and friend; here and there (157).

This vertical axis of time allows a clearer understanding of transnational identification as being a continuous process: because “everything that on earth is divided by time, here, in this verticality, coalesces into eternity, into pure simultaneous coexistence” (Bakhtin 157). In the second “Vertical Time” chapter Michaels’ narrator Ben, describes the way in which objects may “hold” time in this way. After their deaths, his parents’ shoes “retained” the way they walked and “their clothes still carried them,” each rip and patch telling a story, “decades stored there, in a closet or two” (265). Ben’s narration here is itself a representation of vertical time, in that he is living in Jakob’s house, and addressing the deceased Jakob directly. He searches through Jakob’s vast library for the notebooks that contain Jakob’s memoirs. “Immense in scope and size, climbing almost every wall of the house”, Jakob’s library contains books on every imaginable topic and “the most vigorous collection of poetry . . . in Greek, Hebrew, English, Spanish” (261-2). The house has “rooms full of

treasure” and Michaels spends several pages listing them (264). Ben points out that “a house, more than a diary, is the intimate glimpse. A house is a life interrupted. I thought of the families frozen into stone by the eruption of Vesuvius, with their last meal still in their bellies” (265-6). Jakob’s house stands as a metonym here for his eclectic, multicultural life, captured in “the synchrony of a single moment” (Bakhtin 157). This chapter, therefore, metaphorically encapsulates Jakob’s transnational existence, his entire temporal and spatial world, both literally and figuratively within “Vertical Time”.

The trope of the “house” is one that raises numerous connotations and interpretations, which cannot possibly all be dealt with here. What is, perhaps, of most significance at this juncture, is that the metaphor of the house is one that envisions a single structure with a variety of rooms, which offers shelter and a “place” to belong. As such, Jakob’s house may be seen to resonate with Eva Mackey’s description of Canada as *The House of Difference*. Mackey suggests that cultural pluralism in Canada is based on “the ability to recognise, utilise, absorb and negotiate differences, and the capacity to construct and manage new forms of identity” (166). Thus Jakob’s transnational identification shares many of the characteristics of a Canadian national identity.

This chapter has shown that *Fugitive* uses “the poetic voice to articulate the vicissitudes of lived experience” for those whose identities span a number of nations and cultures (M. Cook 12). It has demonstrated that this novel reflects the changes currently taking place in contemporary Canadian fiction, regarding identity in relation to place and geography. The positioning of Canada as “Way Station” has been examined in depth and has proved to be

indicative of Davey's contention that Canadian fiction appears to be announcing "the arrival of the post-national state" (*Post* 266). *Fugitive Pieces* reveals national and cultural identity to be subject to construction through memory, and to the gaps and absences of memory. Michaels' text is seen here to support Kroetsch's argument that "archaeology allows the fragmentary nature of the story, against the coerced unity of traditional history" (7).

Indeed, "archaeology allows for discontinuity. It allows for layering. It allows for imaginative speculation" and as such (Kroetsch 7), allows for a transnational perception of individual identification within the novel. *Fugitive Pieces* clearly draws on collective memories that are shaped by a huge diversity of peoples and a range of cultures. The novel has been shown here to echo the contingent and mobile nature of an emerging Canadian "post-national" identity. The evidence given reveals that Michaels creates a Canadian "mythscape" that is transnational in nature and offers a means of belonging for those whose lives are lived "in-between" cultures. The following chapter examines why this desire for belonging continues to be a focus of concern in the lives of second generation Canadians, and in doing so, calls into question the notion of national identity as "fixed", "authentic" or reliant on inheritance.

i See Alan Lawson's "A Cultural Paradigm for the Second World." The Badlands Conference on Canadian and Australian Literatures. U of Calgary. 29 Aug. 1986. *Australian-Canadian Studies* 9. 1-2 (1991): 67-78.

ii Kristeva draws on Freud's ideas of the uncanny and the unconscious to show how the foreigner actually highlights the differences that exist within society. These differences, created by the unconscious mind, cause fear and thus people form exclusive groups. These groups aim to conceal individual differences of their members by highlighting the strangeness of outsiders. It is only when individuals come to terms with their own strangeness, their unconscious, that they can come to terms with, and truly accept, foreigners.

iii The language of "home-making" is discussed in relation to nation as feminine and nurturing in chapter two on *Cereus Bloom's at Night* pages 75-6. When applied to Jakob in this situation, nation lacks this nurturing aspect, while Michaela provides it for him through an empathetic recognition of that lack.

iv The analogy between recovery of the buried past and the excavation of an archaeological site appears frequently in Freud's work. See Freud, Sigmund, "Constructions in Analysis", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1953-74), Vol 1, trans and ed James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1937. 255-69.

v Jean Laplanche translates "Nachträglichkeit" to mean "afterwardsness". See Laplanche, Jean. "Notes on Afterwardsness" *Seduction, Translation, Drives*. Eds. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992. 217-223.

vi There is a resonance here with the earlier discussion regarding *Life of Pi*, in relation to Pi's syncretic acculturation of religions (pages 109-113).

vii According to Ovid, mythology has it that Tiresias was miraculously transformed into a woman when he tried to separate a pair of copulating serpents with his stick. He then lived as a woman for seven years, only to resume his masculine form when he came across the same two creatures and once again attempted to strike them apart. Because of this transsexual experience, Tiresias subsequently found himself drawn into an argument between Juno and Jove, regarding who has the more pleasure in sex – the man or the woman. Tiresias agreed with Jove, confirming that it is the woman, for which Juno instantly struck him blind. As no god can undo what another has done, Jove granted him the gift of prophesy as some recompense (Gregory, H. 95).

viii Information taken from "The Karst Pages" *Dyetracing.com* a website of Western Kentucky University.

CHAPTER FIVE

Childhood – André Alexis

This dissertation shows the texts under scrutiny to reveal a Canadian national identity that is “performative, subject to circumstances, and so redefinable in different contexts” (Howells, *Contemporary* 2). This can certainly be said of André Alexis’ novel *Childhood*, which provides the focus for this chapter, and the final destination for this thesis in terms of narrative location. Unlike the texts discussed in previous chapters, *Childhood* is set entirely in Canada, and its central protagonist is a second-generation Canadian. Yet, once again, this is a novel that transcends the boundaries of the Canadian nation-state and straddles several cultures and backgrounds.

Childhood has quite accurately been described as “a text almost about nothing”, in that it does not have a complex plot. However, this does not belie the carefully crafted nature of the novel (Walcott, “Desire” 77). The plot of the novel, such as it is, focuses on the life of Thomas MacMillan, who records his memories in an attempt to gain understanding and give order to the elements that have composed the first thirty years of his existence. Thomas embarks upon a potentially endless quest for self-knowledge, and yearns to discover more about his identity; “after all”, as he says, “I come from somewhere” (265).

The narrative has a four-part structure: “History”, in which Thomas describes his early life with his Grandmother in Petrolia, Southern Ontario; “Geography” (the part that most resembles a “road novel”), in which, following his Grandmother’s death, Thomas is taken by car from Petrolia to Ottawa by his mother, Katarina, and her friend Mr. Mataf; “The Sciences”, in which

Thomas and Katarina arrive at the house of Henry Wing, the man who may or may not be Thomas's father, a mystery that is never resolved; and finally "Housecleaning", in which both Thomas's mother and Henry die within a day of each other, and Thomas starts literally and figuratively to put his house in order.

The need to impose order on his life becomes Thomas's "raison d'être", and leads him to conclude that "writing is the discipline I need" (4). Thus, the novel can be seen as an attempt to write the "Self" into existence, in that it documents Thomas's quest for identity, for a sense of self, which he constructs by and through narrative. It is a narrative that betrays some of the range of anxieties that surround individual identification, particularly those that are associated with concerns over a lack of roots and the loss of parents. These concerns are clearly also related to racial and cultural origins and to the role of nation for individual and collective identity.

Rinaldo Walcott suggests that works such as *Childhood* "are not merely national products"; rather, "they occupy the space of the in-between, vacillating between national borders and diasporic ideas, ambitions and disappointments" (*Black* xii). The transnational approach taken in this thesis is, therefore, particularly appropriate as an heuristic tool for the analysis of this text. This chapter argues that Alexis' novel demonstrates a deep concern with the desire for identity, for "belonging", particularly with regard to the relation of the individual to the nation. In order to explore this central issue more fully, this chapter is divided into four subsections: Identity and Race; Identity and Place; Identity and Citizenship; Memory and Identity. The first of these sections begins by examining the relationship between race and identification,

even though race does not initially appear to be a central motif within the novel.

Identity and Race

It has already been established that the growing diversity in contemporary Canadian fiction has led to a need to develop alternatives to traditional postcolonial theorising. This is particularly so in respect of *Childhood*, where the narrative moves beyond categories of oppression and resistance, so that, as Judith Misrahi-Barak points out, “postcoloniality is hardly an issue” in relation to this text (45). The novel’s title, *Childhood*, could be seen to suggest otherwise, in that critics such as Bill Ashcroft argue that “Childhood” is a key concept with regard to Postcolonialism. According to Ashcroft, the idea that a child is ontologically different from an adult “only emerged in Western society after the invention of the printing press” (*On* 39). He suggests that, as a result, imperialism regarded literacy and education, “even where these were imposed on already literate societies,” to represent “a defining separation between the civilized and the barbarous nations” (*On* 39).

Ashcroft argues that the division created between childhood and adulthood by the appearance of literacy is

a precise corollary of the gap between the imperial centre and the illiterate, barbarous, childlike races of empire. The strategies of surveillance, correction and instruction which lie at the heart of the child’s education transfer effortlessly into the disciplinary enterprise of empire. (*On* 39)

It is possible, therefore, to read Alexis' novel as portraying the complexities of his protagonist's Canadian nationality as a metaphorical journey from childhood to adulthood, through the counter-discursive strategy of memory. Ashcroft contends that in the twenty-first century, the "gap between colonizing parent and colonized child has been masked by globalisation and the indiscriminate, transnational character of neo-colonialism" (*On* 52). Arguably, there is evidence in the novel that supports this point of view and it is plausible to read the text in this way. Three of the sections in the novel - "History", "Geography" and "The Sciences" – are evocative of the school curriculum, and Alexis' use of graphs, charts and lists could, in some ways, be reminiscent of a school text book. Furthermore, the whole of the narrative is mediated through the adult Thomas, who complains that "a great deal of my past is lost through the inattention of my younger selves" (125). This adult/child dialectic could indeed be seen as an obfuscation of the coloniser/colonised relationship. However, a postcolonial stance does not take into account the novel's focus on the dislocation and displacement that occurs both within and beyond Canadian national boundaries, and the way in which Thomas can be seen to embody this.

Thomas may be seen to blur the boundaries between the colonised and the colonial subject, in that he asserts his textual "authority" by writing himself into existence against the imperial discourse represented by his relationship to his grandmother and Henry Wing, his "surrogate" father. Thomas's grandmother is Edna MacMillan, a retired teacher from Trinidad, who flourished "at the centre of the Dickens' Society" in her home town of Petrolia (29). Peter Hudson describes Edna as being "marked by a colonial

taint that impels her to identify with English culture" (194). Henry Wing, according to Thomas, is "another version of my Grandmother" (168). Henry is a Trinidadian man who chooses to "live in a Victorian setting, with a gentleman's lab, old-fashioned books, and courtly attitudes that would have marked him as 'stuffy' centuries ago" (168). Both of these figures could be said to be complicit in taking on the cultural ideology of the coloniser, and both subsequently abandon their Trinidadian origins: describing his grandmother, Thomas admits that he "could not have guessed her origins were anything but Canadian" (29).

According to Ashcroft, part of the postcolonial process of resistance has been "the transformation of the concept of the child," as a result of which, the boundaries between adult and child are being blurred (*On* 52). However, from a transnational perspective, it is possible to contend that, rather than blurring the boundaries between coloniser and colonised, *Childhood* examines the concomitant existence of both within Canada's national identity. Thomas acknowledges that he "will have thousands of childhoods before time is done. But this one has its own necessity" (264). This would indicate that "Childhood", in terms of Canadian national identity, has many facets, and cannot be seen as a continuous progression, or theorised as a singular concept. The narrative of *Childhood* reflects that, as a settler-invader colony, Canada occupies a position as both coloniser and colonised, and as a result its national identity is subject to numerous disjunctions, paradoxes and ambiguities.

In some ways the novel's title could be considered a misnomer, since rather than focusing on the state of childhood, it is concerned more with the

construction of the “Self” through memory, and through the very act of writing. This is a complex act that interweaves a variety of different genres to form the fabric of the text and, paradoxically, serves not only to reveal identity, but also to conceal it. Moreover, it “maintains the text within an indeterminate space” that is removed from traditional points of reference to the world (Misrahi-Barak 47). *Childhood* is a text that crosses borders both literally and figuratively in several ways. For example, the novel subverts traditional divisions between genres, encompassing not only biography and autobiography, but also memoir, diary, road novel, and report-writing, so that they blur into a fluid and dynamic whole.

Misrahi-Barak describes *Childhood* as “multi-directional” and suggests that Alexis’ work, along with that of a number of contemporary Canadian writers, appears to have “composed a moving literary territory – a territory that no longer has anything in common with a definition based on static notions of domination over a certain area and of geographical, socio-historical and political boundaries” (44). Instead, she argues that this “newly composed territory” seems “to be built on the basis of a dynamic, dialogic interaction between several genres” (44). The fluid and shifting nature of this new “literary territory” is seen here to echo the mutability of the transnational Canadian territory from which it emerges.

Walcott rightly suggests that “border-crossing pervades Alexis’s text both in terms of its artistry and in terms of its narrative” (“Desire” 64). However, he argues that this is a “forced postmodern aesthetic and practice which often does not work, even though it interestingly disrupts reading practices” (“Desire” 65). The judgement as to whether or not Alexis’ use of

“border-crossing” techniques “works” must depend on what it is supposed to be trying to achieve. Whilst Walcott may have a valid point in his suggestion that the “postmodern quality” of the text “masks some other things going on”, there is evidence that Alexis’ use of border-crossing is, in fact, mimetic of the cultural milieu that surrounds the text (“Desire” 65-6). To put this another way, the postmodern tropes employed by Alexis may well serve to obfuscate certain issues within the narrative, particularly those to do with ethnic origin; however, the transnational approach taken here reveals that in doing so, it offers a reflection of the Canadian socio-cultural environment in which it was written.

André Alexis’ *Childhood* has been nominated for numerous literary awards, winning the Chapters/Books Canada First Novel Award in 1998, and sharing the prestigious Ontario Trillium Award with Alice Munro in the same year. It is noteworthy, however, that the publicity surrounding the book at the time of its release made little or no reference to Alexis as a black man. The promotion of the book under these conditions led Hudson to comment in one review that Alexis “came across as an Artiste: as a cool, erudite Negro whose commitment to pure aesthetic form transcends the vagaries of race” (“Alexis” 35). Indeed, from a transnational perspective, it is true that the novel itself does not overtly appear to place any significance on race. As Judith Misrahi-Barak comments, “it seems as if the book only happened to have been written by a man who was born in Trinidad and as if the Caribbean did not leave any traces in him” (45). In this respect, *Childhood* is unlike many other novels by Canadian writers of Caribbean origins, which often hark back to the islands in some way;¹ for example, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* can be seen

to recreate a fictitious version of Trinidad. However, as critics such as Sanders and Hudson have argued, it is that which is “not said” that “provide[s] ways to read the racial in *Childhood* (Sanders 174). It is necessary, therefore, to explore the way in which Alexis’ text not only focuses on the desire to belong but also calls into question the very terms of belonging, and thus may be seen to articulate “an ambiguous and ambivalent relation to nation” (Walcott, “Desire” 77).

It could be argued that Alexis deliberately creates a sense of the semi-autobiographical about the text. He does so through the first-person narration of his central protagonist, Thomas MacMillan, who fosters a very intimate relationship with the imagined reader from the outset: “So I will write, precisely, about my mother and Henry, about Love, with you in mind, from the beginning” (4). The addressee of the novel is actually MacMillan’s beloved, Marya; however, her character is never defined or described in the narrative, thus leaving a gap in the text that is almost seamlessly and unconsciously filled by the reader. As a consequence of this, the reader is carefully sutured into the novel, so that he or she becomes the direct recipient of Thomas’s revelations. Thus, Alexis begins to blur the boundaries between apparent reality and fiction for his reader.

Alexis further emphasises the impression of autobiography rather than fictional memoir, by the fact that the character-narrator, Thomas, and the author share certain similarities. For example, they both have the same birth date, January 15th 1957, the novel is set in a town where Alexis actually lived, and the narration concludes in 1997, a year before the publication of the novel (Nurse 10). Alexis, in fact, downplays suggestions regarding the

autobiographical nature of the novel, though he is prepared to acknowledge that *Childhood* is “more of an emotional autobiography” (Nurse 10). Whether or not this was the intention, the result is a resonance between the writer and the character of the writer, which obscures the division between the fictional and real. The uncertainty of this self-reflexivity foregrounds the difficulties inherent in the process of defining the “Self” through writing.

The autobiographical nature of *Childhood*, both with regard to Alexis and as Thomas MacMillan’s “fictional memoir”, raises an expectation that the factors that define the protagonist’s “Self” will include race and racial origin. In his examination of *Childhood*, Sanders argues that “typically, in African diasporic autobiography or autobiographical fiction, understanding race and racism is intrinsic to the exercise of self-creation” (173). However, as has already been observed, there is little evidence of Thomas’s racial origins in *Childhood*; indeed, as Sanders concurs, “in a novel full of interrogation” race remains elusive, and “is not explicitly examined” at all (173). Yet, in spite of its apparent “lack” of “blackness”, Sanders describes *Childhood* as “the most celebrated work of fiction yet by an African Canadian” (171), while Walcott considers it to be “one of the most celebrated Black texts in recent Canadian literary history” (“Desire” 63). Clearly, therefore, Alexis’ novel is being “claimed”, and indeed “acclaimed” as an important piece of not only Canadian but, more specifically, African-Canadian, literature.

George Elliott Clarke suggests of African-Canadian literature that African-American and Caribbean influences are “so palpable, so pervasive, that the literature may seldom seem ‘Canadian’ (whatever that means) at all” (1). It is argued here, however, that from a transnational perspective,

Childhood subverts this notion of African-Canadian literature, in that it exhibits a markedly Canadian consciousness, whilst the influences of African-America and the Caribbean are apparently repressed. In his somewhat controversial article entitled "Borrowed Blackness", Alexis expresses the desire to hear "black Canadians speak *from* Canada", and indicates the need for the production of more "black Canadian writing that is conscious of Canada" (20, original italics). Likewise, he argues that it is the responsibility of black writers to add their voices to "the white voices that are articulating Canada" ("Borrowed" 20). It is certainly true to say that *Childhood* demonstrates a shift of emphasis away from race, racism and ethnicity, towards an identification with place, nation and "Canadianness".

Alexis' insistence on the "imagined possibility" of creating a shared, or, as it is read here, transnational Canadian culture, reveals an innate confidence about his place in the nation ("Borrowed" 20). This may be one reason why critics have, by and large, "read race in *Childhood* as incidental, rather than intrinsic", in that Alexis attempts to articulate a Canada where racial origin adds another dimension, rather than provides a central focus (Hudson 173). According to Hudson, *Childhood* offers an apparent "turning away from the normative modes of Blackness that have remained hegemonic" and narrates an "anti-aesthetic of the normative ontologies of Blackness in Canada" (192). In other words, the novel subverts the commonly employed representations of Black Canadian culture and, in doing so, calls into question their very nature.

Hudson's argument is that this is the novel of "a phenotypically Black man who, for all intents and purposes, is white" (192). While this may be true,

it is demonstrated here that the novel also challenges the “normative ontologies” of whiteness in Canada. Hudson goes on to argue, somewhat disparagingly, that Alexis is trying to suggest that “the Black Canadian experience is essentially no different than that of other Canadians” (193). This may well be the case, in as much as the novel refuses the “supposed exceptionalism” of Black Canadian writing” (Hudson 193). Hudson’s contention is that in doing so, *Childhood* rejects black writing’s “essential cultural or formal difference from the wider English-Canadian Canon”, but this is evidently not the case (193). Rather, as a transnational approach shows, *Childhood* is a novel predicated on difference and dislocation. Indeed, it iterates not only its own cultural and formal differences from the canon, but those that exist within the canon itself and, indeed, within Canadian national identity.

The founding myth of the Canadian nation is invariably presented as one of genteel settlement and expansion by white English and French colonists, who were being alternately helped or hindered by First Nations peoples. Jennifer Harris suggests that this “overwhelming emphasis on whiteness supplanting brownness necessarily elides blackness”, and as a result, “black people as citizens” are absented from “pre-1970” historical discourse (367). Harris goes on to contend that post-1970 “official Canadian rhetoric” works through “acts of symbolic and physical displacement” to limit how blackness can be presented in Canada (367). Alexis can be seen subtly to parallel this displacement in his exploration of cultural identity in *Childhood*, which seemingly renders absent the topic of race, and in doing so problematises the discourse of Black Canadian culture.

Alexis' representation of blackness in *Childhood*, or indeed the absence of it, could be seen to echo the problematic nature of Black Canadian cultural discourse. Harris rightly argues that "many black Canadian artists and scholars have come to recognize that the very idea of Black Canada frequently remains, to this present day, controversial or even dubious" (367). In an article in *This Magazine*, Alexis describes how he was once told that in order to discover his authentic "Black self" he should move to the United States ("Borrowed" 17). He reasons that this was because it was generally understood that "no experience I might have in Canada could bring me closer to an understanding of real Black experience, that Black Canadians were not Black enough" ("Borrowed" 17). *Childhood* can be seen to express the "real" Black Canadian experience as being one of difference and displacement that is concealed by the very nature of multiculturalism.

Close examination of the evidence from the text supports Walcott's argument that "the silence on Blackness in *Childhood* is its very utterance and in that utterance is an unintended expansion of the nation" ("Desire" 77). Whether deliberate or not, contemporary fiction such as *Childhood* does indeed have the effect of expanding Canada's national boundaries. Far from being incidental, the palimpsestic nature of race within the novel is integral to a transnational understanding of the text. In other words, the very fact that race is only glimpsed through the surface of the narrative confirms its existence within national identification, whilst also rendering it only one of a plethora of cultural signifiers. The novel offers a profound insight into the contradictions and disjunctions that exist both within and beyond nation, through the way in which Blackness is performed within the narrative.

Thomas's desire for identification is strong, but it does not extend to a willingness to make race the central factor in his construction of the "Self". It appears that for Thomas, his race and colour are simply factors in his existence; however, it is the effect of these factors and the way they impact on his identification that are of importance in the novel.

Clearly, the novel does not deny the existence of racism in Canada, nor does it deny the importance of racial origins with regard to identity, but at the same time, it does not make these issues the central point of focus. Instead, it offers brief glimpses that hint at the cultural complexity that lies beneath the everyday experience of life lived as part of Canadian multicultural society. One episode in particular offers an example of how the small incidents that occur in Thomas's apparently mundane life reveal an ambiguous and uncertain relationship with his racial identity. Thomas describes how, "at nine years of age", he "agreed" to be Margaret Goodman's boyfriend, and "in the end, found the role intoxicating" (61). Although Margaret lives next door to Thomas, "objectively speaking" he describes himself as "an eccentric choice" on her part, firstly, because he had inherited his grandmother's reputation for instability and secondly because "Margaret's father could barely conceal his dislike" for Thomas (60). The reasons for this dislike are described in very vague terms as being "something" to do with Thomas's grandmother, and "something to do with natural antipathy" (60). This is somewhat strange considering Thomas is always very careful to maintain his objectivity, and yet he seems unwilling to acknowledge that Mr Goodman's dislike of him is because of his colour. There is clearly a sense of reluctance on Thomas's part to name Mr Goodman's hostility towards him as

racism. However, Alexis carefully places Goodman in juxtaposition with Margaret's sister's boyfriend, Darren who uses openly racist language.

Thomas describes watching television after school with Margaret as “distressing, because Darren ‘Hey, I smell nigger’ McGuinness was often there with Jane, and Mr Goodman himself came home at 5:30” (62). Thomas recounts his only conflict with Margaret as being one particular incident, when they were watching television together in the Goodman’s basement.

Darren McGuinness said, in his usual friendly way

– Here nigger nigger nigger . . .

And, for whatever reason, Margaret chose to defend me.

– He’s not a nigger, she said.

That brought such mirth from those around us, I wasn’t sure whether I should laugh or not. When Margaret ran out to the yard, I didn’t know if I should follow or stay in the basement with the others.

I did follow her out, but I was upset that she’d ruined my afternoon. (62)

Thomas’s reaction here raises an interesting question. It would seem almost certain that he is being ironic when he describes Darren’s taunts as “friendly”; after all, Margaret feels the need to “defend” Thomas and Thomas himself says that watching television after school with Margaret was “distressing” because Darren was often there. If this is the case, why does he feel that it is Margaret that has “ruined his afternoon” and not Darren by his racist comments?

Hudson argues that Margaret's defence of Thomas actually "acts to legitimise the speech act by arguing for Thomas's exceptionalism" (196). In other words, in saying Thomas is "not a nigger", she is implicitly suggesting that other Black people are, in fact, niggers, thereby invoking all the connotations associated with the word. However, Margaret's position can also be read as one of a multicultural subsuming of difference, in that she defends Thomas because he is her boyfriend and therefore part of her society and culture – he may be different, but it is a difference neutralised by absorption: Thomas is not "a nigger", he is "a Canadian". Kamboureli addresses this idea when she contends that "by releasing 'all Canadians' from the specificity of their histories", The Multiculturalism Act "seeks to overcome difference rather than to confront incommensurability" (*Scandalous* 101). Margaret may therefore be the focus of Thomas's discomfort because it is she who draws attention to him, so forcing him to move away from his liminal position towards that of the "insider" or "outsider".

Thomas's indecision as to whether to join in with the laughter or follow Margaret out of the basement reveals his ambivalent feelings toward his place in this society. A postcolonial perspective would suggest that there is a blurring of boundaries here, between Darren's neo-colonial position that expounds difference and Margaret's that incorporates it. Indeed, in his discussion of this incident, Hudson accuses Alexis of producing "another moment in the book" that is "as meaningless, ambiguous, and insignificant as any other" (197). However, a transnational approach reveals the significance of this ambiguity, in that Thomas can be seen to hypostasise "the place of difference in the national self" (37). In other words Thomas's position actually

embodies difference. Thus, in the character of Thomas, Alexis acknowledges the “range of identity-forming contexts available to citizens in multicultural societies” (Samantrai 37).

Thomas’s position can be seen to be one of belonging within dislocation and liminality, in that he is both of the group and outside of it. It is, as he says later, “a community to which, despite myself, I almost belonged” (75). Alexis places Thomas in a position where he refuses to address directly the overarching subject of his race as a central issue. Thomas inhabits a liminal space, living in “a house that was not mine and not quite mine”, whilst constantly waiting to go to his “rightful home” (70). This is underpinned through the self-conscious blurring of the boundaries between Alexis as the author and his construction of the character of Thomas-the-writer, mentioned earlier. It is this liminal space that offers Thomas an even greater sense of narrative distance and allows him to have an objective and analytical insight into the effects of his race on the process of identity.

Thomas relates only one or two other minor instances of racial intolerance, but these are also represented as being peripheral to his life and he distances himself from them yet further through the use of ordering, listing and subheadings. For example, he reports, under a series of headings, the memories of a neighbour, Lillian Schwartz who was a good friend of his mother, Katarina. He records how Lillian’s own mother, Mrs Martin, had been “wary of a certain tendency in Negroes” and warned Lillian that it was
a tendency that was sure to show itself, however good Katarina might appear on the surface. Katarina was even darker than

Edna, and look at Edna . . . she had hoodwinked people into treating her white, and no good came of that. (39)

Indeed, Lillian tells him that “Mrs Martin never really accepted Katarina. She was even less sympathetic now that Katarina showed clear signs of being Black” (48). However, as Thomas notes, Mrs Martin “never said anything directly”, so that once again issues of race and racism are raised obliquely and displaced to the margins of Thomas’s existence. Alexis’ act of displacement echoes the dominant cultural discourse in Canada, which, “in displacing blackness elsewhere and limiting the terms of its acknowledgement”, attempts to “sever the transnational allegiances that facilitate critiques of racist practices” (Harris 368). Put another way, Alexis’ novel reflects the process of erasure of the black body through assimilation, and the effacement of racial origins where these are considered external rather than integral to identification.

Thomas is a third generation Canadian, and as such his racial origins are not immediately apparent or accessible to him with regard to his identification. The concept of the nation-state as a gendered and familial construction has been discussed previously in this thesis in relation to Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*.ⁱⁱ In the light of this reading, it is possible to equate Thomas’s lack of parents, and his unfulfilled desire to know them, with a longing to know and understand more about his nationality and his ethnic roots. Thomas’s parents “went their separate ways” at his birth and he was sent to live with his grandmother in Petrolia (5). He never discovers the identity of his biological father, and is separated from his mother for the first ten years of his life, until she collects him following the death of his

grandmother. Thomas is therefore lacking the “parentage” of the nation-state. Moreover, he equates his lack of knowledge about his mother with his inability to “know” himself and to establish his identity.

So, of the woman who whelped me, I know a name, a date of birth, something of her parentage, and a handful of incidents from her life. Essentially, I don't know her that much more than I know my father, and the things I do know are almost useless where knowing is concerned. I mean, I can barely scratch the surface of “Who was your mother?”

Mind you, I can barely scratch the surface of “Who am I?” either. (222)

Harris lends credence to this argument when she states that “the search for self often involves an investigation of one’s ancestors and their achievements, and one’s sense of place” (371). In many ways, *Childhood* documents the difficulties of this search, for a person whose background spans more than one culture and exceeds national boundaries.

It is possible, therefore, to understand Thomas’s lack of knowledge about his mother as a metaphor for his lack of a national identification. In his article “Borrowed Blackness”, Alexis discusses the lack of a black Canadian national identity. Of course, Canada’s apparent lack of national identity – white, black, or otherwise – has long been the subject of debate, and is a topic returned to frequently throughout this dissertation. Alexis considers part of the problem of national identity for black Canadians is that they have “yet to elaborate a culture strong enough to help evaluate the foreignness of foreign ideas” (“Borrowed” 20). By this he means that, in order to “belong” to the

nation and be able to assess what is “Other”, it is necessary to establish a collective black Canadian national identity: whereas at the present time Canada is a place that has, on the whole, been “constantly re-imagined by white Canadians” (Alexis, “Borrowed” 20). It is clear that, although Canada is the land of his birth, Thomas is unable to find a collective form of identification through his Canadian “motherland”. He points out that

in April 1967, I was my mother’s son, but “son” was too abstract an idea. I had never been a “son” as such. I was “Thomas MacMillan,” but what use was that to me? None of the details that added up to Thomas MacMillan had any real significance for my mother or Mr Mataf. . . . they didn’t know me, and I was unsure who Thomas MacMillan was. (84)

Although born “a Canadian”, one of Thomas’s “details” is that he, like his mother, is black; and yet, as there is an absence of black Canadian culture, this has no “real significance” to the nation-state of his birth. Moreover, Thomas is unable to identify himself through his racial origins, because he is unsure of his ancestry.

As a child, Thomas has no relationship with his motherland and, as has already been mentioned, Thomas’s substitute mother, his grandmother, appears to have made every attempt to eradicate her Trinidadian background. Thomas’s real father remains a mystery, but the most likely candidate is “Henry Wing, a black man with Chinese blood”, and it is Henry who raises Thomas in the latter part of his childhood (137). Thomas speculates over his paternity, but is unable to reach any conclusion as to the nature of their relationship: “I am, I think, Henry’s son, whoever fathered me, and yet. . .”

(247). Whatever the biological facts, Henry, to all intents and purposes, enacts the role of father to Thomas. Moreover, eventually Thomas becomes Henry's son by inheritance when he leaves him "all of his earthly possessions, which included his house, thousands of dollars in stocks and bonds, and the money he had in a savings account (\$78,999.88)" (259).

Alexis constructs the character of Henry a surrogate "fatherland" for Thomas, who has a "transnational" form of identification. Born in the Caribbean, Henry's parents died when he was very young, and he moved to Canada to work for the "third cousin of a second cousin of a first cousin", whose name is Maurice Wing (168). Henry eventually takes the name Wing as his own, but "Canada, his new home . . . seemed vague and impersonal", and Trinidad held only painful memories for him (169): so Henry "took such parts of world and time as he found appealing in the books he loved" and thereby establishes a liminal and transnational identity. Alexis emphasises Thomas's affinity with this form of identification through his attachment to Henry and his home. For example, Thomas's "memory of the sitting room is in thrall to [his] love for it" (130); and he recalls his bed with its "clean sheets", as being "a white lake", which was "large enough for four or five of me and it was safe" (142). Perhaps most telling of all, is the comment: "I was at ease at Henry's" (146).

Thomas finds it "strange" that he easily accepts the food cooked by Henry's housekeeper, Mrs Williams, because "it was mostly Caribbean" and, "inexplicably foreign. Yet, I took to plantain and roti, dasheen and doubles as if I were born to them" (139). Thomas clearly feels a vague sense of identification with his Caribbean origins, even though his grandmother had

“swept Trinidad from her own life and surroundings” (139). He finds Caribbean food “appropriate” to his new life with Henry: “not that Henry’s home was Caribbean. It wasn’t, but it was more so than anything I’d known . . . Here, in this household, buljol and sugar cake belonged. At least / felt that way” (139). Buljol and sugar cake carry a great number of cultural signifiers for Caribbean Canadians and references such as these contribute to what Mukherjee has called “the composite Canadian culture” (*Postcolonialism* 94).ⁱⁱⁱ Caribbean Canadian connections go back several centuries, and as Mukherjee explains, “Buljol”, which is a salted cod dish, “could not have been prepared except for the trade between Canada and Caribbean” (*Postcolonialism* 94). There is therefore a “substantial” relationship between the two, that is “built on the bitter economy of sugar” via the slave trade (*Postcolonialism* 95). Thus, as a Caribbean-Canadian writer, Alexis can be seen to make use of an internal code that offers a hidden marker of deeply significant cultural collective memories to those who are able to decipher its meaning.

Whilst Thomas is able to recognise and accept the cultural markers of Caribbean food with regard to his transnational identity, his “mother almost certainly felt otherwise” (139). Indeed, for Katarina, Mrs Williams and her cooking are “an unpleasant reminder” of her Caribbean roots (139). Thomas, on the other hand, likes to help Mrs. Williams: “there was usually something we could do together, but when there wasn’t, I sat and listened to her, enchanted by the way she spoke. She was a generous teller of tales, one story flowed leisurely into the next” (143). According to Walcott, Alexis’ representation of Mrs Williams and her relationship with Thomas, draws on

“all the old and tired tropes of the mammy stereotype” (“Desire” 68). Sanders too accuses Alexis of using “uncritical and unimaginative reinscriptions of racist stereotypes” in his portrait of Mrs Williams (197). However, whilst the character of Mrs Williams does indeed fulfil the stereotypical role of the uneducated black domestic, this is not the whole picture. Eventually, Katarina falsely accuses Mrs Williams of stealing from her, and persuades Thomas to lie to support her story. Although Henry is aware that his housekeeper is clearly not guilty of the crime, he takes Katarina’s side and dismisses her.

Although Walcott reads this incident as a desire to “place distance between [Caribbean] domestics and the ‘real’ citizens of Canada”, it may also be seen as a deliberate and conscious choice on the part of Katarina and Thomas, with the complicity of Henry, to remove the “Black Caribbean Stereotype” in the person of Mrs Williams (“Desire” 68). In other words, a transnational form of identification may be seen to encourage the elimination of the “Black body”, which has been marked as foreign, in order to maintain its relationship with the nation. This is echoed in Sanders’ understanding that sees it as “the Canadianization of Bodies”, or “the exchange of Caribbean context and place for that of Canada” (182). Henry, as Thomas’s father figure, therefore, offers him an ambiguous relationship with his Caribbean origins.

Identity and Place

The emphasis on a conscious identification with Canada is very apparent in *Childhood*. This is confirmed by the fact that Thomas's search for identity, for “belonging,” reaches its apotheosis when he considers himself to be a manifestation of Canada's capital city, Ottawa. He explains that

if [Ottawa] were suddenly turned into a human being, I'm certain I would recognize it. In fact, I sometimes think I am its embodiment. I am so thin and my eyesight so poor. I get along in both its languages. My work is menial, but it has an official title: Senior Research Assistant, Lamarck Labs Inc. (129)

The overwhelming majority of the population of Ottawa is white,^{iv} yet, once again, Thomas does not consider colour or race to be a significant factor in his comparison between himself and the city. Indeed, he does not appear to consider it at all. Although Thomas describes himself as Ottawa's "embodiment", the physical resemblance in this personification is limited to its being "thin" (possibly a reference to the narrow shape of a city that stretches along the banks of the river) and to having "poor eyesight" (perhaps implying a lack of vision, the sort of accusation that is often levelled at political seats of government). This physical description suggests that Ottawa and, by association, Canada, has an air of invisibility, a sense of being overlooked and insignificant: a perception that reflects the Canadian preoccupation with identity, and that echoes Thomas Wayman's suggestion that Canada is largely "a country not considered" by its own people.^v Moreover, in his lack of acknowledgement of his colour, Thomas once more overlooks his race, and renders his own Blackness insignificant and invisible. Sanders suggests that this type of "silence concerning race" in *Childhood* may "parallel the polite and understated ways in which Canadian racism is often expressed" (173). While this is quite possibly the case, it is of particular significance that as the "embodiment" of Canada, Alexis' narrator can be seen to have responsibility

for this silencing, thus reproducing the contradictions and paradoxes of life in a multicultural society.

Thomas's racial origins can again be seen to be silenced in his use of the expression to "get along," with regard to his own and the city of Ottawa's bilingual abilities. The phrase connotes a standard in both the French and English language that is not "fluent" or "expert", but merely adequate, and it ignores Thomas's earlier admission that he speaks French "with a Trinidadian accent" (15).^{vi} The semantic field expresses a sense of tolerance at having to speak both languages that lacks enthusiasm. The problematic issue of Canada's linguistic duality is raised here, with Thomas proffering an attitude of practical resignation regarding official bilingualism. Moreover, through the use of the extended metaphor, this perception is also put forward as being that of the country and its capital. *Childhood* is a text that casually, and yet pointedly, crosses boundaries of language, with French being used intermittently, without translation, throughout the novel. Walcott makes a useful point when he argues that "Alexis' use of bilingualism is a strategic border-crossing deployed to make his place in the nation appear secure and correlatively less 'Black'" ("Desire" 66). This is not to say that other Black writers in Canada do not speak or write in French, but to suggest that, in his specific and pointed use of bilingualism, Alexis is foregrounding Thomas' affiliation with a "normative" Canada.

This is further reinforced in the self-deprecating air created by Thomas' description of himself and thereby Ottawa, which highlights an impression of "ordinariness". For example, he calls his work "menial" albeit with an "official title", employing a type of self-effacement that could be

considered very typically culturally Canadian. In terms of Alexis' literary conceit, this suggests that although Ottawa has the prestige of being the capital city of Canada, in practice this is simply an "official title" for a mundane role. Furthermore, the use of this metaphor underpins the notion that these characteristics are stereotypically Canadian: a suggestion supported by Brodie's definition of the ideal Canadian citizen. She states that "the ordinary Canadian is disinterested, neither seeking special status nor treatment from the state. He [sic] is neither raced, nor sexed, nor classed: he transcends difference" (72). Brodie goes on to conclude from this that "a close reading of the current conception of the ordinary Canadian reveals that he can be only a white, heterosexual, middle-class male because in contrast to him everyone is 'special' in some way or another" (72).

However, it becomes clear, when examined from a transnational perspective, that Alexis challenges this conception of the "ordinary" Canadian citizen in *Childhood*, by offering its central character, Thomas, as a synecdoche for Ottawa. Mackay makes the very astute observation that in political terms, the ideal Canadian citizen is "a character defined primarily by what he is not" (21). Thomas is certainly not white, his background is hardly middle-class and, although his adoptive father, Henry, was "neither transvestite nor homosexual himself", he did enjoy the company of both (131). Thomas is indeed an "ordinary Canadian", who "transcends difference", but in contrast to him, other Canadians are not "special"; rather they, too, are all different. As Kertzer points out, "Canadians have had to devise a looser conception of national unity. They are united, not by a common spirit, but by their common differences" (46). Thomas, therefore, may be seen to represent

a subversion of Brodie's description of an "ordinary Canadian", in that if everyone is defined by what they are not, what they are not is "the same". Thus, Alexis can also be seen to undermine the neutralising power of "the cliché that everyone is the same in his or her difference" (Lecker, "Making" 11). As a consequence, to "belong" – to have a recognisable identity – is actually to be special: to be an "ordinary Canadian" is, paradoxically, to be different, to be strange in some way.

The character of Thomas is constructed in such a way that he reflects Julia Kristeva's thinking regarding identity, suggested in the title of her monograph *Strangers to Ourselves*.^{vii} This perception of "strangeness" is one in which the "stranger" not only lives as the foreigner, outsider or alien in either his or her own, or another country, but also lives within the self. There is evidence that this concept not only applies to individual but also national modes of identification. Siemerling argues that on the face of it nations struggle to define themselves through their oppositional differences to other national groups, but that eventually national affirmation comes down to the defiance of an "internal otherness" (*Discoveries* 3, 11). Kertzer expands on this idea when he discusses the situation with regard to Canadian national identity; he explains how the "enigma of alterity collapses both inward and outward: it makes individuals and communities strangely conflicted – different from themselves" (188). Evidence of this can be seen in the way in which the national policy of multiculturalism in Canada, encapsulated in the metaphor of the cultural "mosaic", leads to the contradictory concept of a community of individuals. Indeed, as Kertzer rightly points out, Canada presents an "ideological community that, alas, is never truly communal (unified), because

it is continually alien to itself" (189). Hence, it would follow that Thomas, the quintessentially "ordinary Canadian" is a "stranger to himself".

This concept of the "stranger" has already been discussed previously in this dissertation, in the chapter on *Fugitive Pieces*.^{viii} It is argued here that Alexis' protagonist, Thomas MacMillan, occupies a very similar position to that of Michaels' character, Jakob Beer, where Beer is read as offering a representation of a transnational form of identification through his positioning as the stranger. Like Jakob, Thomas strives to locate himself through memory, and seeks identification with his family, and yet he consistently remains a stranger to himself. At one point he rather plaintively opines, "know thyself? Pardon my language, but the ancient Greeks should bugger off. Knowing so little of my origin, of my parents, of anything at all, how much chance is there of knowing myself?" (222). Here, Thomas's rhetorical question reveals again the sense of alienation from the "Self": deprived of origins, parents and roots, he is unable to "locate" himself within temporal and spatial boundaries. Instead, as will become clear, from a transnational perspective Thomas can be seen eventually to find a means of location through the dislocation of "strangerhood".

A transnational approach, therefore, uncovers a parallel in the novel between the overwhelming desire that Thomas has for identification and the almost ubiquitous concern that Canada has with its lack of national identity. The driving need for a "fixed" and recognisable form of identification that can be authenticated in some way is common to both the character of Thomas and the nation in which he lives. Mackey comments that there have been a "truly astounding number of initiatives intent on making Canadian identity. The

desire for and the necessity for a national identity are seen as common sense, it is taken for granted" (9, original italics). Yet, as Mackay points out, the project of creating identity has also apparently been terribly unsuccessful:

Everywhere, Canadian identity is seen as crisis-ridden, as a fragile and weak entity constantly under attack and in need of vigilant defence. Some people say that Canada has no identity at all, or at least not a real one. Even a report from the federal government suggests that Canada is a "nation without nationality". (9)

This apparent lack of any cohesive form of identification, and the perceived need to have such an identity is clearly reflected in Thomas's pursuit of a "fixed" form of belonging. However, it is in the recognition of the similarities between himself and the city of Ottawa, that Thomas finally finds a sense of location, albeit one that ironically is founded on an absence of fixity.

Identity and Citizenship

Thomas finally turns away from the "cloistered world" of his childhood and abandons his search for a "family" identity, and in doing so quite literally finds himself "a place", through his identification with Ottawa.

I was briefly, blessedly, unselfconscious, and that was how I came to recognize home. . . . The act of discovery was my light. Although Ottawa was the principal thing illuminated, it was through Ottawa, or with it, or in it, that I found my bearings away from my mother and Henry, and without them . . .

Ten years passed during which the outside world mattered more to me than mother, father, home and hearth. I made a concerted effort to put distance between myself and my childhood. Not that I was successful. (202-3)

It is apparent, therefore, that it is only when Thomas stops looking to fulfil his notion of having a “real family”, when he stops being “Self conscious”, that he is able to “recognise home”. Moreover, it is of great significance that it is not in fact Ottawa, but the *act* of discovery itself – the realisation that Ottawa has become home – which provides Thomas Macmillan with a means to belong. Thomas acknowledges that he is unsuccessful in his deliberate effort to separate himself from his past and his roots: in doing so, he finds that the conscious decision not to seek out his identity paradoxically allows him to find a place.

Thomas explains, “I was still unable to do without ‘belonging,’ but I had discovered a ‘somewhere else’ more hospitable than their ‘there’” (198). He acknowledges that the desire to have a “fixed” identity remains, but it is ameliorated by moving away from the binary notions of “here” and “there” to a third and transnational space that is “somewhere else”. Bhabha considers this notion of a “Third Space”, pointing out that although it is “unrepresentable in itself,” it does constitute

the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (*Location* 37)

In other words, it is impossible to define or “fix” this “somewhere else”, because it is open to a continuous process of *re*-presentation. Thomas describes his “discovery” as becoming “conscious of not being myself” (202); he realises that he cannot “find” himself because there is no fixed “Self” for him to find. There is a resonance here with Hardin’s conclusion that “Canadians do not assert their nationalism by looking for it . . . They assert it by not finding it” (26). This is confirmed in Kertzer’s suggestion that Canada’s consistent failure to find a national identity is actually a success, “because it ensures that no totalising definition of nationhood will satisfy us” (199). It would appear, therefore, that any coherence within Canadian national identity is largely achieved through contradiction and fragmentation.

Thomas circumvents the need for nation and nationality by making himself a “citizen”, or more explicitly, through the city becoming part of himself: as he explains, he first encountered “Ottawa-as-Ottawa, before it was Ottawa-as-Thomas” (199). The idea of citizenship in *Childhood* can clearly be seen to be privileged over nationality and nationhood. Indeed, the city is of the utmost importance to Thomas, and he is “astounded there was ever a time it meant nothing to me. It has been everything to me since: my ocean, my desert, my plain” (199). Evidently, Thomas’s whole world is contained within his perception of the city, and as such the city exhibits a transnational mode of identification, which transcends the limitations of place, and crosses the boundary between individual and collective identity. Alexis’ novel, therefore, offers a representation of the city and the citizen that encompasses both nation – in that Ottawa is the capital of Canada – and a global dimension that is beyond boundaries.

Thomas's description of there being "two strands of the city" in his imagination, offers further evidence that the city is not only representative of the nation, but also exhibits a transnational perspective that transcends national boundaries. Close analysis reveals that these "national" and "transnational" aspects of the city can be read in terms of the "real" or concrete, and the "imagined" or abstract. Thomas tells his reader

there's the city I walk in . . . Then there's the city I negotiate in dreams and daydreams. They aren't entirely distinct, of course. Ottawa feeds the city of my dreams, and the city of my dreams is a dimension of the city itself. (126)

Here the lines are blurred between the physical reality of the city, and its abstract conceptualisation in Thomas's imagination. Similarly, whilst the reality may be that the city of Ottawa is, in fact, the capital of the Canadian nation, it is also true to say that, in terms of Benedict Anderson's argument, the Canadian nation is an "imagined community"^x, and that the one impacts on and interacts with the other.

Alexis offers the Canadian National War Memorial as a metaphor for the transcendence of the boundary between the physical nation of Canada and Canada as part of a transnational conceptual framework. The first time Thomas remembers seeing the monument "with its forbidding stone angel and dark soldiers moving through a white arch", he acknowledges that somewhere inside of him "it meant something more peculiar than Death or Heroism" (126). The use of the word "peculiar" indicates that the monument has a distinct or exclusive meaning that goes beyond expected notions of national recognition for the country's war dead and heroes. Anderson argues that cenotaphs and

monuments are accorded public reverence because they offer a means for the transformation of “fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (11). Moreover, in doing so, they allow nations to “loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future” (Anderson 11-12). In other words, such monuments offer a means of defining and preserving national identity, and it is unsurprising, therefore, that “Canada, more than most countries, is a nation of Great War memorials” (Berton 8).

The cultural historian, Jim Zuccherro, quite rightly points out that the Canadian National War Memorial is rich in symbolism when “‘read’ like a text”, and it is clear that there exists a certain intertextuality in *Childhood* between the “real” and the “fictional” monument (“Canadian” 3).^x The War Memorial has particular significance with regard to the blurring of the boundaries between the physical reality of nation and its transnational abstract conceptualisation within Alexis’ novel. The monument is, in actuality, situated in Confederation Square, Ottawa, a location chosen after lengthy debate “on account of its association with the unity of the people of Canada” (Zuccherro, “Canadian” 4). It is also relevant to note that the positioning of the monument, opposite Parliament Buildings, places it close to the seat of Canadian government. The location of the monument, therefore, evokes the unity of the nation and its political stability, and yet, Thomas describes how the Parliament Buildings had “meant nothing to [him] for years” (126). Parallels can be drawn here between Thomas’s lack of engagement with the Parliament Buildings and Kertzer’s contention that there are those Canadians whose focus is on living in “a post-national technopolis” which “render[s] the nation obsolete” (*Worrying* 164).

Moreover, when the buildings do become of importance to Thomas, it is in an oppressive way. They occur repeatedly in his nightmares, so that when he dreams of “running from a knife-wielding lunatic, say, the buildings recur time and again” (125). Although the Parliament Buildings “persist in [his] imagination”, they are “deserted” and do not offer sanctuary in his dream, simply a location that is neither fixed nor stable (125-6). Kertzer recognises that whilst some Canadians may “consider the nation contestable and even contemptible”, it can also be argued that Canada as a nation “persists because it is protean” (*Worrying* 174). In other words, Alexis’ novel does not offer a coherent definition of nationhood; rather, it suggests that whilst the idea of nation continues to endure and is still seen to confer identity, it does so through a constant process of change and through the transcendence of national boundaries. Giles argues that “transnationalism” is an effective term in this situation, “since it implies a mediating conception which acknowledges the hollowing out of national identity while simultaneously admitting its capacity to shape cultural forms in a spectral way” (“Trans Atlantique” 15).

As has already been mentioned, the Canadian National War Memorial is a physical symbol of the endurance of nation and an attempt to “fix” or construct a certain national identity. Indeed, the War Memorial itself appears to be both literally and figuratively of “monumental” national importance. It features a group of bronze figures, including two horses and riders, drawing a gun through a stone arch, on top of which are the emblematic bronze figures of peace and freedom. Among the memorial's most striking features are its sheer physical size, as it reaches a height of twenty-one metres, and the large number of figures that are depicted, twenty-two in all, each being one third

greater than life-size in scale. Finally, the “real” monument is constructed from granite from a quarry in Quebec and bronze sculpted by the British artist Vernon Marsh, thus incorporating elements of Canada’s two “founding” nations.

Zuccherro suggests that the War Memorial may be interpreted as a metaphor for the birth of the Canadian nation. He argues that

the principal repository of the sculpture’s significance is the arch that constitutes its unifying structure: as they struggle through its opening in battle, youth do not merely move towards victory; they enact a rite of passage, a birth that will earn their country a place in the community of nations, a community governed by peace and freedom. (5)

This reading of the metaphorical significance of the monument is one that can, once again, be seen to draw on notions of the “feminine” nation.^{x1} Indeed, the memorial seems to capture not so much the “birth of the nation”, but rather the nation engaged in a perpetual process of reproduction. To take this argument further, it follows on that the monument offers a concrete representation of the abstract conceptualisation that sees Canada as the over-arching bridge that transcends cultures, spanning and encompassing the liminal space beneath in which multiplicity and pluralism reside. Whilst Alexis draws on this range of symbolic features in his novel, he also subverts and defamiliarises them, in a way that challenges and expands notions of a “fixed” Canadian national identity, for both the collectivity and the individual.

One example of this is the way in which Alexis’ fictional representation of the War Memorial is a distortion of the actual monument itself, where the

concrete sculpture literally becomes an abstraction that is absorbed into Thomas's psyche. He explains that years after first seeing the War Memorial, at a difficult point in his life, he "dreamed about the monument". Indeed he "couldn't stop dreaming about it" (126):

The arch and the angel were white as milk, the soldiers like living shadows, whispering and grumbling as they tried to pull the cannon through. For some reason, the angel was angry, but angry as a shopkeeper might be at a difficult employee, and in anger it beat its wings sending bright-red insects in every direction. (126-7)

This representation of the monument is a subversion of the "real" memorial, in that the two bronze figures, emblematic of peace and liberty, that stand on top of the stone arch, become the single figure of a "forbidding stone angel" (126). Indeed, the image of "the stone angel" is one that resonates within the canon of Canadian fiction through Margaret Laurence's novel of the same name. As Howells points out, Laurence's *The Stone Angel* was one of those novels appropriated in "Canada's postwar project of nation-building" and thus there exists an intertextual link between the figure of the stone angel and Canadian national identity ("Writing" 195). It may also be that the stone angel draws on the "Tombstone" aspect of the War Memorial, evoking images of death that combine with its state of anger to contrast sharply with the figures of freedom and peace that it is replacing. Therefore, the two bronze figures, emblematic of peace and freedom, are defamiliarised through the ossification of national identification, into a single, white stone angel.

It is also striking that although, once again, race is not directly addressed in this image, the angel, like the arch, is “white as milk”, rather than the dark bronze of the statues on the actual memorial (126). Thus, drawing on Zuccherro’s metaphor, it seems that the arch, which constitutes the unifying structure of the nation, is predominantly white: peace and freedom are transformed into the single white figure of the stone angel, and encompassed and absorbed into the fabric of the structure itself. Furthermore, Alexis foregrounds the existence of a power relationship such as that of employer/employee, in which the white “stone angel” presides, with exasperated anger, over the arch and the dark figures beneath.

Although the angel appears to be being challenged, its authority is apparently not in question. Its response – “sending bright-red insects in every direction” – offers a complex image, which, whilst possibly representative of the wielding of power, is not that of large-scale death and destruction (127). Rather, it is suggestive of many tiny droplets of blood, or of many small wounds caused by numerous bites and stings that result in irritation and discomfort. The insects seem to be a physical manifestation of the angel’s anger, and yet it is unclear whether this is a deliberate or aggressive act on the part of the angel. The overall feeling created, when combined with the “whispering” and “grumbling” of the soldiers, is one of discontent and discord, an atmosphere that resonates with the cultural clashes that result when national identity becomes “a site of alternation and alterity” (Giles, *Virtual* 273). Kertzer argues that Canada is a nation “in which social coherence is secured not by any ideal or expressive totality . . . but only by a presiding

contradiction" (198). Alexis can be seen to reflect this contradiction in his metaphorical subversion of the Canadian War Memorial.

Alexis suggests through Thomas that "it doesn't matter what the dream meant, if it meant anything at all", but the key aspect from a transnational perspective is the crossing of the boundary between citizen and nation, between individual and collective identity (127). This is shown in Thomas's assertion that "the monument itself seemed as much a part of the city as a part of myself" (127). Here, nation remains "an unavoidable, defining condition of modernity" for Thomas. He is not free to choose or reject it, but continues, in some way, to be defined by it (Kertzer 166). Giles comments on "the increasingly problematic status of the nation-state", because of the "tendency of conceptual categories to exceed national boundaries": at the same time he points out that many authors are reluctant to "abandon the signifying capacity of the nation entirely" (Foreword x). It is important to note that Thomas describes the monument as "a word in the shared language of my mind and my body" (127). The "concrete" is transformed, or indeed translated, into the "abstract" and vice versa, so that "place" transgresses physical and virtual boundaries, in the communication of symbolic meaning. Thus, Thomas can be seen to take on a transnational form of identification that encompasses both the concrete reality of his citizenship and the abstract conceptualisation of his "unfixed" form of identity.

This notion of a "shared language" foregrounds the existence of a split between mind and body that engenders an internal dialogic mode of communication. As has already been noted, Thomas's search for his identity stems from his knowing little about his origins, so that he is continually a

stranger to himself. Thomas recognises this internal division between “Self” and “Self” – or what Kambourelis terms as “the split self” (“Alphabet” 89) – and, confronted with this contradiction, turns to place to provide a means of communicating this “disunity as unity” (Kroetsch, *Lovely* 21). Kroetsch claims that this paradox is a particularly Canadian trait, and that the willingness and ability to exist in this state “becomes a Canadian strategy for survival” (*Lovely* 23). This split within the self is inevitable and seeks to challenge “the preposterous notion of the self” as coherent, unified or stable (Kroetsch, *Labyrinth* 6). It is possible to read this split between mind and body in terms of the parallel between Thomas and Canada, with regard to their respective crises of identity. Canada, too, can be seen as having a metaphorical split between self and self, as a “settler-invader” nation, that is both coloniser and colonised. The Canadian body politic encompasses its First Nations peoples, its two “founding” nations, and a constitutional policy of multiculturalism. As a result, Canadian culture generally “exists in a state of permanent crisis, always on the verge of being overwhelmed” by both inside and outside forces (Kertzer 171).

Adopting a transnational perspective reveals the ambivalence in this “shared-language” that inscribes this division between signifier and signified, between *langue* and *parole*, and, as it is seen here, between “Self” and “Self” (127). The “shared language” of mind and body may be seen, therefore, as an attempt by Alexis to construct a way to articulate Thomas’s experience, in a manner that acknowledges the liminality of his dislocated form of identification (127). “Ottawa”, Thomas tells his reader, “is a crucial messenger in the dialogue between my mind and my body” (127). The city of Ottawa or,

to be more precise, citizenship itself, offers Thomas a space to live within the concept of disunity as unity.

Thomas goes on to give a “short vocabulary of its language”, listing places in Ottawa and what they mean to him in terms of feelings and emotions (127). For example, the list states:

<i>Body at:</i>	<i>Mind:</i>
...	...
<i>War Memorial:</i>	anxiety (death- or sex-related)
<i>National Arts Centre:</i>	friendship, quiet, hush (127)

The very act of listing and the graphology and typography used serve to underline Thomas’s desire to “fix”, or locate, his distinctly Cartesian perception of the dualistic relationship between mind and body. However, this attempted act of cognitive appropriation is subverted because, as Thomas explains, these are words that are “translated from a language that exists only in silence” (128). The language of liminality and dislocation is unutterable; it is a language that yields up its meaning not in the act of speech, but in the process of signification. There is a resonance with Sanders remarks that *Childhood* is a narrative of “obsessive and recursive self-articulation,” which suggests that the narrator cannot “articulate the nation, nor is the nation prepared to articulate him” (184). However, it is the *process* of articulation itself that is key in this regard.

Therefore, it is important to consider that not only is this space unspeakable, but “to make matters worse, the language is constantly changing” (128). Bhabha states that the “process of language” in what he terms the “Third Space” is “crucial to the production of meaning and ensures,

at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent” (*Location* 36). There can be no stasis of expression where difference and change are continual, and Thomas has to concede that his attempt at definition is unsuccessful, because “the monument doesn’t mean the same thing to me now as it did at one time” (128). Thus, although the “War Memorial” may once have offered an expression of “anxiety” at the possibility of the death of nation, or its lack of reproduction and growth this may no longer be the case. Moreover, whilst the “National Arts Centre” may mean that the nation’s cultural production signifies the quiet hopefulness of “friendship”, and therefore evidences the apparent success of the nation, it is inevitable that these meanings can and will change. In fact, Zuccherro makes the very pertinent observation that even the structure of the physical monument itself is not static. He notes that “because it is constructed out of bronze and granite the National War Memorial has changed and will continue to change in appearance over the years through exposure to the elements and to urban pollution” (“Canadian” 4). Thomas confesses that “Ottawa has changed so much and so often” that he doesn’t know “which Ottawa is Ottawa” (125).

Memory and Identity

King asserts that, in autobiographical texts, genealogy and the tracing of family often “seems to be a crucial way of establishing a history and finding a point of origin, which will, of course, always recede before our grasp” (7). It is unsurprising, therefore, that in his search for identity, Thomas attempts to discover more about his family. However, as the quote from King affirms,

establishing a point of origin is an impossible task, in that it is subject to endless deferment. This is reflected in the structure of the novel, which ends where it begins. As Thomas himself emphasises in the opening of the final chapter: “and so I’ve come full circle, or full spiral, or perhaps only up through the ground. (I mean, Time is the ground, but my analogy is weak)” (261). This spiral may be seen to work through the “ground” of the two levels of narration that exist within the novel: the textual level, where Thomas is the narrator and Marya, his beloved, the narratee, and the extra-textual level, where the reader is the imagined narratee who receives the “macro” narrative that frames the text. The circular, or indeed, spiralling structure of the novel reflects the cyclical nature of the construction of the “Self” through memory, and offers a representation of the perpetual desire for identification and belonging that is at the heart of the text.

Thomas’s self-confessedly “weak” analogy between “ground” and “Time” draws attention to the way in which human identification is closely associated with place and time, through memory. The essence of Alexis’ concern with the way memory reconfigures identity, through the crossing and re-crossing of temporal and spatial boundaries, is encapsulated in the following quote.

Time, which isn’t like ground at all, washes things up without regard for order or sense. My life comes back to me in various pieces, from Pablum to Tombstones, each piece changing the contour of the life I’ve led.

I will have thousands of childhoods before time is done.
But this one has its own necessity. (264)

Here, the contradiction of the previous analogy between “Time” and “ground” conversely acts to foreground their similarities, and thereby facilitates connotations of the ubiquitous shifting “sands of time”. Furthermore, this change in the analogy, combined with the use of the word “washes”, highlights the pervasive etymological connection between “Time” and “tide”, where “tide” in its archaic form represents a period of time, such as “eventide”. As a consequence, time becomes connoted as a tide that randomly “washes things up” on the shoreline of memory.

The shoreline is a liminal zone, an interstitial space between ocean and land, and a physical boundary of nation. There is a resonance here with the official motto of Canada, “a mari usque ad mare”, or “from sea to sea”, which according to tradition is drawn from Psalm 72:8, when David prayed that Solomon would “have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth”.^{xii} As Howells points out, this motto “looks very like the expression of a nation builder’s fantasy of transcontinental unity” (*Contemporary* 11). Indeed, it envisions the nation of Canada as not only including the space between its shores, but also encompassing the entire globe within its sphere of influence. It would seem therefore, that metaphorically speaking, the Canadian nation, like the landscape of memory, has fluid borders for those who claim its citizenship.

The permeable and constructed nature of these borders and boundaries is further emphasised by the problematising of the normally fixed referent of the map. Misrahi-Barak argues that in *Childhood*, “the sense of the map seeps through the novel” in relation to the evolution of its characters (48). Thomas’s use of the word “contour” to describe “the life he has led” is of

particular significance in this regard, in that it draws on the semantic field of cartography, and thus evokes the possibility of a “life map”, of “mapping” the “Self” (264). McClintock rightly suggests that “the map is a technology of knowledge that professes to capture the truth about a place”, a “scientific form” that promises “to retrieve and reproduce nature exactly as it is” (27-8). Alexis’ use of the imagery of the map, therefore reinforces the perception that Thomas’s memoirs are an attempt to “fix” his identity, to locate himself “officially” within the temporal and spatial boundaries of the Canadian nation. However, the defining line of the contour, the supposedly “fixed” outline that maps the shape of individual identity, is continually altered by the erosions and deposits of memory. This trope, therefore, conveys memory as constantly shifting and changing and offering an unstable foundation for the construction of the “Self”.

“Memory”, according to Nora, “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (8). The “unfixed” and unreliable nature of memory, of which Nora speaks, is reflected in Thomas’s statement that he will have “thousands of childhoods before time is done” (264). This one, he says, “has its own necessity” but it remains a provisional reconstruction (264). In this way, Alexis can be seen to recognise and explore the dialectic between the fragmentation of identity and the mourning, through recollection, of its loss. Thomas is faced with a paradox, in which “the ‘I’ of the present has been constructed out of, but also continues to rewrite, the ‘I’ of the past” (King 40). He engages with the act of remembrance in the desire

to gain access to his identity; he points out that “until six months ago, I didn’t think it important to look back. I was content to remain closed to myself” (264). Thus, in order to construct and “know” himself in the present, he must first acknowledge the loss of “self” through the deconstruction of his past.

In conclusion, the evidence given here shows that *Childhood* offers a representation of the endeavour to articulate identity as “process” or, to put it another way, the text paradoxically tries to capture the notion of identity as “continual change” using the “fixed” framework of the narrative form. It attempts this task using a multiplicity of discursive strategies such as footnotes, maps, listing and enumeration, each of which serves only to reveal a sense of absence and lack in the very fixity they attempt to convey. The blurring of boundaries has been shown here to reflect the crossing of cultural and national divisions. These, in turn, reveal the multiplicity of the “Self” in terms of both individual and collective identity.

The analysis of *Childhood* provided here shows the way in which the structure and narrative of the novel articulate “the struggle for a genuine multicultural citizenry in Canada” in a very subtle and sophisticated manner (Walcott, “Desire” 78). Alexis’ representation of identity as “process” rather than “product” has particularly been shown to reflect the way in which “various kinds of blackness are always in progress, always in the process of becoming” in Canada (Walcott, *Black* xv). This representation is given strength and cohesion by the almost invisible and yet perceptible strands of race and racial origin that are woven seamlessly into the fabric of the text, in the same way as, coincidentally, the fabric of Thomas’s grandmother’s dresses make manifest the red, white and black of the flag of Trinidad (29).

Walcott argues that “while symbolically and otherwise” Alexis’ work is “forcefully Canadian, Trinidad keeps echoing in his texts” (“Desire” 69). Moreover, although Trinidad seems to be absented from the text, a transnational perspective has shown that it clearly plays “a crucially important shadowy force” in Alexis’ narrative (Walcott, “Desire” 69). Thus, Thomas has been shown to exhibit the type of Canadian identity that Macfarlane identifies as being “articulated as fundamentally interstitial and strategically unstable” (224).

Kristeva is right when she argues that contemporary society is confronted with a situation in which “a paradoxical community is emerging, made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners” (195). She goes on to contend that this multinational society is “the consequence of an extreme individualism”, an individualism that this chapter has shown is reflected in Alexis’ *Childhood*. The Canada of *Childhood* has been revealed in the novel as “an individual space, or a space that permits individuals, rather than a public space” (Davey 238). Indeed, the character of Thomas MacMillan has been read here as representative of a Canada that is “conscious of its discontents and limits”, a nation whose weaknesses and strengths lie in the “radical strangeness” of its citizens (Kristeva, *Strangers* 195).

The desire to belong has been demonstrated as being a central motif in the novel. In particular, Thomas’s quest for identification has a concern with genealogy, which, as Walcott confirms, “bears a trace to something beyond nation, disturbing its boundaries” and requiring analysis that goes “beyond the notion of singularity” (Walcott, “Desire” 77). The transnational approach taken

here has provided a means to examine some of the ways in which citizenship is represented in the novel. Close scrutiny of Thomas's identification with Ottawa has revealed some of the paradoxes and disjunctions of living as part of a multicultural citizenry. The identity of the city is that of a liminal and dislocated space that exceeds the boundaries of nation. Inhabiting the liminal and dislocated space of the "self" can be a difficult and painful task. Indeed, as Thomas himself acknowledges: "I have not always been my favourite place . . ." (197).

ⁱ Misrahi-Barak confirms this opinion in her article "Doing Away with Boundaries: Canadian Writers of Caribbean and Asian Descent" *Thamyris/Intersecting* 8. 2001: 43-52.

ⁱⁱ See this dissertation pages 75-79 for a fuller discussion of the relationship between family and nation.

ⁱⁱⁱ The use of food to signal an "internal code" is first examined in chapter one of this dissertation pages 30-1.

^{iv} According to the Canada 2001 census, the demographics of the city of Ottawa show that only 3.4% of its population are black, whilst 86.4% are white. Information from Statistics Canada, 2001 Census. Accessed online 12.04.06 at:
<http://www.12.statcan.ca/english/census01/home/index.cfm>

^v In his book *A Country Not Considered* Canadian writer and academic Thomas Wayman argues that many of his fellow citizens regard Canada as "beneath consideration as a locale for new and significant ideas, of new hope for the human species" (1).

^{vi} This reference is literally a "footnote" within the text. Thomas describes the "traumatic" way in which he is taught to read in both English and French by his grandmother, who uses a stick to rap him across the knuckles if his answers are wrong. She gives him extremely difficult words to learn, but he "learned to pronounce them, and she never broke any of [his] fingers" (15). Once he could read English, he says he learned French "the same way, though I speak it with a Trinidadian accent" (15). This is the first inkling the reader is given of Thomas's racial origins and the only reference to the fact that Thomas can be identified as having Trinidadian origins from his speech, and yet, as Sanders notes, it is a comment "so minor" that it is "easily missed" (176). The evidence of Thomas's racial origins is, therefore, both literally and figuratively marginalized within the text.

^{vii} Julia Kristeva explores the notion of the "stranger" with regard to the problems of nationality and nationalism, in her book *Strangers to Ourselves* New York: Columbia UP, 1991.

^{viii} See the chapter on *Fugitive Pieces* in this thesis pages 143-4

^{ix} "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6).

^x An in-depth discussion of the significance and origins of the Canadian National War Memorial can be found in Jim Zucchero's article: "The Canadian Nation War Memorial: Metaphor for the Birth of the Nation" *Mnemographia Canadensis: Remember and See* 2.18. Canadian Poetry Press, Uni of Western Ontario.

http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/architexts/mnemographia_canadensis_2/essay_18.htm Accessed online: 28.05.06.

^{xi} The idea of the "feminine" nation is explored further in the chapter on *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

^{xii} This tradition is referred to by Coral Ann Howells, *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2003. 11.

CONCLUSION

The four examples of contemporary Canadian fiction chosen for this thesis have been shown to offer a “transnational space”, where individual and collective identities may exist in a continual state of process. The study of these Canadian novels has confirmed the suggestion made in the introduction that the dialectic between nation and narration is revealed in the interlocution between “Where is here?” and “Who am I?” It has become clear, throughout the course of this dissertation, that the answer to one of these questions is now frequently predicated upon the answer to the other. The “here” that is Canada, in these texts, routinely appears to be dependent on “who” is asking, whilst the “who” that asks persistently lacks “fixity” and is subject to change. Close analysis of the novels has made it clear that this “Canadian” process of identification can be seen to be played out in the discursive exchange between “where” and “who”.

The Canada represented in the contemporary fiction studied here has been shown to be a place in which cultural differences are inextricably intertwined within individual and national identification. This situation reflects Prime Minister Chrétien’s assertion that Canada, in the twenty-first century, “contains the globe within its borders”.¹ Certainly, the transnational approach taken in regard to this literature indicates that these Canadian novels are global in their content. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that not only are these texts the product of a pluralized society, but also that they carry the imprint of their Canadian authors, who are, “by virtue of history and necessity, open to the world” (Chrétien 1). The evidence given in this dissertation supports its initial claim that it is possible to decipher the “hyphenated” status

of the authors within the texts themselves. One of Canada's foremost writers, Margaret Atwood, has commented that she and her fellow novelists "have to write out of who and when and where we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may" (*In Search* 4). The four writers, whose work is examined here, offer a "who", "when" and "where" in their novels that has been shown to be fluid and shifting in nature, and thus to reflect the notion of ongoing process that is integral to Canadian national identification.

The representation of Canadian national identity in these fictions has evidently moved beyond any straightforward perception of postcolonial theorising. What is more, it is very difficult to approach such unstable, diverse and multicultural forms of identification using postcolonial theory, because, as Mukherjee argues, "its vocabulary is too generalized and too monolithic" (*Post* 22). The need for a new theoretical approach has been established here, and the transnational perspective taken has proved to be more than adequate in the analysis of these heterogeneous narratives. This perspective has played an invaluable role in uncovering some of the contradictions, paradoxes and disjunctions that occur when novels such as these reflect life as it is lived "in the space of the hyphen" (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 101). It is also true to say that this transnational mode of analysis frequently raises more questions than it answers; however, any lack of solutions is ameliorated by the fact that it allows an open acknowledgement of problems that require negotiation.

Notwithstanding the necessity and validity of a transnational approach, national identity, and the association between "nation" and literature, remain problematic with regard to Canadian studies. Giles makes an astute observation, when he suggests that to speak "in postnational terms may be

premature, for the nation has not yet ceased to be meaningful as a category of affiliation and analysis" (*Virtual 21*). It is certainly the case that, whilst the idea of nation may be becoming outmoded, it is a concept that continues to be of relevance. Howells supports this viewpoint when she points out that although Canadian national identity might now be an ill-fitting garment, it needs to be refashioned into more "appropriate dimensions", because it is "not the time to throw it away and go naked" (*Contemporary 203*). This is one of the key reasons that it has proved appropriate to explore the nature of individual and collective Canadian national identity within this contemporary literature. What is more, the results show that this fiction does indeed concern itself with how a Canadian citizenship might be meaningfully imagined in a global context.

One of the advantages of taking a transnational, rather than a postnational, perspective is that it requires the critic to take a comparative and dialogic stance, which specifically acknowledges the rearticulation of nation.ⁱⁱ It is from this position that the paradox of nation as an "absent presence" has become an obvious and recurrent motif throughout the course of this dissertation's journey towards Canada. It is a theme that offers a reification of the persistence of nation and national discourse, even where such a discourse exists as a signal of its own demise, as has been shown to be the case in Martel's *Life of Pi*. These four novels occupy a place in the Canadian literary landscape, and yet at the same time they offer representations of a plurality of space. The Canada of these texts is not a single or unified entity, but is constructed as an "abstract-conceptualisation", an absent presence, a metaphorical place of refuge, a "Way Station", or a utopian "promised land".

Stouck confirms this conclusion in his review of *Life of Pi*, when he describes it as being part of a “new wave” of Canadian literature “wherein Canada is no longer a geographical setting for fiction, but something that encompasses events on the world stage” (“Book”140). He goes on to say that “Canada is not so much a place as an idea, ranging from a haven for immigrants and refugees to a vision of a new society based on racial, religious and political tolerance” (140). It could be argued that Martel uses Canada to provide a metaphor for an increasingly globalised world, in that it offers the “better story”, which conceals the difficulties of surviving day to day in a cut-throat world of clashing cultures (*Pi* 317). Thus, the Canada that has been arrived at in this dissertation constitutes what Werbner has described as a “place of non-place”, and as such it is “a typical transnational formation” that extends across and beyond national boundaries (“Place” 119).

Each of the four novels reveals a concern with crossing and transcending traditionally “fixed” cultural divisions, be they of genre, race, religion or gender, and frequently exceed accepted temporal and spatial boundaries. Comparative transnational analysis has shown that the subversion of conventional binary oppositions is a common feature of these texts, and as such they reveal the contingent nature of the construction of identity. These writers represent Canada as a space in which cultural modes of identification are no longer rigidly structured by the imposition of difference. However, whilst the discourse of identity is one of fluidity and process, one of the overriding motifs regarding the characters in these novels is their overwhelming desire to belong. There is a sense in which, paradoxically, Canadian nationhood is in fact “strangerhood” and a sense of location is

found in a communal feeling of dislocation. Put simply, Canadian citizenship affords a sense of security precisely because Canada encompasses conflicting cultural concepts.

A transnational perspective has shown that the difficulties and complexities of identification for those who can be described as stranger, immigrant, or outsider, are arguably central to each of these texts. Zucchero acknowledges that this struggle for identity is reflected in the endeavour to create a multicultural Canadian society, which is “a process still very much in flux”: what is more, he argues that it is time to recognise the writing of hyphenated-Canadians as being “integral to the self-portrait of Canadian national identity” (“What’s” 267). Davey suggests that, in Canada, “to develop a national identity can also be, paradoxically, to acquire a place in universal culture”; however, a transnational perspective serves to deconstruct any tendency towards universality and thus uncovers the disjunctions and fragmentation that exist (*Post* 16). The dialectic between literature and nation that has been established here points to Canada’s diversity as being “a source of continuing creativity and innovation” (Chrétien 1).

There is clearly more work to be done in this area, particularly with regard to the relationship between collective memory and individual identification where these exceed the boundaries of nation. This thesis set out to use a transnational approach to explore a particular aspect of identification in each of the novels; in many cases these aspects overlapped and informed each other and consequently offer the opportunity for further investigation. For example, the trope of the “house” as a metaphor for Canada, briefly examined in the chapter on *Fugitive Pieces*, bears closer analysis, particularly when

viewed comparatively with its use in *Childhood*. Moreover, comparative analysis across the four novels, regarding the collapse of temporal and spatial boundaries, may offer new insights into representations of identification as a process.

Finally, this thesis confirms that national identity, in these four novels at least, is being refashioned to reflect a pluralist Canada, in which cultural differences co-exist. Hall is adamant that the indications are that “the future belongs to the impure”, and the contemporary Canadian literature, which has been the focus of this thesis, appears to confirm this (“Subjects” 299). As Bhabha rightly argues,

where once the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature. (*Location* 12)

What is more, Hoffman supports this claim when she argues that the literature of this “new nomadism or diasporism is a transnational literature . . . in which multiple cultural references collide and collude” (“New” 56). Canada, is indeed the very “house of difference”, and its literature is transforming notions of “centre” and “margin”, “dominant” and “other”. The contemporary Canadian canon offers a diversity of voices, and an “honest recognition of the differences and multiple affiliations within individual identities” that must be negotiated by citizens and politicians alike (Howells, *Contemporary* 203). Canada was the intended destination for this dissertation, but a transnational approach has shown that its boundaries extend beyond the limitations of

nation, for it is a literary realm that is as “big as the globe and as expansive as time” (Michaels 29).

ⁱ Jean Chrétien, Prime Minister of Canada. "The Canadian Way in the 21st Century." Transcript of his speech before the Progressive Governance for the 21st Century Conference, Berlin, Germany, June 2000. See bibliography for details.

ⁱⁱ This conclusion was reached with Paul Giles comments regarding the term "transnational" in mind (*Virtual 21*).

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CONCLUSION

The four examples of contemporary Canadian fiction chosen for this thesis have been shown to offer a “transnational space”, where individual and collective identities may exist in a continual state of process. The study of these Canadian novels has confirmed the suggestion made in the introduction that the dialectic between nation and narration is revealed in the interlocution between “Where is here?” and “Who am I?” It has become clear, throughout the course of this dissertation, that the answer to one of these questions is now frequently predicated upon the answer to the other. The “here” that is Canada, in these texts, routinely appears to be dependent on “who” is asking, whilst the “who” that asks persistently lacks “fixity” and is subject to change. Close analysis of the novels has made it clear that this “Canadian” process of identification can be seen to be played out in the discursive exchange between “where” and “who”.

The Canada represented in the contemporary fiction studied here has been shown to be a place in which cultural differences are inextricably intertwined within individual and national identification. This situation reflects Prime Minister Chrétien’s assertion that Canada, in the twenty-first century, “contains the globe within its borders”.¹ Certainly, the transnational approach taken in regard to this literature indicates that these Canadian novels are global in their content. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that not only are these texts the product of a pluralized society, but also that they carry the imprint of their Canadian authors, who are, “by virtue of history and necessity, open to the world” (Chrétien 1). The evidence given in this dissertation supports its initial claim that it is possible to decipher the “hyphenated” status

of the authors within the texts themselves. One of Canada's foremost writers, Margaret Atwood, has commented that she and her fellow novelists "have to write out of who and when and where we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may" (*In Search* 4). The four writers, whose work is examined here, offer a "who", "when" and "where" in their novels that has been shown to be fluid and shifting in nature, and thus to reflect the notion of ongoing process that is integral to Canadian national identification.

The representation of Canadian national identity in these fictions has evidently moved beyond any straightforward perception of postcolonial theorising. What is more, it is very difficult to approach such unstable, diverse and multicultural forms of identification using postcolonial theory, because, as Mukherjee argues, "its vocabulary is too generalized and too monolithic" (*Post* 22). The need for a new theoretical approach has been established here, and the transnational perspective taken has proved to be more than adequate in the analysis of these heterogeneous narratives. This perspective has played an invaluable role in uncovering some of the contradictions, paradoxes and disjunctions that occur when novels such as these reflect life as it is lived "in the space of the hyphen" (Kamboureli, *Scandalous* 101). It is also true to say that this transnational mode of analysis frequently raises more questions than it answers; however, any lack of solutions is ameliorated by the fact that it allows an open acknowledgement of problems that require negotiation.

Notwithstanding the necessity and validity of a transnational approach, national identity, and the association between "nation" and literature, remain problematic with regard to Canadian studies. Giles makes an astute observation, when he suggests that to speak "in postnational terms may be

premature, for the nation has not yet ceased to be meaningful as a category of affiliation and analysis" (*Virtual* 21). It is certainly the case that, whilst the idea of nation may be becoming outmoded, it is a concept that continues to be of relevance. Howells supports this viewpoint when she points out that although Canadian national identity might now be an ill-fitting garment, it needs to be refashioned into more "appropriate dimensions", because it is "not the time to throw it away and go naked" (*Contemporary* 203). This is one of the key reasons that it has proved appropriate to explore the nature of individual and collective Canadian national identity within this contemporary literature. What is more, the results show that this fiction does indeed concern itself with how a Canadian citizenship might be meaningfully imagined in a global context.

One of the advantages of taking a transnational, rather than a postnational, perspective is that it requires the critic to take a comparative and dialogic stance, which specifically acknowledges the rearticulation of nation.ⁱⁱ It is from this position that the paradox of nation as an "absent presence" has become an obvious and recurrent motif throughout the course of this dissertation's journey towards Canada. It is a theme that offers a reification of the persistence of nation and national discourse, even where such a discourse exists as a signal of its own demise, as has been shown to be the case in Martel's *Life of Pi*. These four novels occupy a place in the Canadian literary landscape, and yet at the same time they offer representations of a plurality of space. The Canada of these texts is not a single or unified entity, but is constructed as an "abstract-conceptualisation", an absent presence, a metaphorical place of refuge, a "Way Station", or a utopian "promised land".

Stouck confirms this conclusion in his review of *Life of Pi*, when he describes it as being part of a “new wave” of Canadian literature “wherein Canada is no longer a geographical setting for fiction, but something that encompasses events on the world stage” (“Book”140). He goes on to say that “Canada is not so much a place as an idea, ranging from a haven for immigrants and refugees to a vision of a new society based on racial, religious and political tolerance” (140). It could be argued that Martel uses Canada to provide a metaphor for an increasingly globalised world, in that it offers the “better story”, which conceals the difficulties of surviving day to day in a cut-throat world of clashing cultures (*Pi* 317). Thus, the Canada that has been arrived at in this dissertation constitutes what Werbner has described as a “place of non-place”, and as such it is “a typical transnational formation” that extends across and beyond national boundaries (“Place” 119).

Each of the four novels reveals a concern with crossing and transcending traditionally “fixed” cultural divisions, be they of genre, race, religion or gender, and frequently exceed accepted temporal and spatial boundaries. Comparative transnational analysis has shown that the subversion of conventional binary oppositions is a common feature of these texts, and as such they reveal the contingent nature of the construction of identity. These writers represent Canada as a space in which cultural modes of identification are no longer rigidly structured by the imposition of difference. However, whilst the discourse of identity is one of fluidity and process, one of the overriding motifs regarding the characters in these novels is their overwhelming desire to belong. There is a sense in which, paradoxically, Canadian nationhood is in fact “strangerhood” and a sense of location is

found in a communal feeling of dislocation. Put simply, Canadian citizenship affords a sense of security precisely because Canada encompasses conflicting cultural concepts.

A transnational perspective has shown that the difficulties and complexities of identification for those who can be described as stranger, immigrant, or outsider, are arguably central to each of these texts. Zucchero acknowledges that this struggle for identity is reflected in the endeavour to create a multicultural Canadian society, which is “a process still very much in flux”: what is more, he argues that it is time to recognise the writing of hyphenated-Canadians as being “integral to the self-portrait of Canadian national identity” (“What’s” 267). Davey suggests that, in Canada, “to develop a national identity can also be, paradoxically, to acquire a place in universal culture”; however, a transnational perspective serves to deconstruct any tendency towards universality and thus uncovers the disjunctions and fragmentation that exist (*Post* 16). The dialectic between literature and nation that has been established here points to Canada's diversity as being “a source of continuing creativity and innovation” (Chrétien 1).

There is clearly more work to be done in this area, particularly with regard to the relationship between collective memory and individual identification where these exceed the boundaries of nation. This thesis set out to use a transnational approach to explore a particular aspect of identification in each of the novels; in many cases these aspects overlapped and informed each other and consequently offer the opportunity for further investigation. For example, the trope of the “house” as a metaphor for Canada, briefly examined in the chapter on *Fugitive Pieces*, bears closer analysis, particularly when

viewed comparatively with its use in *Childhood*. Moreover, comparative analysis across the four novels, regarding the collapse of temporal and spatial boundaries, may offer new insights into representations of identification as a process.

Finally, this thesis confirms that national identity, in these four novels at least, is being refashioned to reflect a pluralist Canada, in which cultural differences co-exist. Hall is adamant that the indications are that “the future belongs to the impure”, and the contemporary Canadian literature, which has been the focus of this thesis, appears to confirm this (“Subjects” 299). As Bhabha rightly argues,

where once the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature. (*Location* 12)

What is more, Hoffman supports this claim when she argues that the literature of this “new nomadism or diasporism is a transnational literature . . . in which multiple cultural references collide and collude” (“New” 56). Canada, is indeed the very “house of difference”, and its literature is transforming notions of “centre” and “margin”, “dominant” and “other”. The contemporary Canadian canon offers a diversity of voices, and an “honest recognition of the differences and multiple affiliations within individual identities” that must be negotiated by citizens and politicians alike (Howells, *Contemporary* 203). Canada was the intended destination for this dissertation, but a transnational approach has shown that its boundaries extend beyond the limitations of

nation, for it is a literary realm that is as “big as the globe and as expansive as time” (Michaels 29).

ⁱ Jean Chrétien, Prime Minister of Canada. "The Canadian Way in the 21st Century." Transcript of his speech before the Progressive Governance for the 21st Century Conference, Berlin, Germany, June 2000. See bibliography for details.

ⁱⁱ This conclusion was reached with Paul Giles comments regarding the term "transnational" in mind (*Virtual 21*).