

ANGELS IN THE LIBRARY: A REVIEW OF SMARO KAMBOURELI'S *SCANDALOUS BODIES*. KAMBOURELI, SMARO. *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Don Mills (Ont.): Oxford UP, 2000.

This is a book about contemporary English Canadian literature in its largest sense. It offers a close reading of some key Canadian texts as well as a critical approach to the contexts of their production, including the emergence of official multiculturalism, the function of the marketing, distribution and reception of texts, and the role of mainstream academic discourses. As Kamboureli herself explains in the introductory essay, her book intends to provide neither solutions to the problems exposed nor a unifying theme or thesis around which contemporary Canadian literature could be articulated (21). What this study does offer is a reflection on Canadian literature and multiculturalism that avoids and contests the idealizations of ethnicity that the official discourse has fostered in recent years.

The opening essay is autobiographical in tone and discusses the problems of definition of the diasporic critic's position and objectives within her own critical discourse. This question of self-location haunts the whole text, thus echoing Kamboureli's words that "constructing our books as mirrors of ourselves does not do away with the persistent question of representation. The logic of self-location [...] is no less fraught with problems than the positions of alleged neutrality and liberalism are" (4). Then, in a serendipitous fashion, the author says to have found in the library angels of Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* a way out of the critical impasse she had reached. Wender's angels meet in the Berlin's public library at night fall, but their actions as angels are seriously "limited by their inability to intervene substantially in the affairs of humans" (8). It is that acknowledgment of both the desire to intervene and the limitations of her position that provides in the end an adequate figure for the diasporic critic in the book.

The four main chapters that follow are characterized by that rhetorics of uncertainty and

seem self-consciously structured around the limits of critical discourse. Yet the book has an un-failing emphasis on undermining the binary thinking behind many studies of ethnicity and minority writing. There is a clear resistance to the fetishization of origins and difference, a firm reluctance to resolve the gaps and contradictions of contemporary literary discourse in multicultural Canada into easy relativistic positions.

Chapter One offers a revisionary approach to the figure and the fiction of Frederick Philip Grove. Kamboureli first dismantles critical discourses on Grove, and specifically the critic Walter Pache's affirmation that ethnicity is not an issue in Grove's fiction. Her subsequent alternative reading of *Settlers of the Marsh*, in the second part of the chapter, succeeds in unveiling the deep structures of ethnocentrism that make Grove's novel *seem* non-ethnic both within and without the text itself. Kamboureli's analysis traces the difficult itineraries of diasporic tradition in Canada and uncovers the bias behind seemingly objective critical discourses.

The rise of a multicultural rhetoric in the various influential social fields represents one of the most important developments in Canadian culture over the last 30 years. But these developments, as Kamboureli affirms in Chapter Two, do not necessarily imply that Canada has finally come to terms with its own cultural diversity. Rather, there is always the threat of the commodification of ethnicity within official multicultural practices. Kamboureli's discussions of the media, the language of the Multiculturalism Act, and the elements of Charles Taylor's politics of recognition in this chapter illustrate the extent to which the acceptance of ethnicity in Canada depends on the ethnic subject's willingness to conform to the required pattern sanctioned by mainstream Canadians. Moreover, there are signs of what has been called "multicultural fatigue," or a "view of multiculturalism as a *fait accompli*, and displays of saturation or impatience with anything related to racialization and ethnicity" (83). The next chapter continues then to deal with these contradictions by providing a sharp analysis of the ideology that informs multicultural anthologies in English Canada. Paradoxically, by drawing attention to



their own marginal status, these anthologies both recognize and otherize the production of non-mainstream writers. In other words, as ethnicity becomes a measure of inclusion in the anthology, it also, for the same reason, dictates the subject's exclusion from dominant discourses and its permanently deterritorialized condition on the Canadian literary scene. In this light, Kamboureli enacts a deconstructive reading of *Other Solitudes*, one of the most influential anthologies of multicultural fiction, edited by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, to show how its tremendous institutional impact has been largely due to its paradoxical affiliation with the mainstream literary canon and the official policy of multiculturalism.

Chapter Four focuses on Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan*, a well-known Canadian novel of the 1980s and the first fictional account of the history of "evacuation," imprisonment and dispersal of Canadian subjects of Japanese origin during and after the World War II. Drawing on Roy Miki's distinction between 'revolutionary' and 'radical' aesthetics, Kamboureli rereads *Obasan* against the majority of critics' interpretation of the novel as a narrative of progress and final healing. The revolutionary potential of Kogawa's text, the critic believes, lies in its failure to reconcile the historical paradoxes it engages. Kamboureli focuses on the main character's body as site of contradictory constructions of racial, national and sexual subjectivity in the novel. With this final reading, *Scandalous Bodies* turns upon itself, connecting the analysis of (the absence of) ethnicity in Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* in the Canada of the mid-1920s to (the excess of) ethnicity in Kogawa's *Obasan* in the early 1980s. This connection obviously provides a temporal perspective on the diasporic tradition in Canada. Additionally, the issues of discussion in both novels seem to draw our at-

tention and give sense to Kamboureli's own polysemic title. As she herself explains:

'Body' refers to corporeality, but also to the body politic; it is what I focus on, more often than not, in order to examine the politics of identity. The body's desires, its traumas, its abuse are all contingent on the body politic and its various manifestations. Similarly, 'scandal' is a sign of excess and transgression, but also of violation and indignity. Neither the diasporic body nor the body politic is scandalous in itself. Although I am heedful of the many issues I was unable to explore in this study, I hope I have not lost sight of the fact that the true scandal in this case would have been to propose a single 'moral' concerning multiculturalism —to disregard the fact that contingency, be it hidden away or easily observable, holds the key to any change we may effect. (ix)

*Scandalous Bodies* is an important book and will, no doubt, have a broad impact on the critical discourses of the coming years. It effectively tackles the contradictions and the sense of disorientation that the official policy of multiculturalism has produced as well as the difficulties presented by the ongoing lack of a coherent national narrative. In its deliberate absence of a central idea or cohesive structure, the very book serves perhaps as paradigm of the rhetorics of contingency it explores. In so doing, it posits the need for considering several sets of articulations and points out the continuing relevance of the practice of close reading of specific texts and individual gestures. Those are, for the time being, the possibilities as well as the limitations of the angels in the library.

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