

IN SEARCH OF NEW METAPHORS: AN INTERVIEW WITH LINDA HUTCHEON

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Linda Hutcheon holds the rank of “University Professor” of English and Comparative at the University of Toronto. She is the author and co-author of 10 books on topics that range from postmodernism to interdisciplinary approaches to opera, but her constant interest has been in critical theory and its intersections with contemporary culture, especially Canadian and American culture. Her most recent books include *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991), *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994) and, with Michael Hutcheon, M.D., *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (1996) and *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (2000). From 1994-2000, with Mario J. Valdes, she directed two large comparative literary history projects (on Latin America and on East Central Europe) to be published by Oxford University Press. She currently sits on the board of 17 scholarly journals, and in 2000 was the President of the Modern Language Association of America.

This interview was partially conducted on Monday, 17th July 2000 at 10:30 am. in Linda Hutcheon's office at the University of Toronto, and then completed through various email exchanges.

Eva Darias Beutell: Let me begin by alluding to Marshal McLuhan's definition of Canada as a “borderline case”: “A border,” McLuhan writes, “is not a connection but an interval of resonance (...). [It is] an area of spiraling repetition and replay (...), of rebirth and metamorphosis.” Given the ongoing movement, actual and imaginary, of people and ideas across frontiers, metaphorical and literal, would you say that North America is living today one of those moments of spiraling metamorphosis?

Linda Hutcheon: McLuhan's wonderful definition offers a description not only of the Canadian present but of the past: since the first Europeans came to the part of the continent now known as Canada, the native peoples were made more than aware of this “interval of resonance” or “spiraling metamorphosis,” as you put it. Since those unhappy times, people from all over the world have migrated to what they have always thought of as the “new world” or as the “golden mountain.” In other words, though the critical discourse on “diaspora” is relatively new to our literary discussions, Canada's demographic reality from the start has been the result of multiple diasporas, and so McLuhan's borderline “spiraling repetition” is played out in people not space. And always in the background is that indigenous population.



EDB: The native peoples are indeed a case in point to argue for the arbitrariness of national boundaries. But then again, the need to rethink runs parallel with the need to maintain certain differences, however historically (and violently) constructed. In the contemporary context of the postnational and the transnational, what can we make, for instance, of the cultural border between the United States and Canada, a border so often ignored by Americans, so jealously kept by Canadians?

LH: You put it well: for many Americans, Canadians do not seem to be so very different from themselves. Yet, I'd bet most Canadians, if taken for American while travelling elsewhere, do what I do —that is, hurriedly (even passionately) assert Canadianness. Even granted the infamous inability of Canadians to define what that might actually mean, we still know it means “not-American.” In the field of culture this question of the American-Canadian border has become especially fraught since the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect. For the big American companies that control publishing, film, and television, culture is an economic issue and therefore falls under the free trade stipulations; for Canadians, culture is a question of national identity. From, let's say, the late 1960s, when the Canadian government consciously began creating a sense of Canadianness through economic support of the arts, to the present, there have been protective measures in place to nurture Canadian cultural production. Likely because the U.S. went through this same process more than a century earlier (*vis-a-vis* Britain), it seems to have forgotten how important this stage of national cultural self-definition and self-assertion is. Multi-national (read: American, often) capitalism today doesn't really have much patience for such identity protection, for obvious reasons. But Canadians continue to try to protect their different culture, in the face of the constant threat of being swamped by the sheer mass of popular and electronic culture coming in from over the border. Benedict Anderson's theory of nation as “imagined communities” is still alive and well in Canada.

EDB: And if we move our emphasis to the presence of borders within the nation, which boundaries would you identify as most salient in the discourse of the national in Canada today?

LH: Since we've never solved the issues around the French-English division, it is this that still tends to preoccupy public discourse in Canada. As Charles Taylor (1993) has shown, there is a fundamental difference between the Quebec model of nationhood (based on ethnicity) and the Canadian one (based on consensual agreement). The ROC (Rest of Canada, as it's ironically known) could never have a sense of nationhood based on single ethnicity: it consists of too many different ethnicities, from the native peoples to the most recent immigrants. The demographic make-up of Quebec, however, is now also very diverse, especially in the urban centres like Montreal. The “pure laine” model, however, has dominated Quebec provincial politics. Interestingly, the French-English issue is also one of the (few) obvious defining features of Canadianness —at least in the eyes of others. So, in

short, unless Quebeckers were to vote in another referendum to stay in Canada, and do so with a resounding majority this time, this issue is not going to go away quickly.

EDB: A very contested border in contemporary literary theory and practice has been that between the center and the periphery. Today, there has even been a significant co-option of the peripheral. The Canadian critic Frank Davey, for instance, writes that one of the most telling examples of the postmodern paradox is the ongoing practice by which some writers and their works are marginalized by being placed at the center, while others are legitimized by being claimed as marginal. In a similar context, Stuart Hall remarks how the postmodern emphasis on dispersion has often had the effect of *centering* the migrant subject. Given this situation of reversal of roles, can we still talk about a center and a periphery, a mainstream and a marginal culture within the nation? And if so, what are their constitutive element and modes of functioning? How would you define those (new?) centers?

LH: Postmodernism certainly shifted the emphasis to margins, but Frank Davey is right, the ultimate effect of that was to make the margins central (which was not quite the idea of the postmodern, but...). In our globalized diasporic world, maybe we need to think about other metaphors for describing positions within cultures (since positions —and, with them, perhaps hierarchies— will always exist). “Network” springs to mind as one (somewhat more democratized) possibility, and for the obvious reasons: in the electronic world of today, the postmodern idea of decentering has been taken to its ultimate extreme. What the French call one’s “*déformation professionnelle*,” one’s professional deformation, conditions my response here: you don’t work on postmodernism for years and not want to rethink the hierarchies that accompany metaphors of centers and margins. And you don’t work on irony and parody for years and not appreciate what a writer like Thomas King is doing, both literarily and politically, to precisely this end in his wonderful ironic cultural inversions in a parodic work like *Green Grass, Running Water*. But we *do* need new metaphors!

EDB: But then the rise of a multicultural discourse and the undeniable success of “multicultural” writers both in Canada and the USA do not necessarily imply that they are entering the canon, or that they are actually transforming the notions of canon and mainstream. Couldn’t we say that these developments, as well as the coverage of multiculturalism in the media, also reveal a high degree of commodification of ethnicity? Aren’t we witnessing the fetishization and packaging of difference, or what critics now call, in the field of Cultural Studies, “the Benetton effect”, a phenomenon promulgated and policed by the (still) dominant Anglo-white society to contain difference?

LH: Of course, you could say that, and many do. But I can’t help feel that such a view risks being complicitous with what it apparently disapproves of. To hold such a view is implicitly to denigrate and even deny the very real cultural power of those of non-Anglo white background. It’s hard to articulate what I mean, but it may be such a theory in fact functions to contain differ-



ence. We know that capitalism has time and time again proved its ability to take advantage of difference, to market it, to contain it, if you will. Nonetheless, the canon is not simply a matter of Oprah's selections or publishers' promotions; it is a more complexly constructed entity in which we as academics play a significant role. What do we teach? More and more we teach the multicultural literary reality of Canada —a nation that has been multicultural from the start (for even the native peoples are plural and diverse). More and more of us are representatives of that multicultural reality: the Scots Hutcheon in my marital name conceals an Italian Bortolotti.

EDB: Let me argue the point a bit further. Some commentators have already observed that Charles Taylor's liberal model of societal organization (1994) as well as Kymlicka's theory of minority rights seem ultimately to leave the mainstream untouched and in place. Do you think that these communitarian models of social recognition can actually work to promote equality and cultural interaction within the nation, or rather tend to freeze difference within their boundaries?

LH: We should probably separate multiculturalism as cultural/social reality from multiculturalism as public policy and ideology (as attacked by Neil Bissoondath in *Selling Illusions*). Neither of the communitarian models you mention, though, negates one often silenced possibility regarding both minority and mainstream social reality that we haven't talked about yet: the fact that ethnic purity (of either center or margin) is a thing of the past in Canada. In other parts of the world, we have been witnessing such terrible results of the insistence on ethnic purity—all of this happening within a globalized and diasporic context in which such insistence makes no sense. In Canada, it is even more nonsensical. Think of writers like Fred Wah—in terms of ethnic background, part Chinese, part Swedish; in terms of nationality, Canadian. This is the future of Canada: retaining a sense of respect for one's (increasingly multiple) heritage, while building a new and hybrid sense of national (as well as personal) identity.

EDB: In your discussion of the critical responses to the publication in 1990 of *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, you argue that the inclusion of well-known as well as new authors in the volume was deliberate and meant to unsettle the line between what is thought of as marginal and central to the national culture “by showing how many of Canada's canonical texts are indeed written from the so-called margins of ethnicity. There is an argument to be made that the canon in Canada has been, from the first, a creation of women and ‘minorities.’” Yet the collection includes the voices but not the stories by the so-called “First” or “Founding” nations. Also, several commentators have already pointed out that the question of ethnicity has been paradoxically left out of recent discussions of the canon in Canada and the United States.

LH: That book was compiled over a decade ago and I think reflects a position that was shared by many at the time, in part because of the particular structure of the debates on Canadian bilingualism that had preceded it: in the



historicized discourse of the time, there were (in order of arrival on the continent) the French and the English, and then there were—to use the language of the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism—all the “other ethnic groups.” The native peoples had to wait for a much later Royal Commission to have their cultures recognized in any major way in these debates. This is why we chose to keep the focus on the “other ethnic groups” but to make sure we included a response to the issue in general from the other founding and first “nations.” I suspect we would construct such a book differently today, because the discourse has changed, though we would likely still aim to recognize historical difference and yet be inclusive (rather than divisive) and integrative (not assimilative). I would have to disagree with your final statement that ethnicity has not played a part in the canon debates. Thanks to Smaro Kamboureli and many others, it is there front and center in Canada. And, in the last volume of the *Literary History of Canada* most of the chapters certainly took this issue into account; it certainly played an important role in the discussions of the editorial team at the time, I can assure you. In the USA, there are such important contributions as *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (edited by Emory Elliott back in 1991) which includes in the idea of “American” everything from internal diversity (African, Asian, and other ethnic Americans) to external (that is, Canadian, Latin American, and so on). This is not intended as an assimilating or colonizing move, but rather as a signal that there are no fixed borders to even this national literature, that there are significant diversifying influences upon the construction of “America” from nearby as well as from within. All the major new literary histories of the US in the last decade have had this kind of focus that made ethnicity (and other differences, such as race, gender, class, and so on) central, from Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Cambridge History of American Literature* to Elliott’s other work, the *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*. If literary histories are the material and textual results of the process of canon-formation, then ethnicity has been at the heart of thinking about the canon for at least the last two decades, if not well before.

EDB: Many studies have recently focused on the very close interaction between nation-building and canon-formation. It is also important to see how the criteria of selection and evaluation of texts change as the process of nation-building is thought of as partly achieved, or it simply stops being perceived as a priority. There is then, it is said, a period of revision in which the internal development of the national tradition becomes central, and this in turn favours the inclusion of themes, genres and experiences previously excluded because their non-national focus or their potential connection to other national literatures (i.e. between Canadian and American Literatures). Would you say that Canadian Literature in English is presently undergoing that process of (self)revision?

LH: If Robert Lecker and, before him, Northrop Frye are right, then the process of canon-formation in Canada is complex and historically conditioned. The



process you outline seems to me to be an on-going one in Canada: like all nations, we have gone through periods (and I'd put that in the plural) of revision and rethinking. One of the differences may be that we've done all this in a relatively short period of time and at a rather accelerated pace: while works were obviously being written in Canada for centuries, our nationalistic self-consciousness about them (like our serious academic study of them) is quite recent. The effect of this condensation is that it is hard for me to pin-point a moment in which Canadian literature in English was *not* in the process of revision!

EDB: In terms of our critical practices, the focus on ethnicity has brought a renewed interest on biography and theme. The rich and challenging new critical field that has come into being under the multicultural umbrella has an undeniable thematic focus. Are we witnessing, as Werner Sollors would put it, a (not always acknowledged) return to thematic criticism? And if so, wouldn't that focus close the texts again around the thematic expectations of readers? Which would be the tools to avoid the *readerly* interpretation of texts?

LH: The interest in biography, in the personal, has not only meant a thematic focus, though. The rise of the study of what is called "life-writing" as a literary form has accompanied it. While, for many readers, it is the life-story as thematic material that is attractive (and that is absolutely understandable), we should not forget the other side, the new theories of genre that have been developing. Canadian scholars like Marlene Kadar and Shirley Neuman have played major roles in this theorizing, working from Canadian materials. And there is now a new generation that is taking up their challenges: Joanne Saul has recently completed an important doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto on the Canadian ethnic "biotext" —the self-reflexive construction of identity through textuality.

EDB: But there are also a number of problems attached to the supposed return of thematic criticism. The focus on theme in so-called "ethnic" writing has drawn our attention back to the relation between authors and texts, to the issues of authenticity and appropriation. The very grouping of authors and texts according to their cultural/racial background implies a belief in purity, homogeneity and in the ultimate essence of identities within the different ethnic groups. At the same time, poststructuralist critics have seen in the analysis of these writings, with their emphasis on the here and there, their preoccupation with the origin, their thematization of language as a tool to create oneself, telling examples of (ironically) the presence-as-absence paradox, of the impossibility of the origin, of the construction of subjectivity in language. In your studies of postmodernism, you have dealt at large with the possibility of this alliance between the postmodern and the ethnic subject, as long as we agree on a notion of the postmodern as strongly rooted in history and memory. But how can we explore cultural difference and the meaning of history in effective ways, avoiding both essentialism and co-option? Or, let me put my question differently by quoting Smaro



Kamboureli's recent words: "what does postmodern historicization, as defined by Hutcheon, mean for ethnicity? What does it do to 'the universal'? How does an opening up of history, in Hutcheon's terms, help us to address the 'lived' experience of minorities both in the present and in sites of memory?"

LH: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. pointed out over a decade ago the irony of the fact that ethnic groups were then claiming for themselves collectively a kind of essentialized identity that, as individuals, they had deconstructed and rejected. Little has changed, I suspect. Our theoretical reflections on postmodern essentialism could not deal with postcolonial subjectivities in ways that were politically meaningful; the same is likely true about ethnicity. It's one thing for Gates to go on to say that "We are all ethnics now in America" but that doesn't account for significant differences in history and memory. It is not that the postmodern thinking was not helpful; the challenging of imperializing universals was a worthy cause. But it needed to be particularized and politicized in ways that the postmodern itself (by definition) resists. The new thinking that has come in its wake has done this, and contemporary theory is the better for it.

The un-mooring of subjectivity from the physical human body in our electronic age presents a different but equally complex set of issues—and problems—that we haven't quite managed to come to terms with yet. But we will.

EDB: Another related discursive field that has come into full being in the last 20 years is that of postcolonial theory. In "Circling the Downspout of Empire," you point out the inadequacy of using a postcolonial frame of analysis for the Canadian context of writing at large and single out the case of the Native Canadian production as the legitimate site of a valid postcolonial discourse in Canada. Given the increasing number of studies that argue for the possibility of applying postcolonial tools of analysis to the North American literatures (Canada and the United States), would you now modify some of the views you put forward then?

LH: Even back in 1990, people were using the term postcolonial to describe both (mostly early) American and (all) Canadian writing, and that's in part why I wrote the article: to suggest that, despite similarities, there were nevertheless major differences between settler-invader colonies (like Canada and the US) and subjugated ones (like India, the nations of Africa, and so on) who experienced empire differently. I still believe there is a qualitative difference in that experience that we ignore at our peril. What I would change, after witnessing the discussions and debates of the last decade, is the designation of the aboriginal situation as postcolonial (specifically in the non-settler-colony sense): the term "neocolonial" may be more appropriate, for the postcolonial moment may still be in the future, sadly, for these peoples.

EDB: Postcolonial theory has probably opened up the possibility of looking at much of the national literatures from an international perspective and reading them in a transnational frame of reference. The present situation is very



complex. As Werner Sollors writes: “The moment is interesting because ethnic culture has become identified as the true mainstream of the United States as well as of Canada, multiculturalism has taken on an undreamed of centrality in literary and cultural studies, and the aesthetic expression of minority groups now has a global circulation. At the same time, there seems to be a questing for new certainties of content and method and some uneasiness about the relationship of literary studies with the long tradition of exegesis, interpretation, and literary historiography.” An obvious development is the rise (or return) of comparative literature approaches with a necessary interdisciplinary framework of analysis. Could you elaborate on the advantages seen as well as on the difficulties found in the projects of comparative literary histories you are working on at present? And, to end at the beginning, is there a place for the category of ‘the national’ in comparative literary histories?

LH: The two large interdisciplinary collaborative projects I’ve been involved with for the last five years have taught me much about the very concerns you raise, both in your question and indeed in the entire issue of this journal. As you know, most literary histories in the past have traditionally been structured around either a national language (French literary history) or a nation (The Literary History of Canada). What our projects have tried to do is think outside the boundaries of nation, to look at how culture moves across borders over time. To that end, the model behind *The Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures* is one we worked out with cultural geographers; so, instead of asking our contributors (over 200 of them) to think about themselves as “Brazilianists” or “Colombianists,” we gave them the challenge of thinking like “Latin Americanists” or sometimes, say, “Amazon Basinists” —in other words, to think about how different nations’ verbal cultures (broadly defined to include everything from sermons to films, from testimonio to opera) were cross-fertilized by each other (and by both the earliest indigenous cultures and those of the colonizers). The other project, *The Comparative History of East Central European Literary Cultures: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* uses a different organizational model: that of cultural “nodes”—places, people, texts, dates that mark convergences, where cultures overlap and come together in meaningful ways. Sometimes it’s a city (like Gdansk/Danzig); sometimes a physical feature (the River Danube, that allowed culture to move through the region). Sometimes the node represents a person (like Kafka, a Jew writing in German in Prague).

What we learned was that it’s hard to stop thinking in national terms: it has become *the* way to focus literary historical thinking since the German Romantics and that’s a tough intellectual habit to break; but when it is broken, things happen. Things come to the surface that were, if not hidden, at least given different and perhaps subsidiary status before.

Comparative models also make so much more sense in our globalized and diasporic world: can we really discuss Salman Rushdie as only a British



writer? Or as only an Indian or Pakistani writer? Is Michael Ondaatje's work explainable only by his Canadian passport? By his Sri Lankan birth? Because of its bicultural and multicultural past and present, I think that Canadian literature has always implicitly been written into history in a comparative way; increasingly it is being discussed in multiply comparative terms (of region, language, religion, gender, class, sexuality, as well as race and ethnicity)—even if it is all still happening under the banner of one nation, a nation with an identity that is resolutely multiple, not single. Comparative models would stand a better chance of capturing a sense of the cultural hybridity of this culture because, to return to where we began, Canada is a nation that can perhaps only be defined, in the end, by its diversity.



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