GEOGRAPHY, GENDER AND IDENTITY IN CANADIAN LITERATURE: SOME INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

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In his brief introduction to *The Atlas of Literature*, Malcolm Bradbury (1996) quotes the American writer, Eudora Welty: `The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place.' He also quotes Herman Melville: `nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books.'[1] Characters have to live somewhere, actions require locations, so - at the very least - geography functions as a container for plot. But the relationship between geography and literature goes far beyond this prosaic function. Bradbury's *Atlas* is `geographical' in its focus on the geographical - cultural, social, economic and political - context in which literature is produced. It has less to say about the geographies that writers produce or what those geographies stand for, the themes that are central to this collection of essays on Canadian literature.

`Geography is destiny' affirms one of the characters in Carol Shields' *The Republic of Love*, in this case referring to the density of relationships and interconnections among the families and neighbourhoods of Winnipeg. Where you live, where you grew up, affects who you are, whom you know and who knows you. But the aphorism is true on a wider canvas, too. Later in the novel, the principal characters engage in a party game where they name their `ideal land form, what part of the earth's geography [they] would choose to be'. One chooses a peninsula - `Because it was separate yet joined. Because, well, it surrendered part but not all of its independence'; another opts for a coastal ridge - `Like the Sierras, maybe, sharply defined, but at the same time not too intimidating'; a third cannot decide between a river delta and a long low valley `with a guaranteed abundance of rainfall'.[2] In this collection, Emily Gilbert discusses Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, where Joan describes her own body in strikingly similar fashion, as a prairie across which her veins flow like rivers. In this case, of course, a pock-marked prairie is exactly what she wishes she was not. Evidently, physical geography is much more than a container for action: it also functions metaphorically. The same is true of the built environment of cities, as Gilbert goes on to show in discussing the metaphorical uses of homes, suburbs, inner cities and downtowns in a series of Toronto novels. As that Toronto denizen Margaret Atwood has remarked, emphasising the significance of location, writers write out of what they know:

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[1] Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Atlas of Literature*. London: De Agostini, 1996, 8.

[2] Carol Shields, *The Republic of Love*. London: Flamingo, 1993, 121-22.

> I don't think you transcend region, any more than a plant transcends earth ... To me an effective writer is one who can make what he or she is writing about understandable and moving to someone who has never been there. All good writing has that kind of transcendence. It doesn't mean being something called `international'; there is no such thing.[3]

Since the 1970s geographers have made a series of incursions into the realm of literature. Not all these ventures have been auspicious. Whether out of pique at the invasion of their territory, or genuinely disturbed by the mundanities to which too literally minded geographers resorted, some literary specialists greeted some of these projects with less than enthusiasm. Yet the parallel engagement of literary specialists with geography has sometimes been equally uninspired, barely going beyond a catalogue of the places in which writers have set their works. Fortunately, the awareness of the subtleties of each discipline among the practitioners of the other has been growing apace. For example, several authors in this collection draw on the work of the feminist geographer, Gillian Rose, her ideas about feminized mappings and paradoxical space which is multidimensional, shifting and contingent. There has been a theoretical convergence in the social sciences and humanities around issues of identity, especially as informed by post-colonial and feminist theory and the politics and poetics of place. Geographers have been exhorted to treat the landscape as text, if not the text as landscape,[4] while literary critics regularly engage in forms of `mapping' their texts which owe more to cultural theory than to Mercator.

Interestingly, cultural geographers based in Canada have been especially prominent in the conjunction of literary and geographical studies.[5]

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[3] Earl Ingersoll, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, London: Virago, 1992, 143.

[4] Marc Brosseau, `The city in textual form: *Manhattan Transfer*'s New York', *Ecumene* **2** (1) (1995), 89-114.

[5] See, e.g., Trevor Barnes and James Duncan, eds., *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and*

Perhaps this is unsurprising, given Canada's reputation both for introspection and as a country famously renowned for having `too little history, too much geography', yet where 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.

For Canadian literary critics in the 1990s the traditional engagement with writing about place, region and identity in texts has shifted slightly to a concern with mapping, where cartographic images focus the reader's attention on spatial metaphors and the subjective elements within any form of representation. Graham Huggan defines the role of the map within the project of literary geography in ways that highlight its political implications, which may then be explored or exploited in imaginative writing:

> The map [in fictional texts] operates as a vehicle for the reorganization of space which permits the writer to invent and explore `new territories' or to reassess more familiar places and his/her relation to them. The map, in this sense, is an enabling construct; yet it may also be a disabling one: maps, after all, are by their nature reductive, introverted, even simplistic or distorted.[6]

The focus of the six papers in this collection is on how Canadians individually and corporately construct their identities through space and place. Five of the papers focus on women's writing and so, unsurprisingly, considerable attention is paid to the idea of a `feminist cartography'. The sixth paper, by Rosalind Jennings, deals with Robert Kroetsch's search for a new kind of masculine Western identity that incorporates attitudes to place and

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Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape. London and New York: Routledge, 1992; Paul Simpson Housley and Glen Norcliffe, eds., *A Few Acres of Snow: Literary and Artistic Images of Canada*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992; Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds., *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon and the New Jerusalem*. London: Routledge, 1994.

[6] Graham Huggan, *Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction*. Toronto & London: University of Toronto Press, 1994, 58.

environment very different from those typically associated with Western masculinity.

Most of the papers are concerned with geography as environment - the environment of wilderness, prairie, arctic, or cities which, if not wilderness, are often described as labyrinthine. Appearances can be deceptive. Toronto may be laid out on a grid, but it can still be a labyrinth where, as Atwood's protagonist in *Cat's Eye* remarks on her return, `In this city I am always lost.' From a different perspective, the prairie can also be labyrinthine for Kroetsch and van Herk. Danielle Schaub's paper, on Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Rest Harrow*, is more concerned with geography as spatial relationships, with spatial metaphors more than environmental metaphors, with the search for self-identity as a spatial journey. But what unites both concepts of geography is a focus on boundaries: boundaries which may seem definite and impermeable, but are actually fluid and shifting. The prairies prove to be labyrinthine because, while they may appear open, there are few unique, fixed markers. The most obvious boundary - between the earth and the sky - is constantly shifting. To reach the horizon you have to penetrate another dimension, to drive off of the edge of the map. As Flora Alexander shows, even in Margaret Laurence's apparently more domestic novel, which moves between locations in Manitoba and Vancouver, life is about coming to terms with boundaries, between self and others, home and beyond, the domesticated and the wild.

Because these papers are about contemporary *Canadian* identity, another recurring theme is that of hybridity. Few of the characters in these novels have an unambiguous `ethnicity'. They are `hyphenated Canadians' whose identities have to be negotiated in the context of cultural diversity. Associated with hybridity are the dilemmas of living (and writing) in post-colonial times. Historically, Canada has always been peripheral, first to Europe, then to the United States. Western Canada has thought of itself as Eastern Canada's `other'. But in the postcolonial reordering of identities and boundaries, Canada loses out again, now grouped with the ex-colonial West, obliged to acknowledge that it is not the norm from which others deviate, but just one among a plethora of different societies. Yet an experience of constant otherness can be positive. Coral Howells quotes van Herk's observation that alienation and isolation can be good and empowering for an artist; Rosalind Jennings explores Kroetsch's idea that the self is other, that Canadians seek to make themselves invisible as a first step to finding their identity.

Four of the papers in this collection originated in a conference organized by the London Conference for Canadian Studies on `Geography in

Literature', held at Macdonald House in London in February 1995. Once it became apparent that all these papers shared an interest in issues of gender and identity as well as place and space, then it seemed appropriate to recruit two further papers on the same themes, both of which started life in literature sessions at the 1996 Annual Conference of the British Association for Canadian Studies. All of the papers have been substantially rewritten since their first public outings, and we are especially grateful to a team of anonymous referees drawn from both sides of the Atlantic and in roughly equal numbers from both Geography and Literature. We are also grateful to Red Deer College Press (Alberta, Canada) for permission to reproduce the front cover of Robert Kroetsch's *A Likely Story*, a black and white version of which appears on page 22, accompanying Rosalind Jennings' paper.