"I Admit to a Slight Ambiguity": Reflecting upon Canada's Creative and Critical Literary Inquisitors

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The Search, Then and Now

Acclaimed Canadian writer and scholar E.D. Blodgett wrote in 1985 that "one of the reasons the Canadian literatures are looked upon with a kind of benign diffidence by those unacquainted with them derives from our failure of imagination as critics" (63). Perhaps the "failure" to which Blodgett points lies in a matter of critical perspective: due to Canada's complex layers of colonial, postcolonial, transnational, multinational, and plurilingual cultural memories, to name but a few, its literatures have always been catalysts for questions instead of answers. Namely, the "search" in Blodgett's "In Search of a Canadian Literature" links to an idea of ambiguity (60) and is always the area of critical value for Canada's literatures, an area that should be celebrated rather than condemned. Since the establishment of a "postmodern condition" in the late 1960s (Lyotard) that still resides in Canada's literatures, the self-reflexive nature of Canada's writers of all cultural origins has proliferated and done immense work in posing, precisely, questions that attempt to understand—and, in doing so, construct—what being Canadian means in various respects. Other than Blodgett, the sheer number of well-known Canadian authors who have taken up these questions both creatively and critically speaks to the importance of "ambiguity," as Blodgett claims: Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, Nicole Brossard, and Thomas King are but a few of numerous authors of Canada's literatures that have written in both genres—critical and creative—to take up the ambiguous literary sites that they occupy.

Each of these writers has enjoyed prolific careers that often span decades of work. Alongside their creative productions that are perhaps best known to public readership, these authors have also, throughout the years, contributed significantly to the

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development of critical thought on literature in Canada. Blodgett wrote the influential *Configuration: Essays in the Canadian Literatures* in 1982 and returned to such broader critical strokes in 2003 with *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada*. Atwood, among other works, wrote the popular *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* back in 1972 before writing *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* over twenty years later in 1995. Kroetsch made an impact in the Canadian literary imaginary with his poetic criticism in 1982 with *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* and again in 1989 with *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Nicole Brossard has been a constant in the areas of postmodernist and feminist articulation in Québec and abroad in works ranging from her collaborative *La Théorie, un dimanche* in 1988 to *Et me voici soudain en train de refaire le monde* in 2015. King has been more critically active in the twenty-first century, beginning with the significant compilation of his Massey Lectures in *The Truth About Stories* in 2003 and more recently even in 2012 with *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. This essay reflects upon some of the authors mentioned here—Blodgett, Atwood, Kroetsch, Brossard, and King—in a survey that looks back and compares their creative and critical bodies of work to understand the questions they pose, how they pose them, and how they relate to one another and contribute to our understanding of and ongoing search for the literatures of Canada.

Blodgett the Historian: An Account of Canada's Literary Ambiguity

During the 1980s, postmodernism in English Canada was firmly established as a literary force. Postmodernism's focus on aesthetics such as self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and fragmentation allowed writers in English Canada, from Margaret Laurence to Timothy Findley, to explore, as a particularly popular theme, the ambiguity of history. Linda Hutcheon famously studied this trend in her 1988 watershed critical text, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, in which she called it "historiographic metafiction" (122); as a fictional retelling of history, Hutcheon argued that historiographic metafiction "often points to the fact by using the paratextual conventions of historiography to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations" (122-23). In both fiction and criticism, therefore, the 1980s in English Canada saw a persistent preoccupation with history and its multitudes of representation.

At this time, poet and scholar of comparative Canadian literature E.D. Blodgett was also highly involved in questions of history and ambiguity with respect to the nation. Although he had not yet risen to the status that he later would as a poet, having only published until then three of what would become an oeuvre of

over twenty books of poetry, Blodgett published the significant piece of criticism, *Configuration: Essays in the Canadian Literatures*, in 1982. Coming from a comparative background, Blodgett effectively underlines key issues with the works of leading critics at the time, including Ronald Sutherland and Clément Moisan, in this particular collection of essays, arguing that their approaches remain too nationalistic—too "centrist" (30)—at their core to account properly for the *ambiguity* in the literatures of Canada. Instead, Blodgett champions grounds for comparison in the literatures of Canada that are in favour of difference: "mode, genre, imagery, and reception" (31). Critics have been too reluctant to raise methodological questions that are central to these literatures (32), he contends, and "[t]he failure of the search to find a suitable emblem that would suggest a model for this relationship [between Canadian and Québécois]" characterizes the problem exactly" (32). Blodgett's proposed solution is that the critic of the literatures of Canada should be a comparatist, one who ought to be "contingent, fragile, unwilling to accept, finally, the illusion of the universal solution, self-absorbed, unguided by the enigmas of the other presence" (35). To great effect, this vulnerability would follow the poet and critic throughout his search for such a literary emblem in Canada.

Blodgett's *Configuration* is significant because, among other reasons, it sets up two core ambiguities at the heart of Canada's literatures: language and history. These ambiguities fell in line with his comparatist values, from which he drew to produce both lasting criticism on literatures in Canada and Governor General's Award-winning poetry: Blodgett won the award in 1996 for *Apostrophes: Woman at a Piano*, while Jacques Brault's translation of his *Transfiguration* won in 1998. *Apostrophes* would go on to have no less than six sequels, with the final book, *Apostrophes VII: Sleep, You, a Tree* (2011), being Blodgett's final published collection. Blodgett's poetry, namely *Apostrophes*, speaks to his comparatist values in terms of ambiguity; its syntax and style are pregnant with ambiguity, while its imagery—consistent with recurring colours, shapes, and senses—is presented as moving parts that often complement each other, as is the case in the concluding lines of the titular poem: "of blue. The woman sits. I tell you this: I want to open my mouth becoming / blue, becoming the dark, leaning into stillness, touch touching touch" (7). In both his poetry and criticism, therefore, potentiality is of utmost importance to Blodgett.

During the span of two decades post-*Configuration*, Blodgett thus continued to develop his thoughts on the literatures of Canada, finally publishing *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada* in 2003. In this critical work, Blodgett navigates in a certain form the complex territory of what has come to be known as distant reading in guise of literary history, though he never names his methodology as such: "The main task of such a history, as I shall elaborate in the conclusion, is to argue that those truths that appear perfectly valid for histories conceived as the articulation of a specific group or even two groups with designedly shared preoccupations lose much of their validity when examined from a larger perspective" (4). On the basis of history, specifically literary history, Blodgett has evolved

since *Configurations* to confidently provide readers with a model of comparison with respect to the literatures of Canada, and what this model should consider: it needs to account for a narrative order, a plot; it ought to pay attention to metanarrative design, one that outlines goals and the processes involved to meet them; it must study beginnings, either in terms of space (mostly in English Canada), time (chiefly in Québec), or catastrophe (Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and others).

Blodgett goes on to compile, as the subtitle to *Five-Part Invention* promises, a "history of literary history in Canada," organized according to writing trends over certain periods of time in various parts of the nation and by different cultures: for instance, "The Search for Agency, 1948-1968" and "The Question of Alterity: Histories of Their Own, 1968-1993." He concludes his book by comparing the Canadian nation to the protagonist in a *Bildungsroman* novel (290) and, perhaps more significantly, argues that Canada necessarily needs to see itself in relation to the undefined Other if it is to ever construct any kind of national identity:

> so long as the Other remains excluded from the [Canadian social] contract, the realization of a "Canadian identity" will always be thwarted. I refer to such an identity in quotation marks because, as Angus argues, such an identity is not fixed and therefore eludes definition. Such an identity is, however, the not yet uncovered core of whatever texts constitute a Canadian canon, the history that can never be definitive. (304)

Precisely, this lack of definition of which Blodgett speaks here in terms of a "Canadian identity"—the inherent ambiguity of its nature—is what drives numerous writers and critics in Canada, including those studied in this article.

Defining and Selling a Genre: Speculative Survival in Atwood's Fiction and Criticism

Where the 1980s saw the rise of a better critical understanding of history and its ambiguity in English Canada, the 1960s and 1970s were enthralled with Northrop Frye's conceptualization of the "garrison mentality" in his "Conclusion" in Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* (1965). Writers like Blodgett would later problematize such thematic grounds for literary studies in Canada; however, a number of critics at the time read Frye as an opportunity to introduce their own takes on the core themes of Canadian literatures, including a young Margaret Atwood. Atwood had already found recognition as a poet, winning the 1966 Governor General's Award in Poetry for *The Circle Game*. Following Frye's tradition, she published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* in 1972, which would go on to become a cornerstone of criticism on Canadian literatures for those many who would continue to attempt to pin down a distinctively *Canadian* identity based on theme; in fact, Frye, who taught Atwood at Victoria College at the University of Toronto, is one of the dedicatees of the book.

Atwood's *Survival*, building on Frye's idea of a "garrison mentality" in Canada's literatures, provides readers with common, thematic patterns that are supposedly telling of distinctively *Canadian* literatures; in other words, it establishes exactly the kind of ideology against which Blodgett would write a decade later. The themes that Atwood presents feature, for the most part, circumstantial settings that demand a *survivalist* response by characters, whether they be related to nature, immigration, or loss; these themes purportedly answer the question of "[w]hat's Canadian about Canadian literature" (14). Atwood's work has garnered such long-standing respect in the Canadian critical imaginary for several reasons. First, it offered a direct, tangible, and sustained extension of the work already laid out by Frye in a much more palatable communication that was not so burdened with theorization. Second, it certainly did underline patterns that had been found in renowned texts in Canada, whether or not a causality exists between one and the other. Third and last, it came at a time when Atwood, herself a rising author, fulfilled her own critical findings by publishing several successful works that, precisely, used themes of survival to great effect.

Atwood's collection of poetry *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and, in particular, her novel *Surfacing* (1972), published in the same year as *Survival*, complemented the latter and helped to legitimize it as an essential piece of criticism on Canadian literatures. *Surfacing* concerns a survivalist struggle with identity in the dangers of the Canadian wilderness, and so directly feeds into Atwood's core argument in *Survival*. Several years later, in 1976, she published *Lady Oracle*, whose protagonist Joan Foster is an author who, throughout her life, escapes from difficult circumstances. *Lady Oracle* thus reflects in significant ways Atwood's chapter in *Survival*, "The Paralyzed Artist" (177), which speaks of the internal and external pressures that writers face. Finally, in 1979 Atwood published *Life before Man*, which deals with differing perspectives on the search for identity in Canada in the face of complicated historical and cultural backgrounds of displacement. In some matters, this novel reflects another chapter from *Survival*, "Failed Sacrifices: The Reluctant Immigrant" (145). Atwood's fiction and its acclaim during the 1970s, therefore, went a long way towards solidifying the claims that she made in *Survival*, thus ensuring that her book of criticism would remain foundational for scholars of Canadian literatures for decades to come.

The 1980s saw Atwood personally soar to international renown, particularly with the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, which won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and was a finalist for the Booker Prize; of course, her success meant new attention to Canadian literatures as well. With this novel, Atwood's focus on survival grew into a genre: others would call it science fiction, dystopian, or even apocalyptic literature; Atwood, however, in a later lecture with Ursula K. Le Guin, called her works "speculative fiction" (*Oryx and Crake*), which, according to her, are imagined fictions based on existing or theoretically possible technologies. In her own understanding, then, speculative fiction has defined much of Atwood's fiction since *The Handmaid's Tale*, including

the *MaddAddam Trilogy*: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). Atwood's influence in the critical understanding of Canadian literatures is thus immense: from her conceptualization of "Canadian," thematic patterns in *Survival* and subsequent deployment of these in her prominent fiction, to her international popularization of speculative fiction as a genre that continues to use the same patterns, Atwood's contributions are now a fabric of external and even internal perceptions of Canadian literatures.

These perceptions make their way into international territory before being refracted back into the Canadian literary imaginary. For instance, in 1991—a suitable middle point between the present and the first publication of *Survival*—Atwood was invited to give a series of four lectures on "English literature," which became "English-Canadian literature," at Oxford University. These lectures were published in 1995 under the title *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. From the title, readers can garner that this book is yet another "thematic guide" to Canadian literature, one presented to an international literary power to apparent success before being published and circulated in Canada. The first theme that she discusses appeals to her audience, speaking of a "stereotypically Canadian" theme of being lost in the frozen North; the second theme on her docket discusses Grey Owl and the urge to claim kinship with Indigenous peoples in literary Canada; the third theme in the collection expands on this urge, using the non-Indigenous appropriation of the Algonquian monster, the Wendigo, as an example; the fourth and final theme that Atwood considers is women leaving the domestic sphere for that of the wilderness, a theme which she herself has helped popularize in Canada. With such themes of "Canadian-ness" so palatable to the Other and coming from such an internationally respected source as Atwood, the problem is that these themes become self-defining and in fact represent only a fraction of literary stories in Canada. By this claim, I mean that authors now seeking to write Canada look to Atwood's example, and believe that they must incorporate the themes that she has established critically and creatively; in short, the fragile ego of Canadian writers may well be swayed by their critics.

Atwood's *Strange Things* features a highly intriguing anecdote in its introduction, far before her musings on the presence of the Wendigo in Canadian literatures, one that describes an interaction with a fellow Canadian in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full:

> While I was still in the process of giving these lectures, I was interviewed by a young man from Canada who was studying at Oxford. He told me that he had a friend—also Canadian—who was concerned about the subject matter I was discussing. This friend felt that I should not be talking about the North, or the wilderness, or snow, or bears, or cannibalism, or any of that. He felt that these were things of the past, and that I would give the English a wrong idea about how most Canadians were spending their time these days. What then—I asked—did this young man think I should be discussing? "The literature of urban life," was the reply. I said I thought that the English had quite a lot of urban life themselves, and that they didn't need to hear about it from me. I failed to say that the

> right idea could often be right from a sociological point of view, but was not necessarily right from a literary one. (5)

The story is compelling because it is a cleverly and even charmingly constructed narrative that serves to defend her position by undermining its contention by others. Yet, the anecdote reveals other complexities as well: Atwood's defence of highly similar arguments that she made two decades prior in the face of the "young" critic's wanting to discuss other aspects of Canadian literatures, and what Atwood, as a recognizable literary figure, intentionally chooses to keep and leave out in her presentation of literary Canada to the English. In fact, I would argue that her final point in this passage undoes her very intention with these lectures, whereas the right idea can often be right from a literary point of view, but for Atwood, it simply was not right from a sociological one; in other words, some images of Canada simply sell better than others to the foreign audience. Survival, especially in Atwood's speculative fiction, has certainly proven to be one such image.

Brossard and the Postmodernist Feminist Voice

When Atwood was carving out thematic patterns in Canadian literatures and publishing what some critics called feminist fiction, Nicole Brossard was conceptualizing a style that championed the feminist experience. Brossard is a poet, novelist, and essayist best known for her feminist-themed and formally experimental writing, becoming a leading member of the emerging feminist movement in Quebec during the 1970s and 1980s. According to Karen Gould, Brossard, along with contemporary writers Madeleine Gagnon (*Chant pour un Québec lointain*, 1990), Louky Bersianik (*L'Euguélionne: roman tryptique*, 1976), and France Théoret [1977-1992] (*Bloody Mary*, 2011), "added considerable depth theoretically to the collective efforts of a growing number of Quebec women writers for whom the political concerns of contemporary feminism, the experimental forms of literary modernity, and the question of the specificity or *difference* of women's writing appear to be inextricably bound" (xiv; emphasis in original). Louise Dupré had also written on the impact of these authors on women's writing in Quebec and Francophone Canada. In her discussion of Brossard's earlier works, especially, Dupré points out how the author as subjective "je" "se construit dans l'ambivalence entre la réalité vécue et l'utopie rêvée [… et] qui se voit schizé, dédoublé" (88). Brossard's innovative use of first-person narration, born from feminist politics, brings up different kinds of questions of identity and language in Canadian—namely Quebec—writings.

As mentioned, Brossard was not alone in her ambitions: along with Louky Bersianik, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, Gail Scott, and France Théoret, Brossard began in the 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s a group that discussed feminist essentialism in Quebec writing that culminated in the publication of the

collaborative *La Théorie, un dimanche* in 1988. This text is of particular interest because it features not only a critical essay by each of these feminist writers, but also an excerpt of a creative work to accompany each piece. The text's topics range from morphology to memory, as Brossard opens the book with a criticism of the trope of desire. Brossard's feminist philosophy is that "chaque femme reçoit simultanément l'information nécessaire au maintien de son infériorisation et la désinformation indispensable à sa subordination" (13). According to her, feminism is a moral and ethical ideology that interrogates Western constructs that inferiorize women: "en légitimant la subjectivité singulière et collective des femmes, ce féminisme a permis l'éclosion de leur créativité, l'affirmation de leur identité ainsi que rendu possible le fondement d'une solidarité" (14). This feminist work, Brossard argues, depends on three elements: motivation, decision, and concentration (15). These elements incite questions that are essential to the feminist movement: what are feminists' motivations in terms of motifs and emotions? What patriarchal narrative constructs must feminists decide to antagonize and denounce completely? By what means can feminists best focalize the doubled image of the unknown woman and the feminist writer in an effort of concentration that effectively conveys their motivations and decisions? Such a model raised new issues on writing and reading identity in Canada, particularly for women and feminist writers trying to reach out to their sorority while remaining political; as Brossard's complementary prose poem articulates: "elle dit *je suis enfiévrée* et sans répit je l'écoute, il y a tant de monstres et de papier froissée dans sa vie […] Je suis enfiévré et je la désire comme on dit spirale amoureuse" (33; emphasis in original).

After her collaborative efforts in *La Théorie, un dimanche*, Brossard continued to be a force in Quebec feminist writing, producing over a dozen books of poetry and four novels, among other works; however, her most renowned text is most likely *Le Désert mauve*, which was published the year prior to *La Théorie* in 1987. *Le Désert mauve* is a kind of tryptic novel: the first part is penned by a fictional author named Laure Angstelle, and tells the story of a teenager, Mélanie, who flees the motel that her mother manages across the Arizona desert; the second part recounts Maude Laures's reading of this novel, her subsequent decision to translate it into a new language, and the choices that she faces regarding this exercise; the third and final part comprises Laures's translation of Angstelle's text under the title *Mauve, l'horizon*. This novel demonstrates Brossard's ability to pose thoughtful and insightful questions by way of translation: how—or in how many ways and in which languages—can identity, culture, and experience be translated to the other? Faced with these obstacles of translation, Maude considers herself "une presence minimale, un espace embué devant la fenêtre. Un Jalon peut-être entre ce livre et son devenir dans une autre langue" (55). This *ambiguous* space is precisely where the power of translation lies for Brossard, between its inherent potentiality as a mode of creation and the respect that it commands with respect to the question that it raises.

So, how does Brossard see writing and representation in the twenty-first century?

They lie with language, since language is the foundation of the patriarchal narrative, and remain tethered to translation. In 2015, she published *Et me voici soudain en train de refaire le monde*, a type of long essay that unpacks questions of language. Brossard has always paid much attention to language, especially because of its significance to the feminist movement, and she continues her reflection in this text with a particular emphasis on translation that has persisted since *Le Désert mauve* and even before: "mon rapport à la traduction passe en grande partie par la fiction et par la fascination que j'ai pour cette activité qui selon moi relève des mêmes circuits affectifs et associatifs que la création" (8). For Brossard, translation presents a certain potentiality in terms of creativity that remains bound in compelling ways to the realities of cultural contexts:

> Il y a sans doute plusieurs façons d'approcher la traduction ; pour moi, c'est interroger les rouages des mots, de la pensée, des images et du sens, et s'imbiber des dérives rêveuses que suscite toute lecture dite littéraire. C'est aussi aborder le contour culturel de la langue, l'identité et une certaine pratique de la pensée. Pour tout dire, c'est faire valoir l'état de virtualité constante dans lequel nous vivons, état qui multiplie les possibilités d'intelligence et d'émerveillement devant la vie. (8)

Translation thus continues to be an important practice precisely because it is an ideological exercise that requires the careful consideration and particular understanding of the cultural circumstances of language and identity; it is also a celebration of ambiguity and, therefore, possibility.

Translation is also significant to Brossard because, even though it is full of potential, it also relies on certain ethical and moral values or obligations. For instance, due to the affective power of language, translators have a certain type of *responsibility* when moving from one language to the other, responsibility to the author, to the languages, and to the cultures; however, responsibility can only come with consciousness. As Brossard points out, some translators are not provided with context, and so their work is based on meaning as is (19). Of course, the opposite can be said when translators identify with certain texts, and this process of identification inevitably influences the translation (21). Brossard's sharp analysis of translation as a kind of contextualized and tethered act of creation is evidently tied to her own experiences in feminist writings of poetry, fiction, and translation of these texts; however, given Canada's historical linguistic split between French and English, but also in light of the numerous other cultures and languages that are represented by writers in Canada and translated, the various responsibilities of which Brossard speaks in *Et me voici soudain*—of the stakes involved in circulating evolving identities in multiple languages—merit consideration as a scholarly model for Canadian literatures. The notion of ambiguity, recurring in this article, and how it links to translation seems especially potent.

Kroetsch and Archeological Aesthetics

If, for instance, Blodgett and Atwood's ideas concerning Canada's literatures stand indirectly in opposition, with the former championing a kind of vulnerable ambiguity in terms of identity and the latter pushing a cohesive set of "Canadian" themes at the international level, Robert Kroetsch's creative body of work perhaps lies somewhere in the middle, focused more on style and poetics than "Canadian" content, in true postmodernist fashion. Though also concerned with the "search" for Canadian identities in literary representations, he offers insight into understandings of the Canadian prairies in particular during the height of postmodernism in the country. Kroetsch boasts over twenty works in both the novel and poetry genres, as well as numerous critical contributions. Two of the latter appear during the 1980s, when literary postmodernism in Canada was at its peak: an interview-style work in *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, published in 1982, and a collection of critical essays, *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*, produced in 1989. Along with his renowned creative writing, Kroetsch was instrumental in establishing critical perspectives on the role of postmodernism in Canada over his career.

We may notice that, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Kroetsch wrote mostly fiction and some poetry, before moving chiefly to poetry during the 1980s. *Labyrinths of Voice*, a conversation between Kroetsch and interviewers Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, marks this transition to poetics in his writing. In *Labyrinths*, Kroetsch differentiates literature from the act of writing, speaking with respect to the latter of the influence of literary traditions, self-reflection, intertextuality, and fragmentation. These aesthetics are, of course, postmodernist, and they allow for ambiguity to prevail even amidst certain desires in the act of writing: as he asserts, "[t]here is a contradiction between my longing for influence and my insistence upon discontinuity. I think that to go into pure chaos is to vanish" (25). In terms of the search for Canada, the postmodernist act of writing also helped Kroetsch write the Canadian prairies, where "a distrust of systems" (33) persists. In fact, Kroetsch goes on to associate the ambiguity of literary postmodernism in Canada—and in the prairies in particular—with the titular labyrinth of this work:

> There is a labyrinth of love. Desire itself is desiring a way through the labyrinth, out of entrapment. And into entrapment. Canadians are so goddamned frightened of the labyrinth they have created out of the need to have a labyrinth. The immensity of love's entrapment is replaced by familial bickering and bourgeois rivalries. I agree that culture itself is a kind of godgame; we have come to a potential and a mystery so huge that it makes us hesitate […] the prairies themselves are labyrinthine. They have been mapped like grids, all those roads, but you can get lost in them so easily. Labyrinths are mental experience, aren't they? (80)

Kroetsch's interest in geography with regards to writing, Canada, and the prairies is compelling because it is different from other, similar preoccupations with nature

or landscape as a place to survive or be conquered, such as in Atwood's case. Much like Blodgett's focus on models of comparative analysis, therefore, Kroetsch appears to be more concerned with formal modes in writings of Canada than with thematic patterns.

The 1980s were Kroetsch's most prolific years in terms of poetry, as he published five books over the course of the decade: *The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise* (1981), *Field Notes: Collected Poems* (1981), *Advice to My Friends: A Continuing Poem* (1985), *Excerpts from the Real World: A Prose Poem in Ten Parts* (1986), and *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch* (1989). Many of these works came together in *Completed Field Notes*, a collection of Kroetsch's long poems. The long poem allowed him to show his mastery of form, of creating and sustaining a kind of mythology that seems to lie in the narrative of an ongoing search in the opaque ambiguity of place. This search, tethered to ambiguous place, is exemplified in a long poem such as "The Poet's Mother": "In the fall of snow / I hear my mother" (217). Moreover, even as Kroetsch is free to create a sense of ambiguity in these poems due to a minimalist style that extends to a longer poem, he can also frame such a sense in a broader mythology and story:

> It was a nice trip
> to heaven. Let us
> now visit the
>
> earth.
> The scarred earth
> is our only
> home.
>
> Mother, where are you? (218)

Kroetsch's choices, here, in contrasting epic spaces in the search for a mother, such as "heaven" and "earth," certainly help him establish a kind of mythology—which, of course, recalls other, long-established mythology—and they are significant because, as the final line implies, the mythological search is ongoing even in such a temporally "closed-off" writing tradition. Moreover, in terms of the search—the *story* of the search—that he puts forth, the outcome is not to be found in some sort of figurative ascension to heaven; rather, it lies with a return to an earthly place, with a digging up and use of its scars.

The Albertan writer closed out the 1980s—a significant time period for Canada's literatures due to the formative influence of postmodernism—with *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* in 1989. In this collection, Kroetsch discusses the power of storytelling in the works of English-Canadian writers ranging from Susanna Moodie to Alice Munro, and especially with respect to writing in the prairies. In Canada, writers had to move beyond European literary traditions to "write in a new country [… yet we] feel a profound ambiguity about the past—about

both its contained stories and its modes of perception" (5). These past stories and their modes of perception comprise Kroetsch's approach to writing:

> It is a kind of archeology that makes this place, with all its implications, available to us for literary purposes. We have not yet grasped the whole story; we have hints and guesses that slowly persuade us towards the recognition of larger patterns. Archeology allows the fragmentary nature of the story, against the coerced unity of traditional history. Archeology allows for discontinuity. It allows for layering. It allows for imaginative speculation. (7)

Of course, the archeological method, the *digging up*, that Kroetsch describes comes in part from Foucault, as he points out (7), and it is highly conducive to the postmodernist aesthetics that defined literature in Canada and Kroetsch's own writing at this time. It contributes to fragmentation, intertextuality, and self-reflection when considering the ambiguities of cultural memories.

Kroetsch's creative method characterizes his critical contribution with *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, that Canadian literatures are obsessed with genealogy because our "genealogies are the narratives of a discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even. We wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions" (65). Although Kroetsch acknowledges that "words have changed meaning for the Canadian writer" (66), he contends that criticism must live in the ambiguous, just as the literature does, to be productive:

> The task of criticism, now, is to examine those changes and those new directions without recourse to an easy version of national definition, and without easy recourse to old vocabularies. And the paradox is, again, that from the recognition of difference (or occasion, or signature) comes the illumination outward, as is suggested by the fictions themselves. (66)

Kroetsch thus aligns himself indirectly with Blodgett's point of view, in this case: his archeological model incites critics to pursue the study of the ambiguities of Canadian literatures, for that is where the search for Canadian identities persists, grows, and begins anew.

King's Stories: On Truth and Identity

Like Blodgett, Thomas King was born in the United States before making Canada his home, earning a PhD in English and American Studies that reflected his interest in and championing of Indigenous oral storytelling as a literary form. From the early 1990s and onwards, especially, King's preoccupations with the notion of truth, its place in stories, and stories as the foundations of any identity feature in most of his works, both creative and critical, and thus place him *alongside* some of the postmodernist writers discussed in this article, at the very least, if not altogether as a follower of their traditions. His short fiction, including *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992) and

One Good Story, That One (1993), his novels, such as *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), and his non-fiction, *The Truth about Stories* (2003) and *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (2012), among others, all draw upon the power of stories and, often using the trickster coyote figure, relate subjective truths that comprise identity.

King became the first person of Indigenous descent to deliver Canada's annual Massey Lectures in 2003, which were published afterwards as *The Truth About Stories*. King makes the claim in his work with the now-often quoted line that "[t]he truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2). "Stories can control our lives," King claims; they "are wondrous things. And they are dangerous" (9). Indeed, King compares Indigenous and Christian creation stories to wonder aloud if Western civilization might be different, more generous, had it been founded on the Indigenous story fostering balance instead of on the Christian story that encourages competition by establishing binaries (24-25). The stories that shape histories, whether cultural, colonial, national, or personal, are powerful: their effects echo for lifetimes, for generations, and across peoples. King compellingly conveys the power of stories by using a storytelling style throughout the Massey Lectures that draws upon oral traditions—using repetition, humour, and personal experience—to critique colonial institutions and add counter-narratives to Western cultural memory. This style is particular effective in lowering audience's defences to convey Indigenous knowledge and perspectives on the stories upon which ideas of nationalism and national literatures are built.

The themes of storytelling, memory, and truth, among others, have for decades featured prominently in King's fiction as well and for all readers, due in great part to their type of universal generosity. For instance, in King's *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1993 [1992]), nominated for the 1992 Governor General's Award for children's literature, a narrator recounts the "true" story of America to a young, naïve Coyote who believed that Columbus had discovered the land. After the story, young Coyote asks, "if Christopher Columbus didn't find America and he didn't find Indians, who found these things?" to which the narrator explains that "[t]hose things were never lost […] Those things were always here. Those things are still here today" (127). Though the text teaches an important lesson with respect to the power—and danger—of oral storytelling, and encourages suspicion in the face of "true" history, it also shows, in the former passage, how stories infiltrate and influence our cultural memory and identity. These stories last across time, and the problems that they can cause—namely for Indigenous peoples in North America—persist at present, as King's use of anachronisms demonstrates: "So, after a while, those Indians find better things to do. Some of them go fishing. Some of them go shopping. Some of them go to a movie" (122). The power of stories, as they can shape cultural memory and identity, is only matched by their danger in relation to truth, and King's fiction, much like writers such as Blodgett and the Canadian postmodernists, forces readers to focus on the ambiguity of history, particularly in a colonial context.

With *The Inconvenient Indian*, King continued to interrogate the place of stories in history and vice-versa by creating an account of Indigenous peoples in North America that combines storytelling of fiction with historical references. He explains—warns, perhaps—in the prologue of this book, "in consideration of […] the respect that I have for history, I've salted my narrative with those things we call facts, even though we should know by now that facts will not save us" (xi). King's key thrust has always been—to an extent just as great as the value of stories—the suspicion of history. History is a series and collection of choices, stories, that are made for numerous reasons, whether personal or collective: pride, ambition, power, wealth; in other words, it often tells, in quite a nice light, of the choices made by the winners of wars, the discoverers, the success stories. King postulates in *The Inconvenient Indian*:

> When we imagine history, we imagine a grand structure, a national chronicle, a closely organized and guarded record of agreed-upon events and interpretations, a bundle of "authenticities" and "truths" welded into a flexible yet conservative narrative that explains how we got from there to here. It is a relationship we have with ourselves, a love affair we celebrate with flags and anthems, festivals and guns. (3)

King's commentary on the perception of history as a "grand structure" of truth is certainly significant, as it points to the impossibility of the pure objectivity that so many readers of history aspire to find in its records; however, his description of history as "a relationship we have with ourselves, a love affair" (2), is highly telling of what gets left *out* of history. As a reflection of ourselves, history tends to leave the shameful and terrible deeds of the past precisely there, *in the past*. History is simply "the stories we tell about the past" (3), King explains, and certainly a heavily curated collection it is. The cracks between the stories, however, and how they connect together through time, space, and people is where the difficult work in understanding identity—whether personal, cultural, or national—must be undertaken: in the ambiguity of history and in the search for what it carries forth.

Conclusion: Keeping the Search Alive in the Twenty-First Century

The fact that this article discusses just one writer, Margaret Atwood, who appears to favour a thematic understanding and production of Canadian literatures, versus four who discern themselves through their modes of writing instead, might seem unfair; however, the number of voices having pushed for this move away from thematic analysis still face difficult resistance from the latter guard in many cases. In fact, and as a poignant example of this trend, the panel "National Literature in Multination States—Canadian Literature" at the Canadian Comparative Literature Association's annual conference at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2019 featured four papers on the eponymous topic: on one end of the spectrum, one paper

discussed Métis literary resistance in the prairies, another examined the creation of Indo-Pak spaces in Canada, and a third analyzed the Acadian paradigm of being both colonizer and colonized; on the other end, one paper argued that, for some reason, none of the Governor General's Award winners in fiction over the past five years in both English and French had "the nation" as a theme whatsoever, and so to what was nationalism coming in Canada? Therefore, if the representative numbers in this article seem unfair, that is perhaps because they attempt to balance the weight of their respective sway in Canadian literary circles.

To that end, how should we keep the search for Canadian literatures alive in the present, now well into the twentieth-first century? The answer appears to lie, somewhat *ambiguously*, in the ambiguity of Canada's history, its languages, its cultures, and the people that, in whatever way, have ties to Canada. At least one common trait seems to be that, in Canada, writers from all kinds of backgrounds are dedicated to contributing to its body of creative work as well as to its critical understandings. Perhaps a "search for Canadian literature" is a futile endeavour if considered in the singular; rather, as Blodgett suggested in *Five-Part Invention*, Canada thrives in its plurality, in a pool of memory that continues to expand and self-reflect:

> If there has been a metahistorical purpose in my bringing the literary histories of Canada into a common compass, it has been to demonstrate the limits of autonomous perspectives, no matter how valid in themselves. To step beyond the limits, one has to recognize the legitimate claims of other autonomies, which is one of the meanings, I suggest, of the epigraph taken from Nicole Brossard […] namely, "la memoire se fait plurielle." We share a plurality of memories or, at least, have the possibility of doing so, and the possibility extends beyond political arrangements. (297-98)

The search continues, at times outwards, at other times inwards, delving into the ambiguities of the past, present, and future across languages, cultures, and borders. Canadian literatures will forever be in the search, in the potentiality of ambiguity.

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