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WENDY WARING

Is This Your Book? Wrapping Postcolonial Fiction for the Global Market

What I propose to do is read through the edges of a few texts from Canada and Australia: Canadian writer Daphne Marlatt's novel, *Anahistoric*; Australian Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford (Ginibi)'s autobiographical novel *Don't Take your Love to Town*; and a collection of short stories published in 1987 by Indo-Canadian Rohinton Mistry, entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. I am interested in the traces which render the processes of cultural production intelligible, as a means of getting at issues of feminism and imperialism in reading. I concentrate on what could loosely be called the paratextual: titles, back cover blurbs, glossary notes, and some italicised quotations.

In his rather hyperstructuralist work *Seuils* (1987) Gérard Genette distinguishes between varieties of paratexts according to the degree of control the author exercises over their inscription. He classes these threshold textual phenomena as either *péritextes* or *épitextes*. To give two brief examples: titles would be peritextual, back cover blurbs epitextual. Linda Hutcheon's comments on paratextuality in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) with respect to historiographic metafiction are also instructive here, specifically with regard to Daphne Marlatt's novel. She notes that the "postmodern use of paratextuality as a formal mode of overt intertextuality both works within and subverts that apparatus of realism still typical of the novel genre, even in its more meta-fictional forms" (89). I will not enter the debate here over how best to delineate paratextual practices; my concern at this time is to focus on the relations of cultural production inscribed through the paratexts of these three texts.

In Daphne Marlatt's experimental novel, *Anahistoric*, the paratextual use of quotations in italics relates to us the narrative's struggle with authority. The narrator, the wife of a history professor, is trying to write historical research on the colony of British Columbia. Increasingly her writing is sidetracked by the unverifiable story of Mrs. Richards, a school teacher in the early colony. In a complex series of parallels the characters come to echo each other: nineteenth-century Mrs. Ana Richards and the twentieth century narrator, Annie and Richard's wife and the narrator's very traditional mother, Ina, yet another British immigrant.

For the first half of *Anahistoric*, quotations are drawn largely from authoritative historical texts. As the narrative moves forward, the paratexts change, and the reader too is differently positioned. Following the trail of this paratextual movement frames for us the story of women reading that is told on so many of the narrative levels of *Anahistoric*.

The historical quotations have a rather ambiguous status from the beginning of the text. They are dropped into the flow of the personal narration and underline the disjunction between History and personal history. The narrator is in conflict with these authorities, and so is her narrative. Her text moves back and forth from her own personal history to the imagined history of Mrs. Richards, a "herstory." This herstorical text is constructed from details of yet another unauthorized text, a "journal suspect at the archives, 'inauthentic,' fictional possibly, contrived later by a daughter who imagined (how ahistoric) her way into the unspoken world of her mother's girlhood" (30). Nonetheless, the modern narrator still feels compelled to respond to the authoritative history texts, to incorporate them in the body of her writing.

She eventually begins to elude the grasp of authoritative history. This is indicated paratextually by a movement to a different kind of authoritative text: from the history of colonial British Columbia to the history of the brutal treatment of hysteria in the nineteenth century:

Mechanical devices were invented for compressing ovaries or for packing them in ice. In Germany, Hegar (1830-1914) and Friedrich (1825-82) were using even more radical methods, including ovariectomy and cauterization of the clitoris. The source of hysteria was still, as in Plato's time, sought in the matrix of the female body, upon which surgical attacks were unleashed. (89; italics in the original)

This quotation, following as it does on a description of her mother's repressed rage, and a lyric scene in which Mrs. Richards leaves the straight path and slides oneirically through the forest into a warm pool to bathe naked with two other women, radically questions the authority of masculine texts. It is by equating the violence done to women by the Victorian medical profession with the text of imperialism that the narrator is able to break free from History's grasp. From this point, the texts of British Columbia's early colonial history no longer act as a brooding authority periodically calling the narrator to order. As critic Manina Jones puts it,

The novel's recitative rereading of historical materials is accomplished precisely by a recourse that goes back over the narrative "tracks" of history with a disruptive, interrogative effect that "steps inside the picture," appealing (to) the definitive sentence ("the phrase that judges") and incriminating the evidence itself. (156)

We are carried forward by the narration of a questioning of this authority until we come to a "choice," either: "The barque Whittier carried a piano among its cabin furniture. The master sold it to a Mrs. Schweppe, who resold it to Mrs. Richards, and then the school teacher also gave piano lessons in her rooms in Gastown" (106) or "Mrs. Schwappe (?) sold it to Mrs. Richards, school teacher, who lived in a little three-room cottage back of the Hastings Sawmill schoolhouse, and afterwards married Ben Springer" (106). The choice here is between two different narratives. The second is the story of a marriage, the plot that the narrator's mother followed with clenched teeth, and which the modern narrator herself followed: "i ended up doing what i was meant to, i followed the plotline through, the story you had me enact" (17). The first is the story of an independent woman. As the narrator proceeds to flesh out this alternative to a wedding, to write herstory, History calls "come back ... to the solid ground of fact. you don't want to fall off the edge of the world" (111). Here is a crisis in authorities, and the quotations which follow reflect this crisis.

As we read the narration of the birth of "the first white child at Hastings Sawmill," snippets from the local newspapers giving commentary on a local boat race are inserted in the text. As Jeannie Alexander gives birth, this is what is considered newsworthy.

FALSEHOOD OF THE HOUR: That Lockhart goes his pile on the "Annie Fraser" ... That like Johns has no objections to holding the stakes at a boat-race. That if he makes a bet and deposits his stakes but is unable to find his man after he has won, that the others may have some difficulty in finding theirs. (116)

It is clear from the repetition of the phrase "FALSEHOOD OF THE HOUR" in the next series of paratextual quotations that these historical sources have lost their foothold as indisputable "facts" which the narrator feels compelled to address. With the names of the boats in this race reflecting one of the few instances of grammatical gender in English nouns, the paratextual narration of the race becomes a social comment on the status of white women in the colony.

the ships men ride into the pages of history. the winning names. the nameless women who are vessels of their destiny. the ship R.H., H.O. ride into history as stars on board the mute matter of being wife and mother — ahistoric, muddled in the mundane, incessantly repeating, their names "in water." (121)

The competition between the two boats, "male females," is juxtaposed with a real couple — mother and child in delivery. Significantly, the next paratextual quotation is from Simone de Beauvoir, a new authority, on the alienation of woman from her own body (133). Increasingly, the narrator moves through quotations to a more woman-identified position. And yet, the move to gender polarisation — to a femininity versus masculinity which pits women against men

— what this implies is brought up short by the intrusion of the patriarchal mother in the text. When the narrator's resolve to mix Mrs. Richard's story with her own and her mother's has grown firmer, she imagines her mother's reaction to the text she is writing.

— the truth is, you want to tell you [*sic*] own story.
 — and yours. ours. the truth is our stories are hidden from us by fear. your fear i inherited, mother dear.
 — the truth is, that's woman's lot. it's what you learn to accept, like bleeding and hysterectomies, like intuition and dizzy spells — all the ways we don't fit into a man's world. (79)

It is the possibility of a second reader, and her embodiment in Zoe, a woman who Annie Richards has met while doing her research, that allows the narrator to confront the patriarchal prohibitions her mother has passed on to her. It is shortly after the imaginary exchange above that the authoritative paratexts move from colonial history to the brutal history of hysteria. The narrator goes on to question her mother's acceptance, and her willingness to experience life as a woman in the negative. It is finally Zoe who suggests an alternative reader for a different narrative. "but don't you think we read with a different eye? Zoe asks" (107). Annie then begins to narrate Mrs. Richards' struggle to find her own authority as she walks to Gastown and finally walks toward a story of love between women.

Near the end of the novel Annie visits Zoe's home where she joins a small group of feminists in the kitchen preparing a mail-out of flyers. The novel finally closes on a lyrical passage with the narrator in Zoe's arms. This narrative move is played out in an address on the last page to the "real" reader:

we give place, giving words, giving birth, to each other — she and me. you. hot skin writing skin. fluid edge, wick. she draws me out. you she breathes, is where we meet. breeze from the window reaching you now, trees out there, streets you might walk down, will, soon. it isn't dark but the luxury of being has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading us into the page ahead. (153)

This textual resolution of a Woman reader for *Anahistoric* is disrupted by two characters, two women. The first is Ina, the narrator's mother. The voice of her mother reading "over her shoulder" has consistently weighted the narrator's imaginative text with disparaging comments which echo both the inhibitions of patriarchy and those of cultural imperialism.

— now you're exaggerating.
 — how would you know?
 — you always did. you should've gone into theatre, not history.

— i mean how would you know what this place was like? you never read about it, you were never interested in any past outside of England's.
 — well think about it. who would play Chopin in a grimy little milltown? who would even appreciate it? no one appreciates good music here, they think it's snobbish, what do they call it? uppercrust, and this is supposed to be a city!
 — there you go, always criticizing this place for its lack of culture. as if we were living somewhere out in the bush.
 — we may as well be, and it's only provincialism that stops you from seeing it. we should've packed you off to boarding school in England long ago. then you'd know something about culture. (22)

Yet it is *this* neo-imperialist voice which is constructed as the primary reader for the text, and it is to the British mother that Annie returns:

she is my first, my ongoing reader. you, i want to say. but you are not reading this as i write and Ina is — in my imagination, Ina i would give birth to, enter her into the world. but it is Zoe's hand that rests beside mine on the table top. (132)

This "imperial mother" recalls yet another mother in the text, the mother of "the first white child at Hastings Sawmill" who, as critic Julia Emberley puts it, "completes the transatlantic circuit of exchange in Europe's trade routes. She is the vessel of imperialist ideology, the mother of the British 'race'" (155). The narration of Jeannie Alexander giving birth, and the women who support her foreshadows the community of women which will end the novel. Yet the silent presence of the native woman Ruth in the birthing room of this first white son inscribes a blanked out cipher of Aboriginality. This first birth, underwritten by the politics of racial imperialism, overlaid with the desired re-birth of Annie's mother, the second birthing into a world beyond patriarchy, constitutes a desire for indigenisation.

In the end, the mother's "imperial" speech, the mother who "taught us the winds, bamboos, and flowers, tapped spirits with a tipped-up sherry glass constructed boats from the silver paper of chocolate bars" (145) is electroshocked into silence. And despite the lingering traces of her speech on the penultimate page of the novel, the imperial mother is reborn indigenous through the final embrace.

The second woman who disturbs the purity of the Woman reader is none other than her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. Let us briefly recall Annie in the final pages of *Anahistoric*, sitting in the kitchen with her new community of women, stamping envelopes, "hundreds of tiny images of the Queen, passing under [her] thumb" (151). Paradoxically, then, it is through the narrative silencing of both the aboriginal woman *and* these "imperial" mothers that the discourse of imperialism is repressed. The woman-identified community in this novel can exist only by keeping the Queen "under thumb."

Patriarchy is *the* ideology in *Anahistoric*, a reading that is underscored by flipping from italicised quote to quote, from authority to authority, through the passages of British Columbian authoritative history to the final paratextual quotation from the doyenne of second-wave feminist philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir. What the tracing of the paratextual quotations in *Anahistoric* demonstrates is the fictional enactment of the inscription of feminist theory in the post-colonial mode (de Lauretis, 1990). To the novel's first line of text — "Who's there?" — the answer seems still to be the Woman reader, despite the intrusions of imperial mothers and Aboriginal ciphers.

Let us now turn to the back cover copy for a text published in Australia, *Don't Take your Love to Town*. In general, we can say that the function of the back cover blurb is one of economic interpellation. Its goal is to persuade the reader to buy the book, to convince the reader that the text "speaks" to her or him. Given this function of interpellation, it is instructive to speculate about the readership which is inscribed in the back cover copy of this book.

We picked up our pay and drove into St. George. Look, here is a dress shop. I went in; I needed a new dress. Halfway into the shop I saw myself in the long mirror, close up. Here was a pregnant woman with blistered hands. Her face peeling like flaky pastry, and black. I stared at myself for a long time, then I bought a sleeveless cotton dress and went outside. I hadn't been in town for so long. I was lonely for another woman to talk to. So every woman I passed I said hello, hello, just to hear them talk to me.

Despite the elements which emphasise the work that this woman has done — the pay picked up, the blistered hands and peeling face — the rest of the passage seems to construct a mid-Atlantic cliché from the 1970s — the isolated suburban woman, starved of meaningful interaction with other women, shopping for a dress.

Ruby Langford (Gimibi)'s autobiographical novel *Don't Take your Love to Town* was published by Penguin Australia in 1988, which was the bicentennial anniversary of British colonisation. In many ways, this year marked the country's movement into a hypernationalist space which celebrated all things Australian and, not incidentally, witnessed a rapidly spreading collective amnesia of the fact of white invasion. *Don't Take your Love to Town* is the autobiographical account of an Aboriginal woman's struggle to raise her family. Langford is writing, as the back cover tells us, "about the changing ways of life in Aboriginal communities — rural and urban; the disintegration of traditional lifestyles and the sustaining energy that has come from the renewal of Aboriginal culture in recent years."

The passage which makes up the copy for the back cover blurb is taken from the book itself, from a passage in which the narrator describes the three months she has spent building fences on stations and living in the open air. It is more than worthwhile to look at the original passage from the book.

We picked up our pay and drove into St. George, paid Clem Jollie what we owed him, and on to the shops. This town was a mecca of civilisation to me, look, here was a dress shop — I went right in. I needed a new dress. Halfway into the shop I saw myself in the long mirror, close up. Here was a pregnant woman with blistered hands like a man's. Her face peeling like flaky pastry, and black, she started black, but her arms were BLACK and the hair ginger. I stared at myself for a long time, then I bought a sleeveless cotton dress and went outside. I hadn't been in town for so long. I was lonely for another woman to talk to. So every woman I passed I said hello, hello, just to hear them talk to me. (93)

A number of transformations result from these small operations performed on the text. What is clearly excised from this passage is the woman's reflection on/of race. The opposition is set up in advance with the introduction of the urban/rural dichotomy and the use of the word "civilisation" which in the context of an Aboriginal woman coming to town (and keep in mind the title of the book) is a loaded one. The removal of the word "right" serves to eliminate from the text the possibility of hesitation at the entrance to a shop. With these excisions, the woman in the text could very easily be white.

Also attenuated in the back cover text are markers of class. To have "blistered hands like a man's," the phrase removed from the copy, is to belong to a class where men's hands are often callused from manual labour. To defer shopping 'til pay day is familiar to those of us who have lived from pay cheque to pay cheque, and could easily be taken as a sign of working class provenance.

And finally, it seems to me, what is also excised from this passage is its lyricism, its literariness. For the sake of retaining realist generic markings and the problematic voice of autobiography and authenticity, I would argue that the more rhythmic, poetic elements of that long line — "Her face peeling like flaky pastry, and black, she started black, but her arms were BLACK" — are rewritten into the more prosaic function of description.

The only other words on the front cover, other than the title and author's name, are the words "the ultimate battler's tale." The function of this front cover copy is to inscribe the fiction within "the battler" genre which Western Australian Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo Narogin describes wryly: "The plotline goes like this. Poor underprivileged person through the force of his or her own character makes it to the top" (149). The book is framed by a genre of individualistic success narratives which relate racism as a thing of the past to a popular reading culture.

Once past the cover, we confront the internal paratextual translation of the glossary footnotes. What seems fairly clear is that the reader who is interpellated by these notes is not Aboriginal, and likely white, but not necessarily Australian. This is clear in the first pages. The first five notes explain: "Koori — Aboriginal person; gubb — urban Aboriginal word for white person; nyathing — grandfather; Go ngudam — sleep; bunning — porcupine (echidna)" (Langford n.p.).

What is interesting here is that the word "porcupine" is a North American English word. The *Macquarie Concise Dictionary* gives us two definitions:

Echidna: any of the spine covered insectivorous monotreme mammals with claws and a slender snout, occurring in two genera, the curved-beaked echidna of New Guinea and the smaller, straight-beaked echidna represented by several species in Australia, Tasmania, and southern New Guinea; spiny anteater.

whereas

Porcupine: any of various rodents covered with stout erectile spines or quills, as the crested porcupine of southern Europe and northern Africa, with long spines, and the common porcupine of North America ... with short spines or quills partially concealed by the fur.

In Australia, the echidna, or spiny anteater, is a common enough animal; an Australian reader would not require a gloss which favoured the porcupine over the echidna. The market reader being constructed through these glossary foot-notes for Ruby Langford's text is homogenised and white, a mid-Atlantic anthro-pological tourist. "The Aboriginal writer exists in ambiguity," writes Mudrooroo Narogin. "White people," he continues, "assume that he or she is writing for the white world, the world of the invader. It is a curious fate — to write for a people not one's own, and stranger still to write for the conquerors of one's people" (148). A very specific kind of reader is inscribed through these notes, not necessarily identical to the one which is inscribed through the narrative.

Langford's text could be inserted with ease into the problematic "confessional" genre, pronounced symptomatic of Stephen Muecke's reworking of the Foucauldian "repressive hypothesis." Yet this would bend too readily to a homogenisation of the reading positions of the text. While some of the circum-textual framing (Reid) of this book constructs a white audience, some of it is destined for an Aboriginal public. The title, for example. Taken from the lyrics of a popular country song, *Don't Take your Love to Town* also functions as an injunction which plays on the difficulty of urban life for Aboriginal people, and positions Ruby Langford, as both narrator and as author, to give advice to her community through storytelling. While it is obvious that the market for the book is white, the readership is mixed. The paratexts of *Don't Take your Love to Town* demonstrate a heterogeneity of reception to which professional readers — particularly those whose interests lie in the realm of challenging ideologies — should pay heed.

Let me approach my conclusion by looking at one more title. Last year, as I was browsing at the New Editions book shop in Perth, I came across what I thought, at first, was a new title by Rohinton Mistry. (Mistry is the author of the

novel *The Long Journey and Tales from Firozsha Baag*.) The book which caught my eye was called *Swimming Lessons*. I soon realised, however, that this was *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, the same collection of interlocking short stories I had read the year before. Intrigued, I began to investigate the source and effects of the title change. First published by Penguin Canada in 1987, Rohinton Mistry's collection of short stories was issued as *Swimming Lessons* and as *Swimming Lessons: and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* by Viking Penguin in 1990. Distribution rights for *Swimming Lessons* were taken up by McClelland & Stewart, a well-known Canadian press, which published *Tales from Firozsha Baag* in 1992.

The title has fluctuated between tales, stories and lessons, between Bombay and Toronto, leaving professional readers with a question: How do we frame this text? The move from the title *Swimming Lessons* to *Tales* is not inconsequential, for the last story in the collection, the only one which was previously unpublished, is also entitled "Swimming Lessons." The story "Swimming Lessons," in an imperfect nutshell, tells of a young Indian man's separation from his family following immigration to Toronto, and his attempts to overcome his fear of immersion by taking swimming lessons at the local pool. Into the fabric of this realistic narration is woven what seems to be the autobiographical text of a letter. This autobiographical text, set in italics, tells of the correspondence between a Mother and Father in Bombay and a son in Toronto. The first missive they receive in this narration is like all the others, perfunctory: "Father looked up from the newspaper and said, don't get too excited, first read it, you know what kind of letters he writes, a few lines of empty words, I'm fine, hope you are all right, your loving son — that kind of writing I don't call letter-writing" (232).

The second envoy from the son is a book, his own collection of short stories. The Mother and Father take turns reading the stories, providing critical discussion of the collection, and literature in general as they go. The "real" story "Squatter" in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is mirrored quite clearly in the fictional Father's reaction to one of his son's stories — "the one with a little bit about Toronto, where a man perches on top of the toilet" (245) and makes it clear that the fictional letter in "Swimming Lessons" is introducing a self-referential commentary on the very volume we have in our hands. Yet before introducing any of the interpretative potential offered by that self-referential text here, it is important to return to the question of the vacillating title. When the collection is called *Swimming Lessons*, we are called upon to frame our interpretation by giving this story primacy. If, however, the collection is called *Tales from Firozsha Baag* the self-referential interpretative framing of the story "Swimming Lessons" is diminished. Moreover, because the collection would now focus on stories from Firozsha Baag, the apartment building in Bombay, the last story, which is set in Toronto, further recedes in importance.

How do we make then a decision about how to proceed authoritatively? interpretatively? Is the reader interpellated by this text to be modelled on the Father and Mother in the final story, familiar with the social and political context of Bombay and Farsi language and culture as well as the setting of most of the stories? Or is it a reader attracted by the "oral," the exotic, nostalgic for village simplicity, soon to be disabused by the decidedly urban concerns in the apartment building of Firozsha Baag? And while the title *Tales from Firozsha Baag* encircles the text with the aroma of woodsmoke and dhal, the blurbs on the cover go to great length to reassure the reader of the literariness of the text and the author's insertion into the metropolitan literary world.

The back inside flap gives autobiographical indices which combine literary greatness with the immigrant success story: Mistry worked in a bank on coming to Canada, a kind of Wallace Stevens crossed with the poor huddled masses. Mistry, we are informed, was a Booker Prize nominee, has won literary prizes, and has had his work published in several literary magazines. The market reader is doubly and contradictorily seduced, offered a text which promises both simplicity and complexity, the primitive and urbanity.

Although we might phone up the author, or wait patiently for his authorized biography or collected letters to discover precisely what he might say his intentions were, what his desired title was, the case of the disappearing title remains. This shift in titles points out quite starkly that the case of the "real" interpellated reader is an undecidable one. Or to put it another way, all of us, are potentially both committed "ideal" readers — parents to the text — and market readers—tourists, book browsers in the neo-imperialist marketplace.

As local authors are increasingly "picked up" by large publishing firms for a mass market audience, we read the traces of the post-colonial work of rendering the fiction intelligible for a homogenised mid-Atlantic readership. But before we settle comfortably into a shudder at anonymous multinational villains, let us pause over a few details. As we saw with both the Langford and the Mistry texts, the heterogeneity of reading positions is not always erased during the construction of various circumtextual and paratextual marketing elements. Of the three texts we have looked at today, the one whose reading positions are most homogeneous was published by a small, progressive literary house in Canada, Coach House Press.

Does this then mean that multinational presses really have the best interests of marginal cultures at heart? Stephen Muecke noted in his recent book *Textual Studies: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* that

The story of Aboriginal relations to the publishing industry is not one of persecution and struggle as the repressive hypothesis might lead us to believe.... What I would argue is that the appearance of an Aboriginal literature over the past two decades is not just in response to historical conditions of repression and struggle, but is also a consequence of

the publishing industry being in a state of readiness, even eagerness, to publish work by Aboriginal writers. (131)

On the other hand, Mudrooroo has remarked that "publishing companies are consciously publishing only those books which advance [the] ideology [of assimilation]" (150).

As I have already mentioned, Ruby Langford's book is published by Penguin. Perhaps her book is assimilationist, as Mudrooroo might argue, or caught up in the "confessional discourse" which Muecke describes, and that it is precisely her implication in this multinational publishing house which shapes her work with such complicity. What hampers this conclusion, is that *Don't Take your Love to Town* is out of print internationally, and has been, to the best of my knowledge, since 1989. In other words, it was never fully intended for a market outside of Australia.

There are limits on how "eager" the publishing industry is to publish the works of women, of immigrants, of gays and lesbians, of Aboriginal writers. I think it is important to keep in mind that the publishing industry is not homogeneous; nor are the discourses which guide its conduct. What happens to the fictional texts of "small" cultures at the level of mass market publishing often leaves its traces in paratexts—titles, marketing blurbs, and so on—as I hope I have demonstrated. Whether we read the scripts of tokenism, of metropolitan civilities, of post-Romantic literariness, or the glimmers of resistance, paratextual reading helps us to answer that question: Is this your book?

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JOSEPH PUGLIESE

Literary Histories
and the Ontologies of Nation

I.

"quel che successe e continua a succedere appartiene a troppi, e riconoscersi è impossibile" (Rosa Capiello 222)¹

The figure of nation has come under review in many contemporary texts which examine the various discursive strategies employed in the construction of national identity. Many of these studies also focus on the political and ideological effects produced by the figure when placed in its sociohistorical context. These recent studies articulate a shift away from a mere cataloguing of national attributes or characteristics to an examination of the various representations, symbols, and narratives which are mobilized in order to construct signs of national identity. For example, in her analysis of the relationship between multiculturalism and literary nationalism, Sneja Gunew draws attention to the need for "the whole of Australian literature ... to be read differently so that the positionality and history involved in all cultural productions be foregrounded" (116). I situate the concerns of this paper in this call for different ways of reading and writing, ways which bring into focus questions of positionality and alternative histories. I also, however, want to alter the focus somewhat by tracing the unacknowledged manner in which ontology informs a series of texts that represent figures of national identity. In particular, by drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas's critique of ontology, I want to examine the manner in which literary histories (my examples will be drawn from Australian literary histories of the 1960s) ground their representations of national identity in ontology. The ontologization of semiotic constructs functions, I argue, to efface the very semiotic nature of the so-called national attributes and types by transposing the textual manoeuvres used by such essentializing strategies to the realm of being. Ontology functions as a type of guarantor which produces the desired reality effects for nationalist claims. Ontology is called upon, time and again, in order to situate the images of nation

I "that which has happened and continues to happen belongs to the many, and to recognise oneself in any of this is impossible." This and all other translations from the Italian are mine.