

Trauma, Testimony, Transcendence: Representing Diaspora in New Canadian Literatures

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Introduction

As Shoshana Felman and a host of other scholars have argued, our era has been marked by individual and collective suffering on a scale unprecedented in human history. We seem to exist in an almost perpetual state of witness, mourning and memorial: that is, of testimony. Felman focuses on Jewish efforts to come to terms with the horrors of the *Shoah*. But for others, Auschwitz has its traumatic analogues; a partial litany of atrocities involving the west, at least, would include Wounded Knee, Paschaendale, Armenia, Dresden, Hiroshima, *Gulag*, *Apartheid*, *Los Desaparecidos*, Cambodia, Bhopal, and more recently, Bosnia, Rwanda, and now the complicated sequence of events surrounding '9/11' and Iraq.

In this respect, trauma may be understood as a 'spiritual, psychic or mental injury,' not just physical harm; that is, as the sort of damage the Anglo-Canadian social philosopher Ian Hacking calls a 'wound to the soul.'¹ Construed as trauma writing, testimony calls into question the social and cultural values in and through which we know ourselves to be who we are. Capable of forensic, political, literary, ethical and religious interpretation, testimony at once expresses and explores questions of suffering arising from challenges to identity posed amongst conditions of radical social and cultural upheaval. Personal testimony thus carries a public dimension. In Laurie Vickroy's words, 'testimony narratives do

¹ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, 2001, 25, quoting Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton, 1995, 214.

not just concern individuals but also the individual as representative of a social class or group assuming relationship or responsibility for others beyond personal interests.² Here, under the presiding rubric of new directions in interdisciplinary studies in religion and literature, I wish to share with you tidbits of new Canadian writing which bear witness to the traumas of exile and diaspora. I shall close with some remarks about the nature of testimony as a vehicle for transforming conditions of suffering into conditions of hope, and hence for transcending the threats to identity that are trauma's more immediate and inevitable effect.

New Canadians and the Traumas of Exile and Diaspora

Like Australia, Canada is a country of immigrants. Canada's social democratic political culture has encouraged immigrants to maintain and nurture the ethnic and religious traditions they bring to their new home, rather than to abandon them in the name of a more homogenizing nationalist myth. This difference is enshrined in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, which was passed into law 21st July, 1988. Among other things, this *Act* declares that Canadian federal government policy will 'recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.'³ What Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor calls a 'politics of recognition' informs this position—a public recognition of the creative possibilities and ethical prerogatives of difference, including religious difference.⁴ Ironically, however, precisely because new Canadians enjoy the freedom to maintain living connections with their countries of origin, the process of settling and making a

² Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Charlottesville, 2002, 5.

³ Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, editors *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, Toronto, 1990, 371.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton, 1992.

home in a foreign country becomes more complex and potentially more traumatic.

In many ways, the Jewish Canadian experience has served as a model of and a model for other immigrant groups in Canada. Jewish Canadian literature often resonates with the traditional diasporic trope of exile, most famously expressed in the psalmist's lament:

How shall we sing Yahweh's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
If I do not remember you,
If I do not set Jerusalem
Above my highest joy!

*Psalms 137: 4*⁵

For echoes of these ambiguities, take, for example, an exchange in Mordecai Richler's autobiographical, *This Year in Jerusalem*. On a visit to Israel, Richler replies 'No' when asked by Eza Lifshitz, an old friend now settled there, whether he, too, intends to move to the sacred land of their ancestors. 'Why not?' challenges Lifshitz. 'Well,' Richler answers, 'I'm not only Jewish but also Canadian, and Montreal just happens to be my home,'

⁵ Interestingly, Jewish writers use the words *hurban* and *galut* to refer to the exposure of Jewish social and cultural identity attendant upon the destruction of both the first and second temples, in 586BCE and 70CE respectively. The terms diaspora and exile are 'virtually synonymous' in Hebrew, 'where the same word *galut* is used to describe either condition,' so that diaspora 'can be traced back at least as far as the first *hurban* in 586 BCE ...' Nicholas de Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism*. New York, 2000, 27 and Maera Schreiber, 'The End of Exile: Jewish Identity and Its Diasporic Poetics,' in *PMLA*, 1998, 113.2: 276. But these historical catastrophes do differ in one key respect: '[I]n the aftermath of the Roman destruction it was probably assumed that there would be a return and rebuilding after a generation or two, just as had happened the first time;' de Lange, *op cit*, 27. This expectation, of course, proved false.

to which Lifshitz replies, 'You actually believe that a Jew can be 'at home' in Canada?'⁶

In different ways, the ambiguities of exile and diaspora expressed in Richler's Jewish experience permeate a good deal of new Canadian literature. The ghosts of old Europe still haunt the work of some new Canadian writers, like the Italian Canadian poet, Pier Giorgio di Cicco, who was appointed poet laureate to the city of Toronto in September, 2004. In the poem, 'A Man without a Country,' published in the collection, *A Burning Patience*, di Cicco echoes the psalmist's sense of displacement:

Italia bella; I return to you.
There is no question of lateness
For I was taken from you and cannot
Remember the parting;
there was a sleep and I woke
to the rumours of you⁷

Less urgent in tone than the biblical lament, the almost impersonal quality of the phrase 'there was a sleep' (di Cicco might have written, 'I was asleep,' for example) suspends the writer's identity in time and space, somewhere between languages, between 'Italia bella' and English 'rumours.' As di Cicco writes in 'Immigrant Music,' another poem included in *A Burning Patience*, the newly settled Italian Canadian possesses 'the moon-struck sadness of a man/ wedged/ between two hearts, one too large for the other.'⁸

In other new Canadian writing, issues of race often accentuate the traumatic effects of exile and diaspora. Such issues characterize a good deal of work by black Canadians, an intrinsically diverse group which includes the descendants of slaves who fled the United States in the nineteenth century and

⁶ Mordecai Richler, *This Year in Jerusalem*, Toronto, 1994, 167.

⁷ Pier Giorgio di Cicco, *A Burning Patience* Ottawa, 1978, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

more recent immigrants from different parts of Africa and the Caribbean. Growing up in a Hindu family and educated at a Christian missionary school in Georgetown, the Guyanese Canadian writer, Arnold Itwaru, has written about the alienating paradoxes of exile:

We are *here*, not *there*, in the region of our birth. ... For to be in exile is considerably more than being in another country. It is to live with myself knowing my estrangement. ... But this estrangement goes further. It touches upon the very notion of home, the lands and places of our birth. For that land, there, that region, lives in us a memory and dream, as nostalgia, romance of reflection, that which defines us as different, that to which we *think* we belong but no longer do. It is thus that many of us repeatedly invent scenarios of our return but never realize them. It is thus also that those of us who do visit *there* return *here* to find that after the painful winters of our struggles a deep sense of uneasiness prevails ... [W]e are now visitors: of our past, and unwelcomed visitors here, and other places like here, where our silence and invisibility, despite our embodied conspicuousness, are the dimensions of our rejection.⁹

Itwaru lingers among the mixed meanings of 'here' and 'there' at play in the discourse of exile and return.¹⁰ He feels at home neither in Guyana nor in Canada, partly because, in *both* cases, someone else's definition of 'here' dominates, always already forestalling the exile's feelings of ease. For Itwaru, the exile is a perpetual visitor, at home neither in his place of birth nor in his adopted land, ceaselessly subject to what another Guyanese Canadian writer, Cyril Dabydeen, calls the 'pendulum of time.'¹¹ But in the last analysis, the stark contrast between 'silence and invisibility' and 'our embodied conspicuousness' captures the

⁹ Arnold Itwaru, 'Exile and Commemoration' in Frank Birbalsingh, editor *Indenture and Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience*, Toronto, 1989, 202-203.

¹⁰ Frank Birbalsingh, *Novels and the Nation: Essays in Canadian Literature*, Toronto, 1995, 159.

¹¹ Cyril Dabydeen, 'The Indo-Caribbean Imagination in Canada,' in Frank Birbalsingh, *Indenture and Exile*, op cit, 250.

ostracizing effects of racial difference so often experienced by new Canadians of colour.

This more complicated ethnic and religious legacy defines the fragmented identity of new Canadians from other backgrounds, too. Born in Canada to a Chinese father and a Swedish mother, Fred Wah is a case in point. Wah's collection, *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, includes a number of pieces exploring the implications of his manifold lineage. The poem, 'Untitled,' invokes the Chinese heritage of Wah's father:

my father hurt-
ing at the table
sitting hurting
at suppertime
deep inside very
far down inside
because I can't stand the ginger
in the beef and greens
he cooked for us tonight
and years later tonight
that look on his face
appears now on mine
my children
my food
their food
my father
their father
me mine
the father
very far
very very far
inside.¹²

Two aspects of Wah's identity, the Canadian and Chinese, insinuate their way into three generations of the family's 'suppertime' menu, as he regrets the 'hurting' of his father, now

¹² Fred Wah, *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, Winnipeg, 1985, 7.

deceased, which he as father now feels, too, in his children's distaste for 'the ginger/in the beef and greens.' As a Canadian son, Wah rejected his father's alien Chinese cooking, only now to feel himself rejected as he offers the same menu to his own offspring. The domestic familiarity of these lines only heightens their elegiac poignancy. Fathers and children alike are at once and alternately Chinese and Canadian: 'my food/their food/my father/their father,' to the very depths of their identity, 'very far/very very far/inside.' Traditional Chinese teachings about filial piety pervade these lines, as perhaps, do the Chinese Buddhist notions of *anatta* (human impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), *karma* (moral energy), *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth), and the *skandhas* (the fluid aspects of individual personality). The tripled superlative 'very' performs the traumatic persistence, through three generations, of Wah's hurting for what is 'far,' that is, what is Chinese, over there and back then, in the here and now, in Canada, at *this* supertime table.

Among the more recent contributions to the new literatures of Canada we find the work of Korean immigrants. Like other new Canadian communities, Koreans are producing writers whose work revolves around themes of exile and diaspora. In an interesting take on migration, for example, the narrator of Un-Young Lim's short story, 'Mirror Image,' recalls the mixed feelings of leaving Korea for Canada:

Leaving was a paradox—a dying and a rebirth. Was it an action or an inaction? There was the unwillingness to carry on their lives in despair and the willingness to start a new life in hope. How was it that they could come to live out their lives on the other side of the world, exiled from their identity and their past?¹³

Like Richler and Itwaru, Lim's narrator focuses here upon the trauma of exile, but careful reading unravels the way in which she has woven this trope out of several strands of the complex

¹³ Un-Young Lim, Un-Young, 'Mirror Image' in Peter Fanning and Maggie Goh, editors *Home and Homeland*, Oakville, 1983, 189.

tapestry that is Korean spirituality. The language of 'dying and ... rebirth' recalls the karmic cycles of Buddhist *samsara*, while the juxtaposing of 'action' and 'inaction' recapitulates Taoist notions of *wu wei*. The Christian tradition likely provides the discourse of 'despair' and 'a new life in hope.' Lastly, Lim associates the threat exile poses to 'identity' with the 'past,' and in so doing captures the veneration for tradition and the ways of the ancestors which permeates so much of Korean society and culture. Indeed, this scene ends with memories of the narrator's 'day of departure,' her 'grandmother, huddled in the corner of the room ... weeping hot, slow tears.'¹⁴ 'Grandmother!' cries the narrator with appropriate concern and respect, 'Though twice removed from your womb, yet still born of you, I ask why do you weep? We shall return from the far-off land paved with gold.'¹⁵

The narrator of Lim's short story does return to Korea, but only for a visit, and the experience is full of mixed sentiments. 'Mirror Image' opens with 'a woman who has just passed through customs' catching a glimpse of someone she thinks she recognizes at Seoul's international airport. 'It is her mirror image—the same, yet different.'¹⁶ This sense of herself as simulacrum—as a facsimile of who she might otherwise be or have been—persists throughout the narrative. The story closes with the narrator in a hotel room, drawing 'a line down the mirror with an Autumn-Berry coloured lipstick.' In a gesture reminiscent of ancient Korean shamanic traditions, she whispers 'a magic incantation to herself,' confessing inwardly that she can never know which way is right, which left, which direction is forward, which backward. With further self-contradiction, '[s]he half smiles, and a tear spills down her cheek.' Having no other choice, she determines: 'I should remain exactly where I am—in the middle.'¹⁷ 'In the middle' is the key phrase, of course, and in this respect, it is important that Lim frames her story *between an*

¹⁴ Ibid, 189-90.

¹⁵ Ibid, 190.

¹⁶ Ibid, 185.

¹⁷ Ibid, 190.

airport and a hotel room, themselves two liminal spaces, neither one public or private.¹⁸ In another Seoul airport scene, another Korean Canadian writer, Jean Yoon, captures the sense of in-between-ness associated with the traumas of exile and diaspora even more succinctly: 'I get on a plane. I'm going home. I'm leaving home.'¹⁹

Conclusion

Writing at the close of the twentieth century, Laurie Vickroy sums up what I have been trying to say about trauma and testimony in new Canadian literature:

Trauma narratives ... highlight postcolonial concerns with rearticulating the lives and voices of marginal people, rejecting Western conceptions of the autonomous subject and describing the complex negotiations of multicultural social relations.²⁰

Here, I have explored the 'personalized responses' of various writers to the challenges Canada's new immigrants face in exile and diaspora, their lives defined as much by nostalgic attachment to old homes now lost as by the promise of new homes not yet fully made. The question remains, finally: In what sense, do these testimonies to trauma engender transcendence—the other substantive term in my title?

In a celebrated essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' Sigmund Freud writes that 'mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.'²¹ David L Eng and David Kazanjian have attempted

¹⁸ I am partly indebted to my partner, Emily Gilbert, for this phrasing.

¹⁹ Jean Yoon, Jean, 'Sliding for Home,' in Yvette Nolan, Betty Quan, George Bwanika Seremba, editorss *Beyond the Pale: Dramatic Writings from First Nations Writers & Writers of Colour*, Toronto, 1996, 70.

²⁰ Vickroy, op cit, x.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' in *The Standard Edition of the*

to unravel the dialectics of mourning and melancholia which define such experiences of loss and subsequent efforts to come to term with what remains. We all know such losses, of course; indeed, there is something almost definitive of *la condition humaine* about them, and about the feelings of guilt, confusion, regret, and so on that they engender. In all their historical and geographical variety, the great religious traditions share a recognition of the elemental anxiety characterizing such threats to identity, captured most obviously in threats to life itself, and equally, every religious tradition articulates theological and philosophical remedies for the fear and trembling such elemental anxiety occasions: Judaism speaks in terms of disobedience and renewed covenant; Christianity in terms of sin and redemption; Islam in terms of wandering and return; Hinduism in terms of ignorance and enlightenment; Buddhism in terms of attachment and release; and so on.

Such existential insecurity being so familiar, mourning seems a normal response to it. Melancholy, on the other hand, seems pathological. 'A mourning without end,' Eng and Kazanjian write, 'melancholia results from the inability to resolve the grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place, or ideal.'²² But what if we rework our understanding of melancholy, Eng and Kazanjian ask, by thinking of it as productive, as a 'continuous engagement with loss and its remains'?²³ 'This attention to remains,' they write, 'generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary.'²⁴ Thus reworked, past losses yield to the possibility of new futures; thus re-imagined, the

Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 Volumes, James Strachey, editor and translator, London, 1957, 14: 243.

²² David L Eng and David Kazanjian, 'Introduction: Mourning Remains,' in David L Eng and David Kazanjian, editors *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, with an afterword by Judith Butler, Berkeley, 2003, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

remains of past suffering become the conditions for the emergence of new identities. In this sense, trauma writing—including the new Canadian writing of exile and diaspora that I have discussed—expresses as much the regenerative as the nostalgic power of melancholy, acknowledging conditions of suffering, but through testimony transforming such conditions into conditions of hope. To commemorate our suffering in stories that remember us is to return ‘us’ to life, to rescue ‘us’ from oblivion, ‘us’ who are otherwise condemned to the shadows, our identities jeopardized by the threat of forgetfulness. Identity comes alive again in the witness’s testimony; in testimony ‘I’ am resurrected. Or in Anais Nin’s words, ‘[s]tories are the only enchantment possible, for when we begin to see our suffering as a story, we are saved.’²⁵

²⁵ Anais Nin, *The Diaries of Anais Nin*, 7 Volumes, Gunther Stullman, editor, New York, 1966-1980, 296.