ARRESTING SUBJECTS: "FOREIGN" SIGNIFICATIONS IN CANADIAN FICTION

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Canadian extended prose fiction, when written by or about immigrants to Canada, clearly discloses a theme that is often applied generally to Canadian literature: the alien experience of the subject in an alien landscape. Canada, for the immigrant, figures as a scene of the "foreign" not only in terms of nature but also in terms of culture. It is for this very reason that such works provide an important literary index to the operation of nature and culture on subjectivity—a topic that figures so prominently in contemporary psycho-semiotic literary theories. This fiction discloses a lack of self-identity for the subject when the bearings of conventional social identity are removed within the context of a different culture. The subject, in such a context, recognizes the need to be defined, not merely refined, in order, as Phil Branden says in Frederick Philip Grove's *A Search for America*, "not to remain for life what I was" (112), which is deemed to be inadequate. The effort to define constitutes the problematic of this literature since the possibility for a definitive subject is blocked by the always constructed subject. In developing an "identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 9), the subject must look in two directions: not only backward to the Old World that has been left but forward to the New World that has been gained; not only to nature which the subject must address but also to culture by which the subject desires to be addressed. But the hazarding of the subject in the bid to both address and be addressed highlights the hazard of the subject as a potential force of disruption for everything that is constituted when it fails to translate a new experience. New settlers to this country found themselves in an unprecedented circumstance with the shattering of preconceptions;

this very circumstance elicits their presence of mind in their unpractised and unrehearsed responses. They were uniquely situated to inquire into the "nature" of things that was as unsettling to them as they were to others. In a "foreign" situation, they had to struggle with their difference, whereas before they had been indifferent. They are thus situated to expose the impact of culture on identity: to confirm "otherness" as it defines them and as they define it. This is manifest in a very concrete way by the speaking of a "foreign" ancestral tongue, which may acquire private associations for the speaker when English is adopted in a public capacity, or which may be sacrificed in the trade-off of "'A language for a job'," as Mrs. Perroquet ruefully recounts it in *A Casual Brutality* (160). Acquisition of a new language heightens awareness of the barriers in language. But even native English speakers from Britain, when placed in the "foreign" English-speaking country of Canada, can discover that the body of language is for them disembodying. Its inadequacy is exposed as it is brought to bear on the unprecedented and the subject finds the need—as does the subject who does not speak the language—to give voice to an experience for which it has not been given a voice.

Language, thus, is disclosed not to do justice; this factor accounts for a legal motif running through much of this literature as the subject serves out a sentence on its own terms. Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants registers the often violent result of a misguided belief that language is everything by valorizing those subjects who refuse to submit to linguistic constructions of the self which are lacking and groundless; who are open to "taking on the variable, broken, fragmented, sometimes even unconstituted and regressive, images" (Lacan, *Seminar Bk. 1* 158) of themselves. This paper explores "foreign" subjects in Canadian extended prose fiction who reject the practice of "'building their personalities on other people's ideas, other people's experiences'" (Bissoondath 200) and who refuse to settle for living out the "failure" of another's "fantasy" (255) even at the price of being considered differential rather than deferential. It is a study of the breakdown of signification as reflected in the immigrant experience of the insufficiency of language acquisition within a symbolic system that is experienced to be semiotically lacking. In my reading, immigrant language acquisition experiences reinforce the formative experience of entry into the symbolic system of language wherein one speaks out of the incommensurability of signifiers that do not signify. Such

immigrant experiences can be seen to isolate breakdowns in signification, the implications of which Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants enables us to recognize. The literature poignantly discloses a life dependent on what is, fundamentally, an undependable language: a life *other*wise preserved, against *Other* odds.

The formative and socially deterministic symbolic order, according to Jacques Lacan, constructs the subject and defines the terms on which it speaks, means, and is. Passage through this order

> decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation—the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus Complex. (Lacan, *Écrits* 5)

In Barry Cameron's summary of Lacanian theory, "The subject is defined by a linguistic structure that does not address in any direct way its being but that determines its entire social/cultural existence" (139). Lacan posits a dialectical mirror stage in which the infant moves from the fundamental imaginary to the determining symbolic order (from which the real escapes and remains unknowable) by perceiving itself as an image, thereby undergoing a split into perceiver and perceived. As Lacan describes it, "We aren't present, in the reflection; to see the reflection, we are in the consciousness of the other" (*Seminar Bk. 2* 112). The unconscious is, henceforth, menacingly interposed between the subject and the symbolic system as "a schism of the symbolic system, a limitation, an alienation induced by the symbolic system" (Lacan, *Seminar Bk. 1* 196). The subject in this system never coincides with the gaze of its ego because "It is in the other that he will always rediscover his ideal ego, from whence develops the dialectic of his relations to the other" (282). In this way the symbolic eye is demeaned by the imaginary gaze in a way that demeans all voice. In the unconscious, the subject is "caught by the letter of signifiers without signification" (Vergote 214). Julia Kristeva sees "the bar between signifier and signified" in the symbolic system as "the first social censorship" (*Revolution* 63). Although the unconscious, having the structure of the signifier, speaks autonomously, signification must cross "the

bar" to be accessible, and it does so only by becoming metonymic instead of metaphoric: adhering to socially-mediated construction. Bryan Turner affirms, in his study of social theory, that "Language represents the authority of society over the unconscious" (20). The unconscious is marked by a disjunction between the corporeal body and the social body that does not accommodate it; the formative split in the orders of consciousness is reinforced by the acquisition of language which splits speaker and spoken.

In Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants, the change in culture accentuates the lack within social mediation. The state of being a "foreigner" underscores for the subject all the ways in which he or she is "foreign," especially as this centres on language. Psychoanalytically and linguistically, language defines and determines a subject who never gets represented outside of the differing terms of a dialectical signifying practice. The speaking subject is "a split subject—divided between unconscious and conscious motivations, that is, between physiological processes and social constraints" (Roudiez 6). Within this context, the two signifying modalities are the semiotic, with its unconscious psychosomatic receptacle of drives and primary processes of the fragmented body's intra- and inter-connectiveness, and the symbolic, with its constitutive and constrained system of intersubjective relations. The symbolic is not installed without a sacrifice that has permanent implications for the subject, as Lacan explains: "The symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire" (*Language of the Self* 84). Kristeva picks up on the potentially radical consequences of the instinctual lack in the symbolic: "We shall have to represent the semiotic . . . as a 'second' return of instinctual functioning within the symbolic, as a negativity introduced into the symbolic order, and as the transgression of that order" (*Revolution* 69). Kristeva designates as "abjection" the potentially disruptive force of unconscious content, since the linguistic is insufficient to mediate the libidinal. We shall see how such "foreign" content may be especially manifested by the subject who is a "foreigner." Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants clarifies the misrepresentation stemming from the subject's experiential split. Hence, this literature thus serves "to signify what is untenable in the symbolic, nominal, paternal function" (Kristeva, *Desire* 138). It is the particular experience of the "foreign" subject that informs Canadian extended

prose fiction by or about immigrants because the subject's desires and passions constitute a private language for which social terms are empty. We glimpse in these narratives that forsaken state "when dreams and hopes were possible, when life was not yet an adventure played out" (Bissoondath 369) according to an alien script.

The adventure of Alice Gull in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* figures very specifically the threshold of the mirror stage. Her taking a parrot's name mocks the parroting and mimicking that is the standard form of communication and, consequently, the standard form of immigrants finding their way into a new tongue by "modelling" themselves on "actors" whose "lines" they assume. Alice chooses to be a pantomime actress. She refuses to traffic in words which fail, and thereby evokes, unspeaking, passion from Patrick as she did life from and for Nicholas. On the verge of her transformation from a repressed nun who would not scream during her near fatal free fall to the pantomime actress, Alice notes in the mirror image her hair on "illicit" (38) display and symbolically yields to its uncontained presence before embarking on the underground life that ends in her activist death.

Rudy Wiebe shows that a mirror is not the only available implement of visual mediation. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the governor examines Big Bear through a telescope that has the effect of diminishing rather than magnifying the subject: "Oddly, while it drew a spot closer, the telescope seemed at the same time to push that spot back into a kind of greyish-ringed haze . . ." (14). The governor's clerk, Kerr, by contrast, recognizes Big Bear with his naked, "ungoverned" eye. The reader recognizes that the symbolic order, sustained by the Law of the Father (represented by the governor in this instance), has a similar effect of diminishing the subject by displacing and supplanting it with a construct. Big Bear perceives that white culture is intent on splitting "his awareness into unfindable pieces" (136) in order to facilitate appropriation (and expropriation). Kitty, in menarche, is in a similar position on the threshold of being appropriated. At the trial, she tries to focus on Big Bear through the judge's spectacles and gets only a "smeared" vision (381). Wandering Spirit figures the effects of such misapprehension when he finds his sight line "'along the barrel of this gun'" (283). In each instance, a subject is isolated in such a way as to constitute not vision but, rather, division and revision of it; not reflection but, rather, deflection. In each instance, we see that the subject is

not represented in symbolic terms. This problematic is a constant in Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants. Even Anna Jameson, in the record of her travels, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, acknowledges that language is "poor and inadequate" (384) and wishes that "words were . . . breathing music" (371). In John Richardson's *Wacousta*, "though the etiquette and strict laws of military discipline chained all speech, the workings of the inward mind remained unchecked . . ." (34). Phil Branden, in Frederick Philip Grove's *A Search for America*, finds language "coarse and lacking in delicacy, and . . . unfamiliar to myself . . ." (238). Abraham in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* senses that "he had said much but told little of what really was" (54). Each desires to be, like Sam Reimer in Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China*, "skinned to the agony of the world before the words" (169).

Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants attempts to get to the other side of language in order to access what cannot be accessed from "this side of language" (Ondaatje 136). This act requires, fundamentally, a translation from the "feeling mind" (Richardson 84) to the "unemotional tongue" (Ondaatje 19). Since it is "the language of . . . desire" (Lacan, *Écrits* 81) that sustains the imaginary life, the object of desire may be this different language itself. Hence, Robert Knapp maintains that desire is not "'of the Other'" but, rather, "of language" (138). According to Knapp:

> Activated by the sense of something lacking, language pours into the interstices of the symbolic: through the unstoppable orifice of the ear, through the cuts which both representation and reproduction make in the Real . . . . It pluralizes the never single letter of the law; it sets the other's selfhood at internal odds; it subverts, seduces, wounds, astounds. (138)

In these terms, it is precisely bodily language with its "inner truths" (Laurence 418) that is desired, and "eros wishes to free the flesh from the power of the symbolic . . ." (Knapp 138).

The semiotic designates bodily, primal, instinctive, unconscious, and unsymbolizable communications which cross the symbolic. Kristeva relates the semiotic, whose influx "remodels the symbolic order" (*Revolution* 62) to "abjection": a revolt "within the being of language" (*Powers* 45) incited by "recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5) and which is encountered "as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of

man is constituted . . ." (68). The abject recognizes the "structural violence of language's irruption as the murder of the soma, the transformation of the body, the captation of drives" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 75) insofar as "an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me'" (Kristeva, *Powers* 10). Abjection is freedom from the prisonhouse of social censorship. Kristeva maintains that, for society to exist, subjects must participate in a law over which they have no control; but she sees the unconscious as potentially disruptive of the symbolic through abjection, which is oppositional and challenging as it "disturbs identity, system, order" (*Powers* 4) in a bid to raise what is seen as a "radical" subjectivity from the ruins of social constructions.

This unconscious force is prominent and revealing in Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants. In *Wacousta*, Richardson invokes both the subjection and rejection of abjection in his description of Madeline's "dreamy recollection of some past horror" during her "speechless flight" from the invaded fort (364). He tells us that "any analysis of the causes conducing to that horror, her subjugated faculties were unable to enter upon," and he describes Madeline's state as being similar to that of a person "who, under the influence of incipient slumber, rejects the fantastic images that rise successively and indistinctly to the slothful brain, until, at length, they weaken, fade, and gradually die away, leaving nothing but a formless and confused picture of the whole . . . ." However, this suppression does not answer to the whole of Richardson's novel, in which the namesake does not allow such traces of the unconscious to weaken or fade or die because he is not "identified" to any extent with the symbolic; Wacousta establishes an identity on his own terms and takes on a life of his own that makes him a threat to the culture that he repudiates in the process. He is not bound to the symbolic, and his unorthodox exploits recuperate the forfeited imaginary life. Likewise, Grove concedes to the value of the unconscious when he maintains, in *Settlers of the Marsh*, that "So long as Niels had to avert his eye from old desires, visions, dreams, there was no foundation for his life" (207). A life that does not incorporate the claims of the unconscious is loaned, not owned. Similarly, in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*, the unorthodox Isaac wonders if, in his dream "attacks," "'my brain doesn't know what to do with the feelings in my body so it makes a story out of them, if you can call it a story'" (199). The currency of abjection is those things that the constructed subject

must impossibly reject, refuse, forfeit, and it is usually associated with bodily experience which is "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva, *Powers* 1). Abjection is Kristeva's designation for what is refused: out of bounds of the social body because, unsanitized, it pours out of the bounds of the physical body. It is a "mechanism of subjectivity" (208) insofar as it situates the collapse of meaning under the pressure of what is "radically excluded" (2) from social constructions. Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* captures this refuse very concretely in the image of "the Municipal Disposal Area," alias "the Nuisance Grounds" (400), and its attendant, Christie Logan, with his slogan: "'By their garbage shall ye know them'" (39). These grounds hold human remains: the remainder, born of desire, which lacks another site of signification. Morag comes to see that the extrinsic is at odds with the intrinsic: "At this moment she hates it all, this external self who is at such variance with whatever or whoever remains inside the glossy painted shell. If anything remains. Her remains" (248).

The subject in the symbolic order is arrested before it is complete so that it always remains "foreign"—the symbolic order permitting only of misidentification or misprision. In *Wacousta*, the desiring subject—be it Wacousta or De Haldimar or his children— experiences the lack of an absence associated with death (Clara Beverely's). Wacousta, in turn, links death with the attempted rectification of speaking that absence: "'You may award me death, but shall not chain my tongue'" (520). It is this very insistence by Wacousta that has him marked as the threat of death by the culture that he had denied, in turn, because it denied him when it could not appropriate him. "'There is death in his very presence'" (525), warns Valletort after the many displays of Wacousta's irrepressible presence of mind—the quality that makes him so elusive and terrible, so prone to act out when words fail and betray. In *Wacousta*, death comes to and by the "other": to the symbolic or cultural *Other* which Wacousta rejects and by Wacousta whom it rejects as an alien *other*. This pattern has parallels to Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in which death comes through language and the lack of it. In his trial, the misconstructed Big Bear is made to stand for and answer for *some*one who is *no* one. It is an impossible position, contrived by people who, as Big Bear sees it, "'speak where [they] know nothing'" (144). Big Bear struggles valiantly against the alienating signifier with his own distinctive voice. He

says: "'A word is power, it comes from nothing into meaning and a Person takes his name with him when he dies'" (398). Big Bear is defeated at what is not "his own word" by the word of a "foreign" ideology. Against this force, his words, which come from "nothing," can avail nothing. Big Bear's "nothing" itself answers to and for everything, testifying to that body of experience which is as unliveable as it is unspeakable.

The problematic which Wiebe explores through the trial motif in *The Temptations of Big Bear,* is what, given the gaps and the communication barrier, constitutes "evidence" of the man (376). This theme is picked up also by Adele Wiseman in *The Sacrifice,* where Chaim, when his friend Abraham has been revealed as a murderer, wonders "How can one know a man?" (311). Is there, indeed, a "language of authority" such as Richardson invokes (23)? Or does everything culminate with the realization that we are authored or spoken, not authoritative? This literature revolves very emphatically around the distinction between authorized and unauthorized communications. The distinction is figured very conveniently in legalistic terms, where the subject is arrested for attempting to live on its own terms.

But how does literature begin to recuperate the hidden content? This content is variously represented: by the Nuisance Grounds in *The Diviners,* and by the snapshots which are cherished as reminders of what they do not contain or what they hide; by the underground life in *In the Skin of a Lion;* by the protagonist's marginalization in *A Search for America;* by encounters with "foreignness" in *Roughing It in the Bush;* by transgression of the law in *The Sacrifice;* by being brought within the law in *The Temptations of Big Bear;* by betrayal in *Wacousta;* by revenge in *The Betrayal;* by unconventionality in *Settlers of the Marsh;* and by restlessness in *The Blue Mountains of China;* by anatomizations that are physical, political, social, spiritual, emotional, psychological and intellectual, to disclose "the intimate, subtle and brutal ways of the body" (269) in *A Casual Brutality.* Each of these works figures an opposition between the authorized and the unauthorized, and each points to ways in which the social is unable to either voice or contain the corporeal, just as Isaac "felt himself on the edge of many worlds, intangible ones, that seemed to exist in the silences and in the cracks and crannies of speech when a group of people sat in a room together" (Wiseman 29). What is heard, instead, is "'a history utterly foreign to the subject'" (Richard-

son 82) which is incommensurate with it because what it desires to voice is considered "foreign" on the terms of the symbolic. Wiebe figures the "unyoking" of language in the urgent passion of John Delaney and Sits Green On The Earth, a passion which requires no translation and which enables him to dismiss "the words he refused to know" while it delivers his self (*Temptations* 231). This is a manifestation, in bodily terms, of a desire for which social terms are empty. Passion refutes interest and the law that it sustains. Therefore, when Abraham wonders, in *The Sacrifice*, "What right would I have then to hope for a word, a sign?" (277) if he accommodated Laiah's sexual overtures, we see, paradoxically, that it is only by giving in to these terms to which he is drawn that he could get the word, the sign, that he desires and break the spell of those signs which mislead him to misprision.

These Canadian fictions are based, fundamentally, on a dialectic between "the passions and the interests," to borrow the term from Albert O. Hirschman's book of the same name. Passion fills the subject's interest even as it exceeds and, indeed, because it exceeds, the other's interests. But what betrays (discloses) "'the master passion of [the] soul'" (Richardson 455) that the symbolic code betrays (circumvents)? How does the author disclose "the clarified world of passion" (Ondaatje 136), or love when it is deemed "criminal" (Richardson 397), or when doing something "passionately" means acting "as if his very existence depended on doing more than he could" (Grove, *Settlers* 213)? How does one "translate" this kind of "*knowing* into *telling*" (White 5) when the "telling" does not do justice to the "knowing"? In *The Sacrifice*, Adele Wiseman points out in connection with Abraham that "Nothing grows but by desire" (10), yet she also shows, in the tomb of his family, the many ways in which desire gets arrested. But insofar as desire "expels the body from itself" (Desmond 21), it can be seen to "mirror" the process of immigration which, likewise, displaces the subject. Desire, "through the body's self-differentiation begins to disclose the difference between self and what is other by differentiating between the 'in-here' and the 'out-there'" (21), just as Morag finds the external being at odds with the internal. We can see how immigration replicates this differentiation so that literature by or about immigrants will be predicated on this prior experience of "foreignness" in the symbolic order.

Not surprisingly, then, Canadian extended prose fiction by

or about immigrants is of mixed construction, a result of its attempt to say the unsayable or to sign the unsignable: the "unsounded depth" (Grove, *Settlers* 85) that "it would be a mockery in the pen to trace" (Richardson 440) and which is "draw[n] upon" (Ondaatje 75) in ways that are not altogether conventional. In its attempts to paint the spirit unencumbered by the letter, it draws—as Ondaatje illustrates with the spirit portraits—upon myriad traces, "travels along a descant of insight and the other follows, completes the phrase, making the gesture safe" (75). The resulting "blueprint in a foreign country" signifies an interface of intertextuality which approximates the tissue of "foreign" representation so that the subject can be posited on its own terms.

It is difficult to label this literature because of its generic complexity. It partakes, for instance, of tragedy, which fundamentally asserts an idea of the subject's self in an "environment" of "otherness" (Birenbaum 54). It partakes of romance, which accommodates "the socially disruptive desires of individuals with the external demands of the group" (Bloch 193) as it strives to encompass "infinite desire within finite form" (Clayton 21) and to "institute" pluralism against the single letter of the institution of the Law. It partakes also of the Gothic, which "broaches the unthinkable, attempts the forbidden, and assaults the ordinary" (Bayer-Berenbaum 146) in an endeavour to recuperate the imaginary within the sphere of the symbolic: "to give imaginative worlds external and objective reality" (Haggerty 7) and to give "private experience external manifestation." Ambrose Small, we recall, became "a Gothic child" when he "had imploded" and "aimed" language "out of his body" (Ondaatje 214). Objectifying the subjective and subjectifying the objective is the dialectic of Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants. In its pluralism of doubled tongues and voices, this literature signifies "the incommensurability of the subject with its narrative representations" (F. Jameson 381), which are exhausted without fixing or stabilizing the subject: without affording the "additions, parentheses, to clarify not the information but his state" (Ondaatje 87). Patrick Lewis, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, perceives that he "has lived beside novels and their clear stories" of "heroes' clarified motives" (82), and it is his recognition of how much he is beside himself that discloses how much in life is beside the point of the words "on the far side of [the]

skin" (38), which have their subterranean, underground registers in primal and subversive semiotic spaces.

Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants, far from showing the subject taking part, shows it taking apart: making the self into the world when the world cannot be made into the self and the self cannot be for all the world. Such literature figures this split between the inside and the outside as the locus between worlds. It is seen ultimately to be a question of life and death, as depicted by Henry Kreisel in *The Betrayal*. Here Theodore Stappler and Joseph Held transport the Old World war to the New World so as to hold on to the chance afforded by that liminal position, that "moment" (177) between states, of "'show[ing] what is in them'" (91), namely, their life in death and their death in life. They figure in concrete flesh and blood terms what is figured as a "character of abstraction" (Richardson 161) in the historical narratives of Max Lerner, but they, nevertheless, are the characters of "everybody," signifying "nobody" (Kreisel 61). Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants traffics in "the falsehood the character" (Richardson 170), under which the subject must appear to find a voice, however "foreign" that voice is to the one who does "*not know the sound of my own voice*" (Laurence 257) or "How to make the words unspoken" (123) in a symbolic register which will not permit it to be heard. Thus, when Gaile McGregor asserts that "the Canadian . . . believes that it is in terms of social definition that he is most likely to find himself" (436), one may see that the whole point of the literature by or about immigrants is that the subject finds itself, not on social symbolic terms, but on its own corporeal semiotic terms, which the social refuses, like the garbage that Laurence's Christie calls "'communal property'" because it represents the only real "'socialism'" (46), and it is, as Christie perceives, achieved only through the disintegration of the constructed self. The constructed self is, as Bissoondath's Raj comes to see, "formed of too many bits and pieces" because "[t]here were too many things that we were not, too few things that we were" (314).

Gaile McGregor points to an "unheroic susceptibility to extrinsic validation" (435) in the Canadian sensibility, but Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants discloses that the outside has no validity for what is inside the subject that it refuses to validate. The "failure of the conventional response" (38) that McGregor points to in Canadian literature is a manifestation of this

incommensurability of subject and representation. Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants is revealing in positing a subject who is not conventionally identifiable: instead of being figured, it is disfigured or transfigured. Because the subject is only other-identified, it is available for other identities: other "character[s] of being" (Desmond 17). William Desmond accounts for this instability by suggesting that "internal to human identity is a certain difference, a lacuna, or openness, that holds us back from being identified without reservation with this or that particular presence" (76-77). This theory may help to explain why Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants is peopled with "uncharacteristic" characters: categorizations of carnival incarnations, outcasts, radicals, revolutionaries, lunatics, and a whole host of the marginalized who seem, in true colonial fashion, "'thing-ification[s]'" (Césaire 21), having no "characteristic features" (Jameson 181), and illustrating the impossibility of a definitive identity. Thus, such fiction presents a circulation of different and conflictual identities, since we learn about the "foreign" subject by learning what it is not from the stand-point of the conventional terms in which it is not privileged. We might say that the "foreign" subject is differential because it cannot be deferential. Irving Massey hints at the benefits associated with the unprivileged condition because "we must become alien to ourselves in order to be anything at all" (19). Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants is all about identifying with the alien in frontiers that are uncharted, both geographically and psychologically speaking. Contrary to the affirmation of "our social identities" in "the return home" that McGregor takes as the structurally defining principle of "the prototypical Canadian novel" (428), such literature discloses the dynamic of disengagement for the "foreign" subject who, like Phil Branden, realizes upon coming to the New World that "I was nothing finished" (Grove, *Search* 103), even though settlers like Susanna Moodie feel that emigration to the colony is an admission of being "finished" in the Old World.

The immigration experience compels differentiation for subjects, like Phil Branden, who have been made "indifferent". "I had grown up and lived in entire indifference. Here I revolted" (Grove, Search 137) and became, in the New World, "something new, something different from what I had been, something less artificial" (136). The subject can signify only from within a system in which it has been made indifferent. The immigration experience of "foreign-

ness" throws the subject into difference of experience that cannot be accommodated on the terms of the symbolic. The context of "foreignness" compels the subject to a differentiation which has been deferred.

If these "uncharacteristic" characters of Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants signify anything, surely it is Phil's observation that "The country seemed to be full of problematical persons" (Grove, *Search* 112) whom, as Morag says of Christie: "'nobody knew . . . to speak of, or even to speak to . . .'" (Laurence 398). These problematical characters highlight the problematic of representing the subject in symbolic terms in which it is "foreign." Such "foreign" or marginal figures strain the limits of language and expose its inadequacies because they require the "projection of experiences and practices that are by their very nature deeper, more powerful, and more complex than language" (Warren 54). McGregor is right on the mark when invoking carnival motifs as "a physical correlative for the existential chasm between 'self' and 'other,' the absolute discontinuity between inside and outside" (211) and in perceiving the difficulty that this poses for human communication. But I would argue that the "radical abnormality" of the carnival figure, rather than reflecting "the Canadian's discomfort with his own 'abnormal' responses to experience" is, rather, invoked in the extended prose fiction by or about immigrants as an expression of and a repository for chaotic New World experience which elicits the "foreign" subject's rebelliousness. For instance, in *Roughing It in the Bush*, the first thing that Susanna Moodie records having witnessed upon her arrival on the Canadian shore is the liberation and rebelliousness of the Irish and Scottish immigrants. She describes them in carnivalesque terms as being "infected by the . . . spirit of insubordination and misrule" (21). The sergeant describes them as "'incarnate devils; singing, drinking, dancing, shouting, and cutting antics that would surprise the leader of a circus'" because, he says, they "'are under no restraint—nobody knows them here, and they think they can speak and act as they please . . .'" (22). Such descriptions resonate in Bakhtin's conceptualization of carnival: "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (10). Moodie herself, although she professes to be aware

of a "contaminating" influence of the crowd (22), nevertheless is fascinated by the lack of restraint conferred by the anonymity in the new land, and is struck by the way in which she and her husband are perceived to be inhibitors and hostile to such displays of burgeoning independence: "Why they treated our claims to their respect with marked insult and rudeness, I could never satisfactorily determine . . . this insolence was more generally practised by the low, uneducated emigrants from Britain, who better understood your claims to their civility, than by the natives themselves" (211), for, she notes, once they emigrate "the clog which fettered them is suddenly removed; they are free; and the dearest privilege of this freedom is to wreak upon their superiors the long-locked-up hatred of their hearts." Robert Kroetsch speculates, and quite correctly as we shall see, that "Perhaps North American culture itself became a kind of carnivalesque response to the 'authority' of European cultures and European versions of history" (*Lovely Treachery* 104). Malcolm admonishes Susanna to allow for circumstance in behaviour: "'Ah, you are such a prude—so methodistical—you make no allowance for circumstances! Surely, in the woods we may dispense with the hypocritical, conventional forms of society, and speak and act as we please'" (394). But it is this kind of passionate and carnivalesque semiotic response which the Moodies, who set themselves up as defenders of symbolic institutionalism, treat with abhorrence.

Roughing It in the Bush is not alone in invoking a carnival motif. Grove, in *A Search for America*, creates in Phil Branden a "foreign" subject whose "whole body and soul were astir with the possibilities of passion" (238) and who, in his adopted country, is "roused to revolt" (29): to become a socialist instead of a social pretender as he was in Europe. He describes himself as an outcast: "I am alone; I stand against the world" (229), and so, on Phil's own "tramps" across the New World, we are introduced to the underground of the vagabond, the tramp, and the hobo. He distinguishes between the tramp, who is "the outcast . . . at variance with constituted society" (321) and the hobo, who considers himself to be "the lord of the world" rather than "the slave of convention." Phil seeks to supplant the construction of institutionalized society with his own sociology of outcasts, thereby shifting centre and margin. But, convinced of his ineffectuality in the face of a multitude of opportunists, he reintegrates with society in a capacity of assisting other "foreigners" to navigate their way safely through the obstacle-course of transition to a new

place and life. He will pass on the benefit of his own unconventional experience in the uncharted territory where he felt most at home. Preoccupation with the uncharted that elicits the unprecedented is hardly surprising in Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants, but it is repeatedly used as a context for revolt in the backlash of the release of what had been contained and repressed. Hence, it becomes symptomatic of a deeper "foreign" nature within the "foreign" subject who expresses, within the "safe" arena of an alien territory, a long-standing alienation.

As well as invoking the carnival motif, Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants figures the "foreign" and alien subject in the guise of the lunatic who has the appearance "of one who communed with different worlds . . ." (Grove, *Settlers* 119) and who does not communicate in terms of the obtaining one. Madness achieves the end of the world as it is known; it invalidates social subjection to realize something other than the social order provides. Madness thereby discloses the effects of a disablement of social identity. The resulting challenge is seductive, as Bissoondath's Raj discovers with Sunil, the loner at his medical school who is deemed to be insane: "Sunil was easily dismissed, his words, unexamined, taken as ravings. Yet I wondered how many in the class, like myself, were intrigued but would never admit to it, for to do so would have meant claiming for oneself a little bit of Sunil's madness" (179). The mad character speaks the self on its own terms, as it were, without the "madness" of fictional mediation that relates only to the social body at the expense of the corporeal body. The "ravings" disclosed in Sunil's violated notebooks strike Raj as "cries of pain and confusion, an internal torture, as if the thoughts were too much of a load, too cumbersome to hold in the mind, and were biting to come out" (181). Madness figures the lack and the loss entailed by the subject's relation to society and by its acquisition of social identity. Madness valorizes the corporeal body, with its drives and desires and senses, over the constructed and fictional social body; it gives precedence to the imaginary, which social identity rejects because madness, in the words of Michel Foucault, "consists merely in allowing the image a spontaneous value, total and absolute truth" (94). As Lacan defines it, "A madman is precisely someone who adheres to the imaginary, purely and simply" (*Seminar Bk. 2* 243). Lacan finds in madness "the negative freedom of speech that has given up trying to make itself recognized" (*Écrits* 68) and

"the singular formation of a delusion which . . . objectifies the subject in a language without dialectic" (69). In these terms, madness serves to reinforce the initial experience of "foreignness" in the symbolic order that is replicated by the experience of "foreignness" in an alien country.

The carnivalesque and the lunatic represent the disfigurement experienced by the "foreign" subject in both identical contexts. Chaim, in *The Sacrifice*, describes the murderous Abraham, who is deemed mad as one who was not cowed into "'treading the safe middle path'" and who walked "'the edge of the ravine'" (315) as he overleaped the restraints besetting him and dared to be more than was permitted—or was it less? The mad character becomes the *other* that the *Other* rejects, suppresses, and censors, because he "constitutes madness in the attachment he bears for himself and by the illusions he entertains" (Foucault 26). The mad character gives free rein to the passions which the social body restricts. Madness transgresses and alienates the social body because it refuses that body's alienation of the corporeal body; the mad become *other* when they will not be *Othered* with a social identity. In the process, the mad become the "nothing" that the fictional construction of the social body represents and as such recuperate the loss and the lack in social identity. Wiseman's Abraham is doubly significant because he is also a Jew, and Jews, in the words of Kristeva, serve in discourse to "*rage against the Symbolic*" (*Powers* 178) in an "attempt to substitute *another Law* for the constraining and frustrating symbolic one . . . ." Adele Wiseman admits that "you can make it in our society as a Jew by saying the things that are too embarrassing for the others to say" (Belkin 153) or, perhaps, too impossible for the *Other* to say. The *other* signifies precisely what can be known when the unimaginative *Other* either does not, or will not, know. It is only by not being dead to the significance of these promptings that one will survive, as Wiseman illustrates in her novel.

Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants also features aboriginal peoples, situated on the margins from where they pose a threat to the symbolic order. Aboriginal peoples are invoked in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes in Canadian literature: for Moodie, their "natural courtesy" (21) serves as a critique of the coarse Irish, and Catherine Parr Traill holds them up, when "reclaimed" by "the milder influence of Christianity" (86) and "found to gather together to give glory to God in the wilderness" (176), as a

rebuke to the sceptical and the lapsed. But the figures of aboriginal peoples evolve from serving the moral and ideological ends of the symbolic agenda to signifying a semiotic challenge to that agenda, and so, as Terry Goldie points out, "meanings can be elicited from the semiotic field of the indigene . . ." (90). Alan Sinfield draws an apt Elizabethan parallel: "In fact, the Indians represented to European peoples a subversive kind of freedom, reminiscent of that found so threatening in Elizabethan 'masterless men,' for, as against the settler ethos, they figured escape from political, social, and familial institutions" (259). This subversiveness is evident in Anna Jameson's account of her rambles (1838), as distinct from Moodie's and Traill's accounts (1852 and 1836). As we shall see, the aboriginal peoples, being associated with a different tongue, are instrumental in Jameson's circulation of different meanings. In thus locating herself between discourses—requiring translation—Jameson shows that another version and, by extension, another identity, is possible. Aboriginal peoples in this way signify everything that cannot be contained, that is irrepressible, in the carnivalesque performances that overwhelm all possibility of order or control or containment before Jameson.

Rudy Wiebe, in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, extends the idea of the different tongue in connection with aboriginal peoples by having Big Bear expose everything for which the symbolic register lacks signs: the "inarticulate confusion" lacking "a recognizable sign" (61-62) or having "a great many signs" (367). Big Bear values and defends that which is not given or given up, be it land, or word, or self. Wiebe will not allow the individual to be displaced, subsumed, by the collective. He attempts nothing less than an emancipation of language so that originals, like Big Bear's people, whose names die with them, will not disappear "in the whiteness" (82) like their tracks in the snow. Wiebe figures in Big Bear what is defiantly not colonized, not reducible to "single words" or to "exact words" (277). He figures experience which is outside the symbolic register and which thereby challenges its limits. This makes Big Bear a threat and a source of temptation: temptation to passion, transgression, refusal. For his people, there is no end of naming; no name is forever because no one and no thing is forever. Kingbird, we recall, talks "in a hollow slowness as if pulling the words one after the other out of a gigantic hole inside himself and having to stretch in further and further, barely able to reach them" (343). His

words come from nothing and return to nothing—found anew with each utterance. For Big Bear and his people, the hole is generative, not covered over and wholly stocked with conventionalities. It is for this very reason that the "dangerous" Big Bear and his people receive the mortal wound which shuts up the hole, dams it with the whole of the governing body which is spoken in the name of the "Great Mother" through "the usual formulas" (19).

Kitty also becomes aware of a hole that has to be stopped up. This coincides with her bloody entry into womanhood which fixes her within the patriarchal system. She is herself brought "within the pale of the law" (*Temptations* 390) of the Father even as she watches Big Bear caught within the pale of the law which claims to be black and white. But her negotiation of this passage from nature to culture undermines her prior instinctive and intuitive certainties, which had facilitated her identification with Big Bear: "Her enormous certainties had somewhere leaked between her fingers . . ." (384). It is at this time that Kitty is devastated with the realization that "she could not understand" (388) Big Bear. She is split and words have taken on a different meaning. Her falling into the law of the Father has sutured her severed body into the symbolic order with its master discourse, and the consequence is that someone has become "foreign": Kitty or Big Bear or both, depending on one's perspective.

Big Bear lays bare the process of representation. Sweetgrass invites him to speak and "'let there be nothing between you and your words'" (20), but Big Bear shows how much is interposed, inscribed, and invested there when he admits that there is "'a stone between me and what I have to say.'" He explains that "'The stone is my people.'" Big Bear thereby problematizes the idea of a homogeneous discourse, and he undermines available subject positions in the symbolic order by pointing up the many ways in which the round peg will not fit into the square hole. He knows that law and politics "'all go only one way'" (32) according to a white agenda that, as Wiebe emphasizes, permits only of monologue or interrogation, not dialogue. Big Bear, Kingbird, and Delaney know that each of them is spoken and written by the other and is bound to follow a discourse. Robertson says "'the line must be drawn'" (362) in the battle between cultures, but Wiebe shows that there is no getting to the end of the line, be it of tracks or of traces such as words; going between the lines is all. Big Bear prophesies that the

person who started it all at Duck Lake "'won't know how to finish what he has begun'" (286), and this is an ominous echo for the carnivalesque Gouin, who, in an abandoned state of intoxication, "could not find the end of the word" (229). Whether in militaristic or in carnivalistic terms, the subject transgresses the symbolic order, admitting what it prohibits, censors, refuses.

In this capacity, aboriginal peoples become the European equivalent of anarchists and revolutionaries. The English colonists figure their struggle in revolutionary terms as a conflict between opposing political factions: democrats and libertarians. The struggle becomes a contest between white democracy and aboriginal liberty; as Dewdney maintains, the aboriginal peoples' "concept of individual liberty goes beyond all democracy; it is anarchic" (121). Ultimately, the aboriginal peoples are described as "pushing individually against massed whites" (411). The irony, which Wiebe underscores, is that "democracy" makes an "organized attack" against the "individualistic defence" (308) of liberty. Wiebe thus explores radicalism; aboriginal peoples are violated in his account along with anyone (such as Kitty or Delaney, for example) who is radical or anti-social enough to attempt self-fashioning for the preservation of autonomy in the face of the restrictive symbolic order. The aboriginal peoples are considered wild and anarchic because they refuse, not what cannot be accommodated in the prevailing order, but that very unaccommodating order itself.

The recourse to an unconventional and mixed form and the construction of uncharacteristic characters is not the only strategy employed in Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants in order to come to terms with a "foreign" content for which there are no terms. The lack in representation under the pressure of subjective reality is figured in the very trope of travel because, as Jon Stratton indicates, "It is in the articulation of the Other that the fracture of representation can be found" (137). This fracture is disclosed when conventional articulations, which would constitute the basis for subsequent interpretations, are refused for not representing experience. For example, Anna Jameson, in the record of her travels, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, cautions that:

> In former times, when people travelled into strange countries, they travelled *de bonne foi*, really to see and learn what was new to them. Now, when a traveller goes to a foreign country, it is

> always with a set of preconceived notions concerning it, to which he fits all he sees, and refers all he hears. . . . (155-156)

Jameson's travel notes function to discover the nature of conventional disguise. Jameson offers a reiterated account based on "preconceived notions" in order to betray how ill-fitting and unfitting are such notions. The reader acknowledges, in the course of her journey, the many possible courses which are available because "the more paths opened to us, the less fear that we should go astray" (120). The frontier is for Jameson a site where the sensual register defies and betrays the symbolic capacity to signify it, where the pulse exceeds the word. Stratton argues that it is only "[w]here representation lacks" that "travel is experienced as productive" (53). Everything is seen to be founded on lack: the social symbolic which lacks a corporeal semiotic is the fundamental lack upon which the remainder are predicated. The "foreign" subject, who is doubly spoken in conflictual "foreign" terms, requires the unconventional and the uncharacteristic for signification when the very occasion of travel into "foreignness" manifests the gap between the subject's other terms and the terms of the Other. The "foreign" subject, in endeavouring to separate out language and society and so to voice what cannot be accommodated in society's terms, is separated out from society and voiced as the negative of its terms: everything that it is not. Language relates to the society, not to the subject, and immigration can shift that valence in positing subjects who do not relate to society. The consequent discourse, as found in Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants, ultimately interrogates more than it articulates. What is discovered in the exploration of the unknown, of the alien, is the extent of the unknowable and uncolonizable, of how much remains unsigned when experience transgresses the boundaries.

This literature reiterates what is already given to show, by its inadequacy, what has not and cannot be given. Anna Jameson writes about coming from Europe with all of the conventional baggage that that entails, but she also writes about going some place that does not simply reiterate but revises its conventions. She discloses that meaning does not translate in the process: "Truth seems to find so much difficulty in crossing the Atlantic . . ." (32). The fragility of meaning is exposed. McGregor compellingly invokes existentialism in connection with "the breakdown of traditional categories and the

consequent freeing of the self from its culturally predetermined identity . . ." (79). A character liberated in this way is, conceivably, able to see through each mediated thing and to lay claim to a perspective that includes what has, conventionally, been excluded— a perspective such as the postmodern one for which "truth is in its nature problematic. It always refers back on itself as that which is excluded lays claim to inclusion" (Stratton 225).

Postmodernism is fundamentally interrogative and challenging. It thrives on anarchy, deconstruction, dispersal, mutation, desire, irony, indeterminacy (Hassan 91-92). Its relevance for what I have detailed in Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants is in its capacity to "show how the 'natural' is in fact the 'constructed,' the made, the social" (Hutcheon 12). Nothing is fixed or stable or undoubted, as when Phil Branden admits in *A Search for America*, "I was no longer so sure of myself as I had been before I emigrated from Europe. . . . I had begun to think less harshly of him who sins against society" (78). The "foreign" subject's state of being between cultures helps it to unpack all that is "foreign" in the other's words, words that cannot address different experience. There is, in *Roughing It in the Bush*, a very prescient passage that draws a connection between linguistic and colonial development and warrants full citation here:

> A colony bears the same relation to an old-settled country that a grammar does to a language. In a colony, society is seen in its first elements, the country itself is in its rudest and simplest form. The colonist knows them in this primitive state, and watches their progress step by step. In this manner he acquires an intimate knowledge of the philosophy of improvement, which is almost unattainable by an individual who has lived from his childhood in a highly-complex and artificial state of society, where everything around him was formed and arranged long before he came into the world; he sees the *effects*, the *causes* existed long before his time. His place in society—his portion of the wealth of the country—his prejudices—his religion itself, if he has any, are all more or less hereditary. He is in some measure a mere machine, or rather a part of one. He is a creature of education, rather than of original thought. (262)

Moodie's distinction between grammar and language bears a striking relation to that between the corporeal semiotic and the social symbolic, where the semiotic represents the "first elements" in a "primitive state" and an "intimate knowledge" that is "unattainable"

in the "highly-complex and artificial state of society," or the symbolic, "where everything . . . was formed and arranged long before [one] came into the world" and, as a result, "original thought" is impossible. This, as we have seen, is the problematic at the very crux of Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants: the gap in modes of communication which underpins the cultural gap of the "foreigner."

One can attribute the contradictions manifest in Canadian literature as early as Anna Jameson's *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, with its pluralization, marginalization and differentiation, to an attempt at exposing and revising conventional constructs. In the preface, Jameson claims to have attempted to extract from her text the "personal nature" and the "leaven of egotism" but she admits that this would have compromised the "character," "reality," and "truth" of the work, rendering it simply "didactic." She concludes that the "thread of sentiment" sustains the "facts and observations" even though it "may expose me to misapprehension" (10). This spotlighting of subjective sentiment or passion is Jameson's attempt to circumvent the symbolic order, making the private public as she continues on "a stranger . . . *feeling* my way . . ." (32). Jameson traces the transformation from the indifferent to the different. She asks, "Can a man conceive that which a man could not by possibility be?" (207), and she proceeds to address her question by invoking everything unconventional and uncharacteristic, beginning with herself as an independent woman in the first half of the nineteenth century; she travels to a new country to finalize divorce with her husband and takes the opportunity to explore unharted territory and to experience things usually out of bounds for a woman, such as camping and canoeing through the rapids. However, the uncharacteristic is especially significant in the way in which aboriginal peoples figure in her text to expose myths of identity. For Jameson, everything connected with aboriginal peoples serves as a rebuke of conventional authority. The attractiveness of their stories of human metamorphosis into the natural (wolf, tree, bird) is in the play on conventional assumptions. In Jameson's account, the stories of metamorphosis reveal the subject to be constructed and relative, rather than definitive. Jameson thus recuperates content absent from the symbolic register and lost to meaning, lost because there is no voice for one's particular experience—no "voice of experience." The metamorphosis serves Jameson to expose misidentifications and

to disclose that the subject is not what it appears, conventionally, to be. Irving Massey maintains that "One does not think about changing one's form before one has had to trade in one's experience for words" (1), finding that words do not do justice to experience. Massey contends that the metamorphosis "gives testimony to the sinister power of language" (185) and that it is "antilinguistic as a desperate measure . . ." (187). The natural (and supernatural) element of the metamorphosis discloses, by contrast, the unnatural element of "reality" because the metamorphosis exhibits the identity that is betrayed by the "unreal" obtaining terms of the symbolic order—whose significations are only metonymic instead of metaphoric.

Jameson's revisionist impulse emerges also when she describes the painted dancers as "a masque of fiends breaking into paradise" (434), disrupting and destabilizing established order. In misidentifying as "masque" what is actually the Jonsonian variation of the antimasque—"a grotesque, disorderly, and antic dance that embodied the concept of 'misrule'" (Sutherland 21)—the erudite Jameson ironically misapplies the convention of the masque so as to undermine and subvert its connotations of order and control and its power of containment; authorized discourse is put to unauthorized use as Jameson refuses to play "by the book." She confuses the il/legitimate in order to interrogate the associated assumptions of the un/privileged in a distinctly counter-hegemonic manner. Jameson's experience of the New World, like her subsequent fellow "foreigners'" experience, demonstrates that "In this new world, the old stories break down" (Kroetsch, *Lovely Treachery* 29).

Robert Kroetsch is quite right to note that "there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience" ("Unhiding" 17). As has emerged in this study, the removal to the context of Canada, with all of its "alien" and "foreign" connotations, accentuates the problematic of identity for the "foreign" subject who finds in the liminal position between cultures a repetition of the formative split engendered by the semiotic lack in the symbolic, which is always under threat of being overturned by the oppositional, differential, not deferential, subjects that it acquires. The subject finds that it cannot speak itself on the terms of an order which makes it *Other*, just as its experience of an *other* site of knowledge cannot be spoken in the established terms. Language fails to describe the subject, and its failure to describe place is symptomatic of that fundamental and

prior failure. The subject must be profoundly alienated for the landscape to be perceived as alien in the identifying relationship between them; what is behind this process of alienation is an alien language that is, unconventionally, made to betray a content that it refuses. Wacousta's concluding remarks on Canada, as part of the New World, are typical of the Canadian extended prose fiction by or about immigrants which we have considered: "'In no other country in the world—under no other circumstances than the present—could I have so secured it'" (491). "It" is his revenge against everything related to the exclusionary order that he had to exclude and be excluded from in order to identify and be identified. Wiseman's Isaac knows that "'There is always another way of seeing . . .'" (216) and Canada is the "other" place for seeing and being, *other*wise.

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