BOOK REVIEWS

Michaela MUDURE

***ALTE LECTURI CANADIENE/ OTHER CANADIAN
READINGS***

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Michaela Mudure's latest book on Canadian culture and literature is itself very diverse in nature, as befits its sources, that is the works it is based on. Right from the start, the author professes her belief in multiculturalism, which, without being perfect, remains the only political program that shows genuine openness toward the Other, the marginal, the oppressed and the disenfranchised. However, almost as a Canadian paradox, the first reading of the book is of Neil Bissondath's well-known *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, a book that was and still is rather controversial in its exposure of multiculturalism as an essentially hypocritical/opportunistic state/government policy which succeeds, according to the author, better at creating conformity rather than diversity, of isolating (ghettoizing) the individual and/or the community rather than integrating it within the general cultural tapestry, even of creating racism by an excessive valorization and idealization of the ethnic component of a certain minority group. Bissondath refuses to be racialized, to be perceived and analyzed only by means of the color of his skin which obviously results in his refusal to be multiculturalized as well. Discussed in this first article only from a cultural perspective, Neil Bissondath will be dedicated a second reading, one focused on a novel of his, *The Soul of all Great Designs*, which is a sort of Canadian version/adaptation of the more well-known perhaps *American Tragedy*, the one written by Theodor Dreiser in the 20th century.

Next comes a review of Beth Brant's volume of short stories *Food Spirits*, a volume which deals with what it means to be a person of mixed ethnic heritage, or downright First Nations heritage, in a contemporary world. Noticing

Brant's penchant for criticizing European colonialism which the writer saw as a destructive force in the life of the Aborigines, Mudure praises among other things the mythological component of her stories, seeing in the way it is being used the real strength of the writer's talent.

Thomas King, another First Nations writer, is discussed in two separate essays, the first a presentation of his volume, *A Short History of Indians in Canada* which, despite the title, is actually a short story collection with a humorous bend, the second a review of his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, which Mudure lauds for its stylistic achievement, though she also maintains that the novel, due to its fragmentary nature and the intersecting of different narrative structures, is rather difficult to read.

Marie de l'Incarnation, the famous mystic belonging to the Ursuline order who left France for Canada in 1639, never to come back, and who, literature-wise, remains important today for a series of letters that she wrote to her son describing life and its tribulations in the French colony of Quebec, makes an appearance as well. Mudure believes that Marie de l'Incarnation's courage and determination in front of all the adversities she had to put up with in New France has something from today's immigrants' courage and desperation to arrive and settle in the Old World.

Returning to the present, Mudure focuses first on Guy Vanderhaeghe's perhaps best-known novel, *The Englishman's Boy*, and then on Mavis Galant's collection of short stories, *Montreal Stories*. Vanderhaeghe's novel is a story about truth and mythology and how the latter will always be more powerful and will outlive the first, a truly great American-Canadian novel, while Galant's book concerns itself (mostly) with a topic that Henry James would have really appreciated: what it means to live overseas or sometimes in a foreign place within your own country. Mudure considers Gallant a true representative of the international (globalized) story in which the characters strive to find meaning in a world often devoid of it.

The Japanese and Jewish contributions to Canadian literature are also noticed, the first with Darcy Tamayose's debut novel, *Odori*, the latter with Miriam Waddington's eclectic book, *The Last Landscape*, as well as Matt Cohen's novel, *The Spanish Doctor*. *Odori* is a traditional Japanese dance which is meant to calm the spirit of the dead. The dead are, for instance, the Japanese civilians who committed suicide in the caves of Okinawa, waiting for the American soldiers to land on the island. But who dances this dance? Well, not just one person, because this novel is multigenerational and, being a Canadian novel, at least one person will dance it in Canada as well. Young, promising, talented, Darcy Tamayose is a writer to watch, Mudure believes and we can only agree. In what Waddington's book is concerned, here we have a combination of

poetry, prose and essay brought together by a common theme, that of the ex-centric, the marginal, the ignored, the refugee, most of them women, all of them Jewish. Matt Cohen's protagonist is not a woman, but he, the doctor in the title, is not less marginal, despite enjoying a seemingly centered position in the life of the community. Born as a result of his mother being raped by Christian soldiers during a "conversion" campaign in 14th-century Toledo, Spain, Avram Espinoza Halevi will become a reputed doctor for the rich, but neither his important profession nor his marriage with a Christian woman will save him from persecution and prejudice.

Dionne Brand, the Trinidadian-Canadian openly lesbian writer is also acknowledged for her novel *In Another Country. Not here*. A bow to James Baldwin's novel 1962 *Another Country*, Brand's book focuses on a woman (not a man) who shares with its creator certain traits, such as living (and leaving) with trauma to move to another country where she will feel safer but also unrooted and depersonalized.

Not only hyphenated Canadian writers are discussed in Mudure's book, but some born and bred in Canada, as well: Margaret Lawrence with *The Diviners*, Douglas Coupland with *Miss Wyoming* and Elizabeth Hay with *Late Nights On Air* are also of much interest for the Canadian Studies professor. And not only English-Canadians, but French-Canadian authors as well. The feminist writer Louky Bersianik, for example, or Dany Laferriere, born in Haiti, are also read and appreciated by the critic. There is also the Romanian-born Felicia Mihali, who immigrated to Canada in 2000, started writing in French and then switched to English and published *The Darling of Kandahar*. This author is allotted, I believe, the most extensive space in this book, even if she comes last in the series.

No matter what writer or issue she discusses, Michaela Mudure's book is very informative and therefore useful to the Canadian Studies apprentice, and not only. Due to the very attractive topics it deals with as well as the easiness of the writing style, I have read it myself with much interest and pleasure.

BIONOTE

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