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Margaret Atwood*

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Poetics of Displacement in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970)

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The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970), Margaret Atwood's response in text and in image to the accounts of pioneering by the eponymous nineteenth-century British immigrant, give form to the harrowing questions: where is one's place when one has been displaced? What does it mean, then, to inhabit? Displacement refers to more than the act of emigrating and the psychological and geographical dislocation it entails. This paper contends that its disruptive force generates the sequence's visual and poetic experimentations with representations of space.

Avec *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Margaret Atwood revisite les écrits de l'immigrante britannique du dix-neuvième siècle par l'entremise du texte poétique et de l'image. Ce faisant, elle donne forme à la question soulevée par l'expérience du déplacement: qu'est-ce qui fait que nous habitons un lieu ? La notion de déplacement est à comprendre au-delà du seul fait d'émigrer et de la dislocation psychologique et géographique qu'il entraîne. La présente étude y voit une poétique générant une expérimentation visuelle et poétique qui vient perturber les représentations traditionnelles du rapport à l'espace.

In the much-quoted Afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Margaret Atwood takes on the role of the "mythographer of modern Canada" (HOWELLS 2005, 37) and elaborates the "heuristic metaphors" (JOHNSTON n.p.) of "violent duality" and "paranoid schizophrenia" (62)¹. These, she argues, are the defining traits of the Canadian psyche for "[Canadians] are all immigrants to this place even if [they] were born here; the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely" (JSM 62). Atwood rewrites nineteenth-century British immigrant Susanna Moodie into a Canadian archetype: the unsettled settler experiencing geographical and psychological dislocation, a figure that already appears in her earlier poems². The Afterword's insistence on "cultural retrieval and postcolonial differentiation" (HOWELLS 2006: 9) has long informed the critical reception of the poetic sequence, either as an interpretative template, alternatively emphasizing "the wisdom of double vision" (GRACE 33) and alienation, or, more recently as a cumbersome, albeit "convenient, [...] crutch" which should be discarded (RELKE 45). While I agree with Jacqui Smyth when she writes that "a reading of the poetic sequence that is not somehow influenced by the Afterword is inescapable" (n.p.), I propose to veer the discussion towards Atwood's reflection on inhabiting, a term which refers to more than the occupying of a location. Her interrogation of

¹ Further references to appear in parentheses in the text, prefaced by the abbreviation JSM.

² "The Settlers" (*The Circle Game*, 1966) and "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (*The Animals in that Country*, 1968) are two striking examples.

the notion of Canada as a place is premised on a concern with the imbrication of human lives and the environment, the immigrant's experience offering a lens through which to explore the transactions allowing "humans [to] invest meaning in a portion of space," and transform it into place (CRESSWELL 10).

Postcolonial literatures' engagement with displacement and the resulting disruption of the "identifying relationship between self and place" is well documented (ASHCROFT *et al.* 8), and the "alienation of vision", as well as the "crisis in self image" produced by such disruption (ASHCROFT *et al.* 9), informs Atwood's poetic recreation of Moodie's experience as an immigrant. The cryptic poem which ushers the reader into *The Journals* thus alludes to an inaugural cutting-out of the persona's face in a picture, a self-inflicted symbolic violence the poetic voice deems necessary to achieve "accura[cy]": "where my eyes were, // every- / thing appears" (JSM 7). The shift, visually underscored by the layout, from static image to becoming-visible, from perceiver to perceived, from self-identification to all-encompassing pronouns suggests a rupturing of aesthetic paradigms and confining frames. This, in turn, calls to attention the relationship between the poetic text, which is suffused with visual imagery, and the eight collages with which Atwood intersperses the sequence and whose function exceeds the mere illustrational. *The Journals*, indeed, present themselves as an iconotext³ "combining two kinds of signs" in "a fruitful tension" (LOUVEL n.p.) as the visual, both visible and legible, reflects as much as it inflects the text. This intermedial dialogue provides a groundwork for Atwood to examine the intimate connection between our ways of being in a place and our ways of representing it, a connection which is the object of an on-going reflection in Canadian literature since, as Susan Glickman points out, "part of the process of inhabiting Canada, of making it habitable, has been to describe it in poetry" and visual arts (23).

The three-part structure of *The Journals*, on the surface, seems to obey a sequential logic, the poems "carry[ing] out the narrative of the persona's life" (RELKE 15), all the more so as some of the events which appear in the poems are directly taken from *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853). Each of the three periods – 1832-1840, 1840-1871, 1871-1969 – is associated with a collage which appears opposite the title page, and is identified with a locale: first the wilderness, then the reassuring domesticity of an interior scene, and finally an urban scenery. While Atwood herself, in the Afterword,

³ The present study focuses on the 1970 edition of *The Journals* illustrated by Atwood herself. For a study of the *livre d'art* which is the product of Atwood's collaboration with Canadian visual artist Charles Pachter, see Murray.

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stresses the linear progression of the discovery of self and place leading to emplacement (JSM 63), the poems resist and subvert this overall structure. My contention, indeed, is that generating *The Journals*' poetics is less the resolution of the postcolonial dialectic place-displacement, than a creative engagement with the ways in which the disruptions brought about by displacement allow for visual and poetic experimentation unsettling representations of space.

Landscape, langscape, thingscape

Atwood casts Moodie in the position of the observer distancing herself from the other settlers whose exuberant manifestation of joy at arrival she records first with priggish condemnation⁴, later with mournful regrets when the hardships of her time in the bush have dented her concern with propriety. The structural counterpoint in "The Immigrants" thus opposes the new comers' enthusiastic expectations to the poetic persona's knowledge that the land will betray their hopes. She knows what awaits them instead of bountiful landscapes of serpentine beauty: "the sky // is flat, the green fruit shrivels" (JSM 33). In this poem, as in the rest of the sequence, the immigrants embody the unseeing eye which cannot see the land for expectations impinge the perception of those who "think they will make an order // like the old one" (JSM 32). In contrast, the persona is endowed with paradoxical insight. Hers is an obscured vision, European covenants of beauty thwarting her apprehension of and relation to the physical environment. Yet the frequentation of strange geographies gives her "bewildered" eyes, "almost blind/ buds" (JSM 25), the alliteration and consonance inflecting the semantic charge of the past participle which hints both at the failure of traditional conventions of landscape appreciation and a possible becoming-wilderness of vision as an alternative sensing of space.

The first journal opens onto the inaugural encounter with the New World whose description is introduced by the landscaping term "vistas" (JSM 11). The ordered, unifying vision from afar it traditionally promises, however, is immediately hindered by a list juxtaposing aspects with no indication of composition. What gives the minimal description its cohesion are the adjectives ("barren," "bone-white," "alien," JSM 11) indexing the persona's inner recoil which is then displaced onto the landscape itself. Endowed with volition, it refuses to acknowledge Moodie's presence, therefore resisting being transformed into an object before her eyes, a mere site for sights: "the moving water will not show me // my reflection," "The rocks ignore" (JSM 11). Each

⁴ "On the first island // the immigrants threw off their clothes // and danced like sandflies" (JSM 12).

phrase, isolated on the space of the page, rings with a definitiveness which excludes negotiation or assuagement. Following a recurring motif identified by Atwood in *Survival* (ATWOOD 54), the perception of an indifferent nature soon gives way to the persona's suspicions that she is surrounded by hostile forces and the first journal, which covers Moodie's time in the bush, is pervaded by the sense of an ominous and elusive presence as she "hears // malice in the trees' whispers" (JSM 13) and glimpses "a malignant face // flicker[ing] over [her] shoulder" in the forest (JSM 15). The persona's sense of estrangement from her physical environment is visually translated in the first collage which disrupts the very aesthetic model to which "vistas" pertain. Whereas in the tradition of landscape painting, the presence of human figures gives a sense of scale and endows the natural scenery with human significance, the female silhouette in the collage hangs in the space of the page against the background of the dark mass of trees. The framing of the image and the collage technique not only preclude a stable focal point which would direct the circulation of the viewer's gaze, they hinder the illusion of depth created by perspectival composition, thereby conveying an impression of impenetrable and inhospitable space.

The silent figure in the illustration offers a visual correlative for the inarticulateness suggested in the epigrammatic statement concluding "Disembarking at Quebec" which tropes the persona's relation to the natural surroundings as that of "a word // in a foreign language" (JSM 11). That the disjunction between the experienced place and the (imported) language available to articulate it "identifies the sense of displacement" is one of the mainstays of postcolonial literatures in English, notably from former settler-invader colonies (ASHCROFT 153). Significantly, "Disembarking at Quebec" is a rewriting of Susanna Moodie's own account of her arrival in Canada which Atwood famously analyzes in *Survival* (50-51), and which Gaile MacGregor reads as a paradigmatic example of "landscape" superimposing European aesthetic paradigms and poetic idioms onto New World experience (33)⁵. In that regard, the poem may be read as laying bare the tensions between what is seen and ways of seeing it in Moodie's accounts of pioneering⁶. Yet, Atwood's poetic sequence does not so much ponder the adequacy between space and imported representational conventions, as it strives to inhabit the harrowing gap

⁵ The lines "One had manners, // painted in watercolours, // used hushed tones when speaking // of mountains or Niagara Falls" may be read as alluding to Susanna Moodie's reliance on European conventions of landscape appreciation in her writings (JSM 42).

⁶ In interviews, Atwood presents *The Journals* as the subtext of Moodie's books, underlining how the poetic sequence developed from what Moodie left unsaid or glossed over (HAMMILL 69).

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opened by displacement⁷. The recurring images pairing language and natural environment register the persona's struggle to produce and consume meaning in her relationship to her surroundings, which resist being apprehended as landscape. Such is the case in "First Neighbours" which brings to the fore the disabling inadequacy of the persona:

Resolve: to be both tentative and hard to startle
[...]
in this area where my damaged
knowing of the language means
prediction is forever impossible (JSM 15)

The conclusive statement evokes a space which is at once finite⁸ and indefinite since it eludes specular cognition and verbal determination. "[T]he drizzle of strange meaning" can be "negotiate[d]" but never loses its power to "trick" and "surpris[e]" (JSM 15). Atwood's pun on the etymology of "prediction" (*pre-dicere*) is in itself a comment on the idea of landscape in the colonial context. It touches on the dual meaning of the term "prospect" which conjoins space (the topographical survey) and time (a vision of the future), looking out and looking ahead (GLICKMAN 33), landscape representation serving as a medium to naturalize and legitimize territorial acquisition. The unpredictability of the Canadian bush in *The Journals* prevents language from acting as a force of conservation and a medium of the familiar, that is, from transforming the land into a discursive terrain to be defined, captured and appropriated.

Atwood's neologism "thingscape" indexes the crisis of traditional paradigms of landscape, by yoking the nondescript 'thing' to a suffix which stems from the Saxon *schaffen*, shaping (JACKSON 7)⁹. The coinage is itself something of an oxymoron suggestive of an expanse of space so disturbingly ill defined that it resists the gathering together of its elements and hence the perceptual unity on which the apprehension of space as landscape relies. The term appears in the title of a poem which strays away from the question of the

⁷ In *Survival*, Atwood argues that Canadian experience of space is irreconcilable with the European cult of the sublime and the picturesque, adding wryly: "If Wordsworth was right, Canada ought to have been the Great Good Place." (50)

⁸ The *OED* defines the term as a "defined extent" having "definite boundaries."

⁹ Whereas the term 'land', as John Brinckerhoff Jackson points out, means "a defined space, one with boundaries" (JACKSON 6), the most common definition of 'thing' reads: "an object or entity not precisely designated or capable of being designated" (*Merriam-Webster*).

aesthetic appreciation of landscape. The indentation of the central section visually reproduces on the page the frame through which the persona looks at a pleasing, sunlit forest. The minimal description of the view is cut short of a slash, a cleft which unravels the descriptive list as it signals a change of scope leaving out the interplay of light and vegetation: the gaze narrows down onto non-descript “ricks” and monotonous “grey tufts of moss” (JSM 20). The laconic statement which immediately follows the slash – “No trails” (JSM 20)” – may be read in the light of traditional painterly composition, notably the structural role played by the representation of a road or a path in allowing the gaze to circulate from foreground to middle-ground to distance. But the phrase implicates more than the visual and refers the reader back to the evocation of the trails left by “those who went ahead // of us in the forest.” (JSM 20) The traces of human frequentation of the land endow it with readability since the “bent” trees are as many “signals” which would enable the persona to locate herself both spatially and temporally, a reminder that any view “always already depends on an involvement or orientation with respect to some particular place” (MALPAS 12). Landscape functions as a mode of emplacement, of involvement with the place that encompasses the viewer’s “own situation in, or in relation to, that landscape” (MALPAS 5). The absence of human markers, therefore, does not merely trigger a crisis of the landscaping gaze; it prevents the possibility of relatedness to the surroundings and undermines the very capacity of landscape to operate as “an articulation of place and of relationship to place” (MALPAS 19)¹⁰. If every landscape is a “place-scape” (MALPAS 7), not only is the “thingscape” placeless, it denies any entry into place. This sheds light on the persona’s wish for reconciliation with her surroundings in which, the object of an unidentified gaze, she is an “invader”:

When will be
that union and each
thing (bits
of surface broken by my foot
step) will without moving move
around me
into its place (JSM 21; emphasis mine)

The extended run-on line and the circumvallated syntax throw into relief the alignment of the two final prepositional phrases. Both point to a

¹⁰ While Tim Cresswell argues for a purely spectatorial definition of landscape and conceptually opposes it to ‘place’ (11), Jeff Malpas underscores the interrelation between the two: “landscape only arises as landscape out of our original involvement with place” (13).

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process of topical convergence which echoes the concluding stanza of the following poem:

Two fires in-
formed me,
[...]
left charred marks
now *around* which I
try to grow (JSM 23; emphasis mine)

The winter fire that destroys the forest around the log cabin and the summer fire that destroys it are presented as potential foundational events both forming and informing the persona and her relationship to place. Like the footprints in "Paths and Thingscape," the "charred marks" left by the "shapeless raging" of the fires (JSM 23) become signs endowed with human significance which could operate as a center of orientation structuring boundless and indiscriminate space from within. Thingscapes, consequently, do not merely reveal the inadequacy of old paradigms, but point to "the complex working of placedness as such" (MALPAS 22) as it becomes evident in the immigrant's efforts to become settled.

The un-settled settler

The Journals reframe the inaugural encounter with the New World by dissociating it from the originary moment of arrival which is continuously deferred. As the collages intimate with the silhouette pasted onto the scenery, the persona never comes to fully inhabit either the bush or Belleville where her family moves at the end of the second journal. Displacement, indeed, is an ongoing process comprised of "repeated acts of erasure and formation" (SMYTH 36) which un-settle the settler, Atwood disengaging the noun from the idea of re-emplacement attached to it.

Central to *The Journals*' exploration of the immigrant's difficulty in inhabiting the here and now is the motif of becoming-wilderness whose variations play on the foundational ambivalence of the wilderness as a space apart from and opposed to human cultivation (GARRARD 67). The "large darkness" the persona enters at the beginning of the sequence (JSM 12) threatens her continuing sense of self, which is troped in the first journal as a

contamination of the gaze¹¹. Yet, the wilderness, as a space untouched by civilization, also holds out the promise of indigenization through a renewed, authentic relation to the land. The concluding poem of the first journal accommodates both readings. “Departure from the Bush” hinges on a reversal of the colonial gesture seeking to transform placeless wilderness into inhabited place by taming the wild and regulating space: wild animals become the “restless” settlers-invaders who mark “new boundaries” to “inhabit” the persona (JSM 26). Images of invasion and occupation bespeak a form of resistance on her part, even as she is granted her wish to have “wolf’s eyes” (JSM 13) when those of the animals who “arrived to inhabit [her]” start “glowing out from inside [her]” (JSM 26). Being “inhabit[ed]” represents both a form of alienation and a means to transform place and self, a possible cure for the persona’s estrangement. First, she has to be stripped of “civilized // distinctions” (JSM 12), no longer relics binding her to her English past, but “debris” which the elements remove like a decayed layer (JSM 24-25) to expose her to the transformative power of the wilderness. The process remains incomplete, interrupted as it is by the letter informing the persona of the family’s departure for Belleville and the poem concludes somewhat wistfully: “There was something they almost taught me // I came away not having learned” (JSM 27).

The illustration which immediately follows “Departure from the Bush” and ushers the reader into the second journal departs from the visual translation of the poetic text that characterizes the previous collages. The anguished figure in the first illustration of the sequence is replaced by an image of peaceful domesticity with the inset engraving whose composition is a pictorial trope reminiscent of seventeenth-century Dutch interiors. Dominating the page is a drawing of the wilderness that is less represented than suggested by the blurry silhouettes of trees amidst which an unidentifiable animal form seems to be lurking. Along with the blatant disregard for proportions, the placement of the inset upsets traditional figurative composition rules, which complicates the reading of the spatial relations between the two places represented, and exposes the dualisms and contradictions underpinning the idea of wilderness. What the collage may be seen as suggesting, the poems of the second journal bring to the fore. Although they cover Moodie’s time in Belleville from 1840 to 1871, with the exception of “1837 War in Retrospect” and “Charivari,” they all hark back to persona’s life in the bush through dreams and memories which disrupt temporal and spatial boundaries as in “Dream 3: Night Bear.” An incident,

¹¹ “The character sees too much of the wilderness, and in a sense becomes it, leaving his humanity behind.” (ATWOOD 55)

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which found its way into Susanna Moodie's memoirs in the guise of a humorous "anecdote" (JSM 38), surface "from beneath stories" (JSM 38) as a dream conflating past and present, the wilderness and Belleville. The dream logic informs a series of antithetic statements in which the persona simultaneously asserts that which she has refuted and refutes that which she has asserted, a series that crucially hinges on a substitution of deictic adverbs. The eponymous bear, a synecdoche for wilderness, does not belong to a separate space, existing over "there" where Moodie no longer is (JSM 38); it appears "here // in this visible kitchen" (JSM 39), a line which cannot but point the reader back to the collage. Significantly, the poem progresses towards a synesthetic shift as the spectacle of the moving bear is likened to a "tenuous [...] echo," before being troped as "a mute vibration passing // between [the persona's] ears" (JSM 39). Unlike what happens in the illustration, which necessarily frames what it represents, if only because of the physicality of the page, the poem alludes to an inchoate presence, the wilderness as soundscape having no fixed boundaries.

The anxiety underlying "Night Bear" and the other two dream poems of the sequence has been the object of much critical attention, the most common response being that it evinces Moodie's inability to come to terms with the land. I would contend that such anxiety has to be read in relation to a concern for the impermanence of human traces which is captured in the much quoted "bush garden," an oxymoron bringing together the forces of culture and nature, the domesticated and the untamed. The former has taken over the latter in "that garden," "deserted" by its inhabitants, reclaimed by the wilderness and "gone to seed" (JSM 34). The dead metaphor is given a new semantic charge by the persona's ability to see life "pulsing" in the soil (JSM 34). The grotesque animal analogies – "pale grubs," "fleshy snouts," "amphibian hearts" (JSM 34) – register inner revulsion which intensifies with the image of flesh being violently torn by the hands that pull vegetation from the ground:

I should have known
anything planted here
would come up blood (JSM 34)

Beyond the violence of the conclusion, somewhat muted by the flatness of tone, the poem as a whole participates in an ongoing reflection in the sequence on the act of human grounding through which "here" becomes place. *The Journals*, indeed, consistently subvert the equation between cultivating and settling indexed by the term "to plant" (*OED*). The planters' efforts to clear the land and carve an enclave out of the wilderness are scaled down to a "stumpy

patch” with a “few rows // of string beans and dusty potatoes” (JSM 16). But it is the planters’ “deny[ing] the ground they stand on” which prevents the plunging of roots (JSM 16). Far from being a neutral referent, “ground” serves as a verbal trope. It draws attention to the way the forward-looking impetus of project – “the future” (JSM 16) – forestalls the formation of a meaningful relation to the land as possible habitat by ignoring its singularity which the persona forcefully re-inscribes through the insistent use of demonstratives: “this dirt,” “these trees,” “this particular sun” (JSM 17).

Where the agricultural endeavor fails to transform space into place, the act of “plant[ing]” one’s dead temporarily brings about “a new covenant which binds [the poetic voice] to the land” (JOHNSTON n.p.). The evocation of the death of the persona’s young son heavily draws upon the imagery of colonial journeys. The boy becomes a figure of exploration, the moment of drowning a moment of discovery whereby he gains access to the secret knowledge of the land which eludes his mother. For Moodie, the migrant who has been “float[ing] on a land” she “could not touch to claim” (JSM 30), his death marks both the end of her journey and the inaugural moment when her “foot hit rock” after she “plant[ed] him in this country // like a flag” (JSM 31). The lines, which conspicuously draw upon traditional images of conquest, is a reminder that “the surest way to take possession of place and secure it as one’s own is to bury one’s dead in it” (POGUE HARRISON 354). The conditions of place-making, Robert Pogue Harrison argues, cannot be envisaged without the institution of burial. As evidenced by the phrases *hic jacet*, ‘here lies,’ the grave marker is “a shifter that refuses to shift” (POGUE HARRISON 352); however crude it may be, it is a sign that points to itself since it indicates its own mark in the ground, thereby appropriating it (POGUE HARRISON 351). The body, once buried, becomes the “cairn of [Moodie’s] plans and future charts,” both a memorial and a landmark of human presence providing the new land with a center and “drawing a boundary of belonging around it” (POGUE HARRISON 352). Only then does the environment “le[ap] into solidity” (JSM 31).

This confident claiming of a place is short-lived, however, undermined as it is by the dreams which rattle the persona, until the precariousness of the foundational gesture is exposed in the penultimate poem of the second journal. “Death of a Young Son by Drowning” and “Deaths of the Other Children” may be read as a diptych revealing the fragility of human lives’ investment in place and the provisional nature of emplacement in the poetic sequence. In stark contrast with the regularity of “Death of a Young Son by Drowning,” the typography in the latter poem creates both empty spaces and a dislocation of language which formally translates the persona’s harrowing awareness of the

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impermanence of human domestication of space. The enjambments in the first half of the poem set into relief the concatenation of assonance, alliteration and consonance creating a tight network of correspondence between the disintegration of the dead body, decaying architecture and the fragmentation of the self. The "shallow" foundations are mere "dim hollows" which no longer enable Moodie to take her stance.¹² Nor does the grave mark the intervention of human time – human finitude – in the inhuman transcendence of "nature's eternally self-renewing cycles." (POGUE HARRISON 351), quite the contrary: the literal becoming-landscape of the buried body participates in the eternal returns of nature – decay and renewal – which erases traces of human habitation as paths are "overgrow[n]" by "spreading briars" (JSM 41). The anguish which pervades the poem is further reinforced by the syntactic ambiguity of the final line which leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the "fingers" impeding the persona's progress belong to the "disintegrated" children or to the anthropomorphic briars (JSM 41) – an image which resonates with "The Bush Garden" and its depiction of the monstrous vitality of the natural world. The foundation process, defiantly announced in "Death of a Young Son," is shown to have miscarried, and along with it the establishment of place and the possibility of dwelling. This, in turn, precludes the possibility for the persona to locate and define her identity in any unified, stable way. In a significant shift, the image of the abandoned "former houses" gives way to the evocation of the "edifice" of the persona's "composite // self" (JSM 41). The metaphor, conventional as it is, underscores the unremitting process of negotiation underlying the construction of subjectivity for the unsettled settler, and the fragility of such construction.

The poem's denial of rootedness and permanence traditionally associated with the notion of place is reciprocated in the collage. Its effectiveness resides in the relationship between the pictured family, in the foreground, and the clearing in the middle ground. The composition may be read as a parody of the paintings commissioned by the landed gentry in eighteenth century England, paintings in which artists "record the extent and quality of their patron's estates, or [...] locate their sitters within a world that was proposed as the sitters' rightful domain, or both" (HARRISON 213). Landscape does not merely serve as a decorative background but is viewed and represented as property, and "the relationship of pictured figure to pictorial

¹² Pogue Harrison argues that "we the living can stand (culturally, institutionally, economically, in other words humanly) only because the dead underlie the ground on which we take our stance." (398)

ground” depends on notions of land management and land ownership: what the landscape is seen to contain sustains the power and authority of the figures who stand “enclosed by that space, yet detached from it” (HARRISON 213). In Atwood’s collage, the human figures are separated from the landscape by a sharp border of white whose function seems to be as much to distinguish as to keep apart. The viewer does not meet the confident and self-satisfied gaze of the painted figures, as in Gainsborough’s celebrated *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (c. 1750), or in Arthur Devies’s lesser-known *The James Family* (1751), but is confronted with blurry ghost-like figures. In a similar fashion, we are not granted an image of propitious landscape with abundant crops and luscious orchards; instead, we are presented with a “desert of tree-stumps like wounds” (WEIR 75). By drawing upon and subverting the codes of eighteenth-century landscape painting, the collage undermines the assumption of property as a way of inhabiting place on which the idea of settling is predicated.

Displacement / dysplacement: genius (de)loci

If the foundational gesture is doomed to fail, how, then, are we to interpret the last illustration in *The Journals*? The human figure is no longer superimposed onto the scenery and the white border surrounding it in the previous illustrations has disappeared. The image is neatly divided into two: in the upper-half, a nineteenth-century engraving of an urban scene represents “the polite world of society and chat” (WEIR 75) to which the poems cursorily allude (JSM 37, 42, 47); in the bottom half, a female silhouette, seemingly reaching out to the surface, represents Moodie after death. The blurred white ovals where the eyes would be are reminiscent of the line “opal // no // eyes glowing” in “Wish: Metamorphosis to Heraldic Emblem” (JSM 49), a poem in which the persona imagines herself in the afterlife, liberated from the constraints of civility. In the bathetic evocation of her own death and burial (“when I am dipped in the earth // I will be much smaller,” JSM 49), the reader will recognize Moodie’s “other voice” which acknowledges inconvenient truths unsuitable for “hushed tones” and “uplifting verse” (JSM 42). The poem, however, soon shifts to the idea of metamorphosis. The accumulation of images, compounded with the irregular typography, upsets sequential logic as words such as “plumage,” “uncorroded,” and “opal” are loosened from the syntactic structure to suggest new configurations which collapse the distinction between organic and mineral, human and non-human. The broken syntax builds up a sense of unrepressed exhilaration at the prospect of letting the “puckered mind” finally “prowl and slink // in crystal darkness” (JSM 49). The underground and resurrection poems that close the sequence bring about the completion of this becoming-wilderness which, unlike what happens in the first and second journals, is eagerly

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anticipated and fully embraced. In life, "the air // was about to tell [Moodie] // all kinds of answers" (JSM 51), the persona teetering on the cusp of revelation. In death, her eyes at once blinded and opened as specular cognition gives way to vision, she "see[s] now" (JSM 58) the "truth" (JSM 13) which has until now eluded her: the primacy of nature itself for "at the last // judgment we will all be trees" (JSM 59).

In the Afterword, Atwood proposes to read the last poems of *The Journals* as a resolution of the conflicts informing the sequence, and explains that "Susanna Moodie has finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated" (JSM 64), a transformation illustrated by the last collage and staged in the two poems which frame it. Once dead, the reluctant immigrant, who felt obliged to praise the country where her family had become successful (JSM 54), joins "the stone // voices of the land" as she prays for "[her] wooden fossil God" (JSM 57). The poem underscores the persona's identification with and sympathy for what is left of the animals which were the land's first inhabitants, placing her on the safe side of the divide separating "the invaders" – the "raisers // of glib superstructures" – from those for whom nature is "sacred" (JSM 57). Only after the metamorphosis brought about by death can Atwood's Moodie resurrect as a spirit springing from the land itself, a resolution indeed of the fraught question of autochthony in settler-invader cultures. That the poet should describe the persona in *The Journals* as "the spirit of the land" is unsurprising as it resonates with the cultural anxieties during the Centennial decade – one has only to think of the conclusion to Earle Birney's 1962 poem "Can.Lit.": "it's only by our lack of ghosts // we're haunted" (18)¹³. When presenting the writing of the poems as an "imaginative rediscovery" (HALL 393) of Canada's settler past and literary history, the Afterword strives to fulfill the need voiced in Birney's poem by filling in the supposed absence. It should be noted, nonetheless, that Atwood portrays her recreation of Moodie less as a revenant than as a *genius loci* who at once embodies and gives its distinctive character to Canada as place.

"Alternate Thoughts from Underground" and "A Bus Along St Clair," the last poem of the sequence, offer a clue as to the perceived necessity of this endeavor. In the urban setting where a "wilderness of wires" (JSM 60), "glass

¹³ Cynthia Sugars reads the poem as one example of the way "populating the Canadian landscape with distinctively Canadian ghosts has long been a concern of Canadian writers and cultural commentators, especially those with an agenda to decolonize Canadian cultural expression" (SUGARS 1).

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and steel” (JSM 57) has taken over the primeval forest, the forward impetus of progress, with its promises of “silver paradise” (JSM 60) and “riveted Babylon” (JSM 57), entails the same blindness as the early planters’. Both poems are informed by the equation between the urban taking over the natural environment and a form of erasure and oblivion. The mournful tone of “Alternate Thoughts” becomes defiant when the poetic voice stakes her claim on the land – “this is my kingdom still” (JSM 60) – and addresses an unidentified and encompassing “you”:

turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the center of a forest

your place is empty (JSM 61)

To the persona’s displacement, the last line of *The Journals* substitutes the displacement of the addressee, “the diminution and dissolution of the experience of place itself” (CASEY 104) caused by the cultural and ecological amnesia underpinning the “conversion of space into mere sites for building” (CASEY 104).

Reading the sequence almost fifty years after its first publication, the critic cannot but underline what Atwood’s own version of settler nationalism erases in the Afterword. Her assessment of the Canadian experience of displacement which the present paper takes as its point of entrance into the poems, ignores the originary claims of those who are neither “exiles” nor “invaders” (JSM 62) and whose discourse of autochthony was disrupted by the colonial appropriation of indigenous places. And yet, however flawed the Afterword reveals itself to be with hindsight, however enlightening it still is with regards to the intention of Atwood the writer and cultural critic, I would argue that the poetic form, the emphasis on dislocation and displacement both thematically and formally eschew the totalizing temptation of cultural nationalism. Throughout the sequence, the sparseness of language and syntactical distortions produce discontinuous and at times discordant aphorisms and epigrams whose meaning is neither stable nor neatly circumscribed. “Solipsism while Dying” and “Thoughts from the Underground” may thus be read as a meta-poetic reflection on place “as a discourse in process” (ASHCROFT 155). The typographic distortion of the toponym “toroNTO”, as well as the question “Where will be Belleville?” (JSM 53) underscore, if need be, that place is the product of constant shifting relations since there is no “simple separation between the ‘place’ named and described in language, and

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some 'real' place inaccessible to it" (ASHCROFT 155). "Forget[ing oneself] // in the middle // of sentences" can accordingly be construed as both a symptom of psychological dislocation and as a disruptive force opening the "enclose[ing]" frames (JSM 52) which seek to transform place into a static and circumscribed territory. Significantly, the persona last appears in *The Journals* in the guise of an old lady whose "eyes [...] destroy[...] the walls, the ceiling" (JSM 61), an image which harks back to the opening poem and subverts comforting assumptions of stability. In that regard, Atwood's Moodie may be less a *genius loci* than a *genius deloci*.

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