Introduction: Revisiting Solitudes - Between and Beyond

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eccs/2869>

DOI: 10.4000/eccs.2869

ISSN: 2429-4667

Publisher

Association française des études canadiennes (AFEC)

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 December 2019

Number of pages: 9-14

ISSN: 0153-1700

Electronic reference

Lorie-Anne Rainville, "Introduction: Revisiting Solitudes - Between and Beyond", *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* [Online], 87 | 2019, Online since 01 December 2020, connection on 18 June 2021.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/2869> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eccs.2869>

Revisiting Solitudes: Between and Beyond

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This special issue of *Études Canadiennes/ Canadian Studies* has decided to revisit the concept of solitudes by exploring the social, linguistic and cultural interactions between the original inhabitants, the Indigenous peoples of Canada, and what has come to be called the “founding races”, as well as the more recent allophone communities, by considering the way they depict one another (or not) in fiction, song, and the visual arts.

A quick glance at some of the national ethnic celebrations that have sprouted since the end of the 20th century is a clear indication of the federal government’s attempt to strengthen the bridges between the various communities that make up Canada’s social fabric: Black History Month in February since 1996, Asian Heritage Month since May 2002, Multiculturalism Day since June 27th, 2002, National Acadian Day since 2003 (which had been celebrated regionally in New Brunswick since August 15th 1881), National History Indigenous Month since June 2009 following Stephen Harper’s 2008 apology for the Indian Residential Schools system. National Indigenous Peoples Day (formerly called National Aboriginal Day) is celebrated every summer solstice on June 21st since 1996 just as Saint Jean-Baptiste Day, which emerged in 1834 in Montreal to compete with the celebration of Saint Patrick’s Day, is observed throughout the country’s francophone communities on June 24th.

However, not all of these celebrations have helped to reinforce ethnic bridges. One bridge in particular wobbled, not to say collapsed - the French Canadian bridge – when Saint Jean Baptiste Day was officially renamed in 1977 *Fête Nationale du Québec*, thus seemingly circumscribing French Canada within the boundaries of the province after the Quiet Revolution had swept through, transitioning by the same token the monolithic *Canadiens français* into the more specific *Québécois* (ZUBRZYCKI 2016, chapter 1). The sovereignist turn of the celebration left Francophone communities outside of Quebec wondering whether Saint Jean-Baptiste Day was a celebration of French Canada or of Québec, thereby increasing the cleavage between Québec and the “ROC” (Rest of Canada) as the saying goes, French speakers included. The fragmentation of French Canada into provincial communities was the inevitable result with the emergence of Franco-Ontarians, Franco-Manitobans, Fransaskois and so on, in tandem with the adoption of their respective provincial francophone flags. This socio-political context has nonetheless had favorable cultural consequences on the production of

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contemporary French writing, especially in the Francophone minority settings of Ontario and Manitoba.

If the conversation on the country's two founding solitudes seems to have somewhat subsided after the national cultural era of the seventies, it has recently flared up in 2016 with the presentation of the then Ontario Premier's formal apologies for the assimilation policy of Regulation 17, banning French from Ontario schools at the beginning of the 20th century, and with the heated debates and protests in the fall of 2018 over the creation the *Université de l'Ontario Français*. The long-standing linguistic rift is still open between the mostly bilingual Francophones and the mostly unilingual Anglophones, the "Sorry, I don't speak French" side (FRASER 2006 and HAYDAY 2015), both sides having opposite visions of Canada in mind. The colonial image of the two solitudes pitted against each other is persistent even though the imperial centres have largely shifted from Britain to the United States, especially since the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (1989) and, for Francophones living outside of the *Belle Province*, from France to Quebec, as most recently highlighted by Denise Bombardier's controversial distinction between French speakers in and outside of Quebec (BOURGEAULT 2019). A similar situation is to be noted among the Métis – a community which was already divided by the language question with the French-speaking Métis on the one hand and the formerly called Anglophone "Half-breeds" on the other – with the ongoing official status battles between the lowercase 'm' and the uppercase 'M' Métis (GAGNON 2019).

The legacy of colonial rule, be it British/American or French/Québécois, is nonetheless fundamental in assessing the historical and contemporary inequalities, endured by the "Other Solitudes" to quote the title of Linda Hutcheon's book on contemporary multicultural fictions (HUTCHEON 1990).

In the Afro-Nova Scotian George Elliott Clarke's words:

To deal with the notion of critical hindsight is necessary so that we *do not* forget the conflicts which exist and existed within a community. I don't think there's any way that we can escape the pressure of history, the shaping forces of history, although different people can have different perspectives on how that history has been shaped and how it has been used. *But* we have to have our own sense of "*Je me souviens*," to use the *québécois* nationalist slogan. We do have to remember the legacies of slavery, segregation, and the pressures that these imposed on our community. (MOYNAGH 1996, 8)

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Hence Clarke's imagined vision of "Africadia", a cross between Africa and Acadia, in his representation of African presence in Nova Scotia.

John Ralston Saul sees Indigenous Peoples as composing a third solitude, a part of the "tripartite foundation" that makes up the complexities of the country that "has been constructed upon three deeply rooted pillars, three experiences – the Aboriginal, the Francophone and the Anglophone" and concludes on their interdependence, a condition he refers to as "'positive solitudes' as opposed to a negative state of isolation" (SAUL 1997). Although his conception of "positive solitudes" is rarely represented in fiction, it captures the original meaning of the phrase "two solitudes" as intended by Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet*: "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other." Interpretations of Hugh MacLennan's novel *Two Solitudes* (1945) – a title he had deliberately borrowed from the Austrian poet's writing – have led the phrase to be understood as a metaphor, even "a cultural meme" (GADPAILLE 2004, 19), suggesting irreconcilable divisiveness between Francophones and Anglophones instead of focusing on togetherness in spite of separateness. To gear the expression back towards its original meaning, the Québécois writer Victor-Lévy Beaulieu suggested the play on words "*Deux Sollicitudes*" for the title of the publication of the mutual interview he conducted in 1995 with the Toronto writer Margaret Atwood. Although Atwood speaks French and ends her introduction to the English edition of their book by recommending the two solitudes to further acknowledge each other¹, her fiction contributes little in acknowledging the experiences of the Francophone or the Aboriginal solitudes, or if it does, as in her early novel *Surfacing* (1972) for example, the portrayal is rather one of a "duet with two deaf singers" to borrow Atwood's own image from her collection of poetry significantly entitled *Two-Headed Poems* (1978, 75). The same can be said of several other prominent Anglophone authors writing outside Québec who either tend to overlook the two other founding cultures or misrepresent them in the fictional worlds they produce. Furthermore, seeing the Indigenous Peoples as composing the third solitude is "problematic" for it nourishes the settler-colonialism discourse, but also, as Kristina Beaudemann argues "in the implication that Indigenous people must overcome a perceived lack – their own solitude – to form a whole with the settler-colonial state." (2019, 154).

Much has been written about the myriad of duality images that Atwood develops in her writing – amongst which the early image of "the Siamese twins" from her *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) as a metaphor for the Canadian condition

¹ "If there were more solicitude, on both sides of the great linguistic divide, we would all be a great deal better off." p. xii.

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shaped by various forms of mutual dependence, a metaphor which John Ralston Saul borrowed for the title of his book *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* (1997); it is also an image he picks up in *A Fair Country* (2008), which opens with the provocative statement “We are a métis civilization” (SAUL 2008, 3), before exploring what he deems to be the influence of the Indigenous populations on settlers and the interdependence and connections between them.

Arguably, the many images evoking a dual existence that Atwood develops in her writing bear the advantage of taking duality beyond the linguistic and racial divides. Like her emblematic character Susanna Moodie, based on the English gentlewoman who immigrated to early 19th century Canada, many Canadians can relate to the concept of experiencing a double identity, of having “two voices” (ATWOOD 1970, 42) in their head whether dual existence results from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, from the wilderness/city dichotomy, from the opposing genders, or from the ambivalent Canadian/American relationship.

Finally, the metaphor of the bridge, which is inherent to the concept of solitudes in its attempts to overcome duality, raises an array of other thorny questions. For, in its most basic usages, the bridge metaphor allows a dialogue to unfold between an “I” and a “you”, with each standing on their side of the bridge, remaining distinct yet connected by a mutual exchange, but it also entails the intractable, underlying questions of colonialism, post-colonialism, nationalism, post-nationalism, decolonization, transnationalism, immigration, racism, assimilation, appropriation of voice, ethnic fraud – a theoretical and cultural minefield of sorts. Can bridges be crossed without being accused of some of the cultural misdeeds mentioned above? Bridges are known to collapse if one does not tread carefully. No fall has been so brutal as that of Joseph Boyden, who significantly was named *Waase Aazhgan* meaning “Shining Bridge” by Ojibway scholar Basil Johnston. Boyden, once the embodiment of a long-awaited bridge straddling two cultures – white mainstream and Aboriginal – fell over his contested Aboriginal roots (see ANDREW-GEE, 2017), with the national cultural appropriation debate overshadowing his fiction that draws attention to the James Bay Cree. Certain writers are not even interested in standing on a reconciliatory bridge. For instance, in “Towards a National Literature”, Lee Maracle writes:

I prefer to speak from within the nation from which I arise and choose not to gaze at the colonizer. I seek to engage Coast Salish people in some form of national/spiritual/cultural revival and renewal through story. The place from which we look at the world determines, in part, the result. I am not standing on some bridge hoping to legitimize Canada and experience a

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share of whatever leftovers Canada has to offer the Sto:lo nation. (2010, 93)

Far from being outdated, the metaphorical concept of solitudes is therefore a timely one to be revisited, as the essays collected in this special issue demonstrate.

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