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# "Imagined Communities, Recuperated Homelands. Rethinking American and Canadian Minority and Exilic Writing"

University of Strasbourg, 11-12 March 2011

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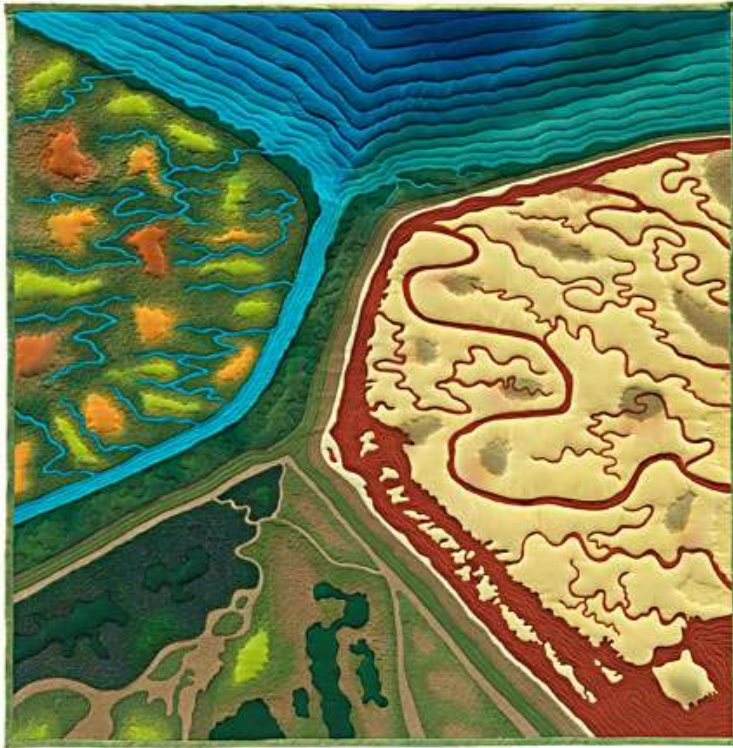
# "Imagined Communities, Recuperated Homelands. Rethinking American and Canadian Minority and Exilic Writing"

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- 1 The question "Where are you from?", which is often heard at conferences, foregrounds the link between identity and location. This link proved constitutive of *Imagined Communities, Recuperated Homelands*, a conference that was organized by Professors Monica Manolescu and Charlotte Sturgess and took place at the University of Strasbourg on the eleventh and twelfth of March 2011. At the heart of the conference was the way Canadian and North American minority and exilic writing questions and reconceptualises fixed notions of "identity," "home" and "belonging." The discussions were haunted by both spatial and temporal dualisms, and by such related oppositions as "insider" vs. "outsider" and "rooted" vs. "rootless". The fact that the notions cannot be rigidly separated was forcefully reaffirmed, and emphasis was put on border crossing as well as the potentially creative role played by the liminal—something that was beautifully illustrated by the conference poster as well. Linda Gass's quilt *Split Personality*, as stated on the artist's website, portrays a San Francisco wetland and a salt-pond separated by a man-made channel.



Linda Gass, *Split Personality* (quilt), 2006 ©

- 2 The fact that the wetland and the once-wetland are divided by water is highly significant considering that water is never a clear border but rather a liminal zone, connecting rather than separating. As such, the quilt perfectly illustrated the border crossing that was at the heart of the conference. For the first time, the University of Strasbourg united specialists on Canadian and North American writing. Several speakers crossed and questioned the border generally maintained between the two literatures, as well as many of the other dichotomies related to their interest in exilic and minority writing.

## Day 1: Friday, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011

- 3 The opening address by Jean-Jacques Chardin, director of the research team "Recherches sur le monde anglophone", reasserted the need to discuss notions of home and belonging in an increasingly transnational world and called brief attention to the crisis in the humanities. Jean-Jacques Chardin confirmed the importance of initiatives and open discussion in the field of the humanities as well as the need to question borders and margins with respect to constructions of (national) identity and the way the latter is recuperated in and reshaped by minority literatures.
- 4 Jean-Jacques Chardin's introduction was followed by the conference's first keynote address, which was delivered by Dr. Larissa Lai—writer, poet, literary critic and lecturer at the University of British Columbia. As the title of her lecture indicates, "How to Do 'You': Methods of Asian/Indigenous Relation" tried to envision positive relationships between Asian and Indigenous people in Canada, keeping in mind their complex historical connection with the Europeans. Even though Asian and Indigenous people interacted long before the Europeans came, the (imposed) label "Asian Canadian"

unambiguously marks the complexity of the Asian predicament: they are both settlers asserting Canada's neo-colonial relations with Indigenous people and colonial subjects who have suffered under the Canadian state. In her attempt to work towards a less dichotomous way of thinking about Asian and Indigenous people, Larissa Lai focused on two multimedia performances as potential answers to the question "How to Do 'You'?". The first project she concentrated on was "How We Forgot Here" by the Toronto-based Movement Project, the second one David Kang's "How to Feed a Piano", which problematizes notions of agency. The former performance, which brought to the stage a fictional airline where Indigenous people are in control of movement, was shown to provide a productive platform to stage diverse stories of movement and connect the different kinds of displacement and violence experienced by (im)migrants and Indigenous people.

## Session 1: "Communities and Margins"

- 5 Displacement was also at the centre of the first session, which united four papers on "Communities and Margins". David Stirrup (University of Kent, Canterbury) read two novels by Native North American writers Thomas King and Eric Gansworth in order to investigate how they use art to open up considerations of homeland, belonging and citizenship.
- 6 Hans Bak (Radboud University, Nijmegen) focused on one visual and two literary representations of the flight from slavery and Canada as an imagined utopia, and questioned the tension between nostalgia for a lost homeland and an imagined community in exile. Hans Bak's corpus—works by African-American painter Jacob Lawrence, African-American novelist Ishmael Reed and Canadian author Lawrence Hill—further reflected his insistence on questioning existing margins.
- 7 Françoise Kral (Université Paris Ovest) discussed Benedict Anderson's and Arjun Appadurai's reflections on communities to consider the impact and status of recently constructed networks. If communities are understood as impossible to break away from, how can one interpret virtual communities from which one can disconnect at any time and in which the individual is but a link? The discussion was connected to works by Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, and followed by comments on the changing status of "hypermodernity", which does not seem to be that far removed anymore from real life.
- 8 Martin Kuester (University of Marburg) centred on Jan Guenther Braun's *Somewhere Else*, a lesbian Mennonite novel. By doing so, he drew attention not only to the writing of an existing religious and linguistic minority, but also to a double marginalization within that community as a result of gender-related issues. What especially came out from this session was the complex and loaded character of the notion "community" and the need to continue to question it as well as its margins.

## Session 2: "Unsettling Cartographies"

- 9 The second session of the day was called "Unsettling Cartographies" and brought together five papers that—in different ways—reflected on notions of belonging and mapping (oneself) as problematized by minority and exilic writing. Ada Savin (Université de Versailles) discussed Cristina Garcia's *The Agüero Sisters* and the book's convoluted links between the human body and body politics, and between home and

exile. She presented the graft as a central metaphor and trope, and drew attention to language to further question the possibility of ever being fully "at home"

- 10 Pilar Cuder-Dominguez (University of Huelva) focused on the immigrant's process of psychological mapmaking and mapbreaking. She used Malashri Lal's distinction to examine Nalini Warriar's *The Enemy Within* and present the book's portrayal of mapmaking with respect to a protagonist who is doubly marginalized—both as an immigrant and as a woman.
- 11 Virginia Ricard (Université Bordeaux 3) shed light on the writings of the almost forgotten Jewish American writer Ludwig Lewisohn, and in particular on his novel *The Island Within*, which, as suggested by the title, can be read as a representation of the protagonist's inner life. Virginia Ricard focused on the way community is represented in the novel, on the trope of the island and on the book's critique of assimilation.
- 12 Paule Lévy (Université de Versailles) offered an in-depth discussion of Korea-born, American novelist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, a book that defies easy categorisation due to its manifold narrative ruptures and unfixed boundaries. As the narrator explores her own genealogy, she inscribes missing narratives into official history and powerfully evokes the history of colonisation. Paule Lévy showed how the book's unfaithful transcription and translation emphasize its problematic relationship with its readers.
- 13 The last speaker of the day, Lianne Moyes (Université de Montréal) completed the circle by returning to Larissa Lai's discussion of the relationship between Indigenous people and immigrants in Canada. Lianne Moyes's paper dealt with Tessa McWatt's *Out of My Skin*, a novel that represents the Oka Crisis from the point of view of a non-native woman of Guyanese heritage who befriends a Native woman. The book explores (dis)similarities in the self- and other-constructions of immigrants and First Nations people, as well as Canada's reluctance to acknowledge its colonial history. The book, it was argued, can be read as an allegory of the relationship between Canada and First Nations in the sense that Canadians are always dominant. Linking the several papers was the idea that, despite the desire to find an individual and communal sense of self, it is impossible to ever be fully "at home".

## Day 2: Saturday, March 12<sup>th</sup> 2011

- 14 The second day was opened by Deborah Madsen (University of Geneva), the second keynote speaker, who presented a paper entitled "The Rhetoric of Double Allegiance: Imagined Communities in North American Diasporic Chinese Literatures". Deborah Madsen zoomed in on one of the conference's most strongly targeted questions, "Where are you from?", and suggested that mainstream diasporic Chinese literature answers the question with "neither (here) – nor (there)" i.e. with a double negative denying the migrant a sense of belonging. This "Orientalist airport paradigm", which can be found in novels by Amy Tan and Wayson Choy, is consonant with the dominant ideology in suggesting it is only possible to have one affiliation and in restating the nationalistic desire to belong either "here" or "there". Deborah Madsen suggested to exchange that rhetoric for a "both-and paradigm" as exemplified by works by Fred Wah and Larissa Lai. Rather than repeating the illusion of an imaginary, fixed homeland, these authors play with the conventions of nationalism and accentuate that the migrant can never return. Emphasis was put on multiple national affiliations, and

on transnational forms of immigrant belonging. The discussion that ensued found itself confronted with the inability to completely dismiss dualistic oppositions, as the "both-and paradigm" also consists of two elements, which are inevitably suggestive of essence and stability.

### Session 3: "Borders, Borderlands, Homelands"

- 15 The attention to "Borders, Borderlands, Homelands" continued in the conference's third session, which was opened by Yves-Charles Grandjeat (Université Bordeaux 3) and his discussion of Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came With Them*. Yves-Charles Grandjeat paid close attention to the chronotope of the *barrio* and illustrated the ways identity and space are interconnected in this strongly *emplaced* narrative. At the heart of his discussion was the idea that there is no time before exile, that loss is what links the characters and that loss as such can be seen as fiction's main catalyst.
- 16 Cristina Ghiban-Mocanu (University of Iasi) continued Yves-Charles Grandjeat's exploration of Chicano/a literature by dealing with the writing of Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros and their use of *neplanta* (i.e. the liminal) as a literary topos, functioning both as actual space and as metaphor.
- 17 Michel Feith (Université de Nantes), like Yves-Charles Grandjeat, considered the importance of fiction writing to imagining the self and community. His focus was on the figure of the trickster and intertextuality in contemporary Native American minority writing, more specifically in Louis Owens's *Nightland* and *Dark River*, and their problematization of notions of authenticity and (Native) identity.
- 18 Marie-Agnès Gay (Université Lyon 3) offered an intriguing reading of Shawn Wong's *Homebase*, a fourth generation Chinese-American coming-of-age story centred on the essentialist quest for identity. The quest that is at the heart of the novel was shown to be destabilized by the text's multiple uncanny passages as well as its poetics of defamiliarization, both of which stress the inescapable persistence of the in-between. At the heart of this session was the notion of the liminal and the fact that it can function both as a critique and as a creative force.

### Session 4: "Immigration, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism"

- 19 The fourth and final session aimed at exploring "Immigration, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism" and started with Belén Martín-Lucas's (University of Vigo) investigation of a Canadian (*The Kappa Child* by Hiromi Goto) and American (*Stealing Buddah's Dinner* by Bich Minh Nguyen) fictional response to one of the ultimate classics of displacement, i.e. *Little House on the Prairie*. Both Hiromi Goto's and Bich Minh Nguyen's novels were shown to present critical evaluations of processes of racialization and of racism in Ingalls Wilder's text.
- 20 Claire Omohovère (Université de Montpellier) accentuated the similarities between two novels dealing with the problems experienced by teenagers trying to grow up in a marginal(ized) community, one Indian (Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*), another Mennonite (Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*). The prominent place attributed to modernity as well as the novels' energy and humour proved to be of central importance.



- 21 Marie-Claude Perrin-Chenour (Université Paris Ouest) presented a paper on "Jamaica Kincaid's Regressive Writing" based on *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Again, the return to a pre-colonial past proved impossible and, as a result, the protagonist found herself trapped and isolated in her mind. Marie-Claude Perrin-Chenour underlined the importance of the text's narrative strategies in its portrayal of the oscillation between regression and opening up to language and communication.
- 22 Anca-Raluca Radu (University of Gottingen) brought the conference to a close with her reading of *What We All Long For* by Caribbean-born Dionne Brand. Anca-Raluca Radu contrasted the first generation's acceptance of their categorisation as hyphenated people in the multicultural Canadian mosaic with the younger generation's search for forms of community that surpass ethnic belonging. The speaker underlined the importance of "new cosmopolitanism," which puts forward "bricolated identities" and processes of change, and can be opposed to multiculturalism and its reliance on the binary opposition between a white Canadian "we" and a non-white, visible "other." This question was a common thread in the session, as all the papers focused on ways of avoiding the trap of thinking about belonging in a dualistic way.

## Conclusion

- 23 Coming from a multitude of places and belonging to a wide variety of communities, the conference speakers and audience gathered in Strasbourg formed an imagined community that considerably added to understanding the complex nature of home, belonging and (individual and communal) identity, and the way those notions are problematized in and by North American and Canadian minority and exilic writing. Even though the participants represented different disciplines and brought their own interests to the discussion, the borders seemingly separating them were easily crossed, leading to an interesting array of cross-fertilizations. Michel Feith's discussion of the trickster, for instance, added to Anca-Raluca Radu's discussion of *What We All Long For* and was strongly related to exchanges on many of the other novels as well, as several of them stressed the importance of border crossing and the inescapable persistence of the liminal. Important as well was the idea of double marginalization (e.g. Claire Omhovère, Martin Kuester, Pilar Cuder-Dominguez), which confirmed the need to profoundly question the dynamics within given communities and the complex workings of insider-outsider politics. Another purpose common to all participants was to reassert the importance of language and writing. Attention was repeatedly drawn to the central role story-telling plays in "recuperating" a sense of self and community, while at the same time stressing the unreliability of language, as illustrated by the books' transgressive narrative techniques. The diversity of novels discussed—American, Canadian, old, contemporary, canonical, marginal—led to an agreement on the need to continue to challenge notions of authenticity and community, and move towards a new paradigm that acknowledges the plural nature of our affiliations. What matters most is not to find an unequivocal "either-or" answer to the question "Where are you from?" but to *share* stories of movement and allow different forms of displacement and diverse (traumatic) experiences of (forced) movement to interact—a process of exchange that was embodied by the conference itself.
- 24 Conference website: <http://monica.manolescu.free.fr/conference2011.html>  
Linda Gass's website: <http://www.lindagass.com/>

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## INDEX

**Thèmes** : Actualité de la recherche

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