The subversive power of the fantastic
in Canadian women's fiction

by

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relevance of three modes of the fantastic – the Gothic, Magic Realism, and the Grotesque – as subversive tools to challenge socio-culturally and/or ideologically determined centres prevalent in Canadian society expressed in Canadian women’s fiction. The works I examine represent Québécois, English-Canadian, and Aboriginal perspectives on history and colonialism viewed through a feminist lens. Marie-Claire Blais’ *Mad Shadows* and Anne Hébert’s *Kamouraska* primarily challenge Quebec’s patriarchal tradition that influences Quebec’s definitions of nation and culture. Marian Engel’s *Bear*, Jane Urquhart’s *Away* and Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* are more concerned with re-evaluating aspects of Canada’s history of colonisation from the perspectives of marginalised individuals or communities. The study determines that oscillation among the fantastic elements and the position of the literary and socio-cultural “ex-centric” correspond to the capacity of submitting an effectively subversive tone of resistance.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: Introduction	3
The literary fantastic – Approaches to a definition	4
Outline and goals of this study	9
CHAPTER 2: The Canadian Postmodern and the literature of the “ex-centric”	14
Approaches to postmodern theory	14
The Canadian Postmodern	16
Historiographic metafiction and the postcolonial condition	18
Deconstructing History, Gender, and Nation: The Canadian Case	22
CHAPTER 3: Forms of the literary fantastic and their subversive effects in Canadian literature	26
Gothicism	26
The Theory of the Sublime: Gothic themes and techniques	26
The Female Gothic	32
Canadian Gothicism	35
Magic Realism	39
Theoretical Approaches	39
Canadian Magic Realism and (Post)Colonial Discourse	42
The Grotesque	45
CHAPTER 4: The female Gothic, the terrible Grotesque, and the Quebec experience:	
Marie-Claire Blais’ <i>Mad Shadows</i> and Anne Hébert’s <i>Kamouraska</i>	48
Gender, nation, and the literature of Quebec	48
Gothic and Grotesque distortions of the Quebec nation: Marie-Claire Blais’ <i>Mad Shadows</i>	51
Blais’ grotesque distortion of traditional family values	53

Further Gothic elements as subversive impulses in <i>Mad Shadows</i>	63
The Female/Feminist Gothic and the history of Quebec: Anne Hébert's <i>Kamouraska</i>	69
Historiographic metafiction	69
Hébert's feminist Gothicism	72
Gender and nation in Blais and Hébert	81
 CHAPTER 5: Towards a gendered postcolonialism: English-Canadian and Aboriginal perspectives on the fantastic	 85
Feminine excess in the Canadian wilderness: Marian Engel's <i>Bear</i>	85
Sexual Gothic: exceeding the Canadian Gothic	88
Deconstructing gender and history in the Canadian wilderness	95
 Magical realism and the postcolonial condition in Jane Urquhart's <i>Away</i>	 99
Fantastic elements in <i>Away</i> : the natural, the supernatural, and the obsessive	100
Historiographic metafiction and postcoloniality: competing nationalisms?	109
 Fantastic Aboriginal writing: Eden Robinson's <i>Monkey Beach</i>	 117
The supernatural and its effects on the individual and on the Community	118
Colonisation, violence and gender: decolonising the present	124
 CHAPTER 6: Conclusion	 130
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 133

It's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted.

Earle Birney, "Canlit." (1947)

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Earle Birney's famous line in his poem grasps the view of the Canadian literary tradition prevalent before the general acceptance that Canada's literature had anything resembling a unique and viable inner life. Nowadays, the line is rather used as an ironic encapsulation to express that the Canadian literary imagination has indeed flourished with a unique eerie undertone that permeates Canadian writings especially after 1947. By quoting Yves Beauchemin who comments on Earle Birney's poem by saying that "[o]ur reality – political, physical – is perhaps too haunting in itself to allow for ghosts,"¹ Margaret Atwood may have implied that discussing the fantastic in Canadian literature means confronting the ghosts of Canadian realism that are so pervasive in the Canadian literary tradition. The aspects that challenge Canadian realism reflected by this line are characterised by an uneasy and unreal undertone, a kind of fear of the presence of the unknown that permeates the Canadian literary imagination especially in writings of the second half of the twentieth century.

Whether there is a connection between these dark and mysterious moods and specific areas of the Canadian social fabric is one question asked in this study. The famous European Gothic classics from the 18th and 19th centuries teach us that these 'tales of terror' did not accidentally appear within a period of socio-political turmoil

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things. The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 63.

when Enlightenment reason, science and empiricism started to perpetuate modern society. An abrupt change in people's trust in religion and metaphysical truths is signified by the sudden fear of the unknown portrayed in Romantic literature of the time. Hence, most literary and cultural criticism argues that the artistic representation of fantastically obscure and often evil phenomena that lurk underneath the surface of any social structure are considered effects of a rebellious culture against oppressive ideologies, undermining certainties of historically determined and socially accepted Lyotardian 'grand narratives.' In her groundbreaking work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson recognises the subversive and therefore liberating power of fantastic literature: "Fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints."²

Critics and writers alike designate the potential of the fantastic for socio-cultural resistance as a relevant construct in Canadian literature. This study examines Canadian women's writings and the subversive potential of their fantastic elements to the socio-cultural status quo of the time they were written.

The literary fantastic – Approaches to a definition

As a general framework used in this study, the fantastic is a mode of writing that does not give priority to realistic representation, commonly subsumed under the term literary realism. Thereby it is important to note that the fantastic not only works on a thematic basis, for example by representing supernatural apparitions, but that it is a distinct style of writing whose texture exceeds the realm of imagination of realist writing.

² Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London / New York: Methuen, 1981, p. 3.

In any case, realism is under attack.³

One essential aspect, however, is that the fantastic lurks underneath the surface of realism, and whenever it springs up it uses and abuses the properties of realism. Jackson argues that “[f]antasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find too frustratingly finite.”⁴ Thus, the fantastic should be placed within a spectrum of uncertainty to the nature of the ‘real’, which Todorov best explains as follows: “In a world which is indeed our world [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty.”⁵ As the main theoretical construct to classify the modes of the fantastic I establish a linear spectrum that expresses this duration or the degree of uncertainty or unfamiliarity to the nature of the real. In other words, on this spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity of prevailing definitions of the ‘real’ or the ‘possible’ – at times amounting to violent opposition to the ‘real’ – I locate and define the fantastic categories of the Gothic, the Magic Realist, and the Grotesque in the later sections of this study. Thereby, I argue that the position of these fantastic modes within this spectrum depends on the degree of competition between the

³ It is important to note here that the literary fantastic, as it is used in this study, is a phenomenon that should not be confused with the types prevalent in such pieces of fantastic literature like the ancient European mythologies or by writers like W.H. Auden or J.R.R. Tolkien whose fantasies are, according to Jackson, more like faery, romance, or parables. According to Jackson, these pieces of fantastic literature transcend reality, escape the human condition and construct alternate, ‘secondary’ worlds. They fulfil a desire for a ‘better’, more complete, unified reality, and they are nostalgic in the sense that they look back to a lost moral and social hierarchy to be recaptured and revived. [Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 2] The term fantasy as it is used in this study has not to do with inventing another non-human world, but rather with inverting elements of this world. And it is not transcendental. [Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 8]

⁴ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 20.

⁵ Todorov quoted in Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic. From Gothic to Postmodernism*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 12.

fantastic and the realistic narratives, and how this position determines the degree of subversive effectiveness.

Fantasy's means of establishing its 'reality' are initially mimetic (i.e. 'realistic', 'objectively') but then move into another mode which seems to be marvellous (i.e. 'unrealistic', representing apparent impossibilities). Also with respect to themes and motifs, the fantastic plays upon difficulties of interpreting events and things as objects or images and thereby disorients the reader's categorisation of what is 'real'.⁶ According to Jackson, recurrent themes of the fantastic are, for example, ghosts, shadows, vampires, werewolves, doubles, partial selves, reflections, enclosures, monsters, beasts, or cannibals. Moreover, the fantastic employs transgressive impulses towards violence, incest, necrophilia, androgyny, cannibalism, narcissism and 'abnormal' psychological states conventionally categorised as hallucination, dream, insanity and paranoia. Furthermore, the literary fantastic attempts to undermine 'realistic' ways of seeing by subverting gender differences of male and of female, and by blurring generic distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral.⁷

The fantastic can also be explained in terms of its subversive texture in relation to literary realism by using a gender-specific approach. Patricia Smart categorises literary realism to be a male domain of writing, so that consequently, the fantastic deconstructs this domain by challenging the so-called 'Father's House': She explains that the 'Father's House' is a metaphor for culture and its ideological, artistic, and linguistic structures of representation; that is, the projection of male subjectivity and male authority.⁸ "What our

⁶ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 20

⁷ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 49.

⁸ Smart, "Introduction", p. 6.

culture has always called the 'traditional novel' (realism) is in fact a literary manifestation of the Father's House."⁹ The reason why the application of the fantastic by women writers is crucial is that they not only challenge the notion of realism but, more importantly, that they also find a subversive voice against patriarchal literary and social conventions: "[W]omen who write ... are a presence that disturbs the order of the Father's House."¹⁰ This specific aspect of subversive character often inherent in writings by women has been a reason for me to choose only works by female authors.

The argument of the gendered divide between men's and women's writing can be applied when looking at the representation of character and identity. According to Smart,

[m]en's writing has a tendency to privilege linearity, logic, and a concept of identity that is closed, distanced from what it perceives as 'other', and reassured by the presence of borders. ... In women's writing, it is rather texture that dominates – the density of what resists closure within the sign, the gestures, the rhythms, and silences that underlie language and that speak in the gaps between the words.¹¹

Therefore, it is important to note that the literary fantastic created by a woman writer often implies a distinctive gendered texture rather than logical and closed character.

With respect to the consequence that women's writings may interrogate this male realist notion of character presentation, Jackson adds that the fantastic generally challenges the realist category of unified character and identity, that definition of the self as coherent, indivisible whole.

⁹ Patricia Smart, "Introduction. Traces of a Murder." Patricia Smart, (ed.) *Writing in the Father's House. The Emergence of the Feminine in the Quebec Literary Tradition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, 3-19, p. 11.

¹⁰ Smart, "Introduction", p. 7.

¹¹ Smart, "Introduction", p. 9.

In fact, it is exactly the aforementioned inversion and recombining of elements of this world in order to “produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different,”¹² which can result in a fragmentation of unified subjectivity into multiple and at times contradictory selves. Thus by this definition, the fantastic inhabits a subversive function by deconstructing the ‘realistic’ language of a unified, coherent, and consequently male self. Perfectly in line with poststructuralism’s deconstructionist claim, the literary fantastic also destructively refuses to conform to a unified Cartesian (male) *cogito* as the source of truth which has dominated Western humanist thought for centuries and which has been represented in the realist writings of modernism. Thereby, the subversive power of the fantastic deconstructs the subject’s cultural formation in its opposition to Western capitalist and patriarchal ideology. The ‘product’ of this deconstructive process is a subject that is “ex-centric, heterogenous, spreading into every contradiction and (im)possibility.”¹³ The fantastic’s relation to reality within a gendered texture and consequently its implied feminist critique is explained by Smart as follows: “Speaking of possibility – and the necessity – of a relationship to reality other than that of domination, women’s writing proposes a new epistemology ... that is, writing in such a way that otherness, the real, and the temporal realm speak through the disorganized texture of the text.”¹⁴

As a result, it is not only the marginal position of the fantastic subject – whether writer or protagonist – that is productive to subvert dominant ideological, epistemological

¹² Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 8.

¹³ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 90.

¹⁴ Smart, “Introduction”, p. 12.

and cultural centres, but the genre of the literary fantastic itself.¹⁵ Hence, one purpose of this study is to examine the intersection of the subversive power of the literary fantastic and the postmodern/postcolonial condition(s) in Canada, where the literary margins subvert the hegemonic centres of the historical, social, and also literary spaces in Canada. Therefore, fantastic literature as a marginalised genre is a telling index of the limits of the dominant centre, and has thus the most productive and subversive power – also by means of its gendered texture – to challenge Canada’s historically established ideological and socio-cultural centres. Hence, the fantastic as a literary mode is inevitably political.

Outline and goals of this study

This study first examines location and function of the “ex-centric” in Canadian culture and literature by using theories of postmodernism. Thereby, a historical lens is applied to specific Canadian discourses – such as the postcolonial condition with respect to English-Canadian colonialism, Aboriginal history and the Quebec experience – combined with a female/feminist perspective on these contexts. With regard to the examination of history within postmodern literary theory, a detailed discussion of so-called historiographic metafiction serves as a tool to later analyse the writers’ preoccupation with history to undermine the claims of historical truths applied to specific discourses, and to create valuable accounts from the past for the present by their attempt to fictionalise history. The gendered lens is applied to see how both women writers and

¹⁵ That the genre is itself marginalised (and therefore productive) is explained by Jackson, p. 173: “As an ‘art’ of unreason, and of desire, fantasy has persistently been silenced, or re-written, in transcendental rather than transgressive terms. Its threatened un-doing, or dissolution, of dominant structures, has been re-made, re-covered into moral allegory and magical romance. As Foucault writes of unreason [in his *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1967)], ‘Any transgression in life becomes a social crime ... condemned and punished ... imprisoned in a moral world [for offending] bourgeois society.’”

critics work in order to reveal the interrelation of history, gender and nation, and in the examples of the writings of women challenge patriarchal structures that permeate the socio-historical and ideological frameworks within these specific Canadian contexts.

Chapter 3 draws closer attention to the fantastic mode itself and its subversive function in Canadian literature. In that chapter, the three subcategories of the fantastic – the Gothic, Magic Realism and the Grotesque – are first theoretically defined and distinguished from each other. Especially the Gothic and Magic Realism are briefly analysed with respect to their relevance for specific Canadian socio-cultural areas, such as gender, nation, or postcolonialism. This section demonstrates that these modes of literary expression have a subversive power against historically determined patriarchal and socio-cultural orders, and are therefore particularly predominant in women's literary spaces of Canada. In sum, both theoretical chapters offer analytical approaches to categorise the particularities of Canadian literature of the last 50 years.

Chapter 4 analyses the relevance of above established frameworks by applying them to different Canadian writings by women. Thereby, the above established spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity to the real serves as the main theoretical construct that categorises the novels in terms of their positions and/or oscillations between the three modes of the fantastic – the Gothic, Magic Realism, or the Grotesque.

The novels chosen vary greatly regarding their time of creation, themes, motivations and styles, but I argue that despite their obvious differences they have two significant aspects in common. Firstly, they reflect specific female and feminist perspectives within specific Canadian contexts not only because the works are written by

women but also because they thoughtfully combine the notions of gender and history, nationality and/or culture. Secondly, all five authors use modes of the fantastic to challenge dominant orders of Canadian society.

Specifically, I argue that the two novels from Québécoise writers, Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Marie-Claire Blais' *Mad Shadows (La Belle Bête)*¹⁶, critically respond to distinct Quebec experiences before and after the Quiet Revolution, and to the historical and cultural experience of women in Quebec in general. Both authors portray the female perspective within male-dominated social structures by using Gothic and Grotesque elements in their development of themes and aesthetics, which ultimately result in strong political and feminist motivations. A detailed analysis of both authors' approaches to the close connection between gender and nation with respect to the Quebec experience closes the chapter on the works from Quebec.

The following chapter deals with the English-Canadian and Aboriginal writers: Marian Engel, Jane Urquhart, and Eden Robinson. The reason why these authors are treated separately from the two writers from Quebec lies in their different political and feminist motivations which are interrelated with their more flexible use of the modes of the fantastic.

Marian Engel's *Bear* uses fantastic elements to deconstruct the Canadian myth of exploration and domination of the Canadian wilderness, which is usually conquered by a male subject. Besides addressing Canada's history of colonisation, the novel also attempts to subvert literary as well as socio-cultural conventions. In her employment of the fantastic, both thematically and aesthetically, the author offers valuable social

¹⁶ The respective textual analysis will refer to the English versions of both novels from Quebec.

statements by grotesquely exceeding traditionally established notions of gender, sexuality, and Canada's history of colonisation.

Jane Urquhart's novel *Away* uses Magic Realist 'ex-centricities' to challenge two interrelated historical contexts of colonialism: the exploitation and colonisation of the Irish by the English, and the history of Irish immigration into Canada and their 'colonising' role. While the novel's magic texture successfully portrays aspects of the female as well as of the Aboriginal Other and discloses interesting and powerful links of gender and colonial oppression, the twofold character of postcoloniality implicit in the novel is critically scrutinised.

As far as a Canadian indigenous experience is concerned, I focus on a very recent novel by the Haisla author Eden Robinson. *Monkey Beach* 'fantastically' employs modes of the Gothic and Magic Realism to address the aspects regarding the life of young Aboriginal people today with respect to their perceived conflicts over the preservation of traditional cultural values and the re-evaluation of their past within contemporary North-American culture. Moreover, I discuss Robinson's representations of highly disturbing aspects of colonial oppression, racism, and systemic violence, and specifically her motivation to show how colonial history still impacts Aboriginal communities today.

In the discussion of each of these works, I come to the conclusion that despite the great discrepancies between these writings, they all reveal an empowering tone of resistance to oppressive ideologies and historically determined socio-cultural discourses by their use of fantastic elements. This study shows how these individual women writers make use of the fantastic to challenge the socio-culturally or ideologically determined aspects imposed on people or communities that are located on the cultural peripheries of

society. Due to the authors' marginal positions as women writers writing about women who live through the (necessarily gendered) discourses of history, nation, culture and society, they are able to use both the subversive power of the socio-cultural margin and the marginal but powerful tool of the fantastic to express their resistance in Canadian writings in the second half of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2: The Canadian Postmodern and the literature of the “ex-centric”

Approaches to postmodern theory

Before explaining the concept of the so-called Canadian Postmodern, I briefly outline a few aspects of postmodern centre/margin theory that are applied to Canadian writings in general in order to then analyse the relevance of these aspects with regard to the fantastic in Canadian literature in particular.

The “ex-centric”, or the socio-historically constructed marginalised Other, is not outside the dominant discourse, but within. Similarly, the fantastic, which has a dynamic relationship with realism, uses and abuses ‘realist’ elements in order to create a subversive piece of writing that challenges literary as well as socio-cultural conventions. Consequently, the ex-centric in Canadian writing – be it the woman writer, the protagonist, or the thematic Other – is “inside yet outside ... to have a different perspective”¹⁷ in order to challenge the centre by using its own language of power. In doing so, the centre is not being eliminated, but dislocated. The postmodern centre/margin discourse draws its subversive productivity from the dialectic between centre and margin, not from a radical elimination of the centre.

The centre incorporates a potential of power, and in modernist realism, the concept of power is a fixed and unchangeable reality. Referring to postmodernism however, Foucault asserts that power is a dynamic process that disentangles a fixed concept into several discourses. This process makes it possible that power relations are exposed and can be challenged. He opposes the common assumption that power is

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. New York / London: Routledge, 1988, p. 67.

exercised and imposed from the top, or that there is a binary opposition between rulers and ruled on the grounds of power relations. Instead, Foucault argues that the manifold relations of force are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole. These effects form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together. These oppositions then bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, and convergences of the power relations. Major dominations – resulting in divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums – are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations.¹⁸

The centre/margin theory has been developed as a consequence of the re-evaluation of the concept of power. The concept of a fixed centre becomes a discourse of centre, or a dominant discourse, as opposed to the marginalized discourse – or what Hutcheon appropriately calls the discourse of the “ex-centrics”. Postmodernism allows for analysing both discourses in order to strive for more equal relations in social reality.

Linda Hutcheon argues that the ex-centrics’ “ex-centricity and difference have often denied them access to Cartesian rationality and relegated them to the realms of the irrational, the mad, or at the very least, the alien.”¹⁹ Here, the link to the ex-centric, marginalised Other can be made in terms of the aforementioned split subject in fantastic literature: the fragmentation of the unified (male) subject implies an ‘unreal’ or an ‘unrealistic’ representation contradicting the real and the rational. Generally, the alienated split subject is often either associated with a self reflected as distorted Other (which signifies the fragmentation of the unified self mirrored as Other), and is often linked to

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “Excerpts from *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*.” in: Natoli, Joseph and Linda Hutcheon, (eds.) *A Postmodern Reader*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, 333-341, p. 335.

¹⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 68.

categories of, for example gender, race, class, or sexuality in fantastic literature. As far as the dynamic redistribution of power within the centre/margin discourse is concerned, I argue that the power assigned to the ex-centric Other in fantastic literature lies in its subversive potential to challenge the dominant order – whether it is located within socio-cultural centres or within literary conventions.

The Canadian Postmodern

The Canadian postmodern condition with regard to the productive and subversive power of the (literary and socio-cultural) margins is explained by Linda Hutcheon's account referring to the Canadian literary imagination:

Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada's perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation. In postmodernism, though, the centre and the periphery do not simply change places. Nor is the margin conceived of only a place of transgression. The periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility.²⁰

Apparently, the Canadian condition itself has been defined as marginal, and a national identity of fragmented ex-centricity is consequently reflected in the marginal position of Canadian literature compared to its (western) international counterparts. Due to its geographical periphery and the contradictions perceived in Canada as francophone/anglophone, indigenous, bilingual and multicultural, colonising and colonised country, Canada's literature has a tendency to emphasise interrelating marginal perspectives that raise their voices to address specific historical and socio-cultural

²⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern. A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 3. It is interesting to note that Hutcheon also emphasises the need to not abandon the centre since it is necessary for the dynamic process of shifting power relations and therefore for the possibility to challenge in order to aim for social change.

contexts. As a result, Canadian writings are distinct in their representations of subject-matter and protagonists as well as their choice of plot structures that are anything but unified, but rather contradictory, literally eccentric, and devoid of closure. Hence, what Earle Birney in his poem, Northrop Frye with his 'garrison mentality' and later Margaret Atwood in her account of victim positions may mean are the same odd phenomena that are so difficult to grasp but seem to permeate the texture of Canadian literature especially since the 1960s. Both Hutcheon and Eva Darias-Beautell argue that the reason for these apparent "ex-centricities", resulting in fragmented selves and the artistic renunciation of realist representations, is that Canadian postmodern fiction is often grounded in specific historical and cultural contexts and is strongly related to the 'problem' of the (lack of a) Canadian identity. According to Darias-Beautell,

the Canadian case argues for specific considerations: resistance to totalizing views of history and culture becomes particularly urgent in a country as heterogenous and contradictory as Canada, where the discourses of history and identity are based on the assumption of a national unity that proves, at its best, artificial. In this way, the postmodern challenge to the Cartesian subject is enacted from within Canadian fiction by way of explicit or tacit references to the history and identity of this nation.²¹

Hutcheon explains the interrelation of postmodern literature and the renunciation of realist representation for the Canadian case in that "Canadian novels have self-consciously milked realism for all its power, even while parodying and subverting its conventions."²² She further argues although postmodernism "begins at the point of realism," realism is a convention and thus is "constitutively a social and historical

²¹ Eva Darias-Beautell, *Contemporary Theory and Canadian Fiction*. Lewiston, NY / Queenston, ON / Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, p. 99.

²² Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 20.

phenomenon.” Therefore, the postmodern process challenges the unexamined assumption that realism is the only convention that can undertake such an examination.²³

Echoing the fact that the literary fantastic also milks realism for its existence and its subversive power, the methodologies of Canadian postmodernism and the fantastic consequently share features on the grounds of their symbiotic relationships with realism. As a result, for the Canadian writer, the fantastic may be a tool to specifically refer to the subversion of aforementioned notions of history and identity. This study demonstrates how concepts associated with history and identity, such as gender, nationality, race/ethnicity, culture, colonialism, and language are linked to the subversive power of the fantastic in Canadian writings by women.

Historiographic metafiction and the postcolonial condition

According to postmodern critics, postmodern literature is first and foremost metafiction. That is any postmodern text has ceased to refer to any biographical circumstances of the author but instead highlights what Hutcheon calls its narcissistic character, which means its “self-reflexive, self-informing, ... auto-referential, auto-representational”²⁴ nature. This echoes the tenets of much poststructuralist thought, which, according to Julia Kristeva, locates textual analysis in the text’s relation to other texts; that is, the study of the text in question as within (the texts of) society and history.²⁵ Kristeva further states that any text is a mosaic of quotations, and the absorption and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. New York / London: Methuen, 1984, pp. 1-2.

²⁵ Darias-Beautell, *Contemporary Theory*, p. 86.

transformation of another,²⁶ which implies a postmodern challenge to Lyotardian grand narratives such as origin, truth, history, the subject, etc. As a consequence, the technique of postmodern intertextuality denotes the fictionalising process of these grand narratives in order to undermine their legitimacy.

In much postmodern fiction, privileged postmodern intertexts are provided by the discourses of history and historiography. In order to put the fictionalisation of these discourses into practice, Hutcheon coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' as the "processes of narrativization of knowledge, and problematizing (historical, cultural) reference through metafictional and parodic strategies."²⁷ Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and other critics have seen history as a human construction, like fiction; both an author of fiction and a historian create their texts through a process of selecting, ordering, and narrating. Consequently, historiographic metafiction questions specifiable ideological implications of the past by politicising them "through their metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction."²⁸

To conclude, the Canadian Postmodern cannot be addressed in formal and aesthetic terms alone. As Walter Pache argues, "Canadian postmodernism, beyond being a purely literary movement, emerges as an integral part of the cultural and political changes taking place in contemporary Canada."²⁹ This assumption, of course, places an emphasis on the revision of Canada's historical narratives.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Darias-Beautell, *Contemporary Theory*, p. 91.

²⁸ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 121.

²⁹ Walter Pache, "'The Fiction That Makes Us Real': Aspects of Postmodernism in Canada." Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik, (eds.) *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*. Western Canadian Literary Documents Series 6. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985, 64-78, p. 76.

Postcolonialism, according to Helen Tiffin, is to be understood as the writing “grounded in those societies whose subjectivity has been constituted in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism.” Furthermore, she attributes to postcolonialism “a set of discursive practices, prominent among which is resistance to colonialism, colonialist ideologies, and their contemporary forms and subjectificatory legacies.”³⁰ Since both postcolonialism and postmodernism – in their theoretical approaches – share the Lyotardian contestation of universalising narratives of the bourgeois Western cultural order, of history, absolute truth, etc., both postcolonial and postmodern literature inscribe different and multiple realities through discontinuous narratives of history, culture, and experiences of colonisation. Consequently, writers of postcolonial literature use historiographic metafiction as their primary artistic technique. By fictionally inscribing and rewriting colonial historiography, they subversively challenge what has been historically assumed about the act of colonising or being colonised, and therefore undermine *not* the legitimisation of the history of colonisation, but the Eurocentric, imperial historiography on colonisation.

Theo D’Haen differentiates the two theoretical concepts of postmodernism and postcolonialism with respect to their subversive effects of the socio-cultural hegemony. He considers the fantastic in postmodernism as the ultimate outcome of postcoloniality by stating that ‘regular’ poststructuralist postmodernism is mere deconstruction on a theoretical basis, but postcolonialism is the true effective challenge to the dominant cultural order by having the potential of true resistance. In other words, he considers the

³⁰ Helen Tiffin, “Introduction.” Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, (eds.) *Past the Last Post. Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, vii-xvi, p. vii.

theory of postmodernism as a Eurocentric theoretical discourse which accommodates in various forms

the Western discourse of 'reason' as legitimized by whatever 'scientific' underpinnings, whatever Lyotardian master or metanarratives, valid at any given time. This postmodernism, then, reveals itself as the heir to all other centralisms in mainstream Western literature. Fantastic postmodernism, on the other hand, falls heir to the 'parallel tradition' ... subsumed under 'the postcolonial'.³¹

This critique emphasises that 'applied postmodernism' within a fantastic discourse implies the most challenging effect of the dominant cultural order, which is expressed in postcolonial literature.

Furthermore, postcolonial literature and fantastic literature intersect in their representation of a marginalised Other. With its targeting of the history of colonialism and of colonialist ideologies, postcolonial writings imply a focus on an Other which is often identified as evil, strange, terrible, or insane. Jackson's discussion of the fantastic Other and its relation to its status in society bears great similarities to the portrayal of the Other in postcolonial theory:

In the guise of its 'unnameable' otherness, social realities are deformed and dismissed. The shadow on the edges of bourgeois culture is variously identified as black, mad, primitive, criminal, socially deprived, deviant, crippled, or (when sexually assertive) female.³²

Jackson indicates here that a racialised, sexualised, socially ostracised, marginalised and 'ex-centric' Other is a motif that combines the postcolonial with the fantastic and with gender studies. The interrelationship of these concepts results in an obvious effect of

³¹ Theo D'Haen. "Postmodern Gothic." Valeria Tinkler-Villani and Peter Davidson (eds.) *Exhibited by Candlelight. Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*. Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995, 283-94, p. 290.

³² Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 121.

inscribing and subverting the patriarchal cultural order and its dominant historical and social discourses.

In the third chapter, I come back to the discussion about the characteristics of the fantastic Other. The following chapter, however, focuses on the gendered analysis of history and nation within a Canadian context.

Deconstructing History, Gender, and Nation: The Canadian Case

As already stated earlier, this study emphasises historical and socio-cultural discourses prevalent in Canada by means of examining different novels that problematise some of these discourses; among other things also by their use of fantastic elements. By setting aside the subversive influences of the fantastic in this section, the following discussion gives a theoretical outline about particular phenomena that the works to be examined share, namely certain postcolonial elements in their approaches of deconstructing history, nation, and gender.

Feminist critics of postcolonial studies have often combined the concepts of gender, history and nation. The historical oppression of women has been theoretically compared to the act of colonisation, whereby the female subject is linked to the colonial subject by evaluating their common experience of being socially and politically disempowered within a national territory. Applying the categories of race, class and sexuality to the Canadian case of being a colonising/colonised multi-ethnic society, one could indeed compare the history of Canada to the history of the female subject in terms of a shared condition as Other. Darias-Beautell states that in Canada, “the explosion of transcultural texts in the last decade is inextricably interconnected with the amazing

number of texts by and about women.”³³ The literary techniques of Canadian women authors reflect those of writers of postcolonial literature, as Barbara Godard notices: “[C]ontemporary women’s writing especially is characterized by strategies of textual (and political) subversion, strategies of decentring and deflective irony which are the classic strategies of the colonized.”³⁴

Besides discussing different ‘herstories’³⁵ in this study, the concept of nation is analysed within its relation to women, or women’s relation to nation. Patricia Smart argues that the concept of nation is not gender-neutral but implicitly and explicitly male: “Nations without exception have used women as reproducers and educators and nurturers, all the while excluding them from power and from public space.”³⁶ In order to link the male concept of nation to the history of colonisation, both the female and the colonised subject are aware of the interaction of power and language to voice and thereby challenge their oppression. Hutcheon relates the connection between the power of language and the woman’s and the colonial’s liberating effort to the Canadian experience: “[T]he ex-centrics, be they Canadian, women, or both, can subvert the authority of language ... Not surprisingly, language has been called the major issue in the general

³³ Darias-Beautell, *Contemporary Theories*, p. 101. Among other critics of Canadian literature, Darias-Beautell speaks of the “feminization of the Canadian postmodern” (cf. p. 102) in this regard.

³⁴ Barbara Godard quoted in Stanley E. McMullin, “‘Adams Mad in Eden’: Magic Realism as Hinterland Experience.” Hinchcliffe, Peter and Ed Jewinski, (eds.) *Magic realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories*. Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986, pp. 13-22, p. 21.

³⁵ ‘Herstory’ is an accepted term in feminist studies to refer to the exclusive practices of historiography, or to the process of re-writing ‘his-story’ by recognising the experiences of women of different identities omitted in history. Thus, ‘herstory’ includes collective categories such as race, class, sexuality, etc., and therefore ‘herstory’ can also be linked to the history of colonial oppression of women.

³⁶ Patricia Smart, “The (In?)Compatibility of Gender and Nation in Canadian and Québécois Feminist Writing.” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 54 (1994 Winter): 12-22, p. 15.

history of decolonization, whether in terms of gender or of nationality [or, I would add, of both].”³⁷

An interesting phenomenon that links the categories of gender and nation in Canada is that the strong increase in Canadian writings by women started in the 1960s, which are the years of nationalist politics in Canada and in Quebec and of the rise of the women’s movement. Not surprisingly, the fiction created in the sixties often dealt with issues – both intellectually and politically – ranging from the Canadian identity to gender politics.³⁸ Considering the fact that Canada continues to work on the project of national identity and national unity by re-evaluating its relationship with the United States, with Aboriginal nationalism, with Quebec, and the sensibilities regarding racism, sexism and immigration, the literature created until today that subversively addresses these issues in one way or another has not ceased to exist either.

There is a rich body of literature discussing the condition of Canada as both a colonising and a colonised society with respect to Canadian/British/American cultural and power relations as well as the situation of cultural supremacy of one group over others within Canada. Diana Brydon suggests that Canada is an invader-settler colony with an “ambiguous, ‘interphase’ position between imperial and colonial minds.”³⁹ That is to say that any postcolonial Canadian non-Aboriginal literature on the one hand appropriates European master codes, but on the other hand also transforms them to represent their colonial status vis-à-vis its imperial centres such as Europe or the United States.

³⁷ Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 7.

³⁸ cf. Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 11.

³⁹ Diana Brydon quoted in Darias-Beautell, *Contemporary Theory*, p. 143-44.

As a result of this apparent 'code-switching' that depends on the subversive position of the particular Canadian text, writers of or writings about any culturally or socially oppressed groups in Canada, whether women, Aboriginal people, Quebecers, people of colour, immigrants, or a combination of them, must be carefully analysed from the perspectives of interrelating categories of history and nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and others.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is utterly important that the apparently binary approach of the centre versus margin has to be taken as a fluid and dynamic discourse that allows for the many interrelations, contradictions, discontinuities and inequalities that constitute the Canadian space; that is, the possibility of internal and multiple peripheries and centres within.

⁴⁰ The novels to be examined in this study will be analysed by using these categories.

CHAPTER 3: Forms of the literary fantastic and their subversive effects in

Canadian literature

The following chapter focuses on three forms of the fantastic: the Gothic, Magic Realism, and the Grotesque. The research in the field of the literary fantastic does not seem to have drawn a clear dividing line between the definitions of these terms, especially with regard to the differentiation between the Gothic and Magic Realism. Although the Gothic has been defined as the earliest fantastic form and it has its literary origins in Europe of the 18th and 19th century, whereas the Magic Realist as a literary form was first mentioned in the mid-20th century and has initially been associated with Latin American writings, both forms bear overlapping characteristics. In the following sections I differentiate the terms so that I can apply them to the characteristics of the fantastic in the novels within the borders of my definitions.

These forms of the fantastic are defined and distinguished according to their basic principles. Although I define the Grotesque as a sub-category to Gothic or Magic Realist representation rather as a mode of its own, I have dedicated a whole section to the Grotesque in this chapter. The two main fantastic modes – the Gothic and the Magic Realist – are applied to specific Canadian contexts in order to elucidate their subversive relevance in Canadian literary production.

Gothicism

The Theory of the Sublime: Gothic themes and techniques

The Gothic as a literary tradition has emerged in the period of European Romanticism of the 18th and 19th century as a counter-movement to the Enlightenment's

emphasis on reason and science. Its historical legacy regarding its emergence in the aftermaths of the French Revolution has been foregrounded by its distinctive revolutionary and rebellious character. The conventional atmosphere of most early Gothic novels is one of darkness and passion, superstition and violence, which has been considered as a reaction to society's prohibition and taboos. Therefore, literary research has traditionally assigned Gothic writings a subversive character that targets political and socio-cultural constraints.

As far as the relationship between Gothicism and realism is concerned, I would like to return to the spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity to the real, which I introduced in the beginning of this study. The Gothic is generally located at a far end of the spectrum signifying a profound degree of uncertainty and unfamiliarity to the real. The Gothic's extreme opposition to the real is visible both in its thematic and in its textual approach. This relationship of utmost resistance to the real is explained, among other things that are relevant in the later discussion of the novels, in the following section about the Gothic sublime.

Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant lay the ground theories of the Gothic sublime, which is one of the most influential theories on the aesthetics of the Gothic. As a basic principle, the Gothic enriches the aesthetics of the sublime into a psychology. According to Fred Botting, Gothic narratives are supposed to evoke in the reader feelings of both fascination and repulsion:

Gothic signified a trend towards an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion and associated primarily with the sublime. [...] The play of antitheses produces the ambivalent and excessive effects and reception of Gothic writings. [...] The emotions most associated with Gothic fiction are similarly ambivalent: objects of terror and horror not only provoke repugnance,

disgust and recoil, but also engage readers' interest, fascinating and attracting them. Threats are spiced with thrills, terror with delights, horror with pleasures.⁴¹

This leads to Edmund Burke's dichotomy of pain and pleasure in relation to the emotional effects of the sublime: "Pain generates self-preservation, terror, and the sublime, while pleasure 'enlist the social passions' related to society, love, and the beautiful."⁴² Burke establishes an interrelation between the sublime's emotional and psychological effects, created by both terror and the beautiful, with consequences connected to socialisation as further sources of these effects.

For Burke, the most powerful sources of the sublime are originally rooted in nature: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."⁴³ The dynamics between the psychological experiences and their awakening at the sight of natural phenomena recalls the relation between the human being and nature discussed in the literary aesthetics of Romanticism. In Gothicism, which was originally a subgenre of Romanticism at the time of its emergence in literature, natural landscapes are not described without references to the human soul, but with explicit concepts of grandeur and magnificence that evoke sublime experiences that aesthetically and emotionally attract both the writer and the reader. The Romantic author puts emphasis on the subject

⁴¹ Fred Botting, *Gothic*. London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 3, 9.

⁴² Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 30. Mishra discusses Edmund Burke's famous *A Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1759.

⁴³ Burke quoted in Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, p. 31.

in relation to nature. Therefore, Romantic nature poetry and prose are not about nature *per se*, but about the *relationship* between the human being and nature; or more generally, about the Romantic writer's aiming to merge subject and object. That is the goal of the writer of the Gothic narrative as well.

Immanuel Kant creates a stronger distinction between the beautiful and the sublime with respect to nature, by which the beautiful is a metaphysical and ideological principle, whereas the sublime aspires to be a transcendental one. That means that sublimity is not a quality intrinsic to the (natural) object, it is profoundly a state of mind transcending every standard of sense.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the sublime in general has an inherent source of energy, in which the mind tries to grasp what reason has established as law, but the experience of the sublime "pushes the imagination to a crisis point, to a point of exhaustion and chaos."⁴⁵ The imagination aspires to grasp the unimaginable, the limitless, the unrepresentable, and is consequently driven to limits and ultimately to artistic excess. Such excess may be symptomatic of madness, mental disorder, resulting in the fear of the loss of self. These symptoms of excess are pathologically psychological effects of the sublime. It is exactly these effects, Mishra argues, that connect directly with the Gothic.⁴⁶ However, the effect of mental disorder can also be seen as a liberating effect of the Gothic subject according to Jennifer Andrews. Gothic novels epitomised the return of the repressed in psychoanalytic terms, in which the subconscious psychic energy

⁴⁴ Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, p. 33.

⁴⁶ Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, p. 34.

bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego. This results in a rather liberating effect of mental freedom, which can also result in an effect of socially subversive force.⁴⁷

The Gothic subject on the edge of sanity/insanity echoes the fragmentation of unified character or identity discussed in a previous section of this study. The loss of wholeness the subject feels in his or her schizophrenic state of mind (resulting in a reflection of the self as distorted Other) is almost like a fear of loss of self according to the Kantian sublime. This Kantian fear of loss of self is then comparable to the fear felt by the subject in the Burkean sublime, which is the fear of death as the principal basis of terror.⁴⁸ This Gothic subject's fear of death in the sublime can be related to Kant's aforementioned failure of representation initiated by the sublime. The ungraspable, unrepresentable object is, according to Mishra, the impossible object, or impossible idea. The impossible idea is the idea of death. For Burke, the mind introjects the fear of death, which is the cause of absolute terror. The Gothic sublime as a projection of psychic terror leads to the unrepresentability of death itself. In order to close the circle by returning to the Gothic's relation to realism, it is the Gothic sublime that is the absolute source of the uncertainty and unfamiliarity to the real. The sublime's ultimate unrepresentability thus means absolute opposition to the representation of anything real. Therefore, the Gothic is located at the extreme end of the previously established spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Andrews, "Native Canadian Gothic Refigured: Reading Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 73 (2001 Spring): 1-24, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism. Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, p. 2.

Sources of the sublime in terms of Gothic themes and techniques vary. Besides the fear or permanent awareness of death and the constant preoccupation with evil,⁴⁹ nature, or rather, the relationship of the subject with nature is a prevalent theme in Gothic literature from the era of Romanticism until today. A typical motif in the area of Gothic feeling and emotion is the irrational side of emotional, imaginative and sensational experience. According to Carol Ann Howells, the main areas of feeling in Gothic fiction deal with “melancholy, anxiety-ridden sentimental love and horror ... lit up from time to time by lurid flashes of passion and violence.”⁵⁰ The Gothic’s extreme antagonism to the real and its preoccupation with anything unreal, unrepresentable, and Other, recalls postmodern implications of fragmented subjectivity, the distorted self as Other, and the supernatural in its direct opposition to the real and human. The supernatural in Gothic fictions confines ‘Otherness’ to the dark, demonic, or monstrous, very often connected with constructions of evil. “Blackness, night, darkness always surrounded this ‘other, this unseen presence, outside the forms and visible confines of the ‘ordinary’ and ‘common’.”⁵¹ It is important to note here that the presence of the supernatural is also predominant in Magic Realist fiction. However, the Gothic supernatural is more often associated with demons, ghosts, spirits, devils, and usually connotes a malignant, destructive force,⁵² whereas the Magic Realist supernatural Other is not necessarily mean-spirited.

⁴⁹ Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and the Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976, pp. 108-9.

⁵⁰ Carol Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction*. London: The Athlone Press, 1995, p. 5.

⁵¹ Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 54.

⁵² Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 55.

The Female Gothic⁵³

Any Gothic fiction is said to refer to the contemporary cultural development of a particular society because of its subversive potential that expresses and subverts the cultural anxieties of any period or social make-up. Susanne Becker argues that Gothic literature has always been provocation and rebellion against order, control, and the power of restrictive ideologies. She consequently creates the relationship between gender and genre by her conviction that “one of the secrets of the gothic’s persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine.”⁵⁴ Most of the gender-related research of the Gothic generally claims that the Gothic is a metaphor for female experience of oppression and for a voice subversively expressing women’s perspectives. This view transcends historical or literary periods of course. Hence, the strong gendered perspective of the Gothic has been assigned to works ranging from authors like Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley to A.S. Byatt, Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood, who express their socio-cultural anxieties of the respective time and place in their Gothic writings.

One typical Gothic feature is the Gothic mansion or the haunted house, which is also a prominent thematic element in many Gothic works written by men, as for example *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole or *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe. In women’s Gothic fiction, however, the labyrinthine structures of the Gothic house are often metaphorically transferred to a place of domestic horror experienced by

⁵³ This term was introduced by critics like Ellen Moers and Juliann E. Fleenor – two of the early critics who analysed the Gothic genre from feminist perspectives. I use the term from Juliann Fleenor’s book titled *The Female Gothic*. Montreal: Eden Press, 1983.

⁵⁴ Susanne Becker. *Gothic forms of feminine fictions*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. 2, 4.

the female subject, which points to the idea of the 'house' as a woman's assigned place. The Gothic house in the female Gothic conceptualises the notion of 'enclosure'; thus, the 'house' is a metaphor of 'containment', where the female subject is imprisoned. The house stands for the woman's spatial enclosure as well as for social and ideological constraints that exclude women from the world of work, or from participating in society in general. Thus, the traditional Gothic haunted house is metaphorically exceeded to a metaphor of space and place of female experience. The literal escape from the Gothic house indicates a metaphorical liberation from social or ideological constraints, which is one subversive task of the Gothic.

The house metaphor also includes Gothic dimensions of female subjectivity and identity and gender construction. It reminds the female subject of her cultural, ideological, and spatial enclosure in a patriarchal society that puts her into the context of chaste and virtuous femininity. Gothic fictions draw attention to idealised constructs of femininity, foregrounding processes involving the female body and emotion, sex, desire, fear, and horror, "[a]nd Gothic heroines, caught in the web of femininity, spin their threads to *exceed* and *escape* the ... gothic houses of fiction."⁵⁵ The Gothic romance has on the one hand a potential of promoting the ideal of the 'proper' feminine subject, but on the other hand, a potential for subverting it by creating its opposition, or what Becker calls "the most famous female figure of the gothic tradition: the monstrous-feminine."⁵⁶ The monstrous-feminine is created by the patriarchal imposition of certain standards of what is feminine in order to justify that these standards for femininity are 'natural.' Consequently, a woman who refuses to conform to these standards can be marked both as

⁵⁵ Becker, *Gothic forms of feminine fictions*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Becker, *Gothic forms of feminine fictions*, p. 44.

‘unfeminine’ or even ‘unnatural’, that is, grotesquely monstrous. These female figures are often described as mad, wild, animalistic, and most often, hypersexual. As a contrast to the ‘proper’ ideal of femininity, this monstrous Other is closely linked to the female body as a target for gothicised dimensions of female sexuality. As Gerry Turcotte argues, Gothic texts have always had an interest in the corporeal and the sexual, usually linked to female sexuality. He notices that predominantly in Gothic novels of the 20th century, the preoccupation of the sexual is seen as a way of commenting on the values embedded in the traditional Gothic romance, as well as to fissure such systems through the introduction of the ‘unsuitable’ material that does not conform to or reconfirm dominant perspectives on the vulnerable or hypersexualised female body.⁵⁷ This recalls Becker’s concept of the monstrous-feminine that both acknowledges and subverts traditional notions of female sexuality. A recurrent motif of Gothic aesthetics is a mirror scene that reflects the fragmentation of the female self; “the mirror itself becomes the site for the classic female gothic trajectory of the female (the mother’s) body; monstrosity and creativity as well as separation/abjection.”⁵⁸ The monstrous-feminine figure enhances the horror of the story and is among the most powerful female figures of literary history according to Becker, “representing forces which are among the most challenging to the structures both of the house of fiction and of the symbolic order. ... The monstrous-feminine is one of the strongest connecting forces within the web of gothic writing.”⁵⁹

In terms of the Gothic’s perspective to the gendered critique of literary realism, the house metaphor is also a metaphor for the woman writer that writes in the Father’s

⁵⁷ Gerry Turcotte, “Sexual Gothic: Marian Engel’s *Bear* and Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well*,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 26:2 (April 1995): 65-91, p. 67.

⁵⁸ Becker, *Gothic forms of feminine fictions*, p. 164.

⁵⁹ Becker, *Gothic forms of feminine fictions*, p. 57.

House, which was discussed in the beginning of this study. Generally then, the Female Gothic's subversive task is to shake the walls of the Father's House. Given the aforementioned assumption that the Gothic is the most extreme antagonist to realism, it is consequently the most subversive mode to challenge the Father's House including its social, cultural, and ideological constraints.

Canadian Gothicism

In the only book-length study on the phenomenon of a Canadian Gothic, Margot Northey offers the following definition of the Gothic:

Gothic refers to a subjective view of the dark side of life, seen through the distorting mirror of the self, with its submerged levels of psychic and spiritual experiences. Non-realistic and essentially symbolic in its approach, the gothic opens up various possibilities of psychological, spiritual, or social interpretation.⁶⁰

Moreover, she characterises the Canadian Gothic by a unique awareness of death, a constant preoccupation of evil, the persistent feature of individual or collective fear in the sense of threat to or collapse of an entire culture.⁶¹ Besides adopting views of the Gothic already discussed before, she emphasises the fragmentation of unified self that results in psychological, spiritual or social effects. Where these effects have their Gothic origins within specific Canadian contexts are discussed in the following.

The most prominent Gothic features when it comes to the Canadian literary imagination are with no doubt nature, the wilderness or the image of the North. For example, Atwood's telling phrase 'Nature the monster' structures her own thematic study

⁶⁰ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, pp. 108-9.

of Canadian literature, *Survival* (1972), and she focuses on the subject's encounter with alien surroundings that has gothically marked Canadian culture. Northrop Frye's Gothic views expressed by his claustrophobic motif of the garrison mentality, in which he juxtaposes the garrison (as a closely knit and beleaguered society) to nature, is an image of 'a terror of the soul' in the face of 'the vast unconsciousness of nature' – an image which echoes the aforementioned source of the sublime and is transhistoricised into modern Canadian culture.⁶² In fact, Margot Northey also identifies the subject in most early Gothic writings in Canada as being strongly associated with an image of nature that inhabits a deep tone of terror, in which the forest wilderness is a symbol of the evil forces of life.⁶³ Susanna Moodie's 1852 perceptions of the Canadian wilderness certainly comply with these conceptions of terror and evil in *Roughing It in the Bush*. These evil forces reinforce an increasing awareness of the psychological dimension of evil inherent in the Gothic, which echoes the relationship between the human soul and nature within a Canadian context. The opposition between ambiguous savagery of Canadian wilderness (and its native inhabitants) and the equally ambiguous civilisation of the European arriving from the Old World "objectifies the necessarily confused inner state of those who would – and would not – indulge both their ids and their superegos. In short, psychology recapitulates geography and history. The result is that constrained passion generally spins the Canadian gothic plot."⁶⁴ An early Canadian Gothic prototype that discusses the themes of terror, evil and savage nature that constrains the subject into psychic terrors is John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832).

⁶² Becker, *Gothic forms of feminine fictions*, p. 93.

⁶³ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 48.

⁶⁴ Arnold E. Davidson, "Canadian Gothic and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*." *MFS. Modern Fiction Studies*, 27:2 (1981 Summer): 243-54, p. 245.

The vicious encounters of the European settlers with the wild nature and Aboriginal civilisations that they found in the New World can be interpreted by means of a Gothic dimension of Canadian colonial thinking. The Gothic imagination specifically calls upon 'Canadian Monsters' as prototypes of the Other who inhabit the Canadian wilderness. These 'ex-centric' appearances are symbolic for the world of the unexplored, and often have their origin in native myths, which will be explored in more detail in the section on Magic Realism.

The gothicised dimension of the Canadian wilderness put into a gendered perspective can be analysed as a postmodern subversion of the traditional literary Canadian myth of the wilderness as being female. In the traditional 19th century explorer literature, the male explorer pervades the female Canadian wilderness and colonises it; makes 'her' his own. Atwood states that in traditional Canadian literature "[m]ale protagonists ... are out encountering the land – they penetrate it, they open it up, they stake it out, they grapple with it, they fight with it, they wrest its secrets and its treasures from it, they win or lose."⁶⁵ However, what happens to the idea of the Canadian wilderness as female if the exploring subject suddenly happens to be a woman? Female protagonists especially in 20th century women's writings start going off into the woods to be by themselves, to get away from a man, or to get a job – examples are *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood, *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence, *No Fixed Address* by Aritha van Herk, or *Bear* by Marian Engel. These authors subvert the traditional Canadian myth of the male explorer penetrating Canadian nature, in which theoretical links between postcolonial and feminist theory are obvious.

⁶⁵ Atwood, *Strange Things*, p. 97.

In the research on the Canadian Gothic, the literature from Quebec is considered different from the Anglophone works because of its distinct Gothic qualities. Northey compares the Gothic of French Canada and the American South on the basis of their cultural parallels, for example their experience of (military) defeat, or of their clinging to traditional ways of life and relying on the power of religion. In Quebec in particular, the Gothic signifies a mood representing their political situation of being colonised by the English and thereby alienated especially with respect to language and culture. This situation has led to the literary production focusing on “the losers, the loners, the monstrous cripples, and the victims of the world.”⁶⁶ Their cultural and political situation has created a sense of marginality and vulnerability, and the Gothic is a genre to articulate the estrangement and doom felt by Quebecers on the one hand. On the other hand, however, the Gothic as a response to ‘cultural disorder’ with its absence of a frame of reality or stability of meaning paradoxically provides the possibility of cultural revitalisation by exploring the topics of ‘unreality,’ evil and disintegration.⁶⁷

Without trying to equate the Quebec historical experience with the experience of Canada’s Aboriginal people, the relevance of the Gothic/fantastic for cultural survival may apply to Aboriginal literature as well. By the use of Gothic, or more generally, by the use of fantastic elements in Aboriginal writings, the cultural order imposed by colonialism (whether European or Canadian colonialism) is challenged, and a potential for the voice of the culturally oppressed is given by the subversive power of the fantastic/Gothic. Hence, the Gothic may be a powerful tool for a variety of Canadian

⁶⁶ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 50.

⁶⁷ cf. Andrews, “Native Canadian Gothic Refigured”, p. 7.

writers – regardless of their cultural heritage – to explore the historical, social and cultural constraints of the nation.

Magic Realism

Theoretical Approaches

The term Magic Realism was first mentioned in Germany in 1925 by Franz Roh who characterised it as a distinctive return to a more realistic style after Expressionism's more abstract style (also so-called Post-Expressionism).⁶⁸ After this characterisation in the field of the fine arts, the term's literary expression has then been mostly affiliated with a style prevalent in South and Central American writings, where it became intimately connected with the myths and cultures of the indigenous populations. The 'fantastic juxtaposition' in Magic Realism was associated with a clash between the mythic (magic) view of the world and European rationalism (realism).⁶⁹ Since it seems to have become a phenomenon especially in English Canadian writings as well, Magic Realism has received a place within the context of Canadian literary culture especially with regard to its specific engagement with postcoloniality.

As a basic principle that emphasises the relationship between Magic Realism and the fantastic, the oxymoronic nature of the term already suggests something of a controversial and consequently subversive character. In fact, the concept suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that of fantasy.

⁶⁸ Franz Roh, "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism (Editor's Note)." Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (eds.) *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 1995, 15-31, p. 15.

⁶⁹ Jeanne Delbaere, "Magic Realism: the Energy of the Margins." Theo D'Haen and Hans Bertens, (eds.) *Postmodern Fiction in Canada*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992, 75-104, p. 76.

However, as opposed to the Gothic, the levels of the fantastic and the real are more porous in Magic Realism, as Geoff Hancock explains, “the ‘real’ is breaking down, ... breaking through. What we once thought of as ‘unreal’ is becoming more and more the only ‘true’ or ‘equally valid’ reality.”⁷⁰ In Magic Realism, the two worlds, the real world and the magical/fantastic world, coexist more symbiotically (than in Gothicism) which creates a hybrid fictional space where opposite and conflicting properties are co-present and interdependent. Thereby, the fantastic/Magic Realist loses the very uneasy nature of the ‘unreal’ that is so terrifying in the Gothic: “Two worlds – distinct – following dissimilar laws – interact, interpenetrate and interwind, unpredictably but in a natural fashion.”⁷¹ Hence, to return to the spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity to the real, I would place the Magic Realist closer to the ‘familiarity’ side than where the Gothic is located, the latter of which being at the far end strongly opposing familiarity and certainty. While still being ‘foreign’ to the real, Magic Realism is always more part of the real than the Gothic can ever be.

The supernatural is very predominant in Magic Realist writings, and its emergence relies heavily on superstition and primitive faith of the culture in which it receives its literary expression. As opposed to the supernatural of the Gothic where the appearance of a ghost or a vampire seems disconnected from any cultural context on the surface, the Magic Realist supernatural has its source in popular myths, legends and folklore as well as in the oral tradition of a specific culture. Therefore, it is strongly but not exclusively associated with apparitions prevalent in indigenous writings of South and

⁷⁰ Geoff Hancock, “Magic or Realism: The Marvellous in Canadian Fiction.” Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed. Jewinski, (eds.) *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories*. Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986, 30-48, p. 42.

⁷¹ Hancock, “Magic or Realism”, p. 71.

North American native mythologies; examples for the latter may be the Sasquatch, the Hamatsa and the Tsonoqua. It is important to note, however, that the supernatural in Magic Realist fiction is not problematic or frightening as it is in Gothic fiction. Herb Wyile argues that in Magic Realism, “the supernatural is ... an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism.”⁷² Again, Magic Realism seems much closer to realism than the Gothic. Magic Realism attempts to converge the real and the supernatural so that the supernatural seems as ordinary and normal as the real. The Magic Realist supernatural apparition is thus more a part of the real and therefore not too much associated with a terrifying fear of the unknown which the Gothic supernatural tends to produce.

Apart from a thematic approach discussed here by the example of the supernatural, Magic Realism especially functions with regard to its distinct narrative style or texture. Lucie Armitt argues that the

narrative structure of magic realism follows a type of ghosting formula, which, in its attempts to demonstrate the inadequacies of realism and to come to terms with the genuinely marvellous within the real, constructs a palimpsest that interrogates the mimetic as it coincides with it and tracks its progress.⁷³

In other words, Magic Realist texture produces for example semantic incongruities (which are of course created by using realist language) in order to express a specific atmosphere that exceeds the semantic capacity of realist language. Hancock offers a few examples of Magic Realist aesthetics of textual images. He distinguishes between

⁷² Herb Wyile, “‘The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness’: Myth, History, and the New Dominion in Jane Urquhart’s *Away*,” *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 24 (1999/1): 20-45, p. 23.

⁷³ Lucie Armitt, “The Magical Realism of the Contemporary Gothic,” David Punter, (ed.) *A Companion to the Gothic*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, 305-16, p. 307.

contradictory images (“the movement of non-existent curtains in the windows of future houses”), hallucinatory images (“eternity found in a wristwatch”) or negative images (“the earth was blue like an orange”).⁷⁴ The Magic Realist novel is a site of a “diversity of social speech types” according to Michail Bakhtin, where “a battle of the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems takes place, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other.”⁷⁵ ‘Magic Realist language’ is comprised of the vitality of language showing layers of formal and informal diction, hyperbole, distortions of times and places, and, in thematic terms, doubles or transformations in order to contribute to a blurring of the textual borders between fiction and reality exerted in these writings.

Canadian Magic Realism and (Post)Colonial Discourse

At the beginning of the previous section, I mention the relevance of Magic Realism in a Canadian context with regard to its specific engagement with postcoloniality. In fact, most critics working on the socio-cultural and historical effects of this fantastic mode have realised the close connection of this mode with an interest in the (post)colonial condition in the writings of Latin America, India, Australia, or Canada; societies where “in a literary context magical realism is most obviously operative in cultures situated at the fringes of the mainstream literary traditions.” Critics like Kroetsch, Slemon, D’Haen and Delbaere all arrive at this conclusion by a general agreement that the “use of magic realist devices are also about marginality and silenced

⁷⁴ Hancock, “Magic or Realism”, p. 41.

⁷⁵cf. Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse.” Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (eds.) *Magical Realism. Theory. History. Community*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 1995, 405-26, p. 410.

voices.”⁷⁶ By creating a link between the mode of Magic Realism to the contemporary movement of postmodernism, D’Haen argues that “it is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place ‘other’ than ‘the’ or ‘a’ center, that seems to me an essential feature of that strain of postmodernism we call magic realism.”⁷⁷

In another article, D’Haen elaborates on the displacement of these centres in Magic Realism: “Magic Realism tends to single out some ‘privileged center’ – of culture, or race, of gender – as embodied in traditional literary discourse, and then via Postmodernist and Magic Realist means, dis-place it.”⁷⁸ This is to analyse an important aspect that distinguishes the Magic Realist from the Gothic with regard to the political effectiveness of the centre/margin discourse. Due to the extreme opposition of realism, the Gothic radically objects to any privileged centre that has been established by realism (for example, Euro-centric rationality). Since Magic Realism exists in a more dynamic relationship with the real, it only displaces the centre, which allows more room for discourse between centres and margins than in the Gothic. Therefore, the Magic Realist has been argued to have a stronger effect of political consciousness-raising and is thus particularly rooted in postcolonial and feminist writings whose Magic Realist elements are often accompanied by “an individual and cultural search for otherwise lost or silenced origins, in which history becomes resituated. ... [T]herefore, ... magic realism is frequently read as a post-colonial fantasy discourse.”⁷⁹ Although a gender-specific strain

⁷⁶ Delbaere, “Magic Realism”, p. 97.

⁷⁷ Theo D’Haen, “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers.” Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, (eds.) *Magical Realism. Theory. History. Community*. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 1995, 191-208, p. 194.

⁷⁸ Theo D’Haen, “Timothy Findley: Magical Realism and the Canadian Postmodern.” Jeanne Delbaere, (ed.) *Multiple Voices. Recent Canadian Fiction*. Brussels: Dangaroo Press, 1990, 217-33, p. 229.

⁷⁹ Armitt, “The Magical Realism of the Contemporary Gothic”, pp. 307-8.

is not explicitly analysed by the critics mentioned above, Magic Realism has the effect of displacing *any* dominant, or 'privileged' centre. Therefore, I emphasise the significance of women's historical and socio-cultural marginality (especially with regard to the novels to be examined) that is challenged in Magic Realist literature. The subversive, politicised and liberating strengths of Canadian Magic Realism I therefore see in its deep concern with cultural myths and socio-historical experiences together with a political determination to regain an individual or collective identity largely eclipsed by European or American colonialism and/or male-dominated ideologies. Examples of Canadian Magic Realist works are, for example, Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983). Swan herself once analysed the relation between Canada and woman in the discourse of ex-centricity: "to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel – cut off from the bases of power."⁸⁰ Other examples are Timothy Findley's *The Telling of Lies* (1986) or *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984). The Magic Realist elements in these works are marked by marginality and silenced voices: Canada vis-à-vis the U.S, women and animals vis-à-vis male domination.⁸¹ In Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* (1978), the real and the fantastic/mythical world interpenetrate, for example a woman made pregnant by a swarm of bees, a dead man ploughing the snow, a child raised by wolves, and other 'ex-centric' encounters.⁸² In addition, Slemon argues that Kroetsch thematises a kind of postcolonial discourse involving the recuperation of silenced voices localised in a region that is metonymic of English-Canadian postcolonial culture as a whole.⁸³ For this

⁸⁰ Hutcheon quotes Swan in D'Haen's discussion about Canadian Magic Realism, cf. D'Haen, "Timothy Findley", p. 223.

⁸¹ Delbaere, "Magic Realism", p. 97.

⁸² Delbaere, "Magic Realism", p. 93.

⁸³ For a more detailed discussion on Kroetsch's engagement with postcolonial discourse see Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse", p. 420.

study, I analyse and show Jane Urquhart and Eden Robinson to be advocates of Magic Realist techniques that stress their characters' experiences that are metonymic for a politicised message with regard to their particular place, culture, and history.

The Grotesque

The Grotesque is regarded as a phenomenon that is independent of genre, place or literary period, because it is accentuated primarily by psychological factors that are transferred to levels of strong socio-political criticism.⁸⁴ I include it in the study on the fantastic because, like the Gothic and the Magic Realist, it reacts "against the conventional ordering of reality, seeking in strange ways a truth beyond the accepted surface of life."⁸⁵ Therefore, I do not classify the Grotesque as a mode equal to the Gothic or the Magic Realist, but rather as a sub-category of these types analysed in the previous sections.

Characteristic examples of Grotesque expression are monstrosity, deformity, death, madness, incest, necrophilia, sadism, or masochism. Predominant thematic features are themes of radical disintegration, both of social and of personal kind. According to Robertson, a long critical tradition has defined the Grotesque in terms of the psychological crisis that develops in the depths of conflicting emotional stimuli.⁸⁶ Physical deformity is often metaphorically associated with a collapse of social values, or

⁸⁴ Christian W Thomsen, "Das Groteske." Ansgar Nünning, (ed.) *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*. Stuttgart / Weimar: Metzler, 2001, 233-34, p. 233.

⁸⁵ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 8. Northey explicitly classifies it as a mode of the Gothic, because she insists that the dominant themes of both types are sin and death.

⁸⁶ Alton Kim Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface. Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution*. Frankfurt am Main / Madrid: Vervuert / Iberoamericana, 1996, pp. 5-6.

cultural oppression and depravity. Thereby, the representation of grotesque deformation is mostly rooted in psychological and socio-cultural disintegration.

With regard to the spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity to what is considered 'real', I argue that the Grotesque oscillates between the Magic Realist and the Gothic – depending on the purpose of one single Grotesque circumstance – because the range of the Grotesque effects is large. On the one hand, the Grotesque operates as an absolute contradiction to order and is expressed by extreme distortion and alienation effects.⁸⁷ It emphasises incongruity and disintegration, disorder and deformity, and it arises from the juxtaposition or clash of the ideal with the real, the psychic with the physical, or the concrete with the symbolic.⁸⁸ The 'grotesque' conflict between the two contradictory principles involves a radical subversion, by which no alternatives are possible: order or anarchy, but either only in the absolute.⁸⁹ As opposed to Magic Realism, or even to some extent to the Gothic, the Grotesque does definitely not tolerate the peaceful co-existence of its contradicting principles. This absolute and radical reading of the Grotesque suggests a place even further extreme than the Gothic on the scale, since in its radical subversion of anything possible it does not allow any room for discourse. On the other hand, the Grotesque can also have qualities that are closer to Magic Realism, because it also operates in myth, in the carnivalesque, in satire, in caricature, in irony and parody.⁹⁰ In this reading, the Grotesque can produce strong comic effects, ranging from absurd ridicule via black humour to sardonic hilarity. In these cases, the Grotesque has more

⁸⁷ Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface*, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁸ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 7.

⁸⁹ Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface*, p. 5.

⁹⁰ Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface*, pp. vii-viii. Since Robertson examines the Grotesque in the work of Gabriel García Márquez, I presume that there are strong similarities to the Magic Realist since in the general research on Magic Realism, García Márquez is mentioned as a major representative that mode.

tolerance toward socio-political discourse since aforementioned comic genres usually involve strong social criticism. In sum, one can infer that the Grotesque is the most flexible mode since it freely oscillates between the far end of Magic Realism to the other extreme where the Gothic is situated on the spectrum of unfamiliarity and uncertainty to the real. Thus, this mode overlaps even stronger with the Gothic and the Magic Realist than these two modes of the fantastic do among each other.

Having set the theoretical stage by having analysed several perspectives of twentieth century Canadian literature, and elaborated on three aesthetic forms of the fantastic and their relevance in Canadian literature, I now apply these theoretical foundations to the novels I mentioned in the beginning of this study. In doing so, I demonstrate that *among* the three categories of the Gothic, Magic Realism, and the Grotesque, the defining boundaries are fluid. In this study as such, the theoretical borders of the Gothic, Magic Realist and Grotesque elements may overlap with regard to specific instances in the novels. I illustrate that all the novels bear these fantastic characteristics for the purpose of conveying subversive facets to challenge historical, ideological, or socio-cultural factors prevalent in Canadian society. In addition, I demonstrate that each novel transmits a unique feminist perspective in order to prove that the literature by Canadian women uphold their powerful reputation.

CHAPTER 4: The female Gothic, the terrible Grotesque, and the Quebec

experience: Marie-Claire Blais' *Mad Shadows* and Anne Hébert's
Kamouraska

Gender, nation, and the literature of Quebec

Before discussing the two novels, the following section focuses on a few aspects that demonstrate the unique character of women's writing from Quebec in the mid-twentieth century. Canadian and Quebec literature from the 1960s onwards have started to strongly diverge, partially because of their national movements that lead to an explosion of literary activities on both sides. While English Canada was trying to articulate a cultural identity at a time when increasing Americanisation and internationalisation started to impact upon Canadian cultural distinctiveness, Quebecers were undergoing a different process of self-definition. The decreasing authority of the Catholic Church, a significant value change in society, a new confidence towards the French language and a proud insistence on the distinctiveness of the Québécois culture that determinedly challenges the assimilatory force of English Canada have contributed to the ignition of a powerful national awareness in Quebec. In this study, I argue that the two novels reveal strong links to the 1960s and 1970s' identity-finding process in Quebec, which is illustrated by the authors' exploring and challenging Quebec's cultural past and traditions and articulated from a female/feminist perspective.

Quebec's search for its national identity and collective destiny from the 1960s onwards is reflected in much of its literature by recurring motifs of economic poverty, solitude, moral destitution, cultural poverty and the destitution of language, and colonial humiliation, whose effects often result in the general themes of dissatisfaction,

uncertainty, and violence. In many of these novels, English Canadians, the Québécois society itself, the priests, fate, colonialism, or God are variously held responsible for these themes of disillusionment.⁹¹ Moreover, Bourneuf identifies a strong correlation between the problem of the individual protagonist and the national identity in many of these novels;⁹² in other words, the plots and the problems of the characters can be understood as metaphorically linked to a particular state of Quebec society. Consequently, these novels are often indirectly but inevitably political.

It has been argued earlier that there is an important link between the notions of gender and nation. Quebec's national survival, or *survivance*, is inescapably connected to the notion of gender, which is however defined by male-centred ideological doctrine. The ideology of Quebec's national survival from its beginnings depended entirely for its coherence on the adherence of women to their traditional reproductive role – for according to the powerful influence of Catholic leaders it is only through 'the revenge of the cradle' that French Canada could hope to subsist within North America.⁹³ The influence of the Catholic Church supported a male-centred ideology that promoted the institutionalisation of traditionally assigned gender roles and sexual repression, and which "imposed upon women the role of the guardians of the francophone culture, that is, of religion and of the French language."⁹⁴ This idealised mother figure as the guardian of French-Canadian culture is marked by passivity, virtue, submission, and self-sacrifice. This myth of the idealised feminine – which symbolically represents the image of Quebec

⁹¹ Roland Bourneuf, "Literary Form and Social Reality in the Québec Novel." Translated by Larry Shouldice. *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 16 (1979-1980): 219-28, p. 222.

⁹² Bourneuf, "Literary Form and Social Reality", p. 224.

⁹³ Smart, "Introduction", p. 12.

⁹⁴ Paula Gilbert Lewis, "Introduction." Paula Gilbert Lewis, (ed.) *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism. Women Writers of Quebec*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985, 3-10, p. 5.

society itself until before the Quiet Revolution – had been perpetuated by the patriarchal (family) ideology of Quebec culture until the mid-twentieth century.

The way in which gender and nation interact here is limited to the reproductive role of the woman and its relevance to cultural survival; consequently, the concept of nation is still identified as masculine because the role of the woman is assigned to her by a male-centred ideology. As a result, in a patriarchal culture, it is all the more necessary to find the feminist interpretation of the relation between gender and nation. In the Quebec nationalist movement, the feminist movement had apparently more difficulties to render the concepts of gender and nation compatible than English Canadian feminists had: “[I]n Quebec, we find a far more violent confrontation between the interests of women and those of nation.”⁹⁵ The masculine nature of the Quebec nation seems to be more vigorous than in English Canada, because “in the Quiet Revolution period, the quest for *le pays* has been figured in the literature as a quest for male identity.”⁹⁶ Consequently, feminist writing in Quebec has seemed to make “‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ the unspeakable,” although the “idea of nation has always been inescapably present in the collective consciousness in Quebec.”⁹⁷ However, it is exactly within the notion of the ‘unspeakable’ where I find the essence of the Quebec woman writer’s potential for a powerful commentary to the nationalist movement. Echoing the Gothic sublime’s preoccupation with the unimaginable, unrepresentable, the ‘unspeakable’ within a nationalist discourse is thus where the fantastic aesthetic discloses its subversive voice in literature, and where women writers challenge both the Quebec nation that

⁹⁵ Smart, “The (In?)Compatibility of Gender and Nation”, p. 18.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

perpetuates a patriarchal culture, and the colonising and assimilatory force imposed on Quebec by English Canada.

Hence, the Quebec woman writer of the mid-twentieth century may often have a dual concern. On the one hand, she expresses her feminism by challenging the Quebec's cultural past with its oppressive constraints exerted on women. On the other hand, she promotes Quebec's national identity and critiques Anglo-Canadian colonialism, often by reconstructing the Quebec cultural disillusionment (past and present) by working with themes of dissatisfaction, uncertainty, or violence, often articulated in the characters or plot structures.⁹⁸ I believe that both Québécoise writers to be examined in the following discursively operate with these political concerns by using the subversive power of the Gothic and the Grotesque.

Gothic and Grotesque distortions of the Quebec nation: Marie-Claire Blais' *Mad*

Shadows

Mad Shadows was Marie-Claire Blais' first novel published in 1959. The novel metaphorically relates to the social reality of the period preceding the Quiet Revolution in Quebec; at a moment when the old order of society had clearly outlived itself, but when the forces of renewal had not yet proven their ability to move toward positive change. Blais describes the very disillusionment and frustration of the society by challenging extensively the traditional order of society with all its repressive constraints on the individual, particularly on women.

⁹⁸ Paula Gilbert Lewis has identified the link between nationalism and feminism in Quebec by stating that "Québécois [...] feminist writers are still concerned with the problems of class struggle, cultural identity, and linguistic rights that plague the average male Quebecer." (Lewis, "Introduction", p. 5.)

In her Gothic critique, Blais hyperbolically refers to the radical disruption of society by exploring the nature of evil and its particular manifestations in Quebec society, which is freeing itself slowly and painfully from the throes of a rigorous Catholicism with its restrictive traditional value system. Furthermore, her use of several elements of the Grotesque signifying the lack of realism reflects destructive rage and absolute disillusionment without any hint of optimism to effect social change. Therefore, I classify the fantastic mode of the novel as a borderline case with overlapping characteristics of the Gothic and the Grotesque, because due to the Grotesque's radicalism, the novel does not allow for much accommodating political discourse.

In *Mad Shadows*, Blais violently opposes realism, which is reflected in her denial of the realities of Quebec society. In doing so, she treats these realities as a nightmare.

Indeed it was only by exaggeration ... that she [Blais] was able to achieve integration.... Thus, once she has denied reality [she has] removed its power to destroy the individual.... To tell the nightmare is to free oneself from it, to escape its power. And the fantastic elements in the narration become a screen that obliterates reality and protects the creator.⁹⁹

When she challenges realism, a subversive and liberating purpose is implied in Blais' political endeavors. Although at first, *Mad Shadows* appears to be a conventional 'realistic' novel with descriptions of landscapes, for example of fields, farms, the lake, woods, the railway, and with developing the narrative in a straightforward chronological order, it is in Blais' portrayal of the grotesquely artificial, disintegrated, and destructive human relationships and cold and cruel actions of the characters, disconnected from any realistic context of time and place, where the unreal and evil undertones become almost

⁹⁹ Naim Kattan, "Introduction." Translated by Joyce Marshall. Marie-Claire Blais, *Mad Shadows*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971, v-x, pp. vi-vii.

unbearably conspicuous. Here is where the extreme clashes between the realistic and the fantastic occur.

Blais' grotesque distortion of traditional family values

In *Mad Shadows*, it is especially the familial interactions that seem strangely disconnected, synthetic, cold and uncanny, which signifies the decline of the traditional family values perpetuated by Quebec society. As Mary Jean Green argues,

[t]he breakdown of familial relationships ... in *La belle bête* ... was itself not unrelated to the changes in Quebec society which were taking place at the time of its writing. The traditional 19th century social structure, whose values still officially dominated Quebec in the 1950s, had been built around the family, with its large numbers of offspring who represented, in a most concrete way, the means of survival for the Quebec francophone community.¹⁰⁰

Since these family values are centred around the life-giving mother and her role as a guardian of cultural survival, Blais' violent rejection of this socio-cultural order, which is particularly reflected in the superficial, unloving relationship between the mother Louise and her daughter Isabelle-Marie, is evidently gendered. She thereby protests against the previously discussed patriarchal image of the mythical interrelationship between woman and nation in the case of Quebec.

It is due to the apparent disconnection from any social context that the relationships in this family seem artificially constructed. Blais often refers to the

¹⁰⁰ Mary Jean Green, "Redefining the Maternal: Women's Relationships in the Fiction of Marie-Claire Blais." Lewis, Paula Gilbert, (ed.) *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism. Women Writers of Quebec*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985, 125-39, p. 127.

characters as puppets and their actions as if performed on stage. “Most insistently, theatre imagery suggests that this is not reality we observe but artificial enactment: the characters are described as marionettes or as ‘grave performers’ in a ‘vast tragedy’.”¹⁰¹ By extensively withdrawing realism from the novel by using metaphors of acting and role-playing, culminated in the actor-character Faust who Patrice meets in the asylum, Blais reinforces the power of illusion as a fantastic technique. The grotesqueness of the family relationships is intensified by the characters’ adherence to illusions, mostly limited to assuming that only beauty is the way to love and happiness. And it is probably this grotesque social disconnection that attributes to the novel the possibility of social interpretation, namely the representation of a disrupted society.

The characters in that family story are exaggeratedly one-dimensional, and so are their relationships. The reason why Louise extremely detests her daughter but effusively loves her son Patrice is merely situated in the fact that Isabelle-Marie’s physical appearance is particularly ugly and deformed, but Patrice’s looks are exceptionally beautiful. Already in the opening paragraphs, the stage is set in terms of introducing the Gothic essentials on which the familial relationships are grounded: physical appearance. “She [Isabelle-Marie] was tall and emaciated; her alarming eyes, so often full of anger, seemed glued to black bone. When she scowled, the lower part of her face twisted into a look of fierce contempt. It was almost frightening.”¹⁰² Cinderella-like, Isabelle-Marie has

¹⁰¹ Joan Coldwell, “Mad Shadows as psychological fiction.” *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2:4 (1973): 65-67, p. 65.

¹⁰² Marie-Claire Blais, *Mad Shadows*. Translated by Merloyd Lawrence. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1960, p. 15. For the textual analysis to follow, quotes from the novel *Mad Shadows* will not be footnoted, but the source will appear after the quote in brackets abbreviated with *MS* followed by the page number.

to do hard menial labour on the farm while Louise worships her son and his beauty in the house. Oedipus-like, Patrice worships his mother with the same intensity, while Isabelle-Marie, the central character, extremely resents her for not being loved. Also, Isabelle-Marie is excessively jealous of her brother because of him being loved by the mother and, more importantly, because of his beauty. As a result of Patrice's incestuous-like relationship with his mother, he – logically – hates her new husband Lanz and eventually kills him, which recalls the Oedipus myth. Analogously, Isabelle-Marie directs hatred towards Lanz, but because of a different reason: she mourns her deceased father in a manner described by Blais using sexual innuendo (which relates to the Electra myth). Isabelle-Marie's later-to-become husband Michael only loves her because he is blind and imagines – and constantly needs to be reassured – that she is beautiful. Isabelle-Marie also seems to love him only because he is very handsome.

In this novel, love only exists on the prerequisite of beauty of the loved one. In fact, love is actually self-love; the Narcissus myth is evidently at work. Patrice is only in love with himself: "When he looked at his reflection [in the lake] and then rose, very slowly, holding out his arms as though trying to drink of his own beauty. [...] He was alone and magnificent. (*MS*, p. 35)

Louise and Lanz's relationship resembles that of two dolls whose sexual encounters are grotesque and without love, and moreover, Lanz's self-centred love is only to possess the beautiful Louise and at the same time suppress her love for Patrice. "Lanz was slowly smothering her [Louise's] maternal instincts in order to take complete possession of his wife, even though it might make her suffer. They spent whole days and

nights together, in a savage exchange of bodies, as though offering flesh to be eaten.”
(*MS*, pp. 50-51)

Furthermore, the way Louise loves Patrice is particularly interesting because of its extreme self-direction. Patrice’s beauty is actually a reflection of her own beauty, which is the only reason for her existence. “Without him [Patrice] she [Louise] was lost, shorn of both roots and flowers. At forty, Louise was still a frivolous doll, empty and excessively concerned with her slender body. Patrice’s beauty was to her but a reflection of her own.” (*MS*, p. 24) After Louise loses Lanz (through the hand of Patrice), Louise goes as far as to equate Patrice’s beauty with her definition of the meaning of life, that is, her identity: “All I have is this child, this face ... only this face... Her heart burst with loneliness.” (*MS*, p. 61) When the cancerous spot on her face begins to slowly disfigure her, she clings to Patrice even more desperately to reassure herself of her beauty, that is, her sense of self: “I must never lose Patrice, she thought. I must never lose his beauty.” (*MS*, p. 72) To conclude, for Louise, Patrice is not a real person, but a beautiful reflection of her own self. Dying for Louise means either to become ugly, or to lose Patrice and his beauty. When she realises her physical decay, Patrice becomes her tool to self-preservation.

The love between Isabelle-Marie and the blind Michael keeps their relationship alive only because she tells him that she is beautiful. She has to reassure him about her beauty over and over, so that she eventually believes herself that she is beautiful, and can now accept her sense of self better than before. “Isabelle-Marie was no longer insecure; she did not doubt her make-believe beauty.... She believed it.” (*MS*, p. 78) Again, beauty here seems the key not only to happiness, but essentially to self-definition: “Meanwhile,

Isabelle was slowly coming to life in her love for Michael, her only chance to live and die. Love had, in a sense, turned her ugliness into an odd kind of beauty.” (*MS*, p. 62) However, when Michael receives back his vision and is able to see that Isabelle-Marie is actually ugly, he is enraged, bursts out in violence, and eventually expels her and their daughter (who is as ugly as Isabelle-Marie): “Wild with despair, shrinking in horror from the one who he had loved when she was ‘beautiful,’ he [Michael] shrieked: ‘Liar! Liar!’ ... He came back to his wife’s side and began to strike her across the face.” (*MS*, pp. 82-3) Again it is obvious in this novel that love cannot exist without physical attraction, which makes all the relationships extremely superficial and somewhat synthetically fabricated.

Ironically, the obsessive preoccupation with beauty prevalent in all characters is counteracted by the fact that all characters are actually physically deformed, which is one of the most important characteristics of the Grotesque according to Northey. Isabelle-Marie’s outer appearance is utterly hideous (such as her daughter’s); Lanz limps and can only walk with his golden cane; Michael is blind; Patrice is mentally disabled (“Behind his forehead everything grew confused, like a billowing stormcloud on a screen. He watched in silence and did not understand, but his idiot face was so dazzling that it made one think of genius.” (*MS*, p. 15) Later Patrice becomes disfigured with a scalded, scarred face. Louise’s beauty is destroyed by a cancerous growth that slowly eats up her face as the narrative progresses. Ironically then, Louise’s obsession with beauty makes a grotesque of her, more than her growing ugliness.¹⁰³ Northey argues that physical deformity and ugliness perpetuated by the Grotesque symbolically suggests a more

¹⁰³ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 73.

fundamental deformity; the characters' mean and deformed bodies reflect souls that are monstrous; a view which is entirely applicable to the characters in *Mad Shadows*. Physical deformity interpreted from a social perspective signifies a general collapse of values, of a world in which there is no heaven but a hell of human unhappiness and depravity. By relating it to Quebec's state of transition, Northey asserts that the Grotesque elements relate to an abyss in which traditional values, beliefs, and hopes have fallen.¹⁰⁴ Isabelle-Marie herself grotesquely classifies her physical ugliness as her social fate of being a monstrous-feminine: "She was of the race of the ugly, destined to be scorned." (*MS*, p. 83) In a more general sense then, what Isabelle-Marie's statement recalls very clearly is the inevitable fate of an Other, outcast by society on the basis of gender (as a monstrous-feminine, she does not conform to the ideal of feminine beauty and virtue) and 'race' (as she herself classifies it), which transcends the borders of Quebec society. Consequently, Blais' obsessive preoccupation with physical deformity and mental disability should not be taken literally (or, realistically for that matter), but metaphorically. Her use of the Grotesque by working with themes of physical or mental deformity – including their highly controversial implications – are an attack on society's manner of excluding marginalised Others on the basis of ability, gender and race.

The grotesque contrast between the obsession with beauty and the physical deformities relates to the fragmentation of the self discussed in the previous chapters on the theory of the fantastic. The marginalised subject is often distorted and split into multiple, often contradictory selves by the deconstructive powers of the fantastic. Recalling the significance of mirror scenes in Gothic aesthetics, several mirror and/or

¹⁰⁴ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 72.

reflection scenes permeate the narrative of *Mad Shadows*. They represent the characters' fragmented identities; the reflections being the self-assuring tool of one's identity based on physical appearance. Louise places Patrice in front of mirrors so that he learns to define his identity by his physical appearance: "Devoting herself more and more to the needs of her son, Louise ... introduced him to Vanity by placing him in front of mirrors." (*MS*, p. 18) Dorian-Gray-like, Patrice is in love with his reflection in the lake when spending hours admiring his own beauty that signifies his identity. Louise is equally obsessed with mirrors, whereas she exercises her narcissism in a double manner: she adores the reflection of her beauty in both a mirror and in her son. When Patrice becomes more and more enraged in his jealousy towards Lanz who deflects Louise's affection from Patrice, he discovers that he cannot find satisfaction in his reflection anymore. "Patrice lived alone in his room, in front of his mirrors. But he was growing weary of himself. His own features no longer gave him pleasure." (*MS*, p. 68) Eventually, he smashes the mirror in order to punish his mother, who reacts extremely upset and actually terrified, because the mirror as the reassurance of her beauty is the key to her identity. One could interpret Patrice's suicide at the end of the novel as the metaphorical murder of his mother. He realises that he himself only symbolises a mirror for his mother, on which all her affection is based, and eventually her whole sense of self, which he can destroy by his suicide.

Isabelle-Marie is a more complex character than the others. In fact, her character seems to correspond exactly to the Gothic subject that is fragmented into multiple and sometimes contradictory selves. She is pathetic and because of her victim status of being an unloved daughter of a superficial, violent mother; she is mean-spirited, which is

expressed by her jealousy and hatred; but she is also intelligent and compassionate, and sometimes even regretful when she reflects upon her viciousness. Isabelle-Marie's schizophrenic character is reflected in her physical appearance – often represented through mirroring. For example, she suffers from extreme anxieties and from an evil nature because of her hatred and jealousy directed towards her brother and her mother. “Since then, bitter and diabolical reveries had haunted her every thought, until now her anguished soul was reflected, rather frighteningly, on her face.” (*MS*, p. 40) Moreover, she has a mean-spirited, depraved nature that is reflected in her bizarre appearance. Blais implies that her wickedness is the result of her mother's hatred towards her; she is actually made a victim by her family.

Isabelle-Marie, seated in front of her mirror, seemed to be sneering from the very depths of her soul. The sight of her was cold and eerie, like a gumless witch. [...] If only Louise had dared to love her daughter.... Wickedness was her second self; she was like those beings who led two separate lives, one by day, and a more sinister one by night. (*MS*, pp. 58-59)

The multiple personalities that Isabelle-Marie occupies refer to an image of the Québécois postcolonial psyche. Alka Kumar suggests that “Isabelle-Marie may also be seen as French Canadian society in transition, having internalised the values of the coloniser and patriarchy and thus reflecting paradoxical impulses. Schizophrenia, a guiding principle of the French Canadian psyche, was the result of diverse impulses, an inalienable bond to the motherland as well as an insistence on a separatist Quebec identity.”¹⁰⁵ Isabelle-Marie is thus seen as a victim, alienated and torn between traditionalism, that is, her obligations of a good daughter, sister and wife, and her

¹⁰⁵ Alka Kumar, “Mad Shadows: Marie-Claire Blais’ Gothic Critique of French Canada.” *Panjab University Research Bulletin (Arts)*, vol. XXVI, No. 1 & 2 (1995): 47-51, p. 48.

emancipation from these traditional constrictions imposed by her mother and her claim to an identity of her own. This resembles the state of Quebec in transition, torn between its adherence to a cultural tradition and its determined emancipation from Old World values.

The aforementioned unloving mother symbolises the subversive contrast Blais assigns to the myth of the maternal image that was essential to the French Canadian 'collective unconsciousness.'¹⁰⁶ It is not only Louise that rejects this maternal image, but also Isabelle-Marie (the victim of a hating mother) who does not correspond to the traditional perception of the Québécoise mother figure. Although Isabelle-Marie's deliberate viciousness is partially the result of maternal neglect, harshness and rejection due to her physical appearance, she adopts this harshness in turn with her own daughter. "From the day of her birth Isabelle-Marie had found the baby even more hideous than herself, and the tiny face, afflicted by the same ugliness, bearing her blood and the same tortured features, repelled her." (*MS*, p. 81) By implying an extreme rejection of the image of the mother as the guardian of culture and values, Blais violently subverts this maternal myth of nurturing and child rearing as primary caregiver and teacher of social values by actually having Louise's children turn out violent and mean-spirited, or mentally challenged. As far as the latter is concerned, Blais parodies the image of the maternal social teacher by implying that Louise is actually responsible for her son's mental disability due to her obsession of equalising life-worthiness with beauty. This is indicated already in the beginning when Blais describes the boy: "He [Patrice] was destined to know nothing but his own beauty." (*MS*, p. 18) Towards the end of the

¹⁰⁶ Kumar, "Mad Shadows", p. 47.

narrative, it seems to be proven that Patrice's mental state has originated in Louise's extreme way of raising him:

Poor Patrice had not been born a complete idiot. But his mother had done everything for him, while all he had ever done was sleep and passively exist. Louise had put words into his mouth, and he had never felt the need to search for them, to wrench them from his hidden soul. He became retarded ... and his only spiritual discovery was that of his own beauty. (MS, p. 110)

Green argues that when Quebec women writers began to express their rejection of the order of the idealised mother figure as the guardian of French Canadian culture, their condemnation was, in many instances, directed against this mother-figure, now seen as a force of repression and a barrier to change.¹⁰⁷ Kumar, for example, goes as far as suggesting that Louise symbolises the Roman Catholic Church in its most decadent form, unaware of the needs of its flock.¹⁰⁸ Generally in *Mad Shadows*, the mother represents the exaggerated, grotesque opposite of any maternal image; consequently, both mothers (Louise and Isabelle-Marie) can be classified as Gothic monstrous-feminines that reject virtue, sanctity, and maternal ideals of the traditional image of the Quebec woman and mother. Hence, I suggest that Blais made a general powerful and subversive statement with respect to the traditionally assigned role of women, and their emancipation from this ideologically imposed identity by means of her Gothic description of grotesquely distorted relationships. Therefore, I agree with Green that

[f]or women in post Word War II Quebec, who were experiencing the decadence of the traditional order in their own lives, the rupture with the mother-figure was more than symbolic. It must have reflected their own inability to identify with their mothers – not just their own biological mothers, of

¹⁰⁷ Green, "Redefining the Maternal", p. 127.

¹⁰⁸ Kumar, "Mad Shadows", p. 48.

course, but an entire generation of *québécois* women whose lives had been committed to the preservation of traditional values.¹⁰⁹

Further Gothic elements as subversive impulses in *Mad Shadows*

Apart from her critique of traditional (family) values, Blais furnishes the novel with those techniques and themes that provide the narrative with a Gothic atmosphere. Motifs like the permanent awareness of evil and death, gothically distorted religious symbolism, nature and the human soul, the theme of madness and the bizarre sexual relationships pervade the novel and thereby recall effects of the Gothic sublime.

The recurring themes of violence, evil and death that evoke feelings of horror and terror are the most obvious factors that define the Gothic. While Louise is psychologically violent and verbally abusive in her display of hatred directed at her daughter, Isabelle-Marie is much more physical in her approach to violence. She constantly uses her power of intelligence to torture her brother. For example, one time she willingly starves her brother almost to death while her mother is out for a few days, knowing that “[h]er brother would not tell. His impoverished mind would protect her. She laughed inside herself and, for a moment, a gleam of perversity shone in her eyes.” (MS, p. 31) Her evil nature often plays with the idea to kill him to put an end to his beauty, which is the key factor that makes her suffer. “It would be so easy to claw this innocent face that did not struggle.... She thought how simple it would be to walk out into the lake and lower her brother into the water, to drown this near-corpse.” (MS, p. 27) After being abandoned by her husband, Isabelle-Marie has no doubt that love and beauty

¹⁰⁹ Green, “Redefining the Maternal”, p. 127.

are inevitably linked. She returns to her mother and brother, and again being confronted with Patrice who is showered with love by their mother, Isabelle-Marie's character becomes even more despicable. She finally does what she had been wishing to do all her life: to disfigure her brother so that her mother hates him as much as she hates Isabelle.

Driven by savage desires, Isabelle-Marie pursed her lips as if with curiosity.... She caressed him [Patrice] more ardently and as she did so she dug her nails into the nape of his neck.... Her malicious eyes focused on this gleaming nape. Her hand hesitated in midair and then, triumphant, it plunged Patrice's head into the boiling water. (*MS*, p. 95)

She finally achieves her goal. In pain and with a grotesquely disfigured face, Patrice seeks consolation from his mother, but she pushes him away. "Louise pulled away from his clutches; she was not physically able to bear the sight of such a desperately injured being.... Violent egotism flared up within her. Patrice no longer meant anything to her, for her soul was that of a doll.... Overcome with disgust, she fled." (*MS*, p. 96) The extraordinary cruelty and violence particularly exercised by the women – in this novel driven to excess – symbolises once more Blais' furious rejection of the myth of the nurturing and caring mother figure.

The terror of death and dying as the ultimate source of the Gothic sublime according to Burke is also a constant factor in this novel. Isabelle-Marie's cruelty targeted at Patrice has often undertones of murder. Her desire to make him ugly is actually her desire to kill him, since his beauty *is* his self because "behind his pale forehead was ... the lethargy of a dead brain" (*MS*, p. 16) according to Isabelle-Marie. Towards the end of the novel, Isabelle-Marie burns the house and her mother within, and then abandons her own child. Recalling parts of the Oedipus myth, Patrice kills Lanz out

of his raging jealousy regarding the love of his mother. At the end of the novel, Patrice drowns himself in the lake while he is once more looking at his reflection after he escapes from the asylum. The psychic terror, which reflects the fear of the loss of self according to the Kantian sublime, culminates in the suffering of Patrice, especially towards the end of the novel. This psychic terror and madness leads to the unrepresentability of death itself, which is instead aesthetically expressed by a permanent awareness of death in this novel and at the very end by Patrice's suicide: "*Then, since he had nothing else in the world but the water, he plunged his head into the lake and sank after it, looking for the beautiful face.... [T]he Beautiful Beast found his soul at last.*" (MS, p. 123)

Patrice's constant connection with the lake also recalls the link between nature and the human soul in Romantic/Gothic aesthetics. His obsessive reassurance of his identity by his reflection in the lake throughout the novel recalls the Romantic vision of the deep relationship between the human being and nature. The goal of this relationship is to define oneself by attempting to merge with nature. Having merged with his mirror image when he drowns himself during his final encounter with the lake, Patrice achieves the ultimate Romantic goal of the merging of subject and (natural) object.

The scene in which Isabelle-Marie is contemplating her real father also recalls a deep interconnection of man with nature. Moreover, this scene also recollects the historical image of the Québécois *paysant* and its cultural relevance in the Québécois consciousness. However, Blais gothically exceeds this image of the merging of the subject with nature by adding obvious sexual as well as spiritual innuendo to this scene. "Far off in her childhood, she could see her father, the austere peasant, the maker of bread. When he tilled the virgin loins of the earth, he was penetrating to the heart of God.

In his soul, honesty mingled with instinct.” (*MS*, p. 39) The traditional association of godliness with a life close to the land refers to a Quebec’s mid-twentieth century nostalgia with the onrush of anti-agrarian technology and urbanisation. By creating the image of a godlike father figure, Blais constructs a religious agrarianism as an historical trait of Québécois traditional culture, which is especially interesting considering the fact that the narrative is overall disconnected from any indications of spiritual goodness. However, by furnishing this description with obvious sexual connotations, Blais subverts this image of sentimental spirituality. Thereby, Blais gothically parodies both a familiar Romantic view of nature and the human soul as well as the traditional male-dominated Québécois myth of religious agrarianism at a time of its decline.

In general, Blais provides many figurative references of a Christian tradition despite the narrative’s rigorous absence of any spiritual morality. Recalling Northey’s claim that the grotesque elements in the novel reflect the situation in which traditional values, beliefs and hopes are on the decline, Blais contributes to a “sense of a disintegrated or a lost Christian tradition [in Quebec, which] is felt in the grotesque distortion of traditional Christian symbols.”¹¹⁰ Northey outlines the following examples indicative for this argument. For example, the family’s only nourishment seems to be bread and wine, which stands for the sacrament of the Eucharist symbolising sacrifice, love and spiritual sustenance. This image becomes gothically distorted into a sadistic rite when Isabelle-Marie systematically starves her brother of his customary meals of bread and wine. Furthermore, the rite of baptism is ironically transformed when Isabelle-Marie plunges the head of Patrice into boiling water. The final fire set by Isabelle-Marie at the

¹¹⁰ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 73.

end of the novel is both a symbol of earthly apocalypse and of spiritual hell to which the characters have been descending throughout the book. And most importantly, the loss of God is represented by the characters' physical deformity, which is symbolic of their spiritual corruption as well as of a false substitute for God sought in beauty.¹¹¹ Hence, Blais repeatedly subverts a significant part of traditional Québécois culture by gothically distorting the Catholic symbolism in the novel.

Finally, the most obvious factor in the novel is the theme of madness, which eventually leads to death as the ultimate effect of the Gothic sublime. Madness in the form of schizophrenia¹¹² appears over and over in the descriptions of reflections of the self as distorted, multiple and/or contradictory selves. Furthermore, madness in the novel is generally derived from the theme of love based on beauty. Patrice's mental disability is often compared to insanity. Interestingly, there is a timely link between his realisation of being ugly and his realisation of his identity, in that he becomes conscious of his mental disposition only at the time when he is abandoned by his mother and taken to an asylum. Isabelle-Marie's extremely violent nature is also an effect of her life-long experience with psychic terror (rooted in maternal neglect and harshness because of being ugly) which eventually leads to her murdering her mother. Because Louise is often described as a grotesque doll in her obsession with beauty on the one hand, and hatred of her daughter who does not conform to her beauty ideal on the other, unreason and madness as a feature of mental sickness is implied, as for example: "As she [Louise] said this, she laughed, and her laugh evoked the doom of invalids and consumptives. Some of her grace went

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² One may recall here the relevance of schizophrenia as a factor in the Québécois collective consciousness, which was discussed earlier.

beyond elegance and hinted at illness.” (MS, p. 33) In all instances of madness-related character traits described in the narrative, the psychic terror, whether it is a mental disposition fabricated by the mother, a sick obsession with beauty and bizarre maternal behaviour, or an unusual tendency to extreme violence and evil, eventually leads to death as the ultimate source of the Gothic sublime. The accumulation of murder and suicide at the end of the novel recreates an atmosphere of the final judgement: Patrice first kills Lanz and later himself; Isabelle-Marie kills her mother and then commits suicide. Louise’s madness is doubly punished: initially through the cancer that disfigures her beauty, and finally through the hand of her daughter. She physically kills nobody, but the deadly fate of her children and her own death happen because she has been psychologically killing her children throughout the novel. The final judgment seems to be directed at the mother. This perspective reiterates Blais’ Gothic way of rejecting the maternal myth perpetuated by Québécois culture.

However, these rather destructive and morbid undertones of this narrative’s continuing psychic terror may also release some positive energy. Referring to the psychoanalytic discussion of the Gothic sublime that emphasises the return of the repressed, in which the subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego, Blais’ Gothicism regarding her preoccupation with madness may also have a somewhat liberating effect of socio-cultural criticism. A less pessimistic view of *Mad Shadows* may therefore comply with Northey’s position that “the very energy of much gothic and grotesque fiction supports a connection with cultural vitality as much as with cultural mortality.”¹¹³ Although it has been argued that the Grotesque, with its

¹¹³ Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 110.

strong accentuation of psychological factors, exercises radical subversion with little room for political discourse, its combination with the Gothicism in the novel may provide some optimistic outlook. Hence, considering the fact that the novel was created just before Quebec's Quiet Revolution, Blais' madness- and death-ridden narrative may be a catalyst for the possibility of the cultural and political regeneration of Quebec in terms of its voice within (or separated from) Canada. Moreover, the regenerative process within Quebec may include the burial of the old patriarchal order to embrace the future with values of social and gender equality.

The Female/Feminist Gothic and the history of Quebec: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*

First published in 1970, *Kamouraska* is a Gothic narrative that illustrates the distress and misery of a society's past and present, portrayed and relived by the central character Elisabeth. The narrative structure of the novel consists of Elisabeth's interior monologue in the form of reveries and nightmares of her past, which creates an effect of subjectivity that allows the feelings associated with past events to impinge upon the present.

Historiographic metafiction

Hébert's preoccupation with history is reiterated by her reconstruction of an actual 19th century event when a woman in Quebec was being accused of having her abusive husband Antoine Tassy murdered by her lover. However, according to Hébert's own epigraph, the story owes little to the known facts and everything of real consequence

to her own creative imagination. Hébert thus applies the mode of historiographic metafiction by fictionally recreating actual events of the past. Her interest therefore was not in reporting about lust and crime, but in portraying ways in which a harsh social environment can affect human behaviour. A more tangible political reference to events past may be the fact that Tassy's murder is set in the years following the Rebellion of 1837, and therefore, Elisabeth's story might be an elaborately coded parable on the suppression and frustration of Quebec, then and now.¹¹⁴ Hence, I can see a strong parallel of Elisabeth's reconstruction of her individual past and the cultural and political fate evolved from Quebec's history. Hébert's impetus for creating her historiographic metafiction may therefore be directly related to Quebec's identity-finding process that started in the 1960s and necessarily relies on reflecting upon its history of defining itself within an Anglophone environment.

Murray Sachs argues against any claim of historical truth (and is therefore in line with the postmodern approach of historiographic metafiction), and thus against any pretense that Hébert intended to reconstruct reality. In fact, Sachs argues that the story is determinedly unrealistic and occupies the tone and manner of a fantasy, and that the details of the plot form a network of symbols.¹¹⁵ Both the narrative structure and the plot's different locations of setting mirror each other in the sense that both evoke an uneasy atmosphere of claustrophobia. The plot is mostly set in the houses where

¹¹⁴ Philip Stratford, *All the Polarities. Comparative Studies in Contemporary Canadian Novels in French and English*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1986, p. 48.

¹¹⁵ Murray Sachs, "Love on the Rocks: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*." Paula Gilbert Lewis, (ed.) *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism. Women Writers of Quebec*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985, 109-23, p. 110.

Elisabeth seems to be trapped, both physically and psychologically. The narrative structure consists of Elisabeth's confused interior monologues desperately expressing her longing to escape her imprisonment from the houses in Sorel, Kamouraska, and Quebec. Both setting and narrative structure recall the Gothic sublime's claim of psychic terror deriving from confinement that eventually ends in death as the ultimate outcome of the Gothic sublime. Hébert's fixation on enclosed spaces where the female is imprisoned, and the woman's longing to escape refers to the earlier discussed metaphor of the Gothic house. The Gothic female's, or the monstrous-feminines', aspiring to escape the physical imprisonment has a metaphorical meaning of liberation from the psychic terror originated from social and ideological constraints.

Recalling the relevance of psychic terror for the Canadian Gothic, one is reminded of the earlier discussion about the assumption that Canadian Gothicism is associated with a specific psychology recapitulating history.¹¹⁶ In *Kamouraska*, the constrained passion of the repressed in Elisabeth's subconscious spins the typically Canadian Gothic plot, which is both connected to history and to the theory of the Gothic sublime. Consequently, with regard to the spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity as opposed to what is 'real', I would place *Kamouraska* on the scale where the Gothic is located. Although the novel refrains from presenting any supernatural events or beings and is instead even permeated by realistic settings, it reveals yet an aesthetic of intense Gothic unfamiliarity through its nightmarish narrative structure and its thematic preoccupation with imprisonment, violent passion, evil, madness and death. The character of Elisabeth as a Quebec woman represents Hébert's Gothicism and her

¹¹⁶ Davidson, "Canadian Gothic", p. 245.

preoccupation with history, as both Elisabeth and Quebec are haunted by their pasts. As Lennox argues, “the gothic setting and atmosphere are represented most saliently in Elisabeth’s vision of herself as terrified prisoner, captive and embattled in the fortress of her present and her past.”¹¹⁷

Hébert’s feminist Gothicism

In the narrative around the character Elisabeth, Hébert focuses in general on issues that challenge traditional perceptions of the role and the rights of women. For example, she addresses issues regarding women’s personal freedom of choice, morality standards imposed on women by social hierarchies, and male violence. It is important to note here that her critique not only relates to the 19th-century Quebec and the experiences of the female protagonist. Elisabeth’s story is on the one hand an elaborately coded parable on the contemporary suppression of women both within and outside the borders of Quebec. On the other hand, her story is also a metaphor for the (post)colonial experience of Quebec within North America, which will be more thoroughly explained in the next section on both authors’ gender/nation projects.

Elisabeth’s rebelliousness is reflected in her longing for personal freedom that is usually denied a girl or a woman in 19th-century Quebec’s society. Elisabeth’s social class is upper crust; a close-knit, unquestioning society regulated by strict rules of (Catholic) tradition and a harsh sense of justice, drawing together in time of crisis to

¹¹⁷ John Lennox, “Dark Journeys: *Kamouraska* and *Deliverance*.” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 12 (1978): 84-104, p. 87.

mask any impropriety.¹¹⁸ Elisabeth imagines that she must have shown her longing for freedom when she was still a fetus in her mother's womb. An interesting Gothic relation is created when Hébert describes Elisabeth's 'thoughts' inside her mother's belly, while outside her father just died. Death is a permanent factor in Elisabeth's life and it haunts her throughout the book. Represented in a truly Gothic manner, death often appears in the same context as her strong lust for life, freedom and happiness.

My mother, deep in mourning, carrying me in her womb....
They're taking my father's coffin out of the house. My mother
is fainting dead away. And here I am, shut in tight, kicking in
her belly. Trying to wake her up. Jumping and bouncing
about. Why, such a long, frightening faint could kill us both!
'What a naughty little girl!' Is that the first voice in the world
to reach my ears?¹¹⁹

This scene of pre-natal recollection sets the stage in terms of what Elisabeth will expect as a woman as far as the pressures of society regarding her individual freedom are concerned. The contextual correlation with death here indicates Elisabeth's perception of society that regards a woman who strives for personal freedom as 'naughty', as Other. Speaking in the language of Gothic theory, Elisabeth is considered a monstrous-feminine, because she "represents a strong denial of the insipid stereotype of the Quebec woman who was synonymous with sanctity, patience, regeneration."¹²⁰ As discussed earlier, a woman who refuses to conform to the social and moral standards of gender roles is marked both as 'unfeminine' or even 'unnatural', that is, grotesquely monstrous.

¹¹⁸ Stratford, *All the Polarities*, p. 49.

¹¹⁹ Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska*. Translated by Norman Shapiro. Don Mills, ON: PaperJacks, 1974, p. 47. For the textual analysis to follow, quotes from the novel *Kamouraska* will not be footnoted, but the source will appear after the quote in brackets abbreviated with *K* followed by the page number.

¹²⁰ Henry Cohen, "The Role of Myth in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*." Translated by Chitra Reddin. *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 10 (1978): 134-43, p. 136.

Moreover, as her desire for freedom also symbolises a love of life and struggle against death, and Elisabeth later realises that society views her struggle for life and freedom as a form of evil, of which it will constantly accuse her, and induce feelings of guilt. The image that Elisabeth has of herself throughout the book is that of a woman of such passionate attachment to life, freedom, happiness, and, above all, love, that society, feeling itself threatened, closes its doors and condemns her as evil.¹²¹

The interrelation of the concepts of love, death, and freedom is particularly striking throughout the novel. These dramatic, emotion-laden concepts are also features of the Gothic. In *Kamouraska*, the concept of loveless marriage denotes imprisonment, or even a death-in-life experience. The only way to escape this confinement of marriage, to achieve freedom, is only possible through actual death. Hébert cynically undermines the concepts of marriage and family, supposedly the cement of the social structure especially in 19th century Quebec, as nothing but a truce between enemies.¹²² As the novel opens, Elisabeth has, for eighteen years, been the respectable wife of a Quebec City notary named Jérôme Rolland, at whose deathbed she is sitting and contemplating about regaining liberation as soon as he dies. “Soon I’ll be free. A widow again.” (*K*, p. 5) For Elisabeth, marriage without love is a prison of society’s self-righteous conventions, or even a death-in-life experience. While Jérôme awaits his real death, she more and more recollects – and hardly in tranquility – her metaphoric one.¹²³ She is married to Jérôme because he was involved in rescuing her from being charged with the murder of her first

¹²¹ Sachs, “Love on the Rocks”, p. 117.

¹²² Cohen, “The Role of Myth in Anne Hébert’s *Kamouraska*”, p. 135.

¹²³ Davidson, “Canadian Gothic”, p. 249.

husband – in the name of honour. “Get married again. No veil this time, no orange blossoms. Jérôme Rolland, my second husband, and honor is restored. Honor. A fine obsession to dangle before your nose. The donkey and his carrot.... Oh, how I love to walk through the streets, with the image of my virtue just a few steps ahead.” (*K*, p. 3) In a very cynical manner, she accuses society of imposing on women the ideal of the honourable and virtuous woman, which constrains their freedom of choice. To regain her honour, she has to get married again; in her case, to enter another prison. “Caught in the trap, the two of us. That’s what marriage is. One fear shared by two.” (*K*, p. 18) Jérôme shares the fear, although in a different way. Supposedly the ‘good’ second husband, M. Rolland exercises his violence passive-aggressively (as opposed to Tassy) in his fantasies. For example, he dreams about being still strong enough to violate his wife. “Oh, to be well enough to rape that woman. To force her back with us onto the marriage bed. Lay her out on our deathbed, here beside us.” (*K*, p. 19) Love, marriage and death – all three concepts bizarrely linked within one (Gothic) idea. Jérôme is afraid that Elisabeth wants to kill him because he is convinced that she was really guilty of murdering her first husband. He portrays his wife in a gothically nightmarish manner: “His wife looms up like that very image of transfigured death that haunts his visions through the long, tortured nights.... Monsieur Rolland is all alone, offered up to his wife’s malevolent power, a wife who already once before...” (*K*, pp. 8-9) The image of his wife as the non-virtuous, Gothic monstrous-feminine is enforced here by Jérôme’s fears. Marriage and death are again closely linked, also for the male protagonist. His own death, however, would mean freedom for Elisabeth.

From there on, the narrative continues with Elisabeth's confused and turbulent thoughts weaving erratically back and forth between the present and the past, and between her identity as the matronly Mme Rolland and as the young Elisabeth d'Aulnières-Tassy. After growing up with her three aunts who adopt the patriarchal and moral order, Elisabeth enters an arranged marriage with her first husband Antoine Tassy, 'the squire of Kamouraska'. This marriage for her is manifesting itself into a death-in-life experience. She lives in constant fear, is threatened, beaten and raped on a regular basis, and humiliated by his public displays of affairs with prostitutes. Thriving in his madness, Antoine cynically equates marriage with death when he wants the pregnant Elisabeth to die with him because of his obsession with suicide. "Are you coming, Elisabeth? I'll make the noose bigger and you can come too.... Husband and wife, hanging together, two heads in one noose. Isn't that nice? ... The bonds of marriage." (K, pp. 84, 85) Antoine's physical abuse of his wife appears to be socially accepted. For example, Tassy's mother represents the hypocritical society that ignores violence against women, when she tells Elisabeth to accept her fate as an abused wife: "You'll just have to turn your back, my dear, if you ever find him coarse or shocking. Simply ignore it.... Don't forget that, and you're sure to be happy. No matter how my son mistreats you..." (K, p. 74)

When Elisabeth meets the respectable American doctor George Nelson, they passionately fall in love. An interesting political dimension referring to the historical situation of Quebec within North America is the English-French dichotomy that is reflected in the relationship of Elisabeth and George Nelson. Nelson is an American who has been sent to Quebec for schooling by parents with loyalist leanings after the

American Revolution. There are several references that indicate the Québécois population's suspicion of him being American: "“That man is a foreigner. It's better not to trust him, anymore than he trusts us.”" (K, p. 124) Elisabeth notices that Nelson is perceived as Other by her society, as she contemplates, "They're afraid of you, Doctor Nelson. As if, under all that obvious selflessness of yours – too obvious, perhaps – some fearful identity lies hidden ... That original flaw, deeper than your Protestant religion, deeper than your English language. ... Look. Look hard. It's not a sin, Doctor Nelson. Only some terrible grief." (K, p. 125) Doctor Nelson is even perceived as "some kind of American devil who goes about casting spells on [pregnant] women's breasts. The way some witches poison the water." (K, p. 110) An animosity against Anglophone people is apparent by the fact that Nelson is being Othered by the Québécois society. This relates to aforementioned assumption that *Kamouraska* makes reference to the (post)colonial Québécois mentality directed against any influences of the Anglophone surroundings. However, Elisabeth's bond with the American doctor may also infer a different reading with the Quiet Revolution context in mind: the fact that Quebec distances itself from English-Canada, but not from the United States may be an allegory of the Québécoise-American attachment of the two characters despite linguistic and cultural differences.

Recalling the Gothic themes and motifs that were discussed earlier, Elisabeth is the stereotypical Gothic heroine who exposes her feelings of melancholy, anxiety-ridden sentimental love and horror that are sometimes lit up by flashes of obsessive passion and violence. "I'm in love with a man who's not my husband. This man I keep calling for. Daytime. Nighttime. Doctor Nelson, Doctor Nelson... His absence, more than I can bear. I'm going to die." (K, p. 112) Due to her mad passion she feels she becomes possessed,

which resonates the characteristics of the Gothic monstrous-feminine that is often portrayed as mad, wild, animalistic. These features are not seldom linked to the female body as a metaphor for female sexuality. "Watching the growth of a giant plant, spreading within me. Ripping me to shreds, devouring me. Yes, I'm possessed." (K, p. 114) That 'giant plant' symbolises their adulterous love, and as their affair progresses, Elisabeth realises that she is in need to be 'exorcised', which can only occur by the death of her tyrannous husband Tassy. In other words, the death of Tassy is the only 'socially acceptable' way to be free to marry George Nelson.

Therefore, Elisabeth starts persuading George to kill Antoine. "I'll give you all my strength to help you. I'll give you my life itself. To punish the wicked, reward the good. Deliver the suffering princess, slay the fierce dragon that holds her prisoner. Justice, justice, justice... Antoine Tassy deserves to die." (K, p. 162) George and Elisabeth then try to persuade Elisabeth's Créole maid Aurélie Caron to kill Antoine. They promise to get her the same class status if she succeeds in murdering him. "We're going to give you the nicest dream you ever had." (K, p. 176) An interesting gender/race/class issue of exploitation is at work here, especially because Elisabeth tries to use her for the murder so that she and Nelson will be free from any guilt. "And whenever I call her [Aurélie] to come and help me, it's to have her deliver me from my evil, absolve me, cleanse me. Rid my love and me of this tale of madness. Aurélie, my friend, my sister." (K, p. 179) However, Aurélie fails to kill him, and Nelson has to finish the deed. The class inequalities become especially apparent when Elisabeth's aunts arrange that Aurélie instead of Elisabeth gets convicted in court. The corrupt justice system seems to be on the side of the upper class. Cohen notes the phenomenon of the

strong depravation of social values in *Kamouraska*, in which “[j]ustice, as a human institution, frees the culprits while imprisoning their victims.”¹²⁴ Elisabeth’s insistence on ‘justice, justice, justice’ as far as Tassy’s death is concerned thus receives an ironic implication considering how the justice system deals with the actual conviction of the people responsible. It is interesting to note that besides addressing the gender inequalities experienced by a Quebec woman in the 19th century, Hébert works with an interrelation of gender and class biases especially exerted by hypocritical social and legal hierarchies. Nevertheless, for Elisabeth, the death of her husband seems to be the only way to freedom and to love – the concepts again inevitably interconnected.

One can indeed infer that the concepts of freedom versus imprisonment, and love/marriage versus death are closely linked throughout the narrative. Elisabeth perceives death as a path to her individual freedom from her husbands, while Antoine and Jérôme use the concept of death as their means to exercise power over Elisabeth. While Jérôme fantasises about violating Elisabeth so that she cannot kill him, Antoine de facto uses violence to intimidate her and to claim absolute possession of her. In order to be able to freely love George Nelson, Elisabeth is equally obsessed with the ideas of evil, murder and death.

After Tassy is killed, Nelson flees to the United States in order not to get convicted by the Canadian justice system, and Elisabeth is again trapped in a marriage without love that she enters in order to restore her social reputation. In this second marriage, she is “wild with regret as she remembers her lover’s homicidal mission, his exile, and his vituperation. She recalls how her adulterous love defied social and moral convention and how her life ever since has been spent quietly but ferociously dissembling

¹²⁴ Cohen, “The Role of Myth in Anne Hébert’s *Kamouraska*”, p. 2.

in order to destroy the morbid notoriety and suspicion attached to her name.”¹²⁵ Society reinforces Elisabeth’s fate of social and moral imprisonment. In the end, defeated by society reflected in another death-in-life experience in her second marriage, she sees her last way to freedom in the death of her second husband. When at the end of the novel the message arrives that Jérôme will survive, a Gothic nightmare about her life-burial breaks in again.

The model wife, clasping her husband’s hand in hers, poised on the sheet. And yet... Off in a parched field, under the rocks, they’ve dug up a woman, all black but still alive, buried there long ago, some far-off, savage time. Strangely preserved. Then they’ve gone and let her loose on the town. And all the people have locked themselves in. So deathly afraid of this woman. And everyone thinks that she must have an utterly awesome lust for life, buried alive so long.... And whenever she runs through the town, begging and weeping, they sound the alarm. Nothing before her but doors shut tight, and the empty, unpaved streets. Nothing to do now but let herself die. (K, pp. 249-50)

In this concluding metaphorical vignette, *Kamouraska*’s sinister ambivalence is highly emphasised. Elisabeth is both a victim of patriarchy and a monstrous-feminine of which society is terrified. Buried alive throughout her life and struggling against death (meaning struggling for freedom), she is perceived as a social outcast because the freedom she wants is denied to her because of her sex. As Cohen and Lennox argue, the novel presents an ethic of polarities which irreducibly oppose the present to the past, good to evil, the angel to the beast.¹²⁶ These contradictions are especially integrated in the character of Elisabeth, and reinforced by the novel’s persistence in binary oppositions. Another divided character is for example Nelson, who is first portrayed as a life-preserving and

¹²⁵ Lennox, “Dark Journeys”, p. 87.

¹²⁶ Cohen, “The Role of Myth in Anne Hébert’s *Kamouraska*”, p. 134.

compassionate doctor who then transforms into the brutal and revengeful murderer of Tassy. Tassy himself, although the arch-villain of the narrative, is also the tragic figure of a suicidal alcoholic. The binary opposition of black and white, or rather red and white, is effectively described in the scene of Nelson's wild journey with the blood-soaked sleigh through the snowy Quebec landscape, when Tassy's blood colours the snow red. Another contradiction is reiterated by the irony in the scene when Elisabeth sheds some tears while she is having the previously quoted nightmare. The scene is quite cynical when the servants surrounding Rolland's bed confuse Elisabeth's tears of defeat as tears of joy over the survival of her husband in the very final sentence of the narrative: "Just look how Madame loves Monsieur! You see, she's crying..." (K, p. 250)

While Elisabeth's and Nelson's split characters reinforce the Gothic theme of the fragmentation of the self in particular, Hébert's permanent insistence on contradictions intensify the schizophrenic character of the earlier discussed Québécois subconscious in general. The morbid metaphors in the final episode of Elisabeth's life-burial vision can also be applied to Quebec's history of colonial imprisonment within a hostile culture: Quebec perceived as a victim, buried alive throughout history, but 'strangely preserved' because of its 'utterly awesome lust for survival' reflected in its resistance that is especially apparent at the time *Kamouraska* was written.

Gender and nation in Blais and Hébert

The following analyses and compares Blais and Hébert's respective gender/nation projects. In their reworkings of history, the authors tend to two different critical

approaches: the Québécois' attempt for liberation within Quebec as well as the colonial situation of Quebec within the North American context.

Similar to *Mad Shadows*, *Kamouraska* plays with themes of individual and social disillusionment and frustration by extensively challenging the traditional order of Quebec society with all its repressive constraints on the individual in general and on women in particular. However closer to realistic representations with more references to social factors than the grotesque and socially disconnected structure of Blais' narrative is, *Kamouraska* addresses issues of social inequalities, male violence, class differences, and self-righteous social standards more directly and less symbolically than *Mad Shadows*. The ways in which this dichotomy of realistic versus fantastic/Grotesque representation affects the authors' respective gender/nation projects is demonstrated in the following.

In contrast to Blais, Hébert focuses on the individual woman *outside* of her role within the family. Of course, in traditional Quebec, the role of the mother and the role of the woman in general are interconnected. In her attack on the Quebec patriarchy, however, Hébert concentrates more on the gendered perspective of human rights than on the specific role of the woman as mother. More profoundly, by especially addressing universal feminist issues of for example individual freedom and objection against male violence, Hébert inevitably exceeds the territorial and social borders of Quebec in her feminist approach as opposed to Blais, who concentrates more on the interrelation between a woman's role in the family and the project of Quebec's cultural survival. Thereby, Blais creates a tighter connection between gender and nation and consequently challenges specifically the Quebec nation from within. In other words, by attacking the traditional cultural order specific to Quebec, Blais criticises Quebec society directly. In

contrast, Hébert's gender/nation project is more loosely articulated by the *example* of the experience of a 19th-century Quebec woman with the society she lives in. Thus, her approach is rather one of a general women's rights nature that can be applied to any other Western society with a history of women's oppression. The more obvious 'Quebec connection' in *Kamouraska* is a postcolonial reading of translating the past and present situation of the main protagonist Elisabeth into the (post)colonial situation of Quebec within Canada. Set in the years following the Rebellions of 1837, the narrative may be a metaphor for Quebec's past and present attempts to liberate itself from the assimilatory force of the surrounding Anglophone culture.

Hébert's feminism discusses the sense of imprisonment experienced by a 19th woman from Quebec who is discomforted by the imposed and confining images of idealised femininity and by the self-righteous morality standards of society. Recalling the link of postcolonialism and feminism, this notion of confinement can be compared to Quebec's sense of colonial imprisonment as a French-speaking island surrounded by and alienated from Anglo-centric culture. Cohen argues that

the idealized woman functioned as the soul in a kind of human metaphor which described the colonial and postcolonial enterprise. She did not exist in a legitimate manner except in terms of her role, as the source of faith, gentleness, and intuition, that is to say, of the passive and non-rational elements, whereas man - an Apollonian being - provided the energy, the intelligence, and the will of the nation.¹²⁷

The formerly discussed masculine nature of the Quebec nation *within* is reiterated here. What is also emphasised here is the similarity of the situations of a woman within Quebec *and* Quebec society within a larger Canadian/North American context; both

¹²⁷ Cohen, "The Role of Myth in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*", p. 137.

situations can be seen as those of colonial victims. The only alternative to submission in both cases is rebellion against this colonial confinement. Since the Quiet Revolution, Quebec has been trying to free itself from the assimilatory force of Anglophone North America. Compared to the situation of the Quebec woman in *Kamouraska*, Elisabeth also engages in revolt; in her case against the socio-cultural and ideological constraints imposed upon her by the Québécois patriarchal and moral order. Elisabeth's feminist rebelliousness is eventually frustrated by the *habitant* establishment, which eventually prevents the narrative from offering a too optimistic outlook. Considering the parallel processes of Quebec's efforts for cultural and political sovereignty on the one hand, and the fights of the feminist movement for gender equality on the other, Hébert may have predicted in her discouraging message of 1970 that both battles may never be won entirely.

By returning to the dichotomy of realism vs. fantasy as far as *Mad Shadows* and *Kamouraska* are concerned, one can conclude that the former, more fantastic/Grotesque mode seems – with direct reference to the Quebec situation as perceived *within* – to imply a tighter gender/nation interrelation than Hébert's work. That is, the Gothicism in *Kamouraska* has a stronger tendency to realism, which seems to result in a more universal feminist statement that is tied to the *history* of women's oppression, and thus applicable to all Western societies.

CHAPTER 5: Towards a gendered postcolonialism: English-Canadian and

Aboriginal perspectives on the fantastic

This chapter focuses on three works by Canadian women writing in English: Marian Engel, Jane Urquhart, and Eden Robinson. Although there are wide thematic and stylistic discrepancies among these works I incorporate them within one chapter because they deviate significantly from the two novels from Quebec. Their approaches towards fantastic representation are not as clear-cut as Blais' and Hébert's use of Gothic and Grotesque elements. Their much more fluid use of all three fantastic modes has a direct impact on their respective political motivation. Although very different in their socio-political messages, they all share a unique concern with the role of Canada's colonial history from feminist, immigrant, and Aboriginal perspectives.

Feminine excess in the Canadian wilderness: Marian Engel's *Bear*

Published in 1976, *Bear* has since been a highly acclaimed novel that is, according to literary critics like Coral Ann Howells or Aritha van Herk, quintessentially (English) Canadian. It is about landscape and wilderness, about a quest, about a bear, and about the relation between civilisation and savage nature. However, it offers more radical alternatives than the conventions of Canadian explorer stories of man making the vast Canadian landscape his own. What *Bear* does is attempt to inscribe female sexuality on the wilderness.¹²⁸

In the literature, the classifications imposed on this narrative shift between pastoral, pornographic, mythological, or Gothic. Therefore, a one and only category is

¹²⁸ Coral Ann Howells, "Marian Engel's *Bear*: Pastoral, Porn, and Myth." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*. 17:4 (1986 October): 105-114, p. 105.

difficult to determine, especially considering the fact that Engel manages to combine realist naturalism with fantastic forms of representation. This overlapping of realism and fantasy becomes particularly apparent when the relationship of the protagonist with the bear drastically exceeds the conventions of pastoral person-animal relationships. Interestingly, the rather mystic and grotesque process of the protagonist's emotional and psychological transformation and the scenes of sexual intimacy with the bear are largely illustrated through detailed naturalism. Therefore, "the moments of fantastic encounter threaten always to strain credibility, in a way that non-naturalistic discourse might not."¹²⁹ Consequently, and above all due to *Bear*'s relevance for postcolonial interpretation, one should consider the mode of Magic Realism that works with the symbiotic coexistence of the real world and the magical/fantastic world which creates a hybrid fictional space where opposite and conflicting properties are co-present and interdependent. In Magic Realism, the real and the fantastic worlds have a more 'natural' interrelationship than they have in the Gothic. However, the fact that Engel pushes sexuality well beyond the socially accepted levels by blending characteristics of the monstrous-feminine with psychic excess, the abject, and the taboo, she goes well beyond the 'easygoing' or 'natural' atmosphere typical for Magic Realism. The theme of bestiality itself is a rather Gothic or even Grotesque concern that necessarily implies an erasing of rigid demarcations of gender. Recalling Jackson's account outlined in the beginning of this study, *Bear* is strongly preoccupied with undermining 'realistic' ways of seeing by subverting generic differences of male, female, and animal.

In sum, with *Bear* it is even more difficult than with the previously discussed works to determine a location on the spectrum of unfamiliarity or uncertainty to realism. I

¹²⁹ Turcotte, "Sexual Gothic", p. 74.

suggest that it moves between the real and the Magical Real, but with frequent pulls towards the Gothic and at times even towards the Grotesque – depending on its changing thematic or stylistic inclinations throughout the narrative. Or, as Turcotte quite poetically phrases the relationship between naturalism and fantasy in the novel: “Engel’s deft use of the Gothic and fantasy motifs sparkles like jewels against the dullness of a naturalistic setting.”¹³⁰

Engel applies the technique of historiographic metafiction when she describes the work of the protagonist Lou, which involves the historical research of the Cary family to find some clues that might contribute to the history of European settlement in the area. Engel thereby supports the fact that history and historiography are human constructions created through (Lou’s) processes of selecting, ordering, and narrating. As a result, Engel fictionally rewrites pieces of colonial history by creating new historical intertexts.

Recalling the interrelationship of postmodern historiographic metafiction and theories of the fantastic, *Bear* is a prototype that uses and exaggerates the conventional features especially of the Gothic in a postmodern fashion in order to destabilise or re-appropriate ‘systems’ that institutionalise and perpetuate imperialist, sexist, or so-called ‘normative values’.¹³¹ In other words, Engel challenges Lyotardian ‘grand narratives’ of for example history and imperialism. She thereby parodies and thus subverts the (gender-specific) myths of conquering the Canadian wilderness including the colonising and civilising mission, and of repressed, chaste, virtuous, and above all, heterosexual female sexuality. Both discourses are interconnected in the narrative, which recalls the relation of the perspectives of both the female and the postcolonial subject reflecting upon the

¹³⁰ Turcotte, “Sexual Gothic”, p. 78.

¹³¹ Turcotte, “Sexual Gothic”, p. 65.

past and the present. By linking these phenomena to the previously discussed blurring of realistic/naturalistic/pastoral versus Gothic/fantastic representation in the narrative, one could argue that the novel suggests that the past links the notions of the pastoral with imperialism and masculinity. Consequently, through the subversive use of the Gothic, the story produces powerful effects with regard to a woman's personal emancipation and to new reflections on Canada's colonial history.

Sexual Gothic: exceeding the Canadian Gothic

The theme of the ambiguous savagery of the Canadian wilderness absorbed by the human being; the protagonist's spiritual, psychological and social transformation; and Engel's preoccupation with the sexual and the abject with respect to the Canadian heroine recalls previously discussed characteristics of the Canadian Gothic.

However, Engel subverts certain parts of the traditional Canadian Gothic, for example by parodying the conventional Canadian myth of the female wilderness that is penetrated and colonised by the male explorer. *Bear* gives an answer to the question of what would happen to the idea of the Canadian wilderness as female if the exploring subject happens to be a woman. Lou, a female historical archivist from the city explores and conquers the wild nature – and even intimately one of its inhabiting animals – of northern Ontario. In this case, the image of the male subject dominating the female wilderness no longer makes sense as far as the discourse of gender and power is concerned. As a consequence, “when the protagonist is a woman, the wilderness is apt to be sexually neuter.”¹³² Engel puts the Canadian wilderness into a Gothic perspective and

¹³² Atwood, *Strange Things*, p. 108.

thereby subverts the traditional gendered perspective of the Canadian nature and the related masculine myth of colonising. In the course of the novel, Lou goes through a process of self-realisation leading to personal growth, and at the end of the narrative, “for one strange, sharp moment she could feel in her pores and the taste of her own mouth that she knew what the world was for.”¹³³ After her experiences out in the Canadian wilderness, Lou returns to the city in touch with her natural feelings, especially with her sexuality, and able to be herself. *Bear*’s Gothicism portrays “an unfamiliar journey into the wilderness of Lou’s own psyche as well as of the Canadian place itself.”¹³⁴

The question asked in much Canadian Literature, Frye has speculated, is not “Who am I?” but “Where is here?” For Engel, however, the two questions are inextricably related.¹³⁵ With the Gothic metaphor of Frye’s garrison mentality, where the garrison is juxtaposed to ‘the vast unconsciousness of nature’, Lou finds the answers to the question of “Where is here?” in the fierce vitality of the northern landscape. While discovering the “where”, she also finds the answer to the existential question “Who am I?”¹³⁶ at the same time, which is connected to the spiritual realm of the Canadian place.

Lou’s sexual and emotional self-discovery is made possible by the bizarre but also healing relationship with the bear. Lou is an emotionally frustrated woman, living “like a mole, buried deep in her office, digging among maps and manuscripts” (*B*, p. 11). Occasionally, she has unsatisfactory sex with the Director of the Historical Institute.

¹³³ Marian Engel, *Bear*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1976, pp. 136-37. For the textual analysis to follow, quotes from the novel *Bear* will not be footnoted, but the source will appear after the quote in brackets abbreviated with *B* followed by the page number.

¹³⁴ Howells, “Marian Engel’s *Bear*”, p. 106.

¹³⁵ Elspeth Cameron, “Midsummer Madness: Marian Engel’s *Bear*.” *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 21 (1977-1978): 83-94, p. 84.

¹³⁶ cf. Cameron, “Midsummer Madness”, pp. 84-87.

Modern love has been for her a wasteland of emotions in a male-dominated world. However, with her research on Colonel Cary and his interest in the Romantic poets Byron, Shelley and Keats, Lou is inspired to free her own romantic longings. She abandons order and reason to let the relationship with the bear happen to her.¹³⁷ Engel parodically exaggerates the Romantic's vision of the pastoral relationship between savage nature and the human soul by bringing together human and wild beast in a sexual way. She thereby turns to the Gothic fascination with the abject which is a popular tool of contemporary women writers to portray female sexuality as the 'unspeakable.' In the case of *Bear*, the 'unspeakable' – or the representation of the unimaginable, unrepresentable – is exceeded into ideas of bestiality. Turcotte argues that, as with most Gothic works, "at the heart of the tale is a preoccupation with the profane, the sexually deviant, and with the taboo – with the abject – an unorthodoxy designed to repudiate the myth of controlled (or absent) female sexuality."¹³⁸

The human-animal relationship and apparent intimacy is expressed by mirror scenes and reflection scenes between Lou and the bear. The Gothic fragmentation of unified subjectivity is thereby grotesquely exceeded by Engel's deliberate blurring of human and animal identities, and gender categories. She thereby accentuates the gendered implications of sexual behaviour as well as the animal presence of sexuality inside the human. It is the bear's otherness that Lou enjoys so much; it/he is a blank screen on which she can project any image or identity that she likes. In the narrative, the bear undergoes a variety of transformations which are an index of Lou's own needs and

¹³⁷ Cameron, "Midsummer Madness", p. 91.

¹³⁸ Turcotte, "Sexual Gothic", p. 73.

desires.¹³⁹ The bear functions as a mirror to the woman, and Lou in reverse, in all her animal humanness, is a mirror to the bear. The narrative is permeated by scenes in which Lou and the bear stare at each other, signifying that very mirror image. “As she sat down, she realized the bear was standing in his doorway staring at her. Bear. There. Staring. She stared back.” (*B*, p. 34).

The androgynously named Lou is often referred to as animal-like, “she lived like a mole” (*B*, p. 11), or “she ... raised her nose to the air like an animal.” (*B*, p. 45) In contrast, as their relationship progresses, Lou ascribes to the bear more and more human attributes, whereby it/he shifts in gender as well. At first, she sees it/him as a “middle-aged woman defeated to the point of being daft” (*B*, p. 36). Later, it/he becomes more and more ‘man-like’ as their intimacy develops. The most carnivalesque-grotesque scene appears when Lou wants to dance with the bear, and she pretends that it/he is a man. “She watched him. He was wonderful. A strange, fat, mesomorphic mannikin, absurdly heavy in calf and shoulder, making his first attempt to dance upright.... She moved towards him and took his paws in her hands, and then, her fingers interlaced with his sets of knitting needles, began to sway against him to the music.” (*B*, pp. 114, 115) This scene produces somewhat comic effects resonating previously discussed effects of the Grotesque.

Grotesque effects are intensified when Lou starts to become more and more emotionally attached to the bear. This becomes apparent, for instance, by her obsessive, repetitive “‘Bear,’ she cried. ‘I love you.’” (*B*, p. 111), which, as the narrative progresses, evokes more and more Grotesque undertones that indicate a radical subversion of human intimacy. The Romantic vision of the merge of subject and object is grotesquely exaggerated when Lou becomes even more strongly obsessed with the bear, leading up to

¹³⁹ Howells, “Marian Engel’s *Bear*”, p. 110

the point where she wants his identity from him: "Bear, make me comfortable in the world at last. Give me your skin." (*B*, p. 112) In a traditionally Gothic mirror scene, Lou realises a transformation; she is indeed becoming more and more like a bear: "She looked at herself in the female colonel's pierglass. Her hair and her eyes were wild. Her skin was brown and her body was different and her face was not the same face she had seen before. She was frightened of herself." (*B*, p. 125) Strongly resembling the Gothic monstrous madwoman at this point, Lou's obsession with the bear leaves the comic side of the Grotesque and enters the somewhat terrifying madness of the Gothic.

Like the traditional sentimental Gothic heroine, Lou passionately declares her love to the bear, desperately promising not to leave it/him: "I won't ever go away. I shall make myself strange garments out of fur in order to stay with you in the winter. I won't ever, ever, leave you." (*B*, p. 113) The difference to the traditional Gothic heroine à la Elisabeth in *Kamouraska* is that Lou's beloved is a bear and not a man, which grotesquely parodies this convention of the Gothic. The frame of reference here shifts between the sexual contexts of human/animal, man/woman and male-bear/female-bear. A Gothic blurring of both gender and species categories is evidently taking place.

Lou perceives their relationship as encompassing the full range of human experience. For the first time, she experiences deep feelings of tenderness, happiness, pleasure and fulfillment; feelings she has never had in her previous relationships with men. Turcotte notes the interesting fact that Lou's and the bear's sexual encounters are recounted in the context of former failed relationships. When Lou thinks of her years of being a mistress, or of being in a relationship with an elegant man who in fact was

nothing more than a sexist cad, the bear, for all his bulk and simplicity, cannot help but be a superior partner.¹⁴⁰

She knew now that she loved him, loved him with a clean passion she had never felt before. Once, briefly, she had as a lover a man of elegance and charm, but she had felt uncomfortable when he said he loved her ... and indeed, it meant, she discovered, that he loved her as long as the socks were folded and she was at his disposal on demand; when the food was exquisite and she was not menstruating. (*B*, p. 118)

Lou starts to emancipate herself from her former frustrating and one-sided relationships, especially, and ironically, when she sees that the bear is a selfless sexual partner that does not seem to experience sexual pleasure while giving it to her. “Never mind, she thought, I’m not asking for anything. I’m not obliged to anyone. I don’t care if I can’t turn you on. I just love you.” (*B*, p. 111) Thereby, Lou justifies her action and is able to temporarily overcome the feelings of guilt and shame she experiences regarding her obvious sexual exploitation of an animal. Lou’s former emotional frustration seems to be responsible for leading her into this madness of devoting herself emotionally and sexually to the bear. Now completely beyond reason, she identifies more and more with it/him which finally makes her fantasise about actually consummating their ‘love’: “A note fell out of the book. *The offspring of a woman and a bear is a hero, with the strength of a bear and the cleverness of a man. – Old Finnish legend.*” (*B*, p. 99) The relationship with the bear takes on an allegorical significance when Lou starts fantasising about the possibility of mating with the bear to conceive a hero according to this legend. Ecstatically involved in these reveries, she tries to get the bear to mate with her as if she were a female bear.

¹⁴⁰ Turcotte, “Sexual Gothic”, p. 75.

However, the attempt fails: the bear gives her a rebuking swipe with its paw and tears half the skin off her back. At this point she finally realises that she had gone too far: "She had broken a taboo." (*B*, p. 122) The bear obviously rejects her because she is human. In the course of the novel, the sexual context of male/female is displaced to animal/human. After this key episode, Lou realises that the line between woman and bear cannot be crossed; she recognises the impossibility of her dream of communion with wild nature. The bear's strike now removes her feeling of exploitation completely; just as it reminds her of her transgressions and restores her to sanity.¹⁴¹ "[H]er scar inscribes a natural taboo line and saves her from bestiality. Then follows a necessary movement beyond her fantasy ... to the ordered world of social relationships again."¹⁴²

In other words, realism wins over the fantastic in the end. The novel shows us the limits that the fantastic tries to push, and in this case, it assumes closure in the sense that it teaches about the inviolability of natural order and the healing corrective power of nature to save us from ourselves as well as its offers for psychic and spiritual renewal.¹⁴³ Lou's fragmented self, which she projects onto the bear by attributing to him various identities, is restored into a whole and unified self when she realises that the bear is indeed a wild beast after all. To identify with the Other (the bear) now means to come to terms with her own animal nature. Engel gothically blends the abject and the taboo (for example sexually attracting the bear by her menstrual blood) by reclaiming, as positive, experiences or elements that have been socially and ideologically excluded, especially with regard to images of absent or repressed female sexuality. Within the process of

¹⁴¹ Howells, "Marian Engel's *Bear*", p. 108.

¹⁴² Turcotte, "Sexual Gothic", p. 111.

¹⁴³ Howells, "Marian Engel's *Bear*", p. 107.

personal self-authentication, “Lou’s relationship with the bear is emblematic of her tentative exploration of, gradual immersion in, and full acceptance of the primitive forces in the world and herself.”¹⁴⁴ To conclude, by subverting literary conventions of, for instance, Romanticism and the (Canadian) Gothic or social conventions of fixed gender roles in (hetero)sexual relationships, Engel creates a cathartic experience for the woman to emancipate herself from socialised orthodoxy.

Deconstructing gender and history in the Canadian wilderness

Besides the subversive impact of the fantastic upon the possibility of a woman’s personal emancipation, it also assumes a significant role within discourses of Canada’s history of settlement and colonisation. Lou’s assignment to catalogue and research the contents of the estate on Cary Island known as Pennarth to find new historical evidence relevant to early settlement in northern Ontario relates to an important connection: the recreation of the impact of history on both Canada and on the female subject within a postcolonial discourse.

Pennarth is a Fowler’s octagon whose labyrinthine structures conceal and then unveil history. Engel touches upon the conventions of the Gothic haunted house as a site for domestic horror. “She was afraid of damp, spidery places.... The nether region was indeed dark and spidery. To her relief, however, she found four filled oil lamps hanging in brackets from the beams. She lit them one by one and the basement flared into eerie dimensions.” (*B*, pp. 101-02) The metaphor of the Gothic house as a space for the containment of the Gothic heroine is subverted by Engel in the sense that, although Lou seems to be entrapped on this island and in this house, it is nevertheless a site for her

¹⁴⁴ Cameron, “Midsummer Madness”, p. 87.

emotional liberation. While the traditional Gothic heroine is imprisoned in the Gothic castle passively awaiting her fate, Lou enjoys her containment in that 'isolated palace' and experiences in the end a kind of rebirth, or in psychological terms, the achievement of an integrated personality. Consequently, *Bear* parodically subverts the plot of the traditional Gothic romance – the quest of a man in search of treasure guarded by a monster – by the fact that the researcher is female, and the monster becomes her sexual partner. Moreover, Lou finds little of lasting value in the house, and, contrary to expectations when the chief setting is an old and mysterious house, there are no surprises to be discovered.¹⁴⁵

Most of the contents are imported items from Europe, such as Victorian, furniture, clothes from the 1920s and 1930s, books (many by English Romantic authors), and relics from World War I; nothing of real relevance for Ontarian history. The real treasure that Lou gains during her research at Pennarth is her own version of the history of that place. "It was a fine building, but it had no secrets. It spoke only of a family who did not want to be common clay, who feared more than anything being lost to history. With their fine tables and velvet pelmets and pier-glasses, the English wives had proclaimed their aristocracy among these Indian summer islands." (*B*, p. 139) From the 'historical evidence' that Lou finds at Pennarth, she infers that the Carys tried to reinforce the imperialist values that were imposed on the New World. The Aboriginal people living around the area and occasionally caring for the bear, Joe King and Lucy Leroy, seem to have been friends with the Carys (especially with the last of them, Jocelyn Cary) according to the information provided by the storeowner Homer. However, Joe King himself mentions to Lou that they were just intruders like all the European settlers. "I

¹⁴⁵ Donald S. Hair, "Marian Engel's *Bear*." *Canadian Literature*, 92 (1982 Spring): 34-45, p. 34.

don't suppose you found any buried treasure. They didn't know much, people like the Carys. They were tourists.'" (*B*, p. 138) In his version of their relationships with the Carys, he actually infers that they, like Lou, are probably just "one of the great irrelevancies of Canadian history." (*B*, p. 84) – intruders like tourists, transformed by the wilderness, or destroyed by it. The delegitimisation of historical truth promoted by historiographic metafiction reflects the postmodern view of the multi-perspectivity of history. Thus, the historical 'evidence' discovered during Lou's stay reinforces this view, and especially in this case, the different perspectives on settlement and colonisation.

The important historical contribution in *Bear* is Lou's inscription of herstory onto the Canadian colonial history. As previously discussed, the found items alone only reveal the settler's urge to relive their European heritage in the New World. What Engel tries to do is, on the one hand, to stress the multi-perspectivity of history, and on the other hand, emphasise the gendered perspective on history. Lou's historiographic work consists of extracting from the found items the relevancies of history/herstory to her; that is, her own perspectives about the Carys' lives. From the items and the books she analyses her own perspective on the Carys and the colonising and settler mentality of the 19th century. Thereby, she draws her own conclusions by applying a gendered perspective on history. "[Cary] Didn't like Mary Shelley, or any woman, much. Useful articles, women, she [Lou] could hear him thinking, when they keep to their place. She thought of the women the officers brought to Canada with them: beached, bent, practical, enduring, exiled. Still, as many there must have been who enjoyed tugging a new world out of the universe as cried and died." (*B*, p. 98) As Turcotte notices, in *Bear*,

the sanitizing of history is linked to imperialism and its own quest for 'whiting out' history – in this case through the story

of the Colonel, very much a figure of masculine hegemony, a man intent on duplicating the Byronic dream of owning his own island (and his own bear). It is a dream that comes to fruition in Canada in a landscape that the feminine rejects at first.¹⁴⁶

The first Colonel's wife "refused to go further into the wilderness and face the inclemencies of the north." (B, p. 15) *Bear* indicates not only the development of the relationship of the wilderness with the female – from the 19th century image of the fierce Canadian wilderness that is unbearable to women à la Susanna Moodie, until the 20th century independent female explorers of the wilderness like Lou, or Maggie in Ethel Wilson's *The Swamp Angel*. The novel also displays the potential of these women to sustain and develop independently in the Canadian wilderness and create their Canadian herstories.

Lou's herstory is thus comprised of two aspects: the independence of the female in the savage nature, and the acceptance of the savage nature within the independent female. The latter implies her resistance to historically imposed social and moral orthodoxies on women; that is, resisting colonisation. As Cameron argues, "[b]y getting underneath the veneer of 19th century gentility to the vital natural landscape, and by realizing her own authenticity as a person beneath the controlled responses which are socially imposed, Lou 'unhides' what has been there all along."¹⁴⁷ Only as a Gothic monstrous madwoman, Lou has gained the opportunity to define both herself and a decolonising view of the history of the place by stripping away the colonial traditions that affect both the history of women in general, and the land and the Aboriginal inhabitants

¹⁴⁶ Turcotte, "Sexual Gothic", p. 85.

¹⁴⁷ Cameron, "Midsummer Madness", p. 88.

of the land in the particular case of Canada.

Magic Realism and the postcolonial condition in Jane Urquhart's *Away*

Published in 1993, *Away* raises interesting questions of cultural identity regarding the reworkings of Irish history and 19th century Canadian settler history. Jane Urquhart thereby brings forward interesting historical discourses relating to the Canadian colonial and postcolonial past and present. In doing so, she focuses on the individual experiences of the women in the novel to portray perspectives on the cultural and political history of 19th century Ireland and English Canada by using the powers of Magic Realism and the Gothic.

Away's focus on cultural identities, whether Irish, Canadian, Aboriginal, or Irish-Canadian, relies much on its combination of history and the mythologies of the respective cultures. The novel's lyrical and mythical texture together with its close thematic interrelation of mythology and history support Urquhart's postcolonial engagement which she expresses by using elements of Magic Realism. Wyle argues that "[m]agic realism's generic features are aptly suited to dramatizing the complex relationship between myth, history, politics, and cultural identification, as the rich stew of historical realism, fantasy, and folklore in *Away* illustrates."¹⁴⁸ *Away's* preoccupation with history and postcoloniality not only raises issues of colonial oppression of the Irish in Ireland by the British, but also those of English Canadian colonialism regarding both the Aboriginal and the Irish immigrant populations in Canada.

In addition, Urquhart's aesthetics of texture also clearly reveal Magic Realist

¹⁴⁸ Wyle, "The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness", p. 31.

techniques. Her use of the ostensibly realistic and the ostensibly fantastic and of the natural and the supernatural coexisting in the same narrative space not only show the ways how these seemingly contradicting concepts often blend in folklore and in popular consciousness, they also provide a vehicle for sophisticated commentary about social, political and cultural assumptions.¹⁴⁹ While Urquhart's descriptions of natural imagery often go as far as producing fantastic and terrifying effects of the Gothic sublime, the supernatural and/or postcolonial Other are often rooted in cultural mythologies or oral traditions. Therefore, this Magic Realist representation of the Other is much more part of the real and thus not as terrifying as the culturally disconnected, frightening Other of the Gothic. Hence, returning to the spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity to the real, I categorise *Away* as where the Magical Realist is located. Its occasional pulls towards the Gothic only reinforce Urquhart's heavy reliance on the fantastic to challenge and to subvert historical, cultural, and gendered centres.

Fantastic elements in *Away*: the natural, the supernatural, and the obsessive

In Urquhart's descriptions of the Canadian wilderness, she draws a direct connection to the cultural context of the Irish and their fears about the future they are about to face in Canada after leaving behind their devastating fate of exploitation, misery and extreme poverty in mid-19th-century Ireland. Highly inclined to the aesthetics of Romanticism, Urquhart portrays natural imagery as being spiritually connected to the human soul. In fact, the descriptions of Canadian nature in *Away* echo elements of the classical Gothic with its sublime impacts of terrifying excess and monstrosity Frye calls the 'terror of the soul' in the face of the 'vast unconsciousness of nature.'

¹⁴⁹ Wylie, "The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness", p. 24.

The novel's first half is set in Ireland, and when the Irish prepare themselves for their exodus to Canada, they hear the alarming rumours about the destructive force of the dangerous Canadian wilderness.

The mountains were unclimbable, the rivers unfordable, the forests impenetrable, and the trees in them unchoppable. The potatoes, if planted at all, ... were inedible because they continued to grow in the digestive tract after they were swallowed, causing certain death.... [T]he landscape swallowed almost everyone who approached it. Gigantic insects were described that tore the livers out of the sides of men, women, and children, and packs of wolves moved through crowds like threshing machines. Storms ... snatched infants out of the arms of their mothers – even indoors – and rivers overflowed aggressively, demolishing everything in their path. Moreover, it was futile to attempt to attempt to make roads through forests because trees reappeared as soon as they were cut down.¹⁵⁰

After their arrival in Canada, Mary, Brian (Mary's husband) and Liam (their son) are petrified by the untamed nature; they are "terrified of the paradise they had imagined." (A, p. 140) Urquhart displays the frightening image of the Canadian wilderness in her description of the "flowers and grass [that] had become huge and terrifying" (A, p. 140) and of the "moths the size of eagles." (A, p. 142) This hyperbolically exceeded image even produces undertones of the Grotesque.

Water is a recurrent natural image signifying the imaginative and spiritual state of the women. Throughout the three generations, the women in *Away* are frantically drawn to water. Mary, Eileen, and Esther all yearn to live as close as possible to "the monstrous liquid neighbour" (A, p. 5) which designates either the Atlantic Ocean (when in Ireland)

¹⁵⁰ Jane Urquhart, *Away*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993, pp. 115-16. For the textual analysis to follow, quotes from the novel *Away* will not be footnoted, but the source will appear after the quote in brackets abbreviated with A followed by the page number.

or the gigantic lakes in Canada. In Ireland, Mary is magically drawn to the Atlantic Ocean where she has found the dead sailor and where she goes back every day to meet the spirit of the dead sailor. Because this daemon lover, who ‘followed’ her to Canada, emerges from water, she is equally drawn to the Canadian lakes to meet him. Hence, “[t]he desire for the sea was on her. Liquid.” (A, p. 36) Urquhart’s description of the St. Lawrence River and Mary’s relationship to it recalls a sublime invincibility and a destructive force:

Mary had begun, as before, to stand beside the stream. [...] When the stream did return ... [s]wollen to five times its usual size, it hurtled past the acre of light, taking some recently ploughed earth with it. It was dangerous and untouchable and revealed nothing of what lay beneath its surface.... Liam was forbidden to approach the water for fear he would be snatched by the monstrous stream and carried off to somewhere else altogether. (A, pp. 148-49)

These sublime forces of Canadian nature underline an increasing awareness of the psychological dimension of the fantastic inherent in the individual and perpetuated by the Canadian Gothic according to Northey. These forces symbolise the unspeakable fear of the Irish to begin a new life in the New World. Thus, the cultural and historical context in which this psychic terror of the Canadian wilderness is produced and perpetuated indicates the Irish people’s fear of leaving behind their cultural past; which means in more general terms a postcolonial fear of the loss of a cultural identity.

The emergence of the supernatural in *Away* either relies on cultural mythologies or popular superstition on the one hand, or can be seen as an inherent quality of the female protagonists on the other. All appearances of the supernatural comply with the

theory of Magical Realism since they are not frightening, and they appear more ordinary and real due to their close connections to individual or cultural contexts. Mary's daemon lover, who emerges again and again at the coast of Rathlin Island (Ireland) and with whom Mary experiences intimate encounters, is not easy to categorise regarding his/its nature. He/it is either a fantastic invention of Mary's eccentric imagination or a supernatural apparition that indeed appears dependent or independent of a Celtic myth. Regardless of his/its physical nature, Urquhart describes these fantastic encounters between Mary and this creature by using the delicate textual aesthetics of Magic Realism:

His song was like no other song. It rasped and whimpered and told her secrets she had known for centuries. Her arms were full of him, he entered her and passed right through her. He enveloped her like her own skin and she a stone sinking under his weight. He forced her to want other elements to breathe beyond that which was available in the ordinary air, and then, moments later, the air was no longer ordinary. If she had been asked to describe him, she would have said that he was the exact spot where the sea touches land, the precise moment of the final reach of surf. (A, pp. 24-25)

These encounters comply with Magic Realist aesthetics that indicate that "[t]wo worlds – distinct, following dissimilar laws – interact, interpenetrate and interwind, unpredictably but in a natural fashion."¹⁵¹ Such a fusion creates a fictional space produced by the dual inscription of incompatible geometries perpetuated by Magic Realism.¹⁵²

Mary's daemon lover is spiritually connected to her state of being 'away', which actually makes her no less 'unreal' than he is. After Mary buries the dead sailor, she goes 'away', which means according to the Celtic myth – as recounted by the priest – that an

¹⁵¹ Robert R. Wilson, "The Metamorphoses of Space: Magic Realism." Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski, (eds.) *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories*. Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986, 61-74, p. 71.

¹⁵² Wilson, "The Metamorphoses of Space", p. 72.

outside force, faeries to be precise, has taken her away and replaced her with an exact replica of her. This replica, the 'gone' Mary so to speak, is provided with extreme sensuality and eccentricity. She does nothing but sing quietly and whisper to an invisible somebody all day, composing rhymes "with words like heart and treasure and darling in them." (A, p. 25) The people on the island, who are inclined to superstitious beliefs in the supernatural and the inexplicable which is partially related to mythologies but also to Catholicism, attribute to her some sort of occult nature that she may have received from this otherworldly encounter. "They feared Mary, but did not wish to offend her, fearing the retribution of 'the others' more. They wondered she would bring a changeling into the world and, if so, what dark powers it would have." (A, p. 22) Due to her state of being 'away', Mary is highly sexualised by the men on the island, including the priest. They think she bewitches them so that they become possessed by her increasing beauty and sensuality.¹⁵³ She is constructed as a hypersexualised Other by the male population on the island. There are strong thematic pulls towards the Gothic area when the priest decides to exorcise the devil-like Other within her, whereby Catholic rituals turn into grotesque superstitious procedures. Urquhart thereby creates a bizarre relation between mythology, Catholicism and female sensuality in the scene when Father Quinn performs the exorcism.

She felt the holy water fill her hair, but it was tepid and useless and ran in futile tracings to her throat.... The water when she placed it in her mouth was not the moisture she desired.... 'No,' she said quietly, and it was the first word she had spoken. 'No,' she said again into the distance of the room. 'Cast off this shadow, Mary,' the priest was saying 'that stands between yourself and God.' He advanced towards her with the large crucifix. Mary saw the young naked man that

¹⁵³ See for example A, pp. 22-23.

hung from the cross and reached tentatively to caress the sand waves of his ribs. But it was not Christ she touched. (A, p. 48)

This account implies a mocking critique of Catholicism which, on the one hand, tends to create occult behaviour in people, and condemns female sexuality on the other. The Catholic perspective creates her as an Other because she does not conform to the morals of idealised femininity, virtue and chastity. In her critique of Catholicism's way of Othering women and of imposing superstitions on society, Urquhart parodically exceeds the Gothics of this scene when she lets Mary confuse the corpse of Christ on the cross with the body of her spirit lover. Mary refuses to be exorcised, that is, she refuses to conform to society's religious and moral laws. Cultural mythologies and institutionalised religion are bizarrely connected in this scene, which gears towards an effect of gender resistance by Mary produced by the subversive potential of Magic Realism.

Away follows three generations of women both blessed and cursed by their passion for an Other world; this state of being 'away.' Their individual conceptions of the Otherworld differs in terms of the mythological (Mary), political (Eileen), and poetic (Esther).¹⁵⁴ The eccentricity of the women is based on the Celtic myth, though only Mary is possessed by an otherworldly lover. Eileen and Esther share Mary's mythical, prophetic and poetic abilities as well as the air of extraordinary sensuality symptomatic for their state of being 'away,' which gives them a supernatural aura. In addition, this condition of being 'away' while physically unmoved recalls the fantastic conception of the fragmented self. Whether this fragmentation is productive or destructive differs with

¹⁵⁴ Patricia Smart, "Weighing the Claims of Memory: the Poetry and Politics of the Irish-Canadian Experience in Jane Urquhart's *Away*." *International Review of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, 10 (1994): 63-70, p. 63.

the individual woman. In any case, these aspects reinforce a correlation of the fantastic with the ex-centric; in this case, the Magic Realist Other with the female.

Urquhart's portrayal of the Aboriginal character Exodus Crow inhabits a stereotypically overmystified nature. Although he is not a supernatural apparition, his majestic advent receives a mystic, obscure and spectral atmosphere which may imply a correlation between an alien (Other?) mythology and the supernatural. Exodus Crow brings Mary's dead body back, and he indicates that she shares something with his culture and mythology. Wyile's account that "Exodus contributes to the mythic quality of the story because he recognizes in Mary a mutually shared quality of *manitou*"¹⁵⁵ perpetuates a romanticised representation of the Aboriginal Canadian that strongly resembles the image of a 'noble savage.' A first indication about Urquhart's problematic intention to associate two completely different cultural mythologies is apparent here. Read within a postcolonial discourse, the representation of the Ojibway is certainly a subversive presentation of the postcolonial Other, which will be analysed in the following section. However, Urquhart unfortunately over-mystifies him in her portrayal which makes it problematic to be a plausible subject to critique colonial oppression.

The women's nature of being 'away' make them inclined to obsessive passion for the loved one, at times resulting in irrationally bizarre, or 'ex-centric', behaviour. This echoes partially the previously discussed Gothic motif of anxiety-ridden, sentimental love and obsession which makes them a prototype of the Gothic heroine. Especially Eileen's obsessive infatuation with the political activist/dancer Aidan Lanighan leans at times

¹⁵⁵ Wyile, "The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness", p. 29.

towards desperate self-sacrificial and masochistic behaviour. Feeling the eccentric urge to identify with the loved one, Eileen “had given her real voice to Aidan Lanighan.” (A, p. 260) Her obsession here resembles narcissistic egotism that results from desperation about unreciprocated love: “She [Eileen] created Aidan over and over, gave him lines he had never uttered. ‘I love you,’ he said in her imagination. ‘You are my heart’s darling.’” (A, p. 293) The pain Eileen feels about the relationship with Aidan is projected onto the love scenes echoing the Burkean definition of the sublime that combines pain and pleasure. Urquhart portrays Eileen’s painful experience with unreciprocated love by assigning her masochistic fantasies of sexual pleasure involving pain. “The pain of his entry into her body caused her to cry out and he covered her mouth with the cool curve of his palm until she whimpered and quieted and began to feel the pain being replaced by a kind of sorrow which she would later recognize as pleasure.” (A, p. 289) Another example for the author’s intention to combine obsessive love with emotional and physical pain is Eileen’s desire to compensate her suffering by self-destructive behaviour: “Eileen fought the desire to dig her elbows into her side and bend over in pain.” (A, p. 293) The correlation of pain and pleasure may either relate to Burke’s account on the sublime or to Urquhart’s intention to emphasise the pain and the hopelessness of unreciprocated love. Eileen never achieves the moment of liberation from her obsession with Aidan. Her mooning over Aidan is mixed with politics, and her perception of the political cause is constructed as naïve romanticism.¹⁵⁶ When Eileen finds out that Aidan has used her only to achieve his political goal, she spends the rest of her life in loneliness, bitterness and remorse for her mistake of investing her full trust in Aidan. Therefore, she does not

¹⁵⁶ Wyile, “The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness”, p. 37.

succeed in freeing herself from her obsession; instead it seems that her fragile personality and her naivety reduces the potential for emancipation of the self.

In contrast, Mary's obsession with her spirit lover does not imply the danger of disempowerment because it seems that her love is reciprocated – regardless if one reads the relationship as taking place in Mary's imagination or within a supernatural discourse. Although Urquhart describes the sexual encounters of Mary and her daemon lover also by using language involving sexual pleasure and pain ("When he entered her she was filled with aching sorrow." (A, p. 84)), there is no indication of physical or emotional suffering – probably *because* it is an imaginative/supernatural relationship. Her supposed self-destructive behaviour reads like ecstatic foreplay rather than physical compensation for emotional suffering as in Eileen's case.

Wednesdays she [Mary] awoke with the smell of sea in her room, her mouth requesting fire and salt and her arms aching.... She ate handfuls of her mother's precious peppercorns and rubbed her thighs until they burned with the turf that awaited the fire, until her body, inside and out, shrieked and sang.... Then she burst from the house to the sea, in fever. (A, p. 24)

Mary never needs to actively free herself from her obsessive preoccupation with her spirit lover because in her eccentric state of being 'away', she is still true to her self. When Brian proposes to her back in Ireland, she confidently tells him that she will stick to her imaginative/supernatural lover even if married to Brian. "'I am here but I am not here,' she said. 'I will be your wife but I will not be your wife.'" (A, p. 57) As a consequence, Brian expects her to leave him eventually. She does so later in Canada where she spends the rest of her life with her spirit lover by Lake Moira. Although both women are inclined to mad obsession with their lovers, Mary never loses her self-determination and is

therefore never disempowered in her relationship unlike Eileen, whose naïve nature seems to prevent her from finding her own identity. *Away* seems to illustrate that the Magical Realist relationship of Mary and the spirit has a potential for liberation and emancipation on behalf of the woman, while the ‘real’ relationship of Eileen and Aidan ends in bitterness and remorse on Eileen’s part.

Historiographic metafiction and postcoloniality: competing nationalisms?

I claim *Away* to be historiographic metafiction in this study not only due to its preoccupation with ‘real’ historical people like Thomas D’Arcy McGee appearing as fictional characters (an aspect which delegitimises him as historical ‘fact’ due to the self-reflexive interplay between historiography and fiction). It is also postcolonial fiction – a subcategory of historiographic metafiction – because it fictionally traces the sorrowful history of the Irish under British oppression in the 19th century including depictions of exploitation and extreme poverty that lead to their forced displacement as their only choice for survival. By transferring experiences of the Irish to a Canadian context, Urquhart discusses their oppression by the English and French settlers in 19th century Canada, but also the Irish nationalist reactions (the Fenian movement) to that oppression against the British in Britain as well as against the British hegemony in Canada. Corresponding to the (post)colonial experiences of the Irish, perspectives of the Aboriginal experience are also raised within the discourse of postcolonialism. However, Urquhart’s approach to compare the experiences of the two colonised peoples is highly problematic, which will be further analysed later.

The idea of 19th century British imperialism to assimilate cultures to 'Britishness' is represented in *Away* when the Irish prepare themselves for their journey to Canada. They are given "a perplexing pamphlet"; a list of items they are supposed to take with them to export Britishness to the North American continent. These include, among other things, ancestral armour, engraved prints of Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, and the Queen, golf clubs, scotch whiskey, tennis racquets, pianos, umbrellas, and Wellingtons. (A, p. 117) They are not allowed to take items that are typically Irish or Catholic, which, after their exodus to North America, would make subsequent generations remember their cultural roots. The goal is to erase Irish cultural heritage completely and instead to implant 'Britishness' into Irish as well as into North American society for cultural assimilation. After Brian, Mary and Liam have settled in Canada, Brian finds that "Orangeism has likewise been exported to Upper Canada"¹⁵⁷ when he observes that "many of his Protestant neighbours had taken the pledge to eliminate Catholicism wherever they find it." (A, p. 198) Brian experiences a replay of British prejudice against the Irish when he gets turned down as a teacher in Canada: "[They] were in fact suspicious of Brian's Irish background in general and his loose association with the 'Popish church' in particular." (A, p. 166) *Away* thus displays the British imperialistic attitudes towards the Irish transported to the New World, and the "struggle of the Irish immigrants ... over sustaining and jettisoning an Irish identity in a new land."¹⁵⁸

This argument relates to the juxtaposition among the immigrants between the preservation of Irish cultural identity and the urge to assimilate around the period of Canada's emergence as a nation in 1867. This juxtaposition is represented by the

¹⁵⁷ Wyle, "The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness", p. 28.

¹⁵⁸ Wyle, "The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness", p. 29.

relationship of Eileen and her brother Liam. While Eileen is concerned with Irish nationalism and Fenian activism striving for the liberation of the Irish in Ireland from British oppression, Liam is interested in establishing a new life and identity in Canada. With respect to the preservation of national and cultural identity in the face of the 'import' of oppressive practices directed at the Irish, Smart argues that "[i]n Canada, the threat of losing the treasure of the past seems less a result of oppression than of a kind of cultural amnesia represented by Liam.... Unlike his sister Eileen, he is more interested in building the future than preserving the past."¹⁵⁹ Although Liam feels that he has lost his past, he does not seem to miss or cherish it. He is more concerned with assimilating. "What does this Irish misery matter, Eileen? We're in Canada now, we're Canadian, not Irish." (A, p. 256) However, while the reader may be tempted to associate Liam with the destructive forces of Canada's unifying attempts to nationbuilding at the expense of cultural diversity, and to idealise Eileen as the dreamer and conserver, the story defies reduction to such simplistic oppositions. Instead, Urquhart raises complex questions about national identity and the relationship of immigrants to their culture of origin.¹⁶⁰

The excerpts of Irish history within the two contexts of colonisation have ambiguous implications in *Away*. The history of the Irish people is represented in *Away* by experiences from both the colonised and the colonising perspectives; their – however forced – exodus to North America along with British colonisers gives their history of displacement a twofold character. On the one hand, they are a people colonised, exploited and oppressed by British hegemony in 19th century Ireland accompanied by religious persecution, deforestation, the banning of hedge schools, and economic exploitation.

¹⁵⁹ Smart, "Weighing the Claims of Memory", p. 67.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

However, on the other hand, the Irish are members of the white settlers/colonisers invading the North American continent exercised with exploitation, displacement, and violent cultural assimilation of the First Nations' people. Hence, there is a postcolonial ambiguity implied in *Away* as far as the coloniser/colonised dichotomy in Irish history is concerned.

As far as Urquhart's preoccupation with the Aboriginal situation is concerned, the character of Exodus Crow represented as Other reveals a postcolonial engagement in that regard. His status as the only Aboriginal in *Away* constructs him as the image of the colonised Other based on race and culture. The reader may be tempted to consider the representation of this character as a stereotypical representative of the dignified, wise Indian chief; as an image of the 'noble savage.' If viewed from this perspective, Urquhart may have missed the highly problematic implications of this image that are in no way undermining the imperial dominance. Instead, they support the imperialist discourse that creates the stereotype of the 'noble savage' as some ancient artefact that must be protected, rather than as members of Aboriginal cultures that have a political voice.

However, there are some valuable postcolonial insights with respect to the name of Exodus Crow, whereby Urquhart undoubtedly parodies Christianity and its cruel history of 'civilising' mission.

'I am called Exodus because my mother, who was taught to read by a churchman, lost interest in the Bible halfway through the book of Exodus. She loved the name Exodus and was doubly disappointed therefore in this book.... This book of Exodus, she said, was not worthy of its name because it was filled with battles for land and the making of laws.... My mother did not like this but she liked the sound of the word

Exodus and wanted to give the name a better home. She called me Exodus.' (A, p. 175)

Exodus Crow does not only refer to the injustices of the history of Christianisation with its brutal impositions onto Aboriginal peoples, he draws attention to the fictitiousness of the Bible. Exodus' mother assumes the Book of Exodus to be the legitimisation for colonisation, with its "battles for land and the making of laws" that Aboriginal people have been suffering from First Contact onwards. Urquhart therefore delegitimises the authority of the Bible by having Exodus' mother self-determinedly reconstruct it: she calls her son after the Book of Exodus to give the text "a better home," or a new origin. Urquhart thereby emphasises the postmodern categorisation of the Bible and of Christianity as being (inter)texts or Lyotardian "grand narratives" that can or should be rewritten, reinterpreted. Thereby, their legitimisation is subverted within the context of postcolonialism in *Away*.

Another postcolonial connection regarding the name of Exodus Crow (and the Biblical connotation) is the notion of migration, or rather forced displacement. It insinuates the displacement of Aboriginal people by European immigration and imposed order, but also the massive forced exodus of a substantial part of the Irish population caused by the British exploitation.

Thereby, another postcolonial ambiguity is revealed: *Away* is preoccupied with the Irish experience of suffering from the oppression in both Ireland and Canada on the one hand, and with the colonial oppression due to European invasion experienced by the indigenous population on the other. As a result, the novel inhabits the concept of postcolonialism in a dual sense which implicitly includes an at times problematic

competition of two nationalisms, which ultimately neglects the divergence of power relationships between the two, particularly on the basis of race.

The character of Exodus Crow is crucial to disclose Urquhart's comparisons between the oppressive experiences of the Irish and of the native people in the context of postcolonialism. This becomes not only apparent in Exodus' attempt to associate the two different traditions of religious spirituality ("“There is a great deal of manitou in this book called Genesis.”” cf. A, p. 175). Urquhart also discusses the evil impacts of the colonisers' land seizures and their acts of dispossession of language and culture in both Ireland and Canada.

[Exodus:] ‘After she had been in the forest for several winters she told him [the spirit lover] dark things; about the time of the stolen lands of her island, and of the disease, and of the lost language and the empty villages and how the people who once sang were now silent, how the people who once danced were now still.’ ‘It is true,’ said Brian bitterly. ‘Those who haven’t died are scattered, and their voice is broken, their words are gone.’ ... [Exodus:] ‘She told me that on the big island there were once forests as thick as those here in this land but that the old kings and lords of England had cut down each tree until only bare hills were left behind.... And so I told her ... that some white men had seized my people’s land and killed many animals for sport and abused our women.’ ... ‘What did she say then?’ asked Brian.... [Exodus:] ‘She embraced me and said that the same trouble stayed in the hearts of both our peoples.’” (A, pp. 184-85)

Apart from the dispossession of land, Urquhart foregrounds the most disastrous effect of colonialism, which the Irish and the Aboriginal histories share: the systemic eradication of culture and language – “Their voice is broken, their words are gone.” Due to the fact that both cultures are on the verge of disappearing by the effects of colonialism, they share an insistent effort for cultural preservation in terms of language and mythologies.

Hence, viewed in that regard, both Mary and Exodus Crow are Magic Realist representatives for two collective identities that fight for cultural survival.

The story of Liam and Molly is another example for the association of both histories of colonialism. Molly Doherty is the biracial daughter of an Irishman and an Aboriginal woman; thus with respect to Urquhart's postcolonial project, Molly seems to be the prototype of the alleged common experiences of the Irish and Canada's First Nations. Liam tries to evict the Dohertys (Molly and her father Thomas) from the land he has just bought. Eileen, who befriends Molly, convinces Liam to let the Doherty's stay by analysing the common historical experiences of the Irish and the Aboriginals in terms of land seizures, and calls upon Liam's Irish roots.

‘I think that the English took the lands from the Indians same as they took it from the Irish. Then they just starve everybody out, or...’ she looked directly at Liam, ‘they evict them, or both.’ Liam did not answer. ‘So now you’re going to evict some people from land you never would have had in the first place if the English hadn’t stolen it ... and if they hadn’t stolen Ireland.’ (A, p. 279)

In her vehement fight for the liberation of Ireland, Eileen draws a direct comparison between Irish and Aboriginal experience of colonisation. Liam and Molly get married eventually, which can be interpreted as Urquhart's ingenuous attempt to reconcile two different historical experiences of colonial oppression (Canadian Aboriginal and Irish).

Urquhart's striving to conciliate the two perspectives on the colonised is debatable. The power relations between the Irish and the English colonisers and between the Aboriginal people and the European colonisers highly diverge, especially on the basis of race and of social and cultural conceptions (European vs. non-European). From an Aboriginal perspective, the original English-speaking settlers in Canada were a

monolithic group as colonisers (including the Irish) who, once they had seized the land from its Aboriginal inhabitants, “evolved a system of power and privilege which excluded not only the original Indian and Inuit peoples but, subsequently, other immigrant groups.”¹⁶¹ In the context of the latter, *Away* challenges the competing voices of the Canadian literary mosaic, each asserting its racial, ethnic, or gender-based legitimacy, to imagine new ways of blending the claims of ‘self’ and ‘other.’”¹⁶² However, although Urquhart’s portrait of Ireland’s experience under British rule corresponds with historical fact, “its juxtaposition with the fate of the aboriginal peoples may seem politically naïve in its apparent neglect of the power relationships between the whites and the Indians in Canada.”¹⁶³ Thus, Urquhart’s attempt to reconcile two nationalisms is extremely problematic because of the diverse power relations inherent in the two dissimilar colonial experiences. Nevertheless, Urquhart generally illustrates the brutalities of colonialism in the quest for power, ownership of land and capital, and cruel practices to achieve cultural, social and political hegemony from cross-cultural and cross-century female perspectives and by using the powers of real, Gothic, and Magical Real aesthetics.

¹⁶¹ Smart, “Weighing the Claims of Memory”, p. 64.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Smart, “Weighing the Claims of Memory”, p. 69.

Fantastic Aboriginal writing: Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*

As the last novel to be examined, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, published in 2000, closes the section of textual analyses in this study. Being Haisla herself, Robinson combines the importance of cultural survival by cherishing traditional knowledge with the life and challenges of contemporary society experienced by today's Aboriginal peoples. This duality is inherent in the main character Lisamarie who "continually negotiates her sense of ambivalence about her place in the world as a Haisla woman [trying] to couple traditional values with contemporary experiences [and] finding strength in the past and a way to cope with the challenges of the present."¹⁶⁴

Besides the fact that Robinson successfully reverses the traditional Canadian Gothic's image of the Native as mystified or romanticised Other, perceived as strange and foreign, she places much emphasis on supernatural appearances that are rooted in Native mythologies. According to Atwood, "[f]or indigenous peoples the wilderness is not empty but full, and one thing it was full of was monsters."¹⁶⁵ Native monsters which are already outside the realm of Eurocentric society offer a source of mystery and magic to incorporate the ghosts of the new world in traditional Canadian Gothic writings. Robinson, however, transports this image of the Native monster to an Aboriginal context and it is described from *within* this context as a result. In addition, rather than depicting the Haisla characters as Others, 'noble savages' or potential threats to the safety of a white, Eurocentric community, Robinson describes them from within the community and lets them form their own world, in which monsters exist but are not necessarily destructive. By locating the narrative on the northwest coast of British Columbia where

¹⁶⁴ Andrews, "Native Canadian Gothic Refigured", p. 21.

¹⁶⁵ Atwood, *Strange Things*, p. 64.

monsters and the supernatural are embraced and Native populations dominate, Robinson overturns the traditional Native Other or monster portrayed by 19th century writers of the Eurocentric community.¹⁶⁶ Although the supernatural apparitions that permeate the narrative are not always perceived as 'normal' and are often connected to Gothic fear, evil and death, Lisamarie eventually learns to come to terms with their 'existence' and therefore accepts them as a non-frightening relic of an almost forgotten culture. Hence, the supernatural in *Monkey Beach* vacillates between the Gothic and the Magic Realist. Taken as a viable part of an Aboriginal mythology, accepted in its opposition to reality and encouraged to sustain cultural survival, this supernatural Other is doubtless a fantastic element of Magic Realism.

Furthermore, the oscillation between the Gothic and the Magic Realist relates to the development of the character Lisamarie in her coming-of-age, and her relationship with her cultural roots. Robinson's preoccupation with the history of colonial oppression of the First Nations, for example regarding the problem of systemic violence as a continuing effect of the residential school system, sheds a powerful light on the life of First Nations people, especially women, and on their attempts to come to terms with contemporary society. I argue that the Magic Realist elements that effectively dramatise the relationship between myth, fantasy, history, and cultural identification in *Monkey Beach* result in powerful literary messages of colonial and feminist resistance.

The supernatural and its effects on the individual and on the community

Central to the story is Lisamarie's gift that she inherited from both sides of the family: a special relationship to the spirit world. She has a supernatural ability to predict

¹⁶⁶ Andrews, "Native Canadian Gothic Refigured", pp. 9, 10.

death in the form of apparitions and dreams, and she can see and hear ghosts. As a result, the character Lisamarie herself, although represented as a realistic person in a contemporary realistic setting, is located at a spot where the real and the fantastic narrative space overlap. Thus, she can be classified as a Magic Realist character herself due to her place in the 'unreal', spirit world.

While Lisamarie and her brother are growing up, their grandparents tell them several stories about the Sasquatches, or *B'gwus* in Haisla; the wild men of the woods. Specifically bound to native mythologies from the West Coast, the legend has it that the Sasquatches are "tall, with thick brown hair on their chests, arms and legs. Their heads were shaped oddly, very large and slanted back sharply from the brow."¹⁶⁷ Despite the fact that Lisamarie's parents try to convince the children that "Sasquatches are make-believe, like faeries. They don't really exist." (*MB*, p. 10), Lisamarie suddenly spots one at Monkey Beach. This incident reveals much of the character's relationship to the supernatural in the narrative: although the coming-of-age Lisamarie desperately wants to be 'normal' she cannot escape her supernatural visions. Her parents actively deny traditional teachings and reject these 'unreal' mythologies that are preoccupied with the supernatural. The recurrent Sasquatch-motif, or Lisa's elaboration on T'sonoqua¹⁶⁸ later in the novel, and the debate about whether these creatures are 'real' or make-believe leads to a more general conflict which First Nations communities today are often faced with: the preservation of traditional mythologies and knowledge versus the trend of

¹⁶⁷ Eden Robinson, *Monkey Beach*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2000, p. 7. For the textual analysis to follow, quotes from the novel *Monkey Beach* will not be footnoted, but the source will appear after the quote in brackets abbreviated with *MB* followed by the page number.

¹⁶⁸ "T'sonoqua is not as famous as B'gwus. She covers herself in a cloak and pretends to be an old woman.... She is an ogress, and she won't let go because, to her, human flesh is the ultimate delicacy and young flesh is especially sweet." (*MB*, p. 337)

leaving traditional ways behind because they are not considered compatible with contemporary cultural perceptions.

Birds like crows, hawks and ravens, have a supernatural and a spiritual significance in the book. For example, they produce a violent massacre among the chickens (which is recounted in a gothically disturbing manner¹⁶⁹), or bring good or bad luck, or speak and give advice. They act as Trickster figures.¹⁷⁰ *Monkey Beach*'s frame narrative is told in the present from the perspective of the 19-year-old Lisamarie who reflects upon her childhood after she learns that her younger brother Jimmy is lost on a boating accident. Before she receives the phone call from her parents from Vancouver informing her that a raft has been found, Jimmy's favourite crow Spotty (he has a ritual of feeding the crows for good luck) tells her to go down to Vancouver on water. "Spotty ... screeches, hops, ... her claws clicking against the shingles. *La'sda*, she says. Go into the water. *La'sda, la'sda*." (MB, p. 135) After Spotty speaks to her, Lisa receives the news about the found raft and decides to travel down to Vancouver by speedboat. The Trickster figure, a supernatural and symbolic guide in many indigenous cultures, is more real than symbolic to Lisamarie, which is another indication that both Trickster and character Lisamarie share the same Magic Realist narrative space.

For almost as long as she can remember, Lisamarie has been seeing a mysterious red-haired man whose nightly visits seem to foretell that someone precious to her will die soon. Such incidents happen for example before the deaths of Mick and Ma-ma-oo. When she tells her parents that, they insist that she is only having bad dreams. They tease

¹⁶⁹ For the gothically disturbing description of the massacre among the chickens, see MB, p. 37)

¹⁷⁰ For example, Lisa specifically mentions the function of the Trickster (or its 'non-function' since tricksters are creatures of contradictions) of Weegit the raven, an oral legend transmitted by Ma-ma-oo (see MB, p. 295).

her about Prozac and take her to a psychiatrist. In fact, Lisamarie's parents want to prevent her from becoming too much involved in the dark mysteries of the old mythologies she is so prone to. Probably being aware of her gift, they either do not want her to be frightened or they want to rid themselves of the traditional Aboriginal way of life which they may think holds the young people back if they want to leave the native community. J.M. Bridgeman argues that Lisamarie's parents stand symbolically for a generation of Native people that mark the disappearance of an oral tradition.¹⁷¹

Uncle Mick is more sensitive to Lisamarie's special powers than her parents, because he thinks they tie her more strongly to her Aboriginal roots. They have a close relationship, and Mick, being a political activist for Native rights in North America, teaches Lisa about native resistance. Mick provides a counterpoint to Lisa's resolutely normal parents, who actively deny the validity of traditional teachings and who seem determined that their children will fit into the conventional values of the non-Native world.¹⁷² When Mick dies Lisamarie believes to have foreseen his death. This is the first time that her supernatural ability to predict death overflows her with feelings of guilt and despair. Her assumption that only she seems to have such connections to the spirits is the source of a personal crisis that she struggles with throughout the novel. The only link to the traditional way of understanding the world and native spirituality is Ma-ma-oo, who gathers traditional foods and medicines, and who practices the Haisla ceremony of

¹⁷¹ Bridgeman, J.M., "Witnessing Creation." Rev. of *Monkey Beach*, by Eden Robinson. <<http://www.januarymagazine.com/fiction/monkeybeach.html>> (04/22/04)

¹⁷² Warren Cariou, "Dreamlike Spiritual Quest in a Vividly Rendered World." Rev. of *Monkey Beach*, by Eden Robinson. *The Canadian Forum* (June 2000): 36-37, p. 37.

burning offerings for the ancestors.¹⁷³ Therefore, she asks her grandmother Ma-ma-oo for comfort and assistance.

Ma-ma-oo becomes a spiritual guide for Lisa, and she instructs her about history, plant medicine, the ancestors, ceremonies, how to communicate with the dead and how to cope with fear. Ma-ma-oo in effect helps initiate her as a shaman.¹⁷⁴ Much of what Lisa learns is a confirmation that her sensitivity to the spirit world is a gift that should be respected.

[Ma-ma-oo:] 'Ah, you have the gift, then. Just like your mother. Didn't she tell you about it?' ... [Lisa:] 'What gift?' [Ma-ma-oo:] 'Your mother's side of the family has it strong. Do you know the future sometimes? Do you get hunches?' [Lisa:] 'Predictions? From the little man. He comes, then something bad happens.' ... [Lisa:] 'What about Mom?' [Ma-ma-oo:] 'When Gladys was very young, lots of death going on. T.B. Flu. Drinking. Diseases. She used to know who was going to die next.' (*MB*, p. 153)

Ma-ma-oo corroborates the fact that nowadays many First Nations people often ignore traditional spiritual procedures, including Lisamarie's own mother. "'All the people knew the old ways are gone. Anyone else is doing it in secret these days.'" (*MB*, p. 154) This is where she starts accepting the significance of traditional knowledge, and she begins to realise that a special connection to the Otherworld, to her ancestors, can help her overcome her guilt because she is able now to get in touch with her uncle. The positive energy of Magic Realism is at work in that it occurs to Lisamarie for the first time that the 'unreal' world can be more comforting than the real world. Lisamarie also starts to understand that she lives within a period of cultural transition regarding the traditional

¹⁷³ Cariou, "Dreamlike Spiritual Quest", p. 36.

¹⁷⁴ Bridgeman, "Witnessing Creation".

ways of life of her culture – stuck between preservation of traditional knowledge, represented by Ma-ma-oo, and assimilation to North American culture, represented by her parents.

However, when Ma-ma-oo dies, Lisamarie's guilt and despair returns because having foreseen it, she thinks she may have been able to save her. Her extreme guilt makes her escape to Vancouver where she tries to drown her feelings of despair by excessive partying, alcohol and drug abuse. However, she realises that this is not the right way to handle her guilt. Lisamarie returns to her community and, at the same time, she starts to fully acknowledge her spiritual gift. When she spots another Sasquatch on the way north, she is no longer surprised by her ability to see supernatural beings. "I felt deeply comforted knowing that the magical things were still living in the world." (MB, p. 316) The debates about whether the mythic supernatural creatures like B'gwus or T'sonoqua are real or not are now irrelevant to Lisamarie; the fact that she is able to see them does not make them more or less real. What matters is her own *recognition* of her special gift, which gives her the opportunity to *see* the significance of preserving and transmitting cultural mythologies. In fact, she realises that the supernatural world, which is also a part of her nature, can serve as a refuge from a harsh and disturbing reality. As a consequence, while ghosts and spirits in traditional Gothic novels are portrayed as mirroring the deranged soul of the female subject, the supernatural in *Monkey Beach* produces positive effects in the heroine – the possibility of personal catharsis and liberation and a full acknowledgement of her cultural roots.

In addition, Lisamarie recognises the significance of traditional knowledge for the cultural survival of Aboriginal people in contemporary North America. Andrews links the

significance of the fantastic to personal as well as cultural empowerment by arguing that “Lisamarie’s recognition of herself in monstrous terms is a crucial breakthrough for the girl precisely because it links her to her Haisla culture and gives value to her talent in a context that fuses contemporary concerns with long-standing tribal narratives.”¹⁷⁵ Hence, in the case of *Monkey Beach*, the subversive effects of the fantastic tied to specific cultural context specifically reflect the power of Magic Realism that is at work in a postcolonial discourse.

Colonisation, violence and gender: decolonising the present

Like most fantastic writings, *Monkey Beach* is a response to cultural disorder. The cultural disorder prevalent in the novel is a reflection of the effects of a history of colonisation experienced by the Haisla characters. Andrews argues that “Robinson’s narrative conveys the sense that whatever disorder or confusion the characters experience is a result of their negotiating the often jarring juxtapositions of Native and non-Native viewpoints. The characters are preoccupied with evil because many of them have had to face the impacts of Eurocentrism on their communities and identities.”¹⁷⁶ Besides Robinson’s focus on contemporary problems that are particularly derived from the impacts of colonisation and inevitably tied to race, she also has a strong general interest in the gendered implications of violence.

Robinson discusses one particular impact of colonisation that triggers many of the problems that Aboriginal people are facing today: the residential school system that many characters in the novel have had to go through. The effects of residential school

¹⁷⁵ Andrews, “Native Canadian Gothic Refigured”, p. 18.

¹⁷⁶ Andrews, “Native Canadian Gothic Refigured”, p. 10.

experiences lead to different coping mechanisms in the characters that are oftentimes linked to the perpetual spread of violence within the Aboriginal community.

The theme of systemic violence is a recurring issue in the novel, whose representation is often highly disturbing and thus at times provides the narrative with an evil and troubling Gothic atmosphere. Violence permeates generations of people that have suffered through the residential school system; it is thus linked to the individual's and the community's coping with their history of colonial oppression. For example Aunt Trudy, Mick's and Lisa's father's sister – also a victim of the residential school system – is a severe alcoholic, and abusive and violent when she is drunk. After Mick's funeral, she fights with Kate and Josh over some of his possessions. "Trudy claimed she was closer to Mick than anyone in the family – they had suffered through residential school together.... That night, we heard an ambulance wailing through the village.... I later learned from Tab that Josh had tried to claim some of Mick's medals, and Trudy had broken a beer bottle over his head." (*MB*, pp. 146, 147) Lisa learns from Tab that the reason why Aunt Trudy and Mick have been at residential school is a result of the fact that Ma-ma-oo has also been a victim of domestic violence. "[Tab:] 'Ba-ba-oo [the late husband of Ma-ma-oo] was an asshole. He beat Gran. Instead of sending him away, she sent Mick and Mom to residential school.'" (*MB*, p. 59)

One of the most disturbing incidents is portrayed by the sexual violence within the Aboriginal community, which is also originated in residential school experiences: the sexual abuse of Jimmy's girlfriend Karaoke by Josh. Lisa discovers this terrifying evidence when she finds an old photograph and a birth announcement card in Jimmy's room, both of which belong to Karaoke. The handwriting in the card says "Dear, dear

Joshua. It was yours so I killed it.” (MB, p. 365) The accompanying photograph adds another dimension to the already disturbing evidence that Josh has sexually abused and impregnated Karaoke. The picture depicts “Josh’s head ... pasted over a priest’s head and Karaoke’s ... pasted over a little boy’s.” (Ibid.) The writing says, “*Dear Joshua, ... I remember every day we spent together. How are you? I miss you terribly. Please write. Your friend in Christ, Archibald.*” (Ibid.) The card and the photograph indicate a cycle of sexual abuse that began with one white male Christian’s sexual violation of a Haisla child in a residential school. Although Karaoke’s card to Josh expresses a pointed refusal to continue the cycle of abuse, Robinson’s reading of the legacy of Christian conversion as an attempt to civilise First Nations highlights the systemic spread of violence.¹⁷⁷ Hence, Robinson seems to be interested in the moral ambivalence and psychological dimensions of evil when she shows how the civilising mission of white settlers has resulted in evil behaviour by both coloniser and the colonised.

In addition, Robinson seems to be specifically concerned with the gendered dimension of colonisation that results in conflict and violence both outside and within the Aboriginal community. In the case of Josh and Karaoke, “[c]olonization has led to the sexual abuse of children, both by the colonizer (Archibald) and eventually by the colonized (Josh), by virtue of power relations, which relegate women to a lesser status than men; the powerlessness of the colonized male is countered by his abusing the colonized female.”¹⁷⁸ Violence at the intersection of gender and race occurs when Lisa is severely threatened by a group of white men on the street. After the incident, which Lisa

¹⁷⁷ cf. Andrews, “Native Canadian Gothic Refigured”, p. 13.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

was thankfully able to escape without harm, Aunt Trudy warns her to be more careful in the future when she articulates the gendered aspect of this kind of racist violence.

[Trudy:] ‘Those guys would have killed you.’ ‘It was broad daylight,’ I [Lisa] said. ‘And there were tons of witnesses. They wouldn’t have done anything.’ [Trudy:] ‘Honey,’ she said. ‘if you were some little white girl, that would be true. But you’re a mouthy Indian, and everyone thinks we’re born sluts. Those guys would have said you were asking for it and got off scot-free.’ (*MB*, p. 255)

Trudy emphasises that the combination of racism and sexism at the level of the state/the judicial system is systemic at the expense of Aboriginal people in general and of Aboriginal women in particular.

The native woman as a ‘doubly-colonised’ subject is especially put forward by Robinson’s attempt to discuss feminism within the Aboriginal community when she briefly introduces Mick’s former girlfriend Cookie as a feminist native activist. Cookie has been expelled from residential school for the third time because she vocally disagrees with the white patriarchal standards imposed on women to be obedient and ladylike. “[Cookie:] ‘You honkies want women to be like cookies, all sweet and dainty and easy to eat. But I’m fry bread, you bitch, and I’m proud of it.’” (*MB*, p. 145) She has received her nickname from this outburst. Moreover, with the character of Cookie, Robinson sensitively raises certain ambivalences that touch upon the dichotomy of contemporary standards of (Western) feminism versus the political aspects for upholding the Aboriginal tradition. Barry, Mick’s brother, recalls an incident at a rally when some of the Aboriginal male activists wanted to go to a sweat but Cookie was not allowed because she was having her period. ““She was pissed off and telling everyone how wrong it was ... Mick piped up that tradition was tradition and if they wanted to get back to the old

ways, they should follow them.” (Ibid.) Refrained from any judgement in favour of one way or the other, Robinson raises the conflict between the upholding of traditionalism to preserve a culture that is on the verge of going extinct by the effects of colonisation, and certain culturally determined gender-sensitive traditions that have become socially less acceptable within a modern society – native or non-native.

The date rape incident in *Monkey Beach* indicates a form of sexual violence that definitely exceeds the Aboriginal context into a universal one. When Lisa’s childhood friend Cheese rapes her after giving her the drug, Robinson places the aspect of gendered sexual violence into a youth context that is disconnected from a cultural discourse. There is no direct indication that Cheese may be a victim of systemic violence that is rooted in residential school experiences; hence in this case, Robinson reinforces the universal aspect of male violence against women as a form of sexual oppression.

Besides the fact that the extreme violence discussed in the book provides the narrative with a troubling Gothic atmosphere, with the gendered aspects of violence in the narrative, Robinson raises four different feminist areas of discussion. The sexual abuse of Karaoke by Josh signifies the systemic violence that has spread into the Aboriginal community, and which has its psychological roots in the abuse that was common in residential schools. The encounter between Lisa and the white bullies support the theoretical debate around the intersection of race and gender that is based on the power structures of colonisation. Cookie’s feminism and native activism designate a potential conflict between the preservation of culture and contemporary (Western) feminist views. Finally, with the date rape committed by Cheese, Robinson raises the general feminist aspect of male sexual violence against women.

Robinson uses elements of Magic Realism to emphasise the significance of traditional Aboriginal knowledge and the power of the spirit world for cultural survival of Aboriginal societies in contemporary North America. Ironically, at the same time, she demystifies the eerie connotations of the supernatural to show the importance of integrating Native mythologies, values and traditions in a contemporarily accepted, North American social context from a Native perspective. In other words, *Monkey Beach* exploits the productive dynamics between the magic and the real to represent the complex and lasting impact of non-native colonisation and to discuss the disturbing reality of contemporary Aboriginal communities. The most prevalent issue addressed in the novel is the problem of systemic violence outside and within the Aboriginal community that has its roots in the often gendered power structures inherent in the civilising/colonising processes. In addition, Robinson also exceeds the Aboriginal context when she raises the general feminist concern of violence against women and makes thereby an empowering feminist contribution for both native as well as non-native societies.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

This study gives a detailed analysis about the subversive potential of different forms of the fantastic that are specifically at work in certain Canadian women's writings from the mid-20th century onwards. It has made clear that the distinctiveness of this Canadian literature employs characteristics that are congruent with postmodern cultural theories and reject forms of literary realism. The so-called Canadian Postmodern is not only concerned with giving Canada's marginalised groups a political voice but also with identifying textual and thematic elements that exceed the realms of realist representation. This study tried to detect how the different forms of the fantastic especially in Canadian women's writings contribute to express the voice of marginalised identities. Each of the five writers in this study identifies her literary and socio-cultural 'ex-centrics' that subversively challenge particular contexts that reflect Canada's ambiguous status as a colonising and colonised country as well as its effects on cultural and gendered identities. In doing so, each author identifies distinct feminist concerns that draw special attention to the biases of history.

In the case of the novels from Quebec, Blais and Hébert make use of the literary 'ex-centricities' of the Gothic and the Grotesque in order to challenge the traditional patriarchal social order of Quebec in reference to its history within and to its colonial relationship with English Canada. Writing within a period of social and political turmoil related to Quebec's national movement of the 1960s and 70s, both authors effectively address the political significance of gender and nation by breaking up traditional social structures and values, as for example family structures and the role and the rights of women of pre-Quiet Revolution Quebec.

In Engel's parody of Canadian history, she challenges the values of imperialism and colonisation and thereby feminises Canadian colonial and literary history. She not only subverts the Canadian literary myth of the male conqueror of the land; she also parodies the masculine nature of imperialist values in direct reference to traditional images of female sexuality. Especially through her use of Gothic and Grotesque elements that exceed the realm of the socially acceptable, she submits a powerful liberating statement by associating the concepts of gender and history. Urquhart is particularly concerned with drawing comparative aspects of colonialism in Canada and in Ireland. In her use of both Gothic and Magic Realist elements, she draws attention to the historical ambiguities of Canada's situation as a colonising/colonised society by representing the voices of the female and of the postcolonial Other. The subversive potential of elements of Magic Realism in postcolonial literature is specifically at work in *Away* whereby it perpetuates a powerful combination between myth, historical realism, politics and cultural identification viewed through the lens of the ex-centric. Robinson provides an Aboriginal voice to express a contemporary preoccupation with the devastating effects of Canada's history as a colonising society. Her alternating techniques of realist, Gothic and Magic Realist forms of representation produce analytical identity discourses of gender and race and thereby operate as empowering forces to represent but also to challenge the oftentimes disturbing present realities of First Nations communities.

As far as the fantastic in general is concerned, there seems to be a development in its aesthetics that parallels the authors' particular socio-cultural frames of reference and motivations for social change. While the novels from Quebec of the 1960s and 70s employ rather clear-cut elements of the Gothic and the Grotesque and are located more

statically on the spectrum of uncertainty and unfamiliarity at the more extreme end in order to challenge the Quebec nation. within and outside a Canadian context, the novels that follow slowly leave the radicality of these forms and show more flexibility among the fantastic modes. In other words, Engel, Urquhart and Robinson use narrative and thematic elements that oscillate between Gothic, Magic Realist and realist forms of representation on the spectrum of unfamiliarity to the real. Blais' and Hébert's rigid use of Gothic and Grotesque elements produce rather destructive and radical perspectives and outlooks as far as their socio-cultural frames of reference – particularly their gender/nation projects applied to the case of Quebec – are concerned. The areas of concern in Engel's, Urquhart's and Robinson's novels contain specifically women's and Aboriginals' perspectives on history that are strongly interrelated with aspects of Canada's (post)colonial past and present. Moreover, Engel's, Urquhart's and Robinson's application of more flexible modes of the fantastic and the real seem to allow for more optimistic outlooks – especially regarding the processes of individual women's self-identification and emancipation from dominance – and for more accommodating political discourse than the novels from Quebec.

However, all authors seem to have a universal feminist concern in common, which exceeds the socio-cultural borders of both Quebec and Canada. Each writer's use of the fantastic contributes to challenge general aspects of dominance over women and of a gendered cultural and political colonialism. The writers' use of fantastic elements help to provide powerful messages of personal liberation and resistance – which, to return to the Canadian context, contributes to the strong reputation of Canadian women's fiction.

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