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# Diasporic Spectrality: Minorities & Cultural Assertions in Canada, Australia and Beyond

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## Introduction

### **Diasporic Spectrality: Minorities & Cultural Assertions in Canada, Australia and Beyond.**

The idea for this volume emerged from a conference organised jointly by the Centre for Canadian-Australian Studies and the Identity and Cultural Transformation Research Group at the University of Wollongong in October 2004. Tracing the themes of diaspora in a wide sense, and read through the engine of minority studies, the conference drew together an interdisciplinary gathering working in fields as diverse as communications and literary studies, ethnohistoriography, sociology and politics; too many papers indeed to be contained in a single volume. One of the organising themes of the conference, moreover, was a focus on Italian culture in a postcolonial framework, and this too drew a range of works from straightforward social histories, to literary readings of Italian, Italo-Canadian and Italo-Australian texts, such that, even here, the material was too varied and extensive to capture in one book.

The present issue, therefore, is comprised of a selection of papers that produced a coherent, though not uniform, picture of minority interests that examine the complex ways culture is “asserted” in contemporary times, primarily in the Canadian context, but understood within the larger story of migration, plurality and diaspora. As we worked through the contributions we found not only that they represented a wide variety of fields — from broadcast policy to Italian migration as expressed in literary texts; from Caribbean-Canadian literature to a wider Caribbean language of exile internationally; to notions of Indigenous diaspora as reflected in the life and work of

Canada's Alooook Ipellie — but also that key threads connected the material in “uncanny” ways.

Much has been written examining the phenomenon of the uncanny in the postcolonial environment and it is little wonder Freud's essay (1956) should have relevance in the context of such large paradigmatic transformations. As Gelder and Jacobs' influential volume *Uncanny Australia* makes clear, Freud's essay is about “one's sense of place in a modern, changing environment, and it attends to anxieties which are symptomatic of an ongoing process of realignment in the post-war modern world” (23). As well as charting the history of the term uncanny — the way it moves between notions of the homely and the unhomely, or *heimlich* and *unheimlich* — Freud's essay has been used to argue for a postcolonial condition that speaks of the conjunction of a type of Gothic sensibility and the fraught experience of belonging, wherein one feels both settled and unsettled simultaneously. Again, it is not surprising that this sense of a spectral condition has assumed a type of currency in contemporary times. Roger Luckhurst refers to this embracing of the “language of ghosts and the uncanny” as a “spectral turn” (2002, 527) but cautions that the “generalized structure of haunting” that is emerging in current criticism may be “symptomatically blind to its generative loci” (528). He insists, following Derrida, that it is important for critics not to surrender to an aestheticised discourse that ignores historical specificity and that produces an atemporalised reading of such figurations. Instead, he urges us to recognise the way a situated Gothic voice might function “as a grounded manifestation of communities in highly delimited locales subjected to cruel and unusual forms of political disempowerment” (536). Sneja Gunew, in her book *Haunted Nations*, argues for a similar need to attend to situated multiculturalisms in order better to understand “local as well as global geopolitical and cultural dynamics” (2004, 1).

The notion of diaspora, of course, is complex and haunting. It speaks of a “moving centre,” of a people unfinished and spectral, at times producing what Joseph Pivato, in his keynote address “Cosmic Ear: 3 *Gerry Turcotte and Gaetano Rando*

Calabrian Writers in Canada,” refers to as the effect of the double — or *il doppio*. For Pivato, this phenomenon of the double — so much a part of the uncanny for Freud — is invoked in the work of one of the writers he studies here, who comments ironically on the way a migrant community might create an exact replica of an old world in the new. In this sense, the notion of the uncanny takes on a particular resonance for diaspora: an imagined city is, but is not, the same as elsewhere; a citizen is and is not Italian/Australian/other. If diaspora once meant the populations of Greek cities that moved into recently conquered areas in order to colonise them, the term came to mean a people forced into a type of exile, so that the word itself became doubled, comprised of inherent contradictions of meaning, just as diasporic subjects continually negotiate the tangle of contradictions that arrivals and departures produce.

For Pivato, the story of Calabrian migration, and Italian-Canadian identity, is played out through a vibrant, often heavily ironic writing by authors whose hybridity is marked in both their works and their lives. Pivato surveys an aspect of Italian Canadian literature that has received relatively little attention. He focuses on the work of six representative Canadian Calabrian writers in the context of Canadian cultural expectations, north-south politics in Italy and global Italian migration. Though very small in number by comparison to a very large and generally economically successful Canadian Calabrian community, these writers have nevertheless made an important contribution to issues of identity and experiences of diaspora, to cultural continuity and cultural transformation, as well as to the transformation of a Canadian national literature into a pluralistic one. As Pivato points out “they often represent an outsider perspective on cultural and political issues.” The group of writers studied by Pivato deals with Calabrian identity and experience as well as with wider issues related to the Italian diaspora. Calabrian-born Antonino Mazza, for example, has contributed to the creation of a neo-ethnic culture that has some Calabrian referents — his poetry presents exotic images of Calabria but his essay describes its harsh realities. Canadian-born Antonio Corea has coined the term “Canabra” to mean Canadian 4

Calabrian (possibly indicating an acceptance of a new reality in Canada) and has adopted a more critical view than Mazza of Italians and life back in Italy while Darlene Madott (the only woman writer in the group) explores the theme of the dream of return to Italy shattered by reality.

As Gaston Barban points out in his opening address (to the conference and to this volume) there are both telling similarities and differences in Italian Australian and Italian Canadian experiences viewed from a socio-historical perspective. Pivato suggests some interesting comparisons in the area of literary expression of the Italian diaspora in the two countries, but he also reminds us of a perhaps larger notion that links all the contributions here as well as other work done on Calabrian Australian literature (Rando 2003), and that is the way communities, no matter how large, have a fragility that is exposed by the act of dislocation. Speaking of the historical actuality of Calabrian displacement, for example, Pivato notes that over one third of Calabria emigrated between 1876 and 1905, and that “between 1870 and 1970, almost twenty-six million Italians left their homeland” producing “one of the major diasporas of the modern age.” This is one reality that speaks simultaneously of a collectivity — a physical mass — of bodies, stories, identities, as well as an extraordinary emptiness — a significant absence of people — that has to have an effect both on the place left and the lands adopted. Here the poignant reality of diaspora is understood in the complexity of the reasons for departure, and the comprehensive haunting that takes place as peoples mourn, celebrate, share and/or (dis)possess lands new and old.

What diaspora inevitably reminds us is that we occupy a world on the move — a world that flows — and in this sense Debra Dudek’s essay on blood and language as read through the works of Dionne Brand and Simone Lazaroo, continues the notion of a strange spectrality that is produced in the crucible of change and displacement. Citing Fred Wah’s influential writings, Dudek invokes his notion of an ethno-poetics in which the English language is “tweaked ... in order 5 *Gerry Turcotte and Gaetano Rando*

to put racialised, marginalised, and invisible bodies ... onto the page" (30). Dudek's essay interrogates the complex ways writers use language to identify the rupture of departure and to orchestrate the fragility of arrivals, in a space that is often uninviting, hostile, naïve or complacent.

In particular, Dudek explores how Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* and Lazaroo's *The Australian Fiancé* offer a critique of a nation-building process that relies upon the integration of the other. In both novels the protagonists are subject to traumatising rejection and abuse because they represent a bloodline perceived as racially inferior by the dominant order. That these texts, written and published in places geographically as far apart as Canada and Australia, use such complementary techniques to tell what are basically approximate stories is attributed by Dudek to the similar manifestation of racist politics in the two countries. Adopting an approach based on language as a semiotic system used to articulate anti-imperialistic statements and Wah's concept of "poetics" as strategies that writers use to initiate movement and change, Dudek takes as her starting point the signifier *blood*, used as a colonial metaphor for identity and citizenry as well as to identify ancestry and contamination, and then analyses how that signifier works within these texts. Both novels use the signifier *blood* to signify the seeming contradictions of belonging and space, inclusion and exclusion, movement and containment. Both present situations that result in loss, absence and distance. In the sense that they present the notion of belonging somewhere else through the way in which they situate dystopia/utopia in particular "mapped" places, the novels can be considered as diasporic narratives rather than challenges to specific concepts of nationalism.

What is incontestable in the work of writers like Brand and Lazaroo is the way language — another world in constant flow — works to articulate displacement and dispossession, often to dismantle the barriers that imprison and contain. Speaking of Brand and Lazaroo, Dudek notes that by "utilising a diasporic poetics that unsettles the sentence, that disperses and dispenses with a single narrative voice, 6

that emphasises the importance of sight, of bearing witness as an aspect of perception, both these novels puncture borders that bind.” There’s that word again — *unsettles* — the perfect term to encapsulate the structures of diasporic presence where being *in place* is often also being *out of place*.

Sarah Phillips Casteel’s paper, submitted for a forthcoming *ACS* issue on Postcolonial Gothic, was brought forward here because of the way its reading of the work of Shani Mootoo, Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau complemented Dudek’s study, and also enlarged the field of the Caribbean diaspora to examine its iterations in Canada, France, England, Guadeloupe and elsewhere. Because of its initial destination, the article’s focus is more overtly concerned to address the Gothic directly, where other contributions here invoke the obvious spectral dimension of diaspora indirectly. And yet our argument here is that this sense of spectrality and haunting inevitably traces its way throughout the story of diaspora wherever it is told, something which comes across very clearly in Casteel’s work where dystopian imagery is a key focal point. Casteel examines the metaphor of Gothic gardens in novels by Caribbean women writers that question scientific narratives (Mootoo), ethnographic narratives (Pineau) and the postcolonial Gothic (Condé). Casteel’s analysis is based on the idea that a postcolonial Gothic interpretation can uncover repressed histories and challenge the dominant order. This is achieved through the discussion of a range of interpretations that view the landscape presented in these texts as a complex intermingling of “paradise motifs ... with Gothic, dystopian landscape imagery, as well as scientific, ethnographic, and touristic discourses about island nature” thus suggesting an entangled reading of the landscape. Rather than mere background, landscape in Caribbean narrative is animated by ancestral spirits and a dynamic nature that is both welcoming and unwelcoming. Although the novels are set in the Caribbean they deal with both internal and external migrations across space and time thus presenting a diasporic experience and questioning assumptions about identity, 7 *Gerry Turcotte and Gaetano Rando*

place and belonging. Extra-rational orders of experience, troubled relationships, family disintegration, Edenic gardens and the grotesque are just some of the motifs that are intricately interwoven through all three texts. Displacement, enslavement and colonisation continually intrude into the Caribbean landscape despite its apparently paradisaical setting and the attempts of the protagonists to escape from history. Casteel concludes her paper by stating, *inter alia*, that in contemporary Caribbean women's writing the representation of landscape reaches beyond realism and engages in a dynamic conception animated by spirits of the past.

In "Indigenous Diaspora and Literature" Kimberley McMahon-Coleman contests established categories about who belongs and where and argues that colonialism has effectively created an Indigenous diaspora by exploring the ways in which Inuk writer Alootook Ipellie's work exemplifies this notion. "Diasporic literature" as a term frequently used to discuss writers who have written about transculturation and disjunction raises a series of difficulties when considering Ipellie's work since he has not migrated across national borders in the traditional sense. His permanent move from Iqaluit to Ottawa in 1972 can however be seen as migration and his people have experienced a history of transplantation, dispossession and alienation at the hands of colonial regimes. McMahon-Coleman argues that issues relating to home and identity can be considered just as pertinent to people subject to dispossession as they are to those who have crossed national boundaries. She adapts Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space as inhabited by those who are constructed and represented as Indigenous to examine the ways in which Ipellie interrogates notions of home and homelessness as well as psychic, political and cultural issues faced by Indigenous diasporas.

A writer/artist who has refused to be limited to one medium or to notions of containment imposed by the dominant culture, Ipellie creatively explores and contests popular representations of Inuit identity in contemporary Canada. His art and writing deal with the problem of living between two cultures and a longing for his spiritual *8*



home in the Arctic. In *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* (1993), the first short story collection published by a single Inuk author, he mobilises many of the features of traditional Inuit stories and produces a narrator who is a practising shaman, maintaining many of the traditional skills of the past, but who also harnesses the technology and iconography of contemporary Canadian culture. Ipellie's character associates with Superman, Brigitte Bardot and God to create a persona who ultimately represents the empowerment of Indigenous cultures in a post-colonial environment.

McMahon-Coleman's insightful paper is preceded by an interview with Ipellie that she recorded in Ottawa in May 2004. The interview both reinforces and illustrates many of the issues raised in her paper. Ipellie's remarks about the considerable problems he had translating legal and medical texts into Inuktitut and the Inuit movement to regain the many cultural practices lost as a result of migration and dispossession provide further significant examples of the devastating impact of cultural and physical dislocation which left many Inuit feeling dispossessed within their own nation space. His account of the writing of *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* complements and enhances the analysis provided in "Indigenous Diaspora and Literature." Indeed, McMahon-Coleman's contributions add a further inflection to the issue's principal theme by addressing the notion of an Indigenous diaspora that is the product not of an elsewhere transplanted here, but of an Indigenous population made ghostly and insubstantial by the policies of a settler nation. Ipellie is one of Canada's most dynamic literary and artistic figures, and his works chart complicated and demanding journeys through contemporary political affairs. But at the heart of the story that Ipellie tells, in words and images, is a ghostly understanding of the process of unsettlement that attends minority groups in their own land.

One of the more visible manifestations of multiculturalism, both in Canada and in Australia, has been the establishment of ethnic minority broadcasting that has given migrant and indigenous groups significant possibilities to make their voices heard. The development 9  
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of this medium, however, has not been without problems, not only those posed by the establishment but also because of conflicting interests within some minority groups. John Langer's paper provides an interesting account of the development and dramatic expansion of "ethnic" broadcasting in Canada, the current situation in Toronto and Vancouver, as well as a case study of the experiences of the Vancouver Sikh community in the use of radio to give voice to internal conflicts over cultural tradition and cultural innovation. This case study provides one of the many examples found in the literature on the migrant experience that "ethnic" communities are not linguistically and culturally uniform, a fallacy often adopted by those responsible for formulating multicultural policy (a specific example in the Australian context is found in SBS radio broadcasting policy).

Langer suggests that minority radio in Canada can be conceptualised as an ecologically differentiated media system that presents complex and highly varied situations at the organisational, cultural, policy and regulatory levels as well as different perspectives from the various stakeholders. Ethnic radio is perceived as fulfilling many functions. It provides news and information, links homeland and host country, serves as a vehicle for community continuity, expresses cultural traditions and diasporic identity, and provides a way to negotiate reconciliation. Such complexities involve broadcasters in a continuous struggle with competing and sometimes contradictory demands and lead to different programs "speaking" distinct community idioms. The program *Scandinavia in Touch*, for example, focuses on lifestyle since their community is perceived as interested in a simultaneous retention of aspects of minority and mainstream identity whereas *Iranian Women's Voice* adopts a politically activist stance as a means of engagement with Iranian exile culture. Langer's article works beautifully with Gaston Barban's to bookend the contributions to this special issue. Barban, in a lovely movement between the personal and the public — between his family's story of migration and the story of Canada's own expansion through trade, politics and diplomacy — makes clear that the private and the public 10

are linked in more than just symbolic ways. Similarly, Langer both usefully summarises the “story” of Canada’s multiculturalism policies, and sets this against case studies within the field of community radio, to examine the way an “archipelago” of sound can be charted and discovered. Together, these works frame a discussion that is also carried through the reviews, which looks at the way Canada has been imagined in postcolonial practices (Howells), the way Indigenous peoples have been made spectral through legal policies and colonialism (Stephenson and Hocking, and Hele), through settler policies in Canada and early feminism (Russell) and through its multicultural policies and the attendant literary responses to such formations by Asian-Canadian and Asian-Australian writers (Woon).

Given the thread of spectrality that runs through this introduction and this issue, it is tempting to close by alluding to the idea of the medium — of radio on the one hand, or writing on the other — but also more widely as a vehicle linking an individual to others, or as something that receives messages from spirits and ghosts, or that can channel such entities so that communication is made possible even across the most extended distances, the most unlikely spaces, the most uncanny moments. Is this perhaps the most accurate definition of diaspora — a spectral, contradictory, fraught, and constantly changing zone of contact and possibility? In the end, this is what we hope this issue most suggests — not just the importance of, but also the necessity for, dialogue in an ever-changing diasporic space.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>As well as Gelder and Jacobs (1998), see Turcotte 1993 a and b, and 1998 for an elaboration of the way Freud's uncanny can be understood to inform a postcolonial condition in the Canadian and Australian contexts.