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Persistence of Vision: Memory, Migration & Citizenship - Free Trade or the Failure of Cross-Culturality?

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Persistence of Vision

Section Four: Fictocriticism

In my novel, *Flying in Silence*, set in both Australia and Canada, my principal character is a French Canadian man torn between landscapes, languages and allegiances. To represent what was for me the central dilemmas of the novel — reconciling memory and migration — I used the metaphor of Persistence of Vision, that process in film through which we physiologically make sense of, or hold together, what should be a blurred, segmented and impartial sequence of frequently unrelated images.

Persistence of vision is all about the eye, the way it follows a film, remembers an image, holds on to it, until the next one appears to replace it, so that we are never conscious of the stutter of frames — the space between. Image after image flows past us leaving ghostly fingerprints on shell-shocked retinas. Our mind races, slower than light, and we see through the past into the present, just as that present no longer exists. And so we imagine the future.

With the old projectors, a glitch could shake that sequence free. Suddenly, we might glimpse a momentary stutter that we'd suppressed — a mother, torn and fractured by a creeping darkness, a loved one felled by another's lifelong expectations, violence inflicted on a child so that he turns himself inward and disappears.

Persistence of vision works through memory — a remembrance of forgetting, and inevitable return. There is no journey forward without ghosts; there is no telling without fear. We tread lightly through the stories, but leave prints wherever we happen to go.

I wrote this opening section of the novel as I travelled — to new lands, through different voices, through different social classes. I wrote what follows as I journeyed back and forth between Canada and Australia. I scribbled it on napkins, on coasters, in a diary. I tried to ask myself questions about identity as I enacted my own version of persistence of vision — travelling into my cultural past, in order to see into the future.

I wondered, in this context, what it meant to be post/colonial? To be French Canadian. To be Canadian *and* Australian simultaneously. To be hybrid. And if a hybrid, why I privileged a part of myself over another?

What are these blindnesses we champion? Are they political fraud? Political correctness? Are they a way to give ourselves currency?

Why is Walter Mosley African-American instead of Jewish? When I ask him this he says he thinks there are enough Jewish crime writers but that there aren't as many African-American ones.

So why do I choose the experience of the French Canadian over the experience of the Scot which is also distantly in me? My father couldn't speak English until quite late in

life, my mother couldn't speak French. And yet they met, they loved, they married. They tortured language religiously and I translated badly in between. At the dinner table we spoke a strange mixture of French and English — or *Français*.

My mother would ask a question in English, my Father would answer in French, and I would flutter between them: 'Pass *le sel*. *Veux-tu* some water?'

My unilingual friends always felt somewhat exhausted when they visited. They blinked in confusion as familiar phrases slipped suddenly out of their grasp, so that they'd reach for the salt shaker, but then weren't sure what to do with it, or accepted a glass of water not realising they'd asked for it.

Why did I come away with the passion of my father's silencing? Why was this the cause I clung to even as I travelled further and further from the language — even as the words began to blur as I stopped writing, reading, speaking. So that my father, as he aged, and lost the English he had slowly learnt, and as my accent changed over the years, it became harder and harder for us to speak to one another.

He said he was going deaf. In fact I was becoming mute.

When he died, we hadn't spoken in years — I realised suddenly that all I knew of him, all that we had become, was through my mother's translations, across the miles, through telephone lines and static; through datelines. When he died, I failed to return to him in time. I wondered who he was? And who it was I knew?

In France the taxi driver is rude to me because he thinks I'm Belgian. Until I stand my ground and he realises that I'm Québécois. Then he is all smiles. "Oh, that's okay then," he tells me, and I can barely escape the cab.

Soon after my arrival in Australia, a bartender rudely slams a drink in front of me and scowls, "bloody American". "But I'm Canadian", I stutter, and he smiles half-heartedly. I become invisible. In that moment, I am Canadian, wholly, simply Canadian, without nuances, without hyphens — whatever that might mean. My cohesion, in that moment, makes me suddenly invisible, silent. Later the publican will say to a patron sitting next to me, in terms of general disdain, "Don't worry about him, mate. He's Canadian", and the fight will leave them.

In Eastern Europe, long ago, officials emptied our train carriage at gunpoint, and everyone was scrutinised, searched. When they saw my Canadian passport they threw it at me quickly, dismissed me with a half-hearted wave of the wrist. So that I wanted to shout, "Canadians can be terrorists too. We can smuggle drugs." I wanted trouble. I wanted to be someone.

Until a German couple were beaten before me and dragged away — and there were consequences. It wasn't funny. Identity has consequences — but they aren't always clear.

To be tongue-tied. It isn't a moment's faltering. It tears your mouth apart — it rips the walls of tissue down.

When I attended English high school, with a French accent, I was sent to the school psychiatrist, and forced to attend speech therapy to bring my pronunciation into line — in Montreal, in a French province. My accent was a medical deficiency. An illness.

I got my revenge secretly. Swear words, in French, are all religious. Eucharist, Sacristy. These are the stuff of the best exhortations. Since my father had forced me to go to English school, I delighted in filling my homework with these words, a perpetual rebellion. ‘A bit *religious*’, one of my teachers commented in the margins, ‘but a lovely story’. How could she know that my words were not what they seemed? That as she read other words emerged. ‘It must be lovely to be bilingual’, she said. ‘Yes’, I answered. Tabernacle, I thought. Chalice.

To be tongue-tied. It's only a trendy metaphor when it's a slip of the tongue and not a signature. It's only a slip of the tongue when you control the tongue, not the other way around. It's only an affectation when you can leave it all behind. Migrate. Move. But not everyone has the luxury of moving. Not everyone wants to move.

And when you do you take it with you anyway.

In Australia, when I published my first work here — in a magazine called *Outrider*, a journal of migrant writing — I was asked on several occasions, by a number of writers, how dare I publish in such journals? That I wasn't a *real* migrant. So that I wondered what *fake* migrants were — and how I had become one. It's your accent, someone else explained patiently. Ah yes, my vocal fingerprint — this English sign I had learned to hide behind, which inadequately sheltered me in my new world. Who knew, back then, that there were different Englishes, and that they weren't all equal or the same?

Persistence of vision. You see forward through the past. The steps you take you place in footprints that are probably no longer there — they're ghostly images, suggestions for paths to take or paths taken — for identities formed once, for words spoken, but which are only echoes, not the words themselves. Sometimes you are brave to step into those moments, those signatures, to keep the film intact.

Often you are braver not to.