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Abstract
In Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, Jacques Poulin's Volkswagen Blues, and Gail Scott's Heroine protagonists, frequently doubling as narrators, set out on quests to discover places, people, histories, and personas which might provide a sense of belonging, strength, and psychic peace. None of them find what they initially anticipated and resolutions are more difficult than imagined. Given the current Eurocentric biased theoretical climate and some post/colonial resistances to it, the novels' plots and their 'uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious'3 content might be considered as either post-modernist or post/colonial at the expense of some kind of critical compromise. For instance, some post-modernist critics' privilege, formalism, and/or ambivalence might blind them to the post/colonial historical roots or influences of these literary texts' practices; while some postcolonialist critics may object to the juxtaposition of novels set in Sri Lanka, Quebec, and the United States as diluting the coherence of what constitutes the post/colonial politically and in literature.
DAVID LEAHY

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In Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family, Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues, and Gail Scott’s Heroine protagonists, frequently doubling as narrators, set out on quests to discover places, people, histories, and personas which might provide a sense of belonging, strength, and psychic peace. None of them find what they initially anticipated and resolutions are more difficult than imagined. Given the current Eurocentric biased theoretical climate and some post/colonial resistances to it, the novels’ plots and their ‘uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious’³ content might be considered as either post-modernist or post/colonial at the expense of some kind of critical compromise. For instance, some post-modernist critics’ privilege, formalism, and/or ambivalence might blind them to the post/colonial historical roots or influences of these literary texts' practices; while some post-colonialist critics may object to the juxtaposition of novels set in Sri Lanka, Quebec, and the United States as diluting the coherence of what constitutes the post/colonial politically and in literature.

Cultural differences certainly demand vigilance against totalizing what defines texts as signs of post/colonial or resistance literature.⁴ But the sites of Sri Lanka, Quebec and the United States in the novels in question do share common post-modernist ground in terms of how they are constructed to dramatize cultural imperialism, post/colonial relations of power, and imaginative strategies of resistance. For instance, Tamil and Singhalese story-telling apparently informs Running in the Family but Ondaatje’s knowledge and practice of post-modernist strategies heightens the novel’s cultural work as a post/colonial expatriate’s text. Heroine’s interweaving of ethnic, gender and class politics within an English text rooted in québécois neo-nationalist left politics, anti-heterosexism, and feminist theory is simultaneously post/colonial and post-modern. Volkswagen Blues is more classical realist but its intertextualities and post/colonial sense of displacement and alienation can be interpreted as post-modernist. A realist text is not inherently any less interrogative, nor is a post-modernist work necessarily any less anti-colonial. What this paper attempts to do is to
interpret how – to gloss Stephen Slemon’s call for the consideration of Second-World texts as ambivalent examples of literary resistance – Running in the Family, Volkswagen Blues, and Heroine negotiate the difficult terrain between post/colonial and post-modern strategies of resistance.

The title Running in the Family suggests an inherited familial trait – borne out by the author’s father’s dipsomania – while at the same time indicating something frightening and/or elusive. Ondaatje’s quest as an expatriate writer and family biographer is ‘to touch [his family] into words’ (22), but he is also afraid of what he may discover about them – especially his father – and himself. For instance, an italicized third person passage signals how the author identifies with his father’s alcoholic madness and how their ‘nightmare’ is the same (see 17). A variation on this motif appears in the chapter ‘Asia’, when Ondaatje relates a friend’s comment ‘that it was only when I was drunk that I seemed to know exactly what I wanted’ (22). Then there is the mythic nightmare ‘story about [... his] father’ which Ondaatje says he ‘cannot come to terms with’ (181). This time it is more detailed and frightening; especially given the notion of his father having ‘captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through’ (182).

Ondaatje’s fear of repeating his father’s fate is finally feverishly rendered in the chapter ‘Thanikama’, or ‘Aloneness’, in which an account of one of his father’s drinking binges becomes a self-referential passage on the process of writing.

In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode [.....] He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Scared of the company of the mirror [.....] He drank. There. He saw the midnight rat. (189)

That the reference to page 189 occurs on the same page in the actual text is a powerful conceit. It reinforces Ondaatje’s fear of becoming like his father, of being his mirror image. The chaos of the scene emphasizes how the forces affecting the life of Mervyn Ondaatje were more powerful than he was and how, in the face of such chaos, as Michael Ondaatje confesses in the acknowledgements, the text’s seeming ‘authenticity’ is a mere ‘gesture’ (206).

The ‘Family’, as the setting and the map at the beginning of the text implies, is also Sri Lanka (11). Ondaatje, as expatriate writer, grapples with its post/colonial familiarity and strangeness; for which his father’s schizophrenic binges become a nightmarish icon. Sri Lanka’s long colonial history is summarized in the epical invocation of its many names.

The island seduced all of Europe. The Portugese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name was changed, as well as its shape, – Serendip, Ratnapida (‘island of gems’), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Cielon, and Ceylon – the wife of many
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marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (64)

This passage is made more poignant by the subsequent reference to the arrival of the author’s Dutch ‘ancestor [...] in 1600’ and the self-referential pin-pointing of the event ‘Here. At the centre of the rumour. At this point on the map’ (64). Like other references by Ondaatje to his own seduction by and ‘invasion’ of Sri Lanka, to the power and the impotence of his sword of language to conquer the elusive ‘here’, ‘this point on the map’, there is an acceptance of the limitations of his ability to logocentrically know and transmit Sri Lanka’s history. Or as he says of his father, though it is applicable to his expatriate’s quandry in fictionalizing Sri Lanka: ‘There is so much to know and we can only guess’; ‘the book again is incomplete’ (200-01).

This does not mean that Ondaatje is a revisionist apologist for colonialism. The colonizers’ ‘false maps’ (63) have several textual equivalents in other Occidental misperceptions and metadiscourses. For instance, Paul Bowles is cited as writing that ‘[t]he Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world’ (76). Edward Lear is cited as caricaturing the local inhabitants as primates: ‘[t]he brown people of this island seem to me odiously inquisitive and botherly-idiotic. All the while the savages go on grinning and chattering to each other’ (78). But where Lear’s colonial perspective led him to dismiss the local peoples’ ‘chatter’ as a sign of their presumed inferiority, Ondaatje turns familial chatter and gossip into fantastic, seductive, reminders of its civilizing function and cultural value. Or as such ‘intricate conversations’ are eulogized: ‘No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized’ (26). Contrary to the imperial necessity of trying to pass off its ideology as objective and the local as insignificant, Running revels in the subjective blurring and multiplicity of everyday facts and in a consequent re-centering of the local as primary as opposed to peripheral.

The text is too joyous in its humorous homages to Ondaatje’s extended family, and their class privilege was too great, to indiscriminately summarize them as ‘victims’; yet their cultural colonization is pervasive. The lighter side runs riot from Mervyn Ondaatje’s failed career at Cambridge (31-2) to the prevalence of ‘imported songs such as “Moonlight Bay” and “A Fine Romance”’ (46). The long-term internalization of such foreign influences results in the self-deprecation apparent in one of the text’s epigrams: ‘“The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils, whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat”’ (12). In the conclusion of the chapter, ‘Karapothas’, a metaphor for foreigners – ‘the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here’ (80) – the tragic consequences
of Occidental imperialism are savaged in a poem by Lakdasa Wikramasinha:

*Don’t talk to me about Matisse...*

*the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio*

*where the nude woman reclines forever*

*on a sheet of blood*

*Talk to me instead of the culture generally –*

*how the murderers were sustained*

*by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote*

*villages the painters came, and our white-washed*

*mud-huts were splattered with gunfire.*

(85-6)

Ondaalje’s strategies in the text attempt to avoid perpetrating such cultural violence.

Yet as much as the ‘flavour of lost-generation romance’ of the text accents the ‘fading splendour [...] damaged hopes, [and] impinging tawdriness’ of Sri Lanka’s colonization, the exoticism is perhaps too class bound to avoid romanticizing the eccentricities of privilege. It is also ironic that the attentions to Ondaalje’s mother’s life make her formidable agency seem almost unexceptional, non-descript (unlike her theatrics! (see 170-71)) – ‘[she] calmly asked for a divorce, demanding no alimony [...] trained herself as a housekeeper-manager and supported us through schools by working in hotels in Ceylon and then England till she died’ (172). There is clearly a whole other auto/biographical fiction waiting to be written about Doris’ ‘blasted’ life, the potential of imaginatively expanding her anti-colonial struggles against the ‘dark unknown alphabet’, as Ondaatje poeticizes it, of her marriage (150). In short, it is difficult not to read Ondaalje’s masculine identified emphasis upon his anti-heroic father as eclipsing the heroine-ism of his mother; as partially recapitulating or re-internalizing the oldest colonial discourse.

Gail Scott’s heroine is attracted to and disillusioned by Québécois left politics and the sexual revolution of the 1970s and subsequently attempts, both personally and artistically, to create an ideal feminist persona. The various quests of the author/narrator/protagonist, or ‘heroine’, for a revolutionary left-nationalist state, sexual liberation, new ways of writing about female experience, and a feminist paradise, are all post/colonial in terms of their historical continuity and identity politics. Yet as much as the heroine as Anglo “other” from Ontario may sympathize with the neo-nationalist struggle of the québécois, the male privilege of “sexual liberation” and the heroine’s difficulties in overcoming her internalizations of gender oppression cause her to shift focus from the male-dominated anti-colonial discourses of class and ethnicity to that of feminism. Class critique remains important but it has a particularly feminist cast, as in the recurrent scenes with the itinerant ‘grey woman’: ‘The heroine trembles.... Thinking she senses how a woman can end up like that. By being a slave
to love until she hates herself' (123). A similar fatigue with or subversion of provincial, exclusively white, ethnic tensions occurs around recurrent appearances of a ‘Black tourist’ (9) who asks a male white revolutionary, and by proxy the white heroine (and reader): “‘how would you treat me in a novel? Among other things, I bet at every mention you’d state my colour’” (78). In an attempt to establish a new socio-linguistic, non-racist, practice he is thereafter simply referred to as the ‘tourist’.8

Most of the novel circulates around the heroine’s struggle to wean herself off of her dependencies upon her lover/comrade, Jon, and his disregard for her as a woman and artist. Jon is one of the leaders of a sectarian left organization called ‘F-group’ and the heroine slowly and painfully learns that he is as phallocratic and traffics in women as much as the capitalist system which he would overthrow. Accordingly, he ‘defend[s] F-group’s decision to drop questions like feminism’ the better to ‘intervene directly in the workers’ movement’ (97). The heroine is as a result increasingly attracted to radical feminism and the solution, which the heroine’s friend Marie offers time and again, that ‘[a]s feminists [...] our responsibility is writing’ (113). ‘FORCE yourself to write [...] By your own words you may start to live’ (172).9 The resultant novel, Heroine, is just such an experiment.

The idealism inherent in such a strategy is reined in by the novel’s dramatizations of pressing women’s issues (i.e. wife abuse, sexploitation, the unequal division of domestic labour); its function as a moving auto/biographical case-study of the contradictions of female liberation; its discursively fragmented, anti-logocentric structure; and its parodies of its own earnestness: ‘Maybe the pneumonia I got last winter was the cause of the final humiliation. Of course, a real heroine would never get dragged down like that’ (166). The process of the heroine’s feminist empowerment is linear but the fragmented shifts in time and the repetitiveness of certain scenes may make this less obvious upon a first reading. One advantage of this narrative strategy is that it helps create a greater sense of the laboriousness of the heroine’s process of change. Another advantage is that it makes it easier for the narrative to avoid getting bogged down in the mechanics of verisimilitude or dogma.

The recurrent bathtub scene is a case in point. It marks the time present of most of the novel as the heroine, masturbating herself with warm faucet water, contemplates her past and future. The reader, however, cannot appreciate the full significance of the first manifestations of this scene, nor of the heroine’s ability to pleasure herself, until the full narrative has been played out and she leaves the tub (presumably to work on the novel). So too, the initial lesbian discourse – ‘I’m lying with my legs up. Oh dream only a woman’s mouth could do it as well as you’ (9) – can thus be enounced and returned to without becoming the absolute focus of the text. After all: ‘[a] heroine locked in time could be the ruination of a novel’ (132).
One of the last bathtub scenes also radically shifts from the heroine coming to a larger global picture:

Oh. The ripples jerking up the stomach. Don't stop. Get it while you can. Damn. Just a tickle. After I always feel like crying. Then some starving Africans walk across the television screen. Reminding me that in larger contexts, North America is like a soap opera for the white and educated. (161-2)

Or as the heroine imagines 'a Black man'[s]' thoughts: "'In this city everyone's a minority'" (63). Given the novel's celebration of linguistic 'free associat[jon]' (78) as an attempt to get beyond the conventional restrictions of language and as a means of marking multiple subject positions, the oxymoronic phrase 'everyon[e]'s a minority' concomitantly foregrounds the multiple identities and/or solitudes of individuals, the cosmopolitanism of Montréal, the paradoxical minority status of the majority of women/heroines, and a black majority perspective.

The negative consequences of male dominated culture and language are also often critiqued and parodied. For instance, some of the terms of the feminist slogan 'A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle' are inverted and recycled in an allegorical dream sequence about Jon's affair with a female swimmer. They both get cast as fish whom the heroine tries to drown until she remembers: 'you both like having your head held under water. BECAUSE YOU'RE FISH' (167). Read: BECAUSE YOU'RE COLD-BLOODED! The subsequent death of a 'Papa Moon' fish which Jon had given the heroine fulfills a second revengeful dream (176) as the male adjectival sign, 'Papa', of male appropriation of a matriarchal sign, the 'Moon', is canceled out as if by sympathetic magic. This sequence, like the novel's title, subtly signals the feminist import of the Umberto Eco epigraph to the novel: 'We use signs and the signs of signs only in cases where the things themselves are lacking' ([5]). I am also tempted to read the names 'Jon' (J-O-N) and 'F-group' as subtle signs of the male oppression of women. In such a reading 'Jon' is a paradigmatic substitute for 'John' (J-O-H-N), as in the client of a prostitute, and the letter 'F' is an acronym for 'fuck' or 'fucking' – something which the 'Johns' of 'F-group' would seem to do with and especially to their female comrades as much as anything else.

Yet it can be argued that women's different relationship to language is more theorized than practiced in the novel; that the heroine's discovery of how to live thanks to writing, the poetic self-indulgence of the rambling narrative, is too dependent upon a post-modernist aesthetic that can only speak to the initiated.10 Or as Arun Mukherjee has argued in terms of post-modernist theorists' over-emphasis upon the literary destabilization of reality: 'precisely because a literary discourse is caught in several affiliative networks, its ideal reader, one who has epistemological privilege, is someone who is a cultural insider, who, in S. K. Desai's words, possesses "cultural inwardness"'.11 Considered from this perspective one
should perhaps read the heroine’s ostensibly progressive translation of the ‘black’ sign into ‘tourist’ – to reinvoke the aforementioned epigraph by Eco – as indicative of the device’s own lack; that it is too gratuitous, too contaminated by a universalist tradition of racial hegemony and erasure, to support a resistive post/colonial reading.

This does not mean that the heroine should not try to make it new. After all, the novel’s use of language and its narrative structure and content are important contributions to the dis-Man-tling of the Romance genre. And as much as the novel lambastes the colonial condition of women it also continually suggests the way forward is yet to be fully imagined. Or, as the closure tantalizingly reads:

[...],

She thinks: Maybe I should talk to someone [...]
She walks a little farther, wondering.
She passes the grey woman sitting in her long skirt on the cement block.
She thinks: Maybe I should talk to her.
She thinks: The question is, is it possible to create Paradise in this Strangeness?
[...] Looking to the left, the right.
She – (183)

This open-ended closure underscores the vulnerability of female subjecthood under patriarchy and the difficulties in imagining, let alone sustaining, new gender roles, while creating a sense of militant vigilance without falling into the trap of romanticism.

Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues tells the story of a novelist, Jack Waterman, and his search across the United States for his long lost brother, Théo, as well as Jack’s relationship with a young métis woman, Pitsémine. During the quest Jack and Pitsémine recount and discuss many things, especially the subjection of the indigenous peoples. Pierre L’Hérault convincingly argues that the text’s ‘rapport with America [...] inscribes the exploration of a culture and of an identity which can no longer be seen as pure, but as necessarily mixed’. I am less convinced, as shall become apparent, about the thoroughness of the text’s ‘non-ideological position’, as L’Hérault puts it, of how its openness presumably allows it ‘to accept everything’ and to avoid a ‘hierarchizing perspective’ (L’Hérault, 39). Volkswagen Blues definitely attempts to move beyond the monolithic tradition of québécois identity politics, but it is not without its residue.

Volkswagen Blues is much more of a conventional realist novel than Running in the Family or Heroine, especially given its more coherent linearity and how its narrative voice or histoire invites the reader to construct a more comprehensive history. It could be argued that the coincidences leading to Jack’s and Pitsémine’s tracking down of Théo are too convenient, too ‘illusionist’. But then it can be counter-argued that the very lack of verisimilitude of the novel’s many readerly coincidences, like its dozens
of disparate intertextual references, remind us of the fictionality of the narrative and hence encourage us to be more writerly, skeptical readers. What is more, like Arun Mukherjee, I am wary of presuming that a classical realist text cannot be ‘interrogative’ – especially in terms of its content. Such is the function of a number of the novel’s intertextual references and the consequent questioning about the subjective limits and ethnic biases of knowledge and narratives. For instance, Jack fondly recalls how during his childhood, as a result of having read so much, Théo would recount stories about Étienne Brulé, the first coureur de bois, as a hero who fought against conflict between whites and natives and as interchangeable with a Wild Bill Hickock or Buffalo Bill (64-69). Pitséméne disabuses Jack of this white biased romantic vision when she recounts how Étienne Brulé may have been put to death by a group of natives for grossly transgressing their moral codes (76-7). Later, Jack attempts to head off Pitséméne’s wrath against white heroes by denouncing Buffalo Bill for having been a scout for General Custer and for warring against the Sioux (see 170). Such shifts throughout the text are not mere capitulations of one discourse to another but, as with Pitséméne’s subsequent recognition ‘that Buffalo Bill had not only committed errors during his life’ (170), are indicative of some of the dialogism of the text – as when Pitséméne laughs at her own monological discourse about what separates indigenous peoples and whites (see 28-9). Such instances dramatize how the givens of any narrative or cultural mythos need to be scrutinized and judged as much for what they don’t (or could) say as for their dogma. They also offer nuanced models of ‘internalized conflict’ (Slemon, 39), discursive alternatives to the polarism which is often one of the strongest negative heritages of colonialism.

Like Scott’s novel, Volkswagen Blues problematizes hero worship while querying the possibility of a post- post/colonial, non-racist, and non-sexist sense of what is heroic. Thus, when Pitséméne is stricken with doubts about her ability to know and speak from any position of authority because of her métis status Jack’s reassurance to her is that ‘you are something new, something that is beginning. You are something that has never yet been seen’ (224). One could read Jack’s discovery of his brother’s progressive paralysis as the tragic conclusion of a life of dissipation and of Théo’s and Jack’s failed heroic quests except for the fact that Jack has learned that ‘[m]aybe I only loved the image that I had made of him’ (289). This half-declaration, half-question suggests that Jack’s meta-narrative about Théo as a heroic, womanizing, man’s man and modern coureur de bois as québécois nationalist leaves something to be desired, that Jack has begun to consider that these interdependent meta-narratives have negatively constructed and progressively paralyzed Théo and himself.

Still, Volkswagen Blue’s healthy skepticism about narrative truth and heroism are contradicted and contaminated by elisions of the histoire’s and Jack’s points of view and the text’s traffic in the semiotic field of the
indigene. Poulin's novel is less obviously autobiographical than Ondaatje's or Scott's, but the discursive slippage evident in the *histoire*'s inability to fully record the murmuring (58) or an outcry (210) by Pitsemine which Jack fails to hear suggests that the narrative is more univocally constructed than it might appear. This slippage is perfectly in keeping with Poulin's admission that: 'The question of the “I” and of the “He” is a very important problem for me. Each time, it's a nightmare [....] I can't choose between the two [....] Sometimes, I've adopted the special technique of writing with an “I” and correcting it by changing the “I” for a “He”.’ The result is not simply a matter of technical doctoring, but of the potentially contradictory cultural work when a discourse written in one voice is made to pass for another. A number of Pitsemine's historical accounts are cases in point. Presumably, in keeping with their pro-indigenous content, they are meant to create a sense of an oral tradition. But they are often too mechanical in their presentation – and clearly the result of Poulin's own reliance upon the many cited historical sources – to provoke an adequate sense of cultural difference and emotional anger (see 114-16, 171-74, 204-08). The most striking example of this is when after a long account by Pitsemine of atrocities by the U.S. Cavalry the *histoire* awkwardly informs us that: '[Pitsemine] still had something to recount, but this was done very briefly. She simply wanted to say that the Indians were also guilty of massacres' (208). The afterthought and tone smack of tokenism.

Pierre L'Hérault claims that in the conjunction of Jack's and Pitsemine's 'identities, it is the amerindianness which predominates' (35, ftnt. 18). This is relatively true given the amount of Pitsemine's discourse which is devoted to indigenous history. Yet Pitsemine is clearly a positive stereotype of what Terry Goldie refers to as the 'Indian maiden' as 'the “good” Other' 'who tempts' Jack 'towards the liberation represented by free and open sexuality' (Goldie, 15). This is operative when Pitsemine seduces Jack in a YMCA hostel and playfully cross-dresses as a male (64-8); or when Pitsemine wants to celebrate their arrival at the Continental Divide by making love next to the highway but Jack ejaculates prematurely because they are 'outside' (220-22). In keeping with the standard female indigene's role, Pitsemine's companionship and guidance on Jack's quest are also crucial to his ability to know and 'to enter the land' (Goldie, 65), to identify with its *americanité* and thereby make it his own.

Pitsemine's orality is central to her discourse and as Goldie points out '[t]he orality of the [indigene...] seems an intrinsic part of their image' (107) in white literature. What is more, 'natives' are regularly represented as 'literally enthralled by the power of writing' (107). This is definitely the case with Pitsemine. She is said to read 'with a voracity that [Jack] had never seen before'; to 'always carry a book' (41); to 'steal' books and to illegally 'borrow' books from libraries (42); and she is defined as 'a book maniac' for whom 'ONE WORD IS WORTH A THOUSAND IMAGES'
This enthrallment, like Pitsemine’s sexuality, is too central to a racist white discourse not to be problematic. There are instances that evidence some parodic comic value, as when Jack and Pitsemine are huddled outside at night and he states: ‘I thought that Indians were never cold’. But her response is more dependent upon racial stereotypes than it subverts them: ‘I said that I was not a real Indian’ (58). The cultural work of the semiotic field of the indigene is made that much more complicated given the novel’s valorization of the French as more benign than other colonizers (46). Or as Pitsemine says of the voyageurs: ‘in general they were better behaved towards the Indians [...] than those who carried out the same occupations on the American side’ (46). Interestingly, in spite of Jack’s aversion to the violence of America – ‘One would say that all of America was constructed upon violence’ (129) – the québécois love affair with our américanité also pervades the text. As Québec has moved closer to some form of greater independence québécois interest in defining our américanité, as opposed to Canadianness, has grown. Volks-wagen Blues can be read as being rooted in this social discourse. Consider the histoire’s invocation of the preface to Jack Kerouac’s On The Road: ‘The road replaced the old “trail” of the pioneers march towards the West; it is the mystic link which binds the American to his continent, to his fellow countrymen’ (258). This fantasy of the sprawling cohesiveness of America and of québécois communion with it is heightened by Jack’s and Pitsemine’s many friendly encounters with people capable of communicating in French – be they German car mechanics, Franco-American journalists, Saul Bellow, the captain of a river boat, a tramp, a peep show manager, or a québécoise stripper. Evidently some of this can be accepted as a device to maintain the francité of the text, but to anyone familiar with the unilingual Anglo hegemony of American culture it surpasses the limits of credibility. This symbolic erasure of cultural difference, as with the text’s reliance upon Pitsemine as the good, friendly, indigene romanticizes the facility of fusion with America (and its First Nations) and may thereby contribute to a more facile understanding of québécois américanité and amérindianité at this historical juncture than might be prudent or desirable.

Given the differences in these novels’ feminist and ethnic agendas, as well as their different textual strategies, it is important not to overly synthesize their cultural work. Still, as Second-World texts which negotiate the difficult terrain between post/colonial and post-modern strategies of resistance some hypotheses are in order. Michael Ondaatje qua expatriate auto/biographic narrator imaginatively attacks colonialism instead of succumbing to madness like his father. Little direct opposition is made between these two subject positions, but much of the text’s post-modernist and auto/biographical fictive play marks the differences between Ondaatje’s privilege and consciousness as an expatriate writer and his father’s construction by his colonized culture. Such themes would have been just
as possible within a more unified, ‘realistic’, narrative; but to depict Ondaatje’s father as a more unified, though still tragic, colonial subject within a less fragmented and eclectic narrative would likely have been less evocative of the disruptiveness and alienation of colonialism, or of the difficulties and contradictions involved in the development of Ondaatje’s post/colonial consciousness. As in Scott’s novel the presumed unity of individuals may be challenged by post-modernist devices such as fragmented discourses, but there is still a persistent faith in individual and collective agency. Or, as was mentioned earlier, contrary to the imperial necessity of trying to pass off its ideology as objective and the local as insignificant, *Running* revels in the subjective, dialogical blurring of everyday facts and in a consequent re-centering of the local as important as opposed to peripheral.

Gail Scott’s heroine’s subject positions are also constantly in flux and in question but not at the expense of a post/colonial vigilance against heterosexism, classism, and ethnic or racial chauvinism. In keeping with the ideological disillusionment of the failures and shortcomings of the sectarian left in the 1970s and early 1980s, Scott’s post-modernist strategies resist a unified, anti-colonial reading and help emphasize some of the complexities, contradictions and difficulties of literary and political engagement. Even more than is the case in *Running in the Family*, *Heroine* exploits a hyper-subjective, dialogical blurring of the everyday as a means of valorizing the personal, and especially women’s experience, as political. A more ‘realistic’ approach could have addressed this theme and its critique of the phallocratism imbedded in male dominated left-nationalist politics and language, but it may not have been as effective in evoking the struggles, inspired leaps forward, and setbacks involved in the development of a feminist consciousness and writing practice. Still, it remains questionable as to whether the text is any more successful at denaturalizing or foregrounding post/colonial content than a well written ‘realist’ approach; especially when the novel’s aesthetic of the initiated may alienate as much as its alienation effects can make for more vigilant readers.

Ironically, Jack Waterman’s failed quest, like Pitsémíne’s doubts about her own monologism, valorizes the liberatory potential of the process of exploration. Nevertheless, though *Volkswagen Blues*’ sense of displacement and fearful discovery has much in common with works like *Running in the Family* or *Heroine*, it is more ideologically imbricated with the vestiges of colonialism – as evidenced by its semiotic field of the indigene. Of course, this is not inherently a result of the novel’s more realistic genre. Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands*, for instance, evidences similar problems around the portrayal of a shamanistic native woman. It may, however, have much to do with the text’s implied facility of the liberatory potential of writing (see 289); with a humanist project which is not as self-reflexive or self-critical as Ondaatje’s or Scott’s post-modernist approaches. On the other hand in spite of some of the aforementioned weaknesses of *Volkswagen*
Blues' historiographic digressions, they can create a sense of the horrors of colonialism for the indigenous peoples and so they may still be able to inform and move readers to appreciate indigenous resistance.

Finally, it is important to note that all three texts and their quests are fundamentally concerned with quandries about absent, impotent, or exploitative paternal or male figures. The extent to which these are related to post-modernist and/or post/colonial agendas varies amongst the three texts, but their commonality to both critical discourses suggests an important common ground of resistance which is far from ambivalent. In the case of Running in the Family, Mervyn Ondaatje and his dipsomania are signs for colonial alienation and dissipation; but they are also signs of a male centred angst which confines women, such as Aunt Lalla, to comedy and reserves tragedy for the Father. The degree to which this gendered emphasis is a result of the post-modernist self-reflexivity of the text or simply its auto/biographic focus is debatable; but as I implied earlier the anti-colonial potential of an auto/biographical fiction on Doris Ondaatje's life is occluded in the process. This perceived lack, however, is highly subjective and in no way detracts from the text's successful integration of post-modernist and post/colonial sensibilities.

Scott's Heroine is almost a polar opposite in regards to women since its post-modernism and its post-colonialism are centred in feminist critiques of patriarchy and romance. A heroine within this paradigm, as with much of the portrayal of Pitsémine, is not as dependent upon hero/in/es as Jon (or Jack, or Ondaatje) are, but is more her own active agent, in keeping with the text's anti-essentialist feminist and post-modernist discourses. Some of Heroine's post/colonial signs – i.e. Québécois left-nationalism, the black tourist, and the starving Africans motifs – may too easily juxtapose the Third and First or Second Worlds, but Heroine's feminist send-up of left nationalism is undoubtedly a strong reminder of the need for vigilance against post/colonial neglect of gender in favour of ethnicity, race or class; a strong, imaginative, reminder of how most forms of hierarchy are fundamentally rooted in sex-gendered divisions of labour and domesticity.

In Volkswagen Blues, in contrast with Jack Waterman's quest for his more macho brother, and in spite of her stereotypical function as a sensual, mystified, "other", Pitsémine and her discourse also subvert sexist notions of female physical weakness, irrationality, and mechanical inaptitude. From the other side of the heterosexist gender divide, Jack's passiveness, his bad investment in male hero worship, and Théo's paralytic denouement are consistent with and parodic of a neo-nationalist tradition dating back to the québécois appropriation of Frantz Fanon in left publications like Parti Pris which associated the colonization of the québécois with male psychosexual and social castration. In the nostalgic post-referendum climate which haunts the margins of Jack's quest for his long-lost nationalist brother, the text's fascination with québécois américanité and amérindianité, and Théo's tragic condition, there is a search and lament for
the québécois nation that has not come to pass. The valorization of Pitsémine as a métisse holds out the slight hope of a new post-nationalist, post-post/colonial culture for Québec, but it is symbolically eclipsed by the semiotic field of the indigene, the end of Pitsémine’s and Jack’s love affair, and the closing sense of ‘l’immensité de l’Amérique’ (290).

Given that all systems of thought, genre or criticism eventually exhibit an overtotalizing overreach or a point of self-critical fatigue, what may be most important about the current post-modernism vs. post/colonialism debate is to recognize when and how the two discourses or genres overlap and abet one another to their mutual benefit. As always, few generalizations about these two modes can be relevant unless considered on a case by case basis. A novel like Volkswagen Blues may be more conventionally ‘realistic’ than a ‘post-modern’ novel like Heroine in the plotting and the details of its portrayal of a quest for identity, but a judgement as to the validity, success, contradictions, or failures of its post/colonial discourses is not only dependent upon the extent of its postmodernity. Likewise, the post-modernity of Running in the Family or Heroine does not automatically exclude post/colonial discourses nor mean that they are necessarily any more ambivalent. Each of these three novels exhibit various forms of postmodernist and post/colonial resistance. What has to be resisted is resistance to building upon how they can be produced and read to their mutual advantage.

NOTES

1. As I have stated elsewhere, like many other people in the field of ‘post-colonial’ studies I am not satisfied with the political implications, especially for non-Occidental studies, of this hyphenated term. My use of the slash in ‘post/colonial’ is a gesture towards emphasizing the socio-political differences between, say, the former ‘White’ Dominions, as they were racistly re-named, and other former colonies and current neo-colonies. Unfortunately this gesture still obfuscates Second World countries’ neo-colonial roles vis-à-vis the United States’ and other imperial powers (or Canada’s relationship with its indigenous Nations).


8. Surprisingly, though the then recent appearance of the novel may have had much to do with it, Barbara Godard said that the 'black tourist [...] remains an inexplicable figure', other than his providing 'the frame for each chapter'. See Book Review, *Border/Lines*, Spring/Summer, 1988, 50-1.

9. See also Marie's discourse on 130.

10. See Janice Kulyk Keefer, 'Me, Myself, and I', *Books in Canada*, October 1987, 35-6, for a sometimes hyperbolic, though related critique.

11. See Mukherjee, *op.cit.*, 5. Though Mukherjee's critique concentrates upon cultural insiders in terms of the gap between Eurocentric cultures and theory vis-à-vis non-European societies and literatures, it is also part of a more general dissatisfaction with the postmodernist tendency to devalue realist fiction and impose its own universalist biases. See also S. K. Desai, 'Arun Kolatkar's *Jejur*: A House of God', *Literary Criterion*, 15, 1980.

12. My thanks to Bob Majzels for reminding me of the importance of *Heroine*'s subversion of the romance genre.


15. I am using the term *histoire* in accordance with Catherine Belsey's summary and citation of Emile Benveniste's use of it: 'History *histoire* narrates events apparently without the intervention of a speaker. In history there is no mention of "you" and "I"; "the events seem to narrate themselves".' See Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London & New York: Methuen, 1980), 71; and Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami: University of Miami Press), 208. 'The authority of this impersonal narration springs from its effacement of its own status as discourse [...] the reader is invited to construct a "history" which is more comprehensive still [...] Through the presentation of an intelligible history which effaces its own status as discourse, classic realism proposes a model in which author and reader are subjects who are the source of shared meanings, the origin of which is mysteriously extra-discursive. It thus does the work of ideology in suppressing the relationship between language and subjectivity' (Belsey, 72).

16. Classical realism has been defined by Catherine Belsey, *à la* Barthes, as being composed of 'illusionism, narrative which leads to closure, and a hierarchy of discourses which establishes the "truth" of the story'. See Belsey, *ibid.*, 70; see also Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974).

17. See Roland Barthes' use of these two terms in *S/Z*, *ibid.*, 4-6. '[T]he writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages [...] But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions)' (5). Of course, as Barthes mentions elsewhere, texts are rarely simply in one of these modes but a hybrid of both.

18. See Mukherjee, *op.cit.* This approach goes against the formalist grain of Belsey's and others' use of the term *interrogative* (Belsey, Chap. IV).
19. It is implied that this explanation of Brulé's death (see Volkswagen Blues, 70, 75-6) has been gleaned from Percy J. Robinson's Toronto During The French Regime: A History of the Toronto Region From Brulé to Simcoe, 1615-1793 (Toronto: U of T Press, 1965 [1st edition, Ryerson Press, 1933]); but I found upon consulting it that there is no such account given. Either Pitséméine's anecdote is meant to be part of her general fund of knowledge, or Poulin was being deliberately misleading for the sake of an in-joke about our logocentric faith in the truth of the written Word.

20. The complexities of Pitséméine's dialogical perspective on herself as a métisse are not gone into during this article but it has to be noted that her sense of self is not idealistically presented as being resolved or without problems. However, to re-appropriate an earlier citation from Pierre L'Hérault, Pitséméine does embody the notion of how 'identity [...] can no longer be seen as pure, but necessarily mixed' (L'Hérault, 28).

21. Having said this, Mukherjee's aforementioned article is a useful reminder of how too global a definition of what constitutes post/colonial writing can erase differences between post/colonial cultures and can place far too much emphasis upon the subjectivity of the post/colonial cultures [being] inextricably tied to their erstwhile occupiers [...]. It claims that 'the empire writes back to the centre' (Rushdie), implying that we do not write out of our own needs but rather out of our obsession with an absent other' (Mukherjee, 6).


23. Though it can be argued that the name of Jack for the protagonist, his profession as a writer with five previous novels to his credit, and his residence in Quebec city create a similar sense of authorial self-referentiality for those readers familiar with Jacques Poulin's career; that it acts as a form of valorization of the text's verisimilitude.


25. Likewise, Pitséméine may ostensibly hide a hunting knife under her clothes because of an unexplained 'misadventure which happened to her during a trip' (60), but negative paradigmatic signs of violence can circulate around her as a naked, knife carrying, indigene as much as they do around the implied aggressor — especially since her being oblivious to carrying the knife implies a troubling 'naturalness' to her implied potential for violence.

26. Such a passage seems innocent enough until we consider how it glosses over the historical differences in the fur trade which, prior to the conquest of New France, was strategically controlled by the French (who could therefore afford or had to be more benign), and how implicitly it ahistorically contrasts the relatively static socio-economic status of the French regime with the much later and quite socio-economically different American imperial context.

27. I am thinking especially of the contradictory Second-World geo-political attitudes of Québécois whom, while still burdened with socio-political baggage from hundreds of years of colonization, given our current greater sense of ourselves as a société distincte and our faith in Québec, Inc. seem increasingly prone to our own imperial projects and discourses — especially towards the indigenous peoples.


29. At the time that I write this, I am referring to the post-1980 nationalist referendum period in Québec and not the forthcoming 1992 referendum.
30. See Jean-Claude Lauzon’s recent film, *Léolo*, for a variation on this lament for an unachieved nation, in which Pierre Bourgault, formerly one of Québec’s most militant nationalist leaders, plays an ambiguous, spectral keeper of a strange baroque museum of québécois cultural artifacts. Léo, the precocious protagonist, who would prefer to be identified as an Italian (Léolo), has no worthy male figure to emulate within his dysfunctional family and eventually succumbs to the ingrown madness inherited from his grandfather.

From a 1656 writing book.