No (Wo)man is an Island: Rewriting Cross-Cultural Encounters within the Canadian Context

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Abstract
What does our conference theme, nationalism versus internationalism, mean in the contemporary Canadian context?1 In deploring the way the ‘four major Western news agencies operate’ to knit the world together through the production of what he terms ‘out-of-scale trans-national images that are now reorienting international social discourse and process’, Edward Said calls in Culture and Imperialism for ‘an internationalist counter-articulation’.2 This counter-articulation would develop ‘a way of regarding our world as amenable to investigation and interrogation without magic keys, special jargons and instruments, curtained-off practices’.3 Instead of such magic keys, this counter-discourse that he proposes would articulate ‘the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together’.4 To complete this analysis, ‘we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices- inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions -all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography’.5 Writing within the United States, Said sees national experience as a limit to be transcended, and argues that to achieve his ideally contrapuntal global perspective the writer must work through such attachments to an appreciation of post-imperial global mixings.
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From my perspective in Canada, Said’s call, addressed to U.S. humanists, articulates a program already largely in place in Commonwealth and postcolonial studies throughout the world, indeed almost everywhere but in the United States. The only difference might lie in the understanding of nation. Where Said stresses nation as limitation and limit, many Canadians see our kind of nationalism as enabling and nurturing those differences we wish to maintain from the United States. Our nation acts as a bulwark against the international media dominance that Said rightly identifies as an extension of U.S. nationalism onto the world stage. Surely there are different kinds of internationalism just as there are different kinds of nationalism. It is too hasty, I think, to conclude with Michael Ignatieff as he meditates on the horrors of Bosnia, that ‘Nationalism everywhere exists to lift the burden of responsibility from a believer’s shoulders’. We need...
to reimagine nationalism and internationalism as equally charged with assum-
ing responsibility and replacing belief with earned understanding and vigil-
ant questioning.

As Said implies, we need not oppose nationalism against international-
ism in an antagonistic relation. They can be revisioned as part of a con-
tinuum in which we can move from our own national identifications and
struggles:

to situate these in a geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to
study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another,
through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate
forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict.7

This is the project Helen Tiffin and I undertook in Decolonising Fictions,
the book Anna Rutherford of Dangaroo Press, that model venture in co-
operative internationalism, is launching at this conference.8 We tried to
show how literature and literary criticism can play a major role in
decolonising imaginations and opening up a new model for international
relations based on mutual respect for national and other differences.

The recent success of Sports Illustrated in circumventing rules designed
to protect the Canadian magazine market from U.S. dumping, and the lack
of protection for Canadian publishing in general from our U.S.-oriented
Tory government, make truly urgent these distinctions between a post-
colonial internationalism that respects differences and a new imperialist
internationalism that masks U.S. nationalism throughout the world.

My work on post-colonial revisions of Shakespeare’s Tempest continues
the post-colonial interrogation of imperialist cross-cultural encounter from
differently situated national responses to invasion and appropriation. In
Canada, writers of First Nations, settler-invader, and multicultural im-
migrant descent approach the problem of reconceptualizing cross-cultural
encounter from very different experiences and perspectives. Such re-
sponses also vary according to gender. My title phrase, ‘No (wo)man is an
island’, both echoes and distorts John Donne’s original pronouncement,
which has been updated and reiterated in Said’s new globalism. Whereas
Donne uses the negative to proclaim an internationalist ‘family of man’ in
a statement that advances itself as self-evident, my shift in gender points
to the way in which the apparent universality of ‘man’ disguises a privil-
eging of the male sex as the norm establishing the human. To say that ‘No
(wo)man is an island’ is to highlight the gender difference obscured in the
original pronouncement, and to shift the focus from merely assuming
human interconnectedness to understanding human differences in order
to achieve a genuinely shared vision of international and cross-gender co-
operation. It is also to point to the ways in which woman is an island, or
is figured as an island, in mass culture and advertisements, that is, in
capitalist and neo-imperialist representations of the world. Here I am
thinking of Judith Williamson's insightful article, 'Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization', which devastatingly explores the implications of its observation that 'The "desert island" is the ideal location for the "other"; it is more easily colonized than an entire continent, and picturing the colony as female makes it so much more conquerable and receptive'.9 Williamson demonstrates the continuities linking contemporary advertising, tourism, and classic narratives of cross-cultural encounter in their deployment of the island/female conflation. She argues that 'Our culture, deeply rooted in imperialism, needs to destroy genuine difference, to capture what is beyond its reach; at the same time, it needs constructs of difference in order to signify itself at all'.10 In her view, 'Woman' is 'the main vehicle for this representation'.11

The island as body politic/female body/colonized space has received less critical attention than the contesting human figures of Prospero, Caliban, and more recently, Miranda and Sycorax. Yet as Michel Tournier's rewriting of Robinson Crusoe (itself a rewrite of The Tempest) in his novel Friday demonstrates, the island/female conflation is implicit in the source-text and crucial to our understanding of what is at stake in rewriting those canonical texts of empire, The Tempest and Robinson Crusoe. The island has long been a crucial element in English nationalism and an important symbol for Caribbean writers claiming their own place in a world system of competing nationalisms. But in Canada, where nationalism has usually taken continental form, the island functions more ambivalently and diversely in our writers' wrestlings with the Tempest model.

If we are to find a non-repressive model of nationalism to replace the violences of past and present, we need to unpack this conflation of body politic, female body, national place, and dominance. Critics are working through this conflation from positions based in deconstructionist, feminist, post-colonial, Marxist, semiotic, and nationalist critique, but we are only beginning to bring these variously generated insights together into a coherent formulation of a new model of understanding. Judith Williamson, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, and Trinh T. Minh-ha have been especially helpful for my still embryonic thinking on these matters.

The St. Lawrence River-based 'Lawrentian thesis' has long been the dominant model in Canadian historiography and literary criticism for conceptualizing Canada as a female space opened up through travel down the St. Lawrence river into a 'new world' heart of darkness. Douglas LePan in his poem, 'A Country Without a Mythology', Margaret Atwood in her Journals of Susanna Moodie, and Northrop Frye in his Canadian literary criticism all solidified this envisioning of national space as a female/native/landscape conflation to be penetrated and opened up. Timothy Findley in Headhunter articulates the dark side of this imperialist/national civilising mission, explicitly through the observations of a contemporary visitor who retraces the Lawrentian journey into the heart of a continent devastated by these earlier arrivals, and implicitly through the entire
book's careful resituating of Conrad's novel and its characters in the industrial heartland of Toronto. Findley's *Headhunter* and Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* could usefully be read together contrapuntally to illuminate the current impasse reached by imperialist attempts to penetrate the other, not only through physical dominance but also through structures of knowledge. Each posits islands of achieved community in a world at war with itself. I had some trouble writing that last sentence because the metaphors we are accustomed to rely on are being turned on their heads and radically questioned by these books: Findley undermines the madness/sanity distinction; Philip, the darkness/light opposition; each questions models that separate the civilized from the barbarian and that presume to name the other. Both books show the one-sidedness of cross-cultural encounter when participants cannot see the full humanity of the other.

But as I have suggested, models of island settings for such encounters are not necessarily any less repressive than that of the conquering voyage inland. Recognition of the conflated island/body politic/female body/contested space dynamic, however, can help us understand imperialism's conquering relation to place as complicit with misogynist and capitalist understandings of human nature and human community. These understandings need to be questioned and revised. Shakespeare's *Tempest* has been used, on stage and in criticism and teaching, to promote English nationalism under the guise of 'universalism'. Thanks to Gauri Viswanathan, we now know that English as an academic discipline and teaching curriculum developed as an experiment in social control in India. 'Shakespeare', the pinnacle of achievement in this discipline, came to represent, in the words of Henry Scadding, a teacher at Upper Canada College in late nineteenth century Toronto, the "clear masculine, right-judging intellects" of Englishmen. Indeed, Scadding considered Shakespeare, 'Virtually a Type of Colonist ... appreciated among the junior members of the family of nations, - among the human down-rootings from the great mother-Tree of England'. *The Tempest* has played a central role in these legitimating myths of empire, continuing on into the present in mutated form, as Terence Hawkes so convincingly demonstrates in 'Swisser-Swatter: making a man of English letters'.

Yet while the school system used English to promote British island nationalism and its extension throughout the world, post-colonial readers constructed resistant readings that made space for their alternatively conceived perspectives. Caliban's claim in *The Tempest* that 'This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother' asserts a matrilineal claim that has inspired Edward Brathwaite's development of what he calls an 'aesthetics of Sycorax' that has enabled him to celebrate his Barbadian island nationalism in poems such as *Mother Poem* in what he terms a 'calibanized' or 'creolized' English that has been indigenized/modified by its contact with the African Diaspora.
In ‘Bad Words’, Marlene Nourbese Philip brilliantly explores and appropriates the implications of Brathwaite’s conflation of woman/island/speech in the service of a pan-Caribbean nationalism. Her black middle-class Miranda learns to curse, first from listening to her friend Clarence (Caliban), and finally from attempting to imitate her neighbour Pomona Adams (Sycorax), ‘a large and beautiful brown-skinned woman’ who has mastered the powerful and forbidden words, the ‘language of badness’, which Miranda instinctively knows that she too will need to ensure her safe passage through higher education into the ‘forbidden spaces’ controlled by a white world. The powerful and forbidden language she learns counters the abstractions favoured by her parents, ‘words like politics and freedom’, with the physical presence of the lived-in body. She treasures these words in silence, finally selecting a Sunday for her initiation into a public speech that she knows will invite sure punishment. Yet when Miranda curses, she feels only fulfilment, savouring how ‘The moist, wet, inner pink space of her mouth had become a tender womb to bad words, any words – mother’s cunts, pricks, dicks – the words were embedded deep inside Miranda filling up all the secret places and spaces created by the forbidden’. Philip links this reclaiming of personal female space, cursing, and black diasporic identity to the history of colonization and slavery in the Caribbean. In an unpublished talk delivered in Port of Spain in March 1990 at a conference of Caribbean women writers, she notes:

Whether we conceive of the space between the legs as one space, the cunt; two spaces, the cunt and womb; or one continuous space extending from cunt to womb, control of and over this space or spaces is a significant marker of the outer space...The black woman came to the New World with only the body and that most precious of resources – the space between her legs...the space between the black woman’s legs became the place – site of oppression – necessary and vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer spaces in a designated form – the plantation machine...  

The theoretical counterpart of Brathwaite’s and Philip’s aesthetics of Sycorax may be found in Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective. Rojo conceptualizes the entire Caribbean as a ‘meta-archipelago’ that ‘has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center’. Rojo’s image of repeating islands as a ‘spiral chaos’ radically transforms conventional notions of fixed national/international boundaries and relations.

The potential of such a thesis for reconceptualizing how we see Canada is inspiring: we would have to reimagine Canada, less as the top half of a continent monolithic in its conception and lineaments, than as itself reconceived and continually metamorphosed through the metaphor of the repeating island. Although Canada’s history, geography, and traditions are very different from those of the Caribbean (so meticulously documented
by Rojo), there are some precedents within Canadian traditions for this kind of rearticulation of national space. In a coffee-table book called *The Islands of Canada*, Marian Engel points out that ‘Canada is comically rich in islands. We speak casually of them in thousands. The Arctic is almost completely composed of islands....There are hundreds of thousands of lakes, each of which has its islands.’ To Engel, who describes herself as ‘afflicted with islomania’:

Islands in their nothingness are everything to us, the heart of our history and the home of our imagination.’

By nothingness, she appears to mean that they are no longer central to our experience in our highly centralized world. ‘Many of them,’ she asserts, ‘have been relegated to the hall-closet roles of Indian reserve, summer resort, and artists’ colony.’ Here again we encounter the conflation noted by Williamson of colonization, tourism, and the creation of cultural myths. What initially appears a trite paradox in a celebratory book that skims the surface, refusing introspection, points through its metaphors to the repressed half of the Canadian settler-invader identity. Gushing over the ‘romance’ of islands’ ‘true isolation’, Engel writes: ‘we seek out islands for our own reasons. These reasons run deep in all of us. We grew up on island stories like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*.’

These stories charge the romance of *The Islands of Canada*, a romance I find imbued with what Renato Rosaldo terms ‘imperialist nostalgia’.

But in her novel *Bear*, Engel reinscribes these hereditary stories with a twist that makes that nostalgia, with its undercurrents of ambivalence and guilt carried by Canada’s settler-invader heritage, undermine the pastoral romance of her chosen form. Engel’s *Bear*, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, and Aritha Van Herk’s *Places Far from Ellesmere* form a triad of feminist revisionings of island narratives, island space, and female bodies, reclaiming this space of contestation as a place of renewed beginnings. *Bear* and *Surfacing* show their female protagonists undergoing ritual penance for the invasion and genocide practised by their ancestors, seeking absolution for their guilt from the spirits of the land. Neither is ready to face First Nations’ nationalisms directly. These land claims appear only in displaced form through totemic animals. The wrongs done to First Nations’ peoples are implicitly recognised but the focus falls on how the imperial project has wounded and dehumanized the colonizers. These novels seem to answer bell hook’s call for white critics to examine the construction of their whiteness before seeking to understand the blackness of others.

Aritha van Herk builds on the teachings of *Surfacing* and *Bear* in *Places Far from Ellesmere* to create a complex conversation among the four Canadian places in which her protagonist takes form – Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary, and Ellesmere – and the Russia of her imagination in dialogue with Tolstoy. ‘Ellesmere: Woman as Island’ occupies the final section and orients the whole book. In taking *Anna Karenina* to Ellesmere Island, Van Herk’s narrator speculates: ‘Perhaps you can un/read her, set her free. There on that desert island, between the harebells and the blue dreaming
of glaciers.’28 Like Atwood and Engel, Van Herk journeys north to find her healing island, what she calls ‘this islanded woman waiting to be read a justice or a future’.29 Ellesmere teaches both ‘pleasure, the pleasure of oblivion, pleasure endorsed, its doors thrown wide’30 and ‘what reading means’.31 It makes its author a new woman, ready to write and to read the justice and the future denied Anna Karenina and the women excluded or marginalised in the canonical island adventures of imperialist narratives. Van Herk interrogates western constructions of Woman (implicitly white) through arguments with Tolstoy and Rudy Wiebe, and counters the homogenizing narratives of ‘empire boys’32 with one Canadian woman’s very particular story. Ellesmere attempts that geographical-literary reconfiguration of male plotting I called for at the beginning of my paper, and demands a more thorough unravelling than I have space for here.

The contrapuntal rereading strategies embodied in van Herk’s text may usefully be compared to the contrapuntal musical and dramatic transformations of stereotypes of white, Metis, and native women parodied and explored in Monique Mojica’s brilliant play, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*. Here, body politic and woman’s body are explicitly and intimately related:

He said, ‘It’s time for the women to pick up their medicine in order for the people to continue.’ *(washes hands, arms)*

She asked him, ‘What is the women’s medicine?’ The only answer he found was, ‘The women are the medicine, so we must heal the women.’33

Travelling through five hundred years of history and moving through space throughout the Americas, this play enacts that healing process until finally Contemporary Woman #1 can say:

So many years of trying to fit into feminist shoes. O.K. I’m trying on the shoes; but they’re not the same as the shoes in the display case. The shoes I’m trying on must be crafted to fit these wide, square, brown feet. I must be able to feel the earth through their soles.

So, it’s International Women’s Day, and here I am. Now, I’d like you to take a good look – *(turns slowly, all the way around)*. I don’t want to be mistaken for a crowd of Native women. I am one. And I do not represent all Native women. I am one.34

In these passages, the islanded woman reclaims her own space and defies categorization, simultaneously asserting her individuality and her communal participations. The play concludes with the following triumphant exchange between Contemporary women #1 and #2, singing first in Spanish and then in English: ‘A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground’; ‘Then, it is done, no matter how brave its warriors, nor how strong its weapons.’35 The final visual image scripted for the audience before the blackout, declares: ‘Blind Faith leaps in the dark.’36
Perhaps that leap is one all artists must take as they seek to conjure more fulfilling images of women’s lives, community solidarity, and national identifications than those provided by the master narratives of the past. The nationalism of Monique Mojica’s play incorporates five hundred years of cross-cultural encounter, respecting the experiences of every native and every Metis and mestizo group, and reaching across linguistic and racial boundaries to create an international vision based on mutual respect. Like the other women writers whose work I’ve touched on here, however, Mojica uses her writing to effect the healing that precedes respect. That healing involves addressing the ways in which women have been constructed and isolated as islands (either defined as desert space to be colonized – defeated, vilified and expunged, like Sycorax; or defined as beyond/above the realm of public activity, islanded in protected enclaves that deny their agency, like Miranda or Conrad’s Intended). Before it is completed, it will require redefining the female body and the body politic, and reorienting the justifying disciplines of conquest – not just English studies, but also geography, ethnography, history, and psychology. Until we have undertaken that critique more thoroughly, we will not know the full potential of either of the two movements under discussion this week, of nationalism or internationalism. Woman as island/body politic/constructor of difference has served as the justifying master-narrative of imperialist internationalism and of various nationalisms. We are only beginning to discover the implications of the counter-phrase: ‘No (Wo)man is an island.’

NOTES

1. This article was first delivered as a conference paper at the European ACLALS conference, entitled Nationalism versus Internationalism, held in Graz, Austria, in May 1993. For the time taken to research and write this paper and for travel funds to attend the conference, I am indebted to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada who generously provided me with a Research Grant for 1992-95, a Research Time Stipend (1993) and a Conference Travel Grant to deliver the paper in Graz.


3. Ibid., p. 312

4. Ibid., p. 318.

5. Ibid.


11. Ibid.


13. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 33.

18. Ibid.

19. Quoted in Leslie Sanders, 'Marlene Nourbese Philip's "Bad Words"', Tessera 12 (Summer 1992), p. 84.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., p. 12.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., p. 11.


29. Ibid., p. 143.

30. Ibid., p. 130.

31. Ibid., p. 132.


34. Ibid., pp. 58-59.

35. Ibid., p. 60.

36. Ibid.