

A Poetics of Ethnicity

FRED WAH

Stances toward writing that have arisen out of an ethnic response demonstrate inventions of alignment and resistance. Immigrant, ethnic and Native writers in Canada have utilized most of the available public aesthetics in order to create a more satisfying space within which to investigate their particular realities. For some writers this entails an alignment with mainstream and traditional strategies, while for others the tactics of refusal and re-territorialization offer a more appropriate poetics.

I'm using the term *poetics* here not in the theoretical sense of the study of or theory about literature, but in its practical and applied sense, as the tools designed or located by writers and artists to initiate movement and change. "That is," as the American poet Charles Bernstein imagines, poetics as a sort of applied poetic, in the sense that engineering is a form of applied mathematics." The culturally marginalized writer will engineer approaches to language and form that enable a particular residue (ethnic, cultural, biographical) to become kinetic and valorized. For writers in Canada like Joy Kogawa and Rohinton Mistry the stance is to operate within a colonized and inherited formal awareness while investigating their individual enactments of internment and migration. But others, such as Roy Kiyooka and Marlene Nourbese Philip, who are migrating from spatial allocations similar to Kogawa and Mistry, have chosen to utilize more formal innovative possibilities. This second group of writers seems to me to embody an approach that might properly be called something like "alienethnic" poetics. This poetics, while often used

for its ethnic imprint and frequently originating from that desire, is certainly not limited to an ethnic, as they say, "project"; the same tactics could as well be used for other goals. Feminist poetics, for example, has arguably contributed the most useful strategies to the ethnic intention.

Margaret Atwood's notion that "we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here" and quoted by Rosemary Sullivan in "Who are the Immigrant Writers and What Have They Done?" seems only to "universalize" the types, that we "many" are really only "one." A "poetics of ethnicity" would be, then, in Atwood's and Sullivan's view, simply the poetics, the whole, inclusive thing. But a practical and applied "poetics" is a singular and personal toolbox, and a writer who seeks to articulate a distinctive ethnic and, as I shall suggest, ethical sensibility requires particular, truthful and circumstantial poetics, the right tools.

For example, in his essay "The Ethnic Voice in Canadian Writing" (264-265), Eli Mandel rebounds from Atwood's claim to point to a particular "ethnic strategy": it is not only that as strangers we find ourselves in a strange land, but with the burden upon us as well . . . of living simultaneously in doubleness, that is difficult enough. To articulate that doubleness simply intensifies the pressure, the burden. But there is a further step in which what Atwood calls "inescapable doubleness" turns into duplicity, a strategy for cultural identification that I take to be the ethnic strategy, the "voice" I'm trying to identify.

The duplicitous voice, then, is what's needed and gets placed in the ethnopoetic toolbox. As indicated by Mandel (266), Robert Kroetsch subsumes the identity question into fiction's role, and Linda Hutcheon, in her introduction to the recent *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (5), cites Aritha Van Herk as claiming fiction as a "refuge" from multicultural or ethnic "displacement." Fiction's double-dealing hand is seen as the result of a move from the familiar to the foreign.

In her article "Dialogism and the Canadian Novel," Sherrill Grace lists some of the chicanery available in the novelist trickster's bag of: double-voicing and polyphony; refraction of words, voices, and characters; parody; polemically coloured autobiography and confession; hybrid languages; carnivalization; inserted genres such as diaries, letters, found documents; Kroetsch's syncretic "provocation of the word by the word" (121). She adds:

At first glance, it would seem that politically, geographically, and linguistically Canada, unlike the United States, constitutes the perfect dialogistic space. To paraphrase Bakhtin in the *Dialogic Imagination*, we believe that we lack a truly

unifying mythology; we behave as if politically decentered, and we try to allow for (or actualize) ethnic and linguistic diversity. As a result, "verbal-ideological decentring" should occur here because, as a "national culture," we have never had a "sealed-off and self-sufficient character" and have always thought of ourselves as "only one among other cultures and languages." (131-132)

Why then, asks the non-aligned writer, the fighter, does the monologic tradition dominate in fiction? What is this longing for unity? This desire for centres?

I've noticed, in the jockeying for the position of voice debate, that the term *ethnic* has been shunned as "incorrect" or "unusable" as a description of non-mainstream, visible/invisible minority, marginalized, race, origin, Native, or otherwise "Other." Linda Hutcheon, for example, argues for the use of the term *multicultural* as a more inclusive term instead of *ethnic*, which "always has to do with the social positioning of the 'other,' and is thus never free of relations of power and value" (2). To me, her rationale is similar to Atwood's view of a generic immigrant experience. Hutcheon admits that the issues associated with the term *ethnic* are, in fact, "the very issues raised by the structure of this book, as well as by the individual voices within it" (2). Though Hutcheon claims to want to challenge "the hierarchy of social and cultural privilege," (2) her apparent contradiction threatens to nullify the move.

But for me, this Greek-Indo-European term has provided significant poetic accommodation. The etymon *eth* surfaced for me many years ago when I struggled with the notion of *earth* and *ethos*. Here's the poem that provided me with a set of lasting keywords.

Eth means why any one returns
 every one all over the place they are in
 entwined into the confluence of the two rivers
 into the edges of a genetic inscription
 find our homes and loves now night
 spreads out up the valleys
 into the many-forgotten messages and arrangements
 carried there the character sticks
 hunger (n.p.)

So the tools of "place," "genetic inscription," "home," "love," "message" and "hunger" have clung like dirt to those roots.

This is also, of course, the Deleuze/Guattari term of *re-territorialization* seen by Barbara Godard in Lola Tostevin's "The Place becomes

Writing . . ." and Smaro Kamboureli's gloss on Tostevin's language as "the graph of place" (Godard, 160) and her own writing as "dealing with the self as 'the place of language'" (Williamson, 34). The "nomadology" (Deleuze and Guattari) of the ethnic writer, that is, the figuring out where she is, where to go, how to move, not just through language but actually in the world, is an investigation of place, as well as of placement in said place. For some, this is a reclamation project, and who could blame them, the Natives. Jeannette Armstrong calls it the "Blood of My People" (*Telling It*, 57):

forward a red liquid stream that draws
ground upward that shakes earth and dust to move
to move a long line before settling
quietly back into soil

Because here she's writing within English and not the purity of her own Okanagan Salish, that "gap" in Armstrong's poem is reflective of the nomadic cut and refusal to settle into English's placement of the syntactic morphology, and more basically and politically, both the imaginary nation and actual geo-morphology.

Furthermore, "place" is "home" or "cave"; proprioceptive, proprius, proper to one's self, the cave of self. But that ethos-ethnos leads to "ethic" – right way. As I came to it in a prose-poem, a lot of my old keywords tumbled forward.

Music at the Heart of Thinking Ninety

On the weekend I got into anger talk about landscape and the hunger of narrative to eat answer or time but space works for me because place got to be more spiritual at least last felt now this watery genetic I suspect passions like anger suprafixed to simply dwells I mean contained as we speak of it believe me I'd like to find a new word-track for feeling but language and moment work out simply as simultaneous occurrences so I don't think you should blame words' time-lapse tropism eg ethics is probably something that surrounds you like you house it's where you live.

Ethnic, ethic. A kind of anagogical exegesis of text that is a poetic reading writing and is particularly attractive to the ethnic sensibility because of the continuous movement, nomadically, as well as the world-sense of Truth-slash-El Dorado Quest for and including traditional notions of value, Idealism, Positivism, Moralism and even

present political/religious economism. That's a mouthful but what I'm trying to indicate is that the truth-track for the poetics of ethnicity vis-à-vis its sister dangling root, ethic, that is, "where you live," is also "Other," a larger poetics term particularly attractive to contemporary ethnopoetics. Octavio Paz writes:

As to the discovery, I shall begin by saying that the concrete life is the real life, as against the uniform living that contemporary society tries to impose on us. [Andre] Breton has said: la véritable existence est ailleurs. That elsewhere is here. Always here and in this moment. Real life opposes neither the quotidian nor the heroic life; it is the perception of the spark of the otherness. (Clarke, 151)

To write (or live) ethnically is also to write (or live) ethically, in pursuit of right value, right place, right home, otherness. Himani Bannerji's editors claim that "her ethic of individual responsibility, counterpointed by her recognition of external forces which imprison, is the coherent element in poems treating such topics as the cultural construction of woman and wife, . . . and the immigrant's vibrant connection to her homeland" (*Shakti's Words*, xi). The poem they're referring to is a powerful indictment of apartheid that Bannerji intervenes as "apart-hate."

Michael Thorpe, in a recent assault on Arun Mukherjee's *Towards an Aesthetics of Opposition*, is bothered by a poetics of the "Other." He asks, "Why would anyone not driven by material necessity . . . emigrate to and remain in an alien country and society in which they feel condemned to adopt a posture of opposition?" (4). Professor Thorpe, and many others who are attracted to notions of alignment and "shared common values" might well feel disturbed by a poetics of difference. For the writer addressing an ethnicity directed at other values, the naming and reterritorialization is fundamental to creative action, and so any move to articulate a re-found territory requires this other-side-of-the-tracks poetics.

This is always threatening to the "other" other-side-of-the-tracks poetics, at least here in Canada, it is politically and ideologically tied to the address and rewrite of the apple of John A. MacDonald's eye – the hot debate on "national unity." The moral exegesis of place-poetics is, as Myrna Kostash does, for example, for a named and correct "otherness":

I had the very odd experience of finding myself entered in the Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature as "Kostash, Myrna. See: Ukrainian Writing." Odd, because, it seems to me that over some 20 years of writing I have made a contribution not just as an ethnic but as a woman/feminist, an Albertan, a Canadian, a non-fictionist, organization activist, teacher – why should the "Ukrainian" component of all this activity be the one to characterize me? Odd, too, in that I have no idea what "Ukrainian writing" is supposed to mean in my case; I write only in English and address an English-speaking audience. What on earth does it take to become a Canadian writer, a contributor to and practitioner of CanLit, if not books written in Canada by a Canadian for Canadians? Could it be that, given my origins outside the Anglo-Celtic and Franco founding nations, I shall never be considered to belong because I wasn't there at the beginning when the naming took place? That CanLit is a category and a practice hijacked and held captive by a very exclusive gang of men and women who all come from the right side of the tracks? (18-19)

She then goes on to negotiate for the position of the "potent" as she rejects the attempts at "assimilation" from the multicultural right side of the tracks. The exclusion, she points out,

... is painful and exciting, for it is in those "interstices" of cultures that we have become writers. In other words, we may not wish to belong to the club. We may wish to live with tension and distress. We may wish to remind ourselves, over and over, that we live on the wrong side of the tracks, on the edge of town. (19)

Kostash is indicating the position of applied, chosen, desired and necessary estrangement that has become a primary unit of composition for many Canadian writers as they seek to de-territorialize inherited literary forms and language, as they seek a heat through friction. This is a poetics of paradox. "Our disgraces are our graces," Charles Olson used to remind us in his seminar on poetics. We know ourselves by our resistances.

Milagros Paredes: "And I move... not forward, but in all the directions my questions take me. I move tentatively, having always to remind myself that surrendering to my confusion will lead me to some kind of clarity" (*Fireweed*, 77).

This principle of synchronous foreignicity, akin to biology's catastrophism, of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony, is a necessary implementation of art that looks for new organizing principles, new narratives.

Jamelie Ismail: "Read this book from right to left, reader dear (n.p.)."

Himani Bannerji: "A whole new story has to be told, with fragments, with disruptions, and with self-conscious and critical reflections. And one has to do it right... [there's that "ethnic" at work]. ... Creating seamless narratives, engaging in exercises in dramatic plot creating, simply make cultural brokers, propagators of orientalism and self-reificationists out of us. My attempt here has been to develop a form which is both fragmentary and coherent in that it is both creative and critical – its self-reflexivity breaking through self-reification, moving towards a fragmented whole" (*Fireweed*, 134) [italics mine].

And, appropriately this week, we might hear Edward Said:

A part of something is for the foreseeable future going to be better than all of it. Fragments over wholes. Restless nomadic activity over the settlements of held territory. Criticism over resignation. The Palestinian as self-consciousness in a barren plain of investments and consumer appetites. The heroism of anger over the begging bowl... To do as others do, but somehow to stand apart. To tell your story in pieces, as it is. (150)

Anger. You can feel a bit of it, too, in Himani Bannerji's statement. And that "anger" in my own prose-poem above ("On the weekend I got into anger") is the proprioceptive response to the genetic other, a posed biotextual response to some ancestral ghosts. But I'm not alone. Here's Winnipeg poet Di Brandt:

I've tried everything, obedience, disobedience, running away, coming back, forgetting (blanking it out), recalling it again out of the dark, killing it off, replicating, leaving it. sometimes it's like a glow running through me, around the horizon like an aura, sometimes it's like a scar, throbbing, on my sleeve. sometimes i visualize it as a suitcase i drag around with me, centuries old, heavy, cumbersome, my people's words, handcuffing me, binding me, & then i open it in a new place & it's filled with coloured scarves, playthings. Mennonite hymns can still make me weep. there is so much re-visioning i've had in order to stay alive: i feel so much anger for the way we were made to raise children, as women, swallowing our desires in secret, submitting to the fathers and God & fate, learning our own silence. i feel so angry when Mennonite women trying to forget (blank out) their lives as they grow old, there was so much suffering in them, the way they have learned at great cost to speak. sometimes i feel like screaming for them, sometimes i feel like crying at them. sometimes i long to go back to my grandmother's garden, with gooseberries & strawberries & blackberries & crab-apples & rhubarb & currants & blue currants & raspberries & blackberries, & all the children, & uncles, my family. i hate having to choose between my inherited identity as a traditional Mennonite versus contemporary Canadian woman writer. how can i be both & not fly apart? (*Prairie Fire*, 183)

Of course this is still part of the ethos, the right place, the "community."

This is Wednesday morning in Calgary, 27 February. External Affairs Minister Joe Clark phones me and asks me to participate in a discussion he's holding with some other artists on Saturday night in Calgary vis-à-vis "national unity." What he wants is our "imagination," our Image Nation. He says he's concerned about the body of much of the discussion on "national unity" drifting too heavily toward "laws" and "legislation" and such "business." While he talks to me I keep thinking, Why isn't he somewhere else doing something about peace in the Mid-East? Why isn't he busy deconstructing Canada's surreptitious arms economy? And just before he phoned, I was reading Himani Bannerji's poem "Apart-Hate" (*Shakti's Words*, 13-14). It's only a page, let me read it to you.

In this white land
Where I wander with scape-goats
there are laws

Apart-hate

In this whiteland
rocks blackhands gold and diamond
blood oozes from the mouth

Apart-hate

In this whiteland
Chinese coolies, black slaves, indian indentures
immigration, head tax, virginity tests

Apart-hate

Sudden attacks in the dark
in the dawn with cops and dogs
White Cop plays with her mouth - resuscitates

London Pretoria Toronto

Apart-hate

Reagan extends his whitehand from the whitehouse
fingers cash sells arms
the shop smells of blood, vomit and gunpowder
"divestment hurts the blacks"

Apart-hate

In this white land
skin is fingered like pelt
skin is sold and the ivory of her eyes

the category human has no meaning
when spoken in white

Apart-hate

You can imagine the resin in my own imagination at the time. I told Mr. Clark that, unfortunately, I'd be at a conference on multiculturalism in Winnipeg that evening. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate being asked. I wish, in some ways, I could be there, mouthing my own disjointed diatribe against the centre. I wonder if I would be able to talk about the non-aligned poetics of ethnicity; Kostash's deep need for opposition; Uma Parameswaran's "question" (*Shakti's Words*, 66) at the end of every word; Di Brandt's anger; Roy Kiyooka's "unwelcome but salutary silences . . . [and] tied tongue" (*West Coast Line*, n.p.); Gerry Shikatani's "the sign / mouth becomes / to throw / all weapons / into the cave of words (frontispiece); Kristjana Gunnars's *Carnival of Longing*; Roy Miki's "fear in the face of racism"; his "museum of mirrors on the far side of town" (both from draft version); Marie Anharte Baker's racing "to write I write about race why do I write about race I must erase all trace of my race I am an eraser abrasive bracing myself embracing"; Marlene Nourbese Phillip's question, "If no one sings the note / between the silence / . . . / is still music?" (15); the community in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*; Anne Harris's "Grammar of the Heart" . . . "How here to say the payable" (54); Jim Wong-Chu "lost . . . / on earth / above the bones / of multitude / of golden mountain men" (21); Lee Maracle's trickster woman, "another trick tucked within her wings"; Daphne Marlatt's "you, spelt out in a language that sounded strange, stranger yourself, arrived of words that spoke what you knew" (94); David Arnason's "writing as carpentry" (*Border Crossings*); Phyllis Webb's "*Leaning . . . / tilted one degree from the horizontal / the whole culture leaning . . . / and you, are you still here / tilted in this stranded ark / blind and in the dark*" (58-59).

Phyllis Webb's "intention," she says,

... was to make trouble, to be a troublemaker in regard to language but also with values of my own embodied by a writing practice that was ludic (playing with words), experimental (trying to understand processes of writing), and exploratory (searching). You see, it brings us back to my values: exploration (which provides for renewal of information and knowledge), intelligence (which provides the ability to process things), and pleasure (which provides for energy and desire). (77)

Well there's the rub, Joe. The tactical imagination of a "national unity" is, for some writers, a "disunity." And the ethnopoetics toolbox isn't even only "ethnic," at least in the sense of racial. These tools are shared, it seems, by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, in short, in need of any tool that might imagine, as the poet George Oppen believed, the unacknowledged world.

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