

WALDEMAR ZACHARASIEWICZ AND CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER (EDS.)

CULTURAL CIRCULATION:  
DIALOGUES BETWEEN CANADA AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH



ÖSTERREICHISCHE AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN  
PHILOSOPHISCH-HISTORISCHE KLASSE  
SITZUNGSBERICHTE, 843. BAND

---

WALDEMAR ZACHARASIEWICZ AND  
CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER (EDS.)

Cultural Circulation:  
Dialogues between Canada and the  
American South

Verlag der  
Österreichischen Akademie  
der Wissenschaften



Wien 2013

**OAW**

Vorgelegt von w. M. WALDEMAR ZACHARASIEWICZ  
in der Sitzung am 14. Juni 2013

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data.  
A Catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

Diese Publikation wurde einem anonymen, internationalen  
peer-review Verfahren unterzogen

This publication had been anonymously reviewed by international peers

Die verwendete Papiersorte ist aus chlorfrei gebleichtem Zellstoff hergestellt,  
frei von säurebildenden Bestandteilen und alterungsbeständig.

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

ISBN 978-3-7001-7429-5

Copyright © 2013 by  
Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften  
Wien

Druck und Bindung: Prime Rate kft., Budapest

Printed and bound in the EU

<http://hw.oeaw.ac.at/7429-5>

<http://verlag.oeaw.ac.at>

# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ..... 9

WALDEMAR ZACHARASIEWICZ and CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER  
**Introduction** ..... 11

## OUVERTURE

ARITHA VAN HERK  
**My Love Affair with Shrevlin McCannon** ..... 23

### I. ACADIANS AND CANADIANS

BERNDT OSTENDORF  
**Et in Acadia Ego: Some Versions of the Pastoral in the Cajun Ethnic Revival** ..... 37

JUTTA ERNST  
**“Beyond the Bayou”: Sociocultural Spaces in Kate Chopin’s Louisiana Short Stories** ..... 51

JACQUES POTHIER  
**Northeast by South: Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha and Antonine Maillet’s Acadia** ..... 67

### II. TRANSMIGRATIONS

CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER  
**Audubon Goes North** ..... 77

RICHARD J. ELLIS  
**Stowe, the South, Canada, and Sadism** ..... 99

JUTTA ZIMMERMANN  
**From Roots to Routes: The Dialogic Relation between Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) and Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* (2007)** ..... 119

HANS BAK  
**Flights to Canada: Jacob Lawrence, Ishmael Reed, and Lawrence Hill** ..... 135

SHARON MONTEITH  
**The Bridge from Mississippi’s Freedom Summer to Canada:  
 Pearl Cleage’s *Bourbon at the Border*** ..... 155

DAVID WILLIAMS  
**Metropolis and Hinterland: Faulkner and MacLeod** ..... 171

**III. REWRITINGS AND INFLUENCES**

ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI  
**Re-Writing the Grimms: Eudora Welty and Margaret Atwood** ..... 183

PEARL AMELIA McHANEY  
**Hard Beauty. The Confluence of Eudora Welty and Alice Munro:  
 Mississippi-South and Ontario-South Portraits of the 1930s** ..... 191

CHARLES R. WILSON  
**Parallel Spiritual Worlds: Alice Munro Country and the American South** ..... 201

DANIÈLE PITAVY-SOUQUES  
**“A Wordless Unease”: Some Aspects of the Relationship between  
 Art and Politics in the Works of Southern and Canadian Writers** ..... 215

IAN MacRAE  
**An Open Field of Possibility: Reading Jack Hodgins’s  
*The Invention of the World* in Dialogue with the American South** ..... 231

WILLIAM V. DAVIS  
**Crisscrossing the Continent: From Black Mountain to Vancouver** ..... 255

**IV. CIRCULATING GENRES AND THE EMERGENCE OF A  
 TRANSCONTINENTAL POSTMODERN**

REINGARD M. NISCHIK  
**Two Nations, One Genre? The Beginnings of the Modernist Short Story  
 in the United States and Canada** ..... 277

DIETER MEINDL

**Canada/American South in the Short Story:**

**Flannery O'Connor – Jack Hodgins – Leon Rooke**..... 291

THOMAS L. McHANEY

**Voice Not Place: Leon Rooke Makes a Success in Canada** ..... 307

MARCEL ARBEIT

**I, Canadian: Elizabeth Spencer's Montreal** ..... 317

NAHEM YOUSAF

**Michael Ondaatje's New Orleans in *Coming Through Slaughter***..... 333

CAROLINE ROSENTHAL

**Culinary Transgressions: Food Practices and Constructions of Female Identity  
in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning* and  
Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*** ..... 351

## ENVOI

Laurie Ricou

**South by Northwest**..... 367

**List of Contributors** ..... 381

**Index** ..... 387



## Acknowledgements

The present volume is the result of an international colloquium that took place in Vienna in September 2010. Twenty-six writers and scholars from North America and from six European countries had been invited to explore the under-researched topic of the cultural exchange between the American South and in the fields of literature and culture. Highly respected experts in the field of Southern studies and equally well-known specialists in the realm of Canadian literature and culture turned their attention to the analysis of historical links between these two vast cultural spaces and considered the literary reflection of significant movements from one large region to the other in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They dealt especially with intertextual relationships and studied the creative energies that were released when North encountered South and South encountered North.

The colloquium and the publication of its proceedings were made possible by several grants the organizers received from institutions both in Austria and abroad. The Rector of the University of Vienna, Georg Winckler, and the Dean of its Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies, Franz Römer, offered initial support and the Austrian Academy of Sciences gave a generous grant, which are both gratefully acknowledged.

The colloquium also received financial assistance from the Canadian government through a grant given to the Center for Canadian Studies at Vienna University, and was similarly supported by the Association of Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries (GKS). A grant from the U.S. Embassy enabled several scholars from North America to attend the colloquium whilst the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research and the Cultural Office of the city of Vienna similarly provided support. Additional help was given by the Association for the Promotion of North American Studies at the University of Vienna.

This publication would not have appeared without a large research grant awarded by the Austrian Science Fund, which was used both for the planning of the colloquium itself and the various tasks associated with preparing the collection of the revised contributions for publication. A small team of graduates and advanced students was largely responsible for the completion of the manuscript, including initially Helen Kopetzky and Martina Rössler, and subsequently especially Alexandra Hauke. Their unstinting support is here gratefully acknowledged. Co-editor Christoph Irmscher would like to ex-

press his gratitude to Indiana University Bloomington for granting a sabbatical, which was also partly used for editorial work. Erika Jenns at Indiana University Bloomington meticulously prepared the index and proofread the entire text.

The two editors of this volume would also like to thank the Austrian Academy of Sciences for including this volume in its series of *Sitzungsberichte*. The editors wish to dedicate this volume to their many friends on both sides of the Atlantic who have engaged in the study of cultural circulation in the North American continent and across the Atlantic.

## Introduction

In *Birds of Ontario*, a magisterial, beautifully written account of ornithological sightings in and around his neighborhood, the coal merchant Thomas McIlwraith of Hamilton, Ontario, lovingly remembers a stuffed bird that was given to him in the summer of 1890, a small species that he had never seen but that corresponded exactly to written accounts of Cory's Bittern, a "southern bird," which he believes "has not been found anywhere north of Florida." Yet there it was, and the Toronto taxidermist who had prepared the bird had told him that it had been killed in a marsh near Toronto. Since then, there had been at least one other sighting in the Ashbridge marsh. Why had these birds come here? Mr. McIlwraith knew the answer: "No doubt this species associates with our common little bitterns, many of which spend the winter in Florida, and it is just possible that some gallant *exilis* has in his own way painted the beauties of Ashbridge's marsh in such glowing colors that as to induce this little brown lady to accompany him to the north, when he started on his annual journey in spring. Pity she did not fare better..." (110). Alerted by this story, paging through the other descriptions in the book, the reader discovers that very few of McIlwraith's birds can truly be said to be "of Ontario." Instead they are from all over the place – coming and leaving as they choose. For the birds, north and south are matters of convenience, not categories of belonging, a notion that McIlwraith, an immigrant from Scotland anxious to establish himself here, finds disturbing but also strangely comforting, as his frequent comments on the subject attest. For the bitterns of North America, everything circulates: it's their way of life. When your home is everywhere, if at different times of the year, exile is nowhere.

In varying degrees, the essays collected in this volume explore the ramifications of this premise. What the birds know, writers seem to have known all along. The lively response to our invitation to submit papers related to the interconnections between Canada and the American South demonstrated to us that the cultural circulation between two huge parts of the North American continent is an under-researched topic. And papers we received quickly reinforced our sense of the multiple ties between the two cultures that extend far beyond the preference of Canadian golfers for the links near Myrtle Beach in South Carolina or the annual migration to Florida or the Carolinas of well-off Canadians tired of their cold winters. Readers have long been conscious of the inspiration major Southern authors have provided to authors writing north of the 49th Parallel, and pertinent demographic facts have become part

of the collective North American consciousness. One need think only of the enforced displacement of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Acadians, who later reassembled in the Deep South, or the flight of thousands of fugitive slaves from Dixie who tried to make their escape to the safe haven in the north, at that time British North America. In addition, there have been several 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors (e.g., Elizabeth Spencer, Clark Blaise, Leon Rooke) who moved north from Dixie or who relocated several times during their writing lives, crossing and re-crossing the border between the two neighboring countries.

The essays in this volume were first delivered as talks at an international colloquium on “cultural circulation” held at Vienna University in September 2010. Experts on Southern and Canadian literature met for several days to discuss multiple aspects of cultural and literary exchanges between Canada and the American South. The essays that grew out of these talks and that are collected here shed new light on the many interconnections between North and South. Of course, they cannot, and don’t attempt to, exhaust a topic the richness of which has become even more evident to us as we have tried to organize the volume according to thematic clusters.

Our opening salvo comes from the pen of a major Canadian writer, the self-defined “Alberta maverick” Aritha van Herk, who boldly continues one of William Faulkner’s most enduring inventions – the life of deep-breathing Canadian Shreve McCannon, the Harvard roommate of high-strung Quentin Compson, now a pathologist in Edmonton. Expanding hints scattered over the course of Faulkner’s great novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, Aritha van Herk imagines Shreve’s life beyond Faulkner’s novel, as told from the perspective of his Edmonton landlady. Van Herk’s “ficto-critical” story explores the mystery of a man who, after all these years, still misses his friend from a region he never understood (Shreve’s eyes turn bright when asked about Quentin) and who, walking around windswept Edmonton with his “sackful of stories,” remains something of a stranger even though he is now supposedly “home.”

Following the course of North American history, our first thematic cluster unites several essays related to “le grand dérangement” of the Acadians or to other wanderings by a Frenchman across North America. Berndt Ostendorf offers a socio-cultural survey of the challenges experienced by the descendants of Acadian settlers in Louisiana and shows how their resilience helped them to cope with the experience of deportation and later with the attempts of Anglo-American capitalists to marginalize them. Though they were, numerically speaking, a rather small minority, the “Cajuns” managed to absorb

other ethnic groups in the same area and, in spite of powerful trends to Americanize them, retained their language until, ironically, the Codofil initiatives to revive French threatened to eliminate their linguistic culture. Ostendorf singles out the strikingly successful film *Bélisaire, le Cajun*, directed by rebellious sons of genteel Acadians, which gained great popular appeal and helped revitalize Cajun culture. From a more literary perspective, Jutta Ernst stresses writer Kate Chopin's double perspective as both an outsider and insider in Louisiana society. Her ambivalent attitude to the "local color" tradition allowed her to criticize biased, stereotypical representations of indigent Cajuns, whose inherent dignity she evoked in stories such as "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche." Chopin's subversion of social hierarchy contrasts with continued attempts to discriminate against Cajuns, such as the effort to ban the use of the French language the Cajuns had inherited from their Acadian forbears. The iconic identification figure of displaced Acadians everywhere became a woman who never existed in the first place, Longfellow's epic heroine Evangeline. In his essay, Jacques Pothier traces the links between Faulkner's response to Longfellow's intercultural fantasy, the uncollected story "Evangeline," and Acadian writer Antonine Maillet's complex narrative re-writing of Acadian history in *Pélagie-la-Charrette*, the first novel written by a non-French citizen to win the coveted Prix Goncourt in 1979. Borrowing from both Rabelais as well as Faulkner, Maillet spectacularly returns Evangeline (re-christened "Pélagie Leblanc") to her homeland, as the leader of a trek of deported Acadians that assumes mythic dimensions. Pélagie has been dubbed the "Mother Courage" of Canadian literature, and her dogged persistence has indeed brought a measure of redemption to Acadian culture: "I have avenged my ancestors," Antonine Maillet declared.

The first cluster is brought to a conclusion with another displaced Frenchman's trek, this time north, recreated from the traveler's diary entries by Christoph Irmscher. The ornithological artist and writer John James Audubon, though born in Haiti, would have liked for his contemporaries to believe that he was in fact born in Louisiana. His allegiance to all things southern was certainly undisputed. Nevertheless, Audubon, deep into his work on the spectacular *Birds of America* (1827-1838), which would become the world's most expensive printed book, was haunted by the sobering realization that he knew nothing about his favorite birds' breeding grounds way up north. Audubon's Labrador journey in the winter and spring of 1833 was supposed to take him to the origins of avian life. But instead it became a trek into the seventh circle of hell, to a place where birds were killed en masse by human greed. Audubon's disenchantment and conversion experience (though short-

lived) from killer to savior of birds is memorably invoked in *Creation*, the 1999 novel about Audubon's Labrador experience by contemporary Canadian writer Katherine Govier.

The volume's second cluster comprises essays that address the historic flight of fugitive slaves from the U.S. to the imagined and all too often imaginary safe haven Canada and the diverse ways in which this traumatic collective experience has been rendered in different media and literary genres. In his new reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Richard Ellis examines the novel's hopelessly intertwined geography, in which, at least from the slave's perspective, the differences between North and South are matters of degree only. Ellis highlights the basic irony inherent in the notion of the slaves seeking freedom in a colony of Britain, with its own history of repression. According to Ellis, the astounding success of Stowe's novel was not just due to the potency of her sentimentalist writing but reflected the deep undercurrents of sadism and masochism in her narrative, which traverse all distinctions between southern and northern, black and white in the novel, appealing to, as well as implicating, contemporary readers everywhere. Jutta Zimmermann, in her contribution to this cluster, contrasts Alex Haley's blockbuster success *Roots* – both the novel (1976) and the TV series (1977) that grew out of it – with the award-winning novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007), by the Canadian mixed-race writer Lawrence Hill, the son of American immigrants to Canada. Haley's particular brand of cultural nationalism led him to gloss over the ethnic diversity of the slaves deported from Africa, whereas Hill, influenced by studies of the black diaspora such as Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, seeks to regain precisely a sense of the hybridization the slave trade caused. In the process, he also challenges the cherished myth of Canada's clean record concerning slavery. That myth is still alive and well in the narrative series of paintings produced, as a tribute to Harriet Tubman, by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence during the Civil Rights Movement. Hans Bak, who begins his essay with a discussion of Lawrence's art, contrasts this evocation of Canada as the Shangri-La of black pride with Ishmael Reed's irreverent riff on the black exodus to the alleged promised land in *Flight to Canada* (1976), written at a time when American draft dodgers indeed found shelter there. And he turns again to *The Book of Negroes*, this time with a focus on the departure of Hill's frustrated protagonist Aminata from racist Nova Scotia to a colonizing venture in Sierra Leone.

A 20<sup>th</sup>-century version of the escape to the illusory Eden of Canada hovers in the background of Pearl Cleage's powerfully disturbing play *Bourbon at*

*the Border* (1997), the subject of Sharon Monteith's essay in the volume. But Cleage's protagonist Charlie, an African American Civil Rights volunteer severely traumatized by the torture he suffered at the hands of racist southern lawmen, never gets to cross the aptly named Ambassador Bridge that connects Detroit with Windsor, Canada. Instead, he is arrested for murdering, thirty years after his Civil Rights ordeal, three white men who had nothing to do with what had happened to him. Across the river still waits the fantastical Canadian garden where the sun always shines, the garden of hope where Charlie and his wife will never be.

A third thematic cluster – the largest in the volume – collects essays which uncover intertextual links (often directly acknowledged) between Southern writers and their Canadian counterparts. Applying the postmodern juggling of center and periphery to two family chronicles set in Dixie and in Eastern, David Williams compares Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) with Nova Scotia writer Alistair MacLeod's first novel *No Great Mischiefs* (1999). Drawing on Glenn Willmott's sociocultural diagnosis of narrative "disfigurements" in Canadian fiction of the first half of the 20th century, Williams finds the progression of the forces of modernity reflected in both Faulkner's and MacLeod's elegiac rendition of inevitable historical change. In her essay on the use of the Grimm fairy tale "The Robber Bridegroom" by writers as different as Margaret Atwood and Eudora Welty, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi uncovers shared subversive tendencies: Welty's eponymous novel is set in the planter society of the Deep South and features a heroic outlaw groom as well as a reckless bride, while Atwood locates her *The Robber Bride* right in urban Canada, inverting not only the title but also the plot, making the woman the culprit who steals the partners of her female friends. Eudora Welty's fiction is the subject also of a detailed reading by Pearl McHaney, who this time puts the Mississippi-born and -bred Welty in conversation with Ontario writer Alice Munro, who has in fact acknowledged her southern colleague's deep influence on her work. The Great Depression equally affected Mississippi and rural Ontario, but it appears differently in each writer's work: displaced into disciplined reflection in Welty's work and rendered autobiographically direct and searingly in Munro's writing. But such differences don't separate Munro from the world of southern literature. *Au contraire*: As Charles Reagan Wilson argues in his analysis of Munro's short story cycle *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), religious matters are of crucial importance in Munro's fictional work. Through her central character Del Jordan, Munro evokes the need for spiritual meaning in a small, provincial society. Munro's

Jubilee, Ontario, has more in common with Faulkner's Jefferson or O'Connor's dusty Georgia than critics have so far acknowledged, and the rituals accompanying baptisms or funerals contribute to the Gothic aura familiar to southern writers that also pervades Munro's narrative art.

The haunting character of both Canadian and American writing of the Deep South is picked up again in Danièle Pitavy's wide-ranging, provocative meditation on the two traditions. Pitavy sees writers from both regions deeply concerned with the borderland between two Arcadias, one "dark" (associated with chaos but also with vitality and creativity) and the other "light" (and therefore indicative of order, restraint and possibly death). Such borderlands are well familiar, she contends, to Welty as well as to Atwood, and they appear prefigured in earlier works such as "Désirée's Baby" by Kate Chopin or the short story "Extradited," by the prolific Irish-born Canadian poet Isabella Valancy Crawford.

Ian McRae proceeds to lend a truly hemispheric dimension to the concept of intertextuality, detailing the connections between *The Invention of the World* (1977), the first novel by the Vancouver Island writer Jack Hodgins, and southern precursor novels from Brazil (Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*) and Colombia (García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*). Against agonistic models of literary influence, McRae highlights Hodgins' willing embrace of this alternative literary tradition, which serves to debunk the great foundational fictions of western civilization and questions the very possibility of coherent historical narratives (as evidenced in the "Scrapbook" section of Hodgins' novel).

The "intertextuality" cluster concludes with a focus on a genre often neglected in such studies. William Davis furnishes a detailed analysis of the close relationship between the experimental poetry practiced by Charles Olson and his disciples at North Carolina's Black Mountain College, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, and the *Tish* group at the University of British Columbia, notably George Bowering, whose poetic life-writing illustrates the influence of the American avant-garde.

The notion of genre provides the focus of the fourth and final cluster of essays in *Cultural Circulation*, which looks at parallel developments in the Canadian and U.S. American short story and the emergence of a shared U.S. American and Canadian category of the "postmodern." Reingard Nischik compares the beginnings of the short story in the USA and Canada by focusing on the fictional work of Sherwood Anderson and the early stories of Raymond Knister. The latter's untimely death in 1932 deprived Canadian literature of a high talent that might have accelerated the evolution of Canadian

short fiction. Instead, the absence of periodicals and other suitable publication venues in Canada delayed the emergence of accomplished modernist stories until the 1960s. Nischik discusses the rejection of plot-oriented stories by Anderson before juxtaposing his classic tale of initiation “I Want to Know Why” with Knister’s accomplished early fiction in *The First Day of Spring*. By contrast, Dieter Meindl pursues a more epistemological angle, illustrating the shared passage from literary modernism via postmodernism to postcolonialism in southern and Canadian writing by offering close readings of three stories by Flannery O’Connor, Jack Hodgins and, finally, Leon Rooke. The latter’s fantastic, satiric rendition of the musings of a belated imperialist demonstrates both the effects of a decades-long intercultural dialogue between the two traditions but also marks the full flowering of contemporary Canadian literature.

Canadian novelist Rooke was in fact born in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, in a small mill town not far from the Virginia border, where his mother worked in one of the last mills in the South to defy unionization. Rooke’s struggle to shed those roots and become a writer not defined by narrow regionalisms led, after a few successes and even more setbacks (one of his stories was rejected 45 times before it won the O. Henry award), to an appointment as writer in residence at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. There, one of his colleagues was Tom McHaney, whose essay in this volume recalls Rooke’s early career before the momentous move to British Columbia. Reflecting on the ostensible orientation of Southern authors towards “place,” McHaney claims that Rooke’s versatile narrative art was, from the outset, based on “voice,” a category that defies locale and region and helps explain the eccentricity as well as the deliberate extravagance of Rooke’s characters.

If Rooke embraced his new Canadian home, the Mississippi-born Elizabeth Spencer viewed her twenty years in Montreal with considerably more ambivalence. Marcel Arbeit examines the hesitant use of Canadian themes in Spencer’s fiction, including her late novel *Night Travellers* (1991). He points out her continuing use of favorite motifs of the tradition of southern fiction and reflects on the recurrent solitude of female characters experiencing alienation in the affluent world of Montreal. Spencer’s exiled draft dodgers and political dissenters remind us of another aspect of the cultural traffic across the border, as does Nahem Yousaf’s look at Michael Ondaatje’s foray into the world of New Orleans jazz as exemplified by the cornetist Buddy Bolden, also known as “King Bolden,” whose band helped create what we know as “jazz” today. Ondaatje, in the absence of conclusive biographical

evidence or, for that matter, recordings, weaves an intertextual collage of tall tales and oral history, pervaded by a sense of the uncanny and the strange. In Bolden, a figure that would go on to stimulate other Canadian artists and writers, Ondaatje had found a model for the co-existence of creative and destructive forces inside the human mind.

In 1826, the famous epicure Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.” Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are. The final essay in this cluster, contributed by Caroline Rosenthal, offers a new take on this old saw. Tell me where you eat and I will help you become who you want to be. Comparing two novels set, respectively, in the Deep South and in British Columbia, Rosenthal shows how female characters learn to use traditional food practices as strategies to defend their individual identities against patriarchal violence. The novels illustrate how mutual support, be it in a café catering to the needs of a Southern community (Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café*, 1988) or in a kitchen on a farm in rural British Columbia (in Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, 1996), can help women develop their identities, subvert the prescribed gender roles, and endure even extremely painful, protracted challenges. Rosenthal’s essay also contrasts in the two texts the use of conventions of local color and of tall tales common in the Deep South with the transgressive narrative strategies associated with the tradition of magic realism that is a hallmark of writing on the Pacific Rim.

Last but not least, Laurie Ricou’s essay with its jocular search for traditions shared by the American South and Canada provides the unconventional coda for our volume. Framed as an attempt at understanding the *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel Psalm* (1997), a set of poems documenting the migration of African-Americans to Canada by the black Canadian writer Wayde Compton, Ricou’s essay meditates more generally on the global significance and reach of what once used to be southern music. But then Ricou goes on to anchor Compton’s transgeneric, border-crossing volume firmly not within North American or even Canadian culture as a whole but more specifically in a Vancouver pub, the Yale Hotel on Granville Street, where the author has gone to listen to a duo called Mud Dog (Christopher Allen and Steve Sainas) playing the blues: “As we get up to leave, we shout thank yous. And the guitarist calls us to more blues. ‘We’ll be back here October 1st and 2nd – with a full band.’” Surely, we have come a long way from amateur ornithologist Thomas McIlwraith of Hamilton, Ontario, lying awake in his bed at night in the 1880s, listening anxiously and enviously as flocks of geese – “Canadian” in name

only – honk as they pass over his house, hurrying to places southern and warm that Mr. McIlwraith can only dream about.

#### WORKS CITED

“Le Goncourt pour Pélagie.” CBC. 26 Nov. 1979.

McIlwraith, Thomas. *The Birds of Ontario, Being a Concise Account of Every Species of Bird Known to Have Been Found in Ontario, with a Description of Their Nests and Eggs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto: William Briggs, 1894.



# OUVERTURE



ARITHA VAN HERK

## My Love Affair with Shrevlin McCannon

*This ficto-critical story is a deliberately referential text responding to William Faulkner's epic novel Absalom, Absalom!, first published in 1936 and subsequently re-issued in many editions. I have taken up the story of Quentin Compson's Canadian roommate, Shrevlin McCannon, who listens to Quentin's story about Thomas Sutpen, and who amplifies and embellishes its details, even while he struggles to understand the "South" that haunts Quentin. Page references are to the Vintage International Edition of the novel, published in 1990.*

Shreve McCannon is a man who goes without gloves, who takes pride in walking the winter streets of Edmonton, Alberta, bare-knuckled. It is his way of declaring that he doesn't need to be prepared for the weather because it is *his* weather, and not some alien climate, which has caught him by surprise. He is intent on affirming that he belongs in this place, it is his home, has been for years, and no mystery to him. If he is asked whether his hands are not cold, he is prone to holding them up in front of himself and regarding them with surprise, as if they are a special implement that only he possesses. "Cold?" he says, with mock puzzlement, "not at all," despite what are decidedly blue knuckles, and as winter progresses, chilblains. They are an unusual symptom here, for this is a city that prides itself on a dry cold, easier to withstand than the bone-creeping humidity down east.

Shreve McCannon is, nevertheless, a man of mystery, a man about whom there is rumour and speculation, much whispering when he has passed. He still presents a round, cherubic face, a "moonlike rubicund face" (147), despite the dignity of his advancing age. It seems he is destined to look younger than he is, although he also manages to look agelessly crotchety, the province of those who have covered some milestone years, or perhaps a consequence of his round and rimless spectacles, which give his visage a shrewd and magnified mien. In fact, he is "one of those people whose correct age you never know because they look exactly that and so you tell yourself that he or she cannot possibly be that because he or she looks too exactly that not to take advantage of the appearance" (236), if you catch my meaning. People say he

harbours secrets, he has heard stories that should never be repeated. And because he is a generous talker, they attribute to him a peculiar notion of both time and combinant grammar. In their brusque Canadian way, in a place where articles are often dropped and even verbs deemed superfluous, they refer to him as a windbag. This in a city stormed along by its own wind and sun and ambition, governed by intense growth and wild weather. Oh, they speak tenderly enough, of course, there is deference in their summary of his vocal tendencies. But it has been a standing joke in our small city that at certain times of the year and definite hours of the day, he will stop an acquaintance on the High Level Bridge or Jasper Avenue and he will subject them to a length and flourish of rhetoric impossible to escape from.

“He gave me a five-hundred word sentence today,” a fellow physician will report.

“Lucky you,” a second will rejoinder. “I got at least eight hundred words last week, and I couldn’t figure out the beginning from the end of his observation. I tried to interrupt him, but there was no deflecting his spiel.”

The record, one wag has claimed, is no less than one thousand, three hundred and fifty-four words, a good half hour of stamping his overshoes in the snow-drifted street. “And one sentence, without taking a breath!” Their recounting of such McCannon rantings ring with cheerful tolerance, as if they triumphed in a contest of endurance. He has a long and convoluted way of talking, Shreve McCannon does, and once in a while, a slow defile creeps in, a circumlocution that works like digression or detour, but ends up turning back to the beginning, a complete circle. It is as if he were trying to cover his tracks. Another suspicion, for there are rumors that he is not really McCannon but MacKenzie and is operating under a subterfuge identity. But that too, in a city of fledgling dynasties, is not unusual. People come to this new west because they can change an inconvenient name, outrun bad debts or by-blow offspring.

He is fond of certain words, Dr. Shreve McCannon, words that do not ride well in Edmonton, Alberta. “Attenuation,” he will say, out of the blue, turning it over like a piece of shale in his hand. “Attenuation” (182). He has a way of enunciating avoidance, of naming elements of behaviour without ever mentioning them “by name, like when people talk about privation without mentioning the siege, about sickness without ever naming the epidemic” (186-187). “Prolixity,” he’ll mutter (190), “implacability” (200), “bombastic phrases” (194) yet pronounced in a forensically anecdotal manner, detached and interested at the same time. It does not do to get him started on legal and

moral sanctions and their intractable and unpredictable outcomes. He can bore you into another century with that, his mates exclaim.

In fact, I could tell them a thing or two. He was there when the “longest sentence in literature” (at least at that time – affirmed by the 1983 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records*) appeared, he was bystander to its clausal gulfs and summits. But as his confederates here are not entirely intimate with fiction, preferring their newspapers and their biographies, they have no notion of his once having been an ubervoyeur to a tale so full of watching and its watchings, so replete with refracted vigilance, so loud with sound and fury (that old pulpit line) that he was never the same. The force of his listening – and interrupting and magnifying and intervention – changed him utterly, more than the terrors he witnessed in France.

Shreve McCannon knows Edmonton better for having gone away, that period of time when he “went south” – his way of saying it – went south to get some education. More east than south, to one of the oldest and most prestigious schools in North America, but he does not add that. Shreve McCannon has a trace of modesty that he is immodestly proud of, although his certificate from Harvard Medical is framed on the wall. Only a few know enough to comment; Edmonton is an innocent city, too innocent of the cachet of Harvard to care as much as they should about its reputation. And Shreve McCannon is no family physician who thumps a knee or peers down a child’s raw throat. He trained as a surgeon, and as Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps performed the most gruesome operations at the French front. He practiced surgery here after returning, but he did not do well with patients; he told me once with quiet melancholy that he frightened them, exactly the opposite of what a doctor ought to do. Now he works as a pathologist, overseeing the bodies that require some summary of their expiry, some forensic interpretation. Each morning he walks to the University Hospital, which sits at the south end of the campus and is beginning to take itself more seriously every day. The Great War had that effect, and now it is a growing concern, although when it opened in 1906 – I was just a girl – it was staffed by no more than five physicians and nurses.

Dr. Shrevlin McCannon then, who lodges upstairs in the east room of my wide-veranda’d brick home, and who pays handsomely for his clean, well-aired room (the bedstead plain iron, covered by a dark-patched quilt), for laundry and breakfast and indifferent social contact, pulls on his bear-like overcoat more days than not (we are definitely a northerly city), and walks west, crossing 109th Street where the streetcars hover to dragonfly their way across the North Saskatchewan River to the Legislature and the city, walking

at his own lumberingly steady pace through the leafy streets around the university. He moves with a determined if hardly brisk gait – well, he is now almost sixty – then descends to the basement, bleak with tiles, of that same hospital, where he has an office and where he oversees a batch of underlings. There he looks through a microscope and writes reports on sclerotic or serotypical cells in a crabbed and enigmatic hand. He is a man of habit and routine, taking his breakfast of black coffee and steel-cut oats at exactly the same time every day. I do not have to prompt him to leave the envelope with his rent, or to have ready his sack of laundry for Monday mornings, but twice in the twenty years I have been his “landlady” (that slightly shabby term containing all the dismissive and yet resentful innuendos of tone and resistance that lodgers determinedly feel), twice I have had to remind him not to go out with his overcoat over his dressing gown. Both times he started, as if I had found him behaving not so much out of character as rudely, and both times he said, “It is a habit of my Harvard days, Rosa. We’d open the windows so that we could breathe, and it got so cold we’d wear our overcoats over top.”

“An unhealthy habit,” I remarked, and he merely grimaced, thinking me some leftover Temperance adherent. I suspect that he believes that I live a life “irrevocably excommunicated from all reality” (156), when in truth I am both hyper-aware of daily necessities, and required by my circumstances to be pragmatic. Nor am I some Coldfield Methodist. I like a taste of sherry in the lingering pale of autumn afternoons.

Dr. Shreve McCannon believes in the health benefits of cold. Each night before he goes to bed, he pulls the sash of the centre window in his east-facing room as high as it will go, so that it yawns wide, and he leans out of his window and he performs some ritual of respiration. I have not seen this, have not seen him “clench-fisted and naked to the waist” (176) drawing the air deep into his lungs, but I have heard those inhalations, vehement and fervent, when I laid a cautious ear against the door to his room. I have had occasion to ask him to ensure that he does not leave the window wide overnight, for fear of freezing the radiators solid, and he grunts and assures me that he will pay attention.

I have few complaints about Dr. Shreve McCannon as a lodger; he is a relatively simple care for me, and in truth is my economic mainstay. He smokes a pipe, he keeps a handful of them stem-up in a Chase and Sanborn can, but I am not bothered by the smell of tobacco. There are very few ways for a widow to earn her bread now that the men who survived have returned, and I have no desire to work as a telephonist or a saleswoman. I prefer my winter’s sewing circle and summer’s gardening club for social contact, and

having one boarder is enough for me. I suspect there is some talk, 1950 is not a particularly tolerant time, and I am a fifty year old widow with an unattached man living under my roof. But there are so few places to rent in this booming city that many houses board and lodge single fellows or girls. More precisely, though, and this has been true of him all his life, from every story that I have heard since he came back to Edmonton from having been south, from having been to France, from having chased a few ghosts around the world, Shreve McCannon is adamantly uninterested in women, provokingly oblivious to any feminine element at all. Some of my friends have inquired, delicately enough, if he would like to be invited for an evening of cold chicken supper and singing around the piano, and I laugh and tell them that he is a Harvard man, and they have been inoculated against women.

He roomed there with a boy called Quentin, Quentin Compson.

"What a peculiar name," I said. "What is its origin?"

"Torment and guilt," he said grimly, "out of the South. Better than the theatre. Better than Ben Hur" (176), which drew me up short, and left me open-mouthed for a second.

"I am sorry," he said gruffly. "I mis-spoke." It was then I understood that at Harvard he learned to pick fights and bring them to a finish, he discovered how the mere lift of an eyebrow can provoke implacable violence. And I found, dusting the books in his room one day, a photograph sticking out from the pages of a medical textbook, a very odd photograph of what appeared to be a plaque stuck in a small alcove and reading,

"QUENTIN COMPSON  
Drowned in the odour of honeysuckle.  
1891-1910"

I did not dare to ask him about that strange summary.

Another time he told me that they put the odd ducks together deliberately, in the student dorm, the blue-bloods (and not so much a question of blood but of money, that royal imprimatur) of the republic to the south of us disingenuously aware of the need to segregate the rich and the predestined from the eccentric and regional and foreign, which he and Quentin were – at least provincial and foreign, and so identifiably eccentric. And then he said that he and Quentin were a good debating team, the two of them questioning one another long into the night, and competing in their elaborate constructions, always "something curious in the way they looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent" (240). "I miss him still," he said, his eyes not quite moist behind those glittering spectacles, but suspiciously bright.

I am thrifty with my questions. Although I know Shreve McCannon walks around with a sackful of stories as intricate as the glass whorls of marbles, I am mindful of being too curious, of “snooping.” That was his one stipulation when he came to view the room. He snuffled around it like an old bear, pacing from the door to the bed and back. It is a large room, almost the size of two, with space for a settee and easy chair distinct from the bed and dresser area, and lined with three large windows that look, as I have said east, and over my back garden, where I grow what will grow here: sour cherries and raspberry canes and rhubarb, rutabaga and potatoes and broad beans.

He was sucking on the stem of his pipe, although it was unlit, and I realized, with that sudden proficient comprehension that comes if you stay quiet and wait, that he was nervous and fearful. Of what I could not tell, although now I will hazard that he was and is afraid to live alone in an apartment or a house, that he needs to hear some stirring, even if only the mouse of a landlady below him.

But he concealed that well, turning around the room as if to test the length of his own strides on the wide boards of the floor. “Excellent,” he said, “excellent. And the sunrise will be my clock. Are there church bells within hearing distance?”

“If it’s quiet you can hear Knox Metropolitan, but they ring only for weddings and funerals, not on the hour.”

“Hmm, unfortunate.” But he hesitated, and his pale red hands met one another, as if to claim kinship or test their own texture. He wheeled and faced me directly, and said brusquely, “I’ll take the room, but let’s be very clear about my requirements as a boarder.”

“Yes? Breakfast and dinner, linens and towels. Personal laundry extra.” I was new to the business, nervous too, with my husband not long dead, and my needing to pay the taxes and the utilities and my worrying that the weekly rate I’d quoted him was rather high.

“No snooping.”

I almost laughed, had to fight to prevent myself from raising a hand to my mouth to hide my smile. I did not want to reveal to this potential meal ticket my “affinity for brigandage” (61). In fact, I hoped that my “very simplicity” (61) would fool him enough to persuade him that here was a harbour of sorts, a place where he could anchor. We stared at one another across the stretch of gleaming hardwood floor, and recognized, “in a sort of hushed and naked searching” (240) that here was a potential match: we both resisted interference, over-interest, too much attentiveness. In fact, and this has borne itself

out over the years, we are similar not-virgins of the remote and suspicious kind, folk who would rather not be forced into intimacies.

And so, Shrevlin McCannon with his lengthy sentences and his bright distracted attention and his habit of interrupting and his ratty well-worn bathrobe (which I have been instructed not to touch) moved into my upper east room. We tolerate each other well enough, perhaps because we are not kin, and we have no contract. We practice a mutual *détente* that keeps us honest. Some days we say nothing at all to one another, and the silence is not accusatory or thick, but simply silence, his spoon steady in the thick sludge of his oats when I push through the double door with a fresh pot of coffee. Some days there are pleasantries about the weather, usually when the temperature stiffens and we meet the rhythm of winter in a northern city, hanging frost and bone-biting embrace and bright exhilaration. We both feel it and are quietly ensorcelled by our arctic precincts, the stir of living in a cold climate. And oh so rarely, never deliberately, we wander onto a plantation of strange, driven creatures who live according to an entirely different incentive. While one could relegate that experience to the war, in truth it reeks of magnolia and honeysuckle, a lush swampy redolence that Shreve McCannon seems to know far too well, more than he ought, given that he is definitely a Canadian and definitely not a man who comes from the hills or the savannah or the levees of Mississippi.

I do not say to Shreve McCannon, "*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*" (142). I am from central Alberta, south of Edmonton, the Battle River valley and the parkland, gently agrarian and not at all corrupt and ambitious and intent on creating and living and destroying according to some terrible predestined design. No architect set foot in that country of square-frame houses and hip-roofed barns, buildings flung together for functionality, neighbours exactly one mile in the surveyed square-section-grid away. And, like Shreve, I have never smelled "jasmine, spiraea, honeysuckle, perhaps myriad scentless unpickable Cherokee roses" (236). I know only the subtle prickliness of the wild roses that crowd our fence-lines, the scent of lilac shelter-belts as close to intense as can be found here in this sere, cold landscape.

"Were they curious about Canada?" I asked him once, daring to "snoop," and by "they" meaning the Harvard yard men, the southerners with their groves of gothic oak and their marble headstones and their genealogies of old planter families in straw hats and white suits, women stemmed under umbrellas and driving behind graceful horses, those characters below the 49th parallel, angry with themselves and with the world they occupy, always

it seems in some extremity of despair or rot or extirpation and so endlessly fascinating to we cautious Presbyterian-Canadians.

Uncharacteristically, he gave me a longer answer than usual. "They didn't even bother asking about the north, didn't say, 'Tell about the North. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there.' The south was sufficiently scandalous to kindle their interest, but the north? Edmonton, Canada? Their eyes glazed over. It is because we are too pale and subtle, because we have taken on the protective coloration of our own weather, we have bleached out so we 'wont show up so sharp against the snow' (302). Do we track men with dogs here? Not often, nor do we track men with men, although we have used aboriginal people to do our tracking. But we ride behind our dogs and water our whiskey and we hunt less and we do not experience the same quality of night. We are too far North."

That was a mouthful, and difficult to sort, although I think he was talking about innocence, whatever that is, whatever euphemism for credulity it hides, whatever blameless irreproachability it claims. The point about innocence, and this is tricky, is that the innocent don't "even know that [they are] innocent" (185). I understand this riddle: if you are innocent, you can't know the impediment of what you don't know you don't know. In this innocent city, so bright-eyed that it barely adjusts to the sharp horizon, more laundry line than city, more bush garden than street should ever be, this city so new and fresh that it tempts the Shrevlin McCannons of the world to take refuge, bury their dark listenings, and hunker down away from the quest for design that will surely emerge here too, lurks just as certainly (under the surface of whatever we call Canada) as it does in the hot, wet, civil war and slavery-bound south, the inevitable incoming verge of corruption. Man's wagon full of slaves which signal division and prejudice and racism and intolerance will inevitably arrive.

"He was always cold," he said once, on a crisp September day when the leaves were starting to show colour, and I knew I would have to cover my tomatoes that night. And then he seemed almost to forget where he was, his rubicund face gone into a breathless wide-angle of memory, his voice into rant. "I told him, 'if I was going to have to spend nine months in this climate [I meant the climate of Massachusetts, not Canada at that time, I couldn't even begin to explain to him the climate of Canada], I would sure hate to have come from the South. Maybe I wouldn't come from the South anyway, even if I could stay there [you see I was trying to explain to him about where you come from being where you come from, but he came from a different place than I do, and while he couldn't go back there, I could and did come