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The Subject and the Nation: Canadian and Israeli Women's Autobiographical Writing

One of the things forever imprinted on my mind from my Israeli military service is the division into three parts which seemed to be the governing logic of everything in basic training, from Uzis, to meal times, to weekends off. When I arrived at McGill in the mid-seventies I was excited to find out about the work of French structuralists like Greimas and Barthes, but also slightly amused by their differently inflected numerical obsession with binary permutations. It should have come as no surprise to me, then, to discover, as I did when putting the finishing touches to this paper, that I had opened the paper with the dialogic binary of subject and nation, and then proceeded with a three-part interrogation. I have now subtitled these parts: Takeoff; In the Air; and Touchdown. Any possible connection between these subtitles and the irresistible allure of military pilots should be attributed to the re-surfacing — no doubt triggered by all those army memories — of the not-so-unconscious fantasy life of an eighteen-year-old Israeli female circa 1970.

Takeoff

Before I take off, I would like to offer two short epigraphs; and as I do so it occurs to me that one could think of epigraphs as the agnostic scholar's version of the traveler's prayer, or as we say in Hebrew, *tefillat haderech*. The first is from an essay by Yael Feldman on contemporary

Hebrew fictional autobiographies. Discussing the inhibiting effects of a communal national project on the formation of individual identities, Feldman writes “[t]o begin with, Israeli literature is still struggling to mean ‘I,’ even when it says *ani*” (Smith, 1988: 193–194).¹ The second is from an essay by Pierre Hébert on the evolution of personal writing in Quebec. Hébert identifies three stages in this evolution, which correspond, in his view, to the historical experiences of colonization, resistance, and emancipation. Thus an initial valorization (necessary for survival) of collective identity over individual identity is followed by a transitional phase, in which emergent voices experience themselves as alienated and cut off from the collectivity, leading, in the final phase, to a truly emancipated form of writing which allows for the integration of the personal and the collective. In this final stage the “I” becomes fully liberated, a subject who can claim both a personal and a collective identity, affirming: “j’existe, donc nous sommes” (37) (I am, therefore we are).

These epigraphs launch me into the theoretical space that frames my essay. Entering this space is a rather daunting undertaking, for on “[r]eading personal narratives we find ourselves immersed in complex issues of representation, ideology, history, identity and politics as they bear on subjectivity” (Smith, 1993: 393).

In thinking of the subject I retain a modified understanding of the individual subject as pre-appointed or interpellated by what Althusser calls “ideological configurations” (165), yet capable of acceding to agency (Smith, 1988: 17) and engaging in oppositional politics (Felski 55). Ideological configurations (gender ideology, for example) are thus experienced by the subject as both “*lived constructions*, . . . operat[ing] intimately and institutionally,” and “*nonlived* (impeding, deforming) *obstructions*” (Gilmore 10). Such an understanding of subjectivity recognizes that while the activities of human beings are grounded and constrained, the determinants of such activities are multiple and often contradictory, and cannot be reduced to a single, overriding explanatory cause. Moreover, individuals are not only subjects of dominant

1 *Ani* is the Hebrew word for the first-person pronoun “I.”

signifying structures, they are also participatory agents in institutions and discourses of powers, and thus potentially capable of mediating, contesting, and transforming those systems (Gagnier 10–11). Narratives — including autobiographical narratives — are instrumental in such struggles, for if ideological interpellations happen through “*representations* by which we construct and accept values and institutions” (DuPlessis x; emphasis added), these interpellations can also be critiqued and resisted through the same narrative medium. If “what’s taught is what’s known,” to cite the Canadian bad girl of country music, k.d. lang, then one could also un-learn and teach oneself differently; as Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts it, “one of the major powers of the muted is to think against the current” (196). Resistance, we have learnt from Foucault, often takes the form *not* of discovering what we (really) are, but rather refusing what we are (presumed to be), so that we can imagine and promote “new forms of subjectivity” (216).

How then do we understand the relationship between the subject, conceived as a “site of excessive and oppositional solicitations and markings” (Gilmore 20), and the collectivity of which we are members? A number of interesting observations emerge from the work of Québécois scholars whose interest in personal narratives has led them to articulate the dynamic interplay between subjectivity and ideology more specifically in terms of the ties that bind individuals to their (national) collectivity. Yvan Lamonde, in the introduction to his bibliographic study of personal narratives in Quebec entitled *Je Me Souviens: La littérature personnelle au Québec 1860–1980*, and Françoise Van Roey-Roux, in *La littérature intime du Québec* speak of personal narratives as vehicles of individual and national self-definition. Personal writings place in the foreground the function of memory as a bridge between self and other, and show the relationship between personal history and collective experience to be closely interrelated. On the one hand, an important means by which a collectivity can claim a distinct character for itself — be it religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, or gender specific — is to mobilize and appropriate the life histories of its members. These individual life narratives become cherished repositories of the collectivity’s past and present experience, icons and proofs of its separate, unique, and

continuous identity. The other side of the autobiographical coin, of course, is that these same categories of group affiliation function as necessary identity boundaries within and against which individual consciousness is constructed and developed.

While the above account presupposes a happy congruence of self and community, many of the autobiographies that form the basis of the present study tell of subjects who experience the social structure — the family, the nation, social class and gender — as alienating and oppressive.² These autobiographers experience “nonreciprocity and . . . nonmirroring” (Gilmore 5) in their relations with their communities of origin, and sometimes even within their communities of choice. These disjunctures, and more specifically the emergence of agency at the point of such contradictions, are my primary interest here. However, subjects experience both disjuncture and conjuncture, and their resistance to relations of domination should be seen in the context of their conformity and complicity with them (Mahoney and Yngvesson 70–71).

What do Canadian and Israeli women’s autobiographical narratives have to teach us about the subject and the nation? I am reluctant to make generalizations about these bodies of writing, partly because the deconstructive-feminist critic in me keeps seeing the differences within: within a single work, within a national corpus. Rather, I have turned to the writings of women within whose national spaces I have spent my life — in exactly equal measures — in order to explore some modalities of being and belonging.

Let us start with the two Susannas, Moodie’s and Atwood’s. In her 1970 long poem *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood adopts, adapts, and celebrates the figure of her nineteenth-century national and literary foremother, creating in the process a sort of fictional autobiography. Its subject is the quintessential Canadian subject as

2 This essay is part of my ongoing work on discourses of subjectivity in women’s writing, in particular Québécois and Canadian women’s life writing. Over the years, support for this research has come from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Concordia University Faculty Development Research Grants.

epitomized by the many selves of Susanna Moodie. The poems in Journals I, II, and III are framed by a dialogue about subjectivity and national identity, into which we are invited by Atwood's initial and final discursive gestures: the untitled prologue-poem, and the afterword. The afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* contains what have since become some of the most familiar statements about the Canadian national character. This vision of Canada has been re-affirmed by many people, and is well documented in Linda Hutcheon's recent monograph *As Canadian as...possible...under the circumstances!* Atwood's afterword underscores *difference* as the quintessential marker of Canadian identity; and this is as much a difference from an other — from Britain, the United States — as it is a difference within:

If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia. Mrs. Moodie is divided down the middle....She claims to be an ardent Canadian patriot while all the time she is standing back from the country and criticizing it as though she were a detached observer, a stranger. Perhaps that is the way we still live. We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen — it is so easy to leave — and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality. (62)

Atwood's observations about the *collective* Canadian national character as exemplified by Moodie are symmetrically counterbalanced by a prologue-poem about the nature of *individual* identity:

I take this picture of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,
every-
thing appears. (n.p.)

The dialogic exchange between the prologue-poem and the afterword suggests that identity, whether individual or collective, is like two-way discursive traffic. Coming in, what one sees of the world has always already passed through one's eyes — the lenses of personal and collective history as inflected by familial dynamics, education, the experiences of class, gender, ethnic and religious identity. On the way out, one recognizes that where one was, "everything" (other than oneself) appears. Commenting on this subjectification of history in *The Journals*, Smaro Kamboureli relates it more generally to the long poem's use of the quest as a metonymy of desire. Such desire "is born out of lack, out of absence," a desire which seeks to recuperate a lost past in the form of a "desired (desirable) future" (Kamboureli 57). I would like to suggest that this condition — a shuttling back and forth between a lost past and an as-yet-unattained future — is as much Moodie's as that of her twentieth-century incarnation; and that it aptly describes a certain modality of being a subject of the nation.

In *Roughing It in the Bush*, the present, for Moodie, is a state of acute awareness, brought about by the defamiliarizing effect of cultural displacement, signifying the existence of an available repertoire of *identity markers*: the markers of national identity (one could be British, Canadian, Yankee), of gender identity, of class. Yet in Moodie's present, the markers have become empty signs: the reality of the bush, for example, gives the lie to notions of gentility and femininity that had formed the bedrock of her identity. This experience of subjectivity as both absence and plenitude also characterizes Moodie the national subject. In Moodie's colonial *imaginaire* she is a motherless child separated from her mother-country but she is also a childless mother, as her own children have embraced another mother, another country. For Moodie, the space of national identity is an abyss straddling the distance between an absent imperial center, the lost "beloved home of my childhood and youth" (61), and the colony, to which, as a daughter of empire, she cannot properly belong. Her claim to Canada can only be one of ownership, never of kinship. Moodie fights back the threat of self-annihilation by constructing a hybrid identity, and by drawing on a relational model of the self. Appealing to "British mothers of Canadian sons," Moodie invokes a collectivity that will give her a

sense of identity: “[m]ake your children proud of the land of their birth...do this and you will soon cease to lament your separation from the mother country” (20). This passage from the chapter entitled “Quebec” can be read as an act of self-interpellation which demonstrates the flip side of Pierre Hébert’s formulation: not “I am, therefore we are,” but “you [British mothers of Canadian sons] are, therefore I am.”

In the Air, or The Dream

Two moments frame this section too. Fanya, the protagonist of the historical novel *Gei Oni* by Israeli woman writer Shulamit Lapid laments: “Once again fate has decreed that she realized others’ dreams. Has she ever had her own dreams?” (in Feldman 1991: 293), to which critic Yael Feldman addresses the question: “Is this a ‘feminist’ protest, lamenting the lot of women in general? Or is this a specific charge against the androcentric Zionist dream?” (1991: 293). The second moment is from the last chapter of Laura Goodman Salverson’s 1939 autobiography *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter*, the chapter entitled “So dreams come true.” At the conclusion of what K. P. Stich has described as “a rare first-person account of growing up Icelandic in the New World, of the agonies and joys which shape the process of discovering one’s identity as a woman and as a Canadian” (v–vi), Salverson writes: “[m]y mind was too full of jumbled memories.... I was hearing kind old Miss Rudd: ‘Laura, whatever happens, never lose your sense of the beautiful. Never let yourself dream little dreams!’ God bless her... I have seen the fulfillment of a dream” (413).

Of what stuff are the dreams of women made and what happens when they try to fulfill them?

I belong to the first generation of Israelis born since Independence. Growing up, our sense of our recent collective history was captured by two one-sentence narratives. One was an exhortation by Herzl, the visionary of the Jewish state, who said: “*im tirzu ein zo agada*” (if you really want it [the Jewish State], it needn’t be a fairy tale). The other was the rallying cry of the settlement era, in the words of the popular song: “we came to the land of Israel to build and be rebuilt in her.”

Does it make any difference, though, if the dreamer, the nation-builder, is a woman? At the risk of anticipating myself I'd like to suggest that, for women, the problem is not so much that fairy tales rarely come true; it is rather that when they do, *perhaps only then*, do we realize how cruelly they have lied.

By far, the largest number of Hebrew autobiographies I have been able to locate are by pioneer women (*halutzot* in Hebrew) who came to Israel in the first decades of this century, as part of three waves of immigration known as the Second, Third, and Fourth *Aliyah*.³ One of these women autobiographers is Tehiya Liberson, who was born in Latvia in 1886, and came to Israel — to Petach Tikva, the first Jewish *moshava*⁴ (and my home town) — in 1906. Liberson's autobiography, *Pirkey Hayim* (Chapters from a Lifetime) reveals a life lived and understood, from an early age, as coterminous with the national ideal. Liberson writes at the opening of her autobiography that ever since her *aliyah*, she has celebrated the anniversary of the State of Israel as if it were her own birthday, although she was born nineteen years earlier (9). Liberson explains this discrepancy:

Why do I celebrate my birthday on the first day of Chanuka? For the simple reason that on that day I went to work the fields of Petach Tikva, the mother of all *moshavot*... [I] saw my greatest dream come true, to stand on and work with my own hands the soil of my native land [*moledet*]; there isn't a day more deserving to be called my birthday, and it is from that day that I count my days on this earth. It's also simpler that way. (9–10)⁵

- 3 A highly valorized term, with connotations of ascendancy, even transcendence, and pilgrimage, *aliyah* refers to the return to the land of Israel. For a useful study of women in pre-state Israel see Bernstein.
- 4 *Moshava* (*moshavot* in the plural) is one of a number of innovative, cooperative forms of settlement, which also include the *kibbutz* and the *moshav*.
- 5 The translations from the Hebrew throughout the paper are mine. For a similar sense of a radical new beginning for the self see Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat* and Alice French's *The Restless Nomad*: "In school I was Alice, an Inuit girl being educated. Now, going down the steps with my father, I felt like one who had been lost, having been so long away from home, going back to a way of life I had almost forgotten. My name is Masak" (1).

The opening concludes: “we, people of the Second *Aliyah*, are of a strong and healthy stock” (9).

The use of the first person plural here carries weight. The initial self-presentation thus offers a collective self-portrait like many autobiographies by women of that generation. Individual identity is valorized and confirmed through identification with the national project. These autobiographies have, in turn, been used by contemporary commentators who draw on the individual life stories to create a heroic national saga. Many of the books in this group are published with editorial prefaces which celebrate individual lives as exemplary and representative. In the foreword to Liberson’s autobiography Zakai notes:

The manner of her *aliyah* and her life here, the hardships, displacements and illnesses she suffered, her failures and triumphs, these are the experiences of a whole generation, the generation of the first Hebrew workers, of the new Hebrew settlements. From her story emerges the story of a whole generation. Even with the particularities of her life, marked by her unique nature and temperament, her life story is still the story of her people. (4)

In the autobiographies of women pioneers, a perfect congruence suggests itself, a seamless interweaving of three narrative strands: the national narrative of rebuilding, the women’s personal narratives of past struggles and triumphs, and the contemporary commentary (editorial or autobiographical) constructing a national past for a state which, in the present, is still struggling for legitimacy and survival.⁶ An illustrative case is *Banativ Shehalachti* (The Path I Took), the autobiography of Jocheved Bat-Rachel (Tarshish), who came to Israel

6 One might indeed argue, with Foucault or Mouré, that narratives of the past, whether collective or personal, are always (already) constructed from the point of view of the present, and inflected by present investments/interests: “Memory is what makes the past present in *the present*” (Mouré in Williamson 220). In this, autobiography and national historiography share a common impulse: “the autobiographer’s narrative . . . reveals more about the autobiographer’s present experience of ‘self’ than about her past. . . . Fundamentally, it reveals the way the autobiographer situates herself and her story in relation to cultural ideologies and figures of selfhood” (Smith 1987: 47).

from Russia in 1921, worked the fields in Petach Tikva and the Galilee, and in time became active in various labour organizations, in social activism on behalf of women workers, and in rescuing Jewish youth from Nazi Germany and pre-war Europe. Bat-Rachel prefaces her autobiography, published in 1981, with a short statement explaining that the only reason for such a public display of a private life is the exemplary collective character of that life; she concludes: "In these pages you will find the spirit of a whole generation, a generation that searched a way and braved many trials" (preface). Another example is a volume of writings by and about another Second *Aliyah* pioneer, Chuma Chayot (born 1897, died 1961), whose editor ends his introduction with the inscription on Chayot's tombstone: "a friend to mankind and the movement/ overflowing with wisdom and loving kindness/ her life — the kibbutz" (8).

The tombstone might read "her life — the kibbutz," but Chayot's autobiography tells a different story. The kibbutzim indeed greatly benefited from the labour and dedication of women like Chayot, but they were certainly not treated as equals by their male counterparts. Their life stories often demonstrate the problematic fit between the fulfillment of the national ideal and their own self-actualization. As Bernstein observes, "[w]omen [of the Settlement or *Yishuv* era] have either been ignored, or put on a 'pioneering pedestal,' where they became the subject of a myth. Accordingly, the *Halutzot*, or pioneering women, worked and struggled hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, with their male comrades. In neither case were the women's own voices heard" (1–2). Their stories also clearly emphasize that this tear in the multi-colored fabric of the national dream is the work of gender ideology.

Tehiya Liberson articulates the visionary commitment of a whole generation when she writes of a meeting with a group of recent immigrants: "I told them that I came here out of my heart's desire to build this nation and be rebuilt in her. I consider working the land a high and sacred calling.... Our goal is to consolidate the foundations of the nation, [and] make Hebrew our living language" (108). Liberson certainly helped build the national home, but was she allowed to be rebuilt in it? She reflects on a critical period of ten years during which

she tried to make a life for herself as a single woman on a *moshav*:

After ten years of struggle I had to acknowledge defeat — I experienced many disappointments, but I never gave up. The two don't always go hand in hand: individual happiness and the fulfillment of the dream of the nation. (5)

The vision of national reconstruction — the dream of settlement, of “conquering labor,” of cooperative living — is the guiding force in Liberson’s life. As she seeks to make it her own, however, she encounters the insidious effects of a patriarchal gender ideology. Even before she migrates she encounters opposition to the idea of an unattached woman joining a settlement (24). Once in the land of Israel, she decides not to take up a properly feminine occupation like sewing, but to try to fulfill her dream of becoming a farm laborer (39); for “working the land is the sole reason for our *aliyah*; only through work will we be able to rebuild the nation and see it reborn” (Gordon as quoted in Liberson 44). But as a woman working the land alone, she meets with hostility and rejection not only from religious Jews, who consider her actions an abomination, but also from secular farmers (39). Disappointed yet determined, Liberson turns to cooperative living as her last chance to realize her dream. At this point the autobiography reveals a split subject: in her public writing Liberson endorses the couple as the basic unit of settlement life (80); in her own life, she remains unmarried and, privately, she writes: “my independence was always the most important thing to me” (84).⁷ She moves from one collective to another, but always as an “adjunct” member: not subject to the authority of the central council, but in all other respects sharing the rights and responsibilities of the community. Although life and work conditions are hard, malaria always a fatal threat, Liberson’s greatest difficulty is in gaining acceptance as a single woman. With

7 Although Liberson never discusses her reasons for remaining unmarried, they might be related to what Dvora Dayan describes as the oppressive climate of the “patriarchal construct”: “The father wields absolute power. The wife and mother assume many responsibilities, but have few rights. Their voices are never heard, their views deemed of little value” (197).

time, the pressures on her only escalate. She is taxed at the same rate as families with two or more workers, she is made a social outcast, and is continuously told that unless she brings a husband to the farm she will have to forfeit the land (126).⁸

Liberson's personal trials motivate her to militate for women's rights: she criticizes a double standard that encourages men to aspire to the ideals of an emergent nationhood, but she relegates women to the communal kitchen and nursery (98–99), and demands women's full participation in the governance of the *moshav*. Liberson's actions bring upon her more scorn and rejection, she has few supporters even among the women — a notable exception is Dvorah Dayan (132) — and finds herself contemplating suicide (130).⁹

The story that started with a celebration — of a birthday, of a national dream and the generation that made it come true — ends on a rather different note. When Liberson falls ill, nobody in the cooperative settlement offers to help. Coming back from a hospital stay, she finds her farm so devastated that she has no choice but to sell it. Her dream in ruins, she writes: “something inside me, my very being, was shattered. There was no longer any purpose to my life... I saw no other way out but to drown myself in the sea” (137–138). Nobody tries to dissuade her from leaving, and the collective finally agrees to buy her land for eighteen *liras*. A short time later, Liberson finds out that the collective had sold her farm for three hundred *liras*, a very large sum in 1932 (138). To add insult to injury, somebody starts a rumor that she had received five hundred(!) *liras* for the farm. In reality, she finds herself homeless and jobless in Jerusalem, and finally through the kind services of David Ben-Gurion finds employment in the Tnuva dairy factory. The autobiography's poignant concluding words are written with painful restraint; they speak of a reality as far removed from the original dream as is the dairy factory from the open fields:

- 8 Liberson's experience recalls Georgina Binnie-Clark's campaigns for the rights of women farmers (see Buss's groundbreaking study 119).
- 9 As a number of contributors to *Pioneers and Homemakers* note, however, “suicide was not a rare phenomenon” among the young people, both male and female, of the Second and Third *Aliyah* (Govrin 174).

Working the machines in Tnuva did not come easily after twenty seven years of farming, but one gets used to anything, and I got used to it. . . . For twenty years I fulfilled my duty, in times of peace and in times of war. Until the day of my retirement. . . . fifty years after my *aliyah*. (144)

Inspired by the collective national dream, initially empowered by it to fashion a different life for herself, Liberson is ultimately betrayed and defeated by this same collectivity. Her personal fate, as recorded in her autobiography, stands in marked contrast to the gains of a collectivity that has appropriated her life for its chronicles of national struggle and triumph. The contemporary commentator writes: “the fruits of her struggle have helped build the very foundations of Israeli society” (5).

The autobiographies of women like Liberson and Chayot demonstrate their problematic positioning, *as women*, within the national project. Yet while these personal narratives expose the ways in which one collective project betrayed its women members, they also testify to the enabling and empowering effect of another collective identity, an identity grounded in the commonality of gender-specific experiences. Dvora Dayan writes of the Women Workers’ Movement in a section of her autobiography entitled “The Woman’s Part”: “what united us transcended any formal organization: it was a commitment to the cause of women, of mothers. Even during the most heated debates, we felt firmly rooted in that common ground” (88). In these narratives the autobiographers often describe in detail the way a socialist pioneering movement failed its women members, perpetuating patriarchal labour relations and domestic arrangements, and blocking attempts by individual women and women’s organizations to bring about change:

Indeed, there will always be the demands of the family, the realities of pregnancy, birth, and nursing — factors which inhibit women’s participation in the labour force. But changes in life style, such as the kibbutz communal nursery, will enable women to work outside the home while ensuring proper child care — these are the issues we have to explore. (Chayot 227)

Addressing a meeting of the Women Workers' Movement, Chayot endorses the broader socialist and national project, but speaks out against the obstacles put in women's way: in the cooperative agricultural settlements women have been pushed aside by their male counterparts, their work devalued; in the cities they become workers' wives, and as wives, mothers, or domestic workers are imprisoned within the four walls of the home, cut off from the life of society and the greater social vision.¹⁰ The pressing issue has become, Chayot writes, how to support the pioneer woman in her struggle for basic values: for economic independence, pay equity, more training and education, and daycare which will allow mothers to work outside the home. She calls for a truly communal way of life, where responsibilities for such basic needs as education and food will be shared (222–223), for raised public awareness, and emphasizes the need to support both the national labor movement and an organization of women workers (228).

Yet even as this gendered collective identity is affirmed, the autobiographies also provide ample evidence of the differences that separate women. There are the differences that pit married women against single women, demonstrated in the former's opposition to the principle of proportional female representation on settlement councils; there are the differences that pit Israeli and Palestinian women against one another, as Ruth Dayan's autobiography documents; there are the differences that turn meetings of the International Women's Federation into battlegrounds, as Chuma Chayot recounts. Women do not necessarily support other women in their fight for self-determination; their own convictions regarding gender and familial ideologies, religious convictions, or conflicting national interests, often stand in the way of such solidarity.

Where, then, should we look for hope?

Perhaps in Salverson's credo, handed down to her by the devoted

10 Dvora Dayan captures this sense of outrage, when she reflects on the symbolism of an inscription in a work log from the early days of the *Yishuv*: "'Kitchen: Sarah.' ... We rebelled against the weight of this tradition, refused to be trapped in it ... and when asked about the work we wanted to do, answered: 'anything but the kitchen'" (89).

schoolmistress, kind old Miss Rudd: "Laura. . . . Never let yourself dream little dreams!" Salverson, who spoke up against "the cruel subjection of women,"¹¹ saw her dream of writing and "justify[ing] her race" (414), as she put it, come true. What of bigger dreams, then?

Touchdown, or of Bigger Dreams

To speak of woman as subject of the nation and subject of her own life-narrative, might appear an impossible undertaking. After all, Virginia Woolf already explained in 1938 that it would be rightful for the disenfranchised to reject any affiliation with a national body that has oppressed and rejected them.

More recently, Shoshana Felman has reminded us of the impossibility of writing a woman's life:

I will suggest that *none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*. Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us. (14)

It may be, however, that women's autobiographies demonstrate not so much the impossibility of such projects, as the need to rethink and refigure them.¹²

My daily newspaper ran a feature a few weeks ago which reported that Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi had asked the Commons committee on citizenship and immigration to hold public hearings to redraw Canada's Citizenship Act so that it will

11 "They are the slaves, every one of them, slaves of convention, of religion, of the house — slaves in their mentality. Even the modern woman, who thinks herself free, has only exchanged the bondage to one man, to make herself the slave of many" (Salverson 378).

12 An interest in rethinking and refiguring "the nation" seems to characterize much contemporary Anglo-Canadian writing. Davey looks at constructions of "Canada" and "Canadians" in selected novels from this period, to see whether "nation" is a significant sign within the humanity imagined by the authors.

“evoke a feeling of national pride and belonging in society.” The Minister was also reported as saying: “there’s a great appetite among Canadians to talk about what bonds us as Canadians. We detect that Canadians want to be a little more aggressively pro-Canadian and have symbols that define them” (Marchi quoted by Wills).

Marlene Nourbese Philip, a Caribbean Canadian writer and activist, might have just what the Minister ordered: a new symbol of “be/longing.” Reflecting on her predicament as a “differently colored” holder of a Canadian passport, Nourbese Philip writes: “that is, in fact what we are speaking about — how to belong — not only in the legal and civic sense of carrying a Canadian passport, but also in another sense of feeling at ‘home’ and at ease. It is only in belonging that we will eventually become Canadian” (16). Belonging is problematic for Nourbese Philip, who finds herself in a “strange land” (22) which continues to see her as alien, a land whose history of empire and colonization she cannot forget. She finds herself arguing out of “both sides of [her] mouth” (20), on the one hand, protesting that Africans are not accepted by the dominant culture, and on the other, reminding herself and us of the real meaning of assimilation: forgetting that “what we now appear to share — education, religion, dress, legal institutions — are really tombstones erected on the graves of African customs, culture and language” (19). The belonging of such a subject, then, is a split consciousness marked by the slash in “be/longing.” The antidote to this splitting, to this othering, is *m/othering*; Nourbese Philip explains why it is so important “to keep the slash — in *all* its negative connotations — in *m/othering*”; the national home — the mother country — is where one remembers one’s difference and owns up to one’s implication in the othering of others: “this land...with the exception of the Native people, is a strange land for us all” (24–25).

Subjectivity and national identity; being and belonging; in Hebrew, *zehut* and *hizdahut*. Be/longing — to adopt Nourbese Philip’s formulation — is about longing to be, longing to belong so that one can/will be. Both the English and the Hebrew words for identity suggest narratives which ground identity not only in longing and desire but, more specifically, in the desire for the selfsame (in Hebrew *zehut* and *zehe*). Paradoxically, to have an identity is to be like others; and to

recognize those others is to come to know oneself. But, by the same token, to have an identity is to be like *some* others and not like some *other* others, whose exclusion is the price paid for self-recognition. As Iris Marion Young has observed, “[t]he ideal of community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other” (Williamson, xvii). In the language of political theory, nationalism — as identity politics — is, in its crudest form, “a rationalization of the desire to exercise political power” (Kedourie in Maclulich 26); at best, to paraphrase Gellner, it provides “the most convenient rationale for the organization of humanity into large, centrally governed, culturally homogeneous, and preferably unilingual political units” within which, for example, industrialism can most successfully flourish (in Maclulich 27).

The nation, then, shows different faces to differently positioned subjects; “alongside the apparent universality of the nation... what we find, in fact, are striking images of singularity” (Probyn 62). When Lilly Harris (an aboriginal woman who, together with other Tobique women, successfully fought to pass Bill C-31 eliminating sexual discrimination from the Indian act) constructs her life narrative, Canada takes on the face of a government agent to whom she goes hoping to get a pair of rubber boots so she can go to school; the agent’s cruel dismissal is something she will carry “around for a long time” (*Enough is Enough* 22). When Hyacinth, a Caribbean Canadian domestic worker tells her life story, it features another Canadian face, that of an employer who, in offering her work in Canada, seems to be making a dream “come true” (Silvera 5), only to turn it into a nightmare of sexual abuse and legal harassment. When Manon Lafleur offers her *Témoignage d’une Québécoise*, she opens her testimony with another face — actually it is a “fesse” (French for “behind”), the naked behind of the boy who molests her at the age of five, one in a long line of abusive colleagues, bosses, and lovers (3). The ethical imperative suggested by these narratives of self-representation is spelled out in the closing statements of another autobiography by a differently positioned subject, Elspeth Probyn’s *Love in a Cold Climate: Queer Belongings in Quebec*: “an ethical practice of belonging and a politics of singularity

must start from where one is — brutally and immediately from one's belonging, modes of being and longing" (64).

Autobiographies seem to tell us that lives often unfold in that complex space of negotiation between "we" and "I," between song and battle cry, between complicity and resistance. They impress upon us the need to challenge the homogenizing, often oppressive, interpellations of collective discourses by "keeping true to the thing within you" (Salverson 414). I would like to end with two voices reminding us of that doubleness, and of the imperative to recognize difference/s as the more legitimate markers of collective identity. In her autobiographical essay "Echoes in a Stranger Land" Marlene Nourbese Philip urges that "we had better find ways of encouraging ourselves and each other to sing our [many, different] songs" (25). In her autobiography *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, Lee Maracle turns the tables on us, refusing to behold Canada, challenging us instead:

It is Canada's turn. In my life, look for your complicit silence, look for the inequity between yourself and others. Search out the meaning of colonial robbery and figure out how you are going to undo it all... We, I, we, will take on the struggle for self-determination and in so doing, will lay the foundation, the bricks that you can build on in undoing the mess we are all in. (241)

This is nation rebuilding with a vengeance, and with a difference.

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