

***Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts: Narratives of English Canada* edited by Eva Darius-Beutell (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012)**

## **Context: CanLit**

*Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts: Narratives of English Canada* is the outcome of a three-year international research project on contemporary Canadian fiction and criticism. Scholars hail from Spain, Canada and the UK. Eva Darius-Beutell, the editor, is an associate professor of American and Canadian literatures at the University of Laguna (Spain). Her previous book *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fictions of Four Canadian Women Writers* was chosen by the International Council of Canadian Studies as seminal text, acknowledging the importance of the palimpsestic layers and interconnected threads imbricated in Canadian culture and literary production.<sup>1</sup> However, Darius-Beutell argues that Canadians are always in the process of 'becoming'; uncertain about the nature of reality, predisposed to question their own authenticity and 'belated' in recognising their embedded national origins. She also notes that parody, self-mockery and scepticism have become the privileged mode of addressing the home culture from within, and speculates on the tendency towards 'the ongoing postmodernization of Canadian writing in English.'<sup>2</sup> The work in hand is critical, an attempt to re-organise and re-orientate scholarship in the field, for strategic reasons.

## **Concept**

Darius-Beutell writes in the Introduction to *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts* that the book has a double objective. On the one hand the creative team examines the hypothesis that English-Canadian literature written and published in the last few decades coalesces around the necessity to debunk the 'Frygian' national myths produced in the 1960s, myths which 'have somehow haunted literary and cultural production in Canada since' (4). On the other hand the intention is to lead by example; to support a parallel movement to recognise and practice a more inclusive and plural literary tradition as integral to 'national culture'. The book is a neat production, easy to peruse, with bold chapter headings and indexed for quick reference, while presenting a kaleidoscope of fascinating scenarios by eight university teachers and academics in the field (only one male). Unity and cohesion come from its clear conception but its beauty is the freedom of individual interpretation afforded each author within the fold. The intention is to unravel the complex issues that arise within and between perceptions of national culture, neo-liberalisation and the influences of other universalising ideologies and the machinations of global productions.

## **Autoethnography**

*Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts* is emphatically ethnography, in literary terms knowledge constituted through fictional narratives and dialogical strategies. Darius-Beutell cleaves to autobiography (telling stories of self) and/or historiography (the struggle to find human truth in the flow of time and the tide of Canadian events), coupled with a focus on the collisions

<sup>1</sup> Eva Darius-Beutell, *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fiction of Four Contemporary Canadian Women* (Bruxelles: PIE Lang, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> 'Displacements, self-mockery, and carnival in the Canadian postmodern', *World Literature Today* 70.2 (Spring 1996) 316.

Book reviews: *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts: Narratives of English Canada* edited by Eva Darius-Beutell. Christine Runnel.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

between the narratives produced by ‘little people’ and the great national myths which were advantageously constructed to authenticate the national canon.<sup>3</sup> She suggests that ‘outsider’ texts do not affirm patterns of order and submission but trouble the establishment, paving the way for cultural and literary mutation – subversive offerings. Darius-Beautell sees the potential for limitless possibilities to be articulated out of the difference and diversity which presently constitutes Canadian multiculturalism. She suggests that everyone in Canada is displaced one way or another: each individual has a unique story to tell; self is privileged; Canadians writers are predisposed to defy the stereotypes; they naturally create ex-centric characters; they are driven to intervene in the meta-narratives of history, culture, politics, subjectivity, language and generic conventions that shape public perceptions of Canadian identities.<sup>4</sup> The cohort of writers in this volume set out to challenge the canon from minority perspectives. They aim to redress the silence imposed on indigenous literature, ethnic minority literature, black Canadian and women’s writing by talking back to the authorities. Each of the eight essayists proceeds out of common concern but broaches the problem from an idiosyncratic perspective; all contribute inclusively to the plural construction of the text.<sup>5</sup>

### Why Penelopes?

Darius-Beautell suggests that the reference to Greek mythology is not frivolous; it fits the case (4). A Penelopian poetics usually refers to the trope of weaving by day and (un)weaving by night. She points out that some critics do not see this trope in literature as dialectical strategy at work but more like a stalling manoeuvre – not in the interests of real progression, neither in the narrative nor in the discourse. She also concedes that the validity of the trope may be contested from the feminist perspective, being everything women should fight against: passivity, stasis, the object of male desire (5). However, in defence of the conceit Darius-Beautell argues (after Barbara Clayton) that Penelope (or Arachne in another guise) stands for an ongoing, open-ended and mutable project. The Penelope figure patiently weaves away at the web of life, back and forth, back and forth, representing in coded language the major dialectical themes of the *Odyssey*: memory and forgetting, marriage and death, reality and illusion, trickery and scepticism. Darius-Beautell postulates that the artistic and cultural flowering in Canada at the beginning of the twenty-first century is based upon the ‘Penelopian process of simultaneous dismantling and reconstruction of the Canadian tradition’ (3). And this process takes place by a constant interrogation of and resistance to official modes of institutionalisation and national belonging embodied in ‘the canon’.

### Why unruly?

The mindset here is passionately recalcitrant – unruly. Darius-Beautell explains that the point of inception is *The Penelopiad* (2005) in which Margaret Atwood retells Homer’s myth ‘from a multiplicity of viewpoints’, introducing idiosyncratic voices, new perspectives and a polyphonic structure which challenges the dominance of grand-narratives about the original. Darius-Beautell says that Atwood’s legacy characterises CanLit research today. She also cites and approves of Aritha van Herk’s surrogate protagonist in the novel *No Fixed Address*. She is named Arachne and challenges prescriptive codes of writing ‘for the proper behaviour of

---

<sup>3</sup> The four texts are *Obasan* (1983) by Joy Kogawa, *Disappearing Chinese Moon Cafe* (1990) by Sky Lee, *The Prowler* (1989) by Kristjana Gunnar and *No Fixed Address* (1987) by Aritha Van Herk.

<sup>4</sup> Darius-Beautell (2001), 12.

<sup>5</sup> The thought may be attributed to Homi Bhabha (1984b), as quoted by Darius-Beautell (2001).

good little girls'. In writing this female adventurer to an inverted pattern of Odysseus' wandering, Van Herk not only explodes thematic conventions of female subjectivity but in epic style rewrites generic conventions on Canadian landscape and topography (6).<sup>6</sup>

### Why ghosts?

In the 1960s and 70s academics sought to individuate Canada from the aegis of British and American discourses by constructing a distinctly Canadian perspective. At the time literary criticism centred on white settler culture; it was Eurocentric, territorial and masculinist. The social imaginary was trapped in metaphors of *lack* and haunted by tropes of landscape, wilderness, terror in regard to Nature and ubiquitously the 'garrison mentality'. Darius-Beutell believes that this collection of essays will help to liberate CanLit from 'Frygian articulations of national culture' which have haunted perceptions of Canadian artistic and literary production ever since (6). She suggests that rhetoric of multiculturalism, environmentalism, cultural studies, queer theory, feminism, postcolonialism and particularly the rise of transnational capitalism altogether prompt the realisation of new possibilities for global self-positioning. *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts* aims to re-focus the discourse on inclusivity and the articulation of 'authentic' ideas of communal identity not found in any canon literature. Darius-Beutell goes on to explain however that the deconstructive approach to tradition which underlies the book's methodology is in a way still predicated on notions of loss and deferral. The process is one of Derridean *hauntology*, which plays with the way cultural memories are inscribed in the present. The appearance of spectres signals the resurgence of unfinished business, something yet unsettling and provocative about truth-saying, for which the text is metonym and synecdoche and which calls for the redress of social injustice.

### Constant transitioning

Darius-Beutell cites Gayatri Spivak who insists that a *planetary vision* requires an interdisciplinary shift in literary studies – regeneration proceeds via oscillation. Darius-Beutell is reluctant to leave behind the concept of 'nation' – an old haunt or a weeping sore – but CanLit is forced to move on 'from the cosy utopian *nationscape* of cultural nationalism to a restless, borderless *globalscape* (see Appadurai)' (8). The *spectrality* lies in the continuous need to rethink Canadian literature. The ideal is a 'multiscaled' reflection of place but Darius-Beutell is well-aware of a paradox in coming into knowledge: Canada is always conditional – in a state of transitioning.

### Eight essays

Darius-Beutell says that each essay in this collection is haunted by a particular ghost and addresses a different set of questions along the '*spectrum* of methodological, historical, cultural and literary paradigms' (9). She writes that they emphasise close readings and critical insights, intersecting with one another at key discursive nodes of literary history, institutionalisation, race, gender, sexuality, cultural memory, locality and the body. Darius-Beutell's introduction is a comprehensive and insightful overview of the project.

In the first chapter, Coral Ann Howell examines the institutionalising drive at work in English Canadian literature and history in the past forty years. She focuses on the critical

---

<sup>6</sup> Taken from a quotation by Aritha van Herk, *In Visible Ink : Crypto-Frictions* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1991) 131.

reflection – aesthetic, political, material and social – which facilitates re-visioning narrative and rewriting tradition: ‘demonstrating the capacity of master narratives to provide elements of their own dismantling’ (10). Howell self-consciously restricts her analysis to the preoccupations of ‘White Civility’ – Eurocentric, territorial and masculinist – as the key patterns in the establishment of Canadian literature as a discipline. She sets up the dominant narrative as ‘implicitly white, British and liberal’ (22), in a nation where culture is conceived as either Anglo or French. Her stand opens the field for the attack from marginalised sectors of the community in need of assertive advocacy and recognition – ethnic minority and indigenous literature, black Canadian’s and women’s voices. This first essay represents the wall and fires off the first round from behind the ramparts.

Smaro Kambourelli next analyses the power of institutions ‘to enforce particular processes of canon formation’ (10). She examines the racialisation and minoritisation of certain sectors of the community. She compares the ‘sign *Asian Canadian*’ and its position in the formation of a literary canon with similar developments in the US. Kambourelli emphasises a close reading of meta-critical texts to discern the difference between the specifics of Area Studies – for instance, Japanese or Chinese literature – and incorporation into canonised studies as iconic examples of Asian-American or Asian-Canadian literature. She is concerned about the ethics of appropriation and commodification which reflect the canalisation of differences. She worries that the particularities of events will be subsumed in clumping or a flattening process. Kambourelli suggests that American discourse is orientated towards pan-ethnicity – eliding the origins of trauma – while Canadian discourse aims to make multiculturalism visible and subject to scrutiny in the interests of social justice.

Both Ana María Fraile and Belén Martín-Lucas, the next two essayists, resist the commodification of multiculturalism as celebratory identity politics. Fraile examines two texts from the perspective of mixed race aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> She talks about the pitfalls of institutionalised multiculturalism and denounces the fantasy of a post-racial Canada. She sees African Canadian literature as a culture in its own right, standing apart from the universalising context of CanLit and ‘inextricably enmeshed in the globalized context of diasporic hybridity, and thus essentially transnational’ (11). The issue is whether race and cultural essentialisms matter in terms of conservation or whether these elements are allowed to be subsumed in a new incorporated nationalism.

Martín-Lucas is interested in transnational poetics and the common strategies of cultural and political dissent displayed in transnational feminist fiction. Her focus is the ‘scandalous body’ and the hybrid manifestations of excess – aliens, monsters, vampires, cyborgs, mutants, post-humans – which defy politically correct inscriptions and double for the racialised and sexualised bodies of those who dare to be different. She examines the metaphorical strategies of personification which challenge the disciplinary measures and containment policies of imposed bourgeois codes.

In the next essay, Darius-Beautell investigates the function of both literature and art in the manufacture of a sense of urban belonging. Her aim is to deconstruct land-based claims to national identity. She critiques the commodified images of the City of Glass and implies that in becoming a ‘world city’ and a global icon Vancouver loses its social cohesiveness at a local level. She is particularly interested in the ideological implications for the community –

---

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Hill’s *Any Known Blood* (1997) and Kim Barry Brunhuber’s *Kameleon Man* (2003).

the gains and the losses of modernity – and the capacity of works ‘to block or cancel a certain spatial perspective’. She identifies her field of interest as ‘termination views’ (12).<sup>8</sup>

Richard Cavell is interested in the use of memory for liberation. He answers back to Robert Lecker’s expression of concern that ‘CanLit as a discipline at the threshold of the new millennium ... lack[s] the historical perspective in Canadian criticism’. He writes that ‘contemporary literary nationalism needs memory to survive.’<sup>9</sup> This work excavates the great grief of silencing in the official annals. Cavell’s essay ‘Jane Rule and the Memory of Canada’ is about remembering the cut of the whip across divisions of gender and sexuality but principally focuses on the collision between queer sexuality and the state, postulating ‘a theory of queer cultural memory based on the individual and collective performance of embodied identity’ (13). Cavell argues that *queer* is not simply about deviant sexuality but about an ethics of alterity that ‘denies the completion of identity, national or otherwise’. He theorises about the possible formation of ‘communities outside the nation-state ideology of the family’ and offers Jane Rule’s success story as an antidote to official history. Cavell sees the recovery work in memory studies as a continuous project aimed at inclusion rather than exclusion – alternative models of citizenship are recognised and affirmed within the expanding fold of the nation-state.

María Jesús Hernández Lerena provides a reading of Michael Crummey’s historical fiction, *River Thieves*. This work is a best-seller and award-winning novel about the ‘collective sense of loss and guilt’ that haunts the narratives of Newfoundland in regard to the extinction of the local aboriginal people. She too is fixated in the same spectrality as the other essayists: ‘the tensions between remembering and forgetting, speaking and silence, history and experience’ (13). However, Hernández Lerena does not revisit the colonial past in order to re-examine the symptomatic unease which results from traumatic events but to investigate rhetorical strategies used by the author to evoke the psychic and social malaise.

Michèle Lacombe brings the compilation to a close with a discussion of indigenous issues. Her essay talks back to Howell’s opening gambit by presenting ‘a panoramic discussion of indigenous literary histories, criticism, and fiction’ (13). She points out that it is inappropriate for a body of national identification such as CanLit to configure aboriginality ‘within colonial frameworks of otherness’. She challenges universities (and the societies which they represent) to do away with ‘cognitive imperialism’. The imperative is to transform ‘colonial, patriarchal, and supremacist mindsets, paradigms, and values’ by engaging in a *web of relationships* which entail responsibilities and assumptions of reciprocity. The issue then becomes one of trust. Lacombe borrows from Rauna Kuokkanen.<sup>10</sup> Together they suggest that the academy adopts a concept of ‘hospitality’ grounded in Indigenous epistemology: one should welcome the other without conditions, translation into the language of the host, or other mediation, but in the spirit of a gift economy. Lacombe concludes that ‘the university has a crucial role to play in that complex process of epistemological transformation’ (221).

---

<sup>8</sup> ... a notion put forward by Cliff Eyland in relation to Bernie Miller’s and Alan Tregobov’s deconstructive techniques.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Lecker, ‘Where Is Here Now?’ *Essays on Canadian Writing* 71 (2000): 10.

<sup>10</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2007).

## Conclusion

*Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts* demonstrates that in one sense over the last forty years *nothing has changed and everything has changed* in the critical analyses and processes of production in the field of Canadian literature.<sup>11</sup> National culture is still the referent but land-based connections and outmoded systems no longer serve as the sole marker of national identity. A plural society struggles to define the ideological, material, political and cultural necessities of citizenship in the contemporary era. This project pleads the case for a certain attitude and rigour as integral to the discipline; critical assessment demands close reading, renewed cultural sensitivity and nuanced understanding, as marginalised sub groups and individuals seek acceptance within the mainstream.

Darius-Beautell also raises the issue of 'belatedness' which seems to cling to Canadian culture.<sup>12</sup> If I may paraphrase, this means the notion of having finally arrived at the dock with one's portmanteau only to have missed the boat. The team is acutely aware of the dilemma. Darius-Beautell offers up Imre Szeman's suggestion that the new transnational scenario privileges an *isochronic* version of the world in which the narrative will again be linear, with only one global time-zone and perforce no one will be out of sync with the main currents of modernity. But this utopian dystopia is immediately undone in the circularity of the Penelopian world-view. Darius-Beautell articulates mock-horror at the impossibility of ideological dissent and then again at an institutionalised inability to conceive of a national literature founded in a multiplicity of cultural, social and political specificities. Nonetheless, she concludes the meta-text with a sure sense of satisfaction that the essays in *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts* are a testament to the unruly imaginings at the heart of Canadian's yearning to belong ... to the Promised Land.

## Christine Runnel

---

<sup>11</sup> A quotation from Barbara Godard in 'Notes from the Cultural Field: Canadian Literature from Identity to Commodity' (2000, 248), *Canadian Literature at the Crossroads of Language and Culture* edited by Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2008) 235-72.

<sup>12</sup> The reference originally comes from Renée Hulan (2000) and Imre Szeman (2000).