

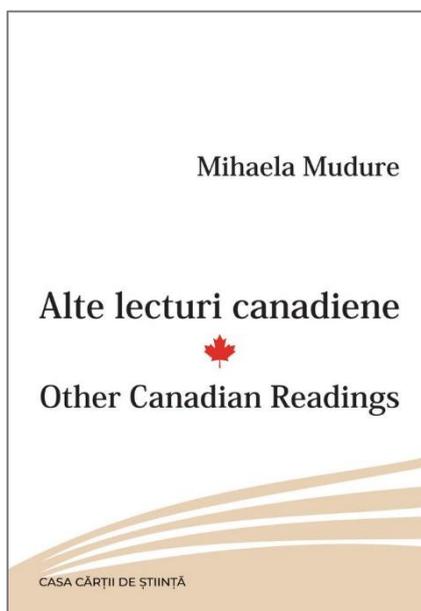
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Mihaela Mudure, *Alte lecturi canadiene / Other Canadian Readings*. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2020, 195 p.

It is a commonly held opinion that Canada's political and economic contributions to the global scene are linked almost exclusively with the tipping points of history, such as the two World Wars and some more recent conflicts. Indeed, if Canada has a "great story" to tell, as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared some years ago in an interview given to *Maclean's* magazine,¹ to many it remains unclear wherein this alleged greatness lies.

And yet, on the literary stage, Canadian voices have been an integral part of a more convincing narrative, as demonstrated by the internationally-acclaimed names of Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro or Michael Ondaatje, to mention but a few.

It is precisely this other story, of Canada as a text to be deciphered by insightful readers, that is addressed in Mihaela Mudure's book *Alte lecturi canadiene / Other Canadian Readings*. As she



explains in the Preface, this collection of essays complements the texts in an earlier volume, *Lecturi canadiene* (2009), being thus an expression of a sustained interest in Canadian culture and literature (5). The author proposes a highly consistent interpretive exercise, centred around the peculiarities of Canadian multiculturalism. In fact, the first essay offers a summary and explanation of the concept, as formulated by the

Trinidadian-Canadian author and theorist Neil Bissoondath. In Bissoondath's opinion, Mudure notes, multiculturalism should not be understood as a rigid notion and should always be adequately contextualised, for there is a risk that it might lead to racism through excessive appraisal and idealisation of ethnicity (8). According to Bissoondath, in a Canadian context, multiculturalism has led to a simplification of culture (11) and even to its

¹ Wells, Paul. 'An Interview with Justin Trudeau'. *Macleans.ca*, 1 July 2017,

<https://www.macleans.ca/politics/justin-trudeau-the-canada-day-interview/>.

reification. Moreover, blindly accepting multiculturalism is equal to submitting oneself to a process of racialisation (12) and demands conformity with the dominant understanding of the concept, which, in the final analysis, is a form of wilful self-censorship (13).

This multicultural and multifaceted character of Canadian literature will represent in fact the thematic focus of the volume. Guided by a diachronic perspective, Mudure devotes the first three essays to notable First Nations writers, Beth Brant and Thomas King. In her works, Brant speaks about ancient creation myths (for example, the Sky Woman) but also addresses contemporary issues such as domestic abuse, patriarchal law, the treatment of girls in traditional families and lesbianism. Brant is one of the most outspoken critics of colonialism, which she holds responsible for a series of “surgical operations” performed on the natives with a view to supporting the interests of the European newcomers to Canada (19). By contrast, Thomas King’s approach to myth and history is more detached, informed by the characteristically postmodern love of irony and satire. As Mudure explains, King simultaneously manipulates and derides mythology and religion, thus inviting his readers to adopt an amused stance on history (22). In his stories, as well as in the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, Thomas King writes about a world that has lost its centre and is in search of a new equilibrium (30).

In the next two essays, the author’s attention turns to female voices. The first of these is Marie de l’Incarnation (Marie Guyart), founder of the religious order of the Ursulines in Canada. Marie de l’Incarnation, we are told, is the first European that left us epistolary accounts of life in Canada.

An exponent of the Counter-Reformation and colonial literature, she stands out mostly through her clear, “Cartesian” rational style. Mudure aptly points out that Marie de l’Incarnation’s letters are of seminal importance as literary and historical documents that can enable us to understand how the West came to dominate a large part of the world (33-34). Closer to our times, Dublin-born Isabella Valancy Crawford is presented as an author who combines a fine eye for domestic detail with a patriotic stance, as in the poem “His Wife and Baby”, which uses a scene of maternal love as an occasion for addressing the topic of duty in times of war. Crawford’s moral and conservative stance is also evident in “How the Nightingale and the Parrot Wooed the Rose”, a piece written in the tradition of Oscar Wilde’s morality tales. Like Wilde, Mudure explains, Crawford’s insistence on the more sordid aspects of existence is not meant to shock through militant realism, but rather to increase the sensitivity of the readers toward the Christian values of modesty, compassion and moderation (37-38).

Next, we return to Neil Bissoondath, this time as author of the novel *The Soul of All Great Designs*. This work provides multiple complex narratives focused on the migrant Indian community of Toronto, which intersect at crucial moments. In Mudure’s reading, this plurality can also be attributed to the multicultural impulse that tries to accommodate, in a hospitable way, all the major founding myths of Canada, including those of the First Nations, of the successful English and French settlers and of the immigrants seeking a better life in the New World (43-44). The literary reflection of the social and existential problems of local communities is also at the core of the next essay, devoted to

Sylvain Rivière's novel *La Belle Embarquée*. Mudure highlights some of the qualities of this text, such as the keen eye for detail which renders convincingly the "ethnic puzzle" of Québec and the novelist's staunch realism (which echoes the technique of the great predecessor, Balzac).

Our understanding of the complex socio-cultural Canadian landscape is enriched through a series of other interesting insights. First, we learn about Guy Vanderhaeghe's novel *The Englishman's Boy*, whose double plot is concerned, on one hand, with the life of Shorty McAdoo, a genuine Canadian cowboy, and, on the other, with the fascinating world of cinema. As Mudure remarks, the novel attempts at demythologising and demystifying the birth and growth of Canada. In our world of illusions, cinema creates a reality that supersedes actual history. Truth is no longer important and nowhere is this more evident than in the stereotypical and prejudiced depiction of the First Nations (54-55). We return to realism, however, with the next author discussed in the book, Mavis Gallant. Her short stories bespeak of a talent found in a Chekhov, Mansfield or Alice Munro, reflecting the ways in which a majority can become a minority in certain conditions, since Gallant writes from the perspective of an Anglophone living in Québec. Her short stories continue the internationalist stance of Henry James (*sans* the upper-class placement of character and plot) and are imbued with humour that has a feminist touch (58-60). Gallant's realism, Mudure concludes, offers a more nuanced understanding of the multiple faces of contemporary Canadian identity (61).

In four of the essays of the next segment of the book we are invited to look at works by authors of hyphenated

ethnicity. Thus, Joy Kogawa's work, *Obasan*, is described as one of the most important North American literary forays into the ordeal of Japanese people who suffered the humiliation of internment during World War II. Mudure justly compares this to the relevance of the Holocaust in Jewish History (62-63). The question of allegiance to different cultures is also explored with reference to Darcy Tamayose's novel *Odori*, whose plot focuses on the destinies of five generations of Japanese-Canadians with lives split between Okinawa and Canada. It is a novel that reflects the struggles of bi-cultural and bilingual individuals, abounding in Japanese words and phrases which the author employs as a subtle mechanism of forcing readers to face and accept alterity (66). Uprooting and the shock of losing a country are further discussed in the essay on Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place. Not Here*. A text infused with poetic qualities (68), Brand's novel deals with the condition of the migrant who is simultaneously included and excluded in the host country (70). The last two essays of this lot focus on Jewish-Canadian writers, namely, Miriam Waddington and Matt Cohen. The former is appraised for the skill demonstrated in the short stories depicting the condition of the grown-up woman constrained by social obligations (78) and the problematic of the diasporic Jewish communities (81). By contrast, the latter's novel, *The Spanish Doctor*, reveals the historical plight of these people through a plot that follows the fate of a Sephardic Jewish doctor in a 14th century Spain ruled by the brutal laws of the Inquisition. Among the qualities of this novel Mudure enumerates the convincing historical references and the faithful presentation of the tension between the individual and the communal (87).

With the next author, Carol Shields, we are in a different sphere, that of the novel of the family. A work that draws on the conventions of the diary genre, Shield's *The Stone Diaries* provides a credible and sensitive view on the frailty of life, on death and the human ability to cope with the sense of inevitable ending (92). Mudure sees in Shield a fine observer of society, a quality that enables the novelist to rebel against the gender privileges imposed and maintained throughout centuries of patriarchal rule (89). We are given a short respite from the heavier theme of social problems in the essay that explores Douglas Coupland's "fascination with the simulacrum". His novel *Miss Wyoming* concentrates on the "overwhelming voyeurism" of modern society that leads to the loss of identity and a life devoid of ideals, direction, meaning and feelings (93). As a response, Mudure explains, one must seek to return to the simple values of the first Canadians who were drawn to the Adamic promise of the New World (96). A different face of the media is presented in Elizabeth Hay's *Nights on Air*, a novel set in the extreme Canadian North, which combines several narrative threads around an ecological theme that is examined from the perspective of the influence of the modern means of communication (the radio) upon human interaction. Here, we are told that the impact of media and technology is inevitable, making the Western acculturation of the First Nations irreversible.

Hay's work is further examined in the first of three essays devoted to women writers included thereafter. Hay's cycle of captivity stories reflects, on the one hand, a colonial tradition consolidated by writers like Susannah Willard Johnson and, on the other, the post-modern preference for the marginal and de-centred (101-102).

Mudure aptly notes that in Hay's stories about Canadians who settle in the United States writing becomes a "therapeutic exercise", a mode of resistance for the Canadian immigrant in face of the intimidating force of the imperialist southern neighbour (102). Next, we read about Marianne Brandis and her historical novel *Elizabeth, Duchess of Somerset*. Brandis proves to be a fine connoisseur of the period of Queen Anne's reign, creating a feminist piece that tackles the survival of the family against the ambitions of men (108). Brandis succeeds in reviving the past and creating a vivid picture of the lives of both aristocracy and ordinary people, giving readers a lesson about the will to continue in face of loss and suffering (110). In a similar fashion, in her story "A Bird in the House", Margaret Laurence offers a most touching image of death and the agony of growing up. To become an adult, Mudure notes, is wonderful and troublesome and hard. Only a handful of writers reached this "generous understanding of life" and even fewer captured its essence in the right words (117).

The first part of this volume ends with essays on writers that take a lighter look at existence. One such case is Allan Weiss' story "The Domitable Knight Errant", a glimpse of Canadian humour and an extended postmodern language game that discreetly but firmly satirises political correctness, seen as one of the major missteps of our age (119-123). The flawed nature of the present is also addressed by Louky Bersianik, a prime representative of the Québec feminist school, most notably in her novel *L'Équellionne*, whose protagonist, a giant feminine alien visitor of Earth, is shocked by the aggressive patriarchy that permeates our society and in her essay *Le pique-nique sur Acropole*, an ironic take on Plato's *The Banquet* (126-

131). Postmodern modes are also at the core of other works on hyphenated identities discussed next in this book. Thus, Haitian-Canadian Dany Lafèrriere's novel *L'Enigme du retour* combines prose, verse and prose poetry in a way that reflects the confusion of identity experienced by the modern migrant (133). It is a novel that fuses the "luxuriant beauty of the Caribbean" with the "fascination for the apparent order and fairness of Canadian or American capitalism" (140). On the other hand, in Thai-Canadian writer Souvankham Thammavongsa's volume *How to Pronounce Knife*, the sombre themes of acculturation and death of traditional family values are tackled from an angle commonly found in traditional oriental tales, with wisdom and detachment. Tragedy can never replace healthy laughter and the joy of living, Mudure notes.

The book ends with three essays written in English, which skilfully combine the author's already demonstrated reading talent with the findings of rigorous academic research. The first provides an analysis of old age in Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters*. In Mudure's reading, one of the main concerns of this work is the "conflict between the flesh and the spiritual and the human desire to surpass this opposition" (152). Despite the "cruelty of the old age lesson", Mistry's approach is infused with "mild and quality humour" (154) and the novel's message remains optimistic. *Family Matters*, Mudure argues, proves that the opposition "evolution vs. involution" is only apparent and not a real dichotomy. (Post-)colonial history involves both of these, in a "rich combination that can turn it from a time of tears

into a starting point for reflection, reparation and survival" (158). The scholarly excursion takes us next to Ronald Lee, whose autobiographical novel *Goddam Gypsy* can be read as a "fictional account of fight and resistance to prejudice and discrimination" (162). With a narrative influenced by the picaresque *peripateia* (164) and bespeaking the author's fascination with modern-day picaros like the hippie or the beatnik (165), this novel also suggests that we are all inherently "nomads, and Gypsies, from birth to death" and at the same time "we are all brothers and sisters, and brothers and sisters should we all be". (172) Mudure's book concludes with a much welcomed contribution on the Romanian-born Felicia Mihali, whose novel *The Darling of Kandahar* is filtered through an analysis anchored in Freud's exposé in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Mudure astutely explains how in Mihali's novel the intertwining of three narrative threads (a tragically-ended erotic story, a successful immigration experience and an account of one's duty toward their adoptive country) both confirm and undermine the original Freudian scheme.

If, as Margaret Atwood said, "literature is a map, a geography of the mind"² that tells us about our cultural emplacement, readers of the literary map of Canada inevitably experience a strange mix of apprehension and wonder, much akin to that of the earliest explorers and settlers of this northern territory. In the Canadian cultural space, the answer to "where is here?" remains forever elusive, like the dream of discovering a passage to the bountiful and enigmatic Cathay that drove

² Atwood, Margaret. *Survival*. House of Anansi Press, Inc., 2012, p. 12.

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many to this land in the first place. In this context, Mihaela Mudure's book serves a twofold purpose. To the everyday reader, these essays provide ample material illustrating the diversity and vastness of the Canadian literary landscape; to the specialist, they are a confirmation that

the journey they once embarked upon was worth the while, but also a reminder that the pleasure of reading is—and must remain—an essential ingredient of any scholarly effort.

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