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**Mythic Migrations:
Recreating Migrant Histories in Canadian Fiction**

Amanda Mullen

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfilment of the requirements
For the PhD degree in English

Department of English
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Canada

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Abstract

This thesis examines the work of five Canadian writers who use their fiction to recreate an immigrant past and to mythologize an originary moment in Canada: a migrant's arrival and settlement in a new land. Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989), Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990), Jane Urquhart's *Away* (1993), Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* (1997), and Nino Ricci's trilogy, *Lives of the Saints* (1990), *In a Glass House* (1993), and *Where She Has Gone* (1997) each express a nostalgic longing for an authenticating mythology that will give a previously silenced ethno-cultural group a place in the national narrative. Nostalgia literally means a painful return home, and the narrators of these novels express a bittersweet longing for a Canadian past, for a Canadian home. While nostalgia has traditionally played a central role in ethnic literature, this longing has typically rested on a nostalgic desire to return to a distant homeland. Yet the narrators of this study express a nostalgia for a different kind of origins – for origins in a new land. Richler, Lee, Urquhart, Hill, and Ricci create detailed genealogies in their novels that show how their different groups – Jewish, Chinese, Irish, Black, and Italian – helped build the nation and what roles each of these groups played in Canada's past. This thesis thus reveals that the interrogation of Canada's master narratives is not complete and that, even for later generations of immigrants, there remains a desire to establish their identities as Canadian. The five writers of this study are deliberately challenging the authority of Canada's dominant cultural paradigm by recreating the immigrant experiences of their ethno-cultural groups in order to refute the myth of two founding nations and to establish Canada as home for their own particular groups. With their mythologized versions of history, these writers are striving to include neglected and forgotten voices in the story of Canada.

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**Introduction:
A Distant Imaginary Place**

because we believe in en(dis)abling difference
 in the secret heart we believe
 at coiled root we believe
 we believe it a matter of science
 we think it matter of truth
 if we do not build on “fact” what is
 shelter except “faith” but
 science constructs a fiction religion
 a myth then hasten to strengthen
 shoring up walls of words finding
 bedrock raising columns to legitimize
 to rationalize the political
 under such roofs we empty goblets of metaphor
 suck the marrow of image
 and they become and bone
 of our bone they speak us
 run wild in our stories structure
 our making our dreams
 incorrigible
 our texts our games our lives
 because we fear the desert its loneliness
 because we do not know how to start over
 lay foundations neuter old metaphor
 dream new dreams
 how to see through see
 beyond screens of culture/gender/race
 to persons I write
 for us all we must change
 the fictions before the fictions
 play us out their unsubtle denouements
 skies without cloud
 earth without rivers or smiles

Claire Harris, *Dipped in Shadow*

Narratives about immigration take as their subject experiences of migration to and settlement in a new land while also exploring diverse approaches (successful or otherwise) to identity formation and belonging. In some cases, the settlement experience takes precedence over the journey, which might only receive a brief mention. In other cases, the journey is described in detail and is constructed as a mythic migration from the old world to the new – a journey that not only depicts immigrants as forever caught between worlds, but that paradoxically represents their delivery across a vast space (often the ocean) and their rebirth into a new time and place.¹ These narratives about immigration and settlement in Canada have been and continue to be written by immigrants and non-immigrants from diverse social and cultural positions whose classifications as “majority” or “minority” are used in this study to emphasize that some ethno-cultural groups in Canada continue to occupy privileged positions while other groups remain marginalized, subject to hierarchizing ideologies and institutions. Roy Miki explains that the “term ‘minority,’ while rejected by many writers and cultural workers of colour for its implied structural subordination and categorization, has been retained for its relative value: that is, despite the global facts of population distributions, in specific Canadian contexts the term reflects the unequal political, social, and cultural status for communities of colour” (124). Indeed, the majority-minority binary reflects circumstances that are more a matter of status and power than they are of numbers (Padolsky, “Cultural Diversity” 114). But what happens when these categories no longer remain stable or “pure”; when ethnic identities shift and change; when those on the margins move to the centre? Are they then considered “Canadian”?

An ethnic group can be described as a collectivity of people with a common culture, religion, and/or national affiliation. The writers of this study demonstrate that ethnic identities are not stable and unchanging, but that these identities can grow and change and

that they are no less valid or meaningful for having done so. Eva Mackey argues that, in Canada, some groups are deemed “ethnic” while certain groups – particularly those who belong to “the dominant white Anglophone majority” (3) – are considered “simply ‘Canadian’” (20). As she writes, “Canada has a proliferation of hyphenated peoples. Many Canadians identify themselves as German-Canadian, Ukrainian-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, Greek-Canadian, Afro-Canadian, French-Canadian, Native-Canadian, Italian-Canadian, and so on. While these hyphenated forms all have their own histories of constitution, some groups are widely considered more ‘ethnic’ than others” (20). She goes on to observe that “usually white and most often British settlers [. . .] are the unmarked, unhyphenated, and hence normative, *Canadian*-Canadians who are thus implicitly constructed as the authentic and *real* Canadian people, while all others are hyphenated and marked as *cultural*” (89). But the possibility exists that these hyphenations more accurately represent the complexities of identity. Indeed, hybrid forms have always reflected the reality of Canadian experiences. In recent years, even the Anglo-Celtic majority has tried to reclaim separate ethnic identities, particularly Irish or Scottish roots. To be Canadian is to possess more than one identity, to have hyphens upon hyphens, to embrace change and adaptability. Despite the fact that hyphenation represents the reality for Canadians, however, there remains a general sense that – with the exception of Quebec – Canada is a homogeneously Anglo-British nation. Critics such as Himani Bannerji, Daniel Francis, Arnold Itwaru, Eva Mackey, Roy Miki, and Sherene Razack have explored this phenomenon at some length. One need only look at the wealth of recent popular celebrations of Canadian history and identity – from the recent “The Greatest Canadian” contest, to Douglas Coupland’s two-volume *Souvenir of Canada* (2002, 2004), to commercials for Tim Horton’s and Molson Canadian – for confirmation of the persistence of this bias in the popular Canadian imagination. This

contradiction is addressed in the writings of hyphenated Canadians who wish to correct this assumption and who intend to see their stories included in the founding narratives of the nation. Thus, while it is true that many hyphenated Canadians consider themselves “simply ‘Canadian,’” it is also true that many are increasingly claiming a hyphenated identity – an identity that might now define what it means to be “Canadian.”

Part of the reason ethnicity has often been considered a matter of degree in Canada is that the term “ethnic” has historically been interpreted as a disparaging term: to be “ethnic” is to be “other” and therefore not Canadian. As Margery Fee writes, “Anglo-Canadians are seen as without ethnicity, as possessed of a ‘Canadian’ ethnicity (generally depicted as not much different from no ethnicity at all), or as possessing the national high culture, while ethnic minorities are permitted to have broken English, colourful costumes, exotic dances, and unusual food. Their writing, categorized as ‘ethnic writing,’ is instantly devalued as both less than national and therefore, less than literature” (686). Miki suggests that the Multiculturalism Act is responsible for advancing this erroneous position because it “can be read as the space of the ‘other’ for the liberalism enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In the inscription of the terms ‘race’ and ‘racial’ as essentialized signs in a national social text, people of colour, or ‘non-whites,’ are produced as ethnic and racial identities that differ from the constitutional base” (149). According to Miki, then, the Multiculturalism Act of 1971 does not, as it claims, “promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barriers to that participation” (Dept. of Justice 4); rather, he would argue that it reinforces the boundaries between ethno-cultural groups, thus limiting the freedoms and opportunities of ethnic minorities in Canada.

Donna Bennett expresses a different opinion, however, when she contends that the Multiculturalism Act has fostered cultural freedom for immigrant groups because “recent immigrants have been encouraged to see culture and individual expression as distinct from, but not threatening to, the preexisting politics and economic practices of English Canada” (188). She writes that “Canada’s multiculturalism policy, as well as enabling newly arrived immigrants to maintain external cultural ties, has encouraged the literary expression of those groups who have maintained separate ethnic identities although their ancestors arrived in Canada before mid-century, Canadians whose cultures have long been present, though relatively silent” (191). Yet she allows that multiculturalism is limited in scope because it still keeps cultures distinct and identifies ethnic minorities as “other” (193-94). Multiculturalism leaves little room for hybridities, changes, or shifting Canadian spaces. Smaro Kamboureli expresses a similar concern when she writes that “official ideology [. . .] insists on separating one ethnic group from another” (149). She explains that “multiculturalism [views] the ethnic subject as remaining the same ‘forever.’ Ethnicity is thus configured as a ‘natural’ condition, the outcome of displacement, that cannot (must not?) be absconded from or adulterated. Identity defined in ethnic terms, it is suggested, can be understood only as permanent and stable” (148). But while official policy fixes the ethnic subject in time, literary works tend to explore lived experiences that place this subject in a fluid hybrid space. The novels of this study react against the limitations of official multiculturalism by exploring the ever-changing nature of identity constructions in a national context.

*

Whose history is valued as part of Canada’s national narrative? What does it mean to be Canadian? And how do immigrants establish a sense of belonging in a new land? These

are some of the questions raised in the seven contemporary novels that are the focus of this study. Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989), Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Jane Urquhart's *Away* (1993), Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* (1997), and Nino Ricci's trilogy, *Lives of the Saints* (1990), *In a Glass House* (1993), and *Where She Has Gone* (1997) exhibit an interest in history and in telling the stories of marginalized groups.² Published in an eight-year period between 1989 and 1997, these novels emerged during a time of debate concerning identity and cultural politics in the late 1980s and 1990s in Canada.³ This emphasis on identity politics was partly a reaction to the overly nationalist cultural debates of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, Canadians were experiencing a new surge of nationalism – a nationalism that was, for example, encouraged by the celebration of Canada's centennial in 1967, by the introduction of university courses on Canadian studies and Canadian literature, and by the academic writings of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood.⁴ This homogenizing nationalism was countered in the following two decades by an emphasis on intra-national dynamics, particularly in the growing fields of race theory, ethnic studies, and postcolonialism. Despite a recent trend towards global contexts and transculturalism, this emphasis remains relevant in Canadian literary studies today. In short, there is continued interest in local and national contexts and in authenticating narratives that seek recuperative and alternative versions of Canada's past. As opposed to an authentic narrative, which would establish verifiable and unquestionable origins in Canada, an authenticating narrative offers a sense of legitimacy while acknowledging that absolute truths and genuine origins can never be found. Many Canadian writers remain engaged with the quest for authenticating origins and thus continue to explore postcolonial and postmodern re-evaluations of historiography and identity formation within distinctly national contexts.

Indeed, the novels of this study express a concern with the ways historical narratives are reimagined and with the constructed nature of national identity. The narrators of these novels each create a record of events that traces personal, familial, communal, and national histories through the use of diverse historical documents such as letters, photographs, memoirs, diaries, interviews, newspaper articles, history books, and video and tape recordings. Although the validity and accuracy of these sources is sometimes called into question, which underlines the difficulties in creating historical narratives, the pursuit of the past nevertheless remains a central concern. Herb Wyile explains that recent historical fiction in Canada is notable for “its inscribing of a consciousness of the problems of writing about the past and its disruption of the traditional ontological, epistemological, and discursive boundaries between history and literature” (“The Opposite” 20). For the characters in these novels, tracing the arrival and settlement of their particular ethno-cultural groups involves questions about the selective process of memory, the desire for secrecy, and the need to draw their own conclusions about the past. Because postcolonialism has disrupted the truths of traditional historical narratives, it has also promoted a growing scepticism towards homogeneous versions of national identity. To put it differently, postcolonial theory has refocused attention on the margins, allowing for the expression of neglected voices and for the creation of detailed genealogies and myths of origins for previously silenced ethno-cultural groups in Canada. In different ways, each of the novels in this study gives voice to a marginalized history while expressing the longing for an authenticating mythology that will establish Canada as home.

Although I have limited my project to the novels of five writers, other recent narratives also explore an immigrant past and mythologize an originary moment in Canada, including, for example, Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), Janice

Kulyk Keefer's *The Green Library* (1996), Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996), Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* (1999), and Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* (1995) and *All That Matters* (2004). Wyile explains that recent historical novels tend to deconstruct national myths as a means of showing how certain groups have been excluded. As he writes, "Contemporary Canadian novelists are much less inclined to construct patriotic narratives of the building of a nation and of a unitary Canadian character than to dramatize the exploitation, appropriation, and exclusion that such narratives of nation have often served to efface" (*Speculative* 7). While the novels I have chosen represent but a small number of ethno-cultural groups in Canadian society – Jewish, Chinese, Irish, Italian, and African Canadian – they demonstrate that the recreation of an immigrant past is not limited to works by writers of colour, nor to works by writers whose origins are non-European, nor to writers of strictly settler descent. Rather, this return to a founding moment in the past is shared by Canadian writers with a range of backgrounds, positions, and perspectives who use their narratives to forge a sense of belonging in this land. Historical narratives – whether they are on immigrant themes or not – often participate in a "narrating into existence" while "contributing to an investigation of the role of representations of the past in the construction of social, political, cultural, and, not least of all, national discourse" (Wyile, *Speculative* xi, 5). The seven novels of this study represent a turn towards heterogeneous versions of history that examine the construction of these various discourses in a specifically Canadian context.

Solomon Gursky Was Here, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, *Away*, *Any Known Blood*, *Lives of the Saints*, *In a Glass House*, and *Where She Has Gone* each express a nostalgic longing for a particular moment in Canada's past: the immigrant's arrival and settlement in a new land. Derived from the Greek "nostos," which signifies a return home, and

“algos,” which refers to suffering or pain, nostalgia is a powerful impulse that awakens a bittersweet longing for the past, even for a past that evokes painful memories, since these memories show those who have suffered that they have the capacity to endure.⁵

In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal observes that nostalgic longings are becoming increasingly common in Western societies, from collecting antiques and family heirlooms, to tracing family trees, to producing nostalgic television shows and films, and to creating nostalgic literature and art. While Lowenthal suggests that a mistrust of the future fuels much of today’s nostalgia, he explains that if “nostalgia is a symptom of malaise, it also has compensating virtues. Attachment to familiar places may buffer social upheaval, attachment to familiar faces may be necessary for enduring association” (13). Daniel Francis reinforces this point when he writes, “In an age of anxiety, it is not surprising to find nostalgia flourishing” (*National* 176). For Canadian writers from different ethno-cultural backgrounds – particularly ethnic minorities since they are often oppressed or dismissed in Canadian society – a nostalgic return to an immigrant past can be a means of establishing roots in this land. As Warren Cariou writes, “Whenever I think about belonging – to a community, a place, a family, an association – I return to that ubiquitous childhood question: where do I come from? It has turned out to be one of the most difficult and necessary questions for me, not because origins provide the answers but because origins must be questioned deeply and continually if we are to be at home in a meaningful way” (12). While nostalgia has traditionally played a central role in ethnic literature, this longing has typically rested on a nostalgic desire to “journey towards an originary home” (Kamboureli 132). The narrators of this study, however, divert this nostalgia for a lost homeland and express instead a bittersweet longing for a Canadian past, for a Canadian home. This emphasis makes this study original because I do not see the immigrants in these novels longing for

some distant homeland, but looking to their roots here in Canada. My thesis thus argues that these novels express a nostalgia for a different kind of origins – for origins in the new land, for the originary moment when immigrant ancestors arrived and settled in Canada, and for the subsequent establishment of cross-generational roots here in this land.

The seven novels of this study reveal that the creation of an authenticating mythology depends upon the assertion of these originary moments in order to insert diverse ethnic voices into Canada's national narrative. The fact that each writer undertakes this authenticating quest for origins has three main implications for work in the field of Canadian literature. Firstly, it demonstrates that there remains a need for diverse ethnic groups to find belonging in Canada and to see their stories reflected in national narratives. Interrogations of national stories are not over or obsolete: these writers each express a desire for a larger presence in the dominant vision of the nation. Secondly, it shows that, in a Canadian context, identity-seeking work is not over either. Even for second- and third-generation immigrants, there remains a need to establish their identities as both Canadian and ethnic, as though being Canadian by birth is not enough. Kamboureli explains that it is possible to be "at once Canadian and ethnic" (22). But she goes on to explain that "this doubleness does not necessarily present her with a choice that will resolve the either/or condition of her hybridity. [. . .] As her ethnic background cannot be reduced to a stable and essentially 'true' past, so her national identity as Canadian resists simplification. Ethnicity is not a condition that she possesses naturally; nor is her ethnic identity fixed and stable in her birthplace or in relation to her ancestral origins" (22). Thirdly, this interest in origins establishes a need to revisit and reinterpret historical narratives, especially when these narratives have traditionally been told from a white Anglo-British standpoint: ethnic minorities want to recover their origins by telling their own stories in their own voices. That each of these writers returns to a different

originary moment in order to tell a particular story is consistent with Robert Kroetsch's avowal that, in Canada, "we cannot for the world decide when we became a nation or what to call the day or days or, for that matter, years that might have been the originary moments" ("Disunity" 27). As a nation, Canada is made up of many such moments, and each one lends legitimacy to the private and public mythologies of a different group. For example, in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee creates an authenticating mythology that begins with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and, in *Any Known Blood*, Hill generates a comparable mythology based on the Underground Railroad in Canada and America. By reconstructing and reimagining genuine historical events in their fiction, the writers of this study search for authenticating mythologies that offer their particular ethnic groups verifiable origins in Canada – origins that help establish a sense of belonging in the nation.

Yet, even as they seek to recover their origins, the writers question historical "truths" and blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. In *New World Myth*, Marie Vautier writes that many postmodern novels share a "deliberately self-conscious play with fiction, history, and myth. The overtly political character of imaginative expression found in these novels is, of course, also discernible in many nation-building novels of the late nineteenth century in European nations. [. . .] The rewriting of European-inspired history is a central concern of many postcolonial literatures; the goal is to revise, reappropriate, or reinterpret history" (32-33). The challenge for these writers, then, is to uncover their lost or forgotten histories while rewriting the narratives of a dominant and exclusionary national myth. Vautier explains that "New World Myth is anchored in historiography; it is highly political; it is concerned with both epistemological uncertainty and the need to know, and is intent on imaginatively reclaiming the past while flaunting its awareness of the processes involved in this act" (35). Although Vautier's study uses

New World Myth to compare a selection of French and English texts and to examine the recreation of classical, biblical, and historical myths,⁶ my project reveals that writers with a divergent focus can also relate to the concept of New World Myth. Lee, Hill, Richler, Ricci, and Urquhart focus on ethnic groupings and stories about migration and yet they engage with New World Myth by questioning accepted “truths” and by taking a political approach to the reinvention and reinterpretation of history. But these five writers also move beyond the concept of New World Myth because they reclaim the past with the specific goal of creating authenticating mythologies that will help their own ethno-cultural groups gain a legitimate sense of belonging in Canada. They use these mythologies to show how their different groups contributed to the founding of the nation and to reconstruct the roles each of these groups played in Canada’s history. In doing so, these writers give voice to neglected moments from Canada’s past while adding these originary moments – these crucial beginnings – to the national narrative.

A national narrative serves a specific function in the nation-state. The term “nation” both relates “to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the ‘natio’ – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging” (Brennan 45). Donna Palmateer Pennee explains that “it is commonplace that geopolitical formations are understood to exist as social, political, and economic facts *and* as imaginary constructs” (80). As such, each nation-state can essentially be defined as an idea or fabrication.⁷ One nation-state can be distinguished from the others by the different ways in which it is imaginatively conceived (Anderson, B. 6). Tied to these imaginings is the assurance that nations can offer those who live within their geographical borders (which are themselves constructions) a sense of “collectivity and belonging, a *mutual* sense of community” (McLeod 69). Benedict Anderson argues that a nation is, in fact, a kind of community – “an imagined political community [which] is

imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). He goes on to explain that a nation is “imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, [it] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). The members of a particular nation experience these feelings of comradeship as a result of the symbols and stories they share – symbols and stories that require emotional investment and that reinforce each member’s sense of belonging to a distinct group.

Eric Hobsbawm claims that nations depend on specific symbols – what he calls “invented traditions” – as a means of indoctrinating and normalizing particular values and behaviours (1). As he writes,

It is [. . .] clear that entirely new symbols and devices came into existence as part of national movements and states, such as the national anthem (of which the British in 1740 seems to be the earliest), the national flag (still largely a variation on the French revolutionary tricolour, evolved 1790-4), or the personification of ‘the nation’ in symbol or image, either official, as with Marianne and Germania, or unofficial, as in the cartoon stereotypes of John Bull, the lean Yankee, Uncle Sam and the ‘German Michel.’” (7)

Stories also contribute to the invention of tradition: national narratives describe pivotal moments from the nation’s history by celebrating victories, explaining origins, and confirming identities. Media sources such as newspapers, radio, and television play a central role in reinforcing the national narrative and in “re-presenting the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (Anderson, B. 25). Similarly, novels can reinforce the idea of this imagined community by telling the stories – both personal and communal – of the people, places, and events that make up the nation. National

narratives thus provide the members of any given nation-state with a shared sense of collectivity, identity, and belonging. As John McLeod explains, “Community, belonging, a sense of rootedness in the land, home – each is relevant to the construction and purpose of nationalist representations. [. . .] [T]he production of symbols is important to the construction of the myth of the nation, the function of which is to unite *many* individuals into *one people*” (71-72). But what happens when some groups do not see themselves or their experiences reflected in the national narrative of this “one people”? What happens when nationalist representations exclude certain groups? As Himani Bannerji points out, “This task of ‘imagining community’ becomes especially difficult in Canada – not only because of class, gender and capital, which ubiquitously provide contentious grounds in the most culturally homogenous of societies – but because its socio-political space is saturated by elements of surplus domination due to its Eurocentric/racist/colonial context” (*Dark Side* 97). Thus, the questions remain, can symbols and stories help unite a heterogeneous society that is dominated by an Anglo-British majority? Can these invented traditions account for socio-economic and ethno-cultural differences in Canada?

As an invader-settler society, Canada possesses a national narrative that often forgets or misrepresents those who were invaded. In other words, the national narrative does not depict Canada as “an immigrant, capitalist culture on usurped land” (Brydon, “Reading” 16). To do so would be to acknowledge that Aboriginal societies existed prior to European settlement and that these societies were brutalized by European invasions. Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson point out that invader-settler cultures tend to avoid referring to the violence done to Aboriginal peoples by using only the word “settler” and therefore concealing “the real politics of these cultures” (362). They explain that the term “settler colonies” emphasizes “the very obvious majority white populations without taking account of the physical violence and representational erasure done to indigenous

communities in order to achieve that ‘whiteness’” (362). In using the term “invader-settler,” however, this violent history is reinserted into the nation’s consciousness, as are the Aboriginal peoples who suffered at the hands of white intruders. Although ethnic minorities in Canada have, like Aboriginal populations, been dismissed by mainstream society, they also have, in many cases, contributed to the devastation of Aboriginal societies (a hierarchy of power that Lee makes explicit in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*). Tamara Palmer Seiler explains that “while in Canada writers from backgrounds such as Ukrainian, Italian, South Asian, Japanese, or Caribbean cultures have been marginalized by [. . .] the privileging of British and French ethnicity and often by an added level of linguistic displacement, these writers nevertheless share with the English/French centre the position of interloper and sometimes invader *vis-à-vis* Aboriginal peoples” (“Multi-Vocality” 54). It is worth remembering, then, especially in terms of this project, that immigrants and ethnic minorities in Canada are living on stolen lands in a country they helped to build. While their powers and position are limited by the inherent racism and ethnocentrism of Canadian society, they occupy, after all, a more privileged position than do Aboriginal peoples, who were displaced by ethnic majority and minority settlers alike and who were generally misrepresented or not represented at all in Canada’s national narrative.

There is no question that nationalist discourse in Canada has historically omitted or distorted the stories of certain ethno-cultural groups, specifically Aboriginal peoples and ethnic minorities.⁸ While it is true that many early Canadian narratives do grapple with questions of diversity, it is nevertheless the case that a more singular model of the nation’s origins, particularly in terms of the two founding nations, has held considerable influence.⁹ What Canada’s invader-settler society has created is a national narrative that speaks primarily to the experiences of white middle- and upper-class English-speaking

Christian males. As Jo-Anne Lee and Linda Cardinal note, “the myth of British identity and Canada’s position in the British Empire as the country’s pre-eminent historical tradition of nation formation needs to be dismantled” (237). This myth of British identity has overwhelmed Canada’s national narrative to the extent that the voices of ethnic minorities have been silenced and ethnic minorities themselves have been positioned as “other” in a nation they helped to build. But Arun Mukherjee points out that ethnic minorities have been resisting this silence and “have challenged their otherization [sic] by the unitary notions of national identity and asserted that being ‘different’ by no means equates with being un-Canadian. Racial and ethnic minority writers, particularly Aboriginal writers, have been at the forefront in the task of rethinking and reformulating the meaning of Canada as a nation state” (*Oppositional* xiii). In doing so, these writers have subverted singular notions of Canadian identity in narratives that reinforce the plurality of Canadian society – a plurality that welcomes hybridity and difference. In an interview with Rosalia Baena, Linda Hutcheon emphasizes the value in nurturing an intercultural identity for Canada as a nation and says that she does not “feel comfortable with the model of a single ethnic identity for a nation-state. Hyphenations are merely the externalizations of the reality of hybridity. They bother you if you need a single coherent sense of citizenship or nationhood. [. . .] As soon as you try to construct an inclusive, single definition, you inevitably end up excluding” (“Critical” 289). The exclusion of certain groups is not, of course, a problem that is unique to Canada; other Western nations also have constructed exclusionary national narratives. David Theo Goldberg explains that “the heterogenous mix of populations making up the capitals of colonial empires has largely been downplayed, and indeed until quite recently all but ignored” (77). However, in creating novels that reflect

their experiences and reinterpret history, writers on ethnic and immigrant themes are laying claim to their places in the national narratives from which they have been omitted.

The five writers of this study use their fiction to overturn this experience of exclusion. They refute the myth of two founding nations by refusing to let Canada's national narrative neglect their histories or trivialize their contributions. They are, in essence, writing against this myth and adding their own ethno-cultural histories to the story of Canada. These writers represent some of "the increasingly diverse immigrants and their descendants who migrated primarily to the western provinces and central Canada in several waves throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Seiler, "Multi-Vocality" 54). They are part of an "increasingly polyglot immigration" that includes:

the Chinese who settled in British Columbia in the late 1850s; the Icelanders who settled in Manitoba in the 1870s; the Eastern-European Jews who began settling in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg in the last decades of the nineteenth century; the Ukrainians who settled in northern Alberta and other parts of the prairie provinces between 1896 and 1930 and in the cities of Ontario after the Second World War; the Italians who came to Toronto, Montreal, and other urban centres in the 1950s; and the South Asians, Southeast Asians, and Caribbeans who came to Canada in ever-greater numbers after the liberalization of immigration regulations in 1967. (Seiler, "Multi-Vocality" 54-55)

By reclaiming these origins in their fictionalized narratives, the writers of this study are making Canada home for their diverse ethno-cultural groups. Since the notion of home is based on selected inclusions and exclusions (George 2), these writers are hoping that their ethnic groups – which have been at different times threatened with exclusion¹⁰ – are

unequivocally included in the idea of Canada. To put it differently, these writers are grounding their ethnic roots in Canada in order to establish a sense of inclusion and belonging in the nation's past, present, and future.

Homes are not neutral places because imagining a home is, like imagining a nation, a political act that involves power and control since membership is extended to a chosen few and designed to keep others out (George 6-9). In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George explains that homes are more about exclusion than inclusion because they involve both screening procedures and closed borders (18). Homes embody a double nature because, while they might be places of security and comfort, they might also be sites of violence, terror, and injustice (George 22). As she writes, "Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few" (9). The writers of this study depict characters who escape from one home and try to find belonging in another. In doing so, each writer reveals a desire to be included in the "exclusive domain": they want to see themselves, their families, their ethnic groups, and their experiences represented in a plural and inclusive Canada. According to Tim Stanley, this desire points to the predominance of Canada's national narrative – what he calls a "grand narrative" – because it has the power to establish and reinforce these inclusions and exclusions:

While nationalist grand narratives purport to trace the origins of the "imagined community" that makes the nation, they in fact constitute it. They identify who belongs in the nation and in what ways. [. . .] The power of the grand narrative to define who and what is Canadian is demonstrated by the efforts of members of various ethnic groups to include themselves within it. (82, 84)

Lee, Hill, Richler, Ricci, and Urquhart are adding their ethno-cultural stories to Canada's grand narrative in order to assert their belonging in this land. The inclusive society that the characters in their novels want is a reflection of the kind of society that these writers also want for Canada – a vision that they share with other writers on immigrant and ethnic themes. Marlene Nourbese Philip, for example, explains why she needs to remember an immigrant past: “to defy a culture that wishes to forget; to rewrite a history that at best forgot and omitted, at worst lied; to seek psychic reparations; to honour those who went before; to grieve for that which was irrevocably lost (language, religion, culture), and those for whom no one grieved; to avoid having to start over again (as so many oppressed groups have had to do); to ‘save ourselves’” (*Frontiers* 56). Like Nourbese Philip, the writers of this study use their stories to remember, rewrite, and honour the past, and to reject and resist a vision of Canada that has left them out.

*

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One explores the ways Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* attempts to write the history of Chinese Canada into the founding myth of the nation. Lee returns to an originary moment in Chinese Canadian history by recreating the experiences of the Chinese labourers who helped construct the Canadian Pacific Railway. In doing so, Lee embarks on a regenerative journey into the past that examines the historical context of Chinese immigration to Canada and the racist policies that affected generations of Chinese Canadians. Both the Head Tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants in 1885 and the Chinese Immigration Act that took effect in 1923 had serious consequences for the Chinese in Canada. Specifically, these exclusionary measures exacerbated the financial burdens of Chinese labourers and forced families to remain apart for decades. As a result, a bachelor society evolved in the

Chinese Canadian community and the fear arose that, without wives in Canada, family lines would cease. This fear is depicted in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and is responsible for shaping Lee's fictional genealogy – a genealogy marked by lies, incest, adultery, and attempted suicide. Lee revisits key moments in the history of Chinese Canada and challenges dominant narratives that privilege the stories and experiences of white Anglo-British Canadians. Not only does Lee give voice to the experiences of Chinese Canadians, but she ties their difficult history to that of Canada's Native populations by providing the Wong family with the legitimizing presence of a Native ancestor. With *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee uses a history of suffering to create an authenticating myth of origins that allows her to claim a stake in the nation for Canadians of Chinese descent.

Chapter Two examines the ways Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* creates an authenticating mythology for Black Canadians that establishes their place in this land. He deconstructs the myth that colour indicates newness by showing that Blacks not only have a long history in Canada, but that they also helped build the nation. Sneja Gunew explains that, for Black Canadians, a history of slavery has “functioned as an excuse for occluding their contribution to the construction of the nation” (*Haunted* 7). While Hill revisits events that are tied to this history of slavery – including the escape of fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad and the anti-slavery raid on Harpers Ferry – he also explores the contributions made by Black Canadians in the founding of Canada, from building physical structures like roads and bridges to building ideological foundations such as equality and civil rights for ethnic minorities. These achievements, however, arise from a difficult past. As a result, Hill, like Lee, returns to a time of suffering in order to relive these successes and to connect with an originary moment in the history of Black Canada. In his novel, Hill associates this suffering with the disturbing realities of racism, slavery, oppression, adultery, and prostitution. Yet, even as he confronts these

difficult circumstances, he approaches his narrative with humour by maintaining an ironic distance from his fictional genealogy. Hill thus uses his narrator's careful research to ground the roots of Black history in Canada, while revealing that he neither takes this quest too seriously nor believes his version of the past can tell anything but one small part of the story.

Mordecai Richler also takes an ironic approach to rewriting the past. Chapter Three considers the ways in which *Solomon Gursky Was Here* offers a deliberately outrageous version of Canadian history, which Richler uses to make a serious point: that Canada's founding myths should be rewritten to include the stories and experiences of Jewish Canadians. Like Lee and Hill, Richler reinvents key moments in Canada's past and challenges the national myth of two founding peoples. He does so by placing Jews at the "beginnings" of Canada with a fictional genealogy that highlights their participation in an originary moment: the "discovery" and exploration of this land. Yet, like Hill, Richler also mocks the nostalgic quest for origins: he portrays his so-called founding family of Jewish Canadians as greedy and self-serving cheaters, liars, and crooks. As a result, he shatters idealized versions of the past, satirizing the longing to connect with people and events from a glorious line of descent. What Richler offers Jewish Canadians is thus a firm but chequered part in Canada's past, while, at the same time, adding these ignoble origins to the founding narrative of the nation.

By contrast, Nino Ricci takes a serious approach to a migrant's need for belonging in Canada. Chapter Four focuses on Ricci's trilogy: *Lives of the Saints*, *In a Glass House*, and *Where She Has Gone*. In these novels, the narrator, Vittorio Innocente, becomes overwhelmed by a nostalgia for Italy, the land of his birth. However, Vittorio's nostalgia for the homeland is detached from the social, political, and historical realities of Italy, and he fails to realize that life in his old land is no more certain or unchanging than

life in his new. As Kamboureli explains, “the truth is that the longing for one’s ancestral country is no guarantee that returning there will restore unity, for that place functions as an allegory of values that are often commemorated while the historical and social contingencies informing them are ignored” (135). By showing that Vittorio’s return to Italy cannot restore a sense of unity, Ricci moves beyond a nostalgia for a lost homeland and redirects a migrant’s gaze towards the present time and place. Indeed, in his trilogy, Ricci exposes the debilitating effects of the homeward-looking gaze and forges an authenticating myth of origins for Italians in Canada. Yet the myth that Ricci creates reveals his ambivalence towards both nations and national identities since Vittorio remains in a liminal space at the trilogy’s close: he neither embraces his origins in Canada, nor in Italy. Despite Ricci’s reluctance to unequivocally accept Canada as home, his novels nevertheless serve as a means of including the voices of Italian Canadians in the national narrative, for he reconstructs their arrival and settlement in this land and explores their personal and communal struggles as they attempt to establish a sense of belonging in the nation.

Chapter Five examines Jane Urquhart’s novel of Canadian settlement, *Away*. In this novel, Urquhart does for Irish Canadians what Lee, Hill, Richler, and Ricci do for their own ethno-cultural groups: she creates a legitimating lineage that allows her to ground their roots in this land. However, as part of the Canadian mainstream, Urquhart challenges national myths that merge the Irish with the British by constructing a fictional genealogy that emphasizes the distinct culture and history of Irish Canada. In doing so, she embraces her own ethnic heritage – her Irish origins in Canada – and lays claim to a hyphenated identity for Canadians of Irish descent. Urquhart mythologizes Irish origins through the detailed storytelling of her narrator, Esther O’Malley Robertson, who returns to ancient myths, visions, and intuitions to retell her grandmother’s story about their

family's arrival and settlement in Canada. As Esther tells this story, Urquhart reveals both her nostalgia for Ireland's mythic past and the potentially destructive nature of this type of nostalgic vision. Thus, with this contradictory treatment of nostalgia, Urquhart unsettles the very story that she seeks to tell. Like the other writers of this study, then, Urquhart problematizes the creation of her authenticating mythology, even as she inscribes the experiences of her ethno-cultural group into the national narrative.

Together, the five chapters of my thesis explore varying responses to the nostalgic revisionings of an originary moment in Canada's past: the migrant's arrival and settlement in the new land. From Lee's nostalgic rewriting of Chinese Canadian history in British Columbia to Urquhart's romantic retelling of Irish Canadian settlement in Ontario, the five writers of this study each forge a place for their ethno-cultural groups in the Canadian consciousness by constructing authenticating myths of origins in this land. But, as each chapter points out, these myths are complicated by the difficulties of writing historical narratives, including the inability to uncover absolute truth, the desire to protect family secrets, the problematic emphasis on bloodlines, and the reluctance to take the quest for origins too seriously. In their different novels, Lee, Hill, Richler, Ricci, and Urquhart express their concerns with the limitations of national-historical narratives, while each mythologizing a migrant past and giving voice to a neglected chapter in the story of Canada.

NOTES

¹ Throughout this study, the terms "new land" and "new world" describe a place imagined and invented by immigrants and their descendants. To borrow Margaret Turner's explanation, "'new world' refers to the Americas that Europeans invented for themselves and colonized, not the landmasses that were the home of coherent and permanent native cultures" (5). Criticism, she says, should not disregard "the fact that the Americas were not new in any sense to the people who had lived in them for centuries; that in making their claim of newness, Europeans dispossessed natives and appropriated both land and language; that since that initial dispossession indigenous peoples have been systematically excluded from history, culture, and

power in their own place; that this exclusion has in various forms effected a brutal suppression of the native voice" (5).

² The works I will be discussing have been written in English and represent a plurality of ethno-cultural groups that make up "English" Canada. Quebec literature about immigration – in the original or in translation – is not within the scope of this project.

³ Some of these discussions include the debate regarding the appropriation of voice and the controversy surrounding the "Writing thru Race" conference of 1994. See Miki (125-59).

⁴ See Frye's *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, and Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.

⁵ See Lowenthal (8-10) and Greene (295-297).

⁶ Six novels form the basis of Vautier's study: Jacques Godbout's *Les Têtes à Papineau*, Rudy Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People*, Jovette Marchessault's *Comme une enfant de la terre*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, George Bowering's *Burning Water*, and François Barcelo's *La Tribu*.

⁷ See McLeod (68-69) and Brennan (49).

⁸ While groups such as women, gays, and lesbians also have been excluded from nationalist representations, my particular focus is the omission suffered by various ethno-cultural groups in Canada.

⁹ For a fuller explication of the exclusionary and homogenizing nature of Canadian national narratives see Bannerji, Brydon, Francis, Lawson, Mackey, Miki, Mukherjee, Razack, and Stanley.

¹⁰ This exclusion could be physical (like that encountered by the Chinese who were prevented from entering the country between 1923 and 1947) or ideological (like that experienced by the Africans who first arrived in Canada in 1605 and whose long history in this land has been largely forgotten).

I

**Past Wrongs, Present Writes: Revisiting Historical
Realities in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe***

journey to merritt

this is the last train

ever

next week I must leave by greyhound
not to say I care
the CPR is not my father

tracks clicked as I watch
the disappearing moon

flashing

as signals do
before a change of rails

the cold breeze whips by

and every mile I see chinese workers

pitching girders

sometimes
solitary

sometimes
blood splattered

sweating
and singing

while the moon shines
a spotlight

on them

Jim Wong-Chu, *Chinatown Ghosts*

Jim Wong-Chu's poem might well have provided Sky Lee with the inspiration for the title of her novel, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990).¹ In this novel, Lee strives to recapture what is rapidly disappearing: memory of the lives and labours of Chinese settlers in Canada. Like the moon that shines a spotlight on the Chinese railway workers in Wong-Chu's poem, Lee's novel shines a light on key events in the neglected history of Chinese Canada. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* provides Chinese Canadians with a triple genealogy based on historical, familial, and symbolic lines of descent. It interweaves the historical realities of Chinese immigration to Canada, including exploitation, racism, and oppression, with the personal struggles of its fictional characters, men and women whose lives were shaped by these realities. In *Beyond Silence*, Lien Chao explains that "genealogy has become a popular format across the generic divisions of both prose and poetry in Chinese Canadian literature. Through this format, the writers present a growing community that has gone through a migration phase and a hundred-year marginalization before achieving a reterritorialization and seeing its descendants writing in English" (28).² Although Lee begins her narrative with the patriarch Wong Gwei Chang, her particular interest lies in the four generations of women whose voices allow her to challenge the tenets of patriarchal rule and to rewrite Canada's recorded history. Lee uses landmark events – the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the imposition of the head tax, the ratification of the Chinese Exclusion Act – to establish the beginnings of Chinese history in Canada.³ As she inserts Chinese Canadians into the national narrative from which they have been omitted, she describes a nostalgic return to an authentic, though difficult, period in Canadian history. Not limited to pleasant events with positive outcomes, nostalgia can be roused by difficult and painful circumstances. As David Lowenthal remarks, "Even horrendous memories can evoke nostalgia" (7). The

nostalgic return to a migrant past in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* raises a number of questions: how does Lee use her fictional genealogy to re-map history? In what context does nostalgia appear in her text? And how does she turn a problematic history into an authenticating narrative?

This chapter will approach these questions by arguing that Lee's portrayal of a time of suffering in the lives of Chinese Canadians enables her to create an authenticating mythology that subverts dominant narratives of white settler Canada while legitimizing the Chinese presence in the nation. In interviews and essays, Lee has expressed her interest in exploring the formation of Chinese Canadian identities. As she says,

“Canadian” is not just hockey and apple pie. It means all kinds of things anything from any immigrant, new or old – because we’re all immigrants here. None of us have been [sic] in Canada long enough to set cultural standards for other people. [. . .] Therefore, what we Chinese Canadians find out in our identity seeking work is just as relevant to a . . . Yugoslav Canadian. [. . .] My efforts in seeking Chinese Canadian identity [are] more Canadian than hockey. (“Sharon Lee” 97)

For Lee, then, the need to establish an identity in Canada is a defining Canadian trait, one that affects migrant and post-migrant generations alike. In *Inalienable Rice*, Bennett Lee explains that the search for identity is a recurring theme in the work of second- and third-generation Chinese Canadian writers, including Sky Lee.⁴ He notes that “the question of identity [. . .] leads to an inquiry into the past, both private and collective. This inquiry often starts close at hand with the family, resulting in a kind of autobiographical detective story, a literary sleuthing into personal history” (3).⁵ Lee undertakes this inquiry into the past in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* with a narrator, Kae Ying Woo, who is obsessed with family history and with questions of identity. As a fourth-generation Chinese Canadian,

Kae worries that her identity is “defective” (41) and explains, “All my life I saw double. All I ever wanted was authenticity” (128). Throughout the novel, Kae searches for an authenticating identity and uses her stories to establish a sense of belonging in Canada for her family and community. As her friend Hermia says, ““Kae, your chinamen stories are about, how shall I say – trying to fit in any way we can”” (138). That Kae uses her stories to help her “fit in” reinforces the notion that Lee is using her novel as part of her “identity seeking work.” Lee explains that when she started writing *Disappearing Moon Cafe* she was “a cultural outsider” who was “marginalized, excluded from the centre of dominant cultural norms” (“Cultural Politics” 10). However, due to her novel’s critical success,⁶ Lee is not only moving away from the margins but is successfully including Chinese Canadians in Canada’s national narrative.

Lee is doing so, in part, by reinventing the beginnings of Chinese history in Canada. In his review of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Joshua S. Mostow writes that “Lee eschews both the delicacy and the nostalgic return to the homeland that one finds in *The Joy Luck Club*” (176).⁷ While it is true Lee avoids a nostalgic return to the homeland, her novel does undertake a nostalgic return “home” to the moment of arrival and settlement in the new land. As Kae returns to her genealogical beginnings in Canada, she struggles to reclaim an “essential” origin that will give her family a sense of belonging in the nation; as a result, she glorifies the moment when her immigrant ancestors arrived and settled in their new land. Kae longs for a time when it was clear what it meant to be Chinese in Canada, even if this was a difficult thing to be. She is therefore nostalgic for a time when answers were forthcoming and, as she says, “the intricate complexities of a family with chinese roots could be massaged into a suant, digestible unit [sic]” (19). The problem, however, is that the search for origins is an act of nostalgia that can never uncover the truth that Kae seeks.

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The origin is not a sacred entity that, when discovered, offers the truth unsullied to its discoverer; rather, the origin is an elusive entity that suggests different lines of enquiry and multiple interpretations of past events. As Foucault writes, “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (142). The desire to revisit the origin represents a nostalgic attempt to recover an essential truth that, in fact, does not exist: “The world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value” (Foucault 155). However, even without the finality of an essential truth, the quest offers a value of its own; Kae, for example, embarks on a journey that allows her to reconnect with key figures from her family’s past and with key moments from Canada’s history. Although Lee recognizes the nostalgia that fuels her protagonist’s quest, her own nostalgia for Canada’s migrant past permeates her text. Nostalgia in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* can thus be read on two levels. On the first level is Kae’s longing for a “sordid” family story (65) and Lee’s exploration of the romantic distortions that are the possible result of this nostalgia. On the second level is Lee’s own desire to return to historical beginnings in a narrative that strives to recapture the immigrant histories of Chinese settlers in Canada. At a presentation in Korea in 1996, Lee explained why her desire to rediscover a neglected history plays such a prominent role in her writing:

We cannot begin to understand ourselves in the face of the history that we were given. [. . .] Now that writers of colour are looking back at history, it becomes imperative for us to fill in the gaps. [. . .] Our task, I believe, is to begin the process of educating ourselves. [. . .] Writing *Disappearing Moon*

Cafe (1990) was an attempt to do just that. I wanted to trace a trajectory that was not only genealogical or chronological, but also a process of self-discovery as one moves away from a place of ignorance to a place of awareness. This was an understanding that could only be arrived at through a sense of history and place which I had to find or reinvent because it was not always readily available to me.

(“Cultural Politics” 10-13)

Lee undertakes a quest for origins in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* that enables her to address an absence in the story of Canada, while also allowing her to question standard historical interpretations that value one truth at the expense of another.

The complexities of this quest can be explored in terms of Kae’s self-reflexive musings on the truthfulness of her narrative. Oppressed by the silence that surrounds her past, Kae researches her family origins in order to connect with her lost history, both personal and communal. This connection is tenuous, however, because Kae questions historical “truth” and knows she can manipulate her version of the past through the selective powers of inclusion and exclusion. As she says, “Like my mother, I will speak of other times only if they were happy ones. Yes, yes, [. . .] only happy mentionables for the family record” (180). However, as she tells her story, Kae suppresses these happy moments and returns instead to “the horrendous events” of her family history (192). It is only by summoning her ancestors’ painful beginnings in Canada that Kae can understand her immigrant past and the “Chineseness” that has always made her so uneasy (66).

Revisiting past events allows Kae to satisfy her present needs, especially her need for some kind of authenticity. She admits that she wants to “rewrite” her family history (21) and knows that, in doing so, she must not succumb to the emotional extremes of elation and remorse: the past should neither be wholly celebrated nor wholly regretted. Kae avoids her uncle’s stories, in particular, because she realizes that he is paralyzed by grief:

“I would have nothing to do with his stories,” she writes, “His stories reached for his forebears but never went beyond himself wallowing in self-pity” (174). She refuses to fall victim to this self-destructive remorse and focuses, instead, on her quest to discover “the real truth” (132). That Kae wants to learn “the real truth” reveals her longing for what she calls “the integrity, the sacred legitimacy, of my family origins” (85). Although she openly pursues this quest, she knows it is destined to fail because true origins can never be found. As she contemplates her uncle’s version of their family’s past, she asks, “Was his story the same as my story? Or should I have said, is history the same as mystery?” (66). With these questions, Kae casts doubt over her version of past events. Like the other narrators of this study – Langston, Moses, Vittorio, and Esther – Kae realizes that she can approach the truth with her stories, but that she can never grasp it as a unified whole: some parts of her history will always remain untold. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* reveals the impossibility of uncovering an absolute truth even as its protagonist attempts to satisfy her desire to essentialize. In other words, a text that questions the glory of the origin craves the origin. Lee thus uses the overtly paradoxical nature of Kae’s quest to construct a genealogy that is subverted even as it is asserted. By subverting the genealogy, Lee throws traditional history into question; by asserting the genealogy, she adds Chinese-Canadian voices to the very history she wishes to subvert. What she produces, in the end, is a mythologized history that questions “truth” while relying on a multiplicity of truths – a multiplicity that together provides a glimpse into the historical beginnings of Chinese Canada.

Lee’s non-linear narrative enables her to retrieve the fragments of this lost history while also challenging the ways history has traditionally been recorded. Unlike conventional historical narratives that approach events chronologically, Lee’s narrative moves between past and present, and between different moments in the past, a strategy

that Hill and Richler also employ in their fictionalized histories. Throughout *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Kae gathers the memories that her mother, her father, her nanny, and her uncles are willing to share in order to connect the fragmented pieces of her family history. In some cases, these memories are difficult to retrieve because they evoke the pain, hardship, and shame that characterize her family's past. As a result, Kae's search for origins does not satisfy her desire for stability, but unsettles the silence that protects the past, disrupting what Kae calls "a chinese-in-Canada trait, a part of the great wall of silence and invisibility we have built around us" (180). Kae sees silence as a defining characteristic of Chinese Canadians because they use it to protect their uncertain position in the nation: if they can maintain their silent invisibility, they can continue to live and work on the margins of Canadian society. However, Donald C. Goellnicht explains that this is a flawed approach which "plays into the hands of the dominant culture" (318). He writes that a "self-imposed silence [. . .] amounts to an erasure of themselves, a denial of their history. Such secrecy was a necessary tool for survival in the world of restrictive immigration, but the next generation views it as a damaging cultural characteristic that must be overcome through narrative telling" (318). Thus, as part of this next generation, Kae strives to reclaim a denied history and, when confronted with her family's silence and unanswered questions, fills in the gaps herself, thereby constructing a genealogy that combines history with imagination and recollection.

Gayle Greene explains that the past is a construct that is ever-changing and open to revision because, as she writes, "Memory revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies; it includes or omits, embellishes or represses, decorates or drops, according to imperatives of its own" (293). Memories, with their inconsistencies and uncertainties, contribute to Kae's imaginative reconstruction of the past by offering "yet another version of another

story” (163). By speaking for her deceased relatives – from her great-grandfather to her Aunt Suzie – Kae juxtaposes various perspectives and crosses boundaries of age, gender, and time as she strives to reconnect with emotions and motives of the past. Chao explains that this “episodic narrative mode helps to facilitate the dialogues between the past and present, self and collective, male and female, without ordering the participants” (“Collective Self” 250). Lee’s non-linear narrative thus enables her to retrieve lost fragments of Chinese Canadian history in a text that, through its intricate dialogues, reflects the genuine act of remembering – an act that does not proceed in chronological sequence but that moves back and forth in time and that follows, as Kae says, “a million possible threads” (66). Lee portrays Kae’s regenerative journey into the past as a search for origins that begins and ends with Kae’s great-grandfather, Wong Gwei Chang. Through this cyclical narrative mode, Lee challenges linear conceptions of memory and shows that the silenced history of the Chinese in Canada can be imaginatively reconstructed piece by fragmented piece.

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Disappearing Moon Cafe enacts this imaginative reconstruction by creating an authenticating myth of origins based, in part, on the suffering of early Chinese immigrants in Canada. Lee uses Gwei Chang’s personal story to weave the communal history of Chinese labourers into her narrative. In an early incarnation, Gwei Chang is a bone-gatherer hired by the Chinese Benevolent Association to collect the bones of Chinese labourers who died while building the Canadian Pacific Railway. Gwei Chang’s story begins in 1892, one year after the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria commissioned the search for more than 300 unidentified remains; when found, these remains were to be returned to China for “decent burial” (Wickberg 24). As Gwei

Chang searches for bones along the railway, he encounters secluded campsites and small Chinatowns filled with former railway workers. Gwei Chang notes their poverty and isolation, and realizes that they were “left behind to rot because the CPR had reneged on its contract to pay the Chinese railway workers’ passage home” (12). Lee conveys the hunger, cold, loneliness, and despair of the former labourers as they interact with Gwei Chang, sharing their meagre supplies with him and begging him for news from their villages. Many of these men left families in China in order to fulfil their dreams of wealth and comfort in “Gold Mountain,” a mythical land of untold riches.⁸ Lee opens her novel in this mythologized setting, but shatters the dream by depicting the reality: death and suffering on Gold Mountain. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* thus demonstrates that the origins of Chinese Canada are firmly embedded in a time and a place that resonate with pain and hardship.

Lee shows that, at first, Gwei Chang sees little that connects his life with these abandoned men and the forgotten bones. But through the trope of the bone-gatherer,⁹ Lee emphasizes the contributions of the Chinese railway workers and gradually draws Gwei Chang into their stories. As he searches for bones in the interior of British Columbia, Gwei Chang digs into the past and uncovers lost Chinese ancestors – pioneers whose bones lie in the soil of a nation they helped to build. When Gwei Chang finally touches these bones, he is awed by all they represent:

How could he not be touched by the spirit of these wilderness uncles who had trekked on an incredible journey and pitted their lives against mountain rocks and human cruelty? [. . .] By then, in the utter peace of the forests, he had met them all – uncles who had climbed mountain heights then fallen from them, uncles who had drowned in deep surging waters, uncles who had clawed to their deaths in the dirt of caved-in mines. By then, he wasn’t afraid and they weren’t alien any more.

Like them, he would piece himself together again from scattered, shattered bone
and then endure.¹⁰ (12-13)

These bones connect Gwei Chang (and, by extension, his great-granddaughter, Kae) with earlier generations of Chinese immigrants whose suffering represents the sacrifices made by Chinese Canadians in the settling of the nation. As a bone-gatherer, Gwei Chang participates in this history and realizes that these men and their lives are inextricably intertwined with his own. Their history is the history of every Chinese Canadian from Gwei Chang to Kae and beyond: it is a collective history that represents the struggles of generations of Chinese Canadians. Indeed, as Lee tells Gwei Chang's personal history, she is also documenting the communal history of 17,000 railway workers recruited from China and Hong Kong, 600 of whom were killed during CPR construction (Wickberg 22). Chao explains that the history Lee depicts in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* offers "a counterweight to the denial of Chinese Canadian experience in existing Canadian history and a rewriting of the dominant history from the viewpoint of the Chinese Canadian community" ("Collective Self" 243). Lee's description of Gwei Chang's bone-gathering expedition, in conjunction with her portrait of the suffering of the Chinese railway workers, revises "official" versions of Canadian nation-building – versions written and recorded in dominant narratives that disregard the significant contributions of Chinese settlers. Lee returns to a time of suffering in the lives of Chinese Canadians in order to re-map these dominant narratives by giving voice to her community and its neglected history. Yet this task is infused with nostalgia because the bones, like the past itself, are scattered and fragmented and can never be retrieved as a unified whole. Though the nostalgic quest reaches for an impossible unity, the bones it uncovers can nonetheless provide Chinese Canadians with a valuable piece from an authenticating past.

Lee further authenticates the Chinese presence in Canada by weaving the bone-gatherer's story with that of a young Native woman. Starving, alone, and lost in the wilderness of British Columbia, Gwei Chang faces imminent death until Kelora Chen finds him and leads him home to the cabin she shares with her stepfather, Chen Gwok Fai. Gwei Chang soon realizes that Kelora is an unusual Native, for she speaks Chinese and is the natural daughter of a Native woman and a white man who died when she was a child. Gwok Fai, a railway worker, discovered the cabin on the cliff and decided to stay with mother and daughter, raising the child as his own and teaching her Chinese. When, many years later, Gwei Chang arrives at the cabin, Gwok Fai welcomes this Chinese migrant into his home and his communities, including the Native community of Kelora's extended family, and the Chinese community of former railway workers. After Gwei Chang regains his health, Gwok Fai helps him locate Chinese burial sites, and Kelora takes him as her husband according to Native custom. Although some of Kelora's maternal aunts and uncles initially question her choice, they respect her wishes and allow her to solemnize her union with Gwei Chang. As Lee writes, "Not everybody was sure about another chinaman, but Kelora seemed to prefer it, and that was enough for them" (8). This reaction serves as a contrast to the homogenizing impulse of white society where the Chinese are unwelcome and are separated as much as possible from the mainstream. That first Gwok Fai and later Gwei Chang are accepted into the Native community of the Shi'atko clan legitimizes their place on Canadian soil: the presence of the Chinese in Canada has been approved by the original inhabitants.

Lee charts the beginnings of a Chinese genealogy in Canada with her idyllic portrayal of the romance between Gwei Chang and Kelora. Lee idealizes Kelora as a Native figure whose "wildness" (14) and "casual nakedness" (9) emphasize her inherent purity and innocence. With this stereotyped portrayal of the "noble savage," Lee

explores the process by which Gwei Chang forges a place for himself in his new land. Newly arrived in Canada, Gwei Chang feels inadequate beside Kelora, “a girl, younger than he. [She] made him feel uncivilized, uncouth” (3). Gwei Chang sees in Kelora a young Native woman who embodies qualities he requires in his new Canadian identity, for Kelora is a skilled tracker, is intelligent and intuitive, and is living a simple life free from the constraints of contemporary society. What Kelora offers is an authenticity associated with the land itself. Alan Lawson claims that the settler subject “exercises authority over the Indigene and the land while translating his (but rarely her) desire for the Indigene and the land into a desire for Native authenticity” (26). Lee, then, portrays Gwei Chang as a Chinese settler who has done what so many white settlers have also done when marrying Native women: he is expressing his yearning for “the authority of the Indigene” (Lawson 26). As Terry Goldie explains, white settlers do not need “to instill spirit in the Other but to gain it from the Other. Through the indigene the white character gains soul and the potential to become of the land. A quite appropriate pun is that it is only by going native that the European arrivant can become native” (*Fear* 16). Gwei Chang mimics this process in his relationship with Kelora, a Native woman whose love and acceptance allow him to take his place in this land.

Lee romanticizes Kelora and the Native way of life as a contrast to the demands and expectations of life in China or in mainstream Canada. Apart from Gwei Chang’s brief time with Kelora, he is never happy in his new land and remains nostalgic for the “simple” life he once shared with her. This depiction of the Native “Other” is problematic because Lee adopts a white European stereotype and unquestioningly applies it to the Natives of her narrative: nowhere does she subvert this construction. Rather, she reinforces this image in the novel’s closing scene when Kelora appears as a vision to Gwei Chang: “She, keeper of the fire, covering him with intense desire [. . .].

Pure and naked” (236-37). Even as the story ends, Lee stresses the purity of this idyllic romance between a Chinese man and a Native woman – a woman whose “noble savagery” and “simple” way of life remain the unattainable and unquestioned ideal. Despite the intensity of his feelings for Kelora, a young Gwei Chang allows the purity of their love to be tainted from the outside: when he receives a letter from his mother in China, he suddenly stops admiring Kelora’s “wild nature” and sees instead an “animal” (234). Gwei Chang soon leaves Kelora to “do his duty” by marrying a “real wife from China” (235, 233). Although this romance ends with Kelora’s untimely death and Gwei Chang’s everlasting guilt, it nonetheless reveals how Lee scripts a genealogy that brings Chinese settlers and Native peoples together in a narrative that authenticates the Chinese presence in Canada.

The child born to Kelora and Gwei Chang plays a significant part in Lee’s authenticating mythology by representing the commingling of Native, white, and Chinese ancestries. As Kae’s grandfather, Wong Ting An provides the link to an ancestral past that is tied to the natural freedom and love of his mother’s Native clan, to the exploits of the white settlers of the region, and to the difficult labours and isolation of his Chinese father and grandfather. Yet Lee complicates relations between Chinese and Native populations by exploring inequalities of power. Timothy J. Stanley explains that the “British Columbia Chinese were at one and the same time people displaced by colonialism and those who helped to displace others” (101). It is this complex relationship that Lee uncovers when she shows that, like British and French settlers and explorers, other ethno-cultural groups took advantage of the Natives of North America (a point that Richler makes explicit in terms of Jewish-Native relations in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*). In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee portrays Gwok Fai as the exception, for he remains ever loyal to his adopted daughter and grandson. Yet the

mistreatment of Kelora and Ting An by Gwei Chang and his family points to the abuse of Native populations. Chao convincingly argues that Lee is here making a political statement and writes that the relationship between Gwei Chang and Kelora “not only suggests an unrecorded mixed kinship between the Chinese Canadians and the native people, but the exploitation of the latter’s generosity by immigrants of all races. [Lee] challenges all non-native groups in North America who have made their settlement and prosperity in this land at the expense of the native people” (“Collective Self” 247, 249). Exploited by white society as members of an “unwanted” race, the Chinese themselves exploit the Natives by using them to bolster their own fortunes. The oppressed therefore become the oppressors.

Lee demonstrates that Gwei Chang, in particular, abuses his position of power by twice betraying his Native wife: first when he leaves her, and second when he misuses the loyalty of their son. Gwei Chang not only abandons Kelora and their unborn child, but he lets years pass before he tells Ting An that he is his father. Growing up in the cabin on the cliff, Ting An loses his mother to illness when he is two and his grandfather ten years later. He then considers himself an orphan, devoting himself to Gwei Chang, the man who employs him for over two decades and gives him “the protection of the Wong name” (233). The relationship between Gwei Chang and Ting An is described as a formal one of employer and employee: “Gwei Chang was the fat-bellied boss; he wasn’t an overtly affectionate man, but in all these years, Ting An had never had much occasion to question his loyalty to him. After all, he was a man easily admired, easily adhered to, especially if one was alone in the world” (116). Gwei Chang could have made amends when he is reunited with Ting An; instead, he takes advantage of Ting An’s obvious devotion and vulnerability in order to gain a hard-working and dedicated employee who answers his every call.

Gwei Chang is not the only one who takes advantage of his son's generous loyalty, for Ting An is also mistreated by other members of the Wong family. Lee Mui Lan, Gwei Chang's wife from China, knows how hard Ting An works, yet dismisses him as "just another worker [. . .] a nameless nobody" (35). Although her son, Wong Choy Fuk, considers Ting An "his best buddy" (33), he takes advantage of his friend's loyalty by letting him do all the work in the Wong family business while he stands lazily by, gambling and drinking with his "no-good chums" (35). Choy Fuk's wife, however, is guilty of doing the most harm to Ting An. Motivated by her loveless marriage, Chan Fong Mei turns to Ting An both for affection and for children. Her goal is to have "a little family to... take care of" (183). Though Ting An wants to marry her, Fong Mei has no intention of leaving her husband and simply watches as her lover, abandoned like his mother before him, self-destructs. Ting An, with his Native ancestry, thus serves a dual purpose in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*: he legitimizes the Chinese presence in Canada by providing the Wong family with "authentic" origins, and he shows how a cycle of racism and oppression can be repeated down through the generations.

In her search for origins, Kae unexpectedly discovers that her roots lie in Canada. Her Native and European ancestries come as a surprise, for she expects to claim her "righteous inheritance to a pure bloodline" (66). Instead, she learns that her family line is "impure" because Ting An, a man whom people call "half-indian – his mother a savage" (54), is, in fact, her biological grandfather. As Kae gradually gathers the pieces of her family history, she explains that "Ting An hardly knew a closeness to kin. His mother was an indian dead of a fever by the time he was two" (114). Kae later admits that "Ting An is my grandfather" (184). Kae's dream of a "pure bloodline" is thus shattered by her realization that her origins include Native blood. Lee, therefore, reveals that, although the Chinese of her novel pursue a myth of pure origins, no such

origins exist. Yet her narrative suggests that origins need not be “pure” to provide authenticity. In fact, Lee uses Kae’s “impure” origins to redefine what it means to be Canadian: the new bloodline that emerges provides Kae with more authenticity than could the “pure bloodline” she was hoping to inherit. Lee thus creates a mythology that extends a racially mixed bloodline as one that redefines standard notions of Canadian identity, and that reinterprets relations between Chinese settlers and Native populations as a means of rewriting the beginnings of Chinese migration and settlement in Canada.

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Lee’s creation of an originary myth involves the fictionalization of the human stories behind historical government policies – what Alison Calder calls “the private impact of public codes” (10). Lee re-maps Canadian history by giving voice to the suffering, isolation, and exclusion of early Chinese immigrants in Canada. In doing so, she identifies and denounces the systemic racism that oppressed entire generations of Chinese Canadians and that helped determine the course of Chinese settlement in Canada. Although their labour was vital to the construction of the railway, Chinese immigrants were subject to unique restrictions and fines. Beginning in 1885, the Canadian government required Chinese immigrants to pay a head tax of \$50 each; the tax increased to \$100 in 1900 and to \$500 in 1903 (Granatstein 348).¹¹ When the head tax failed to end Chinese immigration to Canada, the House of Commons passed the Chinese Immigration Bill (also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act), which effectively prevented the Chinese from entering Canada between 1923 and 1947.¹² As a result, Chinese labourers were unable to send for wives and prospective brides from China: they were trapped in a bachelor society and could either accept their oppression and forsake their opportunities for marriage and children, or could resist their oppression and execute

dangerous illegal manoeuvres to bring Chinese women to Canada.¹³ Gwei Chang chooses the latter option when it is time for his son Choy Fuk to marry. His scheme to secure a bride from China for his son illustrates the risk and expense that Chinese Canadians were willing to take in order to overcome the restrictions of discriminatory government policies: Gwei Chang is willing to bribe government officials and risk an investigation in order to accomplish his goal (58). He sends Ting An to negotiate carefully with “those customs ghosts” and his success is declared “a miracle” in Chinatown (117) – the Chinese community is surprised and impressed when one of its own manages to defy “the law of the land” (221). Lee thus depicts the loneliness and desperation in Vancouver’s Chinatown in order to fill a gap in Canada’s history and to underline the human suffering behind government policies that discriminated against the Chinese in Canada.

Disappearing Moon Cafe enacts a further fictionalization of the personal stories behind historical events with a sensational murder case that lends a semblance of truth to the novel as a whole.¹⁴ In July of 1924, a Scottish-born nursemaid named Janet Smith was found dead of a gunshot wound in a fashionable Vancouver neighbourhood. Although the police first labelled the death a suicide, murder was soon declared and Smith’s fellow servant, the “houseboy” Wong Foon Sing, was the prime suspect. While the alleged murder is an established historical event, Lee reinvents this history by romanticizing relations between Smith and Wong, and by approaching the allegations from the perspective of Vancouver’s Chinese community. Lee suggests the possibility of an illicit romance when Gwei Chang and his followers interrogate Foon Sing. Speaking of Foon Sing, one Chinatown merchant observes, ““He looks like a beautiful boy. Women like beautiful boys. Maybe there’s a lot more going on that he’s not telling us about”” (76). The possibility of romance between Foon Sing and Janet reminds Gwei

Chang of his own love for Kelora: "For a precious instant, he remembered another smooth caress. One he once cherished. For a brief moment, he remembered a time when he had soared beyond all human reach" (78).¹⁵ That Lee returns to this lost love in the midst of the interrogation suggests a parallel between Gwei Chang and Foon Sing, for both men were engaged in passionate romances that ended in death for the women involved. On the one hand, Lee might have drawn this parallel to expose the "racial chasm" separating ethnic groups (223), and to show the impossibility, at least at this moment in Canada's past, of successful interracial romance. On the other hand, Lee might have used this parallel to humanize Foon Sing, to show that he is not a heartless murderer but a man who, like Gwei Chang, made a mistake. Lee suggests that Foon Sing might have committed the murder out of a mixture of passion and frustration.¹⁶ In reinventing the circumstances of this unsolved murder,¹⁷ Lee uses a well-known event to further authenticate the Chinese presence in Canada because, no matter how difficult these circumstances were for the Chinese community, they serve as a reminder of the presence and perseverance of Chinese Canadians in early twentieth-century Vancouver. In fact, Lee explains that Chinese Canadians were determined to remain in Canada and that white society's racist response to the death of Janet Smith could not drive them from the homes and businesses they had established in this land: "Many of them had already passed many-times-ten years over here. No more could they say, 'I've seen too much of their white hate,' pack up, sell out and move back like so many others before them. More and more, memories of the old villages had faded into a vague distance, too far to retrace now. And their roots had sunk deeper in this land, so deep that to pull up stakes would mean death" (70-71). Lee, then, can be seen as using this racially-charged case both to provide a personal context for a notorious historical event and to show that Chinese

Canadians had forged a place in the nation that they were not willing to relinquish, even in the face of “white hate.”

Indeed, race is a contentious issue in the murder case because Foon Sing’s alleged guilt reflects on the entire Chinese Canadian community. Lee gives voice to the insecurities and concerns of this beleaguered group by revealing its fear that a guilty verdict for Foon Sing means a guilty verdict for the Chinese: Chinese men would be portrayed as lecherous murderers who prey on innocent white females. This, in fact, is exactly what the proposed Janet Smith Bill implied, for it was a piece of legislation that sought to protect white women by determining that they could no longer be employed in the same household as Asian men.¹⁸ As Kae explains, “At this critical time, such a proposal not only blatantly implied that Wong Foon Sing had murdered the girl but made criminal suspects of all Chinese men” (224). Two opposing positions emerge in the Chinese community regarding the proposed legislation. The younger generation wants to fight the bill with a boycott; the older generation insists that a boycott is unnecessary and risky. In Lee’s fictionalized version of this historical event, the patriarch Gwei Chang, head of the Wong Clan Association, emerges as a mythic figure who determines Chinatown’s response to the bill when he betrays his lifelong friends and followers by siding with the young Chinese and supporting the boycott. With this decision comes victory for the Chinese community. As Kae’s uncle says, “‘It was a historical landmark in British Columbia’s usual pattern of interracial relations. [. . .] Chinatown fought back the rising tide of virulent hatred headed their way, and for a change, they won’” (68). The blatant racism of the proposed Janet Smith Bill motivates Chinese Canadians to resist their oppression; as a result, they transform a difficult situation into an empowering event – an event that becomes “Chinatown’s first real success story” (227). By intertwining fiction with history in her portrayal of the Janet Smith case, Lee articulates

the Chinese perspective on a highly publicized incident, and empowers Chinese Canadians by commemorating one of their earliest victories.¹⁹

Lee rewrites history from the standpoint of Chinese Canada by exploring the personal impact of public policies that alone were applied to the Chinese. These stories of hardship and discrimination legitimize the place of the Chinese in Canada with the message: *Through our suffering we have earned our place in this land*. Like the other writers of this study, Lee moves what has been lost, forgotten, or ignored into the national consciousness, and thus works against the master narratives of Canada by striving “to maintain at the center of national memory what the dominant group would often like to forget” (Singh 6). But the history of Chinese men in Canada forms only one part of the story: Chinese women also have a long history in this land. Lee continues her revisionist project as she moves from a male to a female line of descent, and thereby reveals that Chinese Canadian women also carry the burden of a painful immigrant past.

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Lee questions patriarchal social structures as she recreates the suffering of a triply oppressed group – immigrant minority women. With her depictions of Mui Lan and Fong Mei, Lee returns to the origins of Kae’s matriarchal line and gives voice to Chinese women, a group that has historically been silenced partly as a result of their subservient position in Chinese culture.²⁰ The anthology *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* addresses this silence: “Canada’s Chinese community possesses a long and rich past in this country. However, little of our history has been recorded. Canadian history textbooks have focused on English and French explorers and politicians, ignoring aboriginal peoples, people of other racial and cultural backgrounds, women and workers. The few texts which do mention Chinese Canadians talk primarily about the history of the

men” (Sugiman 11). In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee focuses extensively on the history of the women and inserts their untold stories, both personal and communal, into the national narrative. According to Gary Boire, many post-colonial writers create “new histories” which often perform both revelatory and revolutionary roles (1). The new history that Lee creates for Chinese Canadian women fulfils its revelatory role when it illuminates their past experiences, and fulfils its revolutionary role when it speaks out against their oppression. The act of writing is itself revolutionary, for it enables Lee to rewrite history by subverting stereotypes of quiet and obedient Asian women. In doing so, she reacts against the commands of patriarchy as she traces Kae’s female line, beginning with the migrant histories of Mui Lan and Fong Mei.

Kae returns to the mother (but not the motherland) when she recreates her great-grandmother’s experiences as a recent immigrant in Vancouver’s Chinatown. Although Mui Lan is not a blood relative (the bloodline follows from Fong Mei’s adulterous affair with Ting An), Kae sees her as an important predecessor, as a woman whose actions altered the direction of the Wong family line. That such an influential member of Kae’s family is not her blood relative emphasizes the paradoxical nature of her quest: origins exist yet do not exist. Lee thus uses Kae’s connection with Mui Lan to show that the quest for origins can be an imaginary conception; the fact that Kae recognizes Mui Lan as the founding mother of her Chinese line is as relevant as any bloodline they might share. With these complex relations, Lee questions the possibility of constructing a reliable genealogy, while simultaneously proving that such a construction is possible, as long as the imagination plays a prominent role.

Kae connects with her origins in Canada when she envisions Mui Lan’s personal struggles with the loneliness and isolation caused by her arrival and settlement in Vancouver. Although Mui Lan, like the other women of her village, eagerly anticipated a

reunion with her husband in the comfort of Gold Mountain, her dream is shattered when, in 1911, she finally arrives in Canada with her teenaged son and discovers she is one of few Chinese women in a society filled with “bachelor” men.²¹ Living and working in this repressive space, Mui Lan misses her community of women in China. Kae explains that Mui Lan’s “old home in the village [was] made up almost entirely of women except for the children and a few old men. At the time, Mui Lan’s position in the village was a high status one. Her husband’s overseas prosperity gave her a lot of clout in her community and she enjoyed that. She missed the daily sweep of woman-talk from morning till night [. . .]. In this welter of woman-sounds, Mui Lan was at her happiest” (25-26). Kae’s vision of Mui Lan’s former community parallels Lee’s description of the community her own mother left behind. In an informal panel discussion, Lee once said,

Women love women in my sense of the Asian community, which has, as its source, the village where my mother came from. It was very hard for her to come to Canada here. It’s because she came from a very loving women’s community and into this really bleak Western alienation. But in the village she came from, there was a whole community of women living and working together, loving each other and they could never appreciate that until they left. (*Telling It* 122-23)

Lee thus returns to her own mother and her family’s migrant past when she explores Mui Lan’s struggle to come to terms with the love she has lost and the sacrifice she has made as a Chinese immigrant woman in a new land. The parallel between Lee’s mother and Mui Lan gives *Disappearing Moon Cafe* an air of authenticity since Lee uses personal experiences to create a convincing portrait of migration and settlement in Canada.

Lee explores a migrant woman’s private pain when she shows that the love and support Mui Lan enjoyed in China is not replaced with a fulfilling family life in Canada.

Neither Mui Lan nor her son can connect with Gwei Chang who, set in his bachelor ways, only communicates briefly with them and spends much of “his time huddled around the back dining-room tables in a tight clique of old men muttering softly about hard times and the old days” (33). Like these lonely bachelor men, Mui Lan suffers as a result of restrictive government policies: the head tax and the Exclusion Act have prevented these men from having wives and Mui Lan from having friends. Devoid of female companionship, Mui Lan withdraws into herself: “Mui Lan’s nightmare was loneliness. She arrived and found only silence. A stone silence that tripped her up when she tried to reach out. Gold Mountain men were like stone. She looked around for women to tell her what was happening, but there were none” (26). Mui Lan cannot avoid the pain and loneliness that are the result of life in a bachelor society where men and women alike suffer as victims of racist and exclusionary government policies. With one woman’s private pain, Lee probes the personal impact of public codes and mythologizes the origins of the founding mothers of Chinese Canada.

Lee reconsiders the role of women in Chinese Canadian culture when she turns Kae’s gaze towards these founding mothers. By giving her protagonist the freedom to comment on the narrative process, Lee continually plays with the authenticity of her fictional genealogy, especially when certain elements are unabashedly romantic. For example, Kae acknowledges her tendency to romanticize her female predecessors when she says, “In the telling of their stories, I get sucked into criticizing their actions, but how can I allow my grandmother and great-grandmother to stay maligned? Perhaps, as Hermia suggested, they were ungrounded women, living with displaced chinamen, and everyone trapped by circumstances. I prefer to romanticize them as a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins” (145). Although the word “romanticize” can carry negative connotations, it has positive implications in this instance because it

denotes Lee's (and Kae's) myth-making strategy by alerting readers to the creative aspects of the reconstructive act. When Kae reveals that Mui Lan, labelled simply as a "merchant's wife" (28) in her entry papers to Canada, soon becomes a more astute merchant than her husband and runs the family restaurant with precision, she is reinventing her great-grandmother as a woman who escapes the confines of her gendered subject-position. Lee thus uses Kae's creative reconstructions to rewrite history by demonstrating what a woman in Mui Lan's position might well have achieved. Whether or not Mui Lan actually accomplished these acts is less important than Kae's desire to reinterpret them through her late twentieth-century feminist lens. Kae wants to see her great-grandmother in a revolutionary role; she needs to gain strength from Mui Lan's experiences in order to find her own place in a land that expects her to be "the token, pregnant, ethnic woman; [. . .] cool, powdered, inhuman" (123). Because Canadian society values Kae for her "ethnic minority" status, she is robbed of her humanity and strives to regain it by connecting with her strong, independent female predecessors. Yet Mui Lan, for all her fierce passion, remains subject to patriarchal rule: Gwei Chang is the boss, the head of the family, and the person who ultimately has all the control. Even as Lee revises the past, she decides to keep certain historical realities intact. She will not omit or rewrite the historically subservient role of Chinese women, but will instead describe and condemn the historical circumstances of this oppression – an oppression that affected generations of Chinese Canadian women.

Lee also depicts the private suffering and oppression of Chinese Canadian women with the story of Kae's grandmother, Fong Mei. Brought to Canada as a bride for Choy Fuk, Fong Mei spends her first days in her new land as a prisoner – terrifying circumstances for a young woman so far from home. In a letter to her sister, Fong Mei explains, "I along with my travelling companions were detained in prison for days. We

were interrogated by white-devil immigration officers. I was terrorized” (43). Not only is Fong Mei terrorized by the authorities in Vancouver, but she is also terrorized by her new family and by her continued subjection to the tenets of patriarchal rule. While women in China were governed by what Mari Peepre describes as “an extremely oppressive patriarchal rule where women were considered worthless baggage and were treated accordingly” (169), Chinese immigrant women in Canada soon discovered that this oppressive system survived the journey to their new land. In Lee’s novel, Fong Mei, like Mui Lan, is expected to obey her husband and “to follow his wishes” (96). Too terrorized to rebel against this system, Fong Mei follows her new family’s orders as she plays “the role of the perfect daughter-in-law [. . .], always eager to please, to work tirelessly, never bitter” (53). Kae explains that Chinese families raised their daughters to play this role and to accept their submission. Referring to Fong Mei’s situation, Kae says, “There’s a proven logic to marrying them off at a very early age; seventeen-year-old girls are like mush. Impress upon them their worthlessness, and what was once firm, young backbone will shrivel with eternal shame! They will become genuinely stupid, unable to take a step forward, or backward, or sideways, for fear of treading on the very feet that trammel them relentlessly” (49). With her portrait of Fong Mei’s private suffering, Lee continues to blend familial and historical lines of descent in a genealogy of pain that reflects the troubled past of the Chinese in Canada. That a portion of this pain is inflicted on Chinese Canadian women from within their own community only complicates their already difficult situation and limits their ability to overcome their degraded status in Canadian society.

Through Fong Mei’s transformation from subservience to independence, Lee recreates the actions of a woman who undermines patriarchal control in order to resist her oppression. This oppression is particularly difficult to overcome when Chinese women

have internalized the tenets of patriarchal rule and thus value males over females, treat their daughters and daughters-in-law like chattel, and believe a woman's worth rests on her ability to produce children. Indeed, Mui Lan is guilty of these transgressions with regard to Fong Mei and thus supports patriarchal control within her own family structure. Although Mui Lan longed for female companionship when she came to Canada, she is bitter and withdrawn by the time Fong Mei arrives from China and will not provide her with the friendship that she herself once craved. Rather, she is demanding and overbearing and instils feelings of fear and loathing in Fong Mei, who suffers "five years of exile and drudgery" after joining the Wong household (50). Mui Lan makes life miserable for her daughter-in-law because she believes Fong Mei has not fulfilled her duty by producing a son who will continue the Wong family name. Confronted with Mui Lan's accusations and obscenities – "'Damned stinky she-bag! [. . .] Roll your useless female eggs a long way from here!'" (58-59) – Fong Mei at first resists the pressure to satisfy her expected role. In fact, Kae claims that this role produced feelings of revulsion in Fong Mei because "the idea of a baby swelling her stomach [. . .] seemed grotesque, a symbol of her enslavement" (49). Fong Mei soon realizes, however, that she can gain control by having a child since she will secure her rightful place in the family, and her mother-in-law will have no further reason for complaint. Moreover, Kae explains, "If she had children here, a woman like Fong Mei would have a firm stake in this land" (53). Indeed, Canadian-born children can contribute to an immigrant woman's sense of belonging in Canada and can encourage her to see her family and community in the future of the nation.

For Fong Mei, the secret knowledge that her children are not her husband's allows her to subvert her mother-in-law's control while seemingly fulfilling her expected role. Because she suspects that it is her husband and not herself who is sterile, Fong Mei

ventures outside her marriage to produce an heir to the Wong dynasty. Chao explains that, in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the “revelation of the unrecorded illegitimate kinships [. . .] undermines the superiority of patriarchy and male lineage” (*Beyond* 101). These illegitimate relations not only reveal the difficulties of tracing an accurate genealogical line, but also expose a weakness in attempts to maintain patriarchal authority and male lines of descent: women control reproduction. Lee thus shifts the traditional genealogical focus from the father’s line to the mother’s line and creates a strong female character who succeeds in transforming a symbol of enslavement into a symbol of empowerment.

Not only does Fong Mei’s adultery enable her to covertly undermine patriarchal control, but it gives her the confidence to do so overtly as well. Kae explains that having children gives Fong Mei “enough armnipotence [sic] to vie for power and launch a full-fledged mutiny” (134). Fong Mei refuses to be restrained by her expected role in the domestic sphere and gains freedom when she uses her share in the family business to establish what Kae calls “the most lucrative [business] of all – real estate” (134). Like Mui Lan, Fong Mei resists her oppression and gains control over her life with her success in the business world – a world dominated by men. Though they are marginalized from mainstream society and lack female companionship in the Chinese community, these women subvert stereotypes and contribute to the ongoing fight for women’s rights. Kae realizes that her female forebears, despite their differences, share a common struggle. As she says, “If there is a simple truth beneath their survival stories, then it must be that women’s lives, being what they are, are linked together” (145–46). Lee empowers women with these “survival stories” by giving voice to both their struggles and their successes, and by ensuring that their history is not forgotten. Greene explains that it is particularly important for women to remember their history because “forgetting is a major obstacle to change” (298). In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee writes a new history for

Chinese Canada from the triply oppressed perspective of Chinese immigrant women whose suffering must be remembered if they are to claim their stake in the nation.

*

The historical oppression of the Chinese in Canada led to unique – and often devastating – circumstances for this community. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the threat of incest becomes a particular concern for later generations of Chinese Canadians because their marginalization limits their choice of marriage partners. As Kae explains, “There was such a meagre number of young people – no new immigrant blood. What few there were, were native-born. Since 1923 the Chinese Exclusion Act had taken its heavy toll. The rapidly diminishing chinese-canadian [sic] community had withdrawn into itself, ripe for incest” (147). Government policies, such as the head tax and the Exclusion Act, continued to affect the lives of Chinese Canadians decades after the policies were imposed. Fong Mei, for example, is haunted by the fear of incest since both she and her husband had extramarital affairs. As a result, she worries that her daughters will marry young men who are, in fact, their half-brothers. When Fong Mei learns of Beatrice’s engagement to Keeman Woo, the threat of incest drives her towards both physical and emotional abuse. She is consumed with such rage that she beats her daughter, whose face becomes “terribly swollen and bruised with red-hot finger-shaped welts [. . .] Her eyelids puffed out like overripe apricots” (148). When this violence fails to separate the young lovers, Fong Mei changes tactics and “bullie[s] Beatrice with all of her might” (165).²² All Fong Mei accomplishes, however, is her daughter’s escape from Chinatown, for Beatrice elopes with the young man of her own choosing and together they move “as far away from Chinatown as they [can] manage” (177). Lee thus uses the threat of incest to show how exclusionary measures instituted by the Canadian government prompted a

sequence of devastating events in the private lives of Chinese Canadians. The lack of young people, the fear of incest, the resulting violence, and the need for escape all point to a community on the brink of collapse – a community whose historical oppression and marginalization in their new land continue to shape the fundamental experiences of later generations of Chinese Canadians.

Lee gives her fictional genealogy a sense of continuity when she revisits the racial discrimination that these later generations were forced to endure. Though over fifty years separate Beatrice Li Ying Wong from her grandfather, Wong Gwei Chang, they share similar experiences in terms of the racism they each encounter in Canadian society. Growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown, Beatrice is segregated from mainstream society and, like Gwei Chang, enjoys the company of her peers. Unlike Mui Lan and Fong Mei, Beatrice has "grown up thoroughly small-town canadian [sic]" with her friends in Chinatown, young women like herself to whom she is "fiercely loyal" (164). This generation of Chinese Canadians shows little interest in China and is working, instead, to establish homes in Canada. In doing so, they rely heavily on one another, especially when confronted with the prejudice of white society. As Kae says, "Friends growing up in Chinatown were allies, necessary for survival; for those times they ventured out of 'their place,' and came back fractured. They nursed each other, offered each other protection; their comminuted humiliation not easily forgotten; their bonds against it sinewy and strong" (164-65). White Canada wanted to minimize its contact with Chinese Canada and thus relegated this group to the margins; in Vancouver, this meant Chinese Canadians were expected to live in the space of several city blocks. In *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*, Kay Anderson explains, "Vancouver's Chinatown was for its representers a collection of essences that seemed to set the Chinese fundamentally apart. It was a set of absences (non-white, non-Christian,

uncivilized, and amoral) that revealed the biases of European cognition and served the social distinctions between insider and outsider that were being made in Vancouver society and space” (92). As an “outsider,” Beatrice, a talented pianist, is denied entry to the music program at the University of British Columbia. With this rejection, Lee makes it clear that white society wants to impose limits on Chinese Canadians in order to stifle their potential for success and to ensure that they remain within the restrictive bounds of their designated space. Although the circumstances have changed, racial discrimination thus continues to touch the lives of Chinese Canadians. While Beatrice is not exploited as her forebears had been, she suffers nonetheless from a racism that strives to deny Chinese Canadians a university education and the opportunity to escape their marginalized position.

Lee further examines how decades of oppression influence later generations with her characterization of Beatrice’s sister, Suzanne Bo Syang Wong. Like Beatrice, Kae’s Aunt Suzie suffers from the lack of young people and the restrictive racial boundaries that shape her sister’s life. Unlike Beatrice, however, Suzie does not date a returning soldier who is the pride of Chinatown; instead, she dates Morgan Keung Chi Wong, a handsome outsider who, with his mixed racial heritage of white, Chinese, and Native, hovers on the edge of Chinatown, belonging neither in the Chinese community nor in mainstream society. As Ting An’s son, Morgan presents Fong Mei with another incestuous threat – a threat that once again drives her towards violence. Suzie recalls the time when, as she says, “Mom drove home in the middle of the day. Right away, she marched into my room and started to tear out my hair. [. . .] She slapped and slapped, and when I tried to crawl away, she dragged me back by the hair” (202). Fong Mei worries that the baby her teenaged daughter is carrying is “a deformed monster” (203) tainted by the actions of his forebears. With Suzie’s pregnancy and Fong Mei’s ensuing fear, Lee shows that no

generation is free from the burden of past wrongs, for even an unborn child can be affected by the “evil tentacles” of a difficult and “shameful” past (23). In contrast to Beatrice’s swift escape from Chinatown, Suzie succumbs to her oppression and attempts suicide, subsequently dying of pneumonia²³ soon after her infant son’s “accidental” death. Lee thus saves one daughter but sacrifices the other in an event that was set in motion decades earlier – perhaps when Gwei Chang met Kelora, perhaps when the Chinese were excluded from Canada, perhaps when Fong Mei misused Ting An. The circumstances surrounding Suzie’s death – marginalization, incest, violence, and attempted suicide – prove that the past matters. Had the history of the Chinese in Canada taken a different course, the lives of later generations of Chinese Canadians would have as well. In short, the suffering of one generation is passed on to another.

Suzie is evoked as a mythic figure in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* due to her defiance of accepted norms, both familial and societal. As Kae reconstructs key moments from her aunt’s short life, she struggles to understand a young woman whom she resembles but never knew. Suzie’s love for Morgan, her pregnancy, and their efforts to run away are all re-envisioned as the actions of an impetuous, bright, and energetic teenager, “one of those types who couldn’t be contained” (190). In fact, Suzie is such a vivacious character that Kae can imagine her on television, where she would bear witness to Fong Mei’s suffering. During the interview, Suzie would be seen as the “most beautiful asian woman you’ve ever laid eyes on, especially knowing how invisible asians are in terms of the media” (185). Kae uses this imagined media exposure to defy cultural norms that keep Chinese Canadians out of the mainstream: Suzie is granted a central place on the six o’clock news where, in telling the unhappy story of one Chinese Canadian woman, she gives voice to an entire community of women whose oppression and helplessness compelled them to “throw away happiness with both hands” (185). With this imaginary

interview, Kae reinforces her vision of Suzie as a mythic figure who, in her refusal to stay on the margins, has broken the tradition of silence by flaunting her visibility and telling her mother's story on the evening news.

Kae admires her aunt's passion and strives to immortalize her as a tragic heroine who forever resists her oppression. Kae cherishes this image of her aunt and even envies her aunt's status as a tragic heroine and lost child. As she says, "I could be my own consummate tragic heroine, in my own way. I could find my way in my own stories about Suzie" (174). Just as Kae recreates the difficult circumstances of her other forebears, beginning with her great-grandparents, she reinvents Suzie's stories in order to find her own place in her family and community. That Kae glorifies her aunt's actions as those of a heroine only emphasizes her own desire to somehow rebel against the boundaries of her present life. Even when faced with the truth about Suzie's unsuccessful suicide, Kae wants to preserve her romanticized version of this piece of family history. In a letter to Hermia, Kae writes, "Funny, all these years I have been obsessed with uncovering the truth. Yet one of the few facts I was given, I completely refused to believe. I suppose it's natural to want to believe that [Suzie] died with the same passion with which she lived. Who wants to know that she botched it, succumbing instead to a slow, ignoble, wheezy death" (214). Although this account of the past does not coincide with Kae's image of her Aunt Suzie, it does emphasize the suffering of a generation that carried the weight of its ancestors' troubled past. Each life in Kae's family tree is inextricably bound to another and no generation is immune to the pain of past wrongs. The horrendous memories that surround Suzie's life and death evoke in Kae a nostalgia for who her aunt was and what has been lost. Suzie's story thus functions as a haunting reminder of the burden of history and as a nostalgic longing for what might have been.

As Lee explores the problems that plague the third generation of Kae's family, she does not avoid the incest, violence, or oppression that form a difficult part of these familial and historical genealogies. Instead, she directly confronts these problems and provides a historical context for the suffering of this post-migrant generation. Like the suffering of earlier generations, this suffering enables her to create an authenticating mythology for the Chinese in Canada that legitimizes their place in the nation. Lee shows that the suffering of Chinese Canadians – especially a suffering inflicted upon them by Canadian institutions – has secured their place in the national narrative of a land that has long tried to deny them their rightful heritage. Lee's nostalgia for this past is the result of her desire to reclaim this heritage by mythologizing the origins of Chinese Canada.

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A problematic history is transformed into an authenticating mythology when difficult struggles become stories of survival. Obsessed with questions of identity, Kae looks for answers in the past and succeeds in connecting with the most valuable and essential moments from her familial and communal histories. Uncovering these moments teaches her that “individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch them” (189) and enables her to connect with the varied experiences of her forebears. In doing so, she gains strength from their determination and discovers that even painful stories must be told. By returning to these painful moments, Kae embarks on a regenerative journey into the past that enables her to work through her feelings of grief and confusion and to acknowledge the historical realities that are the basis of this grief. She gains freedom for herself and her forebears when she comes to terms with the racism, exclusion, and oppression that shaped the settlement experience of the Chinese in Canada. As “one individual thinking collectively” (189), she has accepted the task of

gathering moments from a migrant past in order to re-imagine the lost origins of a people whose long history in Canada has largely been forgotten. This recuperative project underlines Kae's need to locate her origins in Canada, even if these origins can only be glimpsed as fragments that speak primarily to the pain, hardship, and shame of Chinese Canadian history. Kae's search for origins not only forces her to confront the historical realities that have shaped her family, but also drives her to question the validity of the stories she tells (and of the stories she is told), for her understanding of these key historical events lies in a multiplicity of truths. What matters in the end is that Kae's stories enable her to shatter the fiction of a white settler Canada and to forge a sense of belonging in the nation.

Though Kae's stories help her fit in, she decides, at the end of her narrative, to leave Canada for Hong Kong.²⁴ Does this planned departure represent a failure for Chinese Canada? Is it possible that, after all she has done to establish a home in Canada, Kae still suffers from feelings of displacement? Or, perhaps her decision to leave can be seen as a sign of her new-found strength. After recording her ancestors' stories, Kae now knows what she wants to achieve: she turns down a prestigious promotion and proudly declares: "I am free. Isn't that how the prophecy goes? After three generations of struggle, the daughters are free" (209). Lee's revisionist history empowers Chinese Canadians by freeing them from the burden of a neglected past, for she gives voice to their experiences and proves that their stories exist as a necessary and relevant part of an authenticating national narrative. Kae's uncle notes the importance of telling these stories when he says, "Remember, if nobody speaks of it, then it never existed" (161). Lee reveals that a new understanding of their place in history can provide Chinese Canadians with a greater sense of belonging in Canada. After all, they have lived, worked, suffered, and died in this land; they have a stake, literally and metaphorically, in

the nation's past, present, and future. With *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee insists on the validity of this stake as she rights past wrongs by revisiting the history of Chinese Canadians and adding their voices to Canada's national narrative.

NOTES

¹ Lee and Wong-Chu each acknowledge the other's support in the creation of their respective works; Lee adds a special note of thanks for the title.

² Other Chinese Canadian writers who trace genealogies include Denise Chong in *The Concubine's Children* (1994), Larissa Lai in *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995), Fred Wah in *Diamond Grill* (1996), and Wayson Choy in *Paper Shadows* (1999). Chinese American writers who also pursue this quest include Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

³ Larissa Lai undertakes a similar task in her writing. As she explains, "In my fiction writing of recent years I have been focussing on trying to create a sort of historical launch pad for hybrid flowers like myself. [...] I suppose it is my way of trying to escape the reactiveness of identity politics by claiming a mythic, fictive sort of originality, my way of saying, but people like me (take that how you will) have been here all along" (Interview 4).

⁴ Lee was born in Port Alberni, British Columbia, and considers herself part of "the non-Chinese speaking third-generation" ("Cultural Politics" 11). Her father was born and raised in Canada and her mother migrated to Canada in 1951 ("Sharon Lee" 91).

⁵ Lee inserts her personal history into her fictional genealogy by using her mother's surname, Wong, and her father's given names, Gwei Chang, as central designations in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

⁶ *Disappearing Moon Cafe* won the Vancouver Book Award and was nominated for three other literary awards in 1990, including the Governor General's Award.

⁷ Eva Darias Beutell would agree with Mostow's assessment, for she writes that in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* "there is no surrender to the securities of nostalgia" (195). By contrast, Graham Huggan contends that "Kae's search for 'authenticity' indicates the temptation that exists within beleaguered ethnic communities to fall back on nostalgic myths of pure identity" (41).

⁸ Inspired by stories of the gold rush in California and British Columbia in the 1850s, the Chinese commonly referred to North America as "Gum San" or "Gold Mountain" (Lee, B. 3).

⁹ Chao considers this trope one that is particular to Chinese Canadians and claims that as "a powerful signifier deriving directly from Chinese Canadian history, the 'bones' of the community ancestors live on to tell their untold stories in contemporary Chinese Canadian literature" (*Beyond* 27). While this might be true, Chinese American writer Fae Myenne Ng also uses this trope in her powerful novel, *Bone* (1993).

¹⁰ Joshua S. Mostow notes that Lee also pieces herself together from scattered bone: "Like the first of her characters introduced, the author is collecting the bones of her family's history, but rather than attempting to reassemble them into distinct skeletons, she leaves it for the reader to connect them, while she handles and rubs each one individually" (175-76).

¹¹ Not only did the head tax place a financial burden on Chinese immigrants to Canada, but it also limited the number of Chinese entering the country to one person for every 50 tons of cargo on each ship (Wickberg 82). Six classes of migrants were exempt from the head tax: established merchants and their families, diplomats, clergymen, scientists, students, and tourists (Wickberg 82).

¹² As a result of the Chinese Immigration Bill, the Chinese population in Canada decreased because those who died or left the country were not replaced with new Chinese immigrants (Wickberg 148). Only diplomats, children born in Canada, visiting students who would return to China, and merchants involved in imports and exports were excluded from the bill (Chao, *Beyond* 10).

¹³ Relationships between Chinese men and white women were discouraged by both groups; intermarriage with women from other ethno-cultural groups was generally not an option because the Chinese, unwelcome in mainstream society, usually lived in isolated Chinatowns and had little contact with other groups (Calder 14; Wickberg 149).

¹⁴ This murder case, which is central to the novel, initiated Lee's entire project. As she explains, "after I graduated from university I started doing the research, and I wanted to focus on this murder case, the

[Janet] Smith murder case. But I didn't have anywhere to go with it until years later [when] I developed the venue for this murder story" ("Is there a mind" 387).

¹⁵ Lee further romanticizes the relationship between Foon Sing and Janet when Gwei Chang reinvents a traditional August Moon Festival story: "The nursemaid was from heaven, and the houseboy a mere earth-bound mortal. Then, they met and fell deeply in love. The gods or powers above were very displeased with this liaison between unequals. [...] So, the powers-that-be split them apart and created a racial chasm between them, as impossible to cross as the heavens themselves" (223). This story is reminiscent of the love between Kelora and Gwei Chang because, until his mother's letter split them apart, Gwei Chang had elevated Kelora through his wonder and fear – a fear that "made him wince with love" (9).

¹⁶ Although the narrator states that "the secret of the white woman's death would never be fully revealed" (221), the novel provides another version of the circumstances surrounding this highly publicized event:

The trouble began when [Foon Sing] was still a houseboy at twenty-five, with each year of smiling servitude stitched deeply into his face. [...] Then one day, into his futile existence came a fair haired demoness, a perfect example of their fresh-faced innocence. To him, she must have been dazzling. And why not? Her life full of human promises, she would have everything that he was denied. [...] Did he fall in love with her? There was no way for him not to be obsessed with her and all she represented. If that were so, did he come to hate her? Yes... well, that was more the essential question, wasn't it? A white woman would remind him of his alienation, her nearness exposing the raw intensity of his desperation. In the dehumanized structure of his life, murder might even have made sense. (222-23)

¹⁷ Foon Sing was eventually acquitted of the murder, which has remained unsolved (Wickberg 177-78).

¹⁸ Proponents of the Janet Smith Bill not only wanted to protect young white women from the supposed threats of opium addiction and debauchery, but they also wanted to prevent the possibility of mixed-raced children: they wanted to protect the "whiteness" of their British ancestry (Kerwin 104-05).

¹⁹ The Chinese in Vancouver did indeed wage a successful battle against the proposed legislation. As Scott Kerwin explains, "The Chinese consul to Vancouver, Dr. Lin Pao Heng, immediately denounced the proposed bill as being unfair and discriminatory, and he allied with the Chinese Benevolent Association in Vancouver to oppose it" (97).

²⁰ Amy Ling explains that Chinese women have traditionally been assigned an inferior and even expendable status. Practices such as footbinding, concubinage, female slavery, and female infanticide point to the mistreatment of females of all ages in Chinese family structures (Ling 1).

²¹ In 1911 the ratio of Chinese men to Chinese women in Canada was 28:1. In 1921 the ratio changed to 15.3:1 due to a decline in the male population and to a slight increase in the Canadian-born population. The gender imbalance steadily improved after 1947 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and more Chinese women immigrated to Canada (Li 60-62).

²² What complicates this situation is Fong Mei's secret knowledge that Beatrice and Keeman do not have the same father. If Fong Mei wants to keep her affair with Ting An a secret, however, she believes she must prevent a union between her daughter and Keeman, whom she thinks her husband fathered with the waitress, Song Ang. Song Ang, for her part, suspects that a man named Woo, whom she later marries, is actually Keeman's father. Despite its potential for incest, the relationship between Beatrice and Keeman is actually incest-free.

²³ Although the details surrounding Suzie's death are sketchy, it seems that her attempted suicide led to the pneumonia that took her life. That she attempted suicide is revealed on a number of occasions. For example, speaking of Suzie, Morgan says, "'She just ups one day and slits her veins open. And it's my fault?'" (186). On another occasion, Kae writes, "My uncle John still remembers telling her how to do it properly. 'Slit along the veins, all the way up,' he said in jest of course, 'not across. Nobody'll be able to save you then.'" [...] He emphasized that he had said this when he was still in high school, years before the actual incident" (214).

²⁴ The other narrators of this study also make conscious decisions regarding the status of their positions in Canada. Langston of *Any Known Blood* decides to return to Canada after a sojourn in the United States; Moses of *Solomon Gursky Was Here* will stay in Canada to write his story; Vittorio of the *Lives of the Saints* trilogy travels to Africa in order to record his personal history, but intends one day to return to Canada; and Esther of *Away* follows her grandmother's advice and stays physically and psychologically rooted in Canada.

II

**There and Back: Rewriting Hidden
Histories in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood***

Afro-American Fragment

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood—
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums—and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face.

Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*

The memories “that history books create” are not enough to satisfy Langston Cane’s yearnings to reclaim his ancestral origins. As the narrator of Lawrence Hill’s *Any Known Blood* (1997), Langston Cane V strives to uncover the memories that will help him create a new historical record – a record that will counter what Marlene Nourbese Philip calls a “massive and collective social amnesia” (*Frontiers* 24). Like his namesake, the American poet Langston Hughes, Langston Cane¹ expresses a longing to reverse this amnesia by reconnecting with a land “so far away.” Unlike his namesake, however, Langston Cane must overcome his distance not only from his African origins, but from his American origins as well, since his forebears endured a double migration from Africa to America, and from America to Canada. As a result, Langston Cane returns to both Africa and America as he searches for a means of understanding his personal and communal histories. *Any Known Blood* describes this journey into the past as Langston traces his family tree from the birth of the first Langston Cane in Virginia in 1828 to his own experiences growing up in Oakville in the 1960s and 70s. Like the other writers of this study, Hill uses a fictional genealogy to create an authenticating myth of origins that reconstructs historical events. For Hill, this imaginative reconstruction involves the safe passage of fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad, the anti-slavery raid on Harpers Ferry, and the pursuit of civil rights for ethnic minorities. With this narrative, Hill legitimizes the presence of Blacks in Canada by showing that they have a long history in this land and by rewriting this history from their own perspective.² Although, for example, the story of the Underground Railroad has a place in Canadian history, seldom “has the story been told from the viewpoint of the central characters, the fugitive slaves” (Blockson 1). *Any Known Blood* gives these stories back to the “central characters” while emphasizing, as Hill says, “that Canadian history encompasses more than the two ‘founding nations’” (“Black” A15).

By moving beyond narrow definitions of Canadian history and identity, Hill joins other writers who also revise the past in order to contest the silencing of their ethno-cultural histories. As Christl Verduyn explains, “A substantial portion of contemporary literary and critical production has comprised a vigorous effort to dislodge [the] dominant notion of Canada. Authors such as Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand have written powerfully and eloquently about the difficult sense of belonging experienced by Canadians who confront daily erasure in the face of a nation construed in terms of a great, white north” (“Breath” 19). Indeed, Brand speaks out against this erasure and blames the inherent racism of the dominant white culture for relegating non-whites to the margins and reinforcing the notion that one has “to be white to be Canadian” (*Bread* 103). Brand writes that the “European nation-state of Canada built itself around ‘whiteness,’ differentiating itself through ‘whiteness’ and creating outsiders to the state, no matter their claims of birthright or other entitlement. Inclusion in or access to Canadian identity, nationality and citizenship (de facto) depended and depends on one’s relationship to this ‘whiteness’” (*Bread* 173-74). Telling their own histories is one way for marginalized “others” to gain a legitimate sense of belonging in Canada. If they give voice to their stories, then these ethnic minority groups can begin reversing the effects of state-sanctioned amnesia and can forge their own places in Canada’s national narrative. As Brand suggests, “Perhaps we should talk again about the repression of our cultures by this concept of ‘whiteness.’ We haven’t been excluded, we’ve been repressed, and we don’t need access, we need freedom from the tyranny of ‘whiteness’ expressing itself all through our lives” (*Bread* 176). Repressed groups can use their narratives to locate their origins in Canada and, in doing so, can reclaim a denied history – a history that is continually cast aside by the dominant white culture.

Rinaldo Walcott elaborates on this position when he argues that, as a result of their repression, Blacks in Canada can only speak from the margins and therefore cannot escape “a constant craving for recognition in the face of a continuous erasure” (“Who” 39). The myth that colour indicates newness undermines the Black presence in Canada and reinforces the notion that Black Canadians have no place in the nation’s history or identity. As Walcott explains,

The founding narratives of Canada leave little, if any room for imagining Blackness as constitutive of Canadianness. While Black people date their presence in Canada from as early as the 1600s, Blackness is still considered a recent phenomenon within the nation. This problem of thinking Blackness as recent means that longstanding Black communities across the nation continually have their presence absented in the founding narrative of the nation. And yet these long-standing communities find ways to resist this erasure in their personal, collective and everyday histories. (“By Way” 7)

Black Canadians do not see their stories or experiences reflected in the national narrative since their long history in this land disrupts images of Canada as a nation settled by the British and the French. There is no room for Blackness in this vision of the nation. Indeed, as Walcott writes, “Blackness is a counter-narration of the normalized image of Canadian as chromatically white” (“Who” 35). Like Brand, Walcott suggests that the racism of mainstream society ensures that Blackness is considered foreign in a Canadian context. In other words, whites can be “Canadian,” no matter where they were born or how long they have lived in this land, while Blacks remain “other,” even if they were born in Canada. Walcott observes that the “impossibility of imagining blackness³ as Canadian is continually evident even as nation-state policies like multiculturalism seek to signal otherwise. [. . .] Ludicrous excuses like discomfort with the word Negro are used

to deny the evidence and existence of an early black historical presence which troubles and worries the national myth of ‘two founding peoples’” (*Black* 42). Blackness, then, is denied a place in Canada and is subordinated in the national narrative by founding myths that reinforce the achievements of the British and the French (and, in some cases, Aboriginals) while dismissing the contributions of other ethno-cultural groups.

In a similar vein,⁴ George Elliott Clarke calls upon Black Canadian writers to oppose “the persistent erasure of our presence” (Introduction xx). As he explains, “What students of African-Canadian⁵ literature must do is counter amnesia, for those who do not research history are condemned to falsify it” (*Odysseys* 7). He argues that, because their history is dismissed in Canada, African Canadian writers must “act as historians” and “bear witness against Canadian racism” (Introduction xx). In doing so, these writers can refute the national-cultural myopia that results in the denial of their Canadian history – a history that includes the experiences of slavery and segregation; the settling of homes and farms across the nation; and the escape from civil war, oppression, invasion, and famine (*Odysseys* 35, 198). To forget this history is to render Blackness invisible in Canada. For this reason, Clarke urges Black Canadian writers to document their diverse experiences in order to “contest the erasure and silencing of black culture and history” (*Odysseys* 6). By returning to key moments from the past, these writers can reverse the collective amnesia that denies a history of Blackness in Canada.

The process of remembering and recording key moments in Black history is one that Paul Gilroy also emphasizes when he encourages Black writers to commemorate their varied diasporic experiences. As he writes, “Slavery, pogroms, indenture, genocide, and other unnameable terrors have all figured in the constitution of diasporas and the reproduction of diaspora consciousness” (*Against* 123-24). Even painful memories, then, must not be forgotten: Gilroy notes that “histories of ineffable suffering” have a role to

play in terms of gaining compensation for past wrongs and showing that these groups have, through their suffering, earned a legitimate place in the nation-state (*Against* 112). Black Canadian writers can assert their presence in the nation by using their fiction to reconstruct their personal and communal histories in Canada.⁶ But these writers have not, as Walcott notes, “garnered as much attention nationally as they should because their presence – the places and spaces they occupy – makes a lie of too many national myths (or raises too many questions) concerning the Canadian nation-state” (*Black* 39). There are thus no limits as to what kinds of memories – either positive or negative – can be used to unsettle exclusionary national myths, for even a history of suffering exists as a record that resists both forgetfulness and silence.

Hill writes against this silence in *Any Known Blood*. With a Black father and a white mother,⁷ he strives to recover the parts of his past that have been consistently neglected or misrepresented. Because white culture and history remain dominant in Canadian society, Hill embraces his Black heritage and seeks to establish a place for Black Canadians in the story of Canada.⁸ As he explains, “many light-skinned blacks, and mixed-race blacks such as myself, feel they must prove their blackness by asserting themselves through public involvement with the black community. [. . .] Through my work, I have found it increasingly easy to feel engaged” (*Black Berry* 229). Hill expresses a need to claim his Black heritage and to assert his identity as Canadian. In taking his place in the Black community, he has also taken an active role in challenging national myths that deny the presence of “others” in Canada. Specifically, he questions the assumptions that prevent non-white Canadians from gaining a legitimate sense of belonging in the nation:

Do you suppose that [. . .] strangers will ask an indisputably white Canadian with a traditional Anglo-Canadian accent where he is from, where he was born, or where

his parents were born? Absolutely not. Strangers will assume that he is a true Canadian, and leave that part of his identity unmolested. The offence-causing kernel at the centre of this line of interrogation is its implication: “You are not white, you don’t look like me, so you’re clearly not Canadian.” (*Black Berry* 176)

Hill wants Blacks to be accepted – without question – as “true Canadians.” His diverse writings reflect this concern, especially since they confirm that Black Canadians have a long history in this land. From his historical text *Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Negro Women’s Association*, to his children’s history *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of African-Canadians*, to his discussions on race in *Black Berry*, *Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*, to his newspaper and magazine articles, and to his novels *Some Great Thing* and *Any Known Blood*, Hill strives to authenticate the Black presence in Canada and to tell Black history from a Black perspective. He thus shares with Toni Morrison the desire “to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90). Hill shifts the gaze from passive object to active subject and gives voice to the experiences of Black Canadians by reinventing key moments from their past. In doing so, he works against what he calls “the unspoken assumption that white Canadians are the only authentic ones” (*Contemporary Canadian*). With *Any Known Blood*, Hill shatters this assumption and establishes the nation as home by creating a legitimating myth of origins for Blacks in Canada.

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Does a journey to Africa offer a means of connecting with the ancestral homeland for members of the Black diaspora? Hill explores this question when Langston travels to Africa with the intention of gathering material for a novel and gaining access to his

ancestral roots.⁹ So important does Langston consider this journey that he leaves his pregnant wife, Ellen, in Toronto for two months while he visits a remote village in Mali. Langston intends to use his time in Africa to associate with the village people and to connect with his heritage, for he sees his “return” as a way of understanding his communal past in Africa and of conceptualizing his own present and future in Canada. In short, Langston travels to the old world in order to clarify his position in the new: he will not stay in Africa, but will make this experience a part of who he is and what he will become. Nourbese Philip explains the struggle in this way: “For us Africans in the New World tomorrow is a constant problem. We are the only group brought forcibly and unwillingly to the New World, this touted utopia, to help create utopias for others. Cut off from our yesterdays – in fact told that we had no yesterdays, no history – [we are] forbidden to live out the promise of the tomorrows of progress of which the New World boasted” (“Taming” 271). Uncertainty in the present and future is thus the result of an unknown past: African slaves were uprooted from their homelands, but were prevented from laying down roots in their new land. For Langston, then, the return to Africa is a way of retracing this originary journey and of placing himself in a context where he can identify with his missing yesterdays – with his Black ancestry and his neglected history.

Hill reveals, however, that the process of reclaiming a denied heritage in a distant land might well involve a false sense of connectedness and acceptance. As Langston participates in the daily rituals of the village – the meals, the washing, the storytelling and teasing – he believes he is gaining a place in the community. With the village men, he “crouched around a bowl of food, tearing meat from a bird that had been bled and plucked and cleaned and cooked in a tomato and peanut sauce that lit a pleasant burn in the throat” (*Blood* 201). He says that this “was a burn I had grown accustomed to, a burn that I could manage, a burn that said, You’re among these people and becoming part of

them” (201). Yet, ironically, even as Langston experiences this sense of belonging in Africa, the villagers continue to call him “*toubab*, the word for white man” (201). The villagers know Langston is not “really white, or not entirely so” (201), yet they give him a name that emphasizes the distance between them, for Langston is, and will remain, a light-skinned foreigner from a “rich country” (204). The mistake Langston makes is in equating a cultural signifier with cultural belonging. To put it differently, Langston assumes that, because he adapts his palate to the village food, he now belongs with the village people. He sees himself taking on the traits of the African villagers as evidence that he is truly indigenous to Africa. Yet the narrative suggests that Langston’s sense of belonging remains largely superficial: Langston is a tourist in Africa who visits for less than two months, who shares the villagers’ food and homes, but who will ultimately return to his “real life” in Canada. Hill thus demonstrates that the journey to Africa is the enactment of a dream; it is a way for members of the Black diaspora to live out a fantasy of belonging among people who, for them, represent a link to their past and to the ways their ancestors once lived.

Hill exposes the dangers of this dream through Langston’s longing for an African woman from the village. Langston describes his nameless African lover as merely “a village woman,” suggesting that, for him, she symbolizes “Mother Africa” and his own desire to establish his roots in the motherland. When Langston takes this “village woman into [his] bed” (203), he expresses his yearning to take possession of Africa and to inscribe himself on the African landscape. Just as Langston makes love to Ellen in order “to plant the seed” (196) before his departure from Canada, he makes love to the village woman as a means of sowing his seed in Africa. In doing so, Langston repeats the imperialist actions of white colonizers to Africa who took Black mistresses whom they later abandoned. Langston’s conduct thus confirms his outsider status in Africa: he

believes the affair will give him a sense of belonging in Africa, but, ironically, it serves as evidence of his non-belonging. Moreover, although Langston tells himself that his adultery is “unimportant to [his] relationship with Ellen” (209), it is a betrayal of his marriage and a sign that he is willing to sacrifice his material future in Canada for his ancestral past in Africa. This point is reinforced by Langston’s discovery that Ellen suffered her miscarriage “at the very moment” (210) that he was making love to the African woman. The dream thus exacts a significant price, for Langston embraces his fantasy in Africa at the expense of his reality in Canada.

The search for connections in the ancestral home has the potential to destabilize existing relations in the current home. Indeed, Langston’s longing to identify with Africa disrupts the plans he had for himself in Canada: first his son is delivered stillborn and then his marriage fails. Travelling to the ancestral homeland not only gives Langston a false sense of connection to his past in Africa, it also contributes to the uncertainties of his present and future in Canada. What Langston must do is shift his gaze from the old world to the new; he must, as Walcott remarks, “move beyond the discourse of nostalgia for an elsewhere and toward addressing the politics of [the] present location” (*Black* 39). With his journey to Africa, Langston indulges in this “nostalgia for an elsewhere,” for a place where he can escape his feelings of rootlessness in Canada. Hill uses Langston’s nostalgic return to show that, though the journey to Africa can introduce new experiences and insights, it cannot offer a true sense of belonging, especially to those who stay only briefly. That Africa represents only one part of Langston’s history is emphasized by the fact that his journey takes place in the narrative past. When the novel opens, Langston has already returned from Africa and his time there is recounted as a recent memory. While the beginnings of the Black diaspora are located in Africa, the rest of the story exists elsewhere.

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If a journey to the old world does not allow for a meaningful connection with one's ancestral roots, then perhaps a return to one's origins in the new world can compensate for this lack of belonging. In *Any Known Blood*, Hill moves beyond a nostalgia for the ancestral homeland and instead reconstructs various moments in the history of Black North America through Langston's research into his family tree. Hill approaches this project with humour, often taking an ironic stance regarding the quest for ancestors. As he explains, "I've always looked for a way to write about things that were serious to me in an entertaining manner" (qtd. in Nurse). Hill's humorous account, however, is not without its difficult moments: as Langston struggles to establish a connection with his Black heritage, he uncovers circumstances that do not reflect positively on himself or his family, and some that even bring with them feelings of shame and remorse. As a result, Langston must consider the effects his research has on those closest to him as he strives to determine his place in his family and community.

Hill unsettles categories of racial identity through Langston's unwillingness to assert his Blackness. As John McLeod notes, members of various ethnic groups can be forced into racial categories: "Individual and collective identities are things which we fashion for ourselves to a degree; but they are also fashioned by others for us, whether we like it or not" (226). Because racial typing affects Black Canadians, Hill disrupts these classifications by showing that Langston does not conform to Eurocentric notions regarding ethnicity and race. When the novel opens, Langston admits that he has been playing a "game of multiple racial identities" (2). As he explains, "I have the rare distinction [. . .] of not appearing to belong to any particular race, but of seeming like a contender for many. In Spain, people have wondered if I was French. In France, hotel

managers asked if I was Moroccan. In Canada, I've been asked – always tentatively – if I was perhaps Peruvian, American, or Jamaican. But I have rarely given a truthful rendering of my origins” (1). Instead, he claims to be “part Jewish, part Cree, part Zulu, part anything” (2). Langston actively challenges the limitations of racial categories because, as someone of mixed heritage, he is not sure where he belongs. Yet, in failing to claim his Blackness, Langston has lost his sense of identity, his contact with his family, and his understanding of his familial and communal histories. In short, by pretending to be who he is not, Langston has forgotten who he is.

This confusion points to the difficulties that accompany racial classifications, especially for individuals of mixed ancestry. Hill reflects on these difficulties in an article that asks, “Who, exactly, is defined as black? Traditionally in North America, you are seen as black if you have any known black ancestry. Although Americans have had the tightest grip on this concept, we Canadians have embraced it, too” (“Sadly” A17). Hill underlines the American position in *Any Known Blood* with an epigraph that quotes Gunnar Myrdal in *An American Dilemma*: “Everybody having a known trace of Negro blood in his veins – no matter how far back it was acquired – is classified as a Negro. No amount of white ancestry, except one hundred per cent, will permit entrance to the white race” (n. pag.). In Canada, the 1901 Census also adopted the “one-drop rule,” specifying that anyone with Black ancestors would be defined as Black, “irrespective of the degree of colour” (Hill, *Black Berry* 208-09). Langston’s pale complexion allows him to confuse racial categories and he thus decides to identify himself as neither white nor Black. But after his wife leaves him and his boss fires him, Langston needs to determine where he belongs and whom he wants to be. As a result, he decides to assert his Blackness and to trace his paternal line of descent, beginning with its origins in America. Langston rejects his earlier game of multiple identities and embraces, instead,

any physical attributes that proclaim his Blackness. “I was glad that my hair was longer than usual,” he writes, “and combed out into an afro, because I didn’t want to be seen as a white visitor. I wanted my race clearly marked” (119).¹⁰ Through Langston’s wavering position with regards to race, Hill is questioning the validity of racial categories, while at the same time suggesting that such categories can be useful, even necessary, in the process of identity formation.

With Langston’s white mother, Hill creates a legitimizing “Canadian” context for his narrative since her presence in the Cane family tree subverts racial categories. Her whiteness dilutes Langston’s colour, making it more difficult for him to take his place in the Black community. Aunt Mill’s initial reaction to her nephew emphasizes his non-belonging: “I ain’t got any white nephews,” she said. “Look at you. You walk like a prep school boy. You ought to move your backside when you walk. Roll your butt and straighten your back” (111). In attempting to label her nephew in terms of race, Aunt Mill concludes that his way of walking and his pale complexion make him white. But Mill’s friends welcome Langston to their church and reprimand his aunt by saying, ““You’ve got yourself a perfect nephew. Little washed out, color wise, but that ain’t his fault”” (126). Hill thus approaches racial typing with humour by reversing stereotypes and privileging Blackness over whiteness. Langston’s mixed heritage unsettles racial categories because he is not considered dark enough – he has been “contaminated” by whiteness. Although the novel’s title historically refers to contaminating Blackness, it is, ironically, Langston’s contaminating whiteness that confuses his racial identity.

Langston strives to resolve this confusion by reconstructing his Black history. This goal, however, is complicated by his family’s resistance to the excavation of painful memories, a form of resistance that Kae also experiences in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. For Langston, it is his father who disapproves of his project. When Langston IV learns of

his son's plans to conduct research in Baltimore, he says, "I know what you want down there. Family roots. Forget that nonsense. Your life is here and now. [. . .] You'll come back here out of money, out of luck, and out of the job circuit. You're just hiding from your own life" (57). At first, then, Langston IV frames his disapproval as a concern for his son's future. But later, when his son refuses to relent, he visits Baltimore to try another approach. This time, he asks Langston "to stop poking around in things that are best left alone" (250). His words suggest that there are secrets in Baltimore that he does not want revealed – secrets that are painful enough that he travels from Oakville to Baltimore just to deliver his message. In the end, however, Langston IV admits the truth regarding his resistance to his son's project. "This trip to Baltimore. You're doing it to hurt me," he says. "You're trying to dig up painful things from my past" (360). While Langston denies the accusation, his father forces him to reflect on the repercussions of his actions and on the effects his research has on others. As Langston IV tells his son, "You don't understand the politics of shame. Shame in one's family, and in one's community" (361). Langston's father thus represents those who deny the past in order to live comfortably in the "here and now." As a result of some misdemeanours in his youth – committing petty theft, cheating on an exam, and being expelled from college – Langston IV wants his past to be forgotten. He therefore tells his son to examine the lives of his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, leaving his own life out of the story. But Hill's narrative reveals that what one generation wishes to forget, the next generation wishes to remember.¹¹ If a father is content to forget the cultural past, then a son will seek to recover this past as a means of connecting with his ethnic identity and working against a denied history.

The attempt to forget the past also stems from a wish to protect others from shame. For Langston IV, this means protecting his estranged sister from his son's intrusion. As

he warns Langston, ““Stay away from Mill”” (57). But Mill does not need her brother’s protection and proves herself capable of her own form of resistance. When Langston visits Mill in Baltimore, she initially reacts with hostility: ““You want to know all about your daddy and your granddaddy and so on. But why should I talk to you? I don’t like your father. I don’t like your mother. And I can’t say I like you”” (127). Mill’s anger results from the feelings of betrayal she experienced when her brother married a white woman. Mill would like to see Blacks “staying within the race” (110) in terms of marriage so they can retain a strong Black identity and community – the very things her nephew is missing. Although Mill objects to Langston’s mixed heritage, she agrees to help with his project by giving him access to his grandparents’ letters, photos, diaries, church documents, and interview transcripts. Yet Mill makes it clear that she considers this research pointless and impractical and, like her brother, she tells Langston to focus on the present and not the past. As she asks Langston, ““Why don’t you just get on with having a job and starting a family and forget all that stuff?”” (132). However, also like her brother, Mill has her own reasons for encouraging Langston to forget the past: she does not want her years as a prostitute to become part of his story. Mill embodies a contradiction in the narrative because, on the one hand, she wants to hide her shameful past and, on the other hand, she insists on having a voice. Not long after refusing to tell Langston any stories about herself, Mill accuses him of neglecting her version of events: ““You seem to think that only men are in your family story. But I was there, too. I used to live in Oakville. Get that through your half-nappy head. I was there, I keep telling you, and I won’t be left out of this story”” (179). Mill thus offers Langston a selective history that she uses to protect herself from painful memories.

Yet even painful memories have a role to play in narratives that seek to recover a silenced past. Firstly, these moments speak to the suffering of marginalized groups and

to the determination of those individuals who achieve success despite their oppression.

Langston's father, for example, becomes a successful doctor and well-known civil rights activist in Canada, while Langston's aunt gives up her life of prostitution and becomes an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore. Secondly, reviving these moments can contribute to the process of healing and forgiveness.

Although Mill intends to hide her past from Langston, she decides to confront their mutual feelings of awkwardness and shame once she realizes that he has uncovered her secret:

"Look at me, son."

I looked at her again. I wondered if the whole family research project was a bad idea. I had forced my way into Mill's life and learned the one thing that she wanted to keep secret.

"Tell me what I used to be," she said.

"A prostitute." I avoided her eyes.

She was smiling. She blinked, and held something back. But she was smiling.

"I don't mind you knowing, Langston. That was fifty years ago. You weren't even born. I'm not responsible for things I did half a century ago. So stop looking at me like that. It was more than half a lifetime ago." (386)

Once again, Langston must consider the repercussions of his research: he cannot ignore the costs associated with reconstructing his family history. Mill's words, with their tone of defiance, suggest that she is now prepared to confront her past actions and to forgive herself for her mistakes of long ago. Langston's project thus enables his family to move beyond their shame and towards reconciliation – Mill agrees, after decades of silence, to reunite with her brother and his family. She is prepared to forgive her brother for marrying a white woman and will move beyond the strictures of racial categories by

embracing her brother's family as her own. Mill's acceptance represents a change in her perspective, for Langston's narrative quest frees her from a lifelong prejudice. As Gayle Greene explains, "narrative is concerned with change: there is something in the impulse to narrative that is related to the impulse to liberation. Narrative re-collects, re-members, repeats [. . .] in order for there to be an escape from repetition, in order for there to be change or progress" (291). Langston's narrative thus offers freedom from the past and freedom from painful memories for himself and his family.

Humour is also a source of freedom in *Any Known Blood* because it ensures that Langston does not become overly earnest or didactic in his quest for origins. Hill mocks such earnestness with his portrait of "Derek Wedburner, the man of monologues, the master of diatribes" (248). At Mill's dinner party, Derek searches for an audience for his political concerns. He turns to Langston:

"So how do you find it here, compared to Canada?"

"It's an interesting city. It's —"

"Interesting is a white word, man. Interesting isn't a word for people of color. It's a word for politicians, man. But I'll cut you some slack, coming from Canada and all. Black people use that word up there?"

"Well, [. . .] where I'm from, I haven't run into masses of black people fleeing the word *interesting*. It's not generally seen as a betrayal of one's racial identity."
(243)

Hill mocks Derek and other "politically correct" race advocates for taking such a serious approach to race relations that they expect Blacks to express themselves differently – to speak and act in ways deemed "appropriate" for their race – if they are to remain loyal to "the burden of blackness" (243). With endless rants on "racism and ruination" (245),

Derek bores the other dinner guests and is made a subject of ridicule in the novel for his long-winded speeches and his pretentious approach to language.

This pretension is parodied, in particular, when Derek engages Langston IV in a dialogue on their African origins. Langston V relates the following exchange, beginning when his father interrupts Derek's monologue to say:

"I'm not an African, any more than you."

"But I am an African," Derek said. [. . .] "This is not a matter of geography [. . .]. It's a matter of the diaspora. We people of color —"

"*People of color*," my father snorted. "For all its pretension, it sounds to me just the same as *colored people*."

"It's not the same," Derek said. "Not the same at all, if I may beg to differ.

Colored people comes straight out of our American heritage of slavery and segregation. *People of color* evokes a diaspora, a scattering, a collectivity of people of all races —"

"Except whites," I said. "Except maybe Latin Americans. And Sicilians in the summer. Or perhaps you should have a new category for them: people nearly of color." (248-49)

Langston V mocks the earnest desire for origins and shows that Derek's allegiance to an imagined Africa leads him to believe that he is one with a people in a land far away. In this, Derek resembles a young Langston – the one who also believed he could commune with his African "brothers." But Derek is more concerned with theory than practice: he uses pretentious terms that show off his learning, but that also point to his naïveté. As Langston V notes, the very terms that Derek uses to discuss "a collectivity of people of all races" are, in fact, exclusionary terms that are less progressive than Derek would like to think. Hill thus directs his humour towards those who undertake a misguided yet

serious quest for identity and belonging. However, despite his humour, Hill reveals that gaining a sense of identity and belonging in the Black diaspora is indeed a priority for him. As he writes in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, “I’m not one-eighth or one-quarter or one-half black – I’m simply black. And that’s because I see blackness as a form of identity, cultural belonging. I’m attached to my heritage. I love the sense of family that comes from giving to and receiving from and living as members of black communities – no matter how disparate they are geographically” (239). The humour in the novel, then, allows Hill to access his Black heritage without being too rigid in his quest for an authenticating myth of origins.

Hill creates a new-world family legend for the Canes that they use to establish and authenticate their lineage in North America. Langston’s forebears transform the reputed actions of Langston I into a reaffirming family legend – a legend that claims Langston I met “his demise alongside John Brown while trying to strike a blow against slavery” (12). Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859, was meant to be an uprising of free men and slaves who would take up arms against slave holders in the American south. Although the plan failed (and some say it was meant to fail¹²), the events at Harpers Ferry gained widespread attention and garnered sympathy for the abolitionist cause and for Brown, who was convicted of treason and hanged for his role as leader of the raid. Harpers Ferry marks a turning point in the history of slavery since it brought America closer to Civil War. By placing Langston I in this historical context, Hill connects him – and his descendants – with a legendary act of resistance. As Pilar Cuder-Domínguez writes, “The Cane dynasty is thus placed squarely in the centre of momentous events for black North Americans and especially in the midst of key episodes of the histories of the United States and Canada” (60). The legend of Langston I speaks to a need in the Cane family to see themselves as a long line of “born achievers” (12). With the exception of

Langston V, who sees himself as a failure, the Langston Canes “all became doctors, or church ministers [. . .] their accomplishments noted in the *Afro-American*, the *Oakville Standard*, the *Toronto Times*, or the *Baltimore Sun*” (3). These successful men were inspired by what they considered the heroic deeds of their originary father and they each strove to replicate his success in their own lives. Hill thus demonstrates the positive effects of a cherished family legend that ties the Langston Canes to a pivotal moment in the fight against slavery.

This analysis is complicated, however, by the revelation that Langston I did not play a heroic role in these crucial events. As Langston V conducts research at Harpers Ferry, he discovers that the family legend does not tell the entire story and that Langston II deliberately hid the truth from his family. In 1879, at the age of twenty-one, Langston II was approached by a man who claimed to be his father and who presented him with a hand-written document. As Langston II told his guardian, ““He gave me a document. [. . .] He said it would explain some things. He said that I should preserve it, and share it with those who might want to preserve his record of things past”” (423). But Langston II keeps this record to himself for forty years before sending it to the West Virginia Historical Society, along with a letter of explanation:

I have no idea whether the man who came to see me was indeed my father, or had done the things he claimed to have done in this report. I read his narrative and found parts of it blasphemous and immoral. I had no desire to share it with my family or to investigate further. [. . .] These days, however, I am nearing the end of a lifetime of work, and I tend to believe his claims. But I don’t know for sure. At any rate, all my life, I have kept the matter from my own family, and have simply said that my father was rumored to have died a hero’s death at Harpers Ferry. (427)

For Langston II, the truth is too shameful. He would rather perpetuate a glorious family legend than tell his children and grandchildren that his father did not die a hero at Harpers Ferry, but escaped in the early stages of the battle. Langston I abandoned the cause, fleeing the arsenal at Harpers Ferry to continue his adulterous affair with Brown's daughter, Diana.¹³ This affair represents another instance of white contamination in the Cane family line and serves as a reminder of the pervasiveness of Black-white relations (and thus of white ancestry) in the history of Black North America. To reveal these truths would be to tarnish a glorious family legend and to admit that the Canes do not spring from heroic origins. As the archivist at the Harpers Ferry Museum tells Langston V, ““Just remember – amateur genealogists always like to discover royal blood in the family line. They’re never happy about royal screw-ups”” (428). While Langston II was certainly not happy to discover the truth about his father, Langston V takes comfort in his great-great-grandfather's story. As he explains, “I told Mill that I felt strangely connected to Langston the First. ‘I love the fact that he didn’t fit in. I love him for his mixture of weakness and dignity’” (497). Langston V can better accept the mistakes he has made in his own life knowing that his ancestor was also fallible. What is a shameful history to Langston II is a reassuring history to Langston V: his ancestor does not have to die a hero for him to gain a sense of connection to his familial and communal origins.

For Langston III, however, the truth does not offer such rewards. Like Langston II, Langston III decides to conceal shameful moments in the Cane family history. In 1924, a young Aberdeen Williams gives Langston III church documents concerning the bigamy charges levelled against Langston I in 1859. After studying the documents, Langston III expresses his concern to Aberdeen:

“These are very damaging papers,” he said.

Ab said nothing.

“They could do great harm to my family.”

Ab remained silent.

“I’m not one for destroying historical documents, although I’m tempted,”

Langston said. “So I am speaking now as reverend to sexton. And I will ask you, sexton, to seal these pages, and to put them in a place where they will neither be damaged nor found – preferably a safety deposit vault at the bank. I will sign across the seal.” (301-02)

Langston III will not, as Ab says, “destroy history” (302), though he will conceal historical documents because he believes the truth will compromise his position as minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Oakville. Langston III worries that, as Langston I’s grandson, he is too close to these events and will therefore be tainted by association. He sees himself as somehow responsible for his grandfather’s misdeeds and, like his father, wants to hide the truth from his family and to perpetuate the legend that depicts Langston I as a hero.

Almost seventy years later, Langston V offers a different perspective when Aberdeen shows him the sealed documents. Langston V is distanced enough from his great-great-grandfather that he feels no sense of responsibility for “what someone wrote and did 140 years ago” (428). Instead, Langston V expresses interest in all areas of the history of Langston I, from his work as a rat-catcher and stone hooker, to his relationship with his wife and children, to his role in the raid at Harpers Ferry. In contrast to the other men in his family line, Langston V is willing to see his originary ancestor as a man who made mistakes, but whose successes and failures contribute equally to his family legend. Langston V thus makes a conscious decision to neither praise his ancestor and “make a hero out of him” (497), nor condemn his ancestor and turn him into a villain. As Langston V traces his history, he learns that even shameful moments from the past –

moments that different family members wish to conceal – offer meaning and allow him to connect with his roots in both Canada and America.

That America plays a significant role in this history points to the influence that events south of the border have had on the history of Blacks in Canada. As Walcott notes, “Hill’s text seems to suggest that it is impossible to make sense of some aspects of Black Canadian history without a serious and sustained consideration of the place of the US in that history” (“Desire” 73). What is important, then, in terms of Langston’s search for belonging, is that he begins to establish a connection with his Black origins by focusing on his history in North America rather than on his roots in Africa. A journey through historical documents in museums and archives in Oakville, Baltimore, and Harpers Ferry allows Langston to work against a denied history while challenging national narratives that subordinate the experiences of Black North Americans.

*

Though they contrast with shameful memories, heroic moments in Black history also play a recuperative role in the novel. The authors of *Memory and Cultural Politics* explain that when marginalized groups trace their origins, they often focus on positive ways of constructing a new identity out of the painful experiences of the past (7). Hill stresses the positive aspects of painful historical events in his novel as a means of offering Black Canadians a sense of pride in their accomplishments. These accomplishments contribute to Hill’s formation of an authenticating mythology for Black Canadians that speaks to their long history in this land. Despite its light-hearted humour, *Any Known Blood* is, as Walcott notes, “a serious recounting of Black Canadian history which allows for a telling to occur that has been largely absent from imaginative writing and critical fictions by Black Canadians” (“Desire” 74). In his novel, Hill writes against this absence and creates a

legitimizing line of descent that uses Langston's search for belonging to forge a place for Black Canadians in the story of Canada.

Hill accomplishes this task, in part, by depicting the Underground Railroad as a source of pride for Black Canadians. The Underground Railroad proved so successful that the Black population in Canada West expanded from less than 1,000 in 1812 to 60,000 by 1860 (Bertley 82). In 1850, the year in which the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in the United States, approximately 5,000 Blacks moved to Canada West (Bertley 82). In *Any Known Blood*, Langston I is depicted as one of these fugitives, and his escape is remembered with pride in the Cane family. As Langston's father says, "'my great-grandfather escaped from slavery, settled in Oakville around 1850'" (79). The escape of fugitive slaves is a testament to their strength and resourcefulness, for many of them, like Langston I, defied established laws by secretly learning to read and using this knowledge to escape their oppressors. As Charles Blockson explains, "By law, slaves were to be kept illiterate, and those few who could write were generally afraid to record their experiences. Nevertheless, against great odds, many did learn to write and set down an account of their lives" (1). Using forged notes enables Langston I to make his way north, for he reproduces his master's signature on a pass that allows him to travel unhindered under the guise of purchasing new equipment: "one man in town asked me what I was doing with such a fine horse, and who I belonged to," he explains. "I hung my head, mumbled that massa had written out a pass for me, showed the paper, and was left alone" (440). By playing on the superiority of white society, Langston I can navigate – albeit cautiously – on the Underground Railroad, for he knows that white southerners have no faith in the intelligence or abilities of Blacks and therefore do not believe they could be duped by their own slaves. Through Langston I's clever scheme, then, Hill demonstrates the ingenuity of fugitive slaves who not only had the courage to escape, but who also had the skills necessary to resist their oppression.

The Underground Railroad thus represents an active, and successful, form of resistance. But fugitives like Langston I did not accomplish their goals on their own. As Langston I continues his journey north, he takes shelter with Quaker families who provide him with maps and directions that guide him to the shores of Lake Ontario and into the care of Captain Robert Wilson. The white Captain Wilson and his Black assistant, Matilda Tylor, secretly smuggle fugitive slaves into Canada on a schooner that carries goods back and forth across the border. Captain Wilson and Matilda Tylor, a former slave, are both taking significant risks in “aiding and abetting” the escape of fugitives on the Underground Railroad since they could each face fines or prison sentences for their actions (444). That Wilson and Matilda work together to free fugitive slaves emphasizes the ways in which whites and Blacks both strove to undermine the slave system in America. Yet Blacks, in particular, have not gained the recognition they deserve for their work on the Underground Railroad. As Blockson points out,

A serious distortion has been an overemphasis on the amount of assistance rendered by white abolitionists, who wrote a great deal on the subject. This tended to make the people whom the Railroad was designed to aid – the fugitive slaves – seem either invisible or passive and helpless without aid from others. Slaves did not sit passively waiting to be led out of slavery, however. Once free, they often reached back to help others escape to freedom. Black courage and perseverance, along with the spirited and sympathetic help of whites, brought many men, women, and children out of slavery. (4)

Hill counters the erasure of Black history in *Any Known Blood* by giving voice to both slaves and their supporters as a means of shifting the emphasis of a well-known event in Canadian history from the work of white benefactors to the experiences of Black fugitives. Matilda’s dedication to her work on the schooner, as well as Langston I’s initiative in

planning his escape, demonstrate some of the ways in which fugitive slaves actively resisted their oppression and contributed to a significant moment in the history of Black Canada.

The personal history of Langston's great-great-grandmother offers a glimpse into the contributions made by women in the Cane family line, while challenging historical writings that deny Black women a place in the story of Canada. Matilda escapes slavery on the Underground Railroad, helps other fugitives find freedom by crossing Lake Ontario, and works as a cook for a family in Oakville. Matilda's experiences demonstrate the ways Black women advanced the formation of Black communities in Canada, and the active roles they took to ensure their own subsistence. Yet such contributions are conspicuously absent from historical accounts of Canada. As Rosemary Brown notes in a speech to the National Congress of Black Women, "If you read the traditional history books you will find that we [Black women] have never been here and indeed are not here even now – the invisible people – because where judicious prodding might unearth the names of one or two of the [Black] males who made contributions in the past – the digging has to be deep indeed to find the women" (qtd. in Hill, *Women of Vision* 12). Langston V digs deeply enough to uncover his great-great-grandmother's history and learns that she was a woman who persevered in difficult circumstances as she attempted to maintain her freedom and that of her sons. Although Matilda enjoyed success in her early years in Canada, her later years were marked by hardship: she was abandoned by her husband and had to support three young children on her own. Unable to find stable employment in Oakville, Matilda moved her family to Baltimore, where they were forced to live in abject poverty. Throughout these events, Matilda's sole purpose was to support her sons and to secure their safety. Only in death did she cease to protect them, for during her illness she tried to prepare them for the dangers of Baltimore. She asked her youngest son, Langston II, to memorize the address of Nathan Shoemaker, a Quaker and well-known supporter of Black rights, and this act helped save

him when “the snatchers” kidnapped his brothers as a source of child labour (412).

Although Matilda’s own story ends in sadness, her resolve – her perseverance and dedication – saves Langston II and thus enables the survival of the Cane family line.

The link between Matilda and her son reveals that the most admirable attributes of the Langston Canes come from this originary mother. John Clement Ball notes that the earlier Langston Canes are “all community builders of a kind” (256). But Matilda is also a community builder whose strength and determination resurface in her youngest son. Following the death of his mother and the disappearance of his brothers, Langston II is adopted by Nathan Shoemaker, who encourages the child’s intellectual and spiritual development. Although, at first, Langston II has “little joy in his heart” (418), he is determined to excel at school, to master Latin, Greek, and French, and to attend the Baptist church each Sunday. Over time, Langston II reveals his dedication to the Black community when, for example, he leads Sunday school classes for children. As Shoemaker says, “I couldn’t ask for more of him. [. . .] He will serve his people well” (419). Langston II is chosen as his class valedictorian and, in his address, he speaks “of the need to rise above racial hatred and of the need for colored people to take their full place in America” (424). Langston II strives to achieve these goals by studying divinity in university and by embracing the position of minister at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore. In doing so, he serves his people as a spiritual leader and community builder who represents a positive force in a difficult past.

Hill demonstrates that Black leaders are dedicated to moving beyond this difficult past and towards a successful present and future through the political activism of church ministers like Langston II and his son, Langston III. Langston III continues a family tradition when he becomes a minister devoted to improving the lives of people in his community. During his time in Oakville, Langston III gains recognition for his work as a

“local leader” (282) who dramatically increases the size of his congregation and obtains proper medical services for Black patients. Moreover, he takes a stance against the Ku Klux Klan when they descend on his home in Oakville, and he puts an end to the town’s yearly minstrel shows. Langston III demands rights and respect for Black citizens, and he stresses these goals in his guest sermon at the Knox Presbyterian Church:

We were brought over in slave ships. But we survived and we are here today. We have our families, and our churches, and we want, essentially, what all human beings seek. Food. Shelter. Comfort. Love. A sense of things higher. Having survived slavery, and Reconstruction, and lynching, some Negroes don’t care to see themselves mocked in a minstrel show. Depicting Negroes as blackfaced clowns tripping over themselves in ignorance is an indignity to us. It has no place in a town that lent a helping hand to fugitive slaves just two generations ago. God gave us dignity, and we must not squander it. (289)

Later, having returned to Baltimore, Langston III continues to care for the needs of the Black community. He works for the physical and spiritual betterment of his people by establishing a program to feed the homeless and by challenging his parishioners. As Mill tells Langston V, ““Your granddaddy was quiet and severe, but he gave the congregation something to think about”” (127). Langston III tends to the minds, bodies, and souls of his people in order to nurture their growth and encourage them to take active roles in their church, schools, and neighbourhoods. With positive contributions such as these, Hill creates a myth of origins that depicts Black leaders building successful communities based on equality and mutual respect for people of all races.

Hill furthers the creation of this authenticating mythology with his portrait of Langston IV, a doctor and civil rights activist who, like his predecessors, ministers to the needs of the Black community. Langston IV moves from America to Canada to study

medicine in Toronto, where he meets his future wife, Dorothy Perkins.¹⁴ Langston IV explains that he left America for ideological reasons: as a soldier in the American Army, he was consistently treated as a subordinate because of his race. As he tells Dorothy, “Men with the brains of squirrels got to be my commanding officers – solely on the basis of pigment. I left that and I’m not going back” (82). As a result, Langston IV decides to stay in Canada, setting up his medical practice in Oakville. His practice is unique in that most of his patients are Black and that they travel from Toronto specifically to be treated by a Black doctor. Langston IV and Dorothy open their home to these patients, offering them medical advice as well as friendship and support. Their home becomes a meeting place for Blacks in their community and, as Langston V notes, “There was a steady flow of blacks in and out of our house for the better half of the 1960s” (336). However, despite his interest in race relations, Langston IV only takes an active role in the pursuit of minority rights as a result of Dorothy’s prodding. A white woman with a Master’s in Sociology, Dorothy is actively engaged with the Toronto Labor Committee for Human Rights and invites Langston IV to join her cause.¹⁵ Together, Langston IV and Dorothy fight for Black rights by exposing, for example, restaurants that refuse to serve Black customers and landlords who deny lodgings to Black tenants. Later, Langston IV founds organizations and publishes reports that focus on the treatment of Blacks in Canadian society. In doing so, he fights not only for the equality of Black citizens, but also for the legitimacy of Black communities in Canada. Langston IV is, like his forebears, a community builder who takes an active role in challenging a dominant Eurocentric order that subordinates Blacks and other ethnic minorities. Hill thus uses Langston IV’s work as a doctor and activist to resist the silencing of Blacks in Canada and to assert a sense of belonging in this land.

Langston V differs from the earlier Langston Canes since he does not actively seek a leadership role in the Black community. In fact, his first act of resistance takes place

when he is posing as an Algerian.¹⁶ Once Langston discovers that the Ontario government is “about to kill anti-discrimination legislation and junk the provincial human rights commission” (13), he decides to write a speech for the Minister of Wellness that leaks this secret information while expressing the minister’s commitment to opposing this proposal. Langston explains that this speech, addressed to the Canadian Association of Black Journalists, “acknowledged that blacks had contributed to life in Canada, suggested that they wanted opportunities for their children, and claimed that the government was paving the way for long-term prosperity by creating conditions in which businesses and investors would thrive” (15-16). As the minister (unintentionally) declares,

Black people have had a history of challenges and of victories in this province. Ontario’s long history of protecting human rights dates back to our first anti-slavery legislation in 1793. I am committed to upholding that history. [. . .] I will be leading the way in opposing a proposal, recently reviewed by Cabinet, to eliminate human rights legislation and to dismantle the human rights commission. Such a proposal would move Ontario thirty years backward in the step-by-step struggle to create a tolerant and diverse society. (16-17)

Both Langston and the minister are fired for what Ball refers to as a “quixotic act of resistance” – an act that “affiliates Langston not only with the wider black community (who applaud his intervention) but also with the earlier Langstons, whose politically engaged lives exemplify important aspects of black experience in the US and Canada” (256). With his speech, Langston inadvertently thrusts himself into the fight for civil rights and briefly becomes a well-known name in the daily news. Although Langston denies newspaper reports that claim he executed “a brilliantly planned, courageous blow against the Ontario government and its right-wing agenda” (15), he has, in fact, taken a bold stand and thus continues a family tradition based on the struggle for freedom, equality, and respect for

Blacks and other racial minorities. Langston might not consider his actions equal to those of his predecessors, but Hill reveals that Langston has indeed accomplished a memorable feat. As Langston's friend remarks, "'You're a revolutionary under that placid exterior'" (18).

One act of resistance begets another: Langston moves from writing an incendiary speech for the Minister of Wellness to writing his family history. In both instances, Langston refuses to remain silent. He uses his writing to resist the erasure of Black history and to legitimize the presence of Blacks in both Canada and America. He does so by tracing his family tree from its origins and offering, in the end, a narrative that establishes the long history of Blacks in North America. As Walcott notes, "The idea of forgetting is held up to scrutiny in *Any Known Blood*. Remembering as posed by Hill is the active resistance offered to and for rethinking the nation" ("Desire" 75). Like Hill, Langston is a writer who takes on a historian's role by telling Black history from a Black perspective and ensuring that this history is not forgotten. Brand explains that there is a "multitude of voices now emerging in this country. These voices see the imagination as transformative, leading out of the pessimism of colonial discourse, making new narratives" ("Who" 20). Hill's new narrative gives voice to Black experiences, challenges national myths that neglect the presence of "others" in Canada, and resists forgetfulness with an authenticating myth of origins that establishes the nation as home for Black Canadians.

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That Hill intends to forge a place for Black Canadians in the history of the nation is emphasized by the fact that Langston's project is part of a larger strategy. This strategy includes Aberdeen Williams' theory that Black Africans sailed to the Americas more than

two thousand years before Columbus. Aberdeen shares this fantasy of foundational North American origins with Langston and even sends letters to prominent citizens in Oakville in which he writes: “Be it respectfully proposed that our schools and governments and churches recognize the early Negro Adventurers on an equal footing with Columbus” (299). Like Langston, Aberdeen wants to rewrite accepted versions of history; he wants to see Black Canadians take their place alongside other known explorers and settlers of this land. While this theory does not gain widespread approval, Langston’s friend, Yoyo Ali, supports the idea in a Toronto newspaper. “It’s time to raise the flag in honor of the Africans,” he writes. “Let’s drop Columbus from the textbooks, and insert the sailors of papyrus boats from the west coast of Africa” (389-90). Although the newspaper editors and the reading public mistakenly consider Yoyo’s article a piece of humour, the theory nonetheless aims to legitimize the presence of Blacks in Canada. To suggest that Black Africans were the first non-Natives to “discover” America is to offer a playful account of past events – an account which shows that laughter can carry a serious message. Indeed, this unusual theory enables Yoyo to lay claim to a neglected history while expressing his pride in the accomplishments of his African ancestors. Yoyo’s humorous article thus parallels Hill’s own humour in the novel and emphasizes that Blacks established their place in Canada by helping to settle this land.

Yoyo’s request that African explorers be inserted into Canadian textbooks is significant since it reflects Hill’s goals for his novel as a whole. From the Cane family tree, to the history of the Underground Railroad, to the discovery of the Americas, Hill strives to insert the long history of Black Canada into the national narrative. In short, Hill shares Walcott’s desire to “cement Blackness within the national imaginary” (“Who” 35). However, like Richler in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Hill expresses the desire for a

legitimizing lineage while also mocking this desire if the quest for origins becomes too limiting: neither writer wants to be seen as taking his recuperative work too seriously. For Hill, this message is reinforced when he ends his novel on a comic note. At the novel's close, Langston and Aunt Mill (along with Langston's new girlfriend and Yoyo) return together to Canada. Mill sells her house in Baltimore, finds her Canadian citizenship papers, and declares that she is going to Oakville to stay. Their journey by car – rather than by plane – serves as a symbolic re-enactment of the journeys of their American ancestors who also travelled through the northern United States en route to the Canada-US border. After five generations of Canes moving back and forth across this border, Langston and Mill finally establish Canada as home. This point is reinforced by their dialogue with the border official who asks to see some identification:

“You really got to see all that?” Mill said. “Okay, folks, get your ID out.”

“Not everybody,” the officer said. “Just yours, ma’am, and your nephew’s.”

I tendered my passport. Mill showed her seventy-year-old certificate of Canadian citizenship.

“I haven’t seen one of these old certificates in years,” the officer said.

“That’s ’cause I was born a long, long time ago,” Mill said. “But I’m a long way from dead.”

The man laughed. “Have a safe trip home, folks.” (505)

NOTES

¹ With Langston's surname, Hill pays homage to Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a book that influenced “an entire generation of young Negro writers then just beginning to emerge; their reaction to Toomer's *Cane* marked an awakening that soon thereafter began to be called a Negro Renaissance” (Bontemps x). Like Hill, Toomer struggled with his sense of belonging as a result of his mixed ancestry. As he writes, “I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now coloured. [. . .] I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper

and deeper into the Negro group. And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other" (qtd. in Bontemps viii-ix).

² Although Hill's novel reconstructs events from the nineteenth century, Black history in Canada actually began two centuries earlier. In 1605, a man of African origins named Mathieu da Costa accompanied Samuel de Champlain to the French colony of Port Royal in present-day Nova Scotia (Clarke, *Odysseys* 18). In 1628, Olivier Le Jeune arrived in New France as an eight-year-old slave and spent the rest of his life in this land. He likely gained his freedom before his death in 1654 (Hill, *Trials* 14).

³ Walcott started capitalizing the terms "Black" and "Blackness" between his publications of *Black Like Who?* in 1997 and *Rude* in 2000.

⁴ Though many of their points overlap, Walcott and Clarke differ in terms of focus since Walcott is a first-generation Canadian, while Clarke is a seventh-generation Canadian. Accordingly, Walcott encourages immigrant writers in Canada to resist the "nostalgia for an elsewhere" and to consider instead their experiences here (*Black* 39). Clarke, meanwhile, intends to remap the Canadian literary landscape with Black writers who have "always" been here (Introduction xxv).

⁵ Walcott prefers "Black Canadian" to "African Canadian" because he considers it more inclusive: "Blackness for me, like black Canadian, allows for a certain malleability and open-endedness which means that questions of blackness far exceed the categories of the biological and the ethnic" (*Black* xiv). By contrast, Clarke uses both terms, although "African Canadian" appears more frequently in his writing. As he explains, "some African Canadians call themselves *Black* to signal their affiliation with some larger African universe; but others call themselves *African*, choosing to accent their ancestral heritage. Some add the adjective *Canadian*, to express a Canadian identity modified by 'blackness.' Others identify with an ex-colonial heritage – either 'British' or 'Français.' Still others ask to be classified solely as *Canadian*" (*Odysseys* 16). Clarke has also coined the term "Africadian," which he uses to describe Black Nova Scotians and "to stress the long history of Africans in Maritime Canada" (*Odysseys* 18).

⁶ For example, Black Canadian experiences are the focus of *Whylah Falls* (1990) by George Elliott Clarke, *Childhood* (1998) by André Alexis, and *Kipligat's Chance* (2003) by David N. Odhiambo.

⁷ Hill's father was born in Missouri in 1923; his mother was born in South Dakota in 1928. They moved to Toronto in 1953 and raised their family in Don Mills (Lawrence Hill was born in Toronto in 1957). Together, Daniel and Donna Hill founded the Ontario Black History Society and each has produced works on Blacks in Canada (see, for example, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* and *Human Rights in Canada: A Focus on Racism* by Daniel G. Hill, and *A Black Man's Toronto, 1914-1980* edited by Donna Hill). Daniel Hill was the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and both Daniel and Donna Hill are known for their work in the field of civil rights in Canada (Nurse 118-19).

⁸ Hill has made a deliberate choice in terms of his own ethno-cultural identity. He suggests that "people with one black and one white parent move through a subconscious process that works like this: *I can't possibly be white. I am not white, although I have one white parent, will never really be viewed as white, and can't see myself as white, either. I can, however, be black, and that's the identity I'm choosing to claim*" (*Black Berry* 114).

⁹ Hill visited Africa as a student in 1979. Of this experience, he writes,

What surprises me, in retrospect, is that I was well aware before my trip to Niger that many North American blacks had gone to Africa seeking some sort of brotherly, diasporic connection, and returned with complaints that they were snubbed and not accepted as being truly black. That awareness, however, didn't prevent me from feeling overwhelmed by the same desire, which was surely intensified by my realization that the people of Niger might not even recognize my light skin as being black, or that I had any black heritage. I was aching for them to see it. I was dying to be known and treated and welcomed as a prodigal son. (*Black Berry* 67)

¹⁰ Like his fictional character, Hill has also wanted his race to be "clearly marked." As he writes in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, "I wished I was darker. I wanted my blackness to be taken as a given, a *fait accompli*, and even though I was loved in the family, I felt somehow that I would have to affirm my racial identity to be truly accepted" (36).

¹¹ This is a rephrasing of Hansen's Law, which states, "What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (Singh 3).

¹² In *Ambivalent Conspirators*, Jeffery Rossbach explains that "a failed abolitionist act often did as much for the cause as a successful one. [...] Brown understood how much a failed attempt at insurrection meant to abolition and his own historical identity. [...] For a failed ex-businessman, martyrdom at Harpers Ferry was a form of success" (218, 225).

¹³ Diana Brown is Hill's own creation and not a historical figure like the other members of Brown's family who appear in the novel (i.e. Oliver, Owen, and Annie).

¹⁴ On his own father's decision to leave America for Canada, Hill remarks, "I don't think that we can minimize the gravity of these positions. I mean to leave your country – especially to leave the United States – it's not as if you're fleeing for economic reasons. You're fleeing on a matter of racial principle which is a whole different sort of psychological mindset" (qtd. in Nurse 119).

¹⁵ Hill's depiction of Langston's mother is modelled on his own mother, who also studied sociology in university and has been active in the fight for civil rights, especially for minority rights (Nurse 119-20).

¹⁶ Langston pretends to be Algerian in order "to test [his] theory that nobody would challenge [his] claim to any racial identity" (2).

III

Who Was Here?: Reinventing Canada's Founding Myths in Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here*

Now We Will Suffer Loss of Memory

Now we will suffer loss of memory;
 We will forget the tongue our mothers knew;
 We will munch ham, and guzzle milk thereto,
 And this on hallowed fast-days, purposely...
 Abe will elude his base-nativity.
 The kike will be a phantom; we will rue
 Our bearded ancestry, my nasal cue,
 And like the gentiles we will strive to be.
 Our recompense – emancipation-day.
 We will have friend where once we had a foe.
 Impugning epithets will glance astray.
 To gentile parties we will proudly go;
 And Christians, anecdoting us, will say:
 “Mr. and Mrs. Klein – the Jews, you know...”

A.M. Klein, *Selected Poems*

In *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989), Mordecai Richler invents a genealogy that locates a Jewish presence in this land as early as 1845. Creating this fictional genealogy allows him to establish a myth of origins that includes Jewish Canadians in the story of the nation by placing them at the beginnings of Canada. Since Canada's national narratives have typically failed to reflect the experiences of Jewish Canadians,¹ Richler rewrites some of Canada's founding myths – from Arctic exploration in the north to bootlegging in the south – as a means of overcoming this exclusion. Daniel Francis explains that Canada's core myths are currently being challenged by Canadians who have been traditionally marginalized by mainstream society (*National* 12). As he writes, "The master narrative excluded many people [. . .] who did not see themselves reflected in the stories; or worse, felt belittled by them. These people – Aboriginals, minorities, working people, women – have had to force their way into the story of Canada by inventing narratives of their own" (*National* 172). Herb Wyile notes that one way of forming a heterogeneous national narrative is through historical fiction. He explains that "in Canada as elsewhere, the last few decades have seen a proliferation of revisionist historical fiction and historical fiction about previously neglected or marginalized histories, underlining that what is historically significant has been narrowly defined and ideologically overdetermined" (6). By bringing history and fiction together in a specifically Jewish Canadian genealogy, Richler challenges accepted versions of the past in a novel that reimagines the story of Canada.

Homi Bhabha suggests that national narratives must be continually reimagined and retold because they are ambivalent constructs that "lose their origins in the myths of time" ("Narrating" 1). According to Bhabha, writing the story of the nation involves questioning "that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – *the many as one*" (142). He thus refutes the singularity of national identity by interrogating this

metaphor and challenging “the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community” (144). Similarly, Stuart Hall also contests the notion of unified identities. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” he posits that all identities are based on both similarity and difference. On the one hand, “cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (393). But, on the other hand, cultural identities reveal “critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’” (394). Cultural identities involve both “becoming” and “being” and thus do not remain stable but undergo a process of continual transformation (Hall 394). Likewise, national identities change over time and must be constantly reimagined and reinforced in the national consciousness.

In Canada, as Diana Brydon notes, “it has never been possible to forget that our national identity is neither unified nor natural but something we work at reinventing and protecting every day” (“Reading” 9). Richler participates in this reinvention by working against the myth of a unified national identity in a novel that includes Jewish Canadians as a central component in the idea of Canada. In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Richler creates a founding moment that serves as the beginnings of a Jewish Canadian genealogy. Yet, even as he traces a detailed family line in his novel, Richler satirizes this desire for a legitimating lineage, for he mocks his narrator’s nostalgic longing for an authenticating myth of origins in Canada. There is thus a gap in Richler’s novel between his own satire and his narrator’s nostalgia. This chapter will argue that, while *Solomon Gursky Was Here* satirizes the urge to lay claim to a long line of descent in Canada, the novel actually satisfies this urge through Moses Berger’s nostalgic quest to uncover lost origins.

This tension between satire and nostalgia is reflected, in part, in Richler's own ambivalence towards the land of his birth. In 1951, Richler distanced himself from Canada when he decided to leave college and travel in Europe. George Woodcock explains that Richler "made the gesture of combined flight and romantic renunciation that has characterised so many North American writers of our century, abandoning at the same time his academic career and his Montreal background to seek a fulfilment in the Old World from which his grandparents had been glad to flee less than half a century before" (9). After living in London for most of eighteen years, Richler began worrying that, with this extended stay in Europe, he was losing his place in Canada: "Doomed to be always a foreigner in England," he wrote, "I was now in danger of finding Canada foreign too" ("Expo" 106). Richler's return to Canada represents his physical and emotional shift away from the space of the expatriate writer and toward his own Canadian roots in Montreal. According to Arnold E. Davidson, this type of return is "quintessentially Canadian" (18). As he explains, "an important theme in Canadian literature stands in definite opposition to the Thomas Wolfe dicta that you can't go home again. Such major writers as Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence, and Richler himself show again and again that not only can you go home again, you also must. The flight for identity, in the Canadian mythos, requires at least an imaginative return to the past fled from" (17-18). For Canadian writers, this quest for identity embodies a paradox because they return to the new world in search of something old: their ancestral origins, their place in Canada's past. Richler, for one, comes back to Canada as a means of re-establishing his home in this land. As he tells John Metcalf in 1974, "I've come back here in search of some kind of renewal" (73).

Richler's desire to renew his sense of belonging in Canada can be seen in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, a novel that imaginatively reconnects with Canada's past. Recalling

his experience as writer-in-residence at Sir George Williams University² in Montreal, Richler once said, “To come home in 1968 was to discover that it wasn’t where I had left it – it had been bulldozed away – or had become, as is the case with St. Urbain, a Greek preserve” (qtd. in Davidson 2). Because the home he knew had disappeared, Richler strives to “recapture” lost origins in his fiction.³ In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, he reinvents the period of exploration in Canada’s past and mythologizes the roles Jews played in settling the nation. He thus fabricates and manipulates historical moments in order to rewrite some of Canada’s founding myths. As Barbara Korte explains, “*Solomon Gursky* parodically re-writes Canadian history [and] may thus be considered a metafictional exercise in *l’histoire des marginaux*: a version of the past as promoted by Canada’s two official ‘founding’ nations (i.e. the British and the French) is undermined by a hi/story told from a Jewish, de-centralized perspective” (495). Yet the novel also satirizes the *longing* to rewrite these historical moments. In other words, Richler satirizes both the process and the product when it comes to reinventing different versions of the past. Even as Richler creates a Jewish myth of origins in Canada, he highlights the problems with this process by misrepresenting historical moments and by producing a narrative that borders on the absurd: a Jewish swindler takes part in – and survives – the ill-fated Franklin Expedition and becomes the spiritual leader of a band of Inuit in the Arctic and the founding father of a family that builds a financial empire as bootleggers during Prohibition. Put simply, in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Richler creates an authenticating mythology while revelling in the absurdity of doing so and while satirizing the desire for a legitimating myth of origins in Canada.

Two different levels of narrative voice – satirical and sincere – exist in opposition in the creation of this Jewish Canadian mythology. Richler’s voice can be identified as the omniscient narrator who speaks of Moses in the third person and has access to Moses’s private thoughts and actions. This voice satirizes the nostalgic longing for an authenticating mythology by depicting the genealogical impulse as an all-encompassing quest. That the quest becomes an obsession for Moses is underlined by his compulsive search for his missing salmon fly: “Madness, Moses thought. Unforgivably loopy. A fifty-two-year-old man turning his cabin inside out searching for a salmon fly” (222). As Moses rummages through his research notes in his isolated cabin, he comes across the material that he has been gathering on the Gurskys for over thirty years. Like his day-long search for the missing salmon fly, Moses’s life-long pursuit of the elusive Solomon is a quest that he undertakes “as if his life depended on it” (543). Although Moses initially pursues his research in order to expose his father’s misplaced loyalty to Bernard Gursky, he soon becomes addicted to Gursky history, a point that is reinforced by his addiction to Gursky booze (10). Richler suggests that Moses’s obsessive search for Solomon represents the longing for a new father and hence for a new line of descent.⁴ As the doctor in the addiction clinic asks Moses, ““Has it ever occurred to you [. . .] that your obsession with Solomon Gursky can be explained by your self-evident search for a father, having dismissed your own as unacceptable?””(223). Moses seeks symbolic origins in Canada that will legitimize his sense of belonging in this land. However, while Moses pursues these origins, Richler satirizes this quest by taking it to an extreme: he turns the desire for a legitimating lineage into an obsessive addiction and depicts his protagonist, this amateur historian, as “an enormous failure” (308) who suffers from a debilitating nostalgia for origins.

In contrast to Richler's satirical tone, Moses's voice expresses a sincere longing for the beginnings of a Jewish Canadian genealogy. Throughout the text, Moses narrates the passages that tell the Gursky family history. Although Moses differs from the other narrators of this study because he does not pursue his own family origins, he nonetheless shares with Kae, Vittorio, Langston, and Esther a desire to recover a neglected history and to establish his place – and the place of other Jewish Canadians – in the myths of national identity. Moses actively invents a “history” by piecing together a narrative based on journals, letters, memoirs, books, newspaper articles, historical accounts, personal testimonies, old photographs, and video and tape recordings. Richler thus emphasizes the fact that, for Moses, telling the Gursky story is a reconstructive act – one based on recovering and reimagining actual historical events: “Trying to reconstruct Ephraim's interminable winters in the high Arctic, the sun sinking below the horizon for four months, Moses had to rely on conjecture and the accounts of other nineteenth-century explorers. Then there were the fragments from Solomon's journals, those tales told by Ephraim on the shores of a glacial lake, man and boy warming themselves by their camp-fire” (432). Moses strives to legitimize his version of the past by incorporating “historical” sources into his narrative. For example, he cites articles from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Toronto Globe*, and the *Financial Times*; he refers to books such as *Life With The Esquimaux* and *Settling The Townships*; he quotes from memoirs by Mr. Morrie and Sir Russell Morgan; and he inserts a full-length entry on Ephraim Gursky as it appears in *The Newgate Calendar*.⁵ What these and other such references reveal is that Moses, like Richler himself, gathers material from diverse sources in an attempt to revise specific moments from Canada's past.⁶ In tracing the Gursky genealogy, he returns to a period of exploration and settlement as a means of “uncovering” what he insists are the beginnings of Jewish history in Canada.

Of all his sources, Moses relies most heavily on Solomon's version of the past.

The words that Moses reads in Solomon's journal, "Fort McEwen, Alberta. 1908.

Late one winter afternoon I found my grandfather waiting for me on his sled outside the school house. Ephraim stank of rum. His cheek was bruised and his lower lip was swollen" (501), are reproduced and redeveloped in Moses's own voice when he tells his version of the story:

Late one winter afternoon in 1908 Solomon Gursky tumbled out of school into the thickly falling snow in Fort McEwen, Saskatchewan,⁷ to find his grandfather waiting on the stern of his long sled. Solomon was a mere nine-year-old at the time. Ephraim, whom the Indians called Mender-of-Bones, was ninety-one and running short of time. He was rooted in a tarpaper shack out on the reservation, living with a young woman named Lena. A team of ten yapping dogs was harnessed to the sled. Ephraim, his eyes hot, stank of rum. His cheek was bruised and his lower lip was swollen. (33)

Towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Moses himself has been telling the Gursky story all along. As Korte notes, "In retrospect, the chapters attributed to the fictional narrator may be interpreted as chapters which Moses, creative writer at last, has composed around the evidence he has accumulated" (504). In gathering this evidence, Moses expresses a genuine desire to "recover" the Gursky origins as a means of narrating into existence a seemingly neglected part of Canada's past.

While Richler's voice is satirical and Moses's voice is not, Solomon's voice is a combination of the two. On the one hand, Solomon is laughing as Moses attempts to create an authenticating mythology. He teases Moses by turning the quest into a game and furtively dropping clues in his path. For example, disguised as Sir Hyman Kaplansky, Solomon leads Moses to the "truths" hidden in his large collection of rare

books. After conducting his research, Moses tells Sir Hyman why he has decided to write a biography of Solomon Gursky:

Sir Hyman, he allowed, had inadvertently led him to a great discovery. While cataloguing Sir Hyman's Arctic library, he had accidentally stumbled on an unmistakable reference to Solomon's grandfather Ephraim Gursky, and now he suspected that Ephraim might have been a survivor of the Franklin expedition.

"But there were no survivors," Sir Hyman said.

"Certainly that would appear to be the case," Moses agreed, adding that he would soon be returning to Canada to pursue his researches. (495)

Moses's "great discovery" is a key part of Solomon's plan, for Solomon arranges the clues and watches as Moses seeks the answers: he wants Moses to "discover" that the Gursky family has roots in this land that can be traced to a foundational moment in Canada's past – the Franklin Expedition of 1845. Later, after Moses learns who Sir Hyman really is, he sees that he was duped: "As L.B. had been indentured to Mr. Bernard, so Moses acknowledged, he had come to be in thrall to Solomon, Ephraim's anointed one. Furthermore, he had been led like a lamb to Ephraim by Sir Hyman. At the time, Moses had been vain enough to believe that McGibbon's diary had just happened to be open on the pedestal and that Ephrim Gor-ski [sic] had been his discovery" (223). Although Moses realizes that Solomon has been playing with him all along, he does not give up his quest: he eagerly awaits the "tantalizing segments" (76) of Solomon's journals that arrive when least expected, and he pursues Solomon in his various disguises, even though Solomon always eludes his grasp. Solomon's elaborate game thus resonates with a laughter that mirrors Richler's own satirical tone as Moses stubbornly continues his quest for Jewish origins in Canada.

On the other hand, however, Solomon's laughter cannot hide his desire to claim a legitimating line of descent. Not only does Solomon encourage Moses to trace the Gursky history, but he also laments the fact that, as he says, "'This country has no tap root'" (382). Solomon expresses a longing to construct a genealogy with roots that reach back to the beginnings of Canada. This longing is revealed when Solomon, in his relations with Moses, adopts the role of the writer who exerts control over both his narrator and the material that will form the narrative. At the end of the novel, Moses remains haunted by Solomon's words: "I once told you that you were no more than a figment of my imagination. Therefore, if you continue to exist, so must I'" (556). If Moses is Solomon's creation, then so is his story.⁸ Solomon can thus be seen as Richler's double since he also mocks, but ultimately creates, an authenticating myth of Jewish origins in Canada. For Solomon, reality is less important than perception – what matters is not that the Gurskys have real origins at the beginnings of Canada, but that they are reputed to have these origins. Solomon sets up the game and Moses follows the rules by telling, in the end, the story that Solomon wants to hear: he claims that the Gursky origins are firmly rooted in Canada and he turns both Ephraim and Solomon into mythic figures.

That Solomon expects his story to be interpreted as a founding myth can be seen in the journals he gives to Moses. In his journals, Solomon describes his grandfather as an intrepid Arctic adventurer and draws links between his grandfather's ingenuity and his own. Solomon focuses, in particular, on the time his grandfather kidnapped him, taking him by sled to the Polar Sea. Solomon depicts his grandfather as a difficult man, "unpredictable, cranky. A quirky companion. On the rare occasion gentle, but for the most part impatient, charged with anger and contradictions" (39). Yet Solomon also presents Ephraim as an old man with unusual vigour – a man who, at ninety-one, can still build an igloo, hunt for food, and lead a team of dogs to his northern destination, relying

on the stars as his guide. During their journey, Ephraim impresses the nine-year-old Solomon with tales about his exploits, telling him, for example, about working in a saloon in Dawson where he accumulated \$25,000 by secretly spreading gold dust in his hair and carefully washing it out every night. Solomon later records these tales in his journals, using them to romanticize his grandfather as a cunning rogue. Yet he also describes his grandfather's vast knowledge and emphasizes how much he learned from this older man. For example, he says that Ephraim gave him lessons in Latin, hunting, and navigation. Solomon reveals that he was schooled, by his grandfather, in an aristocratic Anglo-Saxon tradition and that his family can, as a result, lay claim to cultured old world origins. By contrast, Solomon also explains that his grandfather made him care for their team of dogs and build an igloo on his own, accomplishments that attest to his ease in Canada's north. Richler thus reveals that both Ephraim and Solomon participate in a process that Terry Goldie calls "indigenization" (*Fear* 13). Goldie explains that this process allows settlers to gain a sense of belonging in a new land by becoming "native" – by pursuing "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" (*Fear* 12-13). Ephraim and Solomon have earned their places in the nation because they have mastered the skills of the Inuit (something that Franklin and his men were unable or unwilling to do). What Solomon's journals suggest, then, is that the Gursky line of descent represents a fusion of old and new worlds that is epitomized in the grandfather and passed on to the grandson. In short, these tales advance a hybrid identity that defines what it means to be an "indigenized" and "authentic" Canadian.

Though Moses relies on Solomon's tales to reconstruct the past, he nonetheless questions the veracity of these tales – "Tales filtered through an old man's faulty memory and written down by Solomon many years later. Tales that Moses suspected had been burnished in the service of not one, but two outsized egos" (146). Indeed, Solomon uses

these tales to show how closely he resembles his grandfather and to illustrate his own abilities, for he explains how he secretly mapped their progress to the Polar Sea and marked a tree at each of their camps. He then claims to have found his way home from the Arctic by himself – though his family believes otherwise. As Morrie notes, ““that was the last we ever saw of my grandfather, aged ninety-one, buried out there somewhere, according to Solomon, who also expects us to believe he made his way home all alone. From the Polar Sea? Tell me another one, my father says”” (215). With these tales, Solomon establishes his ties to his grandfather, placing himself alongside this originary ancestor as a “legitimate northerner,” as someone who can also survive in the Arctic. The fact that Moses and Morrie question the tales does not prevent them from admiring Solomon’s actions and passing on his version of events, thereby elevating the tales – and their heroes – to the status of myth.

The different voices in Richler’s novel point to the complex relationship between history and invention in the creation of alternative versions of the past. As Wyile remarks, “contemporary novelists have recognized that the assumptions that shape how history is written are as problematic as those that shape what history is to be written about. [. . .] The result is that the unitary, authoritative, realistic voice of the historical novel in Canada has been fractured, mongrelized, and in many cases subverted through a discursive interplay that challenges the authority of official history” (139). Indeed, Linda Hutcheon explains that historical fiction raises questions of power and control, and she says that writing “history – or historical fiction – is equally to narrate, to reconstruct by means of selection and interpretation. History (like realist fiction) is *made* by its writer, even if events are made to seem to speak for themselves” (“Canadian Historiographic” 228). In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, the different levels of voice reinforce the notion that writing historical narratives is a (re)constructive act. Richler is therefore being self-

conscious about the invention of history in a novel that satirizes the desire for authenticity even as it creates a legitimating myth of origins in Canada.

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Richler satirically reimagines a well-known Canadian historical event by playfully suggesting that Jews arrived in Canada as part of the Franklin Expedition. In *Moses*, Richler creates a narrator who is determined to prove that Ephraim Gursky was the sole survivor of this ill-fated voyage, which disappeared in the Arctic in August of 1845. However, Moses's "discovery" is refuted by a representative of British Canadian mainstream knowledge, Professor Knowlton Hardy, president of the Arctic Society: "'As for Jews having signed on with Franklin,' Hardy charged, 'nonsense! [. . .] Let me be direct with you, Berger. It is a well-known fact that Jews who immigrated to this great country in the nineteenth century did not risk the Arctic Circle, but tended to settle in cities where there was the most opportunity for trade and advancement'" (50). Professor Hardy's statement reveals the hypocrisy and prejudice of British Canada, for he attacks Moses's biased claim with a biased argument of his own. While Moses is intent on reclaiming "lost" origins by charting a genealogy that begins with a Jewish migrant's arrival and survival in Canada's north, Hardy is equally determined to disprove this theory by casting all Jews in the mould of (greedy) urban merchants. With these opposing positions, Richler both subverts and reinforces Jewish stereotypes in his novel. He subverts the stereotype of Jews as merchants and unadaptable urban-dwellers by portraying Ephraim as a cunning Arctic adventurer; yet he reinforces this stereotype by showing that Ephraim's descendants will build a financial empire based on trade in urban centres. In doing so, Richler exposes the folly of such extreme positions since Moses and Hardy each refuse to see beyond stereotypes or to acknowledge other versions

of events. Richler emphasizes the absurdity of their claims as the debate at the Arctic Society descends into chaos: a drunken Moses “drifted over to Hardy’s place at the U-shaped table, picked up a jug of water, and attempted to empty it over his head. Hardy, leaping free, knocked it out of his hand” (50). By turning this debate into a farce, Richler satirizes the desire for authenticating origins and questions the value in tracing a genealogy to a specific moment in Canada’s past.

But Richler wants it both ways. On the one hand, he wants to satirize the need for a legitimating lineage; on the other hand, he wants to create just such a lineage. Thus, despite his playful approach, Richler manipulates the factual events surrounding the Franklin Expedition in order to make a serious point: he grounds his fictional genealogy in Canadian history as a means of placing Jewish Canadians at the beginnings of Canada. Korte notes that the Franklin Expedition is especially suitable for this “revisionist purpose” because, as she writes, “The last Franklin expedition is arguably one of the most frequently textualized exploration feats of the 19th century, but except for one brief message there is no textual *eyewitness* report” (495-96). Indeed, in *Frozen in Time: Unlocking the Secrets of the Franklin Expedition*, Owen Beattie and John Geiger confirm, “Not one of the 129 crewmen came out of the arctic wastes to tell of their accomplishments or their suffering, and both the expedition ships, HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*, were lost, as were whatever written accounts of the journey that had existed” (3). But in Richler’s imaginative retelling of these events there is one survivor – a man whose strength and skill enable him to triumph in these “arctic wastes.” The possibility that one or more men actually survived the expedition had been suggested well before Richler’s fictional rendering. In *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic*, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson explains that Charles Francis Hall, who led a search for Franklin in 1860, uncovered rumours that some men from the expedition were living in the Arctic “as

Eskimos among Eskimos” (71). Hall, however, could not substantiate these claims and Stefánsson suggests that if any men survived, “then they must have been lost eventually in an effort to cross southerly towards a Hudson’s Bay Company post. More likely, however, the tales of a few survivors who remained several years in the King William Island region were invented by the Eskimos in response to the persistent inquiries of men who had come to the Franklin region with a firm belief that some whites still survived there” (127).⁹ Richler, then, reinvents a historical moment that is already surrounded by speculation. He adds a new dimension to this body of work by borrowing the idea that one or more men survived the expedition and using it to write Jews into British Canadian mainstream history. Turning Ephraim into the sole survivor of the Franklin Expedition allows Richler not only to place him at the head of a Jewish line of descent that begins in 1845, but also to subvert myths of British and French superiority since this Jewish migrant endures where his Christian counterparts perish.

The Franklin Expedition further authenticates Richler’s fictional genealogy by connecting his founding family to a historical event that is firmly rooted in Canadian myth. According to Margaret Atwood, the Franklin Expedition has a place in “the Canadian imagination” as a story of disaster that has been “told and retold” (“Concerning Franklin” 17, 11). It has achieved this status, Atwood says, because it belongs to a set of stories that “hold a curious fascination both for those who tell them and for those who hear them; they are handed down and reworked, and story-tellers come back to them time and time again, approaching them from various angles and discovering new and different meanings each time the story, or a part of it, is given a fresh incarnation” (11). Richler gives the Franklin story new meaning by using it to make claims of legitimacy for Jewish Canadians. In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, he uses research conducted by Owen Beattie to offer “proof” that Jews participated in the Franklin Expedition. When Beattie and a

team of scientists exhumed the body of John Hartnell, buried on Beechey Island, they found that he was wearing a cap and was wrapped in a shroud (*Frozen* 116). Richler uses these historical findings in his fiction when Professor Hardy and his research team discover that Dr. Isaac Grant was buried in a “shroud or shawl [. . .] made of fine woven wool with occasional black bands, its corners pierced and reinforced to take knotted tassels or fringes” (*Gursky* 51). Moses suggests that this artifact is “a *talith*, the traditional prayer shawl common to the Ashkenazi Jews of Northern Europe” (51). His claim gains legitimacy when a Hebrew prayer book and a satin skullcap are also found in the Arctic. Although the man who discovers the skullcap assumes it is “a rare Eskimo artifact” (47), a doctor of divinity corrects this misconception when he says, ““These so-called symbols embroidered into the fabric are not Eskimo, but Hebrew”” (47-48). Yet these are controversial findings. Not only does Professor Hardy refute Moses’s claims, but academics in general are “squabbling over the enigma of the Hebraic artifacts” (49). Although Moses presents these artifacts as evidence that Jews belong to a prominent Canadian myth, he also implies that the artifacts add a new dimension to the Franklin mystery and that only those clever enough to read the signs will accept the Jewish presence on this mythic expedition.

For the descendants of Ephraim Gursky, there is no doubt that Jews belong to this Canadian myth. Both Bernard and Solomon justify their presence in this land by referring to their grandfather’s accomplishments. Bernard, for example, enjoys telling reporters that his family origins are older than the nation:

Lewis and Clark, Frémont hoo ha, my grandpappy Ephraim was right up there with them. He came to this country to help Sir John Franklin in his search for the Northwest Passage. My enemies [. . .] will tell you Bernard Gursky he came out of nowhere. Not like them, eh? Don’t make me laugh. [. . .] Well the Gurskys didn’t

come here steerage fleeing from some *drecky shtetl*. My family was established

here before Canada even became a country. We're older, how about that? (226-27)

On another occasion, meeting with a group of "establishment bankers," Bernard says,

"Of course you know, [. . .] we are hardly newcomers to this great land of opportunity.

My grandfather first set foot in Canada in 1846'" (255-56). Bernard uses Ephraim's journey aboard the *Erebus* to flaunt his origins in Canada and to establish his credentials:

he wants everyone to know that he belongs in this land. Similarly, Solomon emphasizes his grandfather's origins to show that his family has earned its place in Canada. Raging against the establishment, he says, "My grandfather sailed here with Franklin and hiked out of the Arctic. A mere boy, I once made my way home from the Polar Sea. How dare you sit in judgement'" (403). Bernard and Solomon both rely on their family history to garner respect and establish a sense of belonging in a land where they feel like outsiders.

In order to legitimize their presence in the nation, they claim their place in the annals of Canadian myth. Richler, like the other writers of this study, thus reinvents a moment in Canada's past as a means of imagining his ethno-cultural group as a founding people and inserting this story into the national narrative. While Richler's account is not factually true, his message holds truth because Jewish Canadians have a long history in this land – one that can, in fact, be traced to the years "before Canada even became a country."¹⁰

Richler also uses Ephraim's story of survival to include Jewish Canadians in Canada's myth of the north. This myth, as Francis explains, contributes to the national narrative by imagining Canadians as a strong northern people (*National* 161). As Francis writes,

To a Canadian, North is more than a point on the compass. It is a region, a territory, a vast intimidating part of the country somewhere beyond easy comfort. Officially, the North extends from the 60th parallel of latitude all the way to the

Pole: the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, the Arctic archipelago.

Unofficially, it occupies our imagination, filling it with dreams of high adventure and fabulous wealth. To a Canadian, North is an idea, not a location; a myth, a promise, a destiny. (*National* 152)

By locating Ephraim in this fantasy space, Richler romanticizes him as a survivor and Arctic adventurer who, in embracing the north as his new home, participates in a myth that defines what it means to be “Canadian.” Sherrill Grace, however, speaks out against the use of this myth: “The history of southern Canadian sentimentalizing indifference is, in fact, a history of civil imperialism: the ‘North’ is valuable insofar as we can exploit its resources, one of which is its seemingly endless capacity to generate resonant (and marketable) images of a distinct Canadian identity” (“Representing North” 2). John Moss also points out the problems with imaginative representations of the north when he explains that “what writers imagine the Arctic to be, that is what it has become – not in actuality, but in the minds of outsiders and increasingly of people native to the north. The imagined landscape of the Arctic, if not recognized unreal, will continue to be taken as reality itself” (*Enduring* 52). Richler exploits this Arctic myth when Ephraim is portrayed as a survivor of Canada’s north – as an archetypal Canadian ancestor. Ephraim’s survival proves that he belongs in Canada and that his indigenization has been a success. Thus, with this story of survival, Richler establishes authenticating origins in Canada that allow him to place Jewish Canadians in an imaginary north while demonstrating that they belong to a central myth of national identity.

Richler, however, does not only place Jews in Canada’s north – he also envisions them spreading south, east, and west from the Arctic, thereby transforming and populating the Canadian landscape. The idea that Jews are a ubiquitous presence in the nation is confirmed by the novel’s title, which has its own mythic roots. During

the Second World War, the words “Kilroy Was Here” could be found scribbled in the most unlikely places all over the world.¹¹ For American soldiers, it became a game to place the graffiti wherever they landed and to claim it was already there when they arrived. It is fitting that Richler incorporates this myth into his narrative because the elusive Solomon is, like the mysterious Kilroy, everywhere all the time. American soldiers were using their graffiti to inscribe themselves on every part of the world – to claim both a territory and a sense of belonging in unfamiliar lands. This is what Richler is doing for Jewish Canadians with his assertion that “Solomon Gursky Was Here.” However, what he offers is a mock form of empowerment because he borrows an American myth that is based on a joke. As a result, he playfully suggests that Jews have “always” been in Canada. In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, a Jewish presence haunts the nation since the ghosts of Jewish forebears appear and reappear across Canada while also surfacing in well-known events in Canadian history, beginning with Ephraim’s journey aboard the *Erebus*. For this reason, Grace labels the novel “a northern ghost story” and notes that Canadian history “must include these ghosts even if (especially when) they do not fit the stereotypic model (white, male, Christian, and of British descent)” (*Canada* 213). Canadian history is haunted by the ghosts of these marginalized “others” who, by inscribing themselves onto the Canadian landscape, reinforce the notion that “Jews were here.” Thus, while Richler’s use of the Kilroy myth advances the notion that Jewish migrants participated in the Franklin Expedition and survived in Canada’s north, it also points to the ways Richler playfully reimagines historical events in order to place Jewish forebears at the beginnings of Canada.

Richler furthers his creation of a legitimating lineage for Jewish Canada by drawing on the story of a well-known family of Canadian entrepreneurs. The historical Bronfmans serve as a model for Richler's fictional Gurskys who, like their historical counterpart, first build a fortune by supplying American bootleggers with "beverage alcohol" (*Gursky* 365) during the U.S. Prohibition of 1920-33, and then capitalize on this fortune by acquiring a small distillery – McTavish is based on Seagram – and turning it into a world leader in alcohol production.¹² What draws Richler to the Bronfman story is not only their notoriety, but also their attitude towards their bootlegging origins. In an article on Samuel Bronfman, the most prominent of the four brothers,¹³ Richler once wrote:

The Bronfman family fortune, one of the most substantial in North America, was built on the rock of bootlegging. Instead of being defiant, or at least amused, about the gaudy origins of the family's billions, Sam in his time, and now his progeny, has remained unaccountably ashamed. Too bad. For the truth is the roistering Abe, Harry, Sam, and Allan sinned far less against the common weal than J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, or other robber barons. [. . .] All the same, the family is still trying to launder their early history, the only thing interesting about them, determined to render it as bland as possible, that is to say, squeaky clean Canadian. ("Mr. Sam" 24)

While the Bronfmans reinforce the stereotype of capitalist Jews, they subvert the stereotype of "boring Canadians." Richler exploits a Jewish stereotype as a means of constructing a historical narrative that defies expectations by being interesting *and* Canadian. But the Bronfmans, as Richler points out, do not want to be "interesting": they want to be "authentic" – in this case, "bland" – Canadians. Richler satirizes the desire to purify the past with his portrait of Bernard Gursky who, like Sam Bronfman and his heirs, overlooks certain "misdeeds" in an attempt to render his family history less

“interesting.” In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Diana McClure tells Moses that she, for one, does not “consider the bootlegging such a disgrace. On the contrary. It was frightfully clever and quite the only interesting thing about Mr. Bernard” (395). Diana McClure’s comments reinforce Richler’s own feelings on this matter, for what makes these bootleggers notorious also makes them appealing and, as a result, they have taken what Richler calls a “bumpy ride into Canadian mythology” (“Mr. Sam” 29).

The Bronfmans occupy this mythological place in Canadian culture as immigrants who achieved the fabled dream of success on the grandest scale. Outwardly extravagant, they lived in lavish homes in Westmount¹⁴ and worked in elaborate buildings in Montreal and New York: the Seagram’s headquarters in Montreal was designed in 1928 as a “miniature feudal castle” and the Seagram’s building in New York was constructed for \$41 million in 1957 as a bronze tower that “has become the illustrious symbol of Seagram’s predominance among the world’s distillers” (Newman 26, 167). Richler satirizes this materialism in his novel by depicting the Gurskys as equally excessive. When the eleven-year-old Moses and his father are invited to “Mr. Bernard’s opulent redoubt cut high into the Montreal mountainside” (20), they find “an enormous swimming pool. A heated, multi-level tree house, designed by an architect and furnished by an interior decorator. A miniature railway. A hockey rink, the boards thickly padded. A corner candy store with a real soda fountain” (24). But Richler does more than target such material extravagance: he also satirizes a societal obsession with the “rich and famous” – or, more specifically, the “rich and infamous.” That Moses is “awestruck” by such “undreamed-of splendour” (24) underlines a fascination in North American society with a lifestyle that extends beyond what is “normal” and enters a world of fantasy and myth. Bootlegging makes the Bronfmans interesting, but so do their billions; their homes, businesses, relationships, and history contribute to an ongoing narrative about the

social elite and the dream of success that such material extravagance inspires. In short, their conspicuous consumption is a means by which they proclaim their success in Canada. Through Moses's obsession with everything Gursky, Richler satirizes the need to lay claim to material symbols of power and privilege and thus mocks the desire for a grandiose lineage. And yet, by using the Bronfmans as the primary historical intertext for his novel, Richler reveals his own fascination with a family that, through their bootlegging and billions, has taken its place in the annals of Canadian history and myth.

Richler embellishes this myth by using his portrait of Ephraim Gursky to give Jewish Canadians a role in the creation of symbols and stories of national identity. Although the fictional Ephraim has no historical counterpart in the Bronfman clan, his activities reinforce the notion that the Bronfmans/Gurskys have a long history in alcohol production. However, while the Bronfmans have origins in the liquor business that can be traced to the Russian Empire – their name means “liquorman” in Yiddish (Newman 62) – the Gurskys have origins in the distribution of illegal booze that can be located in the Canadian west. Indeed, as Moses pursues his research, he “discovers” that the Gurskys' origins are firmly rooted in the history of Canada's whisky trade:

Moses had been rewarded by the discovery that, in 1861, Ephraim was ensconced in a log cabin in the foothills of the Rockies with a Peigan squaw and three children. He turned his hand to making Whoop-Up Bug Juice from a recipe that called for a handful or two of red pepper, a half-gallon of Jamaica ginger, a quart of molasses, say a pound of chewing tobacco, and a quart of whisky.¹⁵ This lethal brew was [. . .] carted off to a tent outside Fort Whoop-Up, hard by the Montana border. Ephraim peddled it by the cupful to Blackfoot Indians in exchange for fur and horses. (144)

For Moses, these findings fulfil his desire to chart “lost” origins and to provide an accurate account of the history of Jewish Canada. Tracing this genealogy promotes a story of Jewish belonging in Canada because his research suggests that Ephraim played a role in a well-known, if controversial, part of the nation’s past. Ephraim’s clever schemes confirm Moses’s vision of the Gurskys as romantic outlaws who shatter Canada’s image of boring respectability while participating in the myth of Canada’s “wild west.”

For Richler, however, this episode contributes to his imaginative retelling of actual historical events. By depicting Ephraim as a whisky trader at Fort Whoop-Up¹⁶ (officially known as Fort Hamilton), Richler includes Jewish Canadians in the history of western Canada and in the formation of the North West Mounted Police. As a precursor to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, this task force holds a mythical place in the Canadian imagination as the “fabled riders of the plains” who protected Britain’s interests and those of white European settlers. The Mounted Police, as Francis explains, is a Canadian institution that has been idealized as a symbol of loyalty, honesty, and dedication and is therefore seen “to embody important cultural values and elevate them to the status of legend” (*National* 11). Sir John A. Macdonald assembled this police force as a response to the violence and unrest in the Canadian west. Whisky traders like Ephraim were responsible for creating circumstances that led to horse thefts, arson attempts, and fatal shootings. With the arrival of the North West Mounted Police, however, the whisky posts were abandoned and the traders were quick to escape. In giving Ephraim a role in the whisky trade, Richler shows that Jews contributed to a key event in Canadian mainstream history – the formation of the Mounted Police, a celebrated symbol in the story of Canada.

But, even as Richler writes Jewish Canadians into the national narrative, he satirizes this process by giving Ephraim an inglorious part in a dishonourable past. For one, Ephraim is tied to the most notorious of the whisky forts, Fort Whoop-Up, where he peddles his so-called “Bug Juice.” For another, Ephraim participates in the suppression and exploitation of Natives in Canada by taking advantage of an “unquenchable Blackfoot thirst” (144) in order to satisfy his own greed. As a result, Jewish immigrants in Richler’s novel, like the Chinese in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and the Irish in *Away*, are portrayed as “typically Canadian” in their mistreatment of the original inhabitants of this land. Richler gives Jews a place in Canadian history and myth, but not one that is noble or glorious. Instead, he constructs an authenticating myth of origins that rests on the misdeeds of a clever and cunning forefather.

Solomon, however, is not ashamed of his grandfather’s actions. In fact, he embraces these origins when he decides to produce and distribute his own wholesale “drugs,” such as “Dr. Isaac Grant’s Liver & Kidney Cure, Raven Cough Brew, and Tip-Top Fixer” (364). That Solomon names one of his special brews after “Dr. Isaac Grant” reveals his desire to connect his scheme with his grandfather’s exploits and with his family’s origins in Canada, for “Dr. Isaac Grant” is the secret identity of Ephraim’s fellow wanderer, Izzy Garber. Richler satirizes the desire for illustrious origins by identifying his founding family with a notorious part of Canada’s past, and by revealing that Solomon continues a family tradition when he enters the illicit business of beverage alcohol. If the return to origins is meant to uncover a proud moment in the past, then Richler shatters this ideal with his portrait of the Gurskys’ ignoble – though “typically Canadian” – origins in Canada.

Richler also satirizes the longing for legitimacy by ridiculing the desire for a privileged sense of belonging. In the figure of Bernard Gursky, Richler exposes the

self-interest and insecurity of Sam Bronfman, a man who desperately sought public symbols of approval and prestige. As Peter C. Newman explains, “the Bronfmans’ role as kingpins in the bootlegging trade that flourished along the Canadian border during U.S. Prohibition days robbed [them] of the legitimacy they so desperately sought. It was this search for legitimacy, or rather *yechus*, its Jewish equivalent, that dominated Sam Bronfman’s long life” (22). In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, this search for legitimacy preoccupies Mr. Bernard who, like Mr. Sam, longs to take his place in the upper echelons of British Canadian society – he would like to erase his family’s bootlegging origins and gain approval, respect, and recognition. As Diana McClure tells Moses, ““all he ever wanted out of our pathetic, so-called establishment was a seat in the senate. A modest enough demand”” (395). Although their homes in Westmount and their power in Montreal’s business community might suggest that the Bronfmans/Gurskys belonged to the moneyed Anglophone elite, they were, in fact, an establishment family that was not accepted by the establishment. In other words, while French Canadians considered them a non-marginalized power base, elite British Canadians in Montreal and Ottawa relegated them to the margins of their privileged community. As Newman notes, “Sam Bronfman’s search for group identity outside his Jewish milieu was constantly being fouled by his family legend” (22). Due to his bootlegging origins, Sam Bronfman was never granted the recognition – and the senate position – he so craved. Newman writes that Sam Bronfman “felt that elevation to the Red Chamber would crown his name with the mark of legitimacy, a sure sign of acceptance into the upper strata of his country’s society” (51).¹⁷ That Bernard Gursky longs for this same position is Richler’s way of ridiculing the need for external validation as provided by such empty symbols of acceptance. Richler satirizes this pretension with a character who longs for a “mark

of legitimacy” that will set him apart: Mr. Bernard craves a privileged sense of belonging in Canada – one that will give him power and prestige in elite British Canadian society.

However, their bootlegging origins were not the only reason the Bronfmans could not gain acceptance from British Canadian elites: their Jewish origins were also a disadvantage. At the time, the Canadian establishment was loath to include Jews in exclusive clubs or invite them to sit on boards and committees (Newman 41-50).¹⁸ Thus, a family who achieved enormous wealth, held interests in Canadian companies and real estate across the country, and gave prodigiously to charity could not gain acceptance or approval from the upper reaches of British Canadian society.¹⁹ And yet the Bronfmans continued to hold a place in the Canadian imagination for their notorious past and their undeniable success. In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Richler uses the Bronfman myth both to satirize the struggle for belonging in Canada and to legitimize his fictional genealogy by reinventing key moments in the history of a prominent Canadian family. Although Sam Bronfman did not attain the symbols of acceptance he so craved, he was, nonetheless, what Richler calls “a Canadian original” (“Mr. Sam” 31). Romantic outlaws who would rather be boring Canadians, Sam Bronfman and his family occupy a mythical place in Canadian culture as Jewish immigrants turned entrepreneurs whose origins are firmly located in this land.

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The presence of Jews in Canada is further legitimized in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* through Richler’s continued use of the process of indigenization. Ephraim Gursky flees the *Erebus* and joins a band of Inuit hunters from whom he learns to build igloos, hunt game, and speak Inuktitut. In imitating the Inuit, Ephraim reveals his desire for “the authority of the Indigene” (Lawson 26). As Alan Lawson explains, “in settler cultures,

mimicry is a necessary and unavoidable part of the repertoire of the settler” because settlers will strive to overcome their subordinacy and incompleteness through the “appropriation [. . .] of Indigenous authority” (26). With his portrait of Ephraim, Richler indulges in the process of indigenization in order to claim an authenticating sense of belonging for Jewish Canadians: Ephraim forges his place in this land by appropriating Inuit practices while also preserving elements of his own Jewish heritage. He does so by tricking the Inuit into accepting him as “the Lord thy God” (439); by telling them stories from the Bible; by teaching them circumcision; and by asking them to adhere to “a version of Yom Kippur, telling them that this [is] his holiest of holy days” (439). Ephraim therefore becomes an unusual kind of Native: a Jewish wanderer turned Inuit leader and Canadian colonizer. As such, he represents a fusion of peoples and cultures that can be seen as emblematic of invader-settler societies.

Yet, even as Richler describes this cultural melding, he satirizes it by showing that it does not take place without deception or violence. Not only does Ephraim pretend that he caused the eclipse of the moon, but he threatens the Inuit by telling them that ““unless you obey my smallest wish, I will turn myself into a raven and pluck your eyes out one by one”” (438). Ephraim gains a position of power and places demands on the Inuit, including requests for daily provisions of meat and weekly visits by women. This cultural contact has a devastating impact on the Inuit, for they lose their autonomy as soon as they put their faith in Ephraim. For some followers, this faith leads to an untimely death: “In the years to come, followers of Ephraim who wandered too far north in search of seal in October soon discovered that they were in bad trouble. Once the sun went down they were obliged to remain celibate and fast until it rose once more several months later” (440). Consequently, every year, some of these followers “starve, dying devout” (440). Richler reveals that the process of indigenization is, for the “other,”

inherently violent: time and again, Europeans rob Indigenous peoples of their identities, culture, freedom, land, and life.

Richler also legitimizes the Jewish presence in Canada when he aligns both Ephraim and Solomon with the raven from Native mythology. In *The Raven Steals the Light*, Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst describe the raven as a trickster figure with many appetites, including “lust, curiosity and the unquenchable itch to meddle and provoke things, to play tricks on the world and its creatures” (26). With his black beard and hot piercing eyes, Ephraim resembles the bird he has learned to tame by imitating its “inhuman call, some sort of sad clacking noise, at once abandoned yet charged with hope, coming from the back of his throat” (3). Ephraim identifies with the cunning raven since he enjoys using tricks to satisfy his various appetites. Among the Inuit, he is known as “Tulugaq,” which means raven in Inuktitut (48). Like his grandfather, Solomon also resembles the raven, in part because he shares Ephraim’s features – his hair, eyes, and nose (148) – and in part because he too is a trickster who delights in provoking “the world and its creatures” (501).²⁰ Solomon actively associates himself with the raven when, for example, he calls himself Mr. Corbeau, Mr. Cuervo, or Dr. Raven as part of his various disguises. Richler uses the trickster raven to weave Native mythology into his narrative, thereby linking his fictional genealogy to “one of the major creation stories of Canada” (Grace, *Canada* 212-13). In doing so, Richler constructs an authenticating myth of origins that ties the first Jewish family in Canada to the first living thing on earth. As Sir Hyman tells Moses, ““According to the Haidas [. . .] before there was anything, before the great flood had covered the earth and receded, before the animals walked the earth or the trees covered the land or the birds flew between the trees, there was the raven. Because the raven had always existed and always would”” (493). By using this figure from Native Canadian mythology, Richler connects an originary creature with an

originary family and thus identifies these Jewish settlers as “*essential Canadians*” (Grace, “Representations” 44).

The connections between Jewish and Native Canadians go unnoticed by mainstream society in Richler’s novel because acknowledging these cultural ties would mean admitting that Jews can lay claim to a legitimate line of descent in Canada. For this reason, Arctic scholars – including the fictional Professor Hardy – fail to recognize the variations on the Gursky surname that prevail amongst the Natives of King William Island, where Ephraim stayed after having fled the *Erebus*. Moses, of course, is well aware of these ties and notes that the variations include “Gor-ski, Girskee, Gur-ski and Goorsky” (59). In “a nice ironic twist,” some of Ephraim’s descendants are even presented to the British royal family as “authentic” Inuit artists (Korte 497); after Oliver Girskee recites poetry and Timangiak Gor-ski entertains with a song, Professor Hardy announces that “the evening’s artistic events [have] displayed the many-faceted face of Inuit culture” (59). Richler undermines the authority of British Canada and resists notions of cultural purity by offering “proof” that Jews have a legitimate place in Canada since their cultural achievements are – albeit unintentionally – deemed “native” and viewed as “authentic.”

Richler further establishes these claims to authenticity with his description of the “McGibbon Artifact,” which “remains the only Eskimo carving of what was clearly meant to represent a kangaroo” (61). The carving, however, was not produced by an Inuit artist but by Ephraim himself, since he would have seen kangaroos when he spent time as a prisoner in Van Diemen’s Land. Diana Brydon explains that the McGibbon Artifact “makes a serious political point reiterated throughout the text, that the movements of peoples and interactions of cultures that have characterized the twentieth century have taken place as part of the military expansion of capital, but that there is

always a space for resistance, for eluding control and surprising the enemy” (“White Inuit” 199). In this case, the “enemy” is British Canadian mainstream knowledge with its narrow view of history and culture. Richler uses the intermingling of Jewish and Native traditions as a means of challenging accepted knowledge and of resisting myths of cultural purity. He borrows from Native mythology in order to question homogeneous interpretations of Canada’s past and to give his fictional Jewish genealogy a sense of legitimacy. This appropriation of Native mythology is part of a long-standing tradition in Canadian culture. As Brydon writes, “The current flood of books by white Canadian writers embracing Native spirituality clearly serves a white need to feel at home in this country and to assuage the guilt felt over a material appropriation by making it a cultural one as well” (“White Inuit” 196). For Richler, incorporating Native mythology into his narrative represents not only “a white need to feel at home,” but a specifically Jewish need to forge a place in a land that has neglected the presence and contributions of Jewish Canadians.

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Richler reinforces the presence of Jews at the beginnings of Canada by using a genealogical metaphor to cast Ephraim Gursky in the role of founding father. Not the earliest Jewish migrant in Canada,²¹ Ephraim is unique because he arrives with the Franklin Expedition and is the first in a line of clever schemers who build a financial empire in this land. The illegitimate child of a Russian Jew and a Christian Baroness, Ephraim is orphaned by age eleven and becomes a wanderer, first pursuing honest employment in the coal mines of Durham, and then committing petty crimes in London and the nearby towns. Moses romanticizes Ephraim as an ingenious outlaw who uses his proficiency in many languages, his familiarity with biblical phrases, and his elegant

penmanship to make a living as a talented forger with an “inventive pen” (340). Even Ephraim’s failings are romanticized, for he falls victim to his own extravagant devices, “a dangerous admixture of vanity, lust, and recklessness” (343). With this portrait of Ephraim, Moses expresses a nostalgic longing for a daring hero, for someone who does not abide by societal codes but is bold enough – and clever enough – to do and take whatever he wants. These qualities, which resurface in Ephraim’s descendants, emphasize his independence as he moves from one place to another pursuing various schemes and adopting different disguises. In doing so, Ephraim typifies the myth of the Wandering Jew since he occupies an ambiguous space in the old world that is emblematic of the Jewish experience in general. However, after wandering aimlessly in Europe for years, Ephraim arrives in Canada where he forges his place at the head of a long line of descent. This new world represents a version of the promised land with Moses leading the way by narrating a “lost” lineage into existence. As a result, Ephraim can be seen as an originary ancestor, a symbolic father to all Jewish Canada.

But Ephraim is not only a father to Jewish Canadians – he is a father to all Canadians. This role is a fitting one for him to play since his father was Jewish, his mother was Christian, and he himself was named after a biblical figure who was told that “his seed shall become a multitude of nations” (Gen. 48:19). Having studied the Old Testament as a child, Ephraim knows why his namesake was blessed by Jacob’s right hand while Manasseh was blessed by the left: ““It was to show that the descendants of Ephraim would become the greater people”” (*Gursky* 229). In keeping with this benediction, the descendants of Ephraim Gursky – legitimate and illegitimate alike – achieve considerable success as they people a new nation. Though Ephraim has only one legitimate child, he fathers “twenty-seven unacknowledged offspring, not all of them the same colour” (240). His legitimate descendants, whose status is confirmed by their place

in the Gursky family tree, savour financial success at the head of McTavish Distillery.

By contrast, his illegitimate offspring, while not included in the official genealogy (as are the illegitimate progeny in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*), are celebrated as artists, as a “prized part of the Canadian mosaic” (59). With long lines of legitimate and illegitimate children in Canada, Ephraim contributes to this mosaic by scattering his seed across the nation and thus fulfilling his role as a founding father to all of Canada.

Solomon mirrors this founding father in order to position himself as a key player in the Gursky family line. Like his grandfather, Solomon takes risks in order to make a small fortune: he steals his family’s savings as well as the deeds to the family store and uses them to win at poker, taking home “more money than the Gurskys had ever seen at one time” (358). Also like Ephraim, Solomon becomes a wanderer, leaving home to join the war and then travelling extensively upon his return. When the Gursky brothers are brought to trial for evading customs duty and excise tax, Solomon follows his grandfather’s lead and escapes justice: he fakes his own death by crashing his plane in Canada’s north. Just as his grandfather reconnects with his northern roots at the end of his life, Solomon returns to these northern origins to stage his own death. In fact, both men are drawn to the north as a place of refuge (and as a place they can exploit), for each embarks on his Arctic journey to escape charges of murder.²² After his disappearance, Solomon becomes a master of disguise, a suiting part for a man who, according to Morrie, could play any role: ““That’s what Solomon really should have been. A stage actor. [. . .] He could do accents. It was amazing. [. . .] The German butcher. The blacksmith, a Polack. He could do anybody. He also had a gift for languages, but I suppose he inherited that from my grandfather”” (212). Solomon inherits many tricks from his grandfather and it is for this reason that both men are romanticized as ingenious outlaws in Moses’s narrative. As Moses researches Solomon’s biography, he cannot

help but be drawn into Ephraim's story as well. Consequently, a seemingly simple task becomes a complex journey into the past. This nostalgic "return" to a migrant's arrival and settlement in Canada is part of Solomon's plan; yet it is part of Richler's overall design as well, since he makes a point of showing that Moses's romantic vision has been carefully orchestrated: "After all his years on the rivers it finally struck [Moses] that he wasn't the angler but the salmon. A teasing, gleeful Solomon casting the flies over his head, getting him to roll, rise, and dance on his tail at will" (550). Thus, as Moses "recovers" what he considers the mythical origins of Jewish Canadian history, Richler imagines a place for a Jewish forefather at the beginnings of Canada.

At the end of *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, the next generation removes a portrait of Bernard from its prominent place at McTavish and replaces it with a drawing of the founding father.²³ In this picture, Ephraim is "all coiled muscle, obviously ready to spring out of the frame and wrestle anybody to the ground. [. . .] He held a harpoon in his fist, the shaft made of caribou antler. There was a seal lying at his feet, the three masts of the doomed *Erebus* and jagged icebergs rising in the background" (555-56). Replacing the portrait is a symbolic act that represents a nostalgic return to the Gurskys' origins in Canada. Ephraim is sinewy, strong, and defiant; he is a hunter, an explorer, and a northerner – he is a "true" Canadian. Ephraim's portrait serves as a reminder of the long and varied history of Jewish Canada and ensures that future generations will remember their historical and mythical roots in this land. As Grace writes, in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, "Richler constructs a genealogy of Canada based on foundational myths of origins and discovery, and of indigenous and explorer/settler narratives. He includes as many representatives of race, class, and ethnicity as possible, together with their stories. To be Canadian, he tells us, is to write our story into national history by inscribing ourselves on a northern landscape" (*Canada* 209). But Richler is also saying

that to be Jewish Canadian is to claim a place in the national narrative as a founding people whose roots are firmly grounded in this land. As Solomon's son remarks, "'We're an astonishing people. Dandelions, my father used to say. Dig us out here and riding the wind and the rain we take root there'" (95).

NOTES

¹ "National narratives" consist of the symbols and stories that give shape to the idea of the nation and that contribute to a shared sense of collectivity, identity, and belonging within the nation-state (Hobsbawm 1-14; B. Anderson 1-7). The national narratives I am referring to here reinforce the myth of Canada as "the great white north" – a land considered largely uninhabited until settlers from Britain and France "civilized" its wilderness. Tied to this myth is the idea that Canada is a nation founded by British and French peoples, whose history has been peaceful, respectable, and uneventful, especially in their dealings with other peoples and nations.

² Accepting this position represents a homecoming for Richler since he had attended Sir George Williams College (now Concordia University) before leaving for Europe.

³ For example, *The Street*, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, *Joshua Then and Now*, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, and *Barney's Version* each return to Richler's origins in the Montreal of his youth.

⁴ Moses resents his father, L.B. Berger, once a respected poet and writer, for becoming what Moses considers "an apologist for the Gurskys" (29). As far as Moses is concerned, L.B. has undermined his socialist roots and artistic integrity by accepting the office of speech writer and cultural adviser to Solomon's elder brother, Bernard, a sly capitalist rumoured to have betrayed Solomon for his own profit. Richler's portrait of the relationship between L.B. Berger and Bernard Gursky is modelled on the real-life relationship between A.M. Klein and Samuel Bronfman. Like the fictional L.B. Berger, A.M. Klein was, in Richler's opinion, "hired to fill the humiliating office of Sam's poet laureate. Degrading himself and his sullen craft, Klein obliged with more than one hosanna in verse" ("Mr. Sam" 26).

⁵ This encyclopaedia entry can be distinguished from Moses's narrative voice in terms of its tone and style and by the fact that it refers to Ephraim Gursky as "Gursky" while Moses calls him "Ephraim."

⁶ Richler also provides a list of sources for his fictionalized history, although he never mentions his sources for the Bronfman story, claiming instead that he "made the Gurskys up out of [his] own head" (*Gursky* n. pag.).

⁷ Moses not only adds to Solomon's version of the past, he also corrects it.

⁸ Solomon does not write this story himself because he is presumed dead and because he would like to be portrayed as a mysterious and mythical figure – a persona best described by somebody else.

⁹ John Moss explains that Vilhjálmur Stefánsson himself did not object to the reinvention of historical facts: "Stefánsson, perhaps because he wrote to a broader public than most explorers in this century, was among the most freewheeling with his facts, as he candidly confessed on a number of occasions" (*Enduring* 47).

¹⁰ The first Jews who came to North America were part of the Spanish and Portuguese explorations of the sixteenth century, though their numbers in Canada remained small for several centuries. Canada's first synagogue was established in Montreal in 1768, a sign that Jews in this land were beginning to form an organized community (Tulchinsky xiii). However, it was not until the 1880s that large numbers of Jews migrated to Canada in an effort to escape religious persecution in Eastern Europe.

¹¹ This graffiti was rumoured to have been found on the Statue of Liberty, the Arc de Triomphe, and the peak of Mount Everest.

¹² Peter C. Newman calls Seagram "the world's largest distilling business" (16). Seagram was the first Canadian manufacturing company to achieve one billion in annual sales (Newman 17).

¹³ Family legend credits Sam with building the Seagram empire, although Harry also played a key role (Newman 76). Sam's family (including his children and grandchildren) once held the majority of Seagram shares (Bronfman 14-15).

¹⁴ Sam Bronfman's Montreal mansion, located near the summit of Westmount, was "a turreted Victorian pile of instant medieval splendour crammed with treasures a peer of the realm might envy" (Newman 26).

¹⁵ Unscrupulous traders offered "Bug Juice," "Red Eye," and "Whoop-Up Wallop" to the Blackfoot. The recipes typically included ingredients such as soap, ink, red peppers, chewing tobacco, Jamaica ginger, molasses, and painkillers ("RCMP" 1).

¹⁶ Fort Whoop-Up was one of thirty "whisky posts" located in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, close to the American border.

¹⁷ The Bronfmans finally gained acceptance from the British Canadian establishment after Sam Bronfman's death. As Newman explains, "Unlike his father, Charles never did try to make it into the Canadian establishment. They came to him. The elder Bronfman wanted badly to be recognized for what he had done, having come from nowhere and accomplished so much. The directorship at the Bank of Montreal and membership in the Mount Royal Club, which came easily to Charles, are of little importance to him" (262).

¹⁸ Newman explains that Sam Bronfman "was never allowed to join the Montreal clubs that counted – the Mount Royal or the St. James – although his friends made several discreet runs at trying to put him up" (42). Bronfman also coveted a seat on McGill's Board of Directors, which was then considered "the symbol denoting arrival at the summit of Montreal's Anglo society" (Newman 43).

¹⁹ Seagram's sales first surpassed one billion dollars in 1965, six years before Sam Bronfman's death. Bronfman not only used his wealth to invest in mines, oil, hotels, shopping centres, nursing homes, bowling lanes, apartment complexes, and retail and office properties, but he also engaged in charitable donations (Newman 290-311). For example, he provided funding for the planetarium in Winnipeg; financed the Saidye and Samuel Bronfman Canadian Art Collection at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; endowed the Samuel Bronfman Department of Medicine at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City; established the Bronfman chair of economics at McGill; donated drawings to the National Gallery of Canada; and, with Saul Hayes, set up the Refugee Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress (Newman 45-46).

²⁰ Richler quotes verbatim from *The Raven Steals the Light* on several occasions. See, for example, Sir Hyman's description of his picture, "The Raven and the First Men" (499).

²¹ Ephraim is said to have arrived in Canada in 1845, two centuries after the first Jews came to North America.

²² Ephraim makes his hurried journey north to escape arrest for the murder of André Clear Sky's father (34-35). Solomon has been wrongly accused of the murder of Willy McGraw, but Bernard has paid Charley Lin to lie in court (452-54). Bernard, who is guilty of this murder, actually intended to have Solomon killed.

²³ The next generation consists of Morrie's son, Barney, and Solomon's grandson, Isaac, who will now command the Gursky empire. After years of secret scheming, Morrie gathers enough shares to take control of McTavish away from Bernard's son, Lionel.

IV

**Neither Here Nor There:
Redirecting the Homeward Gaze in Nino Ricci's
*Lives of the Saints, In a Glass House, and Where She Has Gone***

Nostalgia

The sunlight dashes in from the lake
in large armfuls, stretches itself on
the room; some clouds are putting the lid
on the western light.

It was so brief, and I am thinking still of
summer; the snow rags the streets, a little bit of
wind wraps the cold bones of the maple.

And now it is waist-high grass in
Michael's orchard, the slender cypress on the hill
beside Bruno's house, the light taking small
steps over the Tuscan hillsides, pines,
and the green lizards basking beside the
cathedral.

I am obsessed with warmth, is it not common?
Even here friends are a premium; I would think
they'd run head first into the love of friends,
they suffer everything else.

The lake is warming its hands, but fails; more snowflakes
ditto in from a low cloud, the light draws itself
in on the farthest sky.

Italia, far beyond that, always Italia
and the rooms of warmth, the landscape searing
its edges at noon.

Under a few cold lilies, my father dreams
cicadas in Vallemario. I am sure of it.
He left me that, and a poem that is only a

dream of cicadas; the brown glove widens
on the dry December earth.
I am a little marvellous, with the sunken
heart of exiles.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, *Living in Paradise*

Like the speaker of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's poem, the narrator of Nino Ricci's trilogy longs for the warmth of a remembered Italy. Suffering from "the sunken heart" of an exile, Vittorio Innocente, Ricci's narrator in *Lives of the Saints* (1990), *In a Glass House* (1993), and *Where She Has Gone* (1997), shares a migrant's nostalgia for a lost homeland and the idealized vision that so often accompanies this nostalgia – the dream of a familiar landscape and the longing to return. Joseph Pivato explains that Italian immigrants, like those in Di Cicco's poem and Ricci's trilogy, experience a particular form of nostalgia that is derived from historical imperatives, regional associations, familial relations, and emotional and societal obligations ("Singing" 56). This nostalgia has its roots in the songs of rural Italy where the peasant populations have a history of migration that spans the last hundred years. Southern Italian peasants, in particular, endured long periods of separation when families were left at home while fathers searched for employment in the more prosperous regions of Italy, the north of Europe, or the Americas (Pivato, "Italian-Canadian Writing" 846). As a result of these prolonged separations, an oral tradition evolved that laments the need for migration and reveals a migrant's nostalgia for the home left behind.

Italian nostalgia is often expressed in a typical song where "the speaker promises his sweetheart, or his wife, that he will return, or he promises his mother that he will come home, or he promises Italia (more often his *paese* or hometown) that he will be back. In many songs the three overlap and merge; a love song to a sweetheart could be a love song to a mother, and a love song to a mother becomes a song to *il paese*, the hometown" (Pivato, "Italian-Canadian Writing" 846). Compelled to leave home in search of better prospects, these migrant labourers cherished the promise of return, whether their travels took them as close as a neighbouring village, or as far as a journey overseas. Songs of migration and the historical tradition to which they belong are thus

connected with contemporary Italian Canadian writings, especially writings that explore diasporic experiences and the longing for home.

Not a migrant himself, Ricci does not long for a lost homeland. Rather, as a second-generation Italian Canadian, he expresses nostalgia for an originary moment in a new land: a migrant's arrival and settlement in Canada. Ricci, like the other writers of this study, is interested in establishing the nation as home. In his trilogy, he examines this process in terms of the departure from the old land, the arrival and settlement in the new land, and the return journey to the former home. Though Ricci was born in Canada, he knows what it means to feel different. As he writes,

When I started school [. . .] a lot of what we did suddenly began to seem not so normal. [. . .] It was as if I, too, had set out on a ship and arrived in another country where people did things differently, so that suddenly everything about my own little domain, the closed, autonomous world I'd been raised in until then, seemed makeshift and shabby and low. This, then, perhaps, was my true passage to Canada, out of innocence and sameness into difference. ("Best" 4).

For Ricci, this moment marks the beginnings of a journey to reconcile his Italian "difference" with his desire for Canadian "sameness."

According to Edward Said, such feelings of difference will always accompany exiles, regardless of how much success they achieve in the new land (*Reflections* 182). These feelings, as Ricci discovers, are also experienced by diasporans who, like migrants, "may in a sense live in exile" (Said, *Reflections* 181). That Ricci, as a child, suddenly recognizes the division between "Italian" and "Canadian" points to his affinity with those who are exiled, for he simultaneously experiences two separate cultures. As Said explains:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (*Reflections* 186)

In terms of Ricci's experience, these old and new environments are not represented by old and new lands, but by private and public spheres, namely his "Italian" family and the "Canadian" mainstream. Ricci's understanding of the old land is based on his parents' memories of this place and on the ways they translated their experiences for their children. In other words, Ricci's contrapuntal vision consists of memories of the old land that are not his own since he primarily knows Italy as a remembered and imagined place (which is also true of Rita's experience in *Where She has Gone*). As Ricci's personal reflections suggest, "Italian" and "Canadian" represent two separate spheres that, in childhood, he could not reconcile. Years later, however, he strives to bridge this gap by bringing Italian and Canadian identities and histories together in a narrative that imaginatively reconstructs the diasporic experiences of first-generation Italian Canadians.

Diasporic writing, including literature by Italian Canadian writers, is defined by Victor Ramraj as "works produced by globally dispersed minority communities that have common ancestral homelands" (214). As well as a common homeland, members of these minority communities share a common culture and a history of displacement and dispersal (Ramraj 229). Memories and stories passed from one generation to another serve to unite these scattered communities and form a significant part of the diasporic

consciousness. As Paul Gilroy writes, “the reproduction of diaspora-consciousness [. . .] is focused less on common territory and more on memory, or, more accurately, on the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration” (“Diaspora” 207). Gilroy notes that some diasporans will not be satisfied with memories of the homeland, and will embark on a physical return home, sometimes without recognizing the difficulties they will encounter (“Diaspora” 208). Other diasporans, however, will not undertake a physical return, but will engage in a psychic return that allows them to “retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home” (Ramraj 215). Whether diasporans physically or psychically return home, they exist in a state of transition as they attempt to balance one culture with another. Ramraj explains that this tension between old and new worlds typifies the diasporic condition, for members of minority communities are “caught between attachment to their homeland to which they do not belong and their adopted home where they remain marginalized” (219). Diasporic writing, including Ricci’s trilogy, employs various means of constructing narratives of identity and history that reflect this “in-between” state and the constant change that characterizes diasporic identities.

Stuart Hall explores this process of change and challenges accepted notions of identity formation when he argues that identities are not stable but are subject to continual transformations and are modified by historical and cultural determinants (394). Identities, he says, are paradoxically shaped by similarity and difference, and diasporic identities, in particular, “are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (402). He thus defines diaspora in terms of “a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” and as “a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (402). Although diasporans are

displaced and globally dispersed, they form communities that are often united “across their differences” (396). This rendering of the diasporic experience is reinforced by Sneja Gunew who writes that “diaspora is not simply a matter of separation and exile but involves a new formation as various communities connect across the global terrain” (“Diaspora and Exile” 198). Diasporic identities, therefore, are defined by division and reunion, and are sustained not by some artificially enforced sameness, but by the acceptance of diversity and hybridity.

If dispersed peoples can be linked despite their differences, they cannot, however, be joined with their places of origin. A lost homeland can never be found because its “original” possesses no powers of transcendence and is thus transformed by history (Hall, S. 399). This inability to return to the place of origin – a place that cannot be fixed in time – has a significant impact on the concept of Italian nostalgia, for the homeland to which Italian diasporans promise to return no longer exists. As a result, these diasporans long for an unattainable ideal since their lost homeland belongs only to an imaginative space, one that “cannot in any simple sense be recovered” (Hall, S. 399). Indeed, as Salman Rushdie explains, recovering a lost homeland is a difficult process because what has been lost can never be fully regained: exiles, immigrants, and diasporans can only “create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10). Alienated from a familiar landscape, they often experience feelings of loss that are associated not only with a lost homeland, but also with a lost history. Rushdie says that “the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form [that] is made more concrete [. . .] by the physical fact of discontinuity, of [the] present being in a different place from [the] past” (12). No amount of nostalgia for the old land can help these diasporic writers overcome the discontinuity between past and present as they attempt to establish a future

in a new land. Nor can nostalgic narratives of a lost home enable them to reconnect with the place of origin as anything except an imaginary space.

The problem, as outlined by Smaro Kamboureli, is that identity is too often perceived as an established fact, and a return to the origin is too often considered a means of recapturing a lost sense of self (148). Diasporans, she says, suffer from the “consciousness of no longer belonging to a cultural continuum” (138). They recognize the in-between space that they inhabit, but often make the mistake of longing for a “distant originary place” (138) rather than forging a sense of belonging in the new land, which is what Ricci strives to accomplish with his trilogy. The agency that diasporans lose through their displacement, and its accompanying feeling of lack, cannot be regained or resolved by a nostalgic journey – either real or imagined – to a lost homeland. As Kamboureli explains, “Characters who speak of the return to a homeland [. . .] are inclined to reify what their longing produces, reconstructing their subjectivity by privileging a past cut off from social and political realities” (148). This reification derives from a debilitating nostalgia for the homeland that compels diasporans to idealize their past in the old country at the expense of their history in the new. If diasporans are to affirm their ties to the new land, then they must reject this nostalgia for a lost homeland and turn, instead, towards an authenticating myth of origins that will give them a sense of belonging in a new place.

Ricci’s trilogy explores both the debilitating effects of a migrant’s homeward-looking gaze and the forging of an authenticating mythology that will enable Italian migrants and their descendants to establish Canada as home. Together, *Lives of the Saints*, *In a Glass House*, and *Where She Has Gone* mythologize an originary moment in Canada by imaginatively reconstructing diasporic experiences, including the complex processes of displacement, movement, and relocation. Pivato explains that these

processes are a central concern for writers of the Italian diaspora, and he says that “Italian-Canadian literature comes from the memory and experience of dislocation. [. . .] It is a literature of the displaced and the marginalized rather than of those in power or of the cultural elite” (*Echo* 177). As a diasporic writer, Ricci gives voice to a neglected history and creates a place, however ambivalent, for Italians in Canada’s national narrative.

Lives of the Saints, set primarily in a small Italian¹ village in the early 1960s, establishes a migrant labourer’s reasons for leaving his home and the effects his displacement has on his wife and children. In this first book of the trilogy, Ricci provides a historical perspective on Italian migration, as well as a portrait of Canada as a preferred destination after the disruption of the Second World War. Although Canada does not exist as a physical reality until the final moments of the novel, the idea of Canada is present throughout: Canada exists as a mythical place that represents both positive and negative aspects of diasporic experiences. In tracing Vittorio’s departure from the village, his journey across the Atlantic, and his arrival in Canada, Ricci examines the process of displacement while also exposing the flaws of Italian nostalgia, for this concept is based on naïve dreams of a joyous reunion and overlooks the difficult truths regarding a migrant’s prolonged separation from home, including the harsh realities of life in a new land and the physical and emotional distance between a migrant and his family. *Lives of the Saints* recreates moments from a childhood in a faraway place, and thus emphasizes the temporal and spatial distancing of a diasporic subject whose past is in the old land and whose present and future belong to a foreign place.

Ricci explores a migrant’s experiences in this foreign land in the second book of his trilogy. *In a Glass House* begins where *Lives of the Saints* ends: Vittorio and his newborn sister have survived a migrant’s uncertain journey across the Atlantic and are

living with Vittorio's father in the fictional Ontario town of Mersea. Throughout the novel, which is set primarily in Canada and depicts the various stages of Vittorio's growth into adulthood, Ricci examines a migrant's struggle to gain a sense of belonging in Canadian space. As Vittorio attempts to resolve the tensions between accepting or rejecting his ethnic heritage, Ricci asks if the formation of a Canadian identity necessitates a rejection of one's ethnic roots. Can exiles, migrants, and diasporans construct hybrid identities that embrace ethnicity as an acceptable – and even essential – Canadian trait? And by what means can they eventually secure the new world as home? By exploring these questions in his fictional narrative, Ricci not only tells a story about the struggle to belong but uses this struggle to show how Italians have earned their place in Canada and as "Canadians."

Where She Has Gone pursues these themes, but complicates matters by focusing on the relationship between Vittorio and his sister, and by exploring a migrant's desire to return to a lost home. As the third book of the trilogy, *Where She Has Gone* approaches a sense of completion by taking Vittorio back to his homeland – to the small Italian village of his birth. But at the very moment that Ricci offers this completion, he takes it away: Vittorio realizes that he cannot reconnect with his place of origin, that the home he remembers can never be found. Ricci thus subverts a migrant's nostalgia for a lost home by reinforcing the notion that the homeland belongs to an imaginative space. Although Ricci is certain that the return journey cannot resolve a migrant's conflicted subjectivity, he is less certain about what can. He resists a straight-forward conclusion to the trilogy by sending his protagonist not to Canada but to England then Africa upon leaving Italy. This ending points to Ricci's ambivalence regarding his own myth-making strategy because a return to Canada would have meant unambiguously embracing this land as home.

This background relates to the quest for an authenticating mythology in terms of the ways Canada is imaginatively conceived in *Lives of the Saints*, the complex processes of displacement and relocation in *In a Glass House*, and the nostalgic return to the motherland in *Where She Has Gone*. Each of these novels strives to connect with a mythologized past and explores, in some way, a myth that Ricci says is “operative in the immigrant mind – that sense of an unacceptable present and a golden future” (“Recreating” 136). In his trilogy, Ricci reconstructs diasporic experiences with a story of arrival and settlement that offers Italian Canadians a sense of belonging in the nation. To put it differently, Ricci attempts to secure Canada as home by redirecting the homeward gaze and mythologizing Italian origins in Canada. Yet, even as he does so, Ricci ends his trilogy with a sense of ambiguity by suggesting – but not confirming – that the desire for authenticity is problematic. He thus provides migrant and post-migrant generations alike with a warning about the dangers of nostalgia as well as a tentative sense of belonging in Canada. For later generations of diasporans, an authenticating mythology can also offer a means of connecting with their forebears, their ethnic roots, and their neglected past. While Ricci’s narrative allows for such connections, his trilogy likewise suggests that ambivalent feelings of home represent the most authentic experience available to diasporans.

*

Canada exists as an abstract concept rather than as a physical reality in *Lives of the Saints*. In this novel, Ricci imaginatively reconstructs nine months in the life of a small village in the south of Italy.² The story is told from the perspective of an adult narrator who relies on memories and observations to recreate formative events from his childhood, beginning with the moment his mother conceives his sister in the summer of

1960 and ending with the moment he and his sister arrive in Canada in the spring of 1961. Ricci intertwines fiction with history as he presents Vittorio's memories and observations; in particular, he uses his fictional renderings to explore the ways in which the historical realities of diaspora affected families in rural Italy, especially those in the southern regions where displacement was most common.³ Thus, as Vittorio revisits key moments from his personal history, he also articulates the communal history of Italian migration and its effects on the family.

Ricci locates his narrative in a historical context that speaks to the difficulties of diasporic experiences. Vittorio explains that his father, Mario, left four years earlier in search of employment "in a new part of America called Canada" (162). The villagers do not distinguish one country of the Americas from another, and Vittorio says that, for them, "America was still all one, New York and Buenos Aires and the Sun Parlour all part of some vast village" (162). Vittorio's father, who finds work as a farm labourer in southern Ontario, regularly sends letters, though only occasionally sends money, home to his family. These letters form but a tenuous link between father and son; as Vittorio says, "The only solid link we had to my father now were the letters that came from him every month or so; but these my mother did not read to me, and when once I had retrieved one of them from the fireplace, where my mother had thrown it, and taken it out to the pasture, I'd been unable to make out anything in my father's erratic script" (36). Mario fails to communicate in any way with his son and thus becomes an elusive absence, "a shadowy blank" (36), whom Vittorio struggles to remember.

With this fictional portrait of the absent father, Ricci gives voice to the personal stories behind historical records which state, for example, that over 400,000 Italians migrated to Canada between 1946 and 1967 (Sturino 61).⁴ Vittorio's father represents one of these migrants, and his life – like the lives of most migrants and their families –

was permanently altered by his decision to journey overseas. Ricci focuses, in particular, on the movement from Italy to North America and addresses the consequences of losing such large numbers of migrants to a land so far away. This interest in migration has long been a part of the Italian psyche and a distinct theme in Italian literature. As Pivato writes, “From Roman times Italians have always been leaving home, trying to return home, or [. . .] trying to find a new home” (“Literature” 171). Indeed, Ricci acknowledges this history of migration in *Lives of the Saints*:

In Valle del Sole the men had long been migrants, to the north, to Buenos Aires, to New York, every year weighing their options, whether the drought would ruin the year’s crops, or a patch of land bring a sufficient price to buy a passage, whether to strike out for Torino or Switzerland, with the promise at least of a yearly return, or to reckon on an absence of years or a lifetime, and cross the sea.
(160)

Vittorio’s family, like many others in the village, has a history of migration that spans several generations. These families understand the sacrifices that have been made and recognize the possible outcomes – both positive and negative – of diasporic experiences. In Vittorio’s case, it was his maternal great-grandfather who left his wife and young children in the 1890s and eventually reached America.⁵ Vittorio explains that for “several years he had sent money back, in increasingly large sums, enough to build the house we now lived in; but suddenly the money stopped, and nothing more was heard of him. After a year my grandfather’s oldest brother had gone in search of him, but had returned in despair” (160-61). Ricci’s fictional rendering of diasporic experiences thus reveals that, with their long history of displacement, Italian labourers and their families recognize both the possible financial gains of migration and its accompanying feelings of uncertainty and loss.

Mario Innocente's reasons for moving to Canada in search of employment reflect those of Italian migrants in general who were drawn to North America after the Second World War. Although migration had long been a necessity in their country, Italian migrants only came to Canada in significant numbers when, after the deposition of Mussolini,⁶ they were no longer associated with a Fascist regime and were actively recruited by the Canadian government as a source of unskilled labour.⁷ The majority of these migrants were – like the fictional Mario – seeking employment overseas as a result of rural poverty in the southern regions of Italy. In contrast to earlier waves of Italian migrants, post-war migrants planned to settle in Canada and to eventually send for their families. Ricci explains that this change had a devastating effect on rural Italy because migrants who once returned to the homeland, and used their savings to foster growth in their villages, were now leaving permanently for the new land.⁸ As Vittorio says, “since the war the village had known mainly one-way departures. The men left, and a few years later wives and children and sometimes ageing parents followed, land and livestock sold off, clothes and old pots packed up in wooden trunks made by the village carpenter, houses left abandoned, their doors and windows boarded up” (161). The promise of return has clearly been forgotten by these later generations of migrants who will not go back to their villages to build homes and establish farms. Settlement in the new land has become an attractive alternative to the traditional return to the old land with its familiar – and seemingly outmoded – way of life. Using this historical context, Ricci depicts the changing realities of the Italian diaspora, including the effects of migration overseas. He shows that, for the families waiting in Italy, Canada exists as an abstract concept: it is a distant place that takes husbands and fathers away but that also offers the possibility of employment and financial security. As a land that takes while it gives, Canada thus embodies a paradox in the diasporic consciousness of post-war generations of Italians.

Ricci further examines this paradox in *Lives of the Saints* when he demonstrates that the villagers consider North America both a place of freedom and a place of entrapment. In this mythical new land, they expect to realize their dreams of financial success and to live comfortably free from need. Indeed, as Urquhart also reveals in *Away*, migrants have traditionally considered the new world a paradise or a promised land. Tamara J. Palmer explains that beginning with “the age of exploration and even before, the New World has been a repository for Europe’s dreams, both spiritual and material, and a significant element in the New World’s magnetism for the immigrant has been the potent mythology of North America as the New Eden” (“Fictionalization” 69). With this idealized vision of the new land, migrants and their families long to make Canada home, even if they have never journeyed overseas. Young village women, for example, are eager to pursue their dreams of success and Vittorio notes, “When occasionally, now, a young man returned from overseas to choose a bride, the young women of the village primped and preened themselves, made potions, promenaded daily through the square, caught up in a dream of freedom” (162-63). Canada thus exists as a place of longing for the villagers; it represents opportunity and prosperity while also offering “a means of escape from their limited and limiting small-town life” (Baena 95). As a result, villagers who long for success and escape focus their dreams on Canada, a land known as the “Sun Parlour” with “flat green fields that stretched for miles and [. . .] lakes as wide as the sea, an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth” (162).⁹ Not only does this description emphasize Canada’s natural landscape and the freedom it offers, but it also reveals the irony inherent in a migrant’s idealized vision, for Canada has both mountains and “rocky earth.” From its wide lakes to its open fields, Canada is ironically portrayed as a paradise where migrants will exchange the poverty of village life for the vast resources and opportunities of life in a mythical new land.

Although they idealize Canada as a place of freedom, Italian migrants and their families also condemn it as a place of entrapment. Migrants who leave the security of the village might soon find themselves in an unfamiliar land, some “vast cold place with rickety wooden houses and great expanses of bush and snow” that is more a nightmare than a dream (162). Ricci suggests that a gap exists between the dream and the reality, for the dream of success is difficult to achieve while the reality of failure is a constant threat. Indeed, Mario’s experiences indicate that securing steady employment with decent wages is a challenge for newcomers to Canada: Mario cannot save enough earnings to provide for himself and his family and thus borrows money to send to his wife, Cristina (95). Mario’s father believes his son has made a mistake in searching for success overseas and, enraged at the suggestion that his son has acted wisely, says, “‘Mario this, Mario that – he can rot in America, and all of you after him! Do you think he did a good thing to go against his father? Do you think he’s living like a king? I’ll tell you where he’s living – in a chicken coop! In a goddamned chicken coop, *per l’amore di Cristo!* Meanwhile he leaves his wife to run around like a whore!’” (27). Mario’s nightmare is not only caused by his poverty in Canada, but is also the result of his deteriorating relations with his family in Italy. Trapped in the new world, Mario loses contact with his family in the old: his wife’s adultery and subsequent pregnancy emphasize the distance that exists between migrants and their families – a physical and emotional distance of indefinite duration.

Cristina is demonized by family, friends, and fellow villagers as a whore for her actions, yet her affair is not unusual in a land with a history of absent husbands. In fact, a friend of Cristina’s later explains: “‘It’s not as if she was the only one, with all the men off in America like that. The orphanages were full in those days. Or sometimes you’d just find the thing frozen to death in the fields’” (*Where* 207). Ricci thus reveals

that fragmented families are another reality of diaspora: women might not wait faithfully for men to return, and men might not be faithful either. As Cristina says of Mario, “‘he’s probably slept with every whore in America by now, but for me it’s a disgrace. Women have had their faces up their asses for too long, they let their men run around like goats and then they’re happy if they don’t come home and beat them!’” (*Lives* 154). Ricci uses the relationship between Mario and Cristina to shatter nostalgic ideals of migration and to emphasize that seeking one’s fortunes overseas can have enduring effects on the family left behind. Migrants like Mario strive for personal and financial freedom but often feel trapped by circumstances in both the new land and the old: from their search for decent employment in Canada to their lack of contact with families in Italy, these migrants soon discover that the dream of success is more fiction than fact. Yet, interestingly, the dream persists. Ricci explains that these migrants and their families can somehow sustain two opposing ideas of one place:

for all the stories of America that had been filtering into the village for a hundred years now from those who had returned, stories of sooty factories and back-breaking work and poor wages and tiny bug-infested shacks, America had remained a mythical place, as if there were two Americas, one which continued merely the mundane life which the peasants accepted as their lot, their fate, the daily grind of toil without respite, the other more a state of mind than a place, a paradise that shimmered just beneath the surface of the seen, one which even those who had been there, working their long hours, shoring up their meagre earnings, had never entered into, though it had loomed around them always as a possibility. (162)

For all the hardship that the new world represents, it nonetheless exists as a place of longing for migrants who dream of a “golden future.” By recording these impressions of North America as a new world destination, Ricci establishes a historical link between

Italy and Canada while locating an Italian presence in Canadian history and showing that migrants and their families are well acquainted with the myth of the new land before they depart on the journey overseas.

Ricci portrays Vittorio's journey to Canada as one that is unusual both in terms of the departure from the village and the crossing aboard the ship. Cristina's sudden decision to migrate to Canada with her son leaves no time for the standard rituals of departure. They do not have time to partake in last meals with family and friends, to sell or give away personal belongings, or to gather small parcels from villagers sending gifts to relatives in Canada. Instead, Vittorio says, "my mother and I, it seemed, were being ripped untimely from our womb, without gestation" (164). Their "untimely" departure emphasizes the fact that they are neither ready to leave a secure and familiar environment, nor prepared for the freedom and uncertainty associated with the act of migration. To journey to a foreign land is to move beyond the womb-like safety of one's former home and to establish one's origins in an unfamiliar place. The violence of Ricci's borrowed image¹⁰ suggests that one's birth into a new land is not without its emotional costs, especially when its suddenness leaves little room for the rituals that have traditionally accompanied a migrant's departure. Indeed, Vittorio has little time to prepare for this emotional – and permanent – departure from home. He does, however, participate in one ritual by taking leave of his friend Fabrizio, his teacher, and his grandfather. With each farewell, Vittorio receives a gift and a parting wish: what is significant about these gifts is that they are personal possessions that are valued by the givers and are meant to symbolize a promise.¹¹ For Fabrizio, it is the promise that Vittorio will one day send for him from Canada; for his teacher, it is the request that Vittorio will follow the teachings of the saints; and for his grandfather, it is the hope

that Vittorio will live a life of good fortune (169-76). While Fabrizio longs to escape to Canada, the teacher and grandfather worry about Vittorio's future in a distant land. As a result, they offer what tokens and wishes they can in order to ensure his safe journey overseas.

Ricci contrasts Vittorio's bittersweet partings from Valle del Sole with Cristina's hostile leave-takings. When Cristina parts from her father, she admits that she is not going to Canada to meet her husband.¹² Her father's last words to her are thus filled with anger: "'Get out of this house! And if you ever step through that door again I swear by God I'll throttle you with my own hands!'" (182). Ricci uses a father's angry words to subvert romantic ideals of tearful departures and loving promises of return. He depicts Cristina's departure from the village as absolute, for no ties of any kind will bind her to her former home. In a scene of mounting hostility, Ricci foreshadows Cristina's death with her final words to the villagers: "'You are the ones who are dead, not me, because not one of you knows what it means to be free and to make a choice, and I pray to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities off the face of the earth! [. . .] The only mistake I made was that I didn't leave this hell a dozen years ago, when I had the Chance'" (184). Cristina's outburst demonstrates her eagerness to be free from a village that has placed its harsh judgements upon her. Indeed, she leaves the village in pursuit of freedom for herself, her son, and her unborn child. For Cristina, the new world will be an escape; she will harbour no regrets and suffer none of the migrant's nostalgia for the home left behind. For Vittorio, however, the decision to leave Italy is not so freely made. While Cristina has fixed her gaze on the new land and the freedom it offers, Vittorio endures an abrupt departure and faces the uncertainties of an unknown place, for he knows neither where they are going nor who will meet them when they arrive. He explains that "all [he] could see clearly of the future was a kind of limitless space that

took shape in [his] head as the sea, and a journey into this space that took direction not from its destination but from its point of departure, Valle del Sole, which somehow could not help but remain always visible on the receding shore” (165). As Vittorio leaves his home and journeys overseas, he suffers the double vision of a migrant who looks forward to an uncertain future across the sea and backward to a familiar past in the land of his birth.

Cristina’s death en route to Canada further complicates Vittorio’s uncertain future and is significant on several levels. Firstly, the migrant’s departure has commonly been equated with death – with what Cesare Pitto calls “the journey of the deceased” (127). Migrants leave home and are considered dead by those left behind. According to Pivato, this line of thought has its roots in “ancient Mediterranean customs that link any form of departure with death. In remote Italian villages emigrants were once sent off with funeral-like rituals. Upon leaving, these people were no longer considered part of the community; in effect, they were dead to their families and friends” (“Return” 171). Although Cristina’s departure lacks ceremony, Ricci nonetheless reveals that, upon leaving, she is no longer regarded as part of her family or community. In fact, her father wishes her dead before she has left the house and says, “I’ll pray every day of my life that you rot in hell!” (182). With the death of the mother, Ricci reinforces the authenticity of a new world myth in which motherless children are left to begin life anew in Canada. He thus uses Cristina’s death to release her children from the burden of the old world while reinforcing the finality of the journey overseas. For Cristina, migration is, like death, a final separation from which there is no return. But, for her children, migration represents a beginning and a chance to establish origins in a new land.

Secondly, the fact that Cristina dies after giving birth to her daughter symbolizes the sacrifice of the old world for the sake of the new. However, while Cristina's death offers a new beginning for her children, the repercussions of her adulterous affair live on in her daughter, an illegitimate child with an absent father. The father's name, nationality, and occupation are not known; his origins remain a mystery. As a result, his daughter has no claim to a traceable or authenticating genealogy of her own. Yet Rita's blue eyes suggest that her father is not Italian and that she is of mixed heritage. These blue eyes reveal an impurity in her family line – an impurity that worries her grandfather, for he says, “I'll not have that bastard child living under my roof” (155). That the grandfather calls her a “bastard” points to her inferior and uncertain origins – origins that are made even more questionable by the fact that the grandfather believes her father is a communist and “a foreigner” (154). Rita's hybrid status thus disrupts the supposed purity of her family line and her grandfather would rather see her disappear to an orphanage than remain as a blight on his family name. This, then, might be another reason for Cristina's death in the end: she has not only sinned in her adultery but also in tainting her family line with a foreigner's “impure” blood. Ricci kills Cristina for her sins, but allows her daughter to live on in a land where hybrid lines of descent characterize the most authentic of genealogies. To put it differently, rigid lines of descent die with the old order as genealogies of mixed origins are born in the new.¹³

The novel's birth and death sequence represents a transition from the old world to the new, a transition that Robert Kroetsch calls “the necessary death – the death, that is, out of one culture, with the hope that it will lead to rebirth in another” (70). Ricci therefore eliminates the mother in order to use the birth of her child as a symbol of a migrant's rebirth into a new time and place. But he complicates this analogy by situating Rita's birth in an ambiguous space: Rita is born at sea and not in Canada. Once again,

Ricci reveals his ambivalence regarding his own myth-making strategy by avoiding a straight-forward depiction of the new world as home. Instead, he chooses to locate Rita's origins in an in-between place that literally exists between old and new worlds. In Rita, Ricci has created a character who will know Canada as her only home: unlike Vittorio, she cannot know her mother or the motherland.

Thirdly, in stories of migration the death of the mother symbolizes the death of the motherland. For Vittorio, in particular, the loss of his mother represents the loss of the love, security, and guidance she offered as well as his ties to his former home.¹⁴ He thus has no choice but to secure his own place in a new land. To do so, he must forge a new identity in a new community in Canada because, as Pivato explains, the death of the mother “suggests that a new order must be found, a new accommodation between the old world and the new” (“Italian-Canadian Writing” 849). As a motherless child, Vittorio is left to establish this new order on his own – he must locate his own origins in an unfamiliar land. But, before he can do so, he must overcome the fever that turns his thoughts to mist. Hospitalized upon his arrival in Canada, Vittorio slowly recovers and finally rises from his fog into a new life: he has lost his mother but gained a father and an infant sister.¹⁵ Although they enter into “a desolate landscape, bleak and snow-covered for as far as the eye could see” (234), Vittorio and his sister have survived the journey overseas – this mythical voyage across the Atlantic that represents “both the breaking away of the single subject from his/her spatial and cultural horizon and the prelude to a new life” (Pitto 125).

In *Lives of the Saints*, Ricci imaginatively reconstructs diasporic experiences and establishes the beginnings of a myth of origins for Italians in Canada. Not only does he outline Italy's long history of migration to North America, but he also presents Canada as a mythical new land and preferred destination for Italians after the Second World

War. The novel is not set in Canada, yet this faraway land exists as a psychic space throughout the narrative: potential migrants long for Canada, a land that embodies their dreams of success and their fears of failure. Ricci only allows Canada to enter the narrative as a physical reality when the journey across the Atlantic is complete, and Vittorio and his sister have arrived in a dismal land that serves as a stark contrast to the warm hills of Italy. Canada is not “home” from the moment migrants arrive; rather, migrants must forge their place in the nation in order to call Canada home.

*

But, the question remains, how can this task be accomplished? How can a second-generation Italian Canadian like Ricci use his fiction to secure Canada as home? These questions will be discussed in light of the second book of the trilogy, *In a Glass House*. In this novel, Ricci creates an authenticating myth of pain that reflects the hardship associated with the struggle to make the new world home.¹⁶ With a portrait of Italian immigrants who suffer the pain of dislocation in terms of their struggle to belong, their degraded status, their lack of opportunity, and their years of poverty, Ricci demonstrates just how much suffering they are willing to endure in order to forge their place in Canada. Like Lee in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Ricci thus invokes a narrative of pain for strategic purposes: pain authenticates a people’s presence because it shows them “paying their dues”; through their hardship, determination, and patience they gain a sense of belonging in a new land. By using his fiction to recreate the suffering of Italian immigrants, Ricci adds their stories to Canada’s national narrative and thereby recovers a lost history and claims a place in the nation for Canadians of Italian origin.

Ricci constructs his authenticating myth of pain, in part, by illustrating Vittorio’s personal suffering as an immigrant in Canada. In using his protagonist’s personal

experiences to document the struggles of an entire community, Ricci establishes Italian origins in Canada and shows how this community has earned its place in a new land.

When Vittorio begins school, for example, he immediately feels like an outsider:

“everything about me proclaimed my ignorance, from my stained hands to my awkward clothes to my large hulking conspicuousness amidst the other children in the class. When I talked I couldn’t get my mouth around the simplest sounds, felt my tongue stumble against my palate as if swollen and numb; when we did assignments my exercise book was always filled with the same hopeless errors” (55). Vittorio feels trapped in his “immigrant crudeness” (140) and fears he will never fit in. But, as he slowly learns the language, he realizes that he has the power to forge his own place in Canada. He explains that “English began to open before me like a new landscape [. . .] that initial surge of understanding was like a kind of arrival, the first sense I’d had of the possibility of me beyond the narrow world of our farm” (56). Ricci here uses a metaphor of discovery and settlement to highlight one of many stages in the gradual process of “arriving” in Canada. Although Vittorio landed in Canada months earlier, he cannot establish a sense of belonging until he emerges from the silence of his family’s farm and arrives in a space where his difference is diminished through the spoken word: he can earn his place if he can learn the language.

Through carefully constructed symbols, images, and metaphors, Ricci recreates this migrant’s arrival in Canada and even, it seems, reflects some of his own experiences here as a second-generation Italian Canadian. Speaking of his own childhood, Ricci says,

I did not like the experience of difference one bit, and sought every means to mitigate it. Thus, all things Italian became anathema, and the two worlds I lived in, at home and at school, were kept cleanly separate and distinct, so that the former should not in any way compromise my standing in the latter. In this way, I sailed

more or less happily toward assimilation, which seemed the good and proper course for someone of my clearly questionable origins. (“Best” 4)

Interestingly, it is this rejection of “all things Italian” that Ricci uses to problematize Vittorio’s “passage to Canada.” In particular, Vittorio remains insecure in his new home and attempts to distance himself from his Italian heritage in order to “become” Canadian. However, as Said explains, “No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental” (*Culture* 336). Ricci, then, uses the tensions between cultures to show how both migrant and post-migrant generations can fall victim to a doctrine of singular identities in an attempt to erase what might be perceived as “questionable origins.”

Because Vittorio believes he can be only “one thing,” he strives to conform to the dominant culture, deliberately avoiding signs that point to his Italian roots. He prefers, for example, store-bought bread to his family’s crusty homemade loaves; he appreciates his family’s new dinner hour because it allows them to discard some of their “habitual immigrant unrefinement” (92); and, most significantly, he bears a “silent hate” (68) towards his family and refuses to befriend his cousins Rocco and Domenic when they migrate to Canada. In rejecting his cousins, Vittorio reveals not only his hatred for his family and ethnicity, but also his self-hatred, for what he despises in Rocco and Domenic are the very things he despises in himself: their awkwardness and strangeness, their obvious difference. These feelings are reinforced by the dominant culture, which has relegated Italians to the margins of Canadian society. Be it on his family’s farm on the

outskirts of town, on the school bus, or in the classroom, Vittorio continually feels his difference as someone who remains “unlike people from the majority culture” (Pivato, *Echo* 217). Pivato notes that scenes of self-hatred are prominent in immigrant narratives and are generally meant to show that “the price for becoming Canadian is self-hatred, hatred of the other self, the immigrant self” (*Echo* 199). But Ricci’s novel demonstrates that possessing this hatred is no guarantee that migrants will take their places in the majority culture. On one occasion, for example, Vittorio is angered by Domenic’s attempts at friendship and says, “I simply pushed him hard against the wall of the school to be away from him, feeling a lightness as my hands shot out against him as if something caged in me had been set free” (65). Vittorio imagines that this act will free him from his cousins and all they represent. Indeed, he does rid himself of his cousins, though he does not escape his Italian roots or achieve the sense of belonging he so craves. Instead, he admits, “In all this I was left with nothing, no reward for trying to follow out what seemed the careful, ruthless logic of fitting in” (65). Vittorio thus remains plagued by self-hatred and suffers the personal pain of a migrant who struggles to belong. In his discussion of *In a Glass House*, Stelio Cro expresses dismay at Vittorio’s feelings of hatred and asks, “Does this mean that in order to become a Canadian an Italian immigrant must hate his family?” (147). If this were Ricci’s message, then Vittorio’s hatred would result in a successful Canadian identity. As it is, however, the Italians of Ricci’s novels remain on the margins, unable to identify themselves as part of Canada’s national history. Paradoxically, by giving voice to this marginalization, Ricci helps Italian Canadians move towards the centre and succeeds in including their stories in Canada’s national narrative by showing that they are, in fact, part of the nation’s past.

No less difficult than his childhood, Vittorio’s troubled adolescence further contributes to Ricci’s creation of an authenticating myth of pain. Isolation and loneliness

are primarily responsible for Vittorio's misery during this time.¹⁷ In high school, for example, he avoids other Italians and eats lunch alone every day until he is befriended by Mark and Terry, non-Italians who welcome him into their religious group. But Ricci reveals that even religion cannot save Vittorio from his solitude. Although Vittorio appreciates the companionship, he does not share Mark and Terry's religious convictions. He knows his lack of faith will end their friendship – and he craves the normalcy it provides – but he cannot pretend to share their beliefs. Despite its brevity, this friendship offers Vittorio a glimpse into another world, a world of backyards and barbecues, conversations and companionship. In short, it is a world in which Vittorio longs to find acceptance. Ricci shows, however, that migrants must search for an authenticating sense of belonging and not one based on false convictions. Vittorio admits that he was never drawn to the religious side of this friendship and says, “perhaps what I most wished for finally was not the transcendence of belief but simply to feel at home” (137).

Yet this novel proves that feelings of home are difficult to secure. After his failed friendship with Mark and Terry, Vittorio attempts to find belonging with some Italians from school, Vince and Tony. Rather than shunning his Italian roots as he did as a child, Vittorio is drawn to Vince's “exaggerated Italianness” (157) and to the in-between space he occupies, since Vince and his family are also recent immigrants. Vittorio appreciates the time he spends at Vince's home: he enjoys its comfort and modernity as well as the sense of belonging he gains there, for, as he says, “I'd feel a quiet status settle around me there as a guest, his parents and brothers soberly attentive in the background, the whole house seeming to adjust itself to allow me a place in it” (163-64). Vittorio is slowly coming to terms with his Italian roots and realizes that, even though he remains uncomfortable on the farm with his family, he can feel at home with other Italians in the space they have carved for themselves in Canada. With Vince and Tony, Vittorio attends

parties at the Italian Club in Mersea and soon considers himself part of a distinct group: he no longer rejects all things Italian. Yet, once again, Vittorio's friendship ends in failure. Like the friendship with Mark and Terry, something about this friendship seems inauthentic or forced. In the end, Vittorio decides he has little in common with Vince and says, "As the summer went on I saw less and less of him [. . .] putting him off until we both seemed to have acknowledged at some level the arbitrariness that had marked our friendship from the outset" (186). In other words, their common Italian heritage is not enough to hold them together – for Vittorio, it is just something arbitrary that cannot sustain a meaningful friendship.

However, theorists such as Ramraj and Gilroy argue that members of dispersed communities *can* be united by their common homelands, histories, cultures, and memories. Perhaps, then, Vittorio's failed friendship with Vince is less the result of the "arbitrariness" of their common homeland and more the result of their failure to communicate, to render this connection less arbitrary by discussing their common history and commemorating their common heritage. Vittorio notes that, for all the hours he spends with Vince, they rarely discuss the past. The one time they do, Vince offers Vittorio an image of his former village in Italy; Vittorio, however, does not reciprocate and their brief conversation fades into silence. Vittorio's inability to connect with Vince and to render their connection less arbitrary increases the distance between them and eventually ends their friendship. But Vittorio grows as a result of this friendship because it helps him to accept his ethnic roots and to forge a place in his community. Ricci, then, not only uses this failed friendship to further emphasize Vittorio's personal pain, but also to show this character's personal growth and his continuing search for an authenticating sense of belonging in Canada.

Ricci recreates much of the pain of these early years when he depicts Vittorio's experiences in university. Although Vittorio longs to escape his family, the farm, and the town of Mersea, he soon discovers that he does not feel at home in Toronto either. Once again, his familiar feelings of isolation and loneliness return, but now they are accompanied by thoughts of suicide. Only Vittorio's concern for his family prevents him from ending his life. As he says, "it was the thought of my family that seemed to keep me from it, of the monstrousness of it for them, so far from anything that would make sense to them – they were what I'd wanted so much to escape and yet all that seemed to connect me now to the world, resurfacing out of the murk into which I'd tried to consign them to hold over me this final tyranny, the slender grip of home" (202-03). Having withdrawn from the farm in Mersea, Vittorio now considers it home – it is the one place where he feels any kind of belonging. The problem, however, is that the farm and his family only have a "slender grip" on him: his feelings of home are incomplete and he continues to question his place in the world.

Through his friendship with a fellow student named Verne, Vittorio is slowly drawn out of his isolation and gains a sense of belonging with his peers. But this sense of belonging is deceptive because Vittorio's increasingly heavy drug use merely creates the illusion of belonging without any lasting effects. This drugged delusion is connected with the novel's title in the expression, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't get stoned,"¹⁸ for these words highlight both Vittorio's insecurities as he tries to make friends at university and a migrant's vulnerability as he or she tries to establish a home in a new land. When, as a child in Valle del Sole, Vittorio was confronted with his imminent departure from Italy, he reflected on everything he had been told about the new land, including Fabrizio's theory that "in America everyone lived in houses of glass. 'When you're taking a bath anyone can come by and look at you. You can see all the women in

their underwear. People look at each other all the time, over there''' (*Lives* 163).

Fabrizio's words serve as a warning about the fragility of these new-world homes and the tenuousness of each migrant's position in the new land. Whether Vittorio is on the farm with his family or at university with his peers, he carries with him the burden of this vulnerability and worries that his belonging is precarious. Although he gradually distances himself from Verne, he continues to admire his friend for his quiet confidence and says that "there was a kind of perfection to him, to his generosity, his essential normalcy, and I would have given anything to live as he did, with his sense of being at home in the world" (210). By aligning himself with Verne and imitating his behaviour, Vittorio attempts to replicate his friend's sense of comfort and security in a land where he himself is still not at home.

Ricci further complicates this sense of home when he portrays Vittorio's ambivalent feelings towards the farm and his family. When Vittorio is in Toronto, he considers the farm his home; when he returns to the farm, however, this image is shattered because he realizes that it is not where he belongs. He feels like a stranger to his family and cannot communicate with either his father or his sister: both relationships are marked by strained silences and unfulfilled expectations. Vittorio explains: "It seemed pointless now to have come home at all. I'd imagined some vague pleasure in returning, some coming back to myself, yet felt now unsolid as air, without contours" (213). Vittorio does not feel at home in Mersea and thus decides to spend his holidays in Toronto, avoiding his family and the farm as much as possible. Speaking of his father, Vittorio says, "I had nothing to offer him, wanted to be on good terms with him but only to disentangle myself from him, to define more clearly the line that divided us" (228). According to Palmer, a rejection of one's father often represents a rejection of one's ethnic heritage ("Fictionalization" 75). Vittorio's rejection of his father and the

farm can therefore be seen as part of the ongoing tension between accepting or rejecting his Italian roots.

Although Vittorio is, at times, drawn towards his Italian heritage, he remains ambivalent about his family and his home in Mersea. Ricci suggests, however, that before Vittorio can feel at home in a physical place he must learn to feel at home with himself. Vittorio attends counselling sessions at the university and gradually begins to make friends and to succeed in his classes by learning to accept his difference as something positive. As he says, “I began to feel more at home in my aloneness. It was the thing I’d most fought against, most hated, yet also what made me most clearly myself, what I’d always clung to as the last refuge of what I was, and it seemed enough now merely to learn how to carry it with some dignity” (234). If Vittorio can learn to feel secure in himself, then perhaps he can also learn to feel comfortable in the in-between space he has occupied for most of his life. With his decision to major in English, Vittorio gains proficiency in the language that set him apart as a newcomer to Canada: “I majored in English literature,” he says, “becoming the expert now in this strangers’ language” (235).¹⁹ By mastering this “strangers’ language,” Vittorio moves closer to forging his place in the dominant culture and to securing this strangers’ country as home.

That Ricci includes a historical research project as part of his narrative represents another means by which he authenticates the Italian presence in Canada. Even as he does so, however, he questions the purpose of such myth-making projects and reveals his ambivalence regarding his own attempts to insert Italians into Canada’s national mythology. *In a Glass House* thus articulates a tension between Ricci’s desire to establish Italian origins in Canada and his own scepticism regarding the effectiveness of such strategies. After Vittorio completes his degree in Toronto, he returns to the farm in Mersea and accepts a position as the coordinator for a project on the history

of Italians in the area.²⁰ The Italian Historical Committee intends to commemorate the experiences of immigrants from Italy, beginning with those who first settled farms and established homes and businesses in Mersea. As one committee member says, ““What we have in mind [. . .] is the sort of book the town put out for the centennial, you know the one. A history book, the first people, photographs, that sort of thing’” (266). When Vittorio finds Mersea’s centennial book in the library, he notes that Italians are largely absent from Canada’s history, a dilemma that Ricci himself addresses with his trilogy. Vittorio wonders if this absence is the result of an Anglo-Saxon bias or of an Italian self-exclusion, since the Italian community prides itself on a self-sufficiency that lies outside of the mainstream. Perhaps this self-sufficiency is a means of protecting themselves against rejection because they know their participation in the public life of their town will not be well received by the dominant culture. Vittorio explains that “the Italians thought of themselves as owning the town and yet they’d never elected a member to the municipal council, to the provincial legislature, to parliament, had hardly involved themselves in the town’s civic life. [. . .] It was enough, merely, for a kind of self-sufficiency, the comfort of passing one’s life outside the sphere of the *inglesi*” (271). Yet this exclusion means that their stories have not been recorded in the history books or included in Canada’s national narrative: they have been denied a voice in the founding mythology of their town.

The committee’s research project aims to remedy this situation by uniting this diasporic community through their common memories of displacement and dispersal, and by adding their stories to the national narrative. The committee’s goals parallel Ricci’s own objectives in writing his trilogy, for he also intends to reclaim a lost history by recovering the origins of Italians in Canada. The fact that not all Italians in Mersea appreciate the committee’s goals reflects Ricci’s own ambivalence and allows him to

introduce opposing ideologies into his narrative. Vittorio's father, for example, questions the committee's reasons for initiating the project and says, "they always want to make it seem like they're doing such a big thing for the Italians. [. . .] I said from the start they have to involve all the Italians in a thing like this but Dino's got his own ideas, he just wants to make a big deal that his family was one of the first'" (267). Mario is not sure that a project like this one will benefit the Italian community in any way and he suspects that the committee's chairman only wants to authenticate his personal sense of belonging in Canada at the expense of migrants who arrived later and whose stories also need to be documented. Although Mario, in the end, agrees to participate in the project, his sister Teresa refuses. Vittorio respects, even admires, his aunt's decision and attributes it to "a sort of integrity" (286). As he explains, "She'd refused a platform to speak, to contradict, to call attention to herself, had chosen instead simply to hold her tongue, as if she'd understood how little place there was in this sort of thing for the truth" (286). Perhaps Vittorio understands his aunt's position because – like his creator – he questions the truth of such projects and wonders what purpose they actually fulfil. As he conducts the interviews, Vittorio notices that the stories take on "a tiresome sameness" (275), that participants adopt "a stiff formality" when recorded (275), and that certain topics, such as finances, cannot be discussed (276). Ricci thus explores the impossibility of uncovering historical truths, for stories will often be altered and something will always be left unsaid.

Vittorio approaches the project with caution because he realizes that Italian migrants and their families can use this platform to reinvent their hardships and humiliations as honourable sacrifices that have made possible both the present and the future. He sees in this project "the desire not so much to reclaim the past as to redeem it, all its meanness and ignominy, to recast it as the ennobled source of the present's

happily-ever-after” (272). Ricci, then, uses Mario’s, Teresa’s, and Vittorio’s separate reactions to the project to express his own doubts regarding the value and effectiveness of such myth-making strategies. Yet, even as he disputes these strategies, Ricci himself mythologizes past events in his trilogy. With *In a Glass House*, he ennobles the past through his myth of pain and uses the research project to show that Italians have a long history in Canada and helped settle towns like Mersea with their farming and entrepreneurial skills.²¹ Ricci’s novel thus enacts a conflict between the desire to create a founding mythology for Italians in Canada and the need to question both the veracity and validity of this project. In the end, Ricci offers Italian Canadians an authenticating myth of origins that establishes their place in the nation while reminding them that no story or mythology can ever tell the whole truth.

Although the Historical Committee’s project aims to give Italian Canadians a communal sense of belonging in Canada, Vittorio remains confused on a personal level. His decision to move to Africa to teach English further emphasizes the tension between accepting or rejecting his ethnic heritage.²² Like his move to Toronto, his move to Nigeria is a means by which he escapes his family and the farm.²³ Even though the historical project brought him closer to an understanding of his Italian heritage, Vittorio is intent on severing all ties to his home and is not inclined to keep contact with his family when he moves to Africa. Speaking of his father, he says, “I hadn’t imagined writing to him, had thought of this departure as somehow complete, no lines leading back” (290). Vittorio seeks to be anonymous in Nigeria: in a sense, he will be starting a new life by reliving a migrant experience as a newcomer in a foreign land. But, unlike his previous experience, this time he has a clearly defined role as a teacher and foreigner whose stay is only temporary.

Living in Nigeria gives Vittorio a new perspective on his feelings of difference since he is distanced from Canada and will always be an outsider in Africa. He feels no pressure to belong and is satisfied with the mere “illusion of home” that Nigeria offers (303). He can, as he says, “be in this place without expectation that I should ever have to find the way to fit in” (308). Despite his plans to the contrary, Vittorio maintains ties with family and friends in Canada because he realizes that he cannot abandon all links to his past; after all, he had “come from somewhere and would one day return there” (310). Vittorio thus exchanges letters with his friends from university, his sister, and his father. Mario’s sporadic letters, filled with “wrenching emotion” (313), are an outlet for his pent-up frustrations, complaints, and sorrows and serve as a precursor to his eventual suicide. Mario expresses regret over his decision to migrate to Canada and writes, “I wish I had never come to this country, it was the biggest mistake of my life and I have paid for it for twenty years and I am still paying for it” (313-14). For all his years in Canada, Mario never accepts the myth of pain and perseverance as part of the process of forging one’s place in a new land. He refuses to see that he is not alone when he experiences loss before gain, hardship before success. Instead, he considers any loss or hardship a personal failure and, despite the wealth he accumulates and the success of his farm, he cannot accept his struggles as a normal part of a difficult process. As Vittorio says, “If he’d carried on, it seemed now, remained whole, there might have been some meaning in his life, the virtue at least of persevering” (330-31). Having removed himself from Canada, Vittorio now realizes that if his father had only bought into this myth, then his father would have been the symbol of success: the ideal migrant who suffers and endures in order to make the new world home.

Although, with his father's death, Vittorio intends to dissociate himself from the farm and his family, he discovers that complete separation is difficult to achieve. When he returns to Canada for his father's funeral, he repeats the pattern that occurred after his mother's death by becoming gravely ill and recovering from his fever into a new life, this time without his father: "When the fever broke, definitively, I came into a strange euphoria, surfacing to it as into sudden daylight" (329). However, he soon realizes that he remains connected to his father because he is the sole inheritor of his father's estate, a financial situation that will keep him tied to the farm for years to come.²⁴ Vittorio is surprised and uncomfortable with this generous act, especially since he has always experienced conflicting loyalties concerning his father's land – it is both home and not-home. As he says, "Somehow I hadn't expected it, had always imagined the farm heavily mortgaged, its profits slim, had hardly even considered I could have much of a stake in it when I'd been so removed from it all my life" (333). Though Vittorio considers accepting a new role on the farm by taking on his father's position, he decides, in the end, to return to university: he will continue his search for authenticity outside the boundaries of the farm and his family. Ricci closes his novel by offering an image of freedom and hope to a character who is now symbolically tied to the land: as Vittorio drives along the highway to Toronto, he sees dozens of hot-air balloons move slowly into the sky. He stops his car and watches the balloons, "a slow growing flurry of them, elephantine and graceful, drifting their weightless way with a languorous patience, goodbye, goodbye, until they filled the horizon" (339).

*

As the third book of the trilogy, *Where She Has Gone* further underlines Ricci's ambivalence by rejecting a conclusion that would definitively make Canada home. In

this novel, Ricci heightens the ambivalence of his myth-making strategy by exploring a migrant's longing for the mother(land) in terms of Vittorio's relationship with his sister and his return journey to Italy. Vittorio admits that, with his father's death, his thoughts keep returning to his mother: "I seldom thought much any more about my father's death. [. . .] It was my mother, instead, who I found myself going back to, as if my father's death had finally freed me to re-imagine her" (10-11). Vittorio's memories express a migrant's longing for a once familiar land. However, it is the voyage itself, and not the homeland, that holds the most resonance for him: "It surprised me how vividly the feel of that voyage came back to me now, the sense of hovering over a chasm, poised between the world we'd left behind and the unknown one where my father was waiting, by then a stranger to me" (11). Ever since this voyage, Vittorio has struggled to forge his place in the strange new land that he shared with his father. Now, with his father's death, his thoughts are free to return to his mother and to the ship on which he had his last glimpse of Italy and his first moments in Canada.²⁵ In a sense, Vittorio's beginnings as an Italian Canadian are located on this ship and, as he recreates key moments from his past, he becomes obsessed with this journey and with the mother he lost at sea.

This obsession manifests itself in Vittorio's relationship with his sister, Rita. Although they lived apart when growing up, Vittorio and Rita regularly spend time together once Rita begins university in Toronto.²⁶ Because of the distance between them, the status of their relationship is unclear: they are not sure what it means to be brother and sister or how to have a "normal" relationship (6). For Vittorio, Rita becomes his only family because he rarely returns to his aunts, uncles, and cousins on the farm in Mersea. Yet Rita also symbolizes the mother he lost as a child – the mother who died giving Rita life. With the exception of her blue eyes, Rita shares their mother's features. On one occasion, Rita says, "I always used to wonder what she looked like. I've never even

seen a picture of her” (16). And Vittorio replies, “Sort of like you, I guess. Dark-haired. Pretty” (16). As they spend more time together, Vittorio first feels protective towards Rita and then becomes possessive of her, telling her, “I suppose I always thought that *you* were what was mine” (69).²⁷ Vittorio’s feelings of possession originated at Rita’s birth when his mother died and his sister arrived – one woman in his life was replaced with another. These confused feelings of possession and obsession culminate in Vittorio the night that he and his sister give in to their sexual desires. The siblings know that their growing intimacy has moved beyond what is normal, healthful, and acceptable, and Vittorio says that there was “something almost ruthless in us then, hopeless, the instantaneous mutual admission of wrong and its flouting. There would be this one time, we seemed to say, when the world would split open and every unspeakable hope, every desire, every fear, would be permitted” (71).²⁸ Rita has, in a sense, replaced Vittorio’s mother and his desire for her thus represents his misplaced longing to reclaim the mother that he lost. In other words, their incest represents a form of mother-love.

After their incestuous act, Vittorio remains obsessed with Rita, but cannot relate to her in any meaningful way and is instead haunted by memories of their mother’s death. As he writes, “I imagined I was in a storm at sea, that I was back on the ship that had brought me to Canada, crawling up to my bunk while beneath me my mother sighed and slept slowly bleeding to death” (96). Now Rita is dead to him as well; in his attempt to reclaim his mother he has lost his sister. During a chance encounter, Rita tells Vittorio that she is going to Europe for several months and that she does not want to see him again before she leaves. Rita’s departure has a devastating effect on Vittorio, who falls “into a kind of a fog, unable for a while to muster the energy to perform anything more than the simplest daily tasks” (133). It is Rita who unknowingly pulls Vittorio out of this fog when, several weeks later, she calls him from Switzerland in the middle of the night.

Vittorio tells her to meet him in Italy and says he will wait for her there. The longing to see Rita again thus compels Vittorio to embark on a return journey – a quest for the mother(land) that will take him back to his former home.

While Ricci portrays Canada as a paradise in *Lives of the Saints*, he reverses this portrayal in *Where She Has Gone* by idealizing Italy. Vittorio, for example, imagines that Italy is a place where both he and his sister truly belong. Speaking of Rita, he says, “The country would hold her; it was half hers, after all, the hills were in her blood and the sky, the crumbled ruins, the cooked earth. Even for her it wasn’t a place to visit but to go back to, like somewhere a road led after years of wandering; and slowly she’d drift down into the dream of it and the village would call to her like home, and she would go” (157). Vittorio romanticizes Italy as a place of freedom that holds the answers to his confused sense of belonging. But Elena, Rita’s adoptive sister, doubts that the return journey will offer any answers and says to Vittorio, “I’m not sure what you guys hope to accomplish there” (160). Elena’s misgivings serve as a warning about what Ricci calls “the inherent flaw of the myth of return” (“Recreating” 137). He explains that, as time passes for migrants, “the paradise they imagined they were coming to is replaced by the paradise they imagine they left behind” (“Recreating” 137). For Vittorio, then, the desire to meet his sister in Italy represents the nostalgic longing to return to a lost mother in the paradise he left behind.

Ricci shows, however, the impossibility of reclaiming this paradise when Vittorio arrives in Valle del Sole. Immediately upon his arrival, Vittorio is confronted with a gap between memory and reality: with his first glimpse of the village he declares, “Everything about it was wrong” (178). As he views his grandfather’s house – the house where he lived as a child – Vittorio says, “I kept expecting some surge of memory to take me over but felt only the same disjunction, the sense that my memory was being not so

much stirred as stripped away” (185). Ricci thus demonstrates that the return journey can be an unsettling experience that disrupts, rather than affirms, stable notions of home. Vittorio’s feelings of disjunction only increase as he spends more time in the village and in his grandfather’s house – a place where he feels “a strange sense of dislocation” (202). With his return to the motherland, Vittorio is transformed into the typical migrant whose remembered home belongs to an imaginative space that can never be reclaimed. He can neither physically nor psychically transcend the boundaries of time to reconnect with the imaginary homeland or to recover the imaginary infant-mother fusion. In short, Vittorio is not “capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (Rushdie 10).

Rather than gaining clarity as the days pass, Vittorio admits that his memories are becoming more confused and that he is beginning to question his vision of “the way things used to be” (Jansen 164). As he explains, “Perhaps I’d got it all wrong, every bit of it. [. . .] Memories that had seemed clear when I’d first arrived were becoming more and more contaminated, overlaid by other people’s versions of the past or simply by mere reality” (211, 230-31). For example, he does not remember the houses being “cramped into so paltry a space” (178). Despite evidence to the contrary, he cannot remember having electricity in the village when he was a child. And, most tellingly, he does not remember posing for a photograph with his mother – a woman with “a plain, peasant look, her hair long and dark and limp, her dress hanging formlessly over her belly” (189). In fact, Vittorio does not remember his mother as anything like the woman in the photograph; as he says, “I could hardly fathom this image of her: it was not just her plainness that struck me, how far she fell from the ideal of her I had created, but that she stood so vulnerable, so grave, with such a look of the mountain peasant that I could hardly imagine I’d ever known her” (189-90). Vittorio has uncovered an image of his mother that he had not anticipated: his return journey has shattered his ideal. Ricci thus

portrays Vittorio as the victim of a flawed myth who exhibits “the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins,’ to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” (Hall, S. 402). Ricci’s point is that migrants cannot reconnect with lost origins because the paradise at the beginning of things exists only in memory and imagination.

Ricci further explores this flawed myth of return when he depicts Vittorio’s reunion with Rita as another failed attempt to reconnect with the motherland. Although Vittorio has lost his idealized image of his mother, he still longs for his sister and her arrival in the village. He mistakenly believes that the simple fact of her presence will somehow bring him closer to the land of his birth. As he says, “If only she would come, then things would make sense, might begin to fall into place” (231). But when Rita and John finally arrive,²⁹ Vittorio’s relationship with his sister remains awkward; they are, for example, “unable to bear the direct gaze” and do not even look at each other when speaking (242). In fact, Vittorio soon realizes that Rita’s arrival has not brought them any closer together: “We’d grown awkward again,” he says, “I found myself wishing once more that she hadn’t come here: what was the point of all this weight we had to bear around each other, of everything that couldn’t be discussed, resolved, of this stricture in my throat as if I were gazing at water, near at hand, unreachable, while dying of thirst?” (253). Like his return to the village, Vittorio’s reunion with Rita shatters his ideal and forces him to consider the reality of his lived experience.

But this realization does not prevent Vittorio from longing for his sister: he cannot relinquish a migrant’s enduring desire and senses that some sort of connection is near yet also far away. As he explains, “I wanted to move in and hold her to me, to feel her body against mine one last time, the way it fit against me like a natural extension of my own. There were just those few inches between us, that bit of air, it could not make any difference; except the longing in me would only grow stronger then, my arms would only

remember more surely the lost feel of her within them” (258-59). Although Vittorio is speaking of Rita, his words are reminiscent of his final moments with his mother, when he “nestled close against her” only to lose her hours later (*Lives* 230). In both cases – with his sister and with his mother – Vittorio expresses an unfulfilled desire that intensifies his feelings of disconnection and displacement. He had hoped that a return journey would enable him to feel at home in Italy; instead, the return only solidifies his distance from his family, his motherland, and his “impenetrable” past (*Where* 280). Perhaps the problem is that he seeks to connect with the wrong place and sees Rita as something that she is not.

Despite Vittorio’s illusions, Rita does not embody the motherland or their Italian roots. In fact, she has little interest in her Italian heritage and approaches Italy as would a foreigner who travels out of interest. As she tells Vittorio, ““You and I are different. [. . .] It’s as if you were born in the past, you have to go back to it, but when I was born the past was already over. It’s not the same thing for me, to look back. It’s not where the answers are”” (277).³⁰ Rita, then, symbolizes a Canadian future rather than an Italian past and her hybrid status reinforces this point because it represents the new-world experience of diaspora and the plurality of cultures as expressed in Said’s contrapuntal approach. In the end, Vittorio is not drawn to a vision of Italy but of Canada – he simply fails to realize why he longs to connect with Rita. The truth is, however, that Rita possesses something that Vittorio has always wanted: a sense of being at home in Canada. By aligning himself with Rita – as he once did with Verne – Vittorio is trying, on some psychic level, to identify his place in Canada.

Although Ricci clearly intends to direct the migrant’s gaze away from the motherland, the new object of this gaze is not as clear. In *Where She Has Gone*, Ricci does not present Canada as a land of possibility and newfound hope. Rather, he reveals

his ambivalence regarding Canada and his own myth-making project by avoiding a straightforward conclusion to his trilogy. As the novel draws to a close, Vittorio is portrayed as lost and directionless due to Rita's departure from the village: he has no sense of purpose without his all-encompassing desire to recover his lost mother. Despite his cousin Marta's unquestioning acceptance and his friendships with Fabrizio and Luisa, Vittorio has not gained a sense of belonging in Valle del Sole. Vittorio's nostalgia for a lost homeland has been shattered and he decides to leave the village, even though he is "not exactly sure where to go" (295). It is thus clear that Ricci does not intend to turn his protagonist's gaze immediately towards Canada: he does not simply determine that, since the old land is not home, the new land is. What he reveals, instead, is that feelings of dislocation, disunity, and even homelessness can plague those who exist in an in-between space where neither arrivals nor departures lead towards home. Indeed, for Vittorio, this is certainly the case: "My second departure from Valle del Sole, twenty years after the first, felt more final," he says. "I was on my own again without destination or hopes, with no place left now to go home" (302). Although Vittorio briefly considers returning to Canada, he rejects this option because it fills him with "an infinite exhaustion" and offers "so little purpose" (304). The new object of Vittorio's gaze is blurred, unfocused – he does not know where to turn and suffers as an exile who never experiences "the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure" (Said, *Reflections* 186).

Thus, while Ricci clearly indicates that the homeland does not hold the answers, he is somewhat less clear about what does. *Where She Has Gone* ends with Vittorio writing his story on an island off the Kenyan coast. This location represents something of a return for him, since he visited this island when he lived in Nigeria. It is, however, not a return to a place where he is known or remembered; it is, rather, a place where he can live in anonymity without any demands or expectations while he tries, as he says, "to work

my way back to my life” (319). Vittorio will do so, in part, by telling his story and healing himself through his writing as he returns through memory to key moments from the past. Returning to these moments is a way for him to set them aside, to let them go, so that he can finally look forward, not backward. Although Vittorio remains in Africa when the novel – indeed the trilogy – ends, he says goodbye to the village and implies that he will eventually go back to Canada, for he wonders how he will reconcile with Rita upon his return (320). As for Valle del Sole, the novel’s closing image reinforces Vittorio’s final separation:

I had a dream: I was walking along a mountain path [. . .] with that peculiar feeling of lightness the mountains give, the sense that just ahead some new vista will be revealed or some new freedom hitherto unimaginable be offered out. [. . .] Then, as I walked, small flickers began to appear in the valley beneath me: bonfires like the ones we would light on Christmas Eve when I was a child, the little messages we’d send out to join ourselves with the scattered villages and farms throughout the valley. There was just a handful at first but then more, spreading across the valley like code, a slow wordless coming-together, and I stood watching from the slopes as the valley lit up with them, ten thousand of them burning away, sending their sparks up into the night that floated an instant, then died, as if bidding goodbye. (321-22)

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“Canadian writers who are immigrants or the children of immigrants testify that they still feel excluded by Canada’s literary and cultural establishment,” writes John Metcalf in his review of *Lives of the Saints* (63). With his trilogy, Ricci includes Italian Canadians in this establishment. Indeed, the attention his novels have garnered points to the extent to

which he has successfully inserted Italians in Canada's national imaginary. The reading public – as well as the literary establishment – has embraced his novels: *Lives of the Saints*, for example, has sold over 70,000 copies and won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, and *Where She Has Gone* was nominated for the Giller Prize. As Pico Iyer writes in his review of *Where She Has Gone*:

If Toronto has become one of the world's literary capitals, that is in large part because so many of its contemporary writers have imported the rites and superstitions of their Old Worlds into the wide-open promise of the New – Rohinton Mistry re-creating Bombay of the 1970s in his heartrending *A Fine Balance*, Anne Michaels piecing together fragments of the Holocaust in her luminous *Fugitive Pieces*, Michael Ondaatje staging a dance of cosmopolitans in *The English Patient*. Nino Ricci belongs very much in their company, Italian division. (86)

Ricci uses his trilogy to establish the Italian presence in Canada and to add their voices to the national narrative. Yet, in doing so, he does not avoid creating scenes that are what Candice Rodd calls "richly ambiguous" (22). In fact, he deliberately rejects categorical interpretations of nation and national identity and shows that Vittorio's "Canada is a more complicated and ominous place than the relatives he visits in Italy can imagine" (Rodd 22). Ricci's trilogy offers an ambivalent, though nonetheless legitimating, narrative by charting the tenuous presence of Italian Canadians in the story of Canada. Thus, while Vittorio remains in a liminal space at the novel's close, Ricci's trilogy is itself firmly grounded in Canada and in the reimagining of the nation.

NOTES

¹ Ricci explains why he set this first book in Italy: "One of the reasons [. . .] I wanted to start the trilogy in Italy, was to give readers a sense of people within a community where they are not marginalized as ethnic. Ethnicity will be a major issue in the second book, and I wanted my readers to be able to enter into that community and see the strangeness of that label – ethnic – for someone who is living it from the inside" ("Recreating" 135). Ricci uses each book in the trilogy as a step in the gradual process of legitimizing the Italian presence in Canada.

² Ricci's fictional village of Valle del Sole is loosely based on his mother's former village in the Italian Apennines (Ricci, "Recreating" 135). Both Ricci's mother and father migrated to Canada from the south-central region of Molise in Italy; Ricci was born in Leamington, Ontario, and grew up on his parents' farm (Dwyer 63).

³ Roland Barthes points out that fictional imaginings play a central role in historical narratives: "historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an *imaginary* elaboration, if we can take the imaginary to be the language through which the utterer of a discourse (a purely linguistic entity) 'fills out' the place of subject of the utterance (a psychological or ideological entity). We can appreciate as a result why it is that the notion of a historical 'fact' has often aroused a certain degree of suspicion in various quarters" (16).

⁴ From the 1880s to the 1950s, the majority of Italian migrants in Canada were men who were employed in positions of manual labour. Among other things, they helped build the railway; dug canals; worked on farms, in mines, and in lumber camps; and removed snow (Pivato, *Echo* 178).

⁵ Italian migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to North America to work as labourers and only planned to earn enough money to send home before returning themselves (DiGiovanni 17). They did not intend to settle in North America and the Canadian government did not encourage them to do so. Official Canadian policy in the early twentieth century regarded migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe as less desirable than those from Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, France, Holland, and Belgium (Jansen 22-23).

⁶ After Mussolini was removed from power in 1943, a distinction was made between his Fascist administration and the people he ruled (Jansen 25). By 1951, Italians in Canada were no longer considered "enemy aliens," and the largest influx of Italians to Canada was well underway (Jansen 25, 30). In fact, so many Italians migrated to Canada after World War II that they became the fourth largest ethnic group in the country after the British, French, and Germans (Jansen 1).

⁷ Italian migration to Canada peaked between 1951 and 1971, with over 22,000 Italians arriving in Canada every year throughout the 1960s (Jansen 49-51).

⁸ Pivato explains that the void created by these permanent departures was not filled by new arrivals. As he writes, "The idea of migrant in English has two words: emigrant, the person who leaves, and immigrant, the new arrival who comes into the host country. In Italian there is only one word, *emigrante*, the person who leaves, since Italy was never a host country to new arrivals until the last ten years. In the Italian word *emigrante*, the person who has left has both positive and negative connotations" ("Singing" 57).

⁹ Rosalía Baena points out that the irony of this name – the "Sun Parlour" – is more complex than the simple fact that Canada is often covered in snow: "The ironic similarity in name only serves to emphasize the profound contrast between the immigrant's destination in Canada, 'Sun Parlour,' and their village, 'Valle del Sole.' [. . .] The contrast begins with the names: though both refer to the sun, there is a difference between the evocation of the natural formation that is a *valle* and the artificial construction 'parlour'" (104). Italy, she says, is a "natural world," whereas Canada is an artificial, material one (104).

¹⁰ Shakespeare's Macduff "was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (*Macbeth* 5.7.45-46). While Macduff was literally forced from the womb at an early stage because his mother was sick or dying, Vittorio is figuratively forced from the womb prematurely because his mother makes a rash decision – one that leads to her eventual death.

¹¹ Fabrizio's gift is his beloved jack-knife; the teacher's gift is her copy of *Lives of the Saints*, a book she used to read to Vittorio after school; and the grandfather's gifts are the medals he won as a soldier in the First World War (*Lives* 169-75).

¹² Though it is not stated explicitly, the angry conversation between Cristina and her father indicates that she will not live with Mario in Canada (*Lives* 182). Mario's brother suspects this to be the case when he visits Cristina and Vittorio the morning of their departure (*Lives* 181).

¹³ Each of the novels in this study presents a genealogy of mixed origins in the new world. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Lee reveals that the Wong family tree includes Chinese, Native, and white ancestries; in *Any Known Blood*, Hill explores the fusion of Black and white; in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Richler brings Native, Jewish, and Christian lines together; and in *Away*, Urquhart creates a genealogy with both white and Native ancestries.

¹⁴ The mother in *Away* first disappears and then dies, after giving birth to her daughter at the family's new home in Canada. Like the mother in *Lives of the Saints*, her death contributes to the distance that her children experience in terms of their ties to the motherland.

¹⁵ An ambiguous presence, Mario has enclosed himself in a world of silence and will not help his son adjust to life in a foreign land.

¹⁶ Ricci is not the only Italian Canadian writer to explore this myth of pain. The suffering of Italian immigrants is depicted in other novels such as F.G. Paci's *The Italians* (1978), Maria Ardizzi's *Made in Italy* (1982), and Marisa De Franceschi's *Surface Tension* (1994).

¹⁷ Ricci admits that his interest in isolation is rooted in his own experience. As he says, "In my life, [isolation] started out as a sense of being marginalized. I perceived it as being marked out for my ethnicity or for being an immigrant" ("Big" 176).

¹⁸ This version is a popular rephrasing of the expression, "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

¹⁹ Like the character he creates, Ricci also studied English in university. He completed his B.A. at York University and his M.A. in creative writing at Concordia University, an experience that gave him the opportunity to write and publish this trilogy.

²⁰ Ricci took part in a similar project when he was in university and says that working on the project gave him a clear sense of the dislocation that migrants experience. As he explains, "What came across most strongly was the sense of people having lost a sense of their wholeness. [...] They had lost a sense of a world where [...] they knew they could speak to their neighbours; where they knew that people knew who they were, and shared a common history; they didn't have that in Canada. And they would never have that again – not even if they returned to Italy, because they would be outsiders there as well. That fragmentation impressed itself very strongly on me" ("Recreating" 136).

²¹ This history stretches as far back as Giovanni Caboto's arrival in 1497. However, Italians did not begin migrating to Canada until the 1880s.

²² Once again, Vittorio's experiences mirror his creator's: Ricci himself spent two years teaching in Nigeria.

²³ Like Langston in *Any Known Blood*, Vittorio sees Africa as an escape. But while Langston hopes to find answers in Africa – to commune with his African "brothers" – Vittorio intends to sever his Canadian ties and has no desire to forge new ties in Africa.

²⁴ It will take ten years for Vittorio's uncle and cousins to buy out his portion of the farm. As Vittorio explains, "Of my father's savings not much remained after taxes and various bills, his outstanding loan; and what I was left with was this intangible, not so much money as time, these ten years like a hole in my life, a kind of slow penance, what I would owe him, would pay him, for all his own years of sacrifice and work" (*Glass* 335).

²⁵ Vittorio is not free to imagine his mother when his father is alive because he knows that memories of his mother hurt and humiliate his father.

²⁶ Rita spends her early years with Vittorio's family, but is adopted by the Amhersts shortly after she begins school.

²⁷ Even as a child, Vittorio saw Rita as his possession and says that he felt "solemn with responsibility for her, understanding that she was mine in some way" (*Glass* 44).

²⁸ A similar case of incest takes place in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*: Kae becomes sexually involved with her uncle Morgan, her mother's half-brother. This situation corresponds with the one in *Where She Has Gone* because, in both novels, the men are expressing a misplaced desire for someone else – Vittorio for his dead mother, Morgan for his dead lover, Suzie, whom Kae resembles. For the young women (and they are both younger than their male partners), the incest seems to reflect a misguided longing for love and acceptance.

²⁹ John, Rita's friend and travelling companion, is an older man who all but admits to being her biological father.

³⁰ The siblings Vittorio and Rita are the exact opposite of the siblings Liam and Eileen in *Away*. While Liam, who is born in Ireland, has no desire to return, Eileen, who is born in Canada, becomes obsessed with her Irish origins.

Jane Urquhart, *False Shuffles*

Jane Urquhart's work reflects her desire to recapture fragments of memory, to recover moments in history. From *The Whirlpool* in 1986 to *The Stone Carvers* in 2001, Urquhart expresses her interest in the past and in reinventing lost or neglected histories. In *The Whirlpool*, military historian David McDougal notes, "This country buries its history so fast people with memories are considered insane" (72). Urquhart unburies moments in Canadian history as a means of preserving memories and of revising national myths. As she remarks, "Telling stories is an important part of the human psyche. Wanting to shape the events of our lives, to give them order. Transforming our daily lives into the stuff of myth" ("Ghosts" 197). In her 1993 novel *Away*, Urquhart turns Irish Canadian history into myth with a romanticized retelling of the migration of Irish Catholics to Canada during the potato famine of the 1840s. Although migration stories of the Irish famine occupy a familiar place in Canada's past, Urquhart revises these events by bringing Irish history and myth together in a specifically Canadian context. In doing so, she creates a legitimating lineage for the Irish in Canada – a lineage that emphasizes their distinct culture and history in this land.

This distinctiveness has, as Sneja Gunew explains, been subsumed by a culture of English colonization in Canada. She notes that "in both the Canadian and Australian postcolonial peripheries a history of those internal English colonizations (in relation to Ireland and Scotland) is being endlessly replayed" (*Haunted* 34). Merging Irish and Scottish with English is thus an act of colonization, especially given that Ireland and Scotland both have been subject to the imperialist forces of England. In Canada, the Irish and Scottish must assert their distinct histories, cultures, and identities or risk being endlessly engulfed by the homogenizing label "English-Canadian." As Gunew writes,

Too often in postcolonial critiques, European immigrant groups are homogenized and made synonymous with a naturalized 'whiteness' or with various imperialisms.

But at the same time different nations or groups within Europe had very different histories relating to colonialism and imperialism. In the anglophone world of postcolonial theory, European and Western in fact often slide directly into English or British and no distinctions are made amongst these categories. (*Haunted* 48)

Despite their different histories, the English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh are together considered part of the British founding of Canada. But this position fails to account for the inequities among these groups. For the Irish, to disregard their unequal treatment in settlement Canada is to ignore the “deep English prejudice” levelled against them as a result of their poverty, rural origins, and Catholicism (MacKay 14). Thus, although the Irish did contribute to the founding of Canada, they did so as an underclass in this new society. It is this story that Urquhart tells in her novel: she recreates the distinct history of the Irish in Canada as a means of inscribing their experiences – including the hardships of the Irish famine and of Canadian settlement – into the national narrative.

As Urquhart reconstructs the immigrant history of Irish Canada, she challenges national myths that dismiss the differences among the ethnic branches of the British Canadian mainstream. In *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement*, Cecil Houston and William Smyth note that “in a country that celebrates its multicultural heritage, the ethnic components of the migrations from the British Isles have been neglected of late. There has been a general reluctance to think of the British peoples in ethnic terms, and instead they are lumped together under the ‘non-ethnic’ label of British” (6). Urquhart rejects the homogeneity of British labelling in *Away* by creating a fictional genealogy for the Irish in Canada that establishes their own place and history in this land. A problem arises, however, because drawing “ethnic” distinctions among British groups can be considered a means of reinforcing white privilege in Canada. As Margery Fee asks, “Is examining my own Irish, Scottish, English ethnic heritage – or even my own Canadian

ancestors – a productive move, or does it also simply add to my privilege, my ‘cultural capital,’ my power?” (687). While studying one’s British ancestry could be seen as a way of reinforcing the cultural dominance of the white Canadian mainstream, it could also be interpreted as “a positive move” since it asks those privileged white Canadians who believe they “transcend ethnicity to reconsider their relations with other ethnic groups” (Fee 690). Moreover, examining their ancestral origins is a way for Anglo-white Canadians to recover their separate histories. Fee echoes Houston and Smyth when she explains why British Canadians have forgotten their ethnic heritage: “Ethnicity, unlike nationality, is regarded in the dominant discourse as something deployed by immigrant groups struggling to overcome the marginalization imposed on them by the dominant national culture. In this model, Celtic Canadians have no ethnicity. The immigrant’s ethnicity is constructed, in part, by the dominant group’s confident appropriation of the term Canadian for itself” (684-85). In laying claim to the term “Canadian,” Anglo-Celts have prompted the erasure of their own ethnic origins in contemporary Canada. Yet these origins are worth studying from a historical perspective. With *Away*, Urquhart gives voice to the distinct history of Irish Canada and re-inscribes “ethnicity on supposedly ‘ethnicity-free’ Anglo-Celtic Canadians” (Fee 690).

Perhaps it is due to this perceived lack of ethnicity that the origins of Irish Canada are often misunderstood. As Donald MacKay writes, “Considering that they came when the country was new, and have done so much to shape it, accounts of the Irish in Canada, and particularly the Catholic Irish, have been curiously lacking up to fairly recent times” (14). Though the story of Irish migration during the Great Famine of 1845-49 is a familiar one in Canada, the history of Irish migration before this time is not so well known. Yet the Irish had established sizeable communities in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia by 1780, and the influx of Irish immigrants to Canada was well underway by

1815 (MacKay 11, 9). In fact, even before the famine, Irish immigrants in Canada were outnumbering English, Scottish, and Welsh immigrants combined (Wilson 9). Between 1825 and 1845, more immigrants from Ireland arrived in Canada – at least 450,000 – than from any other country (MacKay 13). With the famine, the number of Irish immigrants to Canada increased dramatically after 1845, making the Irish the largest ethnic group in English Canada (Wilson 5).¹ However, although the famine had a significant impact on the number of Irish who settled in Canada, it does not represent the origins of Irish migration to this land. Rather, as Houston and Smyth remark, the famine is actually “a late and most tragic spasm in that mass movement” (8). As a result of its tragic appeal, the Great Famine has a prominent place in the national narrative while the earlier migrations of the Irish to Canada have largely been forgotten.

This historical amnesia also marks the more recent experiences of the Irish in Canada. Although the highest concentration of Irish Canadians was in Montreal, this history is gradually being forgotten due to the erasure of Irish landmarks. As masses of poor Irish peasants arrived in Canada, they made their way to the tenement housing in Griffintown, near the factories of south-west Montreal. Here, Irish blacksmiths, carpenters, labourers, servants, and other poorly-waged workers strove to establish their lives in Canada (MacKay 323). But their new community was not without its challenges: it was subject to fires, riots, and strikes; was prone to severe floods, like the one Urquhart describes in *Away*; and was struck by mortality rates, due to typhoid and diphtheria, that were two times higher than in the rest of the city (Driedger 36). However, evidence of this long and difficult past has now disappeared from south-west Montreal. As Sharon Doyle Driedger notes, “There’s not much left of Griffintown” (38). The area was rezoned for industrial use in 1963 and long-time residents were forced to move so their homes could be demolished. The parish church was torn down in 1970 and, shortly

afterwards, St. Ann's Academy was also destroyed. Driedger writes that the "final blow came in 1990, when the city gave Griffintown a new French name – Faubourg-des-Récollets, for the first order of missionaries to settle in Canada" (38). Former Griffintown residents have thus been witness to the erasure of their personal and communal histories. As historian and former resident Don Pidgeon remarks, "It's saying the Irish never existed" (qtd. in Driedger 38). Urquhart works against this erasure in *Away* by giving Griffintown a "place in the literary imagination" (Driedger 36) and by reviving key moments in the history of Irish Canada. From the mass migrations during the Great Famine, to the difficulties of settling homes and farms on rocky soil, to the Fenian resistance, to the Griffintown tenements, and to the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Urquhart reconstructs the distinct history and identity of the Irish in Canada by resisting a culture of forgetfulness.

Recreating these moments from Irish Canadian history allows Urquhart to connect with her own family origins.² As she explains, "my family was famine Irish: they came over in the 1840s. And they moved to what was then considered to be the Northern part of Ontario: north of Belleville. And after that came *total* wilderness. [It] was such impossible country to farm that they gave it to the Irish" (Interview, Richards 12). Urquhart's interest in her Irish past is based, in part, on the stories she heard as a child and on the ways these stories romanticize a distant homeland. She says that, in *Away*, she explores "the myth of that Ireland which the immigrants brought with them, that culminated in the romanticization of that land, and that became stronger as the generations moved forward and further away from it" ("Ghosts" 199). The more removed her forebears were from Ireland, the more they longed for a myth of origins that would confirm their Irish identity and their sense of belonging to Ireland since they felt themselves becoming subsumed within an over-arching Anglo-Canadian identity.

Yet the home these Irish Canadians envisioned existed only in their stories and their minds: never having been to Ireland, they created their own version of it – an imaginary homeland. Urquhart explains: “I grew up in a family of Irish-Canadians who were more Irish than the Irish, despite the fact that they had never been to Ireland” (Interview, Richards 15). One way they maintained their connection to a distant place was to pass stories down from one generation to the next. In doing so, they could relive key moments from the past, focusing, in particular, on the suffering their forebears endured. As Urquhart notes, “I heard stories when I was growing up that had been literally handed down from my great-great-great-grandfathers! Stories that focused on all kinds of real and imagined injustices, and the difficulty of keeping your sense of self when there’s a great imperialist power looming over you” (“Ghosts” 199). United by these injustices, the Irish in Canada could preserve a sense of themselves as distinct from the English while maintaining their emotional bond with Ireland. In *Away*, Urquhart strives to recapture this bond, as reflected in her “own family’s obsession with things Irish” (“Home” 7). By drawing on family stories in her fiction, Urquhart explores the combined need for national belonging to Canada and the desire for identifiable origins.

Away thus fills a cultural gap in Canada by challenging national myths that merge the Irish with other branches of the British Canadian mainstream. Herb Wylie explains that recent historical novels in Canada question authority and “suggest that what has been presented as the backbone of Canadian history is instead a narrative told by those in power in the interests of those in power, to assert an expedient order over the past” (*Speculative* 259). With *Away*, Urquhart gives voice to her version of the past through the creation of an authenticating myth of origins for Irish Canada. Years before her publication of this novel, she expressed her interest in “the effect of history upon the

imagination; not necessarily history in the formal sense... smaller histories from smaller archives... things told and passed down" ("An Interview" 32). She notes that her stories are "a combination of fact and fabrication. The beginning of legend. Very important, I think for a country like Canada with such a short past and such a slim history" ("An Interview" 35). Urquhart adds to the myths of Canada's past with her fictionalized account of Irish immigrants in the 1840s and the tensions they experienced between their visions of the old land and their realities in the new. These tensions are revealed in the contrast between the siblings Eileen and Liam O'Malley. Eileen's nostalgia for Ireland overcomes her entire being and destroys her sense of belonging in Canada: she cannot make this place her home when she remains fixated on an imaginary land. By contrast, Liam's disregard for the romantic appeal of Irish nationalism secures his sense of belonging in Canada: his pragmatic focus on establishing his life in the new land allows him to accept Canada as home. Nevertheless, Liam lacks something that Eileen has – a cultural mythology and a passion for history. Ultimately, then, neither Liam nor Eileen is the ideal settler. Perhaps some combination of the two would achieve the desired balance between old and new lands. Urquhart's novel thus exposes the tensions between the romantic allure of a mythical homeland and the practical indifference towards it. This chapter will explore these tensions and will suggest that, in the end, Urquhart has it both ways: with Eileen she indulges in a nostalgic longing for Ireland, and with Liam she engages in a pragmatic turn towards Canada. Thus, even as Urquhart provides a myth of origins for the Irish in Canada, she destabilizes this myth with her contradictory treatment of nostalgia in *Away*.

Urquhart's narrator, Esther O'Malley Robertson, differs from the other narrators of this study because she does not actively research her ethnic origins in Canada: she does not visit libraries or archives, uncover old documents, conduct interviews, or return to former homes or distant lands. Instead, she remains in the old house on Loughbreeze Beach and retells the story her grandmother told her seventy years earlier, when Esther was only twelve. As she recalls the events of this story, Esther must fill in the gaps on her own:

Esther's mind is skilled at building inner landscapes, those she has never seen, those that lie beyond the views her windows frame. [. . .] As she climbs into the sleigh-bed that has always been in this room, she knows that what she wants is to give shape to one hundred and forty years. She wants to reconstruct the pastures and meadows that have fallen into absence – the disassembled architecture, the great dark belly of an immigrant ship, a pioneer standing inland stunned by the forest, a farmer moving through the beams of light that fill his barn. (11, 21)

In telling this story, Esther resembles Kae, Langston, Moses, and Vittorio since she is also trying to reclaim an absence, to reconstruct a neglected past. Like these other narrators, Esther recognizes the power she holds over both her narrative and her version of history, for she “knows exactly what she is doing as she lies awake in the night. She is recomposing, reaffirming a lengthy, told story, recalling it; calling it back” (133). In doing so, Esther turns her family history into myth and expresses her longing for the forgotten stories of Irish Canada. As Sheila Ross notes, Esther's narrative is “a lamentation for a lost mythology” (176). But Urquhart's narrative is also a lamentation – a lamentation for the distinct history of the Irish in Canada. Through Esther's lengthy story, Urquhart traces a legitimating line of descent for the Irish in Canada while constructing a myth of origins that allows her to ground Irish roots in this land.

Urquhart reinforces the importance of storytelling and the need to preserve the past by setting the poetic rhythms of Esther's narrative against the ceaseless "rumble of machinery" at the quarry (135). As Esther quietly remembers her family history, the men at the quarry noisily destroy memory, contributing to what Patricia Smart calls "the levelling force of modern technology and capitalism" (66). This force is responsible for the destruction of landmarks and for the lack of value placed on historical artifacts and memories. As Wyile writes, "Whereas the rest of the narrative inscribes a sense of the cumulative power of history and the mythic patterns with which it is interlaced, the frame story, by focussing on the destruction of landscape[,] dramatizes an erosion of the past" ("The Opposite" 42). Urquhart uses the quarry to underline a modern societal focus on the immediate needs of the present. Both the past and the future are forgotten – even destroyed – by a disregard for what has come before and for what can later be sustained. The narrator explains that in "Esther's lifetime she has seen architecture die violently. It has been demolished, burned, ripped apart, or buried. Nothing reclaims it. Just as the earth at the quarry is wounded beyond all recognition and no one remembers the fields that flourished there" (135). Esther strives to overcome the death of history by reclaiming her Irish origins in Canada. Yet she does not record or share this history; instead, she spends the night alone "whispering in the dark" (21). Once again, Esther differs from the other narrators of this study because she tells her story only to herself. As Wyile notes, "she has no children and therefore no audience for her family history, and in this sense the O'Malley family saga raises concerns about historical consciousness and cultural continuity" (27). Thus, within the context of the narrative, the history Esther reclaims is condemned to be lost. However, Urquhart herself preserves this mythologized history in an award-winning novel that forges a distinct place for Irish Canadians in the national imaginary.³

The authenticating narrative that Urquhart creates for Irish Canada is tied to the ancient stories and superstitions of Celtic mythology. For Esther, “the last and the most subdued of the extreme women” (3), these stories and superstitions seem far removed from her life in Canada and belong instead to a distant land, an imaginary place: “She paints a landscape in her mind, a landscape she has never seen. Everything began in 1842, she remembers her grandmother Eileen telling her, on the island of Rathlin which lies off the most northern coast of Ireland” (4). It is on the shores of this island that Esther’s great-grandmother Mary becomes entranced by a drowned sailor, a “faery-daemon lover,” who changes her name to Moira and carries her “away” (13). As a result, Mary is transformed into a fragment of her former self and is no longer at home on the island. She even becomes “a stranger to the rooms in which she had lived her short life” (15). Cynthia Sugars points out that Mary’s name change “will condemn her to be always something of a migrant, in search of a home that does not exist” (“Haunted” 12). The state of being away thus mirrors a migrant’s feelings of loss and homelessness. Indeed, these are feelings that Mary carries with her always, even after she begins “to enter the world again” (57) through her marriage to the schoolmaster, Brian O’Malley, and her subsequent move to the mainland. Though ancient myths and superstitions have lost their power over Brian, Mary cannot forget her beliefs or the faery-daemon lover who made them come to life: “Alone, Mary knew there was something hidden inside her, a lost thing she could find again when she had need of it, for she had fragments of the old beliefs. They were gone from her husband but they had not been completely stolen from her... had become dormant, instead, in a kind of winter sleep” (74-75). Ancient myths and superstitions thus continue to influence Mary, this ordinary mother, the first of the “extreme women.” Her beliefs might at times lie dormant, but Mary – like certain of her descendants – will always be searching for some lost thing or some lost place.

In contrast to the romantic allure of ancient myths are the stark realities of hardship and suffering in nineteenth-century Ireland. Urquhart connects her fictional genealogy to the painful history of the Great Famine, an event that resulted in the deaths of between 800,000 and one million Irish, mostly poor Catholic peasants, and that forced the migration across the Atlantic of an additional one million victims (MacKay 14, 308).⁴ Those who made this journey overseas escaped the physical starvation brought on by diseased crops as well as the cultural starvation imposed by English rule. In *Away*, the hunger for food reflects the hunger for knowledge as well as the hunger for independence. Brian knows that education is one way for the Irish to resist their English oppressors and he therefore laments the closing of the hedge schools where he teaches and where his father once taught. As he tells Mary, ““The old language will disappear forever, and all the magic and the legends. It’s what they want, what they’ve always wanted, to be rid of us one way or another. I’d thought the old beliefs were bad for the people. I’d thought that when they were in no danger of disappearing. Now that I know they’ll be gone it saddens me deeply”” (74). Urquhart parallels the ruin of the potato crops with the obliteration of the Irish language, history, and traditions: both events represent a failure to maintain life and independence for the Irish people. Speaking of the old beliefs, Brian notes, ““They can be beaten and starved out, and they can be silenced, Mary. They can be educated out”” (74). In other words, the Irish can be erased from historical memory through death or silence. By locating the origins of the O’Malley family tree in nineteenth-century Ireland, Urquhart stresses that the Irish were an oppressed people, an underclass even in their own land. Wylie explains that the Irish setting in *Away* reveals Urquhart’s Irish nationalist concerns, especially regarding “the history of oppression by the English: the religious persecution, the deforestation of Ireland, and, during the era of the famine, the banning of hedge schools, the exploitation

leading to the famine, and the forced exodus as an expedient solution” (*Speculative* 84).

Urquhart thus traces a difficult history in *Away* – a history that outlines the Irish peasants’ reasons for fleeing the homeland and the necessity of establishing roots in a new land.

Urquhart complicates this history of Irish oppression, however, with her portrait of the English landlords, the brothers Osbert and Granville Sedgewick. On the one hand, she depicts the injustices suffered by the Irish as a result of English rule; on the other hand, she offers an ambivalent portrait of the benefactors of this rule through her depiction of the O’Malleys’ eccentric landlords. The Sedgewick brothers differ from other English imperialists since they are not absentee landlords who care little for Ireland and the Irish people. In fact, their family has lived in Ireland for generations and the brothers share a passion for their adopted land. Osbert expresses this passion in his paintings; Granville does so in his poetry. But this is where the problem begins. The brothers believe that, through their art, they are “communing happily with the spirit of their country’s past” (39). Yet they are so concerned with recapturing this past that they are blind to the present and the future – a future they seem unable to comprehend. Although they hear stories about diseased potatoes and great hardship in the West, they convince themselves that these troubles will not affect their tenants. From their position of privilege, the brothers fail to understand the daily lives and struggles of the Irish people. It is thus with surprise that they discover, late in 1846, that their tenants cannot afford to pay the rent. The brothers believe that, because they have studied Ireland’s history, they understand Ireland’s people. As Granville says, “‘Surely they wouldn’t rise up, would they, against us? Not when we appreciate their history and all those songs and stories and the like. [. . .] I, for one, understand the sorrows of Ireland. I, in fact, have given a *voice* to the sorrows of Ireland’” (103). What the brothers do not realize, however, is that by focusing on past sorrows they have neglected present ones. In fact,

they have contributed to these sorrows by romanticizing Ireland and attempting to preserve their vision in an idealized time. They lament the dying of a culture, and try to preserve this culture in their art, while directly contributing to its demise. The brothers might have good intentions, but they also have, through their ignorance and inaction, failed to take their tenants' present needs into account. As Wylie remarks, they are "well-meaning and eccentric rather than blatantly exploitative villains" (*Speculative* 84). Thus, while Urquhart does not demonize these English landlords, she shows that they are guilty of contributing to a system of oppression and that their tenants, poor and hungry, are longing to escape these harsh conditions.

This longing gives rise to both positive and negative visions of immigrant experiences in the new land. With conditions worsening in Ireland, the Sedgewicks decide to send a chosen number of tenants overseas.⁵ As a result, the idea of Canada becomes a topic of debate amongst the tenants. On one side, the optimists imagine a land of wealth and ease where "golden nuggets [tumble] in the streams" and where "fruit trees [bear] blossoms and fruit all year round" (114); on the other side, the pessimists envision a land of hardship where the "mountains [are] unclimbable, the rivers unfordable, the forests impenetrable, and the trees in them unchoppable" (115).⁶ The tenants who will travel to Canada are reassured by the positive visions, while those who will stay in Ireland are comforted by the negative ones. Both visions, however, are inaccurate and reflect the uncertainty, longing, and fear that migrants experience as they contemplate life in a faraway place. Like the Italian peasants in Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, the Irish peasants in *Away* dream of success in a promised land, a paradise where they can escape their present hardships. However, also like their Italian counterparts, the Irish are plagued by a fear that migration will never satisfy their dreams or expectations.

For Mary, these dreams cannot be fulfilled because her longing for someone or someplace else only grows stronger in Canada. Mary, Brian, and their young son are among those chosen to make the journey overseas since Osbert Sedgewick decides, after a chance encounter with Mary, that her life must be saved. Speaking to his brother, he says, “‘There’s this light in her, you see, [. . .] and it must not be put out. I can’t explain it, but I know that it must not go out, must be kept, somehow, though I’m not certain at all that it will shine as well across the ocean as it does here’” (122). In a sense, then, it is because Mary is already “away” that she is sent away from Ireland. Osbert sees in Mary an embodiment of the old Irish beliefs and he wants to preserve this part of Ireland’s past – a past that is rapidly disappearing. He is moved by his vision of Mary as a prototypical Irish maiden, and does not realize that her romantic longings will only intensify the further she travels from Ireland. In Canada, Mary becomes obsessed with a yearning for both her daemon lover and her Irish home and, as Sugars notes, “is never able to feel settled in Canada” (“Settler” 107). Like a migrant who leaves part of herself in a distant homeland, Mary experiences a void in her life that needs to be filled. Libby Birch explains that “Urquhart is intrigued by the idea that immigrants are ‘away’ in that they bring only replicas of themselves to the new land” (115). Indeed, Mary lacks wholeness and thus expresses a constant desire for completion. Upon arriving at the family’s parcel of land in south-western Ontario, she immediately wanders into the woods and soon calls out to her husband: “‘Brian!’ she shouted. ‘If there’s a stream like this, should it not lead to somewhere... to a lake or a sea? Should it not lead us to somewhere else?’” (141). Mary cannot fix her gaze on the present time and place – on her new home in Canada – because she is always looking elsewhere, searching for that which has been lost.

For Brian, the dream of success in Canada is met with obstacles that impede his family's progress and cast doubt and fear over his decision to migrate. The family must endure a ten-week journey across the ocean in "the dark belly of the ship where no air stirred" (137); a six-week delay while Liam is quarantined at Grosse Isle; a winter's delay in Quebec while the St. Lawrence River remains frozen; and a journey by boat and then another by wagon, both of which exhaust time and resources. It takes Brian, Mary, and Liam a full year to reach their destination and, when they arrive, they are "filled with dread, knowing themselves to be in a region where nothing at all was constructed and everything was engaged in haphazard growth" (139). The dream of the promised land is thus threatened by the reality of the Canadian wilderness, for the O'Malleys are, upon their arrival, "terrified of the paradise they had imagined" (140). Their fears are alleviated to a certain extent the next day when their neighbours arrive: the men construct a log cabin, the women bring food and song. By clearing the land and building their home in Canada, the O'Malleys are, like their neighbours, forging their place in their new community and country. They thus represent early immigrants and pioneers in the O'Malley family line and, as such, Urquhart uses them to legitimize the Irish contribution to the making of Canada. As key players in the pioneer experience, these Irish immigrants are participating in a founding moment in the story of the nation.

Urquhart strives to forge a distinct place for the Irish in Canada and to distinguish the Irish from the English by drawing a link between Irish sorrows and Native troubles. She does so with the Native character, Exodus Crow, who visits Brian and the children after Mary's disappearance and death. Exodus tells Liam that Mary shared the spirit of the Nishnawbe people, for she was filled with "the manitou that is a part of everything" (175). He goes on to tell the family that Mary lived like the Natives in

the woods and spoke to him of “dark things,” including “the time of the stolen lands of her island, and of the disease, and of the lost language and the empty villages and how the people who once sang were now silent, how the people who once danced were now still” (184). Exodus, in turn, spoke to Mary about the troubles of his people. When Brian asks how Mary responded to the Native sorrows, Exodus says, “She embraced me and said that the same trouble stayed in the hearts of both our peoples” (185). Urquhart thus uses a Native character to establish a link between these two separate groups. In fact, she shows that Exodus is so moved by their common suffering that, even as he recalls this conversation, there is “a break in his voice” (185) that seemingly reveals the depth of their emotional ties. Like Lee in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Richler in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Urquhart legitimizes the place of her own ethno-cultural group in Canada by linking her group’s history to that of Canada’s Native populations. In doing so, she paints a scene in which the Irish presence in Canada is approved by the original inhabitants of this land.

However, in drawing a parallel between the injustices committed against these two groups, Urquhart neglects the power imbalance between whites and Natives in Canada. As Sugars writes, “To link Irish oppression prior to their arrival in Canada with the near genocide of Canadian aboriginal peoples is to mix contexts in such a way that Native oppression *within* Canada becomes obliterated. After all, all settlement, regardless of ethnic group, contributed to the displacement of aboriginal populations” (“Settler” 111). But Urquhart seems less concerned with mixing historical contexts than she is with distinguishing the Irish from other settlement groups, namely the English. She intends to show that the Irish are distinct by underlining the message that “we” are not “them.” To put it differently, she demonstrates that Irish settlers share a bond with Native Canadians because both groups have been oppressed by the English. However, while Urquhart

establishes a symbolic link that legitimizes the presence of the Irish in Canada, she ignores the fact that, despite their history of oppression and their subordinate position in settlement Canada, the Irish are considered a charter group in this country and have always enjoyed privileges in Canada's white Anglocentric society that Natives have never had.⁷

In re-examining difficult moments from her family history, Esther redeems a neglected past and gives voice to the sorrows of her people. This history of suffering is worth recovering, for it speaks to the strength and determination of the Irish immigrants who endured the starvation of the Irish famine, the oppression by the English, the difficult journey to Canada, and the hardship of settlement in the new world. Eileen relives these moments when she shares them with her granddaughter Esther; Esther relives them when she repeats the story aloud to herself. As the tale is passed from one generation to another, Urquhart underscores the redemptive power of storytelling and the need to preserve historical memories, both positive and negative. In conversation with Linda Richards, Urquhart explains that "just taking experience, reshaping it and reordering it – whether that experience be celebratory or terribly tragic – is redemptive" (34). Urquhart not only reshapes and reorders a history of suffering in *Away*, but she uses this history to legitimize the place of the Irish in Canada and to add her own version of Irish migration and settlement to the national narrative.

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Yet Urquhart's vision reveals a tension between the reality of the new land and the dream of the old. This tension is expressed in the contrast between Liam and his sister Eileen, for Liam strives to make his home in Canada while Eileen longs to connect with her origins in Ireland. Liam leaves Ireland as a young child and soon forgets the years of

deprivation and sadness in the land of his birth. His memories of this time are vague and it seems as though “most of his previous life had been erased” (146). As he grows older, Liam focuses on building his life in Canada and shows little interest in an Irish childhood that has faded from memory with the passage of time: “All he remembered of Ireland was a flat stone beyond the threshold of a door, the rest of the past had fallen away” (166). Liam makes no effort to recover this forgotten past in Ireland because he must focus on establishing his place in Canada. There is no room for the dream of a mythical homeland in this settler’s commitment to making a life in the new land.

However, while Liam is not drawn to the dream of Ireland, he is moved by the longing for origins in Canada. A white house on the shores of the Great Lake forms the basis of this longing. Although the six-year-old Liam only sees this house from a distance, it becomes fixed in his mind as the symbol of his beginnings in Canada: “the gleaming white house with memories of the Great Lake painted on its windows was to be his kept point of entry, the beginning for him of the long story – a remembered birth” (139). With only vague memories of his life in Ireland, Liam is reborn in Canada as a migrant whose past, present, and future are all located in the new land. The white house marks his origins in Canada and, for years to come, “Liam [holds] fiercely to the image of the white house” (139). It is thus inaccurate to claim that Liam is, as Smart writes, “more interested in building the future than preserving the past” (67). A more valid assessment would be to see Liam as uninterested in his Irish heritage, but captivated by his Canadian origins. So obsessed is he with “the great white house” (155) that he tells his mother “that one day it would be his” (156). Liam, then, intends to preserve his past as symbolized by this house, his first memory of Canada. He has located his past in a specific moment that differs from his parents’ memories of migration. As a young man, Liam reflects on his family’s departure from Ireland and arrival in Canada only to realize

that the white house retains a prominent place in his vision of the past: “Concentrating, Liam suddenly recalled, quite vividly, his father’s turf spade, its worn handle and the spots of rust on its blade; that and a steaming haystack. About the departure, and the misery that preceded and followed it, he remembered nothing at all. His first real souvenir was the act of arrival – immigration – and a white house with water dancing on its windows” (207). With the recurring image of the white house, Urquhart creates an authenticating mythology that begins with the moment of arrival and settlement in the new land – a moment that, for Liam, represents his origins in Canada.

Liam strives to forge his place in the new land as a farmer, planting his roots in Canadian soil. As his father speaks of D’Arcy McGee and the injustices in Ireland, Liam browses through seed catalogues and dreams of making “everything he could grow out of the ground” (166). Liam dismisses his father’s talk of a distant homeland and focuses instead on the present time and place. For Liam, the decision to concentrate on his life in Canada is based on necessity because, with his mother’s disappearance and death, he is responsible for caring for his sister and helping on the farm. Yet the decision is an easy one since Liam has long been tied to the earth; as a young child, he “began to dig in the earth, caking the undersides of his delicate new nails with mud. [. . .] The field had claimed him as it claims all the men...those who are not chosen by the sea” (80). Liam is still a child when he learns that survival depends on his success at farming the land. Perhaps some memory of those failed crops in Ireland propels his dreams of agricultural abundance in Canada. Liam realizes that he does not have time to worry about past injustices – he must seek “the forward momentum of change and growth, the axe in the flesh of the tree, the blade breaking open new soil” (208). But this momentum is stalled by Liam’s discovery, after his father’s death, that his family’s land is “made of solid rock” (209). As he tells Eileen, ““This farm will never grow anything but boulders. We

live on the Canadian Shield’” (210). Irish immigrants in Canada suffered a disadvantage from the moment they arrived because they were given free land on rocky soil. No matter how hard they worked to farm this land, they could never achieve a migrant’s dream of success: they could not plant their roots in a “shield of rock” (209). The land itself is rejecting their attempts to forge their place in Canada. Indeed, from Liam’s perspective, the rock forms a “barrier that would keep [him] from everything he wanted” (209). While Urquhart explores Liam’s frustration as he works to establish his home in Canada, she gives voice to the history of the working-class Irish who came to this country to escape one kind of hardship only to be confronted with another.

Despite this trajectory, the Irish established successful homes, farms, and businesses in Canada. In *Away*, Urquhart marks the beginning of Liam’s success as the time when he sells his family’s land and pursues his origins, the white house in Port Hope. Liam sells the land to Osbert Sedgewick, who appears at the O’Malley homestead expecting to find Brian and Mary. Osbert briefly connects Liam and Eileen with memories of their parents and life in the old land. Yet he also serves as a reminder of their history of oppression and the injustices committed against their people. Eileen, with her passion for Ireland, takes Osbert’s former position as landlord as a personal affront, while Liam, with his focus on Canada, is willing to grant the old man absolution. Liam remains obsessed with his dream of establishing a farm and says, even when gold is found on his family’s land, “I just want something to *grow* in the ground...don’t want to take anything out of it that I didn’t put in myself” (224). Liam gains the financial means to pursue this dream when Osbert purchases the land. Yet, in doing so, Osbert once again takes possession of Brian and Mary, for they are buried on the property. Osbert’s reappearance thus symbolizes what Wyile calls “the migration of

oppression” (85). However, if Osbert’s arrival leads to Brian and Mary’s continued oppression, then it also contributes to Liam’s freedom to build his home in Canada.

Liam gains a sense of belonging in Canada when he connects with the fertile soil on his new farm. With his return to the white house, Liam returns to his beginnings in Canada and fulfils what he considers his destiny. Speaking of the house, he says, “‘I’m going to buy it, Eileen. I think it’s supposed...that I’m supposed to buy it. A house...all those years in my memory. I’m going to buy it’” (244). Liam purchases the house and moves it to his newly-acquired land in Northumberland County. It is on this land that he will grow his crops and raise his children; it is where he will finally achieve success and establish his family line. In contrast to the land on the first farm, this land is fertile – no rock bars Liam from establishing his roots in this soil. As Eileen carries out her chores inside the house, she can see Liam working outside: “During the day she watched her brother wed himself to the land. Often she saw him in the fields digging like a child with his hands buried in the rich soil” (269). Urquhart uses a feminized characterization of the land to emphasize Liam’s desire to plant his seeds in this fertile soil; she thus links the individual with geography in the forging of a national myth of belonging to the land. Like Langston’s longing for Africa in *Any Known Blood*, Liam’s belonging in Canada is expressed in sexual terms that reveal his need to claim the land as his own and to contribute to the propagation of a new people.

Liam’s transition from struggling backwoods farmer to successful landowner is complicated by his new – and unexpected – role as landlord. He decides to evict the squatters from his land and thus confronts the Irishman Thomas J. Doherty and his daughter Molly at their shanty in the woods. Although Doherty appeals to their shared Irish culture and history of suffering, Liam remains unmoved: “in his new, landowner’s voice” (277), he tells the squatters they must leave within two weeks. Eileen compares

Liam's actions to those of the English landlords and accuses him of joining the oppressors. As she says, "I think that the English took the land from the Indians same as they took it from the Irish. Then they just starve everybody out, or..." she looked directly at Liam, "they evict them, or both." (279). Liam redeems himself, however, by allowing the squatters to stay if Doherty will charm the skunks away from his farm. Yet Liam's lenience reveals his self-interest since it allows him to secure his own comfort and success. In the end, though his intentions are questionable, Liam does not emulate the English landlords, but establishes his own connection to the land without infringing on the rights of others to do the same.

Liam's place in Canada is further legitimized through his marriage to Molly Doherty. With an Ojibway mother and an Irish father, Molly brings together the old world and the new. Molly's connection to the land translates into success on the farm: "In the future it would be Molly who made the farm pulse with energy so that barns would seem more substantial, the fields richer, the crops thicker; she who carried the cells of both the old world and the new in the construction of her bones and blood" (302). Historically and biologically, Molly is part of the Canadian geography – she is figured as rightfully belonging to the land. As a result, she is a key component in Liam's indigenization. Sugars explains that the "appropriation of Native cultures accords with a long tradition in settler Canadian texts, whereby the indigenisation of the European legitimises his/her stake in the land" ("Settler" 112). Since Liam marries a woman with Native blood, his claim to the land is legitimized as is that of his future children because, like their mother, they will represent a fusion of old and new worlds.

Like the Wong family in Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and the Gursky family in Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, the O'Malley family in Urquhart's novel gains symbolic, and in this case biological, legitimacy through contact with Native blood. This

process of indigenization is problematic in all three novels due to the power structures involved in Native-settler relations. Even though these groups – Chinese, Jewish, and Irish – have themselves been victims of oppression, they have also contributed to the injustices committed against Native peoples in Canada. Moreover, individual members of these groups have sought authenticity through their sexual desire for the Native, usually Native women. As Alan Lawson explains, “There is [. . .] a complex chain of signification between desire for indigenized identity, spirituality, and land and desire for Aboriginal women” (27). In terms of Urquhart’s novel, Liam’s marriage to Molly symbolizes his (and perhaps Urquhart’s) desire for an indigenized identity that will authenticate his place in Canada. His marriage “redeems” him for his previous imperializing tendencies, while demonstrating that, with the return to his origins, Liam has succeeded in connecting with both the land and its people. For Urquhart’s purposes, then, Liam’s marriage not only underlines the settler’s desire for the Native, but serves to legitimize the Irish presence on Native land.

The future of the O’Malley family rests on Liam and Molly. They are the ones who will continue the family line, who will build a successful farm, and who will establish Canada as home. Liam, then, can be seen as demonstrating “the character traits of the ideal settler” (Sugars, “Settler” 108). But, in achieving this ideal, Liam has sacrificed his connection with the old land and has focused solely on his life in the new. His pragmatism has produced a cultural amnesia that has severed his ties to his Irish origins. As Wyile explains, Liam illustrates “one extreme of the experience of the immigrant – an attempt to completely jettison one’s inherited mythology and culture” (*Speculative* 87). Urquhart establishes Canada as home for Irish immigrants through Liam’s pursuit of his Canadian origins and his success in securing his place in this land. However, she

also reveals that Liam has allowed his Irish origins to be subsumed within the larger Canadian identity. In doing so, he has contributed to the homogenization that Gunew warns against: he has become disconnected from his ancestral history and culture.

*

While Liam's pragmatism plays a key role in *Away*, so does Eileen's romanticism. Urquhart indulges in a romantic longing for Irish history and myth through Eileen's nostalgic vision of the old land. Urquhart explains that, in this novel, she wanted "to work that concept of being *away* in a supernatural sense with the concept of immigration to a new land. When you are there, *away* from the homeland, the homeland then takes on the aspect of myth" ("Ghosts" 199). Ireland first takes on mythic proportions for Eileen under her father's influence – his stories and songs inspire her dreams of a distant land. Born in Canada, Eileen enters the new world but longs for the old: she will never gain a sense of belonging in the land of her birth. As Eileen grows older, Liam realizes that she "would always look back towards lost landscapes and inward towards inherited souvenirs" (207-08). In contrast to Liam, whose nostalgia for origins leads him towards his Canadian roots, Eileen expresses a nostalgia for origins that draws her towards her Irish ancestry. But this is not the only way that nostalgia exists in opposition in this text: as Urquhart reveals the potentially destructive nature of Eileen's romantic vision, she indulges in her own nostalgic rewriting of a neglected past.

Urquhart brings Brian's passion and Mary's longing together in her portrait of Eileen. As a young child, Eileen listens intently to her father's stories and, unlike her brother, is deeply affected by them. Liam later realizes that his "father's stories, which had entertained him as a child [. . .], had left his centre untouched. But his sister, he knew, had ingested the stories, their darkness – the twist in the voice of the song, the

sadness of the broken country – and had therefore carried, in her body and her brain, some of that country’s clay” (207). Brian, too, realizes that his stories speak to a longing within Eileen – a longing that reminds him of her mother: “now and then, when he saw Eileen’s cloud of red hair glowing in the firelight or noticed a distant look in her green eyes, he experienced a chill of recognition and wondered if it were wise to tell the stories of the old sorrows deep in this forest so far from home” (167). Despite his concern, Brian remains preoccupied with the old sorrows, even though he expresses “anger and disbelief” (198) towards the Orange Order for harbouring grudges of their own. As he says, ““They brought the hate with them across all that ocean... across all that water [. . .]. It hardly seems possible”” (198). But Brian has also carried old troubles to a new land – troubles that influence the way his young daughter understands her Irish heritage and her Canadian home.

Urquhart stresses the futility of transporting these troubles across the ocean when Eileen sings Irish revolutionary songs against the backdrop of the Canadian wilderness: “On winter afternoons she cheerfully sang about the hanging of brave young men, wild colonial boys, the curse of Cromwell, cruel landlords, the impossibility of requited love, and the robbery of landscape while she built snow castles under the brilliant slanting sun of several Januarys” (199). These songs have lost their meaning in a Canadian context. Eileen is drawn to the passion and sorrow she hears in the songs, but does not understand the history and suffering that they represent. The same can be said of the Fenian Proclamation, which she likens to poetry. As she tells Liam, ““I thought the words were beautiful [. . .]. I thought they sounded like poetry”” (203). Eileen prefers sound to meaning and, though she is passionate about Irish nationalism, her passion is shaped by a romantic longing for the homeland that she inherited from her mother. Wyile explains that, like Mary, Eileen approaches in a “lyrical and spiritual fashion the legacy of her

people's history" (*Speculative* 87). Eileen's dream of the old land is thus fuelled by her father's passion for Irish stories and songs, and by her mother's nostalgic longing for a faraway place – a place that, for Eileen, exists as an imaginary construct and that, in fact, she knows very little about.

Eileen's longing for Ireland makes it difficult for her to forge her place in Canada, but also makes her a quintessential Canadian settler. As Sugars explains, Eileen can be seen as "more archetypally 'Canadian' than her brother Liam, for while Liam is firmly grounded in the Canadian here and now, it is Eileen who flits between worlds" ("Settler" 109). Indeed, like her mother, Eileen briefly gains a sense of belonging in Canada when she communes with both the natural world and the spirit of her mother's Native friend, Exodus Crow. She spends hours in the willow tree beside her family's cabin and speaks with the crow who shares his many secrets.⁸ And yet Eileen's passion for the old land is stronger than her sense of belonging in the new. When Eileen leaves the cabin in the woods, she loses her contact with the landscape and forgets her friendship with the crow. If Liam represents one extreme of an immigrant's experience, then Eileen represents another – the inability, as she tells Esther, "to be where you are" (355). Eileen refuses to embrace her Canadian present and pursues instead her Irish past when, in moving with Liam to Port Hope, she meets the Irish dancer, Aidan Lanighan, who is widely believed to be fighting for Irish independence against "the traitor McGee" (255). Just as Liam transforms the white house into a symbol of his Canadian origins, Eileen turns Aidan into a symbol of her Irish roots. Eileen's heart and mind go out to this young man and she fails to identify who and what he actually represents:

Lanighan, when he began to dance that night, broke Eileen's heart in her own breast. His feet hammered the boards, his arms whipped like swords through the air. Eileen read the gestures as demanding space, territory, a promised land, hills,

the sky. She heard the dance shout passionate declarations and make pleas for justice. She saw the young man's pulse beat in his neck and the veins throb at his temples, his dance keening, then yelling with joy. (257)

Eileen sees in Aidan only what she wants to see and interprets his movements accordingly. Wyile refers to Eileen as “dangerously uncritical” and explains that “her perception of Irish nationalism is constructed as a naïve romanticism” (*Speculative* 87). Thus, while Eileen represents a prototypical Canadian settler caught between worlds, Urquhart takes this portrait to an extreme by showing that nostalgia for the old world has blinded Eileen to the realities of life in the new.

With her passion for Aidan and her longing for Ireland, Eileen romanticizes the Irish nationalists and becomes increasingly concerned with the troubles in Ireland. But her pragmatic brother dismisses her concerns when he says, ““What does this Irish misery matter, Eileen? We’re in Canada now, we’re Canadian, not Irish. I don’t even remember Ireland and you were born *here*. Soon we’ll be living on the new farm and I’ll have a wife, some sons, a hundred cows”” (256). Liam’s words do not have the desired effect on Eileen, for she continues to romanticize Aidan and the Irish cause. She invents a history for her lover and gives herself a role in this drama:

The bands of wild rovers, desperate warriors for justice, and heartbroken Irish nationalists that she had concocted as a family for Aidan Lanighan were never still in her mind. [. . .] They were brothers-in-arms, fiercely loyal, and their arena was the new dominion. Though they were all men, she believed that she was one of them, that Aidan Lanighan’s touch had guaranteed her a role in the theatre, the performances, that made up their lives. (293).

In casting herself as an Irish nationalist, Eileen demonizes McGee as “the worst kind of enemy, the truly guilty; the one who knows the beauty and betrays it” (339). In Ireland,

McGee had been actively involved in the Young Ireland Movement, which was dedicated to the overthrow of English rule in Ireland; however, in Canada, he supported the British Commonwealth and the English prime minister, John A. Macdonald (MacKay 320).

MacKay explains that “McGee told his Canadian followers that their first duty must be to Canada; however much they wanted an end to English rule in Ireland, they had no right to bring Irish politics to Canada” (321). Herein lies the problem with Eileen’s nostalgic vision: she nurtures old troubles in a new land and fails to approach the political situation from a new-world perspective.

Even as she exposes the dangers of Eileen’s romantic vision, Urquhart reveals her own nostalgia for the history of the Irish in Canada. Urquhart mythologizes a neglected part of Canada’s Irish past when, for example, Eileen visits Griffintown in order to reunite with Aidan. Urquhart’s romantic portrait of Griffintown begins with Eileen’s arrival in the flooded streets of this Montreal neighbourhood. Although Eileen is cold and unhappy as she wades through the murky waters, the people of Griffintown are cheerful and friendly as they pursue their daily tasks. Children sing as they float in rain barrels, business proceeds from second-floor windows and rooftops, and Eileen is offered a ride by a French Canadian woman on a makeshift raft (305-06). As Eileen walks the streets with Aidan, she is struck by the sense of community she witnesses in this poverty-stricken district where the French and the Irish live in harmony. People call out greetings from doorways, sing snippets of songs, and find time to help their neighbours (315-16). Despite their lack of resources and the devastation caused by the flood, the people of Griffintown continue their lives with cheerful determination. Just as Eileen romanticizes the Irish nationalists, Urquhart idealizes the Irish of Griffintown. She indulges in her own nostalgic vision of this Irish ghetto, giving voice to what she sees as noble poverty while forging a place for working-class Irish in the story of Canada.

Urquhart further mythologizes key moments from the nation's past when she recreates the events surrounding the only assassination of a political figure in Canada. Blending fiction with history, she portrays Eileen as complicit in the murder of D'Arcy McGee. Sugars notes that *Away* "manufactures a 'home-made legend,' for Urquhart here ties her narrative with a notable Canadian mystery, since historically the murderer of McGee was never satisfactorily identified" (108). Urquhart remains deliberately vague on this point,⁹ but suggests that, had Eileen never become involved with the Irish nationalists, then she never would have carried the murder weapon – the notorious derringer pistol – to Ottawa, where a man named Patrick seemingly used it to kill McGee.¹⁰ After McGee's death, Aidan accuses Eileen of murder and claims she has no understanding of McGee's politics: "'You killed him,'" he says. "'Did you hear a single thing McGee said? Did you listen to what he wanted?'" (343). The danger of Eileen's nostalgia is that it leads to a blind patriotism, which is based on her idealization of the Irish nationalists and their cause. Yet, even as Urquhart reveals the destructive nature of Eileen's romantic ideal, she expresses her own nostalgia for her Irish roots. From the Irish famine, to the representation of a family of "extreme women" (3), to the murder of D'Arcy McGee, Urquhart's mythologized history is subject to her own romantic inclinations. In other words, Urquhart falls victim to her own nostalgia and thus creates a narrative that both warns against and indulges in a romantic reinvention of the past.

For Eileen, the longing for Irish roots destroys her ability to forge her place in Canada. After she learns the truth about Aidan – that he was a spy working for McGee – she realizes that she belongs neither in Canada nor in Ireland. She joins her mother on "an otherworld island" (346) and is, from this moment on, also away: "So this is what it is to be away, her mother's voice told her. You are never present where you stand" (345). In contrast to Liam, Eileen has sacrificed her place in Canada as a result

of her obsession with her Irish origins. Her romanticism has severed her connection to the land of her birth. As Wylie explains, “Liam’s attempt to slough off his Irish heritage comes across as a distorted, extreme assimilation, a form of colonial cringe, whereas Eileen’s clinging to a fetishized mythology, on the other hand, is portrayed as a distorted, extreme resistance to accommodation that has serious – potentially dangerous – consequences” (*Speculative* 88). What is needed, then, is a balance between the two siblings, for neither Liam nor Eileen represents the ideal settler. In fact, each one has what the other lacks – Liam is missing Eileen’s passion for their Irish roots, while Eileen is missing Liam’s ability to find belonging in their Canadian home. At the novel’s close, Old Eileen tells her granddaughter Esther never to go away; she asks her to resist the call of Ireland and to focus instead on her life in Canada. As she says, “‘If I were you I would be where I stand’” (355).

*

Urquhart constructs a legitimating lineage for Irish Canadians that allows her, like Esther, “to give shape to one hundred and forty years” (21). With *Away*, Urquhart fills a cultural gap in the Canadian consciousness by distinguishing the Irish from other ethnic branches of the British Canadian mainstream. As Wylie explains, “*Away* dramatizes the ethnic distinctions and tensions within what is too often seen as Canada’s monolithic European heritage. It counters Anglocentric accounts of Confederation as a moment of nation-building unity by illustrating not only the history of oppression by the English behind the emigration of so many Irish to Canada, but also the background of intense cultural negotiation, oppression, and violence behind that apparent consensus” (*Speculative* 84). In giving voice to this distinct history, Urquhart – like Lee, Hill, Richler, and Ricci –

overturns the experience of erasure and establishes the nation as home for her own ethno-cultural group.

However, even as Urquhart creates an authenticating myth of origins for the Irish in Canada, she destabilizes this myth by exposing the potentially destructive nature of the myth-making impulse. Thus, in *Away*, Urquhart offers a non-essentialized identity – one that avoids what Paul Gilroy terms “ethnic absolutism” and explores instead “an infinite process of identity construction” (*Black Atlantic* 223). Smaro Kamboureli explains that she considers such absolutism reductive; as she writes, “Self-fashioned authenticity can easily become a straightjacket that is not that different, either ideologically or structurally, from the social attitudes that make diasporic subjects Other to their host societies” (4). Even though Urquhart intends to forge a distinct place for the Irish at the “beginnings” of Canada, the fact that she questions the allegiance to a romanticized “Irishness” shows that she recognizes the need to straddle different cultural and historical identities.

NOTES

¹ Irish arrivals in Canada rose from 134,956 in 1840-44 to 230,094 in 1845-49 (Wilson 5). By 1867, the Irish accounted for one quarter of Canada’s population and were, after the French, the second largest ethnic group in the country (MacKay 14).

² The Scottish surname Urquhart is her married name. Her father’s family name is Carter, which is English, and her mother’s family name is Quinn, which is Irish.

³ *Away* was an acclaimed best-seller in Canada, was the co-winner of the Trillium Award, and was shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

⁴ As MacKay explains, “Most of the victims had been the poor living in overpopulated regions where land had become so overworked and divided it could not support them; the famine was above all a tragedy of the Catholic peasants, particularly in the western counties, who depended on the potato, unlike the Presbyterians of eastern Ulster, whose farming was better organized and who depended on grain” (308-09).

⁵ It was not uncommon during the Great Famine for English landlords to pay their tenants’ passage overseas (MacKay 281).

⁶ Urquhart’s positive images of Canada coincide with Susanna Moodie’s account in *Roughing It in the Bush*: “Men who had been hopeless of supporting their families in comfort and independence at home, thought that they had only to come out to Canada to make their fortunes; almost even to realise the story told in the nursery, of the sheep and oxen that ran about the streets, ready roasted, and with knives and forks upon their backs. They were made to believe that if it did not actually rain gold, that precious metal could be obtained [. . .] by stooping to pick it up” (13-14).

⁷ Three of the Fathers of Confederation were Irish: Thomas D'Arcy McGee in Quebec, Jonathan McCully in Nova Scotia, and Edward Whelan in Prince Edward Island (MacKay 330).

⁸ The crow gives Eileen secret gifts including crystals of quartz and nuggets of gold (220-22). He also shares his secret predictions for the future when he tells Eileen that Osbert will be coming (216), and when he warns her that "her family would be visited by the curse of the mines" (225).

⁹ In the acknowledgements section of her novel, Urquhart writes, "To this day uncertainty regarding the identity of the assassin remains. This book does not pretend to solve the mystery" (n. pag.).

¹⁰ Patrick James Whelan was arrested, convicted, and hanged for McGee's murder, although doubt still remains as to whether or not he actually committed this crime.

Afterword: New Narratives for the Nation

My Genealogy

1.
My great-great-grandfather
played in the streets
of Milano, I am told.
I take it on faith.

2.
His son, the artisan,
immigrated to Baden, Ontario,
as a decorator or builder.
I believe this, but never met him.

3.
My grandfather was born
in Baden, and he married
a German girl there.
I remember him well –
he spoke English
with a German accent.

4.
My grandparents lived
in Berlin, Ontario,
when it changed its name
to honour Lord Kitchener.
They made an unusual couple –
he was more than six feet tall,
she barely five – but together
they produced fourteen children.

5.
One of these fourteen Colombos
was my father. He spoke English
with a Pennsylvania-Dutch accent.

6.
He married a Kitchener girl,
and I was born in that city –
with its light industry
and its farmer's market –
in that city, an only child.

7.

I remember quite distinctly
 my mother's parents, my grand-
 parents. My grandfather spoke
 with a thick Greek accent,
 and my larger grandmother,
 a nasal Quebec French. Yes,
 they made a colourful couple.

8.

They first met in Montreal,
 lived in Toronto for a while,
 finally settled in Kitchener.
 They had five children,
 and their arguments had to be
 heard to be believed.

9.

Blood flows through my veins
 at different speeds:
 Italian, German,
 Greek, French-Canadian.
 Sometimes it mixes.

10.

At times I feel close
 to the Aegean,
 the Cote d'Azure,
 the Lombard Plain,
 and the Black Forest.

11.

I seldom feel close
 to the Rocky Mountains,
 the Prairies,
 the Great Lakes,
 or the cold St. Lawrence.
What am I doing in Toronto?

12.

If this means being Canadian,
 I am a Canadian.

John Robert Colombo, *Roman Candles*

Like John Robert Colombo, the five writers of this study are trying to determine what it means to be Canadian. In each of the novels I have examined, the creation of a fictional genealogy enables the writer to trace the distinct history of his or her ethno-cultural group in Canada, beginning with the arrival and settlement in the new land. Although the fictional genealogies do not represent ethnic and cultural melding to the extent that Colombo's genealogy does, they nonetheless reject what Diana Brydon calls "myths of cultural purity" ("White Inuit" 196). As W.M. Verhoeven explains, "the creation of an ethnic identity is a dynamic process which presupposes some degree of cultural and ethnic conflict. [. . .] Pure ethnicity may not exist, but then neither does pure integration" (13-14). Each novel of this study refutes homogeneous versions of identity by charting genealogies that carry traces of mixed bloodlines. From Chinese, Native and white in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, to Jewish, Christian, and Inuit in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, to Irish and Native in *Away*, these writers are encouraging non-essentialized notions of "Canadianness." In *Paths of Desire*, Marlene Goldman explains that "Canada's legacy of explorers and settlers, combined with the country's experience as a colony, has generated a host of discourses [. . .] which have promoted and continue to promote a sensitivity to, if not a preoccupation with, problems of national as well as self-representation – problems often described as an inability to map oneself on the terrain" (12). By charting genealogies that trace the settlement history of their ethno-cultural groups alongside key moments in Canada's past, Lee, Hill, Richler, Ricci, and Urquhart are mapping their own particular groups – or, more specifically, are re-mapping these groups – on the Canadian terrain.

Through close readings of seven novels, my thesis explores the ways in which recent narratives about immigration reject idealized visions of the old land and express

instead a longing for origins in the new land. Nostalgia literally means a painful return home and the narrators of this study each reveal a bittersweet longing for roots in their Canadian home. In other words, the gaze in these narratives is turned towards an immigrant's personal and communal histories in this land. The five writers of this study each undertake an authenticating quest for origins that demonstrates a need for their ethnic groups to find belonging in Canada and to see their stories reflected in the dominant vision of the nation. My thesis reveals that the interrogation of Canada's accepted narratives is not complete and that, even for second- and third-generation immigrants, there remains a desire to establish their identities as Canadian. The writers are deliberately challenging the myth of two founding nations in novels that not only articulate their group's long history in Canada, but that also suggest the ways in which their particular groups contributed to the founding of the nation.

These writers are participating in an interesting phenomenon in Canadian literature that, while it does not represent the work of all Canadian writers, represents a central concern for many writers on ethnic and immigrant themes.¹ These writers are adding their own distinct voices to the story of Canada in order to recover lost or forgotten histories and to shape communal and national identities. While global contexts of transculturalism are a growing concern in the field of Canadian literature, national contexts remain a significant area of study at a time when historical fictions are recuperating alternative versions of Canada's past. *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, *Any Known Blood*, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, *Lives of the Saints*, *In a Glass House*, *Where She Has Gone*, and *Away* all examine an immigrant's arrival and settlement in historical terms and raise key questions about the biases of traditional history. By focusing on race, ethnicity, and belonging in a Canadian context, these novels engage in the important task of subverting the authority of Canada's dominant cultural paradigm by privileging

previously neglected or marginalized histories and giving them a place within the narrative of Canada's foundation.

The narrators in these novels are amateur historians who are trying to piece together different versions of the past – versions that are meant to resolve their anxiety regarding their places in their families and communities. As Kae, Langston, Moses, Vittorio, and Esther tell their stories, they express their longing for a legitimating line of descent in Canada. What they are searching for is “evidence” that they belong here by locating their origins in this land. These originary moments include the work of Chinese labourers on the Canadian Pacific Railway; the escape of Black slaves on the Underground Railroad; the survival of a Jewish forefather on the Franklin Expedition; the journey of Southern Italians by ship to rural Ontario; and the mass exodus of Irish peasants fleeing the Great Famine. By connecting with these pivotal moments in their personal and communal pasts, these narrators are each laying claim to an authenticating myth of origins in Canada – a myth that contributes to their sense of belonging in this land. And yet, the narrators realize that there are no definitive versions of history, no pure origins, and no absolute truths. As they tell their stories, they explore the problems with reconstructing the past when they question the validity of research documents, expose the flaws in personal memories, or dispute the truths of traditional historical narratives. Notions of ethnic and racial purity are also called into question, often when the writers insert a rogue ancestor or illegitimate child into their fictional lines of descent.² These narratives thus offer versions of the past that are open to interpretation, but that nonetheless present a means of grounding one's roots in this land.

However, even as they trace these Canadian genealogies, some of the writers – Lawrence Hill and Mordecai Richler in particular – are using satire to question the very histories and genealogies that they create. In other words, they subvert even as they

assert the authenticating mythologies that inform their narratives. Yet this is not a sign that these writers have failed in the search for a legitimating lineage since a distinction must be made between the process and the product. Even though the writers question the process by underlining the uncertainties and complexities involved in their recuperative work, the final product for every writer of this study is the creation of an authenticating mythology and fictional line of descent that asserts their presence in the founding of Canada. Indeed, for both Hill and Richler, a satirical approach does not undermine their political goals, for each writer offers a serious message in the end. Hill uses his narrative to deconstruct the myth that colour indicates newness by tracing the long and difficult history of Blacks in North America, while Richler turns a well-known event – the doomed Franklin Expedition – into a pivotal moment in his fictional genealogy in order to deliver the serious message that the stories and experiences of Jewish Canadians must be given a place in Canada's national narrative. That Richler toys with the Franklin myth, rather than seriously undercutting the quest for historical recognition, might suggest an implicit subversion of those very stories and myths of Canadian national identity that hold such power in the Canadian popular imagination at large.

Questions regarding how national identities are formed and why certain versions of history are inscribed on the national consciousness are raised by each of the writers of this study. Lee, Hill, Richler, Ricci, and Urquhart use their genealogies to create lines of descent that are firmly tied to the nation's past, present, and future. As Eva Mackey explains, "Nationalism often depends upon mythological narratives of a unified nation moving progressively through time – a continuum beginning with a glorious past leading to the present and then onward to an even better future. These mythical stories require that specific versions of history are highlighted, versions that re-affirm the

particular characteristics ascribed to a nation” (23). Lee, Hill, Richler, Ricci, and Urquhart work against the vision of a singular narrative of national origin by revising old mythologies and adding previously lost, forgotten, silenced, or misrepresented stories to the national narrative. Taken together, their novels represent a heterogeneous mix of ethnic and cultural groups that are forging their places in the nation while contributing to the diverse voices that make up the story of Canada.

NOTES

¹ Writers such as Anita Rau Badami, Dionne Brand, and Rohinton Mistry (see Supplementary Readings) do not focus on Canada, but belong to a separate phenomenon in Canadian literature that coincides with theoretical discourse about transculturalism and globalization.

² Each of the writers of this study challenges notions of racial purity: Lee with a Native and white grandmother at the head of a long line of Chinese descent; Hill with the contamination of whiteness in his Black genealogy; Richler with a rogue Jewish ancestor who fathers illegitimate children of all races and religions; Ricci with Rita’s illegitimacy and unknown paternal origins; and Urquhart with Molly’s Native and Irish heritage.

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