

SECTION I: DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY

Crypto-Ethnicity and Multiculturalism in Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* and Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

Quentin Ferrari

In Search of April Raintree by Beatrice Mosionier, and *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje both present minority characters othered by Canadian society on the grounds of their ethnicity, and both novels demonstrate that poverty and racialization get inscribed on bodies through injury. A significant difference between each novel's minority characters lies in their origins; in *April Raintree*, April and Cheryl Raintree are othered on the grounds of their Métis heritage, while the community of continental European immigrants living in Toronto in *In the Skin of a Lion* are othered on the grounds of their language and immigrant status. Each novel uses its subaltern figures to depict the development of what Linda Hutcheon terms "cryptoethnicities." Hutcheon shows how ethnicities can get *encrypted* with the example of an Italian-Canadian woman who exchanges their surname for that of their spouse; during the process, their Italian ethnicity may become hidden, or *encrypted*, so that the Italian-Canadian woman passes as Canadian unless she chooses to express her Italian heritage (Hutcheon 28, 32). Both novels argue for a greater acceptance of other cultures amongst Canadian society by depicting characters whose bodies are inscribed with racist and capitalist violence, and who attempt to *encrypt* their ethnic identities. They differ, however, in that Mosionier's book advocates for the preservation of Métis culture and identity by refusing to *encrypt* April's ethnicity, whereas Ondaatje's book depicts successful ethnic *encryption* to argue that historiography must restore ethnic identity to European immigrants.

April Raintree depicts Métis bodies as sites of abuse inspired by racialization and poverty in both personal and institutional interactions. When Mrs. DesRosiers

hears that Cheryl questioned the racist historical narrative that “the Indians scalped, tortured, and massacred brave white explorers” (Mosionier 54), her response is to mark Cheryl’s body according to that violence by cutting her hair. April sees that Cheryl’s body has been marked thus and asks DesRosiers, “‘Why did you scalp my sister?’” (57). Given that Indigenous leaders like Big Bear were forced to have their hair cut as a way to humiliate them when they were convicted or conquered (Smulders 45), when April sees Cheryl’s hair cut by such a virulent racist as Mrs. DesRosiers and frames it as a scalping, the novel suggests that Métis bodies become sites of abuse and humiliation deriving from and recreating racist historical narratives. For Mosionier’s novel, then, Métis bodies are microcosms of racialization itself, since the abuse they are marked with mirrors the abuse dealt to Indigenous peoples across North-American history; this marker is a way of demeaning the two sisters into accepting (and through this acceptance *legitimizing*) a false historical narrative. They are microcosms of Métis racialization in an institutional capacity in two ways. Firstly, this interaction occurs because the school system is warped by racist educational curriculums. The second way is that April and Cheryl are subjected to such a racist individual because of their subjection to the orphanage system. Incidentally, poverty inspires the marks which April and Cheryl bear because their presence in the orphanage system is in large part necessitated by their parents’ socio-economic status. Thus, *April Raintree* depicts the bodies of Métis children like April and Cheryl as microcosms of racialization and poverty that are marked by racist violence in interactions which are simultaneously personal and institutional.

By fueling April’s shame about being Métis, the racialized violence which Mrs. DesRosiers inflicted upon April’s body informs April’s attempt to *encrypt* her Métis identity by covering her body. After having their hair cut, April and Cheryl are “jeered and laughed at” (57) by other school children. This fuels April’s growing shame about her ethnicity when she notes, “Whenever Cheryl wanted to talk about [Louis Riel], I changed the subject” (58). This shame comes to inform April’s attempt to *encrypt* her Métis identity at the convent by lying about her parents’ Indigeneity (91), but it also results in attempts to *encrypt* her identity by covering her body. After she marries Radcliff, April notes, “[Mother Radcliff] took me on shopping excursions and on twice-a-week appointments to hair salons” (118). By wearing clothing and hairstyles that Mother Radcliff approves of, April manipulates her

appearance to *encrypt* her Métis ethnicity so that she can assimilate into a wealthy Canadian society reserved primarily for white people. Since April's hair was the part of her body which bore Mrs. DesRosiers' racialized violence, her choice to consistently style it according to the standards of upper-class white Canadian society which Mother Radcliff symbolizes suggests that the shame and humiliation which April incurs has transformed into a desire to fit into white Canadian society. However, this method of self-cryptography is limited for April, since she cannot hide her Indigenous status from Mother Radcliff and never gains her permission to marry Mother Radcliffe's son.

Unlike *April Raintree*, Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* does not focus on the ways in which racialization gets inscribed upon the body, instead it focuses on the ways in which poverty gets inscribed on bodies through personal and institutional interactions, primarily through Patrick. For example, he is blind in one eye from his attempt to kill Ambrose Small (Ondaatje 97), he has many scars on his face from this same interaction (98), and later, when he dates Alice Gull, Patrick's work in the tanning factory leaves his body reeking permanently of tanning dyes (131). All these bodily qualities represent ways in which the body bears the marks of poverty, but the former two come about through a personal interaction between Patrick and Ambrose, yet this attempt for Patrick to kill Ambrose symbolizes violent revolution from the lower-class workers like Patrick against wealthy capitalists like Ambrose; this interaction is simultaneously personal and institutional. Patrick's bodily markings represent those of some European immigrants when it is said that "the Macedonians and Bulgarians were [Patrick's] only mirror. He worked in the tunnels with them" (112). Since Patrick sustains these scars in personal and institutional interactions with labour, the narrative suggests that immigrants have parallel scars, and therefore parallel inscriptions on their bodies for parallel class reasons. Since Patrick's poverty is inscribed on his body through injuries inflicted in a personal interaction with Small that was loaded with institutional poetic significance, and since Patrick's scars are mirrored by European immigrants based on their relation to Canadian capitalism, Patrick's body is a microcosm of the ways in which poverty is inscribed upon the body, but not racialization.

The characters in Ondaatje's novel whose bodies are marked by poverty and racialization--and who successfully *encrypt* their class and ethnicity--find romantic

connections which help them transcend their shame. Since Patrick partially stands in for racialized characters, he cannot represent an attempt to *encrypt* ethnicity. Yet he is shown to transcend his shame for these bodily markings through his romance with Alice Gull, when her hand touches his heart even though his flesh reeks from the tannery (136). Another character whose body is marked by racialization is the Italian immigrant Caravaggio. He bears a permanent tar stain under his nails from his days as a brick-layer (27-8), proving that he bears the marks of poverty in a capitalistic interaction. He also bears the marks of racialization on his body in the form of a scar on his neck from when he had his throat cut in prison; this was an institutional and personal interaction which constitutes a mark of racialization because the people who did it came into his cell, signalling that they were likely guards and therefore members of the prison system, and used racist slurs for Italians (185). Romance is shown to transcend the shame that Caravaggio's throat scar might cause when Caravaggio and his wife make love with "her fingers on his scar" (205). Although both characters act as metaphors for *self-cryptography*, only Caravaggio represents one based on ethnicity; Linda Hutcheon describing Caravaggio's escape as a "metaphor for selfcryptography," (32). This metaphor contains inherently ethnic resonances because Caravaggio uses paint to cover a body bearing scars induced by racial violence. Patrick similarly *encrypts* his identity by covering his skin with grease (227) to infiltrate the waterworks under cover of night and attempt to kill Harris, but he is not a racialized character; thus, the metaphor for self-cryptography which Patrick represents does not have any inherent ethnic resonance. Like the characters of *April Raintree*, *In the Skin of a Lion* depicts characters whose bodies are inscribed by capitalist and racist violence with scars, but Ondaatje's characters find relief from their shame in sex and can successfully *encrypt* their class and ethnic identities.

April Raintree argues for a more accepting multicultural attitude in Canada. April Raintree resolves not to *encrypt* her Métis identity in a few ways, but the most important is her decision to write this narrative, emphasizing her struggle as a Métis woman throughout. If someone had asked April why she did not choose to *encrypt* her Métis identity in this book, the book's final words could function as a feasible answer: "there would be a tomorrow. And it would be better. I would strive for it. For my sister and her son. For my parents. For my people" (245). This encapsulates April's character arc as it pertains to her ethnicity and experience of

cultural trauma--she begins the story by being inducted into such trauma; she witnesses and experiences the foster system as it makes her and Cheryl vulnerable to sexual assault, poverty, and addiction; she internalizes it throughout and feels shame for her heritage; she understands the ways in which Cheryl and their parents succumbed to the vulnerabilities and trauma which the cultural genocide predisposed them to; and finally, she resolves to change it and preserve that heritage by expressing her ethnicity. Thus, *encryptions* of Métis identity become an expression of shame which recreates Métis erasure in late-twentieth century Canada's cultural discourse that April Raintree operates within. Furthermore, the novel's championing of Métis identity and willingness to reveal the institutions committing cultural genocide make it an expression of the same desire to preserve Métis culture and therefore a refusal to *encrypt* Métis identity to assimilate into a broader Canadian identity; in this way, *In Search of April Raintree* argues for a more accepting multicultural attitude in Canada.

In the Skin of a Lion uses the metaphor of self-cryptography in its depictions of Patrick and Caravaggio to argue for a more accepting multicultural Canadian identity inclusive of immigrants into its cultural historiography. Given that the novel is set in 1920s Toronto, features the real-life Canadian photographer Arthur Goss (103), and features Patrick studying newspapers for Temelkoff (144), the novel ties itself to Canadian history. The novel notes that Patrick studies the other characters' stories surrounding the creation of the Bloor Street Viaduct, and that when he saw "all these fragments of a human order [...] the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned" (145). This passage uses metafiction to frame the novel, with its fragmentary form, as an attempt to update and realign its contemporaries' historiography by incorporating immigrants like Temelkoff and Caravaggio and revolutionaries like Patrick and Alice Gull into Canada. The bodily scars of Caravaggio which connote Italian ethnicity and racist violence are covered, resulting in Caravaggio's successful assimilation into Canadian society and into the novel itself; since the novel is an attempt to update Canadian historiography, Caravaggio consequently gains the ability to enter Canadian historiography. *In the Skin of a Lion* thus uses the metaphor of self-cryptography to argue that modern historiography should be a more accepting multicultural pursuit which retroactively restores the ethnic identities of citizens like Caravaggio and Temelkoff where they have been previously white-washed. Similarly, the bodily scars of Patrick which connote his

class identity are covered so that the lower classes can integrate into modern Canadian historiography, like the novel itself. *In the Skin of a Lion* thus argues for a more accepting Canadian multicultural identity and historical narrative in which European immigrants and lower-class revolutionaries are given equal presence, though the book's focus on the historical circumstances impeding the ethnic integration of European immigrants prevents any rigid equivalence to be made to the ethnic *encryption* of Métis characters in *April Raintree*.

Mosionier frames the bodies of April and Cheryl Raintree as microcosms of racialization and poverty marked by racist violence in interactions which are simultaneously personal and institutional. Mrs. DesRosiers' racist violence causes physical marks upon April's body which induce shame, influencing April to try to *encrypt* her Métis identity by covering her body with clothes and hairstyles acceptable to upper-class white Canadian society. *In the Skin of a Lion* alternatively focuses on the ways in which poverty is written on bodies through personal and institutional interactions, although it does include Caravaggio, whose body bears the marks of racial violence. *April Raintree* and *In the Skin of a Lion* differ in that the characters of Ondaatje's book find relief from any potential shame that these bodily inscriptions may cause, through romance; they also differ in that Ondaatje's characters successfully encrypt their class and ethnic identities. While Mosionier's book argues by example for a more accepting multicultural attitude in Canada which allows for the preservation of Métis culture and ending of cultural genocide, Ondaatje's book argues for a more accepting multicultural identity regarding immigrants in Canadian historiography allowing European immigrants and lower-class revolutionaries historical presence and recognition.

Works Cited

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