IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES IN CANADA: THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING

Florina Năstase
PhD, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract:The current paper tackles the multifaceted aspects of the Canadian immigrant experience as rendered in storytelling. The paper attempts to underline the importance of storytelling in forging the immigrant's hybrid identity, while also illustrating how immigrant narratives contribute to the "foundational fictions" (Homi Bhabha) of Canada as a nation. The paper draws parallels between recent immigrant accounts and the chronicles of Canada's early settlers and natives. Canada's history reveals that the immigrant or the "alien" is at home in a country that for a long time felt marginalized and exiled, considering itself a simple "mediator"(Margaret Atwood) between greater powers. Thus, we may speak of two peripheries meeting and enhancing each other. In order to make its case, the paper close-reads poems and short-stories from three lesser known authors, namely, Andrew Suknaski, J. J. Steinfeld, and Kristjana Gunnars.

Keywords: Canadian, immigrant, storytelling, nationhood, alienation

What has always been prevalent about immigrant narratives is the need to turn the traumatic or life-altering experience into a meaningful story in order to make sense of the past and transform the future. Sometimes, the story will take the shape of autobiographical writing or a diary (Hoerder 16) which records the daily struggles or changes in the lives of the immigrants, but more often than not, the experience is transformed and fictionalized, so that not only one narrative, but several thousands, may have the chance to emerge and be known, especially since academic work on the subject often lacks the "vividness" of storytelling (16). Literature, particularly immigrant literature, bridges the gap between communities who share common trauma, and also provides an intermediary space for outside readers - who are perhaps strangers to the experience - to empathize, engage and react.

Immigrant literature is a curious hybrid of the universal and the particular: although the themes and motifs are general, the narratives delve into an intimate space inhabited by a personal drama. The specificity allows for a personal interpretation of the social structures of integration within a new country, while at the same time, transposing those structures to a global context (Tastsoglou, Jaya 85). The immigrant is faced with the dual challenge of preserving the continuity of the self while assimilating elements of a new identity from the "new" country. In the case of Canada, immigrants are confronted with an emerging "Canadian-ness" that permeates their own experiences (85). Ever since the age of settlement, first-generation immigrants have been unable to separate the "explanations of their life" from "their explanations of how they came to be here in Canada, whether successfully settled, or not" (85). Second-generation immigrants inherit this duality and often times feel the need to compensate for their marked Canadian-ness by immersing themselves in their family's heritage with rather mixed results, since there are certain limitations imposed on cultural identity. As Oscar Handlin claims in *The Uprooted: From the Old World to the New* (1953) the children of immigrants are tasked to choose between two worlds, "one for school and one for home, and each with rules and modes of behavior of its own" (qtd. in Johnston 63). Frequently, as V.P. Young points out, these two worlds may be incompatible "since both the home and the large community prescribe their own code and are indifferent or hostile to that of the other"

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(qtd in Johnson 63). This means there is a constant tension for second-generation immigrant to accommodate two manifestations of the self that may be at odds with each other.

That being said, the reverse is also true; immigrant narratives challenges notions of nationality and nationhood, questioning the homogeneity of any large community. The idea of Canadian-ness as an identity is transformed due to the impact of immigrant stories. As Homi Bhabha states in the introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990) national identity depends heavily on storytelling. Nations are based on "foundational fictions" (5) which entail both "acts of affiliation and establishment" (5) as well as "moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation" (5). In other words, a nation is a narrative in constant formation and transformation, where "meanings may be partial because they are in medias res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image" (3). What this means is that a nation is always readjusting its narrative, depending on social and cultural shifts in its evolution.

Since nations do not pre-exist narratives but rather, the two occur concomitantly, immigrant narratives build upon national identity and redefine it; in fact, they may be considered a new wave of "foundational fictions" that give birth to a plural yet cohesive nation. Of course, it must not be forgotten that many Canadian immigrants helped build the country from the ground up as farmers, laborers and artisans (Hoerder 12) and their efforts often went unrecognized because the government discriminated between "preferred" and not preferred nationalities (12). Through storytelling, immigrant communities constantly remind the nation that they are a part of their on-going foundation.

In the following immigrant narratives – comprised of both fiction and poetry – the issues of plurality, storytelling, and nationhood resurface in various ways, illuminating the struggles of the immigrant to reconcile conflicting selves while at the same time redefining Canadian-ness. The act of writing offers the immigrant the chance to position himself/herself both inside and outside the immigrant experience, both within and without the nation. Andrew Suknaski, a Saskatchewan second-generation poet of Ukrainian origins, speaks out about the sense of entrapment in his own language and culture, while seeking an illusory "homeland" in the poem "West to Tolstoi, Manitoba (circa 1900)"; J.J. Steinfeld, a first-generation writer of German origins, uses storytelling to make sense of the past and to justify a post-Holocaust reality from the position of someone who has survived and experienced it in the short story *Ida Solomon's Play*, and Kristjana Gunnars, a first-generation Icelandic writer lingers on the idea of being haunted by her homeland in the short story, *Mass and a Dance*.

"West to Tolstoi, Manitoba (circa 1900)" by Andrew Suknaski (published in the volume *In The Name of Narid*, 1981) is a powerful poem about dislocation and loss of identity. It portrays the immigrant experience as one of continuous movement: an endless voyage across great spaces of land – from Quebec to Ontario to Manitoba – in order to find a familiar place, a "homeland", peopled by other disenfranchised Ukrainian immigrants:

> the story of the young ukrainian immigrant
> imprisoned in his language and ghetto
> his name no longer remembered
> but an aging woman in assiniboia
> tells the rest about him
> spending those lonely winters in montreal with nothing
> but a friend's letter from tolstoi
> ukrainian hamlet in rural Manitoba
> whitewashed straw and mud shacks
> with thatched roofs
> the way it was done in the homeland (Suknaski 115)

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The nameless young man is a silent figure in the beginning of the poem, his story being recorded by others, while his silence is punctuated by the blanks between the words –white gaps that may visually resemble the forbidding Canadian landscape. Interestingly, the foreign homeland is both alienating (consider the contrast between the hamlet and the endless land surrounding it) and oddly familiar. The poet lived in rural isolation in Ukraine and has now found an inverted mirror to his home in Canada. The sprawl of territory is something that the two countries share in common. In fact, Canadians are particularly sensitive to geographical (dis)placement; what Bruce Hutchinson calls the "deep instinct for the land" (qtd. in Foley 7) is the Canadian drive for survival against harsh conditions, which makes the people more aware and "closer to the soil" (7) than other industrialized nations. The Ukrainian poet can certainly understand this sense of attachment to the soil and, despite linguistic and cultural barriers, his experience is oddly Canadian. In usual Canadian fashion, the geographical land takes on spiritual meaning as the immigrant tries to find a semblance of familiarity in a sea of Otherness.

The language barrier prevents the immigrant from fully engaging with Canadian culture; he feels "imprisoned in his language and ghetto" (116), and at the same time, he bemoans the native Canadian's inability to understand him: "hassled by railway officials/who always failed to understand his talk" (116). When he confesses that "i never want to speak/ to another englishman/for the rest of my life' " (116), we understand that is not hatred that fuels him but fear; the trauma of the journey consists in finding oneself not on a path to self-discovery, but on a path to self-effacement. The loss of the Self is terrifying in a land as large and forbidding as Canada. The poet's destination is not only Tolstoi, Manitoba, but any place that shares a commonality of experience. It should be noted that, throughout his journey, the immigrant remains detached from everyday Canadian life and is instead a voyager that lingers somewhere just enough to get directions to a new place: "and how he always followed the railway tracks west/stopping at some station to check a map" (115). This is not, by any means, a singular happenstance; most immigrants, at the time, were living in a no-man's-land, socially and politically speaking. As Dirk Hoerder puts it in *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada (1999)*:

> In most immigrant experience, the national polity, policies, and politicking, or, in a word, "Ottawa", and the urban elites of Montreal and Toronto, were distant; they are almost never mentioned in life-writings. The immigrants' everyday world consisted of the global and the local (13).

This contributed to the general isolation and vulnerability of immigrant communities, who were unaware of Canada as a whole, or that they were part of it. Yet, this experience is ironically Canadian, for it echoes the marginalization and disenfranchisement of First Nation people who can sympathize with the fruitless wandering of the immigrant. The poet confirms this exchange when he speaks of "an aging woman in assiniboia/[who] tells the rest about him" (115). The immigrant's story may be conveyed by a native woman because the immigrant is closer in status to a native than a Canadian citizen. As Linda Hutcheon points out, immigrants coming to Canada feel a sense of "doubled alienation" (53), since they are situated at the periphery of another periphery, Canada itself being an exiled country. Canadian identity is built on the idea of the marginal. Indeed, Margaret Atwood describes her country as a "circumference with no centre" (379) and a "mediator" between greater powers like Britain and the United States (378). Therefore, the exiled immigrant's story complements the narrative of exile and marginalization which is part of the "foundational fiction" of Canada.

Another important aspect of the poem is that of storytelling. It's no coincidence that the first line begins with "the story", and verbs, such as "relate", "tell" and "remember", drive the lyrical voice forward: the physical journey is doubled by a linguistic one, since it is not only the immigrant travelling, but also the story he carries with him. We are given a third-person account of the young

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man who travels to Manitoba; his direct voice will only appear at the very end of the poem, but this silence is powerful. Since other voices tell his story, it means that his experience is passed on and remembered not only by members of his community but by the natives of Canada, as we have seen above. The poem's structure also leads us to believe that there are many other "stories" that have been silenced; the visual blanks left between the words (for example, "no one knows how far he got each time" (115)) may also refer to an absence of voices, an inability to express what has been lost in translation.

The last retelling of the immigrant's journey belongs to the subject himself: "...he embraced one of them and told his story" (115). The encounter with other Ukrainians in Canada should be triumphant for he has reached his destination, but the sudden intrusion of his voice at the end of the poem brings with it despair: " 'please take me with you/i never want to speak/to another englishman/for the rest of my life' " (116). Once more we see the gaps in the text, almost as if we were witnessing the distances he has crossed in the white landscape. Despite meeting with his countrymen, the immigrant cannot find relief in an isolated community, because the threat of dissolution is just outside its narrow borders. To preserve the Self does not necessarily require erecting "mud shacks" in Tolstoi, but it does require preserving the story and making it endure. The gap in the line "I never want to speak" may suggest a split in the narrative; one part of the immigrant vows never to speak, while the other needs to carry on, despite cultural and linguistic barriers: "want to speak".

In a similar vein, storytelling and alienation are central to the narrative of *Ida Solomon's Play* by J.J. Steinfeld (published in *Dancing at the Club Holocaust: Stories New and Selected*, 1993). The author writes about the imaginative process of creating a story *about* a story, and from this perspective the narrative becomes meta-textual because it showcases the limits and possibilities of immigrant storytelling. Can writing about an experience stand in for the experience itself? This question seems to obsess the nameless narrator, a middle-aged woman who uses fiction to impersonate her Polish mother, Ida Solomon, with a view to understanding the horrors of her life and as a means to justify her own existence: "I wrote the play to keep from jumping off my balcony" (Steinfeld 159). The daughter was spared her parents' fate – a concentration camp in Germany – and has had the chance to remake her life in Canada. Therefore, she must compensate for it by re-enacting their suffering until it becomes her own. Her performance on stage is a manifestation of her guilt, particularly survivor's guilt. This seems to be a pattern with most first-generation immigrants who feel the need to atone for the "crime" of not only having abandoned their country of origin, but of also abandoning the hardships that came with it. As Aaron Haas points out, survivor's guilt can be a useful "call to memory" in order to educate future generations about the Holocaust, but it can also lead to an unsettling liminal state where one is "mired in [the] past to the relative exclusion of [one's] present or future" (25). This liminal state is also represented in the story by the blurring of reality and theater (Kremer 1223). The protagonist has a difficult time breaking away from the role she is playing when she meets an actual Holocaust survivor in a bar and cannot stop *being* Ida Solomon. As Lillian Kremer argues, the story plays with the idea of the "uncanny to collapse Holocaust and post-Holocaust worlds with second-generation survivors literally and figuratively re-enacting the lives of their parents in the camps" (1223).

The daughter is completely submerged in the performance because the stage is the only space where the past can be rewritten: "I wanted to know if I could have survived. Every night on stage I tried to find out" (160). What is obvious from the start is that she is not trying to revive her mother, but the past itself. The past becomes an elusive character which she means to capture and demystify: "Maybe I was too critical, but it was my play...more than a play: a way to confront the past. The past is a tangible character in the play" (Steinfeld 161). She tries to integrate the past in her everyday life so that it will become a coherent narrative. Despite the fact that the play she has crafted presents her mother's character at various stages in her life (youth and old age), the daughter prefers to embody her in the last stages of her existence, "at fifty-six, when Ida releases her hold, allows the past to triumph" (160). It is this last portion of her mother's life that is felt more intensely

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because the past grows more significant and powerful. The imminent death of her mother must be avoided at all costs. The daughter confesses that,

> I want the play to end, but I cannot under any circumstances allow my mother to die and remain lost to me, not again, not ever (161)

The play offers her an ironic substitute in herself; she will be her own mother-figure and remain living. The last vestige of her mother is her own self-portrayal and it is difficult for the daughter to give it up its double function.

At the same time, *Ida Solomon's Play* is a story about the tenets of storytelling. It is a first-person narrative that, nevertheless, sees beyond its own point of view. The intelligence of the story lies in its careful deconstruction of the playwright's "performance". If at first we are meant to sympathize with Ida's daughter, it quickly becomes clear that her obsession is damaging. The protagonist comes to this realization by herself when she encounters the Holocaust survivor in a bar. At that moment, she becomes aware of her privilege; she is playing a role she never had to live and she is now living in a country where pretending to be an old Jewish woman and frequenting "dingy eating places" are not punishable by death. Catharsis is, therefore, achieved through a deconstruction of the play/ performance and its deception. In the end, Ida's daughter learns that her mother's memories must be preserved, and not re-enacted, because re-enactment leads to perversion and self-aggrandizement. The story must remain her mother's, not hers. In this manner, Steinfeld reflects upon the limitations of his own craft, particularly as a German immigrant whose personal voice could be harmed by revisionist history. He understands that the subject of the story (Ida Solomon) can and ought to take precedence over the storyteller (the daughter), and both figures represent different facets of the immigrant experience.

Sometimes the story remains hidden or truncated by memory and its incompleteness haunts the immigrant, despite having left the motherland. Such is the case with Kristjana Gunnars' short story, *Dance and a Mass* (published in the volume *The Guest House and Other Stories*, 1992). In it, the author attempts to reconfigure a lost community of Icelanders, but ultimately realizes that such a feat remains impossible, since both the physical and the internal geography of the homeland have been damaged.

The protagonist is a young woman, now living in Canada, who finds herself unable to bring together the past and the present in a coherent narrative that would satisfy her adult self.
She became an immigrant by force, not by choice, and therefore, the rupture from the homeland has never been fully internalized or accounted for: "She came to Canada because it was somehow no longer feasible to live in the town she came from. It was territory now laid waste" (Gunnar 189). Not only that, but she has no homeland to return to. The immigrant usually preserves a sense of connection with the place of origin which remains a fully existent physical point on a map, whereas in the protagonist's case, the village she grew up in has been abandoned and destroyed. Therefore, the real-life referent of her memories is gone. This means that only memory serves as proof of the community's existence. Is memory enough to create and maintain a narrative?

The question is not only addressed, but allegorized through the short story's main conceit; that of a reunion. The people of her home town have decided to hold a celebratory mass and feast in order to reunite the orphaned community. However, these festivities are taking place on foreign land, and it soon becomes obvious that, without the homeland, these rituals lose their poignancy. The protagonist is embittered by the lack of choice, since the only choice left for the community to recreate the collective Self is through the Other (Canada). In the wake of this loss, the collective Self becomes a ghost that searches for its lost home on foreign land: "People could tell there were ghosts: and had the curious sensation *that they themselves were the ghosts come to haunt the place where they once lived*" (191). The protagonist, too, feels like a ghost in the new settings; in Canada she is an alien, a person who not only does not belong, but who does not understand *why* she does not belong:

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> The place she now lived in seemed to her a place without beginning. Without end. Without rise and fall. It was something else. She did not understand the ground she walked on, the air she breathed. Was this what they meant by the word *alien*? Alien: a person who does not understand the place she is in (Gunnar 191).

Canada both attracts and repels her with its monotonous, never ending geography. She likes "the way the snow fell in Canada" (191), but cannot shake off the sinister feeling that she will become as unidentifiable and obscure as the place she now resides in. In essence, she fears oblivion; she fears dissolution in a foreign land. At the same time, she is very aware of her failure to understand "Canada" and her self-applied denomination, "alien", is a conscientious choice to single out and analyze her experience. This gives the immigrant power over her alienation and even betrays a desire to understand her circumstances.

Much like Andrew Suknaski, Gunnars is, unbeknownst to her, describing a fringe Canadian experience. Her scattered community's need for a "mass" as a tribal recognition is part of the early Canadian mindset. Early settlers and colonists sought communion and protection from a wide, unknown landscape and its powerful neighbors. This instinct was described by Northrop Frye as a "garrison mentality". Frye deconstructs the term in *The Bush Garden* (1965), by defining what a garrison means in the Canadian imagination: "A garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable" (351). Perhaps the most contentious term in that statement is "beleaguered". This may have been a community, but it was built on common anxieties and fears, rather than ideals. The more negative the impact of the outside world, the more the members of this garrison would seek shelter and isolation between its walls. The same ambivalent feeling of community is rendered in Gunnars' story; the Icelanders form a garrison, united by cultural anxieties more than shared ideals. In that sense, they mirror the early Canadian fear of oblivion, the same fear that compels the narrator to call herself an "alien".

The protagonist comes to regard her community's encounters and dispersals as a form of storytelling. The people gathered at the reunion celebrate a mass, but it is really the dance that embodies the group's experience of coming together and breaking apart. The longing for the homeland does not overcome the natural inclination towards movement. The best they can hope for is these scattered and rare moments where memory serves to ignite a collective spiritual experience. The dance becomes a form of performance art that tells a story, the story of loss:

> Snow longs to be whole again. It longs for its origins and cannot remember when it was together. It has fallen on an unknown country. If there is a little wind, the snowflakes dance during their descent (191)

Her people are likened to snowflakes that aggregate and become unrecognizable in a new country, yet their eclectic movement is the same, no matter where they fall. For a brief moment they are seen "dancing". It is a form of communication, beyond borders.

Storytelling is an essential aspect of the immigrant experience; it is not only a means for cultural continuity, but it may also foster deep cultural exchanges: immigrant narratives actually contribute to the new nation's "foundational fictions", thereby enriching the idea of Canadian identity. In every instance of storytelling, the immigrant must reckon with the new and old Self. In a sense, the immigrant plants old roots in fresh soil, yet they are also modifying the "soil", effecting social and cultural change.

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