

RECENT (RE)VISIONS OF CANLIT: PARTIAL STOCK-TAKING

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches recent discussions on the state of contemporary CanLit as a body of literary texts, an academic field, and an institution. The discussion is informed primarily by a number of recent or relatively recent publications, such as *Trans.CanLit. Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (Kamboureli & Miki 2007), *Refuse. CanLit in Ruins* (McGregor, Rak & Wunker 2018), *Luminous Ink: Writers on Writing in Canada* (McWatt, Maharaj & Brand 2018), and the discussions and/or controversies some of those generated – expressed through newspaper and magazine articles, scholarly essays, but also through tweets, etc. The texts have been written as a response to the current state and – in some cases – scandals of CanLit. Many constitute attempts at starting or contributing to a discussion aimed at not only taking stock of, but also re-interpreting and re-defining the field and the institution in view of the challenges of the globalising world. Perhaps more importantly, they address also the challenges resulting from the rift between CanLit as implicated in the (post)colonial nation-building project and rigid institutional structures, perpetuating the silencings, erasures, and hierarchies resulting from such entanglements, and actual literary texts produced by an increasingly diversified group of writers working with a widening range of topics and genres, and creating often intimate, autobiographically inspired art with a sense of responsibility to marginalised communities. The article concludes with the example of Indigenous writing and the position some young Indigenous writers take in the current discussions.

Keywords: Canadian literature; CanLit; multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

It seems that at least from the beginning of the 1990s – almost thirty years now – a sense of unease or discontent has been growing around the state of CanLit understood not simply as the body of texts produced by writers who happen to have

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Canadian citizenship and/or live in Canada. Rather, the CanLit that has recently provoked numerous fervent discussions is likewise an industry related to publication and marketing of literary texts as well as an institution linked to the education system (for example, through creative writing programs, literature courses, etc.) and to the literary awards industry. The three – the actual body of literary texts, the industry, and the field of academic study – are, of course, intertwined. As a cultural institution CanLit has been closely related to and shaped by the Canadian colonial project of nationhood and the discourse of the nation, and has therefore been accused of replicating the exclusions of the national project itself.² Recent quite widely publicized CanLit-related scandals – the so-called “Galloway affair” followed promptly by the Boyden debacle and the “appropriation prize” controversy – heated up the discussion and brought to the fore some of the other most pressing issues. This article constitutes an attempt to address the current visions of CanLit and beyond that emerge from a number of recent or relatively recent publications, academic and popular, which include notably, monographs and collections of articles such as *Trans.CanLit. Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (Kamboureli & Miki 2007), *Revolutions. Essays on Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (Good 2017), *Refuse. CanLit in Ruins* (McGregor, Rak & Wunker 2018), and *Luminous Ink: Writers on Writing in Canada* (McWatt, Maharaj & Brand 2018). Some of those texts are emanations of discussions carried out not in conferences or academic seminars, but in newspaper and magazine articles and also through social media – through tweets and Facebook comments. In the course of the recent heated discussion CanLit has been called “a raging dumpster fire” – a disaster, a garbagy structure of exclusion and privilege in the throes of self-immolation – by Alicia Elliott, a Tuscarora writer, and many agreed. A lot of those publications and comments constitute attempts at starting or contributing to a discussion aimed at not only taking stock of, but also re-interpreting and re-defining the field, the institution and the industry in view of the challenges of the globalising world, but also – perhaps more acutely – the challenges resulting from the more and more painfully felt rift between CanLit and actual literary production of Canadian writers. The rift is that between CanLit as implicated in the (post)colonial nation-building project and rigid institutional structures, perpetuating the silencings, erasures, and hierarchies resulting from such entanglements, and actual literary texts produced by an increasingly diversified group of writers working with an ever widening range of topics and genres, and creating often intimate, autobiographically inspired art with a sense of responsibility to a wide range of intersecting marginalised communities. As current

² One of the long-standing exclusions is, of course, that of Canadian literature written in French – in result, the term “CanLit” in fact refers to Canadian literature in English and related industries and institutions in English-speaking Canada.

discussions and visions of renewed CanLit are a consequence of how it has developed historically, my discussion starts with a look backward.

2. Whence CanLit?

CanLit as we know it now started to coalesce during the “CanLit” boom of the, roughly, 1960s and 1970s. The decades were marked by increased literary production, and the rise of supporting infrastructure, including the federal support framework for the arts put together in the wake of the Massey report of 1951, publishing houses (including small presses), little magazines, academic literary magazines, and the institutionalisation of Canadian literature as an academic discipline.

At the time, Canada was striving to define itself culturally as a North American nation distinct both from the United Kingdom and the United States, perceived as a cultural, economic, and political threat. This effort is reflected in one of texts of thematic criticism highly popular at the time: Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), in which she explicitly contrasts the key themes she identifies in CanLit (the leading one being “survival”) with those of British and US canonical texts. The book also illustrates the fact that, while cultural nationalism was the order of the day, nationalist debates were in general not carried out in or through literary texts by Canadian creative writers (though Atwood’s own *Surfacing* might be viewed through the nationalist lens), but rather by literary critics (Szeman in Cavell 2007: 88). Themselves coming primarily from the Anglo-Saxon milieu, the critics of the era also highlighted white, primarily Anglo-Saxon writers, and championed literary themes related to settler experience. While the realm of Canadian literature in the decades of the “boom” was relatively diverse, it is to this day often reduced, especially in popular accounts, to a handful of primarily white, primarily Toronto-, Montreal-, sometimes Vancouver-based authors single-handedly forcing the amorphous nothing that preceded the period into the shape of Canadian literature.³

³ Cf. for example a recent book-length account of the “boom” era titled *Arrival: The Story of CanLit* (2017) by Nick Mount. According to the author, before the boom there was “a country without literature”, after the boom “a literature without a country” (Mount 2017: 1). Overall, the text is an ambitious, though admittedly non-academic undertaking, an attempt “to tell the whole story” (Mount 2017: 1) of the CanLit boom – the story of the writers, the writing, and the publishing industry of the time. It is written in a conversational style, gives much amusing personal detail about the authors and sketches the cultural scene. It makes economy the major driving force of the cultural development at the time (Mount 2017: 11, 36). The book has had a mixed reception. While the majority of the reviews have been rather positive, Julie Rak in her review of the text says that “it reproduces assumptions about white, homophobic, sexist, settler Canada, and it celebrates them” (Rak 2017; emphasis in the original).

CanLit as it was shaped in that period is then often perceived as a product of colonialism and the Cold War (cf. Cavell 2007). The third shaping factor in the form of the official policy of multiculturalism came in the wake of the political agitation in Quebec in the 1960s, increasing ethnic diversity of Canada as a result of the sweeping changes in the Canadian immigration policy introduced in 1967, and government attempts at managing both (Kymlicka 2015: 17–19; cf. also Mackey 1999). As a points system replaced nationality quotas, Canada started to receive more and more immigrants from beyond Europe, in particular from the Caribbean and Asia. The country that had always been ethnically and racially diverse was becoming even more so. The initial “ethnic dimension” of the policy of multiculturalism was supplemented in the course of the 1970s and 1980s with a focus on race and in time also on religion (cf. Kymlicka 2015). Multiculturalism was to stand for inclusivity.

3. CanLit in multicultural Canada

“The basic goal of multiculturalism”, according to Will Kymlicka, can be defined as “enabling the expression and accommodation of diversity within a larger framework of linguistic duality, human rights, anti-racism, and citizenship promotion” (Kymlicka 2015: 28). He stresses that in Canada multiculturalism is not a stage on the road to social assimilation and more cohesive nation, but rather the end of the road. As Pierre Trudeau declared in 1971, “[e]very ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own culture and values” (Canada 1978: 50). This approach marked the rise of the hyphenated Canadian, and focus on culture and cultural expression – often since criticised as commodified and “folkloric” (Mackey 1999: 79). The cultural component has certainly remained an important aspect of the policy “(...) to be achieved by providing support and encouragement for cultural maintenance and development among all cultural groups” (Berry 2015: 38).

With the advent of the policy of multiculturalism the federal government broadened its role in the regulation and shaping of what it perceived to be the national culture crucial to the process of nation building – by supporting ethnic and racial diversity in the arts, including literature. By defining the minority groups that could acquire federal support – those which wanted to contribute to the growth of Canada (Trudeau in Mackey 1999: 78) – the government at the same time, in the words of Eva Mackey, defined “acceptable forms of difference” (Mackey 1999: 79). “Ethnic groups” were “mobilised as picturesque and colourful helpmates and allies in the nation-building project”, Mackey comments (1999: 79). Among programs providing funds for “multicultural” arts, the Writing and Publications Program (WPP), was established in 1977. It remained active till the late 1990s and later subsumed under a program with more general

prerogatives. The program, which existed alongside other funding institutions, like the Canada Council, was administered directly by the multiculturalism directorate, without – unlike the Canada Council – the freedom to shape its own priorities or quality requirements. For that reason, it was perceived as “a direct government intervention into Canadian literary production to support and promote national multiculturalism” (McCormack 2018; cf also Li 1994), and – like other multicultural programs administered by the government – as patronising. The program’s agenda was to publish texts (literature including non-fiction, critical, and historical texts, etc.) in minority languages or in one of the official languages, but conveying something of note about the writer’s culture. The end aim was to make “this literature” (multicultural literature) start being perceived, by the literary establishment and the general reading public, as part of Canadian literature (Young 2001).

That a change in attitudes was necessary is clearly demonstrated by an interview with Robertson Davies, one of the luminaries of CanLit, included in one of the first anthologies of Canadian multicultural fiction supplemented with interviews with authors and titled *Other solitudes. Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, edited by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond (1990). The anthology was published in 1990, when Davies was 77. What he says in the interview, conducted by a Finnish immigrant, Kaarina Kailo, is an interesting mix of scorn, cultural presumption, and obscurantism a reader of his literary texts would never expect of Davies. Multiculturalism clearly rubs him the wrong way. He makes it clear that in his opinion multicultural programs are a system of hand-outs for irrelevant failures who cannot make it on their own and cannot fully commit to Canada. Maintaining that “literature depends on what people wish to hear”, he at the same time contemptuously admits that he does not read “ethnic” literature because “it does not come my way. I think it is distributed by the State department as hand-outs” (Davies 1990: 363–364). His example of the success of an immigrant writer who did not take hand-outs is that of the Czech dissident Joseph Skvorecky: “Skvorecky has made his name as a North American writer, and is immensely appreciated. That is the way to do it. If he was still writing in Czech it would just be some home industry”, he declares (Davies 1990: 364). The problem is that, as the editor promptly notes, Skvorecky continued to write in Czech while in Canada and all his texts appeared in translation.

While the Writing and Publications Program and other similar programs certainly contributed to some change in prevailing attitudes, another result of the programs, according to Li, writing in the 1990s, was that “racial minorities have not only to accommodate to the artistic and aesthetic standards legitimized in the dominant culture, but also to attune their own culture to an articulation in accordance with the taste and choice of the dominant group”. Li believes also that the two-tiered funding system introduced a hierarchy between the majority high-

culture and minoritised cultures perceived as marginal. The hierarchised division into the majority and minority writers and texts was quite clear to be seen, even in the nomenclature used. Just as “whiteness” was treated as a neutral standard of reference, as if white people had no race or ethnicity, so the purportedly neutral, unmarked term “Canadian literature” was used most often in reference to the literature of the social majority (which included a few non-white celebrities) in contrast to the term “Canadian multicultural literature” – used in reference to texts written by ethnic and racial minority writers. At the same time, numerically, in terms of the number of writers, translators, and publications supported, and the high profile achieved later by some of the beneficiaries, the Writing and Publications Program might be considered a success (Young 2001).

While multiculturalism as a national policy has been criticised from the very beginning, also by those who are supposed to be its beneficiaries, it seems indisputable that it has supported the growing versatility and diversity of the field of Canadian literature. The field, however, at the same time has independently responded to changing social realities and cultural climate in Canada and the world, and to broad literary and philosophical trends related, for example, to postmodern and postcolonial thought. Multiculturalism might be also seen as one factor enabling minorities, also in the field of CanLit, to boldly and loudly claim their rights and demonstrate their unhappiness with various exclusions practiced within the institution. An iconic event in this respect was the 1994 “Writing Thru Race” conference in Vancouver, remarkable because it limited participation in daytime events to Native writers and writers of colour, which provoked a wide-ranging discussion in the national media and even the House of Commons (cf. Lai 2015).

4. CanLit in 21st century

By the beginning of 21st century the landscape of CanLit – as a literary and critical practice, a field of study, an institution – seemed very much diverse and inclusive. In fact, however, some of the traditional exclusions were still clearly visible in the increasingly diverse literature; some of the old attitudes persisted. Even in 2006 M. G. Vassanji, a writer of Indian extraction, still perceived much of the Canadian society as suspicious, to say the least, of the newcomers, writers from beyond Europe: “Just when the country had begun to have a sense of itself and its literature, here come these fellows and gals who write about the tropics. Give them the space, this is a tolerant country: but are they truly, completely Canadian?” (Vassanji 2006: 12). By that time multicultural literature had acquired also a specific flavour, a number of established and expected motives and themes, which apparently indeed, as Li maintains, catered to the tastes of the majority reader and made “ethnic minority texts” easier to publish. By the first decade of the 21st century such texts were usually termed “diasporic”, and the

repertoire of themes was worn thin. This is how the situation is described, tongue in cheek, by Vassanji in his text “Am I a Canadian Writer?”:

Recently I met a young writer of Chinese descent, who told me how fed up he was of the stories of ghosts and bound feet and Chinatown that characterized so much Chinese Canadian and Chinese American fiction; he was impatient to tell the world, to tell Canada what being Chinese Canadian was all about. It was about dominating mothers, he said. About the war between the sexes. It is such young people that make the older writers nervous, threaten to make them irrelevant in a new Canada. (Vassanji 2006: 10)

Broader political, cultural, and social changes, in particular increasing globalisation, were felt also in culture, called for a new reflection on CanLit, the revitalisation of Canadian literary studies and related discourses. In the first decade of the century the challenge was taken up by Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki under the TransCanada project. One of the products of the project is the high-profile collection of highly theorized critical academic articles *Trans.Can.Lit. Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (2007). While contributors take up different positions in their texts, it is clear that major effort is directed at the critical surveying of CanLit as an institution, with its relations to the discourse of the nation, “certain practices of the polity” (Kamboureli 2007: viii) and colonial entanglements, and attempting to see CanLit in its post- and trans-national dimension, in the context of globalisation, at the same time encouraging a creative continuation of discussions related to postcolonialism, hybridity, and multiculturalism in Canada. In an attempt to nudge CanLit in new directions, the authors fine-tune and further theorise some of the perennial problems of CanLit. For example, Lily Cho reflects on the curious positioning of hyphenated literatures (e.g., Asian-Canadian literature), which seem to exist both within and without the nation (Cho 2007: 93), always “in an uneasy lockstep with Canadian literature” (Cho 2007: 108). She links them to the similarly internally contradictory concept of diasporic citizenship, which does “the work of dwelling in this dissonance between diaspora and citizenship in order to enable memory to tear away at the coherence of national forgettings” (Cho 2007: 109). Daniel Coleman, on the other hand, addresses the trance of “white civility” in Canada, which – he argues – has prevented the possibility of creating an inclusive nation. The multifaceted “civility”, in which “literary scholarship is deeply invested” (Coleman 2007: 28), rests on the concepts of “civilization as progress” (Coleman 2007: 29), based on the linear notion of time, and a “peaceful public order... fundamental to the politics of the modern nation-state” (Coleman 2007: 29). These, Coleman says, have been assumed to be best sustained and demonstrated by “civil”, polite behaviour into which citizens should be educated. The model was that of a British gentleman, therefore the concept is based on Britishness,

whiteness, and masculinity. “The idea of civility as a (White) cultural practice”, Coleman maintains, “made it not only a mode of internal management and self definition, because it distinguished the civil from the uncivil, but also a mode of external management, because it gave civil subjects a mandate for managing the circumstances of those perceived as uncivil” (Coleman 2007: 31). He hopes for a “cross-hatched, multiply vectored dialogue”, which might result in “a wry or critical civility” (Coleman 2007: 27), i.e., “a critical positioning” occupying a space of ambivalence “between the gains and the losses of nationalism” (Coleman 2007: 44).

In the same volume Rinaldo Walcott, a black scholar, comments on the illusion of inclusion achieved by CanLit and more generally by Canadian culture – on the exclusivity of multicultural diversity:

there appears to be a notion within the culture industries that Canada as a nation-state has achieved its multicultural moment of integration. Racial minority writers are published by large corporate outfits; visual artists, for example, Stan Douglas, are de-raced international stars; Atom Egoyan is Canada’s singular international filmmaker with Armenian ethnic flavour; hip hop reigns supreme (...) However, as Diana Brydon points out (...), “truly dissident literary texts and their sharper analyses still find less scope for sparking discussion within dominant Canadian public spheres.” (...) on the surface all looks well; arrival has been achieved. Thus talk of marginalization must seek different terms for a discussion to proceed. (Walcott 2007: 21)

This suggests that difference has been neutralised and co-opted, forced into an expected and unobjectionable shape, as critics of multiculturalism long predicted would happen – and not only because of the policies of multiculturalism. Ashok Mathur articulates the situation even more clearly pointing to the intertwinings of the publishing industry, big bookstore chains, and the literary star system related to book prize industry, which results in the production of “a great equalizing taste” to appeal to mass readership, academia and the media. “What is to be done”, he asks, “to develop strong creative and critical practices from a plethora of literary communities without taking our lead from market forces?” (Mathur 2007: 148–150).

While, to my knowledge, no clear strategy has been worked out, the entanglement – coupled with many other offences of CanLit – has contributed recently to a riot of considerable proportions, a riot that has again been a response to the many exclusionary forces that shape CanLit and which even since the publication of *Trans.Can.Lit* have been addressed in many ways by many critics. Mathur’s objections to the existence of the “star system” in CanLit, for example, have been echoed by the popular literary critic Alex Good.

The problem of the CanLit establishment, the CanLit “stars”, is really the problem of the fixation on the same group of writers who started their careers

during the boom-decades, but who still dominate the landscape of CanLit not only as writers, but also as, for example, literary prize jury members. The group, with Atwood and Ondaatje towering among them, has recently repeatedly come under attack as the dead albatross dangling from the fragile neck of CanLit. “The Greatest Generation”, writes Alex Good, “effectively constructed a national literature in its own image: a self-serving mythology that has gone on to dominate Canadian literature for half a century. Cui bono?” (Good 2017: 41) – he asks. “Cui bono” indeed. The answer Good gives in his essay “Shackled to a Corpse. The Long, Long Shadow of CanLit” is that the status quo benefits “the parasitical enabling class (...) agents, publishers, academics, reviewers, et al.” (Good 2017: 51), not only through actual benefits related to money or prestige, but also because the existence of “establishments” effectively frees them from the responsibility of making choices and exercising critical judgment (Good 2017: 57–58). The more or less explicit expectation of journals, also literary, that reviews, not only of the CanLit establishment, but in general, should not be critical or polemical exacerbates, according to Good, the problem.

The influence of the CanLit establishment, Good maintains, extends also to and through the literary awards system in Canada, in particular the Gillers, in which both the panel of jurors and the long- and shortlists of potential awardees tend to include repeatedly the same names, with Margaret Atwood, whom he dubs “Mother Giller” (Good 2017: 152) among them. What is more, the establishment reproduces itself by promoting a new group of writers, who fit their criteria of greatness (Good 2017: 153). No wonder, then, that, as he suggests, there has developed “our own home and native genre: the ‘Giller-bait’ novel” (Good 2017: 143), with writers who want the prize consciously writing texts of the kind that is expected: serious literary novels, preferably historical and dealing with “family matters or ones involving traditionally Canadian elements” and “Canadian settings”, non- or only mildly experimental (Good 2017: 158), “and written in a vague, pseudo-poetically lush and highbrow style” (Good 2017: 143). This, he says, produces a false image of homogeneity of contemporary Canadian literary production.

Good’s eloquent essays, first published in journals such as *Canadian Notes & Queries*, for a broader and more diversified readership than, for example, the articles in *Trans.Can.Lit*, might be treated as a harbinger of the storm that initially played itself out on Twitter, Facebook and in literary – though not scholarly – magazines, such as *The Walrus*, *Carte Blanche*, and *Literary Review*, but the discussion was noticed also by some major media outlets (*The Globe and Mail*, *CBC*). Some of the contributing voices of writers and scholars, in the form of essays, creative fiction, and poetry were published in 2018 as *Refuse. CanLit in Ruins*, edited by Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak and Erin Wunker (2018). The intention of the title is to indicate the state of the field (*refuse* – as in garbage), demonstrate dissent (*to refuse*), and show some new hope for the revamped – *re-fused* – CanLit.

The rage that finally sharply divided the CanLit community was provoked by the publication of the so-called UBC Accountable open letter titled “Open Letter to UBC: Fairness for Writer Steven Galloway”, which appeared in November 2016. It was signed by 91 writers – some of whom later withdrew their signatures – among them such “stars” of CanLit as Margaret Atwood, Yann Martel, and not-yet-discredited Joseph Boyden, who actually wrote the letter. Steven Galloway is an award-winning novelist, the author of the international bestseller *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (2008), definitely part of the new CanLit establishment. He was at the time Chair of the Creative Writing program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). In 2015 he was suspended, and a year later removed from the university because of allegations, which in time were revealed to include sexual harassment, bullying, and some instances of physical aggression. The signatories of the letter believed he did not receive due process. The letter was read by many in the CanLit community as symptomatic of its dismal state. In the words of the writer and university lecturer Jen Sookfong Lee:

For a long time, we laboured under the assumption that most Canadian authors are left-leaning and progressive, or whatever you want to call people who typically advocate for social change and inclusion. The Galloway open letter, which used fame to recruit signatories and then used that same fame to call for a skewed version of justice (or *due process*) at the expense of the women who made complaints, finally revealed that this really isn't the case, that CanLit has never been about the diversity of voices or even fairness. (Sookfong Lee 2019/20; emphasis in the original)

The participants in the debate have taken CanLit to task for a myriad of related offences, which only demonstrates that the list of groups embraced as an idea but in fact excluded from Canadian diversity has grown. The growing list is a somewhat paradoxical result, of course, of important social changes and the rise of communities coalescing around previously silently excluded and minoritised issues, which now can be voiced, acknowledged, and – apparently – given only lip service to by the CanLit establishment. The writers published in *Refuse* have pointed out the widely tolerated culture of misogyny and sexism that, they believe, almost uniformly rules creative writing departments in Canada (apart from UBC, Concordia has also been in the spotlight in this respect; cf. Elliott 2017; Thom 2018); the star system which grants visibility to a limited number of literary award winners; the sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism of publishers, critics, and scholars. Importantly, they highlight also the persistent racism that made Rinaldo Walcott announce in 2017 that he quits CanLit, because twenty years after the publication of his book *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* and the “Writing Thru Race” conference and related discussion he saw very little progress and the same exclusion of Black writers by scholars and critics

that he described in the book (cf. Barrett 2017). Finally, the contributors criticise also the limiting and outdated definitions of what really counts as literature, which excludes, for example, popular genres, life-writing, and the oral tradition. What emerges from the collection is a clear sense that CanLit does not adequately reflect the literary activity and literary expression of Canadians, and that it “is a multi-tiered system of power, influence, reputation, selling power, and fame” (Caple & Reimer 2018: 124–125). Altogether, the volume brings to the fore the simmering unhappiness with CanLit, which, again, has been voiced before, but never successfully confronted.

5. Case in point: Indigenous writers and CanLit

In the closing part of the article I would like to turn from voices of academics and critics to voices of writers, those included in *Refuse* and the recent anthology *Luminous Ink: Writers on Writing in Canada*. While the publications differ significantly from one another, they are both prompted by a need to respond to current conditions of writing in Canada, and – as the editors of *Luminous Ink* put it – to revisit the question of what it means to be a Canadian writer, and reconsider the viability and desirability of a national literature in 21st century, the question of what Canadian literature is and how it is related to the questions of the state (cf. the introduction to McWatt, Maharaj & Brand, 2018). I will focus specifically on issues related to Indigenous voices and indigeneity in Canada and CanLit.

The editors of *Luminous Ink* ask their questions to 26 writers of different generations and backgrounds, all, however, well-known and definitely recognizable. The list includes Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Judith Thompson, Stephen Henighan, George Elliott Clarke, Eden Robinson, Lee Maracle, Madeleine Thien, Hiromi Goto, Rita Wong and others. Importantly, the texts are not direct interviews; rather the responses of the writers tend to take the form of the personal essay, with the writers freely choosing their focus. The majority skirt or address only obliquely broader questions asked by the editors in their introduction and focus on personal stories of what shaped them as writers. The responses of those who actually take up the challenge to explicitly think about their writing in the context of the nation differ quite widely. Stephen Henighan (“An Ambiguous Voice”) is the only author who insists that his writing responds to the nation, and that, in general, fiction focusing on the specifics of a particular society and the nation as “an imagined community” is necessary. According to him, “novel and nation remain inseparable, even though the nation has been rendered diaphanous by globalisation” (Henighan 2018). Judith Thompson, on the other hand, recalls CanLit’s Golden Age with its pride in Canada and declares that now she feels only shame and sadness at the recollection. “How can there be any pride in being a citizen of a country founded on the genocide of the indigenous people?”,

she asks (Thompson 2018). This sentiment is the one that is strikingly often repeated by some other writers in the anthology, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and often connected to the concept of writing as “a place to refuse and resist white hegemony”, as Hiromi Goto puts it (Goto 2018). For example, Lee Maracle, but also Hiromi Goto and Rita Wong, all focus on the need to foster “a new sensibility on this continent” (Maracle 2018) inspired by Indigenous world views, and to redefine relations among humans, but also between humans and the world in the spirit of “all my relations” – through story.

This leads me to Indigenous voices heard in other publications, including *Refuse* – voices reflecting, again, on the present state of CanLit, but also focusing on the place of Indigenous writing in relation to CanLit, sometimes pointing to dangers of inclusive diversity, especially in the context of a settler colonial state. While the written literary texts and criticism authored by Indigenous writers started to appear in Canada in larger number and made a felt impact relatively late – in the late 1970s and the 1990s respectively – the writers and critics now produce generically and formally diverse texts that belong among the most interesting and thought-provoking ones written in Canada. They are also quite widely read and discussed. Contemporarily CanLit is careful to nuance the discourse on Indigenous literatures; the original response to those texts, however, till at least mid-1990s hovered between exclusion and a desire for cooption. Since the beginning of this century, however, all the calls for the renewal of CanLit have included an awareness of the insufficient recognition of Indigenous texts and perspectives. More recently – with the rising number of Indigenous texts published and their much wider recognition by academics and critics – voices indicating that expectations of white majority publishers, critics, and readers pigeonhole the texts and straightjacket the writers have also been raised.

While histories and anthologies of Canadian literature include texts by Indigenous authors as a matter of course, the incorporation of texts by Indigenous writers into the literature of Canada can be viewed as at least problematic. Many critics, not only Canadian, including the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* – the first major text attempting to theorise global postcolonial literatures – argue that Indigenous texts in general should be treated as a discourse independent of national literatures, exploring alternative metaphysical and political concerns (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002: 143). In the Canadian context, it has likewise been pointed out – by Indigenous writers – that Indigenous literatures are rooted in orality, unique worldviews and experience, and therefore stand out from the Canadian literary landscape, but at the same time “are part of cultural continuum that continues to grow and develop” (Akiwenzie-Damm 2005: 170). While Indigenous literatures are attuned to specific metaphysical and political concerns of Indigenous cultures, they are likewise part of a larger cultural and political Canadian context. Akiwenzie-Damm (an Anishnaabe writer) believes, in fact, in

the centrality of First Nations literatures to the literature of Canada because she sees them as organically related to the land without which Canada cannot exist (Akiwenzie-Damm 2005: 175).

Parallel to the views described above, more and more often it seems, Indigenous writers tend to “opt-out” of the CanLit context perceived still as a colonial project. For example, Jeanette Armstrong has declared in one of her texts:

It is we who textualize our origins, it is we who textualize our histories, our lives, our dreams, our griefs, and we who move the aesthetic of Aboriginal literatures from the common text of the settler into a new place in our communities. And that gives me great joy and solace, not being placed in their literature. It gives me great joy to be in the margins, knowing that (Armstrong 2006).

This position persists and is taken up by young Indigenous writers, very much conscious of the intersectional nature of their positioning as insider/outside of CanLit. Among those there is the Two-Spirit trans poet Gwen Benaway of Anishnaabe/Métis descent and Joshua Whitehead, a young Oji-Cree Two-Spirit storyteller and academic from Peguis First Nation. In their texts – “CanLit: It’s Time for the ‘No Contact’ Rule” (published in *Carte Blanche*) and “Writing as a Rupture. A Breakup Note to CanLit” (published in *Refuse*) respectively, they condemn CanLit as an exploitative ideological formation based on the exclusion of non-normative identities. Both writers, echoing and developing perceptions voiced earlier by minority writers, such as Vassanji, show how CanLit attempts to normalise and prescribe non-normative, minoritised identities. Whitehead says:

[W]hen I did write about Indigeneity, my queerness, my gender identity, and/or my culture I was told to either amplify or sequester it (...) Why must I always victimize my characters? What does it look like to write Indigeneity as a normalcy? (...) Am I an Indigenous writer if I write a narrative about a non-Indigenous person? Am I still Indigenous if I write about my queerness unabashedly? Am I still Indigenous if I am not stoic, tragic, pained, or dead? (Whitehead 2018: 196)

Benaway in turn declares: “My part in CanLit is every racialized, Indigenous, Queer, or marginalized writer in Canada. We’re here to give CanLit street cred, to be the Other in their dance of whiteness and desire” (Benaway 2017). These observations lead both writers to repeat Rinaldo Walcott’s gesture of a few years ago, and basically remove themselves from CanLit. Whitehead stresses at the same time that his texts are continuous with Indigenous traditions: “I am not a poet, a novelist, a spoken word artist, nor a performance artist, I am an otâcimow [one who tells stories] who howls âcimowinisa [stories] but follows the tradition of his ancestors: my stories are orations that are printed on the page (...) Because

of that, I am not CanLit, I am Indigenous Lit (...)" (Whitehead 2018: 196–197). Interestingly, he sees the survival of Indigenous literature as a given, but questions whether CanLit will survive without it (Whitehead 2018: 197). He also stresses the essential importance that writers as contemporary storytellers have for their communities, which sustain them, and confirms the belief expressed by many Indigenous writers that stories are necessary for survival and nurture (Whitehead 2018: 198).

6. Conclusion

What follows from this brief and idiosyncratically selective survey is a picture of CanLit in crisis, though perhaps not a literature in crisis. It is clear that many critics, writers, and reviewers treat CanLit as an ossified structure and its purported diversity as a sham. To be included in the kind of diversity that CanLit offers is perceived as a danger by many minoritised writers, a danger they attempt to fight by adopting various strategies. To exist as writers, to have impact on the reality that surrounds them, they need to be published, read, received critically, and taught, they need to be included in broader cultural discussions. The voices that have been most clearly heard in recent discussions suggest either changing CanLit from within (e.g., Elliott 2017: 97–98) or opting out of CanLit (Benaway 2017; Whitehead 2018). The strategies to be taken up, however, seem to be similar in both cases: use smaller, independent presses, write for and subscribe to literary magazines that support true diversity, write what you have always wanted to read, be the mentor and support to other writers; if you are a scholar or a critic seek actively such texts, read and think beyond the pale. "Let's focus on us", writes Benaway. "Diverse Canadian writers, welcome to the future. We can go to our events, promote our books, and build our networks. We've been doing it for decades. But now, instead of living off the attention crumbs CanLit has offered us, we can work on deepening our connections to each other, our communities, and our art" (Benaway 2017).

In spite of the sense of crisis, what emerges from the recent discussions on CanLit, is likewise a feeling of exhilaration that all those injustices, gaps, silences, and failures are now in the open. There is a sense of a new energy, also in the realm of the academia, an impression of a new, burgeoning community of like-minded academics, writers, editors and others who will try to address those sensitive issues with honesty and commitment. On a less positive note, the rise of the new community, means also a rift within a broader CanLit community (which some believe to be a "generational divide", cf. Cho 2020) and a sharp change in the style of discussion, with oppositional views being expressed in a much more decisive, sometimes confrontational manner. It remains to be seen whether the last few stormy years will change the field

and the institution, and if so – to what extent. Given that the academic community has been conscious of the thorny issues within CanLit for decades and while much has changed, many of the same grievances still remain, most probably no revolution is to be expected. Like any huge and multi-faceted institution, CanLit suffers from a serious case of inertia. Academia and CanLit scholars, some of whom now long for the change, have only limited agency as CanLit is driven also, to a large extent, by market forces. At the same time, there are attempts at connecting the dots of dissent emerging throughout the decades since the “boom” into what Karina Vernon calls “the genealogies of struggle developed within *Canadian literature as critical discourse*” (Vernon 2020: emphasis in the original) in hope of bringing about a lasting change. It is difficult not to agree with Lily Cho’s (2020) comment that if anything is to change, “an uncomfortable place” in which CanLit scholars find themselves right now should become our dwelling place for a longer while.

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