CANADIAN SIGNIFICATIONS: MYTH AND MEANING IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

By

ASA KLINT PIGGOTT

Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

submitted to Dr. Nanci Langford

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

April 2014
ABSTRACT

The Canadian identity is constantly changing and so too is our Canadian Myth. Myth, when understood in the semiotic sense, is a made up of numerous cultural signifiers, combined with ideology and understood in context to the time and place they exist within. The Canadian Myth is constantly changing along with each signified representations of what it means to be Canadian that makes our cultural Myth. Our cultural Myth structures how we come to understand the world around us and is used by a culture’s people to define who they are. In order to uncover how representations and signifiers of Canada and Canadians are constructed and understood, this study chose to integrate the methods of semiotics and post colonialism into a cohesive framework in order to provide a holistic point of view. For the purposes of this research, three stories were chosen that present diverse experiences of their characters from vastly different vantage points: Margaret Atwood’s (1972) *Surfacing*, M.G. Vassanji’s (1991) *No New Land* and Joseph Boyden’s (2008) *Through Black Spruce*. These narratives show examples of the changing and consistently evolving system of signs and Myth of Canadians and Canada. What they have in common is that they incorporate multiple systems of signs and Myth through representations of dialogue within the text, as well as layer the English language with non-English and create stories that relate to all Canadians. Atwood, Boyden and Vassanji seek to create new meanings by creating cultural stories that layer dominant significations and Myth with alternatives to them. They not only reconstruct colonial representations that existed within Canadian Myth, but also create new possibilities for redefining what it means to be Canadian.
How we define ourselves as Canadian is influenced by the many representations we regularly interact with in our culture. These representations are formed through language and cultural symbols that make up the system of signs that all within any culture use to make meaning of the world around them. One such medium that disseminates this system to the population is Canadian Literature that provides fictional portrayals of personal experiences. Canada has a long and varied history of authors writing about Canada and its people such as the explorer narratives of Hearn and Franklin and the novels depicting Canada’s North by Mowat and Wilson that present experiences from a Eurocentric colonial perspective. These narratives have contributed to the definition of the Canadian mythology, as has Canadian literature introduced during the latter half of the twentieth century that came to include narratives presenting perspectives of experiences of Canadians that challenge earlier representations and signifiers of Canada and Canadians. This body of literature introduces new ideas of what it means to be Canadian through representations written from a post colonial vantage point that offer a reaction to the colonial point of view. These stories use the dominant language and underlying myths of Canada, layered with values and beliefs that lie outside of the centre through infusing the dominant cultural language and signifiers with alternate post colonial representations and non-English in order to present hybrid stories that are part of a newly emerging mythology on the Canadian cultural landscape. Through exploring stories written by Canadian authors, this research will strive to answer the following questions: How do contemporary Canadian authors Margaret Atwood, Joseph Boyden and M.G. Vassanji represent and create Canadian cultural signifiers in their writing? What transformative learning opportunities do these representations of Canada written about in these novels create for their readers?
In order to uncover how representations and signifiers of Canada and Canadians are constructed and understood, the methods of semiotics and post colonialism will be integrated into a cohesive framework in order to provide a holistic point of view. Semiotics is a methodology that expands on linguistics theory looking beyond the relationship between representations of language and their signified meaning, to all cultural systems and signs. These signs and systems are defined by cultural codes that the receiver uses to make meaning of what is being represented and “have meaning only by virtue of their relationship to one another” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 82). Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1972) extends the analytical possibilities of semiotics and delves into the relationship between myth and ideology and how they construct ideas. It incorporates both ideology and semiology into a reflexive and integrated theory that expands on the sign as a process of how meaning is constructed between the signifier (the image/sound) and the signified (the idea that the signifier represents), towards a cultural Myth which is a signification containing a whole set of signs all laden with their own cultural, contextual and historical implications. Myth is a double system constituted by constantly changing meanings, signifiers and forms. In the creation of Myth, all previous historical relevancies are discarded and “a whole new history …is implanted in Myth” (Barthes, 1972, p.119). As well, our cultural Myth is a system of signs confined by the language and codes already in use – all of which already have a defined meaning and “historical limits, [and] conditions of use” (Barthes, 1972, p. 109). Our changing Myth does not start new with every change that occurs to our cultural signifiers, instead it is a palimpsest of historic representations and ideologies layered with contemporary understandings of our culture and the world around us. As this is the case, Myth defines who we are and is “the very nerve pulse of the life of a people, the electrical impulse that sparks into action the life of a people” (Highway, 2003, p. 18). It is
our “collective subconscious” (p.26) that lies at the halfway point between truth and fiction, and between science and religion that is both created by and reflected in the art and literature of culture.

When semiotic understandings of our culture are intertwined with a post colonial point of view, a critical lens is cast on Canadian signifiers and Myth, and how they are historically and culturally constructed and understood. Post colonial theory looks at the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Post colonialism questions, challenges and reconstructs earlier colonial definitions and constructs of peoples and cultures. The post colonial discourse of ‘Orientalism’ provides an understanding of how the European culture managed and produced the so called Orient during the post-enlightenment period. Through this area of academia, Europeans created an understanding of societies and cultures located outside of Europe using an ethnocentric European perspective and presented them back to society as supposed proven truths to be understood and accepted as such by those in European society. The representations that were created portrayed the ‘other’ as “either romanticized as a noble savage or demonized as a Stone Age heathen” (Brown, 1998, p. 3) in order to justify imperial conquest. Narratives were constructed and transmitted throughout society via educational vehicles in order to “create a form of consciousness that enables the inculcation of the knowledge of the dominant groups as ‘official knowledge’ for all students” (Kanu, 2003, p.71). These narratives with representations of the ideal and ‘the other’ were inculcated through signification into our cultural myth which was used to inform cultures both at the centre and at the margin. Therefore, the Orientalist-inscribed historic stories still influence our understandings of Canadian culture as they exist within the layers that make up our current Myth.
Through a semiotic post colonial lens, fictional representations of the binary divisions between the ideal and ‘the other’ can be critically viewed in order to uncover the power relationships that exist between them in order to provide alternatives to these. “Representation and resistance are very broad arenas within which much of the drama of colonialist relations and post colonial examination and subversion of those relations has taken place. In both conquest and colonization, texts and textuality played a major part” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin qtd. in Brown, 1998, p. 1). A semiotic post colonial interdisciplinary theory creates opportunities to reframe historical representations of the ideal and the ‘other’. Expanding on semiotics to include Myth, enables further critique into the understanding of how meaning is created as “Myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines society” (Barthes, 1972, p. 142) as not only does Myth provide a natural image of reality, it also turns “reality inside out” (p.142) as it loses its connectivity to reality.

When the layers of Myth are unwrapped using a semiotic post colonial strategy, transformative learning opportunities become available to the readers, Transformative learning within the post colonial arena is framed on the belief that “reality is socially constructed, constituted through language, and organized and maintained through narrative” (Brooks, 2000, p.166). Post colonial transformative learning places high value on those narratives “that are marginally situated in relation to the mainstream culture” (Brooks, 2000, p.167) as they present new variations of categorical definitions and representations of culture emerge within literature and other mediums reflecting our culture. Transformative Learning may occur when these narratives provide alternate or restructured signifiers creating an availability of values and ideas “that are marginally situated in relation to the mainstream culture” (Brooks, 2000, p.167). Through stories that present alternative stories and points of view, readers have the opportunity
to experience a transformative learning process as they are exposed to a critical perception of reality different than the dominant mainstream culture.

In an attempt to locate and define post colonial representations, cultural signifiers and Myth, works from authors writing from a post colonial vantage point were gathered and read to look for common themes using a semiotic analysis of their writing. For the purposes of this research, three stories were chosen that present diverse experiences of their characters from vastly different vantage points: Margaret Atwood’s (1972) *Surfacing*, M.G. Vassanji’s (1991) *No New Land* and Joseph Boyden’s (2008) *Through Black Spruce*. Within these novels, many themes appeared where colonial signifiers and Myth were turned on their head, and re-presented back to the reader using post colonial representations of experiences that resist earlier definitions and ideals.

Three post colonial themes stood out that demonstrate a reaction and resistance to Canadian Myths used by vast majority of Canadians and how they come to define themselves as such: The signified north, hybrid language and non-violence. The cultural representations of the signified ‘north’ used to represent the Canadian myth has consistently revolved around the “Idea of North” (Grace). The ideas and visions of the arctic and untamed landscape have created a “mental background” for all Canadians that have influenced all art and literature to this day (Grace, 2001, p.14). The signified North is either a place to be won, controlled and exploited or a vast landscape full of resources to be harvested and developed. As well, the Canadian identity has often included the signified ‘peacekeeper’ and has been “an integral aspect of national identification and, in many ways, this mythology of non-violence and mutualism has come to underwrite other myths similarly central to the Canadian consciousness” (Kapuscinsky, 2007, p. 99). Finally, language is a system of signs that constantly evolve and change due to historical
and cultural forces. The predominant signified languages of Canada have historically been English and French. However, these languages at the centre of Canada’s culture are being layered with and added to with the many other languages spoken in Canada. Much like our cultural Myth that is made up of a layered and evolving system of signs, so too is our language. As languages come into contact with other languages they evolve and change, along with the system of signs that the language represents. The signified north, hybrid language and non-violence are all signifiers that are a part of the Canadian Cultural Myth. All of these signifiers are represented in the narratives discussed here either through resistance to the predominant definitions of them, providing alternatives to them or layering the dominant signifiers with representations that exist in the Canadian cultural margin thus creating opportunities for transformation in how they are understood.

Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* is a story that prompts its readers to reexamine central Canadian emblems and thoughts on a Canadian national identity. Atwood plays with the signified North in this novel by presenting the northern journey of her unnamed female main character – a journey from the southern city with painful memories, to her northern home town, not to conquer and overcome the north, but instead to search for her missing Father, who we learn has died through drowning in one of the lakes surrounding her home. Through her journey north, the reader is introduced to the small town that has undergone much growth and development that the narrator calls home but is a place she no longer recognizes. During this drive through town at the beginning of the novel, Atwood creates an alternate representation to the traditionally signified North by calling attention to colonial inspired Canadian myth when one of the three friends, David states “The true North strong and free” (Atwood, 1972, p. 13). By using this statement outside of the Canadian national anthem, in a deriding tone that infers
David’s disgust at the landscape he is driving through, this statement becomes a reaction to the changing Northern landscape that is in need of protecting from the threat of invasion by Americans that are a “disease…spreading up from the south” (p.7). Violence is a central theme in the novel, as Atwood uses a female character with violent tendencies “as a destabilizing figure who, through her brutality, points toward broader social trends and reconfigures centralized myths of Canadian identity” (Kapuscinski, 2007, p.96). The narrator reacts to and takes part in violence throughout the novel such as when she threw leeches in the fire as a child (Atwood, 1972, p.142), seeing the dead heron that was hung in the path they travelled on to their campsite, gutting fish and hooking a frog on the fishing line in order to better catch fish (chapter 14). All of these “draw attention to Canadians’ participation in the natural ruination that has widely been attributed to Americans’ behaviours and lifestyles” (Kapuscinsky, 2007, p.111). When the narrator discovers that the other campers who she believed to have killed and strung up the heron were in fact Canadian highlights that Canadians have their own prevalence for violence and that we can no longer hide behind the veil of passivity. The importance of language is addressed throughout the novel through an acknowledgement of its importance to the creation of not only personal identity, but also to the Canadian identity as whole. This can be seen when the narrator attempts to speak French to the locals as she understands and accepts that “if you live in a place, you should speak the language” (Atwood, 1972, p. 26). French continues to be played with in the creation of the narrator’s identity when she explains the differences in the constructs of ‘bad words’ in English being about the body and in French being about religion (p.45). Language through signs is explored by Atwood when the narrator is looking for the rock paintings her father had described and imagines her father’s lineage as being “the original ones, the first explorers, leaving behind them their sign, their word” (p.136). As well, she attempts to find her
own language or refuses it all together when she spirals into madness and refuses all culturally inscribed values, including language in her attempt to shed all the cultural attachments she has used to make meaning by saying “the animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are word” (p.181). The narrator has come to understand in her madness that her identity is formed through language and labeled by it. Her refusal of living that life is also her refusal to use the hybrid English/French language that created it.

Joseph Boyden’s *Through Black Spruce* is a story that resists the dominant representations of ‘the other’ in Canadian culture and reframes previous colonialisist portrayals of the aboriginal through presenting characters that do not fit with traditional definitions in an effort to transform colonial infused beliefs. Boyden uses language and modes of communication throughout his narrative that breach the colonial orientalist wall in order to transform our conscious understandings of the Canadians he presents throughout this story. For instance, he uses a call and response method of articulating his story, and creates a conversation among his characters that uses the First Nations rules of dialogue. These unwritten rules create an understanding that “conversation is possible only when the storyteller and listener respect and understand one another through shared knowledge and experience” (Ridington, 1996, p.2), and it is only then that one can understand their place in the other person’s story. It is in this reciprocity of storytelling that knowledge is shared. The first chapter uses the voice of the uncle speaking to his nieces, while in the second chapter we hear the voice of the niece speaking back to her uncle. This call and response from chapter to chapter is used throughout the book, ending with the uncle’s voice in the last chapter. In using dialogue to tell his story, Boyden shares a method of disseminating knowledge used before colonization. As well, language is played with as Boyden infuses the distinct musical undertones of Cree with English and layers symbols of the
dominant culture with those of the subaltern resulting in hybrid stories. Through this unique layering of the English language with the musical Cree undertones and then infusing the Cree language in the narrative, he has managed to leverage a system of signs that addresses the relationship between the colonizers and colonized. Boyden also defers from the traditional representations of the ‘North’ as a place for masculine adventure to conquer and control through a journey from south to north. Instead this story is about a journey where Annie heads from North to South, with the south presenting obstacles and death “with very little hope of rebirth”, instead of the other way around (Grace, 2001, p. 155). Through a search for her missing sister, she experiences violence, drugs and oppression in the south and it is only on her return home that she is able to reconcile her traumatic experiences and realize her own identity. Violence is also represented through Will’s interaction with Marius Netmaker who terrorizes him throughout the novel. Through this representation, Boyden is able to “demystify the romance of the north to show its audiences and readers how close the north is and how important it is to national life” (Grace, 2001, p.152). Boyden has reintroduced the traditionally known ‘north’ to now be represented as a place where violence exists, but is also a place of tradition, hope and home.

M.G. Vassanji (2006) defines the category he writes within as “Canadian post colonial” and states that “those of us who would be described by this term are essentially those who emerged from the colonies in the 1960s and 1970s; we tell stories of those societies – stories which have not been told, or do not have a ready reception in the centres of the world; we are the historians and mythmakers; the witnesses” (Vassanji, 2006, p. 11). Vassanji’s (1991) narrative No New Land presents characters that demonstrate a cultural hybridity that crosses three continents and provides contextual understandings as to how the Indian immigrants to Kenya react when they move en mass to North America. Vassanji’s narrative challenges the
Eurocentric idea that “traditionally a new Canadian was someone who left the shores of Europe, and later China and Japan, set foot on the new soil, kissed the earth, and adopted the new land; forgot the old” (Vassanji, 2006, p. 8). Instead, we see alternative representations to the multicultural ideal of immigrant integration as they struggle to find work and integrate into Toronto life. His narrative creates and historicizes memories of the South Asian Diaspora through a representation of a community in Toronto, describing Rosecliffe Park, an area of the city populated the South Asian Immigrant community. This section of the city is made up of high-rises, each with its own community of characters, one of these high-rises being home to the Lalanis and the main character Nurdin. Their apartment has a view overlooking the Don Valley Parkway with the CN Tower in the distance. Throughout the story, the reader is exposed to the racism and oppression faced by this group of recent immigrants, including the violent beating of Esmail by local youths on a Subway platform in chapter nine. Violence here had a positive outcome in how Torontonian reacted to this news: “Toronto the Good would not have it. It brought home, to everybody, the fact that the immigrants were here to stay” (Vassanji, 1991, p.107). As well, Vassanji takes the reader back to East Africa in order to provide a contextual understanding of the community that is created in Rosecliffe Park. Representations of the Indian identity created within the confines of the ghettoized sections of Toronto’s South Asian community is one constructed out of a population that has been “trans-located into the new place [where] India becomes dis-located and hybridized and ceases to stand for a pristine culture and homeland” (Simatei, 2011, p.61). The language used throughout the Vassanji’s story is also hybridized much like in Through Black Spruce; however, the language presented here is predominantly English layered with the African dialect of Indian. This combination of a hybrid language and identity, combined with memory creates context for the reader of the characters
that enable a better understanding of how they face challenges and come to identify themselves as Canadians.

Atwood, Boyden and Vassanji have given us stories that are all examples of post colonial narratives that uncover and expose traditional colonial representations and either combine them with post colonial representations or present these on their own. When looked at through a semiotic post colonial lens, an understanding of what has contributed to the Canadian Myth is exposed and becomes available to the reader. The colonial signifiers and predominant Canadian ethos which has served this country for generations is one that consistently evolves and changes, incorporating new beliefs and values as it travels through time. Much like the signified Canadian north, Canadian authors are critiquing colonial ideology and resisting its hegemonic power by providing a system of signs that present alternates to these signifiers. The signified North, Canadians as peaceful and our national languages are still a “unifying symbol of national identity” (Grace, 2001, p. 67); however, now these signs that contribute to the Canadian Myth contain more than the colonial signs that created them. Now they also contain Canadian post colonial signifiers that provide readers with representations of experiences that are more in line with their own.

What the Canadian authors presented here have in common, is that they incorporate multiple systems of signs through a pastiche of dialogue within the text, as well as layer the English language with non-English and create stories that relate to all Canadians. By presenting a hybrid language and a hybrid culture to their readers, they are able to create an understanding of the experiences of their characters that all may be a part of, even though they may lack the historical context, knowledge and experience that create its identity. These are stories “that mixes cultures, languages, and modes of storytelling” (Grace, 2001, p.255) that breaks through
the embedded cultural consciousness by using a hybrid approach to the narrative construction and uses dominant cultural representations layered with alternate values and beliefs, to create a unique perspective of Canadian culture. These new stories are providing alternative representations of the Canadian identity for all those who read them and as such, are contributing to the evolving definition of what it means to be Canadian within its Myth.

Much Canadian literature is classified as post colonial as it is a label given to the many literary texts that meet the criteria of writing back to the dominant culture from the margins. Many argue that Canadian fiction cannot be classified as post colonial as Canada does not contain a clear “demarcation line between the colonized people and the colonizers” (Vautier, 1996, p. 3) and the language and culture of the colonizers are now blended into and a part of Canadian culture. Therefore, it can be argued that post colonial theory is not providing sufficient space within which to create representations and areas of discourse of the hybrid Canadian identities. While it does offer a lens through which one can resist and write back to colonial imposed racism and oppression, it is only when viewed through the additional lens of Semiotics that these stories can be seen as presenting opportunities for transformation to the Canadian Myth and in turn the Canadian identity.

Post colonial examples of literature presented in this paper have created a resistance to traditional representations of the ‘ideal’ and the ‘other’ and become sites where transformative learning can occur as they offer revisions to colonial narratives that exist within Canadian culture. When these examples of resistance literature that uncover colonial impositions of ‘the other’ are disseminated to a broad audience, someone situated in the centre views the representations within these narratives as existing outside of their own worldview and offers opportunities for them to reconcile and incorporate these representations into new ways of
knowing and understanding the world around them. On the other hand, someone on the margins experience transformation through a consolidation of representations from these narratives that are more in line with their own reality and identity. As such, new variations of representations, both at the centre and in the margins, emerge that all have an impact on post colonial relationships that lead to social change.

Through engaging with these stories, one can experience transformative learning through the exposure to representations of Canadians that conflict with colonial ideals represented in traditional narratives. This alone could lead to social change; however, if they were to be included in curriculum, they would have greater power to influence the next generation of Canadians. Brown (1998) describes a method of teaching that uses both traditional narratives and resistance literature in his classroom. The traditional colonial literature is “subversively re-read as the objects of an inquiry into the oppressive effects of the signifying practices inscribed in them” (p.5). This “counter-hegemonic” reading allows ‘the other’ within the classroom to create new representations of the decolonized self, and provides a method for students to create a revised frame of references and system of representations to define and speak back to the oppressive structures that have existed through colonialism. Along with re-reading traditional texts, the use of literature that is written as a reaction to the stereotypical representations of ‘the other’ is added to the student’s reading lists. This category of post colonial resistance literature is integral to the struggle of the historically oppressed as it provides representations of ‘the other’ that they can relate to. Through this method, Brown was able to combat the orientalizing and marginalizing effects of colonialism through providing narratives that represented the student’s realities of their own hybridity.
Atwood, Boyden and Vassanji have created cultural stories that layer the dominant with the oppressed, seek to create new meaning and not only reconstruct colonial representations that existed within Canadian Myth, but also create new possibilities for redefining what it means to be Canadian. These authors take the preexisting binary relationships of us/them, north/south, and ideal/’other’ and are using these to show conflict among their characters and the Canadian culture in the foreground while enabling an overall representation of cultural hybridity that privileges polyphony over homogenous discourse. As well, these authors “invite a constant construction, deconstruction and reconstruction” (Maver, p. 10) to the Canadian mythology that is adding to and creating a Canadian national identity that is not static, and is instead continuously changing and in constant flux. It is an identity that revolves around the idea that Canada is constantly readjusting and redefining who its people are. These stories represent an emerging Myth that all are able to understand and become a part of complete with a new system of signs with a new set of signifiers available for all Canadians.
References


Maver, I. (n/d) *New Diasporic Literature in a Post-ethnic Transcultural Canada*. University of Ljubljana, Slovenian. Retrieved from:

http://myuminfo.umanitoba.ca/Documents/2142/MaverI.pdf


