

“Where is here?” The Unimaginable in Hispano-Canadian Writing

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Abstract: Northrop Frye, thinking about the existential Canadian question, did not pose the expected query of “Who am I?”, famously asking instead “Where is here?” If Frye’s question has been of concern to “Canadian” writers, what might it mean to those Other-Canadians whose physical, emotional, and psychic landscapes are inevitably influenced by a new and different geography? How would they imagine – or re-imagine – their new situation and to what purpose? What shape would land-based discourse take in their writing? This study analyzes the ways in which the surprising absence of a characteristic land-based rhetoric in Hispano-Canadian literature creates an even more profound sense of the indistinct geography of the exile.

Key words: Canada; discourse; exile; Hispanic; immigrant; land; Latino; literature; place; winter

Résumé : Northrop Frye, réfléchissant à la question existentielle canadienne, ne s’est pas posé la question *Qui suis-je?* mais plutôt *Où suis-je?* Si la question que pose Frye est d’intérêt pour les écrivains « canadiens », que peut-elle signifier pour les autres Canadiens dont les paysages physiques, émotionnels et psychiques sont inévitablement influencés par une géographie nouvelle et différente? Comment pourraient-ils imaginer ou réimaginer leur nouvelle situation et dans quel but? Quelle forme prendrait le discours du rapport à la terre dans leur écriture? Cette étude analyse diverses façons par lesquelles l’absence surprenante d’une rhétorique basée sur le rapport à la terre, dans la littérature hispano-canadienne, peut créer un sens plus profond de l’indistincte géographie de l’exil.

Mots clés : Canada; discours; exil; hispanique; immigrant; territoire; Latino; littérature; lieu; hiver

When I first began thinking about Canada in the context of Hispano-Canadian writing, a number of remembered descriptions or perceptions of this country sprang almost instantaneously to mind, setting off a kind of domino-effect of linked ideas about land, landscape, and literature. I thought first of Captain George Vancouver, who, in the early 1790s explored our Pacific coast in search of a North-West passage, remarking “A lifetime is not enough to explore this country. A man is too small to feel its size. The poet has not been born to sing its song, nor the painter to paint it¹”. A couple of hundred years later, Edward McCourt, a Canadian novelist, literary critic, and writer of short stories and travelogues, agreed with Captain Vancouver when he observed, as he travelled across the country by car: “In Canada there is too much of everything. Too much rock, too much prairie, too much tundra, too much mountain, too much forest²”. We are, after all, the second largest country in the world in area, surpassed only by Russia. Given all this land mass, not surprisingly, Roy MacGregor, an award-winning journalist and author of note, has declared: “To capture Canada ... you’d have to be not only a portrait painter but also a cartographer, for the central personality of the Canadian is landscape³”. The poet Miriam Waddington, in her 1968 work titled “Canadians”, wrote a more nuanced and interrogative description: “...We look / like a geography but / just scratch us / and we bleed / history, are full / of modest misery / are sensitive / to double-talk double-take / (and double-cross) / in a country / too wide / to be single in. / Are we real or / did someone invent / us...?⁴”. Waddington’s poem then led me to remember a historical anecdote about how this

¹ Roy MacGregor, *Canadians: A Portrait of a Country and its People*, Toronto, Viking Canada, 2007, p. 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴ Miriam Waddington, *Collected Poems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 34.

land came to be called “Canada,” an anecdote in which Spanish plays a significant role, even if only psychologically. According to a certain legend, Spaniards exploring this continent in the 1700s did not bother to chart the lands to the north, simply writing on that portion of the map “acá nada” – “nothing here” – and it is conjectured that this phrase evolved into “Canada”. A similar linguistically-based legend, reinforcing that Spanish idea of nothingness in the north, claims that Spaniards called the seaboard territory they did explore “Capa de Nada” – “Cape of Nothing” – and it is easy to hear how that phrase too could evolve into “Canada”⁵.

The last link in this chain of thought immediately conjures up the powerful and dramatic image of Canada as a black hole, *un agujero negro*, in the short-story of the same name by the Chilean-Canadian novelist, poet, and short story writer, Carmen Rodríguez⁶. Rodríguez was a political and social activist in Chile, forced to flee after the coup of September 11, 1973. She became a Canadian citizen in 1979 and currently lives, works, and writes in Vancouver. Her published work is intimately informed by her experiences in Chile, in Canada, and in the spaces between the two. Estela de Ramírez, the protagonist of “black hole,” like her creator, is forced to leave Chile with her family because of the brutal and repressive military regime. And her problem, she tells us, when she arrives in Canada is that:

[...] she had nothing to hold on to. At most, some pictures in an issue of *National Geographic* from who-knows-when, showing snow-capped mountains and crystal-blue lakes with a hotel that looked like a castle – or maybe she was getting confused and the pictures were from Switzerland...⁷.

⁵ Bill Casselman, “Bill Casselman’s Canadian Word of the Day”, 17 October 2007, http://www.billcasselman.com/cwod_archive/canada.htm, Retrieved October 17, 2007.

⁶ Carmen Rodríguez, *and a body to remember with*, Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

When she had first been told that she was going to Canada, “nothing came to her mind. Canada⁸” – here we should hear very clearly the echo of that “*acá nada*” of those first Spanish explorers – and as her young daughters pressed her for details she could only reply that Canada is “a very big country at the other end of the world. [Because,] now that she thought about it, those *National Geographic* pictures were probably of Switzerland...⁹”. As their plane leaves Santiago behind, “the hole called Canada” begins to take over Estela’s body¹⁰ and within their first weeks in Canada Estela, despite the snow-capped mountains and waters bracketing Vancouver, becomes absolutely convinced that those *National Geographic* images were of Switzerland. She has a recurring dream of now everything falling into “a black hole called Canada¹¹” and, in the end, some 14 years later, despite a seemingly successful process of acculturation, the dream becomes a true nightmare in which Estela herself implodes into this black hole, surrounded by nothingness¹². She cannot imagine Canada.

On the other hand, as William H. New, the Canadian poet and literary critic, echoing the observations of Captain Vancouver *et al*, points out: “Canadians, of course, have long thought of themselves in connection with the land. As scores of writings indicate, they are fascinated by distance and scenery, park and farm, property and region, river system and mountain range...¹³”. He notes that many significant writers, critics, historians, politicians, poets, and commentators “have in the past

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³ William H. New, *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997, p. 17.

encapsulated a collective Canadian identity in land-based metaphor¹⁴, citing, among others, E.J. Pratt, the historian Donald Creighton, and Northrop Frye, for whom the existential Canadian question was not “Who am I?” but “Where is here?”¹⁵. Interestingly, this is a central question that plagues the immigrant, the refugee, the writer in exile, and the very one that Estela de Ramírez, as we have seen, is incapable of answering. New insists that in Canadian writing, land has to be seen as a verbal trope, not simply as a neutral referent¹⁶ and he poses a number of provocative questions about land in the Canadian context:

Why is it ... that people treat the land as protector, or as cloak, or as comforter? Why and in what ways do they consider it theirs? When do they consider it theirs? When do they identify with a particular land, and what (if anything) causes them to find other lands and land-shapes alien, or alienating, or downright oppositional? How, moreover, do they communicate their degree of identification? What words and signs do they use? ... What, in short, does *land* have to do with *writing*, with *representation*, and with *power*¹⁷?

New is interested in studying how various configurations of land function in the English-language literature of Canada and in Canadian culture in general, to determine how a land-based rhetoric and discourse are used to shape, define, and assign meaning to space, place, and, ultimately, how the land is accepted “as a concluding image of identity¹⁸”. Almost three decades earlier, Northrop Frye, in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971) was unequivocal about the relationship between writers, place, and identity, insisting

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1971, p. 220.

¹⁶ William H. New, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

that “the creative instinct has a great deal to do with territorial rights¹⁹” and that “[i]dentity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture²⁰”.

The notion of “Canada” calls up a profoundly powerful physical and imaginary entity. What, then, might Frye’s question of “Where is here?” mean to Hispano-Canadian writers whose physical and psychic landscapes must be inevitably influenced by this new and different geography? How do they imagine or re-imagine where they are, and to what purpose? What would be the nature of their land-based rhetoric as they come to terms with this new place? Marta Dvořák and William New point out that “writers and commentators alike write out of geographical place and also out of (personal, communal) social location²¹”. My (geographical, cultural, personal) assumption was that there is a land-based rhetoric and discourse in Hispano-Canadian literature and that it would, perforce, be a “Canadian” one, albeit from different perspectives. It would have been helpful to have been more mindful of the “*acá nada*” legend and Carmen Rodríguez’ “black hole that is Canada”. Pablo Urbanyi’s novel titled *En ninguna parte*²², literally, “nowhere” (set, significantly in Ottawa and its environs) and José Leandro Urbina’s article “Writing in Exile: Writing Nowhere for Nobody:²³” definitely sound another loud note of alarm.

¹⁹ Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*, p. i.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

²¹ Marta Dvořák and William H. New, “Introduction, Troping the Territory”, in Marta Dvořák and William H. New (eds.), *Tropes and Territories. Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writings in Context*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007, p. 10.

²² Pablo Urbanyi, *En ninguna parte*, Buenos Aires, Editorial de Belgrano, 1981.

²³ José Leandro Urbina, “Writing in Exile: Writing Nowhere for Nobody?”, in Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (eds.), *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1995, p. 123-126.

Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to expect a strong Canadian presence of any kind in the early publications of the writers of the Latin American Diaspora in Canada – the Argentines, Chileans, and Uruguayans who fled or were forced into exile because of the repressive regimes that overtook their countries in the 1970s, the refugees and exiles created by the civil wars that ravaged Central America in the 1980s. As Urbanyi notes matter-of-factly and yet poignantly: “The loss of points of reference, of the feeling of belonging, combined with an abrupt break in the continuity and evolution of a person’s life, are overwhelming and can lead to an acute sense of disorientation and chaos, especially if the person is a writer²⁴”. Hugh Hazelton, in his recent critical work, *Latinocanadá*²⁵, points out that in general, at the beginning, these writers focus on their country of origin, and the dominant themes are those of political repression and struggle, and the economic difficulties and familial and personal issues they experience because of their involuntary and often forced displacement. And while Hazelton also notes that eventually some writers do begin to accept their new environment and live and write in the present, bringing to bear a new and interesting perspective on Canadian reality, he names a good number of writers who, even after years and years in Canada and despite writing now in French and/or English, still focus their imagination elsewhere in the world or on the themes that first informed their work, the themes of political militancy, immigration, exile, nostalgia, and

²⁴ Pablo Urbanyi, “The Writer in Exile”, in Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (eds.), *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1995, p. 131.

²⁵ Hugh Hazelton, *Latinocanadá: A Critical Study of Ten Latin American Writers of Canada*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 2008.

the longing to return to their homeland²⁶. For Mexican writer and editor Ángel Mota, writing in Canada is a constant act of travelling to other remembered and referential spaces²⁷. The Salvadoran poet and prose writer, Alfonso Quijada Urías, describes it more viscerally: “The dilemma of being there and here, of being foreign, of speaking English or French and thinking in Spanish, is like a change of skin, an unending metamorphosis, for we never cease remembering the past or lose the desire to return to the motherland as to a source of life²⁸”. Thus, the absence of Canada and a land-based discourse in much of the early work of those Diaspora writers is understandable, but it is surprising, perhaps, to realize that this assessment is as current in Hazelton’s 2008 *Latinocanadá* as it had been in an article on Latin American writing in Quebec that he published in 1995²⁹. If Canada – as land, landscape, territory, region, property, space, place – does not figure in Hispano-Canadian literature, then truly, can we ask Northrop Frye’s quintessential question of “Where is here?” of those authors? And, not incidentally, without a land-based rhetoric and discourse, just what kind of place is imagined – or not – by Hispano-Canadian writers? As we have long since learned, silence speaks volumes.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20-21. Hazelton refers to authors such as Gloria Escomel (Uruguay), Edith Velázquez de Málec (Venezuela), Elías Letelier (Chile), Alberto Kurapel (Chile), Gilberto Flores Patiño (Mexico).

²⁷ My translation, quoted in Luis Molina Lora and Julio Torres-Recinos (eds.), *Retrato de una nube: Primera antología del cuento hispano canadiense*, Ottawa, Editorial Lugar Común, 2008, p. 170: “Narrar en Canadá es una presencia que se va haciendo con el viaje a otros espacios memóricos y referenciales.”

²⁸ Alfonso Quijada Urías, “Message from the Crossroads”, in Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (eds.), *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1995, p. 129.

²⁹ Hugh Hazelton, “Aquí estamos: An Overview of Latin American Writing in Quebec Today”, in Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (eds.), *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, Ottawa, Ed. Carleton University Press, 1995, p. 135-141.

New asserts that generations of settlers and writers in Canada “did not just observe the new land or measure it, but [...] identified with it, using the shapes of the land as metaphors of mood and thereby defining for themselves some settled system of custom and value³⁰”. V. S. Naipaul, the Trinidadian-born writer, in his 1987 novel about emigration and resettlement, *The Enigma of Arrival*, extends the definition when he observes “land is not land alone ... not something that simply is itself. Land partakes of what we breathe into it, is touched by our moods and memories³¹”. Apart from the realization that so many Hispano-Canadian writers continue to focus their gaze on issues and countries outside of Canada, another compelling explanation for the absence of a land-based rhetoric in their work may be found in the simple fact of their lack of contact with the land itself. As Hazelton has also noted, “one of the characteristics that marks a certain amount of Latino-Canadian writing is its relative urbanism and technical complexity³²”, a legacy of the literary scene in Latin America, and one that is coupled with the concentrated urban nature of their settlement in Canada, primarily in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton³³. Sherry Simon has pointed out: “Cosmopolitan cities do not reflect their hinterland and tend to stand in opposition to them³⁴” and, obviously, living in an urban centre begs the question of just how aware of the land itself one might then be. But, while there may be no land-based rhetoric as such, what one does discover in reading the works of Hispano-Canadian writers

³⁰ William H. New, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

³¹ V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1987, p. 301.

³² Hugh Hazelton, *Latinocanadá, op. cit.*, p. 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁴ Sherry Simon, “Translating in the Multicultural City: Montreal as a City of the Americas”, in Winifred Siermerling and Sarah Phillips (eds.), *Canada and its Americas. Transnational Navigations*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 2010, p. 173.

is a kind of anonymous, bland, undistinguished, or even dismally stereotypical scenery, places that could be anywhere in North America – what could be called the indistinct world of the exile.

Hernán Barrios, a Chilean writer based in Montreal, for example, categorically affirms in the Author's Note to his 1990 collection of short-stories titled *Landed Immigrant: Relatos* that these stories are spatially set in North America, even though mentally they take place in Latin America and are concerned with the condition and identity of contemporary *latinoamericanos*³⁵. In fact, it would be more accurate to say simply that the stories were composed in North America, as there are no identifying topographical details nor is there a sense of defined locale in the majority of the stories that do not evocatively call up a remembered Latin American geography. The Chilean-Canadian poet Alfredo Lavergne, in the majority of the poems in his 1995 work *El puente* (*The Bridge*)³⁶, reflecting on exile, allows only that his poems are set in “the Americas”³⁷. Pablo Urbanyi's 1997 novel *Puesta de sol* (published in translation in 2002 as *Sunset*) deals with years of events that took place in Argentina but he situates the composition of the work in an unnamed northern country, and Pedro, the narrator and ostensible author (who, like Urbanyi is a Hungarian-born Argentinean transplant forced out of the country) makes it clear that wherever that is, is not of any consequence:

Where am I writing from? I don't think it's very important. This is a country with long winters and short summers [...]. I've started writing this in winter, in a house, next to a window; outside lies a snow-covered

³⁵ Hernán Barrios, “Author's Note”, *Landed Immigrant: Relatos*, Santiago, Ediciones Documentados, 1990, p. 8.

³⁶ Alfredo Lavergne, *El puente*, Montréal, Les Éditions d'Orphée, 1995.

³⁷ Hugh Hazelton, *Latinocanadá*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

field with scattered pine trees, through which there is no path. The sunlight reflects violently off the window but there is no warmth³⁸.

Pedro, the few times that he does refer to his current situation, invariably references the window, the cold, and the snow as the undistinguished markers of place. “The world [he says] looks as if it were eternally frozen³⁹”. Tellingly, as he writes up the events of a past life in Argentina, he is often uncertain of where he is now, and one of his final ruminations in the novel poignantly establishes that he is somewhere else, but it is an unspecified somewhere else, defined only by the sign of those long winters: “Whenever the old trembling returns, I have no idea of where I am or which window I happen to be looking out of: whether that of our first house ... , or that of the country house... Then, inevitably, I realize that it is neither of the two: that is why I see the snow outside⁴⁰”. In this anonymous northern country, there is no specific manifestation of place, no distinctive or identifying image springs to mind: there is simply that trackless expanse of snow.

If place remains undefined and unidentified, and geography is ambiguous in this literature, the weather is not. It is striking (although not entirely surprising) just how often it is winter, cold, and snowy in the prose works of these Hispano-Canadian writers, but, curiously, in what I would argue is an understated way, quite contrary to the reaction one would expect when confronted by the extremes of this quintessentially Canadian season. Just as *Puesta de sol* transpires during winter – the season Urbanyi minimally sketches as that generic cold, trackless, snowy field dotted with pine trees he sees from his window – so too does the action of his 1981 humorous, satirical novel, *En ninguna parte*,

³⁸ Pablo Urbanyi, *Sunset*, Trans. Hugh Hazelton, Fredericton NB, Broken Jaw Press, 2002, p. 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

translated as *The Nowhere Idea* by Nigel Dennis (1982)⁴¹. The narrative begins one Friday in January “during a winter of exceptionally low temperatures which, as one knows, contribute to depression⁴²”, involves a convoy of cars full of lawyers and university professors of Spanish venturing into “the immense snowy countryside that covers the sleeping land like a little white blanket all the way from the border with the United States to the North Pole⁴³”, to end the following winter on the shortest, darkest day of the year, in a frigid and snowy landscape one-hundred and one miles outside of Ottawa in a place called Erewhon – an anagram of “Nowhere” and the title of Samuel Butler’s classic nineteenth-century (1872) utopian satire⁴⁴. Yet, despite the winter setting, a car from the convoy sliding into a ditch, and snowflakes as big as tennis balls, I would suggest that the narrator’s references to the snow and freezing temperatures are all rather banal, in fact, humorously reminiscent of the commonplaces that are routinely exchanged about the weather in Canada – deliberately mundane and thus no more than background detail in a narrative that is “a postmodernistic parody of academic postmodernism⁴⁵”.

Winter is also a leitmotif in Alejandro Saravia’s 2003 novel *Rojo, amarillo y verde* (*Red, Yellow and Green*)⁴⁶, so much so that Saravia has described a two-page wordless break in the novel as “an expanse of snow and

⁴¹ Pablo Urbanyi, *En ninguna...*, *op. cit.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 23, my translation.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 141, my translation.

⁴⁴ Reference to Samuel Butler (*Erewhon*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books, [1872] 1985) in Pablo Urbanyi, *En ninguna...*, *op. cit.*, p. 107, note 4.

⁴⁵ Hugh Hazelton, *Latinocanadá*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁴⁶ Alejandro Saravia, *Rojo, amarillo y verde*, 2nd ed., Montreal, Éditions Art-Fact Press/Las Ediciones de la Enana Blanca, 2003.

silence” into which the reader can integrate him or herself⁴⁷, but again, a leitmotif that is a background melody and often a means to an end, always superseded by the drama of the protagonist’s obsession. It creates a backdrop that is far less important and far less immediate, it seems, than the Bolivian memories Alfredo Cutipa, the narrator, is trying to excise, or his confusion, anxiety, and hopefulness about his new lover, also named, ironically, Bolivia. For Saravia, in this novel, winter and all its manifestations become a technique he uses to foreground the main character’s compulsion to orient himself in exile in Canada as well as in his memory and in the violent history of his homeland. For example, even though the novel begins with Alfredo describing in a letter how his back is aching after clearing the driveway of snow, the point of this opening paragraph is not the extreme winter weather so much as the fact that he feels compelled to go out in it because he has to have news about what is happening in Bolivia:

Susana, I have just shoveled the driveway, clearing out the snow that blocked the entrance to the house and now my back is aching. It is still snowing and the weather report on the radio is saying that another twenty centimeters of snow would fall. It’s cold and I don’t want to go out of the house, but I should go to the library to read – to suffer – the latest news from Bolivia in the few Spanish newspapers that arrive in Montreal⁴⁸.

Alfredo once refers to his thirteen years in exile as “all those Montreal winters” and in all that time declares that “he had never ceased to futilely twist and turn the dial on his short-wave radio⁴⁹”, once again focusing not on the Canadian winter but rather on his obsession

⁴⁷ Quoted in Hugh Hazelton, “Transculturation and National Identity in the Novel *Rojos, amarillo y verde* by Alejandro Saravia”, in Winifred Siermerling and Sarah Phillips (eds.), *Canada and its Americas. Transnational Navigations*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 2010, p. 223.

⁴⁸ Alejandro Saravia, *op. cit.*, p. 5, my translation.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54, my translation.

with trying to make contact with his homeland. He realizes, about mid-way through the novel, that what he had begun as a letter to Susana San Miguel has become “a kind of chronicle of Montreal winters. Outside, the cold that was arriving on the wings of the polar winds would sink the city into a silence of fifty degrees below zero⁵⁰”. Significantly, winter in Montreal for Alfredo becomes the tangible dimension of “the infinite uninhabited space that surrounded him⁵¹”, a space that both disorients and alienates and yet is full of desperate promise: “Outside the snow would change Montreal into an immense white expanse where all the histories would become possible⁵²” and Alfredo can write what he will (or what he wills). As with the two wordless pages Saravia physically inserts in the novel, the blank page that Montreal metaphorically becomes under a winter blanket of snow invites agency, both on the part of the reader and the protagonist, creating what Hazelton calls “an open-ended imaginary space⁵³” and one which is open to infinite possibilities for both Alfredo and the reader. Despite the many references to winter, and other fleeting and even poetic references to the cold or snow in this novel, I would suggest that the season itself is significant principally as the mechanism that Saravia uses to facilitate Alfredo’s simultaneous journeys of discovery into his past, his present, and the hope of his future. As William New observes:

Maps and names encode in land one shape of history; but the powers of interpretation perennially reconstruct or re-encode this ‘one’ shape as the reader [or protagonist] ‘reads’ – *sites* and *sights* – the ‘page’ of place-and-time. [...] Each perceptual reconstruction alters the perceived reality⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98, my translation.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101, my translation.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 117-118, my translation.

⁵³ Hugh Hazelton, “Transculturation...”, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁵⁴ William H. New, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

Of all the novels studied here, José Leandro Urbina's 1992 work, *Cobro revertido* (published in translation first in French as *Longues distances* in 1996 and then in English as *Collect Call* in 1999), offers the most potentially dramatic winter episodes, the first a near accident because of black ice on Highway 401, which the protagonist (known only as "the Sociologist") describes as his "first encounter with the Canadian winter, with the Canadian death that had taken a little nip out of us"⁵⁵. But the scene is written in a very straightforward manner:

The car came upon a patch of black ice that covered the highway from one side to the other, and after briefly sliding back and forth we went into a complete spin, crossing over to the other shoulder and back again, while the vehicles coming head on tried to stop or avoid us and began their own slow-motion slides and collisions, and she kept herself upright and firm at the wheel trying to control it and in a matter of seconds the tires wrenched and caught a patch of gravel and loose dirt and we headed half-sideways toward a fatal gully, but Meg steered sharply away and the car climbed back up to the highway on a clear stretch and we steadied down, while in back of us the slow unmistakable sound of ripping metal continued. She stopped the Renault on the shoulder and said we should go and see if we could help the others. Aside from the fright and the battered cars, nothing had happened⁵⁶.

The Sociologist's immediate reaction to the pile-up is that "nothing had happened" as his personal referent links back to Chile (and his thus-far thwarted desire to bed Megan): "I can see it now: He survived prison, torture, mock executions, his own tendency toward self-destruction, only to die crushed in the metal of a car with a gringa who led him to water but never let him drink"⁵⁷. Despite the descriptive possibilities of a terrifying winter scene, Urbina frames the episode with memories

⁵⁵ José Leandro Urbina, *Collect Call*, Trans. Beverly J. DeLong-Tonelli, Ottawa, Split Quotation, 1999, p. 122-123.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117-118.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

of the Sociologist's Chilean past, rather than the immediacy of the Canadian present.

The second winter incident in this novel involves another of the Sociologist's girlfriends and his first experience of skating out of doors on a frozen lake. Apart from the mention of his expected clumsiness on skates, the brief episode emphasizes the booming sounds the ice makes as the temperature changes and the Sociologist's panic at the sight of cracks everywhere on the frozen surface. The first "deep cannon shot" from the cracking ice that the Sociologist hears cues him to talk about Chile in response to the question "Who are you, then?" and we are momentarily transported from the lakeside house in snowy, rural Quebec that the Sociologist is visiting to a Chile that, willfully ignoring the misery and oppression that forced him into exile, he presents in "a flood of brilliant glorified images like the light of summer and the sand and the sea and the crystalline sky over the mountains and the central valleys laden with fruit and the torrential rivers ...⁵⁸". Skating, the following day, he is fearful of plunging through into the watery abyss that lurks below the ice and wants no more of frozen Canadian lakes, longing to return to the comforts of the city and the familiar haunts of the ex-pat Chilean community there⁵⁹. In each of these winter episodes, through the Sociologist's thoughts and reactions, Urbina deliberately focuses the reader's attention away from the immediate wintry Canadian scene, displacing and recontextualizing the experience for both the protagonist and reader, spatially and temporally. The winter scenes are only the catalyst; far more significant are the imaginary consequences. For Urbina, the Canadian locus of the narrative is superseded by Chilean memories and experiences; the Sociologist's

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

sense of place, and his sense of self, is always made more relevant by where he used to be, not by where he is now, by what he experienced then, not by what he is experiencing at the moment.

In all the novels discussed here, winter, while a feature of each and skillfully manipulated in various ways by the different authors, never acquires a force of its own and never becomes the defining element of a narrative despite being what could be considered an intrinsic aspect of the Canadian “environmental reality”. The “unremarkable” presence of winter in these works is symptomatic of what Hernán Barrios has called “this undefined North American context⁶⁰” and that it further contributes to the indistinct world of the exile.

Eli Mandel in his critical collection *Another Time*⁶¹ explains that there is a sense that writers work out of locale or area, boundaries of some sort defining sensibility⁶², so surely, given the intensely urban nature of these writers, one could expect, or at least hope to find a city or cityscapes in their work. Canadian cities are named in Hispano-Canadian literature but are not really described, that is to say, not in such a way as to create an encompassing or even topographic sense of the place. For example, in Carmen Rodríguez’ collection of short stories *and a body to remember with*⁶³, Vancouver is often mentioned and is, occasionally, the setting for a narrative. Most often it seems, however, that the city is referenced only to provide a point of contrast

⁶⁰ Hernán Barrios, “Fuera del país”, in Hernán Barrios *et al.*, *Exilium tremens*, Montreal, Éditions Omelic, 1991, p. 31; my translation.

⁶¹ Eli Mandel, *Another Time*, Erin, Ontario, Press Porcépic, 1977.

⁶² Quoted in William H. New, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁶³ Carmen Rodríguez, *op. cit.*

or comparison with other places, other cities, in Chile⁶⁴. Sometimes Vancouver only seems real because it is possible to relate it in some way to some place familiar and known in the country left behind: “the Vancouver landscape is just like the south of Chile” a character is told in “a balanced diet: laughing and crying in the house in the air⁶⁵”; Estela de Ramírez discovers that

in Vancouver there was no town square because there was no band that played there at noon on Sundays. That Vancouver beaches had no waves. That the Chilean coast was more beautiful. That the mountains in Vancouver were quite big and lovely. That the Andes were bigger and lovelier⁶⁶.

In “trespass,” conversely, it is Vancouver that has become a yearned-for memory for the protagonist, a woman who has returned to Chile to become member of the resistance, and who never imagined that she would miss the Canadian city. For this woman, Vancouver has become as insubstantial and nostalgic as is Chile in the memories of her expatriots in Canada. This deliberate elusiveness of place is a technique that Rodríguez effectively employs for reinforcing the feelings of displacement and alienation with which her protagonists struggle. In so doing, however, she also effectively effaces the possibility of shaping a spatial identity for Vancouver.

Of the fourteen stories that comprise Rodríguez’ collection, Vancouver is the setting for only four, and even in those four, not exclusively. In “breaking the ice” the action takes place at a hockey rink that could be located in any Canadian city, and it is only through casual references

⁶⁴ William H. New has observed that confusion results “when observers think they understand another culture because the structures and images, at first glance, look the same as those they are already familiar with” (William H. New, *op. cit.*, p. 32).

⁶⁵ Carmen Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶⁶ In “black hole”, *ibid.*, p. 22.

by the characters that the locale is identified as Vancouver. In the three remaining stories, the characters and some or all of the narrative may be situated in Vancouver, but either their memories transport them elsewhere in time and place so that the actual geographical setting for the story becomes only a backdrop that is displaced or replaced by remembered actions or events in Chile which drive the narrative elements, or the characters' final actions remove them, literally or otherwise, from Vancouver – by means of Air Canada and a one-way ticket to Chile (“bodily yearnings”), through a mental and emotional breakdown (“black hole”), or by suicide (“3-D”). Vancouver, in Carmen Rodríguez’ *and a body to remember with*, is an impression of cold ocean waters and beaches, mountains and blue skies, an occasional name that may resonate (Stanley Park, Granville Street, Kitsilano, UBC), but it is only an impression. The city never really takes definitive shape in these short stories.

In the work of other Hispano-Canadian writers, the Canadian city or the cityscape may be described in a disparaging fashion, reflecting what Quijada Urías explains as the reaction to a new and unknown reality, and one which is perceived as deeply inimical to the cultures and way of life that the exiled have left behind in Latin America: “We are uprooted; ... We are terrified by the spiritual coldness around us – an outgrowth of consumerism – and by the ruthless market forces that transmit their diseases of selfishness, ugliness and evil⁶⁷”. Jorge Etcheverry, for example, in his short story “Dreamscaping” refers to Montreal as “that enormous, strange, cold, and insidiously superficial city⁶⁸” and to Ottawa as “that little city⁶⁹”; Urbanyi in *En ninguna*

⁶⁷ Alfonso Quijada Urías, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁶⁸ Jorge Etcheverry, “Dreamscaping”, in Hernán Barrios *et al.* (eds.), *Exilium tremens*, Montreal, Éditions Omélie, 1991, p. 80, my translation.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

parte describes Ottawa – in a footnote – simply as the coldest capital city of the world, adding that if it isn't as famous as Moscow that is because it lacks the literature that characterizes the Russian capital⁷⁰; Urbina dismisses Kingston in passing as “the pearl of Anglo-Saxon civilization, next to Lake Ontario⁷¹”; Saravia emphasizes a sense of isolation, often referring to Montreal as an island, and his protagonist's first inkling of “that place called Montreal” in “a vast and desolate terrain on the other side of the world” is sardonically coloured by the expectation that “there would probably be bears, some Iroquois and Constable Chrétien, the RCMP official”⁷². Barrios, in his short-story “Cosmos,” directly reflecting Quijada Urías' anguish, offers a more detailed and depressing description of Montreal,

this city where there are no poppies, smeared with polarized glass, neon, asphalt, pizza *toutes garnies*, ... this antithesis of the south; ... Montreal, an animal sick with stylish cars *toujours* in fashion like a huge shop window installed in the midst of the cold⁷³.

In contrast to these generalized or stereotypical descriptions is the precision with which a number of authors (Urbina, Saravia, Etcheverry, for example) name places in the city, particularly cafés, streets, intersections, metro stations, and bus stops. Given the general lack of topographical definition we have been examining, it is intriguing that there would be such specificity in “mapping,” as it were, the movements of the

⁷⁰ Urbanyi, Pablo, *En ninguna...*, *op. cit.*, p. 57n1.

⁷¹ José Leandro Urbina, *Collect Call*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁷² Alejandro Saravia, *op. cit.*, p. 111-112. As Christopher Gittings points out, “land of lakes and snowy mountains; [...] ‘Indians’; mounted police; snow and ice” are frequent images evoked abroad by “the speech-mark Canada.” Christopher Gittings, “Imaging Canada: The Singing Mountie and Other Commodifications of Nation”, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 23(4), 1998, <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1062/1968>, Retrieved February 16, 2012.

⁷³ Hernán Barrios, “Cosmos”, *Landed Immigrant: Relatos*, Santiago, Ediciones Documentados, 1990, p. 49; my translation.

characters through these relatively undefined spaces. Norman Cheadle, with reference to Urbina's *Collect Call*, sees this as the way the exiled Chilean community occupies its own cultural space in Montreal: "The band of Chileans moves through Montreal – bar hopping, dropping into cafés and restaurants, shopping, rubbing shoulders with other Latin Americans, Greeks, Spaniards, and Portuguese – as though they were quite at home⁷⁴" and attributes this to a certain specific presence and cohesiveness in this particular ex-pat community, made possible not only by the narrative point of view but also to the unique "porous cultural fabric" of a city such as Montreal⁷⁵. Other exiles and refugees, however, as we have seen, feel less at home.

The specifics of place and place names in certain novels may correspond to the notion of "absolute space"⁷⁶. Absolute space can be defined objectively, limited, measured, and located through the coordinates of longitude and latitude. In the work of the authors discussed here the absolutes of the Boulevard St-Denis, the Jean-Talon metro station, the house on Bloor West, the Spanish Bar, subway stops at Bathurst and Dufferin are attempts to create a kind of physical reality in the midst of what Ángel Mota has called "a process of cultural and linguistic banishment"⁷⁷. But, as even geographers have observed, "the spaces

⁷⁴ Norman Cheadle, "Canadian Counterpoint: Don Latino and Doña Canadiense in José Leandro Urbina's *Collect Call* (1992) and Ann Ireland's *Exile* (2002)", in Norman Cheadle and Lucien Pelletier (eds.), *Canadian Cultural Exchange/Échanges culturels au Canada: Translation and Transculturation/traduction et transculturation*, Waterloo, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007, p. 283.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁷⁶ I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Nicole Yantzi, a geographer at Laurentian University, for bringing the idea of "absolute" space to my attention.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Luis Molina Lora and Julio Torres-Recinos (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 170. Mota uses the word "desterritorialización" here, which I have translated as "banishment" although there is English equivalent in "deterritorialization". I am not convinced that the meanings are exactly equivalent as was suggested by a colleague. The term signifies a severance or elimination of

in which people live are more psychological than absolute⁷⁸”, and as long as a writer is engaged more with the events, people, places, memories, and loss of her or his life elsewhere, then there is not much chance that they will begin to develop or attach meaning – the most important component of space⁷⁹ – to their current location, to create a sense of place and to perceive themselves at home in their new environment⁸⁰.

“Elsewhere: it is at once place, no place, a desire – or an imposed or chosen place or process or idea. It can be configured as an alternative style or manner of shaping worlds into narrative and meaning⁸¹”. In the work of the Hispano-Canadian writers studied here, elsewhere seems always to be no place, an imposed place, when it means this place, Canada. Elsewhere is always a desire, a chosen place, an idea when it means what was, what has been left and is far away. The elsewhere that configures their shaping of worlds into narrative and meaning is so powerful that many of these writers, even after many

political, social, and cultural practices from their native places and populations. The situation Mota is addressing is the loss of the native places and populations experienced by immigrants, refugees, and exiles. Their political, social, and cultural practices are profoundly changed – severed, if you will – but it is because they are in (an)other place and among other populations.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Robert P. Larkin and Gary L. Peters, “Distance”, *Dictionary of Concepts in Human Geography*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1983, p. 63.

⁷⁹ Tim Cresswell, “Individual Place”, in Ian Douglas, Richard Huggett and Chris Perkins (eds.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Geography from Local to Global*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 32.

⁸⁰ Nevertheless, in his critical studies on the work of Alfonso Quijada Urías and Pablo Urbanyi in *Latinocanadá*, Hugh Hazelton has noted that the effects of this isolation or detachment from their immediate surroundings may not be entirely negative, as Quijada Urías “maintains that these aspects of his life help him to focus on his writing while giving him time to do so” (118) and in the case of Urbanyi, “[it] has in some ways left him freer to focus more intensely on his literary vocation” (193).

⁸¹ Marta Dvořák and William H. New, *op. cit.*, p. 11. Dvořák and New see “elsewhere” as potential, as an alternative territory, one that is open to movement, to challenges, to the tensions that result from an exploration of the desire for the past and the desire “to turn away from it towards something better, new, or preferred” (p. 11).

years and not inconsiderable literary and personal success in many cases, still are not writing themselves and their stories into Canada in anything but the most topographically superficial manner. Becoming aware of this ambiguous and anomic “geography of the exile” creates an ever more profound understanding of the dimensions of their loss. As Barrios writes: “*Fuera del país carísimo mío, fuera de sí, fuera de lo que es y fuera de lo que fue*⁸²” (“Out of the country my very dear, beside oneself, outside of what is and out of what was⁸³”).

⁸² Hernán Barrios, “Fuera del país”, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁸³ My translation.

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