

Notes Towards...

Lynette Hunter, *Outsider Notes: Feminist Approaches to Nation State Ideology, Writers/Readers and Publishing*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1996. 312 pp.

On the cover of Lynette Hunter's collection of essays *Outsider Notes: Feminist Approaches to Nation State Ideology, Writers/Readers and Publishing*, framed between title and sub-title, appears a surreal bird's eye view of a tiny green island surrounded by an expanse of open sea extending to the horizon. The island is traversed from edge to edge by three intersecting landing strips. In it, a striped wind sock is planted, billowing in the breeze. The island is unidentifiable and, given its odd dimensions and out-of-kilter scale, likely fictional. For a volume of essays ostensibly about Canadian literature, this is a strange and disorienting image indeed, and it presents an intriguing point of departure for my own thinking about the book. The territory depicted is clearly not Canada, and the cover, I note, makes no mention of either Canada or literature, though the essays contained within it deal with such well-known Canadian writers as Jeannette Armstrong, George Bowering, Dionne Brand, Maria Campbell, Frank Davey, Claire Harris, Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Alice Munro, bp Nichol, Michael Ondaatje, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Gail Scott, and Lola Lemire Tostevin. In the Introduction Hunter announces that the collection of essays is "an attempt to try out common grounds for reading across cultural, social and historical boundaries. It is structured throughout by approaches to knowledge informed by feminist practice, and a consciousness of women's lives and their relation to political activities in western nation states: specifically England where, although I am a Canadian, I live and work" (7). Hunter prefers to write about the relationships between publishing history, educational policy and practice, literacy communities, publically approved culture and the situated acts of reading and writing than about Canadian literature in the traditional sense of a recognizable and coherent body of texts or Canada as a geographically or ecologically defined space. In viewing the cover it is thus, perhaps, less appropriate to ask geographer's questions like "Where is this place?" or "What country is this?", than the more theoretically-oriented questions Hunter's text itself elicits, which might be phrased as something like, "What is the relation between (geographical) ground and (ideological and rhetorical) grounding?", or "What are the connections between the ideology of contemporary Western nation states and states of mind or the current state and status of the (literary) art?" Such questions might well transform the familiar terrain of Canadian literature into a foreign destination, even—and perhaps especially—for Canadian readers, recasting the distinctions between "insider" and "outsider" interpreters of Canadian texts, and, potentially, positioning readers, as the cover illustration does, just slightly "at

sea" in relation to the book's subject matter, rather than on taken-for-granted Canlit *terra firma*. These are useful displacements that Hunter's book accomplishes in approaching the Canadian literary establishment and alternatives to it from an "outsider's" position.

The cover image also prompts in my mind connotations involving the word "approaches" itself, which appears centrally in the title and Introduction of *Outsider Notes*. Approach is an aviation term for that stage of flight that occurs before an actual landing takes place. In flying, the approach, however tentative and variable, is always a preparation for the risky act of landing; it is the moment when deciding which way the wind blows can be a life-or-death choice. Hunter's collection of essays metaphorically extends this premise to the realm of literature: its primary strengths are its commitment to exploring the material conditions in which "Canadian literature" itself is produced and consumed, its consistent awareness of the intersections between the (high flown) aesthetic realm and the (landing) field of social engagement. For example, Part One deals with recent publishing history in Canada, roughly from the 1950s onward, considering the relations between literature, nationalism, ideology, and cultural and educational policy. The first chapter, "Writing, Literature, and Ideology: Institutions and the Making of Canadian Canons" describes the history and debates around the formation of the Canadian canon in general terms that stress the influences of publishing economics and changes in the institutions of public education on the growth of an identifiable national culture. While Hunter asserts that nation state political practice and theory constitutes a common ground for a cross-cultural reading of Canadian literature from a British perspective, she also maintains that the subsidized literary culture of Canada produces "conditions significantly different from those in Britain" (14), though direct comparisons with cultural and educational policy in the UK are virtually absent. She also claims that the explosion of publishing here since the 1950s, aided by government subsidies, "throws into relief certain canon-forming activities more quietly at work in other print societies" (17), but she nowhere investigates either analogous situations in which institutionalised cultural nationalism might also be at work, or alternative scenarios. This is an important elision, since the presumption that Canada's level of cultural subsidization is an unusual national feature is never substantiated. In focussing on the subsidization of Canada's cultural industries and its relation to the generation of the Canadian canon, Hunter also risks implying that Canadian literature is a mid-twentieth century phenomenon that has little or no significant prior intellectual or economic history—a fault that Frank Davey has elaborated in relation to Robert Lecker's analysis of the canonization process.¹

The economic and institutional history offered in Hunter's opening chapter, and the one that follows, will be familiar to most specialists in Canadian literature (indeed, in Chapter Two Hunter calls it "a history all too familiar to Canadians" [33]), especially those who have followed the exchanges between Davey, Lecker, Tracy Ware and others, and while a recap of, for example, the

inclusion of Canadian literature on the post-secondary school curriculum, the production of critical reference tools, the influence of the Canada Council and other bodies, or the implementation of multicultural policies is not unwelcome, I was disappointed that Hunter's study did not take the next step and elaborate this survey to consider in more detail specific elements that might complicate her analysis, such as the content of Canadian literature curricula; or the different forms subsidies take; or the particular sources and relative levels of funding; or the nature of the vetting processes for writing and publication grants; or the significant and various effects of Canada-US Free Trade on the publishing industry and cultural policy; or the degree, distribution and impact of government funding cutbacks in recent years—the notion of a generously subsidized national culture in which publishers may operate "altruistically" that Hunter sketches out has already taken on a distinctly nostalgic cast.

Partly because of its general orientation and text-book tone, this section of the volume gives the impression that it might be directed at a non-Canadian audience, though the nature of this audience is not spelled out or immediately obvious. Indeed, this is a question I had about the volume in general: at times it appears to be introducing genuine outsiders to the history of, controversies in, and possible approaches to Canadian literature, but at other moments it seems to assume an informed readership already aware of central issues and texts. Certainly the volume assumes a readership literate in theories of nation state ideology (I would hesitate, for example, to recommend it to undergraduate students). As she notes in the Introduction, Hunter occasionally addresses the reader as "you," "in order to avoid the illusion of the impersonal and the naturalized. Although it is mildly shocking, and often irritating, to be included within the sentence, the inclusion reinforces the need to position ourselves with respect to it" (10). Fair enough—though, I would suggest that the strategy is irritating because Hunter rarely pauses to theorize this "you" or to define it with precision or consistency (it sometimes, for example, refers to a hypothetical *writer* of Canadian literature [for example, 63]). Such work is, perhaps, left to the reader herself. At one point, Hunter quotes an observation by Claire Harris that might well be a commentary on the volume in which it is cited: "the problem is one of audience. We all know *for whom* we write; the ambivalence, and it is a dangerous one, lies in *to whom* we write" (cited on 83).

Hunter *is*, however, self-conscious about the fact that hers is a view from a distance. In Chapter Four she confesses,

I am conscious as I write that it is easy for an outsider to see Canada itself as a cultural fetish, a commodity, since I am not part of the social immediacies. It is easy for outsiders both to turn Canada into a banality, and to turn Canada into a constructive example of responses to multinational globalization, which is how I teach this writing. More difficult is the sense that radically to challenge the multinational, this cultural tourism must be resisted because it's already in terms of the powerful.

In general, though, Hunter's self-consciousness about her position tends to take the form of introductory phrases like, "From here, what has been compelling to watch..." (84) or "From Britain, the formation of Canadian literary canons within education from the 1950s looks as though it has been driven by government support..." (22) or "To an outsider listening casually to conversation in a variety of literary sites in Canada..." (118). Given Hunter's evident awareness of post-colonial theory, the investigation of imperial relations that might exist between a teacher and critic based in what is sometimes considered Canada's Mother Country and her Canadian subject matter is conspicuous by its virtual absence. (Is that a windsock planted in the cover drawing or a flag claiming territory? Who rules the waves?). Further, in her discussion of cultural policy and the subsidization of Canadian literature in Chapter One, Hunter, surprisingly, does not consider the very topics that she, as a reader of Canadian literary systems based abroad, is eminently qualified to discuss, such as the development of publicly funded institutional sites for Canadian studies in Europe and elsewhere, which has, in effect, produced the very institutional matrices that made her own study possible (she acknowledges the assistance of the Canadian Studies Centre at the University of Leeds and the Canada Council). The Canadian literary canon, Hunter implies in a passing comment about the kinds of writers (such as Marlatt, Bowering and Kroetsch) who are "lauded in Europe," is produced differently in different institutional and national loci. Hunter's own selection of both primary texts and secondary materials sometimes seems idiosyncratic to a Canadian reader, and this is no doubt due in part to just such differences in canonical standing, book distribution and availability abroad. In addition, while Hunter makes a number of references to her role as a teacher of Canadian literature in England, she rarely discusses the cross-cultural reception of such texts by her British students, or the constituencies they represent, an omission that left me curious.

Chapter One's discussion of the canonization of Canadian literature identifies parallel "thematic" and "structurally focussed" canons and sets them off against "alternative" writings that are, as Hunter puts it, "full of embarrassment because they insist on difficult and contradictory political problems and positions" (29). Chapter Two addresses the production and reception of "alternative" writings. It, in effect, reorients the "outsider" tag and applies it to writers outside the traditional (economic and institutional) power base of the literary canon. Hunter here offers useful insights into the question of different language, cultural, gender, racial, regional and economic groups and their relative access to the various sites of publishing, and to literacy itself. The focus on literacy and "literacy communities" is productively pursued in other contexts later in the collection; this chapter suggests the variety and complexity of ways in which different communities work to make their voices heard (as well as who might be willing and able to hear them), from small press publications, to neighbourhood newsletters, to fund-raising recipe books, to literacy group publications, to oral storytelling transcription

projects, to electronic experiments like *Swift/Current*. In so doing it pushes at the borders defining both literature and literacy. It also, importantly, suggests that alternative notions of authorship, audience and genre are required if teachers and students of literature are to take these writings and the communities that produce them seriously, and that this project is both necessary and desirable.

This is a compelling argument, and one not to be underestimated. However, while the eclectic and alternative nature of Hunter's subject matter is certainly a strength, her analysis sometimes lacks the kind of systematic and accurate detail necessary to do it justice, and this is an important methodological problem. For example, the Native author Thomas King, a writer who has occupied faculty positions at the Universities of Lethbridge, Minnesota, and Guelph, is misleadingly identified in this chapter as from the "non-academic community" (28). Statistics about the market access of Canadian books, cited as if they were current, are drawn from Frank Davey's *Reading Canadian Reading*, a book now nearly ten years old (33). On the same page as this last citation, Canada is referred to as having "an unusual commitment" to teaching creative writing in primary and secondary schools, but no evidence or basis for comparison is offered. Elsewhere in the chapter, gender and class inequities in multicultural arts funding are demonstrated with the evidence that "the socialist feminist bulletin *Cayenne* appears to have published through the late 80s entirely dependent on subscriptions" (40), though readers do not learn whether the journal applied for funding, to what sources, how consistently over time, or what the profile of grant applications and refusals might be. I do not doubt Hunter's point, and I may here be demonstrating my own implication in "the fact-orientated denotative world of European informational systems reliant on and giving economic reason for the printed medium, with its associated modes of morphemic and syntactic copyright ownership and subject-based textual authorship" (41), but it does seem reasonable that a materialist analysis should be based on reliable, current and precisely presented *material*.

Part Two offers approaches to a variety of textual materials. The Introduction claims that this section "offers a set of readings on [sic] a number of non-canonical writings, or writings that have not straightforwardly gained canonical support or a public audience" (8). Given Chapter Four's focus on the fiction and criticism of canonical figures Frank Davey and George Bowering, it might be more accurate to describe this section as negotiating some of the tense relations between political engagement and the conventions of modernism, postmodernism, and genre. Chapter Three, for example, "After Modernism: Alternative Voices in the Writings of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and M. Nourbese Philip," examines poetry, fiction and criticism by these three Trinidadian-Canadian writers "as starting with modernism's potential for generating 'other' communities and alternative histories, and as responding with a variety of literary strategies to the recognition of the problems implicit in modernism's universalism and claims to fixity and essential identity. In doing so each writer attempts a different stance than that called for by modernism" (56). The writing of these women translates distinctive

verbal traditions across race, culture and education, effectively addressing questions of access, and precipitating new ways of writing and reading. Or, to return to the geographical metaphor, each writer offers common ground from which to negotiate difference: "[t]hat common ground," writes Hunter, "can be radically displaced by my own understanding of race, yet where the grounds that bring women together can be articulated, it can provide a place for talking about precisely those difficulties with race that separate us" (58). Another way of bridging cultural difference that Hunter does not pursue might be by integrating relevant Caribbean-Canadian cultural history, and this would be especially appropriate given both the common national origins of the three writers, and in light of the fact that this chapter also develops a theme taken up at more length later in *Outsider Notes*: the relationships between personal and public memory, between embodied subjectivity and communal identity. Hunter states, for example,

As Noubese [sic] Philip discusses in *She Tries Her Tongue*, no history is possible without memory, and physical reality is akin to the body both in its resistance to remembering and in its ability to remember. The body, the physical world and the community can each resist and remember representation of authentic voice, landscape and history, not just as identity but as commodity, or reflection, or difference from, or difference within, or deferral or différance.

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As the word "discusses" conveys, the textured linguistic nuances of these writers are sometimes reduced to arguments or diminished by paraphrase, and this is a shame, particularly since, as Hunter argues, it is largely through experimentation with syntax, sound, and dialect that a writer like Philip has developed a distinctive and powerful poetic and critical voice. Hunter argues that Brand, Harris and Philip each evade both "ahistorical postmodernism" and "the romanticist individualism/heroics of the surreal" in favour of "a set of historically-based alternatives that shift away from the heroism of alienation toward questions of authenticity that deal in engagement and social support that generate questions about trust: trust in ideology, in history and in language" (60).

If Chapter Three places emphasis on trust and authenticity, the focus in Chapter Four, "Postcards of Canadian Culture," shifts to fiction and fear. In examining the writing of Davey and Bowering in relation to Canadian postmodernism, Hunter is interested in "the way in which the initial attractions of the fear of referentiality in language became informed by the complications of a parallel fear of political referentiality" (84). These issues open up an interrogation of the association between Canada and postmodernism (oddly, she refers only in passing to Linda Hutcheon's influential work on the subject). Hunter argues that Canada is frequently constructed from outside "as an apolitical, apathetic, populist country, and this is frequently associated both positively and negatively in its literature with the strategies and techniques of postmodernism. What I'd like to explore is

whether this is a helpful reconstruction and how the work of these writers relates to it" (84). Chapter Four examines the construction of Canadian literature in an assortment of Davey's critical and creative writings, and Bowering's *Errata*, *Caprice* and *A Short Sad Book*. It is especially interested in the relations these writers develop between nation state ideologies and literary movements and modes such as modernism, postmodernism and realism. Postmodernism occupies a particularly equivocal position, Hunter indicates, because while its impetus is to foreground and critique the artificial conventions of realism, it also responds to nation state ideology, and, notably, has found its home among "a small group of people educated for many years precisely in recognition of the cultural common grounds which are held up for critique" (87). Both Davey and Bowering, Hunter argues, are concerned with the inadequacy of linguistic reference and its potential for banal commodification, though they cope with this inadequacy differently.

Chapter Five, "Bodily Functions in Cartesian Space" examines the reception of "language-focused" feminist writers like Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Betsy Warland and Smaro Kamboureli, whose writing since the 1970s has been traversed, and perhaps even determined, by the politics of Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic language theory and recent French philosophy. As is the case in her chapter on Davey and Bowering, Hunter is interested in identifying the communities in which literary movements find their home. Chapter Five analyses the criticism from socially based women's studies theory of the way "language oriented" writing by women seems isolated from Canadian women's immediate social and political concerns. Unlike the previous chapter, however, Hunter is explicitly *not* interested in commenting on the poetic texts as such, "but upon the philosophical [sic] and cultural filter they acquire in critical and academic responses" (118). Still, some reference to the poetry itself would be useful, especially since one of the faults Hunter finds with criticisms of language-oriented writing is their isolation of that writing from its determining contexts. Quotations from Warland's *Proper Deafinitions* and Tostevin's *Gyno Text* that demonstrate this isolating tendency (124) are, ironically, the only taste readers get of the poetry (the work of this group of poets is, presumably, already known to readers of *Outsider Notes*—an assumption that certainly defines the book's audience). It would be beneficial to have even a brief example of the ways readers might productively interact with such texts in order to allow readers and writing to engage with their social contexts. Nevertheless, Hunter's inquiries into the controversy over this poetry take her into an original, difficult and ultimately rewarding analysis of perceptions about the relation between poetry, philosophy and social change.

Chapter Six, "Critical Embarrassment with the *Bios* of Writing," negotiates the kinds of fiction that convey a sense of autobiographical immediacy and intimacy (especially writing that deals with abuse situations) or that makes apparently unselfconscious use of the generic clichés of formula fiction (such as popular romance writing). This sort of narrative, Hunter writes, "causes embarrassment both to me personally when I read it for the first time, and in a rather more difficult

way for me as a teacher, to my students when I attempt to include it on courses. Most worryingly, these works are often, possibly for reasons of similar embarrassment, silenced by the world of literary criticism which at the least has a powerful means of disseminating them and extending their response" (142). As examples, Hunter uses an eclectic group of works including Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*, Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Elly Danica's *Don't*, Jacqueline Dumas' *Madeleine and the Angel*, and Rose Dorion's *My Name is Rose* (an abuse narrative with illustrated text that emerged from a literacy project). "In the readings," Hunter observes, "there is an attempt to work through some of the uneasiness that a reader trained in the decorum of realism has with the culturally constructed status of realism as superior to genre fiction, and to address some of the difficulties this raises in reading first-person texts from different cultural communities" (147). "Embarrassment" turns out to be a somewhat awkward—though immensely interesting and potentially fertile—critical term. It names an effect of semiotic dissonance experienced when a differential dynamic of power and privilege exists between reader and writer. While Hunter tells us in this chapter that she occupies a privileged position of race, class, education and stable family background by comparison with the writers of the texts under study, she does not say whether this description necessarily extends to her students, or whether new strategies of approaching this material might fundamentally alter or at least interrogate the nature of the communal reading situation and the institutions in which it takes place. The point of the chapter is, nevertheless, an admirable one: to develop strategies of reading and teaching that can cope with writing that transgresses the conventional boundaries between literature and testimony, presumably so that such writing and the issues it raises may be staged in the (Canadian) literature classroom.

Part Three of *Outsider Notes* approaches a series of writings more conventionally understood as canonical, concentrating on the conjunction of memory and writing, individual and nation, in these works. Hunter argues here that,

much recent Canadian writing foregrounds memory and forgetting as topics that makes [sic] it possible to discuss the problems of 'self' and 'appropriate action' that complicate postcolonial writing. Canadian writers are often concerned with the definition of 'individual' or 'self' within their society and are left with the question: how to recognize the appropriateness of the individual within society; as well as: how to choose the appropriate context for fact/event/interpretation/ memory, and thereby establish the common grounds upon which we do things.

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This section of the book looks at two groups of writers. The first, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Michael Ondaatje, critique ideology by addressing the

conventions of literary genres. "Their writing," Hunter attests, "squarely and courageously faces the dilemma of social action, and deals both with foregrounding the artificiality of ideology as well as the way individuals naturalize the artifice" (190). The second group of writers, bp Nichol, Robert Kroetsch and Daphne Marlatt, address ideology on another front, destabilizing its "representative conventions of language and structure" (190). Here and elsewhere in *Outsider Notes*, Hunter's own conventions of language are sometimes a bit obscure. I can not, for example, decipher this passage: "[d]ifferently, devices that throw into relief the media of representation, the process of the production of the commodity, make significance out of structure itself and watch the result" (231).

In the final section of *Outsider Notes*, Hunter interprets canonical writers from the inside out, asserting, for example, that Atwood, Munro and Ondaatje "behave as outsiders perceiving difference and asking of culture and ideology 'how do I get in?' or 'do I want to get in?', and as insiders pressing at the structures of their lives and locating the parts where it breaks down" (227). The second group of writers (Nichol, Kroetsch, Marlatt), whose work is more oriented toward subversive "graphological language devices," is partly alien, too:

The English-Canadian literature being discussed here is alienated from itself not in terms of national identity as with the locus of much third-world literature and classic post-colonial theory, but in terms of economic identity which affects not national ideology so much as as [sic] its modes of representing itself in for example publishing. There can be little impetus to write 'the great Canadian Novel,' which would give the 'novel' a distinctive Canadian difference, when the genre of the novel itself and the inexorable web of commodification, publication, and distribution in which it is caught, is perceived as the problem.

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While Hunter plays productively with the various possible definitions of and roles for "outsiders" in relation to Canadian literature, she says less about the concept of "notes," which is equally prominent in her title, except in relation to Kroetsch's use of journal writing techniques in *Alibi* and "The Frankfurter [sic] *Hauptbahnhof*" (258-9). *Outsider Notes* is note-like in both positive and negative ways. It is, first and most obviously, a self-consciously provisional collection of approaches to an admirably disparate group of Canadian works. I also liked the fact that the tone and even the voice of the essays shifted significantly from topic to topic, from an authoritative text-book feel; to the occasional use of a confessional mode; from the discourse of friendship, generosity and intimacy for some authors (especially Marlatt, Brand, Harris and Philip), to a more distanced critical tone for others (like Davey and Bowering). However, it must also be said that *Outsider Notes* sometimes reads more like *rough* notes toward a critical study than as a finished product. Sometimes, for instance, passing confessional moments seem like obtrusive and dissonant cryptic notes, as when Hunter comments in Chapter

Five that, for her, the concept of "labour" is more enabling than "sacrifice," "partly because sacrifice is cast as individual while labour is more frequently communal and I'm tired of being alone, and partly because I'm also tired of being a sacrifice and continually returning to heroic self-mutilation in the face of the symbolic" (137). On a slightly different note, the complex argument of Chapter Five is based on a preliminary "analysis" that appears as an extended point-form notation (119-20), though perhaps this outline draws on a set of disciplinary writing conventions to which I am unaccustomed. More important, as may already be obvious (though I have not selected quotations with an eye to including typographical or stylistic lapses), this book is riddled with typographical errors and sloppy editing on a scale I have never seen before. There are examples of misspelled author's names, garbled titles, and even an instance of a mis-identified character (207). *Outsider Notes* offers some tantalizing glimpses of important directions in which the study and even the concept of Canadian literature might turn; its premises and project, I hope, will be pursued. However, while I take the pedagogical implications of Hunter's book seriously indeed, I probably won't be caught passing *Outsider Notes* in class.

Notes

1. See Davey, "Critical Response I," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 672-81. [\[back\]](#)

Manina Jones
