

# Introduction

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Literature is surely a special site of encounter between language and territory, a particularly fertile discursive space where the sense of place is forged and even invented, where territory gathers not only shape but also historical and affective depth. If cartography can handle the *topos* or mappable place, literary space helps create the existential *sense* of place or *chôra*, to use the distinction drawn by the geographer-philosopher Agustin Berque<sup>1</sup>. As Marc Brosseau suggests, it is often literature that invests a place with its multiple values and significance<sup>2</sup>. The sere hills and plains of Castilla-La Mancha, for example, have been given their living texture by *Don Quixote* and the poetry of Antonio Machado, among many other literary texts; for Spaniards and non-Spaniards alike, the Manchegan landscape – its *corazón de roble*<sup>3</sup> – can hardly be said to exist independently of the work of such authors. And even though one may never have read them, a foreigner's encounter with the culture emanating from

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<sup>1</sup> “Retenons la différence entre lieu cartographiable (*topos*) et lieu existentiel (*chôra*). Dans la réalité de l'écoumène, comme nous le verrons, tout lieu tient des deux à la fois” (Augustin Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains*, Paris : Belin, 2000, p. 30). Jacques Derrida describes *chôra* as “lieu investi, par opposition à l'espace abstrait” (qtd. in Berque 26).

<sup>2</sup> Marc Brosseau, “L'espace littéraire en l'absence de description : un défi pour l'interprétation géographique de la littérature”, *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, vol. 52, n° 147, 2008, p. 419-437 (p. 424).

<sup>3</sup> “Oaken heart, cœur de chêne” – from Antonio Machado's poem “A orillas del Duero” in *Campos de Castilla*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1988 (p. 44).

a given landscape or territory or place, with its historico-literary sedimented accretions, will be indirectly informed by that place's writers or will at least perceive the echo of their voices.

Significantly, Berque evokes an explicitly literary category, the *poème du monde* postulated by the ancients<sup>4</sup>, in order to characterize what he means to accomplish with his project to give to geography an ontology and to ontology a geography. The inextricable relation binding nature and culture, writes Berque, is the *écoumène*, the ancient Greek term for the inhabited world. If ontology's primary question is why there is something rather than nothing, then Roger Brunet's statement that "[i]l y a ceci plutôt que cela, et ici plutôt que là"<sup>5</sup> is at once geographical and ontological. That *here* is not the same as *there* constitutes, in Berque's view, more than a linguistically generated deictic difference, more than an arbitrary semiotic binarism whose implicit backdrop is homogeneous void space. The difference is at once telluric and human: it is geo-ontological. The English-Canadian critic Northrop Frye was surely searching for our *ecumene* when he posed his famous identitary question, not with the words *Who are we?* but instead as *Where is here?* Unfortunately stumbling over a false dichotomy opposing wilderness to civilization,<sup>6</sup> European-settler Canada has struggled to answer this onto-geographical or geo-ontological question. In order to adapt our imported culture to North American nature, we have depended on the indigenous cultures already existing here, ignoring them at our peril. As Robert Bringhurst reminds us, Canadian literature (Berque would say *any* literature) "speaks from the land," and so

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<sup>4</sup> Berque, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Berque, *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Charles C. Mann (in *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, New York: Vintage, 2011), has shown that the Americas, rather than a pristine wilderness untouched by human hand, were largely composed of ecosystems in which indigenous peoples actively intervened.

“our literary history has to begin with the voices that spoke from this place first and have spoken from it longest and appear to know its deepest layers best<sup>7</sup>”. Belatedly, and often with the help of newcomers like Alejandro Saravia, white-settler Canada is learning to listen to those voices and salvage something of our country’s past so as to repair our already badly compromised future.

Part I of this volume, then, appears under the rubric “Interpreting Place.” It opens with an essay by **Thierry Bissonnette** that creatively listens to Sudbury’s distant past – our region’s “big history” as David Christian calls the story of the universe<sup>8</sup> – to propose that “La vie sur Terre commence toujours *ici*.” Recent geological research suggests that the cosmic accident which two billion years ago created the Sudbury Basin’s mineral wealth may also have been responsible for creating the conditions for organic life on our planet. This point of departure for his *géopoétique sudburoise* signals a more general poetic truth: life in its collective totality always begins *here*, not somewhere else. In sketching his geopoetics, Bissonnette fruitfully quotes Sudburian poets, in particular *les trois grands “D”* – Patrice Desbiens, Jean Marc Dalpé, and Robert Dickson – great interpreters, all three, of our northern sense of place. As Dickson has written elsewhere, however, “*le monde est vaste à partir de n’importe quelle petite place*.” Though the conference on *Langue et territoire* took place precisely in Sudbury, a small place indeed in terms of world affairs, its arms were wide open to the planet.

Following Bissonnette’s essay, then, **Aziza Awad** takes up two novels from France, *Passage de Milan* by Michel Butor and *Villa Amalia* by

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Bringhurst, *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind and Ecology*, Berkeley, Counterpoint, 2008, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> David Christian, *Big History: The Big Bang, Life on Earth, and the Rise of Humanity*, Chantilly, VA: Teaching Co., c2008 [video recording].

Pascal Quignard, and looks at how they explore the dual relationships man / nature and literary space / real space. The binary *topos* / *chôra* becomes under Awad's pen "*le lieu tel qu'on l'habite mais surtout tel qu'il nous habite*". But literature, at least in the hands of Butor and Quignard, creates its own narrative space; "[c]'est l'écriture qui produit son territoire" and, ultimately, "[l]e récit est un moyen de forcer le réel à se révéler."

Still in France, Carolle Gagnon contrasts *territoire politique* and *territoire floristique* in two narrative texts by Elsa Triolet. Whereas political territory is described directly in the novel *Le cheval blanc* (1943), the territory of flora lurks encoded as a subtext in the short story "Les cahiers enterrés sous un pêcher" (1945) and functions symbolically to evoke the passion for life and liberty, complementing the themes of war and oppression linked to the political frontiers that loom large in Triolet's novel. The two imperfectly aligned kinds of territory traced by Gagnon in her close reading of Triolet's fiction might be read as a problematization of the *topos/chôra* binary; the violence implicit in political territory, which arbitrarily imprints its designs on *topos*, is always in tension with territory as *chôra*, the land with its memory, its flora and fauna (humans included), its *devenir*.

Part II: Nation/Territory/Language engages that great modern forger and carver of territory, the modern nation-state. In three articles the nation-state is Canada – "*ce pays qui n'en est pas un*," one might say, since it is officially a two-nation construct. Given that literatures have long been considered in tandem with national histories, the case of francophone literature in Canada has been especially complicated. Its deeply-rooted *identité canadienne*, buffeted by the British conquest, has been subsequently both stimulated and fractured by Quebec nationalism. In "Territories of Literary History: The Shifting Boundaries of Francophone Literature in Canada," **Rosemary Chapman** gives

us a lucid overview of this complex problematic and its historical development, including this literature's encounter with post-national ideology and such nominal entities as *la littérature-monde en français*.

The three ensuing articles are linked not only by the national problem but also their concern with the first imperial language to colonize America. Alejandro Saravia's trilingual book of poetry, *Lettres de Nootka*, is the subject of **Norman Cheadle's** article. Saravia prises open the binational/bilingual Canadian construct by inserting between French and English the Spanish language, including the latter's claim to a certain historical legitimacy in this very young nation, even as he reaches out to connect with this country's indigenous cultures through the once-imperial language appropriated by Latin American *mestizos*. From a different angle, **Carol Stos** perceptively adumbrates the *desencuentro* (misencounter) between Hispanic-Canadian writers and the traditional land-based rhetoric of Canadian literature, reading this as a symptom of their exile. The violence, let's say, of having been uprooted from one's native *chôra* seems to inhibit their re-rooting in the land of another nation. Argentine-Canadian **Sonia Thon**, for her part, looks at the identity struggles waged over language in her native Argentina, where the problem is not interlingual (between *langues*) but intralingual: how is Argentine Spanish to be spoken? What is the "authentic" national language?

The articles gathered under the title *Translatio* in Part III all have to do with language or languages moving from *here* to *there*, either through translation itself or migrations of all kinds, as well as the results of language in motion. **Gabrièle Fois-Kaschel**, in "Enjeux poétiques, existentiels et interprétatifs d'une parole apatride," discusses what could be considered a limit-case of *translatio*, in which the poetic language of the Jewish-Germans Rose Ausländer and Paul Celan abandons all topographical reference to the *Vaterland* that sent them

into exile; the word torn loose from its originary *chôra* – radically deterritorialized – reinvents its home in a *Mutterland* (motherland) or *Stundenmutter* (surrogate mother). In a very different register, **Cheikh M. S. Diop** explores “L’« univers des langues » dans la fiction d’Ahmadou Kourouma, Tahar Ben Jelloun et Abdourahman Waberi” – three African writers whose work treats of multilingual environments. Kourouma, in the very act of writing in a French strongly inflected by the Malinké language of Côte d’Ivoire, is consciously caught up in the (neo)colonial politics of language. Ben Jelloun’s rich fictional universe reflects the linguistic sedimentation of the Moroccan, a Mediterranean world where the indigenous Berber language, Tachlhit, has been successively overlaid by Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and even English. Waberi, for his part, writes from the former French Coast of Somalia, guiding his readership in French through an idiomatic basin where the local Somali languages such as Afar are bathed in Arabic and English.

As for translation, **Gerardo Acerenza** critically examines the Italian sojourn of Michel Tremblay’s very well-travelled *Belles-Sœurs* and the difficulties of translating the *joual* of Tremblay’s characters into an Italian linguistic equivalent – difficulties which again prove that *here* is not the same as *there*. **Tina Mamatsashvili-Kobakhidze** looks at how the French language in motion across borders – those of France, Quebec, and her native Georgia – varies the elementary symbolism of its most basic vocabulary; her analysis of the example of the word “arbre” suggests that the French-Canadians experience the language/environment relationship differently from the Europeans.

Finally, the mass *translatio* of Italians to the Americas during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to the subject matter of **Christine Sansalone**’s article. She reviews contemporary theatre written and performed in “Italiese” and how this Italian-English hybrid tongue

expresses the feelings and aspirations of an Italian-Canadian community in Sudbury. But the language they invented, Sansalone concludes, will fall victim to the community's successful assimilation to the new linguistic reality. Fortunately, that passing will not go undocumented, thanks to the work of Sansalone and her colleague Diana Iuele.

The relationship between language and territory is a constant; the dynamics of that relationship are endlessly complex. The truth of these two complementary propositions is borne out by the eloquent testimony of the essays, ranging over a great variety of literary spaces that are gathered in this volume.