

Tales from the Canadian Crypt: Canadian Ghosts, the Cultural Uncanny, and the Necessity of Haunting in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*

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Résumé de l'article

From Earl Birney to Northrop Frye to Tomson Highway, Canadian writers have contributed to the notion of Canada as a blank space, and have created a literary tradition rooted in notions of Canadian cultural absence. The motif of haunting in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* works to challenge both the limits of official history and the notion of impermeable identity. Relying on Freud's concept of the uncanny as the intersection of the strange with the familiar, MacDonald constructs a narrative in which both identities and geographies are subject to renegotiation. MacDonald's characters continually renegotiate their individual and cultural identities, and her narrative stages a redemption of the uncanny history of Cape Breton.

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JOEL BAETZ

Pearl: I don't believe in ghosts.

Flora: That's of precious little concern to the ghosts.

—Ann-Marie MacDonald, *The Arab's Mouth* (16)

ANN-MARIE MACDONALD'S *Fall on Your Knees* is first and foremost a ghost story. Beginning with the ominous "They're all dead now," *Fall on Your Knees* exhumes the stories of the Piper family, raises a much-ignored regional history of Cape Breton, and retrieves a portion of a long-forgotten national past in much the same way a forensic anthropologist interviews the dead or a clairvoyante gives voice to the disembodied (1). The ghosts that haunt the pages of *Fall on Your Knees* are spectres of a violent, limiting, and limited colonial legacy. They are, to borrow a phrase from Arthur Redding, ghosts of difference that have failed to remain silent, failed to remain in their graves. But the spectres in *Fall on Your Knees* do not "resonate with the more traditionally American theme of self-invention" (Redding 165), where the past is erased or romanticized in order to justify the potential of a sparkling future, where a violent legacy is excised so it cannot taint the sunny promise of tomorrow. The ghosts of MacDonald's novel speak to, or resonate with, a completely different and entirely unique Canadian myth, one that is just as powerful to us in Canada as the Horatio Alger myth of the self-made man is to America, that of cultural absence.

Even before Oprah got ahold of MacDonald's book, I suspect a large part of the fascination with the novel had to do with its insistence that

Canada has an exciting history and is not a culture of absence, a beacon of WASPish conformity, a paradise for the bland and belated. Many of the reviews of the novel say as much. As the reviewers of *Fall on Your Knees* were falling all over themselves to anoint MacDonald the new Canadian superstar and catapult her into the Canadian literary stratosphere alongside Robertson Davies and Margaret Atwood (*Quill and Quire* 29), they could not help but remark on the way in which the novel takes on popular assumptions about the blandness of Canada's history and the racial and ethnic makeup of Cape Breton. For some reviewers, this meant remarking on the diversity of MacDonald's version of Cape Breton, that the novel is a "remarkable synthesis of ingredients" cobbled together from MacDonald's "own diverse background" (*Catholic New Times* 17). Other reviewers were more explicit, pointing out that MacDonald takes pains to show that "the real Cape Breton has always been more than lobster fishing and Celtic music" (Subramanian 85). Still other reviewers were forthright about MacDonald's targets:

The conventional version of Canadian history tells of immigrants from the British Isles and France arriving on the shores of northern North America and beginning the simple, centuries long tale of two solitudes. The truth, however, lies in a far more complex and compelling narrative — as Ann-Marie MacDonald's ambitious and accomplished first novel quietly asserts. (Lawson 53)

But make no mistake about it, there is nothing quiet about MacDonald's novel. It is a direct and open challenge to the assumptions about Canada's cultural absence. In a way, the novel itself is a ghost, haunting those who believe that Canada is a blank space and scaring them into recognition of the diverse richness of our past, the false exclusivity of our written history, and the potentiality of an inclusive present. What MacDonald's novel offers is nothing less than a difficult and complex model for cultural recuperation, a model grounded in Freud's theory of the uncanny that recognizes the consequences of repression and allows for the liberation of lost souls. By looking at the various forms and formulations of the psychological uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees*, examining the ways in which MacDonald draws on the uncanny to structure and pluralize time and history, and then exploring the way in which she gives this temporal plurality spatial dimensions, we can see how and why in *Fall on Your Knees* the buried haunt the living; the missing are never lost but eventually recovered. Their recovery makes a diverse future possible.¹

When Earle Birney writes that "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're

haunted" (15-16), he gives voice to a longstanding literary and cultural tradition that sees Canada as a blank space, either crippled by our lack of exciting and eccentric national symbols, traditions, and myths, or liberated by the absence of domineering master-narratives. Absence, innocence, silence, emptiness, negation, deficiency, belatedness, and blankness have all been popular tropes when it comes to discussions of Canada's national identity. Next to appeals to Canada's northern landscape or our preservation of the communal values of peace, order, and good government (as opposed to the individual's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness), the most dominant theme in discussions of Canadian national identity is our country's lack of distinctive or unique qualities.² The presence of that absence, so obvious when it comes to discussions of a national literature, can be felt when Sara Jeanette Duncan suggests that Canada is an "unliterary people," looked upon with indifference by Americans and derided by the English as mere colonialists (31-32); or when Pelham Edgar argues that we are "only vicariously the heirs" of a vibrant literary history (111); or even when E.K. Brown suggests that "in a colonial or semi-colonial community neither artist nor audience will have the passionate and peculiar interest in their immediate surroundings that is required. Canada is a state in which such an interest exists only among a few" (18). The pattern here is no mere coincidence; Canadians are typically un-something: unliterary, unexciting, or uninterested.

Northrop Frye's "Conclusion to *The Literary History of Canada*" is a seminal work for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it marks a dramatic turn in the valuing of Canada's cultural absence. Frye reformulates Canada's lack as a virtue instead of a disability, something to be celebrated rather than criticized. For Frye, absence is distinctly Canadian and ingrained in the Canadian imagination: "One wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unrealized, the humanly undigested, so built into it" (826). Since Frye's reformulation, scholars and critics are more likely to view our cultural lack as something to be aimed for rather than avoided. In "Cadence, Country, Silence," Dennis Lee writes about hoping to articulate silence, precisely because that is the authentic Canadian voice, free from British or American influence. More recently, Robert Kroetsch has been the most vocal about the presence of Canadian cultural absence and, more specifically, its benefits. For him, the "willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives becomes a Canadian strategy for survival" (23). To live with the absence of a cultural centre, in Kroetsch's estimation, is to live with the ultimate freedom.³

The nature of this absence, its defining qualities and character, needs to be distinguished from the type of non-existence all nations face. It's not just that Canada is an invention. If we believe Benedict Anderson, all nations are constructed or imagined into existence. What is peculiar about Canada, however, is the degree to which this absence dominates discussions about national identity. Writing about the ways America has been imagined through its literature, Geoff Ward remarks that the dominance of the American dream proves that the United States is a "concept more than a country" (13): America "was invented rather than discovered, its identity subjected to ceaseless redefinition by its new arrivals. Its essence is no essence. ... American literature is massively inclusive, but dissident and adversarial; ... addicted to the new, but condemned to repetition" (9). The difference between the absence of Canada and the "no essence" of the United States, however, is that in the States this absence, though noticeable, is held at bay and never fully realized: the absence is transcended by the American dream that is ceaselessly created or picked apart. Canada, too, is an invention, but it is consistently invented as commonplace or compromised, lacking defining qualities that make the country unique, different, or peculiar. Kieran Keohane's *Symptoms of Canada* offers what is perhaps the most convincing account of this triumph of absence. Linking Brian Mulroney's appeals to the "true identity" of Canadians to beer ads to the uproar over the Sikh RCMP recruit who fought to wear a turban with his Mountie uniform, Kehoane pinpoints the characteristic that dominates these and other national gestures:

At the heart of the symbolic order of Canada is an ironic relationship to the lack. Canadians can be goofy about the lack. We know that we lack particularity, and that acknowledgment of the lack is our particularity. The sustaining value of national identity is enduring the lack and the moral commitment required of Canadians is to not pretend to particularity. The moral commitment that sustains Canadian solidarity is a commitment to not being pretentious — a commitment to not pretending to be something that we are not, a commitment to not pretending that we are "positively" or "essentially" Canadian. While others may pretentiously posture as "all-American," "true Brit," or whatever, a real Canadian would never pull such an absurdity. (39)

In this line of thinking, Canada's particularity is its absence of particularity; its defining characteristic is its lack of definition. Even if America's identity moves along a "spectrum of contradiction" (9) that includes essence and no essence, presence and absence, it is still a unique spectrum

that, according to Ward, depends upon the spirit of revolution to displace old models. There is no such spectrum available to Canadians, no possibility of defining what is precisely Canadian. If the American dream is to reach that single green light at the end of the dock, the Canadian dream is the general lack of a stabilizing dream, born by ever-increasing anxiety about the force of totalizing visions or our ability to produce them.⁴

Recent Canadian ghost stories, from Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998) to Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) to SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990), avail themselves of this tradition of cultural absence and engage in a process of naming and animating the racial and ethnic absences that have been hidden, ignored, or otherwise destroyed. The ghosts that haunt the pages of contemporary Canadian fiction are, like their counterparts in recent American fiction, very often symbols of communal erasure and emancipation: reminders of a forgotten, often violent, past and/or manifestations of a potentially pluralistic present or a possible and nearly-arrived future. These ghost stories are narratives "of cultural haunting," a special kind of ghost story defined by Kathleen Brogan as an exploration of "the hidden passageways not only of the individual psyche but also of a people's historical consciousness" (5). These stories of cultural haunting that are popular in contemporary American fiction are, according to Brogan, closely linked to a desire to emphasize the fictive nature of history, its repression of certain cultural stories in an attempt to preserve a narrow and exclusive version of communal (oftentimes national) identity. The ghosts "counter the idea that ghostly 'kinship' is somehow less authentic than affiliations defined strictly by blood [or history books] by exposing the constructed nature of all traditions" and all histories (13). When a ghost appears in contemporary novels, it is very often a challenge to the way history has been written and an attempt to refigure the power relations that construct identity. Or to put it another way, "to be haunted in this literature is to know, viscerally, how specific cultural memories that have seemed to have disappeared in fact refuse to be buried" and require integration into a pluralized, more inclusive present (17).

Like its American counterpart, recent Canadian fiction formulates fantasies and anxieties of cultural, racial, and/or ethnic plurality as stories about ghosts, absent presences, or menacing spirits. The questions that dominate these novels are questions about the consequences of haunting and, for some, the necessity or danger of exorcism: what kind of ghosts do we have? To what degree is it possible to live with these racial or racist ghosts? If they are reminders of a violent and oppressive past, do we want

to keep them around? If they are reminders of a lost community or long-forgotten historical moment, how can we make those absent presences present once again? While we might think that Canadian authors provide a few exceptions to Brogan's general argument, the recent influx of Canadian stories of cultural haunting corresponds and coincides with similarly popular concerns about the past, the problems of writing history, the problems of ignoring it, and the possibility (and potential failure) of an integrated present.⁵

I. The Doctor Is In

There is good reason to focus on Freud in MacDonald's narrative, good reason to see Freud's writing on the uncanny as a valuable intertext or theoretical counterpart instead of, say, Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*. After all, Freud is an unavoidable (though often absent) presence in *Fall on Your Knees*. Similar to the other ghosts and secrets of the Piper household, Freud is appropriately "invisible yet oppressive" (254). MacDonald makes direct reference to Freud only on occasion, and, not surprisingly, as the foundation of James's library. As the Piper patriarch recovers from his fall down the stairs, Lily reads to him "fairy tales and Freud" (421), and "in an effort to discover where to lay the blame for Kathleen's perversity," James "dip[s] into Dr Freud. ... Freud calls women 'the dark continent.' James couldn't agree more" (359). Although Freud's presence is most conspicuous in these direct references, *Fall on Your Knees* has enough phallic imagery, incest, unconscious responses, automatons, repressed childhood memories, alter egos, doppelgängers, apparent deaths, and reanimations of the dead to suggest that his presence in the text is far greater than it first appears.⁶

At its most fundamental level, Freud's essay on the uncanny is about ego disturbances and futile acts of psychological repression and control. As he defines it, the uncanny, in its most basic form, is the unique brand of dread and horror one experiences whenever "infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (249). Though Freud spends most of the essay tracing the uncanny's etymological lineage and enumerating uncanny instances (Terry Castle rightly characterizes Freud's essay as "a sort of theme index: ... an itemized tropology of the weird" [4]), he does offer a few renditions of the uncanny that clarify, if not pin down, its

nature and effects. In other words, his various formulations bring into focus what the uncanny is, even if they fail “to define the uncanny in a final or complete way” (Bernstein 1111). In particular, Freud emphasizes the uncanny’s uncontrollable double nature and casts it as a malformed progeny of one’s own psychic denial. In his most lengthy hypothesis, Freud recalls the supporting assumptions that lurk behind his definition:

if psycho-analytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse ... is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; and it must be a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some *other* affect ...; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (241)

The uncanny is much more than a weird feeling or intellectual uncertainty. The uncanny is something — a mental stage, an infantile complex — that was once familiar, harmless even, but after years of repression inexplicably bursts forth and now appears strange. According to Freud’s most popular formulation, the uncanny is something that has “remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (225). Although the catalogue of uncanny “properties of persons, things, sense-impressions, experiences and situations” ranges from an account of *The Sand-man*’s exploration of the lingering fear of castration to a personal experience in a provincial town in Italy, it is these basic qualities of the Freudian uncanny — a psychological pattern of repression and resurgence, unintended recurrence, and the paradoxical formulation of “strange and familiar” — that MacDonald draws on throughout *Fall on Your Knees*.

MacDonald’s novel goes to great lengths to dramatize the psychological uncanny. On a number of occasions, the characters in *Fall on Your Knees* experience the uncanny as a mental process of repression and resurgence. Try as they might to repress specific memories or desires, these characters are inevitably haunted or disturbed by the eventual resurgence of what they believed was, in Freud’s words, “secret and hidden” (225). Although there are too many instances of the psychological uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees* to catalogue all of them here, a brief inventory should show their pervasiveness. Perhaps the most tangible signs of Freud’s un-

canny are in the mental processes and emotional responses of James Piper. For starters, catching a glimpse of Kathleen's photograph on the piano, past and buried memories surge forth, leading to a temporary and uncanny confusion of imagination and reality. Promising to "fix that C sharp right this minute," James says that he'll "get [his] tools":

Then he sees the photograph. The laughing leaning-forward girl with the halo of hurry, "Daddy!" The house is behind her and you can just see Materia in the kitchen window waving. ... James can hear Kathleen laughing at him, totally unafraid, nothing to be afraid of. Not like now in this room. Now is the dim past. (260)

The psychological pattern described in this passage is an uncanny one: the resurgence of a lost memory that causes James Piper, at the very least, confusion; a frightening, though oddly comforting, mental regression to an experience once thought to be surmounted; the return of a demon once thought to be outrun.

James has similar uncanny experiences on the night Kathleen gives birth and the first time he hits his daughter. While James is "half-entombed in the old piano," Kathleen, like the young Materia in Mahmoud's house, walks over to the piano and strikes a chord. "The hammers barely winged him," but this is enough to trigger the repressed anger he has for his wife. He leaps up and belts Kathleen twice, all "before he realizes who it is and what he's done, and how he'd never, not even Materia, though God knows —" (60). Even though the hyphen interrupts his thinking and signals his mental repression, James's thought is easy to finish: though God knows he has wanted to hit Materia. He has only kept that desire secret and hidden until now, until his daughter unwittingly repeats her mother's actions and reminds James of his wife. This initial uncanny experience is overshadowed by what follows. Comforting Kathleen, James vows to protect his daughter. As he does this,

a life and a warmth enter his body that he hasn't felt since — that he has rarely felt. ... He holds her close.... Her hair smells like the raw edge of spring, her skin is the silk of a thousand spinning-wheels, her breath so soft and fragrant, *milk and honey are beneath your tongue*. ... Then he shocks himself. He lets her go and draws back abruptly so she will not notice what has happened to him. Sick. I must be sick. (61)

The repetition of James and Materia's wedding vows — "*Thy lips, O my bride, drop as the honeycomb, honey and milk under thy tongue*" (15) — makes it clear that it is not just his anger and frustration that he has kept

hidden, but also his recollection of their former intimacy, and the life and warmth he felt when they eloped to the cabin in the woods. Since then, he has dismissed her as a “clinical” simpleton with an “overdeveloped animal nature,” especially adept at seducing unsuspecting young men like himself (34). Since this dismissal, he has refused to sleep with her. The shocking resurgence of this desire that he felt so clearly on his wedding night, a desire he thought he had erased (note his effort to erase it, signalled by the hyphen again), is uncanny in the strictest Freudian sense; his resurgent desire is frightening precisely because he thought he had repressed or eliminated it and it resurfaces while he is comforting his daughter. James and Kathleen refuse to learn the lessons of the uncanny and quickly “put it [the desire] behind them” (62). But this attempt at erasure is futile, and the consequences that surface when James arrives in New York are, for Kathleen, fatal and, for the Piper family, disastrous. The fact that James later rapes Kathleen in New York on Remembrance Day underscores the novel’s desire to dramatize the futility of repression and the unconscious compulsion to remember and re-enact past impulses and experiences.

What, exactly, James and Kathleen try and fail to put behind them is something more than a loose tooth or a moment of parental transgression, as Kathleen thinks; it is James’s demon — his hatred and desire for his Lebanese wife — that they try to ignore. James thinks he has “outrun the demon”; he even rationalizes it: “his demon is so far behind him now, he can reflect upon it: he was overworked” (65). In a typically Freudian fashion, the demon appears again; this time as a symbolic figure in a picture that forms in James’s mind on the night Kathleen gives birth to Ambrose and Lily. If it really were a picture he was looking at,

there would ... be a demon peering out from under the lid of the hope chest at the foot of the bed, looking to steal the Young Mother’s soul. ... But since this is not really a painting but a moment freeze-framed by James’s eye, the supernatural elements are, if present, invisible. ... What can you do with such a picture? You never want to see it again yet ... you have to keep it. *Put it in the hope chest, James. Yes. That’s a good place for it.* ... This is crazy, of course. You can’t stuff a memory of a moment into a real-life hope chest as if it were a family heirloom. (143-44)

The irony is that he does stuff this picture into his mental hope chest and it does become a family heirloom, a burden that his daughters, especially Frances, will have to live with for the rest of their lives. MacDonald further emphasizes the uncanniness of the situation. Looking at Kathleen

on the bed and Materia by her side, James wonders if he has seen this picture before, if it is really “an old portrait that he hid in the hope chest many years ago and just stumbled upon again. This temporary confusion is a premonition; it tells him that he will never get over this sight. That it will be as fresh fourteen years from now, the colours not quite dry, just as it is today” (144). The pattern is by now a familiar one: psychological repression (i.e., stuffing the picture into his hope chest) and resurgence (i.e., the colours will be just “as fresh fourteen years from now”) leading to a feeling of horror, dread, or “temporary confusion.”

James is not the only one who has uncanny experiences in *Fall on Your Knees*. In MacDonald's novel almost every character experiences the uncanny in some form. Compare, for instance, Mercedes's willingness and failure to repress what she sees when she walks downstairs and hears “Daddy making the puppy sound” (167) to James's experiences on the night Kathleen dies. Like James and his silent portrait, *Death and the Young Mother*, Mercedes stores her picture, *Daddy and Frances in the Rocking-Chair*, in her own mental hope chest. She keeps that memory “on top of a pile of things at the back of her mind. Not buried.... But as long as she doesn't talk about it, it can remain overlooked” (374). And yet, in true Freudian fashion, Mercedes cannot keep ignoring it. Try as she might, “it's coming closer and closer,” “advancing steadily towards the front of her mind” (374). For her part, Frances also has uncanny experiences. She and James see the same horrible picture — the one that James labels *Death and the Young Mother* — and Frances represses it, only in a slightly different manner. Frances “is young enough still to be under the greater influence of the cave mind. ... It steals the picture from her voluntary mind ... and stows it, canvas side to the cave wall. ... So Frances sees her sister and, unlike her father, will forget almost immediately, but like her father, will never get over it” (146). Eventually, sleeping in the attic, Frances sees “a picture she did not know she owned: Kathleen with a black-red stomach, sweaty hair, two tiny babies alive between her knees” (321). That picture is an uncanny one, one that she has previously repressed or turned away and that, at a later moment, returns to full view.

More than just experiencing the uncanny, Frances and Lily *are* uncanny, and it is not just because MacDonald tells us so. Granted, Mercedes makes such an observation when Frances guesses her sister's buried secret and her love for Rudolph Valentino — “Frances is uncanny,” Mercedes remarks (196) — and Ginger Taylor observes the same about Lily when he catches sight of her at the Empire: “The youngest Piper child, of course,” thinks Ginger, “and that's who she reminds me

of, her older sister Kathleen. The closer she gets, the more uncanny the resemblance" (349). But it is more than this. For the Piper family and especially for James, Frances represents memory; she "remember[s] everything" (335, 409). And since memory is often figured as silent pictures in *Fall on Your Knees*, Frances appropriately has "a photographic memory" (430). Her cave mind "will never forget" (146). And like so many of the memories in the Piper household and like her mother before her, Frances is ignored. This ever-increasing erasure starts with James telling Frances to "keep it [her illicit behaviour] away from Lily" (290), grows into "increasing absence" (297), and culminates in James denying that Frances even exists; "I don't have a daughter by that name," he tells Jameel (360). Similar to Freud's already surmounted infantile complexes and unconscious impulses, Frances "manoeuvr[es] behind the lines. Camouflaged to blend with the terrain" (307).

This is not to say that Frances disappears completely. Like any other repressed memory in Freud's or MacDonald's universe, Frances is a constant presence, surfacing in uncanny forms and invoking the past when she does. Not only does Frances taunt James with her insistence that it would be nice "to see [Kathleen] now and then" (261), but Frances's seduction of Leo Taylor reminds James of Kathleen's miscegenation. When he hears from Jameel that Frances is "fuckin [that] precious spade, Leo Taylor" (360), he comes home "two inches off to the side of his normal self" (369) and decides to take his rifle and find Leo Taylor — just as he decided to go to New York and rescue Kathleen. Frances's uncanny exploits, however, are not limited to James and the Piper household. For instance, even though Mahmoud has tried to erase Materia (he does, after all, "instruct his wife to purge the house of Materia [and ...] Mrs Mahmoud does just that: she burn[s], snip[s] and bundle[s] off [their] daughter's memory" [16]), Frances exhumes her mother's and grandmother's memory and haunts Mahmoud as he sleeps. In some instances, this means that she simply lies under his bed, "staring up at the spot where his heart sleeps" and bringing back a present or, more accurately, a piece of the (buried) past for Lily: "a sterling silver tail-comb with tortoiseshell teeth. A moonstone ring. A braid" (317). In other instances, this means impersonating her grandmother or, from Mahmoud's perspective, animating the dead (340-41).

Lily, too, is uncanny, a buried secret that eventually comes to light. Just before Kathleen gives birth, Lily (along with Ambrose) is "the bomb jammed in the antechamber of [Kathleen's] belly" that threatens to explode (135). Then, as Materia "prayer-dives both hands" through Kathleen's

abdomen, Lily is described again in Freudian terms; she is a “sunken treasure” that is eventually recovered (136). Lily’s uncanny qualities are most clear after her trip to New York City to escape Mercedes and look for Rose. Dressed in Kathleen’s “dress of pale green silk” and carrying her Holy Angels Covenant School notebook, Lily climbs the stairs to Rose’s apartment. As she does, one of Rose’s neighbours “turns to her cronies and explains, ‘That red-haired devil who ruined Miss Rose has come back to life as a shrunk-down raggedy cripple’” (540). Similarly, as Rose opens the door, she too takes Lily for Kathleen:

‘I love you,’ says Rose.

‘I know.’

‘Never leave you.’

‘It’s okay.’

‘Kathleen.’ (542)⁷

Similar to James’s reaction to seeing his daughter’s photograph on the piano, Lily’s presence is uncanny, reminding both Rose and her neighbours of buried memories and past events. In Freud’s terms, Lily is a secret that must be told. By the end of *Fall on Your Knees*, Frances is right when she says to Lily: “We are the dead” (295). Buried impulses, experiences, and even people refuse to remain hidden, refuse to be ignored.

II. Time and Time Again

In moments such as Rose’s recognition of Lily as Kathleen, it is hard to see MacDonald’s use of the Freudian uncanny as a mere sign of psychological depth. Following Terry Castle, who sees Freud’s theory as an implicit challenge to eighteenth-century assumptions of self-control and societal control, MacDonald reworks the uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees* to contest the limits of official history. Although Freud emphasizes that the uncanny is clearly a psychological process, its central feature — uncontrollable anachronism — makes it a well-suited strategy for cultural resistance, one that disturbs colonial authority and negotiates the possibility of a pluralized history.

In MacDonald’s fictional universe, time clearly follows an uncanny, not a linear, path. As MacDonald reminds us just after James sees Kathleen’s once-buried picture on the piano, “Now is the dim past. Then was the shining present. . . . You’ll always be a slave to the present because the present is more powerful than the past, no matter how long ago the

present happened" (260). More to the point, MacDonald warns that compartmentalizing past events is not only futile but dangerous. It is precisely when Kathleen says she has "no history" (122) and believes that "the Present is a new country, unassailable by the old countries" (176) that the past comes back to haunt her, when James and his once-buried demons arrive in New York. More to the point, MacDonald frequently draws on the uncanny's ability to disrupt the linear time of official history and bring buried versions of past events to light. After all, *Fall on Your Knees* raises the buried Piper family history in much the same way that Freud describes the resurfacing of primitive "modes of thought" and "discarded beliefs." Although Lily's "coloured" family tree, one that obliterates "every ancient [European] name" (213), is ignored by Mercedes and buried by Frances, it eventually surfaces in New York and confirms the relationships and connections that were once ignored. Disrupting the official version of events that "everyone agree[d] to" but knew was not true (i.e., that Lily was the "one ... child born" and "the offspring of [her] grandparents" and that Kathleen died from "the influenza" [165]), this resurrected family tree recognizes Lily's origins; unites the lovers, Rose and Kathleen; and acknowledges Frances's relationship with Leo Taylor:

Lily points to the issue of Frances Euphrasia and Leo (Ginger). Sprouting from the union of their branches is his name in green ink, "Anthony (Aloysius)". Ambrose is there too, twinned with Lily, and under his name the words "died at birth". Brother and sister hang by a twig from a branch that joins James to Kathleen.... Next to Kathleen, an "equals" sign joins her name to Rose's. It could be the stale air, the reeling sense of the familiar awash with the foreign, the ocean finally giving up her dead — Anthony is suddenly seasick. (565)

The paradoxical formulation — "familiar awash with the foreign" — reminds us that this family tree is truly uncanny. Its buried secrets burst forth as a reminder that past events, connections, and people will not stay hidden or ignored forever.

The scope of MacDonald's uncanny project goes far beyond the reworking of Piper family history. *Fall on Your Knees* is itself an uncanny narrative, both structurally and thematically. MacDonald not only replicates the act of repression and resurgence on a structural level in her novel — that is, although chronologically James's trip to New York occurs somewhere between Book I and Book II, this piece of the narrative is suppressed until it surfaces in Book VIII, just as Kathleen's buried

notebook does — but, on a thematic level, MacDonald's narrative brings to light events that are peripheral. By focusing on marginalized peoples (Lebanese immigrants, bootleggers, vaudeville players, scabs, and Jewish neighbours), marginalized places (the coke ovens, speakeasies, and jazz hangouts), and marginalized events (racial intolerance, regional poverty, and homosexual relationships), *Fall on Your Knees* offers a history of Cape Breton, and by extension Canada, that is often ignored — or, more accurately, buried — by regional and national historians. In other words, as Lily tells the story of the Piper family to Anthony, she raises a family past ignored by the region, a regional past ignored by the nation, and a national past that is dismissed on the world stage: Mercedes's research at the Sydney library and in the provincial archives in Halifax only validates the official version of the family tree; those "foolish arses in Upper Canada" ignore Cape Breton's contributions (241); and Canada is a derivative of Merry Old England and only a rest stop between the Old Country and the New World or New York.

Unlike Freud's uncanny, then, MacDonald's version is not necessarily a unique brand of dread or horror. The acknowledgement of buried events is, in part, redemptive. Like the patients that Giles visits, whose "ancient sins bloom afresh, fragrant with the purity they possessed a moment before they were named and nipped in the bud" (124), and James's confession, whose words "[give] up their steamy ghosts" (434), MacDonald's uncanny narrative calls up past ghosts and, in a moment of hurt and healing, rescues memory from obliteration. That remembrance and fiction are connected and the narrative act creates history and that both are equally untrustworthy is made quite clear by Frances's equation ("Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable" [270]) and can be taken as a sign of the potentially frustrating but largely redemptive nature of Frances's, Lily's, and MacDonald's project in *Fall on Your Knees*.

III. Spatial Dementia

As often as MacDonald's uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees* takes on psychological and temporal terms, it also assumes spatial dimensions, mapping the coordinates of home and not home, presence and absence, strange and familiar on bodies, food, houses, rooms, cities, and land formations. By doing so, these in-between, liminal, or uncanny spaces and objects become testing grounds, sites of negotiation where individual and communal iden-

tity is challenged, rebuffed, accepted, or confirmed. In these in-between, uncanny spaces, the characters of *Fall on Your Knees* learn to live with ghosts.

Freud calls attention to the spatial dimensions of the uncanny as he traces its etymology and calls on “Gothic’s major architectural metaphor”; or as Robert K. Martin puts it, “to illustrate his theory of the uncanny, [Freud] points out that some languages can only render the German expression and ‘unheimlich [or uncanny] house’ by ‘a haunted house’” (10). Just as telling is Freud’s rendition of his experience of the uncanny in a provincial town in Italy. After walking for hours, thinking he was leaving a quarter of the town behind yet unwittingly returning to the same corner with the same “painted ladies,” a feeling came over him “that [he] can only describe as uncanny” (237); it was a place that was both strange and familiar at the same time.

MacDonald’s uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees* takes on spatial dimensions, using the uncanny terms of strange and familiar, like and unlike, present and absent, to map uncanny spaces. For instance, returning home from the war, James “has had a few years’ practice being present and absent at the same time” (115), and Materia is half in and half out of the oven, with her face inside and only her “stockings rolled down for housework” showing (2). But more importantly, the novel takes advantage of the spatial potential of the uncanny and uses it to identify spaces where various cultural identities are negotiated. In MacDonald’s novel, the uncanny is used to describe a condition of vexed belonging or possession; the uncanny is mapped onto spaces where identity — national, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual — is settled and unsettled, confirmed and called into question. For example, Leo Taylor’s description of his visit to Harlem takes on the terms of the Freudian uncanny in order to explain his ambivalence about living in a place more racially diverse than Cape Breton and about travelling in the United States: “whenever Ginger is in a place that’s filled with other black people it’s as though he is relieved of a weight that he was unaware of until it came off him. ... In Harlem Ginger felt happy but lonely too. Home and not home” (323). Similar terms and tensions mark Materia’s experience of biting into Mrs. Luvovitz’s *ruggalech*; she finds that it has an oddly similar taste to Lebanese food: “It tasted strange and familiar all at once, cinnamon and raisins” (28). Likewise, for Materia, the Old Country is both terrifying and comforting, strange and familiar; it is a “place better than any on earth, but a place you are nonetheless lucky to have escaped” (87). As Homi K. Bhabha suggests, the negotiation that takes place in in-between spaces and

liminal places defines and shapes cultural identity. In proposing the stairwell in Renée Green's *Sites of Genealogy* to be a metaphor for other "liminal spaces [and] in-between designations of identity," Bhabha argues that such boundary locations are where differences are constructed between "upper and lower, black and white" (4). Bhabha goes on to argue that this is also where difference can be contested: the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4).⁸ In other words, the liminal and ambivalent space, which in *Fall on Your Knees* is identified by Freud's uncanny, provides a unique opportunity to negotiate cultural identity.

As if following Bhabha, MacDonald's most conspicuous metaphor for this cultural uncanny is her expansion and exploitation of No Man's Land. On a literal level, No Man's Land signifies a strip of contested ground in France during the Great War. In *Fall on Your Knees*, MacDonald describes No Man's Land this way:

The mud between the opposing trenches is known as No Man's Land. This is a reasonable name for a stretch of contested ground that has yet to be won by either side.... A limbo — grey, yellow, green, mostly grey, and empty except for the dead. ... No man may venture into this space between the lines and remain a man. ... It is possible to become a man once more if you make it back behind your line again, but you suspend your humanity for your sojourn in between. (108)

MacDonald's No Man's Land holds particular consequences for identity: it is an in-between uncanny place, nowhere and somewhere, home and not home, where one can be both present and absent at the same time. But James is not the only one who has to deal with a No Man's Land. Frances, too, acknowledges that she has been in a war all along, with No Man's Land presumably not that far away (439). And for her part, Lily also navigates a No Man's Land: "Here is a place called Awake. On the Other side of this line is the country of Asleep. And you see this shaded area in between? Don't linger there. It is No Man's Land" (226).

Faced with the constant challenge of uncanny, hybrid spaces and liminal places, faced with an always present No Man's Land haunted by ghosts, MacDonald's characters, and perhaps especially James and his youngest daughter Lily, are in constant negotiations for their individual and cultural identities. James, for instance, feels comforted by the fog and ambiguity of No Man's Land, but he wants to deny these in-between identifications and construct and maintain difference. He wants to rescue himself and others

from in-between spaces and pretend that No Man's Land does not exist, that there are no ghosts or buried memories. While in France, he volunteers numerous times to bring back fellow soldiers who were "out there lost" (109) and tries to save Materia from being buried in "an unsanctified field somewhere, ... some unholy No Man's Land" but, more importantly, he denies his own in-between existence (139). Early on in the novel, James is marked by numerous signs of otherness: his background is not simply English, but also Gaelic; he originates from "a lonely place on the other side of the island" (7) named Egypt; and he is described in exotic terms, as "Aladdin" (13) or a "china figurine" (12). But eventually, James represses his otherness, choosing instead to play the role of "a little prince ... of the British Empire" (7). By the time of the photographs that open the novel, James has eliminated the most obvious traces of his otherness: "His hair is braided. That's not an ethnic custom. They were only ethnic on Mumma's side" (2). Furthermore, even though Mahmoud is more similar than James will admit, he chooses to see only difference. The similarities are striking — the Mahmouds are "more Mediterranean. Closer to being European, really" (327); the "Mahmoud girls are popular, each of them a gleaming clear-eyed olive in plaid and perfect English" (96); and like James, Mahmoud himself is from Egypt (339) — yet James refuses to see them. James only sees the colour of the Mahmouds' skin. In his eyes, Materia has "a racial flaw" (34). Even though her family are merchants or entrepreneurs and colonial subjects like himself, they are, to him, "filthy black Syrians" and definitely not Canadian (19). James refuses to live in-between. He wants people to be either like him or unlike him, not both.

The dangers of such repression and denial are already clear. In MacDonald's fictional universe, structured by uncanny principles, colonial power, though initially successful, is futile. Buried impulses come to light. James's repressed desire for Materia takes a monstrous form and haunts his relationship with his daughters. The trick to survival is not transcendence or exorcism. The trick is learning to live with the ghosts that haunt your every move while avoiding the disembodiment or erasure that all ghosts face.

If James's reactions reveal both the power and anxiety of his own cultural imperialism, then Lily's responses to liminal spaces and negotiations of identity articulate a model for cultural understanding, a willingness to listen to the ghosts, a willingness to live, occasionally, in-between. MacDonald makes this most noticeable as Lily, just before catching a fever, sees the value of walking through No Man's Land:

It's Ambrose. Standing at the foot of her bed, looking down at her the

way he does. Lily is in that place again between the lines. ... Lily asks him, "Who are you?" She is prepared for the flood but he does not open his mouth. ... She asks him again, "Who are you?" He opens his mouth and the water pours out but Lily stays in the in-between place and does not make a sound until she and the bed and Frances sleeping next to her are soaked. It's not so bad. The water is warm, having been inside him. ... She asks for a third time, "Who are you?" Ambrose speaks his first words. He has a dark voice because he lives in a dark place. "I am No Man." ... "Don't be afraid, Ambrose. Don't be afraid. We love you." Ambrose says, "Hello." "Hello," says Lily. "Hello, little boy. Hello." (273)

Like her father, Lily rescues the dead from No Man's Land, but unlike her father, Lily does not deny that No Man's Land ever existed. In fact, after welcoming Ambrose, calling him by name and inviting him to identify himself, Lily reverses the effects of the drowning and allows him, even enables him, to speak. Lily has learned to live with ghosts and her reward is her salvation; Ambrose promises to guide her to "the room of she who conceived me" (275), and that saves her from Mercedes's clutches and unites Lily — a ghostly reminder of her sister, Kathleen — with Rose, her sister's lover.

Lily refuses to have her demons exorcised, but she is no ghost herself. Lily might learn to live with ghosts, learn to see variety instead of difference, learn to ignore borders, divisions, and homogeneity, but this lesson is remarkably different from learning to live *as a ghost*. To live *as a ghost*, for MacDonald, is to be invisible, to have no stabilizing connections. To live as a ghost is to have no past, and that is exactly what MacDonald's novel warns against. To be a ghost in *Fall on Your Knees* is to be inaudible (as in Ambrose's case when he stands at the foot of the bed) or unidentifiable (as in Materia's case when she goes unrecognized by Mrs Luvovitz and, therefore, deemed "a ghost" [27]). As Anthony, the son who Frances was sure was dead, enters the novel in the book's final chapter, he enters as a ghost. When Anthony arrives, he is the ideal global traveller, belonging "everywhere and nowhere" and seeing the world as his orphanage; he walks through walls and across borders; he is lost, set adrift without an anchor. But when he sees his family tree for the first time, his emotions are uncanny: "the reeling sense of the familiar awash with the foreign, the ocean finally giving up her dead — Anthony is suddenly seasick" (565). The entire story that follows, Lily's story to Anthony in the guise of the novel, is an invitation into the world of the living and

the dead, where Anthony is no longer a ghost, but has learned to live with his ghostly, diverse, vibrant, and uncanny past.

Fall on Your Knees, for all its international success, resonates with and challenges a powerful, peculiar, and particular Canadian myth: that we are, crucially and paradoxically, full of absence. MacDonald's novel inscribes Canada, Cape Breton, and the Piper family with a wonderfully tense past and a dynamic range of potential identities and identifications. The uncanny in this novel functions as something more than a sign of an author's passing interest in Freudian psychology or a character's psychological depth and complexity. The various formulations of the uncanny in this novel warn against the establishment and worship of familial, regional, and national centres that are determined to disguise their origins and conceal the full range of possible sympathies and abilities. When Lily, for instance, refuses Mercedes's attempts to obliterate the nature and origins of her "crippled leg," the young Piper sister articulates the novel's central challenge to hegemonic beliefs about Canadian cultural absence. Lily

has promised herself, her little leg that — number one — she will never let it be cut off. And — number two — she will never let it be obliterated by a miracle. The idea of betraying so valiant a limb, which has carried and marched beyond the call of duty. To say, here is your reward: to cease to be — to become, instead, a false twin for the good leg. Her bad leg is special because it is so strong. Lily has learned, however, that to others it is special because it is weak. (377)

Lily offers a powerful lesson, one that is central to *Fall on Your Knees*. The novel celebrates Lily's refusal to obliterate her so-called deficient leg — that is, to make it an absence, something that will "cease to be" — and, in the process, encourages a Canadian reader's refusal to obliterate or ignore a so-called deficient cultural history. *Fall on Your Knees* articulates the danger of repression and the pleasure of return, the repercussions of obedience and the inherent value in the recovery and maintenance of cultural diversity.

NOTES

¹ Aside from the special issue of *Mosaic* in which Redding's essay appears, Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* is the most sustained articulation about the recent fascination with ghosts in contemporary literature. See especially 4-30.

² See Ian Angus's *A Border within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness* for a brief and competent summary of what he calls the "two main abiding themes through-

out the history of definitions of English Canada: ... the public intervention of the federal state and a ... relationship to the land, nature, environment" (114).

3 Adam Carter's "Namelessness, Irony, and National Character in Contemporary Canadian Criticism and the Critical Tradition" recognizes in the work of Robert Kroetsch and Linda Hutcheon this tendency in Canadian criticism to assert the absence of national identity. Carter proceeds to argue that this tendency is one of the "longstanding, recurring features of the discourses of nation" and traces it all the way back to the work of Friedrich Schlegel, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant (7).

⁴Keohane contends that there are two broad movements — in his words, "two problematic hegemonic projects" — that attempt to fill this absence: "The first is a *reactionary, exclusive* discourse represented by the Reform party, organizations like the Heritage Front, and the Quebec separatist movements. These seek to achieve closure of the question of identity by identifying and excluding all excess — all that is not 'mainstream' (Reform), that is not white, Protestant, etc. (Heritage Front), that is not Québécois (Bloc).... The second hegemonic project is a *proactive, inclusive* discourse, best represented by official multiculturalism and the practices of affirmation that have come to be known as 'political correctness.' These discursive practices also seek closure of the question of identity, by identifying, categorizing, and systematically *including* the multiplicity and diversity of experiences that constitute Canada" (7). See 6-9 for more.

⁵At risk of flattening Brogan's insightful and nuanced argument, I think it's compulsory to point out, however briefly, a few of the exceptions to her general argument in the Canadian corpus of stories of cultural haunting. We might think that Canadian novels such as *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* eagerly reverse the terms of conventional cultural haunting and cast WASPish colonialists as demonic spirits; that a few Canadian novels, notably *The Electrical Field*, are suspicious about the benefits of living with these newly animated ghosts; and that a number of contemporary novels, *Fall on Your Knees* included, are skeptical about the process of cultural translation where the hauntings by "a 'source' culture" are rendered into "a 'target' culture" (11).

⁶Of the ever-increasing body of critical works on *Fall on Your Knees*, only Candida Rifkind's essay "Screening Modernity: Cinema and Sexuality in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*" and Coral Ann Howells's "'How Do We Know We Are Who We Think We Are?': Ann-Marie MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*" make any significant use of Freud. In her excellent rendition of Frances's development in relation to specular culture, Rifkind observes that the "connection between an individual's lived experience, her memory of it, and her unconscious compulsion to repeat it" is evidence of Freudian trauma (32). Howells suggests Freud's uncanny as a valuable theoretical counterpart, but only because it is part of the novel's Gothic machinery and grants special Gothic value to the Piper house: "as several recent critics have suggested in their revisionary readings of the uncanny, the scariest Gothic place is the home, which becomes an 'unhomely' space haunted by monstrous memories and abusive father figures. For MacDonald, Gothic horror is family horror and the domestic space of the Pipers' white house ... becomes the dominant architectural metaphor" (113). As exemplary as Rifkind's and Howells's readings are, they miss identifying the size and scope of the Freudian uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees*.

⁷Jennifer Andrews, in her efforts to see *Fall on Your Knees* as an example of magic realism, reads these events as examples of magic-realist techniques that "transcend the realities of time and space" (14). In reference to the neighbour's reaction, she argues that this is where "the magical aspects of [Lily's] journey come to the fore" (15). Although Andrews is quite right in acknowledging that these "magical aspects" refuse to obey the limits of reality, she

does not characterize this pattern of repression and resurgence as a pattern familiar to Gothic literature and readily available in Freud's version of the uncanny.

⁸ Cynthia Sugars and Smaro Kamboureli both have identified a recent tendency in diasporic or postcolonial Canadian fiction to speak of liminal space and identities, where racial and ethnic minorities feel at home and not home, possessed and dispossessed, settled and unsettled; these liminal spaces or the characters' reactions to them take on Freudian terms, and their condition is, Kamboureli writes, the condition of "the Canadian uncanny" (215).

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