

Striving for a Post-Colonial Canadian Hermeneutic

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On Thanksgiving Day, 2018, while our neighbours to the south screamed at their televisions over the vetting of Brett Kavanaugh, *The Beaverton*, Canada's premier satirical magazine, released an article titled "Canadians thankful they can't name single Canadian Supreme Court Justice." The article ends with the made-up statistic, "At press time 10% of the people reading this article were shocked to discover Canada also has a Supreme Court" (Field). Canadians don't much think of the fact that our legal system is still based on colonial hermeneutics: Supreme Court judges attempting to understand the archaic proclamations of colonists and revolutionaries.

Hermes was not just a simple messenger; he was god of both boundaries *and* the transgression of boundaries (Burkert 158). Hermes allows us to pay attention to the wisdom of the ancients *and* to violate the rules that they have handed down. The American hermeneutic is often fundamentalist, only paying attention to the first task of Hermes. Justices of the Supreme Court of the USA attempt to discern the founding fathers' original intent while preachers cherry-pick the words of Leviticus and apply them to contemporary San Francisco. As American legal scholar John MacNamara writes, "The original context [of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights] trumps any pretence toward a reflection on contemporary conditions and the court restricts itself to interpreting eighteenth-century logic and motivation." The American hermeneutic, whether legal or religious, sees that the word of the text must be taken as absolute: Boundaries must not be transgressed.



Hermes with his Kerykeion (herald's staff) Photo Credit Marie-Lan Nguyen Public Domain

To Canadians, this lack of attention to contemporary conditions seems absurd. But, this fundamentalist hermeneutic is not that different from our own colonial hermeneutic. Both the Canadian colonial hermeneutic and the American fundamentalist hermeneutic seek to impose a way of life, one from another place, the other from another era, upon the Other. The reaction to this fundamentalist/colonial hermeneutic is the individualist hermeneutic. As Canadian scholar of hermeneutics Jens Zimmerman explains, in contemporary times we do not understand our reliance on our communities, and instead we see ourselves as "islands of awareness," floating

in a huge ocean, not connected to others (Zimmerman). Zimmerman notes that Charles Taylor labelled this “the disengaged self.” This individualist hermeneutic can lead to a dangerous relativism and even nihilism.

Philosophical hermeneutics is an antidote to both fundamentalism and relativism. A philosophical hermeneutic seeks understanding without imposition from a fusion of horizons (Gadamer) facilitated by trust. A literal horizon is a limit of a person’s perspective in relation to the fact that the earth is a sphere. It is not an absolute boundary, but it is created by one’s position on the planet. If you change your vantage point, you change your horizon. Yet, you cannot realistically continually change your own vantage point in order to get a complete picture. The only way that you can get a picture of the whole planet is if you communicate with people who come from different vantage points—who see different horizons—and fuse your picture together with theirs. While the colonial hermeneutic attempts to impose its picture on others and the individualist hermeneutic trusts no one, the post-colonial hermeneutic embraces this fusion of horizons: it does not dismiss the other’s picture as untrue but recognizes that it comes from a different vantage point. Trusting the other’s vantage point helps one have a more complete picture of the world.

Perhaps Canada’s most renowned hermeneutic scholar, Northrop Frye, recognized that to understand the Canadian imagination, we must study its literary production. Fry notably pointed towards the “garrison mentality” (334) in Canadian literature (which Margaret Atwood elaborated on in *Survival*): a fear of nature and unquestioning obedience to community. Yet, he recognized that Canadian literature was capable of moving beyond this provincial fear and obedience (351). In my essay, “Misbehaving Language: a Postcolonial Philosophy of Communication in *The Satanic Verses*,” I argue that the post-colonial literature genre of magical realism embraces multiple narratives thereby disrupting absolutism. Telling stories from different vantage points (and trusting that the other is honestly sharing their experience) expands our own horizon. Canadian post-colonial theorist Stephen Slemon observes that magical realism contains “a concept of

resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems” (10). Canadians live in a world of multiplicity: we are educated in the colonial discourse of the English and the French, our minds are colonized with the pop culture of the USA, many of us still hear the calls of our immigrant families, and increasingly, we are listening to Indigenous voices. As I stated in 2018, “magical realism overcomes the struggles between the discourse of the centre and the margin through the phenomenological bracketing of what is logically possible in a realist novel” (Corry). Established Canadian authors like Michael Ondaatje, George Elliot Clarke, and Margaret Atwood, as well as emerging authors like Gail Anderson Dargatz and Tomson Highway, use multiple perspectives and magical realism to expand the reader’s horizon, refuting the absolutist systems of both the colonized and the colonizer.

This acknowledgment of multiplicity is not just evident in Canadian literature, but also in Canadian film and television productions. We often hear the phrase “Canadians are so funny,” but few of us consider the role of our position on the margins of empires as key to our success. In the 1970s and 80s, from their standpoint of insider/outside in the American dominated world of television, the cast of *Second City Television (SCTV)* could mock both the British adherence to tradition and brash American individualism. Once one recognizes that class and culture are not absolutes but social constructions that can be mocked, the recognition of gender as a social construction is not far behind. In the 1990s, the gender-mocking comedy of *Kids in the Hall* was judged too controversial for American network T.V., yet received public funding to air prime-time on Canada’s public broadcaster.

As Canadian academics, we can manifest this post-colonial hermeneutic in our teaching: to bring messages from the gods to mortals, we must listen to multiple narratives. I draw on my experience as a child in the suburbs of Vancouver and coming of age in urban Istanbul to understand the conflicting narratives of my undergraduate students' lives, many of whom are first generation immigrants. My teaching-mentor, Roman Onufrijchuk, a Ukrainian-Canadian born into a family of post-WWII displaced persons, explained:



Drawing of Dr. Roman Onufrijchuk by Ahmara Smith

I learned to straddle between understanding and dismay early on—home was one culture, compellingly sung and written in memory and regret; on the street and in school was another, promising in intimations of “progress,” participation and pleasures... my own efforts to understand this state of straddling cultures, and how communication shaped the cultures I inhabited, benefitted from teaching. Crossing and re-crossing of the field, reverse reengineering understanding, rendered both enriching insights, new intellectual temptations and distractions, and a still growing ability to recognize one’s inability to follow all those tributaries, but also to be reinforced and advised by their background presence. (Onufrijchuk)

In this age of reconciliation in Canada, there is no task more important than striving for this post-colonial hermeneutic. We must acknowledge that colonialism is a historical fact that continues to affect us all. We cannot entirely ignore laws and traditions of the colonial founders, but neither can we assume that the founders were infallible: we must fuse horizons with the multiple traditions of Canada. And let us remember that Hermes does not just recognize boundaries, but transgresses them.

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