



Les **Presses** de l'Université d'Ottawa
University of Ottawa **Press**

Chapter Title: Postcolonial Collisions of Language: Teaching and Using Tensions in the Text

Chapter Author(s): MARGARET STEFFLER

Book Title: Home-Work

Book Subtitle: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature

Book Editor(s): Cynthia Sugars

Published by: University of Ottawa Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ekpc18.23>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 United States License (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 US). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>.



University of Ottawa Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Home-Work*

JSTOR

Postcolonial Collisions of Language: Teaching and Using Tensions in the Text

MARGARET STEFFLER

The moment in the heart
where I roam restless, searching
for the thin border of the fence
to break through or leap.

— Michael Ondaatje, “Last Ink”

WHILE TEACHING AS a CUSO co-operant in Nigeria in the early 1980s, I was asked by my Form Two students to speak “Canadian.” I replied, rather erroneously I realized, that I *was* speaking Canadian, but they continued to press me to speak the language of my own country rather than that of England, or at least to speak the English language as I spoke it at home—as my mother spoke it—as opposed to the way I spoke it in the classroom. My response raised confusion in my students, who understandably found it difficult to believe that the English I spoke and taught in the classroom was the only language in which I was truly fluent. At the time, my students’ questions raised in me feelings of linguistic inadequacy and guilt; over the years those same questions have played an important role not only in how I read and teach literature, but also in how I approach and understand language, culture, postcolonialism, and pedagogy.

My Nigerian students' enthusiasm for, interest in, and love of language, in both a vernacular and a literary context, moved me to look at language, and particularly the English language, in new and different ways. The English language spoken and written by my students in Nigeria was the language described by Chinua Achebe, who maintains that "the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" ("African Writer" 84). The "altered" language I both heard and read in Nigeria, a dynamic hybridization, emerged in a violent and political manner out of the collision of cultures, and cannot and should not be considered simply an evolution or adaptation of English. Achebe stresses the submission of the language itself to those who consciously use and change it, claiming that "the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use" ("African Writer" 82). Achebe demonstrates the power of forcing the English language to be submissive, telling stories and relating history in a language that exists precisely *because* those stories and that history have taken place.

Coming back from Nigeria to study and eventually teach English Canadian literature, I found that along with a longing for the extreme ways in which my senses were stretched and challenged in Nigeria, there was also a longing for the dynamic and political use of language. While reading Ken Saro-Wiwa's 1994 novel, *Sozaboy*, I recalled those probing questions posed by my students. Lomber One of Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, subtitled "A Novel in Rotten English," begins as follows:

Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first.

All the nine villages were dancing and we were eating plenty maize with pear and knacking tory under the moon. Because the work on the farm have finished and the yams were growing well well. And because the old, bad government have dead, and the new government of soza and police have come. (1)

The Canadian equivalent of the altered or new English described by Achebe and so prominently displayed in the work of Saro-Wiwa would obviously be found in the way in which Canadian Aboriginal communities and writers, Canadians colonized by English politics and language, use

the English language, forcing it to submit and become altered as it is used.¹ As I taught English Canadian literature, I was struck, however, by the way in which the literary language in the postcolonial context in Canada, at least in the works I was teaching, seemed to be stuck in a stage of collision, pointing out the collisions, but not allowing the emergence of an altered language or the provision of a submission or resolution to the collision. The “other” language in the texts—the non-English—and the attention drawn to its presence constitute a hybridization in process, but not achieved, and apparently not moving or working towards completion. The state of tension remains, is at the centre of the text, and seems to be what holds our attention.

In the second-year English Canadian prose course I have taught for the past ten years, these colliding languages are central to our tutorial discussions about the texts in the “Crossing Cultures” unit of the course. The “other” languages vary as we change the books and the course from year to year, but the presence of the other language is always of great interest and importance in our discussions and often seems to open up the books in valuable and startling ways. This year, for example, we were drawn to the Gaelic in Alistair MacLeod and Jane Urquhart, the Latin in Urquhart and Sheila Watson, the Parsi in Rohinton Mistry, the Japanese in Joy Kogawa, the Sinhalese in Michael Ondaatje, the Cherokee in Thomas King, the Low German in Rudy Wiebe, and references to Yiddish and Hebrew in Adele Wiseman. The presence of other languages raises in the reader questions about semiotics, focusing particularly, as do Achebe and Saro-Wiwa, on breaking down assumptions about the ownership of language. Saussure’s insistence on difference and opposition within language itself (88) can provide a basis for an understanding of the refusal of these other languages to coalesce or integrate with the dominant language of English in these Canadian works.

Colliding Languages

Although Thomas King does give his readers glimpses into the ways in which Aboriginal communities have altered and used the English imposed upon them, more often than not he draws attention to the collisions of languages rather than the alterations. The seamless integration of Ibo

proverbs and the English language into something entirely new in Achebe's work does not have an equivalent in King's work, which is not the place to look for this equivalent, as King, in a spirit of duality, stresses the separations and collisions of languages, drawing attention both orally and visually to the coexistence of two types of language—that of the colonizer and that of the colonized. The abrupt dismissals of the English language attempts of “*Once upon a time . . .*” (11), “*A long time ago in a faraway land . . .*” (12), and “*In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth*” (14) to begin stories in *Green Grass, Running Water* are further undercut by the application of the dismal and listless attempt of the English language to articulate native experience and culture: “*Many moons comechucka . . . bahahahahahahahahaha*” (13). The Cherokee and English in *Green Grass, Running Water* are forced to share the same page and the same line, albeit separated for the most part—the English on the left side of the page or sentence and the Cherokee on the right—and thus have no choice but to take one another into consideration even while maintaining a distinct distance. Using and drawing attention to translation, the text visually places the two languages in diametric opposition, separated by the identification of the speaker, who acts as both a barrier and a connector between the two languages:

“That’s better,” said Hawkeye. “Tsane:hlan’v:hi.”

“Listen,” said Robinson Crusoe. “Hade:loh’v:sgi.”

“It is beginning,” said Ishmael. “Dagvyá:dhv:dv:hnf.” (15)

The emphasis on the distinction, separation, and translation contrasts with Achebe's emphasis on the submission of one language to another and the emergence of an altered language. According to Achebe, the political and deliberate *use* of an instrument, whether that instrument be a trumpet, a language, or a literary genre, will result in a new sound: “did not the black people in America, deprived of their own musical instruments, take the trumpet and the trombone and blow them as they had never been blown before, as indeed they were not designed to be blown? And the result, was it not jazz?” (“Colonialist Criticism” 23). King stresses the collision and difference of sound rather than the use, submission, and emergence of sound.

The placement of Cherokee syllabary at the beginning of each of

the four parts of *Green Grass, Running Water* further increases the exclusion of the English-only reader. Once students accept the inaccessibility of the words on the page, however, realizing that King is deliberately marginalizing them, they appreciate experiencing the position of the “other” language and culture—a position which necessarily begins as one of exclusion. It is often a powerful moment when students suddenly feel the exclusion through their position as reader and extend that feeling beyond the text to the culture and society in which they live, a natural step in an English literature course that is cross-listed as a Canadian studies course.

This feeling of exclusion and difference extends to other works included in this “Crossing Cultures” section of the course. Each of the authors studied, like King, draws attention to collisions of language, often emphasizing difference in a highly visual manner. Rohinton Mistry, for example, in “Auspicious Occasion,” the first story in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, uses Parsi and English words together in a single sentence, without any translation, italicizing the Parsi words, rendering them foreign and visually setting them apart from the English text. The character, Rustomji, for example, explains his dilemma to his wife Mehroo: “*Saala chootia spat paan on my dugli and you think that is fun?*” (17). The hard sounds of the “ch,” “sp,” “d,” and “g,” emphasized through their contrast with the lingering double vowels, mimic the actual spitting of the bus passenger from the upper deck and reflect Rustomji’s tone of anger and frustration as he spits out his questioning complaint. Similarly, in *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje actually provides the Sinhalese script on the typed page, its very presence drawing the reader’s attention not only to the different language but to the shapes and structure of an unfamiliar alphabet. The narrator describes his emotional and aesthetic response to this written language, in which “the insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid. The letters are washed blunt glass which betray no jaggedness” (69). The texture of the brittle Ola leaf of Ceylon on which language was written was responsible, Ondaatje tells us, for the transformation of the verticals of Sanskrit into the “curling alphabet” or “moon coconut” of Sinhalese, resembling “the bones of a lover’s spine” (69). Both Mistry and Ondaatje work with the senses in order to bring the other language off the page, giving it a texture and depth of difference both in itself and through its contrast with English.

In *Running in the Family* and *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, the colliding

languages work to establish other tensions and oppositions in the text. The thematic mixture of the sacred and profane in “Auspicious Occasion,” for example, grows out of and is consonant with the dislocations aroused by the paradoxical separation and mixture of the two languages; the yoking of the two languages and the two attitudes is startling. “*Ashem Vahoo, / See the tits on that chickie-boo,*” repeats Rustomji, maintaining that it takes “a trained ear to sift through their mumbles and separate the prayers from the obscenities” in the language used and heard in the temple (Mistry 14). Similarly, the disparity between the beauty of the Sinhalese alphabet and the incongruous message it conveys—“We must not urinate again on Father Barnabus’ tires” (Ondaatje 69–70)—extends the linguistic tension into a thematic tension, focusing on the opposition between what is said and how it is conveyed.

In Mistry’s “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag,” Jaakaylee responds to the Tamil and Keralite languages, “with their funny *illay illay poe poe*” sounds (46). For her, such difference increases the numbers of those who belong to the group who do not speak like the Parsis, relieving some of her own difference as a “Goan Catholic” of “very dark skin colour” (46). The introduction of more languages means that there are more collisions and tensions to deal with, but a less obvious position of power for the majority group within Firozsha Baag. This refusal of the languages to submit or coalesce illustrates Homi Bhabha’s contention that “the nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the ‘horizontal’ view of society,” but instead “reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (“DissemiNation” 300). For Ondaatje, the different surfaces on which language is written—Ola leaves, paper, classroom boards, walls, desks, rock faces, notebooks, ceilings, and hidden corners of the university campus (69–70)—are the battlegrounds where these linguistic collisions take place and where potential victories, based on which language is wiped out and which is preserved, are taken back to the state of the collision as Ondaatje focuses on the surfaces of the battlegrounds themselves.

In Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, the Japanese language is visually prominent, unbalancing the English-only reader as do the Cherokee, Parsi, and Sinhalese in the texts already discussed. In *Obasan*, however, the Japanese language is often accompanied by a translation in an apparent attempt to

bring the two cultures together and provide clarification rather than accentuate difference. But as Aunt Emily “works the translation” of a Japanese haiku into English (217), the loss of form and meaning is apparent. The merging or connection of the two languages through translation or understanding essentially fails, leaving them in a state of tension. Even the way in which the attempts at translation are explained points out the difference, this linguistic incompatibility of structure, that defies a literal word-by-word translation: “‘Yoku ki ga tsuku ne,’ Grandma responds. It is a statement in appreciation of sensitivity and appropriate gestures” (56). The separation of these two languages in this translation statement is very similar to the structure of King’s single-line treatment and translation of Cherokee and English. In Kogawa’s work, however, the second part of the statement, following the identification of the speaker, is a holistic description of the meaning and tone of all the spoken words together rather than an attempt at a literal translation. Again, the linguistic difference introduces and is expanded into a thematic and cultural tension, in this case the Canadian government’s political oppression of Canadians of Japanese descent. The difference between the Japanese and English language, most obvious during these discussions of translation, provides insight into the cultural and political positions of the oppressor and oppressed: “‘It was not good, was it,’ Mother says. ‘Yoku nakatta ne.’ Three words. Good, negation of good in the past tense, agreement with statement. It is not a language that promotes hysteria” (60). Conversely, of course, the rhetoric used by the Canadian government *does* cause and promote hysteria. In this discussion of language and hysteria there is an attempt at a type of word-by-word translation of the Japanese, but again the attempt manages to reveal the difficulty of translation and emphasizes difference in the way the other language is constructed, each word building on the word that comes before. The reader’s attention is drawn to the concise, economical, and yet emphatic manner in which this language works, the actual meaning of the statement becoming secondary to the explanation of how the three words relate to one another.

In Rudy Wiebe’s *The Blue Mountains of China* we can hear the “other” language of Low German even in the background of the English. Frieda Friesen’s voice is a translation in process as the syntax of the English language makes clear: “I was healthy and worked in the barn and the field though it wasn’t with me what it would have been with a boy” (9). The

migrant experience of the Mennonites explains to some extent the linguistic tension, according to Bhabha, who argues that the “liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the ‘survival’ of migrant life” (*Location* 224). The awareness of the other language as the source of the translated English draws attention to its difference from English. The translation is both awkward and poetic at the same time, an appropriate vehicle to convey the tone of Freida’s immense faith as reflected in her refrain—“it does come all from God, strength and sickness, want and plenty” (10). Elizabeth Driediger comments on Jakob Friesen’s “strange, foregone-conclusion kind of talk” (187). Like Freida’s tone and style, Jakob’s words set him apart from the modern and “progressive” world. The retention of the other language of Low German guarantees his position as other in the new world, the language being the means and the sign of his remaining apart from the dominant culture. The calm and polite tones of Freida’s and Jakob’s carefully translated English contrast with Irene’s modern voice, which shocks and assaults in its brazenness: “‘Hey o poppo,’ her eyes flashed up, ‘can we stay the weekend and drive to Jasper and swim in the hot springs and take one of the big motor boats along and go up a mountain, just a little, poppo mine, huh?’” (200). The contemporary crassness of Irene’s English contrasts with the polite and formal Low German that translates into a polite and formal English. The German is more attractive than the dominant language of English, as are the culture and tone embodied by that Low German in translation. The difference is unmistakable. The more extreme contrast of language in Wiebe’s novel is found in the chapter, “The Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer,” in which the religious and prophetic voice heard by Sam Reimer is neither heard nor believed by anybody else. The Old Testament flavour—“I am the God of your fathers, the Lord your God. Go and proclaim peace in Vietnam” (158)—is far removed from the television world in which Sam’s children live. As in Mistry’s stories, the religious and the secular collide, stressing the conservative nature of the former and the consumerism of the latter. There is no openness in the Canada of 1967 to spiritual and biblical voices that command and proclaim as does the voice in “The Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer.” The state of diaspora and exile for the Mennonite community is thus reflected in the collision of languages in their Canadian experience.

Jane Urquhart, also dealing with migrant characters, uses two “other” languages in *Away*—Latin and Irish Gaelic—both archaic and out of vernacular use. There is an incongruity in the barefoot Irish children of the hedgerow school droning “in the voice of Caesar” “*Insula natura triquetra, cuius unum latus est contra Galliam*” (30). The disparities and ironies between the language, its content, the speaker, and the hedgerow institution are many. An ancestor of the current Sedgewick landlords even places Latin in the mouth of a puffin, who intones, “*Ego sum Fratercula arctica . . . Habito in ora Hibernica*” (40). Other fragments of Latin are those of the church, “*Pater noster . . . In Deo speramus, Te Deum laudamus*” (48), and taxonomy: “*Solanum tuberosum*,” pronounces Osbert Sedgewick, referring to the potato (66). With no translations provided, readers are at the mercy of their own knowledge and memories of Latin, but even with “small Latin and less Greek” (69),² the fragmentary and irrelevant nature of the classical language for those using it is obvious to the reader.

As in *Running in the Family*, new and unfamiliar languages are examined from many perspectives in Urquhart’s novel. Liam responds to Latin’s “soft sounds, the *Ulli, arum, alla, orae*, which tumbled near the fire” (147). Mary notes “the shape of the English words . . . their silence on the slate after the deliberate noise of putting them there,” likening them to “a collection of sticks and stones tossed up on a beach” (60). The English language is associated with the outer world, with a political and global context within which Mary attempts to position herself and her country. She has to work hard, however, to tear herself away from the “traces of songs and poems” associated with “another” world (60), a mystical realm far removed from the English language and the concrete countries of the globe revealed in geography books.

Although *Away* is steeped in references to Gaelic, the actual Irish language is only offered in the small fragment, “*Rian fir ar mhnaoi*” (205). These words, spoken by Brian to Eileen just before he dies, sound “unfamiliar, untranslatable in their ears” (205). The break between the old language/old world and new language/new world has widened to a large void, approaching in its extremity the incomprehensible chasm that lies between the watery world of Mary’s mystical sailor and the inhospitable earth and rocky terrain of Ireland and the Canadian Shield. It is Liam who recalls the meaning of that Irish phrase—“the trace of a man on a woman” (206)—providing the translation for the reader, and taking the reader to

the novel's Irish triad epigraph, interestingly offered in the translated English rather than the original Irish. In Brian's school, the Gaelic and English remain apart, separated into two vertical lists on the slate board. Liam sees "a list of Gaelic nouns written in his father's hand, and beside them their English equivalents written in the hand of a child: 'famine,' 'sorrow,' 'homeland' . . ." (206). The separation of the languages accentuated by the listing formation of two columns is wrenched into violence and oppression for Liam by the imagined interruption of the school trustees, who put a stop to the child's completion of the word *castle*, and an end to the slate-board map "filled with violent arrows and forbidden words" (207).

As in *Away*, the Latin in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* is fragmentary, ritualistic, and incomplete. The mixture of phrases from which Felix can draw is definitely classified and separated by the two different languages: "You're welcome. Put your horse in. Pull up. *Ave Maria. Benedictus fructus ventris. Introibo*" (41). Felix's provision of a translation of "*Pax vobiscum*" for Lenchen provides no relevance or relief as she has no place to "go in peace." Felix's possession of words to dismiss Lenchen—"keep moving, scatter, get-the-hell-out"—is very limited, leaving him with nothing to do but "put a stick on the fire" (41). The consumable nature of the combination of the elements of wood and fire (particularly a single stick of wood) is associated with the insubstantiality of Felix's words and contrasts with the words of Coyote, which come out of the much more substantial rock and ground, issuing from the crevasses and creases, from the very bowels of the earth. Coyote's song, which "fret[s] the gap between the red boulders" near the beginning of the novel, includes the pervasive element of air in the form of the east wind and affects "those who cling to the rocks" (16). At the conclusion of the novel, the voice of Coyote, coming "from a cleft of the rock . . . crying down through the boulders" (118), brings words that control the position of humanity on earth—"on [the] soft ground," "on the sloping shoulders / of the world" (118). Coyote's words are the source of stability, a foundational rock, in a way that Felix's fragmented words never can be. Felix's and Coyote's words contrast and collide in their sources, textures, powers, and effects—the one set gathered haphazardly and randomly from the surface of the human mind and the other set emanating from the core of the earth as it opens up to meet the soil of the surface.

In Alistair MacLeod's *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* it is again the collision of two different languages that provides the foundation for the thematic tensions at the heart of the stories. In the first story, "The Closing Down of Summer," the narrator, along with the other miners, speaks and sings Gaelic, which provides a familiar comfort, particularly the "Gaelic songs because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar" (19). The young soldiers in "Vision" turn to Gaelic for similar reasons. The Gaelic songs and words used by the miners clash with contemporary pop lyrics, as out of place as the narrator's hands and body in a kitchen filled with the latest avocado-coloured appliances. The Gaelic is a sign of the isolation of the miners as they live apart from their families and communities, pushed into the position of "other," regressing to a language that is of the old world and perhaps more suited to articulating and mining the depths of that ancient earth. The Gaelic of the miners collides with the technical language and jargon of law and dentistry that will be the world of the children. In "Vision," the final story in the collection, MacLeod sets up the two languages in the familiar translation statement, the Gaelic and English separated by the identity of the speaker:

"Cò a th'ann?" she called. "Who's there?"

"Se mi fhìn," he answered quietly. "It's myself!" (151)

Here the Gaelic beckons toward that other world of passion and sexuality that has been reined in and controlled in the story's action in much the same way as the English reins in and controls the Gaelic in the sentence itself.

In "The Tuning of Perfection" we are confronted with songs written in Gaelic, which the unknowing eye must more or less skim over, not knowing how to read or pronounce the words. The non-Gaelic reader stumbles, visually and orally, over the line, "Is tric mi 'sealltainn o' n chnoc a' s' airde" (96). MacLeod not only shows us the disparity on the page, but also explains the difference in a later story, suggesting that the people favour Gaelic as the original and thus the purer language: "The story was told in Gaelic, and as the people say, 'It is not the same in English,' although the images are true" (160). The Gaelic song lyrics are juxtaposed with slogans on bumper stickers and T-shirts that assault us, forcing us to read them even if we would prefer not to. The slogan on the bumper

sticker reads, "If you're horny, honk your horn" (97), and on the T-shirt, "if you've got it, flaunt it" (106). The jolting dislocation of the traditional and poetic Gaelic beside the crass and succinct English slang reflects in an exaggerated manner the thematic struggle proposed and embodied by the two main characters in this short story, Carver and Archibald. Carver wants to popularize the past culture by modifying and updating it, whereas Archibald stands firm, determined to preserve a pure culture by refusing to compromise or alter it. In a way, Carver is forcing the Gaelic culture and language to submit to a use that will empower it by making it relevant, just as Achebe's and Saro-Wiwa's use of the English language empowers through its relevance, which demands the submission of the original language itself. A language or culture that does not touch the heart of the people obviously fails to move or affect those for whom it is intended.

Moving from Excluded to Other

When reading these texts, students slip into the position of the excluded, lightly pushed by the language that not only lies outside their knowledge and experience, but also defies attempts to be recognized, read, or pronounced. The transition from the position of the excluded to the position of "other" is a step that becomes familiar. This othering of the reader extends to areas of the text in which language is not a central issue. For example, the moment in Adele Wiseman's *Cruckpot* when Hoda suddenly jumps into Mrs Limprig's body, when she is "jerked through her own skin" (271), is one for which we have been well prepared through our position as excluded and other. These positions have been initiated by the tensions and collisions of language, in this case English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, which lead us to an ability to empathize with the other as Hoda does: "[Hoda] cried out against expanding suddenly into another's world, experiencing another's flesh, another's senses, comprehending another's anguish" (272). Here we have Wiseman's sharply accurate definition and description of the essence of human compassion. As Hoda resists it, so do we as readers resist a position that necessarily and often painfully moves us to experience and view life from the other perspective and point of view, but eventually, like Hoda, we find that we crave it: "It was gone almost immediately, her revelation, and Hoda, who had cried out against it,

wanted it back, the sudden enlargement, the unbidden, anguished thrill, the knowing that was not just trimmed to your head but flowed through your whole being" (272). As readers, we come to feel for Hoda the compassion that she herself is experiencing for others and, to use Edward Said's words, we sense that "it is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntually, about others than only about 'us'" (336).

Our feeling of exclusion has been translated into the ability to "be jerked through our own skin" in most of these books. The realization is sudden and uncontrollable, as Hoda describes it. It is not something that we have planned or orchestrated. The reader who is excluded from the other language in these books experiences the knowledge and insight into the other, albeit very limited, as a progression from initial feelings of resentment and confusion based on exclusion. The collisions and tensions of language remain, making the leap into the other all the more startling and effective for the reader. When we confront these colliding languages, so consciously emphasized and highlighted by these writers, the initial moment of apparent textual fission (the act or process of breaking apart) is translated by the reader's response into a moment and experience of fusion. The two disparate elements create a third, the collision itself, which forces the reader to re-evaluate the familiar signifiers and signs in terms of the other language and within the context of the collision. This re-evaluation requires a singularly demanding resolution each time, repeatedly and relentlessly drawing on the cultural and personal responses of individual readers. The demands of this re-evaluation are the result of what Bhabha identifies as the "borderline work of culture [that] demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present," but "creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (*Location* 7).

We are very aware that the letter read to Naomi and Stephen at the end of *Obasan* is written and read in Japanese, that the letters and words exchanged between Kersi and his parents in "Swimming Lessons," the final story in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, are full of Parsi terms and vocabulary, that the stories told to the narrator in the final section of *Running in the Family*, "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society," are told in a language and a way that reflect the sensuous nature of Sri Lanka itself, that parts of "Vision," the final story in MacLeod's collection, were once told

aloud and in Gaelic. As the characters, often in the position of narrator or storyteller, gain levels of understanding and compassion, so do we as readers extend our boundaries, surprising ourselves because, used to being on the inside, we are now on the outside and feel the tremendous space as we leap across in Hoda-like fashion.

Students become accustomed to shifting into the other position, so that the acceptance of the tension of the colliding languages in the more contemporary texts invites comparisons with earlier texts also containing tensions closely allied with language. Anna Jameson's *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, for example, includes German accompanied by English translations in the first half of the book. By the latter part of her journey, Jameson is translating a far different language, shifting from a literary interest in the written European language to a fascination with the pronunciation of the North American Native language: "Wigwam, a house, they pronounce *wee-ga-waum*; moccasin, a shoe, *muck-a-zeen*; manitou, spirit, *mo-nee-do*,—lengthening the vowels, and softening the aspirates" (389). Jameson attempts to capture and control this Chippewa language and voice,³ maintaining that she is "bent on bringing you [in England] an Indian song, if I can catch one" (389). She does manage to capture and package several Chippewa songs, in translation at first (473–75), but eventually "in the original" as she attempts to reproduce on the page the sounds of the Chippewa language. The reader of Anna Jameson is faced with the unfamiliar language of the new world, as inaccessible as the Cherokee, Sinhalese, and Parsi in later Canadian texts: "We ah, bem, ah dè / We mah jah need dè" (476). The lyrics are even accompanied by a musical score as Jameson attempts to carry back this language and sound to her English readers in the terms and systems of England. Jameson can only do this after summarizing the meaning of the song "without the perpetual repetitions and transpositions" (475) and spending a fair amount of time describing the structure and sound of the language:

The language of the Chippewas, however figurative and significant, is not copious. In their speeches and songs they are emphatic and impressive by the continual repetition of the same phrase or idea; and it seems to affect them like the perpetual recurrence of a few simple notes in music, by which I have been myself wound up to painful excitement, or melted to tears. (472–73)

The use of the other languages in Jameson's text measures her change from the old world to the new world, from a European outlook to a North American perspective. She moves from positioning herself with German intellectuals to positioning herself with Aboriginal women. The collisions are between her own English and the other languages available to her: the literary language of her reading and education, and the Aboriginal language of the land through which she is travelling, which moves her beyond the conventions of her upbringing and the relationship of her marriage. For the reader, the languages reflect Jameson's collisions—the conventional and limited relationships from which she is seeking to break away and the unknown and unfamiliar to which she is attracted, but cannot become attached. The collisions and tensions remain in the text as Jameson is never completely able to forego the European or embrace the Canadian. Through an understanding of Jameson's use of the other languages as a writer, the reader gains insight into the collisions and tensions within Anna Jameson the woman.

The split in Susanna Moodie as English gentlewoman and Canadian pioneer is another tension that is not resolved, and it is precisely the lack of resolution that makes her story interesting. Margaret Atwood's poem, "The Double Voice," in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* effectively illustrates the two English "languages" that collide in *Roughing It in the Bush*—the one politely mannered or Romantic and the other realistically practical. The formal and mannered voice can be seen as old-world English and the more practical voice as Canadian English. In addition, Moodie exposes her readers to English as it is spoken by Irish immigrants and by Yankees.

Students use the postcolonial refusal to resolve colliding languages to highlight and explain other refusals to move towards resolution. This conscious and unyielding juxtaposition of English and the other language can be a powerful and effective way to position readers to experience other collisions and tensions. Within the classroom, the transition from literature to culture and society can be a tricky one, but it is a transition that students are eager to make and one that must be made in a course that includes both English literature and Canadian studies students. After a close reading of the language in *Green Grass, Running Water*, students see that the master narratives of Christopher Columbus and John Wayne are intimately connected with the British and American influences that caused

so much tension for Susanna Moodie, whose position and contradictions are perhaps not as far removed from our own as we might think. From there we can move into Susanna Moodie's colonialist perspective and discourse. These are the connections that excite students when studying Canadian literature and result in animated and perceptive discussions in the classroom—discussions that address political issues of power, race, gender, and class. The examination of the postcolonial collisions of language is an extremely rich starting point for initiating and establishing the leaps and connections that provide insight not only into Canadian literature, history, society, and culture, but also into these “Canadianisms” as they are situated in a global context. The fuller explanation or response to the questions posed by my Form Two students in Nigeria lies, I believe, in these collisions of language, which lead us to leap, like Wiseman's Hoda, into the difference, into the other, taking into account the collisions and tensions that invite us and allow us to leap.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ideas in this paper have come about as the result of teaching a specific course for a number of years. I am indebted to the lectures and ideas of my colleagues at Trent University, where this course is truly team-taught. I have been inspired by and have benefited from the teaching of Gordon Johnston, Orm Mitchell, James Neufeld, Michael Peterman, Zailig Pollock, and Beth Popham in this course. I am also greatly indebted to my students in Canadian literature courses at Trent University, who, like my students in Nigeria, have taught me so much.

NOTES

1. Louise Halfe's poetry provides one example of how Canadian Aboriginal writers have used and forced the English language into submission: “In da name of da fadder, poop / I doughd da geezuz kind but / I is no good. I can't read hen write” (“In Da Name of Da Fadder”).
2. Urquhart is quoting this phrase from Ben Jonson's poem, “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us.”

3. Kehoe explains that Ojibway “is often spelled Chippewa in the United States” (Kehoe 217). Jameson clarifies the spelling and the pronunciation: “*Chippewa* is properly *O-jib-wà-y*” (389).

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. “The African Writer and the English Language.” *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. New York: Anchor, 1976. 74–84.
- . “Colonialist Criticism.” *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. New York: Anchor, 1976. 3–24.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Bhabha, Homi K. “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 291–322.
- . *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Halfe, Louise. “In Da Name of Da Fadder.” *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology*. Ed. Jeannette C. Armstrong and Lally Grauer. Peterborough: Broadview, 2001. 247–48.
- Jameson, Anna. *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*. 1838. Toronto: McClelland, 1990.
- Kehoe, Alice B. *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981.
- King, Thomas. *Green Grass, Running Water*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. 1981. Toronto: Penguin, 1983.
- MacLeod, Alistair. *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*. 1986. Toronto: McClelland, 1992.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Toronto: McClelland, 1992.
- Moodie, Susanna. *Roughing It in the Bush; or, Life in Canada*. 1852. Toronto: McClelland, 1989.
- Ondaatje, Michael. “Last Ink.” *Handwriting*. Toronto: Vintage, 2000. 72–75.
- . *Running in the Family*. 1982. Toronto: McClelland, 1993.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *Sozaboy*. New York: Longman, 1994.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. “Course in General Linguistics.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 76–90.
- Urquhart, Jane. *Away*. Toronto: McClelland, 1993.
- Watson, Sheila. *The Double Hook*. 1959. Toronto: McClelland, 1989.
- Wiebe, Rudy. *The Blue Mountains of China*. 1970. Toronto: McClelland, 1975.
- Wiseman, Adele. *Crackpot*. 1974. Toronto: McClelland, 1978.

This page intentionally left blank