Complicit Witnessing: Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women’s Writing
Title: Complicit Witnessing: Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women's Writing

Author: McGregor, Hannah

Department: School of English and Theatre Studies

Program: Literary Studies / Theatre Studies in English

Advisor: Kamboureli, Smaro

Abstract: Complicit Witnessing: Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women's Writing examines twenty-first-century literature by white Canadian women that represents, or bears witness to, the lives of "distant others" (Boltanski). Camilla Gibb's Sweetness in the Belly and The Beauty of Humanity Movement, Kim Echlin's The Disappeared, and Karen Connelly's The Border Surrounds Us, The Lizard Cage, and Burmese Lessons: A Love Story can be read as examples of Canadian literature gone "global" and situated within the tradition of literature of sentiment that works to educate Western readers about the lives of distant others while also forging transnational affective bonds. In the context of globalization and the commodification of transnational empathy via neoliberal civilizing regimes, however, care for distant others is irrevocably complicit with a fantasy of distance that would produce the white Western woman as an innocent, rather than implicated, subject. These texts demand a rethinking of complicity beyond accusations of representational guilt based in Orientalist paradigms of power/knowledge. Through an understanding of Canadian literature as a middlebrow institution of national pedagogy, this project questions the discursive production of Canada as a benevolent middle power characterized by humanitarian outreach and white civility, and asks how Gibb, Echlin, and Connelly's work both endorses and complicates this view. Through the articulation of an ethics of complicity, this project argues for an expansion of the term beyond accusations of criminal collusion to include the sense of enfoldment, implication, and complex affiliation that takes the form, in these texts, of affectively charged transnational (usually romantic) relationships. This focus on sentimental narratives and border-crossing affiliations complicates the ethics of reading that champions textual resistance. Instead, this project explores the tension between resistance and veracity through a methodological approach that heeds both textual complexity and paratextual framing. Complicity is a grounds for neither celebration nor outright dismissal, but provides a way to engage with books that expand the problem of distant suffering and responsibility for the other in the context of how discourses new and old both curtail and over-determine the possibilities of caring for distant others.

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Canadian literature: Canadian literature, the body of written works produced by Canadians. Reflecting the country's dual origin and its official bilingualism, the literature of Canada can be split into two major divisions: English and French. This article provides a brief historical account of each of these. Given that patterns of exclusion feed on ideology and social critique: Forty years ago, critical science made us laugh at the imbeciles who took images for realities and let themselves be seduced by their hidden messages. In the interim the "imbeciles" have been educated in the art of recognizing the reality behind appearances and the messages concealed in images. Is it enough to witness the scene of distant suffering, in all its intensity and drama, in order to engage with suffering? What forms can our engagement with distant suffering take? Is charity enough to make a difference in the life of the sufferer and what about tra-ditional forms of public action? Do political protest and social solidarity have a place in television's mediations of distant suffering? Finally, it is crucial to turn the UN Secretary General's assertion into a question: under which conditions is it at all possible for the media to induce displays of global care for people we kn...