

# NARRATING CANADA: GENERATIONS, MEMORIES, IDENTITIES

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## Abstract

The following is a short introduction to the themes raised during the Colloquium “Narrating Canada: Generations, Memories, Identities / Raconter le Canada: générations, mémoires, identités”, which was held at the University of Ca’ Foscari Venice (11-12 November, 2015). The presence of scholars from both the Francophone and Anglophone communities of Canada, as well as from different fields of the humanities (literature, visual arts, music, theatre) promoted a challenging interdisciplinary debate, focusing on the construction of individual and national identities. The essays that follow in this section concern the Anglophone contribution to the themes in question, with particular emphasis on the impact the representations of intergenerational relations, travel/migration, ageing and memory, late-life quality and institutional care, late-life creativity have had on Canadian cultural life.

## *Raccontare il Canada: generazioni, memorie, identità*

Il breve saggio discute e mette in relazione fra loro gli studi di ambito anglofono, presentati durante il Convegno “Narrating Canada: Generations, Memories, Identities / Raconter le Canada: générations, mémoires, identités” (Venezia 11-12 novembre, 2015), che vide la collaborazione scientifica di studiosi appartenenti al mondo sia anglofono che francofono. Gli studi che seguono in questa sezione si soffermano sull’interdisciplinarietà fra i temi trattati – specificatamente quelli relativi ai rapporti intergenerazionali, a viaggi/migrazione, invecchiamento e memorie, qualità della vita e istituzioni, creatività così come essi hanno segnato e segnano l’affermazione dell’identità individuale e nazionale del Canada.

## Foreword

The question of defining individual or national identity has long been approached by scholars of different disciplines. The relation between past heritage and present conditions of life undermine existential certainties and inter-cultural impacts with forceful consequences on social and political issues

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– challenging such basic matters as self-reliance, sense of belonging and, last but not least, encounters and clashes between civilizations.

The framework we have chosen for our investigation into the Anglo-Canadian representation of contemporary Canada's intrinsic traits is that of the relationship between ageing and personal stories – personal stories and contextual history. Since, as Herbert Blumer suggests, human beings attach meanings to things according to their own experience, such meanings cannot but depend on human interactions – that is to say that they emerge from the social processes in which the individual is included. Local history and traditions certainly mould people's vision of their own longevity, and intergenerational relations flow at lesser degrees of disruption. Socio-economic stability (no matter how often grounded on inequitable stratifications – a most important question that is, but not directly pertinent to our topic here) allows for shared assumptions on the role of those who are ageing and their significance within the given social structure.

In the polysemic vision of today's concept of identity, in its constant challenge between a perception of unfading youth and an apprehension of future potential instability, what seems to be lacking is the acceptance of a natural passage leading from the exuberance of youth to an acquiescence in ageing – the awareness of 'adulthood', as the age tracing a continuity between the previous and the latter stages (youth and old-age) of personal as well as collective life<sup>1</sup>.

### **Canadian response to ageing**

In following the contents of the essays hereby presented, we have come to realize that most of the protagonists of the literature under discussion confront ageing as something that one must inevitably come to terms with – something which indeed marks a separation from the liveliness and promises of youth. Diseases such as Alzheimer, segregation in nursing homes and the wish to escape into an improbable recapturing of past emotions or melancholy representations of new-(old) selves, are the recurring traits in several of Margaret Atwood's short-stories, in Thom Fitzgerald's road movie *Cloudburst*, not to mention Leonard Cohen's last collection *Book of Longing*, which is totally dedicated to the artist's anguish over the decadence old age implies. An implicit lack of continuity is what interrupts communication, agitating the minds of the elderly the moment they realize the dream of eternal youth is abandoning them.

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between generations, in anthropological as well as cultural terms, see Zagrebelsky.

The persistence of memories and the interplay of flashbacks and flash-forwards connecting past and present in a context which allows confrontations not only between generations, but between New and Old Worlds as well, is itself a sign marking the thirst for narrations/a narration comprehending the intense impact of history on an age that is focused on the future – involving human beings, their expectations, illusions and quests. The texts on Alistair MacLeod and on Michael Ondaatje, thematically and methodologically so far apart, speak up for the urgent need in our times, and in our manifold societies, to establish the incommensurable link between ‘old’ and ‘new’ truths – to overcome the dichotomy between mere existence and the flow of life, achieving consciousness of the complexity that lies beyond any notion of identity. The interplay of time references – suggestively adopting tenses mingling different chronological allusions – renders the clash between different ‘stories’ all the more effectively –, aiming at a reconciliation that from intergenerational and intercultural relations will eventually lead to ideal forms of interaction.

The multidisciplinary contributions to the themes under discussion are but another facet of the contributors’ endeavor to represent Canadian culture coming to terms with its perspectives of earnest change and its need for established reference-points. An example is the promotion that animated movies have received by the Film Board of Canada; in remaining aloof from mere physical representations they provide suggestive instances of conflicts, involving individual as well as public harassment. One of the significant cases discussed is that of the short-film *How People Got Fire*, the story being that of an elderly Native woman gaining her grand-daughter’s confidence through the narration of a traditional legend – thus driving the child’s initial boredom with Grandma to a fascination with her ability to enliven old knowledge and thus resist the loss of cultural heritage – looking forward, perhaps, to a life conceived as ‘ageless’ – belonging to a space and a time intersecting with one another, acknowledging differences.

### «I am a word/ In a foreign language»

The quote, taken from “Disembarking at Québec”<sup>2</sup>, is here meant to mark our conclusion, suggesting that our aim, just like that of Margaret Atwood’s poetic character in “Diary 1”, has been to overcome limitations of rationalizing codes, moving towards a superseding of age-barriers – as *per se* metaphors of ostra-

<sup>2</sup> I owe the quotation to Biancamaria Rizzardi’s own citation from Margaret Atwood as it appears in this collection (52).

cism that impede a development of existential communication, creative vigour and cultural exchanges – choosing to proceed from multi-disciplinary approaches, different theoretical positions and ideological attitudes: words speaking up from within foreignness, overcoming restraints.

### **Works cited**

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