

Unsettling the White Noise:
Deconstructing the Nation-Building Project of CBC Radio One's *Canada Reads*

By

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Abstract

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *Canada Reads* program, based on the popular television show *Survivor*, welcomes five Canadian personalities to defend one Canadian book, per year, that they believe all Canadians should read. The program signifies a common discourse in Canada as a nation-state regarding its own lack of coherent and fixed identity, and can be understood as a nationalist project. I am working with *Canada Reads* as an existing archive, utilizing materials as both individual and interconnected entities in a larger and ongoing process of cultural production – and it is important to note that it is impossible to separate cultural production from cultural consumption. Each year offers a different set of insights that can be consumed in their own right, which is why this project is written in the present tense. Focusing on the first ten years of the *Canada Reads* competition, I argue that *Canada Reads* plays a specific and calculated role in the CBC's goal of nation-building: one that obfuscates repressive national histories and legacies and instead promotes the transformative powers of literacy as that which can conquer historical and contemporary inequalities of all types. This research lays bare the imagined and idealized 'communities' of *Canada Reads* audiences that the CBC wishes to reflect in its programming, and complicates this construction as one that abdicates contemporary responsibilities of settlers.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's annual *Canada Reads* program has garnered much national attention, both positive and negative, from listeners, academics, and readers. The CBC, which, as Danielle Fuller describes, "attempts to create a huge trans-Canada book club," spends a series of days each calendar year devoting its airwaves to debate over which, of five Canadian books, will be the book that Canada "should read together" ("Spectacle" 5, 6). First introduced in 2002, *Canada Reads* was meant to mimic the popular *Survivor* series by eliminating one book per show until only one would be left standing, and advocates for each book were chosen by producers according to "cultural authority, and regional, gender, and ethnic representation" ("Spectacle" 11). Much more than simply choosing a book that Canada should read together, however, *Canada Reads* signifies a common discourse in Canada as a nation-state regarding its own lack of coherent and fixed identity, and can be understood as a "nationalist project" that seeks to weave together some semblance of this identity ("Spectacle" 10). In *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*, Daniel Coleman argues that "whiteness has been naturalized as the norm for English Canadian cultural identity" – an argument which is fortified by both the panelists and the titles touted in the *Canada Reads* program each year (5).

Focusing on the first ten years of the *Canada Reads* competition, I argue that *Canada Reads* plays a specific role in the CBC's goal of nation-building, and that the annual construction and reconstruction of a singular, imagined Canadian identity repeats, reinforces, and reiterates a Canada whose dominant imagery is one of tolerance, one of multiculturalism, and one "that has apologized for and moved beyond its racialized origins in the dispossession of its Indigenous peoples" without dispossessing itself of its own "transnational discourse [and privileging] of whiteness" (Razack ix). *Canada Reads* works to construct this fictive, singular notion of Canadian identity through book and advocate choice; the repetition of the aim of the show, which

is to find a tangible object that can connect all Canadians through the transformative powers of literacy; by deliberately positioning a panel of Canadians that come from ‘different backgrounds’ to discuss the universalizing importance of each individual work; and in the uncritical celebration and depoliticization of the works themselves.

The bestseller nature of the *Canada Reads* booklist, which inevitably places commercially successful novels and books that are chosen by large publishing houses for widespread printing and sale, is part of what contributes to an ideal of depoliticized reading material. Alternative presses and types of “disruptive storytelling” – the types that “trouble the prevailing common sense, underwriting structures, and relations of inequity” – are rarely, if not never, included in the *Canada Reads* shortlist (Razack 41). Some examples of Canadian disruptive storytelling that have not yet appeared in *Canada Reads* include Rana Bose’s *The Fourth Canvas*, a mystery that centres itself on ideas of socio-political dissent, or Eden Robinson’s *Blood Sports*, which is a violent and painful narrative about one Vancouver family’s sadistic dynamics. The depoliticization of even the most political works posits *Canada Reads* as a search for a superficially depoliticized Canadian identity – an ignorance of the reality that the very existence of Canada as a settler nation-state makes Canadian identity undeniably, at its core, a political one. This is a point that must be emphasized because of the very real consequences of this discursive tool utilized by the CBC.

This project aims to deconstruct the depoliticized and idealized Canadian identity that the CBC situates in *Canada Reads* as a way of having a conversation about broader constructions of Canadian identity, and it is methodologically designed to create an overarching approach to discussions of Canadian identity formation that are necessarily and continually troubling categories of race, class, multiculturalism, and settler privilege. Some central research questions

include: what cultural work is the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *Canada Reads* program on Radio One performing? How does this program work to represent and construct ideas and ideals of Canadian identity, and what does this potentially fractured but mainstream representation or construction rely on to bolster itself in lived experiences and Canadian realities? How do conceptualizations of race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and ability factor into *Canada Reads* panel choices, broadcasts, and programming? What do the winning choices of *Canada Reads* represent as being the most valuable facet of Canadian literary participation every year? How is the institutionalization of the *Canada Reads* program working to construct Canadian identities that are already bolstered and funded through government and media, and what are the implications of this authoritative imperative to read particular works chosen by celebrity representatives of the nation-state? What are the implications of *Canada Reads* holdings and acquisitions at Canadian universities, schools, and libraries? What do the CBC and the Canadian print publishing industry have to gain from *Canada Reads*, both financially and ideologically? There are many questions that this project seeks to answer, but also many that should be addressed in future research.

This project works towards a critical understanding of *Canada Reads* and the CBC while simultaneously analyzing these constructions as important and distinguishing facets of broader questions of Canadian identity and Canadian literary canon(s). I have sought to find and flesh out patterns and tropes of normative and unquestioned white settler colonialism and uncritical, federally regulated, celebratory and tokenizing multiculturalism in order to deconstruct, analyze, and address the larger nation-building project propagated by *Canada Reads*, and utilize theories of collective reading, literacy, and book clubs while simultaneously embracing and working to embody politics and methodologies of feminism and critical race studies, which are at the centre

of this project's main critique of the nation-building and whiteness-focused efforts of the *Canada Reads* program. As a white settler myself, the need to fully address the inequities and silences provided by the program to marginalized individuals and groups is most fully realized by utilizing feminist and critical race methodologies; however, while both methodologies certainly intertwine in this project, they can, at times, also be mutually-exclusive. Majorie L. DeVault writes in "Talking Back to Sociology: Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology" that feminist methodologies "do not use or prescribe any single research method; rather, they are united through various efforts to include women's lives and concerns in accounts of society, to minimize the harms of research, and to support changes that will improve women's status" (Abstract). DeVault's assertion that feminist methodologies reject single research methods reflect the multiplicity of approaches brought forward in this project; however, she fails to point out the impossibility of uniting all efforts in order to improve all women's status – rather, it can be assumed that her definition of women mirrors that of *Canada Reads*: white, middle-class women. Due to the limitations of feminist methodologies – except, perhaps, third-wave feminist methodologies, which focus on racial, national, ethnic, and religious difference – critical race methodology is an equally important facet of my research. Critical race methodology can be described as an approach theoretically grounded in "research that foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process" that also "challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect" (Solorzano and Yosso 24). Solorzano and Yosso argue that "unacknowledged white privilege helps maintain racism's stories," and that critical race methodology does the transformative work of acknowledging race and racial inequities (27). Critical race methodology, in the words of Solorzano and Yosso, "generates knowledge by looking to those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and

disempowered,” and “strategically uses multiple methods (...) to draw on the knowledge of people of colour who are traditionally excluded” in society (37).

The work of two particular scholars has influenced the methodologies utilized in my research: Daniel Coleman and Sherene Razack. Coleman, author of *White Civility: The Literary Project of Canada*, describes his analysis as a blend of “traditional literary analysis with the approaches of cultural studies and critical race theory” (Endpaper). Coleman looks at a variety of texts, including art, literature, poetry, journalism, and popular fiction to “trace widespread ideas about Canadian citizenship during the optimistic nation-building years as well as the years of disillusionment that followed the First World War and the Great Depression,” and it is this work of tracing that is reflected in my research (endpaper). Coleman’s work ultimately functions as a call for resistance; in the case of *White Civility*, he desires to transform whiteness into what he calls “wry civility, unearthing rather than disavowing the history of racism in Canadian literary culture” (endpaper). Using a methodology of exposure, Coleman works to create what he calls a “genealogy of whiteness” not for exaltation or celebration, but rather, as item of documented proof that the Canadian nation-state was built on ideologies of racial superiority and white supremacy (Endpaper). Similarly, this project offers anti-colonial reading and discursive techniques as an alternative and form of resistance for the reader and listener of *Canada Reads*. On the other hand, Razack, in *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century*, writes with regard to racial formation in Canada that “the racial and gendered politics of the [Canadian] state were organized through a complex triangulation of relations, with Indigenous peoples marked for physical and cultural extinction, European settlers for integration, and people of colour for perpetual outsider status as ‘immigrants’ and ‘newcomers’” (5). Razack’s personal and political discourse analysis is particularly important because it is both critically self-aware of the historical and contemporary importance of discussing real and lived experiences connected to the

ideologies of the Canadian nation-state and works to generate a necessary discussion surrounding the intentionally genocidal and assimilatory structures of Canadian identity formation. Razack's self-positioning, as well as the emphasis placed on understanding contemporary times within a historical context, are reflected in this project as well. Both Coleman and Razack approach Canadian whiteness and nation-formation in different ways, but their work together methodologically and ideologically anchors my own as I work to deconstruct the inherently supremacist project of the *Canada Reads* competition – a competition which in its very format works against the non-hierarchical, counter-hegemonic methodologies that I am deploying against it.

This project focuses on the first ten years of *Canada Reads* – 2002 to 2011 – in order to tease out and analyze the tonal and thematic changes that take place over the first decade on-air. However, at times I choose to utilize *Canada Reads 2006* as a case study. Neither young and trying to situate its own identity, nor so settled in that identity that the producers were trying to mix up the routine, listening to and reading *Canada Reads 2006* provides a healthy insight into the basic structures and formulae of the program as a whole.

The primary critical method of my larger project has involved reading all fifty titles that have been competitive in the *Canada Reads* program over ten seasons in order to deconstruct the political and interpersonal representations of the books by the panelists, listening to each edited post-production *Canada Reads* broadcast released by the CBC, and locating literature published by not only the CBC but by bookstores, libraries, book clubs, and individuals in both print and online regarding the competition. My analyses of these primary documents and texts have been situated in scholarship revolving around Canadian canon formation, readership studies, and anti-racist feminist theory in order to produce an informed and accountable set of analyses that will contribute to studies of literature and literary culture in Canada in a contemporary context.

As this project engages with a part of broader popular culture in the Canadian nation state and its content has the potential to affect any English-comprehending listeners, the knowledge produced in this research should be accessible to those listeners interested in having a conversation about it without exclusion. This is a challenge, of course, in a graduate level research project; however, I deal with these challenges by presenting my prose in the most straightforward language possible in order to promote the dissemination of knowledge produced in the academy to those outside of that world.

As the project of the *Canada Reads* program is a discursive one, it makes sense that this research project must necessarily be one of practicing discourse analysis. The ways in which the CBC discusses and represents Canadian literature is integral to understanding how, in its nuanced and often contradictory ways, it discusses and represents a monolithic but unstable and fractured construction of Canadian identity. The aim of this project is to engage with and understand more broadly how the program conducts and compulsorizes a particular and constructed understanding or ideal of Canadian identity that is typically imagined as white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, and liberal-minded. My discourse analysis works to lay bare the imagined and idealized ‘communities’ of *Canada Reads* audience(s) that the CBC wishes to reflect in its programming, and complicate this construction as one that abdicates repressive national histories and contemporary responsibilities of settlers.

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Chapter Two: Privilege & Production: A Brief History of the CBC, CanLit, and *Canada Reads*

The CBC as it currently exists was established in 1936, a result of the Canadian Broadcasting Act. Seven years prior, the Aird Commission recommended that there should exist, in Canada, a nationally owned broadcasting company that would operate from coast to coast, and in 1932 the precursor to the CBC, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC), was created. The CBC began as a series of “farm broadcasts,” but the coverage quickly expanded to cover the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, live hockey games, and newly created radio dramas – one, “Un home et son peche,” which ran for an impressive twenty-two years (“History”). The CBC accompanied the Canadian Armed Forces First Division during the Second World War and launched the first Canadian wartime broadcasts. CBC News Service and Radio-Canada’s News division came to air in January of 1941, and by the mid 1940s a total of 43 hours of French and English programs were being broadcast daily. While television came to the fore in the 1950s, CBC Radio remained popular and the service was extended to Canadian troops in Korea in 1952. The CBC Radio Northern Service was established in 1958, and ten years later the freshened Broadcasting Act conferred the role of national service officially upon CBC/Radio-Canada. In 1974 CBC Radio discontinued most on-air commercials, and in 1974 and 1975 the French and English FM stereo stations were introduced. CBC/Radio-Canada began 24-hour broadcasting in 1984, and in the 1990s rebranding and specialty services were established, including CBC Radio One, CBC Radio 2, and Premier Chaine (Radio Canada).

As Paul McCormick writes in “Preserving,”

the 1991 Broadcasting Act sets out the current mandate. Among other things, the Act states that the programming of Canada’s national public broadcaster should be predominantly and distinctively Canadian; reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions; actively contribute to the flow and exchange of cultural expression in English and in French, reflecting the

different needs and circumstances of each official language community, including the particular needs and circumstances of English and French linguistic minorities; contribute to shared national consciousness and identity; and reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada. (78)

The Broadcasting Act that the CBC is committed to uphold means that the programming they are required to create and maintain must necessarily fit into an ideological space that is supportive of fostering a particular brand of nationalism. Perhaps this comes as little surprise, as the CBC is publicly funded; however, the contribution that the CBC must make with regards to the “flow and exchange of cultural expression” in the country is interestingly broad in scope. What types of culture are being privileged, produced, and reproduced in the programming at the CBC, and why is that not specified in the Broadcasting Act? The maintenance and normalization of specific Canadian culture(s) and identities is taking place in this broad and vague space. While Eatock comments, with some level of snark, that “part Kremlin, part Vatican, and Kafkaesque in its complexity, the CBC is not easily grasped, penetrated, or circumnavigated,” this project works to question and disrupt current notions of Canadian identity and culture that are perpetuated by the discourses and representations of Canada and Canadians by the CBC, most particularly in the form of *Canada Reads*. *Canada Reads* provides a space within the national consciousness to have conversations about both Canadian literature and Canadian identity. Exploring the ideological baggage of *Canada Reads* means the deconstruction, not only of an annual radio program, but the books, authors, panelists, producers, and listeners who become intimately involved and invested in the outcome of each year’s program.

Brian Bethune’s article on *Canada Reads* in *Maclean’s* points out that in 2002, Justin Trudeau speaks of his novel choices “either as literature or as a civic duty depending on how the conversation [is] unfolding.” In “Spectacle” Danielle Fuller similarly proposes that “‘*Canada Reads*’ is about producing ‘better,’ more culturally competent and socially aware, citizens”.

Pairing CBC Radio One and social goals for widespread literacy together has not been uncommon, even in the years before the *Canada Reads* program; however, *Canada Reads* does introduce CBC Radio One's investment in a particularly Canadian literacy – or rather, a particularly Canadian literature, however ambiguous the phrase. Reading has been culturally linked to social improvement for centuries, and *Canada Reads* naturally works to extend that link to the social – and nationalist – improvement of Canadian citizens. As Fuller explains, “via the show, the CBC is able to extend its role as a ‘literacy sponsor’ ... [which] according to Deborah Brandt’s formulation... are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy and gain advantage by it in some way” (“Listening”). The CBC’s connection to Canadian publishing companies is also necessary to mention, as large mainstream publishers in the country, such as Random House and McClelland, have long benefited from the book-centered discussions available on CBC’s programming. In 2002, the winning title of *Canada Reads* – *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje – sold 90,000 copies in the first year alone in what Bethune calls “an unexpected bonus” for publisher Vintage Canada.

Canada Reads makes no secret of its aim to create a nation-wide book club. Book clubs, however popular they have become in mainstream media since the introduction of Oprah’s Book Club, are not by any means new. Rather, they date back “more than one-hundred years to the development of women’s literary societies of the progressive era,” writes William McGinley (210). These groups “often provided women with a means to discover the eloquence of their voices and the strength of their convictions; and very quickly these literature study circles became a forum for addressing more public issues of progressive reform and democratic public life” in the United States (McGinley 210). Mark Hall writes that “such groups attracted mostly women readers interested in intellectual self-improvement, self-expression, and friendship” and

that “such groups became increasingly engaged, not only in literary activities, but also in community service and political activism” (Hall 646). However, as McGinley points out, modern book clubs tend to be less focused on the overtly political and more reliant on corporate structures of book publishing and recommendation, consisting mostly of “corporate interests who compete for the cash and consciousness of potential readers” (McGinley 210). These “variety packs” of “knowledge of social life and social reality” are often packaged by publishing companies and distributed both commercially and through public libraries, who pay for pre-assembled packages in order to provide the necessary tools for book clubs to consume specific titles together. While some libraries purchase individual copies of titles and put together their own packages for book clubs to borrow, many recent titles have been individually sold with book club material – questions to consider, extra information, and basic glossaries – in the back in order to encourage collective reading and discussion (McGinley 211). This would indicate that publishers are hoping to suggest the forum of the book club even to those who would normally not participate – and encouraging readers, most often women, to get together in order to discuss books would hopefully enable a cycle of reading together and recommending individually, resulting in increased demand and sales.

While book clubs have already been discussed as primarily – though not entirely – female spaces, participants in book clubs can definitely be narrowed into more specific categories: middle-class, liberal, educated, and white (Burwell 282). Individuals in these categories, often by nature of them having the leisure time that allows them to participate in book clubs, arrive in them for social reasons as well as a desire for self-improvement, and by participating in “the negotiation – and consensus-generating processes” available in the book club environment become “readers” - a particular “class of people” with “an identity to which people aspire” (*Recalling* xxxiii). Margaret Atwood, in the introduction of *The Book Club Book* (2000),

describes the book club as “the graduate seminar, the encounter group, and the good old-fashioned village-pump gossip session, all rolled into one” (Burwell 281). However, Atwood fails to point out what McGinley calls the colonization of educational and social life “by the discourse practices of marketization and commodification” that is ever-present in the North American book club as well (McGinley 208).

A topic often left out of discussions on North American book clubs until quite recently is not only the types of books that book clubs are reading, but the ways in which they are reading and discussing them. Amal Amireh writes, “it is imperative that we always historicize not only the writer and her work but also the reader” (qtd. in Burwell 293). Among the troubling trends present in twenty-first century, post-9/11 book clubs is the pervasive presence of novels that describe what Chandra Mohanty calls “The Third World Difference” – stories of the experiences and oppressions of women in East Asian and North African countries that are only some of the time written by women with life experience that is reflected in the writing that western women are so eager to consume (19). Individual and collective cultural positionality and its effect on personal reading challenges the desire, and the fantasy, of the universal reading experience – in the case of *Canada Reads*, a collective fantasy with impossible nationalist goals tied up in loose notions of personal identification and vague constructions of Canadian identity.

It is important to note that many critical race and feminist theorists argue that “practices of reading ‘can never be divorced from questions of power, privilege, exclusion, and social distinction’” (Long qtd. in Burwell, 282). Canadian writing, as well as Canadian history, is “fraught with explicit forms of institutional racism” and critical race and feminist theory are utilized in order to recognize and deconstruct these examples at the site (Hier and Bolaria 9). Critical race theory focuses on the importance of difference “within and among minority groups in terms, for example, of class position, gender, immigration status, age, and religion” (Hier and

Bolaria 9). While race is recognized in critical race studies as a social construction, it is also recognized as an important discourse that impacts the lived experiences of individuals and groups in the contemporary and historical world in which we live. As Sefa Dei writes in *Race and Racism*, “a critical approach to understanding the questions of power and difference from an anti-racist lens requires (...) that we speak of the salience of race, even as we recognize the intersections of race with other forms of difference. What is notable is that whiteness is often rendered invisible through a process of normalization” (57). Whiteness is a valuable and important facet of critical race studies, most particularly in this project, which addresses race and whiteness – not mutually exclusive by any means – throughout. Indeed, “a basic principle of anti-racist research is also to subvert the idea that the dominant group is an unnamed, unmarked racial category” (Sefa Dei 61-62). Rather than viewing whiteness as normative and unmarked, whiteness must necessarily be viewed as a race itself in order to deconstruct its normalization.

Canadian multicultural theory, nationalist theory, and identity theory are all explored at length in this project, and as such, I will only summarize them briefly. Often, identity and nationalist theory is tied up in notions of power – most specifically, cultural power. As the introduction of *ReCalling Early Canada* states, it is important to understand “how cultural power circulates and rearranges itself” within everyday and institutional life (xliv). Within the power structures of the nation-state, there are cultural players, and cultural players are often ranked in ways that are fluid and change accordingly. In addition to cultural players, there are cultural histories that can be taught through both educational institutions and exposure to media. Canada, as a nation, undergoes constant struggle to iterate and circulate our own national identity, which is tied up in notions of the importance of cultural histories. As the introduction of *Recalling Early Canada* states, “recalling any event, person or object is inherently a political act” (30). The process of connecting cultural histories to a national recollection is a way of participating in what

is called nation-building. For critics such as Northrop Frye, literature is an important tool in the process of nation building; to Frye, “the value of Canadian literature is that it reflects the value of the nation” (qtd. in DeCook). It is counter-discourses, such as anti-racism and feminism, which make “the imaginary viability of such notions of [national] coherence become insupportable” (qtd. in DeCook). Quickly following the emergence of these discourses, the Multiculturalism Act was proposed in Canada. As outlined in *Race and Racism*,

introduced in 1971, the policy intended, among other goals, to break down discriminatory attitudes and barriers in the country. Various programs were established to achieve these goals, including a federal ministry responsible for multiculturalism, a multiculturalism sector in the department of the Secretary of State, a national strategy on race relations to develop and implement programs to eliminate racial discrimination in Canadian institutions, and the proclamation of an act in 1988 for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada. (253)

While some argue that multiculturalism promotes “integration and unity,” others believe that the policy causes “fragmentation and divisions among Canada’s multiple cultural groups” (Hier and Bolaria 253-4). A third opinion, popular amongst critical race theorists and outlined by Sarita Srivastava, is as follows:

Multiculturalism has become a symbol of Canada. In the last few decades, the multicultural approach to managing ethnic diversity has become central to Canada’s image as a tolerant and benevolent nation. Multiculturalism officially acknowledges the wide diversity of ethnic communities in Canada and encourages cultural exchange and harmony. However, official multiculturalism barely acknowledges the historical inequities of race and ethnicity within Canada, and it does little to address systemic racism. Multiculturalism, and its liberal foundation, advocate education, cultural exchange, policy reform, and symbolic gestures as ways of addressing social inequality. It avoids more profound challenges to racist practices and institutions. On the contrary, by representing Canada as a country that values and celebrates ethnic difference, multicultural discourse only submerges more critical discussions of racism. We might say that liberal multiculturalism has taken a 3-D approach – one that celebrates dance, dress, and dining, but fails to take into account the multiple dimensions of racial and social inequality. (291)

As mentioned in the introduction, Danielle Fuller, in “Spectacle,” describes the producers’ process in choosing *Canada Reads* panelists for the first year of the show by looking for “balance in cultural authority, and regional, gender, and ethnic representation.” If one were to read “cultural authority” as “celebrity,” this description may be more accurate – particularly in later years of *Canada Reads*. Indeed, the 2011 description of the show on the website reads: “started in 2001, *Canada Reads* is CBC's annual battle of the books, where five Canadian personalities select the book they think Canadians should read” (“About”). The CBC does describe all panelists as “Canadian book lovers,” but there is clearly a connection to the CBC-insider status of many of these panelists that goes deeper than simply a love for the written word. The choices the panelists make, often based on personal reactions and identifications to their chosen books, turn quickly into cultural norms that assert the power of the institution and complete the work of cultural hegemony. Many of these personalities frequently appear on CBC programming, and it is for this reason that Smaro Kamboureli calls *Canada Reads* an “effortless circulation of culture” (qtd. in “Listening”). While each panelist has an individual career, they are also important stakeholders in the ways in which the CBC represents a universalized Canadian culture.

Canada Reads titles have included fiction, poetry, and plays, though the 2012 *Canada Reads* titles are, for the first time, non-fiction and memoir. Though *Canada Reads* has periodically appeared on CBC television, it has maintained its place on CBC Radio One since 2001 - the year that CBC Radio producer Talin Vartanian created it. Vartanian remained the executive producer until 2007, when the show hosted its previous winning panelists in an “All Star Edition” (“Spectacle”). *Canada Reads* occurs annually, typically in the springtime (February, March, or April). The 2008 version was the first to become available as a podcast. As

Brian Bethune notes in his *Macleans* article, one of the charms of “*Canada Reads*... [is] how it shed light on the notoriously murky world” of closed-door literary prizes.

The rules, guidelines, definitions, and controversies of *Canada Reads* are unpublished by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, but are discussed on a regular basis when the program is on-air. In 2002, host Mary Walsh indicates that the book “must be a book of fiction, and it must be written by a Canadian” (2002 Day 1). The definitions appear to be left purposely vague, and controversies emerge over the years about what – and who – is considered Canadian. For example, while Steven Page argues in the first year that the winner “should be a book that has some resonance, particularly with Canadians” and should be “either a book about Canadians or by Canadians,” he does not define who or what qualifies as Canadian. The technical rules about how the titles are chosen appear to change over the years. In 2003, panelists are asked to submit a shortlist of five titles each, one of which is chosen for each panelist to represent; in 2009, the panelists seem to have been simply asked to choose their favourite Canadian novel (2003 Day 1, 2009 Day 1). The novels do not have to be published within the year they are defended; however, following the inconvenient reprinting of out-of-print *King Leary* in 2008, another rule becomes that the book has to currently be in print at the time of the competition – likely to ease the struggle of providing the novels nationwide in a short period of time (2010 Day 1). In 2011, CBC listeners are asked to submit their own favourite novels, and a list of forty titles, then shortened to ten, are compiled for the panelists to pick from (2011 Day 1). The panelists and the books that vie for the *Canada Reads* title become available several months before the competition in order to give Canadians (read: listeners) time to prepare and read all of the novels.

Canada Reads is based on the formula of *Survivor* – narrowing down a list of Canadian books in order to choose one, per year, that the Canadian public “will,” or “should,” read. The number of times that this imperative is repeated in ten years of programming is impossible to

count; what is possible to note, however, are the ways in which the panelists and hosts talk about *Canada Reads* as a program meant to reach out to, and engage with, listeners. On the first day of *Canada Reads* 2002, Steven Page remarks that “if we’re starting to look for one book for all of Canada to read together, why not make it a Canadian book?” (2002 Day 1). There are double-imperatives in this statement; not only are Canadians asked read a book dictated by the national broadcaster’s panel of Canadian celebrities, but they are asked to read it together. The criteria are discussed and argued over every year by every mix of panelists and hosts, but one topic that comes up again and again is that of accessible fiction versus challenging fiction. *Canada Reads* is also known for choosing fairly safe lists – known authors, prize-winning books, and novels that are already being distributed by large printing presses. *Canada Reads* is “only found in Canada,” says Jian Ghomeshi, calling the show “the only one-book campaign for a nation” (2008 Day 1). The *Canada Reads Effect*, as he calls it, tends to create instant bestsellers out of the novels included every year (2008 Day 1). Ghomeshi boasts in 2009 that “this prize sells more books than any other awards show in this country aside from the Scotiabank Giller” – which, of course, is the largest literary prize in Canada (2009 Day 4). Every year, the winning title’s publisher donates a portion of their exponentially increased sales to a charity – typically one that promotes literacy. Past recipients have included Frontier College, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, ABC Life Literacy Canada, and Laubach Literacy of Canada. In 2004 Radio-Canada launched *Le Combat des livres* (*Battle of the Books*), a French-Canadian version of *Canada Reads*. Both *Canada Reads* and *Le Combat des Livres* have included translated copies of books in the other national language, but most often feature primarily French- or English-language titles.

Undoubtedly, *Canada Reads* plays the role of catalyst for discussions – and, at times, arguments – about what constitutes Canadian literature, and, more broadly, what constitutes Canadian identity. Conversations about Canadian literature and Canadian identity are massaged

by the producers and editors at the CBC into a product that ensures that both topics resonate and remain on the minds of listeners far after the program concludes its time on-air.

Questions asked annually on *Canada Reads* include: what is Canadian identity? What does it mean to be Canadian? Who is Canadian? While some panelists assert their own understanding of what Canadian identity stands for – such as Steven Page’s declaration that the “immigrant experience” is “part of the Canadian experience” – other panelists choose to deem certain attributes or experiences as uniquely or “wonderfully Canadian” without intellectually exploring the meaning of their speech act (2002 Day 4). These discussions typically occur, or at least begin, under the guise of asserting a book’s particular ‘Canadianness.’ At times the conversation emerges and is encouraged by the hosts in order to harness the power of Canadian celebrities discussing national identity in a way that is meaningful and relevant. Megan Follows praises Canada’s diversity in the first season of *Canada Reads* when she gushes that “we have so many people coming from different countries who bring their cultures and their experience,” while Steven Page, in the same episode, praises Canada not for its diversity, but its “ability to view the world in a way that other nations don’t – particularly Americans” (2002 Day 2). Panelists are never asked to substantiate their comments or explore further. Perhaps Follows or Page would have provided more specific evidence to support their claims had they been asked, but listeners are instead required to listen to their nationalist enthusiasm without question – at least, until host Mary Walsh interrupts Page’s anti-American diatribe. Known for her political satire and quick wit, Walsh scolds Page for his generalizations and insists that “when we stop laughing up our smug, self-satisfied Canadian sleeves at Americans, then we will have made a great stride forward in terms of becoming our own country” (2002 Day 2). Walsh’s comments are not repeated in future episodes of *Canada Reads*, but questions of Canadian identities posed against American identities do return in later seasons.

There is an interesting trend that occurs throughout the first ten years of *Canada Reads* programming: a trend of panelists and hosts calling something – a book, a choice, an ideological approach – “Canadian” as an adjective, meant to be descriptive and prescriptive. Steven Page maintains how “wonderfully Canadian” it would be to “say ‘choose a book’ and we choose a book of poetry” (2002 Day 4). Page, again, is never asked to explain his statement, but it can be understood that Page feels the action of choosing an underdog of sorts is sweet and parochial – and, somehow, particularly Canadian in nature. Kim Campbell repeats this sentiment in the same episode when describing *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a novel with a “wonderful Canadian sensibility” and continues that “there is no doubt that this book is written by a Canadian” (2002 Day 4). One may ask – what is “wonderfully Canadian”? What is a “Canadian sensibility”? How does a reader know without a doubt that a novel has been written by a Canadian? These assertions are unfounded and unquestioned in the first year of *Canada Reads* and can only be teased out by looking further into the following nine seasons to search for answers.

In 2003, panelist Nancy Lee laments the message of many Canadian books. She says, with a sigh, “we’re just here, there’s nothing we can do about it, we are the way we are – aw, that’s us, we’re Canadian” (2003 Day 2). When her novel choice, the popular *Life of Pi*, is eliminated from the competition, she calls the voting “typical Canadian behaviour – as soon as someone gets some kind of credit, some accolade, we pan them” (2003 Day 3). That same year, host Bill Richardson admits that he is flattered, “in a perverse way,” that author Wayne Johnson would “settle on [Canadians] as a worthy object of fiction” (2003 Day 3). From these comments, Canadian identity would appear to include a mixture of humility and embarrassment; how, then, do Steven Page’s declarations about Canada’s cultural superiority to the United States fit in? Scott Thompson, in *Canada Reads* 2006, declares that “Canadian letters are very devoid of comedy” and believes that there is “a prejudice in this country towards comedy”; meanwhile, his

fellow panelist, Nelofer Pazira, tells Richardson that she is trying to learn French in order to “become a good Canadian” (2006 Day 1). In the following episode, Richardson plays a clip for the panelists and listeners in which Mordecai Richler speaks of an “unsureness about culture” in Canada and Richardson voices his agreement, calling Canadian culture “insecure” (2006 Day 2).

While these particular examples reveal a notion of Canadian identity that is unsure, there is a resounding foil to these notions: author Susan Musgrave, who defends the poetry of who she calls “the quintessential Canadian,” poet Al Purdy. She describes the late Purdy as “a huge bear of a man” that drank beer and threw empties out his office window, who was a member of the armed forces, and who was always laughing at himself. Musgrave even offers Purdy’s view on Canadian identity, which goes against that of the rest of the panel: as Purdy would say, Canadians solve the “anguish of inferiority by being good at something Americans aren’t: we know who we are” (2006 Day 2). Musgrave argues that Purdy’s poetry “talks about our lives” and that “he gives us distillations in this book of our Canadian experience” – though again, without mentioning what exactly that Canadian experience is (2006 Day 4). Rather than using specific examples, Musgrave simply uses the rhetorical tool of repetition to make her point:

Al would say ‘we don’t have a problem with identity, we know who we are, but we’re told all the time, we’re taught this idea of Canadian identity – well, if you say it enough times, people will start feeling like maybe we don’t have one. But no, we do.’ (2006 Day 5)

On the fourth day, in perhaps the most poignant moment in the entire series – and especially for the purposes of this project – Musgrave asserts that “the CBC creates Canada, and poets create Canada” (2006 Day 4). Musgrave’s representation of Purdy’s construction of Canadian identity – one that presumably aligns with her own – is one that relies heavily on ties with nature, masculinity, and the importance of legacy and heritage (read: European legacy and heritage). Musgrave does gesture to Purdy’s awareness of a so-called Canadian crisis of identity, but rejects

the insecurities raised by her fellow panelists in favour of the clear-cut, sentimental evaluation of her late mentor.

It is not the first, nor the last time that stereotypical notions of Canadian identity present themselves on the *Canada Reads* panel. A memorable argument takes place between Donna Morrissey and Denise Bombardier on the final day of *Canada Reads* 2007. Following Bombardier's argument that a *Canada Reads* title should take place in Canada and be about Canada, Morrissey attempts to remind her to be more inclusive, resulting in heightened tension between the two women.

Morrissey: We have to start accepting each other's stories as well. I think Canada is more than beavers and railroads and fishermen.

Bombardier: I don't want any lessons of what is Canada, and I don't want this politically correct discussion. Being *Canada Reads*, that's what I conclude, and that's it. I'm not a fascist for that.

Richardson quickly steers the conversation in a different direction and the topic is not breached again – but such an exchange highlights the dichotomy occurring in mainstream Canadian discourse on the topic of Canadian identity. While Bombardier's focus is steadily placed on a more static version of Canada that is deeply entrenched in educational and cultural history set in place by colonial governments and powers, Morrissey's version of Canadian identity is representative of a broad and inclusive set of values that includes the acceptance of diversity and international experiences. Both, of course, are problematic in that they attempt to essentialize experiences of identity and culture that can only be described as fluid.

With a more diverse team headed by new host Jian Ghomeshi, there comes in *Canada Reads* 2008 a shift in the dialogue about Canadian identity as a whole. Spoken word artist Jemini talks about the diverse set of characters in her chosen novel as ones that she can “recognize as part of my Canada,” calling them “very Canadian” and “very real” (2008 Day 1). When

discussing hockey novel *King Leary*, panelist Zaib Shaikh praises it while at the same time expressing his concern that hockey is not something necessarily “identifiable with Canada, or today’s Canada” (2008 Day 1). The next day, he returns to the idea of Canadian identity, saying that “Canadians are not made up of their landscape, they’re made up of the people that are reflected in their landscape and how they feel about the world around them” (2008 Day 2). It is at this time that fellow panelist Lisa Moore decides to explain to the panel her own troubles with the notion of Canadian identity:

I think Canadianness is a problem. It feels like an agenda to me, and I don’t want to read a writer who has a visible agenda. I don’t want to be told what – I don’t want to be told anything. I want to discover it when I’m reading. You know, as soon as I see a book about hockey, I’m thinking ‘oh, now we’re going to build a nation and it’s going to be something,’ and I don’t want to be a part of a nation. I don’t want to be a Newfoundlander, I don’t want to be white, I don’t want to be a woman – I’m reading. I want to be borderless and nationless and sexless, or, you know, multi-sexual. (2008 Day 2)

Her fellow panelists make teasing noises at the end of her speech, but that cannot discount her message, which can be interpreted in two ways: the first is that Moore is anti-nationalist and dislikes social identity categories, and the second is that she simply wishes to be a ‘neutral’ reader that is not being manipulated by the author she is spending time with as she reads their novel. It may be both of these things; however, her reaction to *King Leary* as a novel that intends to build a nation is so well-placed, as it is indeed the novel that wins *Canada Reads* 2008 and promotes a certain type of nation-building that is cemented in a Canadian history, however stereotypical, of white male narratives that profess and memorialize the glory days of violent and celebratory hockey culture. However problematic Moore’s desire to separate herself from the inevitable attachments of her own social position, her anti-nationalist admission is a first, and only, for *Canada Reads*.

While journalist Avi Lewis has never been specifically labeled anti-nationalist, he certainly is a fearless advocate of viewing nations in a critical fashion. It is Lewis who defends Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* in *Canada Reads 2009*, congratulating Hill on the ways in which the novel "complicates one of our cherished Canadian myths" about slavery, the Underground Railroad, and Canada as a kind of 'promise land' for escaped and freed slaves of African descent (2009 Day 1). It is his fellow panelist, Jennifer Fooksong Lee, who calls her own novel of choice, Brian Francis's *Fruit*, a "perfect portrait of suburban Canadian life" (2009 Day 1). While Lewis promotes *The Book of Negroes* as a novel that tells a story that will educate readers and listeners, Fooksong Lee argues that her novel "speaks to our constant struggle with personal identity, and I don't think it gets much more Canadian than that" (2009 Day 1). While one panelist seeks to shake up Canadian myths based in history, the other is intent on reflecting realities and truths that exist contemporarily. It is on the third day of *Canada Reads 2009* that the longest, and most thoughtful, discussion of Canadian identity through all of the years of the program takes place. What follows is the abridged transcription of the conversation.

Fooksong-Lee: I think [*Fruit*] is really about, as individuals we are weak, but as a community we are strong.

Withenshaw: Absolutely, and that's why I think it's so Canadian.

Ghomeshi: Do you agree that this is the most Canadian story? (...) Does it matter?

Withenshaw: I don't think it matters at all –

Ghomeshi: Why does it not matter? This is *Canada Reads*.

Withenshaw: This is *Canada Reads*, and it's great to celebrate Canadian authors, but I don't think that any kind of nationalism or Canadian identity needs to really transpire in their works. *The Fat Woman Next Door is Pregnant*, this story that takes place on the Plateau d'Montreal, could take place in Brooklyn. It could take place in Barcelona.

Campbell: You wouldn't know reading [*The Outlander*] where it was set. You wouldn't know that it was Alberta or Canada or anything... I'm saying it has the elements of a classic Canadian novel that people in Canada respond to, and that's why I recommend it.

Slean: I think a book is about humanity –

Ghomeshi: Don't we celebrate some of our greatest authors for the snapshots of Canadian life?

Withenshaw: The fact that we celebrate them is because it actually resonates beyond our cultural borders.

Fooksong-Lee: If we start describing books in terms of their Canadianess or non-Canadianess, we're automatically limiting what our writers and our artists and our musicians or what anybody can do, which means that Canadian identity can never grow or expand or change, and that's ridiculous. Canada is changing all the freaking time.

Lewis: Let's just throw away the whole *Canada Reads* thing and do a ten-part series on Canadian identity.

Campbell: (snoring sound)

Lewis: I think the fundamental, the core aspect of Canadian identity that Canadian literature addresses is our internationalism, our catholicism with a small c, our ability to embrace an incredible diversity of things, and that's the only thing I'm interested in that I think is truly Canadian. (2009 Day 3)

One year later, during *Canada Reads* 2010, Ghomeshi again brings up the topic of Canadian identity – a topic that appears to remain on his mind as he resumes his role as moderator over the next several years with *Canada Reads*. He says,

The Canadianness, if you will, of these books... it comes up every year, and it is not insignificant. This is, after all, *Canada Reads*. I don't think we're looking for it in a provincial way, in a paint-your-face patriotic way, but this can be a way to discover, learn about, or explore and celebrate parts of the country.

When Ghomeshi turns to the panel and asks each panelist what book represents Canada best, he is rewarded with a variety of answers. While Samantha Nutt argues that the title she is defending, *The Jade Peony*, is the most Canadian because "it is about a quintessentially Canadian experience," Simi Sara disagrees, gesturing to Francophone Michel Vezina and saying, "not if you're Michel" (2010 Day 3). Nutt responds by explaining that *The Jade Peony* is "the immigrant experience, the old world versus the new world. It's that Canadian sense of identity where we all come from someplace else, unless you're an Aboriginal Canadian, and so to me, of all of the books, *The Jade Peony*'s the one that I think is most Canadian. It doesn't have the French references, but it does have that sense of alienation and uniqueness that I think is a Canadian

story” (2010 Day 3). When Sara expresses that she disagrees “with the idea that we’re trying to determine what being most Canadian is” and that she does not like that, Ghomeshi interjects.

Ghomeshi: But it’s a question! It comes up! It comes up all the time!

Sara: There was something about Canada that we all loved. My idea of what is Canadian is different from your idea, from what Samantha’s is – it’s based on your own personal experience, based on where you grow up and how you grow up.

Ghomeshi: But surely it’s not an unfair question, to say for *Canada Reads*, what book will resonate most with Canadians as a part of our –

Sara: What are we talking about here? Which province are we talking about, what is their background? What are we talking about?

Nobody does answer Sara’s question directly. On the final day of *Canada Reads* 2010, the panel agrees that winner *Nikolski* is representative not of Canadian identity, but of the “Pan-Canadian experience” because it “is about the most places in Canada” and does “ask the question of what does it actually mean to be Canadian” (2010 Day 5). Though the panel does discuss Canadian literature, *Canada Reads* 2011 is relatively free of discussions of Canadian identity.

While plenty of airtime in *Canada Reads* is dedicated to discussing Canadian identity, the topic of Canadian literature – what is it? who writes it? where does it take place? – is a frequent topic of discussion as well. The *Canada Reads* framework of what is considered a Canadian novel is broad, to say the least – there are virtually no published rules about what qualifies a novel to be classified as Canadian. The Canadian literary canon has been granted plenty of intellectual space and value in the nation-state over the past half-century, but most particularly since September 11th, 2001, when “the definition and boundaries of Canadian national identity and belonging were reconfigured” (Arat-Koc). It would be impossible to discuss the broad-stroke topic of Canadian literature, also known as CanLit, and the Canadian canon without discussing the ways in which it is in negotiation with larger constructions and formulations of Canadian identity. As written in the introduction of *ReCalling Canada*,

to classify cultural products as ‘Canadian’ is to privilege the category of the nation over other possible axes of analysis, to implicitly endorse the idea of the nation-state as a coherent and legitimate social and political entity, to potentially stabilize or shore up the concept of the nation-state in the face of expanding claims of globalization, and (...) to risk falsely projecting a fixed concept of the Canadian nation-state back in time, which lends it an additional antiquity or authenticity not to be found in its actual history of sporadic and contested conquest. (xxi)

It is not my intention to endorse, stabilize, or falsely project any particular notions of Canadian literature or identity; rather, it is my hope to address the ways in which Canadian literature and identity are discussed on *Canada Reads* in order to explore and understand the broad-stroke nationalist and nation-building implications of the program and the program’s relationship with the fluid and unstable category of Canadian literature. Perhaps the most apt description of Canadian literature within this context comes from the Introduction of *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* by Kambourelli and Miki. The excerpt that follows not only outlines the complicated relationship between CanLit and anti-racist anti-colonial academic frameworks, but also indicates the fraught tension between the canon and the nation by which it is named:

Canadian literature: a construct bounded by the nation, a cultural by-product of the Cold War era, a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies, a literature that has assumed transnational and global currency, a tradition often marked by uncertainty about its value and relevance, a corpus of texts in which, albeit not without anxiety and resistance, spaces have been made for First Nations and diasporic voices. These are some of the critical assumptions scholars have brought to the study of CanLit, as we have come to call it for the sake of brevity, but also affectionately, and often ironically as we recognize the dissonances inscribed in the economy of this term. Whether it is considered an integral part of the Canadian nation formation, an autonomous body of works, a literature belonging somewhere between nation and literariness, or a part of ‘world literature,’ CanLit has been subject to a relentless process of institutionalization. Sometimes subtly, sometimes crudely, it has always been employed as an instrument – cultural, intellectual, political, federalist, and capitalist – to advance causes and interests that now complement, now resist, each other. (...) CanLit, then, is not a term to be taken at face value. It resonates with the same ambiguities characterizing literature at large, but

also with the complexities – even nervousness – associated with its own history and location. The specific trajectories of CanLit bespeak a continuing anxiety over intent and purpose, its ends always threatening to dissolve. This accounts for its intense preoccupation with its own formation: its topcentrism; its uneasy relationships with the British, the Commonwealth, and the American; its uneven responses to the (post)colonia and its so-called minority literatures; its desire to accommodate global cultural contexts; its obsessiveness with identity; and its institutionalization and celebration through cultural, social, and trade policies. These diverse preoccupations attest to CanLit’s specificity, but also to its nervous state. (viii)

It is in the spirit of this excerpt that my analysis takes shape surrounding the topic of CanLit, *Canada Reads*, the CBC, and Canadian identity.

As DeCook writes, “literature becomes a means through which Canadians can know themselves and verify their national consciousness. The value of Canadian literature is that it reflects the value of the nation” (qtd. in DeCook). While panelist Nalo Hopkinson, in the first year of *Canada Reads*, declares that “Canadian literature is world literature because of the makeup of this country,” Denise Bombardier five years later admits that “I thought that when we were talking about Canadian books it should have something to do with Canada one way or another” (2002 Day 1, 2007 Day 3). Bombardier also indicates her surprise that “any books by someone who has just arrived in Canada, or lived in Canada by chance or decision” should be chosen for the *Canada Reads* competition (2007 Day 3). Following Bombardier’s statement, moderator Bill Richardson asserts that “it is the nature of our very contemporary literature that some of the most distinguished books are written by people who weren’t born here” (2007 Day 3). These conversations are typical of those which take place in *Canada Reads* every year: one panelist indicates their preference for a stereotypically Eurocentric construction of Canadian literature, saturated in notions of geographical landscape and survival, while another holds steady ground on the importance of diversity and contemporary internationalism in Canadian literature. Both constructions are, of course, problematic for different reasons already discussed. While

Bombardier's comments that Canadian books should be written by Canadian authors – authors who were born in Canada, who have a notion of at least a regionally-informed Canadian identity, and who will write about issues within or at least affecting Canada – betray her own biases regarding Canadian identity and citizenship, Hopkinson's somewhat broad and uncomplicated offering, collapsing Canadian and world literature, disregards the complexities of both categories, however unstable and fluid. Rather than deconstructing CanLit as a category, Hopkinson solidifies CanLit as a broader category.

In *Canada Reads* 2005, panelist Molly Johnson calls CanLit, or as she calls it, “Canadiana,” books that were commonly thought of as “dull” before Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* arrived on the national literary scene (2005 Day 2). Fellow panelist Donna Morrissey disagrees that Canadian novels had previously been considered dull, but does conclude that “there wasn't a whole lot happening on the Canadian literary scene” before the 1960s. She maintains that most people she talks with believe that Canadian literature “begins with Margaret Laurence,” the author she is defending, “in the 1920s” (2005 Day 4). Another panelist in 2005 is author and former National Librarian Roch Carrier, who is introduced on the fourth day as “famously the author of *The Hockey Sweater*” (2005 Day 4). All of these moments in *Canada Reads* 2005 are indicators of a larger construction shared between all panelists: Canadian literature has a distinct contemporary identity – an identity that is informed by the beautiful, if dated, prose of Margaret Laurence, the originality and courage of Leonard Cohen, and the nationalist nostalgic affection for Roch Carrier's *The Hockey Sweater*. It would appear that, by 2005, Canadian literature has crept past what Margaret Atwood refers to as “the Colonial Mentality,” in which there was “a tendency to believe that the Great Good Place was, culturally speaking, elsewhere” – most particularly, in this case, Great Britain (5). Canadian literature, by 2005, has come into its own – into a canon that values stories of older women, young men, and

children all struggling to live their lives in the ways that they feel is desirable. While Atwood writes in *Survival* that “the central symbol for Canada” is “undoubtedly Survival,” it seems to be rather more nuanced than that. If CanLit is represented by survival, it may not be survival in a strict and dire sense, but rather, the desire to be socially mobile, to survive socially and emotionally as primarily white settlers in a harsh, cold nation-state that continually erases histories of pain and hurt (Atwood 25). To credit Atwood, her stance has also altered in the time since *Survival* was published.

Canadian literature in the twenty-first century is no longer strictly about “what white people found when they arrived here: the land, the animals, and the Indians;” rather, it is about itself and the creation of its own canon (Atwood 53). This may be understood as a crisis of identity – both within Canadian culture as a whole, and representative in its national literature. *Canada Reads* seeks to solidify a notion of a distinct Canadian identity, and a distinct Canadian literature, for this very reason – however homogenizing, exclusionary, or essentializing. Daniel Francis writes that

the master narrative excluded many people... who did not see themselves reflected in the stories; or worse, felt belittled by them. These people – Aboriginals, minorities, working peoples, women – have had to force their way into the story of Canada by inventing narratives of their own. For someone like myself, raised on the conventional narratives, it is tremendously invigorating to witness the process... At the same time, the old master narrative does not give up without a fight. People with a vested interest, emotional or otherwise, in the old myths resist their subversion by new voices. As a result, there is a high level of anxiety evident in the culture these days, a feeling on the part of many people that the familiar Canada they have always known is under siege. They are right, of course. Canada is being reimagined. But this should be a cause for celebration, not concern. (qtd. in Hier 11)

While Francis believes that Canada’s reimagining calls for celebration, this is not necessarily the case. In a contemporary political climate in which visible minorities are treated as non-Canadian or less Canadian, the status of women’s reproductive rights are at stake, and the class divide is

widening every year, the reimagining of CanLit is not a guarantee that the result will be an improvement over previous imaginings for those who have been previously mis- or under-represented. Francis also fails to recognize the implicit support for Canadian identity and literature as a category that pervades his optimism – a support that is shared by the producers of *Canada Reads*, but not necessarily a support that will benefit individuals living within the Canadian nation-state who do not feel they belong to or support the nation-state.

Canadian literature – at least in English-speaking provinces – is overwhelmingly understood to be titles written in the English language, with the occasional title translated from French into English. The panel for *Canada Reads* 2003 spends some time discussing Canadian literature within the framework of “two great literatures” – both French and English, where there is “not a lot of transference” (2003 Day 5). It is later in the conversation that Denise Bombardier reminds the rest of the panel about the “Aboriginal group” that is “slightly left out of the mix” (2003 Day 5). She says that “when we talk about two solitudes I think about or consider adding a third, because [Indigenous] literature isn’t written down as much” (2003 Day 5). Bombardier’s comments are a first on *Canada Reads* at this point in time. First Nations people, languages, and literatures had not been discussed on *Canada Reads* prior to 2003, and only traces of the conversation continue through the following years. In 2004, with the inclusion of Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, the topic arises again. Francine Pelletier argues that “there are two kinds of ways of looking at literary traditions – or three kinds of ways, with Thomas King here as a Native Canadian” (2004 Day 5). It is significant that Pelletier mentions a third tradition, an Indigenous tradition, as a result of the inclusion of Thomas King in the year’s competition. King’s inclusion serves as a reminder to her, in this particular year of *Canada Reads*, that Indigenous voices are as important a ‘solitude’ as English and French in the Canadian nation-

state – a reminder that, if not as obviously placed, would have likely been skimmed over or forgotten.

CanLit arguably has more than three solitudes, of course. Nalo Hopkinson's argument regarding Canadian literature as world literature may be problematic, but it also makes a significant point regarding the voices that have been emerging in the Canadian canon over the past half-century. Glen Murray, while defending Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, argues that "in the next hundred years, where is all our immigration coming from? Africa, Asia (...) we're going to be talking about a different type of fusion of ideas and cultural sensibilities emerging in the country and, by proxy, the country's literature" (2004 Day 5). Jim Cuddy agrees with Murray, pointing out that "the next wave of people who settle in this country will determine, to an extent, what the interest in literature will be" (2004 Day 5). Cuddy approaches the conversation not from the perspective of a Canadian literature producer, but a Canadian literature consumer. Correctly, Cuddy indicates that the market for Canadian literature is rapidly changing, which will not only change the definition(s) of who is Canadian, but will also affect the understanding and commodification of CanLit as an intellectual and marketable object to be consumed by people self-identifying as Canadian in culturally complex and multi-layered ways.

When Ghomeshi asks the panel in 2008 about "Canadianness," Jemini chooses to complicate Ghomeshi's question by focusing on his language. She tells him that the novel that she is defending, about a group of people of colour saving downtown Toronto from zombies, is "a Canadian story" but that

you have to understand and change the face of what is a Canadian story and what represents Canada and how does that sound. I think it's continuing to change. I think these people are fiercely Canadian in that they embrace the fact that they can be who they are and can represent their beliefs and where they come from safely in a place like Canada. They are actually changing the face of, in this case, Toronto. (...) It's not the Canadians who have been

here for years and years, it's these people who have now taken this place as their home that are actually saving the city. (2008 Day 2)

Jemini's explanation of Canadian identity is that which embraces the multicultural values of the CBC and of the Canadian government (at least in a technical, official sense). Jemini's explanation undermines the whiteness pervasive in discussions of Canadian identity and CanLit in order to showcase what she calls the new non-white "face" of Canada and Canadian stories. This is an example of what Andrea Davis calls an "alternative understanding of Canadian identities." Another example of this movement towards alternative Canadian identities occurs in the very first year of *Canada Reads* with the inclusion of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Though white defending panelist Megan Follows chooses the book for reasons tied up in white guilt, the inclusion of such a novel on the first year of *Canada Reads* is significant because, as Linda Hutcheon points out, Mistry's inclusion as an author exemplifies the complexities present in the competition when trying to assess whether an author or book is "Canadian enough" to participate or win. Hutcheon explains that Mistry is "by national origin, an Indian; by ethnicity, a Parsi (a diasporic people whose ancestors were forced out of Iran by the Islamic Conquest); by residency, a Canadian. He may write in the English language, but he brings to it multiple traditions, destabilizing in this way any easy relationship of language to territory" (Hutcheon 26). The comprehensive complexity of identity politics in settler nation-states such as Canada is underscored in moments such as these, when *Canada Reads* celebrates Canadian identities outside of a white settler norm while simultaneously representing them as other. Discussions of CanLit and Canadian identity is, of course, never simply about identity and literature, but rather must be understood as a vital part of larger constructions of national myth-making and cultural ownership.

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Chapter Three:
“These Are All White Books” (“Well, It’s Obvious That They Are”):
Intersectional Analysis of the *Canada Reads* Project

Canada Reads works to posit white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied Canadian identities as the norm while glossing over the identities and social categories that diverge from this norm. This chapter analyzes the ways in which *Canada Reads* treats and constructs Canadian identity in the specific terms of white womanhood, vanilla sexuality, middle-class values, educational privilege, metropolitanism, Anglocentrism, and whiteness, and addresses the ways in which the CBC trains the discourse in *Canada Reads* specifically to erase and elide histories of violence and trauma against individuals and communities who do not belong to the categories that they promote as intrinsically and unquestionably Canadian.

White womanhood plays a large role in the overall persona projected by the *Canada Reads* project; the overwhelming number of white women represented in the show as panelists and authors makes that abundantly clear. It is an understatement to say that women writers, particularly those of First Nations and African descent, have been historically marginalized in the Canadian nation-state; however, with the abundance of women writers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds now appearing on the shelves of bookstores and libraries, it is interesting to note that it was not until 2006 that a white woman writer – Miriam Toews – won the *Canada Reads* prize (2006 Day 5). Not once has a transgender writer or panelist been featured on *Canada Reads*, and so unfortunately this section is also saturated with discussions of cisgender individuals and groups. As this section largely focuses on white womanhood, I have elected to include racial and ethnic identity markers for all individuals discussed in this section for clarity’s sake, and to ensure that no blanket statements regarding universal gendered experience are implied.

The first and only white female host of *Canada Reads* 2002 is Mary Walsh of *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* fame. In addition to mixed-race writer Nalo Hopkinson and white actress Megan Follows, the first year of *Canada Reads* also includes former Prime Minister Kim Campbell, who, as of 2012, is the first and only Prime Minister of Canada who happens to be a white woman (2002 Day 1). Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, defended by Leon Rooke, becomes an interesting conversation point in *Canada Reads* 2002. Rooke believes that *The Stone Angel* represents "the perceived role of women in society, which Hagar both succumbs to and struggles against" (2002 Day 1). In the same vein, Campbell likens the oppressive systems in *The Handmaid's Tale* – which drain women's bank accounts and change their names – to that of the institution of marriage on day three (2002 Day 3).

The topic of the struggle of women (read: white women) appears occasionally in *Canada Reads* dialogue over the years, always consisting of an argument between two sides about whether times have changed for (white) women or not. In ten years of *Canada Reads* programming, not once is a conclusive answer reached on the subject, nor is any nuance etched out regarding the unequal experiences of women who do not identify as white.

The question of whether a novel is "a girl book" or not comes up in day one of *Canada Reads* 2003, when Bill Richardson teases Mag Ruffman about *The Lost Garden*.

Ruffman: It's a book that I have lent or given to five or six people and they all say 'this is great!'

Richardson: Were all those people women?

Ruffman: No.

Richardson: No? Okay. Interesting.

Ruffman: No, one was my brother Alan. He's sixty and doesn't even like fiction and he loved it.

Richardson: But he likes his sister! (2003 Day 1)

Richardson obviously means to tease Ruffman, but the conversation emerges again in day two. Trudeau dodges Richardson's line of questioning when he is asked point-blank whether *The Lost Garden* is "a girl book," but Denise Bombardier immediately seizes the opportunity to speak her mind. She agrees with Richardson, calling *The Lost Garden* "a woman's book (...) and that's why I didn't like it. (...) The books I like now that are written by women are books with a sense of humour, because I think that liberation goes through this humour... and all those depressing, politically correct books written by women... I can't stand that anymore" (2003 Day 2). Bombardier makes a regular stance in both of her appearances on *Canada Reads* against anything that identifies as, in her terms, 'politically correct,' to the chagrin of her more liberal fellow panelists.

The women panelists chosen for *Canada Reads* 2004 include white Francophone writer Francine Pelletier, who "works on women and sex," white Vancouver writer and critic Zsuzsi Gartner, who at the time of the show was writing about meat for a men's magazine, and black opera singer Measha Brueggergosman. This panel also includes white gay Winnipeg mayor Glen Murray, and white singer-songwriter Jim Cuddy. The most interesting dynamic of *Canada Reads* 2004 with regard to gender is the ways in which Glen Murray participates in conversations about women and women's empowerment with the white women on the panel, while Cuddy and Brueggergosman often remain silent. Murray straddles an interesting position on the panel in his positionality as an educated gay white man. He speaks with confident feminist language about patriarchy, Eurocentrism, and privilege, while simultaneously failing to identify his own privileges in being able to discuss these topics while living in a white male body. The ultimate paradox is that he believes that *Barney's Version* is guided by "almost a really feminist principle about being defined by others," while the novel is actually written about Mordecai Richler's own sexist treatment of the women, characterized as either "harpies or doormats," in his own life

(2004 Day 2). There are also several moments over the five days of the program that reveal a rooted belief in ‘traditional’ gender roles, including Gartner’s assertion about a character “dying like a man,” Murray’s description of *The Last Crossing* as “a guy’s novel” because of “its historical accuracy,” and the men’s discussions of “powerful women” who are viewed by women panelists as “freakish paragons of virtue” that do not represent the realities of women (2004 Day 2, 3). Gartner believes that Alice Munro’s characters are dated because “there’s not that much repression anymore in society,” clearly contradicting the panelists who are particularly concerned with women as a social group during the 2004 season (2004 Day 2).

The attempt at gendered symmetry in *Canada Reads 2005* is thrown off by the last-minute cancellation of singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright. Producers are able to find a substitute in singer Molly Johnson; however, this results in the only *Canada Reads* in which women outnumber men four to one. Richardson kids with Johnson on the first day of *Canada Reads 2005*, saying “you’re the mother of two kids! How did you find the time to do this?” She swiftly replies, “I didn’t, and I think you’ll find that as the week goes on. *I’ve got to get through Volkswagen Blues! Don’t talk to mummy! Go watch television!*” (2005 Day 1). Mixed-race Johnson, though a last-minute addition to the panel, contributes much to the conversation, particularly about black femininities in *Canada Reads 2005*. The only man on the panel, Roch Carrier speaks with a heavy authority in his voice when he talks about how strong the women are in his novel of choice – certainly a privilege, given his positionality on a panel of women, to make such assertions. Donna Morrissey, who disagrees about the women in *Volkswagen Blues* being strong, voices her concerns about this opinion and is backed up by Sherraine MacKay and Johnson (2005 Day 1). Morrissey is a self-proclaimed feminist, and spends much of the time on-air quipping about the treatment of women in the discussed texts.

The complexities of *Canada Reads* 2006 are more adequately explored later on in this chapter; however, what is necessary to note is that the relationships between panelists – two white straight women, one white straight man, one white gay man, and one straight woman of colour – while it is informed by both gender and racial categories, it appears to be the racial category which forms a problematic and unsafe relationship between the white and non-white panelists. The only woman of colour on the panel, Nelofer Pazira, makes a point to say that she is “tired of resurrecting the dead man from the past” when honouring and discussing literature, referring to Al Purdy’s collection of poetry. Purdy’s defender Susan Musgrave votes off *Cocksure*, as she sarcastically puts it, because she is “bitter because of her appendages,” and Maureen McTeer does that same “not because it is dirty, about sex, or the objectification of women, [which is] something as a feminist I’m used to,” but because of “[Mordecai Richler’s] involvement of children in his charade” (2006 Day 2). McTeer is referring to a scene in the novel in which small children are acting out a Marquis de Sade play.

A strong and interesting element of homonationalism and compulsory masculinity comes from gay actor Scott Thompson, who, in his vote against *Deafening*, calls the novel “female” (2006 Day 3). Thompson complains that

what was missing was the joy of war, and I think that that’s such a female thing – the book was prejudiced against men. When men head off for war, they’re going on the adventure of their life. He’s not having sex? He’s with French girls. There’s no man that would talk like that. If he didn’t have sex in two years, I lost respect for him. (...) For men, these kinds of things, they’re not just all awful. They enjoy war, too. (2006 Day 3)

Thompson’s analysis of *Deafening* not only reveals his own biases regarding nationalisms and masculinities of all sexualities, but also in turn positions all women as necessarily anti-war and anti-sex.

Discussions of gender in *Canada Reads* 2007 primarily revolve around parenthood because many of the novels in this year are centered on the experiences of children. *Canada Reads* 2007 is an all-star year, which means that all past winning panelists return. Most notable in this season is the way in which Bombardier criticizes *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, defended by John K. Samson, for encouraging a “trash culture” that normalizes teenage prostitution and drug use. Regardless of Bombardier’s criticisms, *Lullabies* wins the competition, which is the second time that a novel written by a woman wins *Canada Reads*.

The gendered dynamics of *Canada Reads* 2008 are based, again, on ideas of so-called ‘traditional’ gender roles. Dave Bidini’s first words on the first episode are “my book, fellas, is *King Leary*” – even though two women also sit on the panel. While this may have been said in order to appear charming and offhand, Bidini successfully places himself into the position of defending a book already coded as “a man book” (2008 Day 1). Unlike discussions about *King Leary*, when the group discusses Timothy Findley’s novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, pointed and poignant commentaries on gender occur. While defender Zaib Shaikh believes that the wife of abusive and selfish Noah is “a foil for everything that he does,” Lisa Moore agrees but calls it “the problem” (2008 Day 2). While Shaikh defends who he calls a “gin-swilling woman” who has “got her foibles and her faults,” Moore argues that she is “a total wife, locked in the cellar” (2008 Day 2). She may lead the revolt at the end of the novel, as Shaikh points out, but, as Moore maintains, “that’s a very simplistic notion of feminism – that women are going to be kept down, and then they’re going to revolt, and the man is going to be in control of everything and be the patriarch, and be God with the white beard” (2008 Day 2). While Shaikh tries to argue that Findley is attempting to mock the patriarchy present in religion, Moore disregards the point as “too easy” (2008 Day 2).

Ghomeshi points out on the fourth day that both women authors are knocked off of the *Canada Reads* 2008 list first. While Moore laughs at the joke, Ghomeshi makes a point to ask seriously if the panelists think the voting would be different if there were three women and two men on the panel. Jemini admits that “it might be a point that might be a part of the reason,” because perhaps the novels the women panelists choose don’t “resonate as strongly” for the men as for the women. Shaikh, in his quest to be understood as a feminist man – though he never says it out loud, his intention is obvious – disagrees with the proposal that the gender of the panelists is affecting the outcome of the votes (2008 Day 4).

Many men in the *Canada Reads* 2008 panel are forthcoming about their opinions with regard to the women characters in their novels. Bidini enjoys the representation of the women in *King Leary*, while Moore calls those characters “archetypal” in their “strong, fiery” nature. Bidini jokes with her that he likes “strong, fiery women,” and Moore replies that “nobody is a strong, fiery woman all the time” (2008 Day 1). To Shaikh, in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* Findley is “not only talking about patriarchy and what it means to be a man, a woman, but he’s talking about what we have done to the environment” (2008 Day 1). Shaikh has no trouble labeling *Not Wanted on the Voyage* a “fantastic feminist retelling” of the Noah’s Ark story, even though he must argue every inch of his argument with Moore, who calls the feminism in the novel “simplistic” in that “the guys are bad, the girls are good” (2008 Day 2). Moore eventually votes the novel off because “I felt it was about feminism, and it didn’t get feminism for me” (2008 Day 3). This is an interesting moment in the competition simply because of the statement that feminisms are not universal; while Moore does not elaborate, it is clear that she resents Shaikh’s assertion that his book is feminist though he lives and experiences the world in a male body.

A particularly disturbing moment in the competition is on day four, when, without a trigger warning, the panel begins to discuss a rape scene in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. The panel

together describes a scene involving a young woman who is “raped with the horn of a unicorn” by “Noah, who is her father-in-law” (2008 Day 4). Moore admits that she “couldn’t understand what Timothy Findley wanted us to take away from that,” and Shaikh replies with his own interpretation: “a loss of magic, a loss of innocence,” he says, “a loss of what it means to be whole” (2008 Day 4). While this assessment may or may not be accurate, the moment that a male panelist proclaims to understand the intentions of a male author who represents the rape of a woman in his writing as representative of a larger theme, one must necessarily feel suspect. While it is possible that either or both of these men have experienced sexual assault, the privileged position of speaking as a man claiming to understand the symbolic nature of a rape scene in literature completely erases any possibility of either fully understanding the power inherent in their own positionality.

Much of *Canada Reads* 2009 is spent discussing sexuality, geography, and Canadian identity; gender is left nearly untouched. The improbability that an attractive African-born slave in the United States would only be raped once in her lifetime is mentioned once; otherwise, the panel remains decidedly away from gendered topics and maintains a panel dynamic that appears, at least to the listener of the edited broadcast, gender-issue-free (2009 Day 3).

The *Canada Reads* 2010 panel returns to the idea that occupies *Canada Reads* 2007: traditional gender roles. Jian Ghomeshi points out in the first episode that “the debate around [*Nikolski*] is falling on gender lines. The boys like it, the women think it needs more” (2010 Day 1). Rollie Pemberton agrees with Ghomeshi, calling *Nikolski* “a dude book” (2010 Day 1). Similarly, Pemberton voices his discomfort with what he calls the “heaviness” of *Fall on Your Knees*: “personally, I would have trouble recommending it to other people” because “the things that happen in this book are heavy” (2010 Day 1). Ghomeshi, for clarification, asks Pemberton if the book is “too dark,” and Pemberton agrees. The book’s defender, Perdita Felicien, argues that

“it deals with some of the darker things in human existence, but who says you can’t talk about those things? We don’t live in Disneyland, right? These are topics that I don’t think should be shunned” (2010 Day 1). While this conversation is not necessarily gendered, and can be understood within the context of two individuals disagreeing about what reading material is pleasurable, the producers manipulate the content in order to make it appear gendered when it presents this conversation following the discussion about *Nikolski* as a “dude book.” By presenting *Fall on Your Knees* as a book dealing with “heavy” and intimate human emotions, Pemberton is represented as a man experiencing discomfort when exposed to a broad range of human emotion within fiction, and Felicien is portrayed as an emotional woman who is defensive about Pemberton’s discomfort regarding her chosen novel.

In *Canada Reads* 2011, Ghomeshi presents all five books as representative of “certain stereotypes”: *The Birth House* and *Unless* appeal to women, *The Bone Cage* appeals to athletes and sports fans, *The Best Laid Plans* to politicians, and *Essex County* to indie-hipsters (2011 Day 1). As has been discussed previously, stereotypes of “women’s books” and “men’s books” are prevalent both on the broader cultural stage as well as the *Canada Reads* stage. Since the 2011 *Canada Reads* campaign seeks not simply a Canadian book, but *the* Canadian book of the first decade of the new millennium, panelist Georges Laraque argues that “it has to be attractive to everybody, men, women, adults, and kids” because “if they don’t like it, they’ll never read again” (2011 Day 1). Laraque agrees with Ghomeshi’s suggestion that *The Birth House* is a book that only women will enjoy, because

for men, back in those days, they were pigs. They were rapists. They went into a war. They weren’t necessarily good. If I’m a man reading that, I’m not going to aspire to read about how I was a hundred years ago, because it’s diminishing, it’s really embarrassing. For women it’s more empowering because they’ve come a long way from that. (2011 Day 1)

Laraque argues that point throughout *Canada Reads* 2011, even after his own novel has been voted off. When Ghomeshi asks him to clarify his view that the book does not “speak to men,”

Laraque replies,

it shows how men were a hundred years ago, and they were bad a hundred years ago. They were treating women like crap back in those days, and you're not really interested to see how men were back in the day because you know that they were bad. But for women to see how women have changed back in those days to today? It's empowering to read that book. That's why it does not reach everybody in Canada, it reaches only women. (2011 Day 3)

Ghomeshi then turns his attention to the defender of *The Birth House*, Debbie Travis. “Debbie, we want Canada to read,” he says, “women and men. Is this a women's only book?” Travis calls the claim “ridiculous” because the novel is “very much about men, and the men aren't all pigs (...) there are some great men in this book” (2011 Day 3). Travis defends *The Birth House*, connecting its message to the contemporary need to empower young people, men and women, and confirms her view by asking fellow panelist Ali Velshi to vouch for it as a man (which he does). Panelist Sara Quin also points out that while men may not enjoy reading about the behaviour and actions of men in the past, that discomfort does not justify those men in their choice to avoid reading about the behaviour and actions of men in the past: “we should care,” she says. Following this development, Laraque does not voice this particular argument again.

Indigenous Canadian actor Lorne Cardinal argues for *Unless* specifically because “it opens up a different avenue of thought that we don't get to think about every day, which is the woman's voice and how it's underrepresented in our literature canon today” (2011 Day 2). Of all of the men on *Canada Reads* over ten years who have claimed to be remotely feminist, Cardinal appears to understand fully what it means to be a man – an Indigenous man, at that – taking up space to discuss women's equality. He says on day three that he does not think that times have changed much for the status of women in the country:

Sure, we had some legislation that passed that allowed the vote, but other than that, they are not inclusive in our day-to-day lives. They are not inclusive in Parliament. I mean, in the voice of women. There's underfunding, there's single mothers that need support – they're not being supported. So the voice of the women is not being heard, and this book contains that voice. (2011 Day 3)

While Cardinal does not include race or Indigeneity as a part of his analysis, he does include class, which is an important factor little considered in the topic of gender in *Canada Reads* years passed. Interestingly, the panel seems to agree that one of the most feminist storylines in the novel is in *The Best Laid Plans* – a book about a young man and an older man, but woven together by the older man's letters to his deceased-feminist-scholar wife (2011 Day 3).

Gender is a topic obviously prevalent throughout the first ten years of *Canada Reads*, but one that is not often addressed in a relevant or poignant way – whether regarding the novels or the panelists. The truly interesting commentary to be made regarding gender, however, is made in reference to many other intersecting categories, such as sexuality. In ten years of *Canada Reads* programming – three hosts and 45 panelists – only two radio personalities have ever explicitly gestured to his or her own queerness over the airwaves. Scott Thompson playfully jokes in 2006 that he only reads poetry if it is “set to rap music and the men reading don't wear shirts,” and in 2004, panelist and mayor of Winnipeg Glen Murray comments about *Green Grass, Running Water* character Lionel by saying “I empathize with him. When I had my 40th birthday... I'm not one of those gym buddies, gay men, so when he was sitting there describing his stomach on his thighs and his chest on his stomach and feeling embarrassed about the state of his life...” (2006, Day 1, 2004 Day 3). While Bill Richardson and Nalo Hopkinson both self-identify as queer, their sexuality is not discussed or gestured to over the airwaves.

A key phrase that seems to emerge year after year on *Canada Reads* is the phrase “good sex.” Panelists and hosts tend to use the phrase offhand when discussing a book's overall impact

on their reading experience. For example, Nalo Hopkinson describes *Whylah Falls* as a book “about life, love, and murder in a small town in Nova Scotia. It’s full of intrigue, it’s full of good sex, and it’s the kind of thing you can pick up at any point” (2002 Day 1). In the same episode, Kim Campbell tries to sell *A Handmaid’s Tale* by saying that there is both “lots of good sex in it” and “lots of terrible sex in it” (2002 Day 1). Denise Bombardier comments that there is a lot of “good sex” in *Icefields* during the 2008 competition as well (2008 Day 1). What do these panelists mean when they say that a book has “good sex”? Is “good sex” consensual sex? Enjoyable sex for both parties? Heterosexual sex? Monogamous sex? Or simply sex scenes written in a way that is titillating for the reader, regardless of the answers to these other questions? Alternatively, the singular mention of “bad sex” in the competition comes in 2008 when Lisa Moore discusses *Not Wanted on the Voyage*:

I thought the sex in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* was so brutal... It interested me because I don’t think sex is always pleasurable, and I think that there are feelings of guilt sometimes, and shame that is attached. The idea that these women were supposed to provide sex for their partner, or that the only person who seemed to be having good sex might actually have been hiding what their sexuality was... I just think that was something in the book that really kept me. It’s not that it really turned me on, but it was something that was really interesting to me. (2008 Day 4)

In ten years of programming, *Canada Reads* nearly skims over a vital part of many of these novels. While a large part of Anne Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* is about sex, sexuality, and what Perdita Felicien calls “the forbidden love between Kathleen and Rose,” that element of the novel is only briefly mentioned in nearly three hours of programming (2010 Day 1). Sexuality is a major player in the majority of these books, many of which are intensely focused on the interiority and experiences of individual characters. While there is not time for sexuality to be discussed at length in these short programs, and while the CBC’s mandate is to be as inclusive for as many listeners as possible, the Victorian values associated with the CBC’s

Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage become clearer as one attempts to correlate the actuality of these novels with the ways in which they are represented on the show. *Canada Reads* often asexualizes its novels in the same ways it attempts to asexualize its panelists – and neither end up with a representation realistic or honest by the time the production has been edited for the air.

While heterosexism pervades throughout mainstream media, *Canada Reads* does appear to progressively improve over the years at having conversations about sex and sexuality that are not strictly based on heterosexual relationships aside from 2009, which is a particularly strong year for *Canada Reads* in its representation of queerness. The conversation that begins when Ghomeshi asks Sookfong-Lee about her own novel of choice is representative of this shift.

Ghomeshi: At the heart of [*Fruit*], albeit subtly, is a social issue which seems to be very much a contemporary issue of our times. The film *Milk* just came out, Proposition 8 in California... how important is the social relevance of this book to you as the person championing *Fruit* for Canada Reads?

Fooksong-Lee: *Fruit* always rose to the top. It was only because I loved it, period. It had nothing to do with the social issues behind it, it had nothing to do with – you know, even though sexuality plays a huge part in the book, and it's sort of the driving force and the inside joke, because everyone seems to know Peter is gay except for Peter himself, it was not the thing that compelled me to love it. (2009 Day 4)

While *Canada Reads* becomes, in this moment, a program which is unafraid to talk about what Ghomeshi calls “a contemporary issue of our times,” it also becomes the program that reveals that while panelists care about the books they represent, they all – even the politically active Avi Lewis – appear uninterested in engaging with the overarching social themes of the books they believe are so important over the airwaves. Though *Fruit* is called “a gay-coming-out book” and a “coming-of-age book” that is “packed with multilayered sexuality,” the panelists never come forward and say that their own book will be beneficial for Canadians to read for that reason (2009 Day 4). Interestingly, in the first episode of 2009's competition, there is an exchange between Nicholas Campbell and Avi Lewis about *Fruit* that would indicate otherwise.

Campbell: [With *Fruit*,] right away you're dealing with certain prejudices, maybe... I would want people to actually check their prejudices at the door and then read something—
Lewis: Are you saying you couldn't recommend [*Fruit*] to your homophobic friends? 'Cause that might be...
Campbell: Homophobe? Meaning fear of—
Lewis: Phobia's a little bit more than fear, but I'm just saying maybe that's a reason to recommend it. (2009 Day 1)

While Lewis recommends *Fruit* in order to teach Canadians about “issues of sexuality,” he does not show the same resolve to educate when he recommends his own chosen title, *The Book of Negroes* (2009 Day 5). He, instead, explains that his book is indeed relevant as a teaching tool, but is recommended because of its own power and fortitude as a work of fiction. Nonetheless, this conversation between Campbell and Lewis comes to represent an intergenerational shift that is occurring regarding discussions and understandings of sexualities across the spectrum. While Campbell represents an older demographic uncomfortable reading a book about a boy whose nipples speak to him as he tries to negotiate his sexual identity, Lewis emerges as a powerful contender against sexually conservative thinking.

Conservative thinking is, of course, not restricted to representations of sexuality in *Canada Reads*. The ways in which class, education, and notions of taste are represented in *Canada Reads* are complex, but the dynamics and conversations between the hosts and panelists about these topics are inflected with assumptions and generalizations. Questions of class, education, and taste are also reflected more broadly in the book choices, the makeup of the panel, the varying timeslot of the show, and the discourse around the books that ultimately win each year.

On the first day of the first year of *Canada Reads*, actress Megan Follows describes Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* as a book where “four people from different social stratas and experiences come together” (2002 Day 1). This is an example of the more blatant ways in which

class is introduced as a conversation point in the program. Follows explains that a young male student, two young male tailors, and one older female tailor find themselves living “together in an apartment in Bombay,” which proves to be “a multicultural experience, a class experience” (2002 Day 1). Follows earnestly delves into the details of the different characters’ experiences in the novel, and bases her interpretation of these experiences on her own understanding of the class system at work. However, as the class system in India is admittedly foreign to the Caucasian, Toronto-and-PEI-raised Follows, her interpretations are limited in scope. For Follows to call the experience “multicultural” betrays her limited understanding of both multiculturalism as a concept and the complex class and caste systems at work in Mistry’s novel.

In the very same year, former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell defends Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. During the fourth day, Campbell recalls a moment in the text when the main character tries to retrieve money from her bank account and finds that, because she is a woman and there is a new radical-misogynist government, it has been drained. Campbell calls this the moment the character discovered that she had been “un-personed” (2002 Day 4). For Campbell, being “un-personed” is equated with the loss of capital. By extension, Campbell’s construction of what it means to be a person, or an individual, closely ties and defines the self with and by the amount of capital one has, can, or will acquire. The panel agrees with, and even congratulates Campbell on the analogy that implicitly denies those without significant capital personhood. The class implications of moments such as these in *Canada Reads* are important signifiers of who these panelists are, and what class categories they represent. However, class is not a topic that is always hidden beneath the surface during *Canada Reads*. The very first year, Mary Walsh calls out Kim Campbell on being “intellectually elitist” (2002 Day 4). Walsh does not return to *Canada Reads* the following season.

It is not until the all-star year of *Canada Reads*, in which all previous winning panelists from five years are invited to return and defend new titles, that class – and in particular, poverty – really hit the spotlight on *Canada Reads*. John K. Samson defends Heather O’Neill’s *Lullabies for Little Criminals* as a book that “shows what poverty actually does... to human beings” (2007 Day 5). When *Lullabies* wins the 2007 competition, Samson reminds his fellow panelists and the audience that “we have to look at these brutalities that go on every day” because “numbers are just abstractions” (2007 Day 5). Interestingly, Denise Bombardier, the only panelist who votes consistently against *Lullabies*, expresses her feeling that the book puts ahead a “trash vision we have about our time” (2007 Day 5). Bombardier believes that *Lullabies* glamourizes poverty, but Bombardier also appears understand and read poverty as a value, as something inherently moral and negative, rather than as something political and inherently tied to intersections of oppression and privilege.

Discussions of poverty arise again in 2010 when Simi Sara makes her case for *Good to a Fault*. Panelist Michel Veniza comments that while he had a lot of problems with the book overall, he liked it because it was “talking about people nobody ever talks about... poor people” (2010 Day 1). Host Ghomeshi follows up several days later by asking the panel “which book really sends the message of class divisions home in an effective way,” with the panel not coming to agreement.

The panelists, though few are academically trained in critical literature studies, often bring up technical form as an element of each *Canada Reads* title. Francine Pelletier complains that *Green Grass, Running Water* has too colloquial a tone, and that *Canada Reads* novels should be “a notch above the dialogue you hear on the street” (2004 Day 4). Pemberton asks a fellow panelist – who happens to be a linguist – what he thinks “of the grammar in this book” because “there are so many things that are grammatically incorrect in this book” (2010 Day 1). The

privileging of form as well as content in *Canada Reads* informs the voting each year, and this systemically disadvantages types of storytelling that do not fit a Eurocentric novel form.

It goes without saying that education and class are necessarily tied up in one another. However, the connection becomes clearer in the moments in which the panel is asked to recommend a book for the entirety of Canadian readership. In 2003, panelist Will Ferguson defends *Sarah Binks*. His fellow panelists do not feel particularly friendly towards the novel, but Ferguson insists that it is a satire that is making fun of the Canadian canon. Mag Ruffman exclaims at one point that she does not think Canadians will “get the book if they don’t have a postgraduate degree,” and Ferguson replies, “I would say it’s the opposite” (2003 Day 1). Several days later, Bombardier follows a discussion of reading accessibility with an expression of frustration: “why should a book be easy? Nowadays, of course, everything has to be easy, everything has to be trivial” (2003 Day 4). Bombardier’s bitter outburst on her perception of what appears to be dropping literary standards is particularly telling: it at once reveals the ways in which middle-to-upper-class education is a necessary platform onto which Bombardier suggests Canadian identity be made accessible, and also exposes the strained dynamic between cultural artifacts’ meaning, significance, and accessibility to wide audiences. Bombardier’s statement implies that there is a kind of laziness in consumers of modern Canadian culture, with little or no understanding of the different ways in which individuals will be looking to gain access to cultural materials.

Whether the conversation is about tone, form, plot, characters, content, or broader themes of the books, *Canada Reads* is a hotspot for Canadians to hear conversations about high brow and low brow, what is “good for Canadians,” and the ways in which Canadian identity is constructed around a constantly-negotiated understanding of the average Canadian’s education level.

Ghomeshi asks panelist Lorne Cardinal in 2011 if his chosen book resonates the same way it did

ten years ago because “times have changed. This book is a bit of a polemic, a feminist polemic. It’s a bit top-down” (2011 Day 3). This language points to the hope that the audience is educated enough to understand what a “feminist polemic” is, or at least wishes to educate the audience on the meaning of the phrase by evoking a clear answer from Cardinal.

Canada Reads, as a program, strives to unite the country through the common act of reading at least one novel together, if not five, per year. As much of a challenge that this would present to a country of a moderate size, Canada is the second largest country in the world, made up of ten provinces and three territories and home to nearly 35 million people. Canada’s physical geography spans between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, with expanses of prairie land and mountains in between. While many scholars discuss Canadian identity as that which is positioned simply in opposition to American identity, Canadian identity is also deeply rooted, amongst other things, in geographic and social regionalism and “the local”. Notions of Canadian identity also tend to gloss over the internationality that also necessarily impacts the construct: that of the world outside of Canada that so many Canadians have experienced in meaningful ways, through both immigration and holding multiple citizenships. While the producers of *Canada Reads* try to choose panelists that represent the broad regions of the country, with only five panelists there is hardly a broad cross-section of representation of the panel every year.

Since 2003, the show has been taped in the Toronto studio of the CBC, which typically means that Toronto, as a city, is discussed disproportionately often on *Canada Reads*. However, many comments about Toronto are disparaging. In the first year of *Canada Reads*, host Mary Walsh calls Toronto “the bellybutton of the country” and asks fellow panelists if they do not find Margaret Atwood’s writing “a little bit cold... in that Toronto kind of way” (2002 Day 1). She continues to explain, “sometimes reading Margaret Atwood, for me, is like being in Toronto for too long – a bit grim, a bit too grey” (2002 Day 1). Steven Page, both from Toronto and

defending a story based in Toronto, replies that he was “prepared for the Toronto-bashing,” and these moments of teasing continue to occur throughout the following four episodes (2002 Day 1).

In *Canada Reads* 2011, Lorne Cardinal calls *The Birth House* “just a regional novel” about a “very specific group of people.” Ghomeshi jumps on this statement for clarification, asking “when you say regional... it’s what? It’s too East Coast for you?” Cardinal replies,

it’s too East Coast. Well, it’s not too East Coast, it’s just too specific to an area, to a region. It could have been set anywhere, but it’s a life I never, you know, had to live, on the shelter, fish for cod, and do that arduous survival, but they had to do that and that’s what they did... it’s hard for me, being a prairie boy, to identify with that a hundred percent, except for the isolation, which happens a lot. (2011 Day 3)

Cardinal has a hard time coming to terms with this novel, which, as a “prairie boy” feels so unfamiliar. Cardinal’s argument against *The Birth House* winning *Canada Reads* is that not all Canadians would be able to relate to a life spent oceanside in a different century than the one in which we currently live. His understanding, his construction of Canadian identity is not encapsulated by the region, or the people in the region, of *The Birth House*. In “Crest of the Wave,” Danielle Fuller discusses the rhetoric surrounding Atlantic Canada that imbues it with “old-fashioned cultural practices” and warns against the risks of this, citing “romantic, and frequently racially homogenous notions of place and people” as frequently-reinforced stereotypes. The panelist defending *The Birth House*, British-born Debbie Travis, defends her choice in her reply to Cardinal: “you say it’s East Coast. Well, I’m sorry, but this is a very large country. I come from a tiny country. This is a large country, but it is made up of communities, and we are losing our communities” (2011 Day 3). Though her response lacks clarity, Travis implies that *The Birth House* represents one of many communities and locales in Canada that are at risk of being lost to a world increasingly bound by commercialization and globalization. As the introduction of *ReCalling Early Canada* states, “Confederation serves as a constant reminder

of the diversity that has always undermined the coherence of the Canadian nation-state,” and that since Canada became a nation, it has been a “site of conflicting confederacies” (xxiii). In this moment, Travis unwittingly recalls the importance of regionalism in Canadian literature by indicating that there is no larger Canadian community to be represented in CanLit – only smaller, and often conflicting, ones.

Stereotypes of Canadian regions tend to come hand-in-hand with the mythologies of the Canadian landscape. Northrop Frye describes Canadian literature as steeped in a kind of “garrison mentality” by “providing a viable fiction of a unifying experience for the nation: early settlers’ engagement with hostile, impersonal nature” (DeCook). DeCook points out that while stressing the importance of “regionalism” in Canadian identity and culture, Frye also makes a point to make what he calls “essential connections” across the literature and culture of the country. Indeed, even in the *Discover Canada* citizenship guidebook, provided by the Canadian government for new potential Canadians, Canadians built “a prosperous society in a rugged environment from our Atlantic shores to the Pacific Ocean and to the Arctic Circle” (Government of Canada). In 2002, Steven Page discusses the ways in which he perceives Canadians write and read about their own country: “sometimes Canadians stereotypically look for something that is what they consider to be the forgotten parts of Canada, whether it’s the north or the Maritimes, or places they think the ordinary central Canadian is not going to know about” (2002 Day 1). Page normalizes “the ordinary central Canadian” in this statement, which clearly reveals a regional bias tied up in ideas of who “ordinary Canadians” might be. What is more interesting, however, is his argument that not only do Canadians wish to find and experience so-called “forgotten” parts of Canada, but that these “forgotten” parts of Canada consist of “the north” and “the Maritimes.” While residents of “the north” and “the Maritimes” may agree that they are often

forgotten or dismissed in federal politics, it could be argued that these regions are simply underrepresented in mainstream or popular Canadian culture.

Alongside regional representations that focus on metropolitan Canadians, *Canada Reads* also tends to normalize Canadian Anglocentrism. I acknowledge that there are multiplicities of understandings regarding what is considered French in Canada, and these fall beneath the intersecting categories of both language and culture. *Canada Reads*, produced in English by Anglophone CBC Radio One, often invites one Francophone – or at least Quebecer – to the *Canada Reads* panel each year. Sometimes the novels that these panelists choose are translations of French titles, sometimes they are not, and the relationships that occur within the panel often reflect the ties – or lack of ties – between the French-speaking Anglophone panelists and the Francophone ones. In the 2003 competition, Francophone journalist Denise Bombardier defends Hubert Aquin's *Next Episode*, and is thrilled to find that fellow panelist Justin Trudeau enjoys the book as well – indeed, he enjoys it enough to vote against his own novel in the final round in order to promote *Next Episode* as an important read that will allow Canadians to understand Quebec and Quebecers better (2003).

Canada Reads does require that a novel be 'Canadian,' whatever that means, but it has no language requirement aside from the fact that the novels on the show must be available to read in English. There is no requirement that these novels be translated into French, however. Bombardier, who returns to *Canada Reads* in 2007 to defend Gabrielle Roy's *Children of My Heart*, points out that English Canadians typically think that Roy is English Canadian and thinks that is "wonderful" (2007 Day 1). She also comments, regarding *Natasha and Other Stories*, that "in French, the genre of short stories is not very appreciated and we don't often write short stories" so she "read it as a novel" (2007 Day 2). Moments such as these are rare in *Canada Reads* – that is, moments that acknowledge a non-lingual or distinctly cultural difference between

Anglophone and Francophone Canada. While scholar Andrea Cabajsky believes that “it is necessary to treat comparatively the development of Canada’s two officially recognized national literatures,” there appears to be no middle-ground between CBC Radio One and Radio-Canada that can adequately address the interrelationships between both national literatures (76).

As there have been three hosts and forty-five panelists, five of which return for an all-star show, over the ten years of *Canada Reads* programming provided by the CBC, it is not surprising that every year the show produces widely different content with regards to panel dynamics – especially with regard to the topic, explicit or implicit, of race, whiteness, and otherness. There are, of course, many themes that run through the years; however, they seem to always manifest in different ways.

While the editors of *Race and Racism* define race as “a social relational category defined by socially selected physical and cultural characteristics,” they define whiteness as that which is “conceptualized, implicitly or explicitly, on the basis of socially constructed notions of the white body, and the social category of white is essentialized as a universal condition of privilege” (17). Canadian identity has been tied up in whiteness since the arrival of European settlers on the continent. As George Elliott Clarke writes in “White Like Canada,” the original “‘two solitudes’ of Canadian nationalism – Anglo and Quebecois – have never had a vision of Canada as anything but a white man’s country” (106). According to Clarke, “the bleak topography of winter – polar bears and permafrost, tuques and tundra – has fired the imaginings of Canadian whiteness” (107). Set against the backdrop of what was interpreted to be Indigenous primitivism, European settlers found ways to articulate their own racial superiority before the country was even conceived of. Early English Canadian literature “marginalized the early works of women, First Nations, and African Canadian writers,” ensuring that these voices were unable to solidify themselves in the history books or emerging national canon (Blair et al. 238).

Interestingly, the definition of whiteness has changed considerably over the past century. As Hier and Bolaria write, “European groups that today would be classified as ‘white’ were neither understood nor represented in this way” (17). As individuals and groups of various backgrounds became able to “negotiate their externally imposed racial otherness,” they were able to assume their own white identity and come to be accepted as white. In turn, some of these groups “turned around and became some of the most vigorous defenders of whiteness” (Satzewich 71). As Satzewich writes, however,

...racialized othering was central to the formation of Canada and to the contemporary understanding of French – English relations, but racial otherness was complicated. Sometimes it was constructed around skin colour and biological superiority; at other times it was constructed around language, religion, and culture. (72)

More recent history has worked to solidify these notions. Following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 on the World Trade Centre in New York City, Canada hastened to align and ally itself with “the West” – implying “a re-whitening of Canadian identity after decades of multiculturalism” (Arat-Koc). This, in turn, “increased the marginalization of its nonwhite minorities,” most particularly those of Arab and African descent, as well as those racialized as Muslim (Arat-Koc).

There are people – academics and non-academics alike – who believe that discussing race, bringing it to the table, is widely responsible for the racism that is externalized in contemporary culture. These individuals and groups suggest a more colour-blind approach to discussing contemporary issues of all kinds. However, as Sefa Dei argues, “silence around race is far from neutral” and discussing it is a “necessary strategic perspective for addressing that which by all means already exists” (53).

A critical approach to understanding the questions of power and different from an anti-racist lens requires... that we speak of the salience of race, even as we recognize the intersections of race with other forms of difference. What is notable is that whiteness is often rendered

invisible through a process of normalization. (...) ‘As much as white folks across differences of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religion may be oppressed in relation to the dominant white middle class heterosexual male subject, they hold a pigmentary passport of privilege that allows sanctity as a result of the racial polity of whiteness.’ This is a luxury bodies of colour across all our differences do not enjoy. (57)

Whiteness is a process of normalization that occurs within Canadian culture on every level.

Kobayashi and Peake note that whiteness is “based upon ideological norms that are lived but unacknowledged” – making the topic a particularly challenging one to breach in levels ranging from the personal to the institutional (qtd. in Satzewich 75). According to Kobayashi and Peake,

Whiteness is indicated less by its explicit racism than by the fact that it ignores, or even denies, racist indications. It occupies central ground by deracializing and normalizing common events and beliefs, giving them legitimacy as part of a moral system depicted as natural and universal. (qtd. in Satzewich 75)

While whiteness is a powerful cultural phenomenon that permeates Canadian culture(s) and notions of Canadian identit(ies), it is important to complicate the notion that whiteness bestows the same socio-economic power upon all individuals who self-identify or visually pass as white.

Henry and Tator explain that “the White mother on welfare, the homeless White male do not form a homogenous community with White journalists, judges, educators, and CEOs and clearly do not enjoy equal access to White privilege” (qtd. in Satzewich 76). In the construction of Canadian identity, whiteness necessarily ties in as a singular but powerful factor with other categories of social identity – such as class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, citizenship, or language.

Canada, as a nation, was built upon a foundation of a racially white population descended from European settlers. White women were quickly exalted as “breeders of a virile race,” or “mothers of the nation,” while Indigenous women were represented as “the antithesis of progressive and liberated Canadian mainstream women” (Dua 177). This is the very basis for

what Ng calls the “marker of who is seen as a ‘real Canadian’” because “those who are white (including those who are not Canadian-born) appear native, while racially oppressed women (including Aboriginal women) appear as outsiders” (qtd. in Dua 177). The discourse analysis to follow employs racial and ethnic markers for the sake of the reader unfamiliar with the panelists and novels discussed; however, I acknowledge the flaw in naming identities without significant discussion of the meaning inherent in these lived categories, and so such a discussion follows the year-by-year analytical text. It should be noted that the importance of these identity categories, for the listeners of *Canada Reads* as well as the panelists themselves cannot be understated, as they govern both the script and the lives of those who embody these often physical identity categories. It is also worth noting that unless I have stated that there has been a discussion specifically about a panelist or author’s background over the airwaves, the investigative work of discovering each panelist’s biographical information has been mine as both listener and researcher. The individuals who are identified particularly by racial difference on *Canada Reads* are often marked and asked to broadly represent their racial group; white panelists are never asked to do this.

The first year of *Canada Reads* is one in which race is seldom discussed. White woman Mary Walsh hosts the first season alongside panelists Steven Page (Jewish), Kim Campbell (white), Nalo Hopkinson (black), Leon Rooke (white), and Megan Follows (white). While Hopkinson identifies as black, her self-identification is never explicitly stated, and Steven Page, while Jewish, passes as ethnically white. *Canada Reads* is, at this time, available both as a television and a radio show; however, the television program is cancelled due to unpopularity, and so for the purposes of this project’s continuity, it is only the audio that is included in the analysis.

Though the first winner of *Canada Reads* is an immigrant author of colour – Michael Ondaatje – there is very little discussion of the realities of race and immigration in the panel discussions during the first season (2002 Day 1). The only indication that race even exists as a category is when Kim Campbell likens the circumstances of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is largely about the experience of oppressed white women in a futuristic America, to the Transatlantic slave trade. She remarks that people “were taken out of their lives, their families, ripped away from their families, took their master’s names” and that there are “some wonderful little references to Canada” as being “the underground railroad” (Day 1 2002). Campbell’s enthusiasm about Canada being referenced as a progressive and safe space for women to run away to – and likening it to the much-mythologized and romanticized Underground Railroad – displays a lack of understanding of the serious, painful, global implications of the Transatlantic slave trade and its legacies. As a white Canadian politician, to speak of the slave trade as a symbol without context, and without indicating the racialized depth of its reach, is incredibly problematic.

The second season of *Canada Reads* exemplifies the ways in which whiteness is fluid in its movement, and transparent in its presence. While panelist Nancy Lee is of Asian and Indian descent, her own positionality, like her fellow white panelists, is ignored throughout the progression of the show. Her chosen novel, *Life of Pi*, is never discussed with regard to the race of its narrator or author, allowing the colour-blind nature of the show at this time to quietly perpetuate the normalization of whiteness commonly found in liberal institutions funded by the Government of Canada at this point in time.

Glen Murray, the white and openly gay mayor of Winnipeg in 2004, spends his airtime on *Canada Reads* 2004 defending Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*. While Murray is obviously well-read in matters of social justice and critical theory, he also showcases his own

white privilege in the ways in which he easily discusses First Nations creation myths, stories, and realities without acknowledging his position as a settler benefitting from histories and legacies of colonialism. When Zsuzsi Gartner calls King “half Greek, half Cherokee” Murray corrects her by reiterating that King is “part Greek, part Cherokee” – quietly reassigning the importance of blood quantum. Unfortunately, while Murray spends plenty of time contextualizing the novel in ways that display his obvious knowledge and research, he fails to acknowledge the importance of the fact that a novel about Indigenous people is featured on *Canada Reads*. Instead, he tells Bill Richardson that “the fact that these people were Aboriginal did not mean a lot to me in *Green Grass, Running Water*. They were so empathetic and accessible” and “I had never understood my own culture juxtaposed against Native culture” (2004 Day 2). As Cecily Devereaux writes, “white settler culture ‘uses’ or ‘integrates’ aboriginal myths (...) not to represent aboriginal experiences but (...) settler experience” (298). While Murray is a champion for the novel and for Thomas King, his failure to acknowledge the culturally specific importance of the novel, as well as the way in which he changes his tone to discuss his own relationship with Indigenous cultures, indicates that his understanding of his own position is limited to that of a man who wishes to integrate Indigeneity into the mainstream without fully understanding the consequences of his actions.

Glen Murray’s role in the discussion surrounding *Green Grass, Running Water* is important to consider when thinking about whiteness and otherness in the 2004 series of *Canada Reads*; however, it is not the only role worth discussing. At one point, host Bill Richardson – white and openly queer – asks Murray if “a novel like this might do something to, I don’t know, change or alter in some way, the way we look at our First Nations” (2004 Day 2). Murray’s reply is irrelevant. Richardson’s framing of Indigenous peoples in Canada as “our First Nations” – possessive, that which belongs to another – posits Richardson and Murray, and presumably the

white Canadian listener, as those who look at First Nations people in a particular, but unnamed way. It presents First Nations as other – that which is being read, understood, and consumed by the normalized Canadian citizen – and it suggests that First Nations people inherently belong *to* Canada and (normalized, white) Canadians. Francine Pelletier furthers this paternalism when she argues that Thomas King “was raised by a Greek mother in the states, ’cause he had a Native Canadian father that he wasn’t – he wasn’t raised in the tradition” (2002 Day 2). It is for this reason that she calls the novel “Native Lite” (2002 Day 2). Pelletier’s construction of who and what constitute an Indigenous person, and an Indigenous person’s authentic narrative as coded by being raised in an ambiguous “tradition,” displays her own desire to consume only that which she considers truly, authentically Native – that, she argues, which Thomas King and his novels are most definitely not. This demanding and paternalistic attitude prevalent amongst Canadian whites – the requirement that ethnicity is authenticated by cultural experience and language knowledge foreign to their own experience but understood as adequately exotic – permeates the language of *Canada Reads* in 2004.

As a final note, Measha Brueggergosman, the only woman of colour on yet another white panel, is a popular name within the Canadian classical music scene; however, *Canada Reads* listeners are given no indication as to her race – or, more astutely, her racial difference as compared to her respective panelists. The third year of *Canada Reads* still maintains silence on the topic of racial difference amongst the panelists, hosts, and authors of the novels that are being defended in the show. *Canada Reads* would be ill-advised to point out Brueggergosman’s blackness in a way that would other her; however, to ignore the fact that differences exist amongst the participants in the show is to actively engage in the silent whitewashing that the show already perpetuates.

Richardson again hosts *Canada Reads* 2005, welcoming panelists Donna Morrissey (white), Olivia Chow (Asian), Molly Johnson (mixed-race, with a white mother and a black father), Roch Carrier (white), and Sherraine MacKay (white). While race does not dominate the conversation in *Canada Reads* 2005, there is much to be discussed regarding the treatment of *No Crystal Stair* by Mairuth Sarsfield, defended by Sherraine MacKay. MacKay calls *No Crystal Stair* “a wonderful story, compassionately told, about the survival of many different immigrants, but it focuses on the black people in Canada and the more muted form of Canadian bigotry that took place” during the 1940s in Montreal. She recalls that “it’s a story that could have been a little bit bitter, but it ends up – it’s told with such compassion and grace that it was a wonderful read” (2005 Day 1). The panel’s reaction to the novel is quite positive overall, with Chow admitting that she “learned a great deal” because “it really captures that period from a completely black Canadian perspective” (2005 Day 1). Chow says that she also connects to the story because of her own background, because her own “forefathers... helped to build the CPR... but were immediately afterwards cast out, pushed out, aside” (2005 Day 1). It does not take long for moderator Bill Richardson to make an obvious connection:

Richardson: She’s a widow, she’s a single mother, she’s living in the black neighbourhood of Montreal. Molly, how did you respond to this?

Johnson: I wish there were books around about being black in Canada when I was seventeen. (2005 Day 2)

While Richardson is not incorrect to assume a racial characteristic in common with Johnson, Sarsfield, and her novel’s characters, this question places Johnson on the spot to speak on behalf of black Canadians – most specifically, black Canadian women – about her feelings regarding the way in which the story is constructed and represented. Johnson concedes that the novel does good work, but with a level of hesitation marking her voice. MacKay takes this moment to announce her own feeling that the characters in the novel are “extremely well developed and not

stereotypical” (2005 Day 2). Johnson admits that “it’s a wonderful book for young Canadians to read, and it’s a great lesson in history, and it’s certainly not a part of history that has been told a lot,” but she finds the characters rather simplified “because I live with those characters in my own life” (2005 Day 2). MacKay admits that she grew up in a small town “where there was only one black person” but that the characters of the children were relatable to her because of that (2005 Day 2). Johnson does not engage with MacKay further on the authenticity of the novel, but she decides to cast her vote against *No Crystal Stair* in the next round (2005 Day 3). Johnson’s experience being asked to speak for *No Crystal Stair* does not conclude after this decision, however. Richardson asks Johnson, on the very same day she decides to vote against the title, about the novel’s plotline that involves passing as white.

Richardson: How did that resonate with you, Molly?

Johnson: Well, very close to the bone. I was raised in a very privileged white world called North Toronto, but that doesn’t say that my parents didn’t jump through fire to make that happen for me. Um, and I get, to this day, ridiculous amounts of racism from women blacker than myself with as they call ‘bad hair.’ I happen to have what they call ‘good hair.’ I find, and I’ve found over the years, that the most hurtful things that have come my way have come from the black community.

Interestingly, it is at this moment that MacKay chimes in, saying cheerfully, “of course, there’s prejudices on both sides!” (2005 Day 3). Richardson’s insistence on asking Johnson personal questions about her experience with race, Johnson’s mixed reaction that simplifies black women’s reactions to her physical appearance as a mixed race woman with ‘good hair,’ and MacKay’s pleasant interjection reminding listeners that both white and black people are prejudiced come together to create a moment thoroughly unsettling for listeners both critical and uncritical of how racial dynamics play out in *Canada Reads* and CBC radio programming in general. While Andrea Davis reads *No Crystal Stair* as a novel that fights against “racist, patriarchal, and nationalist narratives that seek to fix black identities in rigid categories defined

by particular understandings of ‘race,’ ‘nation,’ and ‘sexuality,’” Johnson reads the novel coming from the perspective of a woman who the world reads as black, but grew up with one white parent in a white suburban neighbourhood. The lived – and academic – experience of these two women are vastly different, but Richardson’s simplistic understanding of Johnson as a woman who is at least partly black erases the complexities that she clearly experienced when reading this novel about a world quite removed from her own that is, all the same, being connected to her by virtue of her skin colour and parentage. The experience that Johnson cites – that of being discriminated against by women with so-called ‘bad hair’ and darker skin – is one situated at the centre of critical race studies, and is important to address. Andrea Davis writes that “the realities of disconnectedness, fragmentation, and homelessness encoded within the diaspora experience often also encourage people of African descent to rely on their own constructions of black identities guarded within equally rigid notions of identity, nation, and belonging. These constructions can come to constitute other kinds of oppressive, totalizing narratives” – such as those which punish women of darker skin, socially elevate women of lighter skin, and create a tension on the spectrum that often goes unaddressed in social and familial circles (127). This tension is also related to what Davis calls “the unholy forces of nationalist biopolitics” that “intersect on the bodies of women charged with the reproduction of absolute ethnic difference and the continuance of blood lines” (127). Lighter skinned women of African descent who may or may not identify as black are posited at the site of this tension as signifiers of ethnic ambiguity and bloodline continuance failure. While Johnson primarily discusses *No Crystal Stair* as a novel about a singular kind of blackness, Davis argues that “the novel insists that there are multiple historical experiences implicated in what it means to be black, Canadian, and women” (127).

The difference between MacKay’s performance of whiteness and Richardson’s performance of whiteness are interesting to note as well. While MacKay chooses a novel about a black woman

and an immigrant community even though she herself has no experience with either of those things, Richardson takes advantage of his own white privilege not to discuss the novel, but to use it as a crutch in order to pry into the life and feelings of a woman of colour on the panel without considering the potential pain it may conjure up for her.

The *Canada Reads* 2006 panel and booklist makes clear that the only woman of colour, who is also the single panelist not born in Canada, is defending the only title that does not render people of colour and Indigenous peoples virtually invisible in a Canadian literary landscape. The resulting tension in the panel is quite clear. While the white panelists spend much time discussing “women” (read: white women) and “Canadians” (read: white settler Canadians), Nelofer Pazira is most often heard criticizing other novels for “mocking” Mennonite cultures, accusing white panelists of romanticizing First Nations people in Canada (to rallying protests of “no we don’t!”), and complaining that her book did not get as far as she wanted it to: she essentially becomes the killjoy, or Sara Ahmed’s “affect alien” – she who “converts good feelings into bad” (2006 Day 1, Ahmed 49). Indeed, white panelist Susan Musgrave states in the first episode of *Canada Reads* 2006 that *Three Day Road* had forced her into “a territory [she had] been squeamish about,” but never explains why (2006 Day 1). The only moments that unite the four white panelists in a discussion about stereotyping and racism is when they are agreeing that Boyden’s novel is racist against white people. Musgrave complains that “Shamanism is very serious, and the white characters, the authority figures, were all kind of cardboard villains” (2006 Day 3). Thompson adds to the critique with his wish that “there was a sympathetic white character.” (2006 Day 3)

The tension between Pazira and the rest of the panel does not end on day three, or when *Three Day Road* is voted off on the fourth episode. Every time that Pazira speaks, she is interrupted by either Musgrave or McTeer, often with a patronizing “dear” locked on to the end of each argument. Pazira is introduced at the beginning of one show as “a woman of many

cultures,” and is treated with dismissal when she wonders aloud whether the Mennonite community in Manitoba feels exploited by Miriam Toews’ depiction of them in *A Complicated Kindness* (2006 Day 4). When John K. Samson speaks of a ‘Mennonite community’ on the first day, no panelist says a word about the term, but when Pazira uses it, she is met with defensive opposition and ridicule:

Richardson: We can’t really talk about a Mennonite community, any more than we can talk about a black community.

Thompson: You can generalize about black Mennonites, because there’s only three.

Samson: No! There’s lots!

Thompson: (laughs) Well, I’ve never seen one. (2006 Day 4)

As a panelist of colour, all of Pazira’s attempts to have meaningful discussions about inequalities present in the novels are quashed; however, when Richardson and Samson choose to discuss race, it becomes a topic that moves fluidly in and out of the conversation. After *A Complicated Kindness* is announced as the winner, and all panelists are asked to reflect on the most moving moment from their individual selection, Pazira speaks about a powerful moment when a main character in *Three Day Road* shaves her head in resistance to the residential school nuns chopping off the children’s hair. Instead of letting her complete her sentence, the panel immediately jumps in and likens this moment to one in *A Complicated Kindness*, and Thompson proclaims that it must be an overarching statement about short hair and “women’s power” (2006 Day 5). This interruption and statement erases any cultural context, as well as any importance in Pazira’s final reflection in and contribution to the show. Pazira spends all five episodes being constantly shut down by other panelists, and is often spoken to in tones that can be described as alternating between patronizing and abusive.

The cultural politics of race – when discussed in simplified and easily consumable ways – are welcomed in *Canada Reads*, while meaningful discussions brought forward by a woman of

colour are easily silenced and delegitimized. Razack, Smith, and Thobani in *States of Race* write that “the racial and gendered politics of the [Canadian] state were organized through a complex triangulation of relations, with Indigenous peoples marked for physical and cultural extinction, European settlers for integration, and people of colour for perpetual outsider status as ‘immigrants’ and ‘newcomers’” (5). *Canada Reads 2006* certainly proves Razack’s point. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, “to identify as must always include multiple processes of identification with. It also involves identification as against”: the construction of Canadian identity in *Canada Reads* is that which identifies as Canadian, with that which is considered Canadian, and against that which is other – in this case, Pazira, both the racial outsider and reminder of Canada’s colonial history, embodies and defends all which is antithetical to the aim of a coherent and desirable Canadian identity that wishes to ignore these histories (61).

The fifth year of *Canada Reads* – the year in which all previous winning panelists are invited back to defend a new novel – is one that plays it safe, especially in comparison to the previous year. Jewish Steven Page is the only panelist who identifies as anything but a heterosexual white person, and the panel is made up of three men and two women – one of which is from Quebec. Race is mentioned in the most minute of ways – in the moment host Bill Richardson comments that “there’s an interesting racial question too, because the kid is Metis,” as well as his quip that John K. Samson is “defending here the honour of all Icelandic Canadians” (2007 Day 2). While Donna Morrissey and Jim Cuddy hash out their own conceptions and experiences about India, Steven Page reminds listeners about the complexities of ethnic tensions in Europe. He describes his book as one that outlines the process of “learning to belong, whether it’s to your family or your community (...) here we see all these levels of how Jews treat each other. People come from Europe where they were called dirty Jews by non-Jews and come to America where they are

called dirty Jews by other Jewish people” (2007 Day 4). Page’s book is the first to be eliminated, though the panel decidedly attributes the choice not to content but the book’s short-story form. Whiteness is pervasive in the 2007 *Canada Reads* competition – it is so unquestioned and so unchecked that it becomes an invisible and normalized overtone of the season.

Following the incredibly whitewashed 2007 *Canada Reads* competition, it appears that the producers of *Canada Reads* 2008 actively work to diversify the panel and book choices in order to reflect a more multicultural Canadian experience. White musician Dave Bidini, Pakistani Canadian actor Zaib Shaikh, white author Lisa Moore, black spoken word artist and radio host Jemini, and astronaut Steven MacLean round out the panel, and the new host is Iranian Canadian *Q* host Jian Ghomeshi. While a more racially diverse panel does not ensure that race will embody more of the conversation in the show, it certainly improves the level of racial difference and awareness from that of the year before. Jemini playfully teases MacLean about his novel choice, *Icelfields*, laughing about the “stereotype of this man in Canada who’s looking at snow and it’s white” (2008 Day 1). “It just didn’t engage me,” she admits, before turning to describe Mavis Gallant’s book of short stories as embodied by “four paragraphs on how we have tea because we’re English” (2008 Day 1). Jemini’s no-nonsense attitude towards the Eurocentricities present on the *Canada Reads* booklist in 2008 is clear in the first episode, but the topic is not brought up again for the rest of the season.

Ghomeshi does not hesitate to ask Zaib Shaikh about his response to *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and the *Little Mosque on the Prairie* actor is unafraid to answer in a way that implies his understanding of why the question was specifically asked of him.

Well, I am a brown boy in the ring, so I responded favourably to that. You know what? This book is a complicated book for me, because there are things about it that I enjoy because it is so, in a way, culturally specific that I got to get into that culture’s world, but ultimately you have to think about all these books as a book that’s going to be one the nation can read, and I,

as a reader, wanted to read it, but I think – does this apply to all of Canada? I'm not convinced. But at the same time, that's why reading is complicated. (2008 Day 2)

While Lisa Moore, representative of white women readers, argues that regardless of “the language, the patois, the way the dialogue worked, and the way that it was placed on top of a Toronto,” *Brown Girl in the Ring* is a novel that goes beyond cultural specificity and enters the realm of the universal (2008 Day 2). Jemini agrees with Moore, asserting that “there is that West Indian culture, but I think [the book] also speaks to youth culture, and that's any place you're from, any colour, any whatever. It's a youth culture. So the culture is West Indian, maybe, as in where they're from, but I think there are other cultures that represent very strongly in this book” (2008 Day 2).

Whiteness and otherness are not exactly at odds in *Canada Reads* 2008 – though there is some tension, it is played out casually and even, in some cases, with humour. The show is also re-centered with Ghomeshi as the new host, as he embodies a Canadianness that is obviously non-white and yet speaks with great patriotism and cultural ownership of the Canadian artistic brand. While Ghomeshi's presence and un-Anglo name is novel in both *Canada Reads* and the CBC at this point in time, his presence grows increasingly mainstream and whitewashed in Canadian households in the years to come.

While race itself is a central topic of 2009's season of *Canada Reads*, race and whiteness are barely discussed as social factors between the panelists and their various ways of reading. While Avi Lewis, a Jewish Canadian journalist working for Al Jazeera, defends *The Book of Negroes* – a title that garners much attention both due to Lewis's enthusiasm and its own height on the Canadian bestseller lists – there is much attention paid to slavery and little attention paid to race, racism, and the ways in which colonial legacies have been internalized and continue to affect contemporary society and culture. The panelist who struggles with the essential goodness of the

character Aminata in *The Book of Negroes*, Jen Fooksong Lee, is dubious about the ways in which that particular novel works to undo stereotypes. She maintains throughout the five days of the show that “the idea that it’s ripping a hole in stereotypes, I’m not quite sure I believe that, because as somebody who is a visible minority, for lack of a better word, I think that when people write about the struggles of a repressed community they often make the decision to make those people really good, and really noble, and really lovely, and I think that that does a kind of disservice in many ways” (2009 Day 2). Lewis and Fooksong Lee are the two strongest personalities on the panel in *Canada Reads 2009*, both social minorities whose chosen novels portray the internal and external struggles of being an individual treated poorly by society in which they live.

As a trend that begins with the introduction of Ghomeshi as host of *Canada Reads* in 2008, the 2010 season blends a mixture of panelists that reflect the true diversity of Canadian celebrity. Edmonton’s Poet Laureate and hip-hop artist Rollie Pemberton, also known as Cadence Weapon, and Canadian track champion Perdita Felicien represent African Canadians in the prairies and the Atlantic provinces, respectively, while Simi Sara represents Indo-Canadians on the west coast; founder of War Child Samantha Nutt represents white Torontonians, and Michel Vezina represents Quebec’s white male population. This panel does not discuss race, racism, or racial difference – not once, over the entire five days of the show. Of course, any discussions of *The Jade Peony* necessarily touched on the fact that Chinese Canadians suffered during the Depression and the wars in the first half of the twentieth century; however, the politics of a white woman, however educated, defending a story about which she has no life experience to connect to it is never discussed. Ghomeshi asks no pointed questions to members of the panel this year, because none of the novels depict African or Indo-Canadians, and asking Nutt or Vezina about

their experiences reading about white people as white people themselves evidently does not qualify as an interesting or worthwhile question for the listeners of *Canada Reads*.

It takes ten years for *Canada Reads* to invite a panelist of Indigenous descent to participate in the show; however, in 2011 the season welcomes *Corner Gas* actor Lorne Cardinal in addition to black Quebecois former-hockey player Georges Laraque, white indie musician Sara Quin, white British Canadian interior designer and television host Debbie Travis, and Indo-African Canadian CNN anchor Ali Velshi. Even as the most diverse panel emerges in the show's tenth year, the book titles have not diversified at all. On the second day of the program, Ghomeshi attempts to address this glaringly obvious fact:

Ghomeshi: We live in a remarkably diverse country. This panel is remarkably diverse. I'm not sure that these books are. Which book best speaks to Canadian society today? (2011 Day 2).

When the panelists fail to react to this statement, Ghomeshi pushes further.

Ghomeshi: Someone wrote in to say that these are all white books.
Cardinal: (after silence) Well, obviously they are.

Cardinal moves to discuss women's voices in the book choices following this brief admission, and aside from Quin's agreement on the fact that the books are not very diverse, the group as a whole skirts the question entirely. The only time that race is mentioned explicitly again is when Velshi calls Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi "a brown Angus McClintock," referring to the rogue politician that stars in Terry Fallis's *The Best Laid Plans*. The 2011 show is overproduced and disappointingly lacking in intellectual content; however, the racial tensions previously prevalent in *Canada Reads* are not present in the 2011 season. This may be connected to the presence of two white women and three men of colour – the gendered, racial, and various other social oppressions may have somehow evened themselves out in post-production.

While *Canada Reads* goes through several transformations in its first ten years, the reliance on the novel as literary form, the tendency of the characters and authors of the majority of titles – and winning titles – to be white, and the prevalence of racial dynamics that complicate the innerworkings of the panel do not change in a notable way. While the presence of host Jian Ghomeshi, a kind of racial and cultural neutralizer, marks a change in the ways in which race is managed in the show, the increased representation of panelists of colour does not appear to affect the white, Eurocentric novel choices that are placed on the list of books for all Canadians to read. While this may be a result of the Canadian canon, still in its youth and growing from a strictly European formation, it is more likely the tendency of the producers of *Canada Reads* to choose novels that are both from large printing presses capable of large print numbers and are palatable to the widest range of CBC Radio One listeners. As George Elliott Clarke writes in “White Like Canada,” “the general incoherence of a colour-based identity in Canada permits Canadian whiteness to exist, then, as an ethereal force. Left pretty much to its own devices, the white majority in Canada exudes a kind of ideal whiteness, ready for export” (100). The Canadian canon is not simply exported to other countries; it is exported to Canadians who eagerly seek any reflection of themselves in order to centre and re-centre their own constructions of who and what Canadians are. These novel choices, whether or not they are defended and chosen by white panelists, reflect the whiteness that is still understood to be inherently Canadian.

The nature of *Canada Reads* being a primarily radio-based show also problematizes embodiment. While consumers listen to articulate voices, typically unmarred by obvious speech impediments and weaker English, the body and physical characteristics of each individual panelist remains, for the most part, invisible. In an institution increasingly dedicated to liberal multiculturalism, it seems enough to provide diverse bodies; however, if this diversity is not reflected in visual or cultural terms, this diversity does not work to undo the monocultural

dialogue that dominates the program. Symptomatic of the superficiality of multiculturalism as a concept, *Canada Reads* producers are more preoccupied with the optics of a diverse program than the realities of presenting a culturally diverse set of ideologies and opinions.

As Arat-Koc writes, “white racists and white multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around white culture, where Aboriginal people and non-white ‘ethnics’ are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a white national will” (Arat-Koc, Sedef). In this case, the panelists are easily interchangeable in an annual program such as *Canada Reads*, and can be substituted easily as the pool of Canadian celebrity associated with the CBC is quite extensive; the true staying power of *Canada Reads* is, after all, the books, not the panelists. The show will be listened to potentially within a year of the first airing, but each book will remain on the lists, and will enjoy the *Canada Reads* stamp for the rest of its physical and virtual shelf life. The idea that the show celebrates multiculturalism is misleading; in every way that institutionally counts, the show celebrates white authors and validates them by having people of colour represent and applaud them. This, in turn, assists racialized panelists in their journey to becoming understood and valued as so-called ‘real’ Canadians. As Arat-Koc points out,

An element of whiteness quietly enters into cultural definitions, marking the difference between a core cultural group and other groups who are represented as cultural fragments." According to Eva Mackey (2002), Canadian identity is defined by those who position themselves as "ordinary Canadians" or Canadian-Canadians-as opposed to "ethnic" or "multicultural Canadians" - both referring to a category of unmarked, "non-ethnic," white Canadians. They are the ones who claim the final authority to define inclusions and exclusions in the nation. (...) For racialized minorities, the precariousness of belonging creates a disciplinary pressure of having to prove their national loyalty. ‘Behaving nationally’ may help to accumulate capital toward national belonging, but it may not ensure the same types of belonging as those guaranteed to the national aristocracy.

The increasingly multicultural veneer of *Canada Reads* cannot hide what the booklists reveal from year to year: even the titles that are written by non-white Canadians or discuss issues pertinent to communities outside of middle-class white liberal Canadians are chosen in such a way as to please a middle-class white liberal audience, listener, and reader. While racial others are positioned in the program to symbolize diversity and multiculturalism, as well as to work to erase the atrocities of the national past and present, whiteness pervades the show in the way it does in most Canadian institutions: invisibly and thoroughly.

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Chapter Four:
Does This Story Feel Nostalgic to *You?* : Reading Difference in *Canada Reads*

Difference is not something frequently articulated in *Canada Reads*. While panelists all come from various backgrounds and experiences, and while their opinions often differ, resulting in heightened tensions and even occasionally some light bickering, difference is often squashed in the discourse in favour of a holistic and harmonious agreement of what it means to be and choose a Canadian book for the country's citizens to enjoy together. The show provides little nuance in its understanding of the ways in which individuals and groups read according to vastly different lived experiences; rather, it works to convince listeners and readers that the unnamed values that make 'us' Canadian are the values that will tie 'us' to this one novel, regardless of our other differences. This essentializes the experience of what it means to be Canadian, erases the potential for rejection of nationalism, and embraces national identity over all other categories as that which individuals and groups should use to engage with art. The aims of *Canada Reads* become more interesting when one considers the implications that it has with regard to recent immigrants to the country. As the citizenship guide *Discover Canada* states,

to understand what it means to be Canadian, it is important to know about our three founding peoples – Aboriginal, French, and British. (...) The majority of Canadians were born in this country and this has been true since the 1800s. However, Canada is often referred to as a *land of immigrants* because, over the past 200 years, millions of newcomers have helped to build and defend our way of life. (...) Together, these diverse groups, sharing a common Canadian identity, make up today's multicultural society.

Discussions about and around the topic of immigration and immigrants in Canada are tied, in an intermediate way, to a broader discussion about geographies and regionalism in *Canada Reads*, and citizenship and literacy are also often discussed together, whether in the debates around what kind of workers should be granted Canadian citizenship, or in offhand comments made by Anglo Canadians about how immigrants should learn how to speak English. Oprah, in an interview by

Life Magazine, once said that “getting [her] library card was like citizenship, it was like American citizenship” (Hall 649). However, as in any change of citizenship, new citizenship in Canada means former (or concurrent) citizenship elsewhere. The stories present in *Canada Reads* about immigration typically embrace the escape narrative. As Atwood writes,

the lack of expectation is a common characteristic of protagonists in Canadian ‘immigrant’ fiction. The characters don’t think they are coming to a promised land; as a rule they come to get away from bad conditions somewhere else, but they are not travelling *towards* anything. (181)

Hand in hand with the romanticization of the immigrant’s journey to settle in a new place (read: assimilate) is the tumultuous narrative of escape from a “tough life” that necessarily juxtaposes their homeland to the relative paradise that they find after landing in Canada. To be clear, I do not wish to minimize traumatic and dangerous experiences that some immigrants in Canada have faced in the countries in which they previously lived; I do, however, wish to complicate the dichotomous narrative that simplifies the “homeland” and the “new land” as respectively oppressive and liberating. Comforts of familiarity can exist in the most dangerous of countries, and Canada is not always as welcoming and generous as the nation’s media encourage Canadians to believe – especially under the Harper government, which, for example, is currently working to legislate the exclusion of refugees from Canada’s universal healthcare system. The simplified narratives escape narratives that emerge from stories about Canadian immigrants in the program are found not only within the novels presented in *Canada Reads*, but are cemented by well-meaning panelists such as Donna Morrissey, who in 2007 says:

we have this huge East Indian population in Canada and the streets of Bombay sometimes run in the streets of Halifax, of Vancouver. Immigrants, they bring more than their luggage with them, they bring their writers, they bring their stories, they bring their culture, they bring their history, too, and we have a responsibility to learn their stories, and I think this book just gives a gosh-darn good view of what some of our population leave behind when they come here... some of the most destitute people on the planet. (2007 Day 3)

It is also in 2007 that Steven Page discusses *Natasha and Other Stories* as a book about a family who “try to settle and make a life for themselves in Canada” after leaving “a tough life” (2007 Day 1). This is one example of the narrative that often accompanies stories about immigrants and immigration in Canada, which paints the experience as one that is not necessarily easy, but one that nearly always ends in a positive and hopeful way – regardless of the countless hardships endured. This may be called *the settling in* period, which comes as a first step in a larger arc: the *journey to belonging*.

In 2005, Canadian Olympic fencer Sherraine MacKay defends *No Crystal Stair*, a story about an African-Canadian woman in Montreal raising her children as a single mother in the 1940s.

MacKay, a white young woman who self-identifies as a “small girl from the prairies,” describes *No Crystal Stair* as

a wonderful story, compassionately told, about the survival of many different immigrants, but it focuses on the black people in Canada and the more muted form of Canadian bigotry that took place. It’s a story that could have been a little bit bitter, but it ends up – it’s told with such compassion and grace that it was a wonderful read. I love stories of hope. (2005 Day 1)

No Crystal Stair is a novel that explores the experiences of single black women in Montreal during the 1940s – all experiences that are utterly foreign to its panelist. MacKay, a white, upper-middle class athlete from the prairies, takes comfort in a narrative that reassures her of the strength and hope of the marginalized. Read in this way, *No Crystal Stair* becomes a story that reiterates that the process of settling in is temporary and fleeting, and will become a distant and historical part of the overall journey to belonging. In no way does MacKay present evidence that she understands the ways in which this representation of the past connects to the socio-economic concerns of the present or future of African Canadians or of immigrants to Canada. While Andrea Davis writes of *No Crystal Stair* that the author “constructs a 1940s Montreal very much as a

diasporic city in which many diasporas converge – African, Asian, Caribbean, European, and Jewish – and are made to consciously reckon with each other as they all attempt to work out individual understandings of Canada as both homeplace and site of exile,” in *Canada Reads, No Crystal Stair* is reduced to a crutch to hold up the Canadian myth of the multicultural mosaic (Davis 177).

It is a challenge to count the number of times the phrase “the immigrant experience” is used during the ten-year period of *Canada Reads* covered in this project. From the very first day of the very first episode in 2002, Steven Page refers to *In the Skin of a Lion* as a “beautiful book about the immigrant experience” (2002 Day 1) The singularity implied in the phrase requires exploration, for the idea that there is, or that there can be, a singular “immigrant experience” in a large country like Canada, with such a diverse cross-section of people entering the country for various reasons (migrant work, citizenship, refugee status, etc.) is unlikely.

Steven Page makes the comment on the same episode in 2002 that “because [*In the Skin of a Lion*] is a Canadian book by a writer of colour, it’s about the immigrant experience as well” (2002 Day 1). Interestingly, self-identifying Jewish Page, whose parents moved to Scarborough before he was born, indicates that there is a natural connection between being a person of colour and being an immigrant in Canada – an assumption often made by Canadian-born Caucasians unfamiliar with the histories of immigration and people of colour in Canada. Page returns to his generalization of the immigrant experience when he returns as a *Canada Reads* panelist in 2007. He calls *Natasha and Other Stories* “a beautifully poignant picture of the immigrant experience” (2007 Day 1).

In *Canada Reads* 2008, there is a moment when Ghomeshi attempts to address the differences between *King Leary*’s time and the present by asking the only woman of colour on the panel her experience while reading the novel. Ghomeshi says, “the book is set in a time when

Canada looked and sounded very different than it does today. There are still class and race divisions, but they're along the lines of Catholics and Protestants, the Irish immigrants and the English. Does this story feel nostalgic to you, or of a different Canada to you, Jemini?"

Regardless of Jemini's response, this moment is representative of the problematic attempts of CBC Radio One and *Canada Reads* to reflect its understanding that social minorities have worthwhile commentary to provide on the ways in which Canada is reflected in mainstream culture. Ghomeshi likely means to draw out a meaningful opinion from a person whose views would be considered refreshing to a largely Caucasian audience who might be less likely to consider this particular angle; however, it also places a unifying emphasis on Jemini as she who represents Canadians underrepresented in mainstream culture. The entire immigrant experience, or the entire experience of being a person of colour in Canada, is placed squarely onto Jemini's shoulders in this moment. The way in which the question is framed also places Jemini's personal self and heritage outside of a Canadian history that stretches into the mid-twentieth century.

Roland Barthes writes that "myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (109). The Canadian myth of nationalism as that which embraces difference may be official and legislated, but the way in which the myth is uttered betrays its truth: difference in Canada is that which is more often glossed over than celebrated, more recklessly discussed than cared for, and more frequently abused than nurtured.

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Chapter Five:
A Covert War: Colonial Legacies in *Canada Reads*

Canada Reads panelists and hosts rarely discuss Indigeneity, and even more rarely acknowledge their own presence as settlers on Indigenous lands. While this discussion could have taken place during the second chapter's discussion on whiteness and otherness, the choice to discuss Indigeneity in *Canada Reads* in a separate section from the section on race and racism is twofold: first, in Canada, First Nations people are often treated (both legally and socially) as an entirely separate category of human beings, which requires analysis more particular to that cultural trend; and second, to place First Nations peoples into a broader discussion of multiculturalism in Canada can only happen after lengthy discussion has taken place about the ways in which Indigenous people living in Canada operate both within and outside of Canada's multicultural framework. This decision is not intended to single out First Nations populations; rather, it is meant to clarify that the conflicts and solidarities that can be found between racial and ethnic minorities in Canada and Indigenous individuals and communities in Canada cannot be conflated or simplified. Unfortunately, in *Canada Reads*, these solidarities are seldom necessary to reference, as the majority of panelists discussing Indigenous communities and individuals self-identify as Caucasian Canadians – with a few exceptions, of course.

As for my word choice throughout this chapter, I will modify my use of Indigenous, First Nations, Aboriginal, and Native – as well as tribal specifications when possible – in order to provide vocabulary diversity and specificity. As the introduction in *ReCalling Early Canada* states, First Nations is a term “which itself stands as ‘a brilliant rhetorical intervention’ on the part of Aboriginal peoples ‘to counteract the racist nationalist discourse of two founding nations,’” and my work in this section is striving to perpetuate and protect that important intervention (xxiii).

On Day Two of the 2004 competition, Zsuzsi Gartner has an outburst about Thomas King's

Green Grass, Running Water:

Can I say I found this book Native Lite? L-I-T-E? I couldn't help but compare in my mind to Sherman Alexi... or Eden Robinson, or Louise Erdrich, who is a better comparison because Thomas King was raised not Native. I mean, he was raised by a Greek mother in the states, 'cause he had a Native Canadian father that he wasn't – he wasn't raised in the tradition.
(2004 Day 2)

Canada Reads is no stranger to non-Indigenous panelists who speak about their struggles with Native literature and authors in Canada. Especially interesting in this instance is that Gartner, a Caucasian woman who at the time of the competition is a writer for a men's magazine, is able to name notable Indigenous authors with authority. Interestingly, Eden Robinson does not always write about Native communities in her work; yet Gartner mentions Robinson as a foil to King, who writes specifically about Native communities. Bill Richardson chooses this moment in the show to roll a clip of Thomas King speaking about his novels, in which he says that he doesn't think that all novels should fall into stereotypes about Indigenous people, and while "to depict all Indians as drunk or drug addicts or living below the poverty line" is not ideal, he also feels a responsibility to gloss "over the harder facts of Native life" in a comic way in order to convey to his readers that many versions of Native life are not simply the stereotypes that they are laid out in popular fiction to be.

Gartner also uses King's mixed-race background, and the fact that he was not raised in a Native tradition, as a way to destabilize and delegitimize his authority as an Indigenous person. For Gartner, King lacks the authenticity that is required in order for him to be labeled as a truly Native writer. Francine Pelletier, during the same discussion, congratulates King on his ability to lessen the dramatic load of writing about Native populations in Canada; however, she quickly criticizes the language and style, calling it "a little cute" (2004 Day 2).

The panelist defending *Green Grass, Running Water* is Glen Murray, at that time the mayor of Winnipeg – a city with a relatively large Aboriginal population, as pointed out by Richardson (2004 Day 2). Murray, who appears somewhat versed in the vocabulary of anti-oppression and Canada’s violent colonial history, defends King and *Green Grass, Running Water* by weaving the serious and the comic, as well as the “Native” and the “Canadian,” together. He notes that the stories, while rooted in ancient oral stories, are also “realistic” and portray “balanced and intelligent views of the struggles of young Aboriginal men and women as they grow up in an Canadian context.” He continues to point out the keys issues that King covers in the novel, including the problems of geography and identity for Aboriginal individuals: “if you move away to a city, you lose your Aboriginal identity. If you stay there, you often live in high unemployment. If you get an education, you’re almost alienated.” Murray speaks with passion, and with clear knowledge of both the realistic and fictionalized struggles of Indigenous communities. He comments that *Green Grass, Running Water* is

one of the few times that I’ve seen a story about First Nations people that they don’t have to be like they are in historic epics, where they don’t have to be just some stereotype stuck onto a television program – North of Sixty, for example, which places Aboriginal people only in a Northern context predominantly. [*Green Grass, Running Water*] places Aboriginal people in a neighbourhood, in a context, in a town, like most Canadians live in. (2004 Day 4).

Murray’s impassioned speech stirs Richardson to speak a political truth so often ignored on *Canada Reads*, calling Canada a country with a “turbulent and violent history” – an acknowledgement that before 2004 had not been made on the program (2004 Day 4).

Richardson continues to ask Murray, as mayor of a city in which sixty thousand Aboriginal people live, if there is anything “that the rest of us aren’t getting” from the novel that he could provide insight into (2004 Day 4). Murray, disappointingly, replies that he “didn’t view it as an Aboriginal novel in that sense” and that “the fact that these people were Aboriginal did

not mean a lot to me... they were so empathetic and accessible people” (2004 Day 4). It is curious that Murray would spend so much time discussing issues affecting Indigenous populations in Canada only to shoot down the fact that *Green Grass, Running Water* is a story that is, politically, about Indigenous people and experiences. Murray ends the discussion by saying that he has never understood his own culture “juxtaposed against Native culture”; however, Murray fails to speak of what his own culture is, and in failing to do so, cements the normalization of white Anglo Saxon Christianity in what may have been the most overtly political episode of *Canada Reads* in its four-year run (2004 Day 4).

Two years following the futile defense of *Green Grass, Running Water* on *Canada Reads*, another title by an Indigenous author – who happens to also be of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry – is chosen as one of the final five books. Actress and journalist Nelofer Pazira, who also happens to be the only woman of colour – or person of colour – on the panel that year, defends *Three Day Road* by Joseph Boyden. On the first day of the competition, Pazira recalls that the novel is a World War One story, but that it cannot be reduced to that simplified title. She says,

[Three Day Road] taught me something about Canadian history, because I came from outside and was very thirsty for wanting to know something about this country. I’d never heard about it before, I’ve taken so many history courses in high school and in university, and it really was not thought about how the entire community of Canadians - these are stories we have been overlooking for quite a long time, or we have been telling them from our perspective – that community being the Native. [...] This book taught me something about the larger history of this country. [...] It speaks about two parallel wars [...] one in the trenches in France and one that is a covert war that is going unspoken in Canada, and something that we hardly talk about, or if we do, we do it in such a rhetorical way because of guilt, is the war against the Natives. [...] I felt quite connected to it not only because of my own experiences of war, but as a Canadian I feel responsible that there are things that we ought to know. (2006 Day 1)

It takes two days to stew, but panelist and author Susan Musgrave launches on a diatribe against the novel on the third day of the competition:

Well, initially I was put off by the fact that it's not usual to put an author's ethnic background on the book, so when I was told that Joseph Boyden was part Metis, I felt I was given that political correct 'it's okay for him to write about this 'cause he has Metis blood'. I was annoyed. I thought, why do I need to be told this? I'm not a stupid reader... I felt that the book was written by a twentieth-century white man. I didn't feel the Nativeness of those characters.... I didn't have a huge feeling of First Nation-ness... (2006 Day 3)

Musgrave's dismissal of the relevance of Boyden's ethnic background being noted on the cover as "politically correct" not only showcases her ignorance of the importance of understanding cultural appropriation and ownership, but also teases out what ends up being a significant statement on what her idea of "Nativeness" and "First Nations-ness" is, and should be. Boyden does not fulfill her white settler Canadian ideal of what Indigenous peoples should and must be represented as, and therefore forcibly and violently removes any sense of cultural identity or authority from the author. Further damage is done later in the same show, when Musgrave reiterates her point by saying that "Native people have huge senses of humour, they're the funniest people I know, but you'd never know that from this book!" (2006 Day 3).

Pazira, regardless of her fellow panelist's outburst, remains collected and defends Boyden by calmly replying, "I think the problem is that we have this romantic vision, and kind of this exotic idea of what the First Nation(s) should look like and speak like and behave like." At this point, she is interrupted with a chorus of "no, we don't!" from various panelists, but she continues,

This book, in fact, breaks those boundaries. It doesn't look at the First Nations... because it doesn't say 'look, Natives were the heroes'. It actually doesn't blame the whites or the natives... this is one book where you have the original language that someone has spoken is used throughout the book, and it's done in such a seamless way that you don't have to work your way through it, you understand it, you almost become familiar with it at the end of it. (2006 Day 3)

Rather than digest Pazira's argument about breaking boundaries and stereotypes, the panelists choose again to launch into their own understandings of the novel. Scott Thompson calls Boyden "brave" for making "a Native person so negative" – as if Indigenous individuals and communities have never been vilified in popular literature or culture – and Maureen McTeer decides that she finds the "stereotyping of First Nations people in this [novel] to be rather insulting." Thompson's naïve understanding of Boyden's choice to portray a Native character with character flaws simplifies the narrative of the novel, which has an aim to humanize, rather than stereotype or vilify, its characters. The white panelists conclude their conversation about *Three Day Road* by confirming that it, as a novel, is racist against white people. Pazira fights to the bitter conclusion, citing a need for Canada to "learn about history", when, on Day Four, *Three Day Road* is voted off *Canada Reads* (2006 Day 4).

Linda Hutcheon writes that "conquest, dispossession, displacement: these are among the traumas that should never be forgotten" (21). These seasons of *Canada Reads* that I have discussed are particularly violent when it comes to discussions of First Nations authors and literature in Canada. Fully present in these episodes are the "nation's aggressive attempt to efface the different and delimit the sovereignty of another by utilizing racist, paternalistic rhetoric and by applying a singular, violently homogenizing conception of the Canadian law and nation" (Blair et al. xxiv). While even citizenship manuals in Canada disseminate the notion that there are three founding peoples in Canada – "Aboriginal, French, and British," white settler culture "'uses' or 'integrates' aboriginal myths [...] not to represent aboriginal experience but eighteenth- and nineteenth-century settler experience in narratives of beginning, origin, or being first peoples, and making the land into an inhabited space" (Government of Canada, Blair et al. 298).

The cultural hegemony that places European cultures and nations in power is one of the defining facets of the Canadian nation-state. *Discover Canada* unapologetically states that “Canadian society today stems largely from the English-speaking and French-speaking Christian civilizations that were brought here from Europe by settlers. English and French define the reality of day-to-day life for most people and are the country’s official languages” (Government of Canada). Being the national broadcaster, the CBC is most definitely a Eurocentric corporation – however hard the executives and directors have worked to be inclusive of diverse populations. *Canada Reads* requires the panelists to speak English, and for the books to be written (or translated into) English. *Canada Reads*, however it explores various and diverse cultures and life experiences within the novels, is a show rooted in Eurocentric ideas of literature, culture, and Canadian identity.

There is only one year in which discussions directly about Eurocentricity take place in *Canada Reads*, and those discussions are primarily begun and perpetuated by one panelist: Glen Murray, defender of *Green Grass, Running Water*. He works constantly to point out the ways in which his novel satirizes Christian Eurocentric values, which in turn makes readers uncomfortable and unsettled. He recognizes the value in the discomfort, and welcomes the fact that “it doesn’t feed us little doses of things in this Eurocentric kind of perspective” that *Canada Reads* listeners and readers are accustomed to (2004 Day 2). Unfortunately, Murray’s simplistic conflation of Thomas King’s life, which took place in “a European tradition and a First Nations tradition” as more Canadian is problematic, however knowledgeable he is with regards to Eurocentricity’s role in the novel and the competition. He says,

I think [King] brilliantly tells two parallel stories through five sort of master stories that clash our value systems, our rule-based Eurocentricity, versus the imagination and the

wonder of the world around us, and the possibility of it, and the tradition of telling stories. (2004 Day 2).

Murray celebrates the ways in which King mixes his styles to represent a multi-faceted approach to storytelling; however, his constant use of “our” reveals his understanding of not only who he is sharing the panel with, but the listeners of *Canada Reads*. Murray places a false dichotomy between “our value systems” (read: white, Anglo-Saxon, Canadian value systems) and “the imagination and the wonder of the world around us” (read: Indigenous worldviews) without considering the problematic ways in which that positions readers, writers, and worldviews that do not neatly fit into these oversimplified categories.

It would make sense that the panelist who is most familiar and vocal about Eurocentrism is also the panelist most concerned with Canada’s violent colonial history; therefore, it should come as no surprise that Glen Murray speaks with ease about the displacement of Metis people from Northern Alberta in the 2004 competition (2004 Day 3). However, 2006 is the year that *Canada Reads* is able to truly lay Canada’s colonial history – and present – on the table. Nelofer Pazira, while defending Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, speaks strongly of the novel’s importance of understanding a more nuanced version of Canadian history that includes the violence and legacy of colonialism. She calls “the war against the Natives” the “covert war that is going unspoken in Canada, and something that we hardly ever talk about” (2006 Day 1). The circumstances of both Pazira and Murray fall in with the theory advanced by many postcolonial critics: that “settler-invader countries have tended to represent themselves, via cultural nationalism, in ways that elide their origins in the usually brutal conquest of Aboriginal cultures” (Blair et al. xxix).

Colonial violence in Canada is not limited to violence done to Aboriginal communities, however; the experience of people of African descent in Canada, who also suffered systemic

exclusion, violence, and oppression, cannot be excluded in a conversation about colonial history and violence in the country. These experiences are outlined, in part, by Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, defended by Avi Lewis in 2009. Lewis points out that the novel "complicates one of our cherished Canadian myths (...) it makes us feel good to think about how Americans had slavery and we had the Underground Railroad. *The Book of Negroes* punctures this sort of slightly smug and too-easy narrative about our country as a promise land for escaped slaves" (2009 Day 4). He calls the novel itself a "huge public service" and recalls all of the things that he learned about in the novel that he hadn't known – that "1200 black Nova Scotians got on a boat and went to Sierra Leone to found one of the first free colonies" and that "they, as freed slaves, found Nova Scotia so harsh at the end of the eighteenth century that they went back to Africa" (2009 Day 4). Lewis commends Hill's approach to writing the novel, calling it "a truly titanic task to take something that affected the lives of millions of people, that dehumanized and murdered millions upon millions, but equally affected the people who owned other human beings, that built the empires that define our planet today: the Anglo empires, the United States, and the United Kingdom" (2009 Day 5).

It is notable, but unsurprising, that discussions of Canadian colonial histories and violence do not take place in *Canada Reads* outside of novels that explicitly deal with the topic. Colonial histories and legacies are important to discuss, especially in any conversation that attempts to address Canadian identities. Equally important to these discussions, however, is the consideration of who the individuals who are having these conversations are, what they are saying, and the positionality from which they are speaking. When the gay, white mayor of Winnipeg – Glen Murray – discusses Eurocentrism and Aboriginal storytelling, it has a different meaning and impact than if it were being spoken by the author his chosen novel for *Canada Reads*. While Murray scores points in knowing the specificity of Thomas King's heritage – Cherokee and

Greek – he also fails to acknowledge his own privileges in being able to speak about Aboriginal cultures and values without having life experience to validate it. Murray has heard Native creation myths, and he has interacted with Native people, but this does not give him automatic approval to speak on behalf of many cultures and peoples who end up being conflated in a series that airs across the nation-state. Nelofer Pazira also speaks about Indigeneity, but from the perspective of a Canadian immigrant and a woman of colour. She is passionate about revealing a violent colonial past that her fellow white panelist calls herself “squeamish” about (2006 Day 1). This moment of squeamishness distils the place of white guilt in *Canada Reads* – a guilt which is only once, momentarily, acknowledged but that is pervasive throughout any conversation regarding a book or character that does not identify as white in the program. Rather than investigating this feeling of squeamishness at its source, Musgrave leaves Pazira to deal with the accusatory silence that follows, erasing the relevance of Pazira’s argument and instead asking Pazira to bear the burden of having caused a moment of white guilt.

Avi Lewis defends *The Book of Negroes* in 2009, and while the experiences of African Canadians and Jewish Canadians cannot be compared – for many reasons – Lewis’s positionality as a member of a historically marginalized group assists him in understanding and explaining the value of novels that trouble Canadian myths about The Underground Railroad and the existence of Canadian slavery and racism. Lewis speaks freely about the ways in which slavery “dehumanized and murdered millions upon millions, but equally affected the people who owned other human beings,” and fearlessly reminds listeners about the way in which slavery “built the empires that define our planet today, the Anglo empires” (2009 Day 5).

Samantha Nutt, the white woman responsible for the humanitarian group War Child, defends *The Jade Peony* – a story that “follows the three children in the Chen family” in Vancouver’s Chinatown during the Depression and the Second World War. Nutt is moved by the

novel that she calls “a poignant, intergenerational story that teaches us something about ourselves as Canadians, about our history, and challenges us to think differently” (2010 Day 1). Nutt is unknowingly positing the novel as that which is other, that which is to be learned about by CBC’s middle-class white listeners who may not have known or ever thought about the experience – or existence – of Chinese families living in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century.

The identity politics that are present in *Canada Reads*, including that of the panelists, the hosts, the authors, the characters, and the inferred listeners, work to validate monocultural Eurocentricity by using multiethnic and multicultural bodies and voices. The show is programmed to normalize white possession of Canadian land and literature silently and seamlessly due to the visibility of approving cultural minorities in Canada. The books chosen to represent Canada in *Canada Reads* become not only educational models for citizens requiring national and moral improvement, but they also become markers of cultural possession.

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Chapter Six: Conclusion

On the second day of *Canada Reads* 2006, the producer plays a clip of Mordecai Richler speaking about Canadian identity: he says that “in Canada there is an unsureness about culture... so it is a serious thing” (2006 Day 2). Host and moderator Bill Richardson agrees, and adds, “it’s an insecure culture” (2006 Day 2). Later in that same episode, Richardson introduces Al Purdy’s work by calling him “one of the country’s best loved bards,” and Musgrave reiterates that Purdy was a “quintessential Canadian” who “wrote about the land,” was a “huge bear of a man” who would have said “we [Canadians] know who we are” (2006 Day 2).

As Coleman writes in *White Civility*, Canadians are “always engaged in the activities of self-invention, reinvention, self-maintenance, and adaptation, even as they try to avoid observation or detection as anything but fixed” (10). It makes sense, then, that *Canada Reads* is a nation-building program in search of tangible objects that can highlight the unity of Canadians and ‘Canadian-ness’. These tangible objects can be understood as what Sara Ahmed’s book *The Promise of Happiness* discusses as both the idea of “the happy object” and “the kinship object”: objects that are “intimately bound up” with ‘our selves’ (27). Ahmed writes that “a happy object would be one that causes our happiness” and that “a kinship object... gives form to the family as a social gathering, as the tangible thing over which the family gathers” (27, 46). Each year and for each advocate of *Canada Reads*, their book serves as a personal happy object that they want to catapult to the status of a national happy object – one that can be shared with Canadians, and can be transformed into a kinship object: that which can unite Canadians and fulfill the nationalist project of the CBC and *Canada Reads*. Ahmed problematizes the happy object, however, by reminding readers that “where we find happiness teaches us what we value rather than simply what is of value” and that “what is apt to cause pleasure is already judged to be good” (13, 28). Ahmed also calls the happy object a “gap-filler” that distracts individuals, groups,

and nations from self-awareness and consciousness of unhappier realities (32). The confirmation of a singular book that Canadians should read together, then, confirms the chosen book as both a national happy object and a national kinship object – that which is connecting Canadians as a family, and that which is filling that gap that is the ‘unsure’ notion of Canadian identity.

Not only is *Canada Reads* situated within a governmentally funded institution, being run by producers who are aiming to build a nationalist project around an idea that is simultaneously “fun” and saturated in market capitalism, but the choice of novels and panelists are granted a false sense of responsibility for the creation of a national idol: the book that “all Canadians should read together.” Not only, though, do “the narratives of the nation never speak with just one voice,” but the voices on the radio are representative not of some type of ideal Canadian culture; rather, they represent a Canadian celebrity culture that has a tendency to universalize not only the meaning of Canadian identity, but the understanding of what being a non-Indigenous person living in Canada means (Coleman 35). The “content and format of ‘*Canada Reads*’ is about producing ‘better,’ more culturally competent and socially aware, citizens,” write Fuller and Sedo; however, even that ideal cannot be fulfilled if airtime is primarily spent silencing the voices of people of colour, Indigenous peoples, and people, unlike Scott Thompson, who disagree that objectification and exoticization are not positive experiences for everyone (15).

Coleman writes that “popular literature allows us to see a contest between representations of the nation that had broad appeal and how these representations jockey for official state adoption,” and he is correct: between the capitalist nature of competing books from competing presses and the inherently silencing discourse regarding issues of racism and colonialism, *Canada Reads* offers listeners very little realistic contribution towards a sense of a stable, coherent Canadian identity – not to mention the suspicious nature of this desire in itself (Coleman 35). The possibilities for a *Canada Reads* that disregards the Survivor-based notions of competition,

objective merit, and the glory of winning exist, as does the potential for a transformative replacement that would work to question the act of reading and self-identification itself – however, such a program would go against the very fabric of the CBC as a unifying and nation-building broadcaster. As Sunera Thobani writes in *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*, “underneath the sanitized garb of a postmodern, multi-racial, multiethnic ‘tolerant’ Canada, beats the heart of a stubbornly colonial national-formation” – a statement that *Canada Reads* proves to be correct in every episode (29).

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Canada Reads Title Appendix

Year	Author	Title	Advocate	Description From the Publisher
2002	Michael Ondaatje	In the Skin of a Lion	Steven Page	In the Skin of a Lion is a love story and an irresistible mystery set in the turbulent, muscular new world of Toronto in the 20s and 30s. Michael Ondaatje entwines adventure, romance and history, real and invented, enmeshing us in the lives of the immigrants who built the city and those who dreamed it into being: the politically powerful, the anarchists, bridge builders and tunnellers, a vanished millionaire and his mistress, a rescued nun and a thief who leads a charmed life. This is a haunting tale of passion, privilege and biting physical labour, of men and women moved by compassion and driven by the power of dreams -- sometimes even to murder.
2002	Margaret Atwood	The Handmaid's Tale	Kim Campbell	In the world of the near future, who will control women's bodies? Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She may leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. She must lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander makes her pregnant, because in an age of declining births, Offred and the other Handmaids are only valued if their ovaries are viable. Offred can remember the days before, when she lived and made love with her husband Luke; when she played with and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge. But all of that is gone now.... Funny, unexpected, horrifying, and altogether convincing, <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> is at once scathing satire, dire warning, and tour de force.
2002	George Elliott Clarke	Whylah Falls	Nalo Hopkinson	<i>Whylah Falls</i> is a mythic community in the heart of Black Nova Scotia, populated with larger-than-life characters: lovers, murderers and muses. George Elliott Clarke's sensuous narrative sings with the rhythm of blues and gospel, spinning a complex, absorbing tale of unrequited love, earthy wisdom, devouring corruption and racial injustice. This is a rare and beautiful collection of poetry, as much in demand twenty years after its publication as it was when first released. It has inspired an acclaimed CBC-Radio

				drama, a popular stage play, and a feature film, <i>One Heart Broken Into Song</i> .
2002	Margaret Laurence	The Stone Angel	Leon Rooke	Hagar Shipley is stubborn, querulous, self-reliant, and, at ninety, with her life nearly behind her, she makes a bold last step towards freedom and independence. As her story unfolds, we are drawn into her past. We meet Hagar as a young girl growing up in a black prairie town; as the wife of a virile but unsuccessful farmer with whom her marriage was stormy; as a mother who dominates her younger son; and, finally, as an old woman isolated by an uncompromising pride and by the stern virtues she has inherited from her pioneer ancestors. Vivid, evocative, moving, <i>The Stone Angel</i> celebrates the triumph of the spirit, and reveals Margaret Laurence at the height of her powers as a writer of extraordinary craft and profound insight into the workings of the human heart.
2002	Rohinton Mistry	A Fine Balance	Megan Follows	<i>A Fine Balance</i> , Rohinton Mistry's stunning internationally acclaimed bestseller, is set in mid-1970s India. It tells the story of four unlikely people whose lives come together during a time of political turmoil soon after the government declares a "State of Internal Emergency." Through days of bleakness and hope, their circumstances – and their fates – become inextricably linked in ways no one could have foreseen. Mistry's prose is alive with enduring images and a cast of unforgettable characters. Written with compassion, humour, and insight, <i>A Fine Balance</i> is a vivid, richly textured, and powerful novel written by one of the most gifted writers of our time.
2003	Hubert Aquin	Next Episode	Denise Bombardier	First published in 1965, Hubert Aquin's <i>Next Episode</i> is a disturbing and yet deeply moving novel of dissent and distress. As he awaits trial, a young separatist writes an espionage story in the psychiatric ward of the Montreal prison where he has been detained. Sheila Fischman's bold new translation captures the pulsating life of Aquin's complex exploration of the political realities of contemporary Quebec.
2003	Paul Hiebert	Sarah Binks	Will Ferguson	Paul Hiebert's critical biography of the wholly mythical but irrepressible and irresistible Sarah Binks, "the Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan," who gave her life to poetry and died a martyr to the muse, is a hilarious analysis of her career and influences, along with a memorable selection of the poet's tenderest, most inspiring writings. This masterpiece of satire won the 1947 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour.

2003	Helen Humphreys	The Lost Garden	Mag Ruffman	<p>In spring 1941, when London is under attack, Gwen Davis escapes the city for Devon, where she will instruct young girls in growing crops for the Home Front. There, she meets two people who will change her life forever: Raley, a Canadian officer awaiting posting to the Front with his men; and Jane, a frail but free spirit whose fiancé is missing in action. Through them, Gwen comes to understand the unbelievable joy and the unbearable risks of love. Called “exquisite” by <i>The New York Times</i>, this beautifully nuanced novel received rave reviews around the world.</p>
2003	Wayne Johnston	The Colony of Unrequited Dreams	Justin Trudeau	<p>The Colony of Unrequited Dreams, a Canadian bestseller, is a novel about Newfoundland that centres on the story of Joe Smallwood, the true-life controversial political figure who ushered the island through confederation with Canada and became its first premier. Narrated from Smallwood's perspective, it voices a deep longing on the part of the Newfoundlander to do something significant, “commensurate with the greatness of the land itself”. <i>The New York Times</i> said, “this prodigious, eventful, character-rich book is a noteworthy achievement: a biting, entertaining and inventive saga... a brilliant and bravura literary performance”. Smallwood, born in 1900, is the first of thirteen children raised from the ‘scruff’ of Newfoundland, as opposed to the ‘quality’. The colony is seen as an unworthy and negligible place: as his teacher from England says, “The worst of our lot comes over here, inbreeds for several hundred years and the end-product is a hundred thousand Newfoundlanders with Smallwood at the bottom of the barrel.” Smallwood, who still weighs only 75 pounds at the age of 20, seems an unlikely hero to fulfil what he sees as his mission: to transform the ‘old lost land’, with its lack of identity, into ‘the new found land’; and meanwhile to rise “not from rags to riches, but from obscurity to world renown.” With perseverance and determination, he sets about the task, becoming a journalist for a socialist newspaper in New York and then a union leader, at one point walking the 700-mile railway track across the island to sell memberships to the section-men living in shacks. He sees beyond his unpromising background, the cold and unrelenting hardship and isolation, envisioning a proud and great destiny. Eventually, a politician full of wild moneymaking schemes, he is swept into a world of intrigues and the machinations of the power elite, just</p>

				<p>as Newfoundland must decide whether to become an independent country or to join Canada. In counterpoint to the earnest endeavours of Smallwood, champion of the poor and the workers, is the Dorothy Parker-like figure of his lifelong friend, Sheilagh Fielding. Their paths first cross at the private school from which Smallwood is expelled, falsely accused of writing a letter critical of the school, and thenceforth their lives are inextricably intertwined. Fielding becomes an acerbic newspaper columnist, a hard drinker with a sharp tongue who shares a strange love-hate relationship with Smallwood. Her cynical columns and personal journals are interspersed among Smallwood's account, along with her irreverent and satirical <i>Condensed History of Newfoundland</i>. In writing a work of the imagination in part inspired by historical events, Johnston wanted "to fashion out of the formless infinitude of 'facts' ... a work of art that would express a felt, emotional truth... Adherence to the 'facts' will not lead you safely through the labyrinthine pathways of the human heart." Johnston was 19 when he met the real Joe Smallwood; he was just starting out as a journalist, and Smallwood was less than complimentary about Johnston's reporting. Although the politician died only in 1991, little was written about his life before the age of fifty, allowing Johnston some license to imagine his formative influences. "I wanted to write a big book about Newfoundland in scope and in vision. I couldn't think of a bigger character whose life touched on more themes, involved the whole of Newfoundland more completely than Smallwood did." Smallwood saw Newfoundland in terms of "unrealized talent and unfulfilled ambition"; his life was somehow emblematic of the land. Moreover, says Johnston, "He was so prone to making mistakes and so fallible, and he combines so many contradictions in his personality. His quest, like that of many great literary figures of the past century, is to overcome these divisions." The completely invented character of Fielding, meanwhile, "is like me", says Johnston. "I share her view of Newfoundland." The title of the book, Johnston says, evokes "the nostalgia Newfoundlanders have felt for the possibilities of the island, and that they still have for the future. Joe is always searching for something commensurate with the greatness of the land itself, but he can't find it, and it's driving him</p>
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				<p>mad...Newfoundland is that kind of place. It makes you want to live up to the landscape, but on the other hand it offers you no resources to do so. There's always this constant yearning that at least for my part helped me to start writing." Smallwood's chronicle of his development from poor schoolboy to Father of the Confederation is a story full of epic journeys and thwarted loves, travelling from the ice floes of the seal hunt to New York City, in a style reminiscent at times of John Irving, Robertson Davies and Charles Dickens. Absorbing and entertaining, <i>The Colony of Unrequited Dreams</i> provides us with a deep perspective on the relationship between private lives and what comes to be understood as history and shows, as E. Annie Proulx commented, "Wayne Johnston is a brilliant and accomplished writer."</p>
2003	Yann Martel	Life of Pi	Nancy Lee	<p><i>Life of Pi</i> is a masterful and utterly original novel that is at once the story of a young castaway who faces immeasurable hardships on the high seas, and a meditation on religion, faith, art and life that is as witty as it is profound. Using the threads of all of our best stories, Yann Martel has woven a glorious spiritual adventure that makes us question what it means to be alive, and to believe. Growing up in Pondicherry, India, Piscine Molitor Patel -- known as Pi -- has a rich life. Bookish by nature, young Pi acquires a broad knowledge of not only the great religious texts but of all literature, and has a great curiosity about how the world works. His family runs the local zoo, and he spends many of his days among goats, hippos, swans, and bears, developing his own theories about the nature of animals and how human nature conforms to it. Pi's family life is quite happy, even though his brother picks on him and his parents aren't quite sure how to accept his decision to simultaneously embrace and practise three religions -- Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. But despite the lush and nurturing variety of Pi's world, there are broad political changes afoot in India, and when Pi is sixteen his parents decide that the family needs to escape to a better life. Choosing to move to Canada, they close the zoo, pack their belongings, and board a Japanese cargo ship called the <i>Tsimtsum</i>. Travelling with them are many of their animals, bound for zoos in North America. However, they have only just begun their journey when the ship sinks, taking the dreams of the Patel family down with it. Only Pi survives, cast adrift in a lifeboat with the</p>

				<p>unlikeliest of travelling companions: a zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Thus begins Pi Patel's epic, 227-day voyage across the Pacific, and the powerful story of faith and survival at the heart of <i>Life of Pi</i>. Worn and scared, oscillating between hope and despair, Pi is witness to the playing out of the food chain, quite aware of his new position within it. When only the tiger is left of the seafaring menagerie, Pi realizes that his survival depends on his ability to assert his own will, and sets upon a grand and ordered scheme to keep from being Richard Parker's next meal. As the days pass, Pi fights both boredom and terror by throwing himself into the practical details of surviving on the open sea -- catching fish, collecting rain water, protecting himself from the sun -- all the while ensuring that the tiger is also kept alive, and knows that Pi is the key to his survival. The castaways face gruelling pain in their brushes with starvation, illness, and the storms that lash the small boat, but there is also the solace of beauty: the rainbow hues of a dorado's death-throes, the peaceful eye of a looming whale, the shimmering blues of the ocean's swells. Hope is fleeting, however, and despite adapting his religious practices to his daily routine, Pi feels the constant, pressing weight of despair. It is during the most hopeless and gruelling days of his voyage that Pi whittles to the core of his beliefs, casts off his own assumptions, and faces his underlying terrors head-on. As Yann Martel has said in one interview, "The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story." And for Martel, the greatest imaginative overlay is religion. "God is a shorthand for anything that is beyond the material -- any greater pattern of meaning." In <i>Life of Pi</i>, the question of stories, and of what stories to believe, is front and centre from the beginning, when the author tells us how he was led to Pi Patel and to this novel: in an Indian coffee house, a gentleman told him, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." And as this novel comes to its brilliant conclusion, Pi shows us that the story with the imaginative overlay is also the story that contains the most truth.</p>
2004	Guy Vanderha	The Last Crossing	Jim Cuddy	Set in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the American and Canadian West and in Victorian

	eghe			<p>England, <i>The Last Crossing</i> is a sweeping tale of interwoven lives and stories. Charles and Addington Gaunt must find their brother Simon, who has gone missing in the wilds of the American West. Charles, a disillusioned artist, and Addington, a disgraced military captain, enlist the services of a guide to lead them on their journey across a difficult and unknown landscape. This is the enigmatic Jerry Potts, half Blackfoot, half Scottish, who suffers his own painful past. The party grows to include Caleb Ayto, a sycophantic American journalist, and Lucy Stoveall, a wise and beautiful woman who travels in the hope of avenging her sister's vicious murder. Later, the group is joined by Custis Straw, a Civil War veteran searching for salvation, and Custis's friend and protector Aloysius Dooley, a saloon-keeper. This unlikely posse becomes entangled in an unfolding drama that forces each person to come to terms with his own demons. <i>The Last Crossing</i> contains many haunting scenes – among them, a bear hunt at dawn, the meeting of a Métis caravan, the discovery of an Indian village decimated by smallpox, a sharpshooter's devastating annihilation of his prey, a young boy's last memory of his mother. Vanderhaeghe links the hallowed colleges of Oxford and the pleasure houses of London to the treacherous Montana plains; and the rough trading posts of the Canadian wilderness to the heart of Indian folklore. At the novel's centre is an unusual and moving love story. <i>The Last Crossing</i> is Guy Vanderhaeghe's most powerful novel to date. It is a novel of harshness and redemption, an epic masterpiece, rich with unforgettable characters and vividly described events, that solidifies his place as one of Canada's premier storytellers.</p>
2004	Thomas King	Green Grass, Running Water	Glen Murray	<p>Strong, sassy women and hard-luck, hard-headed men, all searching for the middle ground between Native American tradition and the modern world, perform an elaborate dance of approach and avoidance in this magical, rollicking tale by award-winning author Thomas King. Alberta, Eli, Lionel and others are coming to the Blackfoot reservation for the Sun Dance. There they will encounter four Indian elders and their companion, the trickster Coyote—and nothing in the small town of Blossom will be the same again. . . .</p>
2004	Alice Munro	The Love of a Good	Measha Brueggger	<p>Eight new stories about what people will do for love, and the unexpected routes their passion will force them</p>

		Woman	osman	to take. A prim, old landlady in Vancouver with a crime of passion lurking in her past. A young mother with a secret life who abandons her children to be with her lover. A country doctor in the 1960s discovered by his daughter to be helping desperate women, his "special patients." These and other fascinating characters weave their way through stories that track the changes that time brings to families, lovers and even to friends who share old, intimate secrets about the "prostration of love" in a collection that is clear-eyed about the clutter of our emotional lives. The rich layering that gives Alice Munro's work such a strong sense of life is particularly apparent in the title story, in which the death of a local opto-metrist brings an entire community into focus - from the preadolescent boys who find his body to the man who probably killed him, to the woman who must decide what to do about what she might know. Large, moving, profound - these are stories that extend the limits of fiction.
2004	Monique Proulx	The Heart is an Involuntary Muscle	Francine Pelletier	<p>Monique Proulx's last novel, <i>Invisible Man at the Window</i>, was first published in English in 1994. Following that is this brilliant, complex, witty, moving book about writing and writers. It was nominated for a 2002 Governor General's award when it was first published in French.</p> <p>Florence doesn't like writers—they're so full of hang-ups—and she likes their books even less, those corpulent things that aren't even true. She only likes Zeno, but she'll never admit it, even under pain of death. Zeno is her partner in their small website construction business, Mahone Inc., which has the brilliant idea of putting lesser-known artists and writers back in the limelight.</p> <p>Zeno, on the other hand, loves writers, especially Pierre Laliberté, the mysterious and mythic novelist who lives like a recluse while awards and trophies tarnish and gather dust waiting for him. Because of Zeno, because of a stolen sentence, Florence finds herself following a trail that could lead her to Pierre Laliberté, this impostor who pillages other people's lives as inspiration for his novels.</p> <p>Proulx plays with the mystery genre, to write about literature and those who create it. But above all this is a book whose engaging characters pull us into their lives.</p>
2004	Mordecai	Barney's	Zsuzsi	Ebullient and perverse, thrice married, Barney

	Richler	Version	Gartner	Panofsky has always clung to two cherished beliefs: life is absurd and nobody truly ever understands anybody else. But when his sworn enemy publicly states that Barney is a wife abuser, an intellectual fraud and probably a murderer, he is driven to write his own memoirs. Charged with comic energy and a wicked disregard for any pieties whatsoever, Barney's Version is a brilliant portrait of a man whom Mordecai Richler has made uniquely memorable for all time. It is also an unforgettable love story, a story about family and the riches of friendship.
2005	Frank Parker Day	Rockbound	Donna Morrissey	<p>To the harsh domain of Rockbound -- governed by the sternly righteous and rapacious Uriah Jung --comes the youthful David Jung to claim his small share of the island. Filled with dreamy optimism and a love for the unspoken promises of the night sky, David tries to find his way in a narrow, unforgiving, and controlled world. His conflicts are both internal and external, locking him in an unceasing struggle for survival; sometimes the sea is his enemy, sometimes his own rude behavior, sometimes his best friend Gershom Born, sometimes his secret love for the island teacher Mary Dauphiny; but always, inevitably, his Jung relatives and their manifold ambitions for money and power.</p> <p>The balance of life on Rockbound is precarious and thus fiercely guarded by all who inhabit its lonely domain, but just as a sudden change in the direction of the wind can lead to certain peril at sea, so too can the sudden change in the direction of a man's heart lead to a danger altogether unknown.</p> <p>Enormously evocative of the power, terror, and dramatic beauty of the Atlantic sea, and unrelenting in its portrait of back-breaking labour, cunning bitterness, and family strife, Rockbound is a story of many passions-love, pride, greed, and yearning -- all formed and buffeted on a small island by an unyielding wind and the rocky landscape of the human spirit.</p>
2005	Margaret Atwood	Oryx and Crake	Olivia Chow	A stunning and provocative new novel by the internationally celebrated author of <i>The Blind Assassin</i> , winner of the Booker Prize Margaret Atwood's new novel is so utterly compelling, so prescient, so relevant, so terrifyingly-all-too-likely-to-be-true, that readers may find their view of the world forever changed after reading it. This is Margaret Atwood at the absolute peak of her powers. For

				<p>readers of <i>Oryx and Crake</i>, nothing will ever look the same again. The narrator of Atwood's riveting novel calls himself Snowman. When the story opens, he is sleeping in a tree, wearing an old bedsheet, mourning the loss of his beloved Oryx and his best friend Crake, and slowly starving to death. He searches for supplies in a wasteland where insects proliferate and pigeons and wolvogs ravage the pleeblands, where ordinary people once lived, and the Compounds that sheltered the extraordinary. As he tries to piece together what has taken place, the narrative shifts to decades earlier. How did everything fall apart so quickly? Why is he left with nothing but his haunting memories? Alone except for the green-eyed Children of Crake, who think of him as a kind of monster, he explores the answers to these questions in the double journey he takes - into his own past, and back to Crake's high-tech bubble-dome, where the Paradise Project unfolded and the world came to grief. With breathtaking command of her shocking material, and with her customary sharp wit and dark humour, Atwood projects us into an outlandish yet wholly believable realm populated by characters who will continue to inhabit our dreams long after the last chapter. This is Margaret Atwood at the absolute peak of her powers.</p>
2005	Leonard Cohen	Beautiful Losers	Molly Johnson	<p>One of the best-known experimental novels of the 1960s, <i>Beautiful Losers</i> is Cohen's most defiant and uninhibited work. The novel centres upon the hapless members of a love triangle united by their sexual obsessions and by their fascination with Catherine Tekakwitha, the 17th-century Mohawk saint. By turns vulgar, rhapsodic, and viciously witty, <i>Beautiful Losers</i> explores each character's attainment of a state of self-abandonment, in which the sensualist cannot be distinguished from the saint.</p>
2005	Jacques Poulin	Volkswagen Blues	Roch Carrier	<p>In this classic road novel, Jacques Poulin tells the story of a man in search of his brother. The geographical journey — through Detroit, into Chicago, on to St. Louis, along the Oregon Trail and into California — becomes a metaphor for the exploration of the history of the French in North America.</p>
2005	Mairuth Sarsfield	No Crystal Stair	Sherraine MacKay	<p><i>No Crystal Stair</i> is an absorbing novel that explores an increasingly difficult contemporary reality: functioning as though White while surviving as Black. Marion Willow, a proud young widow, must work at two jobs to ensure that her three girls develop lifestyles not</p>

				<p>hindered by class and colour. The bittersweet experience of Marion's elegant American expatriate neighbour, Torrie Delacourt, could help the girls survive Canada's subtle racism, which, though not legislated, wounds and hems them in. But the women's rivalry for the love of Edmund Thompson, a handsome railway porter, pits them against one another. With humour and sensitivity, <i>No Crystal Stair</i> reveals both the conflict and the human heart of the proud, tightly knit Black community of the Little Burgundy district of Quebec in the mid-forties. It recaptures the days when Montreal was a cosmopolitan hub. It was a city inhabited by jazz musicians, cafe society, artists, gangsters - those whose world revolved around Rockhead's Paradise - and others who clung to the community church at the end of prohibition, the depression and the anxious years of World War II.</p>
2006	Miriam Toews	A Complicated Kindness	John K. Samson	<p>Sixteen-year-old Nomi Nickel longs to hang out with Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull in New York City's East Village. Instead she's trapped in East Village, Manitoba, a small town whose population is Mennonite: "the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager." East Village is a town with no train and no bar whose job prospects consist of slaughtering chickens at the Happy Family Farms abattoir or churning butter for tourists at the pioneer village. Ministered with an iron fist by Nomi's uncle Hans, a.k.a. The Mouth of Darkness, East Village is a town that's tall on rules and short on fun: no dancing, drinking, rock 'n' roll, recreational sex, swimming, make-up, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities or staying up past nine o'clock. As the novel begins, Nomi struggles to cope with the back-to-back departures three years earlier of Tash, her beautiful and mouthy sister, and Trudie, her warm and spirited mother. She lives with her father, Ray, a sweet yet hapless schoolteacher whose love is unconditional but whose parenting skills amount to benign neglect. Father and daughter deal with their losses in very different ways. Ray, a committed elder of the church, seeks to create an artificial sense of order by reorganizing the city dump late at night. Nomi, on the other hand, favours chaos as she tries to blunt her pain through "drugs and imagination." Together they live in a limbo of unanswered questions. Nomi's first person narrative shifts effortlessly between the present and the past. Within the present, Nomi goes through the</p>

				<p>motions of finishing high school while flagrantly rebelling against Mennonite tradition. She hangs out on Suicide Hill, hooks up with a boy named Travis, goes on the Pill, wanders around town, skips class and cranks Led Zeppelin. But the past is never far from her mind as she remembers happy times with her mother and sister — as well as the painful events that led them to flee town. Throughout, in a voice both defiant and vulnerable, she offers hilarious and heartbreaking reflections on life, death, family, faith and love. Eventually Nomi’s grief — and a growing sense of hypocrisy — cause her to spiral ever downward to a climax that seems at once startling and inevitable. But even when one more loss is heaped on her piles of losses, Nomi maintains hope and finds the imagination and willingness to envision what lies beyond. Few novels in recent years have generated as much excitement as <i>A Complicated Kindness</i>. Winner of the Governor General’s Award and a Giller Prize Finalist, Miriam Toews’s third novel has earned both critical acclaim and a long and steady position on our national bestseller lists. In the <i>Globe and Mail</i>, author Bill Richardson writes the following: “There is so much that’s accomplished and fine. The momentum of the narrative, the quality of the storytelling, the startling images, the brilliant rendering of a time and place, the observant, cataloguing eye of the writer, her great grace. But if I had to name Miriam Toews’s crowning achievement, it would be the creation of Nomi Nickel, who deserves to take her place beside Daisy Goodwill Flett, Pi Patel and Hagar Shipley as a brilliantly realized character for whom the reader comes to care, okay, comes to love.”</p>
2006	Joseph Boyden	Three Day Road	Nelofer Pazira	<p>It is 1919, and Niska, the last Oji-Cree woman to live off the land, has received word that one of the two boys she saw off to the Great War has returned. Xavier Bird, her sole living relation, is gravely wounded and addicted to morphine. As Niska slowly paddles her canoe on the three-day journey to bring Xavier home, travelling through the stark but stunning landscape of Northern Ontario, their respective stories emerge— stories of Niska’s life among her kin and of Xavier’s horrifying experiences in the killing fields of Ypres and the Somme.</p>
2006	Frances Itani	Deafening	Maureen McTeer	<p>Deaf since she was five years old, Grania has learned that watching is not always enough to survive in the</p>

				<p>world of the hearing. She has learned that words can often be impossible to see, their shape disappearing into a place where she cannot decipher their skittery ways. Sent to the Ontario School for the Deaf in Belleville, Grania must learn to live away from her loving family, lonely for the company of her sister and the secret language they shared. When Grania falls in love with Jim, a young hearing man from the east coast, her life seems complete, but the First World War soon tears them apart and sweeps him into the worst of experiences—trench warfare. At the Western Front, Jim is tested to his limit as he and his buddy Irish—both stretcher bearers—retrieve the shattered bodies of their comrades.</p> <p>Fueled by tremendous word-of-mouth excitement at the Frankfurt Book Fair, <i>Deafening</i> has already become an international publishing phenomenon, with rights sold in over 12 countries so far. Author Frances Itani, the source of this unprecedented attention for a debut novel, has steadily been gaining a stellar reputation for her short fiction collections, her most recent, <i>Leaning, Leaning Over Water</i>, receiving ecstatic reviews. Touted as “writer to watch,” Itani has lived up to her accolades with <i>Deafening</i>.</p> <p>Her depiction of a world where sound exists only in the margins is a singular feat in literary fiction, a place difficult to leave and even harder to forget. Elegantly written, with grace and precision, <i>Deafening</i> is, above all, a deeply moving journey through the strands of strength and vulnerability that weave heart and spirit together.</p>
2006	Al Purdy	Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets: Selected Poems 1962-1996	Susan Musgrave	<p>A selection of poems by the man described by the <i>Globe & Mail</i> as "the greatest of our poets." <i>Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets</i> includes three decades' worth of thought-provoking work, including poems from the Governor-General's Award-winning <i>The Cariboo Horses to Naked with Summer in Your Mouth</i>. Purdy personally made this selection, assisted by Sam Solecki, the editor of <i>Starting from Ameliasburgh: The Collected Prose of Al Purdy</i>. In these poems, Purdy ponders the remains of a Native village; encounters Fidel Castro in Revolutionary Square; curses a noisy cellmate in the drunk tank; and marvels at the "combination of ballet and murder" known as hockey, all in the author's inimitable man-on-the-street style. <i>Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets</i> is destined to become the standard Purdy poetry volume for many</p>

				years to come.
2006	Mordecai Richler	Cocksure	Scott Thompson	In the swinging culture of sixties' London, Canadian Mortimer Griffin is a beleaguered editor adrift in a sea of hypocrisy and deceit. Alone in a world where nobody shares his values but everyone wants the same things, Mortimer must navigate the currents of these changing times. Richler's eccentric cast of characters include the gorgeous Polly, who conducts her life as though it were a movie, complete with censor-type cuts at all the climactic moments; Rachel Coleman, slinky Black Panther of the boudoir; Star Maker, the narcissistic Hollywood tycoon who has discovered the secret of eternal life; and a precocious group of school children with a taste for the teachings of the Marquis de Sade. <i>Cocksure</i> is a savagely funny satire on television, movies, and the entertainment industry. This is Mordecai Richler at his most caustic and wicked best.
2007	Heather O'Neill	Lullabies for Little Criminals	John K. Samson	Baby is thirteen, hovering between childhood and the temptations of the adult world. Motherless, she lives with her father, Jules, who takes better care of his heroin habit than he does of her. Yet Baby's got a genius for survival, spinning stories, cracking herself up, and slipping through an improvised life—until her unfurling beauty captures the attention of the charismatic Alphonse, with his string of sad girls who do his bidding. Finally, here is a danger that even the oblivious Jules cannot ignore. Baby comes at last to realize that the power to save herself rests in her hands alone.
2007	David Bezmozgiss	Natasha and Other Stories	Steven Page	A dazzling debut, and a publishing phenomenon: the tender, savagely funny collection from a young immigrant who has taken the critics by storm. Few readers had heard of David Bezmozgiss before May 2003, when <i>Harper's</i> , <i>Zoetrope</i> , and <i>The New Yorker</i> all printed stories from his forthcoming collection. In the space of a few weeks, America thus met the Bermans--Bella and Roman and their son, Mark--Russian Jews who have fled the Riga of Brezhnev for Toronto, the city of their dreams. Told through Mark's eyes, the stories in <i>Natasha</i> possess a serious wit and uniquely Jewish perspective that recall the first published stories of Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, not to mention the recent work of Jhumpa Lahiri, Nathan Englander, and Adam Haslett.

2007	Anosh Irani	The Song of Kahunsha	Donna Morrissey	<p>Abandoned as an infant, ten-year-old Chamdi has spent his entire life in a Bombay orphanage. There he has learned to find solace in his everyday surroundings: the smell of the first rains, the vibrant pinks and reds of the bougainvilleas that blossom in the courtyard, the life-size statue of Jesus, the "beautiful giant," to whom he confides his hopes and fears in the prayer room. Though he rarely ventures outside the orphanage, he entertains an idyllic fantasy of what the city is like – a paradise he calls Kahunsha, "the city of no sadness," where children play cricket in the streets and where people will become one with all the colours known to man. Chamdi's quiet life takes a sudden turn, however, when he learns that the orphanage will be shut down by land developers. He decides that he must run away in search of his long-lost father, taking nothing with him but the blood-stained white cloth he was left in as a baby. Outside the walls of the orphanage, Chamdi quickly discovers that Bombay is nothing like Kahunsha. The streets are filthy and devoid of colour, and no one shows him an ounce of kindness. Just as he's about to faint from hunger, two seasoned street children offer help: the lovely, sarcastic Guddi and her brother, the charming, scarred, and crippled Sumdi. After their father was crushed by a car before their eyes, the children were left to care for their insane mother and their infant brother. They soon initiate Chamdi into the brutal life of the city's homeless, begging all day and handing over most of his earnings to Anand Bhai, a vicious underworld don who will happily mutilate or kill whoever dares to defy him. Determined to escape the desperation, filth, and violence of their lives, Guddi and Sumdi recruit Chamdi into their plot to steal from a temple. But when the robbery goes terribly awry, Chamdi finds himself in an even worse situation. The city has erupted in Hindu-Muslim violence and, held in Anand Bhai's fierce grip, Chamdi is presented with a choice that threatens to rob him of his innocence forever.</p>
2007	Gabrielle Roy	Children of My Heart	Denise Bombardier	<p>Set in the prairies in the 1930s, and rich with the author's own memories of her time there as a young woman, this is a powerful story of an impressionable and passionate young teacher and the pupils, from impoverished immigrant families, whose lives she touches. Children of My Heart bears unforgettable testimony to the healing power love exerts on the</p>

				wounds of loneliness and poverty.
2007	Timothy Taylor	Stanley Park	Jim Cuddy	A young chef who revels in local bounty, a long-ago murder that remains unsolved, the homeless of Stanley Park, a smooth-talking businessman named Dante — these are the ingredients of Timothy Taylor's stunning debut novel — <i>Kitchen Confidential</i> meets <i>The Edible Woman</i> . Trained in France, Jeremy Papier, the young Vancouver chef, is becoming known for his unpretentious dishes that highlight fresh, local ingredients. His restaurant, The Monkey's Paw Bistro, while struggling financially, is attracting the attention of local foodies, and is not going unnoticed by Dante Beale, owner of a successful coffeehouse chain, Dante's Inferno. Meanwhile, Jeremy's father, an eccentric anthropologist, has moved into Stanley Park to better acquaint himself with the homeless and their daily struggles for food, shelter and company. Jeremy's father also has a strange fascination for a years-old unsolved murder case, known as "The Babes in the Wood" and asks Jeremy to help him research it. Dante is dying to get his hands on The Monkey's Paw. When Jeremy's elaborate financial kite begins to fall, he is forced to sell to Dante and become his employee. The restaurant is closed for renovations, Inferno style. Jeremy plans a menu for opening night that he intends to be the greatest culinary statement he's ever made, one that unites the homeless with high foody society in a paparazzi-covered celebration of "local splendour."
2008	Paul Quarrington	King Leary	Dave Bidini	Percival Leary was once the King of the Ice, one of hockey's greatest heroes. Now, in the South Grouse Nursing Home, where he shares a room with Edmund "Blue" Hermann, the antagonistic and alcoholic reporter who once chronicled his career, Leary looks back on his tumultuous life and times: his days at the boys' reformatory when he burned down a house; the four mad monks who first taught him to play hockey; and the time he executed the perfect "St. Louis Whirlygig" to score the winning goal in the 1919 Stanley Cup final. Now all but forgotten, Leary is only a legend in his own mind until a high-powered advertising agency decides to feature him in a series of ginger ale commercials. With his male nurse, his son, and the irrepressible Blue, Leary sets off for Toronto on one last adventure as he revisits the scenes of his glorious life as King of the Ice.
2008	Timothy	Not Wanted	Zaib	<i>Not Wanted on the Voyage</i> is the story of the great

	Findley	on the Voyage	Shaikh	flood and the first time the world ended. It is a brilliant, unforgettable drama filled with an extraordinary cast of remarkable characters: the tyrannical Noah and his indomitable wife, Mrs. Noyes; the aging and irritable Yahweh; a chorus of singing sheep; and a unicorn destined for a horrible death. With pathos and pageantry, desperation and hope, magic and mythology, this acclaimed novel weaves its unforgettable spell.
2008	Mavis Gallant	From the Fifteenth District	Lisa Moore	Set in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, the nine stories in this glittering collection reflect on the foibles and dilemmas of human relationships. An English family goes to the south of France for the sake of the father's health, and to get away from an England of rationing and poverty. A displaced person turned French soldier in Algeria now makes a living as an actor in Paris. A group of selfish English expatriates on the Italian Riviera are incredulous that Mussolini and the Germans may affect their lives. A great writer's quiet widow blossoms in widowhood, to the surprise and alarm of her children, who send a ten-year-old grandson to Switzerland to keep her company one Christmas. Full of wry humour and penetrating insights, this is Mavis Gallant at her most unforgettable.
2008	Nalo Hopkinson	Brown Girl in the Ring	Jemini	The rich and the privileged have fled the city, barricaded it behind roadblocks, and left it to crumble. The inner city has had to rediscover old ways -- farming, barter, herb lore. But now the monied need a harvest of bodies, and so they prey upon the helpless of the streets. With nowhere to turn, a young woman must open herself to ancient truths, eternal powers, the tragic mystery surrounding her mother and grandmother. She must bargain with gods, and give birth to new legends.
2008	Thomas Wharton	Icefields	Steve MacLean	At a quarter past three in the afternoon, on August 17, 1898, Doctor Edward Byrne slipped on the ice of Acturus glacier in the Canadian Rockies and slid into a crevasse . . . Nearly sixty feet below the surface, Byrne is wedged upside down between the narrowing walls of a chasm, fighting his desire to sleep. The ice in front of him is lit with a pale blue-green radiance. There, embedded in the pure, antediluvian glacier, Byrne sees something that will inextricably link him to the vast bed of ice, and the people who inhabit this strange corner of the world. In this moment, his life becomes a

				quest to uncover the mystery of the icefield that almost became his tomb. Within the deceptively simple framework of a tourist guidebook, <i>Icefields</i> takes a breathtaking, imaginative look at the human spirit, loss, myth, and elusive truths. Here is an impressive literary landscape, and an expedition unlike any you have ever experienced.
2009	Lawrence Hill	The Book of Negroes	Avi Lewis	<p>Abducted as an 11-year-old child from her village in West Africa and forced to walk for months to the sea in a coffle—a string of slaves— Aminata Diallo is sent to live as a slave in South Carolina. But years later, she forges her way to freedom, serving the British in the Revolutionary War and registering her name in the historic “Book of Negroes.” This book, an actual document, provides a short but immensely revealing record of freed Loyalist slaves who requested permission to leave the US for resettlement in Nova Scotia, only to find that the haven they sought was steeped in an oppression all of its own.</p> <p>Aminata’s eventual return to Sierra Leone—passing ships carrying thousands of slaves bound for America—is an engrossing account of an obscure but important chapter in history that saw 1,200 former slaves embark on a harrowing back-to-Africa odyssey. Lawrence Hill is a master at transforming the neglected corners of history into brilliant imaginings, as engaging and revealing as only the best historical fiction can be. A sweeping story that transports the reader from a tribal African village to a plantation in the southern United States, from the teeming Halifax docks to the manor houses of London, <i>The Book of Negroes</i> introduces one of the strongest female characters in recent Canadian fiction, one who cuts a swath through a world hostile to her colour and her sex.</p>
2009	David Adams Richards	Mercy Among the Children	Sarah Slean	<p>Mercy Among the Children received effusive praise from the critics, was nominated for a Governor General’s Award and won the Giller Prize. It was named one of 2000’s best books, became a national bestseller in hardcover for months, and would be published in the US and UK. It is seen, however, as being at odds with literary fashion for concerning itself with good and evil and the human freedom to choose between them — an approach that puts Richards, as <i>Maclean’s</i> magazine says, firmly in the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Author Wayne Johnston</p>

			<p>recounts hearing Richards read in 1983 and being struck by his unqualified love for every one of his characters, even though “it was not then fashionable to love your characters”. <i>Pottersfield Portfolio</i> editor Tony Tremblay calls Richards the most misunderstood Canadian writer of the century, and a “great moralist”, comparing him to Morley Callaghan, Kafka and Melville. As a boy, Sydney Henderson thinks he has killed Connie Devlin when he pushes him from a roof for stealing his sandwich. He vows to God he will never again harm another if Connie survives. Connie walks away, laughing, and Sydney embarks upon a life of self-immolating goodness. In spite of having educated himself with such classics as Tolstoy and Marcus Aurelius, he is not taken seriously enough to enter university because of his background of dire poverty and abuse, which leads everyone to expect the worst of him. His saintly generosity of spirit is treated with suspicion and contempt, especially when he manages to win the love of beautiful Elly. Unwilling to harm another in thought or deed, or to defend himself against false accusations, he is exploited and tormented by others in this rural community, and finally implicated in the death of a 19-year-old boy. Lyle Henderson knows his father is innocent, but is angry that the family has been ridiculed for years, and that his mother and sister suffer for it. He feels betrayed by his father’s passivity in the face of one blow after another, and unable to accept his belief in long-term salvation. Unlike his father, he cannot believe that evil will be punished in the end. While his father turns the other cheek, Lyle decides the right way is in fighting, and embarks on a morally empty life of stealing, drinking and violence. A compassionate, powerful story of humanity confronting inhumanity, it is a culmination of Richards’ last seven books, beginning with <i>Road to the Stilt House</i>. It takes place in New Brunswick’s Miramichi Valley, like all of his novels so far, which has led some urban critics to misjudge his work as regional — a criticism leveled at Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad and Emily Bronte in their own day. Like his literary heroes, Richards aims to evoke universal human struggles through his depiction of the events of a small, rural place, where one person’s actions impact inevitably on others in a tragic web of interconnectedness. The setting is extremely important in Richards’ work, “because the</p>
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				characters come from the soil”; but as British Columbia author Jack Hodgins once told Richards, “every character you talk about is a character I’ve met here in Campbell River”.
2009	Gil Adamson	The Outlander	Nicholas Campbell	In 1903 a mysterious, desperate young woman flees alone across the west, one quick step ahead of the law. She has just become a widow by her own hand. Two vengeful brothers and a pack of bloodhounds track her across the western wilderness. She is nineteen years old and half mad. Gil Adamson's extraordinary novel opens in heart-pounding mid-flight and propels the reader through a gripping road trip with a twist -- the steely outlaw in this story is a grief-struck young woman. Along the way she encounters characters of all stripes -- unsavoury, wheedling, greedy, lascivious, self-reliant, and occasionally generous and trustworthy. Part historical novel, part Gothic tale, and part literary Western, <i>The Outlander</i> is an original and unforgettable read.
2009	Brian Francis	Fruit: A Novel About a Boy and His Nipples	Jen Sookfong Lee	Peter Paddington is your typical thirteen-year-old paperboy with a few exceptions. He's 204 pounds, at the mercy of an overactive imagination, and his only friend is a trash-talking beauty queen reject from across the street. As if that wasn't bad enough, Peter's nipples pop out one day and begin speaking to him, threatening to expose his private fantasies to an unkind world. Peter knows that if he could just lose weight, develop a brand-new personality, and get rid of those pesky talking nipples, he'd be able to find the acceptance he desperately craves. But it isn't easy to change who you really are, and Peter, ready or not, is finally forced to confront his secret self. Hilarious and exquisitely touching, this is the funniest and most memorable novel you'll read all year.
2009	Michel Tremblay	The Fat Woman Next Door is Pregnant	Anne-Marie Withenshaw	<i>The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant</i> is Michel Tremblay's first novel, the first book of the <i>Chroniques du plateau Mont-Royal</i> . It is a long love letter from the author to his characters. When asked why he wrote <i>The Fat Woman Next Door Is Pregnant</i> , Tremblay answered, “I wrote this book to tell these people how much I love them.” It is the glorious second day of May, 1942. The sun is drawing the damp from earth still heavy with the end of a long Quebec winter, the budding branches of the trees along rue Fabre and in Parc Lafontaine of the Plateau Mont Royal ache to release their leaves into the warm, clear

				<p>air heralding the approach of summer. Seven women in this raucous Francophone working-class Montreal neighbourhood are pregnant—only one of them, “the fat woman,” is bearing a child of true love and affection. Next door to the home that is by times refuge, asylum, circus-arena, confessional and battleground to her extended family, with ancient roots in both rural Quebec and the primordial land of the Saskatchewan Cree, stands an immaculately kept but seemingly empty house where the fates, Rose, Mauve, Violet and their mother Florence, only ever fleetingly and uncertainly glimpsed by those in a state of emotional extremis, are knitting the booties of what will become the children of a whole new nation. In this first of six novels that became his <i>Chronicles of the Plateau Mont Royal</i>, Tremblay allows his imagination free reign, fictionalizing the lives of his beloved characters, dramatized so brilliantly in his plays and remembered so poignantly in his memoirs. “The fat woman” both is and is not Michel Tremblay’s mother—her extended family and neighbours more than a symbol of a colonized people: abandoned and mocked by France; conquered and exploited by England; abused and terrorized by the Church; and forced into a war by Canada supporting the very powers that have crushed their spirit and twisted their souls since time immemorial. This is a “divine comedy” of the extraordinary triumphs and tragedies of ordinary people caught up by circumstances that span the range of the ridiculous to the sublime.</p>
2010	Nicholas Dickner, translated by Lazer Lederhendler	Nikolski	Michel Vezina	<p>Intricately plotted and shimmering with originality, Nikolski charts the curious and unexpected courses of personal migration, and shows how they just might eventually lead us to home. In the spring of 1989, three young people, born thousands of miles apart, each cut themselves adrift from their birthplaces and set out to discover what - or who - might anchor them in their lives. They each leave almost everything behind, carrying with them only a few artefacts of their lives so far - possessions that have proven so formative that they can't imagine surviving without them - but also the accumulated memories of their own lives and family histories. Noah, who was taught to read using road maps during a life of nomadic travels with his mother - their home being a 1966 Bonneville station wagon with a silver trailer - decides to leave the</p>

				<p>prairies for university in Montreal. But putting down roots there turns out to be a more transitory experience than he expected. Joyce, stifled by life in a remote village on Quebec's Lower North Shore, and her overbearing relatives, hitches a ride into Montreal, spurred on by a news story about a modern-day cyber-pirate and the spirit of her own buccaneer ancestors. While her daily existence remains surprisingly routine - working at a fish shop in Jean-Talon market, dumpster-diving at night for necessities - it's her Internet piracy career that takes off. And then there's the unnamed narrator, who we first meet clearing out his deceased mother's house on Montreal's South Shore, and who decides to move into the city to start a new life. There he finds his true home among books, content to spend his days working in a used bookstore and journeying through the many worlds books open up for him. Over the course of the next ten years, Noah, Joyce and the unnamed bookseller will sometimes cross paths, and sometimes narrowly miss each other, as they all pass through one vibrant neighbourhood on Montreal's Plateau. Their journeys seem remarkably unformed, more often guided by the prevailing winds than personal will, yet their stories weave in and out of other wondrous tales - stories about such things as fearsome female pirates, urban archaeologists, unexpected floods, fish of all kinds, a mysterious book without a cover and a dysfunctional compass whose needle obstinately points to the remote Aleutian village of Nikolski. And it is in the magical accumulation of those details around the edges of their lives that we begin to know these individuals as part of a greater whole, and ultimately realize that anchors aren't at all permanent, really; rather, they're made to be hoisted up and held in reserve until their strength is needed again.</p>
2010	Wayson Choy	The Jade Peony	Samantha Nutt	<p>Chinatown, Vancouver, in the late 1930s and '40s provides the setting for this poignant first novel, told through the vivid and intense reminiscences of the three younger children of an immigrant family. They each experience a very different childhood, depending on age and sex, as they encounter the complexities of birth and death, love and hate, kinship and otherness. Mingling with the realities of Canada and the horror of war are the magic, ghosts, paper uncles and family secrets of Poh-Poh, or Grandmother, who is the heart and pillar of the family.</p> <p>Wayson Choy's Chinatown is a community of</p>

				unforgettable individuals who are “neither this nor that,” neither entirely Canadian nor Chinese. But with each other's help, they survive hardship and heartbreak with grit and humour.
2010	Marina Endicott	Good to a Fault	Simi Sara	<p>In a novel reminiscent of the work of Penelope Lively, Anne Tyler, and Alice Munro, acclaimed author Marina Endicott gives us one of the most satisfying, most profound, and most memorable reads of the year. Absorbed in her own failings, Clara Purdy crashes her life into a sharp left turn, taking the young family in the other car along with her. When bruises on the mother, Lorraine, prove to be late-stage cancer, Clara—against all habit and comfort—moves the three children and their terrible grandmother into her own house.</p> <p>We know what is good, but we don't do it. In <i>Good to a Fault</i>, Clara decides to give it a try, and then has to cope with the consequences: exhaustion, fury, hilarity, and unexpected love. But she must question her own motives. Is she acting out of true goodness, or out of guilt? Most shamefully, has she taken over simply because she wants the baby for her own?</p> <p>What do we owe in this life, and what do we deserve? This compassionate, funny, and fiercely intelligent novel looks at life and death through grocery-store reading glasses: being good, being at fault, and finding some balance on the precipice.</p>
2010	Ann-Marie MacDonald	Fall on Your Knees	Perdita Felicien	<p>“What a wild ride — I couldn't turn the pages fast enough,” Oprah Winfrey told her viewers as she announced <i>Fall on Your Knees</i> as her February 2002 Book Club selection. Set largely in a Cape Breton coal mining community called New Waterford, ranging through four generations, Ann-Marie MacDonald's dark, insightful and hilarious first novel focuses on the Piper sisters and their troubled relationship with their father, James. Winner of the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, it was a national bestseller in Canada for two years, and it has been translated into 17 languages. At the start of the 20th century, James Piper sets fire to his dead mother's piano and heads out across Cape Breton Island to find a new place to live, eventually eloping with 13-year-old Materia Mahmoud, the daughter of wealthy, traditional Lebanese parents. And so, from early on, Ann-Marie MacDonald establishes some major themes: racial tension, isolation, passion and forbidden</p>

				<p>love, which will gradually lead to incest, death in childbirth, and even murder. At the centre of this epic story is the nature of family love, beginning with the Piper sister who depend on one another for survival. Their development as characters — beautiful Kathleen, the promising diva; saintly Mercedes; Frances, the mischievous bad girl, who tries to bear the family’s burden; and disabled Lily, everyone’s favourite — forms the heart of the novel. And then there is James, their flawed father. Moving from Cape Breton Island to the battlefields of World War I, to Harlem in New York’s Jazz Age and the Depression, the tense and enthralling plot of <i>Fall on Your Knees</i> contains love, pain, death, joy, and triumph. The structure of the narrative is multi-faceted, richly layered, and shifts back and forth through time as it approaches the story from different angles, “giving it a mythic quality that allows dark, half buried secrets to be gracefully and chillingly revealed” (<i>The New York Times Book Review</i>). As the details of the labyrinthine plot are pulled together, the question of whether it is possible to escape one’s family history gradually raises itself. The book’s epigraph, taken from <i>Wuthering Heights</i>, seems appropriate to a novel concerned with the different, often violent, forms that love can take. On the inexorable journey towards tragedy we encounter dark yet vivid images of neglect and violence, yet the novel radiates an unquenchable life-force, and yet the novel radiates an unquenchable life-force, shimmering with emotional depth, sensual with virtuoso descriptions of the power of music. It is a saga haunted by ghosts and saints, religious fanaticism and magic. MacDonald gives the most ordinary lives extraordinarily dramatic dimensions. The <i>Sunday Times</i> wrote, "It is the unpredictability of this huge book that is its greatest joy." With allusions ranging from Hollywood stars to religious tracts, <i>Fall on Your Knees</i> simmers with vibrancy and crackling, effervescent, breathtaking language.</p>
2010	Douglas Coupland	Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture	Cadence Weapon (also known as Rollie Pemberton)	<p><i>Generation X</i> is Douglas Coupland's acclaimed salute to the generation born in the late 1950s and 1960s--a generation known vaguely up to then as "twentysomething." Andy, Claire, and Dag, each in their twenties, have quit "pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause" in their respective hometowns and cut themselves adrift on the California desert. In search of the drastic</p>

				<p>changes that will lend meaning to their lives, they've mired themselves in the detritus of American cultural memory. Refugees from history, the three develop an ascetic regime of story-telling, boozing, and working McJobs--"low-pay, low-prestige, low-benefit, no-future jobs in the service industry." They create modern fables of love and death among the cosmetic surgery parlors and cocktail bars of Palm Springs, disturbingly funny tales of nuclear waste, historical overdosing, and mall culture.</p> <p>A dark snapshot of the trio's highly fortified inner world quickly emerges--landscapes peopled with dead TV shows, "Elvis moments," and semi-disposable Swedish furniture. And from these landscapes, deeper portraits emerge, those of fanatically independent individuals, pathologically ambivalent about the future and brimming with unsatisfied longings for permanence, for love, and for their own home. Andy, Dag, and Claire are underemployed, overeducated, intensely private, and unpredictable. Like the group they mirror, they have nowhere to assuage their fears, and no culture to replace their anomie.</p>
2011	Terry Fallis	The Best Laid Plans	Ali Velshi	<p>This book beat out work by Douglas Coupland and Will Ferguson because it is very, very good — a terrific Canadian political satire. Here's the set up: A burnt-out political aide quits just before an election — but is forced to run a hopeless campaign on the way out. He makes a deal with a crusty old Scot, Angus McLintock — an engineering professor who will do anything, <i>anything</i>, to avoid teaching English to engineers — to let his name stand in the election. No need to campaign, certain to lose, and so on. Then a great scandal blows away his opponent, and to their horror, Angus is elected. He decides to see what good an honest M.P. who doesn't care about being re-elected can do in Parliament. The results are hilarious — and with chess, a hovercraft, and the love of a good woman thrown in, this very funny book has something for everyone.</p>
2011	Angie Abdou	The Bone Cage	Georges Laraque	<p>Digger, an 85 kilo wrestler, and Sadie, a 26-year-old speed swimmer, stand on the verge of realizing every athlete's dream—winning a gold medal at the Olympics. Both athletes are nearing the end of their careers, and are forced to confront the question: what happens to athletes when their bodies are too worn to compete? The blossoming relationship between Digger</p>

				and Sadie is tested in the intense months leading up to the Olympics, as demanding training schedules, divided loyalties, and unpredicted obstacles take their draining toll. The Olympics, as both of them are painfully aware, will be the realization or the end of a life's dream.
2011	Jeff Lemire	Essex County	Sara Quin	In ESSEX COUNTY (VOL 1): TALES FROM THE FARM, Lemire illustrates the tale of Lester, a recently orphaned 10-year-old who goes to live on his Uncle's farm. Their relationship grows increasingly strained and Lester befriends the town's hulking gas station owner, Jimmy Lebeuf. The two escape into a private fantasy world of Superheroes, Alien Invaders and good old-fashioned pond Hockey. TALES FROM THE FARM is the first volume in a trilogy of graphic novels set in a fictionalized version of Lemire's hometown of Essex County, Ontario.
2011	Ami McKay	The Birth House	Debbie Travis	The Birth House is the story of Dora Rare, the first daughter to be born in five generations of Rares. As a child in an isolated village in Nova Scotia, she is drawn to Miss Babineau, an outspoken Acadian midwife with a gift for healing. Dora becomes Miss B.'s apprentice, and together they help the women of Scots Bay through infertility, difficult labours, breech births, unwanted pregnancies and even unfulfilling sex lives. Filled with details as compelling as they are surprising, The Birth House is an unforgettable tale of the struggles women have faced to have control of their own bodies and to keep the best parts of tradition alive in the world of modern medicine.
2011	Carol Shields	Unless	Lorne Cardinal	Reta Winters has many reasons to be happy: Her three almost grown daughters. Her twenty-year relationship with their father. Her work translating the larger-than-life French intellectual and feminist Danielle Westerman. Her modest success with a novel of her own, and the clamour of her American publisher for a sequel. Then in the spring of her forty-fourth year, all the quiet satisfactions of her well-lived life disappear in a moment: her eldest daughter Norah suddenly runs from the family and ends up mute and begging on a Toronto street corner, with a hand-lettered sign reading GOODNESS around her neck. GOODNESS. With the inconceivable loss of her daughter like a lump in her throat, Reta tackles the mystery of this message. What in this world has broken Norah, and what could bring her back to the provisional safety of home? Reta's wit

				is the weapon she most often brandishes as she kicks against the pricks that have brought her daughter down: Carol Shields brings us Reta's voice in all its poignancy, outrage and droll humour. Piercing and sad, astute and evocative, full of tenderness and laughter, Unless will stand with The Stone Diaries in the canon of Carol Shields's fiction.
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