This essay examines the work of six Jewish-Canadian writers within a postcolonial context. Adele Wiseman's protagonist Hoda in Crackpot, the poetry of Miriam Waddington and Miriam Mandel across the prairies, the poetic prose of Anne Michaels' Fugitive Pieces, and the shifting Quebec perspectives of Monique Bosco and Régine Robin -- all serve to deconstruct any dominant power structures in Canadian history and society.

Some of the major theories of post-colonialism, including Edward Said’s orientalism, Homi Bhabha’s notions of mimicry and hybridity, and Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern status have been put into practice in Edna Aizenberg’s study of Argentine-Jewish writing – one of the very few instances of the application of postcolonialism to Jewish literature. Within a Canadian-Jewish context, one would uncover elements of identification with the “other,” at times the oppressed native Canadian, at other times other immigrant groups. In addition, the Jewish writer might critique outmoded colonial structures, either traditional British imperial vestiges or newer American forces of power. A tradition of Yiddish humour and irony provide the tools for critiquing patriarchal authority. Whereas imperialism is territorial and militant, post-colonial writing is counter-expansionist and pacifist, domestic without being subservient to domestication. In the hands of several Jewish-Canadian women writers, the subaltern becomes subversive, as the hybrid mimics hegemony and hierarchy.

Thoroughly post-colonial Hoda, the protagonist of Adele Wiseman’s second novel, Crackpot, is a hybrid subaltern who mimics Winnipeg’s mainstream. Ostensibly the novel concerns a variety of births – from the birth of a nation to the birth of allegory. Hoda’s oral history about her Eastern European origins amidst plagues and pogroms clashes with her teacher’s official history of England and Canada. Her teacher tries to cover up Hoda’s tall tale by having the class sing “The Maple Leaf Forever” to purge “something unclean and uncivilized and best forgotten.” Post-colonialism best remembers what others attempt to sanitize and civilize in a different time and space. Hoda reproduces her own mysterious origins by leaving her baby on the steps of the Jewish orphanage. Some in the Jewish community speculate that the mother must be a rich American from Minneapolis who wanted the child to be a Canadian citizen so that “it would be eligible to take over the throne in time” (155). On the one hand, Hoda’s family romance points to the Royal Family; on the other hand, she goes native: “Why couldn’t she have come down from up North as easily as from East and West and South. You’re prejudiced against our Eskimo Jews and our Indian Jews. She probably came down the river in her kayak in the dead of night” (156). The incomparable Hoda is expert at mimicry, hybridity, and originality; her diasporic compass confounds spatial order, direction, and identity imposed by Empire.
Walking along Main Street, “Hoda hurried past the half-breeds, afraid because she knew that if she let herself she would know what they were like inside too” (205). In this post-colonial environment, hybrid and half-breed are two sides of the same coin, as Hoda interacts with others and Otherness in her dialogic and polyphonic narrative. She tries to teach her Hebrew teacher the lessons of universalism: Jews are not the only oppressed people of the world, for the sufferings of the Indians and half-breeds confront her as well. If Hoda is to redress these wrongs, she has to spin her own post-colonial fantasy about marrying the Prince of Wales who would convince the King and Queen that their union would put an end to civil war. Similarly, she would convince her own father that she would be like the Persian Queen Esther and save the Jews. Through mimicry and hybridity, subaltern Hoda ascends to oriental and occidental thrones in Crackpot’s coronation. Wiseman’s novel begins with a kabbalistic legend of creation and ends with “muddy waters” – the Cree word for Winnipeg. In between lie the shards of Wiseman’s colonies, Empires, ghettos, and Diaspora – global spaces shrunk to manageable proportions and locales. The Diaspora writes back and backwards, de-colonizing City Hall’s standard “Commerce, Prudence, Industry,” with Hoda’s subversive “Condoms, Prurience, Incestry.” Wiseman shifts the boundaries of Empire by writing from the margins where half-breeds and hybrids unite in a different spatial orientation.

Like Wiseman’s prose, Miriam Waddington’s poetry writes back to get to the root of history. Echoes of Wallace Stevens’ “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” appear in the imperatives opening the stanzas of “Winnipeg.” Succour the deviant bees” addresses the prairies as well as the poet’s imagination, which pollinates deviance and defiance throughout the poem. “Call home the fertilizing winds” is equally devious in its directions: the poet domesticates those correspondent breezes, tames them and names them, stretching nature along wide streets beneath which lie heresies. Personification summons the ghost of colonial Selkirk in the first section and a British ghost awakened by Merlin’s Excalibur in the second, which begins with another imperative: “Accept these alien fields.” Her plea soon shifts to an acceptance of her “parents’ foreign tongue” – the Yiddish challenge to Scots’ colonizing.

Just as the blades of Manitoba’s harvesting machine oppose Merlin’s Excalibur, so British ghosts turn to a “ghostly lostness” at the end of the poem. Having denied the flood, the poet drains the prairies to dust and displaces history with an emptiness where “No voice cries return.” The exuberance of the fertile opening narrows down to a lament. Her displacement of the landscape is matched by a historical displacement of trees “Rooted from rightful earth” and “severed jewelled roots which cleaved / Earth from its lawful crust.” In its postcolonial cleavage, the poem cuts both ways, clearing a new home in the Diaspora and Manitoba. By mixing the ghosts of Selkirk and legendary Merlin, Waddington recreates her city’s chaos and postcolonial “lostness.” Her pen vies with Excalibur for the rightful origin of the prairies.

On the cusp of Confederation, The Glass Trumpet (1966) opens with the clarion “Things of the World”: a “north Winnipeg girl” bends over lake water to watch goldeye swim. This song of innocence opens with the poet’s local identity – Jewish prairies – before expanding to the “good things of the world”:

“She played with Indian children
across the river in the saint
settlements and was converted
by the golden statues.” (74)

In this aboriginal exchange between Jew and Indian, the glass trumpet or ram’s horn captures prairie wind in a narrow opening and sends it out a universal end “of an eastern city.”

If The Glass Trumpet is pre-Centennial, then Waddington’s next collection, Call Them Canadians (1968), is post-Centennial and questions Canadian identity. Her pluralistic answer appears in the form of a rhetorical question, “What is a Canadian,” listing all the natural features of the landscape, and culminating in “empire daughter imperial order.” (125) The daughter of empire disrupts imperial order with Jewish irony and uncertainty: “a yes-no somehow-or-other maybe / might-be should-be could-be,” which is the hyphenated hybrid of Jewish-Canadian post-colonial identity. Polymorphous irony turns to fantasy in “In Exile”:

I am in exile,
Therefore I dream
Of new kingdoms
Fabled as Oz. (129)

Waddington’s new kingdom displaces the old imperial order.

With its four stanzas, “Canadians” is a longer version of the single-stanza “What is a Canadian.” The first stanza offers hyphenated signatures: “eskimo / faces, girl-guide / cookies, ink-drawings, and tree-plantings” (149). The second stanza further hyphenates “double-talk double-take / (and double-cross),” and alludes to Shakespeare’s Shylock: “just scratch us / and we bleed.” The third stanza juxtaposes “a pity of Indians” with the Fathers of Confederation in preparation for the final stanza which lists those Fathers in contrast to the less official signatures of the opening stanza. After addressing the Fathers, the poem ends with a reversal of history: “when we call you turn / around please and / don’t look so / surprised.” The roll call ends in a post-colonial recall and return, as Waddington writes back with her Canadian-Jewish accent that confounds colonial space.

Similarly, “Back at York University” (272) finds the poet exiled in her own country: “I am walking back / to an English colony.” Waddington’s glass trumpet is bi-vocal, just as her dream telescope is bifocal, mixing lost myths and imperial cities. Winnipeg’s Yiddish socialist background exchanges the Russian past with British imperialism across a post-colonial prairie.

Miriam Mandel’s lone voice on the prairies juxtaposes Canadian, Jewish, and British experiences. In her “Introduction” to The Collected Poems of Miriam Mandel, Sheila Watson comments: “The poem speaks both of enclosure and of exclusion, of a locking in and a locking out, of implication in a textual death, of delimitation, and of an enforced marginality which it can elude or escape only by brinkmanship or by transgression.” Although she won the Governor General’s award for poetry, her textual death ended in her own suicide, for all of the qualities listed by Watson could not save the locked life. An early poem, “Statement,” subtitled “Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny,” helps to explain Mandel’s Jewish aesthetic: “born without a foreskin / you are the messiah / I have no wisdom teeth” (24). In this gendered “Statement” the wisdom toothless poet lacks an identity, except an ironic identity with respect to the circumcised “you” in the poem. Individual history is repeated in the history of the race: the messianic birthmark is a synecdoche for transcendence. Mandel’s poem may allude to Irving Layton’s boast of being born without a foreskin: if Layton is the boisterous false messiah,
then Mandel’s quieter rant in the last line undercuts his status. She is “other wise,” and must guard against masculine domination in the Hebraic codes. Her first long poem in the sequence, “Memory,” begins with autobiographical details of the poet’s birth, the unwanted sixth of eight children. She remembers how her mother “braided bread into long loaves” – the Sabbath challah. She also remembers how her family fought “at the Seder tables / in mumbling Hebrew, prayed” (55). Her rhyming of played and prayed underscores the dichotomy between Hebraic ritual seriousness and ludic life on the Saskatchewan plains. “The Seder” picks up years later where “Memory” leaves off: “I once mentioned the Passover / in another poem / but didn’t enlarge on it” (101). Now that her father is long dead, her eldest brother conducts the Seder in English without the old Hebrew. She asks if she will break Matzoh while she grieves for her father and “all ceremonies / small and large?” Although she is attracted to church ritual and especially confession, “Oh Israel” still pounds through her head, so she has to find other means of alleviating her guilt. The poem ends with her wondering if her doctor will let her go on her knees before him. Mandel both submits to and defies psychiatric authority; she also genuflects to the fields on the prairies in an effort at sanity.

Where have you been? (1980) describes her stay in London, the metropolis at the opposite end of the spectrum to the Saskatchewan plains. She pares her lines down to simple words or short phrases, giving a vertical columnar appearance characteristic of her “bare plains” and “no tradition.” (158) She explains illusions and realities in “London, June 6, 1978” (170) in the Buckingham Hotel. Expecting queens and palaces associated with the name “Buckingham,” she discovers instead an Arab tribe staying at the hotel, and is conscious of her own Jewish identity. The jolt of recognition in the lobby with its glowing chandeliers and velvet chairs changes in the levelling elevator by the end of the poem: there is only one lift to serve Arab and Jew in the Buckingham Hotel. This deflationary mode continues in the next poem when she visits Westminster Abbey in search of the Poets’ Corner. Overwhelmed, she cannot find that “Special Corner”: “Where went my plans / for feelings / of awe” (173). Her poem of rhythm and beauty written at the feet of poets resting in peace in the Abbey ends in a “monumental surprise.” Her discoveries are post-monumental, for the surprise lies within the Canadian poet rather than in a work as monumental as Gray’s Elegy. In place of The Great Tradition, Mandel recreates her own counter-monumental gaze against British idols.

In “Warwick Castle” the poet is overwhelmed by too much of England with its elegant and treacherous castles of torture whose instruments are comparable to those used by the Germans in “Our World War.” From turret to dungeon she reverses her gaze from the heights to the countryside dotted with sheep, “back / from pain / to pastoral beauty again” (177). By combining torture and beauty, Nazi and Jew, Mandel creates a mixed pastoral in England. On Westminster Bridge she gouges her name on the railings, another monumental surprise of the North Saskatchewan River against the Thames, an impression against her own depression in the search for “a middle path” (180) of sanity. The bridge serves as a metaphor for Mandel’s attempts at bridging the various gaps between her self or selves and the external world she inhabits; the bridge is a locus of connection rather than expansion. In St. Paul’s she falls on her knees when she finds the crypt of Alexander Mackenzie, a staunch Canadian. Alone in London, she captures “the collected madmen” / of the / Commonwealth.” Mandel’s psychiatric state questions the sanity of Empire, but ultimately she succumbs to an inner prison of the mind. What we are left with are
Mandel’s post-colonial monuments superimposed on imperial monuments, the subaltern prairie Jew unsuccessfully forming a hybrid with Arabs, Scots, and Indians.

In its treatment of subaltern and hybrid relationships, Anne Michaels’ award-winning first novel, Fugitive Pieces, belongs to a post-colonial paradigm. The title refers not only to musical interludes from fugues to Brahms’ intermezzo to Yiddish lullabies, but also to refugees from Poland to Greece to Canada. Jakob Beer, Holocaust survivor and protagonist, partakes at once of subaltern and hybrid status. From the beginning he announces that “No one is born just once,” as he surfaces from the drowned city of Biskupin. Sub-aqueous, subaltern Jakob rises and writes his memoirs in an attempt to come to terms with the Holocaust. In the intertextual universe of Fugitive Pieces each character overlaps, bleeds into another’s personality, through music and metaphor. Jakob carries his dead sister Bella within him, just as Athos Roussos saves Jakob from the Germans: “We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me” (14). These hybridized characters form part of a polyvalent, polyphonic narrative layered between Greece and Canada.

One of the refrains at the centre of the novel is “every moment is two moments” (138, 140, 143, 161), just as every place and every character are more than just one. Jakob and Athos form part of a Hebraic-Hellenic overlap of Orientalism and Occidentalism. In contrast to German imperialism under the Nazis, Michaels focuses on language and history in a counter-narrative where the Diaspora writes back. Athos records how the Nazis abused archaeology to fabricate the past: “The job of Himmler’s SS-Ahnenerbe – the Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance – was to conquer history. The policy of territorial expansion – lebensraum – devoured time as well as space” (104). Whereas the Nazis falsified language and history, Michaels’ phenomenology restores truth after the Holocaust. Just as Heine’s Reisebilder deconstruct Hegel’s philosophy of world history, so Fugitive Pieces restores Jewish presence in history through a synthesis with Greek origins. Jakob’s first view of Greek signs transforms them into the fluid script of Hebrew letters (14). By going back to Hebraic-Hellenic roots, Michaels’ postcolonialism undermines Hegel’s totalizing, imperial view of history.

On Zakynthos, the island of salvation, Athos forces Jakob to review his Hebrew alphabet to “remember the future.” “He taught me the ornate Greek script, like a twisting twin of Hebrew” (21). Twin languages, personalities, and civilizations twist and turn against monolithic imperialism. The fluid script and Mobius strip of Fugitive Pieces allow one metaphor to flow into another -- the wandering of language and imagination without expansionist designs of imperialism. This Hebrew-Greek hybrid carries its own form of orientalism. As a child, Athos learns that most of Salonika’s dockworkers were Jews who lived in the Hebrew quarter, “yehudi mahallari”(28). Built along the harbour, this ghetto is a liminal space, tempting improbable voyages, as well as a kind of “way station” (87, 287) – a fugitive place, an intermediate zone for immigrants and postcolonial exploration.

On Zakynthos the “zudeccha” (ghetto) is the equivalent of Salonika’s mahallari, and on June 5, 1944 the Germans invade the island: “In the zudeccha, the Spanish silver siddur with hinges on the spine, the tallith and candlesticks are being buried in the earth under the kitchen floor” (39). This underground orientalism and subalternship of Jews contrast with German totalitarianism and distorted Occidentalism. The Greeks resist fascism through graffiti and heroic language: “I already knew the power of language to..."
destroy…. But poetry, the power of language to restore” (79). Linking together all strands, the poetry of restoration becomes another protagonist in Fugitive Pieces. The transition from Zakynthos to Toronto is facilitated by the proximity of the city’s Greek and Jewish neighbourhoods, and the synthesis of old and new world yields a transnational recuperation. As both poet and translator, Jakob hybridizes language(s), wandering among Greek, English, Hebrew, and Yiddish. He quotes Bialik: “Reading a poem in translation is like kissing a woman through a veil” (108). Jakob extends Bialik’s “veiled” orientalism to Greek poetry (with its mixture of elevated and demotic language), which “is like kissing two women” (108-9). Both translator and poet, “like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications” (109). Through the phenomenology of metaphor, music, and science, the novel approaches the Holocaust. “The poetics of covalent bonding” (119) is a Bachelardian recipe for postcolonial hybridization of languages, cultures, and communities against nationalistic aspirations of power.

Rivers generally associated with colonial expansionist routes become vehicles for postcolonial exploration in Fugitive Pieces. The phenomenology of flowing water links geographic locations throughout the novel. Jakob’s dream sequence includes Bella: “Now we hear the river and move towards it, the swirls and eddies of Brahms’s Intermezzo No. 2 that descend” (125). Michaels’s mapping of history goes back to the fourteenth century’s Catalan Atlas, charted by the cartographer Abraham Cresques Le Juif. While other maps of the period filled in unknown northern and southern regions with places of sea monsters, “the truth-seeking, fact-faithful Catalan Atlas instead left unknown parts of the earth blank” (136). Like the representation of reality in the Bible, Cresques’s oriental atlas is fraught with background – the mystery that Michaels tries to capture centuries later. When Jakob revisits Greece years later, he recites a Hebrew saying: “Hold a book in your hand and you’re a pilgrim at the gates of a new city” (156). The postcolonial pilgrim remains at the fringes, her only weapon a book. Forever leaving Egypt and the Holocaust, the Jewish survivor faces south-southwest like a caged bird. “Their bodies will follow you when you lie down … curving to every curve like the Hebrew alphabet and the Greek, which cross the page to greet each other in the middle of historia” (169). The synaesthetic quality of Fugitive Pieces, where everything flows into everything else, undermines imperialist hegemony and monolithic destruction.

Monique Bosco’s Babel-Opéra also utilizes a mixture of music, languages, and genres as a postcolonial critique of the Shoah. Bosco’s texts engage Biblical sources in a feminist midrash against patriarchal authority. With its mélange of prose and poetry, seven sections on “metamorphosis,” three sections on “Exodus,” and four on “Shoah,” Babel-Opéra is both fluid and marmoreal – the former linguistic confusion an attempt to deconstruct towers or monuments. A vertical structure, the imperial tower unlike a bridge, does not serve to connect relationships. Bosco’s “overture” poses the question of how to begin between silence and blasphemy in the face of a God who was blind and deaf during the Holocaust.

Born in Vienna during the time of Emperor Franz Joseph, the narrator Myriam Manassé has abandoned observance of Jewish laws, but has also lost her German maternal tongue. What she retains from her grandmothers are a silver bracelet and sapphire necklace. Viennese waltzes, pastries, and châteaux are as much an illusion as the family’s exit from the ghetto, and from Austria to France. Exchanging the Danube for the

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Seine does not suffice, for she is equally threatened by her Parisian schoolmates as well as by refugees who prepare to leave for New York, Tel Aviv, or Rio. Not for nothing is her surname Manassé – at once an allusion to the Biblical tribe as well as a pun on “menacé” or threatened. Bosco’s “intertext” interacts with the Book of Chronicles as well as with Kafka’s and Ovid’s “metamorphoses,” for Myriam undergoes postcolonial metamorphoses from Austrian Empire to Third French Republic where she becomes a chameleon, changing her to Marianne Mésange.

After “Métamorphose IV” the narrator yields to an alternating chorus of children, women, and men. The women and children are postcolonial innocents, while the men are militant, associated with Nazis, totalitarianism, and all oppressive forces. In Canada, Myriam wants to learn the Iroquois language, for as an immigrant she cannot identify with either the French or English majorities. Having rejected her country of origin as well as Israel, she turns to Canada as a Promised Land where exiles from around the world are welcome.

Where Babel-Opéra uses multiple voices for postcolonial mimicry and midrash, Régine Robin’s The Wanderer employs a cacophony of signs, the semitics and semiotics of a postcolonial Diaspora (Eastern Europe, Paris, Montreal) to counter imperialist claims. Her French and Yiddish sensibilities destabilize established forms. Just as Bosco’s narrator struggles with silence, so the original French title, La Québécoite, indicates the silence that the newcomer to Quebec must overcome. Spaces and signs on the page form the baggage of a wandering Jew contesting the linguistic imperialism of the metropolis. Paris becomes decentred when viewed from the perspectives of Montreal and Eastern Europe, a hybrid of orientalism and Occidentalism. Her “sign language” is double and diasporic, beginning with epigraphs by Jabès and Kafka that highlight fragments, floating signifiers, and a “gypsy literature” that “dances on the tightrope.”

She begins without any defined beginning: “No order. No chronology, no logic, no lodging. Nothing but a desire for writing and this proliferation of existence.”

Where Bosco’s “Babel” multiplies voices in a dizzying array, Robin’s visual lists overlap to create vertigo on the page. Like Bosco, Robin alludes to a biblical background and the Holocaust. In their juxtapositions of anything and everything, her random lists break down all hierarchies. Her desire to write with the six million letters of the Jewish alphabet mixes with her reference to the Algerian wars – a postcolonial-diasporic synthesis in line with Albert Memmi’s portraits of colonized Jews. Like Phyllis Gotlieb’s poetry, her kabbalistic discursions and digressions scatter to the false Messiah, Sabbatai Sevi, the Golem, Isaac Babel. Alternating between Paris and Montreal, she comes across a history book that discusses the Treaty of Paris (1763): “This treaty sanctioned the demise of ‘the first French colonial Empire’.” (44) Robin’s latter-day treatise sanctions the demise of all colonial empires, as seen through her Yiddish lenses. Colonial space is expansionist and monocural; postcolonial space is dishevelled, heteroglossic, and polyphonic.

With its Yiddish inflections, Canadian-Jewish women’s writing exhibits many of the characteristics of postcolonial literature: the “freewheeling pastiche of authors, epochs, languages, and philosophies is equally undermining, since the very juxtaposition short-circuits metropolitan notions of linearity, epistemological security, temporal and spatial coherence … mimetic accuracy.”

Hoda’s birthright, Waddington’s Winnipeg, Mandel’s prairie madness, Michaels’s fugitive pieces, Bosco’s Babel, and Robin’s wandering – all of these highlight the Diaspora as a challenge to the indeterminate
identity of the postcolonial. They clear imaginative terrain at the same time as they deny territorialism; their foreign home is domestic and abroad, familiar and exotic.

7 Monique Bosco, *Babel-Opéra* (Laval, 1989).
9 Aizenberg, p. 108.

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