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Green-Card American Fiction: Naturalizing Novels by Visiting Authors

ELIZABETH ABELE

In 1868, Sir Charles Dilke made this prediction about US culture: “America is becoming, not English merely, but world-embracing in the variety of its type; and, as the English element has given language and history to that land, America offers the English race the moral dictatorship of the globe, by ruling mankind through Saxon institutions and the English tongue.”¹ Regardless of whether Dilke was merely attempting rhetorically to extend the influence of a declining British empire, this view is echoed in Salman Rushdie’s 2001 novel *Fury*, as his Indo-British protagonist Malik Solanka proclaims his “American-ness”: “Everyone was an American now, or at least Americanized: Indians, Iranians, Uzbeks, Japanese, Lilliputians, all. America was the world’s playing field, its rule book, umpire and ball. Even anti-Americanism was Americanism in disguise, conceding, as it did, that America was the only game in town and the matter of America the only business at hand.”² Both Dilke’s and Rushdie’s words characterize American ideology as seductive, ensnaring people beyond its borders. While Solanka may proclaim the entire world as “American,” this virtual citizenship may be even more seductive for citizens of Anglophone countries, who experience American cultural imperialism in a language very close to their own.

As an example of an ambiguous US “citizenship,” the 2003 winner of the Man Booker Prize for the best novel in English by a Commonwealth author was *Vernon God Little*—a novel set primarily in Texas with only American characters, written by DBC Pierre, an Australian born to English parents raised in Mexico, now living in Ireland. Two years earlier, Salman Rushdie set his novel *Fury* in New York City, drawing on his American residencies yet funded by the Dutch government. These novels raise the question of what defines a text written in English as “American” as opposed to “British” or “Commonwealth,” particularly when many Anglophone authors avail themselves of residential opportunities in the United States. For

example, Indian-born author Vikram Seth wrote *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* (1986) while studying at Stanford University. Canadian Margaret Atwood's fiction likewise crosses the US–Canadian border, frequently featuring migrating Americans and Canadians; Atwood studied at Harvard University and has had appointments at US universities. British author Zadie Smith³ began *On Beauty* (2005), a novel about American academics and liberalism, during her fellowship at Harvard University. Though set in the US, Smith's *On Beauty* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) were both short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, a distinction for which these novels would not have been eligible if written by an American citizen. Does only the passport of the author determine the nationality of a novel? Can a book both be recognized by the Booker Prize and be an “American” novel?

In trying to address these questions, the terms “expatriates” or “immigrants” do not quite capture these authors' positions. The residencies in the US of these authors under investigation, generally for academic reasons, were planned, temporary immersions. And unlike expatriates, they became a deliberate and productive part of American culture and society as lecturers, editors, and writers, although, as with a visa, with an expiration date.

As more authors avail themselves of legal and virtual multiple citizenships, the challenges of defining national literatures become complex, and at times controversial. To explore the dynamics of transnational US fiction, I will examine examples of contemporary US-centered novels written by acclaimed Anglophone authors, published within a span of ten years: *Alias Grace* (1996), *Fury* (2001), *Vernon God Little* (2003), and *On Beauty* (2005). All of these novelists lived in the United States for extended periods. I will examine *Fury* and *Vernon God Little* together, since their critiques of US society are perhaps written more for non-US readers. While *Alias Grace* and *On Beauty* likewise critique US culture, these critiques present more developed US characters and situations, in novels that were acclaimed by both US and global readers. My purpose through these case studies is to explore the qualities of border-crossing literature, determining when a novel is written from the viewpoint of a tourist and when it contains the familiarity and ambivalences of a resident, producing what I call “green-card” fiction.

The Dynamics of Green-Card Fiction

Charles Dickens's American fiction demonstrates many of the dynamics of prospective “green-card” fiction. Though only a temporary US resident during his two speaking tours (1842 and 1867–68), Dickens “felt” American: “No visitor can ever have set foot on those shores with a stronger faith in the Republic than I had, when I landed in America.”⁴ Following his 1842 visit, he wrote the novel *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), as well as an essay that reflected his disappointment with his direct American experience. As with contemporary Commonwealth authors, Dickens's affinity for American values coupled with his

stateside experience made him feel entitled to parody American society as an insider. If the discipline of American literature depends, in Benedict Anderson's terms, on imagined communities of authors, and possibly readers—"in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"⁵—a novelist's felt-American-ness, however transitory, may be as relevant in determining the "nationality" of a novel as the novelist's parentage, birthplace, or passport.

Contemporary green-card novels further demonstrate this fuzzy distinction between an American novel and expatriate fiction. For example, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse*, and *Vernon God Little* only contain American-born characters, with no non-American perspective apparent within the novel (with the exception of *The Handmaid's Tale's* epilogue). These authors do not fit neatly into David Cowart's observation of the fiction of exiles and expatriates whose writings "look always to their homeland, no matter how remote the prospects of their return,"⁶ since these authors look to the US for setting and characters.

In addition to the ease of travel (and return), the ease and speed of international communication feeds these transnational relationships; as Paul Giles notes, since the 1990s, the internet has made possible the rapid exchange of ideas across geographical distances, creating virtual scholarly communities that coexist with the local.⁷ This exchange and virtual community may be particularly fluid between Anglophone cultures, which share a common language and literary markets. In the 2004 multivolume *Oxford English Literary History*, editor Jonathan Bate made it clear the focus would be on English nationals, excluding the works of Anglophone authors from other countries; however, US authors who lived and worked in England could be included. This editorial decision gives precedence for criteria to place certain English and Commonwealth texts within American literary boundaries.

Giles responded both to Bates's decision to exclude non-English Anglophone authors and his exception for noncitizen residents, which exemplify the nationalistic impulses behind the creation of literary histories and canons, that "either explicitly or implicitly, remained lock into teleological structures that necessarily remain blind to anything which would radically traverse or obstruct their nativist agenda."⁸ However, George Steiner provides a justification for caution before opening the borders. Though it is tempting to read any Anglophone novel as in "our" language, Steiner notes the need for "translation," for recognizing the differences in word and syntax between epochs, classes, and localities.⁹ While it is relatively easy to identify (and mimic) regional differences, Steiner cautions that it is more difficult to fully inhabit another region's writing: "Any body of language, spoken in the same time in a complex community, is in fact rifted by much subtler differentiations" (32).

To various degrees, these Commonwealth and British authors demonstrate their knowledge of American history, media, and geography in their envisionings of American society, and from their own complicated identities existing between the poles of the two Anglophone Empires. As with US immigrant authors, they are "availing themselves of the American's right to reflect positively or negatively on the

nation,”¹⁰ claiming their freedom to exist alongside US satirists from Mark Twain to Nathanael West, Tom Wolfe, and John Kennedy Toole.

Strangely, reviews of *Vernon God Little* and *Fury*, American and British, compared these novels almost exclusively to American texts.¹¹ In addition to *Vernon God Little*'s frequent comparison to *The Catcher in the Rye*, British author Andrew O'Hagan wrote for the novel's flyleaf, "It's like 'The Osbournes' invited 'The Simpsons' round for a root beer, and Don DeLillo dropped by to help them write a new song for Eminem." *Fury* was compared to Saul Bellow's novels, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Similarly, Gore Vidal referred to *Golden Gate* as "the Great California Novel." These comparisons demonstrate that these novels have already been perceived by some as part of an American literary conversation.

Though the four authors and their novels that I will examine definitely share specific objective qualities—Commonwealth citizenship, US residency, US setting and characters—there are certain subjective qualities that separate them regarding their relationship to the term "American." It is less clear whether these novels function as an external critique of American culture, belonging to Australian/British or Indian/British traditions or Canadian traditions—or whether, in fact, these novels are part of an *American* literary tradition that includes *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Day of the Locust*. Critics and scholars will draw these boundaries differently. Some will argue that these novels are definitively *non-American*, presenting an external challenge to American imperialism, while others may claim that these authors are exercising their positions as "virtual Americans" to participate in the healthy exchange of ideas central to American democracy. The latter position aligns them more with Cowart's observation of immigrant authors (as opposed to expatriates) who are "availing themselves of the American's right to reflect positively or negatively."¹² I would contend that these novels do not present one answer that applies to them equally, but that they exist instead on an American literary continuum.

Writing American Violence

What particularly connects the millennial novels *Vernon God Little* and *Fury* and makes them timely is their portrayal of the intimate relationship between American violence and media. Respectively, DBC Pierre and Salman Rushdie each present a portrait of a US community that is grappling with a US phenomenon: school shootings and serial killers. Though these are issues that call for scrutiny, it is a question whether these novelists' US residencies actually provided them with insights into the societal dynamics that regularly create these types of violent acts, or were merely a platform to export a sensational novel to the global market.

The selection of Pierre's *Vernon God Little* as winner of the 2003 Booker Prize was controversial on several levels. Some argued that this novel was insensitive toward America and an American tragedy, particularly following September 11.

(Coincidentally, Pierre landed his publishing deal for *Vernon* one hour before the first plane hit the World Trade Center.) Others argued that this first novel did not deserve the award and was selected (1) because it was disrespectful of America; (2) because of the author's romantically disreputable past; (3) because of the Booker's desire to be more inclusive (less high culture); or (4) some combination thereof. In the press release, Booker Prize chairman John Carey called *Vernon God Little* "a coruscating black comedy reflecting our alarm and fascination with modern America."¹³ This novel was recognized for its connection to British readings of America.¹⁴

Overall, American critics and readers were not as enamored of the novel as the Booker Prize committee. In his defense, Pierre has explained that he was as much parodying the world's *impressions of America* as America itself—an interpretation that has appeared rarely in reviews. Pierre notes that his impetus for the novel was from this outsider perspective: "I've cut the story line together from bits of media that come over our television, which is either euphoria or despair (of America)—no middle ground."¹⁵ Yet since this story is told from Vernon's first person, *his* perspective as a US resident might be more expected rather than the perspective of foreign viewers. Though a few US critics have questioned Pierre's authority to write US fiction, it seems more appropriate to question why the novel declines to acknowledge its Commonwealth perspective.

Vernon God Little follows the aftermath of a Columbine-style shooting on a small Texas community, when Jesus Navarro, a Mexican American teen, killed sixteen of his classmates before killing himself. Since Vernon is Jesus's only friend, the town of Martirio has focused on him as a scapegoat, accusing him of being an accomplice. Unfortunately, because of his own family secrets, Vernon is unable to clear himself. His situation is particularly precarious under the glare of the media spotlight, which attracts his family and friends like moths, leaving him on his own. The pied piper who leads the town to judgment is Lalito Ledesma, a TV repairman passing himself off as a CNN reporter. Ledesma successfully turns the town's tragedy into quick fame and a marketing bonanza for himself and the Martirio citizens—all for the bargain price of Vernon's conviction. The only people who resist this rush to judgment are his mom's best friend Pam—who weighs 300 pounds from her diet of take-out fried chicken—his court-appointed attorney whose command of English is played for comic effect, and Ella, an oversexualized redneck of uncertain intelligence.

Pierre's marriage of a parody of American stereotypes to the American enigma of teen mass murderers is ultimately unsatisfying. Fans of the novel speak of its engaging portrait of an adolescent's self-narrated journey (hence, Vernon's constant comparison to Holden Caulfield and Huckleberry Finn), while others have echoed the *Boston Globe's* assessment of "a tedious literary tantrum narrated by a Texas teenager and filled with naughty words."¹⁶ Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* comments that "given the novel's clumsy contrivance and its dogged reliance on insulting American stereotypes, that assessment [of the Booker Prize committee] probably says more about British attitudes toward the United States than about

literary taste.” Kakutani specifically rejects the Holden Caulfield comparison, countering that the novel “reads more like Beavis and Butt-head trying to do Nathanael West.”¹⁷ Though Sam Sifton of the *New York Times* found *Vernon God Little* entertaining, he ultimately concedes, “[Pierre] appears to know America well, but does not fully understand it.”¹⁸ What these American critics seem to object to about *Vernon God Little* and its lionization by the Booker Prize committee is less its criticism of American society, and more that the parody offers few insights into the people and the institutions it mocks.

The novel’s resolution of its main issue is actually more troubling than the crudeness of its journey. The enigma of teen mass shootings has sincerely troubled Americans, but Pierre seems to be unaware of the defining characteristics of these acts. For one thing, almost all of these shooters have been white; as a minority, Jesus’s rage against his classmates begins to be explainable. But Pierre offers a more direct, clichéd justification to this puzzle: molestation and exploitation by a teacher. As Ron Charles of the *Christian Science Monitor* complains, “This is the sort of psychological depth we might expect from one of Vern’s favorite made-for-TV-movies, but not from the British Commonwealth’s best novel of the year.”¹⁹

Though *Vernon God Little*’s parody of the American public’s hunger for murder coverage—an appetite that far exceeds its interest in war coverage or stories on Africa’s dilemmas—feels close to the mark, the characters offer few insights into the source or nature of American violence. Having followed Vernon through this bildungsroman, it is unsettling that, in the last ten pages, Pierre reveals teacher molestation, a gay porn ring, spousal abuse, patricide, and murder-by-cop without any explanation—using serious social issues as punchlines, rather than providing a coherent response to US social problems.

More Sound and Fury

On the other hand, Salman Rushdie is a proven master at creating picaresque tales with resonance. Though US culture and citizens have made appearances in Rushdie’s fiction set in India (including *The Satanic Verses*), *Fury* explores American culture and people on US soil, through the eyes of an Indian-born protagonist. *Fury* is artful in documenting the indeterminacy of Anglophone national identity at the turn of the millennium, though it is generally considered a lesser novel by a brilliant novelist. Like *Vernon*, the novel was written prior to 9/11 though published in the months following. Unlike *Vernon*, this novel set in the US features mostly characters not American by birth. *Fury* grapples with US residents’ anxiety over the potential of violence, a fear that is fueled by the media in its varied, omnipresent forms, presenting an intense whirlwind within this short novel.

The protagonist is Malik Solanka, a British academic born in Bombay who has moved to New York City to shield his wife and his son from his uncontrollable fury—implying that this fury is more at home in America. In fact, there is a series of murders

being committed in New York against perfect debutantes, of which he fears he may be guilty. Again, in the US, individual violent acts get more media coverage than urban violence or war.

Like Pierre, Salman Rushdie's national identity is complex. Born in Bombay, he was educated in England, to which he returned after a failed attempt to repatriate, marrying an American as his second wife. After the fatwa, he lived underground in various countries, including residencies in America.²⁰ With both Pierre and Rushdie, their associations with the nations of their birth have become more and more remote, with the US as only one stop in their expatriate journeys.

The novel features riffs on the subjects of American media obsession at this time—but makes less mention of major world events than of entertainment news bites like the divorce of Meg Ryan and Dennis Quaid, the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and the return of *Star Wars*. Ironically, Malik finds the cure for his fury through collaborating with this media-driven society, creating a mythological world that is disseminated through the global fluidity of the internet, advertising, and franchising. As his first English wife left literary studies for Madison Avenue, Malik with his New York collaborators have expanded his cult BBC TV puppet-philosophy show to the virtual world of the Puppet Kings—complete with merchandising. Malik finds this combination of technology and marketing intoxicating: “Images raced toward him like bazaar traders. This was technology as hustler, peddling its wares, Solanka thought; or, as if in a darkened nightclub, gyrating for him.”²¹ However, he soon sees the characters he created evolve beyond his control.

The central characters of the novel—with one exception—have all transplanted to America to rewrite their lives, as Malik hopes to do even more thoroughly: “In despair, to unwrite it. Not to be but to un-be. He had flown to the land of self-creation . . . the country whose paradigmatic modern fiction was the story of a man who remade himself—his past, his present, his shirts, even his name—for love” (79). His transition to America appears relatively easy. With his Anglophone position and previous visits to New York he “could speak the language and find his way around and understand, up to a point, the customs of the natives” (82). The “up to a point” however is key. As Malik and his partners avoid understanding themselves, they make only superficial efforts to understand Americans.

Rodney Stephens notes that Malik as protagonist should have the ideal stance to critique the myths of the United States: “coming from a country that has been misrepresented by Europe he is able to interrogate Old World images of America.”²² However, Malik's perspective may be too compromised for his critique to carry weight. He has been infected by his Western education, prestige, and wealth, too infected by violence to offer a cogent critique of American imperialism.

In addition, this proliferation of violence threatens the refuge of Malik and other hyphenate Americans. The debutante murders coincide with Malik's episodic blackouts, and a man dressed similarly to him is spotted near the scenes of the crimes. Instead of finding relief through the false consciousness of American identity,

for Malik it proves to be little more than a mask. Like Pierre, Rushdie circles the enigma of American violence without being able to penetrate it. He calls New York “a city of half-truths and echoes that somehow dominates the earth”²³—without addressing this paradox. The murderers are revealed to be masters of this universe, privileged white boys who lured their girlfriends into deviant sexual practices before murdering them. The closest Malik/Rushdie comes to explaining this kind of motiveless American violence is the following: “human expectations were at the highest levels in human history, and so, therefore, were human disappointments. . . . this disappointment for which the word ‘disappointment’ was too weak was the engine driving the killers’ tongue-tied expressiveness. This was the only subject: the crushing of dreams in a land where the right to dream was the national ideological cornerstone” (184). “Disappointment” is *Fury*’s explanation for these random acts of mass violence. Likewise unsatisfying is that Malik’s own violent *impulses* are not clearly separated from the killers’ deliberate *acts*. And coincidentally, Rushdie goes to the same source as Pierre to explain Malik’s fury: molestation. *Fury* may provide a colorful snapshot of various expatriates living in New York, yet it is less successful in furnishing insight into the Americans or American violence that it portrays.

Rushdie’s and Pierre’s novels offer entertaining postcards of the addictive quality and potential trajectories of American media—from transforming the death penalty into the ultimate voter-driven reality show to the creation of a franchise that provides the map for a revolution. Perhaps the glare of American media makes it harder to perceive clearly the details of these troubling issues.

Atwood’s Southern Exposure

Alias Grace represents Margaret Atwood’s ongoing question on the impact of American behavior, particularly on their northern cousins in Canada. Unlike the other novelists under examination who have each written one US-based novel, the United States and Americans have made appearances throughout her writing career, in her novels, short stories, and poetry. Though in most cases these are cameos, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Alias Grace* questions about the character of the US and its citizens are central to the novels. While in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood presents an imagined future United States, in *Alias Grace*, she deals with the US in a historical context, revealing her complex familiarity with Canada’s friendly but insidious neighbor.

Unlike Pierre and Rushdie, Atwood seems to be more concerned with Americans’ unaware destructiveness than their penchant for overt violence: “That was their armour, bland ignorance, heads empty as weather balloons: with that they could defend themselves against anything. Straight power, they mainlined it. . . . The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety.”²⁴ Even though these are the thoughts of a woman on the brink of madness in *Surfacing* (1972), variations of this

attitude toward Americans reoccur as a subtext in works by Atwood. Despite the United States' vision of itself as a benign, well-meaning force, in Atwood's work it appears as a subtle yet constant threat to Canada, Canadians, and Canadian identity.

Unlike her fellow Booker Prize winners Rushdie and Pierre, Margaret Atwood is decidedly North American, having lived most of her life in Canada, with the exception of years she has spent in US academic institutions, both as a graduate student and as a visiting professor. Despite her recognition as a Commonwealth author,²⁵ she has not had extended residencies in Britain. And her work is not overly concerned with either Britain or the Commonwealth. However, she has characterized the Canadian schools she attended as agents of the British Empire: "Of the things I later discovered I wanted to know we were told next to nothing. Among these were the disadvantages of being a colony, political or economic, and the even greater disadvantages of being an Indian."²⁶ Though England and France were the colonizing forces for Canada, in Atwood's fiction they are but faint vestiges of the past, more like bad habits to be understood and overcome than an active force of the present.

Providing a more direct exploration of North American geography, Atwood's historical novel *Alias Grace* is more specific in terms of both places and people. Though America and Americans have been interwoven into Atwood's fiction, *Alias Grace* is significant because of the way Americans are intentionally made a part of a story in which they played a very small role. For her first Canadian historical novel, Atwood chose the story of convicted murderer, Grace Marks, a case made notorious by her youth, gender, and looks. Perhaps Atwood believes that the impression that the US and Americans are not a part of Canadian history is part of what makes the United States a threat. Though *Alias Grace* is mostly set in Canada, Canadian and American border crossings are central to the novel. Her major characters are either Americans residing in Canada or Canadians residing in the US by the end of the novel.

Atwood sets the novel in 1859, sixteen years after the murders, by which point a group had organized for Grace's release. Atwood established clear rules for her historical fiction: "every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times."²⁷

What is striking about *Alias Grace* is Atwood's invention of displaced American characters, particularly the creation of Dr. Simon Jordan, a major character second only to Grace in importance. The peddler Jeremiah is also written as an American by birth, frequently crossing the border to purchase goods. Though Jeremiah might have been mentioned in the trial documents as the last visitor to the farm before the murders, he did not testify, so most likely little biographical data existed. The third American male character who plays a key role in Atwood's narrative is George Parkinson, the son of Grace Marks's first employer, Mrs. Alderman Parkinson. In the novel, Mr. George seduces Grace's friend Mary Whitney, leading to her death. It is possible that as Grace's previous employer some facts were known about the Alderman Parkinson family. With Jeremiah and George Parkinson, Atwood has chosen to "fill in the gaps" with Americans, in some cases exaggerating their role in

Grace's story, in others possibly creating their nationality and existence out of whole cloth.

Why Americans? Was it suggested "in the writing about Grace and her times" that 1840–60 Ontario was overrun with Americans? Why not focus instead on British immigrants, who featured largely in the historical record? It appears that, in addition to her portrait of Grace as a figure who subverts power relations, Atwood has an interest in establishing a historical context for the insidious threat of Americans, particularly American men, a threat that appears in her non-historical fiction like *Surfacing* (1972) and *The Robber Bride* (1993).

Throughout the novel, Atwood consistently portrays Dr. Simon Jordan as a man more concerned with his own amusement and welfare than that of others, despite his role as a physician. Grace's first impression of Jordan is consistent with seeing him as a colonizer: "He must be a wanderer, like Jeremiah the peddler. But Jeremiah travelled to earn his bread, and these other sorts of men are rich enough already. . . . They amble around the world and stare at things, they sail across the ocean as if there's nothing to it at all, and if it goes ill with them in one place they simply pick up and move along to another."²⁸ Simon's goal in taking Grace Marks's case is to document great revelations that will gain him worldwide recognition, marking him as more interested in the status that Grace's psychological treatment could give him, rather than in serving her interests. Hilde Staels notes that *Alias Grace* is unusual in "present[ing] a psychoanalyst-detective whose inquest is purely guided by positivist detection and who lacks a traditional detective's creative spirit and intuitive side"²⁹—he is merely a collector.

Part of the reason that Simon has wandered through Europe and now Canada is his desire to avoid his own history, perhaps another stereotypically American flaw. He expresses an aversion to both jokes about the Boston Tea Party and questions about the abolitionist movement. Ultimately, he is trapped by the events of his own country. After fleeing from his Canadian entanglements back to America, he is pulled into the Civil War and severely wounded—resulting in amnesia of his Canadian experience. Simon resembles Rachel Adams's description of Billy in *The Robber Bride*: "The draft dodger is no longer a victim, but rather the embodiment of his nation's abuse of power."³⁰ Though Grace writes to Dr. Jordan, asking him to complete his commission to assist her appeal, he does not respond, using his privileged position, including his citizenship, to abandon her.

Like Simon Jordan, George Parkinson woos women because he is stuck in Canada and bored. As Grace explains, "And so there he was, being fussed over by all, and with time on his hands . . . , which is a bad situation for a young man full of spirits. . . . For if the world treats you well, Sir, you come to believe you are deserving of it."³¹ Not only does George resemble Simon in his taking what he wants without feeling any obligation, George and his American mother likewise never assimilate, never stop being Americans in Canada. Adams notes both this masculine self-absorption and failure to assimilate as characteristic of transient Americans in Atwood's fiction.³²

After the death of her Canadian husband, Mrs. Parkinson permanently returns with her sons to the United States: “She found the winters too cold.”³³ In possession of her husband’s estate and sons, Canada has no more to offer her.

While Jeremiah Pontelli, the peddler, is portrayed as the American most integrated into Canadian life, he is still an opportunist, a shape-shifter who moves from peddler, to carnival attraction, to a respected mesmerist. His choice of names—DuPont, Ponti, Pontelli and Bridges—is evidence of his commitment to movement, allowing him access to both cultures. He succeeds, where Simon Jordan fails, “creat[ing] a bridge between Grace’s conscious and unconscious self.”³⁴ However, this feat serves him more than it serves Grace, since his performance does not forward Grace’s appeal and leads to her abandonment by Jordan.

Before the murders, Jeremiah tells Grace about America: “There are rogues and scoundrels everywhere, but they use a different sort of language to excuse themselves; and there they pay a great lip service to democracy. . . . But when you cross over the border, it is like passing through air, you wouldn’t know you’d done it, as the trees on both sides of it are the same.”³⁵ Though Jeremiah may speak of the sameness of the two countries, the one value that the United States seems to hold in *Alias Grace* is as a refuge for Canadians in crisis. The novel notes rebellion leader William Lyon Mackenzie’s escape to the United States, as well as the emigration of his supporters: “Dependable servants were scarce, as many had left for the States after the Rebellion” (199). After the murders, James McDermott and Grace unsuccessfully attempt to escape across the border. However, after her ultimate release twenty-eight years after her arrest, she finally crosses the border, immigrating to Western New York with a former Canadian admirer and disappearing from the historical record. Grace assimilates, accepting life in the United States as well as she previously accepted her life in the penitentiary. Perhaps Atwood is implying that the United States is the perfect setting into which a murderer can disappear.

Atwood’s efforts to untangle the relationship between Canada and the United States may reflect the conundrum expressed by Rushdie’s protagonist Malik: “Yes, it had seduced him, America . . . and he was compromised by this seduction. What he opposed in it he must also attack in himself. It made him want what it promised and eternally withheld.”³⁶ Perhaps Atwood has likewise found that, what she opposes in America, she must also oppose in Canada. With a long history of border crossings in both directions, untangling the two nations is complex. Robert K. Martin notes the tendency in US English departments to read “Margaret Atwood as if she were an American novelist,” ignoring the fact that “the defining myths of Canadian and Québécois culture are not those of a U.S. culture.”³⁷ However, though it is essential to respect these defining myths, it would be a mistake to exclude Atwood’s significant contribution to North American fiction. Parallel to Henry James’s transatlantic fiction, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Alias Grace* may be simultaneously Canadian and American novels.

Zadie Smith's American Novel

Of the novels acknowledged by the British Man Booker Prize committee, I find Zadie Smith's novel the most subtle and intriguing portrait of US society. Drawing on her own identity as a British-born author with a Jamaican mother who resided in the United States, Smith's *On Beauty* directly explores the fluidity of relationships within Anglophone culture, particularly as promoted by British and US academia. The world of her novel demonstrates how Commonwealth scholars exist in a tenuous position between England and the United States. The universe of *On Beauty* deliberately acknowledges the complex relationships between Commonwealth, UK, and US citizens, in particular those of African descent, while presenting a model for an American novel written by a non-US citizen.

On Beauty provides a complicated portrait of the challenges of the new millennium in the US, made no less poignant by its clever use of the plot of E. M. Forster's *Howards End* as a frame. *Howards End* may signal Smith's English origin, but her characters' origins differ widely from Forster's universe. Smith places race in the foreground of her intersections of American, British, and Commonwealth identity, setting her novel in a Cambridge (called "Wellington") and Boston more detailed than that of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Smith stays clear of mega-issues like American violence and media, focusing instead on the conflicts within two families, conflicts stemming from complex definitions of idealism, identity, and beauty.

On Beauty complicates monolithic ideas about the United States, for readers abroad and in the US, through her dimensional array of characters. As Charles Green notes, Smith "moves incredibly deftly from character to character, inventing fictional academics, disappointed wives, ambitious street rappers, and fledgling feminists with both acid honesty and tremendous accuracy, and even love."³⁸ Like Vikram Seth and his American novel *The Golden Gate*, Smith has an affection for the characters and the setting of her novel, an affection that is not without mockery or criticism, but less polemical than Pierre, Rushdie, or Atwood. This affectionate realism is balanced by Smith's satire of transnational academics.

The novel opens with the emails sent by Jerome from London to his father Howard Belsey in Wellington, Massachusetts, about his growing affection for the Kipps family, culminating in his "engagement" to their daughter Victoria. This opening sets up several key elements of the novel: *On Beauty*'s structural relationship to *Howards End*, which likewise opens with correspondence announcing a sudden engagement as suddenly broken off; the fluidity of information and relationships across oceans in the new millennium; and the rivalry between the two academic scholars and patriarchs Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps, a rivalry intensified by their (in Freudian terms) "narcissism of small differences."

Belsey's and Kipps's intersecting identities embody many of the circulations of the novel. Howard Belsey was born both white and British, marrying an African American woman with whom he has three children, who mostly identify themselves

as African Americans. Though Monty Kipps and his wife Carlene were born in Trinidad, as “Sir” Monty, he may now be more British than Howard. Though the two men are working in the same field, they have opposing views on the transcendent value of beauty; this (lack of) faith in transcendence may also fuel their differing views on God. Monty also upsets racial expectations by being both more respected and more politically conservative than Howard, a combination that is particularly vexing to Howard. When an academic residency brings Monty and his family to Howard’s US institution, where their respective children comingle with the range of black identity and nationality found in Boston, Massachusetts, and the suburb of Wellington, this long-distance rivalry becomes even more personal.

Smith’s one allusion to American violence and national ideology is indirect, acknowledging her narrative’s place in American history, but again placing it within the family experience. The second section of the novel revolves around the planning of the Belseys’ thirtieth anniversary party—the date of which is given obliquely: “Jack asked the date. Kiki told him. Jack’s face gave in to that tiny, involuntary shudder with which Kiki had, in recent years, become familiar.”³⁹ Smith’s use of September 11 as the date of this party portrays the awkward reality of life continuing after this watershed event. In addition, this date highlights the ambivalence of this milestone in the Belseys’ life. The Belseys’ decision to go ahead with this party may be publicly odd because of the date, but it is even more privately odd since the stability of the Belseys’ marriage is in question, due to Howard’s affair a few months earlier. By assigning September 11 as the date of the Belseys’ marriage, Smith presents relationship traumas in *On Beauty* as worthy of consideration as political trauma. When the Kipps family’s arrival in Wellington coincides with the Belseys’ anniversary party, it intensifies the drama while adding a global dimension to the Belseys’ domestic crisis.

It is an interesting question why Smith chose to center her exploration of the twenty-first-century African diaspora in the US, rather than her native Britain. Though two sequences in the novel do occur in London, the most dynamic mix of characters of African heritage occurs in Massachusetts. While the nods to London and the Caribbean do situate the novel’s dynamics within the Black Atlantic, the novel still places the United States as the apex of black (Anglophone) culture, and US academic institutions as the center of Black Studies. In addition to the mixed identities of the upper-middle-class Belseys and Kipps, Wellington includes Howard’s best friend, Erskine Jegede, an Oxford-educated Nigerian who heads Wellington’s Black Studies department. Despite Jegede’s and Kipps’s British credentials, their success would be somehow incomplete without the US.

Overall, Wellington seems to promote this clashing of cultures: The local Moroccan restaurant attracts both white Wellington students and Roxbury youth who “were down with Morocco, down with its essential Arab nature and African soul” (212), while it also provides a space for spoken-word performances, a genre that likewise attracts white and black, educated and street, practitioners. It is here

that Wellington poet and professor Claire Malcolm is impressed by Carl, a high school dropout with raw talent (and good looks). Throughout this novel, characters are drawn together by perceived commonalities only to be violently separated by discovered differences. These continually shifting discoveries are key to Smith's nuanced portrait of race: "She isn't didactic; instead she allows the characters to struggle with the intersections between nationality and skin color . . . and the search for authenticity."⁴⁰

Parallel to the tragic failure in *Howards End* to uplift Leonard Bast is Wellington's failure with Carl. Levi first takes an interest in Carl at a free Mozart concert, where Zora accidentally takes his Walkman. However, when Carl accepts Kiki and Levi's invitation to the Belsey anniversary party, Howard, not recognizing Carl, refuses him admittance—even though the heart of the party is Wellington's Black Studies department, who pride themselves as being "the most socialized people at Wellington."⁴¹ As Kanika Batra observes, "there are limits to the sociability that welcomes the 'theoretical' engagement with blackness while rejecting any interaction with the kind of vernacular sociality represented by Carl."⁴²

Smith presents a rather negative view of black liberalism, through the working-class characters Carl and Chantelle. Carl's acceptance into the sociability of Wellington is actually more problematic than his initial rejections. After his spoken-word reading, Claire and Zora champion Carl, petitioning to allow him to audit Claire's course, despite his lack of credentials. Chantelle is also one of Claire's discretionary students. To solidify his position, Erskine creates a fake job for Carl as a hip-hop librarian, a position Carl takes seriously, making intellectual connections that excite him more than his own poetry. But despite his authenticity, Carl is little more than an object for any of these Wellington do-gooders. Levi, in fact, rejects Carl's intellectual growth as apolitical—"this ex-Carl, this played-out fool, this *shell* of a brother"⁴³—and has moved on to protesting the low pay of immigrants, while Zora sees herself as Carl's Pygmalion. Zora, Levi, and Erskine all disparage Carl's hip-hop archiving and research. Carl finally confronts them all: "I'm just trying to get a stage higher with my life. But that's a joke around here, man. People like me are just toys to people like you. . . . You people aren't even black any more, man—I don't know *what* you are. You think you're too good for your own people. You got your college degrees, but you don't even live right" (418). Batra finds Smith's portrayal of Black Studies ironic and damning: "The discipline is presented as disconnected to social reality and actively participating in the perpetuation of social inequality."⁴⁴ Carl is returned to their urban neighborhoods damaged by his commutes to Wellington.

What keeps *On Beauty* from lapsing into a superficial critique of US intellectuals is the compassion the novel expresses for its characters, including Howard. But the heart of the novel are the US characters Carl and Kiki. As Charles Green writes, "Kiki represents Smith's most impressive artistic power in *On Beauty*, the ability to give characters emotional breadth. Kiki is not just an ex-Floridian, a mother, a hurt wife, an academic spouse. She morphs through all these overlapping

roles.”⁴⁵ It is this complex portrait of Kiki that demonstrates that Smith did not write her US novel as a visitor, but as someone who successfully internalized American experience. This novel deftly explores the complexity of contemporary African American identities, joining the conversation of US authors, from Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor to Lydia R. Diamond and her 2011–12 Broadway play *Stick Fly*. Smith writes US characters as if she were a member of the family, with affection yet with full knowledge of the family’s shortcomings.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the implications of today’s more fluid citizenships on defining national literatures, in particular the defining of American literature. Of course, there is a history of US authors who have contributed to American literature while living abroad, including Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and James Baldwin. There are additional US authors who redefined themselves as British authors, most notably Henry James and T. S. Eliot. In addition, there are European and Canadian authors who immigrated and wrote fiction set in the United States, like Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow. However, while the four novels discussed here have been placed within the context of the American literary canon, considering these novels *as* American literature is complicated by the fact that Rushdie, Pierre, Atwood, and Smith have never claimed US citizenship.

Determining which national canon a particular literary text or author belongs to is not a new debate: the writings of Carol Shields,⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, and Oscar Wilde are credibly claimed by the literatures of multiple countries. Though, as Paul Giles argues in *The Global Remapping of American Literature*, we are moving into an age of multiple and fluid citizenships, the literary community is still invested in promoting national literatures, through institutions like the Man Booker Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the Modern Language Association,⁴⁷ academic journals, and survey literature courses.

It is not a coincidence that, as the epigraph for the second section of *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith quotes Elaine Scarry, whose work also inspired the novel’s title: “To misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed.”⁴⁸ Though Smith’s novel may challenge figures like Howard, Monty, Erskine, and Claire who misuse their privilege, Zadie Smith’s own success within academia, namely the residency that produced this novel, speaks to the potential of universities to promote beauty. US academic exchanges have the potential to promote a more nuanced understanding of the United States abroad, as well as making non-US perspectives like Smith’s and Atwood’s part of the fabric of US university education.

In the twenty-first century, determining what is a novel written by a foreign national *about* the United States and what is a novel written *as* an “American” is

likewise an issue open to debate. My exploration of these novels by DBC Pierre, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and Zadie Smith has been written less to argue for or against annexing Commonwealth novels, but more to situate novels written by US residents within the study of American literature—so that if they remain outside the boundaries of American literature they are at least properly footnoted.

As evident from my reading of these four contemporary novels, I find *Fury* and *Vernon God Little* to read more as a visitor's satire of the US, parallel perhaps to Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*. As clever and entertaining as these picaresque novels may be, for me they fail to demonstrate an understanding of American society. On the other hand, *Alias Grace* and *On Beauty* resonate as written by authors who feel at home in the US and with Americans, and who write with compassion and understanding as they critique both the people and social structures. Authors who craft novels that are compelling to US and global readers alike may present a stronger argument for their inclusion within an American literary canon.

Instead of expecting my experience of these novels to dictate their place within American literature, I am ultimately arguing for a recognition of the continuum of US literature, allowing critics to place individual novels within these borders.

Notes

¹ Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries*, 8th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1888), 224, <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=jroIAQAAMAAJ>.

² Salman Rushdie, *Fury* (London: Vintage, 2001), 87.

³ Zadie Smith is the most English of these authors. However, her Jamaica-born mother and her marriage to Nick Laird, born in Northern Ireland, do complicate her position within an English identity.

⁴ Quoted in Alex Zwerdling, *Improvised Europeans: American Literary Expatriates and the Siege of London* (New York: Basic, 1998), 8.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

⁶ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 205.

⁷ Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), xi.

⁸ Paul Giles, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 359.

⁹ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 47.

¹⁰ Cowart, *Trailing Clouds*, 3.

¹¹ The only exception I have come across is Madelena Gonzalez's essay in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, in which she includes *Fury* comfortably in her examination of four "British" contemporary novels, with Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog*, Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*, and Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook*. See Madelena Gonzalez, "The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1 (2008): 111–33.

¹² Cowart, *Trailing Clouds*, 3.

¹³ Sarah Lyall, "Australian Wins Man Booker Prize for Novel He Sees as a Form of Atonement," *New York Times*, October 15, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/15/books/australian-wins-man-booker-prize-for-novel-he-sees-as-a-form-of-atonement.html>, emphasis mine.

¹⁴ In addition to the Man Booker Prize, *Vernon God Little* also won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic literature at the Hay Festival and the James Joyce Award from the Literary & Historical Society of University College Dublin.

¹⁵ Beth Gardiner, "Pass the Barbecue Sauce: Vernon God Little," *Eugene Register Record*, November 16, 2003, G7.

¹⁶ Anna Mundow, "2003: A Road Map to the Best – Fiction," *Boston Globe*, December 7, 2003, D6.

¹⁷ Michiko Kakutani, "Deep in the Heart of Texas (Via Australia)," *New York Times*, November 5, 2003, E1.

¹⁸ Sam Sifton, "Holden Caulfield on Ritalin," *New York Times*, November 9, 2003, G7.

¹⁹ Ron Charles, "Columbine Dominates Europe's Concept of US," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 4, 2003, Features 14.

²⁰ *Fury* was actually funded by the Dutch government, to the annoyance of Holland's literary community.

²¹ Rushdie, *Fury*, 179.

²² Rodney Stephens, "American Culture Meets Post-Colonial Insight: Visions of the United States in Salman Rushdie's *Fury*," in *How Far Is America from Here? Selected Proceedings of the First World Congress of the International American Studies Association, 22–24 May 2003*, ed. Theo D'Haen, Paul Giles, Djelal Kadir, and Lori Parkinson Zamora (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 348.

- ²³ Rushdie, *Fury*, 44.
- ²⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Fawcett, 1972), 152.
- ²⁵ Atwood has arguably been more lauded by the Man Booker Prize committees than even Rushdie, with more novels shortlisted than Rushdie and as a two-time contender for the Man Booker International Prize, compared to once for Rushdie.
- ²⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960–1982* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), 85.
- ²⁷ Margaret Atwood, “In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (1998): 1515.
- ²⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 39.
- ²⁹ Hilde Staels, “Intertexts of Atwood’s *Alias Grace*,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 2 (2000): 432.
- ³⁰ Rachel Adams, “‘Going to Canada’: The Politics and Poetics of Northern Exodus,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2005): 414.
- ³¹ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 171.
- ³² Adams, “‘Going to Canada,’” 415.
- ³³ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 188.
- ³⁴ Staels, “Intertexts,” 443.
- ³⁵ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 266.
- ³⁶ Rushdie, *Fury*, 87.
- ³⁷ Robert K. Martin, “North of the Border: Whose Postnationalism?” *American Literature* 65, no. 2 (1993): 358, 359.
- ³⁸ Charles Green, “The Drovers of Academe,” *Missouri Review* 31, no. 3 (2008): 184.
- ³⁹ Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 68.
- ⁴⁰ Green, “Drovers of Academe,” 185.
- ⁴¹ Smith, *On Beauty*, 107.
- ⁴² Kanika Batra, “Kipps, Belsey, and Jegede: Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism, and Black Studies in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*,” *Callaloo* 33, no. 4 (2010): 1082.
- ⁴³ Smith, *On Beauty*, 389.
- ⁴⁴ Batra, “Kipps, Belsey, and Jegede,” 1080.
- ⁴⁵ Green, “Drovers of Academe,” 184–85.

⁴⁶ Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries* (New York: Viking, 1994) is the only novel to have won the Governor General's Award (Canada) and the Pulitzer Prize (US); in addition, the novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Shields was eligible for these three awards as an American-born naturalized Canadian. The novel was set in Indiana and Canada.

⁴⁷ As Executive Director of the Northeast Modern Language Association, I can attest that the national labels within Anglophone literatures provoke heated debate from our members.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Smith, *On Beauty*, 127.

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