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Border Crossings? Elizabeth Smart and Elizabeth Hay Writing About Mexico

Shoshannah Ganz

Abstract

By examining the work of two Canadian writers, Elizabeth Smart and Elizabeth Hay, living fifty years apart, this article looks at how these women write life on the border and what this tells them about their own identity. In the case of Elizabeth Smart, the identity she is exploring is primarily that of being a woman and a writer. Elizabeth Hay, on the other hand, meditates more explicitly on what it means to be a Canadian abroad and a Canadian writing about Mexico.

Keywords

Border, women writing, Canadian identity, travel literature, Mexico

Guillermo Verdecchia in *Fronteras Americanas (American Borders)* (1993) meditates on the question of Canadian identity from the perspective of an Argentinian immigrant existing in what he describes as a process of "learning to live on the border" (77). Verdecchia discusses the identity of the nations that border the United States and the economic, cultural, and interpersonal effects the United States has on its neighbors to the North and South. As part of his performative work, he asks in the first person: "Where does the US end and Canada begin? Does the US end at the 49th parallel or does the US only end at your living room when you switch on the CBC? After all, as Carlos Fuentes reminds us, a border is more than just the division between two countries; it is also the division between two cultures and two memories (21). I use a writer of Latin origin meditating on his identity as a hyphenated Canadian, aware of the mediated nature of his Canadian identity as a result of the relationship Canada has with the

United States, to open a discussion by two Canadian women writers who have traveled and lived in two borderlands: Mexico and Canada. I want to look at how these women write life on the border and what this tells them about their own identity. In the case of Elizabeth Smart, the identity she is exploring is primarily that of being a woman and a writer. Elizabeth Hay, on the other hand, meditates more explicitly on what it means to be a Canadian abroad and a Canadian writing about Mexico.

Although both women have called Ottawa home, Elizabeth Smart and Elizabeth Hay, write the self, Mexico, and Canada nearly fifty years apart and employ very different techniques and genres. I want to explore the international journeys of particular Canadian women as a way of probing the already elastic definitions of Canadian identity. How does writing self as woman, self as Canadian woman, and self as Canadian woman traveling in Mexico change from the time when Elizabeth Smart traveled, and when Elizabeth Hay took on a similar project? Does their work reflect a more important shift in Canadian identity and sense of national borders?

Elizabeth Smart is celebrated and known as the author of the experimental and modernist novel or long prose poem *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945). This article however is primarily concerned with her writing about Mexico both before and after the publication of that work. As I argue elsewhere,[1] Elizabeth Smart's journal published as *Necessary Secrets* (1986) and written in Mexico during 1939-40 is the first place the author experiments with the style and language of love. While the context for this exploration is Mexico, the author views the place as inconsequential to her ideas and form as either a person or a writer. She focuses almost entirely on her own pursuit of love and experience from which she believes she will discover material for her writing and thereby live a fulfilling life. However, much later in life, the subject of Mexico and her life in Mexico reoccurs in her writing. Hence the journal becomes something of a tool for scholars to explore Smart's development as a writer, the influences on her writing, her first encounters with the man who would be the father of her four children and the subject of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*.

1 For an earlier articulation of this argument please see my earlier article "'Learning to live on the border': Elizabeth Smart's Mexico Writing." Although I replicate parts of this earlier argument, I have significantly altered some interpretations of the primary text. Hopefully this will complement and not refute the earlier reading.

The second author, Elizabeth Hay, writes an autobiographical novel entitled *The Only Snow in Havana* (1992) set in Mexico, New York and Canada.[2] Although less stylistically experimental, Hay explores subjects relating to her position as a woman, a writer, a Canadian, and at times a nomad. In the fifty years separating the two authors' work, postcolonial theory has become a part of popular culture and Hay writes self-reflexively, aware of her position and the position of her country and Mexico; the borders she must cross and the culture that she is mediating are different. Nonetheless both women agree that their travels and life in Mexico have little or no effect on the development of their voices as writers. In her Mexico journal Smart claims that in Mexico "all the sources of nourishment are cut off" (209) and that Mexico "has not made love to me" (207). However, as I argue elsewhere, "her actual works seem to suggest that her time in Mexico was central to her formation as a person and the development of her unique and experimental style as a writer" (Ganz 18). Elizabeth Hay likewise portrays her time in Mexico as one saturated with longing for the North, and yet her memories become the source of a formation of a clear sense of Canadian identity (or lack thereof). I will therefore present a case for the centrality of Mexico to the formation of these writers' senses of self as women, Canadians, and writers.

Graham Greene was traveling and writing about Mexico at the same time as Elizabeth Smart. His *Another Mexico* was published in 1939, with particular attention paid to the border which

> means more than a customs house, a passport officer, a man with a gun. Over there everything is going to be different; life is never going to be quite the same again after your passport has been stamped and you find yourself speechless among the moneychangers. The man seeking scenery imagines strange woods and unheard-of mountains; the romantic believes that the women over the border will be more beautiful

2 Elizabeth Hay's autobiographical writing about a friend living and dying of HIV/AIDS is part of a chapter entitled "Canadian Literary Representations of HIV/AIDS" in *HIV in World Cultures: Three Decades of Representation* (2013). While I am referring to the same text, *The Only Snow in Havana*, I do not anticipate overlap in the arguments or selections from the text.

> and complaisant than those at home; the unhappy man imagines at least a different hell; the suicidal traveler expects the death he never finds. The atmosphere of the border — it is like starting over again (13).

The border is an apt metaphor for the "crossing over" into another culture and "becoming" another self. It is like starting over again; likewise for Smart the act of crossing into Mexico is an attempt to discover new possibilities, whether creatively, culturally or personally.

Elizabeth Smart lived much of her life on different types of borders. She traveled in her late teens away from the upper-class protected Ottawa society of her childhood to cities and countries around the world — London, Sweden, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Ceylon, Egypt, Palestine — and Mexico. Much of her writing is transparently autobiographical; this is perhaps most evident in her diaries about her travels. However, the experiences are often rewritten in the same journal, or in writing years later. Hence it becomes clear that the experience becomes merely the pretext for Smart's experimentation with forms which characterize her writing. Any particular passage of her writing could be viewed as an attempt to draw upon many different generic forms to create new and emerging hybrid forms. *Necessary Secrets*, is not only a personal diary but a public piece of travel writing; it is difficult to classify regardless of how it participates in either genre. It is a site of Smart's early experimentations in form and genre, a technique that reaches its apotheosis in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, a work that participates in a multitude of forms somewhere on a continuum of poetry and prose. In this article Smart's writing about Mexico will be viewed under the broad rubric of travel writing.

In *The Ethics of Travel from Marco Polo to Kafka*, Syed Manzurul Islam argues that there are two types of travel: sedentary and nomadic (vii). Islam goes on to insist that "only nomadic travel deserves the name 'travel'" (vii), for in nomadic travel the traveler is forced to encounter the other face to face and in fact become "other." Elizabeth Smart was continually seeking to become "one" with the landscape, and thereby cross borders of self and representation of self as other. At the very beginning of her diary, she employs Sapphic language and imagery: "O to leap only into the

sea — to *be* sea — to be sky — to be air. I will be there. I will by willing be" (*Necessary Secrets* 198). Smart goes on to say: "The sea's rhythm is love enveloping, surrounding, adoring and expanding. The sky's melting meeting" (*Necessary Secrets* 198). The sky and sea's "melting meeting" become a metaphor for the oneness that she seeks with the world and with the changing forms of love. She sees this crossing over of the border from one to the other, from sea to sky, as the place she longs to dwell so as to create and find an altogether new form of self and other expression; to become both the lover and the beloved, even if it involves a loss of an aspect of self in order to more fully embrace the other: "And I thought after virginity is lost the world can be your lover. Before so much is clutched because so much is unknown and the vague intimations startle and alarm" (*Necessary Secrets* 196).

Smart wills herself to become the specifically Mexican landscape, shedding the Northern Canadian self of her earlier writing and becoming the travel writer who incorporates the new vista into her personal expanse:

> Under the feathery-leaved tree, with mountain on all side, the pale dried maize field rustling all around, the cactus sands in rows between, clouds billowing, the valley in a haze, I begin to feel the *earth* of Mexico. I begin to mingle. The small yellow butterfly or the escaping lizard have the same rhythm — I am at last again a continuation of the ground I walk on — the dust even and my feet have a union of harmony, and the rocks I jump from hug, render in passing their essence (*Necessary Secrets* 199).

She must become the rhythm of what she sees and translate this experience into the rhythm of language: "The small yellow butterfly or the escaping lizard have the same rhythm." Once acquainted with such rhythm she at last is able to become "a continuation of the ground I walk on" (*Necessary Secrets* 199). There is a "union" and "harmony" achieved through becoming the essence of the other.

Smart tries to find harmony with all living beings: "For to me the goal of every single soul is to achieve harmony with every surrounding it *has* to have, with every person it *has* to be with. Harmony is the key to heaven"

(*Necessary Secrets* 205). Drewey Wayne Gunn in *American and British Writers in Mexico, 1556-1973* notes that "[t]he Indian lives in harmony with the land, feeling a kinship for his small plot of ground" (97). B. Traven in *The White Rose* (1929) identifies with "certain immaterial matters such as the infinite beauty of wild flowers, or the possession of a little desert-like place, or riding an Indian pony into the rising sun early on a tropical morning, or journeying at night by a creaking *carreta* with a full moon popping between the large horns of the bullocks" (143-144). While Smart writes very little about the people, she nonetheless enters the "real" spirit of the country by entering into a harmonious relationship with the land. In fact, she rarely identified with humanity; in a prose piece, "Dig a Grave and Let Us Bury Our Mother" (1939), she refers to her relationships with people in Mexico: "There I was, going steerage to Mexico, hoping for help from geography. I welcomed the stark conditions. I took the vomiting body of humanity to my bosom" (*In the Meantime* 43-44). While she may have taken "the vomiting body of humanity to [her] bosom," this is a movement that both embraces humanity and disparages it at once. The landscape may have inspired her to associate herself with sky, sea, and earth, but her discussion of the people draws on negative portraits of Americans to depict a falseness about the Mexican experience. "[T]he American tourists' show at the phoney Mexican antique shop — the gullible tasteless condescending stupidity of American tourists. The Mexican dancers were neither Mexican nor dancers. No one smiled" (*Necessary Secrets* 206). And later she goes on to ask "Why have I not spoken of Mexico? Because it has not made love to me" (207). Smart concludes: "How did Mexico ever get its reputation as the colourful exciting alive place, where things came out in you that you didn't know you had in you, where you lived, loved, radiated?" (209). It is important to note that by 1939-40 there was already a considerably long tradition of British and American writing about Mexico. And while there is no indication in Smart's journals that she has been reading such writing, the lack of Canadian writing on the subject would suggest that her belief in Mexico as exotic derived from such material. Her invention of various "Americans," suggests the desire to move beyond the stereotype, part of her need to escape from the strictures of a genteel life in Ottawa and particularly the expectations of family and class. While she was traveling on her "pin" money, she is disgusted with American tourists: "why it is always *that* sort of people who get the time and money to travel" (215).

The journals adopt a different tone in places. Smart wonders if "[p]erhaps it is only the climate that doesn't agree with me. I am not myself [….] It's abstract, the country. You can't become part of it. You are forced to turn into yourself for nourishment […] All the sources of nourishment are cut off, so you have to turn in on yourself" (209) In a diary entry from 18 December she looks towards the landscapes of home for nourishment, but suddenly discovers its shortcomings:

> It is my mountain I run towards when I run — my woods and my rocks — but here — how can I reach them, fenced, bound, wearing my warning, dissembling heels. Saying, after all, this soft strange painful thing I must know — take outward clothes like his, listen, be hurt but say nothing, wait, with much love, all will be revealed (210).

The language of flight and being trapped, "fenced," and "bound" all contribute to the association of home with a bondage she was attempting to escape.

As she spends more time in Mexico, so her responses become more complex as she finds herself in another complicated domestic situation through her relationship with Alice Paalen and Alice's husband Wolfgang. Smart finds in Wolfgang all the attributes she perceives as characterizing the tyranny of men and causing the suffering of women. She hates Wolfgang's way of viewing the world and the suffering associated with his process of writing and creating. Smart muses: "I was thinking if it *is* really necessary to renounce living to bring forth compensating art" (223). By contrast she views all experience of the world to be comprised of joy and celebration. Writing about her sister Jane's wedding, after being reprimanded for her bourgeois sensibilities, she articulates her view thus: "[F]estivals are the rhythm of daily life — the periods that make the dance. A straight monotonous life can never be a rhythm. Surely an artist should know that? And then these occasions of abnormal and heightened loving, of excitement, bring out unknown sides, reveal things — even parties are indispensable mirrors" (224). Sometimes her views willfully exclude sorrow; in an entry dated 5 December she writes:

> Yanko's letter: — I looked out into the garden sadly, and Alice put her arm around me. When he is alone he begins to weep for the war, the used, to feel shame for his happiness and success, his inability to help. He becomes frantic with anxiety and sorrow. He saw poverty and filth on his trip, and fourteen-year-old prostitutes hanging on his arm, and his great sympathy, his fierce sense of injustice, makes him want to leap into the bloodstreams too (199).

This is the only mention that Smart makes of the Second World War while in Mexico. The events of world war are strangely absent; or perhaps not so strange when we understand her principal preoccupations:

> But I, I insist on shutting my imagination, and when I am with him his too. I insist on looking the other way, like the last pregnant woman in a desolated world. It is the vital thing to keep your eyes on the sun, to grow calm, to hang to that hope, to cherish with every ounce of love to be squeezed from the universe, the *seed*, the frail seed (199).

She believes in a higher calling to protect her from the brutality of the world: "I am at all times her (nature's) instrument. I shall continue to look the other way" (199). This attitude seems paradoxical; as a travel writer she should observe everything around her. However, much of her writing is highly personal or purely descriptive; there is no mention of Mexican politics, poverty, or personal relationships. In fact Smart expresses frustration in having to witness anything that interrupts her celebration of life and freedom – for example her description of a hummingbird that she witnesses in the bush that contrasts starkly with "Mexico City [that] slouches in its plain, tufted with pubic trees" (225). The next lines return to a description of this "animal's world" as she calls it, followed by a further celebration of her experience at "The top of the hill! Pines and a row of singing trees! Fields sloping down and all around more mountains! Now I am happy happy really happy. The wind! Impossible not to yield to joy!" (225).

In *Feminism and Geography* Gillian Rose suggests that the ways in which women explore geography, and their way of interacting with place and people is quite different to that of men. They often travel to explore their internal geography, and to broaden their understanding and experience. This seems especially characteristic of Smart's writing. The journal entry from December 21, 22, 23, where she describes Mexico as "a beautiful backdrop" (215), begins by merely mentioning the pyramids and subsequently focuses on the emotional situation with the Palaans: "Also saw Rivera, Teotihuacán and the pyramids, but mostly the tenseness, the hard knot in the stomach from their sadness and irritation" (215). Perhaps this was due to an instinct for self-preservation as well as an active pursuit of her art. Smart had grown up witnessing the "proper" role for women of her class; to choose an appropriately wealthy and successful man and raise his children. As she attests in "Dig a Grave and Let Us Bury Our Mother," the outcome was inevitable:

> Her eyes, though — she was *all* woman. She was womanhood. Her eyes then were worn, tired, sad, deceived, full of bitter knowledge, love, all the wonderful and dreadful things that ever came to woman. Her eyes like this, naked, were my mother's eyes, terribly terrifyingly near — eyes my mother had after her long scenes of hysteria and crying, of pacing up and down the veranda, wailing in her uncanny voice, 'I am going insane! I am going insane!' or moaning as she lay soft and whale-like in a lump on the bathroom floor (89).

Hence her need to seek something else in a life of art and an escape to Mexico. And yet this so-called escape prompts her to reflect once more on the terrible suffering of women at the whims of a less conventional patriarch (i.e. Wolfgang), one whose demands are misery for the sake of the muse and misery so that he can produce art. In response to these portraits of womanhood, Elizabeth Smart turns towards those aspects of life that inspire her art.

One of Smart's metaphors for the production of art is that of birthing and mothering. It seems unjustly ironic that following her long

and painful career as a writer and a mother Burridge would introduce her *Autobiographies* as follows: "But balancing the 'necessities of the Womb' against the inconvenient 'gift of the Word' was an almost impossible task, especially with four children to bring up on a small allowance" (6). Susan Stanford Friedman discusses the history of childbirth as a metaphor employed by women:

> In general, women's birth metaphors cover a wide spectrum of personal statement, reproducing the central debates over the relationship between poetics and the body. At one end of the continuum, women's birth metaphors express a fundamental acceptance of a masculinist aesthetic that separates creativity and procreativity. At the other end of the continuum is a defiant celebration of (pro)creation, a gynocentric aesthetic based on the body (66).

Smart laments the lack of opportunity to write and her inability to balance the "necessities of the Womb" with those of writing. In the poem "The Muse: His & Hers" she compares the response of the male and the female to the muse; the male begs the muse for more inspiration, while for the woman:

> Her Muse screamed
> But children louder.
> Then which strength
> Made her prouder? […]
>
> Stevie, the Emilys,
> Mrs Woolf
> By-passed the womb
> And kept the Self […]
>
> Can women do?
> Can women make?
> When the womb rests
> Animus awake? (25-7).

Prior to the arrival of her children Smart employs the birth metaphor to show the struggles to "birth" a new form of poetry:

> But what form? Infinite pains for a poem. But I need a new form even for a poem. I have used up my ones. Tricks begin to slouch about. Each word must rip virgin ground. No past effort must ease the new birth. Rather than that, the haphazard note, the unborn child, the bottled embryo (*Necessary Secrets* 202).

Smart employs language that could be characterized as gynocentric in the sense that she explores the female body and the suffering experienced by women in creating art. By making herself an instrument of nature in the Mexican landscape, she tries to determine her relationship to womanhood, motherhood, and her own mother.

While in "Dig a Grave and Let Us Bury Our Mother," Smart is explicitly writing about her sexual relationship with a woman she calls Ruth (who is undoubtedly Alice Palaan), it is evident from her dreams that she conflates her relationships with all women into a more primeval one with her mother:

> I dreamt a long dream of unscrupulous satyrs with watermelon mouths, and of escaping, and of indoor swimming pools, tiled and vaulted, and then of my mother and a flock of sexual babies. My mother had liked the preliminaries, not knowing or suspecting where they led, but when she came back from contact with the satyrs she was terrified, terrified. A satyr had tried to put his hand under her dress, she said. "Look!" she said, and she lifted her skirt and showed me how she had sewn her underskirt together into a kind of below-the-knee bloomers, with great untidy stiches in sailor's strong thread. She was defiant, but I touched her face and it was petrified. All over she was hard lumps. I was filled with compassion for her terror, arising from ignorance, so I sat down, sprawled in a chair,

> and told her to relax. "Now your toes," I said, and she relaxed her toes, and I went all the way up, being careful, I remember, not to mention any indelicate part. Gradually she thawed out, and I went away to a cafeteria to get something to eat. (*In the Meantime* 64)

This dream occurs during Smart's travels in Mexico during her sexual relationship with Alice Palaan. She displaces some of her experience of transgression onto her mother in a strange experience where mythical beings, the satyr (half animal and half human), but here babies, become part of a sexual experience that leaves her mother frozen and terrified. Her mother's life had been usurped by childbearing, and her old-fashioned protections of bloomers and strong stitches had not been able to protect her. While swimming pools and sexual satyr babies might be far from explicit, the relations that end the dream episode are rather transparent in their incestuous content. Smart writes: "and I went all the way up, being careful, I remember, not to mention any indelicate part" and then she went "to get something to eat" (64). Her mother "thaws" as a result of this process and loses her frigidity. This entire episode goes unexplored, but in the day-time episodes surrounding this passage, Smart is exploring herself as a sexual being in relation to another woman.

Smart's "losing of self" and "the melting, passionate heaving of becoming one with another" (63) recalls her earlier discussions of the sea and sky becoming one. She writes: "But the savouring, the lingering, the articulation of Sappho with her girls in the flowery grottoes. 'To me, Sappho, you are like the lotus unfolding.' Here my eyes become wild animals who have never seen human beings, they dare not watch love approaching. Their terror makes them mad for escape, or freezes them stockstill" (63). However she is also aware of her own awkwardness in this situation, calling herself "a blunderer here, heavy-handed, a new world tourist in the Buddhist temple. I hate my inexperienced tread, my brusque inadequacy" (63). Part of the problem for Smart as the writer is in the discourse she employs: "Can I not become an image gazing at an image, and not the distant analytical one, saying what next?" (63). While participating in the Sapphic tradition, there is still the problem of how to become "distant" and "analytical" while "saying what next" (63).

Smart's writing is erotically charged with the melting and meeting between women in her dreams and in the physical relationships she explores with other women. Both her mother and her lover are both tortured by the deceptions of men and destroyed by a bitterness that she herself falls prey to in her own years of suffering motherhood. Smart writes:

> How can Ruth, who calls herself all animal, who makes love to anything loveable in sight, and knows that women are to be loved before all else, and my mother with her sexual fears hidden in her leather-bound Emerson, have the same passion-wracked face? How can the worn-out eyes, criss-crossed with bitterness and knowledge that they have been deceived, still see and desire to be the image of the tender one, smiling forgivingly at the deathblows given by the child? (91)

Smart blurs the borders of others in seeing the essential oneness in all womanhood. Women's suffering, nurturing, and sexuality are all entombed in the shared womb that embraces humanity:

> Ruth, Ruth. I will be your mother again. And with the consoling kisses receive again my mother from your lips. Not to her womb again. But she into mine. I am hiding the thing that haunts me in my womb. But my womb is as large and forgiving as the world. I walk complete and free, the giver of life (91).

While Smart at this point in her life sees herself as free from the suffering of her mother and Ruth, it is not clear why she thinks her "womb is as large and forgiving as the world" and why she possesses the gift to heal and give life. Perhaps she believes that womanhood can be reborn through language. Her womb then becomes the source of this new language that makes her whole and heals women's suffering as a result.

Discussing Katherine Anne Porter's writing about Mexico, Gunn notes: "apparently the country was somehow responsible for a sudden creative realization" (103). While Smart may not have acknowledged the

influence Mexico had on her creatively, Katherine Anne Porter fully credits the experience. In an interview with Roy Newquist almost 40 years after her 1920-21 trip, she recalls:

> Mexico was wonderful […] Mexico has meant something else to me, and I can't explain it any more than I can explain how you fall in love. I hear all the analyses and theories, and I can rationalize and give you a dozen reasons; but not one of them would be right, because there are no reasons. If there are, they're so hidden in my experience, so much a part of imagination and feeling, that they can't be isolated (141).

It is interesting in relation to Smart's search for a language to express love, that Porter uses the language of falling in love to express her experience of Mexico. While Smart claims that Mexico "has not made love to me" (207), it is in fact during this critical time that she creates the language that reaches its fruition in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. In the entry dated 19 December 19 she eulogizes: "Must not love though, be fed on images?" (211). She employs language that invokes both nature and the sense most attuned to travel: "My eyes are wild animals" (212). What better place to find the new language for the crossing over of societal borders than in her travel writing and experience of loving women?

Postcolonial theory has taught us to be wary of writing that creates binaries between us and them, or in this case posits the Canadian self against the Mexican other. However, through Smart's process of becoming other her descriptions are surprisingly free of this kind of language. Remembering Gillian Rose's contention that men try to claim geography by naming and mapping, Smart rather finds a means of writing travel and landscape that crosses many borders and explores the terrain of self. She neatly inserts her writing into an existing tradition of American colonial writing that uses the Mexican landscape as a virtual *tabula rasa* on which to write the experience of the expat American or Canadian traveler in "exotic" Mexico. The problems of this position are self-consciously articulated and reflected on nearly fifty years later by Elizabeth Hay.

Hay consciously positions herself as postcolonial in her discussions of Mexico, and yet, the position of herself as a woman, as a writer, and as a

Canadian is the dramatization of a "[person] who [is] colonized and [doesn't] even know it" (73). As a travel writer and as a writer of autobiography, Hay blurs the borders of North and South, but remains rooted in a colonial and Canadian subjectivity. Although often blurring the borders of North and South, Mexico and Canada, Canadian self and colonial history, writing self and suffering subjectivity, she establishes a form of expression representing a uniquely feminine approach to travel writing concentrating on personal relationships and a mapping of the experience of self in relation to other people, the environment, and emotional history.

The Only Snow In Havana (1992) is an ambiguous blending of "autobiography, biography, and history" in order to create a new form of "arctic literature" (back cover). This blurring becomes a metaphor for the project of language to create something new. As North and South become something new by their union, through the blending of genres there is creative rebirth. Hay describes the process of translation thus: "[i] n simultaneous translation the voice of one climate runs under the voice of another, and the two become a third whose strands are still decipherable — as hot and cold — but speaking to each other. Less to each other than to us. They couple, become intimate, melt together but still exist, as in any good love story" (147). The border that is crossed is likened to that of a couple "becom[ing] intimate" or "melt[ing] together." It could be argued that the tenuous relationship between her lover of the southern climates and Mexico, Alec, and her own northern sensibilities is an extended metaphor for the creative blending of genres, articulated through the literal blending of language in simultaneous translation. The relationship Hay has with Alec is one that overlays the elements of North and South, producing an offspring that comprises elements of both, speaking Spanish and English, loving the heat and cold, dusted in talcum powder and with the flakes of the first snow. In a further elaboration on the metaphor of translation Hay writes: "[s]lowly I'm surrounding myself with things I had rejected. I take out all the Mexican objects I had stored away in boxes, all the things that made me feel inadequate and drab. I translate the south, and the south translates me" (150). The co-existence of North and South in the process of translation and in Hay's project of translating the experience into writing shapes her reading of herself and her connection to environment and ultimately creates a unique work of art — *The Only Snow in Havana*.

The apartment in New York, something of a middle ground or borderland, further illustrates this relationship between North and South:

> [i]n the recess that contains my desk, David's photograph of Yellowknife hangs alongside photographs of musk-oxen, caribou, a snow fence on Great Slave Lake. The wall next to the recess is Mexican: a bark painting, papier-mâché birds, lacquered animals, death toys on a shelf higher up. Of these two halves the northern is almost entirely black and white, the Mexican, colour" (148).

The separation of North and South is illustrated by the brightness of the Mexican objects that adorn the apartment and the black and white of the northern objects. Nonetheless both contain objects that remind the reader of the deadly demands of Mother Nature. The northern wall's icons of nature are the photographs of "caribou" and "musk oxen" and the Mexican recess contains "papier-mache birds" and "lacquered animals" and both are subject to the laws of Nature, including death.

The record of a conversation with a man at a party in New York is helpful in understanding the problems of writing as a Canadian, and more broadly the problems of language. Hay writes: "[h]e talked about a Canadian friend who was always running Canada down until he did, and then his friend defended it. But to Americans, he said, Canada seems like a milquetoast version of the United States. I nodded. Yes, to most Americans, that's what it is" (73). Hay further records the exchange as follows: "Alec tells me I write about Canadian consciousness. He looked puzzled, what's that? I agreed, it is puzzling, and I'm not sure that's what I write about, but since Alec says it, there must be some truth to it: what it's like to be colonized, to live in such a climate. What it's like, I didn't say, to be considered milquetoast" (74). While Smart seems to believe she can effectively escape the binaries of "us" and "them" by writing the self in the context of Mexico, and leaving behind her connections to home and Canada, Hay is constantly attempting to define her nationalism and its relation to her definitions of self. Hay asks: "[w]hat are the sensibilities of a country founded on something as ambivalent as fur?" (12). The ambivalence of fur is further elaborated upon by the ambivalence of both the writing and the self in the lines that follow: "[a]nimal skins become our

own skin, swinging emptily and apologetically" (13). Searching in historical Canadian documents for the answers to her own emotional make-up, Hay discusses Harold Innis' *The Fur Trade*: "[h]is economic history made me think about emotional history, a book that would chart the emotional underpinnings of Canada and show how our longing for warmth was fulfilled" (14). Like the juxtaposition of images of Mexico and Canada, Hay uses the images of fur and snow to further elaborate on her discussions of North and South. It can be seen that even within Canada these images of cold and warmth operate to create the ambiguity of a borderland. Fur and snow meet and melt somewhere between cold and warmth, and the skins of the other, the animal, "become our own skin" (13). Hay connects both the emotional ambivalence of being Canadian, and the apologetic nature of this subjectivity to the skins of the animals that she says swing "emptily and apologetically" signally again something of a borderland between the self and other, life and death. Hay continues in her comparisons of fur and snow:

> Fur travels. Snow is still. The bleak and sensual point to which we return, our sense of worth always melting. Snow appears simple and isn't. It's cold and warm, light and dark, soft and hard. Snow is solid but it flows, fur is continuous but composed of millions of hairs. Fur is warm and dark and soft. It wraps us against death and wraps us in death. Sensual violence, we wear it casually—the luxury of warmth, the memory of the trap. We can smell ambivalence, bury our fingers in it, an object on a hanger — beautiful, lonely, empty of its owner. (16)

Again, northern history emphasizes the ambivalence of the Canadian experience and the emotional history of the country. Canada is at once founded on the warmth and protection of furs and their history of death and violence. Hay then connects the snow of the north to Mexico and Mexico's experience of death and destruction. Again the images of luxury and destruction, life and death are paired to underscore the ambivalent situation of the Mexican experience: "Sweet ruin of a spoonful of sugar in coffee. Melting snow is a northern ruin, in the south civilizations melt" (16). And like the memory of furs on which Canada was built, the

sugar that came with conquest "permeates" Mexican culture: "[u]ntil the Conquest, Mexico didn't have sugar, then Cortes lingered on, permeating everything" (16).

Hay's discussion of Champlain's journals underscores two important aspects of her travel writing and autobiography -- first the difference between male and female travel writers, and then the particularly female concern of childbearing and the raising of children. Sara Mills in *Discourses of Difference* notes that "the stress that women lay on the personal and on relationships in general" (227). She also points to what she calls "'the less authoritarian stance they take *vis-à-vis* narrative voice'." Accordingly, "[t]he basic questions remain: do women's travel accounts differ from those written by men in any fundamental way, and is there a way in which travel writing is inherently gendered?" To Hay, the answer is assuredly yes. She notes with dismay that "Champlain married an eleven-year-old girl. He wrote six volumes about his life and didn't mention her once. For a long time I didn't even know her name" (22). Sara Mills is troubled by the claim of a variety of feminists who read travel writing that "[t]ravel for some women, it seems, may have offered a means of redefining themselves, assuming a different persona and becoming someone who did not exist at home" (234). For Elizabeth Smart, in many ways, this statement holds true. She escapes the confines of her upbringing to explore homosexual relationships and a bohemian artists' life-style. Hay likewise attempts a project in her writing of travel that will give definition, through travel and the exploration of travel, of herself and her Canadian identity. And yet, in her re-evaluation of previous chroniclers of the North, as a woman travel writer, she draws attention to the absence of the personal. Champlain's eleven-year-old wife is not given a name. He writes six volumes about his life and she does not appear once. The revaluation of the personal is important in the charting of the emotional history of Canada, and parallels in important ways the conflicting elements of warmth and cold, fur and snow. In a section entitled "Real Snow," Hay records the travels of Hannah, the Eskimo interpreter for Charles Hall's Arctic expedition. Again by visiting this absence, Hay engages in the feminist project of revitalizing the personal. She records the births and deaths of Hannah's children through Hall's record and then through the eyes of a mother. Hall records: "The loss was great to both of them, but to the mother it was a terrible blow. For several days after its death she was unconscious, and for a part of the time delirious. When she began to recover from this state she expressed

a longing desire to die, to be with her lost Tuk-er-lik-e-ta" (59). During her stays in the south she longs not only for her lost boy, but also for the north. Her "tortured yet beautiful handwriting" (60) laments, "I wish this. Come home again this winter sometime" and further "I some time down Hearted and worry, and worry, poor my little Johnny I lost." By reinserting the memories of the voiceless "Eskimo interpreter" of Hall's expeditions, Hay is able to give voice to her own longing for the north, and reinsert the personal dimension into the history of conquest. "Hannah was real snow. 'In hot furs in hot rooms' she was the memory of it falling and the loneliness of its melting" (58). As with Smart, childbirth and the bearing of children are both an actual reality and a metaphor for the creative process. For Hannah, the loss of her son is part of her lament for her lost culture and her longing for the north. Mothers and children are likewise part of the images of the south and Mexico, both lurking in the borders between life and death following the earthquake: "[a]s infants are pulled alive from the ruins of hospitals, we pack up death: the skeleton mask, the sugar skull with "Alec" written on the forehead, the paper cutout of Death with a scythe in its hands, the papier-mâché skeleton with a baseball cap and a grin. One baby is removed from his dead mother's arms, still alive and suckling" (31).

North and South find companionship in mother's arms, as well as being subject to the laws of nature. The comparisons of North and South are one of the ways in which Hay attempts to make sense of her Canadian identity. The comparison of cultures is never more evident than in a discussion with Alec while he is working on a class about Mexican history: "a complete civilization subjugated, the Indians demeaned, Mexicans went from reactionary to radical to reactionary with no clear motive beyond a search for identity" (20). Alec questions following this episode: "What does Canada mean?" (20). Hay acknowledges that she "couldn't tell him" (20), going on to state that "Canada has a crisis of too little identity […] and Mexico has a crisis of too much. […] Mexicans: polite and contained. Canadians, equally so. But Mexicans have pride, and Canadians don't. A slur slums it up" (20-21). Hay concludes: "But Mexicans don't belittle themselves, at least not to strangers. And they remember their past, while Canadians forget" (21). This realization about her own lack of identity and knowledge of history is seemingly part of what inspires Hay to embark autobiographically on the historical project of learning about Canada's fur trading history. Through an exploration of herself and her countries'

history she attempts to come to an understanding of her Canadian-ness. She roots this search in the furs of the early fur trade and the link that they create between North and South, cold and warmth, and through the ambivalent blurring of genres explores her own subjectivity.

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