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**THE DIASPORA IN SPACE.
THE QUESTION OF HOME, ANCESTRY AND
HERITAGE IN CELU AMBERSTONE’S “REFUGEES”**

Résumé : Les questions telles que la différence raciale, l’Alterité ou le phénomène de la diaspora ont occupé depuis longtemps une place importante dans la littérature canadienne, et de nombreux écrivains réalistes et poètes les ont étudiées. Cependant, la discussion sur la politique de l’alterité ne se limite pas uniquement à la prose réaliste, vu l’émergence et la popularité croissante de la prose spéculative, et le débat sur les tensions raciales et coloniales a trouvé un outil qui offre une nouvelle approche pour ces problèmes constituant un point de convergence pour la théorie postcoloniale. En conséquence, l’auteure de cet article vise à analyser la question de différents types de diaspora – comme la diaspora dans l’espace présentée dans « Refugees », une nouvelle de Celu Amberstone, qui réexamine la dynamique du pouvoir de Moi – Autre et revisite les traumatismes postcoloniaux d’une perspective science-fictionnelle, afin de « contre-écrire » au centre et d’attirer l’attention sur la nature non binaire des relations dans le cadre du système colonial ainsi que sur la diaspora elle-même. En prenant appui sur la théorie postcoloniale, l’article porte d’abord et avant tout sur les relations entre les descendants des membres des Premières Nations – protagonistes de « Refugees » – et sur les notions comme l’histoire, le chez-soi, les ancêtres et le patrimoine, les concepts qui exercent une influence sur la façon de construire l’identité d’une personne et sur le maintien de l’identité culturelle d’un groupe.

De plus, l’article étudie la notion d’être un Autre parmi les Autres, un Étranger parmi les Étrangers, vu qu’Amberstone joue avec la notion de différences raciales, d’ambivalence et la multitude des expériences des groupes ethniques dans son analyse des relations complexes entre les deux flux de réfugiés, ce qui montre à son tour la nature non-binaire de ces relations et permet de comprendre le caractère des tensions coloniales dans le Canada contemporain.

When it comes to speculative fiction, it is a common sentiment and a widespread practice to view this genre first and foremost as a purely escapist phenomenon, distanced from any measure of broadly understood realism and divorced from the realm of reality as we know it. This attitude, however, appears to be more

than a bit simplistic, as speculative fiction, of which science fiction is a prominent subgenre, serves arguably first and foremost as a mirror image of our world, reflecting fears, hopes and struggles of the human race, and offers, therefore, a potent vehicle that allows for novel approaches to issues which the academic world—as well as the world of literature and the world at large—has been debating for a long time. One of the most fundamental questions posed by numerous works of science fiction, as well as various science fiction theorists, is what could be called the “what if” question, allowed by the level of conceptual defamiliarization inherent in the genre, but to see it merely as a speculation devoid of any grounding in reality would seem erroneous. What the poetic language, then, according to Shklovsky, does to prevent “over-automatisation” and formulaic thinking at the level of language (16), science fiction is capable of doing on the conceptual level as well, thus allowing authors the opportunity to challenge the perception of seemingly uncomplicated, basic concepts that lie at the foundations of the Western paradigm of thought and are governed, to a large extent, by the system of binary oppositions. This is not to say, however, that this term should be seen as one which is strictly based upon Shklovsky’s model with no regard for the shift in the point of reference, or that science fiction allows defamiliarization only on the conceptual level, completely disregarding the linguistic aspect, but rather that it should be treated as an extension of Shklovsky’s ideas, one that borrows from his terminological apparatus but functions on another level, utilising a slightly different set of tools. It allows, therefore, to present the familiar in an unfamiliar way, though not only via the use of the poetic language, but mainly by presenting the conceptual framework itself as distanced from everyday experience, which provides the possibility for re-presentation and re-imagining of the colonial tensions and simultaneously emphasises the pervasiveness of the hegemonic colonial paradigm.

Similarly to Alan Clarke, who speaks of science fiction as a genre which is, in fact, surprisingly, oriented towards the present rather than the future (70), Damien Broderick, in his definition of the genre, emphasizes its metaphorical and metonymic nature and sees it, as Adam Roberts puts it, as an “open-ended cultural phenomenon, which is particularly good at reflecting times of great cultural and technological change, of which our present age is a good example” (13). The pattern of subversive denial of the old norms and establishing a new order, so characteristic of this genre, is precisely why the postcolonial literary tradition has been one of the first to recognize the possibilities of science fiction and seize it for itself, in order to use its endless world-building capabilities to construct narratives that would challenge the colonial, binary status quo and attempt to dismantle the discourse from within, using the discourse of the coloniser to infuse it with the ethnic identity of those who had been denied their voice by the colonial paradigm. As Nalo Hopkinson says in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, an anthology

of postcolonial speculative fiction: “Arguably, one of the most familiar memes of science fiction is that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives, and as I’ve said elsewhere, for many of us, that’s not a thrilling adventure story; it’s non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere” (7). Given the fact that science fiction, though potentially revolutionary and subversive, is nonetheless deeply rooted in the colonial ideals of imperial expansion and conquest, it would be possible to argue that the phenomenon of postcolonial speculative fiction has emerged as a reaction to the essentially colonialist roots of the genre (Reid 257), a certain sort of counter-discourse, which, as Helen Tiffin observes, “is dynamic, not static: it does not seek to subvert the dominant with a view to taking its place, but, in Wilson Harris’s formulation, to evolve textual strategies which continually ‘consume’ their ‘own biases’ (Harris 1985:127) at the same time as they expose and erode those of the dominant discourse (...)” (96). Thus, it would be possible to see postcolonial speculative fiction as a genre which transcends the binary nature of the imperial system and questions the most fundamental assumptions of the colonial discourse, while giving the voice back to the silenced colonial subject.

Given the historical implications, it should not be surprising, then, that postcolonial speculative fiction is a genre which seems to experience rapid growth in contemporary Canadian literary tradition, with such prominent writers as Nalo Hopkinson, Suzette Mayr or Larissa Lai gaining not only critical acclaim but also significant recognition both at home and abroad. The growing popularity of this genre can attest to the fact that, since Canada is not the Peaceable Kingdom it had been imagined to be, implementation of revisionary tactics in literature seems to be a necessity, particularly for those who had been denied the right to speak for themselves in the past, allowing for a renegotiation of concepts that the Western discourse has taken for granted and reclamation of the ancestral heritage by people of colour. Therefore, in her short story entitled “Refugees,” Celu Amberstone—in keeping with the idea of science fiction understood as a genre concerned with the present and the past as much as with the future—makes use of the possibilities offered by science fiction in order to examine the condition of indigenous communities not only of the future, but also of the present, thus offering a commentary on the state of modern-day Canadian aboriginal peoples.

Following James Clifford’s remarks concerning the reality of indigenous communities in present day and age, Amberstone seems to view this condition as first and foremost diasporic in nature, at the same time emphasising strongly the non-binary nature of the complex relationships between the elements of the hegemonic power structure and within the diaspora itself. In “Refugees,” there are no straightforward answers to the questions of home, belonging or identity, as Amberstone delves into the nuances of the

postcolonial condition, with its fractured identities and hybrid states of being, in order to construct a story which captures the multiplicity of the colonial and postcolonial experience and accentuates the complex, sometimes conflicting patterns of belonging and self-identification. Her story, therefore, aims at a re-examination of the Self-Other power dynamics and revisits the colonial traumas from the perspective of the Othered colonial subject, so that she can, in the words of Nalo Hopkinson, not so much destroy the massa's house, but rather undertake massive renovations and build herself a house of her own (8). Moreover, the author analyses the complex relations between the two waves of descendants of the First Nations and notions such as history, ancestry, home, and heritage, which directly relate to their diasporic existence and which influence the way in which the identity of the subject is constructed and the cultural identity of the group is preserved. This reflection of the dynamics within the contemporary indigenous diasporic community in Canada accentuates first and foremost the clash and generational divide among the First Nations people, who are torn between two traditions, trying to reconcile them and negotiate their identity on the tribal-urban axis.

"Refugees," structured primarily as an epistolary story but nonetheless slightly reminiscent of the oral tradition when it comes to its storytelling aspect, with its characteristic, flowing rhythms and cadences, eschews the highly individualistic, solitary hero (although the narrative is a first-person account presented by Qwalshina, a descendant of the original First Nations settlers) and focuses instead on a community of indigenous people resettled to a far-away planet of Tallav'Wahir by a race of alien Benefactors to live as a diaspora and be "preserved" in the face of extinction. In this way, the descendants of the First Nations come to occupy an extremely precarious position—they are, at the same time, at home and not at home, being colonised and colonising, rebuilding their ancestors' way of life in a new environment they adapted as refugees and at the same time challenging the colonial binary status quo of the coloniser-colonised dichotomy. This situation becomes complicated even further when a second wave of refugees—the so-called "fosters," who come from the contemporary urban diaspora of First Nations people—is relocated to Tallav'Wahir, giving rise to additional tensions within the aboriginal community. Amberstone explores those themes mainly in terms of belonging and the right to belong in a place that is not one's own, posing a question of how to differentiate between those who colonise and those who are colonised in the case of diaspora. The line, she seems to suggest, is extremely blurred in this case, exposing the inadequacy of the colonial narrative, which glorifies the fixed margin-centre dichotomy and disallows any shifts in the allocation of power. There is a sense of foreignness and displacement permeating the story, commonly associated with the condition of the diaspora, and it manifests itself explicitly at several points throughout the

story. “Tallav’Wahir is kind, but there is something in this adoptive environment that is hard on us too. We aren’t a perfect match for our new home (...)”(Amberstone 163), Qwalshina says at one point while contemplating her bond with the planet. Even earlier, at the very beginning of the story in the opening paragraph, she states: “My blood is red, an alien colour on this world” (Amberstone 161). This sentiment is repeated again, verbatim, at the end of the story, at the same time tying the narrative together (it is a cycle, the author seems to suggest, much like the cycle of colonising and being subject to colonisation) as well as emphasising the theme of displacement and being alien even at home which is not really a home to begin with. Those questions, which concern belonging and the right to belong, echo the words of James Clifford, who says:

If tribal groups survive, it is now frequently in artificially reduced and displaced conditions, with segments of their populations living in cities away from the land, temporarily or even permanently. In these conditions, the older forms of tribal cosmopolitanism (practices of travel, spiritual quest, trade, exploration, warfare, labor migrancy, visiting and political alliance) are supplemented by more properly diasporic forms (practices of long-dwelling away from home) (532).

What is particularly interesting, though, is the fact that while Clifford emphasises the physical displacement from the land as one of the most important factors in the creation of those, as he calls it, “properly diasporic” forms of existence, for Amberstone it is precisely that closeness to the land that facilitates, in part, the emergence of the diasporic community—but it is a foreign land, one that reminds of the loss of the ancestral home and accentuates the difference instead of bringing a sense of closeness to one’s heritage, at every turn emphasising the fact that the settlers are, in fact, strangers in a strange land.

For Amberstone, then, the diasporic condition and, even more importantly, the creation of the subject’s identity in the diaspora seem to be established primarily in relation to history and ancestral memory. Uprooted and displaced, the subjects can create their identity via their connection with the past rather than the present, so that the relation is temporal rather than spatial—that is, in order to define themselves, they connect with the repository of ancestral knowledge rather than look for their place within the landscape of the community of their contemporaries. This process can be characterised as a certain kind of communion accompanied by ritualistic ceremonies that intend to evoke a sense of closeness with the past. At one point the narrator says: “I cut open my arm with the ceremonial obsidian knife I carried with me, and watched my blood drip into the channel carved into the stone for that purpose. Blood. The old people say it is the carrier of ancestral memories, and our future’s promise” (Amberstone 161). Thus, memory and ritual, seen as a means of carrying and retaining memories, are regarded as the deciding factors

in preserving the ancestral heritage and establishing one's own identity as an uprooted member of the diaspora. It is the ritual, then, grounded in body, blood and earth, as opposed to technology (which carries clear undertones of the indigenous-Western dichotomy), which facilitates self-identification of the members of the diaspora, faced with colonisation and displacement, and which grounds the colonial subject and allows for access to the ancestral heritage in order to search for something that would resemble home.

The question of home and belonging constitutes one of the central themes of the story, one which is addressed both in regard to the first wave of refugees, coming from the tribal tradition, and the second wave of resettled urban indigenous people. Even though their experiences are almost polar opposites, despite their belonging to the same ethnic group (which further demonstrates the non-binary, liminal nature of relations within the colonial system and exposes the inadequacy of the simplistic, homogenous Self-Other divide), both groups experience a sense of displacement and remain keenly aware of their status as the intruders, those who do not belong. Following one of her usual ritual offerings, the protagonist says: "In the shadows along the path spectres of other races that once lived here too materialized, and watched me with solemn red eyes. Their voices whispered to me on the cool wind, but I couldn't understand their speech. What happened to those born on this world?" (Amberstone 173). What Amberstone presents here is a moment of almost straightforward realisation of the fact that they, the descendants of the First Nations people, have repeated the cycle that shaped the lives of their ancestors, only this time, they are not only colonised, but actively colonising, even though the process is, in reality, far from voluntary. In turn, the awareness of the fact that there had been life—sentient life—before them on this planet that their ancestors claimed as their own, seems to create an even greater sense of confusion and further complicates the relationship between the diaspora and the land they have come to inhabit. Therefore, if all groups—the first refugees, the newcomers, and even the Benefactors—are alien on this planet, and the indigenous people live as a diaspora, then home becomes just an abstract notion, liminal in its elusiveness. But the question remains: if they do not belong on Tallav'Wahir, where do they belong? The author never provides a definitive answer, as she seems to view the relation between the refugees and their home—wherever that home may be—as one rooted primarily in tradition and remembrance which preserve their past and allow them to create a future for themselves. She seems to suggest, therefore, that for a diaspora, home ceases to exist in the physical sense, but it becomes dependent upon their adherence to the ways of their ancestors and preserving their heritage; that is why, even after she begins to question the honesty of the Benefactors as well as the purpose of her own people, Qwalshina still keeps

making offerings to the Mother Stone, in hopes of safeguarding the only measure of home she is afforded.

However, it seems that the author sees the diasporic condition as a certain dichotomy—the ancestry and heritage of the indigenous people is preserved but also forgotten, which is manifested most explicitly when it comes to the interactions between the two waves of refugees. The fact that Qwalshina needs to relearn words like *potlatch*—which at the same time she does and does not recognise as a part of her native heritage, as the word sounds strange on her lips—indicates that for a diaspora, there is always something of their home that is permanently lost, no matter how hard they try to preserve it. Therefore, in the world of the story, the characters live while balancing on a very thin line between remembering and forgetting, the former of which is essential for their survival and the latter of which is the necessary consequence of their condition. But, as Amberstone appears to suggest by drawing the parallels between the second-wave refugees and the contemporary First Nations diaspora, those are the very same problems that plague the diasporic indigenous communities in modern-day Canada. The fact that Sleek, one of the fosters coming from the modern, urban indigenous tradition, does not recognise the elements of the tribal tradition of Qwalshina as part of her own heritage seems to imply that those who live in contemporary diasporic communities are deprived of the full access to their ancestral tradition, destroyed by the colonial attempts at eradication. It would seem, then, that it is possible to observe in the diasporic communities a certain longing for the past and the lost home, but also a realisation of the fact that it is impossible to go back and that this imagined home of their ancestors does not exist anymore, changed forever by the colonial discourse.

What is more, when it comes to the theme of the relations between the old and new waves of refugees, Amberstone analyses what could be described as various degrees of Otherness and being Other among Others, alien among aliens. First and foremost, the author plays with the notion of racial difference and the multiplicity of the ethnic experience, which, when addressed in this way, subverts and destabilises the colonial paradigm by exposing the fact that the Other is not a homogenous entity, but rather that the multitude of varying experiences contribute to the emergence of vastly different colonial subjects. This may account for the fact that, even though the refugees and the newcomers belong to the same ethnic group, their experiences as colonial subjects differ to such a significant extent that they do not recognise each other as the same people, and the refugees regard the newcomers as equally alien to the Benefactors. As a result, the two traditions to which they belong—the tribal tradition in the case of Qwalshina and the urban diaspora in the case of Sleek and other modern-day First Nations people—significantly colour their conceptions of what it means to be indigenous and how to express (or not express) their aboriginality, while the clash between the old ways of

Qwalshina and her people and the modern lifestyle of Sleek and the other recent expatriates becomes the source of tension even within the diaspora itself, manifesting the unsettling experience of being the same but not quite. The most notable example of the chasm between the cultural norms of the old and the new generation of refugees within the text is the relationship between Qwalshina and Sleek, which is initially to a large extent dependent upon the rejection of their respective values by each other, which reaches its culminating point during an argument when Sleek attempts to comfort Qwalshina after she receives the news that Tukta, her daughter, lost her baby in childbirth. At that point, Amberstone further emphasises the parallels between Tukta and Sleek that she has constructed throughout the text—they are both young or expecting mothers, and on several occasions Qwalshina remarks that Sleek reminds her in some elusive way of Tukta, at the same time recognising the disconcerting disparities between the two and the feeling of disconnect that accompanies her attempts at comparison. This metaphor allows Amberstone to, once again, accentuate the multiplicity of the indigenous experience as well as the resulting tension and further clash between the two groups of the indigenous people.

This, in turn, connected with the fact that they are all alien on the world they inhabit, raises questions of authority, adaptation and resistance, and decision-making, as the two waves of refugees try to reconcile their two worldviews within one diaspora, inadvertently changing it from within. What is perhaps most striking is the fact that, in trying to resist the process of adaptation to the customs of Tallav'Wahir, Sleek (as well as some of the other newcomers) resorts to the colonial discourse of primitive versus civilised, but what she fails to understand is that, when she calls Qwalshina and her people savage, she effectively calls herself savage as well, repeating the patterns of her own colonial experience as a member of the First Nations. The fact that she feels a certain disconnect between herself and Qwalshina and voices it by pointing to Qwalshina's supposed savagery and backwardness reveals, arguably, the level of internalisation of the colonial discourse that can be observed in some members of the indigenous communities and points to its insidiousness. What is more, Sleek seems to be completely incapable of recognising that she is, in fact, turning her own history of oppression against those who share that colonial legacy. Thus, the whole colonial paradigm is presented as severely complicated, since everything eludes the binary divide, nothing is as black and white as the colonial discourse would make it seem, challenging in this way the preconceptions perpetuated by the colonial system, and, once again, exposing the system of binary oppositions and the Self-Other dichotomy as severely lacking. What emerges, then, is a complex portrait of a diaspora in space, but—to come back for a moment to the metonymic and metaphorical properties of science fiction as well as its surprising orientation towards the present rather

than the future—this portrait also seems to reflect the situation of the diaspora in present day and age. What the author emphasises here, then, is first and foremost the temporal dimension of the diasporic community, which looks inwards, towards history and the preserved ancestral heritage embodied by collective memory in order for the members of the community to establish their identity, as well as the complexity of relations within the diaspora itself, which reflect the multiplicity of the ethnic experience and, in turn, challenge the notion of Otherness as understood by the dominant discourse.

All in all, it could be argued that in “Refugees,” by means of what could be called conceptual defamiliarization, Amberstone engages in a dialogue concerning the condition of the indigenous diaspora and at the same time exposes the inadequacies of the colonial paradigm that she writes against. Utilising the possibilities provided by the world-building capabilities of science fiction, she constructs a story which creates powerful parallels between her futuristic vision of diasporic communities in space and the reality of modern-day Canadian indigenous diaspora, living in what is most certainly not the idealised Peacable Kingdom. Her story constitutes a part of an important movement within the contemporary Canadian literary tradition, which concerns itself with the task of postcolonial writing back, subverting and reclaiming the science fiction genre, rooted deeply in the colonial ideals of imperial expansion and conquest, in order to reinvent and re-imagine the possible futures of those who had been denied the possibility to speak under the colonial paradigm.

As evidenced, Amberstone regards the indigenous diaspora as a community which establishes itself predominantly in reference to their ancestral heritage, therefore emphasising the temporal aspect of community-building over the spatial one. In her story, the link between the times of their ancestors and the present generation of refugees is established by means of ritual, grounded in blood, body and earth, allowing the characters to access the ancestral repository of knowledge and tradition on which they construct their identities. However, the author clearly implies that for everything they are capable of saving, there is much more that becomes irrevocably lost, thus drawing clear parallels with the condition of the indigenous diaspora in modern-day Canada. This story, then, is an account of remembering and forgetting, so characteristic of the diasporic communities, who strive to negotiate and preserve their identities despite long history of uprooting and displacement. Moreover, the author engages in a discussion concerning the Self-Other binary perpetuated to a large extent by the science fiction genre and exposes it as arbitrary, artificial and lacking in the face of the multiplicity of the ethnic experience which she describes. Her story blurs the boundaries of what it means to be colonised and to colonise, subverting the dominant tropes of the genre and writing back against the hegemonic model of the Self-Other dichotomy, while the way she deals with the issue of othering even within the

diasporic communities, emphasising the generational conflict and the multiplicity of the means of expression of one's aboriginality, allows for a more complex approach to the colonial and postcolonial dynamics of difference and challenges the *status quo*. At the same time, Amberstone raises questions concerning authority, adaptation and resistance, and decision-making within the diaspora, accentuating the precarious position in which her characters find themselves, subjugated and displaced, trying to reconcile their conflicting worldviews in the same way they attempt to reconcile the present with the past, at the same time trying to preserve their ancestral heritage and create a future for themselves and their descendants, much like the modern-day indigenous communities in Canada. In the end, Amberstone paints a picture of a community rife with tensions, still reliving the colonial traumas of their past, disconnected and uprooted, trying to survive, if only in part.

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