

# Against the Grain: The Canadian Desert

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The desert is a landscape seldom foregrounded; it is, as Nicole Brossard describes it, a landscape "sises à l'arrière-plan de nos pensées" (177), situated in the background of our thoughts. In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins calls the desert of the popular imagination the classic Western landscape: "Fertility, abundance, softness, fluidity, many-layeredness are at a discount here" (74), but this desert is an imaginary landscape which conflates local landforms of prairie and range with a biblical land of severe conditions and extreme temptations. And just as Edward W. Said has observed cinematic representations of Palestine that portray "a Promised land conveniently empty of any inhabitants" (159), so the American desert has required the removal of natives from view, and the slaughter of animals before it could become the available site for the cowboy legend (Egan 21) in which the solitary hero (usually male) proves capable of overcoming any hardship the landscape may offer. This erasure is an initial chapter in how "colonial discourse turns 'empty' space into inhabited place through the discourse of mapping and naming" (Ashcroft 128), marking the desert as a geographical object of desire. Thus were the deserts of Australia legally designated *terra nullius* in order to initiate the British Imperial project (Bordo 13), and it is the idea of a void, too, perhaps, that allows the United States to conduct nuclear tests in the southwestern deserts of its own land, out of sight.

At the same time that the desert has excited the Western imagination, it has also eluded it. If traditional Western narrative unfolds over time and the desert is considered a timeless landscape, then it would appear foreign and even hostile to that process. The desert's elusive and attractive qualities overlap in the Western imagination with an undifferentiated and generic East as a "space of otherness" along with a similar belief in its inscrutability and "imperviousness to change" (Schick 70). It is this conflation with the East that also renders the desert as a sexualized imagined geography: dancing boys and belly dancers are part of its erotic edge, intensified by the desert's links to

temptations, and where the practise of self denial can be a richly erotic form of self indulgence. While the "emptied" desert is rendered as space rather than place, some deserts exist as names that evoke the *frisson* of the unknown in spite of their familiarity. There is, for example, the Sahara "the schoolboy's desert" as George Bachelard calls it, the "immense horizon of sand . . . found in every school atlas" (204), inaccessible in both geographic and temporal terms. The allure of the desert begins by poring over a map or page of a book, and imagining the romance of danger, the discovery of the ancient and forgotten, and of stories usurped from a culture hidden behind some "foreign" language.

In Canada, there is no desert, at least in English, although there is a precedent for the French classical usage of "désert" to render the wilderness (Bordo 17). Configurations of land, however, have been frequent tropes in Canadian writing, and as W.H. New explains in *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, "landscape is a place, but also it is a body of attitudes in time, couched in the manner of speech and asking to be read in its own terms" (New 130). New's study of land-based metaphors in Canadian writing is preoccupied with features of the Canadian geography, although the author admits an impatience with "the barren land snowscape" that has been repeatedly evoked in writing, and the European and American assumptions about that image that have proved so influential on Canadian culture. Is it only to resist "the snowscape mindset" ("Ice Crystals" online) that a Canadian writer, steeped in winter, imagines the desert, or are there other reasons to choose that landscape as a setting for a story, or as a verbal trope?

Margaret Atwood wryly refers to the limited appeal of the Canadian landscape in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) from the colonial perspective; Canada's geography and its lack of "the exoticism of Africa, the strange fauna of Australia, or the romance of India," locate it on "the bottom rung on the status ladder of ex-British colonies" (2), another landscape joining the desert in a forgotten corner of the imagination. In spite (or because of) that dismissal, Canadians have always valued the "wilderness" over the city as a reflection of themselves. At the same time, in response to the need for an identity distinct from the United States, Canada "developed essentialist and geographical fictions to stress its innate difference," and with it, a resistance to "the interrogation of discursive systems and the intersections of knowledge, language and power" (Brydon & Tiffin 66). Over the

past couple of decades, some Canadian writers, including Atwood, have interrogated these intersections, specifically linking, for example, Canada and the desert to make space for a narrative that is more ecological than developmental, that re-reads the "emptiness" as a place great with life. The desert then is an appropriate site for authors complicating the notion of nation and of self to include a more "densely textured understanding of who 'we' are" (Niranjana 186). In this paper, I would like to look at how some Canadian writers imagine the desert, and how their choice of this site for their stories—particularly as a site for stories of translation, of love and war—goes against the grain of the dry clarity and air-tight arguments of historical narrative and critical positions, to make an unlikely space for writers and readers to swim with words and memory. In the examples that follow—from Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, Nicole Brossard's *Le désert mauve/Mauve Desert*, and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, the notion of the "desert" will function in different accents and registers as a site of narration.

### **The Blind Assassin**

I will begin with evidence of how this re-siting in Canadian writing changes the "timeless" desert found in Atwood's latest novel, *The Blind Assassin*. While the desert is not the setting for the novel, it hovers about Ontario like a mirage, skewing our versions of both. Atwood begins the novel with a fictional reconsideration of where a one might locate a story, a quest, with a number of possibilities: "dinner jackets and romance, or shipwrecks on a barren coast? You can have your pick: jungles, tropical islands, mountains. Or another dimension of space" (9). The collocation of these geographies suggests they are all viewed as extra-terrestrial. But the listener prefers another setting: a desert, with date palms and an oasis. The storyteller balks, evoking the landscape as sterile ground for the imagination unless there are props suggestive of ancient mysteries or erotic possibilities:

Not much scope, with deserts. Not many features, unless you add some tombs. Then you could have a pack of nude women who've been dead for three thousand years, with lithe, curvaceous figures, ruby-red lips, azure hair in a foam of tumbled curls, and eyes like snake-filled pits. (9)

If, as the storyteller asserts, deserts then have no intrinsic sex appeal, they do conjure a particular version of romance. The romance of the desert through

reading books about Egypt and longing to see the pyramids is an attraction not to the geography but to the props of a romance, of a "luxurious, ambitious, relentless vanished life;" where the desert is the unobtrusive white space surrounding stories of the restless rich, hardy adventurers, or perhaps, of missionaries. In *The Blind Assassin*, pulp fiction makes the desert part and parcel of a mysterious but very sexy East, as heady as Xanadu, as arousing as a belly dance. In Atwood's novel, Toronto costume balls in the late 30's abound with free translations of the idea of the Eastern desert manifest in (women's) costumes consisting of boleros, bare midriffs, and harem pants with nose veils. At roughly the same time, members of the Group of Seven (a group of artists clumped together in the same way we conflate deserts) are creating specifically Canadian wilderness icons that are landscapes devoid of human and animal presence, an imaginary ideal that became accepted as the "distinctive visual paradigm of modern Canada" (New 142). And in another neck of the woods in the 20s and the 30s, uranium is being used indiscriminately as radium in medicines or in luminous paint (Roff 55) and causing bone cancer and leukemia, even before it becomes a component of nuclear weapons and its taint a further dimension of the Western desert. Thus the sands of the desert wilderness shift to simultaneously accommodate a Western story and a stage setting of the erotic East. There is desire in this desert, but also danger in its seductive nature: "You can see how people are drawn to it, but like waterfalls or deep lakes, deserts are "places of no return" (473).

As Atwood's novel progresses, the desert of the East is replaced by the desert of Back East in Toronto, arguably the cultural heartland of anglophone Canada, reversing the predictable Canadian pattern which views the West as the wilderness frontier and the East as the site of settlement and power. The desert's timelessness is downgraded to ageing and decay and sexual fever is replaced by aridity as the seasons turn on their hinges, "the earth swings farther from the light" (222) and the air dries out, "preparing us for the Sahara of centrally heated winter. Already the ends of my thumbs are fissuring, my face withering further" (222). The seasons revolve and blur, the signs of ageing, like earlier signs of sex, are like indecipherable hieroglyphics, or a secret code; the skin is like desert sand, like winter snow: "written on, rewritten, smoothed over" (371). Evidently we have not escaped the "snowscape mindset" here, but translated the desert into it. The desert in Atwood's novel did not leave Canada,

remaining an imagined place, a kitsch reproduction, which was more a comment on the lack of authentic "culture" that Canada lacked when (inevitably) compared with the grand civilizations of Europe, specifically England. But what Terry Goldie has identified as Atwood's "assertive maple leafishness" grows increasingly rare as Canadian acts of narration move away from nationalism as an essential component of a writer's consciousness. 'Where is here' is no longer a question confined to locations above the Medicine Line/49th parallel-and probably never has been.

### **Le désert mauve/Mauve Desert**

The desert in Québécoise writer Nicole Brossard's novel is equally fictional, being in fact, the title of a book that a woman finds in a secondhand bookstore; in the process of reading it, she falls in love with it and decides to translate it. In short, the desert in *Le désert mauve* is a landscape of desire.

"Le désert est indiscriptible /The desert is indescribable," begins the novel, *Le désert mauve* (1987), twinning the landscape and the lesbian as conceptual impossibilities. In a manner reminiscent of what Bill Ashcroft describes as the "sense of dislocation between the environment and the imported language" used to describe it that marks the tension between language and the experience of colonized place (Ashcroft 153), Brossard finds both desert and lesbian *désir* to be excluded Others in the dominant cultural tradition. Her project is to open that gap and, in the lapse of language, queer it in a process that will translate a desert marked by nuclear contamination and male violence into a landscape of lesbian desire.

In describing the process of writing *Le désert mauve*, Brossard has said that "before the idea of the novel had definitely shaped itself," she knew that it would be in a "hot place, where the weather, *la température*, would be almost unbearable; people would be sweating; the light would be difficult" (*Mauve Desert: A CD ROM Translation*). That site became the American southwestern desert of Arizona and New Mexico because of its contradictions: its beauty and danger, its timelessness and history; and its decadence, the traces of Western civilization in the litter of old bottles and the abandoned, rusting cars. Marking a trajectory that is north-south in her version of the desert, Brossard links the heat and light of the desert with the cold and harsh reflective glare of sunlit snow in wintry Montreal, subjecting "the misleading

reflections" of the desert's white light to a translator's gaze. This story of the desert sparks in the instant formed by a single symbol: light, but that light is translated into the blinding glare of the sun, the blinking neon of motel signs, the restless movement of headlights, or the instantaneous flash of a gun or a bomb. Meanings ricochet off each other, prompting the novel's narrator, Mélanie, to wonder, "La réalité avait un sens, mais lequel? (28)/ Reality had a meaning, but which one?" (25), and the translator to rephrase that question as, "La réalité avait un sens. Comment?" (198)/"Reality had a meaning. How?" (15), and inviting us to wonder what makes the desert so "natural" that it draws helicopters full of tourists bent on enjoying its ecological exoticism.

In writing her novel, Brossard imagined the desert through the images and words of books she read about the desert, appropriating the flowers and cacti that excited her through their names, through language. The novel's translator, that is, the character Maude Laures, the translator within the novel, finds the desert as a dimension of her reading, and, like the process of translation, a space, a landscape, an enigma entered with each reading" (133). *Le désert mauve* was an attempt by Brossard to translate from French to French, but her descriptions of the desert landscape – the *saguaro*, *senita*, *ocotillos*, and *arroyo* – show Spanish to be a language of the desert, as well as one of colonialism. The translator, Maude Laures, increases the code switching in her version of the novel, adding more Spanish phrases to her text, and Japanese, too, to magnify the echo of nuclear destruction that resonates in *l'homme long's* beautiful equations and his poetic recitations in the "dead" language of Sanskrit. Linking the desert through language with nuclear testing gives it a "semantic density," as Nicholas Entrikin calls it, that extends far beyond the geographical location to recognize the events embedded in that space through associative memory. *L'homme long/longman* is certainly linked through language to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the original atomic bomb project at Los Alamos, New Mexico. Maude Laures re-reads both *l'homme long* and his words. She renders him more substantial, calling him *l'homme oblong/o'blongman* to increase his menace, and changes his words, "*I/am/become/Death* -maintenant nous sommes tous des fils de chiennes" (17)/ *I/am become/Death-now we are all sons of bitches*" (173), borrowed from Oppenheimer, who was himself making reference to the Bhagavad Gita, by absorbing the English into French to acknowledge Western complicity with

the insidious use of nuclear technology, while at the same time clearly making gender distinctions and rejecting inclusion in the category of 'sons of bitches'. Thus she writes, "La mort-Je/suis/la mort-Je suis un enfant d'chienne" (187)/ "Death/I/am/death-I am a sonofabitch" (173).

Even though the American desert is found in a country where a war has not been fought on its own soil for seven generations, the desert is still a site of struggle between the past and the future, "with the popular imagination constructing a past largely evacuated of machinery and a future utterly filled with it" (Detweiler 221). As Jane Detweiler points out in her essay, "Landscaping the Final Frontier," technology was a crucial factor in the settlement of the empty "deserted" spaces of the West by "centralizing such phenomena as the building of transcontinental railroads and telegraph communications, as well as the electrification of the western states" (224). Brossard peoples her desert with geometricians and scientists, and lesbian mechanics living under poisonous clouds of smoke that stop time, in a desert "pockmarked by decades of nuclear detonations" (Detweiler 218); and when she asks, "What then is the desert?" (138), it is erased of the human, traced by the human, a site simultaneously ancient, essential, and postmodern, "a site of the conjunction of the beautiful and the toxic" (Frow 1):

To erase human traces, to fascinate with these same traces, derision, the approximate calculation of the life expectancy of a tin can, of a car wreck half-buried in sand, of a traffic sign at a crossroads. Of disappearance, traces, traces amassed. The exact calculation of languages that have ended up in space like an explosion (138).

In the desert, fear can be exact, too: "beaks, fangs, stingers, forked tongue" (178), but there is another kind of fear found in the images of the motel, television, "a fear that frightens... on the screen as in thought" (179). Perhaps it is the exactness of the desert that attracts the English, famous for their own "precise behaviour" as we read in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*; and perhaps it is the uneasiness of technology so easily camouflaged by sand and deceit, on sites at the background of our thoughts that currently constitute "the secret of deserts from Unweinat to Hiroshima" (295).

### **The English Patient**

The desert holds the secrets of the English patient's identity in Ondaatje's

novel, and never relinquishes them. The titular English patient is, in fact, a character-site of the desert, a man whose intimate geography has been burnt to anonymity. Lying, dying, fixed on his bed in a room in a Tuscan ruin, the English patient occupies the dead centre of Ondaatje's narrative, and recalling the desert in terms of his own seared somatic state and through his memory, as he mediates between the nurse, thief, and sapper that share the provisional space of the abandoned villa. Brossard's interest in the desert was as a landscape of desire; her fascination in the process of translation was in the merging of tongues - those of language, yes, but those of the woman reading and the woman writing, desiring each other, giving each other ideas. While the desert is still the site of a love story and of translation, it is located in the past and reached only by drifting on a raft of morphine. The English patient is a reservoir of information and a pool of memory, "a translated subject, a liminal figure, not someone who has "gone native"...but someone whose identity has become terminally displaced through cross cultural experience" (Jay 421); and his stories of the desert are fragments of an immense and fluid interweave of narrative that no longer fits snugly together in an assured and sturdy way. This is a sabotaged narrative contained neither by genre nor nation state, a communal production of an epistemic community with transnational allegiances (Pease 2). It would mark a maple leaf waving narrative such as Atwood's as an anachronism; for Ondaatje's purpose, the national terrain of the Canadian narrative is, like the English patient, not dead exactly, but in the process of a radical translation.

The novel reminds us that the desert experienced an averting of Western eyes for hundreds of years after Herodotus, from 425 BC to the beginning of the twentieth century (133):

The nineteenth century was an age of river seekers. And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history on this pocket of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions and followed by modest lectures given at the Geographical Society in London. (133)

Love and war and endless emotion charge the explorations, but in the name of scientific objectivity, these are erased in the process of writing, much in the way that "the truth of lived communal (or personal) experience has often been totally sublimated in official narratives, institutions, and ideologies" (Said 147), or technology airbrushed out of the wilderness in order to differentiate



between the corruption of Civilization and the purity of Nature. The English patient had entered the Libyan desert as an explorer "between the wars" in 1930, and gradually become nationless, nameless. For him, the desert "could not be claimed or owned-it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East" (138-9). As an explorer, he thought he was acting alone, or in concert with a group of men who cared only for the land, although one wanted a sand dune named after him, another a village. In the reports delivered to the Royal Geographic Society, "all human and financial behaviour [lay] on the farside of the issue being discussed-which [was] the earth's surface and its 'interesting geographical problems'" (134). Thus his eye fooled, for even as it registered the brightness and faith and colour" (261) of a desert illuminated by the communal book of moonlight, he misread the implications of European presence there:

The ends of the earth are never the points on the map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever. (141)

As in Atwood and Brossard, the desert here is a destination reached by reading, and indicates how "history enters us" through maps and language. The English patient knew the desert before he had ever been there, "knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed" (18). In the wake of his seduction in and by the desert, the attraction to that geography is in the re-reading, turning the pages backwards and "retreat[ing] from the grand story ...stumb[ing] accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we can go back and forth over" (*Skin of a Lion* 148); in the English patient's case, the story of his illicit love for a married woman. But like a book, the desert is also "crowded with the world" (285), and with the aid of books in code to guide spies and armies across it, the desert has been "raped by war and shelled as if it were just sand" (257). Caravaggio, the thief, sums it up: "The trouble with us is we are all where we shouldn't be" (122). Europe is fighting wars in the "vast and silent pocket[s]" (134) of the Libyan Desert; Kip, a Sikh, is in Italy, fighting English wars.

The British army teaches him the skills and the Americans teach him further skills and the team of sappers are given lectures, are decorated and set off into the rich hills. You are being used, boyo ...Get the hell out of Dodge City. (121)

As much as the desert in *The English Patient* speaks of a "classical" European colonialism and military presence, it also evokes in its "hypnotic unreality" a remote imperial power using technology to keep its distance from the realities it seeks to control (Said 160). It is a desert then ineluctably troped with technology. Along with linguistic translation there is the translation of guns by touch; the mechanical aptitude of the English patient, like the Sikh sapper Kip's cultural "affinity" with machines; and the radio, the hearing aid, the equipment that will become miniaturized and more sophisticated surveillance weapons for all kinds of later wars. And, as David Williams reminds us in "The Politics of Cyborg Communications," Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964 that "all technology, including language as a means of processing experience, [is] a means of storing and speeding information... In such a situation all technology can be plausibly regarded as weapons" (31), which lie adjacent to the extreme actions of civilization such as the bombing of Hiroshima.

### **Anil's Ghost**

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje strips the desert narrative of its hypnotic density, melding desert and island geography to further his exploration of violence, specifically that of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist, arrives in Colombo "directly from working in sparse high-tech desert towns of the American Southwest. Although her last location, Borrego Springs, hadn't seemed, at the start, enough of a real desert to satisfy her" (148):

Too many cappuccino bars and clothing shops on the main street. But after a week she was comfortable in what was really a narrow strip of civilization, a few mid-twentieth-century luxuries surrounded by the starkness of the desert. The beauty of the place was subtle. In the southwestern deserts you need to look twice at emptiness, you needed to take your time, the air like ether, where things grew only with difficulty.

On the island of her childhood she could spit on the ground and a bush would leap up. (148)

She had been sent by a human rights group based in Geneva to try and

unearth the source of ongoing murders which have made fear endemic. The desert is sited in the background of this story, but never forgotten, offering a geographic counterpart to the *amygdala*, the somatic location for fear in "the dark aspect of the brain," and offsetting the isolated image of the island by providing an echo of its pattern in the manner of "those nineteenth century novels where brothers and sisters in different cities could feel the same pains, have the same fears" (135). Her lover is left in the desert as she was in *The English Patient*, while Anil attempts to open another container of secrets. The novel also echoes Brossard's desert, in the lesbian relationship of Anil and Leaf Niedecker, their "high speed driving in the desert, swerving back and forth in the night" (236). In Sri Lanka, Anil remembers the desert like a story: once upon a time in the West. Like a movie. But her partner, Leaf, wanders in the desert of the southwest, losing her memory as she succumbs to Alzheimer's. The Western story, like a cowboy with a willed version of Alzheimer's, forgets history and denies the communal nature of consciousness, letting wars fester beyond its borders, and profiting from the sale of weapons or other multi-use technologies; letting waste be disposed of somewhere where nobody can see it, somewhere where "we" do not live. Technology allows the domination from a distance in a way that translates "classical" European colonialism into a remote imperial power that does not occupy the land so much as preoccupy the mind and recolonize the soul. The desert here is no longer indescribable for it adheres to a familiar plot of controlling turf and trade.

As Nicole Brossard says, then, the desert is a location situated in the background of our thoughts, except for those whose lives are inextricably part of that geography, like the Aboriginal Australians living alongside the uranium mines and Maralinga and Emu Field test sites; the Navajo, Lakota and Hopi of the Four Corners (Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah) downwind of the Nevada Test Site; the Inuit, Ojibway nation and Dene Indians of Canada caught between the US's Alaska test site and the old Soviet sites of Novaya Zemlya and Semipalantinsk (Roff 55). Foregrounding the desert and making its geography intimate rather than remote is a way for Canadian writers to protest how secrets are "hidden" in locations emptied of meaningful life and written out of histories. Without boundaries the land knits us together in a communal fate that cannot be escaped, no matter how autonomous the cowboy story has insisted the human (male) is. There is no point in going off to the

desert and living in isolation, seeing civilization as corrupt and wilderness as pure and no one can ride off into the sunset: the desert offers no demarcations that give us our bearings or leave us solitary readers.

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