

(Im) Possible Nations: Chrystos and Poetry from the Borders

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Nations (im)possibles: Chrystos et poésie des frontières

Comment les régimes sexuels participent-ils dans le processus de construction de la nation? Et comment les nations aborigènes interrogent-elles la notion de nationalité? Chrystos, une poète post-coloniale et lesbienne, dérange l'idée de nation. En exploitant ses talents de façon stratégique elle déstabilise, à la fois les notions identitaires de «Premières nations» et de «nation lesbienne». Sa poésie traverse les frontières nationales et défie la ghettoïsation nationale. Ce faisant, Chrystos rend visibles les formes du pouvoir colonial qui s'étend au-delà des constructions nationalistes des frontières géographiques. Ces frontières – raciale, sexuelle, nationale – sont questionnées par la position qu'adopte Chrystos et par le style qu'elle développe dans le but de «libérer» sa poésie.

In Memory,
Kathleen Martindale
1947-1995

She looks at the Border Park fence
posts are struck into her throat, her navel
barbwire is shoved up her cunt.
Her body torn in two, half a woman on the other side
half a woman on this side
... Hers is a struggle of the flesh, a struggle of borders

Gloria Anzaldúa

In an earlier life, this essay was titled "Oh (A)ca/nada, Indeed." That paper began with Susanna Moodie's recollections in *Roughing It in the Bush*, of how "Canada" came to be named as such.

Little did the modern discoverers of America dream, when they called this country "Canada" from the exclamation of one of the exploring party, "Aca nada," – "there is nothing here" (493)

Already present in this passage are a number of tensions which structure notions of nationhood, the foremost being the categorical erasure of aboriginal nations. "America" too signifies a certain slippage in terms: today, for me it's that vast corporation south of the place from which I write. In Moodie's terms though, it still signified what was thought of as one geographical entity on this side of the Atlantic.

What was at stake in my use of Moodie in that earlier version of this essay is telling. It signalled a desire, on my part, to "Canadianize" the poet Chrystos, who, in her own words was "born ... off reservation in San Francisco of a Menominee father & a Lithuanian/Alsace-Lorraine mother" and is a "self-educated artist as well as writer ... Indigenous Land & Treaty Rights Activist ... Proud Lesbian ... Loving Tia ... Sober" – clearly resisting the identitarian, erroneous closure I wanted to enact. My desire remains to read Chrystos as a post-colonial lesbian poet – although in that earlier draft I read her as Canadian – in an effort to challenge the "straight mind" underwriting a postcolonial theory course at a Canadian university, as well as much of postcolonial theory itself. I want to foreground what seemed to me to be absent in the discussions of post-colonial theory, that is, a rigorous investigation of the ways in which regimes of sexuality are imbricated with colonial and nation building discourses.

The cover illustration of Robert J. C. Young's book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995) maps the imbrication of regimes of racism and sexuality that Young argues was always already present in colonial discourses in the nineteenth century. Entitled "Picnic (?), British East Africa, 1897," this unnerving photo shows a group of white, presumably British, men photographed with East African women, all sitting in front of a large canvas tent, almost dwarfed by its location under several very large trees. The three men, dressed in white, drape their arms possessively over the shoulders of the women. At the far right, one man holds a child on his lap. The child looks back at the

opening of the tent which is guarded by two other white men. To their left, another African woman stands looking back at the camera. The “black and white” photograph is a semaphore – a signalling apparatus which communicates meaning with movements of the body – of both colonial desire and material conquest, and while the specificities of the colonization of one ‘nation’, East Africa, are not necessarily generalizable to another, ie., North America, the importance of analyzing the function of the kind of sexual colonization flagged in the photograph, or what I want to call “colonial desire,” cannot be underestimated.

What emerges from Young’s discourse analysis of the empirical ‘how’ of that colonial machinery are the ways in which it co-exists with those machineries producing sexual identities as well. In Young’s analysis of the “endless discussions of questions of racial miscegenation,” it is possible to discern “the soft underbelly” of Foucault’s power/knowledge regimes at work in a colonial discourse “fueled by the multifarious forms of colonial desire” (Young 174). The effects of such discourses are the types of quasi-anthropological tables Young reproduces in his book, tables which not only obsessively detail the allegedly decivilizing activity of miscegenation, but also provide a tabulation of colonial desire:

Each new racial ramification of miscegenation traced an historical trajectory that betrayed a narrative of conquest, absorption and inevitable decline. For the Victorians, race and sex became history, and history spoke of race and sex ... Racial difference in the nineteenth century was constructed not only according to a fundamental binary division between black and white but also ... through the ‘computation of normalities’ and ‘degrees of deviance’ from the white norm, by means of which racial difference became identified with other forms of sexual and social perversity as degeneracy, deformation or arrested embryological development. (Young 175-80)

As if anticipating the heteronormative blindspots of Young’s argument, Lynda Hart traces the racial overdetermination of lesbian subjectivity by the colonizing and scientific gaze of late nineteenth-century sexology. In *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, (1995) Hart traces the historical configuration of the female ‘invert’ in conjunction with two other historical figures, the ‘female offender’ of, once again, nineteenth-century criminology, and the ‘narcissist’ of

psychoanalysis. Hart also traces a fourth figure through a reading of nineteenth-century sexology in general, and Havelock Ellis in particular: the racially othered and sexually 'deviant' woman. The 'computation of sexual normalities' and 'degrees of deviance' in Ellis's "Sexual Inversion in Women" (1913) are not new to readers of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, however, what is remarkable is the central place a colonializing gaze occupies in Ellis' work, especially in the long footnotes and case studies that Ellis documents from his own studies and synthesizes from other sexologists. Out of approximately twenty-six case studies and citations more than half are from colonized nations, including Brazil, "North American Indian tribes," Bali, Zanzibar, Arabic countries, Madagascar, and China. The remainder are accounts of inversion from prostitutes, female prisons, female colleges and other sex-segregated sites, working class women and women in domestic service. A small handful hail from German sexology, French literature, and American newspapers (Duggan 1992). Such staggering numbers move Hart to sardonically comment, "[i]ndeed if we were to make a composite of Ellis's 'typical' invert, she might well appear as a working-class woman of color" – even a twentieth-century woman, Chrystos perhaps (4).

The argument I am setting up through my very brief discussion of both Young and Hart is twofold. First, I am interested in the imbrication of questions of sexuality and race, and in analyzing how colonial desire functioned in the production of white nationhood. I want to interrogate forms of resistance possible in the places where sexuality and race intersect, resistances mapped by Chrystos onto numerous bodies and nations. If as Homi Bhabha suggests, the complexities of colonial power extend beyond nationalistic constructions of geographic space and imagined identity – beyond, for instance, my own desire to Canadianize Chrystos – and toward boundary disputes, no longer constructing entities such as citizen, nation and country but colonial subjects produced through an ambivalent discursive economy of difference, then how does sexual difference function within that discursive economy? If the complexities of a postcolonial moment include major shifts, overlaps and divisions within and between epistemological and discursive categories themselves, then what strategies are possible to resist not only "(post-)colonial Nation," but the identitarian, equally overdetermined, and primarily white "Lesbian Nation" as well? I want to suggest that in her poetry Chrystos fleshes out Sedgwick's axiom that

every issue of racial meaning [is] embodied through the specificities of a particular class position – and every issue of class, for instance, through the specificity of a particular gender position – so every issue of gender [is] necessarily ... embodied through the specificity of a particular sexuality, and vice versa. (1990 31)

The poetry of Chrystos crosses many discursive borders – national, racial and sexual – mapping complicated resistances which strategically deploy, then trouble, the nation(s).

Currently living in the U.S. – in the “Pacific Northwest” – but published by a small Canadian, alternative, and primarily women’s press, Chrystos defies boundaries as well as nation/al closure. Born off the reservation and raised in tenements in San Francisco, Chrystos is the author of three books of poetry: *Not Vanishing* (1988), *Dream On* (1991) and, most recently, *In Her I Am* (1993), all published by Press Gang Publishers of Vancouver. Each of her three texts, as material objects, have profoundly different lives, and it is possible to trace not only the proliferation of authorial selves through the trajectory constructed by the textual apparatus of each book, but a narrative of both “colonialism” and “desire” as well. The first, *Not Vanishing*, bears a rather eclectic but telling series of advance reviews on the back cover from well-known North American feminist writers including Gloria Anzaldúa, Pat Parker, Beth Brant, Audre Lorde, Anne Cameron, and interestingly, Kate Millett. Each of these signatures, along with the photo of Chrystos, and cover illustration, “Feather drawings and Four Directions symbol ... painted by Chrystos,” construct the author as Native. However, the first words of the text, on the acknowledgments page, resist those same terms.

Because there are so many myths and misconceptions about Native people, it is important to clarify myself to the reader ... I was not born on the reservation ... am not the “Voice” of Native women, nor representative of Native women in general ... you will find no creation myths here.

The textual apparatus of *Dream On* constructs similar tensions. Cover art, again by Chrystos, bears Native designs and the text, too, is catalogued as “Poetry/Prose/Native American Literature,” and yet the Canadian and American reviewers on the back cover – Dorothy Allison, Kitty Tsui and Jewelle Gomez – signify in slightly different ways than those on the first book. Allison’s own *Trash* and *The Women Who Hate Me*

have been published by the time *Dream On* appears, and Allison is well on her way to notoriety as a lesbian 'sex radical.' Jewell Gomez's lesbian of colour and vampire novel, *The Gilda Stories*, appears in 1991 as well. Both Gomez and Allison, Americans published in the United States by Firebrand Books, as well as Anzaldúa, Lorde, Cameron and Parker, are known to North American lesbian audiences. Yet the word "lesbian" does not appear on the covers of either *Not Vanishing* or *Dream On*, suggesting a refusal of the whiteness that might underwrite the totalizing Lesbian Nation. But by the time *In Her I Am* appears in 1993, the story told by the textual apparatus is a completely different one. Catalogued as "*Literature/Poetry/Lesbian Studies*," *In Her I Am* constructs Chrystos as a high femme. The front cover photograph shows a hand, clad in black lace coverlet, exposed fingers with short nails, holding a white rose; the back cover depicts Chrystos with wind-swept hair gazing intently into the camera, large silver labyris visible, head held up by the same hand covered in black lace. On the back cover appear reviewers Dorothy Allison (who has, since *Dream On*, published *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Skin* where she, too, identifies as femme), femme-extraordinaire, Joan Nestle (author of *Restricted Country* and *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader*), and Vancouver's lesbian sex photography collective, Kiss & Tell. Each, all white and clearly lesbian-identified praises *In Her I Am* for its "femme lust," "raucous ... lesbian sex," and "lesbian erotic poetry;" all the signifiers of Native which adorned the first two books are, at least on the covers, noticeably absent. The first acknowledgment page remembers a cat companion named in honour of Sappho, while the second acknowledges both "the working-class [butch-femme] bar world of San Francisco," butch Leslie Feinberg and her highly regarded novel, *Stone Butch Blues*. What I am suggesting is that Chrystos, as shape-shifter, strategically deploys, and then destabilizes, national, sexual and racial borders. The poetry within these books follows the trajectory which can be read in their textual apparatus. *Not Vanishing* and *Dream On* write back, as it were, to the discursive national and racial colonization of Native Americans, articulating the differences between nations in the supposed melting pot of America, while *In Her I Am* troubles the Lesbian Nation from within its own sexual borders.

Not Vanishing opens with a piece called "Crazy Grandpa Whispers," and names a profound sense of urban alienation and dislocation, seeking to invert the domestication of the land by early British colonists.

Crazy grandpa whispers
 tells me: take a pick ax to new car row hack and clear the land
 plant Hopi corn down to the sea ...
 Grandpa tells me: take back these cities
 live as your ancestors (1)

But both the city and discursive knowledge regimes continue to loom large, here and in "Vision : Bundle," functioning as ambivalent points of reference for historical memory and 'nation/al' identity.

They have our bundles split open in museums
 our dresses and shirts at auctions
 our languages on tape
 our stories in locked rare book libraries ...
 We live trapped in places we can't dig out of or move. (21)

Similarly, *Dream On*, and the poem "Winter Count" in particular, draw on those same notions of the city in their resignification of Native history in the "civilized americas."

By their own report america has killed
 forty million of us in the last century ...
 The ravage of suburbia covers our burial grounds
 our spiritual places, our homes ...
 Into the cold night I send these burning words
Never forget
america is our hitler (13)

While Chrystos documents the devastation caused by colonization and nation-building in the americas, she also writes of resistances, and in doing so, identifies across national borders. "Morning Song" both celebrates and mourns the surrender of Mohawk Warriors at Oka (149).

Time has brought me to my knees ...
 I felt myself begin to rise with the first news
 of you .

" [W]e'll have another golf course after all," she writes, lamenting both the defeat of the Mohawks, and the devastating fires lit by the occupying canadian armed forces (emphasis mine).

I can see the piles of what they call brush
but we call Life
burning in a fire that keeps no one warm cooks nothing
in a crazy blaze of their hatred whose smoke coats our lungs.

In "I Dreamt Again Tonight of that Beach," Chrystos herself "remembers," in both English and Spanish, both the living and the dead of El Salvador who fought both "discourse," and the secret police (NV 48-51); "White Girl Don't" rages at those who travel to Russia, Peru, Argentina, and South Africa to document and study torture, hunger, neglect and abuse: "I'll show you blood on every street in america / ... right here now / genocide / I'll tell you about it" (NV 74-5); "I Like to Think" honours those who struggled and resisted in South Africa, especially those Black miners who are searched and inspected as "they come from the mines / for always white owners / ... stripping our lands for the master" (DO 68, emphasis mine). The prose-poem, "Gate #9," muses about the need to document the psychic damage created by everyday acts of racism and homophobia; it also fantasizes about the need for a "guerilla warfare team" to challenge that violence, so that we can "go back to what we were thinking about before" (DO 80-2). Finally, in "I Walk in the History of My People," Chrystos identifies across temporal borders and deciphers the semaphoric text that both colonization and resistance have written on/with the 'body' of this Nation.

There are women locked in my joints ...
My red blood full of those ...
My tendons stretched brittle with anger ...
In my marrow are hungry faces ...
My knee is so badly wounded

Invoking the infamous battle at Wounded Knee, the narrator tells us that this body is weakened, but not defeated.

My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly
Anger is my crutch I hold myself upright with it
My knee is wounded
See
How I Am Still Walking (NV 7)

In "I Have Not Signed a Treaty With the U.S. Government," Chrystos resists ideological interpellation by the political machinery of "The

United States of America." In a clever counter-discourse, she hijacks that machinery itself, deploying nationalistic rhetoric to refuse it.

I have not signed a treaty with the U.S. Government
 nor has my father nor his father
 nor any grandmothers
 We don't recognize these names on old sorry paper
 Therefore we declare the United States a crazy person
 ... This U. S. is theory illusion
 terrible ceremony The United States can't dance
 ... No this U. S. is not a good idea We declare you terminated
 ... We revoke your immigration papers. (NV 71)

Addressing "The United States" in the first person, she exposes it as a discursive and, more precisely performative construct: "...Your spell is dead / Take these words back with you," and ends the text, dismissing the posture of authority which such performances rely on for their efficacy.

While *Not Vanishing* and *Dream On* both deploy and cross nation/al, colonial and racial borders, *In Her I Am* interrogates and threatens the borders which demarcate lesbian sexual identities. Before the poetry in *In Her I Am* one comes across not one but several pages of acknowledgments which are again proliferated at the end of the book. The first dedication is crucial, "for the poet Sappho ... / whose fragments of Lesbian Erotica / we cherish / as the oldest surviving record / of our natural existence," and establishes the terms at play in the text. I want to read some of the poems in this text through the discourses evoked in this dedication to Sappho.

Perhaps the most resonant signifiers here are "Sappho," and "natural existence." Many of Chrystos's poems are written in the tradition of the "oldest surviving" Sappho fragments, yet surpass those fragments as well. Rich in detail, occasional, written mostly in honor of lovers and sexual encounters, erotic and filled with lush descriptions of dripping fruit, "sticky sweet" flowers, desert, mountainous and cavernous landscapes, many of these poems draw on what might be called 'tricks of the vaginal metaphor trade'. Such conventions 'lesbianize' the landscape, inscribing lesbian lust onto those surfaces, such that "lesbian" both prefigures and emerges from a naturalized, feminized, geography. Here, for example, are fragments from the title poem, "In Her I Am."

We're hurtling through stars becoming
... Sobbing rocks fly through my heart in a river that breaks
down into my eyes where closed & black I am suddenly
red & searing hot rubies (29)

Such essentializing conventions are saturated with the representations of historically situated sexual practices – practices like butch-femme and s/m once scorned by the Lesbian Nation – in a way that undermines their own terms of reference. Butch-femme also collide with s/m in the text, and lesbian erotica is written in a substantially different form than the conventions usually suggest. The rose her in her hand on the front cover is resignified, no longer a symbol of 'love' or heterosexual romance, but transmogrified into the fist holding it, and, eventually, into fisting in the poem, "Sestina."

Taking you my fist becomes a rose
opening into our journey where wings
move over deep water ...
soaring out my love clenches & rises (43)

The naturalizing metaphors which punctuate much of this text are always similarly transformed: these signs of nature no longer signify a singular and self-present lesbian essence but rather, are now suggestive evocations of butch-femme desire.

We awaken at dawn leave each other dreaming
slip into the wild edge where reason fails
your branches shelter
mine flower ("A Soft Indentation" 41)

But "All the Best Butches" refuses the traditional and once narrowly defined roles of butch-femme, and we hear not only of a femme's desire to 'top' butches, but also of a butch's desire to be 'topped.'

All the best butches
roll over in the dark but sometimes pretend they don't
Like my sweet fist when they've had their way & mine
with me
... All the best butches ...
know exactly how
to bring out the best in me (49)

Traditional conventions and metaphors, such as those in “Your Iridescent Aqua,” “your velvet rose cunt blossoming wide” are played off against the tropes of s/m erotic writing, “I slip my long wild rice need around your flaming dance/ deep as entering you up to my wrist” and explore the complexities of s/m play and the difficulties of representing that play in language (66). “Against,” for instance, teases out the relationships between desire and prohibition, suggesting that the former is produced by the latter.

your red skin under my hand against every
 political principle we both hold you want
 me to spank you & I do
 ... My fingermarks on your ass are loving you
 tied to the bed my other hand pushing
 into our vortex of pleasure I'd agree that its wrong
 to do this (24)

“Hold Me Down” interrogates the place where the gender-play of butch-femme collides with the power-play of s/m, blurring the boundaries that used to cordon each off from the other. Here silk and ruffles, signifiers of a traditional heterosexual femininity, are now symbols of a deeply erotic and precisely ‘lesbian’ scene.

tie me to my bed with silk so I can't get away
 since I don't want
 to anyway
 Pull my skirt over my head
 face lost in hot ruffles
 Fuck me with your strap on ... (65)

“We Pretended She Was a Young Boy,” explores not only the role fantasy plays in constituting desire, but stages a very sexy make-believe scene of cross-generational desire.

We pretended she was a young boy
 who had come over to mow my lawn & I'd asked her in
 for a cool drink of lemonade ...
 I made her sit beside me on the couch while I told her
 how much I liked her hard body & the fine dew of sweat
 on her upper lip
 ... I began to rub her hard

... She had the dildo on rubbing her crotch
... She touched me without my permission pulling
the pearls until I touched her lips kissing me hard
her thrusts into me her hands on my hips
the lemonade flying across the room (21-22)

While Chrystos does identify as femme, and clearly locates herself within some of the most scorned of lesbian sex practices – butch/femme and s/m – she does resist closure on how that ‘We,’ ie., sex radicals, may or may not function. And it isn’t until the last pieces in *In Her I Am*, a journal entry called “Looking for a Blanket to Cover Myself After the Horses are Free,” and a disclaimer entitled “The Night Gown,” that we see those contingent resignifications and resistances to absolute identitarianism in this text. In the polemical “Looking for a Blanket,” Chrystos muses about the response she expects her book to receive: “I expect the rage of ‘vanilla’ (how I dislike the term for its disrespect, & yet, have no other) as well as s/m Dykes” (79). Here the narrator tells us that even though she actually doesn’t practice s/m, she defends it, celebrating “our outlaw lust” (81). In “The Night Gown,” she insists that many of the voices speaking in the text are no longer coterminous with her own,

As sex is both sacred & profane, funny as well as gross,
tender & fierce, this erotica contains many voices,
romantic as well as raunchy, some of which have since
been discarded (83)

thus calling into question not only the “author-function” of the name “Chrystos,” which does not ‘stand behind’ all of – perhaps any of – these personas as guarantor of their authenticity, but also the operations of a regime of sexuality that would have ‘truth’ secured through claims to membership in a Lesbian Nation.

Chrystos resists the formation of yet another “We,” this one a subgroup, a spin-off from the Lesbian Nation critiqued in her text, a collective identity organized this time around a common colonial history.

This is one of the canyons between us, her
traditions of a lifeline, grandmothers, ceremonies tended
... I don’t belong in her ceremonies; she thinks I do
Stubborn, I cling to the prayers I made up myself as a
child of tenements ... (“Dare” 26)

In Her I Am ends with a final dedication page called "Thanks & Bouquets." Here Chrystos enacts another undoing, continuously inhabiting and then troubling location. She ends with a list of the many complicated racial, sexual and nation/al border cross-identifications under discussion:

Thanks & Bouquets ... to all my lovers ... to the s/m community, which has been open to me despite my opinions ... to Karen Fredrickson, for the idea of returning to the phrase Women's Liberation ... and especially to the over 100 First Nations Lesbians I've met in Canada, the United States, Mexico & New Zealand whose beauty & courage help make my life possible[.] (n.p.)

It is perhaps fitting that the gift of acknowledgment Chrystos gives is a "Bouquet," given her erotic play with roses in the text. Chrystos constructs her own desires along complicated axes of identifications, the strongest perhaps, at least for the moment, being 'high femme.' Given that western culture seems to be stuck in a 'good girl/bad girl' binary when it reads female sexuality in general, Chrystos, along with Joan Nestle and Minnie Bruce Pratt, begins the long overdue, and important process of intelligently articulating dyke 'femme' sexuality. Attempting to read Chrystos as only 'post-colonial' or just 'lesbian femme sex radical,' cannot do justice to the complexities of the desires represented in her work. "Fences are psychosis," although perhaps strategically and politically necessary; yet the strength of Chrystos's work is that it strains against its own desire for "a white picket fence" (27). When such a fence does surface, the many I's of these texts jump it.

I want our wanderings to cross & recross each other
with a wind blowing away our tracks ...
("Dare" IN 27)

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