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Abstract

“My exile from the world I loved”: Codes of Exclusion in Canadian Short Fiction

The short story, through its inherent fleetingness, suggestiveness and genre-specific aesthetics of fragmentation, is a congenial medium for problematizing the social and psychological effects of exclusion on the ‘othered’ individual or community. This generic quality is at the core of Adrian Hunter’s (2007) classification of the modern short story as a ‘minor genre’ – not in the sense of being unimportant but because, due to its narrative economy, fragmentation, indeterminacy and resistance to closure, it “makes an aesthetic virtue out of social phenomena of fragmentation, dislocation and isolation” (44). That the short story displays a particularly strong tendency to engage with characters who are isolated, stigmatized and excluded due to imposed normative codes can also be observed in contemporary Canadian literature.

In my keynote, I shall demonstrate how Canadian authors have made use of the short story’s aesthetic potential and malleability to offer thought-provoking perspectives on configurations of exclusion while, at the same time, functioning as an inclusive force by giving voice to the culturally marginalized. I shall first explore the issue with regard to ethnic/racial exclusion on the example of authors such as Rohinton Mistry, Austin Clarke, Evelyn Lau, Madeleine Thien, Souvankham Thammavongsa and Caterina Edwards. How fixed gender scripts and heteronormative codes control who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ will be investigated on the example of stories by Alice Munro and Shyam Selvadurai. Thus, in Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, the 7-year-old Arjie is brutally driven from the world of the girls and pushed into his “exile from the world [he] loved” before he even knows that he is gay. In fact, *Funny Boy* – just like Andy Quan’s *Calendar Boy* – as will be demonstrated, are also memorable examples of stories that foreground the intersection of gender-related and ethnicity-related mechanisms of exclusion.

I shall round off my talk with a brief look at thought-provoking short fiction approaches to ageism and ableism. The concluding word, however, is granted to eco-fiction, that is, stories which powerfully counterbalance the exclusion of non-human voices in cultural discourses by letting nature speak.