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The Spatial Imaginary and Literary Reflections on the Political

ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of two immigrant narratives published in the francophone province of Quebec, Canada, I wish to examine the specifically literary forms of reflecting on the political, of rewriting dominant models of the nation, and even of deconstructing newer, critical models of inequality such as John Porter's vertical Canadian mosaic. The complex and fluid spatial imaginary of the narratives rewrites commonly accepted paradigms and renders them more complex in a "making visible" of social, economic and political forces. Drawing on Rancière's writing on the "politics of literature," but going beyond it by using insights from Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Rorty to understand "literary thinking," I focus on the immigrant authors Mona Latif Ghattas and Émile Ollivier.

KEYWORDS

The Politics of Literature; The Vertical Mosaic; Multiculturalism; Immigrant Writing; The Spatial Imaginary; The Specificity of Literary Thought; Mona Latif Ghattas; Émile Ollivier.

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In their discussion of art, science and philosophy as the three major forms of thought, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari make the following remarks about painting: "[...] painting is thought; vision is through thought, and the eye thinks [...]"¹. Literature, since it belongs to art, also "thinks," but not in the way in which science and philosophy do. According to Deleuze and Guattari, literature, as well as other forms of art, thinks through sensations, which include affects and percepts. The latter, percepts, are of course created through discourse in literature, and not through forms and colors on the canvas. Jean-François Lyotard also establishes links between different forms of art, linking the figural dimension, which is central to the contemplation of painting and even a landscape, to the activity of reading. The figural, he argues, is not just an aspect of painting, but also exists within and beyond discourse, which is not limited to the system of signification based on correspondences between signifiers and signifieds, but entails an active, fluid, constantly renewed work of the imagination to actualize and flesh out the meanings suggested by signs, just as the contemplation of paintings requires an active movement of the eye². The emphasis on the visual is explicitly linked to the "politics of literature" by Jacques Rancière, who argues that fiction



“reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible”; the politics of literature, in other words, does not require explicit political content, but a “carving up of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise”³. While Rancière’s view – that the political in literature can be constituted by the form in which space and time are carved up within the literary text – is very illuminating, I wish to go back to the work of both Lyotard and that of Deleuze and Guattari in order to examine at greater length the specifically literary dimension of this carving up. How, in other words, is political thinking in literature constituted as a *literary form of thought*? How does it operate through particular images and textual configurations that elicit active reader participation in rethinking the political and questioning dominant national imaginaries? My particular emphasis will be on immigrant writing in the francophone province of Quebec in Canada. The complexity of the intercultural dynamics of Montreal, with its bilingual history (English and French), its situation within a province that is home to several different native peoples speaking their traditional languages (including Cree, Mohawk, and Innu), and its status as a magnet for newer immigrants and refugees from all parts of the world, explains why its literature is often very fertile ground for thinking through some strategies of literary rewritings of the political.

Since Rancière explicitly linked the political to form in literature, it is useful to examine his arguments in greater detail. The first concerns the “way in which the world is visible for us”⁴, in other words, the representation of marginalized sectors of society, as well as the juxtaposition of diverse social groups, of individuals belonging to different circles, and of objects linked to various lifestyles. To give an example, we could go beyond Rancière’s emphasis on French

nineteenth century literature and think of the emergence of the ordinary man in Pushkin and Dostoyevsky, the appearance on the center stage of fiction of the impecunious minor bureaucrat dwelling in a miserable tenement building, or the rich variety of social types, from the indigent to the aristocratic, mingling on Nevsky Prospect in Gogol. Rancière compares literature to the social sciences, which, he argues, have been influenced by literature’s particular way of “bearing witness to the hidden truth about a society, to tell the truth about the surface by tunneling into the depths and then formulating the unconscious social text”⁵. He sees this activity not only as a new form of interpreting society, but as an intervention into social functioning itself, a “transformation of the world”, through the creation of a “new landscape of the common”⁶. The second component of Rancière’s argument concerns the way in which speech is made visible. In other words, what is considered as noise (the complaints of the common people and marginalized sectors), and what is considered as speech worthy of listening to (the opinions voiced by powerful members of society), should be rethought. Rancière urges us to see how particular narratives allow us to “quit the stage of speech carried by sonorous voices in order to decipher the testimonies that society itself offers for us to read, to disinter those society unwittingly and unintentionally deposits in its dark underground shoals”⁷.

In the context of Quebec writing, the “noise” of immigrant voices has indeed been transformed into “speech” for the past three decades, and “migrant literature” has become an important area of academic study, as an increasing number of newcomers contribute to the literary scene, which used to be limited to anglophone and francophone fiction. In English Canada, the older but equivalent concept of “minority” or “immigrant” writing refers to an even longer



tradition, although it is important to distinguish between the older designations and the more recent term "migrant writing", which stresses the increased mobility and transnational connections of our contemporary world. Today, Quebec authors of many origins regularly move to center stage by producing bestsellers, receiving prestigious literary prizes, appearing in the public media, and being elected to venerable cultural institutions such as the *Académie française* in Paris, as in the case of Dany Laferrière, the francophone writer of Haitian origin. These newer voices often provide moving accounts of the immigrant experience, of exile, of economic hardship and of exclusion. Many of them thus provide us with what Deleuze and Guattari would describe as new literary percepts (as opposed to perception in our normal daily experience). According to these two philosophers, the role of art and literature is "to make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become"⁸. These forces include the experience of exile, but they go much further in their reflection on the functioning of central political, social and economic forces, such as marginalization, racism and exploitation in a difficult job market. Literary works participate in what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls the "redescription" of society, a task adopted by "ironists" (such as novelists) who question hegemonic discourses and beliefs and provide new ways of seeing groups, institutions, governments and revolutionaries, contrary to "metaphysicians" who do not doubt their "final vocabulary"⁹ or set of beliefs and cognitive models. In the case of some Quebec immigrant novels, short stories and poems, central paradigms of the national imaginary are indeed deconstructed or "made perceptible" in other ways, or, to use Rorty's term, redescribed.

With respect to the different ways in which literature makes the world visible, we

need to go further in our examination of the rhetoric of Rancière's discourse itself.

Even more than his insistence on the politics of literature as the transformation of noise into speech as we listen to previously marginalized members of society who had remained mute on the sidelines, and more than his emphasis on the different carving up of the visible, his manner of presenting his views illustrates and sheds light on the specifically literary rewriting of the visible. He employs a highly spatialized discourse, with references to the upper and the lower, the depths of society, dark underground shoals, tunneling and the horizontal juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements in one single space, reminiscent of Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Rancière's discourse is impregnated with "literary thinking," in which much of his argument is made not through expository discourse, but through metaphors, images and spatial figures. In literature, this form of meaning construction is even more central. It is thus not merely a question of showing different life experiences and giving voice to the marginalized, but of creating a complex figuration of social realities through the literary, the imaginary and the symbolic, and, to go back to Deleuze and Guattari, of forging new percepts and affects. Images, symbols and metaphors are, of course, central to many discourses. An example would be the cave in Plato's *Republic*, or the circle as a structuring image in certain philosophical texts. In post-modern philosophical writing such as that of Deleuze and Guattari, images such as the rhizome, the tree and the nomad are often central heuristic devices that shape their discourse. But it is in fiction that the figural dimension, and especially the spatial imaginary, allows us to explore the multiple aspects of lived experience. Spatiality in fiction, however, is not just a matter of simple geometrical divisions within the



fictional world, such as distinctions between outside and inside, center and margins, basement and main floor, but a way of deconstructing these binaries, or showing how these binaries are fluid and changing constructions of thought that vary with different individuals and groups. This gives us a sense of the complexity of our experience, and of that of groups and individuals we may consider as “other.”

It is through symbols, metaphors, images and spatial figures that literature questions common truths, ethnic stereotypes, certain perceptions of the immigrant experience and dominant ideologies. This also leads to the creation of forms of empathic vision, to use Jill Bennett’s term¹⁰, which go beyond simply showing us a different reality. As Rorty remarked, “novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do”¹¹. In order to reflect further on these issues, I will discuss two immigrant narratives that use complex spatial figurations to shed light on the intricacy of lived experience, the emergence of new subjectivities, the criticism of dominant national paradigms through multiple, shifting, contradictory perspectives that deconstruct unitary, geometric configurations of space in order to intervene in a specifically literary rethinking of the political. These narratives also “sensitize us to the pain” of various subjects in their intersubjective experience of lived space.

In my first example, the novel *Le double conte de l’exil* (The double story of exile) by Mona Latif Ghattas, a Quebec author of Egyptian origin,¹² the world made visible is that of a group of female laundry workers on the fourth level of the basement of a Montreal hospital. Their position as employees at the bottom of the social

ladder, cleaning the soiled and contaminated linen of the sick and dying, competing with others for low wages, and performing work consisting of repetitive movements leading to injury, is emphasized by the spatial location of their work area. The windowless space of the basement signals not only their total invisibility as subjects, but also their lack of any possibility of leaving this work space for a better one and improving their material existence. The main focalizer is the indigenous protagonist Madeleine, who is intensely aware of the sensescape of the laundry (the visual, but also the sounds produced by the laundry machines) and reconstructs her environment in her imagination as a train station in which noisy engines come and go and in which she arrives from a voyage. The imaginary redescription of the basement as a station reminds us of Marc Augé’s concept of the non-place,¹³ a site of mass transit in which human interaction is kept to a minimum, and in which the users temporarily lose connections to the past, and to group or family identity, as they are constituted as users rather than individuals. Augé refers to stations and airports as postmodern or supermodern non-places.

Madeleine’s imaginary reconstruction of her surroundings foreshadows the subsequent critique of the integration of immigrants in society by figuring the workplace as a site that others would consider a dehumanizing non-place. However, Madeleine is described as happy as she works in silence and imagines returning from abroad. The apparently paradoxical conjunction of her positive feelings and the dysphoric environment, which will be developed later in the novel, signals a much more dire reality – that of indigenous people who are subjected to violence in their own society without any means of defending themselves. This is in fact Madeleine’s own experience. In comparison, the basement is a secure space.



Space is shown as fluid and multiple, as it is reconstructed in the imagination in order to contain within itself several realities and connections to other places, either illusory or remembered. Madeleine's consciousness moves not only between perception and illusion, but also between her lived present reality and her memories. In a similar manner, another apparently safe place, her room, becomes transformed in her nightmares into the tavern of her childhood – but in this case, the memory is traumatic, since it is there that she was sexually abused. The description of the tavern, with its cheap and worn furnishings, fumes of stale beer and vomit, and lugubrious orange lamp, sheds light on the life of native people and constitutes a harsh criticism of the living conditions of the First Nations. Their hidden reality is made visible without any explicit discussion of their economic marginalization and without an obvious condemnation of the government. Madeleine's terror at seeing her own face, the “face of a terrified child”¹⁴, explains her relative contentment in the basement. The image of her face is a central percept, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term, which emphasizes the horror of traumatic memories and constitutes an empathic vision. Instead of signaling a positive childhood memory of a place of social interaction where indigenous people can maintain their community, language and culture, the striking image of the face conjures up a nightmarish image of being trapped in an enclosed space of terror and subjected to abuse, possibly, although this is not explicitly stated, by one's own people.

The making visible of social forces by the image of the terrified face constitutes a specifically literary form of thinking (through percept and affect, instead of descriptive and expository discourse) about marginalization, abuse and exclusion. It also rewrites a very old cliché, that of indiscriminate alcohol consumption by native people, in order to

highlight the traumatic effects of this on members of their own community from the point of view of an insider. Furthermore, the striking image of the face is set within a series of contexts that comment on each other and form a network of connections. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize movement within art, which is directed by what they call “frames” that “hold the compounds of sensations,” but also by a “*deframing* following lines of flight that pass through the territory only in order to open it onto the universe” in a constant interplay of geometrical figures on the one hand and vectors or cosmic forces such as disorder and dissolution on the other.¹⁵ The three main frames in Latif Ghattas's novel, namely, the basement, the rented room and the childhood tavern evoked at the beginning, constantly give rise to other trajectories: the illusory travels imagined in the basement, but especially the lines of flight leading toward the Middle East through the memories of Fève, a refugee from a war-torn country whom Madeleine lodges in her apartment. This opens up the making visible of the world to global realities, which include violence and destruction abroad. The voice of the traumatized refugee, whom Madeleine listens to with great empathy, contrasts with the silence of herself as an outsider in the group of laundry workers and the terror she experienced as a mute victim of childhood abuse. The hospital basement is not merely a metaphor of a vertical mosaic, the expression used by the historian John Porter¹⁶ to deconstruct the dominant metaphor of the Canadian mosaic as a patchwork of different cultures coexisting peacefully, and to reconfigure the image as vertical in order to stress inequality between various sectors of the population. In Latif Ghattas' novel, the spatial imaginary is constantly reconfigured to draw the reader into percepts and affects linked to various characters in a



literary intervention into the political that goes beyond static cognitive models, whether hegemonic and ideological, such as the mosaic, or critical, as in the case of Porter's redescription of the mosaic as vertical, in order to stress the potential vulnerability of all members of society.

The laundry basement of the hospital is the scene of an allegory of nation-building in a multicultural society, but this allegory is shown to be mobile, multifaceted and polysemous. A better term may be that of rhizomic allegorization. On a superficial level, the description of the workers appears as a simple allegory. The three white female employees (the "league of the three Claras"¹⁷) working with the indigenous Madeleine represent the three main cultural groups in Montreal: Clairette Légaré is French Canadian, Clarence Lindsay English Canadian, and Clara Leibovitch Jewish. All three started as employees of the laundry after Madeleine, described in a flashback as an innocent young girl, thus suggesting stereotypes of the childlike noble savage. The fact that Madeleine was there before the others also allegorizes the colonial past, since the European colonizers and later European immigrants arrived in a country already populated by native peoples. The connection with the trauma and lasting effects of colonization is reinforced in a later scene through Madeleine's memory of a burned totem pole, in front of which her grandfather shed tears of rage, a memory triggered by her chance encounter with an elderly native man in a bus. As another image of transience, another non-place, the moving public conveyance constitutes a metaphorical making visible of social and political forces, namely, the marginalization and uprooting of the first inhabitants of the nation whose place has been transformed by the colonial encounter into a non-place. To Madeleine, and the much more recently

hired Asian worker in the laundry, the three Claras represent a homogeneous block of white workers, symbolic of the emergence of a new nation in which European immigrants constituted the dominant sector and forged the national imaginary. Although the white workers appear to be united through a shared identity in the eyes of outsiders, the emphasis on the three different names, associated with three cultural groups, reminds us that new political entities emerge from previously antagonistic communities. Anglo-French tensions in Quebec, Christian-Jewish conflict and the memories of the Shoah seem to dissolve in the consolidation of a nation based on forgetting. Rather than a static metaphor of race-base solidarity in the face of a non-European other, the three Claras represent a fluid and multilayered space of different temporalities, a palimpsest of various historical periods, in which the solidarities of the present still contain traces of past conflicts and exclusions. These traces are made visible, or rather, audible, in the conversations between the Claras, who mention ties between immigrants and family members still in Europe, difficult relations between themselves and their Montreal neighbors belonging to different ethnoracial groups, and memories of the hardships faced by their own ancestors in a complex rhizome of interpersonal and diachronic connections that allegorize the bubbling cauldron of social forces. The initial one-dimensional allegory of nation-building is thus replaced by a fluid rhizomic allegorization that constitutes a permanent becoming.

Porter's ethnic vertical mosaic, which has itself become a dominant metaphor in descriptions of the multicultural nation, is redescrbed in the novel through the central presence of invisible and subterranean *white* members of society, as well as that of native persons and non-European immigrants, contrary to his vertical mosaic in which certain European groups occupied the upper



echelons. The traditional ethnic hierarchy is thus problematized in the rhizomic allegorization of more fluid solidarities and struggles that go beyond relatively fixed ethnic divisions and inequalities. Clarence Lindsay, who, as an anglophone, would normally represent the English-speaking elite, and tower at the top of the mosaic above all other groups, including French-Canadians before the Quiet Revolution of the nineteen sixties and seventies, is just as marginalized as the other Claras of the novel. As for the Asian newcomer, he is seen as a threat, not as a downtrodden immigrant to be kept at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. What the figure of the laundry suggests is not a stable structure of inequality based on traditional relations between elites and other groups, but a node of socio-economic forces operating beyond older hierarchies. The reference to the basement as a “huge hold of a ship, without a captain and without a ship’s boy”¹⁸, with enormous machines humming in the belly of the beast, conjures up a posthuman system of command that continues to operate in the absence of human agency, relentlessly absorbing and expelling items of laundry, as well as expendable workers. The machine/beast (the text designates the machines as an ogre) disregards any merely human distinctions, whether ethnic, religious or racial, in its devouring of humans and non-humans. As the female laundry workers eat their sandwiches, sitting on their reserved bench in the corridor, the young Asian employee remains standing, ready to take their place in the cogs of production. The spatial figure of the bench, containing traces of the past in a palimpsest of previous periods of Anglo-French and Christian-Jewish conflict, is contained in a more encompassing space including the standing Asian employee, in a making visible of present and impending forces, as newer immigrants replace the older workforce. Contrary to older immigrant

writing, this newer migrant fiction represents long-term residents and newcomers not merely in terms of interpersonal relations, but according to a posthuman global paradigm of production.

In this fluid spatial configuration, established hierarchies disappear. Contrary to one version of the American metaphor of the melting pot, however, in which diverse people of many origins are purified in the cauldron of Americanization and emerge as new men and women blending into the fabric of the nation, Latif Ghattas’ immigrants and native peoples retain many of their differences, although not in a simple, ethnic paradigm of juxtaposed cultures. The reference to the variegated and colored food items eaten and shared by the three Claras point to this essential difference in the national imaginary, which stresses multiculturalism rather than the melting pot. In their study of multiculturalism in Canada, Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott define the “new mosaic,” as opposed to the old one that remains in the private sphere, as a form of diversity that is an “integral and legitimate component of Canadian society, conferring on minorities the right to compete as equals for scarce resources”¹⁹. That certainly seems to apply, in an ironic way, to the situation depicted in the novel, in which the minorities, and even the two majorities (English and French speaking) compete for scarce resources. Their further explanation, however, does not; namely, that the mosaic “not only focuses on celebrating diversity, but also acknowledges a new multicultural agenda based on social equity, antiracism, and institutional change”²⁰. While the novel’s workers compete equally for scarce resources, racism is in fact represented as a by-product of this process, which entails the co-constituency of different groups. The metaphorization of the bench does not quite correspond to the



American model of the melting pot either, graphically described by the two sociologists as a “two-way process in which the dominant and the subordinate sectors interact to forge a new entity, in much the same way as different paints in a bucket,” with the conclusion that this fusion “has not substantially altered the American race relations ‘pot’: it remains unmistakably white, capitalist, and liberal in orientation”²¹.

The novel’s spatialization of the divisions between the sitting and the standing deconstructs any possibility of forging a new entity including everyone, albeit on different rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. While the occupants of the bench are white in the novel, the standing figure of the Asian employee suggests that the group will inevitably become racially variegated, but others will always be left outside the newly constituted group that occupies a limited space on the bench. The latter is of course a metaphorical figuration of capitalism, as I will discuss further on. All occupants, past, present and future, are food for the machines. And this includes the dominant majority.

The novel, however, does not limit its spatial figuration to a subtle allegorization of a jumbled, mobile, mosaic and emerging blocks of solidarity. It makes visible not only social forces, but also singular percepts and affects that clash with each other and provide a constantly moving focus. While the description of the three Claras at the beginning corresponds to the perception of an excluded, non-white, bystander, who sees the group as an impenetrable bastion of white privilege, a later passage in the novel presents the perspective of the three Claras as they contemplate the Asian employee with fear and suspicion, and give voice to common stereotypes of the impenetrable Asian with an inexpressive demeanor. Whereas the indigenous Madeleine admires his dexterity and professionalism, the three Claras stare at

him with intense, undefined, “epidermal” and “epidemic” or contagious hatred based on prejudice, which is described as a universal “human alchemy”²². Fearing that their jobs are threatened by newer workers who will eventually replace them (when one of them was injured, she was in fact replaced temporarily by the Asian employee’s mother), the three Claras experience a new combative solidarity in the face of the newcomer.

It is at this point that the central image of the bench acquires its greatest force as a figuration of the political. Whereas it initially allegorized the formation of solidarities and the emergence of an imagined nation in a diversified society, it now makes visible the machinations of the humming beast of capitalist production (symbolized by the laundry machines), which blindly ingests and excretes workers. The bench, as a finite material object, can only accommodate a limited number of workers, thus symbolizing the competitive nature of the work market in which many workers fight for the crumbs of a low salary. As newer workers take place on the bench, after waiting on the margins like the young Asian employee, the older workers will inevitably be expelled in a game of musical chairs. The bench, contrary to a static figure, is a figure of mobility, but one that is constituted by infinite repetitions of the same, in which no radically new political subject can come into being. The possibility of genuine change, of a significant political event, is foreclosed by the static dynamics of the metaphorical bench. In the process, new solidarities do emerge, but these are in continuation with the same laws underlying the constitution of older solidarities, which were created by conflict, the representation of others as threatening, and various self-other differentiations. As Aletta Norval reminds us, “the possibility of creating any identity at all is related to the exclusion, and in many cases the silencing of the other”²³. The racial hatred that grips



the three Claras when their positions are threatened does not herald the emergence of a new political subject that desires change. Trapped in the windowless rooms of the lower basement, surrounded by the roaring beast of machines, and forced to struggle for a temporary place on the metaphorical bench, the employees are subject to posthuman forces that perpetuate themselves and make any radical change unthinkable.

The spatial imaginary, linking the conquest of the Americas, the marginalization of native peoples, the integration of immigrants, and the expulsion of unwanted refugees (Fève is deported at the end of the novel), makes visible the invisible, and does so without taking sides in what could become a simplistic allegory of exploitation and racism. Several perspectives collide in the fluid spatiality of the narrative, in which empathic visions alternate, as white employees are both exploited and xenophobic, and refugees are both hard-working and dishonest. The literary reflection on the political provides a complex picture in which the one-sidedness of the idealized horizontal mosaic is deconstructed by the verticality of socio-economic positions, while the critical metaphor of the vertical mosaic is dissolved by placing dominant groups at the bottom of the process of production as well as non-European groups constructed as racial others. The reader is drawn into changing empathic relations with the various perspectives created in the text, so that no simplistic criticism of white privilege and racism can be maintained. The predicament of English-speaking Clarence is made visible, as is that of the Oriental Fève or the Asian newcomer. Furthermore, the villain in the novel is not always a member of a dominant group. A Moroccan immigrant, for example, has led Clarence's husband into bankruptcy through fraud, subsequently fleeing the country only to return three years later with a Canadian passport. The reference to Clairette's brother-

in-law, whose means of survival are seriously affected by the influx of Haitian taxi drivers, is not simply a criticism of the cliché of immigrants who steal jobs. While it does reproduce the frequently heard complaint, it also casts Clairette as a victim of economic forces of supply and demand. The litany of racial stereotypes voiced by the three Claras – Egyptians in Oriental robes drinking coffee, Latin American drug traffickers, Iranian women in chadors, orthodox Jews with side locks, the Babelic confusion of languages pervading the metro system – is immediately followed by a change of scene in which Clarence, laid off temporarily due to a work-related injury, returns to work while still suffering, since she is afraid of losing her job permanently if she misses a single day's work. The three Claras are in a similar predicament, since Clara has a wrist injury and Clarence experiences back pain. Their hate-filled gaze as the Asian newcomer accomplishes his tasks with admirable diligence and efficiency is explicitly set in the context of daily drudgery, economic hardship, and fear of losing their livelihood. The novel does not excuse their racist remarks, but draws the reader into a deeper understanding of the deleterious effects of ruthless work-force competition and insecurity, and their need for a geoemotional anchor in a shared space of belonging.

The bench, on which the conversations take place, thus becomes an integral part of multiple, fluid, and contrasting spatialities extending from the basement to other continents. Contrary to a simple allegory with identifiable correspondences, the bench becomes a making visible of newer forms of conceptualizing space. Rather than seeing space as geometrically structured, unitary, and distinct from other spaces, the bench represents the multifaceted nature of constructed space as a series of relations, of Deleuzian lines of flight, of rhizomatic connections that exist simultaneously. The



metaphorical bench becomes a focal point for tensions, but also a starting point for multiple spatialities that shed light on the processes evolving in the basement. The connections between the Claras and their low-income neighborhoods, established by the daily movement of the commuters between their homes and place of work, and their concrete quotidian dwelling and negotiations of local space within these neighborhoods characterized by ethnic tensions, are superimposed on larger spatialities of the memory and the imagination, as the three Claras remember their own backgrounds or that of family members living in other countries.

What keeps the inhabitants of the metaphorical basement in constant movement is primarily economic forces and unequal distribution of wealth, whereas ethnic and racial tensions and inequalities, although very important, are shown partially as a by-product. A significant detail is the difficulty experienced by Clara Leibovitch's sister-in-law, whose immigration file was held up for six years owing to her lack of financial means, and who finally enters the country as a menial household employee, while a wealthy immigrant from a presumably non-European country (described simply as a country at war), is accepted immediately in return for a substantial investment in the country, thus benefiting from the privileged investor status. Inequality is represented as a characteristic of not only the metaphorical bench of Canadian workers, but also as a global phenomenon. The bench, however, is the central spatial metaphor that redescribes the ubiquity of racism and other forms of antagonism as a product of rivalry, of the struggle for survival, of the competition between workers, in a series of closed systems that are repeated elsewhere. The metaphorical bench is not expandable, since jobs and opportunities are limited.

Exclusion and hardship in the novel, however, are not linked only to the relentless functioning of the capitalist system. In alternating chapters, the text is divided into roughly two equal parts, that of the events unfolding in the hospital laundry, and the events remembered by Fève and narrated to Madeleine. The juxtaposition of these two narratives underlines certain injustices in the treatment of refugees. The image of Clara Leibovitch's grandmother, fleeing from the Spanish Civil War as an impoverished widow with four daughters, of whom one suffers from tuberculosis, represents the ubiquitous model of the model immigrant. As Clara returns to memories of her family history, she describes how her grandmother worked tirelessly as a seamstress, and apparently learned the language of the country in one month. This image from the past forms a striking contrast with an even more horrific description of Fève's experiences in the war-torn Middle East, when his house was bombed, his family killed, and his girlfriend raped, in a description reminiscent of today's violence in the Middle East. The immigration officers, however, deport him because his identification papers were destroyed in the war. The bench, as a central spatial metaphor, provides the narrative framing of this injustice, since it signals the forces of discrimination, of selection, and of exclusion: between those sitting, those standing, and those who are expelled from the work place, as well as other forms of drawing lines, such as decisions concerning which immigrants and refugees will be accepted and which ones rejected.

At the end of the novel, the figure of the bench is replaced by a very different image – that of a circle of children sitting around a campfire on the indigenous reservation to which Madeleine finally returns. The description of the scene constitutes an apparently nostalgic representation of innocent and peaceful native communities, whose



members congregate in the evening in order to keep alive their oral traditions by telling each other stories. It also seems to suggest that the indigenous Madeleine, after having attempted to integrate into dominant society, rejects European civilization in order to return to her community. The circle, however, also provides a different model for conceptualizing intercultural relations that contrasts markedly with that of the bench. The circular structure suggests community, but also potential expansion and greater inclusiveness, which the linear bench with its limited dimensions does not. A significant detail in this depiction is the nature of the stories told by Madeleine. Rather than repeating the traditions of her community's immemorial past, which would indicate the fixity of identities and boundary maintenance between communities, she tells the children tales based on the memoirs of the deported Fève, whose trauma in the Middle East is linked to that of other communities having suffered violence in the past. The circle is thus not a metaphor for perfection and closure within strict lines drawn around a center, but one of a mobile sphere of intercultural understanding and empathy, whose perimeters are not fixed. Although the circle is presented as an alternative, however, it is situated on a reservation, whereas the bench remains in place in the urban center as a spatial model of political and economic forces that the novel depicts as a permanent situation.

By concentrating on the complex spatial imaginary of Latif Ghattas' novel, I wanted to show not only how a particular author of immigrant background reimagines the political, and especially the central metaphor of the Canadian national mosaic, but also how the literary imagination can constitute a specific kind of reflection on the political. Latif Ghattas' novel, in other words, should not be seen as a mere illustration or example of immigrant experience, or a

criticism of dominant models which the reader consumes passively; reading it attentively constitutes an activity of literary thought – perceptual and affective – that can affect our participation in the shaping of the political. Other immigrant narratives in Quebec also redescribe dominant social and political models in a relatively pessimistic creation of spatial images that lead us to consider integration in a different light. In a short story by Émile Ollivier,²⁴ a Quebec author of Haitian origin, the depiction of the form and functioning of a circus situated at the margins of an urban center constitutes a heterotopia, which stands apart from, but also provides a deforming mirror image of society in general. In this story, it is also the central ideogeme of the Canadian mosaic that is made visible in new and more complex ways. The circus performers move on different planes of verticality, with the tightrope and trapeze artists at the top, and the lion tamer and other performers standing or walking on ground level. Two Haitian lion impersonators, dressed in costumes that resemble the appearance of a real lion so closely that one of the two, Manès, believes he is facing an actual beast, crawl on all fours under the threatening whip of the tamer.

In this version of the vertical mosaic, in which Haitians are at the lowest level, while white trapeze artists swing along near the top of the tent, the hierarchy does not correspond to decreasing degrees of danger, since the story stresses the perilous nature of acrobatics in the air and the ever-present possibility of a fatal fall. However, it does stress the divisions between various groups, as does the aggressive behavior of the lion tamer toward the human lion impersonators, and the boundary dividing the spectators, seated in the dark behind a barrier and thus invisible to the performers, from those illuminated by the spotlights in the arena. This division inverts the invisible status of



the workers in the basement of Latif Ghattas' novel, since the circus performers are the objects of the gaze of paying onlookers. The visible/invisible distinction erects an impenetrable wall between those who have the privilege to see and those who are seen as they are forced to perform dangerous and even demeaning roles. The vertical mosaic, as a spatial metaphor for the whole of society, thus becomes a separate sector of a fractured society, split between the objects and subjects of the gaze. Just as in the figure of the bench, with its repetitive substitution of workers, the movements of the performers suggest an endless repetition of the same, without any suggestion of a radically new event or the emergence of new political subjectivities. The performers move in circles, goaded by the lion tamer's whip, or simply perform their stunts in the round arena. The complex spatial imaginary thus juxtaposes the hierarchical structure of verticality with the horizontal division between performers and spectators, and finally the circular movement of the performers, in an allegorization of social forces that go beyond the identifiable divisions and hierarchies of older mosaic models.

Space, however, is not merely a matter of the visual. The movement of the performers introduces other sensory aspects of the spatial, such as the proprioceptive and the haptic. Manès and his compatriot are described as suffocating in their tight lion costumes, in a metaphorical figuration of their limited opportunities and lack of freedom in the performance of their duties. This constitutes a striking making "visible" (or rather, "feelable") of the experiential – the difficulties of an immigrant reduced to accepting difficult or degrading work – through other sensory dimensions. The multisensorial figure of constriction – within the arena, behind a barrier, trussed up in a stifling costume – flows into another spatial

figuration, that of the box in which Manès had confined a firefly in his childhood. In an illustration of what could be considered a Deleuzian process of becoming-animal²⁵, the depiction of the confined Manès leads to that of the imprisoned firefly, which finds its death in the box. In a similar way, the description of the terrified Manès, who desperately tries to flee from what he considers as a real lion, flows into that of his previous dodging of alligators as he escapes from his country of origin through infested swamps. The narrative thus "draws paths," to use Lyotard's expression for the mobilization of the eye in painting: "To look at a painting is to draw paths across it, or at least to collaboratively draw paths," since the viewer's eye remobilizes the paths laid down by the painter²⁶. In his rewriting of the mosaic metaphor, Ollivier, like Latif Ghattas, refigures the political as situated within a network of global relations that go beyond the nation state in a cognitive mapping that potentially connects all parts of the globe through the imaginary and remembered trajectories depicted by the narrative.

In the final scene, Manès zigzags through the cold between automobiles as he leaves the circus after the performance in a figuration of the circuitous but arguably successful negotiation of the hurdles of integration. While Manès and his new acquaintance and compatriot wind their way through the howling wind on the icy and snow-covered road, they finally direct their gaze on others: the commuters waiting with hunched shoulders like a "routed army"²⁷, standing in a bus queue beside a column of cars moving with difficulty up the treacherous, slippery slope. These residents, who may well be the spectators on their way home after attending the circus performance, and the cars, constitute a joint image of humans and non-humans united in a common struggle against the elements in a frigid Canadian winter. The zigzag movement of



the two Haitians even suggests a salutary mobility, contrary to the immobile and shivering commuters. This figuration of comparative advantage is strengthened by the names of the protagonists. Félix, which signifies fortunate or happy in Latin, and Manès, which evokes the Latin verb *maneo* (to remain, stay), suggest a positive outcome in their search for a new homeland. Furthermore, the human/non-human conjunction of cars, waiting commuters and pedestrians is completed by the anthropomorphic description of the bare trees as “dancing skeletons” that seemed to have “lost all hope of spring”²⁸. This posthuman ecology of the material, the animal and the plant kingdoms, interacting in a hostile environment, throws a different light on the pessimistic metaphorical spatial figurations of the circus. Although the groaning trees have lost all hope of seeing spring again in their glacial surroundings, we all know that their bare branches will spring to life anew in the coming months. Similarly, although the circus performers, and particularly the immigrants from Haiti, may be discouraged by their present predicament, they may also see their conditions improve. The main spatial figure at the end of the story, however, is the immobile line of people waiting for the bus, while the Haitian immigrants move in a zigzag pattern. This static image seems to suggest the permanent state of the present system of immigration and integration, in which newcomers move with difficulty through the labyrinth of immobile institutions.

In my analysis of two immigrant narratives, I wished to illustrate the specifically literary forms of reflecting on the political, of rewriting dominant models of the nation, and even of deconstructing newer, critical models of inequality such as Porter’s vertical mosaic. The complex and fluid spatial imaginary redescribes commonly accepted paradigms and renders them more complex. It is not simply a matter of making the

invisible visible (Ollivier’s circus performers are only too visible as the objects of a problematic gaze that sees Haitians as wild beasts crawling on all fours), and giving a voice to the previously silenced by encouraging the publication of literature by immigrants. Literature reconstructs the visible, makes the invisible visible in very specific ways, and produces percepts and affects that draw the reader into new ways of experiencing the world that go beyond cognition. It teaches us to feel otherwise, as well as to see otherwise. The mobility of the spatial imagination, with its rhizomatic wandering and constant work of reconfiguration, together with the alternating percepts that create multiple and contradictory constructions of spatiality, make us question any unitary model of figuring the nation. The polyphonous nature of narrative also allows us to see and feel with various “others” simultaneously and deconstruct prevalent binaries of self and other, of long-term citizens and immigrants, and of Europeans and non-Europeans in a constantly changing critical questioning of the political.

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Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, transl. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 195.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, transl. by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 4.

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, transl. by Julie Rose, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2011, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, p. 182.

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 78.

¹⁰ Jill Bennet, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2005.

¹¹ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 94.

¹² Mona Latif Ghattas, *Le double conte de l'exil*, Montréal, Boréal, 1990. All quotations from this work are translated by myself.

¹³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, transl. by John Howe, London, Verso, 2008.

¹⁴ Latif Ghattas, *Le double*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 187.

¹⁶ John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965.

¹⁷ Latif Ghattas, *Le double*, p. 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 73.

¹⁹ Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott, *Multiculturalism in Canada*, Scarborough, Ontario, Nelson Canada, 1992, p. 317.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²² Latif Ghattas, *Le double*, p. 100.

²³ Ernesto Laclau, ed., *The Making of Political Identities*, London, Verso, 1994, p. 121.

²⁴ Émile Ollivier, "Regarde, regarde les lions," in *Regarde, regarde les lions*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2001. All quotations from this work are translated by myself.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 242-43.

²⁶ Lyotard, *Discourse/Figure*, p. 9.

²⁷ Ollivier, *Regarde*, p. 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63