Ethics, Spectres, and Formalism in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook**

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> Aware of the dangers of rationalism and moralism, this is a view that does not dream of mastering or eliminating undecidability and of establishing transparency.
>
> ***Chantal Mouffe***

Northrop Frye began his 1963 Massey Lectures, entitled *The Educated Imagination*, by asking: "What good is the study of literature? Does it help us to think more clearly, or feel more sensitively, or live a better life?" Such questions are currently of great concern to many literary scholars in the United States, where there has been a tremendous surge of interest in "the turn to ethics." Writers including Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, J. Hillis Miller, and Marjorie Garber, to name only a few, have charted the connections among literature, literary theory, politics, and moral philosophy that have become increasingly apparent over the last twenty years. At the same time, critics have also identified troubling connections between the legacy of modernist humanism and the so-called "turn to ethics." Gauri Viswanathan, for example, notes the entanglement of the roots of literary criticism with the "civilizing mission" carried out

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in England's colonies through the supposedly moral influence of "good" English literature.

In what follows, I turn to Sheila Watson's modernist classic *The Double Hook* (1966) to trace how this novel complicates any simplistic notions of literature's ethical engagement. By strategically introducing obstacles to communication, most obviously the trope of the spectre, I argue that Watson's narrative frustrates the hermeneutical impulse to cross barriers and merge self and other, particularly when this impulse is directed at Native North Americans. Ironically, because *The Double Hook* relies on tropes of obstruction and features of modernist drama that prompt readers to relinquish "the exorbitant (and unethical) but usually unspoken assumption that we should know others enough to speak for them," this text might be good for us (Sommer 206). In other words, literature is good for us when it teaches us the resistance of the other.

An exploration of the relationship between ethics and literature is both timely and valuable because the debates that raged in the U.S. about the "turn to ethics" have instigated a resurgence of interest in ethical criticism in Canada.[1] In light of the uncertain relationship between literature, imperialism, and ethics, however, it is worth asking whether a scholarly turn to ethics in Canada would be "good" for anyone. Leaving aside the question of whether or not it makes sense to label the recent interest in ethics a "turn,"[2] what I want to consider in my reading of *The Double Hook* are the implications of the recent critical attraction to the idea that literature and literary criticism should be "good for us." In using the word "good," I am invoking the standard definitions of the field of ethics, also known as moral philosophy, which involves "systematizing, defending, and recommending

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1 In the spring of 2006, at least four sessions of the ACCUTE conference were exclusively dedicated to a consideration of ethics and literature. In the session "Ethics in Canadian Literature," the organizers invited scholars to investigate the alleged link between "the death of postmodernism" and what they describe as "a resurgence of moralizing in literary studies." The session, in their words, aimed to address "the veracity and significance" of the turn to ethics "in a Canadian context." For a more detailed analysis of the recent turn to ethics, see my Introduction to *The University of Toronto Quarterly's* special issue "The Ethical Turn in Canadian Literature and Criticism," 809–20.

2 In his essay "The Double Turn to Ethics and Literature," Michael Eskin, a proponent of ethical criticism, confesses that "what may have seemed like a turn at the time appears, from the vantage point of the present, more like a noticeable turbulence in the path of modern intellectual history than a (radical) veering off from hitherto accepted intellectual practices implied in the notion of 'turn'" (558).

concepts of right and wrong behaviour."[3] Put somewhat differently, moral philosophy concerns "how we ought to live and act so as to live a (variously conceived) good life" (Eskin, "On Literature" 574). Michael Eskin argues further that anything that goes by the name of ethical criticism "must be supported by the skeleton of a minimum of abiding, fundamental concern that make it what it is—such as the overall question of literature and its significance for the moral potential of the human being in a given community" (Eskin, "The Double" 560).

Contemporary ethical criticism, however, is not simply concerned with our relationship to literature and to the good but, more specifically, with our relationship to the other: "[I]t is the singular encounter between reader and text-as-other, soliciting a singularly just response on the reader's part that is at stake in 'ethics and literature'" (Eskin, "The Double" 560). Indeed, ethics is ultimately about otherness: "the decentered center of ethics … [is] its concern for the 'other.' Ethics is the arena in which the claims of otherness … are articulated and negotiated" (Harpham 394). In framing the question—"Why are critics of Canadian literature attracted to the idea that literature and literary criticism should be ethical or good for us?"—in addition to recalling familiar definitions of ethics, I am invoking the phrase "good for *us*" to enquire, first, whose ethics are stake. As Beatrice Hanssen remarks, one must always ask: "Whose ethics are being promoted?" (in Garber 132). Second, I also want to probe what it means to say that literature is "good *for* us" and thus register my concern with the trend in ethical criticism to view texts (and our readings of them) as doing good on our behalf, in effect acting as a prosthetic in our efforts to access the other. To complicate the latter view, I draw on the theoretical writings of Doris Sommer and Homi Bhaba. Works such as *Proceed With Caution When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* and "Attitude, Its Rhetoric" by Sommer are particularly valuable because in them she outlines what she terms "tropes of obstruction" that instigate strategic interferences in communication which demarcate the limits of intimacy between the text and the reader. Like Sommer, Bhabha also concentrates on discursive practices, but whereas Sommer focuses on tropes of obstruction, Bhabha analyzes the distinction between the discursive registers of what he terms "recognition," the supposedly static perception of a pre-existing other and "the poetics of identification," which take into account the often elided issue of power, which makes "recognition" seem transparent and natural and, further, determines who is allowed to assume the status of signifying

3 See www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm.

subject. In effect, both Sommer and Bhabha challenge theoretical models that champion empathy and direct access to the other.

According to Martha Nussbaum, "The only contact we have with the particularity and agency of another person is, in fact, in our relationship with the literary work of art: for the artist does succeed in capturing in the text his or her own particularity and agency, and through that lens we have access, the only access we will ever have, to the reality of someone else's mind" (706–07). As this quotation suggests, in the name of ethical criticism, texts and close readings are singled out and relied upon to demonstrate our moral engagement with the other, to my mind a troubling and fetishistic gesture.[4] Nussbaum seems to be reviving the neo-Victorian *via positiva* or "reading mediated by the image of the book as companion and friend," adopted by critics such as Wayne Booth (Buell in Garber 6). In so doing, Nussbaum, like Booth, insists on positing what literary theory has been most reluctant to accept, "a model of artistic representation as surrogate personhood" (Buell in Garber 6).

Watson's *The Double Hook* specifically challenges the claim that ethical criticism fosters "a singular encounter between reader and text-as-other" (Eskin, "The Double" 560) or, to borrow Nussbaum's words, that it is "only in and through our [loving erotic] relation with the literary work that the other is at all accessible in his or her singularity" (quoted in Eskin, "The Double" 569). As a result, *The Double Hook* questions the belief that literature is "good *for* us." In contrast to these claims, Watson's writing suggests that it is not possible to render the other visible or "accessible in his or her singularity." Moreover, far from an ethical failing, an awareness of the limitations of vision and insight might well represent a healthy antidote to the fetishism and narcissism associated with strains of ethical criticism that subscribe to "the model of artistic representation as surrogate personhood" (Buell in Garber 7).

The genesis of *The Double Hook* and its doubts about the possibility of transcending human isolation are rooted in Watson's two-year sojourn in Dog Creek, British Columbia, where she worked as an elementary school teacher. An earlier attempt to capture the experience of being an outsider

4 For Freud, the fetish is not merely a sexually charged part-object that substitutes for a woman with whom it is in some way associated, but, rather, it is a substitute for the absent female phallus. For the purposes of this study, a more useful understanding of fetishism and castration, however, is posited by Lacan, who, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan observes, uses the latter term to denote the feeling of "disintegration," the loss not of an organ but of "being" (Ragland-Sullivan 270). "Out of this inadequacy," she argues, "arises every kind of compensatory attachment to objects, people, ideologies, and so on" (Ragland-Sullivan 292).

in a fragmented rural community also formed the basis of Watson's novel *Deep Hollow Creek* (1992). Both novels are set in the interior of British Columbia, in an area where the Shuswap people lived and to which they laid claim for four thousand years. This area is also the locus of a two-hundred-year struggle over land claims that remain unresolved. With the exception of a very few coastal bands, the Native peoples of British Columbia "never made any agreement for the sale of their aboriginal rights, nor had they fought and been conquered by the whites"; thus, unlike most of the indigenous peoples elsewhere in Canada, "they are non-treaty Natives, and land laws were imposed on them without any recompense" (Balf 13).[5] Watson described the Cariboo District of British Columbia as "a country of opposites": "heat and cold; flat rolling plateau and sheared-off hills; streams, rivers, potholes and alkali waste; large ranches and small holdings; native Indians and expatriated Europeans and great stretches where no one lives at all" (Watson quoted in Morriss 55). In this barren, sparsely populated region, Watson lived entirely alone. Watson herself confirmed that the loneliness and the sense of isolation she had experienced when she had gone to Dog Creek were "where the novel had begun" (Flahiff 84):

> Here for perhaps the first time in my life I was alone for hours of the day and night and often for days in succession. I was alone physically … Yet round me and in myself too I became actively conscious of another kind of loneliness, the kind Angel [a character in the novel] speaks of when she says to Felix: "Take a man and a woman. There's no word to tell that when they get together in bed they're still anything but two people." Man is born with this loneliness or he becomes aware of it at least with his first consciousness. The human heart cries out not to be freed from spatial separation, but from the isolation of which spatial separation is a symbol, the isolation of mind from mind. (quoted in Flahiff 84)

Watson's experience of loneliness and of the unendurable physical and, more importantly, psychological isolation directly inform her novel about the moral imperative to transcend isolation, to care for others, and to create a sense of community. As Shirley Neuman observes, "Writing about a region and a time in which English, American, Spanish, Japanese and Chinese settlers, among others, lived alongside an aboriginal population,

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5 At present, the Dog Creek people are part of the Canoe Creek band, which, in turn, has united with other bands to form the Cariboo Tribal Council. The Council is currently working with the BC Treaty Commission to resolve outstanding land claims (see www.BCTreaty.net).

Sheila Watson asks what common knowledge could possess them, make them into a civilized community" (Neuman 1). Indeed, as Watson explains, she wrote the novel because she was deeply troubled by the fragmented and isolated community that she encountered: "The theme of the book is simply this: … If men … have neither an image of church or state or even tribal unity, if they are cut off from a rooted pattern of behaviour … they respond to life with violence or apathy" (quoted in Morriss 55).

In an attempt to resolve the apparent isolation, "unsettled-ness," and lack of civility, the novel portrays the once-isolated inhabitants forming what Margaret Morriss refers to as "a true community" (56). But the community that constellates, in true Gothic fashion, remains predicated on the expression of direct threats to its cohesion, namely, the unsettled and unsettling desires of nomadic Native peoples and women who refuse patriarchal and Christian models of domestication.[6] The formation of the new community in Watson's novel is quite literally predicated on expulsion and sacrifice. Two threatening women die violently: the non-maternal, selfish old lady is murdered by her son James (19), and the old lady's daughter, Greta, whose transgressive sexuality is incestuously directed toward James, commits suicide (85). For my purposes, it is significant that earlier drafts of the novel depict these women as part Native. As Margaret Morriss observes, drafts one and two of the novel provide background information about the characters' race: "Old Man Potter was an Englishman.… Kip and Angel are 'pure-blooded' Indians," and while "no one knows where the Old Lady came from," she must be at least part-Native because her children, "William and James (and presumably Greta) are 'a mixed lot'" (Morriss 11). Morriss also observes that "the draft versions, with more factual information, insinuate … [James and Greta's] incestuous bond more strongly" (68). Morris surmises that Watson "preserved the suggestion of an incestuous attraction between Greta and James, but as with other revisions, she discards explicit comment," perhaps because the incest, "as originally presented, was too sensational" (69).[7] Yet, just as traces of the

6 See my article "Coyote's Children and the Canadian Gothic: Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* and Gail Anderson-Dargaztz's *The Cure for Death By Lightning*" in *Australasian–Canadian Studies* 24.2 (2006): 15–44, a special issue on Canadian Literature and the postcolonial gothic edited by Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte.

7 As Morriss explains, James's rebellion against their mother "is in some way connected to the way she seems to have fostered their bond" (68). Watson initially portrayed James complaining bitterly that the Old Lady "drove Greta and me together. We don't know nothing but each other. … Mare and stallion of the same get" (Morriss 68). Although Watson suppressed explicit references to their

incest theme can still be discerned, traces of the women's Native ancestry continue to haunt the text, most obviously when the Old Lady and Greta are claimed by Coyote in death.[8]

Although Coyote claims both Greta and her mother, throughout the novel the old lady's apparition, always in association with Coyote, haunts the community.[9] Scorning notions of property and propriety, restlessly and shamelessly fishing on everyone else's land, her ghost acts as the trace of an Aboriginal claim that overflows "into the otherwise 'homely' realm of modernity" (Gelder and Jacobs 181). In contrast to critics who concentrate on the formation of the "civilized" community, I argue that Watson maintains a double focus on the community and the individuals that it cannot access and accommodate.

Watson's decisions not to represent the Native trickster Coyote, to efface the markers of race, and to feature the ghost of a part-Native woman are of particular relevance to debates within ethical criticism about our ability to access the other. More precisely, rather than attempt to render the other "accessible in his or her singularity," Watson's narrative relies on invisibility and the trope of the ghost to underscore the limits of and the errors associated with vision, particularly when it comes to Canada's indigenous peoples and their cultures. Although Coyote is referred to

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incestuous relationship, in both the early drafts and in the final version Greta's suicide is portrayed as an enraged and passionate response to having been replaced by Lenchen as James's lover: "She [Greta] wanted her voice to shatter all memory of the girl who had stayed too long.… Die suffering so that James would remember the pain of her. Die young so that James would remember the sweetness of her. Die giving so that he'd live in the thought of her" (85).

8 In his Introduction to the novel, John Grube explains that Watson felt the pressure to make her story "universal" and to "overcome … the limits of the 'ethnic-group novel.'" According to Grube, the latter "prevents the characters from becoming universal or even fully human, since the basic hypothesis is that they are particular and singular in some way" (12–13).

9 John Grube observes that Mrs Potter is "always associated with the chilling sound of the coyote" (Grube quoted in Jones 43). Moreover, John Lennox argues that Mrs Potter "expresses the spirit of Coyote, for it is more her presence than her person which is perceived and felt in the community" (49). Morriss also observes that in earlier drafts Greta, like her mother, was a palpable presence even after her death: "Ara fears that 'she would see Greta fleshed and sinewed, standing in the ruin she had made,'" and later, "Ara also sees Greta's death as somehow facilitating the birth of Lenchen's baby: 'If it's not too late, she said to the boy, Greta's death will turn down the covers for Lenchen and she will bear her child in the hollow Greta made.' During her labour Lenchen cries out: 'It's Greta's baby I tell you. Ask her. She'll tell you,' though immediately after she revokes her odd statement: 'It's a lie, the girl cried. A lie. It's my own. My very own'" (68).

throughout the text, he is only glimpsed on one occasion, "on a jut of rock calling down over the ledge so that the walls of the valley magnified its voice and sent it echoing back" (100). Although he appears in this instance, he retains his inaccessible, otherworldly aura because his bark, in the ears of his listeners, is transformed into an oracular pronouncement: "Happy are the dead / for their eyes see no more" (100). The characters' and, by extension, the reader's inability to pin Coyote down—is he an animal or a god?—signal the presence of a trope of obstruction that can "slow readers down, detain them at the boundary between contact and conquest" (Sommer 202). Similarly, despite the fact that various characters claim to have seen the old lady and they criticize her repeatedly for her unethical behaviour, readers soon learn that the characters only thought that they saw her; all the while, the old lady was lying dead in her bed. What they encountered was a ghost, an entity with an unsettled ontological status that hovers somewhere between the visible and the invisible, life and death, the real and the unreal. Doris Sommer uses the term "disencounter" to describe engagements that interrupt the predictable expectation of the reader: "Disencounters are not only a nuisance to universal understanding; they are also enabling signs for reading the historical and cultural embeddedness of texts and of readers" (205). She goes on to insist that "[w]ell-meaning readers who hope to overcome limits through empathy and learning aren't harmless when they violate difference. Without difference, writer and reader are ultimately redundant. One will do" (205). In effect, Watson's treatment of Coyote and her use of the ghost stage this type of disencounter.

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It is also useful to consider Watson's strategy in light of Homi Bhabha's notion of "a poetics of identification":

> Unlike the notion of recognition, which assumes that cultural value is, indeed, *in place*, requiring only just conditions of representation and recognition, a poetics of identification puts *in play* the question of the location of cultural difference, its modes of representation, and *who* or *what* might be authorized to be its signifying subjects.… What is at stake in the agonistic and ambivalent splitting of the minoritarian subject—I/You—is the emergence of a spectral or virtual "third" position that mediates the relation of self to others. (191–92)

For both Sommer and Bhabha, what is at issue is not, as Nussbaum would have it, the recognition of an essential, pre-existing other but, instead, the putting into play of representations of cultural difference and, equally

important, highlighting who or what might be authorized to be its signifying subjects.

Watson's first attempt to represent Native North Americans and their culture in her earlier novel, *Deep Hollow Creek*, highlights problems associated with what Bhabha terms "recognition." The narrative foregrounds the process of representation by filtering events through the eyes of an outsider, the school teacher, Stella. Sentences are studded with phrases such as "Stella thought" and "Stella said" to remind readers that neither the narrator nor the reader can ever penetrate the secrets of the community. The narrative's foregrounding of the subjective stance of the perceiver is also apparent in *The Double Hook*, which relies on elements of drama, beginning with the list of the novel's cast of characters on the first page, to highlight the highly subjective quality of each character's response to events. Moreover, in *Deep Hollow Creek*, rather than stake a claim based on her ability to access the other, the narrator quietly insists on the Native people's legitimate ownership of the land and its secrets, elements of cultural value that, to borrow Bhabha's words, are presumed to be "in place": "Round the valley the hills crowded Ra'tlem the Shuswaps had called their village there; they were the people of the deep hollow" (18). Although Stella befriends Nicholas Farish, who trades with the Shuswap and learns about the existence of a secret, magical lake, she is forcibly reminded that non-Natives are outsiders who are unable and, perhaps, undeserving of privileged information. As Farish explains, he could never find that lake again, "[b]ut the Indians know it … and talk about it in their own houses. They have a god, he says—one called Coyote. But I can't say more … They trust me and they tell me but there's reasons why a man can't say more" (25). Sommer would call this rhetorical strategy a "flaunted secret," a "border trope between self and other" that limits intimacy "whether or not information is withheld"; in these instances, secrecy preserves the other's "externality from sympathetic listeners" (212). In accordance with Sommer's view, throughout *Deep Hollow Creek* secrecy and silence enforce respect and an awareness of difference.

But *Deep Hollow Creek* moves beyond "recognition" to what Bhabha terms "a poetics of identification," with the latter's production of a spectral third, toward the conclusion when Stella visits the reservation because she needs help with the chores (she broke a rib and finds it difficult to look after herself). Upon her arrival, she wonders how to enter into dialogue with Antoine Billy and, by extension, the Shuswap who have been exploited by the settler-invaders. "How does one speak to a man sitting in the silence of a spring day—sitting wrapped in the majesty of a plaid shirt on his own

doorstep, Stella thought" (131). Stella's reference to the dollar-fifty plaid shirt recalls the storekeeper Mockett's smug assertion: "There's no end to the work you can get out of them for a plaid shirt" (131). In this scene, Stella's uncertainty about how to converse with the marginalized other is followed by an uncanny glimpse of a spectral coyote: "The coyote sat silent on the ledge like a shadow on the rock. Only the practiced eye could see the substance in the shadow. Farish had told her. Coyote the god—the great god Coyote, coming in the night" (131). By simultaneously invoking both a real coyote and the Trickster god of the Shuswap, the text underscores the tricky and doubled poetics of identification—a process that entails what Bhabha terms the ambivalent splitting of the minoritarian subject.

Watson insisted that she wanted "to get rid of the condescension of omniscience" (quoted in Morriss 55). At issue in both of Watson's earlier and later novels is the reader's response to the tropes of obstruction and to the emergence of this "spectral or virtual 'third' position that mediates the relation of self to others" (191–92). In *The Double Hook*, the widow's boy, Heinrich, recalls Stella's difficulty in seeing "the substance in the shadow" when he claims to have seen Mrs Potter: "I knew it was the old lady.… Shadows don't bend grass. I know a shadow from an old woman" (Watson 29). Despite his boasts about the accuracy of his vision, the novel ultimately supports poststructuralist and psychoanalytic insights into the workings of projection and the "shadow" of the ego. Here "projection" refers to "the operation whereby a neurological or psychological element is displaced and relocated in an external position, thus passing from centre to periphery or from subject to object" (Laplanche and Pontalis 349). The subject who relies on this primitive defence "attributes tendencies, desires, etc., to others that he refuses to recognise in himself: the fascist, for instance, projects his own faults and unacknowledged inclinations on to the group he reviles" (351). This type of projection, also known as "disowning projection" (351), is "always a matter of throwing out what one refuses either to *recognise* in oneself or to *be* oneself" (354). Freud holds that such projections have "*a refusal to recognise something*" as their basic principle and *raison d'etre*: 'demons' and 'ghosts' are embodiments of bad unconscious desires" (quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis 352)

Although all of the characters claim to see a selfish old lady, they gradually learn to doubt the accuracy of their vision: "Your old lady's down to the Wagner's," Kip tells James (25). But Ara immediately contradicts Kip, saying, "She's here" (25). When Heinrich arrives to tell James that the old lady was "down to our place, fishing in our pool," Ara asks: "How could we both have seen her? How could we have seen her at both our places"

(36). Playing on the ambivalent splitting of the minoritarian subject and the ambiguity inherent in what it means "to see things," the narrative casts into doubt Ara's and the others claims to have seen the old lady and to be able to put her in her place. Greta chastises them for their presumption: "You've been seeing things.... Like everybody else around here" (27).

By emphasizing that the old lady is present when there is another person to encounter her difference, Watson's novel supports Bhabha's insistence that critics have been wasting time arguing about "*who or what* 'is' the subject" while ignoring "a far more significant contemporary question about *where* the 'subject' of difference lies": "Is the moment of differentiation internal to the history of a culture and integral to its communal existence? Or, are cultural differences to be read as borderline, liminal 'effects,' signs of identification produced in those translational movements in which minorities negotiate their rights and representations?" (189). Bhabha later suggests that "we move between recognition and a poetics of identification" (193) or, put somewhat differently, from a belief that we encounter essential others to an awareness that in our encounters with others, on the borderline, we produce the signs of the other whom we fear and desire. Something akin to this movement is comically illustrated when Felix recalls the time his wife, Angel, saw what she thought was a bear but which turned out to be a scrap of tarpaper blowing in the wind:

> The rain pounding on the tar-paper roof. The memory of the time Angel had seen the bear at the fish camp. Seen the bear rising on its haunches.... Rising as if to strike.... Angel furious with fear beating wildly. Her hunting-knife pounding the old billycan. He chuckled remembering the noise and the white face of Angel when he picked up the bear in its devotions. Picked up paper blown off the fish-shack roof. (29)

Mistaking tarpaper for a bear is, as Felix's laughter suggests, comical and does not (unless one is prepared to stretch culture to its eco-critical limits) involve the issue of cultural difference. Later, however, interpersonal differences are at stake when Angel's lover, Theophil, explicitly questions her ability to comprehend his thinking and intentions. As he says, "Go on as if you were reading out of a newspaper what's in my mind. Go on as if my head was as plain to see into as an old shack with the curtains off" (67). It is worth noting that the least sympathetic characters in the novel, Greta and Theophil, are the ones who insist on the limits of vision and one's access to the other. Both Theophil and Greta share a distrust of sympathy and the attendant assumption of a cultural continuity between orator and audience, and they draw attention to the limits of this assumption by varying

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degrees of uncooperativeness. Perhaps Watson distrusted her own radical interrogation of sympathy and left the dirty work of resistance to the most marginalized and transgressive characters in her text.Yet, as Sommer reminds us: "A frustrated incitation to interpret, a lure to contemplate difficulties along with prohibitions against explaining them away, these can confront readers with their own desire to burn away difference" (207).

This desire is gruesomely and tangibly depicted when Greta bolts the door and sets her house on fire to evade the probing eyes and questions of members of her community who neither understand nor sympathize with her position. In an earlier scene, Angel, William, and Ara find themselves outside the old lady's house and they consider what exactly brought them together: "They stood like a crowd of fools outside James's door.… Having come together by accident, Ara said. Sent by William, answered Angel. Perhaps because he'd had word, Ara said, that his mother was sick or that some accident had happened. Perhaps, she'd said, brought together by sympathy" (43). But Angel contradicts her, saying, "And what sympathy could one have for Greta.… Since Greta never thought of anyone. Not even herself. Only what had been done to her" (44). Unable to fashion a self that can elicit the sympathy of others, Greta remains an outsider in the eyes of the community. Furthermore, by refusing to release the burden of her difference and "what had been done to her," Greta acts as a force of obstruction: "Inside the house Greta put her hand on the door bolt as if to feel its strength. She had stepped back from the window when she'd seen the boy's eyes on her. They're on me now, she said. The pack of them. What have I done? she asked. What's a moth done that man strikes it away from the lamp?" (72). In keeping with her earlier denial of sympathy, Angel calls through the door and questions Greta's attachment and love for others: "You never felt the flame scorch your wings. You never felt nothing" (73). But Greta's reply, in effect her final utterance, refutes Angel's claim: "You don't know, she said" (73). In response to her community's demands for access, knowledge, and power—"There's a good girl, Greta, William said. We want to do what we can. Steady on and open the door"—Greta rejects any desire for intimacy that refuses to accommodate her story of incest and betrayal. Her refusal forces readers to consider what it means to be "a good girl" or a good Métis, for that matter, in the context of intercultural relations "*in-between* class, gender, generation, race, religion … [and] region" (Bhabha in Garber 190). Before Greta strikes the fatal match, readers are told: "She wanted to cry abuse through the boards. She wanted to cram the empty space with hate" (74). The narrative goes on to relate her unspeakable and unspoken jealousy and hatred directed at Lenchen, who captured

the erotic attention of her brother James—attention that had once been Greta's. Her experience of incest, in effect, paralyzes normative judgment. As Bhabha reminds us: "Acts of judgment that deliberate on the good life, or the good citizen, become particularly difficult when the cultural norms by which we orientate ourselves, and the codes by which we signify value, are themselves rendered indeterminant and contingent" (183).

Owing, in part, to incest and to the confused familial and social conditions that lead to the collapse of fixed subject positions, Greta cannot comply with her brother's request to be "a good girl"; instead, like her mother before her, she antagonistically declines to identify with the good and the community that would demand this identification from her. Given that Greta's brother James is never punished for murdering his mother or for his incestuous relations with his sister, readers are left with the distinct impression that not everyone in this community is expected to be good. As Flahiff notes, "isolated from the work of justice" the novel portrays a world that operates by "silent consensus" (323). Whereas Flahiff discusses how James's "vicious acts" which are "somehow neutralized by the impulses that led to the birth of his child" and how "a kind of silent patience admitted another side to murderous violence," my analysis considers, instead, how this "silent consensus" operates in the service of hegemonic sexual and racial oppression. In essence, by arresting the desire for easy access and sympathy, Greta instigates a more thorough process of working through of what Bhabha terms the "shards that unsettle any easy sense of solidarity or community" (Bhabha in Garber 190).

According to Sommer, tropes of obstruction can wrest control from would-be interpreters "who may be enchanted by the surprising turns and feel disoriented, dependent, even relieved from the anxiety of needing to know it all. Then the hard work of interpretation can begin; it will attend to what cannot or should not be explained away" (Sommer 213). In accordance with Sommer's insights, in *The Double Hook* Greta's brother William, faced with the mystery and tragedy of his mother's and sister's deaths, begins to appreciate that he does not know what is going on in the hearts and minds of his closest relations and finds himself surprised and humbled by his lack of vision: "Do you know Ara," he says to his wife, "for a man who sees so much, I've not seen what was growing up in my own yard. It's like a man who stands on a rock. Suppose the rock should suddenly move. Or start clutching at you like gumbo" (65–66). In this passage, readers are not permitted to peer into Williams mind as if it is "an old shack with the curtains off," to borrow Theophil's words; rather than clarify matters, the metaphor of "gumbo" obscures the source of William's

confusion. Nevertheless, the image of a rock transformed into something animate does suggest that what one had accorded object status (his sister, Greta, perhaps) might actually be animate and have desires, albeit seemingly perverse and murderous, of its own. In response to her husband William's confession of failure, Ara echoes his demonic, biblical conceit ("Suppose the rock should suddenly move") and complains: "There's too much supposing … Yet how can a man escape it since he can't hold and shape the world" (66).

Ara's response expresses both the longing to "hold and shape the world" and the recognition that this is impossible. As noted earlier, to an extent the old lady is held and shaped by those who perceive her. Yet, although she is demonized, she slips from their grasp by appearing in different places at once. The community's attempts at holding and shaping, representing the old lady in the form of a powerful selfish predator, are further undermined when we are told that she looks at her children intent on murdering her with the eyes, not of a predator, but of prey: "And when they'd raised their eyes their mother was watching as a deer watches" (33). The old lady's supposed lack of concern for others is also challenged when Greta embarks on her suicide attempt and the specter of the old lady addresses Greta directly: "Don't play with those Greta, she said" (74). Taken together, these instances force readers to contend with fleeting images and spectral gestures that do not accord with the community's demonic perception of the other.

Of all the characters, William seems the most able to move from "recognition" to "a poetics of identification," in part because he perceives that what a thing (or person) becomes depends on how it is envisioned and used: "When a woman on his route flagged him down with a coat and asked him to bring back a spool of thread from the town below, he'd explain that thread has a hundred uses. When it comes down to it, he'd say, there's no telling what thread is for. I knew a woman once, he'd say, who used it to sew up her man after he was throwed on a barbed-wire fence" (12). In keeping with this recognition of multiple perspectives translated into use, William responds to his sister's death by considering how she was perceived and used. More precisely, in an attempt to understand his sister's reluctance to be "a good girl," William belatedly acknowledges that she did not possess an essential, stubborn, and destructive nature. Instead, her gender training (how she was envisioned, positioned, and used as a woman) contributed to the tragedy: "Greta had inherited destruction like a section surveyed and fenced. She had lived no longer than the old lady's shadow left its stain on the ground. She sat in her mother's doom as she sat in her chair … Ma was hard on her.… She thought that grief

was what a woman was born to sooner or later" (99). On the one hand, William's analysis seemingly blames the victims by suggesting that his mother bears the responsibility for instilling his sister's doom—a familiar patriarchal sleight of hand. But, on the other hand, his comments affirm how oppressed peoples suffer from projections and transmit this suffering to their children—a process of transmission that psychoanalysts have described as "inter-generational haunting" (Abraham and Torok).

A consideration of the tropes of obstruction in Watson's novel highlights the oscillation between what Bhabha calls "recognition" and "a poetics of identification." Put somewhat differently, *The Double Hook*, *avant la lettre* of poststructuralism, underscores that "alterity is not about essential cultural, sexual, or ethnic otherness as such; rather it is about the process of reinscribing the difference hitherto thought to exist between (two) entities as one that is already within entities" (Chow 675). At bottom, the ethical work in the novel lies in exposing the projection and, where possible, restoring the shadow to its proper owner, "this attempt, patient and persistent, at restoring difference and otherness to the interiority of an ongoing state of affairs" (Chow 675), in this case, the sex-gender system and the Christian, assimilationist project of the Canadian nation-state.

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Although thus far my analysis concentrates on the content of Watson's novel, it is also important to note that in writing *The Double Hook* Watson relied on the structures of European modernism to formalize interference in communication and convey her awareness that we cannot render the other accessible. If, as Benedict Anderson asserts, collusion exists between the realist novel and the nation as an imagined possibility, then, as Jody Mason argues, the questioning of realist impulses can serve as an admission that the nation is no longer knowable—that the subjects the nation excluded in its making would now assert themselves and the nation will no longer be recognizable (Mason 62). Many Canadian writers who eschewed modernist experimentation may well have agreed with Georg Lukács's view that objective realism "comes from viewing the totality of the capitalist system and reconstructing the wholeness of human experience that has been lost under capitalism, rather than emphasizing capitalism's fragmenting and contradictory effects on experience, as modernist experimentation tended" (Lukàcs quoted in Mason 63). In contrast, Watson writing seems to have adopted an aesthetics more closely aligned with that of the Frankfurt School intellectuals, such as Bertolt Brecht, who championed modernist formal experimentation because such techniques serve, they argued, as a tacit critique of the effects of capitalism (Brecht quoted in Mason 63). Watson's attraction to European modernism is particularly

relevant owing to the portrayal of the ethical turn as an antidote to "postmodern relativism"—indeed, increasingly, the ethical turn is inevitably tied to a rise in the stake of literary realism.[10] At issue here is the reactionary refrain which mistakenly insists that attention to formal innovation and, more generally, to aesthetics, necessitates a turn away from ethics. In these critiques of postmodernism from the right and from the left, one hears echoes of earlier dismissals of modernist experimentation, again on supposedly ethical grounds. As Kermode remarked about the modernist authors Pound, Eliot, and Yeats: "What we feel about these men at times is perhaps that they retreated into some paradigm, into a timeless and unreal vacuum from which all reality had been pumped" (Kermode; emphasis added). Yet, critics often describe artists and their works as unethical because the former disagree with the morals being promoted by the latter. As noted earlier, we must always ask: "Whose ethics are being promoted?" (Hanson 132).

As a student at the University of British Columbia, Watson took courses in the English Department on contemporary literature that included works by Eliot, Joyce, Pound, Lawrence, and Woolf, even when these texts were banned in Canada because they were deemed immoral.[11] Throughout her studies, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics remained central. For example, her MA thesis offered an evaluation of the periodical essay

10 In the call for paper for the ACCUTE conference session entitled "Ethics in Canadian Literature," for example, the turn to ethics is linked to the "rehabilitation of realism: the re-emergence of once discredited narrative strategies such as realism and humanism." Ironically, Watson's novel, which sprang from a powerful, ethical engagement and delivered its message in a style that transformed Canadian literature, nearly went unpublished. In 1953, Watson herself recognized that writing an experimental novel which reflected a debt to European modernism would incite the wrath of conservative Canadian critics who preferred realism above all. As she states:

> There is a tremendous voice rising in Canada (echoed from England and the USA) crying out for clarity. John Sutherland quotes from *Poetry Chicago*: "By now James, Pound, Eliot, Joyce are dowds, jades and trulls of Parnassus." This reminds me of the anti-Tennysonians of my youth. God rest James, Pound, Eliot and Joyce. They did and wrote as they could. Why must fury be used to drive out fury? I have little hope for *The Double Hook*. (quoted in Flahiff 80)

In some descriptions of ethical criticism, the same distrust of modernism (and now postmodernism) can be observed.

11 Watson spoke of reading bootleg copies of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and *Ulysses* and observed, "part of my experience in BC was reading Pound when he was just writing the Cantos, reading Eliot before he wrote the *Four Quartets*, reading Faulkner, reading Dos Passos, reading Hemingway" (quoted in Flahiff 30).

by eighteenth-century essayists Joseph Addison and Richard Steele as a medium for ethical instruction (Flahiff 30–31). Ultimately, Watson concluded that "a reform based on wit and a morality founded on decorum and sentiment could make no obvious impression on the moral tone of the day" (quoted in Flahiff 30). In keeping, then, with the modernists, she determined that instigating change necessitated challenging the rules of decorum and embracing an experimental engagement with language. Owing perhaps to her insight that "a morality founded on decorum and wit" would prove ineffectual in changing "the moral tone of the day," when it came to writing *The Double Hook*, Watson chose to adopt aspects of Eliot and Beckett's innovative dramatic structure. As Flahiff observes, these formal, aesthetic choices had explicit ethical dimensions: "For Eliot drama was not just a literary form whose possibilities he explored and with which he experimented as he grew older; it also came to represent for him a moral condition, an escape from a limited and limiting sense of self into a state of, in his words, 'Knowing myself yet being someone other'" (Flahiff 63).[12] Whereas Eliot accepted the belief that literature could effect a merger between self and other, *The Double Hook* uses a similar dramatic structure to highlight, on the one hand, the desire to escape the self and know the other and, on the other hand, the impossibility of ever fully realizing this desire. As Sheila's husband, Wilfrid Watson, confirmed, when she wrote the first drafts of the novel, she firmly "believed that complete communication between two people was not possible" (quoted in Flahiff 84). In addition to its use of tropes of obstruction, *The Double Hook*'s overarching, innovative dramatic structure and its rejection of realist modes of representation support the narrative's insistence on the impossibility of wholly rendering the other accessible.

In the case of Watson's novel, the resistance offered by the narrative differs from other forms of aesthetic and intellectual counter-realist resistance deployed in modernist texts by writers such as Eliot and Pound. It also differs from more general problems of discerning authorial intention. The difference lies in the fact that *The Double Hook*'s rhetoric of resistance is tied specifically to the politics and history of Canada's brutal encounter with Native North Americans. Somewhat paradoxically, Watson's text must signal its resistance in forms that are legible and interpretable. But whereas repeated readings of modernist texts and the acquisition of helpful background knowledge can break down textual resistance and allow

12 As Flahiff asserts, "It is the spareness of Beckett—whom she was reading and seeing performed at the same time in Paris that she was doing this final work on her novel … that is a quality of *The Double Hook*" (168–69).

for the intellectual mastery of modernist works, the ongoing disputes between Canada and the Shuswap nation demonstrate that the forms of resistance encoded in Watson's novel gesture to challenges in excess of mere displays of intellectual mastery—challenges that continue to vex the nation-state.

By stressing Watson's doubts concerning the power of sympathy to forge the basis of a community, I do not mean to suggest that Watson had little concern for the other; instead, she realized and insisted that the other does not always want to be, nor can be, accessed according to the terms explicitly or implicitly outlined by the dominant group. Moreover, we must consider whether or not our desire for community camouflages desires for sameness and assimilation. As Watson herself admitted: "I went to teach in the Cariboo where I sank roots which I've never really been able to disentangle" (quoted in Flahiff 39).[13] Watson's inexplicable and enduring attraction to the Cariboo sprang her from what Sommer might well describe as her "disencounter" with the Shuswap nation. In 1924, Watson wrote to Emily Carr and asked her what contacts she had made among the Shuswap. Watson concluded her letter, saying: "Too little is known and too much is being lost of the spirit which is native to British Columbia." Watson was particularly disgusted by the government's treatment of the indigenous people. Commenting on the residential school attended by the Native children from Dog Creek, Watson stated: "The Indian mission school at Williams Lake seemed like a penal colony out of which children were released, finally into a starving and decimated community in which language and culture—religious and social—had been destroyed—but not obliterated—not completely" (quoted in Flahiff 39). To preclude further destruction of the Shuswap nation, Watson placed obstacles in the path of the reader's desire to know the other, detaining readers "at the boundary between contact and conquest" (Sommer 202). Yet, in conjunction with Sommer, I would argue that readers ultimately benefit from unyielding books: "Obstacles enable something different from control; they summon the kinds of interpretive labour that accept the burden of difference instead of wishing it away" (Sommer 207–08). To return to the question posed in the introduction, namely, if texts can be "good for us" in the sense that they can assist us in our effort to access the other, it is useful to consider *The Double Hook*'s strategies of resistance, non-representation, and spec-

13 Owing to the profound impact of Watson's encounter with the Natives in Dog Creek, for the rest of her life, her husband Wilfred referred to her in his letters as "swp," a shortened form for Shuswap (Flahiff 166).

trality. Rather than try to render the other "accessible," Watson chose to remain haunted by the agonistic, intercultural relations in Canada and, more specifically, the nation's perception and treatment of the Shuswap nation. In doing so, she left her readers the ethical project of negotiating the legacy of this haunting.

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