

Unless

A Covert Post-Colonial and Transnational Gothic Novel, Or The Haunted House (of Fiction) Is Falling Apart

Esra Melikoğlu

Volume 40, Number 2, 2015

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl40_2art11

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Melikoğlu, E. (2015). *Unless: A Covert Post-Colonial and Transnational Gothic Novel, Or The Haunted House (of Fiction) Is Falling Apart*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 40(2), 211–226.

Unless: A Covert Post-Colonial and Transnational Gothic Novel, Or The Haunted House (of Fiction) Is Falling Apart

ESRA MELIKOĞLU

CYNTHIA SUGARS AND GERRY TURCOTTE observe that “In recent years many Canadian authors have turned to the Gothic to articulate a postcolonial — sometimes transnational — revision of Canadian history and over-arching national meta-narratives” (xviii). Carol Shields, labelled earlier in her writing career a writer of light fiction, has not been included among this group of writers. I argue in this article not only that her last novel, *Unless* (2002), is a covert ghost-ridden, post-colonial, and transnational gothic text, intertextually linked to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,¹ but also that it presents us with a writer of one as a protagonist. Shields thus accentuates the pivotal role of the writer and (his or) her dialogue with ghosts in the interrogation of unresolved national traumas. Despite the increasingly multicultural makeup of the country and the impact of post-colonial thinking, the colonial gothic discourse of the unified nation and alien ghosts from beyond the borders continue to haunt Canada. It is in dialogue with ghosts that writer Reta Winters must, in the hope of resolving ethnic conflicts, deconstruct this xenophobic discourse and envision a transnational Canada.

Reta is a former human rights activist of dominant British and displaced francophone roots who has settled in a middle-class home in Ontario and become a writer. When the novel opens, her home has already been turned upside down by her failure to make visible the continuing trauma of diverse “others.” Unknown to Reta, her nineteen-year-old daughter Norah tried, in vain, to save the anonymous Muslim woman who immolated herself on a street corner in downtown Toronto, apparently in protest against xenophobia. Norah, as Reta must discover, then vacated her (national) home to sit on the eerie corner, and Reta asks why.

Reta's contemplation of Norah's encounter with the Muslim woman reveals the incomplete resolution both in Canada and in her fiction of colonial gothic discourse. Many members of the dominant culture continue to conceive of themselves as a unified homely nation and of displaced Indigenous peoples and different groups of immigrants as invasive ghostly others. Reta's interrogation of this discourse turns into a revisionist gothic narrative in which ghosts return to protest the historical unhomeliness of Canada. Occluded memories of victims and guilt-ridden perpetrators, they testify to the "homely" nation's historical role as alien invader and its (neo-)colonial violence against diverse "others." Reta, Norah, the Muslim woman, a former tenant by the name of Crystal McGinn, Brontë's madwoman from colonial England, and the Indigenous peoples of colonial Canada all take their places in this transnational and generational chain of ghosts awaiting reincarnation.² Reta's story of Norah's encounter with the Muslim woman is suggestive not only of unresolved trauma, but also of the construction of a transnational Canada. Yet both rooted in and critical of the barricaded nation, Reta is intrigued by and in flight from ghosts.

Shields and Reta, then, turn to the Canadian post-colonial and transnational gothic to continue revision of the joint legacy of the colonial past and the colonial gothic. A brief review of these three sub-genres of the gothic will be helpful in examining how the two writers, real and fictional, make inverted use of gothic tropes — in particular the figure of the ghost — to resolve this legacy. The review will largely be based on the work of Sugars and Turcotte and, to a lesser degree, on Marlene Goldman's discussion of the gothic. As Sugars and Turcotte state, theories of the gothic are indebted to Jacques Derrida's and Homi Bhabha's ghost-ridden critical writings, themselves post-colonial, international, and transnational (vii). Reta, who mentions her study of "too much Derrida" in the 1980s (4), also acknowledges her debt as a writer to him.

Post-colonial and transnational gothic literature in Canada is implicated in the revision of colonial history and colonial gothic discourse, which continue to haunt the present. "The colonization of Canada coincided, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," Sugars and Turcotte note, "with the literary genre of the Gothic in English" (xi). British colonizers built a garrison in the appropriated New World territory and policed its borders. The colonial gothic reflected their fear

of what existed beyond those borders, “out there,” the invaded landscape and Indigenous people (xi). As Sugars and Turcotte observe, each was constructed as a “ghostly or monstrous threat” (xi). The genre was thus implicated in the production and perpetuation of the discourse of the unified homely nation under threat of invasion from the ghostly race and space of the other. *Unless*, as noted above, signals the ongoing circulation in multicultural Canada of this historically inaccurate, xenophobic, colonial gothic discourse. Both Shields and Reta make use of the post-colonial and transnational gothic to resolve this discourse and reconstruct the nation as a site of culturally hybrid, indeed transnational, identities.

In *Unless*, ghosts play an important role in the process of de- and reconstruction. Shields and Reta must be placed among writers who reclaim the frightful gothic figure of the ghost not only as a victim (and a perpetrator) of nationalist violence, but also as the very tool of discursive revision. As Sugars and Turcotte remark, the revenant ghost causes “boundary dissolution,” which also suggests “epistemological destabilization” (viii). It is indeed in communication with ghosts that Reta, reiterating Shields, brings to light the inauthenticity of the Canadian nation-state and its acts of (neo-)colonial violence against diverse cultural “others.” It is again ghosts that inspire her vision of a transnational Canada.

The ghost is a manifestation of what Sigmund Freud calls the “uncanny” (Sugars and Turcotte vii). “This uncanny is in reality,” as Freud notes, “something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (47). Contemplation of the canny, or *heimlich*, which means both “homely” and “secret(ive)ly,” ushers in its apparent opposite, the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, literally the “unhomely.” Sugars and Turcotte speak of ghosts in the Canadian post-colonial gothic as, among other things, reminders of half-repressed national “trauma, guilt” (xxi). They are, more precisely, emblems of “unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from the experience of colonial oppression” (vii). It is, in fact, to implement “a *politics* of memory” that Derrida summons intellectuals to “speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost,” or victim of, among other things, national violence (xix). In *Unless*, it is the writer, the memory and conscience of her culture, who faces ghosts as they usher in memories of trauma. Reta is both intrigued by them and makes use of

what Justin D. Edwards calls the “language of terror, panic [,] . . . the rhetoric of repulsion,” or “Gothic discourse” (xvii).

Reta seeks to produce the idea of a happy home and nation, but ghosts constantly disrupt her narrative, bringing to light trauma. Her contemplation of her national home is thus informed by the Freudian notion of the inseparability of the *heimlich* from the *unheimlich*. Once Reta perceives her double role as alien invader and marginalized “other,” her “homely” nation suddenly seems to be strange and unreal. Post-colonial interrogation of the inauthentic and unhomely nation-state in which cultures collide ultimately raises the question of the shape of the future. Ghosts demand another incarnation.

The publication of *Unless*, an example also of the subgenre of the transnational gothic, coincided with Canadian thinkers’ decision to redefine the nation from a transnational perspective.³ Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), argues that transnationalism will heal (neo-) colonial history. Redefinition of the boundary or border — so pivotal in the colonial gothic — as a cultural bridge will allow for the free passage of people and ideas (Bhabha 5). The polarity of “homely” nation and uncanny “other” might thus be resolved into cultural hybridity. Sugars and Turcotte do not dwell on the transnational revision of national(ist) discourse in the new gothic. Goldman, unlike Bhabha, is wary of the assumption that transnationalism will put an end to nationalism (14). Rather, she continues to argue that it helps to create a global economy, which in turn creates migrant workers (14). This means that “more and more people are unhomed — often forced to exist in a kind of liminal space, traditionally associated with the ghost” (14). By no means a homogeneous subgenre, the transnational gothic, then, might articulate the fear of both in-between identity and uprootedness, as embodied in the figure of the unsettled ghost. Shields, on the other hand, acknowledges this fear, but she suggests that we must overcome it in order to make use of the redemptive potential of transnationalism. When the novel opens, the ghostly Norah, the new transnational subject, is sitting on a corner and dreaming of travelling in the world. She is an object of both desire and fear. At once desirous of historical transformation and in fear of uprootedness, Reta seeks to send her daughter across the bridge and lure her back home. However, unless the idea of the nation is radically revised, Shields warns us, the cycle of trauma will continue.

Relatively early in *Unless*, Reta reviews her involvement as first a

human rights activist and then a writer in Canada's engagement with its ghost- and guilt-ridden history. She briefly refers to the revolutionary 1960s, when serious revision of historical acts of violence against the "other" and reconstruction began not only in America, but also in Canada.⁴ Dominique Clément observes that in Canada large-scale "social movements led by women, Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, ethnic and racial minorities as well as a host of others" played a decisive role in the process (48). Minorities protested against pervasive, entrenched racism in Canada and "embrac[ed] human rights as a vision for social change" (48). These protests continued in the next decade. Pierre Elliott Trudeau promised to preserve human rights and in 1971 introduced multiculturalism, brought into law in 1988. Replacing the policy of assimilation, multiculturalism was intended to enable the different groups in Canada to visibly express their ethnic identities.⁵ Yet Reta must realize the partial failure of the new policy.

In the revolutionary 1960s, she was too young to be an activist. However, in the "liberated" 1970s, she and her present "husband," Tom, are "two students sitting side by side at a human rights rally in Nathan Phillips Square in downtown Toronto" (185). It is presumably in awareness of her double role as alien intruder and displaced "other" that Reta joins the rally. Alluding to the revisionist gothic writer's role as a spirit medium of sorts, she says, "I was allowed to be receptor and transmitter both, not a dead thing but a live link in the storage of what would become an unendurable grief" (66-67). Yet her growing sense of rootedness in her middle-class home in Ontario makes Reta oblivious of ghosts and the need to continue to deconstruct xenophobic discourse.

Indeed, she becomes oblivious of trauma itself. Like the early settlers, who made a "home" in invaded territory, she remembers to forget. Alluding to Ernest Renan, Daniel Coleman refers to "the contradictory injunction of nationalist discourse to remember to forget [Canada's] fantasmatic and traumatic history" (224).⁶ In wilful oblivion of Indigenous peoples' land claims, Reta deems herself the rightful owner of her mortgage-free house. When the unnamed books columnist interviewing her in a cappuccino bar speaks of Indigenous writers' "post-colonial cry of blaming anguish," she inwardly wishes him to "shut up, shut up" (31, 32). Reta is representative here of Canadians who, fearful of losing their national home, choose either to forget the existence of Indigenous peoples or to vilify them as invasive ghostly aliens. *Unless* signals that

British colonial discourse also continues to vilify other ethnicities as threats to the “unified” nation. These are non-European immigrants, like the Muslim woman, who have arrived in Canada since the 1960s and French Canadians. As a British French Canadian, Reta is both self and vilified “other.” Yet she chooses to forget her own trauma as well. But ghosts return to turn her home and house of fiction upside down and to reinvigorate in her the spirit of revision.

In the new millennium, the strangely altered Norah forces Reta to contemplate anew the ghosts and dark underside of the “homely” nation. Once “a good, obedient little girl” (11), her daughter has been transformed into “Norah the outcast” (215), in fact into a “gaping absence” (134), a ghost. She has vacated her parents’ home and her apartment off Bathurst and dropped out of university to sit on a street corner in downtown Toronto. This is reminiscent of “ghosts hover[ing] where secrets are held in time . . . [,] the secrets of the past, the secrets of the dead” (Rayner x). Reta repeatedly visits Norah, circling around the street where she is begging. On the one hand, her circling is suggestive of her contemplation of this new uncanny Norah; on the other, it evokes the ancient ritual of drawing a circle, or threshold, intended, Margaret Atwood observes, to protect the living from the dead (*Negotiating* 167). Reta is both in pursuit of and in flight from her ghostly daughter, indeed wishes for “a lobotomy” (261). Retrieval of trauma involves both knowledge and denial. Yet even “denial,” as Bhabha observes, “is always a . . . half-acknowledgement of that otherness [that] has left its traumatic mark” (62).

In his theory about what has happened to Norah, Tom resorts to the gothic discourse of the homely nation under threat from the invasive ghost. Reiterating this discourse in her tale, Reta appears to legitimize it, but she also produces a counter-theory that turns into a post-colonial and transnational gothic. Although unaware of their encounter, she makes the association early in the novel between the apparently depressed Norah and the self-immolating Muslim woman mentioned in the newspaper. Norah’s involvement with the racialized “other” is actually foreshadowed by her interest in Hamlet, haunted by the ghost of his father. Reta’s gothic tale, then, tells of a ghostly encounter that results in the surfacing of historical trauma.

Her story takes us to the corner where Bathurst and Bloor intersect, in downtown Toronto, and to the area around it. The security camera

of the retail store Honest Ed's records the Muslim woman's horrific spectacle of self-immolation, in which Norah, in her vain attempt to save the woman, must participate. Reta and Tom watch the footage only toward the end of the novel; until then, they produce conflicting interpretations of blonde-haired Norah's encounter with the racialized dark "other." Reta relates that Tom is determined to chase "that 'thing' that leapt out at [Norah] last spring and knocked her out of her life" (269). These words usher in a significant ambiguity: "that 'thing'" refers both to the trauma that Tom believes his panhandling daughter to suffer from and to the Muslim woman. The designation alludes to the latter not only as Aimé Césaire's "thingifi[ed]" colonial subject (21), but also as an alien ghost, attempting to invade Norah and, by extension, the Winters' home and nation.

Derrida's notion of "the Thing or the Athing called ghosts" (138) sheds further light on the Muslim woman's projection by European mainstream culture as an impenetrable and hence frightful spectre. Derrida states that "the subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception" (136). The Muslim woman, wearing a veil and gown, has neither a name nor a face nor a recognizable body. She represents the categorical ghost, traditionally visualized, Alice Rayner states, as "a formless body floating within a veil" (xi). The fire that the Muslim woman ignites more precisely points to a phantasm. Tom's ambiguous choice of words, then, implies that Norah is traumatized by a hostile encounter with an alien phantom. European mainstream culture, disquieted by immigrants arriving not only from Asia, but also from Africa and the Caribbean, is still haunted by the colonial gothic tale of the invasive ghostly stranger.

In fact, the Muslim woman blends in Tom's and Reta's minds with a ghost from colonial England. "[T]hat 'thing' that leapt out at her [Norah] last spring and knocked her out of her life" (269) is also an allusion to Brontë's madwoman, or ghost, in the attic, Bertha Mason. A privileged white Creole in the English colony of Jamaica, she is projected in England as the invasive ghostly "other" and incarcerated by her English husband, Rochester, in the attic. Her double, the protagonist Jane Eyre, warns the imperial Rochester, whom she is going to wed, "I had rather be a *thing* than an angel" (Brontë 291). About a month later, in the attic, it is the thingified, or dehumanized, Bertha

that “sprang and grappled his throat viciously” (321). Although Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of her as “a self-immolating colonial subject” (127),⁷ Bertha does not finally set herself, but the imperial house on fire and jumps from the roof. More than a century and a half later, European mainstream culture in Canada conceives of the Muslim woman as another invasive ghost.

Reta, as noted above, appears to subscribe to Tom’s theory: Norah, as representative of the “homely” nation, has been assaulted by a frightful, alien ghost. Reta, however, has already begun to turn Tom’s colonial gothic discourse on its head, which causes her to conceive of herself as another “madwoman” (227). Norah in her alternative narrative does not represent Canada; a guilt-ridden alien invader and another ghostly “other,” she no longer feels at home in it. Reta relates that, on her last visit home, her deeply perturbed daughter told her, “I’m trying to find where I fit in” (132). Norah’s obsession with Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*⁸ and her interest in “forgotten dead languages” (128) imply her realization of the displacement of her French and presumably of other ethnic roots.

Read in the light of Reta’s counternarrative, Norah’s encounter with the Muslim woman acquires a different meaning. The Muslim woman, “that ‘thing,’” is said to have “leapt” at Norah. Yet the footage shows that it is actually Norah who leaps at the woman to save her from the flames. Norah readily assumes her moral responsibility toward another sacrificed “other.” However, in her attempt to stifle the fire, she reignites it: “the dish rack [in Norah’s hand] became a second fire” (315). An item that belongs in the kitchen, the dish rack is suggestive of her inability to emancipate herself altogether from the ideology of the homely nation or pleasures of the hearth. The xenophobic discourse figuratively consumes her and the Muslim woman. Both are alight, melting into each other, as Norah’s “fingers sank into the woman’s melting flesh” (315). Together they mime the unspeakable gothic secret of the stranger’s dissolution in Canada into a ghost. What we are presented with, however, is not only the re-enactment of trauma, but also a figurative reconstruction of the nation. As they undergo symbiosis, Norah and the Muslim woman also disrupt the colonial discourse of the self and uncanny other, thus reconstructing the exclusionary nation as a hybrid space. “Paradoxically, the haunting effect,” Sugars and Turcotte note, “can be unsettling and enabling at the same time” (xi).

After her encounter with the Muslim woman, Norah refuses to return home. The injured young woman is taken by two firemen to emergency, where she mysteriously disappears. Nora Foster Stovel states that “Norah has stepped across to the other side” (“Because” 71). Already a ghostly “other” before her descent to the underworld, she returns to the world of the living twice a ghost. Reta is both intrigued by her strangely altered daughter, sitting on the ominous corner, and seeks to disclaim her as a madwoman “in a demented trance” (105) and her tale of trauma as signifying nothing. However, as Derrida observes, “ghosts are” not only “a little mad and unsettled,” but also “unhinge” the living (153, xix). Disoriented and destabilized, Reta seeks shelter in her home only to find it, too, invaded by the uncanny. We are transported, then, into the most popular site in the ghost tale, the home.

Reta’s hundred-year-old home is representative, at once, of her nation, her house of fiction, and her unconscious, the secrets of which are terrifying. True to Freudian theory, her contemplation of the (seemingly) *heimlich* character of her home ushers in the *unheimlich*. Destabilization of the ideology of home and nation is suggested by her reference to the impossibility of translating the word *cozy* into marginalized French (58). This constitutes an allusion to both the problem of translating *heimlich* and *unheimlich* into English and to the conflict between Canada’s British heritage and French heritage.⁹ Destabilization is also suggested by Reta’s memory of how the “box of Dance Dust” in the house would make “the floor . . . slippery” (52). Soon enough her love of its “spaciousness and, at the same time, coziness” (57) gives way to her recognition of the inauthenticity of her (national) home and its gothic violence against diverse “others.” Reta’s historical revision ultimately brings to light the need to reconsider the idea of the nation from a transnational perspective. At the end of roughly two hundred years of cultural collisions and conflicts, the Canadian nation-state is falling apart.

The Ontario farmhouse into which Reta and her family moved in 1980 dates back to 1900. She accentuates the seemingly “firm foundation” and “durable authenticity” of her home (49) and, by extension, of her nation. Together with the ancient trees outside, they apparently root the house and its inhabitants and the Canadian nation at large in both the earth and an authentic past. Another organic image is invoked as part of the natural(ized) discourse of the nation: Reta likens the spar-

rows' song that reaches her from the woods to the Canadian national anthem. Inside the house, the Winters have enjoyed "comfort, ease, companionability, food and drink": that is, "family love" (170, 171). Reta's indulgence in memories of domestic life is charged with heightened significance. "The scraps, patches and rags of daily life," Bhabha remarks, "must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture" (145). We are presented in *Unless* with a narrative struggle to construct the Canadian nation as authentic, homogeneous, and idyllic. However, what is described to us is actually a hundred-year-old haunted house, once separated from another "by ghostly old lilacs" (52). Inside it is "a concealed door on the wall" leading into a "tiny crawl space" (53). This is reminiscent of the secret passages and sliding panels in the gothic house, leading to unspeakable horrors and guilt-laden secrets. But it is predominantly "the immense built-in gun cupboard . . . in the upstairs hall" (53) that alludes to Canada's guilt-ridden history as a settler-invader culture.

The haunted house conceals still other secrets. In the crypt-like basement lingers the ghost of a previous tenant, Crystal McGinn, both an invader and a displaced cultural "other." Her first name and surname establish her as a ghost. The former is evocative of the crystal ball in which the ghosts of the past and future are conjured up. And the word *gin* is not only the name of a (distilled alcoholic) spirit, but also the original meaning of its derivative *ginner* as "a tool" or "a trick" ("ginn"), suggestive here of "trick or treat." Reta, who learns of her name much later, speculates that Crystal might have been named Ruth, her own middle name. Clearly, Crystal functions as a ghostly double for her.

Reta remembers having heard rumours of a "tragedy in the McGinn family" (54). Her "questions" about Crystal's fate "opened up for me like rooms along a dim corridor, and these rooms possess doorways to other rooms" (54-55). We are inside the bewildering interior of the haunted house. Reta muses that Crystal must have felt as if she was "living in a falling-apart house that wishes she weren't there" (65). The house appears to resent the settler-invader who, Edwards remarks, "carve[d] out a sense of homeliness on foreign terrain[,] . . . settling down at the cost of other cultures" (xx). Yet, like Reta, Crystal is not only an invader, but also an "other" displaced by dominant British culture. Reta continues to speculate that "Mr. McGinn," apparently of Scottish origin, "attempted to insulate the attic" or "accidentally" shot his wife (55).¹⁰

The former scenario is reminiscent of the Jamaican madwoman's live burial in the attic of the mansion of her xenophobic English husband. Reta muses that Crystal's "life has been burning up one day at a time[,] . . . and she's swallowed the flames without blinking" (65). Her association with fire, in fact, establishes her connection not only with the madwoman, but also with the Muslim woman and Norah, all consumed or marked by fire.

Envisioning a transnational future, Reta blends with the visionary Julian of Norwich, whose words are quoted in the novel: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (218). The ghosts that the writer negotiates with not only are reminders of trauma, but also usher in hope. Impatiently awaiting another incarnation, "the specter," Derrida notes, "is the becoming-body" (6), carrying the "messianic promise" of a better future (91). Among the deterritorialized ghosts, it is Norah whom Reta presents as "the becoming-body" or new transnational subject. Her daughter is willing to cross the border to erase a politics of cultural polarity inside and outside Canada. Yet the future that she ushers in signifies dissolution of the old familiar home and is thus also frightening.

Reta says, "My daughter is living like a vagabond on the streets of Toronto" (167). Once Norah realizes her roles as displaced "other" and alien intruder, she no longer feels rooted in the "home" and nation. A ghost, she sits on the street corner. Reta believes that, if her daughter's prosaic friend Tracy were to look at her, she would "see no one" (215). Ghostliness identifies Norah, then, as both an exile and the new transnational subject, ready for departure. Indeed, she takes her place among Bhabha's migrants, who, as Bhabha observes, have the power to break down the xenophobic border and implement the discourse of cultural hybridity (5).

Actually, Norah's journey has already begun when, ironically, Norah vacated her home to buy a plastic dish rack, which, as noted above, alludes to the pleasures of the hearth. It has culminated in her and the Muslim woman's symbiosis on the street corner. The Norah whom Reta contemplates is hence, strictly speaking, no longer Norah. She and the Muslim woman represent a new incorporation suggestive of the birth of the transnational subject and a transnational Canada. In fact, their symbiosis results in the redefinition of the border, represented here by the street corner, as a cultural bridge. Bhabha notes that it is here, the

in-between space, where “the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (2).

After her encounter with the Muslim woman, Norah is ready to negotiate with still other cultures. She plans to travel across the bridge and into the once terrifying space of the “other.” Before she goes missing, Norah tells her perplexed mother of her interest in “whole continents. India. Especially those places like India that I’ve never seen” (128-29). Her reference to India, a former British colony, reminds us that the polarity of East and West, reinforced by colonial history, must be healed as well. But the dream of a redemptive transnational future turns into a haunting nightmare and the ghost making a gesture of reparation into an object of fear.

Norah’s and the Muslim woman’s ghostliness also signals the transnational migrant’s apparent loss of his or her home, which ultimately means for the horrified Reta loss of the self. She recalls how, as a little girl, she was overcome by a feeling of dissolution: “Any minute I would lose my balance and then I wouldn’t be little Reta anymore. Like Norah, I wouldn’t be anything” (148). Edwards, in his discussion of the Canadian gothic, speaks of the “haunting trepidation of losing one’s self, of collapsing into the terrifying space of a void” (xvi-xvii). Reta both desires and fears a transnational redefinition of the exclusionary nation. She wants to encourage Norah in her vagabond existence, but also wants to lure her back home. Is Norah to depart from or return home? Is Reta’s visit to the Orangetown cemetery on a December morning suggestive of her desire to banish the disquieting ghost or to help her come back to life and redeem the nation? The ending of Reta’s story about her daughter and the future of Canada is uncertain.

Coral Ann Howells notes that the title of the novel conveys “a sense of crisis” (108). Stovel’s remark that “*Unless* concludes with the joyful reunion of Reta Winters with her lost daughter, Norah” (“Moral Seriousness” 92), suggests resolution of the crisis. Reta, however, states that “I’m desperate to know how the story will turn out” (16). Typical of the gothic style, though, it ends in ambiguity. Norah, who has pneumonia, is rushed from the street corner to the hospital, where she is reunited with her parents. The hospital is suggestive here not only of personal trauma but also of national trauma and a fragile chance of healing. Reta relates that “in another bed, behind a cloth screen, a stranger [is] tossing and moaning between her sheets, having nightmares, mut-

tering in some language I couldn't identify" (304). Reta is still haunted by the ghostly "other" but appears to refuse to translate her coded tale of trauma and offer her a place in her narrative of the nation. Indeed, Norah is soon reabsorbed into the fiction of the "homely" nation under threat of invasion from the "other." She is transferred from the room that she shares with the ghostly stranger into a family room.

Reta already speaks of forgetting trauma. "You are allowed to forget," she tells her sleeping daughter, "we'll remember it for you" (315). This echoes the nationalist discourse that urges Canadians to remember to forget their culpable history. Despite the assurance that Reta and Tom will remember in Norah's place, we cannot be sure of this. Indeed, professing doubts about its veracity, Reta dismisses her tale as "a tottering fantasy" (227). Unwilling to renounce her old familiar home and nation, Reta appears to be tempted to disown her tale and deny the excluded ghostly "others."

At the end of the novel, Norah is brought back home; the ghost of dormant transnationalism, she is asleep. Reta's contemplation of the ambiguous future eerily converges with her awareness of time: "It is after midnight, late in the month of March" (320). Almost a year earlier, in April, the Muslim woman reignited the madwoman's fire and immolated herself, and Norah was marked by the flames. Since this desperate and provocative spectacle, the exclusionary discourse of the home and nation has not been abandoned entirely, and the witching hour portends the return of troubled ghosts. The haunting is not over.

An example of the post-colonial and transnational gothic, then, *Unless* presents us with a ghost-ridden writer's revision of the guilt-laden Canadian past and discourse of the nation. Yet the novel "lacks" closure; as noted above, ambiguity pervades the ending. A representative of hybrid Canadian culture, Reta articulates different positions: fear of perpetuation of the trauma of diverse "others" as well as fear of and desire for national renewal. The result is indeterminacy. Perhaps nothing will change. On the other hand, it can be argued that indeterminacy is the very point of departure in the ongoing debate on the idea of the nation in the revisionist gothic critique. A typical postmodern concept, it signifies the end of totalizing discourse or single, centralized meaning. *Unless* can thus be said to open up space for negotiation among different ethnicities in Canada of the personal and collective ideas of "nationness."

NOTES

¹ I have elsewhere identified and explored *Unless* as a feminist ghost tale intertextually linked to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (see Melikoğlu). As Dianne Osland has shown, *Jane Eyre* is also a pivotal intertext to Shields's novel *The Stone Diaries*, reinforcing its feminist concerns (see Osland). Susan Elizabeth Sweeney has identified — but not explored — Shields's *Swann: A Mystery* as a ghost story (see Sweeney 24). Shields herself revealed that her juvenile stories often had “a supernatural theme and a trick ending” (“View” 19).

² Roman, an important character in Reta's novel *Thyme in Bloom*, is not presented as a ghost and hence not included in this article. Yet his story is also relevant: the son of Albanian immigrants, Roman desires to reconnect with his ethnic heritage.

³ Lloyd Wong and Vic Satzewich note that it was in the early 2000s that Canada decided to redefine its policy (3).

⁴ Reta refers to the year “1961, . . . [when] John Fitzgerald Kennedy was president of the United States. And the country exploded with consciousness and guilt” (58). White America had to face the past of slavery and racial segregation. Kennedy promised to support the African-American civil rights movement, but was shot in 1963.

⁵ Trudeau is mentioned in *Unless* on page 272 and his minister of Indian Affairs, Jean Chrétien, on page 169. Both advocated multiculturalism. Dominique argues that Trudeau sought not only to enable the different groups in Canada to express their ethnic identities, but also to prevent domination of the nation-state by British Canadians and to check Quebec's nationalist aspirations. Dominique concludes that “multiculturalism was an updated version of the British imperial policy of divide and rule” (83).

⁶ Renan notes that “forgetting . . . is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation,” since “unity is always effected by means of brutality” (11).

⁷ Spivak associates the madwoman among the flames with *sati*, the Hindu ritual of burning widows alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands (127).

⁸ *Madame Bovary* is another intertext in *Unless*. Both of their protagonists, Emma and Reta, are wives of physicians, motherless daughters, and mothers alienated from their own daughters.

⁹ Stovel observes that “whenever Reta, or Shields, wants to emphasize a point, such as women's powerlessness, [Shields] employs French translation” (“Written” 220). These instances of French translation in *Unless* also serve to emphasize the marginalization of Quebec.

¹⁰ According to yet another scenario, Crystal committed suicide. Yet the “suicide note” that Reta finds behind a radiator turns out to be an invitation to a baby shower. I am reminded of Catherine Morland, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, who finds a scroll of paper in the black cabinet in her room in General Tilney's home, an abbey. A reader of gothic literature, she expects to discover a dark secret but merely finds mundane bills. Yet, like Reta, Catherine is right in her suspicion that the house is a gothic site. Its owner is a misogynistic, mercenary villain.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. 7th ed. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Q. D. Leavis. London: Penguin Classics, 1985. Print.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review P, 1972. Print.
- Clément, Dominique. "Legacies and Implications of Human Rights Law in Canada." *Canadian Issues* (Spring 2013): 46-50. Web. 7 Oct. 2015. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1321690303/fulltextPDF?accountid=9645>.
- Coleman, Daniel. *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Ed. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Edwards, Justin D. *Gothic Canada: Rereading the Spectre of a National Literature*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2005. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny (1919)." *Studies in Parapsychology*. Ed. Philip Rieff. New York: Collier, 1963.19-60. Print.
- "Ginn." *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 10th ed. Ed. Judith Pearsall. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Goldman, Marlene. *Dispossession: Haunting in Canadian Fiction*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2012. Print.
- Howells, Coral Ann. "Regulated Anger." Rev. of *Jane Austen and Unless*, by Carol Shields. *Canadian Literature* 179 (2003): 107-09. *ProQuest*. Web. 26 Mar. 2014.
- Melikoglu, Esra. "Ghosts Haunting the 'Kronk City' in Shields's House of Fiction: *Unless*." Women and Gothic Conference. Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge. 23 Jan. 2010. Conference presentation.
- Rayner, Alice. *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theater*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. Print.
- Renan, Ernest. "What Is a Nation?" Trans. Martin Thom. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 8-22. Print.
- Shields, Carol. Interview. With Donna Krolik Hollenberg. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literature* 39 (1998): 338-55. Print.
- . *Unless*. London: Fourth Estate, 2002. Print.
- . "A View from the Edge of the Edge." *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*. Ed. Marta Dvořák and Manina Jones. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007. 17-29. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- Stovel, Nora Foster. "Because She's a Woman: Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *English Studies in Canada* 32.4 (2006): 51-73. Print.
- . "Moral Seriousness with Comic Drama." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 30 (2008): 88-100. Print.
- . "Written in 'Women's Ink': French Translation and Female Power in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *Canada and Beyond: A Journal of Canadian Literary and Cultural Studies* 3.1-2 (2013): 219-41. Print.
- Sugars, Cynthia, and Gerry Turcotte. "Introduction: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic." *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*. Ed. Sugars and Turcotte. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. vii-xxvi. Print.