Defying Categorization
The Work of Suzette Mayr

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Le corpus littéraire de Suzette Mayr examine les croisements raciaux, la sexualité marginalisée et la formation de l'identité personnelle dans des espaces indéfinis. Ses recueils de poèmes et ses nouvelles ont tous remis en question la situation et le classement des populations. L'auteure a exploré et validé les espaces non explorés et non compartimentés qui sont présents dans les réalités traditionelles.

In the afterword to her Master's thesis "Chimaera Lips" (1992), the Calgary poet and novelist Suzette Mayr states that

> a positive approach to categorization would not rely on having to distinguish oneself through comparison to another group, but would emphasize the whole or merged self, rather than the categorized self. (59)

In this work, Mayr explores "existence between 'realities.'" She investigates and attempts to undermine the binary constructions surrounding race, sexuality and gender, by writing about, and presumably from within, what she terms "middle spaces;" spaces which exist between the starkly delineated realities commonly associated with various racial, sexual and gender categories (61). Mayr posits an absorption of "realities" by these in-between spaces, leading to an integrated system in which neither reality nor intermediate space dominates. The novels Mayr wrote following "Chimaera Lips," *Moon Honey* (1995) and *The Widows* (1998), and her chapbook of poems, *Zebra Talk* (1991), all serve to challenge the ways in which people are necessarily located or categorized and to explore, expose, and validate uncharted, uncompartmentalized middle spaces.

Both of Suzette Mayr's novels, as well as her poetry chapbook, deal with marginalized sexualities and the difference between sexuality and gender. She writes about lesbianism, interracial partnerships, and the sexuality of elderly people, all of which have traditionally been overlooked as literary points of focus. In "The Technology of Gender," Teresa de Lauretis posits that gender refers to more than simply sexual difference (1987). Sexual difference, she claims, is an abstract notion that results

> not from biology or socialization but from signification and discursive effects (the emphasis here being less on the sexual than on differences as différance), ends up being in the last instance a difference (of woman) from man—or better, the very instance of difference in man. (de Lauretis 713)

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De Lauretis identifies the primary limitation of sexual difference as the fact that it offers woman as difference itself, a difference from man, where both woman and man are universalized. There is no provision in this concept for the articulation of differences between women, of the difference of "women from Woman" (714). De Lauretis outlines the need for a social subject

> constituted in gender, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual relations. (714).

Such a subject would be multiple and contradictory as opposed to divided. This is the sort of gender with which Mayr endows her characters, a gender comprising sexual, racial, class, and experiential factors.

Mayr's chapbook, *Zebra Talk*, is a collection of poems of a relatively personal nature which describe Mayr's own perceptions as a lesbian and a Canadian of mixed, Black-Caucasian, race. She explores issues of race and sexuality, identity and family, describing middle and hybrid spaces. Mayr treats her poetic subjects in much the same way as she does the characters in her novels; their appearances, actions and significances are described in unique, creative and at times ambiguous ways which emphasize the difficulty, if not impossibility, of categorizing individuals without that action being destructive and/or reductive.

Zebra Talk contains poems which discuss the idea of being a "zebra," a person of mixed race. Mayr details the process of coming to terms with racial hybridity and of understanding how a person of mixed race locates herself within a multiracial family setting and within the larger setting of a multiracial community or nation. Clearly, racial and cultural hybridity create new spaces. People of in-between colors and in-between cultures have to forge in-between identities and locations for themselves. However, what stands in the middle cannot be identified simply in relation to the poles it stands between.

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Mayr's use of the repetitive imagery of skin, invertebrates, volcanic insides, and people made of earth turns ordered family and romantic structures into a tempestuous and vividly multicolored mixture. In the first poem, the speaker describes her family:

> The skin on a drum
> The skin stretched over a moving rib cage
> The skin stretched and bitten by two other heads on this
> three-headed body
> 2 brothers 1 sister 3 heads and 1 body
> plus 1 and 1 parents. (2)

The children, each different versions of the same mixture, form a three-headed being, sharing a body. The parents, "1 and 1," remain separate. The skin to which Mayr refers appears thin but strong, stretched and fitted over skeleton and roiling core: "(Zebra pelt stretched over a hot and bloody centre)" (2). This particular mixture of heat and blood and guts is never given a clear meaning. It could be a reference, as George Elliott Clarke suggests in "Canadian Biraciality and Its 'Zebra' Poetics," to "a volcanic core—a history of violence and death ... 0 the same seething hurt," an internal upheaval particular to people of mixed race (233). Or, Mayr could be pointing out that everyone, regardless of race, is, at the core, composed of the same unstable material, which cannot be classified or associated in any way with outside appearance.

The second poem demonstrates the irrelevance of race to sexual intimacy. The two characters in this poem, the woman Lady, and the man Never-gonna

> play their venus games to a syncopated drum
> beat their bodies clamp belly-to-belly like slugs for hours
> for hours for hours. Slugs are not annelids. Their bodies never
> were never will be never aren't segmented or striped. (4)

The transformation described here, of humans to slugs, allows for no segmentation, no division. Neither humans nor slugs are striped or divided creatures. They are whole and solid.

Mayr's speaker describes her father in the following poem. She inquires as to his form of hybridity, asking what color lies beneath the white on white stripes of a German man living in Calgary. He responds that, for him, it is "easier to be an asshole" (5). He chooses not to tackle the contradictions, not make the distinctions, and not to answer the question; to be an "asshole." The speaker claims that it is easiest for him not to create a new hybrid space for himself, but rather to assimilate himself to the best of his ability. This answer is not adequate for the speaker. Mayr ends the poem with the question "But who is we now?" after abruptly separating this unidentified/unidentifiable "we" from the English who would use the idiom "asshole" (5).

The subsequent two poems contrast heterosexual and homosexual love. These poems taken together show the speaker experiencing a crisis of confidence regarding her ability to love other women. In "Love: Homosexual," the speaker describes her relationship with her would-be lover Yvette. Yvette kisses her "straight on the mouth homophobia and all" (Mayr 7), and she thinks that "it was through race we were related brown skin/and all but I couldn't touch her" (7). The speaker believes she can create a connection with Yvette through their racial similarities, but she is unable to. She finds Yvette to be composed of the same material as herself and her siblings: "I thought that by tearing off/her skin I might find more earth. Nothing but/a hot bloody centre" (7). The speaker is surprised to find that there is no mystery to Yvette, simply more of the same. She concludes, then that "the only way to understand her is to love her. To get inside/her. I'll leave it to a brother" (7). This poem conveys a lack of self-confidence on the part of the speaker. She is unsure of herself, and so chooses to abandon her mission to one she feels to be more suited, a brother. Homosexuality is, like racial hybridity, a marginalized space. There is no previously existing template for the lesbian identity the speaker is gingerly trying to shape for herself. Middle spaces necessarily defy categorization because they are spaces, or locations, that must be formed on an individual basis.

In the last poem, Mayr's speaker poses the question "The centre of what?" (10). She appears to be much

more reserved in her questioning of her mother, who "chooses not to speak" (10). Her mother simply does not respond, and so seems distant and inaccessible. The speaker worries that she will be discovered and chastised for trying to make her mother, the colored parent, a centre: "Does she hear only a stool-pigeon coo from the centre I try to make her?" (10).

Mayr's first novel *Moon Honey* draws from two works, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, both of which deal with transformation, the transgression of boundaries, and the deconstruction of established categories. *Moon Honey* is structured in a manner similar to *Metamorphoses*; it is a patchwork of related stories all of which involve changes of shape. Mayr uses magical realism, to dismantle divisions, assumptions, prejudices and abstract groupings through a series of transformations.

Moon Honey is a magical realist novel. Magical realism is a notoriously slippery concept. It is difficult to define; a satisfactory definition has never been reached, and perhaps never will be. Amaryll Chanady writes that magical realism is "defined as an 'amalgamation of realism and fantasy,' 'esthetic animism' and the 'semi-fantastic,' or as an attempt to capture the mysterious essence of reality" (49). The "mysterious essence of reality" is, indeed, a difficult thing to pin down. However, there are some things to be said about magical realism that are generally considered to be acceptable. Magic realism seeks to capture those characteristics of reality, which are not usually perceived, to point out that which is often overlooked or ignored. Mayr's examination of unexplored spaces, or "existence between 'realities,'" where boundaries and divisions are dismantled and metamorphosis is natural and expected, fits in nicely with magical realism's search for the fantastic in fluctuation and relentless transformation (Mayr 1992: 61).

Mayr's protagonist, Carmen, is a young white woman who suddenly turns into a black woman and must learn to live with the delights, confusions, frustrations and anxieties of "colored" existence. Carmen's metamorphosis leads to new behaviors, perspectives and perceptions, introducing in her character a hybridity of experience. Multiple magical transformations are portrayed throughout the novel: bridesmaids change into horses, mothers into birds, great-grandmothers into fountains. These metamorphoses themselves indicate the presence of "middle spaces," unexplored terrain and possibilities; however imaginary, existing outside of properly ordered reality. While this is obviously a magical realist text, the concept of transformation as possible, desirable and inevitable, coupled with the themes of lesbianism and interracial relationships, implies a merging of realities and foregrounds marginalized spaces.

Now, transformation is contrary to categorization; it requires the transgression of boundaries, sometimes rigidly enforced, and the invalidation of definitions. The most important transformation in *Moon Honey* is clearly Carmen's change from a white woman to a colored woman, referred to alternately as "black" and "brown." Her metamorphosis is not gradual, but the result of a spontaneous change in perception. Carmen asks her Indo-Canadian boss, Rama, to explain to her why she becomes so angry when people inquire about her heritage: "educate me...show me the difference!" (21). Rama obliges by becoming the catalyst for Carmen's conversion:

> Three veins in Rama's forehead stretch upward in the shape of a trident. She gives Carmen a *look*, but this time the look pulls apart Carmen's face, peels off Carmen's skin. *I cut you you bleed I cut me I bleed*, burrows through the layer of subcutaneous fat and splays out her veins and nerves, frayed electrical wires, snaps apart Carmen's muscles and scrapes at Carmen's bones, digs and gouges away Carmen's life.
>
> The colour of Carmen's pink and freckled fingers and forearms deepens, darkens to freckled chocolate brown and beige pink on the palms of her hands. Her hair curls and frizzes, shortens. (22-23)

Carmen changes not only from a white woman to a black woman, but from someone who pays little attention to the significance of race, making flippant assumptions secure in the centrality of her whiteness, to someone "so sensitive sometimes she can't even stand *herself*" (49). She undergoes a variety of psychological changes along with her change in skin colour. She becomes intensely aware of people's attitudes towards her and towards members of other racial and cultural minorities. Carmen notices that people regard her and her boyfriend Griffin, who is white, differently now that they are a mixed couple. She even becomes attuned to the racist thoughts of others. Not only is Carmen more aware of her body, and the bodily communication of others, but she also deliberately pursues friendships with coloured colleagues and reacts in a protective, sentimental manner to de-

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pictions of coloured people in an attempt to find something, or someone, with whom to identify.

It is also interesting to note that Carmen's opinion of her blackness changes, and her reactions to those around her often contradict her feelings. For example, immediately after her metamorphosis, Carmen enjoys the enthusiastic attention she receives from Griffin, who has "always wanted to have a black woman" (49), but is offended by the racist way in which he expresses himself: "Have a black woman, Carmen says. 'You can have leprosy, shit-head, but you can't *have* people. Don't be such a fucking shit-head!" (49). While recovering from the shock induced by Griffin's marriage to another woman and trying to put her life back in order, Carmen finds her coloured self almost intoxicating. She revels in her exoticism, and questions whether she ever was white to begin with:

> She's sipped and gulped so much she's drunk, drunk out of her skull, dead drunk, past drunk, so drunk she's sober, her mind as sharp and bright as the point of a new needle. That's what being a white girl turned brown girl is all about. Or a brown girl who was brown all along but nobody knew, not even herself. Only now learning to enjoy the taste of the drink, not just an intoxicating cocktail, but an empowering elixir. (211-12)

Though Carmen's constant oscillations between depression, hope, resolution and despair can be as much attributed to her situation in life as they can to her sudden blackness, they are influenced by her skin color and difficulties with establishing a racial identity. The man she is desperately in love with has left her for another woman, and so the one relationship she is almost totally dependent on, both in terms of identity and of emotional stability, collapses. While her race is inextricably connected to the events that shape her life, as it is a part of her, it is not wholly responsible for them. By placing Carmen in this position, Mayr demonstrates that race cannot be separated from the remainder of life. Race is not an independent factor.

Mayr's second novel, *The Widows*, is a historical novel whose main characters follow in the footsteps of Annie Edson Taylor, the first person to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel and survive. When faced with losing the independence she had so meticulously preserved to this point, or starving if she continued to look for conventional work, Taylor chose to do something entirely different. Pierre Berton observes that, "what Annie Edson Taylor was doing, as she prepared to enter her barrel, was to shake her fist at Victorian morality, which decreed that there was no place but the almshouse for a woman without means who had reached a certain age" (267). *The Widows* also brings to the forefront characters and spaces that cannot be neatly defined. In the spirit of Taylor, three elderly German immigrants steal a specially designed barrel in which they go over Niagara Falls in order to prove to the world that, despite their age, they are still valuable and useful and expect to be noticed as such. Themes of lesbianism and interracial union are also present in this text, evidence of Mayr's proactive approach to categorization. Each character exists within him or herself, completely unique, and impossible to contain within a single, or even within multiple "realities".

Though *Moon Honey* provides a wonderful example of hybridity of experience, *The Widows* gives a much more thorough treatment of racial and cultural hybridity. Mayr foregrounds the mixed nature of her characters' realities by inserting German words and phrases into the text, and by vividly describing the women's memories of their respective youths in Germany. The two sisters Hannelore and Clotilde, and Frau Schnadelhuber, friend and lover to each respectively, are all between the ages of 75 and 85 when they steal the orange Niagara Ball and take the plunge over the falls. All three characters lived in Germany during the time of the Third Reich, and now have difficulty balancing culture, history, family, and personal fulfillment. Hannelore and Clotilde move to Canada so that Hannelore might be closer to her son, Dieter, and his family, however she has trouble being a part of their lives without interfering. She constantly, but seemingly unconsciously, attempts to assert her own values and life strategies, which are, obviously, intensely reflective of German culture, on her son and daughter-in-law. Hannelore also finds it difficult to accept the fact that her son has married someone of mixed race, Rosario, his wife, who is "half Mexican, half African, half Chinese, half Kanadian (half mongrel, Hannelore said to herself, only to herself, she would never say this out loud to *anyone*)" (17).

It is important to note that Hannelore does manage to establish an extremely loving relationship with her granddaughter Cleopatra Maria, who of course is also of mixed race. Hannelore's reaction to Rosario, and her relatively frequent but apparently unintentional racist comments, demonstrate how hybridities can, at times, be contradictory. Hybridity, like race or gender, is not necessarily a unifying factor simply because it exists between categories.

Hannelore and Clotilde meet Frau Schnadelhuber at a Bavarian delicatessen. When Frau Schnadelhuber's is dismissed from her delicatessen job on account of her age, she retires to bed and decides to die, realizing that

> her whole life had been a huge joke at her expense.... Simply to be told that because she had reached a certain age, she was taking up too much room, was no longer useful, no longer wanted. (169)

It is the prospect of stealing the Niagara Ball, driving it across the country and hurtling over the falls

that resuscitates Frau Schnadelhuber.

Each character provides an interesting example of development within marginalized spaces, as not one could be accurately included within the traditional conception of "elderly." One of the ways in which Mayr most overtly discourages the categorization of her older characters is to provide a vivid account of their still-developing sexualities. Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber begin a lesbian relationship together, breaking down yet another barrier. Venturing into an undefined space at such a late time in life is not something commonly done, or commonly seen. It is not a decision one would expect to either hear or read about. However, Mayr makes a point of emphasizing that her elderly characters are not only sexually aware and active, but capable of achieving and maintaining sexually satisfying relationships.

The work of Suzette Mayr, as a whole, endeavors to expose and validate spaces, states, and lives found "between 'realities'" (Mayr 1992: 61). Whether existing "in-between" because of racial hybridity, gender, or age, Mayr's characters challenge and defy definition. She presents her readers with "whole or merged [selves], rather than the categorized self" (Mayr 1992: 59). Each character contributes to a proliferation of differences aimed at filling middle and marginalized spaces such that realities blend fluidly with the spaces separating them, and people, literary or otherwise, are no longer subject to destructive and reductive compartmentalization.

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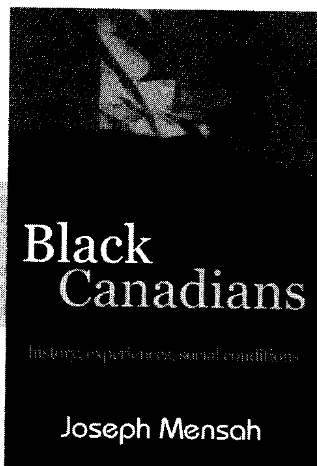

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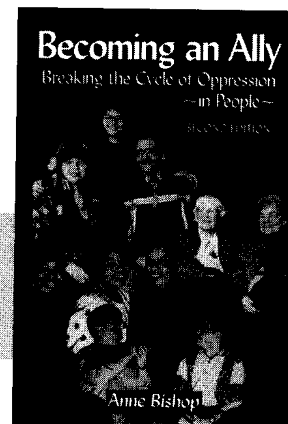

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