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Deconstructing Canadian sexuality in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*

Gender representations and stereotypes, relations between the sexes and sexual imagery play a strong part in creating a sense of national identity and are often exploited and produced for political and nationalistic reasons. Sexual symbolic is a very powerful tool in influencing peoples' minds – it decides whether one wishes to identify with a given embodiment of a nation, with its values and official politics. My aim in this paper is to analyse briefly some stereotypical Canadian gender representations, values attached to them as well as power relations that support and promote them, and then to re-examine or rather deconstruct such a gendered notion of Canadianess through an analysis of Cohen's novel that provides us with a dramatically different view on the realm of sexuality as well as Canadianess. What is more, I would like to point to the relevance of the book to topics such as queer theory, homoeroticism, cyber feminism (and other feminisms) and Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "making oneself a body without organs." Though some of these points are very contemporary and maybe not overtly, explicitly present in the text of *Beautiful Losers*, they are easily perceptible at least as similarities, symptoms or reminiscences. Another aspect of Cohen's text that I wish to consider is his notion of "fucking the saint" (13) and his examination of the relations between sexuality and religion.

Since the beginning of the colonization of America, the continent was strongly promoted by the means of sexual imagery. On various sketches and allegories America was thus represented:

[a]s pictured in 1580 etching she was voluptuous, naked and reclining, representing both the almost sexual rewards available to those that conquer her virgin soil and the need for Europeans to come clothe her in their superior civilization. (Berger)

The first thing mentioned in any discussion about native peoples was their ‘nakedness,’ which successfully enflamed imaginations of the Europeans; due to the western civilisation’s taboo of the body they became almost obsessed with the native peoples supposed lack of clothing; it was an evidence of their closeness to nature and, depending on the occasion, proved them either pure, uncorrupted and naive or the contrary, lustful, wanton, rapacious, promiscuous and immodest. Colonizers were enhanced to colonize by stories of multitudes of sexual possibilities and erotic freedom of native women. Native men were in these representations either strongly brutalised, their masculinity was aggressive and primitive and threatening (which served to justify the authority and power of the white men on their women by causing their fear of the natives) or as effeminate, lazy and womanly, in the sphere of unreason, uneducation and superstition thus supposedly lustful, revengefull, malicious, cunning or docile and submissive (the most suspicious but also typical feature of gender stereotypes are their inner inconsistencies and paradoxes, gender is represented accordingly to the purposes of the dominating ideology that are different depending on the circumstances, e.g. women are often either sanctified as “virgins” or “mothers” or oversexualised as temptresses, sinful whores etc.; this double representation (lilly and rose) proves the ill-logic of gender representations):

In part the qualities ascribed to Indian people, male and female, were the qualities that European Americans ascribed to their own women.(...) were creatures of nature rather than reason, like women, subject to wild impulses and passions, and, most importantly, like women, needed European and American men to protect and guide them. (Berger)

Apart from the sexualized representation of the continent and First Nations, the very land, the nation’s territory as a determining factor of nationhood was also gendered and sexualised. In many cases Canada was described in terms of wilderness, hostile nature, as :

a devouring, dangerous and alien female, even a vagina dentata (...)Frye's settlers are uncomfortable because *they* don't *penetrate* and control the natural/female foreign space; nature *engulfs* and swallows *them*. (Mackey, 128)

In the creation of the sense of national identity we observe a tendency to construct a myth of a strong, healthy colonizer - an almost heroic figure who cannot be broken by harsh weather conditions and hardships, who constantly fights with nature's hostility and strives to tame it; it is indeed a strongly masculine, virile figure. That was the official policy and ideology of Canada's First Movement (paradoxically – the Inuit People were not included amongst those glorious, heroic men):

(...) if the northern race was superior, the South was other: inferior, weaker, and- predictably- essentially *female*. While the adjective "northern" symbolized the *masculine* virtues of "energy, strength, self-reliance, health and purity", southern was equated with "decay and *effeminacy*, even libertinism and disease" (Mackey, 126).

The perpetuation of such a 'northern' image is, to a large extent, the figure of the Mountie – bound to represent the best Canadian (meaning also British) features and qualities, a Canadian ideal male – an "idealized sign of a masculinized imperial order" (Gittings,509), a well-built, handsome, strong, endowed with power and authority (over women, natives and nature which all three are almost the same thing for this ideology) but still a gallant gentleman, that is, all things considered- a sexual model in its most irritatingly patronizing form. The Mountie from the beginning was a powerful heterosexual icon- the one who calmly tames the wilderness, reigns in the hearts of women and protects their virtue from the assaults of sexually insatiable, pervert Indians:

Woman, French-Canadian, and "Indian" signify wilderness (...) and as such are subject to the civilizing, ordering, and assimilationist settlement processes (Gittings, 513)

This image was massively propagated in cinema (especially the Hollywood-made Mountie) as well as in fiction and served to promote stereotyped Canada abroad. As I shall point later – despite its present plurality Canada still seems strangely attached to this image, and such stereotypes are still strongly embedded in Canadians.

Gender stereotypes and their part in evoking a sense of nationhood are explicit in sports – it is doubtfully a coincidence that the most promoted, sponsored and popular sports in Canada are those which perpetuate conservative gender imagery. One of such sports is hockey where the strength and impressive body built as well as aggression are the factors of a great importance. Hockey is perceived as a national sport and thus endowed with great social prestige. Young boys are encouraged to training hockey as well as (not always only implicitly) to build their male self-identification in accordance with such ‘masculine’ features as strength, musculature, aggression, bravado, activity, competitiveness along with a sense of belonging to the group of other boys, loyalty, cooperation. Again we see the urge to represent the country’s inhabitants as ‘tough guys’ – virile, heterosexual, strong, healthy and fit – but what is most important, to make them internalize this image. We deal with a similar situation in figure skating –here we see the attempt to promote clear-cut gender distinctions, hence stereotypes again. There is a strong tendency in the policy of the government to promote figure skaters as examples of healthy, fit, heterosexual couples, perfectly matching that is –a woman as “feminine” and a man as “masculine” as possible – “what’s better than figure skating? They’re good, clean-cut kids” (McGarry). Sports associations and media focus on the strength, and other typically heterosexual defining features of ‘masculinity,’ of the male figure skaters to such an extent that any rumours or even real information on a skater’s homosexuality are considered as an infamy to the sport, concealed and, (to remove even the shade of suspicion), the skaters are represented in similar terms to the ones in which hockey players are, strangely enough, no one seems willing to point to the obvious relation between figure skating and ballet (or dance in general) for it could make the skaters effeminate in the eyes of the public:

By emphasizing male skaters’ athletic abilities in media portrayals, links are made between the supposed “strength” of the male figure skating body, and the “strength” of the nation. As one sponsor said to me, “we want to promote strong images of our male skaters to show the Americans and other nations that we are an important force to contend with.” The bottom line is that images of male heterosexuality sell to a broader, and hence more lucrative, spectator demographic.(...)

Women are expected to emulate a soft, delicate femininity reminiscent of, as one coach told me, 'an Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly era' (McGarry).

In case of women in sports, stereotypes are as much visible. Female skaters are forced to present the most 'feminine' image possible. As opposed to male skaters their slenderness, lightness and beauty is stressed which often leads skaters to serious psycho-somatic problems – anorexia, bulimia, neurosis, crisis of self-esteem, obsession with weight, crisis of identity towards constant demandings and expectations of others. Also the ballet is very popular in Canada and the image of the Canadian British-like distinguished, reserved, frail and fragile, beautiful, slender ballerina is one of the most widely recognised icons of Canadianess and the embodiment of the Canadian ideal of femininity. Needless to say that male ballet dancers are not that much welcome when it comes to creating Canadian gender models home and abroad.

In Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* we see a very different picture of Canadians, from the one we are so blatantly served in mass culture (that is sports as well) despite the official policy of supposedly diversified, liberal multiculturalism. His focus is on desires and sexuality of Canadians. One of the first observations is the novel's peculiar disinterest or even disgust when it comes to glorious, lofty attempts to establish the meaning of 'Canadianess' or to discover its 'truth':

I've poisoned the air, I've lost my erection. Is it because I've stumbled on the truth about Canada?
I don't want to stumble on the truth about Canada. (Cohen, 37)

Cohen seems tired with that omnipresent theatre of a unified nationhood, of evoking a national identity. His protagonists are not the ones which the government would like to consider as ordinary representants of Canadian Society – they are orphans, not strictly sexually straight (but still not homosexual which would be a cozy, safe label) and apparently of non-British origin (First Nations, Quebecois, Jews). They are neither heroes nor martyrs or victims of the system.

Gender stereotypes are to a large extent non-present in the novel and in the places in which they appear they are subversive: ironic, mocking, ridiculing themselves as clichés or myths. Edith – the Indigenous woman is not a “wanton savage” figure, she is not described in terms of debilitating ready-made set of ‘feminine’ features and qualities, either. Though existing in men’s relations and memories she is a flesh and blood person. Her difficult situation of existing in a homoerotic environment (that could almost be a more universal metaphor, for the western culture is inherently homoerotic, this being the central feature of patriarchy). Elizabeth Grosz elaborates on this cultural homoeroticism (discussing Luce Irigaray’s work) and describes it as a:

(...) (re)production of a circuit of symbolic exchange in which women function only as objects, commodities, or goods; where women serve as the excuse, the intermediary as it were, the linkage point between one man and another.(...) .Moreover, gay male relations are partly persecuted in our culture, she claims, because they (or many of them) make explicit the fundamental homosexual nature of exchange itself- including the exchange constituted as desire- they make clear that the stakes do not involve women themselves. (Grosz, 178)

Edith’s silenced, dismissed needs, and her eventual lonely death seem very insightful as written by a man in the early sixties. The scene of her rape in adolescence is a powerful reversal of sexual representations, shows us the dark side of power and sexuality as its powerful tool, almost its basic prop. As Foucault observed , “Where there is desire, the power relation is already present”(Foucault, 81). Also the way Edith was raped might be interpreted as strongly symbolic: the violators proved their impotence (not only literal) in dealing with a real-life situation, with the suffering they cause, but were still unable to acknowledge it, their hatred and prejudice took the upper hand – they raped Edith by means of various tools, including pens (what could bring to mind textual, educational colonization of the Native Peoples, colonization, rape on minds):

They could not bear that Edith was no longer Other, that she was indeed, Sister. Natural Law they felt, but Collective Law they obeyed. They fell on the child with index fingers, pipe stems, ballpoint pens, and twigs. (Cohen, 65)

Despite her sufferings Edith is not victimized. She strives to demystify herself, her origin, her sexuality in love and various practices; she strives to regain or re-establish her self, that part deprived of happiness, understanding, pleasure (that is –obviously also her orgasm); she does not simply announce herself defeated, she keeps trying, wishes to depend on herself, to ‘come’ without help, without even being touched. Another protagonist – F. –mocks the stereotype of the sexually obsessed, insatiable Quebecois for he is that but even more. Colloquially speaking – at times he seems to be the ‘omnifucking’ narrator of the story , this having no pejorative meaning:

See me at this moment of my curious little history,(...) my prick rotten and black,
you saw my worldly prick decayed, but now see my visionary prick, cover your head
and see my visionary prick which I do not own and never owned, which owned me,
which was me, which bore me as a broom bears a witch, bore me from world to world ,
from sky to sky. Forget this. (Cohen ,159)

His interest in body-building ridicules traditional stereotypes of masculinity when juxtaposed with his homosexual practices, it also draws attention to the very fact of males’ interest in the body, their narcissism in the culture where women are said to be body/looks obsessed or represented strongly in terms of their bodies. F. is fascinated, enchanted by Camp, which is visible, for instance, in his peculiar collection of soap, the Akropolis covered in red nail polish, fireworks etc. and in his attitude to his body too –he wants it to be preposterous, extravagantly impressing, comic-like; he loves exaggeration:

In your greedy brain you cherished an unspeakable desire. You wanted to be Blue Beetle.
You wanted to be Captain Marvel. You wanted to be Plastic man. Robin was never
good enough for you, you wanted to be Batman. (...)
-You wanted to be the Superman who was never Clark Kent. You wanted to live
at the front of the comic.(...) You wanted SOCK! POW! SLAM! UGG! OOF! World.
To become a New Man in just fifteen minutes a day meant absolutely nothing for you. Confess!
-The pain! The pain! Yes, yes, I confess. I wanted miracles! I didn’t want to climb to success
on a ladder of coupons! I wanted to wake up suddenly with X-ray Vision! I confess! (Cohen, 123)

This very exaggeration Susan Sontag considered one of the main features of Camp-the enormity of the enterprise one takes up: „In Camp there is often something demesure in the quality of the ambition (...) – the ambition on the part of one man to do what it takes a generation, a whole culture to accomplish” (Sontag). Even parliament is some kind of an

erotic device for F., a position guaranteeing more sexual possibilities, power serves the role of erotic fetish, he is bitter or rather disillusioned about power thus determined to draw maximum pleasure out of it. He is also fully aware of the homoeroticism of the parliament and politics: "I'm in the world of men"(Cohen, 97). He delights in revolution not because of his hope for change but for its disruptive power, for the aesthetics of explosion:

-This is an ugly crowd , F. Let's walk faster.
 -No it's a beautiful crowd.
 -Why?
 -Because they think they are Negroes, and that is the best feeling a man can have in this century.
 (Cohen, 125)

What is more, the sexual energy present in revolution apparently attracts him:

Many of the demonstrators wore sweatshirts inscribed with QUEBEC LIBRE.
 I noticed that everyone had a hard-on, including the women. (Cohen, 125)

Another aspect of F.'s political actions is the longing for multitude, heterogeneity that it can bring about:

It is not merely because I am French that I long for an independent Quebec. It is not merely because I do not want our people to become a quaint drawing on the corner of a tourist map that I long for thick national borders. It is not merely because without independence we will be nothing but a Louisiana of the north, a few good restaurants and a latin Quarter the only relics of our blood. It is not merely because I know that lofty things like destiny and a rare spirit must be guaranteed by dusty things like flags, armies, and passports. I want to hammer a beautiful colored bruise on the whole American monolith. I want a breathing chimney on the corner of the continent. I want a country to break in half so men can learn to break their lives in half. I want history to jump on Canada's spine with sharp skates.(...) I want two hundred million to know that everything can be different, and only different. I want the state to doubt itself seriously. (Cohen, 198)

As far as sarcasm, mockery and critique of the cliches are concerned– Cohen makes bitter remarks on the society, its hypocrisy in dealing with sex. He indicates the camouflaged Canadian (and not only) sexual obsession with adolescents, almost children as well as sexual basis and influence in advertising, perversion inscribed in the socially accepted things:

Bittersweet is the cunt sap of the thirteen-year-old. O Tongue of the nation!
 Why don't you speak for yourself? Can't you see what is behind all this teen-age advertising?
 Is it only money?(...) men who shave want little girls to ravish but sell them high heels instead.
 The sexual Hit Parade is written by fathers who shave. (Cohen, 62)

All the personae of the novel exist in a certain void, the very chapter of the book is suggestive on the point (“History of them all”) for it is really only them who seem to exist, there is hardly any world apart from them, the reader is not allowed to know things too well, to have other points of reference. This hermeticism is the trait of their love relation, it influences everything and shapes the novel in a manner described by Grosz below :

There is always equivocation and ambiguity in passion : on the one hand, the erotic is self-contained and self-absorbed – lovers are closed off to the world, wrapped up in each other, disinterested in what is outside; on the other hand, in a contrary movement, eroticism and sensuality tends to spread out over many things, infecting all sorts of other relations. (Grosz, 204)

One must trust their descriptions and vague memories, must let oneself go on the changing current of narration and fits of their occasional emotional exhibitionism. We perceive this exhibitionism also when the narrator refuses to occupy the God-like position in the text. He stresses his humanity, makes himself the element of the novel, equivocal with others. The narrator does not pretend to be abstract, does not aspire to objectiveness. He stresses his suffering, seems to long for reader’s sympathy. This pain he knows to be making his account awry, “flooding his recognition,” makes him not obedient to the “Gods and Goddesses of The Pure Event” who could be interpreted as principles of realistic, ‘objective’ narration, of distance:

O Reader, do you know that a man is writing this? A man like you who longed for a hero’s heart. In arctic isolation a man is writing this, a man who hates his memory and remembers everything, who was once as proud as you, who loved society as only an orphan can, who loved it as a spy in milk and honey. A man like you writes this most daring passage, who dreamed like you of leadership and gratitude. No no please, not the cramps, not the cramps. Take away the cramps and I promise never to interrupt, I swear, o you Gods and Goddesses of the Pure Event. (Cohen, 108)

The reader is refused the right to pin the characters down in some fixed position by naming for he/she does not even know the names. Moreover – as they are orphans they are situated in some ambiguous, uncertain realm of imagination, they are somewhat social outcasts, lacking any known and sure, socially accepted background they are deprived of roots or cannot fully reach them what is probably deciding about their inaccuracy with respect to stereotypes,

gender norms and social roles to which they could otherwise ascribe. Michel Foucault points to the fact that the family plays a great part in sexualising an individual, when it seems to be restraining sexuality it in fact serves to feed, as well as mould it. The role of the family is, to simplify things dramatically, to breed normative desires:

(...) the family organization, precisely to the extent that it was insular and heteromorphous with respect to other power mechanisms, was used to support the great "maneuvers" employed for the malthusian control of the birthrate, for the populationist encitements, for the medicalization of sex and the psychiatrization of its nongenital forms. (Foucault, 100)

The relation of the protagonists is strongly homoerotic, love relation between two male characters exists on many levels, they do not only happen to have occasional sexual intercourses, they are also friends and almost brothers for they grew up together. Edith is even stronger bidding them together, they do not only 'share' her sexually, but emotionally as well, she seems to be the essence of their relation. They seem to be one organism of despair and desire, as in the fragment below:

Our love will never die, that I can promise you, I who launch this letter like a kite among the winds of your desire.(...) I was your journey and you were my journey, and Edith was our holy star.(...) Our queer love keeps the lines of our manhood hard and clean, so that we bring nobody but our own self to our separate marriage beds, and our women finally know us. (Cohen, 164)

In analyzing love and sexual relations between the personae of the novel (including the three main characters' relation to Catherine Tekakwitha, which I will discuss later) traditional classifications seem useless or irrelevant. Though in the sixties Queer Theory did not exist and even the word was just an offensive name for homosexual (male), relations and desires present in Cohen's novel, as well as its aesthetics are expressing features of what we call queer today (with all the benefits from the openness of the term). What the first narrator, F. or Edith do or say does not correspond to clear-cut categories; they are neither hetero nor homosexual, they are not even simply bisexual. What is important, the protagonists do not feel identified with any of the above, they resent nominalistic nature of any identification, its futility:

“You see, F. Said, this isn’t homosexuality at all.
 -Oh, F. Come off it. Homosexuality is a name.
 -That’s why I’m telling you this, my friend. You live in a world of names. That’s why
 I have the charity to tell you this.” (Cohen, 18)

They are also not merely promiscuous or joyfully hedonistic in their eternal triangle which still is not always and not directly a triangle. Their sex is both mysticism and mortification, seeking union as well as a deep experience of solitude and abandonment. As queer they defy stable, clear classifications, they confuse and baffle both themselves and the reader, cannot be framed in the logic of sense or reproduction. They do not constitute themselves as unified identities. We perceive them in glimpses, recollections of memories – non chronological and non linear. The protagonists act not describe themselves, we are not given their coherent biographies, just bits and pieces, just things they did ,usually together. This importance of action as the deciding factor constantly creating identity of a “subject-in-process,” to use Kristeva’s terminology:

I had an idea of what a man should look like, but it kept changing. I couldn’t devote a lifetime to discovering the ideal physique. All I heard was pain, all I saw was mutilation. My needle going so madly , sometimes I found I’d run the thread right through my own flesh and I was joined to one of my own grotesque creations- I’d rip us apart- and then I knew that I was also truly part of the disaster. (Cohen, 187)

This clearly accords with queer assumption ‘Acts not Identities’ and is present also in many declarations F. made of not “fucking faces” (Cohen, 6).

Another aspect of the novel is frequently confronting the reader with the abject¹. The abject is, as Kristeva pointed out following Mary Douglas, slimy and repulsive, it threatens our borders, we push it to the margins but still need it to constitute our identities as positive (meaning – opposite to the rejected, negative abject). The basic examples of the abject are bodily fluids- excrements, semen, blood, spit, etc. Cohen’s book is almost soaked in abject fluids- the lovers’ sexual juices, semen of the desperate, lonely-masturbating narrator soaked into his carpet, mutual homosexual comings. Grosz elaborates on that in positive terms:

(...) the subject’s body ceases to be a body, to become the site of provocations and reactions , the site of intensive disruptions. The subject ceases to be a subject, giving way to pulsations,

¹ More on the abject in: Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

gyrations, flux, secretions, swellings, processes over which it can exert no control and to which it only wants to succumb. (Grosz, 198)

Moreover- urine is almost fetishised (Edith's skin supposedly smelled of urine) and the narrator's constipation pervades the whole novel, is like a doom, receives almost symbolic a quality – being not only physical calamity but also an emotional blockage, impossibility of purification, catharsis, longing for it:

Take hope, take cathedrals, take the radio, take my research. These are hard to give up, but a load of shit is harder still. Yes, yes, I abandon even the system of renunciation. In the tiled dawn courtroom a folded man tries a thousand oaths. Let me testify! Let me Prove Order! Let me cast a shadow! Please make me empty, if I'm empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me I'm not alone! I cannot bear this loneliness. Above all it is loneliness. I don't want to be a star, merely dying. Please let me be hungry, then I am not the dead Center, then I can single out the trees in their particular lives(...), oh, I want to be fascinated by phenomena! I don't want to live inside! Renew my life. How can I exist as the vessel of yesterday's slaughter? (Cohen, 41)

This unity of the vulgar, overt physicality with the emotional is one of many cases of the dichotomy body/soul being questioned and disrupted in the novel. The reader is forced to interact with the abject in reading, forced to acknowledge things that he/she might otherwise be willing to silence or condemn, to rethink one's categories (for the abject here is not only physiological but, first and foremost, social and psychological - social injustices, racial and sexual inequalities, abuses and misrepresentations, all the topics tabooed by official discourses). The abject by its nature is both repulsive and attracting. Cohen does not condemn his protagonists but brings the abject back to nature, to existence. By its usage he also does not reverse the hierarchy, advocate, glorify them as pure and immaculate in their queerness (which would be creating another, only reversed mythology of non-normative desires). The abject is the manifesto of the body; Cohen provokes us to start thinking of the body in new terms (what reminds of Antonin Artaud's writings such as "Shit to the spirit" or "Situation of the flesh" but of course with differences in many respects).

On mentioning the body and its role (or rather- weight) in the text I observe also elements of today's interests in Cyber, its specific attitude towards the body, as the one Donna Haraway proposed (as a new way for establishing a positive identity by women). The cyborg

is, according to Haraway, “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway). A cyborg makes possible new ways of incorporation, a new attitude to the body, drawing from its cultural origins but still remaining independently outside of the violent, hierarchised symbolic order of genders, races, species or dychotomy nature/culture. Though cybernetics was not a developed science at the time when the book was written (in fact I am not sure whether it existed at all), I see in it very similar ideas on the body or the possible new ways of incorporation. These are visible, for instance, in the scene of ‘the telephone dance’ between Edith, F. and the telephone:

Hear is not the right word. I *became* a telephone. Edith was the electrical conversation that went through me. (Cohen,35)

And:

We dug our index fingers in each other’s ears. I won’t deny the sexual implications. You are ready to face them now. All parts of the body are erotogenic. Assholes can be Trained with whips and kisses, that’s elementary. Pricks and cunts have become monstrous! Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come! Don’t you see what we have lost? Why have we abdicated so much pleasure to that which lives in our underwear? Orgasms in the shoulder! Knees going off like firecrackers! Hair in motion! And only caresses leading us into the nourishing anonymity of the climax, not only sucking and wet tubes, but wind and conversation and a beautiful pair of gloves, fingers blushing! Lost! Lost! (Cohen, 34)

As in cyber (I use the term in its maximum broadness , for I do not intend to associate it only with feminism in this essay) we deal here with a peculiar incorporation or fusion of humans (of different sexes) and machines. They become intertwined, they use fingers to plug themselves to one another, they become telephones but still they are organic (and at the same time- not quite, for such a distinction loses its validity):

(...) form a machine that enters into relations with an machine composed of “animal” components: becomings then are not a broad general trajectory of development, but always more specific, becoming-something, something momentary, provisional, something inherently unstable and changing. It is not a question of being (...), of attaining a definite status as a thing, a permanent fixture, nor of clinging to, having an identity, but of moving, changing, being swept beyond one singular position into a multiplicity of flows, or, what Deleuze and Guattari have described as “a thousand tiny sexes”: to liberate the myriad of flows, to proliferate connections, to intensify. (Grosz, 184)

Here (and in other places in the text as well) we see the non traditional attitude towards the body – as not subject to economy of reproduction and symmetry of genital sex only:

-You lost yourself in particulars. All parts of the body are erotogenic, or at least have the possibility of so becoming. If she had stuck her index finger in your ears you would have got the same results. (Cohen, 29)

They become “plains of intensities”, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it. Additionally the word ‘dance’ implies some pulsation, flux, circulation as well as spirituality, that is often expressed in dances in Native People’s cultures. Here again the erotic and the spiritual (or religious) become intermingled, almost impossible to distinguish. What we deal with here (at least implicitly) and in other practices of the protagonists is creating “a body without organs”:

The BwO is the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it).(...) The field of immanence is not internal to the self, but neither does it come from An external self or a nonself. Rather, it is like the absolute Outside that knows no Selves because interior and exterior are equally a part of the immanence in which they have fused. (Deleuze)

As they subvert hierarchies and the social system or even exist beyond them, similarly the body without organs refuses to be moulded and stratified by violent hierarchies, “the judgment of God”(Deleuze & Guattari) and to have its organs mapped, pinned-down and kept in the grasp of power. The body without organs is a surface rather than depth, as Elizabeth Grosz observes:

The orgasmic body cannot be identified with the organic body, but is more an interference in and displacement of the body of “nature” (Grosz, 197)

Such a body is sensuous, draws its pleasures from contact with other surfaces, in them seems to lose its restraints. It is no longer a receptacle of the soul, its corrupt outer-layer, its opposite:

Lingis refigures carnal desire in terms of the lateral (“horizontal”) contamination of one erotogenic zone or bodily surface by another, rather than in terms of a “vertical relation” between (bodily) surface and (psychical) depth. The intensification of one bodily region or zone induces an increase in the excitation of those contiguous with it. Significantly, the two or more interacting zones or regions need not be part of one body but may come from different bodies and different substances. Their relations cannot be understood in terms of complementarity, the one completing the other (...) for there can be no constitution of a totality, union, or merger of the two. Each remains in its site, functioning in its own ways. The relationship between these regions or zones cannot be understood in terms of domination, penetration, control, or mastery, but in terms of jealousy, as one organ jealous of another, as the desire of organs and zones for the intensity and excitations, the agitations and tumultousness of others. (Grosz, 197)

Throughout the text sexuality becomes demythologized, demystified in order to unveil its real mystic, to turn it from “magical” to “magic”(this distinction Cohen makes in the novel). The reader perceives delicate interweavings of pain, desire and almost religious ecstasy:

I wanted you to bring pain to heaven.(...) I saw all things change their nature by mere intensification of their properties. (Cohen, 171)

The protagonists build their private space, they dance in their circuit, reader is not offered any outside, a space without them what might question of the possibility of existence of such a space ever, anywhere at all. It questions the necessity to tell the inside apart from the outside, proves it pointless and artificial. It could also be understood as the critique of any supposedly objective account, of the mind’s transcendence for one is always affected with discourse and affect it, there is never any outside-of-ourselves world accessible for us, we are always there and we are our bodies, not only in them. Cohen does not confront his characters with ones of ‘decency,’ with social norms openly. He does not seek simple confrontations, cheap shocking. He does not allow crude contrasts, black-and-white juxtapositions. Instead of that, he ironically questions the sense of such operations, wishes to cause doubt and distrust to what is easily accepted as supposedly ‘normal’; he does not want to credit cliches and beaten tracks:

(...) the reader will be shocked to see how abnormal are the tastes of the so-called normal person.(...) the average reader will be surprised to learn how “Unusual” practices are passed along by seemingly innocent,normal sex partners. (Cohen, 180)

Leonard Cohen in his novel strives to free sex from vulgarised/romanticised social conventions that stifle actual romanticism of desire (or rather desires). He introduces the notion of “fucking the saint” as a certain purifying strategy of individual development. – by confusing sexual with religious imagery he turns his back on hierarchies and fragmentations which are supported by the doctrine of the separateness of sacrum and profanum, he refuses to make the subject a system, he wishes it to be , first and foremost, a body but a body that is essentially spiritual, in its very physicality ,not out of it or apart from it. It is a panorgasmic body, a body of pleasure and mysticism:

(...)perfect the pan-orgasmic body, extend the erogenous zone over the whole fleshy envelope, popularize the Telephone Dance, then we’ve got to begin by diminishing the tyranny of the nipples,

lips, clitoris, and asshole. (Cohen, 178)

This body rebels against attempts to exercise power on it. He wants to free the body from the soul against the judeochristian conceptions of the body as the prison of the soul but still does not reject the spirit but attempts to reclaim its proper place. Religious experience in Cohen's novel is orgasmic by nature (and vice versa). This attitude is reflected in his story of Catherine Tekakwitha and her role in the novel. Again it is necessary to draw from Michel Foucault and his observations on religion, especially Catholicism. What he thinks to be one of its primary features is its peculiar obsession about sex :

speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*. (...)speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say (Foucault, 8,35)

Foucault points also to similarities between Catholic rituals and imagery and sex:

In the Christian confession, but especially in the direction and examination of conscience, in the search for spiritual union and the love of God, there was a whole series of methods that had much in common with an erotic art: guidance by the master along a path of initiation, the intensification of experiences extending down to their physical components, the optimization of effects by the discourse that accompanied them. The phenomena of possession and ecstasy, which were quite frequent in the Catholicism of the Counter Reformation, were undoubtedly effects that had got outside the control of the erotic technique immanent in this subtle science of the flesh. (Foucault,70)

This questions the supposed perversity present in the book, shows the paradoxical central position of the margin in constituting the dominating identity and destabilizes it. Cohen draws our attention to the destructive potential of religion. F. and Edith use the water from Lourdes deliberately as a drug- a substance that implies both bliss and destruction as well as addiction.

In the figure of Catherine Tekakwitha he also mocks the Church's treacherous mechanisms of control and appropriation, the fact that it uses everything it comes across, devours it. Dead Catherine becomes almost miraculously pure and 'whitened' in the eyes of the priests, as if sanctity was basically a white domain, it seems to pervert the proverb that "a good Indian is a dead one" :

"(...) this face, so battered and so very swarthy, underwent a sudden change, about a quarter of an hour after her death. And in a moment she became so beautiful and so white..." (Cohen, 224)

Only after her death, when she is finally mortified and white enough her sanctity can be accepted and acknowledged, incorporated by church for its own potential future purposes.

Experiences of Catherine Tekakwitha in the novel show similarities to religious experiences of such saints as Saint Theresa or Saint Katherine of Siena that bore the marks of erotism and masochism, “blissful suffering from feeling in one’s body the pangs of temptation and the love that resists it.”(Foucault, 23). The experiences of Catherine Tekakwitha, as presented in the novel, provide us with a new perspective on religion, on the way it paradoxically revolves around sexuality:

All at once, and for the first time, Catherine Tekakwitha knew that she lived in a body, a female body! She felt the presence of her thighs and knew what they could squeeze, she felt the flower life of her nipples, she felt the sucking hollowness of her belly, the loneliness of her buttocks, the door ache of her little cunt, a cry for stretching, and she felt the existence of each cunt hair (...) She lived in a body, a woman’s body and it worked! (...) Her tits were bleeding . She was sitting on blood. The circles of love tightened like a noose, squeezing, ripping, slicing. Little hairs were caught in knots. Agony! A burning circle attacked her cunt and severed it from her crotch like the top of a tin can. She lived in a woman’s body but it did not belong to her! It was not hers to offer! With a desperate slingshots she hurled her cunt forever into the night. (Cohen, 53)

A religion which severs body from the soul brings violent experience, experience of mutilation, something almost unintelligible, especially for an Indigenous Woman. Catherine Tekakwitha sucked desire inside, into the inner night ,making of it the invisible core of faith and existence, in a gesture of religious passion and masochism. This again shows the fact that religion and sex are energies of the same kind and from one source. They are one energy that is subject to attempts of violent division and rupture by power and it’s institutions but manage to manifest themselves in unity in cases such as were mentioned above, its sexual nature the more visible, the more intense the religious extasy is. Cohen seems to be proposing partaking in it as in a universal , omnipresent energy, intensity, that’s his notion of sanctity, of “fucking the saint”(Cohen, 13):

A saint is someone that has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what the possibility is . I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that the saint dissolves the chaos even for himself ,for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order..

It is a kind of balance that is glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is the caress of the hill.(...) Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. (Cohen, 101)

Cohen's supposed blasphemies and perversions draw our attention to violence of western culture and its religions. It's the official rigid sacrum that actually corrupts and perverts, not the other way around:

I accuse the Roman Catholic Church of Quebec of ruining my sex life and of shoving my member up a relic box meant for a finger, I accuse the R.C.C. of Q. Of making me commit queer horrible acts with F., another victim of the system, I accuse the Church of killing Indians, I accuse the Church of covering Edith with red grease, and of depriving Catherine Tekakwitha of red grease, I accuse the Church of haunting automobiles and of causing pimples, I accuse the Church of building green masturbation toilets, I accuse the church of squashing Mohawk dances and of not collecting folk songs, I accuse the Church of stealing my sun tan and of promoting dandruff, I accuse the Church of sending people with dirty toenails into streetcars where they work against Science, I accuse the church of female circumcision in French Canada. (Cohen, 50)

Leonard Cohen makes no attempt to overthrow religion, social, sexual and gender norms but only to make them more problematic. To open the closed space for discussion, he proposes to draw from it all in a new way rather than blindly condemn or glorify:

(...)let it be our glory to forget the legends and watch the nights empty. Let the mundane Church serve the White race with a change of color. Let the mundane Revolution serve the Gray race with a burning church. (...) we are in love with a tower view of rainbow bodies. Suffer the change from red to white, you who weave insignia, which is all of us in our night. But we are merely once upon a time. Another second from our raw fingers, now we are in love with pure flags, our privacy is valueless, we do not own our history, it is borne away in a Shower of tiny seed dust and we filter it as in the network of a high drift of wild daisies, and our fashions change so beautifully. (Cohen,225)

To sum it all up – Cohen does not provide us with a pattern, does not promote new ideals and icons; he casts the shadow of doubt on our preconceptions, confronts us with our restraints, undermines Canadian stereotypes and manipulations in the realm of sexuality, sharpens our observation, suggests the possibility to “not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (Foucault, 157); he proposes the game instead of the stifling, conservative sacrum or at least instead of its domination, for:

Games are nature's most beautiful creation. All animals play games, and the truly Messianic vision of the brotherhood of creatures must be based on the idea of the game, indeed (Cohen, 31) .

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