

Fictions of Mixed Origins: *Iracema*, *Tay John*, and Racial Hybridity in Brazil and Canada

*“Beware of el romance del mestizaje, I hear myself saying silently.
Puede ser una ficción.”*

Gloria Anzaldúa

Given the diasporic origins of the overwhelming majority of their populace, most countries in the Americas have had to indigenize themselves. Some of them have been content to simply “play Indian.” However, many others have attempted to achieve national legitimacy by fusing their Indigenous and non-Indigenous inhabitants, even if they subsequently do not always admit it. In this essay, I examine how two foundational inter-American novels, José de Alencar’s *Iracema* and Howard O’Hagan’s *Tay John*, convey the contrasting ways in which Brazil and Canada have used racial hybridity in their national imaginaries; the former by celebrating the union of the Indigenous and the European that culminates in the birth of the first Brazilian, and thus the Brazilian nation; the latter, which is set in the aftermath of the fall of Batoche and the end of the Métis national dream, by dramatizing the apparent impossibility of racial mixing in Canada. Tellingly, despite the fact one country has embraced what one might term an ideology of ethnoracial hybridity and the other has largely rejected it, both of them have been culturally and politically dominated by groups of European descent. No less important, Indigenous people seem to have become more prominent in the country that historically has been uncomfortable with ethnoracial hybridity, Canada, than with the one that ostensibly glories in it, Brazil.

The idea of race has become extremely problematic in the last few decades. “On the one hand,” I have argued elsewhere, “we have utopian declarations about the end of race; indeed, that there is no such a phenomenon as race [. . .]. But, on the other hand, we have sustained campaigns to ensure ‘diversity’ in institutions such as the university, reflecting the ‘desire that the faculty and the student body comprise different races’” (Braz, “Whitey” 151; see also Amoko 129). As Gavin Campbell perceptively notes, we would like “to have it both ways—race is real; race is fiction—and politely paper over the resulting logical inconsistencies by saying that race’s *effects* are real” (501). The contemporary schizophrenia about race becomes especially conspicuous when dealing with biological hybridity. If there are no races, of course, there cannot be ethnoracial hybridity and hybrids. Yet, regardless of whether race is real or merely a discursive construct, there is little question that the incidence of sexual encounters between Natives and Newcomers throughout the Americas has produced considerable anxiety. The fate of the progeny of these exchanges, in particular, has been a central concern in the continent’s history, as reflected in both *Iracema* and *Tay John*.

Perhaps I should start by acknowledging that there are crucial differences between the two texts, beyond the obvious fact one is Brazilian and the other is Canadian and one is set on Ceará’s coast and interior and the other in the northern Rocky Mountains. Whereas no less a figure than Machado de Assis describes Alencar’s novel as “*um poema em prosa*” (189), or a prose poem, Michael Ondaatje characterizes O’Hagan’s novel as a “Rough-edged Chronicle” (“O’Hagan’s Chronicle” 24). Also, while *Iracema* was embraced as a Brazilian classic almost from the moment it appeared, *Tay John* belongs to what has been called an “uncomfortable tradition” of non-realistic Canadian fictions championed by “critics and theorists who [. . .] are themselves uncomfortable with the very idea of tradition” (Fee, Introduction 13); it is deemed one of those literary “outriders—books that burn or splash on the periphery” (Ondaatje, Afterword 211). Furthermore, although they were published less than three quarters of a century apart, *Iracema* in 1865 and *Tay John* in 1939, the two works deal with two distinct historical periods. Alencar’s novel explores the dawn of European settlement in the early 1600s in what is now northeastern Brazil, and therefore the opening of the continent to an infusion of foreign people and ideas and the potential creation of new societies. O’Hagan’s novel, in contrast, focuses on the turn of the twentieth century colonization of what became known as the Last Best West, the crossing of “the

last great frontier of the New World” (McCourt 26), as exemplified by the arrival of the railroad. In other words, in many ways, *Tay John* marks the closing of European settlement in the Americas.

At least on the surface, *Iracema* is the more optimistic of the two texts, mapping as it does the beginnings of the Brazilian national experiment. In fact, part of the reason that Alencar has been so influential in his homeland is that his Indianist-themed novels are not read simply as works of literature, but as “allegories” of both “the genesis of the Brazilian people” and “the genesis of Brazilian national culture” (Lindstrom xii, xvii). As befits a national romance, *Iracema* revolves around Moacir, “[t]he first child born in Ceará” (111). However, most of Alencar’s relatively short narrative, which is more a novella than a novel, focuses not on Moacir but on his begetters, a young Portuguese warrior named Martim and the equally youthful Tabajara priestess of the title, Iracema, who are the Brazilian Adam and Eve. Martim and Iracema bear heavily symbolic names. In addition to meaning “the maiden with lips of honey” (3; 118, n. 2), Iracema is an anagram for America.¹ The name Martim, as the Portuguese adventurer explains to Iracema’s father, signifies “son of a warrior” and his “blood [is] that of the great people who first saw the lands of your country” (8). That is, the novel’s two central figures are not so much lovers as representatives of two continents.

Like most other fictional narratives about the founding of New World nations, *Iracema* cannot evade the political contradictions at the core of those societies, notably their contested title to the land they occupy and which often defines them. For example, when Alencar writes that Moacir was the first child born in Ceará, one cannot help but wonder where his mother was born. Considering that Iracema is Indigenous, one is led to conclude that the author must perceive her as having existed in some pre-historical time, at least as far as official Brazilian history is concerned, until she comes in contact with the European Martim. The suspicion that Alencar does not quite consider Iracema, and presumably Indigenous people in general, as being an integral part of the Brazilian national family is confirmed when he clarifies that Moacir is not necessarily the first child born in what would become Brazil. Rather, he is “the first child that the blood of the white race had begotten in this land of freedom” (100). In short, despite the rhetoric about the fusion of different peoples, for Alencar, Brazilian citizenship is inseparable from a certain kind of Europeaness, or whiteness, reflecting his acute awareness that the motherland was “*conquistada*” by European might (Alencar, *Guarani* 19). Nevertheless, Iracema remains essential to the development of this national narrative, since she is the source of the Brazilianness not only of her offspring but, curiously, also of her husband.

Critics have often admonished Alencar for constructing a fictional narrative about the national origins of Brazil without mentioning the pivotal role played in the building of the country by people of African descent (Sommer 154-55; Ventura 41). Yet, without discounting Alencar’s possibly racist motivation for erasing blacks, there is logic to his privileging Indigenous people. As scholars like Earl Fitz have pointed out, the motif of racial hybridity is “endemic to the literature of the New World” (70, 94), most frequently involving Indigenous people, Africans, and Europeans. But given that Indigenous people are the only ethno-national group that has an unchallenged claim to the land, their presence in any national narrative is almost mandatory. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of *Iracema* is its emphasis on the foreignness of its male protagonist. Throughout the text, Martim is invariably described in ways that stress his alien origins, such as the “strange” or “white warrior” (4, 5), the “foreigner” (6, 7),

¹ Iracema’s relation to America remains problematic to this day, given that America refers both to the continent and to the United States. Thus in his 1998 song “Iracema voou,” Chico Buarque sings of a contemporary Iracema who migrates north, where she ends up washing the floor of a teahouse. Yet Buarque writes simultaneously that “Iracema voou/ Para a América” and “Iracema [é] da América,” meaning that Iracema flew to America and she is from (or belongs to) America.

and the “Christian” or “Christian warrior” (10). The emphasis on the inherent foreignness of Martim is noteworthy, for he appears to be remarkably acculturated. Martim is so receptive to the cultures he encounters that, when he first meets Iracema, he is able to speak with her in an Indigenous language, what she calls her “brothers’ tongue” (5). Still, regardless of his cultural openness, he can never manage to overcome his ethnoracial origins, the fact his “white skin is not colored by the blood of the Americas” (1). The only way that Martim succeeds in finally becoming part of Brazil is through the child he produces with Iracema. As his Christianized Indigenous friend Poti describes Martim’s national conversion, “The white warrior desires no other homeland but that of his son and of his heart” (79). The process of acquiring national affiliation is thus reversed here. Instead of the child inheriting the homeland of his progenitor, it is the father who embraces his child’s homeland, the land that Martim has made his own through his sexual union with the Indigenous Iracema, who tragically—or perhaps conveniently—dies while giving birth to their child (109).

Tay John, as might be expected from a work published on the eve of the Second World War, is much more cynical about the virtues of European civilization than *Iracema*. For instance, O’Hagan’s novel opens with a discussion of the building of the first Canadian transcontinental railroad, the Canadian Pacific Railway. Yet the text suggests that the mammoth construction project was not designed to connect Canada from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, as the dominant narratives usually have it, but rather that Canada was created in order to make the construction of the railroad possible. As the narrator informs the reader, “In those days Canada was without a railway across the mountains. The Canadian Pacific was being built, but it was not till 1885 that the first train steamed over its rails to reach the tidewater at Port Moody [. . .]. So that it might be built and that men might gain money from its building, Canada was made a dominion” (11). In brief, from the outset, the text calls into question the legitimacy of master narratives, including those about the creation of new nations.

That being said, there are major affinities between the two novels, not the least the fact that they both explore the ramifications of the cultural and sexual encounters between Indigenous peoples and Europeans in the Americas and that they inhabit the borderline between myth and history. While *Iracema* traces the origins of the Brazilian nation, Alencar’s narrator candidly admits that he neither witnessed the events he describes nor discovered them in some archive. According to him, the narrative is based on a “story that I was told in the beautiful plains where I was born, at dead of night, when the moon was gliding through the heavens silvering the countryside and the breeze rustled in the palm groves” (2). The mythical origins of the text are particularly evident in the title of the Brazilian original, *Iracema: lenda do Ceará*, or *Iracema: Legend of Ceará*. As Manuel Bandeira writes in his poem celebrating the centennial of Alencar’s classic, *Iracema*, “*é mais poema/ Que romance, e poema menos/ Que um mito*” (ix), which translates as *Iracema* is more poem than novel, and less poem than a myth. Similarly, the text’s title character is endowed with paranormal powers, which she does not refrain from using. Iracema is not only the daughter of a chieftain but also the person who “guards the secret of the *jurema* and the mystery of dreams” (9). The *jurema*, we are told in a footnote, is a tree that “gives an extremely bitter fruit with an acrid odor” that has “the effect of hashish” (120). Since Iracema knows that Martim is not as obsessed with her as she is with him, she employs the narcotic to make it possible for their “love [to] come to fruition” (50), an action that incidentally undercuts the widely-held idea that Alencar produces “conveniently submissive Indians” (Sommer 21).

If anything, *Tay John* blurs even more the line between myth and history. O’Hagan had first-hand knowledge of the alpine world he depicts in *Tay John* and his other writings. As he states in the foreword to his collection of short stories and essays *Trees Are Lonely Company*, he knew some of the individuals he portrays and the only reason he writes in the third person is “to preserve the same point of view throughout the book” (10). Also, even though his eponymous protagonist in *Tay John* is a figure from

the past, there is evidence that O'Hagan did extensive research before writing his text (Maud 92-95). Still, the fact remains that he divides his novel into three sections entitled "Legend," "Hearsay," and "Evidence—without a finding." One respected critic contends that O'Hagan's work "contains both Indian legend and white history" (Keith 73). However, I am not sure that one can make a clear distinction between legend and history, whether they be Indian, European, or something else. The author certainly does not seem to provide us with the grounds for separating one category from the other.

Set between 1880 and 1914, *Tay John* centers on the life of the semi-mythical, semi-historical mountain guide Tête Jaune, or Yellowhead, whose name has become corrupted as Tay John. Like Moacir, Tay John has a white father and an Indigenous mother. But the reason he is usually considered "a semi-human being," as Margaret Atwood calls him, is not so much that he is "half white man and half Indian," but that he is "half mythical and half 'realistic'" (Atwood 104). The product of a violent (but not necessarily unwelcome) sexual encounter between a white Christian zealot named Red Rorty and a young married Shuswap woman called Hanni, both of whom pay with their lives for their transgression, Tay John rises mysteriously from "the grave where his [mother] lay buried" (36). While the Shuswap dwell in the Rocky Mountains, they supposedly hail from the Pacific coast and yearn to return to their ancestral lands.² As the text informs us, they were "sometimes called *Tête Jaune*, or Yellowhead people, and the place where they lived *Tête Jaune Cache*, from the belief that one day a leader would come among them—a tall man (for they were of short stature), with yellow hair, and lead them back over the mountains to their cousins, the Salish tribes" (21-22; see also Maud 92-93). Since the newly-born boy has yellow or blond hair, the Shuswap become convinced that he is their Messiah, or at least their Moses, who is destined to lead his people back to their Promised Land, where once they were a powerful group.

The complication is that, because of his hybridity, Tay John is not quite at home among the Shuswap. To begin with, he does not resemble his people, for whereas they are short and dark-haired, he is tall and blond. That is, he is an Indian who does not look like an Indian. As O'Hagan's enigmatic narrator, Jack Denham, describes Tay John:

He was tall, dark of skin as an Indian, yet his hair was full and thick and yellow, and fell to his shoulders. His eyes were black, and I was so close to him that I could see their whites, and his nostrils flex ever so slightly and his white teeth showed when he breathed [. . .]. He had a build, that fellow. Still, there was something, it is hard to say, something abstract about him—as though he were a symbol of some sort or other. He seemed to stand for something. He stood there with his feet planted apart upon the ground, as though he owned it, as though he grasped it with them. (82-83)

Moreover, while Tay John appears fated to be the great national leader of the Shuswap, their liberator, he lacks some basic powers, such as the ability to determine his own self-identity. It is significant that Tay John is always being named by others. First, it is the Shuswap, who call him "Kumkan-kleseem, and later, Kumkleseem, for his yellow hair" (40). Then after he leaves the Shuswap and becomes a guide for white prospectors searching for gold, he is given a "second name," Tête Jaune, which the Shuswap find difficult to pronounce and turn into "*Tay John*" (40). Again, whether among Indigenous people or

² Ralph Maud challenges this claim, asserting that "[n]othing in the written sources on the subject suggests that the Shuswap have, or had, a nostalgia for the coast. O'Hagan may have been tapping into the universal archetype of the messiah, which may also be traced in the Aztec myth of the fair-skinned Quetzalcoatl" (92).

whites, he is always named after the color of his hair, underscoring his seemingly inescapable alterity.

If any one characteristic captures Tay John it is his utter solitude. He usually appears to be “alone” (65), even when he is surrounded by others, including the Shuswap. As the poet and novelist Robert Kroetsch asserts, Tay John is an Orpheus figure but an inverse Orpheus, an Orpheus that does not sing. “He has come up from under the ground,” writes Kroetsch, “not with speech or poetry, but with silence” (186). The one person with whom Tay John makes a connection is another mysterious soul, Ardith Aeriola. Tay John first meets Ardith when he is hired to guide her on a pack-pony trip through the Rockies, and the rumor is that she is the “mistress” of an Eastern railroad executive (190). Although she is a magnet for men, drawing the opposite sex “like a piece of bad meat draws flies” (252), nobody knows very much about her. Even the narrator confesses that he thinks “she found her name as she travelled” (195), which may explain why she and Tay John are so attracted to each other. Before long they become lovers, yet they remain very much a community of two, both “stalk[ing] the boundaries of society without every [sic] fully entering it” (253). The last time anyone sees Tay John and Ardith is in the middle of a frozen lake in a blinding blizzard, as the “yellow-headed fellow [is] pullin’ a dead woman on the toboggan behind him” (262). The trapper who meets the couple decides to go back the next day, but he does not find anyone, and concludes that Tay John could not have “gone over the [nearby mountain] pass at all. He had just walked down, the toboggan behind him, under the snow and into the ground” (264). That is, unable to find community among either the Shuswap or the whites, Tay John returns to the place where his life began, under the ground.

Needless to say, the story of Tay John possesses none of the national triumphalism that marks that of Moacir—the bulk of whose narrative, it bears stressing, has yet to unravel, making him more a symbol of some hypothetical future than a representation of a lived reality. One of the elements responsible for the defeat of O’Hagan’s protagonist would appear to be modern technology, particularly the network of transcontinental railroads that is introduced at the beginning of the novel. It is primarily the railroad that is opening up the Rockies to tourism and development, resulting in the construction of new towns and turning people who used to work as trappers into tourist guides. In fact, the text suggests that across the Canadian west, the railroad is treated not so much as an economic force as a divine one, a source of veneration, with small towns being “set in half-circles of worship round railway stations” (73). Furthermore, the railroad brings not only tourists and developers, who threaten to displace the Indigenous inhabitants, but also a new culture, “the world of authority and discipline” Tay John encounters as it “mov[es] with the railway into the mountains” (161). O’Hagan’s text questions whether the culture symbolized by the railroad is something new, or rather whether it is something ancient, something from which the Shuswap had fled, since “[t]o-day was implicit in time’s beginning” (161). Either way, there is no denying the impact of the railroad on the denizens of the Rocky Mountains.

Interestingly, despite his extensive exploration of the consequences of the building of the transcontinental railroad, there is one element that O’Hagan does not explore in any detail—its connection to “the Canadian internal war of 1885” (Saul xiii). Numerous writers and scholars allege that the so-called Northwest Rebellion, which pitted Canada against the Métis, was orchestrated by the Canadian government in order “TO GET PEOPLE EXCITED ABOUT THE [CANADIAN PACIFIC] RAILWAY,” whose cost overruns threatened to scuttle the project (Brown 133; McLean 116). The clash between the new Canadian confederation and the Métis also marked the last military stand by a mixed-race group in Canada. With the hanging (for treason) of their charismatic leader Louis Riel, who claimed to be the Prophet of the New World, the *nouvelle nation* or New Nation ceased to believe in the possibility of creating a separate geopolitical space for people of mixed ancestry. The fate of the Métis in 1885 perhaps shows why Tay John returns under the ground at the end of O’Hagan’s

narrative. Considering the way he is treated by the Shuswap and the whites, both of whom seem unable to accommodate his ethnoracial difference, it is likely that he deduces that biological hybridity has become an untenable idea in Canada.

Tay John's decision is understandable, in light of developments in Canadian society at the time, particularly "the Canadian state's destruction of Métis national power in nineteenth century western Canada" (Andersen 348). What is more unexpected, however, is that prominent contemporary Canadian thinkers would come to argue that ethnoracial hybridity has never played a major role in the country's history. The literary scholar Linda Hutcheon, for example, contends that, while it is "culturally a hybrid, like all post-colonized nations [. . .], Canada has experienced no actual 'creolization' which might have created something new out of an adaptation process within a split racial context" (77-78). Likewise, the sociologist Gérard Bouchard maintains that "métissage does not run very deep in the history of societies like Québec [and] English Canada," as well as the "United States, Haiti, Argentina, Bolivia, Southern Brazil and the likes" ("Figures and Myths" 53). Not surprisingly, in his study about the making of nations and cultures in the New World, he does not deal with the Métis in general and Riel in particular. This omission is striking, since Bouchard is a well-known Quebec nationalist and the Métis were a French-speaking people, what Riel called "*Les Métis Canadien Français*" (4: 319-25). In addition, Riel developed a sophisticated theory of *métissage*, which would call into question Bouchard's claim that, in the New World, concepts of ethnoracial mixing presupposed that "the only way to (definitely) reduce the gap between the Indian and the White man would be to eradicate the former biologically by fusing him with the latter through *métissage*" (*Making* 172). Riel, who is not only "one of the great exponents of racial hybridity and continental identity in the Americas" but also of the few who was himself of "mixed race" (Braz, "Outer America" 120, 130; see also Riel 2: 120), was not likely to have intended to efface the First Nations. After all, he was quite aware that it is from their Indigenous ancestors that the Métis derive their "*titre*" (Riel 3: 279) to the land.

Hutcheon and Bouchard would appear to agree with the Brazilian anthropologist and novelist Darcy Ribeiro when he states that Canadians and Americans are "*povos transplantados*" (452), or transplanted peoples, who have privileged their diasporic cultures to such a degree that they have failed to fuse themselves with their land's Indigenous inhabitants. Presumably the reason Canadians have not embraced ethnoracial hybridity is because of their country's puritanism, in contrast to Brazil, where Ribeiro asserts "*a mestiçagem jamais foi crime ou pecado*" (453), or racial mixing has never been a crime or a sin. I have no desire to glorify ethnoracial hybridity, especially considering the ignoble manner in which hybrid peoples have often been treated throughout the Americas. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in the passage that serves as the epigraph to this essay, "el romance del mestizaje" could be "una ficción" (181). Or as Amaryll Chanady underlines, miscegenation is "an ambiguous marker of difference" in Latin America, since it is less a reflection of a real filiation with Indigenous people than "a gesture of differentiation [. . .] with the United States" (97, 85). Still, the problem with Ribeiro's argument is that, despite the comments by Hutcheon and Bouchard, it is clearly challenged by the existence of the Métis, which suggests that at certain moments in the history of Canada, racial mixing has been neither a crime nor a sin but the order of the day. Moreover, regardless of the fact they were supposed to disappear, the Métis have not vanished from the Canadian national territory. On the contrary, they are currently one of the fastest growing populations in Canada, even if there are questions about the way the Canadian agency that collects census data defines Métis (Andersen 347-48). In addition, in 1982, the Supreme Court of Canada declared the Métis one of the country's Indigenous peoples, reportedly making Canada "the only country in the world [that] has constitutionally recognized a mixed-blood people as 'Aboriginal'" (Teillet 61). In other words, Canada's attitude toward ethnoracial hybridity is far more complex than the dominant discourse in the country, and elsewhere, would indicate.

Of course one cannot help but notice that the Canadian interest in ethnoracial hybridity tends not to extend to sexual relations involving people of African descent. Notwithstanding the phenomenal popularity of Indianist works like Alencar's, in Brazil racial hybridity has focused more on relations between blacks and whites than between either of those groups and Indigenous people. In fact, when it comes to the outside world's view of what constitutes the Brazilian experience, it is largely restricted to the cultural production of the African-European coastal people, best exemplified by Rio de Janeiro's *carnaval* (Armstrong 11-16). Canada, in contrast, finds it difficult to acknowledge that it has a rooted population of African descent. Actually, the myth of Canada as the Peaceable Kingdom appears to require the fiction that slavery was "almost entirely absent" in the country's history, as opposed to the United States, where "slavery and race have been intimately connected to the rise of the gun culture" (Laxer 36). Such a belief explains the erasure of even polemical figures like the woman known to history as Marie-Joseph Angélique, the Portuguese-born slave who in 1734 was tortured and then hanged for the burning of Montreal (Gale; Cooper). In any case, when it comes to ethnoracial hybridity, Canadian writers have concentrated almost exclusively on relations between Indigenous people and Europeans. Their motivation would appear to be to demonstrate that they are at home in their national territory. That is, that they are an American people and thus belong. This apparent need to prove that they are part of the New World is one of the paradoxes of the Canadian fictional representations of ethnoracial hybridity, since there is much evidence that Canada has shown rather little interest in any concept of Americanness that goes beyond its relations with the United States (Bahia; Argüelles Arredondo).

In conclusion, in *Iracema* and *Tay John* José de Alencar and Howard O'Hagan provide two contrasting views of the ways their homelands tend to perceive ethnoracial hybridity, with the Brazilian apotheosizing it and the Canadian dramatizing its ostensible impossibility. Yet despite these two antithetical visions of racial fusion, both Canada and Brazil historically have been dominated by people of European descent, leading one to question what this apparent difference really signifies. Although they have distinct perspectives, *Iracema* and *Tay John* illustrate the seemingly inherent contradictions in constructing a national identity in the Americas. Both Alencar and O'Hagan are aware that in order to be considered authentic, any New World culture has to reflect the voice of the land, a voice that must bear the imprint of the land's first occupants, who are believed to embody "the spirit of the continent" (Deloria 3). At the same time, it is evident that Indigenous people are one group that does not have much of a voice in either text. Furthermore, while O'Hagan dramatizes the manner in which the dominant society silences Indigenous voices, Alencar seems oblivious to the ways he erases those that he claims are the voices of the land. After all, he kills off the title character in *Iracema* and says of the Indigenous protagonist of another of his novels that he is "*um cavalheiro português no corpo de um selvagem?*" (*Guarani* 45), or that he is a Portuguese gentleman in the body of a savage, underscoring the fact that his Brazil is "founded on Indian removal" (Sommer 139). In short, ultimately, Alencar's celebration of ethnoracial hybridity could be seen as a reflection of his failure to engage with the otherness of Indigenous Brazilians and their progeny, a response that has found much support in the country. Thus perhaps it is not a surprise that it is in Canada, not Brazil, that both Indigenous people and those of mixed descent are making a resurgence.

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