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## Scratching the Surface: Marian Engel's 1970s Writing

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# Scratching the Surface: Marian Engel's 1970s Writing

CHRISTL VERDUYN

. . . the Lower Classes, who have, indeed, not died.

— Marian Engel, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* 175

The difference between being a male writer and a female writer in this country is that women have to work in opposition.

— Marian Engel, "Interpretation, Inspiration, and the Irrelevant Question" 6

IN HER WRITING, MARIAN ENGEL raised issues and themes outside the paradigmatic mainstream positive self-image of Canada of the late 1960s and 1970s. She demonstrated a sharp eye for and a sympathetic view of the marginalized and disadvantaged of Canadian society and the places where they lived. Her novels and short stories include a range of characters whose lives unfold in antithesis to the social narrative of 1970s Canada, scratching its polished surfaces as a country promising social, cultural, and economic well-being for all.

In the wake of the wildly successful Expo '67, the international fair that Canada had hosted in tandem with its centennial celebrations in 1967, the country was bursting with a maturing sense of optimism and self-confidence. The postwar economic boom had generated wealth, employment, rising living standards, spreading consumerism, an expanding middle class, and increasing housing and suburban development. This apparently halcyon time was symbolized in the election of the charismatic "hip" Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, with his call for a just society, foreshadowed in his reform of the Canadian Criminal Code. The music and culture of the era opened new avenues of expression and new opportunities for personal self-development. As Engel has her protagonist describe it in "Elizabeth and the Golden City,"

The country was in a maelstrom of cultural rebounding excitement. . . . [W]riters were emerging in Canada, publishers were

creating and recreating themselves. There was a Royal Commission to watch and speak to, there was a Quiet Revolution in Quebec, a prime minister shaking a big stick. . . . Nationalism, bilingualism, biculturalism, separatism, the Vietnam protest; the draft dodgers, hippies, yuppies, marijuana; . . . [t]he Trudeau phenomenon, French-love, French-hate, back-to-the-land. (61)

The 1970s, or more broadly the years 1965-80 that Cinda Gault documents in “Grooving the Nation: 1965-1980 as a Literary Era in Canada,” were uniquely important to Canadian literature and to Canadian women writers in particular. The period’s two dominant social movements — Canadian nationalism and second-wave feminism — aligned with a literature “understood and valued for representation of female and national identity” (Gault 362). Indeed, the 1970s saw the publication of work by a significant number of women writers across Canada and Quebec.<sup>1</sup> In an important dialectical twist, many of these writers explored issues and themes well outside the optimistic if not Pollyannaish self-images of the 1960s and 1970s, such as poverty and social dislocation in the booming postwar economy, colonial attitudes toward immigrants and Indigenous communities, and “power politics,” to call up the title of Margaret Atwood’s 1971 collection of poetry. Among these new literary voices, Engel’s sounded a powerful note.

In her writing, Engel was attentive to areas below the surfaces of Canadian society, to those members who lived their lives at the edges of success and community, outside the mainstream confidence, consumerism, and prosperity of the era. In “the feel-good-about-being-Canadian” narrative (Gault 363) of the decade, these were the “remnants of nation,” to borrow from critic Roxanne Rimstead’s study *Remnants of Nation: On Poverty Narratives by Women* (2001). Rimstead calls for greater critical attention to “poverty narratives,” her term for a category of analysis that includes stories about or by the poor (4), and their representation of class experience, specifically that of the “lower classes,” and of women in particular. “Poverty narratives in wealthy countries such as Canada,” Rimstead argues, “often unfold a national imaginary which locates the poor outside the imagined community on the fringes as fragments of nation” (7). The terms “national imaginary” and “imagined community” here align with Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities as presented in his investigation into contemporary nationalism, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of*

*Nationalism* (1983). Anderson discerned nations as socially constructed communities imagined by those who perceive themselves to be part of them — those who feel that they belong. For Anderson, a nation is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6-7). For Rimstead, and in the poverty narratives that she examines, the least heard, met, or truly known members of prosperous Western nations such as Canada are the poor — the “internal Others” or “marginalized members who are fixed by insults, degrading paradigms, stereotypes, or euphemisms such as ‘welfare bums,’ the ‘underclass,’ ‘trailer trash,’ or ‘child poverty’” (8). Rimstead’s list of poverty narratives by Canadian women between 1919 and 1990 (305-08) does not include the work of Engel. However, Engel’s novels and short stories present many “internal Others,” characters at the margins of social inclusion, economic security, and political influence. Their presence throughout her writing is not a widely held vision of her work. Instead, critics and readers have tended to focus on one of her seven novels,<sup>2</sup> the 1976 Governor General’s Literary Award-winning *Bear*. During the 1970s alone, Engel published four novels, two children’s books, and a collection of short stories, all the while managing numerous personal and political responsibilities and commitments. In these years, she was raising twins, chairing the newly formed Writers’ Union of Canada, serving on the Toronto Public Library board, and laying the foundation for what would become the PLR, the public lending rights program that continues to be greatly appreciated by authors today. And, like many Canadian women writers of the time, Engel was struggling to make a living from her writing. *Bear* garnered more critical and readership attention than her other novels and has continued to do so.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, this is understandable given its literary quality and of course its “topic,” which frequently has been (over)simplified as the story of a woman who has sex with a bear.<sup>4</sup> On the other, the critical focus on *Bear* has perhaps overshadowed other works of hers, to the unfortunate neglect of one of her primary concerns — including in *Bear* — of marginalization in and displacement from the mainstream.

In this essay, I examine the pervasive concern that Engel demonstrated in her writing for the marginalized of Canadian society, her representation of those who did not reap or share the benefits of Canada’s

buoyant postwar socio-economic expansion. Hers was not the only 1970s representation of this world at the time by a Canadian woman writer.<sup>5</sup> But it was one of the most evocative, effective, and authentic explorations, directing attention to the disadvantaged and dispossessed of Canadian society. Her focus was primarily on women, but it included members of Canada's Indigenous and "minority" communities as well as the mentally and physically challenged. The predominant settings of her novels and short stories are urban Toronto and rural Ontario.<sup>6</sup> Her characters' lives unfold in public and private places from city streets to convents, from courtrooms to tumbledown houses. As Rimstead notes, "in the absence of a more inclusive national imaginary, the poor often see themselves defined in relation to other forms of community, whether a family, a neighbourhood, a small town, a city slum, a street, a region, or even the poor or homeless as a group — groups which many times prove more humanitarian than nation" (8). In Engel's novels and short stories, these are authentic, lived-in places where all of the real-life drama and politics of postwar Canada play out. Far from abstract, neutral, or anonymous locales, they are places where her characters experience concrete social exclusion; where they lose out tragically in society's asymmetrical power relations; where cultural conditioning assigns them demeaning, inconsequential, and dependent roles; and where they are doomed to be the perpetual losers in Canada's ongoing socio-economic stratification.

Engel critiqued and countered these conditions and consequences of marginalization from the outset of her career in the 1960s, through the 1970s, and up to her tragically early death in the mid-1980s. From her earliest writings to her final work, she challenged her readers persistently with stories and characters that contested the conventions of contemporary power and society, whose predominant narratives suggested a relentless and thorough movement toward universal prosperity and happiness. Analysis of her writing is productively informed by Rimstead's discussion of an oppositional approach in reading and writing, "prying open both dominant and subversive representations of poverty in literary works and in everyday, popular discourse . . . [and] recovering previously silenced voices" (4). As Engel asserted in a 1981 interview with Cathy Matyas and Jennifer Joiner, women writers had to write "in opposition" ("Interpretation" 6). Her novels and short stories explored what society ignored or pushed to the side as it privileged

mainstream advance. Characters in *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (1968) and *The Honeyman Festival* (1970) include the urban homeless and rural Ontario "white trash." Characters from the worlds of alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, and poverty pass through the pages of *The Glassy Sea* (1978) and *Lunatic Villas* (1981). Engel offered stark perspectives from the outsider positions of these and other characters. These perspectives were neither academic nor condescending. On the contrary, she came at writing from a deliberately different angle. "When I took on most of the support of the family," she explained, "I had to decide — quickly — not to write for academics; . . . I write for my peers. Unfortunately, my peers are women who don't have very much money" ("Interpretation" 4). Engel was one with her peer group. Her writing did not situate itself outside or above the financially pressed or socially marginalized, looking in on or down at poverty or the powerless of society. It was located existentially within the circle of poverty and its everyday realities. Engel took great care and used her considerable writing skill to present this world's representatives with authenticity and respect, offering realistic, imaginative, and liberating possibilities for overcoming the entrapping socio-spatial boundaries in which her characters found themselves.

In brief, Engel brought her writing talent, personal commitment, and persistent effort to focus on topics pushed below the surface in the ostensible social progress that Canadians appeared to be enjoying in the 1970s. As Rimstead has commented, these substrate areas were not garnering the attention that they warranted in Canadian literary criticism: "With its traditionally tacit emphasis on individual subjectivity and 'refined' culture and good taste, the field of literary studies in Canada has often looked away from class divisions among people and their texts, even as other marginal viewpoints such as feminism, multiculturalism, regionalism, and post colonialism have emerged to challenge the canon epistemologically, aesthetically, and politically" (37). To a great extent, Engel's work helped to fill this lacuna by addressing the themes, issues, and worlds of those at the margins or left behind in 1970s Canada.

Engel's first published novel, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, established a number of concerns that would recur throughout her work. The push-and-pull of class differences comprises a substantial presence in her narratives. Her characters are particularly discomfited and unsettled in their positions and relations vis-à-vis middle-class Canadian soci-

ety, beginning with Sarah Porlock, the protagonist of *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*.

Sarah has recently returned from a rite-of-passage trip through Europe. Her colleagues and family fear that this journey has had negative consequences for what was anticipated as her successful life's path as a university professor. They maintain that something happened to Sarah in Europe that has altered her thinking and behaviour and led her to jeopardize her promising academic career by indulging in what they regard as questionable behaviour: having affairs with married men and carrying out reckless interviews. In particular, they are puzzled and alarmed by her "unfortunate" decision to live in one of Toronto's less appealing neighbourhoods. The Toronto evoked from the first page of *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* is strikingly different from the more comfortable neighbourhoods of Rosedale, the Annex, and the Beaches. Sarah's neighbourhood sets the scene for Engel's counter-exploration and -representation of Canadian society. Sarah opts to live in an area that her family and colleagues shun. Despite the privileges that she could enjoy as a professor at a Toronto university, she chooses a neighbourhood in a down-and-out part of town, Glenholme Place, where "old men crawl out of their lairs . . . [and] hang around the booze cans shouting for Bill, Phil, Pete, the love of Mike, and Fucking Jesus Christ" (3). These are neighbourhoods found in the shadows of cities all across the country, from Vancouver to Halifax, and the voices that this and other passages in Engel's work capture are those of the lost, the homeless, and the destitute. Their ramblings, ravings, and heartfelt cries contrast starkly with the cool, detached self-discipline of the privileged members of the world of academia.

Sarah's apparent place in this world of privilege, given her scholarly accomplishments (she is, after all, Sarah Porlock, PhD), is undermined by social and family expectations of conformity and propriety to which she cannot relate. "I ooze, booze, stink, feel human rather than feminine," Sarah declares, "melting and re-forming day after day" (12). Engel's first protagonist is "a de-centered, marginalized self, who illustrates an 'other mode' of subjectivity" (Verduyn 69) and who, like the author's subsequent protagonists, does not opt for a position of privilege and detachment vis-à-vis the world of society's outsiders. For Sarah, home is Glenholme Place, a sad, melancholy street whose original gentility has long gone. Once a tree-lined carriageway between two parks,

now — despite or indeed because of social progress and modernity — Glenholme Place comprises houses that have become the “rabbit warrens of the poor” (Engel 26). Notwithstanding this harsh reality, Sarah feels strongly that she belongs there,<sup>7</sup> with “the one-legged, sodden, wrong-coloured, prompt-at-the-hostel” (79), even if she “cannot wipe middle class off [her] face” and is “ashamed as well as half frightened” (25-26) of the setting: “This morning, the length of Glenholme Place, a couple my parents’ age staggered and swore, he holding her every six paces against a wall and slapping at her. ‘Kill me, that’s right, kill me, you fucking bastard, go ahead, get the razor out of my purse, kill me.’ She took his blows with a twitch of habit” (26).

Engel neither glorifies nor romanticizes this place and the lives of its inhabitants. The hard reality that she suggests is that poverty is often coupled with violence. “People on this street,” Sarah remarks, “inhabit furnished rooms, own nothing, except for knives, broken bottles, guns (yes, guns), razors, tongues” (139-40). Engel describes a real part of 1960s-70s Toronto, as real as Rosedale or the Beaches. For its inhabitants, it is where they experience economic exclusion, where social stratification sees them at the bottom of the barrel, where class distinction is lived hourly, where power structures perpetuate their substrate realities, and where cultural boundaries inhibit mainstream interactions. Rainy days see Sarah sitting and reading in the legendary Honey Dew restaurant at Carlton and Yonge Streets. There she watches upstanding, community-minded Rotarians quick-lunch alongside “bums, Swedenborgians, queers, men mumbling about Castro, all driven from the park” (76). Witnessing a man stumble “out of the booze can blinded by his bleeding head,” Sarah declares unequivocally that “Class does exist” (66).

It is a particular strength of her writing that Engel did not project class, in particular “the Lower Classes” (175), as being elsewhere or foreign to Canada. Passages throughout *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook* illustrate clearly the “here and now-ness”<sup>8</sup> of class and social distribution where her protagonist lives. Symbolically and authentically, Engel’s characters inhabit these places of “urban decay” not as tourists or as detached observers but as individuals on the margins of urban affluence. Their perspectives are neither sensational nor sensationalized. As Sarah comments, there might be sensational news events such as murders in these places, but what is more likely is “less sensational, a humiliation,



desertion, a carving, a rape" (175). The portrayal of marginal life in *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* is nuanced and empathetic and characteristic of Engel's work as a whole.

*Sarah Bastard's Notebook* drew attention to the plight of the publicly disadvantaged, "bums" (80), "winos" and "hookers" (117), the homeless, and other street people. In her second novel, *The Honeyman Festival*, Engel turned to the more inward and often hidden world of women, in particular mothers raising children.<sup>9</sup> This is the situation of the novel's protagonist, Minn Burge. Mothers are key figures in Engel's work, and their day-to-day lives are fundamental features of her fictional world. For Engel, as for other women writers of the period, the material realities and challenging features of mothers' lives had too often been ignored or trivialized in literature and critical analysis, tucked away from the world at large, typically in isolated, imprisoning situations in urban and rural settings alike. As Alice Munro observed of Engel's attention to the "domestic" lives and voices of women in Canadian fiction,

Here was a woman writing about the lives of women at their most muddled . . . [and] just managing to keep afloat in the woozy world of maternity, with its shocks and confusions and fearful love and secret brutality. You have to remember how shunned, despised, mis-used, this material was at the time. . . . Before people like Marian Engel and Audrey Thomas and Margaret Laurence, in their very different ways, gave their attention as serious fiction writers to such material, most of us thought there was no way to deal with it except to turn it into the layer-cake fiction of the women's magazines. (33)

Such "layer-cake fiction" was decidedly not Engel's style or purpose in writing. Her novels and short stories countered that tendency, with the narrative pursued especially powerfully and effectively in *The Honeyman Festival*, in which Minn is a keen and perspicacious observer of society's underprivileged. She sees "the small, sadistic gestures of women in imprisoned situations" (6) and how "women abandoned with infants are dangerous animals" (12) — "Mrs-Prentice-in-Godwin," for example, "who killed all hers with an axe" (6). Like Sarah before her, Minn lives in a marginal part of town, another neighbourhood made up of the homeless, alcoholics, and drug addicts. This social setting contrasts significantly with the privileged world and "beautiful people" of the American filmmaker Honeyman's circle or of Minn's British social worker Jane-Regina. Lorna Irvine has examined the colonial metaphor

of these and other characters in Engel's work. In *The Honeyman Festival*, and subsequently in *Lunatic Villas*, the character of the social worker, together with psychologists, psychiatrists, and other professional figures in Engel's novels, evokes values of orderliness, social control, and rationality. They stand in contrast to the chaos and disorder in the lives of the author's protagonists and marginal characters. With these opposing social contexts, Engel shows how society's professionals are unwelcome in her protagonists' lives. Uninvited and incapable of truly understanding marginalized experience, these individuals inject themselves into the lives of women such as Minn Burge in *The Honeyman Festival* or like Harriet Ross in *Lunatic Villas*.

Although *Lunatic Villas* was published in 1981, its prologue establishes its focus on the 1970s: "In 1967, to celebrate Canada's hundredth birthday and to give the woman something to do, a broker named Morgan Wickwire bought his wife a street in Toronto" (7). The street in question is Rathbone Place, the eventual locus of the "lunatic villas" of the novel, for Wickwire "did not choose well": the "charming cul-de-sac" is in fact "a dozen houses facing each other in two rows like broken teeth, bounded on the south by a hydro substation, on the west by a mattress factory, and on the north by a neighbourhood where no one has spoken English since 1926" (7). It is the lower-class housing for the host of characters that Engel presents in *Lunatic Villas*. Rathbone Place anchors her exploration of the marginal experience of immigrants, single mothers, delinquent children, struggling writers, the elderly, the disabled, and other individuals dealing with a daily challenge to make ends meet — in short, people whom Harriet refers to as members of "How the Other Quarter Lives" (16).

Harriet springs from the same ethos as the protagonists of *The Honeyman Festival* and *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*. She is a single mother raising half a dozen children on a freelance writer's income. Like Minn and Sarah, she lives in a neighbourhood where poverty and mental stress coexist in an environment of vulnerability and violence. Here again Engel presents the class-oriented experiences of people who, like Harriet, live in "lunatic villas." As the title of the novel suggests, there is a measure of madness in everyday life for Harriet and her neighbours. For twenty years, she has written about the daily challenges that they face: "welfare and aprons, abortion and fitted sheets, hyperactivity and hyperacidity . . . , the unmentionables of society" (16), "things about

all of us that nobody wants to know . . . : the existence of warts, moles, pimps, debt-collectors, cancer, socially unacceptable lovers . . . , repressive welfare workers, permissive welfare workers, networks of missing nerves” (70). *Lunatic Villas* includes a bold and, for its era, early recognition of the serious and then largely hidden issue of mental illness. Engel sympathetically and carefully portrays the mental health pressures and issues experienced by people struggling to cope with financial problems. This is especially the case for women who have families to feed, particularly those without spousal support and whose circumstances are often exacerbated by outsiders from the middle-class world. Just like Minn Burge in *The Honeyman Festival*, Harriet Ross in *Lunatic Villas* must endure visits from a social worker: Susan Forbrush Littlemore, “a smooth, neat girl from the Children’s Aid with a form to fill out, saying that someone has said [Harriet] wasn’t managing too well. . . . A nifty kid from Etobicoke or Don Mills, who’s never seen any dirt before” (30). To add personal insult to social injury, Susan is Harriet’s ex-husband’s new wife. The day that she visits Harriet’s home, the children are miserable with mumps, Harriet has been housebound so food is low, and there has been no time to tidy up. “Well, we looked like hell,” she admits (30). Further to Miss Littlemore’s report, social services authorities threaten Harriet’s precarious household. Forced to go to court to fight for custody of her children, Harriet is at a serious disadvantage in the exclusive, rational space of the court, and she is humiliatingly belittled when her income is cruelly raised as a substantial and consequential issue. “And you are a free-lance writer, Mrs . . . Ross?” the judge asks, his scramble for her name reinforcing her sense of disadvantage; “not much to support six children on” (209). In her freelance work, Harriet has written about “Children’s Aid, about social workers, about social problems . . . [.] about how well our social services worked, how good things were” (33). When social services intervene in her family life, however, her personal identity and social existence are reduced and objectified. “That day I wasn’t Harriet Ross. . . . I was just Mrs. Thing, and the Children’s Aid wanted my kids” (33).

In creating characters like Harriet Ross and Minn Burge, Engel provided perspective on lives of financial worry, family stress, and personal and social humiliation, and she demonstrated compassion and understanding of how marginalized women are subjected, condescendingly and inhumanely, to societal observation from on high or from outside. For Harriet and Minn, this is harsh and unfair judgment, particularly

as they end up caring for members of society's lower echelons whom social services have overlooked. The hard reality of their social circumstances is an underdeveloped welfare system and the absence of a larger caring community. In these situations, as Rimstead has observed, "the care and survival of the poor fall back on families and individuals, especially women" (8). Harriet and Minn scramble and improvise in order to generate the financial resources needed for their families. In *Lunatic Villas*, Harriet's income as a freelancer is indeed, as the judge notes, "not much to support six children on," and Harriet is constantly "comparing her cheque book to her bank statement" (14). Minn takes in boarders, further representatives of the marginalized world in which she lives. She rents her attic to teenagers who have been forced out of their families' homes to live on their own. The sad and lost Richard Potter, for example, is "a push-out rather than a drop-out," his father having called him "a snivelling fairy and told him to get out" (*Honeyman* 42). At the other end of the age spectrum, Minn takes in an older boarder, John Colebrook, a broken, destitute, sixty year old whom she has met in the Salvation Army bookstore and who lives from drink to drink. Colebrook is an educated and cultured man — "He knew about editions," remarks Minn poignantly (140) — but his circumstances have stripped him of social status. In a parallel to the biblical passage in which Jesus washes his disciples' feet, Minn cleans and manicures Colebrook's dirty, scabbed hands, literally touching and connecting with society's subsurface.

*The Honeyman Festival* and *Lunatic Villas* portray the hard internal and external realities and emotions of mothers in marginalized social settings. Their basic humanity and deep social awareness impose further human burdens on them as they reach out to care for others in their lower-class urban communities. Engel further examined marginalized existence in the unforgiving realities of rural poverty in *Bear* and *The Glassy Sea*. In these novels, she challenged the romanticized image of Canadian rural life, the marginal dimensions of which can be every bit as socially and culturally demeaning as those of urban slums.

*Bear* is set on an island in the countryside north of Toronto. This might be attractive "cottage country" for the more fortunate representatives of urban middle-class Canadian society. For Engel's characters, however, it can be a place of existential isolation, deep desperation, and cold loneliness. Once again Engel presents an emotionally power-

ful and evocative setting in clear-eyed fashion. She is matter-of-fact in depicting the conditions and consequences of rural poverty, especially for women and children, with characters who, like Mrs. Francis and her daughter (127) or Mrs. Bird and her eleven children (39-40), have been abandoned by husbands and sons or whose fates have been left to the whims of social services agencies and to Children's Aid. *Bear's* protagonist, Lou, takes her place among these characters not as a mother but as a woman in desperate mental shape, struggling with social and emotional alienation, lost and lonely in life. Lou is "inconsolably lonely" (92): "The image of the Good Life long ago stamped on her soul was quite different than this, and she suffered by contrast" (12). By profession an archivist and bibliographer at the Toronto Historical Institute, Lou lives "like a mole, buried deep in her office" (11), "existential screaming inside herself" (82), demanding "who the hell do you think you are, attempting to be alive" (83). She is worrisomely on the edge of serious breakdown, and the opportunity comes just in time to accept an assignment that takes her out of her office and the city. The assignment is to catalogue an estate library in an unusual octagonal house called Pennarth that, more unusually yet, comes with a bear.

The relationship that develops between Lou and the bear has been the focus of extensive critical work on Engel's award-winning novel.<sup>10</sup> Of interest in regard to Engel's attention to marginalized lives is Lou's relationship with a character associated with the bear, Lucy Leroy. She is "an old Indian woman" (35) whom Lou first sees as withered and toothless, wearing old pinned clothes, but then also as a woman with lively eyes and knowledge about the bear. Lou begins to understand as well as appreciate that, unlike her, Lucy knows how to interact with the bear and that she is willing to share that knowledge. Lucy has been read by critics as a figure of the Wise Old Woman of Jungian analysis,<sup>11</sup> a "vision Lou has the potential to become" (Monk 35), and as Lou's "Self, not Other" (Fee 23). These are interpretations supported in *Bear* by the resemblance of their names — Lou and Lucy — and by Lou's reflection as Lucy extends a hand in greeting: "I will be like that, she thought" (48). At the same time, there is more to Lucy. Although referred to by both Lou and the local grocer, Homer Campbell, using the uninformed but mainstream term of the time, as an "Indian," the novel reveals that Lucy is a Cree woman. "People will tell you Lucy's Métis," Homer tells Lou, "but she and Joe are nearly full-blooded Indians" (79). Joe King is

Lucy's nephew, a trapper and her helper in looking after the bear. Lucy lives with her niece and is a talented knitter (41) and a lively talker. Homer might not know whether she is speaking Cree or French (41), and Lou might think that she hears Lucy "babbling" with the bear (48), but the "old Indian woman" presents herself quite differently: "I was a young girl once. I came from Swift Current. Married a man, came here. Now I live on Neebish. He's a good bear" (49). Lucy's added comments — "I am one hundred years old. I can read. I went to the mission school" (49) — reference a chapter of Canadian history that in the 1970s was still largely unacknowledged by mainstream society. Lucy and her family are part of the marginalized and dispossessed of Canada. Homer's remark that "some people don't like Indians" (27) greatly understates the negative attitudes toward Canada's Indigenous population reflected in the establishment and operation of reserves and residential schools. His condescending comment that "they can't hold their liquor" (27) further expresses an all-too-common lack of knowledge about the country's history. A country grocery store and gas station keeper with nine children to support, two adopted ("You wouldn't leave a kid without a home" [103], Homer explains to Lou), he is hardly representative of the comfortable urban middle-class cottager. Not unlike his grocery store, which Lou finds leaves "a sophisticated taste something to desire" with its "withered potatoes, knobby carrots, and wilted cabbages," his life contains "the necessities" (40), but Homer is limited in his understanding of and empathy for lives more marginalized than his own — those of the area's Indigenous population in particular. In that regard, he is not unlike the Carys, as Joe observes to Lou: "They didn't know much, people like the Carys. They were tourists" (138). The Carys were among the nineteenth-century waves of settlers from England and Europe to Canada, part of the country's colonial history and displacement of its original inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> The first Colonel Cary immigrated to Canada in 1826, secured a charter to the island in 1834, and passed on to family descendants its octagonal house with its library of British and European literature and history. The impacts and consequences of this stage of Canadian history are not developed in the novel beyond the inclusion of the characters Lucy Leroy and Joe King and the sketch of their lives on the outskirts of the Cary estate. Yet even this limited portrayal points to the social exclusion that Indigenous

peoples of Canada have shared with other groups treated as “the lower classes.”

The latter appear in Engel’s follow-up to *Bear* as the rural poor or “white trash” families of her 1978 novel *The Glassy Sea*. Hard realities surface throughout the novel, and people who praise country life and its ecological sanity, remarks Rita Heber, the protagonist, have not experienced how lonely it can be to grow up a country child, especially in a family of “country bumpkins” (41). “We were . . . worms struggling blind out of our country world,” Rita reflects, and “We did what we could to, let’s say, adjust to our society” (137, 138). Rita is a Heber, one of the rural Ontario working-class families subject to disparagement as “white trash.” These families have long histories and traditions and their own sets of values, dignity, and pride, brilliantly presented by Engel through the examples of the Hebers and Macraes as well as through her portrayal of the complex Catholic and Protestant religious traditions and histories of rural Ontario. As a Heber, Rita is aware of social expectations that she “could and should amount to nothing” other than to be “hard-working, teetotal, plain, honest, and sexually virtuous” (19, 37). For Hebers, unlike for families whose values revolve around good teeth and silverware, their faded kitchen linoleum does not mean poverty; it means that the floor is clean (32). It means managing and making do, “as Hebers always do,” Rita grimly observes, “with efficiency on nothing and on principle” (106). There is pride in making do, as Rita’s mother firmly insists. At the same time, Rimstead points out, the everyday struggles of poverty can be seen as “adaptive and resilient steps towards resistance or as self-defeating steps towards consent and domination” (5). For Rita in *The Glassy Sea*, Heber pride is repressive, unthinking duty and the source of multiple fears: of imagination, of feeling free, of knowing. “One didn’t know the Catholics, or the Indians. Or old, foreign people, or the summer cottagers from town. . . . One knew very little, one walked alone” (42). Fear and pride coexist with a perpetual condition of personal isolation, humiliation, and destructive consequences such as depression, self-abnegation, or an array of forms of abuse, from alcoholism to drug addiction to physical violence.

These conditions and consequences are examined in *The Glassy Sea*. Engel presents a brutal portrayal of the unravelling of Rita’s life when her marriage to the symbolically named Asher Bowen falls apart following the birth of their only child, a son born hydrocephalic. Asher

is a lawyer, and while in court he is “refined, autocratic, and eloquent” (118), in his marriage he is repressive and oppressive, a life-denying snob. He turns away from his child and wife in his ambition to achieve a career in politics, a goal that cannot accommodate a sickly son or Rita’s downward spiral into depression following their son’s death. Asher “goes a lot by appearances,” his secretary points out (120); politics demands propriety and health, and Rita has become an awkward and disobliging embarrassment. Asher replaces her with a younger and more societally appropriate wife. Left alone and impoverished, Rita slips into illness and toward death’s door.

Engel does not abandon her characters to a fate at the bottom of the barrel. Her novels present possible solutions and alternatives to social marginalization and poverty. Rita circumvents what appears to be an inevitable slide toward death in an imaginative and energetic return to her life before Asher. As a young woman, she joined a convent run by a small group of Eglantine Sisters of the Church of England. “It wasn’t hard,” she explains about what might have seemed an unusual contemporary life choice, “to think of living a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience where I came from” (24). The convent has since closed, but Rita considers its possibilities as a new and different space for women — “a women’s hostel run by a small staff of sisters . . . a core of women helping other women to put their lives . . . in order” (163). She reopens Eglantine House as a hospice for women, a positive, reconstructive, and transformative space for the marginalized, damaged, and isolated, a place to belong: “We’ll go out to women and say, if you need me, I’m here. They’ll come” (164).

At the time of her death in 1985, Engel was working on a novel titled “Elizabeth and the Golden City.” Published in 2010, thirty years beyond the period in focus here, Engel’s posthumous novel continues to focus on the lives and fates of women outside the mainstream. The novel concerns two sisters, Elizabeth and Frances, who share housing — and a guardian known as the Major — in unconventional arrangements throughout their lives. Their Ontario childhood resembles those of other Engel characters, steeped in “the traditional idea of farmers being poor and low” (83). When their mother dies, their father leaves them in the care of the Major, who becomes a permanent fixture in their lives and an alternating presence in their beds. In Montreal while Elizabeth attends McGill University and Frances has the first baby in their joint



family, they live in “student-warrens, under-heated and shabby” (146). In the last year of Elizabeth’s degree, she says that they share “a two-room basement hole so cold that the three of us often slept in the big bed together with the babies on either side of us” (160). From Montreal, they return to the outskirts of Toronto and live in run-down cabins owned by a couple who spend their evenings “drinking and throwing things at each other [and] . . . shouting and growling” (168). Listening to the couple’s ugly fights, Elizabeth asks herself why she has tried to avoid “what people called reality, the world” (168). If “reality” means demeaning living circumstances for those outside mainstream society, or a world of socio-economic insiders and outsiders, then this, Elizabeth determines, is a reality or world to avoid. In their awareness and experience of “other” lives, Engel’s protagonists question a world that pushes those lives to the margins. They contest a “reality” in which the difficult but real worlds of “other lives” are located beyond or below the surface. *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook*’s protagonist expresses her opposition to such “reality” sharply in asserting a very different reality: “[T]he life expectancy of the Canadian Indian is thirty-one. There’s your reality,” she declares (158).

In her novels and short stories, gender, class, and the family unit are the primary lenses through which Engel examines lives and places at the margins. She also includes marginalized existences generated by race and religion — in particular those of members of Indigenous and Jewish communities in Canada. In the case of the former, Indigenous people are included in novels such as *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook*, *Bear*, and *The Glassy Sea*. They are not protagonists, but they are not featureless. *Bear*’s Lucy Leroy has a hundred years of knowledge, skill, and experience, and she speaks for herself. In this regard, Engel never proposed to speak *for* society’s marginalized, even if she often saw herself among them and always placed her protagonists in their company. In the case of the latter, she expressed her anger at the public attitude that she encountered toward Jews in Canada, notably during her student years at McGill University. “Ideologically speaking, McGill shocked me,” Engel recalled in an essay titled “The Office on the Landing.”<sup>13</sup> “I’d been brought up on the CBC and *Canadian Forum*, the Farm Broadcasts: thought we were all equal. Things kept happening to show we weren’t. I was asked not to go out with Jewish young men” (127). In “Elizabeth and the

Golden City,” Elizabeth reflects at length about Jewish experience in Montreal and Toronto:

I knew, too, that their lives were different from mine and more complicated and that family relations had different corners to turn than mine. . . . And I knew that somewhere in their background was a village that had not been safe, and a life that had to be hedged with money and a kind of glamour to make it worth hesitantly claiming. What was simple in them had been paved over, even their bodies were cities. It seemed to me obvious that they had been maimed by their history. (202)

Personal experience might have contributed to Engel’s sensitivity to marginalization. Engel herself was an adopted child who, by her own account, grew up in a caring family. Her adopted status made her aware of and sympathetic to the condition of the outsider, however, as reflected in her writing and the examples considered in this essay.

Engel situated her writing within lives and locales below the surfaces of social convention, pointing out the marginalized of society. However, her writing is not indulgently or depressingly melancholic or uninvolved. Nor is it voyeuristic or sensational. Her narratives and characters are empathetic, respectful, and resistant. Sarah Porlock in *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook* self-consciously refuses the authority of the academy or a role as a superior outsider, trading her position as a university professor in Toronto for that of a writer in Montreal. Minn Burge of *The Honeyman Festival* refuses the authority claimed by the police who show up at her door looking for the teens who rent her attic. In *The Glassy Sea*, Rita Heber rejects the status and authority of her husband’s political world. And in *Lunatic Villas*, Harriet Ross stands up to social services and to the courts in defence of her performance and contribution as a mother and breadwinner.

In the last analysis, Engel’s writing articulates the conditions and consequences of the marginalization and poverty and the socio-spatial constraints that existed simultaneously in the buoyant and optimistic period of Canada’s Expo ’67, “PET,” and the postwar boom. Engel carried out this critical project by presenting perspectives from a variety of protagonists and by exploring an eclectic array of narrative situations. The characters and situations of her novels reflect realities that are emotionally wrenching and difficult to ignore. Engel shows readers the desperate insecurity and deep vulnerability of those who do not enjoy

the financial means to sustain daily life reliably. She evokes the personally humiliating experiences of a paternalistic and condescending social system represented by figures such as the social worker. She details the debilitating and destructive effects of the illness, drinking, and depression that can result from marginalization and socially generated failure. Engel does not glorify, romanticize, moralize, or indulge any of this. She raises probing questions and provides critical insights into her characters and their circumstances beyond the chimerical surface possibilities of middle-class consumer society. Even more importantly, in her writing, she does not accept these conditions as a *fait accompli*. Instead, Engel attempts to explore possible ways around, through, and even out of her characters' experiences and situations. Her work proposes transformative strategies that can offer alternatives to her protagonists and to the status quo. Three decades after her death, there is still a shortage of shelters, hospices, public housing, and other services and spaces for the poor and disadvantaged of society, such as those presented in her work. For both their art and their critical politics, and for their unblinking, clear-eyed looks beneath social surfaces, Marian Engel's novels have remained timely and compelling well beyond the 1970s.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary list could include Margaret Atwood, Jeannette Armstrong, Joan Barfoot, Constance Beresford-Howe, Monique Bosco, Denise Boucher, Maria Campbell, Adrienne Choquette, Joan Clark, Solange Chaput-Rolland, Marian Engel, Sylvia Fraser, Mavis Gallant, Diane Giguère, Madeleine Gagnon, Anne Hébert, Betty Lambert, Margaret Laurence, Pat Lowther, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Andrée Maillet, Louise Maheux-Forcier, Joyce Marshall, Claire Martin, Mary di Michele, Alice Munro, Libby Oughton, Suzanne Paradis, Libby Scheier, Carol Shields, Donna Smyth, Audrey Thomas, Aritha van Herk, Bronwen Wallace, Helen Weinzwieg, and Adele Wiseman, among others. These were some of the authors about whom papers were invited for the conference "Re-Surfacing/Refaire surface" organized at Mount Allison University and the Université de Moncton in April 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Beyond works that appeared during the 1970s, Engel's oeuvre includes a first published novel, *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (1968, originally titled *No Clouds of Glory*), *Lunatic Villas* (1981), *The Tattooed Woman* (1985), and the posthumous "Elizabeth and the Golden City" (2010). My discussion in this essay reaches a little back and a little beyond the general 1970s framework.

<sup>3</sup> A flurry of public attention was generated in 2014 by online, radio, and newspaper discussions about the cover of a paperback version of the novel, depicting a semi-nude woman in a bear's embrace. See, for example, "Bearotica"; Flinn; Keeler; and Semley.

<sup>4</sup> Repeated throughout the discussions in 2014, as at the time of the novel's publication in 1976.

<sup>5</sup> See Rimstead's list of poverty narratives by Canadian women (1919-90s) for other examples (305-08).

<sup>6</sup> The one exception is *Monodromos* (1973), her sole work set outside Canada — and thus not part of the focus of this essay — on an island evocative of Cyprus, where Engel lived from 1962 to 1963.

<sup>7</sup> "Up my street all day wander the dispossessed and because my country is a northern one the dispossessed are the sodden. On the radio there are forums to discuss the causes of dispossession, to distinguish between the chicken and the omelette. . . . *I have known since I was born that here, I belong*" (79; emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Three examples illustrate empirically her awareness and understanding of urban spatial disposition and social distribution.

*Here and now* the frizzed Chinawoman next door is brooming three bums out of the booze can. The cops come to zip their flies, frisk them, stack them in a blue chauffeur-driven Studebaker Lark. One Indian, two Saxons, lolling. Could see them lying masturbating on the floor until one vomited; then, out: evacuate your methyl alcohol in a cell, this is Toronto. (80; emphasis added)

Down *here where I live*, on a casebook street in the history of urban decay, . . . winos die in the poky, hookers plug C court, magistrates are strict and opaque, Black Marias are full. (117; emphasis added)

Now we have sex and possessions instead of ideas, spit on Victorians, who had ideas, possessions, and *the Lower Classes*, who have, indeed, not died, next door there may well be a murder under cover of our noises: more likely something less sensational, a humiliation, desertion, a carving, a rape. (175; emphasis added)

<sup>9</sup> There are mothers in other works by Engel, including her short stories. For the purposes of this overview study, however, I focus on the novels *The Honeyman Festival* and *Lunatic Villas*.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, among numerous other possibilities, Cameron; Fee; Hair; Howells; Meoni; Monk; van Herk; and Verduyn.

<sup>11</sup> An archetype of the human collective unconscious.

<sup>12</sup> Critics have pointed out the colonial dimension of Colonel Cary's estate, with its library full of volumes of British history and literature, on an island in the Ontario countryside. See Cameron (83-84) and Wicken (97-98). Lou herself recognizes that Cary's octagonal house, Pennarth, is an absurd example of "colonial pretentiousness" (36).

<sup>13</sup> "I sure was a nothing as far as McGill went. I found out many things about McGill that other people didn't seem to realize. I won't forget the time the Dean of Women's secretary said to me: 'Miss Passmore, could you not arrange that Jewish gentlemen do not pick you up at the front door?' Things like that went on then. They loved the Lord. I found that hard to take. So I was always confronting my own poverty and my own prejudices, my own *lack of prejudice* in some departments" (126).

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