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Volume 44, numéro 2, 2019

Resurfacing: Women Writing in 1970s Canada
Refaire surface : écrivaines canadiennes des années 1970

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070962ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070962ar>

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Éditeur(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

van Herk, A. (2019). Lola Montez, c'est moi; or, Francesca Replayed. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 44(2), 197–210.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1070962ar>

Lola Montez, c'est moi; or, Francesca Replayed

ARITHA VAN HERK

THE DESIRE TO MAKE OF HELEN WEINZWEIG'S 1980 novel, *Basic Black with Pearls*, a picaresque fantasy or an exploration of "romanticized self-abnegation" (Cohen) prevails. Critics have summarized the work as "an episode of schizophrenic madness" (Weinman, "Backlist"), a "middle-aged woman's attempts to grapple with her frustrated dreams and thwarted desires" (Rooney), or an example of "the delicate equipoise between the surreal and the mundane" (Selinger 38). Certainly, its designation as a feminist classic is inescapable, although one could play devil's advocate and argue that readers might resort to that label as a means of masking bewilderment at the novel's sophistication. Contemporary re-reading of the novel argues for its feminism, but trying to locate this mistress-piece in Weinzweig's historical era is nigh impossible. *Basic Black with Pearls* simply refuses to conduct itself according to the modes expected of feminist, surrealist, or even mousy domestic fiction. Although the works of Margaret Atwood, Joy Kogawa, Maria Campbell, Nicole Brossard, Alice Munro, Audrey Thomas, and Daphne Marlatt were getting attention at the time of *Basic Black*'s publication, Weinzweig's unusual approach did not at all "fit" into the template of personal/political writing, the depictions of women seeking fulfillment and self-determination. As Ruth Panofsky indicates, Weinzweig "describes herself as a feminist who has been able, through writing, to integrate the conflicting facets of her life" (74), but this novel is less integration than "an ingenious work of puzzles that exposes the vacuousness of traditional marriage" (75). Panofsky accurately summarizes that Weinzweig's is a "female-gendered narrative form that would articulate the feelings of depersonalization and fragmentation that women, particularly of her generation, experience" (75). *Basic Black* indeed does not seek to achieve closure or resolution, but instead circles over and over the need for women to adopt disguise after disguise, mask after mask, role after role, in an endless masquerade that varnishes the roles expected of them (mother, wife, daughter, lover). While *Basic*

Black with Pearls has, as its “three central concerns,” the restricted and subservient lives of women, the weight of the past on the present, and, as Weinzweig says, the conflict within the “house of appearance and illusion” (“Personal” 363), it refuses to resolve or heal the fractures it brings to light. In seeking closure, critical readings have tried to solve its puzzle, seek resolution, even while dodging the key refrain of the novel: wherever women turn, they can only don another disguise and thus participate in their own undercover work. While Panofsky is correct that *Basic Black* seeks to “reveal the interplay of appearance and illusion in women’s lives” (77), the multiple appearances and disappearances of Shirley Kaszenbowski, or Lola Montez, or Shirley Silverberg argue for a more complex feminist intervention. Critic Sarah Weinman most accurately calls the book “an interior feminist espionage novel” (“Helen”), a comment that best encapsulates the possibilities that the book explores, even while it explodes those limitations.

It is a generalization to say that in the 1970s and ’80s, the lineaments projected onto women’s writing almost inevitably produced their anticipated outcome, so that they were handily shrugged off as “domestic fiction” or “kitchen sink realism.” Writing by women at that time was virtually required to throw light on women’s experience as fraught with dissatisfaction, ripe with the smell of leftovers and stale perfume, sexual frustration, and repudiated talent. Whatever the work actually set out to explore, responses inevitably reverted to presuppositions of sentimentalism and a focus on the trinity roles of mother, saint, or whore. Such essentialist functions surely could only be accompanied by frustration and frigidity, domestic unhappiness or complacency, motherhood anxiety, and the recursive and inextinguishable desire for some elusive Harlequin man always lurking on the edges of consciousness and the narrative. It is then unsurprising that a novel about an unobtrusive woman traversing the streets of Toronto on an endless quest would meet with a nugatory shrug, although the novel did arouse some unusual reactions, from surprise to a peculiar distrust and misreading of Weinzweig’s narrative competency. Mostly, it elicited silence, for readers could not compute their expectations of a middle-aged woman’s novel about a middle-aged woman’s odyssey with their own readerly surprise at a text wilder and more unpredictable than any courtesan’s progress. For *Basic Black with Pearls* only pretends to be as unobtrusive as its primary female character. In his review in *The Los Angeles Times*, Art

Seidenbaum says that “[Shirley’s] odyssey is erotic, but her appearance is prosaic” (qtd. in Weinman, “Helen”). And that dichotomy encapsulates the genius disguises that the novel adopts, the prosaic appearance of the main character as subterfuge for an erotic odyssey, complex, dangerous, intrepid, and remarkable, one that can — and should — arouse disquiet.

The “heroine,” Shirley Kaszenbowski, is a template for invisibility. She wears, yes, the eponymous “basic black dress with pearls” (*Basic Black* 25) and thus appears as the epitome of respectability, genteel and presentable, able to shop in Holt Renfrew, to breakfast in the Royal York Hotel, and to walk the best of Toronto’s sidewalks without notice. But her decorous veneer is a brilliant disguise, one that she rehearses and that she wields to her benefit. Entering Canada at Pearson airport, she is aware that her middle age has conferred on her “a slight advantage in these situations. I try to give off that mixture of confusion and unhappiness that will make [the immigration officer] reluctant to detain me, for in that state I remind him of his mother” (12). No passionate outburst à la *By Grand Central Station* for her, no abject Anita Brookner *Look at Me* woman, she deploys her matronly power in tandem with a wallet full of credit cards, a passport, money, and an unmistakably expensive coat. Scrutinized by officials, by men, by women, by hotel clerks and hostesses, she passes for what she is not: a woman of no import. Tongue in cheek, she declares, “I fool no one. I simply do not command the respect of those paid to serve. . . . I am regarded as a woman with no apparent purpose, offering no reason for my presence” (60). Her apparent lack of significance becomes, then, the perfect camouflage, a doubling back on the weapon of her invisibility. Shirley’s costume, the black dress, duplicates the costumes of maids, hostesses in restaurants (25), and those many women who must wear a neutral uniform to perform the acts that identify their position. Shirley knows this and wears her dress and pearls with an ironic aplomb that equips her with the cloak of invisibility. She has learned that she can “fit right in with my good black dress and the pearls; I know how to order in French; how to use a knife and fork in the English manner; how to place without ostentation my credit card on the little silver tray with the bill” (65). Her attire and her attitude function to mask her rich inner life, her thirst for adventure, her pleasure in illicit sex, travel, and adventure. Some critics insist that she is desperately unhappy, a woman on a quest for fulfill-

ment, and that her elusive lover, Coenraad, the object of her peripatetic movement, is the agent (the reference to Conrad and *The Secret Agent* deliberate) of her frustration. But Coenraad, a figure who appears only in Shirley's memories or fantasies, is both highlighted by the text and made invisible by Shirley's material odyssey. He is the "excuse," but not the motivator, consequence, destination, or outcome. He may be the character that readers seek to decipher, but the more interesting cipher is Shirley because she hides in plain view.

The first clue to Weinzweig's playful interrogation of those who might dismiss her imagination is contained in the epigraph to *Basic Black with Pearls*, a quote about masking and unmasking from Ann Quin's novel, *Passages*.

I asked him to take off his mask, but this is all I have, he replied. Take it off I commanded. He did so. It's no use I still cannot recognize you — put the mask back on — there that's better now that I know that I don't know you we can talk more easily. (Passages 105; italics in Weinzweig)

That profoundly important prompt has been generally ignored by readers and critics, as has the figure of Ann Quin herself, largely forgotten (although there is a small resurgence of interest in her now). She was an avant-garde writer of the 1960s in Britain, experimental and recalcitrant, who honed narrative fragmentation to its finest point. She published in her life four novels, before committing suicide by walking into the water off Brighton's Palace Pier in August of 1973. Pop artist Billy Apple says that she ghost-wrote his manifesto and thesis for the Royal College of Art in London. "Quin was one of the major experimental novelists in 60s Britain. It turns out that in 1962, she was also a secretary in the Painting School at the Royal College. And she was sleeping with Bates [who became pop-artist Billy Apple]" (Byrt). Billy Apple admits outright, "I did it the way I'd do any business. You get the best writer around and away you go. She ghosted the whole bloody thing. But boy, did she piece it together" (Byrt). The ghost writer ghost-writing her own manifesto, as well as another's, lurks, then, behind Weinzweig's own ghost story, her deliberate subversion of the presumed lack demonstrated by Shirley Kaszenbowski or Shirley Silverberg or even Francesca (the replacement wife), thus enacting a ghost-writing that doubles back on its own eidolon.

Passages, by Quin, is described as an “antinovel,” concerned with time more than narrative, and following a woman who is searching for her brother. The parallel of a woman searching for another person who may or may not exist in Weinzweig’s *Basic Black*, then, argues for the trope of an inevitably frustrated quest, the endless pursuit of the woman designated as unsatisfied, filled with longing and forever unrequited. But if Weinzweig’s novel is intended to serve as a dirge for wistful disappointment, it belies that reductivity with the sheer energy of its expedition, the curiosity of its protagonist, and the deliberate terror and eroticism of Shirley Kaszenbowski/Lola Montez’s many adventures and encounters. While the narrative pretends to reveal an unmasked and patiently waiting Shirley, its counterpoint is Shirley’s own episodic *jouissance* as key participant in her waiting experience. She reflects, “It takes a great deal of energy to wait. Although I am quiet, I feel as if I were running all the while to a point in the distance, panting for breath. My entire being strains toward that moment when he will appear. Time is suspended; it goes on without me” (*Basic Black* 28-29). Her “suspended” time, within the novel’s energy, is taken apart with a skill that becomes its own contradiction. Rooney says, “Weinzweig depicts with acuity the flanerrie of those who want to kill time, as well as the strength needed to wait and the determination required of the passive. Shirley’s cracked diamond of a mind draws readers in as they follow her physical and verbal perambulations.” On the surface, such waiting would seem pitiable, abject, and plaintive, but the action of the novel contradicts this abasement. “I can wait anywhere. I have learned to sit still, to stand still, to remain silent. I eat and sleep and I wander the streets. To help put in the time while waiting I take long walks . . . I don’t use maps; I don’t worry about getting lost. I make turns recklessly: a right turn here, a left there. Walking in circles has become a skill” (*Basic Black* 27). In short, Shirley’s waiting becomes active trekking, an opportunity to experience surprise, to encounter adventures that mark her as far more than a middle-aged woman wandering around in order to thwart boredom. When she says, “I fool no one,” her declaration deliberately fools us, the unsuspecting reader, by making us believe that her progress is anecdotal, meandering, directionless, and lacking in purpose, when in truth it follows a deliberation and denouement. “I walked so long I came full circle. It is the law of the lost” (52), she concludes, even while the circle refuses loss and she is never lost.

The “Coenraad” she claims to be waiting for, the Coenraad who leaves enigmatic clues and who resists being pinned down, believes in fate (85) but wants her to forget the past, to “take nothing for granted” (87). He too is a man who resorts to the disguises of multiple positions and occupations, from a bellhop to a tramp to a gondolier. His name signals his symbolism and Weinzweig’s nod to writer Joseph Conrad. He is a “coenraad,” one of those successful men respected by all, the pinnacle of achievement, the man everyone wants to be and wants to have. He may be the object of Shirley’s hiatus, but this “coenraad” is simply that: a cipher, desired by the Harlequin heroine, forever anticipated, and never actualized. “Coenraad” wears this persona as a man of mystery who works for “the Agency,” always elusive, on the *qui vive*, a version of a Bond-figure whose work is global (27) and who is the perfect fantasy figure because he never materializes. Shirley says, “When I see that stance of Coenraad’s all fears disappear: babies don’t die, cars don’t collide, planes fly on course, muzak is silenced, certitude reigns. That is how I always recognize my love: the way he stands, the way I feel” (8). Except that she does not see him, does not recognize him, and in the course of *Basic Black* he does not appear and does not make an assignation with her, despite her claim that she wants to find him. Leah Cohen is skeptical of this aspect of Weinzweig’s invention: “The more reasons we’re given to doubt whether Coenraad even exists, the more Shirley seems implicated in her own romanticized self-abnegation.” But is that not exactly the point? In fact, the very first question posed within the novel is Shirley’s conjecture about one of the guides on a tour that she takes: “Was he my lover?” (*Basic Black* 7). That question underlines the rhetorical position that the novel refuses to take. In fact, Shirley is completely in charge of her own invention of Coenraad, from his vague resistance to her probing — “ask no questions” (62) — to his caution to “take nothing for granted; nothing is predictable” (87). She herself wonders if Coenraad is “using [her] in his work, was his love affair [with her] just another cover?” (71). Which must raise the mirrored question: is Coenraad a cover for *her* peripatetic roaming, an excuse for Shirley’s pilgrimage? Cohen, absolutely accurately, comments on that potential: “Weinzweig’s refusal to deliver a straightforward novel of empowerment, a narrative of liberation, a role model — as if insisting on a flawed heroine is itself an act of resistance. One might even call it a phenomenon of paradox” (Cohen). Shirley contains the impetus for her

own momentum, her own consequence. Indeed, Shirley Kaszenbowski is less Shirley Kaszenbowski or her dutiful double Francesca, than she is Lola Montez, her pseudonym.

The most important and critically neglected aspect of Shirley's self-invention is her using as her alias the name Lola Montez. "My passport (false) . . . says that my name is Lola Montez and that I was born in New York, New York, in the United States of America, on May 11, 1925, and shows a picture of me taken three years ago, which is still a reasonable likeness" (*Basic Black* 22). Through Lola Montez, the novel presages its conspiracy with dual questions of actualization and fantasy. If "Coenraad" is a construction, Lola Montez is his counterpart, but more, she is the living, breathing, actual woman who steps into Shirley's shoes. Beyond an "alias," Lola Montez is, from her very first mention in the novel, the performative aspect of the presumed narrator's self. Shirley reveals her own trace when she says, "It is going to be difficult to remain anonymous in this city where I had scratched the name *Lola* into wet cement outside the library on St. George Street, above the neat stamp of the contractor, *Felucci, 1942*" (*Basic Black* 12). While Shirley quickly adds "it is not my name" (12), throughout the novel Lola Montez performs as signatory, pseudonym, and testator to the imaginary Shirley Kaszenbowski and the dowdy wife-surrogate, Francesca. She (Lola/Shirley) is the translation of the novel's power.

The actual Lola Montez (whose real name was Maria Dolores Eliza Rosanna Gilbert) was a delicious chameleon who herself employed various names and pseudonyms as a courtesan, dancer, entertainer, and serial relationship connoisseur; most importantly, she was considered "an incorrigible liar" (Seymour vii). Her travels, affairs, and transformations certainly must have inspired Weinzweig, to the extent that she is the personage that Shirley inhabits, and who inhabits Shirley. Who was Lola Montez? Born in Ireland, as a child her family moved to India. When her father died, and her mother remarried, in an effort to tame her, she was sent back to Britain to school, but eloped at sixteen; after transforming herself from an English woman into a Spanish dancer, Lola Montez traversed the world as a performer, adventuress, and lecturer, from Calcutta to Paris, to Munich, to Switzerland, back to France, to London, to Spain, then to the United States, and on to Australia before returning to Europe with a series of moral lectures, and finally dying in New York. She collected at least three husbands and dozens

of lovers, among them Franz Liszt, Alexandre Dumas *père*, Alexandre Dujarier, and King Ludwig I of Bavaria, who made her Countess of Landsfeld. She left behind a trail of scandals, duels, and corpses, along with some incredible stories about her wilfulness, her ungovernable behaviour, and her shocking lack of decorum. “She could ride like an Amazon, was deadly with a pistol, and had horsewhipped more than one man who had dared to impugn her character,” says one biographer (Seymour 1-2). When she performed her famous “*death to the tarantula*” dance (Seymour 34), she intrigued her audiences to the extent that they ignored her rather mediocre gifts as a dancer. She thus moved between the roles of performer and persuader, and ultimately, for all the scandals attending her, demonstrated “that a woman of intelligence, daring, charm, and enormous will could succeed far beyond the constricted role conventionally allowed to women . . . she defied scorn, ridicule, outrage, and all the obstacles society placed in her path, achieving fame and success on her own terms as a dancer, actress, lecturer, and author” (Seymour 400). Shirley Kaszenbowski’s occupation of Lola Montez as her alibi and pseudonym nods to her own abandonment of marriage and conventionality, her invention of a more interesting self than the middle-aged woman decently dressed and decorated with a strand of good pearls. When she checks into the King Edward Hotel in Toronto, she is aware that it matters very little how she registers, so long as she has identification and a credit card. She can be Shirley Kaszenbowski or Lola Montez: “At the bottom, my signature *Lola Montez* is supposed to attest to the truth of the statements above it” (*Basic Black* 13). Do the clerks or bellhops recognize the name? No. Do readers? No, mainly because we have relegated the exquisite nimbleness of courtesans to some other era and thus lack any concept of the historical recognition that the name demands. The obvious irony at work here is the connection between Lola Montez and truth, reiterated when Shirley/Lola meets Andrew O’Hara, the botanist, and they speculate about one another’s assumed identities. She tells him, “I use the name Lola Montez. She was a beautiful, clever and brave woman” (98), and when he asks, “Why not your own name?” she answers, “When I look in the mirror, I see my mother’s tragic face” (98). Exactly like Lola Montez, she has no wish to replicate her mother’s life: her evasions are performed with determined assertion, while throughout, she appears to reassure herself that she *is* Lola Montez, or at least a version thereof.

In the bar of the King Edward Hotel one evening, she eavesdrops on some women who are drinking together, possible reflections of her future or her doppelgänger:

- You should have hung on to one of your four husbands.
- Those guys! Total losses. The only man I ever loved died while I was still a bride. (*Basic Black* 95)

Suspicious of her eavesdropping, one of the women turns on her, demanding, “What are you doing here!” and accuses her of spying. Shirley responds, “You’re confusing me with someone else. My name is Lola Montez and I’m here on a visit.” To which the woman replies, “You’re lying. I don’t trust you” (95-96). The echo of Montez’s life (the four husbands, the reference to spying and to lying) reiterates the powerful affiliation between Shirley as Lola Montez, and Lola Montez as Shirley, mirror-images of women who seem to be waiting and prevaricating, in the process experiencing adventures that enfold past and present. Shirley’s play with an imaginary unreliability then adopts the very camouflage that her alias used so effectively. Weinman argues that the “masks and costumes [that] suffuse the narrative of *Basic Black with Pearls* [show that] Shirley’s exterior life as a housewife and mother is also a disguise (Weinman, “Helen”). Every mask, to return to Quin’s quote, merely unmask another, and we come to understand that we cannot possibly know her.

But to complicate what might then seem a mere tale of adventure, another less charming alias lurks within the pages of the novel. That is the figure of the girl that Shirley re-encounters in her return to her childhood home, Toronto, where Coenraad has sent her, or she has sent herself. Critic Bernard Selinger identifies the Toronto scenes as “memorybanks” (40) or flashbacks that reflect a girlhood of poverty, isolation, and anxiety, skinned and forsaken and lonely. Shirley/Lola revisits places that signify childhood deprivation, and from those visits reaps stories, her own and other stories that ask how people escape or accommodate the compounded misery of past trauma. “Her odyssey through Toronto is a highly sensory one: the sights, sounds, and smells of the Spadina-Dundas area where, ostensibly, she grew up as an immigrant child, trigger memories that bottom out with the weight of loneliness and alienation, childhood poverty, and humiliation” (Selinger 39). Her voyeurism into the lives of others, how and where people live

(*Basic Black* 86), is modified by her constant encounters with doors: locked doors (88), open doors, the doors of her old neighbourhood (42), and the doors of the hotel where she waits. While she looks for clues or coded messages, doors are over and over slammed in her face, and she is locked out of various temporary homes to the extent that all homes become and remain temporary to her. She is Shirley/Lola, on the move and thus on the make — making herself.

Because they afford ready access, she has always lurked in “palaces and art galleries and libraries and museums” (28), public places where doors must be open at certain times, and in which she takes refuge. “In the King Edward at this hour of the night every room seems sealed off: no footsteps in the corridor, no doors banging shut. Outside, the city’s tumult is stilled. In certain sleepless states I have apprehensions of doom; my heart pumps furiously, even though I lie perfectly still. I attribute this to a fear my body knows, a fear my mind cannot name” (74-75). That fear is linked to her squalid past, the boarding houses where she knows exactly what the rooms will be like (63) and where she breathes in the smells of the poor (64); she revisits the places where she worked in a cigarette factory (105-06), and where she “once typed two thousand envelopes a day for a mail-order company” (106). Her voyage occurs not merely in terms of place, but time, as she remembers “her misfit dresses and ridiculous clothes. I feel sorry for the girl who (still) wanders darkening streets carrying two or three library books, shifting them now and again from left arm to right and back again” (12). In Toronto, that city “mined with the explosive devices of memory” (27), she walks the mongrel streets (62), mining her memory (32). In the novel’s most pivotal scene, when she goes into the Art Gallery for warmth (54), she meets herself, a girl trapped in a painting who begs her for help. In a surreal *mise en scène*, Lola/Shirley enters the painting (56), but although she and the girl converse at length, she is unable to rescue the girl double (58-59). That illusion pulls together Lola/Shirley’s domestic turmoil, poverty, and isolation into one crucial moment when she traverses both actuality and the veracity of illusion, which she goes on to unpack as truth or deceit. “It isn’t as if life for me has been a mere matter of honesty, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf. She also said that candor is the greatest vice. It seems to me that in a confusion of extremes one either lies or tells the truth, whichever works best. Up until now the risk of deceit has, for me, been greater than the risk of truth”

(60). We women all contain that girl. We are the “incorrigible liars” combining Lola/Shirley, experiencing “that strange elation brought on by terror” (52), negotiating the poignancy of poverty or the plumpness of plenty, nothing and nowhere, hibernating patience with waiting and frustration. But as Weinman concludes, “Weinzweig . . . is too astute to slide into platitudes when there are more pressing liminal spaces to mine” (Weinman, “Helen”). Whatever the binary of lies and truth, the intoxication of pure freedom and her movement toward a place where she “will not miss being a stranger from whom nothing is wanted and from whom nothing is expected” (*Basic Black* 135) accommodate her position as a constantly chameleonic woman.

The image of closing doors and estrangement is further accented by the one door that is open to Shirley, the back door to her matrimonial home, the cedar deck’s unlocked “glass doors opening out from the family room” (119). She stands outside in the dark, watching her husband, Zbigniew, and his wife (her double, Francesca), discussing her, and how, according to a newspaper report, “she claimed to have neither husband, children, or other family” (121), but was identified as “Mrs. Kaszenbowski.” When Shirley does go around to the front door and rings the bell, it is her double (dressed exactly like her) who welcomes her in, saying, “I’ve been expecting you” (122), and then proceeds to act as her hostess, her ghost, and her informant. They have a lengthy, almost staged conversation (entirely circumnavigating the presence of Zbigniew), wherein their similar background is revealed, and then, after dinner, both get into the marital bed with him, sandwiching this man who “immobilises” (133) them both, sexually and psychologically. The narrator tells us that Zbigniew is not aware that they conspire together, “bound by the same picture” (124); “a sense of communion sprang up between us, so that, in a manner of speaking, we became one mind” (131). After this momentary rapport in the marital bed, Shirley says to Francesca, “You must understand I no longer belong here” (134) and prepares to leave (without saying goodbye to her children). This alignment of Shirley and Francesca brings full circle Shirley/Lola’s perambulation; having re-visited the home that is not a home, having met her “replacement” and symbolically severed her connection to Zbigniew, Shirley is finally able to embrace completely the Lola she has become. Leaving, she says, “For the first time in this house I laughed out loud” (134). The closure effected by this gestural visit to her home

of “empty virtue” underlines her choosing restlessness and invisibility, her new awareness that “I will not miss being a stranger from whom nothing is wanted and from whom nothing is expected” (135). Readings of this final observation tend to believe that it pushes Shirley toward her new lover, but in truth it was as Zbigniew’s wife that she was a stranger, that she had no frame or shadow.

Although *Basic Black with Pearls* may seem a work that circumambulates the pent-up sorrows of “ordinary” women in an oblivious world, it is leavened by a trenchant wit that does not back down from acidity. The messages that the fabular Coenraad leaves for her in various editions of *National Geographic* perform as a wonderful jest; that periodical touts its role in geography, cartography, and exploration, when it has always read women as objects of anthropological interest and scrutiny — and Shirley turns that scrutiny inside out. When Coenraad informs her that their “mathematical formulae” (7) and the code “that works most of the time” (8) must be transferred from *National Geographic* to *The American Scholar*, she responds, rather tartly, “Too parochial” (10). Her intellect outstrips his, although she is careful to conceal that. He is less interested in her and her desires and her life than his own narcissism; she wants to tell him stories about her past, but “he is quickly bored” (107). At one point when they meet, she is distracted by the décor in the hotel room, and says, “I was about to expatiate on the phenomenon of paradox, when I remembered that my philosophizing causes Coenraad to lose his erection” (22). At their first meeting, when she presumably saves him from an ambush by gesturing him into her hotel room through an adjoining door, he slowly begins to remove his shoes. “Do all men, I wondered, take so long to untie their shoe laces?” (100), she muses. As Cohen observes, “On the particulars of sexism and misogyny, Weinzwieg can be superbly caustic.” Shirley is acutely aware of her prescribed role as “consort,” and feels both terror and release at her weightlessness when she walks the city alone: “I remembered the Latin word for baggage was *impedimenta*” (103). She has, clearly, left behind much that weighs her down.

It might have given Helen Weinzwieg a frisson of happiness to know that Ann Quin has been quietly resurrected, her work in *The Unmapped Country: Stories and Fragments* published in 2018. Josie Mitchell observes, “Quin stood out as the author of vertiginous, staccato sentences and claustrophobic worlds — a woman famously contemptuous of

the verb 'to be.' Today, she is little known, little read, and her books are a challenge to track down. Reading her now, I am struck as to how such a vibrant writer could have fallen so completely from public attention" (Mitchell). In a curious parallel, Weinzweig too is experiencing a small resurfacing. *Basic Black with Pearls* was reprinted by House of Anansi in 2015, made a selection for the *New York Review of Books* Classics Book Club in 2018, and discussed by Sarah Weinman on 1 February 2019, on CBC's *The Sunday Edition*, "The Backlist," a small measure of her writing's glorious stamina, although it still arouses considerable puzzlement. We are not quite ready to understand the Shirley Silverberg/Shirley Kaszenbowski/Lola Montez/Ann Quin/Helen Weinzweig conundrum. It might have helped if she had said more overtly, "*Lola Montez, c'est moi.*" Although readerly ignorance would doubtless have missed that clue.

I remember how, in the '70s and '80s, for all of Anansi's courageous publication of her unusual novels and the "sympathy" for her as a somewhat unorthodox writer (most often introduced as the wife of composer John Weinzweig), Helen Weinzweig experienced a huge amount of male disdain levelled at her as a menopausal fantasist. Re-reading her oeuvre now, I detect the trajectory of her own development on the page as a reaction to the attitudes she was served. As a woman, she was patronized, condescended to, and in general subjected to curiosity leavened by a trace of contempt; as a writer she met with puzzled silence. Panofsky says, "Her marginalization is not so much the result of a relatively small oeuvre but is due largely to the surreal, often bleak vision that informs her writing, a combination that has challenged critics and alienated some readers" (72). That vision, if one reads with the energy of the writing, is less bleak than celebratory, the resolve of risk and the daring to live as "*Lola Montez.*"

In the '80s, as a young woman, myself puzzled and very green in the literary world, I paid little attention to Helen Weinzweig — although I now feel real regret that I did not use my firebrand temper on some of the comments that I overheard male writers making about her, their *sotto voce* mockery of a middle-aged woman wearing a pearl necklace and dressed with impeccable taste. But she probably heard those comments and must have felt, I am convinced, their manifest dismissal. *Basic Black with Pearls*, I would contend, was her *sotto voce* response to the systemic sneers she encountered. An incredibly sophisticated novel,

it enshrined her own adventuresome imagination, but performed — and continues to perform — as an eloquent dismantling of not women's stories, but what is *expected* of a woman's story.

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