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Andrew Lesk and Batia Boe Stolar

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Article abstract

A question posed in the story “Separating,” — ‘Where is the dividing line?’ — acts as a starting point from which to explore the dividing line between various sex/gender constructs in the collection of stories that makes up Jack Hodgins’s *Spit Delaney’s Island*. The differences between the ostensibly natural and the culturally constructed are explored in order to understand ideas and expressions of desire that are present in the stories in the collection. Using various recent theories concerning margins, peripheries, and centres to inform a reading of the stories in *Spit Delaney’s Island* allows one to explore and challenge what traditionally counts as viable notions of sexuality and desire. In particular, such an approach challenges notions of masculinity, male desire, and sexuality, or some combination of these. Hodgins’s work challenges critics to expand and refigure modes of permissible literary criticism in Canada, particularly involving meanings of gender and masculinity.

# Gender Trespass and Masculine Privilege: “Male Trouble” in Jack Hodgins’s *Spit Delaney’s Island*

ANDREW LESK AND BATIA BOE STOLAR

IT IS NOT SURPRISING that critics of Jack Hodgins’s *Spit Delaney’s Island* focus largely on the collection’s framing stories, since these narratives — “Separating” and “Spit Delaney’s Island” — depict what has become the focus of critical inquiry into Hodgins’s work. JoAnn McCaig, for example, states that Hodgins’s first novel, *The Invention of the World*, is “deeply rooted in the world of dreams and myth and the ceaseless striving of human beings to grab hold of the truth,” but that ultimately these searches reveal that “the truth can never really be found” (138-39).<sup>1</sup> The titular character of *Spit Delaney’s Island* is one such human, who strives to attain the “truth” while undergoing a painful, almost mythical, transformation as a means of re-establishing his grasp on what he construes as real. McCaig’s emblematic critique identifies the forceful philosophical investigations of truth within Hodgins’s work, with particular attention to the resonance of historical, biblical, and mythological allusions, ultimately pointing to the transformations that occur within both landscape and character.<sup>2</sup>

More specifically, it is Hodgins’s fascination with the complexity of the human character that leads Allan Pritchard to suggest that “the exploration of the people rather than the geography of the island [i.e., Vancouver Island] is at the heart of Hodgins’s work” (27). Tim Struthers similarly argues that Hodgins’s characters, consciously or unconsciously, ask “fundamental questions about the nature of reality and the nature of humanity, about how to fulfill their own identities, about how to determine truth and value” (“Visionary” 70). And these, he continues, are the very questions that “supply the two framing stories about Spit Delaney — and the stories arranged between them — with much of their force and unity” (70). It appears that the “nature of reality” in Hodgins’s work derives from the conflation of the ideal (or the mythic) and the material

(or the conscious self), which raises questions about the truth, specifically in terms of perceived (self-)identity.

And because Hodgins — and his critics — focus on these issues of identity, it is remarkable that work on *Spit Delaney's Island* has shied away from addressing a crucial aspect of the self suggested by the mythical and philosophical question raised in the collection's first story, "Separating": "*Where is the dividing line?*" (7). This question is the nexus of our critical inquiry into "Separating" and "Spit Delaney's Island." We propose a critical reading that explores the dividing line between various sex/gender constructs, and between the ostensibly natural and the culturally constructed, especially as these paradigms inform what counts as desire in the stories. These often-overlooked qualities, we argue, are crucial aspects in deliberating the various transformations — mythical, allegorical, and symbolic — that occur, especially Spit Delaney's own transformation.

The complexity and ambiguity of the mythical catechism in "Separating" that critics grapple with similarly point to the folly in attempting to attain a normative sexual and gendered reading of Hodgins's narratives; in other words, reading Hodgins's characters "straight"-forwardly does not tell the whole story. We hope to situate Hodgins's text using recent theories concerning margins, peripheries, and centres that have revealed how traditional Western thought has fostered as natural humanist concepts of universality and impartial rationale, especially as such philosophies have underscored what *counts* as viable sexuality and desire.

The notion of a neutral observer who publicly positions himself — and it has most often been "him" — as arbiter of sociosexual expression is, as Nancy Duncan writes, "based on a fiction of coherence and spatial and social centeredness that erases cultural alterity, hybridity, marginality, distance and deterritorializing global processes" ("Introduction" 3). Such erasure has served to reaffirm the fiction that masculinist heterosexual desire is at the core of all relations. Of course, because the globe — or an island — is replete with interconnecting social relations, Spit Delaney (who presumes himself to be a self-reliant Cartesian subject) finds that as various separations ensue so too do fault lines appear.

When Spit is forced to consider the possibility of (contradicting) multiplicities — whether they concern masculinity, male desire, or sexuality, or some combination of these — his self-defined position as an independent subject must also change.<sup>3</sup> As a result of Spit's perception of his own understanding of himself being disrupted, and separated both from the "things that were real — his job, his family, his marriage" (*Island* 7) and from that which authorizes his rule, Spit reverts to the safety

of his private universe and personal desires. And it is within this realm that “male trouble” materializes.

Here, Hodgins’s narratives playfully anticipate Judith Butler, who (in her reading of Sartre) finds that “all desire, problematically presumed as heterosexual and masculine, was defined as *trouble*” (*Gender* vii). Spit’s trouble concerns not so much the sexuality of others — at least, not consciously — but the manner(s) in which the people in his life transgress gender boundaries, to the extent that he must either vigorously (re)assert his masculinity or thoroughly examine (and call into question) the gender contraventions performed by those others. He consciously identifies his trouble by way of the sudden revelation in the form of a question that completely engulfs his consciousness. At the same time that he is attempting to understand the mysterious and ambiguous question — “*Where is the dividing line?*” (*Island* 7) — that becomes his obsession, Spit’s world begins to “fall apart” (7). The question marks the separations — from the steam engine, Old Number One, and from family — that disrupt Spit’s understanding of his self-defined identity. However, unbeknownst to him, Spit’s world has already begun to change prior to this. As a result, Spit must reconstruct his image of himself, particularly in relation to the world around him since it is this world that Spit has always used to construct a culturally intelligible self-identity that reflects his natural self.

But it is his unnatural relationship with the steam engine that he daily operates, Old Number One, and to which he affectionately refers as the “old girl” (10), that ultimately works to define and naturalize his identity:

“Spit and Old Number One, a marriage made in heaven,” people joked. “Him and that machine was made for each other, a kid and his toy. That train means more to him than any human could hope to.” Only it wasn’t a joke, it was true, he was glad to admit it. Who else in all that mill got out of bed at four o’clock in the morning to fire up a head of steam for the day’s work? Who else hung around after the shift was over, cleaning and polishing? [...] He couldn’t name another person whose job was so much a part of himself, who was so totally committed to what he did for a living. (6)

But which “part of himself” does Old Number One represent? Attention to the machinations of engendering, particularly as coherent genders begin to rupture in these stories, reveals that Spit, through his often phallogocentric understandings of his island world, has an anxious need to stabilize gender boundaries in a social environment increasingly antitheti-

cal to his hegemonic values, including those indicating sexual desires. Spit's firm erection of an "island mind" wherein he, the objective locus, presides, softens (as it were) as the narratives progress. His increasing unease is due to his efforts to appropriate the incomprehensibility of desires not natural to him and force them into a categorical, knowable framework. The obfuscation nurtured by Spit, prescribed by his aversion to panic in the face of other desires, emphasizes a determination to see to it that desire naturally follows from heterosexually inscribed gender differences which, in turn, naturally follow from differences in biologically defined sex.<sup>4</sup>

Gender confusion accentuates the sexual spatialization subsequent to the engine's dislocation to the Canadian capital (emphasizing the shift from the *margins* to the *centre*). Our contrary understanding of Old Number One embraces the analogy of a rational, well-ordered male machine, a correlation which instructively attends upon an essentialist comprehension of certain things being naturally male or female. The locomotive is, by metaphoric convention, presumed male but bears the cultural inscription of "old girl" only by virtue of the men who have built it. The engine may be female through the historical (and dated) context of "male creation" but not by structural design. The anxiety caused by immanent separation, in any case, forces Spit to at least symbolically maintain a hold on the machine:

First he hired a painter to come into the mill and do a four-foot oil of her, to hang over the fireplace. And unscrewed the big silver 1 from the nose to hang on the bedroom door. And bought himself a good-quality portable recorder to get the locomotive's sounds immortalized on tape.... But at least he knew that while strangers four thousand miles away were staring at her, static and soundless as a stuffed grizzly, he would be able to sit back, close his eyes, and let the sounds of her soul shake through him full-blast just whenever he felt like it. (10)

Suggestively, Old Number One moves from the public sphere of work into the private sphere of the home, and into the even more private realm of the bedroom, reaffirming what for Spit is his true marriage.

The portrait of Old Number One underscores that what Spit understands has much to do with how the concept of the masculine gaze orders the world outside his closed circle and submits it to the rigours of male determinism. If Spit is unable to touch what he feels he has either created or is responsible for, he must at least find a way to order his world so that his gaze presumes symbolic control. Indeed, the two stories are replete with equations of Spit's sight with visual regulation and knowledge. Spit

envisages the east and west coasts of the island as, respectively, “beginnings” and “endings,” connected by a highway, “the long grey ribbon that joins them [and] runs smooth and mindless along the surface of things. In his head Spit Delaney can follow it, can see every turn, can feel himself coming over the last hill to find the ocean laid out in the wide blue haze beneath him” (4). The portrait of Old Number One in his bedroom allows him to sustain a visual and spatially distinct relationship, one that implicates the beholder’s pleasure, and to retain, vicariously, ownership, indicating mastery of his “female” subordinate.

Symbolically, in the first story, after his awareness of the unbidden question, Spit escapes to the safety of Old Number One’s cab, an enclosed space where he wonders: “*Where is the dividing line?* He sat there with his hands on the levers deep into the night, all the way through to the early morning when it was time to fire up her boilers and start getting her ready for a day’s work ahead” (9-10). And it is within the safety of the cab and the safety of his ability to touch the levers throughout the night that he takes the dialogue further by demanding in that silence, “*And what does it take to see it?*” (10). Spit’s ensuing awareness of the upcoming separation laments that “this was one uncoupling that would not be soon forgiven”; disconsolate, he shouts that, “It takes a man to put life into Old Number One!” (10).

Old Number One appears, hence, to function as the figure that ultimately underscores Spit’s troubled masculine identity. “She” is the fetishized object of male (sexual) desire. Spit goes so far as to express desire for the “old girl” when he is jealous of the gawking tourists (10) who will have access to her “corporeal” body. This, however, reveals an inherent contradiction in his engendering of the machine since his jealousy is directed at the children who will wonder “what it would be like to ride in her, feel the thudding of her pistons under you” (22-23). The culminating disclosure of Spit’s embarrassing actions, though, occurs on another island, in Ireland, in a foreign landscape that oppresses Spit to the point where he can no longer contain his secret desire.

When Spit takes the engine with him to Europe (by bringing along the recording), and to the Irish countryside in particular, he finds that “he could stare out this farmhouse window all he wanted and never find what he needed” (14); he is the tourist as expansionist, troubled by foreign landscapes that do not reassure. So, to relieve his frustration both with being cheated out of “the tourist’s rightfully expected fun” (17) and with his family — “He couldn’t believe these people belonged to him” (15) — he plays the tape in the privacy of his car. In an extraordinary, allusively

masturbatory scene of autoeroticism, Old Number One paradoxically takes on human attributes as it assists Spit in reasserting his inner, thus true, identity as transcendent and controlling male subject:

The temptation was too much to resist. He leaned back and closed his eyes, pressed the button, and turned the volume up full. Old Number One came alive again, throbbed through him, swelled to become the whole world. His hands shifted levers, his foot kicked back from a back-spray of steam, his fingers itched to yank the whistle-cord. Then, when it blew, when the old steam whistle cut right through to his core, he could have died happily. (15-16)

Spit, the imperialist tourist, has tried to remain untouched by local contexts and their inherent multiplicities, but feels the threat of the Other. As the detached explorer who is forced to confront his surroundings, he gazes inside — the closed eyes — to find and then to reassert the territory of masculinist reason, calling upon what he thinks to be his most powerful weapon: the phallus. Spit appropriates the sensibility of Old Number One's "female" qualities, a gender play that is continually in flux between the masculine and the feminine. And it is precisely this problematic gender performance that draws attention to the complexity of Spit's own presumed natural and untroubled desires.

For example, Spit initially recalls that what first draws him to Stella are her "big hands, in the orange mess of peel and juice and carved-out bruises, [that] reminded him of the hands of a fisherman gouging out fish guts" (7). But what draws him equally is "her cotton dress [that] dipped up at the hem, to show the tiny blue veins behind her knees and the pink patches of skin where she'd pressed one leg to the other" (7). Stella's masculine hands and behaviour are permitted under the guise of her femininity, the cotton dress that allows a glimpse of a patch of skin behind her legs.

However, after their separation, Spit finds himself disturbed by her behaviour, which is at odds with her new "masculine" dress. As Spit collects in the second story, "Spit Delaney's Island," "Stella was one of those women who still wore housedresses when we were married, around the house, even when every other woman we knew, no matter what age or size, was wearing pants like a man to go everywhere even in public. She wore flowered dresses to the day I left. I don't know what happened after that. I'm scared to think" (177). Spit's reaction to Stella's new self is to call attention to its artificiality, to its unnaturalness, by pointing out its performance: "She always did think she could've been a lady if she'd ever been given a chance. She knew which fork to use. But I could never

see her acting like that without thinking Come on lady, this is Spit sitting here, I'm the one that's seen you walking around naked in the bedroom and how lady are you then? How can you put on this act in front of someone who's seen the stretch-marks on your belly?" (177). Spit pictures Stella as he once knew her, naked in the inner sanctum of their bedroom, shorn of her drag, mistaking this private visualizing of her for her true essence.

Equally striking, during this scene in the closing story, is Spit's attraction to Phemie Porter.<sup>5</sup> When Phemie arrives at the restaurant, Spit first notices her clothes; he says to Stella, "Look at that rig. Some people shouldn't be allowed out in public" (181). The rigid equation of one's clothes with one's gender correlates to the enforced distinctions between what is acceptable outside as opposed to what is worn inside. As a key to furthering an understanding of Spit's anxiety over his own desire, we return to Butler's related discussion of spatial distinctions, primarily the binary of inner/outer. Butler writes that, beyond articulating both feared and desired fantasies, the linguistic terms of "'Inner' and 'outer' make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability"; it is this binary distinction, she continues, that "stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject" (*Gender* 134). Spit depends on a cohering concept of ordered sexuality both to maintain trouble-free dominance within his world and to differentiate himself from others, especially as these others transmit the threat of their desires. To avoid the (stereotypical) possibility of being identified as homosexual (through an association with people displaying gender confusion), he asserts an ever-vigilant gender identity, one that will prescribe as natural, he hopes, an outer, transparent surface concomitantly revealing a stable inner essence of masculine (heterosexual) individualism.

Hence, he is able to transfer his desire from the "old Stella," who wears flowered cotton dresses, to the newcomer, the skirt-wearing Phemie, an evident opposite to the "new Stella" who now dons the "masculine" emblem, the pants; Phemie, as masculine as she may appear, at least wears feminine garb. The artificial gender dichotomies compound Spit's fascination with Phemie, whom he raptly describes: "She looked as if she just stepped out of a freak show, or a movie. She was short and dumpy, and had on an old moth-eaten fur coat ... and a long skirt that reached to the floor, and *hair*, she had it so thick and long" (*Island* 181). But what ultimately appeals to Spit is Phemie's performance: "she acted like a half-starved logger.... She laughed loud and coarse ... and sat with her knees wide apart in that skirt. (Stella, even in her black pants, sat so tight-together you



couldn't drive a wedge.) When her food came she dug in, got it all over her hands, laughed with her mouth full, and hollered for the waiter.... I could've watched that woman for ever, she was such a good show" (183). Phemie is no longer "ugly after all," but "*grotesque*" (182), and it is her performance as a kind of drag king that contributes to Spit's confused imaginings and troubling desires.

Butler writes that "drag is an effort to negotiate cross-gendered identification, but that cross-gendered identification is not the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality, although it may be one" (*Bodies* 235). It is important to note, though, that at work here are Spit's, and not Phemie's, negotiations of cross-gendered identifications that both excite and repel him. Although Spit's confusion over gender signals does not necessarily indicate homosexuality, a definite queering is at play.<sup>6</sup> Spit feels momentarily rescued, however, by being situated, in the midst of this gender-confused space, as the masculine centre: Phemie refers to him as "Mr. Man" (*Island* 184), no doubt affirming for him his coherent, rational centeredness, which requires at least the semblance of a female subordinate. Phemie "performs" the feminine site to which Spit can safely transfer his desire from the emasculating "old girl" Stella.

In tandem with his fascination with Phemie is Spit's increasing hostility to Reef, the younger "pipe stem" competitor (182) who is Phemie's "portable Prick" (186), and who is later referred to as, simply, "the Crotch" (190). From the outset, at the restaurant, Spit notices that Reef is "All hair and bulging crotch" (182), and it is he who gets in Spit's way. Their erotic rivalry is a classic instance of the now-familiar notion of homosociality, in that their competition over Phemie contains at least the rudiments of male-male attraction.<sup>7</sup> The sexualized tension between Spit and Reef, as they compete for Phemie, simultaneously elides but highlights what can only be, by now, Spit's unacknowledged desires to be Reef, since Reef has what Spit does not.

Spit, upon meeting the couple again the next day on the beach, strongly reacts to the stare from Reef, who is suggestively leaning against a totem pole: "I didn't like the looks of that fellow, I don't mind admitting; there was something dangerous in his face" (185). The beach setting also recalls Spit's earlier encounter with the naked swimmer (in the first story, to which we will return). Spit now projects what may be his own dangerous insights onto the feared Other, Reef, in an attempt to forestall any sexualized threats thereby presented.

These encounters with Reef fuel the most aggressive and emotional depictions in the story, although much of the narrative largely concerns

Phemie's nurturing of Spit. Phemie's casual dismissal of Reef as merely her sexual partner does not undermine Spit's jealousy. He notices that Reef "just looked at me, never smiled, with a bit of a sneer. Maybe he really was nothing more than what she said. There was no sign of anything else in his eyes" (186). When the three are inside Spit's vehicle, he notices that Phemie "put her hand down over her friend's crotch, gave it a pat, then folded both hands in her lap" (188). Phemie can actually touch, while Spit can only revel in sight.

The tension boils over when Spit finds himself emasculated, again, by the absent Stella. When he plays for Phemie the recording of his still-beloved locomotive, Old Number One, he finds, to his horror, that Stella has completely overlaid the engine sounds with her recording of a sermon about what Spit should be doing with his life. Spit, finding that he "could hardly see for the sweat that was getting into [his] eyes, stinging," does manage to see Reef coming nearer to Phemie and himself: "Reef had come over closer and squatted, his wrists draped over his knees. He had long, long hands that hung down limply. I imagined those hands touching her. I remembered them peeling back the fur in the restaurant. I imagined them running up her arm, up her leg. It doesn't make any sense — I shouldn't have been thinking that" (196).

But he does. His suppressed desires reveal, in homosocial terms, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the concentration of "the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence; all are fully structured by the logic of paranoia" (162). Spit uses Reef as a screen onto which he projects this paranoia and his gathering anxieties, yet this cannot forestall the ensuing psychical sundering:

Reef tries to quiet me, he comes over and puts one of those long narrow hands on my arm, tries to steady me into silence, but when I look in his eyes I see the hatred that's been building up all day. He despises me. He would like to kill me. Without moving a muscle in his face, without changing his expression at all, he brings up a sharp bony knee and gets me hard in the crotch and I go down, puking into the salal, and he kicks me. (*Island* 196)

Reef's — or is it Spit's? — explosion occurs at the moment of mutual regard, as if Spit can, by looking *into* Reef, project onto him desires that must remain impossible.

But, as Spit later explains, Reef never struck him. Spit's consequent disingenuous explanation for his violent fiction is that he wants others — as he, passing through an imagined landscape, *would want* them to re-

member — to recall this “bit of excitement,” that he had “offered a bit of myself, I exposed something” (197). This risk of exposure in a public space is nil, however, since the entire fantasy includes his own prescribed reaction to it. Spit flees from the scene after he thinks Phemie, in comforting him over the loss of the engine recording, “knew plenty about me” (197). In distancing himself from the threats to his essence, he retreats and safeguards his fiction of a stable, masculinist gender core.

Spit's perceived threat points to the inherent homophobia depicted in his island community. In the first story, Spit's son, Jon, is characterized as effeminate: although an adolescent, he had “clear skin, not a single adolescent blemish, nor any sign of a whisker. Sexually he was a late developer, he explained, and left you to conclude the obvious: he was a genius. Brilliant people didn't have time for a messy adolescence. They were too busy thinking” (14-15). His passivity is compounded by the fact that he “would rather read a book than do anything else at all” (6).<sup>8</sup> The text tantalizingly suggests, for a moment, the possibility of sexual difference, only to pull back into the safety of comic relief. But Stella's objections to her son's genius cannot undermine the obvious. She chastises him to “be careful or you'll get a prissy mouth. There's nothing worse on a man” (15).

Spit's own awareness of the communal aversion to sexual difference is evident in the opening pages of the closing story. Residing at “The Touch-and-Go Motel,” a name suggesting a plurality of anonymous sexual encounters, Spit muses: “But what does a man like Marsten [a fellow resident] know about the things that I'm thinking, after what's happened to me? What does he know? [...] I've a pretty good idea what he would say if he knew I was doing this, thinking these things, or if he found out about Phemie Porter. I know Marsten; that son of a gun would go through the roof” (170). Taking over the narration in the closing story, Spit does not inform the reader about “these things” that he is “doing,” but the assumption is that “these things” ought to be kept private. At the centre of Spit's repressed desire to break the social code of silence lies the commodity of prohibiting social forces, with its intricate machinations of power dictating the parameters of admissible desires.

Spit's encounter with a rather literal (and literary) silence have generated critical readings centring on the very question that disrupts Spit's life at the beginning of the first story, “Separating.” While on the beach with his family, Spit is suddenly aware of a non-uttered question — “*Where is the dividing line?*” — to which he vocally replies with a question of his own — “Between what and what?” (7). He worries that he is “beginning to crack up. He'd heard of the things that happened to some

men at his age” (8); and he becomes aware of another non-uttered response: “*Between what is and what isn’t*” (8).<sup>9</sup> Clearly, such ambiguity points to philosophical inquiries about the fundamental (if not existential) questions that formulate a sequence, a dialogue, or even a catechism between a passively ignorant Cartesian subject (Spit) and an unknowable but knowing voice. But rather than engaging with previous criticism on the epistemology of the “dividing line,” we propose to situate the dialogue with regard to the narrative performances of sexual discourses that threaten to spiral out of control.

It is initially striking that the question and answer that Spit hears, visualizes, imagines, or articulates in his own private understanding is a silent utterance. According to Pritchard, while “Hodgins excels in representing the diversity of his islanders, both their ethnic variety and their personal eccentricities, he is concerned above all with island community, and the ways in which the diversity can be made the basis for that community” (29). The “personal eccentricities” that Pritchard refers to are evident in Spit’s own characterization and suggest that such eccentricities are the result of a repressed difference — a difference that Spit attempts to keep unknowable, even from himself. That Spit does not want to admit to the difference(s) within himself is evident by his own assertion that “he’ll be damned if he can figure out what is happening to him” (*Island 3*).

His anxiety can be furthered characterized by his relative solitude within the realm of un-knowing: “There wasn’t a thing he could reach out and touch and be sure of” (21). Spit’s need for the tangible to aid in making sense of his world is contingent upon his ability to maintain a sense of mastery over that world, even if that means that such dominance is found only within the imagination. David Jeffrey explains that

Reality seems at least somewhat contingent upon what we can touch, taste, hear, feel, and see with our ordinary eyes.... For the real division is within, the boundary reached, not the real border at all. Separation occurs as often as not because one is standing on the line itself, unable to cross over to anything that will give meaning back to our history or that will interpret life. Like other characters in an apocalyptic age, Hodgins’ personalities look for a conclusion they can believe in, some dream which could put time and the world back together. Unable to find such a form outside themselves, many of them — each in their own peculiar way — are driven to invent a universe in the private world, an island, an island within an island, an island in the mind. (29)

But Spit already lives in a world of relative homeostasis; he does not have to invent anything, though he has to respond to the world outside. It is his private world, his "island in the mind," that is at odds with his physical and public island. It is the tension between his as yet unarticulated private life and his projection of that life into his public reality that ultimately pressures him into knowing the difference between private and public, thereby enforcing a painful separation between the "imagined" and the "real." It is the silent but knowledgeable voice, his own, that performs the task of conflating the epistemological and the ontological twain.

The experience of separation in Spit's consciousness is depicted as a loss, a symbolic castration that further threatens the self-constructed image of himself as the patriarch who orders his world. His anxiety is a result of the possibility of some nameless occurrence, and he tries to naturalize what is happening to him by contextualizing his experience into a readily intelligible cultural understanding that will pinpoint his apparently disintegrating identity. It is only after Spit loses complete control over the unnatural desires that he can no longer suppress (during the family vacation) that he returns to the geographical location where he first becomes aware of the impending question: to the beach that functions as a location between worlds, between the West-coast beach and the Indian site of the mythical and legendary transformations.

In search of the Other world which he now seeks to enter, Spit only finds disappointment, that it is a male "naked youth" akin to a Classical representation of Aphrodite, who emerges "out of waves to greet him" (17). Their contact is rooted in the materialist world of the body; as Spit tells the youth: "Don't tell me it's warm when you get used to it [i.e., the water], boy, I can see by the way you're all shriveled up that you're nearly froze" (17).<sup>10</sup> Echoing religious symbolism, Hodgins writes that, like Jesus, the "youth denied nothing" (17). Rather than respond to the charge, the young man raises both arms "to the sky as if he expected to ascend, water streaming from his long hair and beard and his crotch, forming beads in the hairs, shining on goose-bumped skin" (17). The (homo)eroticization of the youth invites the reader to participate in the gaze that is Spit's in order to read the open or exposed body of the naked youth.

Slowly moving in an upward motion to the sky only to follow a slow taking-in of the upright body, the narrative emphasizes the youth's natural masculinity, which is the abundance of body, head, and facial hair. But it is the youth's intimate knowledge of Spit rather than the naked body that is ultimately disruptive to the older man:

“Don’t I know you?”

“Not me,” Spit said. “I don’t live here.”

“Me neither,” the youth said.... “I *do* know you. You let me use your can.”

“What? What’s that?” Why couldn’t the kid just move on? You had to be alone sometimes, other people only complicated things....

Spit looked at the youth’s face. He remembered someone, he remembered the youth on that hot day, but here was nothing in this face that he recognized. It was as if when he’d stripped off his clothes he’d also stripped off whatever it was that would make his face different from a thousand others. (17-18)

For Spit, the location of identity is found in the artificial layers that construct a person’s identity, in the clothing that relates its difference to a face, rather than in the differences between individual bodies. Spit’s discomfort stems from the youth’s potential power over him; how this young man complicates anything is left unsaid, but his knowing Spit is what makes the youth threatening.

What was, in Ireland, the incomprehensibility that results from staring out the farmhouse window at foreign landscape is, here on the beach, compounded by the addition of a human — and naked — Other. Spit’s attempt to maintain his ignorance or, rather, the burden of suppressing *knowing* more, typifies the “right of refusal” in what Gillian Rose calls the hegemonically positioned male: he sees other identities “only in terms of his own self-perception; he sees them as what I shall term his Other. And I will refer to him as the Same because, in his inability to recognize difference from himself in terms which do not refer to himself, this dominant subject position can only see himself” (6).

Extending Hodgins’s evocation of Greek mythology to include Spitas-Narcissus recalls how Spit earlier closed his eyes and reveled in the interiority, the self-regard, of erotic fantasy. Spit now becomes troubled by the unacknowledged conflicting desires that do not follow his rigid code of (heterosexual) gender identification. His desire for homeostasis reveals a longing for homogeneity: the Same, the mirror that, Narcissus-like, reflects only himself. But when the youth, as both Same (the male gender) and Other (the threat of difference), invades his space, Spit’s mirror fractures; his mood becomes intemperate. His new insight, of the possibility of other desires, of perhaps desiring the Other, reveals how his presumed heterosexuality, concomitant with his idea of masculinity, is disquietingly fragile.

Hodgins's continued privileging of the trope of sight also reveals, as Rose writes, how the gaze is always torn "between two conflicting impulses: on the one hand, a narcissistic identification with what it sees and through which it constitutes its identity; and on the other a voyeuristic distance from what is seen as Other to it" (103). Spit, the emblem of the Same, also unwittingly comprehends the feared Other as potentially (or constitutive of) the Same; the result, for Spit, is a confusion of same/other boundaries. He vision is somewhat queer, as he continues to cruise. A hitchhiker, a boy with a St. Bernard who frames this story (*Island* 4, 22), gets a ride on the highway just outside Spit's home: "For a moment his eyes meet Spit's, the laugh dies; they watch each other until the pickup has gone on past the other hitch-hikers, on up the road out of sight behind trees" (5).

Spit, clearly at war with his insight, reveals the paradox of his anxiety by taking, then refusing, an imaginary ride with the hitchhiker: "He could follow them, in his mind he could go the whole distance with them, but he refuses, slides back from it, holds onto the things that are happening here and now" (22). It is Spit's identification with the hitchhikers in both stories that characterizes his repressed desire — unlike everyone else who "ignores" Spit as part of the landscape, "Hitch-hikers do notice, however; they can hear his muttering. . . . they see him suddenly, they turn alarmed eyes his way. . . . And all he gives back, all they can take away with them, is a side-tilted look they have seen a hundred times in family snapshots, in the eyes of people out at the edge of group photos unsure they belong. Deference" (3).

Although Spit "does not accept their attention" (3), he is "fascinated" by them and their lifestyle: "They are heading for the west coast of the Island, he knows, the Pacific, where they have heard it is still possible to live right down on the beach under driftwood shelters and go everywhere naked from morning until night. [...] Sitting on his rock, at the foot of the old paint-peeled sign saying B/A, he isn't afraid to envy" (4). The hitchhikers' lifestyle epitomizes, for Spit, the space of liminality that he paradoxically yearns for and repels. When, in the closing story, he encounters Phemie and Reef, he immediately categorizes them as hitchhikers and wonders: "What kind of world do these people live in anyway? What kind of people are they?" (188). But by this point in the story Spit has already entered the space of liminality as defined by the hitchhikers. For him, it is "almost a relief to take my pickup and camper and a few things and move down here to the beach" (174), since he acknowledges that he "might as well have been one of them hitch-hikers" (175).



Spit's initial uncertainty over the naked youth's *knowing* him in the opening story is curiously juxtaposed with Stella's knowing him, which remains a point of contention with his understanding of her. In this story, it is clear that it is Stella who knows Spit. She "allowed him to move her Tom Thomson print to the side wall to make room for the new painting [of Old Number One]; she permitted him to hang the big number 1 on the bedroom door; but she forbade him to play his tape when she was in the house. Enough is enough, she said" (10). It is only in retrospect, from the last story's viewpoint, that Spit realizes that Stella may have known more about him than he is willing to admit: "Stella always said she could take a mistress easier than Old Number One, you could scratch a mistress's eyes out, she said, but what do you do to a steam locomotive? How can you fight it?" (174-75). But he refuses to acknowledge the extent of Stella's understanding: "What did she know? How would she know what it felt like to be me? She couldn't imagine what it's like to be locked up inside me, locked inside this" (180). For Spit, knowing somebody is rooted in a mutual recognition.

That Stella knows Spit is unquestionable. And that she knows that Old Number One is more than a steam locomotive is evident in her choosing not to act but to live with the pretense of a marriage as long as Spit relegates his private doings to his own space; not knowing how to fight it, she chooses to live with Spit without telling him who he is. She already knows what is to become the "open secret" in the first story, a secret that is enshrouded with metaphorical and fetishized imagery, revealed only by the sexualized discourse that permeates the masturbatory scenes. Prior to the scene in Ireland, during their vacation, Stella fails to notice "the preoccupied, desperate look in his eyes. But they were in Egypt before that desperation became intense enough to risk discovery" (11). Stella recognizes the aggressive locomotive sounds in the middle of the Egyptian desert, and finds Spit

where in the shrill moment of the whistle she'd realized he would be, at the far side of the pyramid, leaning back against its dusty base with his eyes closed. The tape recorder was clutched with both hands against his chest. Old Number One rattled through him like a fever.

When it was over, when he'd turned the machine off, he raised his eyes to her angry face. [...]

Lord, you're an ugly woman, he thought. (12-13)

Spit reads Stella's anger as an antagonistic manifestation that emphasizes their not knowing each other, an act emphasizing their separation. But



Stella's deep awareness of Spit is evident by her subsequent reaction. Unlike their children, who pretend not to be acquainted with Spit after his embarrassing scene, Stella chooses not to brood "over the memory of his foolishness" because she sees "the same symptoms building up again in his face. She only hoped that this time he would choose some place private" (13).<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the story, Spit returns to the beach, the site of transformations and mystical encounters, to shout:

*Okay!*  
*Okay you son of a bitch!*  
*I'm stripped now, okay, now where is that god-damned line? (23)*

No longer silent, Spit's utterances are now aggressive and bold. He demands to see the line he becomes aware of exactly at the moment his desire can no longer mask its trouble. He demands to see the very figurative line that the naked youth tells him about, thereby forcing Spit to know it:

"Out there they found this crack that runs all around the ocean floor. Sure, man, they say it's squeezing lava out like toothpaste all the time. Runs all the way around the outside edge of this ocean."

"What?" Spit said. "What are you talking about?"

"Squirting lava up out of the centre of the earth! Pushing the continents farther and farther apart! Don't that blow your mind?"

"Look," Spit said. But he lost the thought that had occurred.

"Pushing and pushing. Dividing the waters. Like that what-was-it right back there at the beginning of things. And there it is, right out there somewhere, a bloody big seam. Spreading and pushing." (18)<sup>12</sup>

The sexualized language used to describe the line suggests, allegorically, a constant state of non-reproductive sexual activity that is nevertheless ripe with *being*; its constant orgasmic (therefore transformative) ejaculation transmutes base human nature.

It is Spit's ability to utter — indeed to shout — his readiness that indicates his transformation from an unknowing to a knowing sexualized being from the first to the second story. Whereas in the first story he is uncomfortable with those who non-verbally comprehend him (the naked youth, the hitchhikers) and is ignorant about those who possess insight (Stella), in the last story Spit is in control over his own (unspoken) understandings. Not only does he take over the narration, denoting his ability and willingness to utter and thereby perform, he also demonstrates

that it is he who now holds and disseminates his own information. And, by the end of the story, which marks the end of the collection, Spit articulates his choice to remain a knowing but silent participant:

I'm tempted to tell [Marsten], "Can't ask you in tonight, Marsten, there's a woman [i.e., Phemie] waiting for me, up a mountain." Or when he gets nagging at me to quit brooding, to get back in the swing of life. What is the matter with him? Don't people look at other people? Can't they tell when other people start to change? But I know him, he doesn't have an idea what anyone else is like. [...] It's all just habit, we go through, we act out. And they don't know a thing about me. Not a thing. They haven't noticed yet that there have been a few nights when I haven't come straight home from work, and a few nights when I've gone out late and do not come home until far into morning. They don't notice a thing. (198)

Spit's decision not to give in to temptation here is a conscious act. Like his fellow residents, we remain ignorant of where he goes after work, or with whom he spends the nights away from his own dwelling in the motel. But it is evident that Spit is now calling attention to the very acts that he himself performs in both stories, and of the acts that the people around him similarly perform on a daily basis. He calls attention to the performance as a knowing subject and asserts that "It just doesn't enter some people's heads that others might not be what they seem. So I'll never tell them" (199). He now, through his realization of his own difference, chooses to adhere to a performative silence in which he is able to see the changes in himself and others.

Yet this paradoxical relationship between seen and unseen, between "inner" essence and "outer" surfaces, is exactly what Spit, faced with unforeseen desires that tend to evoke discomfort, will not himself confront. Invariably, any penetration of gendered spaces and bodies usually relies on a prescribed mapping of culturally permissible expression. But those more fluid variations in social and sexual situation suggestively, as Spit finds, cross the line.

And these kinds of explorations of "trouble" also have the tendency of crossing another line, that of the rarely explored realm of asymmetrical desires, identities, genders and sexualities in Canadian literature. Peter Dickinson, in his recent work which explores these very issues, argues that "queer," as a literary-critical category of an almost inevitable definitional elasticity, one whose inventory of sexual meanings has yet to be exhausted, challenges and upsets certain received national orthodoxies of writing in

Canada" (5). He suggests, furthermore, that the construction of such orthodoxies is, in part, "facilitated by, if not wholly dependent upon, a critical refusal to come to grips with the textual *superabundance* of a destabilizing and counter-normative sexuality" (4). Certainly, in Hodgins's work, the exploration of that "superabundance" not only uncovers the anxieties that inform Spit's depiction of his "island mind" but helps to reconfigure modes of permissible literary criticism in Canada; this will promote, we hope, other fresh rereadings and reworkings of (dominant) cultural and literary texts, particularly those involving the ever-changing meanings of gender and masculinity, and other forms of "male trouble."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Critics often focus on the philosophical inquiries that Hodgins's texts evoke. For example, W.J. Keith, echoing McCaig's argument, states that Hodgins reminds us that reality "can be idealistic (Platonic) or down-to-earth (materialistic). His own brand of realism attempts to combine both ends of the spectrum" (90). Hodgins's work not only combines the ideal and the material but, as Robert Lecker suggests, "Hodgins establishes blatant connections between mythical structure and self awareness in order to purposely break them down" (86).

<sup>2</sup> Critics who focus on these various transformations often discuss Hodgins's use of magic realism. See the Geoff Hancock interview (1979).

<sup>3</sup> Living as a "figure on the edge" (*Island 3*), Spit is similar to Davey Crockett, although the latter is an example of frontier lawlessness as opposed to the former's rural decadence. Carol Smith-Rosenberg describes Crockett as "between categories" and, as such, "embodies all the chaotic power of formlessness and disorder" that evokes a space of liminality (98). At the edges of these frontiers, we find individuals who are, as Smith-Rosenberg explains, experiencing themselves as powerless in the face of massive and unremitting social transformation, [and so] respond by attempting to capture and encapsulate such change within a new and ordered symbolic universe. They seek through imagery and myth to mitigate their feelings of helplessness by deflecting and partially distorting change and thus bringing it within the control of the imagination.... At such times individuals will revert to their most primitive experience of human interaction and social ordering. On an even more instinctive level, when all the world spins out of control, the last intuitive resource of any individual is her or his own body, and especially its sexual impulses. That, at least, one can control and manipulate. Thus sexuality and the family, because of their primitive psychic and social functions, serve as reservoirs of physical imagery through which individuals seek to express and rationalize their experience of social change. (90)

<sup>4</sup> Again, see Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>5</sup> Hodgins tells us that "the name Phemie, or Euphemia, was quite deliberate. I did want a name that had something to do with the ethereal, the poetic" (David 20). Euphemia, associated with "euphemism," recalls how harsh realities are smoothed over using more favourable expressions.

<sup>6</sup> We are making an important distinction between “queer” — an anti-identitarian stance embracing the energies of homosexual social contravention and a non-specific politics of difference in order to oppose, in part, sexual regulation — and “homosexual” — a term rallying the interest and self-identification of those who desire members of the same sex and who realize, positively or otherwise, the socially transgressive nature of such desire. As such, the use of “queering” here denotes the idea of the possibility of a different form of sexuality, which may or may not include homosexuality (although Spit, we believe, is not homosexual). For an expansive yet concise exploration of this distinction and its problematics, see Seidman especially 146-59.

<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick defines homosociality as “the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (2). The distinction between homosexuality and homosociality is essential and, in many ways, parallels the dissimilarities between homosexuality and queer, particularly in that the latter expression does not necessarily indicate a consummated (genital) male-male relationship. See the previous footnote for a more expansive definition of “queer” and “homosexual.”

<sup>8</sup> Hodgins takes a stab here at the academic critic who, like Jon, is presumed to gather knowledge from books rather than from “the real thing” (*Island* 12): “It was obvious to Spit that his son was cut out for a university professor” (12).

<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity of the question and subsequent answer leads critics to respond by proposing various philosophical interpretations. Struthers, in drawing analogies between Emily Carr and Hodgins, says that the questions depict “the moral and spiritual force ... that is central to Hodgins’ fiction” (“Visionary” 67). Similarly, taking issue with the philosophical “nature” of these questions, David Jeffrey argues that “in Spit’s questions it is not a Conradian or Aristotelian sequence that we read. The questioning is Socratic” (29).

<sup>10</sup> The reader is left to make the connection that cold water always notably causes the shriveling up of one particular aspect of the male anatomy.

<sup>11</sup> Symbolically, the next place is Anne Hathaway’s cottage, which establishes a paradigm of the female figure that is worthy of male devotion. A link is also established between the male “genius” figures — Jon, who identifies with a young Shakespeare — whose own ambiguous sexual orientation has been theorized by critics, particularly when examining the unknown subject of his early sonnets. Since the text has previously identified a queer connection between male (sexual) “difference” and “genius,” in its description of Jon’s effeminate manner, the link denotes, if only for a moment, a homosocial connotation.

<sup>12</sup> The critical tendency to read this “message” allegorically is largely determined by Hodgins’s use of mythical and biblical allusions throughout his texts. Struthers, for example, says the youth “alludes to the description of God’s Creation of a firmament dividing the waters (Genesis 1.6-8) and seems to interpret the phenomenon of continental drift as signifying the coming of the Apocalypse. This crack or seam separating the continents becomes a metaphor for the separation between Spit and Stella” (“Visionary” 77).

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