

A Past Which Refuses to Become History: Nazism, Niagara Falls, and a New National Identity in Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*

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Article abstract

Through the experiences of Hannelore Schmitt, a German war widow, Suzette Mayr locates *The Widows* in the context of debates in contemporary German society about Nazi brutality. The novel suggests that it is only through a confrontation with history that German citizens can experience liberation, not only at the level of the individual citizen, but also at the national policy level. Simultaneously, the novel expresses skepticism about the Canadian immigrant identity, parodying historians who have constructed Canada's cultural memory in the contemporary multicultural movement. The creation of a utopian women's community at the novel's end therefore suggests the vision of a nation which truly incorporates difference into its daily life.

A Past Which Refuses to Become History: Nazism, Niagara Falls, and a New National Identity in Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*

DORIS WOLF

THE FUCKINGS OF MEMORY," mutters Hannelore Schmitt, the main character of Suzette Mayr's second novel, *The Widows*, when her son forces her to acknowledge the inaccuracy of a story she believes is and offers to others as truth (16). At other times, Hannelore, a self-absorbed and often manipulative storyteller, takes delight in knowingly offering conflicting versions of events such as her immigration to Canada from Germany: "I moved to Canada because of the wilderness" (42), she claims at one point, although earlier she insists it was because too many of her friends were dying (38) and later because her sister, Clotilde, was beginning to act too old (45). Centring on a woman whose memory frequently is both selective and false and who enjoys telling multiple accounts of the same story, *The Widows* foregrounds some of the crucial lessons about the nature of historiography learned in recent decades, for instance, how memory is a constitutive act rather than a simple act of recall. "It is now commonplace," writes Alun Munslow in *Deconstructing History*, "for historians, philosophers of history and others interested in narrative to claim we live in a postmodern age wherein the old modernist certainties of historical truth and methodological objectivity, as applied by disinterested historians, are challenged principles" (1). As Munslow emphasizes, following the work of Hayden White and Michel Foucault, it is the nature of narrative itself that creates the impossibility of recovering and representing the past as it actually was. Even the translation of the most simple facts into the most seemingly simple and plain narrative is a product of the historian's imaginative and fictive power.

A postmodernist novel, *The Widows* foregrounds how the telling of history is a literary enterprise. While its main storyline revolves around Hannelore's trip over Niagara Falls in a bright orange space-age barrel on October 24, 1996, the novel is consumed with the past. Through Hannelore, a German war widow who becomes utterly captivated with the historical figure of Annie Edson Taylor, the novel takes up two very different histories in its challenge to old empiricist claims of historical objectivity. The most evident of the two is the story of Taylor who made her own plunge over the Falls in a barrel, exactly ninety-five years earlier than Hannelore, on October 24, 1901. Because she was the first person to survive this daring feat, Taylor quickly became a key figure in the history of Niagara Falls. Unfortunately, as Karen Dubinsky notes in her provocative study of the Falls, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls*, while she has been a key figure, she has not been an entirely sympathetic one. As Dubinsky remarks, because of her marginal status as a financially destitute, aging, and unattractive woman, Taylor has long "been the subject of misogynist lampooning in the Niagara Falls tourist industry" (35). Everything about Mayr's novel foregrounds Taylor's narrative, from its cover which features a photograph of the Victorian daredevil tumbling headlong over the Falls, to its section epigraphs which are taken primarily from Pierre Berton's account of her in *Niagara: A History of the Falls*, to its main character's fascination with and ultimate emulation of her. Taylor herself appears in the final pages of the novel, a ghostly visitation which initially violently resists having her story told again, although this time, in the hands of a writer who herself lives on the edge of mainstream society as a lesbian, woman of colour, and Albertan, it will prove to better ends. In retelling Taylor's tale in a contemporary context of three elderly women's journey over Niagara Falls (Hannelore manipulates her sister, Clotilde, and sister's lover, Frau Schnadelhuber, into going with her), Mayr engages in a feminist revisionist history which undermines the sexist and ageist biases of existing accounts of Taylor.

The second, less evident history Mayr explores is the barbarism of Nazism and its lingering effects on the German psyche in the present. While reviewers of the novel tend to highlight how the German backgrounds of Hannelore, Clotilde, and Frau Schnadelhuber impact their daily lives in Canada, only one raises the spectre of Nazism, though she immediately dismisses its centrality to the politics of the novel. Writing for *Quill & Quire*, Mary Soderstrom maintains that Mayr "sidesteps the problems of dealing sympathetically with Germans who were young in the 1940s. The widows are prejudiced but mainly (and comically)

against Germans from other regions” (25). Certainly, the novel depicts the traditional rivalry between North and South Germany, particularly the Northern view of its Bavarian neighbours as too dirty, loud, and carefree, and there is no question that this depiction is comic, although, I would stress from the outset, in a satiric sense. Yet the novel does not sidestep the problems of World War Two Germany. Rather, I contend, it interrogates the longevity of Nazi doctrines within German society.

The Widows thus emerges as more than a critique of ageism and sexism. It also engages with fundamental issues arising out of the world’s attempts to come to terms with the Second World War and Nazism, particularly the question of whether the Nazi past can ever be historicized and thus laid to rest. As German historian Ernst Nolte wrote in 1986, Germany has a past which “refuses to become history” (qtd. in Fulbrook 5). Considered key to Germany’s internal healing, historicization is obviously offensive to the many, both in the international community and in Germany, who feel that the barbarism of the Holocaust excludes it from any process that might lead to the peace of mind and future prosperity of its perpetrators. As part of the conservative intellectual elite in Germany, Nolte offered his comment on Germany’s past as a lament, thereby sparking the infamous *Historikerstreit* (historian’s conflict) among Germany’s top historians in 1986-87.¹ While the conflict did not raise entirely new issues, as the most publicly visible and heated debate amongst German scholars since the postwar period and possibly ever, it foregrounded the problem-atics of contemporary German historiography with respect to the war and its relationship to German national identity in the present. Participants quickly linked historicization to the concepts of relativization and normalization as they debated whether Nazi crimes are a unique legacy of evil in a class by themselves, or whether they are comparable to other national atrocities, for example, the Stalinist terror. Broadly, the argument ran as follows: if Nazism and its mass genocide of the Jews can be relativized then Germany can still aspire to reclaim a national acceptance; however, if the Final Solution is incomparable then a German nationalism based in anything other than shame and guilt is rendered impossible. As Charles Maier emphasizes in *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, the conflict raised issues that Germans had resisted facing for a long while, not merely questions of what the Nazi experience was or meant but of what sort of national existence Germany can enjoy after the horrors of the Holocaust (5-6).

Not only did the *Historikerstreit* underline the crucial role of history in the construction of national identity, but it also emerged as *the* German

form of postmodern historiography (Maier 168). The different versions of the Second World War which have circulated in all areas of German society, both private and public, have underscored how personal and political motivations, based here in complicity and shame, have a bearing on the telling of history. *The Widows* explores the problematics of historicizing Nazism through the character of Hannelore who, at the end of the novel, after decades of denial and revisionism, finally confronts her own experience of and complicity in Nazi politics and ideology. The story of Annie Edson Taylor and her trip over the Falls is the catalyst for her process of self-discovery. It is by imitating Taylor that Hannelore is forced to face the ghosts of her German past, thus merging the two histories that the novel explores and challenges in its concluding pages. Because Hannelore confronts her past in Canada, specifically at/on Niagara Falls, her transformation ultimately becomes tied to questions of Canadian rather than German national identity. Mayr offers at the conclusion of *The Widows* a utopian vision of Canada, one free from sexist, ageist, homophobic, and racist biases.

* * *

A novel of immigration, *The Widows* centres on Hannelore who relocates to Canada in the early 1980s, bringing her older sister, Clotilde, with her. Well into her sixties, Hannelore instigates the move to be closer to her only child, a son named Dieter, now living in Edmonton, Alberta, with his wife, Rosario, and their daughter, Cleopatra Maria. While she practically forces Clotilde, almost a decade older than herself, to leave Germany, ironically Hannelore has the more difficult time adapting to their new home. Although Clotilde might occasionally deride Edmonton as a “frozen hell” (85) and Canada as “the coldest country on Earth” (174), she nonetheless creates a new life for herself fairly quickly by finding outside interests, including a lesbian lover. In contrast, Hannelore, initially at least, holds onto her past and clings to her family as the only positive thing about her life in Canada, much to the irritation of her son and especially her daughter-in-law. Everything else fails to live up to German standards, from cake which is too spongy and sweet and coffee which is too dark and bitter, to toys which are made of cheap plastic and wave pools which are just plain inferior (15). “Made in Germany of course,” she sums up. “All the best things were” (16).

Even though Hannelore cannot forego, nor does she make any effort to do so, her nostalgic longing for her old life, the Germany of her

memory is not entirely unproblematic. While it might be the clear winner for the dominant place in her heart, it is also linked with stasis and death. Before her emigration, faced with the deaths of her friends and overwhelmed by the thought of spending her final years attending funerals, Hannelore feels increasingly burdened by her surroundings:

But now young Hannelore was buried by the past, the chairs in her house in exactly the same positions as where her grandfather set them a hundred years ago. The pictures on the walls in positions identical to when Hannelore was born, then Dieter was born. The same pictures, the same places. Everything the same except that there were no children in the house, no one to take care of her except Clotilde if Hannelore became ill, and Clotilde was nearly ten years older, no guarantee that she would be around for Hannelore. Not like when they took care of their father until he died, not like when their mother took care of *her* father, their grandfather, until he died. (39–40)

What emerges as a patriarchal history through a lineage of fathers and grandfathers becomes oppressive in its insistent repetition. “We are rotting here,” Hannelore exclaims loudly to Clotilde one day, as they stand in their kitchen in Northern Germany. “Time for a trip” (46, 47). A trip to Canada offers both a respite from death and patriarchal German society and a promise of rejuvenation, and throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the two sisters make frequent, lengthy visits to their family in “Kanada.”² Eventually trips, even long ones, are not enough, and they relocate permanently.

Mayr’s depiction of her characters, particularly Hannelore, is clearly satiric, although reviewers have been slow to identify it as such. The one reviewer who does place Mayr’s work in the satiric tradition ultimately considers it a gentle example. While Guy Beauregard calls Mayr’s first novel, *Moon Honey* (1995), a “scathing portrayal” of shallow characters, he claims *The Widows* “broadens the humour” and presents its characters “more sympathetically” and with “good-natured humor” (43). In contrast, I see Mayr’s second novel as equally scathing as her first, particularly in its treatment of its elderly main character. For instance, Hannelore’s insistence that all the best things were made in Germany, evoking as it does the concept of German superiority and the refrain “Deutschland über alles,” is deeply disturbing. This example is no anomalous event, and it is through Hannelore that the novel addresses the inadequacies and failures of Germany’s attempts to come to terms with Nazism in a context of a worldwide refusal to let its past become history. Since the *Historikerstreit*, which in

the end resolved very little, studies of the German failure to overcome the past have had to address the dramatic rise of rightwing extremism in Germany. Evoking Freud's theory of "the return of the repressed" in "The Presence of the Past — Xenophobia and Rightwing Extremism in the Federal Republic of Germany: Psychoanalytic Reflections," Werner Bohleber locates the rise of right-wing violence against foreigners in Germany not within the economic or ideological problems surrounding German unification but within the nation's failure to deal thoroughly with its guilt over the Holocaust.³ "The Nazi past which has been denied and passed over in silence, but which will not go away," he writes, constantly generates a deep-seated memory blockage. This block is especially evident in the refusal of many Germans to empathize with the fate of asylum seekers and refugees" (332). A willingness to identify with the foreigner or stranger would mean an inward confrontation with the barbarism of the Holocaust, something many Germans, Bohleber argues, are incapable of doing.

Current xenophobia in Germany manifests itself not only in the outward expressions of violence exhibited by right-wing extremists or neo-Nazis but also in conscious and unconscious utterances of Nazi ideology within mainstream society. It is this less overt, but in some ways more disturbing, form of the "return of the repressed" that we witness in Hannelore, primarily in her negative feelings, verging on hatred, for her daughter-in-law, Rosario, who is of mixed, though never clearly defined, racial and ethnic ancestry. While, on one level, her feelings mirror those of a stereotypically jealous and overbearing mother-in-law, on another, they echo the Nazi ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of "volk" or people) with its attendant values of homogeneity, ethnic purity, and normality. Reflecting on the woman who steals her son and then takes him halfway around the world to live, Hannelore displays a fear of being merged with foreigners: "half Mexican, half African, half Chinese, half Canadian (half mongrel, Hannelore said to herself, only to herself, she would never say this out loud to *anyone*)" (17). Living in a Germany which officially sought to expunge itself of its xenophobia and anti-Semitism immediately after World War Two, Hannelore recognizes the offensiveness of her thoughts and the need for censoring their articulation even if she cannot stop herself from having them. Bohleber comments on the difficulties of letting go of old attitudes in spite of pressure to do so: The fundamental liberalization of German society post-1945 created a new reality of cultural pluralism but the end of Nazism did not mean the end of the fantasy of an ethnically homogenous community" (340).

Similarly, Mary Fulbrook notes in *German National Identity After the Holocaust*, “The disjuncture between the officially permissible and the taboo led for many individuals into a suppression of their true feelings” (175). Mayr’s use of parentheses, repetition of “to herself,” and italicization of “anyone” in the quotation above highlight the tension between the values Hannelore knows she should espouse and her fantasy of ethnic purity for her family and, by extension, nation, definitely a taboo subject in contemporary Germany.

A similar example occurs later in the novel during a showdown between mother- and daughter-in-law over whether Hannelore would move with the family to a new home on the other side of Edmonton. During this encounter, a frustrated Rosario exclaims, “You drive us up the wall, don’t you understand? We need to live by ourselves” (86). This time Hannelore reacts with an anti-Semitic thought about her daughter-in-law with her “strange foreign smell, acidic, corrosive” (86). Having lost the fight, Hannelore appeases herself by thinking that at least she can finally redecorate the old townhouse according to her own tastes (which, of course, to her means “decently”):

Enough of Rosario’s bead-curtains and Jew art. Not Jew art, Hannelore didn’t mean Jew art, the art had nothing to do with Jews, just paintings with unnecessarily naked people, this is what she meant. She clapped her hand to her mouth even though she’d said nothing, nothing out loud about the Jew art. (88)

Less conscious than the previous example (indicated in the clapping of her hand to her mouth), her thoughts highlight the insidiousness of Nazi propaganda which still has hold over a German subject who was a young wife and mother during the war but who lived for another three and a half decades in a Germany that supposedly underwent a fundamental liberalization in the post-war period. As Fulbrook notes, the high levels of anti-Semitism which were still prevalent among the population after the war were not so much educated out as they were grown out in succeeding generations (149). Hannelore and Dieter represent generational differences in overcoming the past: on the one hand, we have Hannelore, an adult during the war, whose world view is still affected by Nazi concepts, and on the other, we have Dieter, a baby at the time, who falls in love with and marries Rosario.

The interplay of memory and amnesia — what Hannelore remembers and forgets — emphasizes the problematics of “the presence of the past” in contemporary Germany. Her recurrent memories of the difficult wartime

and post-wartime years centre on the grief, poverty, and starvation that she and her family experienced. These experiences continue to haunt her behaviour in the present; for instance, she cannot bring herself to redecorate the bedroom she once shared with her husband, even though his empty twin bed is a constant reminder of his death in the war and her own painfully absent sex life ever since (17); also, having been frugal by necessity during the war, decades later she still cannot bear to see Rosario “waste” food, that is, throw out perfectly good grease, bones with fat still on them, and toast crumbs (22). The humour of these depictions of a frugal, sexually repressed German Hausfrau stands in sharp relief to the novel’s more political message: that even though Hannelore can obsess about the past when it relates to personal trauma, she cannot confront the truth about the Third Reich and her role in it. When Cleopatra Maria insists that a hiking group to which her Oma belonged during the war must have been part of the Hitler Youth, Hannelore insists otherwise:

It was a Christian hiking group. Not Hitler Jugend.
 So you were in one of those Hitler youth groups, says Cleopatra Maria.
 Hitler group? says Hannelore. It was a Christian group.
 But you were the right age.
 The hiking group was not politically affiliated, says Hannelore, her mouth stiff.
 You were one of those girls. One of those Hitler Youth girls.
 When I was younger I was part of the Bund deutscher Mädel, yes.
 You had to be. (210)

Although Hannelore finally admits that her hiking group was part of the Hitler youth movement (the Bund deutscher Mädel was the female equivalent of the all-male Hitler Jugend),⁴ her emphasis on its compulsory membership — “You had to be” — uncomfortably evokes the common post-war refrain of SS soldiers and other Nazi officials that they had no choice but to carry out orders, a refrain meant to disclaim personal responsibility for the brutal acts they committed or authorized. Although this strategy of denying personal agency was adopted by the SS and others to avoid conviction at war trials, the novel suggests that it was also internalized by Germany’s general population as a coping mechanism for what it did or failed to do during the war. Immediately following the above exchange with her granddaughter, Hannelore is disturbed by the unwanted memory that she and the girls in the Bund deutscher Mädel had to wear white tops with “the rhombus on the chest and the Haken-

kreuz in the middle of the rhombus” when they played sports (210). To avoid confronting this memory fully, she quickly shifts the conversation to a topic she knows will upset Cleopatra Maria — her granddaughter’s lack of a boyfriend.

As I explore in the remainder of this paper, Hannelore does eventually confront history and undergo a transformation, what we might call, echoing Bohleber, “a fundamental liberalization,” at the end of the novel when she goes over Niagara Falls. But even prior to this life-altering event, her closed-mindedness and bigotry are put under pressure by her deep love for two people who do not fit within the Nazi ideology of “normality” and “purity.” It might be easy to dislike Rosario, that “other” woman in the dual sense of the non-white foreigner and the woman who steals the only man in her life, her son, but it is much harder to sustain her racism when it comes to her own flesh and blood, Cleopatra Maria. While eventually Hannelore forms a close relationship with her brainy, socially awkward granddaughter, initially she is disappointed: that Cleopatra Maria is not a boy, that she is never christened, that she lives in Kanada, that she will never live in Germany and know her heritage (17). But what disturbs her most is the child’s racial and ethnic heritage. Dismayed by Cleopatra Maria’s long name because it is too “exotic,” she attempts to shorten it to something “more appropriate” in a birthday card she sends to her baby granddaughter: “Maria,” she carefully writes in the card (11). During a visit to Canada a few years later, she is confronted by Cleopatra Maria’s racial difference when she tries to comb her hair after a trip to the local swimming pool:

Hannelore wrestled with Cleopatra Maria’s fine, frizzy hair.

This hair is your mother’s hair, grumped Hannelore.

No it’s my hair, said Cleopatra Maria. Oma, you’re doing it *wrong*.

Cleopatra Maria’s tiny hands scrabbled the air with irritation. She screamed. Because of the hair, because of the nasty sound of her grandmother’s voice. (15)

Even at age four, Cleopatra Maria, a sensitive and brilliant child, identifies the hatred in her Oma’s voice for her inherited “mongrel” hair. While she might not understand fully the racist implications of her grandmother’s words and actions, as readers we cannot fail to when we learn only a few pages later that Rosario has a “deliciously frothy afro” (22). Although these attempts to “normalize” Cleopatra Maria do not succeed — Rosario steps in to insist on the use of her daughter’s full name, and Cleopatra Maria herself resists her Oma’s efforts to comb her hair — Hannelore never fully

seems to see her granddaughter as a racial and ethnic “other.” While the novel repeatedly insists on Rosario’s otherness, it almost completely elides Cleopatra Maria’s, except for a very few instances such as the hair combing. Because the narrative point of view is predominantly Hannelore’s, the novel gives the impression that this is how the German immigrant prefers to see her granddaughter: not as a person of colour but as a precocious white girl from the Canadian suburbs. In fact, somewhere in her transformation from child to adult, Cleopatra Maria, who spends an inordinate amount of time with her Oma, comes to prefer this image as well. At one point, chatting with a German-speaking salesclerk in a shoe store, they are confronted with Cleopatra Maria’s visible difference: “The clerk asked Cleopatra Maria was she adopted? Cleopatra Maria said *no*. The clerk smiled serenely at Hannelore. Hannelore busily tied then retied her shoelaces. Cleopatra Maria dropped a platform shoe very loudly” (65). True to character, Hannelore avoids the topic, and equally true to character, Cleopatra Maria, twenty-six years old in this encounter but still socially immature, resists in a childish manner.

Clotilde is the other character who challenges Hannelore’s narrow world view. If Hannelore is in denial over her granddaughter’s racial heritage, she is equally in denial over her sister’s sexual orientation. On a trip to Banff with Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber in the 1980s, Hannelore becomes agitated by their public displays of affection at the hot springs and repeats the homophobic cliché which belittles homosexuality as a “stage”: “You always do this Clotilde, fluttered Hannelore. I thought at last you’d grown out of it” (113). Similar to how she displaces her racist attitudes from Cleopatra Maria onto Rosario, she displaces her homophobia from the older sister with whom she has lived for most of her life onto her sister’s lover. When she comes home late at night dreading that she will once again witness Clotilde and Frau Schnadelhuber’s “hands clutched together” and “perverted conversations,” it is Frau Schnadelhuber, not Clotilde, whom she condemns: “Hannelore didn’t approve of Frau Schnadelhuber” (76). In spite of seeing Frau Schnadelhuber frequently, Hannelore maintains a formal distance from her, briskly shaking her hand when occasion necessitates physical contact and always calling her “Frau Schnadelhuber,” never by her first name. While Frau Schnadelhuber’s Bavarian background might explain some of Hannelore’s reactions (Hannelore is from the North, as she repeatedly makes clear), it is hard to give this interpretation too much credence: Hannelore’s beloved dead husband was from South Germany, after all. Instead, Hannelore’s homophobia in this instance is more likely complicated by wartime politics.

Frau Schnadelhuber, we learn, was involved in the German Resistance and ended up in a work camp for her efforts (187-88). Hannelore, unsurprisingly, refuses to believe her, at least until it is convenient to do so — when she needs help stealing the egg-shaped ball that will take the women over the Falls (186). It is no wonder that Hannelore cannot stand the woman who is a constant reminder not only of her sister's sexual orientation but also of her own obvious, though passive, support for the Third Reich before and during the war. Although she never belonged to the Nazi party, she falls into that uncomfortable camp of the average German citizen who did nothing to stop the terrifying events and who claimed afterward that she knew nothing of the horrors perpetrated by her leaders.

* * *

A metonym for Germany, Hannelore represents the need for moving beyond denial and guilt to acknowledge historical truth. The inspiration for her transformation is Annie Edson Taylor who took part in what became, at the turn of the twentieth century, the latest fad for drawing tourists to Niagara Falls, the barrel craze (Dubinsky 35). However, unlike many other daredevils drawn to the sensationalism of the popular tourist destination, Taylor always insisted on her middle-class, though impoverished, Christian respectability: "I am not of the common daredevil sort. I feel refined and I know that I am well educated and well connected" (qtd. in Berton 265). Instead, Taylor's motivation was financial. A widow, Taylor supported herself first as a teacher then as a dance instructor until, at age sixty-three, she no longer had any means for earning an income beyond the grudging charity of her relatives. By going over the Falls, she hoped to save herself from the poorhouse. Highlighting both the danger of her adventure and the social conditions of an elderly woman without private means, she commented to reporters, "I might as well be dead as to remain in my present condition" (qtd. in Berton 261). The victim of an ageist and sexist society, she felt her best chances for success lay in posing as a younger woman. Taylor told reporters she was forty-two, a lie she would insist upon until her death.

Taylor's narrative has obvious appeal for Hannelore, Clotilde, and Frau Schnadelhuber who, at Hannelore's instigation, eventually go over the Falls in their stolen space-age barrel. Fired from her job at a German delicatessen after forty years of service, Frau Schnadelhuber slumps into a deep depression, refusing to eat or move from Clotilde's bed. Her job had

been everything to her: earlier in her life, it had offered an escape from an unhappy marriage, and later, as she aged, it meant that she was “not invisible, no one’s burden” (153). Similar to Taylor’s comment that she might as well be dead as to remain in her present condition, Frau Schnadelhuber remarks to Clotilde during their cross-country car trip to Niagara Falls, “I have nothing left to live for without my job, without you. What difference would it make if I lived or died?” (215). Clotilde’s motivations for joining her sister and lover on their trip are less clear, although she recognizes the lack of power that elderly women have and the need to keep her lover from falling back into her life-threatening depression.

While Hannelore’s journey over Niagara Falls is for similar reasons of disenfranchisement and invisibility, her fascination with the Falls and Annie Edson Taylor is of much longer standing than Frau Schnadelhuber’s. On their first visit to Canada in 1971, Hannelore and Clotilde consider the Falls “the most important thing” about their trip: “Niagara Falls were the only thing they noticed because everything else you could get in Germany and of better quality” (20). In 1980, Hannelore makes a second trip, this time by herself. During this visit, the Falls become associated with resistance to social attitudes surrounding aging women, thus foreshadowing future events. On her way to Edmonton, Hannelore fails to get back on the plane during her stopover in Toronto. Instead, she takes a bus to Niagara Falls and watches them for an hour before boarding a bus for Edmonton where she dreams that “she and Clotilde were wearing long beautiful gowns and feathered hats and floating like balloons among the seagulls” (54). The fury of Dieter when she finally does arrive at her original destination, emphasizing his view of her as dependent, old, and frail, is in stark contrast to her own imaginings of freedom and independence.

Hannelore’s love for the Falls anticipates her love for Annie Edson Taylor. Working at the Edmonton Royal Auditorium as one of its many elderly and poorly paid ushers, Hannelore gets to see all the shows, including what quickly becomes her favourite, *Niagara! The Musical*. Based loosely on Taylor’s life and starring the world famous singer, Sharon-Lee Silver, the musical initially captivates Hannelore because the young and pretty Silver sounds just like her favourite German Schlagersängerin from the fifties. Hearing her Oma’s rapturous descriptions of *Niagara! The Musical*, Cleopatra Maria curtly informs her it is “full of shit”: unlike in the stage version, Taylor was not young when she made her trip over the Falls; she was not pretty; and she certainly did not live happily ever after as a millionaire’s wife but died in obscurity and poverty (118). Rather

than being disenchanted by her new knowledge, Hannelore falls in love with Taylor and her story even more as she begins to draw explicit comparisons between the Victorian daredevil and herself: “Anna Taylor also only married once, Anna Taylor was also Anna Edson. Old and fat and poor and unloved. Hannelore old and nearly poor and only provisionally loved. Also fat. Weekend filial love. Dieter’s mowing the lawn and nailing shingles to the roof love” (121). Her identification with Taylor explodes when Sharon-Lee Silver’s understudy performs one night. Because the understudy is old and fat, the audience insists on getting its money back: “No one wanted to pay eighty dollars to see an old and bitter woman tell the world like it was, how she had no place because no one would give her any room” (123). Hannelore, however, can only weep with excitement at the performance — finally, Annie Edson Taylor portrayed as she actually was. She soon finds the means to take her over the Falls: the egg-shaped Niagara Ball owned and built by Hamish, a grimy, sexist, kilt-wearing Scotsman, who is her first lover since the death of her husband and with whom she has a complicated, though thankfully brief, love-hate relationship. After Hannelore manages to steal the Ball from Hamish, her journey over the Falls, and ultimate identification with Taylor, is determined.

Through her narrative of three elderly women who go over Niagara Falls, Mayr creates a feminist revisionist history of Annie Edson Taylor whose story has been told in all major accounts of the Falls, including Pierre Berton’s *Niagara: A History of the Falls*, Andy O’Brien’s *Daredevils of Niagara*, and Percy Rowe’s *Niagara Falls and Falls*. Mayr makes her challenge to these patriarchal versions of Taylor evident by including excerpts from them as epigraphs to her novel’s sections. Berton’s account, in particular, becomes the focus of her critique: the majority of her epigraphs, including the first one, come from his book. Clichéd images of old, unattractive women abound in his version of Taylor’s story. His numerous physical descriptors such as “bulky and shapeless” (254), “coarse features” (254), “stout and almost shapeless” (263), and “fleshy features” (263), as well as other negative comments such as “lost her figure” (257) and “rasping voice” (254), mirror a misogynist society that views the aging female body as ugly and the aging woman as valueless.

Mayr echoes Berton’s ageist and misogynist descriptions with her own depictions of old, creaking, wrinkled, and sagging female bodies, although to an entirely different effect. The primary description with which Mayr takes issue occurs toward the end of Berton’s account but appears as the very first epigraph in *The Widows*:

There [Taylor] stood, with the waters swirling only a few feet away — a lumpy figure with a pudding of a face, resolute, unafraid, and totally confident that she, at sixty-three, could accomplish a feat that no other human being had managed, and from which younger and more athletic dare-devils had shrunk. What was she doing here — a woman of “refinement” as she constantly reminded the press — indulging in a common stunt mainly suitable for exploitation in the music halls that she despised? What Annie Edson Taylor was doing, as she prepared to enter her barrel, was to shake her fist at Victorian morality, which decreed that there was no place but the almshouse for a woman without means who had reached a certain age. (Mayr 1; Berton 266)

Although Berton presents some positive images of Taylor here — of her bravery in the face of possible and even probable death, as well as of her social consciousness on behalf of old and poor women — they are ultimately undermined by his ridiculous image of “a lumpy figure with a pudding of a face.” Mayr echoes this image at least twice in the novel, remarking that Sharon-Lee Silver’s understudy’s breasts were “huge like puddings” (122) and that Taylor’s face “hidden by a sweeping feather on her hat except for the woman’s jowl ... reminded Hannelore of a Dr. Oetker lemon pudding” (53). By taking up this and other ageist and sexist descriptions within her own narrative, Mayr reverses the effects: if the number of clichéd descriptions used by Berton ultimately holds up Taylor, and not the reporters or society around her, to ridicule, their use in a narrative of elderly female empowerment, where the aging female body is rendered beautiful and sexual, satirizes instead their originator, Berton.

Like Robert Budde, who in a review of *The Widows* writes, “Mayr claims to have no quarrel with Berton but it is hard for me not to read parodic intent” (252), I see the novel as a sharp critique of patriarchal histories written by men such as Berton, who, as Dubinsky says of Niagara Falls, is a “remarkably durable cultural icon” (4). Although the clear and objective style of most historians has been taken as a measure of their ability to tell the truth, Berton, credited with almost single-handedly popularizing Canadian history, has never tried to imitate this kind of writing. Instead, he claims that “his writing style is influenced by the movies” and that “he strives to create a dramatic representation of Canada’s historic past” (Calabrese B11). Although his writing style would seem to highlight the fictive nature of his work, his books are nevertheless read as “fact.” As Peter Newman notes in a recent tribute, the power of Berton’s books lies in his ability to infuse them with a “retroactive ring of authenticity.” That

he has been severely taken to task for his “historical” accounts of Canada by the academic community has done nothing to undermine his popularity — in fact, it has probably added to it. Called “our Walt Disney, in the best sense of popularizing our sleepy past” (Newman 25), Berton has written an account of Annie Edson Taylor which, in all its misogyny, has been read by thousands of Canadians. Further, it most likely is the only account they will ever read. The power of Mayr’s revision of Taylor does not lie in its offering its version as *the* true story. As its playful style makes clear, it merely opens up an alternate reading, one that does not lampoon but empowers the Victorian daredevil. Its power lies in creating scepticism of existing accounts and in foreground-ing how it *matters* which version of Taylor circulates.

The implications of Berton’s authority as a popular historian are further underscored by his other primary claim to fame. As Rina Calabrese writes, Berton’s “most lasting contribution [may be] helping Canadians define their national identity” (B11). With his long run as a permanent panellist on Front Page Challenge and his forty plus popular books on Canadian history and society, he has not merely commented on current events and documented parts of Canada’s past but shaped how Canadians see themselves and their country. In her feminist revisionist narrative, Mayr challenges the images of Canada offered by old patriarchs of Canadian history and letters such as Berton. She transforms Hannelore’s journey over the Falls from a mere act of outrage against an ageist and sexist society, as it was for Annie Edson Taylor, into a rite of citizenship to a newly envisioned nation. The day before her life-threatening trip, Hannelore stands in the tunnels behind the Falls, one of our national symbols. Unable to hear anything but the thunderous roar of the rushing water, she “smiles so hard she wants to scream because at last she is *home*” (225). Finally, after twenty-five years — ten as a visitor and fifteen as a full-time resident — Canada becomes home for Hannelore. The symbolism of going over the Falls as a ritual of becoming Canadian is established during Hannelore’s first visit many years before when, mesmerized by the rushing water, she dreams of another of Canada’s national symbols, the maple leaf: “Very nice, sehr schön, said Hannelore asleep, her mind a maple leaf on the surface of the water, slipping over the sleepy edge. A maple leaf like on the Kanadian flag. Yes, she liked Kanada very much. The leaf on the water asleep before the prodigious drop” (21). While the process of making Canada home already begins on the women’s cross-country car trip

to their daredevil attempt at the Falls when Hannelore munches happily on a “sticky butter tart” and drinks with pleasure the hotel coffee (218-19) — a far cry from the German tourist who abhorred sweet Canadian desserts and bitter Canadian coffee — her actual trip *over* the Falls ends a long history of arm’s length attachment to her new homeland.

As the thunderous roaring of Niagara Falls highlights, for Hannelore the process of becoming Canadian is no sleepy slipping over the edge but a jarring, painful experience. One of Mayr’s epigraphs earlier in *The Widows* makes explicit how Hannelore’s trip over the Falls also constitutes an exorcism of the ghosts of a Nazi heritage. Taken from Andy O’Brien’s *Daredevils of Niagara*, the epigraph states: “In 1942, a War Bond sales drive was conducted across New York State with effigies of Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito riding in a ‘Bondmobile.’ ... [A]s five thousand persons cheered, the effigies were placed in a wooden boat, doused with gasoline, set ablaze and released into the rapids just above the American Falls” (Mayr 33). Although Hannelore goes over the Canadian Falls to an audience of only one, an anxious, not cheering, Cleopatra Maria, the act is a symbolic shedding of many of her racist and homophobic attitudes that were fostered when she was a young woman under Nazi rule. The confrontation of her racism is revealed in highly symbolic terms, for instance, in the description of Cleopatra Maria’s hair when the group of women is just fifteen minutes away from the Falls: “Cleopatra Maria’s hair frizzes around her head like a halo, she forgot to bring her curlers and hair dryer, lost her barrette in the last hotel room. Her hair is free as a bird and so is she” (223). While this scene directly reflects Cleopatra Maria’s growing self-acceptance of her racial background, because of its direct parallel to the earlier scene in which Hannelore tries to straighten her granddaughter’s hair with her comb, it also alludes to Hannelore’s changing attitudes. Hannelore is now more concerned that her own blouse is clean, and thus a fitting tribute to the momentous events about to transpire, than she is with her granddaughter’s looks. Equally significant is the bright orange Niagara Ball she steals for her journey over the Falls: the Ball is modelled after the Plunge-O-Sphere used successfully by William Fitzgerald, a.k.a. Nathan T. Boya, a black man, in the early 1960s. Again, Mayr uses her epigraphs to provide a commentary on her main character’s development, this one taken from Berton’s book: “To this day nobody really knows what possessed William Fitzgerald to invest his life savings in a “Plunge-O-Sphere” so he could conquer the Falls. ... His words when he was taken from his odd craft in July 1961 give some hint as to his intentions. ‘I have integrated the Falls,’ he said” (Mayr 129). It is only fitting that Mayr’s

main character uses a replica of Boya's ball, of all the possible models in existence, for her journey as she works through her racism.

Hannelore's confrontation with her homophobia is revealed in more explicit terms. Strapped into the Ball and amid all the terrifying banging and crashing, she faces the truth about her sister: "this wasn't the way it was supposed to be, dead with lesbians, yes she's finally said the word, admits her eighty-five-year-old sister probably isn't going through a phase, she's known it ever since that terrible time in the war when Hannelore caught Clotilde kissing and hugging and kissing that, that *woman*" (60). Along with saying the word "lesbian," she calls her sister's lover by her first name for the first time: "Hannelore will never forgive herself for killing not only her sister but also Frau Schnadelhuber, no, no, Friedl, in her ridiculous Heidi uniform, her feathered hat pinned to her head" (61). Although the "enemies suddenly turned allies" (189) earlier in the novel when Hannelore enlists her help in stealing the Niagara Ball, Frau Schnadelhuber is finally personalized and not just appreciated for her use-value.

Once she confronts the Nazi heritage she internalized and never properly worked through, Hannelore can transform her life in other ways. Although she had sex with Hamish, she convinced herself it was "mostly only because of the Niagara Ball" (218). Now Hannelore experiences a sexual liberation and admits to wanting sex purely for the pleasure of sex: "Hannelore realizes she will need to find some sex, crashing, overwhelming Niagara Falls kind of sex, but soon" (248). The trip over the Falls also changes the lives of Frau Schnadelhuber and Clotilde: always proud of her large breasts, Frau Schnadelhuber poses topless for a Toronto art magazine and a San Francisco lesbian nude magazine and begins to wear "a purple push-up bra and jeans" to work instead of the corny Bavarian outfits mandated by her old boss (247); and Clotilde takes painting lessons from Rosario and creates pictures in which German yellow flowers and the Rocky Mountains appear together, thus merging her German and Canadian identities while bringing Rosario more fully into the family circle (247).

In addition, the three together create a women's community. When Hannelore, Clotilde, and Frau Schnadelhuber make twenty thousand dollars from a book deal about their feat — money they make because of their age, which they immediately proclaim to reporters and police when they emerge from the Niagara Ball (241) — they buy the German delicatessen where Frau Schnadelhuber had worked and transform it into

an establishment run by and for women: “The women who come there, come to put their feet up, to escape their families, or to find company and be visible in a group of very present women. The food is cheap and German and fills the stomach, doggie bags are mandatory even if there is no food left over” (247). Now nurturing the souls and stomachs of a company of women, all three have come a long way from looking after husbands, fathers, and sons. At their first sighting of Niagara Falls in 1971, Hannelore and Clotilde had stood in awe at what they considered the monstrosity of the scene: “Monstrous, said Clotilde, baby Cleopatra Maria vomiting peacock blue onto the napkin on Clotilde’s shoulder. Yes, monstrous, said Hannelore” (21). The novel clearly outlines that Hannelore, Clotilde, and Friedl succeed “because they do what Annie Taylor in 1901 refused to do” (241); they dare to be “monstrous,” that is, proclaim, not deny, their age and in doing so defy a society which considers them invisible, asexual, and worthless.

The image of female solidarity portrayed in the final pages of the novel also includes Annie Edson Taylor. As Hannelore, Clotilde, Friedl, and Cleopatra Maria near the Falls, Taylor’s ghost begins to haunt them. Threatened by the upstarts who might take away the title given to her by Niagara’s tourist industry, “Queen of the Mist,” Taylor attempts to scare them away, first in their hotel room when she strews mud and seaweed in a bathtub full of handwashed clothes and later in a bar when she impersonates a surly waitress and kicks them out, muttering then yelling, “Get outta the bar. Get outta this town” (226). The morning after the three women make their successful trip over the Falls, Cleopatra Maria uses her telepathic abilities to communicate with Taylor’s ghost. Sitting in a diner, Cleopatra Maria mentally travels to her gravesite and encounters a furious Taylor. Amid flying femurs, ribs, and knuckle bones, she convinces Taylor that while she is “not the oldest, not the last” she will always be “the first. The best. The bravest” (239). Appeased, Taylor joins the women at their table where “Cleopatra Maria pulls a handkerchief, more environmental than Kleenex, from her sleeve and offers it to Annie’s pocked and bloated, but well dressed, remains. So Annie can wipe away the tears and get on with her breakfast” (240). Given the sad conclusion to her life, Taylor has much to cry about: in spite of the fact that she risked her life to go over the Falls, she never made any significant money from her feat because both her managers, Frank M. Tussie and William A. Banks, abused her trust and stole her only asset, her barrel, thus ensuring her fate in the poorhouse. In a context of sisterhood and solidarity, the wiping away of her tears is

a symbolic erasure of the misogyny to which she and her story have been subjected and thus a symbolic release from a long patriarchal history.

Through Hannelore, Mayr locates *The Widows* in the context of debates in contemporary German historiography about Nazi brutality. With her fantasy of a pure homogenous German society, Mayr's main character highlights how the Nazi ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft* was anchored so deeply within the collective unconscious of the German nation that it continues to impact the beliefs and actions of its citizens more than half a century later. Hannelore's initial, and ultimately untenable, desire to repress any knowledge of Nazism and her role in the Third Reich provides a commentary on conservative factions in Germany which have wanted to make a clean break with the past rather than undergo the arduous and painful process of dealing with it directly. As the novel suggests, it is only through a confrontation with history that German citizens can experience a liberation, not only at the level of the individual citizen but at the level of the national polity as well. As the *Historikerstreit* so amply foregrounded in the late 1980s, the Nazi past is deeply imbricated in questions of German nationalism, past, present, and future.

Yet, as much as *The Widows* is framed within debates in contemporary German historiography, it is, finally, a novel of immigration. Thus, it explores some of our long-standing and troubling questions concerning Canadian identity, including how the immigrant brings Old World attitudes to the new country and how those attitudes shape and are shaped by the new country. In Mayr's novel, this reciprocal process of old-new world influence is represented largely through Hannelore's impact on her granddaughter's beliefs and behaviour (particularly with respect to Cleopatra Maria's denial of her racial heritage) and through her eventual jettisoning of her racist and homophobic attitudes at Niagara Falls. *The Widows* also examines what has been, since the 1970s, our own officially sanctioned ideology of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. Although the origins of official cultural pluralism in Canada are entirely different from those in Germany (located in the negative reactions to the early mandate of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, established in the 1960s,⁵ rather than in the post-war feelings of guilt and shame over the Holocaust), many critics have lamented how our new reality of cultural pluralism has not meant the end of a fantasy of a homogenous Anglocentric society. Recently, in a comparative study of

Canadian and American multicultural literature, Adam Weisman has lent his voice to the tradition of skepticism over the efficacy of Canada's multicultural policy within literary studies. Remarking on how it conceals racism, prejudice, and other social ills under a pluralist national myth, Weisman calls the policy "a coercive reductionism, not an embrace of Canadian diversity" (27).

Mayr locates her second novel within this tradition of skepticism by parodying popular historians such as Pierre Berton who have been so central in the construction of Canada's cultural memory in the contemporary multicultural moment but who, as Mayr emphasizes through her rereading of the historical figure of Annie Edson Taylor, exhibit an affinity for an Anglocentric male perspective. It is within this parodic intent that the introduction of fantastical elements at the novel's conclusion, primarily the appearance of Annie Edson Taylor's ghost and Cleopatra Maria's telepathic abilities, can be understood. These elements underscore the utopian nature of the ending: the newly established women's community run by three immigrant women, including the newly transformed Hannelore and two lesbian lovers, is a vision of a nation which truly incorporates difference into its daily life. In other words, it offers a vision of Canada as it could/should be, not as it is now. That Mayr, through her exploration of the two painful histories of Annie Edson Taylor and Nazi Germany, engages with some of the most crucial questions concerning Canadian identity today, particularly in a climate of erosion of multi-culturalism under the federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien,⁶ is a testament to the complexity of her novel, a complexity which so far has been overlooked in a focus on the novel's comic elements and its status, sold by its backcover copy and picked up on by reviewers, as an "action-adventure romance."

NOTES

¹ The *Historikerstreit* began in 1986 when Ernst Nolte, who had long held the controversial view that Bolshevik crimes maintained precedence over the Nazi racial extermination programme both chronologically and causally, published two essays in which he tried to elicit sympathy for the German soldiers who had fought Bolshevism on the eastern front and in which he claimed that the Holocaust was unique only in the technical means used. Jürgen Habermas quickly responded with a scathing critique of Nolte's "apologetic" arguments in *Die Zeit*, Germany's highbrow national press. As part of the conservative camp of historians, Nolte tried to resurrect public pride in being German; in contrast, Habermas pleaded for western values and constitutional patriotism as the basis for a new German identity. Historians in both camps quickly added their voices to the debate. For a full account of events, see the

original documents of the *Historikerstreit*, translated into English by Knowlton and Cates. For an overview, see Fulbrook, 121, 125-7 and Maier, 1-8, 47-56.

² Mayr uses the German spelling of Canada — Kanada — in the first part of the novel to emphasize Hannelore's strong association with and nostalgia for Germany.

³ Although Bohleber does not discuss the economic problems and ideological tensions surrounding national identity imposed by German unification in order to make his point about the importance of facing the Nazi past, both of these factors certainly played a role in the rise of rightwing extremism. The fact that West Germany felt it was carrying East Germany financially was compounded by the fact that they no longer shared a common idea of nationhood. In part, the absence of a shared group identity stemmed back to the aftermaths of the Second World War when both Germanies were forced to deal with Nazism and the Holocaust but ultimately did so in unique ways. As Mary Fulbrook suggests in *German National Identity After the Holocaust*, the two Germanies adopted very different collective histories of their roles in Nazism: heroism and resistance to Nazism became the founding myth of the new Soviet-occupied German Democratic Republic and ritualized collective shame and penance reigned in West Germany (28-47).

⁴ The National Youth Movement, which comprised the Hitler Jugend and Bund deutscher Mädel for ages fourteen to eighteen, as well as the Deutsches Jungvolk and Jungmädelsbund for ages ten to fourteen, was a crucial part of the Nazi regime's attempt to reorder German society in line with its ideological imperatives. As Peter D. Stachura notes in *Nazi Youth in the Weimar Republic*, membership in the various groups theoretically remained voluntary until 1939, at which time compulsory membership was implemented. Even while the state eventually forced all youth to join one of its groups, many children and adolescents did so of their own volition. As Lisa Pine outlines in her article "Girls in Uniform," girls in particular were often very attracted to the Bund deutscher Mädel (BDM) "because it allowed them to escape from their tedious home lives, where they were usually under the constant scrutiny of their parents. It gave them opportunities to get away on hikes and camping trips and to take part in group activities" (24). The BDM also broke old taboos that girls should not take part in sports in public. While in these respects the organization had a "modernizing and liberating effect on German girls," the main goal of the organization was to give systematic instruction on political events and Nazi norms and values (Pine 25). For girls, these norms included being domestically capable, as well as physically fit, healthy, clean, and well-dressed. Above all, the BDM girl was to be aware of her role as a future mother, which meant having both a knowledge of traditional songs, tales, and dances so that she could be a bearer of German culture and a belief in the racial-biological ideas of Nazism so that she would make the right choice of husband.

⁵ The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was originally established, as its name suggests, to study the possibility of establishing a new identity for Canada that would allow for the more amicable and equal sharing of power and culture by our two "founding" nations: French and English. The negative reaction from the regions and other groups to the Commission's aims led to a last-minute addition to its mandate: the study of the impact of ethnic groups on the fabric of Canadian society. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's official declaration of a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework in the House of Commons in 1971 has been seen as an awkward compromise between the original aims of the Commission and negative response to those aims. See Harney, 64-73.

⁶ See "Welcome/STAY OUT: The Contradiction of Canadian Integration and Immigration Policies at the Millennium," by Yasmeen Abu-Laban, for a convincing discussion of how the Liberal government under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has been characterized by a reduced emphasis on multiculturalism and an increasing emphasis on immigrant integration into Canadian society.

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