

# Arcadia's Borders: A Study on the Functions of Borders and Diasporic Border-Crossers in Catherine Bush's *The Rules of Engagement*

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## Introduction

In the last section of *A History of Canadian Literature*, W.H. New points to one of the vital currents in the nation's literature in the beginning of the new millennium: globalism. Within the context of globalism, characterized by its broader literary focus in the recurrent use of international media and non-Canadian settings in writing, the nationalism, the central issue of literature in Canada by the mid-1970s, becomes obsolete (New 293). Although New ignores this writer in his account of the history of Canadian literature, Catherine Bush (1961-) deserves to be placed in the new trend. The Toronto-born-novelist's globalism is particularly embodied in her descriptions of borders, cities, and transnational dwellers with diasporic backgrounds. Marking her three novels, *Minus Time* (1993), *The Rules of Engagement* (2000), and her latest, *Claire's Head* (2005) with her elaborate understanding of urban dwelling in the twenty first century, she remarks:

For me, cities are both a place of obvious disconnection and a place of an intimacy, a charged intimacy just because you are living with so many people. The way people who live really disparate lives brush against each other in the Underground in London or on a streetcar in Toronto--that kind of near intimacy where people are shoved together and you never know what is going to be sparked by those kind[s] of connections.

(Bush, "Conversation" 13)

Among her three novels, this article will explore *The Rules of Engagement* by focusing on borders and border crossers in the novel. Bush edifies her support of postcolonial understanding of porous borders<sup>(1)</sup> in the representation

of Arcadia's liberation from dualisms that isolate her from the others. The Canadian narrator recreates her concept of borders, from one which entraps her in one side of the dualistic world, to the porous borders that she can go beyond if her moral requires through her engagements with transnational diasporas introduced by her border-crossing sister in postcolonial metropolises.

### **I. Arcadia's Dualisms and Borders**

Bush weaves *The Rules of Engagement* from the liberation narratives of three immigrants: Arcadia Hearne, Amir Barmour, and Basra Alale. They crisscross in London, England, where they fled from the violence in their native lands. Arcadia escaped from Toronto where her boyfriends, Neil Laurier and Evan Biederman, fought a duel over her. While Arcadia sought London as a refuge from the personal conflict, other two sought the city as a political refuge from their homes in war zones: Iran and Somalia.

Tim Cresswell argues in "Imagining the Nomad: Mobility and the Postmodern Primitive" that conceptual dualisms are modernist thought system "tethered to the geography of here and there" (367). Entrapped by this system in the beginning of the story, Arcadia dualistically captures London as "here" and Toronto as "there." In addition, Arcadia lays her mental map over the spatial map and assigns dualistic spatial characteristics to each city. Through her habitual remembrance of the Toronto experience in London during her geographical disconnection from Toronto for ten years, Arcadia has reinvented Toronto as a dangerous place opposing "a sort of" safe London (27). For Arcadia, the engagements with risks do not belong to her present life in London so that she avoids anything potentially dangerous. These opposing sets also construct Arcadia herself as a war intervention researcher in London; appreciating her father's detached coolness as a scientist, she has been strictly theoretical in practice, neither traveling to war zones nor engaging in any personal actions.

Arcadia's search of safety is not limited to her separation from Toronto. In her attempt to insulate herself from risks, she confines herself in the space where she believes it is safe; for example, she seldom leaves London, particularly, the triangle of her apartment, her office in the Centre for

Contemporary War Studies, and research rooms at the British War Museum, except for well planned, safe business travels or for the occasional family reunions away in Europe, in which she knows whom she meets and where she stays. Her self-containment in favor of safety is particularly represented by her spatial preferences within London. She spends most of her time in small and secure compartments often fortified with gates, walls, and gardens. The rooms are not located on the ground level as if to avoid contact with the outside. For instance, she prefers her apartment and the research rooms in the War Museum to her shared office in the Centre, which is reasonably well protected in the second floor of the office of a barrister, but has office mates, loose windows, and information cables connected to the outer world (15). A further examination of her favorite places reveals how rigidly she insulates herself from risks. Arcadia's basement apartment, whose bedroom does not have even a window, is described as a "white cocoon" or a "haven within these four walls" (13). The apartment is protected by a gate, a small garden, and soil from invasions. Her flowerbed in the garden, which itself implies the safety of cultivation rather than the violence associated with hunting,<sup>(2)</sup> is carefully surrounded by bricks. Arcadia's favorite research rooms have soundproofed doors to shut down the artificial noise of war in the museum, and she is "unlikely to be disturbed" (19) there. The research rooms are in the museum near the police station's parking enclosed by "the spiked metal top grill" (18). Between the police office and the museum, there are more cushions: the pastoral green grounds where people peacefully spend their time (18).

In addition to her spatial isolation, her avoidance of contacts from outside, which are potential risks, comes into view in her modes of communication. She attempts to be anonymous in London. Arcadia's "battered" *London A-Z* (30) and sensitivities to foreign pronunciations in English language of others are reflections of her own effort to erase the trace of her North Americanness and to pass as a Londoner. Not only disguising herself as a local woman, she also avoids active communications with people in the rest of London. She wears sunglasses even in the Underground (14); she frequently turns the phone off and uses the answering machine in her apartments (79); and she

evades romantic relationships that traumatized her in the past. Her perception of being in love as a potential danger is evidenced by her decisions to break up with her former boyfriends when she saw the risks such as the sickness (52-54) and the gun (74-75) in their hypothetically safe bedrooms. She even thinks that having lunch with Amir is a potential danger (51).

## II. From Insulated Borders to Porous Borders

However, Bush does not allow Arcadia to disconnect herself from risks with such borders. As critics of postcolonialism claim, borders are thresholds that “both separate and join different places” (McLeod 217). In support of such postcolonial thought, Bush creates porous borders which appear as, for example, the imperfect insulation of the walls in *The Rules of Engagement*.

In the novel, diaspora communities in London are, on a superficial level, described as segregated places from Arcadia’s dualistic perspective. As well as her own apartment, diaspora communities tend to decline the easy access of outsiders with closed doors and walls. Unlike the wide open Café Olé in the central location, where Arcadia and her sister Lux meet, the diaspora-run Good Grub Café, on the back street where Arcadia has to “[slung her] bag across [her] chest, hand tight on it,” has been “invisible” in her *London A-Z* (31). The sign on the door says “CLOSED” and the interiors are mostly “covered”; curtains cover the windows as red velvet does the walls (32). However, these covers are, in fact, imperfect insulators; the curtains are “net curtains” that “yellow light shown within” can go through (32); the cover of the door is “opaque” but “lace” so that it cannot perfectly interrupt the view from outside (32); and beneath the velvet, there must be communication lines to connect the property with the rest of the world.

In this regard, readers will find that even Arcadia’s security walls and gates paradoxically exemplify the fragility of borders. Her favorite research rooms’ doors are soundproofed, but are made of glass that everyone can see through (55). The cement foundation of her apartment is “cracking” (11). The sterilized white walls in her heavily fortified apartment connect her cocoon with the outside world. Placed upon one wall is a world map with shifting borders. Beneath the same walls are laid communication lines of

telephone, fax, cable TV, and the Internet (13). Global media breaches the walls of her apartment. In the London haven, Arcadia watches Lux's world music program "Mundo." Its international contents are broadcasted beyond national borders from Toronto. The most obvious of those porous borders is, however, the Atlantic. Although the body of water between Toronto and London can be a strong border to prevent one from traveling, the traffic between the two cities has never ceased since the colonization of North America by Europeans centuries ago.

Furthermore, there is something whose passage cannot be halted by any artificial borders: imagination. Although she is geographically separated from Toronto and the duel, Arcadia still reads the map of Ontario over that of London (Ball 83-84). She sees the Ottawa Eaton's escalator where the London Underground escalator lies; Omega Place evokes the clearing in Toronto where her narcissistic boyfriend Evan cut "O" for Omega on his bare chest with his knife; and she is drawn to the London canals which are the reminder of ravines in Toronto, where her boyfriends fought the duel. Bush also layers Arcadia's private war history in Toronto over British public war history in London by using Arcadia's imagination. Although she claims that the history of wars that she finds everywhere in London is not her own (38), what Arcadia studies in London is the theory of war intervention, the metaphysical elaboration of what she could have done to prevent the duel in Toronto, although she had not been able to exercise it yet at the beginning of the novel.

Not only the imperfectness of Arcadia's border construction, but also the omnipresence of Toronto in her imagination suggests that Arcadia's mental state is suspended in-between two seemingly opposite sites: Toronto and London. The ambivalence of Arcadia's mental state that shuttles between these two places can be understood as her transitory state preparing for the border-crossing following Homi Bhabha's argument in *The Location of Culture* (1-2). The border is a space of conflict where one contemplates the two opposites and often creates new out of this struggle. Her slow transition in this border state is represented through her act of continuous walking in London that overlaps with the method of Amir and Basra's escapes from the war zones;

walking across the borders in the deserts in their search of refugees.

### **III. Diasporic Border Crossers as Agents of Change**

Porous borders are made to be penetrated. To facilitate Arcadia's transition beyond the borders, mental as well as geographical, Bush creates transnational characters such as Lux, Basra, and Amir to force Arcadia to reconsider her dualisms. They, especially the latter two who have diasporic backgrounds, function as agents of change to deploy Arcadia's past in the present and convolute it as a hybridized new life as diaspora people recreate their identities through their migrations. Arcadia has constructed her own migrant identity in the traditional international model that depends on the one-way transition to assimilation that starts from where one is from (there) and where one is now (here). However, Arcadia's assimilation into London is incomplete because she cannot overcome her past Toronto experience. Consequently, Arcadia, who is programmed to cross the border between Toronto and London once and cross no other borders, is permanently suspended between the two cities in this model until she learns to acquire a different model.

Unlike Arcadia, the other three's lives are conducted within the transnational model of border crossers. They are prepared to move across multiple borders so that their lives cannot be understood in the simple dualistic here/there model. Moreover, with their border-crossing habits, they are never limited to one side of an opposing set like Arcadia.<sup>(3)</sup> Lux shares an apartment in Toronto with her dancer girlfriend although neither Lux nor Haydee stays there long enough to be rooted due to their frequent transnational business trips. Lux, who has her home in Toronto where she was born, is not a diaspora. However, she is still an extensive transnational traveler and a strong border crosser. Bush's construction of Lux as a sexually ambiguous lesbian also emphasizes her role as a border character. The two diasporic people in the novel, Basra and Amir, are typical cases of transnational border crossers. Their homes have been on the move. Basra is preparing to move to a Somali diaspora in Dixon, Toronto, from Somalia via Kenya and London, in the middle of the novel. Amir, who is from Iran went through

Pakistan, Germany, Paris, and lives in London for twelve years changing his residence occasionally.

Arcadia's porous borders are devised to let these agents go through her space: her safe London cocoon and her body. Bush gives these agents names that suggest their roles in the story. Lux, whose name means "light," first travels through the borders Arcadia has set up. These borders include the ocean, national borders, and her apartment walls. Lux is a trickster of the novel; not only does she initiate Arcadia's transformation process, she also transforms Neil Laurier's life by randomly telling him Arcadia is in China.<sup>(4)</sup> As an initial vehicle to connect Arcadia's dualistically fragmented mental and spatial life, Lux uses her special status as a sister for whom Arcadia feels she owes emotional baggage, having left Lux behind in Toronto. Knowing that Arcadia cannot decline her request, Lux forcefully involves Arcadia, who fears the risks of taking action, in the humanitarian war intervention: delivering money to Basra (24). This singular, supposedly simple, task moves Arcadia beyond her border as a safety-oriented theorist.

As a sequence of this involvement, Arcadia eventually goes beyond other borders. The following comparison of Arcadia's remarks about her perception of the link between knowledge and action reveals her gradual shift. Before she meets Basra, Arcadia clearly defends her attitude as a detached theorist: "The work I do is perfectly valid. I am a theorist. I hardly need to race about the globe. Besides, I value safety" (27). However, after her involvement in Basra's issue, Arcadia starts to wonder if it is possible to separate herself from the actual war intervention knowing what is going on (110). Furthermore, when she finds Amir's passport business that facilitates Basra's border-crossing, Arcadia comes to realize the invalidness of her isolationism: "Once you know them, you're in, you're implicated" (133).

Bush creates the structure in which the liberation of Basra from her troubles and that of Arcadia overrides. In other words, Arcadia is released from her dualisms through the border-crossing engagement with the Somali who is charged with mobility. The author employs Basra who shares the first names signifying lost cities and troubles caused by males. This enables Arcadia to project herself in Basra to foster her engagement. Basra, whose

name is derived from the Middle Eastern war-torn city, is fleeing from the civil war and likewise from her ethnic communities both in Africa and London because of her resistance to clan customs that require her to surrender to males. Introduced by Lux, Basra, reengages Arcadia with both past Toronto and the present reality of war. Simultaneously, Basra gives Arcadia a chance to go across additional borders by asking the war intervention researcher to deliver a passport to her sister in a Kenyan refugee camp from Toronto.

Arcadia's trip to see the result of her present intervention in Basra's conflict is designed to take Arcadia back to Toronto to face the consequence of her unexecuted intervention in the past duel. Before she decides to save Basra's sister with her motivation, Arcadia must see the result of the duel as well as that of Basra's flight to be successful contrary to her expectations. Her Toronto visit is necessary to rationalize and accept the needs of active interventions in spite of potential risks.

Amir is an agent to propel the movement of the women toward Toronto. Preparing her forged passport, he assists Basra's flight from London to Toronto. Therefore, although it is Lux who introduces Basra to Arcadia, and Basra who invites Arcadia to the further engagements in the present war zone, Amir, whose name means "conductor" in Arabic, enables Arcadia's geographical border-crossing journeys following the Alale sisters to Toronto and Kenya in practice. Amir has a complex of border-crossing occupations that make himself a strong agent of change for Arcadia. In addition to the passport forging business, he works as a copy shop worker, an English as a Second Language teacher, and a Farsi-English translator. Notably, his businesses all involve transformation.

In addition, another border-crossing engagement, the romantic relationship of Arcadia and Amir beyond their racial, socio-cultural, and philosophical differences, solidifies the initial engagement between Basra and Arcadia. Not only for the technical need of a passport forger, Arcadia also needs Amir to revise her intervention policy to go beyond her borders. The image of "penetration" along with the porous borders pervades their relationship. The border crosser technically guides Arcadia's transnational journey; he makes love to her passing through her borders against risks



created by her “history of bad romantic luck” (51); he influences her mind through their arguments over their intervention policies in the war period in the way only a romantic partner can do. Furthermore, to deepen the relationship, he takes a risk and shares his own fleeing history and involves her in his job by asking her for a passport delivery. These possibly dangerous information disclosures can be understood as Amir allowing Arcadia to see his side of the borders.

It is during one of these arguments that Arcadia finds the clue to connect the opposing sets in her dualistic mode of thinking: London/Toronto, present/past, safety/risk, and theory/action. Amir’s world, which is constructed from his multiple border-crossing experiences, is not controlled by dualisms like Arcadia’s. Moreover, unlike Arcadia who cannot connect her past and present, he finely converges his past as a refugee from a war zone who has gone through multiple national borders and his present in London through his active intervention policy as a trespassing agent without falling into passivity. Facing Arcadia’s strong accusation of his business, not because of its ethical fallacy but because of his risk taking, Amir attacks Arcadia who has enough personal and academic knowledge about fleeing, but selfishly detaches from the risks. Amir clearly explicates his position in interventions:

You know the conditions under which people flee, how they flee wars. You write about intervention. You’re the specialist, aren’t you? Right, then--why not think of this as my private act of intervention--or my small gesture in an era of globalization. Free up the transit of people. Make borders a little more porous. (145)

Concurrently, he rationalizes the presence of risk in any serious engagements for Arcadia to encourage her reconciliation with her past Toronto experience: “Isn’t that the question, really, Arcadia? It is, isn’t it? What are the risks that you’d be willing to take?” (145-46).

Being struck by Amir’s persuasive argument, Arcadia dares to cross the borders to converge her fragmented worlds in her search of Basra’s safety and the result of the duel in Toronto. The representation of border-crossing

frequently includes the images of water in this novel. The water bodies such as rivers, canals, ravines, and the ocean function as the critical mediations of transformation and rebirth of Arcadia. The ever-moving substance is a typical literary device to represent transitions as well as borders (Ball 85). As the major shifts in her past relationships happen near water, the duel in the ravine and the separation from Martin on the bridge (90), for instance, the water appears in the crucial moments over the development of the relationship between Arcadia and Amir. Arcadia is “bathed in sweat” in her bed with Amir for the first time (108). Arcadia tries to catch Amir for their first lunch at the War Museum along the canal in London. The canal is described as a site of continuous change; the nameless boats float on the water while pedestrians ceaselessly walk and disappear under the bridges without any trace on the path besides the canal (48).

Markedly, it is in one of the boats on the canal, in which Amir hides after he freed a Kurdish man, that Arcadia gets the clue to realize the need of risk taking in the engagement. Bush represents Arcadia’s drastic change in her mental state from this boat scene, the moment of vacillation of her dualisms that shut the others out, in the form of her consecutive geographical water border-crossings: the canal and the Atlantic. The transition is dramatized by Bush’s synchronized employment of the image of birth canals and rebirth during her travel. Arcadia walks through “a tiny door into the narrow galley” (138) to confront Amir over his stance in the intervention. Arcadia leaps from the boat and swims across the canal after learning of his dangerous and criminal business (132-46). Leaving her old soaked clothes in London, she flies across the Atlantic (150-51) and walks through “the long corridor of the terminal” (155) to be born again in Toronto, in the sun once more after ten years. Arcadia’s condition of “beyond,” according to Homi Bhabha, allows an active contemplation which results in the creation of groundbreaking ideas (10). During her flight over the Atlantic, she meditates on Amir’s comment about interventions: “*What risks, though what I heard was not only risks, but what borders are you prepared to cross?*” (151).

Gone through the re-birth process, Arcadia reemerges in Toronto as a new person so long away from home that a young taxi driver fails to recognize

her as a foreigner (156). By the time Arcadia arrives in the Canadian metropolis, she has learned the possibility of border-crossing from transnational border crossers. In her reunited world, she is no longer detached from the conceptual others. Four months after Lux's London visit, Arcadia formulates a holistic theory that unites her previously fragmented life on the way to revisit the ravine in the dawn, significantly, the border moment between day and night:

Everything converges. Are we to intervene or not? Who are we to let slip within our borders? Who's a stranger? Whom do we allow ourselves to love? [. . .] And there is something to be gained in the attempt at explanation, by offering some sort of testimony, for private acts as well as public ones, despite the gaps and distortions--and that this is different from simply accruing information, and, in the end, this is the knowledge I've come to believe in (279-80).

In Toronto, Arcadia converges her past private war experience and her present specialty in the public war intervention studies, and regains her will to take action. Here, she faces the consequences of the duel that she could not stop so that it "twisted" and "reshaped" her and her boyfriends' lives (291). Therefore, to prevent further avoidable miseries, in her new Toronto, she starts to take others inside her safe haven that could barely accommodate herself a few months ago by her choice of risks of intervention: the Alale sisters in Toronto and Kenya, who are on the way to the reunion in Toronto, and Amir hiding in her apartment after helping his last client in the end of story.

## **Conclusion**

In the final two paragraphs, Arcadia is resolute. She reaffirms her plan to visit Sudan in addition to Kenya in the future tense, again, over the Atlantic on her return to London. Arcadia is no more an irresponsible victim without agency and vision. Arcadia has obtained her mental as well as physical mobility to choose her risk and act beyond borders if her new ethic requires.

Through out the novel, Catherine Bush represents Arcadia's mental states in relation to her geographic state. The traumatized mentality of Arcadia Hearne in the beginning, which is described in her conceptual and geographic dualisms that create opposing sets by borders, leads her to isolation from the others in London. However, her fragmented world is united through her mental and geophysical border-crossings. As vehicles to foster Arcadia's border-crossing habits, Bush employs transnational border characters often with diasporic backgrounds in two postcolonial transnational metropolises, London and Toronto. Bush's understanding of a city as a place of both disconnection and intimacy is rather exceptional in Canadian writings that tend to employ a city as a location of urban isolation set against idealized rural intimacy (Rigelhof 215-16). This concept of city is crucial in the narrative construction of this novel.

The employment of metropolis setting, where there is ceaseless traffic of information and people, is important as a premise of the characters' random encounter as well as the impossibility of Arcadia's isolation policy under the conditions. In particular, Bush's choice of London, the capital of the former British Empire in which Canada and Somalia were colonies, is appropriate as the central location of this story because London is permanently changing through its access to and from the former colonies through its porous borders.<sup>(5)</sup> As a result of border-crossings enabled by her interactions with transnational border characters, in the end of the novel, Arcadia grows out of her passivity that keeps her isolated within a safe haven.

Nearly thirty-five years have passed since Margaret Atwood's *Survival* problematized the victim complex in Canadian literature. However, John Ralston Saul still laments for the Canadian "mythology of victimization" that leads Canadians to "a comfortable position of passivity" (16). Focusing an urban Canadian female's growth as an active subject with mobility on, Catherine Bush's *The Rules of Engagement* challenges some of the traditional Canadian representations in Canadian writings in the new millennium.

## Notes

- (1) Different matters are “always leaking into each other” through porous borders. These borders assist hybridizations (McLeod 228). As for the importance of hybridity in postcolonialism, see Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*.
- (2) Arcadia shares the dualistic thought system with her parents. The parents’ dualism particularly appears as Canada/U.S. dualism, a typical binary set that is often found in Canadian writings. In their minds, Canada is a safe country against the dangerous United States. For example, her nuclear engineer father characterizes aggressive American nuclear engineers as “nuclear cowboys” while calling safety-oriented Canadian equivalent as “nuclear fishermen”(176); her mother does not let her children watch TV because she thinks it is “too American or too violent”(22).
- (3) According to Scott and Marshall, the model of *international* migration, which is more inclined to emphasize the “unidirectional flows and influences” that uproot migrants from their societies and cultures of origin and their assimilation into the new countries. Besides, the focus of this model is only on the two places: where migrants are from and where they are now. On the other hand, the model of *transnational* migration, which has become influential along with the burgeoning of diaspora studies in the late 1980s, calls more attention to a series of shifting and contested boundaries that migrants go beyond while they keep their distinctive cultural identities through the developed global media and transportations system (par.5).
- (4) Lux tells Neil that Arcadia is in China when she catches a phone call from Neil after his recovery (298). In search of Arcadia, Neil, once a philosophy graduate student, moves to China and teaches English there. Later, he involves with Chinese criminal cases in Vancouver as a lawyer before his sudden death in a strange car accident, which may be a foul play related to his job.
- (5) In postcolonial understanding, a colonizer and its colonies influence each other. Therefore, as McLeod argues, while the British colonized people in other countries, they “too [were] changed forever by its colonial encounters” (205).

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