

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT LITHUANIA IN LITHUANIAN-CANADIAN FICTION WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

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Among the very small number of literary texts produced by Lithuanian-Canadians in English, there are two novels that deal with the theme of ethnic identity, Magdelana Raškevičiūtė Eggleston's *Mountain Shadows* (1955) and Antanas Šileika's *Buying on Time* (1997).¹ In sharp contrast to writings in Lithuanian produced by Lithuanian-Canadians, which tend to be strongly patriotic and nostalgic about the homeland, these two texts show a marked ambivalence towards Lithuania and Lithuanianism. However, this ambivalence would be read very differently by readers who are or who are not Lithuanian, especially as both novels present Lithuanianism in the context of the problem of Canadian identity. This study will consider how different elements in both Raškevičiūtė Eggleston's *Mountain Shadows* and Šileika's *Buying on Time* provoke very diverse interpretations by readers of different ethnic origins.

The theoretical basis for this approach to these novels is reader-response theory, including such basic ideas as Wolfgang Iser's assertion that

one text is potentially capable of several different realizations... each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities (quoted in Green and LeBihan 185).

This notion has helped formulate this analysis of *Mountain Shadows* and *Buying on Time*, but it does not go quite as far as the analysis requires in distinguishing different groups of potential readers. In the present analysis, the principal emphasis will be on readers who are contemporary in time, yet ethnically diverse. They may be divided into the following groups of readers:

Canadians who are not Lithuanian;
Lithuanian-Canadians;
Lithuanians who are not Canadian.

Other groups are possible (for example, readers who are neither Canadian nor Lithuanian), but the present analysis is concerned only with the three listed.

The writers in their historical context

Lithuanian settlement in Canada is usually divided into two distinct historical periods. Magdelana Raškevičiūtė Eggleston, born in 1907 of Lithuanian immigrant parents, belonged to the first period. From the beginning of the 20th century to the start of the Great depression in 1930, Lithuanians settled in Canada wherever work could be found. Like the heroine of her novel, Raškevičiūtė Eggleston grew up in small coal-mining towns in western Canada, where Lithuanians were not numerous and were only one of a large number of ethnic groups. Unlike the majority of Lithuanian-Canadians of this period, however, Raškevičiūtė Eggleston, through education and marriage, integrated herself into the dominant English culture of Canada. Her husband, Wilfrid Eggleston, was a well-known journalist, head of censorship during the Second World War, and founder of the School of Journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa. The Lithuanian community in Canada

from which Raškevičiūtė Eggleston came was never very large - possibly about 8,000 people just before - and the writer herself never lived in one of the urban centers in which an organized Lithuanian cultural life existed.

Antanas Šileika, born in 1953, belongs to the second major wave of Lithuanian immigration to Canada, one that took place after the Second World War, its members were political refugees who had remained in Displaced Persons camps in Europe after the war rather than return to a homeland occupied by the Soviet Union. Larger in numbers (about 30,000) and with many well-educated members, this group created a dense network of organizations designed to preserve Lithuanianism in the second and subsequent generations. Šileika grew up in the Toronto area and is currently active within the Lithuanian-Canadian community. He has also become a member of the English-Canadian cultural community as a writer, editor and reviewer.

The stories of Mountain Shadows and Buying on Time

Mountain Shadows depicts the multiethnic mining community of Coaltown in the western Canadian mountains around 1920. Maggie Mileris, sixteen years old, finds herself psychologically divided between her Lithuanian family and the dominant English culture of her society. A pretty girl, who attracts men, she is tempted to decide her future by uniting herself with one man or another, but eventually resolves to become a schoolteacher and help the immigrants, Lithuanians among them, to understand and appreciate their true Canadian identity.

Antanas Šileika covers a longer time period in the linked stories that make up the novel *Buying on Time*, but his main focus is also on an adolescent's coming of age. Dave is divided between mingled affection and rebellion against his immigrant parents and allegiance to the English values of the community around him. Šileika's novel is set in the new suburb of Weston, just outside Toronto in the 1950s and, like Raškevičiūtė Eggleston, Šileika is very interested in analyzing the particularities of this community under formation.

Both novels have strong autobiographical elements; both are set in the Canadian communities in which their authors grew up, and both have as their principal characters young, second-generation Lithuanian-Canadians.

A Canadian reading of Mountain Shadows and Buying on Time

For a Canadian reader who is not Lithuanian, *Mountain Shadows* reflects the buoyant optimism of the 1950s (it was published in 1955) and an emerging sense of Canadian national identity. Through the mind of her young heroine, Raškevičiūtė Eggleston depicts a multiethnic community, Coaltown, in which difference and Otherness are taken for granted by the first-generation immigrants who inhabit it. Maggie's parents live largely within a Lithuanian social circle: her mother frequently retreats from the frustrations of her marriage and life in Coaltown to blissful reading of her Lithuanian-American newspaper, with its articles on Lithuanian diaspora events south of the border, while her father finds release in retelling the legends of his homeland to gatherings of his equally nostalgic friends.

In the second generation, however, psychological ghettos are beginning to collapse. Maggie's friends are Polish, Ukrainian, Italian and English; two of them are planning the town's first boundary-crossing marriage, between a British girl and a "foreign" (i.e., non-British) man. An Anglo visitor to Coaltown surprises the young people by preaching integration through education and the creation of a new Canadian identity, a cause that Maggie takes up enthusiastically at the close of the novel. This optimistic faith in the integrating power of education is also typical of the 1950s. None of the problems that currently divide Canada have much reality in this novel: there are no regional conflicts, no French-English disputes, and only a brief allusion to the existence of a native population (*Mountain Shadows* 33). To a Canadian reader of today, the novel seems naive and simplistic, yet somewhat attractive for its picture of a less troubled kind of Canadianism.

In *Buying on Time* the main character's ethnic crisis is less evident to a Canadian reader, since it is masked by his conflict with his father, who is depicted as a (comically) tyrannical power within the family. The narrator, Dave, is deeply embarrassed not only by his father's broken English, but also by his vulgarity and rudeness. Embarrassment over his father's crudeness, rebellion against his tyranny and admiration for his father's ability to maneuver and manipulate within a foreign society alternate within the young narrator; in the final stories, filial affection becomes the dominant tone. This affection is strengthened throughout the story by a deep nostalgia for the pioneering stage of suburban life and the consumer pleasures of the 1950s. For a Canadian reader, nostalgia is probably the principal attraction of these stories, as the brand names, television programs and ritual moments of suburban life (paving driveways, buying the first television, watching hockey games on TV) are evoked and celebrated.

Lithuanian and Lithuanian-Canadian readings of Mountain Shadows and Buying on Time

For readers of *Mountain Shadows* who are Lithuanian-Canadian or from Lithuania, the internal struggle between Maggie's Lithuanian roots and an English-Canadian identity cannot be read in a neutral fashion. Even the heroine's decision at the close of the story to try to Canadianize the ethnic community seems a betrayal of Lithuanian values. Moreover, this kind of reader is more sensitive to the frequently negative association that Lithuania and Lithuanians develop throughout Raškevičiūtė Eggleston's novel.

The word "Lithuanian" is repeated over twenty times in the course of the narrative. On the fourth page of the book, Maggie's drowsy morning reflections in bed are interrupted by her mother's cry:

'Maggie, aren't you ever gettin' up? Lyin' there like a big cow.'

Mama's strident, angry tones cut across her reveries, shattering the exquisite stillness... She'd changed from the broken English of a moment ago to her own Lithuanian, and the words poured round and through Maggie like hot coals. (*Mountain Shadows* 4)

Here, the first of many words given in Lithuanian also appear, with their translation into English provided in brackets:

What kind of daughter am I bringing up, anyway? Dieva! Dieva! (God! God!) (*Mountain Shadows* 4)

Negative uses of the word 'Lithuanian' are mostly associated with Mama and her bad temper. They also appear in references to the Lithuanian-American weekly newspaper that Mama subscribes to: Maggie never even considers looking at this paper and sees no point in her parents' subscription to it, calling it "a silly old paper." (*Mountain Shadows* 32)

There are some positive uses of the Lithuanian language in the novel. Papa's nickname for his daughter, "Širdelė",² (translated as "Little Heart," though "Sweetheart" would be more appropriate) appears very frequently. The Lithuanian language is also associated with Maggie's aunt, a character who is presented very sympathetically. Lithuanianism is also present in the names of some of the characters. Maggie's father is referred to as Petras, the Lithuanian version of Peter, her mother as Marcella, while her aunt is given not only the typical Lithuanian first name of Ona (Ann), but also a Lithuanian surname, Sparauskienė. (*Mountain Shadows* 80) Some of the Lithuanian friends who come to the Mileris party are also given typically Lithuanian names: Mateusas Rugys, Juozas Smitas, Antanas Zinkus, Pranas Baras, Justinas Kuzma.

Finally, Lithuanian terms are used nostalgically to refer to Lithuanian food, of which there is more than one highly sensual description in the narrative:

(pastry called *auselės*, or "little ears") ...delectable little cakes of flour and egg, rolled finely, cut in small diamond shapes with a slit in the center, through which one end of the diamond was pulled, making a twisted knot. These were fried in deep fat, and sprinkled with icing sugar... So light and crisp and faintly sweet it was, as soon as her teeth touched it, it disintegrated, but she caught it in time, holding pieces in her palm and munching them. (*Mountain Shadows* 78)

(*blynai*, or potato pancakes)... rolling one up carefully, like a jellyroll, her fingers covered with the lard in which they'd been fried, she took a large mouthful, chewing ravenously. The grated potato, the slight tang of onion, the crusty surface... (*Mountain Shadows* 153)

There is also a detailed and appreciative description of Mama frying wild mushrooms with bacon and onion. Hunting for wild mushrooms, as Maggie and her father do, is a Lithuanian custom, while the description of the mushroom feast is one of the rare moments in the novel in which Maggie's family is seen in a state of harmony and mutual love. (*Mountain Shadows* 187-188)

Nevertheless, discussions about the value of Lithuanianism in *Mountain Shadows* have negative or at best ambivalent overtones. Maggie's mother more than once comments on her daughter's rejection of her Lithuanian heritage. "Lithuanian manners aren't good enough for the little lady," she cries bitterly in one of the nastiest descriptions of confrontation between her and Maggie:

She [Mama] paused for breath, saliva coating her lips. When she resumed, her voice dropped to a deep, throaty snarl. Maggie, cringing, looking on in horror, didn't know which was worse, the screaming or the snarling. (*Mountain Shadows* 159)

The images of a repulsive physicality ("saliva coating her lips") and bestiality ("deep, throaty snarl") are part of a pattern in the novel that link ethnic minority cultures with the animal world or unpleasant bodily functions.³

Maggie's English friend, Paul Warren, offers an ambivalent assessment of the value of her Lithuanianism. He urges Maggie "to be proud of your Lithuanian descent," calling the Lithuanians "a fine people... the oldest race in Europe." (*Mountain Shadows* 69). However, he also tells the girl and her friends that their parents cannot offer them any help in creating their future: "the new world is new to them, too. They do not know its ways, they do not know its language, they cannot help you." (*Mountain Shadows* 206) He advises Maggie to change her name to another diminutive for Margaret, Peggy, a name that is typically Scottish, and so associated with one of the ethnically dominant groups in Canada. Maggie's decision to become Peggy at the close of the novel is part of her decision to modify her ethnic background to become a powerful instrument of Canadianization as a teacher within her ethnic community.

Lithuania itself fares even worse in the novel than Lithuanianism or the Lithuanian language. References to the country are relatively rare. It is the country of the romantic Birutė and Kęstutis legend that Maggie's father retells during a party. Maggie is first drawn in by his narration, but then experiences her first conscious revulsion against this demonstrative attachment to the homeland:

their [the Lithuanian guests'] spirits were thousands of miles away... each was home in his province, back to the scenes of his or her childhood. Maggie felt she was seeing them for the first time. *They are doing it all over Coaltown tonight, not only here. The Slavs. The Ukrainians. The Italians. The Finns. The Germans. Wherever there are enough of them to make a gathering.*

What then were they doing in Canada?... Why had they come? This whole Sunday afternoon was a Lithuanian Sunday afternoon! In the length of time she'd been in the house there'd been no talk of Canada, not one Canadian bit of news. Everything was Lithuanian, Lithuanian, here in Canada, in Coaltown in this so new province of Alberta... If they were Canadians, shouldn't they be talking about Canada, improving the present, planning the future, perhaps learning to be better Canadians? (*Mountain Shadows* 122-123; italics in original)

Lithuania remains a shadow country, part of the Old World that the novel speaks out against. Even the snobbish English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Garner, eventually reject their homeland values:

When we leave the Old Country behind, we should leave the old habits, the old ways too. They do not fit into this new world. (*Mountain Shadows* 235)

The homeland, the country of origin, is something to be repudiated, and its inferiority to the new place, Canada, something that Maggie takes for granted. At the close of the novel she reflects that "the fact that they'd [the immigrants] left the Old Country to look for something better in a new land spoke well for them." (*Mountain Shadows* 252) In this case, even the act of leaving the homeland can be approved of as a hopeful mark of intelligence in the immigrants.

If Lithuania is present, but negated, in Magdelana Eggleston's *Mountain Shadows*, it is paradoxically both absent and negated in Antanas Šileika's *Buying on Time*. This seems strange, because the author's name on the second novel is, to a Lithuanian, immediately identifiable as Lithuanian. Even the fact that the first name, Antanas, has not been converted into its English equivalent, Anthony, is significant to the Lithuanian reader, who so rarely finds traces of Lithuanianism in the English-language world.⁴ Expectations of a Lithuanian theme are raised in both the Lithuanian and the Lithuanian-Canadian reader by the autobiographical form taken by the narrative: the thirteen stories that form the novel recount the childhood and adolescence of a boy from an immigrant family living in Weston, just outside of Toronto.

On the very first page, there are references to the family as being "DPs" (that is, Displaced Persons, or refugees, after the Second World War) and to their belonging to an ethnic group classified with "the Italians, Poles, and Ukrainians," and not the higher-status English or Germans. (*Buying on Time* 9) The Lithuanian reader waits for a clearer identification of the boy and his family as Lithuanian, but they wait in vain, or almost so, for it is only five pages from the end of the novel that the word 'Lithuania' appears - and appears only once - in a discussion between the narrator and his brothers, now all in their thirties, of how burdened they felt by their ethnic ties to Lithuania:

'You know what I hate about the name of the homeland?' Gerry finally asked.

'What?'

'The name.'

'It's just a name,' I said.

'Yeah, but it sounds corny.'

I said it aloud: 'Lithuania.'

'Gerry's right,' said Tom. 'It's embarrassing. And nobody knows where it is. It's one of those nonexistent countries.' 'And it's going to stay that way,' said Gerry. 'The iron curtain is going to last another hundred years. Even the sound of the name bugs me. It's the ending. All the funny countries have funny endings on them. Bulgaria, Albania, Estonia, Lusitania.'

'The last one was a ship,' I said.

'But it was named after a Roman province,' Tom said.

'Gerry means it sounds like we're from some kind of comic opera. Like we're from Ruritania.'

...'We come from a ghost country.'

(*Buying on Time* 228-229)

Lithuania is the text's embarrassing secret. Looking back through the whole narrative, we notice how many moments there are in which it would seem natural to use the word Lithuania or Lithuanian, but that these are replaced by a less specific term; Lithuanian words are never indicated in the text, and the language is simply called "our own language" (for example, *Buying on Time* 50, 220).

In Šileika's stories, references to Lithuania itself most commonly take the form of "the old country"⁵, although it is also referred to as "that part of Europe," "over there" and "our part of the world" (*Buying on Time* 110, 111, 186). A reader who is not Lithuanian, and who would therefore be unlikely to identify the name Antanas Šileika as Lithuanian, would be hard

put to identify the precise national origin of the characters. In the story "Smoke" there are references to the "funny names of countries," "countries that didn't exist" (*Buying on Time*, 113), while in "The Main Drag," cottage building at Wasaga Beach by immigrants is said to have turned this area into "a strip of ghettos" peopled by "the Ukrainians, and then the Poles, and then all the other funny East Europeans from places we had never heard of before." (*Buying on Time*, 172).

The major term that substitutes for the word 'Lithuanian/ however, is 'DP'. It would be familiar to middle-aged Canadian readers from its use as a negative form of reference for the immigrants from Displaced Person camps in Germany and Austria who came to Canada from 1947 to 1951. The term 'DP' is always used negatively in *Buying on Time*. In a typically comic example, the father's unusual way of eating popcorn is described in the story "All Boys in Canada Play Hockey", and explained in these terms:

When Tom made popcorn, the Old Man set down his pipe and ate from his own bowl, one piece at a time. He was such a DP that he didn't even know you were supposed to stuff your mouth with popcorn until you emptied the bowl, and after that you ate the pieces that had fallen down on your lap or in the space between the cushion and the chair. (*Buying on Time* 144)

In this reference, the irony cuts both ways ethnically; while, in other instances, 'DP' is frankly negative in its implications. The same expression is used on the first page of *Buying on Time* to refer to the fact that the father cuts up newspaper to use in the outhouse rather than buy toilet paper. "DP" here means "barbarian, uncivilized, un-Canadian", which is the way that Dave's father is presented throughout most of the novel.

Šileika also removes Lithuanianism from his text where it would normally occur in the names of his characters. The father and mother, who play such important roles in all the stories, have neither first nor last names. The father is most commonly referred to as the 'Old Man,' which a Lithuanian reader may interpret as a translation of the Lithuanian *senis*, not an uncommon way of referring to the head of a family. The non-Lithuanian reader would take the term simply as an English one. The three boys are given English names: Gerry, Dave and Tom; their last name is never given, though it is once said to be recognized as foreign by the mother of a fellow pupil (*Buying on Time* 158). It is not only the boys' names that are anglicized, however: this also happens to the father's Lithuanian friends such as Stan, in the opening story and the Lithuanian priest, Father Mark, in the story, "Penance." An aunt and uncle who visit from the United States are nameless, while another aunt is called "Aunt Ramona," probably a rendition of the common Lithuanian name "Ramunė." The Lithuanian girls that the boys try to seduce are called Alma, a Latinate name common in Lithuania, and Francine, which would be highly unlikely for the children of the displaced persons. These names, which would not attract the attention of non-Lithuanian readers, stand out for Lithuanian readers: they strike a false note, of a reality that has been translated, cleaned up, as it were, for an Anglo-Canadian public intolerant of foreignisms. There are some hidden Lithuanianisms in the text that neither the non-Lithuanian nor the Lithuanian reader would notice. Here the ideal reader-detective would be the Lithuanian-Canadian, who would expect references to the realities of the Lithuanian diaspora in Canada and so be alert to the often meagre clues which the text provides. In the story "Smoke," for example, there are references to attending Palm Sunday Mass at one of two possible churches, one in the neighborhood of the home, the other in downtown Toronto. The boys' sister and his father argue about the choice:

'Why can't we go to the local church? If 11 be faster.'

'On Palm Sunday, we go to our church. You want everyone we know to think we're atheists.'

The "local church" is the English Catholic church in Weston, while "our church" is one of the two Lithuanian parishes in the city of Toronto; "everyone we know" is the Toronto Lithuanian community. This is not a reference that could be interpreted correctly without knowledge of the Lithuanian community in the Toronto area in the 1950s and 1960s.

Finding such references, however, though it confirms that the story does indeed have a Lithuanian diaspora context, is not necessarily pleasant for the Lithuanian-Canadian reader. This kind of reader is likely to be surprised (and probably offended) by the picture of Lithuanian-Canadian life that is offered in *Buying on Time*. The frequent negative images offered by the novel (Lithuanians as uncivilized, as alcoholics) have no compensatory side. There is no mention of the rich cultural life of the Lithuanian-Canadian community, with its choral and opera concerts, poetry-readings, folk-dance festivals, exhibitions of paintings and the like. The proliferation of organizations created by the DP generation, especially those for children and young people, are also missing. Even more surprising is the absence of what was probably the most striking feature of Lithuanian-Canadian gatherings in the 1950s and 1960s - their intense, highly emotional, and often sentimental rhetoric concerning the lost homeland, the singing of patriotic songs, and the staging of events designed to arouse patriotism in both the older and the younger generations. The community that *Buying on Time* depicts seems to have no such focus in its meetings, picnics, and other activities. A non-Lithuanian reader, or even one from Lithuania with little knowledge of diaspora life, would simply not see these absences. For a Lithuanian-Canadian reader, these lacunae become increasingly obvious with the progress of the stories from childhood to adulthood, and find confirmation in the final admission of guilty embarrassment about Lithuania in the last pages of the book.

In *Buying on Time*, as in *Mountain Shadows*, the Canadian reader who is not Lithuanian is likely to read nostalgia and optimism about childhood and optimism about Canada, whereas the Lithuanian or Lithuanian-Canadian reader sees bitterness and betrayal toward Lithuania and Lithuanianism. This contradiction cannot be resolved by suggesting that the authors of these two works have coded both responses into their texts, since it is hard to imagine how a reader could be equally sensitive to both readings. Instead, one reading cancels the other out. Yet, awareness of the ambivalence towards

Lithuanianism undoubtedly makes the reading of both texts more interesting. What reads as near sentimentalism for the Canadian reader becomes more dramatic and conflictual for the Lithuanian-Canadian reader.

List of references

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¹ Eggleston's novel has "Magdelana Eggleston" as the author, while the name "Antanas Šileika" is given on the title page of *Buying on Time* without the diacritical mark on the initial "s" of the family name. I have chosen a more emphatically Lithuanian form of reference in both cases to underline the fact of a Lithuanian reading of these novels.

² The Lithuanian in *Mountain Shadows* is fairly accurate, though Lithuanian diacritical signs are not always provided. Some deviations from standard Lithuanian may be due to Eggleston transcribing by ear or perhaps her attempt to reproduce dialect variations. "Dieva", for example, should be "Dieve."

³ Maggie defends a Polish woman who indicates, by mimicking a laying hen, that she wants to buy eggs (*Mountain Shadows* 35-36) but feels deeply humiliated when her English friend Paul sees an immigrant woman packing stolen wheat in her bloomers and flashing her behind to insult another woman. (*Mountain Shadows* 173-176).

⁴ "Sileika" would be "Šileika" in Lithuanian, but the disappearance of the diacritical sign was standard practice among East Europeans until very recently.

⁵ For example, *Buying on Time* 150, 190, 214 and 225.