'It was, we felt, their country': Childhood Elsewhere in Mordecai Richler's *The Street*

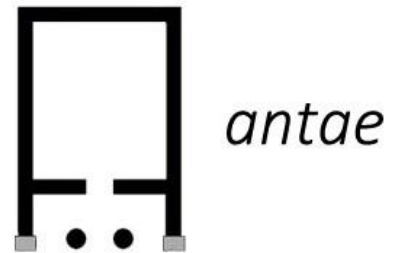Rocco de Leo

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Rocco De Leo

University of Calabria

According to developmental psychology, culture and environment play a crucial role in the development of an individual's behaviour, of their relation with the other members of the community they belong to, as well as of their attitude towards education. Today, more than in any other era, people are confronted with changing realities and are "modelled" from their birth upon different bases of discrimination, difference, and repetition; the spaces inhabited during a life are never completely owned, and the perception of living "elsewhere" influences personal development. Multiculturalism, and multicultural policies, are considered by some to be the ground where multiple personalities can grow: but what happens, then, in societies that claim to be open to inclusion, acceptance, and integration? The Canadian experience, in this sense, constitutes a *unicum*: before the official Multiculturalism Act became law in 1988, issues related to race, religion, and sex profoundly shaped the Canadian sense of "Home" as:

> an unknown territory for the people who live in it. […] A state of mind, the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we found ourselves lost.[1]

As a consequence, when it comes to describing conditions of uneasiness and dislocation in order to unveil what life in a foreign land is like for minority groups and societies, intellectuals' sensibilities and wit usually translate into writing a representation of reality which is as truthful as possible. If to an intellectual's or artist's sensibility and wit a substantial dose of irony and irreverence is added, then the reason why Mordecai Richler is considered worldwide as one of the most talented Canadian representatives seems obvious: his characters—Duddy Kravitz, Solomon Gursky, Joshua Shapiro and, of course, Barney Panofsky—hold the place they deserve in the Canadian canon and imagining. In the introduction to M.G. Vassanji's book *Mordecai Richler*, John R. Saul writes that one way for civilisations to imagine themselves is 'to look at [them]selves through [their] society's most remarkable figures'; and Canada certainly inspired Richler's imagination, as he often returns to the "ghetto" of his native city, Montreal, the enclosed world of his childhood elsewhere.[2] So, even if he describes his mother country as 'an accident', after many years in Europe he finally chose to return to where at least a sense of home was.[3] Therefore, throughout this

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004), p. 26.

[2] John R. Saul, 'Introduction', in M. G. Vassanji, *Mordecai Richler* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009), pp. i-ix, p. ix.

[3] Mordecai Richler, *The Street* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), p. 17: 'On board ship my grandfather encountered a follower of the same Hasidic rabbi; the man had a train ticket to Montreal, but relatives in Chicago. My grandfather knew somebody's cousin in Toronto, also in Canada, he was informed. So the two men swapped train tickets on deck one morning'.

essay, Richler's years in the limited space of Montreal's ghetto will be analysed; following this, the stories collected in *The Street*—one of his most autobiographical and cleverly humorous writings on his relationships with friends, religion, prejudices and stereotypes—will be further discussed in order to understand what his first years in Canada were like and why the country was to him something of an elsewhere.

A subaltern, an early postcolonial novelist, a controversial writer of acclaimed fiction who refashioned the cultural map of his days: in many senses, and from many points of view, a proper analysis of Richler's childhood world can be rooted in the new theories deriving from the so-called *spatial turn*. A quick glance at the social impact of this substantially postmodern academic field of study will therefore be provided.

Human beings have always put a great effort in the practice of studying and understanding time—from the very first pre-historic individuals who set up their lives according to the interchanges between light and darkness; to the Egyptian and Latin American cultures for whom the passing of time was used to organise their rituals of fertility and praise of the gods; to Saint Augustine who considered it strictly connected to the soul and consequently to the Lord; to the internal time of Spinoza and Leibniz; and finally, in contemporary times, where we live with the considerable increase of available technologies which potentially lead us to avoid "wasting time". Part of this earlier attention to temporality, Robert Tally Jr. argues, has to do with 'the dominance of the Hegelian model of history and Absolute Spirit'.[4] It is historically verifiable that, from the Industrial revolution onwards, the purpose of progress has been that of producing goods and services in the shortest span of time possible in order to raise companies' incomes and transform populations' habits and lifestyles. Furthermore:

> [t]he idea of progress, which implied an afterwards explainable in terms of what had gone before, has run aground, so to speak, on the shoals of the twentieth century, following the departure of the hopes or illusions that had accompanied the ocean crossing of the nineteenth.[5]

As a consequence, and as has been stated by the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman,[6] everything started to be considered in terms of the *instant*: time lost its value, and it became possible to do many different things contemporarily, so that time was no longer something 'abstract', but rather everything had to be considered in terms of a final 'product', and thus 'for a number of intellectuals, time today is no longer a principle of intelligibility'.[7]

Thenceforth, intellectuals shifted to a more serious consideration of time's counterpart, *space*. The intuition behind the *spatial turn* was that time had *space* inside, because if people were able to do or to perform many activities in a relatively short period of time, that is to say, to 'produce' a variety of 'products' simultaneously, it was also true that they acquired the ability of being in multiple spaces at the same time. This idea was the basis for the

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[4] See 'Space and Literature: An Interview with Robert T. Tally Jr.'.
<https://www.academia.edu/2641157/Space_and_Literature_An_Interview_with_Robert_T._Tally_Jr>
[accessed 25 February 2016].
[5] Marc Augé, *Nonplaces - Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), p. 24.
[6] Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
[7] Augé, *Nonplaces*, p. 24.

Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's argument in *The Production of Space* (1974). Space as a social product is a complex social construction (based on values and the social production of meanings) which affects spatial practices and perceptions. Moreover, Lefebvre also argued that every society produces a certain space which is its own; on the contrary, any 'social existence' aspiring to be or declaring itself to be real, but not producing its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar abstraction.[8] The great intuition brought by globalisation, then, was certainly the *time-space compression* which annihilates both time and space and gives thousands of people a sort of ubiquity (at least in a virtual rather than real sense).[9] We can drink a coffee at Starbucks even if we are working, even if our workplace is miles away; or we can stay home sitting on our sofa while attending a meeting in another hemisphere. Being connected is fundamental today, and in some way everybody is influenced by the consequences of such a seeming necessity in terms of social and personal relationships; that is to say, there is a reverse of the coin: if we are always in some sort of movement, if we can be anywhere at the same time, we do not have any fixed point, any space of our own where we can feel "home". Or, in other words, we are geo-sociologically out of place, where "here" and "there" mix and overlap. Without a space 'perceived', we cannot become aware of where we are situated, and cannot develop a 'sense of place' as subjects who inhabit a specific environment; because while *space* exists without dependence on the observer, *place* is specific to time and people—it is always the presence of an observer that transforms environment into landscape.[10]

Without a kind of space as such, human beings are only an abstract social existence—in the Lefebvrian sense—because even if they *live* in a space as physical subjects, and occupy a geographical *position* which implies ethnic and social coordinates of belonging, they cannot consider themselves as *localised* until 'the geopolitics of identity within differing communal spaces of being and becoming' are involved.[11] It is space, then, which influences in a decisive way the construction of its individuals, determines their features and the way they relate to the other members of society. Our postmodern (or, as British cultural critic Alan Kirby suggests, *post*-postmodern)[12] world, liquid and at large,[13] with its developing

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[8] In this sense, Lefebvre proposes a tripartite schema to support his thesis, differentiating between *spatial practice*, *representations of space* and *representational spaces*: in the first group, he includes spatial structures such as roads and houses, which express certain social expectations toward physical needs and economic transactions; in the second, he refers to geometric configurations such as open arches and closed circles, lines and squares, grids and boxes, perspective configurations and *trompe l'oeil*; the third category, on the other hand, concerns the symbolic function of spatial references, such as the ones evoked by art's semiotic codes. Cf. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Hoboken: Wiley- Blackwell, 1992), pp. 38-39.

[9] Cf. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005); and 'Some Times of Space' in *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*, ed. by Susan May (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).

[10] Barry Cunliffe, 'Landscapes with People', in *Culture, Landscape, and the Environment*, ed. by Flint Morphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 111-167, p. 111.

[11] Susan S. Friedman, *Mappings. Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 3.

[12] Professor Alan Kirby says postmodernism is dead and buried, and in its place comes a new paradigm of authority and knowledge formed under the pressure of new technologies and contemporary social forces. In his 2006 paper 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', he formulated a socio-cultural assessment of post-postmodernism that he calls *pseudo-modernism*, and associates it with the triteness and shallowness resulting from the instantaneous, direct, and superficial participation in culture made possible by the internet, mobile phones, interactive television and similar means: 'In pseudo-modernism one phones, clicks,

theories of inclusion and exclusion, of subalternity and representation, moves then from Lefebvre's conception of spatial trialectics to Edward Soja's political geography and urban theory of 'Thirdspace', where everything comes together—subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.[14]

A "third" space conceived as such clearly and necessarily includes references to French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*, spaces of *otherness* which are neither here nor there that are simultaneously physical and mental, as well as to the work of postcolonial thinkers from Gayatri Spivak to Edward Said and Homi Bhabha.[15] In particular, Spivak's theory of *subalternity* clearly expresses the condition of today's (and Richler's) living "elsewhere":

> *subaltern* is not just a classy word for 'oppressed', for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. […] Everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference.[16]

A 'space of difference' is then what characterises specific cultures and communities, and their members; this inscribes an overall discourse about origins, belonging, and discrimination, too. Subalterns, as Mordecai Richler himself will prove to be, live their elsewhere-ness in a beyond which 'signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future'; they represent Bhabha's 'in-between' spaces,

> terrain[s] for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' because 'it is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.[17]

Furthermore, this 'Thirdspace' is defined by Soja as a transcendent concept that is constantly expanding to include 'an-Other', thus enabling the contestation and re-negotiation of boundaries and cultural identity. He effectively mirrors Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridisation, in which 'all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity' that displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.[18]

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presses, surfs, chooses, moves, downloads'. Alan Kirby, 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', *Philosophy Now*, 58, (2006), 34-37, p. 35.
[13] Cf. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[14] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), p. 57.
[15] Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).
[16] Leon de Kock, 'Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 23(3), 1992, 29-47, p. 46.
[17] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-2.
[18] Jonathan Rutherford, 'The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), pp. 207-221, p. 211.

Bhabha's theory of third space has gone beyond its origin in postcolonial studies: this still-enigmatic concept raises an extremely critical debate in this age of globalisation where inter- and transcultural communication have become the norm rather than the exception. The rapid progress in the field of communication and information technologies, indeed, is profoundly reducing the horizons of the contemporary world: public (or *diasporic*) spheres are not closed, marginal, or exceptional anymore, but have become part of the cultural dynamics of urban life, so much so that 'migration and mass mediation co-constitute a new sense of the global as modern and the modern as global'.[19] This new anthropological configuration, most intensively investigated by social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, is characterised by a new communicative approach deriving from the interconnection between electronic media and social migrations. In this context, the desire for movement and change, and emotional fantasies, does not produce totally emancipated nor entirely disciplined individuals, but opens a contested and contestable space wherein subjects and social groups try to imagine, to give sense, introducing the global in their everyday practices. In some sense, then, the 'third' space is not a space as such but rather a site. As Thomas Moore argued, 'there are places in this world that are neither here nor there, neither up nor down, neither real nor imaginary. These are the in-between places, difficult to find and even more challenging to sustain.'[20] So the 'here' is shifting, and the 'there' is not detectable; but they both coincide in the elsewhere which is inside the individual's mind and body as well as outside in the concrete, tangible world and its productions.

How can Richler's complex personality be at ease in a microcosm that forces its inhabitants in a limbo outside the world, both on a physical and psychological level? It seems that the answer can be found only in writing; because if feeling "elsewhere" is being always a foreigner, an exile, according to Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, this is the necessary condition for the literary experience: 'Writing is impossible without some kind of exile. […] How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity?'[21] Historically speaking, the term *exile* has been commonly related to the idea of loss and separation, from the first documented case of the Egyptian Sinuhe, who lived around 2000 B.C., to twentieth century examples ranging from the Europeans who fled from the Nazis, to the Asians and Latin Americans (and today's Africans and Syrians) who migrated to escape war, dictatorial regimes, and famine. But exile (either real or metaphorical), in its wider sense, is not only a specific historical circumstance, but also a constant difference, or 'otherness', something that mutilates and invigorates at the same time: it is rejection, self-fragmentation, alienation, and anguish, but its sense of release, of critical distance, or renewed identity, of fusion or shock of cultures and even of languages, can paradoxically be productive. The originality of vision must necessarily derive from the transgressing and the transcending of boundaries. Exile, then, is also a process of becoming, in-between origins and destinations; it is a two-directional movement that, although beginning with a split, carries the possibility for

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[19] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 10.
[20] Thomas Moore, 'Neither Here nor There', *Parabola*, 25(1), 2000, p. 34.
[21] Julia Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 292-300, p. 298.

the understanding of one's self, culture, and society through the lens of other persons, cultures, and societies.[22] As Wendy Brown notes:

> What we have come to call a globalized world harbors fundamental tensions between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription. These tensions materialize as increasingly liberalized borders, on the one hand, and the development of unprecedented funds, energies, and technologies to border fortifications, on the other.[23]

The problem of exiles' inclusion in the country of first or last arrival certainly represents one of the major issue at stake for governments in our globalised and interconnected world: do they represent a resource, or a menace? Do they add values to the community, or threats? Moreover, to which degree should they be included in order to be respectful of all the aspects concerned with social life? What is more, different cultures, and the differences between cultural practices, and the differences in the construction of cultures within different groups, very often set up among and between themselves an *incommensurability*. However rational you are, it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist.[24] This is a point often taken for granted; but on the other hand, we also have to admit that there's the reverse side of the coin: the aforementioned 'in-between places' are not just a site of suffering and containment, but they can be also

> […] [t]he most fruitful places of all. For in these liminal narrows a kind of life takes place that is out of the ordinary, creative, and once in a while genuinely magical.[25]

An attempt both to respond and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference has been represented by the introduction of innovative multicultural policies; in any case, Bhabha's statement is probably a fair summary of what the majority of native citizens of any country think, and what policy makers should seriously contend with. From an historical perspective, in fact, populations moving from the margins to the centre of old Empires (Roman, Ottoman, and especially the British) were confined in a pre-determined area, mainly far beyond what used to be considered the commercial and social heart of the city. And if it is true that migrations have always been part of humanity's history, we must admit that a sort of "discrimination" towards the "alien" invaders has characterised Western societies and governments since antiquity. These spaces of 'otherness' became settlers' elsewhere, where life was possible only in restricted places, but to which they still brought their habits, food and costumes. And they were also given a name—*ghetto*.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, a *ghetto* is a part of a city in which members of a minority group live, often in poor conditions, and usually because of social, legal, or economic pressure.[26] The term first appeared in 1516, and was originally

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[22] Timothy Weiss, *On the Margins - The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (Boston, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 5.

[23] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), pp. 7-8.

[24] Rutherford, 'The Third Space', p. 209.

[25] Moore, 'Neither Here nor There', p. 34.

[26] *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ghetto> [accessed 31 March 2016]

used in Venice to describe the part of the city to which Jews were restricted and segregated. Throughout history, however, it has been used to describe many other forms of spatial discrimination, such as the ones in Northern Ireland during The Troubles in the 60s, Jewish ghettos in Nazi-occupied Europe (the well-known Warsaw ghetto) and African-American ghettos in the years of racial segregation (1914-1950). As the first uses of the word suggest, ghetto was born for a specific population: the Jews. Reasons for this can be found back in the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215, convoked by Pope Innocent III: in Canons 67 to 70, Europeans required Jews (and Muslims) to wear special clothing, such as the yellow badge. The practice of their religion was often restricted, and they had to swear special oaths; moreover, they were not allowed to vote, and some countries formally prohibited their entry, such as Norway, Sweden and Spain after the expulsions of the late 15th century. However, after many years of struggle for emancipation, Jews were granted legal equality between 1871 and 1923 (which means before the Nazi's subversion and *Shoah*). Despite this, a place had been already set in their new worlds, and their living always elsewhere was producing stories of in-betweenness.

After all, as etymologist Anatoly Liberman suggests, one of *ghetto*'s possible etymological connections is with the German *Gasse*, Swedish *Gata*, or Gothic *Gatwo*, meaning 'street'; and *The Street* is exactly the name that Jewish-Canadian writer Mordecai Richler, acclaimed author of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and winner of the Giller Prize in 2001 for his novel *Barney's Version*, chose for his collection of eleven autobiographical short stories.[27] Set and written in the forties, but published first in 1969, the book represents Richler at his best: his characteristic subtle irony permeates the descriptions and the episodes of the Jewish community in Montreal's ghetto, and the repeated use of words from religious diction and popular registers certainly indicates the degree of 'elsewhereness' Jews were confined to. For example, we read words such as *straimel* ('the fur-trimmed round hat of a rabbi') and *zeyda*,[28] which are derived from religion; or *shvitz* or *mikva*, the ritual baths;[29] as well as *pisherke*, *melamud*, and *sabbath*, which belong to the common Jewish language.[30] Actually, Quebec had been one of the first Canadian provinces which, in 1832, granted limited rights in order to 'change the Jews for the better'.[31] Many years later, in 1971, in the wake of emancipation movements from many different minority groups, Canada adopted an official multiculturalism policy; but it was only in 1988 that it became an actual law, the basis upon which the so-called Canadian Multiculturalism Act was built, where the right was given to all Canadian citizens to practice their religions and maintain their identities without the fear of persecution; moreover, the policy emphasised mutual respect between

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[27] Anatoly Liberman, 'Why Don't We Know the Origin of the Word Ghetto?'.
<http://blog.oup.com/2009/03/ghetto/> [accessed 14 April 2016].
[28] Richler, *The Street*, p. 34.
[29] ibid., p. 51.
[30] ibid., pp. 42, 52, 63.
[31] *Friends & Partners*. <http://www.friends-partners.org/partners/beyond-the-pale/eng_captions/21-5.html> [accessed 31 March 2016].

ethnicities as well as the acceptance of one's personal beliefs, including those of aboriginal tribes.[32]

For all we know about the persecution of Jews, then, it is not accidental that Richler decides to set his stories during the years of the Second World War: the condition of physical as well as psychological exile seems to be inscribed in their history, forcing them to a life always in some sense elsewhere. Richler himself once said: 'I don't want to be respected, man, I just want to be accepted… I don't consider myself a Jewish or Canadian writer. I am a writer'.[33] Born in 1931 into an Orthodox Jewish family in Montreal, in a neighbourhood downtown that he called, despite objections, the *ghetto* (and we know now what implications and connotations the word carries), he left college and fled to Europe in order to become a writer, leaving behind what he considered at that time a small-minded, limiting Canada, and a smothering, oppressive Montreal Orthodox Jewish community. Even though they were intimately related in their history and culture,

> the Jews of North America and their traditions nurtured in the Old World for centuries came under threat in the generational conflicts that where part of Richler's growing up. On one side existed the great tradition going back of thousands of years, the elaborate rules and rituals, the memoirs of exile, oppression, and survival; on the other, the exhilarating freedom of North America, the seductions of assimilation, the promise of a new identity in a land of unlimited expanse and opportunity.[34]

This elsewhere and the various forms it can assume are exactly what Richler describes in this book. Indeed, one of the first images delineated relates to very essence of short-story writing:

> As a discipline, obviously the short story is more precise than the novel, not nearly so tolerant of literary truancies: digressions, self-indulgences. It strikes me as an unforgiving test, second only to poetry, of the ability to distil experience, and I am charged with admiration for writers who can do it well. […] In this country (as in others) more reverence is paid to novelists – a sloppy bunch – than to short story writers, even though some of the most satisfying work…has been delivered by our short story writers: say, Morley Callaghan, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant. […] Readers—for reasons beyond my comprehension—will more readily fork out money for a novel than for a collection of short stories. So publishers are always badgering their short story writers to produce a novel.[35]

Considered then a 'minor' genre, choosing the form of the short story suddenly situates Richler in an elsewhere far from the more fashionable genres. But only two pages later, he justifies his choice saying that the short story represents a 'place' where he can describe 'a mixed bag… larded with a number of quasi-autobiographical memoirs, some journalism, and vignettes'.[36] Throughout the book, then, Richler looks at his 1940s childhood universe between the Main and Park Avenue; the street of the title is St. Urbain, 'the Hell's Kitchen

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[32] *Government of Canada Website*. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/citizenship.asp> [accessed 31 March 2016]
[33] As quoted in Vassanji, *Mordecai Richler*, p. 1.
[34] ibid., p. 10.
[35] Richler, *The Street*, p. 3.
[36] ibid., p. 5.

of Montreal',[37] where living was like being elsewhere as society consisted of three distinct parts 'with hardly any social interaction between them, but with great suspicion, animosity, and envy to go around'.[38]
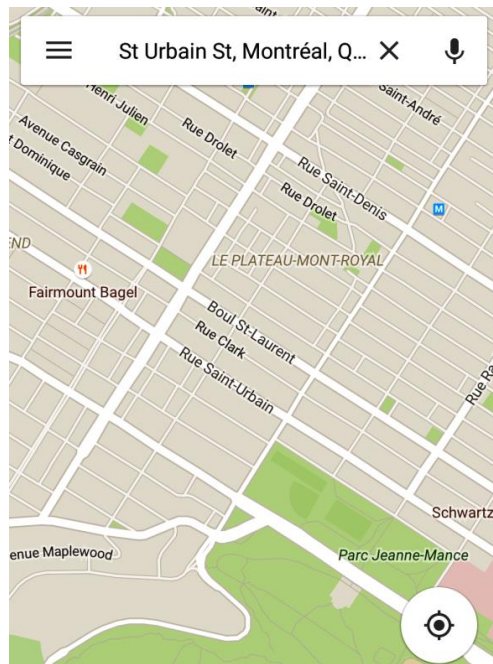

Figure 1:   St. Urbain Street. (Google Maps)

Since the nineteenth century, Jewish immigration to North America had been progressively on the rise: the Montreal where Richler grew up was the first elsewhere of the New World, before going on by train to Toronto, Chicago, or New York. It was Canada's biggest city and largest port of the time, the most important economic centre of the country and its doorway to the world: for this reason, a diversity of people came to settle there, so that thanks to 'its diversity of coexisting peoples and two predominant language cultures, it had a unique character'.[39]
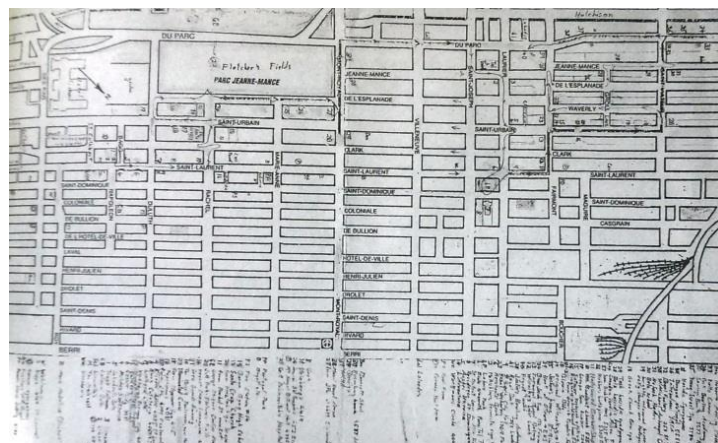

Figure 2: Map of Richler's childhood: St. Urbain area (Richler Fonds, acc. No. 582/50.10)

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[37] Richler, *The Street*, p. 30.
[38] ibid., p. xiii.
[39] Vassanji, *Mordecai Richler*, p. 14.

Montreal's ghetto was then the real non-place, where 'a head start was all'.[40] Graduating from Fletcher's Filed High School (F.F.H.S.) meant a job for most of its children, and an end of a 'self-contained world made up of five streets: Clark, St. Urbain, Waverley, Esplanade, and Jeanne Mance, bounded by the Main, on one side, and Park Avenue, on the other' (Figure 2).[41] The accurate descriptions Richler uses perfectly explain the feeling of living in a sort of limbo, a state of uncertainty both real and imagined; living in the elsewhere, apparently, coincides with being anywhere: 'St. Urbain was, I suppose, somewhat similar to ghetto streets in New York and Chicago', and he adds:

> The five streets would have seemed interchangeable. On each corner a cigar store, a grocery, and a fruit man. Outside staircases everywhere. […] An endless repetition of precious peeling balconies and waste lots making the occasional gap here and there.[42]

Figure 3: St. Urbain Street, 1930s (University of Calgary Archives)

However, this happens only 'to a middle-class stranger'; indeed, each of the streets between the Main and Park Avenue 'represented subtle differences': if the ghetto is a material and psychological elsewhere, it was the Main, 'rich in delights, but also squalid, filthy, and hollering with stores… with something for all our appetites',[43] that was the *place* to long for but also the *space* children were always warned about.[44] *The Main* is the title of an entire, nine-page story: it is the street 'dedicated to pinching pennies from the poor, but it was there to entertain, educate, and comfort us too', as people would find a strip show or have their ritual baths; children had to go there in order to find a new suit and shoes, but only 'once a year before the High Holidays', to shop for fruit, meat and fish, and to watch 'the man at the scales'. Once the errands had been done, they could return once more to look for part-time jobs or to study with their *melamud*, or even for a fight with the pea-soups that

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[40] Richler, *The Street*, p. 7.
[41] ibid., p. 10.
[42] ibid., p. 22.
[43] ibid., p. 51.
[44] ibid., p. 55: 'The Main, good enough for them, was not to be for us […]. The Main was for *bummers*, drinkers, and (heaven forbid) failures.

'sprang more out of boredom than from racial hatred'.[45] On the other hand, the Main was also a dividing line:

> Below, the French Canadians. Above, some distance above, the dreaded wasps. On the Main itself there were some Italians, Yugoslavs and Ukrainians, but they did not count as true Gentiles. Even the French Canadians, who were our enemies, were not entirely unloved. Like us, they were poor and coarse with large families and spoke English badly.[46]

The more we reach the boundaries of the ghetto, the more things seem to get worse: it is like an invisible wall has been drawn around the area, creating a map of elsewhere(s) all around this circumscribed zone—'Streets such as ours and Outremont, where the emergent middle-class and the rich lived, comprised an almost self-contained world. Outside of business there was a minimal contact with the Gentiles'.[47] In his *Maps of Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, novelist Peter Turchi suggests that there are important links between maps, stories, and the mind; using the map as a metaphor, he considers writing as a combination of exploration and presentation, and compares the way a writer leads a reader though the imaginary world of a story, novel, or poem to the way a mapmaker charts the physical world. To ask for a map, says Turchi, is to say 'Tell me a story':

> The reasons for recording who we are, where we are, what is, and what might be haven't changed much over time. The earliest maps are thought to have been created to help people find their way and to reduce their fear of the unknown. […] We organize information on maps in order to see our knowledge in a new way. As a result, maps suggest explanations; and while explanations reassure us, they also inspire us to ask more questions, consider other possibilities.[48]

In our case, we also see how power deeply influences the construction of maps, and conversely how maps can be used to maintain and control population. No doubt that map-making as an expression of power dates back to the first era of colonisation: since then, lying through maps has guaranteed empires their presence over the colonised through the representation of land according to the governor's distorted vision. So it is no surprise that another Canadian writer, the Ceylonese-born Michael Ondaatje, opens his autobiography by saying that the maps on the wall of his brother's room in Toronto—instead of describing the real objectivity of his island—reveal 'rumors of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales'; they are 'false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations […] growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy'.[49] When a geographical space is invented and constructed 'with scant attention paid to the actuality of its inhabitants', a Saidian process of 'imaginative

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[45] Richler, *The Street*, p. 53.
[46] ibid.; a 'true Gentile', Richler had written on p. 8, was 'an authentic white Protestant'.
[47] ibid., p. 57.
[48] Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2004), p. 1.
[49] Michael Ondatje, *Running in the Family* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), p. 53.

geography' is then in act, and the only feeling people are left with is that of living elsewhere.[50]

However, this is a condition which involves real space as well as social spaces, such as sports, food, family: from the divisions and distinctions between different football roles to be played by different ethnic groups (as is described in the fifth story of the collection, *The Main*), to forbidden groceries to be bought and eaten ('…if you start by eating pig, if you stray so far from tradition, what next?', asks the author in story number one, *Going Home Again*), the whole of Richler's childhood appears very strange and foreign to him.[51] Actually, Canada itself was not a choice, but an accident: it represented 'the second-best. It made us nearly Americans'; and it is for this reason that, even if he refers to St. Urban as 'our', a kind of familiar microcosm, he constantly feels that 'It was… their country', the country of the truly hated and feared wasps: 'We were convinced that we gained from dissension between Canada's two cultures, the English and the French, and we looked neither to England nor France for guidance. We turned to the United States. The real America'.[52] Despite many attempts of fighting them 'stereotypes for stereotypes', or trying to secretly infiltrate in their reserved beach, as happens in *Pinky's Squealer*, the concrete, insuperable, chronic 'elsewhere' is in the very nature of Richler's Jewishness.[53] This is a particular story, where discrimination is shown at its deepest and worse level: only a few Jewish families ('who lived on Clark, St. Urban, Rachel and City Hall'), having in some way raised money, rent together summer houses in Prévost, 'a crazy-quilt of clapboard shacks and cottages strewn over hills and fields and laced by bumpy dirt roads and an elaborate system of paths. The centre of the village was at the foot of the bridge'; Prévost had a beach which was 'a field of spiky grass and tree stumps' where 'plump, middle-aged ladies, their flesh boiled pink, spread out blankets and squatted their bras and bloomers, playing poker, smoking and sipping cokes'.[54] On Fridays, at 6.15 in the evening, men arrived and a parade started:

> An event that always horrified the residents of the village. Who were these outlandish, cigar-chomping men, burdened with watermelons and Kik bottles, salamis and baskets of peaches, yelling at their children, whacking their wives' behinds and – worst of all – waving merrily at the sombre Scots who sat petrified on their balconies?[55]

But 'elsewhere', for these children, is also something to long and look for: so one bright, cloudless morning in July 1941, Noah, Gas, Hershey, and seventeen-year-old Milton Fishman, known as 'Pinky's Squealer', line up and decide to cross the mountain. Going to the other side is a physical and symbolic task, it is a revolutionary act which has a double meaning: it is like crossing the boundaries in which society had confined them, but it is also like leaving a spiritual elsewhere and sinking into a new, foreign world of otherness. Because in that new space, with their beach umbrellas, deck chairs, a diving board and real canoes,

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[50] Edward W. Said, 'Invention, Memory, and Place', *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (2000), 175-192, p. 181.
[51] Richler, *The Street*, pp. 51, 11.
[52] ibid., pp. 17, 23, 55, 56.
[53] ibid., pp. 60-67.
[54] ibid., p. 62.
[55] ibid., p. 63.

the men were taller and slender and the women were awfully pretty, lying out in the sun there, just like that, not afraid of anything. There was no yelling or watermelons peels or women in bloomers. Everything was so clean. Beautiful, almost.[56]

The boys cautiously approach the beach: at the moment when a car pulls away, a sign becomes visible, carrying the message 'THIS BEACH IS RESTRICTED TO GENTILES'.[57] A sense of rivalry, of resentment, of Jew against smug, privileged wasp, emerges: full of envy and wonder, of fear and humour, they decide to steal the sign and stick it up in 'their' area, in their *place* of small and limited 'elsewhere' inscribed in the bigger one of being Jews, but one that they felt as their own. Suddenly, everything has changed: with the sign now reciting 'THIS BEACH IS RESTRICTED TO ~~GENTILES~~ LITVAKS', 'that was their night of glory in Prévost'.[58] Richler's childhood years are still far from the years of Canada's official multicultural policy, so he and his community still have to suffer 'the malice of the Gentiles'.[59] It is probably from this suffering that comes his most important sense of elsewhere; as Richler himself writes, 'I had no intention of becoming a Jew… with a foolish accent, an eye for a bargain, and a habit, clearly unsanitary, of licking his thumb before turning a page of the *Aufbau*'.[60] As a matter of fact, during the entirety of his future career he tried to remake himself as a secular world citizen, and to put his Jewishness behind him. The end of World War II also meant making new friends, finding fresh interests, writing his first poems, growing up in every sense, and leaving. Flying back to Montreal in 1967, after eighteen years spent in Europe, was a striking experience. As he writes in *Home Sweet Home*, the space, or the non-place of his early years had changed.

> [It] [a]ppeared to be an endless glitter of eccentrically shaped green ink wells. Suburban swimming pools… multi-decked highways unwinding into a pot of prosperity, a downtown of high rise apartments and hotels […]. This cornucopia certainly wasn't the city I had grown up in and quit.[61]

Nevertheless, not even in adulthood does he manage to feel at ease in Canada, as he now lives with a recurring fear of running dry, a punishment for having left what was his mother country anyway. As a consequence, growing up has left Richler with a depressing and depriving sense of not belonging neither to Canada nor to Montreal's Jewish group. The stories and memories collected in *The Street* show how a boy, child and descendant of a long line of Orthodox rabbis, had felt the paradoxes of living in an abstract and distant 'third' space of in-betweenness that we can now easily associate with the condition of being always *elsewhere*; however, only in his later works does he come to a 'measure of balance', arguing that he did so because 'the community itself changed, broadening enough to include his less than celebratory vision'.[62] As an adult, and although he was commonly considered as a spokesman for Jews, he struggled with his younger role of being simultaneously insider and

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[56] Richler, *The Street*, p. 64.
[57] ibid., p. 65.
[58] ibid., p. 67.
[59] ibid., p. 111.
[60] ibid.
[61] ibid., p. 11.
[62] Reinhold Kramer, *Mordecai Richler - Leaving St. Urbain* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), p. 3.

outsider among the Jews: he had to rediscover, to claim, and to engage with Jewishness in order to reinvent and defend it from the threats which were mining the basis of what he had been raised with. The semi-autobiographical stories collected in *The Street* pave the way to the themes and language of his future novels. In *Son of a Smaller Hero*, he writes again of his childhood ghetto and the adventures of Noah Adler departing for Europe (echoing Richler's own departure from Montreal); and with *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* he finds his true humorous, satirical, precise tone in the description of Montreal's oppressive Jewish establishment. The sometimes fierce and aggressive irony that we see in some quotations raised protests in his native Quebec, particularly for the treatment he reserves for religion. He has been called 'a self-hating Jew', but he was 'a witness to his time. He did not write to please'.[63] The stories collected in *The Street* constitute a book reflecting our world, about Jews and any other group's challenges which reflect wider human truths. Through them, Richler aims to subvert stereotypes and prejudices, and to demonstrate that self-containment, enclosure, limitation, and the experience of physical and psychological 'elsewhere', can be a painful condition as well as a productive motivation. And from a childhood spent out of place, in a journey of constant self-discovery, the writer Mordecai Richler was able to develop the lines where politics, race, faith and language converge in individual lives. The young author and exile walk together, even when he decides to leave the confines of the ghetto; the nostalgia, the detailed description of places and characters which develop from the eye of the insider and outsider at one time (Montreal was his inspiration, and his literary mission), the kind of writing apparently detaching from but firmly rooted in his Jewishness, left him with two inheritances: on one side, the idea of Canada as a small country with a small history and culture; on the other side, an ancient tradition with too much culture and tradition—that he sternly fought and criticised in order to come to terms with.

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[63] Vassanji, *Mordecai Richler*, p. 4.

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