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Marooning on Islands of Her Own Choosing: Inscribing Place and Instability in Alice Munro's "Deep-Holes"

Corinne Bigot

Throughout her work Alice Munro has shown a great interest in the Ontario landscape she knows very well, and most particularly in its geological features. Rather than simply depict it, the Canadian short story writer explores, composes, inscribes and claims this landscape. Munro's short fiction is informed by contrary dynamics, the yoking together of seemingly opposed forces – the visible and the invisible, the mobile and the static – and the friction of scales and times. Thomas Dutoit has argued that Munro's writing is "particularly Canadian 'by dint of the grating against each other of two fundamental and apparently opposed forces,' deep geological time and the shallow and ephemeral architectural world," "the traces of which she passionately attempts to secure from their disappearance" (2014, 77–78). Place in Munro then could be understood as relation, as argued by a recent volume of essays interrogating the relationship between space and place in Munro's writing (Lorre-Johnston and Rao 2018). Her stories are shown to explore the relationship between human beings and the place they inhabit (Omhovère 2018, 96). Place is seen as the product of shifting visions as "homes and landscape metamorphose in a character's perception of them" (Lorre-Johnston and Rao 2018, 3). As Marilyn Simonds recently and perceptively put it, "place, in Alice Munro, is a chimera: deceptive, implausible, sometimes one thing, sometimes another" (2016, 26). I would even go further and argue that Munro's inscription of place often rests on a "making it strange" of place,¹ the intrusion and inclusion of placelessness, as a disruptive force challenging the stability of place *and* of meaning. Munro often draws attention to Ontario's hole-ridden landscape and to the works of erosion, forcing awareness of gaps in the referential process. Thus another way to consider the relationship between place and placelessness is to see how Munro yokes together geology and fiction, resulting in a type of unfixed texts that the Canadian

writer Aritha van Herk calls “geografictione”: “a fiction of geography/geography of fiction: coming together in people and landscape and the harboured designation of fickle memory” (1990, 40). Munro’s work similarly demonstrates the impossibility of dissociating place from its inscription in a signifying process.

In this essay I analyze “Deep-Holes” from Alice Munro’s 2009 collection,² whose very title suggests the possibility of a making it strange of place, with a hyphen that destabilizes meaning and forces us to consider holes as significant places. The story features several real, singular and apparently unconnected places – Toronto, Osler Bluff on the Niagara Escarpment, and remote islands a character researches but does not wish to see. Yet they will prove to be neither stable, nor unconnected. Munro turns place into an event by drawing her fictional, real and literary spaces into resonant relationships. In a seminal essay on Munro’s “geographic metafiction” (2002, 109; 2018, 27), Robert McGill called Alice Munro “a *geomancer*: one who arranges spaces artfully, drawing them into resonant relationships with one another” (2018, 32; original emphasis). Although McGill’s analysis focuses on fictional houses, I would argue that his approach is equally relevant to how Munro inscribes “real places” in a story. The Ontario landscape operates as an analogical prism, the works of erosion and the cracks in its rocks refracting the gaps in the referential process. Meaning is allowed to circulate in these fissures, however unsettling this might be to our perception of the central event of the story. As the characters’ perception of place metamorphoses them, binary oppositions between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the visible and the invisible, the continent and the island, the static and the mobile are all challenged. This encourages me to explore the poetic potential of the vocabulary of geology – words such as joints, craters, and bluff – and to interrogate the image on which the story ends: a woman who is marooned on islands of her own choosing. As readers are invited to follow meandering paths, to look at strange signs, to see invisible craters that could connect singular places on the surface, I will consider whether “Deep-Holes” can be read as an independent story, or in its relation to other stories – as part of an archipelago rather than an isolated island.

“Deep-Holes” opens with a family picnic on Osler Bluff, on the Niagara Escarpment, near Georgian Bay. Alice Munro has thus chosen a real place one can find on maps, in tourist guides and scientific literature due to its spectacular features and geological formation. Yet Osler Bluff is first described subjectively through the eyes of the main protagonist, drawing attention to how space turns into place, a process which informs much of Munro’s fiction, as argued by Christine Lorre-Johnston and Eleanora Rao (2018, 2). Mundane details about picnic food to be prepared are given, reflecting the main character’s concerns as a wife and mother. Internal focalization allows readers to see the site through the young woman’s eyes, as she notices a “roughly painted” sign on a board that “needed retouching” and realizes that the entrance to the woods “looked quite ordinary and unthreatening” (Munro 2009, 94). Attention is drawn to this sign and its unusual spelling:

Caution. Deep-Holes.

Why the hyphen? Sally thought. But who cares? (94)

The hyphen forces itself upon character and reader alike. The sign defamiliarizes language and place as one of the functions of a hyphen is to create a new word by combining two elements. Thus the unfamiliar spelling intimates that Osler Bluff is more than a tourist site and the object of scientific study – Sally’s husband, a geologist, has published an article featuring Osler Bluff. The hyphen seems to pave the way for Sally’s

subjective perception of the site, as her surprise is emphasized when she sees the holes (94), and danger is intimated when the rocks are compared to coffins (94). Yet I would argue that both the hyphen and Sally's subjective take on Osler Bluff function to yoke the familiar and the unfamiliar together:

Deep chambers, really, some as big as a coffin, some much bigger than that, like rooms cut out of the rocks. Corridors zigzagging between them [...]. Not enough greenery, however, to make some sort of cushion over the rubble [...]. The path went meandering over [...] shelves of not-quite-level rock. (94)

As argued by Claire Omhové, in Munro's stories "landscape occurs as an event whenever the narrative fuses together the character and the spaces they inhabit through the figurative properties of language" (2018, 96). While the house imagery could be explained by psychology, reflecting the fact that Sally, as a housewife and mother, is inclined to compare the unfamiliar landscape – the narrator points out that Sally has never been to Osler Bluff before – to a house, the simile blurs boundaries between inside and outside, the house and the wilderness. Disquieting notes are introduced – the comparison with coffins means that both Osler Bluff and the house are endowed with dangerous proclivities or possibilities. Everything that happens during the picnic on this unfamiliar spot is depicted as familiar. During the hike, Sally is said to be "nearly crying with some *familiar* sort of seeping rage" (Munro 2009, 94; emphasis added). The baby's need to be fed immediately upon arrival disrupts Alex's plans, a fact that is perceived through Sally's eyes: "this was not *of course* as Alex had planned things" (95; emphasis added). Their sons' antics – they start shouting "glug-glug" when they see their mother breastfeeding the baby – exasperate their father, a fact that is also perceived as a familiar occurrence: "*Of course* Alex believed that Kent had started this nonsense [...] because he was crudely excited by the sight of Sally's breast" (95; emphasis added). Soon the boundaries between Osler Bluff and the house are blurred when Alex's opinion is evoked: "And he thought Sally was far too casual about the whole procedure, sometimes going around the kitchen doing things with one hand while the infant guzzled" (95). The scenes at home are superimposed upon a picnic fraught with unspoken tensions, which induces a vague sense of menace.

The second vision of Osler Bluff is provided by Alex. On the surface, his geologist's approach contrasts with Sally's emotional take on the landscape. While Sally's subjective vision has been analyzed (Lorre-Johnston 2014, 78–79), Alex's scientific explanations have received less critical attention. Yet I find them equally crucial to the way Munro uses the landscape to challenge the boundaries between the inside and the outside, expose dangerous instability, and contribute to turning place into an event. Erosion is described as fact but is conveyed through poetic devices such as sounds – a high number of fricatives – repetitions, and figurative language:

Dolomite, Alex says. That is the thick, caprock they see. Underneath it is shale, clay turned into rock, very fine, fine grained. Water works through the dolomite and when it gets to the shale it just lies there [...]. So the erosion – that's the destruction of the dolomite – works and works back to its source, eats a channel back, and the caprock develops vertical joints. (Munro 2009, 96)

The word "eats," a metaphor borrowed from everyday language, creates a connection with the family picnic. The vocabulary of the picnic gets transposed into the geological discourse, which parallels the way the language of erosion permeates Sally's mind when the narrator describes Sally's reaction during the hike as "some familiar sort of *seeping* rage" (94; emphasis added). Both Alex's discourse and Sally's vision function to intimate the presence of cracks in the picture. Osler Bluff does not so much affect the

characters as it reflects corrosive frictions within the family which seem to work their way through the surface.

Alex's explanations highlight instability in the landscape. They do not, however, exhaust its mystery. Rather, instability in meaning is revealed when he explains that "the caprock develops weak vertical joints" (Munro 2009, 96). In the vocabulary of geology, a break or fracture in a mass of rock is indeed called a "joint," and we could argue that being a geologist Alex would choose this word. Yet there is no escaping the jolt one experiences when reading the word "joint," which usually refers to a place where two things are connected or fastened, either in a body or in construction. The vocabulary of geology makes the fractures even more duplicitous and allows for these fractures to be seen as "places where things are connected," thereby showing that cracks in this story are crucial places.

Sally's subjective vision of Osler Bluff, the strange hyphen on the sign, the way the familiar and the unfamiliar collide, and Alex's lecture all result in a making it strange of place, paving the way for the transformation of place into an event. The picnic is interrupted when their nine-year-old son falls into a hole and is rescued by his parents. On the surface, the story is built around Kent's dramatic fall and rescue, which could be identified as the main event that takes place. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the short story as a genre is centrally organized around the question, "what happened, what could have happened?" (1987, 192) and "relates, in the present itself, to the formal dimension of something that has happened, even if that something is nothing or remains unknowable" (194). Kent later describes his fall and rescue as a "near-death experience," claiming he felt as if he had been "reborn" (Munro 2009, 102) when his father pushed him out of the hole and his mother pulled him up. However, I believe that "what happened" is not so easily identifiable, fixed, or circumscribed. Kent's fall does not only interrupt the picnic, it also brings the tensions within the family to an end, as his parents work together to pull him out of the hole. Munro uses the singular landscape that is depicted through Sally's and Alex's combined visions to encourage us to consider the gaps between what happened and what might have happened, not only to Kent, but within the whole family. There is no escaping the sense of erosion and danger that undermines the family unity, from Alex's exasperation and Sally's need to "soothe" Alex to the familiar, seeping rage that surfaces on this occasion. As argued by Isabela Martini, the allusion to Kool-Aid also introduces a disquieting note: although a standard children's drink in North America, Kool-Aid has also been associated with the Jonestown massacre since the 1970s, as Jim Jones's flock committed mass-suicide by ingesting the drink laced with potassium cyanide (2017, 183). These elements cast doubt as to whether Kent's dramatic fall and rescue is the only event we should consider, or whether there is ground for thinking of it as one scene in a life-long family drama. The narrator's remark that Kent's proclivity for behaving and speaking "dramatically" "got on [Alex's] nerves [and] had done so even before the deep-hole drama" (100) reveals that the fall did not change the family dynamics. The phrase "deep-hole drama" retrospectively adds to the bizarre effect of the two-word combination on the sign, but does not allow the readers to ascertain the extent of the drama.

The second section seems to cast some light on Sally and Kent's marriage by introducing an opposition between Alex's world, which centers on the Ontario landscape, and the remote islands which Sally researches. After Kent's accident, as Kent

has to study from home, Sally tells him about a secret passion of hers: “she was attracted to remote islands [...] obscure islands that nobody talked about and that were seldom, if ever, visited” (99). Although these islands are real places – Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Chatham Islands, Christmas Island, Desolation Island and the Faeroes – they seem to stand for “a space for the imagination to run free, away from Alex’s narrative control [...] a symbolic mental space that she can create for herself” (Lorre-Johnston 2014, 84). When Kent disappears from his parents’ lives and becomes incommunicado, the islands turn into another form of refuge for Sally, as she entertains the “fantasy that Kent was now living on one or another of them (Munro 2009, 103). Many years later, Alex fails to understand Sally’s reaction – shock and disappointment – when he shows her how easy it is to find information and to see pictures of “her” islands. So he tells her that she needs “something real to do” (103) and suggests helping him. Although these elements indicate an opposition between the real world – as materialized by Alex’s hard rocks – and Sally’s fantasy world, I believe that these islands are more than a mental refuge or a fantasy world. Sally is “shocked” when she sees Tristan da Cunha on the screen (103) and has to turn away. I read her reaction as a sign that easy access to images and information would leave no room for investigation, deplete the islands of their poetic opacity and deprive Sally of a personal relation to these places. She can no longer claim these islands as hers. Names such as Chatham, Christmas, Ascension, and Da Cunha, which recall the so-called discoveries of these islands by European explorers, suggest that Sally used to enjoy the illusion of discovery. The next section in the story, depicting Sally’s interest in Alex’s work and world, shows that the relationship between the visible and the invisible is central. It is part of a character’s ability to reconfigure place, and an example of how Munro connects place and placelessness. When Sally becomes Alex’s assistant, the Ontario landscape and its seemingly boring geological features become much more relevant to her, as she gradually moves from the position of one who stands against the rocks for pictures to the position of one who “learn[s] to use her eyes” (Munro 2009, 103). She learns that the landscape bears traces of past upheavals: “the gneiss formed by intense compression, folded and deformed by clashes of the American and Pacific plates to make the present continent” (103). As argued by Robert McGill, Munro does not oppose the mobile and the static, rather she finds ways to unsettle the sedentary (2018, 27). Although McGill’s analysis is concerned with a fictional house, it can also be made relevant to the Ontario landscape which, at first, seems to stand for the continent, in opposition to the island. Alex’s explanations about Osler Bluff highlight the work of erosion and emphasize instability, pointing out that rocks will fall down the slope, becoming outliers. Ultimately, in the distant future, the whole bluff will morph into an outlier when it breaks off from the Escarpment and becomes some kind of island. The word “bluff,” a nautical term referring to the bow of a ship, in relation to its resemblance to a cliff, is a reminder that the Niagara Escarpment itself was a sediment layer at the bottom of a sea that is no more, which suggests a connection with, rather than an opposition to the world of islands.

Sally gradually learns to see the unseeable, the hidden, invisible traces of the history of the earth few people can detect. Munro uncovers and recovers the poetic potential of what is invisible, as invisible traces are imagined into existence:

Gradually she learned to use her eyes and apply new knowledge, till she could stand in an empty suburban street and realize that far beneath her shoes was a crater filled with rubble, never to be seen, that never had been seen, because there were

no eyes to see it at its creation or through the long history of its being made and filled and hidden and lost. (Munro 2009, 104)

The crater that can only be imagined is one of the most important “places” in the story, although it resists any definition. It needs to be seen in order to exist, but it is not imaginary either, it is both there and not there anymore, and thus encapsulates the tension between place and placelessness. The crater is a fine example of how Munro draws real and fictional spaces into resonant relationships. The crater imaginatively connects the singular places the story features – Osler Bluff, Toronto, the islands, and the fictional house. As a subterranean crater that is filled with rubble, it recalls the rubble-filled holes on the surface of Osler Bluff. The hidden crater also functions as a reversed image of the highly visible bluffs that are part of the Niagara Escarpment. The word “crater” usually refers to a volcano, which turns it into an inverted image of the volcanic islands Sally used to study. The mention of “rubble,” which usually refers to debris from the demolition of buildings, also connects the crater to the last singular place in the short story, the city of Toronto, and the derelict, soon to be demolished, neighborhood Kent inhabits. Finally, since the word “crater” originally referred to a large bowl, a strong connection to the picnic and domesticity is also re-activated.

Although invisible, the crater thus functions as a “joint” and its very invisibility serves to highlight the role played by the characters’ double vision, which the readers are invited to share. This is perhaps best shown by a similar scene in an earlier Munro story, “Oh, What Avails,” in which a character realizes that:

you can look down a street, and you can see the shadows, the light, the brick walls, the truck parked under a tree [...] – you can see all these things in their temporary separateness, all connected underneath in such a troubling, satisfying, necessary, indescribable way. Or you can see rubble. Passing states, a useless variety of passing states. Rubble. (Munro 1996, 208)

The invisible crater challenges our perception of space, and the boundaries we may believe to exist between “two apparently opposed forces, deep geological time and the shallow and ephemeral architectural world” (Dutoit 2004, 77–78). Munro does not so much oppose the two visions of place she presents here as yoke them together, as the conjunction “or” does not necessarily exclude the second proposition. The pronoun “you” draws the readers in, explicitly encouraging them to share the character’s double vision.

“Deep-Holes” is centrally concerned with the need to revisit places and learn how to see them differently, which the structure of the story encourages us to do. The final section mentions the food that Sally, now a widow, eats, introducing a thematic circularity since the story opens with the food Sally prepares for the family picnic. The final section, which depicts Sally’s and Kent’s reunion and separation, several decades after Kent disappeared, allows for several readings. It apparently emphasizes Sally’s and Kent’s radical differences and isolation, as suggested by Kent himself: “I’m not in your world, you’re not in mine” (Munro 2009, 112). The final section contrasts her sheltered life with his precarious life, his selfless activity with her lack of purpose – her daughter thinks she is “maybe at loose ends a little” (106) – and suggests a lonely and selfish life, in opposition to her son’s communal life with other squatters. Details about the food Sally now eats – a precooked “single serving of lasagna” (115) – show that Sally, a widow and a mother whose children have left home, finds herself alone. Most importantly, the final image of the story, a semi-fixed phrase isolated by a single dash, is generally understood to imply loneliness and isolation:

And it was possible, too, that age could be her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen the look on the faces of certain old people – marooned on islands of their own choosing, clear-sighted, content. (115)

The *OED* shows that “marooned” implies loneliness since the verb *maroon* means “to put (a person) ashore on a desolate island or coast.” The verb is often used in a semi-fixed cliché, turning the island into an image of entrapment: “to place or leave in a position from which one cannot escape” (*OED*). The final image, Lorre-Johnson argues, means Sally “ends up isolated in a world of her own” (2014, 81). The word “islands” also fosters connections with the real islands Sally researched. Since islands are shown to be central to the connection or friction between the static and the mobile, it is tempting to revisit the image. My contention is that there is no such thing as fixed meaning even with the semi-fixed phrases that suggest lack of purpose and isolation – being “at loose ends” (the phrase her daughter uses because she thinks Sally is not used to being alone) and being “marooned on islands.” As shown by an earlier story, “Oranges and Apples” (*Friend of My Youth*), the adjective “loose” does not necessarily imply idleness or loneliness. A husband wonders whether the word could not describe a woman “who wasn't fastened down, who wasn't reliable, who could roll away” (Munro 1990, 133). So Sally can either be seen as a woman who finds herself idle and lonely, or as a woman who can roll away, who is unattached and perhaps a little dangerous or unreliable, as someone who finds herself loose, and not simply at loose ends, that is to say “free from bonds, fetters, or physical restraint” (*OED*).

As Munro once pointed out to John Metcalf, she makes changes until she is “satisfied when [she] know[s] that the word is right,” and at the right place, having found “*emotional exactness ... an exactness of resonance*” (1972, 56). I believe that “marooned,” which did not appear in the earlier magazine version of the story, provides an exactness of resonance. The *New Yorker* version ended with “clear-sighted but content, on islands of their own making” (Munro 2008, np). Munro inverted the word order (and removed “but”) in order to end on “clear-sighted, content,” changed “making” into “choosing” and added the word “marooned.” The final version apparently introduces a tension between the word “marooned” as it is usually understood, that is to say having been left stranded on an island, and the idea of choice. However “marooned” comes from the word *maroon*, referring to the communities of black slaves who had escaped from captivity to settle in the mountains and forests of the West Indies (*OED*). “Maroon” derives from the Spanish *cimarrón*, which can mean wild or untamed. Thus originally (in the early eighteenth century) the verb “marooned” did not mean “stranded,” but “lost in the wilds.” In other words, the phrase that has come to mean being stranded and trapped also recalls the existence of the Maroons who fled to the wilds. Thus we can either see Sally as someone who has been marooned and stranded or as a Maroon, if not a marooner, a person who chose to live and run free in the wilds, a wandering fugitive or pirate (*OED*). Paradoxically then, although she finds herself on her own at home, she is also free to pursue her reading and research, which can be perceived as an exhilarating form of errantry.

Drawing attention to a sign at the entrance to the hike and a path that keeps “meandering” (Munro 2009, 94) is a device also used in “Vandals,” an earlier story (1996), to indicate that Munro is taking her readers on a textual tour. I believe that “Deep-Holes,” which evokes explorers, and whose main character is said to love to peruse maps and encyclopaedias, and learns to read the landscape, is centrally concerned with the practice of reading. As Franco Moretti argues, maps can “dissect a

text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden” (1999, 3). A map would show that Osler Bluff lies where the Niagara Escarpment and the Algonquin Arch intersect. A map of the Niagara Escarpment similarly reveals that the arc also comprises a series of islands in Lake Huron, indicating Osler Bluff’s future as an outlier or island. As pointed out by geologist Ralph Krueger, Osler Bluff “will become an ‘island’ separated from the main body of the Escarpment” (Watershed Canada Trust n.d., n.p.). Encyclopaedias and maps would also show that Tristan da Cunha and Ascension are two islands in the middle of the Atlantic, close to the crestline of the mid-Atlantic Ridge, and that the Chatham Islands sit on the Chatham Rise, which is part of a submerged continent. Looking up Sally’s remote islands on maps and in encyclopaedias would finally show that all of them are volcanic in origin, and most of them part of archipelagos. Through them, readers are shown evidence that the continent and islands are closely connected, insofar as Osler Bluff, Ontario’s rocks and remote islands simultaneously hide and reveal their (and the planet’s) geological history. Readers who take the time to indulge in detours while seeking connections engage in what Glissant calls archipelagic thinking, which acknowledges the powerful relationship between tracing, traces and imagination.³

Thus I consider the friction between the static and the mobile to be essential, and part of Munro’s reflection on how to read stories. As pointed out by McGill, the stories themselves are simultaneously static and dynamic” (2018, 38). I have also long believed that, as argued by Judith Miller, “Munro constantly repositions her reader,” both within a story and “from book to book” (1999, 160). Thus readers can see her fiction as attempting to resist textual enclosure. One could read a Munro story as an independent story, or in its relation to other stories – as part of an archipelago rather than an isolated island so to speak. Unsettling the readers by reversing binary oppositions and asking them to consider the presence of invisible craters under their cities, Munro fosters a double vision in them. Readers receptive to these unobtrusive correspondences can see how the singular places featured in “Deep-Holes” are all “connected underneath in a troubling, satisfying, necessary, and indescribable way” (Munro 1990, 208) within the space of this story. Features of the actual landscape call attention to gaps in the referential process and the process of creation. Sally’s evocation of the subterranean crater, “filled with rubble [...] that never had been seen, because there were no eyes to see it at its creation” (Munro 2009, 104), shows that “Deep-Holes” draws attention to the process of creation. Rubble usually refers to debris and waste, which could evoke the fragments of scenarios the writer abandoned, and would explain the disquieting note the first pages strike by drawing attention to tensions within the family and to the work of erosion. As a Munro reader I cannot help feeling that there is some truth that lies in the gaps between what happened and what might have happened. I also tend to feel that other stories are present as subtexts one can glimpse through the fissures of the text. The geological landscape operates as an analogical prism, something that educates the gaze and teaches us how to read. A reader who is engaged in reading *Too Much Happiness* would notice similarities with the opening story of the collection, “Dimensions,” which also features a difficult husband and a wife who strives to placate him. The fact that things fall apart because of an argument over a tin of spaghetti (2009, 17) creates a correspondence with the allusions to food in “Deep-Holes.” Likewise, the development that leads the husband to murder his children after his wife stops humouring him casts a sinister light on the tensions surfacing during the picnic on Osler Bluff. “Fits,” an earlier story in which the main

characters discover that their neighbor inexplicably killed his wife and committed suicide, also weighs upon my reception of “Deep-Holes.” The main character explains to his stepson that a fit is “like an earthquake or a volcano” as “people can take a fit like the earth takes a fit” after the boy tells his family that, as a kid, he used to be very afraid of his parents’ fights, imagining they could hurt him (Munro 1986, 126). “Fits” also exemplifies how Munro reconfigures the Ontario landscape and articulates mental and physical spaces. It ends with the main character staring at a monstrous congestion of white shapes with gaping black holes in them and which eventually puzzle him less than the gaps in his wife’s story and his understanding of her (131). Knowledge of these earlier stories which are fraught with violence creates an unsettling impression in the reader who cannot help feeling that the deep-hole drama could have been far worse, although there is no concrete evidence of this.

Reading “Deep-Holes” in connection with two “Juliet stories” from *Runaway*, Munro’s 2004 collection, can shed light on the family dynamics, with the result of unsettling our perception of the characters and, ultimately, our comprehension of what the event in the story is. The second section highlights a strong bond between Sally and “her son” (Munro 2009, 100) when they work on the remote island project, which implies that they exclude the father: “And never telling Alex what they were doing. ‘He would think we were off our heads,’ said Sally” (99). This exclusive bond is reminiscent of the father-daughter relationship in “Soon” which excludes the mother, to the extent that the daughter wishes her mother to be gone, since every evening father and daughter wait till they are “rid of” the mother to talk (2004, 101; original emphasis). The similitude challenges our perception of Alex as the only villain. “Deep-Holes,” however, reverses the perspective by giving prominence to the mother, all the while revealing very little about her feelings when Kent goes incommunicado. The final section emphasizes their radical difference, if not Kent’s indifference to his mother and clearly recalls “Silence” (*Runaway*) in which a daughter inexplicably chooses to disappear from her mother’s life, effectively punishing her.

These two stories are also connected by a similar treatment of place. Lorre-Johnston and Rao (2018, 17) argue that both Denman Island (“Silence”) and Toronto (“Deep-Holes”) function as the type of “other spaces” that Michel Foucault calls “heterotopias of crisis” – “sacred or forbidden places that are reserved for the individual who finds himself in a state of crisis with respect to the society or the environment in which he lives” (1997, 253). “Radical transformations in family relationships take place in these ‘other spaces’” (Lorre-Johnston and Rao 2018, 18), which is illustrated by Kent’s hostile treatment of his mother in Toronto.

While Toronto is reconfigured as a crisis heterotopia, the final section introduces other shifts, transformations and reconfigurations. Sally’s identification of Kent’s derelict neighbourhood (when she sees it on television) draws attention to the changes that have taken place. It is “a district she knew, or used to know” (Munro 2009, 104), it was first inhabited by hippies and became fashionable, with expensive bistros and boutiques replacing cheap restaurants. However when she emerges from the subway station Sally almost feels or fears that Toronto has morphed into a foreign country: “turbans and saris and dashikis were much in evidence [...] they weren’t being worn as foreign costumes” (108). The word “costumes,” with its theatrical undertone, introduces yet another change, turning Toronto into Kent’s stage. Theatricality is also a key element in the depiction of Denman Island in “Silence.” The daughter, Penelope, is

shown to have masterminded and staged her mother's arrival, reception and deception, having sent a note but having disappeared before Juliet reaches Denman Island (2004, 126-9). In "Deep-Holes" Kent emerges as a consummate actor-stage director who manipulates his mother, having sent her a note instructing her to take the subway to a specified station, and waiting for her amidst a group of men who are sitting on the steps of a former bank, as if they were posing for a tableau (108). Sally also notices something theatrical in the way Kent talks to her: "the special effort, the slight labor involved in speaking to her [...] seemed something she was meant to notice" (109). Toronto is depicted as a stage for Kent to play (yet) another scene, which confirms that the story deals with a life-long drama, but also draws attention to artifice.

The description of Toronto through Sally's eyes with its emphasis on theatricality encourages readers to revisit *Osler Bluff* and wonder about what happened there. Although a bluff is the proper word for the type of cliff where *Osler Bluff* stands, one cannot but marvel at how apt the word is. Munro's love of words allows for other meanings to surface and disturb the scene - bravado, deception, and, ultimately hoodwink. In a game of poker, to bluff is also to blindfold and hoodwink. The ground shifts as readers wonder about Kent's proclivity for theatrics and at Munro's ability to unsettle place and meaning. Munro turns *Osler Bluff* into a very unstable and shifting place - a dangerous place because it features dangerous holes and fissures created by erosion and blurs the divide between home and the wilderness. The Bluff is the perfect site for Kent's antics and the setting of a family drama, which, however, remains largely unseen. We fail to circumscribe the event that took place on the Bluff and its depth, although we are certain that something happened there.

Opening with an odd sign at the entrance to a trail leading to a hole-ridden cliff called *Osler Bluff*, featuring crevasses that are called "joints," "Deep-Holes" illustrates Munro's ability to introduce placelessness as a disruptive force when she inscribes place in her fiction. It illustrates her life-long passion for finding "the right word" and the right "resonance" when inscribing her familiar landscape in her story. The story explores the poetic and disturbing potential of the vocabulary of geology, the better to challenge perceptions and foster a double vision in her readers. "Deep-Holes" best exemplifies how Munro moves far beyond realistic and psychological treatments of space and place. Seizing and drawing attention to a hyphen that should not be there on a sign at the entrance to a trail leading to the outlook on *Osler Bluff*, the narrator introduces instability of meaning, which paves the way for a making it strange of place. Munro reconfigures Toronto and *Osler Bluff* as places of (her own) fiction, as *geografictione*. Clearly, the features of the real places she reconfigures serve as analogies to the space of fiction, with the emphasis on the works of erosion and fissures evoking gaps in the referential process, allowing for meaning to circulate. Equally crucial to Munro's inclusion of placelessness is the way she yokes together the static and the mobile, so that her stories themselves can be simultaneously static and dynamic, with their meaning shifting with each reading or revisiting.

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NOTES

1. As used in the introduction to the issue by Claire Omhové and Pascale Tollance.
 2. In this essay I analyze the revised, collected version, which I will compare with the magazine version Munro published in *The New Yorker* in 2008.
 3. "[La pensée de l'archipel] reconnaît la portée des imaginaires de la Trace, qu'elle ratifie." (Glissant 1997, 31)
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ABSTRACTS

The essay analyzes Alice Munro's "Deep-Holes" which features real, singular and apparently unconnected places, arguing that as a geomancer Munro inscribes place, highlights gaps in the referential process, and reveals instability of meaning, through shifts in the perception of space and place. "Deep-Holes" is one of the Canadian short story writer's geoliterary stories in which she uses space to comment on her writing, to foster a double vision in readers and encourage them to draw connections between place and fiction, within a single story and from story to story.

INDEX

Keywords: Alice Munro, short fiction, Ontario geological landscape, geographic metafiction, geografictione

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