Memories, Hauntings and Exorcisms in Brad Fraser’s *Snake in Fridge*

Roberta Mock

DONNA:  Gone are the days  
         When my heart was young and gay  
         Gone are my friends  
         In the cotton fields away  
         Gone from this earth  
         To a better land I know  
         I hear a gentle voice a calling  
         Old Black Joe.

– Opening of Act I, *Snake in Fridge*

Brad Fraser exploded onto the international theatre scene in the early 1990s with his play *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*. Since then he has written six others, thereby consolidating his image as the cosmopolitan Canadian bad boy of gay theatre; he would probably agree that neither his pigeon-holing as a gay writer nor reputation as *enfant terrible* have done his recent theatre career any favours. All of Fraser’s plays tend to revolve around marginalized outsiders: drug-users, prostitutes, pornographers, murderers, the abused, the mentally ill; people who are sexually promiscuous or who practice deviant sexualities; and, people who generally place pleasure before conventional work ethics. Some of these characters – perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not – are successful artists or politicians. The individuals who comprise the communities he represents on stage incorporate the opposition between shared self and separated self and their face-to-face relations, as Iris Marion Young has noted, often result in extreme violence (302, 314). In his nightmarish fantasy narratives, both Fraser’s characters and his
Canada seem to will themselves into existence, straddling the borders between imagined history and imagined future, in a constant state of “becoming.”

This chapter focuses on Fraser’s *Snake in Fridge*, which was commissioned by, and premiered at, the Manchester Royal Exchange in England in 2000. Although published in Canada the following year, it has – perhaps significantly – never been produced in the country in which it is set. *Snake in Fridge* crystallizes Fraser’s past thematic concerns often by diverging in significant ways from his previous plays. Set in a haunted house in Toronto, its mainly twenty-something year old characters struggle to remember and forget past trauma, desire, dreams and lives which bind them to the past. In an email Fraser wrote that “memory, and particularly memory of abuse or neglect, informs almost all of the characters [in the play] and those with the worst abuse… are haunted by it. The entire story is a sort of exorcism in which the characters either expel these influences, or not.” Although Judith Herman has noted that the goal of recounting trauma stories should be integration rather than exorcism (181), Fraser seems to be implying that the same objectives are guiding his characters (that is, recognition and recovery). He is clearly positioning these acts of personal subjectivity as oral alternatives to formal archived histories.

To conventionally describe the narrative of *Snake in Fridge* is challenging in that Fraser refuses to prioritize onstage action over, for instance, reported off stage activity (which the characters may be watching on a television screen that the audience is unable to see) or the performativity of speaking itself. Descriptions of what some characters may be seeing (but which others cannot or do not) and the recounting of memory are both active constituents of the “plot” unfolding in real time. Exposition is never simply background knowledge. What follows is my description – or rather, my organization – of what “happens” in Act I. Not all of these situations were played out onstage within the symbolic timeframe of the play, nor were they necessarily revealed in this order.

- Travis, Corbett, Randy, Donna and Caddie are the tenants of a shared house owned by Corbett’s aunt Violet who, pushing 40, is considered old.
• Violet also owns the strip bar at which Caddie is a dancer and launches a live sex internet site that is managed by Randy.

• Randy’s girlfriend Stacey arrives from Orangeville and decides to move into his room with him.

• The snake that Corbett received in exchange for a drug debt appears to be dead so he puts it in the broken fridge, just to make sure.

• The snake later disappears.

• Charles, a 45 year old man who has just left his wife and family in Brampton, follows Caddie home and is told by Donna that he can rent the vacant room in the house.

• Donna, Caddie’s older sister, has suffered from brain damage since her older brother tried to kill her after sexually abusing her for years. According to Caddie, her family called it an accident: “Like he accidentally bashed Donna’s head in after he accidentally fucked her eight or nine hundred times” (Snake 43). Their father helped him to get away and blamed Donna, who was 14 at the time, for breaking up the family. Donna claims that she’s fingered by aliens and has Barbie clothes put in her brain.

• Donna encounters a dead girl with a bashed in head and hears her crying in the house.

• Corbett has spent the rent money on drugs. He seduces his drug dealer, Gabriel, kills him while they are having sex, and takes the $15000 Gabriel made that night.

• When Corbett drags the body to the basement of the house, he hears a slithering sound. He chops off Gabriel’s fingers and leaves them for the snake to eat.

Although Fraser carefully constructs his plots as story-telling, what is most important about them is their relentlessly detailed and hyperbolic accumulation of sensation and experience.

The relationship between form and content is always symbiotic in Fraser’s plays: style becomes metaphor, theme becomes dramaturgy. In Martin Yesterday these revolve around the motif of the roller
coaster; in *Poor Super Man*, it’s comic books. Despite a lack of any explicit reference in the play, the fairground ghost train ride serves the same function in *Snake in Fridge*.\(^2\) If you strap yourself into the cart, you can enjoy the corners that are taken too fast, the hairy hand that emerges from the dark to tap you on the shoulder, the dangling dusty skeleton that nearly grazes the top of your head, the trick mirrors, and the sinister laughter that was recorded so long ago that nobody remembers what was funny. Ghost trains share their vicarious production of fear with other cultural products Fraser references, the most obvious being Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, upon which he claims *Snake in Fridge* is loosely based, and later teen slasher movies that largely emerged from its sensibility.\(^3\) Jackson’s 1959 novel begins with the memorable line: “No live organism can continue for long to exist in conditions of absolute reality” (3). As in many subsequent horror movies and in Fraser’s play, Hill House itself can be considered a character, interestingly one that will never respond to rituals of exorcism.

The apparently generic twists and turns of Fraser’s plot are mirrored in his crafting of language. He said in an interview that “in *Snake In Fridge* the language could peel paint off the wall, just about every rude way of expressing yourself is in there” (qtd. in Proulx). All of the characters speak what Fraser calls elsewhere “the poetics of profanity” (“Magnetic North Speech”). My summary earlier of Act I takes us to an extraordinary speech that showcases Fraser’s notoriously colourful vocabulary. It is performed by Travis, one of the first explicitly non-white characters in any of Fraser’s plays: a black arts graduate who, like so many of Fraser’s characters, works in a restaurant.

At the start of *Snake in Fridge*’s second act, Travis describes an outrageous scenario that he has just experienced, significantly, at the bank where he was repaying his student loan. It begins like a utopian vision of multicultural harmony, with people of every age, shape, colour, and sexuality participating in the rituals of capitalism. But, when the surface is scratched (a bank card is reported lost and its owner requires ID she doesn’t have), the edifice tumbles like a set of dominoes. The irate customer calls the teller a “Nigger Bitch”; Travis calls her a “fat dump-eating honky cunt”; a bald white guy calls Travis a “jig
cocksucker”; a Filipino lady calls him a “pasty Nazi bastard”; a Korean calls her “a stupid yellow hag.” The abuse escalates to an uncontrolled cacophony amidst hurled furniture: “It was a fucking race riot in the middle of the Bank of Nova Scotia” (Snake 81-2).

There are several other monologues in Snake in Fridge (most notably Corbett’s pleading for money to his older lover, Norm, whom we never see). However, they remain unusual in Fraser’s writing for stage which tends to take the form of quick fire repartee. Additionally, this particular speech sits outside the narrative trajectory of the play. The reported happenings in the bank have no consequences later in the plot; the event is never referred to again. Also, while there are other characters in the kitchen when Travis enters – seemingly only in order to deliver this monologue – it is directed primarily to audience, to us. Thus, for me, this specific story and the act of story-telling are of metatheatrical significance and function heuristically as cultural location. They conjure a ghosted image of multicultural idealism, like a doubly exposed photograph featuring a spectral presence lurking beside and uncannily similar to what that which we assume to be more solid, material, and stable. Travis’s act of telling exposes the power of words as well as their ability to expose power.

Fraser was not the only Canadian playwright drawing attention to, at best, a strained ambivalence and, at worst, a confused or cynical hypocrisy toward official multiculturalism at this time. Precisely eleven months prior to the opening of Snake in Fridge, George F. Walker’s Heaven premiered at the Canadian Stage Theatre in Toronto. Although Fraser and Walker both appear to be responding to the spectre of Pierre Trudeau – and in particular, his 1971 statement to the House of Commons on Bilingualism and Biculturalism – there are significant differences in what each seem to be saying about the multicultural society he continues to haunt thirty years later. Interestingly both Fraser and Walker draw attention to issues of class in the performative inter-relationships between what Judith Butler calls “vectors of power” which also include sexuality, gender, and race (18). But whereas Walker seems to pointing to the impossibility of embodying Otherness, Fraser draws attention to how easily a shared
“highly codified system of identification grounded in visible social markers” – such as language, manner, dress, style, and setting (D. Taylor 87) – can emerge to signify otherness regardless of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or race.⁴

According to Fraser, the house in which *Snake in Fridge* largely takes place really is a microcosm of poor middle-class, staid Toronto infected by the multiculturalism of the people moving into it from all places… My point is really about how similar we all are because of the pop culture juggernaut that tends to reduce everything to the lowest common denominator. In the case of Travis and Stacey I wanted to show that not every ethnic community is defined by some lifestyle cliché but by the same personality traits and developments that affect most middle-class Canadians.

One of these developments, not surprisingly, is generational tension, which can be perhaps more acute in immigrant families and traditionally closely knit ethnic and religious communities:

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CADDIE: Your folks know you’ve decided to stay in the city?
STACEY: Shrugs. I’ll call them.
CADDIE: Will they freak out?
STACEY: Oh yeah. They’re really old-world. Three generations in Canada and they still insist we’re Chinese. Like whatever dolts. We’re Canadian okay? (43)
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Stacey, like Travis (in fact, *with* Travis), ends up performing on Violet’s sex channel. The reasons are more complex than just needing money: it is an act of retribution aimed at her hypocritical boyfriend Randy (who is Violet’s toyboy as well as her personal assistant), as well as an excuse to make love with Caddie. Afterwards she says she “feels cheap”; her projected image has lost any sense of individuality within pornographic convention. Handing over her pay, Violet calls her “Tracey”. “My fucking name is STACEY bitch”. There’s a pause (also uncharacteristic in Fraser’s writing) before Violet replies:

“Actually your name is now Just Another Cunt On The Net Fucking For Money but whatever” (131-132).

Travis eventually gives in to the cybersex temptation due to lack of opportunity in his restaurant job, despite his desire to stay “clean” and also not wanting to reify the stereotype of the black porn stud (which of course he does). It is not clear, however, that he is passed over for promotion from busboy to waiter simply because he is black. He himself says it was due to nepotism within the Italian family that
owns the restaurant. If anything, Travis seems to blame his financial insecurity on the fact that he pursued an arts degree rather than something “useful.” He describes his parents as respectable “Negros”: “I always wanted to be a nigga but those kinda people scared me,” he says. “They seemed so – ethnic” (94). I would suggest, however, that it is perhaps the mediated Americanized perception of black ethnicity that troubles Travis.

The epigraph of this chapter are the song lyrics performed by Donna as a kind of prologue to the play. A few scenes later she repeats the second verse.

TRAVIS: I really wish you wouldn’t sing that song.
DONNA: Why?
TRAVIS: Cuz as a black guy I find it offensive.
DONNA: Why?
TRAVIS: Cuz it’s a slave song.
DONNA: Black guys were slaves?
TRAVIS: Yes.
DONNA: Wow. In Canada?
TRAVIS: No.
DONNA: Oh. (9)

Travis’s sense of blackness has been conditioned by what it isn’t (that is, USAmerican, which is itself an oversimplified shorthand), but what he can imagine it to be. Indeed, his personal memory as much as his cultural memory is relatively privileged and this effects both his self-confidence and his acceptance of other people; unlike every other character in the play – with the important exception of Stacey – he has neither been abused nor traumatized by his family. It is Travis who leaps to Corbett’s defense when Caddie calls him an “asshole”: “His mother left him alone all the time when he was a kid – then blew her brains out right in front of him when he was twelve. He comes from a pretty fucked up place” (84). Travis and Corbett met in day camp: “My parents thought I should be exposed to disadvantaged children.” It is more than a little ironic that, although Travis’s SexNet work is for him something regrettable but necessarily profitable, Corbett practically begs to be allowed to perform and fantasizes about getting a penis enlargement so his aunt Violet will hire him.
Like Walker’s *Heaven*, *Snake in Fridge* includes the murder of a character who later haunts a confused and desperate protagonist trying to negotiate his status in his cultural landscape. When the ghost of Gabriel confronts Corbett with the fact that he didn’t actually have to kill him (he could have simply stolen his money), Corbett replies: “I didn’t really think. I’ve been taking this testosterone enhancer” (118). According to Gabe, though, Corbett is playing to the demand of the “hungry house” which has been fed on emotions, hormones and pain; the relationship between the house and Corbett is dialogic. Not only is he under its spell, but Gabriel identifies Corbett as “its keeper.” Scenes featuring Gabe’s ghost, the communications from supernatural forces via the large screen TV that Corbett buys with his money, the snake that dies and reanimates itself in unexpected places, and Donna’s recognition and conjuring of spirits sharing the cold corners and empty corridors of the house can be read using the codes of magic realism, as Marc Maufort does in his analysis of *Heaven*.

I make these comparisons of the two plays for a number of reasons. The first is simply to respond to Jen Harvie’s observation that one of the reasons why Fraser has been seen as both “unique” and “standing alone in the landscape of Canadian culture” by British theatre critics is because he has been so rarely compared to other Canadian artists (137). Perhaps being a Canadian who has lived for an extended period of time in the U.K. – and having only seen Fraser’s plays performed in Britain – allows me the distance to notice that Fraser is actually very rarely analysed by anybody in terms of what he has to say about Canada or as a Canadian. As I discuss elsewhere, I believe this is because Fraser’s work resonates with those international audiences for whom identity is the product of multinational late capitalism rather than geographic boundaries. His plays are therefore perceived as somehow transcending Canadian cultural discourse, either through their use of transnational strategies bound to gay identity positions or their reflection of globalized lifestyles.

However, while I would describe many of the characters in *Snake in Fridge* to be queer, none of them is recognizably gay. In fact the dismantling of recognizable identities (either ethnic or sexual) and
the communities that share in their performance, is one of the main focuses of the play. In an interview with Shaun Proulx on the *Gay Guide Toronto* website, Fraser claims that Corbett – one of his own favourite characters – represents the “ultimate gay man” in a state of denial and under pressure from all quarters to conform to a sexualized body fascism. His violence, however, is not (like Bernie’s in *Human Remains*, for instance) due to a repressed and unspeakable homosexuality. Corbett, who claims to “hate fags” is happy to take money for sex from a sugar daddy. When Randy tells him that, despite trying, it doesn’t work for him with guys, Corbett replies, “Fuck man that’s kinda like being fucking crippled.” “I know,” says Randy (52).

According to Gargi Bhattacharyya, the “turbo-capitalism” characterizing globalization has led to a shift in the ways performative subjects negotiate spatial relationships. The “global” or “world” city, of which Toronto is a prime example, makes available sexual freedom and experimentation, generating and concealing “dirty spaces.” It “promises anonymity and the chance to reinvent yourself on the hoof – perhaps choosing to be different things at different times or for different audiences” (149-151). In *Snake in Fridge*, Stacey eventually leaves Randy to live with Caddie. A more spectacular transformation, however, plays with a very different spatio-temporal dimension, relying on an intertextual memory of another cultural product. Those familiar with Fraser’s plays have met Violet before. She was Matt’s homophobic inflexible wife in *Poor Super Man*, which was set in Calgary. Although Paul Taylor suggested in *The Independent* that Violet’s becoming a pornographer in *Snake in Fridge*, seems as “likely as her becoming the Dalai Lama”, she was always a hard-hearted businesswoman. Fraser’s earlier play is summarized in the following short exchange:

RANDY: Violet married a fag.
VIOLET: Well he wasn’t officially a fag when I married him but that’s the general story.
STACEY: Oh.
VIOLET: I’m not starting a self-help group or anything. (*Snake, 69*)
But Violet doesn’t have to start such a group because the community of which she is a part – and even to a large extent constructs by preying on this very impulse – was created through individual acts of self-help. In Fraser’s plays set in Toronto, most of the characters have come from other parts of Canada – to seek fame and fortune, to “become” or reinvent themselves, to seek refuge.

In *Snake in Fridge*, close connections are made between past abuse and a character’s relocation to Toronto. Donna and Caddie have come from Red Deer, Alberta; a quick internet search will reveal that Red Deer’s claim to fame is the Michener Centre, which comprises 48 residential homes for adults with mental disabilities on a 300 acre site. We find out where Randy comes from when he tells Violet that “Lotsa guys in Winnipeg hit their kids. Specially if they’re cops. It’s not like I’m damaged or anything” (37). Similarly Charles tells us that what his uncle did to him maybe “wasn’t abuse then but it is now” (106). Regardless, the result was that he was always afraid to touch his sons, something which is linked to the failure of his marriage and his need to flee to Toronto:

CHARLES: I feel like I turned forty-five and realized that for as long back as I could remember everything I ate tasted like ashes in my mouth. I hated waking up because I dreaded the thought of facing the day. I haven’t had an honest erection in five years. Everyone I know is the same. The living dead and the walking wounded. (74-75)

Earlier, Donna says that Charles reminds her of “someone who was dead once and isn’t anymore” (54).

Donna of course knows a thing or two about being dead. Her brother certainly thought she was and though she didn’t physically die after the “accident,” Caddie knew she “wasn’t really alive either” (14). The dead crying girl she frequently encounters is a typical response to sexual abuse, “the dislodgement of the self from the body [being] designed to preserve the social persona from the trespasses” (Young qtd. in Williamson 139). Donna tells Caddie that “If I’m allowed to remember I know I’ll forget” but this is not really a case of recovered memory. Donna has always remembered the “accident”; she was at first prevented from discussing it by her father and then prevented herself from speaking out to avoid upsetting Caddie and their relationship. Donna, the childlike holy fool, knew that Caddie’s self identity was created
through the need to protect her sister. This included the protection of Donna’s sexuality. Paradoxically, Donna, who functions as not only a virgin but the virgin in the play, has been fucked several hundred times. It is Donna who makes it clear that mental health – and by extension, cultural health – is both a cause and a symptom of sexual health. When Caddie doesn’t want to hear Donna say that she wants to have sex with Charles, Donna explains:

   Except for those three guys that raped me when I was in the group home that time I haven’t had any sex. Not real sex like when no one has their panties stuffed in their mouth. Charles makes me feel – eggy in my hoona. (123)

Healthy sex, and a healthy society, is based on mutual desire rather than coercion in any form.

   Neil Smith has employed a typology of scales to trace the ways spatial spheres are negotiated. It moves in a particular sequence – body, home, community, urban, region, nation, global – and focuses on the way identities are created and borders are contested in the hierarchical social, economic, cultural and political landscapes of contemporary capitalism and patriarchy (101). This chimes quite closely with the ways Connerton suggests that individual and collective memories are mapped against material spaces in How Societies Remember (37). Although Snake in Fridge’s eighty-five scenes take place in bars, diners, gyms, streets, alleys, bedrooms and bathrooms (Snake, xiii), it is in the figure of the shared haunted house that the spatial spheres Smith has identified are both mimed and converge. Charles describes it as “one of those old detached Victorian places just off Queen East in one of those neighbourhoods that don’t seem to have enough streetlights” (26). In many ways, the house (and many others like it) can be considered a topsy-turvy version of the 19th century colonial Old Toronto City Hall at the corner of Queen Street West and Bay, which houses provincial criminal and municipal courts. Violet’s house is located on the other side of Queen Street, and lurks in the “dirty spaces” of the global city’s colonized modernity. The functions of these two buildings are mutually constitutive – referring to, constructing, and sustaining each other in multicultural Toronto.
The power of the house in *Snake in Fridge* emanates from the basement: in other words, that which is low, dark, buried, abject, horrific. The *Sunday Times* critic John Peter wrote (with admirable self-confidence) that, “Clearly, the basement is the darkness down below that we both fear and want to explore, and the snake is to Fraser what the weasel under the cocktail cabinet is to Pinter: the bizarre terror of life.” The characters who are in tune with the house, who hear and respond to it, are Donna and Corbett. Both have a relationship with the basement. It is the place that Donna has been squirrelling away the kitchenware she’s been buying with her pocket money for when she has her own place. And of course, this is where Corbett hides Gabe’s dead body. The final image of the play, following the snake’s unexplained reappearance in the fridge, is the word “MORE” flashing on the television screen while Corbett screams “Mummy!” in agony as he is devoured by the basement. It is not a coincidence that this was the same screen on which he watched his friends having sex a few hours earlier. He is being consumed by the dark underbelly of the culture of consumption in an act of self-cannibalism.

Fraser strongly implies that Corbett’s actions should be located not in terms of binaries but within a continuum that embraces both individual bodies and organizing systems. It is not a coincidence that the clubs Corbett frequents in the play are called Government and Industry. These really were the mega dance clubs in Toronto in the late 1990s, catering for thousands of people each weekend, the majority certainly enjoying a chemically enhanced experience. As Travis tells Corbett at the end of the play, despite the mysterious influence of the house, his steroid abuse, his “fucked up mother,” and his height, Corbett “went over a line no one needs to go over” (142).

Alessandro Dal Lago has noted that microcriminality (that is, “any kind of deviance, drug dealing and consumption,” and so on) is most common among marginal people, especially young ones. This behaviour often takes the form of “desperate, individual protest or of ‘secessation’ from a social order that offers no perspectives but only subordination and dead ends” (31). The demonization of these people is then managed by the dominant political and cultural élites through mass communication apparatus. By
creating and stigmatizing local “enemies” (that is, “the poor, migrants, addicts, microcriminals, and marginal human beings”), nation-states may maintain territorial power in an increasingly “universal” context (Burgazzoli 46-47). Fraser is not equating difference per se with some form of innate criminality. Rather, he is indicating that marginalization, self-harm and criminality easily close a vicious circle of poverty and lack of opportunity (despite – or perhaps because of – a liberal tolerance that denies it).

According to Fraser, he’s an optimist. “I don’t leave the audience with kind of an ‘Okay, now everybody’s dead and there’s no hope’ kind of feeling…It’s all about people finding hope” (qtd. in Proulx). Of course, he made this statement because an interviewer asked him about his point of view – and nobody would ask such a question if the answer was altogether obvious. I have fixed on a spark of light that perhaps resolves the rather problematic parallels Fraser draws throughout Snake in Fridge between Canada’s strategy of official multiculturalism and its support systems for people who have been abused, both of which he seems to accuse of being well-meaning but of limited efficacy. Just before Charles and Donna leave for Quebec together to “look at French people,” Donna sings again: “I hear a gentle voice acalling / Old – big toe” (145). She has remembered Travis’s barely articulated discomfort.

Representing the amnesia of national identity, Donna has reconciled the external (the voice acalling) and internal through embodiment (her big toe). She has incorporated and transformed both personal and cultural trauma. Fraser doesn’t allow us to celebrate this symbolic reparation for long – soon the characters are scattering, leaving Corbett, whose body has disappeared, in the very fabric of the house. He too has been incorporated and transformed. The others agree to never mention the incident or Corbett again. “It never happened,” says Travis (148), who really should know better. And perhaps on a strategically political level – if not on personal and cultural ones – he does.

Notes:

Snake in Fridge ran from 20 November – 9 December 2000 at the Royal Exchange, Manchester, directed by Braham Murray. Although I saw Murray’s production and this will undeniably colour my
understanding and impressions of the play, my reading of it in this chapter relies primarily on Fraser’s written text in the published script (NeWest, 2001).

2 See the Guardian North review quoted on back cover of the script.

3 Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House was adapted for film twice as The Haunting (1963 and 1999). Fraser seems to be referencing all three versions in his stage translation.

4 Taylor’s identification of performative visual social markers and their operation was made within a discussion of the representation of the Spanish caste system in Mexico.

5 This article, first published in Contemporary Theatre Review, was the starting point for many of the ideas in this chapter.

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