

A Polyphony of Voices: The Diversity of the Immigrant Experience in Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes*

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Rakenteellisesti Annie Proulxin Vaarallinen harmonikka voidaan nähdä kahdeksana toisiinsa liittyvinä novelleina. Näitä kahdeksaa tarinaa yhdistää harmonikka, joka vaihtaa omistajaa useampaan kertaan noin sadan vuoden aikana. Romaani kuvaa Amerikkaan muuttaneiden siirtolaisten kokemusten monimuotoisuutta. Tämä paperi tutkii tuota monimuotoisuutta ja tapoja, joilla nämä tarinat sidotaan yhteen sekä kommentoi kielen ja musiikin roolia sekä niiden voimaa maahanmuuttajien kokemuksissa. Tämän paperin teoriakehikko perustuu dialogismiin, jonka käsitteenä ensimmäisenä otti käyttöön venäläinen kriitikko Mikael Bakhtin. Hänen käyttämiään muitakin käsitteitä, kuten polyfoniaa, heteroglossia ja dialogia, voidaan käyttää kuvaamaan romaanin teemoja.

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1 Introduction

The American novelist Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes* (1997) depicts the challenges that immigrants to America and their descendents face to survive in a hostile, gruelling, and unforgiving environment. In tracing the lives of eight extended families over a century, Proulx demonstrates both the diversity of the immigrant experience, as well as how these lives are inter-related and similar, through the exchange of a green-button accordion. Language and music are seen as tools of power, both to repress and empower.

The basic premise of the novel is a green button accordion traversing the United States over a period of approximately one hundred years (the 1890s to the 1990s). The accordion changes hands, but very rarely is it a direct exchange between the old and new owners – it is given as a gift, bought at a flea market, found in a taxi, and so on, which represents the related, yet not directly connected histories of the characters. This creates an atmosphere of randomness, as there is no telling how long a person will be in possession of the accordion or where it will go next. Despite the apparent randomness within the text, each section does relate to an important period in American history (for

example, during WWI, the focus is on the plight of three German Americans and their families, who settle in Iowa – this is the third chapter of the book and is called “The Goat Gland Operation”).

In spite of the link of the accordion, each chapter is almost like a story unto itself. The focus is upon the owner of the accordion, and describes their interaction with the instrument, their family and community, and with being ‘American’. The physical link is the accordion and as it changes hands, its meaning and significance changes, which, in turn, makes a statement about the immigrant experience in America over the last hundred years. I would argue that Proulx demystifies the ‘American dream’, which puts her in a prominent position in contemporary American literature. As Karen L. Rood (2001: 89–90) states:

In its scope and in its theme of individuals at the mercy of historical forces beyond their understanding or control ... [*Accordion Crimes*] has much in common with John Dos Passo’s U.S.A. trilogy (1930–1936). She too grapples with the threads of U.S. history in an ambitious attempt to weave a definition of the American experience.

The polyphony of voices – often clashing with the official dialogue – demonstrates that America was not the paradise promised to many immigrants. They had to struggle to have their voices heard.

The structure of the text is further complicated through Proulx’s manipulation of time. While the basic chronology of the text is linear (each chapter moves forward in time), within each chapter time takes on a life of its own, adding to the complexity of the immigrant experience. The chapters themselves are divided into sections with their own titles, which has the effect of sub-dividing the life of each character into smaller pieces. As well, Proulx has employed a technique which she herself has termed “the ‘flash-forward’ to reveal what happens to a character outside the time frame of the novel” (Rood 2001: 14). These ‘flash-forwards’ are always marked off from the rest of the text with parentheses, and in many cases, do not even relate the fate of a major character. For example, as readers we hear the fate of the grandson of the original German immigrants in “Goat Gland Operation”. He is able to regain possession of the farm and

the land which was lost in the Great Depression, demonstrating how one can overcome tragedy and rebuild. He is also determined to find his grandfather's green button accordion, which proves to be his downfall:

- (1) Weren't they still searching in 1985 when Rawley and his wife, Evelyn, celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with an autumn trip to Yellowstone Park where Rawley, in the West Thumb Geyser Basin, dropped a roll of film, trod on it, lost his balance and fell headlong into a seething hot spring, and despite eyes parboiled blind and the knowledge of impending death, clambered out – leaving the skin of his hands like red gloves on the stony edge – only to fall into another, hotter pool? You bet (Proulx 1997: 104).

There is a mixture of positive and negative elements in his life, though his ultimate fate is rather grim. Perhaps Proulx is making a statement about how difficult it is to reclaim a past which has been lost, and that it is always held in a fragile balance to the accidents and misfortunes which take place in the present/future.

2 Speak my language: the language barrier and the immigrant experience

Aside from the green button accordion, what links all of the chapters and the characters within them together, is the roles of language and music in aiding and hindering these men, women, and children in their struggles to forge a life for themselves. As anyone who moves to a new country where another language is spoken knows, an important element of integrating into this new environment is to learn the local language. How can you expect to find your way, get a job, buy groceries, or go to school if you cannot communicate your wants and needs? This is one of the challenges that early immigrants had to face upon their arrival in America, though these challenges are not exclusive to these early settlers – problems faced continue to this very day, in many shapes and forms. It could simply be a matter of not being understood or a lack of respect for a particular language (due to cultural stereotypes and racism). To describe these situations and their importance to defining the diversity of the immigrant experience in the novel, the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony, dialogue, and heteroglossia are useful, as they deal with the interaction between people, as well as the power struggles inherently involved in language.

In *Accordion Crimes*, there are many variations upon the theme, but one of the more prominent situations is the clash between the dominant language (in this case, American English) and the language spoken by the immigrant group. The dialogue between the interlopers becomes muddled and complicated, revealing a complex power struggle, where eventually someone falls through the cracks. First and foremost, not speaking 'American' is seen as a weakness and the immigrants encounter the consequences of this on a daily basis.

This can be illustrated quite clearly with the story of the accordion maker, the main figure in the first chapter of the novel, which is entitled "The Accordion Maker". First of all, he is never given a proper name (he is always referred to as 'the accordion maker'), making him one man among many who fled Europe searching for a better life. He hand-crafted the green button accordion and had dreams of becoming rich with this talent in "La Merica. He thought of a new life, fresh and unused, of money hanging in the future like pears hidden in high leaves" (Proulx 1997: 23). Unfortunately, what he and his son, Silvano, encounter does not match the glorious stories he heard from his brother-in-law. They arrive in New Orleans and enter a world which is driven by money and greed and fuelled with racism and violence. The accordion maker's story is a fictionalization of real events which took place in the city at the end of the 19th century – there was much violence against and racism between the various immigrant groups – especially towards immigrants of Italian descent – and the Americans. The accordion maker is thrust into a world he does not understand (because he does not speak English) and is falsely arrested and accused of a crime he did not commit, along with many other Italian immigrants. A riot breaks out in the prison (instigated by a local businessman who is afraid of losing his hold on the trade industry in the city) and the accordion maker is killed in the fray. Silvano survives, heads out on the shrimp boats, and shuns his roots:

A hardness began to form in his chest, a red stone of hatred, not for Americans but for the foolish, weak Sicilian father who had failed to learn American ways and let himself be killed... 'Bob Joe,' he said quietly in American, burning with hatred for Sicilians. 'My name are Bob Joe. I work for you, please.' (Proulx 1997: 59).

Not only does he discard his heritage, but he changes his name, cutting off all ties with the home he once knew. It is also important to note that it is not the residents of his new home that he resents, but his father, for not adapting to his new situation.

It is through Silvano that the power of language to oppress is seen especially clearly. As is often the case, the children of immigrants are better equipped to adapt to a new environment where learning the new language is concerned. An old Italian woman warns them about the stigma their homeland carries and advises them: “Americans believe Sicilians and Italians are the same and hate them both, curse them as sacks of evil. If you wish success you must master the American language.” (Proulx 1997: 31–32). Silvano quickly learns this the hard way. When they attempt to ask for directions, their question is ignored and they are spat at. This continues as they search for a place to stay and employment, and “Silvano experienced the helpless rage of the prisoner of language” (Proulx 1997: 33). In the end, as already mentioned, the only way he sees out of this situation is to become part of the dominant dialogue, at any price.

Another striking example of this occurs in the second chapter, which is entitled “The Goat Gland Operation.” This chapter features three German immigrants who found a town in Iowa and build very successful lives for themselves, at least until WWI breaks out. The first encounter with the complexities of language in their new home country is with the naming of the town. Beutle, one of the three men, argues: “It’s these *Pranken*, these paws, that will build our farms and the town. Let the name show the work of our hands” (Proulx 1997: 67). The matter is decided upon, “but when they filed the papers at the county seat, the word was written down as Prank” (Proulx 1997: 67). Loats, one of the other founders, is obviously disappointed: “If we called it *Hände*...it would of turned into Hand, not a bad name. But Prank? A joke. Your life place becomes a joke because language mixes up!” (Proulx 1997: 67). This is the first of a number of disappointments that the men experience – they face discrimination and hardship, not only from the Americans, but from the other immigrant groups which arrive in their community (the Irish workers who are building the railroad, for example). With this, Proulx shows that “*Accordion Crimes* is not only the fictionalized history of the

American immigrant experience but also the story of the myriad forms of bigotry that have accompanied it” (Rood 2001: 92).

Despite all their hard work and contribution to the community, not to mention a fierce patriotism to their new homeland, this is all cast aside when WWI breaks out and fear and scepticism towards those of German descent takes over. Their fate, as with the majority of characters in the novel, is affected by events which are entirely out of their control; in this case, war in Europe. German Americans become the enemy, and the situation is more far-reaching than simply worried stares from their neighbours; it is a part of the official discourse:

- (2) This is Roosevelt’s horse, he is riding it hard. He don’t like hyphens! Jesus Christ! He is concerned about German hyphen Americans. See here, down here. He says, ‘some Americans need hyphens in their names because only part of them have come over. But when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name.’ And what else drops? Jesus, Jesus and Christ, a beautiful language, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Schiller drops, Goethe drops, Kant and Hegel, Wagner, Wagner drops. (Proulx 1997: 86–87).

There is little tolerance for the cultural diversity which the immigrants bring with them from their homelands. The emphasis is on assimilation, especially in times of war. As might be expected, the Germans do not give up easily, which results in their ostracism within the community and their ultimate demise. They are literally shut out of the dialogue.

The pressure from the official discourse to assimilate continues in the third chapter, “Spider Bite Me.” The focus in this case is on a family of Mexican Americans, living near the Mexican border. The pressure the Relampagos feel comes from both sides, as their relatives in Mexico mock the ‘Tejanas’ (Texans) and their funny way of speaking, and there is also pressure from the dominant discourse in Hornet. Sadly enough, the mother, Adina, has bought into this pressure:

- (3) “*¿por qué* you kids don’t talk American? No more Spanish. From now on American at home too, not just school. If you talk Spanish you’ll end up in the fields. Talk American and get an education you get a good job. You’re Americans, no? Then be an American and get some money.” For her part, she had given them a start with American names: Baby, Chris, Betty. (Proulx 1997: 120)

Once again it can be seen that wealth and success are only achievable if one can communicate in the dominant discourse, which is why many immigrants and their families lose all contact with their language and culture. A hierarchy of languages is created, where English is favoured. Bakhtin (1996: 270) examines the meeting of languages in “Discourse in the Novel” and posits the following:

- (4) Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given [*dan*] but is always in essence posited [*zadan*]—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.

There is no way of achieving the monolingualism strived towards; there will always be competing voices. This is true of the novel as a genre, as well as the specific context of this text.

However, the lessons of the dominance of American English are explicitly taught to the children at school:

- (5) The Hornet school was segregated, a school for ‘Mexicans,’ no matter how many generations you had been in Texas...The teachers were Anglos, most of them from the north at their first jobs. The lessons were in American. There was an expensive rule: a penny fine for every Spanish word uttered.

“You are in the United States where we speak English,” said the principal in morning assembly, stepping to the edge of the stage to lead them in the Pledge of Allegiance (Proulx 1997: 125)

A clear irony is seen here – the children of Mexican descent are segregated from the other children, yet forced to adopt their ways. This is very similar to what the Germans encountered in the previous chapter. Language is a powerful tool used to dominate.

With time, however, it is possible to try and regain what has been lost, and in many cases, it means skipping a generation. Once the immediate effects of the pressure to assimilate are overcome, the second or third generation of immigrant can try to reclaim what is lost. This is the case in the story of the Przybysz family in Chicago, where Mrs. Józef Przybysz passes on sensational tales about her husband to her grandson, Joey. While he never learns to speak Polish, he does take up the accordion, showing some

interest in his heritage. He and his wife, Sofia, travel the accordion concert circuit and live off their winnings. Unfortunately, the contests have changed over time, due to the demands of the crowd:

- (6) When the first festivals started up in the sixties - let the blacks see that Polish was beautiful – the more Polish the music, the better the organizers liked it, wanted performers to sing in the language or some regional dialect, preferred unusual music and difficult dances that took a long time to get going, music from some isolated Little Poland. It was all Polish people who came then. But the festivals boomed and swelled, turned into everybody-come, beer-drinking weekend good times: the organizers knew what the crowd wanted and it wasn't cultural esoterica (Proulx 1997: 236).

Joey and Sofia are only in this for the money, and do not get any other satisfaction from their playing (in fact, Sofia dies from throat cancer because she drinks some tonic before each performance to make her voice sound husky). Everything is an act – a tragically flawed version of the Bakhtinian carnival. It has all the ingredients for rejuvenation, but has been corrupted by greed, from the organizers to the performers and to the audience that comes to listen.

What do all these examples say about the diversity of the immigrant experience and the role of language in the novel? I believe that Proulx is making a statement of how progress can rob a system of its diversity. This is compounded by a fear of the unknown, as well as the pressure to conform to the dominant paradigm. So, while the heteroglossia within the novel as a whole celebrates the diversity of the immigrant experience (for example, through the use of many different languages throughout), in the end, the message is clear – if you want to survive in America, you must fit in and speak 'American'.

3 Music as a tool in conveying the immigrant experience

Music is another 'language' which is 'spoken' in the novel and is also an important element in conveying the diversity of the immigrant experience. As noted earlier, the protagonist is a little green accordion which travels around the country, visiting the homes of many people during its lifetime. The accordion is received in a variety of ways (from delight to disdain), although it often assumes a life of its own. For example,

Octave, the black man who buys the accordion from Buddy Malefoot in the chapter titled “Don’t Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand,” thinks:

He wanted the green accordion because it sounded good and loud and could sound better, but most of all because it had looked him in the eye...Of course he knew it was his own eyes reflected but figured the odds were a million to one they could line up with the mirrors that way. It made the instrument powerfully alive (Proulx 1997: 255).

As well, not only does each chapter feature the green accordion, there is also a second accordion which is compared to it. Characters weigh the merits of these accordions for their sound and versatility. With this, Proulx is yet again commenting on the diversity of experience, and how a particular instrument can represent a particular time or type of music or culture. It is one more level in the polyphony that can be found within the text.

The journey of the green accordion begins with the accordion maker. For him, the instrument is a culmination of his skill and artistry, as well as a representation of his homeland. While he is unable to succeed financially in this venture, he uses the instrument to connect with fellow Sicilians: “Only the Sicilians pressed closer, hungry to hear the lost music that brought with it the scent of thyme and the tinkle of goat bells, and they called out for certain melodies that made them contort their faces with grief” (Proulx 1997: 44). His playing binds the men together, creating a community where all other troubles are forgotten, if only for a moment.

Dolor Gagnon is also in search of a cultural connection to music in “Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair.” He was put in an orphanage at the age of two (his father had deserted the family, and when his mother moves to live with her brother, she could not take all six children with her, so she leaves the four youngest behind). He grows up there, making up stories about his family and roots. They change his name to Frank, and he has also lost all touch with his French, which was quite common in Random, his hometown. When he returns there as an adult, in search of his roots, no one can remember his parents. His life is one long struggle to retrieve this past, and the green accordion is one tool to do just that – music is a window into his history, though it is complicated by the fact that he does not speak French. He takes a trip to Quebec, and all starts off well: “A

heady feeling rose in him that he was returning home. Somewhere up here was his source. He wept when he saw the great river, the deep bolt of water shot into the heart of the continent” (Proulx 1997: 203). He meets a man, Fintan O’Brien, who wants to help him on his search (ironically enough, he has no French roots), but Dolor quickly comes down from this high the following morning:

- (7) He wanted to play that music, music that belonged to him by blood inheritance, but could not learn it because he didn’t speak French, because he lived in a place where the music was no longer admired or played, because he could never be as good as the tranced man with the piston leg. Random had revealed nothing, meant nothing and held no meaning for him. The journey to Québec had only compounded his sense of alienation and inadequacy. He could never be those accordionists. And of himself he knew what he had known when he was two – nothing, *rien*, nothing. (Proulx 1997: 207)

He abandons this search for his roots and ultimately ends up killing himself, leaving a note with the words “I am happy” for his new bride. No matter what he does, he cannot overcome the emptiness that his lack of a past had created.

When examining them through the lens of the green accordion and the role of music to the people, the final two chapters are quite different from the rest. In “The Color of Horses,” Josephine buys the accordion at a yard sale (Joey and Sofia sell it to finance their move to Texas) in order to give it to the old ranch hand, Fay McGettigan, who works for her parents on their ranch in Montana. The setting of this chapter is the summer of 1980, and Josephine is going home with her violent and abusive boyfriend, Virgil, a Vietnam veteran. The green accordion is just one of a number of trinkets that she buys at yard sales in the drive out west, showing how this instrument, crafted almost a century earlier by the accordion maker, has almost completely lost its value. Traditional music and cultural diversity has been replaced with billboards and interstates. Fay does not even keep the accordion, but gives it to a Basque sheepherder who is not able to enjoy the instrument for long (he is bitten by a poisonous snake, which just happened to be sleeping underneath the accordion – he had left it on a rock in the hot sun).

In the final chapter of the book, “Back Home with reattached Arms,” we have the story of Vela Gasmann, a young girl whose arms are cut off (and reattached) in a freak

accident in her yard during a wind storm (she is outside, waving a broom in the air to scare away the swallows in the eaves, and a pick-up truck passes by the house with a load of scrap metal sheeting in the back. The load is not secure, and the wind picks up one of the sheets and sends it flying through the air – it chops Vela's arms off. The father and son in the truck do not realize what has happened and continue on their journey). Needless to say, Vela has a lot of recovering to do, and one thing that she finds comfort in is listening to old accordion music. Her father tells a neighbour about this strange pastime and he mentions that he has a lot of old cassettes at home which he can bring for her. He also finds the green accordion in an antique shop and buys it for her.

But, the father has bad timing and gives all of these things to Vela when her friends are over visiting – they are listening to hip-hop music in her bedroom. When she opens the package, she is mortified to see what is inside, only because of how her friends will react. So, she asks her mother to throw them all away:

“Ma, I don't want that junk. Take it out. Just throw it in the trash. And that thing too,” pointing her chin at the accordion. Audrey pressed a button on the player and the tape shot out. She dropped it in the plastic bag as if disposing of a reeking bone and slepped the booming, chanting tape in its place (Proulx 1997: 423).

Techno trumps tradition, and the popular beats out the eccentric – not much has changed in one hundred years.

4 Conclusions

The fate of the accordion is grim. It is deemed trash and taken away on a garbage truck, only to be thrown out of the window (one of the drivers of the truck had salvaged it, thinking it might have some value). A group of small children find it on the side of the road and throw it into traffic. The accordion is smashed to bits, revealing a secret it has been hiding for nearly the entire book. In Chapter 3, Abelardo Relampago hid fourteen one thousand dollar bills in the bellows of the accordion – money he received for delivering packages for a man who visits the restaurant where he works as a busboy (we

are never told what was in the packages, but it can be safely assumed that it was something illegal). There is a profound irony here if one looks back on all the struggles of the owners along the way. That money would have certainly helped any one of them to overcome some of the difficulties they faced in their lives.

The dialogue through music in the novel is not an easy one to decipher, as it works on so many levels, often at the same time. Again, as with the role of language, there is ambivalence. Music is a way to express oneself, but this is not necessarily understood by those who hear it – it could also be that you are prevented from playing, due to your race or gender, for example. Or, you are forced to play music which is not yours, if only to please the crowd and listening public.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Proulx paints a rather dismal picture of the situation of American immigrants and their descendents. The American dream is no more than an illusion, at least in its ideal form. We are witnesses to the struggle to maintain one's language and culture when outside forces pressure you to suppress it and forget it altogether. Proulx aptly shows the diversity of the immigrant experience from many perspectives.

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