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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7550>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.7550

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Monica Manolescu-Oancea, "Inventing and naming America: Place and Place Names in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 4-1 | 2009, document 3, Online since 01 June 2009, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7550> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.7550>

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Inventing and naming America: Place and Place Names in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*¹

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After the Gold Rush



(Silk crepe de chine hand painted, machine quilted, 66 × 53.3 cm)-Linda Gass, 1998, <http://www.lindagass.com/GoldRush.html>

1. Vladimir Nabokov's Sense of Place: Recreations and Fairy Tales

- 1 This paper is an exploration of Nabokov's geographic and toponymic sensibility and of its very special combination of observation, cultural projections, desires and expectations, words and "average 'reality'" (*Strong Opinions* 26; "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" 312) that contribute to the invention of a hybrid America, an America that is partly recognizable and partly a game in a mental or literary space. Nabokov's America is best rendered, visually and kaleidoscopically, by the image of the patchwork, "the crazy quilt of forty-eight states" that features in *Lolita* (152), a colourful and playful surface dotted with real place names that seem imaginary and imaginary place names that sometimes seem real. Nabokov has a special preference for mosaics, kaleidoscopes, stained glass windows, lozenge surfaces, colourful butterflies, chessboards: composite objects that share the dimensions of patterning, chromatic contrast and fractioned design. The "crazy quilt" in *Lolita* is the textile version of the mosaic, the artefact that best represents Nabokov's American geography.
- 2 This paper will first offer a quick survey of Nabokov's various statements on his vision of place in fiction developed in the forewords to some of his Russian works and in the afterword to *Lolita*, as well as in his critical texts. A shift of paradigm is visible from the rejection of mimetic interest (with notable exceptions) in the Russian fiction to the thorough research conducted for *Lolita*. Critics have already examined the ways in which *Lolita*'s America reconfigures cultural projections coming from elsewhere (from Humbert's European background). This paper will look at the erotic overtones of *Lolita* and Humbert's American journeys and examine space as a narrative of seduction. Place names will then be analyzed, with a special focus on the notion of referentiality and the various ways in which a "crazy quilt" of real and imaginary place names is created. Finally, the heterogeneity of Nabokov's American patchwork will be contrasted with the existence of a unique consciousness manipulating geography and naming, playing games of words and worlds (like John Shade in *Pale Fire* 63).
- 3 Nabokov's relationship with America is best understood in terms of his mosaic-like diversity as an individual and as a writer, since linguistic, exilic, geographic diversity is inherent in this "American writer born in Russia and educated in England" (*Strong Opinions* 131), a "one-man multitude," as he defines himself (*Strong Opinions* 99). Nabokov studied French literature at Cambridge University and was an exile in Prague, Paris and Berlin before emigrating to the United States, where he spent twenty years teaching and writing before retiring in the rosy exile of Switzerland and Montreux Palace, never to return to the United States. In terms of languages and genres, Nabokov's prolific production in Russian, English and French² testifies to his multilingual talent and proves his consummate mastery of the conventions of narrative, poetry and drama, conventions that he often liked to transgress.
- 4 Once in the New World, the lepidopterist went butterfly-hunting in the West, the professor praised the dream libraries of American universities, the writer impregnated himself with all things American in order to instill "a modicum of average 'reality'" into the book about the nymphet ("On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" 312). What is at stake is the invention of the United States after Nabokov had invented Europe in the Russian language:

I had to invent America and *Lolita*. It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced by a similar task, with a lesser amount of time at my disposal. The obtaining of such local ingredients as would allow me to inject average "reality" into the brew of individual fancy proved, at

fifty, a much more difficult process than it had been in the Europe of my youth.
(*Strong Opinions* 26)

- 5 Vladimir Nabokov's aesthetic temperament is definitely not that of the literary sociologist or the literary realist. The word "reality" itself is a problematic concept, since he famously claimed that reality means nothing without quotation marks ("On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" 312). The forewords that open the works of fiction produced during Nabokov's Russian years often discuss the choice of place (most of the time Berlin) and develop a theory of place in fiction which seems quite remote from the more substantial "average 'reality'" which is visible in some of Nabokov's American novels. The foreword to the 1967 English translation of *King, Queen, Knave* (*Korol', dama, valet*, 1928) insists on the accidental choice of Berlin and on the a-spatial, a-topological quality of the book, which is actually a fairy tale presenting German characters in a German setting:

One might readily conjecture that a Russian writer in choosing a set of exclusively German characters [...] was creating for himself insurmountable difficulties. I spoke no German, had no German friends, had not read a single German novel either in the original, or in translation. But in art, as in nature, a glaring disadvantage may turn out to be a subtle protective device. [...] the lack of any emotional involvement and the fairytale freedom inherent in an unknown milieu [*i.e. Berlin*] answered my dream of pure invention. I might have staged *King, Queen, Knave* in Rumania or Holland. Familiarity with the map and weather of Berlin settled my choice. (*King, Queen, Knave* viii)

- 6 *King, Queen, Knave* is thus situated at the crossroads between pure invention and the local ingredients offered by the author's familiarity with Berlin's cartographic and meteorological identity. Place appears to be a fatality (even fairy tales need distant and vague kingdoms in order to exist), the result of a more or less arbitrary choice. Similarly to Saussure's arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, Nabokov's foreword seems to posit the arbitrariness of the world framed in his fiction, since there is no necessary connection between the plot or the characters and their milieu. The bond uniting them is utterly accidental, influenced by the author's own knowledge of a given place. Interestingly, the absence of emotion ("lack of any emotional involvement") leads to the emergence of invention, partly because German, not Russian, characters were chosen to play the schematic roles of the king, the queen and the knave.
- 7 The English foreword to *The Eye* (*Soglyadatay*, 1930) conceives of place as a diagram rapidly assembled with elements close at hand. Nabokov hints once again at his preference for a fairy tale setting, but although his "favourite" Russian characters may seem to unsettle "the lack of emotional involvement," his conclusion regarding the fundamental accidentalness of place is unchanged:

The people in the book are the favourite characters of my literary youth: Russian expatriates living in Berlin, Paris, or London. Actually, of course, they might just as well have been Norwegians in Naples or Ambracians in Ambridge: I have always been indifferent to social problems, merely using the material that happened to be near, as a voluble diner pencils a street corner on the table cloth or arranges a crumb and two olives in a diagrammatic position between menu and salt cellar. (*The Eye* i-ii)
- 8 There is however one notable exception to the rule of the diagram and to the vision of accidental place: Nabokov's last Russian novel, *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1937-1938), whose 1962 English foreword talks about the "recreation" of an environment, although various

degrees are identified, from the mild recreation offered by *The Gift*, to the radical recreation put forward in Nabokov's American fiction:

In the days I worked on this book, I did not have the knack of recreating Berlin and its colony of expatriates as radically and ruthlessly as I have done in regard to certain environments in my later, English, fiction. Here and there history shows through artistry. (*The Gift* i-ii)

- 9 The term "recreation," however, should not be confused with the impure or downright comical notion of local color, whom Nabokov mockingly condemns in his lectures on literature and in his study of Gogol's fiction:

Couleur locale has been responsible for many hasty appreciations, and local color is not a fast color. I have never been able to see eye to eye with people who enjoyed books merely because they were in dialect, or moved in the exotic atmosphere of remote places. [...] There is nothing more dull and sickening to my taste than romantic folklore or rollicking yarns about lumberjacks or Yorkshiremen or French villagers or Ukrainian good companions. (*Gogol* 31)

- 10 "Place is accidental" is an axiom which holds true even in masterpieces like *Ulysses* or *Madame Bovary*, which we generally associate with Dublin or France in an indissoluble way:

Gogol's heroes merely happen to be Russian squires and officials; their imagined surroundings and social conditions are perfectly unimportant factors – just as Monsieur Homais might be a businessman in Chicago or Mrs. Bloom the wife of a schoolmaster in Vyshny-Volochok. Moreover, their surroundings and conditions, whatever they might have been in "real life," underwent such a thorough permutation and reconstruction [...] that it is as useless to look in *Dead Souls* for an authentic Russian background as it would be to try and form a conception of Denmark on the basis of that little affair in cloudy Elsinore³. (*Gogol* 70-71)

- 11 What Nabokov calls "good readers" should not expect fiction to provide didactic information on history or geography:

Can we expect to glean information about places and times from a novel? [...] Can we rely on Jane Austen's picture of landowning England with baronets and landscaped grounds when all she knew was a clergyman's parlour? And *Bleak House*, that fantastic romance within a fantastic London, can we call it a study of London a hundred years ago? Certainly not. [...] The truth is that great novels are great fairy tales [...]. (*Lectures on Literature* 1-2)

- 12 Words like "recreation," "permutation," "pure invention" and "fairy tale" are landmarks defining Nabokov's aesthetic vision of place. A sentence like "My sense of places is Nabokovian rather than Proustian" (*Strong Opinions* 197), which can be endlessly analyzed from a comparative perspective, is meant above all to distinguish Nabokov's own stance from that of other famous writers with whom he had been compared. Despite the prominence of the term "fairy tale" and of the type of rarefied aesthetics it implies due to its rejection of any mimetic imperative, there clearly emerges a nuanced mimetic scale in Nabokov's fiction (Nabokov's rainbow of "realities"), in which one can distinguish the sketchy outlines of Berlin in *Mary*, the definitely more substantial, but still phantasmal, Berlin in *King, Queen, Knave*, the "ruthless recreation" of Berlin and its expatriate colony in *The Gift*, the introduction of considerable quantities of average American reality in *Lolita* and, on a totally different plane of mimetic disentanglement (copying the "emotional disentanglement" mentioned earlier), the invented Zembla and Antiterria in *Pale Fire* and *Ada*.

- 13 In his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel Jr. insists on the writer's thorough research for the book "in scholarly fashion," on his efforts to document slang, to collect newspaper stories, to gather signs of Americanness (*Lolita* xl). *Lolita* seems to be a "radical and ruthless" recreation and the idea of violence inherent in such ruthless (because truthful) recreations suggests that the lightness and the fairy tale freedom of *King, Queen, Knave* have been replaced in *Lolita* by the toil and strain of a different kind of approach, more labored and premeditated, aiming at recapturing the spirit of place. The sober minimalism of the diagram drawn rapidly on a napkin is swept aside in favor of the chromatic richness of the crazy quilt made up of patches of different colors, motifs and sizes sewn together, a striking and time-consuming artefact. The quilt is a metaphor of the geographic and administrative configuration of the United States as well, a country that grew out of a gradual assemblage of states⁴. The variegated nature of the quilt suggests heterogeneity, a motley space flaunting its decorative hybridity – and it is precisely the hybridity that characterizes the representations of America in *Lolita* that I will try to highlight.
- 14 *Lolita's* American setting and the extreme paucity of Russian references it contains⁵ prove that Nabokov was trying to go beyond his status as a "Russian-born author of a would-be all-American novel" (Toker 21) and become the American author of an all-American novel. *Pnin* (1957), composed at the same time as *Lolita*, channels a great number of Russian elements and is thus considered by Toker to be "a contrasting companion piece to *Lolita*" (*ibid.*).
- 15 In 1966, Nabokov defined himself as an American writer and as a proud American citizen, but he also presented himself as humorously aloof from a certain number of regional or popular elements in American culture:
- I am as American as April in Arizona. The flora, the fauna, the air of the Western states are my links with Asiatic and Arctic Russia. Of course, I owe too much to the Russian language and landscape to be emotionally involved in, say, American regional literature, or Indian dances, or pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane; but I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers. (*Strong Opinions* 98)
- 16 Just how American is "April in Arizona" and in what ways one can be "emotionally involved" in "pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane" are questions that would deserve further attention, but not within the limits of this paper.⁶ And just how American is *Lolita's* America?
2. "We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing."
- 17 For Nabokov, becoming American also implied an organic process. In 1964, the writer claimed, tongue-in-cheek, that even his body was partly made up of American flesh:
- I became as stout as Cortez⁷ – mainly because I quit smoking and started to munch molasses and candy instead [...]. In consequence, I am one-third American – good American flesh keeping me warm and safe. (*Strong Opinions* 27)
- 18 This metaphor of the colonist who goes native, whose body is one third American, could also be applied to Humbert Humbert's America, which is one third American, the rest being a mixture of European great expectations, cultural references and clichés – in the image and likeness of the narrator. Humbert defines himself as a "salad of racial genes" (9), someone who is made up of "French epithets, a Dorset yokel's knuckles, an Austrian tailor's flat fingers – that's Humbert Humbert" (274). Genetically and metaphorically, Humbert is a quilt himself. Moreover, Humbert is a weaver who calls himself "Humbert the Wounded Spider" (54) and whose thread meanders around the

Haze house. In the arctic adventures episode, his crafty web of stories and caresses is meant to capture and captivate the nymphet: "I had completely enmeshed my darling in this weave of ethereal caresses" (45).

- 19 If we browse through *Lolita*, Chateaubriand, Flaubert, El Greco, Claude Lorrain, Arcadia, Botticelli are the main elements of an alchemy of cultural references that allows the Old World to construct the myth of the New (Haegert; Raguet-Bouvard 1996 & 1999). Many of the various patches making up the American quilt are of European origin. The forests display "enormous Chateaubriandesque trees" (145) borrowed from *Atala*, the sky is "pregnant with the inky rain" of El Greco's paintings (152), the clouds remind one of Claude Lorrain (152), the American wilderness suggests a semblance of Arcadia, but is actually populated with "semi-extinct dragons" (168) and is therefore too aggressive for erotic pastimes. The filter of European mental models is not always applicable, since Humbert admits that at times his expectations are baffled by the unpredictable landscape: "the models of those elementary rusticities became stranger and stranger to the eye, the nearer I came to know them" (152). The French language constantly interferes with Humbert's American idiom, to signal strangeness, charm, erudition. *Lolita*'s second translator into French argues that Humbert's English syntax is at times surprisingly close to French syntax and therefore relatively easy to transmute into French (Couturier, "The French Nabokov" 145). It seems that Humbert writes his memoir of the nymphet in a disguised French and that he writes America in the European idiom.
- 20 When the learned traveller, book in hand and talking "like a book" (114), finally visits the America of his bookish European experience, a reverse alchemy takes place – gold is transformed into lead and the grandiose mental image of the European child who had equated America with mountains, adventures and Indians is bathetically deflated into the garbage and smoke of a suburban lawn:

I remember as a child in Europe gloating over a map of North America that had "Appalachian Mountains" boldly running from Alabama up to New Brunswick, so that the whole region they spanned--Tennessee, the Virginias, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, appeared to my imagination as a gigantic Switzerland or even Tibet, all mountain, glorious diamond peak upon peak, giant conifers, *le montagnard émigré* in his bear skin glory, and *Felix tigris goldsmithi*⁸, and Red Indians under the catalpas. That it all boiled down to a measly suburban lawn and a smoking garbage incinerator, was appalling. (209-210)
- 21 The "measly" suburban lawn epitomizes Nabokov's notion of "poshlust," defined as "cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high-falutin', in bad taste" or "inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack" (*Gogol* 64). Small-town America is painfully "poshlust," although Nabokov denied any satirical intention in *Lolita*:

I can only repeat that I have neither the intent nor the temperament of a moral or social satirist. Whether or not critics think that in *Lolita* I am ridiculing moral folly leaves me supremely indifferent. But I am annoyed when the glad news is spread that I am ridiculing America. (*Strong Opinions* 22-23)
- 22 The fact that the book was perceived by some readers as a satire (which grieved Nabokov⁹) is symptomatic of its double status of "American novel" and Nabokovian fairy tale.
- 23 However, we have to do justice to Humbert's "measly" suburban lawn, because the nymphet appears, like Venus out of the foam of the sea (*Lolita* is actually compared to "Botticelli's russet Venus" 270), in the sleepy town of Ramsdale, on the lawn of the

Haze house: "I cast around for some place in the New England countryside or sleepy small town (elms, white church) where I could spend a studious summer" (35). Ramsdale, the New England cliché parenthetically defined by its elms and white church, becomes the site of an explosive epiphany, since the copy of Annabel Leigh peers at Humbert over dark glasses from the suburban lawn, with no garbage incinerator, for a change.

- 24 The "yearlong travels" of Humbert and Lolita across the United States function as a means of *seduction*, a term that points to the Latin "se-ducere," leading astray, which is precisely Humbert's project. Baudrillard sees seduction, in spatial terms, as a ritual of disorientation, as a way of going off-track (Baudrillard 38). As a consequence, these travels do not proceed in a straightforward manner, but are essentially made up of zigzags, loops, meanders, "wiggles and whorls" (154), "twists of lust" (117), the geometrical shapes of voluptuous digression. A spatial discourse of seduction is developed, in which a spiralled vertigo of speed and renewed vistas sucks the nymphet in, keeps desire alive and the two unlikely partners close to each other. Roland Barthes compares erotic discourse to a skin caressing the body of the lover, a verbal skin tremulous with desire (Barthes 87). The "crazy quilt" is analogous to an erotic discourse constantly unfolding in an ever-changing American setting, enveloping the nymphet in its colourful embrace. The "weave of ethereal caresses" (45) mentioned earlier is transmuted into the geographic and textile metaphor of the quilt. The predatory aspect of Humbert's spidery web is complemented by the carnivalesque excess of a harlequin patchwork suggesting transgression and delight. We are dealing with a geography of seduction in which desire is the fuel of movement. There is no definite objective, no destination, no end:

Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive till bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed. The object in view might be anything [...] anything whatsoever – but it had to be there, in front of us, like a fixed star [...]. By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight. (151-152)

- 25 Humbert's conclusion at the end of the trip talks about blindness and frantic, intransitive movement in order to keep the nymphet alive, literally, but also metaphorically, in order to keep the myth of the nymphet alive: "We had been everywhere, we had really seen nothing" (175). During the "yearlong travels," the motels, the tourist attractions and the landscapes are condensed in more or less fugitive remarks, eloquent vignettes that capture the essence of the scene:

Cliff dwellings. The mummy of a child [...]. Our twentieth Hell's Canyon. Our fiftieth gateway to something or other *fide* that tour book, the cover of which had been lost by that time. A tick in my groin. Always the same three old men, in hats and suspenders, idling away the summer afternoon under the trees near the public fountain. (157)

- 26 These nominal sentences, each focusing on a distinct element, prove that the narrative is on the run, just like America, which constitutes a narrative in itself. There is no satisfactory descriptive pause, no narrative patience, no repose. Umberto Eco says at a certain point in the *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* that there are novels that breathe like elephants and novels that breathe like gazelles (Eco 50-51). In the pages devoted to

the “yearlong travels” *Lolita* (actually both the nymphet and the text) certainly breathes like a chased gazelle.

- 27 Arguably, the landscape and the tourist attractions exist only because Humbert resorts to them in order to “keep the nymphet alive.” Their mere existence depends on her presence, on her need to consume them – as if the consumer’s desire nourished the vitality of the landscape. The funereal overtones of Humbert’s description (“the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed”) prove, symmetrically, that Lolita’s days are inanimate, irredeemably deflated when the life-giving tourist attractions are no longer available. Ultimately, Lolita and America are mutually dependent. Quite revealingly, once Lolita has left Humbert, the landscape slips out of Humbert’s sight (for objective, but also subjective, reasons): “By that time night had eliminated most of the landscape” (292). In Humbert and Lolita’s second trip, the tourist book and the tourist attractions are “overshadowed” (217) by the intriguing Red Aztec Convertible which follows them across the “great and ugly plains” (217). Visions of the mountains that surround Humbert are conflated with delirious visions of multiple Lolitas – an effect which is typical of the pathetic fallacy: “The noncommittal mauve mountains half encircling the town seemed to me to swarm with panting, scrambling, laughing, panting Lolitas who dissolved in their haze” (224). America is “hazy” indeed, and it gradually dissolves, just like Humbert’s hallucinatory Lolitas (whose model will soon leave him).
- 28 Despite the exuberance of the “crazy quilt” and of the “joyride” (175, 209, 298) that Humbert imagines for Lolita’s pleasure, the first trip leaves a bitter aftertaste (and the second trip an even bitterer one). Humbert’s signature of defilement is spread across the quilt like the repulsive trace of a snail or an insect:
- And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep. (175-176)
- 29 The slime of desecration and Lolita’s sobs reintroduce the moral issue at the very heart of the representation of America in the text. The defiled quilt and the “ruined tour books” cannot be dissociated from Humbert’s enterprise of mapping the country and the nymphet.
- 30 Among the various ways in which America is represented, “ruthlessly” dislocated or bent by the game of wayward seduction, toponymy plays a privileged role. Laurence Guy talks about Nabokov’s “manipulations of naming” through anagrams (Guy 137). Place names in *Lolita* belong to a distinct category, since place names that do not exist on any American map and that could be compared to extraneous onomastic patches are sewn onto the existing toponymic fabric of the United States, thus creating a Nabokovian “crazy quilt.” These intrusions of naming (intrusions of invented names into real geography) complement the “manipulations of naming” restricted to the reconfiguration of existing verbal entities. Reversing Nabokov’s pronouncement, we could say that it seems at times that individual fancy is injected into “reality” and thus place names allow Nabokov to invent or at least appropriate America by (partially) naming it all over again.

3. Place Names: a Referentiality of Suspicion, a Suspicion of Referentiality

- 31 Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* project the image of the writer as creator and explorer of a new world with a specific topography and creatures, and with imaginative place names. The act of naming is endowed with a performative value:

The writer is the first man to map it [the new world of the book] and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries there are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. That lake between those trees will be called lake Opal or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake. (*Lectures on Literature* 2)

- 32 Place names are among Nabokov's favourite lexical playgrounds, as the hesitation between the pompous "lake Opal" and the humorous "Dishwater Lake" suggests. Dieter E. Zimmer's website devoted to the unravelling of *Lolita's* geography shows that there are fifteen imaginary towns in the novel, some of which carry larger intertextual and metaphorical implications: Ramsdale, Parkington, Climax, Briceland, Lepingville, Pisky, Kasbeam, Soda, Wace, Snow, Champion, Elphinstone, Cantrip, Coalmont, Gray Star. Briceland echoes the enchanted forest of Brocéliande in Arthurian texts, Elphinstone and Pisky point to the motif of elves and fairies, and so on.

- 33 The simplest observation one can make about *Lolita's* place names and general topographic framework is that, obviously, real and imaginary place names (real and imaginary places) coexist, but actually the ways in which this coexistence is enacted in the narrative are quite oblique. When Humbert catalogues his fights with the nymphet, precise details saturate the passage, describing altitudes, crossroads, reasons for fighting:

We had rows, minor and major. The biggest ones we had took place: at Lacework Cabins, Virginia; on Park Avenue, Little Rock, near a school; on Milner Pass, 10,759 feet high, in Colorado; at the corner of Seventh Street and Central Avenue in Phoenix, Arizona; on Third Street, Los Angeles, because the tickets to some studio or other were sold out... [...] And on McEwen St., corner of Wheaton Ave., in a Michigan town bearing his first name. (158)

- 34 Upon close scrutiny, it turns out that McEwen Street does intersect Wheaton Avenue in Clare, Michigan (as proved by Brattin), but there is no intersection between Seventh Street and Central Avenue in Phoenix, Arizona (the two streets run parallel to each other). Escher's eerie lithographs come to mind, with their illusive crossroads and intersecting staircases masking actual physical impossibilities. Such Escher-like moments and spaces in the text, in which real intersections coexist with imaginary ones, become apparent only if a maniac reader emerges (not a manic-depressive reader, but rather a manic-euphoric one), a maniac reader who is ready to verify the accuracy of Humbert's minutest details, their adequacy to reality. One reason why the American quilt in *Lolita* is "crazy" is precisely because of such hybrid instances that construct *trompe l'oeil* vistas.

- 35 Several levels of toponymic inventiveness can be identified: within Humbert's narrative, which creates a geography of its own through the use of real and invented place names, Quilty's "cryptogrammic paperchase" through motel registers (250) opens up another topographic and toponymic frame, which requires impressive hermeneutic skills. In this case, geography and interpretation cannot be dissociated, as if traveling through America (through Quilty's paper America) were equated with the reading of cultural and literary signs encoded in the language and conventions of toponymy.

- 36 Once *Lolita* has left him with an unknown man on the emblematic date of the 4th of July, Humbert retraces his steps from motel to motel trying to gather clues that might reveal

the identity of his rival. Quilty's signatures are disseminated in hotel registers, showing his stubborn pursuit of Humbert and Lolita, but also the fact that he is leading the chase. The "crazy quilt" is toponymic in nature as well, the result of a mad pursuit (Quilty is partly hidden in the quilt). Each of Quilty's signatures is made up of an invented name with an overt or covert literary allusion and a place name, real or imaginary, mostly in the United States, although there are three European references as well: N. Petit, Larousse, Ill.; Dr. Gratiano Forbeson, Mirandola, NY; Harold Haze, Tombstone, Arizona; D. Orgon, Elmira, NY; Dr. Kitzler, Eryx, Miss.; A. Person, Porlock, England... Humbert traces Quilty's trajectory in an encrypted labyrinth of words (he mentions "logodaedaly and logomancy" 250) which offers an implicit comment on Humbert or Quilty's relationship with Lolita, but also a displacement of America itself, which becomes a shadow of European culture and a shadow of the plot itself, just like Quilty is Humbert's shadow, his nemesis and *Doppelgänger*. Hotel registers become a storehouse of signs (and America becomes a book of signs) talking about the multiplicity of identities of the mysterious rival as well as the rich diversity of his literary culture, which is projected onto the map of the United States. Each of these encrypted signatures and place names is a private or scholarly joke, as well as a riddle that needs to be solved, annotated, translated from the language of Quilty into world literature and into English. Every town he mentions, as well as every town Humbert mentions, are haunted by the possibility of non existence (Tombstone and Elmira are real, but Mirandola, Merrymay and Eryx are invented) and by the almost certainty of a linguistic or cultural disguise, of an alibi pointing to some other hermeneutic level (see the footnote for a selection of annotated signatures and place names¹⁰).

- 37 Through the use of cryptogrammic place names, Nabokov exploits the cultural and poetic potential of American geography. The traditionally virgin land is cultivated, cultured, encrypted in Quilty's toponymic riddles. Such place names are also, arguably, the starting point of Nabokov's fictional geographies in later novels like *Pale Fire* (where Zembla coexists with the United States) and *Ada* (where Antiterra replaces the planet Earth¹¹). *Ada* is without any doubt the text that best illustrates Nabokov's creative geography, the novel in which Nabokov takes the art of toponymic invention to its limits, pouring out dozens of imaginary place names belonging to Antiterra, a planet that could be described as Terra with a temporal and spatial difference¹². *Ada*'s "tessellated protectorate" of the Seven Tories which "commingles, granoblastically¹³ and organically, with 'Russian' Canady" (*Ada* 3) is an avatar of the "crazy quilt," recombining Russia and America in a strange mosaic.
- 38 We could talk about *Lolita*'s autotelic geography or rather about *Lolita*'s "textotelic" geography, that is a metatextual geography making references to the text in which it features. American toponyms are led astray, metaphorically seduced and made to signify in unexpected ways, placed on the semiotic orbit of the "yearlong travels" of Humbert and Lolita. Beyond the playful place names that make up the "cryptogrammic paperchase," the problem of referentiality becomes central, since even if toponyms like Elphinstone, Lepingville or Gray Star are not identifiable on any American map (Melville would have said that "they are not down on any map, true places never are"), some critics tend to read Nabokov's texts as riddles, following the writer's cue: "I only like to compose riddles with elegant solutions" (*Strong Opinions* 16). Therefore, each of the towns and tourist attractions begs to be decrypted. This kind of logic has led to the

emergence of a trend in Nabokov studies that could be qualified as referential criticism, that seeks to find the real place behind the imaginary one (Zimmer¹⁴).

- 39 To give an example, when Humbert meets pregnant, 17-year-old Lolita for the last time, at the end of the novel, their encounter takes place in the bleak town of Coalmont, where, as Lolita puts it, “you can’t see the morons for the fog” (266):

[T]he address she gave was “General Delivery, Coalmont” (not “Va.,” not “Pa.,” not “Tenn.” – and not Coalmont, anyway – I have camouflaged everything, my love).

Inquiries showed this to be a small industrial community some eight hundred miles from New York City. (267)

- 40 Coalmont is therefore not Coalmont at all, because “I have camouflaged everything, my love.” This camouflage is also manifest in the use of famous brands, for instance throughout the novel “Shell” is transformed into “Conch,” “Mobil” into “Pegasus” and “Camel” cigarettes into “Drome” cigarettes (a chain of associations going from *camel* to *dromedary*, then *drome*), smoked and advertised by Quilty. John Ray Jr. mentions, in the *Foreword*, the suppressions he has carried out in Humbert’s memoir, which complete Humbert’s own “camouflage”:

Save for the correction of obvious solecisms and a careful suppression of a few tenacious details that despite ‘H.H.’s own efforts still subsisted in his text as signposts and tombstones (indicative of places or persons that taste would conceal and compassion spare), this remarkable memoir is presented intact. (3)

- 41 At times, Humbert is careful to signal the change of names, for instance when he mentions the quite transparent address of Mr and Mrs Schiller, “10 Killer Street”: “I am not going very far for my pseudonyms” (268). The same holds true for Hunter Road (Lolita’s actual address, 269). In these cases, a cliché (Killer, Hunter) suffices to shed light on what the reader expects as a predictable dénouement. The same oblique strategy is at work in “a Michigan town bearing his first name” (158), which is another riddle concealing a reference to Clare, although “his” is not preceded by any identifiable antecedent (it is the general plot which provides it once the first-time reader has finished the book). Michael Wood claims that when Humbert says that he is writing under observation, he “presumably tells us to look out for codes and clues and beware of the literal” (Wood 110). Certain toponymic occurrences accompanied by more or less precise details suggest that the reader is faced with a riddle carrying its own solution: the above quoted Coalmont, “an industrial community some eight hundred miles from New York City” (267), or, to give another example, Lepingville, in New England, “where a great poet had resided in the early nineteenth century” (112). A certain number of questions naturally spring in the reader’s mind: what great poet¹⁵? Are Lepingville and Coalmont mere nominal veils that we are goaded into lifting?

- 42 Certain place names are Humbert’s fiction and the numerical details giving the distance from New York City to imaginary Coalmont urge the reader (or some readers, in any case) to take a map and start making guesses about where and what Coalmont *really* is¹⁶. “Average ‘reality’” strikes back. We could talk about a referentiality of suspicion or a suspicion of referentiality, about a geography that is haunted by meaning, but also by its referential doubles. Geography is contaminated by cultural allusion and by the illusion of referential depth as well. The poetic and the referential functions of language, in Roman Jakobson’s terms, are here playfully interconnected, truly inseparable, each mimicking the other.

43 The real place name hidden behind the invented one (identified by critics as such) sometimes plays a significant role in the game of interpretation, expanding meaning and inviting further cultural connections. To give an example, Alfred Appel Jr. identifies Gray Star, the “capital town of the book” according to Nabokov (“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 316), as Juneau, the capital of Alaska (*Lolita* 443), and so does Brian Boyd, who interprets it as a reference to a cartographic convention (stars used to indicate capitals), “but also a play on Juno, the goddess of marriage” (“Even Homais Nods” 77; italics mine). The imaginary Gray Star leads the critic to Juneau (hence to Juno), and thus the real place name allows a new layer of meaning to emerge, an additional significance which is relevant for the plot itself. Indeed, in this game of annotation and interpretation, meaning grows out of such findings. Juno, the goddess of marriage, is added to the constellation of meanings surrounding Gray Star (and indeed, Nabokov’s fiction constantly builds networks of motifs): the nymph has gray eyes, Humbert has reached his “gray goal” (269), Gray Star completes the “haze of stars” (15) inaugurated by Annabel, Gray Star reminds the reader of the “fixed star” (152) that Humbert offers to Lolita during their trips... With Juneau/Juno, my previous statement concerning *Lolita*’s autotelic or “textotelic” geography is further complicated, since real geography becomes “Lolitolitic” (the camouflaged Juneau reflects on Lolita’s marriage to Richard Schiller) and the usual transitivity connecting the book and the world is reversed: America talks about Nabokov’s novel just as much as *Lolita* talks about America. Who knows, one day a town may be called Ambridge or Briceland or Mirandola, and a lake – Lake Opal or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake.

44 What I have called “referential criticism” signals an interest in Nabokov’s manipulations of the real (with an emphasis on “real” rather than “manipulations”) which complements the various critical approaches that have dominated Nabokov studies so far (stylistic, moral, metaphysical or otherworldly). In the “Prologue” to *Nabokov’s World*, Brian Boyd and Donald Barton Johnson encourage researchers to explore Nabokov’s various worlds, be they real or imaginary:

Do not overlook all his other worlds, his Russia, his Germany, his France, his England, his America, his Switzerland, his dream and nightmare Europes, his Zemblas and Antiterrass. If he could not make this world exist so well in his fiction, his other worlds would matter much less, much less. (Boyd & Johnson 20)

45 Referential criticism is part of the mapping of what Boyd and Johnson call Nabokov’s “other worlds,” since it provides a useful basis for launching further analyses.

4. Conclusion. America: between *Unum* and *Plura*

46 The “cryptogrammic paperchase” creates the image of a very diverse (one is tempted to say “crazy quiltic”) America, which is Italian (“Dr. Gratiano Forbeson, Mirandola, NY”), Greek (“N.S. Aristoff, Catagela, NY”), Don Quixotic (“Donald Quix, Sierra, Nev.”), French (“Lucas Picador, Merrymay, Pa.”), Sicilian (“Dr. Kitzler, Eryx, Miss.”) and, in the end, highly idiosyncratic. However, in spite of this heterogeneous explosion of place names, the identity of the creator of this encrypted labyrinth is unique. Quilty is at the origin of this cryptogrammic dissemination, and the heterogeneity of toponyms is absorbed into the homogeneousness of the mastermind – this is something that Humbert comes to realize very soon: “The clues he left did not help establish his identity but they reflected his personality, or at least a certain homogenous and striking personality” (249). This “homogeneousness” which is discernible behind the crafty web of Quiltian traces is in the spirit of Nabokov’s philosophy of the author as

God or tyrant¹⁷ of his fictional world – he referred to his characters as “galley slaves” (*Strong Opinions* 95). The idea of encrypted signature which is apparent in the “cryptogrammic paperchase” reminds one of Vladimir Nabokov’s well-known anagrams disseminated in most of his texts, anagrammatic masks of the creating mind (analyzed in Shapiro 1999, Guy 134-140): Blavdak Vinomori, Vivian Badlook (*King, Queen, Knave*), Vivian Darkbloom (*Lolita*), Vivian Bloodmark (*Speak, Memory*), Baron Klim Avidov (*Ada*), Adam von Librikov (*Transparent Things*), Van Bock (*Strong Opinions*). A design is hidden in the “crazy quilt,” and the diversity of Quiltic America is a *trompe l’oeil* diversity that dissimulates the unique and versatile consciousness behind it. The pictorial device of the *trompe l’oeil*¹⁸ is a useful complement to the metaphor of the quilt.

- 47 In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov talks about an invented painting entitled *The Artist’s Studio* by the painter Van Bock, an imperfect anagram of Nabokov himself (*Strong Opinions* 72-73). Nabokov was very fond of Flemish painting, of its meticulousness and of a specific motif – the convex mirror that one can find in Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini* (1434) or in Hans Memling’s *Diptych of Maarten Niewenhove* (1487) for instance¹⁹. This device allows the painter to prolong the space of the painting (details of the room are shown in the mirror), while also offering at times a reflection of the author/painter himself, as in *The Arnolfini*²⁰ (Stoichita 212-213). The convex mirror is, in a way, the painter’s signature inside the space of the painting. This is precisely how diversity and heterogeneity function in *Lolita*, with the “crazy quilt” and “the cryptogrammic paperchase” actually hiding a convex mirror somewhere, where the authorial figure, Van Bock (also called McFate in *Lolita*), inscribes his signature and marks the origin, the *unum* of the tessellar *plura* that he has created. To go back to the image of the patchwork, beneath the “crazy quilt” there lies the “underside of the weave” (*Pale Fire* 17), bearing the discrete traces, knots and stitches of the supreme artificer.

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NOTES

1. A preliminary and radically different version of this paper was presented in Oslo at the conference of the European Association for American Studies (9-12 May 2008). I would like to thank Nathalie Cochoy and Kristiaan Versluys for their kind support. I am very grateful to Géraldine Chouard for her assistance in finding a suitable image of a quilt, Linda Gass' wonderful *After the Gold Rush*.
2. Nabokov wrote only two texts in French, "Mademoiselle O" and the essay "Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable."
3. For a radically different opinion, see for instance Eudora Welty's claim that place in famous works of fiction is of paramount importance: "Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else. Imagine Swann's Way laid in London, or The Magic Mountain in Spain, or Green Mansions in the Black Forest. The very notion of moving a novel brings ruder havoc to the mind and affections than would a century's alteration in its time" (Welty 122).
4. For the quilt as fabric of the American nation, see Géraldine Chouard, "'Once Upon a Quilt': la fabrique de l'Amérique."
5. Valeria's lover, Maximovich (28), and a "repulsively handsome White Russian, a baron they said" (155), are the only Russian characters in the novel.
6. For a discussion of Nabokov's claim that he was "as American as April in Arizona," see Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "'April in Arizona': Nabokov as an American Writer."

7. This is a reference to John Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" (1816): "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold,/And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;/Round many western islands have I been/Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold./ Oft of one wide expanse had I been told/That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;/Yet did I never breathe its pure serene/Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold;/Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken;/Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes/He stared at the Pacific – and all his men/Looked at each other with a wild surmise–/Silent, upon a peak in Darien" (italics mine).

8. A reference to Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" (1770): "where crouching tigers wait their hapless prey."

9. He also gave a humorous answer to those who read *Lolita* as a satire by joking that the book should have been published in the Soviet Union, where it was banished, of course, because it was a bitter condemnation of the American system of motels (Strong Opinions 97).

10. For the reader's delight and in order to show how Quilty's place names function, I will reproduce, with minor changes and additions, a selection of examples accompanied by Alfred Appel's explanatory notes from *The Annotated Lolita*. There are no novel discoveries; my main interest here is not in annotating *Lolita*, but in discussing the interweaving of artifice and reality through the use of cultural references in Nabokov's American place names. All the entries that are mentioned hereafter can be found in *Lolita*, 248-251: **N. Petit, Larousse, Ill.** : A reference to the title of the French dictionary, *Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré*. Of course there is no Larousse in Illinois. Larousse becomes La Rousse in Nabokov's novel *Ada*, a pun on the French "rousse," "red hair." Lucette, *Ada*'s sister, is called La Rousse. ; **Dr. Gratiano Forbeson, Mirandola, NY** : Dr. Gratiano is a character in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*; he frequently delivers quotations in Latin and Greek. His audiences interrupt him in order to stem the flow of eloquence – a reference to Humbert's eloquence. Forbeson is a minor character in Italian comedy as well, whereas Mirandola is an invented town. **Harold Haze, Tombstone, Arizona** : This is a reference to *Lolita*'s father, who is dead. Tombstone is an actual town, the most renowned of Arizona's old mining camps. **D. Orgon, Elmira, NY** : Orgon is the husband of Elmire in Molière's *Tartuffe* (1664). Hypocritical *Tartuffe* attempts to seduce her, just like Quilty attempts to seduce *Lolita* – the denouement is different however, since Elmire is faithful to Orgon, whereas *Lolita* is more than willing to leave Humbert. The term "orgon" also refers to the Austrian-American psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who coined the term "orgone" to designate sexual energy, a version of Freud's libido (Proffer 13). Elmira is an actual town in New York and the location of a college for women. **Dr. Kitzler, Eryx, Miss.** : Eryx is a mountain in western Sicily, where the cult of Aphrodite flourished, many temples were built and religious prostitution was practiced – hence the name "Venus Erycina." Venus was the patron goddess of prostitutes. Alfred Appel translates this entry in the following way: Dr. Clitoris, Venus, Miss. (427). Miss Venus is the winner of the famous beauty contest, and so *Lolita* is cast as the beauty queen, with references to *The Iliad* and to Greek mythology: *Lolita*/Helen is stolen by Quilty/Paris from Humbert/Menelaus. **Donald Quix, Sierra, Nev.** : This is a transparent reference to Don Quixote, with whom Quilty shares the first three letters of his name. Both Don Quixote and Quilty claim to be "redressers of wrongs." Don Quixote is associated with the Sierra Morena mountain range, whereas Sierra Nevada is of course a mountain range in

California, which creates a conflation between the Spain of Cervantes and chivalric romance and the United States of Humbert and Quilty, with Lolita cast as Dulcinea del Toboso. (Gerard de Vries has provided some help with this entry). **Ted Hunter, Cane, NH** : “Hunter” is a reference to Quilty hunting Humbert, to Humbert hunting Quilty, to the name of the motel where Humbert seduces Lolita, The Enchanted Hunters. The whole phrase is an anagram of Enchanted Hunter. Also, there is an allusion to Cain/Cane, Abel’s brother, since Quilty is Humbert’s imaginary brother. **Will Brown, Dolores, Colo.** : A county, a river and a town are called Dolores in the state of Colorado. Brown is Lolita’s colour – she is always compared to dark liquids and ripe fruit. Dolores is of course Lolita’s name. Incidentally, there is a town called Lolita in Texas, with a population of 548 people at the 2000 census. Clare Quilty’s name is also derived from a place name, an Irish one: there is a small fishing village called Quilty in County Clare.

11. John Updike complained about the fictional nature of the general framework (country and planet) in *Ada*: “I confess to a prejudice: fiction is earthbound, and while in decency the names of small towns and middling cities must be faked, metropolises and nations are unique and should be given their own names or none. I did not even like it when Nabokov, in *Pale Fire*, gave New York State the pre-empted appellation of *Appalachia*” (Updike 68).

12. Brian Boyd’s project *ADAonline* offers annotations and interpretations of the novel, including place names. See also Maixent 26-37.

13. Vivan Darkbloom’s annotations explain that “granoblastically” means “in a tessellar (mosaic) jumble” (*Ada* 591), another patchwork image.

14. Dieter E. Zimmer has accomplished an impressive and painstaking work of annotation of Nabokov’s texts, without which our understanding of the writer’s use of “average ‘reality’” would be dramatically incomplete. Dieter E. Zimmer foregrounds the various ways in which Nabokov incorporated or disguised elements of reality into his texts, thus proving that the consummate stylist was also attentive to the smallest details of the material, political and geographic world around him.

15. Nabokov gave some mocking clues to Alfred Appel Jr. as to the identity of the famous poet, who is an invention: “That poet was evidently Leping who used to go lepping (i.e. lepidoptera hunting) but that’s about all anybody knows about him” (*Lolita* 376).

16. A quick search on the archives of the Vladimir Nabokov Forum (“Nabokv-I”) shows that readers have inquired about the real place behind Coalmont and have done detective work in order to identify it. Two possibilities have emerged: Coal Mountain, Georgia, or Carbondale, Indiana. There are also several real Coalmonts in the United States (in Indiana, Colorado, Tennessee) and one in Canada, which further complicates matters.

17. The idea of the “tyranny of the author” is developed by Maurice Couturier in his seminal study *Vladimir Nabokov ou la Tyrannie de l’auteur* (1993).

18. For Nabokov and the *trompe l’œil*, see Valérie Burling’s article.

19. On the convex mirror in *Pnin*, see Shapiro 1992 and (more generally on Nabokov’s interest in Netherlandish art) Shapiro 2003, as well as the chapter on art in *Pnin* that can be found in Gerard de Vries & Donald B. Johnson, 44-59. In her article on “Nabokov’s pictorial approach to women,” Lara Delage-Toriel discusses the Arnolfini portrait and the convex mirror in the context of Nabokov’s anagrammatic signatures.

20. I cannot help finding similarities between the final encounter at Coalmont and the domestic scene in the Arnolfini. The painting presents the husband and the wife (the

analogues of Richard and Dolores Schiller) from the point of view of “Johannes van Eyck” who “was there” (the inscription in the convex mirror says “fuit hic”). The painter includes himself in the mirror, just like Humbert includes himself in the narrative of the scene, which is presented from his point of view. Pregnant Giovanna is echoed by pregnant Lolita. Even the dog in the painting has his counterpart in Lolita’s dog (“a nondescript cur” 269). The slippers on the carpet (which are present in many of Jan van Eyck’s paintings) call to mind Lolita’s “sloppy felt slippers” (269).

ABSTRACTS

In the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov claimed that in this book he had to invent both Lolita and America after having invented Europe in his previous fiction. This paper focuses precisely on the various ways in which Nabokov “invented” America in his best-known novel. This invention is first of all the result of the author’s evolving stance on the complexity of what he called “average ‘reality’” in his works. Through a survey of Nabokov’s statements on the choice and role of place in the forewords to his Russian works and in his critical texts, I show that *Lolita* is indeed considered by Nabokov to be a “recreation” of American reality, to a much greater extent than his Russian works had been recreations of a given milieu. I take the metaphor of the “crazy quilt” mentioned in *Lolita* to suggest complexity, chromatic exuberance, hybridity. The invention of America is also the result of a process of naming. Place names will be examined, not only those which make up Quilty’s “cryptogrammic paperchase”, but also Humbert’s choice of place names. The problem of referentiality is discussed and the way recent criticism has dealt with it. Finally, the interplay between one and many is emphasized, the way in which the diversity of the “crazy quilt” is counterbalanced by the uniqueness of the mastermind having produced it. The American motto “From many make one” could be reinterpreted as “From one make many”.

INDEX

Keywords: place and place names in literature, geography and representation, referentiality, authorial interference