Border Crossings: A Conversation with Alix Ohlin

Alix Ohlin's story "You Never Know" appears in this issue.

Alix Ohlin is an author whose characters explore the fluid gaps between identities—be they nationalities, generational identities, gender identities or the identities that only surface in the quiet moments when a pattern of light and shadow on the wall becomes the focal point of the room. The author of four books—most recently the novel *Inside*, which was a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize—she lives in Vancouver, where she chairs the creative writing program at the University of British Columbia. Her new novel, *Dual Citizen*, will be published by Knopf in June 2019. In the final days of the last year, Alix Ohlin and I sat down before our various devices to chat about art-making, art-viewing, sisterhood, reality TV, and the permeable nature of all boundaries.

Sarah Blackman: To start at the literal beginning of things, I'm interested in the provocations of your title *Dual Citizens*. Obviously, this is first and foremost a reference to the fact that your main characters—Lark and Robin—are citizens of both Canada and America and travel between those two national identities with varying degrees of fluidity. But I think that title also asserts an interest in duality that can be applied to many different areas of the book. Dual citizenship in the nation-states of gender roles, of sisterhood, of mother/daughter roles. Dual citizenship in the roles of artists and muse, or artist and facilitator, or artist and tool of art-making (which identities I think apply equally to both sisters). Can you talk a little bit about your sense of duality in the book? Or about your sense of citizenship, actually, which I think is an equally assertive theme in the novel.

Alix Ohlin: Thanks for this great question. You're absolutely right that I hoped the title and ideas of dual citizenship would have resonances and echoes beyond the literal question

of which passport you hold or where you vote. I've found myself writing a lot, in recent years, about female dyads—friends, co-workers, sisters—and I've realized I'm interested in the ways that women define themselves in relationship to, in complement or contrast to, another woman who's important to them. It's a big part of identity formation for many of us. You see this intensity in a lot of families and also in a lot of "best friendships," and the complexity of these bonds offers wonderful territory for fiction, one that's perhaps been underserved in the history of the novel, which has often focused on narratives of romantic entanglement or of connection and conflict with our families of origin. I thought of my book from the start as a love story between sisters, which would provide the container in which to explore some of the other issues and questions of identity you mentioned (feminism, motherhood, what art-making and ambition can look like in women's lives). When I think about citizenship, the questions that arise are both political and personal, such as: where do we belong? What responsibilities do we have to others? Where and how do we make a home? All of those ideas thread through the relationship between Lark and Robin, their connecting and diverging paths through life.

SB: I love the idea of a love story between sisters! I spend a good bit of time in my own work thinking about relationships between women that are not sexualized, or even romanticized, but occupy the complex territory of a platonic love. We deeply undervalue those connections in Western society, I think. Particularly in art, platonic love gets dismissed as a method of character development—introducing a foil to the main character or a Mercutio to spur on the plot. Or, most frequently in the case of female characters, friends devolve into rivals as a way of upping the dramatic ante. It is as if we cannot, as a society, fathom a relationship that does not become a romantic entanglement or a romantic rivalry. Maybe that's something to do with believing all resources, even emotional ones, can be translated into private property. Therefore all resources can be stolen or usurped or vandalized or horded. It leads to some provoking questions about the role of the artist as art-maker vs. the artist as art-producer. More on this later, maybe, but for now one of the many elements in your book I was so struck by is the way that Lark surrounds herself with *l'enfant terrible* artistic types: her lover Wheelock whose artistic genius exculpates him (at least in his own mind) from the social and domestic realties of adult life; her sister who will not seize the future her art opens for her but instead insists on the wild music of the ramshackle pianos in her barn (an excruciatingly lovely scene, by the way). Even Lark's mother Marianne, whose artistic genius might be said to be in the realm of beauty or youth or irascibility. It would be easy to write a character like Lark as a doormat and yet she takes real and deep enjoyment out of the act of observing these personalities, even as it brings her pain. She is so very much a writer figure, even though she doesn't write:

the constant observer, the wry recorder of other people's lives. Were you thinking of her as a stand-in for the act of authoring, if not for the figure of the author herself? Or does she occupy a different kind of archetype for you?

AO: I didn't necessarily think of Lark as a writer figure, though I can certainly see how that interpretation would come to mind. She's definitely an observer and a person who is more comfortable seeing others rather than being seen herself. In my head this is connected to all kinds of ideas around the male gaze. Marianne, Robin, and Lark all rebel against the male gaze and against the roles that gaze seems to assign to them, though the rebellion takes different forms for each of them. For Marianne, it means not conforming to traditional expectations of motherhood. For Robin, it means walking away from a career in music that would have put her on the stage. For Lark, it means receding behind the fame and reputation of a male artist. I've always been interested in ways that artistry and genius are gendered—the eccentricity and postures and liberties available to men are so often not available to women—and the female characters in my book are chafing against that, and struggling, not always successfully, to find an alternative path. When I was researching the book and thinking through ideas about film, I came across a lot of information about women who are editors. Thelma Schoonmaker, who has worked with Scorcese for fifty years, is perhaps the best known, but there's also Dede Allen, Verna Fields, Dorothy Spencer, Margaret Booth. Of course none of them are household names, unlike the directors with whom they collaborated (D.W. Griffith, Eliza Kazan, and so forth). Movies are made in the editing room and yet the labor and talent of these women remains mostly hidden, at least to the lay public. It's a whole invisible history of film. I saw Lark as a person who deeply prized her invisibility despite the complications and danger of it. She gets taken advantage of because of it and is alienated from others in some ways, and yet at the same time, she finds in editing a form of artistic expression that is deeply her own.

SB: Lark's editing and her attention to its grace, as well as the films she makes on her own, also seem deeply intimate to me in a way that the focal point of Wheelock's more Herzogian (can we allow that as a word?) films can't or won't. The scope is different. Lark films the changes in light as they filter through the elderly cat's fur, or close-ups of her lover's hands as he drives, or tight shots of her mother's face as she talks about day-to-day grievances at the end of her life. She doesn't do anything with those films other than make them, and that seems to be the point for her. It reminds me of the way Robin plays once she does divorce her art from the stage of the male gaze. The missing notes are a part of the making which is meant to exist only in its moment. This suggests an idea I was poking around with in an earlier question: the difference between art that must be made because

it is a necessary part of the artist's existence and art that is meant to distribute a message or an agenda—art that is conceived of as a product for its audience even if the goals of that product are selfless or beneficial to society at large. That seems like another polemic at work in your book, and in the world, perhaps. Making art because the act of making is a necessary part of being human versus making art because it creates an identity (the artistic genius) that can be distributed. Can you talk a little about the art-making impetus that your characters feel? It seems so nuanced to me the way you explore these through all the different vehicles of your plot.

AO: That's a really interesting comment. There are a number of threads in the book about the space where art becomes commodified. Wheelock goes from being a sort of high-art filmmaker to making prestige television documentaries shown on PBS, and he seems quite happy about that change, as well as with the material comfort and stability and acclaim that arrive with it. In contrast Robin records music that no one will hear, and Min, Wheelock's daughter, makes art she destroys at the end of each day. Lark is somewhere in the middle—she often makes films for the experience of making them, not for an audience, but she also winds up working in (and enjoying) reality television. I guess I'm not really interested in putting forth an argument about the purity of art for art's sake, or that any time art finds an audience or results in fame and fortune there's something terrible about it. I don't think that's true. I *am* interested in how people construct identities as artists in a place that's separate from audience, or the marketplace, because the marketplace is often driven by conservative ideas of success and/or replicates traditional ideologies. It made sense to me that Lark's identity as an artist is going to be formed somewhere outside of the narrative of a traditional career—in a space that's more interstitial, or more private, more particular to her. I was reading a great essay recently by Stacey D'Erasmo about Joni Mitchell, Roni Horn, and other women artists. D'Erasmo writes that if "the alienation that women and other Others often experience can be painful, it can also be liberating. It interposes a primal question mark between feeling and form, and it can kick off a lifelong quest to find a form that fits and/or inculcates a certain looseness and play." She characterizes that looseness of form as a doubt, a shadow, a friction. All those words ring true to me in terms of the strangeness of Lark's films and Robin's music made with untuned, broken-down pianos. Both of them are outsiders, in ways both chosen and not, and whatever art they make is necessarily going to be reflective of that.

SB: Yes! I loved the part where Lark starts editing for reality TV and finds the artistry in evolving those human dramas. That seemed so smart to me and such an interesting way to engage the eternal high art/low art dilemma—by asking which subjects are worthy of

artistic treatment, in other words. It's always been hard for me to conceive of a subject that *wasn't* worthy of artistic treatment since I think all subjects are merely different lenses through which to view the human experience—whether that experience happens on *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* or in Michelangelo's *Pieta*. But I guess there are ways of treating those subjects with varying levels of integrity, and Lark's focus seems to be in tune with the integrity of human emotion, even if the reality of that emotion is revealed through editorial manipulation. That kind of play with the high/low is pretty indicative of a lot of female or female-identifying artists. I think specifically of Laurie Anderson's crossover art-world/pop star appeal, or Judy Chicago's *The Birth Project*, which is not only collaborative (which feels very female to me) but is also expressed using the domestic or ornamental form of embroidery or needlepoint. I guess all of this is to say the continuum of women artists' work and the way it intersects or elevates or just explores domestic/popular/everyday culture is endlessly fascinating to me. And here you are: a woman artist writing about women artists! And here I am: a woman artist interviewing a woman artist writing about women artists! I confess, I'm very pleased by that sense of community. You clearly do a lot of research and related reading when you are writing; are there other writers whose work you feel like your own is in conversation with, even if they don't share the same temporal plane with you?

AO: I feel like the writer who influenced the book the most is so obvious that it's almost embarrassing—Elena Ferrante and the Neapolitan novels. So much of the discussion about those books focused on how they foregrounded the troubled complexity of female friendship, and that's true of course, but there was so much else I valued in them, including the story of how women strive and sometimes fail to be taken seriously as intellectuals, how sex can both reward and complicate that identity for them. I loved her formal choices too—the short, numbered chapters, the energetic temporal movement across vivid scenes and capacious summary, the abruptness of some of her endings. I read those books hungrily, with a pure enjoyment that's all too rare. Further back is someone like Elizabeth Bowen, whose book *The House in Paris* I love so much, especially the way she writes about children. James Baldwin's classic story "Sonny's Blues" was a touchstone for me, too, because it's about siblings and has the most elegantly rendered descriptions of piano music I've ever read. *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson—my character of Robin owes a lot to the shimmering weirdness of Robinson's Sylvie. And finally, *The Future of Nostalgia* by the late scholar Svetlana Boym, who was a distant inspiration for the character of Olga, Lark's professor and mentor. *The Future of Nostalgia* is part memoir, part philosophy, part cultural criticism, and it mines Boym's own experiences of immigration and exile as she discusses imagined homelands and constructed spaces. She describes

nostalgia as "hypochondria of the heart," which I really love. It's a gorgeously melancholy book, full of longing, and I think parts of my book were written out of a feeling of connection to that mood.

SB: Do you have a new project you are working on now, or do you take some time off between books to recharge? I'm a constant fiddler between ideas so I'm usually in research mode for something or other. Is there anything you are currently finding fascinating?

AO: I have a tendency to break up novel drafts by working on short stories, which are really my first love—so right now I'm finishing up a collection of short stories which will be published next year, after *Dual Citizens*. It's interesting to see, looking back, how the stories are working through similar thoughts and configurations as the novel. You never realize how transparent your obsessions are until after the fact. I don't have a new novel project on the go yet; often I spend a year or two reading, picking up ideas and putting them down, before I figure out which one is going to stick. So in terms of research, I've been reading a lot about the life and work of the artist Eva Hesse, with whom I've always been fascinated; also reading the work of Jenny Erpenbeck, about the refugee crisis in Europe; and re-reading *Olive Kitteridge*, by Elizabeth Strout, which is making me think about chronology and ordering of stories. It'll be a long while before I figure out how any of this will coalesce for my own work, but part of the joy for me in finishing a project is becoming a reader again, sinking into one book after the next, welcoming any influence that comes my way.