Refiguring Identities

Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction

Coral Howells

CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN WOMEN'S FICTION REFIGURING IDENTITIES

CORAL ANN HOWELLS





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Introduction

This book is designed to chart significant changes that have taken place in Canada's literary profile since the early 1990s, as it is figured through women's fiction written in English. As a reader and critic working outside Canada, I have been impressed by two remarkable phenomena during this period. One is the increasingly familiar presence of Canadian women's fiction on international publishers' lists together with the high visibility of Canadian women writers as winners of international literary prizes, and the other is the substantially growing number of novels by women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, who make the traditional image of "white" Canada look rather outdated. Clearly, the concept of Canadianness has changed, and it is in response to these changes that I want to explore how women's voices contribute to some of the issues within Canadian debates about identity. I shall consider how some significant contemporary novels written by women from a variety of ethnocultural perspectives refigure the nation and questions of national identity, opening up spaces for a revised rhetoric of Canadianness. Of course national affiliation is only one component of identity construction, and indeed it may not always be the most crucial in comparison with other identificatory markers like race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, or education and social class. I shall pay attention to the ways that individual writers represent these intertwined affiliations, as their fictions offer different answers to the questions: Who am I? and Where do I belong?

Though multiculturalism as coded into the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988 has been a major factor for making Canadians and non-Canadians think again about what being Canadian means, this is not a book that focuses primarily on ethnic and minority fiction. What I offer is an analysis of a representative range of nine women's novels and one short-story collection in English, all published since the mid-1990s, through which to explore the complexities of identity construction, investigating continuities and differences of emphasis from one text to another. This is an anglophone perspective, which

leaves out the different inflections of francophone Quebec women's experience.² Beginning with Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Carol Shields, who are the most widely read Canadian women writers outside Canada, I shall go on to present a constellation of younger writers whose novels have gained wide international visibility: Ann-Marie MacDonald, Kerri Sakamoto, Shani Mootoo, Gail Anderson Dargatz, and Eden Robinson.

Multiculturalism, feminism, and nationalism in the postcolonial context are the key concepts debated in this study, though those topics are given very different inflections in this deliberately diverse selection of texts. The emphasis will often fall on women's counter-narratives to discourses of patriarchal authority in the home, the importance of maternal inheritance, and women's revisions of traditional narrative genres, which they reshape for their own purposes. All these writers are engaged in writing and rewriting history across generations and frequently across countries and cultures, all of them uncover secrets hidden in the past, so that storytelling becomes an agent of confession or exorcism and possibly of regeneration. Arguably these novels are symptomatic of a larger process beyond their domestic plots, representing a nation in the process of unearthing deliberately forgotten secrets and scandals, as they share in the enterprise of telling stories that recognize the differences concealed within constructions of identity in contemporary multicultural Canada. What is more, all of them register that "slippage in the bedrock" of Anglo-Canadian myths of identity, which Margaret Atwood signaled at the beginning of the 1990s with her ambiguously titled short-story collection Wilderness Tips (1991).

When it comes to questions of refiguring identity, inevitably different novelists follow different agendas, depending on a range of factors. There is always the gender issue that conditions women's relation to culture and history, but there are often powerful issues of ethnicity and race, sexuality, immigrancy, expatriatism, or indigeneity, through which identities are constructed and reconstructed. All these writers raise the question of how much of anyone's identity is authentic and dependent on inheritance, and how much it is performative, subject to circumstances, and so redefinable in different contexts. As the black British critic Stuart Hall says: "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past"—and I would add, within narratives of the present as well.³

Where are the women's voices in my book coming from, in these stories from across Canada east to west? Specificities of location are important, for though biographical data is sometimes regarded as

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reductive or as the kind of marginal information provided in publishers' blurbs and author interviews, its significance is not entirely extratextual. Many of these texts explore representations of cultural and racial difference together with "the extreme difficulty of having to negotiate everything through race, gender and ethnicity,"4 so that it forms a significant element not only in the creative process but also in the reader's responses to the texts. Moreover, it would seem wise to dispel misconceptions about Canada's national self-image as one of uniformity and cohesiveness, just as one would wish to avoid the scandal of generalizing visible minority writers as "others." The writer's signature is on the text if only we can learn to read it, for as Atwood remarked of her historical novel Alias Grace, "We have to write out of who and when and where we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may."5 So, some brief biographical information about these writers is given here, beginning with Margaret Atwood, Canada's most famous novelist. An Anglo-Canadian and a descendant of Empire Lovalists who fled the United States for Nova Scotia, she was born in Ottawa and has lived in Toronto for many years. As an international literary star she travels extensively on publicity tours for every new novel and to give readings and lectures. Alice Munro, a descendant of nineteenth-century Scottish settlers to rural Southwestern Ontario, was brought up in that area and still lives part of the year in a small town there and the rest of the time in British Columbia. Her local connections were publicly celebrated on her seventy-first birthday in the summer of 2002 by the opening of the Alice Munro Literary Park in her hometown of Wingham. Carol Shields, born and brought up in Oak Park, Illinois, moved to Canada in the late 1950s after her marriage to a Canadian whom she had met on a student exchange in Exeter, England; after living in Winnipeg for many years, she now lives in British Columbia, Ann-Marie MacDonald, who lives in Toronto, was born on a Royal Canadian Air Force base in Germany, the daughter of parents from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia; her father's family is Scottish and her mother's Lebanese. Kerri Sakamoto is Sansei, a third-generation Japanese Canadian, the child of parents who were interned in Canada during World War II; she grew up in Toronto and then spent seven years in New York before returning to Toronto, where she now lives. Shani Mootoo, born in Ireland and raised in Trinidad, immigrated to Canada at the age of nineteen; she now lives in Vancouver. Gail Anderson-Dargatz was born in rural British Columbia, the descendant of a white pioneering family in the Rockies, who having farmed with her husband in Alberta now lives on Vancouver Island. Eden Robinson is an Aboriginal writer belonging to the Haisla nation

who grew up on the Kiamaat Reserve on the northwest coast of British Columbia; a graduate from the famous creative writing program at the University of British Columbia, she now lives in Vancouver. While it may be useful to know these bare essentials, it is also evident that such facts do not tell us much about the subjective identities of these writers nor about the identities of their fictional characters. (What relative significance, for example, would each of them attribute to sociological factors such as race, age, sexuality, education, family background, to locality, to dislocations and relocations in the construction of their identities?) Their fictions are in no sense autobiographical texts, though the "composite genealogies of the self," to use Smaro Kamboureli's excellent phrase, 6 inevitably shape the positions from which these novelists write. One further comment would seem to be in order here, this time from a European critic speaking about refiguring identities in a broadly North American context: "Positions are needed in order to claim that they are not stable; some idea of identity or literary tradition is needed in order to begin to work cross-culturally."7

A sketch of chapter arrangements will indicate the context for my narrative and cultural analysis of the variety of positions from which these selected storytellers renegotiate questions of identity. Chapter 1 outlines the parameters, where I discuss the changing discourses of nationhood, heritage, and identity in Canada over the past two decades. My main interest is in how English-Canadian literary and cultural traditions have shown obvious signs of becoming destabilized during the 1990s, in what might now be seen as a necessary process of refiguring multicultural Canada in a very different mode from the cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Increasingly, creative writers, literary critics, and cultural theorists have been debating what Homi Bhabha has called "the disjunctive forms of representation that signify a people, a nation, or a national culture."8 True, there has been a slippage in the bedrock, as I shall show through my examination of a number of key texts of Anglo-Canadian literary and cultural criticism from the early 1990s, which signal crucial stages in the process of refiguring what Canadianness means. It was Barbara Godard in her interrogative essay "Canadian? Literary? Theory?" (1992) who trenchantly formulated the challenge: "What 'Canadian' means in literary terms is a question that needs to be addressed if only to rephrase it as a problem in the meaning of 'national' as it operates in literary discourse." Since then, that question has been repeatedly addressed by critics and indeed it is possible just by looking at the titles of some of these studies to gain a sense not only of the shifts of emphasis in the debate but also to perceive how emotionally charged the issues around nationality and identity can become. W.H. New's Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing (1997) and Ionathan Kertzer's Worrving the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada (1998) are cases in point. Kertzer's book appeared in the same year as Arun Mukherjee's Postcolonialism: My Living (1998), a collection of essays that is a turning point in the radical interrogation of the Canadian literary canon. By 2000 those accumulating signs of slippage began to look like a landslide, as the balance tipped from Anglo-Canadian critics' anxieties about accommodating "other" voices toward a sharp focus on the writing of those others, through new studies by diasporic critics like Smaro Kamboureli and Himani Bannerii. The landslide has continued, with Helen Hoy's How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada (2001) and Robert Wright's Hip and Trivial: Youth Culture, Book Publishing, and the Greying of Canadian Nationalism (2001). Wright's answer to the question Godard asked ten years ago is this: "In a postmodern, globalized world of seemingly infinite choice, the idea of the national as the defining element in Canadian Lit appears to have had its day."10

So it is all the more surprising to find Wright quoting the following accolade from Russell Smith, one of Toronto's new urban novelists: "But I would also say that one of the hippest writers in Canada, who knows a great deal about contemporary urban life, modern sexual relations, trends and mass culture, and who always writes in a humorously satiric way, is Margaret Atwood" (p. 153). Is that so surprising really? What "hip" writer was it who warned that the national icon of Canadian wilderness landscape was becoming outdated back in the early 1990s? Who wrote a prose poem in 1992 in which the following complaint is heard: "Forest? Forest is passé, I mean, I've had it with all this wilderness stuff. It's not a right image of our society today. Let's have some urban for a change"?11 That voice is Margaret Atwood's, and it is with Atwood's ongoing inquiry into Canadian discourses of nationalism and identity that I begin my narrative analyses in chapter 2, where I discuss her two recent novels Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin. Whether she looks into nineteenth-century colonial history or the history of English Canada in the twentieth century, Atwood suggests that history is "not as we learned it in school."12 Addressing official Canadian history through the voices of the marginalized—women, working-class underprivileged immigrants from Ireland or Eastern Europe, criminals or suspect criminals (and these categories are, needless to say, not exclusive), Atwood's fiction unearths secrets and scandals that have been carefully hidden away and forgotten. Arguably both these novels might be read as sociohistorical projects masquerading as women's fictive autobiographies.

Alice Munro is also concerned with the secrets of history, though hers unlike Atwood's are private histories and their resonance sounds in the subjective lives of her protagonists, where identities are reinvented and narratives of the past are reshaped to reveal hidden meanings long after the events have happened. In chapter 3, I discuss what I have called Munro's "intimate dislocations" of identity in her most recent shortstory collection, which explores secret spaces within her familiar home territory of smalltown Ontario and the fracture lines that split open to reveal secret alternative histories within the life stories of her female protagonists. Chapter 4 discusses Carol Shields's radical critique of essentialist concepts of identity in The Stone Diaries and Larry's Party, for Shields uses fictive biography and autobiography to question the very notion of identity and its representations. Writing about the "accidental lives" of decentered subjects in narratives that move easily across the borders from Canada to the United States and back again, she refuses to believe in either gender or nationality as foundational fictions for the self. Instead she adopts a postmodern performative concept of identity as shifting, relational, and subject to endless refigurings, in hybridized fictional forms that "break open the phantom set of rules about how stories should be shaped."13 In fact, Shields is more interested in constructions of gender than in national identities, about which she ironized as early as her first novel Small Ceremonies back in 1976 where a popular Canadian male prairie novelist turns out to be an American draft dodger from Maple Bluffs, Iowa, who took up residence in Saskatchewan.

Ann-Marie MacDonald's Fall on Your Knees, which I discuss in chapter 5, is a neo-Gothic Maritime novel where issues of identity are enormously complicated by mixed race relationships, transnational affiliations, and transgressive sexualities that are hidden away in the "locked box of our inheritance" or erased from the family tree. In this family saga patriarchal obsessions with genealogy are continually subverted by the stories of rebellious daughters, and the novel ends far from Nova Scotia in New York City where "the ocean finally gives up her dead" in true Maritime literary fashion. Stories of origin are exposed as myths of origin through women's storytelling and set out on a revised version of the family tree where identities are refigured and missing links are restored. MacDonald's novel resists myths of racial purity in a narrative that reveals how identities within the spaces of the family and the nation become hybridized over time as part of the ongoing process of social

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history. By contrast, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* in chapter 6 takes as its subject the traumatized identities of the generation of Japanese Canadians who suffered internment during World War II. As historical fiction set in the 1970s long before the Redress Settlement of the late 1980s, this novel is dominated by images of paralysis and betrayal as the psychological legacy of that experience. Sakamoto's alienated protagonists have no sense of being Canadian as they cling to a Japanese cultural identity from which they are already displaced by their Canadian birth. Looking back, Sakamoto sees such haunted identities as forms of entrapment, and her novel reads like an exorcism as the narrator struggles to break through the uncanny shadows of the past.

Unlike the other texts I discuss, Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night in chapter 7 does not have a Canadian frame of geographical or historical reference at all but is set on a fictive Caribbean island. As a novel by an immigrant writer about the history of another country (and there are many examples in recent fiction published in Canada, by Dionne Brand, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Michael Ondaatje, and Rohinton Mistry, to name but a few) it raises interesting questions about the way in which definitions of Canadian identity and traditions of Canadian literature are currently under revision. Certainly it is a warning against the assumption that being Canadian means being Canadian born, white, and heterosexual, just as it exemplifies a national identity that can accommodate multiple cultural affiliations. In her fiction as in her poetry, which I shall also discuss briefly, Mootoo writes about liminal identities positioned on the margins or between worlds. Such issues relate not only to the immigrant condition but also to sexual and racial politics and the legacy of colonialism, figured here in a narrative that shifts between reality, fantasy, and dream in the mode of magic realism.

Of course the condition of liminality and culturally hybridized identities are not exclusive to immigrant fictions, as my discussion in chapters 8 and 9 of two Canadian wilderness novels will show. Both these novels set in rural British Columbia are borderline fictions that represent the ambiguous positions of their adolescent female narrators, one white and one Native, each of whom is situated on the edge of the other's culture. For the white protagonist in *The Cure for Death by Lightning* the wilderness is a dangerous place haunted by the legendary Native Trickster Coyote, who becomes the means of figuring her own traumatic sexual fears, while Robinson's Haisla protagonist in *Monkey Beach* has an entirely different imaginative apprehension of the natural world focused through the elusive figure of the sasquatch, wild man of the woods.

Both narratives are pervaded by anxiety, but whereas the focus of the white girl's story is on avoidance and escape, Robinson's narrator is searching for something that is lost in the wilderness landscape as her story becomes a quest to retrieve her Aboriginal identity through dismembered almost forgotten traditions. These two novels speak out of different cultural heritages—one in a revision of traditional pioneer women's wilderness narratives as it speculates on the possibility of a racially mixed Canadian inheritance recognizing the presence of Aboriginal people and Native spiritual values missing from white society, and the other deriving from traditions of Native oral storytelling in a fictional form that is inevitably hybridized by white education in English and Western print culture. Though both Dargatz's and Robinson's narrators strive to move beyond the divisive heritage of colonialism in their redefinitions of postcolonial feminine identities, their narratives offer two very different cultural lenses for understanding the relation between human beings and the wilderness environment in contemporary Canada.

Such heterogeneous representations of identity in these contemporary fictions would seem to throw the reader back to Godard's questions of how to define "Canadian" in literary discourse. Yet they also provide a sketch for the future where multiculturalism, itself an evolving concept, looks like the transformation mechanism through which the terms for social relations and national identity will be reinterpreted. As well as policies and ideologies however, any society needs models through which to imagine redefinitions and possible futures, and this is where the role of fiction is so important. Believing as I do that fiction shows how individuals and communities articulate their identities through their cultural self-awareness, I am arguing for the significance of women writers as the unofficial negotiators of change and for women's fiction as an index of crises and shifts in Canada's evolving narrative of nationhood.

CHAPTER 1 REFIGURING IDENTITIES

Since Laura is no longer who you thought she was, you're no longer who you think you are, either. That can be a shock, but it can also be a relief . . . You're free to reinvent yourself at will.

(Margaret Atwood, The Blind Assassin)1

She loves her daughter-in-law, would you believe? And her five grand-children who are only each perfect. They speak French at home, English at school and Yiddish with every second shopkeeper. Real Canadians.

(Ann-Marie Macdonald, Fall on Your Knees)2

But being "just Canadian" is a privilege only white people enjoy in this country . . . I doubt that I will ever become "just Canadian," whatever that means.

(Arun Mukherjee, "The 'Race Consciousness' of a South Asian")3

I begin my study of contemporary English Canadian literary traditions and questions of cultural and national identity as they are being refigured through women's fiction since the mid-1990s with this assemblage of three different women's perspectives on identity construction. They would seem to be emblematic of the multivoiced narrative of Canadianness at the present time, where all the speakers appear to be looking in different directions. Margaret Atwood speaks out of a white Anglo-Canadian context in a radical questioning of traditional narratives of origin and heritage; Ann-Marie MacDonald's old German Jewish immigrant to Nova Scotia contemplates the multiple identities so easily assumed by her grandchildren who live in Montreal where her son is married to a Roman Catholic Quebecoise; Arun Mukherjee speaks as a South Asian academic who came to Canada in the early 1970s about her experiences as a non-white woman in a smilingly racist society where a national identity is so elusive that it is not recognizable to someone living there. Yet these different perspectives converge at a very significant point, for they all challenge traditional nationalist approaches to the definition of what "being Canadian" means. All of them signal an urgent need to interrogate cultural conventions around private and public formulations of identity at the same time as they represent the

formidable individual complexities within the multicultural nation-space of contemporary Canada. English Canadians would seem to be experiencing a pluralized present moment when myths of nationhood and the rhetoric of national identity are under reconstruction. How this situation arose, what the key stages have been in a gradually accelerating revisionary process, and what contribution cultural criticism and women's literary texts are making to this process of reimagining Canadianness, are the major topics that I address in this book.

From my perspective as an interested outsider, what makes Canada so distinctive in its representations of postcolonial nationhood is its official commitment to the ideology of multiculturalism. Canada was the first country in the world to introduce an official Multiculturalism Policy back in 1971 under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, and this was codified into the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988, the first clause of which is as follows:

It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.⁴

"Multicultural Canada" represents a radical revision of the country's colonial image as a dominantly white English- and French-speaking nation, and not surprisingly multiculturalism as concept and social policy has generated much vigorous debate and savage critique—not only from right-wing white traditionalists but also from Quebec and Aboriginal people as well as from ethnic and racial minorities.⁵ (It is also worth remembering the warning given by an American academic: "If multiculturalism simply means a belief in the autonomy and integrity of distinct cultures, then it can be put to the service of very different political agendas.")6 During the past ten years it has been a fascinating spectacle to witness Canada's discourse of national identity being rewritten as creative writers, cultural theorists, historians, and literary critics have responded to a revised official rhetoric of nationhood. In this same period the profile of English-Canadian literary production has changed remarkably, featuring an increasing number of writers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, both immigrant and indigenous, whose voices challenge the traditional definitions of what being Canadian means and what constitutes Canadian literature. In 1995, Arun Mukherjee commented on what she saw as the continuing dominance of white cultural nationalism in the English-Canadian

literary canon, which promoted "the settler-colonial view of Canada" and "environmentalist explanations of a Canadian identity," arguing that although those views had been frequently challenged, "they have not been replaced yet by more inclusive theories of Canada and Canadian literature . . . we do not hear any concerted responses to what Aboriginals and racial minority writers tell us about Canada and Canadian literature." Ironically, Mukherjee was making this complaint at the very point in time when I locate the beginnings of a shift and the introduction of new cultural coordinates into the mapping of Canadian literary traditions, as fictions by ethnic and racial minority writers come increasingly into visibility. Certainly Mukherjee is right when she asserts that prior to the 1990s there were only a handful of racial minority writers in the Canadian literary canon; the Japanese Canadian Joy Kogawa and Michael Ondaatje (born in Sri Lanka, educated in Britain and an immigrant to Canada in 1962) are among the few well-known names before that time.8 However, the revisionary impulse has become a full-scale project for redefinition, and I would argue that the policies relating to multiculturalism have been a major force in transforming Canada's discourse of nationhood and identity.

Though my major concern is with contemporary women's fiction, I should like to begin by glancing back at the history of Canada's nation building, emblematized by its official motto, A mari usque ad mare ("From sea to sea"), a proud claim to national unity across the vastness of the North American continent. That motto, which codes in the strong spatial elements in Canada's national rhetoric, was incorporated in the coat of arms in 1921, though it was apparently formulated back in the days before the Dominion of Canada even came into existence in 1867, when the term "Dominion" (instead of "Kingdom") was decided upon and derived as tradition has it from Psalm 72:8, when David prayed that Solomon "shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." It looks very like the expression of a nation builder's fantasy of transcontinental unity, or as Canadian critic Gerald Lynch recently described it, "a kind of geo-political fictional linkage of abiding bonds and creative gaps as opposed to the continuous totalizing story written E Pluribus Unum."10 The historical struggles to achieve national unity and the current pressures internal and external on maintaining Canada as a unified nation constitute the public political context within which my narrative is situated.¹¹ However, the focus of this study is set at an oblique angle to official history, being concerned with what resonance these wider political questions have in relation to cultural and literary discourse and to women's fiction in particular.