

# Post-National Arguments

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of the  
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Canadian  
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since  
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*Frank Davey*

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## Post-National Arguments The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967

The search for the Canadian identity has often attempted to unify cultural characteristics into a homogeneous whole, and to idealize national notions of art and thought. In this examination of sixteen post-centennial Canadian novels, Frank Davey argues that there is no monological Canadian nationalism, and that studies that have attempted to define Canadian literature as a unitary cultural category have overlooked the conflict and heterogeneity active in Canadian texts, and also mistaken the process of nationhood.

Using post-Saussurean linguistics and contemporary discourse theory as terms for his debate, Davey presents the argument that it is the presence of internal conflict and debate, national arguments in fact, that signal a separate society in Canada. The high proportion of conflicts, he argues, indicates national health and confidence. A national concept such as Canada receives its definition within an evolving differential system of linguistic signs, specific to individuals, yet overlapping into other constituencies. Different positions are indicated through metaphor, genre, allusion, quotation, specific vocabularies, sentence structure, and textual organization. These reflect concurrent and competing effects of ethnicity, region, gender, class, ideological inheritance, and self-identification with race.

Davey begins with an investigation of the declared positions of writers in the recent free trade debate. There is, he says, a semiotic relationship between these positions and well-known aesthetic and cultural arguments in Canadian criticism, both of which attempt to idealize themselves, one by positing an ideal and homogeneous Canadian nation and the other with idealized notions of art and thought. These idealizations conceal the political natures of the writers' interventions.

FRANK DAVEY is first Carl F. Klinck Professor of Canadian Literature, University of Western Ontario.

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## POST-NATIONAL ARGUMENTS



# Introduction

That literary texts may have overt political meaning is something few readers, if any, would dispute; writers who wish their texts to have political impact usually require little help from the critic or reviewer to bring this to public note. Several of the novels investigated in this study – like Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Gail Scott's *Heroine*, or Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* – foreground their political engagements in re-staging recent or historical political arguments, constructing the viewpoints of specific actors or positions, and favouring one or more of these viewpoints by representing them in intimate discourses that operate to 'humanize' and 'naturalize' their postulates. Many of these novels have been framed by their publishers to give emphasis to their political significance. The cover of Kogawa's *Obasan* announces it as 'the moving story of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War'; that of Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* names it 'a story of colonialism in Canada.'

What this study addresses is not any overt politics these sixteen novels may contain, but the assumptions they take for granted and which become identifiable as political in the context of differing assumptions brought to the text by a reader. In the particular discourses in which a novel narrates its stories, in its array of characters, places, and issues, its narrative viewpoints and structures, its selections of imagery, symbol, and metaphor, the syntax it awards to narrators and characters, and the relative space it may give to any of these, it signals specific understandings not only about human relations, social structure, and political conflict but also about such trans-human questions as the nature of value and being. Such understandings enter a novel because texts are produced not merely by individual wills and perceptions; they are produced also – like the individuals who write them

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– by the linguistic conventions and social practices from which their own particular selections and combinations have been taken. Attentive readings of widely read fiction can help in understanding not only what issues are consciously under debate in a culture but also what unspoken assumptions, wishes, or fantasies underlie that conscious debate, influence the terms in which it is conducted, and add psychodramatic significance to what may appear to be pragmatic alternatives.

I began this study in 1988 during the anglophone-Canadian debate about the establishment of 'free trade' between Canada and the United States – a debate in which many Canadian writers, particularly in Ontario, attempted to play public roles. I was intrigued by a number of aspects of their interventions. Although their writing engaged many different kinds of people, in terms of experience, region, and class, the writers had only two positions to take: for or against free trade. Were there relationships between which position they took and the kinds of writing they sought to publish or the kinds of experience they sought to represent? Would the establishment of 'free trade' be likely to impede or assist the circulation of the kinds of text they wrote, or the fortunes of the particular Canadians their texts might be said to 'represent'? I was intrigued also by regional, gender, and ethnic distributions evident among the names of the free trade intervenors. Why did I, both officially and historically a 'Canadian,' feel alien to both positions? Were the political interests of some writers, and perhaps of some segments of Canadian society, not at stake in the debate? Did many Canadian writers not envision their society in either national or continental terms, or perhaps give priority to affiliations that were paradigmatically incongruent with either a 'free trade' or 'status quo' option?

Within a year of the 1988 'free trade' election Canada entered its 'Meech Lake' crisis over the constitutional position of Quebec within the Canadian federation. The implicit cultural politics of the earlier debate was soon subsumed within a many-sided quarrel among numerous well-identified anglophone-Canadian interests: aboriginal peoples who desired that their own constitutional claims not yield precedence to those of Quebec; multiculturalism advocates who wished the Québécois to be merely one ethnicity among many; free trade opponents who blamed Quebec sovereigntists for the Conservative party's 1988 federal election victory and the passage of the trade agreement; Quebec anglophones and allophones who resisted equating the province of Quebec with French ethnicity; provincial rights

advocates who wished all provinces to have equal and perhaps enhanced confederal standing; women's groups who feared that a 'special status' for Quebec would end the federal guarantee of women's rights within that province; and English-Canadian linguistic nationalists who sought a unary country freed of the expense of official bilingualism. Particularly after introduction in the spring of 1991 by the Quebec government of referendum legislation inviting anglophone Canada to make it a constitutional 'offer,' a major question in the Canadian media became whether or not there could be a single anglophone-Canadian constitutional position.<sup>1</sup> Was there even a name possible for the area of Canada outside Quebec – English Canada, the Rest of Canada, 'ROC'? Curiously, despite their active participation in the free trade debates, anglophone-Canadian arts groups have been relatively quiet in the constitutional ones. Their strongest interventions have been to oppose the so-called devolution of arts funding – a hypothetical constitutional revision that would allow responsibility for culture and thus for arts funding to 'devolve' into exclusive provincial jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup>

As the constitutional discussions have intensified, my questions about what constructions of 'Canada' and 'Canadians' lay behind anglophone-Canadian writers' positions or non-positions on the free trade issue have grown. The trade debate had demonstrated how deeply fractured the conscious cultural views of anglophone-Canadian writers could be; but how various were the views offered by their writings? What implications did this diversity hold for the constitutional questions into which the free trade issue appeared to have evolved? Were there hints in anglophone-Canadian fiction written in the decades immediately before this constitutional impasse of how deeply fractured the English-Canadian polity was, or of how it viewed the Canadian federation? How had anglophone-Canadian writing in these decades constructed Quebec and francophone Quebecers? What places entered into this writing's imagination of the country, what images, arguments, or symbols? How did it map the world around

1 See, for example, 'Survival Strategies: The Regions Seek Their Own Solutions,' *Maclean's*, 12 Nov. 1990, 22, and 'Canada Must Prove to Quebec It Can Reform,' *Financial Times*, 17 Dec. 1990, 30.

2 In April 1991 approximately thirty arts organizations, including the Writers Union and the League of Canadian Poets, founded the Common Agenda Alliance for the Arts, primarily to address the devolution issue. See H.J. Kirschhoff and Val Ross, 'Anxiety Spreads over Devolution,' *Globe and Mail*, 17 Aug. 1991, C1 and C10; and Marian Botsford Fraser, 'Devolution of Cultural Policy Symbolizes Demolition of the Country,' *Globe and Mail*, 26 Aug. 1991, C1.

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its characters? With what discursively encoded ideologies did it affiliate them? From where did the forces that affected these characters come, where did they travel, what significant lacunae marked their consciousnesses? What relationships with other members of humanity did this writing imagine for its characters? Was 'nation' a significant sign within this imagination?

For during these decades, within the teaching of 'Canadian literature,' a direct link had been assumed between anglophone-Canadian writing and nationalism. Anglophone-Canadian literature in this view was a national literature; it evolved from the colonial to the modern (Woodcock), from the Victorian to the postmodern (Kroetsch), from the romantic to the high modern (Keith), from the colonial to a place among the postcolonial (New). It had developed national mythologies like 'two solitudes' or 'survival,' national images like Atwood's 'ice maidens,' beleaguered farmhouses, gothic mothers, Moss's signs of isolation, Sutherland's Presbyterians and Jansenists, and more recently, in Linda Hutcheon's work, national modes of irony and historical metafiction. Throughout the period there had been dissenters from the notion of a national canon, complaints that the canons deployed were too Frygian (Mandel), were an instrument of Ontario imperialism, were unresponsive to anything but realism (Lecker), or insensitive to regional priorities, but the national construction had endured both in historically configured textbooks and historically taught college surveys. Had a gap opened up between the models employed in the teaching of Canadian literature and the cultural assumptions embodied in its latest writing?

My choice of 1967 as the beginning date of this study is a symbolic one, intended to highlight the contrast between that centennial year and the uncertainties of 1992. This is an openly post-centennial study, one that sets the centennial and its nationalist sentiments aside, as it were, at the same time as it accepts the writing that has followed as to some extent caused or enabled by that event. What concerns me here is not those nationalistic sentiments themselves but the constructions of nation that have ensued from them, from 1967 through to the difficult present. Although all the texts engaged here are to some extent products of the centennial period – of its expansion of literary production and its development of the Canadian book market into a potentially primary one for Canadian writers, of the emphasis it placed on the role of artistic construction within cultural construction, and of the stimulus it gave to the institutional development of

Canadian literature as both a teaching subject and a political field<sup>3</sup> – they are also signs of how that national celebration has subsequently been translated in various parts of the country. My choice to study fiction alone is, I hope, a pragmatic one. Among other possible genres, Canadian poetry is poorly and mostly regionally circulated, and read mainly by university-educated readers. Plays tend currently not only to be regionally disseminated but also to be performed only in a handful of major cities. Fiction, however, continues to be written for general Canadian audiences, to be widely read, and to be circulated both nationally and regionally.

I have chosen the specific texts of the study, not with the aim of representing any 'best' books, or even best-selling books, but of representing instead books that have been important to particular Canadian audiences and have offered some portrayal of Canada as a semiotic field.<sup>4</sup> I have looked for novels that have been widely acclaimed, circulated, and studied, giving special attention to texts that have had impact within at least one anglophone-Canadian constituency. I have thus looked, in particular, for novels whose modes of articulating experience elicited powerful and continuing response from at least some group of readers. I have not attempted to consider all such novels of the period, but instead have selected texts from a large number of anglophone-Canadian regions and constituencies. The ones selected constitute a list that, like any list, can be quarrelled with. Its construction involved the epistemologically dubious procedure of my hypothesizing positions other than my own, and doing so on the basis of textual evidence that may not circulate well between variously positioned Canadian constituencies; other readers almost certainly have their own positions *and* lists. But because the focus of my study is on the signs, discourses, and narrative strategies at work in the novels, and because such textual elements tend to operate in a culture

3 Among the post-centennial political organizations in Canadian literature are the League of Canadian Poets, the Writers Union of Canada, the Association of Canadian Publishers (with its sub-group, the Literary Press Group), the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association, and the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures.

4 This criterion excludes from direct examination some recent novels of Canadian ethnic communities which are of considerable importance, such as Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, Moyez Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, novels which contain few if any significations of Canada or of Canadian polity. Their lack of such significations, however, itself has political implications which contribute to the general suggestions of this study.



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independently of individual speakers, writers, or texts, I doubt that my readings would have been greatly altered by my having chosen, say, a different 'arctic' novel from that of Van Herk, or an earlier Atwood novel, or by my having included novels from one or two additional constituencies; particular instances of signification would have been different, but the overall array of signs, characters, discourses, and narrative structures and strategies would have very likely been much the same.

The sequence in which the novels are considered is similarly based on the concept of an array of inter-referring discourses and positions rather than on a concept of contrasted authors or texts. Whatever readers may infer from the sequence (and I am sure they will *infer*), it has not been intended to signify evaluation, change, or hierarchy – best to worst, least to most – nor to replicate any 'actual' narrative of my inquiry. Nor has it been designed to match or 'pair' dichotomous positions – there are too many interwoven and nuanced issues and positions at work in these texts for a critic to adopt such simple schemas. Instead I have attempted to arrange the chapters in a sequence that foregrounds the various ways in which the issues and concerns of the novels overlap and contest, and that allows all possible play to the complex dialogue implicit among the novels in their disputation and qualification of various kinds of discourse and position. I have hoped thereby to discourage any preconceptions readers may bring to this study that these particular novels represent polarizations, singularities, or exclusivities of focus, and to encourage appreciation of the complex field of reference and disputation they all occupy.

I am aware that this book is also very much a product of my own *interests* in both senses of the word – that my past situates me in various and mixed relationships with the regional, ethnic, cultural, gender, and class conflicts of Canada, that I am myself conflicted in particular ways that have the potential to alienate me in some way not only from two 'free trade' viewpoints but from elements in nearly every Canadian text which I encounter. I believe, however, that other readers, while not likely similarly positioned, may well be similarly conflicted, and thus find at least some of their interests and desires similarly jeopardized by the possible social dominance of the constructions these novels offer. As someone with contrary interests and desires, in a nation of contrary desires, I find myself in this book seeking, not the elimination of conflict or the establishment of some liberal ideal of social harmony, but continued debate and irresolution.