

SPATIAL/IDENTITY DECONSTRUCTIONS: NATION AND MAPS IN CANADIAN FICTION



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The concept of 'nation,' a concept born within the belief of a centered structure and thus part of the philosophy of Western metaphysics, has played a constitutive role in both the colonial and postcolonial periods. In the former, the (imperial) nation serves as a universal model which the subjugated territories must imitate. In the present postcolonial phase, the nation becomes the site for nationalist claims of political independence and cultural specificity. Given the ambiguous position of Canada in the colonial/postcolonial periods, contemporary Canadian production seems to offer valuable insights into the possibilities and the dangers of both approaches to the nation. Moreover, the ongoing Canadian emphasis on national identity and the great number of texts that touch upon (the myth of a) national unity illustrate with unprecedented force the contradictions raised by that twofold discourse on/of nation (universality vs. cultural specificity). This article provides therefore a brief discussion of the notions of 'nation' and 'map' as cultural constructs undergoing thorough revisions in both contemporary theory and Canadian fiction.

Homi Bhabha (1991a) has successfully deconstructed the concept of nation, laying bare the group of strategies that construct the people as nation by situating them within a discourse of cultural identification. 'Nationness,' according to Bhabha, provides a doubtful axis for postcolonial discursivity in that it is based on the negation/exclusion of the Other; in other words, in order to function, the discourse on nation must oppose inside to outside, «the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other» (Bhabha 1991b, 2). This opposition is carried out through complex rhetorical strategies that construct the people both as objects of a common historical origin and subjects in the making of the present nation; the nation must represent the people and, at the same time, be represented by the people—two strategies that incidentally erase each other to guarantee, sometimes, the illusion of action in the historical past, sometimes, the renovation of the official discourse which constitutes the nation. The slippage produced by this object/subject (of history) structure becomes the site of (postcolonial) counterdiscursivity: «The nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference» (Bhabha 1991a, 300).

As a space of supplementarity, the energy of minority discourse¹ resides not in the denial of history but, as Bhabha argues, «in the renegotiation of those times, terms, and tra-

¹ The concept of minority does not imply a quantitative relation to some majority. Anything different from a defined set of standard values can become minoritarian in Deleuze and Guattari's sense: «Majority implies a constant, of expression and content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate [minority]» (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 105).

ditions through which we turn our uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history» (1991a, 306). In its drive to unify the people in a common ideology, the concept of a national identity depends on the erasure of the process of its own construction as well as on the exclusion of specific social categories (race, class, gender, etc.) which determine different approaches to identity-construction. National identity becomes thus suspect in the face of the appearance of minority discourses which do not fit into the defined official pattern of identity. In this way, as Donald Pease has pointed out, the minorities' increasing awareness of the allocation of power in the national comes along with a realization that «the negative class, race, and gender categories ... were ... a structural necessity for the construction of a national narrative» (Pease 1992, 4). The consideration of these excluded narratives, with their heterogeneous accents, makes it impossible to sustain the central arguments that construct the nation as a compact and centralized structure of power.

In Canada, the overwhelming presence of explicitly transcultural texts within national production questions the model of national unity—be this in the monocultural or in the new, but, often, equally assimilative, multicultural form (see Craig 1989 and Itwaru 1990). That seems indeed the case of fictions by Canadian writers like Sandra Birdsell, Kristjana Gunnars, Marwan Hassan, Marlene Nourbese Philips, Michael Ondaatje, and others. The strong decentering drive in the texts of these writers represents the breaking of minority discourse into the discourse of nationness, supplementing it in the Derridean sense of the word; that is, both affirming and undermining its unifying tendency. «There are official stories and then there are unofficial stories,» the enigmatic narrator of Gunnars's *The Substance of Forgetting* (1992) writes:

Sometimes we break through the official story. We escape into an alternate story. Just for a while. A day, a night. Two days, three. Four nights. However long. We taste the possibilities of other lives. Other stories. We roll them in our mouths like good wine. No one knows where we are. We have dropped out of the picture and we cannot be found. (Gunnars 1992, 71-72).

The Canadian multicultural model represents a vivid example of the contradictions raised by the official search for national unity in national disunity. The theory and practice of multiculturalism cannot help but contain a great number of differences within the plural, but somehow rigid, structure of the Canadian mosaic. This critique comes precisely from many Canadian texts which engage the problems of constructing a (national) identity from this multicultural perspective. They do so by often shifting away from overall national representations and focusing instead on local and/or international narratives. The short stories of Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant epitomize perhaps the two extremes of this choice in the form of «provinciality» versus «internationality,» respectively. Yet, as the fictions of Gunnars, Kroetsch, van Herk, Wiebe, and others show, a juxtaposition of the two movements, that is, a process of simultaneous de- and re-territorialization is not only possible but perhaps more effective in terms of resistance to imposed notions of national identity.

This double move, however, would not necessarily come to support a postnational argument of the kind defended by the Canadian critic Frank Davey (1993)—a postnationalism which informs much contemporary theory and criticism, and to which I wish therefore to turn briefly. In his reading of sixteen texts by contemporary writers, Davey affirms that Canadian novels «inhabit a post-national space, in which sites are as interchangeable as postcards, in which discourses are transnational, and in which political issues are constructed on non-national (and often a-historical) ideological grounds» (Davey 1993, 259). Davey suggests that the apparent specificity of some of these novels ultimately conveys

«an homogenous human situation» which eventually «homogenizes other Canadian regions and constituencies and trivializes political argument» (Davey 1993, 259).

This assertion, I would protest, appears determined by the agonistic view of McLuhan's global village with its lack of faith in politics and community and its atomized individuals living under a compulsorily homogenized culture. Davey's anti-thematic, anti-identity criticism obliterates the fact that the rejection of a unified national identity does not necessarily imply an erasure of differences but rather the opposite: the celebration of an open national space that finds in its incommensurable heterogeneity the force to produce new sites for counterdiscursivity. One important site of struggle against overwhelming theories of globality has proven to be precisely fiction, narrative, and art in general.

Viewed in this way, the postnational cannot but be a problematic concept. The term, however, has been used differently elsewhere. Postnational narratives, according to Donald Pease, for instance, involve the production and proliferation of previously excluded heterogeneous narratives of nation, enacting strategic subversions of the supposed unicity of national identity. Contrarily, Davey's postnational argument in relation to recent Canadian texts represents an attempt to claim universal values and themes back to the study of literature. Despite their sharing a common starting point, an awareness of the impossibility of maintaining a concept of nation as cultural and historical unity, Pease and Davey then take two opposite directions.

Additionally, I would argue that the neouniversalizing postnational defended by Davey is particularly worrying in that it can be read as the cultural counterpart of the operations of contemporary transnational economics, effecting subtle homogenizations and colonizations of the world. In this scheme, the postcolonial would become diffused throughout undifferentiated postnational and multicultural discourses; that is, it would become, in Masao Miyoshi's words, «another alibi to conceal the actuality of global politics» (1993, 728). While the nation served to justify and legitimize the pre-1945 colonial enterprise of the West, the present transnational corporations act on a double nation/nationless basis, ignoring borders for economic profit and installing them back when need appears (as in case of military interventions, often in the name of the common good of the intervened nation and the benevolence of the intervening one). In the latter case, the symbolic function of nation is restored to its privileged position and supported by the old paraphernalia: national flag, anthem, map, etc. (see Miyoshi 1993 and Said 1992).

Against Davey's globalizing criticism, then, I would argue that, while questioning unifying notions of national unity, an important number of recent Canadian texts focuses on the differences and specificities in and within Canadian cultures. They do that by insisting on the need to rewrite and reread history through the articulation of Canadian spaces, placing themselves between centripetal and centrifugal movements in the literal sense of physical (dis)placement. A related recurrent strategy that inscribes the concurrence/difference spatial paradigm is provided by the use of maps as a writing device, an activity which, given the Western exploitation of cartography for colonial ends, appears as a constitutive element of postcolonial writing.

The function of maps, in the complicitous endeavours of the subjects of Enlightenment and Imperialism, has become vulnerable to the post-structuralist undressing, after which cartography emerges as one more discursive construct within the Western project of a binary world based on the metaphysics of presence. As José Rabasa shows (1985), from its very beginning, Mercator's *Atlas* (1595) is susceptible to deconstruction because its own palimpsestic structure—the result of multiple erasures, corrections, additions and modification of basic data—undermines the authority of the final draft and propitiates an allegorical reading of the Western construction of history and geography. The map, seen as

text, as discourse, pre-codifies unknown territory, assimilating it within the overall structure of representational philosophy, and revealing, in so doing, the presence of specific cultural practices that legitimize the contradictory movement implicit in this philosophy: «The map functions as a mirror of the world, not because the representation of the earth has the status of a natural sign, but due to a simulacrum of an always inaccessible totality it aims to invoke by means of an arrangement of symbols» (Rabasa 1985, 3).

The ongoing questioning of representation in post-structuralist practice then can also be applied to the map, which, by an inverse, deconstructive operation, exposes, behind the guise of a continuous and definite set of lines and drawings, the openness of its own structure, a necessary condition to incorporate and assimilate the discontinuity of new data into the paradoxically total representation. Cartographic representation appears thus as an ideological practice fixing reality within given historical/geographical coordinates which simultaneously justify and guarantee the production and possession of knowledge, authority, and power.² This link between knowledge and power becomes particularly relevant in looking at the participation of cartography in the colonial project. As J.B. Harley maintains, the colonization of North America was strategically facilitated by the imposition of a set of self-legitimizing epistemological codes unknown to native American societies. In this way,

boundary lines on the map were a medium of appropriation which those unlearned in geometrical survey methods found impossible to challenge. Maps entered the law, were attached to ordinances, acquired an aureole of science, and helped create an ethic and virtue of ever more precise definition. Tracings on maps excluded as much as they enclosed. They fixed territorial relativities according to the lottery of birth, the accidents of discovery, or, increasingly, the mechanism of world market. (Harley 1988, 285)

In its crude and detailed depiction of the loss of Indian land to the white government surveyors, Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptation of Big Bear* (1973) enacts a powerful critique of these processes of appropriation and control of territory, based on the imposition of an allegedly universal mode of spatial representation—as opposed to a native Indian idea of the map as a non-written configuration of space based on collective experience (see Brody 1988). At the same time, the literary transposition of cartographical models of spatial representation draws the reader's attention to the textual properties of the map, unveiling, in so doing, its ideology; that is, its condition as cultural artifact responding to particular structures of power (see Huggan 1994).

Yet, as contemporary Canadian texts suggest, the complicity between cartography and nation in the attempt to control the world is not exclusive of the imperial/colonial period. The role of technology in modern Western societies does not only perpetuate but increases the power of transmission and imposition of carefully chosen social values and cultural codes. Already in the 1970s, the map/nation paradigm constitutes a privileged intertext in many Canadian texts: e.g., Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), Engel's *Bear* (1976), Kroetsch's *Badlands* (1975), among others. Whether metaphorical or literal, the map here appears not as a fixed structure organizing spatial perception, but rather as what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call a rhizomatic structure: an uncentered, multi-stemmed, heterogeneous model which, applied to cartography (one of the rhizome's own constitutive principles), implies

² The privilege implied in the access to map knowledge is well illustrated by a history of cartography that reveals, beginning with the Spanish sixteenth-century policy of sigilo, the secrecy surrounding (and the restricted access to) maps (see Harley 1988).

a rejection of «tracing»—meaning here the reproduction (mimesis/mimicry) of a previously given pattern—and involves instead a process that constructs the map every time for the first time. In this way,

the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a mediation. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 12)

That kaleidoscopic view of cartographical practice, increasingly shared by more recent Canadian texts, offers an alternative to the colonial writing of maps and general inscriptions of space. It also makes possible to identify, and then undermine, the operations of official cartography beyond the coordinates empire/colony towards the different relations of power within national territories. This is seen, for example, in the great number of prairie fictions that revert the movement marked by the tradition of exploration narratives, fixing the Canadian west as «a colony of a colony» in a permanent position of «looking eastward toward the centres of power» (Harrison 1980, 108-109). Recent prairie writing contests cartographical representation not as an imperial instrument securing a slave/master relation between Canadian territory and a distant metropolitan center, but as a means of spatial and cultural control within. At the same time, they engage the map-rhizome to construct an alternative space where geography, history, culture, and therefore, identity, can be read as processual.

Take, for instance, van Herk's two novels *No Fixed Address* (1987) and *Places Far from Ellesmere* (1990), where the unmaking of the Western concepts of Woman, Nation, and Tradition is enacted by means of cartographical deconstructions. Kogawa's *Obasan* (1983), on the other hand, provides a powerful critique of the function of official maps to erase the inconvenient data of socially and politically disempowered groups within national territory. In novels like these, there is a constant pull between the lines of territorialization (the organizing and signifying function), on the one hand, and the lines of deterritorialization (the drive to escape definition), on the other (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8-12). The interaction between these two groups of lines produces not only a recurrent thematics reclaiming the contradictory nature of cultural difference, but also a permanent movement of displacement from which to rework notions of time and space.

In this way, Canadian texts unveil and connect through the map the soft spots of national history and culture. They mark, as Graham Huggan puts it, the site of «new territories» or «a series of new or revised rhetorical spaces occupied by feminism, regionalism and ethnicity, where each of these items is understood primarily as a set of counter-discursive strategies which challenge the claims of or avoid circumscription within one or other form of cultural centrism» (Huggan 1989, 127). The use of cartography in Canadian fiction works thus on a literal level, as the inscribed multiplication of spatial reference and, on an allegorical level, as an instrument to question hegemonic concepts such as nation, patriarchy and ethnocentrism. In doing so, Canadian literary production opens up multiple entryways into the interrelated fields of cultural studies, feminist and postcolonial theories.

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