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CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY – NOMADISM, FRIENDSHIP AND WAR IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanist imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all of the interests are vested*.

Toni Morrison, «Unspeakable Things Unspoken»

When we do not know where we are, we need someone (or thing) to ask who knows the way, someone to tell us, a sign post or a map. As metanarratives and ideology seem distinctly out of vogue; signs, signifiers and sign posts blown over; and «post» surely a little too premature to attach to feminism anyway, it seems clearer as to why there is so much mapping around. We appear to have moved from the academic buzz word of «margins» to «mapping», and the terrain inherently covered is as myriad as the meanings of the terms.

This article seeks to engage a reading of *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood using the background map of the Second World War, the bodies and spaces incorporated into female friendships and Rosi Braidotti's ideas on nomadism. In so doing I hope to glance at where feminism is on the map at the moment. Is it a «lost boutique in the academic mall» à la post-colonialism according to some (a point I shall return to later), has it moved from margin to centre in such a way as to have its own flag flying on the map or do we longingly look back over our shoulder to second wave feminism and long before to insert and appropriate a meaningful place in the canon? I argue that Atwood's text provides a forum to update issues which currently languish in re-makes of films such as *Little Women* or updates the visual Jane Austen canon by shooting through a filtered lense, notwithstanding the buxom beauties with cleavage for more popular appeal. If *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson flashes body parts every calculated

few minutes in the name of her art presumably, and her cheque, then it could work for audience ratings on *Pride and Prejudice* too – and it has!

Salman Rushdie in the early eighties famously stated that nostalgia for empire would be expressed in films about ex-colonies showing a period of former British glory. Lo and behold *A Passage to India*, *The Jewel in the Crown*, *The Remains of the Day* to name but a few – by both canonical and non-canonical writers – emblazoned sepia and ochre tinted images onto our screens to imprint audience memories with past visions of greatness, where everyone knew his (and sometimes her) place. An important factor, to my mind, is that the contents of many such films often have women's friendships as a central theme. Rushdie's salient prophesies continue to come true – it seems that if we are unwilling, or unable, to examine where we are, then this wistful regard over the shoulder to the filtered lensed world of bygone eras will fill the space.

The Robber Bride provides a contemporary commentary on such issues as history and women's friendships and are very central concerns but before engaging with this text more fully, I would like to turn to the work of Rosi Braidotti. In *Nomadic Subjects* Braidotti states the argument set out by Aristotle in *The Generation of Animals*, positing the human norm «in terms of bodily organisation based on a male model». Male space, a rational space and by extension of course, female as «other» became the norm in Western philosophy and literature. For according to Aristotle and quite a few commentators since, women do not possess a rational soul. The female body has been variously the site and location of the monster as well as the mother or angel. Susan Faludi's *Backlash* cites countless examples of just how monstrous contemporary females have proved themselves to be in terms of negotiations of power in the last twenty years, as distraught patriarchal structures do their damndest to send at least American women back to the kitchen sink (a point to return to later).

Braidotti develops several ideas linking exiles and migrants but it is her use of the nomadic which is most interesting. In the chapter entitled «The Politics of Ontological Difference» she clearly defines basic terrain:

although psychoanalytical theory has done a great deal to improve our understanding of sexual difference, it has done little or nothing to change the concrete conditions of sex relations and of gender-stratification. The latter is precisely the target of feminist practice; feminism is neither about feminine sexuality nor about desire – it is about change (1994: 183).

Although it may be relatively easy to take issue with the former part of the above, and polemically differing views are held, I cannot help but note that this, in the 1990's – a supposedly «post» feminist phase makes a refreshing «change». Feminism IS about change and certainly also about choice whether in personal, political or bodily realms. In *The Robber Bride*, the three main protagonists can all be read against the latter areas. Tony, the historian linked to the political in her assertive and incisive rereadings of history, challenges the academic and historical canon and effects personal transformation through the invention of a private language. Charis centres more on the «reli-

gious», both mythic, traditional and New Age, and encompasses the realms of the metaphysical moving between bodily and supernatural boundaries. Roz centres on the corporate body of her business empire, the fractured bodies she charitably donates to and the battle with her own body shape. Her gay personal assistant, constantly quoting canonical writers and her own references to fairy tales and consumerism place her as the character most likely to engage with second wave feminism. The reader is broached in the form of the conscious-raising groups Roz involves herself with, only to find that wealth excludes her, to the magazine *Wise Woman World* saved from financial ruin by her authoritative intervention (p. 350). It is suggested that egalitarian bank balances is the route to putting sisterhood on the map. Or perhaps making it like a man is not the aim of this period's feminism.

Atwood is always careful never to position herself in total alignment with any group in a blanket way. Her distance and criticism of inherent faults in feminist (and national) causes only serve to highlight their importance however. If there is only eulogy and no critique how do we move forward on any front?

Appropriating war, traditionally the male realm, versus the role of motherhood and the domestic for women, as exponentially described by Nancy Huston, where she quotes the Gnostic conundrum «How long will men make war? As long as women have children», is a narrative and psychological strategy adopted by Atwood. This metaphor of war – whether read through the personal histories of women in the novel and the inextricable link to families fleeing Hitler's Europe however, is extended to spatial motifs in a fascinating way. Whether it be the dichotomies in characters' heads or the visible spatial distance encountered between them and their stories concerned with it, war, its creators, detractors, victims and analysts soak up this novel. It addresses contemporary issues as it focusses on the internal personal «war» of the child in the family – from which identity is forced to be created – to a rereading of history through such means as domestic imagery, economic and political war in the form of the '80's Canadian recession and earlier Vietnam draft dodgers' wars with the US and Canadian authorities. The ethical war of the individual in telling her/his story in a world ever fractured into less dominant narratives with security guaranteed is also at issue here. If underlying our «new world» is the horror of not only the holocaust in *The Robber Bride* and Hiroshima – old territory perhaps but not so far away from the contemporary imagination with regard to Chirac et al in nuclear testing, and private western complicity discrediting public wimpers of disapproval.

The recuperative readings of texts and history which are surfacing as feminism attempts NOT to have the prefix «post» eternally attached to it, are few in the face of the deluge of Western male discourses they must wade back and forth through. If the survey of Feminist Studies (Lansen and Beck, 1979) mentioned by Catherine Stimpson were to be updated, what would we find? Doubtless there are many more books published for and by women in the nineties but where are the anthologies with a substantial amount of women's writing contained in them taught? Where are the Women's Studies or Feminist Studies courses? They are only for a still marginalised and practically un-

mapped few in a select number of locations on the globe. In 1975 of 24 widely used anthologies of literary criticism from a total of 653 essays only 16 (2,4%) were by women. Are there that many more today in most literary courses?

If rosy views of the past are «la mode» in Britain with Jane Austen and in the U.S: with *Little Women* and *The Scarlet Letter* then let us cast our attention to Canada to provide a different space for departure. Friendships among women, despite Aristotle and all who follow him, can provide a backdrop to an analysis of the construction of identity in the Canadian novel and identity in the subject position. As has been posited by Lorna Irvine, fiction written by women occupies a specific and important space in the creation of the Canadian canon. British and American literature carry their fair share of dead white males, at least as far as the academy is concerned – and canons are difficult to move and even slower to evolve into more articulate forms of warfare. Let us investigate this space then, with reference to the Canadian novel and explore a few possibilities as to how identity, in an increasingly fragmented world, is constructed.

It is difficult to envisage «identity» without «culture» to my mind. Montserrat Guibernau states that identity:

is a definition, an interpretation of the self that establishes what and where the person is in both social and psychological terms. ... As Baumeister puts it: «the search for identity includes the question of what is the proper relationship of the individual to society as a whole». This search is also evident at the individual level through the need to belong to a community. In the current era the nation represents one of these communities: national identity is its product (1996: 72).

Guibernau goes on to assert that because of the human being's adaptability and capacity for social learning, culture is the outcome of individuals socialised in space and time through the transmission of «values, beliefs, customs, conventions, habits and practices». Perhaps history and mapping might be missing from this list but importantly Guibernau goes on to point out that all cultures point to certain parts of a «neutral reality and charge them with meaning. Individuals are born within cultures that determine the way in which they view and organise themselves in relation to others and nature».

Both the solidarity of common culture and the common bonds they forge and individuals who:

enter a culture, emotionally charge certain symbols, values, beliefs and customs by internalizing them and conceiving them as part of themselves. The emotional charge that individuals invest in their land, language, symbols and beliefs while building up to their identity, facilitates the spread of nationalism... nationalism emanates from this basic emotional attachment to one's land and culture (1996: 76).

Current literature is awash with titles on National Identity. The plight of ex-Yugoslavia has had some effects on the intellectual conscience of the West perhaps, even if far too little, far too late to actually provide any concrete hope to the victims of ethnic

cleansing, the rape «campaigns», concentration camps and refugees. In *The Robber Bride*, Canadian identity is inextricably linked to the Second World War. If Freud, the Holocaust and nuclear weapons are the driving memories of this century then the characters mapped onto the Toronto landscape in this novel show the product of the anxieties created through such events. Where are the boundaries of identity when you come from somewhere else? Are you fixed by your past, by geographical location, by the culture you hail from or the culture you live your daily life in? Does literature provide any answers? Atwood determinedly turns to history in this text and decisively engages with new historicism as a motif for re-reading the past. Interlaced with history are the histories of the main protagonists who all engage in their private war with their pasts and families. Each woman has fought a specific war with their mothers, absent or weak fathers and with the men they become involved with who are vicariously carted off by the villainess of the story, Zenia. They all ultimately, also do more than survive.

At the interface between the realm of the family, the personal and the emotional there is a common strand that connects the three characters, Tony, Roz and Charis. It is not their individual pasts, triumphs and defeats, it is the bond they have forged through experiences since they met as students. The sweep of their experience since studying at McClung Hall has withstood time and difference. They have been united in supporting one another against the actions of Zenia who has manipulated each of them and run off with the various men in their lives. Without being absorbed into sentimental «sisterhood is powerful» rhetoric, the reader is transported through the past fifty years from the Second World War to the Gulf War in a critique of the postmodern world laced with myth and fairy tales. The stories of the three women's lives become inseparable from history and space because they embody the two features in the narrative itself.

Just as Mary McCarthy's «The Group» epitomised 1950's America and the place of women in society then, I would argue that *The Robber Bride* occupies a similar position in the Canada of the 1990's. The history of war, war heroes, refugees and war racketeering is the history of the people who took part in these activities. Mirroring this is the self-referential power of history readdressed from someone within the academy in true post modern fashion. Tony, a history lecturer wanders the world in search of relics from battle sites. As Braidotti points out this «nomadic» position is a minority one but nonetheless significant. I do not suggest that Tony is a nomad in the exact reading and definition given by Braidotti but she represents a departure from the linear mode of western rational thought. Tony grew up, lives and works in Toronto but her sorties into a re-reading of history through use of domestic imagery, and lectures on spontaneous massacres via dress codes suggests Foucauldian notions of power at play.

Braidotti defines the migrant, exile and nomad as corresponding to different styles and genres and to different relationships to time. To briefly summarise some of Braidotti's argument, the «mode and tense of exile are based on an acute sense of foreignness, often coupled with the often hostile perception of the host country. The migrant is however caught in an inbetween state often in a suspended, often impossible present, it is about missing, nostalgia and blocked horizons». Nomadic consciousness however is an

epistemological position because «nomadic concepts» have acquired the ability to transfer from one scientific discourse to another «in a blurring of disciplinary boundaries that is the distinct historical privilege of contemporary science» (Braidotti: 23). This allows for multiple interconnections and transmigrations of notions, mostly from the «hard» to the «soft» sciences. I would argue here that this concept of nomadism can be appropriated in the construction of Canadian identity as witnessed in *The Robber Bride*. It is by now almost anecdotal that we know what a Canadian is not; not American, not British or French depending on the individual's mother tongue. The Mosaic is the invoked image, cultural diversity now government policy with central and province-funded multiculturalism as a required aim. Yet we still define Canadian in terms of what it is not and most vehemently it is not American. British sovereignty over Canada, it could be argued, though having strong historical tentacles entangled in the national psyche outside Quebec, pales into insignificance as a contemporary threat when contrasted with the influence of NAFTA and American business interests on the Canadian doorstep.

Atwood's irony in subverting American notions of perceived power are cleverly woven into the text. The American draft dodger Billy, partner of one of the protagonists escapes over the border to Canada to avoid the draft for the Vietnam war. He is ironically arrested by the Mounties, symbol of supreme white male uncorrupted authority. The Canadians may not have been in Vietnam but the authorities assisted the American intelligence services. (Atwood uses the Canadian-as-American «mindset» in other texts such as «Surfacing» to avoid what she herself terms victim mentality in her theoretical mapping of Canadian Literature, «Survival» and elsewhere). Yet Billy turns in his friends in a deal for a new identity when back in the US. As an exile in Canada he is inert, nostalgic as in the above description of exile yet does not find happiness with his new identity, ending up washed up and drunken in Boston.

Similarly Anthea, Tony's English mother, a war bride brought to Canada by her Canadian husband, finds her daughter's accent alarming. Her dysfunctional marriage and feelings about Canada exemplified:

in this tedious neighbourhood, in this narrow-minded provincial city, in this too-large, too-small, too-cold, too-hot country that she hates with a strange, entrapped and baffled fury. Don't talk like that! She hisses at Tony. She means the accent. Flat, she calls it. But how can Tony talk the same way her mother does? Like the radio, at noon. The kids at school would laugh (p. 145).

And her own «horizons» become so severely curtailed that she flees home and family with her lover only to drown off the coast of California, ironically as far west as the American dream may be pushed. Geographical location and language then become perniciously perceived threats for the culturally displaced. Exiles do not always fare well in Atwood's novels.

Similarly exiles of the home. When Roz does not forgive one more indiscretion on her husband Mitch's part, as she has habitually done in the past, he commits suicide while sailing. She herself is a nomad wandering through Catholic and Jewish religions,

schools and various histories of her father, being the victim in her marriage until it dawns on her that she does have choices. As corporate business woman, with external trappings of wealth intact, obsession with her body and attractiveness stemming from a hugely dissatisfying relationship with both her mother and husband, Roz articulates the position of upper middle class, corporate Canada searching for meaning in a fractured world. It is her friendships with Tony and Charis which in a concrete way help her negotiate a relationship as to who she really is. She discovers her son's homosexuality and analyses her relationship with her daughters only when confronted with facts and issues, not from any inherent empathy with them. Foreigners, whether literal or metaphorical, fare differently I would argue. Tony is ostracised from both parents:

So Tony is a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father also, because, although she talks the same way he does, she is – and he has made this clear – not a boy. Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting. Like a foreigner she keeps out an eye for sudden hostile gestures. Like a foreigner she makes mistakes (p. 145).

Yet it is through this foreignness that she is able to forge links with those she perceives as having something in common with her. The war is the backdrop for Roz, Tony and Charis and stemming from their parents involvements and escape from Europe a new generation becomes rooted in Toronto. Their friendship also hinges on uniting against Zenia who turns out to be the common enemy and be a nomad of a different order. Zenia constructs her own identity in terms of different personal histories depending on who is listening.

Charis adopts the nomadic position but not in an external sense. She enters the realms of sleepwalking and magical realism, traits inherited from her grandmother to escape her uncle's sexual abuse, aunt's collusion and the inability to come to terms with her mother's incarceration and death in a psychiatric hospital. Her refuge in New Age crystals, Tarot and yoga is part of her nomadic search for herself – and Atwood's answer to contemporary religion perhaps – as Charis never embarks on a career and sojourns into the world of a hippy type existence mirrored and contrasted with her pristine daughter who reinvents herself and goes to business school. Unstable identities reach for certainties, posited by money, new religion or even the academy, addenda to Guibernau's definitions. Charis' nomadism is through the unconscious as Tony's is through her use of an invented language, writing backwards, a technique first learned as a child to empower her and provide a space for herself growing under repressed conditions. Yet Tony, as we saw above also travels to historical sites of battles fought long ago to collect and preserve a memory from them for her collection. She also enacts battle scenes in her basement on a kitchen table using spices to denote different armies.

The juxtaposition of the domestic with the military surprises the reader, for has not motherhood been the traditional realm of the female when war was for men, a

stereotype Atwood endlessly repudiates in this text? She also shows how strategic plans are made:

For the armies and populations, Tony doesn't use pins or flags, not primarily. Instead she uses kitchen spices, a different one for each tribe or ethnic grouping: cloves for the Germanic tribes, red peppercorns for the Vikings... For each major king, chief, emperor, or pope, there's a Monopoly man; areas in which each has sovereignty, actual or nominal, are marked by lengths of cut-up plastic swizzle stick, in matching colours... It's a complex system, but she prefers it to more schematic representations or to ones that show the armies and the strongholds only. With it she can depict interbreeding and hybridization, through conquest or through the slave trade, because populations are not in fact homogeneous blocks, but mixtures. There are white peppercorns in Constantinople and Rome, traded as slaves by the red peppercorns, who rule them; the green peppercorns trade from south to north, as well as from east to west and back again, using lentils... There is a continuous ebb and flow, a blending, a shifting of territories. To keep the lighter spices from rolling around, she uses a touch of hairspray. Gently, though; otherwise they will be blown away. When she wants to change the year or the century, she scrapes off this or that population and sets up again. She uses tweezers; otherwise her fingers get covered with seeds. History isn't dry, it's sticky, it can get all over your hands (p. 464).

I have quoted this at length because this microcosmic view of the western history of human race transported to the kitchen table holds so many connections with national identity and place. In an increasingly fractured world of national identities paralleled with transnational corporate interests, off shore manufacturing in cheap labour territories, the global supremacy of his majesty the media, champions of history, when reduced to the kitchen, or rather cellar table seem slightly ludicrous. Atwood has elsewhere pointed out that the first step for military dictatorships is to silence poets and writers – the power of language provoking serious slippage in dominant rhetoric – and here posits an informed juxtaposition with the contemporary so-called «first world». Dominant ideologies desperately shoring up their countries with increasing wealth and increasingly aging populations cannot escape the «hybridization» which is upon them. If western powers do enshrine their «monopoly men» with total disregard for those outside the «armies» and the «strongholds», then they do so at their own peril. Each conquering nation quoted above gave rise to the demise and rise of others. The contemporary world is no exception. Atwood seems to posit that the readings of domination may vary but like Edmund Burke, «the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history» – so far.

Towards the end of the novel Tony, in her cellar, lays out a map of downtown Toronto on a map of thirteenth century Europe. Here she locates all the central areas of action of the text, from the restaurant the Toxique to Roz's office, the Island where Charis lives, the hotel where Zenia is found dead, the college where they all studied and finally her own house:

with the cellar in it, with the sand-table in it, with the map in it. Maps, thinks Tony, contain the ground that contains them... Tony needs the map for the same reason she always uses maps: they help her to see, to visualise the topology, to remember (p. 464).

It is fascinating that Tony uses a map of Toronto and fixes the spaces of her friends upon it with the shared sites and locations of the city in a similar way to her mother had rejected such mapping. She layers twentieth century Canada on top of thirteenth century Europe – the ultimate colonial type link? Where is the change? Friendship here represents more than the bonds of the psyche built through stories and shared experiences. Geography is bound to the individual in the sense that the profoundly historical and political for Tony becomes the personal and the particular. The human relationships, particularly female friendships, held together in the webs of space and time, offer a reference point for all the women in this novel. Cultural geography assumes new proportions in the psyches and physical realms of characters in the way that feminisms outside the sweeping Anglo-American versus French feminist schools rather locked in time and place, can now be read using Braidotti's nomadism in a more transdisciplinary fashion.

Atwood has repeatedly used maps and mapping in her work to cite Canada and Canadian identity as more than the space north of the United States and the weakened western arm of British colonisation, and this use is a clear indicator as well as several other factors in defining her as a post colonial writer.

Postcolonial discourses are still prevalent yet not without detractors. Its voices are fortunately loud, as feminism's still should be, whether rereading texts set in Africa, India or to some Eurocentric critics, the unlikely locus of Canada. In a vitriolic denouncement of what he regards as postcolonialism possibly being turned into «another boutique in the academic mall of knowledge» Russell Jacoby, a Californian History lecturer chips away at the heels of Spivak, Bhaba, Said and Rushdie. Perhaps, like those who pronounce feminism to be outmoded and like the historians parodied by Tony in *The Robber Bride*, there is still that nostalgic wish for a return to the past through the filter lense of Empire where everyone knew their place(s) and women remained in front of the kitchen sink instead of in charge of their own discourses, whether through friendship or other modes. Hopefully, with writers of Atwood's calibre to delineate and deconstruct history, construct new ways of regarding women's identity and to tell the stories of our fluctuating times, he will, like others, be located in the rusting scrapyards as we travel forward (nomadically) in the opposite direction to the redundant mall.

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