

# The Trick of Divining a Postcolonial Canadian Identity

Margaret Laurence Between Race  
and Nation

The postcolonial stance in Canadian literature and literary theory is inspired by contradictory impulses.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, postcolonialism validates what has been denigrated by empire and thus serves nationalism. The literatures of ex-colonies have had to struggle to dislodge the imperial centre and to overcome a perception of themselves as peripheral. Their anti-imperialism creates new centres where once there had been only margins. On the other hand, the postcolonialism associated with Homi Bhabha, closely allied with poststructuralism, implies a questioning of centres wherever they are located. The poststructuralist face of postcolonialism challenges nationalisms because they inevitably rely on founding narratives and notions of autonomy similar to those deployed by imperialism. These two streams of postcolonialism do not represent options that a critic of Canadian literature can choose between: mutually contradictory though they are, both are inevitably present in any discussion of a postcolonial *national* identity.

No matter how radically poststructuralist, postcolonial Canadian criticism finds itself coloured by nationalism. The postcolonial critic Gary Boire decries the nationalism that imagines a blank, unpeopled landscape on which a future history will be written and that ignores both the names given to that landscape by the indigenous peoples and the fate of those peoples. Boire calls for the “destruction” of coherent historical narrative and of historical lines of continuity which ignore conflict and so perpetuate injustice (14). Only by acknowledging discontinuity and struggle, Boire argues, can

“Canadian criticism” fulfil a truly “substantive social function” and overcome its colonization by American New Criticism. But it is precisely the existence of Canadian criticism that is in question. What is it that makes the influence of New Criticism “foreign” and “colonial” but the existence of arbitrary imperialist-inspired boundaries? If we move, as Boire argues we should, “beyond boundaries, to deconstruct priorities, origins, teleologies” (2), why should we work within the framework of Canada? It is not its foreign origin that makes New Criticism objectionable, for Boire’s own use of Derrida would be open to a similar objection. And yet, the ideological critique of New Criticism is easily, even inevitably, conflated with the nationalist objection to New Criticism’s foreignness.

No matter how aware of the constructedness of identities, no matter how concerned with rupture, discontinuity, and transgression, postcolonial criticism of Canadian literature remains nationalist in inspiration. The post-structuralist rejection of nationalist constructs is always in favour of a renewed nation, the nation as it should be. To argue that *Canadian* criticism should question the nation and its historiography is still to presume that the field of inquiry is the nation. Even when the subject of inquiry is regionalism or ethnicity or gender, the field of inquiry remains the nation and determines what will be found. Postcolonial studies that consider Canadian attitudes to indigenous peoples presume the frame of the nation even as they denounce the imperialist framing of the New World. Studies that make irony *the* dominant mode of English-Canadian discourse presume that at some level beyond irony there is a Canada and that there is something that Canadians have in common that makes them different from other people.<sup>2</sup>

The national borders that trip up postcolonial writing make for a contradiction. That contradiction is present in reversed form in nationalist writing that deploys postcolonial rhetorical strategies to reject a foreign imperialist discourse. Attempts to rewrite the empire in order to validate the nation inevitably reinstate the same formulas that they reject. This contradiction is displayed by Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Diviners*.

*The Diviners* may not appear the most appropriate focus for my study because it is not stylistically postmodern, but rather straightforwardly realist. The narrative of the past in Laurence’s novel unfolds in a linear, chronological fashion: time is imagined as a river leading from the past to the present. That river, however, is said to flow in two directions, and the novel

emphasizes the way that history and identity are self-consciously fashioned to suit the purposes of the present. In that sense Laurence's novel may be considered a postcolonial prototype. Laurence's self-identity as a Canadian novelist was directly shaped by her awareness of African writers. She even considered herself a "Third World novelist" ("Ivory Tower or Grassroots" 17), and *The Diviners* has many of the key ingredients of the postcolonial novel: it is what Fredric Jameson would call a national allegory in which personal relations mirror larger public relations; it is a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Tempest* that has Miranda become Caliban's lover (Godard 55-62); it is a rejection of England and English literature in favour of a native tradition based on orality; and it is a celebration of creolization, the blending of different cultures in an indigenous mix. As a postcolonial novel, *The Diviners* advocates the shedding of a colonial mentality and itself marks the shedding of that mentality. Indeed, a plausible case has been made for Laurence's novel being *the* primary Canadian text because of its concern with "the readjustment of roots in the New World" (Bader 43). Laurence's postcolonial nationalism also, I hope to show, establishes the nation on the same foundations as the empire she rejects.

**A** doubleness in *The Diviners* arises from its status as fictional autobiography. Morag Gunn, the protagonist and the focus of the narration, is herself a novelist and her life has many parallels with Laurence's own. Morag the mythmaker-novelist does what Laurence does: she invents an identity for herself using the cultural materials provided by "diviners" such as her foster father Christie Logan. Insofar as Morag's life diverges from Laurence's, it fulfils the author's own myth of national identity. Morag, who rejects an identification with the imperialist and identifies with the indigenous, the dispossessed, and the land of her birth, embodies the national identity that Laurence herself advocates. Morag the mythmaker writes a novel called *Prospero's Daughter* that is a postcolonial revision of *The Tempest*; Morag the embodiment of Laurence's own myth has herself lived a revised version of Miranda's story.

Morag Gunn embodies a myth of romance, and romance, as Doris Sommer shows, is the mode best suited to fictions that would found a nation. Morag is an orphan, ashamed of her foster father, the town garbage collector, and feels constrained by the small-town prison that is Manawaka. Away from home, at university, she falls in love with her English professor.

His Britishness attracts Morag: Brooke Skelton represents the culture and the tradition of the imperial metropole. However, Brooke is an imperialist. His heart has been twisted and unnaturally hardened by his childhood in that most imperial of colonies, India.

Brooke loves Morag's lack of a past—she is virgin territory—and Morag's acceptance, under his spell, that she has nothing to put alongside his cultural tradition. This is the imperialist view of an empty New World that Boire denounces. Brooke patronizes Morag and makes her feel like a child. He also refuses to entertain her desire for a child: their relationship is barren. However, it is not true that Morag is without a past. She carries Manawaka with her in spite of herself. She has been given a Scottish identity through the stories told by Christie Logan her foster father. And she even has a sexual history: an early experience with Jules Tonnerre, a Métis with whom she went to school.

Eventually Morag succeeds in publishing a novel, which gives her the strength to leave Brooke and to go to Jules, with whom she conceives a child. This decision marks the collapse of the internal barriers imposed by the marriage to Brooke and the restoration of the authentic self: "In her present state of mind, she doesn't expect to be aroused, and does not even care if she isn't, as though this joining is being done for other reasons, some debt or answer to the past, some severing of inner chains which have kept her bound and separated from part of herself" (292).

**T**he national romance establishes two nations: the real nation and the ideal. The real nation is the bigoted, class-ridden, and provincial town of Manawaka. The contrast between this colonial reality and the glorious world of literature is intolerable. Morag marries Brooke to deny the real nation and emigrate to the world of books. She discovers that only alienation lies in foreign books. The solution is to write a counterdiscourse that would redeem an ideal nation by turning toward the authentic and valuable in Manawaka: the oral traditions of all those defined as other, the scavenger, the Métis, the working class, women.

Morag does what the nation is called upon to do as well: she recognizes the falseness and the psychological harm resulting from her dependence on the representative of English imperialism, breaks with him, and forms a union with the representative of the indigenous population. The result of the union of Morag and Jules is a child who carries in her veins the blood of

both settlers and indigenes. Pique Tonnerre Gunn's inheritance is cultural as well as genetic. Her mother passes on to her the stories of both sides of the racial divide. From Christie Logan Morag heard tales of Piper Gunn who led Scottish Highlanders to the Red River colony in 1814 and who later fought against Louis Riel in 1870. Jules has been told by his father, Lazarus, of an ancestor, Rider Tonnerre, who fought against the Scottish settlers in 1816 and later again alongside Riel.

Morag recognizes these stories, in which history is given a heroic cast, as myths. The heroes of Christie's and Lazarus's tales are of Biblical longevity, and they display more than human fortitude. As Morag understands, we need myths to live by. If myths do not tell what happened, they tell what should have happened and provide the present with the past it needs. Both sets of stories are passed on to Pique, who will have to fashion a personal myth out of them. The nation itself must also create its myth: Laurence, writing in her own voice in an article entitled "Man of Our People", has argued that Canada needs to invent national heroes, and she suggests Gabriel Dumont, the model for Rider Tonnerre, as a suitable candidate.

*The Diviners* shows that the Scots and Métis have something in common apart from their enmity: a history of dispossession by the English empire-makers. The Scottish Highlanders came to the New World because they had lost their land in the Clearances. If they recognize that they share a history of suffering and a common imperialist enemy, the descendants of settlers and indigenes can establish a new community based on a respect for the land they share.

The national myth in *The Diviners* has a second half: Morag outgrows the Scottish identity given her as a child and recognizes her true identity as a function of the land where she was born. Although she lives in London, takes a Scottish lover, and goes to visit Scotland, Morag rejects Christie's injunction to go on a "pilgrimage" to Sutherland, the home of the Gunn clan, "where her people came from" (393). Her sojourn in the British Isles has taught her that her home is "Christie's real country" and that Christie's real country was the land where he lived and told his tales (415).

Morag decides she must return to Christie's country, but she returns to Ontario not Manawaka. (In Christie's version of the Red River Rebellion, Central Canadians had been identified as "goddamn English, them bloody Sassenachs" [144]). If Morag can "return" to Ontario, it is because she identifies not with a particular landscape but with a map. "Christie's real coun-

try,” it turns out, has less to do with the landscape he lived in (the Nuisance Grounds and Hill Street) than with the nation-state that Morag first learned about in school.

**B**oth halves of the national myth that Morag embodies—the marriage to and separation from Brooke and the aborted pilgrimage to Sutherland—involve the same double movement of departure and return. In the one case she returns to Jules; in the other she returns to Christie. Canada is not where Morag is from but where she goes back to. One is not born Canadian; one becomes Canadian. We may doubt whether, if Morag had stayed in Manawaka, she would have achieved the same sense of roots. As many, including Benedict Anderson, have argued, “exile is the nursery of nationality” (“Exodus” 315). Thus, Christie Logan, exiled in Canada, is so much more “Scottish” than Dan McRaith in Scotland. Morag must go to Scotland to become Canadian. Abroad Morag becomes aware of her difference and learns to identify with the state that issued her passport.

The corollary of this awakening is that Morag’s Scottishness is not merely an illusion that she sheds, but an essential part of Morag’s Canadian identity. Scottishness must be present (in order to be superseded) for Morag to become Canadian. If it is not present, then Scottishness has to be invented. Young Morag is that typical New World figure, the orphan without a past or a guarantee of meaning. Not only is Morag without parents, but her name itself is without content. When she looks up Gunn in a volume entitled *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland*, she discovers that the Gunns are without arms or motto (58). Perhaps elsewhere in the Americas the orphan can be imagined as self-engendering: an American or Caribbean Adam. Such anti-historic conception is not possible for Morag, who vehemently rejects the possibility that her name carries no implicit identity. At Christie’s invitation she imagines a Scottish identity and a family history that will give her meaning.

Christie invites Morag to think of herself not as parentless, but as the last surviving bearer of the name Gunn. Christie himself was born in Scotland and came to Canada as a small boy (74). There is no suggestion that the accent and patterns of speech he retains from the old country (“och aye” [56]) are in any way self-chosen.<sup>3</sup> To give his adopted daughter some of his own sense of ethnic identity, however, Christie must invent an ancestor, Piper Gunn, who bears her name and who came with the first Scottish set-

tlers to Manitoba. The daughter came before the ancestor; Piper Gunn did not exist until Morag became Christie's daughter. Morag did not receive her name from Piper Gunn; he received his name from her. Morag's Scottish identity is a cisatlantic fiction, and Morag is no more Scottish than she is Siamese (as Laurence said of herself ["Road from the Isles" 147]).

Morag's Scottish identity is based on the slight link with the past offered by her surname. It is an attempt to motivate the arbitrary sign, to interpret signs as if they were mimetic and thus naturally tied to the object for which they stand. In a letter to her Scottish lover Dan McRaith, the adult Morag reflects, "I don't know why names seem so important to me. Yes, I guess I do know. My own name, and feeling I'd come from nowhere" (311). To complement Christie's stories and give herself someone she can identify with, Morag invents stories about "Piper Gunn's woman," also called Morag. However, Piper Gunn is not displaced by the woman in Morag's versions, and the reason is clear: she needs an ancestor bearing her name who was present at the founding of the West *and* who is male. Only a male ancestor can make possible an imagined line of Gunns descending to Morag. Elsewhere Margaret Laurence herself has recognized and objected to the tyranny of the patrilineal proper name:

In our culture, our genealogical descent is always in the male line. Where the mothers come from, what their names are, is always where their fathers came from and what names they carried. (*Dance on the Earth* 9)

Laurence's own memoir resists that tyranny by tracing a genealogy through the mothers she has known. But Morag Gunn's ethnic identity is based on people she has not known and must therefore imagine. Since all she has with which to imagine them is her own family name, she inevitably imagines a patrilineal family.

The arbitrariness of an ethnic identity based solely on a name becomes obvious if one imagines a Franco-Manitoban or for that matter a Cree with the name Gunn, something very much within the realms of possibility. The first man to carry the name Gunn to what is now Manitoba might have come from the United States. Would Morag then still have thought of herself as having Scottish roots? Language, place, physical differences, and immediate parentage are usually more important than family name in the constitution of an ethnic identity. Family name is an unsatisfactory metonym for genetic inheritance. Morag Gunn has inherited the genes of more than one ancestor and is almost certainly the product of generations

of creole unions. Even if Morag had an ancestor who came over with the Selkirk settlers (and the novel insists there is *no* reason to think so) and that such an ancestor was her great-great-great-grandfather (she was born in 1926; Piper Gunn was adult in 1814), she would have very little genetically in common with him. She would still have 32 ancestors at the same remove as Piper Gunn. Few of these are likely to have been from Scotland: the population of Manitoba doubled in 1875-6 alone, and has multiplied many times since, and the bulk of that immigration was from Ontario (Morton 176).<sup>4</sup>

Readers of the novel have all, without exception, assumed that Morag really is a descendant of Scottish settlers to Manitoba. The lapse may be forgiven, for Margaret Laurence makes the same mistake: she writes that she gave Morag Gunn “ancestors who came from Sutherland and who were turned out during the Highland Clearances” (*Heart of a Stranger* 145), forgetting that it is Christie Logan who gave Morag those ancestors. An older Morag, who has learned that Scotland is nothing to her, remembers Colin Gunn, the father she scarcely knew, as someone

whose people came to this country so long ago, from Sutherland, during the Highland Clearances, *maybe*, and who had in them a sadness and a stern quality. Can it ever be eradicated? (18; my emphasis)

With that *maybe* Morag casts doubt on the identification of her father’s “people” (meaning the man who carried the name Gunn to Canada). However, in the same sentence she asserts that she has inherited a certain personality from this ancestor she cannot positively identify. The moroseness that elsewhere Morag calls “the Black Celt” is imagined as a genetic legacy linked directly to the name Gunn; that is, it is inherited by children of both sexes, but passed on only by males.<sup>5</sup> This genetic impossibility is a seemingly ineradicable myth.<sup>6</sup>

Christie Logan, who remembers a childhood in Scotland, “remembers” a lot else besides: Highland Clearances, tartans, and clan mottos. His claims to ancestry compensate for his lowly status in Manawaka:

Let the Connors and the McVities and the Camerons and Simon Pearl and all them in their houses up there—let them look down on the likes of Christie Logan. . . . They don’t touch me, Morag. For my kin and clan are as good as theirs any day of the week, any week of the month, any month of the year, any year of the century, and any century of all time.(56)

Strangely, Morag also feels the need for Scottish ancestry, partially because of her social status as the daughter of the Scavenger. Ironically, Christie’s



stories inspire her with pride although he remains the source of deep shame. The ostracism Morag suffers because she is related to Christie the Scavenger is related metonymically to the dispossession of the Highland Clearances, and so becomes meaningful.

Jules Tonnerre has a similarly confused relationship with his father. Deeply ashamed of his father and his alcoholism, Jules counters that shame with the stories Lazarus has told him of heroic ancestors and with a pride in his father's suffering. Jules, however, has no way of avoiding his racial identity; it is inscribed on his skin in a way that Morag's is not. In her rush to deny Christie and Manawaka's part in her, Morag might well have shed the ethnicity invented for her. She does not do that.

I do not insist on the arbitrariness of Morag's Scottishness because I want to show that she was Canadian all along. On the contrary, as I have said, Morag's Canadianness requires that she be Scottish first. I want to ask why Canadians should feel the need for what Clara Thomas calls the "Scottish mythology" (10), and why this Scottishness is so hard to shake even when its fictional nature is manifest. If Morag must first be Scottish in order to become Canadian, it is because the novel wants to assert that Canadianness is homologous with Scottishness. Political sovereignty is not in question (Canada has that); it is the strongly delineated Scottish national character that the novel envies. The novel wants to depict a Canadian identity that, like the Scottish, is based on a clearly defined and circumscribed territory, on an inspiring, even romantic history, and on a particular relation to the English language.

Liisa Malkki describes a recent internationalist board game called "Friends around the World, A Game of World Peace," intended to teach cooperation. Players race to get international friends, dressed in "'distinctive' clothes approximating national costume," to the World Peace Centre ahead of Grey Blob (52). Grey Blob is "a formless lump with no cultural patterns of markers," "no gender, no humanity—clearly a categorical abomination" (52). In the world of "international friends," humanity is imagined as a patchwork where everyone must be different, but everyone must also be representative. "[H]aving an identity amounts to being a *representative* or ambassador of one's national or cultural type" (58). Differences are stable and measurable: everyone is different in the same way. No room for Grey Blobs here.

Apparently Grey Blob is intended to represent anything from nuclear war

to personal insults that might threaten world peace. At the same time, one imagines that for a child playing the game, Grey Blob would also represent a fearful homogeneity, a homelessness, a being without a place in the world system of nations. *The Diviners* is haunted by just such a fear of not belonging to the community of nations where difference is fixed and recognizable and already fitted into a series. The novel is concerned with making a Canadian nationality that will be as stable and as inspiring as national identities in Europe are presumed to be.

What would greyness mean in Morag's case? What would the young Morag be if she were not Scottish? The answer is that she would be white. Indeed there are readers who insist on reading her as white. Barbara Godard writes that "Pique is three-quarters white, and as such more Morag's daughter than Jules's" (68). This statement appears ludicrous on a first reading (how does Godard know that Jules is 50% white and 50% Indian? what can it mean to say that part of Jules is closer to Morag than to himself?), but it reveals an important tension in the experience of reading the novel. If half of Jules is somehow closer to Morag than it is to himself, it is not because he is Scottish; it is because she is white. Godard harkens back to the common North American notion of race as a kind of stain on whiteness. If, as Godard suggests, Jules is defined by his Indian blood and his white blood is not truly his, it must be that there is an Indian blood different from and stronger than white blood. Any amount of Indian blood makes one Indian. White blood is imagined as like water: it can dilute but it cannot alter the fundamental nature of the stain. It is precisely this kind of aqueous whiteness that Morag tries to avoid by being Scottish.

If Godard were consistent, she would see that Pique's Indian blood works the same way as Jules's does. It is more diluted than Jules's, but still overrides whatever white blood she has: Pique is Métisse. Indeed Frank Davey assumes that race puts an insuperable barrier between mother and daughter. Davey accuses Morag the "white novelist" of appropriating Jules and Pique's songs when she appends them to her novel, thereby unfairly appropriating the "signs of connection to the land, aboriginality, inheritance, and 'naturalness'" of the indigenes (41). Davey here assumes the reverse of Godard: that Pique is more closely related to her father than to her mother; that Morag has no part in her, in spite of the claim of blood that mother and daughter both recognize; in short, that Pique is of a different race than her mother.<sup>7</sup>

Godard and Davey's readings illustrate how much the question of race shadows the text. It is within this framework of racial assumptions that the novel seeks to locate the national identity it is fashioning. We can now qualify the point we made earlier: if Morag must first be Scottish in order to become Canadian, it is because the novel wants to assert that Canadianness is homologous to Scottishness and because it fears that it is not. National identities like Scottishness are marked by difference, but they all belong to a single order of classification. The differences between them can be compared because they can be plotted along a single continuum. Nations exist within a system of nations wherein their sovereignty and their difference are recognized. They are all theoretically equal and all entitled to representation in the General Assembly of the United Nations and at the Olympics.<sup>8</sup> Races, however, are not imagined as different, but as absolutely other. They cannot be compared because they are not of the same order.<sup>9</sup> Races are by definition not homologous and not equal.

Race was the marker of the old imperial world divisions, when the world was divided into Europe and the Rest. In that world Morag in Manitoba would be condemned to greyness: she would never be any more than off-white, a displaced European. *The Diviners* rejects race as a basis of identity in favour of nationality; it seeks to replace the old imperialist divisions of humanity by a new understanding of the world, now formally organized into homologous and theoretically equal nation states. *The Diviners* celebrates a creolization in the future that will be the union of the settlers and the indigenes: a union, not a dilution. For Morag's and Jules's blood to mingle rather than merely have her blood dilute his, they must both represent national cultures rather than races. You cannot have a union of white and Indian (two races), but you can of Scottish and Métis (two nations).

The creole union, in order to serve the national myth, requires that Morag be the descendant of the original Scottish settlers and that Jules be in a direct line of descent from the Métis who fought against the Scots. As a descendant of Piper Gunn, who fought against the Métis, Morag can now make peace with their descendant. As we have seen, her claim to Scottish blood also allows Morag to imagine an atavistic primitive side to herself that she refers to as the Black Celt. The Black Celt, as the reference to colour suggests, enables her to identify with Jules the Métis more easily than with the well-to-do folk of Manawaka (in spite of their "Scottish" names). This tendency Terry Goldie calls the theme of the Celtic savage (26), the notion that

Celtic settlers in the new land had more in common with the indigenous peoples than either did with the English colonizers. This idea opposes Godard's point that part of Jules is closer to Morag than to himself: part of Morag is closer to Jules than to herself. Moreover, if Morag is Scottish, she can claim to be of dispossessed stock just as the Métis are (in spite of the obvious fact that the Scots in Canada have not as a group suffered dispossession).

The creolization that the novel advocates requires a complementary notion of ancestral purity. The national myth offered in *The Diviners* cannot recognize creolization in the past. Archie McDonald, the historical figure on whom Christie based his tales of Piper Gunn, actually married the daughter of a Chinook chief and later a "mixed-blood woman," with whom he had twelve sons and a daughter (*DCB VIII*: 526-27). Piper Gunn, of course, cannot be imagined with an Indian or mixed-blood wife, for that would mean that Morag already had Indian blood and that creolization predates the problems of today and cannot be imagined as tomorrow's solution. Jules, of course, is marked by his skin and his name as having both Indian and French ancestry. But *métissage* does not mean, as one might think, that blood is unimportant. What defines the Métis, as Godard underlines, is his aboriginal blood. (Frenchness may actually point to aboriginality because on the Prairies French is a figure of difference.) It is even possible that Godard is wrong and Jules's aboriginality has not suffered a dilution at all. The original Tonnerre, the Chevalier or Rider Tonnerre that Jules has heard about from his father, is imagined as already Métis, not as Indian or French (160). Rider Tonnerre, like the first man to bear the name Gunn across the ocean, is the sole ancestor, the single source of a whole and complete inheritance. (No one asks who Jules's mother or grandmothers were.)

A creolized Canadian identity such as *The Diviners* posits has meaning where the field is a world entirely divided into different but homologous nation-states. Such an identity has no meaning where the field is European imperialism conquering a world of others, whose otherness is figured in terms of race. Canadianness also has no meaning if the field is figured in terms of grey capitalist modernity integrating the globe into a single system characterized by uneven development.

We (Canadians) may long for a world divided into nations, but the world continues to be bedeviled by race, about which we (academic writers) still have no way of talking sensibly. Racial divisions coincide roughly, though

not exactly, with other divisions in many ways more real than those that divide nations. Etienne Balibar writes that the new inter-national system continues to be

traversed by the constantly shifting frontier—irreducible to the frontiers between states—between two humanities which seem incommensurable, namely the humanity of destitution and that of ‘consumption’, the humanity of underdevelopment and that of overdevelopment. In appearance, humanity has been unified by the suppression of imperial hierarchies; in fact, however, it is only today that humanity exists as such, though split into tendentially incompatible masses. (44)

It can be argued that *The Diviners* is justified in seeking to replace race by nation as a basis of identity. Nations, unlike races, require the consent of citizens for their legitimacy. And nations are based on a shared history and culture, not on ineluctable genetic qualities. As part of its attempt to replace race by nation, *The Diviners* insists that identities are human constructs. My reading thus far, however much it has differed from other readings, has followed the novel: it is the text itself that underlines the fictiveness of Morag’s Scottishness.

Laurence finds in the very fictiveness of identities a reason for celebrating those responsible for their invention. These “diviners” forge an identity that others can share. National culture is held to be a question of artistic achievement as well as of shared behaviour patterns. The inventors of myth are thus heroes to rival the subjects of their tales. Morag passes on to Pique not just the stories about Piper Gunn and Rider Tonnerre, but also stories about Christie Logan and Lazarus Tonnerre: the story-tellers become the story.

*The Diviners* makes clear that the stories of the community do not predate the community but are its self-conscious inventions. Christie’s tales of Piper Gunn are explicitly said to be based on a book he has read (94). Christie, the first-generation immigrant, only knows about the Sutherlanders who came to Canada ninety or so years before he did because he has read Canadian history. The mythic qualities of his narrative are not the inevitable products of oral transmission, but deliberate distortions made to historical narrative. In the school that young Morag attends, children learn a national history that includes the Selkirk settlers and Louis Riel. They are thus given a frame of reference that they will share with all Canadians and only Canadians. School-taught history makes citizens. What Christie has done is to take that written narrative and restore its capacity for inspiration by patterning it on oral tales. Or rather, he patterns his heroic tales on literary models of oral

narrative: the tales of that great inventor and writer of “traditional oral” narrative, James Macpherson (73).

Christie Logan, who passes off history as if it were oral legend, does not appreciate how much he is Macpherson’s successor, but Laurence presumably does. Macpherson’s poems, which purported to be translations from the Gaelic of an ancient bard called Ossian, were loosely inspired by Gaelic sources but actually written in English. Macpherson altered the tales associated with Cuchulain in order to give the Irish hero Scottish origins (deGateño 60), just as Christie alters the history of Archie McDonald to make him a Gunn. Christie, who has two volumes of Ossian at home, stands in awe before the Gaelic version which he cannot read and in which he sees the sign of an unfathomable loss. He does not know that the Gaelic “original” is a translation of the English. In the same way, Morag plays Gaelic records to herself in order to arouse a sense of melancholy (263). Her Scottish lover Dan McRaith laughs at her and wonders why she does not take Gaelic lessons (264). Morag the ironic novelist, however, understands that it is not the language once spoken by many and still spoken by a few that matters, but the mournful feelings of loss that Gaelic conjures up in the Canadian speaker of English. Canadians invent the Scotland that they need.

Macpherson had a direct influence on Walter Scott (deGateño 111), who went on to invent Scotland even more thoroughly and persuasively than did the Ossianic poet. The relationship between the two resembles that between Christie Logan the story-teller and Morag Gunn the novelist. Like Scott, Morag (and Laurence) has invented a national myth that can be shared by all citizens. *The Diviners* is precisely the sort of novel that people want to see taught in schools (which, of course, is why there was controversy when a few people objected to it being taught).

■ If *The Diviners* is as well loved by Canadians as it seems to be, is it not successful on its own terms? If other Canadians recognize themselves in Morag’s story, is that not enough? There is, however, a contradiction in the novel’s construction of Canadianness. Even as it shows that identities are inventions whose validity lies precisely in their fictionality, the novel must make an identity based on the nation-state more valid (and less of an invention) than other identities. If the community exists before the stories do, what is it that makes the community? The national allegory implicitly and inevitably grounds the imagined nation in the family. It com-

mands the assent of readers to an imagined community by appropriating the forms of a “natural” community. The nation, however much of a cultural construct it may be, in the end relies on the same notion of inherited identity as race does.

The novel shows that people invent the narrative of their own past. These invented narratives then have validity precisely because they constitute identity. Morag Gunn imagines (at Christie’s bidding) a Scottish ancestor, and she is Scottish because she does so. Later she becomes Canadian when she recognizes Christie as her father (and defines his “real country” as Canada). However, it is not sufficient explanation of why we tell certain stories to say that these are the stories that we tell. Laurence insists that storytellers are like diviners: they tap into what is already there. At some underground level the narrative must already exist: the novelist can invent it because she has already been invented by it. We choose some stories and not others to define us because some stories are felt to be more appropriate than others. If they are felt to be more appropriate, it is because they are already ours in some way, before ever we tell them. The criterion for judging appropriateness is genetic inheritance.<sup>10</sup>

Morag credits Christie Logan’s stories of Piper Gunn with inspiring her with “the strength of conviction.” Christie’s tales are based on the historical figure of “Archie Macdonald,” as Morag herself tells us (443). If the significance of the piper who led the Scottish settlers were merely “cultural”—his example teaches certain values—why should Christie change the piper’s name to Gunn? If heroism were what mattered, then one might as well choose Jewish or British or Indian heroes. Clearly Christie believes that it is not enough to choose heroes from the past; Morag must recognize that those heroes are already a part of herself. And the way that heroes are a part of one’s self is through blood. Morag’s Scottishness is a function of rewriting Archie Macdonald as Piper Gunn. If Christie had retained the name Macdonald, there would be no reason even for thinking Morag Scottish and the story would lose its relevance. Pride in one’s heritage is less a question of values than of having a heritage.

Lazarus and Jules Tonnerre do not need the tales of Rider Tonnerre to make them Métis. Their identity is inscribed on their bodies in a way that Morag’s Scottishness is not. Yet Lazarus (or his father) also takes an historical figure, Gabriel Dumont, and makes him an eponymous ancestor, Rider Tonnerre. It is not immediately clear why Lazarus should do this: a shared

ethnicity is enough in most courts to justify pride in a hero, and Dumont can be claimed by all Métis. Presumably Laurence means to show that the Métis identity is just as invented, just as much a matter of culture and the stories one tells as Morag's Scottish identity. Rider Tonnerre bears a generic name, suggesting that he is no less fictional than Piper Gunn. We are not invited to think that the stories of Rider Tonnerre accrued around someone who actually lived and was able to pass on genes to descendants; Rider Tonnerre was invented to give an ancestor to people who felt the lack of one.

The novel also shows, however, that Lazarus's tales, like Christie's, are intended to answer the needs of the immediate family. Christie and Lazarus face their audience and that audience is intimately known to them. Their tales have meaning only for themselves and their audience, not for strangers. Christie takes Canadian history and changes the names so that it may speak to his adopted daughter; Lazarus does the same for his son. The nation is rewritten in terms of the family. The family, unlike the nation, is of unquestioned meaning: it provides the individual with a social position and a name already inscribed with meaning. The individual does not choose her family, but is born into it. Christie thus answers a need felt by Morag, who finds her own orphan status intolerable and longs for her family name to hold the secret of her identity in the way that names do in English novels.

In a class society such as Morag would have found in British literature, the name a child is born with exists before the child herself does and defines the child absolutely. In a society that believes in inherent class differences, the names that indicate inherited social position are also held to reveal character. A high-born name reveals an inner nobility. Therefore, names in many British novels reveal a character's identity in some absolute and ineluctable fashion. In the New World, however, populated by younger sons and bastards, and by non-English-speaking subject peoples, the connection between name and intimate self is broken."

Part of Dr. Brooke Skelton's attraction for Morag is that his name is already a promise of significance (it combines the names of two poets). The name Skelton, of course, also bears a sinister significance, and when she comes to publish her own novels Morag will take back her maiden name. Morag, who wants the inherent meaning of a character in a novel, learns how dangerous it is to be a Canadian character in a British novel or a woman in a man's narrative. One may be imprisoned by a name. Women,



in particular, risk being flattened into names that define them completely: Prin (short for Princess), Bridie, and Eva Winkler are all warnings how not to be a woman.

If she is not written by others, Morag will have to become a writer herself, writing herself as she writes her novels. Morag's career as a writer gives meaning to the name Gunn affixed to her books. However, Morag continues to long for the guarantee of meaning that comes from being already written. Christie Logan's Piper Gunn promised her that meaning, and Morag always harkens back to those stories.

Jules Tonnerre's name, unlike Morag's, does have an inherent meaning, a meaning that existed before he did: a grandfather who fought alongside Dumont in the North West Rebellion of 1885 was also called Jules Tonnerre. The meaning of Jules's name is hidden: at school he is known as Skinner, and when he tells Morag to call him Jules she has difficulty pronouncing it. The rebarbative nature of the name is its own guarantee of meaning; it is as though in telling Morag his name Jules were letting her in on a secret that she will never wholly master. The name of Pique's father is also withheld from readers for much of the first part of the book—one of the few ways in which the narrative does not offer itself to immediate comprehension. The strategy gives readers the sense of being let in on a secret when they discover that Pique is the daughter of Jules. The New World is neither nameless nor named by the British: the Métis possess a valid name.

If the story-teller is to do more than invent a national identity, if she is to *divine* stories that already exist at the truest level, then the nation must have the inevitability of an inherited family identity. Morag Gunn triumphs by giving her daughter what she herself did not have: a name that will define her completely. Morag Gunn existed before Christie's stories gave her meaning. The birth of her daughter, on the other hand, has been preceded by stories: Piquette Tonnerre Gunn's identity is already assured. Christie and Lazarus invented ancestors inspired by the needs of the living; Morag names her daughter after Jules's sister Piquette who died in a tragic fire.

Barbara Godard celebrates *The Diviners* as a "(m)othering text" whose triumph is that Pique is allowed to be free to write her own life history, to create her own life story. Morag releases her daughter just as "the author lets her character go, free to develop her different voice": "This is what it means to (m)other a text: to enter into a loving and reciprocal relationship with the other, to let the daughter tell her own story" (68). Laurence's dialogic,

feminine text abdicates final authority “and lets everyone tell or write their own story” (69). I believe the opposite is true: the novel insists so much on Pique’s breaking loose and finding her own way because at the deepest level she never will. Her mother worries about her, but she need not. Pique will never be tempted as Morag was when she married Brooke to declare herself without a past: she is defined more absolutely by her parents than Morag ever was. Morag, who had been fed on stories of Scotland by Christie, learned that her true home is not Scotland but the land where she was born. Pique, on the other hand, learns that her true home is where her parents were born. Although born in Vancouver and raised in London England and in rural Southern Ontario, Pique never imagines that those are her true country. Pique felt more at ease in London, where she went to school with “Pakistani and African and West Indian kids,” than she does in Ontario where she encounters prejudice (446), but she never imagines that London is her home. Pique is eleven when she returns from England to Canada, but she does not have Christie’s problems with accent (Christie was younger than fifteen when he came to Canada [74]). In the present of the narrative Pique travels to the places she has heard about in stories, to Manawaka and Galloping Mountain, in order to discover who she is. At the end of the novel she is off to Galloping Mountain to live with relatives on her father’s side whom she has only recently met. Morag learned that the highlands of her imaginary forbears are not hers; Pique learns precisely the opposite: that there’s a valley and a mountain that hold her name, and they hold her name because her “fathers, they lived there long ago” (464). Ghosts lead her “back to that home I never knowed” (465).<sup>12</sup>

The young Morag experiences a lack because what came before her is unknown and must be invented. Pique, however, has been preceded by a history that defines her. Moreover, she is able to “return” to what came before her. In a circular fashion she thereby underwrites her mother’s own identity: Pique’s inherited identity is a guarantee of the authenticity of Morag’s own invented Canadian identity. Morag invents the past and the fathers she needs, not just for herself but, more importantly, for the next generation. One might go so far as to say that the colonial’s search for a father to give her a name is really a search for a father for her child. Brooke was unsatisfactory: he made Morag feel like a child instead of giving her a child. Morag asserts her independence by rejecting him and returning to her childhood experience in Manawaka where she has known Christie and

Jules, a pair of social outsiders. She adopts Christie as a father for herself *and* she makes Jules the father of her child. By projecting paternity into the future, Morag can at last secure the paternity that stands behind her.

The site that defines identity changes subtly throughout the novel, in a process that mirrors the development of a national identity. It is first the ancestral legends that Christie invents for his family, then the nation-state to which Morag returns from Scotland, and finally Pique's land of sacred memory. Family romance gives way to novelistic realism, which in turn gives way to family romance. A twist in this circle makes it a Mobius strip (we do not return to where we started). Christie's legends made the nation serve the family; *The Diviners* makes the family serve the nation. Christie's tales were recognized as inventions serving the present; Pique's identity is no longer merely an invention.

Godard, who reads the novel differently than I do, believes the text is a "collective, 'unauthorized' work" (62). It is unauthorized because it includes so many different voices. I have no doubt that Godard is accurately describing Laurence's intentions: to create a text that abdicates final authority and thus can speak for the "collective". But, I would argue, the definition of the collective is precisely what is at stake. Laurence's text can bring together all these voices because she is concerned to depict them as part of one particular collective, the nation. Once the imperialist voice of Brooke Skelton has been excluded, all share in a single collective defined by the common possession of certain stories. What makes this collective suspect is that finally it must be underwritten by more than stories; it must also be imagined as having a basis in genetic inheritance.

**I**n "Man of Our People" Margaret Laurence wrote that Canadians who are not Indian or Métis must learn to call Gabriel Dumont their ancestor even though they may not have earned the right: "His life, his legend, and his times are a part of our past which we desperately need to understand and pay heed to" (212). If the question is "How should Canadian history be told?" then Laurence is surely right: Canadian history must include Gabriel Dumont and the defeat of the Métis. But if the question is "How should the defeat of the Métis be told?" then it is not certain whether the best context for understanding Gabriel Dumont is Canadian history, or some other context, more local and more continental.

Children are taught Canadian history at school and learn to think of

themselves as Canadian. It is claimed this classroom history makes Canadians what they are. No doubt telling a particular story of identity is necessary to establish that identity. However, history can be sliced in different ways: the history can be told of a gender, an ethnic group, a race, a diaspora, an empire, or a class. There may be histories of the English-speaking peoples and of the New World told “through Indian eyes,” histories of Western civilization and of the Black Atlantic. Why should the national identity be more valid than class, regional or racial identity? Why should the national narrative be accepted as the truest one? One obvious answer is that, since the nineteenth century, literature as taught in universities has been national literature. The nation defines the field and is therefore not itself called into question. My point is not that the nation should be rejected and that we should take contemporary literature written in English as a single field, a suggestion made by Christopher Clausen. One may wonder about the field of identity that Clausen assumes. What we must ask is why we identify with nations rather than other identities? what does such an identification provide? what does it compensate for? what does it occlude? Why has national identification been so powerful for the last two centuries? Why is an identification with the nation under threat now?

Postcolonial critics should, I am arguing, take as our field of inquiry the modern capitalist industrialized world. It is a world divided into seemingly homologous nation-states, but better understood in terms of other, intra-national and transnational frontiers. It is also a world that is intolerable, unjust, and ultimately unsustainable, and our task must also be to imagine a larger field that can contain it. Because, however, we cannot stand outside race, class, nation, and family in order to contemplate this larger field, and because the very notion of a single global system risks obliterating difference, postcolonial critics must concern themselves with the comparative study of identities. The grounds for comparison should not be homologous units (such as Canada and Australia), for that presumes a world divided into sovereign nation-states, the very state of affairs we want to question. The fields for comparison must belong to different orders: nations and empires; nationalisms and sexualities; genders and classes. Postcolonial criticism should be hybrid, but not in the way that the postcolonial nation is imagined as creolized, a creolization which assumes a heterogeneous content (settlers and indigenes) but a standard form (the nation). Postcolonial criticism should first question its own form.

## NOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Susan Knutson at the Université Sainte-Anne for her comments on this article. She is not, however, responsible for the opinions here expressed.
- 2 Linda Hutcheon is careful only to affirm that “irony is one mode of self-defining discourse used by English-speaking Canadians” (3) and not to say that Canadians are more partial to irony than, say, British or Americans, something that is empirically doubtful.
- 3 The novel draws our attention to the way that pronunciation may be a means of consciously asserting difference. Morag teaches her daughter that Canadians say “kiy-oot” and not “coy-oh-tee” the way Americans do (441).
- 4 Typical is Margaret Laurence’s own ancestry: Laurence liked to imagine herself as having Highland roots (“Road from the Isles” 146), although only one of four grandparents came from Scotland and he was a Lowlander (*Dance on the Earth* 26-9). Three of her grandparents came from Ontario. However, the Scot in her family was her paternal grandfather, which makes all the difference.
- 5 The original Gunn to come to Canada did pass on something to Morag that can be identified: the name. He had in common with Morag an identity based on that proper name; he, too, thought of himself as a Gunn. Conceivably a Canadian called Gunn may feel that she owes it to the name (and to her father) to be stern. In other words, sternness might be a function of Presbyterianism, and the Black Celt might be a cultural rather than a genetic trait. Morag, however, was not raised Presbyterian and her notions of what she owes to her name come to her not from her father but from Christie Logan. (Nor were the Scottish Highlanders who came to Canada before 1815 all Presbyterian; the majority were Roman Catholic.)
- 6 Laurence herself, who recognized that the Scotland she dreamed about as a child was a “fantasy” (“Road from the Isles” 147), continued to write about the Black Celt in herself without employing quotation marks (*Dance on the Earth* 26).
- 7 Davey’s complaint about the appropriation of Métis culture would make more sense if directed at Margaret Laurence rather than at Morag. Morag has not invented characters of another race; Laurence has.
- 8 Scotland, of course, is not fully sovereign, but nationalists do seek such sovereignty. Scotland does compete as a separate nation in the World Cup of Soccer.
- 9 For a discussion of the distinction between difference and otherness, see Castoriadis.
- 10 My argument here is based on Anthony Appiah and Walter Benn Michaels.
- 11 This account is inspired by Michael Ragussis, *Acts of Naming*. Ragussis’s analysis is much more nuanced than that offered here. In particular he shows how British and American novels resist the tyranny of the “family plot.”
- 12 Pique’s decision to move to Galloping Mountain can be explained in different ways. Galloping Mountain may be so attractive that anyone would want to go there if she had any chance of being accepted by the people already there. It could also be that the Métis community at Galloping Mountain provides Pique with a sense of completeness because it fulfils expectations raised in others and in herself by the colour of her skin. My point is that the novel does not have to address why Pique goes there: the “return” to Galloping

Mountain is imagined as already inscribed in Pique's deepest self.

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