

**PLACE AND IDENTITY: THE MOTHER IN
MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE FIRE-DWELLERS***

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Abstract

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, Margaret Laurence creates a narrative discourse which incorporates elements of memory and fantasy, and uses it as a medium for exploration of the pressures on her sense of self experienced by a woman in her maternal role. Perceptions of place and space develop thinking about confinement and freedom, and about the problematic nature of 'home'. Issues of Canadian identity and postcolonial hybridity are addressed through consideration of the relationships of individuals to territory and to ethnic heritage and traditions.

In the Canadian fiction of Margaret Laurence the sense of place is critically important. The four Manawaka novels, together with her collection of short stories, *A Bird in the House*, all engage in a detailed and specific way with the nature of the life of the prairies.¹ Laurence is interested in people with different histories and heritages, Scots-Canadian or Métis or Ukrainian-Canadian, who share the same surroundings and landscape and physical conditions. In the interaction between these people, both their different traditions and the land they share are seen as significant. In all of the novels and stories, women are represented dealing with conflicts and frustrations. In *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*, Laurence shows the dissatisfactions and loneliness felt by the widowed Hagar Shipley and the unmarried Rachel Cameron, and the repressiveness of life in a small prairie town where Scottish origins have bequeathed a tradition of reticence. In *The Fire-Dwellers*, she creates as her central figure Rachel's sister, Stacey MacAindra, who has escaped the small town spinsterhood which thwarts and isolates Rachel, but in spite of the apparent advantages of husband, children, and city life still faces difficulties of a different kind. *The Fire-Dwellers* is important for its analysis of issues relating to gender and to national and regional identities. Stacey is defined by the roles of wife and mother. Further, she is a Canadian of Scots descent, born in Manitoba and living in Vancouver, and her identity is significantly shaped by aspects of her European heritage, by her location in Western Canada, and by her consciousness of herself as a woman from the prairies now living in the city. Her perception of her present troubles, her recollections of an earlier, happier state, and the negotiation by which she

reaches a better understanding of her problems, are represented through a complex of spatial and topographic metaphors. A postcolonial concern with ethnicity, and an awareness of the problematic nature of Canadian identity, are signalled through manipulation of ideas about place and territory.²

The Fire-Dwellers offers a comprehensive feminist study of maternity. The importance of Laurence's early contribution to a body of thinking about mothering which can be traced back to beginnings in the 1960s has been too easily overlooked, and it may well be that the disappointingly low level of critical attention received by the novel at its first publication is a reflection of the general undervaluing at that time both of the activity of mothering, and of motherhood as a subject for fiction.³ At this time Margaret Drabble had achieved a certain reputation for innovative writing by taking as subjects pregnancy and the care of young children, in *The Garrick Year* (1964) and *The Millstone* (1965), but there was otherwise extraordinarily little serious fictional treatment of the activities of bearing and rearing children, either in Britain (where Laurence was living while she was writing the book, between 1966 and 1968) or in Canada. Marian Engel's *The Honeyman Festival* and Audrey Thomas's *Mrs Blood*, both of which give sustained treatment to women in pregnancy, follow rapidly after *The Fire-Dwellers*, being both published in Canada in the following year, 1970. Laurence's insistence on the value, and the difficulty, of women's nurturing activities may in fact be seen as a part of a development of understanding about women in the creative writing of the 1960s, emerging from a view of life which, whether labelled as feminism or not, amounts to a kind of liberal feminism, and which can also be traced in the assertion of the importance of women as individual human beings found in work by Drabble and also the earliest work of Margaret Atwood, produced before the intensive feminist activity of the late 1960s.⁴

The Fire-Dwellers is written in a mixture of discourses which interweaves a third person narrative focalised through Stacey, her interior monologue, her memory, and her fantasies, with dialogue representing her interaction with family and neighbours, and a barrage of messages from popular media which are received by her consciousness.⁵ Her life, as a thirty-nine-year-old mother of four, with marital difficulties and a drink problem, is the focus of an acute analysis of problems connected to femininity and dependency. Stacey suffers greatly from the psychological, if not physical, isolation which is one of the conditions of motherhood in the second half of the twentieth century: she is conscious that she lives 'alone in a house full of people'. This has seriously damaging consequences for her sense of herself,

and as I shall demonstrate, this psychological state is treated in terms of her perceptions of place and space, creating in the fiction an extended exploration of confinement and liberty. The whole text is made up of a concentration of talk coming from different sources, combined with Stacey's inner monologue, and a relatively small component of external narration. The management of the interaction between voices draws attention to the limited amount of true communication available to Stacey. Her husband's work as a travelling salesman means that he spends much of each week separated from her, and when he is there he avoids speaking to her. This lack of communication between marriage partners is displayed in acute form in their inability to discuss, until they reach a partial resolution at the end of the novel, their anxieties about a major problem for both of them: the reason why Stacey has secretly kept her father's old revolver, and Mac's misplaced anxiety, having seen the concealed weapon, that she may be contemplating suicide (167, 262). Her interior monologue reveals a sense of her self which is affected by the absence of any support or rewarding relationship with other adults. Talk with neighbours is superficial: her closest contact is with Tess Vogler whose conversation, preoccupied to the point of absurdity with cosmetics and shopping, appears comic until an overdose reveals her hidden despair. Stacey's discussions with her father-in-law are polite and formal. These stilted dialogues contrast with the painful vividness of Stacey's thoughts, emphasising her lack of effective human contact. She speaks in a direct, challenging way to the God about whose existence she is doubtful, and the fact that her forthright presentation of difficulties and problems is concentrated in this direction indicates the absence from her life of real engagement with other people. There are largely formulaic exchanges with her two sons, and she comments explicitly on her inability to reach Ian and on her feeling of distance from the younger son, Duncan (100-1). A substantial amount of Stacey's 'conversation' is directed at her small daughter, Jennifer, who at the age of two does not yet speak: the absence of any reply to these remarks further emphasises Stacey's isolation. This produces for her a crisis of identity, announced pointedly in one of her fantasy conversations in which God says, 'Sometimes I wonder if I even exist' and she retorts, 'I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself' (7). Her thoughts return to the problem of who she is, and this is linked with her roles in the family: 'I can't go anywhere as myself. Only as Mac's wife or the kids' mother.' She experiences simultaneously a desire to have time for herself, and a contradictory feeling that she prefers to be accompanied by one of her children, because 'Then I know who I'm supposed to be' (81).

The treatment of the mother-daughter dyad of Stacey and Katie points to general difficulties inherent in this relationship, which present threats to a mother's sense of her own identity. The daughter's adolescence is inevitably accompanied by the mother's ageing, and as Stacey recognises painfully the approach of her fortieth birthday, it is in full awareness that she is relinquishing to Katie the role of young woman which has in the past been a source of great pleasure to her. Parallel situations prompt Stacey to make comparisons unfavourable to herself. When she dances privately and self-indulgently in a moment of celebration, her sense of slight ridiculousness is intensified when later the same day she observes Katie, young and graceful, similarly dancing by herself (114-7). Stacey's comparisons also lead her to recognise that Katie, as she matures, is sometimes capable of greater wisdom than her mother, so that age does not necessarily bring the benefit of good judgement. The activity of Stacey's memory creates parallels between the two mother-daughter couples, Stacey and Katie, and Mrs Cameron and Stacey. She is a mother who has herself been in some ways poorly mothered, and this has made her task harder. Her youthful resolution to be a more enlightened mother than Mrs Cameron had been is countered by Katie's remark that what she has seen of family life makes her want to avoid maternity altogether (102). Stacey comes to see ways in which her maternal role carries unhappy echoes of her own mother's treatment of herself as an adolescent. As she interrogates Katie about whether she has smoked pot, and recalls her mother's similar enquiries about Stacey's use of alcohol, she recognises a situation repeating itself, although with the difference that her mother had appeared confident that she was right, whereas Stacey does not know what she should tell her daughter (258). So Stacey's aspirations are reviewed in the light of what may be an inevitable pattern of conflict and friction between the generations. There is an implication that mothering may be impossible to do well, and since for Stacey it is her central activity, her perception of what she sees as failure is a threat to her sense of herself. Further, Stacey has to recognise that her first child is now a grown woman, as separate from Stacey as Stacey herself is from Mrs Cameron. The text demonstrates through Stacey's experience and reflections, as she faces the question of what she has to show for her life, the painful paradoxical truth that the activity of a mother is largely a matter of working towards making herself, in the end, unnecessary. She has done her best to bring up her children, but she is aware that they are not her possessions: they belong to themselves (81). Mothering is an achievement, but it leads to a particularly feminine loss, since she has sacrificed freedoms to carry out her obligations at home with her family, and she will find that what she must do

for them finally is to let them go.

The inclusion in the text, as a distinct strand typographically signalled, of the messages delivered to Stacey's consciousness by media of information, entertainment, and advertising, draws attention to how her location in a North American city of the 1960s exerts cultural pressures which increase the difficulty of the maternal role. She has a natural anxiety to preserve her children from harm such as road accidents, but the 'EVER OPEN EYE' of television, bringing into her home awareness of the horrors of the war in Vietnam, exacerbates her worries about the possibility of war and nuclear attack, and thus increases her terror for her children's safety. So as she surveys the brash buildings in the heart of Vancouver she is at first reassured by them, but then, in a clear allusion to Hiroshima, 'sees them charred, open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like vulnerable live bones, shadows of people frog-splayed on the stone like in that other city' (8). Magazine journalism directed towards women has demoralising effects which exacerbate Stacey's difficulties. Her mind returns repeatedly, in the earlier part of the novel, to titles of articles she has read. These titles convey a relentless message to wives and mothers about the need for self-improvement, combined with a further message that they can never achieve complete success. Even a woman's caring for her family is turned into a potential source of harm, through the effect on her vulnerable consciousness of headlines like 'Nine Ways The Modern Mum May Be Ruining Her Daughter' (10-11), and 'Are You Emasculating your Husband' (48). This is destructive to Stacey's sense of herself, creating a constant awareness of the likelihood that she is doing things wrong, and suggesting that she is always falling short in the activity which is central to her existence.

The novel examines the situation of the housewife and mother through a pattern of spatial polarities, emphasising confinement in the home and escape from it. There are basic requirements that accompany the role of mother: having to be available to her children, or arrange for an adequate substitute, and being always responsible for their welfare and safety, and Stacey has to fulfil these requirements without relief or support. The effect on Stacey is seen at first in a wish to be 'more free' (2), and in her reflection as she drives with her child to the supermarket, 'My boundaries are four walls' (62). Her longing for freedom is expressed initially by her indulgence in a walk by the waterfront, a part of the city she hardly knows. Later when she leaves her marital home in anger after a quarrel with her husband, and drives up the Sound, the intensity of her emotional conflict about 'home' is expressed as she urges herself to go home, and simultaneously recognises that 'I don't

want to go home. I want to go away' (149). Having on that occasion met the young man, Luke Venturi, who finds her sitting alone by the beach, she leaves home twice more to drive north out of desire for him, and each of her three visits to Luke's house is brought to an end by Stacey's use of exactly the same words: 'I have to go home' (155, 175, 195). The theme of confinement is reflected in the clearly defined structure of the text. Most of the novel is built on a five times repeated pattern of Stacey escaping briefly from home to gratify a wish of her own, having taken trouble to arrange care for her family, and on each occasion returning late, usually tormented by guilt and anxiety about her children, and always having to face the reproach of her husband or her elder daughter. The conflict between her wish for freedom and her worry about her family, and the significance of home as a focus of obligation and anxiety, are summed up by the presence in Stacey's mind at the beginning, near the end, and at the critical point in the middle of the narrative where she refuses Luke's invitation, of the rhyme:

Ladybird, ladybird,
 Fly away home;
 Your house is on fire,
 Your children are gone (1, 195, 263).

Stacey's dealings with Luke Venturi may on the face of it appear insignificant. After three conversations, two of them leading to brief sexual encounters, she returns to her family. She does not meet him again, and when she sees him on a peace march, accompanied by a young woman, she leaves the march to avoid contact with them (236). But these visits to his timber house in a setting of trees and water are crucial events in Stacey's psychological life. For her, Luke acts as a therapist. He invites her to express her problems; he listens; he reassures her that the fact that she 'took off' is all right; he allows her to cry; he assures her that she is not alone; and above all he makes her the focus of attention, thus addressing the problem that her preoccupation with her family has submerged her own identity: 'Come out. From wherever you're hiding yourself. See - if I look very hard, I can just about make you out in there, but miniature, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope' (155). Later, as well as regretting the loss of him as her lover, Stacey recollects, perhaps constructively, the details of this therapeutic process. Luke does further important things for Stacey. By inviting her to come away with him, he forces her to make a choice - to go back to her children - and thus to recognise where her priorities lie. Her brief sexual

relationship with him is important because it is a focus for her realisation that they have both lied about their ages, and that she is the same age as Luke's admittedly very youthful mother. As she works out that a twenty-four-year-old lover would be more appropriate for Katie than for herself, she has to face the reality and the implications of her own lost youth (196-7).

Stacey's memories, and the fantasies to which they contribute, both typographically separated from the central narration, form an important part of the presentation of her predicament. She remembers various stages of her past, but predominantly times in her young adult life when she was confident and happy, in contrast to her present discontent. Laurence uses topographic metaphor to build an impression of Stacey's lost happiness, creating Timber Lake and Diamond Lake as sites of her pleasure. Her recollections are laden with symbols of ease, fluidity, and delight in the body, notably figures of swimming and dancing, as when she moves here from interior monologue to memory:

Once I was different.

Stacey, travelling light, unfearful in the sun, swimming outward as though the sea were shallow and known, drinking without dignity, making spendthrift love in the days when flesh and love were indestructible (63).⁶

One passage of recollection, presented twice in the same form (30, 164), uses Timber Lake as a symbol for her sexual happiness with Mac in their early years together. Fish in clear water, and berries, carry associations of fruitfulness, and trees take on sexual symbolism. When she remembers the earlier time when at the age of eighteen, still living on the prairies, she visited Diamond Lake with her first lover, the topographic symbolism is similar: key elements are the trees, the 'fallen light' of the moon, and the fish dancing (64). Her final reconciliation to the reality that now it is Katie, not Stacey, who is the young woman, is worked out through a new version of the dancing image, this time as a fantasy dance performed by Stacey in a Greek taverna. As she brings herself back from imagination to actuality, the thought that from now on her dancing will have to be 'in the head', is fused with new insights into both the notion of her confinement in the home and her sense of her problematic identity: 'I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how I started out' (259). There is here a kind of reconciliation, and a sense of

potentially endless recurrence, in that at the point where Stacey achieves this understanding, she also recalls from her youth in Manawaka an old woman, a friend of her mother's, who habitually asked for the same record to be played, and appeared to be dancing in her head as she listened to it.

The idea of the north is an important element in Stacey's consciousness, relating to what she longs for and cannot attain. In part, the north is for her a place of escape. At times of anxiety about nuclear war, she has imagined that she and her family could take refuge in a self-sufficient existence in the 'great north woods' (51), and she still fantasises about living by a lake in the Cariboo, working as a teacher among farmers and Indians (148-9). North is also for her associated with sexual longing, in her passing fantasy about Mac's friend, Buckle Fennick, whose work is driving north to the Alaska Highway, the Cariboo Highway, and the Peace River country (131). Yet again, north connects in her mind with the cry of the loons, which for her speaks of elusive things connected with native spirituality (148).⁷ All of these associations converge in a psychologically crucial moment immediately preceding her first meeting with Luke. She remembers her youthful experience of listening to the birds, and they are defined as belonging to a world opposed to the familiarity of 'home': 'listening to the lunatic voices of the loons, witchbirds out there in the night lake, or voices of dead shamans, mourning the departed Indian gods, she not thinking of it like that then, only wholly immersed in the unhuman voices, the begone voices that cared nothing for lights or shelter or the known quality of home' (148). At the age of eighteen, Stacey had thought the loons had gone so far north that people would never penetrate to drive them off again. Now she returns ambivalently to this idea: 'There *isn't* any place that far north, that far anywhere. There must be. That's where I would like to go, very far away', and her dream of escape flows into a fantasy of a lake, with trees which pick up the phallic overtones of her lust for Buckle (149). At this point, urging herself to return home, and simultaneously recognising that she wants to go a long way off, she suddenly sees clearly what it is she is longing for. Not the Cariboo or 'up north', but 'Like, I guess I mean, everything will be just fine when I'm eighteen again' (150). It is at this moment, when she grasps that her desire for the distant north masks a longing for something that can never be achieved, a moment therefore of psychological receptiveness, that Luke finds her and their dialogue begins.

In Stacey's transactions with Luke the resonances of 'north' are pursued and modified, developing a second strand of awareness in the text of the plight of indigenous peoples, which runs alongside Laurence's interest here and in the other Manawaka novels in the Métis, focused on members of the

Tonnerre family and the history of the North-West rebellion.⁸ Luke, although ethnically Italian, is from his first appearance associated with Indian culture, through his always wearing a sweater with 'Haida or something motifs of outspread eagle wings and bear masks' (151). His mention of a plan to go north on a fishboat in the summer develops into talk of an Indian village he knows, near a ferry across the Skeena, where visitors come to look at totem poles (193). He speaks of the Indians in a way which despite some oversimplification corrects Stacey's romantic notion of the attraction of distance and mystery. His account of their village is filled with resonances of death. The ferryman on the crossing he calls Charon, turning the river into the Styx. The people are associated with dust and dying; visitors come there, 'for maybe half an hour', to visit 'the totems of the dead. And of the living dead' (194). The words here, although understated, stress the insulting triviality of these brief visits, and the enormity of the harm that has been done to the native people. His account of them is marked by sympathy and understanding of the hatred present in the way they look at visitors. He sees them as having been 'separated from themselves', and conveys, along with respect for them, a sense of an unbridgeable division between them and Euro-Canadians: 'You don't ask anybody anything. You haven't suffered enough. You don't know what they know' (194). Luke's analysis is that the people of the Indian village have suffered a fatal loss to their identity: their language has gone, and their sense of themselves has been destroyed, so that they take refuge in drunkenness. Near the end of the novel, prompted by a chance meeting with Valentine Tonnerre, who was once her schoolmate in Manawaka, Stacey has a parallel perception of injustice when she considers how ironically the family's name, 'thunder', resonates in their present state of decline. As she calls to mind how their grandfather Jules Tonnerre came to settle in the Wachakwa valley, her thoughts are presented in a patterned discourse of unusual intensity, recalling the passion with which Luke speaks of the northern village: 'he stopped off ... on his way back from the last uprising of his people, on his way back from Batoche and Fish Creek, from the last and failed attempt to save themselves and their land, the last of their hopeless hope which was finished the year that Riel was hanged in Regina' (225). Her meeting with Valentine raises for Stacey issues about her own ethnic identity, and the idea of belonging on the prairies, and makes her reflect on a negative aspect of her own Scottish inheritance. She contemplates the Métis in territorial terms: 'once the prairie horse-lords', but now belonging nowhere, and recognises that what her Presbyterian forefathers have bequeathed to her above all is a legacy of guilt for damage done by them to native peoples (226).

Postcolonial issues which reflect and extend the theme of relationships between races emerge when Luke outlines to Stacey the essential materials of the Science Fiction novel he is writing (171-2). It presents a wider framework of thinking which subverts traditional ideas about the superiority of Western culture and values, incorporating the new perspectives brought to Margaret Laurence's thought by her African experience, and suggesting through Luke's critique some connection between Eurocentric assumptions and the lack of understanding that has damaged native Canadian civilisations. Luke highlights the destructiveness of the white races in his hypothesis that they precipitate a nuclear cataclysm which almost entirely destroys the North American continent. The damaged remnant of North Americans called the 'greyfolk', now in a reversal of historic roles administered by Africans, are shown in a position comparable to that of the Indians of the northern village, having lost their language and the knowledge of their past, although with the difference that they have brought this misfortune upon themselves. Their ideas about their identity are confused, in that having lost their history they generate a comforting and immature notion that they once had an ideal ancestral culture until it was destroyed by some outside agency. Luke's novel exists in Laurence's text only in bare outline, and the tentative quality of the thought behind it is indicated in his comment to Stacey that he is having trouble in working out the ideas. But through the idea of a benevolent African administration governing the surviving greyfolk, and the detail that the African Chief Administrator is opposed in principle to colonialism, but desires the good of the greyfolk and is unable to coax them into an intellectual and moral maturity that would enable them to be independent, Luke's fiction introduces a small but concentrated element of counter-discourse which contributes to the critique of Euro-Canadian perspectives in *The Fire-Dwellers*. The postcolonial issues are not treated in a conclusive way; rather, Laurence is broaching questions about the cultures and politics of the Western world, and about relations between Euro-Canadians and indigenous peoples, which are developed more extensively in her final novel, *The Diviners*.

The text addresses aspects of the problematic nature of Canadian identity through attention to the relationship of people to territory and to ethnic heritage and traditions. Laurence's handling of the displacement of many of the characters points to cultural diversity. Thor and Stacey and Valentine Tonnerre have all come to Vancouver from a home in the prairies, but in very different ways. Thor acts on the assumption that Manitoba is inferior: he speaks patronisingly about salesmen from the prairies, and claims to be practically a native of Vancouver (32). Stacey, on the other hand,

experiences Vancouver as strange and in parts frightening. Using the key concept of 'home' in a positive sense, she is aware that after twenty years she does not feel 'at home' in the city, and she still occasionally refers to Manawaka as her home (32, 166). Occasionally she sees aspects of the city in terms of the prairie or forest which are its polar opposites. Its lights 'flash and shift like the prairie northern lights in the winter sky, here captured and bound' (76-7). Later they become the 'eternal flames of neon forest fires' (143). She is conscious of how much of it she does not know. People are defined for her by where they live, and she in suburban Bluejay Crescent is conscious of her difference from those who live in rooms above stores by the waterfront (4-5), and those others who inhabit high old houses by the beach (63). The city has not one culture, but many. Hybridity becomes a theme, pursued further through the textual handling of Canadians' relationships to European cultures. Luke has been brought from Italy as an infant, and regards his mother as still an Italian farmwoman (167). Stacey has struggled with an evening class in Greek drama. She and Mac are both of Scots descent, and she remembers occasionally that she is a Cameron. Old legends about the moon being 'Macfarlane's lantern' come into her conversation with her husband, because she knows that the MacAindras belong to the MacFarlane clan. But her Scottishness is reduced to a minimal awareness of heritage. Her name, Anastasia Cameron, gives her material for European-based fantasies: 'Anastasia, princess of all the Russias; Anastasia, queen of the Hebrides, soon to inherit the ancestral castle in the craggy isles' (81), but the romance is quickly undermined by its context in Stacey's mundane existence. Her racial antecedents are usually no more than an excuse for drinking Scotch. She cannot belong properly either to European culture or to the Canadian wilderness, and while she cannot escape her obligation to her home, in the sense of responsibility to her family, there is another sense in which the idea of home is seen as deeply complex and provisional. This is summed up in the way she dismisses her fantasy of herself and Mac taking refuge in the north from a nuclear war, living self-sufficiently and teaching the children all they remember of Shakespeare: 'Only one or two snags. Neither Mac nor I could have mustered more than about two lines of Shakespeare, and neither of us would last more than twenty-four hours in the great north woods' (51).

In *The Fire-Dwellers* Laurence creates a far-reaching study of the pressure on her sense of self experienced by a woman in the maternal role, who also has some consciousness of problematic aspects of Canadian identity. Meaning is produced through manipulation of ideas about space, topography, territory, and ethnic and cultural traditions, which work to clarify thinking

about different states of being. Ideas about difference between confinement and freedom, the prairie and the coast, the lake and the city, the waterfront and the suburbs, the northern village and the neon-lit streets, are processed in Stacey's mind. She crosses and re-crosses borders between home and other places which stand for excitement but also for risk. Liminality in spatial terms provides for exploration of a time of crisis in Stacey's life, partially resolved through a combination of changes in her inner life effected with Luke's assistance, and by the reassessment of Mac's and Stacey's lives provoked by the death of Buckle Fennick, and by the accident to their son Ian. Time as well as space focuses attention on crossing of borders. While much of the interest of *The Fire-Dwellers* lies in Laurence's ability to open up large issues about Canadian identities which must be left unresolved because there are no simple conclusions, the novel's predominant area of interest, the stages of the life of a woman, does reach a resolution of sorts. The treatment of the identities available to women records Stacey's achievement of substantial insights, in particular her recognition that it is the world, not the house, which is her prison, and her grasping of the truth that she cannot be eighteen again. The text presents Stacey and both of her daughters in phases of significant transition. Her perception of herself caught between the younger self of her memories and the matriarch she may one day become is balanced with her awareness of Katie's adolescence, and the narrative moves towards a strongly symmetrical closure as her entry into middle age coincides with one daughter's passage into young womanhood and with the silent child's acquisition of language and subjectivity.⁹ Stacey's eventual choice, to accept home and the restrictions it imposes, is linked inextricably with her submission to the inevitable passing of time.

Notes

1 The Manawaka novels, which share a location in the life of the small prairie town of Manawaka, based on Neepawa, Manitoba, Laurence's home town, are *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964); *A Jest of God* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966); *The Fire-Dwellers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969); and *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974). Her collection of short stories, *A Bird in the House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), also uses the Manawaka location and some of the same characters. All page references in this essay are to *The Fire-Dwellers* (London: Virago, 1988).

2 Laurence's respect for cultures other than North American and Western European, and her concern with the inadequacy of Eurocentric values, are continuing preoccupations in her fiction

as well as her non-fiction writings. Her interest in the prairies as the home both of settlers and of native peoples, and her sense of injustices done to Métis and Indians, is worked out most fully in *The Diviners*, where Morag Gunn points out how the dispossessed Highland Scots who settled in the Red River Colony proceeded to treat the Métis as callously as they themselves had been treated. The importance for Laurence's work of her residence in Africa, as a source of her sense of herself as a 'Third World Novelist' and her resistance to what she has called 'an overwhelming cultural imperialism', is discussed by Craig Tapping, in 'Margaret Laurence and Africa' in Kristjana Gunnars, ed., *Crossing the River. Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), 65-80, and by David Richards, in "'Leave the Dead some room to dance!": Margaret Laurence and Africa', in Colin Nicholson, ed., *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 16-34. The reference to the Third World and to cultural imperialism is from Margaret Laurence, 'Ivory Tower or Grassroots?: the Novelist as Sociopolitical Being', in W.H. New (ed.), *A Political Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1978), 17.

3 Laurence was writing this novel in the period 1966-68, when the Women's Movement was still in its earliest stages, and little public attention was paid to issues emerging from women's domestic lives. Even after the emergence of 'second-wave' feminism in the later 1960s, and the development of an effective sexual politics, the concerns of women as mothers received only a low priority in feminist debate until a revaluing of the maternal role began in the mid-1970s. Key texts are: Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World*, also published as *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Institution and Experience* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976); and Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

4 For an outline of the argument that one of the streams of thought which contribute to feminism is liberal theory about the 'rights of man', which derives from 17th- and 18th-century philosophers, see Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), xv.

5 The narrative is focalised through the consciousness of Stacey, i.e. the narrating voice in the fiction has access to Stacey's thoughts and perceptions, and communicates them to the reader.

6 The language in which Laurence writes of Stacey's recollections of youthful pleasure bears strong similarities to that used in English translations of texts by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray dealing with women's sexuality. See for example Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (published in French 1975) and Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One' (published in French 1977), both in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, ed., *Feminisms. An Anthology of*

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Literary Theory and Criticism (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 1991), 334-49 and 350-56.

7 See Peter Easingwood, 'The Realism of Laurence's Semi-Autobiographical Fiction' in Colin Nicholson, ed., *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 119-32 for discussion of a similar association made in *A Bird in the House* between the silencing of the voices of the Métis and the disappearance of the loons.

8 See especially the fictional history of the Tonnerre family in *The Diviners*.

9 Nancy Bailey's essay 'Identity in *The Fire-Dwellers*' in Colin Nicholson, ed., *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 107-18 is a helpful discussion of the presentation of the maternal figure of Stacey in terms of archetypes, which touches on ideas about the mother and the daughter in matriarchal societies. But in this reading I take the use of 'matriarch' in Stacey's closing thoughts to signify primarily a simple, slightly self-mocking acceptance of ageing and any benefits it may confer.