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Title of Thesis:

Playing House: Home as the Necessary Context of Margaret Laurence's *Dance on the Earth*

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April 26, 2000.

## **Playing House: Home as the Necessary Context of Margaret Laurence's *Dance on the Earth***

*We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (Didion 11)*

### Theoretical Outline: Selfhood, Autobiography, Home, and Humanism

#### The Partial Truth of Personal Identity

For the past seven years, I have spent the summers working up in Alaska, travelling to various coastal communities and taking on commissions from commercial fishers to paint watercolour portraits of their boats. Because I get most of my work by showing my portfolio wherever fishers convene--usually the dock or the bar--and because I am always travelling, my life, for these four months, is very public. I am always "on," always speaking to groups of people and staying, as a guest, in and on different homes and boats. In contrast, my life as a graduate student in Victoria is quiet and largely solitary. I go to the library and grade first-year English papers; I work at my computer and paint the paintings that were commissioned the summer before. I not only behave in a way I suppose I'd call more serious and responsible, I feel as if *I am* more serious and responsible.

I want to stress that neither of these lives seems more "real" than the other. I do not think, after seven years of returning to Alaska, that Alaska is simply "away" to Victoria's "home." Although, I should add here that one of this project's driving questions is why, in any case, we would attribute more "truth" to the selves we are when we're at home. Moreover, although I am framing my own life in a way that emphasizes the contrast between a winter and a summer identity, I want to premise this project on the more general claim that most of us experience a plurality of identities. That is, we are all, even in small ways, different people at different times. Part of the appeal of post-structuralist theory is that it allows for and indeed almost normalizes the concept of a personal identity that is shifting and partial, and for the

contradictions that may arise between an individual's various "selves." A "whole truth" that allows one to assert, for all time, "I am" smart or shy or beautiful or happy is recognized as unachievable, and even once-unambiguous categories of identity such as womanhood are now being called into question. Each of us has the potential for a multitude of identities, some of which we choose (consciously or not), some of which--especially if we happen to be "marked" in any way--are chosen for us.

The concept of identity being conditional, contextual, and volatile is intuitive: Asked to describe oneself, whose answer would be consistent from year to year? From season to season? From day to day? Who isn't different around different people? I suspect that many of us who have moved away from our hometowns revert to an almost-forgotten identity when we return to our childhood homes. I know that, in describing whether I am confident or insecure, content or depressed, gregarious or shy, my account fluctuates depending not only on whether I'm in Victoria or Alaska but on the weather, my mood, and the state of my health at the moment. It also depends on who wants to know: I would tell different stories to my employer than I would to an old friend. Depending on the circumstance, I would withhold certain facts and reveal others.

The issue of how one's audience alters the identity that one experiences and presents is particularly relevant to the study of autobiographical writing. When we choose to compose our memoirs or autobiographies an additional layer of censorship is added to our self-representation. First, we always write with an audience in mind, even if that audience consists only of ourselves at a later point in time. We want to put forward a certain version of ourselves--usually one that is both pleasing and credible. If we are writing for publication, the conditions set by publishers and literary genre demand that we further edit our accounts. The historical link between identity and autobiography that I explore in the following section aids in explaining why the current fascination with redefining selfhood has been accompanied with a tandem interest in autobiography and autobiographical theory.

### Autobiographical Writing and the Humanist Model of Selfhood

"Suddenly," Sidonie Smith begins her *Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, "everyone in the universe of literary critics and theorists seems to be talking about autobiography" (3). In fact, the current interest in autobiography encompasses several academic disciplines, ranging from history to geography,

anthropology to architecture and, as Smith elaborates in later chapters, can be at least partially credited to the historical and philosophical link between the genre of autobiography and the humanist model of selfhood; consequently, interrogation of the latter demands and sanctions a study of the former. According to Smith, the increase in the number of individuals who, from the Renaissance onwards, "began to consider their life stories to be potentially valuable to their culture and therefore began to write about themselves" was due to various preconditions<sup>1</sup> which together

coalesced to foster an environment in which a realignment of the human subject occurred and in which autobiography as the literary representation of that human potentiality became not only possible but also desirable. That environment became the precondition of what would eventually emerge as the ideology of individualism, that tenacious set of beliefs that fostered in the West a conception of "man" as a metaphysical entity, "a self existing independently of any particular style of expression and logically prior to all literary genres and even to language itself." (26)

Autobiographical writing thus can be understood, from its inception, as an ideal vehicle for self-expression by the humanist subject; the genre functions in the service of the atomistic transcendental self that, up until about 30 years ago, went largely unproblematized. Critics often refer to Georges Gusdorf as epitomizing this link and championing what is now recognised as a limited and exclusive definition of autobiography. In his now-infamous 1956 essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," Gusdorf proposes what some feminist theorists have termed (contemptuously) the "Great Man" theory of autobiography: Autobiography, he asserts, can only be written by accomplished individuals who recognize the singularity of their lives. Espousing what I consider a "made-for-tv-movie" attitude towards writing the self, Gusdorf would only hear those stories whose protagonists live out intriguing dramas, that is, whose lives fit into conventional storylines such as that of the *Odyssey*. This is not to say that variations in plotlines can not occur, only that they are limited. For example, journeys can be internalized and psychological or active and daring. Also, although the issue of female writers is not addressed by Gusdorf,

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<sup>1</sup>Smith identifies these preconditions as

the new recognition of identity as an earned cultural achievement, an arena of self-fashioning rather than an ascriptive, natural *donnee*; the corollary recognition of identity as simultaneously unique and yet dependent on social reality and cultural conventions; an increased willingness to challenge the authority of traditional modes of inquiry and to promote the hermeneutical responsibility and authority of the speaking subject; the transformation of conceptions of historiography. (26)

it is important to note that Western women writers have had access to the genre of autobiography. They, however, have been required to fit their life stories into an even narrower range of scripts than those available to their male counterparts.

Common to all these plotlines is the presence of a singular hero. According to Gusdorf, all sanctioned writers of the self have achieved a recognition of the "singularity of each individual life" (29). The autobiographical writer must be able to position him- or herself as the star of his or her own show; he or she must possess the ability to disentangle his or her life from those of others and bring it to the fore. All that is outside of Gusdorf's self, be they people, places, or objects, are relegated to the role of supporting cast and are to be utilized as "relief for his image" (29). Consequently, autobiography can be understood as a valorization and product of the self/other binary division, which dictates that we define ourselves through the rejection of what--and who--the self is not. The person who "does not oppose himself to others" (Gusdorf 29) can not find a place within the genre.

As an inaccurate and undesirable premise on which to base the writing of human experience, discrete selfhood is one of several elements of traditional autobiographical theory that has been much-critiqued over the past three decades. For one, such a selfhood is inaccessible to any member of a marginalized group who can not claim individual identity because he or she is defined as a member of that group by the dominant culture. Seen in this light, communal identity is a constraint, a condition to which marginalized people are subjugated. Thus, as was frequently expounded at the Hebrew high school I attended, I cannot claim indifference to my Jewish identity because "they"--the Canadian government, the neighbours, the public--could always derogatorily label me a Jew. The genre of autobiography is thus discriminatory because it excludes those who are not permitted to claim an unmarked identity. A contrasting critique focuses not on the inequity of the genre's criterion but on its foolishness; this stream of thought understands communal identity as a positive source of fulfillment and questions why separation from others would even be posited as an ideal. Theorists such as Trin Minh-ha and Arnold Krupat valorize the communal cultures of Native Americans, Africans, and African-Americans, refuting the perception that individual selfhood should be a universal ideal. In a similar vein, Susan Stanford Friedman makes the not unproblematic essentialist claim that women experience identity more communally (and, when pregnant, quite literally represent a "we" as opposed to an "I"). She also rewrites Gusdorf's individualistic claims

about autobiography by redefining life as "an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community" (41).

Critique of the traditional theory that Gusdorf epitomizes is not limited to censure of a requisite individuality. However, before I launch into further critique of this type, I first want to call into question and explain the critical approach I take--it's not without reservation that I am adopting a strategy of exposition and criticism of the humanist argument. I am hesitant to use Gusdorf as a frame of reference here because he has become to autobiographical criticism what Descartes is to theories of selfhood; Gusdorf is the fall guy, the archaic thinker who can be invoked in order to be opposed unproblematically. Humanist arguments put forth by not only Gusdorf but writers I refer to in subsequent sections--for example, Lukacs, Marcus, and Bachelard--can be easily dismantled by the well-honed tools of contemporary criticism and, I, too, am sharpening my knife. But the gap between theory and practice suggests that even those concepts that, on paper, can be most effortlessly discredited often stubbornly persist in our lives. That autobiography and the humanist model of selfhood are linked implies that any dramatic shift in the conception of selfhood would have to be accompanied by a concomitant change in the nature of autobiography. However, as this project explores, while some autobiographical writing is, to various degrees, different from that written a century or even a generation ago, many traditional patterns continue to pervade it. In the words of Julia Watson, "Despite the post-structuralist dismantling of the metaphysics of subjectivity, the metaphysical self is alive and well in much 'new model' theory of autobiography" (55).

Watson's point, for me, became clear when I came across autobiographer Andrei Codrescu's 1994 anecdotal essay, "Adding to my Life." Codrescu writes of his experience as an autobiographer, explaining that he, unlike his mother, was permitted to write of his self and story only because they fulfilled certain conditions; that is, his life met with the very criteria that allows a human being to lay claim to *being a self* and *having a story*. The essay, which in the following section I use as an example of persistent autobiographical codes and a springboard for the critique of their exclusionary nature, lends currency to some of the humanistic theories that, upon first glance, seem as if they should be too dated to bother using as a point of reference.

## "Adding to my Life": The Suitable Subject of Autobiography

In 1994, the year "Adding to my Life" was published, Codrescu already had come out with two autobiographies and was working on a third. In the essay, he makes clear that he was able to write and publish his first book because his life and the way he composed its events met with specific criteria:

I'd changed countries and languages at nineteen, a neat break that could provide a thousand books with rudimentary structure. In addition I had the numbers: born in 1946, became conscious with the Hungarian revolt in 1956, came to the United States in 1966. Initiatory structures in plain view, natural chapter breaks for the taking. I had already practiced all the anecdotes and revealed their cosmic import to my new American friends in the process of learning the language. I was learning to view my journey, if not *sub-specie aeternitatis*, than at least as a quest. (23)

Codrescu's story was not only easily structured into a known narrative form, it also possessed content that was of topical interest. "Having the assistance of a wayward myth is a special kind of luck," Codrescu writes and, according to him, in America in the late sixties, the story of the dark Transylvanian-style exile was just such a myth.

However, if his casting as an exotic stranger accords him the right to write his first autobiography, Codrescu's access to the genre is called into question once he becomes an American. He recalls an incident in which a publisher wants him to write a second autobiography but asks that he "make it a novel": "Whence the reluctance?" I ask him. 'Well, to be perfectly frank, you're not famous enough,' he said. 'This is the time of the Iacoccas!'" (28). It is only, ten years later, when Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books contacts him to "find out the end of the story," that Codrescu has the opportunity to write a second autobiography, *In America's Shoes*.

Codrescu's essay thus implies that the autobiographical writer can only write his or her story as long as it *corresponds to a story that has already been told*. In writing your self, you choose those parts and that way of telling that fits with the dominant narratives of the time. "Telling our selves" thus reveals itself as an inevitably *social* process, and cultural values set limits on the ways our stories may be told: "The narrative resource of a culture--its repertoire of shared and recognized forms--therefore functions as a currency of recognizable social identities" (Berg n.p.). When Codrescu writes that "the currency of outsiders is their personal story" (23), he is asserting that the way outsiders can enter the sphere of dominant culture is by presenting their lives as narratives that already exist within the culture's own mythology. The outsider can then--to use Codrescu's imagery--seat him- or herself at the circle around the



fire along with those whose personas are derived from the range of other legible narratives. For example, Codrescu suggests that earning a lot of money, thus fulfilling the myth of success and of the self-made man, is another way to gain sanctioning for one's story, at least in North America.

The sanctioning of such myths point to what Julie Watson terms "*bios-bias*" (59), a bias in autobiographical theory that serves to equate a worthwhile life with one in which a linear plot is played out. This structure relegates the lives of those who do not experience their lives in terms of a journey--a classic example is of those, particularly women, who work within the home--to the status of not worthy of being told. Furthermore, as is pointed out by Trin Minh-ha in "Grandma's Story," this structure is altogether limited in its potential to capture the complexities of people's lives:

Life is not a (Western) drama of four or five acts. Sometimes it just drifts along; it may go on year after year without development, without climax, without definite beginnings or endings. Or it may accumulate climax after climax, and if one chooses to mark it with beginnings and endings, then everything has a beginning and an ending. (143)

That there is no place for such rhythms within the genre limits what we can know of--and indeed what is defined as--human experience.

As Codrescu makes clear through the figure of his mother, the narratives that we as readers and as a society generally accept, and hence are willing to look for, are success stories; we are fond of Hollywood endings. The mother is the story's ghost: her appearance in the text reminds us that the exclusive codes of literary texts correlate to real-life exclusions. Why, despite the fact that, by Codrescu's own admission, his mother is the possessor of a more tragic story than his own, could she not write of it?

"You're not old enough to wipe nose!" my mother exploded. "I should write my autobiography. I lived!" That was doubtlessly true, but she would never do it. She had not only had too much life but she had such an active quarrel with it that she would have been hard put to find anyone to address her story to. (21)

Rage as she might, Codrescu's mother, who never succeeded in making money or friends, two factors that Codrescu implies are criteria for permission to write one's life, is not permitted to join the metaphorical circle and tell her tale. According to Codrescu, whether a life is deemed worthy of autobiography is as crudely and cruelly decided as who is deemed the most popular girl of her high school.

Significantly, Codrescu explains that he had to separate from his mother before he was able to write his story, thus fulfilling the Gusdorfian criteria of individual selfhood. Moreover, equally important, is that this separation is described not only as a *precondition for* but also the *consequence of* the

autobiographical act. Precondition and consequence become entangled in a chicken and egg association: Just as Codrescu was required to recognize himself as distinct before he could write, the very writing--and publication--of his autobiography serve to distinguish him. The violence inherent in the act of dissociation is made explicit by Codrescu himself: He claims that coming out with his autobiography allowed him not only to "say farewell" to his mother and "leave her story" but also to "sabotage her story, a less than benign thing" (21). In the essay's description of a simultaneous creation and discovery of a self, the insidious nature of the limits of the genre become clear--that autobiography lays hegemonic claim to unveiling a truth that it in fact abets in creating. In the words of Trin Minh-ha: "what we look for is un/fortunately what we shall find" (141).

Autobiography, then, is doubly suspect in that it serves as both gatekeeper and producer of an elite selection of identities. As the title of Codrescu's essay, "Adding to my Life," implies, autobiography alters the life that it claims merely to showcase and, in supposedly recording his or her life, "the autobiographer constructs a self that would not otherwise exist" (Eakin xxiii).

### Positioning Selfhood: The Context of Home and the Dream of One "True" Self

Until now, I have focussed on the contextual nature of identity and how autobiography as a fictional context limits and alters the self that it claims merely to describe. Yet my interest in autobiography as a thesis topic originated with an interest in physical context, specifically that of the home. I was and am curious about how different people create homes for themselves; in other words, I am interested in how people grow to feel both psychically and physically "at home" in the world, as well as in the types of physical structures that nurture and reflect this feeling.

When I started my M.A. in English Literature, I began searching literary texts for the ones I could use to explore my subject. It was only after several months that I stumbled upon the genre of autobiography and was overwhelmed by the ubiquity of the images, photos, descriptions, and metaphors of homes. "Why do so many autobiographers refer to their homes?" I wrote in an old journal. Two years later, having researched the subject a bit more, I want to add the question, "Why is the home, as opposed to the many other places we find ourselves in each day, privileged in the exploration and representation of identity?"

One response is rooted in a paralleling of one's home to one's body. If we momentarily leave the much-disputed notion of an inner disembodied self intact, we can understand the three terms--self, body, and home--as existing in concentric circles with self at the centre. According to this model, the body houses the self and the home houses the body. Home and body are thus in some ways reflections of the self and presumably both can be examined and analyzed in order to gain self-knowledge. In *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*, Clare Cooper Marcus, who conducted in-depth interviews about home with 60 individuals, elaborates on how we use our homes to reflect our selves and makes explicit the link between our domestic and physical images:

The more stories I listened to, the more it became apparent that people consciously and unconsciously "use" their home environment to express something about themselves. On a conscious level, this is not a new insight. We have all had the experience of visiting new friends in their home and becoming aware of some facet of their values made manifest by the environment--be it the books on their shelves, art (or lack of it) on the walls, the degree to which the house is open or closed to the view of visitors, and so on. All of these represent more or less conscious decisions about personal expression. Just as our clothes or hairstyle or the kind of car we drive are conscious expressions of our values. (9-10)

As Marcus goes on to explain, much of what we express through our homes and bodies is, unlike our choice of wallpaper or hair colour, not the product of conscious decision making. Our "off-guard" postures and facial expressions often reveal just as much about our selves as those bodily expressions that are more deliberately composed. In our homes, we often gain some awareness of the degree we are revealing ourselves only when we are anticipating visitors. Before having guests over, I become aware that what, to me, seems clean and crisply ordered, may, to others appear cluttered and shabby, or worse yet, dirty. Guests may not only notice what books I have; they may also look to see where they've been dog-eared; they may scan the grocery list I've posted on the fridge; or perhaps scrutinize the pad near the telephone that I've doodled on. All these are scraps of information that may corroborate or contradict the version of my self that I wish to present.

Books, grocery lists, and doodles as well as greasy fingerprints on windows and languorous odours leftover from cooking reveal facets of my interiority--what I read, what I eat, what I consider clean and what I was really thinking while talking on the phone. But they also represent traces of my life that have become etched onto the surfaces--or in the case of odours, linger in the air--of my residence. Both home and body are also artifacts, archeological sites where history inscribes itself. Our bodies' scars, muscle tone, and wrinkles serve as record of our lives' passages. Elizabeth Grosz asserts,

It is possible to construct a biography, a history of the body, for each individual and social body. The history would include not only all contingencies that befall a body, impinging on it from the outside--a history of accidents, illnesses, misadventures that mark the body and its functioning; such a history would also have to include the "raw ingredients" out of which the body is produced--its internal conditions of possibility, the history of particular tastes, predilections, movements, habits, postures, gait, and comportment. (142)

As is implied by Walter Benjamin's much-quoted statement, "To live means to leave traces" (36), constructing a history of the self through the examination, detective-like, of one's home is equally plausible. From the charts of our growth literally marked on the walls by our parents to the chairs that have moulded to the shape of our bottoms, our homes are as replete with clues as any diary to the way we've occupied our days.

Using this framework, the answer to my query about the prevalence of domestic imagery in autobiographical writing appears self-evident: as a "second skin," one's home can be understood as an autobiographical text that can be scrutinized by a writer in order to gain self-knowledge--he or she reads one text in order to write another. My second question, "Why is the home, as opposed to the many other places we find ourselves in each day, privileged in the exploration and representation of identity?" could be answered in an equally straightforward manner: as the place where we conduct what are considered one's most intimate activities and where many spend the greatest single block of time, the home may offer the greatest number of personal traces to be used as clues to and proofs of one's identity.

However, if identity is indeed contextual, I understand the answer as more complex and less innocent than this. If, as Marcus recommends, autobiographical writers utilize their homes as a reference point for writing, what are the consequences in terms of which contextual identity is being constructed and presented? What is the reader gaining or losing in being told of a self that emerges from and is expressed by the context of the home? Marcus points out that, in Britain, the question "and what is that when it's at home?" is an expression that means "and what is *that* when it is most truly itself?" (18). The home is privileged by the autobiographical writer because it ostensibly can reveal the *truest* version of him or herself and it is precisely this assumption--that the home exists as a site where we are "most ourselves"--that I want to call into question. In the next section, I argue that the version of identity found in the home can only be proclaimed "the truest" when home itself is conceptualized as a retreat, and thus a *noncontext*. While the identities that assert themselves in all other arenas of life are understood as mitigated by context, the one expressed in and by the home is pure. Outside one's home, one is subjected to the uncontrollable

odours, noises, and jostling of other people and forces; in the domesticated environment of one's home, these "intrusions" are swept away and one's true self ostensibly can be examined without interference.

### The Melting Away of Architecture: Home as Congruency Between Self and Environment

Marcus begins the third chapter of her book with a description of Carl Jung's house and his process of designing it. Inspired by a desire to make a "confession in stone," Jung began the home in 1923 with the construction of a tower dwelling, which was reminiscent of a hut, and completed the home 22 years later with the addition of a final tower. According to Marcus,

Jung had thus built his house over time as a representation in stone of his own evolving and maturing psyche: It was the place, he said, where "I am in the midst of my true life, I am most deeply myself." This was a place where he could reflect upon--and concretize--who he was and who he could become. (50)

Marcus goes on to explain that, although few of us have the opportunity to design our own homes, most of us can create a space in the world that is our own and that is shaped and decorated to reflect our values. In other words, by dwelling in a place that is reflective of our selves, we can experience being "most deeply" ourselves; we too, through the achievement of home, can feel at home in the world.

In idealizing home in this way, Marcus is subscribing to a humanistic definition of "home" that dates back several centuries. In fact, the concept and term home, which are products of the Renaissance, developed along with words such as self-esteem, self-knowledge, melancholy, sentimental, character, and conscience that denote self-reflectivity (Lukacs 623). That the places where we sleep could reflect an individual selfhood is the very thing that distinguishes a home--which refers to one way our places of residence have been experienced from the Renaissance until the present--from a dwelling, whose dominant connotation would be "shelter."<sup>2</sup> For me, as for Marcus and those she interviews (at least as they are

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<sup>2</sup> Witold Rybczynski elaborates on the way medieval people, who did not experience personal selfhood, did not associate their dwellings with personal comfort or taste. "What mattered then," Rybczynski asserts, "was the external world, and one's place in it" (35). For example, the benches on which medieval people sat to eat their meals would, by today's standards, be perceived as uncomfortably hard. But if medieval diners did not pad their benches, it was not because they lacked the technical skill to do so. "Improving" the bench in this way simply would never have occurred to them (Rybczynski 34-35). Rybczynski explains:

The medieval diner was less concerned with how she or he sat than with *where* he or she sat. To be placed "above the salt" was an honor reserved only for a distinguished few. To sit in the wrong place, or next to the wrong person was a serious gaffe. Manners dictated

depicted by her), feeling at-home in my home, which in my case is a one-bedroom suite in a divided house, is integral to my sense of contentment. My apartment is not only where I sleep, eat, and entertain, it is also my place of work, and for this reason, its rooms serve functions for which they were not originally designed. My main room contains not only my couch, kitchen table, and television, but also a drafting table, where I work on my paintings and shelves that store art supplies. The space of my bedroom is dominated by my computer, desk, and bookshelves, an arrangement that is relatively new: I rearranged the furniture so that the room would seem more like an office and less like a bedroom when I decided it was time to start working seriously on this thesis. My apartment is also filled with things that have personal meaning to me: photographs, artwork that I bought up in Alaska or that I painted myself, a tapestry woven for me by my sister. I continually strive to create an environment that reflects and accommodates my self and lifestyle--an environment in which "inside" and "outside" are synchronous. My efforts are, to a certain degree, successful: the place feels more like mine, like me, now than it did when I moved in. But they can never amount to more than half the story. Just as I strive to create an environment that reflects me, my dwelling pushes me to reflect it. Not only the specific conditions of this apartment, but also more general design features such as the division of homes into bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens, fix daily rituals and regulate my life's patterns. Perhaps even more obviously than one's body, which Elizabeth Grosz convincingly argues is always, even when naked, a cultural product, one's dwelling always reflects societal norms and values that precede and form them. Even those who have the privilege of designing their own homes, ostensibly to reflect their unique selves and lifestyles, subscribe to building codes and, often, to conventional divisions of space. Rarely is one of our greatest cultural taboos, concretized in the enclosure

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not only where and next to whom the members of the five social classes sat, but even what they could eat. (32)

Social regulation, not decisions based on criteria such as character or personal comfort, dictated all aspects of daily life. Taste, in fact, was an invention of the 1500s when "living became a matter of externalizing one's inner life and private values" (Aries 6). The following quotation from Philippe Aries' introduction to the third volume of *A History of Private Life* points to how, at that time, furniture, a key ingredient in the make-ups of our homes, began to become associated with one's person and personality:

. . . furniture--such as beds, chests, benches--was simple, capable of being taken apart and transported from place to place as the owner required. But now people began to reserve a special place for the marriage bed. The storage chest became an objet d'art or, still more significant, was replaced by the armoire or commode. No longer did armchairs signify and dramatize the social eminence of their occupants. Mme de Sevigne straddles the divide between two eras, and her letters contain examples of both attitudes. On her first journey to Les Rochers, she took her bed with her, and though still relatively indifferent to the minor art of furniture, she admired her daughter's taste. (6)

and absolute privacy of the bathroom, transgressed. Furthermore, not only gyprock and studs but also, as anyone who has tried to furnish an oddly shaped room can corroborate, appliances, furniture, and fixtures come in standard sizes.

Thus, while we may leave individual imprints on our places of residence, these places always locate us in a system that precedes us. Furthermore, far from being a mere backdrop to our lives, these places shape our selves. In other words, while the impression of one's buttocks left on the sofa may reveal something about the settee, the role of the sofa--its contours, its degree of hardness or softness, and its placement in a room--in shaping that settee's bodily posture, and personal and social rituals must also be acknowledged. Our homes shape us through their very materiality--for example through the hardness and softness of the materials that surround us, and the room temperature--as well as through the social conventions that the material circumstance of the home represents and perpetuates; the theatre of our lives is, in many ways, dictated by the setting in which we find ourselves. Virginia Woolf recognized this tenet when she asserted a woman's need for a room of her own: women needed access to the spatial condition--privacy--that would allow for the achievement of full selfhood, which, in this society, is equated with individual expression and accomplishment.

For me, the degree to which our values are expressed and perpetuated through the physical space of our homes is made clear most strikingly by architect Lars Lerup. In his book, *Planned Assaults*, Lerup makes theoretical alterations to the single-family detached house in order to reveal the hegemonic power it exerts. For example, in his *Nofamily House*, he places a window in the wall between the hallway and the parents' bedroom, thus "making the Peeping Tom legitimate by letting him inside the house and placing him in the hallway, outside the bedroom, looking now, legitimately, out into the bedroom" (54); an illustration shows two young children peering through a French window, which Lerup renames the "Fresh Window," a title taken from a work by Marcel Duchamp. Although I could not predict how the routine witnessing of our parents' sex lives would affect us as a society, I would expect, judging from the intensity of the prohibition against it, that the effects would be quite radical. Tim Creswell writes that "spatial structures structure representations of the world as they are held in a taken-for-granted way" (9). By adding features such as the *Fresh Window*, Lerup makes explicit that we usually don't notice our homes' architecture nor do we notice the values it represents and the way they direct us. According to Lerup,

architects, developers, and planners design homes based on the imagined habits of cartoon figures who hover in their minds; Lerup stresses, "the automatons, or mannequins, of the family may be a cartoon, but most of us have to live in their footsteps" (16).

In depicting home-dwellers as automatons, devoid of all agency, Lerup overtly attacks the humanist notion of a home that emanates from the traits and whims of its inhabitants. Lerup, who grants the home's inhabitants no agency, and humanists such as Marcus, who grant them total agency, thus can be understood as polarly opposed. I would like to adhere to neither of these poles but, rather, to envision self and dwelling as partaking in a cyclical co-formation: our dwellings (and the values their walls represent) shape us just as we shape them. Home--as it is defined by Marcus, but also as it is conventionally used to imply feeling at ease in one's physical environment--could thus be defined as a point of equilibrium: it is experienced at the point when all shaping and conforming stops, and the dwelling's inhabitant feels that self and environment are congruent. Home is always a noncontext because the very term denotes a state in which one's dwelling is so reflective of one's self that the material condition of the dwelling--its architecture--ceases to assert itself. Lerup's program, to reinsert *architecture* into the single-family house, thus successfully obliterates any remnants of hominess because home and architecture are implicitly at odds. Hopefully, an example, in which I once again refer to Lerup's *Fresh Window*, will help to clarify my point: Lerup's suggestion of a *Fresh Window* is facetious, intended as a commentary on the naturalization of existing values, and not as a blueprint for construction. However, if I, for a moment, take his proposal in earnest, the distinction between a dwelling, which is an architectural construct, and a home, which implies a feeling that is sometimes associated with the dwelling, becomes clear. That I can't imagine feeling "at home" in the *Nofamily House*--that I can't imagine feeling at ease living with, for example, my parents in a dwelling whose program includes such a radical breaking down of sexual boundaries between generations--may be due to the fact that the values implied by the dwelling are too far outside of my current value system; the architecture becomes jarring, a perpetual reminder of an incongruence between my self and my environment. Conversely, in the suburban house in which I did grow up, the walls of my parents' bedroom are invisible to me; they serve as a silent reassurance that all is right with the world. The concept of home, with its associated implications of comfort and ease, tacitly demands the invisibility of architecture. In Lerup's assault-dwellings, with their "fresh windows," "useless doors," and "liberated



handrails," the inhabitant is perpetually in danger of walking into a wall or an abyss; the house is a perpetual reminder of the discrepancy between him- or herself and his or her environment. In contrast, our homes, when experienced as such, reassure us that we live in harmony with our environment; they validate us and confirm that we have a place in the world.

When, in the 1960s, humanist geographers took on the concept of home as a focus of study, they defined home, at least in part, in a way that accords with this model of congruity. Gillian Rose explains that geographers like Yi-fu Tuan and Ted Relph imagined home as a place where materiality slips away and one can exist in oneness with one's environment, a notion that has been widely critiqued. To begin, such a model points to a flagrant denial of materiality. It is clear, for example, why Jung would choose to employ stone to represent his self: an enduring natural material, it would reflect back to him the comforting image of himself made immortal. However, I don't think there is any intrinsic connection between the inner self of a man such as Jung and a stone wall, as opposed to one that is constructed of brick, concrete, or glass. Furthermore, while the cartooned forms of a tower or loggia may hold a broad symbolic meaning, I doubt that the systems that render them amenable to human habitation such as plumbing or sources of heat can be infused with a corresponding significance.

Moreover, if the melding of one's self with one's environment always represents an impossible dream, even an approximation of this dream is only achievable and desired by some of the people some of the time. Simply put, those who do not have the power to shape the physical world are unlikely to see their image reflected in it and consequently are unlikely to feel at home. So too is the case with anyone whose dwelling's materiality asserts itself as a force distinct from his or her self and impinges upon it. Thus those whose rooms do not correspond to their lifestyles, but also those who are subjected to conditions such as cold or noisiness are not privy to feelings of at-homeness, as it is defined in humanist terms. Moreover, humanism does not account for all those for whom a melding of self and environment is undesirable, those who feel most at home when immersed in tumultuous environments in which other forces-- be they, for example, other people or forces of nature--exert their influence. Finally, even for those who partake in an approximation of the desired humanist self-dwelling union, the experience is necessarily short-lived. If identity is understood as volatile and in flux, so we experience places differently at different times. While

built form is by no means permanent, it is too fixed to keep pace with the nuanced metamorphoses of selfhood.

And yet, I do not want to let go entirely of the hope of a home based on congruency. After all, even if home can be at best only a fleeting and approximate sensation of union with one's environment, isn't moulding one's world to reflect one's self what empowerment is about? Does theorizing the impossibility of home decrease one's need to experience it? I would like tentatively and conditionally to hold on to this dream of congruency while focussing on another aspect of the definition of home: its historical link to house and the associated connotations of privacy and retreat.

### The Bourgeois Sanctuary of Home

Feeling at home, Marcus would have us believe, has nothing to do with the lavishness or modesty of one's abode. It's about the "right fit," the perfect match between person and place. Consequently, as the inside jacket of her book reveals, she interviews subjects who reside in a wide range of housing types,

from urban mansions, housing projects, rented apartments, and suburban homes, to a converted factory, a convent, and a dome in the forest. Some people, wealthy enough to own several homes, never felt "at home" anywhere; conversely, others felt content in a single studio.

But the book's cover sends a less democratic message. Despite the variety of housing forms explored by Marcus, she has chosen an image of the top story and peaked roof of a traditionally styled house to decorate the cover of her book. More tellingly, despite having distinguished between "house" and "home" in her introduction (5), she has entitled the work *House as a Mirror of Self*, unobtrusively substituting one term for the other. If, as Marcus claims in the body of her text, all people are able--indeed entitled--to experience home, she seems to suggest with her cover and title that those who live in the single-family detached house (a housing form which, far from being universal, is a product of climactic, cultural, economic, social and historical factors) epitomize the experience.

For Marcus, as for other humanist thinkers, the experience of home always involves dwelling within a refuge that provides personal and familial privacy, as well as protection from the stresses of the "outside world," such as those experienced in one's work life. For example, Marcus argues against combining one's work life and home life, reasoning that "all of us, consciously or unconsciously, consider

our home to be a *refuge*. It is *the* place in the world where we can recoup from the vagaries of the outside world" (183). Elsewhere, quoting Kimberly Dovey, she reinforces the notion of home as sanctuary:

Home is a place of security within an insecure world, a place of certainty within doubt, a familiar place within a strange world, a sacred place in a profane world. It is a place of autonomy and power in an increasingly heteronomous world where others make the rules. (qtd. in Marcus 191)

To state that such a place can exist only as an ideal is to state the obvious. We are affected by what goes on beyond the walls of even the most secure buildings. However, when Marcus conflates house and home, she does so because the house, whose inhabitants are least likely to hear their neighbours, to smell their cooking, and least likely to have a front door that opens directly onto a busy street, can most easily perpetuate the illusion of home.

Humanistic theory in general has long been criticized for the denial of its own specificity; claiming to speak of universal human truths, it actually puts forth the truths of those occupying the dominant centre. In a similar vein, theorists like Marcus who romanticize the home as a space of withdrawal and repose can be criticized for ignoring the actual home lives and housing conditions of most of the world. In valorizing the home as a place of withdrawal from the world, they are putting forth theories pertinent only to those who want and can afford, both literally and metaphorically, to build protective walls separating themselves and their families from the intrusions of an outside world. Furthermore, failing to recognize differences *between* family members, the humanist project fails to reflect the experiences even of many of those, namely women, who do inhabit these enclosures.

I refer to Marcus here not to vilify her or thinkers like her but to suggest that, in defining home in terms of privacy and security and in grounding the concept in the material form of the house, she echoes our general societal definition of the term. That is, I am less concerned that Marcus describes home in humanistic terms than by the possibility that the word home is itself humanistic. If, as historical evidence seems to suggest, this is the case, any time the concept of home is invoked--even by those who in other situations question the premises of humanism--these premises would be invoked with it. In the remainder of this section, I briefly survey the history of home in order to determine more specifically what the very word implies. As I go on to illustrate, the connotations of home become relevant to this project in the way they affect the identity of an autobiographical writer who refers to his or her home in order to better know

and describe his or her self. How, for instance, does turning to one's home to acquire self-knowledge predetermine the type of self one will "find"?

The concepts of home, family and privacy, all which came into being in the same historical period, developed in a tight entanglement as preconditions for and consequences of each other. In the fifteenth century, a time Lukacs marks as the beginning of what he identifies as the Bourgeois age, for the first time, the family, comprised of two parents and their children, became the primary social unit, and a family life, associated with leisure time, began to evolve. While most Western medieval dwellings were single halls where up to twenty-five household members and their guests cooked, ate, worked, entertained, and slept, housing after that time served to spatially distinguish family members from outsiders, work life from home life, and, correlatively, with the development of separate rooms, family members from each other.<sup>3</sup> Only in the 15th century did people begin to categorize their lives and environment in terms of privacy and publicity, and only then did the dwelling become a home, the hub of private life.

Home, then, is at its root based on the ability and desirability of forming distinctions between us, who are inside, and them, outside. Not surprisingly, it also has always been linked to class. In some ways this is obvious: the wealthy can afford more private space and more impenetrable walls than the poor. But as John Lukacs points out in his article "The Bourgeois Interior," the concept of home is specifically bourgeois and, as such, is linked not only to financial status but to attitudes about that status. For example, quoting Philippe Aries, Lukacs observes a burgeoning of class snobbery that arose along with the dawning of the Bourgeois age:

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<sup>3</sup>I should stress that, although I do not problematize the link between familial privacy and personal privacy, historically, their connection has not always been straightforward. In *The History of Private Life*, Roger Chartier credits Philippe Aries with having suggested the following periodization of the years between 1500 and 1800:

first, a period of heightened individualism, as the individual set himself apart from the collectivity; second, a period during which individuals escaped their newly created solitude by joining together in small groups of their own choosing (smaller than the village or neighborhood, the class or guild, but larger than the family); and finally, a shrinking of the private sphere to coincide with the family unit, which became the primary if not the unique center of intimacy and emotional investment. (400)

In the introduction to the same volume, Aries himself emphasizes how, when personal privacy first developed in the 1500s, it was considered at odds with family life. However,

ultimately, the family became the focus of private life. Its significance changed. No longer was it merely an economic unit for the sake of whose reproduction everything had to be sacrificed. No longer was it a restraint on personal freedom . . . . It became something it had never been: a refuge, to which people fled in order to escape the scrutiny of outsiders. (8)

The aspiring bourgeois emulated the classes that still stood above them.

In one sense this led to a social selfishness that was the worst characteristic of the bourgeoisie. In the Middle Ages "people lived in a state of contrast: high birth or great wealth rubbed shoulders with poverty, vice with virtue, scandal with devotion. Despite its shrill contrasts, this medley of colours caused no surprises." But "there came a time when the [bourgeois] could no longer bear the pressure of the multitude or the contact of the lower class." Instead, they cultivated, selfishly, their "homes designed for privacy, in new districts kept free from all lower-class contamination." (628)

For the first time, non-aristocratic people began to distinguish themselves in a way that previously had been the prerogative of the elite. Significantly, however, if home implied aristocratic privilege, it was and remains a markedly unaristocratic ideal. Hominess is associated with neither an excess of luxury nor the infringement of social obligation on the private realm. Moreover, home is patently democratic: with the inception of home, not only did a man's house become his castle, *every man's* house--no matter, as they say, how humble--was bestowed with castle-like potential. The simultaneous deference to both exclusivity and equality that is implicit in the notion of home can be understood, according to Lukacs, as a broader characteristic of the Bourgeois age: "Typical of the bourgeois era was the coexistence of democratic ideas with aristocratic standards. The half-thousand years from about 1450 to 1950 were no longer an age of aristocrat and not yet one of democracy" (620).

I would not want to be so reductive as to assume that home and its correlative ideals developed in a linear manner from the 15th century until today; however, I do understand the word to remain infused with many of its originating implications. Much of the hegemony of home, for instance, arises from its denial of its own aristocratic premises. Even the *OED*, in defining home as, "a dwelling place, house, abode . . . one's own house," thus privileging the house, acknowledges that, despite humanist platitudes, we *don't* in fact all have equal access to the experience of home. For instance, in trying to set up a home of my own I very much am aware of the link that still prevails between home and family. I put a lot of thought and effort into establishing a home that feels "real" to me, that is, that doesn't feel merely like a place where I am camping out until my theoretical "real life" begins. While I don't imagine that my friends who are married have an easier or better life than me, I do think that they do not have to dedicate the same amount of thought to this specific issue. The privilege of presuming that one *has* a home, is an ingrained by-product of marriage, which not coincidentally is itself often accompanied by the purchase of a house.

That being said, I look around my apartment and wonder how much of my claiming it as a home can be attributed not to my own ability to imagine alternative possibilities for home, but to the apartment's house-like qualities and consequent ability to perpetuate for me the humanist dream of house. In other words, I wonder to what degree I experience home by "playing house." Here, unlike my last place, an apartment in a characterless 70s apartment block, I can feel at home. But why? Born in 1970, I undoubtedly more rightfully can claim as my heritage the orange shag carpet and pre-fab construction of my last apartment than I can the stained glass windows, clawfoot tub, and hardwood floors of the suite in the 1920s character house where I now reside. I like this apartment, in part, because it allows me to believe that *I* have character, that I deserve to benefit from the time and care of craftspeople, and that I am in part defined by older, seemingly timeless, traditions. Guests' responses to my place are generally positive and immediate: because it is an approximation of how a home *should* look, it is *easy* to like. Moreover, more than my previous apartment, the ways in which this suite is "unhomely" are easy to ignore. For example, when I first met my current landlord, he made a point of telling me that each of the three apartments had its own address. Here, in selling me the idea of acquiring my own number--an acquisition that would make no material difference to my daily life--he was selling me the illusion of home. The private doorway, small front lawn, and personal address offer me the possibility to imagine my apartment not as it is--a suite attached to two others--but as I would wish it to be, specifically a house. That home is always only an ideal means that even those who live in single family detached dwellings must edit their experiences so that their houses feel like homes. Most of us, for example, in imagining a house, edit out all the wires that connect the dwelling to the street and betray its inhabitants' dependence on the world outside. We all experience home through a process of editing; those of us who don't live in houses simply must do more of it.

### Home as the Necessary Context for the Sanctioned Subject of Autobiography

This strategy of self-delusion is endorsed by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space*. In observing that our houses are "not experienced from day to day" but rather as a pastiche of past dwellings, real and imaginary, he recognizes that home can be experienced only through the muting of the architecture we personally experience. However, if, for Bachelard, home is always an illusion, it is nonetheless a necessary illusion. Chapter 9, which opens with a quotation by Colette, "One of

the maxims of practical education that governed my childhood: "Don't eat with your mouth open" (211), contains the following excerpt from a prose-poem by Henri Michaux: "Space, but you cannot even conceive the horrible inside-outside that real space is" (216). These two quotations reveal that Bachelard is well aware that drawing distinguishing lines between the inside and the outside is a matter of mere convention, or in the case of the Colette quotation, manners. But his book implores us to respect these conventions as holy; focussing on the sacredness of home, it provides us with a recipe for avoiding the distaste and horror that would result from exposing to ourselves the truth about "real space." I point to this recipe because it illuminates how autobiographical writers in general, and, as I shall show, Margaret Laurence in particular, construct selfhoods that are stable, unfragmented, and atomistic by associating their selves with a dwelling that they idealize as a home. Moreover, not coincidentally, the self that is "discovered" through the exploration of home is the same one that is sanctioned by the genre of autobiography.

Bachelard, then, like Marcus, insists that the experience of home is integral to the development of interior life and recommends getting to know one's self through examining one's home, a strategy he terms topoanalysis. But, while Marcus claims that through studying our homes we can attain knowledge of our true selves, Bachelard offers the promise not of truth but of a pleasing illusion. It is precisely because our selfhoods are *not* stable that we need our homes to give "mankind [sic] proofs or illusions of stability" (17). Because we experience self as fragmented, we look towards a home that "thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man [sic] would be a dispersed being" (7). Moreover, only through the context of what Bachelard calls the places of our solitude can we even entertain the prospect of an atomistic self. Our imaginings of home allow us to "detach from our own history the always too contingent history of the persons who have encumbered it. . . . desocialize our important memories, and attain to the plane of the daydreams that we used to have in the places identified with solitude" (8-9).

The association between home and childhood further aids us in using home to imagine ourselves not only as stable but as content. Like Marcus, who claims that "our childhood home remains with us--in a shadow form--throughout our lives" (103), Bachelard asserts that we always experience home as if we were young, well-cared-for children:

And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live

fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. (5-6)

Seeing our dwellings through the eyes of our child-selves allows us to believe that, if now we are not exactly who we were then, a stable grain of selfhood, of the same self that we once were, still exists somewhere within us. If we are among those lucky enough to succeed in imagining childhood as primarily a happy time, we are doubly fortunate: the stable self becomes a happy self, not only housed, but well-housed and protected. If home, as it is for Bachelard, is always a "being-well," associated with the human being's "well-being" (7), the self we find within it is always contented.

In the remainder of this project, I use Margaret Laurence's memoir *Dance on the Earth* to further explore and reinforce the ways in which home, self, and autobiography are linked and how, if the terms are not rigorously interrogated, they can work together to reinforce humanistic notions. That these three concepts, as we commonly conceive of them today, arose out of the same historical era is not coincidence. They are the preconditions and results of each other and any meaningful change in one would necessarily be manifest by changes in the others. In examining Laurence's text, I focus on the ways her adherence to a traditionally humanistic notion of home predetermines her autobiographical persona. In other words, I argue that, just as a child who, in "playing house," reenacts the socially dictated role of grown-up, Laurence, in *Dance on the Earth*, takes on the identities prescribed by those humanist homes within which she contextualizes her autobiographical character.

## **Known Mythologies: Margaret Laurence as Credible Autobiographical Subject**

### Margaret Laurence's Reliance on the Sanctioned Myth of Motherhood

*I have heard it said that war is for men what motherhood is for women. I find this appalling, and essentially quite false. I realize, however, that it is more true for some men than most of us, women and men, would like to think. But to compare (on an intensity-of-experience scale? on a devotion scale? on a commitment scale?) the giving and nurturing of life to the violent and brutal and senseless taking away of life seems to me to be an ultimate obscenity. (3)*

*The fact remains, however, that war is a popular and time-honoured subject of novels, histories, poetry, films, painting, and sculpture, whereas birth and mothering have scarcely been subjects at*



*all, or at least not recognized and honoured subjects of art and history and philosophy, until comparatively recent times. . . . But this is scarcely surprising in a world in which communications and the arts have been dominated by men and herstory either ignored, condescended to, or forgotten. To my personal knowledge, this downgrading of women in every field has been changing considerably for the better, although still too gradually, over the past forty years or so, but some memories come back bitterly. (4)*

*My novels are not exactly dotted with birth scenes, but . . . I never hesitated to write about birth, and I never did so again except from the viewpoint of the mother. I like to think that in some ways my generation of women novelists may have helped younger women writers speak with women's voices about sex and birth. (6)*

The above excerpts, taken from the first three pages of Margaret Laurence's *Dance on the Earth*, touch on themes and sentiments that are to run through the entire memoir. For one thing, they point to one of the driving forces behind the writing of the memoir: to try to tell a specifically female story. In telling her life, Laurence demonstrates a lifelong commitment to speaking of the female experiences such as sex and birth that, at the time in which she wrote of them, had not yet been explored in literature. A belief in the possibility that the personal could impact the political fuels this effort; that is, by writing honestly about herself, Laurence believes that she can help other women articulate their own truths.

I read *Dance on the Earth* as a continuation of this feminist program. By 58, when Margaret Laurence began writing her memoir, she had achieved all the recognized markers of vocational success. The story of her individual achievements--her journey from humble, small-town Prairies beginnings to success as an internationally renowned author and activist--could easily have fit into a conventional quest-based narrative structure that would undoubtedly have been a welcome addition to the literary canon. But the story that Laurence wants to tell is not of her rise to celebrity status or her development as a writer. Instead, she takes on the revamping of autobiographical form in order to better suit her more personal/political project: to write her life in terms of her relationships to other women and to her children, and to elaborate her views on war and social issues. She does not entirely avoid the telling of her career but neither does she bring it to the fore; stressing that she writes "as a mother and a writer" (8), Laurence frames her professional success in terms of how it affected and was affected by her familial relationships.

But if the quotations with which I open this section point to the problem of female exclusion from the cultural canon, they also allude to the problematic nature of Laurence's solution: the valorization of motherhood. The memoir equates "writing as a woman" to "writing as a mother" and motherhood is rigidly

defined in terms of stereotypical traits such as selflessness and a natural compulsion to nurture and protect. For example, Laurence attributes her volubility in the peace effort to her ability to imagine all children of the world as her own and her empathy with mothers in war-torn countries: "To me, the noblest causes or the conquest of the whole world would not be worth the life of my son. . . . I think of the way I love my children and I know, with no shadow of doubt, that mothers everywhere feel the same way" (32). Working from this same stereotype, she describes her relationship with her children as wholly giving. Laurence creates a myth about herself in which caring for her children always took precedent over any personal desires--from career aspirations to sexual longings.

For Laurence to perpetuate this myth, she would be required to perform an impossible task: to edit out of the memoir much of the complexity that, as a woman juggling multiple roles, she undoubtedly lived. Not surprisingly, other stories of ambition and self-centredness--character traits that all human beings possess and that Laurence herself argues women should have the right to express--leak in and contradict the overarching theme of selfless motherhood. As a reader, I found myself constantly doubting the author and judging her for failing to meet her own standards of ethical living. For example, Laurence describes enormous guilt at having to leave her children in England while she takes a position at Massey College:

I justified it by the fact that I needed the money, I needed the clout, or thought I did, and I felt I needed the experience. If I was to leave my children, then seventeen and fourteen, for nearly a year, then I certainly wanted someone both reliable and agreeable to take over the fortress. (190)

And yet, in the same paragraph, she tells of ultimately leaving Jocelyn and David with near-strangers: "Clara Thomas put me in touch with Ian and Sandy Cameron. Clara had known them both for some time. . . . I had never met them myself, but I trusted Clara's judgment" (190). Here, I am not suggesting that Laurence was negligent in caring for her children, only that she was incapable of fulfilling the criteria of good motherhood that she reifies in her memoir.

The strength of her pacifist convictions is similarly undermined. Their basis--feelings of maternal nurturing--proves too simplistic to address issues of war. For example, she recalls hearing that war had broken out in the Middle East shortly after she had returned from an assignment in Egypt:

The moment of truth is sometimes humiliating. My first thought was not for the young Israelis and the young Egyptians set to killing one another. My first thought was, "Thank God I got paid." A few minutes later I collected myself enough to see how awful my initial reaction had been. . . . We think first of our own--how can we help it? (183)

We can't. Or at least I can't and can't imagine why anyone would think she could. For me, the intriguing question is, why does Laurence write a book in which she maintains emphatic support for ideals which are not humanly achievable? Moreover, Laurence--unlike the characters in her novels--comes across as unaware that the myth of the all-nurturing mother had already been under dispute for almost two decades. In commenting on *Dance on the Earth*, Alexandra Pett observes that Laurence "seems to belong to an earlier generation of women writers" (212). Why would Laurence write a book in which she is perpetually claiming humiliation for failing to meet standards that were commonly recognized as unachievable? Is she, in admitting to these all-too-human "sins," avoiding the story that she really doesn't want to tell?

Here, I should explain that these questions emerge from my own struggle with this memoir. When I originally read the book it infuriated me: I couldn't understand why Laurence, a woman whose life path was so remarkable and whose associated decision making processes were undoubtedly complex, would take on such a reductive mythology. Why wasn't she telling me the truth? Isn't it somehow "unfeminist" in the most 70s second wave sense of the word not to try to pass on to the next generation an authentic account of the problems that one faced? What could I, as an artist myself--one who hasn't had children--possibly learn from Laurence's claims that birth is "the core of women's lives" and that her love for her children was unambiguous and took precedent over any personal desire?

I am still disappointed in the book and disappointed in Laurence, undoubtedly unfairly, for not offering herself as a role model for my own life and, beyond that, for not even writing to me. Perhaps Laurence believed that adopting the persona of an all-nurturing mother was the best way to communicate to her children that, although she pursued a career, she loved them above all else. Perhaps she is writing to an audience of male critics or to those who banned her books and proclaimed that "Margaret Laurence's aim in life is to destroy the home and family" (216). Or perhaps, regardless of whatever changes she, on an intellectual level, must have known had taken place since she began her career, she continues to write for a time in which admitting to being a less than perfect mother could have dire consequences. When I spoke to Susan, a friend of mine, about the memoir, she was better able to understand Laurence's position. Born about fifteen years after Laurence, Susan remembers having to lie constantly when she went through law

school as a single mother: "In those days, they would have taken your kid away for not living up to societal expectations."

I don't think I recognized the extent to which Laurence's fear of having been a "bad mother" may have continued to haunt her until her death. After all, the enormous guilt that she describes having felt as a young writer surely did not dissipate with the latest wave of feminism. Such guilt is apparent when Laurence interprets an episode in which she mails her only copy of *The Stone Angel* to London as a possible subconscious longing to sabotage herself:

During those months, I was in agony every single day, imagining it gone forever. This was the novel for which I had separated from my husband and embarked on who knew what, uprooting and dragging along my two children, and I almost seemed to be trying to lose it. Guilt and fear can do strange things to the mind and body. I questioned my right to write, even though I knew I had to do it. I had just wanted everything--husband, children, work. Was this too much? Of course it wasn't, but the puritan conscience can be a fearsome thing and when, in a woman, it is combined with the need to create in a society that questions this need or ignores it, the results are self-inflicted wounds scarring the heart. (159-160)

This memoir continues to "self-inflict" these wounds: Although Laurence directs anger outwards, her targets are nebulous, faceless, and unaccountable entities such as "society," "old politicians" or "men who make war" (32). "What a terrible choice society has always forced upon women," she exclaims (38); but she provides only vague notions of what changes should or could occur. This is, of course, the experience of most critical thinkers, at least some of the time--it is much easier to identify a problem than to solve it. But Laurence's references to societal change are only sketchily delineated for another reason, as well: if maternal instincts are just that, instinctual, no amount of societal reform will alter a mother's feelings of obligation to her children. Laurence may belittle domestic chores such as baking cookies or keeping a house meticulously clean, but ultimately the onus is on mothers to be the primary nurturers of children. She claims that no one but herself expected the sacrifices she made: "I began writing again when David was just over a month old. The kids had to be in bed and asleep before I could begin. That was my own rule; no one imposed it on me, least of all Jack" (152).

In other words, in *Dance on the Earth* Laurence fights a feminist battle on two conflicting fronts: she argues for the recognition of a uniquely female experience at the same time as she seeks to efface sexual difference by insisting that women should be permitted the rights and privileges granted to men. That is, in arguing that society should place more value on the uniquely maternal experience of loving others above oneself, she diminishes the power of a second argument that claims that both men and women

are equally suited to pursue self-fulfillment just as they are equally qualified to nurture children. Moreover, her very premises--that writing is a selfish and atomistic pursuit and motherhood is communal and wholly selfless--destine the memoir, written by a mother and a writer, to be riddled with contradiction. In her years as a working mother, Laurence undoubtedly lived this contradiction: I have no doubt that she both loved her children as part of herself at the same time as she lusted for fulfillments that were unrelated to them. I don't know if that means that she lived with contradiction or that she, in fact, experienced an identity that transcended dualistic categorization. Laurence either does not want or does not have the vocabulary to tell us. However, by adopting, in *Dance on the Earth*, a stereotypical female narrative of selflessness, her autobiographical self can never be shown to live out, as Laurence surely did in life, a position of willful individuality.

How then does Laurence deal with the holes, with all the places where another less altruistic self leaks in? Either, as I elaborate above, by acknowledging a contradiction and berating herself for not having lived up to the "good" and true autobiographical self or by renouncing her own agency and depicting all "nonmaternal" acts as events that "happened to her." Her entire career as a writer thus is cast either as merely a means to support her family or as a calling that she must heed. For example, when to her "astonishment" she wins the Governor General's award, she remembers not satisfaction or pride but that she felt "guilty about leaving the children [to return to Canada and accept the award]. I reasoned that we would be two thousand Canadian dollars richer" (186). When not cast as a means to fulfil financial responsibilities, writing is described in mystical terms: the voices of her fictional characters come to her, unbidden; Laurence is obliged only to transcribe their stories. She remembers writing *The Stone Angel* as an obligation to Hagar, the protagonist, as opposed to an act of creation that originated within her: "The novel poured forth. It was if the old woman was actually there, telling me her life story, and it was my responsibility to put it down as faithfully as I could" (156). Similarly, her decision to become a writer is a non-decision; her fate is decided for her in a near-religious moment of inspiration:

Sudden revelations aren't supposed to happen, whereas, in truth, they happen quite a few times, or at least they have to me in my life. I was fourteen and I was walking up the stairs in my grandfather Simpson's house, towards my bedroom. I can see myself, with my hand on the dark vanished banister, staring at the ugly etching of "The Stag at Eve" that hung on the stairway wall. A thought had just come to me, with enormous strength: I can't be a nurse; I have to be a writer. I was frightened and appalled. (74)

In *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*, Jill Ker Conway tells how the narrative of the Western romantic heroine has dominated Western women's telling of their lives since their first autobiographical writings emerged in the twelfth century. The first religious white female autobiographers told the events of their life as if their unfolding was due not to personal will but to the will of God. In later stories, the ruling force changed but the pattern, in which any personal agency is denied, persisted. For example, Conway tells of the first generation of female professionals who "recounted their lives as though their successes just happened to them, rather like the soprano's chance meeting with the tenor in the first act of an opera":

So the woman professional, actually a new and potentially revolutionary social type, told her story as a philanthropic romance: she seems to have chanced upon the causes which elicit a lifetime commitment from her. She never acknowledges strategizing about how to advance the cause; she is as surprised as anyone else when success is at hand. (15-16)

*Dance on the Earth* persists in retelling this narrative. Laurence, as if foreseeing attack, explains to the reader that--although women in general should have the right to pursue personal desires--she herself is not guilty of such a pursuit. "I only did what I had to do," she seems to assert, apologetically. Conway points out that "agency unacknowledged is not subject to moral constraints" (59) and Laurence writes with the hope of avoiding judgment. I now suspect that my own negative reaction to this book was in part due to my perception of Laurence's memoir--and life--not ending in the happy way I would have wanted it to. If, in fact, she was writing primarily for her loved ones and to a literary community in which she enjoyed much success, how sad that she anticipated censure. How could I not hope to hear--and not only for Laurence's sake--that this apparently successful woman ended her life confident enough to speak her truth?

Before going on, I want to stress the contradiction upon which Laurence's autobiographical self and *Dance on the Earth* as a whole are premised. The quotations with which I open this section point to the way that Laurence's acceptance of social norms as unquestionable truths backs her into a corner where she herself doesn't want to be. The author opens her book by admonishing an unnamed opponent who would make the claim that "war is to men what motherhood is to women," a claim Laurence asserts is "appalling and essentially quite false" (3). However, Laurence herself, in the first sentence of the following quotation, goes on to champion the female story of birth and, indeed, to compare it to men's stories of war. In other words, despite her desire to conceptualize male and female stories outside of a binary system, Laurence cannot conceive of an alternative female--or male--narrative. Moreover, despite her attempt to tell her self

"as a mother and a writer" (8), she is unable to describe motherhood as anything but stereotypically feminine and, significantly, writing as masculine and, hence, according to her world view, its opposite. In other words, in *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence creates a fictional world in which the person she was, the person who both raised children and wrote books, is an impossibility.

Laurence's adoption of a humanistic notion of home is integral to her memoir because, as I go on to explore in the remainder of this thesis, it naturalizes this fictional world and, to a certain degree, masks the contradiction between her conflicting selves. In referring to her houses as homes, Laurence infuses into her story over 500 years of Western assumptions about family life and associated male and female roles. For example, in referring to Elm Cottage, Laurence naturalizes an order in which motherhood and sexual desire is at odds. Although, she asserts, she would have liked to act on her sexual urges, "I quickly realized that casual sex was not for me. It was a foregone conclusion, in my mind, that I could never take a man to Elm Cottage. My children were more important to me than any sexual relationship could ever be" (170). Here, the mere mention of the house is sufficient to explain away even the possibility of engaging in sexual affairs. While her vocational ambitions, equally at odds with a selfless motherhood, are more difficult to explain away, because both her writing and her caring for her children take place within the context of the home, she can conceal the way the roles, as they are defined by her in the memoir, are intrinsically contradictory. As I say, these are issues I explore in greater depth later in the project. First, however, in the following section, I look at how, from the beginning of the memoir, Laurence establishes the order of the humanist home as a natural order and how she then deploys the notion of home in order to justify to the reader that hers is a story worthy of being told.

### Playing House: Establishing Credibility Through Home

By the time Margaret Laurence was ten years old, she had moved three times and had experienced a variety of permutations on the conventionally defined family structure. She had lived with her birth parents in the Little House; with her father and Mum--her father's new wife and birth mother's sister--in the Little House and the Wemyss house; and with Mum, her brother, and her grandfather in the Big House. Perhaps these early migrations can be credited with setting patterns that lasted a lifetime: in the remainder of the book, Laurence tells of occupying a college dorm, a room in a rooming house, four different London

flats, an "architect-designed" house in Somaliland, a house-sat house in Toronto, a summer cottage in Ontario, a house in Lakefield, an apartment in Winnipeg, two rented houses in Ontario, and a suburban West Vancouver tract home. Some of these residences, such as the one she rented from a distinguished Western University professor, are described as luxurious; others, like some of her London flats, are dingy and cold. Moreover, even this listing does not fully describe her peripatetic ways: on numerous occasions, Laurence stayed with family members or friends for extended periods of time; she also traveled, for work and for pleasure, to destinations such as Scotland and Egypt.

As I was compiling this list, I couldn't help but think of the book that could have been written. Laurence's life events could just as easily have been ordered into a book about motion and exploration. I think about Laurence, with her husband and newborn daughter, leaving Canada for the first time to go to Somaliland where she will give birth to her son. I consider the courage it must have taken to take off to London, with limited funds and two small children, determined to ensconce herself in a literary community and live as a writer. However, if her life was neither sheltered nor mundane, Laurence composes a narrative that emphasizes stability and adherence to convention. She may have occupied over 20 residences, but she only refers to five as homes. These--the Little House and the Big House in Neepawa, the shack, Elm cottage, and the Lakefield house--are all older single family detached houses, which Laurence describes, in words and through photos, at length. They are the places through which Laurence believes she can describe herself to the reader. Other abodes are presented as temporary aberrations: she may have lived in them but they were not where she *truly* belonged.

Why does Laurence adhere to such a truth? Why does she conflate house and home to reinforce humanistic notions of home, and consequently, of selfhood? In the last section, I examined the mythology Laurence adopts in order to avoid the judgment of an audience she imagines as hostile and it is in this light that I understand her emphatic adoption of the humanist dream of home. By positioning herself in an English hamlet amid squires and lords, she seems to assert that her life, too, fits into a traditional mold and, consequently, should be sanctioned. By telling of how she raised her children in a yarded house that would seem the ideal setting for a happy, privileged childhood, she aims to convince the reader that her commitment to motherhood was beyond reproach. While all Laurence's references to home serve to reinforce her place within the dominant centre, she renders the implicit privilege of the humanist home



most explicit when she describes Elm Cottage, a house to which, perhaps because it was her children's "childhood home" (167), she devotes particular attention. Significantly, Laurence focuses on a portrait of Lady Maclean:

When we moved into the house, Alan [Maclean] lent us a portrait of his mother, painted when she was young. She wore a white dress and had long fair hair which gave the look of a pensive Alice in Wonderland. That portrait became in a sense the spirit of the house. We hung it in the downstairs hall where we could see it every time we went upstairs or into the kitchen or into my study. I used to open the study door and look out at the portrait. I used to talk to her and she always smiled back. Before she died, his mother had told Alan she would like the house to be lived in by a family with children. (169)

In imagining that this "spirit of the house," who is an aristocratic woman and a (presumably good) mother, approves of her and her family, Laurence associates herself with an elite class and a nuclear family structure. Was Lady Maclean an enlightened modern woman who would have approved of Laurence, a divorcee with two children who was determined to pursue a career as a writer? Maybe. But I don't think the assumption can be made unproblematically. Other members of the moneyed establishment did not, after all, vie for Laurence to occupy the house. She explains that, as a single woman writer, she was considered too unreliable to be approved for a mortgage and, ultimately, she was only able to buy the house thanks to her friend Alan's connections to an "old boys' network" (182). In other words, in associating herself with a house like Elm Cottage, Laurence implies that she had more access to privilege than she, in fact, did.

Despite Laurence's desire to use her memoir as a platform for her egalitarian views, she appears to believe that, in order to appear credible, she herself must claim a place within a privileged class. That is, she can only fight for the disenfranchised if she positions herself within the dominant centre. Consequently, when she expounds her feminist or political views, she characterizes herself as benevolent and unmarked. Hence, for example, Laurence may argue emphatically that women should be allowed to experience greater sexual freedom (36), but, in her memoir, she creates a world in which she herself experiences sexual satisfaction only within the context of her marriage. Moreover, she distances herself from the circumstances of those women whose sexual freedom she champions: she advocates their cause even though she personally concludes that "casual sex was not for me" (170). She embraces left-wing politics from a similar position of safety. She allies herself with the views of "old-time Communists in the forties . . . [who] were proclaiming a need for social justice in terms of our land" (107) while making it clear that, although it would not have been a disgrace, she was never a Communist. More importantly--and this is a

theme that I explore throughout the thesis and will not elaborate here--she seems to believe that she must claim this place of privilege in order to be able to speak--and write--at all.

Home, as it is defined by Lukacs as the product of a bourgeois era characterized by the "coexistence of democratic ideas with aristocratic standards" (620), is integral to Laurence's narrative because it allows her to simultaneously claim and deny that she exists within a sphere of privilege. Laurence's autobiographical persona is, after all, as dependent on her disavowal of privilege as it is on her alleged proximity to it. Even once Laurence's children have grown into adolescence, when she has already published several books, she emphasizes, particularly on the numerous occasions when her work takes her out of the country, that she needs the money. If Laurence is to convince the reader that her career as a writer is the result not of ego but of financial need, she cannot associate herself with a moneyed class. If, for example, Laurence describes herself partaking in imaginary conversations with the benign spirit of Lady Maclean, she pointedly dissociates herself from the living members of the aristocracy whom she meets while residing at Elm Cottage. When describing the couple who occupied the house opposite to hers, Laurence emphasizes her difference from them. Referring derisively to them as "the so-called squire and his lady" (172), Laurence explains that the head gardener, not the house's occupants, became her "friend and helper" (173). "We never could be accepted as villagers," she proclaims, "an entire lifetime in the village would scarcely have sufficed" (172). She assures the reader that, although she happened to end up at Elm Cottage, she is not a member of an elite class. She remembers, "At nights, I used to look out my bedroom window and see its impressive, solid, Victorian shape looming against the sky, and I used to wonder how on earth we had found this strange refuge here in this unlikely place" (172).

While the case of Elm Cottage makes most explicit the class order that she wishes both to subscribe to and reject, the concept of home is used by Laurence throughout the memoir to associate herself with class privilege. For example, in claiming the middle class privilege of familial privacy as her natural right, she communicates to the reader that she does not belong a lower class of people--particularly those who do not reside in single-family detached houses. As a reader, I must accept that Laurence "naturally" belongs in a house, if I am to sympathize with her intolerance of apartment living. I must believe that Laurence is reacting normally to an unnatural situation if I am to justify her intolerance of, for example, the Scottish couple that lived in an apartment next door to her: "Despite my Scots-Canadian background, it was

enough to put me off Scots for life. They used to have loud arguments that filtered upstairs, along with the pervading and repellent smell of the kippers they cooked for breakfast" (16). Moreover, like Laurence, I must assume the naturalness of familial privacy within the house, in order to understand her strong reaction to having renters in the house. Remembering how, out of financial necessity, Mum was required to take in boarders, Laurence recalls that she "hated" having "somebody in our house who was not family" (85). When, as an adult, Laurence rents a suite in her own house she is similarly irked: "Those tenants were part of our lives for the first three years in Elm Cottage. My children absolutely hated even the idea and I didn't like it much either" (169).

That Laurence attributes the hatred of outsiders to the children of the house in these examples is significant because it allows her to naturalize the house's association with the family as a discrete and private unit: although the adult, aware of financial considerations, can act graciously, the child's hatred suggests that the desire for domestic privacy is innately human. Although Laurence aims to contextualize herself within the privileged sphere of the humanistic home, she must do so covertly, without acknowledging that she is partaking in an elitist order. Consequently, she constructs a fictional world in which the rules of the humanist home pose as natural law and in which these "house rules" justify behaviours and attitudes she herself, elsewhere in the memoir, perceives as unacceptable. Laurence reinforces the unquestionability of the order of the house by depicting the connection between her self and her home as mystical. For example, in describing how she decorated and cared for Elm Cottage, Laurence presents her choices as being dictated by the building: "We always tried to be true to the house itself and I think we succeeded" (174). She speaks disparagingly of previous tenants who, unlike her, did not "belong" there. She complains that one foolishly had covered the red stone tile floors with linoleum; of others, "American military families," she states simply that they had "not done well by the house" (171). Significantly, this relationship between herself and the house is described as immutable; Laurence's feelings for her places of residence do not develop or change--she knows whether a house is or isn't a home from the moment she walks in the door. If Laurence fiddles with Elm Cottage's decor, she is only accentuating a preexisting relationship; after all, "it was home from the moment we moved in" (174). She describes her reactions to her other adult homes in similar terms. "There it was, just waiting for me," Laurence says of the Lakefield house, "the very house I had described. . . . I knew that if I hesitated, I

would lose this marvel that was obviously meant for me, as I was for it" (206). Telling of her Ontario summer cottage, she remembers, "We went to see a cedar cottage and I knew instantly, as soon as I saw it, that it was meant to be mine" (197).

How could the reader doubt that it is in these houses and not the multitude of apartments that Laurence truly belongs? Moreover, who could object to the rules of "us" and "them" that these materializations of a seemingly natural and immutable order represent? Home is integral to the credibility of Laurence's autobiographical persona because it positions her within a class system while rendering the system's elitism innocent.

### Within the Safety of Home: Margaret Laurence's Limited Pacifism

Up to this point, I have focussed on the way Laurence relies on the concept of home in order to position herself as close to the dominant centre as possible. But the humanist conception of home is integral to the memoir for another reason as well: the internal logic that drives Laurence's emphatic belief in world peace is also dependent on her position of privilege. Laurence makes clear in her forewords that she wants to use her memoir to communicate her passionate anti-war sentiment, which she claims as a natural consequence of being a mother. But she also makes clear that her pacifism, although heartfelt, is premised on her position of privilege. For example, she admits, "I realize that if I had been born a black woman in South Africa, I would feel differently about my passionate belief in non-violence" (57). In other words, her political position relies on her being physically positioned within the borders of a country that is not at war and in which she personally does not experience oppression.

I perceive Laurence's seemingly unexamined claim to pacifism as perhaps the book's greatest shortcoming. To begin, she does not acknowledge the obvious contradiction between her ardent Canadian nationalism and her claim to love all children as her own. Throughout the memoir, she expresses not only pride in her Canadian identity but also an underlying discrimination against those born outside the country. For example, when describing how, in 1971, she was invested as a Companion of the Order of Canada, Laurence demonstrates a strong sense of national identity. She remembers, "I had always thought I had no use for such awards, but this is a Canadian award, and I am proud to have it" (200). More insidiously, when she denounces the racism that she has witnessed within Canada during her lifetime, she distinguishes

between Canadian-born and foreign victims. In recalling with embarrassment how, as a child, she and her girlfriend Mona chanted racist comments at a Ukrainian boy "from the other side of the tracks," she emphasizes not the inherent wrongness of discrimination but the fallacy in discriminating against someone who was, in fact, as Canadian as herself. She remarks that the Ukrainian boy was "one of those people whose parents and grandparents had come to Canada at the beginning of the century, as Mona's Irish and my Scots ancestors had" (54). Similarly, when telling of "one of the most shameful chapters of our history," the time during the Second World War when Japanese-Canadians were forced into internment on the west coast, she explains her disdain for the government's action in the following way: "Some of [the Japanese Canadians] had been born in Japan, but by far the larger proportion had been born in Canada." (81).

Moreover, although Laurence wants to claim a pacifist identity, she seems to perceive war more as a sad inevitability than something she would truly like to stop. Remembering the Second World War, she recalls how war "became finally and forever real to me" (83) when many of the Neepawa boys she knew were mutilated and killed while fighting in Europe. And yet, in expressing her outrage, she touches on so many tangential topics that I wonder whether she is trying to conceal the fact that she does not overtly oppose the war:

[Dieppe] runs as a leitmotif through all my so-called Manawaka fiction and, in a way, it runs through my whole life in my hatred of war was so profound I can't find words to express my outrage at these recurring assaults upon the human flesh, mind, and spirit. How dare we call our species *Homo Sapiens*? The whales and dolphins, whom we are rapidly destroying, are surely superior in every way that counts. I do believe in some kind of a Creator. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I think there is an informing spirit in the whole of creation but I also believe we have some kind of free will. The sorrow of a creator spirit, having formed mankind with a degree of free will and then observing how we persist in misusing it for destruction, is impossible for our minds to comprehend. (84)

Finally, she concludes this section on war, by firing another oddly directed opinion. In criticizing the way, during World War II, Canadians began pledging allegiance to Britain and the Queen, Laurence makes clear that she, in fact, supported the war:

Alice Duer Miller's book of prose / poetry, *The White Cliffs*, came out and I wept over it, as it proclaimed the sentiments that a world without England wouldn't be worth living in. If the Nazis had won, that would probably have been true, but thinking back on it as a Canadian, I realize that England has never been of all-consuming importance to me. (85-86)

More subtly, Laurence's identity as a nonviolent, caring person--and correlatively, as a "good" mother--is dependent on her contextualization of herself within the privileged realm of a refuge-like home. That Laurence, as I pointed out in the previous section, hates disruption caused by those outside her

household suggests that she is only peace-loving when walls shield her from undesirable intrusions. Only by subscribing to a notion of home that not only posits the house as protector but naturalizes the violence inherent in the keeping out of others can Laurence claim to be tolerant of others. Consequently, if Laurence wants to claim a "true" identity that is non-violent, she must claim home as her only true context. Moreover, the reader must accept that violence is justified when home's "natural" sanctity is infringed upon. Thus, when, as a girl, the neighbour boys "threatened" Laurence "and my perch in the birch tree" she can justify, despite an ostensibly nonviolent nature "wag[ing] a kind of war against the two boys next door" (57).

Furthermore, although it would be reductive to suggest that Laurence's distaste for animals within her house implicates her as non-pacifist, I am interested in the parallels between her disposal of unwanted creatures and the way she approaches foreign enemies. On three occasions, Laurence makes specific mention of having to evict wild animals from her property. Revealingly, in referring to each of these incidents, Laurence recruits someone else to do the deed. I find it telling, for example, that although she "felt like a murderer" when she hired a mole catcher "complete with explosives and gas" to clear her Elm Cottage lawn of moles, she brushes over the incident by explaining that "I wasn't about to sacrifice my lawn to them" (188-189). Reading this anecdote as symbolic of a larger pattern, I suggest that Laurence, although squeamish and kindhearted, advocates nonviolence only so long as violence is not necessary to maintain the distinctions between inside and outside, and correlatively us and them, that she perceives as "natural."

Because Laurence roots her volubility against war in her feelings of maternal caring for all the children of the world whom she imagines as her own (141), she undermines her argument as soon as she acknowledges that her primary loyalties lie with her immediate family. The humanist concept of home, which she unquestioningly adopts, demands that she distinguish between "us" and "them" and, consequently, obviates the necessity of her caring for her neighbour--whether he or she be next door or in a distant country--as she does for her own household. However, because intrinsic to the humanist concept of home is the denial of its own exclusionary violence, Laurence, as long as she positions herself within it, can claim to be her "true" peace-loving self.

**Mothers at Home, Mothers as Home: The Necessary Contexts** *of Dance on the Earth*

Telling her Mothers' Lives

*Dance on the Earth* is a book that might easily never have been written. In the years that followed the publication of *The Diviners*, Laurence was not actively writing autobiographically and, in fact, as she struggled with her adult writing, seemed pointedly to resist moving in that direction. She was, after all, a person who had spent a lifetime consciously deflecting attention from Margaret Laurence, the woman, and who repeatedly--and vehemently--denied that her fiction was autobiographical. Friends describe her as someone who was ill at ease in the public eye. Many, like Alice Munro, who, in a posthumously published collection of Laurence's letters, reflects, "I don't know what made her become [a] public person," surely would have been surprised that she chose to reveal herself at all.

One way of explaining how *Dance on the Earth* came to be is to see it as the product of a slow evolution: after years of struggling with a novel that would never be completed, Laurence turned to writing nonfictional accounts of the lives of her female ancestors; this project in turn, and again after some time, evolved into the memoir that was eventually published. Laurence's reluctance to write autobiographically is evident in a 1984 letter to Marian Engel. "I find myself writing odd things," she imparts to Engel:

not a novel, more like things about my ancestral families, especially the women. History has been written, and lines of descent traced, through the male lines. More and more I want to speak about women (always have, of course, in my fiction, but now I want to get closer to my own experience. . . not necessarily directly autobiog, but close, I guess). (Laurence, *A Very Large Soul* 63)

Even in 1986, when the book, because of Laurence's illness, was necessarily near completion, the author describes it in a letter to "Peggy" Atwood as "my so-called memoir"; echoing the tone and content of *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence stresses to Atwood that the focus of the book is not her own life: "Really, they're sort of a memoir of my 3 mothers (my birth mother, my stepmother, my mother-in-law) and myself as a mother/writer" (Laurence, *A Very Large Soul* 9).

*Dance on the Earth* itself tells a different but not incongruous story. According to Jocelyn and Margaret Laurence, in their respective preface and forewords to the book, the author originally took on the composition of a chronological account of her life, an exercise that resulted only in frustration. Jocelyn, who from the project's inception was unsettled by its implications of mortality, recalls that, after having written "pages and pages merely to get to the point where she turned eighteen . . . she was bored silly. I made suitably sympathetic (albeit slightly hypocritical) noises, secretly relieved that she would now presumably give up the project and move on to something else" (xi). The memoir was saved only by Laurence's working out of a new framework, the one that currently structures the book. The author explains that, by using the theme of motherhood and the stories of three women whom she considers mothers as organizational devices, she could avoid recounting the entire story of her life (after all, she reasons, "it is mine") and instead "write more about my feelings about mothers and about my own life views" (7).

In light of these tellings of the memoir's origins, *Dance on the Earth* can be understood as the amalgamation of two linked but discrete projects. Rooted in a desire to illuminate a previously neglected female history, Laurence's chronicling of her mothers' lives is a goal in itself; but it is also a structuring device for a second project, the



recounting of her own story. I attribute much of my uneasiness with the current memoir to this marriage of projects. By turning her mothers' stories into the context for her own, Laurence cannot do justice to the individuality of each of their lives. On the contrary, in order to employ her mothers' life stories, as Laurence does, to ensure the credibility and amiability of her own autobiographical persona, she must fit them into a restrictively formulaic narrative. If the reader is to believe Laurence's suspect claim that all mothers are naturally "good" and self-sacrificing, all mothers in the fictional world of the memoir, indeed, must fit this mythological ideal. Furthermore, Laurence can justify her own pursuit of a career by writing the lives of Verna, Marg, and Elsie as stories of dissatisfaction and unfulfilled potential: by depicting herself as the progeny of foremothers who, because they were required to nurture others, could not seek self-fulfilment, Laurence, in becoming a writer, is not only selfishly answering a personal calling, she is vindicating the lives of those who came before her. In other words, although Laurence, in dedicating three chapters of her memoir to the lives of others, appears to want to work against Gudorf's model of atomistic identity, in actuality, she employs her mother's life, just as Gudorf suggests, as relief to her own image.

Because of the contrast between the way the characters of Laurence's mothers and that of Codrescu are deployed, I am reminded of the essay, "Adding to my Life." Codrescu's mother barges into her son's story only to resist his telling of her life, which he admits is an act of sabotage. Her character makes clear the impossibility of Codrescu composing a definitive account of his own life, never mind that of someone else. Laurence's mothers, on the other hand, none of whom were living at the time the book was written, are cast, for the most part, as acquiescent subjects; Laurence presumes that their lives are knowable to her. The dance metaphor, for example, allows Laurence to

claim unique access to intergenerational knowledge; because she can interpret her mothers' "life dances," she is privy to information that they never spoke of to her. Laurence's own love of dance may have inspired her to use it as the dominant metaphor of her memoir; but I suspect she also favours such a metaphor because, as long as it remains loosely defined, it allows her free rein to interpret her mothers' lives. The foreword, in which the author imagines the unwitnessed dances of her mothers, foreshadows the liberties she will take throughout the memoir:

I never saw my maternal grandmother dance, although I think she must have, both ballroom dancing and square dancing with the fiddler and a caller in country schoolhouses. In her quilts and hooked rugs she also danced some of her perseverance, her gentleness, her hard work, her pain, her life. I never saw any of my mothers dance, although I feel sure that they did, and that my own young mother perhaps even danced with me when I was a very young child. My mothers must have danced the steps of their youth: the waltz, the Charleston, the two-step. No, I never saw my mothers actually dancing, but they all danced in the other ways, the ways that are different from the dance observed as a dance. (18)

Significantly, Laurence concludes this first chapter by linking her speculations about her mothers' dances with her own knowledge of them: "I had three mothers. I have countless foremothers. I never saw my mothers dancing. But now I know their dance" (19).

I believe in the earnestness of Laurence's attempt to tell a previously untold female story. She wants to bring a maternal story to Codrescu's imagined circle of sanctioned storytellers who gather around a fire to speak. But, in her timidity, she brings the self-sacrificing story of maternity that those already-sanctioned heroes already have told themselves. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence creates a world in which all women are not only mothers but mothers who have sacrificed their vocational dreams in order to raise children. Because Laurence takes the experience of having given birth to be at the core of all female experience, she cannot admit into her fictional world the story of those women who have never bore children. For example, although Laurence defends

Mum against those who would argue that stepmothers are not "real" mothers, she herself does not seem convinced. Interestingly, the author conspicuously omits the fact that her younger brother Robert was adopted, leading the reader to believe that Mum was the biological parent of one of her children.<sup>4</sup>

In my early readings of the book, I assumed that Laurence adopted a malleable definition of motherhood and used the term "mother" casually to imply a range of relationships. After all, the unusual claim to have three mothers (made particularly unusual by the fact that, in the words of Alexandra Pett, "throughout most of her adult life, Laurence did not have a living mother figure" [210]) would demand a flexible defining of the term. However, I now suspect that the opposite is true, that is, that Laurence can claim a multitude of women as mothers because she moulds their stories to a single narrative. Differences between the women are minimized when, for example, Laurence summarizes the contents of the chapters on Verna, Marg, and Elsie:

All of them were talented artists in their various ways--music, teaching, writing. All of them might have, under other circumstances, pursued careers that fulfilled their talents, as well as marrying and having children. I mourn that loss, even as I rejoice in the riches they gave their children, no matter how hard up they were for money.

The story of Verna, Laurence's birth mother, makes most explicit the degree to which Laurence is invested in telling her mothers' stories in terms of a narrative of self-sacrificial nurturing. Because Verna died when her daughter was only four, the life story presented in *Dance on the Earth* is largely the product of the author's imagination

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<sup>4</sup> Describing Robert's homecoming, Laurence writes, "My brother, Robert Morrison Wemyss, was born in May 1933, and named after our dad. . . . I was overjoyed. Overjoyed, that is, until I realized that a baby is a demanding creature, and that your mum has to spend a lot of time looking after this kid. . . . He is *her* baby. She thinks he's great so you look at him. . . . Mum might have been more nervous about him when he was a baby than she would have been if she had been a younger mother. She was in her early forties when he was born, after all" (52).

and consequently, it provides more insight into Laurence's compositional strategies than it does into Verna's character. I've chosen the following quotation in order to demonstrate the multiple layers of assumption upon which Laurence must draw in order to sketch out a figure who, like her, struggled with the oppositional demands of childrearing and vocational calling. Extrapolating from sparse evidence, the author assumes, firstly, that her mother would have wanted to pursue a career in music, secondly, that she would have been unable to do so and, thirdly, that she would have regretted this loss:

If she had lived, however, it is entirely possible she might have regretted her lost career in music. Even if she had tried to do everything--to be wife, mother, and professional musician--it would have been virtually impossible for her to have achieved professional status without wealth and a great deal of domestic help. A few women did succeed, of course, but given the demands of a concert career it seems unlikely that most women musicians and singers were able, in those days, to combine their careers with raising a family. If they had a vocation, they chose not to marry. Naturally I'm glad my mother chose to have me, but had she lived to see adulthood, I can't see that she could have failed to feel some regrets for that other self of hers, her own self of music. (37)

Here, I want to emphasize Laurence's ambiguity toward Verna's sacrifice: she at once regrets and is thankful for the self-renunciation that would have been endured on her behalf. Similarly, although Laurence mourns the independence that Marg forfeited in becoming a stepmother, she also indicates that her own fate relied upon this sacrifice. For example, she credits the "miracle" of having grown up to be as steady as she is to "Mum, who quit her teaching and came back to look after me, and then to look after both my brother and me for so many years after our dad died" (49). Laurence's feminist convictions compel her to champion a changed world in which women like her mothers would be free to pursue their ambitions. However, because, the author's own autobiographical persona is, as I elaborate further shortly, dependent on their sacrifice, she must, at

the same time, render their self-abnegation natural and unpreventable. Here again, as I show in the following section, Laurence relies on the humanist conception of home to work as an unacknowledged enforcer of a hegemonic social order.

#### Home and the Gender of Creativity

*The passions simmer and resimmer in solitude: the passionate being prepares his explosions and his exploits in solitude.*

*And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative. . . The recollection of moments of confined, simple, shut-in spaces are experiences of heartwarming space, of a space that does not seek to become extended, but would like above all still to be possessed. (Bachelard<sup>9-10</sup>)*

I point here to the above quotation from *Poetics of Space* because, like Laurence, its author links creativity not only with solitude but with a safe and domestic solitude. For Bachelard, creativity is, in the final moments, nurtured not by, for example, the "on the road" type of adventure associated with the Beat movement, but with the "heartwarming" space that allows one, quietly, and without outside interference, to think, write, paint, or simply sit alone with oneself. The house, then, becomes a necessary precondition to creativity; the house, if it is imagined as a home, "shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6).

That the humanist concept of home is intrinsically gendered, in that it both requires a mother and that it is a mother, has become a truism. But here I want to emphasize the way in which such a home engenders creativity. In the humanist dream of home, our dwellings always are endowed with maternal qualities: they provide nurturing

and care and shield us from the outside responsibilities and frustrations that--at least according to this model of creativity--would thwart the creative impulse. In concrete terms, this implies that artists can be most creative when someone else is looking after all the responsibilities of daily life.<sup>5</sup> In more abstract terms, it implies that home is imagined through a symbolic conflation of woman and home.

In naturalizing the order of the humanist home in *Dance on the Earth*, Margaret Laurence naturalizes an order in which writing and motherhood exist as an oppositional dualism whereby writing is a masculine and selfish pursuit that is opposed to but dependent on the nurturing of a selfless woman. When describing her young self, Laurence is able to adopt this dualistic model easily because, as a child, she is not yet marked by sex and is cared for by her mothers. For example, remembering that she "needed and did have an unusual amount of privacy in order to think and write," Laurence, writing of the Big House, speaks with gratitude of its "special places," "the play-house, the loft, my own bedroom," (69) each valued according to their degree of "inaccessib[ility] to the adult eye" (67). In these refuges, she could indulge in activities that foreshadow her future career. She remembers them as the spaces where she "spent so many hours sitting at the white enamel table in the bay window, writing" (101), "kept my five-cent scribbler in which I was writing a novel entitled 'The Pillars of the Nation'" (67) and "read for hours" (64).

As Laurence is herself aware, the space and time she was permitted in order to nurture her creative self was available to her only because Mum took care of "the

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<sup>5</sup>Here, I should make clear, that although home implies a role duality of male creativity and female nurturing, these roles do not have to be played out by a man and a woman. For example, as a woman who lives alone and does creative work within my home, I suspect I often experience this model of home by "mothering" myself. That is, rather than experiencing a model of creativity that represents a transcension of categorization, I create a home for myself from which I then benefit.

cooking, the cleaning, the mending of clothes, and the mending of hearts" (130), tasks described by Laurence as unfairly assigned to women. Mum's experience of the Big House can, in fact, be read as polarly oppositional to that of her young charge: while Laurence escapes probing eyes, Mum is always available to others; while the house nurtures Laurence's creativity and independence, its care denies Mum hers; when Laurence dreams, Mum must be practical. Moreover, while Laurence is free to leave the house, Mum is bound to it. Laurence comments that when Mum was in Neepawa "coping with her ancient and difficult father and bringing up her young son, I was out there dancing on the earth" (108). Marg Simpson Wemyss is repeatedly described as self-denying, lonely, and anxious: a talented and intelligent woman who sacrificed a great deal in order to be a good wife and mother. In contrast, Laurence, at least until her graduation from university (which was, in part, paid for with money sent from home by Mum), is sacrificed for, and encouraged in almost every way to develop a strong sense of self.

The sexism intrinsic in this dualism is not lost on Laurence and, as a feminist, she seems to want to suggest that the fates of Mum and her other mothers could have been different. However, because Laurence adheres to a model of creativity which requires selfless maternal care, her own identity as a writer requires that her mothers' lives be told as narratives of self-sacrifice. In other words, Laurence needs to describe her mothers in this way so that she can explain how she herself became a writer. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, that her mothers sacrificed their own vocational ambitions in order to nurture their families justifies, perhaps ironically, Laurence's own decision to write: in composing a memoir in which she positions herself as part of a lineage of unfulfilled women, Laurence can cast her own vocational ambition not in terms of selfishness but as a vindication of the lives that preceded hers. In casting all her

mothers--at least as they are described by her--as having struggled, like she did, with the conflicting demands of marriage, motherhood, and vocation and having, regrettably, sacrificed vocation, Laurence seems to imply that she is doing what her mothers would have wanted to do.

By placing her mothers in the houses that imply what Lars Lerup would refer to as a "singularity of meaning" (16), the maternal sacrifices that are so integral to Laurence's own story are rendered unquestionably acceptable. In Laurence's descriptions of the single family houses that she identifies as homes, all family members play out their roles as obediently as the automatons for whom Lerup proposes these structures were designed. For Laurence, home implies a predestined place for everything and everyone. For example, when, remembering the relief she felt upon moving back into the Little House, she comments that she was able to reinstall her desk in the attic corner "where it had always belonged," (58), she is alluding to a law of placeness which takes an immutable order as its premise. Because, in *Dance on the Earth*, home represents a natural order, Laurence can know how her mother's family lived by observing the arrangement of their house's bedrooms. While her assumption that, through examining the three-bedroom house, she can know that the parents' slept in the biggest room, girls shared one bedroom and boys the other, appears fairly innocuous, that Laurence "can't see how else they could have arranged things" (27) suggests that, without acknowledgment, she is adopting a larger set of assumptions about "normal" family life.

Among these assumptions is that the woman of the house will serve as nurturer and caretaker for other members of the family.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Laurence does not need to know

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<sup>6</sup> Although my focus here is on the link between mothers and home, I want also to point out that a humanist vision which imagines the home as a naturally nurturing place also naturalizes the presence of servants. Thus, for example, if Laurence, as I observed in the previously, "hates" having outsiders in her home, she



the details of her mothers' lives in order to understand their motivations and ambitions: they are revealed to her through knowledge of their domestic arrangements. In referring to the reasons why her father and stepmother got married, Laurence rules out the possibility of motivation other than concern for her, as a child, and possibly platonic companionship. Furthermore, the marriage is described as almost predetermined by their co-habitation in the Little House. Laurence writes,

Her marriage to my father couldn't have been love's young dream. . . Bob was a young lawyer, left alone with a four-year-old daughter. He needed support and help. Margaret Simpson gave it. She gave up a lot for that. She was not simply a teacher, her vocation was teaching. . . I imagine Bob and Marg living in the same house, the Little house, for a year, he sleeping in the bedroom where he and Verna had slept and she in the little back bedroom, me in my attic room. I imagine them saying after about a year, "This is ridiculous. We'd better get married" . . . I like to think of their marriage as a marriage of comrades. I was the unknowing catalyst whom they both loved and for whom they wanted the best, but they liked each other and could talk together. They joined in a marriage that was marked both by mutual need and by mutual respect and affection. (49-50)

For Mum, as for Laurence herself, the house dictates women's roles as nurturers and obviates the possibility of personal desire in general, and sexual longing in particular.

#### The Mothering House

Laurence's inability to envision a model of motherhood and vocational calling that is not intrinsically conflictual becomes particularly problematic in her recounting of her adult life in which, as both a writer and a mother, she is positioned in an

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does not appear to mind the stream of "hired girls" who people her childhood or hired help to do deeds she is not comfortable doing. Moreover, although Laurence repeatedly writes of her struggle over the ethics of employing servants, when she finds that a maid "comes with the house" she has rented from a distinguished professor, she unproblematically accepts and even pokes fun at the "sturdy cleaning woman who loved to polish the hardwood floors" whom she has "inherit[ed]" (207). The employment of servants, which presents such an overt dilemma to Laurence elsewhere, seems to be acceptable when maid and house come as package deal.

inherently contradictory position. If she is to be a good mother, not only must she sacrifice for her children in the same way that her mothers sacrificed for her; she, herself, if she is to write, is in need of nurturing--she needs both to be a mother and to have one.

The home here becomes particularly integral to her narrative. For one thing, because, as a writer, she works within the home, she can gloss over the way her work may have detracted from the time she gives to her children. As long as she positions herself within her home, she can convince the reader that she did, in fact "do it all," that is, that, without straying from stereotype, she lived both as female nurturer and male artist. But her story quickly falls apart as soon as she contextualizes herself elsewhere. For example, Laurence avers that she experienced extreme guilt every time she left her children in England in order to teach, tour, or accept awards in Canada. However, while this guilt was undoubtedly real, I read her descriptions of her physical departures as points in the text where she must admit to the decisions that she made, on a smaller scale, on a daily basis. After all, in not repeating the patterns of self-renunciation lived by her mothers, Laurence could not possibly have given to her children, as she would have the reader believe, the same type of mothering that she, as a child, had received. Unlike her own mothers, at least as they are described by her, in order to write, Laurence must have constantly and in mundane ways claimed her own time and space.

Laurence's houses doubly aid her in glossing over the discrepancy between the narratives she adheres to for the purpose of the memoir and the life she undoubtedly lived. In describing her childhood, Laurence sets the groundwork for a definition of home that conflates house and woman. She describes Mum, for example, as bound to the house and

almost literally conflates woman and architecture when she comments that Mum "had a keen mind and a witty one. Our house was never shrouded in gloom" (59). Interestingly, when Laurence describes her own maturation into adulthood and motherhood, she does not position herself as similarly bound but, rather, as an occupant of a house that is *itself* a mother. Consequently, the house supports her claim that she adhered to the mythology of both the selfless mother and the nurtured artist. The home itself shoulders some of the responsibility of raising her children at the same time as it nurtures Laurence herself.

In other words, as an adult, Laurence can avoid the responsibilities she prescribes to mothers by placing herself in a house that does the mothering for her. Significantly, in introducing the portrait of Lady Maclean with a seemingly out-of-context comment about Mum, Laurence parallels Marg and the portrait: "I used to think about Mum a lot and I grew to understand more about how her life must have been. The other person I thought about was a person I had never met, Alan's mother, Lady Maclean" (169). In making this link, Laurence seems to suggest that Elm Cottage comes equipped with its own mother. Consequently, when Laurence leaves for Canada she appears unconcerned about leaving her children--even if, as I pointed to earlier, they are with near-strangers--if they are in Elm Cottage. For example, in describing her decision to move back to Canada while David, 17, <sup>was to</sup> remain in England, she remembers the anxiety that he may not be able to stay in Elm Cottage as her only concern: "I wanted to move back to Canada. I knew I'd have to sell Elm Cottage eventually, but I didn't want David to have to move out of his home the moment he left school" (201).

Moreover, Laurence credits Elm Cottage with nurturing her self as a writer. Elm Cottage feeds her ideas. She praises it for having "given" her six books in the way she recalls that it gave her *The Diviners*: "I remember sitting down in my study in Elm

Cottage one morning, the kids safely off to school, opening a notebook and beginning, as I always have, as though taking down dictation" (176). The house is endowed with human characteristics. Describing her final night in Elm Cottage, Laurence comments, "The house, as always, protected me until the very end of our association . . . . It would remain the home to which I owed so much, and where I had done so much of my work. I had loved it, as I have loved all my homes" (204-205). Finally, on the last page of the memoir, Laurence classes her houses along with her work and family as objects of her gratitude. "I have been blessed," she asserts, "with my children, with my work, with a mate of many years and a parting that was mutually respecting, with enduring friends, with my families and my places of home" (222).

### Disruptive Narratives: Joan Didion's "The White Album" and the Stories Margaret Laurence Won't Tell

*I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no "meaning" beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience. In what would probably be the middle of my life I still wanted to believe in narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as more electrical than ethical.*

*During this period I spent what were for me the usual proportions of time in Los Angeles and New York and Sacramento. I spent what seemed to many people I knew an eccentric amount of time in Honolulu, the particular aspect of which lent me the illusion that I could any minute order from room service a revisionist theory of my own history, garnished with a vanda orchid. I watched Robert Kennedy's funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai. I reread all of George Orwell on the Royal Hawaiian Beach, and I also read, in the papers that came one day late from the mainland, the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die in the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child, whose fingers had to be pried loose from the Cyclone fence when she was rescued twelve hours later by the California Highway Patrol, reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew. (Didion 13)*

During the writing of this thesis, I referred back several times to Joan Didion's essay "The White Album" and began to use it as a touchstone. In it, Didion weaves together personal anecdote, political events of the late sixties, theoretical musings, and points at which her own life as a political reporter intersected with "The News" to tell of a period in her life when she lost faith in the narratives she had come to rely on as ballasts. My fascination with many aspects of Didion's work precedes my study of Margaret Laurence and *Dance on the Earth*. But I credit some of my recent interest in "The White Album" with the way it serves as a counterpoint to Laurence's memoir. Didion can be read as a foil to Laurence. For example, when Laurence describes an epiphanic moment that, at age fourteen, revealed to her that she "ha[d] to be a writer," she is telling of her life in terms of a predestined path that she followed until her death. Didion, on the other hand, speaks of having lost "the plot." While, as I elaborate shortly, Laurence speaks of a home that protects and nurtures her, Didion suggests that any humanist conception of home is just another unreliable mythology. Also, significantly, while Laurence presents herself as fully sane and reiterates to the reader that "stability" has always been one of her dominant character traits, Didion tells of a time in her life when she was spinning and disoriented.

It is unfair of me to wish that Margaret Laurence were more like Joan Didion, that, like Didion, she had recognized that sometimes our lives fit into no known narrative. As I acknowledge in my introduction to *Dance on the Earth*, much of my own reaction to the book undoubtedly results from my own personal offence at Laurence's seeming indifference to the reality lived by a reader like myself. As I finish this thesis and am faced with an utter unknowingness about where I'll be a year from now or even three months from now, I am even more inclined than I was when I started writing to

feel frustrated by an author who claims to have had, from an early age, access to a coherent narrative that served her throughout her life. But I also do not want to romanticize Joan Didion, whom I have set up as Laurence's antithesis. Didion's essay aims to expose the narratives upon which we rely as mythologies but it is also a cautionary tale. In allowing the reader to peruse a page and a half long psychiatric evaluation, Didion suggests that, although on one level she appeared fully functioning (for example, in 1968, the year of which she speaks, she was named a *Los Angeles Times* "Woman of the Year"), on another she was unable to cope with her own critical stance on societal mythologies. Perhaps those master narratives adopted by Laurence, such as that of the nurturing woman or the divinely inspired masculine artist are now too dated to be useful, at least to me. However, I read "The White Album" as suggesting that the need for narratives--even flawed ones--persists.

Laurence herself undoubtedly would agree. Her deliberate departure from a more conventional chronological telling of her life and her painstaking effort to create a unique structure that reflects a different autobiographical reality than the one that has been expressed in the past reveal that she longs to explore a new way of telling her self. For instance, writing a memoir in which three chapters are dedicated to the telling of one's mothers' lives and only one to the telling of one's own could point to an assertion of communal identity that would contradict Gusdorf's precept that the autobiographical writer must recognize the uniqueness of his or her individual life. As I've made clear, I do not think that Laurence succeeds in using this structure to express a new form of selfhood: Laurence employs her mothers' stories, as Gusdorf would have all stories outside of that of the autobiographer his- or herself, as relief for her own.

I should add, however, that I do read Laurence's description of her relationship with her own children as a genuine departure from Gusdorf's call for discrete individuality. Although Laurence seems to feel motivated by a sense of feminist activism to claim communal identity with her mothers, she apologizes for the seemingly genuinely communal relationship she experiences with her children. She begins the chapter entitled "Margaret Wemyss Laurence" by expressing her reluctance to write about her children, explaining that "their lives belong to themselves not to me" (135). And yet, she finds that she cannot tell her own story without telling **parts of** theirs as well. Their very births are as much if not more a part of her own narrative as they are of her children's. She makes clear the degree to which she experiences an identity that cannot be separated from those of her children in her recollection of the time she spent, during Mum's illness, staying at her aunt's house in Victoria. Laurence reacts to Aunt Ruby's sleeping arrangement, in which Laurence is to share a bedroom with her and Laurence's children are to sleep in the basement, by complaining that she would not have privacy from Aunt Ruby: "Contemplating this arrangement, my first thought was that I couldn't have my kids in the basement when I was relatively so far away. I would also have no privacy. Lights out when Aunt Ruby chose. No place to work. . . . Without privacy I knew I would break down entirely" (114). And yet, she does not recognize her chosen alternative--to sleep in the basement with her children--as anything but private. Describing the makeshift room she constructed out of blankets, she explains, "I had my own space before Mum and Aunt Ruby returned" (114).

Moreover, in other places in the memoir, I understand Laurence as wishing for but unable to intelligibly imagine an alternative space that would imply a narrative that differs from the singular one dictated by the single family detached house. I like to

think that, in describing a model "dwarf house" (71) she designed and built as a child and childhood spaces like the "dark and suitably spooky" loft, which, with candles and plants, she turned into her own "theater" and "stage" (67), Laurence is identifying a longing to create an architecture that is representative of another, yet unknown, narrative. I read these creatively designed dwellings as symbols of Laurence's unfulfilled desire to move beyond the roles that I perceive her as feeling compelled to adopt in order to write her memoir. That, but for the basement room constructed in Aunt Ruby's basement, she only acknowledges having imagined such architectures when she was a child implies that, if Laurence did hold hopes for an alternatively structured world, these hopes were merely childhood dreams.

In fact, in the context of *Dance on the Earth*, she cannot imagine such spaces as an adult. In the memoir, Laurence can contextualize her adult self only within single family houses because she has created an autobiographical persona that, like a perspective drawing, makes sense only from a single viewing position. As I've elaborated in this thesis, when Laurence contextualizes her writing self outside of the home, she exposes the inherent impossibility of her claim that she lived as a selfless mother while simultaneously pursuing a self-interested vocational endeavour. Moreover, had she claimed as home one of the apartments in which she lived temporarily, she would have been required to identify herself not as a woman who loves all children as her own, but rather as one with a basic intolerance of disruption who maintains a love only for those others who in no way infringe on the borders of her own life. In other words, the credibility of Laurence's autobiographical persona relies on the reader's acceptance that a home which is naturally nurturing and protective is Laurence's "true" and natural context. Laurence



cannot acknowledge that perhaps, like all narratives, that of home is partial and fallible.

I am again reminded of Didion who, in "The White Album," claims as home the very type of space that I imagine Laurence, had she lived there, would have written off as a temporary and inconvenient place of residence. Didion recalls that she lived in a part of Hollywood she enigmatically refers to as "a senseless-killing neighborhood" (15) in a house that, due to rezoning laws, was about to be torn down. Her neighbours, she recalls, were "rock and roll bands, therapy groups, very old women wheeled down the street by practical nurses in soiled uniforms" (16). As opposed to Laurence, who speaks in terms of separating herself from those who do not belong within her household and of enjoying a domestic orderliness, Didion admits to having had very little control over her own house. "In the big house on Franklin Avenue," she recalls, "many people seemed to come and go without relation to what I did. I knew where the sheets and towels were kept but I did not always know who was sleeping in every bed. I had the keys but not the key" (19). Didion also suggests that our trust that our homes are good and protective is pitiable. Having lived in a self-described paranoid state, Didion remembers that she was convinced that, disguised as friends, strangers wielding knives could enter the permeable space of her household, that phones could be bugged. She, like David Friedman in his contribution to *The Architect's Dream*, makes clear to the reader that "all houses are haunted. All houses have some wildness, some violence, some restless homelessness residing in the hollows of the walls" (9).

I am drawn to Didion because, in her descriptions of disorientation, I am able to locate some of the narratives that Laurence could have potentially told but didn't for fear of disrupting the face of her autobiographical image. For example, I am always

stopped by Didion's telling of the woman who left her child to die by the side of the road. What would become of Laurence's story if she acknowledged such a narrative as a way that some women experience motherhood, at least some of the time? To begin with, Laurence would not be able to tell her own mothers' lives as if, simply because she and they shared the experience of *being* mothers, their stories and motivations were knowable to her. She would also be unable to maintain most of her political views. For instance, she would not be able to embrace a pro-choice position that is premised on mothers' intrinsic morality. (Abortion, in Laurence's view, should be legal and accessible because only an aberrant woman would rely on it as anything but a painful last resort [35].) Nor would she be able to refer unquestioningly to a link between motherhood and pacifism. In short, several of the memoir's premises would crumble.

In *Dance on the Earth*, as I have argued, these other stories exert too much pressure to be kept cleanly edited out. Everywhere I find hints that Laurence's story is affected by, for example, those other "bad" mothers whom Laurence requires herself to treat as aberrations. Referring to female political leaders, she qualifies--and effectively repudiates--her claim that women are inherently peace-loving. Laurence comments,

When I think of women like Margaret Thatcher, the belligerent and awful prime minister of England, who herself has two children, or the late Indira Gandhi, also a mother, I wonder what fallacies of reasoning I must have to believe that if men could give birth, the predominantly male governments of the world might not take life so lightly. (149)

When describing her own mothers, she can more easily cast into the mould of willing self-sacrifice those mothers whom she barely knew. While the stories of Elsie and Verna, with whom she had little to no extended contact, conform almost unproblematically to Laurence's formula of motherhood, that of Marg, whom she knew intimately, proves more

troublesome. Underneath Laurence's claim that Mum unbegrudgingly sacrificed for her daughter runs another story, one that reveals a current of tension between stepmother and daughter and that belies romanticized notions of an unconditional mother-love. For example, upon first reading, Laurence's detailed description of the old silver teapot Mum gave her for her wedding seems to communicate only her delight at having received a "marvelous" gift. But Laurence's addition of Mum's enigmatic comment causes me to wonder in what spirit the gift was given--and received. Laurence writes, "'You can clean it now,' Mum said with a small laugh" (104). Moreover, Laurence seems to try to rationalize why, before her wedding night, Mum gave her a Dorothy Parker story "about a young couple on their honeymoon who are very embarrassed about sex." Although Laurence attributes the gift to Mum's own discomfort with sex, she admits, "I didn't know if Mum thought this was amusing, but I was upset and offended" (105). In places, Laurence seems to use her memoir to get back at Mum. For instance, in recounting an incident that occurred in London, she overtly cast Mum in an unfavourable light:

One day in London, just before Jocelyn was born, I was fussing with my hair. Mum, whose hair had been grey for years, said to me fairly angrily, "A lady gets dressed and makes up her appearance and then forgets about it." I felt a bit hurt, but later I saw that what she was trying to say was about herself not about me at all. (109)

In fact, the pressure of the stories Laurence refuses to acknowledge seems at times so strong that I do not believe that Laurence herself expected the reader to ignore them. I find it difficult to imagine that Laurence, a meticulous craftswoman who spent a career developing complex fictional characters, would have expected the reader to find credible the impossible world she creates in *Dance on the Earth*. Here I want to point to a textual example that causes me to question whether knowingly or not, Laurence creates a text that points to its own impossibility. In speaking of Marg's marriage to her father,

Laurence repeats a seemingly benign comment that her stepmother once made: „Mum once said to me, when I myself was about to get married, 'Your father was a kind man. Kindness is a valuable quality. We don't see much of it., They were kind to each other. They married not just to look after me but to look after each other" (50) I gave this quotation little thought until I read *A Jest of God*, in which the protagonist, Rachel, referring to her own mother, remarks on a similar comment:

She believes resolutely that she never speaks ill of anyone or harmfully to a soul. Once when I was quite young, she said to me, "Whatever people say of it, your father is a kind man--you must always believe that, Rachel." Until that moment it had never occurred to me that he might not be thought a kind man. . . . Her weapons were invisible, and she would never admit even to carrying them, much less putting them to use" (46).

The way in which Laurence's novel directly contradicts the message she appears to want to put forth in her memoir causes me to wonder whether Laurence herself knew the degree to which her romanticization of the maternal role was a reduction of real experience. Perhaps she did not expect these saintly mothers to be credible and, consequently, did not expect the reader to take seriously the political convictions--from pacifism to abortion--that she premises on this saintliness. Perhaps, in creating an autobiographical persona that is so blatantly premised on impossible claims, Laurence deliberately creates a character who lays claim to a noncredible identity. That is, perhaps by premising her more radical political views on their own impossibility, she works to create a persona of a well-intentioned but overly idealistic person who, reassuringly, presents no threat to the status quo.

## **An Inconclusive Ending**

When I wrote the first part of this thesis, I was able to focus on a dual identity--as student and artist--in order to describe myself, albeit sketchily, in a single paragraph. Now, even to provide the most cursory self-description, I would need more space, more explanation and qualification. Just as I am coming to the time when I will no longer be able to identify myself, as I have for most of my life, as a student, I am also considering either ceasing to go to Alaska or changing what I do there drastically and in yet unknown ways. Furthermore, I suspect that, within the next few months I will be moving, although I'm **not** sure to where. In other words, many of my own narratives, those labels that, in defining what I do and where I live allow me to tie myself into society with a single word, will shortly become obsolete. While, at times, I am excited by this upcoming freedom, I am in greater parts scared. In looking back at the last two months of my life, I recognize a frenetic energy that I associate with **being unsettled**. I've been experiencing moments of extreme self-doubt as well as their opposite--times when I am not just feeling confident but overwhelmingly and what seems to me almost frantically confident.

I have already made clear that I would have wanted Laurence to reveal more about how she felt at times like this. I would want to know what it was like for her on those days, that she undoubtedly had, when she lost sight of the fact that mystical forces compelled her to write, when she was uncertain of her identity as *writer*. And yet, I can relate to the allure of looking back on your life and creating a narrative whose logic suggests that *where you are now* is where you were intended to end up. If I continue painting professionally, I can imagine telling a story that casts me, from the beginning, as an artist. Even now, when people ask me how I got started, I begin by relaying that I was always one of those kids who loved to draw. If, for example, I move up north, I can

imagine saying, as many of my Alaskan friends do, that I knew from the time I first took the ferry up the Inside Passage that *this is where I belong*. Even though, especially after working through this thesis, I can recognize the lie in a story such as this, I still adhere to it as a type of truth. In a similar way, I **both** adhere and don't adhere to the mythology of the humanist home. For example, I don't perceive insulating oneself from outside forces--even disruptive ones--as a desirable way to live. And yet, I know from experience that I often want to claim my space as mine and exert as much control as possible over it.

In coming to the end of this thesis, I can only speak of what I've learnt in ambiguous terms. I criticize Laurence, and yet, I sometimes relate to her--both in my need to adhere to certain narratives and in some of the narrative of home that I accept. Although I feel I've been successful in pointing to some the reasons why her adherence to the rigid narratives of mother and writer is problematic, I am not certain where this analysis leaves me. In grappling with *Dance on the Earth*, I have come to understand the way in which Laurence's own identity is premised on its own impossibility but I can't find for myself a place of unproblematic possibility on which to stand. If nothing else, I hope that, in showing how the normative definitions of home and autobiography are the products and premises of humanist thinking, I've been able to elucidate the way all of us adopt and naturalize narratives. In analyzing the links between home, identity, and autobiography and the way they work to mutually reinforce each other, I have come to an understanding of personal narrative that, I hope, is relevant to more than the study of autobiography: whether we write autobiographically or not, we all tell stories about ourselves, to ourselves and others.

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