Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

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The Robber Bride; or, Who Is a True Canadian?

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Even the real thing looks constructed. When Roz saw her first Alp, she thought, Bring out the chorus line in bodices and dirndls, and let’s all yodel. Maybe that’s what people mean by a national identity. The hired help in outfits. The backdrops. The props. (Robber Bride, 88)

This parodic representation of national identity as staged performance resonates against Margaret Atwood’s more serious remarks in Macleans (“Survival,” 57): “Canada’s well-known failure to embrace a single ‘identity’ of the yodelling or Beefeater variety has come to seem less like a failure than a deliberate and rather brave refusal. . . . The former Canadian-identity question, ‘Where is here?’ has been replaced by ‘Who are we?’.” It is within these parameters that I want to consider The Robber Bride as part of Atwood’s ongoing inquiry into what “being Canadian” means.

Atwood has always been an astute and sensitive cultural critic, charting shifts in Canada’s social attitudes and nationalist ideology, speaking from her own position as a white Anglophone Canadian woman, born in Ontario and living in Toronto. The narrative voices in her novels may speak out of that specific location of culture, gender, and race; but her fictional territory extends beyond that to include other and “othered” ethnic and racial identities in Canadian society, their presence sharpened by Atwood’s critique of widespread English Canadian prejudice and what nonwhite writers refer to as the systemic violence of racism in Canada (Bannerji, 11). Though signaling the presence of those
“others,” Atwood does not attempt to negotiate racial politics; instead, she engages with issues of white immigrancy and ethnicity in *The Robber Bride* (as she had earlier in *Life before Man* and as she does in *Alias Grace*), in answer to her question, “Who are we?” The novel primarily addresses English Canadian anxieties about changing representations of national identity, focused at a precise point in time and place: Toronto in 1990–1991, while that city is itself situated in the international context, with events in Eastern Europe and the Gulf War whirling around. Atwood’s concerns with late-twentieth-century Canada’s malaise have shifted from anxieties about the country’s political survival expressed in *Wilderness Tips* (1991), where the title story registers a “slippage in the bedrock” of traditional English Canadian myths of nationhood under pressures of Quebec separatism and the cultural and political resurgence of First Nations People (Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 33–37). In *The Robber Bride* she is asking, “Are we really that different from anybody else? And if so, how?” (“Survival,” 58) What do distinctively Canadian identities—personal and collective—look like in the nineties? And is Canadian identity always in the plural, to take account of cultural differences in revised narratives of Canada’s national heritage?

In seeking answers to these questions in *The Robber Bride*, Atwood appeals to the present “nation-space” as it is represented by Toronto, one of the three most ethnically and racially diverse cities in Canada. She also, characteristically, looks back to history, for “nothing has happened, really, that hasn’t happened before” (WT, 221). However, the answers vary from one historical period to another, for political choices change as power relations within a country shift in response to constantly changing relations between dominant and formerly marginal groups. The social space of postwar Toronto in *The Robber Bride* (from the 1940s to the early 1990s) might be interpreted through Homi Bhabha’s “discourse of nation,” for whatever else Atwood may be doing here, she is also narrating the nation. Any discourse of nation investigates the nation-space in the process of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are in medias res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of “composing” its powerful image. (Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 3)

It is within that context of what Bhabha calls “the problematic unity of the nation” and “the articulation of cultural difference” (Nation and
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_Narration, 5_) that we can most clearly situate _The Robber Bride_ as a postcolonial Canadian novel that displays the “cultural temporality of the nation” and its “always transitional social reality” (_Nation and Narration, 1_).

It is true that as a result of its changing immigration policies and demography since the end of World War II, Canada has shifted its ideological discourse of nation beyond the traditional Anglophone/francophone pattern that reflects its founding history so as to take account of widespread cultural and racial differences. This revised discourse of nation is codified in the 1988 Multiculturalism Act, which recognizes that ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural diversity are a “fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity.” Such recognition of the heterogeneous histories of its citizens fundamentally revises traditional colonial concepts of a dominantly British Canada, opening up the nation-space and necessitating a redefinition of the terms in which it is possible to think about Canadian nationhood and identity in a postcolonial context. The most appropriate terms for this redefinition of Canadianness would seem to be those offered by postcolonial theory and criticism, with its emphasis on immigrancy and nomadism, hybridity and diaspora, and its analysis of split selves and socially constructed “others.” The pervasive emphasis is on displacement and shifting subject positions where reinventions and transformations of the self become mechanisms of survival. (My frames of reference are Bannerji, 70–74; Bhabha 1994, 1–18; Brydon, 193–97; Hall, 392–403; and Mukherjee, 24–40.) If we look at _The Robber Bride_ from these postcolonial perspectives, we begin to notice that Atwood is peering beneath the surface of English Canadian narratives of identity as she looks into the life stories of three white Canadian women born during World War II, growing up and still living in Toronto in the 1990s. And what does she see? She sees hidden histories of immigrancy and cultural displacement, split subjects, dislocated identities, reinventions and renamings, a pervasive sense of otherness and not belonging. To read _The Robber Bride_ in postcolonial terms reveals how the white subject fractures under this analysis too. This is in no way meant to trivialize or minimize the experience of nonwhite subjects in Canada, nor the painful experiences of “negative othering,” but rather to highlight how Atwood’s fictional representations of subjectivity reveal the nonfixity of identity, and how her narrative strategies uncover secrets hidden in the past as she deconstructs myths of white English Canadian authenticity, showing how difference is a crucial factor in any identity construction.
The Robber Bride; or, Who Is a True Canadian?

Of course the catalyst in the novel is the Robber Bride, for Tony, Roz, and Charis are all threatened by Zenia, the European postwar immigrant, the Other Woman. Yet those three protagonists survive, and it is Zenia whose death is recorded (twice, as it happens). They are all there for both of her memorial services and the scattering of her ashes, and the novel ends with the three of them together, ready to tell more stories about their experiences with Zenia. So what exactly is Zenia’s role, and why is she the focus of the plot? Her role as the Other Woman has usually been interpreted in feminist terms focusing on issues of sexuality and gender in the novel, and I have seen only two essays that go beyond a feminist heading into “postimperial or nationalist interpretations (Hengen 1995, 271–86; Potts, 230–38). Thinking in postcolonial terms, would it not be possible to see a second frame of “othering” here, with the focus on Zenia as immigrant, in Atwood’s discourse of Canadianness? It is Zenia’s otherness that forces these women to confront dimensions of otherness within themselves, a fact obscurely recognized at the beginning by Tony, who like her creator is given to deconstructing the myths of history:

Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unravelled. . . .

But Zenia is also a puzzle, a knot: if Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free, for everyone involved, and for herself as well. Or this is her hope. She has a historian’s belief in the salutary power of explanations. (RB, 3)

Life histories do unravel in the course of the novel—not Zenia’s, but those of Tony, Roz, and Charis—and a great deal does come free. Storytelling becomes the agent of exorcism and opens the way for regeneration and new figurations of identity. Zenia herself remains an enigma to the end, and her multiple life stories seem like a series of magic mirrors held up to the Canadian women, magnifying and distorting their own deepest fears and desires: “She did it with mirrors. The mirror was whoever was watching” (RB, 461). As Hengen pertinently remarks, “Zenia’s foreignness, her difference, is precisely what each of the other three main characters must come to understand, and that difference is as powerful as any other force in their lives” (Hengen 1995, 278). Zenia is more than a threat; she is also a teacher, though her teaching methods are savagely painful. After all, as Atwood’s first epigraph reminds us, “A rattlesnake that doesn’t bite teaches you nothing.” Zenia’s lessons are about difference (which maybe should be spelled differance here), showing the three women how they might answer the
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questions that Atwood would pose six years later: “Are we really that different from anybody else? And if so, how?” (“Survival,” 58)

In this reading of Canadian female postcolonial subjectivities, my emphasis is less on Zenia and more on the three protagonists. Zenia herself is Rosi Braidotti’s Nomadic Subject par excellence, “Nomadism is . . . an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries. It is the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing” (Nomadic Subjects, 36). Zenia is always outside and on the loose, an exile and an invader. Incidentally these are the very terms that Atwood used to describe Canadians’ immigrant heritage in The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970). She crosses boundaries between nationalities as easily as she crosses between realism and fantasy, slipping in and out of these women’s lives over three decades. Though Zenia is a world traveler and those women stay at home in Toronto, their life histories also demonstrate the “illusory stability of fixed identities” (Braidotti, 15) as well as those “unhomely moments” that Bhabha locates within narratives of postcolonial identity (Location of Culture, 11). The difference is that for Tony, Charis, and Roz, these fissures are entirely subjective and invisible to others, and it is only in Zenia’s presence that what is repressed comes to light. Zenia disrupts the plots of their lives, forcing them to remember what they have forgotten and to redefine themselves in the crises that she precipitates.

Zenia may be a foreigner in Canada (a White Russian aristocrat on her mother’s side and with any one of three possible fathers—Greek, Polish, English—in the version she tells Tony), but Tony herself has always felt like a foreigner in Canada. We see her as one of Atwood’s flaneuses walking the streets of multicultural 1990s Toronto:

She likes the mix on the street here, the mixed skins. Chinatown has taken over mostly, though there are still some Jewish delicatessens, and, further up and off to the side, the Portuguese and West Indian shops of the Kensington Market. Rome in the second century, Constantinople in the tenth, Vienna in the nineteenth. . . .

. . . Among Chinese people she feels the right height, although she is not unaware of how she might be viewed by some of them. . . . Foreign, yes. Foreign here. (RB, 36)

From her perspective as a professional historian, Tony can compare Toronto with other earlier hybridized urban societies, just as in her war games the kitchen spices provide a more accurate representation of medieval populations not as “homogeneous blocks, but mixtures”
Nevertheless, Tony feels a deep sense of personal inadequacy when her hairdresser tells her that she is “almost Chinese,” which is rooted in her anxious early experience. As the child of an unhappy wartime marriage between a Canadian soldier and an English mother (who hated Canada and who later ran away to California), she grew up feeling not quite adequate to her parents’ expectations, not being English and not being a boy: “Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting. Like a foreigner she keeps an eye out for sudden hostile gestures. Like a foreigner she makes mistakes” (145).

Tony has always been a split subject, aware of her mind and body as a site of contradictory impulses, with her left-handedness and her ability to read and write backward, indeed to speak and sing backward as well. This is more than a college party trick (when she sings “Clementine” backward in the junior common room) for it is also her own “archaic” language, her secret source of power and resistance:

Tomato, she whispered to herself. Otamot. One of the Great Lakes. A stone war hammer used by an ancient tribe. If you said a word backwards, the meaning emptied out and then the word was vacant. Ready for a new meaning to flow in. (154)

Although Tony considers it absurd that people might think her speaking backward is Satan worship, there is a strong connection between spelling and spells here, as such language allows her to say what is otherwise forbidden. The voice of her other self speaks out of the anger and frustration that even as a child she has assiduously repressed, as in the startling example of the five-year-old Tony on a snowy slope with her mother. As her mother, utterly contemptuous of Tony’s refusal to go on the toboggan, careers off on it by herself, Tony screams, “No! No!” However, “inside herself she could hear another voice, also hers, which was shouting, fearlessly and with ferocious delight: On! On!” (137). Such double voicing offers the spectacle of the self as site of estrangement, which has been a consistent motif in Atwood’s writing from at least Lady Oracle through Alias Grace. Here we see Atwood’s construction of a split female subjectivity, which finds its parallel with the construction of the nonwhite postcolonial subject or the immigrant subject (Bannerji, 24), where the conscious self is shadowed, indeed displaced, by its “unborn twin.”

It is only in conversations with Zenia as a student in the 1960s that Tony manages to tell the story of her childhood with the pain of her mother’s abandonment and her father’s suicide shortly after she
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graduated. This telling is for Tony a kind of exorcism, while Zenia’s response in its duplicitous way both convinces her that she is not alone and also reduces its significance. Zenia’s story of her own wartime childhood experiences in Paris, though oddly parallel to Tony’s, is much worse and far more exciting. By comparison, Tony’s story looks “minor, grey, suburban . . . whereas Zenia’s sparkles—no, it glares, in the lurid though uncertain light cast by large and portentous world events. (White Russians!)” (166). Zenia’s foreignness represents for Tony her idealized other self, “herself as she would like to be: Tnomerf Ynot” (167). Indeed, it is this shadow self that Tony has normalized by becoming an expert in medieval military history. Tony’s fascination with Zenia confronts us with what Hengen calls “the old oppressions of a Eurocentric view” (Hengen 1995, 272), highlighting Tony’s Canadian sense of cultural inferiority, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the “Colonial Mentality. . . . It was part of a tendency to believe that the Great Good Place was, culturally speaking, elsewhere” (“Survival,” 56). Potts traces a very similar pattern in the relationship between Tony and Zenia, arguing that Tony is “the perfect victim for Zenia” (Potts, 232). I would argue the balance shifts, however, for just as Tony’s attitudes to Zenia change over thirty years, from admiration to deep distrust and finally to a more detached historicized perspective in the early 1990s, when Zenia is no longer seen as a threat, so does Tony revise to some extent her own Eurocentrism as she learns to live “at home” in Canada. When in the basement of her own house, where she lives with her beloved husband, West, Tony places the street map of Toronto on top of her sand-table map of medieval Europe; this is her decisive gesture of recognition that her own life’s frame of reference is located in Toronto (Howells, Margaret Atwood, 163–64). The rest of the world is still out there and Zenia still lurks as a shadow on the periphery of Tony’s mental landscape, but now she is History and the authority is in Tony’s hands: She owes her only a “remembrance. She owes her an end” (464). Returning to the idea of Atwood’s narrating the nation here, we might see Tony’s story as a recapitulation of Bhabha’s ambivalent national discourse, where the image of cultural authority is caught in the process of being composed; only here it is a process of shifting cultural affiliations.

For Roz, Zenia’s disruptions highlight an altogether different set of dilemmas that speak to her personal history, and that are also representative in the Canadian context. These dilemmas cluster around the related issues of immigrancy, ethnicity, and social class. Living in a mansion in Rosedale as a wealthy company director with a smart office
in a converted downtown brewery and cited in Toronto Life as one of “Toronto’s Fifty Most Influential” citizens (88), Roz would seem to personify the immigrant New World success story—except that Roz is not an immigrant, although she feels like one. Born in Toronto to a working-class Irish Canadian mother and a Jewish refugee father from Winnipeg, it is Roz who is most keenly aware of the inauthenticity of either personal or national identity. What is the real thing when identities are continually being reinvented? “When you alter yourself, the alterations become the truth. Who knows that better than Roz?” (102)

And how much does being Canadian depend on the passage of time rather than on a person’s ethnic origins? Roz’s thoughts on multicultural Canada reflect these dilemmas:

[H]ow many immigrants can you fit in? How many of them can you handle, realistically, and who is them, and where do you draw the line? The mere fact that Roz is thinking this way shows the extent of the problem, because Roz knows very well what it’s like to be them.

By now, however, she is us. It makes a difference. (100)

The concept of an evolving ethnicity is certainly one favored by many historians and sociologists:

New ethnic identities can emerge over time for identity is self-determined, whether Canadian, ethnic or recent newcomer. And the truth is that a majority of Canadians outside of Québec consider themselves ethnically Canadian and a majority of Francophone Québécois identify themselves as ethnically Québécois. (Buckner, 26)

Roz’s life story reflects the “transitional social realities” that characterize Canada’s postwar history. She herself has had several identities and changes of name, from Rosalind Greenwood to Roz Grunwald and later to Roz Andrews when she married Mitch. In those namings are encoded Roz’s transformations and her upward mobility but also her insecurities, for every one of her identities is shadowed by the others. Brought up in Toronto during the war by her Roman Catholic mother who kept a rooming house, Roz was teased at her convent by speculations about her absent father: “Where’s your father anyways? My Mum says he’s a DP” (329). To be called a Displaced Person was a slur, and in Roz’s memory of the daily harassment of European postwar refugees Atwood gives a sharp brief sketch of Canadian racial prejudice in the late 1940s: “DP! DP! Go back where you came from”
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(324). In this context it is all the more traumatic when Roz’s father does return a few years after the war and she discovers that he is a DP after all: “She can tell by the way he talks” (332).

With the arrival of her father and his two cronies, the “Uncles,” Roz discovers that she is half Jewish. Her father becomes a rich Toronto property developer, though the original source of his wealth remains mysterious for a long time, and when her family moves north into an enormous house with a three-car garage near Upper Canada College, Rosalind is given a new identity to fit her family’s new lifestyle. Her name is changed to Roz Grunwald, which was, she also discovers, her “real name all along” (343), but it was not safe to use it during the war because of Canadian anti-Semitic prejudice. (Indeed it had not been safe before the war, and was not entirely safe even in the late 1950s, it would appear, since Roz’s father still received hate calls because of his last name, 308). Roz shifts from being Catholic and poor like her mother to being rich and Jewish like her father, though she still feels like an outsider, split in two by her dual cultural inheritance: “But whereas once Roz was not Catholic enough, now she isn’t Jewish enough. She’s an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person” (344). Caught between cultures, Roz’s experience is that of being a Displaced Person in her own country, where she decides to survive by adopting the immigrant’s strategies of wariness and mimicry, even learning a new language: “She adds layers of language to herself, sticking them on, like posters on a fence” (345). With painful effort she transforms herself into an imitation of the Jewish princess she is supposed to be, adding for good measure her own interpretation to the performance. She becomes “smarter, funnier, and richer” than the other girls, for after all, she is “the joker” in the pack.

Even Roz’s marriage to the man she loves does nothing to alleviate her sense of being an outsider; in fact, it exacerbates it, for the handsome Mitch Andrews, representative of old Toronto WASP society, is a continual reminder of her socially inferior background. Their courtship is a devastating satire on Toronto snobbery, with its hypocrisies of money and class: “Roz was new money, Mitch was old money; or he would have been old money if he’d had any money” (312). Though I do not propose to discuss sexual politics here nor the “holy hell with Mitch” (303) and his repeated infidelities, which is the subtext of their family life, it is perhaps worth noting that even after twenty years of marriage, the old class paradigms have not shifted at all. Confronted by her husband’s air of social superiority, Roz still feels intimidated, remembering her own immigrant history: “Everyone she’s descended
from got kicked out of somewhere else, for being too poor or too politically uncouth or for having the wrong profile or accent or hair colour” (305).

However, despite her self-punishing love for Mitch, Roz is still her father’s daughter, the inheritor of his business skills and his fortune, and his greatest admirer. Her father remains an ambiguous figure, a risk taker with a war history full of secrets. The uncles declare that he was “the best,” but the best at what? Was he a hero (as Roz so much wants to believe), or was he a thief and a black marketeer? Was he perhaps both, as Uncle George suggests on his deathbed: “Your father was a crook. Don’t get me wrong, he was a hero, too. . . . Only some wouldn’t understand” (348–49). Of course it is through Roz’s quest for her father’s true story that Zenia first manages to seduce her with the claim that Roz’s father saved her life during the war: “But this is what she’s longed for always—an eyewitness, someone involved but impartial, who could assure her that her father really was what he was rumoured to be: a hero. Or a semi-hero; at any rate, more than a shady trader” (316).

In the version of her life story that Zenia tells Roz, Zenia comes of mixed Jewish and Roman Catholic parentage in Berlin. She is saved from the Holocaust by a forged passport Roz’s father provides and brought to Canada as a child refugee, growing up in Waterloo, Ontario. Zenia’s attack is characteristically double edged. On the one hand, her story speaks to Roz’s deepest desire, for it is Roz’s imagined tale of her father’s heroism magnified and given back to her, while it is also a melodramatic reflection of her own mixed inheritance and sense of otherness: “She’s not what she appears, a beautiful and successful career woman. . . . She’s a waif, a homeless wandering waif” (365). On several occasions Roz wishes that she were Zenia, and at this early stage of her attack, Zenia grants her that illusion. However, Zenia’s main function seems to be to confront Roz with her own limits of power: as a wife (Zenia seduces Mitch away from Roz), as a mother (Zenia claims to have seduced Roz’s son, Larry), as a feminist (Zenia causes a debacle over WiseWomanWorld), as a businesswoman (Zenia defrauds Roz in several quite spectacular ways), and as a Canadian. Roz, like Tony, is both thrilled and reduced by Zenia’s cosmopolitanism:

Zenia has been out in the world. The wide world, wider than Toronto: the deep world, deeper than the small pond where Roz is such a large and sheltered frog. Zenia makes Roz feel not only protected, but lax. (364)
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Roz, however, refuses to be overawed by Zenia’s contemptuous criticism of “gentle” Canada, deriving strength this time from her own immigrant history to defend the country adopted by her ancestors as a desirable safe haven: “However, boring has something to offer, these days” (367).

It is Roz who describes Zenia as the Other Woman; it is also Roz who describes her as the Robber Bride, in both names highlighting the soap opera or fairy-tale dimensions of Zenia’s threats, and incidentally drawing attention to the artifice within constructions (and impositions) of identity. Roz, who has practiced her own identity performance for so long, putting on a clown face to cover up her distress, finds herself saddened at the scattering of Zenia’s ashes, bereft of that shadowy other, but also delivered for the first time in her life from the “tumour” of her past. Free to reinvent herself, Roz does not have a new identity as she faces the future with openness: “Roz will finally be a widow. No. She’ll be something beyond that. What? She will wait and see” (467).

When the three protagonists come together at the end for Zenia’s “wake of sorts,” it is Charis who is at the center of the group, and it is Charis who has foreseen Zenia’s death. Though her life story as abused child and New Age eccentric would seem to be positioned “elsewhere” in any discourse of national identity, I believe that a case can be made for Charis as victim, which would relate her particular split subjectivity to Atwood’s analysis of the Colonial Mentality. “Born to the wrong parents,” beaten and sexually abused, the child Karen split herself in two in a desperately willed act of migration from herself: “Finally she changed into Charis, and vanished, and reappeared elsewhere, and she has been elsewhere ever since” (41). Such phenomena of self-alienation as the result of violently abusive social relations have been analyzed from a psychoanalytic perspective (Mycak, 230–38) and from a racial perspective (Bannerji, 99–103), though my concern here is with how Atwood translates that victimization into the representation of an emerging postcolonial mentality. Back in 1972, Atwood famously sketched out four Basic Victim Positions (Survival, 36–39), which she suggested could be applied “whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group, or a victimized individual.” In many ways Charis’s history might fit this model, though Atwood does mention that “there may be a Position 5, for mystics; I postulate it but will not explore it here, since mystics do not as a rule write books” (Survival, 39). I suspect that she is exploring Position 5 in Charis’s case, though perhaps in order to expose its limited usefulness for repudiating the victim role.
Charis’s meditative practices, her floating clothes, and her faith in herbal remedies are mildly satirized as ineffectual and unworldly, though her alternative lifestyle might be seen as a veil that hides a great deal of Charis from herself. Karen’s body may have been “split open” to let Charis escape, but the traumatic childhood memories have not vanished; they are merely blocked off from consciousness, or as Charis herself realizes, “the lake was inside Charis really, so that’s where Karen was too. Down deep” (265). It is Zenia who opens the way for the return of this abject othered self, forcing Charis (as she had forced Tony and Roz) to face the ghosts of her past; only in 1990, when Charis is already middle-aged, does her narrative of victimization end, in her final confrontation with Zenia. As Zenia plays her duplicitous tormenting games at their meeting in the Arnold Garden Hotel, “something breaks” inside Charis, and she is free for the first time to acknowledge the force of her rage and desire for revenge, which she had conscientiously displaced on to the dark Other Woman hidden inside her self. Now that rage is turned not against her shadow self, but against Zenia, in a truly schizophrenic struggle as Charis watches an irresistibly powerful Karen push Zenia out the window and over the balcony to her death. Perhaps this is a psychic drama, but it is also a moment of triumph for Charis, when she begins to recognize her own otherness and the ways in which she is like Zenia, “herself in the mirror, herself with power” (398). Only now can she truly forgive Zenia as she emerges from the shadows of her own past, ready to assume a new “creative non-victim” position (Survival, 38) to become somebody “who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony” (Gibson, 27).

In counterpoint to the story of Charis as victim stands the story of Shanita, Charis’s employer at the shop called Radiance, who is herself one of Toronto’s visible minorities. Through their conversations we catch a glimpse of that “everyday racism” experienced by nonwhite Canadians, which Bannerji records with such passionate anger and political awareness: “People coming into the store frequently ask Shanita where she’s from. ‘Right here,’ she says, smiling her ultra-bright smile. ‘I was born right in this very city!’ . . . It’s a question that bothers her a lot” (57). And when Charis fails to understand why, Shanita interprets with some impatience at her naivety: “What they mean is, when am I leaving.” Shanita survives through her strategies of continual transformation, changing the name of her shop in response to the recession (Radiance is in the process of becoming Scrimpers), and teasingly reinventing the story of her origins: “Shanita has more
grandmothers than anyone she knows. But sometimes she’s part Ojib- 
way, or else part Mayan, and one day she was even Tibetan. She can be 
whatever she feels like, because who can tell?” (57) As someone who 
refuses to be a victim, Shanita understands how constructions of iden-
tity are subject to change, depending on circumstances. Her dynamism 
offers a sharp critique of racial stereotypes, for though Shanita may 
look exotic and may even be psychic (as Charis believes), she is also a 
smart businesswoman, who in no way conforms to the image of East-
ern mysticism or passive femininity. It is Charis, not Shanita, who 
“floats around in Radiance”; Shanita’s gaze is level and Charis comes 
to see her position as one to be envied: “In her next life she’s going to 
be a mixture, a blend, a vigorous hybrid like Shanita” (58).

So, to return to the question with which I began: “Who is a true 
Canadian?” Ironically, the only character in The Robber Bride to be 
explicitly classified as Canadian is Zenia, in the newspaper report of 
her first death in the Lebanon: “Canadian Killed in Terrorist Blast” 
(13). Zenia had at least three passports, though according to official 
records, “she was never even born” (416). Once again Zenia is the test 
case, and her nomadic existence highlights the fact that no single defi-
nition of Canadian identity is possible. Through her, myths of origin 
are discredited, identities are reinvented, and her otherness finds its 
mirror reflection in the lives of the three Canadian-born protagonists. 
Her border crossings are a reminder of the international context with-
in which Canada as a nation operates, a point that is elaborated more 
sharply with references to the recession and the Gulf War, an acknowl-
edgement of how much the country is implicated in the forces of glob-
al capitalism.3 The Robber Bride is a ghost story, or rather a story 
about exorcizing ghosts, in an attempt at a realistic reappraisal of 
Canadianness in the 1990s and a more honest recognition of the dif-
ferences concealed within constructions of personal and national iden-
tity. Tony’s final question addresses Zenia’s status as the Other Woman, 
opening up the question of difference to a further stage in the debate: 
“Was she in any way like us? thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way 
around: Are we in any way like her?” (470)

NOTES

1. According to the 1996 census, nine out of ten immigrants live in Canada’s three 
largest cities, as do 86 percent of visible minorities. These figures are taken from R. Pen-
dakur and J. Hennerbry, ed., Multicultural Canada: A Demographic Overview (20–27).
2. This interpretation of a second othering was sparked by a comment in Barbara Godard’s “Canadian? Literary? Theory?” on questions of exclusion within Canadian narratives of national identity (22). Donna L. Potts’s article, which I encountered after I had completed mine, asks similar questions, though she interprets the same textual evidence slightly differently. Linking Atwood’s feminism and her nationalism, Potts emphasizes Zenia’s foreignness and her role as sacrificial victim in an argument focused on Canadian women’s emergence from the colonial mentality.

3. Stephen Morton’s 1999 article engages with some of the identity questions that I raise here, though in the context of Atwood’s articulation of Toronto within the contemporary globalized space of late capitalism.