

**REVIEWS****Mobilizing Modernism: Canadian Representations of the Great Depression**

Jody Mason, *Writing Unemployment: Worklessness, Mobility, and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Canadian Literatures*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. viii + 258 pp.

Over the past decade, a number of books on Canadian modernism have addressed the processes behind the establishment of its canon, exploring the issue of “beginnings” (Mount 5) and “the construction of its centres and peripheries” (Irvine 5). These approaches have enabled recovery work in the wake of “critical neglect” (Brandt 6) and further inquiry into the “historical, political, and aesthetic terms” that place writers, their writing, and their reception over time (Rifkind 5). Outcomes have included an expansion of the canon of Canadian modernism in the form of rediscovered, reprinted, or newly researched texts, and thus a re-evaluation of modernism itself. In keeping with the New Modernist Studies, such scholarship suggests that early twentieth-century writing can be viewed as a response to “Canadian modernization” (Betts xi) as much as to exemplary literary experimentation from abroad, and that it involves not just borders—temporal, national, artistic—but also border-crossings and complexities, which some literary and historical narratives may overlook. Jody Mason engages with the modernist discourse of unemployment and its representation over six decades of Canadian leftist culture from a similar perspective, and as she states near the end of *Writing Unemployment*, “To conclude an analysis of such a diverse body of material is difficult” (195). But her words and work speak to what is, perhaps, the most rewarding element of materialist studies of modernism: complication rather than reduction.

It’s a scholarly goal that Mason achieves on a number of levels, given the eras, texts, and theories through which she explores the place of labour and leftist cultural work in conceptions of Canadian identity. Her focus is the interwar construction of unemployment, as the connotations of mobility—and its traditional associations with seasonal, migrant labour—shift according to a vision of citizenship rooted in a settler myth. This grounded sense of national identity is problematized, however, by the number of

transient workers and those out of work in the 1930s, a crisis which prompted a range of creative and political responses. Mason's core argument is that leftist depictions of worklessness during the Great Depression, and especially representations of transient men disattached from a stable place in the capitalist system, participated in the establishment of an interventionist state. The iconic image of the Depression—the unemployed white male worker, riding the rails—became the anchor for “the postwar compact between labour and the state” (14), and, as a privileged signifier of worklessness, came to characterize the dominant narratives of Canada and Canadian unemployment into the 1970s.

Mason's approach to the role of “the cultural left in twentieth-century Canada” (5) through textual representations of worklessness begins in the 1910s and is organized by Ian McKay's mapping of Canada's socialist formations. The thematic focus on mobility, derived in large part from Doreen Massey's writing on the topic (21), is used in conjunction with this chronological frame. The transience of the unemployed is thus echoed by their shifting significance at various moments in Canadian culture and leftist thought, as traced through the work of novelists, poets, dramatists, essayists, publishers, scholars, politicians, and filmmakers. Just as the texts depict mobility, and just as the image of the unemployed transient proves motile over time, so Mason's readings shift their grounds in order to historicize specific representations of worklessness. In her detailed interdisciplinary approach, Mason analyses writings through their production histories as well as through theories of cultural production, and foregrounds the intersections of gender, class, and ethnicity which inform the political heft of the texts in question.

Starting with the vagabondia of Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey, Mason moves from a romanticized image of the hobo to Frederick Philip Grove, whose *A Search for America* depicts a mobility that “succeeds in perpetuating rather than alleviating” the economic hardships of those who travel for work (28). She then addresses the equally romanticized figure of the settler-pioneer, whose ability to claim citizenship is used by Mason to point out the invisibility of indigenous experiences and of non-Northern European itinerant workers in modernist accounts of unemployment. Ironically, Grove's reading of the West as the space in which his literary genius can take root is undermined by the realities of the economic landscape and Canadian-US publishing practices, and the second chapter shifts from Grove's mass-produced novels of the 1920s to Canadian leftist periodicals of the 1930s. The political stances of magazines such as the *Canadian Forum* are contextualized through the policies of the LSR and the CCF,

and in her examination of articles, editorials, stories, and poems, Mason argues that the magazines' depictions of the white, male, unemployed worker played a significant but ambivalent role in the development of the welfare state. Federal initiatives such as the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1940 and the Citizenship Act of 1947 were inflected by larger cultural anxieties, especially regarding the figure of "the immigrant, radicalized, male transient" (52). In constructing a normative image of the Canadian citizen uprooted from his proper place by unemployment, then, contributors strategically drew attention to the plight of the out-of-work but also participated in an exclusionary process that placed individuals as either within or without the nation's scope of responsibility (68).

Dorothy Livesay is central to this chapter through Mason's reading of *Masses* and its more internationalist stance. In what is a strong section of the book, Mason explores specific volumes of the magazine and other publications—*New Frontier*, *The Worker*, the *Daily Clarion*—to contextualize, to compare, and to trace Livesay's developing body of work. The analyses are informed by the voices of other literary critics but directed by the patterns of worklessness and rootedness in Livesay's literature. It's the shift towards a more inclusive sense of home that becomes crucial here; the worker's "natural right" to place and a place within a collective (86).

Chapter 3 continues the focus on the 1930s but through Depression-era social protest novels—*Forgotten Men* by Claudius Gregory and *Waste Heritage* by Irene Baird—which, according to Mason, were unique in their direct engagement with protest and with state policy. In some impressive archival work, Mason explores the "Depression-era conditions of authorship" as influenced by public politics and publishing practices (94). Both novels reflect the authors' situatedness, as Baird in particular negotiated the constraints of "her class and gender, the demands of her publishers, the influence of U.S.-American literary standards, and state censorship" (113). A novel depicting the Vancouver Sit-In of 1938 through a narrator whose reportage is both class- and gender-transient, *Waste Heritage* suggests how the stasis of protestors reflects the paralyzing transience of worklessness in contrast to the social mobility enabled by a place within the capitalist structure.

Postwar representations of the Depression are focused through the specific space of Hugh Garner's *Cabbagetown*, as Mason addresses the rise of the welfare state and the third socialist formation. In a nifty move, *Cabbagetown*'s textual history becomes Mason's conduit from modernism and modernity into the political landscape of 1968, when the text, first marketed in 1950 as a sensationalist "crime novel" (137), is revised and

repackaged into a work of “documentary realism” by the Ryerson Press (146). Mason thus situates the second edition of the novel as a product of the Centennial period, and its characterization of the Depression provides a segue into chapter 5, where the national trope of the Dirty Thirties is mobilized by the New Left as well as by the state. Job creation programs, such as the LIP and OFY, are shadowed by new anxieties regarding the place of women, the transience associated with 1970s youth culture, Quebec radicalism, and the questionable economic value of the arts. However, Mason explores the era through independent works of drama, and she traces the fourth leftist formation’s response to the cultural work of the 1930s through *Buffalo Jump* and *Ten Lost Years*. The former is particularly suggestive of the ways in which historical and popular accounts of the Depression are used to comment upon contemporary perceptions of unemployment and government policies. In this “struggle for the past that was being waged in the 1970s” (181), performances, academic histories, personal memoirs, interviews, and film documentaries construct the experience of the Depression in various ways: a crisis prompting solidarity among Canadians and workers; a time of stoic individualism rather than spoiled youth; a moment at which the state rescued her citizens. Charged with nostalgia, such representations are compared with and contrasted to Jean-Jules Richard’s *Journal d’un hobo* and Helen Potrebenko’s *Taxi!*, which recharge the image of the transient through marginalized perspectives. Their texts speak to the contradictions and limitations of the welfare state for less visible workers, and as Mason turns to a consideration of neoliberal policies in her conclusion, she links the individualism of the 1996 Employment Insurance Act to Austin Clarke’s *Nine Men Who Laughed* and Rawi Hage’s novel *Cockroach*.

The scope of Mason’s work is the book’s strength, and it’s a striking combination of archival, literary, political, and cultural studies approaches. That said, the scope of the book is also its challenge, and the labour involved in drawing together these threads becomes evident at points. The introduction stages the intentions and methods of the book in several different ways, a gesture suggesting the separate levels on which the study proceeds. The introductory sections of each chapter summarize the arguments, and subsection headings provide signposts, but the readings themselves tend to move through less linear networks of information. At times, literature is secondary to political theories, historical shifts, publishing practices, and socialist movements, but that’s the diverse territory signalled by Mason’s reference to “Canadian literatures” in her title. A result,

however, is that the close readings are like gems: very desirable, a little bit rare, and sometimes isolated from the surrounding material.

These glitches nevertheless pale in comparison to a series of rewarding intersections, and the argumentative lines according to which Mason moves result not just in a number of informative and persuasive readings, but also in a canon of texts that have much potential for further study. It's a productive approach to the dynamic relationship between politics and art, as well as to strategies of representation that are at every level mutually intersecting and mutable. Directed by an ethical as well as scholarly perspective on what subject positions become visible through the issue of unemployment, and when, and why, Mason has recontextualized this area of Canadian literature into a new complexity.

## Works Cited

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